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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETTY TREVOR ***

Mrs G de Horne Vaizey

"Betty Trevor"

Chapter One.

The "Pampered Pet."

"There goes the 'Pampered Pet' again! Got its little keeper with it, as usual. Why don't they lead her by a chain, and be done with it?"

Miles stood by the schoolroom window, hands jingling in pockets, as he surveyed a prospect, sufficiently grey and drear to make any diversity doubly welcome, and at his words there came the sound of a general pushing-back of chairs, as the four other occupants of the room dashed forward to share in the view.

They jostled each other with the scant courtesy which brothers and sisters are apt to show each other in early days; five big boys and girls, ranging between the ages of eight and nineteen. Miles kept his central position by reason of superior strength, a vigorous dig of his pointed elbow being enough to keep trespassers at a distance. Betty darted before him and nimbly dropped on her knees, the twins stood on either side of the window-sill, while poor Pam grumbled and fretted in the background, dodging here and there to try all positions in turn, and finding each as unsatisfactory as the last.

The Square gardens looked grey and sodden with the desolation of autumn in a city, and the road facing the window was empty, except for two female figures—a lady, and a girl of sixteen, who were slowly approaching the corner. The lady was dressed in black, the girl was noticeably smart, in a pretty blue costume, with dainty boots on her tiny feet, and a fur cap worn at the fashionable angle on her golden head.

"That's a new dress,—the fifth I've seen her in this month!" sighed Betty enviously. "Wearing it on an afternoon like this, too. The idea! Serve her right if it were soaked through!"

"Look at her mincing over the puddles! She'd rather go a mile out of her way than get a splash on those precious boots. I'm sure by the look of them that they pinch her toes! I am glad you girls don't make ninnies of yourselves by wearing such stupid things."

"Can't! Feet too big!" mumbled Jill, each cheek bulging in turn with the lump of toffee which she was mechanically moving from side to side, so as to lengthen the enjoyment as much as possible.

"Can't! Too poor! Only four shillings to last out till the end of the quarter!" sighed Betty, dolorous again.

"Boots! Boots! What boots? Let me see her boots. It's mean! You won't let me see a thing!" cried Pam, pushing her shaggy head round Miles' elbow, and craning forward on the tip of her toes. "I say! She's grander than ever to-day, isn't she?"

"Look at the umbrella! About as thick as a lead pencil!" scoffed Jill, flattening her nose against the pane. "Aunt Amy had one like that when she came to stay, and I opened it, because mother says it spoils them to be left squeezed up, and she was as mad as a hatter. She twisted at it a good ten minutes before she would take it out again. She'd never get *mine* straight! I've carried things in it till the wires bulge out like hoops. An umbrella is made for use; it's bosh pretending it's an ornament. ... They are going a toddle round the Square between the showers for the benefit of the Pet's complexion. I'm glad I haven't got one to bother about!"

"True for you!" agreed Miles, with brotherly candour. "You are as brown as a nigger, and the Pet is like a big wax-doll—yellow hair, blue eyes, pink cheeks, all complete. Not a bad-looking doll, either. I passed quite close to her one day, and she looked rattling. She'll be a jolly pretty girl one of these days."

"Oh, if you admire that type. Personally, I don't care for niminy-piminies. You never see her speaking, but I daresay if you poked her in the right places she would bleat out 'Mam-ma! Pa-pa!' ... Now watch!" cried Betty dramatically. "When she gets to the corner, she will peer up at this window beneath her eyelashes, and mince worse than ever when she sees us watching. Don't shove so, Pam! You can see quite well where you are. Now *look!* She's going to raise her head."

The five heads pressed still more curiously against the pane, and five pairs of eyes were fixed unblinkingly upon the young girl who was daintily picking her way round the corner of the Square. The fur cap left her face fully exposed to view, and, true to Betty's prophecy, as she reached a certain point in the road she turned her head over her shoulder and shot a quick glance at the window overhead. Quicker than lightning the pretty head went round again, and the pink cheeks grew crimson at the sight of those five eager faces watching her every movement.

Jack and Jill burst into loud laughter, Betty's upper lip curled derisively, but Miles' thin face showed an answering flush of colour, and he backed into the room, exclaiming angrily—

"I say, this is too much of a good thing! I don't know what you all mean by swarming round me wherever I go! Why can't you leave a fellow alone? Can't I even look out of the window without having you all on my back? A nice effect it must have to see the whole place blocked up, as if we were staring at a Lord Mayor's show!"

Betty sat down by the table and took up the blouse on which she had been working for the last three months. The sleeves had been taken out and replaced twice over, and the collar-band obstinately refused to come right. By the time it was finished it would be hopelessly out of date, which Betty considered as one of the many contrary circumstances of life which continually thwarted her good endeavours.

"Don't worry yourself. She will enjoy being stared at!" she said coldly. "She knows we watch her coming in and out, and shows off all her little tricks for our benefit. She's the most conceited, stuck-up, affected little wretch I ever saw, without a thought in her head but her clothes, and her own importance. I wouldn't have anything to do with her for the world!"

"Jolly good thing then that you are never likely to get a chance! Her people will never trouble to call upon us; they are much too high and mighty. That's no reason, though, why you should be so down on the poor little soul. I should have thought that you would have felt sorry for her, cooped up with that old governess all her time, with not a soul to keep her company! But girls are such cads—they never play fair."

Miles strode out of the room in a fume, and Betty's lips compressed themselves into a thin straight line, the meaning of which the others knew full well. To incur Miles' displeasure was Betty's bitterest punishment, and the "Pampered Pet" was not likely to fare any better at her hands in consequence of his denouncement. Jill beckoned furtively to Jack. There was no chance of any more fun in the schoolroom now that Miles had departed, and Betty was in the sulks; it would be wise to go and disport themselves elsewhere. They left the room arm-in-arm, heads almost touching, as they whispered and giggled together, the most devoted pair of twins that ever existed, and eight-year-old Pam leant her elbows on the table and stared fixedly at her big sister.

Betty was seventeen, nearly grown-up, inasmuch as she had left school, and now took classes to complete her education. Her blue serge dress came down to her ankles, and she made a gallant attempt to "do up" her hair in the style of the period. Mrs Trevor considered the style too elaborate for such a young girl, but after all it did not much matter what was aimed at, since every morning someone exclaimed innocently, "You've done your hair a new way, Betty!" and was fully justified in the remark. One day Betty's ambition ran to curls and waves, and she appeared at the breakfast-table with a fuzz worthy of a negress. The next day better judgment prevailed, when she brushed hard for ten minutes, and then pinned on a hair-net, with the result that she looked a veritable little Puritan; and between these extremes ranged a variety of effects, only possible of achievement to an amateur with no experience, but boundless ambition.

If you could have honestly pronounced Betty pretty, you would have satisfied the deepest longing of her heart. She gazed in the glass every morning, twisting her head from side to side, and deciding irrevocably that she was hideous, a fright, a perfect freak, while all the time an obstinate little hope lingered that perhaps after all, in becoming clothes, and when she was in a good temper, she might look rather ... nice! Chestnut hair, such a pretty colour, but so little of it that it would not "go" like other girls'; dark grey eyes with curly black lashes; an impertinent little nose, and a mouth just about twice as big as those possessed by the ladies in mother's *Book of Beauty* downstairs. At the best she could only be "pretty" or a "sweet-looking girl," and she pined to be beautiful and stately, and to reign as a queen over the hearts of men.

Poor Betty! Many a girl of seventeen lives through the same tragedy in secret, but they are not all fortunate enough to possess an adoring younger sister who thinks her all that she fain would be.

Pam put out a little ink-stained hand, and stroked the half-finished blouse admiringly.

"It's going to be lubly, Bet! It hardly shows a bit where you joined it. You'll soon have finished it now."

"No, I shan't," snapped Betty. "There's heaps to do still, and it's getting too cold for cottons. Just my luck! I always seem to be making mistakes. It wasn't my fault that that stupid girl looked up and caught us watching."

The underlying thought showed itself in the sudden change of subject, but Pam was not surprised, for in her quiet, shrewd little way she had divined it long ago.

"But you said she'd look up, so you could have moved if you liked. I don't think it was very perlitte," she said solemnly. "There were all four of you at the window, and my eyes peeping round Miles' back. I expect it looked pretty fearful. She went purple, didn't she? It's horrid to blush! I did once when I got a prize before people, and I hated it."

"Oh, you! You are a modest little mouse. The Pet is quite different. Nasty thing, she might have been satisfied without making mischief between Miles and me! She has everything that she wants, and that I want, and haven't got. She's pretty, and rich, and has a lovely big house and heaps of people to wait upon her, and nice things, and—everything! You can't think how I hate her!"

Pam leant her thin arms on the table, and meditated for a long, thoughtful moment. When she spoke, it was, as usual, to deliver herself of the unexpected.

"That's what you call 'envy, hatred, and malice,' I s'pose," she said thoughtfully, and Betty's head came up with a jerk to turn upon her a glance of suspicious inquiry.

No! The round, grey eyes were as clear, as innocent, as guilelessly adoring as she had ever seen them. They gazed into her own without a shadow of self-consciousness, and as she met that gaze Betty flushed, and the irritable lines disappeared from her face as if wiped out by a sponge.

"One for you, Pam," she cried, laughing. "I *am* a pig! A nice big elder sister I am, to set you such an example! I'm cross, dear. Everything has gone wrong the whole day long. You had better run off and leave me alone, or I'll snap again. I feel all churned up inside! This is only a temporary lapse."

"There's scones for tea; I saw the bag in the pantry. S'pose I went downstairs and coaxed cook to toast them? You said yourself toasted scones were soothing. If Miles smells them he's sure to come," said Pam shrewdly, and Betty leant forward and kissed her impetuously on the cheek.

"There's one comfort," she cried; "I've got you, and the Pet hasn't! You are the comfort of my old age, Pamela, my child. Yes, toasted! And lots of butter, and leave the door wide open, so that the smell may get out, and lure Miles back."

Chapter Two.

The People of the Square.

Brompton Square is situated on the north side of Hyde Park, between the Marble Arch and Lancaster Gate, and is as stiff and, for the greater portion of the year, as gloomy in appearance as most of the regions in the neighbourhood. The different sides of the Square differ widely in social status, the northern side being the most, and the eastern side the least, aristocratic and roomy. The largest house of all was a great grey stone edifice, having a stretch of three windows on either side of the heavy oak door. The smallest and shabbiest stood at right angles to it, showing a shabby frontage of two windows to the gardens, and having its front entrance in a side street. Really and truly it could barely claim to belong to the Square at all, though the landlord claimed, and the doctor tenant felt it worth while to pay, a heavy rent for the privilege of printing a fashionable address upon his cards.

Behind the silken curtains and *brise-bise* of Number 14, the "Pampered Pet" had her residence. At Number 1 the doctor's big family was so crowded together that Betty was thankful to appropriate a front attic as the only chance of possessing that luxury dear to every girlish heart—"a bedroom to herself!" It was not a luxurious apartment, but it was pretty, as every girl's bedroom may easily be, if she has the will to make it so. The hemp carpet had long since faded to a nondescript grey, but the pink-washed walls were hung with pictures and photographs, and the owner's love of beauty and order showed itself in the arrangement of the furniture, and the careful setting out of a few treasured ornaments.

There was no gas in the room, so that Betty was obliged to do her simple dressing for dinner by the aid of a candle, whose flickering beams seemed intent on lighting every corner of the room, and leaving the mirror in inky darkness. It was only within the last three months that Dr Trevor had left his old-fashioned house in Bloomsbury, hoping that the change of residence would help him in his ambition to extend his practice among a better class of patients. The neighbourhood was new to his family, and none of the residents of the Square had so far taken any notice of their presence. Calling is not usual in London unless there is some personal interest involved, and no doubt the occupants of more aristocratic houses looked down with contempt on the sandwiched row of shabby windows which belonged to them only on sufferance. If the neighbours showed no interest in the doctor's family, the Trevors, on the contrary, felt a devouring interest in everyone around them. They had invented nicknames for all the residents in the northern row, of which the schoolroom possessed the best view, before they had been a week in their new quarters. A glance at the Directory in their father's consulting-room would have solved the problem at once, but that was a practical and commonplace method of procedure which made no appeal to their imaginations. Nicknames were a thousand times better, because you could manufacture them to suit!

The two old maiden ladies who lived in Number 15 were Emily and Hannah. Emily was dressy, wore a false front, and always took precedence of her sister, who was small and mousy in demeanour. It was apparent to the meanest intellect that a godmother had bequeathed her fortune to Emily, and that she gave her sister a home and generally supported her, for which generosity Hannah was duly thankful. The two old ladies breakfasted in bed every morning, went out for drives at eleven and three o'clock, ("ambles," Miles called them in scornful reference to the pace of the sleek old horses), retired to their rooms for naps after lunch, ate a hearty dinner at eight, and settled down for the night at ten o'clock.

It does not require the skill of a Sherlock Holmes to discover such proceedings on the part of our neighbours. The study of electric lights on gloomy autumn days is wonderfully informing! Number 16 was uninteresting,—only a stupid man and his wife, who looked like a hundred other men and their wives; and who had tiresome silk curtains drawn across the lower panes of their windows, so that it was impossible to obtain a glimpse of the rooms. Number 17, however, more than ever made up for this disappointment, for there lived "The Pretty Lady" beloved by one and

all. She was tall, and dark, and young; almost like a girl, and Betty darkly suspected her of being engaged, for she looked so beamingly happy, and was often seen walking about with a tall, handsome man in the shiniest of top-hats. The door of Number 17 was somewhat out of the line of vision, so that it was not always easy to see who went in and out, but the young couple often passed the corner of the Square, and always seemed to be in radiant spirits. Once when the pretty lady was wearing a new coat, Edwin (of course he was Edwin!) fell behind a pace or two to study the effect, and softly clapped his hands in approval. It must be nice, Betty thought wistfully, to be engaged, and have someone who liked you the best of all, and brought you home chocolates and flowers! She was anxious to know who formed the other members of the household, but Jill said there was only an invalid mother, who said, "Go about as much as ever you can, my darling. Don't think about me! The young should always be happy;" and this was accepted by all as a natural and satisfactory explanation.

There were no children to be found in the whole length of the terrace. The landlords, no doubt, had too much regard for their white enamel and costly wall-papers to welcome tenants with large families. The "Pampered Pet" in Number 14 was the nearest approach to a child, and she must have been sixteen at least. Her father was a General Somebody out in India, and her mother remained in England to superintend the Darling's education, and see that she did not get her feet wet. As soon as she was eighteen she would be presented at Court, taken out to India, and married to the Viceroy at the end of her first season.

The Pet's bedroom was on the third storey of the house, and as its windows faced the gardens of the Square, she had a fancy for leaving them undraped, except for the narrow *brise-bise* over the lower panes. It probably never occurred to her to remember one little dormer window perched high in the corner house, which of late days had constituted Betty Trevor's domain, and she would have been greatly surprised to know how good a view of her sanctum could be obtained from this vantage-ground, or how much time its mistress gave to enjoying the same.

All alone in the dark Betty would kneel on a chair and press her face against the cold panes, staring, staring, muttering to herself—

"She has a fire to dress by—I can see the flames flickering up and down. What stupid indulgence for a child like that! Electric lights in pink shades. It does look cosy! The maid is brushing her hair. I can see her arm going up and down like a machine. Goodness! How long is she going to keep on? No wonder it shines! I'll brush mine, too. Ten minutes regularly every night and morning; but I'm always late in the morning, and too tired at night, so I know I won't. I do hope they come over here to fasten her dress. It was white last night; on Tuesday it was blue. What a fuss to make, when there is only Mrs General and the governess! The Pet plays and sings to them in the drawing-room after dinner. That hot night when the windows were open we could hear her distinctly, and it was such a funny little squeak. Jill can imitate it beautifully. If I couldn't sing better than that I wouldn't sing at all. ... There! She is getting up—*pink* this time! I can see the maid lacing it up. Well, what next!"

Betty crouched back on her knees and sighed dolorously. It must be nice to be rich like that and have everything one wanted,—the only adored darling of the household. It did seem hard that one girl should have everything she wanted, and another want so much. The furnishing of this attic bedroom, for instance—everything was a makeshift for something else which was what she really wanted, and had been unable to get, and it was the same all through the house. When mother had pleaded for a new paper for the drawing-room, father had said—

"Not just yet, I'm afraid, dear. There are so many necessities which must be met." That was the worst of it; there never was money enough for the nice ornamental things which were so much more interesting than stodgy old usefuls!

Betty sighed again, and shrugged her shoulders impatiently. The Pampered Pet had finished her toilet by this time; she crossed the room and stood by the window for a moment, a slim pink figure in the soft pink light.

"Horrid, horrid thing!" cried Betty fretfully. "How I do—" And then at the very moment of repeating her protestations of dislike, Pam's serious childish face rose before her sight, and she heard the sweet shrill voice saying once again—

"I suppose that's what they call 'envy, hatred, and malice...'"

"She's right, quite right," Betty acknowledged to herself. "It *is*, or just as near it as is possible for a girl to get who is surrounded by good influences. How hateful it sounds! I did feel ashamed of myself. I'm the eldest girl, and I ought to set a good example. If I were quiet and gentle and resigned, they would all look up to me, and Miles wouldn't snub me any more. I'll turn over a new leaf from this very hour, and remember my blessings, and never grumble any more, or be cross, or snappy, and be glad, absolutely glad, when other people are better off than myself. After all, I'm seventeen. It's time I was growing resigned. I won't envy anybody any more."

Betty jumped up from her seat, lighted her candles, and began to make her modest toilet for dinner with an air of satisfied finality. It was characteristic of her that she was never satisfied with half-measures, and was always supremely confident of her ability to carry out new resolutions. The determination to become a perfect character was taken as easily as if it had been a choice between a couple of ribbons, and she put on her quietest blouse, and parted her hair in the middle, brushing it smoothly over her ears, with an artistic satisfaction in dressing for a part. The resolution held good exactly a quarter of an hour, at the expiration of which time Jack and Jill dashed suddenly out of the schoolroom as their elder sister was pursuing a staid course downstairs, when Jill promptly seized hold of her silk sleeves with sticky fingers, and Jack exclaimed, "I say! What a fright!" with brotherly candour.

Betty snapped, of course, and snapped vigorously. It was not her fault, she reflected. No one could be expected to be patient if other people would insist on being so horrid and exasperating!

The Trevor Family.

The family dinner was served at seven o'clock, and all the children, down to Pam herself, appeared at table, for Dr Trevor liked to have his family round him at the close of the day, and, thanks to his wife's good management, the meal was always a bright and cheery occasion.

Mrs Trevor was a devoted mother to every one of her flock, but the person in the house whom she mothered most of all was her hard-working husband, whose life was so devoted to others that he had little time to consider himself. From the children's earliest years they had been taught that to "worry father" was one of the most serious offences which they could commit.

"Father spends his life going about from one sickroom to another; all day long he is meeting people who are ill, and anxious, in fear, and in pain, and when he comes home he must have a cheery welcome. If you want to grumble about anything, grumble to yourselves or to me; if you have anything disagreeable to tell, let it wait until we are alone. Meal-times with father must be devoted to pleasant subjects alone." Such were Mrs Trevor's instructions, instilled into her children's minds with such persistent firmness that they were never disobeyed, with the result that the tired doctor came home with the happy certainty of enjoying a cheery, harmonious hour, and the young people themselves learnt a lesson in self-restraint which was of infinite value in after life.

Betty might grumble and tirade outside the schoolroom door, but as she approached the dining-room she mechanically smoothed her brow and adopted a cheerful expression. To-night Dr Trevor was already seated in his place at the end of the long table, for his wife took the head, to save him the fatigue of carving for so large a party. He was a tall, thin man, with a lined face lit by the keen, thoughtful eyes of the true physician. He looked up as his eldest daughter entered the room, and held out his hand to her in a mute caress. She bent to kiss his forehead, and stood holding his hand to chat for a few minutes until the other members of the family made their appearance. He noticed the Puritan-like coiffure—there were few things that those shrewd eyes did not notice—but made no comment thereon, for, as he frequently observed to his wife when she confided to him her troubles over Betty's eccentricities, boys and girls who are in the transition stage between childhood and maturity are apt to become a trifle restless and eccentric, and it was wisdom to be for the most part judiciously blind, interfering only in cases of right and wrong. Let the little maid run with a loose rein for a time. She would soon settle down, and be the first to laugh at her own foibles.

Mrs Trevor took her place, looking round on her assembled children with the pretty, half-appealing little smile which was her greatest charm. She was slight and graceful, not stout and elderly, like other people's mothers. In the morning light she often looked wan and tired, but in the kindly lamplight she seemed more like Betty's sister than the mother of a rapidly growing up family.

Miles sat at her right hand, a tall, somewhat heavy-looking youth, with enormous hands and feet, a square, determined jaw, and deep-set brown eyes. Even a casual glance at him was sufficient to show that he was going to make a man of power and determination, but, like Betty, he was passing through his awkward stage, and was often neither easy nor agreeable to live with.

Jack was just a mischievous schoolboy, with protruding ears and twinkling eyes. One can see a score like him any day, marching, marching along the street with satchels of books; but his twin sister had a more striking personality. Jill was a mystery to her relations and friends. She had ordinary brown hair, and not too much of that, light blue eyes with indifferent lashes, a nose a shade more impertinent than Betty's own, a big mouth, and a powdering of freckles under her eyes; yet with those very ordinary equipments she managed to rank as a beauty among her schoolmates, and to attract more admiration than is vouchsafed to many people whose features might have been turned out of a classic mould. Betty used to ponder wistfully over the secret of Jill's charm, and think it hard lines that it had not been given to herself, who would have cared for it so much more. Jill didn't care a pin how she looked. She wanted to "have fun," to invite Nora Bruce to tea as often as possible, to buy a constant supply of a special sort of almond toffee which was offered for sale at a shop which she passed on the way to school, to be a first-form girl and have one of the new desks, and, incidentally, to pass the Cambridge examination if it could be done without too much "fag." She put on her clothes any way, did her hair in the twinkling of an eye, and the effect was uniformly charming.

"If she's untidy, she's picturesque; if I'm untidy, I'm a fright. It's mean!" soliloquised Betty discontentedly. Every day she lived she was the more convinced that the world was topsy-turvy, and that she herself was the only person who was competent to set it to rights.

Pam was just Pam; like herself, and no one else in the world. A dear little, wide-eyed, pointed-chinned kitten, everybody's tease, and pet, and conscience all in one, for those clear child eyes seemed to see through all pretences, and what she thought she put into words without a shadow of fear or hesitation.

It was a very plain, almost a frugal, repast, but the table looked cheerful and pretty with the pink-shaded lamp in the centre, surrounded by the four little bowls of flowers which it was one of Betty's duties to keep fresh, and there was no lack of lively conversation.

Mrs Trevor had had a trying day, and several of her worries must of necessity be discussed with her husband later on, but she would allow no hint of them to escape until he had been fed and rested, and in the same manner all the children searched their memories for the pleasantest event which they had experienced to retail for his benefit.

"I was top to-day, father," Jack announced proudly; "answered every single question in Latin, and read off my translation like a book. If I liked to stew, I believe I could lick Johnston all the time. He was pretty sick at having to go down; looked as glum as an old owl for the rest of the morning."

"He takes his work more seriously than you do, my boy. You say you could be top if you liked: I am glad to hear it;

but why don't you like? You can't surely prefer a lower place?"

"Oh, well, there's reason in all things!" returned Jack, with a vagueness which his brothers and sisters had apparently little difficulty in understanding, for they laughed, and sniggered meaningly to each other.

"Such a waste of time, when there is football to be played!"

"A full back has to keep his energy for his work, and not fritter it away over stupid books. That's about it, isn't it, Jack?" they teased, while Dr Trevor said between a sigh and a smile—

"Ah, well, my boy, you are old enough to judge for yourself how your time should be spent! If you win a scholarship, I'll manage to help you through a 'Varsity course, but I can't afford to keep you there unassisted. Remember it is your whole career which is at stake."

"All right, father, I *will* work," said Jack easily.

He was an affectionate boy, who disliked disappointing his parents, but unfortunately he disliked work even more. He was rather sorry now that he had mentioned his easy victory over the redoubtable Johnston. The pater would expect him to be top every day, whereas he had only just put on a spurt to show what he could do if he chose. Suppose he did lose the scholarship, it wouldn't be so bad after all, he could still play footer on Saturday afternoons!

The doctor's glance had wandered, as if for consolation, to his elder son—Miles the strenuous, the indefatigable, who had a passion for work for work's sake. He was going through the practical stage of an engineer's training, and left the house at six o'clock each morning, to return in the afternoon clad in workman's clothes, incredibly greasy and dirty. Betty suffered agonies in case "they"—that wonderful impersonal "they" who overclouded her life—should think he was really and truly an ordinary workman! On one occasion Miles had joined her on the doorstep as she was returning from an afternoon walk, and she had distinctly seen the curtains of the Pampered Pet's drawing-room move, as if someone were peeping out from behind, when, as she confided to Jill later on, "her cheeks turned k-rimson with mortification!"

"Well, Miles, my boy, did you take your little invention with you to-day, and were you able to show it to the manager?"

"Yes, I took it all right."

"And what did he say?"

"He said it was all right."

"Does that mean that he acknowledged that it was an improvement on the present method? Did he feel inclined to give it a trial?"

"Oh yes, it went all right. He said it would do."

"But that's capital! Capital! I congratulate you heartily! Didn't Mr Davidson seem pleased that you should have hit on such a bright idea?"

"Oh, he said it was all right."

Miles made a determined attack on his plate, as if pleading to be left alone to enjoy his dinner in peace. Since the days of his babyhood he had shown a strong inventive genius, and now it was his delight to spend his spare moments working in his little cupboard sanctum at home, striving to improve on any bit of machinery which struck him as falling short of perfection. It was a very simple thing which he had attempted, but in machinery, as in many other things, trifles are all-important, and it was a triumph indeed that a lad of nineteen should have hit on an improvement which was considered worth a trial.

Dr Trevor and his wife exchanged smiles of happy satisfaction. They yearned to ask a dozen more questions, but refrained out of sympathy with that natural masculine reserve which they understood so well. Betty, however, was less considerate.

"I do think you might tell us a little more about it, Miles!" she cried resentfully. "You know we are all dying of curiosity. I can't think why it is that boys can never give a decent account of anything that has happened! Now, if it had been me, I should have begun at the very beginning, from the moment I entered the works, and told you how I felt as I went upstairs, and how I began to speak to the manager, and what he said, and how he looked, and—"

"What colour of necktie he wore—"

Betty tossed her head in scornful contempt of the burst of laughter evoked by Miles' words.

"And what he did with the screw, or whatever you call it, when you showed it to him, and what the other men said, and— Oh, dozens of interesting things; but you can say nothing but 'all right' to every single question. It *is* dull!"

"You must allow for diversities of talent, Betty," said Mrs Trevor, laughing. "We do not all possess your powers of description. Miles is very modest over his success, and I, like you, want to hear more details. You must be sure to tell us how the trial works, Son; and if your improvement is permanently adopted, I shall be proud!"

"Nothing to be proud of!" muttered Miles into his plate.

If there was one thing he loathed more than another, it was to be praised and petted, and made the centre of attention. His roughened fingers clenched themselves tightly round the knife and fork, and he cut his beef into pieces with savage energy.

Why couldn't they leave a fellow alone? All this fuss about a bit of a cog!

Betty divined his discomfiture, as she divined all that concerned her beloved brother, but she had not the tact to come to the rescue, and it was Jill who turned the conversation by a casual question which yet was of interest to all the family.

"Father, is there a father at the big house at the corner? We can't decide what's the matter with him. There must have been one, of course, because of the Pet. Jack says he's dead, but she is not in mourning, and the mother doesn't wear widow's things. I say he's gone a tour round the world, and is buying presents at every port so as to pamper her more than ever when he comes back."

Dr Trevor looked a trifle mystified, but he was accustomed to his children's mental flights, and, after a moment's consideration, he replied smilingly—

"If you mean Number 14, the tenant is a certain Major Alliot, who is at present, I believe, with his regiment in India. I don't know anything about his household, or the identity of the 'Pet,' as you are pleased to call her."

"I wish she'd fall downstairs, or have an accident of some sort suddenly, so that they'd have to fly across for you in a hurry," sighed Jill with frank brutality. "I wish all the people in that row would have accidents, so that you could tell us all about them. We are dying with curiosity!"

"Wouldn't influenza do as well? There is no need to be quite so brutal, Jill," her father reminded her. "Besides, it is hardly my usual custom to tell you 'all about' my cases, is it? I should be very glad to find new patients nearer here for my own sake; which reminds me, dear, that I have to go a long drive after dinner, and shan't be home for the evening, as I hoped. It is unfortunate having so many late nights this week."

Mrs Trevor's brow shadowed for a moment, but she recovered herself, and smiled bravely at her husband, while Betty cried emphatically—

"I shall never marry a doctor!"

"Lucky beggar! He's had an escape anyway!" growled Miles beneath his breath, quite unable to resist paying Betty back for her attack on him a few moments before, and Betty laughed as merrily as the rest at the joke against herself.

"Well, I shall have an escape too! I don't like ill people or having anything to do with them; it's not my vocation!" she announced grandiloquently, and her face fell with dismay when her father said cheerily—

"Oh, come, you don't do yourself justice, dear. I always find you a very acceptable little nurse. Mrs Ewen was asking for you only to-day. I should be glad if you would make a point of going to see her some afternoon this week, and trying to amuse her for an hour or two. She has had a very sharp attack, poor soul."

"Yes, father," assented Betty meekly, but mentally she ground her teeth.

Mrs Ewen was an old patient, a tiresome patient from Betty's point of view, who never grew better, but was frequently worse, who spent all her life in her bedroom and an upstairs sitting-room, her chief subject of conversation being the misdemeanours of her hardly-worked nurses. She had taken a fancy to the doctor's young daughter, and liked to be visited by her as often as possible in convalescent periods; but Betty did not return the liking.

"She doesn't understand girls," she grumbled to herself. "I don't believe she ever was a girl herself. She must have been born about forty, with spectacles and a cap. I can't think why she wants to see me. I do nothing but say 'Yes' and 'No' while she abuses other people, and yawn my head off in that stifling room. And I did so want to get on with my blouse. Seems as if I could never do as I like, somehow!"

She sat looking such an image of meekness and resignation, with her smoothly-braided locks and downcast lids, that her father's lips twitched with amusement as he glanced at her, and quickly averted his eyes. He knew just as well as she did how distasteful his request had been, but he was none the less anxious to enforce it. Betty's horizon was blocked with self at the present moment, and anything and everything was of gain which forced her to think of something besides that all-important personage Miss Elizabeth Trevor.

Chapter Four.

A Piece of Looking-Glass.

"Such a joke, Jill! The sun is shining, and the Pet is sitting reading, in the drawing-room window, and I've found a broken piece of looking-glass in the street.—There's luck! Let's hide behind the curtains and flash it in her eyes!"

Jill's book fell down with a crash, and she leapt to her feet, abeam with anticipation. It was Saturday, and she had announced her intention of "stewing hard" all the afternoon, but the claims of examinations sank into the background before the thrilling prospect held out by her twin.

"Break it in two! Fair does, Jack! Give me a bit, and let us flash in turns!" she cried eagerly; but Jack would not

consent to anything so rash.

"How can I divide it, silly?" he replied. "I haven't a diamond *to cut it*, and if I crunch it with my foot it may all go to smithereens, and there will be nothing left. I'll lend it to you for a bit now and then, but you won't aim straight. Girls never do!"

"I do! I do!" Jill maintained loudly. "I will! I will! Come along, be quick! She might move away, and it would be such a sell. I'll kneel down here and keep the curtains round me. I wonder what she's reading. Something awfully dry and proper, I expect! What heaps of hair! It hangs over her face, so that we shan't be able to dazzle her a bit."

"Yes, we will," contradicted Jack. "She'll see the light dancing about on the page, and look up to see what's the matter! You watch, but mind you don't bob up your head and let her see you!"

"Mind you don't let her see your hand! It's sticking right out. You ought to put on a dark glove, which she wouldn't notice against the pane."

Jack was pleased to approve of the glove proposition, and an adjournment was made to the doctor's dressing-room, where a pair of 'funeral gloves' were discovered which seemed exactly what was desired. Jack drew one on his right hand, Jill drew the other on her left, and thus equipped they crept back to their hiding-place behind the shabby red curtains, and proceeded to work.

It was rather difficult to move the glass so as to throw the reflection on one exact spot, as the conspirators could only peep out for a moment at a time. The little white circle of light danced all over the big grey house before it found the window above the porch, and, moving slowly up and down, eventually alighted on the page of the open book. Jill giggled, Jack snored loudly, as was his habit when excited; the Pet gave a little hitch round in her chair, and read on stolidly.

"My turn! My turn!" cried Jill excitedly. "You've had your innings, now give me mine. Hand it over!" and the two black gloved hands met in the middle of the window.

"You moved it away too quickly! You must follow her about, and bob it gently up and down. Wait till I get it right. There it is! I've got it better than you, Jack, ever so much better!"

"That's because the sun's so much brighter. Be careful now. That's enough! If you go on too long at a time, she'll move away into the room and it will be all up. Let her settle down again, and imagine she's all right, then we'll give her another treat!"

It was wonderful how expert one grew with practice! The light now danced direct to its destination, and move her book as she would, the Pet could not escape. At last she grew impatient, tossed back her mane of hair and turned to stare curiously out of the window. This was the longed-for opportunity, and Jack snored louder than ever with relief that it had come about when it was his turn to hold the treasured glass. Quick as thought he waved it to and fro, and the Pet threw up her hands, unable to withstand the glare. Safe in the seclusion of their distant room, the twins shrieked with exultation, and had much ado to keep their position behind the curtains. Jill kept endeavouring to snatch the glass from her brother, but Jack was too intent on his work to take any notice of her efforts.

The Pet lifted one hand from her eyes and cautiously peeped out. The sun was shining with unusual brilliancy for an October morning, but there was not the slightest difficulty in viewing the landscape as fully as she liked. She turned her head from side to side in a curious inquiring fashion, and Jack, with an artist's appreciation of the right moment, waited until she had abandoned the search, and was about to settle down again, when another blinding flash of light fell full on her face, and she shrank back into the shade with a startled gesture.

Seated in this last position, she exactly faced the schoolroom, and the twins had a moment's horrified fear that she had caught a glimpse of their peeping faces, but her next movement put an end to suspicion, for she took up her book and settled down again to her reading exactly as if she had never been interrupted.

And then an extraordinary thing happened! The mane of golden hair was tossed back, leaving the face fully exposed, yet though the twins flashed the light on both eyes and book, the Pet read on stolidly, turning over the pages with leisurely enjoyment, apparently no whit disturbed.

"What's the matter with her all of a sudden? Is she blind?" Jill queried impatiently.

Jack grunted, and flashed more vigorously than ever, but the Pet might have been a hundred miles away for all the effect produced. It was most mysterious and perplexing, not to say exasperating to the last degree. After ten minutes' fruitless effort, Jack went off in search of fresh victims, and Jill sorrowfully returned to her lessons.

How interested they would have been if they could have overheard a conversation which was even then taking place across the road!

"Dear child!" cried a lady lying on a sofa at the far end of a beautifully-furnished drawing-room. "Dear child, what are you doing? For the last five minutes I have been watching you pretending to read with your eyes shut. It's not a lesson book, and Miss Mason is not here, so what can you be thinking about, dear wee goose?"

The fair head turned round, and the book dropped to the floor.

"I'm thinking," said a very sweet, sad little voice, "I'm thinking that I wish I were a large family, mother. I'm so tired of being only one!"

"Oh, Cynthia!" cried the lady—and there was a world of mother-yearning in her voice—"is it that old trouble again?"

Poor child, it is dull for you, but I do all I can for you, darling. I stayed at home especially to be near you, and I do my best to be a companion, and to sympathise in all your interests. Don't tell me that I have failed altogether!"

Cynthia crossed the room, knelt down on the floor by her mother's couch and laid both hands on her knee. The two faces that confronted each other were as much alike as was possible, given a difference in age of twenty-five years. Cynthia was a beautiful girl, and her mother was a beautiful woman, and the beauty lay as much in expression as in feature. Miles Trevor had been entirely mistaken when he compared the girl to a doll, for the direct glance of the eye, the sweet, firm lips and well-formed chin, belonged to no puppet, but showed unusual strength of character.

"You are a darling, and I adore you!" cried Cynthia fondly. "But you are old, you know, and I am so dreadfully young. There's something all fizzling inside me for want of a vent. I'm just desperate sometimes to do something wild, and exciting, and hilarious; it doesn't matter how silly it is; the sillier the better! I'm so dreadfully well-regulated, mother, considering I'm only sixteen. Lessons—'studies,' as Miss Mason calls them—musical exercises, constitutional, luncheon, more studies, dinner, polite conversation, performances upon the piano, that's my daily round, and I get *so* tired! Don't think I don't appreciate you, mother. You know I do. We are the best friends in the world, but still—"

"I know," said Mrs Alliot, and sighed once more. She stroked her daughter's golden head in thoughtful silence, then asked curiously, "What made you feel your loneliness especially to-day, dear?"

A flicker of laughter passed over Cynthia's pink-and-white face.

"The boy and girl in Number 1, the corner house, were playing tricks on me, trying to dazzle my eyes with something—a piece of old looking-glass, I suppose. I could not understand what caused the sudden glare until I caught a glimpse of their faces peering out from behind the curtains."

"Trying to dazzle you! That doctor's children? How exceedingly rude! They must be very badly brought up. And you were sitting with your eyes shut pretending to go on reading. You curious child! Why?"

"It was their joke; they enjoyed it. It would have been mean to cut it short. Besides," added Cynthia, with a twinkle, "it was my joke too! They must have been so puzzled when I seemed to go on reading, for they couldn't see that my eyes were shut, and I went on turning over the pages at regular intervals, as if I were perfectly comfortable and happy. Oh no, I don't think they are rude, mother; only frisky, and I love frisky people! There are such a lot of them, and they do have such a good time. Schoolroom tea all together, and the big girl pours out. I could see them quite well when they first came, and the afternoons were light. They go in pairs—a big boy and a big girl, a middling boy and a middling girl, and then a dear little girl with a face like a kitten. I like them all so much, but—" and her voice died away in a plaintive cadence, "they don't like me!"

"And how have you found that out, may I ask?"

"I—I feel they don't," sighed Cynthia sadly. "They watch me out of the windows, and talk and laugh, and make remarks among themselves. The window seemed full of faces the other day..."

Mrs Alliot's delicate face flushed resentfully.

"Abominably rude! Really, dear, I don't think you need worry yourself what such people think. There can be no possible excuse for such behaviour!"

"Oh yes, dear, there is, for they don't intend me to see! It was quite extraordinary how they all vanished into space the very instant I raised my eyes. You might just as well say it is rude of me to stare into their windows, and I do, for I can't help it. It's a sort of magnet to me every time I pass. I do so wish I knew them, mother dear!"

Mrs Alliot smiled and stroked her daughter's head once more. She was thinking that for Cynthia's sake she must really manage to cultivate some friends with large families; but she had not the least intention of introducing her daughter to the strange doctor's mischievous, unconventional children.

In many cases, however, there is something stronger than the will of parents and guardians. Some people call it fate, some by a higher name. In later years Cynthia Alliot considered her friendship with the Trevor family as one of the greatest providences of her life.

Chapter Five.

An Old Trick.

It was very dull and dreary for the remainder of the month, typical November weather, with what the Trevors called a "pea-soup" atmosphere, deepening now and then into a regular fog. The Square gardens were soaking with moisture, the surrounding houses looked greyer and gloomier than ever, until it seemed impossible to believe that the sky had ever been blue, or that gay-coloured spring flowers had flourished in those black-looking beds.

Jack and Jill had the bad taste to approve of fogs. They were "ripping," they declared. "So adventurous and jolly! Yesterday, when I was walking to school, a hansom drove on the pavement beside me. Think of that!" cried Jill in a tone of triumph. "The horse's nose nearly touched my shoulder, and an old lady near me shrieked like anything. It *was* sport!"

Jack was rather envious of the hansom episode, but had had his own share of amusement. "I followed Johnston all the way home, and chaffed him with a pebble in my mouth to disguise my voice. He was nearly mad with rage, and whenever he turned round I simply bent double, and he went for another fellow, and there was no end of a game."

"But how did it happen that you could see him when he couldn't see you?" queried Jill, when Jack was forced to admit that he *had* made mistakes more than once; but it only added to the sport to see the consternation of innocent pedestrians when an accusing voice suddenly hissed in their ears, "Who sneaked the indiarubber from Smith's desk?"

The twins were happily constituted to enjoy all things, and from their conversation it would have appeared that to be hopelessly lost in a fog would be the climax of earthly joy; but Betty hated the gloom of the long days, when the gas burned steadily from breakfast to bedtime, and was nervous about trusting herself alone in the streets. In her leisure moments she devoted herself to the preparation of Christmas presents, and turned over the contents of her scrap-drawers, debating how to make a dozen handsome articles with the least possible expenditure. It is to be feared that Betty's gifts were arranged more to suit her own convenience than the tastes of the recipients. "This will make a book-cover for Jill. I don't suppose she'll ever use it, but it's not big enough for anything else, so she'll just have to like it!" This was the spirit in which she assorted her materials, and set to work thereon. Not the ideal attitude by any means, but one must make allowances for a girl with a small allowance and a large family connection, and must also enter it to the credit of this particular damsel that she grudged no work which could beautify the simple background. Poor Betty! For two whole gloomy afternoons did she work at a spray of roses on a linen work-bag, and on the third day a feeble gleam of sunlight showed itself, and lo, the roses were a harlequin study in pinks and orange!

"Is it at all trying? Is it enough to make you pitch the whole thing into the fire?" she demanded dramatically of the chairs and tables, as the horrible discovery burst upon her, and she proceeded to snap at the silk with her sharp little scissors, and viciously tear away the stitches. "Shan't bother to fill them in any more! They'll just have to do in outline, and if she doesn't like it she can do the other thing!" she grunted under her breath; but that was only the impulse of the moment, and when it came to action each stitch was put in as carefully as before.

"What are you sewing away at those old things for?" Jill demanded, coming into the room and seating herself easily on the edge of the table. "It's much easier to buy match-boxes and needle-books. You can get beauties for sixpence three-farthings at the Christmas bazaars, and it saves no end of fag. You can give me safety-pins if you like, for my clothes are all coming to pieces, and my pins disappear like smoke. Mary eats them, I believe! What are you going to give mother?"

"Can't think! She wants a palm for the drawing-room, but a nice one costs half a guinea, and I couldn't possibly scrape together more than three and six."

Jill pondered, swinging her feet to and fro. "Five more Saturdays at fourpence each,—one and eight-pence, and I've got about two shillings in hand. No! I couldn't possibly offer to join. I wish we could have managed it, for the drawing-room doesn't look half furnished, and a big palm would have made a fine effect, but we can't, so there's an end of that!"

A gasp of suppressed nervousness sounded from the end of the room, and Pam's voice said with the usual funny little squeak, "I've got sixpence with a hole in it. I'll join, Betty! Do get mother a palm! She wants it so badly. We saw one in a shop window yesterday, and she said it was just the thing for our room!"

"Sorry, Pam, but it can't be done. They are a frightful price in the shops, and even old 'All a-growing all a-blowing' has none under seven and six. Perhaps when her birthday comes round we can manage it, but at Christmas there are so many presents to buy that one can't afford big things."

"I want to get it now," squeaked Pam obstinately, while Jill jumped down from the table and turned to the door.

"I'm going out! Can't afford to waste holiday afternoons. Why don't you put away that stupid work and come too?"

"Where are you going? A walk?"

"Rather not! Am I a Pampered Pet to promenade up and down? Jack and I are going to have some fun in the Square. I'm not going to tell you what it is, but you can come too if you like."

Betty raised her head and peered out of the window. Black railings, black trees, sodden grass, paths strewn with decaying leaves, a fast-failing light. She gave a shudder of distaste and sank back in her chair.

"Thanks! I prefer the fire. I can't understand you, Jill, going in for an exam, and wasting every spare moment you get! When I went in, I stewed every Saturday afternoon the whole term, and never dreamed of going out."

"Yes, and got plucked for your pains!" retorted Jill brutally. Poor Betty! She had passed so well in everything but that fatal arithmetic, which made all the difference between success and failure. The figures would not add up, the lines danced before her eyes, she could not remember the simplest table. It was cruel to rake up that old sore. She pressed her lips together and sat in offended dignity, while Jill skipped to the door, tossing her pretty pert head.

"I shall take care of my health and my nerves, and not have them breaking down just when I need them most. If the worst comes to the worst, I shall be no worse off than you were yourself, and I shall have had my fun!"

She ran downstairs into the hall, where Jack was awaiting her with a brown-paper parcel tucked under his arm, and together they crossed the road to the nearest gate, and let themselves into the garden with a heavy key.

"The other corner is the best," Jack cried, leading the way forward at an eager pace, "more traffic, and thicker bushes. I spotted the exact place yesterday. Have you got the reel in your pocket all right?"

"Yes, yes! And you must give me my turn, Jack. It's only fair, because you wouldn't let me have a parcel of my own on the other side."

"Of course not! You wouldn't expect to find two lost parcels within a few yards of each other, would you? You want to

give the whole show away!" cried Jack in indignant schoolboy fashion. "Now don't talk so much, but creep between these bushes when nobody is passing. There's room for us both, and I can get a pull at the string between these branches. We'll have a rehearsal now, and see how it works." He crawled forward on the dank earth, in easy unconcern for the knees of his trousers, dropped the daintily-wrapped parcel on to the centre of the pavement, and crept back to his place, holding in his hand the end of a long black thread.

They crouched together behind the bushes, as mischievous a Jack and Jill as have been known since the world began, giggling with anticipated glee, nudging each other violently at the sound of approaching footsteps, and peering eagerly through their loopholes to see what manner of prey was about to fall into their hands.

First, a fine lady walking gingerly along, both hands occupied in keeping her skirt from contact with the greasy pavement. She looked at the parcel with blank indifference, and passed quietly on her way. The twins gasped with stupefaction. Could such things be? Was it possible that a human creature could be so surfeited with the good things of this world, that she could behold an unopened parcel lying on the ground, and feel no curiosity to discover what was inside? Imagination refused to picture such a position!

"Mad!" was Jack's scornful explanation. "Mad as a March hare! Ought to be shut up out of the way. Walked straight over the string too. Hope to goodness she hasn't broken it!"

A flick to the end of the string proved that this fear was unfounded, and the twins composed themselves for another period of waiting. Pedestrians seemed to prefer the pavement by the houses instead of that darker one overshadowed by the trees of the gardens, and several moments elapsed before a brisk footstep announced the approach of a tall, well set-up man clad in a light overcoat. His eye lit on the parcel, he bent his head and stretched out a hand to raise it up. Instantly Jack gave a flick to the string, to which the parcel responded by jumping an inch or two farther along the pavement. The brown-coated man straightened himself, gave a funny little grunt, half amused, half-angry, and strode on his way. He had been a boy himself!

The next victim was an old woman carrying a pile of parcels, and breathing heavily from fatigue, but although overladen, she was evidently nothing loath to add to her burden. The twins could hear her surprised exclamation, and see the hitch of the shoulders with which she freed her right arm for the attack. Down she bent, panting louder than before, until, even as her envious fingers approached the prize, it leapt into the air, and as by some magic process disappeared from sight. Jack was bursting with pride at his own adroitness, and Jill nudged in enthusiastic approval. This came of fishing by the river-banks in the last summer holidays, and gaining dexterity in the art of casting lines! It was wonderful how useful such accomplishments were at times. The bewildered face of the disappointed treasure-seeker was almost too much for the conspirators, and had she not been too much engrossed in her own thoughts she must certainly have heard the splutterings which not even the handkerchief stuffed between Jill's lips could entirely drown. With a sigh she went on her way, wondering if eyesight were about to fail, as the culmination of her troubles.

After this came an errand-boy, whistling as he walked. He made a pounce at the parcel, and when it disappeared had no difficulty in understanding the phenomenon.

"Ho, you would, would you?" he cried, and picking up a handful of stones, sent them flying in among the bushes with such force that the twins congratulated themselves on escaping without injury.

They learnt a lesson from this experience, and henceforth made a rule of allowing all boys to pass by when they practised this particular pastime. By this time Jill was shivering in her shabby coat, and beginning to cast longing glances across the Square to the lighted schoolroom window. Anticipations of tea and hot buttered toast—the Saturday afternoon treat of years' standing—made her present position seem unattractive, and she proposed an immediate adjournment home.

Jack, however, was not yet satisfied with his achievements.

"We haven't had what I call a real proper rise out of anyone yet. Just once more, and then we'll run for it," he protested, and Jill shivered, and yielded to his superior will.

She had not long to wait. In less than five minutes a slow, measured tread was heard in the distance, and presently an elderly gentleman hove in sight, portly, well-dressed, and walking with a certain stiffness and deliberation which would have secured for him the sympathetic consideration of people of his own age. Jack and Jill, however, had no thought for such uninteresting subjects as rheumatism; they nudged each other delightedly, and waited in breathless silence to see what would happen next.

Tramp, tramp, tramp came the slow approach, and then a sudden halt—the halt they knew so well—followed by something like a stifled groan as the victim stiffly bent forward to examine the treasure-trove. His gloved hand had nearly closed on the parcel when Jack adroitly flicked it a few inches away. He bent still farther, with another gasping effort, and then, even as the parcel again moved onward, there came a loud, startled cry, and the horrified twins beheld their victim fall forward on his face, and lie helpless on the ground.

Chapter Six.

What came of the Trick.

A moment Jack and Jill stared at each other in horrified silence, then the same words burst from both lips—

"We must help him! We must see if he is hurt!" Out from behind the bushes they flew, raced for the nearest gate, and ran panting to the scene of the accident.

The rays from the lamp near at hand lighted up the pavement, and showed the old gentleman already dragging himself to his feet, assisted by a lady whom Jill recognised in the flash of an eye as the much-admired occupant of Number 17. There she stood in her smart fur coat, a little red velvet toque perched on her dark locks, supporting the old gentleman by the arm, and so evidently overpowered by his weight that she was overjoyed to welcome further assistance.

No words were spoken, but quick as light Jack darted forward and pulled with all his force, while Jill placed both hands against the blue broadcloth back and vigorously pushed forward. As a result of these united efforts, the old gentleman was hoisted to an upright position, with a celerity which appeared to startle him almost as much as the preceding fall. He leant against the railings, puffed and panted, groaned and grumbled, while the onlookers listened with sympathy and self-reproach.

"Injured for life—strained in every muscle—nervous shock—police—disgraceful—much obliged—advice at once—no time for delay." The different phrases detached themselves from attacks of groanings and sighings, and, hearing the last words, Jack was blessed with a brilliant inspiration.

"There's a doctor at the corner, sir. Would you like me to help you to the house?" he said in his politest manner.

It seemed as if, after all, good might arise out of evil if the accident were the means of providing his father with a new patient. There was not much wrong with the old fellow—anyone could see that—but he was fidgety and nervous about himself, which, of course, would make him the more valuable from a doctor's point of view. Later on the boy would be obliged to confess his own responsibility in the accident. He would feel a sneak if he did not, but the present was the time for action, not confession.

"Doctor at the corner, eh? Well, well, get me to him as quickly as possible. Shattered! Quite shattered! Must have a rest, and drive home! Bad day's work! Never the same again!"

The old gentleman laid his hand on Jack's shoulder and hobbled stiffly away, pausing just one moment to lift his hat and say courteously—

"My best thanks to you, madam, for your assistance." Jill and the pretty lady were left standing in the middle of the pavement, staring curiously into each other's faces.

The pretty lady was dark, and quite young, astonishingly young, like a big girl dressed in important clothes. Her eyes were very bright and happy-looking, and her lips looked as though they were made for laughter. Jill's pert little face was left fully exposed by the cloth cap which was perched at the top of her curly locks; her expression was divided between triumph and consternation.

"Do you think he is hurt, really hurt?" she asked eagerly. "He made a great fuss, but men generally do, and he walks nearly as well as before. He can't have broken anything, can he?"

"Oh no!" cried the pretty lady. "I think you can be quite sure of that, but at such an age any shock of this kind may be serious. He is a very heavy old man."

She paused, looking at the girl with an inquiring expression, as if waiting for something which had not yet been said, and to her own astonishment Jill found herself answering the unspoken question.

"It was our fault that he fell at all. We did it. We were in the Square hiding behind the bushes, and we had a parcel just the right size to hold something nice and pretty—it was cotton-wool really!—very neatly tied up. We dropped it out through the railings and waited till people came along, and then we twitched it away by the end of a long black thread."

The pretty lady's expression changed suddenly. Up till now she had been all interest and vivacity, almost one might have imagined of approval, but at the last word she frowned and shook her head. Jill expected a vigorous remonstrance, but the words, when they came, were not in the least what she had expected.

"Thread!" echoed the pretty lady shrilly. "But how stupid! Elastic is far better. It jerks ever so much bet—" She stopped suddenly with a gasp of recollection, and continued in a stiff, mincing voice, "It is very unwise to play practical jokes. One can never tell what the consequence may be."

Jill laughed gaily, being much too sharp to be put off with so transparent a pretence. She drew a step nearer to the pretty lady, and looked up in her face with twinkling eyes.

"Oh, it's no use pretending! You weren't shocked a bit! I believe"—she gave a little gasp at the audacity of the idea, but her courage did not fail—"I believe you have even—done it yourself. However did you manage to think of elastic? It's a lovely idea!"

The pretty lady wrinkled her brows in a funny, apologetic fashion.

"It doesn't follow because I did a thing that it is not foolish and rash. I am afraid I was known for my foolish tricks. I was one of a big family—such a lot of sisters that people used to call us 'the houseful of girls,' and I was the most mischievous of all. I don't want to preach to you—it wouldn't be fair, would it, when I have done far sillier things myself?—but next time you try the parcel trick, get it out of the way when old people come along. Don't let them run the risk of a fall, like this poor old gentleman, or even have the trouble of stooping for nothing. Try to remember, won't you? And,"—eyes and teeth flashed in an irresistible smile,—"*try the elastic!*"

Jill's merry trill rang out again, and the pretty lady looked at her with smiling approval. The girl's natural attractiveness was as conspicuous as ever, despite the disadvantageous circumstances, and it would have been a

cold heart that did not warm towards her, as she stood with hands thrust deep into her pockets, fresh, wholesome, and bonnie, like a bit of summer in the midst of the grey London gloom.

The pretty lady had heard high praise of the skill of the new doctor who had come to live in the Square, and also of the personal character of himself and his wife, but at this moment it is to be feared that she felt little interested in them as individuals, but regarded them solely as the parents of their daughter.

"It is getting rather dusk for you to be out alone. I will walk with you to the corner. You are one of the doctor's daughters, aren't you? I have watched you and your sisters from my windows, and envied you for being together. I do so miss my own sisters. I have five—think of that!—and only one married besides myself. You can think what a lively time of it we used to have!"

But Jill was too busy thinking of something else to have any thought to spare for the lively times of the past.

"Are you married?" she inquired breathlessly. "Truly and really? You look much too young. We thought you were engaged, and had an invalid mother in the house. I suppose he is the husband?"

"Yes, he is the husband, sure enough, and we keep no invalids nor skeletons of any sort in the cupboards, only such a lot of big, empty rooms, waiting for girls to fill them. I do love girls. I can't be happy without girls. We have been away constantly the last few months, but now that we are settled at home I must call on your mother, and ask if she will spare you to come and have tea with me sometimes. Would you like to come?"

"Rather!" replied Jill in expressive, schoolgirl fashion, and the pretty lady laughed again.

"That's all right! We must arrange a day quite soon, and I must ask Cynthia Alliot to meet you. She is a lonely little soul who needs livening. There now, here we are at your door, and I am sure you are longing to see how the old gentleman is getting on. Good-bye! We shall meet soon again."

She waved her hand, and hurried homewards, the red toque gleaming out brightly as she passed under the lamp-post, and Jill gazed after her with adoring eyes. Young girls often cherish a romantic affection for women older than themselves, and where could there be a more fitting object on which to lavish one's devotion—so young, so pretty, so friendly, so—so understanding! She had not preached a bit, only just thought it would be better to leave old people alone; and then that suggestion of elastic! In itself it was sufficient to establish her as a miracle of good sense and ingenuity!

Chapter Seven.

What the Victim said.

Jill entered the house to hear from the servant that the doctor had not yet returned from his rounds, that Mrs Trevor was also out, and that Miss Betty and Master Jack were looking after the old gentleman in the dining-room.

Listening outside the door, she caught a sound of puffing and groaning, and, unable to resist the promptings of anxiety and curiosity, turned the handle and entered the room.

The victim was seated in the doctor's big leather arm-chair, looking very perturbed and sorry for himself, while Jack and Betty hovered near, alternately offering suggestions for his relief.

"If you would lie down on the sofa—"

"Or have a cushion to your back—"

"Or a cup of tea—"

"Or wine—"

"Or sal-volatile—"

"Shall I bathe your head with eau de Cologne?"

"Would you put up your feet on a chair?"

The victim had apparently been too much engrossed in his own self-pity to take any notice of the separate suggestions, but now their reiteration had an irritating effect, for with startling unexpectedness he thrust forward his big, flushed face, and shouted a loud refusal.

"No, no, no, no! Do you want to kill me at once? I only want rest and a chance to get my breath again. Tea? Wine? Faugh! I hope I know better than that after the agonies I have had to go through. Sal-volatile! Do you take me for an hysterical old woman? Feet up? Ay, young sir, I expect I shall have a longer dose of that position than I care for after this adventure! As if I had not had enough of it already—five weeks on my chair in the summer, three in the spring, two months last winter."

From his own account he was evidently a great sufferer, yet in appearance he was stout and healthy enough. Jack made a swift diagnosis, and said politely—

"Gout, I suppose, sir? Gout in your feet?"

"And what makes you suppose anything of the kind, sir? I don't carry a label to advertise my ailments that I am aware of!" cried the old gentleman, with an irascibility which convinced his audience that he was on the point of another attack. Then suddenly he looked past his two questioners, saw Jill's peering face, and went off at another tangent.

"Oh ho! What's this? I saw you outside in the street. What are you doing here, may I ask? Come in for a treat to see the rest of the show?"

"It's my house! I live here!" replied Jill grandiloquently. "I am sorry you are not well. Would you like us to whistle for a cab to take you home? It's always nicest to be at home when one is ill."

It was all very well for Jack to frown dissent. Jill was inclined to think that the truest wisdom lay in getting the old gentleman out of the way before her father's return, and so escape with one scolding instead of two. She raised her eyebrows, and mouthed the dumb question, "Will you tell?" while the victim continued his groans and lamentations.

"Great mistake ever to leave home in these days. Can't think what I am coming to next. I merely stooped down to pick up a parcel—simplest thing in the world; done it a score of times before—and over I went full on my face. Terrible crash! Terrible crash! Paralysis now, I expect, in addition to everything else. Just my luck! A wreck, sir—a wreck! And I used to be the strongest man in the regiment. Ah, well, well, that's all over! I must be content to be on the shelf now."

Betty turned towards the twins with a scrutinising gaze, but they had no eyes for her. A note of real pathos had sounded in the victim's voice as he bemoaned his lost strength, and their hearts melted before it. Jack stepped boldly forward to make his confession.

"It was not paralysis, sir. It was—the parcel! We're sorry,—I'm sorry, but it was only a joke, and we never thought you would fall. No one else fell. We kept pulling it away by the string, you know, a *few* inches at a time, so that you did not notice, but you had really farther and farther to stretch, and it was that that made you topple over."

He paused, and the old gentleman stopped groaning and stared at him with eyes of crab-like protuberance. The crimson flush deepened on his cheeks, and his white whiskers appeared to bristle with wrath. He was truly an awe-inspiring object.

"It was your doing, was it? You pulled away the parcel, did you? I 'toppled over,' did I?" he repeated with awful deliberation. That was the lull before the storm, and then it broke in all its fury, and roared over their heads, so that they gasped and trembled before it.

The victim went back to his earliest childhood, and thanked Providence that he at least had known how to behave himself, and desist from silly, idiotic, ridiculous, tom-fool tricks, which would disgrace a monkey on an organ. He projected himself into the future, and prophesied ruin and destruction for a race which produced popinjays and clowns. He announced his intention of dying that very night, so that the crime which his hearers had committed might be duly avenged, and in the same breath would have them to know that he was not the sort of man to be affected by the tricks of unmannerly cubs, and that General Terence Digby was match for a hundred such as they, gout or no gout. Gout, indeed! Toppled, forsooth! The world was coming to a pretty pass! Was it part of the plot, might he ask, to cajole him into the house and poison him with their sal-volatile tea? This was a case for the police!

Betty gave a little shriek of dismay, but the twins exchanged glances of subdued admiration. They liked to hear a thing done really well, and the General's denunciation was a triumph of its kind. But when asked if he were not thoroughly ashamed of himself, Jack showed the courage of his opinion.

"Sorry!" he declared. "I said so before, sir, but not ashamed. We wouldn't have been bribed to hurt you, and I'll apologise as much as you like, but we were doing nothing wrong. It was only a joke."

"Joke!" screamed the old gentleman. "Joke!" He rolled his protruding eyes towards the ceiling, and gasped and spluttered in disgust. "Is that what you call a joke? I don't know what this country is coming to! Have you nothing better to do with your time, young sir, than to prowl about the streets playing monkey tricks on innocent passers-by? I am sorry for you if that is your best idea of enjoyment."

"Boys will be boys!" said Jack, in his quaint, sententious fashion. "We can only be young once, sir, so we might as well make the most of it while we can."

"Besides, we weren't prowling about in the street!" cried Jill, suddenly bursting into the conversation, her determination to keep silent melting away before what she was pleased to consider a slight on her dignity. "Mother wouldn't allow such a thing. The Square is private property. We have a key, and she knows we are perfectly safe when we are there."

"But, by Jove, other people are not! You manage to get into mischief though you are railed up!" cried the victim, and a sort of spasm passed over his face, as of a smile violently suppressed. He glared at Jill, from her to Betty, from Betty to Jack, and then let his glance wander round the room—the big, handsome apartment so sparsely filled with the furniture of a smaller house. The sideboard looked poor and insignificant in the recess designed for one twice the size; the few pictures entirely failed to hide the marks of the places where the last tenant had hung his more generous supply. The carpet covered only two-thirds of the floor, and was eked out by linoleum. To the most unobservant eye it must have been evident that the owner of this house was a man whose means were so limited that the strictest economy was necessary in the management of his household.

"Ha—ho—hum!" coughed the old gentleman suddenly. "Have you ever heard of such a thing as the Employers' Liability Act?"

The girls shook their heads. Jack had glimmering ideas on the subject.

"It's a sort of—er—of insurance, isn't it? If a workman fellow drops a sack on your head, the other fellow has to pay up, so he pays the insurance fellow to do it for him. That's the sort of thing, isn't it, sir?"

"That is the sort of thing, sir, expressed with your natural elegance of diction. Does your father contract with an 'insurance fellow,' may I ask?"

"No—why should he? He doesn't employ any workmen."

"He is responsible for his children, however, who are a hundred times more dangerous. How will he like it, do you think, when I send him in a bill for my expenses, and the loss of time caused by this accident? I put a high price on my time, let me tell you. It is of value to other people besides myself—of value to my country, sir, I am proud to think! If I am laid aside by the hand of Providence, that is one matter. It's a very different thing when it is done of malice intent. What should you say to a hundred pounds a week, eh, what?"

Jill gave a squeal of dismay. Betty set her lips tight, and tried to look composed and haughty, but she felt a trifle sick. She could hardly bring herself to believe that such a proceeding would be legally possible, yet the old gentleman had distinctly said that such a law existed, and Jack appeared to know something about it. Beneath his air of bravado she could see that the boy shared in her own nervousness, and a wild idea of flinging herself at the stranger's feet and imploring his clemency was beginning to take shape in her brain, when a sound from without attracted the attention of all.

It was the click of the doctor's key in the latch, and a moment later he entered the hall, and paused, as his custom was, to read the messages which had been pencilled for him on a slate. Then came the rustle of Mary's skirt, a few low-toned words, and the sound of quick steps approaching the dining-room door. It was a thrilling moment!

There sat the victim, scarlet-faced, glassy-eyed, scowling more fiercely than ever, as if in anticipation of the coming conflict. There in a row stood the three young people, shivering in their respective shoes, for was it not the greatest of offences to "worry father," and involve him in needless expenses?

"Sorry to have been out, sir," cried the doctor, entering the room, and rubbing his hands in brisk, professional manner. "My maid tells me that you have had a fall. I hope my young people have looked after you in my absence. Now, would you prefer to have a talk here, or shall I assist you into my consulting-room?"

The critical moment had arrived, and with it came a rapturous surprise, for even as the young people gazed, the anger faded out of the stranger's face, the gleaming eyes softened, the lips relaxed, and, as by the waving of a magician's wand, he was suddenly changed into a kindly, benevolent old gentleman, who would never condescend to such an indignity as a fit of temper.

"Thank you, sir, thank you, sir! I fancy I am pretty nearly my own man again. Your son very kindly brought me in, and gave me the opportunity of resting, which was really all I required. And your daughter offered me refreshments. I—ah—happened to slip,"—the protruding eyes met Jack's with a flicker, which, if such a thing could be imagined, was almost a wink!—"to slip on the pavement, and a man of my weight feels these things more than a boy. Gout, sir, gout in the feet! Your good son has already diagnosed my complaint, and, no doubt, you will be equally ready. Now, if you could make up a prescription which would give me back my powers of twenty years ago—"

Dr Trevor laughed, while Betty, Jack, and Jill mentally erected a monument, and placed the figure of the victim upon it in everlasting gratitude and affection.

"I am afraid I can hardly do that, but if you will allow me I will give you a draught which will steady your nerves after the shock. How did you come to fall? Was the pavement slippery with the mud?"

"The London pavements, sir," answered the old man pompously, "the London pavements are a disgrace to civilisation! Don't tell me that I am crazy. Don't tell me it is the best-paved city in the world. I've heard that statement before, and I stick to my own opinion. My opinion, I trust, sir, is worth as much as any other man's. It is a wonder there are not many more accidents. I fell, sir, I would have you know, in consequence of my own selfish and avaricious instincts, and I attach no blame to anyone but myself!"

"Ah!" exclaimed the doctor significantly. He glanced towards his son, caught his air of embarrassment, and hesitated between amusement and indignation. "Jack—at your old parcel trick again?"

"Boys will be boys, sir, as I have just been reminded. Perhaps we can remember the day when we also— But what about that draught? Five minutes in your consulting-room, if you please, and then Master Jack can kindly get me a cab. I will not trust myself in the streets again to-day."

Another twinkling glance at the twins, and the old gentleman raised himself slowly from his chair, and followed the doctor from the room, leaving the three young people staring at each other breathlessly.

"This *is* a day!" cried Jill, with a caper of delight. "We've made two new friends! The pretty lady says she is coming to call, and we must go to tea, and then this jolly old man... What a brick he is! He didn't mind scolding us himself, but he wouldn't let anyone else do it. Jack, do be awfully nice when you get the cab, and offer to see him home. Tell him how grateful we are. Hint like anything to make him invite us there!"

"Trust me for that!" cried Jack.

Chapter Eight.

Mrs Vanburgh's Plans.

The pretty lady came to call the very next week. Mrs Trevor and Betty were busy sewing in the upstairs workroom when the maid brought up the card, and the first sight of it brought no enlightenment.

"Mrs Gervase Vanburgh! Goodness! What a fine name! Who can she be? Do you know who it is, mother?"

"Not in the least, dear. One of the neighbours, perhaps. We will go down and see."

Betty smoothed her hair before the looking-glass, and then as carefully fluffed it out, shook her skirt free from the little ends of thread which would stick to the rough blue cloth, and followed her mother to the drawing-room, for now that she was over seventeen it was Mrs Trevor's wish that she should learn to help in social duties. Half-way downstairs inspiration dawned. "I believe it's the pretty lady! Jill said she was coming!" she whispered breathlessly. The pleasant expectation brought a flush into her cheeks, and an added animation into her eyes, so that it was in her most attractive guise that she entered the drawing-room in her mother's train.

Yes! It was the pretty lady and no one else, prettier than ever in her very smartest clothes, sitting in orthodox fashion, on a stiff upright chair, card-case in hand, and discussing the weather and the advantages and disadvantages of the neighbourhood with the sedateness of an old married woman; yet ever and anon as she glanced at Betty there was a something in her face,—a smile, a tremble, a momentary uplifting of the eyebrow,—which bespoke an unspoken sympathy. "We understand each other, you and I!" it seemed to say. "This is only a pretence. The *real* business will begin when we are alone, but—*don't I do it well?*" Betty twinkled back, and was content to wait her turn, knowing that it would surely come.

Yes, Mrs Vanburgh said, she and her husband had only lately returned to their town house. They had a little place in the country, and spent a great deal of time with an old uncle who was an invalid, and very fond of young society. No! She did not care for town life, but for her husband's sake she made the best of it for a few months in the year. The days seemed very long when one was obliged to turn on the lights before four o'clock. Oh yes, she was fond of reading—sometimes! But one seemed to need some more active occupation. She did a good deal of wood-carving. Did Miss Trevor go in for wood-carving? Would she care to take it up? It would be so very nice to have a companion, and all the tools were lying in readiness just across the road.

"Thank you so much. I'd love it!" cried Betty, all pink with excitement and pleasure. "I take a few classes still—music and French—but my afternoons are mostly free. I could come any time."

"To-day?" queried the pretty lady, raising her pretty eyebrows eagerly. "Now? Come back with me and have tea, and I'll show you my carvings, and you can decide what you will try first."

It was all very irregular and unconventional, because, of course, the proper thing would have been for Mrs Vanburgh to have waited quietly until Mrs Trevor had returned her call, and even for a judicious period after that, before sending a formal invitation. Nevertheless Mrs Trevor had not the heart to interfere. She remembered her own youth, and the rapture which it had then afforded her to be able to do things *at once*; she saw the radiance in Betty's face, and realised that her visitor was only a girl herself, so that when Betty turned towards her a flushed, appealing face, she smiled indulgently, and said, "Certainly, dear! It is very kind of Mrs Vanburgh to ask you. Run upstairs and put on your hat."

Betty lost no time in taking advantage of this permission, and in ten minutes' time the extraordinary thing came to pass, that she and the pretty lady were walking along the Square, chatting together as if they had been friends of years' standing.

Mrs Vanburgh paused upon the threshold to give some instructions to the servant, then escorted Betty straight upstairs to a big, bare room on the third floor, which she described as her "lair."

"No one ever sits here but myself, and I can make as much mess as I like. It's lovely!" she explained, and forthwith turned on the electric light, and poked up the fire, for the atmosphere was distinctly chilly. It was certainly not a tidy apartment, no one could have said that for it, but it was extremely interesting from a girl's point of view. The wood-carving bench occupied the place of honour before the window; but there were evidences that the owner possessed more hobbies than one, for a piece of copper was in process of being beaten into a pattern of pomegranates and leaves, a work-table was littered with odds and ends, and on an old black tray was a weird medallion portrait of a gentleman, manufactured out of plasticine, a lump of which lay by its side.

Young Mrs Vanburgh held out the tray towards Betty with a dramatic gesture.

"That's my husband! Let me introduce you—Mr Gervase Vanburgh—Miss Trevor! Would you believe, to look at him there, that he is quite the handsomest man you ever beheld?"

Betty looked at the grey profile, and sniggered helplessly.

"I'm afraid I never should!"

"No, it's horrid! I'm just beginning modelling, and it's not a success. I suppose it's because I can't draw well enough. What *is wrong*, do you think?"

"Everything!" Betty felt inclined to say, but politely compromised by pointing out the most flagrant offences.

"The ear is on a level with the mouth. The eye is perched upon a mound, instead of being in a hollow; he has no nostril, and oh! Water on the brain! He must have, with all that bump in front!"

"Goodness! What a critic! You might be one of my very own sisters!" cried Mrs Vanburgh, laughing. She looked at the profile scrutinisingly. "There's one comfort—it can soon be altered. There! I'll take a bit off his head. It's the neatest shape in the world really. I don't think I am born to be a sculptor. For one thing, I should never have the patience to clean my nails. This plasticine gets into all the nooks and crannies, and simply *won't* come out!"

Betty had no sympathy to spare for nails. She was too much occupied in considering another problem. Mrs Vanburgh looked almost as young as herself, and was far more spontaneous and lively in manner; it seemed impossible to imagine her the mistress of this stately house, and the wife of the handsomest man in the world! There was all the natural awe of the unmarried for the married girl in her voice as she said—

"It is so strange to hear you talk of your husband. You don't look a bit married. Doesn't it feel very—queer?"

Mrs Vanburgh laughed happily.

"It feels very—nice! I have only one trouble in life, and that is that I am too happy. Yes, seriously, it does trouble me! It's so difficult not to grow selfish when one is always petted, and praised, and considered first of all. I want to be of some use in the world. My husband says I am of use to him, and of course that's my first duty, but it's not enough. When I was married a dear old lady wrote me a letter, and said that marriage often became 'the selfishness of two,' and I do feel that it is true. It's no credit to be good to someone who is dearer than yourself, and giving a few subscriptions is no credit either when you are rich; it was a very different matter when you scraped them out of your dress allowance. I've thought over heaps of things that I could do, and at last I've decided—sit down, and I'll tell you all about it! This is the comfiest chair. It's so nice getting to know you first, because you can help. Ages ago I read a story by Sir Walter Besant, *Katherine Regina* was the name, I think. I forget what it was about, and all about it, except that one character was a poor governess living in a dreary London 'Home,' knowing nobody, and having absolutely nowhere to go in her leisure hours, because of course she could not afford entertainments. One day she had a desperately miserable fit, and said to one of her companions—I always remembered those words—'Is there no woman in all the length and breadth of this great city who has a thought for us, or who cares enough for us to open the house to us for a few hours a week?' I made up my mind then and there, that if I ever lived in a city and had a home of my own, I would share it with homeless people. I asked my husband if I might have an 'At Home' every Saturday afternoon, and he said I could ask everyone I liked, so long as I did not expect him to put in an appearance. So!"—she clasped her hands excitedly, and her eyes flashed—"this very week I drove round to three separate Governesses' Homes and left cards of invitation—'Mrs Gervase Vanburgh will be at home every Saturday afternoon between November 12 and December 20 from three to seven o'clock, and will be pleased to see any ladies who may care to call upon her.' What do you think of that for a start?"

Betty stared in amazement. "Governesses! Three Homes! Three to seven! How *dreadful!* What will you do with them?"

"Oh! I've lots of plans. I'll have a scrumptious light, cakey tea in the drawing-room, and in the dining-room a sort of cold high-tea as they have in the North, with chickens, and ham, and potted shrimps, and sandwiches, and all sorts of good things for those who can stay until six, and sit down to a regular meal. And I'll have nice books and magazines in the library, and easy-chairs drawn up to the fire; and up here, anyone who likes can practise wood-carving, or copper beating, or any of my little hobbies. I'll throw open the whole house, and let each one do what she likes best; and you shall help me! I've got another girl coming on Saturday, and between the three of us we ought to be able to manage. I don't ask you to come, you see,—I command! I need your help."

Betty hesitated between pride and dismay.

"I can't imagine myself entertaining a party of govies! I am still under their thrall, remember. You are emancipated, so it's different for you. But I'll come, of course I'll come. How many visitors do you expect?"

"That's just what cook asked, and I hadn't a notion what to say. I don't suppose we shall have many the first time. Only the enterprising spirits will come, but when they go back and say what a good time they have had, the numbers will increase. Do you think perhaps—twenty altogether?"

"Say a dozen!" said Betty, and Nan's face lengthened with disappointment.

"Only a dozen? Oh, surely there must be more than that! Just think; there are three Homes, and I expect forty or fifty living in each. I am quite sure there will be twenty. I shall provide for twenty-five, to be on the safe side."

She bent forward to poke the fire once more, and Betty's eyes roamed to the white overmantel, which was divided into five panels, each of which contained a vignette portrait of a girl's head, printed in a delicate shade of brown. She had seen much the same kind of thing in furniture warehouses again and again, but in this case the pictured faces lacked the pretty prettiness which was the usual characteristic, and were unmistakably portraits of living people. She looked at her hostess with an eager question.

"Your sisters?"

"Yes; isn't it lovely? They clubbed together and gave it to me for a wedding present. It feels a little bit as if they were here, to look up from my work and see their faces. That's the eldest—Maud; my Maud! She and I were always together. She is married, and has a dear little girl. That's Lillias, the next eldest—the beauty of the family."

"Ah!" sighed Betty enviously, "she *is* pretty. How lovely to be like that! Is she married too?"

"No."

"Engaged?"

"No."

"How funny! I should have thought she would have been married the first of all. Didn't everyone fall in love with her at first sight?"

"Yes, I think they did, but at second sight they seem to have preferred Maud and—me?"

Mrs Vanburgh did not seem disposed to discuss her sister's love affairs. She pointed to the next portrait, that of a dark, interesting-looking girl with hair parted down the middle and smoothed plainly down, in marked contrast to her sister's curls and pompadours.

"That's Elsie! She has views, and objects to being like the common herd. She writes articles *for* papers, not *in* them, abusing everything that is, and praising up everything that isn't. Gervase, my husband, says she will do very well when she learns sense. She is a dear old raven, and I miss her croak more than you would believe. That's Agatha. She's just—Agatha! A good-natured dear, always terribly in earnest about the smallest thing. Christabel is the baby, which means the head of the family. She is coming out next year, and means to outshine us all. I will tell you lots of stories about the girls and the jolly times we had at home, and soon I hope you will meet some of them here. Sisters are such comforts, aren't they?"

Betty mumbled an inarticulate something which might have been an assent or the reverse, and a servant entering with a tea-tray, the conversation turned to less personal topics. There was never any lack of anything to say, however, for, strangers as they were, the two girls chattered away without a break until the clock struck six, at which sound Betty leapt from her seat like another Cinderella, and turned hastily towards the door.

"Six! Oh, and I had Pam's music-lesson at half-past five! How awful of me to forget! You were so interesting, and I was enjoying myself so much. I must fly!"

"It's no use, I'm afraid. You can't put the clock back. There's one comfort—Pam will forgive you! That's the little one, I suppose, with the kitten face. I must get to know her soon."

Mrs Vanburgh tripped downstairs by Betty's side, and shook hands with the geniality of a lifelong friendship.

"Remember Saturday!" she cried. "Three o'clock punctually, and bring all your stores of small talk with you, for the first half-hour."

Betty ran across the darkened street and let herself into her own house, aglow with pleasurable excitement. Life looked quite a different thing in the last few hours, wherein a friend and a vocation had alike sprung into being. After all, it was a delightful old world! She would never grumble again, since at any moment such delightful surprises might arise.

The door swung open. How cold and grey the hall appeared after the glowing richness of Mrs Vanburgh's carpets and hangings! Betty made a little grimace at the linoleum, and lifting her eyes was suddenly aware of a wrathful figure confronting her from the threshold of the dining-room—Jill, standing with arms akimbo, flushed cheeks, and flashing eyes.

"So you have deigned to come back, have you? What business had you to go to tea with her at all, I should like to know? She's my friend! I knew her first! What right had you to go poking yourself forward?"

"I didn't poke. She asked me! Mother can tell you that she did. I'm going again on Saturday."

Jill's wrath gave way to an overwhelming anxiety.

"And me? And me? I am sure she asked me too."

"No, she didn't. It's a grown-up party. She'll ask you another time with Pam. She said she wanted to know Pam."

It was the last straw to be classed with Pam, a child of eight summers! Jill stuttered with mortified rage.

"S-neak! Just like you! Mark my word, Elizabeth Trevor, *I'll be even with you about this!*"

Chapter Nine.

A Visit to the Victim.

During the next week Betty's thoughts were continually winging across the Square to her new friend, Mrs Vanburgh, though her own time was so fully occupied, that, with the exception of a sudden encounter in the street, they did not see anything of each other until the great Saturday arrived.

Meantime it rankled in Jill's mind that she had been unfairly treated, and, in consequence, she was constantly endeavouring to hit on some scheme which would at once vindicate her own importance and put Betty's adventure in the shade. General Digby, as a new and striking personality in her small circle of acquaintances, naturally suggested himself as a fitting object for the enterprise, and she lost no time in consulting her ally.

"I say, Jack, when you saw the 'Victim' home the other night, did you notice the address?"

"What do you take me for, silly? I have eyes, haven't I? Of course I noticed it."

"You may have eyes, but you certainly haven't a memory. Do you happen to remember where it was?"

"No, I don't, but I wrote it down in my pocket-book, so I could soon find out if I wanted to. Why?"

"Because I think we ought to call and ask how he is."

"Father says he's all right except for his gout."

"I know—but it would be polite to call. Mother always does, even when she knows they are better. And as we were the—er—what do you call it?—cause of the accident—"

"Innocent?"

"No, that's not it! A much finer word—un—un—*unwitting!*—that's it, so it's all the more proper that we should inquire. How far off is it? Could we meet and go together after school this afternoon?"

"It's near enough, as far as that goes—one of those swagger flats in Prince's Square. I suppose we could manage all right. Will you tell mother about it?"

"Not till we get back. I am sure she would think it very nice and kind of us, but she'd want me to put on best things, and worry about my hair. I wish I'd been born a savage! I do so loathe being bothered about clothes."

"Never mind. No one would think to look at you that you ever bothered about them at all," quoth Jack, with somewhat unflattering sympathy. "I'll wait for you at the corner of Prince's Square. I'm not going to meet all those sniggering girls if I know it."

So it was arranged, and Jill swelled with importance for the rest of the day, longing for four o'clock to arrive, and set her free from her duties.

Pam went to the door with her sister after lunch, and stood shivering upon the top step while they exchanged farewells. She herself attended only the morning school, and was apt to find the afternoons rather lonely when the twins were out, and Betty was absorbed in her studies.

"Come back quickly," she pleaded. "Do come back quickly, and 'muse me!" and Jill nodded a bright assent.

"I'll amuse you finely—when I come!"

She pranced off, tossing back her hair, and swinging her satchel to and fro, while Pam looked after her with admiring envy. How lovely to be old like that—quite old—old enough to do your own hair, and walk to school by yourself! Pam heaved another sigh, and glanced wistfully up and down the Square—the look of a captive who longs to escape. A policeman was strolling along his beat. Emily and Hannah were taking their places in the old-fashioned barouche preparatory to starting on their afternoon amble. Just across the road old "All a-growing all a-blowing" was standing by his barrow, loudly urging a passer-by to purchase one of his plants.

Pam looked longingly at the branching palms as his guttural accents came to her ear—

"Buy a palm, lidy, won't you, lidy? Very cheap—cheaper than you could buy 'em anywhere in the City. If you've got such a thing as an old dress or a pair of trousers, of the master's, I'd allow you 'ansome for them. I'd rather have clothes nor money. I'm a married man, lidy, with a fam'ly of children—"

"Pam, Pam," cried Mrs Trevor's voice, "don't stand out there, darling. It's far too cold. Come in here to me."

Pam obediently shut the door, and settled down to the afternoon duties of plain sewing and practice, which her soul abhorred. It was characteristic of her that she never rebelled against authority, nor expressed her distaste in words. A meek, uncomplaining little martyr, she sat perched on the piano-stool, wrestling with the "Blue Bells of Scotland," the while the wildest rebellion surged within her soul.

"I wish pianos had never been born! I wish I'd been made a boy. When I'm a lidy," (unconscious intonation of "All a-blowing!") "I'll have no pianos in the house, nor no needles, and my little girls shall 'muse themselves however they like. The—Blue—Bells—of—Scot—land... It doesn't go a bit nice in the bass! Don't believe I shall ever get it right if I live a hundred thousand years?"

The moment school was over Jill made a rush for the dressing-room, scrambled into her outdoor clothes, and hurried to the appointed meeting-place, where Jack found her a few minutes later. It was already dusk, and they set off at a brisk trot towards the mansions in which General Digby's flat was situated, in great hopes of finding that gentleman at home and disengaged.

"It's too damp for him to be out. Gout's a kind of rheumatism, and that always has to be kept dry," Jill declared learnedly. "He's sure to be in, but I've got a card, just in case. It's a correspondence one cut down, and I've printed our names on it, and 'Kind inquiries' in the corner, like mother puts. It's fine! When I cough it will mean that I don't know what to say next, so you must go on while I think. If he asks us to stay to tea, we must say we can't, until he begs us again."

"But suppose he didn't—that would be a pretty sell! I shan't do anything so silly," said cautious Jack. "I'll accept at

once.”

“Well—perhaps. But it’s politer to make a fuss. Is it a man who opens the door, or a woman?”

“A man—looks like an old soldier himself.”

“What’s the proper way to tell him our names?”

“Jack and Mary Trevor, of course.”

“It isn’t! Miss Mary Trevor and Master Jack Trevor, if you please!”

“If you’re miss, I’m mister. I’m not going to be called ‘master,’ as if I were a kid!”

“All right, then—Miss and Mr Trevor. I’ll speak, because I’m the lady, and give him the card to carry up.”

Jack was not at all anxious to take the lead, so he assented by means of the usual grunt, and when the door of the flat was reached, and the man-servant appeared in response to a furious onslaught on the electric bell, he stood by silently while Jill conducted operations.

“Does a gentleman called General Digby live here?”

“He does, madam.”

Jill gave a toss to her saucy head. She had never before been addressed as “madam,” and the sensation was distinctly agreeable.

“We want to see him, please.”

The butler looked in hesitating fashion from one of the strange visitors to the other—Jill with her elfin locks, shabby hat and thick woollen gloves; Jack with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, his school cap at the back of his head.

“I am not sure, madam, that the General is receiving this afternoon.”

“Then please take in my card and inquire,” returned Jill with a burst of dignity, which surprised herself and rilled Jack with admiration.

The butler also looked distinctly impressed, though the card itself, when produced from the recesses of Jill’s pocket, had somewhat lost its first crispness and beauty. He placed it on a silver salver and disappeared down the passage, while the twins peered curiously through the doorway.

Old guns, swords, and curious-looking Eastern weapons hung against the wall; stags’ heads peered over the different doorways; a great glass-case of stuffed birds stood on a table. “Hidjus!” thought Jill. “Ripping!” thought Jack, his mind turning longingly to the exciting scenes of sport in which these trophies had been captured. He had time to examine them pretty thoroughly before the servant returned, but when he did make his appearance he brought with him the desired answer. The General was “at home,” and would be pleased to receive Miss and Mr Trevor forthwith.

Chapter Ten.

The General’s Story.

Jill stepped forward, tossing her head, as though to imply that there had never been any doubt about her welcome, and Jack followed closely behind, while the servant led the way down two long passages running at right angles to each other, and threw open a door at the end, announcing the visitors’ names in stentorian tones.

A strong whiff of cigar smoke filled the air, and there sat the General on a crimson velvet arm-chair, which was hardly redder than his own complexion. His protruding eyes looked as glassy as ever, and his grey locks were ruffled at the top until he bore a ludicrous likeness to a paroquet. He held the crumpled card in his hand, and greeted his visitors with a chuckle of amusement.

“Well, sir. Well, ma’am—‘kind enquiries,’ eh? Come to see how the poor old man is faring after his fall?”

“Yes! We wanted to know. We thought it would be polite, as we were the un—er—unwitting causers of your accident.”

Jill brought out the right word with fine effect, whereupon the General made great play with his outstanding tufts of eyebrow, pretending to frown, and look ferocious.

“Un—witting, indeed! If that is your idea of unwitting, I should like to know how you would define deliberate intent! I’ll forgive you this time, but let me catch you at any of your tricks again, and the fat will be in the fire! Sit down—sit down. It’s not often an old bachelor like myself has the honour of entertaining a young lady visitor. No man has had better friends, or more of them, than Terence Digby, but there are precious few remaining nowadays. I’ve left them behind me in many a lonely grave, without a stick or stone to show the resting-place of some of the bravest fellows the world has ever known. It’s lonely work to outlive one’s best friends.”

“Have you been in many wars, sir?” asked Jack, quick to scent a story of adventure. He dropped his hat on the floor and wriggled back in his chair, the rebellious locks of hair which his sisters christened “Cetewayo,” after the Zulu

chief, sticking up rampantly at the back of his head. "Have you been in any real, proper wars?"

"I should think I have, sir. Many wars, and tough and serious wars at that, though a whipper-snapper like you would not know their names, and the English newspapers sandwich the news of them in a corner—with a small headline of 'Border War.' It's the Border Wars which keep the Empire together, let me tell you, sir—the Border Wars which entail the most self-sacrificing and thankless work. There's no honour and glory about them. The people you are fighting for don't even take the trouble to find out where you are, or what the trouble is about. Not that there ought to be any hardship about that to the true soldier. He fights for his King! That is enough for him!"

A curious softening of expression came over the fierce old face as he spoke the last sentence. The young people both noticed it, and dimly suspected a deeper meaning to the words, but they were in no mood for moralising.

"I should prefer the honour and glory," Jill declared boldly. "I'd hate to be sent to fight savages in pokey out-of-the-way places where nobody was watching and saying, 'England expects!' I could be most terrifically brave, if I knew it would be in the papers in the morning, and I should be a hero when I got home; but I'd be scared to death up among great lonely mountains with the feeling that nobody cared. Were you ever frightened, General Digby?"

"Soldiers are never frightened. You are only a girl," interrupted Jack indignantly, but his host did not agree with his conclusions.

"She may be a girl, but she knows what she is talking about. She understands, because she is a girl, perhaps. Women have that faculty born in them. Banners and flags, and bands playing patriotic airs, and the feeling that the world is watching, have an inspiring effect on the most timid of men. Who told you that a soldier was never afraid, young sir? Whoever it was did not know what he was talking about. Yes, I have been afraid, deadly afraid, many times over, and no man dared to call Terence Digby a coward. To camp with a handful of men among the great lonely mountains, as your sister so aptly puts it, never knowing when or how the attack may fall—an attack of devils rather than men; to know that if you are taken torture will be your portion, not death,—there is nothing to dread in dying for one's country,—that shakes the nerves of the strongest man! I hear people talking about modern warfare, and saying it is the hardest trial of bravery to fight an unseen foe three or four miles away. Well, well! I wonder if they have ever seen a rush of one of those warlike hill-tribes, and stood waiting to receive it as I have had to do times and again!"

"Did you kill lots of men—yourself? How many have you killed?" Jack inquired eagerly, but the General refused to be specific.

"I prefer not to think. It's not a pleasant recollection. When the world is a little older, let us hope we shall find some better way of settling a quarrel than seeing who can kill off the most men. What are you going to be when you are a man, Mr Jack? Going in for a profession?"

Jack's face fell. For personal questions, especially questions referring to his studies, he had a strong distaste. He wriggled on his chair, and mumbled between his lips—

"Trying for a scholarship. Half fees for the next three years. If I get it father will send me on to Cambridge. He wants me to be a doctor, and help him in the practice when he gets old."

"And you?"

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"I'd like to be a surgeon. It would be fine patching people up, setting their bones, and trying things no one had dared to do before; but I couldn't stand driving round every day to look after their wretched colds, and vaccinate the babies. I'd like to be an army doctor best of all."

"Humph! Would you! Much you know about it. I fancy you'd soon be thankful to take on the babies in exchange. Well, I've only one piece of advice to give you, my boy: never be persuaded to take up a career into which you cannot throw your whole heart and soul. You are responsible for your life's work, and will have to account for it some day. Don't make things harder by drifting into uncongenial surroundings. You look to me like a young fellow who might drift. Too easy-going by half!"

Jack flushed uncomfortably. He hated being criticised, especially when the criticism was true, as conscience proclaimed the present indictment to be. There came to him every now and then moments of illumination, when, as if a flashlight was suddenly played over the future, he realised that he would soon be a man, with a man's duties and responsibilities to himself and to others, and that these years of preparation were his training-ground for the fight, concerning the spending of which he would either rejoice or sorrow all his life long. At such moments the blood tingled in his veins, and he felt strong to do all things, and deny himself all things, if only the goal could be reached; but the vision soon faded, and he relapsed once more into careless, happy-go-lucky ways, caring more for a "lark" than for any solid gain, present or to come.

The old man stared at the boy for a moment,—seemed as if about to add something to his denunciation, but changed his mind, and addressed Jill instead.

"And you, missy? Girls have professions nowadays as well as their brothers. Have you any special vocation in view?"

Jill shook her pretty shaggy head.

"Oh no, I'm just going to be a plain lady!" whereat the General threw himself back in his chair with a stentorian laugh.

"No, that you never will! That is, fortunately, out of your own hands. You will have to make another choice, my dear."

Jill showed her white teeth in a smile, wholly unembarrassed by the compliment.

"I mean, I shall get married as soon as I leave school. I should hate to have to make money for myself. I'll marry a rich man with lots of dogs and horses, and then I can enjoy myself without any bother."

The General drew his eyebrows together and stared scrutinisingly at the girlish figure seated on the high-backed oak chair. Flowing locks, short petticoats, heavy boots, woollen gloves—just a bit of a schoolgirl in the hobbledehoy stage in which feminine instincts seem dormant—and the ambitions are more those of a boy than a girl. But Jill was going to be a woman some day, and a fascinating woman into the bargain, with all the power for good or evil over the lives of others which such fascination brings. The General shook his head in warning fashion.

"Don't say that, my girl. Never say or think a thing like that again! You are only a child, but you'll grow up. It's wonderful how quickly you young things spring up. You'll be a woman before you can say, 'Jack Robinson!' and there's no worse sin a woman can commit than to look upon marriage as a mere profession, an easy way of securing board and lodging. It's not only ruining her own life—it's ten times worse—for it ruins another into the bargain. When I was a young fellow I asked a girl to marry me—the only girl I ever did ask—and she wouldn't look at me. She was a poor girl, and I had lots of money, but she was honest with me all the same, and I've been grateful to her all my life. I've been a lonely old fellow, but it would have been a thousand times worse to have had a wife who did not love me! You put it out of your head, little girl, that you are going to sell yourself for all the horses and dogs in creation."

"Um—" said Jill vaguely.

She had scented a love—story, and with the inherent curiosity of her sex was dying to hear more about it.

"And what became of the girl? Did she marry—someone else?"

"Which girl? Oh—I suppose so! I went out to India and lost sight of her. I did not want to see her again. I hope she settled down with a good fellow who could take care of her. Hullo, what's this?"

The man-servant had entered the room with a tray, which he proceeded to place on a table by Jill's side. It contained the usual paraphernalia for afternoon tea, but it appeared that the General did not as a rule indulge in this meal, hence his astonishment at its appearance.

"Thought the young lady would like some, eh? Quite right—quite right. You keep me up to my duties as usual! Johnson has been with me for the last thirty years!" he explained to his guests. "We fought together in the East, and I should get on badly without him nowadays. Now, my dear, help yourself. You are the lady of the party, so you must preside."

Jill pulled off her gloves, gave a surreptitious lick to an ink-stain on the second finger of her right hand, rubbed it dry on the side of her dress, and proceeded to do the honours with equal self-possession and enjoyment. If Betty could see her now! A real General with a man-servant to wait upon him! It was a hundred times more important and exciting than Mrs Vanburgh and her governesses!

"Have you got any medals—Victoria Crosses and things?" she asked, with a view to adding point to her account of the interview, and the General gave a loud guffaw of amusement.

"A selection of Victoria Crosses! Eh, what? No, I am sorry to say I have not; only one or two medals, such as any man might possess who has served the same number of years. Where are they? In a drawer in my bedroom, of course! You don't expect me to hang them up on the wall, do you?"

"Yes, I do. I should! Where everyone would see and ask questions about them. I'd wear them, too, whenever I possibly could!" cried Jill, unabashed, and once more the General shook his head and exclaimed—

"Woman, woman!" in a tone of tragic significance.

When the meal was over, however, he yielded to Jack's entreaties, and escorted his visitors into the adjoining bedroom, where various warlike trophies reposed with the medals in the drawers of an old cabinet. The boy's interest was intense, but Jill soon wearied and turned to inspect the general furnishing of the room. It was very bare and plain—a narrow camp bed, a few chairs, and a dressing-table—bare of everything but the absolute necessities of toilet, and those of the simplest description. One saw the old soldier in every arrangement, but it was on the opposite corner of the room that Jill's eyes rested with the greatest astonishment.

On the wall hung a picture which she did not remember having seen before, representing a group of Eastern beggars, and in the foreground the figure of Christ with a beautiful, earnest face—a *young* face, not the worn and haggard representation so often seen—talking to one whose handsome robes showed him to be a person of position, who stood with hanging head and pained, disappointed expression. Beneath the picture stood a kneeling-chair with a pile of devotional books on the ledge. The whole effect was that of a quiet corner or "closet," as the Apostle calls it, and Jill was still staring at it with distended eyes when the General turned round and discovered her.

"You appear to be astonished by the sight of my corner! Why?" he inquired, and a more observant listener might have discovered a certain tension and anxiety in his tone, but Jill noticed nothing, and answered with the brutal candour of youth—

"I—I did not think you were—like that!"

"Ah! Why not? Because I lost my temper, and railed at you the other day. Eh, what?"

Jack and Jill gave a simultaneous exclamation of denial, for there had been a note of real pain and shame in the old

man's voice which was quick to reach their hearts. In truth, they had thought no less of the General for his expression of temper. It was only what was to be expected under the circumstances, and he had been a brick in defending them from their father's anger. It was difficult to explain the real reason of their surprise at the discovery of his Christianity. One could not say, for instance, "because your face is so red, and your eyes are so fierce, and your voice is so loud, and your manner of conversation so abrupt and startling; because you have been a slayer of men, and have lived a life of storm and adventure," yet it was in truth the contrast to the pale, anaemic type which young people instinctively picture in a devotee which caused the astonishment in their minds. They remained silent, hanging their heads, while the General continued sadly—

"Well, well, I don't wonder! That tongue of mine has dishonoured me a hundred times before now, but, bad specimen as I am, I should be a hundred times worse but for the time spent in that corner. Have you seen that picture before?"

Jill shook her head.

"No, it is not half so well-known as it deserves to be! 'Christ and the Young Ruler,' who went away sorrowful 'because he had great possessions.' It has never entered your head, I suppose, to pray to be preserved from prosperity, or *in* prosperity, if you like that better? Of course not! Precious few people ever do, yet the temptations of prosperity are fifty times more subtle, if they are less pressing, than those of poverty. I tell you, sir, when a man is young and strong, and feels the blood coursing in his veins, and when his balance at the banker's allows him to do pretty well as he chooses, it is precious difficult to realise that he needs any help, human or Divine. Even now—selfish old beggar that I am!—I have no one's convenience but my own to consider, and if I want a thing there's no end of a fuss if I don't get it in the twinkling of an eye. So I keep that picture there to remind me that my money is only lent to me to use for the good of others. Christ, the Captain! I am here to obey His orders!"

As he spoke he lifted his hand to his brow in stiff military salute, and over the fierce old face came the same wonderful softening which the twins had noticed a few minutes before.

They were speechless with embarrassment, as young things often are when a conversation suddenly takes a serious turn; but when they had taken their leave, with many invitations to repeat their visit, the same thought lingered in the mind of each as they made their way homeward.

"Fancy him turning out so—good!" cried Jill wonderingly. "He really almost—preached. I *was* surprised!"

"Humph!" returned Jack vaguely, for the figure of the old soldier saluting his Captain had made too deep an impression on his heart to be lightly discussed. "Christ, the Captain!" The idea appealed to his boyish instincts, and awoke a new ambition. Hitherto he had looked upon religion as a thing apart from his own life, the monopoly of women and clergymen, whose business it was; now for the first time it appealed to him as a fine and manly virtue.

Sitting by his lonely fireside, General Digby reproached himself for his lack of influence on his new friends. He would have been a happy man if he had known that by God's grace he had that afternoon planted a seed for God in Jack Trevor's careless heart. "Christ, the Captain!" To the last day of the boy's life he never forgot those words, nor the picture of the old soldier with his hand raised to the salute.

Chapter Eleven.

Betty and Cynthia meet.

"Jill, do you know where my green check blouse has gone? I can't find it anywhere."

"How should I know? I haven't taken it—wouldn't be seen in the horrid old thing! Why are you worrying if it has disappeared? I thought you said the other day that it was too shabby to wear any more?"

"So I did, but I want the buttons to put on a new blouse. It was hanging up in my cupboard last week."

"I expect it's there still, only you can't see it because it's hidden away behind your dresses. What is far more important is my umbrella. Somebody has eaten it, I believe—it's simply *gone!*"

"You have left it at school again. You are always losing your umbrellas."

"People steal them, I suppose, because they are so beautiful! Alpaca—three and eleven! Mother says it's no use giving me a silk because I'm not careful. That's bad reasoning! I should be careful if I had a silk. But it's not my fault this time. I know I brought it home, because there was an apple inside it which Norah gave me in prep. I ate it last night, and this morning the broilley has vanished. It's hard lines, for I shall get a rowing if it doesn't turn up, and it isn't my fault a bit."

"Oh, I expect you'll find it all right. It's so tiresome, because the buttons exactly match this blouse, and I want it for Saturday," returned Betty, too much absorbed in her own affairs to have any sympathy to spare for Jill's loss. All the week long she lived in the thought of Saturday, and when at long last the day arrived she could hardly wait until three o'clock, so anxious was she to be at her post.

Mrs Vanburgh came to meet her at the door of the dining-room, looking flushed and excited.

"Come in here!" she said. "We are beginning to set out the table, so you are just in time. I want to have everything ready by the half-hour."

"Who are 'we,' I wonder?" was Betty's mental question as she crossed the threshold, and the next moment brought

with it a shock of surprise, for, standing in the middle of the room, her hair shining like an aureola round her head, stood no less a person than the Pampered Pet herself. A plate of cakes was held in one hand, and a plate of bread-and-butter in the other, and she stood stock still, staring at the new-comer, apparently as much surprised to recognise Betty as Betty was to recognise herself.

"This is my friend Cynthia Alliot; this is my friend Betty Trevor!" cried Mrs Vanburgh, introducing the two girls with an easy wave of the hand. "She can't shake hands, poor dear, so you'll have to take the will for the deed. Where shall we put those plates? There doesn't seem much room left."

There did not, indeed! Betty stared in amazement at the noble feast which had been provided for the expected guests. The dining-table was profusely decorated with flowers, which looked especially beautiful at this dull, wintry season. Dishes of cold fowls, ham, and tongue, were flanked by every imaginable description of cakes, both small and large. Different sorts of jam were dotted here and there among the larger dishes; tea and coffee cups were ranged at the farther end. It was, in fact, a North Country high-tea of the most complete and tempting description.

"Light refreshments are to be served in the drawing-room. This is for those who can stay on for several hours. My husband is going to dine at his club, so we can keep the dear things as long as they are happy," said Nan with a gush, while the two girls smiled at each other with shy friendliness.

"Now I shall get to know them! Now they may get to like me, and ask me to sit with them in their schoolroom," thought lonely Cynthia longingly.

"The Pet herself! She *is* pretty! Miles would admire her more than ever; and oh, what a blouse, and I thought mine was quite nice!" sighed Betty dolorously.

Both Mrs Vanburgh and her friend were very simply attired, but with a dainty finish and elegance from which Betty's home-made garment was very far removed. She felt plain and dowdy beside them, and her spirits suffered in consequence. Superior people may despise her for so doing, but they don't understand how a girl feels, so their opinion is not worth having. At seventeen it takes real grace to be a contented Cinderella, and poor Betty did not at all enjoy the position.

It was difficult, however, for any companions of Nan Vanburgh to be depressed for long together, so bright was she, so radiant, so brisk, friendly, and confidential. The girls were sent flying hither and thither until all the preparations were finished, then—

"Let's go out into the hall, and pretend to be governesses, and walk in again, to see how the effect strikes us," she cried; and out they rushed, like a trio of merry schoolgirls, drawing their faces into expressions of abnormal gravity, to march back again solemn and slow.

"Pray be seated. You must be exhausted after your long walk. To what can I assist you?"

"The breast of a fowl, please, and a portion of ham; a cup of tea and a few hot muffins— Goodness me, are you going to talk to the poor creatures like that? They *will* be daunted!" replied Cynthia, all in a breath. She was not at all proper, Betty was glad to see, but as full of fun as an ordinary commonplace girl. "What are you going to talk to them about?" she demanded of her hostess, who shook her head in somewhat helpless fashion, and replied—

"I don't know! I'm hoping for inspiration at the last moment, and eating is a grand resource! Ply them well with muffins till the ice is broken—"

At this moment the conversation was interrupted by the sound of an electric bell, upon hearing which Mrs Vanburgh uttered a sharp exclamation of dismay, and rushed for the hall. Her two assistants followed, but even they in their schoolgirl stage could not keep up with the pace at which she literally flew up the staircase. Her feet seemed hardly to touch the ground; she sprang up two steps at a time, crying continuously, "Quick, quick!" until, just as the head of the staircase was reached, cr-r-r-ur! Came the sounds of ripping seams, and a long dangle of silk flounce showed underneath her skirt.

"Just my luck!" she cried disconsolately. "It never seems as if I could get upstairs like anyone else. Now they'll think I'm an untidy wretch, and it will all be spoiled. What's the use of silk flounces anyway? I'll never have another—I vow I won't! There! I'll pin it up with a brooch till they've gone. We must be in the drawing-room ready to receive. Cynthia, sit over there, and pretend to be reading. Miss Trevor, you might be casually poking the fire. Whatever we do, we mustn't alarm the poor dears by looking formal."

"I am a great deal more alarmed of the poor dears than they will be of me! My sister Jill pretended to swoon at the idea of a room full of governesses. She said it was more like a nightmare than a piece of real life."

"Hush!" whispered Mrs Vanburgh tragically. "They come!" for footsteps were heard ascending the staircase, and the assistants flew to their posts, while the hostess endeavoured to hum a tune in a light and jaunty manner.

Another moment and the door was thrown open to disclose—a servant, bearing a note upon a silver salver. It was not a governess after all!

The two girls came forward into the room, divided between relief and disappointment.

Mrs Vanburgh tossed the note impatiently aside, and said resignedly—

"Ah, well, it gives us all the longer to prepare! I'll run into my room and mend this horrid dress, and you might arrange these books of photographs. They are really awfully interesting, and of almost every country you can imagine. Old Mr Vanburgh collected them on his travels, so you have only to find out which country interests your

special governess most, and—there you are! It will save no end of exertion!”

She ran out of the room, and the two girls stood together, seized with a sudden shyness at finding themselves alone.

“I—I think we know each other very well by sight,” said Cynthia, and Betty blushed and blinked, remembering the crowded schoolroom window and her own scathing criticisms.

“Yes—I’m afraid we have stared a great deal. We are so interested in our neighbours, but they are almost all old—you were the only young one like ourselves. We were frightfully anxious to know all about you.”

Cynthia gave a pathetic little sigh.

“There’s so little to know! There’s just mother and me—and father at the other end of the world. It isn’t half so exciting as having brothers and sisters, and going to school, and having good times all together. I have envied you so!”

“Me!” cried Betty, aghast. “You envied *me*! How extraordinary! I’ve perfectly ached with envying you sometimes.”

“Oh, why?” asked Cynthia; and as Betty looked into her wide earnest eyes she felt of a sudden shamed and silenced. How could she acknowledge that she had envied the greater luxury, the cosy fire in the bedroom, the pink evening dress, the monopoly of attention, she who was so rich in the dear human companionship which the other lacked!

“There are drawbacks to a large family, you know,” she exclaimed. “We don’t *always* have good times. Sometimes we all get cross together and quarrel like cats, and then it feels as if it would be so nice and peaceful to be the only one. You have no one to quarrel with.”

“I have myself. I quarrel fearfully with myself,” said Cynthia.

She perched herself on the arm of a high chair and stared at Betty with her grave grey eyes. She wore an enamel buckle on her belt, a gold bangle encircled her wrist, her shoes, her stockings, her ribbons were all in the perfection of taste. Betty felt another twinge of envy at the sight, and wondered what in the world such a lucky person could find to quarrel about! In manner Cynthia was as simple and direct as Pam herself. A Pet she might be, but there was nothing pampered or self-satisfied for the most carping critic to discover.

“I do get so bored with myself,” she said plaintively. “My mother has stayed in England on purpose to look after me and my education, and it is always a case of ‘This would be good for Cynthia,’ ‘That would be bad for Cynthia,’ ‘What would be best for Cynthia?’—there is altogether too much Cynthia in my life, and I am sick of her. In a big family one would have so many people to think of that there would be no room for self.”

“No—o!” said Betty doubtfully. Her conscience told her that despite father and mother, and Miles and Jack, and Jill and Pamela, Betty loomed very large on her own horizon, but she was ashamed to confess the fact in so many words, and it was a relief when Mrs Vanburgh came bustling back in her quick energetic fashion.

“There!” she cried. “I’ve put in a row of safety-pins. I couldn’t spare the time to sew it up just now. It’s half-past three, and they may be arriving any moment. I’ll talk to each one as she comes in, and artlessly find out how long she can stay, then I’ll hand her over to you to be treated accordingly. Tea and cake if it’s a call, photographs and light conversation if it’s a visit. Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see anyone coming?”

Cynthia looked round from the window and shook her head.

“Nary a governess! They wouldn’t like to come exactly at the hour you mention. Perhaps they are prowling round the Square, whiling away the time until it is polite to appear.”

“Oh dear, I wish they wouldn’t! I like things to happen at once! I get fidgety and nervous if I have to wait,” cried Mrs Vanburgh, poking the fire with such violence that the ashes were strewn all over the grate.

“Let’s pretend that you are the first-comers, and rehearse the conversation! Now then, go out of the room and come in, and I’ll welcome you.”

Cynthia and Betty dutifully retreated to the hall, whence came a sound of subdued giggling and whispering, lasting for several minutes, at the expiration of which the door was thrown open and “Miss Perks” announced in a voice shaken by laughter, whereupon Cynthia bounced into the room, transformed almost out of recognition by a few touches accomplished by Betty’s nimble fingers.

Her long mane of hair was twisted into an exaggerated “door-knocker,” at the top of which, with all the appearance of a very fly-away toque, was perched one of the frilled pink shades which covered the electric lights; a piece of Eastern drapery was folded scarf-like round her shoulders. Perk by name and Perk by nature did she appear as she minced across the room, while hostess and maid alike looked on in helpless convulsions of laughter. No rehearsal was possible under the circumstances, though Cynthia persisted in acting her part, and sat on the edge of the sofa tossing her head, and delivering herself of staccato little sentences in reply to imaginary questions suitable to the occasion.

“Oh, really! No indeed! Unusually cold for the time of year. Most kind of you, I’m sure. Charming opportunity?”

“You impertinent girl; go and put back those things this minute! How dare you make fun of me and spoil the look of my hall!” cried Nan, wiping the tears from her eyes; then she turned towards the clock, and her face fell.

“Ten minutes to four! They ought to be coming! Why don’t they come?—Now then, I *told* you how it would be!

There's the bell, and everything upset!"

With a bound Miss Perks was in the middle of the floor, tearing the scarf from her shoulders, and shaking her hair loose from its fastenings. Betty jumped on a chair to put the shade back in its place, Nan threw the drapery over the easel, which being done, all three rushed to the head of the staircase, and peered curiously into the hall beneath.

Once more disappointment awaited them, for a brown-paper parcel was the nearest approach to a governess which met their gaze, and the return to the drawing-room was conducted in a much more leisurely and dignified manner than the exit. For the first time the awful possibility of failure seemed to dawn on the hostess's heart.

"Suppose," she said blankly, "suppose Nobody comes! It would be a terrible disappointment, but the worst of all would be Gervase—my husband! He laughed so at the preparations. I've provided enough for twenty. He would tease me to death if it were all left."

"It won't be!" cried Betty stoutly. "If the worst comes to the worst, I shall be so ravenous with disappointment and nervous strain by six o'clock, that I shall be able to demolish enough for ten."

"And you can't say you have had nobody. You have had Miss Perks," added Cynthia slyly; but Mrs Vanburgh refused to be comforted, and wandered disconsolately up and down the room, peering out of each of the three windows in succession, and watching the clock with anxious dismay.

"Half-past four, and not one here! What can it mean? Three big Homes I went to, and there must have been at least a score of inmates in each; it isn't *possible* that nobody will come!"

"In all the length and breadth of this great city, is there not *one* governess who will take pity upon a hospitable lady!" quoted Cynthia mischievously. It was evident that she also knew the source from which had sprung the inspiration of these Saturday gatherings; but though Nan laughed, it was with a somewhat uncertain sound, and her brown eyes looked suspiciously moist. The two girls were quick to realise that it was not a time for teasing, and hastened to give a safer turn to the conversation.

In truth, Nan's heart was very deeply in her enterprise. Hers was one of those sweet, generous natures which expand, instead of shrivelling under the influence of prosperity. Just in proportion as her own life was beautiful and hedged round with all the sweet fences of love, so did she yearn more and more over her sisters whose lots were cast in such different places—which is the true spirit of Christ, who left the very heavens for our sakes. She had woven many happy dreams about these afternoon meetings, seeing the radiance of her own happiness lighting up dark places, and the power of love and sympathy cheering starved and lonely lives, and was it all to end like this—in a joke for her husband and these two girls? Would Gervase come home, and laugh his tender, happy laugh, and stroke her hair, and call her "Poor little pet!" as if she, and not the missing guests, was the real object of compassion?

Nan blinked the tears from her eyes, but they rose again and again—tears of bitter disappointment; and then, just as the clock was about to strike the quarter, there came another quick whirr of the electric bell, and Cynthia, running out into the hall, came back aglow with excitement.

"It is! It *is*!" she hissed in an excited whisper. "I saw her. She's coming upstairs. Quick! Quick! To your posts!"

Betty rushed to the fire, Nan stood in the middle of the floor radiant with expectation. The servant threw open the door, and announced in solemn tones—

"Miss Beveridge."

The first governess had arrived!

Chapter Twelve.

Miss Beveridge.

She was small and thin, with a bleached, joyless face, which seemed all of the same dull grey tint. Grey hair, grey eyes, grey complexion, a pinched-in mouth and deeply-furrowed forehead. She was dressed in black—shabby black, which is the shabbiest of all shabbies—and, looking at her, it seemed impossible to believe that there had ever been a time when she was young and happy, and had frisked and frolicked, and liked pretty things like any ordinary girl. Cynthia and Betty felt a chill of dismay, but Nan's heart gave a throb of delight. This was one of the very starved, joyless lives which she longed to brighten; it would have been difficult to find a better type of the class. She walked quickly forward, and held out a warm, welcoming hand.

"How do you do? I am so pleased you have come?"

Miss Beveridge looked at her coldly, then cast an inquiring glance around the room; at the luxurious hangings and furniture, at the glowing fire, at Betty slim and childish in her simple blue frock, at Cynthia with her flowing locks.

"Is—is Mrs Vanburgh not at home?" she inquired, drawing up her thin figure with an air of wounded dignity. "I understood that the hours mentioned were from three to seven, but if she is engaged—"

Nan smiled in the merry, radiant manner which made her look even younger than her years.

"I am Mrs Vanburgh!"

"Oh, indeed!" said Miss Beveridge coldly.

Why she should have taken the announcement as a personal insult the girls could not understand, but that she did receive it in such a spirit was proved by the sudden stiffening which passed over her features even as she spoke. She seated herself on the edge of the chair to which Nan escorted her, sternly refused an offer of tea, and vouchsafed only monosyllabic replies when spoken to. It was a terrible occasion! Nan took refuge in the resort of the destitute, and exhausted the subject of the weather in all its branches.

"It is a very chilly afternoon."

"Very chilly."

"It seemed in the morning as if it were going to clear up."

"It did."

"The forecast says it will rain before night."

"Indeed!"

"November always *is* a dreary month."

No reply.

"In London there are so many fogs, but in the country the fallen leaves are almost as depressing."

"Perhaps so."

Nan looked across the room and made a desperate grimace at her companions. Before doing so she made sure that Miss Beveridge was not looking, but she forgot that in turning her head in the opposite direction she was naturally *vis-à-vis* with Cynthia and Betty, and they—silly things!—simultaneously jerked with surprise, flushed and struggled after speech, thereby hopelessly giving away the situation.

"Er—are you *quite* sure you will not have a cup of tea? Or—er, coffee? We have both ready. Or a high-tea downstairs, if you care for anything more solid."

"I have had luncheon, thank you. I am not in the least in need of food," replied Miss Beveridge in tones of scathing coldness. There was a ghastly silence.

"Horrid thing! Always did hate 'em!" soliloquised Betty.

"How dare she? Ungrateful wretch!" queried Cynthia.

"She's cross because she's miserable; she's just as miserable as she can be! Somebody else could comfort her, but I can't. She thinks I am a presumptuous chit. Perhaps I am, trying to do work that is far beyond me!" sighed Nan, with a heavy sinking of the heart. She could not attempt to speak, and the silence lasted several minutes, until at last Miss Beveridge roused herself to inquire hesitatingly, yet with a certain suppressed eagerness—

"Were you perhaps wishing to—er—to organise some classes? My time is disengaged on Saturday afternoons. My special subject is music, but I hold very high certificates, and am of course competent to take up other subjects."

Nan gasped with dismay! Here was a situation, to be treated as a schoolgirl whose education required finishing! She could hear Gervase's derisive laughter, the amused chuckle with which he would say, "Silly girl, serve you right!" Across the room Cynthia and Betty were sniggering, and biting their lips. This was indeed a travesty of what she had expected. The blood flamed in her cheeks, but she answered steadily enough—

"Oh no, I was not thinking of anything for myself. It occurred to me that it might be dull in those 'Homes' on holiday afternoons, especially for ladies who are strangers in London, and I hoped it might make a little change for them to come out to tea. It would certainly be a pleasure to me to receive them."

"Indeed!" said Miss Beveridge coldly.

The momentary animation which had flickered in her face at the thought of the possibility of classes died away, leaving her looking even more bleached and hopeless than before. She pressed her thin lips together, looked at the clock, and inquired suddenly—

"Can you tell me the nearest way from here to Maida Vale?"

It was a direct intimation of departure, and Nan accepted it as such, giving the desired information, without protest, it is true, but in a manner absolutely devoid of offence. It was raining heavily by this time, and she would fain have offered to whistle for a hansom, but she felt that such a proceeding would have been interpreted as an additional offence. When the visitor rose, however, she insisted upon accompanying her downstairs, where in the privacy of the vestibule she allowed herself the luxury of a farewell appeal.

"I am so sorry that it has been a failure! You are vexed with me for having brought you here for nothing, and on such a terrible afternoon too, but I *meant* well! I'm young, and foolish, and don't know how to do things properly, but I couldn't bear to keep everything to myself, and I could think of no better way. You'll forgive me, won't you? I'm so sorry you've been bored!"

Miss Beveridge looked at her swiftly, and as she looked her thin features twitched beneath her veil, and two little patches of colour showed themselves on her cheeks.

"There is nothing to forgive," she said hurriedly. "Nothing on your side, at least. I was taken by surprise and did not quite understand. If you will allow me I will come again another time."

"Will you—will you really? Oh, it would make me so happy!" cried Nan rapturously. "Thank you so much! Next Saturday, perhaps? I shall look forward to it all the week."

She motioned the servant aside, and, accompanying her visitor to the door, insisted upon opening her umbrella and helping to tuck up the well-worn skirt. Her bonnie face shone out under the light as she waved her hand and cried out eagerly, "Come soon! Come soon!" Miss Beveridge shut her lips tightly and did not reply in words, but she did something which was more expressive—she dropped her skirt into the mud on purpose to wave a response! The November evening was dark and cheerless enough to strike a chill to the stoutest heart, but one solitary woman walked through it with a new glow at her heart. The warm light streaming out into the darkness, the sweet welcoming voice, were as meat and drink to her starved soul.

In the drawing-room the girls awaited Nan's return with some anxiety, but, to their amazement, she came bounding upstairs two steps at a time, all abeam with complacent delight. What a comfort it was that she had so soon returned to her senses!

"Has she gone? Really gone! What a relief!"

"She's coming again! She said she would. Thank goodness for that!"

"Mrs Vanburgh, you—you can't mean it! She was a horror! You can't possibly want to see her again! She was as cross as two sticks because she had come once, so why should she try it a second time?"

"She didn't understand, and it was a shock to find us all so young. Yes, of course I want her! She's just the sort I do want; the happy, prosperous ones have no need of me. Oh, did you see her poor grey face?"

Betty shivered dramatically.

"I did! It made me think of vinegar and, lemon-juice, and all the sour things you can think of mixed together. Her lips were so thin you could hardly see them at all, and they turned right down at the corners."

"She was pretty once, prettier than any of us—her features are perfect still. She's worried, and ill, and badly dressed. Did you see her blouse?"

"Yes!" Betty sighed sententiously. "It was such a comfort to me. I'd been feeling so grumpy because my own was horrid compared to yours, but when I saw that grey flannel atrocity I felt I ought to be thankful instead?"

Nan laughed happily.

"Then she did you good too? That's all right. Girls, I'm hungry. This has been a most exhausting afternoon. I don't think there is a chance of anyone else coming, so hadn't we better go downstairs and eat up some of the good things ourselves? How do you feel?"

There was no doubt about the girls' feelings. They might have been starving, from the alacrity with which they sprang from their seats, followed their hostess downstairs, and seated themselves at the dining-table.

"We will not wait any longer, Johnson. Bring in fresh tea and coffee, and then you can leave us. We will attend to ourselves," said Nan to the solemn-faced butler; and, as soon as he had departed, "Isn't it just wonderful how servants contrive to keep their faces straight?" she cried laughingly. "I've no doubt they are all laughing themselves ill downstairs at the collapse of my great 'At Home,' but Johnson looks as if it were the most correct thing in the world for three people to sit down to a table laid for a dozen! I'll carve, and you can pour out. Now for the chicken and ham—now for the gay Sally Lunn! Eat, my darlings, eat! Do without dinner for one night, and save a friend's reputation! I shall never hear the last of it from Gervase, unless I can tell him that some of the things were used."

It was a merry meal, and lasted for an inordinately long time, and when it was over the three girls felt that their mutual acquaintance had progressed by giant strides.

Cynthia went home to give a graphic description of Betty's charms, and to cry—

"You must, you really must, call upon Mrs Trevor, mother, for I can't be happy till I know the whole family."

Betty burst into the dining-room in a flutter of excitement, exclaiming all in a breath—

"She's a darling, a perfect darling; and the Pet was there, and her name is Cynthia, and she's not pampered a bit. We are awfully good friends; and what do you think?—only one governess turned up, and there are heaps and heaps of cakes left. And may Jill and Pam go to tea on Monday to eat them up?"

As for Nan, she laid her pretty head on her husband's shoulder, and refused to be comforted.

"No, it was not a failure! I'm not disappointed a bit. I was silly, and expected too much, but the one who came—oh, Gervase, she was the very incarnation of homelessness. If she will let me help her, I shall be quite, quite satisfied?"

Chapter Thirteen.

Letters.

Christmas approached. Cynthia drove from one big shop to another, accompanied by mother or governess, and selected costly remembrances for her friends, Betty Trevor among the rest, for Mrs Alliot had at last been induced to call on the doctor's wife, and so formally sanction the girls' friendship. Nan Vanburgh crossed out every day as it passed on the calendar, and danced for joy at the thought of going "home" for the festival.

"It's rather rough on me. I flattered myself that I was sufficient for your happiness," her husband told her, "and—"

"So you are, you darling!" Nan assured him gushingly. "I don't want anyone else in the world but just you, and father, and mother, and Jim, and the girls, and Kitty, and Ned, and your old uncle, and Maud's baby—and—"

"And Cynthia Alliot, and this newly-discovered family at Number 14, and twenty governesses rolled into one as exemplified by Miss Beveridge, and a few score of friends scattered up and down the country! What it is to have married a little soul with a big heart!" cried Gervase, shrugging his shoulders with an air of martyrdom, though, as a matter of fact, he was well satisfied with his place in his wife's affection, and loved her all the more for remaining faithful to old claims.

As for Betty Trevor, she shivered up in her attic bedroom, putting in last stitches to the presents which had been manufactured at the cost of much trouble and self-denial. The table-centre for mother had cost only one and threepence, but looked every bit as nice as those displayed in the shop-windows for six and nine. The shield of white wadded satin seemed an ideal protector for a dress shirt, and if father did not use it as such when he went out in the evening, it would be his fault, not hers! The blotters for Miles and Jack, the work and shoe bags for the girls, to say nothing of endless odds and ends for cousins and aunts, made quite a brave show when she laid them all out on the bed preparatory to wrapping them up in paper. Jill was invited to the private view, her own present being discreetly hidden away for the occasion, and expressed an admiration tempered by pity.

"Such a fag!" she declared. "Look at me, I've done the whole thing in one afternoon! Sallied out with my savings in my purse—two shillings pocket-money, one and three for waking Miles in the morning, sixpence from mother—reward of merit for not biting my nails for a week—ninepence from Norah for my pink silk tie (it cost half-a-crown, and I hated the old thing), four and sixpence altogether—and I got fifteen really handsome presents."

"Jill, you haven't! It isn't possible!"

"It is then; it only needs management. I've kept all the chocolate boxes we have had given to us by grateful patients during the year—six of them—and they look ripping filled with sweets at sixpence a pound. I collected mother's old scent-bottles too, with cut-glass stoppers, and bought a shilling's worth of eau-de-Cologne to fill them. Such a joke! It didn't quite go round, so I put some water in the last, and it's turned quite milky. I'll have to give that to Pam. She'll think it something new and superior. I've got sticking—plaster for the boys—they are sure to cut their fingers some day—and a beautiful needle-book for mother—ninepence halfpenny—and it looks worth it, every penny. Oh, I say, while I remember, I don't mind lending you my snow-shoes, but you might take the trouble to put them back when you've done with them! I wanted them badly this morning."

"I haven't got your old snow-shoes. I don't know what has come to this house. Everyone is accusing me of stealing! Mother was on the rampage about her gloves this morning, and father's old smoking-jacket is missing. Mother says it's a good thing, for it was disgracefully shabby, but he loved it because it was so comfy, and we had such a fuss searching all over the house. Christmas seems to put everything out of gear."

"Oh, well, it's worth it! Think of the presents!" cried Jill gleefully. She skipped downstairs, and, sitting down before the writing-table in the drawing-room, pulled out a number of sheets of her mother's writing-paper, on which she proceeded to indite a number of epistles, in which words and spaces were curiously mingled.

"Dear Aunt Margaret,—Thank you so much for the beautiful ... It is just what I wanted. It was so nice of you to send it to me. I think it is ... I hope you are quite well, and not having asthma any more,—Your loving niece,—

"Margaret."

"Darling Cousin Flo,—I am so awfully obliged to you for the lovely ... It is just what I wanted. I am so pleased to have it. It will just do for ... I think Christmas is ripping, don't you? Please write soon to Jill."

"Dear Mrs Gregory,—It is most kind of you to remember me with such a nice present. The ...



is just what I wanted. I am much obliged to you for remembering me. Has not Christmas Day been ... this year?—I am your loving little friend, Margaret Meredith Trevor.”

“My own dear, darling Norah,—What an angel you are to send me that perfectly ripping ... It is just exactly what I wanted, and I am so proud to have it. Come round to-morrow and see my things. I’ve got ... altogether. Isn’t that a lot? Don’t you call this weather ...?—Your own Jill.”

She was scribbling away—the table littered with the finished productions—when a hand fell on her shoulder and a stentorian voice cried—

“Eh, what? Too busy to hear me come in, were you? What’s the meaning of this sudden industry?” and, starting up, she beheld the red, parrot-like visage of General Digby bending over her. This was not by any means the first visit which the General had paid in return for the “kind enquiries.” He was a lonely old man, and to spend a few minutes in the cheery atmosphere of a family made a pleasant break in his daily constitutional. Mrs Trevor was always pleased to welcome him, but as she was aware that it was not herself but the children who were the attraction, she did not hurry downstairs on occasions like the present.

“Writing Christmas letters, eh?” boomed the General loudly. “Sending off your presents, I suppose. Eh, what? *Thanking* people for presents, do you say? That’s a bit previous, isn’t it? What’s the hurry?”

“Oh, there’s always so much going on after Christmas, when the boys are at home, and it’s such a bore sticking in the house writing letters. I use up the odd times before, in getting them as ready as I can, and then it only takes a minute to fill in the spaces.”

She held out a specimen letter as she spoke, and, looking at it, General Digby went off into such a convulsion of laughter, coughing, and panting for breath, that he presented a truly alarming spectacle. The protuberant eyes protruded farther and farther, the tuft of grey hair seemed to rear itself more stiffly erect, his cheeks changed from red to purple. It was not a time for ceremony, and Jill promptly pounded him on the back until he recovered himself sufficiently to shake her off, declaring forcibly that the cure was worse than the disease. Then he subsided into a chair, and wiped his eyes elaborately with a bandana handkerchief.

“Where’s my letter?” he inquired. “I suppose there’s one addressed to me among all that number. Was I as fortunate as the rest in sending just what was wanted? You are a young woman of a great many wants, it seems to me. Tell you what now: I’ll strike a bargain! Fill up the blanks, and I’ll see if I can come up to expectation! Eh, what?”

“Oh no!” cried Jill, blushing with an embarrassment which yet had in it a fearful joy, for who would have thought that such a new friend would enrol himself in the blessed ranks of present-givers? “There is no letter for you. I truly never thought you would give us anything,” she explained hesitatingly. “I couldn’t possibly choose myself. It’s awfully good of you to think of it, but, really, anything—it’s like this, you see; I want everything I can get!”

“Oh, you do, do you?” cried the General, beginning to shake again in the old, alarming, jelly-like fashion. “Nothing like honesty in this world, my dear. Well, well, we must see what we can do! I’ll bend my great mind to the question,

and you shall know the result on Christmas Day.”

Jill smiled uncertainly. Already she was beginning to repent her modesty. Suppose she had taken her courage into her hands, and had said boldly, “A gold watch,” could it possibly have been true that the ambition of a lifetime would have been gratified, as by the stroke of a magician’s wand? Really and truly the General had tumbled (literally tumbled) into their lives in the most unexpected fashion, and to begin talking of presents upon an acquaintance of a month’s standing proved him to be something far superior to ordinary mortals. Jill made up her mind to change the nickname of Victim for that of Magician from this time forward.

Presently Betty appeared, a pensive, melancholy Betty, chilly about the fingers, and nippy about the nose, much oppressed by the feeling that she worked while others played, and had no thanks for her pains, and was altogether too good for a world in which her excellencies were unappreciated. As usual, her hair was dressed in accordance with her mood, a brush dipped in water having been employed to flatten out the curls which had been painfully achieved a few hours before.

The General looked at the dismal little figure with a twinkling eye. Already he had been introduced to three separate Betty Trevors, and it would be interesting to ascertain which of the various representations approached nearest to the reality. Judging from Miss Betty’s conversation this afternoon, Christmas would appear to be her *bête noire* throughout the year, and she could see no bright spot in the horizon. The presents which she had prepared were all failures; unlike Jill, she wanted nothing in return; it was dull having “no one but ourselves” in the house on the great day, while, on the other hand, it would be horrid to have strangers. Mrs Vanburgh had gone off home to enjoy herself, and had left the “Govies” in the charge of herself and Cynthia Alliot to “cheer up and entertain,” and how could they do it, pray, a couple of girls like themselves? She scowled quite fiercely at the General as she put the question, but he only chuckled in reply, having already been treated to the history of Nan’s first ‘At Home’ from the lips of an historian more sceptical than sympathetic.

“Aha! Those governesses! How many may they be? Do you still entertain the few to conversation, and yourselves to the good things provided for the many?” he cried teasingly, whereupon Betty assumed what she conceived to be an air of haughty reproach, and replied coldly—

“We had four at our last reception. They all want to come again, and were most agreeable. Two of them have gone home for the holidays, but the others have no homes to go to. They are the ones we have to entertain, and it’s silly, because they are so tired of girls that we are the last people they wish to see. Mrs Vanburgh is different—she’s married, and is more interesting. Mother says she’s sorry, but there are a dozen poor ladies who have a greater claim on us—father’s patients, and so on—and what can I do by myself?” She sighed, and raised her eyes in a meek, resigned fashion to the cornet of the ceiling. “It’s not for want of will, or want of thought I lay awake for quite half an hour worrying about it one night!”

“Send them a Christmas card, and be done with it,” cried Jill callously. “You can get beauties for a halfpenny at the little sweet shop round the corner. I’ll sell you one I bought yesterday. *Convolvulus*, and ‘May all your hours be filled with joy.’ Just the thing you want!”

Betty’s lip curled in disdain.

“So appropriate, isn’t it? So likely to be true!”

“All the more reason to wish for it,” maintained Jill pertly. “What’s the good of wishing if you don’t wish something nice? You don’t want to take for granted that she is going on mumping and grumping all next year. Something nice might happen to her, as well as to anyone else.”

“Quite right, quite right! Always expect the best, and prepare for the worst,” cried the General heartily. “Now, I’ve a suggestion to make! There’s a big concert advertised to take place in the Albert Hall on the afternoon of Boxing Day. Some friends of mine who are wandering abroad have a box there which is at my disposal when I choose to use it. I’m not going with you, mind—none of your governesses for me!—but I’ll give you the tickets, and you can make up a happy party, and get rid of some of your responsibilities, at least. How does that idea strike you, Miss Betty—eh, what?”

“Oh, I—I love it! You *are* sweet!” gushed Betty fervently. A box! The Albert Hall! Herself the head of the party, the gracious dispenser of favours—it was almost too ecstatic to be believed! “The two governesses, Cynthia and myself, Miles, because he loves music, and we want someone to bring us home, and father, if he has time, for Miles won’t come if he is the only male. That would be a delightful party!” she decided. There were points, after all, about being left “in charge?”

Chapter Fourteen.

Christmas Presents.

The Trevors’ programme on Christmas Day differed from those of their friends, and possessed in their opinion many striking advantages. No presents were given in the morning; it was enough excitement to know that it was Christmas Day, and to linger over a late and luxurious breakfast before going to church. There was something particularly inspiring about the moment when the great congregation rose in the ivy-decked church and burst into song—

“Hark, the herald angels sing,
Glory to the new-born King!”

Even Jill had a fleeting realisation that the true meaning of Christmas was something quite apart from presents, and turkey, and plum-puddings, while Betty's thoughts flew back to the day of her confirmation, and she vowed herself anew to the service of the King. Jack sang the well-known words with a new attention—"Christ the everlasting Lord;" this was the same Christ who was General Digby's "Captain." "I am here to obey my Captain's orders,"—the words rang in his ears, and he saw once more the wonderful softening of the fierce old face. Miles did not sing at all; his voice was still hoarse and broken, and his set expression gave little clue to his feelings, but Pam's treble was clear and sweet, and her little face shone with innocent fervour.

After church came a walk through the—well! It should have been "the crisp cold air," but unfortunately the weather showed no sense of propriety, and in reality it was as dank and cheerless a day as even London itself can produce in mid-winter. As the advance guard in the shape of Miles and Betty neared their own doorway, a dainty figure ran down the steps, and there was Cynthia Alliot, blooming like a delicate pink rose in the midst of the fog.

"You!" cried Betty in surprise, and then awkwardly attempted the difficult task of introduction. "Er—this is my brother Miles! Miles—this is—"

"The Pampered Pet!" interrupted Cynthia, laughing. Miles knit his brows in the fashion he had when ill at ease, and mumbled an unintelligible greeting, but Cynthia was not in the least embarrassed. She smiled at him as frankly as if he had been another Betty, yet with a little air of gracious dignity which is rarely found in girls of her age. She was quite simple and unaffected, but one could never imagine her taking part in the free-and-easy, slangy, unchivalrous intercourse which so often prevails nowadays between girls and boys. She held herself like a Queen, and silent Miles looked at her, and in the depths of his honest heart vowed himself to her service.

"What did you call for?" Betty queried. "Did you want to see me? Was it about to-morrow? We are going to call for you at half-past two. We can walk, I suppose, unless it is wet?"

"Oh yes, it will be far nicer. I do hope it will be fine. This is not at all a cheerful Christmas, is it? Good-bye! I do hope you'll have a lovely time!" returned Cynthia, waving her hand and crossing the road towards her own doorway. It was too late to remind her that she had not answered the last question, and the first sight of the hall table banished every other thought, for on it lay the pile of Christmas cards whose advent had been so eagerly expected. Betty seized the bundle and began doling them out, while her brothers and sisters clustered round, and clamoured for their share.

"Miss Trevor—Miss Trevor—Miss Trevor—(Betty, it's not fair, you are taking them all!) Miss Jill Trevor, Miss JM Trevor, Mrs Trevor, James Trevor, Esquire, MD—(Looks like a bill! How mean to send a bill on Christmas day!) Miss Trevor, Miss Pamela Trevor," so it went on, the major share falling to the three girls, the boys coming in only for an occasional missive from an aunt or some such kindly relation, who suddenly awoke to the fact of their existence at Christmas time. When the cards were dealt out there still remained a little pile of envelopes which had apparently been delivered by hand, as no stamps appeared beside the addresses. Betty pounced on them, and gave a shout of delight.

"There's money inside! There is, I can feel it. Mine's quite small—like a—a—" She dropped the remaining envelopes to open her own in a flutter of excitement. Inside there was a folded piece of paper enclosing a second envelope—one of those tiny, dainty affairs in which some old-fashioned tradesmen still deliver change to their customers. In her haste Betty ripped it open, and held up to view a brand new sovereign.

"It is! It is! How s-implly lovely! I was so hard up—and now! What perfect angel can have sent it?"

She picked up the piece of paper which she had dropped in her haste, and read aloud, "With the best wishes of Terence Digby," the while her brothers and sisters made short work of their own envelopes. Jack and Jill had each a new ten-shilling piece, and Pam a magnificent silver crown, the size of which delighted her even more than the value.

"He said he would send me something, but I never thought it would be money. It's what I like better than anything else, to be rich in the Christmas holidays!" Jill cried rapturously, and Mrs Trevor smiled and said—

"So he seemed to think. He asked my permission before sending his presents in this form, and said he would like to give you money, because when he was a boy an old lady used to send new coins to himself and his brothers every Christmas in these same little envelopes, and he had never forgotten the pleasure they gave him. Yes! You will feel rich, but don't be in too great a hurry to spend your fortunes, for the General may wish to speak to you on that point."

Jill shrugged her shoulders disgustedly.

"Bother! I hope he won't want us to spend it sensibly! That would take away all the fun. I want to keep it in my purse, and fritter it away just as I like. What's the good of giving presents, and not letting you use them as you like?"

"Well, well, what's the use of grumbling before you know if there is anything to grumble about?" returned Mrs Trevor, laughing. She moved away, carrying her bundle of letters, and the children followed her example, and spent a happy half-hour examining, displaying, and comparing cards and calendars.

Then came lunch, a glorified lunch with "party" sweets, and dessert, finishing up with a big dish of chestnuts to roast over the fire. The doctor was at home for the afternoon, having made the round of his serious patients in the morning (abominably selfish of anyone to be ill on Christmas Day!), and that fact alone gave a festivity to the afternoon tea, while ever in the background lurked the delightful anticipation of presents—presents to come!

Other people had done with all their excitement before now, and had even grown accustomed to their new possessions, but Betty and Jill donned last year's party dresses for dinner in a flutter of anticipation, and then hurried downstairs, each with an armful of parcels to add to the store which had been accumulating in the library all day

long.

The sofa was full of them—neat brown—paper parcels, bulky parcels, shapeless parcels, tissue-paper parcels, large and small, dainty and the reverse, boxes, envelopes, and a mysterious pyramid covered with a sheet, over which Pam mounted jealous guard. Betty had just time to arrange the parcels on two large trays, and see the larger articles conveyed into the dining-room and hidden behind a screen, before the gong rang, and dinner began.

There was the orthodox turkey and roast beef, plum-pudding and mince-pies, but when dessert was over there came a moment of thrilling excitement, as the servants placed one heaped trayful of presents on the table before Dr Trevor, and another at the bottom before his wife. The long-looked-for moment had come at last!

Well, it was a pleasant sight to see the twinkle in the doctor's tired eyes as he looked round the table at his five children, and exchanged a smile of comradeship with his pretty wife. His long delicate hand, the true doctor's hand, lifted the topmost parcel from the tray, and held it aloft while he read aloud the laborious inscription—"To Miles, hoping he will like it, from Pam.' Here you are, Miles!" and down the table it went, from one eager pair of hands to another, while Pam blushed a vivid red, and wriggled bashfully on her chair.

There were a great many wrappings, and the dimensions of the parcel diminished so rapidly as to excite serious fears that it contained nothing more substantial than a joke, but such an idea was an insult to Pam's generosity. She had bestowed much thought on the choice of this special present, and could not in the least understand the roar of laughter which rose from every side as the last paper fell away to disclose a magnificent sixpenny tooth-brush in all its creamy splendour.

Miles' face was a study as he gazed upon it, and turned it speculatively to and fro.

"Anything personal meant, Pam?" he inquired, and, "Yes, please, Miles!" replied innocent Pam, and blushed again to the verge of tears at the second shout of merriment.

"It's a very useful present, dear," Mrs Trevor said consolingly, and hastened to give the conversation a turn by doling out another parcel from her own tray.

"Betty, with love from Jill."

It was a very small parcel, and Betty looked at it with suspicion, remembering the sticking-plaster and watered eau de Cologne, but things turned out better than she expected, the enclosure being quite a pretty hat-pin, of a colour to match her best hat.

"Just what I wanted!" was both the true and the gracious manner of acknowledging this trophy, as also the book from Jack, and the gloves from Miles, which presently fell to her share. Then it was the doctor's turn, his wife having retired behind the screen to bring forth an enormous parcel, which could only be laid on a chair by his side, since it was far too big to place on the table itself.

"For me? Why, what can this be? It feels like a blanket!" he cried in astonishment, and his face was a picture of mingled surprise, pleasure, and consternation, as a handsome fur-lined carriage rug was presently revealed to view. "Oh, this is too much! This won't do! Edith, what reckless extravagance!"

"Not extravagance at all," his wife answered sturdily. "You must be kept warm, driving about from morning till night. It is nothing less than a necessity which you ought to have had years ago. Besides, it's not my gift alone—it's a joint affair. The children all contributed—it's from all six of us, with our best love to you, dearest."

"I gave threepence," announced Pam proudly, thereby bringing a smile to her father's face, though his voice had a suspicious quiver in it as he said—

"Thank you, my six darlings!" and smoothed the rug with a loving touch. Its presence would keep not only his body but his heart warm on many a wintry day to come.

After this, the parcel-opening went on fast and furious. Pam received a young lady doll, and had barely recovered from the rapture of her arrival when, presto! There appeared a miniature travelling-box, covered with leather, provided with straps, and a white PT painted at the sides, just like a real true grown-up box! And inside—a veritable trousseau! The work of loving mother hands on many a winter evening—a blue serge coat and skirt, a party frock of pale pink silk, a long white cloak; a straw hat for ordinary wear, and—could you believe it?—a toque, boa, and muff of real fur, just like that old muff of mother's that she wore before the new one arrived. Beneath these treasures a supply of under garments, including a dear little flannel dressing-jacket, and bedroom slippers to match. Never, no, never since the creation of the world did a little girl of eight years receive a more all-satisfying and delightful offering! In her parents' eyes at least, Pam's little face, aglow with innocent rapture, was the most beautiful sight of that happy Christmas Day.

Jack had a book from his father, a knitted tie from Betty, skates from his mother—oh, for a good hard frost!—some cast-off tools from Miles, and a packet of black sticking-plaster from Jill. He grinned broadly over this last offering, and while the parcel-opening went on on both sides fumbled mysteriously beneath the tablecloth. Five minutes later, as he joined the others in a burst of laughter, his mother started violently, and cried, "Jack! What *has* happened!" in a tone of dismay which brought every eye upon him. Freckled nose, twinkling eyes, outstanding ears—no change to be seen in these well-known features, but the teeth—the teeth! Between lips extended in broadest of smiles appeared horrible, isolated tusks standing out conspicuously from the black gaps on either side. What in the name of all that was mysterious and perplexing had happened to those rows of sound regular ivories which had been his chief beauty five minutes before? And what an alteration in his whole appearance! Extraordinary to think of the change which was effected by the loss of half a dozen little teeth!

After the first start of surprise, understanding dawned quickly enough. Jill's present had been short-lived, but it had served its purpose, both in her eyes and Jack's, in causing the sensation of the evening, and the mother's pitiful, "Take them off, Jack dear, do! You look *so* dreadful!" could not persuade Jack to peel off the disfiguring black squares. It was too dear a triumph to a schoolboy's heart to create shudders of disgust every time he opened his mouth!

The pile of presents on the trays waxed rapidly less and less, the last parcel of all being of exceptional daintiness,—tissue-paper, tied round with a narrow blue ribbon. It was addressed to Betty, and to her rapturous surprise contained a line of congratulation from Cynthia Alliot, and the exact duplicate of an artistic silver and enamel buckle which she had admired on her friend's belt a few days before. She was so entirely occupied crooning over this treasure, that she did not notice that Pam had suddenly slipped from her chair and pushed the screen aside, leaving the tall draped mystery fully exposed to view.

"It's my present," she explained proudly. "For mother. Just what she wanted! Cook hid it for me, and covered it with these clothes." She stood on tiptoe as she spoke, taking out the pins which held the coverings together. They fell to the ground, and revealed a handsome branching palm, standing four or five feet from the ground. Mrs Trevor uttered an exclamation of incredulous surprise, and indeed every face round the table expressed the same sentiment, for the plant was obviously expensive, and how in the world could Pam have purchased it out of an income of a penny a week?

"My darling! For me? That is indeed a magnificent present. Where did it come from, dear? Has someone joined with you to give a present to mother?"

Before now it had happened that a friend of the family had consulted the children as to their mother's wishes in the matter of Christmas presents, and it seemed the most likely solution of the mystery that this had occurred once again, Pam contributing in the same proportion as she had done to her father's rug. But no! Pam proudly denied the insinuation, and repeated—

"It's my very own present I bought it myself."

"But, my sweetheart—" began Mrs Trevor anxiously, and then checked herself at the thought of another possible explanation. "Did someone give you some money, dear, that I knew nothing about?"

"Oh no! I haven't had any money, only General Digby's to-day."

"Then how— I am very pleased and delighted to have the palm, but I can't enjoy it properly until I know a little more about how it came into your possession. It is such a very big present for a little girl. How did you get all the money, dear?"

Pam smiled with an air of innocent pride.

"It wasn't—all—money!" she said, smiling.

"Not all money? What do you mean? If it was not all money, what was the rest?"

"Clothes!"

"Clothes!" cried Mrs Trevor vaguely.

"Clothes!" echoed her husband.

"Clothes!" shrieked Betty in a shrill treble.

"Cl-oths!" repeated the boys curiously. Only Jill's face lit up with comprehension, mingled with a spice of resentment.

"I know—I know! *Old* clothes, she means! She has been selling old clothes—our old clothes, if you please—to 'All a-growing all a-blowing' in exchange for the palm! He likes them better than money. I heard him say so one day when Pam was seeing me off at the door. That's where dad's old coat has gone to, that's where your blouse is, Betty, not to mention some of the boys' ties, and gloves, and my umbrella. Oh, you wretched child! The hours I've spent searching for it! That's where everything has gone that we have been searching for for the last month. She has been gathering them together for the palm!"

Mrs Trevor's face was a study of complex emotion as she looked at her baby, but Pam's triumphant satisfaction did not waver for a moment. She nodded her head, and cried cheerfully—

"Oh, lots more things than that! He wanted so much, because palms is most expensive of all before Christmas, and I bought it when you were all out, and cook hid it, and we sprayed its leaves to make them bright. In her last place Miss Bella did them every week with milk-and-water to make them shine!"

She had not the least idea that there was anything to be ashamed of in her action; on the contrary, she was full of pride in her own cleverness. But it was impossible to allow such an occasion to pass, even on Christmas evening, when discipline is necessarily relaxed. Mrs Trevor's face was an eloquent mingling of tenderness and distress as she said—

"But did it never strike you, Pam dear, that these things were not your own to sell? That you had no right to sell them?"

"They were no use. You said to father, 'That coat is too disgraceful to be worn,' and Betty said the blouse mortified her pride, and Jill made fun of her umbrella because it was three and eleven-pence, and the wires bulged out. She said, 'I can't think why it is that I always lose silk ones, and I can't get rid of this wretched thing, do what I will!' I thought,"—Pam's voice sounded a tremulous note of disappointment—"I thought you would all be pleased with me for clearing them away."

"It would have been different, dear, if you had asked our permission, though we all have to put up with shabby things sometimes. As it was, it was both wrong and dishonest to take things which belonged to other people, and sell them without permission."

"But I sold my own too! My blue coat and hat, because you said yourself they didn't suit me, and you couldn't bear to see them on. I heard you speaking to Betty, and saying those very words. I thought you'd be pleased if you never did see them again!"

Mrs Trevor gasped in consternation.

"Oh, Pam, Pam, what am I to say to you? This is worse than I imagined! Your blue coat—and it was quite good still! I can't possibly accept a present obtained in such a way!"

She cast an appealing glance at her husband, who had been sitting covering his mouth with his hand, and trying in vain to subdue the twinkle in his eyes as he listened to Pam's extraordinary confession. Now he looked at the child's frightened, shrinking face, and said kindly—

"I think Pam and I will have a quiet talk together while you adjourn to the drawing-room. She did not mean to do wrong, and I am sure she will never offend again in the same way when she understands things in their right light."

So Mrs Trevor and the elder children went to the drawing-room, and, ten minutes later, a subdued little Pam crept up to her mother's side, holding out a bright crown-piece on her palm.

"Father says General Digby would like me best to pay my debts. Will you please give some to the others to pay for the things I took?"

"Thank you, Pam. I shall be very pleased to do so," said Mrs Trevor quietly. Her heart ached at being obliged to take the child's fortune from her, but she knew it was the right thing to do, and would not allow herself to hesitate. "And now, darling, I shall be delighted to have the palm. It is indeed the very thing I wanted."

Pam tried to smile, but her lips quivered. A whole crown-piece, and a new one into the bargain! A Vanderbilt deprived of his millions could not have felt his poverty more bitterly than she did at that moment!

Chapter Fifteen.

The Concert.

Next afternoon Betty left Jill engaged in filling up the blanks in her Christmas letters, and Pam lovingly dressing up Pamela junior in her various costumes, and, accompanied by her father and Miles, called for Cynthia and set out to walk across the Park to the Albert Hall, where Miss Beveridge and a friend had arranged to meet them in the box.

Cynthia looked delightfully graceful and pretty in a blue costume and hat, which had already caused Betty many pangs of envy, and perhaps it was a remembrance of his own youth which made Dr Trevor pass his hand through Betty's arm and lead her ahead, so that his son should have the pleasure of a talk with this very charming little lady. Miles was the best of good fellows, all solid goodness and worth, but he was still in the boorish stage, and it would do him good to be drawn out of himself, and forced to play the gallant.

Miles himself was by no means sure that he approved of the arrangement. He would have preferred to walk behind Cynthia, and admire her pretty hair, her tiny feet, and the general air of daintiness which was to him the greatest charm of all, but he had not the slightest idea what to say, and thought of the long walk before him with something approaching consternation. Fortunately for him Cynthia was not in the least shy, and had so seldom an opportunity of talking to anyone of her own age, that she could have chattered away the whole afternoon without the slightest difficulty.

"It isn't often *you* have a holiday, is it?" she said, smiling at him in her bright, friendly manner. "Once when I was up very early I saw you going out before six o'clock, and now if I'm awake I hear the door slam—you do slam it very loudly, you know!—and know it is you going out to your work. It makes me feel so lazy, because I am supposed to do half an hour's practising before nine o'clock breakfast, and I do feel it such a penance."

Miles laughed shortly.

"Did you ever see me coming back?" he inquired, and when Cynthia nodded, with a twinkle in her eye—"Betty was afraid you would believe I was a *real* workman," he told her. "She thought you would put us down as quite impossible people, having a workman living in the house!"

"Betty is a goose," said Betty's new friend cheerily, "but she is a nice goose. I like her. I guessed you were learning to be an engineer, because I have a cousin who did the same. I like a man to do manly work. I suppose you are dreadfully interested in all those noisy engines and things. Tell me about them."

It was rather a large order, and Miles would have answered shortly enough if an ordinary acquaintance had put such

a question, but there was a magnetism about Cynthia which broke down reserve, and to his own astonishment he found himself answering quite easily and naturally.

"I am not studying for railway engineering—I am going in for mines. It's a different course altogether, and in some ways much more difficult. There seems nothing that a mining engineer ought not to know—assaying, and surveying, and everything to do with minerals, and, of course, a thorough understanding of pumps, and all the machinery employed. Then he ought to know something about doctoring, and even cooking, if he wants to be an all-round success, for ten to one he will be sent to some out-of-the-way wilderness where there is no one else to look after the comfort of his men—"

"Is that what you intend to do? Go and bury yourself at the end of the world?"

"I expect so—any time after the next six months. I shall have finished my course by that time, and be on the look-out for the first opening that comes!"

"What will Betty do without you?"

Betty's brother shrugged his shoulders with the unconcern with which, it is to be feared, most lads regard their sisters' feelings.

"Oh, she'll get used to it! It's no use sticking at home if one wants to get on in the world. I should never be content to jog along in a secondary position all my life, as some fellows do. I don't care how hard I work, but I mean to get to the very top of the tree!"

"Wish I'd been born a boy! It must be delicious to rough it in the wilds," sighed Cynthia, stepping daintily over a puddle, and looking down with concern to see if perchance there was a splash on her boots. "Boys have much the best of it; they have a chance of doing something great in the world, while girls have to stay at home and—darn their socks! All the great things are done by men—in war, in science, in discovery, even in art and literature, though a few women may equal them there. All the great things are made by men, too, the wonderful cathedrals and buildings, and the great bridges and battleships—all the big things. There's so little left for us."

Miles looked at her beneath drawn brows, his rugged face softening with the smile that Betty loved to see.

"And who makes the men?" he asked simply, and Cynthia peered at him in startled, eager fashion, and cried—

"You mean—*we* do? Women, mothers and sisters and wives? Is *that* what you mean? Oh, I *do* think you say nice things!" (Shy, silent old Miles being accused of saying "nice things" to a member of the opposite sex! Wonders will never cease!) "I shall remember that, next time I see a lucky boy pass by rattling the railings, and looking as if the world belonged to him, while I must stand behind the curtains, because it's not 'lady-like' to stare out of the windows! I do ramp and rage sometimes!"

Miles' laugh rang out so merrily that Betty turned to stare in amazement. The idea of Cynthia doing anything so violent as "ramp and rage" seemed impossible to realise, as one looked at her dainty figure and sweet pink-and-white face. All the same it was a pleasure to find that she did not belong to the wax-doll type of girl, but had a will and a temper of her own.

"Yes, you may laugh," she cried, laughing herself, "but it's quite true. Or perhaps it would be more 'lady-like' to say that I feel like 'a caged bird,' as people do in books. In future I shall console myself with the thought that I may be the lever which supplies the force. Is that simile right, or ridiculously wrong? It's rash of me to use engineering terms before you. I mean that I'll try to be a good influence to some man, and so inspire work, if I can't do it myself. The worst is, I know so few men! Father is abroad, all our relations are far away, and until I come out I seem to meet nothing but girls, old and young. Of course, if I got to know you better, I might influence *you*!"

She turned her laughing face upon him, the face of a frank, innocent child, for, though she was nearly seventeen years old, Cynthia was absolutely innocent of the flirtatious instinct which is strong in some little girls in the coral and pinafore stage. She offered her friendship to Betty's brother as composedly as she had done to Betty herself; it was Miles who blushed, and stared at the pavement, and his voice sounded hoarse and difficult as he mumbled his reply—

"I wish you—I'm sure I should—awfully good thing for me if you did!"

"Very well; but you will have to do great things, remember! I shan't be satisfied with anything less. It will be good for me too, for I shall have to be very stern with myself, if I am to influence someone else. What are your chief faults? I ought to know, oughtn't I, so as to be able to set to work the right way?"

She was so deliciously naïve and outspoken, that once again Miles' rare laugh rang out, and once again Betty marvelled, and felt a thrill of envy.

By the time that the Albert Hall was reached, the two young people had progressed so far towards intimacy that Miles had forgotten his shyness, and confided to his new mentor some of the trials and grievances which beset him in his work, the which he had never before confided in a human being. The attraction of one sex to another is a natural and beautiful thing. God designed it as one of the great forces in His universe, and an almost omnipotent power it is, either for good or evil. Do the girls who jest and frivol with the young men with whom they are brought in contact, realise their responsibility in all they say and do? Do they ever reflect that the beauty and charm which they possess are weapons with which God has endowed them,—weapons which may have more power in the battle of life than a two-edged sword? Laugh and be merry—enjoy the sunshine of your youth; it is a sin to see a young thing sad; but never, never, as you value your womanhood, speak a slighting or irreverent word against God's great laws of

righteousness, nor allow such a word to pass unproved in your presence. Remember in the midst of your merry-making to preserve your dignity as women, knowing that by so doing you will not lose, but trebly strengthen your hold on any man worthy of the name. Say to yourself, dear girls—"With God's help I will be a good angel to this man, who has to meet trials and temptations from which I am exempt. So far as in me lies I will make him respect all women, and help, not hinder him in his work." It isn't necessary to be prim and proper—don't think that! The Misses Prunes and Prisms, who are always preaching, weary rather than help, but when the bright, sweet-natured girl, who loves a joke, and can be the whole-hearted companion of a summer day, speaks a word of reproof, or draws back from a proposed enterprise, her action carries with it a treble weight of influence.

When the whole party were seated in the box—Miss Beveridge and Betty in the front row, Cynthia and governess number two in the second, and the two "men" at the back—Miles had little attention to spare for the music, so absorbed was he in gazing at Cynthia's delicately-cut profile, and in weaving about her the halo of a young man's first romance. There was no romance in the two girls; they were absorbed in admiration of the wonderful building itself, in enjoyment of the music, and in anxiety to do their duty to dear Mrs Vanburgh's "Govies," as they irreverently termed Miss Beveridge and her companion. Even when on pleasure bent, the former could not be called "responsive." When asked, "Do you like music?" she replied curtly, "No! I teach it!" which reduced the questioner to stupid silence, though her thoughts were active enough.

"Oh, indeed! That's one for me, as I am a pupil still! It's the stupidity of pupils which has made her dislike music, but then—why does she come to a concert? Why couldn't she have had the decency to refuse, and let someone else have the ticket? Oh, I do dislike you—you cold,—cutting, disagreeable, ungrateful, snappy old thing!"

Betty sat back in her chair and let her eyes rest on Miss Beveridge's profile, as that lady in her turn stared fixedly at the orchestra. She was wearing quite "a decent little toque," and had taken pains with the arrangement of her hair. Betty was at the stage when she imagined that it was impossible that life could retain any interest after the age of thirty, but it dawned upon her now that, at some far-off, prehistoric period, Miss Beveridge had been handsome—even very handsome, which made her present condition all the more pitiable. Suppose, just suppose for a moment, that one became old and lonely, and poor and plain and snappy, oneself! It was too horrible a prospect to be believed; much more satisfactory to take refuge in the usual rose-coloured dreams!

The Royal Box was close at hand—empty, unfortunately, of interesting occupants. How would it feel to be a princess, and loll back in one's chair, conscious of being the cynosure of every eye? Betty lolled, and tried to project herself into the position, pleasingly conscious of a new blouse, quite immaculate suede gloves, and Cynthia's buckle showing its dull blues and reds at the front of her belt. She turned her head slowly from side to side, and cultivated a charming smile.—"Princess Elizabeth appeared in the Royal Box, looking as fascinating as ever in a costume of her favourite grey.—"

The musical programme was interesting and varied, but during the second half of the concert the cheerfulness of the scene was sadly marred by the ever-increasing fog which crept in from without, filling the vast interior with a gloom against which the many lights seemed powerless to contend. Dr Trevor began to feel a little nervous about the safety of his party, and suggested making a move before the end of the concert, but Miss Beveridge insisted that she and her friend needed no escort home.

"It would have to be a very bad fog to frighten us. We are accustomed to going about town in all weathers," she declared, and this was so obviously the case that it seemed affectation to protest. The doctor therefore explained that as he was in charge of Cynthia he wished to allay her mother's natural anxiety as soon as possible, and the young people bade farewell to their guests of the afternoon and hurried downstairs.

Early though it was, hundreds of people seemed to have been inspired by the same fears, for the stairway was thronged and the passages downstairs were becoming momentarily blocked. Dr Trevor tucked Cynthia's hand through his arm.

"Look after your sister, Miles," he cried, turning a quick glance over his shoulder. "I'm afraid it's very thick. Keep close behind me if you can. In any case make the best of your way home."

A moment later they passed through the doorway into a world of black gloom, in which phantom shapes at one moment pressed against one, and at the next vanished utterly from sight.

Betty gave a little cry of dismay, for, London-bred as she was, never before had she been out of doors in such an impenetrable fog. She put out her hand towards the spot where Miles had stood a moment before, but her fingers gripped nothing more substantial than air. She gave a quick leap forward, and clutching at a shadowy coat-sleeve shook it violently, calling out in accents half-frightened, half-angry—

"Miles, how horrid of you! You must not stalk on ahead like that! I shall be lost, and then what will become of me? For pity's sake keep hold of my arm!"

She had walked a few paces forward as she spoke, but now she stopped short, in response to a determined movement of the arm to which she clung. Betty glanced upwards in surprise; she could not see the face so near to her arm, but the blood chilled in her veins as a strange voice answered slowly—

"But—I'm sorry, but I do not happen to be Miles!"

Chapter Sixteen.

Lost in the Fog.

The feeling of despair, of helplessness, of desolation, which overcame Betty at that moment, remained with her as a poignant memory to the end of her life. She was lost, as hopelessly lost as if she had been in the midst of a solitary waste, though close at hand, perhaps only a few yards away, were her own father and brother, the latter no doubt desperately searching for her. Dr Trevor would make the best of his way home with Cynthia, knowing his son to be as good a guide as himself. Poor old Miles! He would have a bad time of it when he arrived home alone;—yet he had not been to blame, for she herself had refused to take his arm before leaving the Hall. “It looked so silly!” She had intended to take it the moment they were in the street, but even that one moment had been too long. As she heard the stranger’s voice she turned in a panic of fear, and tried to drag her hand from his arm, but he held her tightly, saying, with an odd mixture of weariness and impatience—

“Don’t be foolish! You can do no good by running away. You can never find your friends again in this blackness. Tell me where you want to go, and I’ll try to help you.”

Betty trembled helplessly.

“But I must—I must try! It’s a long way off—across the Park. Father is here, and my brother, and some friends. I’ll go back to the Hall—they may go there to look for me.”

“Look round!” said the strange voice, and Betty turned her head and stared in amazement, for the great building had vanished as completely as had Miles himself, and nothing was to be seen but a wall of darkness. On every side she heard the movement of invisible forms, but their very unreality added to the sense of desolation which possessed her. It was terrible even to think of venturing alone through the ghost-like ranks.

Instinctively she clung more closely to her companion’s arm, and, as if recognising her feelings, his voice took a gentler, more reassuring tone.

“Don’t be afraid. I had a sister of my own once. You can trust me to see you safely home. I am afraid it is no earthly use trying to find your friends among all the thousands who are leaving the Hall. Better tell me where you live, so that we can get there as soon as the rest of your party, and save them needless alarm. Across the Park, you said? The gates will be closed, of course, and in any case that would be the last route to take. Tell me your exact address.”

“Brompton Square—we turn off at Stanhope Terrace, just past the Lancaster Gate Station. It is one of those squares lying between the Park and Edgware Road.”

“I know, I know. It’s a long walk, but perhaps it will get lighter as we go on. These dense fogs are often very local. Keep tight hold of my arm, please. If we are once separated, it might not be easy to meet again.”

“No, indeed! I could not have believed it was so easy to get lost. My brother was beside me one instant, the next—it was your coat-sleeve! I hope I did not shake it too violently! I was so nervous and frightened I did not think what I was doing.”

She laughed as she spoke, her youthful spirits beginning to assert themselves again, as her confidence was assured. The face of her companion was unknown, but the tone of that quite, “Don’t be afraid, I had a sister of my own,” had put an end to her fears. Here was an adventure indeed—a full-fledged adventure! In anticipation she felt the joys of relating her experiences to a breathless audience in the schoolroom, and thrilled with importance. The stranger did not echo her laugh, however, but merely murmured a few words of conventional disclaimer and relapsed into silence. Betty could hear him sigh now and then as they made their way onward—slowly feeling the way from point to point through the eerie, all-enveloping gloom. Sometimes a brief question to a link-boy would assure them that they were still on the right road; sometimes they wandered off the pavement and were suddenly aware of the champing of horses dangerously near at hand; sometimes for a minute or two they stood still, waiting to find a clue to their position; but through all the strange man preserved an unbroken silence, until Betty’s nerve gave way again, and she cried in plaintive, child-like fashion—

“Oh, please would you mind talking a little bit! I’m frightened. It’s like a dreadful nightmare, feeling one’s way through this darkness—and when you are so silent, I feel as if you were a ghost like all the rest, instead of a real live man.”

“I wish I were!” returned the stranger bitterly. Then recovering himself with an effort, “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I am afraid I have been very remiss. To tell the truth, I was lost in my own thoughts when you came to me a few minutes ago, and I am afraid I had gone back to them, and forgotten that I had a companion!”

Forgotten! Forgotten her very existence! A young man rescues a beautiful maid—really and truly she had looked unusually well in all her smart Christmas froings—from a position of deadly peril, and straightway forgets her very existence! This part of the story, at least, must be omitted from the home recital. Betty pursed her lips in offended dignity, but in the end curiosity got the better of her annoyance, and she said tentatively—

“They must have been very nice thoughts!”

“Nice!”

The foolish girl’s word was repeated in a tone of bitterest satire.

“Interesting, then?”

“In so far as the last of anything is interesting, be the beginning what it may!”

“The last!” It was Betty’s turn to play the part of echo, as she stared in amazement at the shadowy form by her side. “How could they be your last thoughts? You seem quite well and strong. It isn’t possible to go on living and not to

think.”

“No, it is not, and therefore when thoughts become unbearable—”

He stopped short, and Betty felt a thrill of foreboding. The strange silence, followed by the hopeless bitterness in the stranger’s voice, seemed to bespeak some trouble of overwhelming magnitude, and, viewed in that light, his last words admitted of only one conclusion. Life had become unbearable, and therefore he had decided to end it. Hitherto Betty had carelessly classed all suicides as mad; but this man was not mad; he was, on the contrary, remarkably sane and quiet in manner! He was only so hopelessly, helplessly miserable that it did not seem possible to endure another day’s existence. Betty thrilled with a strange new feeling of awe and responsibility. The hidden strength of her nature, which had come to her as the result of being brought up to womanhood in a household dedicated to God and His Christ, broke through the veneer of youthful folly, and came triumphantly to the surface.

Her nervous fear dropped from her like a mantle, and she was possessed by a burning longing to comfort and save. In the midst of the fog and darkness God had sent to her a great opportunity. She rose to it with a dignity which seemed to set the restless, self-centred Betty of an hour ago years behind. Her fingers tightened on the stranger’s arm; she spoke in firm, quiet tones.

“I can guess what you mean! Forgive me for teasing you with my silly questions when you are in such trouble. Do you think you could tell me what it is? It seems a strange thing to ask, but I am no real person to-night. I am just a shadow that has come out of the fog. I have not even a face or a name. You might speak to me as safely as to the air itself, and it might be a relief to put it into words. It is so sometimes when one is in trouble.”

There was a moment’s silence, then—

“Thank you,” he said in a softened voice. “It’s kind of you to think of it. You might have condemned me at once, as not fit to speak to a girl like you. You are only a girl, aren’t you? Your voice sounds very young.”

“Yes, only eighteen—nearly eighteen. But my father is a doctor, so I am always being brought near to sad things, and sometimes I feel quite old. I think I could understand if you told me your trouble.”

“Suppose it was not so much sorrow as sin? What then? What can you at eighteen—‘nearly eighteen’—know of that? You could not understand if I did speak.”

“Oh yes, I could. I sin myself—often!” cried Betty, with a swift remembrance of all those little things done or left undone which made the failure of her home life. “A girl living at home, with a father and a mother to look after her, has no temptation to any big thing, but it’s just as bad, if she is idle and selfish and ungrateful, and I am all three together many times over. I’d be too proud to say that to you if I saw your face and knew your name; but, as I said before, we are only shadows in a dream to-night. It doesn’t matter what we say. Tell me your trouble, and let me try to understand. It isn’t because I am curious—it isn’t really! Do you believe that?”

“Yes,” he said instantly, “I do! Poor child, you want to help; but I am past that. I have ruined my own life and the life of the man who has been my best friend. I have had my chance—a better chance than is given to most men—and I have made an utter failure of it. If I—went on, it would mean starting again from the very beginning, with the stigma of failure to hinder me at every turn—a hopeless fight.”

“But,”—Betty’s voice faltered nervously—“isn’t it cowardly to run away just when the fight is hardest? A soldier would be called a traitor if he did that. And what would come afterwards? Do you believe that you have a right to take your own life?”

“You mean from a religious point of view. I’m afraid that’s out of my line. I have lost what little faith I had in these last few years. You believe in it all, of course—it’s natural for a girl—but to me the idea of a personal God is as unreal as a fairy tale. It does not touch my position.”

“But just suppose for a moment that it *were* true. Suppose He does exist, and has been longing to help you all this time—what then?” cried Betty earnestly, and her companion gave a short, derisive laugh.

“It would have been easy enough for Him to have prevented all this trouble! I can see no help in the story of the last few years. Everything has gone against me. In the beginning I borrowed some money—of course, it’s a case of money—to help a friend who was in a tight fix. That was innocent enough. But when the time came round I could not repay the debt, and in my position it was fatally easy to help myself to what I needed. I called it just another loan. I was sure of repaying it before anything was discovered, but again it was impossible, for there were calls upon me which I had not expected. If I had been short in my accounts I should have lost my situation, and it was a handsome one for a man of my age. You won’t understand the details, but I began to speculate, to put off the evil hour, always hoping for a *coup* which would put everything right; but it never came. I was not helped, you see! Things went from bad to worse, until I could go on no longer. Then in despair I confessed the whole story to my friend—he is a near relation also, but that is by the way. He would not allow the family name to be disgraced; he paid up all that was due, and saved me the shame of prosecution, but even he could do no more. I am sent about my business—a felon in deed, though not in name. Incidentally, too, he is ruined. He must give up his house, remove his children to cheap schools, live in poverty instead of ease. Naturally enough he will have no more to do with me. There is not a soul on earth who would regret me if I passed out of being to-night.”

There was a long silence while the strangely-matched couple wended their way slowly along the bisecting roads which lead from Kensington High Street to Bayswater Road. The fog had slightly lessened by this time, but it was still too dense to show anything but a dim outline of passers-by, and the face of the stranger was but a blur against the darkness to Betty’s searching eyes. Her heart was beating rapidly; she was praying with a whole-hearted earnestness unknown to her usual morning and evening supplications—praying to be guided to say the right thing to save this

man's soul from despair. At last—

"You say you were not helped," she began timidly; "but if your speculations had succeeded as you hoped, it might not have been really good for you. It would have been easier, of course, but if all had gone smoothly you might have been tempted to do the same thing another time. Perhaps God knew that, and that there was no way of bringing you back to Himself except through trouble."

The stranger laughed again—his hard, mirthless little laugh.

"I am afraid I can hardly believe in that theory. I can see no reason for believing that my doings are the slightest interest to Him, or that He cares in the least what becomes of me."

"Can't you!" cried Betty eagerly. "Oh, I can! Just think more carefully, and you will remember many, many things which you have not stopped to notice at the time. To-night, for instance! Do you think it chance that I missed my brother, and came to you out of all the hundreds of people who were around? / don't! I believe God sent me to you because you would not speak to anyone you knew; because you needed help so badly—and I need it, too—and we could help each other."

The shadowy head bent nearer to hers, and the arm pressed against her hand.

"Thank you," said the voice in a softened key; "that is a kind thought! It is quite true that I could not have spoken as I have done under ordinary circumstances. When I met you I was going straight for the nearest water. There are many places where an accident might easily occur on a night like this. I do not wish to make any scandal, only to disappear."

Betty drew in her breath sharply. The sound of that one word "water" gave a definite touch to the situation, and thereby trebly increased its tragedy, but the gentleness of the voice gave her increased hope, and she cried eagerly —

"Disappear, yes! I can understand it would be difficult to stay among the old surroundings, but why not disappear *to come back* another day, when you can redeem the past? Suppose you went away to a strange place, and worked hard, oh, very hard, and denied yourself every possible thing, so as to save up money. Suppose you succeeded—when people are terribly in earnest about a thing, they generally *do* succeed—and in some years' time could pay off what you owe! That would be braver than killing yourself, wouldn't it? That would be worth living for. Or if it took too long to pay it back in your friend's lifetime, he has children, and you could help them as their father has helped you. That would be paying back the debt in the way he would like best. Think of it! They would imagine you dead, or perhaps worse than dead, but they wouldn't be angry with you any more; people don't go on being angry for years and years, especially if they are good and kind, as your friends must be. But some day it might happen that they were in trouble, or getting old and tired, and feeling it was hard to go on working, and a letter would come in— from you—and inside that letter there would be a cheque, and they would be so happy, and so thankful, and so *helped!* And they would send for you to come back, and the old trouble would be wiped away, and they would honour you for your brave fight. Oh, you will—you *will!* You must do it! Promise, promise that you will!"

Her voice broke into a sob, and something like a faint echo of the sound came to her ears through the darkness. It seemed the most promising answer she could have had, in its contrast from the biting self-possession of a few minutes before. Her heart beat high with hope.

"Is there any place to which you could go? Have you enough money left to take you there?" she questioned, as if the matter were already settled, and, consciously or unconsciously, the stranger replied in the same vein.

"I have an old friend in America; he would help me to a start. I have a good many possessions left; they would bring in enough to pay the passage if—"

"No, there is no 'if'! Don't let yourself say it! Sell the things to-morrow, and begin again in a new world, in a new way. Believe that God *does* care, and that it is a chance that He has given you, and every night and every morning, oh, and so often through the day, I shall remember you, and pray that you may be helped! Sometimes when you feel lonely you may be glad to know that one person in the Old Country knows all about you, and is waiting to see the reward of your work. You must let me know when the success comes. I shall always be waiting; and remember, this talk is going to do me good too! I have *made* troubles for myself because I did not know how well off I was, but now that I have come so close to the real thing I shall be ashamed to grizzle over trifles. It *is* settled, isn't it? You are going on fighting?"

There was a long silence. She could feel rather than see the struggle in the man's face, but the pressure tightened on her hand, foretelling that the decision would be what she wished.

"Yes," he said slowly at last. "I promise! An hour ago it seemed as if there was not a soul in the world who cared whether I lived or died, but as you say you came to me—in the darkness! You think you were sent. My old mother would have thought the same. I don't know, I can't tell, but it may be so, and that gives me courage to try again."

He paused for a moment or two, then suddenly—

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Betty!"

"Betty!" His voice lingered over the pretty, girlish name. "Thank you, Betty!"

"And yours?"

“Ralph.”

“Thank you, Ralph! You have given me something real to think of in life—something to look forward to.”

“Ah!” He drew a long, stabbing breath. “But at the best it will be a long waiting. You will be far from eighteen—‘nearly eighteen’—before I can hope for success. The years will seem very long.”

“But they will pass!” cried Betty. “I can wait!”

She was in a state of exaltation when no trial of patience seemed too great to face, and difficulties presented themselves only as glorious opportunities; but the man, who had experienced the heat and burden of the day, sighed, and was silent.

By this time they had made their way past the great houses standing back from the road, and were close on the Lancaster Gate Station of the Central London Railway. A faint light streamed into the gloom from the glass fanlight, and for the first time Betty began to feel that she trod on familiar ground.

“Ah, here we are; if we go round this corner I shall be home in five minutes. Perhaps we shall arrive before the others, after all. You have brought me so quickly that there is no time for them to have been anxious, unless Miles went in alone.”

The stranger did not answer. They turned round the corner of Stanhope Terrace and walked along for twenty or thirty yards, then suddenly he stood still, and dropped her arm.

“I may never meet you again,” he said slowly; “in all probability we never shall meet, but before we part, let me see your face, Betty!”

There was a sound of a match being struck against the side of a box, then a tiny flame flickered up in the darkness. Betty gazed upwards into a face still young, but haggard and drawn with suffering, a long thin face with deep-set eyes and a well-cut chin.

“Now, now, now,” she was saying breathlessly to herself. “I must notice! I must remember! I shall have to remember for so many years—”

The flame quivered and faded away.

“Thank you,” said the stranger quietly. “I shall remember!” Evidently his thoughts and hers had followed the same course.

They walked along slowly side by side, but no longer arm in arm, for that momentary exchange of glances had brought a touch of personal embarrassment into the situation which had been unfelt before. Betty was anxiously pondering what to say in farewell, feeling at the same time that further words would be more likely to mar than to aid the impression already made, when suddenly a form loomed through the darkness, and a well-known “Coo-ee” sounded in her ears.

“Miles—oh, Miles! I’m here! Oh, Miles, I am so glad! I was so frightened, but this gentleman has been so kind. He has brought me all the way home.”

Miles grunted discourteously; he disapproved of stray acquaintances for his sister, and now that anxiety for her safety was assuaged, began to feel aggrieved at having been frightened for nothing.

“What on earth did you mean by rushing off by yourself? Might have been lost all night. I’ve been hanging about for an age, not daring to go into the house and scare the mater. Never go out with you again in a fog!”

Betty laughed merrily.

“I can return that compliment. It seems to me that you ran away from me.” She turned to hold out her hand to the stranger. “Now that my brother is here I need not trouble you any more. Good-bye! Thank you very much!”

“Thank you!” he said earnestly. “Good-bye until—a brighter day.”

“What does that boulder mean by talking of another day? Cheek!” grunted Miles, leading the way onward, but Betty only pressed his arm and replied irrelevantly—

“Don’t say anything about our having missed each other when we first go in, Miles. I’ll tell mother quietly. I’d rather, if you don’t mind.”

Miles did not mind a bit—in fact, he was thankful to be spared questioning and reproach, so he made his way upstairs to his room, while Betty entered the study, where Dr and Mrs Trevor were seated.

“Here we are, safe and sound! It has been adventurous, but all’s well that ends well. Have you been anxious, mother dear? I do hope not.”

She bent to kiss her mother with an unwonted tenderness, which brought a flush of pleasure into the thin cheek.

“How sweet that child looks to-night! Did you notice?” she said to her husband when they were once more alone. “And she was so gentle and considerate. It’s such a pleasure to see her like that, for she is sometimes so difficult.”

Dr Trevor smiled.

"She is mellowing, dear, she is mellowing! I told you it would come. The child is turning into a woman—and a bonnie woman she will be too. Dear little Betty!"

And in the shelter of her attic bedroom the child woman was holding a lighted candle before the looking-glass, and staring half abashed into an oval face with dilated eyes, and dark hair twisted by the damp into a cloud of tiny ringlets.

"Did he—did he think me—nice?" she was asking of herself.

Chapter Seventeen.

The Sisters.

Upon the first quiet opportunity Betty confided the history of her walk to her mother, who listened with the deepest interest and sympathy.

"It was a great opportunity, dear, and you made the most of it. I am proud of my daughter," she said. "I will join with you in praying that the poor fellow may be kept true to his pledge. It's not the first step which costs in these struggles, whatever the proverb may say; the hardest part of the fight comes later on, when the first excitement is over, and progress seems so pitifully slow. So don't let yourself grow weary in well-doing, dear Betty. Your poor friend will need your prayers more and more, not less and less."

"Oh no, I shall never grow tired," said Betty confidently. Then her face clouded, and she sighed. "Mother, do you suppose I shall ever—see him again?"

"It is very unlikely, dear. He is going so far away, and will have no money to spare for visits home. It must be a large sum which he has to repay, if the loss of it necessitated such a change in his friend's household. With everything in his favour it would take a long time to earn."

"How long, mother?"

"Dear child, what a question! It is impossible to say. It would be extraordinary, I should think, if he managed it in less than a dozen years."

"A dozen years! I should be thirty! I shall be hideous at thirty," thought Betty ruefully, recalling the vision of the sweet, flushed face which had looked at her from the mirror the day before. Could it be possible that a dozen years—twelve whole years—could pass by without bringing her any tidings of "Ralph"? In the state of exaltation which had possessed her last night she had felt raised above the need of words, but already reaction had set in, and with it a strange sense of depression at the thought of the future.

It was good to know that there was Cynthia to talk to—Cynthia, who might not be able to advise and strengthen as wisely as mother did, but who was a girl, and knew how girls felt—"up and down, and in and out, and—oh, and so topsy-turvy upside down!" thought poor Betty to herself.

A breathless, "I want to speak to you; I have something dreadfully interesting to tell!" whispered in a chance encounter in the street, brought an immediate invitation to tea 'in my own room, where we shan't be bothered'; and under these happy auspices the adventure was once more related, while Cynthia's grey eyes grew wide with excitement.

"Dear Betty, how glorious for you!" she cried ecstatically. "What a wonderful thing to remember! You can never be blue again, and say that you are no use in the world. To have saved a man's life, and started him on the right road—at eighteen—not eighteen! You are the most fortunate girl in the whole world! It's so strange that this chance should have come to you on that particular day, because your brother and I had been talking about the different work of men and women as we walked over the Park to the Albert Hall, and he said that if it was men's province to make the greatest things in the world, it was women's work to make the men; and that was what you did, Betty dear. You helped God to make a man!"

Betty raised her brows in a surprise which was not altogether agreeable.

"Miles—*Miles* said so! How extraordinary! He never talks like that to me, and he hardly knew you at all. However did you come to discuss such a subject?"

"I asked him about his work, and envied him for being able to do something real. He is a nice boy. I like him very much," said Cynthia placidly.

Imagine being favoured with confidences from Miles, and remaining quite cool and unconcerned! For a good two moments Betty forgot all about her own affairs in sheer wonder at such an astonishing state of mind. Then remembrance came back, and she asked eagerly—

"Cynthia, do you think I shall ever hear anything more about him? Mother says it will take years and years to save so much money. Do you think I shall ever know?"

"Yes!" said Cynthia confidently. "Of course you will know. He will find some way of telling you. You told him your address, so it was the easiest thing in the world to find out your name. You will get something from him every year—perhaps on Christmas Day, perhaps in summer, perhaps on the anniversary of the night. It may be only a newspaper, it may be a letter, it may be just a flower—like the man in *The Prisoner of Zenda* sent to the princess, but it will be

something! He mayn't sign his name or give his address, but he will want you to know—he will feel you ought to know that he is alive and remembering."

Oh, the beauty of a girl confidante! How truly she understands the art of comfort!

"And shall I ever see him again?"

"Yes—if you both live. He will want to see you again more than anything in the world, except paying off his debt. When that is done, he will rush straight off to you and say, 'Here I am. I have worked hard and kept my promise. To-day I can look the whole world in the face, for I owe not any man. I have regained my friend and my position, and it is your doing. *You* saved me! All these years the thought of you has been my inspiration. I have lived in the thought of seeing your face again—'"

"Oh, oh, oh!" cried Betty, gasping. "And I shall be hideous, Cynthia, hideous! Fancy, I may be thirty! What will he think, when he sees me so changed?"

"He won't mind a bit—they never do. He will say, 'Though worn and haggard, you are still in my eyes the most beautiful woman in the world!'" cried Cynthia.

And then, being only eighteen—nearly eighteen—each girl suddenly descended from her high horse, and went off into peal after peal of laughter, merry, heart-whole laughter, which floated to Mrs Alliot's ears as she lay on her couch in the drawing-room, and brought a smile to her pale face. This new friendship was doing great things for her lonely girl!

Towards the end of the Christmas holidays the great news circulated that Mrs Vanburgh was coming home, and bringing her two younger sisters for a few weeks' shopping in town. Agatha and Christabel had just returned from two years' sojourn abroad, and were presumably "finished" young ladies. Cynthia and Betty wondered how much finished, and whether finished enough to look down with contempt upon unfinished damsels still undergoing the thralldom of "classes!"

It was a thrilling occasion when they were bidden to tea "to meet my sisters," and Betty felt she would hardly have had courage to face the ordeal but for the fact of a new blouse and that fascinating buckle on her belt. She had a sensation of being all arms and legs—a horrible, almost forgotten remnant of schoolroom days—as she crossed Mrs Vanburgh's drawing-room to be introduced to the two strange figures on the sofa.

One was dark and one was fair; both possessed a wonderful wealth of beautiful glossy hair, gold in the one case, in the other brown, rolling back from the brow in upstanding pompadours, which were, however, more picturesque than stiff, and rolled into coil after coil at the back of the neck. Done-up hair—that was very "finished" indeed! Both were distinctly good-looking, and the younger, though the smaller of the two, possessed a personality which at once seemed to constitute her mistress of the ceremonies. Both were perfectly at ease, and so full of conversation that they talked both at the same time, emphasising every second or third word after a quaint fashion of their own which Betty found very amusing.

They were fear-fully pleased to see her. They had heard such *reams* about her from Nan. It was so charming for Nan to have girl friends. Nan was *devoted* to girls. It was such *sport* to be staying with Nan. They had been simply *dying* to live in town. My dear, they had not a *rag* to wear! Nobody wore decent clothes in Germany. Frumps, my dear, perfect frumps! They were on their own allowance. Was Betty on her own allowance? Lucky girl! It was simply *agonising* to have to buy *everything* you needed on a quarter's allowance. They had lain awake for *hours* considering the problem. They were in *despair*! Nan had given them each a dress for Christmas. Nan was an *angel*! They wanted Nan to give a dance for them while they were in town.

Betty's heart leapt, but Mrs Vanburgh shook her head, and said—

"Sorry, but Nan can't! Mother wouldn't like it, as you have only just left school, and are not properly out yet."

"Well, I shall *leak* out, then! I am not going to wait another year, if I know it. There's a dance coming on at home in February, and I'm going to it, or my name is not Christabel Rendell. I'm going to buy a dress and all the *et-ceteras*, and then mother won't have the *heart* to say No. Nan, if you won't give us a dance, what *are* you going to do? You can't be so mean as to provide *no* evening jollification!"

"My dear, remembah! You were a girl yourself!" echoed Agatha, in deep-toned remonstrance, and then they began rattling out a list of suggestions.

"Tableaux—"

"Progressive games—"

"Dinner-party. No old fogies! We will choose the guests."

"Music and conversation. You do the music, and we'll converse."

"General frolic, and supper to finish up. If it develops into a dance, so much the better! It's not coming out to dance on a carpet."

"Really, Nan, it's piteous to think how *stodgy* you have grown! Married sisters are a delusion. We used to imagine coming to stay, and doing whatever we liked, and eating all sorts of indigestible things that we mayn't have at home. But now Maud can think of nothing but that baby, and you are so prim—too fearfully prim for words."

"Prim!" shouted Mrs Vanburgh. There is really no other word to express the outraged indignation of her tone. To hear her, one might have supposed it the greatest insult in the world to be accused of primness of demeanour. "You dare to sit there and call me names in my own house! If I am prim, you had better go home and leave me. I wouldn't stay any longer, if I'm prim. I'm sorry I asked you, if I'm prim. If I'm prim, I wonder why you ever wanted to come. Prim, indeed! If it's prim to know what is correct and what is not, it's a pity you are not prim too! If I'm prim, I won't give any party at all. You had better sit round the fire and knit stockings, and I'll read aloud *The Old Helmet*, as I'm so prim."

Christabel raised her hands to her ears in affected distraction.

"Stop her, somebody—stop her for pity's sake! When she is once wound up like this she will go on for hours! My dear, I crawl, I *grovel* before you! You are *not* prim! Nothing is further removed from your character. You are going to give us as many parties as we like."

"Humph!" said Mrs Vanburgh shortly. She was by no means appeased, and during the meal which followed ejaculations of "Prim—prim, indeed!" fell from her lips at intervals like so many minute-guns of indignation, while Christabel ate cakes and scones with undiminished zest, and smiled upon her with patronising indulgence.

In relating the history of the afternoon to Jill, later on, Betty declared that she herself had not spoken a single sentence the whole afternoon. She had exclaimed, "Really!" "Fancy!" "Goodness!" "How killing!" each about a hundred times over, had laughed and smiled, nodded her head and said "Yes" to a dozen propositions, had been unceasingly amused and interested, but had never been allowed a breathing space in which to air her own opinions.

It had been finally decided that "a general frolic" should be held on the following Thursday evening, Christabel proposing, seconding, and triumphantly carrying the resolution that each guest should come prepared to entertain the company for a period of at least five minutes on end. The protesting groans and denials of her companions beat in vain against the rock of her decision. She smiled graciously upon them, and cried—

"Rubbish! Of *course* you can! Sing, play, dance, recite, read aloud, tell a story, show some new tricks; there's no *end* to the things to choose from, my dear! If you begin by protesting and excusing as you are doing now, there will be no time left. It will be too lovelay for *words*! A sit-down supper, Nan,—no light refreshments, please!—and, as a matter of precaution, as much furniture as possible moved out of the drawing-room. I can't think why you did not have a parquet floor! People grow so selfish and inconsiderate when they are married. *Piteous*, I call it!"

"Anything else?" queried Nan loftily. "Selfish, and inconsiderate, and prim, am I? Prim, indeed! I'll tell Gervase the moment he comes in what a wretched wife he has married! He'd never find it out for himself."

Chapter Eighteen.

The Party.

"She may request as much as she likes; I'm not going! I wouldn't go if I were paid for it!" was Miles' ungallant comment upon receipt of Mrs Vanburgh's invitation; but before he had time to pen his refusal, Cynthia, in her new character of mentor, issued her regal decree that it should be turned into an acceptance. In vain he grumbled and protested; the silken chains never relaxed their hold.

"Hate parties! Senseless waste of time."

"It would be kind of you to help to make it more profitable."

"I've no parlour tricks—and don't see the fun of making a performing bear of myself among a lot of strangers."

"It would be bearish to refuse, and allow your sisters to go alone! I've always longed for a brother to take me about. A nice man is always considerate to girls."

Miles grunted.

"If I did go, they wouldn't speak to me all the evening! I never know what to say to strangers. I should have to sit in a corner by myself. There'll be a crowd of girls—you, and Betty, and Mrs Vanburgh's sisters, and who knows how many more?"

Cynthia bowed her head in stately salute.

"You would not be ungallant enough to insinuate that there could be too many! It will be your proud privilege to introduce a masculine element into the assembly."

"Humph!"

"It likewise appears probable to me that Mrs Vanburgh may know a few nice men besides yourself."

Betty would have said "boys," Cynthia knew better, and reaped her reward in Miles' wavering air.

"Couldn't entertain a party for one minute, let alone ten."

"We will go into partnership then, and do it together! Ten minutes instead of five. We'll be confederates, and show them tricks. I know a lovely one about telling the time from the position of a poker—no! How silly I am, I always give

away the secret! You tell a *card*, not the hour. It's quite easy. You have an imaginary clock face on the hearthrug; twelve o'clock is the fire, and you lay the poker on the rug with the point on the number you want—one, two, three and so on, up to queen. For king, you simply hold it in your hand, which puzzles them more than ever."

"What about the suits?"

"Oh, that's quite easy. When the person outside comes in, he must notice first of all how his confederate is looking; to the left means hearts; to the right, diamonds; upwards, clubs; downward, spades. It's really a lovely trick. We'll rehearse it, and I'm sure you must know many more."

"I know some balancing tips,—Georgia Magnet business. You might be the Magnetic Lady, and I'd be the showman."

"Oh, lovely, lovely! Could you teach me really? Could I lift up a table with two or three men sitting on it, like you see in the advertisements?" cried Cynthia fervently, and though Miles replied, "Rather not!" he condescended to state one or two less strenuous feats which she might safely accomplish, and even to put her through a preliminary drilling on the spot.

The battle was won! For the next week Mrs Vanburgh's party was the one subject of discussion with the Trevor sisters. Betty was agitated on the subject of her dress, and being denied a new sash, subsided into gloom for the space of ten minutes, when with a sudden turn of the wheel a mental picture was presented of a ship ploughing across the seas, bearing a lonely emigrant to his difficult task, when it became, all of a sudden, contemptible beyond words to fret oneself about—a ribbon! As she herself had said, having once come face to face with tragedy, her eyes were opened to the petty nature of her own trials. She ironed and pressed, and viewing the shabby bows and insufficient ends, said bravely: "Who cares? It will be all the same in a hundred years!"

Jill wished to know exactly how late the party would be kept up, and if there was to be a sit-down supper. "I loathe 'light refreshments' like we have at breaks up. Bitter lemonade and sangwidges—who wants sangwidges? I like to sit down, and have courses, and stay as long as you like, and crackers, with things in them." When asked how she proposed to amuse the company when her turn came round, she shrugged her shoulders, and replied, "Haven't the faintest idea! Shall think of something, I suppose," in true Jill-like, happy-go-lucky fashion.

Pam sat glued to the window, and kept an unerring record of everything which entered the Vanburgh house for two days before the fray. Baskets from the fruiterer's, trays from the confectioner's; mysterious paper boxes from the Stores; flowers from the florist's; they were all registered in her accurate little brain, and described at length to her sisters.

"Couldn't you bring me back somefing nice?" she pleaded wistfully. "Sweets—or a cracker—or a very pretty cake with icing on it?"—and though Betty proved adamant, Jill succumbed.

"What are pouches for if you can't carry things in them?" she demanded. "My party body has a huge pouch. I'll bring you samples, Pam, and if there are enough, we'll share them together!"

When the great night arrived, Miles was decidedly short as to temper, but he looked so tall and imposing in his dress suit, that Cynthia's designation of "man" seemed nothing but his due. Like all male beings, he seemed to regard the behaviour of his tie and shirt front as the only things of importance in the universe, and so completely engrossed was he thereby that he had only an absent, "Oh, all right!" to return to Betty's anxious inquiries as to her own appearance.

They crossed the road together, three ungainly-looking figures in ulsters and snow-shoes, and were admitted to the Vanburgh hall, which was instinct with the air of festivity. Flowers everywhere, plants banked up in the background, attentive servants to wave you forward; more servants to greet you at the head of the staircase, to help you to unwrap in the bedroom, and make you feel ashamed that your tweed coat was not an opera mantle, like the charming specimens displayed on the bed!

In the drawing-room quite a number of guests were assembled, and Miles was relieved to discover that he was by no means the only member of his sex. Betty's first shyness died away as Christabel smiled at her across the room, and patted the empty seat by her side with an inviting gesture. She looked very charming and imposing in her evening dress, but when Betty ventured to admire it she was informed that it was "A rag, my dear—a prehistoric *rag!*" and warned that at any moment the worn-out fabric might be expected to fly asunder, when "As you love me, fling yourself upon me, and *hurl* me from the room! My entertainment comes on last of all. I arranged it so for a special reason," Christabel explained, with the *grande dame* air which was one of her chief characteristics. "We are to draw lots for the rest, so that there shall be no favouritism."

Presently the lots were drawn, and who should draw number one but Jill, the casual and unprepared! Betty blushed for her, and felt a wild longing to creep beneath the grand piano, but Jill herself laughed, and went forward to seat herself on a chair facing the whole assembly with undisturbed composure.

Everyone stared at her, and she stared back, dropping her head on one side, and screwing up her saucy nose with a transparent pretence of embarrassment, which aroused the first laugh of the evening. Everybody was amused and interested, and ready to be pleased, so that the announcement, "I'm going to ask riddles!" instead of falling flat, as might have been expected, was received with quite a burst of applause. And there she sat asking riddles—venerable old chestnuts for the most part, and the marvel of it was that it was a most lively performance, for the orthodox answers were mischievously replaced by newer and more amusing editions, and one person after another would cry, "That reminds me—do you know what is the difference," etcetera, etcetera, so that presently everyone was asking riddles and catches, and really good ones into the bargain, and it was only after fifteen minutes had elapsed that Jill retired from her post beneath a hurricane of applause. Happy Jill, it was her birthright to charm! It seemed impossible that she should ever do the wrong thing.

When it came to Betty's turn she played conscientiously through the Sonata Pathétique, with which she had been wrestling for two hours a day for the last month. That very morning she had played it over without a single fault, and really and truly the runs had sounded quite professional; but when your head throbs, and your cheeks burn, and your heart pounds, and your feet grow cold, and your fingers are hot, and stick together, and refuse to do what they are told, it is wonderful how differently things sound! Poor Sonata! It really *was* rather pathetic, and it is to be feared that the audience was almost as much relieved as was Betty herself, when it came to an end.

The Magnetic Lady performance was a great success, Miles as showman being an agreeable surprise to his relations, for if he were not discursive, he was at least perfectly composed and business-like, and the poker trick and balancing feats were alike marvellous and perplexing.

Agatha recounted a story of a haunted castle, and of a ghost which was not a ghost at all, but simply a gentleman's bath-gown hung on a nail. The plot was decidedly thin, but the audience found amusement in the quaint and truly Rendell-like phraseology in which it was presented, and in the lavish use of italics. Poor crushed Betty congratulated Agatha on her success, and Agatha rolled her eyes, and cried tragically—

"My dear—I nearly *expired* with embarrassment! I was *purple* with agitation. As a candid friend, tell me truly—*has* it spread to my nose?"

Somebody recited; someone sang a song; somebody introduced a new game; somebody showed card tricks; a budding artist took lightning portraits of host and hostess and a few of the leading guests, and presently supper was announced before Christabel had had time for her turn.

"Never mind! It will be even better afterwards! I intended it to be afterwards," she said, smiling mysteriously, as she was led down to supper by the oldest and most important man in the room. Miles eagerly appropriated Cynthia, and Betty's partner was one Mr Ned Rendell, the only brother of the houseful of girls, a somewhat lofty and self-satisfied gentleman, who let her see that he considered her a mere child more plainly than was altogether polite. Not being possessed of Jill's youthful love of good things to eat, she was thankful when it was time to return to the drawing-room, where Christabel was already awaiting her turn, with an eagerness which had been lacking in any other performer.

"Put your chairs against the wall, please—quite against the wall! I need all the room I can get," she directed, waving her hands to right and left in masterful fashion. "That's better! Move that table, please. I don't want to knock it down. I shall want someone to help me. Mr Ross, will you be so kind? We must have a musical accompaniment, too. A little slow music—Agatha knows what I mean. Begin at once, please!"

A meaning glance passed between the sisters as Agatha obediently seated herself on the piano-stool and struck up—a waltz tune! When, presto! Christabel and her partner were whirling round the room, while she laughed a merry defiance at Nan, and nodded to the assembled guests to follow her example.

In a trice the floor was covered with dancers, and for the rest of the evening no other amusement had a chance. Christabel had her way after all! It was safe to predict that Christabel generally *would* get her own way.

It was in the middle of the final Sir Roger, just as she was curtseying in the centre of the two long lines, that Jill's pouch played her false, and a meringue, a sausage roll, and a couple of crackers fell on the ground in a sticky heap. Betty wished that the ground would open and swallow her up, and even Jill had the grace to blush, but Mrs Vanburgh came to the rescue with truly delightful understanding.

"Oh—oh, what a pity! You were taking them home for the children—I always did!" she cried sympathetically. "Bring a shovel, Gervase, please, and take away the crumbs. You should have smuggled them into the bedroom, Jill—that's how I managed. Now then, partner!" and off she went, dancing down the line, and setting everybody else going, so that it was impossible to dwell any longer on the tragic discovery.

Never since the creation of the world, Jill decided, had there lived anyone more deliciously suitable to play the part of hostess to an assembly of young people!

Chapter Nineteen.

A Strange Meeting.

Time passes rapidly to the young and light-hearted, and winter fogs had given place to blue skies and flowering trees before—as Jill expressed it—one could say "Jack Robinson."

Miles was finishing his course of study, and had so distinguished himself above his fellows that there was little doubt that a good opening would be offered to him ere long. Dr Trevor was very proud of his clever son, but the mother's face took on a wistful expression as she looked round the table at her assembled family, and realised that the time was close at hand for the stirring up of the nest. She was unusually indulgent during those spring months, as if she could not find it in her heart to deny any possible pleasure.

"We shall not long be together. Miles will be going away, and after then—who knows?" she told herself sadly. "Once children begin to grow up and go out into the world, one can never be sure of meeting again as a complete family circle. Let them be happy while they may!"

So those spring months saw an unusual succession of gaieties in the doctor's shabby house, in the shape of merry, informal gatherings, which went far to cement newly-made friendships. Agatha and Christabel Rendell returned

home, only to be succeeded by the remaining three sisters of the family, who proved quite as interesting in their various ways. Dear good Maud was as sweet and placid as her own fat baby, while Elsie was an intense young person, quite different from anyone else whom Betty and Cynthia had ever encountered. Her hair was parted in the middle and brushed smoothly over her ears; she wore quaintly unfashionable garments, and—thrilling item of interest!—was engaged to be married to a sub-editor of a magazine, who was reported to be even more intense than herself. Elsie disdained the ordinary sign of betrothal; a ring, she explained to the astonished girls, was a badge of servitude to which no self-respecting woman should submit, and she wore in its place a gold locket, bearing strange cabalistic signs, the meaning of which the beholders vainly yearned to discover.

With regard to the future, Elsie and her editor announced their intention of living “the higher life”—a high-sounding phrase which was not a little impressive, until one heard the details thereof, which scarcely appealed to the ordinary imagination. They were going to subsist on a diet of bread and nuts, a regime which did away at one fell swoop with the need of such superfluities as cook and kitchen; they would have no curtains nor draperies, as woollens harbour microbes; no wall-papers, as papers exude poisons; no ornaments, since it was a sin to waste the precious hours in dusting what was of no use. What they *were* going to have, soon became the question in the minds of the anxious hearers, while “Poor old Elsie!” cried Nan Vanburgh, laughing. “I give her a month before I am taken for a day’s hard shopping at Maple’s! She rides her hobbies so violently that they collapse of sheer exhaustion before she has time to put them into practice!”

In the matter of conversation, Elsie swayed between the high-flown and the natural, sometimes chatting away in ordinary commonplace fashion, at other times confounding her hearers by weird and mysterious utterances.

“Have you ever felt the intense meaning in *colour*?” she demanded one day, at the end of a silence during which she had been gazing into the heart of the fire. Betty stared aghast, but Cynthia, with finer humour, smiled demurely, and replied—

“Of blues—yes! I feel it horribly at times,” whereupon, being a Rendell, Elsie descended promptly from her high horse, and chuckled with enjoyment.

After Elsie appeared Lili—a vision of beauty and elegance, but far too grown-up and superior to care for the society of chits in the schoolroom. Her visit was a round of gaiety, for she did not care for quiet home evenings, but she never seemed really satisfied nor pleased, and there was always a “but” or an “if” at the end of her description of the last day’s doings.

Nan looked at her with troubled eyes, and her “Poor Lili!” had a very different ring from the “Poor old Elsie!” which was after all only a pretence at pity.

Cynthia’s prophecy had been fulfilled, for at the end of January Betty had received from America a copy of the *New York Herald*, with the significant letter “R” printed on a corner of the wrapper. Her friend of the fog had evidently possessed himself of her full name and address before leaving town, and now wished her to know that he had safely reached the scene of his future labours. How carefully that wrapper was preserved! How diligently it was searched for further messages, long after it had been definitely concluded that no such message could exist! Betty considered the handwriting the most manly and distinctive that she had ever beheld; and Cynthia, without going so far, was still prepared to read in it all the desired meanings.

“The letters are joined together; that means sequence of thought and mental ability. The line rises at the end; that shows proper ambition. There are power and success written in every stroke!”

“Dear Cynthia!” sighed Betty ardently. “How clever you are! You are always right.”

As for Jack, he was working, absolutely working hard, instead of playing with his tasks. The redoubtable Johnson was constrained to take a second place in the class as a permanency nowadays, and hopes of the scholarship grew apace in the parental heart. Jack did not appreciate home references to his newly-developed industry, and, so strange and unaccountable a thing is schoolboy nature, that when Betty injudiciously remarked on his “goodness,” he “slacked it” of intent for a whole week, just to have the satisfaction of telling her of his descent in the class. Not for all the riches in the world would he have explained the real reason for the change, but those three words, “the Captain’s orders!” rang in his ears like a battle-cry, and the voice within gave him no peace if he did less than his best. Poor General Digby! It seemed hard that he should be denied the exquisite satisfaction of knowing what good he had been the means of working; but, though Jack’s lips were sealed on this point, he showed an appreciation of that gentleman’s company and an affectionate forethought for his comfort which were very comforting to a lonely bachelor. It became a habit to drop in at the flat for a cup of tea and half an hour’s chat on the way home from school, and to accompany the General for a walk on Sunday afternoons. Dr and Mrs Trevor were pleased that the boy should be brought so much in contact with a man for whom their admiration and respect increased more and more with better acquaintance, for the General’s faults were all on the surface, and behind the loud voice and irascible mien were hidden a child-like faith and purity of heart.

And then one day an extraordinary thing happened! Talk of story-books, as Betty said,—talk of three volume novels,—talk of a whole circulating library at once, and never, no never, could you think of anything more exciting or romantic!

Mrs Trevor had invited Miss Beveridge to spend Sunday at Number 1, in response to a plaintive appeal from her eldest daughter.

“She weighs on my mind like a lump of lead, for I know Mrs Vanburgh thinks I’m mean never to have asked her here, but I really can’t contend with her alone, she is so frightfully snubbing and superior. If you would let her come some Sunday when everyone is at home, and you are not busy all the time, we could take turns at entertaining her. I’d love you for ever and ever if you only would!”

"Well—it's a big bribe!" said Mrs Trevor, laughing. "Yes, by all means ask her to come. I shall be very glad to welcome her any Sunday, if she seems to enjoy coming."

"Oh, she won't do that. She hasn't any enjoying power left. It's all taught out of her. I don't believe she could feel anything if she tried," quoth Miss Betty in her wisdom, and was fated to see the folly of her words.

Mrs Trevor was pouring out tea in the drawing-room at a little table set almost beneath the shadow of Pam's branching palm. Miss Beveridge was sitting bolt upright in an easy-chair, looking as if she were accustomed to be uncomfortable, and uncomfortable she was determined to be, in spite of all conspiracies to the contrary. She wore a severe black dress, and her iron-grey hair was brushed back from her face with almost painful neatness. Betty looked from one to the other as she handed round cakes and scones, and wondered if her mother was really years and years younger than Miss Beveridge, or if she only looked it because she was pretty and dainty, and happy at heart. Miss Beveridge had beautiful features, but the listless gloom of her expression spoiled what beauty she might still have possessed. Nan's persistent efforts had to some extent thawed the icy barrier of reserve, but in a strange atmosphere it seemed to have frozen even harder than before, so that Mrs Trevor was devoutly thankful for the arrival of the tea-tray, and wondered no more at Betty's unwillingness to tackle this silent visitor.

And then the door opened, and Jack's cheery voice was heard.

"Hallo, mother, here's a friend come to tea!" he announced, and the next moment the whole atmosphere of the room was changed, as the General's big form hobbled forward, the big red face smiled its big kind smile, and the big voice boomed out a thunderous greeting.

"Afternoon, madam! Afternoon, Lady Betty! This boy tempted me, and I fell. What's this I hear about hot muffins and apricot jam? When I was a nipper there was no boy in the length of Ireland that could beat Terence Digby at a muffin struggle. Where's my friend Jill? Plain Jill! Eh, what? No, my dear—I said to her—that, at least, you never can be. That's taken out of your power! Where's Miss Pussy Pam? I can't see you all in this half light. Very picturesque for young eyes, madam, but when you get old like me you'll be thankful for electricity. Eh! Who's this?"

He had caught a glimpse of the figure in the easy-chair, and, wheeling suddenly round, stared full at it. Stared, and grew silent. And Miss Beveridge stared back, and her eyes looked big, big, and oh! So dark and deep. And her lips worked as if she were going to speak, and a red spot came out on each cheek, and she was not Miss Beveridge any longer, but someone whom the onlookers had never seen before.

The General's figure seemed to stiffen, his bent shoulders straightened and broadened out. He stretched out his right hand.

"*Alice!*" he said, and his voice was soft and breathless. One could hardly imagine it could be General Digby's voice. "Alice! Is that you?"

She put her hand in his, and nodded dumbly. Mrs Trevor rattled her teacups, questioned Jack volubly as to his walk—frowning at Betty to second her efforts, and so leave the two old friends undisturbed; but it was beyond girl nature to resist sly peeps, and if one's ears were made sharp by nature, how could one help hearing odd scraps of conversation?

"And you have been living in London for years? You are not—" a glance at the ringless hand—"not married then? I always thought you would marry. ... You will give me your address. I must not lose sight of you again.—A Governesses' Home. Oh, Alice!..."

General Digby had no appetite for muffins and apricot jam that afternoon. His fierce old face worked strangely as he sat with the untasted tea in his hands, his glassy eyes were for once moist and tender. As for Miss Beveridge, the flush died away from her cheeks, leaving her looking even more worn and grey than before, and Betty, looking at her, was conscious of a sudden tender outgoing of the heart, a longing to help and comfort, such as had inspired Nan Vanburgh months before, but after which she herself had striven in vain. This was evidently a meeting of old lovers parted by some untoward fate. Ah, poor soul, and it had come too late! Youth and health, and joy and beauty, had all paid toll to the long years as they passed. How shocked and pained the General must be, to meet his love in such a sadly different guise! It was not possible he could care for her any more. Better not to have met, and to have preserved the old illusion.

"I'll be nice to her! I thought she had been born old, but she has been young after all. I will be nice to her. I'll try to make up!" said Betty pitifully to herself.

Chapter Twenty.

A Tête-à-Tête.

Half an hour later, when Betty escorted the General to the door, he paused in the hall to lay his hand on her arm, and inquire in a voice unusually tremulous—

"You have often spoken to me about your 'Govies,' as you call them. Was—was *She* one of the number?"

Betty murmured an assent, guiltily conscious of the criticisms which had accompanied the references. Was he about to take her to task for all the scathing remarks she had made on the subject of his old love? But no—the grip tightened on her arm, and he said gently—

"God bless you, my dear, for all your kindness! May it be meted out to you a hundred times over in your hour of

need. A Governesses' Home—Alice Beveridge! And Terence Digby living in the lap of luxury! Well, well! Twenty years, my dear, since we last met—I was over forty, but she was a mere girl. A beautiful girl,—I never saw her equal, and the years have not touched her. I should have known her anywhere. She is marvellously unchanged!”

Betty gazed at him dumbly, and there came to her at that moment, for the first time in her life, a realisation of the deep, abiding love which sees beneath the surface, and knows neither change nor time. She had no inclination to laugh at the old man's blindness; rather she felt towards him reverence and admiration. Happy Miss Beveridge! To one loyal heart at least she would remain always young, always beautiful. Happy Terence Digby, who had kept his ideal untouched!

When Betty retraced her steps to the drawing-room a few minutes later, another surprise was in waiting, for behold, Miss Beveridge sobbing, with her hands over her face, while Mrs Trevor patted her tenderly on the shoulder. She looked across the room and shook her head at her young daughter.

“Go away, Betty dear, please! Leave us alone,” she said gently, and Betty tottered across the hall and collapsed in a heap on the nearest chair, positively faint with excitement. The first real romance with which she had come in contact,—and behold! The leading characters were General Digby and Miss Beveridge! Wonders would never cease!

The next afternoon the General appeared once more, and had a long *tête-à-tête* with Mrs Trevor.

“I am sorry to be such a trouble to you, madam, but you have no one to blame but yourself, for you have been so patient and forbearing with me during the last six months, that I feel as if there were no limits to your kindness. I went to that Governesses' Home to-day—for that matter I passed it half a dozen times, but I could not screw up my courage to do any more. The look of the place daunted me, to begin with. To think of Alice Beveridge shut up there! Besides, I'm a soldier; my life has been spent among men; I haven't the pluck to face a houseful of women. Be a good angel, and let us meet here once more! I was too much overcome yesterday to know what I was saying, but something must be done, and done quickly. I can't go on living as I am, and think of her working for her living. Of course, you know what it all means. You are a woman, and women are quick enough at guessing these things. I never cared for another woman. I was a middle-aged man when we met, and it went very hard with me when she said Number 1 was not a boy, to forget at the sight of the next pretty face. I have tried to make the best of things, but it's been lonely work. I went abroad immediately after she refused me, and heard no more about her. She was visiting a common friend when we met. I knew nothing of her family, so we simply passed out of each other's lives. I always thought of her as happily married years ago; it never dawned upon me that there could have been any misunderstanding, but yesterday when we met there was something in her face, her manner— She seemed almost as much agitated as I was myself. I may be a conceited old idiot, but it seemed to me as if she *had* cared after all,— as if there had been some mistake! Women talk to each other more openly than we do. If she told you anything about it, I think you ought to let me know. I have waited a long time!”

There was a pathos in the sound of those last few words which went straight to Mrs Trevor's heart, and she answered as frankly as he had spoken.

“Yes, indeed, it has been a hard time for you both. Miss Beveridge quite broke down after you left last night, and I gathered from what she said that at the time of your proposal she was taken by surprise, and felt nervous and uncertain of herself, as girls often do. It was only after you had sailed, and she was at home again, that she realised what a blank your absence made, and knew that she had loved you all the time. She hoped you might write, or see her on your return.”

“But she had not the courage to write herself, and acknowledge her mistake? Well, well! Women have their own code of honour, I suppose, but it would have been a gracious act. I remembered her always, but it did not seem to me the straight thing to force myself on a girl half my age, who had already refused me once, and so we have gone on misunderstanding all these years. Then I suppose trouble began? Her people were not rich, but she had a comfortable home, so far as I knew.”

“The parents died, and she was obliged to earn her own living. She has been teaching music in London for the last fifteen years.”

The General groaned.

“I know! I know! Dragging about in all weathers, to earn a few shillings for hearing wretched brats strumming five-finger exercises. Beg pardon, ma'am—I should not have said that to you! You have children of your own.”

“But I do not in the least envy their music-mistress!” cried Mrs Trevor, smiling. “It is a hard, hard life, especially when it is a case of going back to an Institution instead of a home. It is young Mrs Vanburgh, Betty's friend, to whom you are really indebted for this meeting. It was her idea to welcome lonely gentlewomen to her home, and Miss Beveridge happened to be her first visitor.”

“God bless her!” said the General reverently. He sat in silence for some minutes, gazing dreamily before him, a puzzled look on the red face. At last—“Now there's the question of the future to consider!” he said anxiously. “I'm getting old—sixty-four next birthday, precious near the allotted span of life, but she is twenty years younger—she may have a long life before her still. It would break my heart to let her go on working, but she'd be too proud to take money from me, unless— unless— Mrs Trevor, you are a sensible woman! I can trust you to give me a candid answer. Would you consider me a madman if I asked the girl a second time to marry me, old as I am, gouty as I am? Is it too late, or can you imagine it possible that she might still care to take me in hand?”

He looked across the room as he spoke with a pathetic eagerness in his glance, and Mrs Trevor's answering smile was full of tenderness.

"Indeed I can! I should not think you a madman at all, General, for I am old enough to know that the heart does not age with the body, and that the happiness which comes late in life is sometimes the sweetest of all. You are a hale man still, in spite of your gout, and with a wife to care for you, you might renew your youth. I hope and believe that all will go well this time, but let me advise you not to be in too great a hurry. Twenty years is a long time, and you and Miss Beveridge have led such very different lives that you may find that there is little sympathy left between you. It is only a 'may,' but I do think you would do well to see more of each other before speaking of anything so serious as marriage. You shall have plenty of opportunity of seeing each other, I promise you that! I will invite Miss Beveridge to spend as much of her time with us as is possible, and you shall be left alone to renew your acquaintance, and learn to know each other afresh. That will be the wisest plan, will it not?"

"Um—um!" grunted the General vaguely. He frowned and looked crestfallen, for he retained enough of his youthful impetuosity to make anything like delay distinctly a trial. "Perhaps you are right, though I cannot believe that any number of years could change my feelings. Alice is—Alice! The one woman in the world I ever loved. That's the beginning and the end of the matter, but perhaps for her sake I should not be hasty. Mustn't frighten her again, poor girl! That's arranged, then, ma'am—you let us meet in your house, and if we live, we'll try to pay you back for your goodness, and I'll wait—two or three weeks. You wouldn't wish me to wait longer than two or three weeks?" He put up his hand and raked his grey locks into a fierce, upstanding crest, while a curious embarrassment flashed across his face. "A married man? Terence Digby married! There's only one thing I'm afraid of—Johnson! What will Johnson say to a woman in possession?"

Mrs Trevor laughed, but could give no reply, and presently the General took himself off, and left her to write an invitation for the next week-end to his old love, which was accepted in a grateful little note by return of post.

For three nights running did the General dine at Dr Trevor's table, while Miss Beveridge sat beside him, with pathetic little bows of lace pinned in the front of her shabby black silk, which somehow looked shabbier than ever for the attempt at decoration. At the beginning of the meal she was just Miss Beveridge, stiff, silent, colourless; but as time passed by and she talked to the General, and the General talked to her, attending to her little wants as if they were of all things in the world the most important, fussing about a draught that might possibly distress her, and violently kicking his opposite neighbour in his endeavours to provide her with a footstool, gradually, gradually the Miss Beveridge of the music-lessons and the Governesses' Home disappeared from sight, and there appeared in her place an absolutely different woman, with a sweet smiling face, out of which the lines seemed to have been miraculously smoothed away, while a delicate colour in her cheeks gave to the once grey face something of the fragile beauty of an old pastel.

For fifteen years she had fought a hand-to-hand battle with want; a lonely battle, with no one to care or to comfort, and now it was meat, and drink, and health, and sunshine, to find herself of a sudden the most precious object on earth to one faithful heart! Although the General had given a promise not to be too precipitate in his wooing, it was easy to prophesy how things would end; but before the "two or three weeks" had come to an end, another event happened of such supreme importance to the Trevor household as to put in the background every other subject, interesting and romantic though it might be.

Chapter Twenty One.

Trying Days.

One May afternoon Miles came home with the news that, through the influence of an engineering friend, he had been offered a post in connection with a new railway which the ever-increasing mining industry in Mexico had rendered necessary. The salary proposed was a handsome one for so young a man. He owed the offer entirely to Mr Owen's good offices, and would be required to sail as soon as his outfit could be got together.

Dr Trevor rejoiced in his son's success, and warmly congratulated him on having had so short a time to wait for an opening. He took a man's view of life, and felt that it was time that Miles faced the world on his own account; but the youth faded out of the mother's face as she sat in her corner and listened to the conversation.

"Luck!" They called it luck that Miles, her darling, should be sent to the other side of the world, to a wild, dare-devil country, the very name of which conjured up a dozen thrilling tales of adventure. "A five years' appointment!" The words rang like a knell in her ears!

Of course, she had known all along that a separation must come, but she had hoped against hope that an opening might be found somewhere within the borders of the United Kingdom, when she would still be able to feel within reach in case of need. Now it was indeed good-bye, since it must at best be a matter of years before she could hope for another meeting. Oh, this stirring up of the nest, how it tears the mother's heart!

Mrs Trevor looked across the room to where Miles stood, almost as tall and broad as the doctor himself, and her thoughts flew back to the time when he was a little curly-headed boy who vowed he would never leave his mother. "I won't never get married," he had announced one day. "You shall be my wife. You are daddy's wife, and I don't see why you shouldn't be wife to both your darlin's!" Another day—"I'll stay with you all my life, and when you're a nold, nold woman I'll wheel you about in a Barf chair." Later on had come the time when the first dawning of future responsibility began to weigh on the childish mind—"I can't sink how I can ever make pennies like daddy does! I can't write proper letters like grown-ups do, only the printed ones!" he had sighed, and she had bidden him be a good boy and do his best for the day, leaving the future in God's hand. "God will give you your work!" she had told him; and how she and his father had rejoiced together when his absorption in a box of tools, and his ingenuity therewith, had pointed out a congenial career. She had prayed and trusted for guidance in bringing up this dear son, and that being so, she must now believe that the offered post was the right thing, and that the distant land was just the very spot of

all others where God wished him to be.

When Miles turned to his mother, she had a smile in readiness for him, and if it were rather tremulous, it was none the less sweet. She would not allow herself to break down, but threw herself heart and soul into a study of the Stores' list, which could not be delayed another day, seeing that it was suggested that Miles should sail in a week's time. A week! Only one week! Was it really possible that the following day was the last Sunday which would see a united family circle round the table?

Every female member of the household shed tears on their pillows that evening, and Betty was convinced that she had lain awake all night long, because she had actually heard the clock strike one. Mrs Trevor's vigil was real, not imaginary, and she was thankful when it was time to get up, and get ready for that quiet early service at church which would be her best preparation for the week. Her hard-worked husband was sleeping soundly, and she would not waken him, but a feeling of unusual sadness and loneliness oppressed her as she made her way through the silent house. She had depended so much on her big strong boy, had grown into the habit of consulting him on many matters, in which, by helping her, he could save his father trouble. That was all over now. She must learn to do without Miles' aid! And then suddenly from behind the dining-room door a big figure stepped forward to meet her, and Miles' voice said, in half-shamefaced tones—

"I thought—I'd come too! I thought we'd go together!"

"Oh, Miles!" cried his mother, and could say no more, but her heart leapt with thankfulness for all that that action meant—for this sign that her boy was anxious to dedicate himself afresh to Christ's service at the beginning of his new life. She passed her hand through his arm, and they went out of the house together, unconscious of the presence of a third figure which had looked down at them from an upper landing.

Betty had awakened to fresh tears, and, hearing her mother stirring, had hurried into her clothes, so as to accompany her to church; but in the very act of slipping downstairs Miles' voice had arrested her, and she had drawn back into the shadow. The Betty of a year ago would have continued her course unabashed; the Betty of to-day divined with a new humility that her presence would mar the sacredness of that last Communion of mother and son, and turned back quietly to her own room.

The days flew. The first mornings were spent at the Stores, choosing, ordering, and fitting; the afternoons in marking and packing the different possessions as they arrived. Then there were farewell visits to be paid, and to receive, and a score of letters and presents to acknowledge. Relations turned up trumps, and sent contributions towards the outfit in money and in kind; the General presented a handsome double-barrelled fowling-piece, which thrilled Miles with delight and his mother with horror. Miss Beveridge gave a "housewife" stocked with all sorts of mending materials—fancy Miles darning his own socks!—and Cynthia Alliot sent across a case containing one of the most perfect quarter-plate cameras that ever was seen.

"When this you see,
Send snaps to me!"

was inscribed on the inner wrapping, which Miles quietly folded and put away in his pocket. He would not need the camera or any external aid to help him to remember his mentor of the golden hair and sweet grey eyes.

Cynthia came over very often those last few days, and diffused a little fun into the gathering gloom by constituting herself Miles' sewing-mistress, and sitting over him in sternest fashion while he fumbled clumsily at his task. Rumour had it that she even rapped his knuckles with the scissors when he took up half a dozen threads at once in his second darn; and even Mrs Trevor was obliged to laugh at her imitation of Miles' grimaces when trying to thread a needle. In the end Pam was made happy by being commissioned to thread dozens of needles with long black and white threads, and then stick them in a special needle-book, with their tails twisted neatly round and round.

As for Cynthia, she revelled in her position as instructress.

"I've suffered so much myself, that it is simply lovely to turn the tables on someone else," she announced. "I am going to see this business through in a proper and well-regulated fashion. Now that the technical course is finished, you are going to be put through a *vivâ voce* examination. Sit down in front of the work-basket, and answer without any shuffling or trying to escape. Now then! Distinguish between a darning-needle and a bodkin." She nipped up Mrs Trevor's spectacles from a side-table, as she spoke, perched them on the end of her nose, and stared over them with an assumption of great severity. Miles grinned complacently.

"Easy enough. One pricks and the other doesn't."

"A very superficial reply! To what separate and distinctive duties would you apply the two?"

"Wouldn't apply them at all if I had my way," began the pupil daringly, but a flash of his mistress's eye recalled him promptly to order, and he added hastily, "One you use to darn things up with, and the other to drag strings through tunnel sort of businesses, and bring them out at the other side."

"No engineering terms, please! Your matter is correct, but the manner leaves much to be desired. Question number two is—Which thread would you use to affix (a) a shirt, (b) a boot, (c) a waistcoat button?"

"The first that came handy," replied Miles recklessly, whereupon Pam squealed with dismay, and was for labelling all her needles forthwith, but Cynthia rapped sternly on the table, and would have each bobbin brought out in turn, and so carefully examined that its qualities could not easily be forgotten. Then, and only then, would she consent to pass on to the third question, which concerned itself with the vexed question of darning.

“Three, State clearly, and in sequence, the steps necessary for repairing a hole in the sole of your sock.”

Miles shrugged his shoulders with a despairing gesture.

“Oh, if you mean how a woman does it,—drag the old thing tightly over your left arm, so that you have only one hand to work with, fill your needle with a silly stuff that breaks if you look at it, and begin see-sawing away half a mile from the scene of the accident. Stick at it until you have pulled off most of the skin on your fingers, and then turn it round and start the whole thing over again, the other way round. Then walk about and get a blister on your heel!”

The audience sputtered with laughter at this eloquent description, but Cynthia gazed down her nose with an expression of contemptuous disgust.

“And how many blisters would you have if you did not mend it, pray? May I suggest that you make the experiment and see? No marks at all for that answer! Question number four is, Work a buttonhole on the accompanying strip of linen.”

But here Miles struck. No power on earth, he declared, would induce him to attempt to “festoon” a hole in the accepted fashion.

“When I want one I’ll make it with the nearest implement that comes handy. There are always my teeth as a last resource. It’s silly nonsense cutting out a hole and immediately proceeding to sew it up! Time enough for that when it begins to split—”

“Plucked! Hopelessly plucked!” cried Cynthia, rolling her eyes in dismay. Then the spectacles dropped off her nose, and she joined in the general laughter, and forgot her rôle of mentor for the rest of the evening.

But it was not only in the matter of amusement that Cynthia made herself invaluable during those last trying days; she seemed ever on the watch for opportunities of service. If anything was overlooked or late in delivery, she was ready to drive to the shop, and bring it home. She invited Pam to lunch and tea, thereby setting her elders free and keeping the child happy and occupied, and she steadily refused to accompany Miles and Betty on any of their expeditions, thereby earning her friend’s undying gratitude, though perhaps Miles himself was less appreciative of her self-denial. Her turn for a quiet word came only on the last day of all, when Miles accompanied her for the few yards which intervened between the two houses, and stood on the doorstep to wish her farewell.

His face was white, and his words came out with even more than the usual difficulty.

“It’s been—a jolly good thing for me—knowing you for these last months. You’ve been—a help! If I ever turn out anything of a man—it will be a good deal—your doing!”

Cynthia stared at him with her beautiful grave eyes.

“Mine?” she cried in amazement. “Oh, why? What have I done?”

“You’ve been yourself!” said Miles gruffly. “Good-bye!”

He held out his big hand, and Cynthia’s little fingers closed tightly round it.

“Good-bye, Miles! I won’t forget,” she said simply. And with those words ringing in his ears Miles Trevor sailed away to begin his new life.

Chapter Twenty Two.

The General’s Wooing.

Tears and lamentations made up the story of the next few days.

“When’s the washing coming home? I’ve cried out all my handkerchiefs, and I get scolded if I sniff!” grumbled red-eyed Jill on the evening of the third day after Miles’ departure; and it appeared that most members of the family found themselves in the same predicament, for the first break in the family circle is a painful experience, especially when its members are as devoted as were the Trevors.

It was a relief to all to watch the progress of the General’s wooing, and to have his genial presence among them. Now that the evenings were beginning to be really summer-like, he and Miss Beveridge would adjourn to the Square Gardens after dinner, and sit on a bench not far removed from that historic spot where he had fallen a victim to the twins’ love of adventure. As a rule, so soon as dusk approached, Miss Beveridge would take an omnibus and return to her “Home,” while the General would step stiffly into a cab and return to his flat, where the faithful Johnson was no doubt wondering what had happened to induce such young habits in his once stay-at-home master. One night, however, instead of separating as usual, they returned to Number 1, and the first glance at their faces showed that the *dénouement* had been reached. The General was red, Miss Beveridge was white; he was voluble with excitement, she was too excited to speak. Mrs Trevor read the signs of the times, and thoughtfully led the way to the drawing-room, so that the formal announcement of the engagement could be made away from the somewhat embarrassing scrutiny of the young people.

“Alice has promised to let me take care of her! Congratulate me, my dear madam. I am the happiest man in the world!” cried the excited Irishman. “We have wasted enough time, but we are not going to waste any more. ‘Haste to the wedding!’—that’s our motto. What? Alice talks about clothes. Fiddlesticks, I tell her! We can buy the finest dress

in London in half an hour's time, or my name's not Terence Digby. Then she talks about pupils. Pack of rubbish, I tell her! There are fifty women in London wanting to give lessons, for every pupil who wants to learn. Let someone else hear the 'nid, nid, nodding' for a change!" (This last was a dark reference to the Scotch air with which poor Pam had been wrestling for weeks past.) "'A June wedding!' Always said I'd be married in June if I had the chance, and it's a poor thing if I can't have my way after waiting twenty years. Don't like July—nasty, treacherous month! Best way to spend it is a honeymoon in the country. What? You'll tell the boys and girls, eh? Tell them after we've gone. Too bashful to stand the racket to-night! Besides, there's Johnson to face. Bit of a pill to face Johnson. What? Don't know what he'll say to a mistress, but it will be all right when he sees Alice. Alice will get over him fast enough!"

It was charming to see the look of proud admiration which he cast at his *fiancée*; charming to see her changed and softened mien; charming to see the smile of complete and happy confidence which was exchanged between the two. For the first time for many days the weight of depression lifted from Mrs Trevor's heart, and she forgot Miles' departure in rejoicing in their joy. Her face had its old bright look as she re-entered the study to tell the news to her children, who, truth to tell, were not too sympathetic in their reception.

The three elders were, of course, more or less prepared for the announcement, but Pam gasped in shocked surprise.

"*Married!*" she cried shrilly. "But they are so old! What's the good of being married, and having all the bother for nothing? They'll be dead so soon!"

"It's an awful fag. It won't be half so much sport going to tea," commented Jill with outspoken selfishness, while Jack shrugged his shoulders and grimaced disapproval.

"Got everything he wants—rattling good food, all his relics and things around him, and Johnson to save all bother. Can't think why he couldn't be satisfied!"

Only Betty was silent, her heart warming with a tender sympathy over the story of an old and loyal love. Miss Beveridge was quite, quite old, over forty, and her hair was grey, yet the General called her a girl, and thought her beautiful still. Somehow the thought had a direct personal comfort. Other people might feel the same; and thirty—thirty was comparatively young!

The next day the General was taken in state to call upon Nan Vanburgh, who had heard from Betty which way the wind was blowing, but had, of course, been obliged to preserve an unconscious demeanour until the engagement was a *fait accompli*.

"Under Providence, madam, I am indebted to you for this happiness!" cried the General, bowing over her hand in his courtly old-world fashion; and Nan looked at him with what her friends called "the shiny look" in her eyes, and said, in the honest, big-girl fashion which she never seemed to outgrow—

"And I am so happy that you are happy that I could just jump for joy! It's a perfectly beautiful ending to my Saturday afternoons. I'm only a little bit jealous that Mrs Trevor has had you to herself all this time. Now it's my turn! What about the wedding? Where is it to take place? Are you perhaps going to some relation's house?"

"No. Neither of us owns anyone very near and dear, so we prefer to stay quietly in town."

"Then it must certainly be from here! You couldn't dream of being married from the Home, Miss Beveridge! Come to me a few days before, and I'll be your tire-woman, and help to get everything ready, and you shall have a nice breakfast and invite all your friends."

But here the General interfered.

"No, no! No breakfast!" he cried. "None the less grateful to you, madam, but fuss and speechifying don't come naturally to a man of my age. I want to get my wife to myself as soon as possible, so we'll make a bolt of it from the church door. Capital plan, though, to stay with you for a bit before. What? You'd like that, Alice, wouldn't you? Need someone to fix your fal-lals. What? Another debt of gratitude, madam, which we will hope to repay, God willing, when we settle down in our new home."

Miss Beveridge gratefully accepted Nan's invitation, but when she went a step further and offered to assist in the choice of the wedding-dress, it appeared that the bridegroom had decided views of his own on the subject, and had already made his selection.

"She must wear blue! Says it ought to be grey at her age! Her age, indeed, as if she were an elderly woman! She was wearing blue when I saw her first, and she's going to be married in blue, or I'll know the reason why! Blue dress, and a hat with blue feathers; and those Trevor lassies shall be bridesmaids. Must have bridesmaids, however quiet it is. What? Besides, I owe them something, and it will be an excuse to give them their kit—white muslin and blue ribbons. That's how young girls used to dress when I was a lad, and I've never seen anything to touch it. There will be no trouble about the dresses, madam. I've decided all that. You just tell me the name of a dressmaker—a tip-top dressmaker, mind you—and we'll send in the order at once."

The bride-elect turned to her friend with a somewhat horrified expression, but Nan flashed a reassuring smile, and adroitly turned the subject in another direction.

"Don't worry!" she whispered, the first time that there was an opportunity for a quiet word. "The General shall have his way, and everything shall be charming into the bargain. I know of a dressmaker who could make sackcloth elegant. She will manufacture even the hat with blue feathers, so that you will never have had anything so becoming in your life. Fortunately the General does not confine you to one shade of blue. And the muslins and blue ribbons will be wonderful filmy creations, as different from the Early Victorian stiffnesses as anything you can possibly imagine."

How Betty will enjoy herself!"

Betty did! In all the course of her eighteen years, it was the first occasion on which she had been provided with an outfit with no regard to money, but simply to what would be prettiest and most becoming. The dress, the hat, the shoes, the gloves, the basket of pale-hued roses, were all perfect of their kind, and, to crown all, on the morning of the wedding there arrived two small morocco boxes, which, being opened, displayed two miniature gold watches, encircled with turquoise, and provided with blue enamel bows, by which they could be attached to the dress. Jill's whoops of delight might have been heard half-way across the Square. There seemed nothing left to wish for in life, now that the long-dreamed-of "real gold" watch was actually in her grasp.

And so Terence Digby took Alice Beveridge to wife, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death did them part; and more than one spectator prayed fervently that the hour of separation should be long delayed, so that the reunited lovers might enjoy a peaceful golden summer.

They drove away from the church door, and when the bride thrust her blue-feathered toque out of the window to smile a radiant farewell, Nan Vanburgh nodded her pretty head at Betty, and cried triumphantly—

"Now behold for yourself what miracles love and home and appreciation can work! That was Miss Beveridge once on a time, and you called her a frump and a fright, but the *rea/* woman was that charming Mrs Digby, and the magician's wand has brought her to life?"

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Bundle of Letters.

Miles Trevor to his Mother.

Dearest Mater,—A merry Christmas to you all! I can hardly believe it is nearly four years since I said good-bye and came out here, though there are times, when I am down on my luck, when it seems more like a hundred. One doesn't have much time for moping during the day, but the evenings are the trying times, when one wonders what on earth made him such an idiot as to leave the dear old country. In saner moments I'm precious glad I did, for I shouldn't have had half the chance of getting on at home. The manager went off for a holiday last week and left me in charge, and I'm thankful to say all has gone well. It was my chance of showing what I could do, and I was determined to make the most of it. All the same, I am sorry at times that I did not go in for mining, as I once thought of doing, you remember. My chum Gerard is going ahead at a great rate. He came out here without a penny, and has simply worked his way through the different processes in the big Aladdin Mine with which we are connected. He took the most profitable stages first, and when he had saved up a little money went in for the ones which paid least, until he had a real practical working knowledge of everything from start to finish. Of course he had had no training at home, or this would not have been necessary, but as he is a beggar to work, and a genius at making other people work too, he has risen to the post of sub-manager, and as soon as he has saved enough money is going prospecting on his own account. He has promised me a share in his gold-mine when it is discovered, and you may trust Gerard to find one if it is in existence, so you may see us home together some fine day to float our company.

The sooner it comes the better, or everything and everyone will be changed out of knowledge! It is beyond my imaginative powers to think of Jill as a young lady with her hair up, and Jack at Oxford, and Betty "an old maid." (There's not much of the old maid about that photograph she sent out last mail!) All the fellows admire it tremendously, and it gives quite an air of beauty and fashion to my little cabin. I never thought Betty would turn out so pretty, but there's no denying that she looks a lot older. Tell Pam not to grow up if she loves me! I want to find *someone* the same as when I left!

Glad to hear the General and Mrs Digby are still happy and satisfied with each other, and that pretty Mrs, Vanburgh's little boy is all right again. Remember me to them, and to Cynthia Alliot when you see her. Is she well? You have not mentioned her lately.

Many thanks to father for the papers; you can hardly imagine how welcome they are out here, or how eagerly one looks forward to mail days. Tell that lazy Jill to write to a fellow now and then. She shall have no nuggets out of my El Dorado if she doesn't. Yes, I'm all right! Don't worry about me, dear. I had a bit of a breakdown a month or two ago, but Gerard nursed me almost as well as you could have done yourself. He is the best chum a man could have. Love to everybody, and most of all to yourself, dearest mater.—From your son, Miles.

Betty Trevor to her Brother Miles.

Dearest old Lad,—I missed the last mail, so I must send you an extra long scrawl to make up. Thanks so much for your last batch of photographs. I am glad you marked the names on the back, for really it is difficult to believe that that ferocious-looking bearded person is really you! I am glad you have promised to shave it off before you come home, for—honestly speaking—it's not becoming! Mr Gerard looks just a shade less disreputable than yourself, but I like him because he is nice to you. You can give him my kind regards.

I've had ever such a good time since I wrote last, staying with the Rendell girls—Nan Vanburgh's sisters, you know, whom you met at that first historic party. They are dears, and so amusing that it's as good as a play to be with them. Elsie is married, and Liliias, the beauty, is engaged—to a clergyman, if you please. Everyone is surprised, for she has always been rather selfish and worldly, and cared only for people who were rich and grand, and Mr Ross is not like that. He is rather old, nearly forty, I think, and rather delicate, and very grave, and not a bit well off, and he thinks Liliias a miracle of goodness and sweetness, and the nice part is that she really *is* growing nicer, because she likes him so much, and doesn't want him to be disappointed. They are all awfully pleased, and Agatha and Christabel think

it will be great sport to be the only girls in the house, and have no elder sister left to rule over them. The brother, Ned, is in love with the girls' great friend, Kitty Maitland, but she snubs him, though the girls say she likes him all the time, and only does it to pay him back for the way he used to snub her as a child, and because he is so conceited that she thinks it will do him good. He really *is* a good deal spoiled by all those six sisters.

You see everybody seems to be falling in love and getting married except me, and I shall be an old maid. I don't like anyone, and I don't like anyone to like me. I feel quite angry if anyone pays me the least attention, and yet I'm lonely inside. Oh, Miles, why did you go so far away, and turn into a great bearded stranger, when I wanted you at home to talk to every day? I hate Mexico, and the valley, and the mine, and "my chum Gerard"—"my chum Gerard" most of all, because I'm so jealous of him. What business had he to nurse you, I should like to know! But I pity him, if you were as cross as you used to be when you had a cold in the old days, and had to put your feet into mustard and water! How well I remember it! First the water was too hot, then it was too cold, and in the end there, was no water left in the bath, and the furniture was afloat. Jack is not half so *difficile* as you used to be! He has grown such a dear old thing, just as merry and mischievous as ever, but so kind, and thoughtful, and nice all round. Father is very proud of him, and he is the old General's special pet, and half lives there when he is at home. As for Jill, she is a MINX in capital letters. So pretty and gay, and funny and charming, and naughty and nice, and aggravating and coaxing, and lazy and reckless, and altogether different from everybody else, that my poor little nose is quite out of joint, and I heard an impertinent young man speaking of me the other night as "Jill Trevor's sister"! That's what I have descended to, after all my lofty ambitions—*Jill's sister!* How furious I should have been in the old days, but now I don't seem to mind. Are you changed very much, old Miles? Inside, I mean, I'm not thinking of the horrid beard. You are such a reserved person that your letters leave one in ignorance of the real *you*. "My chum Gerard" knows you better than I do nowadays. What an awful thought! Life seems so different now from what it did at eighteen, and all one's ideals are changed. I had my usual yearly "token" from my friend of the fog this spring—just a newspaper posted from New York, as before, so that I know he is alive and well, but I long to know more, and sometimes it seems as if I never should. Sometimes—when I am in the blues—I feel as if that night was the only time in my life when I was really and truly of use. I suppose that's what makes me remember it so well, and think so much of the poor man. I can remember his face still—so distinctly! Poor, poor fellow! Father says it's more difficult than ever to make money nowadays. He may work all his life, and never be able to pay off his debts.

Cynthia! No; Cynthia is *not* well. We didn't tell you before, because it's horrid to write bad news, and you two were good friends. Besides, we hoped she would get better. It began six months ago with an attack of influenza. She did not seem to throw it off, but grew thin, and coughed—a horrid cough! They took her away, and did everything they could, but so far she is no better, and I'm afraid there's no doubt that her lungs are affected. Mrs Alliot is awfully anxious, and so is her father, who has retired now, as you know, and is home for good. They have taken her away to the sea, and she lives out of doors, and has a nurse, and everything that can possibly be got to make her better. She is very thin, but is quite bright and cheerful, and thinks about everybody in the world but herself. They hope she will get better; she *must* get better—she's so young, and dear, and lovely, and everything that's sweet. I can't tell you what Cynthia has been to me all these years! Pray for her, Miles—pray *hard!* I rend the heavens for Cynthia's life.

That's all, old boy—I have no more news. Bother the nuggets! Come home the instant you can. Father doesn't believe in gold-mines. Don't let "my chum Gerard" lead you into any wild-goose chase!—Always your lovingest sister, Betty.

From General Digby to Jack Trevor.

My dear Boy,—If you were my own son (which I wish you were!) I could not have felt happier and prouder than I did on the receipt of your letter this morning. To hear that you have decided to read for the ministry, and that you attribute the origin of this choice to some chance words of mine uttered years ago—that is indeed an unexpected joy! This tongue of mine has uttered so many foolish sayings in its time, and got me into so much trouble, that I am thankful beyond expression to know that in this instance it has done some good for a change. Thank you, my boy, for giving me the satisfaction of knowing as much. I know it is hard for you young fellows to speak out. You might easily have kept it to yourself, and left me a poorer man.

No! Since you ask my opinion, I'm convinced that it would be a thousand pities to drop any of your athletic interests. I'd rather advise you to put more grist into them, and come to the front as much as possible; short, of course, of interfering with your studies. When you have a parish of your own, or assist another man in his parish, you will have a big work to do among the boys and young men, and how do you think it will affect *them* to hear that you have pulled stroke in your boat, or played for the 'Varsity in football or cricket? Will they think less of you, or more? If I know masculine nature, it will give you an immediate influence which scarcely anything else could command. They will know you for a man, and a manly man into the bargain, a man who has like interests with themselves, and is not merely a puppet stuck up in the pulpit to babble platitudes, as so many fellows do nowadays—more shame to them! Play with the young fellows on Saturday;—let them feel that you understand and enter into their interests, and my name's not Terence Digby if your serious words don't have a tenfold influence on Sunday.

We must have a good talk on this subject when you come home. It is one on which I feel very strongly. Let me know at any time if you want help as to books, or any other expenses. Your father has enough to do with the rest of the family, and it is a pleasure to me to pretend now and again that you belong to me.

All goes well at Brompton Square. Your mother wears well—a wonderful woman! None of her daughters will ever equal her, though Betty is twice the girl she used to be, and Mademoiselle Jill makes havoc among the young fellows. My dear wife looks after me so carefully that my gout is steadily on the decline, and I grow younger year by year. Get the right woman for your wife, young fellow! I waited twenty years for mine, and she's cheap at the price.—Your friend, Terence Digby.

Christabel Rendell to her sister Nan Vanburgh.

Dearest Mops,—I am in a state of abject collapse after rushing after the beagles yesterday, tearing all over the

countryside, and leaping wildly over mountainous barriers, so I think I might as well spend my time writing to you, as you have been hurling reproaches at me for my silence. I couldn't possibly attempt letters while Betty was here, for we only had a fortnight, and I didn't get through half what I wanted to say. We enjoyed having her immensely, she's a perfect dear, and very pretty when she takes enough trouble, which isn't by any means always the case. I read her a severe lecture on the subject, and retrimmed her blue hat. I'm sure you'll think it improved. Talking of hats—I can't understand why I am not a lunatic, after all I've experienced with my clothes this spring! Agatha and I went to a tailor's at Hertford and ordered coats and skirts for morning wear. She wasn't in a hurry for hers, but I was simply panting for mine to take to the Goodmans' the next Wednesday, so it was arranged that he should rush on with mine, and that I should go over for a fitting on Monday. My dear, on Monday I was a wreck!—toothache in every joint, chattering with cold, and the rain descended in floods. I ploughed to the station in a sort of dismal, it-is-my-duty-and-I-must kind of stupor; sat in the train with Mrs Ellis, who yelled at me the whole time about the Coal Club, and Mary Jane's little Emma's mumps; staggered along the roads to the tailor's shop, and sat shuddering in his nasty little room with my feet on a slippery oilcloth as cold as ice.

After about twenty minutes (it seemed three hours and a half)—he came in with a coat over his arm! *Agatha's coat!* I nearly swooned! ... "Now you don't say so—really! Your sister's? And I made so sure it was yours! Isn't that curious, now? I may say I have been in the tailoring trade, man and boy, for a matter of twenty years, an' I never knew such a thing to occur before! Of course it wouldn't be any use saying I could make another by Wednesday, for I should only disappoint, but if Miss Hagatha was to run over, such a thing as this hafternoon, she could have 'er's 'ome in the place of yours." ... I got home *somehow*, I don't know how, for my mind was a blank, fell into bed, and lay prostrate until the next day, when hope revived once more. If the worst came to the worst, I was sure of a new voile dress which Miss Green was making, and the old coat and skirt would do very well for the mornings. The voile dress promised to be charming, for she really makes very well when she likes; so I felt restored to equanimity, until at eleven o'clock, behold a small girl, to see Miss C Rendell—"Oh, if—you—please—Miss Green—says—as—she's—two—yards—short—of—the—material—and—could—you—make—it—convenient—to—get—it—to-day?" My brain reeled! As soon as I had sufficiently recovered, I rushed round to see her myself. "You *told* me you only needed twelve yards, and I got thirteen!" "Yes, madam, but you see, madam, these guagings run into a deal of material. You wouldn't like them not to be full and 'andsome. Just another two yards!" There was nothing else for it, so I promised to go up to town next morning (I couldn't possibly go that day), and impressed upon the wretch to finish the bodice *first*,—as, if necessary, we could do with less trimming on the skirt. My dear, the worst is still to come! The shop was *sold out* of the shade of voile, and could not get it again, and when I went back to Miss Green, she had finished the *skirt*, and had nothing left for sleeves! "Yes, I remember you *did* say do the bodice first, but I thought I'd be getting on with the guaging. Guaging runs into a deal of time!" ... I just lay back, and said to myself, "Can it be real—or is it only a terrible nightmare?" We sat turning over hundreds of dirty old fashion plates, to find out how to make sleeves out of nothing, and they are sights, and I look an owl in them. There's only one comfort—if my brain has stood such a strain, it will stand anything!

Lilias and Mr Ross are really very satisfactory, and considering that she is thirty (thirty! Isn't it appalling!), he is not a bit too old. It's nice to see her look happy and satisfied, and she has been as sweet as sugar ever since, and as pleased as possible with furnishing her little house, which will be quite poky and shabby compared with yours, or Maud's, or even Elsie's sanatorium. Poor old Lil! I'm glad she's going to have a good time, at last. I'm afraid she has felt very "out of it" the last few years.

Old Mr Vanburgh is longing for your next visit, and has his study simply plastered over with portraits of the boy. I go to sit with him on wet afternoons, and listen meekly to praises of yourself, which I know to be absolutely undeserved.

By the way—is Betty in love? Never a word could I get out of her, but her indifference to the admiration she got down here—and she got a good deal—was quite phenomenal, unless there is something behind! Methinks at times I trace a melancholy in her eye. Adieu, my love; this epistle ought to make up for past delinquencies.—Yours ever, Christabel.

Chapter Twenty Four.

Miles' Return.

It was six years after his departure from home when Miles Trevor sailed again for his native land. There had been some talk of his return during the previous winter, and bitter indeed had been the disappointment when it was again postponed, and postponed on account of that ubiquitous person "my chum Gerard." The prospecting expedition of Will Gerard and his partner had at last been blessed with success;—if reports could be believed, with extraordinary success, for the opinion of the experts who had visited the claim predicted for it an even greater future than the Aladdin itself. Between the partners in the venture a sufficient sum had been raised to enable the mine to be "proved" by several shafts and cross-cuts, and the analyses of samples produced were so abundantly satisfactory, that there could be no difficulty in obtaining all the money necessary to thoroughly develop the mine. Miles was intensely interested in his chum's prospects, which to a certain extent were coincident with his own, for, according to promise, he had been allowed to buy a share in the land, which, small as it was, might turn out a more profitable investment than engineering.

It was decided that while one partner stayed on the spot, Miles should fit in his holiday so as to be able to help Gerard with the work of floating a company in England, an arrangement which it was believed would necessitate but a short delay. As is invariably the case in these affairs, however, matters took much longer to set in train than had been originally expected, and it was a good six months later before the welcome cablegram was received stating that the travellers were really on their way.

Six years! Miles was a man of twenty-six, matured by a life of enterprise and adventure. Betty admitted with horror to being "twenty-four next birthday," and shivered at the remembrance that six more years would bring her to that

dreaded thirty which she had once considered the “finis” of life. Jack and Jill were twenty, and if he were still a lad, she was a very finished product indeed, the acknowledged belle of her set, with a transparent satisfaction in her own success which would have been called vanity in a less popular person, but which in her case was indulgently voted as yet another charm. Pam was fourteen, a lanky schoolgirl, who had outgrown her kitten-like graces, and entered the world of school, where everything (including the return of a half-forgotten brother!) was secondary in interest to the strictures of “Maddie” on the subject of French verbs, the ambition of some day becoming “head girl,” and the daily meetings with her bosom friend Nellie Banks.

Everyone had grown older; even little Jerry Vanburgh, who six years before had been by his own account “a baby angel up in heaven,” was now a sturdy rascal of four, in man-of-war suits, whose love of fun and frolic was worthy of his mother’s son.

What would Miles think of them all? Betty asked herself as she donned her prettiest dress, in preparation for the long-expected hour. Would he be prepared for the changes which had taken place, or feel surprised and chilled, perhaps even disappointed, to find his old companions turned into comparative strangers? He had never had much imagination, dear old lad!—it would be just like him to come home expecting to find everything looking as if he had left it but a month before.

Betty leant her arms on the dressing-table and stared scrutinisingly at her reflection in the mirror. She had always been a severe judge of her own charms, and now the remembrance of Jill’s sparkling little face made her own appear unnaturally grave and staid; still, when all was said and done, she looked very *nice!*—the old schoolgirl word came in as ever to fill an awkward place.

Twenty-four though she undoubtedly was, it was certain that she was prettier than she had been at eighteen, and pink was Miles’ favourite colour—she had remembered that in buying her new dress, and had chosen it especially for his benefit. “Oh, I hope he’ll like me! He *must* like me!” she cried to herself, with a rush of love and longing swelling at her heart. How was it that as one grew older, home ceased to be the absolutely complete and satisfying world which it had been in early days? Why was it that, surrounded with father and mother, and sisters and brothers, all dear and kind and loving, the heart would yet experience a feeling of loneliness, a longing for something too intangible to be put into words?

“I want something—*badly!* What can it be?” Betty had questioned of herself times and again during the last few years, and the invariable answer had been—“Miles! It must be the loss of Miles which I feel more and more, instead of less and less. When Miles comes home there will be nothing left to wish for in all the world!” And now in an hour,—in half an hour, Miles would be with her once more! Dr Trevor and Jack had gone to the station to meet him, but his mother and the girls had preferred to wait at home. “So that you can all howl, and hang round his neck at once—I know you!” Jack had cried teasingly. “Take my advice, and cut short the huggings. When fellows have roughed it abroad, they don’t like being mauled!”—at which a chorus of feminine indignation had buzzed about his ears.

“Mauled, indeed! Howl, indeed! They trusted they knew how to behave without his advice! Would it not be well if he allowed Miles himself to say what he did and did not like? Had he not better rehearse his own conduct, before troubling himself about other people’s?” So on, and so on, until Jack fled in dismay, fingers in ears. That was the worst of chaffing girls—they would always insist upon having the last word!

Downstairs in the sitting-rooms all was *en fête*, the best mats and covers and cushions being exhibited for the benefit of one who would probably never notice their existence, or might even be misguided enough to imagine that chiffon-draped cushions were meant for use, not ornament. Flowers were tastefully arrayed in every available position; the tea-table lacked only the presence of pot and kettle; Jill had arranged the little curl on her forehead at its most artless and captivating angle—in a word, preparation was complete!

“Sit down, dears—sit down! You make me nervous fidgeting about, and—I’m nervous enough already!” said Mrs Trevor tremulously, and her three big daughters obediently sank down on chairs and stared at each other across the room.

“I’m very sorry to say so—but I’m *ill!*” cried Betty tragically. “I feel awful. A kind of crawly, creepy—all—overish—sick-swimming-kind-of-feeling—I think I’m going to faint! I’m sorry to alarm you—”

But no one was in the least alarmed. Mrs Trevor only smiled feebly, while the other girls expatiated upon even more alarming symptoms.

“My heart is going like a sledge-hammer,” sighed Jill. “I feel every moment as if it might *burst!*—I can’t see you. The air is full of spots—”

“I’m as dizzy as dizzy,” declared Pam eloquently. “I feel exactly as I did that Wednesday Nellie and I ate chocolates all the afternoon in a hot room. If he doesn’t come soon we’d better all lie down. We could get up again when we heard the bell.”

“The bell, indeed! Miles shall not have to ring the bell when he arrives home after six years’ absence, if his mother is alive to open the door for him!” cried Mrs Trevor indignantly, and then suddenly she gave a cry, and rushed across the room. A cab laden with luggage had drawn up before the door. Miles had arrived!

Well, after all Jack was right! They *did* all hang round him at once. Mrs Trevor was folded in his arms, but Betty and Jill each hung on to a side, while Pam stroked the back of his head, and if they did not exactly “howl,” they were certainly by no means dry-eyed.

“My boy! My boy!” cried the mother. “Miles, oh, Miles!” sobbed the girls; and Miles mumbled incoherent answers in his big man’s voice, and quietly but surely pushed his way into the drawing-room. *His* eyes were shining too, but he

had no intention that the passers-by should witness his emotion. He looked enormously big and broad, and tanned and important. Handsome Miles would never be, but his was a good strong face, with the firmly-set lips and clear, level gaze which speak so eloquently of a man's character, and his mother thanked God with a full heart as she welcomed him back.

As for Miles himself, the sight of his mother brought with it a pang of sadness, for though outsiders might exclaim at her youthful appearance, six years on the wrong side of forty can never fail to leave behind them heavy traces, and to the unaccustomed eyes she looked greatly changed. He kept his arm round her as they moved forward, and his eyes grew very tender. The little mother was growing old! Her hair was quite grey, her pretty cheeks had lost their roundness—he must take more care of her than ever. She enjoyed being cared for, as all nice women did. And then Miles sat down and drank tea, and they all settled themselves to the difficult task of making conversation after a long absence. It seems sad that it should be difficult, but it is invariably the case, for when there is so much to tell, and to ask, it is difficult to know where to begin, and a certain strangeness follows hard on the first excitement. Were these smart young ladies truly and actually Betty and Jill; this young man with the Oxford drawl the once unkempt and noisy Jack? And who was this shy and awkward maypole, who had taken the place of dear, cuddlesome, wee Pam?

If it had not been for Dr Trevor, conversation would have halted sadly during the first difficult quarter of an hour, but that gentleman was fortunately free from sentimental embarrassment, and kept the ball rolling by his practical questions and remarks.

The voyage, it appeared, had been unusually calm and agreeable, and the partners had thoroughly enjoyed the rest after the somewhat worrying work of the last six months. Yes, everything was working out splendidly as regards the new mine, and Miles was convinced that only time was necessary to turn it into a huge success. Will Gerard would be a millionaire some fine day, or something very like a millionaire, and he would deserve all he got. The best fellow and the smartest, and the hardest working, and the truest chum—

In the background saucy Jill dumbly echoed these well-worn sentiments, rolling her eyes ceilingwards, and declaiming with outstretched hands, till Miles, turning suddenly, caught sight of her, and burst into one of his old hearty laughs.

“Well, what does that mean, Jill? What have I said to amuse you?”

Jill sparkled at him in her most captivating manner.

“*Toujours le bon* Gerard! We have heard so much of this marvel that we are dying to behold him. Snap-shots, we know, are not the most flattering medium, so we ought not to judge by the likenesses we have already seen, but he hardly appeals to me as a miracle of beauty! When does he propose to dazzle our eyes by appearing before us in the flesh?”

Miles laughed once more.

“Not till next week, so you must exercise your patience, my dear. He has his own people to see, and besides that he has too much tact to intrude upon a fellow's first days at home. Gerard always knows what is the right—” He broke off hastily as Jill resumed her silent pantomime of admiration. “Oh, all right! I won't praise him any more. You can find out his good points for yourself. If the truth were known, I daresay he is anxious to get a new rig-out before he pays calls on fascinating young ladies. We have neither of us a decent coat to our backs, and must go tailor-hunting the first thing to-morrow morning. We have not had much ladies' society abroad. I expect Gerard will fall headlong in love when he sees you in that blouse, Jill!”

“I expect he will. They generally do! But it's no use. I don't care for Colonials!” drawled Miss Jill, chin in air, and Miles' heated repudiation of the term as applied to either his partner or himself failed to move her from her front.

“Jill is waiting for Prince Edward of Wales. There's no other unmarried male who comes up to her standpoint,” said her father, laughing; and once more Miles marvelled at the changes of the years!

When bedtime came, Betty looked shyly at the new Miles, who seemed still more than half a stranger, and felt her heart throb with pleasure as his grasp tightened on her arm, and he said affectionately—

“Come into my room for a chat, old girl, before you turn in! It won't seem like home unless I see you perched on my bed nursing your knees and your grievances at the same time. Got any grievances nowadays, eh? You used generally to have a good stock on hand. We'll have to lay them together while I'm at home. That's what I want to do—give you all a rattling good time! It's what I have looked forward to most in coming home. How are things going, really? Quite well? No bothers and worries that you have been keeping to yourselves, for fear of making me anxious?”

“Nothing big, dear—only the little worries which one must grin and put up with.”

Betty perched herself on the bed, and fell into the old position, while Miles sat down on the chair by the dressing-table, and began unlacing his shoes with the same, oh, the very same gestures which he had used every night during the many long years when this evening conference had been the brightest spot in the day! It was as if time had flashed back for a moment, and they were boy and girl together once more! Betty's eyes melted in tender rejoicing, and Miles cried heartily—

“Bet, my dear, you've grown rattling pretty! You beat Jill into fits when you look like that. You must wear that frock when Gerard comes next week. It suits you splendidly.”

“I got it for your sake—not Mr Gerard's. You always liked pink, Miles. Oh, I shan't have any grievances now that you are home. I am really and truly far less grumbly than I used to be. I have tried hard to make it a duty to be happy, since I discovered—you know how!—how imaginary my troubles really were—but sometimes I have felt very lonely. I

think one does, as one grows older, for there seem so many things that one can't talk about to the best of friends. Of course you may not understand the feeling—you are so devoted to Mr Gerard."

Miles kicked his shoes in opposite directions—another old trick!—and stroked his chin silently. The offending beard had disappeared, but the skin was dark with constant shaving, and there were new lines in his face. This was a man indeed. The boy had disappeared for ever.

"I don't think I should advertise my loneliness even to Gerard," he said slowly. Then, leaning forward and opening a drawer in the dressing-table, "How is Cynthia?" he queried abruptly.

"Better!" replied Betty, so quietly that no one would have guessed the leap of excitement which her heart had given at the sound of her friend's name uttered in this connection. "Very delicate still, but certainly better. They live entirely in the country for her sake, and the doctors think that in a year or two she will probably be quite well again. Meantime she is treated like an invalid, and we can seldom meet. It isn't good for her to chatter, and it isn't supposed to be good for my health to be there. I *ache* for her, Miles! No one will ever know what it has meant for me to be separated like this."

Miles sat silently staring at his stockinged feet. His eyes were hidden, the heavy moustache covered the lines of his mouth, yet as Betty looked at him she felt a stab of reproach, as if, while pitying herself, she had inadvertently probed a deeper wound. Had Miles also ached for Cynthia? Had the separation from her been the hardest part of his long exile? She longed to question him on the subject, but the stern, set face gave no encouragement to curiosity, however affectionate.

"We are to go down to see her some day soon. She was almost as much excited about your coming home as we were ourselves, and we can run down to Franton and back quite easily in the day. You won't be occupied with business every day while you are at home, will you, Miles? You will be able to give up some of your time to us?"

"Oh dear, yes. This is by way of being a holiday, and I mean to take you girls about, and the mater too, if she will come. We must see the mining business in train first, and then we'll go off somewhere and have a good time. I haven't worked for nothing all these years, and the best chance of enjoying myself is to see your enjoyment. Things don't always work out as we expect—but we must make the best of what remains—"

He sighed, and rose from his chair with a gesture which somehow made Betty conscious that he wished to be alone. It had been a very short chat, and the impression left was rather sad than cheerful. She put her arms round Miles' neck, kissed him fervently, but in silence, and stole away to her own room.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Mr Gerard.

Clad in an immaculate frock-coat, with a hat of irreproachable shininess on his head, a flower in his buttonhole, and every detail of his attire correctly up-to-date, "my chum Gerard" made his appearance to call at Brompton Square on the Monday afternoon following Miles' return.

"I've met him a hundred times in Piccadilly!" was Jill's comment on the stranger, and indeed he had far more the air of a fashionable Londoner than of a miner from the far-off wilds of Mexico. As tall as Miles, though of a more slender build, showing in the same eloquent fashion the marks of recent shaving, rather handsome than plain, rather dark than fair, there seemed at first sight little to distinguish him from a hundred other men of the same age. On a closer acquaintance, however, a further attraction was found in the grave, steady glance of the eyes, and in a rare smile, lighting up somewhat careworn features into a charming flash of gaiety. Mr Gerard was evidently unused to laughter—with all his sterling qualities Miles could not be described as a humorous companion!—and the programme of the past years had been all work and no play. As he sat in Mrs Trevor's drawing-room that first afternoon, he listened in a somewhat dazed fashion to the banter which went on between Jack and his sisters; but after some time had passed his face began to soften, the corners of his mouth twitched, and presently out flashed that delightful, whole-hearted smile, and Betty, meeting it, buried at once and for ever all lingering prejudices against her brother's friend.

It was fortunate that Mr Gerard had made a favourable impression on the young people, for, at Miles' earnest request, he was invited to take up his quarters at Brompton Square for the next few weeks.

"His own people live in the country; he has no friends that he cares about in town, and I hate the thought of him moping alone in an hotel after all he has done for me. Besides, we ought to be together just now. There will be business to talk over every night until we get this company floated, and if he were not here I should always have to be going over to him—"

The last argument settled the matter in Mrs Trevor's eyes. Truth to tell, she was not too anxious to introduce a stranger into her reunited family circle, but if it were easier and more convenient for Miles, and ensured for herself a greater amount of his society, it was impossible to refuse. She reaped the reward of merit in a growing liking and admiration for her guest, who was even pathetically grateful for her hospitality, and appreciative of the home atmosphere to which he had so long been a stranger.

Business engrossed the greater part of the time, but there were odd hours of leisure when the girls were suddenly commanded to get ready with all possible speed, and spirited off for an afternoon on the river, or on bicycle expeditions to the country, ending up with an evening meal at some old-fashioned country inn. They were treated to concerts also, and to entertainments of all sorts, including welcoming parties at friends' houses, and when they bemoaned the speedy wearing out of evening dresses, Miles insisted upon providing new ones, regardless of

expense.

"It's most grateful and comforting to have a gold-mine in the family," cried Jill, making languishing eyes at the senior partner. Of course she flirted with him—Jill flirted with everything in the shape of a man—monopolising his attention on all occasions in a manner which would have been somewhat trying to most elder sisters.

"But I know you don't mind. You like best of all to be with Miles," said Jill easily, when some remark of the sort was made, and Betty's reply held an unexpected tartness.

"I don't mind in the least. It is a matter of perfect unconcern to me how Mr Gerard behaves; but you are my sister. I am sorry to see you lowering your dignity, by being so silly, and flighty, and ridiculous! I am sure he must laugh at you in private?"

"He laughs to my face, dear. I amuse him wonderfully. He told me yesterday that I was as good as a tonic. Such a pity you should bother your poor old head about me! I understand men, my dear!"

The insinuation of that emphasised "I" was unmistakable. Jill began to hum—an aggravating habit of hers when she felt the mistress of a situation—and tripped lightly out of the room.

And Betty sat and thought. Burning like a furnace, throbbing in every nerve, shaking her even as she sat, came a sudden fierce heat of anger such as she had not experienced for many a long year. She had been accustomed to regard Jill's flirtation from a mental height of affectionate disdain, to laugh with purest amusement at her assumption of superiority, but now of a sudden indifference had changed to anger and a sore rankling of jealousy, which puzzled as much as it disturbed. It could not be that she herself coveted Mr Gerard's attention! Cynthia, Nan Vanburgh, all her friends had remarked times and again upon her indifference to masculine admiration, for, strange as it might seem, that romantic interview in the fog six years before had linked her sympathies so strangely with one man's lot that she had had none to spare for later comers. Under God's providence she had saved a life, and while those voiceless messengers told of its preservation, it must remain the one supreme interest of life. Some day "Ralph" would come home. Some day he would appear before her to announce his task completed, and to claim her friendship as his reward. Her mother pleaded with her not to allow a romantic fancy to ruin her life, pointed out that "Ralph" might have married long before now, that even if he returned she might be bitterly disappointed in his identity. In vain! Betty could not argue. She *felt*—and that was the end of the matter. The sympathetic attraction was too strong to be one-sided. At the other side of the ocean "Ralph" was waiting for her, even as she for him, and the meeting would surely come. It might be years hence, but—marvellous thought!—it might be to-day. Each fresh awakening brought with it a thrill and a hope.

All these long years had this fantasy lasted; it was not possible that it was beginning to fade at the sight of a pair of grave grey eyes, at the sound of a man's deep-toned voice!

Betty sat and thought. Ten minutes passed, twenty minutes, half an hour.

Jill thrust her head round the corner of the door to give a careless invitation.

"I'm going for a trot before dinner. Come along too. It will do you good."

"No, thank you. I'd rather not."

"Sulking still? Goodness, I thought you'd have recovered by this time! Bye-bye, my dear. Hope you'll get it over before dinner."

She was humming again as she made her way to the door, where, no doubt, Mr Gerard waited to accompany her. The invitation had been a polite matter of form to which an acceptance was not desired. Betty leant her head on the table and lived through a moment of bitterness before the door opened once more, and a voice said—

"If you are not going out, may I come in for a few minutes? Miles has not yet—" Then, in a tone of startled concern, "I beg your pardon! I am interrupting you. You are in trouble?"

Betty straightened herself with a nervous laugh.

"Oh, please come in! It's nothing. I only felt rather—upset. Something vexed me, but it's nothing of any importance. Can I do anything for you? Are you expecting Miles? He said he would be home quite early. Were you going out together?"

"Yes, we have some calls to pay, but there's still half an hour to spare. He will be up to time, I'm sure. Miles is always punctual."

Mr Gerard seated himself, and looked with concern at Betty's face, on which the signs of her mental conflict were clearly printed. It was almost the first time that they had been alone together, for *tête-à-têtes* were of rare occurrence in the doctor's busy household, and there was a perceptible hesitation on both sides.

"No, thank you! You can do nothing for me, but I wish I could help you," said Gerard. "Can't I pummel somebody? Miles will tell you I have a good fighting arm. If anyone has been annoying you—"

That made Betty laugh, with a quick wonder as to what Mr Gerard would say if he knew the identity of his proposed opponent.

"No, no, thank you! I must fight my own battles. As a matter of fact, it's more temper than anything else. I have a most intrusive temper. It is always pushing itself forward—"

She expected the usual polite disclaimer, but it did not come. Will Gerard looked at her for a minute, as if thoughtfully weighing her in the balance, and then the delightful irradiating smile passed over his features.

“And it is more difficult to fight now than in the old days, when you could let yourself go, have a grand rampage, and trust to time and the aroma of roast chestnuts to make the peace!” he said mischievously; and when Betty started in dismay—

“Oh, I know all about it! The subject of home is very attractive when one is alone in exile. I could hardly know more about you if I’d been a member of your schoolroom party. I used to lure Miles on to talk of old days. It kept us both occupied. Do you remember the occasion when you decided to starve yourself to death, because you imagined that you had been unjustly treated, and then got up in the middle of the first night to raid a cold chop from the larder? Or the time you vowed vengeance on Miles for cutting off the ends of your hair to make paint brushes, repented after you went to bed, and went to make it up, when he concluded you were playing ghosts, and nearly throttled you as a welcome?”

Betty laughed, undecided between amusement and vexation.

“It’s too bad! He seems to have given me away all round. If he was going to tell tales, he might have told flattering ones. I am sure I was often very nice, or I was always sorry if I wasn’t. I used to roast chestnuts and muffins, and eat oranges and peppermints with the door wide open to lure him back. They were dear old days! I am glad he remembered them, but it must have been boring for you. Did he—did he tell you—more things about me?”

“Many more!”

“Principally about me? More than about the others?”

“You were his special chum. It was natural that he should speak most of you.”

“And—er—my letters! Did he read those aloud?”

“Parts of them. I never saw them, of course, except—”

“Except when?”

“When he was ill. He could not read himself, and was anxious to hear the news. Three letters from you arrived during that time. He said it did not matter. That there would be no secrets in them—nothing you would not wish me to know.”

Betty flushed, cast an agonised thought back through the years, to try to remember the gist of those three missives, failed completely, and nervously twisted her fingers together.

“There was one thing they would show you pretty plainly, which I’d rather have kept secret.”

“Yes?”

“Myself?”

She looked across the room with a flickering glance, and met Will Gerard’s steady gaze.

“Yes,” he said slowly. “They showed me yourself!”

That was all. Not another word, either of praise or blame. Did he hate her then—think her altogether flighty and contemptible, or had the letters been by chance good specimens of their number, and did he like them, and think her “nice”? The face told her nothing in its grave impenetrability. She felt herself blushing more deeply than ever, rallied all her powers with the determination that she would *not* be stupid, and cried gaily—

“Well, after all, the confidence was not all on one side! We heard enough about you. ‘My chum Gerard’ has been a household word among us for years past. You were such a paragon that we were quite bored with the list of your perfections.” She raised her hands and began checking off his characteristics on the different fingers in charming, mischievous fashion. “My chum Gerard is so clever,—so industrious,—so far-seeing,—so thoughtful,—so generous,—so kind,—so helpful—no! I am not going to stop; I’ve not half-finished yet.—All that he does is wise; all that he tries, succeeds; all that he has, he shares; and when he speaks, let no dog bark! When we read about impossible heroes in books we called them ‘Gerard’; when we wanted to express the acme of perfection, we called a thing ‘Gerardy.’ Jill read aloud the *Swiss Family Robinson* to Pam, and called the good proper papa ‘Mr Gerard’ all the way through. So now!”

“Now, indeed!” echoed the real Mr Gerard, laughing. “You are certainly revenged, Miss Trevor. I don’t know anything more trying than to be preceded by an impossibly exaggerated character! The reality is bound to be a disappointment. Miles has credited me with his own virtues, for in reality I am a very faulty person; not in the least like that paragon, Robinson Papa, of whom I have a vivid remembrance. He would have been a useful person out in Mexico, all the same. That convenient habit of discovering every necessity for the table or the toilet on the nearest bush would have helped us out of many a dilemma.”

They laughed together over the old-time memory, and then, suddenly sobering, Mr Gerard continued—

“At any rate, Miss Trevor, the fact remains, that by ‘good report or ill,’ even by sight, so far as photographs can reproduce us, we have been intimately acquainted with each other for the last six years. Six years is a long time. It ought to enable us to meet as friends rather than acquaintances?”

The last sentence was uttered more as a question than a fact, and Betty answered with eager acquiescence.

"Oh yes, as friends, quite old friends. It is far better so—"

"Yet there are times when you treat me like the veriest stranger! It must be my own fault. Have I done or said anything since my arrival which has displeased you?"

"Oh no! Please don't think so. It was nothing at all, not a thing, except only that—"

She could not say, "Except that you seemed to prefer Jill's society to mine," and so complete the sentence; so she subsided into blushing silence, and Mr Gerard tactfully forbore to question.

"Don't let there be any more 'excepts' or 'buts,' please! Take me on trust as Miles' friend and—if you will allow me—your own. That is all I request."

At this interesting moment the sound of a latchkey was heard in the front door, followed by voices and footsteps in the hall. Mr Gerard muttered something under his breath. What the exact words were Betty did not know, but they were certainly not indicative of pleasure. Then the door opened, and Miles entered, followed by Jill, who had met her brother soon after starting for her walk, and had escorted him back to the house.

She raised her eyebrows at the sight of Mr Gerard. Had he not refused to go out with her a few minutes before, on the score of letters to be written? Yet here he was, talking to Betty, with never a pretence of paper or ink in the room.

Jill came down to dinner an hour or two later, attired in her prettiest dress, with the little curl, which Jack naughtily termed the "War Cry," artlessly displayed on her forehead. She did not care two pins about her brother's partner, but it was her nature to wish to reign supreme with any man with whom she was brought into contact, so she was her most captivating self all the evening, and Will Gerard laid his hand on his heart and bowed before her, laughed at her sallies, and applauded her songs, as he had done every evening since his arrival, and Betty laughed and applauded in her turn, without a trace of the old rankling jealousy. "He talks to her, but he looks at me. He wants *me* to be his friend!" she told herself with a proud content.

For the first time for many a long year her dreams that night were in the present, instead of in the past.

Chapter Twenty Six.

A Moonlight Walk.

Cynthia wrote to beg that Betty would soon come down to see her, and bring her old pupil to be reintroduced to his mentor, but time passed by, and one day after another was vetoed by Miles himself. Betty was nonplussed. It seemed as if he did not want to go. Yet she could hardly believe that such could be the case, when she recalled to memory the tone of his voice, the look on his face when, for the first and last time since his return, Miles had voluntarily mentioned Cynthia's name.

"It is quite an easy journey. We can get there in less than two hours by an express train, stay for lunch and tea, and get home again in time for dinner. I've been down twice this spring, and it is quite easily managed," she protested; but Miles would do nothing but grunt, and refuse a definite answer. To spend three or four hours in Franton, a large proportion of which would be taken up in eating meals, and talking to other people—this was not his idea of a first visit to Cynthia after six years of absence. He continued to grunt and make objections for the next few weeks, and then one night at dinner he announced airily—

"I've taken rooms at the Grand at Franton for a week from Friday. I thought, as we were going down in any case, we might as well do the thing comfortably, and have a breath of sea-air. Awfully stuffy in town this last week! They say the Grand is the best hotel, and we shall be fairly comfortable there. Four bedrooms, and a private sitting-room for you, mater, in case you want to be quiet. Gerard's coming along; and you'll come too—over Sunday, at least—I hope, father?"

"Over Sunday, certainly. I can manage that very well; and perhaps Horton can take on my work for a few days. There are no very serious cases on at present, and a rest would be very delightful!" said the tired doctor with a sigh. His wife brightened instantly at the thought of his pleasure, while Betty and Jill flushed with excitement.

Rooms at the Grand! The best hotel, where perchance they might be "comfortable"! They had never before stayed in an hotel; lodgings, and cheap lodgings into the bargain, had been their portion on the occasion of their rare holiday-makings. The grandeur of the prospect drove out every other thought, and, to his own immense relief, Miles escaped embarrassing comments on his sudden change of front.

"I hope we shan't have meals in the private room," Jill said anxiously. "The great fun of staying in an hotel is to see the people, and—er—"

"Be seen by the people?"

"Exactly! Especially the latter. Don't ask me to do a single thing before Friday, for I shan't have a second to spare. I'm off remnant-hunting this morning, and shall be glued to the sewing-machine for the rest of the time. Two new blouses at least I *must* have, if I am to pose before the public eye—"

"Oh, bother remnants! We'll go to Regent Street this morning, and buy half a dozen blouses between you. I am not going to take you to an hotel in remnants!" cried Miles with masculine scorn.

Since his return from abroad the eldest son of the family displayed a disregard of money which seemed next door to criminal in the eyes of his careful relations. Why worry to make up a blouse for three-and-sixpence when you can buy a better one for three guineas? That was his present attitude of mind; and when the girls hesitated,—fascinated yet fearful,—the reply was always the same—

“I’ve slaved hard enough all these years! This is my holiday. I’ve come home to enjoy myself, and see you enjoy yourselves, and I’m not going to worry my head about shillings. For pity’s sake take what you can get, and don’t fuss!”

It is the attitude of all men who come back to civilisation after a long absence, and in Miles’ case it could truthfully be said that his extravagances benefited other people infinitely more than himself.

It was a very merry party which travelled down to Franton a few days later, and the comfort and grandeur of the hotel exceeded even the girls’ expectation. All the bedrooms secured were situated on the front, and were provided with dear little balconies, on which they could sit and gaze over the sea. The drawing-room was a gorgeous apartment—all yellow satin and white archways, and banks of flowers. The dining-hall was dotted over with little tables, a larger one in a bay-window being reserved for the Trevor party. The lounge was provided with innumerable couches and wicker chairs, in which one could loll at ease, scrutinising the other visitors, or submitting to scrutiny on one’s own account, with a delightful consciousness of a Regent Street blouse. The gardens and shrubberies would have been quite irresistible, had it not been that just beyond their bounds stretched the firm golden sands, on which the white-crested waves broke with a siren sound.

“Go to bed without a walk on the shore by moonlight—I can’t and *won’t*, not if ten fathers, and fifty thousand mothers went down on their knees and implored me to be prudent!” asserted audacious Jill, as she finished her after-dinner coffee; whereupon Dr Trevor laughed good-naturedly, and said—

“There’s only one father present, and the only knees he possesses are much too stiff to exert themselves in a hopeless cause! Run along, my dear; I should have felt the same at your age. Put on a shawl. Miles, you will see that your sisters don’t run wild, and that they come in by a sensible hour.”

So the four young people wandered along the sands, and watched the moonlight play upon the waters; but there was no need of the last part of the doctor’s warning, for even Jill grew quiet and subdued, and forgot to tease and banter. Coming fresh from the noisy, crowded city, there was something inexpressibly impressive in the long stretch of sand, the dark, mysterious waters, the loneliness, the silence, broken only by the rhythmic break of the waves.

Miles walked alone, his face lifted now and again to the top of the cliff on which stood the villa which the Alliot had hired for the summer months. Betty looked across the waste of waters, and felt a pang of compunction. How long was it since she had last thought of her friend across the sea? Fainter and more faint had his image been growing, until from forming a constant background to her thoughts, it had become a positive effort to remember. She turned aside from Will Gerard’s whispered words, and passed her hand through her brother’s arm. To be beside Miles was in itself an incentive to loyalty.

Next morning at eleven o’clock, Betty and Miles started to walk up to the Alliot’s villa, leaving Jill and Will Gerard seated on the shore throwing pebbles into the sea, with every appearance of satisfaction with themselves, and their occupation. The path was steep but not very long, and at the entrance to the garden Mrs Alliot was strolling about, as if awaiting their arrival. She kissed Betty and patted her affectionately on the shoulder.

“Cynthia is waiting for you. Run along to her, dear! I will follow with your brother, and hear some of his news,” she said in a light tone which yet held a hint of command, and, when Betty disappeared, she turned in an opposite direction, so as to take the least direct path to the house.

“I am sure your mother is delighted to have you back! It is delightful that you have been so successful in your work. We have been so interested in your adventures.”

The short conventional sentences were the only references made to Miles’ own affairs, and then, as if in a hurry to get to the subject most on her mind, Mrs Alliot began to speak of her daughter.

“You will be surprised to find Cynthia looking so well. She has put on flesh during the last few months, and the sea-air has given her a colour. Last winter she was painfully thin. It has been a long uphill struggle, but now at last we begin to see definite improvement. The doctors are confident that it will be a complete cure if we are very careful during the next two or three years. The great thing is to live in pure bracing air, and to keep her happy and cheerful. Anything that caused agitation or worry of any kind, would have a deleterious effect. She has a very sensitive nature, and things go deeply with her,—more deeply than with most girls. Her father and I hide all worries from her, even our anxiety about herself. We, and all the friends who love her, must unite in doing everything in our power to spare her during these all-important years. I know you will understand the position.”

“Yes,” said Miles quietly, “I perfectly understand.”

He had grown very white beneath his tan, and Mrs Alliot, glancing swiftly at him, felt a pang of compunction. Poor young fellow, it was hard on him, if he really cared! Yet she had done no more than her duty in warning him that he could not be allowed to disturb Cynthia’s peace of mind. So far, the girl was fancy free, but her interest in the return of her boy-friend was so strong that a word, a look, a hint of his own feeling might be sufficient to fan it into a stronger flame.

“But now that I have spoken he knows how things are, and he is a good fellow! He will think of her before himself,” said Cynthia’s mother to herself with a sigh of relief.

For the rest of the way to the house Mrs Alliot talked on impersonal subjects, and Miles answered with colourless politeness; then, at last, across a wide green lawn, a sun shelter came into view, in which Betty could be discerned, and someone else in a white dress lying on a couch banked up with blue cushions.

"There are the girls! Don't wait for me! Go across the lawn," said Mrs Alliot kindly.

When one has dealt the one great blow, it is easy enough to make trifling concessions, reflected Miles bitterly, as he strode forward; but the next moment all bitterness died away as he grasped a thin white hand, and looked down into a face which was at once strange, and exquisitely familiar. Cynthia, but Cynthia as a woman, no longer a schoolgirl; Cynthia with her golden mane wound smoothly round her head, with blue shadows under the sweet eyes, and hollows where the dimples used to dip in the rounded cheeks. At the first glance the air of delicacy was painfully pronounced, but as she smiled and flushed, the old merry Cynthia looked at him once more.

"Miles! Is it really you? I can hardly believe it! Such a great, big man! Oh, but I'm glad! I'm glad to see you again! Sit down, sit down. Let me see you properly. I mayn't get up from this horrid couch. Yes, it's you! I'd know your eyes anywhere, and the moustache is nice—a very fine moustache, Miles! I'm glad the beard is off. I like your square chin. It is lovely to have you all here, and to know you have not to run away in a few hours. I'm looking forward immensely to the next week. Old Miles! It *is* good to see you!"

She laughed and coughed, and lent back against the cushions, pushing them into place with an impatient hand; while Miles stared at her in an intent silence which printed every detail so deeply in his memory that no passage of time could wear them away. The loose ends of hair which escaped from the coils and curled on her white neck, the long transparent hands against the blue cushions, the slight figure in the white dress—how often that vision arose before him in the years to come!

As of old, Cynthia's friendliness showed no hint of embarrassment, and she chatted away as easily as if the separation had lasted for weeks instead of years. Betty had tactfully rejoined Mrs Alliot, and for the next half-hour Miles was allowed an uninterrupted *tête-à-tête*.

"Tell me all about everything!" cried Cynthia, just as years before she had demanded an account of Miles' engineering studies; and when he protested, "Oh, it's quite easy," she maintained, "Tell me the history of a day. You wake in the morning, and get up, and then—what next? Go through the whole programme until it is time to go to bed again."

Then Miles spoke, and she listened eagerly, the flush dying out of her cheeks and a wistful expression deepening in her eyes.

"It's just as I said long ago," she sighed plaintively when he had finished; "you have gone out into the world and done things, and I have stayed at home and done—*nothing!* Oh, Miles, it was hard being taken ill just then! Father had come home, and we were looking forward to travelling about, and having a good time together, and being so happy. I had finished classes, and was old enough to come out, and I meant to be such a good daughter, and to take care of the parents for a change, after being taken care of all my life. I was going to my first ball—my dress was in the house—when I caught influenza, and since then"—she threw out her arms with an expressive gesture—"it's been this sort of thing all the time! Lying still—eating—sleeping—being waited on hand and foot; an anxiety instead of a help; a care instead of a joy—oh, and I *did* want to be a joy!" She paused a moment to press her lips together, and to give her head an impatient shake. "I mustn't be silly! Father and mother don't guess that I feel like this, and it isn't always so bad. Some days I feel quite bright and happy, especially lately, since I've been getting better, but seeing you brought back the dear old days, and oh, I *want* to be well again, and run about with you on the sands. I shan't be able to go about with you at all."

"I will come and sit with you as often as I may—as long as I may," said Miles huskily whereupon Cynthia smiled on him again.

"How nice of you! Ah yes, you must come. I'll keep quite quiet for the rest of the day, and then I can talk while you are here. There's so much I want to tell, and to hear!"

She coughed again, and brushed her hair from her brow, evidently fatigued by her own emotion. The dainty finish and grace of her appearance, which had been the greatest charm in Miles' eyes long ago, was accentuated by her illness into a fragility which made her seem more like a spirit than a flesh-and-blood woman to his unaccustomed eyes. His thoughts raced back for a moment to the scene of his Mexican home, and he realised the folly of the dream which had for so long made the half-conscious background of his thoughts. Even if she were willing, even if she loved him, as he loved and would always love her, it would be a madman who could dream of transplanting this fragile flower to those rude surroundings. Cynthia was not for him! Their lives, for the present at least, lay far apart. As for the future, that was in God's hands; it would be selfish and cowardly to try to ensure it for himself. Miles' heart was wrung with the agony of renunciation, but his set face showed no signs of his suffering. He cheered Cynthia with renewed promises of daily visits, chatted with her of old friends and old times, and had the reward of hearing her laugh with the old merry ring. When he took her hand in farewell, she looked at him with frank eyes, and said sweetly

"I'm sorry I grumbled—it was wrong of me when I'm so well off. I do try to be good, but I was always impatient—you used to laugh when I said so, but it was true. This illness may be just what I need—'They also serve, who only stand and wait'—I think so often of that line, and try to wait in patience, but it is hard—the hardest thing in the world, sometimes!"

"Yes," said Miles quietly, "the very hardest?"

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Explanations.

It was a very happy week. The weather was all that could be desired for a seaside holiday,—bright yet not glaring, warm but not hot. The hotel was everything that was luxurious and comfortable, and, last and best of all, Cynthia kept bright and happy, and was better—not worse—for the visits of her old friends.

Every morning Betty accompanied Miles up to the villa, leaving Mr Gerard and Jill busy playing tennis, roving about on the shore, or engaged in that other engrossing occupation of throwing stones. For the first day or two she made excuses, and strolled away to join Mrs Alliot, but it soon became apparent to her quick senses that neither that lady nor, strangely enough, Miles himself encouraged these well-meant excursions. So for the rest of the time she sat in the shelter by Cynthia's couch, and joined frankly in the conversation. Sometimes Miles would be silent for almost the whole morning, listening while the two friends talked together as girls will—a pretty, innocent, sweet-hearted chatter of home and friends and books and dresses, and “Do you remember,” and “Oh, just suppose,” which unconsciously revealed the character of both.

Absorbed as he was in Cynthia and all that belonged to her, Miles was more than once arrested by Betty herself, and asked himself if it could be true or only imagination that she had gained immensely in beauty, softness, and general charm since his return five weeks ago. There was an expression on her face in these last days which transfigured the old Betty into something a hundred times sweeter and more attractive. Happiness enveloped her as an atmosphere,—an almost tremulous happiness, as of one fearful of her own joy. Miles felt assured that Cynthia noticed this new development as he did himself, as he saw the grey eyes rest on her friend's face with a tender wistfulness of gaze, and heard the fluttering sigh with which she turned aside.

Never again had Cynthia breathed a word of complaint for her own limitations. After that first involuntary outburst she had carefully steered clear of the subject of self, and thrown herself heart and soul into her companion's interest. It was only when the last day of the short visit had been reached that she alluded to her own plans.

“We are ordered to leave Franton. It is very hot and oppressive in July and August, and the doctors want us to go to some high mountain resort in Switzerland. We shall move on by easy stages as soon as possible—possibly next week. It is quite uncertain what we shall do for the autumn and winter; we may possibly move on to the Engadine. In any case I'm afraid it is unlikely that we shall return to England. Will there be any chance of seeing you when we return in spring, Miles?”

And then Betty received a shock, for Miles replied quietly—

“I shall be back in Mexico long before then. I don't think I shall take more than three months' holiday this time. One gets tired of loafing after a busy life. I shall want to get back to work.”

“Miles, how can you!” cried his sister shrilly. “Three months! In another seven weeks—it's impossible! We have hardly had time to realise that you are home. We made sure that you would be with us till after Christmas at least. Three months' holiday after all these years! Oh, Miles, you can't mean it!”

“I came home to see you all, Betty, and to satisfy myself that you were well; when that's done there's no more excuse for lazying. I am entitled to a year's rest, if I like to take it; but if I go back now I shall be nine months nearer my next visit; and if the mine does all that we expect, I shall be back sooner than you imagine. Three years—even two—may see me home again, and then—things may be changed—it may be easier to stay—!”

He kept his eyes lowered as he spoke, but Betty understood. Perhaps Cynthia did too, for her pale cheeks flushed, and she made not a word of comment.

When Miles rose a few minutes later, she said “Good-bye” to him in exactly the same words which she had used six years before—

“Good-bye, Miles. I won't forget!”

And Miles crushed her little hands in his, and walked silently away.

At the gate Mrs Alliot was awaiting him, as on the morning of his first visit. She looked wistfully at the stern, white face, then laid her hand on his arm, and said in a tremulous voice—

“Mr Trevor—I—I want to thank you! You have been very brave and kind. Don't think I have not understood—mothers always understand—but for Cynthia's sake I was obliged to be selfish. It might have undone all she has gained, to have had any great excitement or agitation. She is very young yet—only twenty-two—and she looks upon you as a friend of her school-days. It was better for every reason that your relations should remain unchanged.”

Then Miles faced her, a tall imposing figure drawn to his full height, with shoulders squared and flashing eyes.

“For the present, yes! I have respected your wishes, and put my own hopes on one side. Now I am going back to work like ten men rather than one. If things go as we expect—as we have a right to expect—in a few years' time I shall be able to live where I please, to choose my home where it best suits myself—and others. If I live, Mrs Alliot, I shall be home again in a few years' time, and then I warn you that nothing and nobody shall keep me apart from Cynthia if she will be my wife. If she has recovered—well! If she is ill—I will take care of her! I have served for her six years already. I will serve six more if needs be, but I shall claim her in the end!”

“And if it is God's will that she lives and loves you, I will give her to you gladly. You are a good man, Miles. God bless

you! All good go with you!" said Mrs Alliot warmly.

Then they shook hands and parted. For how long? It was impossible to say. Before Miles lay the far country, danger by land and sea, a hard, adventurous life; before Cynthia years of what at the best must be a slow, difficult convalescence, with the ever-present danger of a relapse into her old condition. Only God knew, Who holds the issue of time. Their greatest stronghold lay in their confidence in Him.

That evening Betty sat beside Will Gerard on the sloping beach, and watched the sun set in a silence tinged with melancholy. Miles' announcement of a speedy return to America had planted a dart in her heart which was not solely on his own account; for if he went, would not his partner go too, leaving her to a life of such blank emptiness as was terrifying to contemplate? All day long the thought had haunted her; she had longed yet dreaded to speak on the subject, and now that evening was here, she felt it impossible to face the long hours of the night without some certain knowledge.

A few minutes before, Miles had taken Jill for a walk along the sands; in a short time they would return, and the opportunity for quiet conversation would be over. Betty turned slowly, to meet her companion's deep-set eyes fixed intently on her face. He had fallen into a habit of watching her in this earnest manner, and was often able to divine her thoughts even before she spoke.

"What is it?" he asked gently. "Something is troubling you. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"It's Miles! He said this morning that he intended to take only three months' holiday—that means to leave England in six or seven weeks from now. I can't believe it. We counted on six months or more,—possibly even a year. Do you think he seriously means to go?"

"I am sure he does, and I think he is right. If you want to be really kind, Miss Trevor, you won't ask him to stay."

Betty's lips trembled.

"Oh, perhaps not, but it is hardest of all to feel that he *wants* to go; that with all our love and care we are so much outside his life that we can't make him happy or satisfied. Poor mother! It must be dreadful to bring up a child all those years, and to long and long for his return, and then see him in a hurry to rush away again, just because—oh, I know that you know the real reason—because of a girl of whom, after all, he has seen very little! It's very hard!"

"Yes, it is hard—but it is the natural course of events, and I am sure Mrs Trevor realises that Miles is one of the best sons that it is possible for a woman to have. He doesn't love you any the less because he feels the need of getting back to his work. A man must work if he has any trouble weighing upon him; it is the only safe way of letting off steam. Fortunately there is plenty for him to do, and the chances are good for a speedy return."

He paused, and Betty turned her head aside, and gazed over the darkening sea.

"And—you?" she asked softly. "Will you go too?"

"That depends."

"On business?"

"Partly. If things go on as well as they have started, the company will be floated in another month, and I shall be of more use at the other end than here. I have made no plans, however. There are other considerations which come even before business."

He paused again, as if waiting to be questioned, but Betty did not speak. The gentle break of the water was the only sound which broke the silence. Afar off she could just distinguish the dark, retreating figures of Miles and Jill. She stared at them, at the sea, the sky, anywhere except at that pale, eager face which was watching her so intently.

"Betty," breathed a low voice by her side, "you know what I mean! You know that my going or staying depends upon yourself—that the happiness of my life is in your hands! Are you going to be kind to me, Betty? Will you let me love you?"

She drew herself away from him with a cry of protest, almost startling in its suddenness.

"Oh no, no! I cannot—I must not listen! It is quite impossible. Please don't say any more. I cannot listen to you!"

"But, Betty,"—he put out his hand and took forcible possession of the little cold fingers—"I must speak. We must have this out, and be honest with each other. Dear!—don't think me presumptuous, but lately I have fancied that you did care a little bit for me, and were not perfectly indifferent whether I came or stayed. Was I quite mistaken? Can you look me in the eyes, Betty, and say that I am no more to you than any other man?"

Betty did not attempt to meet his eyes, and her disclaimer was transparently artificial.

"Oh, of course you are Miles' friend, naturally it is different—but I can't be engaged to anybody. It's impossible. Please, please believe that I know what I say!"

"Not unless you tell me the reason why it is impossible. Is there someone else, Betty? Someone whom you love better than me?"

"No—yes! I don't know if I love him, but I have always felt as if I belonged to him, and must wait till he came back.

You would think me mad if you knew the whole story. I sometimes think I am mad myself, but I feel as if I should be betraying a trust if I married another man.”

Will Gerard sat very still for a moment. Then: “Tell me about it!” he said hoarsely. “Tell me! I ought to know. Perhaps I shall understand.”

“I don’t understand myself,” said Betty sadly. “I have tried not to care for you, but I do care in spite of trying. When I thought of you going away, my heart stood still, but the other thing has gone on so long; it has been part of my life, and even for your sake I can’t forget it. If I could be sure that he was well and happy, and had found someone else to love him, then to be your wife would be the greatest happiness in the world; but until I hear, I feel—*bound!* We only met once. That sounds mad enough, doesn’t it? And I know nothing of him but his Christian name. It was an evening more than six years ago; we had been at a concert at the Albert Hall, and when we came out there was a black fog, and I lost Miles, and met this man, who brought me home instead. He was in great trouble—I found it out from something he said—in such terrible trouble that he had lost all hope, and made up his mind to commit suicide. That was the first time that I had ever been brought face to face with real trouble, and it changed my whole life. Think of it! I was coming back to my happy home from an afternoon’s pleasure, and he—was going to the river...”

Will Gerard had been sitting listening to her with his head buried in his hands, but at the sound of that last word he raised his face, and turned towards her with a sudden, passionate gesture.

“And you came to him like a good angel in the midst of the darkness—came to him without a face or a name,—just as a girl’s sweet voice bidding him take courage, and sending him out to a fresh battle! And all these years you have treasured him in your faithful heart, and waited for his return; and he has waited too, Betty, and worked hard—worked for you with the thought of you before him! And now that he can repay his debts and look the world in the face once more, he comes to you for his reward. Betty, Betty, a man may have more names than one—is my face quite strange to you? Have you never seen it before—in a half light like this, lit by a flickering flame? Betty, *look!* What do you see?”

She gave a little gasp of incredulity—rapture—relief, and held out her hands towards him.

“Ralph, Ralph! It is you—you have come home!”

So the long dream was fulfilled, and the fairy prince threw off his disguise, and showed himself in the shape of the struggler who had bravely redeemed a past offence. In loving one, she could love both. Past and present united in bestowing a perfect happiness. Betty held Ralph’s hands in her own, and looked deep into his eyes.

The End.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BETTY TREVOR ***

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