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Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

"Pixie O'Shaughnessy"

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## Chapter One.

### The Ugly Duckling.

Pixie O'Shaughnessy was at once the joy and terror of the school. It had been a quiet, well-conducted seminary before her time, or it seemed so, at least, looking back after the arrival of the wild Irish tornado, before whose pranks the mild mischief of the Englishers was as water unto wine. Pixie was entered in the school-lists as "Patricia Monica de Vere O'Shaughnessy," but no one ever addressed her by such a title, not even her home-people, by whom the name was considered at once as a tragedy and a joke of the purest water.

Mrs O'Shaughnessy had held stern ideas about fanciful names for her children, on which subject she had often waxed eloquent to her friends.

"What," she would ask, "could be more trying to a large and bouncing young woman than to find herself saddled for life with the title of 'Ivy,' or for a poor anaemic creature to pose as 'Ruby' before a derisive world?" She christened her own first daughter Bridget, and the second Joan, and the three boys respectively Jack, Miles, and Patrick, resolutely waving aside suggestions of more poetic names even when they touched her fancy, or appealed to her imagination. Better err on the safe side, and safeguard oneself from the risk of having a brood of plain, awkward children masquerading through life under names which made them a laughing-stock to their companions.

So she argued; but as the years passed by, it became apparent that her children had too much respect for the traditions of the race to appear in any such unattractive guise. "The O'Shaughnessys were always beautiful," quoth the Major, tossing his own handsome head with the air of supreme self-satisfaction which was his leading characteristic, "and it's not my children that are going to break the rule," and certain it is that one might have travelled far and wide before finding another family to equal the one at Knock Castle in point of appearance. The boys were fine upstanding fellows with dark eyes and aquiline features; Bridgie was a dainty, fair-haired little lady; while Joan, (Esmeralda for short, as her brothers had it), had reached such a climax of beauty that strangers gasped with delight, and the hardest heart softened before her baby smile. Well might Mrs O'Shaughnessy waver in her decision; well might she suppose that she was safe in relaxing her principles sufficiently to bestow upon baby number six a name more appropriate to prospective beauty and charm. The most sensible people have the most serious relapses, and once having given rein to her imagination nothing less than three names would satisfy her—and those three the high-sounding Patricia Monica de Vere.

She was an ugly baby. Well, but babies often were ugly. That counted for nothing. It was really a bad sign if an infant were conspicuously pretty. She had no nose to speak of, and a mouth of enormous proportions. What of that? Babies' noses always were small, and the mouth would not grow in proportion to the rest of the features. In a few months she would no doubt be as charming as her sisters had been before her; but, alas! Pixie disappointed that expectation, as she was fated to disappoint most expectations during her life. Her nose refused to grow bigger, her mouth to grow smaller, her small twinkling eyes disdained the lashes which were so marked a feature in the faces of her sisters, and her hair was thin and straight, and refused to grow beyond her neck, whereas Bridgie and Esmeralda had curling manes so long that, as their nurse proudly pointed out to other nurses, they could sit on them, the darlints! and that to spare.

There was no disguising the fact that she was an extraordinarily plain child, and as the years passed by she grew ever plainer and plainer, and showed less possibility of improvement. The same contrariety of fate which made Bridget look like Patricia, made Patricia look like Bridget, and Mrs O'Shaughnessy often thought regretfully of her broken principle. "Indeed it's a judgment on me!" she would cry; but always as she said the words she hugged her baby to her breast, and showered kisses on the dear, ugly little face, wondering in her heart if she had ever loved a

child so much before, or if any of Pixie's beautiful sisters and brothers had had such strange, fascinating little ways. At the age when most infants are content to blink, she smiled accurately and with intent; when three months old she would look up from her pillow with a twinkling glance, as who would say, "Such an adventure as I've had with these cot curtains! You wait a few months until I can speak, and I'll astonish you about it!" And when she could sit up she virtually governed the nursery. The shrewdness of the glance which she cast upon her sisters quite disturbed the enjoyment of those young ladies in the pursuance of such innocent tricks as making lakes of ink in the laps of their clean pinafores, or scratching their initials on newly painted doors, and she waved her rattle at them with such an imperious air that they meekly bowed their heads, and allowed her to tug at their curls without reproach.

The whole family vied with each other in adoring the ugly duckling, and in happy Irish fashion regarded her shortcomings as a joke rather than a misfortune. "Seen that youngster of mine?" the Major would cry genially to his friends. "She's worth a visit, I tell you! Ugliest child in Galway, though I say it that shouldn't." And Pixie's company tricks were all based on the subject of personal shortcomings.

"Show the lady where your nose ought to be, darling," her mother would say fondly, and the baby fingers would point solemnly to the flat space between the eyes.

"And where's the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, sweetheart?" would be the next question, when the whole of Pixie's fat fist would disappear bodily inside the capacious mouth.

"The Major takes more notice of her than he did of any of the others," Mrs O'Shaughnessy would tell her visitor. "He is always buying her presents!"

And then she would sigh, for, alas! the Major was one of those careless, extravagant creatures, who are never restrained from buying a luxury by the uninteresting fact that the bread bill is owing, and the butcher growing pressing in his demands. When his wife pleaded for money with which to defray household bills, he grew irritable and impatient, as though he himself were the injured party. "The impudence of the fellows!" he would cry. "They are nothing but ignorant upstarts, while the O'Shaughnessys have been living on this ground for the last three centuries. They ought to be proud to serve me! This is what comes of educating people beyond their station. Any upstart of a tradesman thinks himself good enough to trouble an O'Shaughnessy about a trumpery twenty or thirty pounds. I'll show them their mistake! You can tell them that I'll not be bullied, and indeed they might as well save their trouble, for, between you and me, there's not a five-pound note in my pocket between now and the beginning of the year." After delivering himself of which statement he would take the train to the nearest town, order a new coat, buy an armful of toys for Pixie, and enjoy a good dinner at the best hotel, leaving his poor wife to face the irate tradesmen as best she might.

Poor Mrs O'Shaughnessy! She hid an aching heart under a bright exterior many times over, as the pressure for money grew ever tighter and tighter, and she saw her children running wild over the countryside, with little or no education to fit them for the battle of life. The Major declared that he could not afford school fees, so a daily governess was engaged to teach boys and girls alike—a staid, old-fashioned maiden lady, who tried to teach the young O'Shaughnessys on the principles of fifty years ago, to her own confusion and their patronising disdain. The three boys were sharp as needles to discover the weak points in her armour, and maliciously prepared questions by which she could be put to confusion, while the girls tittered and idled, finding endless excuses for neglecting their unwelcome tasks. Half a dozen times over had Miss Minnitt threatened to resign her hopeless task, and half a dozen times had she been persuaded by Mrs O'Shaughnessy to withdraw her resignation. The poor mother knew full well that it would be a difficulty to find anyone to take the place of the hard-worked, ill-paid governess, and the governess loved her wild charges, as indeed did everyone who knew them, and sorrowed over them in her heart, because she saw what their blind young eyes never noticed—the coming shadow on the house, the gradual fading away of the weary, overtaxed mother. Mrs O'Shaughnessy had fought for years against chronic weariness and ill-health, but the time was coming when she could fight no longer, and, almost before her family had recognised that she was ill, the end drew near, and her husband and children were summoned to bid the last farewell.

The eyes of the dying woman roamed from one to the other of her six children—twenty-two-year-old Jack, handsome and manly, so like—oh, so like that other Jack who had come wooing her nearly thirty years ago! Bridgie, slim and delicate—so unfit, poor child, to take the burden of a mother's place; Miles, with his proud, overbearing look, a boy who had had especial claims on her care and guidance; Joan, beautiful and daring, ignorant of nothing so much as of her own ignorance; Pat, of the pensive face and reckless spirit; and last but not least, Pixie, her baby—dear, naughty, loyal little Pixie, whom she must leave to the tender mercies of children little older than herself! The dim eyes brightened, the thin hand stretched out and gripped her husband by the arm.

"Jack!" she cried shrilly—"Pixie! Give Pixie a chance! Take care of her—she is so young—and I can't stay. For my sake, Jack, give Pixie a chance!"

The Major promised with sobs and tears. In his own selfish way he had adored his wife, and her last words could not easily be put aside. As the months passed by, he was the more inclined to follow her wishes, as the few thousands which fell to him at her death enabled him to pay off his more pressing debts and enjoy a temporary feeling of affluence. Jack went back to his office in London, where he had betaken himself three years before, to the disgust of the father, who considered it more respectable for an O'Shaughnessy to be in debt than to work for his living in the City among City men. Pat and Miles remained at home, ostensibly to help on the estate, and in reality to shoot rabbits and get into mischief with the farm hands. Miss Minnitt was discharged, since Bridgie must now be occupied with household duties, and Joan was satisfied that her education was finished. And the verdict went forth that Pixie was to go to school.

"Your mother was always grieving that she could not educate your sisters like other girls, and it was her wish that you should have a chance. I'll send you to London to the best school that can be found, if I have to sell the coat off my back to do it," said the Major fervently; for there was no sacrifice which he was not ready to make—in

anticipation, and he hoped to discover a school which did not demand payments in advance. He patted the child on the shoulder in congratulation; but Pixie was horrified, and, opening her mouth, burst into howls and yells of indignation.

"I won't! I shan't! I hate school! I won't go a step! I'll stay at home and have Miss Minnitt to teach me! I won't! I won't! I won't!"

The Major smiled and stroked his moustache. He was used to Pixie's outbursts, and quite unperturbed thereby, although a stranger would have quailed at the sound, and would certainly have imagined that some horrible form of torture was being employed. Pixie checked herself sufficiently to peep at his face, realised that violence was useless, and promptly changed her tactics. She whimpered dismally, and essayed cajolery.

"It will break me heart to leave you. Father darlin', let me stay! What will you do without your little girl at all?"

"I'll miss you badly, but it's for your own good. That brogue of yours is getting worse and worse. And such a fine school, too! Think of all you will be able to learn!"

"Me education's finished," said Pixie haughtily. "I know me tables and can read me books, and write a letter when I want, and that's all that's required of a young gentlewoman living at home with her parents. I've heard you say so meself—a hundred times, if once."

It was too true. The Major recognised the argument with which he had been wont to answer his wife's pleas for higher education, and was incensed, as we all are when our own words are brought up against us.

"You are a very silly child," he said severely, "and don't understand what you are talking about. I am giving you an opportunity which none of your brothers and sisters have had, and you have not the decency to say as much as 'Thank you.' I am ashamed of you. I am bitterly ashamed!"

Such a statement would have been blighting indeed to an ordinary child, but Pixie looked relieved rather than otherwise, for her quick wits had recognised another form of appeal, and she was instantly transformed into an image of penitence and humiliation.

"I am a bad, ungrateful choild, and don't deserve your kindness. I ought to be punished, and kept at home, and then when I grew older and had more sense I'd regret it, and it would be a warning to me. Esmeralda's cleverer than me. It would serve me right if she went instead."

It was of no avail. The Major only laughed and repeated his decision, when Pixie realised that it was useless fighting against fate, and resigned herself to the inevitable with characteristic philosophy.

Her outbursts of rebellion, though violent for the time being, were of remarkably short duration, for she was of too sunny a nature to remain long depressed, and moreover it was more congenial to her pride to pose as an object of envy than pity. On the present occasion she no sooner realised that go to school she must, than she began to plume herself on her importance, and prepare to queen it over her sisters.

"You had better make the most of me, my dears," she announced in the morning-room five minutes later, "for it's not long you'll be having me with you. I'm off to a grand London school to correct me brogue and learn accomplishments. It will cost a mint of money, and father can't afford to send you too; but I'll tell you all about it when I come back, and correct your accent and show you me fine new clothes!"

"Thank you, darling!" said Bridgie meekly, while Esmeralda stifled a laugh and turned her lovely eyes on the ugly duckling with a glance of fondest admiration. Both sisters had overheard the shrieks of ten minutes before and could still see tell-tale tear-marks, but nothing in the world would have induced them to say as much or check their darling in her newly found complacency.

After all it was not until some months had elapsed that the dilatory Major discovered a school to his liking, and even then he allowed his own engagements to interfere with the date of her arrival, for he insisted upon accompanying Pixie himself, and could not see that it made the least difference whether she arrived at the beginning of the term or a few weeks later on. Miss Minnitt protested faintly, but soon relapsed into silence, and consoled herself by turning seamstress and helping Bridgie and Joan with the school outfit. It was a case of making new lamps out of old, for little money was forthcoming to buy fresh material, and, with the best will in the world, the workers were still unskilled in their efforts.

Bridgie's tender heart was pierced with sorrow as she looked at the dismal little outfit spread out on the bed preparatory to packing—so poor it seemed, so shabby, oh, so black, black, black and sorrowful! Poor little Pixie going forth alone into the unknown world—little, wild, ignorant Irish girl, bound for a strange land among strange people! Would those fine English girls laugh among themselves and jeer at her untamed ways? Would they imitate her brogue in their thin mincing voices, and if so, how, oh, how would Pixie conduct herself in return? Bridgie was barely twenty years old, but since her mother's death she had grown into a woman in thoughtfulness and love for others, and now it weighed on her mind that it was her duty to speak seriously to Pixie before she left home, and prepare her in some sort for the trials which might lie before her. If she did not, no one would, and it was cruel to let the child leave without a word of counsel. She lay awake wondering what to say and how to say it.

"It's no use telling Pixie not to get into mischief, for she can't help it, the darling! It's the nature of her, but she has such a loving little heart that she will never go far wrong."

The next day she watched her opportunity, and took advantage of a quiet moment to speak her words of counsel.

"You won't be disappointed if school isn't all you expect, will you, dear?" she began nervously. "I have heard girls say that they felt dreadfully lonely and homesick at first, and when the pupils are all strange to you, and chums with one another, you may think they are not as friendly as you could wish. And the teachers may seem stern. Miss Minnitt has spoiled us by being too mild and easy, and you will feel the difference. Then you have run wild all your life, and it will seem strange to be allowed out for walks only; but, Pixie, I want you to remember that you are our pet and baby, and that our happiness depends on you. If you get a good report and bring home prizes, the pride we shall feel, the airs we shall be giving ourselves, going into Galway and telling everyone we meet on the street; but if you are disobedient and we hear complaints, it's covered with disgrace we shall be in the eyes of the county. Now, there will be good girls in that school, and bad girls, and lazy girls, and industrious ones, and girls who would tell the truth if they were to be shot for it the next moment; and girls who would trick and deceive to get a mean advantage over another. Patricia O'Shaughnessy, which are you going to choose for your companions?"

Pixie fairly jumped upon her seat with surprise, the use of that seldom-heard name impressing her more than anything else could possibly have done with the importance of the occasion. A murmur of protest did duty as a reply, and Bridgie continued impressively—

"Yes, I am sure you will choose the right sort of friend, for the honour of your name and the family to which you belong; but you must be industrious with your work as well. Now that I have left off lessons I wish I had worked twice as hard, for I feel so ignorant and stupid beside other girls; and you are clever, Pixie, and can do well if you choose. Don't be troublesome to the teachers, dearie; it must be maddening to have to teach day after day, and they have to be cross now and then—the creatures!—to relieve their feelings. And if you feel tempted to be rude and naughty, just remember that you are mother's little baby, and that the last thing she asked was that you should have your chance! Perhaps she sees you still, Pixie! Perhaps God lets her be a white angel to watch over her boys and girls. If you thought mother was watching, you never could do anything to grieve her!"

The ready tears poured down Pixie's face. She sobbed and moaned, and with clasped hands repeated her vow to be good, good, good; never to be naughty again so long as she lived! And Bridgie wept too, smiling through her tears at the impracticability of the promise, the while she clasped the dear little sister to her breast.

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## Chapter Two.

### Fond Farewells.

The morning rose clear and fair, and the sun shone as cheerfully as if no tragedy were about to be enacted, and Pixie O'Shaughnessy would presently run out of doors to sit swinging on a gate, clad in Esmeralda's dyed skirt, Pat's shooting jacket, and the first cap that came to hand, instead of starting on the journey to school in a new dress, a hat with bows and two whole quills at the side, and her hair tied back with a ribbon that had not once been washed! It was almost too stylish to be believed!

Pixie entered the breakfast-room with much the same stride as that with which the big drum-major heads the Lord Mayor's procession, and spread out her dress ostentatiously as she seated herself by the table. The armholes stuck into her arms, the collar was an inch too high, and the chest painfully contracted, but she was intensely proud of herself all the same, and privately thought the London girls would have little spirit left in them when confronted with so much elegance. Bridgie was wiping her eyes behind the urn, Esmeralda was pressing the mustard upon her, the Major was stroking his moustache and smiling as he murmured to himself—

"Uglier than ever in that black frock! Eh—what! Bless the child, it is the mischief to let her go! The house will be lost without her!"

Pat and Miles were conversing together in tones of laboured mystery, a device certain to arrest Pixie's vivid attention.

"On Sundays—yes! Occasionally on Wednesdays also. It *does* seem rather mean, but I suppose puddings are not good for growing girls. Two a week is ample if you think of it!"

"Good wholesome puddings too!" said Pat, nodding assent. "Suet and rice, and perhaps tapioca for a change! Very sensible, I call it. Porridge for breakfast, I think they said, but no butter, of course?"

"Certainly not! Too bad for the complexion, but cod-liver oil regularly after every meal. Especially large doses to those suffering from change of climate!"

The Major was chuckling with amusement; Bridgie was shaking her head, and murmuring, "Boys, don't! It's cruel!" Pixie was turning from one to the other with eager eyes, and mouth agape with excitement. She knew perfectly well that the conversation was planned for her benefit, and more than guessed its imaginary nature, but it was impossible to resist a thrill—a fear—a doubt! The bread-and-butter was arrested in her hand in the keenness of listening.

"Did I understand you to say *no* talking allowed?" queried Pat earnestly. "I had an impression that on holiday afternoons a little more liberty might be given?"

"My dear fellow, there are no holidays! They are abolished in modern schools as being unsettling, and disturbing to study. 'In work, in work, in work always let my young days be spent!' Pass the marmalade, please! The girls are occasionally allowed to speak to each other in French, or, if they prefer it, in German, or any other Continental language. The constant use of one language is supposed to be bad for the throat. I hope, by the way, father, that you mentioned distinctly that Pixie's throat requires care?"

Pixie cast an agonised glance round the table, caught Bridgie's eye, and sighed with relief, as a shake of the head

and an encouraging smile testified to the absurdity of the boys' statements.

"There's not a word of truth in it, darling. Don't listen to them. They are only trying to tease you."

"I'd scorn to listen! Ignorant creatures, brought up at home by a lady governess! What do they know about schooling?" cried Pixie cruelly; for this was a sore point, on which it was not safe to jest on ordinary occasions. Miles rolled his eyes at her in threatening fashion, and Pat stamped on her foot; but she smiled on unabashed, knowing full well that her coming departure would protect her from the ordinary retribution.

After breakfast it seemed a natural thing to go a farewell round of the house and grounds, escorted by the entire family circle, and a melancholy review it would have been to anyone unblest with Irish spirits, and the Irish capability of shutting one's eyes to unpleasant truths. Knock Castle sounded grandly enough, and a fine old place it had been some centuries before; but for want of repairs it had now fallen into a semi-ruinous condition pathetic to witness. Slates in hundreds had fallen off the roof and been left unreplaced; a large staircase window, blown in by a storm, was still boarded up, waiting to be mended "some time," though more than a year had elapsed since the accident had taken place; the walls in the great drawing-room were mouldy with damp, for it had been deserted for many a day, because its owner could not afford the two big fires necessary to keep it aired. Pixie sniffed with delight when she entered the gloomy apartment, for the room represented the family glory to her childish imagination, so that the smell of mildew was irresistibly associated with luxury. The dining-room carpet was worn into holes, and there was one especially big one near the window, where Esmeralda, who was nothing if not artistic, had painted so accurate a repetition of the pattern on the boards beneath that one could scarcely see where one ended, and the other began!

The original intention had been to disguise the hole, but so proud was the family of the success of the imitation, that it became one of the show places of the establishment. When the hounds met at Bally William, and the Major brought old Lord Atrim into the house for lunch, he called the old gentleman's attention to it with a chuckle of enjoyment. "My daughter's work! The second, Joan here—Esmeralda, we call her. She'll be an artist yet! A real genius with the brush." And the old lord had laughed till he cried, and stared at Esmeralda the whole time of lunch, and when Christmas-time came round, did he not send her the most beautiful box of the best possible paints, the very thing of all others for which she had been longing, so that it seemed after all that it had been a good thing when the terriers Tramp and Scamp had scratched the thin web into a hole! The ceilings were black with the smoke of fire and lamps, but the silver on the oak dresser would have delighted the heart of a connoisseur, and the china in daily use would have been laid out for view in glassed-in cabinets in most households, instead of being given over to the care of an Irish biddy who tried to hang cups upon hooks with her head turned in an opposite direction, and had a weakness for sitting on the corner of the table to rest herself in the midst of washing the plates.

Outside the garden was an overgrown wilderness of vegetation, for the one gardener, realising the impossibility of doing the work of the six who would have been required to keep the place in order, resigned himself to doing nothing at all, or as little as was compatible with the weekly drawing of wages. The stables were empty, save for the two fine hunters which were necessary for the Major's enjoyment of his favourite sport, and the rough little pony which did duty for all the rest of the family in turns. The row of glass-houses looked imposing enough from a distance, but almost squalid at a nearer view, for, as the Major could not afford to keep them in working order, broken panes greeted the eye in every direction, and plants were replaced by broken pieces of furniture and the hutches and cages of such live-stock as white mice, guinea-pigs, and ferrets. Pixie had many farewells to bid in this quarter, and elaborate instructions to give as to the care to be lavished on her favourites during her absence. The ferret was boarded out to Pat, who had no idea of doing anything for nothing, but was willing to keep the creature supplied with the unsavoury morsels in which its soul delighted, for the fee of a halfpenny a week, to be paid "some time," an happy O'Shaughnessy fashion. The white mice looked on coldly with their little pink eyes, while their mistress's own grew red with the misery of parting from them, and the rabbit seized the opportunity to gnaw Bridgie's skirt with its sharp teeth; but for Pixie the keenest pang of parting was over when she saw no more the floor with its scattered cabbage-leaves, and the door closed behind her, shutting out the dear mousy, rabbit smell associated with so many happy hours.

Outside on the gravel path old Dennis was sitting on a wheelbarrow enjoying a pipe in the sunshine. He made no attempt to rise as "the family" approached, but took the pipe out of his mouth and shook his head lugubriously.

"This is the black day for us, for all the sun's shining in the skies. Good luck to ye, Miss Pixie, and don't forget to spake a good word for Ould Ireland when the opportunity is yours. The ould place won't seem like itself with you and Mr Jack both going off within the same month; but there's one comfort—one frettin' will do for the pair of you!" And with this philosophic reflection he stuck the pipe back in the corner of his mouth and resigned himself to the inevitable.

"Pixie darling," said Bridgie nervously, "I think we must go back to the house. It's time—very nearly time that you were getting ready. Father is going to drive you over in the cart, and he won't like to be kept waiting."

"Aren't you coming too?" queried Pixie eagerly. There was a look on Bridgie's face this morning which reminded her of the dear dead mother, and she had a sudden feeling of dread and longing. "I want you, Bridgie! Come too! Come too!"

"I can't, my dearie. Your box must go, you know, and there's not room for both. But you won't cry, Pixie. It's only babies who cry, not girls like you—big girls, almost in their teens, going away to see the world like any grand lady. You may see the queen some day! Think of that, now! If you ever do, bow to her twice—once for yourself, and once for me—and tell her Bridget O'Shaughnessy is hers to the death. / wouldn't cry, Pixie, if I were going to see the queen!"

"Is it cry?" asked Pixie airily, with the tears pouring down her face and splashing on to her collar, which had been

manufactured out of the strings of an old bonnet, with only three joins at the back to betray the fact that it had not been cut out of "the piece."

"It's not likely I'll cry, when I'm going on a real train and steamer, and meals on the way right up to to-morrow night! *You* never had lunch on a train, Bridgie, and you are eight years older than me!"

"Deed I didn't, then. No such luck!" sighed Bridgie regretfully, making the most of her own privation for the encouragement of the young traveller. "That will be a treat for you, Pixie, and there are sandwiches and cakes in the dining-room for you to eat before you go. Come straight in, for I brought down your coat before going out. You must write often, dear, and tell us every single thing. What Miss Phipps is like, and the other teachers, and the girls in your class, and who sleeps in your bedroom, and every single thing that happens to you."

"And remember to write every second letter to your brothers, for if you don't, they won't write to you. Girls get all the letters, and it isn't fair. Tell us if you play any games, and what sort of food they give you, and what you think of the English," said Miles, helping himself to sandwiches, and turning over the cakes to select the most tempting for his own refreshment, despite the young housekeeper's frowns of disapproval. "Stick up for your country, and stand no cheek. You understand, of course, that you are to be the Champion of Ireland in the school."

"I do!" said little Pixie, and her back straightened, and her head reared itself in proud determination.

"And if any English upstarts dare to try bullying you, just let them know that your name is O'Shaughnessy, and that your ancestors were Kings of Ireland when theirs were begging bread on the streets! Talk to them straight, and let them know who they are dealing with!"

"I will so!" said Pixie. She chuckled gleefully at the anticipation; but, alas! her joy was short-lived, for at that moment the shabby dogcart passed the window, and the Major's voice was heard calling impatiently from the hall.

"Ten minutes late already. We shall need all our time. Tumble in, now, tumble in! You have had the whole morning for saying good-bye. Surely you have finished by now!"

The children thought they had hardly begun; but perhaps it was just as well to be spared the last trying moments. Bridgie and Esmeralda wrapped their arms round the little sister and almost carried her to the door; Pat and Miles followed with their hands in their pockets, putting on a great affectation of jollity in their anxiety to disguise a natural regret; the two women-servants wailed loudly from the staircase. Pixie scrambled to her seat and looked down at them, her poor little chin quivering with emotion.

"Bridgie, write! Esmeralda, write!" she cried brokenly. "Oh, write often! Write every day. Pat, Pat, be kind to my ferret. Don't starve it. Don't let it die. Take care of it for me till I come back."

"I'll be a mother to it," said Pat solemnly.

And so Pixie O'Shaughnessy went off to school.

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## Chapter Three.

### The new Scholar.

Major O'Shaughnessy and his little daughter reached London on the following afternoon, after a comfortable and unadventurous journey. Pixie had howled dismally all the way to the station, but had dried her eyes at the sight of the train, and even brightened into hilarious spirits on boarding the steamer. She ate an enormous dinner of the richest and most indigestible dishes on the menu, slept peacefully through a stormy passage, and was up on deck conversing affably with the men who were washing down, long before her father had nerved himself to think of dressing. The journey to London was a more or less disappointing experience, for, if she had not known to the contrary, she was not at all sure that she would have recognised that she was in a strange land. What she had expected, it was impossible to say; but that England should bear so close a resemblance to her beloved land seemed another "insult to Ireland," as Pat would have had it, and that it should in some respects look better, more prosperous and orderly, this was indeed a bitter pill to swallow.

As the train neared London, and other passengers came in and out of the carriage, Major O'Shaughnessy became conscious for the first time what a dusty, dishevelled little mortal he was about to introduce to an English school. He was not noticing where his children were concerned, and moreover, his eye had grown accustomed to the home surroundings, but the contrast between these trim strangers and his own daughter was too striking to be overlooked. Pixie had wriggled about until her frock was a mass of creases, her hat was grey with dust, and she had apparently forgotten to brush her hair before leaving her cabin. The Major was too easy-going to feel any distress at this reflection. He merely remarked to himself whimsically that, "the piccaninny would astonish them!" meaning the companions to whom she was about to be introduced, and decided then and there to take her straight to her destination. This had been the only point upon which he and his young daughter had been at variance; for from the start Pixie had laid down as her idea of what was right and proper that her father should take her for the night to a grand hotel, introduce her next morning to the Tower, the Zoological Gardens, and Madame Tussaud's, and deposit her at Surbiton in the afternoon. The Major's ideas on the subject were, however, that an exacting little daughter was a drawback to a man's enjoyment of a visit to London, and that there were other forms of amusement which he would prefer to a visit to the before-mentioned historic resorts. With accustomed fluency, he found a dozen reasons for carrying out his own wishes, and propitiated Pixie by promising that Jack should take her sight-seeing before many weeks were over.

"I'll tell Miss Phipps that I wish you to go out with your brother on Saturday afternoons, and you'll have a fine time together seeing all that is to be seen. Far greater fun than if we tried to hurry about with not a minute to spare."

"I like to do things *now*," sighed Pixie pensively; but as usual she resigned herself to the inevitable, and a box of chocolates, bought at Waterloo, sufficed to bring back the smiles to her face and restore her equanimity.

The arrival at Surbiton Station was a breathless experience, though it was a distinct blow to her vanity to find that no deputation from Holly House was in waiting to receive Patricia O'Shaughnessy with the honours she deserved. No one took any notice of her at all. When the cabman, when directed to drive to Holly House, preserved an unmoved stolidity of feature, and had no remark whatever to offer on the subject. How different from dear, friendly, outspoken Bally William, where each man was keenly interested in the affairs of his neighbour, and the poorest peasant upon the road felt himself competent to offer advice on the most intimate family matters! Pixie felt a chill of foreboding as she drove through the trim Surbiton streets and noticed girls like herself walking demurely beside mother or governess, with laced-in boots, gloved bands, and silky manes flowing down their backs in straight, uninterrupted flow. She looked down at her own new, stout, little boots. Sixteen buttons in all, and only one missing! Such a pitch of propriety made her feel quite in keeping with her surroundings, and she had kid gloves too—dyed ones—which looked every bit as good as new, and left no mark at all except round the fastenings, and the lobes of the fingers. She gave a wriggle of contentment, and at that moment the cab turned in at the gate of Holly House.

The name of the house seemed to have more appropriateness than is usually the case, for the garden was surrounded by a thick holly hedge, and the beds were planted with holly trees so dark that they appeared to be almost black in hue. To the eyes of the new pupil there was something awe-inspiring in the sight of the grim flowerless beds and the foliage which looked so stern and prickly, almost as bad as the pieces of broken glass which are laid on the top of high walls to prevent escape or intrusion. The house itself was big and square, with a door in the centre, and at the top two quaint dormer windows, standing out from the roof like big surprised-looking eyes. "Dear, dear!" they seemed to say. "If this isn't Pixie O'Shaughnessy driving up to the door! Wonders will never cease!"

The hall was wide and cold, and, oh, so clean—"fearful clean," thought the new pupil with a sigh, as she stepped gingerly over the polished oilcloth and gazed awesomely at spotless wood and burnished brass. The drawing-room had none of the splendour of that disused apartment at Knock Castle, but it was bright and home-like, with an abundance of pretty cushions and tablecloths, a scent of spring flowers in the air, and a fire dancing cheerily in the grate. Pixie's prejudices received a shock at the sight of so much frivolity in a drawing-room, and she could not echo her father's admiration. She seated herself on the edge of the sofa and began to paint imaginary pictures of the mistress of this fine house. "She will be tall, with yellow hair. She will have cold fingers and a nose that looks thin and has a hump in the middle. No, I don't believe she will, after all. I believe she'll be fussy, and then they are small and dark—dark, with eyeglasses, and those funny red cheeks that are made up of little lines, and never get lighter or darker. And she'll have a chain hanging from her waist with a lot of things that jingle, like the lady in the train. Oh, me dear, suppose she was old! I never thought of that. Suppose she was old, in a cap and a black satin dress, and chilblains on her hands!" And when the door opened—it was really a most exciting occasion!—and Miss Phipps came into the room.

She was not in the least like any of the three pictures which Pixie had imagined, she was far, far nicer and prettier. She was tall, and so graceful and elegantly dressed as to be quite dazzling to the eyes of the country-bred stranger. She had waving brown hair, which formed a sort of halo round her face, a pale complexion, and grey eyes which looked at you with a straight long glance, and then lightened as if they liked what they saw. She was quite young, too, not a bit old and proper; the only thing that looked old were the little lines about the eyes, and even those disappeared when her face was in repose. She came forward to where the major was standing, and held out her hand with a smile of welcome.

"Major O'Shaughnessy! I am very pleased to see you. I hope you have had a good journey and a comfortable crossing." Then she turned and looked at the crumpled little figure on the sofa, and her eyes softened tenderly. "Is this my new pupil? How do you do, dear? I hope we shall be very good friends!"

"Oi trust we may!" returned Pixie fervently, and with a broadening of the already broad brogue which arose from the emotion of the moment and made her father frown with embarrassment.

"Ha—hum—ha—I am afraid I have brought you rather a rough specimen," he said apologetically. "Pixie is the baby of the family, and has been allowed to run wild, and play with all the children about the place. I hope you will not find her very backward in her lessons. She has had a governess at home, but—"

"But she wasn't much good, either!" interrupted Pixie, entering into the conversation with the ease and geniality of one whose remarks are in the habit of being received with applause. "I didn't pay much attention to her. I expect there's a good deal I don't know yet, but I'm very quick and clever, and can be even with anyone if I choose to try."

"Then please try, Pixie! I shall be disappointed if you don't!" said Miss Phipps promptly. Her cheeks had grown quite red with surprise, and she pulled in her upper lip and bit at it hard as she looked down at her new pupil and noted the flat nose, the wide mouth, and the elf-like thinness of the shabby figure. "Pixie! that's a very charming little name, but a fancy one, surely. What is your Christian name?"

Father and daughter gazed at each other appealingly. It was a moment which they had both dreaded, and the Major had fondly hoped that he might escape before the question was asked. He remained obstinately silent, and Pixie nerved herself to reply.

"Me name's not suited to me appearance," she said sadly. "I'd rather, if you please, that ye didn't tell it to the girls. I am always called Pixie at home. Me name's Patricia!"

Miss Phipps bit her lip harder than ever, but did managed to control her features, and Pixie was relieved to see that she did not even smile at the mention of the fatal name.

"It's rather a long name for such a small person, isn't it?" she said seriously. "I think we will keep to Pixie. It will make school more home-like for you than if we changed to one to which you are not accustomed." Then turning to the Major, "I am sorry my head mistress, Miss Bruce, is not at home to-day, as I should have liked you to see her. She is very bright and original, and has a happy knack of bringing out the best that is in her pupils. She directs the teaching, and I am the housekeeper and sick-nurse of the establishment. Would you like to come upstairs and see the room in which Pixie will sleep, or shall we wait perhaps until after tea?"

The Major declared that he could not wait for tea. He had kept the cab waiting at the door, and was all anxiety to get the parting over as quickly as possible and return to the fascinations of town, so he discussed a few business matters with Miss Phipps, and then took Pixie's hand and accompanied her up the staircase to the third-floor bedroom which she was to share with three other pupils.

Two windows looked out on to the garden in front of the house, and an arrangement of curtains hung on rods made each little cubicle private from the rest. Pixie's handbag had already been laid by her bed, and she felt quite a swelling of importance as she surveyed her new domain, wherein everything was to be her very own, and not shared with someone else, as had always been the case at home. The Major gushed over all he saw, and professed himself as more than satisfied, but he was plainly ill at ease, and after walking twice round the room was all eagerness to make his escape.

"I'll say good-bye to you now, Pixie," he said, "for your bag is there, I see, and you would be much the better for a wash and brush. It's no use coming downstairs again. Be a good girl, now, and Jack shall come often to see you! I'm happy to leave you in such good hands, and it's a lucky child you are to have such a school to come to! It will be your own fault if you are not happy."

"I've no doubt I'll be very comfortable, thank you," Pixie said pleasantly, lifting her cheek to receive her father's kiss, with little sign of the emotion dreaded by the two onlookers, for her mind was too full of the new excitements to allow her to realise his departure. He hurried out of the room, followed by Miss Phipps, and Pixie withdrew into her cubicle, pulled the curtains closely around her, and felt monarch of all she surveyed. A dear little white bed, so narrow that if you turned, you turned at your peril and in instant dread of landing on the floor; a wonderful piece of furniture which did duty as dressing-table, washstand, and chest of drawers combined; a single chair and a hanging cupboard. Everything fresh, spotlessly clean, and in perfect order; absolutely, if you can believe it, not a single broken thing to be seen! Pixie drew a quick breath of admiration, and wondered how long it could possibly be before she succeeded in cracking that lovely blue and white china, and exactly what would happen if she spilt the water over the floor! She was so much occupied in building castles in the air that ten minutes passed by and she had not moved from her seat, when suddenly there came the sound of footsteps running up the stairs, the door was pushed open, and tramp, tramp, in came her future companions, hidden from sight, but talking volubly to each other as they took off hats and jackets after the afternoon walk.

"The new girl has arrived!" cried number one, in a tone of breathless excitement. "I saw her box as I came through the hall. I peeped at the label, but hadn't time to read it properly."

"I did, though!" cried another. "A funny name—O something or other. 'Shog-nessie,' or something like that. Such a shabby old trunk! Looked as if it came out of the Ark."

"It will be rather fun having an Irish girl, don't you think?" number two suggested. "They are untidy and quarrelsome, of course, but it is funny to hear them talk, and they make such droll mistakes. I shouldn't like to be Irish myself, but it will be a pleasant change to have a Paddy among us!"

"Well, I hope she isn't quarrelsome in this room, that's all!" said a third speaker, who had hitherto been silent, "because if she is, I shall feel it my duty to give her a taste of Home Rule that she may not appreciate. And if she snores I shall squeeze my sponge over her, so you may tell her what she has to expect. There's nothing like training these youngsters properly from the beginning!"

"Twelve years old! I call it mean to put a child like that in this room! You are fourteen, I'm fourteen, Ethel is fifteen; we ought to have one of the older ones with us. We will make her fag for her living. She shall get the hot water, and fold up our nightgowns, and pick up the pins. All the same, I shall be kind to her, for the credit of the country, for Irish people are always imagining themselves ill-used by England. If I had thought of it I would have drawn a picture for her cubicle, as a delicate little mark of attention. An Irishman with his—what do you call it?—shi-lee-lah!"

The speaker stopped suddenly as she pronounced this difficult word, for a curious muffled sound reached her ears. "What's that?" she asked quickly; but her companions had heard nothing, so she retired into the cubicle next Pixie's own to brush her hair, slightly raising her voice, so as to be heard more easily by her companions.

"She lives in a castle! I heard Miss Phipps telling Miss Bruce when she was sending the labels. 'Knock-kneed Castle,' or something like that. Every second house in Ireland is called a castle, my father says. It's no more than a villa in England, and all the people are as poor as Job, and have hens in their parlours and pigs on the lawn. They don't know what it is to keep order. What are you grunting for, Ethel? It's quite true, I tell you!"

"Dear me, I'm not grunting, I'm only washing my hands," cried Ethel, aggrieved. "What's the matter with your ears this afternoon? I don't care where she lives, so long as she behaves herself, and knows how to respect her elders. I wonder what she is like!"

"Irish girls are mostly pretty."



“Who told you that?”

“Never mind, I know it. It’s always raining over there, and that is supposed to be good for the hair, or the complexion, or something. And they are so bright and vivacious. If an author wants to make a specially lively heroine in a book, the father is Irish, and the mother is French. Perhaps she’ll be the beauty of the school, and then won’t someone we could mention tear her hair with rage?”

“Well, I don’t know about being pretty,” said Pixie’s neighbour reflectively. “We have had lots of Irish servants, and they were plain enough. But the name sounds interesting—‘Miss Shog-nessie—the Castle—Ireland.’ It certainly sounds interesting. I’d give something to know what she is like.”

“If ye’ll step inside the curtain, ye may judge for yerself,” said a deep rich voice suddenly from behind the curtain which was farthest from the door.

There was silence in the bedroom—a silence which might be felt!

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## Chapter Four.

### First Impressions.

Pixie’s first week at school was a period of delirious excitement. Above all things in the world she loved to be of importance, and occupy a foremost place with those around her, and she was proudly conscious that her name was on every lip, her doings the subject of universal attention. New girls were wont to be subdued and bashful in their demeanour, and poor unfortunates who arrived after the beginning of the term to find other pupils settled down into regular work, were apt to feel doubly alone. By this time those arrangements are determined which are of such amazing importance to the schoolgirl’s heart—Clara has sworn deathless friendship with Ethel; Mary, Winifred, and Elsie have formed a “triple alliance,” each solemnly vowing to tell the other her inmost secrets, and consult her in all matters of difficulty. Rosalind and Bertha have agreed to form a pair in the daily crocodile, and Grace has sent Florence to Coventry because she has dared to sharpen pencils for Lottie, the school pet, when she knew perfectly well that it was Grace’s special privilege, and she is a nasty, interfering thing, anyhow, and ought to be snubbed! What chance has a poor late-comer against such syndicates as these? There is nothing for her but to take a back place, and wait patiently for a chance at the beginning of another term.

Pixie O’Shaughnessy, however, has never taken a back place in her life, and has no intention of beginning now. On her very first evening the two head girls entered the school parlour to find a small, ugly girl seated in the middle of the hearth rug on the most comfortable chair which the room afforded, and were invited in the most genial manner to, “Shtep forward and take a seat!”

“It’s rremarkably cold for the time of year!” remarked the small person, making no sign of giving up her seat, but waving blandly towards the cane chairs by the wall. “I’m the new girl, I come from Ireland. Me father brought me. I’m the youngest of six, and I’ve come to school to correct me brogue, and be polished up. As soon as I’ve finished I shall go back to me home!”

The head girl came over to the fireplace, and stared downwards with wide grey eyes. She looked almost grown-up, for her hair was twisted round and round like a lady’s, and her dress reached to her ankles.

“That’s very interesting!” she said slowly. “I am glad you have made yourself comfortable, for from what you say I expect we shall have you with us for quite a long time. Can’t you tell us some more family details while you are about it?”

“I can so!” said Pixie with emphasis, and sitting erect in her seat she folded her hands in her lap, and began to talk. The room was filling by this time, for the quarter of an hour before tea was a cosy holiday-time, when the girls could talk without restraint, and compare notes on the work of the day. One by one they approached the fireside, until Pixie’s chair was surrounded by a compact wall of laughing young faces, and thirty pairs of eyes stared at her from head to foot, back again from foot to head. Her black skirt was so short that it was like a flounce, and nothing more; from chest to back there was no more width than could be covered by the scraggy little arm, the feet dangled half-way to the floor, and the hands waved about, emphasising every sentence with impassioned gestures.

At the end of ten minutes what the pupils of Holly House did not know about the O’Shaughnessy family may be safely described as not worth knowing! They had been treated to graphic descriptions of all its members, with illustrative anecdotes setting them forth in their best and worst lights; they had heard of the ancient splendours of the Castle, and the past glories of the family, and—for Pixie was gifted with a most engaging honesty—they had also heard of the present straitness of means, the ingenious contrivances by which the family needs were supplied, and even of one tragic episode when the butcher refused to supply any more meat, just when one of the county magnates was expected to dinner! It had been a ghastly occasion, but Bridgie went and “spoke soft to him,” and he was a decent man, and he said it wasn’t for “all the mutton in the world,” he said, that he would see her shamed before the quality, so all ended as happily as could be desired!

“I wouldn’t tell stories like that if I were you, Pixie,” said the head girl gravely, at the end of this recital. She had not laughed as the others had done, but looked at the little chatterbox with a grave, steady glance. Margaret had gained for herself the title of “School-Mother”, by thinking of something better than the amusement of the moment, and being brave enough to speak a word of warning when she saw a girl setting out on a path which was likely to bring her into trouble. “I wouldn’t tell stories like that!” she repeated, and when the swift “Why not?” came back, she was ready with her reply. “Because I am sure your people would not like it. It is all right for you to tell us about your brothers and sisters, and it was very interesting. I wish Bridgie and Esmeralda had come to school with you; but we

don't tell stories of our home doings of which we are,"—she was about to say "ashamed," but the child's innocent eyes restrained her—"about which we are sorry! We keep those to ourselves."

"But—but we got the mutton! He gave us the mutton!" cried Pixie, agape with wonder. It seemed to her an interesting and highly creditable history, seeing that Bridgie had had the better of the butcher, and maintained the family credit in the eyes of the neighbourhood. She could not understand Margaret's gravity, and the half-amused, half-pitiful glances of the older pupils.

The girl standing nearest to her put an arm round her neck, and said, "Poor little girlie!" in such a soft, tender voice that her tears overflowed at the moment, and she returned the embrace with startling fervour. Pixie's emotions were all on the surface, and she could cry at one moment and laugh at the next, with more ease than an ordinary person could smile or sigh. When the gong sounded for tea, she went downstairs with her arms twined fondly round the waists of two new friends, and there was quite a quarrel among the girls as to who should sit beside her.

Miss Phipps was at one end of the table, and Mademoiselle, the resident French teacher, at the other, and between them stretched a long white space flanked by plates of bread-and-butter, and in the centre some currant scones, and dishes of jam. These latter dainties were intended to supply a second course when appetite had been appeased by plainer fare, but the moment that grace was said the new-comer helped herself to the largest scone she could find, half covered her plate with jam, and fell to work with unrestrained relish, while thirty pairs of eyes watched with fascinated horror. She thought that everyone seemed uncommonly quiet and solemn, and was casting about in her mind for a pleasant means of opening the conversation, when a sound broke on her ears which recalled one of Pat's prophecies with unpleasant distinctness. Mademoiselle was talking in her native tongue, and it was not in the least like the French which she had been accustomed to hear in the schoolroom at Bally William. The agonising presentiment that her ignorance was about to be discovered before her schoolmates reduced Pixie at one blow to a condition of abject despair. She hung her head over her plate, and strove to avoid attention by keeping as quiet as possible.

"They speak too quick. It's rude to gabble!" she told herself resentfully. "And I know some French meself. '*J'ai, tu as, il a, nous sommes, vous êtes, ils sont.*' Listen at that, now!" She felt a momentary thrill of triumph in her achievement, but it quickly faded away, as further efforts showed how scanty was the knowledge upon which she could draw. "*Je suis faim*" was the only phrase which occurred at the moment, and appropriately enough too! She stretched out her hand to take a second scone, but was immediately called to order by Miss Phipps's soft voice.

"Bread-and-butter this time, Pixie! You are not supposed to take scones until you have had at least three pieces of bread. You must do as the other girls do, you know, dear!"

"Oi like a relish to my tay!" sighed Pixie sadly, and five separate girls who happened to have their cups to their mouths at the moment, choked immediately, and had to be patted on the backs by their companions. All the girls were laughing; even the victims smiled amidst their struggles, and Mademoiselle's brown eyes were sparkling with amusement. There was not one of them half so beautiful as Esmeralda, nor so sweet as Bridgie, but they were good to look at all the same, reflected the new pupil critically. Right opposite sat her three room-mates—Flora, plump and beaming; Kate, sallow and spectacled; Ethel, the curious, with a mane of reddish brown hair, which she kept tossing from side to side with a self-conscious, consequential air. Margaret sat by Miss Phipps's side, and helped her by putting sugar and milk into the cups. Glance where she would, she met bright, kindly smiles, and her friend on either side looked after her wants in the kindest of manners. Pixie did not know their names, so she addressed them indiscriminately as "darlin'," and was prepared to vow eternal friendship without waiting to be introduced.

"Do you always speak French at meals?" she asked under cover of the general conversation a few minutes later, and the reply was even worse than her fears.

"We are supposed to speak it always, except in the quarter of an hour before tea, and on Sundays, and holidays. But of course, if you do not know a word you can ask Mademoiselle, or look it up in a dictionary, and the new girls get into it gradually. Miss Phipps is a darling; she can't bear to see a girl unhappy, and of course it is difficult to get into school ways when you have been taught at home. I have been here for two years, and am as happy as possible, though I cried myself sick the first week. If you do what you are told and work hard, you will have a very good time at Holly House."

Pixie looked dubious.

"But aren't you ever naughty?" she asked anxiously. "Not really bad, you know, but just mischeevous! Don't you ever play tricks, or have pillow fights, or secret suppers up in your room, or dress up as bogeys to frighten the others?"

"Certainly not!" Eleanor Hopton was a proper and dignified young lady, and the straightness of her back was quite alarming as she frowned dissent at the new-comer. "Frighten people, indeed! Do you not call that naughty? It's a wicked and dangerous thing to do, and you would be punished severely if you attempted it. I have read of people who died of fright. How would you feel if you played bogey, as you call it, to startle one of the girls, and she had a weak heart and died before your eyes? You would feel pretty miserable then, I should say."

"I would so! I'd get the fright myself that time. But suppers, now,—suppers don't hurt anyone!" urged Pixie, pushing aside one objectionable proposition and bringing forward the next with unconscious generalship. "Don't you ever smuggle things upstairs—sausages and cakes, and sardines and cream—and wake up early in the morning—early—early, before it is light—and eat them together, and pretend you are ladies and gentlemen, or shipwrecked mariners on desert islands, or wild Indians, or anything like that, and talk like they talk, and dance about the room?"

"Cer-tain-ly not! The very idea!" cried Eleanor once more. "I never heard of anything so silly. Why on earth should one sit up shivering to eat things in the middle of the night, when one can have them comfortably downstairs at the

right hour? I should not think of doing anything so foolish.”

Pixie sighed heavily. This was England indeed! For the first time since entering the house she realised that she was a stranger in a strange land. Eleanor’s calm commonsense was so entirely foreign to her nature that she felt a distinct chilling of the new affection. The companion on her right looked more sympathetic, and she addressed her next remark in that direction.

“We were for ever playing tricks on one another at home. Bridgie and Esmeralda sleep in the same bed, and one day Pat—that’s the second boy—the next but one to me—he went to Bridgie and he says, ‘I’ve played a fine joke on Esmeralda! Ask no questions, but just wait up until she gets into bed to-night, and you’ll have the best laugh you’ve had this side Christmas.’ Then off he goes to Esmeralda, and ‘Keep a secret!’ says he. ‘Let Bridget be the first to get into bed to-night. Make an excuse and sit up yourself to see the fun, for she’ll have a fine surprise when she lies down.’ The girls guessed that they had been taking the laths off the bed, as they had done once or twice before, to let a visitor fall through on to the floor, and it was a very cold night, and they were tired, for they had been working hard mending the staircase carpet; and says Bridgie to Esmeralda, ‘Just hurry up, can’t you! I never did see such a girl for dawdling. Get into bed,’ she says, ‘and don’t sit up all night.’ ‘Oh,’ says Esmeralda, smiling, ‘I’ve a fancy to brush out me hair. Take no notice of me, but just lie down and turn your face to the wall, and I’ll be as quiet as a mouse.’ ‘I never can sleep with a light in the room,’ says Bridgie, quite testy... I was in my own bed in the dressing-room, so I heard what they said, and was stuffing the bedclothes into my mouth not to laugh out and spoil the fun. ‘If you are going to make a night of it, I’ll sit down and read, and you can let me know when you are ready.’ ‘You will catch cold sitting in that draught!’ Esmeralda says, her own teeth chattering, for it was mortal cold, and there was a hole in the window above her head, where Pat had thrown up a stone when he wanted to wake her one morning, and couldn’t spare time to walk upstairs. ‘And you know, Bridget, you are always delicate on the chest.’ ‘It’ll be on your head, then,’ says Bridgie, ‘if I *am* made ill, keeping me up when I’m longing for my bed! Come, dear,’ wheedling her to see if she could get round that way, ‘leave it alone now, and I’ll brush it for you in the morning. It is beautiful hair, and Mrs Gallagher the laundress was saying to me this morning there wasn’t its match in the country.’ And Esmeralda said afterwards that she was too cold for compliments, so she up and said it was her own hair, and she’d brush it when she liked, and how she liked, without interference from anyone; and at that they grew mad, and began quarrelling with each other, and throwing up everything that ever they did since they were short-coated, and meself lying trembling on me bed, to think what would happen next. Joan—that’s Esmeralda—she would have sat up all night, she’s that obstinate, but Bridgie grew tired, and says she, ‘I’m not going to catch me death shivering here for all the jokes on earth, so here goes, and I don’t care what happens!’ and with that she throws herself down on the bed; and—would ye believe it?—nothing happened at all. The bed was as right as it had been all its life, and the boys had had their joke without any trouble.”

Pixie finished in the midst of a dead silence, for one by one the speakers round the table had paused to listen to the soft Irish voice, and the story once begun had riveted attention. Some of the girls laughed outright, some held down their heads to conceal their smiles, some nudged their companions and looked demurely at Miss Phipps to take their cue from her face. She was undoubtedly smiling, but she looked worried all the same, and gave the signal for rising in a hurried manner, as if anxious to allow no time for comment. The girls rose and filed slowly past, Pixie skipping complacently in front, with her arm round another new friend, whom she was prepared to adore even more fondly than the last. Only Margaret remained behind to assist in putting the room in order, and when the door shut Miss Phipps looked at her under raised appealing brows.

“I am afraid we have rather a difficult subject there, Margaret! Poor little thing! Her father says she has been allowed to run wild, and it will be difficult for her to get into school ways. She doesn’t mean to be forward, but of course we can’t allow her to go on like this. She must be taught wholesome respect and reticence, but I don’t want to be too hard upon her at first. She’s a lovable little creature, and I’ve no doubt will be a favourite with the girls. They like to be amused, and I fear they may encourage her for the sake of their own amusement. You must help me, dear, by setting a good example and checking her gently when she gets excited.”

“I’ll try!” said Margaret, but she looked by no means hopeful of success. “I did try before tea. She was telling the most extraordinary tales about home, and I said it was not right to repeat such things, but she seemed quite puzzled. She doesn’t seem to have the same ideas that we have, or the same feelings about things.”

Miss Phipps sighed, and shook her head.

“She is a difficult subject,” she repeated anxiously; then her face lighted up suddenly and she began to laugh. “But you can’t help liking her!” she cried. “Funny little mite! I am growing quite fond of her already.”

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## Chapter Five.

### The Alice Prize.

To the surprise of all concerned, Pixie took a very fair place in the school. The sorely tried Miss Minnitt was by no means an accomplished woman, but what she did know she taught well, and she felt rewarded for her efforts when she heard that Miss Bruce, the English teacher, had remarked that Pixie had been well grounded, and knew more than many girls of her age. The mixture of knowledge and ignorance which the child displayed was indeed incomprehensible to those who did not understand the conditions under which she had lived. She was quite a botanist in a small way, could discourse like any farmer on crops and tillages, was most sporting in her descriptions of shooting and hunting, and had an exhaustive understanding of, and sympathy with, the animal world, which seemed quite uncanny to town-bred girls. Here, however, her knowledge stopped, and of the ways of the world, the hundred and one restrictions and obligations of society which come as second nature to most girls, she knew no more than a South Sea Islander dancing gaily upon the sands, and stringing shells in her dusky locks. “I wish I was

born a savage!" was indeed her daily reflection, as she buttoned her tight little frock, and wriggled to and fro in a vain search for comfort.

"Now listen to me!" said Miss Bruce, at the end of the examination which was conducted after breakfast the day following Pixie's arrival. "I am undecided which of two classes you shall join, so I am going to give you the choice. The under-fourth would be comparatively easy, the upper-fourth would mean real hard work. I think you could manage it, if you worked hard and determined to do your very, very best; but I tell you frankly it will not be easy. If you would rather have a term in the lower class and work up gradually, I am willing to let it be so; but you must realise that it will be less good for yourself. You seem to have a good memory and to learn quickly; but we don't like to force girls beyond their strength. You would be the youngest girl in the upper-fourth."

That decided the matter! Pixie's heart had sunk at the mention of work; but the ecstatic prospect of being the baby of a class, of writing home to boast of her position, and of reminding her elders at frequent intervals of her own precocious cleverness, was too tempting to be resisted. She pleaded eagerly for the upper-fourth, and came through the first morning's ordeal with gratifying success. But, alas! afternoon brought a change of scene, for the girls retired to the schoolroom for "prep," and the new class-member stared in dismay at the work before her.

"Is it for next week we are to learn it?" she asked, and when the answer came, "For to-morrow," she shrieked aloud in dismay. "What! The lot of it? Grammar, and arithmetic, and geography? All those pages, an' pages, and pages! I couldn't finish to-day if I sat up all night! You're joking with me! It isn't really and truly for to-morrow morning?"

"It is indeed, my dear, worse luck! Miss Bruce gives a terrible amount of prep, and you are bound to get through somehow. Sometimes it is worse than this, and you feel simply frantic. You are not allowed to go on after seven o'clock either, so there is no hope for you if you are not finished by that time."

"Don't frighten her, Dora," said Kate kindly. She looked through her spectacles at Pixie's woe-begone face, and smiled encouragement. "It seems hopeless at first, but you will get accustomed to it in time. I used to be in despair, but you get into the way of learning quickly, and picking out the things that are most important. There's no time for talking, though. Open your grammar and begin at once."

"Hate grammar!" grumbled Pixie crossly. "What's the use of it? I can talk as well as I want to without bothering about grammar, and I don't understand it either! Silly gibberish!"

She wished with all her heart at that moment that she had been content with the seclusion of the lower-fourth; but she was not allowed to talk any more, for Clara called out an impatient "Hush!" and Florence stuck her fingers in her ears and looked so savage that it was impossible to disregard the warning. Pixie read over the tiresome grammar, and then lay back in her seat studying the furniture of the room, and deciding on the improvements which she would make if Miss Phipps asked her advice on the subject of redecoration. It was an engrossing subject, and would have kept her happily occupied for quite a long time, had not Kate jerked her elbow as a reminder, and pointed significantly to the history. She had mentally constituted herself as friend-in-need to the new classmate, and was determined to do her duty by her, however little thanks she might receive; so she nudged, and nudged again, until Pixie resentfully opened the history book in its turn.

History was interesting—it was just like a story! When the prescribed portion had been read, she was anxious to learn what happened next, and read on and on until the watchful Kate suspected something wrong, and forcibly confiscated the book.

"What are you reading the next chapter for? A minute ago you were groaning because you had too much to do. Finish the work that is given you before trying to do more!"

"But there was an execution coming on. I love executions!" sighed Pixie miserably. "This is the best bit of the whole history, for there's no more fun when you get to the Georges. They never have any murders, nor plots, nor blowings up."

"You will get blown up if you interrupt like this! How do you suppose I can learn with you chattering away all the time?" cried Clara, the irascible. She glared at Pixie, and Pixie glared at her, and went on glaring long after the other had settled to work with an intentness which seemed mysteriously connected with the movement of a stubby lead pencil. Presently she touched Kate softly, and there on the margin of the clean new book was exhibited the drawing of a dismembered head, glaring horribly over rule-of-three problems, and labelled "Clara" in largest round hand. It was a very juvenile effort, but drawing was a family talent among the O'Shaughnessys, and the artist had been sharp to note the weak points of her subject, as well as to exaggerate them with cruel honesty. The high forehead was doubled in height, the long upper lip stretched to abnormal length, the blots which did duty for eyes were really marvellously, astonishingly like Clara's in expression! Kate pressed her handkerchief against her mouth, but the sound of her splutters was distinctly audible, and her companions looked up in amazement. Kate laughing during prep was a sight which had never been witnessed before, and they stared at her in mingled surprise and envy.

"What's the joke?" asked Marjorie wistfully. "You might share it, I think, for I feel as if I should never smile again until the holidays. If there is anything amusing in these lessons to-night, I should like to have it pointed out, that's all!"

"It's n-n-thing!" returned Kate, spluttering still. Pixie had flipped over a page with a deft movement, and sat with hands folded on her lap, a picture of lamblike innocence.

For the rest of the time allowed for preparation she worked really well, inspired by the remembrance that she had made Kate laugh, and drawn a caricature which even Esmeralda herself must have approved.

About half-past seven came supper, and after supper prayers, and after prayers bed, and an interesting conversation with the three room-mates.

"Which is the nicest girl in the school?" Pixie asked, going at once to the most important point, and fondly hoping that she might listen to her own name by way of answer. She was doomed to disappointment, however, for though there was a difference of opinion, her name was not even mentioned.

"Margaret!" said Kate.

"Lottie!" cried Flora.

"Clara!" cried Ethel; and they proceeded to argue the question between themselves.

"Margaret is an angel. She is sweet to everyone. She never says an unkind word."

"Lottie is so bright and clever. She is first in almost every single class."

"Clara is so sensible. She doesn't make a fuss, and gush over everything, as Lottie does; but if she says she will be your friend, she keeps her word, and always tries to do you a good turn."

"That's the way with meself," said Pixie modestly. "I'm the soft-heartedest creature! You three girls are me best friends because ye share me room, and I'll stick to you, whatever trouble ye're in. Ye need never be afraid to come to me, for the worse ye are, the better I'll like ye!"

"Ho, ho, ho!" laughed Kate shrilly. Flora chuckled to herself in fat, good-natured fashion, and Ethel tossed her mane and said—

"I can quite believe it, but if you will excuse my saying so, I think the trouble is more likely to come to you than to us! If you go on behaving as you have done the last two days, you will be in need of friends yourself, my dear, so don't say I haven't warned you."

"Behaving as I have done! Get into trouble meself!" echoed Pixie blankly. "And what for, please? What have I done? I promised Bridgie before I left that I would behave meself, and not disgrace the family, and I've kept me word. I've not been naughty once the whole time through."

"Don't say 'naughty,' child, as if you were a baby two years old! You may not have done anything wrong from your point of view, but you have broken half a dozen rules all the same. You planted yourself in front of the fire when the fifth-form girls were in the room, and never offered to give up your place even when Margaret herself came in. Not one of the old girls would think of doing such a thing. And you answered back when Miss Phipps spoke to you at tea—and told a story so loud that everyone could hear!"

"And small blame to me if I did! It *was* the dullest meal I ever sat through, and I thought I would do you a kindness by waking you up!" returned Pixie defiantly. She did not at all approve of Clara's attitude of fault-finding, and was up in arms at once in her own defence. "I have been brought up to make meself agreeable, and when Miss Phipps spoke to me, wasn't I obliged to give a civil answer? And I was cold when I sat before the fire. Are fifth-form girls colder than anyone else, that they must have all the heat?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean, or if you don't, you are a stupid child, and you needn't fly into a temper when I tell you your mistakes. You want to get on, I suppose, and take a good place in the school, so you ought to be grateful to anyone who tries to keep you out of trouble."

In the seclusion of her cubicle Pixie made a grimace, the reverse of appreciative, but she stifled her feelings in her desire for information, and asked the next question on her list.

"How often in the year do you get prizes?"

"Once. At the end of the summer term. There's a chance for you now! Work hard for six months, and win the class prize!"

Flora chuckled with amusement at the idea, but Pixie considered the subject seriously for a good two minutes, and found it altogether agreeable. She saw a vision of herself walking forward to receive her honours while the elder girls sat in a row, subdued and envious, and tasted in advance the ecstasy of the moment.

"What sort of prizes do they give you—books?"

"Books, of course. Improving books. Poets, with nice soft backs, and Dutch Republics in calf, and things like that. The sort of book you are awfully proud of, but hardly ever read. You put it carefully in a bookcase, and admire the binding. You can always tell a prize a yard off, it looks so smart and gilt, and unopened. I've seen rows of them in some houses, all ranged together with their little silk markers hanging out at the bottom, as smooth and uncrumpled as if they had never been moved; and the owners take them down and show you the inscription on the first page, to prove how good and clever they were when they were at school!"

"Ah!" Pixie drew a rapturous sigh, seeing herself be-capped and shawled, in the act of exhibiting her own spoils to a bevy of admiring grandchildren. The great point seemed to be to have the inscription as striking as possible, so she inquired anxiously if the class prize was the highest that could be obtained.

"She's ambitious, girls, isn't she? The class prize isn't enough for her, you notice!" cried Ethel, splashing her face with cold water, and interposing her remarks with audible shudderings. "Yes, there's one thing higher—the 'Alice Prize,' we call it, because it is given by the father of a certain Alice who used to be at school here, and who died at the end of her last term. She was Lottie's sister; but Lottie is not in the least like her, for she was very shy and nervous, and the girls teased her a great deal, and she took it to heart and made herself miserable. After her death it was found

that she had kept a diary, and written down all her troubles; and her parents read it, and tried to think what they could do to prevent any other girl suffering as she had done. At last they thought of offering this prize—it is given every year—five pounds' worth of books, which you can choose for yourself. You can get a lot of books for five pounds, and it is given to the girl who is kindest and most considerate to others. She has to be nice to new girls, and answer their questions, and be patient with them, as I am being with you, my dear, at the present moment, and dry their little eyes when they weep, and cheer them up when they are low in their minds. And she has to be careful not to hurt other people's feelings, and to use her influence to stop a joke when it is going too far. Oh, and a dozen other things which you can imagine for yourself! The girls know best who deserves the prize, and they vote at the end of the year, and whoever gets most votes gets the prize."

"Who got it last year?"

"Margaret, of course. So she would every time, but the same person is not allowed to have it two years running. A good thing, too, for we should all feel that it was no use competing with her, and so give up trying."

"And who do you think will get it this year?"

"Oh dear me! How many more questions? Myself, of course, for answering you so kindly. If you don't vote for me, young woman, there'll be a coldness between us, and so I tell you. Flora thinks she will get it, but it won't be fair if she does, for she is so fat that she couldn't be anything else than good-natured if she tried. Now I have really a violent temper, but I keep it in check. I can't answer any more questions, though. Time's up. I give you all two minutes more, and then I must put out the light."

"Let me do it! I'll put it out! You get into your bed and keep warm, and I'll wait upon you!" cried Pixie eagerly; and, to her dismay, there came a simultaneous burst of laughter from all three listeners.

"She's Alicing," they cried—"she's Alicing! Nothing like beginning in time, and making the most of your opportunities. So you want that prize too, do you, as well as the class one? It's a bad lookout for the rest of the girls. There won't be anything left for us to try for."

Pixie stood transfixed within her cubicle, staring before her with bewildered eyes. As it had been her delight to wait upon her beloved sisters, it had come naturally to wish to help these girls who, for the time, had taken their place in her life. She had made her offer in all good faith, and her heart swelled with bitterness at the injustice of the accusation. A rush of honest Irish pride forbade an answer; but the tears came to her eyes as she lay down in bed, and the loneliness of exile fell upon her. Bally William, oh, dear Bally William, how are you looking to-night? Is everything going on as usual, though Pixie O'Shaughnessy is far away in a cold, cruel land where no one knows her, and her best motives are misjudged and derided? Beautiful old castle, standing among your luxuriant green, are the lamps lit in your rooms, and twinkling like so many stars into the night? And there, where the red curtains are drawn so snugly, are the boys and girls gathered round the fire, the flames lighting up Bridgie's sweet face and Esmeralda's stormy beauty? Oh, boys and girls, are you thinking of Pixie—your own little Pixie?

"How that child does snort!" muttered Ethel impatiently. "It seems to be our luck to have all the snorers in this room."

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## Chapter Six.

### A Novel Amusement.

During the weeks which followed, "Pixie's Prep" became a by-word among her companions, for no amount of goading seemed sufficient to keep her attention from roaming from her books during the hours when it was most necessary that she should give them her undivided attention. However sturdily she might begin, in ten minutes' time her eyes were wandering about the room, she was scribbling on the margin of her book, or twisting her handkerchief into a new variety of rag doll. The well-meaning Kate, finding frowns and nudges losing their effect, resorted to more drastic measures, such as the prick of a pin, or a tug of the elf-like locks; but the victim's howls and protestations not only disturbed her companions, but took so long to pacify that the experiment had to be abandoned.

How Pixie managed to sustain even her very low place in the class was a wonder to her companions; but in truth she had an unusually quick brain, so that when she chose to apply herself she learnt as much as slower girls would do in twice the time, while her Irish wit enabled her to place her scraps of knowledge in the most advantageous light, and rescued her from awkward questionings. Nowhere was this faculty more marked than in French, of which she knew least, yet in which subject she made the most rapid progress. It was clear to a pair of uncommonly sharp eyes that Miss Phipps's leniency would some day come to an end, and that she would then find herself in the position of being obliged either to speak French or not to speak at all. To a born chatterbox the latter alternative seemed the acme of misery, so it behoved her to prepare for speech before the dread verdict was given, which she did in a manner astonishing to her companions. Of French grammar she had the poorest opinion, but she was sharp as a magpie to pick up the phrases of others and store them for her own use. The morning after Mademoiselle had suffered from a headache, Pixie's handkerchief was soaked with offerings of eau-de-Cologne from the various girls to whom she had repeated ejaculations of distress; she discoursed exhaustively upon the weather to every one who could be induced to listen, and recited exercise phrases to the school cat until her tongue grew quite nimble over the words.

Mademoiselle was an object of intense interest and curiosity to her new pupil. She was the first foreigner whom Pixie had known, and there was something in her dark, eager face which arrested the child's attention. Mademoiselle was quick and nervous, subject to fits of unreasonable irritation; but at other times there was a sad, far-away look in her eyes, and then her voice would take a softer cadence, so that when she said "Chérie," one pupil at least forgot all the scoldings which had gone before. Pixie felt irresistibly drawn to Mademoiselle in her hours of depression. She could

not have explained the attraction, but in her heart she felt that they were both exiles, and that Mademoiselle pined for her own sunny land even as she pined for the dear green isle which seemed so far away. She longed for Mademoiselle to notice her, to show her some special mark of favour, but longed in vain, until at last a day dawned which brought her into notice in a manner which was scarcely to her liking.

It was a wet Saturday afternoon, and wet Saturday afternoons are abominations to every boarding-school girl, and the cause of endless grumblings and repinings. Ethel and Kate had gone out to tea with an old maiden lady who lived in the neighbourhood, and had still further deepened their friend's depression before departing by drawing a most roseate picture of the joys before them.

"She is awfully kind," they had explained of their hostess; "she gives you the most galumptious teas, and the best part of it is, she has an e-normous appetite herself, so you can eat as much as you like, without fear of looking greedy!"

No wonder the poor stay-at-homes looked glum after this; no wonder they sighed with envy as they thought of the thick bread-and-butter in store for themselves. The elder girls provided themselves with books, and sat in rows before the fire, while artistic spirits set themselves copies, and filled up page after page of their sketching-books. Flora stitched on a table-centre destined to be a birthday present for her mother, and the younger girls clustered round Pixie, and besought her to think of some new means of amusement.

"Think of something, Pixie-doo! It's so dull, and we are sick of the stupid old games. What did you do at home when it rained and you couldn't go out?"

"I've never seen it rain hard enough to keep me indoors if I wanted to be out," returned Pixie, with a toss of the head; "but I've had fine fun indoors sometimes when I didn't feel disposed for exertion. Rattling in the barn is good sport, or grooming the pony, or feeding the animals, and pretending it is the Zoo; but you can't do those things here. It's hard to think of anything amusing when you are shut up in one room."

"We can go out on the landing, if we like; I vote we do, and be by ourselves. The fifth forms are sure to tell us not to, the moment we have thought of something nice. Come along now, before they notice us!"

No sooner said than done. The little band of conspirators slipped from the room, and stood without on the square landing, five short-frocked girls all gazing eagerly, confidently, into the face of their leader.

"Pixie, what shall we do?"

Pixie racked her brains in despair, for not a single idea would come to her aid, and yet to acknowledge such a want of invention would have been to forfeit her position, and therefore not to be thought of for a second. Her eyes roamed from side to side, and lit upon a table on which some working materials happened to be lying. A basket, a folded length of cloth, and a roll of wide green binding such as was used to edge old-fashioned window-curtains. Pixie looked at it thoughtfully, fingered it to ascertain its weight, shook it out to discover its length, and cried eagerly—

"Just the thing! Might have been made for it. Would you like to see me lasso the next person who comes upstairs?"

"Lasso!" The girls were not quite sure of the meaning of the word, but Pixie explained it, suiting the action to the word.

A lasso was a rope with a noose at one end—so! and it was used to catch wild horses, or anything else you happened to chase. You stood with the rope gathered up in your hand—so! and then took aim and sent it flying out suddenly—so! Pat could do it beautifully, and he had taught her too, but she could not always manage very well. If you caught a girl from above, she would be startled out of her wits, and squeal like anything. It would be splendid fun. The next one, then, who came upstairs!

The girls were divided between horror and delight. Dared she? Really! Would it hurt? What would Miss Phipps say? Did she really think she ought? But their agitation acted as fuel to Pixie's determination, and she would only laugh and lean over the banisters, experimenting with the long green rope, and altering the length until it met with her approval.

Five minutes passed, and nobody appeared; ten minutes, and the conspirators were beginning to grow impatient, when from below came the unmistakable sound of an ascending footstep. The orders of the chief had been that when this happened her attendants were to withdraw to a safe distance, so that no movement nor sound of muffled laughter should warn the victim of her peril; so the girls retreated obediently, leaving Pixie to crouch on the floor until the eventful moment when a head appeared on the landing six steps below. It came—the top of a smooth, brown head, and on the moment out flew the rope, whirled into space with a skilful jerk which sent the noose flying wide, and with an accuracy of aim which brought it right round the neck of the new-comer. She squealed indeed, but horror of horrors! she squealed in French, with such staccato "Oh's" and "Ah's" of astonishment as could only have come from one person in the house. It was Mademoiselle herself! and lifting her glance she beheld six horrified faces peering at her over the banisters, six pairs of startled eyes, six mouths agape with dismay. She looked, and then, as it seemed with one stride, was in their midst, with her hands gripping Pixie by the shoulders.

Now it happened that Mademoiselle was in her most irritable mood this afternoon, for all day long she had been struggling against what, for convenience' sake, she called a headache, but which might more honestly have been described as a heartache instead. A teacher cannot explain to thirty pupils that she has received a letter from home which has seemed to drop a veil before the sky, but such letters come all the same, and make it difficult to bear the hundred and one little annoyances and trials of temper which fall to her lot. Mademoiselle's letter had told of the illness of a beloved father, and as she dared not sit down and have a good cry to relieve her feelings, she was in a pent-up state of nerves which made her the worst possible subject for a practical joke. The rope in Pixie's hand

marked her out as the principal offender, and she was called to order in a breathless stream of French which left her dumb and bewildered.

"I—I can't understand!" she stammered, and Mademoiselle struggled to express herself in sufficiently expressive English. "You bad girl! You rude, bad girl! What 'ave you done? What you mean playing your treecks on me? I will not 'ave it. I will complain to Miss Phipps. How dare you throw your strings about to catch me as I come upstairs! Impertinent! Disobedient!"

"P—please, Mademoiselle, it was a lasso! I didn't know it was you. I said I would do it to the first person who came, and I didn't see your face. It was only a joke."

"A joke! You catch me by the throat, you 'ang me by the neck, and you call it a joke! You wicked, impertinent girl, you shall be punished for this!"

Pixie heaved a sigh so sepulchral that it might almost have been called a groan instead.

"It's just my luck!" she said dismally. "When I tried to show off before Pat and the girls, I couldn't do it one time in a hundred, and just now, when I'd have no credit, but only get into trouble, I caught you the very first try!"

Did she mean to be impertinent? Mademoiselle looked down with sharp suspicion, but even in her excited condition she could not mistake that downcast look, and troubled, disconsolate frown. Her voice grew a trifle less sharp, but she was very angry still.

"You ought to be ashamed playing such treecks! It is always the same thing—there is no peace since you 'ave come. These girls were quite good and mild, but you make them as wild as yourself. I will teach you to be 'ave better. You will come with me to the schoolroom and write out a verrrb!"

"I will, Mademoiselle," said Pixie meekly, so meekly that her companions fondly hoped that such exemplary submission would win forgiveness; but no, Mademoiselle flounced downstairs, and Pixie followed at her heels, to seat herself in solitary state at one end of the deserted schoolroom, while Mademoiselle took possession of the desk and began to correct a pile of exercise books.

To write out a verb is not, as a rule, a very lengthy matter, but Mademoiselle's punishment verbs had invariably a phrase attached which gave to them an added appropriateness, but very much lengthened the task. "I am sorry that I was rude to Mademoiselle" was the verb which poor Pixie was to-day condemned to conjugate, and the big straggling sentences amplified the statement until it seemed impossible to express it in any other way. "I am sorry that I was rude to Mademoiselle—I was sorry that I was rude to Mademoiselle—I shall or will be sorry that I was rude to Mademoiselle."

At intervals of every two or three minutes Mademoiselle glanced from her work to the little figure at the other end of the room, but each time Pixie's head was bent over her task, and the wandering eyes were glued to their task. Such industry seemed so unnatural that the onlooker became first puzzled and then uneasy, and at last resorted to coughing and moving about in her chair in order to satisfy curiosity. In vain! Pixie's head went down lower than ever, and the pen scratched away without a moment's cessation, for she was enduring that unreasoning panic of fear which sensitive children suffer when they are in disgrace with their elders. She had been brought up in an atmosphere of tender indulgence, had been the adored baby of the household, who had never heard the sound of an angry voice, so that now, to sit alone in a room with a person whom she had displeased, reduced her to a condition of trembling fear. Her eyelids felt weighed down, a lump rose in her throat, and she trembled as with cold, and then presently the dreaded voice spoke again, and Mademoiselle said—

"Pixie, come here. Bring your verrrb!"

The wretched scribe had not yet finished her conjugation, being about imperatively to command herself to be sorry that she had been rude to Mademoiselle, but she was too nervous to explain, and stood twisting her hands together and staring at the carpet, while Mademoiselle turned over the pages. She bit her lips once or twice as she read, and her eyes twinkled, but Pixie did not see that, and the voice which spoke sounded alarmingly stern.

"It is ver' badly written. You make your letters too big; and such blots! I cannot 'ave such blots. What 'ave you been doing to make such blots as these?"

"They are not blots, please, Mademoiselle; they are only—"

"Only what then?"

"Spots!"

"Spots!" echoed Mademoiselle blankly. "Spots—blots! Blots—spots! I do not understand. What is then the difference between blots and spots?"

"Blots is made with ink,"—when Pixie was agitated, as at the present moment, grammar was by no means her strong point—"and spots is made with—with—"

"*Eh bien!* And with what, then?"

"T-tears!" came the answer in the softest echo of a voice, and Mademoiselle looked down at the woe-begone face with startled eyes.

"Tears! Your tears! But why should you cry? It is not so dreadful to write a verrrb. I might have given you worse



punishment than that. Perhaps it was because you had missed the afternoon with your friends. I cannot think a girl of your age should cry over a simple verrrb."

"I thought it was a very elaborate verb!" said Pixie faintly. "But it wasn't that that made me cry; it was hurting your feelings, Mademoiselle!"

Mademoiselle leant back in her seat and looked intently at the shrinking figure.

"Look up, *chérie!*" she said softly, and Pixie's fear fell from her like a mantle. She saw a hand outstretched, and clasped it eagerly.

"I never meant to hang you, Mademoiselle! It was only a joke. The girls asked me to amuse them, and we think it fine sport to lasso one another at home. How was I to know it would be you, when I gave my word I would catch the first one that came upstairs? I didn't mean to be impertinent."

"But, *ma petite*, you should not play such treecks at all!" Mademoiselle shook her head, but she was smiling as she spoke, for she was beginning to realise that no disrespect had been meant to herself, and that she had been unduly stern in her denunciations. "It is not the thing for a young lady at school; it is only for wild—how do you call them—'cowboys,' out on the prairie. If you do it at 'ome, it is not my affair, but if your father should see you some day, he must be shocked like me!"

"I'm the youngest of six, and me father won't have me thwarted!" sighed Pixie, lapsing into her brogue, as she usually did when agitated. "Nobody's ever angry with me at Bally William; I get into mischief the day long, and it's all quite happy and comfortable. If I'm quiet and well-behaved, Bridgie is after giving me a mixture, for, says she, 'The choild's ill; there's not been a sound out of her this day!' I wish I was back in me own country, Mademoiselle, and then I shouldn't trouble you any more!"

"I vish I was back in my coundree, too," sighed the other softly, and two big tears started in the brown eyes, and trickled slowly down the cheeks. "My father is ill, and needs me, and I cannot be with him. I feel as if I could have wings and fly, I long so much to go; but I must stay here and work. My 'eart is very sad, and sometimes I get cross—too cross, perhaps, because I cannot bear any more. Then you girls talk among yourselves and say, 'How she is bad-tempered, that Mademoiselle! How she is cross and strict!' That is what you say very often, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"We do!" replied Pixie frankly. It was one of the Irishisms which amused her companions that she never by any chance gave a simple "Yes" or "No" in reply to a question. It was always "I am!" "I will!" "I do!" as the case might be.

"We do!" she replied now, and then hastened to soften the admission by a coaxing, "But I wouldn't be troubling meself about that, if I were you, for they don't mind it a bit. I drew a picture of you the other day with a bubble coming out of your mouth, and 'Bow-wow-wow' written on it like a dog, because you are always barking; but there isn't a bite in ye, and all the girls say you aren't half as bad as the Mademoiselle who was here before!"

Well! There are some conditions of mind when we are thankful for the smallest grain of comfort, and Mademoiselle smiled and flicked the tears from her eyes.

"They are too kind! I am much obliged; but another time, when I 'bark' as you call it, you will perhaps remember that your teachers are like yourselves, and 'ave the same feelings. When you come first to school you have to be comforted because you are 'ome-sick, but we are 'ome-sick too; and when you get bad news you cry, and are excused your work, but we must go on the same as before; and if it is difficult to learn your lessons, it is also difficult to teach! Well, now you may go! You will remember not to be rude to Mademoiselle again, eh?"

She held out her hand, smiling more brightly this time, and Pixie seized it eagerly.

"I will! And I hope your father will get well soon. You will see him at Christmas, and that isn't very long now; only forty-eight days to-morrow. I mark them off on my calendar."

"No, that is so sad, I shall not see him until summer! He is going to my brother in Italy, where it is warm and sunny, and it is too far for me to go there with him. It costs too much money, and the little house in Paris will be shut up till he returns, so I must stay in England all through the dark, long winter, when the sun never shines, and I shiver, shiver, shiver all day and all night! I shall forget what it is like to be warm before the spring arrives!"

Pixie rubbed the cold hands with a sympathetic touch, but she made no remark, and presently went from the schoolroom to rejoin her companions and make the most of the hours which still remained, while Mademoiselle went wearily on with the task of correction. She forgot all about her own complaints of cold, but when she retired to bed that night a delightful surprise was in store, for the sheets were warm instead of cold, and her chilled feet came in contact with something soft and hot, which proved upon examination to be an indiarubber water-bottle encased in a flannel bag. Mademoiselle drew a long gasp of rapture, and nestled down again with a feeling of comfort to which she had long been a stranger. A day or two earlier, Miss Phipps had spoken of the necessity of putting more coverings on the beds, as the frost had set in unusually early, and Mademoiselle sleepily attributed this new comfort as another instance of the Principal's consideration for her assistants. She felt certain that it must be so, as night after night the welcome warmth was in waiting, and more than once determined to express her appreciation; but life was busy, and there was such an accumulation of work as the period of examination approached, that there seemed no time to speak of anything but school affairs.

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## Chapter Seven.

### Term-Holiday.

Flora and Kate and Ethel were sitting with their classmates discussing the day's work, and Pixie O'Shaughnessy had drawn her stool beside them, and was putting in a remark at every possible opportunity. It made her feel grown-up and important to join in the conferences of the older girls, and though in words they might say, "Run away, Pixie!" it generally happened that someone moved to the side of her chair to make an extra place, or that an arm stretched out to encircle the tiny waist. Even sixth-form girls like to be amused occasionally as if they were ordinary mortals, and Pixie was welcomed because she made them laugh and forget their trials and troubles, in the shape of Latin and Euclid and German idioms which refused to be unravelled. Two or three of the older pupils were going in for the Cambridge Examination at Christmas, and all were looking forward to the school exams at the end of the term, so that anxiety was heavy upon them.

"My brain feels like jelly! It *won't* work. I shall be getting softening of the brain at this rate!" sighed Flora, rubbing her cheeks up and down between her bands until she looked like a fat indiarubber doll. "I keep mixing things up until I don't seem to have a clear idea left, and my mother has set her heart on my taking a good place. She will look sad if I come out bottom, and I do hate and detest people looking sad! I would far rather they scolded, and had done with it!"

"My people don't worry their heads about lessons. They sent me to school because they think it polishes a girl, and rubs off the angles, don't you know!" said Lottie, with an air. She was the richest girl in the school, who took all the extras, and put her name down for every concert and entertainment, without thinking of the expense. Her parents had a house in town to which they came regularly every spring, during which season Lottie's friends received many delightful invitations. She had unlimited pocket-money also, and was lavish in gifts to those who happened to be in her favour, a fact which a certain number of girls found it impossible to banish from their minds; and thus Lottie held a little court over which she reigned as queen, while the more earnest-minded of the pupils adored Margaret, and would hear no one compared to the sweet "school-mother." Clara was a Margaret-worshipper, so she felt in duty bound to snub Lottie on this as on every possible occasion.

"I don't see much polish about *you!*" she retorted brutally. "And it's ridiculous to come to school at all, if you don't mean to work. If it's only 'pruins and prism' you want, why didn't you go to board with a dancing-mistress, and practise how to come in and out of a room, and bow to your friends, and cut your old schoolfellows when you meet them in the road? You'd find it useful, my dear!"

The last sentence was a deliberate hit, for a former pupil had reported that, during a visit to a well-known watering-place, when she herself was returning unkempt and sandy from a cockling expedition, she had encountered Lottie walking on the parade with a number of fashionable visitors, and that, after one hasty glance in her direction, Miss Lottie had become so wonderfully interested in what was going on at the other side of the road that she altogether forgot to return her bow. Needless to say, Lottie had been reminded more than once of this incident, so that even Pixie, the newest comer, was familiar with its incidents, though she could not bring herself to believe in such deliberate snobbery. To-day, as Lottie flushed, and Margaret looked a pained reproach, it was Pixie who rushed to the rescue, wriggling about in her seat, and clasping and unclasping her hands in the earnestness of her defence.

"Clara Montagu, you've no business accusing Lottie! You weren't there, so you can't tell! Perhaps the sun was in her eyes. You can't see a man from a woman when it's shining full in your face, though they may see you clear enough, and believe you're shamming. Or perhaps the dust was blowing. I've been blind meself with dust before now, and come into the house looking as though I'd been crying for weeks. Why should she pretend not to know a friend—least of all when she'd been cockling? 'Deed, I'd have been more affectionate than ever, in the hope she'd say, 'Help yourself, me dear! Lend me your handkerchief, and I'll give ye a nice little bundle to take home for your tea!'"

The Margaret-girls gave a simultaneous shriek of laughter at the idea of Miss Lottie carrying a handkerchief full of cockles, and even the Lottie-girls smiled approvingly at the little speaker, for was she not advocating the position of their chief? Flora nodded encouragingly across the hearth and cried, "Good for you, Pixie! Never listen to second-hand stories against your friends!" And Kate added meaningly, "Go on believing in human nature as long as you can, my dear. You're young yet. When you are as old as I am it will be time to open your eyes. But to go back to the last subject but one, don't you give way to nerves, girls, and begin worrying about the exams already. I've noticed that just about the middle of the term there always comes a 'discouragement stage' to anyone who is anxious to do well. The first energy with which one begins work has worn off, and as it is too soon for the final spurt, there comes a dull, flat time, when one worries and frets and gets down in the lowest depths of dumps. I spoke about it at home, and my father says every worker feels the same—artists when they are painting pictures, and authors when they are writing books. They have an idea, and set to work, all delight and excitement, believing that they are going to do the best thing they have ever done. For a little time all goes well, and then they begin to grow discouraged and worried, and think they might as well give it up at once, for it is going to be a dismal failure. They know *something* is wrong, but they can't see what it is, and they mope about, and don't know what to try next. Father told me a story about Millais, the man who painted 'Bubbles,' you know, and heaps of other beautiful things. He was so miserable about a picture once that he grew quite ill worrying about it. His wife tried to persuade him to leave it alone for a few days, and then take a rest; but no, he would not hear of it, so one fine day, when he was out, she just took the law into her own hands and had it carried down and hidden in the cellar. When he came home he went straight to the studio, and—my dears! I am glad I didn't happen to be in the house, that's all. I know what my father is like when he can't find a clothes-brush, or someone has moved the matches out of the dressing-room. Millais raged about like a wild animal, but his wife was quite firm and determined, and wouldn't tell him where it was for several days. He was obliged to go out and interest himself in other ways, and when he was quite well again she had the picture brought up, and he simply looked at it and laughed. He knew at once what was wrong, and how to put it right."

"I say," cried Flora eagerly, "do tell that story to Miss Phipps! She might give us a week's holiday and send us to see the sights of London! Do, Kate! Get it up in French and tell it to-night at tea. You don't know how much good it might do!"

"It's a very good story, but I fail to see where the moral comes in. It hardly applies to us, I think," said Clara, in her superior manner, and Kate breathlessly vindicated her position.

"Yes, it does—of course it does. It shows that this anxious stage is a natural thing which all workers have to live through, and even if we can't leave off lessons altogether, we can help ourselves by not giving way to nerves, but going steadily on, knowing that we shall feel all right again in a few days. Besides, there's the Exeat coming,—that will make a nice break."

"I never worry about lessons, do I?" cried Pixie, pluming herself complacently. The part of Kate's lecture which had dealt with over-anxiety about work had appealed with special force to one listener at least, and Pixie was delighted to find that she was free from failing in one direction at least. "I never did. Miss Minnitt—that's the one who used to teach us—she said I never paid any attention at all. There was one day she was questioning me about grammar. 'Pixie O'Shaughnessy,' she says, 'you've been over this one page until it's worn transparent. For pity's sake,' she says, 'be done with it, and get on to something fresh. Let me see if you can remember to-day what I taught you yesterday afternoon. How many kinds of verbs are there?' 'There are two,' I said, and with that she was all smiles and noddings. 'So there are, now. You're quite right. And what will be their names?' 'Verb and adverb,' says I, quite haughty; and the howl that went out of her you might have heard from Cork to Galway! That was all the grammar she'd managed to teach *me!*"

"You don't know very much more now, do you, chicken?" said Margaret, bending her head so that her cheek rested upon the rough, dark head. "Just bring your books to me any time you get puzzled, and I'll try to make it clear. Talking of the term-holiday, girls, it is time we began to make our plans. How many of you are going out? Lottie, are you? Clara? Kate? Pixie? We had better find out first how many will be here."

Clara had had hopes that the maiden lady with the appetite would rise to the occasion, but, alas! she had betaken herself to stay with a relative, Pixie was sure that Jack could not spare time to have her for a whole day, and besides, she was going to have tea with him the Saturday before. All the girls seemed fated to spend the holiday at school save only the two sisters, Mabel and Violet, who were to be entertained by a kind aunt, and to choose their own entertainment for the afternoon, and Lottie, who was fortunate as usual.

"I am doubly engaged for the evening!" she announced with a flourish. "I wrote home to my people about the holiday, and mother asked some friends to have me for part of the day. They live in a regular mansion—as big as two or three houses like this rolled into one, and they know all sorts of grand people! I am going to dinner, and it's most exciting, for I don't know whom I may meet!"

"The Prince and Princess of Wales are at Sandringham! What a pity!" sighed Kate, the sarcastic. "It's so awfully trying to come down to Lords and Ladies, don't you know! You will hardly trouble to put on your best dress, I should think. The pea-green satin with the pink flounces will be good enough for them!"

The Margaret-girls laughed hysterically at this exhibition of wit, but Lottie's followers shot indignant glances across the room, and Pixie asked innocently—"Have you got a pea-green satin, Lottie? And pink flounces to it? You *will* be fine! I have a little pink fan out of a cracker last year, when there was company at the Chase. I'll lend it to you if you like, and then you'll be all complete!"

"Thank you, Pixie O'Shaughnessy; you are a kind little girl. I shan't want it this time, but I'll be sure to remind you when I do," replied Lottie, with unusual warmth of manner, for the child's sincerity had touched a soft spot in her vain heart, and she had an increasing desire to include her in the number of her admirers. Later on, when they were left alone together at the end of the schoolroom, she put her arm round the tiny waist, and said caressingly—

"Talking of party dresses, what are you going to wear yourself on Tuesday evening? You have to put on your best things, you know, just as if you were going out?"

"*Will* I?" Pixie looked surprised, but absolutely unperturbed. "But I haven't a rag to my back but the black you see every night! Bridgie said, 'It's not likely you'll be visiting at Court until ye're education's finished, so this old grenadine will see you through until the ship comes home from its next voyage. It's gone a long way this time,' says she, 'and between you and me, I expect the storms will swamp it, but I've taken the best pieces out of my old dress and Esmeralda's, and, barring the darn on the back seam, I defy ye to tell it from new!' So that's all I've got, as I told you before, and, party or no party, it will have to do."

Lottie looked at her in horrified sympathy, but not a sigh of regret clouded the beaming face; the head was tilting to and fro in its usual complacent fashion, the shabby little flounce of a skirt was whisking to and fro. Such a depth of poverty seemed incomprehensible to the child of wealthy parents, and she was moved to an unusual desire to help. Never before had she been known to lend one of her possessions to another girl, but now she said quite eagerly—

"I have a lace collar, Pixie—a very pretty collar—I'll lend it to you, and a white ribbon for your hair! It would lighten your dress wonderfully; and there is a brooch too, and a little gold bangle."

She paused, looking inquiringly to see the result of her offer, for one could never tell how it would be received. Some girls might be pleased, others might consider it almost an insult, and she would be sorry to offend the funny little thing. But Pixie was not offended. She had too much of the O'Shaughnessy blood in her veins to object to have things made easy for her at the expense of another, and she felt no embarrassment in taking the good things that came in her way.

"Oh, ye darlin'!" she cried rapturously. "Will ye lend them to me, really? Think of me now with a bracelet on me arm, and a brooch at me neck! They wouldn't be knowing me at home. I wish to-day was Tuesday; and what shall we do with ourselves all the hours before it's time to dress up?"

Lottie referred the question to Margaret, who, as head girl, had been busy thinking out plans for the enjoyment of her friends.

"I thought of asking if we might go to see the Cinematograph at the Polytechnic," she replied. "Miss Phipps promised to take us some day, and if we could do some shopping first, and have tea afterwards, it would be a delightful way of spending the afternoon. There is one thing that we must buy while we have the chance, and that's a present for Fraulein. Her birthday is next week, and she is such a kind old dear that she deserves something nice. I want at least a shilling from everyone, and as much more as they can afford. I wonder what we had better get?"

"I know what she would love! A scent-bottle for her dressing-table like the one Mademoiselle has. We could not afford one quite so good, but we could get a very nice size for about two pounds. One day when I was in Mademoiselle's room, Fraulein came in and took up the bottle, and began admiring it, and saying how nice it was to get presents which were good to look at, as well as to use. She has not many pretty things—poor Fraulein!—and I think she would really enjoy a taste of luxury. Mademoiselle has her initials engraven on the glass, but that would be too expensive for us. We can have them on the stopper instead."

"And who gave Mademoiselle her bottle? Was it someone here?" asked Pixie curiously, whereupon Kate tossed her head with an air of exaggerated dismay.

"My dear, how can you? Don't say that to Mademoiselle, I implore you! She would have a fit. *We* are all commoners, and English commoners at that, and the lady who gave her that precious bottle was Madame la Marquise de Something or Other, the mother of her beloved pupil Isoult Andrée Adèle Marie Thérèse—the most perfect, and beautiful, and clever, and amiable *jeune fille* that was ever created!" Kate paused, hitched one shoulder to her ear, spread out her hands, and elevated her eyebrows in ridiculous mimicry of Mademoiselle's mannerisms. "Did she evare neglect her work? *Jamais*, nevare! Did she evare forget that she was a *jeune fille*, and be'ave like a vild, rough boy? *Jamais, jamais!* Was she evare like these Engleesh—rude, impairtinent, disobedient? *Mais non!* Always the same—*cette ange*, the most wise, the most amiable! And when she has finished her education and made her *débût*, to be the most beautiful and admired wherever she has gone, she has vept—*vept*, I tell you, to say *adieu* to her beloved Mademoiselle! And she has given her a chain for her neck, and Madame la Marquise that beautiful 'ansome botelle. Really, Pixie, you are behind the times if you don't know about Isoult. Just turn Mademoiselle on to her next time you are with her on the walk, and you won't have to exert yourself any more. She will sing her praises until you come in."

"I will," said Pixie sturdily. "And I'll see that bottle, too. I must see that bottle. I'll go into Mademoiselle's room next time I have a chance, and have a good look at it all to myself!"

The girls smiled, but took little note of a determination which seemed natural enough under the circumstances. A week afterwards they remembered it with very different feelings, and Pixie's own words were brought up in judgment against her.

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## Chapter Eight.

### Pixie in Trouble.

It was already dark when the crocodile passed in at the gates of Holly House on its return from the expedition to town, and Miss Phipps gave instructions that the girls were to go straight to their rooms to dress for the evening. Full dress was the rule for the evenings of term-holiday, for even if nothing particular was going on, and no extra guests expected, it gave one a gala feeling to don a light frock, and gaze down upon one's very best shoes and stockings. Before leaving for town in the morning, visits had been paid to the box-room to take the rarely-used splendours from their wrappings, and now they lay stretched out in all their glory on the narrow beds, white, blue, and pink, a very wealth of colour and luxury.

Pixie O'Shaughnessy, having no adornment to do for herself, acted as lady's-maid to her bedroom, with much satisfaction to her mistresses, and credit to herself. She brushed Kate's hair until it was so smooth and flat as to be almost invisible from a front view; she tied Ethel's sash, and the ribbon to match which confined the ends of her curls; and she fastened Flora's dress, which was a matter of difficulty and time, for though it was let out regularly each holiday-time, it invariably grew too tight before it was needed again.

"I can't help it," the poor thing protested miserably. "I don't eat half as much as Ethel, and she's as thin as a stick. It's my fate! I was born fat, and I go on growing fatter and fatter all the time. I shall be a fat woman in a show, before I am done with it. It's hard lines, for I should so love to be slim and willowy. That's what the heroines are in books, and it makes me quite ill every time I read it. Nothing exciting ever happens to fat people! The thin ones get all the fun and excitement, and marry the nice man, while the poor fatty stays at home, and waits upon her hand and foot. Then she grows into an aunt, and takes charge of the nephews and nieces when they have fever or measles, or when the parents go abroad for a holiday. Everyone imposes upon her, just because she is fat!"

"No, indeed, then, it is because she's good-natured. Look at yourself now; you are always laughing!" declared Pixie soothingly. "Hold yer breath a single moment while I get the better of this hook. Ye'll not need to curtsey too low, I'm thinking, or you'll go off like a cracker! And the elegant dress that it is, too! I remember the night Bridgie went to her first ball, the Hunt Ball it was, over at Roskillie. It was me mother's wedding-dress that she wore, and she looked like a picture in it, the darlin'! Me mother was for having it altered to be in the fashion, but me father says, 'Leave it alone; you'll spoil it if ye alter a stitch! It's better than fashionable,' he says, 'it's artistic, and fits the child like her own skin.' So away it was put in Bridgie's cupboard, and Esmeralda comes peeping at it, and, thinks she, 'What yellow lace! It would be a disgrace to us all to have the girl dancing about with that dirty stuff round her neck,' so not a word did she speak, but off with the lace and washed it herself, with a good hard rub, and plenty of blue bag. Then she ironed it, with a morsel of starch to make it stand out and show itself off, and stitched it on again as proud as could be. It was to be a surprise for Bridgie, and, me dears, it *was* a surprise! Mother and Bridgie screeching at the top of their voices, and looking as if the plague was upon us. Would ye believe it, it was just what they liked, to have

the lace that colour, and it was the bad turn Esmeralda had done them, starching it up like new! Off it all came, and mother found an old lace scarf, yellower than the first, and pinned it round Bridgie's shoulders, and she had pearls round her neck, and a star in her hair, and Lord Atrim danced the first dance with her, and told me mother she was the prettiest thing he had seen for a twelvemonth. But Esmeralda sulked all the evening, and it was very lively for me alone at home with her tantrums!"

Flora chuckled softly, and Ethel give a shrill "He! he!" from her cubicle at the other end of the room.

"I do think you must be the funniest family! You seem always to be doing the most extraordinary things. We never have such experiences at home. We used to go along quietly and steadily, and there is never any hubbub nor excitement. You seem to have a constant succession of alarms and adventures."

"We do so!" said Pixie with relish. "Scarcely the day that we're not all rushing about in distraction about something. Either it's the boys tumbling out of the barn and cutting themselves open, or father bringing home accidents from the meet, or the ferret getting loose in the drawing-room when there's visitors present, or not a pound of fresh meat in the house, and the Bishop taking it into his head to drive over ten miles to lunch! And Bridgie was for going out and killing a chicken, and engaging him in conversation while it was cooked, but mother says, 'No, the man's hungry! Bring lunch in the same as if we were alone, and leave the rest to me.' And when he had asked the blessing she says, smiling, 'It's nothing but ham and eggs I've got to offer ye, Bishop, but there's enough welcome for ten courses,' and the smile of him would have done you good to behold. Three eggs he ate, and half a pig besides, and 'It's the best lunch I've had since I said good-bye to short jackets,' he said when he was finished."

"Now, now, Pixie, not so much talking! Get on with your own dressing, you little chatterbox!" cried Kate, putting her head round the corner of the curtain and giving a tug to the end of the short black skirt. "Flora can manage now, and you have not too much time, if you are to catch Lottie before she goes out. Hurry up! Hurry up!"

Pixie retired obediently, for Kate was head girl of the dormitory, and must needs be obeyed; so one black frock came off and another went on, the stout boots were exchanged for slippers, and then—the others having already departed—she turned down the gas, and skipped along to the room where Lottie stood waiting for her, a vision of spotless white.

"That's right! I was just wondering what had become of you. Sit down here, and I'll put on the collar, and just call out if I stick a pin in you by mistake. I'm going to fasten it with this little brooch. There! Isn't it sweet? I think I will give it to you to keep. I never wear it, and you might just as well have it. Yes, I will! You shall have it for a term-holiday present, because you were a kind little girl and didn't join the other girls when they were nasty to me last week. Are you pleased with it now?"

"Oh-h, Lottie! You darlin'! Is it really me very own?" Pixie was fairly breathless with pleasure and excitement, and could only exclaim rapturously and gaze at the reflection of the new treasure, while Lottie smiled, well pleased to have given so much pleasure. Yes! she told herself she was really devoted to Pixie O'Shaughnessy! There was something so sweet and taking about the child that it made one feel nice to give her pleasure, and she pinned, and arranged, and tied ribbons with as much zest as if she were arranging her own toilette.

"There! Now you are done. I think you look very nice. The collar goes so well with that black dress."

"My worrd! Aren't I stylish! I just look beautiful!" cried Pixie, poking her ugly little face close to the glass, and twisting round and round to examine herself in all aspects. She kissed Lottie effusively, expressed a hundred thanks, and danced downstairs into the schoolroom, where the girls were standing about in twos and threes, looking so grand that it was quite difficult to recognise them. They all stared at her as the latest arrival, and Pixie, being conscious of their scrutiny, held out her arms stiffly on either side, and revolved slowly round and round on one heel. The girls laughed uproariously at first, then suddenly the laughs subsided into titters, and Pixie, stopping to see what was wrong, espied Miss Phipps and the three governesses standing just inside the doorway, watching with the rest and applauding with their hands. It was an embarrassing moment, and the performer made a quick dash behind a sofa to screen herself from publicity, but she had not been there five minutes before she was called upon to answer a question.

"Pixie, Kate tells me you were in Lottie's room before you came down. Was she nearly ready?"

"She was, Miss Phipps, quite ready! Only waiting for me. She's on a white dress, and—"

"Never mind that. I want you to run upstairs, please, and tell her that the cab is here. She must put on her wraps and come down at once."

"I will, Miss Phipps." There was a whisk of short black skirts and off she went, running lightly upstairs, and raising her voice in rich, musical cry, "Lottie! Lottie!"

"The real Irish voice! She ought to be able to sing charmingly when she is older," said Miss Phipps to Mademoiselle, and Mademoiselle nodded her head in assent.

"I 'ope so! It is a great charm for a young girl to sing well, and she is not pretty. *La pauvre petite!*"

"No; yet the father is fine-looking, and my friends tell me that the two sisters are quite beauties, and all the family wonderfully handsome with this one exception. But Pixie is better than pretty, she is charming. Would you be kind enough to go to the dining-room to see if everything is ready, Mademoiselle? It is time we began tea."

Mademoiselle departed, and came back to give the required signal, when the girls filed slowly across the hall, casting curious glances at Lottie as she came downstairs. She was wrapped up in a long white cloak, and had a fleecy shawl

thrown over her head, almost covering her face from view. She looked very dainty, and when the door opened and they beheld her step into the cab, they felt a rising of envy which could not be entirely removed, even by the sight of the luxurious tea spread out on the dining-room table.

“Lottie is a lucky creature!” sighed Clara discontentedly. “She is always going out. I wish my people lived near, instead of at the other end of England. I am glad I am North Country, though; I don’t like Southerners! I agree with Tennyson—

““True, and firm, and tender is the North;  
False, and fair, and smiling is the South.””

“It isn’t false; it’s sweet!”

“It *is* false, I tell you! False, and fair, and—”

“Sweet, and fair, and—”

“Ask Miss Phipps, then, if you won’t believe me. Oh, I say, look at the icing on the cake! We didn’t have icing last time. Doesn’t the table look nice? I do think it is sweet of Miss Phipps to take so much trouble. Sit by me, and we will get hold of Pixie, and make her tell us stories. It makes me laugh just to hear that child talk. Her brogue doesn’t get a bit better.”

“I hope it never may. Pixie, here! Sit by us. We’ve kept a place!”

But Pixie shook her head, for she had been engaged to Flora ever since breakfast, and was already seating herself at the other end of the table. She did not speak much, however, during the meal, for experience had taught what it had been difficult to express in words—that it was not respectful to her teachers to chatter in their presence, as she would do with her companions. She applied herself instead to the good things that had been provided, and ate away steadily until she had sampled the contents of every plate upon the table, and could superintend the choice of her companions with the wisdom of experience.

Miss Phipps had drawn out a programme of games for the evening’s amusement, and later on the older pupils took it in turns to play waltzes and polkas, while the others danced. The teachers joined in with the rest, and it was a proud girl who had Miss Phipps for a partner, while Mademoiselle was so light and agile that it was like dancing with a feather, and Fraulein felt like a heavy log lying against one’s arm. Then everyone sat down and puffed and panted, while Jeanie, the Scotch girl, danced a Highland Fling, and when Pixie called out an appropriate “Hoch! Hoch!” the teachers laughed as heartily as the girls; for be it well understood there are things which are allowed on term-holiday which the rashest spirit dare not attempt on working days! Then two pretty sisters went through the stately figures of a minuet, and Margaret sang a song in her sweet voice, pronouncing the words so distinctly that you really knew what she was singing about, which nowadays is a very rare and wonderful accomplishment. Altogether it was a most festive evening, and Flora was in the act of remarking complacently, “We really are a most accomplished school!” when suddenly the scene changed, and an expression of horrified anxiety appeared on every face, for Mademoiselle came rushing into the room, which she had left but a few minutes before, and the tears stood in her eyes, and her face was scarlet with mingled grief and anger. She held in one hand the gold stopper of her precious scent-bottle, and in the other a number of pieces of broken glass, at sight of which a groan of dismay sounded on every hand.

“*Voilà! Regardez* See what I ’ave found! I go to my room, and the air is full of scent, and I turn up the gas, and there it is—on the dressing-table before my eyes—in pieces! My bottle—that I have kept all these years—that was given to me by my friend—my dear, good friend!”

Her voice broke off in a sob, and Miss Phipps came forward to examine the pieces with an expression of real distress.

“But, Mademoiselle, how has it happened? You found it on the table, you say,—not on the floor. If it had been on the floor, you might perhaps have swept it off in leaving the room, and not heard the sound against the mat. But on the table! How could it be broken on the table?”

“Someone has been touching it and let it drop.”

“I be so careless as to break my bottle? It is impossible to think of! I never come away without a look to see that it is safe. I dust my dressing-table myself every morning, so that no one shall interfere with my things. The servants know that it is so. When I came downstairs this evening it was all right. I have not been upstairs since.”

“I think very few of us have. We have been too busy. Ellen would go in, of course, to prepare the bed. Did she—”

“Yes! It was Ellen who told me. I was in the hall, and she came out of the kitchen and said, ‘Oh, Mademoiselle, do you know? Your beautiful bottle is broken!’” Mademoiselle’s voice broke; she held out the pieces and exclaimed in broken tones, “And I ran—and I saw—this!”

“I am sorry! I am grieved! But we must get to the bottom of this mystery. Things do not fall over and break by themselves. Girls, do any of you know anything about this? If so, please speak out at once, and don’t be afraid to tell the truth. If by any chance one of you has unintentionally broken Mademoiselle’s bottle, I know you will be as deeply grieved as she can be herself; but the only thing you can do now is to explain, and beg her forgiveness. Carelessness it must have been, and you cannot hope to escape altogether without punishment, but remember deception is fifty times worse. I have no mercy on a girl who knows she is guilty, and lets her companions rest under the shadow of suspicion. Now, I ask you again, do you know anything at all of the cause of this accident?”

There was a unanimous burst of denial from all parts of the room; but different girls took the question in different

ways, as was natural to the different characters. Some looked grieved, some indignant, a few showed suspicions of tears, and Pixie looked so thoroughly scared and miserable that more than one eye rested curiously upon her.

Miss Phipps glanced around with her keen, scrutinising glance, then pressed her lips together, and said sharply—

“This becomes serious! You all deny it? Very well, I must find out the truth for myself. Call Ellen, please, Mademoiselle. I am sorry to have such a painful ending to our happy holiday, but we cannot go to bed with this cloud hanging over us. Ellen, Mademoiselle tells me that you found the scent-bottle broken when you went into her room just now to turn down the bed!”

Ellen straightened herself and fumbled miserably with the corner of her apron. She loved all the girls, and had known many of them for years; for though other maids might come and go, Ellen, like the brook, went on for ever. She had been a servant in the Phipps family, and had accompanied “her young lady” when Holly House was bought and the school first founded. Matron, nurse, general factotum, and refuge in time of trouble, it would have been as easy to suspect her of duplicity as Miss Phipps herself. She was wretched now because she feared that her “children” might be in trouble, and her “children” knew it, and loved her for her fear.

“I did, Miss Emily. It was lying just where it usually stands, with the glass piled up in a little heap.”

“It looked, then, as if someone had arranged it so? Not as if it had been, say, blown over by any chance?”

“It couldn’t have blown over, Miss Emily! It was too heavy. And it wasn’t near the window, either.”

“And the pieces, you say, were gathered together, as if someone had placed them so? Very well, I understand! Now, Ellen, have any of the other maids been upstairs to your knowledge since Mademoiselle left her room at seven o’clock?”

“They say they have not, miss, for I asked them, and I’ve been in the kitchen all the time. We were busy clearing away after tea, and getting the refreshments ready for supper, and then we came and watched the young ladies dance.”

“You would have noticed if anyone had gone upstairs?”

“I think I should, being together all the time. They have no work upstairs at this hour—”

“I know that, but I must speak to them myself later on. There is one thing more, Ellen. Your work upstairs takes you a good time. In passing to and fro, you didn’t happen to see anyone in or near Mademoiselle’s room, I suppose? Speak up, please! Remember I rely upon you to do all in your power to help me to get to the bottom of this mystery!”

The last words were added in a warning voice, for Ellen’s start of dismay and drawn, miserable brows too plainly betrayed the truth of her mistress’s surmise.

“I saw—when I went up first in the middle of the dancing, I was at the end of the passage, and I saw little Miss O’Shaughnessy coming out of a room. I couldn’t be sure, but I *thought* it was Mademoiselle’s!”

She had said it, and in an instant every eye in the room was riveted upon Pixie, and every heart sank woefully at the sight of her crimson, agitated face. It said much for the hold which she had gained on her companions’ affections that at this moment the feeling in every girl’s breast was that she would prefer to find the culprit in almost any other girl in the school than in dear, loving, kind-hearted Irish Pixie. Perhaps Miss Phipps felt the same, but it did not become her to show favouritism, and her voice was very stern and cold.

“Come here, Pixie, please! Stand before me! You have heard what Ellen says! Was it Mademoiselle’s room out of which you were coming?”

“It—was, Miss Phipps!” said Pixie, with a gulp; and a groan of dismay sounded through the room, at which Miss Phipps’s eyes sent out a flashing glance.

“Silence, please! Leave this to me! Was it you who let the bottle fall and broke it, then, though you would not acknowledge it when I asked just now?”

Pixie’s lips moved, but she seemed so paralysed with fear that she had to repeat her words twice over before they could be heard.

“No, I—I didn’t break it, Miss Phipps! I didn’t break it!”

“Do you mean to say you know nothing about it? Did you not notice it when you were in the room? May I ask what you were doing in that room at all? You had no business in there.”

“I—I—please, Miss Phipps, the gas was down; I didn’t see anything!”

“I asked you, Pixie, what you were doing in that room?”

To the dismay of her companions, Pixie hung her head and refused to answer, and, when the question was repeated, had no reason to offer but a stammering, “It was nothing! I was doing nothing!”

“That is nonsense, Pixie; you would not go upstairs and into a strange room, to-night of all nights, without a very definite reason. I insist upon your telling me what you were doing. If it is nothing of which you are ashamed, you need surely not hesitate to speak.”

"I wasn't doing anything! I never touched it!" said Pixie once more, and an expression came over her face which was well known to the inhabitants of Bally William, though so far it was unfamiliar to her companions—a dumb, obstinate look which promised little satisfaction to the questioner.

"If you refuse to answer me, Pixie, it is your own fault if I suspect you. You have been with us only a short time, but I have always believed you to be truthful and straightforward. I should be sorry to change my opinion, but you will have yourself to blame!" She paused and looked down at the little black figure, and her face softened regretfully. "You need not look so terrified, child. Mademoiselle is naturally very grieved and distressed, but you know her well enough to be sure that she would forgive you if you have unintentionally broken her pretty bottle. She would be sorry to drive you into telling a falsehood—wouldn't you, Mademoiselle?"

"I shall say nothing to her. My bottle is gone, and it can do no good now. But she had no right to touch my things. My room is my own, and she had no business there at all. I thought you were a good girl, Pixie, and remembered what I had said to you. I did not think you would grieve me like this. I have not so many treasures!"

Mademoiselle's tears trickled down afresh, and the girls began to look askance at Pixie, and to feel the first incredulity give place to a horrible doubt. Why wouldn't she speak? Why did she look so guilty? Why need she have been so alarmed at the first mention of the accident if she had no part in bringing it about? Margaret held out her hand with an involuntary gesture of appeal, and Pixie, seeing it, shut her lips more tightly than ever.

"You may go to your room, Pixie," said Miss Phipps coldly. "I am very much disappointed in you!"

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## Chapter Nine.

### Dark Days.

The three girls who shared Pixie's room were not forbidden to speak to her when they went upstairs to bed, and their first impulse was to pull aside the curtains of her cubicle, where she was discovered lying on the top of the bed, still fully dressed, with features swollen and disfigured with crying. She was shivering, too, and the hand which Kate touched was so icy cold that she exclaimed in horrified reproach—

"Pixie, you are freezing! What do you mean by not getting into bed? You will catch a chill, and then goodness knows what may happen! You may go into consumption and die."

Pixie gave a dismal little sniff, and her teeth chattered together.

"That's what I thought. A girl at Bally William died of a chill, and consumption's in our family. Me mother's cousin suffered from it every winter. I want to die!"

"Here, sit up! I am going to unhook you. Dear me, what a mess you have made of your fine collar! I don't know what Lottie will say when she sees it. Lucky girl to be out to-night and escape all this fuss! She always gets the best of things. I never wish to spend such an evening again, I know that!"

"Pixie, why wouldn't you tell? Why wouldn't you answer Miss Phipps?" cried Flora, unable to contain herself a moment longer; and Pixie drew herself up, and tried to look dignified, a difficult achievement when one is being forcibly undressed, and can hardly see out of red, swollen eyelids.

"I told her I had not broken the bottle. I gave her a straight answer, and that ought to be enough for any lady!"

"Don't talk such rubbish! This house is not yours, and if you go wandering about into strange rooms, it is only right that you should be made to explain. And it looks so bad when you refuse to answer. You don't realise how bad it looks. After you left the room, Miss Phipps asked if we had heard you say anything which would explain your going into that room, and we all remembered—we didn't want to tell, but we were obliged—we remembered that you said you intended to have a good look at the scent-bottle."

"So I did, and I don't mind who you tell. I looked at it the very next day, but I never lifted it once. I was too afraid I'd be hurting it, and it was all right long after that—Mademoiselle said so herself!"

The three girls looked at each other quickly, and as quickly averted their eyes. Ethel gave a toss to her curls, and walked off to her cubicle. Kate went on unhooking with relentless haste, and Flora sat down heavily on the edge of the bed, and melted into tears.

"I wish scent-bottles had never been invented! I wish that old marquise had had more sense than to spend her money on a thing that would break if you looked at it! I know how easy it would be. I've broken lots of things myself. Mother always said to us when we were children, 'Don't be afraid to tell me if you've had an accident. I will never scold you if you tell the truth, but if I find out that you have hidden anything from me I shall be extremely angry.' Lots of girls tell stories just because they are frightened, especially little ones, and when they are strange, too, and don't know people well. But we all love you, Pixie, really and truly we do! We won't turn against you. Oh, do tell! Do tell! Tell Kate and me now before we go to bed, and we will help you to-morrow."

"Will Miss Phipps talk to me again to-morrow? Will she be cross again? Will Mademoiselle be cross?" cried Pixie fearfully. "Oh, what will I do? What will I do? No one was ever cross with me at home. I'll run away in the night and swim over to Ireland. They'd welcome me there if I'd smashed all the scent-bottles in the world. I never meant to do any harm. I didn't know it was wrong to go into Mademoiselle's room. No one ever said I mustn't. Molly, our maid, broke something every day of her life at Bally William, and no one disturbed themselves about it. What's a scent-bottle? Suppose I *had* broken it, why should they make such a storm, I should like to know?"



Her sentences were broken by sobs and tears, and her companions had learnt by now that Pixie's outbursts of grief were not to be trifled with, for while other girls shed tears in a quiet and ladylike manner, Pixie grew hysterical on the slightest pretext, and sobbed, and wailed, and shivered, and shook, and drowned herself in tears until she was in a condition of real physical collapse. To-night Kate signalled imperiously to Flora to depart to her own cubicle, and herself bundled the shaking, quivering little creature into bed, where she left her with a "good-night" sufficiently sympathetic, but—oh, agonies to a sensitive heart!—without attempting the kiss which had become a nightly institution!

Next morning Pixie's face was still swollen and puffy, but her elastic spirits had sufficiently recovered to enable her to make repeated attempts to converse with her taciturn companions, and to run in and out of their cubicles to play lady's-maid as usual, in such useful, unostentatious ways as carrying water, folding nightgowns, and tying hair ribbons. This morning she was even more assiduous than usual in her attentions, for there was an edge of coldness and reserve in the manner even of Flora herself which cut deeply into the sensitive heart. Then when she had fully dressed, she gathered together Lottie's fineries and betook herself to the room which that luxurious young lady occupied in solitary splendour.

Early as she had been in leaving her cubicle, breakfast had already begun when Pixie made her appearance downstairs, and the furtive manner in which she entered the room was not calculated to dispel the suspicions with which she was regarded. Her "good-morning" to the teachers was a mere mumble, and oh, how formidable they looked! Miss Phipps with tight lips and a back like a poker; Mademoiselle, a vision of misery, and Fraulein and Miss Bruce staring at the tablecloth as if afraid to raise their eyes. As for the girls, they munched away in silence, no one daring to make a remark, and it was significant of the solemnity of the occasion that not a single girl helped herself to marmalade or jam. By the unwritten laws of the school it would have been considered unfeeling to indulge in such luxuries while the reputation of a companion was at stake. It was a ghastly occasion, and Pixie seemed literally to shrink in stature as she cowered in her chair, glancing to right and left with quick, terrified glances. The hopefulness of the earlier morning had departed, and among all the dejected faces round the table hers was conspicuously the worst.

There seemed a special meaning in the Bible reading that morning, and when Miss Phipps laid aside the book she added a few words of her own before kneeling in prayer. The sternness had left her face, but it was very grave and sad.

"Before we kneel down together this morning, girls, there are some thoughts which I would like to impress upon you all. We are in trouble, and it behoves each one of us to ask in all earnestness that the cloud may be lifted, and that courage and truthfulness may be given where it is most needed. An accident, however regrettable, is not a serious offence, but in this instance it has been turned into one by the refusal of the culprit to acknowledge her offence. I have made every inquiry, and it seems morally certain that one of you must know how it happened, and be able to give a satisfactory explanation; and until she does so, the shadow of her deceit must fall on all. I ask those of you who know that they are blameless to pray for her who is guilty, that she may acknowledge her fault, and for yourselves that you be preserved from temptation; and I ask the guilty one to remember that God reads all hearts, and although she may deceive her companions, she can hide nothing from His eyes. And now we will kneel and pray, and let the words which you say be no vain repetition, but the earnest cry of your hearts that God will help us!"

Many of the girls had tears in their eyes as they rose from their knees, and no one was surprised when, as they filed slowly towards the door, Miss Phipps spoke again, to request Pixie O'Shaughnessy to follow her to her private sanctum. Flora thrust her hand through Lottie's arm as they went upstairs and heaved a sigh of funereal proportions.

"Poor little Pixie! Don't you pity her? Oh, Lottie, you are lucky to have been out last night and escape all this bother! I wish I had had an invitation too, and then, even if Pixie doesn't confess, no one could possibly think that I had done it. Poor little thing! She is so scared that she hardly knows what she is doing. Did you notice her face at breakfast? Did you hear about the accident when you came in last night, or who told you first?"

"I only saw the teachers last night, but Mademoiselle was crying, and I knew something was wrong. Then Pixie came to my room this morning to bring me back my collar, and she told me. It seems that she is suspected because she won't tell why she was in Mademoiselle's room. It's very stupid of her! There can't be any great mystery about it, one would think, though she wouldn't tell even me; but if she says she didn't break the bottle, I think she ought to be believed. She has always been truthful, so far as we know."

"Yes, but then we haven't known her long, and she has never been in a corner before. It is easy to tell the truth when all is going smoothly, but it's rather dreadful when you know quite well you are going to be punished; and if you let the first moment pass it's fifty times worse, because then you have been deceitful as well. What I'm afraid of is that she was too frightened to own up last night—you know what a scarey little thing she is—and that now she is determined to be obstinate and brave it out!"

Lottie hitched her shoulder with an impatient movement which drew her arm free from her companion.

"Well, I'm fond of Pixie O'Shaughnessy, and I am going to stick to her, whatever happens! It's mean of Mademoiselle to make such a fuss about an accident which nobody could help. I'll buy her another scent-bottle myself, if that will satisfy her. I have lots of money, and can get as much more as I want. It's absurd making thirty people miserable for the sake of a few pounds. I'll ask Miss Phipps if I may go into town and buy one this very day."

"She wouldn't let you spend so much without your mother's consent, and it's my belief Mademoiselle wouldn't take it if she did. It was the association she liked, and you could not give her that. I'm fond of Pixie too, but I shan't like her a bit if she gets us all into trouble, and that's what it will mean if she is obstinate. We shall have all our treats and holidays knocked off until the truth comes out. It is bound to be discovered sooner or later, don't you think?"

"No, I don't! Lots of things are never discovered, and the holidays will be here in a month, thank goodness! It will have to drop after that, for it wouldn't be fair to drag the troubles of one term into the next. I don't know what Margaret is going to do, but I shall be kind to Pixie and try to help her!"

The girls had reached the schoolroom by this time and joined the group by the fire, so that Margaret herself was able to reply.

"I shall certainly help her if I can," she said gently; but her followers noticed that she avoided giving any opinion as to guilt or innocence, and the reticence depressed them still further, for it was unlike Margaret to refrain from speaking a good word if it was possible to do so.

She was soon to have an opportunity of trying to help, however, for half an hour later Miss Phipps called her out of class, and said sadly—

"I can make nothing of Pixie, Margaret. Will you try what you can do? She seems afraid of me, though I have tried to be as forbearing as possible, and perhaps she may speak more freely to a girl like herself. So long as she refuses to say what she was doing in Mademoiselle's room we cannot help believing her to be guilty. I am dreadfully upset about it all, and should be so thankful to get at the truth. I have heard of this kind of thing going on in other schools, but this is my first experience, and I earnestly hope it will be the last. She is in my snuggery. Go to her there, and see what your influence will do!"

Margaret went, and, at the first opening of the door, Pixie rushed into her arms with a cry of joyous welcome.

"Oh, Margaret, I hoped you would come! I wanted you to come. I'm so dreadfully miserable."

"So are we all, Pixie, but you can end the misery if you will only tell us truthfully all you know about this accident. You do know something, I feel certain, or why should you be so afraid to speak? It's no use being afraid, dear. We all have to do difficult things sometimes, whether we like them or not, and it will only get worse as time goes on. The truth is bound to come out, and then how ashamed you will feel, if you have not taken the opportunity while it was yours!"

"Do you think it will be found out, really?" Pixie shivered, and twisted her fingers together in nervous fashion. "But how can it if I don't tell, and if—if there is no one else?"

"I don't know, Pixie, but I believe it will, sooner or later. It may be later, for God is very patient, and waits to give us our chance before He takes things into His own hands. In the days when Jesus was on earth He used to work miracles, but He doesn't do that any longer. I used to be sorry for that, but I am not now, for it is so wonderful that He lets us help Him by putting it into our hearts to do His will. He won't show us in any miraculous way who is deceiving us now, but if she will listen He will speak to her, and make it seem impossible to go on doing wrong."

"That's what Bridgie said!" agreed Pixie eagerly. "It was the night before I came to school, and she was speaking to me for my good. 'You'll be far away from home,' she said, 'but you never need be far from Him, and He is your best friend. When you are happy and everything is bright, thank Him for it, for it's a shame to be always asking, asking, and never saying a "Thank you" for what you receive. And when you are undecided between two ways, take the one that's hardest, for that was what He meant by bearing the cross; and when you are in trouble, keep still,' she says, 'keep still, and you'll hear His voice in your heart.' And I was thinking of that last night, and I could hear Bridgie saying it all over again, as plain as if she were by my side!"

"And the other voice, Pixie—did you hear that too?"

"I tried to, but,"—the small troubled face was pitiful to behold—"it seemed always to say the things I wanted, and I was afraid I was imagining. Then I remembered about doing the hardest thing, and every time I awoke I thought of it again, and this morning I decided that I would!"

"Pixie!" cried Margaret, in a tone of almost incredulous relief. "Oh, Pixie, you will really! I am so glad, so glad! You will come with me to Miss Phipps now, and tell all you know!"

But Pixie shook her head firmly, and her lips closed in determined lines.

"I will never tell," she said. "I'll be silent for ever!"

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## Chapter Ten.

### An Armistice.

A week passed by, and the mystery was no nearer being unravelled than on the first evening, though every possible means had been taken to discover the offender. At the beginning of the time the general feeling had been in favour of Pixie, but girls are very human creatures, and as the days passed by and they suffered for her silence, a feeling of resentment began to grow against her. Why should all the school be suspected because one girl refused to tell what she knew? What was the use of pretending to be so kind and helpful, if you would not sacrifice your pride for your friends' comfort? If Pixie were innocent, why should she be afraid to answer questions? But, really—and then the heads would draw close together, and the voices drop to a whisper—really she looked so wretched and ashamed, that one began to wonder if she could be innocent after all! A whole week, and she had not once been in mischief. Didn't that look as if something was on her mind? While as for funny stories, she was as dull as Clara herself; and it was impossible to say anything more scathing than that!

After Margaret's failure no more personal efforts had been made to induce Pixie to confess; but at the end of a week

the anticipated blow fell, for Miss Phipps addressed the assembled school and announced her intention of confiscating holidays until the end of the term.

"I am sorry to punish the innocent with the guilty," she said, "but I hope that the consciousness that she is depriving her companions of their enjoyment may have more influence with the culprit, whoever she may be, than any words of mine. I don't think it is right to deprive your teachers of their much-needed rest, so on Wednesdays and Saturdays you will have extra preparation during the hours which would otherwise have been your own. Of course no invitations can be accepted. I have written to your brother, Pixie, to say that you will not be able to go out with him on Saturday, as arranged."

Pixie's cry of dismay was drowned by the general groan, which swelled ever louder and louder as Miss Phipps left the room. The younger girls looked inclined to cry, one or two stamped on the floor with irrepressible anger, and there was a very babel of indignation.

"I told you so! What did I say? As if we hadn't enough to do without slaving six hours more! I know what it will be now—I shall get so worn out that I shall fail in my examination."

"Preparation! More prep! I call that adding insult to injury. If it had been a class, I wouldn't have minded half so much. I'm sick and tired of school. I'll ask my mother if I may leave the day I am seventeen."

"And I was going out on Wednesday! I had an invitation this morning, and was going to tell Miss Phipps after tea. I may as well write and say I can't go, and it would have been so nice too. I should have had such fun!"

"Jack was going to take me to the s-s-circus! I've never seen a clown in all me days! I was c-counting the hours!" stammered Pixie tearfully; and at the sound of her voice, as at a signal, all the girls stopped talking and fixed their eyes upon her. She looked pitiful enough with the tears streaming down her cheeks, but there was not much sympathy in the watching faces, and for the first time the growing resentment forced itself into words.

"You have only yourself to blame," Kate said coldly. "If you had spoken up and told all you knew about that horrible night, it would have been forgotten by this time. I believe Mademoiselle is sorry already that she made such a fuss, but Miss Phipps won't rest until she has found out what she wants. If you *will* be obstinate, you must expect to be punished, but it's hard lines on the rest of us who have done nothing wrong."

"And we were all so kind to you, Pixie O'Shaughnessy, and made a regular pet of you—you know we did! We helped you like angels when you couldn't do your lessons. I've been in this school five years, and I've never seen a new girl made such a fuss of before. I call you an ungrateful serpent to turn and rend us like this."

"Clowns indeed! I should think you have something else to think of than clowns! Do you realise that thirty girls are losing their fun for three whole weeks because you won't speak? If you had any nice feeling, you would be too miserable for clowns."

"Oh, Pixie, I've such a smashing headache! You might tell! I was so looking forward to a rest this afternoon. It makes the week so dreadfully, dreadfully long when there are no holidays!"

Flora's voice was full of tears, and Pixie's miserable glance, roving from one speaker to another, grew suddenly eager as it rested upon her, for she was skilled in the treatment of headaches, and was never more happy than when officiating as nurse.

"I'll lend ye my smelling-bottle. It's awful strong! Ye said yourself the last time you smelt it ye forgot all about the pain. Will I run up this minute and bring it for you?"

"No, thank you!" Flora's tone was almost as cold as Kate's. "I don't want your loans. Smelling-bottles are no good to me if I have to rack my brains all the afternoon. You needn't pretend to be sorry, for if you were you could soon cure me. Come along, girls, let's go upstairs! It is no use talking to her any longer."

The girls linked arms and filed to the door, only Lottie lingering behind to thrust her hand encouragingly through Pixie's arm. Kate, standing near, caught the whispered words of consolation. "You shall go to the circus in the holidays. I'll ask you to stay with me, and we will go somewhere nice every afternoon!"—and told herself reproachfully that Lottie was more forgiving than herself.

"I don't feel in the least inclined to offer her treats, though I'm sorry for her all the same. She does look such a woe-begone little wretch! It's my belief she thought it was a good opportunity to examine the scent-bottle when we were all upstairs, and that she put it down too roughly or let it slip from her hands and hadn't the nerve to own up at once. I don't wonder she is afraid to confess now; I should be myself. You don't know what might happen—you might even be expelled! I don't believe Miss Phipps would keep a girl who was so mean as to make all the school suffer rather than face a scolding. There's one thing certain, I'm not going to have Pixie O'Shaughnessy fagging for me until this business is cleared up! I have tied my own hair bows before and can do them again, and I shall tell Flora and Ethel not to allow her in their cubicles either. If she is untruthful, how are we to know that she might not be dishonest next!"

There is no truer proverb than that which says, "Give a dog a bad name and hang him!" for it is certain that when once we begin to harbour suspicion, a dozen little actions and coincidences arise to strengthen us in our convictions.

It is also true that no judges are so unflinching as very young people, who set a hard line between right and wrong, and are unwilling to acknowledge the existence of extenuating circumstances. During the next few weeks Pixie was sent to Coventry by her companions, to her own unutterable grief and confusion. No one offered to help her with difficult lessons; no one invited her to be a companion in the daily crocodile; no one made room for her when she

entered a room; on the contrary, she was avoided as if her very presence were infectious, and when she spoke a silence fell over the room, and several moments elapsed before a cold, stern voice would vouchsafe a monosyllabic answer. She was at the bottom of her classes too, being unable to learn in this atmosphere of displeasure, and the governess's strictures had in them a touch of unusual severity.

Curiously enough, it was Mademoiselle herself who showed most sympathy with Pixie during those dark days. Like most people of impulsive temperament, she had quick reactions of feeling, and after having stormed and bewailed for a couple of days, she began to regret the gloom into which she had plunged the school. She had been fond of the droll little Irish girl, and, though convinced of her guilt, feared lest her own unbridled anger had frightened a sensitive child into a denial difficult to retract.

It happened one day that governess and pupil were alike suffering from cold and unable to go out for the usual walk, and the impressionable French heart went out in a wave of pity, as its owner entered the deserted schoolroom and found Pixie seated alone by the fire, her hands folded listlessly on her lap, a very Cinderella of misery and dejection. When the door opened she looked up with that shrinking expression of dread which is so pitiful to see on a young face, for to be left *tête-à-tête* with Mademoiselle seemed under the circumstances the most terrible thing that could happen. Her head drooped forward over her chest, and she stared fixedly at the floor while Mademoiselle seated herself on a chair close by and stared at her with curious eyes.

Surely the ugly little face was smaller, the figure more absurdly minute than of yore! The black dress with its folds of rusty crape added to the pathos of the picture, and awoke remembrances of the dead mother who would never comfort her baby again, nor point out the right way with wise, tender words. Mademoiselle's thoughts went back to her own past, when, if the truth must be told, she had been an exceedingly naughty child; and she realised that it was not coldness and severity which had wrought the most good, but the tender patience and affection of the kindest of parents. What if they had been trying the wrong course with Pixie O'Shaughnessy? What if suspicion and avoidance were but hardening the child's heart and hastening her path downwards? Mademoiselle cleared her throat and said in the softest tone which she could command—

"*Eh bien*, Pixie! What are you doing sitting here all by yourself?"

"I'm thinking, Mademoiselle."

"And what are you thinking about then? Tell me your thoughts for a penny, as you girls say to each other!"

"I'm thinking of Foxe's martyrs!" was Pixie's somewhat startling reply. Her face had lightened with immeasurable relief at the sound of the friendly voice, and the talkative tongue once loosened could not resist the temptation to enlarge on the reply. "We have the book at home. Did ye ever see it, Mademoiselle? It's got lovely pictures! There's one man lying down and they are pinching him with hot tongs, and another being stoned, and another being boiled in oil. They were so brave that they never screamed out, but only sang hymns, and prayed beautiful prayers. I used to long to be a martyr too, but I don't any more now, for I know I couldn't bear it, but it cheers me up to think about them. Bridgie says there's nothing so bad but it might be worse, and I was thinking that they were worse off than me. I'd rather even that the girls wouldn't speak to me than boiling oil—wouldn't you, Mademoiselle?"

"I would indeed!" replied Mademoiselle fervently. "But what a subject to think about on a dull grey day! No wonder you look miserable! You need not think about boiling oil just now at all events, for I have to stay in too, and I have come to sit here and talk to you. Will that make you feel a little bit less miserable?"

"Now that depends upon what ye talk about, Mademoiselle," said Pixie, with that air of quaint candour which her companions had been wont to find so amusing; and Mademoiselle first smiled, and then looked grave enough.

"I am not going to question you about your trouble, if you mean that, Pixie. It is Miss Phipps's affair now, not mine. I wish you had been more outspoken, but I am not going to scold you again. You are being punished already, and I feel sorry to see you so grave and to hear no more laughs and jokes. Shall we 'ave what they call an armistice, and talk together as we used to do when we were very good friends?"

She held out her hand as she spoke, and Pixie's thin fingers grasped hers with a force that was almost painful. She looked overcome with gratitude, nevertheless, now that it had been agreed to talk, both felt a decided difficulty in deciding what to talk about, for even a temporary coldness between friends heaps up many barriers, and in this particular case it was difficult to feel once more at ease and unconstrained. It was Pixie who spoke first, and her voice was full of shy eagerness.

"How's your father, Mademoiselle? Is he having his health any better than it was?"

"A little—yes, a little better. He is in the South with my brother until the cold winds are over in Paris. He is like me—he hates to be cold, so he is very happy down there in the sunshine. I told you about him then, did I? I had forgotten that."

"Yes, you told me that day when I—when I lassoed you on the stairs, and I wrote the verb not to be rude to you any more. You said I would remember that, and I do; but perhaps you think I have done something worse than being rude, Mademoiselle! I want to know—please tell me!—can your bottle be stuck together so that you can use it again?"

Mademoiselle's face clouded over. She had recovered from her first violent anger about the accident, but it was still too sore a subject to be lightly touched.

"No," she said shortly, "it cannot mend. I tried. I thought I might use it still as an ornament, but the pieces will not *fit*. There is perhaps something missing. I have just to make up my mind that it is gone for ever. It seems as if I should

never know what happened to it.”

An expression of undoubted relief and satisfaction passed over Pixie’s face as she heard these last words, but Mademoiselle was gazing disconsolately in the fire, and it had passed before she looked up. Perhaps she had hoped that her words would draw forth some sort of confession, but, if so, she was fated to be disappointed, for when Pixie spoke again it was to broach another subject.

“Mademoiselle, I’ve a favour to ask you! I’ve been afraid to do it before, but you are so kind to-day that I’m not frightened any longer. It’s about the party at the end of the term. The girls say they always have one, and they will be broken-hearted if they miss that as well as all the holidays. It is no use my asking, because it’s me that’s in trouble, but, Mademoiselle, it was your bottle that was broken. If you asked Miss Phipps, she couldn’t find the heart in her to say no! Please, Mademoiselle, will you ask if the girls can have their party the same as ever?”

Mademoiselle looked, as she felt, completely taken aback by this unexpected request. It sounded strange indeed coming from Pixie’s lips, and it was difficult to explain to the girl that she herself would be the greatest hindrance to the granting of such a request. She looked down, fingered her dress in embarrassment, and said slowly—

“For my part I should be glad for the girls to have their party. It is hard that they should all suffer, and it *is* dull for them. I have been here three years, but it was never so dull as this. Yes, I would ask, but what would Miss Phipps say? That is a different thing! It seems odd to stop the holidays and give the party all the same, and—do you not see?—the bad girl—the girl who will not say what she has done—she would have her pleasure with the rest, and that would not be right. It is to punish her we have to punish many.”

“But if I stayed upstairs—” cried Pixie eagerly, and then stopped short, with crimson cheeks, as if startled by the sound of her own words. “I mean I am the one they are vexed with; they want to punish me most. If I stayed upstairs in my own room, or was sent to bed, why shouldn’t the others have their party? It would be an extra punishment to me to hear them dancing, wouldn’t it now?”

Mademoiselle threw up her hands in an expressive silence. In all her experience of school life never before had she met a girl who pleaded in such coaxing terms for her own humiliation, and she was at sea as to what it might mean. Either Pixie was guilty, in which case she was one of the most arrant little hypocrites that could be imagined, or she was innocent, and a marvel of sweetness and charity. Which could it be? A moment before she had felt sure that the former was the case, now she was equally convinced of the latter. In any case she was gratified by the idea that she herself should plead for the breaking-up party, and was ready to promise that she would interview Miss Phipps without delay.

“And ye’ll not say that ever I mentioned it,” urged Pixie anxiously, “for maybe that would put her off altogether. Just ask as if it was a favour to yourself, and if she asks, ‘What about Pixie?’ ‘Oh, Pixie,’ says you, ‘never trouble about her! Send her to bed! It will be good for her health. She can lie still and listen to the music, and amuse herself thinking of all she has lost.’”

The beaming smile with which this suggestion was offered was too much for Mademoiselle’s composure, and, do what she would, she could not restrain a peal of laughter.

“You are a ridiculous child, but I will do as you say, and hope for success. I like parties too, but it will not be half so nice if you are not there, *petite!* See, I was angry at first, and when I am angry I say many sharp things, but I am not angry any more. If it had happened to anyone to break my bottle by mistake, she need no more be frightened to tell me. I would not be angry now!”

“Wouldn’t you?” queried Pixie eagerly, but instantly her face fell, and she shivered as with dread. “But, oh, Miss Phipps would! She would be angrier than ever! The girls say so, and it is only a fortnight longer before the holidays, and then we shall all go home. If it is not found out before the holidays, it will be all over then, won’t it? No one will say anything about it next term.”

“I do not know, Pixie. I can’t tell what Miss Phipps will do,” returned Mademoiselle sadly. She felt no doubt at this moment that Pixie was guilty; but that only strengthened her in her decision to plead for the party, for it did indeed seem hard that twenty-nine girls should be deprived of their pleasure for the sake of one obstinate wrong-doer.

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## Chapter Eleven.

### Divided Opinions.

“Girls,” announced Miss Phipps after tea, two evenings later, “I have something to tell you which I am sure you will be delighted, and also much touched to hear. You have, I suppose, taken for granted that no breaking-up party would be held this term, as I have unfortunately had to deprive you of all holidays and excursions. For myself, I had put the matter entirely aside, as out of keeping with our present position, but you have had an advocate whom I have found it impossible to refuse. Someone has pleaded your cause so eloquently that she has gained the day, and I have now to announce that your party will be held as usual on Wednesday next, a few days before we break up. Don’t thank me, please! It is someone else who deserves your thanks. Can you guess who it is?”

The girls were jumping about in their seats, all excitement and delight. Ethel was tossing her curls, Flora beaming from ear to ear, Kate’s eyes were dancing behind her spectacles, Margaret was looking across the table at Pixie with an anxious, scrutinising glance. Who could it be—this unknown champion? There were whispering and consulting on every side, but the first suggestions fell wide of the mark.

"Mrs Vane!" said one, mentioning the name of the giver of the "Alice Prize," which was held in such importance in the school. But no, it was not Mrs Vane. "Miss Ewing!" cried another, naming a friend of Miss Phipps, who on one memorable occasion had begged a holiday for the entire school; but it was not Miss Ewing. "Nearer home, nearer home! She is in this room now!" cried Miss Phipps, laughing; and then it was impossible to look at Mademoiselle's red cheeks and remain in doubt any longer.

The gasp of surprise, of gratitude, of admiration that went round the room was the most eloquent acknowledgment of the generosity which had prompted the request, and Mademoiselle grew redder than ever, as she reflected that she would not have deserved any thanks had it not been for the suggestion of another. She looked instinctively at Pixie, and met a smile which reached from ear to ear, and was fairly beaming over with exultation. No one in the room looked so beamingly happy, but the next moment the smile gave way to a startled expression, as Miss Phipps continued slowly—

"There is one girl whom I am unfortunately obliged to except in giving my invitation, and that is Pixie O'Shaughnessy. Whether she is guilty of really breaking Mademoiselle's scent-bottle or not, it is impossible for me to say, but a suspicion has rested upon her which she has persistently refused to remove. I cannot allow a girl who defies my authority to be among us on such an occasion, and though the fact that she is in disgrace will cast a shadow over our evening, I consider that I have no choice in the matter. On Wednesday night, then, Pixie, you will have tea by yourself in the schoolroom, and go up to bed at seven o'clock."

"I will, Miss Phipps," said Pixie faintly. She had blushed until her face was crimson from the roots of her hair to the tip of her chin, and her face stood out like a vivid peony among those of her companions. Everyone looked at her, and the glances were more kindly than they had been for many a day; for it is easy to be sympathetic when we get our own way, and have shifted the burden off our own shoulders on to those of another. When the Principal left the room, attention was almost equally divided between Mademoiselle and Pixie, who were each surrounded by a group of excited talkers.

"Oh, Maddie, I do call you an angel! It was simply sweet of you to plead for us when you have been the one to suffer. I'll love you for ever for this!"

"So shall I, Maddie, and you'll see how well I'll do my verbs! I'll never worry you any more, but be so good and industrious. Dance with me, do, the first waltz, and I'll be gentleman, and not let you bump into anybody!"

"Pixie dear, I'm so sorry, but you would rather the girls had their party even if you couldn't go, wouldn't you, dear?"—this from Margaret, while Lottie tossed her head and said—

"She needn't distress herself! There is nothing to make a fuss about. Party, indeed! A fine sort of party! No one comes, and it is just like any other night, except that you dance and wear your best things!"

"And have programmes, and trifles, and jellies, and crackers, and all sorts of good things, and sit up until ten o'clock! But I'm awfully sorry you can't come, Pixie. If I get a chance I'll bring you something upstairs from the supper-table. You can't put lumps of jelly in your pocket, but if there is anything dry, I'll bring it to you when I go to bed!"

"So will I, Pixie. My party frock has a baggy front, so I can carry a lot. I could get a whole cheese-cake in when no one was looking. Or would you rather have a mince pie?"

"I think I'd rather have—both," said Pixie sadly. "I shall be so hungry, lying alone repining! I have never been to a party except once, at Bally William, and that wasn't a party either, for there was only me and two other boys, and the girls of the house, but we had crackers all the same, and I got an elegant little fan. The same I offered to you, Lottie, when you went out last time!"

"I remember, but it didn't go with my dress. That's another thing, Pixie—you haven't a dress to wear, so it's just as well you aren't asked, after all! I managed to make you presentable for a half-term evening, but that old frock of yours would never do for a breaking-up party."

Well, Lottie evidently intended to be comforting, but she had an extraordinary tactless way of going about it, Kate reflected angrily. She herself had a much happier inspiration, when she said with an elaborate affectation of relief—

"And it's an ill wind that blows nobody good! What we should have done without you to help us to dress, I really don't know! Mind you come to me first now. Ethel doesn't need you half so much, for her hair curls naturally, and mine always takes an unruly turn when it sees my best dress, and refuses to lie as I want it."

The listeners opened their eyes significantly, for no one had ever seen Kate's hair untidy, and it was impossible to imagine the lank locks exhibiting roving propensities; but Pixie smiled, and that was all that had been desired. Pixie flicked the tears away and cried eagerly—

"I'll plait it in four, like I used to do Bridgie's when she went visiting. You wouldn't believe the style there is to it. Esmeralda said no one would believe that it was really her own. It was for all the world as if she had bought a plait and stuck it on. I'll make yours look like that too, if you'll give me time!"

"Oh, I'll give you time!" laughed Kate pleasantly. Her conscience misgave her when she thought of her behaviour during the last days, and saw how ready the child was to forgive the cold contempt with which she had been treated. It was pleasant, too, to hear again of Bridgie and Esmeralda, who had been so long unmentioned, and who must really be the funniest creatures! And now that the poor little scrap was to be punished in such drastic fashion, one might venture to show pity without being accused of encouraging wickedness. After all, she had so far been convicted of no worse crime than obstinacy.

Unfortunately for Pixie, some of her companions took a different view of Miss Phipps's decision, seeing in it a proof that the Principal at least was convinced of her guilt, and so felt themselves bound to follow her example by ostracising the offender. Some of Lottie's followers were among the number, and that young lady found herself in the difficult position of being drawn two ways at once, for she had vowed to befriend Pixie, yet was loth to risk her popularity by acting in opposition to the general feeling. She took refuge in an easy neutrality, remaining silent when gibing words were passed from mouth to mouth, and avoiding every opportunity of coming into contact with Pixie herself. With so many girls about and the rush of examination work on hand, this was easy enough to accomplish, for Lottie was ambitious, and made special effort to come out in a good position on the list. Every evening she pored over books to "stew" up the subject of the next day's exam, and every morning seated herself before her desk, and became immediately immersed in the paper before her. Oh, those papers, what agony and confusion of spirit they brought to one poor scholar at least! Pixie had been informed that the secret of examination work was to carefully read over the list of questions, and then set to work at once on the one she could answer best, be it number one or six; but what was a poor girl to do when she was convinced that she could not answer one at all? No one had even imagined such a position, and yet it was the one in which she found herself over and over again during those last miserable days. She was so unused to examination work that the formal wording of the questions frequently disguised their meaning, and made her imagine ignorance when in reality she could have answered correctly enough; and oh, what misery to look around the room and see every other girl scribbling for her life, and looking as if the only difficulty was lack of time to write all she knew!

Pixie's mode of proceeding was to print an elaborate heading to her paper, and while away a quarter of an hour in adding ornamental flourishes to the double lines, and in elaborately darkening the down-strokes of her capitals. Then she would scribble on her blotting-paper, dropping intentional blots upon a clean page, and weaving them into a connected picture with no little skill and ingenuity. At this point a sharp reminder from teacher or scholar would bring her back to another melancholy perusal of the paper, and she would read and read the questions, in the melancholy hope of finding them grown more easy for the time of waiting.

Sometimes a query was put in so straightforward a form that it was possible to answer it in a single word, and then with glee Pixie would print "Question two" in ornamental characters, and write "Yes!" underneath it with a glow of exhilaration. At other times, as in the grammar paper, a question would make no calls on the memory, but would, so to speak, supply its own material, when she attacked it with more haste than discretion in her delight at finding something which she could really accomplish.

To give an example—Miss Bruce, the English teacher, quoted the sentence, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child!" and asked to have it paraphrased so as to show the two predicates which made it into a complex sentence. Pixie licked her lips over this opportunity, and squeak, squeak, squeak, went her pen along the paper, making the other girls look up and raise their eyebrows at one another in surprised comment. Writing at last, and so eagerly too! Pixie must surely have an inspiration at last; and so she had, for the big straggly writing set forth an extraordinary sentence: "How sharper it is to have an ungrateful child, than it is to have a serpent's tooth!"

"Humph!" mused Pixie, gnawing her pen, "there's a queer sound to it too. If I didn't know for sure it was right, I'd be just as certain it was wrong!" and so the paraphrase remained, to astonish the eyes of Miss Bruce, and give her a hearty laugh in the midst of the dreary work of reading examination papers that evening.

"Well, who comes out first in the exams it is impossible to say, but there is no doubt who will be last! I don't think Pixie O'Shaughnessy will get more than a dozen marks for a single paper she has written," was the remark of a certain Evelyn, one of the leaders of the anti-Pixie faction, on the day before the breaking-up party. "We used to think her clever, but it was only a bubble, which has collapsed utterly the last few weeks. A guilty conscience—that's my explanation! I call her a hardened little wretch, for she doesn't seem to mind a bit not being allowed to come down to-morrow. You might have thought that she would be perfectly miserable, but instead of that she really seems in better spirits than before."

"She does, and she likes to hear about the party, too! Just watch her when we are talking about it, and she is all eyes and ears. We saw some of the refreshments coming in to-day, and she positively beamed! I said, 'Those are for supper to-morrow!' and she said, 'Are they as nice as usual? Do you think it will be as grand as last year? Will you have every single thing just the same as if Miss Phipps hadn't been angry?' I said that if Miss Phipps did a thing at all, she would do it properly, and that I was quite sure it would be quite as 'grand,' and she chuckled with delight, just as if she were going herself. I can't make her out."

"Perhaps she thinks that Miss Phipps will relax at the last moment, but if she does, she is very much mistaken. There will be no pardon for her until she speaks the truth. As I said before, I believe she is just a hardened little wretch who doesn't care what happens to her, and that is why she doesn't show any sign of feeling."

"She has looked miserable enough until now. Why not give her the benefit of the doubt, and believe that, whether she is guilty or not, she is generous enough to be glad that the whole school is not to be punished?" asked Margaret gently. "Whatever Pixie has done, she is too warm-hearted to be called 'hardened,' and I think some of you girls make a great mistake in treating her as you do. You will never do any good by bullying, for she is so terrified at anything like unkindness that it makes it still more difficult to speak. You would have more influence if you were kinder to her."

"Oh, Margaret, you are so absurdly good-natured! It's always the same cry with you. You would forgive everybody, if you had your way!" cried Evelyn impatiently, and promptly flounced across the room, leaving Margaret and Lottie alone by the fire. They looked at each other in silence, and then Margaret summoned up courage to make an appeal which she had been meditating for some days past.

"They won't listen to me, Lottie, but they would if you asked them. It is really cruel to be always gibing and jeering as they are, and the older girls ought to set a better example. You are fond of Pixie too, and want to do the best for her."

Can't you persuade your friends to treat her better for the rest of the term?"

Lottie shrugged her shoulders impatiently, and frowned in worried, discontented fashion.

"It is only three days longer. What is the use of making a fuss? It is idiotic of Pixie not to tell what she was doing in Mademoiselle's room, and I can't go about lecturing the whole school because she chooses to be obstinate! I am going to invite her to stay with me in the holidays, and will give her a good time to make up for all this. What's the good of worrying? The girls will be too busy packing and preparing for the party to think of her any more now."

This was true enough, so true that Margaret could say no more, though she could not suppress the reflection that Lottie might have given the clue weeks before, if she had been so disposed. "But, as she says, the worst is over. Nothing much can happen in three days," she told herself consolingly; wherein she was for something very exciting indeed was fated to happen before half that time had elapsed!

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## Chapter Twelve.

### The Discovery.

The next afternoon all was bustle and confusion in Holly House, servants setting the tables in the dining-room, and clearing the large classroom, in preparation for the party, and governesses and pupils dressing themselves with as much care as though they expected to meet a hundred strangers, instead of the everyday school set, without a single addition. Dresses which had not seen the light since the half-term-holiday were brought forth once more, with such additions in the shape of sashes, flowers, and gloves as befitted the greater importance of the occasion, and in her own bedroom Pixie O'Shaughnessy was whisking to and fro, attending to the wants of three exacting mistresses, who all seemed to require her at one and the same moment.

"Hi, Pixie, come here! This place is getting knee-deep in clothes. Just put them away."

"Now then, Pixie. I'm waiting for this hair-dressing! You make it look like an artificial plait, or there'll be trouble in this camp."

"Oh-h, bother! The more hurry the less speed. Now I've broken this tape. Has anyone got a bodkin? No, of course not! There never is a bodkin when I want one. You'll have to manage with a hairpin, Pixie, and be sharp about it. I shall be late for tea at this rate!" So on, and so on, and at each summons in rushed an eager little worker, so deft, so willing, so incredibly quick in her movements, that her mistresses were overcome with admiration.

"Your hands do you more credit than your brains, young woman!" pronounced Kate judicially. "You will never be a mistress of a High School; but you are a born lady's-maid, and you can come to me for a reference when you need it."

"That's what Esmeralda says. I am going to be her maid when she marries the duke. He comes down to hunt near Bally William, but he really lives in England, in the most beautiful palace, with peacocks on the lawn. Esmeralda's going to have the drawing-room papered in yellow, to suit her complexion, and to set the fashion of having little sisters to wait upon you, like pages in old story-books," returned Pixie, with her mouth full of hairpins, and there was a rustle of excitement in the different cubicles.

"Esmeralda engaged! You never told us! To a duke. Which duke? How lovely for her! When are they going to get married?"

"Now indeed I can't tell you!" returned Pixie regretfully. She was proudly conscious of having made a sensation, and it did seem hard to be obliged to dispel it as soon as it was made! "There's nothing settled, for, to tell you the truth, he has never so much as seen her yet, but she was visiting old Biddy Gallagher when he drove past to the meet, and at lunch says she, 'He's the elegant creature, that duke! I'm thinking of marrying him myself!' and took Bridgie's advice on the trousseau that very afternoon. She says she won't be engaged until she is twenty-one, and that it's a pity to unsettle him about it yet awhile, as there's over two years to wait. He wouldn't want to wait if he saw her, for she's more beautiful than anyone you ever saw out of a picture, though it's himself I pity when the tantrums is on her. We often talk about it, and plan how we will spend his money, and if you want to put her in a good temper you've nothing to do but call her 'Your Grace!'"

"I never heard anything so silly!" cried Ethel scornfully. Kate gave a mild "He, he!" as she watched the process of hair-dressing in the mirror, and reflected pensively that spectacles seemed strangely out of keeping with evening dress. There was no doubt about it, she was astonishingly plain, and oh, how nice it must be to be beautiful like Esmeralda—so beautiful that even your own brothers and sisters admired you! It was a natural longing, for every girl wishes to be attractive to others, and feels a pang if obliged to realise that the tribute of admiration can never be hers; but Kate was too sensible to grieve long over impossibilities. "I shall have to be extra amiable to make up for it, that's all!" she told herself philosophically, as she lifted the hand-glass, and wriggled about before the glass to view the effect of the new coiffure. It was most elaborate and hairdresser-windowish in effect, and if it were not exactly becoming, that was perhaps more her own misfortune than the fault of the operator, who had bestowed such pains upon the erection. So she declared truthfully enough that she had never felt so fine in her life, and threatened to sit at the piano the whole of the evening, so that all beholders might have an opportunity of admiring her "back hair."

Her toilet was now finished, but Ethel's bows were waiting to be tied and smoothed out, and Flora had to be laced into her dress, and to be consoled when again visited with the dread of finishing her career as the fat woman in a show. Finally, the first bell for tea was heard pealing downstairs, and away ran the three girls, leaving poor Cinderella to tidy the cubicles, and almost forgetting to thank her for her services; for in truth they had been so cheerfully



rendered as to appear a favour given, rather than received.

Left to herself, Pixie stole into the corridor and flattened herself into a doorway to watch the gay figures descending the staircase. The tidying away could wait for a few moments, but it was not often that one had the opportunity of watching so festive a scene. Doors opened on every side, and out they came, one girl after another, so smart and fine that one could hardly recognise them for the blue-serged damsels of ordinary school life. Down the stairs they tripped, with rustlings of silk and crinklings of muslin, dainty white shoes, looking daintier than ever against the well-worn carpet. Such a crowd of girls, and each one looking brighter and happier than the one before. Lottie in white, Margaret in blue, with her brown hair coiled round her head in a shining chestnut coronet, one after another, until at last there was no one left, and silence reigned in the corridor, broken only by a little sniff and sigh from the shadow of a doorway. "And one little p-ig stayed at h-ome," sighed Pixie, trying hard to laugh, and assiduously licking the tears from her cheeks, as she hung school skirts in the cupboards, and folded everyday garments on bedroom chairs, in readiness for use on the following day.

"Now they are all sitting down and beginning to eat! There'll be nothing but jam and cakes and elegant bread-and-butter—so thin you might eat a plateful, and starve upon it! I wonder what they'll be sending me upstairs. I couldn't look at a bit of plain food, but plum cake would be medicine to me. Me digestion was always delicate. Bridgie said so. 'The child needs tempting!' I've heard her say, over and over again, when the milk pudding came in at the door, and my appetite went out. I must go to the schoolroom now, I suppose, for Miss Phipps said I must be in my bed by seven. Ellen has the soft heart—I wouldn't wonder if she brought me something nice to cheer me spirits!"

Buoyed up by this hope, she ran off to the classroom, and there was Ellen herself at the door, looking at her with such kind, sorry-looking eyes, as if there was nothing she would like better than to carry her bodily downstairs.

"Your tea is ready, Miss Pixie. Miss Emily's orders were that I was not to bring you any cake, but I have brought something else that you will like better."

What could that be? Pixie rushed to the table, and oh, joy of joys, there lay a big fat letter with the Bally William postmark in the corner, and Bridgie's dear, well-known writing straggling over its surface. No one in the world wrote such sweet letters as Bridgie, and how dear of her to time this one to arrive at the moment of all others when it was most desired! Pixie gloated over it with sparkling eyes, kissed it, hugged it, poked at it with her fingers to discover exactly how many sheets it might contain, and finally devoured it and the bread-and-butter together in one long beam of delight.

"Littlest and dearest, do you want to see us all, and know what we are doing? It is eight o'clock, and we have had three dinners in succession, each lordly male waiting until the other had finished his meal before he could resign himself to come indoors, and at the third coming Molly sent for me to the kitchen to give warning for this day month, which same I took smiling, for it's never a bribe she would take to leave Knock Castle while an O'Shaughnessy was within its walls. It's Pat that's sitting at the table now, eating apples and cracking nuts as languid as if the day was his own, and Esmeralda frowning thunder at him because she wants the table to draw a sketch for the newest picture, which is to make all our fortunes yet. The Major is reading the newspaper, and groaning aloud at every comma, because the Government has no sense at all, and the only man who could put things straight is tied by the heel by half a dozen children. The dogs are sitting in a circle round Pat, watching every bite with such big, longing eyes, and myself writing on my knee by the fire, with the ink on the fender,—looking threatening at the rug! Says Esmeralda, 'Five days more, and we shall see her again,' meaning yourself, to whom I write. 'Will she be grown, I'm wondering! She's too small altogether, and yet we don't want our Pixie changed. And the mimic she is! Wait till we hear the fine English talk, and have her correcting us all, on account of our brogue!' Then Pat must up and say there was no room for him and an English accent in the Castle at the same time, and the Major rebuked him, and asked was it for pleasure he paid as much for schooling as could be spent sensibly on as fine a hunter as a man could wish, and besought us all to put ourselves at your feet, and learn what you could teach us. Then Esmeralda sighed and clasped her hands, and says she, 'It's tired to death I am of my own family, and longing to meet somebody who has seen more of the world than Bally William. Couldn't we tell the Pixie to bring home one of her friends with her, to divert us during the Christmas holidays?' and at that we all called out together, for we have been dull without you, little one, and looking forward to a frolic on Christmas. Last year we were all too sad thinking of the dear mother, but this year she will want to see us happy. I am sure she sees us, and often and often when I sit alone sewing as she used to do, I think about her, and feel she is near still, and it's only because my eyes are dim that I can't see her. Well then, dearie, think over your friends, and decide which it shall be! There's room at Castle Knock for anyone who has been kind to its baby, and it won't be our fault if she hasn't a happy memory of Old Ireland."

The letter went on for another sheet, but Pixie's mind was so full of this new idea that she was hardly able to take in the words on which her eye rested. To take home a friend to Bally William! To give an invitation on her own account, and be able to show the glories of the dear old Castle! This was indeed a dazzling prospect, and the problem of deciding which friend it should be kept her occupied even when tea was over, and she was undergoing the humiliation of putting herself to bed in the chilly little cubicle. Should it be Margaret? No; for Margaret, with all her sweetness, had little sense of humour, and though Pixie could not reason out the matter for herself, she yet realised instinctively that she would be uncomfortable and out of place in the haphazard atmosphere of the Irish household. Should it be Kate? No, that would not do either, for at first sight Kate was not prepossessing, and the Major and the boys would certainly take a dislike to her straightway. Should it be Flora—dear, fat, good-tempered Flora? But what fun Esmeralda would make of her, to be sure, and how helpless she would be when attacked by the boys' badinage! Pixie grew quite tired and sleepy puzzling out the question; her eyelids drooped down and down until the lashes rested upon her cheeks, and her thoughts passed unconsciously into dreams.

Meantime, in the large classroom downstairs the other thirty pupils were enjoying themselves with a zest all the greater for the dullness of the weeks which had gone before. The floor had been sponged with milk until it was quite smooth and slippery, a table supplied with such refreshments as lemonade, ginger-beer, and sweet biscuits, was placed outside the door, and the violin pupils took it in turns to accompany the piano, so that nothing was lacking to

enhance the grandeur of the occasion. Pretty little programmes were distributed around the room; blue for the ladies, pink for the “gentlemen,” and after each dance the couples marched round and round the room, conversing together as if they were at “a real party,” and tabooing the affairs of ordinary school life. Then the gentlemen deposited their partners on chairs, and inquired, “May I bring you a little refreshment?” until the last drop of lemonade was drained, and only crumbs remained in the cake-baskets. They were all flushed and panting with the vigour with which they had joined in the dance, and at last Miss Phipps thought it wise to call a halt.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, you must really sit down for ten minutes!” she cried laughingly. “If you get so overheated, you will be catching chills next, and I am sure you don’t want to be invalided just before the holidays. Come and take your places round the room, and we will ask Lottie to dance her pretty scarf-dance for us, as she looks the only cool member of the party. There’s your scarf, dear, in that drawer, and Miss Bruce will play for you. You dance so nicely that it is a pleasure to see it.”

Lottie blushed with pleasure at such words of praise, and took her place in the centre of the room with smiling alacrity, and the watchers whispered admiringly to each other as they looked at the dainty, satin-clad figure. Lottie was not really pretty, but she was always so charmingly dressed that she gave the effect of beauty, and to-night in her gala frock she certainly looked her best. She danced gracefully and modestly, waving her chiffon scarf in the air, and moving it to and fro in a manner which looked easy enough, but which was in reality extremely difficult, and required no little effort of strength, so that by the time the dance was finished she was as flushed as her friends, and her breath came in quick, short pants. Poof—how hot she felt, and how tired! It was a relief to give the scarf into Mademoiselle’s outstretched hands, and be free to feel for a handkerchief with which to wipe the moisture from her brow. There was a little difficulty in finding her pocket, and the girls watched her fumbles with amused attention. It was a little pause in the evening’s entertainment, and for want of something better to do all eyes were fixed upon the figure which stood so prominently in the middle of the room. “Try again!” they cried encouragingly, and Lottie made yet another dive downwards. This time she was successful, for her hand disappeared into her pocket, and presently jerked upwards, bringing with it a small lace handkerchief rolled up into a ball, as if it had lain forgotten since the last time that the dress was worn. She flicked it in the air, and at that something flew out and clattered on the floor near her feet. Mademoiselle stooped to pick it up, and threw up her hands with a cry of dismay. It was a piece of glass, about half an inch in size, and in one corner was clearly discernible the end of an engraved letter—the letter “T!”

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### Explanations.

“Pixie, awake! awake! Oh, Pixie, open your eyes! Get up, dear, get up! We want you downstairs!”

Margaret bent over Pixie’s bedside, tears shining in her eyes, and lifting the slight figure in her arms, shook it to and fro, until the grey eyes opened in astonishment, and a sleepy voice murmured—

“Is’t morning? Time get up?”

“Morning, no! It is not nine o’clock, and Miss Phipps thought you would certainly be awake, with so much music going on; but it’s no use, I must wake you, whatever happens! Here’s your dressing-gown. Here are your bedroom slippers. You have to come downstairs with me this minute!”

“Am I the queen?” asked Pixie, waking up all in a moment, and peering mischievously into Margaret’s face. “When you are wakened up in the middle of the night, and taken downstairs in your dressing-gown and slippers, it’s either a fire, or you are the queen, and the courtiers are waiting to kiss your hand. You know it is, Margaret! You have seen it in the pictures!”

“Yes, I’ve seen it? and perhaps there may be courtiers waiting for you, Pixie; and kisses too, and a dear little crown to put on that shaggy head! Great excitements have happened since you went to bed, and we know now that it was not you who broke Mademoiselle’s scent-bottle. We are almost certain that it was Lottie herself, and Miss Phipps has sent for you to help us!”

Pixie gave a start of dismay, and the laughter died out of her face, leaving it scared and white. Her fingers tightened round Margaret’s arm, and she hung back trembling as they neared the schoolroom door. Another moment and they stood within the threshold, looking round on what seemed suddenly to have taken upon itself the aspect of a court of justice. The girls were as before ranged round the walls, and at the end of the room stood a row of teachers; Fraulein and Miss Bruce flushed and excited, Mademoiselle with tears in her eyes, Miss Phipps with an awful sternness of expression, which gave place to a momentary softness as she looked at the new-comers. Pixie glanced at them all, one after the other, and from them to the figure standing in the centre of the room, like a prisoner at the bar, her face white as her dress, her eyes full of terror and despair. She gave a sharp cry of distress, and rushed forward with outstretched arms.

“Lottie, Lottie, I didn’t tell! I never told—Lottie, Lottie, I kept my word!”

A deep murmur sounded through the room as each hearer drew her breath in a sob of mingled conviction and regret, and of all the number Lottie seemed the most affected. She burst into a paroxysm of tears, clasped Pixie in an hysterical embrace, then, thrusting her aside, turned eagerly towards Miss Phipps.

“Oh, I will tell—I will! It was all my fault—Pixie had nothing to do with it—I will tell you all about it.”

“It is more than time, Lottie. Begin at once, and pray calm yourself until you have finished!” returned Miss Phipps coldly; and Lottie wiped away her tears, and struggled to keep back the rising sobs.

"It was the night of the term-holiday—I was going out—I was dressed and going along the passage, and Mademoiselle's door stood open, and I saw the light shining upon the gold of the scent-bottle. I had no scent of my own, and I thought I would go in and take a little of Mademoiselle's. I knew she would give it to me if I asked, and if I told her next day there wouldn't be any harm. But I was in a hurry, and I heard Pixie calling, and I put the bottle down too quickly, and the glass struck the corner of the table and fell into pieces in my hand. I was so frightened—and there was no time to think, for Pixie was running along the passage, so I just mopped up the scent with my handkerchief, and flew to the door. I suppose the piece of glass must have got in then, for the handkerchief has never been out of my pocket until to-night. Pixie said, 'Oh, what a smell of scent!' and I said something—I forget what—about its being rude to make remarks, and ran downstairs as quickly as I could go. I was so wretched all the evening I didn't know what to do. I thought when it was found out Pixie would be sure to tell; but when I came home the girls all said how lucky I was to have been out, for no one could suspect me, and I said nothing. And I saw Mademoiselle crying, and I said nothing, and then I was afraid to speak, for it was too late! Pixie came to me next morning and said, 'Lottie, they think I broke the bottle because I was the only girl in Mademoiselle's room last night; but I know that you were there too, and that you had been taking some scent!' and I begged and prayed her not to tell anyone else. I was so confused that I let her see I had broken it, but I said if she told I should get into trouble with my father, and she promised at once. She was so willing, that I didn't feel as uncomfortable as I expected, but I was miserable when everyone blamed her, and she was punished. I comforted myself by thinking that I would ask her to stay with me in the holidays, and make it up to her then. She never told me what she was doing in Mademoiselle's room—I tried to believe that she was really to blame. She might have cracked the bottle, and that was why it broke so easily!"

"And so the best reward you could give to the friend who shielded you at her own expense was to suspect her of deceit! That will do, Lottie! You can go to your own room now. I will deal with you to-morrow. Now we will hear what Pixie has to say!"

Miss Phipps paused impressively for a moment, and then spoke again in tones so sweet and gentle that it was difficult to recognise them as coming from the same voice which had spoken but a moment before.

"Pixie, you have heard Lottie's explanation. I will speak about that later on, but now I have a favour to ask you. For my sake, dear—for all our sakes—to help us to get at the whole truth of this unhappy affair, I ask you to tell me frankly what you were doing in Mademoiselle's room when Ellen saw you there?"

Pixie hung her head, and her cheeks grew as scarlet as the scarlet dressing-gown itself. She lifted one little slippered foot and stood perched on the other like a funny little ruffled stork in the midst of the shining floor, and the watching faces of the girls were pretty to see with their expressions of tender amusement and sympathy.

"Please, Miss Phipps," said Pixie hoarsely, "I was doing nothing. I was only after putting in the hot bottle!"

Miss Phipps stared, Mademoiselle gave a sharp exclamation of surprise, and turned impetuously to her Principal.

"The 'ot bottle! It is true. I 'ave one every night, but I thought that Ellen—that one of the maids—"

"We have put no hot bottle in your bed, Mademoiselle. It is Miss Emily's rule that any of the young ladies may have bottles of their own, if they take the trouble to fill them in the bathroom as they go to bed, and to put them back there in the morning. We never put one in a bed unless in the case of illness," said Ellen, who stood in a corner of the room, one of the most anxious and interested of the spectators; and at that Miss Phipps turned once more to Pixie.

"Then are we to understand that it was your own bottle of which you are talking? And what made you think of lending it to Mademoiselle?"

"She told me that she was always cold," said Pixie faintly. "I didn't like to think of her lying there shivering. Bridgie gave me the bottle when I came away in a little red flannel cover. 'You're such a frog!' says she, 'maybe this will warm you,' but I just roll my feet in my nightgown and hug them in my hands until they are warm. I thought perhaps Mademoiselle couldn't do that. Ye can't bend so easy when you're old, so she needed the bottle most."

"*Ma petite!*" cried Mademoiselle. "*Ma chérie!*"—and she would have rushed forward and taken Pixie into her arms straight away, had not Miss Phipps held her back with a restraining touch.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### Pixie Intercedes.

"One more question, Pixie, and remember I place absolute reliance on what you say, for you have given proof that you are to be trusted. You heard Lottie's insinuation that you might have had some share in the accident! Had you touched the scent-bottle at all that night?"

"I had not, Miss Phipps!" The grey eyes looked into the face of the questioner with a steady light. "I never noticed it at all until the girls began talking about it, and then said I, 'I must have a look at that bottle before I'm much older,' and so I did that very same evening, but never a finger did I lay upon it. I put me hands behind me back and just doubled meself over the table—like this!—looking at it all I knew, but not daring as much as to breathe upon it, and from that hour I was never within yards of its presence."

"I understand! But why, dear, have you refused to give us this simple explanation all these weeks? It was surely only to your credit that you had thought of Mademoiselle's comfort before your own, so there was no reason for being so secret about it. Did you not see that it would have helped your cause to have given this explanation?"

"I—didn't—like!" said Pixie, twisting her finger in and out in embarrassed fashion. "It was this way—that first night you were all so cross and so certain that it was me, because I had been in the room, that I was shy about telling. You see Mademoiselle would have been obliged to be pleased with me, and she wasn't feeling disposed to be pleased just then, and it would seem as if I were trying to get off blame by boasting of what I'd done. I can't explain my feelings, but I couldn't tell! The next day it would have been different, but Lottie begged me not to say what I knew, and we never told tales of each other at home. The boys would have been cut in pieces before they had rounded on each other, so of course I had to give my word. It was very miserable, because no one loved me, and in my home we have very affectionate ways, the one with the other; but Lottie said it was only a little time to the holidays, and after that all would be forgotten. She did say she would ask me to visit her, and I wouldn't hurt her feelings by saying No, so I just wrote and told Bridgie to say I couldn't be spared, for I can't go anywhere but my own home. And she said her father would be so angry with her if he knew, that never another happy moment would she have, and I knew my people wouldn't mind!"

"And did you tell your people how unhappy you were? Did you tell them what trouble you were in?" queried Miss Phipps softly, and at that Pixie shook her head with great emphasis.

"I did not, Miss Phipps—I wouldn't dare! They would be so terribly angry!"

"But you said a moment ago that they 'wouldn't mind'! Then how could they be angry with you, dear?" asked Miss Phipps, smiling, and Pixie bent her head with a quick propitiatory bow.

"Deed, it was yourself they would be angry with,—not me! If the two Houses of Parliament were walking up to Knock Castle and telling them that Pixie had told a lie and stuck to it for a month on end, they would only be calling shame upon them, to have nothing better to do than take away a lady's character, and the Major would say, 'Twelve years have I known her, and never the day that she wasn't up to her neck in mischief, but no child of mine ever looked in my face and gave me the lie, and Pixie's not the one to begin.' So never a word did I say, but just that the examinations were coming on, and we were not allowed to go out."

"Pixie, come here!" cried Miss Phipps; and when the girl approached she received her with outstretched arms and framed the thin little face with her hands. "Little Pixie," she said softly, "never say again that no one loves you in this house. I have loved you from the first, and have felt it a real trouble to be obliged to doubt you, and now I love you a hundred times more for your loyalty and unselfish consideration for your friend. You would have been wiser to be more candid about your own doings, but I appreciate your scruples, and the school code of honour has so many good points that I cannot bring myself to say that it should have been broken. As for the conduct of a girl who would let another suffer as you have done rather than bear the consequences of her own misdoing, I have no words to express my horror and indignation, especially when she is a senior and you one of the youngest in the school. It shows a want of principle which makes me despair of her future. A sudden slip or disobedience I could pardon, but not deliberate deceit, and I am too fond of my girls, and too anxious about their welfare, to allow such an influence to remain in their midst."

Like the shiver of wind among the trees, the word "Expelled!" came from a dozen quivering lips, and Pixie O'Shaughnessy clasped her hands in horrified appeal.

"Oh, ye wouldn't—ye wouldn't send her away! Ye wouldn't give her over to her father, and him so stern and cruel with her! If she's been bad now, she was good before. The girls were fond of her, and she was kind to meself, lending me her lace collar and all the fixings for the party. If it's for making me miserable you are after punishing her, I'll be more miserable than ever, and the girls will be miserable too—ask them if they won't! Lots of them think there isn't another to touch her in the school, and they couldn't do that if she was all bad. Punish her some other way, but oh, don't, don't send her away! What's the use of me taking all the trouble if it's to be no good after all?"

A smile came to Miss Phipps's lips at the innocent directness of the question, but she grew grave enough the next moment, and her voice sounded both sad and troubled as she replied—

"You certainly give us a lesson in the way to forgive our enemies, Pixie, and I should be sorry to do anything that would make you 'miserable'; but I must think of Lottie's good before our own preferences. Mr Vane is too good and just a man to treat her unkindly, and is only stern because he has realised the weakness of her character. He is too anxious about her welfare to make it right for me to conceal anything from him, especially so flagrant a breach of honour; but perhaps—I don't know—if the feeling of the girls themselves is in her favour, I may consent to give her another chance. I am glad to hear that she has been kind—"

"Lottie is very good-natured, Miss Phipps. She is a favourite with the girls. They would be sorry to lose her. I think it would be a punishment to her to feel that she had fallen so much in their opinion, and we would all like to give her another chance," said Margaret timidly, and Miss Phipps nodded kindly in reply.

"Ah, well, we can decide nothing to-night. It will need careful thinking over, and meanwhile we will banish the subject and make the most of the time that is left. I am very sorry for the interruption, although in one sense we are glad of it too, for it has brought Pixie back amongst us. She must go upstairs and dress quickly, and then we will have supper and put away unpleasant thoughts, and Mademoiselle must really dry her eyes, for I cannot have any more crying to-night."

"If Peexie will forgeeve me!" cried Mademoiselle, stretching out her arms and clasping Pixie in so tight an embrace that when her little snub nose came again in sight, it bore the pattern of a steel button plainly stamped upon it. "I won't forgeeve myself that I was so 'arsh and cross. It was a poor thanks, *chérie*, for your kindness to me all these weeks when I have been so warm and comfortable. I am ashamed to remember what I have done."

"Small blame to you if you were mad when you believed I was telling a lie to your face! But ye weren't half so nasty as ye think ye were," said Pixie, beaming upon her in sweetest condescension. "Sometimes ye were quite agreeable."

There was one day I was in with a cold, and ye came and cheered up me spirits until I hardly knew meself for the same creature.”

Mademoiselle lifted her hands with an eloquent gesture, as a sudden remembrance darted into her mind.

“Ah, yes! It is true. And now I have something else to tell you, you girls! It is Pixie whom you have to thank for this party, not me. It was she who begged me to supplicate Miss Phipps for you. She said, ‘She will say Yes if it is you who ask, but not to me, therefore you must not say my name at all; but if she will not give the party because I am to be punished, tell her to send me to bed and let the rest be ‘appy.’ The dear child has thought of you when you were all so cross with her!”

There was an outburst of cheering from all corners of the room, in the midst of which Evelyn fell back in her chair and tugged with both hands at her long dark locks.

“And I called her a hardened little sinner! I abused her like a pickpocket, and called her an ungrateful serpent! Bring some sackcloth and ashes, somebody, quickly! I shall go in mourning for the rest of my life!”

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## Chapter Fifteen.

### An Unexpected Invitation.

“That child Pixie is more wonderful than ever. What do you think she asks me next?” said Mademoiselle to Miss Phipps early the next morning. “The dear Breedgie has told her to invite a friend to return ‘ome with her for the holidays, and she gives me the letter to read, and asks that it shall be me! I have laughed, but it is no use; she is still in earnest. I have said, ‘I am not a schoolgirl, and too old for you, my dear.’ She stares in my face, and asks, “Ow old are you then? Not more than forty, are you?’ Ah, dear! If someone else had said that, I had been furious, for one does not like to be made ten years too old, but one cannot be angry with that child. Then I said, ‘Your sister will expect a girl like yourself, and will be disappointed to see me, and that would be uncomfortable for both.’ But she would not listen to that either, but declared it would be still better for them, for they had wished for someone who had seen the world. Nothing that I can say will convince her, but you know it is impossible that I should go!”

“Well, really, Thérèse, I wish you would!” returned Miss Phipps, laughing. “It has been a weight on my mind to think of your remaining here alone during the holidays; and I cannot stay with you, for I am bound to go to my old aunt. As for Pixie taking one of the girls home with her, that is out of the question at this hour of the day. If Miss O’Shaughnessy had sent an invitation even a fortnight ago, it might have been arranged, but now there is no time to write, and get permission, and make the necessary plans. It is only in a case like yours, when there is no one else to consult, that such a very Irish invitation could be accepted; so either you go with Pixie, or she returns alone. And that reminds me of another thing. It would be a comfort to me if you could look after the child on the journey, for I have had a letter from the brother to say that he cannot decide definitely on what day he will cross. How would it be if you accepted the invitation for one week, took the child safely home, and just left it to circumstances to decide what to do after that?”

“You think I might venture—really?” asked Mademoiselle eagerly. Her eyes brightened, and a flush of colour came into her cheek. “If it would not be too absurd, I should like it ver’ much! We have heard so much of those dear sisters that we seem to know them already, and I should be glad of the change. If, for example, you would write and say you would be more comfortable if I accompanied the child, and that I would stay a few days—that would perhaps make it easier!”

“Certainly, with pleasure; and I shall be so glad if it ends in a nice holiday for you, dear! The last part of the term has been so trying that we all need cheering up; and, from all we hear, I should think the household at Knock Castle must be a delightful study. Young Mr O’Shaughnessy has promised to call this afternoon, so you had better come down and talk to him yourself. I am sure you will find that he is as cordial as Pixie herself.”

This, indeed, proved to be the case, and greatly charmed was Mademoiselle with the handsome youth, who beamed upon her with Pixie’s own smile, and who was so much warmer and more enthusiastic in his manner than his English brothers. Jack, indeed, was an apt disciple of the Blarney Stone, and could pay compliments with any man in Ireland. He gazed at Mademoiselle with an expression in his eyes which seemed to say that never, no, never, had he met so charming a woman; his voice gurgled with emotion as he seconded his sister’s invitation, and he bade her welcome to Knock Castle with the graciousness of a prince of the blood. So handsome he looked, too, that Pixie’s heart swelled with pride, as she beheld him seated on the sofa, in his frock coat and freshly creased trousers, looking, as she mentally expressed it, as if he never “gave a thought to money,” which in good truth was the case, though in another sense to that in which she meant it. The West End tailor would have a weary time to wait before Mr Jack troubled himself to pay for all his fine new clothes!

Jack declared that it would be of all things the most helpful if Mademoiselle would escort Pixie home, for he himself would have to leave his journey until the very last moment before Christmas, when travelling would be both difficult and unpleasant. He offered to telegraph to his sisters, prophesied that Mademoiselle would receive an immediate response, so that before he left the house the matter was virtually settled, and the extraordinary news spread through the school that Mademoiselle was going home with Pixie O’Shaughnessy to pay a visit to her relatives. Surprise was the first feeling, envy the next, and the elder pupils were urgent in their demands for letters.

“Write to us, Maddie, do! Promise you will! We are all dying to hear what they are like. Tell us if Esmeralda is really as beautiful as Pixie says, and what Bridgie is like, and the boys, and ‘the Major,’ and the Castle itself. And tell us all you do, and exactly what happens when you arrive. Write one really long, detaily letter, and we will send it the round of the class, so that we will all get the benefit. You will, Maddie, won’t you? We do want so badly to know about Pixie’s

home!"

Mademoiselle laughed merrily. It was astonishing how bright and young she looked in the prospect of the unexpected holiday. She was in such a good temper that it seemed really impossible for her to say No.

"I will tell you what I can, but you know it is not *comme il faut* to criticise the house in which you stay. I will write all the pleasant things, but for the jokes—the *contretemps*, no! Pixie shall do that if she will, I must keep them to myself. If they are all as nice as the son whom I have seen, they must be charming. I have never met a more pleasant youth."

The girls wagged their heads in meaning fashion.

"We saw him!" they said meaningly—"we saw him! Pixie said he was coming about four, so we kept a lookout, and were obliged to go to the window to read some small print, just as he happened to walk up the steps. Ethel heard the bell, and stopped practising five minutes before the time, and strolled casually downstairs to meet him. He stood aside to let her pass, and she says he smiles with his eyes, just like Pixie! Oh, of course, we don't expect you to tell tales, but just to ease our curiosity. We do take such an extraordinary interest in that family!"

"There is another family in which I take an even greater interest just now, and that's the Vanes!" remarked Kate meaningly. "Miss Phipps wrote to Mr Vane, and I met poor Lottie just now with eyes all magenta with crying over a letter she had just received from him. She saw I was sorry for her, and I think she was thankful to have someone to talk to, for she asked me to read it." She threw up her hands with a gesture of dismay. "Well, I don't know what I should do if my father wrote me a letter like that!"

"Ow-w-ow!" Ethel shivered dramatically. "How horrible! What did he say? Was it terribly furious?"

"It wasn't furious at all, not even angry; but oh, so sad and solemn that it made you turn cold to read it! 'It had tears in it,' as Fraulein said of Margaret's singing, and you could tell he was so bitterly, bitterly disappointed! Lottie felt that more than if he had been cross, for she does so love to be loved and fussed over; and if ever there was a poor thing scared out of her wits at the thought of to-morrow, it is herself at this moment. He comes to take her away, you know, and instead of the holidays being a relief, as she expected, she is longing for them to be over. She says now that she would rather not come back here, but go to some fresh school where no one knows about this trouble; but her father thinks it would be good for her to suffer the humiliation of losing her position among us, and says if Miss Phipps will have her, she must try to regain our esteem. Ah, well, I was as disgusted with her as anyone could be, and felt inclined never to speak to her again when I thought how she had treated the Pixie; but I am dreadfully sorry for her now, when I compare her home-going with my own. I do have such a time! The family is one beam of delight when I arrive; the children quarrel who shall sit by me at table, and I have all my favourite puddings. My room looks so sweet with flowers on the dressing-table, and I sit up till ten o'clock, and mother comes to see me in bed and gives me a lovely hug. Fifty-two more hours! I'm so happy I couldn't be angry with my deadliest enemy!"

"I saw Mr Vane once, and he looks a regular grey man," said Ethel in reply. "Clothes, and hair, and eyes, and skin—all the same washed-out grey. I don't wonder Lottie is in awe of him, and I'm thankful I am not mixed up in the business, so that he can't ask to interview me. I believe he will want to see Pixie, though. It would seem only natural. I wouldn't say so to her for the world, but don't you think Miss Phipps will send for her when he comes?"

Some of the girls thought no, others thought yes, and events proved that the latter were in the right; for the next afternoon Pixie was summoned to the drawing-room in the middle of her packing, and entered to find Miss Phipps in earnest conversation with a tall, grave-looking man, while Lottie stood miserably by the window. She looked tall and womanly in her travelling-cloak, and the pained glance which Mr Vane turned from her to the new-comer showed that he felt all an Englishman's horror at the idea of cruelty to the weak.

"Is this—this surely can't be *Pixie*?" he asked anxiously. "I did not expect to see anyone so—small. She is surely very young!"

He was really speaking to Miss Phipps, but as he held Pixie's hand in his, she felt it her duty to answer for herself.

"No—I'm really quite old, but I'm stunted. I'm twelve!" she said, smiling up at him, with the confiding look which was her best introduction to a stranger. She was about to enlighten him still further as to the respective heights of the different members of her family, but a curious quiver passed over the grey face, and scared her into silence.

"Twelve, are you, and Lottie is sixteen! I sent for you, Pixie, to tell you how bitterly grieved Mrs Vane and I are to think of all you have suffered through our daughter's cowardice. I wish it were in our power to do something for you in return, but I hope at least that Lottie has expressed her regret before leaving, and begged your forgiveness!"

"No, she didn't beg anything. She just cried, and hugged me, and I cried, and hugged her back. I knew she was sorry from the beginning; and it was worse for her, because she knew all the time that she was wrong, and I was quite comfortable inside. And she was very kind to me before that. I liked her very much. She gave me an elegant little brooch that she didn't want any longer."

Mr Vane turned aside, and looked into Miss Phipps's face, and Miss Phipps looked back at him with a glance half smiling, half tearful, and withal wholly proud, as though justified in something about which she had previously been inclined to boast.

"Pixie finds no difficulty in forgiving, Mr Vane, and I think the best thanks you could give her would be an opportunity of befriending Lottie still further, and helping her to regain her position in the school. I think it is an encouraging omen for the future that it is the girls themselves who have persuaded me to take her back."

"They are very good! You are all very good," he said sadly. "I need hardly say how much I appreciate your kindness. Good-bye, then, little Pixie O'Shaughnessy, and I hope we may meet again under happier circumstances. May you have happy holidays!"

"I'm going home," said Pixie eloquently. Her radiant face made such a striking contrast to that other bleached, frightened-looking visage that the father's heart softened as he looked from one to the other. He took Lottie's hand and drew it tenderly through his arm.

"And so is Lottie, and if her parents seem stern with her, it is only because they are anxious for her good. She perhaps hardly realises the bitter pain it gives them to see her unhappy."

"Father!" cried Lottie eagerly, and now for the first time she clung to him instead of shrinking out of sight, and seemed to find comfort in the touch of his hand. The fifth-form girls, peeping cautiously out of the window a few minutes later, were amazed to see her descend the steps holding tightly to his arm, but they were too much engrossed with their own exciting preparations to have time to ponder over the phenomenon. Only Miss Phipps and Pixie knew that the "grey man" had a tender heart despite his sternness, and that Lottie had fallen into wise and loving care.

The next morning all was excitement and bustle, cabs and omnibuses driving up to the door of Holly House to convey parties of pupils to the station, gushing farewells and promises to write taking place on the staircase, mysterious bundles, "not to be opened until Christmas morning," slipped into trunks at the last moment, and such racings up and down stairs in search of things forgotten as can be better imagined than described when thirty girls half-mad with excitement are on the point of starting for home.

Mademoiselle and Pixie were among the first to leave, and, despite the very early hour of their departure, came in for such a magnificent "send off" that they felt quite like royal personages as they drove away from the door. Meals would be supplied on train and boat, but they were laden with other comforts for the long journey in the shape of sweets, scent, books to read, and, alas! specifics against sea-sickness. Mademoiselle looked pensive whenever she thought of the hours on board the boat, but for the rest she was as gay as one of the girls themselves, and much interested in the country through which they flew. One great town after another appeared, and was left behind as they roared through the stations, seeing nothing but a blur of white faces and undecipherable letters upon a board. Hour after hour and never a stop, morning changing into afternoon, and still no slackening of that wonderful onward rush. Two o'clock, and then, just as Pixie was beginning to nod after her lunch, a sudden cry of admiration came from Mademoiselle by her side, and there, close at hand, so near that but a step would have taken them upon the beach, lay the beautiful, mysterious sea, its waters shining in the winter sunshine, the breakers making a ridge of white along the yellow shore. The bathing vans were drawn up on the shingle, and there were no active little figures running to and fro digging castles on the sands, no nigger minstrels and gingerbread stalls and swarms of donkey-boys. All was still and bare and lifeless, and as the short day closed in there was an eeriness about the scene which made the travellers glad to draw the curtains over the windows, and which gave an added cheeriness to the prospect of tea. When Holyhead was reached, Mademoiselle lifted her bag and walked on board the steamer with the air of a martyr marching to the stake, and, to Pixie's dismay, laid herself down at once with an utter disregard of the tables spread out in the saloon. She waited in what patience she could command until they were well on their way and the preparations for the evening meal grew more advanced, and then it was impossible to remain silent any longer.

"Would ye not be taking something to warm ye, Mademoiselle?" she inquired anxiously. "There's a lovely smell of cooking—two smells. One of them is cabbage, and the other smells like gravy spilt in the oven. Doesn't it make you hungry, that nice greasy smell?"

But Mademoiselle only groaned and bade her eat a biscuit and be silent; so for mere occupation's sake the wisest thing seemed to be to go to sleep, which she proceeded to do with extraordinary quickness. Such an amount of groanings and clanking of chains mingled with her dreams that they naturally took the shape of confinement within prison walls, where she suffered many and wonderful adventures, and from which she was on the point of escaping under the most romantic circumstances when she was seized in the grasp of the jailer, as she at first supposed, but it turned out to be Mademoiselle herself—such a haggard, dishevelled Mademoiselle!—who bade her get up and put on her hat, for the sea was crossed at last, and they were anchored at the quay at Dublin. Pixie felt as if roused in the middle of the night, and altogether it was a most dejected-looking couple who went shivering across the gangway in the pouring rain and made their way to the train for the third and last stage of the journey. Neither spoke, but just lay prone against the cushions of the railway carriage, so much asleep as to be uncomfortably aware that they were awake, so much awake as to long hopelessly for sleep. Mademoiselle determined drearily to send for her aged father, and spend the rest of her life in enforced exile on this grey, rain-swept island, since never, never again could she summon up courage to cross that dreadful sea, and the night seemed half over when Bally William was reached at last.

The station clock was pointing to eleven, and a broken-down fly was waiting to convey the travellers to their destination. In the dim light the surroundings looked both poor and squalid, but porter and flyman vied with one another in a welcome so warm that it went far to dissipate the cheerlessness of the scene.

Pixie discoursed with them in animated fashion the while the trunks were being hoisted to their places.

"Has anyone been here from the Castle to-day, Dennis? They are all quite well, I suppose?"

"They are so, Miss Pixie, and Miss Joan down upon us this morning, hinting of what would happen if Jock was forgetting the fly. You mind the night the lady was arriving, and having to find her way in the dark while he was snoring in his bed? It's a fine flow of language Miss Joan has of her own. It's as good as a sermon to listen to her when she's roused, and Jock was getting the benefit of it this day!"

"There's a fine tale he's spinning!" exclaimed the defaulting Jock, grinning in unabashed complacency. "Don't you be after believing a word of it, Miss Pixie dear. It would be a cold bed that would keep Jock Magee from driving ye home this night. And the size of ye too. You've grown out of knowledge! It's a fine strapping lass you will be one of these days." And Jock gazed with simulated amazement at the elf-like figure as it stepped forward into the lamplight. "My Molly was biddin' me give you her duty, and say her eyes are longing for the sight of you again."

"I'll come to-morrow, as soon as I can get away. Give Molly my love, Jock, and say I was often thinking of her. He is a decent fellow, Jock Magee!" she explained to her companion, as the ramshackle vehicle trundled away in the darkness. "A decent fellow, but he has been terrible unlucky with his wives. They fall ill on him as soon as they're married, and cost him pounds in doctors and funerals. This one has asthma, and he expects she will die too before very long. He says it doesn't give a man a chance; but he's the wonderful knack for keeping up his spirits!"

He had indeed. Mademoiselle found it difficult to think of the jovial, round-faced Jehu as the victim of domestic afflictions, and for the hundredth time she reflected that this Ireland to which she had come was a most extraordinary place. Nothing could be seen from the windows of the fly save an occasional tree against the sky, but ever up and up they climbed, while the wind blew round them in furious blasts. Then suddenly came a bend in the road, and a vision of twinkling windows, row upon row, stretching from one wing to the other of a fine old building, and each window glowing with its own cheery welcome.

"It's illumined!" cried Pixie wildly, pinching Mademoiselle's arm in her excitement. "It's illumined! Oh, Bridgie, Bridgie, did I ever see! Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle, did ye ever have a castle illumined for you before? Did they ever give you such a welcome in your own country?"

"Never, never!" cried Mademoiselle. She was almost as excited as Pixie herself, craning forward to peer out of the windows, counting breathlessly the long line of lights, and reflecting that she had not sufficiently realised the grandeur of the household to which she was coming. Another moment and a still brighter light shone through an opened doorway, and a chorus of voices sang out welcome. Then the fly stopped, someone helped her to alight, a hand clasped hers affectionately, and a rich, soft voice spoke in her ears.

"Are you destroyed? The journey you've been having, poor creatures, in the wind and the rain! Are you destroyed altogether?"

This was Castle Knock indeed, and Bridgie O'Shaughnessy's fair face beamed a welcome upon her.

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## **Chapter Sixteen.**

### **Knock Castle Once More.**

Mademoiselle was so exhausted that she begged to retire at once, and was forthwith escorted to a huge cavern of a room, which boasted tapestried walls, an oaken ceiling, and a four-poster bed large enough to have accommodated the whole fifth-form at a pinch. It looked cheery enough, however, in the light of a great peat fire, and the visitor was feeling so unwell after her stormy crossing that her one overpowering desire was to lay her head upon the pillows, and revel in the consciousness that her journeyings were at an end. Her tact suggested also that this affectionate family would be glad to have their baby to themselves for the first meeting; but when she woke up refreshed and vigorous the following morning, she was full of eagerness to get downstairs, and make the acquaintance of the O'Shaughnessys in their own home. The night before she had been so faint and dazed that she had gone automatically through the various introductions, and as the lights inside the rooms were by no means as bright as those at the windows, even the very faces seemed seen through a mist. But Bridget had mentioned eight o'clock as the breakfast-hour, so Mademoiselle leaped out of bed, and, wondering a little why no one appeared to bring tea, hot water, or a bath, made the best work of her toilet which was possible under the circumstances.

Truth to tell, the room did not appear so attractive in the light of a dark December morning, aided by one flickering candle upon the dressing-table. The tapestry was worn into holes, the carpet was threadbare, and the silk curtains had faded to a dull grey hue. The general aspect was so grim and dull, both within the room and outside in the wind-swept park, that the sun-loving Mademoiselle made all speed she could to get downstairs to the cheering influences of breakfast and fire. The sound of voices guided her when she reached the ground floor, and she entered a room on the right of the hall, hoping to see the family already assembled to meet her.

What a disappointment! Not one welcoming face did she see, not a sign of breakfast upon the table, and but a flicker of light on the huge grate, before which knelt one untidy maid, while another stopped short in her dusting operations to stare at the new-comer with unconcealed amazement.

"Was this perhaps not the room where breakfast was held?" Mademoiselle inquired politely, but it appeared that this was the room. And she had understood Miss O'Shaughnessy to say that the hour was eight o'clock. Had she been mistaken in her impression?

Molly laughed, and shook her duster in the air, so that the atoms which she had swept together were instantly dispersed afresh.

"'Deed, you were right enough. The hour is eight, but you'll be in fine time if you're down by nine," she replied encouragingly; and poor Mademoiselle felt her heart sink at the thought of the weary hour which stretched between her and the longed-for meal. Nothing solid to eat since one o'clock yesterday, and now to have to sit shivering and watching the provisions slowly taking their place on the table, deterred by politeness from helping herself to as much as a slice of bread. She felt intensely sorry for herself, but, after all, the prospect was the worst part of the business, for the kindness of the Irish heart came to her rescue, and while Molly blew at the fire with a pair of huge leather



bellows, her companion scuttled upstairs into the room where Bridgie lay sweetly sleeping, to bring her out of bed with a bound with the information that the "foreign lady was in her clothes, and after inquiring for her breakfast."

In an incredibly short space of time Bridgie appeared downstairs, and as she broke into vehement apologies, Mademoiselle had an opportunity of studying her face, and came to the conclusion that the little sister had, if anything, understated its charms. Surely never did sweeter grey eyes shelter behind curling black lashes, and look out of a broader, fairer brow. The waving hair was of purest flaxen, and the careless coiffure was as becoming as if arranged by the most skilful of hairdressers. What if the mouth were large, and the nose of no classical outline, no one who looked into Bridget O'Shaughnessy's eyes had either time or inclination to look further.

"I'm ashamed to think of you sitting here all by yourself!" she cried, holding both Mademoiselle's hands in hers, and smiling into her face with a beguiling sweetness. "We always call the breakfast-hour eight; because, if we said nine, it would be ten, and ye must be punctual in arranging for a family. But it's all for the best, for I've told Molly to bring something in at once, and you and I will have a cosy meal before the rest appear. And you are looking quite fresh and bright this morning—that's good! My heart was broken for you last night, when you came in all perished with cold. And it was so good of you to take the long journey to give us this pleasure. You don't know the excitement there was in this house when Jack's telegram arrived! If we were pleased to think of having a child for the holidays, imagine our delight when it was a girl like ourselves—a companion for Esmeralda and me!"

"A girl like ourselves!" Oh, Bridgie, Bridgie, you must have had a taste of the Blarney Stone too, to have ignored so completely the ten years which separated you from your visitor; but, needless to say, Mademoiselle bore you no grudge for your short-sightedness, and was only too happy to be classed as a girl once more.

They sat down to breakfast together, and presently one member after another of the family strolled in, and took their share in entertaining the stranger. The Major put on his most fascinating air, and revived recollections of an old visit to "Paree," and Pat and Miles stared unblinkingly at every morsel she put between her lips. They were both handsome lads, but Pat in especial had such languishing eyes, such an air of pensive melancholy, that he seemed almost too good for this wicked world, and as far as possible removed from the ordinary mischievous schoolboy. Mademoiselle wondered what beautiful poetic fancies were passing through his brain as he lay back in his chair and pushed the curls from his forehead. Then his eyes met hers, and he smiled angelic questioning.

"Do you have frogs for breakfast in your home in France, Mademoiselle?"

"Pat, be quiet! That's very rude."

"It is not, Bridgie; it's thirst for information. Or snails, Mademoiselle? Have you often eaten snails?"

"Never once, nor frogs neither. We have a breakfast much as you have here. Rolls of bread, and honey, and butter, and coffee—ver' good coffee!" and there was a regretful tone in Mademoiselle's voice, as she struggled womanfully to swallow the grounds of chicory which seemed to constitute the leading feature of coffee as served at Knock Castle. She did not intend to show her distaste, but the Major exclaimed in eager agreement with the unspoken criticism.

"And this stuff is not fit to drink! If you will teach my girls to make coffee as you have it in France, Mademoiselle, you will be doing me a lifelong favour. I suppose you can cook by instinct, like most of your countrywomen?"

"I think I can—pretty well, but I do not often get the chance. If Miss Breegie will let me teach her some of our favourite dishes, it will be a pleasure to me too! I used to be very happy cooking tempting things for my father to eat!"

"Hark to that now, Bridgie! There's no better ambition for a young girl than to wait upon her father and see to his comfort!" cried the Major solemnly; and a merry laugh rang out from the doorway as Esmeralda came forward, and standing behind his chair, clasped her arms round his neck, the while she sent her bright, inquiring glances round the table.

"The whole duty of woman is to wait upon man! and a good long time she has to wait too, if the man is anything like yourself, me dear! We will make him an omelette for his lunch this very day, Mademoiselle, if he'll promise to eat it when he returns an hour past the proper time! I hope you're well, and had a good sleep after your travels."

Mademoiselle murmured something in reply, but what, she scarcely knew, so absorbed was she in studying the charming picture made by father and daughter, the Major with his hair scarcely touched with grey, his charming smile and stalwart figure, and above him Esmeralda, in all her wonderful, gipsy-like beauty. Her hair was as dark as Bridgie's was fair, and stood out from her head in a mass of curls and waves, her features were perfect in their haughty, aquiline curves, and the bloom of youth was on her cheeks. With such hair and colouring it would have been natural to expect brown eyes, but what gave to her face its note of distinction was the fact that they were grey, and not brown—wonderful clear grey eyes, which gave the beholder a thrill of mingled surprise and admiration every time she lifted her curled black lashes and turned them upon him. Mademoiselle stared in speechless admiration, and Esmeralda's brothers and sisters stared at her in their turn, well pleased at the effect produced; for what was the use of groaning beneath the whims and tyrannies of "the beautiful Miss O'Shaughnessy," if one could not also enjoy a little honour and glory once in a while?

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## Chapter Seventeen.

### Esmeralda's Wiles.

It was easy to see that if Pixie were the pet, Esmeralda was the pride of her father's heart, and exercised a unique

influence over him. She seated herself by his side at the table, and they teased and joked together more like a couple of mischievous children than a staid, grown-up father and his daughter. The girl was quick and apt in her replies, and Mademoiselle was conscious that the Major kept turning surreptitious glances towards herself, to see if she were duly impressed by the exhibition. He evidently delighted in showing off Esmeralda's beauty and cleverness, and that in a wider circle than home, for presently he said meaningfully—

"The hounds meet at Balligarry on Monday, Joan. It will be the best run we have had yet, and the whole county will be there. You'll arrange to come with me, of course."

"I'd love to, but—" Esmeralda raised her brows, and looked across the table with a glance half appealing, half apologetic—"it's Bridgie's turn! I went with you the last time."

"And the time before that!" muttered Miles into his cup; but the Major waved aside the suggestion with his accustomed carelessness. "Oh, Bridgie would rather stay at home. She'll be too much taken up with Mademoiselle to have any time to spare."

Mademoiselle looked, as she felt, decidedly uncomfortable, but the first glance at Bridgie's face sufficed to restore her complacency, for the smile was without a shadow of offence, and the voice in which she replied was cheerfulness itself.

"Indeed that's true! We can get hunting for half of the year, but it's not every day we have a visitor in the house. You go with father, Esmeralda, and don't think of me! We will have a fine little spree on our own account, Mademoiselle and I! Maybe we'll drive into Roskillie and have a look at the shops!"

Mademoiselle remembered the Rue de la Paix, and smiled to herself at the thought of the shops in the Irish village, but she said honestly enough that she would enjoy the expedition; for would not Bridgie O'Shaughnessy be her companion, and did she not appear sweeter and more attractive with every moment that passed? Nearly an hour had elapsed since breakfast began, and still she sat behind the urn, smiling brilliantly at each fresh laggard, and looking as unruffled as if she had nothing to do but attend to his demands! It was the quaintest meal Mademoiselle had ever known, and seemed as if it would never come to an end, for just as she was expecting a general rise the Major would cry, "What about a fresh brew of tea? I could drink another cup if I were pressed," and presto! it took on a new lease of life. Last of all Pixie made her appearance, to be invited to a seat on each knee, and embraced with a fervour which made Mademoiselle realise more fully than ever what the child must have suffered during those weeks of suspicion and coldness.

"How's my ferret?" she inquired, with her mouth full of toast, selected from her father's plate; and Pat seized the occasion to deliver his outstanding account.

"Grown out of knowledge! Eightpence halfpenny you owe me now. I had to put on another farthing a week because his appetite grew so big. I knew you would rather pay more than see him suffer. And the guinea-pig died. There's twopence extra for funeral expenses. We put him in the orchard beside the dogs, and made a headstone out of your old slate. It's a rattling good idea, because, don't you see, you can write your own inscription!"

"If it was my own slate, and I am to make up the inscription, I don't see why I should pay!" reasoned Pixie, with a business sharpness which sent her father into fits of delighted laughter, though it left Pat obstinately firm.

"Man's time!" he said stolidly. "That's what costs nowadays. You look at any bill, and you'll find the labour comes to ten times as much as the material. You needn't grudge the poor thing its last resting-place. He was a good guinea-pig to you."

"I don't care how much I owe, for I have no money to pay with," returned Pixie, unconsciously echoing her father's financial principles. "Give Pat a shilling, please, Major, for taking care of my animals while I was away." And that gentleman promptly threw a coin across the table.

"I wish my animals were as cheap to keep! Well, who is coming out with me this morning? I have an appointment in Roskillie at 10:30, but I can't be there now until 11, so there's no use hurrying. Put on your cap, piccaninny, and come to the stables with me. The girls will look after you, Mademoiselle, and find some means of amusing you for the day."

"Oh yes, we'll take care of her!" said Esmeralda lightly; then, as the boys withdrew after their father, she planted her elbows on the table and looked across under questioning eyebrows. "Please, have we to call you 'Mademoiselle' all the time? Haven't you a nice, pretty French name that we could call you instead?"

"Thérèse! Yes, please do! I should feel so much more happy!" cried Mademoiselle eagerly, and Bridgie nodded in approval.

"Thérèse is charming, and it's so much more friendly to use Christian names at Christmas-time. I shall begin at once. We want you to help us with the decoration of the rooms, Thérèse! We shall be just a family party, but Jack will be at home, and we will have games and charades to make it lively. We might rehearse something this morning, mightn't we, Joan dear?"

"/ mightn't!" replied "Joan dear" promptly, "because why?—I've got something better to do. There is plenty of time still, and you will agree with me later that my business is important. If you put on a cloak, Thérèse, I will come back for you in ten minutes, and take you to the stables to join father and Pixie. It will amuse you, I'm sure."

She left the room without waiting for a reply, and Bridgie heaved a sigh of disappointment.

"She's just mad after horses, that girl. Now she will be off with father, and not a sight of her shall we have until afternoon. It's easy to say there is time to spare, but to-morrow we must decorate, and look after all the arrangements for Jack's return, and I do hate a scramble. However, when Esmeralda says she won't, she won't, and there's an end of it. You had better go with her, dear, while I interview the servants."

"I suppose I had," said Mademoiselle slowly. She thought Esmeralda selfish and autocratic, but she was fascinated, despite herself, by her beauty and brightness, and anxious to know her better; so she obediently went up to her room to heap on the wraps, for the morning was cold, though by this time the sun was struggling from behind the clouds. On the way down she was joined by Esmeralda in riding costume—a most peculiar riding costume, and, extraordinary to relate, most unbecoming into the bargain. Mademoiselle's critical glance roamed from head to foot, back again from foot to head, while Esmeralda stood watching her with tightened lips and curious twinkling eyes. Then Bridgie appeared upon the scene, and stopped short, uttering shrill cries of astonishment, as she looked at the slovenly tie, the twisted skirt, the general air of dishevelment and shabbiness.

"Esmeralda, you're an *Object!* Look at the dust on your skirt. You've not half brushed it, and everything is hanging the wrong way. It's a perfect disgrace you look to ride out with any man!"

"I'm delighted to hear it! That's just my intention," replied the young lady, tugging the disreputable skirt still further awry, and nodding her beautiful head, with an air of mysterious amusement. The blue serge had a smudge of white all down one side, which looked suspiciously as if the powder-box had been spilt over it. A seam gaped open and showed little fragments of thread still sticking to the cloth.

If Esmeralda's intention was to look disreputable, she had certainly accomplished her object; and when the stables were reached she took care to place herself conspicuously, so that her father's eyes must of necessity rest upon her.

"I'm going to ride to Roskylie with you, dad! It's a fine morning, and I thought you would be the better of my company."

"That's a good girl!" cried the Major cheerily; then his brow puckered, and he stared uneasily at the untidy figure. He was so unnoticing about clothes that it required a good deal to attract his attention, but surely there was something wrong about the girl's get-up-to-day? He kept throwing uneasy glances towards her while the horses were brought out, and Esmeralda strolled about in a patch of sunshine, and picked her steps gingerly over the muddles, like a model of fastidious care. She sprang to the saddle, light as thistledown, and curved her graceful throat with a complacent toss, as the groom smoothed her skirt, bringing the white stain into full prominence.

"You want dusting!" said the Major curtly, and a brush was brought from the stable, and scrubbed vigorously up and down, with the result that the surface of the cloth was frayed and roughened, though there was no appreciable removal of the stain.

"It doesn't seem as if it would come out, does it? but there are plenty more further on," said Esmeralda innocently. "Have a try at another, Dennis!"—but the Major motioned the man away with a hasty gesture.

"Leave the rag alone—it's past dusting! Is that the best habit you have to your back?" he cried testily, and the dark eyes looked into his with angelic resignation.

"It was a very good habit—six years ago! That's as good as twelve, for we've worn it in turns ever since. The bodice is the least thing in the world crinkly, for I'm broader than Bridgie, and stretch it out, and then it goes into creases on her figure. We might try washing the skirt to take out the stains, and then it would be clean, if the colour *did* run a bit! Ride round by the back roads, dear, and I'll keep behind, and not disgrace you!"

"Humph," said the Major again, and led the way out of the yard without another word, Esmeralda following, looking over her shoulder at the little group of watchers with a smile of such triumphant enjoyment as took away Mademoiselle's breath to behold. She looked inquiringly at Pixie, but Pixie and Dennis were in silent convulsions of enjoyment, and only waited until the riders were out of hearing before exploding into peals of laughter.

"That bates all for the cleverness of her! Miss Bridgie has been fretting over that old habit for a couple of years, and trying to wheedle a new one out of the Major, but it's Miss Joan that can twist him round her little finger when she takes the work in hand! That was a funny stain, that got the worse the more you brushed it! She never got that on the hunting-field. Go back to the house, Miss Pixie, dearie, and tell the mistress the new habit is as good as paid for. The Major's not the man I take him for, if he passes the tailor's door this morning without stepping inside!"

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## Chapter Eighteen.

### Christmas Preparations.

Esmeralda strolled into the house in time for afternoon tea, and smiled complacently around as she warmed herself at the fire.

"Blue cloth!" she announced triumphantly. "No more serge, thank you, but good, solid cloth with a fine surface to it, and a smart little coat instead of a bodice, which was pure unselfishness on my part, for I should have been fitted well enough, and the man pressed it on me, but I thought of you, me darling, and the agony it would be to you to have your waist misjudged by a couple of inches, so I stuck to the coat, and I hope you are grateful!"

"I am," said Bridgie frankly; but there was a pained expression mingling with her satisfaction, and presently she added slowly, "So Dennis was right, and you got your way again. I have been trying for ages to persuade father that

we needed a new habit, but he paid no attention to me.”

“You didn’t go about it the right way, me dear. You are fifty times cleverer than I, but there is one thing you don’t understand, and that is how to manage men! They hate and detest being told what to do, and the secret of getting round them is to make them believe that what you want is their own suggestion. You have to be very cunning, and that’s just what you can never manage to be!”

“Yes, she can!” came a shrill cry from the doorway, as Pixie burst into the room and made a bee-line for the tea-table. “Indeed she can now, Esmeralda, so it’s no use denying it. She can, perfectly well!”

The three listeners looked at each other with questioning glances, for such vehemence was somewhat bewildering on the part of one who could not possibly have heard the first part of the conversation.

“What can she do?” queried Esmeralda sternly.

“Whatever you say she can’t,” replied the champion, unabashed; and at that the cloud rolled off Bridgie’s brow, like mist before the sun.

“Oh, you precious goose! Bridgie can do everything, can’t she? She always could in your eyes. It’s very silly of you, dear, but it’s very nice. I’m not at all vexed with you about it.”

“You would be, though, if you were her true friend, but you always spoil one another, you two!” cried Esmeralda lightly. Then she stared round the room with a surprised expression, and added disapprovingly, “You seem to have been fairly lazy while I’ve been out. I thought you would have been getting on with the decorations. Whatever have you been doing?”

“Roaming about, and actually daring to enjoy ourselves like other people,” retorted Bridgie, with what Mademoiselle was glad to recognise as a decided nip of severity; “but from this minute there must be no more playing until the work is finished. Dennis has cut the evergreens, and we must begin making wreaths at once, so as to be in order when Jack arrives to-morrow evening. We could have two hours’ work before dinner.”

“I loathe making wreaths; they are so dirty and prickly, and I take a pride in me hands; they are the only ones I have, and what’s the use of sleeping in white kid gloves, the same as if I were dressed for a party, if they are to be scratched all over with that hateful holly?” Esmeralda stretched out two well-shaped if somewhat large hands, and gazed at them with pensive admiration; but Bridgie was firm, and, scratches or no scratches, insisted that she should take her own share of the work. As soon as tea was over, then, the family descended to the servants’ hall, a whitewashed apartment about as cheerful as a vault, and but little warmer despite the big peat fire, where they set to work to reduce a stack of evergreens into wreaths and borderings for cotton wool “Merrie Christmases” and “Happy Newe Yeares” reserved from former occasions.

Pat and Miles cut the branches into smaller and more workable proportions. Pixie unravelled string and wire, and the three elders worked steadily at their separate wreaths. At the end of an hour they had progressed so well that it was suggested that the three fragments should be tied together, and the wreath hung in the hall, to clear the room for further operations.

The suggestion being universally approved, a stormy half-hour followed, when each of the five O’Shaughnessys harangued the others concerning the superiority of his or her own plan of decoration, and precious lives were imperilled on the oldest and shakiest of step-ladders. The boys could naturally mount to the highest step without a fear, but, when mounted, were so clumsy and inartistic in their arrangements that they were called down with derisive cries, and retired to sulk in a corner. Then Bridgie lifted her skirt and gallantly ascended five steps, felt the boards sway beneath her, and scuttled down to make way for her sister. The daring rider across country possessed stronger nerves, but also a heavier body, and the ladder creaked so ominously beneath her that she insisted upon the whole company acting as props, in one breath sending them running for hammer and rope, and in the next shrieking to them to return to their posts.

By the time that the wreath was really hung, the friction had reached such a pitch that Mademoiselle expected a state of civil war for the rest of the evening, and even wondered if the atmosphere would have time to clear before Christmas itself. She could hardly believe the evidence of her senses when the boys affably volunteered to clear away the rubbish, and Bridgie and Esmeralda went upstairs with wreathed arms, calling one another “Darling” and “Love,” with the echo of sharp taunt and sharper reply still ringing in the air! Certainly, if the Irish tongue were quick, the heart seemed even quicker to forgive an enemy, or pardon an offence.

By the time that Mademoiselle retired to bed that night the last remnant of strangeness had vanished, and she felt like a lifelong friend and confidante. She had seen the *ménu* for the Christmas dinner, and had helped to manufacture jellies and creams, while Pixie perched upon the dresser industriously scraping basins of their sweet, lemony, creamy leavings, with the aid of a teaspoon and an occasional surreptitious finger when her sisters were looking in an opposite direction. She suggested and achieved such marvels in the way of garnishing that Molly was greatly impressed, being a very plain cook in more ways than one, and solemnly asked for advice upon the killing of turkeys, when Mademoiselle had to acknowledge ignorance, and lost caste forthwith. Then Esmeralda invited her to a display of evening dresses in her bedroom, and wished to know which she should wear—the black silk with the net top, or the net top over a white skirt, or the black silk with no top at all, and Bridgie plaintively appealed to her for the casting vote on the great question of crackers or no crackers!

It was certainly a curious mingling of grandeur and poverty, this life in the half-ruined Castle, with its magnificent tapestries and carvings, its evidences of bygone splendour, and, alas! present-day parsimony. The little house at Passy could have been put down inside the great entrance hall, but it was a trim little habitation, where on a minute scale all the refinements and niceties of life were observed, and income and expenditure were so well balanced that

there was always a margin to the good; but the Misses O'Shaughnessy, who bore themselves as queens in the neighbourhood, and were treated with truly loyal deference, owned hardly a decent gown between them, and were seriously exercised about spending an extra half-crown on a Christmas dinner!

"It's the trifles that mount up! I am a miser about pennies, but I can spend pounds with the best!" Bridgie explained; and Mademoiselle smiled meaningly, for had not the order just gone forth that the Castle was to be "illuminated" once more for the arrival of the son and heir?

On Christmas Eve the rain fell in torrents, and, after a morning spent in preparations of one sort and another, the workers felt the need of a little amusing recreation. This did not seem easy to achieve, in this lonely habitation set in the midst of a rain-swept plain, but Bridgie's fertile brain came to the rescue, and proposed a scheme which kept the young people busy for the rest of the afternoon.

"I vote we have a fancy-dress dinner to-night!" she cried, at the conclusion of lunch. "Not an ordinary affair, but like the one the Pegrams enjoyed so much when they were spending the winter in Grindelwald. 'A sheet and pillow-case party,' they called it, for that is all you have out of which to make your dress. I will open the linen-box and give you each a pair of sheets, and a pillow-case for head-gear, and you must arrange them in your own rooms, and not let anyone see you until the gong rings. It really will be quite pretty—all the white figures against the flags and holly, and we shall feel more festive than in our ordinary clothes. I think it will be great fun, don't you?"

Great fun indeed! The O'Shaughnessy family was always ready for any excitement, and particularly so at Christmas-time, a season when we all feel that we *ought* to be festive, and are injured in our minds if there is nothing to make us so.

Esmeralda fell at once to pleating her table-napkin into one shape after another, Mademoiselle smiled over a happy inspiration, whereupon wily Pat put on his most angelic look and asked—

"Will you dress me, Mademoiselle? A man's no good at this sort of thing. You can't fasten sheets with screws, and I'm no hand at fancy stitching. I've an idea I'd look rather well as—" He whispered a few words in her ear, and Mademoiselle threw up her hands, and laughed, and nodded in emphatic assent.

Pixie and Miles fell to Bridgie's share, while the Major declared that he would have nothing to do with such foolishness, but with a ruminating expression on his face which belied the words.

Bridgie went upstairs immediately after lunch, and, opening her linen-chest, apportioned its contents among the different members of the family. Some wanted large sheets, some wanted small; some begged for frills to their pillow-cases, some preferred plain; but at last all were satisfied, and were further supplied with tape from the various work-baskets, while Pixie was sent a round of the bedrooms to pick up the pins with which the floors were liberally scattered, as the demand in this direction was so large as to be practically unlimited.

Esmeralda flew off at once, with the boys in her train; but Mademoiselle lingered to help Bridgie to fold away the linen that was not needed, and to enjoy the luxury of a quiet chat, which was not an easy thing to accomplish in this noisy household. Bridgie in company was always laughing and gay, but the visitor had already noticed that Bridgie alone was apt to grow grave and to wear a wistful pucker on her brow. It was there now as she locked the chest and sat down on the lid, stretching out her arms with a sigh of weariness. The wintry light left the gallery full of shadows, and the only bright thing to be seen was the girl's own golden head outlined against the oak walls. Mademoiselle thought that if she had been an artist she could have wished for no fairer picture than this old-world corridor, with the fair face of the young mistress shining out like a lily in the darkness; but the lily toiled more than she liked to see, and she could not restrain a protest against the custom which gave one sister all the work, and another all the play.

"You are tired already before the day is half over, and now you have those children's dresses to look after as well as your own! Why do you not make Esmeralda help, instead of doing everything yourself?"

"Esmeralda, is it?" Bridgie's face lit up with a smile as she repeated the name. "Indeed now, Mademoiselle, I'm never worked so hard in my life as when Esmeralda has been trying to help, and I have to tidy away after her! She has the best will in the world, poor thing; but work doesn't come naturally to her. You mustn't be hard on her. She shows her worst side to a stranger, for, though her first impulse may be selfish, when she takes time to think, she is all generosity and kindness. That habit, now! She was longing to have a fitted bodice, but she chose a coat, out of consideration for me. She is a darling, and so young yet that I don't like to worry her. Let her have a good time as long as she may. It will be hard enough soon."

Mademoiselle started and looked alarmed questionings, and Bridgie smiled in response, saying in cool, conversational tones—

"We are ruined, you know! We can't go on living here much longer. Father has spent all his money, and we should have had to leave before now, but that he came into a little more at mother's death. It was not much, and it is going very fast. It can't be more than a year or two at most before the crash comes, so you can't wonder I let the boys and girls enjoy themselves, can you?"

"*Mais oui!* I wonder very much!" cried Mademoiselle, dismayed at what seemed to her prudent mind such a fatal way of preparing for a difficulty. "The kind thing surely would be to prepare them for what will come. It will make it more hard if they have never known work. In three years one can do much to prepare for a struggle. Why do you not speak to your sister, and say it is time to stop play? Why do you not send her away to work, and then perhaps the bad day need never come after all?"

Bridgie looked surprised, almost shocked at the suggestion. The easy-going Irish nature saw things in a different light from that taken by the thrifty Frenchwoman; moreover, the idea of girls working for themselves was still viewed as

decidedly *infra dig* by the old-fashioned inhabitants of Bally William. She gasped at the thought of her father's wrath at such a suggestion, then laughed at the idea of Esmeralda's earnings being large enough to stave off the coming ruin.

"I'm afraid it would be taking more than that to prevent it, Thérèse! You don't know the state our landlords are in over here. There's no money to be got at all, and things go from bad to worse. Until mother died I didn't know how poor we were, and at first I wore myself to pieces saving pennies here and halfpennies there; but there's not much fun in saving twopence when nothing less than thousands of pounds would do any good. I grew tired of it, and says I to myself, 'A short life, and a merry one!' If I can't help, I'll just put the thought from my mind, and give the young ones a good time to remember. No use troubling the creatures before it's necessary!"

Mademoiselle grunted in eloquent disapproval, and wished to know whether the master of the house had been equally philosophical.

"Is it the Major?" cried Bridgie, laughing. "He never troubles himself about anything, and he has it all fitted up like a puzzle. Esmeralda is to marry a duke, Jack a countess in her own right, and meself a millionaire manufacturer, who will be so flattered at marrying an O'Shaughnessy that he will be proud to house Pixie into the bargain. Pat and Miles are to go to London to seek their fortunes, and the Castle is to be let—to Jack and his wife by preference, but, failing them, to anyone who offers, when the Major can keep himself and his hunters on the rental without a 'Thank you' to anyone. It works out so beautifully when you hear him talk, that it seems folly to trouble oneself beforehand."

"And suppose you don't marry? Your country is full of old maids. And suppose the Castle does not let? It is very far from—anywhere!" said Mademoiselle, who had lived in the gayest city in the world, and felt the solitude of Bally William only a degree less absolute than that of the backwoods themselves. "Suppose none of these things of which you speak were to 'appen, what then?"

"Indeed, I can't tell you!" returned Bridgie, truthfully enough. "And—excuse me, me love, it's not a very diverting suggestion for the time of year! Let me keep my millionaire, if it's only for the day, for by the same token I'm quite attached to him in prospect! Will you come and visit me, Thérèse, when I'm comfortably established in my soap bubble?"

She was laughing again, full of mischief and wilful impracticability, and Mademoiselle was tactful enough to realise that the time was not apt for pressing her lesson further. Later on she would return to the charge, but to-day at least might be safely given over to enjoyment.

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## Chapter Nineteen.

### Pat's Taunt.

When the gong sounded that night two white-robed figures stole out of Mademoiselle's room, and crept quietly along the gallery. Pat was arrayed as a knight of old, wearing a pair of Esmeralda's old white stockings, surmounted by loose linen trunks, the rest of the sheet being ingeniously swathed round his body, and kept in place by such an elaborate criss-crossing of tape as gave the effect of a slashed doublet. A thickly pleated cloak, (made out of sheet number two), hung over his shoulders, and the pillow-case was drawn into a cap, which was placed jauntily on the side of his head. As handsome a young knight as one could wish to see was Mr Patrick O'Shaughnessy, and the manner in which he held Mademoiselle's hand, and led her down the great staircase, evoked thunders of applause from the watchers beneath.

Mademoiselle herself looked worthy of her squire, for her dark, animated face stood the test of the unrelieved whiteness so successfully, that she was all ablush with delight at the discovery that she was not an old woman after all, but on occasion could still look as girlish as she felt. She was attired as a Normandy peasant, with turned-back skirt and loose white bodice; but the feature of the costume was undoubtedly the cap, which looked so extraordinarily like the real article that the sceptical refused to believe in its pillow-case origin, until the buttonholes were exhibited in evidence.

"It is wonderful—wonderful! But how have you made it so stiff and crinkly?" the Major inquired curiously; and Mademoiselle laughed in gleeful triumph.

"I 'ave curled it with the curling tongs—not perhaps curl, but what the washerwoman would say—'goffer,' and for the rest, can you not see the wire? It is a piece I have taken upstairs after the decorations, and it is stitched in to keep the folds in place; but I must keep my 'ead still, for it is not too strong. You are very fine too, sir. You are, I suppose, some old patrician?"

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears!" declaimed the Major, throwing his arms about with impassioned gestures. His white toga fell in graceful folds round his tall figure; his arms were bared to the elbows; he wore a twisted turban, which was impressive, if not exactly appropriate; and it was really an imposing spectacle to behold him strutting up and down the hall, with a great display of sandalled feet, of which he was evidently immensely proud.

Bridgie sat demurely on a high-backed chair, a sweet-faced nun, with her golden hair hidden from sight, and her dark-lashed eyes looking lovelier than ever when contrasted with the white bands across her forehead. She had been so busy dressing others that she had had no time to plan anything more elaborate for herself; but if she had worked for days she could not have hit on a costume more becoming to her style of beauty. It was scarcely in character, however, to shriek aloud with laughter, as she did a moment later, as Mark Antony was suddenly arrested on his march by an apparition which leapt forward from behind a screen, and advanced upon him to an accompaniment of

unearthly groanings.

Miles as a ghost was certainly an eerie figure; for by means of a stick strapped to his back the sheet was raised to an abnormal altitude, while a couple of tennis rackets held in either hand made extended wings with which to swoop about, and raise warning signals to the onlookers. He chased Mark Antony until that classic gentleman threatened fight with a poker; when he amused himself by groaning vigorously at Pixie, who had been attired as a "Lady in Waiting"—not, it must be confessed, with any striking success; and who was somewhat ruffled in her temper through constant trippings over her train.

"Ye stupid thing!" she cried crossly. "Be over hooting at me! If you are a bogie, you can go and haunt by yourself, and not molest your betters! It's the worst dress of the lot. Nothing but three sticks and the sheets in knots. You had better rest yourself a bit, and groan while we are at dinner, for your head is covered up that tight that you'll never be able to eat!"

"Trust me!" cried Miles, and somewhere about the middle of the ghost the white folds parted, and out peered a crimson face with twinkling eyes, and a mat of damp curls falling over the forehead. "You don't catch me taking any part which interfered with eating! Contrariwise—I'm best off of you all, for I have just to drop my sticks, and—there I am! The sheet falls down, and I eat my dinner in comfort, instead of being stewed alive, as you will be before it's half over."

"That's true for you! I feel as if I had mumps already!" sighed the nun sadly; but the next moment she gave a cry of delight, and pointed eagerly across the hall.

"Esmeralda! Oh, look! look!"

There had been so much to see and admire that the absence of the second daughter of the house had not been noticed; but even as Bridgie spoke each one realised that her late arrival was just what might have been expected. The beautiful Miss O'Shaughnessy had preferred to be sure of her audience before appearing upon the stage; for, to judge by the continuous rumble of the sewing-machine which had sounded from her room, she had bestowed no little pains upon her costume.

Great expectations are apt to be disappointed; but in this instance it is safe to say that the reality exceeded the wildest dreams, for it was almost impossible to believe that this charming figure owed her attire to no more promising materials than ordinary bed-linen! Esmeralda had aimed at nothing less ambitious than a Watteau costume, and the rumbling of the machine was accounted for by one glance at the elaborately quilted petticoat. She had folded a blanket between the double sheet, so as to give the effect of wadding, and an ancient crinoline held out the folds with old-world effect. For the rest she wore the orthodox panniers on the hips, and a bodice swathed as artistically as might be, round the beautiful bare neck and arms. Her hair was dressed high and powdered, and the pillow-case was drawn into the shape of a hood which dangled lightly over her arm. Half-way down the staircase she came to a stand, and stood sunning herself in the applause of the beholders, then came slowly forward, and, standing in the middle of the floor, revolved slowly round and round, so as to display every feature of her costume. It was certainly a marvel of ingenuity, and amidst the general chorus of praise, Mademoiselle could not refrain from improving the occasion by remarking that such a good needlewoman should have no difficulty in turning dressmaker for her own and her sisters' benefit. The reply to this insinuation was a threatening grimace, and Esmeralda made haste to draw her father's attention to another topic.

"Aren't you proud of me now, father dear, and cut to the heart to think that no one will see me but yourself? Sure it's a crime to waste all this splendour on the desert air!"—and she rolled her eyes at him with a languishing glance, and smiled so bewitchingly, that the Major rubbed his hands in delight, and fell unhesitatingly into the snare.

"Faith, and you're right! It's a perfect crime. We should have asked some of the neighbours to see you. Bridgie, why did you not think of that, now? We might have had a pleasant little party to amuse your friend, instead of taking all this trouble for nothing!"

"Not on two days' invitation, father, and besides, Jack is not here yet. While he is at home, perhaps—"

"Yes, father, on New Year's Eve! Give us leave to ask some people on New Year's Eve, and we will plan such a wonderful programme as will be the talk for miles around. I'm brimful of ideas, and we have not had any sort of entertainment for two years now. Say we may ask them, won't you, dear?"

But at this the Major began to look uneasy, for it was one thing to find fault with Bridgie for not having given an invitation in the past, and quite another to be asked to sanction a fresh one in the future.

"Who will you be wanting to ask?" he queried anxiously. "Never did I meet such an exacting child! My mouth's no sooner opened than you are ready to jump inside! 'A wonderful programme,' says she. And who's to pay for it, may I ask? You would ruin me between you, you children, if I hadn't saved you the trouble long ago. How much will this entertainment be costing me now?"

"Oh, twopence halfpenny! Not more than that. We will kill the old turkey, that is so tough that he is fairly pleading to be killed, and use up the dessert from Christmas, and Mademoiselle shall make us some of her fine French dishes, and there will be so much going on that there will be very little time to eat. Make your mind easy, and trust to me."

"I'll see you through!" cried Esmeralda grandly; whereupon the Major shrugged his shoulders, and reflected cheerfully that a few pounds more or less made little difference. Let the girl have her way! she had been kept too long in seclusion as it was, and what was the use of possessing the most beautiful daughter in the county if you could not show her off to your friends once in a while?

Silence was rightly interpreted as consent, and having gained her point, Esmeralda was wreathed in smiles and amiability for the rest of the evening.

The Major dispensed with his toga at an early hour, and Nun and Ghost alike shed their wrappings and appeared in ordinary evening dress; but Esmeralda was too complacently conscious of looking her best to make any change in her attire. Dinner passed hilariously enough, and then, the rain having ceased, the Major put on his coat and went out for a walk in the grounds, while the ladies retired to their snuggerly upstairs and made themselves comfortable round the fire. To them entered presently Master Pat, white knight no longer, but an ordinary shabby stripling with pensive eyes and an innocent expression. He sat himself down in leisurely fashion, and gazed at his second sister with melancholy interest, as one far removed from youthful follies and grieved to behold them in those he held dear.

"You are the only one who has kept on her dress! I suppose you don't mind what you suffer, so long as you make an appearance! It's a pity, as you said, that there is no one to admire you, but if you would like to meet a stranger, why don't you go for a walk down the left wing and back by the hall? The moonlight is shining in at the windows, and you know the old saying that if you walk by yourself in the moonlight to-night you will see the spirit of your future husband waiting for you! You might have a peep at him now, and come back and tell us what he is like!"

Esmeralda turned her head on the cushion, and looked at him with a lazy smile.

"What nonsense are you talking? You are thinking of Hallowe'en, stupid! That has nothing to do with to-day!"

"It has, then! It's just as good as Christmas Eve. We been told so by those that know, but you want to get out of it because you haven't the pluck. All girls are afraid of the dark."

"You said yourself it was moonlight! I shouldn't be afraid to walk the whole round of the Castle if it came to that, but I don't see why I should. I'm snug and comfortable here, and it's not worth disturbing myself to convince a boy like you!"

"So you say." Pat wagged his head in undisguised scepticism. "It's easy to talk, my dear, but I should prefer actions to words. You made a poor show on that ladder yesterday, and I don't like to own a coward for my sister. Look here now, you were worrying me to give you that racket, and I said I would do nothing of the kind, but I'll change my mind and hand it over to you to-night, if you will walk that round and come back here without letting a single howl out of you the whole time!"

Bridgie drew her brows together and looked suspicious at this unwonted generosity, but Esmeralda sprang to her feet, all eagerness and excitement.

"You will now? Honour bright? If I walk down the left wing, go down the circular staircase, and round by the hall, you will hand the racket over when I come back?"

"I will so!"

"You hear that, you girls? You are witnesses, remember! I'm off this minute, and if I meet my spouse I'll bring him back for a warm by the fire, so stoke up and get a good blaze. I hope he will think I am becomingly arrayed."

He was sure to do that, was Mademoiselle's reflection as she smiled back into the sparkling face, and watched the tall figure flit down the corridor. Quite ghost-like it looked in the cold blue rays which came in through the windows, the dead white of the dress standing out sharply against the darkness of the background. It was almost as if the spirit of one of those old ancestors whose portraits lined the walls had come back to revisit her old home, and Bridgie shivered as she looked, and turned on Pat with unusual sharpness.

"What nonsense are you up to now? She'll not catch anything but her death of cold, wandering about those galleries with her bare arms and neck. Spirits indeed! You ought to know better than to believe in such nonsense; but there's some mischief afoot, or you wouldn't be so generous all of a sudden. What's the meaning of it now? Tell me this minute!"

Pat's grin of delight extended from ear to ear; he stood in obstinate silence until the last flicker of whiteness disappeared in the distance, then shut the door, and deliberately barred it with his back.

"Sit down, then, and I'll give the history; but don't attempt to get out, for you'll not pass this door except over my dead body. You say she won't meet anybody, do you? That's where you are wrong, for he's waiting for her at this very minute. He came ringing at the door five minutes ago, the young Englishman that's with the Trelawneys, and that father was after offering a mount to the other day. 'Is Mr O'Shaughnessy at home?' says he. 'He is, sir,' says Molly, knowing no better, for she never had a sight of the Major after dinner. 'Can I see him for a moment? I'll not come farther than the hall, for the cart's waiting, and I am not fit to enter a room.' So with that he comes in, six foot two, if he's an inch, and covered from head to foot in a shiny white mackintosh, with his head peeping out on top, and I've seen uglier men than him before this. I was coming down the stairs after shedding me sheets, and Molly was asking me where the Major might be, so I told her to send Dennis in search, and I was all smiles and apologies for the darkness of the place, with only the one lamp and the fire dying out on the hearth. 'I'll fetch more light,' says I, and, 'Pray do nothing of the kind. It's charming to see this fine old place lit up by the moonlight; I could study it for an hour on end. A perfect setting for a ghost story, isn't it?' says he, smiling, and with that he crosses over to the window, and by the same token it was a regular ghost he looked himself, all tall, and straight, and shiny white. Then it walked into my head what a jest it would be to send Esmeralda to meet him, and the two of them each thinking the other was a ghost, and frightened out of their seven senses. So I excused myself, polite like, saying I would speak to my sister, and the rest of the tale you know for yourselves. I taunted her with cowardice to make her rise to the occasion, but that wouldn't work, and time was passing, so I turned to bribery, but by good fortune I'll keep my racket yet. At this very moment she will be feeling her way cautiously down that stair, and he'll be hearing the creak,



and coming forward to see the cause. All bluey white they'll be, and each one so scared by the sight of the other that they'll hardly dare to breathe. Listen now while I open the door, and you may hear her squeal."

"Patrick O'Shaughnessy, ye graceless boy, how dare you take such a liberty with your sister! A strange man,—an Englishman,—and Esmeralda knowing nothing about him, and believing there is no one near! Let me pass now! Stand aside this moment! Patrick O'Shaughnessy, will you let me pass, or will you not?"

"I will not!" returned Pat sturdily. "It's my joke, and I'm not going to have it spoiled. You leave them to fight it out between themselves, and if they come out alive you'll hear the tale first hand. 'What do my eyes behold?' says he. 'What fairy form is this I see before me?' 'Pity me!' says she. 'What's that white pillar over there by the window? It's a dust sheet that Molly has been hanging over the curtains, and maybe the draught is making it move. Oh, oh, oh, there's a head to it! It's alive! It comes towards me! What will I do? What will I do?'"

Pat clasped his hands in affected terror, and shrieked in clever imitation of his sister's manner. The door was still ajar, and as he stopped a sound from below rose faintly to the ears of his companions, a second shriek so alike in tone and expression that it might have been the echo of his own. "Pixie," cried Bridgie wildly, "at him, Pixie! At him!" And like a flash of lightning Pixie lay prone on the floor with her arms wound tightly round Pat's legs. He swayed and staggered, clutched at the wall, and felt Mademoiselle's arms nip him from behind, as the door flew open, and Bridgie sped like a lapwing along the gallery.

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## Chapter Twenty.

### The White Lady.

Esmeralda set out on her expedition in the highest spirits, for a girl who is brought up on a regime of outdoor sport is not troubled with nerves, and she laughed at the suggestion of ghosts with the scorn which it deserved. What she did not laugh at, however, was the promise of Pat's racket, a gift to him from an absent godfather, and coveted by all his brothers and sisters, but by none so much as Esmeralda, who played a very pretty game of her own, and felt a conviction that she could distinguish herself still more if she possessed a good racket instead of the old one which had done duty for years, and was now badly sprung.

Pat had promised in the presence of witnesses to hand over his treasure if she returned to the schoolroom without—oh, elegant expression!—"letting a howl out of her," and Esmeralda smiled to herself at the unlikeliness of such a proceeding. Why, except for the cold air, it was really a treat to walk along the disused old gallery which traversed the left wing of the Castle, where the moonbeams shone in through the long row of windows with such picturesque effect. She sauntered along, enjoying the scene with artistic appreciation, even feeling a sense of satisfaction in her own appropriate attire. Powdered hair and hooped skirt seemed more in keeping with the surroundings than the bicycling dress of everyday life, and it was an agreeable variety to pose as one's own great-grandmother once in a way.

Esmeralda reached the end of the gallery, and stretched a hand on either side, to feel her way down the circular stone staircase which would lead her into the entrance hall below. This means of descent was rarely used, and was now in a semi-ruinous condition, the stone steps being so much worn with the action of time that it required some little care to descend safely in the darkness. She stood poised on each step, extending a pretty foot to find a secure resting-place on the one below; round the curve where the darkness was almost complete, then coming into sight of the hall, with the moonlight making long streaks of light across the floor, and in the distance a yellow gleam from the solitary lamp.

Only three more steps remained to be descended, when suddenly she stopped short, drawing her breath sharply, for there by the second window stood a man's tall form, all straight and still, and of a curious shining whiteness. The face was turned aside, but at the sound of that gasping sob it turned slowly round, and a pair of keen, steel-like eyes stared into hers.

Geoffrey Hilliard had been thoroughly enjoying this opportunity of studying the features of the fine old hall, and making a note of them for future use. "What a magnificent old place!" he said to himself. "Trelawney says the man is at his last gasp, and will positively have to turn out before long. Poor beggar! I pity him. It must be heartbreaking to leave an old place like this, where one's ancestors have lived for generations, where every stone has its history, and the spirits of the departed seem still hovering in the air. Halloo, what's that?"

He turned his head, and peering round the corner of that quaintest of stone staircases beheld a vision at sight of which he stood transfixed and astounded. Spirits of ancestors, indeed! Here was one before his very eyes, a picture out of its frame, a dream of grace and beauty such as is not vouchsafed to mortal eyes in this commonplace, matter-of-fact twentieth century! The first glance was admiration alone, the second brought a thrill of something uncomfortably like fear, for to the most unsuperstitious of minds there was still something unpleasantly eerie in this unexpected apparition. Motionless as a figure of stone stood the White Lady, her body craned forward, one hand resting against the wall, the other drawing aside the quilted skirt; the moonlight fell full on the face, and showed it stiff and rigid as a sculptor's block.

For one moment Geoffrey felt incapable of movement, but the next commonsense returned, and a dozen matter-of-fact explanations darted into his head. What he saw was no figure, but simply a statue, a reflection, a curious effect of light. He must examine the phenomenon at close quarters, and find a solution with which to confound the superstitious in the future. No sooner said than done, and he stepped forward, momentarily averting his eyes, to make his sight the more searching. When he opened them again the figure still confronted him; but now the position seemed slightly altered, for instead of bending forward she had drawn back, as if to avoid his approach.

A dread seized him lest the phenomenon might vanish altogether before he had had time to discover its character; he gave a sudden leap forward, and to his dismay beheld the figure stagger forward, and collapse in a heap on the lowest stair. In an instant his arms were round her, and two warm living hands came together with a shock of surprise. Masculine ghost lifted, and feminine ghost struggled and pinched in a manner unmistakably human. But if Geoffrey Hilliard's matter-of-fact mind leapt to a quick understanding of the real situation, Esmeralda was much more sensational in her explanation. He remembered that it was Christmas Eve, a time when some family festivity, of which fancy-dress was a feature, might well be in progress; she leapt to the dramatic conclusion that this was a thief masquerading in ghost's attire, the better to make his escape in the event of discovery.

Cowardly ruffian! He should not find it so easy as he expected! If it was only a girl whom he had encountered, he should find that she was not so easily shaken off as he expected. To Hilliard's intense amazement he felt the hands fasten suddenly round his arm, the white fingers grip his flesh with no uncertain grasp. The premeditated apologies died upon his lips, as the White Lady became rosy red, and her lips parted to show teeth set in threatening anger. He stepped back, or tried to do so, but she clung only the closer; he laughingly tried to move her hand from his arm, at which she shrieked aloud, and struggled valiantly.

"No, no, you shall not go! You shall stay here until my father comes!"

"That is just what I want to do! Pardon me, there is really no necessity to hold me so fast. I am not going to run away!" returned the young fellow, laughing, but in a somewhat impatient fashion. He had no ambition to be discovered in this melodramatic attitude, and once more made an effort to escape. The grasp on her wrist was gentle, but withal wonderfully strong, and to Esmeralda's horror she found it impossible to struggle against it. The thought that the thief was escaping after all was too humiliating to be borne, and as one hand after the other was forced back she grew desperate, and raised her voice in a shrill cry for help.

"Help! Help! Murder! Thieves! He-l-p!"

"My dear, good girl!" exclaimed the Murderer blankly, overcome with amazement, and allowing himself to be once more seized in a detaining grasp, while Esmeralda poured the vials of her wrath upon him.

"How dare you call me names! It's a horsewhip you'll be feeling on your back for this, once my father is here. I'll hold you tight till he comes!"

The stranger looked at her, tried to speak, choked hopelessly, and was just attempting a stammering, "You are really most—complimentary!" when the sound of flying footsteps came from above, and Bridgie rushed headlong down the staircase. Poor Bridgie, what a sight was that which met her eye! In the middle of the hall stood the figure of the tall Englishman, his face all sparkling with fun, his arms hanging slack by his sides, while Esmeralda clasped him in close embrace, reiterating shrilly—

"I'll hold you tight! I'll hold you tight!"

"For pity's sake, Esmeralda, let go of him this minute!" she cried, rushing to the rescue, and laying soothing hands upon her sister's shoulder. "There's nothing to be frightened at, dear; it's just that wicked Pat, who ought to be destroyed for his pains. It's no ghost, darling. See, now, he's laughing at you. Ghosts don't laugh! He's nothing but a man after all!"

"He's a thief! He was trying to get the things out of the cabinet. I am holding him until father comes, so that he may give him in charge!" gasped Esmeralda wildly; and Hilliard looked from one sister to the other with eyes dancing with amusement.

"I'm neither ghost nor thief, as Major O'Shaughnessy will testify when he arrives. I'm really exceedingly sorry to have made such an unfortunate impression, but I came on the most innocent errand. I am staying with Mr Trelawney, and your father was kind enough to offer to lend me a mount for to-morrow. We thought of going for a long ride in the morning, so—"

Esmeralda's hands fell to her sides. The commonplace explanation did more than a hundred protestations, and a remembrance of the Major's rhapsodies over the handsome young Englishman whom he had met but a week before was still fresh in her mind. She stepped back, but the light in her eyes gleamed more threateningly than before, as with tragic attitude she turned towards the staircase. On the lowest step crouched Pixie, all eyes and gaping mouth; on the third Mademoiselle clasped her hands, and wagged her head from side to side, as if calling someone to witness that she at least was innocent of offence; from between the banisters peered a red, questioning face, audacious, yet vaguely alarmed.

"Patrick O'Shaughnessy," said Esmeralda in an awful voice, "you shall pay for this evening's work!" and at that, audacity triumphed, and Pat retorted sharply—

"But not with the racket, me dear, for ye did howl after all. We heard you right up in the schoolroom. You're not the hero you thought yourself, to mistake an innocent gentleman for a midnight assassin."

"Pat, be quiet!" interrupted Bridgie sharply, then turned to the stranger with that winsome smile which was her greatest charm. "You've been a schoolboy yourself, and know the ways of them. My brother never rests out of mischief, and he dared my sister Joan to walk the round of the Castle in the dark. She was dressed up as you see, and he had seen you down here in your white coat, and thought maybe you would each be startled by the sight of the other."

"And at first she wouldn't go at all, and was only laughing at him for his pains, but Pat said Christmas Eve and Hallowe'en were all the same, and that if a girl went alone by herself in the moonlight she would see the spirit of her

future h—” cried Pixie in one breathless sentence. In her opinion Bridgie’s explanation had been singularly inadequate, and she was filled with indignation at the babel of sounds which drowned her conclusion. Bridgie was seized with a paroxysm of coughing, Mademoiselle with admirable promptitude knocked an old metal cup from a bracket, and sent it clanging to the floor, and Pat cried shrilly—

“See a spook! She was dressed all in white, and you said yourself it was a good setting for a ghost story! It was yourself that put it in my head!”

“I believe you are right. I certainly did make that remark,” said the stranger obligingly. For some reason or other his colour had decidedly heightened during the last few moments, and he looked at Esmeralda with a quick, embarrassed glance, as if afraid to meet her eyes. She was flushed like himself, a beautiful young fury, with eyes ablaze, and lips set in a hard, straight line. Propitiation was plainly hopeless at the moment, and he was not so foolish as to attempt the impossible. This was evidently “Beauty O’Shaughnessy,” of whom he had heard so much, and, to judge by his own experience, his friends’ accounts of the eccentricities of the family were no whit exaggerated. The dear little girl with the sweet eyes was plainly the eldest sister, since she took upon herself to perform the honours of the house, and he was thankful to follow her towards the fireplace, leaving the belligerents at the end of the hall.

“I’m exceedingly sorry to have caused such an alarm! Please make my peace with your sister. I am afraid, if she was not prepared to see me, my actions must have seemed sadly suspicious,” he began apologetically; but Bridgie stopped him with uplifted hand, and a queenliness of manner which sat charmingly upon her slight figure.

“Indeed you were not to blame at all, and there is no need to give it another thought. You have had bad weather for your visit, but I hope there is a change to-night. The Major will be delighted that you took him at his word, and Dandy will carry you like a feather. Here he is at last, to welcome you himself.”

The Major came forward as she spoke, calling out welcomes from afar, and holding out his hand in hospitable Irish greeting. He was all smiles and superlatives, charmed that Mr Hilliard had called, overjoyed to give him a mount, delighted that he had already made the acquaintance of “me children,” beamingly unconscious that there was trouble in the air, and persistent in summoning Esmeralda to his side.

“What do you think of that for an impromptu costume? All made out of a couple of sheets, me dear fellow, and at a moment’s notice. Quite a display we had this night, with the whole lot of them got up to match; but this child is the only one that kept it on. Me daughter Joan! Esmeralda, for short. Mr Geoffrey Hilliard!”

Hilliard bowed deeply. Esmeralda drooped her eyelids, and the Major chuckled afresh at “the spirit of the girl!”

“A shame to waste such sweetness on the desert air, isn’t it, Hilliard? That’s what she says herself, and there’s nothing for it but to give my consent to a party on New Year’s Eve. A man’s not master of himself when he has three daughters, but you must give us the pleasure of welcoming you with the rest of our guests. The Trelawneys will be here to a man, and you must come over with them. Esmeralda says she is fatigued with meeting the same people over and over again, so she’ll be delighted to see you. Won’t you now, Esmeralda? Give your own invitation to Mr Hilliard.”

“Indeed, father, we have scarcely got the length of invitations. It was just an idea we were thinking over, and at the best it will be a poor country affair. If Mr Hilliard is accustomed to London, ’twould be but a bore to him to join us.”

It was evident that Esmeralda was by no means anxious to count the stranger among her guests. Having shown herself to him in a ridiculous and unbecoming light, she had no wish to pursue the acquaintance, and the glance which accompanied the words was even more eloquent than themselves.

“Don’t dare to come here again!” said the haughty eyes. “Don’t imagine you will get the laugh over me,” said the haughty head, and Geoffrey Hilliard read the signals, and smiled unperturbed—a happy, self-confident smile.

“I assure Miss O’Shaughnessy that I should be honoured by an invitation,” he said blandly, “if I may accept in advance. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to join your gathering.”

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## **Chapter Twenty One.**

### **Bridgie’s Confession.**

After Mr Hilliard’s departure, Mademoiselle was treated to an exhibition of what was known in the family as “Esmeralda’s tantrums.” Hardly had her father turned from the door than she had rushed towards him, and begun pouring out the story of her wrongs. Eyes flashed, head tossed, arms waving about in emphatic declamation, little foot tapped the floor all a-quiver with excitement, while Pixie stood in the background faithfully imitating each gesture, and Pat gazed at the ceiling with an expression of heart-broken innocence. Esmeralda called upon all present to witness that she was despised and ridiculed by the members of her own family; that by this evening’s work she had been made the laughing-stock of the county; and announced her intention of leaving home by the first train that steamed out of the station. She would earn her own living, and if necessary, wander barefoot through the world, rather than submit any longer to insults from her own kith and kin, and when she died a beggar’s death, and lay stretched in a pauper’s grave, they might remember her words, and forgive themselves if they could!

The invective was originally directed against Pat alone, but as she warmed to her work it grew ever more comprehensive, until at last it seemed as though the whole household were in conspiracy against her. Then suddenly the climax was touched and passed; the last stage of all was announced by a tempest of tears, and the Major tugged miserably at his moustache, nerving himself to the task most difficult in the world to his easy-going nature,—that of

finding fault!

“Pat, ye rascal, what’s this I hear about you? Mark my words, now. I’ll not have your sisters made the subject for practical jokes! If you can’t keep yourself out of mischief, I’ll find a way to occupy you with something you’d like worse. Can I have no peace in me own home for the complaints of you and your doings? If ye can’t carry yourself as a gentleman, I’ll apprentice ye to a trade, and wash me hands of you once for all. Mind what I’m telling ye, for there’s truth in it! Will I be giving him a punishment now, Esmeralda? Is it your wish I should punish him?”

“It is so! And the harder the better!” sobbed Esmeralda; and the Major heaved a sigh of ponderous dimensions.

“Ye hear that, Patrick? Listen to that, now, and see your sister in tears, and think shame to yourself on a good Christmas Eve. And now I’ve the trouble of punishing you into the bargain. What will I do with him, Esmeralda? Will I send him off to his bed before Jack comes home?”

And then a pretty thing happened, for among the chorus of groans which greeted this suggestion, Esmeralda’s “No, no!” sounded shrillest of all, and off she rushed to Pat’s side in a whirlwind of repentance.

“No, no! Not that! He would be so disappointed. He must see Jack. I won’t have him punished after all, father. It’s Christmas-time, and he’s sorry already. Tell the Major you are sorry, Pat, and I’ll shake hands and say no more.”

“I’m sorry, sir, there’s been such a stupid row,” said Pat truthfully enough; but when his father turned away with a sigh of relief, he put his arm round his sister and gave her a bear-like hug.

“What did you howl about, silly?” he asked affectionately. “When you’ve had time to cool down you will think it the finest joke of the year. And you so well plucked, too, holding on like grim death, for all his struggles. You ought to be proud instead of sorry. Look here, now, you shall have the racket after all! I won’t have you the loser for your dealings with me. I’ll give it to you at once, if you’ll be troubled to come to my room!”

Then Esmeralda cried, “Oh, Pat, me darlin’!” and Pat hung on to her arms, crying, “Hold me tight! Hold me tight!” at which she blushed and tugged his curly locks, and off they went together, laughing, squabbling, protesting; sworn enemies, dearest of friends!

Jack arrived in due course, and a happier Christmas party than that assembled round the breakfast-table at Knock Castle next morning it would have been hard to find. Each one had provided presents for the others, and if they were of infinitesimal value, they were apparently none the less valued by the recipients. Mademoiselle thought she had never seen anything more charming than the manner in which Pixie presented, and the Major received, a solitary bone stud for his collar, amidst the acclamations of an admiring family.

“A happy Christmas to ye, father darlin’, and many happy returns!” said Pixie in deep sweet accents, as she pressed the tiny packet into his hand, and blinked at it with an air of elaborate indifference. “It’s just a little present I was buying you, thinking maybe you would like to wear something I’d chosen meself.”

“And now what can this be next?” soliloquised the Major, untwisting the paper with tenderest fingers and an air of absorption seldom seen on his merry features. When wrapping number two was undone, and the stud was disclosed in all its glory, he appeared almost dizzy with rapture, holding it out on an outstretched palm, and gazing at it with incredulous joy. “Did ever anything fall out so lucky as that? The very thing I was breaking my heart over not an hour ago. Somebody eats my studs—I’m sure they do—and what are left Esmeralda steals for her cuffs. But I’ll be even with anybody who dares to take this one from my drawer. Thank you, my piccaninny. It’s a broth of a stud, and you could not have given me anything I liked better.”

“I hope it may never break on you when you are in a hurry,” said Pixie politely, and with sundry memories of past occasions when the Major had dressed for a function, while the sounds of his groans and lamentations had been heard without the portals of his dressing-room.

Esmeralda presented Bridgie with a card of hat-pins; Bridgie had knitted woollen gloves for the boys, and the most exciting presentations were those which Mademoiselle had thoughtfully brought with her—dainty lace ties for the sisters, which were received with a rapture almost too great for words, and the grey Suède gloves which were Jack’s happy inspiration. Dark and threatening as the day appeared, on went gloves and tie, when it was time to start for church, and Esmeralda at least was proudly conscious of her stylish appearance, when half-way along the muddy lane the Trelawneys’ carriage bowled past, and the laughing eyes of the stranger met hers once more. The mud flew from the carriage-wheels, and she held up her skirts with a great display of grey-gloved hands, and backed up against the hedge, frowning and petulant—my Lady Disdain in every gesture and expression.

Mademoiselle had never before attended a Christmas service in an English church, and though it was impossible to resist some pangs of homesickness, she was still interested and impressed. The little building was tastefully decorated, and the beautiful hymns were sung with delightful heartiness and feeling. The O’Shaughnessys themselves would have constituted a creditable choir, for Pat’s still unbroken voice was a joy to hear as he joined in the air with Bridgie and Pixie, the Major rolled out a sonorous bass, Jack sang tenor, while Esmeralda’s alto was rich and full as an organ stop. They sang with heart as well as voice, as indeed who can help singing those wonderful words? First, the heralds’ call to Christendom to greet the great festival of the year, the birthday of its Lord: “Christians, awake! Salute the happy morn.”—It must be a cold heart indeed which does not thrill a response to that summons; then the description of the angelic joy at His coming, “Hark, the herald angels sing”; and last, and perhaps most beautiful of all, the summons to the saints on earth to join in that praise, “Oh, come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!”

The service passed in a glow of exaltation, and the softening influence continued throughout the long walk home, when the younger members of the family walked on ahead, and the two older girls followed sedately in the rear.

Bridgie's eyes glowed as she looked after her "children", Pat and Miles, tall and graceful even in their hobbled stage, Esmeralda queening it in their midst, and Pixie dancing blissfully through every puddle that came in her way.

"Doesn't it make you rejoice to see them all so well and happy?" she cried fervently. "Last Christmas we were so sad that it seemed as if the sun would never shine again; but mother said she wanted us to be happy, and it would do her heart good to see them to-day. I was thinking about her in church, and asked myself if I had done all I could to keep my charge. She left them in my care, you know, for I had to take her place, and on days like this I feel as if I had to answer to her for all that is wrong. Pixie is happy at school, and it's lovely to know you, and feel that you will be good to the darling; Jack is getting on with his work, and the boys and Esmeralda quarrel less than they used to do. She's the one I am most anxious about, for she is not satisfied with this quiet life, and her head will be turned with flattery before many years are over. Did you notice that young Englishman last night, and the way he fixed his eyes upon her? If he comes over here flirting with her, what will I do, Thérèse? He is here for a week or two only, and after he has gone she will feel duller than ever, poor creature. I wonder what I had better do?"

"Mees Esmeralda seems to me exceedingly able to take care of herself," remarked Mademoiselle quietly. "I don't think you need distress yourself about her in this instance. Monsieur 'Illiard has had the misfortune to make a bad impression, by placing her in an uncomfortable position, and have you not observed the air with which she has bowed to him to-day as he passed? It was not, to say the least of it, encouraging."

Bridgie laughed,—a little, tender, indulgent laugh.

"But it was very pretty all the same, and sort of encouraging discouraging, don't you think? If I were in his place I don't think I should be exactly depressed. It was like a challenge thrown down before him, and from his look I believe he means to accept it too! Ah dear, it's a great responsibility to have a beauty for a sister! I am in terror every time a young man comes to the house, in case he should fall in love with her."

"There is more than one girl in the house, however, and I know vich of the two would be my choice, if I were, as you say, a young man myself," returned Mademoiselle sturdily. Bridgie's utter unconsciousness of her own claims to attention filled her at once with admiration and impatience, and she could not resist putting her feelings into words. "Does it never give you any fear in case one should fall in love with you instead?"

"No, never; how could they when she was near?" cried Bridgie fervently, and then suddenly flushed all over her delicate face and began a stammering explanation. "At least, that's not quite true. There was one man—I never told anyone about it before, and indeed there's not much to tell. Joan and I went to stay ten days with some friends at the other side of the county, nearly a year ago last autumn, and he was staying there too. He was not like other men I had met, or I thought he was different. He was graver than most young men, though he liked fun all the same, and when we talked it seemed as if we shared the same thoughts. It was not long after mother's death, and I was feeling very lonely, but I didn't feel lonely when I was with him. On the third day we went a picnic, and I drove in a wagonette with the ladies, and he walked with the men. Just as we overtook them the horses took fright, and began to gallop down a hill. We thought for a few minutes that we should certainly be thrown out at the bottom, but the driver managed to pull up in time, and we were none the worse except for the fright. The men came racing along to see what had happened, and his face was as white as death. When he came up he looked straight at me, and at no one else, though his sister was there and several old friends, and he said, '*Thank God!*' Only that, but his voice shook as he said it, and he turned away, as if he could not bear any more. And I felt so strange and glad, so happy and proud; all that day I felt as if I were walking on air, but when I went to bed at night I could not sleep, for I realised suddenly what it meant. He was growing fond of me, and I of him; if we were together another week, perhaps he would ask me to marry him and go away to the other end of the world, for he was a soldier—did I tell you that? And I had promised mother to look after the children until they were old enough to manage for themselves. I couldn't break my word, and yet if I stayed on and was nice to him, he might think it was wrong of me to say No. And I was afraid I couldn't help being nice."

The sweet voice broke off suddenly, and Mademoiselle looked into the grey eyes, and thought that the young soldier was to be congratulated both on his own good taste, and on the feelings which he had been fortunate enough to awaken in this best and sweetest of girls.

"*Eh bien*, and what have you done then?" she inquired eagerly. "It was a difficult position. What have you done?"

"Oh, I did nothing. I came away!" said Bridgie, as simply as if that were not just the most difficult thing she could have done under the circumstances. "The next morning he went out shooting, and the post came in at ten o'clock with a letter from father saying that Pat had fallen from the barn and twisted his ankle. It was very few weeks he did not fall from the barn, as a matter of fact, but it was an excuse, so I said I must go home and nurse him, and they drove me to the station that very afternoon before the men came home."

Mademoiselle drew in her breath, in a gasp of amazement. She looked at Bridgie, and her eyes flashed with eloquent comment. It was so wonderful to think of the courage with which this young thing, with the bright, pleasure-loving nature which had come to her as an inheritance, had yet had the courage to deliberately put from her the greatest happiness which she could have known, in order to devote herself to the care of others. The simple, unpretentious manner in which the tale was told, made so light of the incident that it might have involved little or no suffering; but Mademoiselle knew better, and her voice trembled with sympathy as she put the low-toned question—

"And afterwards—did it hurt—did it hurt very much, *chérie?*"

"I think it did. I cried a great deal for several nights when I thought of the good times they were all having together; but I knew it would have been worse later on, and I comforted myself with that. Besides, what is the use of giving up a thing at all if one can't do it cheerfully? It would have been better for me to have married and left home, than to

stay and make them all miserable by moping and looking sad. And they are all such darlings, and so loving and kind. I don't think any other girl ever had such a family as mine!"

"The Major ignores you; the boys worry you to death; my lady Joan orders you about as if she were a queen, and you her servant; only the little Pixie worships you as you deserve to be worshipped," reflected Mademoiselle mentally; but she kept her reflections to herself, and asked another question, the answer to which she was longing to hear with truly feminine curiosity. "And was that all,—the end of everything? What happened next? Have you not heard or seen him since that time?"

The red flew over Bridgie's face, and she smiled—a soft, contented smile.

"I have never seen him—no! Only a month after that he was ordered to India, and sailed almost at once, but he wrote to me before he left. A letter arrived one day in a strange handwriting, but I guessed almost at once that it was from him. He said he had intended to come to Ireland in the spring, and to call at Knock Castle, but that now it would be impossible for some years to come. He said he had enjoyed so much meeting me for those few days, and he hoped I should not altogether forget him while he was away. Would I allow him to write to me now and again, and would I send a photograph for a poor exile to take away to comfort his loneliness? I had a very nice photograph that a friend of father had taken the summer before, and I thought there was no harm in sending him that, and writing a polite little note. It was very short, and I tried not to make it too nice, and I said nothing at all about writing, only just remarked that it would be interesting to receive letters from India," said Bridgie, with a naïveté which made Mademoiselle throw up her hands in delight. "He has written to me four times since then, and,"—her eyes began to dance, and a dimple danced mischievously in her cheek—"I enjoy writing to him so much that I answer them the very next day; but it would not be proper to send them so soon, you know, so I put no date, but just lock them away in my desk, and wait for six weeks, or two months before I send them off. Once I waited for three, and then he sent a newspaper. There was nothing in it that could interest me in the least, but it was just a gentle hurry up. I did laugh over that newspaper!"

"Bridgie, Bridgie! this is more serious than I thought. No wonder you look upon new-comers with indifference. I hope they are very interesting, those letters. They must be, I suppose, since you are so eager to reply." But at this Bridgie shook her head, and shrugged her shoulders deprecatingly.

"You are a teacher; perhaps you would call them interesting. For me they are just a trifle instructive! I want to hear about himself, and he describes the country, and the expeditions they make. Don't please think they are love-letters, Thérèse. They are very, very proper, not in the least affectionate, and my replies are terribly dull. You see I'm in an awkward position, for everything that would be interesting it would not be proper to say, and everything I can say must be uninteresting, for he knows almost nothing of us or of our people."

"And yet you are compelled to answer these 'instructive epistles' the moment they arrive, and he cannot wait patiently to receive your so dull replies. That has only one meaning, my dear, and it will come when he returns home in a few years, and your children are grown up and able to be left. It will come. I am sure it will come!"

"If it is the right thing for me—if it is God's will—yes! it will come, and meanwhile I am very happy. It is good of Him to have given me such a hope in my life," said Bridgie simply; and Mademoiselle's eyes dimmed with sudden tears. Her own nervous, restless spirit was for ever kicking against the pricks, but she was at least honest enough to acknowledge her shortcomings, and the example of this young girl filled her with shame and a humble desire to follow in her footsteps.

"And I am thankful that He has let me know you. You do me good, *chérie*. I wish to be more like you," she said humbly; and Bridgie opened her great eyes in bewilderment.

"Like me!" she echoed incredulously. "My dear!" The dimple dipped again, and she slipped her hand through Mademoiselle's arm and shook her in playful remonstrance. "Don't you make fun of your hostess, or she'll starve you for your pains. The very idea of clever, accomplished You wanting to be like blundering Irish Me!"

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## Chapter Twenty Two.

### "To See the Ruins!"

"This begins to grow exciting. The plot develops!" said Mademoiselle gaily to herself, when the fifth day of the last week in the year was reached, and Mr Geoffrey Hilliard made his fifth appearance on the scene in transparently accidental-on-purpose manner. On the first day he had been discovered assiduously pumping up the tyres of a bicycle immediately outside the Castle gates; on the second, he was lounging about the village street with an air of boredom which showed that he had exhausted all the objects of interest long before the O'Shaughnessy party passed by on their morning walk; on the third, he paid a formal call in the afternoon and stayed a good two hours by the clock, for which breach of etiquette he was so much concerned that he was compelled to come again the next day to apologise, and hope the ladies were not fatigued. Bridgie smiled polite reassurances, but Esmeralda lay back in her seat and naughtily yawned, as though in protest against her sister's words. She affected to conceal her weariness, but it was a transparent pretence, and the young fellow's eyes twinkled with amusement. Since the moment of their first meeting there had been this pretence of antagonism, this playing at fighting on the girl's part; but, as Bridgie had foretold, the man seemed to find it rather an encouragement than otherwise, and his smile was never more bright and self-confident than after an exhibition like the present.

"Miss Joan seems to have suffered," he said boldly. "I feel truly guilty; but won't you allow me to remedy the mischief? If I might make a suggestion, it's a perfect winter afternoon, and you promised to show me the remains of that old ruin in your grounds. Don't you think that half an hour's walk before tea would freshen you up?"

"I detest ruins; they are so dull," said Esmeralda ungraciously; but Mr Hilliard still continued to smile and to look at her in expectant fashion, and presently, almost against her will, as it seemed, she rose from her chair and moved across the room. "Of course, if you really want to see them! It will only take a few minutes. Come then, Pixie! You were asking me to come out. It will do you good to come too."

Bridgie and Mademoiselle exchanged a quick glance of amusement at the look of disgust which passed over the visitor's face, and which all his politeness was not able to conceal; but Pixie pranced after her sister with willing step, for it had never entered into her heart to believe it possible that there could exist a living creature unto whom her society could be otherwise than rapturously welcome. In the cloak-room off the hall she put on two odd shoes, the two which came first to hand, and a piebald sealskin jacket, which, according to tradition, had descended from a great-aunt, and which was known in the household as "The jacket," and worn indiscriminately by whosoever might happen to need a warm wrap.

The effect of this costume, finished off by an old bowler hat, was so weird and grotesque that at the first moment of beholding it Hilliard thought it must surely be a joke designed for his benefit; but the air of unconsciousness worn by both girls saved him from making a false move, and he speedily forgot all about Pixie in admiration of her sister. Whatever Esmeralda wore, it seemed as if this were the dress of all others to show off her beauty to the best advantage; and the grey golf-cape and knitted cap, set carelessly over her smoke-like locks, appeared at once the ideal garments for a winter promenade. Pixie slipped her arm underneath the cloak to hang on to her sister's arm, and the three set off together across the snow-bound park.

"I suppose you know a great deal about ruins, since you are so much interested in ours," said Esmeralda, as an opening to the conversation. "People are always interested in things they understand. That's the only reason why I should like to be clever and learned—it would make life so much more satisfying. It doesn't amuse me in the least to see old walls, and bits of pillars sticking out of the earth. I'd pull them all down and build something new in their place if I had the chance, but people who understand are quite different. Some people came here once on a picnic from Dublin, and father gave them permission to see over the grounds. Of course it rained, but they all stood round on the damp, soaking grass while an old gentleman gave a lecture about that miserable little ruin. He said something about the shape of the windows, and they all took notes and sketches and snapshots, as if they had never seen anything so wonderful in their lives. There is a bit of a pillar two yards high. He prosed away about that until I had to yawn, but they seemed to like it. Some of them were quite young too. There was a girl rather like Bridgie, with such a pretty hat!" Esmeralda heaved a sigh of melancholy recollection. "She stood there and let the rain soak through the ribbons while she sketched the stupid old things. I envied her so! I thought, 'Why can't I be interested in ruins too, and then I should have something to think about, and to amuse myself with when the time feels so long?'"

"Does the time seem long to you, then? Do you find it dull over here?" asked Hilliard, in a tone that was almost tender in its anxious solicitude; and Esmeralda heaved a sigh of funereal proportions, delighted to find herself supplied with a listener ready to sympathise with her woes. A home audience is proverbially stoical, and after the jeers and smiles of brothers and sisters, it was a refreshing change to wake a note of distress at the very beginning of a conversation. She became suddenly conscious of a feeling of acute enjoyment, but endeavoured to look pensive, as befitted the occasion, and rolled her grey eyes upward with eloquent sadness.

"Oh, dull! Dull does not express my feelings! We are so shut in here, and so little happens, and I know nothing. I have had no chance of learning and finding interests in that way."

"Why didn't ye study, then, when ye had the chance? Ye drove Miss Minnitt crazy with your idleness!" interposed Pixie brutally; and Esmeralda flushed and hesitated, momentarily discomfited, then, recovering herself, cast a melancholy glance in Hilliard's face.

"Our old governess," she explained resignedly, in the tone of one who might speak volumes, but is restrained from feelings of loyalty and decorum. "A kind old creature, so good to us! She has lived in this village all her life."

"I understand," said the model listener. It seemed to him quite natural that this beautiful creature possessed an intellect to match her person, and felt her eagle wings pinioned in the atmosphere of an Irish village. He wished he were only more intellectual himself, so that he might be a fitter companion, and devoutly hoped that he might make no bad slip to betray his ignorance, and so alienate her sweet confidence. "As you say, the more one knows, the less possible it should be to be dull or idle. Amusement can never make up for good solid occupation."

"Oh, never, never!" cried Miss Esmeralda, with a fervour which brought Pixie's eyes upon her in a flash of righteous indignation. Esmeralda to talk like this! Esmeralda, who sat at ease while others worked, who groaned aloud if asked to sew on a button, and was at once so dilatory and so inefficient that Bridgie declared it was easier to do a task at once than to unravel it after her vain attempts. Pixie gasped and pranced on ahead, her back towards the direction in which she was going, her face turned upon the culprit in kindling reproach.

"Joan O'Shaughnessy, what's happened to you to talk in such a fashion this day? You, that doesn't know the meaning of work, to be sighing and groaning that you haven't enough to do! You, to be saying that it would cheer you to be busy, when ye sigh like a furnace and grumble the day long if you have to work for an hour on end! I've heard ye say with my own ears that if you had your own way, you would never do another hand's turn, and of all the lazy, idle girls —"

"Wouldn't it perhaps be wise if you looked which way you were going? The ground is rough, and I'm afraid you will have a fall," interposed Hilliard mildly; not that he was in truth the least bit anxious about this strange child's safety, or could not have witnessed her downfall with equanimity, but in pity for Esmeralda's embarrassment she could not be allowed to continue her tirade indefinitely. He was rewarded by a melting glance, as the beauty sighed once more, and said, in a tone of sweet forbearance—

"She does not understand! She has been away, and that's not the sort of work I meant; and besides—"

She stopped short, for she could not think how to finish the sentence, and the fear of Pixie was ever before her eyes. It was in a different and much more natural voice that she again took up her explanation. "Perhaps I was mistaken in saying it was work I wanted, but it is certainly interest. I have never been farther away than Dublin, and I get so tired and weary of it all, and have such a longing for something fresh. The others don't feel it, for they are so fond of the place; but I'm restless. I feel pent in, knowing the world is moving on and on all the time, and I am shut up here, and sometimes the longing comes over me so strongly that it's more than I can bear, and I fall into—"

"A rage!" said Pixie calmly. Esmeralda had paused just long enough to draw that short eloquent breath which adds so largely to the eloquence of a peroration, and was preparing to roll out a tragic "despair," when that tiresome child must needs interfere and spoil everything by her suggestion. Esmeralda's anger was quickly roused, but fortunately even quicker still was her sense of humour. For a moment clouds and sunshine struggled together upon her face, then the sunshine prevailed, she looked at Hilliard, beheld him biting his lips in a vain effort to preserve composure, and went off into peal after peal of rich, melodious laughter.

"Next time I wish to talk at my ease, it's not bringing you out with me I'll be, Pixie O'Shaughnessy!" she cried between her gasps; and Hilliard's merry "Ho! ho! ho!" rang out in echo.

"She is indeed a most painfully honest accompanist. I am thankful that I have no small brothers to give me away in return. You give your sister a very bad character, Miss Pixie; but you seem very little in awe of her, I notice. She must possess some redeeming qualities to make up for the bad ones you have quoted."

Pixie bent her head in benignant assent, as one bound by honesty to see both sides of a question and to deal out praise with blame.

"She's idle," she said judicially, "and she's hasty, but she's sorry afterwards. The more awful her temper, the quicker she's sorry. The night after you left—"

"Thank you, Pixie, you can spare us further domestic revelations!" cried Esmeralda, flushing in lovely confusion, and keeping her face turned away from the merry blue eyes so persistently bent upon her. "There's one comfort, Mr Hilliard. You know the worst of me now, and there is nothing more to dread. Pixie has spoiled my chance of posing as a blighted genius, and shown me as just a bad-tempered, discontented girl who has not the sense to be satisfied with her position. I'm sorry, for it would have been interesting to hear you talk like the clever, intellectual people in books, and perhaps, if I had kept very quiet and agreed with all you said, you wouldn't have discovered my ignorance for quite a long time to come."

"But, dear me, you would have discovered mine! I couldn't have kept it up for an hour. You surely don't expect me to lecture on improving topics!" cried Hilliard, in such transparent amazement that Esmeralda could not but be convinced of his sincerity.

"Then you are not clever either!" she exclaimed. "What a relief! Now we can just talk comfortably, and not pretend any more. But at any rate you have seen more than we have. Have you travelled much? What have you seen? What countries have you been in?"

"I can hardly say straight off. Let me count. France, Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, Greece, Turkey—"

The "Ohs!" and "Ahs!" of astonishment had been steadily gaining in volume, but at the sound of this last name they reached a perfect shriek of delight. There was something so very strange and mysterious about Turkey that even to see a man who had visited its borders gave one a thrill of excitement. Pixie's premeditated boast that she had been in Surbiton died upon her lips, and Esmeralda's eyes grew soft with wonder.

"Turkey! Oh, you are a traveller! What on earth made you go to Turkey?"

"It was part of a tour on which my uncle took me after leaving the University, and I went even farther afield than that, —to Palestine and Egypt. You would like Egypt even better than Turkey, Miss Joan, for there, thanks to our rule, you have picturesqueness without squalor, whereas Turkey does not stand a close inspection. We were thankful to leave Constantinople after a very few days, but were sad indeed to turn our backs on fascinating Cairo. If I had the seven-leagued boots, I should be a frequent visitor over there."

The two sisters linked arms, and gazed at him with awe-stricken eyes.

"And you have seen veiled women," sighed Esmeralda softly, "and Mont Blanc, and the Pyramids, and the desert, and the Red Sea, and Saint Peter's at Rome, and all the things I have dreamt about ever since I was a child! Oh, you are lucky! I think I should die with joy if anyone offered to take me a trip like that. Did you have any adventures? What did you like best? Begin at the beginning, and tell us all about it!"

Well, as our American cousins would say, this was rather a large order; but Hilliard could refuse nothing to such an audience, and, if the truth must be told, had his full share of the traveller's love of relating his experiences. He passed lightly over days spent in countries near home, but grew even more and more animated as he went farther afield and reached the Eastern surroundings in which he delighted.

"Shall I tell you about Palestine? I never knew anything stranger than arriving at that railway station and seeing 'Jerusalem' written up on the hoardings. It seemed extraordinary to have a station there at all, and such a station! It was in autumn, and everything was white with dust. Outside in the road were a number of the most extraordinary-looking vehicles you can possibly imagine, white as if they had been kept in a flour mill, and as decrepit as if a hundred years had passed since they were last used. How they kept together at all was a marvel to me, and as for



the harness, there was more string than leather to be seen. The drive from the station to the hotel was one of the most exciting things I ever experienced. I am not nervous, and have had as much driving as most fellows, but that was a bit too much even for me. The road is very hilly, turns sharply at many corners, and is, of course, badly made to the last degree, so that it would have seemed difficult enough to manage such crazy vehicles even at a foot-pace; but our fellow drove as if the Furies were at his back, as if it were a question of life and death to get to the hotel before any of his companions. He stood up on the box and shouted to his horses; he lashed at them with his whip; he yelled imprecations to the rivals who were galloping in pursuit. When an especially dangerous corner came in view, two drivers made for it in a reckless stampede, which made it seem certain that one or other must be hurled to the bottom of the hill. A lady inside our carriage burst into a flood of tears, and I believe her companions were all clinging to one another in terror. As for me, I was on the box, and I never passed a more exciting ten minutes. We were told afterwards that we had had the best driver in Jerusalem, but I never engaged his services again.

“That same night in the hotel I was introduced to a dragoman, whom we engaged to take us about. I am sure you will like to hear about Salim, for, apart from himself, he had a great claim to attention, for he had been Gordon’s dragoman years ago when he was in Egypt. Yes! I knew that would interest you, and you would have loved Salim for his own sake too. He had a gentle, sad face, with the beautiful dark eyes of the Eastern, and he spoke English remarkably well. He was unmarried, and lived with his mother and a married brother. Sixteen years he and his sister-in-law had lived in the same house, but he had never seen her face. He had been unlucky in money matters, but accepted his poverty with the placid acquiescence of the Oriental. I remember one day when he told me of a piece of good fortune which had befallen a fellow-dragoman, and I said that I hoped he might be similarly fortunate. He bowed his head with quiet dignity, and waved a brown hand in the air. ‘That is with God, sahib—that is with God!’ I used to question him about Gordon, and he loved to talk of him. ‘He was a good man, sahib, better than any bishop. When we were camping in the desert he was up every morning before it was light, kneeling to pray before his tent, and his heart was so great that he could not bear to see anyone in trouble. I must always keep with me a bag with small moneys, and he would not wait to be asked. Everyone who needed must be helped. When he went away he gave me his two best horses, but my heart was sore. He was a great chief—a great chief; but I heard afterwards that when he came to die he was quite poor—the same as Christ!’”

Hilliard told a story well, and now, as he repeated the words, his voice softened into the deep cadence of the Eastern tones in which they had first been said; his hand waved and his eye kindled with emotion.

Esmeralda looked at him, and her heart gave a throb of admiration. The manner in which he had spoken was unmistakably reverent, and if young men only knew it, there is nothing which a girl loves more than a mingling of manliness and reverence in the man who singles her out for attention.

“He is a good man; I like him,” was the mental comment. Aloud she said dreamily, “Gordon is my hero. I love to hear about him. He was too generous to others to heap up money for himself. I suppose he didn’t care about it. I wish I didn’t, but I do. It’s so very distressing to be always short of money. All the good people in books are poor, but for myself I think it’s bad for the temper. They talk about the peril of riches, but I should like to try it for myself, wouldn’t you, Mr Hilliard?”

Hilliard smiled—a quiet, amused smile.

“Well, I don’t know. Everything is comparative. If some people would think us poor, others would most certainly consider us very rich indeed. We have all that we need, and for myself I’m quite content. I manage to have a very good time.”

“And you get away for holidays like this. That must make it easier. Have you to work very hard? What is your work? In what way do you make your living?”

Once more Hilliard smiled in amusement, and in truth there was a directness about Esmeralda’s questionings which was as unusual as it was unconscious. He put up his hand and stroked one end of his curly moustache.

“Glue!”

“Glue!” echoed Esmeralda shrilly.

“Glue!” shrieked Pixie in even shriller echo.

The two pairs of eyes were fixed upon him in horrified incredulity. The pity, the commiseration of their expressions was touching to behold.

“Oh, poor fellow!” sighed Esmeralda softly. “You *must* be poor! How can anyone manage to make a living out of—glue?”

“But you know, Esmeralda darling, it is useful! We break such heaps of things ourselves. We often use it,” urged Pixie anxiously; and at this her sister brightened visibly.

“We do. That’s true for you, Pixie. Perhaps it’s your glue we use, Mr Hilliard. Dear me, it will be quite cheering when we break anything after this! We shall feel we are helping a friend by our misfortune.”

“That’s very kind of you. I’ll remember that you said that, and it will cheer me too,” replied Hilliard gallantly, and at that very moment a sound came to the ears of all. “The gong! It must be tea-time. They are sounding it to let us hear. I hope I have not kept you out too long.”

Ten minutes later they were all seated in the hall enjoying tea and scones, while Bridgie smiled sweetly on their flushed, animated faces.

"You look well after your walk," she said. "And what did Mr Hilliard think of our tame ruins?"

Pixie looked at Esmeralda; Esmeralda looked at Mr Hilliard; Mr Hilliard looked at his boots. One and all they had forgotten all about the ruins!

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## Chapter Twenty Three.

### The Unwritten Page.

The New Year gathering was a great success, and justified Esmeralda's boast that she would organise an entertainment which should be both original and striking. Mademoiselle was not admitted to the secret conferences, for she was to be surprised with the other guests; but she could not shut her ears, and would not have done so if she could, for the sound of the music which rose to her ears was too melodious to lose. One and all the O'Shaughnessys possessed beautiful singing voices, and though the carols which they rehearsed were simple in themselves, they were practised with a care which made them a joy to hear. Over and over again the Major made his choir repeat a certain phrase, until the *diminuendo* or *crescendo* was rendered to his satisfaction, until opening and closing notes sounded together to the instant, and due expression was given to every mark. Music he loved, and over music would spend time and trouble which he would have grudged in almost every other way; but he rubbed his hands with satisfaction when the last rehearsal was over, and boasted gleefully that for carol-singing not many choirs could be found to beat his own.

By eight o'clock the girls were dressed and strutting up and down the hall to exhibit themselves to the gaze of their companions. Bridgie wore her coming-out dress—not so white as it had once been, but carefully chalked at the worst places, and swathed in lovely old lace round the shoulders. Esmeralda sported a pink moiré dress which had once belonged to her mother, with a voluminous sash of white muslin, since nothing more elaborate was to hand, a wreath of roses out of last summer's hat pinned over one shoulder, with all the crunched-up leaves ironed out smooth and flat, and white gloves cleaned with benzoline until you could hardly tell them from new. She was a vision of elegance, or looked so at least to the ordinary observer; for when a girl is eighteen, and a beauty at that, she is bound to look charming, whatever be her clothes.

At nine o'clock the guests were asked, and the hour had barely struck before they began to arrive. The sound of horses' feet was heard from without, wheels drew up before the door, and in they came, one party after another, having driven across country in the cold and the dark for five, for six, and in one instance for ten long miles, but arriving fresh and radiant for all that, and brimming over with good humour. Mademoiselle thought that she had not seen such a merry assembly since leaving her own dear land, or heard such a babel of tongues. Everyone seemed to know everyone else, and to be on terms of closest intimacy and affection; everyone talked at once and exclaimed with rapture and admiration at the preparations for the entertainment. It was easy to amuse such a company, and dancing and games were carried on with gusto in the long drawing-room, which had been prepared for the occasion, and looked comparatively festive with great fires burning in the fireplaces at either end.

Soon after eleven o'clock the different members of the O'Shaughnessy family began to slip out of the room, but almost before their absence was noted, the Major was ringing a bell to attract attention and marshalling the company to the far end of the room. At the same signal two servants entered the room, turned out the lamps, and drew aside the curtains from the mullioned windows, through which the grounds could be seen, lying white and still in the moonlight. There was a rustle of expectation among the guests, for evidently something was about to happen, something appropriate to the day and the hour, yet what it could be no one had the ghost of an idea. That was the best of those dear O'Shaughnessys, a smiling lady confided to Geoffrey Hilliard—no one could tell what they would be up to next! They were different from everybody else, and their ways were so much more amusing and charming than the ordinary stereotyped usages of society.

Hilliard agreed with fervour, and found an additional proof of the assertion as, one by one, a picturesque band of carollers entered the room by the farthest door and took up their position in a semicircle facing the audience. They were uniformly robed in black, with cowl-like hoods hanging loosely round the face, and each bore a stick, on the end of which waved a brilliant Japanese lantern. The lights lit up the features of the singers, and seldom indeed had "the beautiful O'Shaughnessys" appeared to greater advantage than at this moment. Jack's handsome features and commanding stature made him appear a type of young manhood, Miles for once forgot to grimace, and Pat's misleading air of innocence was even more guileless and touching than usual. As for the girls, Esmeralda looked like a picture by Rossetti, and Bridgie's halo of golden hair was more bewitching than ever in its sombre setting. No one looked at Pixie until the signal was given and the choristers burst into song, when she came in for even more than her own share of admiration, for the treble solos were without exception given to her to sing, and the piercing sweetness of the young voice moved some of the more emotional of the audience to surreptitious tears.

Several carols were sung, interspersed with part-songs suitable to the occasion, and then the singers formed up in rank two and two, and at the Major's request the guests followed their example, making a long procession in the rear. Another song was started, something slow and plaintive in tone, its subject being the dying year, with regret for all that it had brought of joy and gladness, and to its strains the procession started on a strange and charming expedition. Down one long corridor, unlit save by the cold light from without and the warm flicker of lantern ahead along a deserted wing, where dust lay thick on the walls and the faces of departed ancestors looked down sadly from their tarnished frames, finally down the circular staircase, from which Esmeralda had had her first glimpse of Geoffrey Hilliard, and so into the great hall beneath. At the end farthest from the door the Major halted, raised one hand, and called aloud in slow, solemn tones.

"Prithee, silence!" he said. That was all—"Prithee, silence!" and at the sound there was another flutter of excitement among the guests. The hands of the clock pointed to four minutes to twelve, and it was evident that the last item in

the charming programme was about to take place. Ladies moved about on tiptoe, mounting the first steps of the staircase, or standing on stools to ensure a better view. Men moved politely to the rear. There was a minute's preoccupation, and when the general gaze was once more turned to the doorway, it was seen that a significant change had taken place in the scene.

Against a background of screens stood the figure of an old man—a very old man, it would appear, since his back was bowed and his head and beard white as the snow on the ground outside. His brown cloak hung in tatters, and he leant heavily upon his staff. A deep-toned “Ah-h!” sounded through the assembly, and showed that the onlookers were at no loss to understand the character which he was intended to represent. “The Old Year,” murmured one voice after another.

Then a solemn hush fell over all as the clock ticked out the last minutes, and through the opened door came a blast of icy air and a few flakes of snow, blown inwards by the wind. Only another minute, and then there it came—the slow, solemn chiming of the clock on the tower. One, two, three. Good-bye, Old Year! What if you have brought troubles in your wake, you have brought blessings too, and sunny summer hours! Four, five, six—Dear old friend, we are sorrier to part with thee than we knew! We have not appreciated thee enough, made enough of thy opportunities. If we have ever reproached thee, thou hast cause to reproach us now. Seven, eight, nine. Going so soon? We were used to thee, and had been long companions, and of the new and untried there is always a dread. Good-bye, Old Year! Take with thee our blessings and our thanks, our sorrowful regrets for all wherein we have been amiss. Ten, eleven, *twelve*.

It is here! The New Year has come, and to greet its arrival such a clashing of bells, such an outburst of strange and jangling sounds as fairly deafened the listening ears. Molly, grinning from ear to ear, was running the broom-handle up and down the row of bells outside the servants' hall. Mike was belabouring the gong as if his life depended on his exertions. The stable-boy was blowing shrilly through a tin whistle, and the fat old cook was dashing trays of empty mustard-tins on the stone floor, and going off into peals of laughter between each movement.

Perhaps it was owing to the stunning effect of this sudden noise that what had happened at the doorway seemed to have something of the quickness of magic to the astonished onlookers, but a good deal of the credit was still due to the castors on which the screens had been mounted, to an ingenious arrangement of strings, and to many and careful rehearsals. Certain it is that, whereas at one moment the figure of the Old Year was visible to all, at the next he had disappeared, and the sound of that last long chime had hardly died away before another figure stood in his place. No need to ask the name of the visitor. It was once more patent to the most obtuse beholder. A small, girlish figure with dark locks falling loosely over the shoulders, with a straight white gown reaching midway between the knees and the ankles, and showing little bare feet encased in sandals. A few white blossoms were held loosely in one hand, and in the other a long white scroll—the page on which was to be inscribed the history of an untried path.

Pixie's face was white and awed, for the solemnity of the occasion and the poetry of the impersonation alike appealed to her emotional nature, and there was an expression upon the plain little face which was more impressive than any mere pink and white prettiness, as more than one of the onlookers remarked with astonishment.

“Who could have believed that that child could look like that?” cried Geoffrey Hilliard to Mademoiselle, and that young lady tossed her head with an impatient movement.

“Why not, pray? If Pixie is not pretty, she is something better—she is *spirituelle*!” for it had come to this, that Mademoiselle could not endure to hear Pixie adversely criticised, and resented a depreciating remark as hotly as if it had had reference to herself.

At this point the formal programme came to an end, and the guests hurried forward to shake hands with their hosts and thank them over and over again for the entertainment which they had provided, while the choristers shed their monk-like robes, (nothing after all but mackintosh cloaks with hoods cut out of black calico!) and appeared once more in evening dress. The way was led to the dining-room, where refreshments were spread out on the long table, and there was much drinking of healths and exchanging of good wishes for the New Year. Everyone was hungry and happy, and Mademoiselle's cakes and jellies were much appreciated; but Esmeralda sighed as she looked around, and ate sandwiches with such a pensive air that Hilliard demanded the reason of her depression.

“This!” she sighed, holding out the half-eaten fragment, on which was plainly circled the mark of small white teeth. “It hurts my sense of fitness. We should have had boar's head and venison, and a sheep roasted whole. We have some lovely old silver dishes which would have held them, but—” the “but” was significant, and she raised her beautiful shoulders with a shrug—“those days have departed. We have to be content with sandwiches now.”

“There's no limit to one, surely,” Hilliard replied gravely. “We will keep this plate to ourselves, for I am prepared to eat a very good half, and you must be hungry after your exertions. I can't tell how much I have enjoyed this evening. It will stand out in my memory as unlike any other I have ever spent. I shall often recall it when I am back in town.”

“When—when are you going back?” asked Esmeralda, with an anxiety which she made no effort to conceal. “Not very soon, I hope. Jack goes to-morrow, and that is quite enough at one time. Oh, I do hate the end of the Christmas season! Everyone seems to go away. In a fortnight or so Pixie will be off, and Mademoiselle with her. It has been so delightful having a visitor in the house, and she has been so kind and useful. She made most of the things on the table to-night,—all those pretty iced cakes.”

“Ah, yes! Very clever, I'm sure,” said Hilliard absently. It was easy to see that he had no attention to spare for Mademoiselle or her confectionery, and presently he added in a lower tone, “There is no immediate hurry for my return. I can just as well stay another three or four days, but I must be back in town before this day week. I fear there is no getting out of that.”

“Glue?” queried Esmeralda saucily. They were sitting together at a little table behind most of the other guests, and

she lay back in her chair looking up at him with a roguish smile. "Glue?"

"Glue principally. It is a very—er—engrossing occupation," returned Hilliard, nobly resisting the inclination to pun; "but I think it could manage without me for a few days longer, and perhaps we could have another ride together. There is a meet somewhere near the day after to-morrow. Shall you be there?"

Esmeralda hesitated, seized with a sudden mysterious disinclination to say "No," a desperate longing to say "Yes," and yet—and yet,—how could it decently be done?

"I—don't know! It's Bridgie's turn. We have only one horse between us, and I have been the last three times. I don't like to ask her again. It seems so mean."

"But if you did ask, she would let you go. She would not mind taking her turn later on?"

"Oh no, or not at all, for the matter of that. There's nothing Bridgie wouldn't give away if anyone else wanted it. She's an angel. It's just because she's so sweet that I'm ashamed to be selfish."

"I can understand that, but—just for once! If you were to ask her very nicely to change places with you this time, because—because—er—"—Hilliard hesitated and pulled his moustache in embarrassment—"because you—"

"Yes, that's just it. What can I say? Because what?" laughed Esmeralda gaily, then suddenly met the gaze of a pair of deep blue eyes, twinkling no longer, but fixed upon her in intent, earnest scrutiny, and flushed in mysterious embarrassment.

"Because it was my last chance, and I had asked you especially to be there. Because I had stayed on purpose to have another ride with you! That's the true reason, so far as I am concerned. I am sure, if you told Miss Bridgie the truth, she wouldn't have the heart to say No."

Esmeralda looked down at the table and crumbled bread thoughtfully. She was by no means so sure. Bridgie was enough of a mother to take fright at such an open declaration of interest. She would not be so rash as to repeat the conversation *verbatim*, but go to that meet she would, let Bridgie refuse ten times over, let every horse disappear from the stable. Go she would, if she had to borrow the pedlar's pony and ride barebacked all the way. Such was the mental decision; aloud she said languidly—

"Don't know, I'm sure! Perhaps I may be too tired. I'll see when the time comes," and stretched out her hand to beckon Pixie to her side.

Hilliard smiled quietly. He had an extraordinary way of seeing through Esmeralda's pretences, and he welcomed Pixie as genially as if the *tête-à-tête* were of no consequence in his eyes.

"Well, little white New Year, are you coming to sit down beside us? Have you had no supper yet? I am sure you must be hungry after all your exertions. Let me wait upon you now, in return for all the pleasure you have given me by your charming singing."

But no, Pixie refused to sit down or to eat any of the good things pressed upon her. For once in her life jellies and creams, even meringues themselves, failed to tempt her appetite, for she was feasting on an even sweeter diet—that of unlimited flattery and praise. As she strolled to and fro among the guests she was greeted on every side with words of commendation for her singing, her charming impersonation of the character assigned to her, and by the more facetious members of the party implored to smile kindly upon them, to promise them her favour, and to remember their especial desires. It was not likely that she was going to sit down in a corner of the room with no one but her sister and that stupid Mr Hilliard, who did nothing but stare at Esmeralda, as if he had never seen a girl before. She shook her head as he pointed to a chair, but lingered a moment to allow him to examine her costume and pay the proper tribute of praise.

"It's charming—quite charming—so simple, and yet so effective. Those few loose flowers are much better than a formal bouquet, and the scroll—who made the scroll? It is most professional, and I see you have a pencil hanging by the side,—white,—to match the rest." He lifted it as he spoke, and made as though about to write, but at that Pixie drew back in dismay.

"No, you mustn't! Be careful,—you must be careful. It won't rub out."

She walked hastily away, and the two who were left looked at each other, half sad, half smiling, for the words went home with a meaning deeper than any which the speaker had intended to convey.

"Be careful. It won't rub out," repeated Hilliard slowly. "That's a good motto for the New Year. I don't know that one could have a better. I shall remember that, and the scroll all white and unmarked. I wonder what will be written there before the year is done?"

"A great deal, I hope—a great many happenings. I am tired of jogging along in the same old way. I would like a sensational headline in big print, and that as soon as possible!" cried Esmeralda recklessly.

Poor Esmeralda! The day was near at hand when she recalled her words, and winced at the remembrance in sorrow and misery.

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## Chapter Twenty Four.

## The Last Run.

"Me dear," said Bridgie to Mademoiselle, the next morning, showing all her dimples at once in the most mischievous of smiles, "what do you think Mr Hilliard said to me last night before he left? He has made arrangements to stay a few days later to have another ride with the hounds. He believed it would be a very good meet on Thursday, and how wonderfully my sister did ride, to be sure. It's my belief he started with the intention of asking me to let Esmeralda go in my place, but I looked so innocent at him that he hadn't the heart. 'Indeed,' I said, 'she did so, and I feared he would think I made but a poor show in comparison.' Wasn't it cruel of me now, and the poor thing looking at me speechless, with those lovely, humbugging eyes! I had to turn away and laugh in a corner, but I wouldn't relent, for, says I to myself, if I have to give up my run, I'll get some fun another way—and it is amusing, isn't it now, when a man shows you so plainly that he doesn't want you?"

"Indeed that is a form of humour I do not understand!" returned Mademoiselle, with her nose in the air. "But you will give way, of course—that goes without saying—and let Esmeralda go once again. You will not stand out to the end!"

"How could I? Suppose it was myself, and—someone I told you about. How should I feel if I had the chance of seeing him, and she would not allow me? I believe they are really beginning to care for each other, and he is a nice man. I should like him well enough."

"A week ago you were alarmed at the thought! I confess he makes on me a pleasant impression, but surely you know very little about him, and it is rather rash to accept him at once as a possible suitor. What do you know beyond that he is handsome, and appears amiable and kind?"

"His uncle was one of the Hilliards of Nanabeg. My father knew him well, and he was a fine, old-fashioned gentleman. That was what made this Mr Geoffrey come here for the hunting. He had heard his uncle speak of Bally William, and the Trelawneys take paying guests for the hunting season, so he arranged to come to them. He is not very well off, I'm afraid, for Joan tells me that he has to make his money out of glue, poor creature! But he must be nice, if he is the old squire's nephew."

Mademoiselle's eyes rolled upward with an eloquent glance. It was a new article of faith that a nephew must needs be exemplary because his uncle had been a popular country squire, but she held her peace and amused herself by watching the play which went on between the two sisters during the next twenty-four hours. Esmeralda was plainly anxious and ill at ease, and made tentative allusions to the coming meet, which Bridgie received with bland obtuseness. She had not the courage to make her request in so many words, but instead brought forward a succession of gloomy prophecies calculated to dampen expectation in the mind of any but the most enthusiastic rider.

"It will be a heavy run to-morrow," she said, shaking her head dismally as she glanced out of the window on the quickly melting snow. "I wouldn't wonder if it poured with rain! It's a fine draggled set the women will look before they get home."

"I prefer the ground soft, and as for sunshine, it's a thing I detest,—dazzling your eyes, and the poor mare's into the bargain. Dull weather and a cloudy sky is what I hope to see, and for once it looks as if I should get my wish."

"Well, it's good weather you need, to get safely over that country. Mr O'Brien was saying only last season that it was the worst we had. There are some nasty bits of water this side of Roskillie, and they will be swollen with all this snow. Now next week over at Aughrin it really will be pleasant and comfortable."

"I'm so glad, darling! I hope you will enjoy it!" Bridgie put her head on one side, with a smile of angelic sweetness. Then, as Esmeralda flounced from the room in disgust, turned back to Mademoiselle, laughingly penitent.

"Isn't it wicked of me now, but I do enjoy it! She must care very much to be so shy about asking, for in an ordinary way she would have blurted it out long ago. Well, I shall just wait until to-morrow, and then I'll say I am—" she paused to laugh over the word—"indisposed!"

There is many a true word spoken in jest, and Bridgie was reminded of the proverb when the next morning arrived, and her inclination for hunting or any other amusement died a sudden death through an incident which happened at the breakfast-table. The Major was the only one of the party who received a letter, and when he had perused it he gave an exclamation of dismay, and leant back in his chair with an expression of bewilderment. "It can't be! It isn't possible!" he muttered to himself, and when Bridgie inquired the reason of his distress, he threw the letter across the table with an impatient movement.

"That wretched bank! They say I have overdrawn. It's impossible,—there was a decent balance only a few months back! They have made some mistake. I am positive it is a mistake."

He left the room as he spoke, for breakfast had come to an end at last, after the usual long-drawn-out proceedings, and he had waited until he had finished his meal before opening the uninteresting looking envelope, and only Bridgie was left, sitting patiently behind the urn, with Mademoiselle to keep her company. She also rose as if to go, feeling that she might be *de trop* under the circumstances, but Bridgie raised a pale face, and said flatly—

"Don't run away, Thérèse, I'd rather you stayed! I knew it must come some day. It's only a little sooner than I expected."

"But, *ma chérie*—don't look like that, Bridgie dear! Your father says there is a mistake. He seemed surprised like yourself. If, as he says, the bank is mistaken—"

But at this Bridgie shook her head with doleful conviction.

"The bank is never wrong! Oh, I've been through this before, and every time father declares it's a mistake, but it never is! I've been disappointed so often that I can't hope any more. Poor dear father seems to have no idea how quickly money goes, and he is so extravagant with his horses. He bought a new hunter this autumn, and made alterations in the stables. I have tried to be careful, but, as I said before, it is so little I can do! Well, this is the last stage but one. There are a few more shares that can be sold to keep us going for a little longer, and then out we go. Poor father, he won't be able to carry out his programme at this rate. Esmeralda's duke has not come forward, and neither has my millionaire. When we leave the Castle we shall have to squeeze into a cottage, and live on potatoes and buttermilk. I am glad I am not going to the meet. I should have been wretched all the time, but Joan need not know until she comes back."

Bridgie's pale cheeks seemed sufficient explanation of her determination to stay at home, and Esmeralda was sweetly sympathetic and concerned, but quite decided that exertion must at all costs be avoided.

"Me dear, you must not think of going! It would be madness. I'll keep father company, so don't you worry a bit, but just lie down and take it easy the whole day long," she cried gushingly; and Bridgie smiled, despite her heartache, and felt comforted by the reflection that two people would owe their happiness to her absence.

The Major looked very handsome in his "pink" coat, but his brow was clouded, and he sighed profoundly as he came into the dining-room to light his cigar, and saw his eldest daughter standing disconsolately by the window.

"So you are not coming after all, Bride? Letting Joan take your place? Well, everyone to his taste. I feel as if it would do me good to have a hard run and let off steam that way. I'll show them some riding to-day, if they have never seen it before. There won't be much that will stand in my way, but you prefer to stay at home and eat your heart out in quiet. Your mother was the same; she couldn't throw it off. It's a pity for your own sake you don't take after me instead." Then suddenly, as he looked at her, his face altered, and he put his arms round her with a rare tenderness. "Poor little woman! Poor little anxious Martha, this is rough on you! I've brought about this ill day by my thoughtlessness. If I'd been as careful as you, we might have lasted out until the children were grown up, but I was like Micawber—always expecting something to 'turn up.' You must try to forgive me, Bride. You must not be hard on your old father!"

Ah, and it was a lovely sight to see Bridget O'Shaughnessy's face at that moment—the sweetness of it, and the pity and tenderness, and the deep, unselfish love! Her father was touched by the sight, and lingered by her side, stroking her soft hair and murmuring fond, regretful words.

"I haven't treated you well. That minx Joan has twisted me round her finger, and you have suffered for it. You have had a hard time these last two years. Never mind, we'll make a fresh start. I'll turn over a new leaf from this day, and you shall take me in hand. Who knows but we may pull through yet?"

He went off waving his hand in adieu, and Bridgie stood watching the two riders until they disappeared from sight, and repeating his loving words with fond appreciation. Hard time! Who had had a hard time? She was a fortunate girl to have had so much love and kindness, to possess such a dear, gallant, handsome father. What if they had to leave the Castle? Happiness did not depend upon the walls by which they were surrounded. So long as they were all together, they might laugh at poverty!

Meanwhile Esmeralda and her father were gently trotting along towards the park at Roskillie, from whence, in hunting parlance, they were to proceed to "draw Long Gorse," and on their way were enjoying the picturesque surroundings of a meet in the country. Along every high road, footpath, and byroad came horses and riders of various sorts and sizes, walking or jogging along towards the central point. Schoolboys were coming on ponies to see the start, farmers on clever nags; neatly dressed grooms riding, or leading horses conspicuous for shape and beauty. Down the cross-road approached the hounds themselves, headed by their whipper-in and surrounding the picturesque figure of the huntsman. They took up their position in the park, and presently from every point of the compass the scarlet coats came trotting forward, followed by a string of drags, dogcarts, and gigs. The Major and his daughter came in for greetings on every side, for they were among old friends, and the girl's beauty and daring had made her popular with all. There were other ladies present, but they looked colourless and insignificant beside the glowing young Amazon, and she was quite conscious of the fact, and of the becoming correctness of the new habit. While yet twenty yards distant her quick eye had distinguished Geoffrey Hilliard, but she affected not to see him until he rode up to her side, his face aglow with pleasure.

"You managed it, then? You managed to get here?"

"My sister is not feeling very well. She begged to be excused," replied Esmeralda demurely, and Hilliard laughed and muttered something about "blessed Saint Bridget," which on the whole she thought it wiser not to hear. When the signal was given to move on, he kept beside her as the horsemen proceeded to cross several grassy fields; and, contrary to his usual custom, her father lagged behind, as though relieved to leave her to the care of another. Esmeralda turned lightly in her saddle, saw him riding at the farther end of the long line, and looked wonderingly at her companion.

"Something's wrong with the Major. He was so glum all the way here, and look at him now with his head hanging forward! It's not like him to be down-hearted at a meet."

"Perhaps he is tired. He'll waken up presently when we get to business. It would only worry him if we took any notice."

"That's true. Perhaps the mare fidgets him. It's the one he bought a short time since, and she has an awkward temper. Sometimes she is a paragon and does everything that she ought, but at others she is fidgety and uncertain. Father thinks she has been badly ridden at the start, but that she is good enough to take trouble with still."

"She looks a beauty, and she has not had any time to annoy him to-day. I think it can hardly be that. Did not your brother return to town yesterday? I stayed away on purpose, because I feared that on his last day you would not care to be disturbed; but isn't it very likely that Major O'Shaughnessy is depressed at being without him?"

Esmeralda looked up with a brightening glance. "Why, of course, I never thought of that! Father hates saying good-bye to Jack, hates him being in town at all, for he is the first O'Shaughnessy who has ever gone into business. There was a great scene when Jack was twenty, because he insisted on doing something for himself. 'Have you no pride?' cries my father. 'Faith I have!' cries Jack. 'Too much of it to spend all my life starving in a ruin.' 'You will be the first of your race to soil your hands with trade.' 'Honest work,' says Jack, 'will soil no man's hands, and please God, I'll touch nothing that isn't honest.' 'You'll be falling into English ways and selling the old place as not fit for you to live in. I know the ways of your purse-proud English.' Then Jack went white all over his face, and he says, 'It's never a stone of Knock I'd sell if I could keep it with my own heart's blood, but it's time it had a master who could spend money on it instead of seeing it fall to pieces before his eyes.' Then it was the Major's turn to go white, and mother said softly, 'Jack dear—Jack!' You never knew my mother. Bridgie is like her, she always made peace—and after that father made no more objections. I think, in a curious sort of way, he was proud of Jack because he would have his will, and he is doing well. He will retrieve our fortunes some fine day. There! there go the hounds! They are over into the covert, and see! see! there's that old shepherd holding up his hat. The fox is off! Now for it!"

Now for it indeed! From that time forth there was little chance of connected conversation, but all his life long Geoffrey Hilliard looked back upon that morning with the fond, yearning tenderness with which we recall the sunshine which precedes a storm. It was so delightful to be mounted upon a fine horse galloping lightly across country with that beautiful figure by his side, the dark eyes meeting his with a flash of understanding at every fresh incident of the run. As time wore on and the ground became more difficult, the other ladies dropped behind one by one, but Esmeralda never wearied, never flinched before any obstacle. It was the prettiest thing in the world to see her trot slowly but straightly towards gate or fence, loosen the reins, and soar like a bird over the apparently formidable obstacle, and Hilliard privately admitted that it took him all his time to keep level with her. The Major still rode apart, and seemed to take pleasure in choosing the most difficult jumps that came in his way; but his mare behaved well, and no one felt any anxiety about the safety of one of the cleverest riders present. Danger was close at hand, however, in one of those nasty "bits of water" of which Esmeralda had spoken to her sister. The hounds doubled suddenly, and the huntsmen, wheeling their horses to follow, saw before them at a distance of some quarter of a mile a line of those well-known willows which to the practised eye so plainly bespeak the presence of a brook. Esmeralda pointed towards them and spoke a few warning words.

"A bad bit, swollen, I expect, after the snow. A fence this side. There's the Master taking a view. He will tell us if it's safe, if not, we must try the meadow. Ride over here towards him."

She swerved to the side as she spoke, and a moment later was within short enough distance to hear the warning cry. The Master pointed with his whip in the direction of the meadow of which Esmeralda had spoken, and the next moment the whole hunt was galloping after him. The whole hunt, we have said, but there was one exception, for one rider refused to take warning or to turn aside from the direct line across country. The sudden change of course had left him in the rear, and so it happened that his absence was not noted by his companions, and it was only when several moments had passed that Esmeralda, looking from side to side, began to draw her delicate brows into a frown as she asked Hilliard—

"Where's father? I can't see him. He is not here."

"I don't see him either, but he was with us five minutes ago before we turned back. I saw him in the last field."

"So did I, but where is he now? He can't—" Esmeralda reined in suddenly and turned startled eyes upon her companion—"he can't have tried that brook?"

"No, no! Certainly not." But even as he spoke Hilliard had a prevision of the truth. Although he would not admit as much as Esmeralda, there had been something in the Major's bearing which had struck him unpleasantly since the moment of meeting, and his reckless riding had deepened the impression. "You go on," he said earnestly, "and I will ride back and see. Perhaps he took a look at the brook and then had to come round after all, which would make him late. Please go on, Miss Joan."

But Esmeralda looked him full in the eyes and turned her horse back towards the brook.

"I am going back myself. If there has been an accident, it is I who should be there. Don't hinder me, Mr Hilliard. I must go to my father."

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## Chapter Twenty Five.

### Trouble at Knock.

The Major was lying on the bank of the stream, white and motionless, while Black Bess was pawing the air in agony a few yards away. Esmeralda slipped from her saddle and ran to his side, and he opened his eyes and smiled at her feebly.

"Joan, my girl! That's right. My—own—fault! I had no business to try it, but I was—mad, I think. That poor beast!" and he turned away his head, unable to look upon the animal's struggles. "I can't move. Get a cart—O'Brien's farm."

"I'll go! I can see the chimneys. I'll bring help at once. I'll bring back men with me, and we'll lift him with less pain."

Hilliard dashed off in the direction of the farm, and Joan knelt down and lifted her father's head on to her knee. He tried to smile encouragement into the ashen face.

"It might have been worse, dear! She threw me clear of the water, and I've no pain. I shall be all right when I get home, and have a rest."

"Yes, darling, yes. Of course you will," answered Esmeralda bravely. Accidents in the hunting-field were unfortunately no new thing to her, and her heart died within her as she looked at the helpless limbs, and heard her father's words. Over and over again had she heard old huntsmen marvel at the unconsciousness of those who were most mortally injured. Absence of pain, combined with loss of power in the limbs, meant serious injury to the spine, yet it seemed as if, with the comparative comfort of the body, there must be a dulling of the mental powers, since the victim frequently congratulated himself on his escape, and seemed to forget the experiences of others!

As Esmeralda sat holding her father's head on her knee, the future stretched before her, transformed by the accident of a moment. The Major would never again ride by her side, never again mount his horse and gallop over the wide green land; while he lived he must lie even as he lay now, still and straight, a child in the hands of his nurses! Poor father! oh, poor, poor father! what a death in life, to one of his restless nature! what grief, what agony to see his sufferings! The spring would come, and the summer, and the autumn, but there would be no sunshine at Knock Castle, nothing but clouds and darkness, and dull, settled gloom. Esmeralda had been her father's darling, and had returned his love with all the fervour of a passionate Irish heart, so that the sight of him in his helplessness hurt like a physical pain, and the moments seemed endless until Hilliard returned accompanied by the farmer and three of his men.

An hour later the Major was carried upstairs to his own room in the Castle, and laid gently upon the old four-poster bed. Hilliard had ridden on in advance to prepare the young mistress, and there she stood at the doorway, white to the lips, but smiling still, a smile of almost motherly tenderness as she bent over the prostrate form.

"More trouble to ye, Bridgie!" murmured the Major faintly. "A little rest—that's all I need; but that poor beast! Tell Dennis to go and put her out of her misery." He shut his eyes and remained silent until the doctor arrived, galloping up to the door on Hilliard's horse, which he had lent to save time, and tearing up the staircase to the sick-room with the unprofessional speed of an old and devoted friend.

The examination was soon over, and fortunately the patient asked no questions; he was tired and inclined for sleep, unperturbed on his own account, but greatly distressed for the noble animal for whose agony he held himself responsible. He was soothed by the assurance that everything possible should be done to cure, or, if that were impossible, to end its sufferings, and was then left to rest while the doctor returned to the morning-room to face the sisters with what courage he might. Bridgie lay back in a deep, old-fashioned chair, a slight, almost childlike figure, her hands clasped in her lap, her shoulders bowed as by too heavy a burden—the burden of all those five motherless,—it might soon be fatherless?—children. Esmeralda, straight and defiant by the fireplace, her stormy eyes challenging his face.

"I—I—there is very little to say!" The doctor passed his hands helplessly through his grey locks and wished himself at the other end of the county. "I didn't want to fatigue him to-day, but to-morrow we can have a better examination. Perhaps Trevor would come over in consultation. He seems quite easy—quite easy and comfortable. I think he will sleep. You must keep up your hearts, and not let him think you are anxious. A great thing to keep up the spirits!"

"Why do you talk like that? Why do you try to deceive us? My father will never get better. You know perfectly well that it is hopeless!" Esmeralda's voice sounded clear and cold as falling water; her lips did not tremble, she looked the doctor full in the face with hard, defiant eyes. "I have seen other accidents before this, and know what it means. It is useless to pretend. He has no pain because his spine is too much injured. If he suffered, there might be some hope; as it is, there is none. He will lie there days, weeks, months, whichever it may be, but he will never move out of that room. He is dead already, my father, the father I love, and it will be cruel and wicked of you if you try to keep him alive!"

"Joan, Joan! Oh, darling, don't! Think what you are saying!"

Tender-hearted Bridgie burst into tears, but Esmeralda would not be restrained. She turned to her sister ablaze with righteous anger.

"What! You too? Would you keep him here, existing—merely existing—not able to do anything—he who has been so active all his life! It's cruel, I tell you—cruel and selfish! You ought not even to wish such a thing!"

"My child, the issues of life and death are not in our hands!" The voice of the old man sounded solemn and deep after the girl's heated accents, and she caught her breath as she listened. "It is not for you to decide what is best. If your father lingers in helplessness, it will be for some wise purpose, and you will see that it will be less trying than you expect. Nature herself will work in his favour, for, when paralysis comes, on the brain is mercifully deadened against the worst. He will not suffer, and in all probability he will be patient and resigned. Is not that something for which to be thankful?"

Bridgie covered her face with a low, heart-broken cry, for the doctor's silent assent to Esmeralda's verdict—the undisguised conviction that the case was hopeless—came to her with a shock of surprise before which her courage wavered.

"Mother dead—father dead! All those children alone in the world, and no money for them, and only me—only me—" Her heart swelled with a great wave of protecting love; she held out her arms and cried brokenly, "Esmeralda, come—come to me. Darling, if we are to be alone, we must help each other, we must love each other more! Oh, Esmeralda, be brave, for I am frightened—I can't do everything alone!" And at that Esmeralda gave a great cry and



rushed across the room, and the old doctor groped his way downstairs, leaving the sisters sobbing in each other's arms.

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## Chapter Twenty Six.

### The Sentence.

That afternoon and the next day passed away like a nightmare, and still the Major lay in the same helpless calm. Mr Hilliard had gone over to Dublin on his own responsibility, and had come back late at night, bringing with him a trained nurse, at the sight of whom Bridgie shed tears of thankfulness; but during the daytime the sisters took it in turns to watch by the bedside, while Mademoiselle seemed to act the part of guardian angel to the whole household in turns. She soothed the excited servants and roused them to a sense of their duty. She cooked dainty little dishes for the nurses, and ministered to them when they were off duty. She interviewed callers, and, last and best of all, took Pixie in hand, and kept her interested and content. It was the strong wish of her brothers and sisters that Pixie should not suspect the dangerous nature of her father's illness, for they knew her excitable nature, and trembled for the effect on the invalid of one of her passionate bursts of lamentation.

"Besides, what's the use? Let her be happy as long as she can! I want her to be happy!" cried Bridgie pathetically; and Mademoiselle assented, knowing full well that the very effort of keeping up before the child would be good for the rest of the household. There was no preventing one interview, however, for the Major was as much set on seeing his piccaninny as she was determined to see him; so on the evening of the second day Bridgie led her cautiously into the room, and the sick man moved his eyes—the only part of him that seemed able to move—and looked wistfully into the eager face.

"Well, my Pixie, I've been getting into trouble, you see!"

"Does it hurt ye, father? Have you got a pain?"

"Never a bit, Pixie. I'm just numb. I feel as if I can't move!"

"I've felt the same meself. Many times! I feel it every morning at school when the gong rings and I'm made to get up. It's the same as being lazy."

The Major smiled for the first time since his return home. He never could resist Pixie's quaint speeches, and Bridgie watched with delight his brightening glance.

"Is it, piccaninny? That doesn't sound very serious. You'll have to tell the doctor to be stern with me. What have you been doing with yourself all day?"

"Fretting for you, but Mademoiselle's going to play games with me, and I'll enjoy them now that you're comfortable. You've got on the very best pillow-cases, father. You do look smart! Are you tired now? Do you want to go to sleep? Will I sing to you awhile, the hymn you liked so much at church last Sunday?"

Bridgie looked dismayed at the suggestion, but it appeared that Pixie knew best what would please her father, for once more his face brightened, and the eyes flashed an assent. On Sunday evenings in winter, when the long dark walk made it difficult to get to church, the O'Shaughnessys had been accustomed to sing hymns together, not in the drawling, slipshod method in which such singing is too often done, but with at least as much care and finish as they would have bestowed on secular music, the different parts being accurately represented, and due attention given to time and expression. In this way delightful hours had been spent, and many beautiful hymns imprinted on the memory, so that in this instance Pixie had no need to consult a book. She merely leant against the bed-post, clasped her hands together, and, opening her lips, began at once to sing, with clear, full-throated sweetness—

"Come unto Me, ye weary,  
And I will give you rest!"

The beautiful old words seemed to take upon themselves an added significance in the shaded room, with the motionless figure lying upon the bed. The Major shut his eyes, and Bridgie turned aside with quivering face, but the flute-like voice went on without a tremor—

"Come unto Me, ye fainting,  
And I will give you life!  
O cheering voice of Jesus,  
Which comes to end our strife.  
The foe is stern and eager,  
The fight is fierce and long,  
But He has made us mighty,  
And stronger than the strong."

There was a slight quickening of time in the last two lines, a clearer, stronger tone, as the singer's emotional nature caught the triumph in the words, but the last verse was soft as an echo.

"And whosoever cometh  
I will not cast him out.'  
O welcome voice of Jesus,  
Which drives away our doubt;

Which calls us very sinners,  
Unworthy though we be  
Of love so free and boundless,  
To come, dear Lord, to Thee!"

The Major's face was in shadow, but Bridgie saw the big tears rolling down his cheeks, and hurried the little sister from the room.

"You sang beautifully, darling. It was sweet of you to think of it, but now we must let him be quiet. I think perhaps he will go to sleep."

"Yes, he says he feels lazy! The Major was always fond of his bed!" cried Pixie, skipping blithely down the staircase; but when Bridgie went back to the sick-room her father's eyes were fixed eagerly on the doorway, and he said in urgent tones—

"Bride, I'm wanting to see O'Brien! Send down for him at once, and when he arrives, let him come up alone. I want to have a talk!"

Bridgie obeyed, in fear and trembling. Had something in the sweet though solemn words of the hymn arrested the sick man's attention and given him a conviction of his own danger? She sent the faithful Dennis in search of the doctor, and in less than an hour's time the two old friends were once more face to face.

"O'Brien," said the Major clearly, "I want you to answer me a question before I sleep. Shall I ever hunt again?" And at this the doctor heaved a sigh of relief, for he had feared a more direct inquiry, and consequently one more difficult to answer.

"Not this season, my boy; you must make up your mind to that. A spill like yours takes a little time to recover. You must be easy, and make yourself happy at home."

"O'Brien, shall I ever hunt again?"

The doctor put his hand to his head in miserable embarrassment. He had known handsome Jack O'Shaughnessy since he was a boy in knickerbockers. It was more than he could stand to look him in the face and give him his death-warrant.

"Now—now—now," he cried impatiently, "it isn't like you, Major, to be worrying your head about what is going to happen next year! Keep still, and be thankful you've a comfortable bed to lie on and two of the prettiest daughters in Ireland to wait upon you! When next season comes it will answer for itself, but I'm not a prophet—I can't foretell the future."

The Major looked in his face with bright, steady eyes.

"You foolish fellow!" he cried. "You foolish fellow! You were always a bad hand at deception, and you are no cleverer than usual this evening. What are you afraid of, man? I'm not a coward! If my time's come, I can face it calmly. Back injured, eh? That's why I felt no pain, but it's difficult to realise that an injury is hopeless, when one is so comparatively comfortable. How long will it be?"

He was perfectly calm, but the doctor was trembling with emotion, and his voice was rough with tears.

"I can't say. You are very ill, old man—I won't deceive you—but while there is life there is hope. We are going to have a man from Dublin; we will try every means, and you must help us by keeping up your heart. One never knows what changes may take place." But the Major only looked at him the more steadily and repeated his question.

"How long will it be? I ought to know, so that I may do what I can for the children. I haven't been the best of fathers to them, and the estate is in a rare muddle. And Jack! What about Jack? I'd like to see him again, but if it's not imminent, I won't bring him back just yet. The boy is doing well, but he is not his own master, and has just had a holiday. I must be unselfish in my last days, but you must promise, doctor, not to let me go without seeing Jack!"

"My dear fellow, it's not a question of days! At the worst it will be weeks, possibly months. My own opinion is two or three months, but we shall know better after Barrett has been down. I wish you had not asked me. It's the hardest work I've ever had to do, to tell you this; but for the children's sake—if there is anything to be done, you ought not to waste time!"

"I understand!" said the Major quietly, then suddenly a light flashed across his face, and his eyes sparkled as with joy. "I shall die at Knock!" he cried. "I shall not have to turn out after all! It was that that drove me mad, O'Brien—the thought of leaving the old place where I was born, and all my people before me! I had bad news from the bank, and it seemed as if the end had come at last, and all the time I was riding I was feeling desperate—driven into a corner. The poor beast tried to save me, she knew the jump was too much for her, but I was too reckless to care. I felt that I could face death sooner than leave the old place, and now it has come to that after all. I shall die at Knock! Thank God for that! Go downstairs, O'Brien, and tell the girls that I know the truth, and am quite happy. You needn't mind leaving me. I shall sleep now!"

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## Chapter Twenty Seven.

### Esmeralda's Solace.

The Dublin specialist came down in due course, and entirely agreed with Dr O'Brien's diagnosis. There was no chance of the Major's recovery, and though there was no immediate danger, it was not likely that life would be prolonged for more than two or three months at most. He would not suffer physically nor mentally, for the brain power would become more and more dulled, so that he would hardly realise his condition.

The thought of watching him die by inches, as it were, was an even harder trial to Esmeralda's impetuous nature than the shock of a sudden death, but Bridgie was thankful for every day as it came, for every opportunity of ministering to his needs. And he was so sweet, so gentle; all his former indifference and selfishness had fallen from him like a cloak, and his one thought was for his children, his one anxiety on their behalf. When Bridgie saw how devoted he was to his piccaninny, and how she could always succeed in raising a smile, she proposed that the child should not return to school for the next term at least; but the Major would not listen to the suggestion.

"No, no! I promised Molly that she should have her chance, and I won't have her distressed. If she stayed on she would find out—and she would cry, and I never could endure to see her cry. It would be delightful to have her, but it will count for one real unselfish thing I've done in my life if I do without her for these last weeks."

So it was arranged that Pixie should return at the proper date, and Mademoiselle sat in the morning-room stitching away at the pile of shabby little garments, mending, and darning, putting in "elegant" little patches at the elbows, and turning and pressing the frayed silk cuffs. Neither of the sisters had time to help, and indeed seemed to think it unnecessary to spend so much trouble on a child's outfit, but Mademoiselle set her lips and went steadily on with her task. She knew, if they did not, that it is not too pleasant for a girl to be noticeably shabby at a fashionable school, and many a dainty piece of ribbon and lace found its way from her box to refresh hat or dress, and give an appearance of freshness to the well-worn background. When the last night came, and Bridgie tried to thank her for her help, she shook her head and refused to listen.

"I was a stranger to you, and you welcomed me among you as if I had been your own. You were more than kind, you seemed to love me, and never let me feel for one moment that I was one apart. That means a great deal to a woman who is alone in a strange land, and I could not be more happy than to find something to do for you in return. What is a little sewing? Bah! I tell you, my friend, it is much more than that I intend to do for your Pixie. You say that you will not long be able to send her to school, but I can do better for her than school. At the end of this year I must go 'ome, for my sister is *fiancée*, and when she is married I must be there to look after the old father. Lend Pixie to me, and she shall learn to speak French, the proper French, not that dreadful language of Holly House, and I will take her myself to the Conservatoire—there is no better place in the world to learn music than the Conservatoire in Paris—and she shall learn to sing and make use of that lovely voice. *Voilà, ma chère*, at the end of a few years she comes back to you, and you will not know her! A young woman, with grace, with charm, with—what shall I say?—an air such as your English girls do not know how to possess, and everyone shall say, 'How she is accomplished, that Pixie! How she is clever and *chic!*'"

The tears had risen in Bridgie's eyes, but now she was obliged to laugh at the same time, for it was so droll to think of Pixie as a young lady "with an air!" She laid her hand on Mademoiselle's arm, with one of her pretty caressing gestures.

"You are a dear, kind Thérèse, and it all sounds too charming, but I am afraid it cannot be done. We shall be very poor, dear father's pension will die with him, and if we cannot afford school, we could not pay you properly for all your trouble. You are a darling for thinking of it, but—"

She stopped short in dismay, for Mademoiselle had straightened her back until it was as stiff as a poker, and was glaring at her with the air of an offended Fury.

"Did you ask me for money when I came here? Did you expect me to pay when you asked me to your house? Am I a pauper, then, that you insult me with such an idea? It is the first time, I must say, that I have invited a guest, and been offered a payment."

"Oh! oh! oh! What will I do? Don't glare at me like that, Thérèse, or I'll expire with fright! I never offered you a payment, my dear; I said I couldn't pay. I don't know what I said, but I never meant to make you angry! If you don't forgive me this instant, I'll cry, and if I once start crying, I shall go on till to-morrow, and so I warn you! *Please*, Thérèse!"

She held out her hand appealingly, but Mademoiselle still tilted her head, and kept up an air of offence.

"My feelings are 'urt," she said with dignity, "and they can only be appeased if you withdraw your remarks, and promise that Pixie shall come. You can pay for the lessons she takes, and the Paris Conservatoire will not ruin you, my dear, I can tell you that; but for the rest, do you suppose Pixie will do nothing for me in return for her board? It is not too lively, a house with an invalid and an old maid, and they may perhaps be glad to have a young thing about; to be made to laugh sometimes and have some interest in life beyond rheumatism and asthma! Do not disturb yourself; if you are too proud to accept help from me, be assured that I shall make the child useful. She shall work for her living!"

"You are pretending to be cross, to make me say 'Yes,' but you needn't keep it up any longer, dear. I'll say it with thankfulness this minute, if it is indeed a pleasure to you too. I don't feel at all too proud to accept a favour from you, and besides, it seems as if Providence meant it to be so, and just the most wonderful and beautiful reason for your coming here, which seemed at first so extraordinary. If you will really let us pay for her lessons and make her as useful as if she were your own little sister, why, then, thank you a thousand times, and a thousand times more for lifting a weight off my mind. I was worrying myself about her future, and now I shall worry no more, and father will be so relieved, so happy! Are you sufficiently appeased to let me kiss you, you haughty Mademoiselle?"

"With pleasure; yes! but my feelings are still sensitive. With the slightest irritation I should have a relapse!" said

Mademoiselle stiffly; for it would not do to indulge in sentiment to-day, and Bridgie's tears were dangerously near the surface.

The time for parting came at last, and the Major nerved himself to bid adieu to his piccaninny with a composure which should leave her unsuspecting of its final nature. He was very white, but Pixie had grown accustomed to his pallor, and mingling with her grief at leaving home was a keen pleasure at the thought of returning to her school companions, of seeing Margaret and Ethel, of hearing Flora's fat, contented chuckle, and seeing poor Lottie, and hearing how she had fared at home. It was all very interesting and exciting, and somehow or other home had been unusually dull during the last fortnight. Even Esmeralda had turned quiet and mild, and Pat abandoned practical joking, and for once been as good as he looked. The longing for some of the old mischievous days made Pixie listen to her father's precepts with a decided lack of enthusiasm.

"You will be a good child now, piccaninny, and work hard at your tasks. Remember what I say to you, that you couldn't please me more than by being good and industrious, and obedient to your teachers. I let you run wild too long, and that's made you behind other girls of your age, but you'll promise me that you will settle down, and make the most of your opportunities?"

"I don't feel as if I wanted to 'settle down.' It sounds so dull! Ye can work without being so awfully proper, can't you, father? I can be a little mischievous sometimes, can't I—especially on half-holidays? I'll work all the better for it afterwards. And the girls would be so disappointed if I were proper. You wouldn't believe how I liven them up. Ye wouldn't like it yourself, now, Major, if ye never saw any more of my pranks!"

He winced at that, but smiled bravely, his eye resting longingly upon the thin little figure wriggling to and fro in the earnestness of its appeal. With the remembrance of all that her brightness had been to him, he could not bring himself to forbid it to others.

"Be as happy as you can, darling, and make other people happy too. So long as you consider their feelings, and are careful not to go too far, you will do no harm. Good-bye, my piccaninny! God bless you! Never mind if you are not clever. Go on loving and making sunshine, and you will do a great work in the world. Remember your old father when you get back among your new friends!"

"I'll think of you for ever!" said Pixie solemnly. "Haste and get well, Major, and come and take me out. You must be getting tired of your bed, poor creature, but I'm glad you have no pain! You won't be here long now."

"No, not long," said the Major quietly. Then he held up his lips to be kissed, murmuring the last, the very last words of farewell, "Good-bye, dearest. Thank you for being such a good, loving little daughter!"

"Thank you, me dear, for the father you have been to me!" returned Pixie, in a tone of gracious condescension which made the listener smile through his tears. That was a sweet characteristic little speech to cherish as the last! He shut his eyes in token of dismissal, and Pixie stole away, somewhat sobered and impressed, for the Major had not been given to improving an occasion, but free from the vaguest suspicion that she had bidden him her last farewell.

Downstairs Esmeralda was waiting to drive the cart to the station, and at the station itself Mr Hilliard was standing ready to receive the travellers and make every preparation for their comfort. No one seemed in the least surprised to see him, for in Jack's absence he had quietly taken upon himself the part of an elder son, and in every emergency had stepped forward and filled the gap so efficiently and with such tact that he seemed more like a friend of years' standing than an acquaintance of a few weeks. His business in London had apparently been accomplished in a flying visit of forty-eight hours, during which time he had seen Jack and eased anxiety by a personal report of the invalid, and here he was back again, declaring that there was no reason to keep him in town, and that if he could be of the slightest use at Bally William, there was no place in the world where he would sooner remain. Bridgie smiled to herself with quiet understanding, and Esmeralda grew thoughtful, and her white cheeks hung out a flag of welcome every time he made his appearance.

To-day she made no objections to his proposal that they should walk back from the station, leaving a boy to drive the cart home during the afternoon, and they struck across the fields together, disregarding damp and mud with the callousness of true lovers of the country. The girl's face was worn and downcast, for the Castle would seem sadder and emptier than ever, now that the little sister had gone and that dear, helpful Mademoiselle; and at nineteen it is hard to look forward and know for a certainty that the shadows must deepen. There were still sadder times ahead, and a loneliness such as she dared not even imagine; for Esmeralda had not Bridgie's sweet faith and trust, and hers was a stormy, rebellious nature, which made trouble harder to bear by useless fightings against the inevitable. Bridgie found a dozen reasons for thankfulness among all her distresses—the kindness of friends, the ceaseless attentions of the good old doctor, her father's freedom from pain, and the fact that he would be spared the dread of his lifetime—a separation from the old home. Joan saw nothing but clouds and darkness, and tortured herself with useless questionings. Why—why—why—why should all this trouble fall upon her? Why should other girls have father and mother and money and opportunity, and she be deprived of all? Why should the accident have been allowed to happen when her father's life was of such value—such inestimable value to his young family? Why should her life be darkened just at the time when she was most able to appreciate joy and gladness?

Hilliard watched the clouds flit over the beautiful face, and was at no loss to understand their meaning. During the last fortnight he had more than once been a witness to a storm of misery and rebellion, and apart from that fact he had an instinctive understanding of the girl's moods, which seemed all the more curious, as his own nature of happy optimism was as great a contrast to hers as could possibly be imagined.

A smile flickered over his face as he reflected on the strangeness of his present position. A month ago, if anyone had described to him the O'Shaughnessy sisters, he would have declared without a moment's hesitation that Bridgie would be his favourite—that in every way her character would be more attractive to him than that of Esmeralda.

Even now—even now, yes!—if the question were put plainly before him, he must still confess that “Saint Bridget” was sweeter, simpler, less wayward, more unselfish; yet in spite of all there remained the extraordinary fact that he liked Bridgie and loved Esmeralda with the whole strength of a warm and loving heart! He saw her faults clearly enough with those keen, quizzical eyes; but what the sight roused in him was not so much disapproval as pity, and an immense longing to help and comfort. He loved her; he understood her; he honestly believed he could help her to rise above the weaknesses of girlhood, and become the fine large-hearted woman which Providence had intended her to be; and the time had come when he intended to speak his mind and ask her to be his wife. The silence had lasted so long that at last Joan herself became conscious of it, and roused herself to apologise for her rudeness.

“But I’m miserable,” she said simply. “I can’t remember to be polite. I was miserable last time when the Pixie left us, but now it is a hundred times worse. I can’t bear to think of going back to that big empty place, with that dreadful shadow coming nearer and nearer every day. I am a coward, and can’t face it!”

“You are a very brave girl—one of the bravest I have known. If anyone but yourself dared to call you cowardly, you would never forgive him!”

“I know. It’s quite true. I am brave physically, but I’ve never been tried in this way before, so I didn’t know how weak I was. It arises from selfishness, I suppose. It’s so hard to suffer like this.”

“No one can be selfish who loves another person more than himself. I have never seen two sisters so devoted to each other as you and Miss Bridgie. You will think of her before yourself, and try to help her, simply because you will not be able to help it!”

“Darling Bridgie—yes, I do love her. Who could help it? She takes this trouble like the saint she is, and believes that it is God’s will, and must be for the best. I can’t feel that—I can’t! It’s against reason. It’s no use pretending that I do, for I should only be a hypocrite.”

“You have a different nature from your sister’s. It is more difficult for you to be resigned, and therefore all the more praiseworthy if you fight against your rebellious thoughts, and learn submission.”

The tears rose slowly to Joan’s eyes, and she looked at him with a flickering smile.

“It’s no use talking to you. You won’t believe how wicked I am. You make excuses for me all the time.”

“Because I love you, Joan, that’s why! Have you found that out for yourself? I began to love you the first night I saw you, and I’ve been progressing rapidly ever since. We have not known each other for long, as time goes, but so much has happened, and we have been thrown so much together, that we know each other as well as many acquaintances of years’ standing. My mind is made up, at any rate; there is no other girl in the world for me! Do you think if you tried very hard, and I waited very patiently, you could possibly bring yourself to love me in return?”

Esmeralda gazed at him with her wonderful grey eyes, not shyly, not self-consciously, but with slow, solemn deliberation.

“I don’t know,” she said simply. “I can’t tell. I like you very much; you have been very kind to us, and it does me good to talk to you, but that isn’t enough, is it? I don’t know if I love you, but I love you to love me! It comforts my heart, and makes me feel braver and less lonely. Sometimes this last week—just once or twice when we have been alone—I have thought perhaps you did, and I hoped I was right. I hoped I was not mistaken.”

“You darling! Oh, you darling!” cried Hilliard rapturously. “You do make me happy by telling me that. That’s all I want—the very best proof you could give me that you care for me too. Don’t you see, my beauty, that you must care, or you would not want my love? Don’t you see that you have been drawn to me, just as I have been drawn to you, and have felt the need of me, just as I have longed and wearied for you ever since we met?”

He tried to take hold of her hand as he spoke, but Esmeralda drew back, refusing to be caressed. She was trembling now, and her cheeks were flushed with the loveliest rosy blush, but there was an almost piteous appeal in her voice.

“No, no! I don’t see, and I don’t want to see. My father is dying—he has only a little time to live, and I don’t want to think of anything but him. If it is as you say, there will be all my life after that, but I can’t think of love-making and being happy just the very last weeks we shall have him with us. You mustn’t be vexed; you mustn’t think me ungrateful. Indeed, indeed I can’t help it!”

“Vexed!” echoed Hilliard. “Ungrateful!” His glance was eloquent enough to show how far such words were from expressing his real feelings; and indeed, if it had been possible to love Esmeralda more dearly than he did, he would have done so at this moment, when she had shown him the reality of the generous nature which lay beneath her girlish extravagances, “You are absolutely and perfectly right, dearest,” he said warmly, “and I promise you faithfully that I will not try in any way to absorb your attention so long as your father lives. But after that, Esmeralda, (I may call you Esmeralda, mayn’t I? Dear, charming, ridiculous name—I love it, it is so deliciously characteristic!) after that you must let me take my right place as your chief helper and comforter. I won’t be put off any longer, and I think I shall be able to do more for you than anyone else.”

“I believe you would, but—” Esmeralda looked at him beneath a troubled, puckered brow—“please understand exactly what you are doing! We are dreadfully poor—we shall be poorer than ever after father’s death. If I marry I shall not have a penny; for what little there is will be needed, and more than needed, for Bridgie and the children. It would be rather hard on you, for, as you are not rich yourself, you ought to marry a rich wife.”

“The same argument would apply to you, wouldn’t it? Are you quite sure that you would not mind marrying a poor man, and that you would be willing to give up luxuries for my sake?”

"If I cared enough in other ways, it would not be money that would prevent me, but I should not like to be *very* poor!" returned Esmeralda honestly. "I've had a taste of it, you see, and it is so dull to be always worried about butchers' bills, and not be able to have nice puddings because of the eggs, and to have to turn your dresses over and over again. I've never once in my life bought a thing because I liked it best. I've always had to think that it was cheaper than the others, and I must make it do. I suppose men can't realise how hard that is, for they need so much less, and their things are so much alike; but it's hard to know for certain that you could look just twice as nice, and have to put up with the frumpy things, because you have no money to pay for the pretty ones!"

"Could you look twice as nice as you do now—really?" Hilliard laughed with happy incredulity. "Esmeralda, I don't believe it; but if you marry me you shall try! I am not so poor that I cannot afford to be a little extravagant for my wife, and I promise you faithfully that you shall never be worried about the bills. I'll protect you from that, and every other trouble, I hope, my darling!"

"It—it seems to me we are getting on very fast. I thought I said that nothing was decided. Oh, please talk of something else!" cried Esmeralda urgently; and Hilliard laughed once more, and obediently discussed the weather until the Castle gates were reached.

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## Chapter Twenty Eight.

### A Telegram.

It was six weeks later that the girls in Holly House heard a sharp, wailing cry from within the portals of Miss Phipps's private room, and looked at each other with eyes of sympathetic understanding. The knowledge that Pixie's father was seriously ill had leaked out among the elder pupils, and this afternoon, as they returned from their walk, a telegraph boy had met them in the drive, and Mademoiselle had turned pale and muttered below her breath. Miss Phipps called her aside on entering, and at tea-time there were unmistakable tear-marks round her eyes, and she was even more affectionate than usual in her manner to Pixie,—poor, unconscious Pixie, who was in radiant spirits, and quite puffed up with pride because she had suddenly remembered a favourite exploit as practised at Knock Castle, and had issued invitations to the fifth-form to come to the classroom before tea and play the part of spectators, while she made a circuit of the room without touching the ground.

"Without—touching—the—ground! Pixie O'Shaughnessy, are you demented?" demanded Flora incredulously. "You can't fly, I suppose? Then how on earth could you get round a room without touching the floor?"

"Come with me, me dear, and you shall see," returned Pixie graciously, and forthwith led the way into the big, bare room. There was no class being held at the time, so that the performer and her friends were the only persons present; the chairs were neatly ranged beside the desks, the matches and vases of spills which usually graced the mantelpiece were placed together on a corner bracket, otherwise no article had been moved from its place. Pixie sprang lightly on to a chair near the door, kissed her hand after the manner of the lady riders at the circus, and started off on her mad career.

From one chair to another, from chair number two to the shelf of the old bookcase which filled the middle space of the wall; from the bookcase, with a leap and a bound, on to the oak chest in which were stored drawing-books and copies; from the chest to another chair, and thence with a whoop and wildly waving hands to the end of an ordinary wooden form. Why that form did not collapse at once, and land the invader on the floor, no one of the spectators could understand! Flora gave a hollow groan and leant against the wall in palpitating nervousness; Kate shut her eyes, and Ethel pinched Margaret's arm with unconscious severity; but, after all, nothing happened! With instantaneous quickness Pixie had fallen forward on her knees, and so restored the bench to its normal position; and now she was off again with another kiss, another flourish, another whisk of those absurd short petticoats. Providentially there was a table close at hand which she could mount without difficulty, and so bring herself to the completion of the first half of her task, but the harder part was still to come.

It was easy enough to run along the blackboard, but what about that space between it and the shelves at the other side of the fireplace? "She can't do it!" cried Ethel confidently; but Pixie had not made her boast without counting the cost. What if there was no article of furniture within reach, there was a shelf overhead to which one could cling and work slowly along hand over hand until the coal-box offered a friendly footing! Then, when one had been accustomed to climb trees all one's life, what could be easier than to rest the elbows on the mantelpiece, and with the aid of one foot pressed lightly on that fat, substantial bell, (horrors! suppose it rang!) to wriggle upward until knees joined elbows, and a perpendicular position was once more possible! The gasps and groans from the doorway were even more encouraging than applause, and under their influence it was impossible to resist indulging in a few extravagances, such as standing poised on one leg, blowing more kisses, and bowing from side to side after the manner of that fascinating circus lady. Another bound sent her lightly on to the one substantial chair which the room possessed—Miss Phipps's seat when she came to take a class. It rocked, of course, but to balance it was child's play, compared with the really difficult feat with the form, and for the rest of the course the way was easy. Anyone could have run along the substantial dumb waiter, stepped down to the chair by its side, and so, with a leap, to the one from which the start had been made. Pixie stopped, panting, gasping, and smirking at her companions, expectant of adulation, but there was more reproach than praise in store.

"You are mad!" cried Ethel shortly. "Stark, staring mad! No thanks to you that every bone in your body isn't broken. I wonder what Miss Phipps would have said if she had come in while you were pirouetting on the mantelpiece! It would have been your turn to be surprised then, my young friend."

"I n-n-never did see such a sight in all my born days," stuttered Flora blankly. "You've made me feel quite ill. My heart is pumping like an engine. I thought every moment you would be killed. I call it mean and unkind to ask us to

look on while you play such tricks, for you know very well we should be blamed if anything went wrong! I'll never come again, so you needn't trouble to ask me!"

"Pixie dear, it really is most dangerous! You might have sprained your ankle a dozen times over. Promise me, promise me faithfully, that you will never do it again!" pleaded Margaret gently; but Pixie shook her head in obstinate fashion.

"Me dear, don't ask me! I'll tell you no stories. I've done it a dozen times at home, and so have Bridgie and Esmeralda. It was a fine handicap we had one night, boys against girls, and Bridgie the winner, being so light on her feet. You wouldn't wish to forbid what my own family approves." She drew herself up with an air of dignity as she pronounced the last words, and skipped out of the room, as the quickest way of closing the argument; but when tea-time arrived she was still abeam with complacency, and pleasantly conscious of being the object of an unusual amount of attention. The girls all looked at her and smiled so kindly when they met her eye; jam and scones were pressed upon her from half a dozen different quarters; Mademoiselle called her "*chérie*," and even Miss Phipps said "dear." "Are you having a good tea, dear?" "Won't you have another cup of tea, dear?" It was all very pleasant and gratifying, and she felt convinced that the fame of her exploit had spread over the school, and that even the teachers had been unable to resist it.

She was strutting out of the dining-room at the conclusion of the meal, when Miss Phipps laid a hand on her shoulder and said, "Come into my room, Pixie," and a moment later she stood within the boudoir, staring around with wide, astonished eyes. Mademoiselle had followed, and was twisting her hands together, trying vainly not to cry. Miss Phipps looked at her and made a little signal, but Mademoiselle only shook her head, and held out her hands with a helpless gesture, and then Miss Phipps began to speak herself, in such a gentle voice—a voice quite different from her usual brisk, decided accents.

"Pixie dear, I have something to tell you. God has been very kind to the dear father whom you love so much. He saw that he could never be well again—never able to move about, nor walk, nor ride, as he had done before, and instead of leaving him to lie helpless upon his bed for long weary years, as so many poor sufferers have had to do, He took him home at once, and made him well and strong again. You must not think of your father as dead, Pixie. He is alive and happy in heaven!"

But it was too early for the dead man's child to realise that beautiful truth, and Pixie burst into a passion of grief, and the girls without heard the long pitiful wails and nestled close to each other and sobbed in sympathy.

Miss Phipps talked on and on, saying comforting words in that new sweet voice, and Mademoiselle put her arms fondly round the little figure and said—

"You will be brave, *chérie*. You are always brave! All the O'Shaughnessys are brave—your Bridgie told me so, and said it was the pride of the family! You will not be the first to act like a coward. No!" But the shock was too sudden to be borne with resignation.

"We haven't got any family now! How can you have a family without a father? He wouldn't have died if I had been at home. He was always cheerful when I was with him, and he said himself I was better than a doctor. Oh, Major, Major! Oh, Bridgie, Bridgie! Me heart's broken! Me heart's broken!"

Pixie wept and wailed, and presently Miss Phipps stopped trying to console, and let her weep her fill, knowing well that the noisy grief is never the most lasting, and that when the first passion was exhausted she would be more ready for comfort. She had purposely delayed telling the sad news until tea was over, and presently it would be time for bed, when the sleep of childhood would drop its soothing curtain over grief. Pixie lay on the sofa, and cried until her face was swollen and she was too exhausted to cry any longer, and Miss Phipps was just about to propose a move to bed when, to her amazement, the child suddenly put her feet to the ground, sat up, and said faintly—

"I want to see the girls!"

Well, after all, it was a natural request, for the bent of a lifetime does not change in moments of grief, and Pixie was a sociable little creature who must needs have someone in whom to confide on every occasion. Miss Phipps realised as much, and also that companions of her own age would be better comforters than the teachers, between whom and the pupils there was naturally a great gulf fixed; so she assented at once, saying only—

"I will come for you in ten minutes. You must not stay downstairs longer than that," and Pixie feebly tottered across the hall to the room where the elder girls were sitting. She chose to join them rather than the pupils of her own age, for, as she had previously explained, she had been accustomed to "grown-ups" at home, and felt more interest in their society. The girls raised their heads with starts of surprise as she entered, and came slowly forward to seat herself in a chair. They stared at her with melancholy eyes, but there was a dead silence, for no one knew what to say or how to say it, so they sat in a row facing her, and Pixie blinked and trembled, and screwed her fingers together in a tight little knot.

"I'm an orphan!" she said faintly, and five separate sobs of sympathy sounded as replies.

"Poor little kid!" said Kate gruffly.

"D-arling!" sobbed Flora.

"But we all love you, Pixie! Everyone loves you! You can't be lonely, dear, when you have so many friends," said Margaret's soft voice; and a hand stretched out and clutched hers in convulsive energy. It was Lottie's hand, and Lottie's face was trembling as if she were going to cry, and a pulse on her temple was beating up and down, Pixie looked at her curiously, and realised that, sorry as the others were, she was somehow sorriest of all, and most

anxious to comfort. Lottie had been much subdued and silent since the beginning of the term, and had seemed, if anything, to avoid the society of the girl whom she had treated so badly, but with her fine intuition Pixie had understood quite well that the avoidance arose from no lack of affection. She held Lottie's hand in a tight pressure while she continued her broken sentences.

"And I didn't know he was going to die. They never told me. Miss Phipps says they didn't want me to be unhappy, but I'd rather have known. He wasn't like other people's fathers. They are old, with grey hair; he was young—like a boy, and so handsome and gay. He always laughed, even if things went wrong, and I was the youngest, and he wouldn't have me thwarted. No one ever appreciated me like the Major. The very last words he spoke were praising me and saying what a daughter I'd been!"

"When you said 'Good-bye,' you mean. That's good to think of, isn't it, Pixie? He knew he would never see you again, and that afterwards you would remember all he said, and treasure it in your heart, and the sweetest thing of all is to know that you were a joy and pleasure to him. It is a comfort to think that he is well again, isn't it? Quite well and happy in heaven!"

"I want him on earth!" said Pixie, and the tears flowed down her cheeks. "We all want him. What is to become of us without our father? I feel as if I could never be happy again, but he said I must be. 'Be as happy as you can,' he said, 'and make other people happy too. Never trouble a bit about your lessons, but go on loving and making sunshine, and you'll do a great work in the world.' Those were the very last words I heard him speak."

It was a somewhat free translation, so far as lessons were concerned, and the girls realised as much, being accustomed to Pixie and her ways, but they allowed that part of the story to pass without comment, and referred only to what was obviously a literal repetition.

"Well, then, of course, you must obey his last words! It would not be like a good daughter if you didn't. You must go on loving us, and making us happy, and we shall all be wretched if we see you fretting. You do make us happy, you know, Pixie! We have been ever so much livelier since you came. I think it ought to cheer anyone to know that she can make thirty-three people happy, don't you, now?"

"Can I—can I really?" Pixie inquired wistfully. "I'm glad of that, and I will try, but I can't help fretting a little first! I don't think the Major would like it if I didn't fret for him." And at this moment Miss Phipps came into the room and put an end to the conference.

"I can't let you sit up a moment longer, you weary little girl! Say 'Good-night' at once, and one of the girls shall go upstairs with you, and help you to undress. Which will you have?"

Pixie looked from one to the other of her companions with uncertain gaze. Where everyone was so kind it was hard to choose. Ethel had not tossed her head once since she entered the room; Kate kept taking off her spectacles, and polishing them on her handkerchief; Flora looked so kind and comfortable; the "Bridgie's expression" was stronger than ever in Margaret's eyes; but there was a something in Lottie's face—a humble, wistful longing which was to be found nowhere else.

"Lottie, please!" she cried quickly; and the other girls realised at once that the cure had begun, for Pixie was already forgetting herself, and considering how she could make other people happy!

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## Chapter Twenty Nine.

### The Sisters' Visit.

Pixie did not go home for the Easter holidays, for everything at the Castle was so sad and unsettled that Bridgie felt it advisable that she should stay away a little longer, and an invitation from Mr and Mrs Vane came as a happy alternative.

On the whole she spent a happy three weeks, thoroughly enjoying the luxury of her surroundings and the attention lavished upon her by every member of the household. Mr Vane still remained grey and serious, but he was unfailingly kind; while his wife belonged to the type designated by schoolgirls as "simple darlings," and seemed to find no greater pleasure in life than in making young people happy. It was evident that they were both devoted to their only remaining child, though there was a reserve in their manner which seemed to Irish Pixie perilously allied to coldness. She was all unconscious that her own fearless intimacy of manner made a precedent for little demonstrations of affection which had hitherto been unknown in the household; but so it was, and her host and hostess felt that they owed her a second debt of gratitude, whenever Lottie volunteered a caress, or added a second kiss to the morning greeting. Perhaps, in their determination to overcome their daughter's faults, they had erred on the side of firmness, and so brought about another temptation in the girl's terror of discovery; and if this were so, what better instrument could have been found to draw them together than fearless, loving, audacious Pixie?

When the time came to return to school, she received many pressing invitations to return to a home where she would always be welcome, and was able truthfully to assure the girls at Holly House that Lottie had been "an angel" to her throughout the holidays.

After that the ordinary routine went on for a few weeks, broken by nothing more exciting than the weekly letters from home; then came an episode of thrilling interest, when Geoffrey Hilliard was shown into the drawing-room, and Miss O'Shaughnessy summoned from her class and sent upstairs to brush her hair, before going to interview him. He was leaning against the mantelpiece as she entered, looking very tall and handsome in his long frock coat, and he was smiling to himself with a curious shiny look in his eyes, which at once arrested Pixie's attention.



"How are you, Pixie? How are you, dear little girl?" he cried gushingly.

Pixie remarked that she was in excellent health, privately not a little taken aback by his fervour. "He seems mighty fond of me, all of a sudden. Over at Bally William he didn't care half so much. I suppose he missed me, after I'd gone!" She smiled at him encouragingly. "And you are looking very well yourself. I'm pleased to see you!"

"I am very well, Pixie. Happiness agrees with me. I'm very happy—the happiest man in the world! Do you know why? I am going to be married. I came on purpose to tell you. Can you guess who 'She' is?"

"How could I guess? I don't know your friends. There's no one at all that it could be, unless, perhaps—"

Pixie stopped short suddenly, as certain memories darted into her mind. The extraordinary manner in which Mr Hilliard was always appearing at Knock Castle during the Christmas holidays; his interest in everything Esmeralda did and said; the fixity of his gaze upon the beautiful face. She gasped and blinked with surprise. "Not—*not* Esmeralda?"

"Yes, yes, yes! Esmeralda, of course! Clever girl to guess so well! It was settled only last Wednesday, and she sent me across to tell you first thing, and ask your consent, as she couldn't be properly engaged without it. You see this is an important matter for me, so you really must be kind, for I can't give up Esmeralda, after waiting for her so long. Will you have me for another brother, and let me do all I can to make you happy?"

"I'm glad it isn't Bridgie," sighed Pixie irrelevantly; then, fearing that she had failed in politeness, "But Esmeralda is nice too," she added quickly. "She can't help having a temper, but she won't show it to you, like she did to her brothers and sisters. And she *is* beautiful! I've seen photographs of people they call beautiful here, and they are frights compared with her. I suppose I can have her room after she's married! It's got one of the turret windows, and I always wanted it because of the view. I hope you will be happy, Mr Hilliard. It was very kind of you to come and tell me. I'll write and ask Esmeralda if I may be a bridesmaid."

Hilliard laughed, and muttered something about "sisterly candour." He did not seem in the least alarmed at the thought of Esmeralda's temper, and settled the bridesmaid question there and then with the utmost confidence.

"Of course you shall be bridesmaid. The wedding will be in the summer holidays, but you will see your sisters before then. You knew, of course, that they were trying to let the Castle for a few years, until Jack makes his fortune, and goes back to live there himself. Well, I am glad to say a tenant has been found through a lawyer, and that everything is satisfactorily arranged. He takes possession on the first of September, and Bridgie is coming to live in London with Jack and the boys, in a nice little flat, where you can spend your holidays. She said I was to tell you that, and to say that you were not to fret for the Castle, for you would see much more of each other than if she had remained over there. She is coming to town in summer to look for the flat, and Esmeralda is coming too, to buy fineries for the wedding, and then we will all return to Ireland and have a quiet little wedding, and you shall keep Bridgie company when I carry Esmeralda away. That's the summer programme. I hope you approve!"

"I hate the man who's coming to Knock," said Pixie sadly; "but I am glad Bridgie will be near, and it will be lovely on holidays. It must feel strange to live in a flat; like being in a cage. I am sorry for the people beneath, when the boys get romping round. If I were Bridgie, I'd take a house, and then we could make as much noise as we liked. It's no use pretending that we are a quiet family, because we're not. You might think it was an army, to hear us tramp downstairs!"

"I—I think myself that a house would be more suitable!" said Hilliard, smiling his humorous twisted smile; then he asked to see Mademoiselle, and when he said to her in her turn that he had a piece of news to impart, she nodded her head gaily, and cried, "So, so! I 'ope you will be very 'appy!" and could not be induced to say that she was in the least surprised. Pixie hoped that none of the girls would ask about the new brother's business; for, after boasting of possible dukes, it was really rather humiliating to come down to glue! What a comfort that Lottie had turned over a new leaf, and abandoned her snobbish, inquisitive questionings!

After that it was a case of counting the days until the arrival of the sisters, and Pixie's companions were almost as excited as herself at the prospect of seeing the much-talked-of Bridgie and Esmeralda in the flesh. Miss Joan announced her intention of taking advantage of the July sales to buy her trousseau—a delightful arrangement, for by the time that dressmakers had done their work the holidays would begin, so that the girls could be present at the great breaking-up festival, and afterwards act as companions on the journey home. Pixie's elastic spirits went up with a bound, and every week they grew higher and higher, until at last it became a question of days, and Bridgie's letter must needs be addressed to Jack's lodgings instead of Knock Castle, for by the time it was delivered the dear visitors would have arrived in town.

"Please come to see me soon," ran the letter, "and be sure to look your nicest, because of the girls! They all want to see you, and I've told them such lots about you. Please ask Miss Phipps to let me come out often. Wednesday is the best day, because it's half-holiday, only I should like other days better, because I should get off prep. Please wear your best clothes!"

The two sisters laughed heartily over this missive, but Pixie's word was law, and as usual they obeyed her instructions to the letter. A telegram was sent off next morning to announce the hour in the afternoon at which they hoped to call, and the morning was spent to such good purpose that two most elegant and fashionable-looking young ladies drove up to Holly House shortly before four o'clock. The third-form girls were, to a man, peeping through the curtains of their classroom; Ethel had left her music in the drawing-room, and rushed downstairs to reclaim it the moment the door-bell rang; Kate suddenly felt it impossible to live without a clean handkerchief, and on her way upstairs waited round the corner of the hall until she could meet the visitors face to face; Flora peeped through the banisters, and snored so loudly in her excitement that she was in instant danger of discovery; and Pixie rushed like a whirlwind from the top of the house, and flung herself into Bridgie's arms.

They hugged and kissed, and kissed and hugged again, and fell apart to gaze with eyes that suddenly brimmed with tears. No need to ask the cause! The remembrance of the Major was in each heart, but Bridgie dried her eyes, and said, as if answering the unspoken lament—

“But we have so much to be thankful for! Such a splendid let for the Castle, and Jack so good, trying to find work for the boys, and Geoffrey like another brother, and Esmeralda so happy.”

No question about that! Esmeralda was radiant, more beautiful than ever, and astonishingly grand. So was Bridgie! The little sister gazed from one to the other with kindling eyes. Black dresses with tails to them; fluffy gauze boas with ends floating to the knees; hats that were not hats, but crinkled, brimless things like the Surbiton ladies wore in the afternoons, and so light and gauzy that they might have been blown away with a breath.

“You *are* fine!” she gasped, and the girls laughed and cried merrily.

“We had our instructions, you see! We dared not come down until we had bought new hats and gloves; and we put on our very best clothes for the girls’ benefit.”

“And jewellery!” added Esmeralda; and Pixie looked at her with an even more critical scrutiny. There was a little diamond brooch sparkling among the laces at her throat. “Geoffrey gave me that!” There was a gold bangle round her wrist, with a heart-shaped locket dangling from the clasp. “Geoffrey gave me that!” There was a dainty little watch pinned on to her dress. “Geoffrey gave me that!”

“Deary me,” quoth Pixie at last, “it must be rather nice being engaged.”

“It is, my dear. Quite nice! And he gave us these boas too,—insisted upon buying them when he came shopping with us this morning. He said boas were the fashionable thing, and he really dared not allow us to face ‘the girls’ without them. He is very extravagant, but he says he will only be engaged once, and after we are married he will be as careful as I like. It was through his lawyer that we found our tenant. Geoffrey told him about the place, and it seemed that it was just exactly what a client had been wanting. We have not seen him yet, but he is tremendously interested in old places, and is going to spend a lot of money putting things into repair, which, of course, is a very good thing for us. He has taken it for ten years, and by the end of the lease Jack hopes he may be able to go back himself, for part of the year, at any rate. It is hard to leave Knock, but not so hard as we expected, for I am to be married, and the rest of you will be together, and able to enjoy seeing the sights, and all the fun and bustle of town life.”

“And it will be so good for the boys! They were idling away their time, but now they will have to set to work in earnest to make their way in the world. It will be the making of them, so even if we do feel homesick at times it will be a light price to pay for their good,” said Bridgie hastily, for the tears were beginning to rise again in Pixie’s eyes at the thought of leaving the dear old home. “Dear me, I am longing to see ‘the girls’! Aren’t we going to see ‘the girls’? What is the use of our dressing up like this if we are not to see ‘the girls’?”

“Come along! Come along! Miss Phipps said I was to take you round before she came in to give you tea. Come along, and see them now,” cried Pixie, prancing to the door with eager steps, and forgetting everything else in the excitement of the coming introduction, as it had been intended that she should do. Bridgie and Joan followed close behind, smiling in anticipation; but it was rather an embarrassing occasion, when the door of the big classroom was thrown open, and fifteen girls rose to their feet and stood staring with unblinking eyes, while Fraulein smiled and bowed from the end of the long table. Bridgie wanted to say something graceful and appropriate, but could only blush, and smile, and stammer feebly. “Oh-h! How do you do? Is there anyone here that I know by name? Flora—Margaret—Kate? Are any of your special friends here, Pixie? Please introduce me.”

“That’s Flora!” said Pixie, pointing barefacedly across the room. “The fat one. Kate is next to Fraulein—with specs. Margaret is having her music lesson. That’s Ethel in the middle, with the frizzy hair. This is my sister Bridgie that I’ve told you about.”

The faces of the girls thus singled out for special notice were wooden in stolidity. Not a flicker of animation lit up their features; they stood like pokers staring blankly before them, as if they had heard no word of what was passing, and poor Bridgie murmured more disconnected nothings, while Esmeralda looked from one to the other with her haughty, patronising smile. It was quite a relief when the door was shut, and the presence of Mademoiselle in classroom number two insured one listener at least who would speak in reply. The greeting was a warm one on both sides, but conversation was deferred until tea-time, when Mademoiselle had been asked to join the party in the drawing-room, and after just a minute’s wait a move was made upstairs to the room where Pixie slept. Here there were photographs to exhibit, and a number of tiny ornaments which had been gifts from other girls.

“Ethel gave me that the day that I was ill.—Fanny bought me that when she went out for the day. It cost threepence. Wasn’t it dear? Dora Ellis and Vera Knowles clubbed together and bought me that at the bazaar. It’s supposed to be for matches. I am going to give it to Jack at Christmas. That’s Ethel’s mother! She is really awfully nice, though you wouldn’t think so. That’s Flora’s little brother. Isn’t he like Mellin’s Food? Ethel has silver brushes. I wish I might have silver things. She is awfully proud of her dressing-table. If I stand on my pillow I can just see over the curtain between our beds. I painted eyes on my forehead one night, and tied my hair round it. It looked lovely,—just like a monkey! and then I crept up quietly, and put it over for Ethel to see. She did how! Shall we go downstairs now? You’ll have a scrumptious tea. Visitors always do. That’s one reason why it’s so nice having them coming to see you.”

Miss Phipps and Mademoiselle were waiting in the drawing-room, and, to the amusement of her sisters, Pixie became a model of decorum the moment she entered their presence, and handed about cake and tea in the most staid and deliberate fashion. To see her stand with her heels drawn neatly together in the first position; to hear her demure, “Yes, Miss Phipps!” “No, Miss Phipps!” was almost too much for Esmeralda’s composure, and she was glad to leave the house with the promise of having Pixie to spend a long day in town at the beginning of the following week, while that young lady herself was so eager to return to her companions and hear their criticisms on her visitors that she

bore the parting with wonderful resignation.

Fortunately for all, approval was unanimous, and the girls declared in a breath that never, no never, had they seen anyone so “simply sweet” as Bridgie, so “frightfully pretty” as Esmeralda. Bridgie was a darling; her eyes were so kind and loving and sorry for you, and didn’t she look an angel when she smiled? Esmeralda was like a queen; they could quite imagine that she had a temper, but when she laughed she had the sweetest dimples! Did her hair curl naturally? Fancy! She was really and truly like a picture, and not a bit like a person who was alive. Didn’t they look ducks together—one so fair, and one so dark? So on, and so on, until Pixie was one big beam of joy and contentment.

During the next fortnight Pixie spent no less than three days with her sisters, and had the felicity of helping to choose the little house in which they were to begin the new life. After an inspection of various flats Bridgie was quite of one mind with her youngest sister in believing that either they themselves or every other tenant in the building would have to give notice within a week of their arrival. It was so preposterous to think of creeping on tiptoe in consideration for your neighbours below, and speaking in hushed tones because of your neighbours above, while, in spite of high rents, the passages seemed so cramped, oh, so painfully cramped and narrow! Even a little house was a castle, comparatively speaking; and in due time one was found which promised to be healthy and convenient, and was put in the hands of painters and paper-hangers to be ready for the removal in autumn.

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## Chapter Thirty.

### The Prize is Won.

When the breaking-up gathering was held, Pixie was proud indeed, for if other girls had fathers and mothers present, she had two sisters and Jack and Geoffrey Hilliard into the bargain, and there was no doubt that they were the handsomest and most attractive of all the guests. There was only one drawback to her happiness, and that was that there was no chance of being called forward to receive a prize, and so cover herself with glory. She devoutly hoped that the class lists might not be read aloud, to betray how very, very near the bottom she was to be found, and heaved a deep sigh of relief when little Beatrice Ferrars marched up to receive her certificate, and so end the list of honours. But it appeared that it was not quite finished, for Miss Phipps rose to her feet and began to speak amid a general murmur of excitement.

“We now come to perhaps the most interesting item on our programme—the bestowal of a prize by the girls themselves, instead of by the teachers. For the benefit of those who have not been present at one of these gatherings before, I must briefly explain that this prize consists of five pounds to be expended in books, and is the gift of the father of one of the pupils. Its object is to encourage among the girls a spirit of kindness and consideration, a readiness to hold out a helping hand, to assist another to overcome a weakness, and, in short, to *befriend*, in the best sense of the word. The prize is given once a year at the end of the summer term, and, as I have said, is awarded by the vote of the girls themselves. As they have the best opportunity of judging, it is only right that the decision should come from them, and it is pleasant to know that this year at least there is absolute unanimity among them. I have gone over your voting papers, girls, and have pleasure in telling you that, with the natural exception of the winner herself, the same name was given by all. There is one girl who, whatever may be her faults and shortcomings, has never failed to show the most generous and unselfish friendship, one girl who has put her own interests aside and been content to suffer for the sake of others, one girl who has ever been on the watch to do a kindly act or speak a loving word, a girl whom everyone loves, who counts every member of the household among her admirers, and that girl’s name is—”

She paused and looked smilingly at her pupils, and on the instant came the loud answering cry. The girls waved their hands in the air, they drummed on the ground with their feet. “Pixie!” they cried, “Pixie O’Shaughnessy!” and “Pixie!” once again, “Bravo, Pixie!” “Three cheers for Pixie!” until they were hoarse with shouting, and Miss Phipps held up her hand for silence.

It was really a most exciting scene. Every eye was riveted on Pixie herself, who had applauded as violently as her companions when Miss Phipps first asked her question, and whose shrill cry of “Margaret! Margaret!” had been frozen on her lips by the sound of her own name. There she sat with her mouth agape, too much overcome by surprise to have any thought for appearances, and there sat Bridgie looking on and crying copiously with happiness, and Esmeralda blinking the tears away and laughing furtively at Jack, who was grunting to himself, “Silly fuss! Silly fuss!” and putting on a great appearance of boredom to distract attention from the tears on his eyelashes. There sat Mr and Mrs Vane, too, beaming with pleasure that their prize should have gone to Pixie of all people, and Lottie rubbing her hands and growing hysterical in delight. Then Pixie was marched up to the desk to be presented with the envelope containing the crisp new note, and when she had taken it she must needs turn round and face the audience, instead of scuttling back to her seat in abashed, self-conscious fashion like other girls, and even address a word of acknowledgment for the applause bestowed upon her. “I’m very much obliged to ye!” she said in the broadest of Irish accents, and all the fathers and mothers lay back in their chairs and laughed until they were tired, and clapped so enthusiastically that it was a marvel that their beautiful light kid gloves did not split an halves.

In the drawing-room afterwards Pixie was quite the heroine of the occasion, and was greeted on all sides, and warmly congratulated on her success. Mr and Mrs Vane asked especially to be introduced to Bridgie and her party, and eventually sat down on the same corner to partake of tea. Pixie could not hear all that they said, but they looked at her as they spoke, and their faces were very kindly, so that she was pleasantly conscious of being the subject of conversation. Then Mrs Vane began to speak of the contemplated removal to town, and made many kind offers of help and hospitality, while her husband put in a word about the dear old Castle.

“Your sister showed me some photographs when she was with us, and I was much impressed by them. It is a fine old place, and I can understand your attachment to it. You are fortunate to have secured such a good tenant. Curiously

enough, I was mentioning your name to my lawyer, who was dining with me the other night, and he told me he had negotiated the lease for your new tenant. The young fellow is able to pay for his hobbies, and is evidently keen on putting the place in repair. It is not every day that a millionaire comes to the rescue just when he is wanted, but this Mr Hilliard certainly seems the right man in the right place. Wonderful what glue can accomplish, isn't it, Miss O'Shaughnessy? it makes one almost wish to be in trade oneself!"

Jack was wont to say in later years that he had never admired Bridgie more than at this moment of surprise and shock. She turned white, it was true, but her voice was as calm as usual, and the manner in which she replied so full of quiet dignity, that neither then nor at any other time had Mr Vane the slightest idea of the sensation which he had created.

As for Esmeralda, she did not know the meaning of control; what she felt she was obliged to show, and that forthwith, so within two minutes of Mr Vane's disclosure she became suddenly overcome with heat, and demanded Geoffrey's escort to the ball without. There they stood and faced each other, he all downcast and abashed, as who should say, "Please forgive me for not being poor!" she, flashing with indignation, which said as plainly, "How dare you be a millionaire!" There was silence for a minute, then she asked imperiously, "Is this true?" and he made a gesture of impatience.

"I wish that chattering old fellow was at the bottom of the sea. Yes, it's true, darling. I'm your tenant. I have more money than I know what to do with, and we are going to live at Knock half the year, you and I, and amuse ourselves by putting it in repair, and have Bridgie and the rest over to stay with us whenever you like. Don't be angry with me, please. I meant it all so well!"

Esmeralda drew a quick breath, and pressed her hands tightly together. Oh, dear old home! oh, dear old Castle! was it possible that it need not be left after all? need never pass into the hands of strangers? Was it really, really possible that she herself was to reign as Lady Bountiful, and see order replace disorder, beauty restored where ruin had walked barefaced? It was an effort to preserve an appearance of severity, but she would not give in so soon, so held her head erect, and demanded haughtily—

"Why was this kept from me? Why was I never told?"

"Jack knew," said Hilliard humbly. "Your father knew. I told him before his death. But, Esmeralda darling, I have been run after for my money all my life, and it was so sweet to me to think that you believed me poor, and would still marry me for my own sake, that I could not bear to put an end to the delusion. Then I thought I would wait until we were married, and give you the lease of the Castle as a wedding-present. I meant it to be such a happy surprise, and that grey man has spoiled it all! What a comfort it would be if people would mind their own business! Do you remember pitying me for being dependent on glue, and taking for granted I must be poor? How I did enjoy that walk, and our talk together! But you see, darling, it is a more valuable commodity than you thought. My old uncle made a fortune by it, and I make a fresh fortune every year. You said once that you would like to be rich, but I haven't found it altogether a bed of roses. I need your help at least as much as if I were a poor man, and we will try together to use our money so as to make other people happier and better. First of all come your own brothers. I can help them on, and Bridgie and Pixie will be like my own sisters. You are pleased, Esmeralda; I can see it in your face. You are not angry with me any more? What are you thinking of, darling, with that far-away gaze?"

"I am thinking of father," said Esmeralda softly. "How happy he would be! There will still be an O'Shaughnessy at dear Knock Castle."

## The End.

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