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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STORY OF THE BIG FRONT DOOR ***

Transcriber's Note:

Inconsistent hyphenation in the original document has been preserved.



"THEY HAD DRAWN THEIR CHAIRS TOGETHER IN A COSEY GROUP."

THE STORY
OF
THE BIG FRONT DOOR

BY
MARY F. LEONARD

"THEY HELPED EVERY ONE HIS NEIGHBOR."

NEW YORK: 46 EAST FOURTEENTH STREET
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THE STORY OF THE BIG FRONT DOOR

CHAPTER I.

[ToC](#)

THE OUTLAWS.

"Come listen to me, ye gallants so free,
All ye who love mirth for to hear;
And I will tell you of a bold outlaw
Who lived in Nottinghamshire."

Old Ballad.

Ikey Ford was the first to make the discovery, and he lost no time in carrying the news to the others.

Great was their consternation!

"Moving into the Brown house? Nonsense, Ikey, you are making it up!" Carl exclaimed.

"What shall we do about the banquet for King Richard?" cried Bess, sitting down on the doorstep despairingly.

"And my racket is over there, and your grandma's fur rug, Ikey Ford!" wailed Louise, shaking her finger at the bringer of evil tidings. He assented meekly, adding, "and Sallie's clothes-pins."

A stranger might have been puzzled to guess what sort of calamity had befallen the little group in the doorway of the pleasant, hospitable-looking house among the maple trees, that warm August morning. Something serious certainly, for Louise's dimples had disappeared, Bess was almost tearful, and the boys, though they

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affected to take it more lightly, wore plainly depressed.

"Let's go over to Ikey's and look through the fence," suggested Carl, and, as there seemed nothing else to do, the others agreed.

They filed solemnly down the walk and across the street,—Bess with a roll of green cambric under her arm,—and nobody uttered a word till a secluded spot behind Mrs. Ford's syringa bushes was reached, where, through an opening in the division fence, they could look out unobserved upon the adjoining house.

"The side windows are open!" Louise announced in a tragic whisper.

"Didn't I tell you so?" replied Ikey with mournful triumph.

It was a small house with a pointed roof, and it stood in the midst of an old-fashioned garden, where for years and years lilacs and snowballs, peonies and roses, pinks and sweet-william, and dozens of other flowers, had bloomed happily in their season, without any trouble to anybody. In the background sunflowers and hollyhocks grew, and on either side of the front gate two stout little cedars stood like sentinels on guard. The street upon which this gate opened was wide and shady, and the bustle and din of the city had not yet invaded its quiet.

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Though in reality a red house grown somewhat rusty, it was called the "Brown house," because as far back as any one in the neighborhood could remember it had been occupied by an old lady of that name. For years before she died she was bed-ridden, and to the children there was something mysterious about this person who was never seen, but on whose account they were cautioned not to be noisy at their play. After her death the house was left closed and unoccupied, but hardly more silent than before. An air of mystery still hung about the place; the children when they passed peeped in at the flowers alone in their glory, and spoke softly as though even yet their owner might be disturbed.

This was in the early spring; as the summer wore on this garden grew more and more irresistible. Other playgrounds lost their charm to the eyes that looked in at the long waving grass and the pleasant shady places under the apple trees.

"Let's play Robin Hood," Bess proposed one morning as they sat in a row on the fence.

Carl and Louise received the idea with enthusiasm, and Ikey listened in silent admiration as the details of the fascinating game were unfolded.

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The Hazeltine children had from their babyhood been in the habit of making plays of their favorite stories, but it seemed to Ikey immensely clever; so while the others argued over who should take this part and who that, he joyfully accepted whatever was offered him.

He did not fare so badly either, for being plump and rosy he was allowed to personate the jolly Friar Tuck. Robin Hood fell naturally to Carl as the oldest and the leader, Bess became Little John, Louise appeared by turns as Allan-a-Dale and the sheriff of Nottingham, and little Helen was occasionally pressed into service as Maid Marian. Who first thought of turning the deserted garden into Sherwood forest no one could ever remember, but as they sat on the fence that morning with the waving sea of grass below them, somebody began

"One for the money,
Two for the show,..."

and away they all went. Some minutes later, Mrs. Ford, glancing from her window, wondered what had become of the children.

So the fun began and continued through the long summer days, when grown people stayed indoors and wondered what the children found to do out in the heat from morning till night. But in that distant corner of the garden, where, under the shelter of a crooked apple tree, the forest rovers had their trysting place, the weather was never too warm. The unoccupied house became transformed into Nottingham castle, and was never approached without delicious thrills of terror. Excitement ran high on the day when Robin was released from the jail—otherwise a small rustic arbor—by his trusty followers.

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There was simply no end to the fun, and the secrecy with which it was carried on helped to deepen the interest. The climax was reached when preparations were begun for King Richard's banquet.

As usual, it originated with Bess, when she heard that a favorite cousin, a boy about Carl's age, was coming to visit them for a few days.

"Aleck will make a very good King Richard," said Louise, when the matter was under discussion, "and we can pretend that he is just back from the Holy Land."

It was decided that this must be a real feast, not merely an occasion of pepper grass and cookies, so their combined funds were carefully laid out at the corner confectionery. Many articles supposed to be necessary to the comfort of the royal guest were smuggled into the garden, and everything was in readiness for his arrival

on the next day, when Ikey made his startling discovery.

It had never occurred to them that some one might come to live in the Brown house; they were quite overwhelmed by it, and for more than an hour they sat under the syringa bushes peeping through at their lost domain. No one had much to say. Bess was gazing sadly at her roll of cambric which was to have done duty as suits of Lincoln green for the foresters, and Ikey was thinking of the fur rug and the clothespins, when Carl proposed a raid for the recovery of their possessions. "The girls can wait on the fence and take the things as we bring them," he said.

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This promised a little excitement, so on the very spot from which they had made their first entrance into Sherwood forest, Bess and Louise waited while the boys dropped down and disappeared behind the bushes. In a few minutes they came rushing back empty handed, to report that not a trace of anything was to be found, and that a man with a scythe was at work on the other side of the garden cutting down the grass.

It was very quiet in the neighborhood that afternoon. There were no children to be seen anywhere, and on the broad piazza of the house where the Hazeltines lived the chairs and settees, with here and there a gay cushion, appeared to be having a good time all to themselves, gathered in sociable groups. The clematis and honeysuckle swung softly in the breeze, making graceful shadows, and the maple trees stretched out long arms and touched each other gently now and then. At the back of the house on the kitchen steps sat Aunt Sukey, a person of dignity and authority. Her hands were folded over her white apron and her eyes rested with satisfaction on the rows of peach preserves that represented her morning's work.

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"Mammy," as the children called her, was a family institution, and could not be spared, though her last nursling was fast outgrowing her.

No preserves tasted like Sukey's, and no one could, on occasion, make such rolls.

"Yes," she remarked, continuing her conversation with Mandy, the cook, who was stepping around inside, "they's *mischevious* of course, but I can remember when Mr. Frank and Mr. William was a heap worse."

"Law, Aunt Sukey, I wouldn't want to see 'em if they was any worse than that Ikey Ford! It looks like the children has been up to twice as many pranks since he come," replied Mandy.

"He don't take after his pa, then; Mr. Isaac was as nice, quiet-mannered a boy as you ever see, when he used to go with Mr. Frank. But pshaw! all that triflin' is soon over. Look at Miss Zélie: seems like it warn't no time since she was climbin' fences and tearin' her clothes, till I'd get clean discouraged tryin' to keep her nice. Oh! they's fine children, I don't care what you say; and Louise is the flock of the flower. She is like Miss Zélie, with her dark eyes and shinin' hair."

"Miss Zélie herself sets more store by Carl than any of the rest," said Mandy, coming to the door.

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"That's cause he favors his ma's family and has a look like his uncle Carl. You know Miss Zélie married Miss Elinor's brother. He used to come here for his holidays when she was a little girl no bigger 'n Bess,—that was after Mr. Frank married Miss Elinor,—and they was always great friends. It looks like it's mighty strange that Miss Elinor and Mr. Carl should be taken, and old Sukey left."

There was silence for a minute; then as Sukey wiped her eyes she continued, "I've nursed 'em all from Mr. William down, and I knows old master's grandchildren is bound to turn out right."

It was almost sunset when Aunt Zélie—tall and fair, like Bess's favorite heroines—came and stood in the front door, wondering where the children were. She was not left long in doubt, for hardly had she settled herself to enjoy the pleasant air when there was a sudden rush from somewhere and she was surrounded by a laughing, breathless little company. The outlaws of the morning were scarcely to be recognized. Little John and the sheriff of Nottingham were attired in the freshest of white dresses, with pink bows on their Gretchen braids, while Robin and the Friar were disguised as a pair of bright-faced modern boys, and with them was little Helen, a dignified person of eight, who carried a doll in her arms.

"Auntie, did you know that somebody is coming to live in the Brown house?" Louise asked, as they drew their chairs as close as possible to hers. At this time in the day she was their own special property, though there *were* people who complained that they always monopolized her.

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"Yes, your father heard that a relative of old Mrs. Brown's was going to take the house, but that is all I know," she answered.

"Carl and Ikey saw a cross-looking woman with a feather duster. I do hope there

will be some nice children," said Bess.

"All boys," Carl added briefly.

"Boys? No, indeed! Girls are much nicer, aren't they, Ikey?" and Louise looked at him mischievously over her shoulder.

Ikey's shyness or his politeness, perhaps both, would not allow him to reply.

"They are both nice when they are nice," said Aunt Zélie. "Being a girl myself, of course I like girls, and so does this individual," patting the head against her shoulder.

"Oh, I like *some* girls!" Carl conceded graciously.

"I wish there would be a little girl for me to play with," remarked Helen plaintively, for it was the trial of her life that she was considered too little to be made a companion of by the other children except on special occasions.

"It is a fortunate thing that the house is to be occupied," said Aunt Zélie, "for Mr. Jackson, the agent, told Frank that it looked as if some one had been camping out in the garden. The grass was trampled down and I don't know what damage done."

If she had not happened to be looking across the street she would have seen some guilty faces. Bess grew red, Louise opened her mouth and shut it again without saying anything, Carl drummed on the back of his chair with an air of extreme indifference which Ikey tried to copy, and Helen looked from one to the other with very big eyes.

The Fords' tea bell, rung at the front door for Ikey's benefit, relieved the strain. Then presently Louise saw her father and baby Carie coming up the street, and the Brown house was not mentioned again.

As Aunt Zélie was on her way upstairs that night she was waylaid in the dimly lighted hall by three ghostly figures.

"What are you doing out of bed?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, auntie, we want to tell you something! It is about the Brown house. We have been playing Robin Hood in the garden."

"It was a lovely place, and we didn't do any harm, really."

Aunt Zélie listened with just a little bit of a smile till she had heard the whole story. It had been great fun, there could be no doubt of that.

"Was it wrong?" asked Bess anxiously.

"We did not hurt anything, not one bit," Carl insisted.

"Why did you keep it such a secret?"

"That was part of the fun; but I wish we had told you," said Louise.

"Yes, it is nicer to have you know things;" and Bess sighed, relieved now that confession was made.

"It is too late to discuss it to-night, but I want you to think about it and decide for yourselves whether or not it was right."

"Did you know it before we told you?" Carl asked suddenly.

"I only guessed it to-day," she replied, smiling.

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CHAPTER II.

ToC

IN THE STAR CHAMBER.

There never lived a more genial, kindly man than old Judge Hazeltine, and the house he planned and built reflected, as perfectly as a house could, the character of its owner.

"The front door looks like the Judge," people used to say, laughing as they said it, for he was portly and the door was wide. But they meant more than just that, for there were few, even among the unimaginative, who did not feel drawn to that door. Hospitality shone from every panel, the big fanlight was like a genial sun, and the resemblance to his cheery face and cordial manner was not altogether fanciful.

Of the inside of the house perhaps it is enough to say at present that it kept the

promise of the outside.

After the judge's death the old home fell to the share of the younger of his two sons, for the William Hazeltines had already built their fine mansion out on Dean avenue, where Aunt Marcia found things more suited to her fastidious taste than on the quiet street which had ceased to be fashionable.

On the other hand, her brother-in-law declared that he much preferred his large garden and home-like neighborhood to the elegant monotony of her surroundings. The children agreed with their father, and so perhaps, for the matter of that, did Uncle William.

At the top of the house there was a long low room, with five windows looking east, west, and south, which was known as the star chamber. This name had originated with Uncle William in the days when he and his brother Frank played and studied there, as Carl and his sisters did now. On rainy days when the garden was out of the question the children were most likely to be found here.

It was a pleasant place and well suited for any sort of indoor game. Except for a rug or two the floor was bare, and the furniture consisted of an old claw-footed sofa on which at least six people could sit comfortably at one time, a wardrobe, some book-shelves, and a hammock swung across one corner. There may have been a chair or two, but the wide window-sills made pleasanter resting-places. Here in the summer time you looked out into the soft greenness of the maple trees, getting glimpses of the quiet street, but when the branches were bare a fine outlook was to be had all over the neighborhood, and you saw how big houses and little houses stood sociably side by side, while an old gray church kept guard at one corner. Here Bess and Louise romanced over an imaginary family known as "The Carletons," or played dolls with Helen, and here Carl arranged his stamp album and made signals to Ikey across the street. Sometimes their father and uncle would drop in and pretend they were boys once more. Then what delight it was to listen to their stories of boyish pranks!

Aunt Zélie was their most frequent visitor. The days when she kept her dolls and "dressing-up things" in the old wardrobe, which was now put to the same use by her little nieces, were not so very far back in the past, and many of her story books were still to be found on the shelves among later favorites.

Going up to the star chamber on the morning after the excitement over the Brown house, she walked in upon an indignation meeting.

"Just when we wanted to play Crokonole!"

"It is *too* mean!"

"She might let him come, it spoils all our fun!"

This is what she heard, and she asked in surprise, "What in the world is the matter?"

There was silence for a minute, during which the rain made a great patterning outside; then little Helen, who was serenely busy with her paper dolls, replied, "Ikey's grandma won't let him come over, 'cause he took her fur rug and Sallie's clothes-pins."

"What did he want with the clothes-pins and rug?"

"We wanted them to play with, Aunt Zélie. You can do a great many things with clothes-pins," Bess explained.

"Aleck was to have been King Richard—the rug was for him at the banquet; and now he hasn't come and we can't do anything," said Louise mournfully.

Aunt Zélie sat down on the sofa and folded her hands in her lap.

"I should like to know how many of *our* things have been carried over to the Brown house garden," she said.

"We took some of the straw cushions and two or three cups that Mandy said we might play with," replied Bess, watching her aunt's face anxiously. There was another silence, during which Carl became absorbed in a book and Louise gave her attention to Helen's dolls. Then Aunt Zélie spoke:

"The more I think of this the more uncomfortable I feel about it."

"I can't see why," came from Carl.

"Because it seems to me such a lawless proceeding. Do you know that there are people who say that no children were ever so lawless as American children to-day?"

"That is poetry, auntie; you made a beautiful rhyme," laughed Louise. But her aunt refused to smile.

"It is not poetry, but sad fact, I'm afraid. You may not have done much actual harm, but you have shown no respect for other people's property. You went into the Brown house garden without leave, and you encouraged Ikey to carry off his grandmother's things without permission. I have trusted you all summer—I thought I could; but this

makes me afraid that you ought to have someone with more experience to watch over you. You know when I came back to you two years ago I promised to stay so long as I could be a help to you, but—"

"Oh, Aunt Zélie! You do help us—don't go away!" cried Bess, clasping her around the waist; Louise seized one of her hands tightly in both her own, and Carl looked out the window with a flushed face.

"That is not fair, Aunt Zélie," was all he said.

He could never forget—nor could Bess—how she had come to them in their loneliness, and taken the motherless little flock into her arms, comforting them and wrapping them all about with her love and sympathy. How could they ever do without her?

"You aren't going away, are you?" Helen asked, leaving her dolls and coming to her side.

"I hope not, for I can't think what I should do without my children," she answered. And then they all snuggled around her on the old sofa and talked things over. It was astonishing what a difference it made—trying to look at the matter from all sides. Even Mrs. Ford's indignation did not seem so very unreasonable when you stopped to think how inconvenient it was to be without clothes-pins on Monday morning.

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"I know it does not seem exactly right as you put it, Aunt Zélie," Carl acknowledged, "but it was such fun, we couldn't have had so good a time anywhere else."

"Suppose you found the Arnold children playing in our garden some day, would you think that because they had found that they couldn't have so good a time anywhere else, it was all right?"

"Why, auntie, those Arnold boys are not nice at all; we *couldn't* have them in our garden," cried Louise.

"No one was living in the Brown house—it is different," Carl began.

"I know what she means," said Bess. "Just because it is fun isn't a good excuse."

"That is it," answered her aunt. "I believe in fun if only you do not put it first, above thought for the feelings or property of others. I am sure you did not mean to do wrong, but it would not do for me to let you go on being thoughtless, would it?"

"Mrs. Ford isn't a bit like you, Aunt Zélie; she was dreadfully mad at Ikey, and said he must stay in his room all day," remarked Louise.

"I am sorry for Mrs. Ford. I rather think *I* should be dreadfully mad too, if I were in her place. She is an old lady and is used to having her household affairs move on smoothly, and one day she finds her servants upset and some of her property missing, all because certain naughty children cared more for a little fun than for her comfort."

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Aunt Zélie spoke gravely, and her audience looked very much subdued.

In the course of the day Joanna, one of the maids, was sent over to the Brown house to inquire about the things left by the children in the garden. She returned with the missing articles, which had been carried into the house by the man who cut the grass.

"Did you see anybody, Jo? Are there any children?" were the questions she met with. But she had only seen a middle-aged woman who was cleaning the hall, and had learned nothing about the new occupants.

"It is very stupid of Joanna," said Carl as he rolled up the rug and the clothes-pins and marched over to apologize to Mrs. Ford for their share of the mischief. He did this so meekly and with such evident sincerity that the old lady was greatly mollified, and sent him up to tell Ikey he might consider himself released from the day's confinement in his room.

For the rest of the week the children were models of propriety. No one would have dreamed that they had been outlaws so short a time before.

From the star chamber windows Robin and his merry men looked down on the transformation which was taking place in their old domain.

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The long grass was cut down, and with it those patches of pepper grass that had seasoned many a feast. The bushes and vines were trimmed, the walk was reddened, the shutters were thrown open. Every day added something to the change, yet, besides the servants, no one had been seen about the house.

Who could their new neighbors be? The subject was discussed morning, noon, and night, till their father said he would have to tell them the story of the man who made a fortune minding his own business. Uncle William, who was there at the time, said that probably the man was too stupid to enjoy his fortune after he made it, and he pretended to be willing to go over and inquire at the door, if Louise would go with him.

"At least we know there can't be any children," said Bess, "for they couldn't stay in the house all the time."

"Please tell us the story about the man, Father," asked little Helen, and couldn't understand why they all laughed.

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[ToC](#)

CHAPTER III.

THE LADY OF THE BROWN HOUSE.

Bang! went the door, and away they rushed, like a small tornado, across the porch, down the walk and over the street.

They seemed to be running away from Helen, for a second after they had vanished behind Mrs. Ford's oleanders she came around the house.

Indignant tears were in her eyes; it was hard not to be wanted, to be thought too little to play with. Bess and Louise had such good times with the boys and she had nothing in the world to do this afternoon. To be sure they had been very gracious all morning, and had even allowed her to listen to a thrilling chapter in the history of the Carletons, but this was too good to last.

At lunch certain signs passed back and forth across the table arousing her curiosity, and afterwards when she found them laughing on the stairs and begged to know what they were going to do, Carl had replied provokingly, "What do you suppose?" and now they had run away with Ikey somewhere. The house was very quiet; Carie was taking her nap, Aunt Zélie dressing to go out. Helen sat down on the top step of the porch and wiped her eyes, saying to herself, "They are just as mean as anything, but I don't care—I'll have a good time too. I think I'll ask Aunt Zélie to let me go with her."

It happened that as the runaways reached the gate Aunt Marcia's coupé turned the corner, and her horrified eyes beheld their flight. When she stepped from her carriage her lips were firmly closed in a manner which indicated that they would be opened presently for somebody's benefit. She was so absorbed that she almost fell over the woebegone little figure on the step.

"You have been crying—what is the matter?" she demanded.

"Oh, Aunt Marcia, I didn't see you—please excuse me," said Helen, whose politeness rarely failed her, rising and putting away her handkerchief. Mrs. Hazeltine saw pretty clearly how matters stood.

"Never mind, my dear," she said; "perhaps you would like to take a drive with me. I am going out to Cousin John's."

Helen was her favorite among the children, because she was quiet and demure, and did not tear and soil her clothes as Bess and Louise did. Helen on her part looked up to Aunt Marcia with deep admiration, and meant to be just like her when she was grown. So she ran off very happily to have her dress changed, while Mrs. Hazeltine waylaid Aunt Zélie as she came downstairs ready for a walk.

"Dear me! the children have been in mischief," was this lady's inward exclamation, for she knew the signs of disapproval, and felt like running away, as she used to do when a child, from Sister Marcia's lectures.

She only sat down on the bottom step, however, and waited.

"How do you do, Zélie? I see you are going out and I shall not detain you for more than a minute. Little Helen is coming to drive with me."

She seated herself in a judicial attitude on one of the high-backed hall chairs.

"I do not wish to interfere," she continued, "But I should like to inquire if you know where the children are this afternoon?"

"I have a general idea," Aunt Zélie replied, slowly putting on her glove and reflecting that it would take more than her sister's powers to be able to say at any given moment exactly where they were.

"I thought you did not know. They are running through the streets, Louise without her hat. It may do for boys, but for little girls I think it disgraceful."

"I told them they might go to the Ford's; they do not play in the street. You must

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have seen them when they were on their way there, and I do not object to their running."

Mrs. Hazeltine shook her head. "How can you think it proper for Bess and Louise to race with the boys in that fashion? You seem to be conscientious, yet you do not restrain them in the least."

"I own I do not know how to make a difference between girls and boys. Why are they born into the same families if they are not meant to play together? And if they are to be strong and healthy they must be out of doors. I am sorry to seem to set my judgment up against yours, but—"

"You are stubborn, Zélie, like all the Hazeltines. *I* believe in fresh air as much as you do, but I should send Bess and Louise to walk with Joanna. However, I see it is of no use to talk to you. I should never mention the subject at all if I did not feel a deep interest in the children." Mrs. Hazeltine rose. "Here comes Helen," she said, "so I'll not detain you any longer," and taking her little niece by the hand she sailed away.

Meanwhile the culprits were taking breath on the grass in the Fords' back yard, Ikey hospitably treating his guests to apples and salt.

"I suppose," Bess began, taking a bite of her apple, "that it is rather mean to run away from Helen, but we have been very good to her to-day, haven't we, Louise?"

"Yes, we have; and the more you do for her the more she thinks you ought to do."

"She can't expect to go everywhere we go," said Carl decidedly.

The business on hand this afternoon was nothing more or less than the erection of a telephone which had been constructed by the boys out of fruit cans and pieces of old kid gloves. The main difficulty lay in getting their line across the street, for it was to communicate between Ikey's room and the star chamber. An attempt had been made once before, but the result was such a mortifying failure that their energy and interest flagged for a while.

The trees caused most of the trouble. Their line first caught in one of these at such a distance from the pavement that while they were absorbed in getting it off a gentleman who happened to be passing had his hat suddenly removed. This accident convulsed everybody but Bess, who in great embarrassment tried to explain that it was not intended for a practical joke. Finally it was caught and broken by the angry driver of a market wagon. Carl, who disliked to give anything up, had ever since been trying to think of a plan.

"There must be some way," he said as he lay on his back looking up at the sky.

"I know!" cried Bess, seized with an inspiration; "clothes-props!"

"What about them?" asked Ikey doubtfully.

"It isn't Monday, and any way we can get ours.—Mandy will let us have them," Bess said reassuringly, and then she unfolded her plan.

"Isn't she clever?" exclaimed Louise admiringly.

"We'll try it, it may work," said Carl, with masculine condescension.

"What in the world can those children be doing?" somebody wondered as she looked through the half-closed blinds of one of the Brown house windows a few minutes later.

Mounted on a chair near the Fords' front fence stood Bess holding aloft a clothes-prop, and looking like a small copy of "Liberty Enlightening the World." Through a groove in the top of the pole ran the line, one end of which was safely fastened in Ikey's window. Louise had the rest of it in charge and slowly dealt it out as she crossed the street in front of Carl, who by means of another pole kept it elevated beyond all harm. Once over the street it was easily attached to a cord hanging from the star chamber, then slowly and cautiously Ikey pulled it up. Several times it caught in the trees, but a careful jerk sent it free, and at last it was safe.

"Three cheers for Bess! It was her plan," called Ikey from above.

"It really worked very well," Carl acknowledged.

"I knew all the time it would," added Louise, as they went inside to finish their work.

The watcher in the Brown house window returned reluctantly to the book she had been reading, as though she found the bit of real life more entertaining.

When all was done it was pronounced a success. Even though you could not hear so very distinctly, at least the bells fastened at each end tinkled most realistically when the line was pulled.

As they came out of the side door at the Fords' after inspecting Ikey's end of the telephone, Louise catching sight of a ball which lay on the grass made a spring for it. The others rushed after her, there was a scramble that would have shocked Aunt Marcia beyond expression, and Carl getting possession tossed it with all his might—he did not stop to think where. Alas! it went over into the next yard and a crash of

broken glass told the tale. They looked at each other in consternation, and Ikey ran and peeped through the fence.

"You have broken one of the Brown house windows," he reported.

"It wasn't all his fault, it was partly mine," said Louise, who always stood by her friends in trouble.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Bess. "Just when we were going to be so good! What will Aunt Zélie say?"

"I'll have to go and tell them I did it, and that I'll have the glass put in," said Carl.

Louise at once volunteered to go with him, and Bess suggested, "Let's all go."

Ikey did not like the plan exactly, but he would not have objected for the world. Louise tossed back her long braids and put on her hat, and the solemn little party started out.

"Whom shall I ask for?" Carl suddenly demanded, as they marched up the newly reddened walk.

"Dear me! We don't know the name," gasped Bess, feeling inclined to turn and run.

"Never mind, just ask for the lady of the house," said Louise, her courage rising to the occasion. "It sounds beggarish, but you can't help it."

Bess and Ikey retreated a little when the door was opened by a woman who asked somewhat gruffly what they wanted.

Carl hesitated, so Louise in her politest manner inquired for the lady of the house.

"What do you want with her?" said the woman, eying them sharply.

"We want to *see* her," was the emphatic reply.

"Well, you can't, then," and the door would have been shut in their faces if a voice from inside had not called "Mary!"

She disappeared for a moment, then returning asked them in.

Bess held Ikey's hand tightly as they followed the others along the hall. To think of being inside the Brown house!

Before they had time to consider what they were to do or say, they found themselves in a quaint room with dim old portraits on the wall; but all the children saw was a lady with white hair and bright eyes, seated in an invalid's chair by the window. As Louise advanced timidly, followed by the others, this lady held out her hand, saying:

"You wish to speak to me, Mary says; I am very glad to see you."

They all felt reassured by her pleasant tone, and Louise found her voice.

"We came to tell you that, while we were playing, Carl threw his ball and broke your window. It was partly my fault too, and we thought we would all come and tell you."

"I am very sorry about it, and I will have a new pane put in," Carl added.

"I am sure it was an accident," said the lady, smiling; "you must not feel badly. I shall be glad of it if it helps me to make the acquaintance of some of my new neighbors. Won't you tell me your names?"

Louise's dimples at once began to show themselves, for she was always ready to make friends, and she gave her plump little hand, saying:

"I am Louise Hazeltine, and this is my brother Carl and my sister Bess, and Ikey Ford who lives next door."

"We are much obliged to you for not minding about the window," Bess added, forgetting her shyness.

"Won't you sit down and talk to me for a while? I am Miss Brown."

The children smiled at each other. "We have always called this the Brown house," Carl explained.

"Then you won't have to change. It is much simpler than if I had happened to be named Green or Black, isn't it?" said their new friend, laughing. "And now I am sure you can't guess what I call *your* house."

Of course they couldn't, so she told them that she had named it the house with the Big Front Door.

This amused them very much, and Louise asked, "How did you know we lived there?"

"Oh, I have seen you going in and out. I can't move about easily, so when I grow tired of reading or sewing I look out of the window."

It was astonishing how much at home they felt. Bess and Louise sat together in a big chair chattering away as if they had known Miss Brown all their lives. When she

asked about the telephone, even Ikey had a word to say as they grew merry over the story of their difficulties.

As they were leaving, Bess said demurely, "Miss Brown, I think we ought to tell you that we have been playing in your garden. We didn't mean to do any harm, but Aunt Zélie says it wasn't respecting other people's property."

"My dear children, I wish you would come often and play in my garden," was the hospitable reply.

"I am afraid your Mary wouldn't like it," said Louise; adding quickly, "and we'd rather come inside now and see you."

"Thank you, I hope you will come, and you must excuse poor Mary; she is not so ill-natured as she seems."[30]

"Aunt Zélie," said Carl that evening as they were relating the day's adventures, "Miss Brown is tiptop, she wasn't a bit mad. There is something about her like you."

"Why, Carl! Her hair is white, and she is not nearly so pretty," cried Louise.

"Well, goosie, I didn't say she looked like her, did I?"

"She is very nice at any rate, and has lots of things to show us some time—things she had when she was a little girl. We may go to see her again, mayn't we, Auntie?" Bess asked.

"Do you think she would like me to go to see her?" Helen inquired.

"Probably she wouldn't mind; we will take you sometime," Louise replied graciously.

Helen had returned from her drive in a happy frame of mind, for Aunt Marcia had bought her a charming little card-case, and had ordered some engraved cards to go in it. Her sisters admired it as much as its proud owner could desire, and were quite attentive all the evening.

"Mary," said Miss Brown that night, "those are nice children; and just think! I already know *four* of my neighbors!"

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CHAPTER IV.

ToC

DORA.

One afternoon, when the interest in the Brown house was still at its height, and before the children had made the acquaintance of their new neighbor, a little girl came slowly up the street carrying a sun-umbrella.

A hush had fallen upon the neighborhood; nobody was to be seen, and the only sound not made by the birds and insects was the far-away click and whirr of a lawn-mower.

She had had a long walk and was tired; a carriage-block under the maple trees offered a pleasant resting place, so, closing her umbrella, she sat down. She had a pair of frank gray eyes and a smile that made you feel at once that she was a cheery little person, accustomed to make the best of things.

"How still it is!" she said to herself. "I wonder if some wicked fairy has put everybody to sleep? I wish I might go into their houses and break the spell. And here comes an enchanted prince," she continued, laughing at the fancy, as a large black cat came across the street in a leisurely, sleepy way.

The gray eyes seemed to inspire his confidence, for the victim of enchantment stopped to rub against her dress.

"Pretty old kitty, you are somebody's pet," she said, softly touching the glossy head.

He could have told her that some one in the neighborhood was awake. In fact, two individuals had invaded the shady spot where he was taking his nap, and persisted in tickling his ears with grass till he was obliged to leave. He did not mention this, however, only arched his back and purred a little, and then, as if he suddenly remembered important business, trotted off through the bars of the gate and up the walk leading to a large house. The observer on the carriage-block thought it the most attractive house she had ever seen. Everything about it told of pleasant times: the tennis net, the hammock under the trees, the broad piazza, and, most of all, the wide

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front door which seemed to invite her to come in and see what sort of people lived behind it. "I wonder who lives here. I wish I knew. I believe I'll follow the cat and find out," she thought merrily.

At this moment the door opened and two little girls appeared, all in a flutter of dainty blue ruffles. Each carried a cushion, and one had what looked like an atlas under her arm.

"Shall we sit on the porch, Bess?" asked the one with yellow hair.

"Oh, no, Louise, don't you think it will be pleasanter under the chestnut tree?" the brown-haired maiden said; and then they came across the grass and settled themselves under the horse-chestnut, the branches of which met those of the maple tree that cast its shade over the carriage-block. They were quite unconscious of the wistful eyes that watched them as they bent over the atlas, from which Louise took some large sheets of paper.

"How pretty they are! I wish I knew them," the owner of the eyes said to herself. Then, feeling rather shy in the presence of these charming little persons who might look around presently and wonder what she was doing there, she rose and took up her umbrella.

She couldn't help lingering a little, for she wanted very much to know what they were going to do. Standing where she was shielded front their view by a bush that grew in the fence corner, this is what she heard:

"We haven't played the Carletons for ever so long; do begin," urged Louise.

"I think Lucy ought to be married," said Bess; "she is eighteen, you know, and I suppose people are generally married when they are so old as that. Then a wedding will be such fun!"

"Yes, indeed, and she has been engaged to Edwin Graves a long time."

"Well, her father and mother have at last consented, though they wanted her to marry an English earl, who was madly in love with her."

"I am glad I finished the new house in time," said Louise, holding up a drawing which represented the interior of a lofty mansion. "But go on about the earl."

"She met him at the queen's palace, where all the English young ladies were in love with him, but he thought Lucy the most beautiful of all. She did not care for him, though, because she loved Edwin and had promised to marry him. Even though he hadn't so much money, she said she would rather marry a free-born American than any haughty earl."

"That is very interesting," said Louise, admiring the patriotic sentiment, "but do you suppose if she didn't marry Edwin he would die of a broken heart?"

"But she is going to marry him," said Bess, refusing to consider the question.

"And now we will skip the getting ready part and have the wedding. It is a beautiful cloudless night in June, and there are roses everywhere; the house is filled with them."

"I'll put them in while you are telling it," suggested the artist.

Bess assented to this and continued, "Lucy is dressed now, and she is the most beautiful bride anyone ever saw."

"Do you remember Aunt Zélie's wedding?" asked Louise. "Cousin Helen says she was the prettiest bride she ever saw."

"Not very well. I don't remember how she looked, but I think she is the most beautiful person in the world now."

"Oh, yes, so do I!"

The wedding then went on without interruption for a while.

"Lucy is tall and stately, her eyes are blue as the sky, and her hair is long and golden. She speaks very softly, and has the sweetest smile, and she walks like a queen. Her dress is white silk and beautiful lace, with a long, long train, and she wears diamonds and carries a bunch of roses."

"Now tell about Edwin Graves, Bess."

"Men are a great deal harder to do," said the story-teller with a sigh.

"Let me, then, for I know exactly how he looks," and, clasping her hands around her knees and gazing upwards, Louise began: "He is very tall and grand-looking, his eyes are black, and his voice is very deep."

At this interesting point Bess exclaimed, "Louise, here comes Uncle William, and I know he is going to take us driving!"

The listener, who had forgotten everything but the story, came to herself with a start. "How dreadful of me!" she said, walking away very rapidly, while the story-tellers ran out of the gate to greet a tall gentleman who had just driven up.

"I suppose they are sisters," she thought, looking back once more before she turned the corner.

"How nice it must be to live in a house like that. *Bess* and *Louise*; I wonder what their last name is."

Louise was busy with her drawing one morning, comfortably established in a shady corner of the porch, when her aunt called to her:

"I wish you would keep an eye on Carie while Joanna goes on an errand for me."

"I will, Aunt Zélie," she responded promptly.

It was not likely her charge would give her much trouble, for Carie was quite capable of entertaining herself, and was at that moment promenading back and forth with an old parasol over her head, pretending she was going to market.

"Don't go on the grass, baby; it is wet," cautioned Louise, by way of showing her authority, and then returned to the new mansion for the Carletons upon which she was working. She soon became so absorbed in this that she forgot to look up now and then.

Meanwhile Carie talked busily to herself, gesticulating with one small forefinger. But after a little she grew tired of filling her basket with grass and leaves, and stood peeping out through the bars of the gate. How much more fun it would be to go to the real market where she had often been with Joanna! She knew perfectly well that she was not allowed outside by herself, but that did not make it seem any less attractive. With a cautious glance over her shoulder she softly pulled the gate open, and in a moment more was flying up the street. When she reached the corner she turned to the right and slackened her pace, feeling very important and grown up as she bobbed merrily along under her parasol.

"Where are you going, little one?" asked a man who passed her.

She gave him a roguish glance as she answered, "To martet."

At the next corner she turned again to the right, safely crossing the street, but here everything was unfamiliar and she began to feel timid. Then she suddenly saw a very large dog coming toward her. He was so large she thought he must be a bear, and, with a frightened scream, she turned to run, but tripped over her parasol, and fell, a forlorn little heap, on the sidewalk.

"What is the matter? Are you hurt? You mustn't be afraid of the dog; he is good, and doesn't bite."

These reassuring words were spoken by a girl of eleven or twelve, who helped her up and brushed off her dress.

"What a darling you are!" she added, as Carie lifted her big blue eyes, all swimming in tears, saying, "I fought it was a bear."

"No, indeed; he is only a nice old dog who lives next door to me, so I know all about him. Now tell me where you are going all alone?"

"I runned away," was the honest answer, "and I dess you better take me home," she added, looking up confidently into the pleasant face.

"Then you must tell me what your name is and where you live."

Carie could tell her name, but to the other question could only answer, "Over there," pointing in the wrong direction with great assurance. Her companion was puzzled; she felt certain some one was alarmed at the disappearance of this dainty little midget.

"I'll ask Mrs. West if she knows anybody near here named Hazeltine," she said. "Come in and sit on the doorstep till I find out something about you."

She was back in a moment. "I think I know now, you dear little thing! It must be that lovely house I saw the other day."

For some minutes after Carie's flight Louise worked on, then remembering her charge she discovered her absence. She ran to the gate and looked up and down the street, she searched the garden and the house, and finally burst in upon Aunt Zélie crying:

"I have lost her! I have lost her!"

The news spread in a moment; nothing else could be thought of till the lost darling was found.

Carl ran in one direction, Sukey in another, and Bess flew over to ask if by any chance Miss Brown had seen the runaway. Louise stood on the porch, the picture of misery.



"A GIRL OF ELEVEN OR TWELVE HELPED HER UP AND BRUSHED OFF HER CLOTHES."

"You will never trust me again, *never*" she sobbed as her aunt came out and stood beside her, looking anxiously up and down.

"I am sure you won't be so careless another time," Aunt Zélie said, pitying her distress.

At this moment who should turn the corner but the small cause of all the excitement, chatting away to her new friend, quite unconscious that she was giving anybody any trouble!

"Why, Carie Hazeltine, where have you been?" cried Louise, drying her eyes and running to meet her.

"I found her on Chestnut street—a dog had frightened her," her companion explained, reluctantly releasing the plump hand she held.

"You are a naughty girl," said her sister, taking possession of her. "You might have been run over, or something dreadful."

"I didn't det run over," Carie insisted indignantly.

"Well, say good-by, and 'thank you for taking care of me.' We are all very much obliged to you," Louise added, turning to the stranger. Carie held up her mouth for a kiss, and then allowed herself to be led away.

"At any rate I know their name is Hazeltine," said Carie's friend to herself.

The culprit was soon in a fair way to think she had done something very funny and interesting, people made such a fuss over her, so Aunt Zélie carried her off to be solemnly reprimanded.

"I suppose you are going to the party to-morrow, aren't you?" asked Elsie Morris, a neighbor and friend, who had been helping in the search.

"Of course," answered Bess. "I am glad you came home in time, Elsie; Aleck is going to stay in and go with us."

"There are to be fireworks and lanterns and all sorts of things," observed Aleck, who lay at his ease in the hammock.

"Yes, I know," said Elsie, "and everybody is to have a—I don't know what you call it—something to remember the party by. Annie May told me herself."

"How nice! It will be almost like Christmas," said Louise.

"Not like one of Uncle William's parties, though," put in Carl.

"School begins next week, and three months of pegging before Christmas," groaned Aleck.

"Come on, then; let's make the most of the time we have," Carl urged energetically.

It was the afternoon of the next day, and Louise stood before the mirror critically viewing her sash.

"Why, Joanna! You have made Bess's bows ever so much longer than mine."

"I can't see what difference that makes," was the rather sharp reply, for the September day was warm and the task of dressing three restless young ladies for a party was not conducive to coolness.

"It makes a great deal of difference to us, for we wish to look exactly alike," said Louise loftily. "And if you are going to do a thing at all, you ought to do it well; Father says so."

"Dear me! Here comes Ikey, and we are not ready," exclaimed Bess, who stood at the window.

"You might be if you weren't so particular. I never saw the beat of your equal," and Joanna whisked Helen's dress over her head.

"The *beat* of your *equal*," Bess repeated. "What does that mean, Jo?"

"My patience!" was the only reply to be had from this much-enduring maid.

"Joanna is cross; I'll get Aunt Zélie to tie my sash," said Louise, running off, followed by Bess.

Their aunt was in the lower hall with Ikey, who was looking dignified, if not a trifle stiff, in a new standing collar. Louise decided that he needed a rose in his buttonhole, and danced away to get one when her sash had been arranged to her satisfaction.

Though there was more than a year's difference in their ages, Bess and Louise were exactly the same height, and were sometimes taken for twins. This delighted them beyond measure, and to help the impression they wished to be dressed alike, down to the smallest detail.

Though Bess's hair curled prettily she insisted on wearing it in two braids, because that was the only comfortable fashion in which her sister's heavy locks could be arranged. Aunt Zélie laughed at them, but let them have their way.

Carl and Aleck were the last to appear, which Bess thought was very strange, considering they had no sashes to be tied, or hair to be curled or braided.

"Now trot along and have the best kind of a time," said Aunt Zélie after she had inspected them, and given some finishing touches to their cravats; "I am proud of my girls and boys."

They were a merry party as they started out, waving their good-bys, Ikey feeling particularly proud to be counted one of her boys. He only half wanted to go, for, though sociably inclined, he was bashful, but the girls had promised not to desert him.

Carl affected to hold parties in disdain. "They never do anything worth while; who cares for 'drop the handkerchief' or dancing?"

When Louise mischievously suggested that he must be going for the supper, he strolled ahead with an air of lofty scorn.

The occasion was a birthday party, an outdoor affair, and the large yard was hung with Japanese lanterns ready to light when the sun went down. As the children came flocking in with their bright faces and gay ribbons, it was a pretty scene.

There were swings and all sorts of games, and soon everybody was busy having a good time. Even Carl forgot that he did not like parties. But there was one person who seemed to be left out of the fun. Stopping to rest after some lively game, Bess noticed a girl sitting on a bench all by herself. She looked lonely, and Bess felt sorry for her.

"I think I ought to go and speak to her; won't you go with me, Elsie?" she asked.

"No; I'd rather not. I think she is funny-looking."

"But I am afraid she does not know anybody."

"Well, it is not our party; why doesn't Annie May take care of her?" And Elsie smoothed her pink ribbons complacently.

Bess was shy, and thought she could not go by herself to speak to a stranger. "I'll wait till I see Louise," she said.

"Who is that girl?" some one asked the little hostess.

"Her name is Dora Warner," was the reply. "Mamma knows her mother. They haven't lived here long. I have tried to introduce her, but nobody wants to talk to her, and she doesn't know a single game. I wish Mamma would come and take care of her."

The stranger sat alone looking on at the merry scene. She felt timid and unhappy, and had to wink very hard now and then to get rid of a troublesome mist that found its way to her eyes.

"I am silly I know; I ought not to expect to get acquainted all at once," she said to herself bravely.

If it had not been for the loneliness she might have enjoyed the fun going on around her, even though she had no part in it. Such dainty dresses, such laughing

and dancing about, such airs and graces, she had never before seen! She recognized the charming little girls who had so taken her fancy a week or two before—sisters, she felt sure, of that dear little Carie.

"Oh, dear!" she said at last; "I can't help wishing I had not come!"

Not thinking what she was doing, Dora took up a croquet mallet which had been left on the bench, and began slowly to screw it into the ground. Just then a boy rushed by hotly chased by another. The one in pursuit tripped on the mallet and fell headlong on the grass.

"Are you hurt? I am so sorry; I did not mean to do it!" she exclaimed in dismay.

"No, I am not hurt," he replied, sitting up and rubbing the stains off his hands with his handkerchief. "How did you come to do it anyhow?" and he gave her a glimpse of a pair of merry brown eyes, and then went on polishing his hands.

"I don't know," she answered.

"If it had not been for you I could have caught Aleck."

"I am so sorry," Dora said again, in such a mournful tone that the boy laughed.

"You needn't think I care! Aleck knows I can catch him. Do you like to run?"

"I haven't tried it very often lately. I think you could catch me," she answered.

"I probably could; as a general thing girls aren't much on running, but you should see Louise!"

"Who is she?" asked Dora.

"She is my sister; I thought everybody knew Louise."

"I don't know any one," was the reply in a mournful tone.

"Don't you really?" Carl asked, sitting up very straight; "and is that the reason you are over here by yourself?"

"I know Annie a little, but you see I haven't lived here since I was a baby. We have been travelling about a good deal, so I haven't had a chance to know many people. Mamma wanted me to come this afternoon."

There was something exceedingly pleasant in her straightforward manner.

"I don't care much for parties myself," said Carl, "but if you want to get acquainted you must not stick in a corner."

"What must I do?" Dora asked, smiling.

"Well, to begin with, you make friends with somebody who knows somebody else, and so on. It is very easy."

"Then I have begun with you, though I do not know your name."

"Very well, here goes! My name is Carl Hazeltine, the girl over by the oak tree is my sister Louise, the boy with her is Isaac Ford—the one who is laughing I mean; next to him is Elsie Morris, and that fellow coming this way is Aleck Hazeltine, my cousin, and—"

Dora put out her hand appealingly. "I can't possibly remember so many, and I haven't told you my name. It is Dora Warner."

"We used to have a cat named Dora," Carl remarked gravely, taking a small round glass from his pocket and composedly surveying his necktie, "a nice, white, meek little pussy cat."

"I had a dog once, when we were in London, named Carl—o. He was a curly dog and ever so vain when we tied a ribbon on his collar," was the prompt response. Then they both laughed merrily, and Carl asked with friendly interest, "Were you really in London!"

"Yes, we were there last winter."

"Wasn't it great fun?"

"No, for papa was ill, and mamma always with him, so I was lonely."

Something in Dora's tone made Carl notice that her sash was black.

"So I suppose her father is dead," he thought, but could think of nothing to say, and jumping up suddenly was off like a flash.

Dora thought her new acquaintance a funny one, but his friendly manner had made her feel cheerful again.

She saw him coming back presently, accompanied by a little girl with soft dark eyes and a sweet face which she recognized at once.

"This is my sister Bess," he announced.

Bess sat down beside her, saying gravely, "Carl says you don't know anyone. Wouldn't you like to come and play with us? We are going to begin a new game."

Dora was quite ready. "Only I am afraid I shall not know how," she said.

"That won't make the least difference, for we haven't any of us played it before. It is very easy—just throwing bean-bags," and, taking her hand in a friendly clasp, Bess led her toward a gay group that was all in an uproar over some of Aleck's nonsense.

"Here comes that odd-looking girl," whispered Elsie to Helen. "Just see what a plain dress she has on!"

"Why, you are the girl who brought our Carie home yesterday, aren't you?" cried Louise, as Bess introduced Dora.

"Are you really? She has been talking about you all day. Carl, it was Dora who found Carie," Bess exclaimed delightedly.

From this moment the charmed circle was open to her. Dora could hardly believe she was not dreaming. To be taken into the midst of all the fun under the protection of her new friends—to find herself suddenly popular! What could have seemed more incredible half an hour before? Louise, who was a born leader, and whose bright face and sunny temper made her a general favorite, took her in charge, and Dora entered so heartily into the game, laughing so merrily at her mistakes, that her companions begun at once to like her.

"Come, Elsie, aren't you going to play?" asked Bess.

"I don't know how," was her reply, in a fretful tone.

"It is perfectly easy," said one of the others.

"Never mind; she doesn't know beans," laughed Aleck, tossing a bag to Dora.

"I know you are very rude," pouted Elsie.

"Do play," urged Dora, running to her. "I will show you exactly how," and half reluctantly she yielded, for she really wanted to play. Before they were through the game, supper interrupted, and gave them something else to think about.

Mrs. May, remembering the stranger and coming to look for her, concluded that she was quite able to take care of herself, for she seemed to be having an extremely good time.

A good time truly it was, Dora thought, as she sat among her new friends.

"I am so glad we are acquainted with you," Louise said.

"I am sure I am glad," she answered, "and I do hope I shall see Carie again sometime. There is one thing I must tell you," she continued. "The other day I walked by your house, and I was so tired I sat down on your carriage-block to rest. It was very quiet, and nobody was in sight, and I was sitting there thinking how very big your front door was—"

"How did you know it was our house?" asked Bess.

"I didn't then, but presently the door opened and you two came out. You had on blue dresses, and Louise had a book, and you came and sat under a tree not very far from me."

"Why, we didn't see you!"

"I know you did not, and, of course, I ought to have gone away, but"—here Dora's face flushed—"I couldn't help hearing the beginning of your story, and then I forgot what I was doing—it was dreadful; I want you to know about it—I listened to all you said."

"How funny! And we did not see you! Why, Dora, we don't care a bit, do we, Bess?"

"I am very glad if you don't. I was so ashamed of myself. I hoped some day I should know you, but I did not think it would happen so soon," and Dora heaved a sigh of relief.

"But isn't it funny that you should have found Carie?" said Bess.

"And then have tripped me up," added Carl, joining them. "It is really as curious as our getting acquainted with Miss Brown."

"Who is Miss Brown?" asked Elsie.

"She is a person who has lately moved into Nottingham castle," he replied gravely.

"Robin Hood broke one of her windows," added Aleck.

"What does he mean? I don't understand it at all," fretted Elsie, who was so easily teased the boys could never resist the temptation.

"Carl is talking nonsense. I will tell you about her sometime," said Bess.

"Good-by, Dora," said Louise when the happy evening was over and they were starting home. "I think we ought to be friends because you found Carie; don't you, Bess?"

Bess certainly thought so, for she had taken a desperate fancy to this new acquaintance.

"You must come to see me; Helen and all of you," Dora said cordially.

"Mamma, I have had a beautiful time, I am glad I went," she exclaimed, standing beside her mother's couch a few minutes later. "Does your head ache? Then I'll wait till to-morrow to tell you about it;" and she went to bed to dream pleasant dreams.

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CHAPTER V.

ToC

UNCLE WILLIAM.

When the children reached home that evening they found Aunt Marcia and Uncle William in the library.

Carie, too, was there, bent on an investigation of her uncle's pocket, from which she had just brought to light in triumph a chocolate mouse.

"Now, baby dear, you must go to bed, mammy is waiting for you," said Aunt Zélie.

"Let me find one uzzer one," pleaded Carie, depositing her prize on her uncle's knee, and continuing the search.

"Of course you have had a 'perfectly lovely' time," said Uncle William as the party-goers entered.

"Indeed we have," answered Louise, establishing herself on an arm of her father's chair. "And we've found the nicest girl," she added.

"I found her," said Carl.

"She is the girl who brought Carie home yesterday, and we like her very much," explained Bess.

"Annie May hasn't any politeness; she didn't introduce her to more than one or two people. Think of being at a big party like that and not knowing anyone!"

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"That is not a proper way in which to speak of your hostess, my son," said Mr. Hazeltine.

"How did you happen to get acquainted with her?" asked Aunt Zélie, smiling at Carl's vehemence.

"Auntie, it was the funniest thing you ever heard of!" Louise exclaimed. "She tripped him up with a croquet mallet!"

"She must have been desperate," remarked her father, pulling one of the long braids that hung over her shoulder.

"She did not mean to do it—it was when I was running after Aleck—and she was very sorry. Then I found she didn't know anybody, so I went for Bess, and she had a good time after that," Carl explained briefly.

"She has lived in London, and different places abroad," Bess added.

"May we go to see her, auntie? We told her we would if you'd let us."

"Louise, you should never promise to visit people till you know something about them," said Aunt Marcia reprovingly.

"Her name is Dora Warner, and she boards with her mother at Mrs. West's on Chestnut street, and her father is dead. I think we know a good deal about her, Aunt Marcia," Bess said demurely.

"I am going to see her, and take her a chocolate mouse," Carie suddenly announced, having been a silent listener while she captured a handful of mice.

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"I want to know what it is you like so much about your new friend," said Uncle William.

"What do you think of her, Helen?" his wife asked of the little girl, sitting so quietly beside her.

"Oh, I like her, Aunt Marcia, ever so much. She asked *me* to come to see her, and she is older than Bess."

"There is no nonsense about her," said Carl.

"I think it is hard to tell why you like people." Bess twisted her handkerchief meditatively. "She isn't exactly pretty, but she is pleasant and polite—"

"Yes, and she is ready to do anything, and doesn't think about her clothes," Carl interposed.

"Boys think about their clothes as well as girls," said Louise. "I know lots of girls who don't think about their clothes."

"So do I—some who have no regard whatever for them," said Aunt Zélie, laughing.

"Do you know I like the description they give of Dora," remarked Mr. William Hazeltine, after the children had left the room.

"I never knew Carl to be so warm in the praise of a new acquaintance," said his brother. "You will have to let them go to see her, Zélie."

"Pray, do not be rash; find out who they are first," begged Mrs. Hazeltine.

"I can't help thinking," said her husband, "that this little girl may be the daughter of my old friend Dick Warner; you remember him, Frank? He died about a year ago, somewhere abroad. As bright and sweet-tempered a fellow as ever lived! I must look into it."

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Uncle William usually had his own way about things, for the reason that no other way was so pleasant. No one could resist his bright face and cordial manner. He carried around with him an atmosphere of such hearty goodwill that it was next to impossible to be cross or gloomy in his presence. People sometimes wondered how he happened to marry Mrs. Hazeltine, but the reason was plain enough to him. He regarded her with the greatest admiration, feeling that a harum-scarum fellow like himself was most fortunate in having such a wife to keep him straight. He was very proud and fond of her, and quite blind to what others called her managing propensities. Sometimes, indeed, he wondered how she could be so severe in her judgment of the children, but then someone must be firm. And though she was often annoyed by his friendliness with all sorts of odd people, and wished William would draw the line somewhere, she always ended by saying leniently that he would never be anything but a boy.

He had a warm love for children. No matter how ragged and forlorn they might be, they interested him. The newsboys and bootblacks felt that he was their friend, and many were the treats they received at his hand. By his young relatives and their many friends he was looked upon as a sort of every-day Santa Claus. One of his peculiarities was a love for surprising people. He sent mysterious parcels, left candy about in unexpected places, or took the children out for a walk, and then whisked them off on some delightful excursion.

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Promptness was another of Uncle William's good qualities. Having determined to make inquiries about his old friend, he did it at once, and so it happened that Dora and her mother were called down to the parlor one day to see a tall gentleman with kindly dark eyes and iron-gray hair, who won them at once by his simple, cordial manner.

Mrs. Warner was a thoroughly saddened woman since the death of her husband, but even she could not resist his friendliness, and Dora was altogether captivated.

The children were surprised and delighted when they heard that their uncle had been to see the Warners, and that Dora was really the daughter of his old friend.

"So of course we *ought* to be friends with her," Bess remarked, as though it was a solemn duty rather than a pleasure.

Aunt Zélie allowed them to go to see her at once, and invite her to spend the next day with them.

"Don't things happen beautifully, Mamma?" Dora said gayly, as she dressed that morning. "To think that I really know Bess and Louise, and am going to see them!"

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Her mother smiled sadly; she was glad her daughter had found such pleasant friends, for she knew that their quiet life was making her old for her years.

So Dora, in a flutter of delight, found herself following in the footsteps of the black cat, up the walk leading to the Big Front Door. And there on the porch, stretched at his ease, was that gentleman himself, apparently waiting for her, for he rose to meet her, and arched his back, and purred with great friendliness.

Then the door opened and she was inside, but before she could look around her, three little girls came flying down the stairs and laid violent hands upon her. Talking very fast, and quite breathless with laughing, they took her up to the dainty room—all blue and white—which Bess and Louise called theirs, where she took off her hat. Next she had to be presented to Aunt Zélie, from whom she received a welcome which made her feel at home from that minute. And then to the star chamber, where they found Carl, who was very glad indeed to see Dora again. One morning was really too short for all there was to be said and seen.

Dora was interested in everything: stamp albums, photographs, dolls, and most of all in the story books.

"You must take 'The Adventures of Robin Hood' home with you," Carl insisted when he found she had not read it, and then the others began to press their favorites upon

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her until she was quite overwhelmed.

She must look over at the Brown house garden, and hear about their new neighbor, and about Ikey Ford, and how tiresome his grandmother was. These confidences were interrupted by Carie, who walked in, eager to see the girl who had found her, and other attractions faded before the delight of holding this dainty bit of humanity on her lap. Nothing could be so charming, Dora thought, as she kissed the rosy cheeks and soft hair, and listened to her funny chatter; for Carie, who was not given to showing favors indiscriminately, treated her with unusual graciousness, bestowing chocolate mice with a lavish hand.

"You ought to be the best children in the world, for you have everything," Dora said as they went down to lunch.

"Oh, we are!" modestly replied Carl.

When this was over she was taken into a large room full of books and beautiful things, among them two portraits. One of these was of a white-haired man whose eyes seemed to smile at her as Bess said, "This is Grandfather;" the other face had something about it so like Bess's own that her low-toned explanation, "This is Mamma," was not needed.

After all, they had not quite everything.

When Carl went over to see Ikey about something, they seized the opportunity to play the Carletons, it being a game that the masculine mind scorned. They sat under the same chestnut tree, and the black cat joined them, and was formally introduced to Dora as Mr. Smith. Everything was quiet in the neighborhood, somebody was cutting the grass not far away, and it really might have been mistaken for that afternoon two weeks ago, except that the girl who was then on the carriage-block was now in the garden. To make the resemblance complete, who should drive up but Uncle William, calling to know if anybody wanted to go to the country.

The Carletons were promptly consigned to the seclusion of the atlas, while the romancers ran for their hats.

It was almost dark when Dora was set down at her own door, merry and rosy.

"Good-by! and do ask your mother to let you go to our school," her friends called, waving their handkerchiefs as they turned the corner. That happy day settled it. Dora and the Hazeltines became fast friends. Everybody liked her, the grown people as well as the children. Even Aunt Marcia pronounced her a most well-behaved little girl, and hoped Bess and Louise would profit by her example. Carl claimed the credit of having discovered her, and Carie always referred to her as "My Dora."

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CHAPTER VI.

THE MAGIC DOOR.

ToC

When Miss Brown said of the Big Front Door that it made her cheerful simply to look at it, she had no idea, nor had anyone else, how much was going to grow out of it.

First of all was the story Uncle William told one stormy Sunday evening before the wood fire in the library.

It had been a trying day to the children, with the rain coming steadily down, their father away, and Aunt Zélie sick with a cold. Perhaps it was not to be wondered at that by afternoon they had grown "cantankerous," as Sukey expressed it, and that something very like quarrelling had gone on in the star chamber.

This was all forgotten when the early tea was over, and they gathered around the fire with Uncle William in father's arm-chair.

The shadows were dark in the corners of the room, but the soft wavering light gilded everything within reach, touching Grandfather's portrait with its gentle magic, till he himself seemed to be standing there, smiling and about to speak. The young faces turned to Uncle William were full of quiet content.

"Do you know what Miss Brown has named our house?" Bess asked. "She calls it the house with the Big Front Door."

"That is a very good name and reminds me of a story."

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"Oh, please tell it," they all begged, and so without preface Uncle William began:

"Once upon a time a man built a house. He selected the materials with greatest care, and watched every brick, stone, and beam used in its construction, that everything might be strong and good. But it was to the front door that he gave most thought. This was of oak after a design of his own, and was wide and massive, with hinges of wrought-iron and a dragon's-head knocker. Some of his neighbors admired it, others found fault with it, objecting that it was out of proportion and too large for a dwelling-house. But after a while they discovered that it was more than an ordinary door. There was some magic about it; it shed a radiance over the whole neighborhood. People when they were perplexed would look towards it, and presently their doubts would fade away. Those who were despondent or sorrowful were cheered and comforted by the sight of it. In stormy weather it was like a small neighborhood sun. And no one rejoiced more than its owner in the strange power of the door, for he had a heart full of love and goodwill, and he and his children were constantly doing kindnesses to their neighbors. They were a happy family too among themselves, and the reason seemed to be because they lived in the radiance of the magic door.

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"At length, to the sorrow of his friends, this good man died. In his parting instructions to his children he warned them that the door might sometime lose its power, and if its hinges should ever become rusty, or its lock hard to turn, he directed them to a certain iron box where they would find a key which, if used according to the directions attached, would soon restore it. This made little or no impression upon them at the time, for, since the oldest of them could remember, the door had been always the same, and it seemed improbable that it would ever change. They missed their father sadly, but for a time continued to live as they had when he was with them. However, as the months passed, all unconsciously at first they began to neglect their duties; to forget the acts of neighborly kindness they had once been so glad to perform; and saddest of all, they fell to quarrelling among themselves. Then one day they could not open the door, try as they would. Rust was discovered thick upon its hinges, and while they were wondering how this could have happened, some one brought word that complaint was general in the neighborhood that the door had lost its magic power. The children looked at one another in dismay, till one remembered the iron box and went in search of it. When it was found and opened in the midst of the family there was in it simply an ordinary key with a card tied to it, and on the card were written these words: 'They helped every one his neighbor.'

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"They were for a time at a loss to understand, when one wiser than the rest spoke: 'Do you not see,' he said, 'that it was the spirit of helpfulness that made our home happy, and gave our door its strange power? We have neglected our father's teaching; have been selfish and unloving, and so are no longer a blessing to ourselves or others.'

"Each felt in his heart that this was true, and with one accord they made up their quarrels; one went to visit a sick neighbor, another carried a coat to a poor man and food to his children, and in various ways they tried to begin over again, and live as their father had lived. Then happiness returned to their home, the key slipped easily into the lock, the door opened wide once more, and gradually regained its old power. So not only were they happy themselves, but they kept alive the memory of their father, whose name was loved and honored by all who came within the radiance of the magic door."

There was silence for a few minutes; then Bess asked, "Was Grandfather the man who built the house?"

Uncle William smiled.

"You must find the moral for yourselves, but I acknowledge that Miss Brown put the idea into my head."

"And you told it because we were cross this afternoon, I know," said Louise wisely.

"Suppose Miss Brown could tell when we are bad just by looking at the door!" Carl suggested, laughing.

"It would be dreadful," said Bess soberly.

"But it isn't true about *our* door, is it?" Helen asked.

"Of course not, goosie," replied her brother.

"Put it the other way, and suppose that Miss Brown could tell when you are kind and unselfish, that would not be dreadful," said their uncle. "And I forgot to say," he added, "that the key in the story is warranted to work like magic anywhere. It was a favorite text of your grandfather's. When this house was built I was a little boy, hardly as old as Helen, but I remember distinctly the first time I went through it. I was very much delighted, and came running down the steps, calling, 'Oh, father, what a nice house this is!' and he replied, 'I am glad you like it, William. It is only a house now, but we are going to try to make it a home.' I don't think I quite understood what he meant till long afterwards, though he went on to explain that a home is a place where love, obedience, and helpfulness grow, and are stored up as

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the water is stored in Quarry Hill reservoir, to find its way out into the world after a while, carrying comfort and cheer.

"Your grandfather did all he could to make this house a real home while he lived, and now the responsibility rests upon you."

"I truly mean to remember the key, and try to be a helper," said Bess, finding and marking the text in her own Bible, at Uncle William's suggestion. "I like that part about the radiance of the magic door," she added.

"It is easy enough to talk about it, but it's not so easy to *be* good," said Carl with emphasis.

"We are not here to do easy things, and, as Bess says, we can all try," Uncle William replied, "and now we have had a sermon, let us have some music before I go."

"Let's tell Dora about the magic door; perhaps she would like to help!" said Louise, as she and Bess went upstairs to bed.

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CHAPTER VII.

IKEY'S ACCIDENT.

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ToC

The days grew shorter and cooler, the leaves began to flutter down, and each morning, from her sitting-room window, Miss Brown watched the children start for school.

First the little girls, tossing good-by kisses to Aunt Zélie, ran down the walk to join Dora or Elsie; then a few minutes later Ikey was at the gate whistling for Carl. In the five months since Ikey had come to stay with his grandparents the boys had become almost inseparable.

Dr. Isaac Clinton Ford was a surgeon in the navy, and having been ordered to the Mediterranean, his wife, whose health was not good, followed him, with their little daughter, while young Isaac was sent to his father's old home. Warmly attached to it himself, Dr. Ford could think of no better place for his son, and old Mr. and Mrs. Ford felt that it would be almost like having their boy again, from whom they had had only brief visits for eighteen years.

Unfortunately, neither took into account that young Isaac was totally unlike the quiet, studious boy his father had been. It was a question which suffered most during those first weeks, the elderly people whose lives had moved on like clockwork for so many years, or the mischievous, fun-loving boy suddenly introduced into their household.

The Fords' was a tall, three-story, stone front house, with everything about it inside and out in immaculate order. The stone steps and walk were spotless, the windows shone, and the shades and curtains were arranged in the most exact manner. The only flowers were three oleanders in tubs, and these partook of the general tidiness.

It is easy to see that a boy without any deep regard for spotless stones, who labored under the delusion that windows were made to look out of, and who did not hesitate to push curtains aside and open blinds, who whistled when his grandfather was taking his nap, left his things lying about, and teased the snappish old pug was destined to be a trial. On the other hand, the change from a free and easy home life, with a mother as merry-hearted as himself and a father who was more of a boy at forty than he had been at twelve, to that humdrum routine would have been trying to wiser people than Ikey.

No wonder the first weeks were full of miserable homesickness. Life would have been unendurable if the Hazeltines had not discovered him. Ikey was ready to meet them more than half way, and before long became their boon companion.

Mrs. Howard, the children's aunt, guessed how matters stood, for she had lived across the street from the Fords most of her life; so she went to his grandmother, and asked her to let Ikey play with Carl and the little girls every day.

Mrs. Ford consented, feeling surprised and gratified; and unwilling to be lacking in hospitality, she allowed her grandson and his friends the freedom of the back yard, on condition that they would respect the front. Before the summer was over she had become so used to the sound of the children's voices that she no longer found it

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necessary to go to the window every five minutes to see what they were doing.

Ikey had a genius for getting hurt. Cuts, bumps, and bruises were matters of everyday occurrence, and were accepted with a heroism born of long familiarity. But one morning when he and Carl were on their way to school he met with an accident which was unusually hard to bear.

As they were passing a high board fence they heard a great barking and growling, as if a lot of dogs were tearing one another to pieces. "What in the world!" exclaimed Carl, trying to find some crack or knothole.

"You can't see in that way," Ikey cried scornfully, and giving a spring he grasped the top of the fence and drew himself up to look over.

Exactly how it happened he could never tell; probably his curiosity was resented, for before he had time to see anything, some sharp teeth made themselves felt, and he dropped down groaning, "My nose! My nose!" Carl was very much alarmed at sight of the blood that streamed down from his face, but had presence of mind to remember a doctor's office in the next block.

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"Your nose isn't all gone, is it?" he asked anxiously, as he led the way.

"No, I think there is some of it left," came in muffled tones from the handkerchief Ikey held to his face.

Fortunately the doctor was in and dressed the wound, pronouncing it not serious, but advising his patient not to be in such a hurry to investigate strange dogs another time, or he might lose the whole of his nose instead of only a slice.

Relieved that it was no worse, and not being in the habit of making a fuss over his hurts, Ikey decided to go on to school.

Perhaps if he could have looked in the glass he would not have been so ready, for the yellow plaster did not add to his beauty.

Now all danger was over, Carl could not contain himself, but laughed and laughed till his friend's feelings were somewhat hurt.

They were late of course, and created a sensation when they entered, and the suppressed amusement among the boys became an uproar at recess. It was decidedly trying to be the object of so much school-boy wit; to hear over and over again: "Ikey, what ails your nose?"—"Can't you wear it in a sling?"—"Or put a shade over it?"—or to see on the blackboard lines adapted from Mother Goose:

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"It used to be a blackbird, so the story
goes,
But now it is a puppy dog that nips off his
nose."

He stood it bravely till school was over, but on the way home, at sight of the girls on the corner he made a sudden dive across the street.

"Where is Ikey going?" Louise asked, in surprise, of Carl and Aleck.

"He has lost his nose," answered the latter.

"Has he gone to look for it?" laughed Dora.

"Tell us what you mean," said Bess.

With much laughter the boys told the story.

"It is mean of you to make fun. Suppose it was your nose?" and Louise held on to her own.

"Perhaps it won't turn up any more," suggested Bess.

"I am afraid he won't go to the ball-game; that will be too bad," said Carl.

They were all going with Uncle William to see a game of foot-ball that afternoon, and there was only time for a hasty lunch before they started. Carl ran over to beg Ikey to go in spite of his disfigurement, but a melancholy voice from the third-story landing declined so positively that there was nothing left to be said.

From behind the curtains Ikey watched the party start off, and felt very unhappy at not being with them.

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That was a miserable afternoon! His grandmother's exclamations and questions had only made matters worse, and he took refuge in his room, declining to eat any lunch.

Before long he succeeded in convincing himself that nobody cared for him, except, perhaps, his father and mother, who were so far away.

Maybe the others would be sorry when he died of hydrophobia. He had heard that people often had it when they were bitten by dogs, and it seemed very probable that this would be his fate.

Absorbed in his misery, he hardly knew how time passed, till some one knocked at

his door. He lay on the couch with his face buried in the pillows, and thinking it was the housemaid he said, "Come in," without looking up.

The hand that touched his head, however, was not Katie's, nor the voice that said, "You poor boy!"

It was Mrs. Howard, or Aunt Zélie as he always called her in his thoughts.

Overwhelmed with mingled delight and dismay, he could only struggle to a sitting position, with his handkerchief to his nose and not a word to say.

She did not appear to notice this, but talked on, and in some way it came about that presently his aching head was down on the pillows again, and her soft hand was smoothing back his hair, just as Mamma did, while she told him that Mr. Hazeltine had inquired about the dogs, and found that they were only very large and lively puppies, not at all vicious.

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Ikey heaved a sigh of relief, and managed to thank her for her thoughtfulness. Then they talked of other things, and he actually lit the gas—for it was growing dark—that she might see the photographs of his mother and sister.

Before Aunt Zélie left they were even laughing together over his funny accident, and when with a kiss on his forehead she was gone, it was a much happier boy she left on the sofa.

There was sure to be a tonic in her petting, and Ikey got up and washed his face, looking bravely in the glass meanwhile. Then he went meekly downstairs and enjoyed his dinner. Mrs. Ford never petted anyone, she did not know how; but she showed her sympathy by offering her grandson all sorts of good things to eat.

At the most exciting moment of the foot-ball game Louise exclaimed: "We haven't done anything to help Ikey, and he is really and truly our neighbor!"

"We will try to find something to take him," said Uncle William.

There was little to be had in that part of the town, so they turned it into a joke, and it was a most remarkable collection that Carl and Aleck displayed in the Fords' sitting-room that night.

There was a toy balloon, a beetle that ran all over the room in a life-like manner, a jumping jack, and some popcorn balls.

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Old Mr. Ford declared he had not laughed so much in twenty years as he did at the antics of the boys and the beetle. His bedtime passed before he knew it.

Ikey went to sleep with the balloon tied to the head of his bed, feeling that after all his friends *did* care. The next day the doctor replaced the ugly yellow plaster with something white that was more pleasant to look at, and in a short time his nose was as well as ever, except for a slight scar.

Bess had thought of giving a masquerade ball in his honor, to be held in the star chamber, and at which he was to appear as "The Man in the Iron Mask," but owing to his rapid recovery it was given up. She was rather disappointed, for it seemed an interesting way in which to help a neighbor in affliction. She and Louise were very anxious to be helpers, but were not content with small every-day opportunities.

"I can't think of things as Dora does," she complained to Aunt Zélie one evening.

"What has Dora been doing?" her aunt asked.

"Oh, it was at school to-day, when we were reading together at recess in a new story book of Elsie's. There was Elsie and Constance, Dora, Louise and I, and that meek little Mamie Garland kept walking up and down looking at us. Nobody likes her, because she is a telltale. Then before we knew what she was going to do Dora jumped up and ran after Mamie, and asked her if she didn't want to hear the story. You could see she was surprised, but she came, and Louise made room for her."

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"And did she spoil the story?"

"No—not really, but it is nicer to have just the people you like. But I suppose it is pretty mean to go on having a nice time when somebody else isn't—even if you don't like them—and not ask them."

Aunt Zélie smiled at this remarkable sentence. "It is easy to be selfish with our good times," she said; "but don't be discouraged, you will be more quick to see an opportunity next time. If I am not mistaken I saw a little girl put away her book to play with her small sister not so very long ago."

"Do you think that would count?" Bess asked earnestly.

"I certainly do," answered her aunt, pinching the rosy cheek.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE M.KS.

Bess stood at the window, her brows drawn together in a decided frown. Not that the sunshine was dazzling; quite the contrary. It was what Aunt Sukey called a drizzle-dazzle day. The air was full of a penetrating mist that put outdoor amusements out of the question. Stormy Saturdays were particularly trying, and to-day the rain interfered with an expedition to which the children had been looking forward for a week.

"I wish I were a fairy," said Louise, who sat on the floor building a block house for Carie; "I wouldn't have any rainy days."

"A mighty nice world 't would be, I reckon, if you had the fixin' of it," Sukey remarked sarcastically.

"Oh, well, perhaps I'd have *some* rain, but only at night."

"Don't you s'pose the good Lord knows what kind of weather is best for us a heap better than a no-account fairy?" Sukey continued, seeing an opportunity for some moral teaching.

"Of course he does, but I shouldn't think one Saturday would make much difference."

"That ain't for us to say. Folks can't have all they wants in this world, and they has to be taught it."

"Louise, I see Miss Brown at her window; don't you think it would be nice to go to see her?" said Bess. "We could wear our waterproofs."

"Yes, indeed; may we, mammy?" asked Louise, jumping up. Though Sukey professed to be a stern disciplinarian she rarely denied the children anything, so after a careful survey of the weather she thought they might go if they would wear their overshoes. Miss Brown saw them as they came out of the door and raised a big umbrella. "Where can they be going?" she wondered as they disappeared from her view. A few minutes later, however, they came in sight again, this time on her side of the street, and stopped at her gate.

"You are a pair of rainy-day fairies!" she exclaimed as they entered. They both laughed at this, and Bess explained that it was just what Louise had been wishing to be.

"Then we each have our wish, for I have been longing for some good fairy to cheer me this gloomy day."

Miss Brown's sitting-room was a pleasant place even on the darkest day. A bright fire burned in the grate behind the high brass fender, some yellow chrysanthemums bloomed in the west window, the mahogany chairs and tables shone with the polish time gives to such things, and behind the glass doors of the corner cupboard stood rows of pretty old china. From above the mantel, old Mrs. Brown—at the age of eighteen, with stiff little curls over each ear and immense leg o' mutton sleeves in her low-necked pink gown—looked down, smiling impartially upon everybody.

"Don't you think rainy days are tiresome?" asked Louise, seating herself in the window beside the flowers.

"Not when I have company," was the smiling reply.

"Aunt Zélie has been staying with Cousin Helen this week, and Carl went home with Aleck yesterday, and we were going out to spend the day to-day and come home with them. But of course we couldn't on account of the rain, and there is nobody at home but Carie and Sukey, for Helen is at Aunt Marcia's." The tone in which Bess spoke was so doleful it was almost tragic.

"Uncle William says there is always a bright spot somewhere, and perhaps there is for us, but we haven't found it," added Louise; then looking across the street she gave a little laugh. "I was just thinking of the Magic Door," she explained.

Miss Brown wanted to hear about it, so Bess told the story, growing quite cheerful as she proceeded.

Miss Brown was more pleased with it, if possible, than Dora had been. She said it explained why she was so contented and happy in her new home.

"My old aunt left me this house with all its contents on condition that I would occupy it. At first it seemed out of the question, but the more I thought of a home of my own the more I wanted to try it, and now I feel settled for life! You see," she went on, "how beautifully it came about this afternoon. Here I was feeling stupid and a little lonely; I looked at the Big Front Door, and presently it opened and you came out

and straight over here, to make me cheerful again."

The children beamed on her with faces that said plainly: "Here is an appreciative person."

At this moment who should appear but Mary, with a plate of warm spicy cookies! The climax of sociability was reached!

"Miss Brown, is it hard to knit?—to learn, I mean," Louise asked presently, looking admiringly at the bright wools the lady was working with.

"Not at all; I learned when I was a little girl."

"I should like to know how, it is such pretty soft work," said Bess.

"I shall be very glad to teach you. We might have a knitting class for rainy afternoons."

"And after awhile perhaps we could make an afghan for Uncle William!" cried Louise delightedly. "Wouldn't that be fun, Bess?"

"If it would not be a trouble to Miss Brown."

"It would be a great pleasure to me," she answered, smiling at the bright faces.

"It would be nice—" Bess began.

"Well, dear, what?" as she hesitated.

"I don't know whether I ought to ask you, for it might be a bother to you, but I was thinking how nice it would be to have a club, and ask Dora and Elsie."

"Bess, that is a *lovely* plan!" exclaimed her sister.

Miss Brown thought so too, and said if the others would like it she should be glad to have them, and she suggested that they bring their friends to talk the matter over on the next Saturday afternoon.

In discussing the club Bess and Louise forgot their disappointment, and were astonished to find how late it was when Joanna came for them.

"There *was* a bright spot, after all," said Louise as they were putting on their waterproofs. "If we had gone to the country we might never have thought of the club."

Some days later the postman had three most important notes to deliver to Miss Dora Warner, Miss Elsie Morris, and Miss Constance Myer.

This is the way they read:

You are requested to be present at the Brown house next Saturday afternoon, to organize a knitting club. Please come early.

Truly yours,

BESS HAZELTINE.

LOUISE HAZELTINE.

Much time and thought were expended on these invitations, and the importance of the senders was only equalled by the curiosity and interest of the girls who received them.

Aunt Zélie insisted that five were as many as Miss Brown ought to have. "For you know she is not used to such lively young ladies as you and Elsie and Do—"

"Not *Dora*, Auntie!" cried Bess; "she is perfect, and never makes a noise."

Mrs. Howard laughed, and went to see the lady of the Brown house, fearing she was undertaking too much for her strength.

But Miss Brown was quite sure of herself.

"If you knew how like spring sunshine they are in my sober life, you would see that it can only be a benefit to me," she said.

"Of course *I* think they are dear children, but I may be partial," their aunt replied, smiling.

"I discovered one secret of their attractiveness some time ago—they are fortunate children," and Miss Brown looked admiringly into the sweet face before her.

Promptly at three on Saturday afternoon the invited guests appeared. They were a little shy and silent at first after Bess introduced them to their hostess, but this wore off very quickly at the sight of five pairs of needles with the knitting already begun in bright worsteds.

Dora, who had learned to knit in Germany, was made assistant teacher, and for an hour they worked away diligently.

Then Miss Brown said they had done very well for beginners, and that it was time to stop and decide upon a name for their club.

The work was hardly put away when Nannie, the new maid, came in, bringing some of Mary's delicious cakes, and chocolate which was served in the oddest little cups

brought by Miss Brown's grandfather from India when she was a child. Chocolate had never before tasted so good.

"Did you have tea parties with them when you were a little girl, and never break any of them?" Constance asked with wide-open eyes, for she had broken half a dozen tea-sets in her short lifetime.

"You did not think *then* that when you were grown up you would give some other children chocolate in these cups, did you?" said Dora.

"If we should keep our things I wonder if they would be as funny and interesting to us when we are grown up?" Bess fingered one of the cups admiringly as she spoke.

"I never feel as if I'd care for things when I am old," said Elsie.

"I can remember when I used to feel so too, but it is a great mistake. Now I enjoy things which I have had for a long time, more than I do new ones. When I use my tea-set I always think of the days when my cousin Margaret and I used to play together."

"Couldn't you tell us about it, Miss Brown?—about your cousin and when you were a little girl?" asked Louise.

"Please, if it is not too much trouble," added Bess.

They all looked so eager she could not refuse.

"There is really not much to tell," she said. "Thirty years ago little girls were not very different from those I see now, though we had not half so many toys and books."

"This cousin and I lived with our grandmother. Margaret was a year younger than I, and a delicate child, while I was strong and well then. My father and mother died when I was a baby, and my grandmother's house in Philadelphia is the first place I remember. Margaret did not come to live with us till she was six years old. Her mother too was dead, and her father spent most of his time abroad. She used to talk a great deal of her home in the South, for she did not like the city, but longed for the country and the warm climate she was used to. I remember the stories she told me after we were in bed at night. Sometimes they were in rhyme and always about her beautiful southern home."

"Our grandmother was good to us, but she was strict too, and every day for an hour we sat beside her learning to sew and knit. Instead of going to school we had a governess. We took our exercise in the open square opposite our house, where there were trees and grass, and, best of all, squirrels. This tea-set which my grandfather brought to me the year before Margaret came to live with us was my greatest treasure, and I thought it a great treat to be allowed to play with it. When I was ten years old Margaret and I had measles, and one day when we were nearly well grandmother left us to go to a funeral. Our house servant happened to be sick, so there was no one in the house, besides ourselves, but the cook. Telling us on no account to leave the warm room, grandmother drove off. Then Margaret began to wish that we had asked to have the tea-set. I knew where it was kept and volunteered to get it, for it was mine and I thought I had a right to it."

"Next we began to wish for something to eat. The spirit of naughtiness possessed me, I think, for I determined to go downstairs and find something. I stole down to the dining-room, where I found nothing but bread—which we did not want—and doughnuts. I carried back half a dozen of these, and we had our feast."

"Before we finished grandmother came home. When we heard the carriage we had a great time getting the crumbs out of the way, and the dishes put in their place. In my hurry I dropped a cup and cracked it."

"When grandmother came in she found everything as usual, but that night Margaret was very ill; she had a relapse and came near dying. No doubt the doughnuts had something to do with this, and perhaps the excitement also. I confessed how naughty I had been, and my grandmother was very kind, for she knew how I loved Margaret, and how I should miss her if she died. However, she recovered, but I had the broken cup to remind me of my disobedience. It is there among the others now."

"Thank you for telling us," said Dora as the cup was passed around.

"Is Margaret alive now?" Bess asked.

"Yes, indeed; she is married and living in England, and has three great boys and one little daughter. And now let us find a name for our club."

It was difficult to suit everybody, till after a good deal of discussion Dora made a suggestion.

"Suppose we have a name not like any we ever heard of, and call ourselves the Merry Knitters."

Nobody could find any objection to this, so it was accepted.

"For we want to be knitters and we mean to be merry," said Louise.

"And let's not tell the boys what M.K. stands for," proposed Elsie.

CHAPTER IX.

A RIVAL CLUB.

[ToC](#)

It was the next Saturday afternoon, and Carl, Aleck, and Ikey sat in the star chamber busily discussing something.

"There they go!" Ikey exclaimed; and the others, looking over his shoulder, saw the M.K.s. filing up the Brown house walk.

"They think they are so clever," growled Aleck. Carl raised the window and called; "Never you mind, we'll get even!"

"We don't care," answered Elsie.

"You are welcome to," cried Dora gayly, waving her work-bag.

"You'd better not lean out so far," cautioned Bess, and then the door closed behind them.

As the girls had hoped, the boys were wildly curious about the mysterious letters "M.K." They made a great many absurd guesses, and Carl finally nicknamed it the "Club of Many Kinks," which he thought sounded like girls. But they only laughed, and wouldn't tell.

He tried to bribe Louise, or to extract it unawares from Bess. Aleck went to the length of offering Elsie a box of candy if she would give him so much as a hint, and they united their efforts upon Aunt Zélie, all to no purpose. Now they had come to the conclusion that the only thing to do was to start an opposition club, and in their turn arouse the curiosity of the girls.

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Mrs. Howard sat in her own little study, a room over the front door, where she kept her special treasures, and was most likely to be found when she was at home. She was busily sorting letters and bills when Carl's face appeared at the half-open door.

"May we come in?" he asked.

"Who are 'we'?"

"Oh, only Aleck and Ikey," and he ushered in his companions without further ceremony.

"If you don't object to my going on with my work, I shall be glad to have you," she said.

"Can't we help you?" asked Aleck politely, dropping down among the cushions on the couch.

"No, I thank you, and please have some mercy on my new pillow."

Ikey, who admired pretty things, rescued the dainty white and yellow pillow, and modestly helped himself to a footstool.

"Take the floor, Carl, it is the only safe place," murmured lazy Aleck.

"Somebody take it, please, and tell me the object of this call."

"We want to get even with the girls," began Carl, as his aunt leaned back in her chair, all attention.

"They think themselves so clever with their old club," said Aleck, his nose in the air.

"They are clever—quite as much so as boys." Aunt Zélie returned to her bills, and there was silence for a moment; then Ikey spoke:

"We thought it would be fun to have a club too, and not tell the girls the name. There isn't any harm in that, is there?" meekly.

"None whatever. What I do not like is that tone of lofty superiority. You do not realize how it sounds, and as I consider myself one of the girls I shall take such remarks as personal. Now tell me about the club; is it to be simply for fun?"

"We'd like a little fun, please," said Aleck.

"Aunt Zélie, we really don't know what we want, but we thought you could suggest something. You can think of scrumptious things when you try, and we can get ahead

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of the girls easily if we have you. So please, there's a dear," and Carl emphasized his request with a bear-like hug from behind.

There was no holding out against their entreaties, so she agreed to think it over.

"You may each invite one friend to a meeting in the star chamber next Friday evening, and in the meantime I'll do my best to think of something for you," she said, and very well satisfied the boys departed, to lie in wait for the M.Ks.

When they came to think of it, it was not easy to decide which of their friends to ask. Ikey finally settled upon his next best chum, Fred Ames. "Don't you think he will do?" he asked Carl as they walked home from school.

"Yes, of course; he is a very nice boy. I think I'll ask Jim Carter."

Ikey looked astonished. "Do you think he is the sort of a fellow your aunt will like?"

"I don't care; I like him and I am going to ask him," Carl replied positively. He thought best, however, to make some explanation.

"You see, Aunt Zélie," he said, finding her alone that evening, "Jim is a funny kind of a boy. Ikey doesn't like him, but I think there is a lot that is good in him. He is bright, I can tell you, and there is nothing really mean about him, but his father gives him too much money. I suppose that isn't ever good for a boy."

"I hardly think it is," she said, smiling at Carl's judicial manner.

"When he first came to school he thought he could get around anybody with his money, but he soon found the boys did not like it,—but perhaps I'd better not ask him."

"Ask him by all means if you think he would like to come. I am willing to trust your judgment."

There were many points of resemblance between Jim Carter and Carl. Both stood well in their classes, were independent and popular with their schoolmates, but their home surroundings were very different. Mr. Carter was deeply engrossed in making money, having become suddenly rich through a lucky speculation. Ambitious for his only son, he wished him to have all the advantages of education which he himself had missed. So Jim was sent to a good school, but was taught at home by precept and example that to get money was the chief thing.

Mrs. Carter was a good-natured, loud-voiced woman, who idolized her son, and could not deny him anything. It was the want of refinement, which Carl felt but could not express, and the utter lack of home training, that were responsible for Jim's faults.

His good-nature and real generosity won him friends among those who were at first disgusted by his boasting and display, and with a keen instinct for popularity Jim quickly learned the lesson.

He admired Carl Hazeltine and was flattered by his invitation.

"We want to get up a club," Carl said. "My aunt is going to help us, and we mean to have some fun; I'd like to have you, if you will come."

He accepted on the spot, though he wondered a little why an "aunt" should have anything to do with it. His experience with such relatives was limited to a middle-aged person who wore a shawl the year around, and regarded boys as necessary evils, to be sent upon as many errands as possible in the course of the day. Indeed, he would have considered his mother, of whom he was very fond, decidedly out of place among his friends.

He was the last to arrive on Friday evening, and he looked about him with some curiosity as Carl led the way to the star chamber. As they passed the library door he had a glimpse of a pleasant family group; Mr. Hazeltine with his paper, Bess and Louise studying their geography lesson, and Helen playing with Mr. Smith. An airy vision awaited them at the top of the first flight of steps; Carie in her nightgown, holding out her arms and calling, "I want to tiss you dood-night," while Sukey came running after.

"You naughty fairy," said her big brother, catching her and handing her over to mammy after the kiss was bestowed.

"What a pretty little thing!" Jim remarked admiringly.

"She is the sweetest baby in the town," Carl responded loyally.

In the star chamber they found the other boys. Ikey and his friend Fred Ames, Aleck and his special chum Will Archer, who was as quiet and steady-going as Aleck was mischievous and happy-go-lucky.

Jim was warmly welcomed, and Ikey gave him an ear of popcorn to shell. The rest were already at work seated on the rug before the fire. The old sofa was drawn up sociably, and a chair of state had been provided for Mrs. Howard.

When the door opened a few minutes later, they were all talking and laughing at once in a decidedly uproarious fashion.

"Here is Cousin Zélie!" cried Aleck, and there came a sudden lull as they scrambled to their feet. Jim was the only one she did not know, and for some reason the sight of this slender young woman in black, with a white rose in her dress, caused him a fit of unusual shyness. Ikey himself could not have been more abashed than he was when Carl introduced him.

"As the fire is in such fine condition, perhaps the popping had best go on while we talk," Aunt Zélie said, taking the chair; "then when business is over the refreshments will be ready."

Fred and Ikey were appointed a committee to attend to the corn, and when all were comfortably settled, she began:

"As you know, the object of this meeting is to hear suggestions for a club. I have been thinking about it for a week, and this is the best plan that has occurred to me: it is to have a Good Neighbors Club. The text Uncle William gave you children, Carl, suggested it to me. 'They helped every one his neighbor.' It would mean keeping our eyes open for ways of helping, and being careful to respect the property of others.

"You see I take it for granted that you want something besides fun, though I am sure we shall have a good time too."

"I don't think I understand what we are to do," said Will.

"You are not to break your neighbors' windows, for instance," replied Aleck, winking at Carl.

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"There is no trouble about the helping," answered Mrs. Howard; "there are always opportunities for that, and on the other hand I am inclined to think that you all at times do things that, to say the least, do not improve the appearance of your neighborhood. For example—but I believe I'll let you find out for yourselves. Suppose for a week you try to discover what it means to be a good neighbor, and report next Friday. The rest of my plan is very simple. To hold meetings every week or once in two weeks, as you choose, and I have some fascinating work which I know you can learn to do, and surprise the girls. I shall have it ready for the next meeting, and while you work we can have reading, or you can select a subject to discuss. Now the meeting is open; please talk and ask questions."

Just here Ikey created a diversion by letting the pop-corn burn, whereupon Mrs. Howard took it from him, and, kneeling on the rug, popped the rest herself. Carl brought in a basket of apples, and drawing up in a sociable circle they soon became merry and very much at ease.

Aunt Zélie liked boys, and had a way of establishing friendly relations with them on short acquaintance. And this evening she made a special effort, for she wanted to know Carl's friends and make the new club a success. The boys were ready to adopt her plan without waiting, but she insisted upon their taking a week to think about it. Before they left she wrote out the text on a card for each of them, that they might keep it in mind.

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"Isn't she splendid?" said Ikey to Jim as the door closed behind them, for ever since the day of his accident he had been her ardent worshipper. Jim assented rather coolly. In fact, he was a little dazed. He had had a good time, though now it was over he was inclined to wonder why. As for being a good neighbor, he thought it sounded silly; but before he went to bed he took out the card and read the text: "They helped every one his neighbor."

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CHAPTER X.

GOOD NEIGHBORS.

ToC

The Hazeltines' lot was a corner one, and Aunt Marcia, driving one afternoon along the street upon which their side gate opened, saw two boys seated on a box near the entrance to the alley that ran back of the stable.

"What can they be doing?" she asked herself, and not being able to imagine, she stopped the carriage and stepped out to investigate.

As she approached it became evident that one of the boys was Carl.

"What are you doing here I should like to know?" she demanded.

"We aren't doing any harm, Aunt Marcia," her nephew answered stoutly.

"An alley is no place to play in. Is that Louise?" as somebody peeped out of the stable door. "I am astonished; you must go in at once."

"I am going in directly, I am, indeed, Aunt Marcia; but please don't make the boys get up till they are sure it is quite dead." As she spoke Louise came out into full view.

"What are you talking about, and who is this boy?" Mrs. Hazeltine put up her glass, embarrassing Ikey greatly. "Oh, it is that Ford boy! Now tell me what you have in that box."

"A cat." Carl's eyes were full of mischief, though his tone was solemnity itself.

"Mercy upon us! Let it out at once!"

"We can't; it is dead."

"Dead? You wicked boys! Did you kill it?"

"Oh, Aunt Marcia," cried Louise before Carl could reply, "they had to do it, indeed, *indeed* they did! It was hurt; some boys shot it with a toy pistol, and it was dreadful; so we bought some chloroform and Ikey killed it because he knew how, and now they are sitting on the box to make sure!"

Horrified and astonished, Mrs. Hazeltine surveyed her young relatives in silence.

"Why couldn't you have James do it?" she inquired at length.

"He has taken the horses to be shod."

"Where is Zélie?"

"Gone to Chicago with Cousin Helen."

"Well, Louise must go in at once, and may I inquire how long it will be necessary for you to sit on that box in this damp place?"

"It must be dead now, I think," Ikey said, rising.

Carl was proceeding to make an investigation, when Aunt Marcia protested, "Wait till I'm gone, if you *please*; I don't care to have anything to do with such business," and drawing her skirts about her, she hastily retired.

"There never were such children!" she said to her husband that night. "Think of it—actually killing a cat—and Louise helping!"

"Don't you think it was better than letting the poor thing suffer?" asked tender-hearted Uncle William.

"I don't care, Carl, you needn't laugh," said Louise that same evening; "for cats *are* neighbors, father says so. Anything or anybody you can help, he said."

"All right, I'll tell Ikey to report it at the G.N. meeting."

"Oh, ho, Mr. Carl! Is that what you are going to do at your club?" cried both his sisters in the same breath.

"Pooh! that is nothing," said Carl, affecting great unconcern, but secretly very much provoked with himself; "we do a great deal more than that."

The girls were excessively pleased over his little slip, and he at last descended from his lofty pinnacle and humbly begged them not to tell Aleck.

The M.Ks. had in their turn christened the boys' club the "Great Noodles," a name in which it was thought Uncle William had a hand.

"*Sounds like boys,*" Elsie remarked with much emphasis.

The next day after school, just as the group of boys on the corner began to separate in various directions, Jim Carter asked, "Have you fellows thought of anything for Friday night?"

"Ikey has," laughed Carl. "You couldn't guess what he did yesterday."

"Shut up! I'd like to know if you didn't help?" Ikey's strap full of books swung round in dangerous proximity to his friend's head.

"Full details of the sad occurrence given later," Carl called out as he ran for his life.

"I don't understand it, do you? I haven't any neighbors to help," Jim said, as he and Fred Ames walked on together.

"I don't know. I suppose it means *not* doing things too. Perhaps this is one thing," and Fred carried to the edge of the sidewalk the skin of the banana he was peeling, and dropped it on the pile of dust and dirt which had been swept up by the street cleaner.

"Do you think Mrs. Howard meant silly things like that?"

"Why not? I heard of an old man who slipped on a banana skin and broke his leg. It would not have seemed silly to him if someone had put it out of his way. But if she didn't mean such things, what did she mean? Perhaps you think you are improving the neighborhood." Fred glanced mischievously at his companion, who held a piece

of chalk and was carelessly making a straggling-white line on everything he passed. Jim dropped his hand impatiently. "I don't think I'll belong," he said. He did not quite mean this. He was really curious to see what it would amount to, but at the same time he was not exactly pleased. He felt great scorn for what he considered trifles, and had a strong belief in his right to do as he pleased.

Thursday night of this week happened to be Hallowe'en. Jim, who had had almost unlimited freedom since his babyhood, had often gone about with a crowd of boys on this night ringing doorbells, carrying away door-mats, and turning on water. By the marauders it was looked upon as a grand frolic, and owners of missing mats and deluged yards might grumble as they pleased. He had even looked forward to the time when more daring exploits would be possible, and when some of his old companions came for him this evening he joined them as a matter of course.

"Let's give old Grandfather Clark a dose first, he is always as mad as fury," said one of the boys.

At this moment the motto of the club popped into Jim's head.

"They helped every one his neighbor." This was not helping. There came to him a sudden determination not to have anything to do with it. Not that he saw any special reason why they should not have fun at old Mr. Clark's expense, but rather because he wanted to go to the club at least once more; and, mingled with this, there was a feeling that the nicest fellows did not do things of this kind.

There could be no doubt as to the interest in the G.N.C. as the boys had begun to call it. On Friday night six eager faces greeted Mrs. Howard when she entered the star chamber, and there was an amiable scramble for the honor of giving her a chair.

"First we'll have reports and then begin work; that is, if you have decided that you like the plan." As she spoke she looked at Jim, who was nearest.

He had entirely recovered from his bashfulness, and was feeling rather well pleased with himself, so he answered promptly:

"I am not sure I understand it, Mrs. Howard, but I have thought of one thing. I suppose you would not call it being a good neighbor to go about on Hallowe'en as lots of boys do, carrying off gates and doing other mischief. I have done it myself, and I never thought there was much harm in it, but I suppose there is." He was astonished himself at this honest conclusion.

Mrs. Howard smiled. "Stopping to think makes such a difference," she said. "I should be sorry indeed to believe that any of you boys could take part in some of the wild pranks that are often played on Hallowe'en. My brother had a valuable young tree destroyed last night. Boys do such things for fun, they say, but it doesn't seem honest to make other people pay so dearly for their fun."

"I never thought of it in that way," said Fred.

"But how are you ever to have any fun if you must stop and think about things?" Jim asked, feeling ashamed in spite of himself as he remembered how near he had come to making one of such a crowd.

"Its being fun isn't any excuse. Suppose you thought it fun to steal somebody's pocketbook?" said Carl.

"That is a different thing."

"What is the real difference between stealing money and ruining something that cost money?" asked Will.

"Father says that in America people have less respect for public property than anywhere else in the world," remarked Fred.

"I am afraid it is true," replied Mrs. Howard, "and that is why I want you boys to think about it. Ikey, haven't you something to say?" This young gentleman, who had been fidgeting about like some uneasy insect, now became greatly embarrassed.

"I don't know whether it will count or not, and it is as much Carl's as mine," he began.

"It isn't at all; you thought of it—go on."

Aunt Zélie nodded encouragingly at him, though she had no idea what was coming, and after several beginnings Ikey managed to tell the story of the cat. Louise had found the poor thing, and had come in great distress to the boys. Ikey remembered seeing his father kill a pet dog with chloroform, and so volunteered to try it on the cat. Carl bought the chloroform, and, putting some cotton saturated with it in a paper bag, they drew this over the animal's head, covering all with a box made as airtight as possible.

"But," said Ikey comically, "I don't know whether cats are neighbors."

"Indeed, they are most useful ones, and frequently unappreciated. It was a kind thing to do, and, now you know how easy it is, I hope you will all be ready to put any poor animal out of its misery when you find it hopelessly hurt."

"We had a beautiful funeral, Cousin Zélie, and are going to take up a collection for a tombstone," said Aleck.

They grew so merry over Ikey's story that it was difficult to come back to such commonplaces as writing on fences and walls, and scattering papers around.

"Everybody does such things, so what difference will our not doing them make?" asked Jim.

"Everything has to begin, and you don't know how contagious a good example is," replied Mrs. Howard.

"Let's have a penny fine for each time we do a thing of the sort," Carl suggested.

Last of all, Will Archer told about the little lame boy, son of the minister at the church on the corner.

"I think perhaps it would be a pleasure to him if some of us would go to see him occasionally. He hardly gets out at all in the winter, and he is a bright little fellow."

"That is a beautiful suggestion," said Mrs. Howard. "I am glad that you have thought of so many things good neighbors should and should not do. Taken all together it amounts to this: To be thoughtful for the rights of others, and ready to help. Now, what of our club? Shall we try this plan?"

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It was unanimously adopted, and they all wrote their names under the text in a new blank-book which was handed over to Jim, who offered no objection to being made secretary.

"And now for our work," said Mrs. Howard. "Some years ago, when I spent a summer in Maine, I learned from an Indian woman to make baskets of sweet grass. This year I had a friend bring me some of this grass, and it occurred to me the other day that it would be just the work for you boys."

Carl brought in an armful of the fragrant material, and his aunt showed them how to fasten it to the frame she had had made for the purpose, and then braid it. Their fingers were awkward at first, but they soon learned to do it evenly, and found it pleasant work.

"What are we to do with them when they are done?" Ikey asked.

"Sell them, and help somebody with the money," was the reply.

The thought of making anything good enough to sell was inspiring, and they worked with a will till it was time to adjourn.

Talking it over with her brother after the boys were gone, Aunt Zélie said: "Perhaps our club is too comprehensive: a sort of Village Improvement, Humane and Missionary Society combined, but the boys thought of these things themselves. If we can only cultivate the spirit of helpfulness, perhaps it will find its own natural channel in each."

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"You can't specialize in everything, life is too short," answered Mr. Hazeltine, laughing.

"I don't know what you mean by channels, and specializing, and all that," said Carl, looking in the door, "but I can tell you, Aunt Zélie, the boys like it, and Jim thinks you are tiptop. Hurrah for the G.N.C.!"

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CHAPTER XI.

ToC

PLANS.

"Suppose we ask the boys to help us," said Bess, threading her needle, and carefully making a nice little knot.

"Oh, no!" objected Elsie, "let's do it all by ourselves."

"If the boys can help us to do something better than we can do without them, I think we ought to have them," said Dora wisely.

"It will be more fun too," said Louise, whose motto was "The more, the merrier."

"We haven't much time either," Bess continued; "but Aunt Zélie will help us, and you too, won't you, Miss Brown?"

"I'll be glad to do anything I can," replied that lady, looking up from the feather-stitching she was showing Constance.

Christmas was coming. The fact could no longer be overlooked, and as usual everybody was feeling surprised at its nearness.

It was not a bit too near, the children thought, though even they had a great deal to do, and found the days all too short.

Miss Brown was full of suggestions for Christmas gifts, and most patient with awkward fingers, and the M.Ks. were very happy over the things she was helping them to make. Now, on top of all this they had found something else to talk about and work for.

One day when Bess and Louise were in the corner confectionery, the wife of the proprietor, as she handed them their package, held out a small bundle of edging, asking them to take it home and show it to their aunt. It was made, she said, by a young Italian girl who, though a cripple, was trying to support herself and some younger brothers and sisters.

As the trimming was pretty and strong, Mrs. Howard bought some for the children's aprons, and finding the girl worthy, gave her other work, which was carried back and forth by a little sister.

Louise saw this child waiting in the hall one Saturday morning, and went down to talk to her. Tina was pretty, with great black eyes and short dark curls, but Louise found her rather silent, for she was in fact rather awed by her surroundings. The wide hall with its polished floor and soft rugs seemed very grand to her unaccustomed eyes.

"I wish I could sew and embroider like your sister, then I could make some money," said Louise.

Tina wondered why she wanted money, but only answered, "So do I."

"Bess and I have never enough money for Christmas. Is that what you want it for?"

"No; I would give it to my father."

"Why, he wouldn't want it, would he? Hasn't he any money?"

Tina shook her head, and after some questioning she explained that her father was a member of a small string band. He played the harp, she said, and sometimes earned a good deal, but he had been sick, so he lent his harp to a man who promised to keep his place for him and pay him something besides. "But he was a bad man!" she exclaimed vehemently, "for he broke the harp, and then ran away and would not pay to have it mended; and now my father does not want to get well, he is sick with sorrow."

"But can't he get it mended himself, or find the bad man and make him pay for it?"

"It would cost a great deal of money,—fifteen dollars the music man told my sister,—and the man who broke it has gone away to the South."

"I am so sorry," was all Louise could say, for their talk was interrupted; but she ran upstairs immediately to tell Bess.

"Don't you wish we could have it mended for him?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed, but we haven't any money to spare from our Christmas things, and if we used it every bit it would not be enough."

"We might get somebody to help us; still that wouldn't be as nice as doing it ourselves."

"Perhaps we could have a fair, like the one Aunt Zélie had when she was a little girl. Let's ask her," proposed Bess, jumping up.

But their aunt thought it too great an undertaking. "I was several years older than you are," she said, "and we worked for six months to get ready. However," she added, seeing the disappointed faces, "you might do something else, tableaux or charades."

This idea pleased them, and they decided to talk it over at the club that afternoon.

There was no difficulty in interesting the M.Ks. They were all enthusiasm.

"We may not make enough," said Louise, "but that ought not to keep us from trying to help."

"If we could only give them the money for a Christmas gift," said Dora.

"I don't see how you could manage that, but a New Year's gift would be almost as good, would it not?" asked Miss Brown.

"There is Ikey now! I'll call to him to find the other boys and bring them over." Dora rapped on the window-pane with her knitting needle as she spoke.

Ikey, who had just vaulted over a hitching-post on his way down the street, came to a sudden halt.

"Find Carl and Aleck, and bring them here, that's a good boy; we want to consult you about something," she called.

He obeyed with soldierly promptness and was across the street in a second. A few minutes later Louise announced, "Here they come, and Aunt Zélie with them."

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"I am one of the boys now, you know," said Mrs. Howard as she entered. "How cosey you look! I believe I should like to join your club too."

"Oh, do! Please do, Mrs. Howard!" came in a chorus from the M.K.s. as she sat down in the midst of them.

"We'll talk about that another time; at present we have something else to discuss. Sit down, boys, and listen while the girls tell you what they want. I already know about it."

Bess then told the story of the broken harp, and explained how anxious they were to earn money enough to have it mended.

"We intend to give an entertainment, and we want you to help," said Dora.

"What are you going to have?" Carl asked cautiously.

"We want you to help us to decide."

"We can help in one way, can't we?" Ikey exclaimed ecstatically, whereupon the other boys looked daggers at him, for the basket-making was kept a profound secret.

"I didn't tell anything, did I?" he inquired in an aggrieved tone.

"What does he mean, Aunt Zélie?" asked Louise.

"It is something we are not ready to tell just yet, but I have a plan to propose. I shall need all of you to help carry it out, and if you are willing to do a little work I am sure we can have a charming entertainment."

Profound interest reigned in Miss Brown's sitting-room for the next half hour, as Aunt Zélie unfolded her plan and explained what she wanted of each one. "And in the meantime you must not breathe a word about what we are to have, but excite every body's curiosity as much as possible," she said in conclusion.

"Won't it be lovely!" cried Elsie, clapping her hands.

"A great deal better than a fair, and more fun," said Louise.

In the pretty room which belonged to Bess and Louise sat a busy group one afternoon. Its owners were occupied with a tall scrap basket that was intended for Uncle William and Aunt Marcia. Aunt Zélie had donated the ribbons to trim it, and they were anxious to have it as handsome as possible. Helen and Carl were there too, the one making a bonnet for her doll, the other pasting in his scrap-book, sitting on the floor with a newspaper spread out before him. Dora had received a warm welcome when she came in with her work, as she often did. They all agreed in thinking that she could not come too often, and to Dora life in that house was a sort of enchantment. It seemed brighter, roomier, pleasanter there than anywhere else.

Her young friends did not dream of the cares already resting on her shoulders: the effort to cheer her mother, who was fast becoming an invalid, the life in the large boarding-house that neither of them liked.

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"Do you think it will be pretty?" Bess asked, holding her basket at arm's length to see the effect of the golden-brown ribbon she was weaving in and out through the straw.

"It is a beauty," answered Dora admiringly.

"Yes, it *is* pretty, really," said Louise, whose fingers were trying to fashion what she called a stylish bow.

"Girls are funny, always sticking bows on things," observed Carl.

"If it is funny to like to make things look pretty, I am glad I am funny," said Dora severely.

"Dear me! Of course, I was not objecting in the least," replied the young gentleman, who rather enjoyed being taken to task by Dora.

"I am sorry to break up this pleasant party, but I am afraid I must," Aunt Zélie said, coming in.

"Why, Auntie?" asked Louise, looking up with three little wrinkles between her eyes, for the stylish bow would not be quite as she wanted it.

"Because I am in danger of losing my roses," answered her aunt, pinching Bess's cheek. "Yesterday they had no fresh air worth mentioning."

"Oh, please don't make us go!" cried Bess in a tone that was almost a wail. "We have so much to do!"

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"I must finish my bow," Louise said positively.

"I shall not *make* you, but Joanna is going to Aunt Marcia's with a note, and I want

you to go too because you need the air. I am sure Dora will take the walk with you, and on the way back suppose you stop and ask Mrs. Warner to let her stay to dinner. So fly now and get ready." She spoke so energetically that Dora began at once to roll up her work, and Bess dropped her scissors with a sigh of relief, but Louise held on to her bow desperately.

"I *will* finish it," she said to herself.

"Louise," her aunt said gently, "the reason you cannot make the bow to please you is because you are tired. Now, which will you do, put it away till to-morrow—when I am sure you will not have any trouble with it—and go to walk with the others, or stay here and grow more and more tired and cross, till you are not fit to come to dinner with the rest of us?"

She had a struggle with herself before she answered in a choked voice, "I guess I'll go, but I did want to finish it."

"Of course, but you will be glad by and by that you chose to do what was right, instead of what you wanted to do," and Aunt Zélie sent her off with a kiss.

The walk to Aunt Marcia's was not such a hardship after all, and when they reached home there was at least an hour for studying lessons before dinner, and that was followed by a grand frolic with Carie, lasting till it was time for Dora to go.

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"I am sorry I was cross this afternoon," Louise said when she came for her good-night kiss.

"It was because you were tired, dear, I know. You and Bess must take care not to be too much occupied with Christmas. It will not do to neglect every-day duties even for that," replied her aunt.

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CHAPTER XII.

ToC

CEDAR AND HOLLY.

One Saturday afternoon, about three weeks before Christmas, the boys marched triumphantly into Miss Brown's sitting-room with a large tissue-paper parcel. When this was undone, before the eager eyes of the M.Ks., there were four beautiful fragrant little baskets with tops of bright-colored silk.

"How pretty!"—"How lovely!"—"Where did you get them?"—"Surely you did not make them?"—"What are you going to do with them?"

"Why didn't we make them, I'd like to know?" asked Ikey proudly.

Certainly the boys had reason to be satisfied at the praise their work received.

"I know you did not sew on the silk," said Dora, examining one closely.

"Oh, well, Aunt Zélie and Cousin Helen did the sewing, of course, but we did all the rest," said Carl.

"And what do you mean to do with them?" asked Elsie.

"Sell them and give the money to the harp man."

They were so pretty there proved to be no trouble in disposing of them. Aunt Marcia, who was superintending a Christmas bazaar, offered to put them on one of her tables, where they sold the first evening for a dollar and a half apiece.

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After this the meetings of the G.N. club had to give way to rehearsals for what Cousin Helen called "The Harp Man's Benefit," which was to occur on New Year's eve. In the meantime Uncle William had interested himself in the matter, and, through a friend who was a music dealer, a harp was lent to Mr. Finnelli till his own could be repaired.

"So we feel more comfortable about it now," said Louise, "and we think we'll make at least ten dollars at our entertainment."

Late in the afternoon of the day before Christmas Aunt Zélie sat alone in the library taking a moment's rest.

The sound of happy voices came through the open door. It was a custom in the family to decorate the hall on Christmas eve, and the children had been making wreaths and festoons of cedar, and having any amount of fun. They were now having

a merry time over Ikey's suggestion to hang a holly wreath above the Big Front Door. From the top of the ladder Carl began:

"'Twas the night before Christmas,"

and the others chimed in:

"and all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a
mouse."

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A moment later Aunt Zélie's quiet was invaded.

"Nothing makes me feel more like Christmas than that old rhyme," she said, as the laughing children gathered around her.

"Talk to us about Christmas, Auntie, please," said Louise.

"Could you possibly talk about anything else?" she asked. "What is it that makes this such a happy time?"

"Why," answered Carl, "it is because it is such fun to give presents to people, and know you are sure to get a lot yourself."

"Yes, it is because every one tries to make some one else happy. Why do we keep Christ's birthday in this way?"

"Because he came to make us happy, I suppose," said Bess.

"Don't you wish you could have heard the angels sing? I like that part of the story best where the shepherds are out in the fields," said Louise.

"I like the wise men seeing the star and bringing gifts," said Carl.

"It is beautiful from beginning to end, and it is a true story, that is what makes it so dear to us," Aunt Zélie said, looking into the fire.

"I wish it came oftener, a whole year is so long to wait," sighed Bess.

"Dear me," laughed her aunt, "I don't. It would take all my time to get ready. I have ever so many things to do after you are snugly tucked in bed."

"I think I'll not go to bed to-night," remarked Carl.

Even he was tired, however, after they had helped their father and Uncle William trim the hall. So many small fingers were sometimes a hindrance, but then it was "such fun."

"Christmas belongs to the children, so let them have a good time in their own way," said their uncle.

To the older people the season was full of memories of those who used to take part in the happy festival, but were there no longer; for the children's sake, however, no difference was made in the old customs.

All was done at last, even to fastening the mistletoe in the chandelier, and it only remained to hang the stockings beside the nursery fireplace. Carie's was already there and she herself safe in dreamland.

"I just can't wait till morning," said Bess, as she put up her own.

"It is nice to know it is coming, I think," and Louise twirled around on her toes and dropped her stocking into the grate.

"What will Santa Claus put your things in now?" laughed Carl.

"It is only scorched," she said, snatching it from the fire, which was fortunately low.

After some laughing and whispering over a plan for waking before any one else, they separated and were soon so soundly asleep that even Christmas was forgotten.

It was beginning to be light next morning when Louise opened her eyes to find Carl standing beside her.

"How hard you are to wake," he said. "It is daylight, and everybody will be up directly."

They aroused Bess, and the three ran first to their father's door, then to Aunt Zélie's, giving half a dozen hearty raps, and calling "Merry Christmas" at the tops of their voices.

When Mrs. Howard opened her door she saw three airily attired figures flying up the third-story stairs.

Hurrying into her dressing-gown, she followed. She found them in the star chamber with the window wide open, shouting themselves hoarse at Ikey, who had been awakened by the telephone bell.

"You crazy children, you will take cold! Put the window down at once."

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"Oh, Auntie, it was such fun! Ikey was so surprised!" they cried.

"I should imagine so," severely.

"You needn't pretend to look cross, Aunt Zélie, for you just can't," laughed Carl.

"Now for our stockings!" cried Bess, and there was a rush for the nursery.

Such laughing, such squeals of delight, such cries of admiration, as were to be heard there for the next half hour!

Carie in her long night-gown pranced wildly around a wonderful white bear, which moved its head and growled in a most natural manner when Carl wound it up. Helen hugged in one arm the beautiful doll Cousin Helen had dressed for her, while she dived into the toe of her stocking. Bess and Louise sat on their new sled and turned the pages of a story-book. Carie brought matters to a climax by backing into her bath-tub, which Aunt Sukey had just brought in and placed by the fire. She was rescued, dripping and somewhat aggrieved, amid great laughter. Such an every-day matter as breakfast was hardly worth thinking of, there was so much else in prospect. All the uncles and aunts and cousins were coming to dinner, and after that the tree! There was enough to keep them in a gale of excitement.

Bess and Louise had a plan of their own which no one else knew about, and after breakfast they stole off together.

Going into her little study not long after, Aunt Zélie found them there. Bess stood on a chair holding a vase which she had just filled with white roses; Louise stood beside her with some others in her hand.

"Oh, Auntie!" they both exclaimed, "we didn't want you to come till it was all done."

"Shall I go away?" she asked, smiling.

"We'll tell you about it now, shan't we, Bess?" said Louise. "You know," she continued, as her sister nodded approval, "we thought perhaps Uncle Carl would be glad if we remembered him on Christmas, and we couldn't think of anything but flowers."

Bess had placed the vase on a bracket beneath her uncle's portrait, and now came down from the chair, adding anxiously, "You like it, don't you, Aunt Zélie?"

"The vase wouldn't hold them all, so you must wear the rest," and Louise put them into her hand.

Aunt Zélie silently kissed them both.

There was something about this kiss that for a moment clouded the brightness of the day for Bess. "I wish people did not die," she exclaimed with almost a sob, as they went downstairs.

"What makes you look so sober, I should like to know?" demanded Uncle William, who, with Aunt Marcia, was the first of the guests to arrive.

"I was just thinking," she replied, and then, as Aunt Zélie came in with her usual bright face and the roses on her breast, she felt reassured and danced away to be as merry as anybody.

Dora and Ikey were the only outsiders invited to the tree, which was much like other trees, and so does not need to be described. It was perfectly satisfactory, however, and they all had exactly what they wanted. Dora was amazed at the number of things that fell to her share, most of all at a small gold bracelet with a daisy on the clasp, from Aunt Marcia.

"You may be sure she likes you after that," whispered Aleck.

"Let's go over and wish Miss Brown a Merry Christmas," proposed Carl, when the candles began to burn low.

"We will storm Nottingham castle!" cried Ikey. "Come on!"

They received a cordial welcome. "What good children you are to think of me today!" she said, laying down her book.

"We have had such a beautiful time we thought we would finish it by coming to see you," said Dora.

"And thank you for our work-bags," added Bess.

"You need not think you have had all the Christmas on your side of the street," said Miss Brown, pointing to a rose-bush in bloom in the window and to some new books on her table. "And I should like to know," she continued, "how five little girls happened to guess what would please me most."

The M.Ks., after much discussion about their gift to Miss Brown, had accepted Aunt Zélie's advice and had themselves photographed in a group.

"I shall never be lonely again with these bright faces to look at," she said, lifting the picture from the floor beside her sofa.

"Did you have Christmas trees when you were a little girl, Miss Brown?" Louise

asked.

"No, my grandmother used to celebrate New Year's day as the great holiday; we had gifts then, but not a tree."

"I haven't had one since I was a very little girl," said Dora; and Ikey added, "And neither have I."

"Did you have one when you were a little girl, Ikey?" asked Aleck gravely, making everybody laugh.

After they were gone Miss Brown sat alone in the firelight, thinking that of all the blessings the year had brought her, not the least was the friendship of these girls and boys.

Of all the young people invited to Uncle William's party, no one was in such a flutter of delight as Dora. Affairs of this kind were new to her, and as the Hazeltines had talked so much about it, it was no wonder she felt eager and excited as she dressed next evening.

"I suppose Elsie wouldn't go if she had to wear such plain things as mine," she thought as she took out her white dress. "Louise said they were going to wear white. Oh, dear! I should like to have nice clothes, but I can't bother mamma about it." Dora sighed, for she liked pretty things as much as anybody.

All trace of anything like discontent had disappeared when she stood before her mother to have her sash tied.

"You should have had a new dress, poor child," Mrs. Warner said sadly.

"No, Mamma dear," was the cheerful answer, "you must not mind. It does not matter what I wear; I shall have a good time."

"How fortunate it is that Dora cares so little about dress!" her mother thought as her daughter kissed her and ran down to the parlor, where Carl was waiting with a bunch of roses which he presented with much grace. The girls were in the carriage outside, and the drive through the streets, where the electric lights were just appearing, was no small part of the pleasure. Helen said it was like grown people going to a party. "But it is more fun to be children, I think," said Dora, burying her face in her flowers.

It was not quite like a grown-up party, for Uncle William's guests were invited to come at the sensible hour of six o'clock, but the beautiful house was all thrown open for their entertainment.

Dora forgot her dress as they went up the steps and were ushered into the brilliantly lighted hall.

They were the first arrivals, for the Hazeltine children were to assist in receiving the others, so when they came downstairs there were only Aunt Marcia, handsome and stately as usual, and Cousin Helen, looking exceedingly pretty in her pale-blue gown. The next comer was a tall gentleman whom Bess and Louise seemed to know very well. They called him Mr. Caruth, and were evidently delighted to see him.

"I am glad you came home in time for the party," Louise said to him; and Carl with an eye to business added, "You must come to our entertainment on New Year's eve, Mr. Caruth."

"What do you charge for reserved seats?" asked the gentleman, laughing.

"Suppose we give him an arm-chair and make him pay a dollar for it," suggested Miss Hazeltine.

"He is a very nice man," Bess whispered to Dora. "We wish he would marry Cousin Helen, for then he would be related to us."

"Upon my word!" Miss Hazeltine exclaimed, so suddenly that Bess gave a guilty start, "I have forgotten my office; come here and be decorated before any more arrive." From a basket she took a handful of badges.

"What are these for?" Louise asked as her cousin pinned one on her shoulder.

"You will find out by and by," said Uncle William, coming in with a red rose in his buttonhole.

And now the fun began. The children came in so rapidly that Cousin Helen had to have an assistant to fasten on the badges, and Mr. Hazeltine was here, there, and everywhere, seeing that no one was left out of the good time. They played games and danced, grown people and all, and later in the evening Mr. Frank Hazeltine actually induced Aunt Marcia to take part in "Tucker," to the delight of her young relatives.

It was particularly exciting when Uncle William was "Tucker." They came through the grand right and left positively breathless, and everybody was glad of a few minutes' rest before supper.

"Isn't it strange that Dora does not have prettier dresses?" Elsie Morris whispered to the girl next her. "I like her ever so much, but she wears the plainest clothes."

As she spoke Dora passed to join Bess, who was beckoning to her from the other side of the room. She heard enough of what was said to make her color deepen as she went straight on.

"Elsie, she knew you were talking about her," cried Constance Myer.

"No, she didn't," Elsie insisted, feeling very much ashamed.

"She won't have any use for you after this," remarked Jim Carter, who was standing near. He found that he was mistaken, however. When they were decorating themselves with the tissue-paper caps and favors found in the bonbons, Elsie, who was a most fastidious little mortal, exclaimed, "I wish my cap was not green. I can't wear it with a blue dress."

"I'll change with you, for mine is blue and I like green quite as well."

It was Dora who stood beside her, holding out the cap. Poor Elsie was greatly abashed and couldn't say a word, but Dora insisted.

"Please take it; I want you to have it, you will look so pretty in it."

She was exceedingly surprised when Elsie put her arms around her neck and kissed her, saying:

"You are the best girl in the world."

It was a small thing, for Dora had spoken truly when she said that she liked one as well as the other, but it made a deep impression upon two people. Elsie began from that moment to be more careful and kind in her criticisms, and Jim rather reluctantly came to the conclusion that this was better and finer than showing resentment.

When supper was over the company was pervaded by a feeling that something interesting was about to happen.

"What is on hand, Louise, do you know?" Aleck asked, and at that moment Uncle William was heard making an announcement. He had had an interview with Santa Claus, he said, as the old gentleman was passing through the city in a hurry to get home, and after some persuasion he had prevailed upon him to wait over and receive any of the young people present who cared to call on him.

This occasioned great applause, and all were eager to pay their respects to jolly St. Nicholas.

Half a dozen at a time, according to the numbers on their badges, were conducted to a curtained doorway and told to enter. They all seemed to enjoy the interview, for they came out with smiling faces, and not empty-handed either.

The children of the family were, of course, the last to go in, and Dora waited for them.

The room was one which Uncle William called his den, and the figure in the arm-chair would have been recognized anywhere by his rosy countenance and long white beard. He wore his fur great-coat, and his cap and gloves lay on the table.

He gave them a friendly greeting, saying, "So you are the last? It is a fortunate thing, for if I wait much longer I shall miss my train."

"I did not know you travelled in that way," said Carl mischievously.

"Dear me, boy! How could I manage with a sleigh and reindeer in this mud? I save those for colder climates. Now, before I am off, I think I have something left in my bag."

Opening a large satchel, he brought out half a dozen packages, and then taking up his cap and gloves and wishing them a Happy New Year, he was off before they could say "Jack Robinson."

"He is a fine old fellow," said Carl, examining the gun he had been wishing for.

"Indeed he is!" echoed Dora, taking a peep at the beautiful illustrated copy of "Little Women," and then she was called to lead in the closing Virginia reel with Uncle William.

"Well, how did you like the party?" Carl asked her as they drove home.

"I have had the best time I ever had in my life," she answered with a happy laugh.

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"Where is my wig?"

"I have lost my banner!"

"Tell Ikey to hurry, he has to go on first. Do you think that chimney will stand?"

There was such confusion behind the scenes on New Year's eve that Cousin Helen put her hands over her ears when she came in.

"It is time to begin," she said. "Ikey and Helen are first."

The performers had advertised their entertainment very thoroughly, and as a result a large and interested audience of young people had assembled before eight o'clock.

When at length the curtain rose in response to vigorous clapping, it brought to view a fine stage, on which was a cottage with a window and door and a lifelike chimney, and everything was covered with glistening snow. After the audience had had time to admire this scene sufficiently, a boy and girl entered, dressed in outdoor costume. They looked sad, and the girl took her handkerchief from her muff and held it to her eyes. Her companion begged her not to cry, for Father Time would surely help them. Then he knocked at the door of the cottage. It opened at once and out came a veritable Father Time, leaning on his staff. His long white beard, his scythe and hourglass, all proved his identity. Looking at the children he asked:

"Who is it knocks at my door to-day?
Speak to me quickly, I cannot stay."

The little girl replied:

"Dear Father Time, we've come to you,
Perhaps you'll tell us what to do.
Our teacher says that in the year
Too many holidays appear.
She says we must at least drop one,
And she'd be glad if there were none."

And the boy added:

"It is hard to know what day to choose,
When there isn't one you care to lose."

In great astonishment Father Time exclaimed:

"To drop a holiday! Absurd!
Impossible! Upon my word!
Affairs like this belong to me,
As I'll soon let this teacher see."

He rapped on the ground with his staff and a small page appeared, wearing a pointed cap and carrying a tin horn. Bowing low before Father Time, he was instructed to call the Holidays together. He withdrew and was heard blowing his horn in the distance. Presently music sounded, and the eight Holidays came marching in, with banners, singing:

"Joyous Holidays,
Full of gayety,
Bringing happy hours,
Merry days are we."

"Children love us well,
Surely they have reason.
Happiness and mirth
Bring we every season."

"Father Time, we've come,
Answering to your call,
Glad to do your will
Are we one and all."

After marching twice around the stage they took their stand in a semicircle before Father Time and the children.

Father Time: "These children have come to me in deep distress, because their teacher (a most singular person) says there are too many Holidays, and one of them must be given up. I have sent for you to reassure them; speak for yourselves."

The Holidays looked at each other in dismay, and exclaimed:

He rapped on the ground with his staff and a small page appeared, wearing a pointed cap and carrying a tin horn. Bowing low before Father Time, he was instructed to call the Holidays together. He withdrew and was heard blowing his horn in the distance. Presently music sounded, and the eight Holidays came marching in, with banners, singing:

"Holidays are we,
And we've come to stay,
Caring not a whit
What such people say."

Boy and girl (clapping their hands): "Oh, dear Holidays, we are so glad! But are you sure she can't send any of you away?"

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New Year's day now stepped forward. It was Jim Carter, whose suit of cotton batting, decorated with tinsel and cedar, was most becoming. Banner in hand he recited:

"First upon the list,
I'd be greatly missed.
Pages fresh and new,
Resolutions true,
Wishes for good cheer
In the coming year,
Where would these all be,
Were it not for me?"

Both children:

"No matter what the teachers say,
We can't give up our New Year's Day."

Next came Elsie, looking exceedingly like a valentine in her gauzy dress, her fair hair waving over her shoulders. In her own airy way she recited:

"Surely you know, if you are not quite
stupid,
That I belong to that gay god Cupid.
Send me away and I very much fear
You'll find him infesting each day of the
year."

Both children:

"We never could endure to part
From you who lie so near our heart."

The next Holiday excited great laughter and applause as he came forward. It was Aleck, in powdered wig, velvet coat, knee breeches, silk stockings, and shining shoe-buckles. In one hand he carried a small hatchet. The occasion was almost too much for him, and he spoke his lines with difficulty:

"My very great importance
To see you cannot fail,
I point a useful moral
And adorn a thrilling tale.
And with my honored hatchet
I'm sure you'll ever find
I make a good impression
Upon the youthful mind."

Girl and boy:

"Indeed, we do not doubt you;
We could never do without you."

Washington's Birthday was of course followed by April Fool's Day. This part was taken by Fred Ames, in a suit of figured chintz, with cap and bells. He recited:

"Don't think I'm the one to be laid on the
shelf;
I have a few words now to say for myself.
To nonsense each one at some time must
give vent;
To furnish you with an excuse I am sent.
To give you a day without precept or rule,
In which you may each be a gay April
Fool."

The children:

"Though not the most important on the
list,
We know, dear April Fool, you would be

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Next came Constance, with a garland of roses on her head, and her white dress trimmed with flowers. She recited:

"When first the flowers begin to show
 Their happy little faces,
 And tiny leaves begin to grow,
 To make us shady places,
 'Tis then I sing in merry tune—
 Sweet Summer's coming very soon."

The children:

"Pretty May-Day must not go,
 We have always loved her so."

After Constance came Louise, who made a charming Goddess of Liberty, dressed in stars and stripes, with a flag in her hand. She said:

"I come to tell the story
 Of the birthday of our land,
 To remind you of her glory,
 And to help you understand
 How by good men, brave and true,
 This great land was won for you."

The children:

"Dear Fourth, we love your fun and noise,
 You're ever dear to girls and boys."

Thanksgiving Day was represented by Dora, dressed as a Puritan maiden, carrying a basket of apples and a sheaf of wheat. She made a pleasant picture as she recited:

"When wintry days once more appear,
 I come well laden with good cheer.
 You can't lose *me* at any rate,
 For I'm appointed by the State."

The children:

"As long as we're living
 We'll keep dear Thanksgiving."

Last of all came Christmas Day. This was Carl, in white, like New Year's, with trimmings of holly and mistletoe. A brave young Holiday he looked, as he repeated:

"Last comes to you the merry day
 O'er which St. Nicholas holds sway;
 A day that's sent your hearts to fill
 With peace and joy and glad goodwill.
 And down through all the centuries long
 Echo the angel words and song,
 And every year again I tell
 The old sweet story, loved so well."

As he finished, the children said eagerly:

"Dear Holidays, we love you all;
 You're good and true and gay,
 And we hope, as you have said,
 That all have come to stay.
 But though we value all the rest,
 'Tis Christmas Day we love the best."

At this the other Holidays stepped out, and bowing to Christmas, said:

"We all unite in words of praise,
 And crown him king of Holidays."

Then New Year's Day placed a crown on his head, May-Day gave him a rose, Fourth of July, a flag, Thanksgiving, an apple, Washington's Birthday offered his hatchet, and St. Valentine gave him a sugar heart; and joining hands the children and the Holidays danced around him, singing:

"We all unite in words of praise,
 And crown him king of Holidays."

The curtain fell on a tableau: the Holidays, with their flags and banners, old Father Time, and the happy children.

The applause was so vehement it had to rise again for a moment, and then there was an intermission while some of the actors changed their costumes.

When the curtain went up for the last time the cottage was gone, and in its place appeared a row of high-backed chairs on which were seated five little ladies in the quaintest of short-waisted gowns, each with a reticule on her arm, from which she took her needles and began to knit. Then Bess, who sat at one end of the line, looked up, and said in her own sweet little way:

"We're learning to knit, you see, because
We wish to be nice grandmamas;
You would not care, I'm sure, a bit
For a grandmamma who couldn't knit."

Dora, who came next, continued:

"How daintily warm, how soft and sweet,
The tiny socks for baby's feet.
Nothing you'll find in all the land
Fashioned like these by grandma's hand."

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Here Elsie took it up:

"All the older children too can tell
How grandma's stockings wear so well,
And how she makes, with greatest pains,
Comforters, afghans, balls, and reins."

Louise had just made a discovery that surprised her, and with shining eyes she recited:

"There's nothing so good, the children
know,
As grandmamma's stories of long ago.
Empty-handed she could not tell
All the dear old stories half so well."

Constance sat at the end of the row, and looking at the others she said:

"When she was a girl like you and me,
'Twas then she learned to knit, you see.
So like her now we must begin
Carefully putting the stitches in."

Then together they recited:

"Our shining needles we gayly ply,
Getting ready for by and by.
Aren't you glad to know there'll be
Five old ladies as nice as we?"

At the last line they rose, each dropped a profound courtesy and marched from the stage. The enthusiastic audience recalled them half a dozen times, till Mr. Hazeltine was obliged to announce that the entertainment was over.

No one had enjoyed it more than a person who sat in an easy-chair, where without any effort she could see all that went on.

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Here the children gathered when it was over, exclaiming, "Why, Miss Brown, we did not know you were coming! How did you get here, and how did you like it?"

It was of no use to try to answer so many questions, so she only laughed and said she had enjoyed herself immensely.

Then they must rush off to see how much money had been taken in.

Mr. Caruth, who had been pressed into service as doorkeeper by Cousin Helen, was in the hall with Aunt Zélie.

"Here are nine dollars and a half for you, Grandma," he said, putting a box into Louise's hands.

"Oh, thank you! Then that will be enough with the basket money. Don't you think our entertainment was pretty good, Mr. Caruth?" she asked.

"Delightful! I was just telling Mrs. Howard that it was a star performance," he answered.

"I don't know what that is, but Aunt Zélie and Cousin Helen made it all up, every bit," Bess said proudly.

The performers were so enchanted with the evening's fun that they refused to take off their gay costumes, and declared one and all that they meant to see the old year out.

The Father of his Country forgot his dignity, and cut up all sorts of antics with April Fool's Day. Even Father Time joined in the fun, and Christmas and New Year bestrewed the floor with cotton batting as they danced with the old ladies.

But they were tired out before midnight, and when the city bells rang in the new year they were all sound asleep and heard not a bit of it.

And this is what came of it:

Of course in the first place the harp was mended and paid for, and its owner was able once more to earn something for his family. With her burden thus made lighter, Marie worked away cheerfully at her embroidery, and Tina went happily to school in the warm dress Mrs. Howard gave her. Many were the blessings invoked on the heads of the young people who had helped them!

"But after all," said Bess, "it was only fun for us."

In the second place Uncle William was so pleased with the five old ladies that a charming idea came into his head. After a consultation with Miss Brown, he sent them one Saturday afternoon a note and a big bundle. Here is the note:

MY DEAR LITTLE FRIENDS: I was delighted the other night to find that your small fingers were already learning to be useful, and I take the liberty of giving them some more work to do. I know an old colored woman who, after spending most of her life in taking care of little children, is now paralyzed, and can only lie in bed. Nothing pleases her so much as bright colors, so I want you to make her a gay afghan. She will not mind any uneven stitches if they happen to put in, and will be very proud of it.

I send the yarn of which to make it. There are to be five stripes, one for each of you.

Hoping that you will enjoy the work, and at the same time the thought that it is to please a poor old invalid, I am affectionately your friend,

WILLIAM S. HAZELTINE.

The bundle when it was unrolled was found to contain some of the oddest-looking balls of yarn that ever were seen.

"I think he must have wound them himself," remarked Louise, shaking her head over the lumpy, unsymmetrical ball she held.

However, Miss Brown said the shape did not matter, and work was begun, with great interest. Dora was the first to make a discovery, perhaps because she could knit more rapidly than the others. One of the lumps in her ball proved to be caused by something rolled in tissue paper. Feeling sure that this was the key to one of Uncle William's surprises, they looked on eagerly while she pulled the paper off and found a gold thimble with her name on it. Not long after Elsie found a tiny pair of scissors. Never had any work been so delightful! It usually happened that some one of the gay balls yielded a prize each Saturday afternoon. Sometimes only a big sugar plum, but oftener something pretty and useful. A tiny book of texts, a dainty handkerchief rolled into smallest compass, rings of twisted gold with the letters M.K. on bangles attached to them,—these were some of the things found in the wonder balls, for that is what they are called in Germany, where Mr. Hazeltine first heard of them.

"It is so exactly like him, I thought he must have invented it himself," said Dora.

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CHAPTER XIV.

CLOUDS.

The beautiful snow-storm which came two weeks after Christmas seemed to be the cause of all the unhappiness, though the real reason for it was to be found in quite another quarter.

A deep snow followed by a week of clear cold weather seldom came more than once during the winter in this part of the country, and the children were wild with

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delight. Aunt Zélie was obliged to do a little of the curbing that Aunt Marcia so often advised, and Bess and Louise thought it hard that they were not allowed to hitch their sleds behind wagons as Carl and Ikey did.

The boys first got into trouble. They began at once building forts in their playground at school, and were soon divided into two opposing forces, each with one of the older boys for captain.

For a time things went very well, and Carl and Ikey, though they belonged to different sides, could discuss their battles good-naturedly. But this did not last. One day the cry of "Not fair" arose; someone was hurt and resented it, his friends took it up, and all good feeling went to the winds. When the bell called them in there were some bad bruises, and, worse still, angry looks and accusations.

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On the way home the dispute ran high between Carl and Ikey. The first-named in particular was very much excited, and declared he wanted nothing more to do with cheats. Ikey retorted warmly, with natural indignation, and so they parted.

About the same time discord arose among the girls.

Mr. Hazeltine had had a slide made for the children in the back yard. It was built from the top of the stable loft, and was as good a substitute for a hill as such an affair could be. Here they had a grand time till one day when Elsie insisted it was her turn to slide.

"No, it is Dora's," objected Louise. "Isn't it, Constance?"

But Constance, always devoted to Elsie, was not sure. Bess and Helen both agreed with Louise.

"I am sure it is my turn to slide," said Dora, "but if Elsie thinks it is hers, I'd rather have her take it."

Bess had very positive ideas of fairness, however, and would not give up. "No," she declared, "it is her turn, and we must play fair or it isn't any fun."

"But I know it is my turn," said Elsie, equally stubborn; "Connie thinks so too."

"Never mind, Bess," pleaded Dora.

"I *shall* mind; for when Louise and Helen and I all say it is your turn, and only Constance thinks it is Elsie's, you have a—a majority, and she ought to see it."

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"Yes," added Louise, admiring her sister's big word; "I think you ought, Elsie."

"And it is *our* slide," put in Helen very unwisely.

"That doesn't make any difference," Bess hastened to say; but the mischief was done.

"Then keep your old slide," Elsie cried angrily. "I wouldn't be so selfish. Come, Constance, let's not stay where they don't want us."

"Don't go, Elsie; it is not worth quarrelling about," urged Dora; but she wouldn't listen and walked off with an air of offended dignity, followed rather reluctantly by Constance. Dora wanted to go after her, but Louise held her fast.

"Don't go, Dody; it won't do a bit of good. If she is mad, she can just *be* mad."

They took a few more slides, finding it not half so much fun as before. Dora looked very sober, for quarrelling was something she was not accustomed to, and after a visit to Carie, who was sick with a cold, she went home feeling exceedingly uncomfortable. Perhaps it would be all right to-morrow, she thought, but that did not prove to be the case.

When they met at school Elsie entirely ignored Bess and Louise, who in their turn treated her with a lofty indifference wonderful to behold.

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"I am not at all mad at you, Dora," Elsie said to her; "but I am at Bess and Louise, for they were impolite. I am not going to speak to them till they say they are sorry."

"Oh, dear! I feel as though it were my fault in some way. It will spoil our club and everything," sighed Dora.

How long this unhappy state of affairs might have continued had not the Big Front Door taken matters in hand, it is impossible to say.

On the afternoon of the quarrel Elsie had a story book with her, which in her hasty departure she forgot. She remembered it before she reached home, but did not like to go back. The next day she planned a very cold note which was to be carried by one of the servants. Mrs. Morris, however, saw no reason why her daughter should not do her own errand, and all arguments were in vain. Finding that it was of no use to plead, after some rebellious tears she decided to go for her book herself.

Bess, Louise, and Dora were studying their history lesson together, when Joanna came in to say that Elsie was downstairs and wanted the book she had left.

"I wonder," said Bess, when it had been found and sent down, "if she will come to the club."

After they went back to their lessons Dora's thoughts kept wandering off to that miserable quarrel, and she said, as she put on her hat, "If Elsie were willing to make up, you would be, wouldn't you?"

"Oh, yes," they both answered readily, Louise adding, "but she doesn't want to."

Elsie felt rather uncomfortable as she sat in the library. She hoped that none of the children would come in and find her there. She could not help remembering the pleasant time she had had in that very room a few weeks ago, getting ready for the New Year's eve entertainment, and for a moment she was sorry about the quarrel.

When Joanna brought her the book she hurried away, and, opening the front door for herself, pulled it to behind her with a bang, when to her dismay she found herself held fast. The door had closed on her dress. She pulled and twisted, but it was of no use—she was a prisoner. She could not reach the bell, and only a dead latch-key would open it from the outside. It was late in the afternoon and few people were passing; then too she did not like to call for help. The poor child felt herself to be in a somewhat ridiculous position, and if she dreaded anything it was being made fun of.

Suppose Carl should come in and find her! He was such a tease he would tell the other boys, and they would think it a great joke. The wind was so cold and penetrating that after a little Elsie forgot her fear of being laughed at, and began to long for anybody who would release her. All the passers-by seemed to be on the other side of the street. Once she called to a colored boy, but he only looked at her stupidly and went on.

"Oh, dear! what shall I do!" she cried, sinking down on the cold marble step. "I wish I had never thought of my book."

She wondered what Bess and Louise would think if she were found frozen to death on their doorstep. Her mother would be sorry she had not allowed one of the servants to take her note. There was some comfort in this thought. Then—was that really someone coming down the walk at the side of the house? She held her breath. Yes, it certainly was. She immediately returned to life.

It was Dora on her way home, so busy thinking that she started when Elsie called her.

"Why, Elsie Morris," she exclaimed as she caught sight of the forlorn figure on the doorstep.

"Oh, Dora, please help me. I am caught and can't get out."

"Have you been here all this time?" Dora asked, running up the steps in great surprise. "Shall I ring the bell or go around?" pausing with her hand on the knob.

"You'd better ring. I don't want to see the girls."

Dora's hand still rested on the bell, but she hesitated. "Elsie," she said, "I just believe this has happened so we can make up. Won't you? I know that Bess and Louise will if you will. Think how unhappy we are! We can't have any more good times." Dora felt that she had the advantage.

"No," said Elsie crossly; "and I wish you would ring that bell; I am as cold as I can be. It was my turn, and it was selfish and mean in them not to let me have it."

"Oh, Elsie, they are not selfish; they are always ready to do what we like, but they thought it was my turn. That is why I feel so badly about it; for if it had been her own turn I think Bess would have given up. Please, *please* promise to make up."

That Dora cared a great deal was plain, for her eyes were full of tears, and those tears did much towards gaining the victory.

"I am not the least bit mad with you, Dora," Elsie hastened to say, "but I am with Bess. Please ring the bell."

"In one minute, if you will only promise to make up."

"Dora Warner, I tell you I *can't*," stamping her foot. "I can't say it wasn't my turn, for that would be a story."

"That won't make any difference, for you need not say anything about it, only that you are willing to make up. You think you were right, and Bess thinks she was right, so all you have to do is not to say anything about it. *Please*, Elsie."

Dora's logic may not have been altogether convincing, but her earnestness was not to be resisted.

"Well," began the prisoner, "I suppose I shall freeze to death if I don't, so I will only—" "

Dora waited for nothing more, but gave the bell a joyous pull.

Louise, who was on her way upstairs, ran back to see who was at the door.

"Why, it is Dora!" she exclaimed, opening it.

It did not take long to explain, and Elsie was glad to sit down by the register in the hall and make it up in earnest.

Bess, who heard them talking and ran down, was quite ready to meet her more than half way, and no one would have guessed, seeing their friendliness, that an hour ago they were not on speaking terms.

Elsie was pitied and petted to her heart's content, while Dora beamed on them like a genial little sun which had at last made its way through the clouds.

Aunt Zélie heard the whole story that night.

"Wasn't it funny, Elsie's getting caught?" said Louise. "I believe it is really a magic door; Dora thinks so too."

"I don't know. It seems to me if the rest of you had been as anxious for peace as she was, the door need not have come to your relief. If you had each been trying to help," said her aunt.

"I believe I have been forgetting the text," Bess said gravely.

If only the quarrel between Carl and Ikey could have been settled as quickly. A week passed and matters did not mend. The walk to and from school was now taken alone, and neither made any sign of recognition when they met. Ikey was miserable at the sight of Carl's intimacy with Jim, and he imagined, too, that Mrs. Howard took her nephew's part, and this was hardest of all.

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The fact was Aunt Zélie knew little or nothing about it. She had a house full of company, and Carie was sick besides.

In spite of appearances to the contrary, Carl was no happier than his friend, and quite as keenly missed the daily companionship in lessons and play. It had its effect in making him overbearing and fault-finding in an unusual degree. The family began to wonder what had happened to merry, good-tempered Carl, when one Saturday morning matters reached a climax. As he came upstairs from the library where he had been copying a composition, his father called to him from the hall below. Running into the girls' room, he laid his paper on the table there, with strict injunctions to them not to touch it.

Some minutes passed before his return, and Helen, who was apt to be attracted by forbidden fruit, could not resist going over to look at it. "I only want to see if I can read it," she said in reply to a warning word from Bess, who passed through the room on her way to the star chamber, where she and Louise were busy.

Helen, left to herself, was seized with a desire to make a capital S like Carl's. Finding a pen and some ink, she set to work, forgetting everything else till Bess, returning for something, exclaimed, "Why, Helen, what are you doing? Here he comes."

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Very much startled, she looked around quickly, and the pen fell from her unaccustomed fingers upon the composition, scattering ink in every direction. At this moment her brother entered the room, and at one glance took in Helen's frightened look and the blotted paper.

"Didn't I tell you not to touch that?" he thundered, all the stored-up anger of weeks coming to the surface, and, springing forward, he caught her by the shoulder, gave her a furious shake, and pushed her from him with all his strength. With a frightened scream she fell backwards, striking her head against the edge of the half-open door.

"You wicked boy!" cried Bess, greatly shocked; "perhaps you have killed her."

But Helen's cries told that it was not so bad as this. Everybody came running to see what the matter was, and Joanna picked her up and carried her into Aunt Zélie's room, where it was found that a large lump on her head and a bruise on her arm were the worst of her injuries. Bess told how it happened.

"I can't think what ails Carl lately," said Louise.

"He is a mean, hateful boy," sobbed Helen; "I don't care if I *did* spoil his composition."

Feeling that it would be of no use to talk to her then, Aunt Zélie left her to the tender ministrations of her sisters and Joanna, and went to seek the chief offender.

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He was still in the girls' room, standing his ground defiantly.

The moment's fright lest he had hurt Helen badly had passed, and the sight of his composition stirred his anger afresh.

"Is it true that you threw your sister down?" His aunt stood before him with a look in her dark eyes which it was not pleasant to meet.

Carl glanced down, but answered, "Yes, and here is what *she* did!" holding up the blotted paper.

"Does that excuse your unmanliness, your—you might have killed her, you know. I can't talk to you now, Carl; you'd better go to your room. I can't tell you how disappointed I am."

He never thought of not following her suggestion; indeed, he was glad to get away from those indignant eyes.

"Of course," he muttered to himself, "I am all to blame and nothing is said to Helen about spoiling my work. Boys are always found fault with, but girls can do anything."

Down in his heart he knew this was not true, but he chose to think it. He flung himself into a chair by the window. It was a gloomy, thawing day; the snow, as if aghast at the trouble it had caused, was melting sadly away. There was nothing in the prospect to make him feel cheerful. After awhile he went to work on his composition again, and as he wrote he felt more and more like a martyr. When it was finished he folded it and put it away, and began to think it must be near lunch-time. With the door closed, there in the third story he could not hear the bell; however, he would not go down; if they wanted him they might send for him. By two o'clock he was feeling deeply injured. Nobody cared whether he starved or not. Then he remembered that Uncle William was to take them to see Hermann that afternoon. By this time they must have gone without him. Carl threw himself on the bed and shed some tears of vexation and disappointment. All the while something was whispering to him that he deserved to be unhappy. The afternoon dragged slowly; he grew very hungry, and at last saying to himself that he would go and get some biscuit, and "Tom Sawyer," one of his favorite books, he went softly downstairs.

The house was so quiet that the sight of Mr. Smith asleep on a hall chair was a positive relief. After visiting the pantry he went to the library for his book. The door was half open, and when he reached it he suddenly stopped, for there was Aunt Zélie by the table with her head bowed on her arms. Evidently she had not heard him, and Carl almost held his breath. He thought she was crying; he was not sure, but certainly she was unhappy. It came to him in that moment, as it never had before, how tender and sweet and helpful she was. She had sorrow of her own, he knew, and who was there to comfort her as she comforted others? And he had disappointed her—had behaved shamefully. As he stood there it seemed to him that he must have been crazy. He could not endure the sight of that sorrowful figure, and turning to go away, instead; the next minute he was kneeling beside her saying, "Aunt Zélie, I am *so* sorry."

She was startled, for she had not heard him; but she turned and put her arms around him for a moment, without speaking.

"Aunt Zélie, I know how contemptible I am; you ought not to have anything to do with me," Carl exclaimed in a great burst of contrition. She took his hand and held it fast as she answered, "I can't throw stones at you, dear, but perhaps I can help you to learn the lesson I have had to learn many times."

He never forgot that afternoon. How he sat beside her with his head on her shoulder, while she talked to him as she had never talked before. How his face glowed with mingled shame and pride as she said that, of all the children, he was, if possible, the dearest to her.

"But I have more fear for you than for the others. I long to have you grow up a strong, true man—master of yourself in every sense. If you do not, I shall feel that in some way it is my fault."

"I will try to be what you want me to be—like Uncle Carl—if I can; and nobody in the world could help me as you do."



"HE TOLD HER ABOUT THE TROUBLE AT SCHOOL."

"I shall not leave you till you leave me," Aunt Zélie said, smiling rather wistfully at the tall boy.

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"That will be never, and I will always take care of you," answered Carl, laying his cheek against her hand. He told her about the trouble at school too, finding it a relief to confess everything and she listened gravely.

"For a little misunderstanding like this, a little hateful pride, pleasant friendships are given up, and the good times we expected to have in the club this winter! Have my Good Neighbors forgotten their motto already?"

"I'm afraid so," Carl said, thinking how hard it would be to make things right again.

"Have you told Father?" he asked.

"No, he did not come to lunch."

"Then I shall have to tell him," with a sigh.

This was not an easy thing to do. That they were the best of companions and friends made it all the harder, for he felt he had forfeited the right to this good-fellowship.

Carl told his story with such evident shame and repentance that, though he listened with a grave face, Mr. Hazeltine could not find it in his heart to be very severe.

"I did not think," he said, "that my only son could be guilty of such a cruel and ungentlemanly act."

Carl winced at this.

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"You see," his father continued, laying his hand on his shoulder, "I always had such a tender feeling for my little sister that it is hard for me to understand how you could be so unkind."

It was Carl's private opinion that Aunt Zélie could never have been so trying as Helen, but he did not say so. They had a serious talk, and for a week after, Carl was seen only at the table, for he and his father decided that as he had sinned against the happiness of the family, he must forfeit the privileges of the family life for a while.

Everybody was glad when the week was over, Carl most of all.

No one else knew how lonely those evenings were, spent in his room, or how he longed to join the group around the library fire.

Helen was deeply impressed by her brother's humble apology, and decided that after all she wasn't glad she had spoiled his composition, but very sorry she had been so meddlesome.

Carl lost no time in starting out to find Ikey and make friends.

It was on Monday morning, and they met just outside the gate.

"Hello!" said Carl.

"Hello!" replied Ikey.

"Know your Latin?"

"Hope so, I have studied it a lot," and they walked down street together as if nothing had happened.

"Where were you going this morning when I met you?" Carl asked when his neighbor came in, in the old way, with his books that afternoon.

"I was coming over for you. I was tired of it."

"Were you? Why, I was going for you!"

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CHAPTER XV.

ToC

DORA'S BRIGHT IDEA.

One thing troubled Carl. It was that Dora knew all about it. She came to lunch that dreadful Saturday to go with the others to see Hermann, and of course Helen's bruises and his own absence had to be accounted for.

On his way home from school one morning he saw her and her mother coming towards him on the other side of the street. When they were within speaking distance, Mrs. Warner bowed, but Dora looked in another direction as if she wished not to see him.

Carl was hurt and mortified, for he was sure he knew the reason.

"I don't care, it is mean to be so hard on a fellow. Aunt Zélie isn't," he said to himself.

He did care, however, and was silent and gloomy at lunch. As he left the room on his way upstairs to study he heard Bess say, "Dora had such an accident to-day." But he did not wait to hear what it was.

An hour later, having an errand to do up town, he went off alone instead of asking Ikey to go with him as usual.

The clear, cold air was making him cheerful in spite of himself, when, as he drew near home after a long walk, he saw two familiar figures in front of him. His spirits immediately fell, for they were Ikey and Dora chatting together most sociably. Carl suddenly felt jealous.

He knew they were great friends, and he never had dreamed of objecting till now that he was himself out of favor. He began to walk slowly that he might not overtake them, his pride keeping him from turning back and going home some other way.

They paused a moment when they reached the corner; then Ikey, with his politest bow, left her and crossed the street. Dora stood waiting. Carl advanced, trying to look unconscious and indifferent.

Her smile changed to a puzzled look, and then became positive astonishment when he was passing without a word.

Always straightforward, she exclaimed, "Why, Carl! Aren't you going to speak to me? I am on my way to your house."

"I thought you would not care to speak to me, you didn't this morning," he answered somewhat loftily.

"Not speak to you? I don't know what you mean."

"You would not this morning," he persisted.

"Oh, I know now! How absurd! Didn't the girls tell you about my glasses getting broken? It must have been when I was going to have them mended. You know I am so near-sighted I can't see across the street without them."

Carl looked rather foolish. Dora had worn glasses only a short time, and he had not noticed their absence.

"You knew I would not do such a thing; how could you be so silly?" She was decidedly vexed with him.

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"I thought perhaps you really did not care to have anything to do with me after—"

"You thought I would stop speaking to you for that!" she exclaimed. "Why Bess told me how sorry you were, and at any rate it would have been acting as if I never did wrong myself."

"You wouldn't do anything so horrid."

"I was a little surprised at you," Dora, acknowledged, "but it is so disagreeable not to be friends with people. I am glad you and Ikey have made up; he was telling me about it."

By this time they had reached the gate, and Carl said, "I don't think the girls are at home; they were going out with Aunt Zélie, but you might come in and wait, if you don't mind talking to me while I look over some books for father."

"I don't mind talking to you," she answered, laughing, "but I can't stay long. I want 'Water Babies.' Louise said I could have it to read."

"Come in, then, and I'll find it for you."

They went up to the star chamber together, and Dora sat down in the west window, where a little wintry sunshine still lingered, while Carl looked for the book.

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"I can't see how you could be such a goose as to think I would not speak to you," she said presently.

"I suppose I knew I deserved it." Carl laid "Water Babies" on her lap, and, kneeling on the floor with his elbows on the window-sill and his chin in his hands, looked thoughtfully out at the bare branches of the maples.

"I'll tell you what it is," he said after a minute's silence, "Aunt Zélie is a trump."

"I know that, only I'd call her a prettier name," said Dora, smiling.

"You can't know really till you have been very bad. She was so good to me. It makes a fellow feel awfully when somebody like her cares a lot for him and he goes and disappoints her."

"But you won't again, I'm sure."

"You see," Carl went on, "she cares for me particularly because I am named for Uncle Carl. Has Bess or Louise ever told you about him?"

Dora shook her head.

"He was Mamma's brother, you know, and he was splendid. I thought there was nobody like him when I was a little fellow. He used to be here a great deal, and we were glad when he married Aunt Zélie because we were so fond of them both. The only thing we did not like about it was that Aunt Zélie went away to live, but they came to see us very often. Then Uncle Carl died. He was skating with some people, and a friend of his went where the ice wouldn't hold, and broke through. Nobody knew just what to do, it was so hard to get to him on the broken ice, and the man couldn't swim. Uncle Carl saw that he would drown before help came, so he went right into the freezing water and held up his head till they brought ropes."

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"He wasn't drowned, was he?" Dora asked in an awestruck voice.

"No, but he was in the water so long that it made him ill. The other man got well. It happened not long before Mamma died. Then, you know, Aunt Zélie came back to us."

"You must be glad you are named for him."

"Yes, I am, only I am not good enough. I am afraid I shall never do anything brave like that."

"I think, perhaps, little things have to come first," said Dora wisely, adding, "He was helping, wasn't he?"

"I had not thought of that," said Carl.

As she walked home an idea came into Dora's head, which interested her so much that "Water Babies" lay unopened on her lap for half an hour that night. Next day she confided it to Bess and Louise, who highly approved.

"Why, Dora, you are very clever. When you are grown up you will be as good at thinking of things as Aunt Zélie," said Bess.

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"You think of pretty good things yourself, Bess," added Louise.

"And so do you, for you first thought of trying to help the harp man," said Dora merrily.

"The G.N. Club meets to-night, and we'll ask the boys to let us in. You come over to dinner," Louise suggested.

"They won't do it," said her sister positively.

"Oh, perhaps they will if we are very polite; we will try."

The weekly meetings of the G.N. Club had begun again with great interest. No one

enjoyed them more than Aunt Zélie, and nothing was allowed to interfere with this engagement with the boys if she could help it. However, it happened this evening that some old friends of the family who were passing through the city on their way south called, and it was impossible to excuse herself, so the boys were left to their own devices.

Though the star chamber looked as cheerful as usual and Carl did his best as host, it was not quite the same without her.

Jim recalled with wonder that first evening when he hoped she would not come. The rehearsals for the harp man's benefit had made them all feel very well acquainted with her and one another.

They were beginning work on some screens for the Children's Hospital when there came a knock at the door. Ikey opened it and Carie walked in.

"I came to bring you a letter," she announced, handing Carl a folded paper, and shyly surveying the rest of the company from behind him.

He read it aloud.

To the G.N.C.:

We should like to come to your meeting this evening, if you will let us. We have a splendid plan to tell you. Dora thought of it. Send reply by bearer.

Yours truly,

BESS HAZELTINE.

LOUISE HAZELTINE.

DORA WARNER.

"Shall we let them come?" he asked.

"Of course," said Jim, and as nobody was actively opposed, Carl scribbled, "Come on," on the back of their elegant note.

Within five minutes the girls were established in their midst, quite as if they belonged there.

When the screens were duly admired and their offers of help politely declined, Bess explained the object of their visit.

"We think it would be nice, now that we haven't secrets any more, and because you helped us with the harp man's benefit, for our clubs to be friends and meet together sometimes. Dora has thought of a beautiful plan. Won't you tell about it yourself, Dora?"

"It is nothing very great," she began modestly. "You know in the days of chivalry how all the knights belonged always to some order,—like the Knights Templars in 'Ivanhoe,'—and perhaps there are some now; I don't know."

"There is the Independent Order of Odd Fellows," suggested Will, and Carl added, "Joanna's young man belongs to the Ancient Order of something."

"Then I don't see why we shouldn't have one," Dora went on, laughing. "My idea was to unite our two clubs in an order, and call it the Order of the Big Front Door. We both have the same motto and are trying to help, so it would not be anything really new, except that we could have a badge to remind us, and have meetings together sometimes. The story of the Magic Door put it into my head."

"Good for you, Dora! I'm for it!" cried Ikey.

The funny name took the boys' fancy, and the plan of having joint meetings was not altogether objectionable. The story of the Magic Door had to be explained to some of them, and while Bess was doing this Aunt Zélie came in. She was surprised and delighted to see the visitors, and when the new project was told again for her benefit, she thought it a very good one.

"I was trying myself to think of some way of keeping our motto in mind, and now you must let me furnish the badges. The name, Order of the Big Front Door, has given me an idea about them."

"What, Aunt Zélie?" asked Louise. "I am sure it is lovely."

Her aunt only laughed, and would not tell.

"Just as soon as I can get them," she said, "I'll call a meeting of the Order."

CHAPTER XVI.

SILVER KEYS.

"I wonder what they are going to do this afternoon," said little John Armstrong.

He sat in his usual place in the bay-window, with his drawing materials and his books beside him, but the doings of certain girls and boys who constantly passed to and fro interested him more than any story book.

John was twelve years old and had never had a friend of his own age. That sad disease paralysis laid its hand upon him when he was only a baby, so instead of going to school, and running and playing like other children, he sat in a wheeled chair and looked on.

He was not exactly unhappy, for he had a quick, bright mind, and a love of knowledge which made his lessons a pleasure. Everything that love could suggest was lavished upon him by his father and mother, but they did not guess how he longed for the companionship of other children.

They feared the contrast between himself and them would only make him miserable. So in the eighteen months since Dr. Armstrong had been preaching in the church on the corner, John had hardly spoken to a child. The M.Ks. and the G.Ns. never dreamed how eagerly they were watched that winter. Some of them seeing him always at the window fell into the way of nodding to him as they passed.

He knew their names from hearing them call each other, and his favorites were Louise, Ikey, and Jim.

On this particular Saturday afternoon John felt that something unusual was going on. Dora passed with her work-bag, to be met at the Hazeltines' gate by Bess and Louise, and they seemed to have something very interesting to talk about as they crossed the street together.

A moment later Elsie and Constance went up the Brown house walk. This happened every Saturday, but when nearly an hour had gone by Jim Carter appeared. His whistle brought Ikey, and then Carl and Aleck, and they stood talking almost in front of John's window. How he did wish he could hear what they said! Presently they were joined by Will and Fred, and finally by Mrs. Howard, who had a package. Each of the boys apparently offered to carry this for her, but she declined. Then they, too, crossed the street and disappeared within the Brown house.

This was all John saw, except that Louise and Ikey came and sat in the window and seemed to be laughing, but that was not unusual.

It was the first meeting of the Order of the Big Front Door, that was being held at Miss Brown's this afternoon.

As the M.Ks. were still at work on Aunt Sallie's afghan, their meeting was put at half-past two in order to give them an hour and still leave time for the other. When this had passed the knitting was put away and more chairs brought in, for the Brown house sitting-room was not a spacious apartment, and twelve visitors quite filled it.

Much excitement was caused by the box which Aunt Zélie carried, for of course it held the long-expected badges.

"It is good of you to meet here," said Miss Brown, giving the G.Ns. a cordial welcome.

"It is good of you to let us," replied Mrs. Howard. "You belong to the new Order, and must have your badge as well as the rest of us. And now the meeting will please be in order, especially the members on the window-sill."

"The first business before us is the election of a President. The Tellers will please distribute the ballots."

This office was performed by Elsie and Aleck, who also collected and counted the votes, and announced the election of Will Archer. In the same way Bess was made Secretary and Ikey Treasurer. It was decided that the G.Ns. would give up their club once a month for the meeting of the Order, when reports from both clubs would be made. When this business was finished Aunt Zélie took up her box, saying, "The next thing is the distribution of badges; but before I take them out I want to say a word."

"Hear! Hear!" murmured Carl.

"No preaching!" begged Aleck.

"*Do*, Mrs. Howard, he needs it," said Dora.

"Yes, I am going to preach a little. I want you to remember that these badges are to keep our motto before you. They mean that you promise to be helpers, and that is something more than getting up entertainments as we did for the harp man. It means being good-tempered and kind at home and in school, doing little thoughtful things for people. You remember in the story of the Magic Door it was because they forgot

this that the lock grew rusty and useless, so it seemed to me that the most appropriate badge would be this." As she spoke she took from the box a tiny silver key. On close inspection it proved to be a pin so prettily and ingeniously made that anybody might be pleased to wear it. On one side was engraved a part of their motto—"They Helped"—and on the other, the letters O.B.F.D.

So great was the enthusiasm that all order went to the winds.

"Aren't they lovely?" "Tiptop!" "Dandy!" "Too pretty for anything!"

And no one was more pleased than Miss Brown.

"I am afraid I can never be half so good to my neighbors as they are to me," she said, "but I'll try."

"As if you were not the nicest neighbor we ever had!" cried Louise.

"Let's give Mrs. Howard a vote of thanks," proposed Jim.

Ikey looked at him with envy. Jim always thought of the right thing.

"We ought to thank Dora too, for it was her idea," said Carl as the clapping subsided.

"I did not dream of anything so nice," said Dora, patting her little key.

"I am glad you are pleased, and I hope they will open some rusty locks," said Aunt Zélie.

"And now, if you please, we'll adjourn into the dining-room," said Miss Brown. "This is a very special occasion, you know," she added, in reply to a grave shake of the head from Mrs. Howard.

They drank success to the new Order in chocolate, and munched crisp little sugar cakes which were cleverly twisted into M's and K's. Mary had long ago become a friend of the children, and this was her contribution to the occasion.

"There is something I should like to suggest," their hostess said as Carl passed the peppermints. "I feel an interest in people who, like myself, can't get about easily, and I have noticed that little lame boy over the way, and I wonder if these silver keys could not open a door of pleasure for him."

"Will suggested it long ago, but our Christmas work put it out of our thoughts," Mrs. Howard replied.

"Suppose we go now and take him some M.Ks.," Louise said merrily.

"We don't know him," objected Elsie.

"Let Louise and Ikey go, and I will put up some cakes and peppermints for him," said Miss Brown.

Ikey, though shy when left to himself, was always willing to follow Louise, and they went off together in high spirits, not in the least subdued by Aunt Zélie's remark that she hardly thought she would care for a visit from two such geese.

John was still at his window waiting for the meeting to be over, and laughed at the sight of Louise chasing Ikey around the garden. They seemed to be disputing over something that was done up in a napkin. It ended by the former getting possession, and then, still laughing, they came out of the gate and crossed the street.

John's heart almost stopped beating for a second. Could they be coming to see him? He felt both glad and frightened when the maid announced that some children wanted to see him, but he told her gravely to ask them up. Louise's friendliness was irresistible, and when she came straight to his side holding out her hand and saying, "How do you do, John? We have been having a meeting at Miss Brown's, and she has sent you some sugar cakes. Ikey and I have brought them," John forgot his shyness and felt that she was an old acquaintance. He could not think of much to say, but he smiled cordially at them.

When the cakes were undone it was of course necessary to explain the meaning of so many M's and K's, and this led to an account of the other club, and the Order of the Big Front Door. It was like finding the missing pages of a fascinating story.

"And that is what you were doing this afternoon?" asked John, admiring the little keys. "I did so wonder what was going on when I saw the boys go in."

"I didn't know you were watching us," said Ikey.

John's face flushed as he replied, "I hope you do not mind. I often do."

Mind! Of course they did not!

The visit was a decided success. When Mrs. Armstrong came hurrying in, feeling that she had left John a long time alone, she found him with very bright eyes, eating sugar cakes.

This was only the beginning; it soon became an established thing for one or two of the Order to spend an afternoon each week with the lame boy; and at such times the pleasure was by no means all on one side.

CHAPTER XVII.

[ToC](#)

A PRISONER.

"I believe I'll go to see little John this afternoon," said Louise.

"You can take him the last 'St. Nicholas' if you do. I'd rather have you go there than to Dora's or Elsie's, for then I shall not wish so much that I could go with you," answered Bess, who was to spend the afternoon at the dentist's.

Louise found the magazine and then walked as far as the Armstrongs' gate with her sister and Joanna.

"Good-by," she said; "I hope Dr. Atmore won't hurt you."

Several hours later Bess entered the room where Mrs. Howard was taking off her wraps, and asked, "Do you know where Louise is, Aunt Zélie?"

"Why, no, I have only just come in; can't you find her?"

"No, Auntie, and I have looked everywhere."

"Surely she must be in the house; it is nearly dark. Did you have your tooth attended to?"

Bess forgot everything else in the interest of relating her afternoon's experience, but when the story was finished she began again to wonder what had become of Louise.

"I think Carl has just come in—I hear his whistle; perhaps she is with him," said Aunt Zélie. But upon inquiry he had not seen her since lunch.

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"And you have looked everywhere? In the star chamber, and the library, and—"

"Yes, and I have asked Sukey and James, and they have not seen her," Bess replied.

"It is a little strange, for she knows I do not like to have her out late. She was going to John's, wasn't she?"

"I know she went there, for she walked as far as the gate with me. Perhaps some of the boys are there and will bring her home," said Bess.

"We will wait a quarter of an hour, and if she does not come I'll send over to the Armstrongs'," said Mrs. Howard.

The minutes slipped away, but no Louise; and Joanna, who was sent in search of her, returned with the news that she had left there about four o'clock.

"Oh, dear! She must be lost!" Bess exclaimed.

"Louise get lost! Nonsense! She could find her way anywhere," said Carl.

"I hardly think she can be lost, but I am worried about her. Joanna, you'd better go to Mrs. Warner's, and, Carl, suppose you run over to Miss Brown's, she may be there," and Aunt Zélie walked to the window and looked out into the darkness. "It is beginning to snow," she said.

Neither Miss Brown nor the Warners had seen Louise, nor had she been heard of at the Morrises', and they were trying to think what to do next when Mr. Hazeltine came in.

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"Father, she must be lost, don't you think so?" asked Bess, when matters were explained to him.

"I don't know what to think," he answered. "Louise is not the kind of a child to get lost easily."

"So I say," added Carl.

"Then somebody has stolen her like Charlie Ross, and I'll never see her again."

"It is too soon to despair, dearie," said Aunt Zélie, as Bess looked ready to cry.

"Suppose we have some dinner, and then if we hear nothing in the meantime, I'll go to the Armstrongs' and try to find a clue to start with," said Mr. Hazeltine.

It was not a cheerful meal, in spite of Aunt Zélie's effort to hide her anxiety and talk of other things. It seemed as if Louise's bright face must appear each minute; but dinner was over and no word of her.

The snow was falling fast when Carl and his father started out. Little John could tell them nothing more than that Louise had been there for an hour, and then said she must go, as there was something she wanted to do. He watched her out of the gate and thought she went home.

"It is a great puzzle," said Carl when they were on the street again.

"It is indeed," his father replied, looking up and down irresolutely.

"Are you worried? What do you think can have happened to her?"

"I don't know, my son; yes, I am very much worried. I wish William was not away from home. I think, perhaps, the best thing I can do is to see Roberts." Roberts was a detective, and Carl began to feel that the situation was serious.

There was nothing for Aunt Zélie and Bess to do that long evening but wait and try to be patient. Mr. Hazeltine promised to telephone the moment he discovered the least clue to her whereabouts.

And where was Louise?

While she and John were playing checkers she overheard Mr. Armstrong talking to his wife about a book which he evidently was very anxious to have, and which he seemed unable to find either at the library or the bookstores.

At the first mention of the title Louise was sure she had seen it on their own library table at home, and remembered hearing her father and uncle discuss it. "I know father will lend it to him," she thought, and was about to say so to Mr. Armstrong, when she recollects that Uncle William had borrowed it.

"I am sure he has finished it," she thought, "and at any rate he has gone to Chicago. I'll go home and ask Aunt Zélie to let me get it." Eager to do this kindness, she ran off as soon as the game was finished.

But everybody was out. James was at work in the cellar; Mandy so occupied with her pantry shelves that she did not know when Louise passed through the kitchen; Sukey had taken Helen and Carie for a walk, and Aunt Zélie was at a lecture. What should she do?

She went up to the star chamber, hoping to find Carl and coax him to go with her, but he was not there. She wanted very much to get that book for Mr. Armstrong. He wished to make use of it in a lecture he expected to give on Monday night, so it was important that he should have it as soon as possible. She knew the way to Uncle William's perfectly, but she and Bess never went so far by themselves.

"I can go all the way on the cars," she said to herself. "Nothing could happen to me, and I can't ask Aunt Zélie when she isn't here." Trying to satisfy her conscience in this way, she found her pocket-book and started out. It happened that she saw nobody she knew as she waited on the corner for the car, feeling very independent.

The afternoon was cold and cloudy, and the ride seemed longer than usual.

"I wish I had asked Dora to come with me," she thought; "I shall have to hurry to get hack before dark."

"I want to go to the library just a minute, Bruce," she said to the man who opened the door.

He looked somewhat surprised to see her alone, but made no comment, only replying, "I am afraid it is rather cold there; we are having the furnace cleaned today."

"I only want to get a book. I'm not going to stay. And you needn't wait, Bruce. I can let myself out," she said.

The library was at the end of the hall, almost opposite the front door, but somewhat cut off from the rest of the house, as it communicated with no other room.

As Louise entered she pushed the door to behind her. Yes, there was the volume she wanted on the table. Taking it up and turning to go, her eyes fell on the corner where Uncle William kept his story books—books intended for his young guests, which he very much enjoyed reading himself sometimes, and to which he was constantly adding. As there seemed to be some new ones, Louise sat down to examine them, and before she knew it became absorbed. When at length she looked up it was beginning to grow dark.

"Dear me! what will Aunt Zélie say? I must hurry," she exclaimed, and running to the door she stopped in bewilderment, for there wasn't any knob, and yet it was securely latched. She was very much puzzled. For a few minutes it seemed rather funny to be fastened up in Uncle William's library, but when all her attempts to open the door failed it did not seem so much like a joke. She tried pounding on it, but any noise such small hands might make could not be heard twenty feet away. Louise soon realized this; the servants she knew were on the other side of the house and might not come near the library till the next day. She thought of the windows, and tried them one after another, standing on tiptoe on the sill, but she could not move the fastenings. The one that faced the street was too far back for any possibility of

attracting the attention of passers-by.

"What shall I do? They won't know what has become of me," she said. She wondered if Bruce would not come to turn on the light in the hall, only to be disappointed again, for when she peeped through the keyhole it was already burning. Again and again she tried to move the latch with a pen-knife, and then with a paper-cutter, but without success.

Then she sat down to think. There was nothing to do but wait. She was a brave little person, but as she saw how dark it was growing and thought of home with all its light and cheer she could not keep the tears out of her eyes.

How foolish she had been, and naughty, too! What right had she to the book? She ought to have asked her father's permission before she thought of going for it. This was all quite clear now.

The room was cold, and outside the wind whistled about the house. The snow had begun to fall so thickly that when she went to the window she could not see the street. It was some comfort to turn on the electric light, but it did not keep her from being cold and tired and hungry. The clock said a quarter past six; in a few minutes more they would be eating dinner at home. Somebody *must* come; she couldn't stay there all night.

She went to the door again and called "Bruce! Bruce!" till she was tired. Slowly the hands of the clock moved on: seven; half-past; eight. Her excited imagination began to bring to her mind all the stories of burglars she had ever heard. Suppose some one should come to rob the house, knowing the family were away! She was afraid to take her eyes off the door, and much as she longed for release she almost dreaded to see it open. She sat on the floor, pulling a great bear-skin rug over her, and by and by she fell asleep with her head on a chair. Then she dreamed that she was out in a sleigh in a furious snow-storm. Carl was with her and Bruce was driving, and they were chased by wolves. (This was probably suggested by the story she had been reading, which was one of Russian adventure.) The wolves gained upon them, though they seemed to be going like the wind; she felt their hot breath on her face as they climbed over the back of the sleigh. Just as she was being dragged out she thought Carl cried, "There goes Louise!" Then she opened her eyes to find herself on the library floor, with Mr. Caruth and Bruce standing over her, and Dan, the big mastiff, trying to lick her face. The clock on the mantel said half-past ten.

About half an hour earlier Mr. Caruth, going home on a street-car, met an acquaintance who remarked that he had just seen Mr. Hazeltine, who was much worried over the disappearance of his little girl. His informer did not know which of the children it was, or any particulars, and after riding another block Mr. Caruth rang the bell and got off, intending to go back to the Hazeltines and learn the truth of the matter.

On his way to take the down-town car he passed Mr. William Hazeltine's house. He noticed that only a dim light burned in the hall, and recalled the fact that they were out of town, but happening to glance in the direction of the library he was surprised to see it brilliantly illuminated. Hesitating for a moment, he turned and went up the steps. "I'll take occasion to ask Bruce if he knows anything about one of the children getting lost," he said to himself.

After some minutes the door was opened by the sleepy-looking man, who was not disposed to be quite amiable. In reply to Mr. Caruth's question he said he knew nothing about it.

"Well, see here, Bruce, what does that light in the library mean? Mr. and Mrs. Hazeltine are both away, aren't they?"

The man looked at him in surprise, and said there wasn't any light in the library.

"Just come out here, then, and tell me what you call this," and Mr. Caruth led the way to the corner of the house.

"I haven't been near the library since morning, sir," the astonished man exclaimed.

"How about the other servants?"

"They are all away but the cook, and she went to bed an hour ago. There was a man here attending to some locks, but he left about noon."

"It can't be burglars, for they wouldn't leave the blinds open. We must look into this," said Mr. Caruth, as they entered the house.

The dog had followed Bruce to the door, and under his protection they entered the library.

A more unexpected sight could hardly have met their gaze—Louise fast asleep on the floor, with the bear-skin partly covering her!

Dan's cold nose aroused her, and she started up with wide-open, bewildered eyes.

"Don't be frightened, it is only Dan," said Mr. Caruth, lifting her into a chair. "Get wide awake and then tell us why you are spending the night here. I am afraid from what I hear that they are worried about you at home."

"I'm awake now and I must go. You will take me, won't you?" said Louise, rising and pushing back her hair, and looking about for her hat. "I did not mean to stay here," she added, "but I couldn't get out—there isn't any knob on the door."

Bruce, who had been standing open-mouthed, turned at this to examine the door, and sure enough there was a knob on the outside, but not on the inside. He could not explain why it had been left so; he only knew that the man who came to make some change in the door-knobs had said that something was wrong and he could not finish the work till the next day.

A long ring at the bell startled Mrs. Howard, and aroused Bess from a troubled doze on the sofa. They ran into the hall just as Joanna, who was on the watch, opened the door with a scream of delight.

"Louise! Louise! Where have you been? Where did you find her, Mr. Caruth?" Bess laughed and cried at the same time, and Aunt Zélie was almost as bad. Louise was hugged and kissed and asked the same questions over and over again, because it was impossible to take in anything more than the glad fact that she was found.

In the midst of it Carl rushed in, exclaiming, "We can't find a trace of her, and Roberts says—"

"The next time you want a detective you'd better employ me," remarked Mr. Caruth calmly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SOMETHING ELSE HAPPENS.

Louise's adventure resulted in a cold that came near being pneumonia, and kept her housed for more than a week. As she paid so dearly for her thoughtlessness, no one had the heart to scold her; indeed, she received an unusual amount of petting.

Mr. Hazeltine did suggest that the next time she wished to help one of her neighbors it might be as well to count the cost, and her meek "Yes, Father," showed that she saw her mistake.

"I wonder what will happen next," said Carl one day, a week later, speaking from the depths of the wardrobe, where he was rummaging.

"Nothing, I hope," remarked Bess, who sat in the window with Louise, supervising a new mansion for the Carletons.

"Not even something nice?" asked her brother.

"Nothing really nice has happened since Aunt Zélie gave us our silver keys," said Louise. "There is the postman; I am going to see if he has anything for us," and putting aside her papers she ran downstairs.

She and the postman were great friends, and always had some merry words to exchange when they met.

"I treat you vell to-day," said the cheery Dutchman; "I bring you two letter."

"Thank you, but they aren't for me. They are for my aunt. You must bring me one for myself."

"Dot is too bad, I vill haf one for you next time." He trotted off, and Louise carried the letters in and laid them on the library table, as Aunt Zélie was not at home, and then went back to her drawing. Just before dark Mrs. Howard came in, bringing Cousin Helen with her to spend the night. The children were delighted at this, for it meant a merry evening if nobody came to call. The one provoking thing about Cousin Helen was that she had so many friends.

Bess was charmed to discover that it was beginning to rain.

"Now we can sit around the fire after dinner and tell stories," she said, putting away her papers in an old checker-board.

Their cousin, like their aunt, was generally willing to do what the children wished, so they made a sociable group in the library after dinner.

"Let's play something first," suggested Miss Hazeltine, taking possession of the sleepy-hollow chair.

"I Have a Thought," Aunt Zélie proposed; "little Helen likes that."

"I have a thought that rhymes with deep," announced Carl.

"Is it what Cousin Helen will do if she sits in that chair?" asked Bess.

"Thank you, miss, I am not such a sleepy-head as you think," said her cousin, with pretended indignation.

It was not till some one had a thought rhyming with "better" that Louise was reminded of the letters the postman left.

"There are two, Auntie," she said, bringing them; "one is from Father."

"Yes, just a note to say he will be at home to-morrow at three. I don't know this writing," opening the other.

"Why, it is from Miss Lyons, Aunt Mary's companion!" she exclaimed, looking at the signature.

"You are frowning, Aunt Zélie," remarked Carl.

"Don't keep us in suspense, Zélie. Is there anything wrong?" asked her cousin.

"Nothing really serious. Aunt Mary fell and broke her ankle, and will have to stay in bed for several weeks; but the trouble is Miss Lyons's brother is very ill and she has to go to him."

"So that is it? And she wants some one to take her place for a while, I suppose. I'd go in a minute if Father and Mother were not away."

"Of course you could not go, Helen. I am the one. Frank will be at home, and Sukey is here to take care of the children. I wish I had had this sooner; I must telegraph to Miss Lyons that I will take the nine o'clock train to-morrow."

While she was speaking the children were silent from astonishment, but a wail arose presently.

"Why can't Aunt Mary take care of herself?"

"What shall we do without you?"

"Don't go, *please* don't go!"

"Children, I must; think of poor Miss Lyons."

"If you put on such long faces when she is only going sixty miles away for a few weeks, what would you do if she should go away to live?" asked Cousin Helen.

"But she never will do that, for she has promised," said Carl confidently.

Bess's face suddenly brightened. "It will be helping, to let her go, won't it?"

"I suppose so," sighed Louise, "but it is such a dreadful thing."

"Oh, no, not dreadful at all!" and Aunt Zélie laughed at the doleful faces. "You can help, all of you, by being cheerful. And think what nice letters you can write me!"

"What will the club do?" Carl demanded.

"Conduct itself with propriety, to be sure; and now I must pack my trunk."

"Think of your wishing that something would happen!" said Bess reproachfully to her brother as they went upstairs.

It was very forlorn next morning to say good-by, knowing that when they came from school Aunt Zélie would not be there; but they remembered their promise and tried to be cheerful. How the rest of the day passed Bess told in a letter written that evening:

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DEAR AUNT ZÉLIE: You have been gone ten hours. Carl counted it up, and we miss you very much. Father has come home, so that is one comfort. He is reading the paper now. It was lonely at lunch with only us, but Nannie came over with a note from Miss Brown asking us to come and take five o'clock tea, Carie and all. We had a good time. Miss Brown told stories and showed us some funny old things that belonged to her aunt. There was some jewelry that Louise and I would like to have to play Queen Mary in. Carl liked an old "Pilgrim's Progress" that was printed more than a hundred years ago, but Ikey said he would rather have a new one.

Carie was good as could be, and we had tea out of the little cups. We are grateful to Miss Brown. I think she was being a good neighbor, don't you? Father says it is bedtime, so good-night, dear Aunt Zélie.

From your loving nieces,
BESS and LOUISE.

Several days later she received one from Carl:

DEAR AUNT ZÉLIE: I have not written before because there was nothing of interest to tell you. We are getting on very well, though I think Joanna is

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too bossy, and mammy is nearly as bad. But we have been pretty good on the whole. Cousin Helen was not going to let Aleck stay Friday night, for fear he would cut up, but Father said, "Nonsense!" so he came. We had a better time at the club than we expected. The boys were dreadfully sorry you were not there. Our screens are coming on finely, though Ikey pasted a dragon on upside-down. Will read the last chapter of "The Talisman" aloud while we worked. Then Father came up and was as jolly as could be. He advised us to read the "Life of Washington" next, and we decided to begin it next week. Father is coming up again if he can. The O.B.F.D. will meet next week, so we can't have the club; I forgot. Some of us will write you about it. I hope Miss Lyons's brother will soon be well and Aunt Mary too. Good-by,

Your devoted nephew,
WILLIAM CARLETON HAZELTINE.

A week or two later Aunt Zélie received two long letters in the same envelope, from her nieces:

DEAR AUNTIE: We have so much to tell you that we are going to divide it between us. Aunt Marcia has just been here and has asked Father to let Helen go with her to Florida. Isn't that lovely? Uncle William said he wished he could take us all, but I don't believe Aunt Marcia does. Louise and I wish we could go. Aleck wants Helen to bring him an alligator. Another thing we have to tell you is that Louise went to hear Patti sing, with Mr. Caruth. He was going to take Cousin Helen, but she was sick, so he came and asked Louise if she would go instead. Aunt Marcia said it was a great compliment to such a little girl, and that she must wear her white silk dress. I couldn't help wanting to go, because we always go together, and she was sorry too. Mr. Caruth brought her some flowers just as if she was a young lady, and I heard him tell Father she was a beautiful child. She had a lovely time, but she was sleepy next day. Now Louise is going to tell you about the meeting of the Order.

Your devoted niece,
ELIZABETH HAZELTINE.

DARLING AUNT ZÉLIE: Bess says I must tell you about the O.B.F.D. It met yesterday afternoon. We trimmed the star chamber with our flags, and Carl cut some big letters out of gilt paper,—O.B.F.D.'s I mean,—and put them on the wall. Everybody came, and we had a nice time. Carl made a speech of welcome; and Jim played on the banjo, and then we had reports. We each wrote on a piece of paper how we were trying to help, and Will read them. We didn't put our names, because Bess said it would seem as if we were proud of ourselves. Connie said some poetry and Aleck sang a funny song. Ikey and Will both had to pay fines. We are each going to pay ten cents a month and give the money to the Children's Hospital. When we thought it was all over Jim got up and said he had a present for us, and what do you think it was? Our motto painted in colors. Father says it is illuminated, and little John did it. Jim had it framed. We hung it on the wall, and we think perhaps we will ask John to belong to the Order. I liked Patti very much, but I wished Bess could go.

With a great many kisses and lots of love,
LOUISE HAZELTINE.

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CHAPTER XIX.

AUNT SUKEY'S STORY.

ToC

"It is a whole month since Aunt Zélie went away, and nearly a week since we had a letter. I wonder if Miss Lyons's brother is not well yet;" Bess sighed, for time was beginning to drag.

"Suppose Miss Lyons couldn't go back at all, would your aunt have to stay?" asked Dora, who had come in to spend the afternoon.

"Dear, no! Aunt Mary would have to get another companion; Aunt Zélie belongs to us," answered Carl, who sat on the floor showing Carie pictures.

There was one supposed to represent the drowning of Pharaoh and his host which interested her deeply, and her brother made it even more thrilling by singing in an explosive manner one of Sukey's songs:

"Oh! didn't old Pharaoh get drowned—
Oh! *didn't* old Pharaoh got drowned—
Oh! DIDN'T old Pharaoh get drowned in
the Red sea?"

"Is Carl here?" asked Louise, looking in; "here's Ikey."

"What are you boys going to do this afternoon? Don't you want to play something?" asked Bess.

"No, thanks, we have something else on hand," was the unsatisfactory reply.

"What?" said Louise.

"Never mind; little girls mustn't ask questions," responded Carl paternally, as he and Ikey left the room. A moment later he returned to call through the half-opened door, "I know something I'm not going to tell."

"Never mind, I can get it out of Ikey," responded Louise.

"Unfortunately he doesn't know it," came from the third-story stairs.

"Perhaps Mandy will let us make some candy; let's ask her, and not tell the boys," Louise suggested.

So while Joanna carried Carie off for a walk the others went down to the kitchen.

It was a large, bright room, and it was Mandy's pride to keep it shining. Aunt Sukey sat by one of the windows with the mending basket beside her, and the presiding genius stood at the spotless table rolling out croquettes.

"Mandy, we are so lonely without Auntie! mayn't we make some candy to amuse us?" Louise put on her most coaxing expression.

"The kitchen ain't the place for young ladies to get their dresses dirty in, and their fingers burned," said Sukey severely.

"But we aren't young ladies, mammy, and we will be careful," urged Bess.

"I don't think anyone *could* get dirty in this kitchen," Dora added in honest admiration.

This compliment pleased Mandy, and furthermore it was her kitchen, so she said good-naturedly, "You can make all the candy you want, so long as you get through before dinner-time."

With this permission the sugar and molasses were soon simmering in a saucepan, sending forth a pleasant fragrance.

When it was well begun Bess sat down by Sukey, saying, "Now tell us a story, mammy."

"Oh, go 'long, I tol' you all my stories long ago! You all's getting too big for stories. Looks like it was just yesterday that Miss Zélie was askin', 'Mammy, tell me a story,' same as you."

"Was Auntie pretty when she was a little girl?" asked Bess.

"There never was a child as good-looking from first to last. Louise favors her, and it looks like I forget sometimes that it ain't Miss Zélie; but pretty is as pretty does, that's the truth, and she was pretty in manners as well as face."

"Go on and tell us about her," begged Louise, for though they had heard it all many times there was nothing they liked so well to listen to. Nor was there anything Sukey liked so well to tell, so as she sorted and turned and rolled the stockings in a leisurely way, she began.

The sunshine came in at the window and rested on Louise's bright head and Dora's dark one, as they sat together in the same chair. Bess's seat was an upturned earthen jar, and the same sunlight fell on her small folded hands and on the brown wrinkled ones at work with the stockings.

"Well, you know how Miss Zélie's ma died when she wasn't as big as little Carie, and the last thing she said to me was, 'Sukey, you mind my baby.' Miss Elizabeth always set great store by me, and I 'lowed that freedom or nothin' could take me from old Master's family. It was powerful lonesome in this big house in those days. Your grandpa took your grandma's death mighty hard, and he had to travel a good deal for his health, so Miss Zélie didn't have any one to look after her but Mr. William and me. Mr. Frank, your pa, was away at college. Then Mr. William got married. Miss Marcia is a good woman and kind-hearted, but she ain't any gift at managin' children, and that's the truth. Miss Zélie was a smart, lively child with a temper of

her own, and if I do say it she would have had a hard time if it had not been for her old mammy. When she was ten years old Mr. Frank—he had been home from college a year—come to me and says, 'Sukey, I'm goin' to be married.'

"I didn't know whether to be glad or sorry, but I wished him good luck, an' he went back up North for his wife."

"That was Mamma, you know," Louise explained to Dora.

"I remember how Miss Zélie come to me, and says she, 'Mammy, do you think she will love me?'

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"About that time Miss Marcia took it into her head to go to Europe. She said something about taking Miss Zélie along, but I up an' tole her that where my child went I went too, an' she 'lowed she didn't want me.

"It was the prettiest kind of a day when they came home, and we was out on the porch watchin' for them. They drove up presently with your grandpa, and Miss Elinor she came up the walk ahead of Mr. Frank, smiling as sweet us could be, an' she says, 'So this is my little sister.' I knew that minute they'd be friends.

"Your ma was dreadful fond of children, and she made a great pet of Miss Zélie, and she was as happy as a bird."

"Isn't it interesting to think of Aunt Zélie being a little girl?" said Bess; "but go on, Sukey, and tell about when Carl was born."

"Well, it did seem like she was just too happy when the baby came. He was a fine child, and Miss Elinor said Miss Zélie might name him. Well, she and your grandpa would sit and argue about that name, and after I don't know how long they settled on William Carleton. That was the name of Miss Elinor's only brother, and William was old Master's name too. Mr. Carl used to come down right often, and he and Miss Zélie was great friends, though he was eight years older. Well, when—"

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Just at this moment the kitchen door opened; the children had their backs to it, but Sukey sat facing it, and her story came to a sudden stop. Bess, turning to look, was clasped from behind. Could it possibly be? Yes, it certainly was Aunt Zélie herself.

"You darling! When did you come?" asked Louise, holding her fast.

"This very minute. I wrote to Frank that I would be home to-morrow, and then found that I could get off to-day."

"And is Miss Lyons's brother well?" inquired Bess.

"Almost, and she sent her thanks to you for letting me take her place."

"She is welcome, now you are at home again," laughed Louise, with another hug.

The candy was almost forgotten in the delight at Aunt Zélie's return, and would have been spoiled if Mandy had not taken it in hand.

When the traveller went to change her dress Louise had a little triumph over Carl which pleased her exceedingly.

Going up to the star chamber, she called, "Well, I have found out your secret, Mr. Carl. It is that Auntie is coming home to-morrow."

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"Who told you?" he demanded.

"Never mind, I told you I'd find out," and she ran away without giving him a chance to ask any more questions.

An hour later, when the boys came downstairs, there was Aunt Zélie looking as if she had never, never been away, and the girls quite consumed with delight at their surprise.

"Louise, that was mean!" Carl cried. "How long have you been here, I'd like to know?" with one of his bearlike hugs.

"I did not *mean* to be mean, really, and you and Ikey can have all the candy you want," said Louise generously.

Mrs. Howard had certainly no reason to doubt her popularity. The news of her arrival spread, and the next day in the afternoon she held an impromptu reception.

One after another the boys and girls dropped in, till the whole eleven were there. The first to arrive was Jim, with a great bunch of roses, at which extravagance Aunt Zélie shook her head, though she could not help appreciating their beauty and Jim's thoughtfulness.

Ikey wished that he could do magnificent things like that,—he sometimes dreamed of it,—but alas! he was in a chronically penniless state. He had nothing for her but a message from his mother, but when he screwed up sufficient courage to deliver it it seemed to please her as much as the roses. The message was: "Thank Mrs. Howard for being so good to my boy. Some day I hope to see her and tell her how I love her for it." Ikey's heart fairly glowed when Aunt Zélie said that it was only a pleasure to be good to such a nice boy.

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Last of all came Cousin Helen and Aleck, who stayed and spent a merry evening.

"It is so nice to have Aunt Zélie back, I am almost glad she went," Bess was heard to say.

And that lady herself thought that such a welcome quite made up for the four rather lonely weeks in the country with her invalid aunt.

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ToC

CHAPTER XX.

THE ORDER OF THE BIG FRONT DOOR.

On the afternoon of the meeting at Miss Brown's, when the silver keys were distributed, Jim had walked home with Aunt Zélie and said as they reached the gate, "Thank you very much for the pin, Mrs. Howard; I mean to remember the motto and be a helper if I can."

"I am sure you do, and you are more than welcome," she replied, thinking, as she looked into the bright, handsome face, "He wants to please me now, but perhaps it will grow into a higher motive."

Jim was quite in earnest when he said this. Three months in the Good Neighbors Club had somewhat changed his point of view. He might still be inconsiderate and thoughtless, but he no longer defended himself by saying that every fellow must look out for himself.

The friendship of little John Armstrong was doing much for him. A strong liking had sprung up between the two, rather to the surprise of everybody. From the first John showed a decided preference for Jim, who was so big and strong and capable, everything he himself was not; and in the same way the helpless weakness of the invalid made its appeal to the boy who in all his life had never been ill.

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Certainly Miss Brown was right when she said that the silver keys could open a door of pleasure to the lame boy.

The children could not guess the happiness their companionship gave him. He listened with eager interest to all they told him of their life at home and at school, and when they were gone he lived it over again in imagination. He cherished a secret desire to belong to the Order, but would not have mentioned it for the world, for how could he help? He wrote the motto in his note-book, and then for weeks spent all his spare time copying it on parchment in letters taken from an old English missal, one of his father's treasures, drawing and coloring them with greatest care. When it was done it was really beautiful, and Jim, who was in the secret, had it nicely framed and presented it, as we know, at the next meeting of the Order.

But John wanted to be a real helper. He thought about it a great deal, but everything was done for him; there seemed to be no chance.

One day he noticed a lot of magazines which his father had been looking over, and left lying on the floor when he was suddenly called away. They belonged on the lower shelves of the bookcase, and it occurred to him that he might replace them. He rolled his chair over to that side of the room, and with a good deal of effort put them back in order on the shelves. Then when Dr. Armstrong thanked his wife that evening for putting them away, and she answered that she had not even seen them, John had the great delight of surprising them. It sent him to bed with a happy heart. However, next day he began to doubt whether so small a thing would count, and when Jim dropped in in the afternoon he asked his opinion. "Of course, you see, I can't do much of anything, but I'd like to help a little," he said.

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"Count?" said Jim, the despiser of trifles; "of course it does; everything counts."

He told the boys and Aunt Zélie about it at the next meeting of the G.N. Club. "I can't help feeling sorry for the little fellow; I never thought before how hard it would be not to be able to do things like other people, but just sit still and be waited on; so I told him I thought it would count. Don't you think so?" Jim looked at Aunt Zélie appealingly, half afraid the boys would laugh at his soft-heartedness.

"I certainly do," she answered, and Will said, "There are a great many things he could do, I am sure. Did he ever show you his scrap-books? They are beautifully done. He could make some smaller ones for the hospital."

"Why couldn't we make him a member of the Order? He would be so pleased," said Jim.

"He couldn't come, could he?" asked Ikey, not meaning to object.

"Why couldn't he?" said Carl; "some of us could carry him over as easily as not."

"I say let's talk it over with the girls and have him here next Friday," said Will.

The girls entered into it willingly. "Of course he ought to belong, for he made us that beautiful motto," said Elsie.

"And we must get up something interesting for him," said Louise, who with Jim was on the entertainment committee.

Aunt Zélie consulted Mrs. Armstrong and found she was not willing to let John go out at night, so the time of the meeting was changed to Friday afternoon. Nothing was said to John himself till that morning, when Carl stopped in on his way to school to invite him.

"Could I go? Do you think I could go, Mother?" he asked eagerly, and from then until lunch time he lived in delightful anticipation.

After that the minutes dragged till three, when the boys came for him, and the journey from the parsonage to the star chamber was easily accomplished. This apartment presented a festive appearance, decorated with flags and bunting which had done service in one of Aunt Marcia's numerous charitable entertainments.

"You see, John," Louise explained as soon as his chair had been placed in a corner from which he could see everything, "Aunt Zélie said we ought to have colors for our Order, and I thought, and so did Bess and Dora, that red, white, and blue would be nicest, because they are the colors of our country. Carl says it is silly, for we are not doing anything for our country, but I'm sure we would if we could."

As Louise chattered away John looked around him. His motto hung in the place of honor over the mantel. In front of this was a low platform which dated back to Uncle William's time, and had often done duty for tableaux and such things; on it were two chairs and a table for the President and Secretary. Chairs for the audience were arranged in rows facing this. It was a most exciting moment to John when Will took the chair and called the meeting to order in a business-like way. Bess read the minutes of the last meeting, and Ikey gave the Treasurer's report. Then came reports from the two clubs, given respectively by Elsie and Aleck. The M.Ks. were still at work on the afghan for old Aunt Sallie, which was nearly done, and Miss Brown was reading aloud to them "A New England Girlhood."

The G.Ns. had finished one of their screens and were at work on another while they listened to "The Life of Washington."

"Next in order is the election of new members," said Will, and John started and flushed and then felt ashamed that he could be so silly as to think he was meant.

Jim rose and said, "Mr. President, I nominate John Armstrong."

This was seconded by Ikey, and the President continued: "John Armstrong is nominated; all in favor will please say 'aye.'"

The "ayes" were overwhelming, and accompanied by such a clapping of hands that the President forgot to ask for the "noes."

When it was quiet again John found voice to say timidly, "I'm afraid I won't amount to much, but I am very much obliged and I'll try."

When Louise pinned a little silver key with a tiny bow of red, white, and blue ribbon on his coat no Knight of the Garter was ever prouder of his decoration.

The President announced that he had been told of a little girl who had to lie on her back for a year on account of some spinal trouble, and who had almost nothing to amuse her, so if anyone had scrap-books or toys and would send them to her it would be helping.

John's eyes grew bright; here was something for him to do.

After this the meeting adjourned, the table and chairs were removed from the platform, a white curtain drawn, the room darkened, and the audience, such as did not take part, were treated to shadow pictures.

John, who had never seen any before, laughed till he cried at "Lord Ullin's Daughter" and "The Ballad of the Oysterman." This last was performed with particularly fine effect by Carl and Louise, and everybody knows how funny it is when well done.

John was carried home again very tired, but with a radiant face, eager to show his silver key. As the spring days grew warm and pleasant his wheeled chair was often seen on the sidewalk, or in the Hazeltines' garden, where he liked to watch the games of tennis and croquet, drawing clever little caricatures of the players meanwhile. Somebody was always ready to wheel him about, and in the pleasure of young companionship he grew stronger, and his face lost much of its pathetic look.

About this time old Mr. Ford, whose eyes were growing dim, discovered that when the print of his paper was particularly fine a pair of strong young eyes were ready to

lend their service. Sweet-tempered Ikey had always been willing enough to help when it occurred to him, but his thoughts were likely to be anywhere else than at home, so that the broadest hints were lost on him. Now, with the little key to remind him, he was oftener on the lookout for opportunities, and as the months passed his grandfather was heard to say: "Isaac is a fine boy, only a little mischievous," and Mrs. Ford added: "Yes, he is really growing like his father."

The letters that found their way across the sea were not homesick in these days, and Ikey's mother ceased to worry about him.

In ways like these the silver keys did their work. Their owners did not forthwith turn into models of helpfulness and unselfishness; such things need time to grow, and this is exactly what they began to do. Only little sprouts, hardly to be noticed at first, they gave promise of being sturdy plants some day.

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CHAPTER XXI.

ToC

WORK AND PLAY.

Miss Brown sat in her accustomed place by the window, where the sun was pouring in in a springlike way, though it was only February. Her sitting-room wore a festive air; the curtains looked crisp and white as if they were just hung, the old mahogany shone with more than its ordinary lustre, and on a table at her side stood a bowl filled with white carnations. She looked about her with happy eyes, for she had been away a month and had discovered that there was no place like home, after all.

From the pleasant room she turned to the window, and her glance went across the sunny street and rested on the Big Front Door.

It opened presently, as she rather expected, and Bess and Louise came out with their work-bags, and stood talking to Aunt Zélie, who followed them.

"Dear, dear, how those children are growing! It seems only yesterday that they broke my window and came to confess."

As she watched them Miss Brown thought, as she had so often before, what a happy home that was, and how much of its brightness found its way over to her!

"Come for us early this afternoon, Carl, for we want to go out to Uncle William's," said Bess to her brother, who had joined them and was carefully marking his aunt's height on the wall.

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"You are not expecting me to grow any more, I suppose," said that lady, laughing.

"I simply wish to prove to you that I am two inches taller, so you can't lord it over me any longer, madam."

"I was under the impression that the lording came from quite a different quarter."

"That is a base slander; you know I am your humble slave, so take it back," and Carl gave her a hug that compelled her to cry for mercy.

"If you must embrace me, let it not be in public; what will the neighbors think?" she said, as he released her.

"They may think that I am very fond of you, and where is the harm?" following her into the hall and closing the door.

Over at Miss Brown's a few minutes later five work-bags were being opened, their owners all talking at once as they took out their thimbles and needles.

Though nearly two years and a half had passed since the day when the M.Ks. took their first lesson in knitting, the club still flourished, and after a month's holiday they were eager to begin the meetings again.

"We did hardly any work while you were gone, we were so afraid of making some mistake," said Louise, bringing her chair to Miss Brown's side.

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"Uncle William's dreams ought to be sweet when he takes his nap under this; I believe Dora's stripe is the prettiest of all," and Bess held up her friend's work admiringly.

"Dora's stripes are always prettiest," said Elsie; "I wish I could do half so well."

"Aren't they absurd, Miss Brown, when it is only because daisies look particularly well on tan color?" said Dora, laughing.

"I think the skilful fingers have something to do with it, but I am proud of all the work."

"We have improved a little since we made the afghan for Aunt Sallie, haven't we?" remarked Constance.

"You have, indeed, but you were such dear little girls then, and now you are growing distressingly tall; I do not half like it." Miss Brown shook her head disapprovingly as she looked around the circle.

"I think it will be very nice to be grown up," said Elsie, who was already beginning to consider herself a young lady at fourteen.

"I'd much rather stay a little girl. I don't like growing up. Next year Carl is going away to school, and all our good times will be over," and Bess sighed as though the weight of years already rested on her shoulders.

"Well, we *are* only little girls yet, so what is the use of worrying?" said Louise, who, though she was tallest of all, was more of a child than any of the others.

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Dora was perhaps more changed than any of her friends. She was growing very sweet and womanly, and her manners were as simple and frank as ever. Her mother's feeble health brought her more care than fell to the share of most girls of her age, and this made her seem older than she really was.

This afternoon she seemed somewhat preoccupied and silent. When appealed to she answered as brightly as usual, but a thoughtful, anxious look came to her face when she turned to her work.

Miss Brown noticed it and wondered what was troubling her.

"Girls," exclaimed Bess, "suppose we give Uncle William a party when we finish the slumber robe—just our set, you know."

This suggestion met with enthusiastic approval, and was discussed with great glee till Louise announced the arrival of the boys.

On pleasant Saturdays they often dropped in about five o'clock, and when work was put up went with the girls for a walk, a custom which Aunt Zélie encouraged, for she liked to have her boys and girls together.

Carl came across the street, followed by Will and Aleck; Ikey, who was waiting at his gate, joined them; and a moment later Jim came hurrying round the corner.

"Let's show them the slumber robe," proposed Louise. So they were called in while Bess and Elsie spread their work over a chair.

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The boys went through the ordeal fairly well, being amiably desirous of pleasing the proud needlewomen.

Will brought down their scorn upon his head by saying it was pretty, as if it were not "lovely," and Aleck insulted Dora by examining her daisies with a critical air and then asking what sort of flowers they were.

For this stupidity Carl promised to punish him.

"Aren't you coming with us, Dora?" asked Bess when they reached the street, seeing that she turned toward home.

"I am sorry, but I can't this afternoon," she said.

They united in coaxing her, but she would not listen, and with a cheerful good-by walked briskly away.

"Mayn't I carry your parcel for you?" asked a voice at her side.

"Why, Carl, I thought you had gone with the others! It isn't dark. I do not need anyone."

"Please, ma'm, I'd like to walk with you if you don't mind."

Dora couldn't help smiling, though she said severely, "I don't believe you. It is because you think I am lonely by myself. I am much obliged to you, but I wish you would run after the others."

Carl coolly took possession of the work-bag. "You will have to make the best of it, for I am going home with you."

They walked on in silence for a minute; then he asked meekly, "Are you mad?"

"You know I am not."

"Then you might tell what is the matter. You don't know how much good, honest confession does one."

"Yes, I do, but I have nothing to confess. I am worried about something, but you cannot help me, and it is not worth speaking of, at any rate."

"Come home, then, and tell Aunt Zélie; she is pretty good at helping."

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"I ought to know that; still I don't know what even she could do. It is not much, after all; I am just rather low in my mind, as Mrs. West says." Dora smiled with an attempt at cheerfulness not altogether successful.

"Don't fib; brace up and make a clean breast of it, and if you need advice I am full of it."

"Dear me, you are such a goose! I shall not have any peace till I tell you. Well, then, the beginning of it is that Mrs. West is going to Florida to live."

"I am sorry, but it seems to me matters might be worse," Carl answered gravely.

"Of course you don't understand it. It means that we must find another boarding place, *where* I am sure I do not know. We can't afford any that are near here, and Mamma does so hate to board, she is not a bit happy. I would give anything if we could have a little house all to ourselves."

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"There is one thing certain, you shall not go away from this neighborhood. Don't worry about it, it will come out all right."

Dora felt a little comforted by Carl's sympathy, though she knew he could not help her.

"Are you sure you could not find a small house that would do?" he asked.

"Yes, I know that is quite out of the question. Even a small house would cost too much, and then it would be too lonely for Mamma, when I am at school. You see it was foolish in me to tell you, for it only bothers you for nothing."

"Just wait a minute, I have an idea," said Carl, putting his hands in his pockets and assuming an air of deep meditation.

"It is ever so much better than Mrs. West's!" he exclaimed presently. "I am glad the old lady is going. I shall not tell you what it is till I investigate, but I am sure it will do."

He was so interested in his scheme, whatever it might be, that he would not wait a moment, but rushed away as soon as the door was opened.

"Ridiculous boy! What can he be thinking of?" Dora said to herself as she went upstairs, her curiosity much stronger than her faith.

"Aunt Zélie, can't you come with me over to the bakery?" asked Carl, bursting in upon her five minutes later.

"If it is a matter of life and death I presume I can," she replied. "What is going on there?"

"Nothing; I'll tell you about it, only do get your things, or it will be dark."

As she put on her hat and coat he told her about Dora's trouble, which she could appreciate far better than he.

"She said she knew they could not find a house that would do," he went on, "and that reminded me that there is a 'For Rent' sign in the windows over the bakery. You know if they lived there Mrs. Smith would be good to them, and perhaps they could get their meals from her. So I want you to look at the rooms and see what you think. Dora would listen to you."

Very much amused, Aunt Zélie went with him, agreeing that it might be practicable.

Mrs. Smith, the wife of the confectioner, was delighted to show her rooms, and led the way through the store into the entrance hall at the side, and on upstairs. There were two large, bright rooms opening into the hall, with a bath-room adjoining. The rent was very reasonable, and she said she could furnish meals. Aunt Zélie was forced to admit that her nephew's plan had a good deal to recommend it.

Nothing would do but they must go and tell Dora about it before they went home.

She was very much surprised to see them, and listened with eyes that grew bright as the plan was unfolded.

"Didn't I tell you it would be better than staying here?" Carl asked triumphantly.

"It sounds as if it would be perfect; how did you come to think of it?" Dora said gratefully.

She could hardly wait till Monday afternoon to go and see for herself. Mrs. Howard went with her then, and so did Bess and Louise, but they only sat on the window-sill and built castles while the others made calculations and discussed carpets and curtains.

"They are such pleasant rooms, so much more so than the one we have now," Dora said. "I think, and the doctor said so too, that sunshine is the best thing for Mamma. I believe I have thought of everything, and it won't cost much more than boarding at Mrs. West's. If it were only on the other side of the street I could see the Big Front Door."

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Aunt Zélie offered to take charge of the cleaning and getting ready, so that her

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lessons need not be interrupted, and nothing remained but to gain her mother's consent to the plan.

Mrs. Warner made no objection to it when she heard that Mr. Hazeltine and Mrs. Howard thought it wise, but she did not show the interest Dora hoped for.

Once it was decided upon, things seemed almost to arrange themselves. All her young friends took an interest in Dora's moving, and Elsie, who doubted the propriety of living over a store,—for as yet "flats" had not been heard of in this part of the country,—nevertheless confided to Bess that she was going to make her a beautiful pincushion. This suggested an idea to Bess.

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"Don't you think it would nice for each of us to give Dora something for her housekeeping?" she asked at the dinner table that evening.

Uncle William and Aunt Marcia were there, and the Warners had just been spoken of. "A good suggestion," said the first-named; "suppose we do."

"I don't approve of this move at all," Mrs. Hazeltine announced; "Mrs. Warner must have lost her mind to consent."

"It is a great deal nicer than you imagine, Aunt Marcia," urged Bess.

"Dora doesn't care about being fashionable, and you can have more fun if you don't," observed Louise.

"You seem to care for nothing but fun," said her aunt, with dignity.

"At any rate we all admire Dora's energy and good sense, and would like to do something to help her," said Mr. Frank Hazeltine.

So they put their heads together and made their plans.

It was arranged that Mrs. Warner should come to her new quarters on Saturday morning, and Dora lingered long on Friday afternoon putting a few last touches here and there, arranging her little sideboard with some pretty glass and china, relics of her mother's early housekeeping, till everything was in dainty order.

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"I do hope Mamma will think it pleasant," she said to Louise, who was helping.

"She will, I'm sure," Louise answered, looking around the room, which was indeed very attractive with the afternoon sunshine streaming in through the windows draped in their pretty muslin curtains.

"Everything is so sweet and cosey I almost envy you," she added, dusting the top of the clock with a tiny feather duster.

"Louise Hazeltine, how could you envy anybody?" Dora exclaimed. "There are two things I ought to have, and mean to sometime," she went on, "and they are some plants and a canary."

Louise looked out of the window to hide a smile.

One more peep had to be taken at the other room, where two snowy beds looked restful and inviting; then she locked the doors, leaving the key with Mrs. Smith that the fires might be made in the morning.

"I hope you will like it, Mamma," were her last words that night and her first thought next morning.

Mr. Hazeltine sent his carriage for Mrs. Warner, and short as the drive was it seemed tiresomely long to Dora.

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"I am glad it is pleasant so that the sunshine will be in your windows; it is always there by eleven o'clock," she said.

Mrs. Smith was at the door to welcome them, with her small son Tommy to carry up any bundles.

"I declare," she remarked to her husband, "it doesn't look right for a woman that has a daughter like Miss Dora to be so terrible down-hearted."

In her eagerness to see how her mother was pleased, Dora hardly noticed anything herself when she opened the door.

A more hopelessly gloomy person than Mrs. Warner could not have failed to be impressed with the sweet, cheerful comfort which pervaded the room. The sunshine from the south windows lay in two great patches on the quiet carpet, and glistened in a corner of something that did not look quite familiar; the fire burned briskly, doing its best to add to the cheeriness.

"My dear daughter, how could you do all this?" she asked, her face brightening.

"Do you like it? I am so glad!" Then Dora began to look about in some bewilderment; something had certainly happened to the room since yesterday. In the corner by the fireplace was the dearest mahogany desk, and on it a card which read, "For a brave little girl, from Uncle William." Glancing up, her eyes rested on the sweet face of a Madonna, which she guessed at once came from Aunt Zélie.

"How good they are to me!" she exclaimed, feeling almost like crying; but just then

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the canary in the window burst into a song, thus calling attention to himself and to the pot of ivy from Miss Brown.

It was a morning of surprises. While her mother sat in her easy-chair, with a more cheerful face than she had worn for years, Dora went about finding every now and then something new. There were hyacinths from Helen and Carie, Elsie's pincushion on the bureau, a table cover from Constance, and on the sideboard a cunning teapot, with this touching verse tied on the handle:

"Whene'er a cup of tea you drink,
Of me I hope you'll kindly think.
To make the memory more complete,
Be sure to take it very sweet."

This effusion did not need Carl's initials to tell her where it came from. The last thing to be discovered was a beautiful chair to match the desk, from Carl's father.

Late in the afternoon a happy face looked in on Aunt Zélie, and a merry voice exclaimed, "It is going to be a success; and to-day has been better than Christmas!"

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CHAPTER XXII.

ToC

UNCLE WILLIAM IS SURPRISED.

Dora's housekeeping seemed to thrive from the first. Her mother grew more cheerful and a little stronger, and she herself was rosy and happy. It was so pleasant to come home every day after school and find Fanny, their small maid, who came each morning and stayed till after lunch, setting their own little table. And then, what a pleasure to study at her beautiful desk!

"It is lovely, if it is over a confectionery, isn't it, Mamma?" she would say.

It was her great pleasure to keep this small domain in the daintiest order, and Saturday morning was sure to find her busy with her duster. On this particular morning, as she was shaking it out of the window, she saw Bess and Louise coming in.

"If you aren't busy, Dora, we want to talk to you about something." began the last-named person before she was fairly in the room.

"I am just through, and delighted to see you," she said hospitably.

"It is about the afghan," Bess explained. "We can finish it easily this afternoon, and the twentieth is Uncle William's birthday; don't you think it would be best to give it to him then?"

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"We asked the boys about the party and they are in favor of it, and Aunt Zélie says we can have it. Now what kind of a party shall it be? We want suggestions," said Louise, folding her hands in her lap, and leaning back as if she had only to ask.

"Why not have a surprise party?—ask him to dinner as if it were nothing special, you know."

"The very thing!" they both exclaimed.

"Why didn't we think of surprising the dear old duck, who is always surprising us?" Louise added.

Bess shook her head at her sister. "That is not a becoming way in which to speak of your uncle. But that is a good idea, Dora; you are a very bright girl."

"Thank you, I am glad I am satisfactory. Do you need any more suggestions?"

"It must be a real party; we must trim the house and have Carl present the slumber robe; and do you think we could have a cake with candles? Forty-eight would be a good many."

"Four dozen," said Dora, as Louise paused for breath. "Why don't you leave the decorations to the boys? We have done our share in making the afghan."

"Another brilliant idea. We will," said Bess.

They discussed it again over their work that afternoon, and Constance and Elsie gave their entire approval to the plan.

A party at the Hazeltines' was always welcome, and the combination of circumstances made this particularly pleasant to anticipate.

Their fingers flew as they talked, and by five o'clock the last stitch was taken, and the work of nearly six months finished.

After surveying it fondly on all sides and trying its effect on Miss Brown's sofa, it was reluctantly wrapped in a sheet and put away till the all-important day.

It was hard to do justice to lessons the next week, with such interesting preparations to be made. Aunt Zélie had shaken her head over parties during the school term, but gave in to the plan that this was a very special occasion. They couldn't help the fact that Uncle William's birthday came in March.

Everything was ready in good time, Mr. Hazeltine was invited to dinner, and a hint was given to his wife.

At seven o'clock on Thursday evening most of the party had assembled, and the Hazeltine house was pervaded by an air of expectancy.

In the place of honor in the long drawing-room sat Miss Brown, who could not resist the united urging of Aunt Zélie and the girls.

"We arranged this corner just for you," said Bess, coming to greet her as soon as she was seated. "We knew you would look like a picture in it."

Miss Brown laughed and said that would be a new sensation, as she had never before been a picture.

"Oh, yes, you have been, but perhaps you didn't know it!" said Louise. "This time you are to know it, and every one is to admire you, for you are part of our decorations; I am glad you wore that lovely shawl."

She made a picture, truly, with her bright eyes and snowy hair against the crimson velvet of the chair, a delicate white lace shawl over her dark dress, and a copper lamp with a deep rose-colored shade throwing a soft radiance about her.

"And here is somebody to keep you company," said Bess, bringing Aunt Zélie to sit beside her.

Mrs. Howard's eyes followed lovingly her two pretty nieces as they danced away to join the group around the afghan.

"I wonder," said Miss Brown, watching them, "what difference it would have made in me if I had had such a home when I was a child."

"It is a beautiful and helpful thing to have a happy childhood to look back upon," answered their aunt. "When I meet discontented, cynical people I feel sure that no sweet true child-life lies behind them. I want my boys and girls to be able to say that their happiest times have been at home. Here comes our housekeeper."

There was certainly a housewifely air about Dora's plump little figure in her simple white dress as she came to speak to Miss Brown and get Aunt Zélie to pin on her flowers.

"Everybody is here but Ikey and Jim," announced Louise, whose blue ribbons were fluttering from one end of the house to the other.

"Here they are!" called Carl from the window, "and someone else; it must be Uncle William!"

Great excitement prevailed till the door opened and it proved to be Mr. Caruth.

"I had forgotten you were invited, but I am very glad to see you," Louise said, advancing to meet him.

"Then I should not have been missed if I had not come?" he said, shaking hands with Mrs. Howard.

"Oh, I had only forgotten for a minute, because I have so much on my mind!" she explained, laughing. "Why, Jim, what lovely flowers! Ikey, where is your buttonhole bouquet that I took so much trouble to make?"

Ikey stared blankly at his undecorated coat. "Oh! I forgot it. I put it in the refrigerator; I'll go and get it."

"In the *refrigerator*?" repeated the girls with one voice. "Just like a boy!"

"Well, why not? That is where you put things to keep;" and Ikey departed to find his posies, while Jim divided his roses between Louise and Aunt Zélie.

In three minutes Ikey came flying back quite breathless, announcing that Uncle William was at the gate.

The festive air which reigned inside found its way out through various cracks and crevices, causing Mr. Hazeltine to remark that the house looked unusually brilliant.

The truth did not dawn upon him till he stood in the parlor floor before a semicircle of bright faces, all very full of the fun of the occasion.

Across the top of the large mirror he saw "Welcome," in letters of evergreen, and a

chorus of "Many happy returns!" greeted him.

"Bless me! what does this mean? Is it possible that it is my birthday?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, and it's a *s'prise* party; aren't you *s'prised?*" demanded Carie, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"Surprised? I should say so! I shall have to have forty-eight kisses from somebody."

Carie immediately volunteered her share, and altogether it is probable that he really received more than he was entitled to.

He made his way to Miss Brown's corner after a while, and when the excitement subsided a little Carl stepped forward and said in an extremely lawyer-like manner: "I have the honor to be chosen spokesman this evening, to welcome you and wish you many happy returns of the day in the name of the members of the Order of the Big Front Door, who in testimony of their affection for you tender you this reception. I am also requested to present to you, in behalf of the Merry Knitters, this slumber robe, the work of their own fair fingers, which they offer as a slight token of their appreciation of all your kindness to them. May your dreams be sweet!"

Aleck and Ikey advanced and threw the slumber robe over a chair before the astonished Uncle William.

For it moment it quite took his breath away. He was touched and gratified that the girls should have done so much work for him, and found it necessary to clear his throat vigorously before he replied to Carl's graceful effort.

"I am sure I can truthfully say that only once before in my life have I been so completely surprised. I thank you all most heartily for remembering an old fellow like me, and I particularly thank the M.Ks. for their beautiful gift. I shall prize it as one of my greatest treasures. I also thank Miss Brown for coming to my party; I consider it a great honor. As I had not the same opportunity as my nephew for preparing a speech I shall not say any more except to thank you all again."

He sat down amid great applause.

The slumber robe became for a while the centre of attraction. It was as great a surprise to Aunt Marcia as to her husband, and she admired it extremely, praising the young needlewomen warmly.

"Mr. Caruth and I feel envious, and want to know what you have done that so much work should be bestowed on you?" said Mr. Frank Hazeltine, joining the group around it.

"You see, Father, he is a sort of public benefactor; he gets up wonder balls and takes us to the circus, so he has to be publicly rewarded," Louise explained gayly.

"I am sure I was Santa Claus once," said Mr. Caruth.

Supper was announced presently, and what a birthday supper it was! Mandy and Sukey had done their best for Mr. William, and their best was not to be sniffed at. Aunt Zélie contributed menu cards, each with a flower and a quotation on it.

Dora thought hers the prettiest of all. On it were a thistle and a wild rose, and the lines were:

"Duty, like a strict preceptor,
Sometimes frowns or seems to frown.
Choose her thistle for thy sceptre,
While youth's roses are thy crown."

"It was written by a poet for his own little daughter Dora," said Mrs. Howard.

Aleck had:

"The heights by great men reached and
kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept
Were toiling upward in the night."

"Cousin Zélie thinks I am lazy," he said, laughing.

"Mine is better than Dora's, and I know where it came from, and she has not an idea," said Carl. His lines were:

"My good blade carves the casques of
men,
My tough lance thrusteth sure,
My strength is as the strength of ten
Because my heart is pure."

"I don't care, for I can find out, and that is half the fun," Dora replied, comparing

hers with Louise's, which had lilies of the valley on it, and these lines:

"I pray the prayer of Plato old—
God make thee beautiful within,
And may thine eyes the good behold
In everything save sin."

Uncle William put his card away before anybody had seen it, and refused to show it, in spite of much coaxing.

"It is too complimentary; modesty forbids," Carl suggested.

"Why didn't you and Miss Helen favor us with something original, Mrs. Howard?" asked Mr. Caruth.

"He is making fun of the Harp Man's Benefit," said Miss Hazeltine.

"I am afraid we exhausted our genius on that occasion," her cousin answered, laughing.

"Uncle William, there is one thing you must tell us," said Bess, "and that is, *when* you were more surprised than to-night?"

"Oh, that was long ago!" he replied. "It was Aunt Marcia who surprised me." All eyes turned to Mrs. Hazeltine. [228]

"Aunt Marcia, how did you do it?"

"I am sure I can't tell you. I think I am the one most apt to be surprised."

"You'll have to tell," said Carl, turning to his uncle.

"Well, if you must know, it was when she said 'Yes.'"

Everybody laughed, and his wife said majestically: "My dear, you are very absurd." But she did not appear seriously displeased.

"I don't understand," remarked Helen; "what did she say yes *to*?" and this of course brought down the house.

After supper was over they danced and played games till, all too soon, the evening was over.

"Good times never last quite long enough," Louise said, as her uncle was arranging for the farewell Virginia reel.

"I thought they lasted the year around," remarked Mr. Caruth, who stood beside her.

"I mean special ones," she answered gayly, as she went off with him to take her place, leaving Ikey rather crestfallen.

The others had quickly paired off: Carl and Dora, Aleck and Bess, Jim and Elsie, Will and Constance. Elsie called "Tucker" aggravatingly as she passed.

"Anyway, I didn't want to dance with her," he said to himself. [229]

Miss Hazeltine was playing for them, and Aunt Marcia sat with Miss Brown looking on; Aunt Zélie stood in the doorway.

She smiled at Ikey when he looked in her direction, saying: "Do you want a partner?"

His gloom turned to rapture. "Oh! Mrs. Howard, will you?"

"I'll try," she answered, as they took their places, his heart beating quickly with pride and delight. And never was a dance performed with more reverent devotion.

"Why, Aunt Zélie, that is not fair!" called Carl, as he and Dora danced down the middle and back again.

"I didn't know you danced, Mrs. Howard," said Jim, upon whom Ikey cast a triumphant glance.

When it was over she was besieged with partners for another, but she refused, declaring it was too late.

So ended Uncle William's surprise party.

When the door had closed on the last guest and Bess at the piano was playing a snatch of a waltz, Carl pounced upon his aunt and carried her off before she knew it.

"Ikey shall not get ahead of *me*," he said, as after sailing twice around the room he dropped her breathless on the sofa.

CHAPTER XXIII.

JIM.

For various reasons, after a flourishing existence of two winters, the G.N. Club was given up, or perhaps it should be said was merged in the Order of the Big Front Door, which still held monthly meetings, and whose members wore their silver keys and tried in different ways to carry out their motto.

There was hardly time in the press of school work for the weekly meetings, and, besides, out of the little club had grown what was known as the Boys' Civic League, an organization among schoolboys, in which, under the direction of one of their professors, they studied the history of their own town and pledged themselves to do all they could for its welfare. So, as Mrs. Howard wished it, the Good Neighbors gave up their club and joined the League.

They still considered themselves her boys, however, and a week seldom passed in which some of them did not spend an hour with her. They owed more than they knew to her companionship, for in varying degrees her love for what was pure and true had left its impress on their characters. Her interest in them had grown with their years, and she looked forward with regret to the next winter, when most of them would go away to school. She would miss their boyish devotion, and she dreaded the temptations which they must so surely meet. Each one must fight his own battle, she knew, and she had not much fear for quiet, painstaking Will, or even for Carl, with all his faults; Ikey was still a good deal of a child, conscientious and open-hearted; but Aleck, with his brightness and indolence, and Jim, with his handsome face, engaging ways, and money, gave her most concern.

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Three years had brought about some changes. Little John's place was vacant. A sudden sharp illness, and the frail life went out, leaving a sweet and gentle memory, for John had helped in ways he did not dream of. Every one of those merry girls and boys was more thoughtful and tender for the association with him. Seeing the pleasure their companionship gave him, they learned the value of simple friendliness. Fred Ames had gone to Chicago to live, and this reduced the members of the Order to ten, not counting, of course, the "Honorary," as Miss Brown and Aunt Zélie were called.

"I can't imagine what ails Jim," Carl remarked at the lunch table one day, a week or two after Uncle William's birthday; "he wasn't at school and when I stopped there on my way home the man said he believed he had a headache and could not see anyone. That is not in the least like Jim."

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"I see nothing so strange in that. A headache can be a very serious thing while it lasts," said his father.

"But if you had seen the man. He looked as if he were making it up."

"Much study has affected your imagination, Carl," laughed Cousin Helen.

"And what is the matter with you, then, Cousin Helen? Who sent Aunt Zélie a postal card with nothing on it but the address?" inquired Louise.

This caused a laugh, for Miss Hazeltine was just now the target for all the teasing her young relatives could contrive.

Always somewhat famous for her absent mindedness, now that she was soon to be married they chose to lay anything of the kind to the fact of her being so deeply in love.

"Let me tell you the latest joke," cried Aleck. "Last Sunday, when Mr. Arthur was here, they went to service at St. John's. The usher wanted to take them up front, but Sister Helen, being very modest, stopped at a seat half-way and asked politely, 'Can't we *occupew this py?*'"

"Aleck, you are too bad! I only half said it," exclaimed the victim, while the others shouted.

Bess and Louise were in the seventh heaven of delight at the prospect of being bridesmaids, and took a rapturous interest in all the preparations, their only regret being that Mr. Caruth was not to be the groom. Everybody was so occupied with other things that afternoon that Carl's remark about Jim was forgotten till he came in at dinner-time, looking very much excited.

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"You won't think I am crazy now. The Carters have gone to smash, and it is reported that Mr. Carter tried to kill himself."

"Carl! How dreadful! Are you sure?" Aunt Zélie dropped her book in her astonishment.

"I am not altogether surprised," said Mr. Hazeltine, coming in. "He was known as

one of the most reckless speculators in the country. His wealth was gained in that way, and now it has gone as it came."

"Think of poor Jim," said Carl.

"Poor boy! And yet it may not be the worst thing for him," added Mrs. Howard.

"What shall I do?" asked Carl. "I am awfully sorry for him, but I am afraid he won't want to see me, and I shouldn't know what to say, anyway. I wonder if he will have to give up college and everything. Poor Jim!"

Poor Jim, indeed! There could not have been found a more wretchedly miserable boy than he. The loss of their money he hardly thought of,—did not realize,—but the horrid notoriety of it all made him sick.

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With burning face he read the sensational newspaper reports, and thought how the boys at school were talking about him—perhaps pitying him. He did not want their pity; he would rather have them indifferent. He wished he might never see any of them again.

Toward his father he felt a certain resentment. It was not true that Mr. Carter had tried to kill himself, but mind and body had given way under the long strain, and he was ill with brain fever.

Mrs. Carter was altogether unnerved by the suddenness of the calamity, so that she was not allowed in her husband's room. If it had not been for her Jim would have run away, but he was very fond of his mother. He was the chief object of her interest and affection since his sisters had married and left home. She laughingly declared that Jim could make her do anything, and certainly he brought about many improvements. She received good-naturedly his hints that Mrs. Howard did this, or that at the Hazeltines' things were done so. He could not desert her now that she had no one else to depend on.

Two dreadful days passed slowly, a number of his friends called to inquire, and left kind messages, for he would not see them. He spent his time strolling aimlessly through the handsome house, occasionally going in to see his mother. He was very gentle to her, though he found her lamentations hard to bear.

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Late in the afternoon of the second day he sat in his room, trying to read. He was quite worn out with anxiety and loss of sleep, and was half-dozing, when his attention was attracted by a gleam of sunshine reflected in something on the table beside him. It was the little silver key. The words of the motto stared him in the face: "They Helped." How much it recalled to him—such pleasant companionships, and some real effort to be kind and useful! Was he going to fail now? Perhaps this was his great opportunity. If he did not help, who would?

He stood up before the mirror, stretching himself to his full height,—a tall, broad-shouldered young fellow.

"Many a boy younger than I takes care of himself, and so can I, and of my mother too," and wide awake now he sat down to think.

On the table lay a note from Mrs. Howard, which he had only half read. He took it up now, and the warm affection it expressed, and the confidence that he would bear his trouble bravely, stirred his manliness—he would not disappoint her. "I have been a coward," he said, and with the same prompt decision which had surprised his companions on that Halloween so long ago he turned his back on his pride and useless regrets and became a man. When his father's brother arrived that night Jim met him, saw to his comfort, explained all he knew about the trouble, and asked such intelligent questions, with such an evident determination to help himself, that his uncle was greatly pleased.

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There were weeks of anxious nursing while Mr. Carter hung between life and death, and his son, strong and gentle, made himself most useful in the sick-room. When at last the once sturdy, ambitious man struggled back to life he was only the wreck of what he had been.

Jim returned to school when his father was out of danger, as his uncle thought he ought to finish the term. He was very much subdued, but his companions appreciated his manliness, and gave him a warm welcome.

"He has lots of pluck," said Carl warmly; "he was as anxious to go to college as any of us, but he doesn't say a word about it now—says he is going to work this summer."

"I wish you would tell him how pleased I am with him," said Aunt Zélie. "I see so little of him lately, he seems almost shy."

The big house was sold, and when Mr. Carter could be moved he was taken to their new home, a little place that belonged to his wife. When everything was settled it was found that they would have a small income, enough to support two people in some degree of comfort. Then Jim's uncle, to everybody's surprise, offered to send him to college.

"I don't believe in it very much, but you are such a likely boy you may make something out of it, so if you want to go I'll foot the bills."

Jim brought the news one Friday night to a meeting of the O.B.F.D. It was early, and only Carl and his aunt were in the room.

"I shall work very hard, for I mean to pay Uncle James back some day," he said.

"That is right; I am sure you will, and I am glad for you and proud of you, for you deserve it," Aunt Zélie said earnestly.

"Are you really?" he asked humbly, but looking in his pleasure quite like his old self.

"Why, of course we are *all* proud of you, boy," said Carl.

And Jim thought he had never been so happy before. He had discovered that there are some things better even than money.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

Dora thought one of the pleasantest things about housekeeping was being able to give a tea-party now and then. They were of necessity very small affairs, if for no other reason than because Mrs. Warner could not stand much excitement.

Mrs. Smith was delighted to do anything for Miss Dora, and finding out in some way when her birthday came, herself proposed a celebration.

Mrs. Warner entered into the idea with unusual interest, so Dora consented to invite Bess, Louise, Carl, Aleck, and Ikey.

If it had been an order for a grand reception, Mrs. Smith could not have filled it with more pleasure. She sent up a delicious little supper, and as the crowning glory, and a present from herself, an immense birthday cake in pink icing, with fifteen candles on it.

It is needless to say they had a merry time. The hostess did the honors with a great deal of grace, looking very pretty in a charming gown brought to her from New York by Aunt Marcia. Mrs. Hazeltine was in the habit of bringing home pretty things to her nieces, and as she said she considered Dora one of them it was not possible to refuse her gifts.

"Suppose we tell what we mean to be when we are grown up," suggested Bess, when the feast was over and they had drawn their chairs together in a cosey group.

"Dear me! I don't know," said Dora.

"Well, what you would like to be, then?"

"I think perhaps I shall be some kind of a teacher, but—I know you will laugh—I believe I'd like to keep a store and live back of it, as Mrs. Smith does."

"A confectionery, Dora?" asked Louise, as they all laughed at this lofty ambition. "I'll promise you my custom."

"Ikey, you are next; what are you going to do?" inquired Bess.

"Well, after Carl and I go to college I am going to study medicine. By that time Father will have left the navy, I hope, and we will all live here together, and I'll practise."

"Perhaps there will be an office for you back of Dora's store," said Carl.

"I'd like to write books," said Bess. "Beautiful stories that everybody will want to read. Then I'll make lots of money and build hospitals and do ever so much good."

"The hospitals will be for Ikey to practise in, I suppose, my great and good cousin," remarked Aleck, with a profound bow.

"I mean to be a judge," announced Carl, who was next. "Now, Aleck."

"I am going to try for West Point next year. Father has given his consent, and—well, I'll be a general."

"I don't see how you can unless there is a war," said Ikey.

"Perhaps there'll be one then, and if I am wounded I can go to Bess's hospital and have you practise on me."

"Louise, you are the last; what noble ambition have you?"

"I think I'll illustrate Bess's books and help Dora keep store," she said, laughing.

A knock at the door interrupted just then, and Uncle William's cheery face appeared. "It is so late I must not stop," he said; "but I ran away from a political meeting to wish my little girl many happy returns."

"There is to be another wedding in the family," said Mrs. Howard, entering the library one day with some hyacinths in her hand.

"Do you mean it really? I did not know there was anybody to get married but Cousin Helen," Bess exclaimed.

Carl looked up from a weighty volume he was consulting. "That is easy to guess; it is Joanna, of course."

"Is it Jo, Auntie?"

"Yes, she confided it to me a few minutes ago. It will be in June, and Patrick Loughlin is the happy man."[241]

"I should think she would rather live with us, but there is no accounting for taste," said Bess, as she went to find Louise and tell the news.

"I can't imagine what ails Ikey; he is as cross as a bear," remarked Carl, closing his book with a bang.

"Perhaps he is worrying over examinations," Aunt Zélie suggested.

Her nephew laughed. "That would not be like Ikey; and then he has done finely this term, so that there will not be a bit of trouble about his passing."

"I sincerely hope that there is not another of my boys in trouble," she said anxiously.

"Oh! it can't be any thing really, only I never knew him to be snappish. I thought I'd mention it, for you might get it out of him if you happen to see him."

About the middle of the afternoon Mrs. Howard closed the front door behind her and came out into the pleasant spring air. As she reached the gate she caught sight of a light-brown head in one of the third-story windows across the street, and acting on a sudden impulse she made a signal.

The window went up promptly, and going over she called: "Can't you come with me out to Neffler's? I'd like some company. Never mind, of course, if you are busy."

"Thank you, I am not busy; I'll come," and in two minutes Ikey was beside her.[242]

It was easy to see he was not quite himself. Usually he would have been bubbling over with gayety at the honor of being chosen a companion for a long walk to the florist's, but now the conversation was all on one side.

Mrs. Howard did her best to be entertaining, and took no notice of his evident preoccupation until she had given her orders and they turned toward home; then she said: "I have been waiting in the hope that you would tell me what is troubling you, but now I shall have to ask; Carl and I are both wondering what has happened."

Ikey looked very much surprised, being under the delusion that he was concealing his feelings perfectly.

"I am not in any trouble," he began, "though I am bothered about something, and I oughtn't to be; that is what makes it so bad."

His companion looked sympathetic and waited for further revelations.

"You see," Ikey went on, "I wrote to Papa about going to school with Carl next winter and to Yale the year after, and he was willing and so was Grandfather; it seemed all settled. I knew they would be back in June, certainly Mamma and Alice, so we could spend the summer together. Then I thought, of course, they would be settled somewhere where I could go for my holidays, but now all my plans are spoiled: Papa has to go to the Pacific coast."[243]

If his father had been sent to Siberia, Ikey's tone could not have been more tragic. Mrs. Howard could hardly help smiling.

"I don't quite understand yet," she said. "Does that mean that you will still be separated from your father and mother? or—"

"That is what makes me feel so mean," he burst out. "Of course I want to be with them, and yet I can't bear to go to California, and that is what I must do. Give up going with Carl, and go to some horrid old university out there. They seem to think I shall like it. Mamma is pleased because she used to live in San Francisco, and Grandfather thinks he will go out too. There is no help for it."

"Then you will have to make the best of it, will you not? It is perfectly natural to feel as you do, after setting your heart on the other plan, and I am sure it does not mean any lack of affection for your father and mother."

"I am glad you think it doesn't," he said, in a relieved tone, for he had been torturing himself with the thought that he was a most unnatural son.

"I hate to think of going so far away and never seeing any of you again, when you have been so good to me." His voice faltered.

"I should feel very badly if you could leave us without caring, after all our good times together. Carl will be dreadfully disappointed, but as for not meeting again, California is not so far away as that, and it is not likely your father will be there for the rest of his life." She spoke with great cheerfulness, not daring to be too sympathetic.

"I'll try not to hate it so," Ikey said, bracing up a little.

Mrs. Howard insisted on taking him home to dinner, and when Carl came in he found him holding a skein of wool for Bess while Louise read aloud, and if not quite his usual gay self he was at least more cheerful than he had been for days.

The storm which arose when his friends heard of the change in his plans was most comforting. Carl declared he didn't half care about going to college himself if Ikey couldn't go, and Bess remarked sorrowfully that everything would be different next winter, with Cousin Helen married and the boys all away.

"Why, Ikey and Cousin Helen are going to the same place!" exclaimed Louise, "and we are going to see her, so we'll see him too." Here was a gleam of brightness, and Carl added, "And of course when you get to be a doctor you will come back to practise in Bess's hospital."

When letters came from his mother and father, telling more fully their plans, and overflowing with the pleasure of being all together again, Ikey would not have been his warm-hearted self if he had not been glad. Dear as were the friendships which he had made in the three years spent at his grandfather's, family ties were stronger.

Old Mr. Ford said he did not know what he should do without his grandson, and talked seriously of accepting his son's invitation to try a winter in California.

It was finally arranged that Ikey should meet his parents in New York sometime about the middle of July, and as that was more than two months distant, and the present full of interesting events, as Louise expressed it, he put aside his disappointment and was as merry as ever.

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CHAPTER XXV.

ToC

AUNT ZÉLIE.

The interesting events were, first, the school commencements, and, the week after, Cousin Helen's wedding.

This last, which was a grand affair, took place at her country home. The ceremony was performed on the lawn, under the big forest trees, and Bess and Louise made two charming and happy bridesmaids, quite worthy of such a lovely bride.

The ten were all invited, for Miss Hazeltine took a deep interest in the Order of the Big Front Door, and said she meant to start something of the kind in her new home. There never was such a beautiful wedding, these young people thought, and they were not alone in their opinion.

The sweet summer day, the blue sky, the trees and grass, and the gay company, all made a lasting impression on the guests.

The bride would have no formality, but moved about among her friends as if it were simply a garden party.

"Do you know what this reminds me of?" Bess asked Louise, as they sat on the grass with the other girls, waiting for the boys to bring them some ices.

"No, what?"

"Why, Lucie Carleton's wedding, to be sure; you haven't forgotten that?" They both laughed at the recollection.

"Of course I haven't. What fun it was, and how long it is since we have played 'the Carletons'!"

"What is the joke?" inquired Jim, coming back with his hands full.

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"Oh, just something this wedding reminds us of," Bess replied.

"I'm reminded that there is not much more fun for me," said Ikey, in a momentary fit of despondency.

"What a long face!" laughed Dora. "Remember this is a cheerful occasion. The next thing you will be married yourself to some California girl."

"He is coming back to see us before then, aren't you, Ikey?" said Louise.

"In six years he is coming back to stay," added Carl.

"I wonder where we shall all be six years from now," said Constance, placidly eating her ice.

"Dear me, I shall be twenty; think of it!" From Bess's tone one might have inferred that this meant extreme old age.

"I expect to be married before that," remarked Elsie confidently.

"Is it possible? I wonder to whom," Aleck exclaimed with an air of great surprise.

"I am sure I don't know, for I have never seen anybody I'd marry if he begged me forever," she retorted scornfully.

"Be quiet, you two geese, and don't spoil this lovely day by quarrelling," admonished Dora.

"To change the subject, isn't Aunt Zélie a daisy?" said Carl, pointing across the lawn where she stood, looking wonderfully fair and sweet in her soft white dress, with a touch of sunlight on her hair.

"There is nobody in the world like her," said Dora.

"I should think not!" echoed Jim.

"She is the dearest, loveliest, most beautiful, and everything-else-you-can-think-of person that ever lived," Louise declared with emphasis.

"You haven't left much for the rest of us to say," remarked Will, "but I am sure we all agree."

There must have been some attraction about the ten pairs of eyes, for just then she turned, and seeing them smiled and threw a kiss in their direction.

The sad thing about this wedding was the parting which followed. Mr. Arthur found himself very unpopular when at last it dawned upon her young relatives what it meant to tell Cousin Helen good-by with the certainty that, though she promised to come back often to visit, she would never live among them, their merry playfellow, again.

Aleck discovered that he was extremely fond of this sister, and felt what he considered an unmanly tightness about his throat when she kissed him. The bridesmaids were decidedly tearful, and only the thought of the other wedding in prospect restored their cheerfulness. This last-mentioned affair took place two days later at the Cathedral. The whole family attended, and Joanna, in blue with a white veil and wreath, with Nannie for bridesmaid, in a dress the counterpart of her own, made a blooming and happy bride. After a wedding breakfast at the Hazeltines' the couple departed, with many good wishes for their happiness, to have their pictures taken.

Aunt Zélie sat alone in the wide hall that afternoon. The door was open, and outside the sunshine sifted through the vines as the wind kept them swinging softly to and fro; it was very still, and the ticking of the tall clock had a mournful sound.

No doubt it was the reaction after the excitement of the last few weeks that made her feel so weary and sad. Unhappy thoughts seemed determined to take possession of her mind—regrets for the past and fears for the future; she could not throw off the depression.

She thought of Carl's going, and how she would miss him. Would he become weaned from the old happy home life? Had she done all she might have done to help him to good, true manhood?

She asked herself these questions sadly; in her present mood it seemed to her she had failed of what she most wished to accomplish.

These dreary thoughts so engrossed her that Jim's voice, asking, "May I come in?" caused her to start.

"Certainly," she answered, "I am glad to see you, though I warn you I am not in a very good humor."

He did not appear alarmed. "I met Carl and he said I'd probably find you here. I want to tell you something."

"I am ready to listen," she said encouragingly, but Jim seemed to find it hard to begin, and looked at the floor in a hesitating way quite unusual.

Aunt Zélie watched him, thinking that something had come into that handsome

young face of late which spoke hopefully for the future.

She was very much surprised at his words.

"Mrs. Howard, I have decided not to go to college." They were resolute eyes that looked up at her.

"But I thought your uncle wished you to go—that it was all settled. Are you sure you are doing wisely?"

His face flushed.

"I beg your pardon, dear," she said before he could reply. "I know you have a good reason. I am surprised, that is all."

"It is on Mother's account, chiefly; she needs me now that Father is so feeble. Then you know she is used to having things, and though she thinks she could get along, I should feel mean to have her scrimp and pinch at home when I am having a good time at college. I went to see Mr. Barrows to-day, and he thinks he can give me a situation. They say it is a good place for a fellow to get a start in, so I am going to be a business man."

He spoke earnestly and cheerfully, but she guessed the struggle it had cost. He was used to "having things" himself.

She laid her hand on his. "You are learning to be brave and unselfish, to help in the truest sense, and these are far more valuable lessons than any you could learn out of books. I honor you for your decision." Aunt Zélie spoke with shining eyes.

"If I have learned anything it is you who have taught me," Jim said gently.

"If I have really been a help to you I am very glad and thankful, but I am sure most of the credit belongs to the boy who was so ready to be helped."

When he left, after half an hour's talk, her sympathy and interest had already made his sacrifice seem a little easier, but he did not guess how he had on his part cheered and comforted this kind friend.

Jim had been gone only a few minutes when Aunt Zélie's corner was again invaded. This time it was Ikey who looked in, and seeing her alone came and took possession of a stool at her feet.

"I am going a week from next Thursday," he announced.

"I don't enjoy all these changes in the least," she said, patting the curly head; "I can't think what I shall do without my boys."

"You have been so awfully good to me, only I never could say so like Jim. I don't want to go away and have you think I don't care, for I do, and I hope you won't forget me." Ikey got through this speech with difficulty.

Aunt Zélie couldn't help laughing at him. "You are a dear boy, and there is not the slightest danger that we will ever forget you," she said, and then she told him about the talk she had just had with Jim.

"He is splendid, isn't he? and I used to wonder why Carl liked him."

"Yes, he has changed a good deal since we first knew him, but I am proud of all my boys, and believe I can trust them wherever they go."

It was almost dark in the hall when she found herself taken possession of by two strong arms, and Carl's voice inquired what she was doing all alone.

"Feeling ashamed of myself."

"Very unnecessary, I am sure."

"No, I was worrying a little over you boys for one thing; then I had a visit from Jim."

"He is tiptop, but I don't know what I am going to do without old Ikey."

"Then tell him so, for he is afraid we will forget him."

"Ikey is a great goose; but indeed, Aunt Zélie, you need not be afraid for us! I don't mean to be self-confident,—I know I shall often do wrong,—but it means a lot to a fellow when he has somebody like you to care for him."

"Why, how dark it is! Who is here? I can't see," exclaimed Bess, coming in, followed by her father and Louise.

"Carl making love to Aunt Zélie," said the latter, dropping down on the other side of her aunt, and taking possession of all that was left.

Bess surveyed them discontentedly. "There is not a scrap of a place for me."

"You will have to put up with your old father," said Mr. Hazeltine.

"You are better than nobody," she said saucily.

"I forgot to tell you," began Louise suddenly, "that Mr. Caruth is going to Japan."

"Is that so?" her father said in surprise, while Carl and Bess both exclaimed. "Did you know anything of it, Zélie?"

"It is rather a sudden decision, I fancy. Some friends have been urging him to go. He was here this afternoon and said good-by," she replied.

"I met him just as he was leaving," said Louise, "and he asked me to say good-by to everybody for him."

"If everybody goes, what are we to do?" asked Bess disconsolately.

"Suppose we go, too! What do you say, Zélie, to sending Carie and Helen to comfort Aunt Annie in her loneliness while the rest of us go off for a holiday? We can see Ikey on his way and drop Carl at school later on."

"You are an angel to think of such a thing!" cried Louise, and Mr. Hazeltine was so nearly suffocated by his ecstatic daughters that he almost regretted his proposal.

Aunt Zélie wouldn't have dared to object if she had wished to, so she and her brother made their plans while the girls and Carl ran over to tell Ikey the good news.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BIG FRONT DOOR IS LEFT ALONE.

"If Dora could only go!" Bess said, as she and Louise flew around in a delightful bustle of preparation.

As this was quite out of the question, Dora was content to stay at home. She promised Helen that she would go over and pet Mr. Smith, the cat, occasionally, that he might not feel her absence too deeply, and Aunt Zélie told her to help herself to all the flowers she wanted. Uncle William sent her half a dozen new books, and the girls and Carl promised to write often.

The boys felt themselves to be most important members of society as the time for leaving drew near, for they were petted and feasted and made much of generally.

Aunt Marcia gave them an elegant dinner; Elsie had a fête in their honor; but best of all was the farewell tea-party at Miss Brown's the evening before they left, to which only the ten were invited.

It would be impossible to tell of all the fun they had, and how Mary actually came so near laughing at some of the nonsense that she had to beat a hasty retreat to the kitchen to save her dignity.

They drank the health of the departing members in lemonade, and then Ikey proposed "the Lady of the Brown House, who has been altogether jolly, though we did begin by breaking her window."

This was received with great applause, and Aleck said, "You must make a speech, Miss Brown."

"I am afraid I shall not be equal to the occasion," she answered; "but I must say that I have always been glad of that broken window. I owe to it some of my happiest hours, and I thank you all for your kindness to your invalid neighbor."

"Three cheers for Miss Brown!" cried Aleck.

"I think she will be just as much complimented if we make less noise," suggested Bess. "I am sure she knows that we all love her, and if we have given her any happiness it is only a piece of the pleasure she has given us come back to her."

"Hurrah for Bess!" cried the irrepressible one.

Next Will proposed the Big Front Door.

Great enthusiasm prevailed as Carl rose to respond. They all expected one of his spread-eagle efforts, but instead he said: "I thank you all in the name of the Big Front Door and the people who live behind it. We have had good times there and hope to have more in the future, but besides this it has helped us to do right sometimes, and though our Order may seem rather childish now, let us not forget our motto, and keep our silver keys to remind us to be helpers wherever we go."

He sat down with a flushed face, rather abashed at his own earnestness.

"Good for you!" said Jim cordially, and the others responded, "We will! We will!"

In the midst of the festivities Louise was discovered in tears. "I did not mean to," she said, "but it seems as if everything was coming to an end."

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"It is only the end of a chapter, and we will begin another presently," Dora suggested brightly.

In two minutes Louise was laughing through her tears, and the party came to an end as cheerfully as it had begun.

Dora waved a good-by to the travellers as they passed early the next morning. In the afternoon she went over to the deserted house, where only Sukey was left in charge, petted Mr. Smith, and cut some roses; then she went out and sat on the carriage block and recalled the day three years before when she had stopped there to rest, and had wondered who lived in that pleasant house.

There was the same big, hospitable door, but it would not open to-day to let out two merry little maidens.

From her window Miss Brown nodded and beckoned, so she ran across and paid her a visit.

"Come often and cheer me up, for I shall miss my neighbors dreadfully," that lady said as she was leaving. [258]

"I will," answered Dora, adding merrily, "but you still have the Big Front Door."

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STORY OF THE BIG FRONT DOOR ***

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