Title: More about Pixie

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Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

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Chapter One.

A New Neighbour.

The night nurse was dusting the room preparatory to going off duty for the day, and Sylvia was lying on her water-bed watching her movements with gloomy, disapproving eyes. For four long weeks—ever since the crisis had passed and she had come back to consciousness of her surroundings—she had watched the same proceeding morning after morning, until its details had become almost unbearably wearisome to her weak nerves.

First of all came Mary to sweep the floor—she went down on her knees, and swept up the dust with a small hand-brush, and however carefully she might begin, it was quite, quite certain that she would end by knocking up against the legs of the bed, and giving a jar and shock to the quivering inmate. Then she would depart, and nurse would take the ornaments off the mantelpiece, flick the duster over them, and put them back in the wrong places.

It did not seem of the least importance to her whether the blue vase stood in the centre or at the side, but Sylvia had a dozen reasons for wishing to have it in exactly one position and no other. She liked to see its graceful shape and rich colouring reflected in the mirror which hung immediately beneath the gas-bracket; if it were moved to the left it spoiled her view of a tiny water-colour painting which was one of her greatest treasures, while if it stood on the right it ousted the greatest treasure of all—the silver-framed portrait of the dear, darling, most beloved of fathers, who was afar off at the other side of the world, tea-planting in Ceylon.

Sylvia was too weak to protest, but she burrowed down among the clothes, and moped to herself in good old typhoid fashion. "Wish she would leave it alone! Wish people wouldn't bother about the room. Don't care if it is dusty! Wish I could be left in peace. Don't believe I shall ever be better. Don't believe my temperature ever *will* go down. Don't care if it doesn't! Wish father were home to come and talk, and cheer me up. Boo-hoo-hoo!"

The tears trickled down and splashed saltly against her lips, but she kept her sobs under control, for crying was a luxury which was forbidden by the authorities, and could only be indulged in by stealth.

The night nurse thought that the patient had fallen asleep, but when she went off duty, and her successor arrived, she cast a suspicious glance at the humped-up bedclothes, and turned them down with a gentle but determined hand.

"Crying again?" she cried. "Oh, come now, I can't allow that! What are you crying about on such a lovely, bright morning, when you have had such a good night's rest?"

"I had a horrid night. I couldn't sleep a bit. I feel so mum-mum-miserable!" wailed the patient dolefully. "I'm so tired of being in bed."

"You won't have very much longer of it now. Your temperature is lower than it has ever been this morning. You ought to be in good spirits instead of crying in this silly way. Come now, cheer up! I am not going to allow such a doleful face."

"I'm very cheerful when I'm well. Ask Aunt Margaret if I'm not. I've a most lively disposition. Everyone says so," whined Sylvia dismally. "I'm tired of everything and everybody. So would you be if you'd been in bed for two months."

"Tired of me as well as the rest?"

“Yes, I am. You are a nasty, horrid, strict, cross thing.” But a smile struggled through the tears, and a thin hand stole out from beneath the clothes and pressed the white-sleeved arms in eloquent contradiction. Whatever Sylvia was tired of, it was certainly not this gentle, sweet-faced little woman who—humanly speaking—had brought her back from the verge of the grave. She snoodled her head along the pillow so as to lean it against the nurse’s shoulder, and said in weak, disconnected snatches, “I’m sorry—I’m so horrid. I feel so cross and low-spirited. I want—a change. Can’t you think—of something nice?”

“You are going to have some beautiful chicken-soup for your lunch. It is in a perfect jelly.”

“Hate chicken-soup! Hate the sight of soup! Want to have salmon and cucumber, and ice creams, and nice rich puddings.”

Nurse laughed complacently.

“So you shall—some day! Glad you feel well enough to want them now. Would you like to be carried to the sofa by the window for an hour this afternoon, while your bed is being aired and made comfortable? I think it would do you good to lie in the sunshine, and the doctor could help me to carry you. It would be quite exciting to see a glimpse of the outer world, wouldn’t it?”

“Rather! I can’t believe that everything is going on just the same. Are all the neighbours alive still? Is the old man at the corner alive? Has the little girl at Number Five grown-up and put on long frocks? I feel as if I had been lying here for years and years. I believe I have grown grey myself. Give me a hand-glass, Whitey, and let me see how I look.”

Whitey walked obediently across the room, and brought back the silver-backed glass from the dressing-table. She was accustomed to her nickname by this time, and was indeed rather proud of it than otherwise. She had been known successively as “Spirit of the Day,” and “The White Nurse,” during the hours of delirium, and the abbreviation had a natural girlish ring about it, which was a herald of returning health.

“There, look at yourself, Miss Conceit!” she cried laughingly, and Sylvia held the glass erect in both hands and stared curiously at her own reflection. She saw a thin, clear-cut little face, with arched eyebrows, large brown eyes, an aquiline nose, and full, pouting lips. The cheeks showed delicate hollows beneath the cheek bones, and the eyes looked tired and heavy, otherwise there was no startling change to record.

“I don’t look as much older as I expected, but I’ve got a different expression, Whitey—a sort of starved-wolf, haggard, tired-out look, just exactly like I feel. Aren’t I beautifully thin? It’s always been my ambition to be slim and willowy, like the people in fashion plates. I shall be quite a vision of elegance, shan’t I, Whitey?”

“Um! Well,” said Whitey vaguely, “you must expect to look very slight after lying in bed for so long, but it doesn’t matter about that. You won’t trouble about appearances, so long as you feel well and strong again.”

“Yes, I shall!” said the invalid stubbornly. She turned her head on one side and stared intently at the long plaits of hair which trailed over the pillow—her “Kenwigs” as she had dubbed them, after Charles Dickens’s immortal “Miss Kenwigses,” who are pictorially represented in short frocks, pantaloons, and tight plaits of hair, secured at the ends by bows of ribbon.

“My Kenwigs look very thin,” she said anxiously. “I used to have three thick coils. People’s hair doesn’t come out after typhoid fever, does it, Whitey? I shall be furious if mine does.”

“Oh, hair generally comes out a little in autumn,” replied Whitey easily. “Now you have looked at yourself quite long enough. I will put back the glass and prepare some food while your aunt comes to see you, but I shall tell her not to talk too much, for the doctor won’t let you be moved if you are looking tired and exhausted.”

Sylvia sighed to herself, for interviews with Aunt Margaret were a decided trial in these days of convalescence, when every nerve seemed on edge and ready to be jarred. She was nearly twenty-two, and for the first year after leaving school the dear old dad had been in England, and she had had the most delightful time travelling about with him. He always declared that he was a poor man, that tea was doing so disgracefully badly, that he expected to retire into the workhouse in the course of the next year, but, all the same, he never appeared to be short of money, and the travelling was done in the most comfortable and luxurious of fashions. Sylvia was his only child, and in his eyes was the most beautiful and accomplished creature in the world, so that it was a trying experience to be domiciled with an elderly maiden aunt, whose ideas were as early Victorian as her furniture, who had forgotten what it felt like to be young, and was continually aggrieved because her niece had not learned to be old.

During the long year of idleness Sylvia had cherished the idea that her father would take her back to Ceylon, when she would reign as Queen of the Bungalow, charm the hearts of the coolies by her beauty and dignity, pay frequent visits to Kandy, and become one of the favourites of society; but when it came to the point it appeared that he had no intention of the sort. In two or three years he hoped to be able to settle in England, and meantime his ambition for his daughter demanded that she should remain at home and devote her time to music, for which she showed an unusual talent. If he had other reasons he kept them to himself, but as a matter of fact he dreaded a possible marriage abroad, which would condemn the girl to a life of separation from so much that is good and pleasant, and if any qualms arose as to the cheerfulness of the home in which he was leaving her, he consoled himself by the reflection that he would be able to make up for temporary deprivations in the years to come.

Mr Trevor sailed off to the East, and Sylvia took up her abode at Number 6 Rutland Road, in an unfashionable suburb in the north of London, and settled down to being a “good industrious girl” with what grace she might. She did not understand Aunt Margaret, and Aunt Margaret felt it a decided trial to have her sleepy home invaded by a restless young creature, who was never so happy as when she was singing at the pitch of her voice, rushing up and down stairs, and playing silly schoolboy tricks; but fate had ordained that they were to live together, and they had jogged

along more or less peacefully until that unlucky day when the girl had sickened for her dangerous illness. Then, indeed, Aunt Margaret realised that she had grown to love her wayward charge, and all the manifold demands and inconveniences of illness were swallowed up in anxiety during the first anxious weeks. She allowed not only one, but two of “those dreadful nurses” to take possession of her spare rooms, submitted meekly to their orders, and saw her domestic rules and regulations put aside without a murmur of protest; but when the crisis was safely passed, and recovery became only a matter of time, the old fussy nature reasserted itself, and her eyes were open to behold the dire results of a long illness.

This bright October morning she came stooping into Sylvia’s bedroom, a slight woman with a narrow bent back, brown hair smoothed neatly down on each side of a withered, dried-up face, with a patch of red on the cheek bones, and sunken brown eyes roving restlessly to right and left. She wore a black stuff dress, a satin apron with pockets and an edging of jet, and knitted mittens over her wrists—a typical old lady of the ancient type. Yet as she stood beside the bed there was a curious likeness to be observed between her face and the one on the pillow; and Sylvia recognised as much, and felt a thrill of dismay at the thought that some day she, too, would be frail and bent, and wear a cap and mittens, and have rheumatic joints, and attacks of bronchitis if by chance she was so imprudent as to go out without putting on goloshes, a woollen “crossover,” and a big silk muffler beneath her mantle. To one-and-twenty it seemed an appalling prospect, and one to be shunted into the background with all possible speed.

“Well, my love, and how are you this morning? Much better, I hear. A good drop in temperature,” said Aunt Margaret, pecking her niece’s cheek with her lips, and answering her own question without waiting for a reply, as her custom was. “Nurse tells me that you will soon be up again, and I’m sure it is time. This room needs a regular spring cleaning, and as for the new drugget on the landing—three new spots of milk this morning, to say nothing of what has gone before! If I had known you were going to be ill I would have made the old one last another year, for it is sheer waste of money buying new things to have them ruined in six months. The last one was down thirteen years, and looked very little worse than this does now!”

“Father will buy you another. You must put it down as one of the expenses. He won’t mind so long as I get better,” said the invalid wearily; whereupon Aunt Margaret drew herself up with an air of wounded pride.

“Indeed, my dear, your poor father will have enough to do to pay all the doctors and nurses without being called upon for extras. I am willing to bear my own share, though I will say my stair-carpets have had as much wear and tear in the last two months as in half a dozen years before, and that Nurse Ellen is a most careless creature, she leaves everything in a muddle! If you get up, my dear, you must wear my wadded jacket. I had a young friend—she was the cousin of Sarah Wedderburn, who lived in Stanhope Terrace, and married young Johnson of Sunderland.—You have heard me speak of the Johnsons, who were at school with your Aunt Emma?”

Sylvia blinked her eyelids in a non-committal manner which might be taken either for assent or denial. She was afraid to confess ignorance of the Johnson family, lest Aunt Margaret’s love of biography should take a further flight in order to recall Sarah Wedderburn’s cousin to her remembrance.

“And what did she do?” she queried weakly. “Don’t tell me anything gruesome, please, aunt, because I feel so low-spirited this morning that I can’t bear anything depressing!”

“I should be very sorry to depress you, my dear. Nothing is farther from my wishes, and if she had been careful nothing need have happened. Her sister told me it was all her own fault for not being sufficiently wrapped up. I’ll tell you the whole story another day when there is more time, for now I must go out to do my housekeeping. These meals will be the death of me! The cloth is never off the table. I quite expect Mary will give notice at the end of the month, and goodness knows what we shall do then, for it seems impossible to get hold of respectable girls. The milk-bill has just come in for the month. Ruinous! Ruinous! Now, my love, you must really cheer up and try to look more like yourself. Perhaps I shall find you on the sofa when I come back. Tell nurse not to use my best cushions; your own pillows will do perfectly well.”

She bustled out of the room, and Sylvia stared into space with a doleful face.

“It’s all very well to ask me to be cheerful, when she tells me in the same breath that I am ruining her, and her beloved furniture. I’m sure I didn’t want to be ill! If dad were at home he would never reproach me.” The tears were very near falling once more, but just at that moment there came the sound of a manly footstep, and in walked the doctor, large, stout, beaming, a very incarnation of health and good spirits.

“Well, and so nurse tells me you think of going to the seaside to-day! You are getting tired of yourself, and want a change—eh? I don’t wonder at that. You think you would enjoy having a little peep at the world again? Let me feel your pulse and see if I can allow it.”

The pulse was quite satisfactory, so nurse and doctor promptly set to work to spread blankets on the couch, draw forward screens to prevent possibility of draught, and bank up pillows to allow a glimpse of the road beneath. Then Sylvia clasped her arms tightly round the nurse’s neck, the doctor raised her feet, there was a moment’s dizzy confusion, while her eyes swam and her ears hummed, and there she lay on the sofa, as at the end of a long and arduous journey, while her attendants wrapped her up in blankets and eiderdowns, and looked anxiously to see how she had borne the exertion. The little face was very white, but bright with pleasure and excitement, and the offer of smelling salts and cordials was laughed aside with good-natured contempt.

“No, no—I’m all right—just a little breathless after that whirl through space. How funny the room looks! I’ve looked at it broadways so long that I can’t recognise it from this point of view. Is that the water-bed? What a strange-looking thing! just like a lot of hot bottles joined together. It *is* comfortable over here! I’d like to stay all day. Oh, oh, oh! here’s the butcher’s cart! How lovely it is to see the world again!”

The jovial-looking doctor shrugged his shoulders as he took his departure. The poor child must have been in sad

straits indeed if she found the sight of a butcher's cart so exciting! He would have enjoyed sitting beside her and listening to her rhapsodies, but was obliged to hurry off to other patients, while Whitey seated herself beside the couch, and began hemming strips of muslin to be made into those starched cap-strings which were tied so jauntily beneath her chin.

"Oh, Whitey," cried Sylvia, "I feel better already! It all looks so bright, and cheerful, and alive! I'm simply dying to go out for a drive, and to see the people walking about. I used to think this such a dull little road, but now it seems quite gay and fashionable. I've seen three perambulators already, to say nothing of the butcher's cart! I wish the Number Seven lady would go out for a walk, and let me see her autumn clothes. She wears all the colours of the rainbow, and looks like a walking kaleidoscope... Whitey! Oh, Whitey!"

The weak voice rose to a squeal of excitement, and the nurse bent forward curiously to discover the reason of so much agitation. To the ordinary eye, however, there was nothing to be seen, for Sylvia's outstretched hand pointed to a semi-detached villa in no way distinguished from the rest of the row.

"It's taken!" she cried—"Number Three is taken! It has been empty for a year, and I have simply longed for someone to come, for it is the most convenient house to watch, and I take such interest in the neighbours. It's pretty lonely for me here, for I haven't a single girl-friend. Father kept me at school in Brussels for the sake of learning the language, but almost all the girls were French or American, and none of them live in London. Aunt Margaret introduced me to some 'young friends' when I first arrived, but I thought they were horrid prigs, and I suppose they thought I was mad, so the friendship didn't progress. I amuse myself with my music and in dreaming of the time when father comes home, but every time a house changes hands I have a wild hope that there will be a girl in the family, who would be lively and jolly like myself. I'm very nice when I'm well, Whitey—I am really! You needn't laugh like that. I daresay you would be fractious yourself if you had to lie in bed for months and months, and had an old griffin to mount guard over you, who made you eat against your will, and bullied you from morning till night... What was I talking about last? Oh yes, I wanted to ask if you had seen anything of these new people, and what they were like."

"I haven't had much time for looking out of the window, but I have seen a young lady and gentleman going out and in. I think they are a newly-married couple, for they look very juvenile and affectionate. He is dark and handsome, and she is fair, and I should say very pretty."

Sylvia's face clouded with disappointment.

"Bother the husband! She won't want me or anyone else to interrupt the duet. I do wish it could have been a family with a daughter. The curtains don't look newly-married, Whitey!"

"No, they don't. I thought that myself. The house doesn't look as smart and fresh as one expects under the circumstances, but perhaps they are not well off, and had to be content with what they could get. You should not leap to the conclusion that she won't want you. Brides often feel very lonely through the day when their husbands are in the city, and I should think she would be delighted to have a friend of her own age so near at hand. We will watch and see if we can get a glimpse of her. She is almost sure to have gone out for a walk this fine morning, and if so she will come home in time for lunch."

From that moment Sylvia's eyes were glued to the window, and every woman between the ages of sixteen and sixty was in turn heralded as the bride, and scornfully laughed aside by the nurse.

"I told you that she was young and pretty!" she repeated laughingly. "I didn't mean that she was a schoolgirl, or a middle-aged woman. If she is coming at all she will be here within the next half-hour, so lie still and rest, and I'll play Sister Anne for you."

Ten minutes passed, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and Whitey was beginning to hint at a return to bed, when at last the longed-for figure hove in sight. Sylvia raised herself on her pillows and peered eagerly forward, her scarlet dressing-jacket making a brilliant patch of colour against the background of white. She saw a slight, graceful figure clad in a tightly fitting black cloth costume, and a mass of flaxen hair beneath a sailor hat, and even as she looked the girl raised her head and stared upward with eager interest. She had a delicate, oval face and grey-blue eyes beneath thoughtful brows, but at the sight of the invalid the whole face flashed into sunshine, and the lips curled into a smile of such irrepressible rejoicing which was more eloquent than words. The next moment her head was lowered, and she walked demurely up the path dividing the little gardens, while Sylvia lay back on her pillows a-quiver with excitement.

"Oh, oh, the d–arling! What a perfect duck of a darling! Did you see her smile? Didn't she look glad to see me? Whitey, why did she look so pleased? What can she know about me?"

"My dear, she has seen the doctor's carriage drive up at all hours of the day, and two nurses going in and out, to say nothing of the bark which was laid down on the road. She must have known that someone was seriously ill, and no doubt the servants have told her that it was a young girl like herself. Yes, it was delightful to see her. You won't have any better congratulation on your recovery than that smile!"

"Whitey, she is in black! Brides don't wear black."

"They are obliged to wear it sometimes, dear. You can't lay down a rule about such things."

"She looks too young to be married. She ought to play about with me for a year or two first. I hate that man for taking her from me! That's the girl I should marry myself if I had a chance. Do find out what her name is, Whitey. Mary is sure to know, for she gossips with the other servants while she is cleaning the steps. Yes, I'll go back to bed now. I'm tired, and I don't care to see anyone else. I'll go to sleep and dream about that smile!"

Chapter Two.

An Unexpected Visitor.

“Aunt Margaret, can you tell me anything about the people who have come to Number Three? I saw the lady coming in just now while I was sitting up, and I do so want to know her. Have you been to call while I was ill?”

Miss Munns crossed her hands on her lap, and looked the image of dignified reproach.

“My dear, do you suppose I have had leisure for social engagements? I know nothing about the people, except that their blinds are invariably crooked, and every one drawn up to a different length. Most untidy the house looks! A dear friend of mine used to say—Mary Appleford, whose father was the clergyman in my old home in Leicestershire—charming old man who married Lady Evelyn Bruce—most aristocratic family!—Mary always declared that she could judge a woman’s character by the appearance of her windows. Judged from that standpoint, I should not feel disposed to call on the mistress of Number Three.”

“But you haven’t seen her, aunt; if you did, you could not help loving her. She looked so delighted to see me sitting up, and gave me such a delicious smile!”

“Smiled at you, do you say? A most unladylike thing to do! The first advances should come from our side, as she would know if she had any experience of society. I hope, my dear, that you were not so foolish as to respond. One cannot be too careful about strangers in this big wicked city. I shall never forget my poor dear cousin telling me how she called on a most superior-looking lady who came to live in the same terrace, and two months later the police raided the house, and it turned out that the husband made false coins in the back kitchen, and the wife circulated them among the tradesfolk. So awkward for Maria!”

Sylvia brought her eyebrows together in a frown, and tossed about on her pillow. She felt irritated and disappointed, and that made her head ache, and the headache sent down her spirits again, and eclipsed the brightness of the morning. If Aunt Margaret refused to call, she could not make the acquaintance of the fair unknown, and it would be a tantalising experience to see her every day, and, yet be as far removed from friendship as if they lived a dozen miles apart!

During the weeks which followed, nurse and patient kept a close watch on the little house over the road, and were rewarded by witnessing several interesting domestic scenes.

On Saturday afternoon, for instance, Edwin came home early to show himself in his turn. He was tall, dark, and handsome; dressed in the height of the fashion, and bore himself with such an air of complacency and benign patronage towards his fellows, that he looked far more like a prince of the blood than an ordinary city man. He carried a little bunch of flowers in his hand, and whistled as he drew near the gate in orthodox, newly-married fashion, and the pretty girl flew to the door, and nodded her head at him in happy welcome. He bent down to kiss her, and she took the flowers and sniffed at them lovingly; then they walked together down the little path to examine the growth of some sooty chrysanthemums and three struggling creepers placed against the house.

Edwin shook his head after the inspection, as though it had been far from promising, and then, instead of looking disappointed, they both laughed, turned round and round to look over their twelve-yard domain, and laughed again as if it were the best joke in the world. Then Angelina said something in a low aside, whereupon Edwin strolled to the gate, and in the most casual manner looked up the road and down the road, and then straight across at the window where the invalid lay!

“She told him to look!” cried Sylvia breathlessly, and her pale cheeks flushed until they were almost as red as the dressing-jacket itself. “He is very handsome, Whitey. I don’t dislike him as much as I expected. Oh dear, they look disgustingly happy! I am sure they don’t want me a bit, and I want them dreadfully. He doesn’t seem the sort of man to coin false money, does he? Do please casually remark to Aunt Margaret how very nice and distinguished they look! It’s my one object in life at present to make her call upon them.”

The next day the situation developed still further, for a form was seen seated at a window, who must, of course, be Edwin; yet he looked strangely younger and fairer in colouring. Nurse and patient debated the point hotly, until presently the door opened and out came one, two, three masculine creatures, all as like as peas in a pod, except for the difference in years which divided Edwin from the handsome striplings on either side. They stood together in the tiny garden, obviously waiting for the mistress of the house, and when she did not appear, the youngest of the three picked up pieces of gravel and threw them up at a bedroom window, while the others whistled and beat upon the gate with their sticks.

Angelina strolled to the window in response to these demonstrations, and stood smiling at them while she fastened on her hat, but she did not appear to hurry herself in the least, nor did the brothers show any signs of annoyance at their long waiting. When at long last she made her appearance, there was great manoeuvring to get a place by her side, and away they trotted, four abreast, pushing everyone else off the pavement, but apparently blissfully unconscious of anything unusual in the proceeding.

Sylvia and Whitey watched until the last flutter of the black dress disappeared from sight, then fell to work to settle the identity of the new actors in the drama.

“They are brothers—there is no doubt about that; but they can’t live there, Whitey! That wouldn’t be at all newly-married. Do you suppose they are here for the day? Perhaps they are in rooms in town, and Angelina lets them come down over Sundays sometimes as a treat. They seem very fond of her, and quite at home. I think that is the most likely explanation, don’t you?”

“I really think it is. Or they might live in the country and have come up to pay a visit and see the sights,” said Whitey thoughtfully.

She was thankful to find a subject of interest in these long days of convalescence to keep her patient’s mind from dwelling on depressing topics. Truth to tell, Sylvia was not getting well so quickly as had been expected, and besides more serious drawbacks there were minor troubles, trying enough to the girlish mind. She had to learn to walk again, like a baby, her back ached so badly that if she tried to stoop she screamed aloud with pain, and, worse than all, the plaits of hair grew small and beautifully less, until there was hardly anything left to plait. Sylvia had been proud of her hair, so she grew alarmed, and finally sent off in haste for her special barber to give advice and consolation in the difficulty. Consolation was not forthcoming, however, and the advice offered was by no means acceptable.

“You can’t do nothing—there’s nothing will be a bit of good,” the man said dolefully. “Whatever you do, it’s bound to come. The wisest thing would be to be shaved at once, and give it a start.”

Sylvia fairly screamed with horror and consternation.

“Shaved!” she cried. “I? I go about with a bald head—a horrible, bare, shiny scalp! I’d rather die! I’d rather—I’d rather—I’d rather anything in the world! It’s no use talking to me, Whitey; I will—not—be shaved!”

“Very well, dear,” assented Whitey easily. “Then you shan’t. We will just have a few inches cut off, and get a lotion to rub in to help the growth. I daresay the old hair will keep on until the new appears, and then you need never have the horrible experience of seeing a bald head.”

“I never should see it in any case. I’d buy a wig and wear it night and day. Nothing would induce me to look in the glass when it was off. I should never respect myself again. And oh, Whitey, even at the best the new hair will be ages growing, and it will be impossible to do anything with it!”

“Not at all. You can wear it short and curly. It would look very pretty, and suit you so well.”

Whitey was aggressively cheerful, but Sylvia refused to be comforted.

“It would be hateful. I don’t know anything more dejected-looking than to see the back of a shorn head under a pretty hat. I won’t *allow* my hair to fall out, and that’s the end of it!”

“Well, p’r’aps it won’t, after all, miss! We must ’ope for the best,” said the barber cheerfully.

He and Whitey talked incessantly all the time the hair-cutting was proceeding, with the fond hope of distracting the girl’s attention; but in naughty mood she refused to listen, insisted on sitting directly in front of her glass, and was rewarded for her pains by catching a glimpse of a bald spot on the crown of her head, which put the finishing touch of depression.

When the doctor arrived for his morning visit, he found a most melancholy patient, and held a serious consultation with nurse on the staircase before departing.

“She seems very low and listless this morning. Can’t you do something to cheer her up? I am afraid we are going to have trouble with that foot, and if she has to lie up again it will never do for her to get in a melancholy condition. You do your best, I know, but she needs a change. There is no reason why she should not see visitors. Has she no young friends who could come to have tea with her, and make her laugh?”

Whitey sighed, and leant against the banisters with a dejected air. It is exhausting work being cheerful for two, and no one would have welcomed a laughing stranger more heartily than herself. The question was,—where was she to be found?

“She was lamenting to me the other day that she had no girl-friends. She went abroad to school, and has had little opportunity of making acquaintances since she came home. Miss Munns is very—conservative. She does not care to associate with her neighbours. There is a charming girl who has come to live opposite. We watch her from the window, and Sylvia has been trying to persuade her aunt to call for the last three weeks; but it is useless. I’m sorry, for she looks just the very person we want.”

“Won’t call, won’t she? We’ll see about that. I’m not going to have my patient thrown back, after all the trouble I’ve had with her, for fifty old ladies and their prejudices. You leave it to me!” cried the jovial doctor, and tramped downstairs into the parlour to give his orders forthwith.

A little diplomacy, a little coaxing, a few words of warning to revive affectionate anxiety, a good big dose of flattery, and the thing was done; and, what was better still, Aunt Margaret was left under the happy delusion that the projected visit was the outcome of her own inspiration. She said nothing to the invalid, but at half-past three that afternoon she put on her woollen crossover, and a black silk muffler, and her best silk dolman, and dear Aunt Sarah’s sable pelerine, and her Sunday bonnet, and new black kid gloves, two sizes too big, carried her tortoiseshell card-case in one hand, and her umbrella in the other, and sailed across the road to call at Number Three.

Sylvia had gone back to bed after lunch by her own request. The hair-cutting ordeal had tired her out, and there was, besides, a deep-seated wearing pain in one foot and ankle which made her long to lie still and rest. She tried to sleep, and after long waiting had just arrived at that happy stage when thoughts grow misty, and a gentle prickling feeling creeps up from the toes to the brain, when a patriotic barrel-organ began to rattle out the strains of “Rule, Britannia” from the end of the road, and the chance was gone. Then Whitey read aloud for an hour, but the book had come to a dull, uneventful stage, and the chapters dragged heavily.

Sylvia longed for tea as an oasis in this desert of a day, and despatched nurse to bid Mary bring it up half an hour

before the usual time. And then came a charming surprise! Back came Whitey all smiles and dimples, the tired lines wiped out of her face as by a miracle. She stood in the doorway, looking at her patient with dancing eyes.

“I’ve brought you something better than tea!” she cried. “Just look what I have brought you!” As she spoke she moved to the side, as if to make room for another visitor, and—was it a dream, or could it really be true?—there stood the bride of Number Three, the sweet-faced Angelina, in her black dress, her grey eyes soft with welcome.

“Oh!” cried Sylvia shrilly. “Oh—oh!” She sat up in bed and stretched out two thin little hands, all a-tremble with excitement. “It’s *you*! Oh, how did you come? What made you come? How did you know I wanted you so badly?”

“I wanted you too!” said the girl quickly. She had a delightful voice; soft, and deep, and musical in tone, and she was prettier than ever, seen close at hand. Best of all, she was not a bit shy, but as frank and outspoken as if they had been friends of years’ standing. “Your aunt called on me this afternoon,” she went on, coming nearer the bed, and sitting down on the chair which nurse placed for her. “She invited me to come to see you some day, but I’ve a dislike to waiting, if there’s a good thing in prospect, so I asked if I might come at once, and here I am! I’m so glad you wanted to see me. I have watched you from my window, ever since you first sat up in your pretty red jacket.”

“And you looked up and smiled at me! I have watched you too, and wanted to know you so badly. I’ve been ill for months, it seems like years, and was so surprised to see that your house was taken. You can’t think how strange it is to creep back to life, and see how everything has gone on while you have lain still. It’s conceited, of course, to expect a revolution of nature, just because you are out of things yourself, but I didn’t seem able to help it.”

“I’m like that myself!” said the pretty girl pleasantly. There was a soft gurgle in her voice as of laughter barely repressed, and she pronounced her i’s with a faint broadening of accent, which was altogether quaint and delightful.

Sylvia mentally repeated the phrase as it sounded in her ears, “Oi’m like that meself!” and came to an instant conclusion. “Irish! She’s Irish. I’m glad of that. I like Irish people.” She smiled for pure pleasure, and the visitor stretched out a hand impulsively, and grasped the thin fingers lying on the counterpane.

“You poor creature, I’m grieved for you! Tell me, is your name Beatrice? I’m dying to know, for we had a discussion about it at home, and I said I was sure it was Beatrice. I always imagine a Beatrice dark like you, with brown eyes and arched eyebrows.”

“I don’t! The only Beatrice I know is quite fair and fluffy. No, I am not Beatrice!”

“But you are not Helen! I do hope you are not Helen. The boys guessed that, and they would be so triumphant if they were right.”

“No, I’m not Helen either. I’m Sylvia Trevor.”

“’Deed, you are, then! It’s an elegant name. I never knew anyone living by it before, and it suits you, too. I like it immensely. Did you,”—the grey eyes twinkled merrily—“did you find a nickname for me?”

Sylvia glanced at Whitey and smiled demurely.

“We called you Angelina. Oh, we didn’t think that was really your name, but we called you by it because you looked so happy and er—er affectionate, and pleased with everything. And we called your husband Edwin, to match. Those are the proper names for newly-married couples, you know.”

The girl stared back with wide grey eyes, her chin dropped, and she sat suddenly bolt upright in her chair.

“My *what*?” she gasped. “My h—” She put her hands against her cheeks, which had grown quite pink, and gurgled into the merriest, most infectious laughter. “But I’m not married at all! It’s my brother. He is not Edwin, he is Jack, and I’m Bridgie—Bridget O’Shaughnessy, just a bit of a girl like yourself, and not even engaged.”

Sylvia sank back in the bed with a great sigh of thanksgiving.

“What a relief! I was so jealous of that husband, for I wanted you for myself, and if you had been married you would have been too settled-down and domestic to care for me. I do hope we shall be friends. I’m an only child, and my father is abroad, and I pine to know someone of my own age.”

“I know; your aunt told me. We talked about you all the time, for I had been so interested and sorry about your illness, that I had no end of questions to ask. What a dear old lady she is! I envy you having her to live with. I always think one misses so much if there is no old person in the house to help with advice and example!”

The invalid moved restlessly on her pillows, and cast a curious glance at her companion. The grey eyes were clear and honest, the sweet lips showed not the shadow of a smile; it was transparently apparent that she was in earnest.

Sylvia felt a pang of apprehension lest her new friend was about to turn out “proper,” that acme of undesirable qualities to the girlish mind. If that were so, the future would be robbed of much of its charm; but the discussion of Aunt Margaret and her qualities must be deferred until a greater degree of intimacy had shown Bridgie the difficulties, as well as the advantages, of the situation. In the meantime she was longing to hear a little family history, and judiciously led the conversation in the desired direction.

“You are four young people living alone, then? for I suppose the two younger boys are brothers also. How fond they seem of you!”

“Why, of course. They dote upon me,” said Miss O’Shaughnessy, with an air of calm taking-for-granted which spoke

volumes for the character of the family. Then she began to smile, and the corners of her lips twisted with humorous enjoyment. “I wouldn’t be saying that we don’t have a breeze now and again, just to vary the monotony; but we admire one another the more for the spirit in us. And it’s pleasant having an even number, for we can fight two against two, and no unfairness. Maybe they are a bit more attentive than usual just now, for they have been without me most of the winter, poor creatures! We have had a troublous time of it these last two years. My dear father died the spring before last, and we had to leave our home in Ireland. Then one sister was married, and another went to Paris for her education, so there were two *trousseaux* to prepare, and when all the fuss and excitement was over I was worn-out, and the doctor said I must do nothing but rest for some months to come. The boys went into lodgings, while I junketed about visiting friends, and they are so pleased to get into a place of their own again, that they don’t know how to knock about the furniture enough, or make the most upset!”

It seemed to Sylvia an extraordinary manner of appreciating the delights of housekeeping, and she attempted to condole with the young mistress, only to be interrupted with laughing complacency.

“’Deed, I don’t mind. Let them enjoy themselves, poor dears. It’s depressing to boy creatures to have to think about carpets and cushions, and have no ease at their writing for fear of a spot of ink. I care far more about seeing them happy, than having the furniture spick and span. What was it made for, if it wasn’t to be used?”

Sylvia groaned heavily.

“Wait until you have been in our drawing-room!” she said. “The chairs were originally covered in cherry-coloured repp,—over that is a cover of flowered chintz,—over that is a cover of brown holland,—over that is a capacious antimacassar,—over that, each night of the week, is carefully draped a linen dust sheet. The carpet is covered with a drugget, the ornaments are covered with glass shades, the fire-screen is covered with crackly oilskin. Even the footstools have little hoods to draw on over the beadwork. I have lived here for two years, and on one occasion we got down as far as the chintz stratum, when Cousin Mary Robinson and dear Mrs MacDugal from Aberdeen came to stay for the night, but my eyes have never yet been dazzled by the glory of the cherry-coloured repp.”

Bridgie lengthened her chin, and shook her head from side to side, with a comical air of humiliation.

“Ah, well, tidiness is a gift. It runs in the family like wooden legs. Some have got it, and others haven’t, so they must just be resigned to their fate. I’m going to see these repp covers, though! I’ll wheedle and wheedle until one cover comes off after another, and never feel that I have done credit to Old Ireland until I get down to the foundation.” She rose from her chair, and held out a hand in farewell. “Nurse said I was to stay only a few minutes, as you were tired already, but I may come to tea another day if you would like to have me.”

“Oh, do, please! Come often! You can’t think how I should love it. Will you come for a drive with me some day, when it is bright and sunny?”

“I will. We could have a nice chat as we went along. I have not told you about my sisters yet. I have the dearest sisters in the world!” said Bridgie O’Shaughnessy.

Chapter Three.

Family Portraits.

Bright and sunny days are not common in November, but the invalid managed to go out driving in such fine blinks as came along, and in each instance “Angelina” was seated by her side. The friendship was progressing with giant strides, and doctor and nurse looked upon Bridgie O’Shaughnessy as their greatest assistant in a period of great anxiety.

Sylvia was now able to sit up and work and read; head and eyes had come back to their normal condition, but the treacherous disease had left its poison in foot and ankle, and the pain on movement became more and more acute. It required all the cheer that the new friend could give to hearten the invalid when once more she was sent back to counterpane land, with a big cage over the affected part to protect it from the bedclothes, and all manner of painful and exhausting dressings to be undergone.

Sylvia fumed, and grumbled, and whined; she grew sulky and refused to speak; she waxed angry and snapped at the nurse. Worst of all, she lost hope, and shed slow, bitter tears, which scalded the thin cheeks.

“I shall never get better, Whitey,” she sobbed miserably. “I shan’t try; it’s too much trouble. You might as well leave me alone to die in peace.”

“It’s not a question of dying, my dear. It’s a question of healing your foot. If I leave you in peace, you may be lame for life. How would you like that?” said Whitey bluntly. She knew her patient by this time, and understood that while the idea of fading away in her youth might appear sufficiently romantic, Miss Sylvia would find nothing attractive in the prospect of limping ungracefully through life. The dressings and bandagings were endured meekly enough after that, but the girl’s heart was full of dread, and the long dark days were hard to bear.

It became a rule that, instead of taking the meal alone, Bridgie O’Shaughnessy should come across the road to tea, and sit an hour in the sick-room while Whitey wrote letters or went out for a constitutional. She came with hands full of photographs and letters and family trophies, to give point to her conversation, and make her dear ones live in Sylvia’s imagination.

One day there was a picture of the old home—such a venerable and imposing building that Aunt Margaret, beholding

it, felt her last suspicions of counterfeit coining die a natural death, and gave instructions to Mary that the second-best tea-things were to be taken upstairs whenever Miss O'Shaughnessy was present. Sylvia was impressed too, but thought it very sad that anyone who had lived in a castle should come down to Number Three, Rutland Road. She delicately hinted as much, and Bridgie said—

"Yes, it would be hard if we took it seriously, but we don't. It's just like being in seaside lodgings, when the smallnesses and inconveniences make part of the fun. We are going home some day, when Jack has made his fortune, and until then my brother-in-law rents the Castle from us, and we go over and stay with him once or twice in the year. Esmeralda is mistress of Knock, and is having it put in such terrible order that we can hardly recognise the dear old tumbledown place. There is not a single broken pane in the glass-houses!" Bridgie spoke in a tone of almost incredulous admiration, the while she drew a large promenade photograph from its envelope. "There, that's Esmeralda! Taken in the dress in which she was presented."

Sylvia looked, and gasped with surprise. Such a vision of beauty and elegance, such billows of satin, such lace, such jewels and nodding plumes, were seldom seen in this modest suburban neighbourhood. She had never before had any connection with a girl who had been presented at Court, and the face which looked out of the photograph was as young as her own—startlingly, dazzlingly young.

"Your sister? Really! How per-fectly lovely and beautiful! Is she really as pretty as that? How old is she? What is her husband like? Is she very happy? She must be very rich to have all those beautiful things."

"She has more money than she can spend. Can you imagine that? I can't!" said Bridgie solemnly. "I asked Esmeralda what it felt like to be able to get whatever she liked without asking the price, and she said it was very soothing to the feelings, but not nearly so exciting as when she used to make up new hats out of nothing at all and a piece of dyed ribbon. She is only twenty—younger than I, and as beautiful as a picture. Geoffrey adores her. She has a dear little baby boy to play with, and wherever she goes people turn round to look after her, so that she walks about from morning till night in a kind of triumphal procession."

"How nice!" sighed Sylvia enviously. "Just what I should like. No one turns round to look after me, and I feel a worm every time I walk down Bond Street among all the horrible creatures who look nicer than I do myself. People say—sensible old people, I mean—that it is bad for the character to have everything that one wants. Do you think it is so in your sister's case? Is she spoiled by prosperity?"

Esmeralda's sister hesitated, loyally unwilling to breathe a word against a member of her family.

"She is just as loving and generous as she can be; thinks of every single thing that father would have liked, and makes a perfect mistress of the old place. The people adore her, and are in wholesome awe of her, too—far more so than they ever were of me. The boys get cross sometimes because she expects us to do exactly what she wishes, and that immediately, if not sooner, but it doesn't worry me. I agree with all she says, and then quietly go my own way, and the next time we meet she has forgotten all about it. She is just the least in the world inclined to be overbearing, but we all have our faults, and can't afford to judge each other. She has been a dear sweet sister to me!"

Bridgie smoothed the tissue paper carefully over the portrait and put it back in its envelope. Then she picked up a smaller photograph from the table, and her face glowed with tenderness and pride. "Now!" she cried, and her voice was as a herald's trumpet announcing the advent of the principal character upon the stage. "Now, here she comes! Here's Pixie! Here's our Baby!"

Sylvia sat up eagerly and held the photograph up to the light. She looked at it, and blinked her eyes to be sure she had seen aright. She cast a swift look at Bridgie's face to assure herself that she was not the victim of a practical joke. She pressed her lips together to repress an exclamation of dismay. She had expected to behold a vision of loveliness—the superlative in the scale in which the two elder sisters made positive and comparative, but what she saw was an elf-like figure sitting huddled in the depths of an arm-chair, with tiny hands clasped together, and large dilapidated boots occupying the place of honour in the foreground. Lank tails of hair fell to the shoulders, and while the nose was of the smallest possible dimensions, the mouth seemed to stretch right across the face. It seemed impossible that this comical little creature could belong to such a handsome and distinguished-looking family, still more so that her belongings should be proud of her rather than ashamed, yet there sat Bridgie all beams and expectancy, her sweet lips a-tremble with tenderness.

"That's little Pixie! Esmeralda gave her two shillings for unpicking some old dresses, and she went into the village and got photographed for my birthday present. There was a travelling photographer down for a week, and it's wonderfully like her for eighteenpence. The other sixpence she spent on a frame—green plush, with shells at the corners. Esmeralda had remarks to make when I put it on the drawing-room mantelpiece, and offered to give me a silver one instead." Bridgie smiled and shook her head with an expression which showed that the price of the green plush frame was above rubies. "No, indeed! It's not likely I will give up Pixie's present."

"She is not very like any of you!" Sylvia said lamely. She wanted to be pleasant and appreciative, but could not think what on earth to say next. "It must be—er—very nice to have a little sister. She is in Paris, you say. Will she be away long?"

"She is coming home for good in January. Geoffrey and Esmeralda are going over to bring her back, and she will go on with finishing lessons at home. We can't do without each other any longer. I feel quite sore with wanting her sometimes, and she is home-sick too. I had a letter from her this morning. Would you like me to read it to you to show you what she is like?"

"Please do!" said Sylvia politely, but in reality she was rather bored by the prospect.

It was one of Aunt Margaret's peculiarities that she insisted upon reading aloud the letters which she received from old-lady friends, and the incredible dulness of the epistles made them a trial to the patience of her lively young niece. She stifled a yawn as Bridgie straightened the sheets of foreign note-paper, and cleared her throat with prospective enjoyment.

"'Dearest, Darling People, especially Bridgie,—I was gladder than ever to get your letters this week, because it's been raining and dull, and the mud looked so home-like that it depressed my spirits. Thérèse has gone out for the day, so Père and I are alone. He wears white socks and a velvet jacket, and sleeps all the time. He told me one day that he used to be very active when he was young, and that was why he liked to rest now. "All the week I do nozzing, and on Sundays I repose me!" I teach him English, but he doesn't like to talk it much, because it's so difficult to be clever in a foreign language.

"'My dear, I never suffered more than when I first came here, and Thérèse telling everyone how amusing I was, and myself sitting as dumb as a mummy! I can talk quite beautifully now, and wriggle about like a native. I'll teach you how to shrug your shoulders, and you hold up your dress quite differently in France, and it's fashionable to be fat. Last night Thérèse let me have two girls for *souper*. They are called Marie and Julie, and wear plaid dresses, and combs in their hair. I like them frightfully, but they are very rude sometimes, saying France is better than England, and that we have big teeth and ugly boots. Then they got angry because I laughed, and said England always thought she was right, but that everyone else knew she was a cheat and a bully, and that she was the most disliked nation on earth! "And you are the politest," says I, quite composed, and at that they got red in the face, for I was all alone, and there were two of them in their own country.

"'When they went away they kissed me, and said they were sorry, and that my teeth weren't big a bit, and I said France was an elegant country, but you couldn't wear high heels in Ireland, or you'd never be free of the bog. It's a pity French people don't like us, and I don't think they always mean exactly what they say, but they make beautiful things to eat.

"'Thérèse gives me cooking lessons out of school hours, and I've lost my taste for coffee with grounds in it, like we had at Knock. Everything is as clean as if it were quite new, and there is such a different smell in the houses—a lonely smell! It makes me long for home and you, and a peat fire, and all the people in the streets speaking English, and never as much as thinking of the tenses of verbs.

"'You are quite sure I may come home in January, aren't you, Bridgie? You are not saying it just to pacify me? I'll tell you a secret! Once I thought of running away and coming back to you in London, because I couldn't bear myself any longer. I said to Thérèse, just in a careless kind of way, as if I had only thought of it that moment: "Supposing now that a young girl was in Paris, and wanting to run away to her friends in England, how would she set about getting there?"

"'And she never suspected a bit, for she said:—

"'"Supposing that she lived in this suburb, it would be quite easy to manage. She should rest tranquil until the family were in bed, and no one in the streets but thieves and robbers, and then slip out of the house and walk to the station. There would be no *voiture*, but perhaps the thieves may not see her, and all of them do not care about kidnapping children. When she reaches the station, she will take her ticket for England—it costs but a few sovereigns—and she has only to change twice, and get through the custom-house. If all went well, she would be in London next morning, while the poor friends in Paris might cry as much as they liked—they could not bring her back."

"'She seemed to think it quite easy, but I was afraid of the thieves, and had only three francs in my purse; and that afternoon they were both awfully kind to me, and Père called me *chèrie*, and Thérèse took me to the circus. The clown is called August, but the principal one is English, because they are the best. He made English jokes, and I laughed as loudly as I could, to show that I understood. The other people smiled with their lips, don't you know—the way people do when they don't understand, but think it is grand to pretend. I feel so stylish being English in France. When I come home to London, I'll be French!

"'Esmeralda sent me a book and some money for Christmas presents. Tell Jack to write me a funny letter with illustrations. How is the poor girl with the bark on the road? We haven't a single animal in the house, not even a cat. I miss them frightfully. Do you remember when my ferret died, and I filled up to cry, and the Major bought me a white rat for consolation? Health, and tons of love, darling, from your own Pixie.'"

Sylvia chuckled softly from the bed.

"It's not a scrap like a letter," she said. "It is just like somebody talking. What a jolly little soul! She seems very young, doesn't she? Some girls of sixteen are quite young ladies."

"Pixie will always be a child," said Pixie's sister fondly. "There is something simple and trustful about her which will keep her young all her life. She is so transparently honest, that it never occurs to her that anyone else can be different; and she is the kindest, most loving little creature that was ever created. Don't you think she looks a darling in the photograph?"

It had come at last, the dreaded question, and Sylvia tried her best to combine truthfulness with politeness.

"She has very sweet eyes. It is difficult to judge when you have never seen a person. She—she isn't exactly pretty, is she?"

"*Pretty*—Pixie pretty! I should think not, indeed!" cried Bridgie, with a heat of denial which seemed singularly out of

keeping with the occasion. From the manner of her reply it was evident that she considered Pixie's plainness a hundred times more *distingué* than Esmeralda's beauty. "She's the quaintest-looking little creature that ever you set eyes on, with the dearest, funniest face! Father used to call her the ugliest child in Galway. He was so proud of her, bless him!"

Bridgie sighed pensively, and Sylvia stared at her with curious eyes. So far she had made the acquaintance of but one member of the O'Shaughnessy family, but it seemed as though they took the various trials and vicissitudes of life in a very different spirit from the people with whom she herself had associated. Instead of moaning over the inevitable, they discerned the humour of the situation, and in happy fashion turned the trial into a joke.

"I wonder," sighed Sylvia to herself, "I wonder where the joke comes in in losing your hair. I suppose she would say it was so cool to be bald!" Not even to herself would she put into words the deeper, crueller dread which lay hauntingly in the background of her mind!

Chapter Four.

Dread.

The foot refused to heal, and one morning a well-known surgeon followed Dr Horton into the sick-room. The very sound of his name was as a death-knell to the girl in the bed, but she controlled herself by a mighty effort, and strained every nerve to watch the faces of her attendants during the examination which followed. She knew that they would keep up appearances in her presence, and so long as possible hide the worst from her knowledge; but if she appeared unsuspicious they would perhaps be less careful, and a stray word, an interchange of glances, might show the direction of their thoughts. She lay perfectly still, not even flinching with pain when the diseased bone was touched, for the tension of mind was so great as to eclipse bodily suffering; but the cool, business-like manner of the great surgeon gave no hint of his decision, while Dr Horton was as cheerful, Whitey as serenely composed, as on ordinary occasions.

The cage was replaced over the foot, the bedclothes put in order, a few pleasant commonplaces exchanged, and the trio adjourned for consultation. Trained to their work of self-repression, not one of them had given the slightest hint of what was feared, but their precautions were undone by the thoughtless haste of the watcher outside.

Miss Munns was hovering about the landing awaiting the verdict, and trembling at the thought of the news which she might have to send to her brother, when the door opened and the surgeon came towards her. Dr Horton and the nurse followed, and before the door was closed behind them an eager whisper burst from her lips—

"Can you save it? Must you ampu—"

Before the word was completed the surgeon's hand was over her lips, Whitey brought to the door with a bang, and three pale faces stared at each other in consternation. Had Sylvia heard? Could she have overheard? That was the question which was agitating every mind. They strained their ears for a cry from the sick-room, but no cry came. Whitey looked at the doctor and made a movement towards the door, and he bent his head in assent.

"Yes! Go in as if you had forgotten something. She may have fainted. Poor child, it was enough to make her!"

Tears of remorse were standing in Aunt Margaret's eyes, but she waited silently enough now while Whitey re-entered the room and strolled across to the window to pick up the book in which she wrote the daily report. She smiled at Sylvia as she passed, and Sylvia looked at her quietly, quite quietly, and the dark eyes showed no signs of tears. Whitey went back to the doctors with lightened face, and eased their minds by a definite assurance.

"She heard nothing. She is lying quite still and composed. She cannot possibly have heard."

They turned and went downstairs to the dining-room. Sylvia heard their footsteps die away in the distance, the opening and shutting of the door. The brown eyes shone with unnatural brilliancy, the hot hands were clasped tightly together beneath the sheet.

"God," she was crying deep down in her soul, "do You really mean it? I've been very wicked often, I've forgotten You and taken my own way, but I'm so young—only twenty-one—don't make me lame! I'll be good, I'll think of other people, I'll be grateful all my life. Don't make me lame! Think what it means to a girl like me to lose her foot! I have no mother, nor brothers, nor sisters, and father is far-away. It would be so dreadful to be shut up here and never, never run about any more. Have pity on me. *Don't make me lame*!"

It was a cry from the depths of her heart, very different from the formal prayers which she was accustomed to offer morning and evening—a plea for help such as she would have addressed to her dear earthly father in any of the minor difficulties of life, but in this great crisis of her fate she must needs go straight to the fountain of comfort—the Great Physician who was able to save the soul as well as the body.

All the rest of the day, as she lay so quietly on her pillows, she was talking to Him, pleading for deliverance, setting forth pathetic girlish arguments why she should be spared the coming trial. When the thought arose of many others younger than herself who were leading maimed lives, she thrust the memory aside as something which could not be faced, and her lips refused to utter the words which she had been taught to affix to her petitions. "'Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done.' I can't say it, Lord. I can't mean it!" she cried tremblingly. "Not yet! Forgive me, and be patient with me. I'm so frightened!" and even as the prayer went up, the assurance came into her soul that the Heavenly Father would understand, and show towards her the divinest of sympathy and patience.

For some reason which she would have found difficult to explain to herself Sylvia felt an intense disinclination to let her attendants know what she had overheard. She perceived that they were more than usually tender towards herself, and they on their part were puzzled by the quiet of the once restless patient. She grumbled no more about small unpleasantnesses—oh, how small they seemed! She was content to lie still and think her own thoughts, and seemed to have lost all interest in the ordinary events of the day.

Only once in the twenty-four hours did a smile light up the set face, and that was when Bridgie O'Shaughnessy appeared for her afternoon visit, and seated herself by the bedside. On one of these occasions, a week after the surgeon's first visit, Whitey went out for, her daily walk, and Sylvia watched her go and peered anxiously round the screen to make sure that the door was really shut. Then she stretched out her hand, and gripped Bridgie by the wrist. It was a very thin, feeble-looking hand, but the grip had nothing feeble about it—it was almost painful in its strength, and the brown eyes had a glazed misery of expression which made Bridgie tremble at the thought of what was to come.

"Bridget O'Shaughnessy, you call yourself my friend. Will you tell me the truth?"

"I'll not promise that, me dear. I'll not deceive you about anything if I can help it, but you are an invalid, and there are some questions which you should not ask me. Only the doctor should answer them."

But Sylvia went on with her story as if she had not heard the protest.

"The other morning Sir Alfred Heap came to see my foot. He said very little about it to me, and after examining it, went out of the room to consult with Dr Horton. Aunt Margaret was waiting for them on the landing, and they were not quick enough in shutting the door. I heard what she said. To-morrow morning Sir Alfred is coming again. Bridgie, —*is he going to cut off my foot*?"

"He is not, darling. He is going to give you chloroform and do something to the bone to try to make it sound and healthy again."

"And if that fails, will he cut it off then?"

"He will operate again, and go on trying as long as he dare."

"And if everything else fails, then—"

"Yes, Sylvia," said Bridgie gently.

Downstairs in the dining-room Miss Munns had been consulting with Whitey as to how the patient was to be prepared for the ordeal of to-morrow, and by whom the news should be broken. Whitey had taken the task upon herself with the unselfish heroism of her profession, but her pretty face was worn with the strain of this long anxious case, and Bridgie's heart had ached for her in her painful task. Now, in the midst of her own agitation, she felt a thrill of unselfish joy that she had been able to take one burden at least from those heavily-laden shoulders.

Sylvia knew not only of the ordeal of the morrow, but also of that nightmare dread of what might have to follow. She had known it for a week past, and had lain quietly on her bed with all the horror and misery of it locked up in her own heart. Such restraint seemed almost incredible to the outspoken Irish nature, but Bridgie's words of admiration brought an added shade over the invalid's face.

"No, it was not bravery, it was cowardice! I was like an ostrich hiding my head in the ground for fear of what I might see. I literally dare not ask until it came to the last moment. Oh, Bridgie, what a week it has been! Going to sleep with the weight on my heart; waking up and thinking, 'What is it? What is it?' and the shock of remembering afresh! I lay and thought it all out; never to be able to run, nor bicycle, nor skate, nor dance, nor even walk without crutches, to dread going upstairs, to be cut off from girls of my own age because I could not take part in their amusements, to hear people say 'Poor thing!' and look pitifully at me as I hobbled by. I've tried to be resigned and take it like invalids in books, but—I can't! I feel desperate. Bridgie, suppose it was you! How would you feel?"

"I should cry myself ill for two or three days, and then brisk up and be thankful that if it was one foot, it wasn't two!" said Bridgie quaintly. "That is, if I were quite certain about it, but I never believe in disagreeable things until they have really happened. Hope for the best as long as you can. You have clever doctors and nurses, and you will have a better chance if you keep up your spirits."

Sylvia shook her head hopelessly.

"It's easy to be philosophic for someone else. I could preach beautifully to you, Bridgie, if you were lying here instead of me, but the suspense is so hard to bear! I feel as if I could not live through another week like the last. Have you ever known what it was to drag through the days with a nightmare of dread growing bigger and bigger, nearer and nearer, to look ahead and see your life robbed of the things you care for most, to hope against hope, while all the time your heart is sinking down—down—"

"Down—until it is just one great big ache clouding out the whole world? Yes, I know!" said Bridgie quietly. "I have never had a bad illness, but my trouble came to me in a different way, Sylvia, and my time of suspense was not days, but weeks and months, I might almost say years, except that even my hopes died out before that time arrived!"

The two girls looked at each other intently, and the blank depression on the invalid's face gave place to one of anxious sympathy.

"You mean, of course, that it was a mental trouble. Could you tell me about it, Bridgie, do you think? I don't want to force your confidence, but I am so interested in you, and it would do me good to be sorry for someone beside myself.

Was it a—love affair?”

“I cared for him, but I am afraid he could not have liked me very much,” said Bridgie sadly. “I have never spoken of him except to Esmeralda and one other person, but I don’t mind telling you, dear, if it will be the least bit of help to you now. We seem to know each other so well that it seems absurd to think we had not met, two months ago.

“It was just someone I met one time when I was visiting, and when he was ordered abroad he asked if he might write while he was away. I was very happy about it, for I had never seen anyone I liked so much, and we wrote to each other regularly for over a year. They were not love-letters; just quite ordinary, sensible, telling-the-news, but there was always one little sentence in his which seemed to say more than the words, and to tell me that he cared a great deal. If a stranger had read it, he would not have understood, but I knew what he meant, and I used to skim over the pages until I came to those few words, and they were the whole letter to me.

“Looking back now I can see how I lived in expectation of mail day, but suddenly his letters stopped. When father was pronounced hopelessly ill, I sent him a hurried note, saying that we should have to leave the Castle, for all the money was gone, and from that day to this I have heard no more. It was very hard coming just then, Sylvia!

“For the first few months I was not really uneasy, though very disappointed. I knew that a soldier’s life is not always his own, and that he might have been ordered to a part of the country where it was impossible to send off letters, but then I read his name as taking part in some function in Bombay, and I knew that could be the case no longer. I would not tell Esmeralda to depress her in the midst of her happiness, so I just sat tight and waited, and the time was very long.

“When it came near mail day my hopes would go up, for it’s my nature to be cheerful. The postman would knock at the door, and my heart would go head over heels with excitement, and it would be a circular, or a bill wanting payment. Another time he would not come at all, and that was worse, for one went on drearily hoping and hoping, and pretending that the clock was fast. Now I forget mail days on purpose, for it is nearly eighteen months since he wrote last, and I have given up all hope of hearing.”

Sylvia drew a deep sigh, and knitted her forehead.

“I can’t believe that anyone could forget you when he had once cared. You are so different from other girls. It is most strange and mysterious. Do you think that perhaps—you won’t mind my suggesting it—the money had some influence with him? Perhaps he thought you were an heiress—at any rate, that your people were rich and influential, and when he heard that you were poor he may have changed.”

“No!” said Bridgie decisively. “No, I won’t think it! I won’t let myself think so badly of anyone for whom I have cared so much. I don’t know what his reasons were, and perhaps I never shall, but I would rather believe the best. Some people don’t find it easy to remember when they are far-away, and he might have a delicacy in writing to say that he had forgotten!

“If I had still been Miss O’Shaughnessy of Knock, I should have sent just one more letter to ask if anything was wrong, but I had too much pride to obtrude myself as Bridgie of nowhere. I have no reason to believe that my letter went astray, and even if it had, he would have written again if he had wished to hear. He is alive and well, I know so much, and I’m well too, and very happy with my boys. I had a bad time of it, and the suspense had more to do with making me ill than the hard work of that summer; but now I have faced the worst, and have far too much to do to be able to mope. Boys are such cheering creatures! They give you so much work. The very darning of their socks is a distraction!”

“It would distract me in a very different way!” said Sylvia, with a smile.

Chapter Five.

An Invitation.

The operation was successful and unsuccessful—that is to say, the fear of amputation was removed; but it became abundantly evident that it would be a very long time before Sylvia recovered the power of walking about with ease.

A few weeks earlier she would have been heartbroken at the prospect of a spell of crippledom, but the greater troubles eclipse the less, and compared with that other paralysing dread, it was a passing inconvenience at which she could afford to smile.

Poor child! her first impulse on recovering from the chloroform had been to dive to the bottom of the bed to feel if the foot were still there, and her elastic spirits went up with a bound as she listened to the surgeon’s reassuring report. She was perfectly willing to lie on the sofa and give up all idea of Christmas festivities, willing, in fact, in the relief and joy of the moment, to promise anything and everything if only she might look forward to unimpaired strength in the future.

As for Miss Munns, she rejoiced with grumbling, as her custom was, mingling thankful speeches with plaints for her own deprivations, to the mingled distress and amusement of her hearers. Christmas was drawing near, and there had been no time to prepare for the proper keeping of the festival, for cook had been too much occupied with jellies and beef-teas to have any time to spare. There were no mince-pies in the larder, no plum-puddings in their fat cloth wrappings, no jars of lemon cheese, no cakes, no shortbread, not so much as a common bun-loaf, and Aunt Margaret hung her head, and felt that a blot had fallen upon her escutcheon.

“I can’t fancy Christmas with bought mince-pies!” she said sadly. “I’ve kept house for forty years and never failed to make four plum-puddings—one for Christmas Day, one for New Year, one for company, and one for Easter. Some people make them without eggs nowadays, but I keep to the old recipe. My mother’s plum-puddings were quite famous among her friends. Of course, my dear, we have great cause for thankfulness, and I should have had no appetite if you had lost your foot; but it really upsets me to look at that larder! How many pounds of mincemeat have *you* made, Miss O’Shaughnessy, may I ask?”

Sylvia was lying on the sofa in the drawing-room, to which she had been carried in time for tea, and Bridgie was sitting beside her, looking with wondering eyes at the muffled splendours which she now beheld for the first time. She blushed as she heard the question, and adroitly evaded an answer, for, to tell the truth, she bought her pies from the pastry-cook, and congratulated herself on the saving of trouble.

“Oh, indeed, we get through a great deal, for the boys think nothing of three pies at a sitting. I’d be obliged to you, Miss Munns, if you would lend me your recipe for the pudding, for my cook is not the cleverest in the world, and, as Jack says, there is no monotony about her results. If she does a thing well three times, there’s all the more chance that it will be wrong the fourth, when you are encouraged to ask a friend to dinner.”

Aunt Margaret sawed the air with her mittened hands, and shook her cap in solemn denunciation.

“Method, my dear—method! They won’t take the trouble to measure the ingredients, but just trust to chance, so what can you expect? You shall have the recipe with pleasure, but if you take my advice you will look after the weighing yourself. Are you expecting any friends for the day, or perhaps one of your sisters?”

“No—we shall be quite alone. My married sister wanted us all to go to Ireland, but the boys cannot spare the time, and I will not leave them.” Bridgie sighed, and a shadow passed over her face. “It won’t seem like Christmas to have no coming nor going, and Esmeralda and Pixie so far-away. I have been trying to think of a diversion for the boys, but I might spare myself the trouble, for I’ve no money to pay for it if I had the idea.”

“Straitness of means is a great curtailer of pleasure,” said Miss Munns, gazing solemnly into space over the edge of her spectacles. “In my own family we have had sad experiences of the kind. My great-uncle was in most comfortable circumstances, and kept his own brougham and peach-houses before the failure of the Glasgow Bank. They removed to Syringa Villas after that, and did the washing at home. I shall never forget calling upon Emma the first Tuesday that the clothes were hanging out to dry in the back garden, and finding her in tears, with the blinds drawn down. She had a great deal of family pride, had poor Emma, for her mother belonged to the leading circles in Wolverhampton, and the steam of clothes in the boiler is most depressing unless you have been brought up to it from a child. George died soon after. He never held up his head again, and Emmeline, the daughter, had a very good offer from a corn-broker. She was a fine-looking girl, with black eyes and her poor father’s nose. She looked very well in the evening, when she was dressed, and had a colour.”

“And did she marry the corn-broker?” queried Bridgie eagerly.

Sylvia was flushed and frowning, more than half ashamed of the old lady’s disclosures, fearful lest they might affect her own importance in the estimation of a friend who had lived in a Castle, and owned a sister who went to Court, and profoundly uninterested in Emmeline and her destiny; but Bridgie was all animation and curiosity, her grey eyes wide with anxiety as to the success of the corn-broker and his suit. Here, indeed, was a listener worth having, and Miss Munns warmed to her task with even more than the usual enjoyment.

“My dear, you would hardly believe the time poor Emma had with that girl! She took a fancy to a bank clerk on two hundred a year, and nothing would suit but she must be engaged to him. He gave her a turquoise ring, I remember—a shabby thing that could not have cost more than a sovereign, and Emma was quite mortified when people asked to see it. They were engaged for five years, and she lost all her looks, and he had a bicycling accident, and hurt his right arm so badly that he could not write.

“Emma insisted that the engagement should be broken off, but the stupid girl would not listen to reason. She had a little legacy from her godmother about that time, and his father allowed him something, so they were married, and went abroad to try a cure for his arm. He is back at work again, and they seem happy enough; but it was a poor match for her, and they can only afford one servant. The corn-broker said he could never look at a girl again, but he married one of the Miss Twemlows within the year. Perhaps you know the Twemlows? They are a very well-known family in their suburb.”

No, Bridgie did not know them, but her expression seemed to denote that she was quite ready to listen to their family history, in addition to those which she had already heard. But this was more than Sylvia could bear, and she hastened to interrupt the flow of her aunt’s reminiscences.

“You have not heard from Aunt Emma lately—at least, you have not told me of her letters. I suppose you have not seen her while I have been ill?”

Miss Munns pursed up her lips in a manner which seemed to imply that she was in possession of some weighty secret, but from motives of prudence was resolved to conceal it from the world.

“I have heard from her, my dear. I have not seen her. As I said in my reply, everything must give way to illness, though I am very sorry indeed to think of her alone in the house. Emmeline can’t leave the baby, so it is only natural that her mother should want some companionship over Christmas. I would have had her here instead, but the house is so upset that I am not prepared for visitors. It is very pleasant meeting from time to time, being contemporaries as we are, and having gone through so many troubles together. There is nothing I enjoy more than talking them over with your Aunt Emma, and I am grieved to disappoint her. Of course I made up my mind from the first to say nothing about it to you.”

Now it was Bridgie's turn to look blank, and Sylvia's to question anxiously.

"Do you mean that she invited you for Christmas, and that you refused because of me? Oh, Aunt Margaret, you must not do that! You need a change, and it would be a relief to have all arrangements taken off your hands. Whitey and I could manage quite well by ourselves. Do please change your mind and write to say that you will go!"

"My love, I assure you that I considered the matter very carefully before I decided, and it is impossible for me to leave home. I have promised nurse that she shall spend two days with her sister, coming round each morning to attend to your foot, and I should not like to disappoint her. It is only natural that she should wish to be with her own friends. I sympathise with her, but I don't complain. It is not your fault that your illness has upset my plans, and it is my duty to be resigned and cheerful."

Aunt Margaret testified to her sense of duty by heaving a sigh of funereal proportions, the while Sylvia's brow became fretted with lines, and she turned a glance of despair upon her friend.

To be condemned to spend Christmas alone with Aunt Margaret in this mood of melancholy resignation; to realise that she had deprived her of the happiness of talking over past troubles with poor dear Emma; to listen from morning to night to her transparently-veiled repinings—this was indeed a cheerful prospect for an invalid, who might naturally have expected to receive the sympathy herself.

"Aren't you sorry for me?" the brown eyes asked Bridgie mutely. But, lo! Bridgie was radiant, her face one sparkle of animation, her hands uplifted to hail the advent of a happy thought.

"The Diversion," she cried rapturously—"the Diversion! I see it all, and it is perfectly charming! Sylvia shall be the diversion! She shall stay over the New Year with us; Miss Munns shall go to her friend and talk over old times; nurse shall visit her sister and have a rest after her hard work; I will look after Sylvia, and Sylvia shall flirt with the boys, and keep them happy. It's a perfectly charming arrangement all round!"

"My dear!" cried Aunt Margaret in horrified protest against the last item on the programme. But Sylvia gave a chuckle of cheerful complacency, and, so far from being overcome, looked so much revived by the prospect that there could be no doubt as to the expediency of the proposed visit, so far as health at least was concerned.

Miss Munns went through the form of protesting, but her objections were easily waved aside, for to tell the truth she was only too ready to be persuaded, and her objections had no deeper root than the belief that it was not polite to seize too eagerly on an invitation.

"I could not think of it, my dear! Such an upset for you. You don't know how much work an invalid makes in the house! She has to be carried up and down stairs, and waited on hand and foot!"

"I have three big strong boys, and you have only women in the house. Pat could put her in his pocket, and not know there was anything there!"

"My dear—how can you! It would take up your spare room, too, and make so much ringing at the bell with nurse coming in the morning and the doctor in the afternoon."

"But what a lesson it would be to me to see them attending to her! So useful for the next time the boys break their legs! I love Whitey, and feel better for it every time I see her sweet, kind face."

"If you had had to prepare meals at all hours of the night and day, you would be sick of the sight of a nurse, however sweet she might look! I don't see why you should be upset, my dear, for the sake of my friend."

"Dear Miss Munns, I am thinking even more of my own friend. It is selfishness which makes me want to have Sylvia with me. We would enjoy being together and talking over our troubles just as you do. Please let her come!"

"Troubles, my dear—troubles? Has your cook given notice?" cried Miss Munns, her mind flying at once to domestic matters, and dwelling thereon with accustomed enjoyment. She had so many stories to tell of cooks who had left their places immediately before Christmas, and of the tragic consequences which followed, that the original subject of discussion took a secondary position in her thoughts, and when Bridgie began placidly to discuss arrangements, she fell into the trap with innocent alacrity. Sylvia could hardly believe her ears. It seemed quite too good to be true. The week's holiday held out glorious possibilities of enjoyment, and she began at once to count the hours which must elapse before her departure.

Chapter Six.

Bridgie's Pudding.

It was two days before Christmas, and Bridgie O'Shaughnessy enveloped herself in a white apron, and pensively regarded the contents of the larder. In a couple of hours Sylvia was expected to arrive, and meanwhile Mary the cook had been seized with an irresistible craving to visit an invalid mother, and had taken herself off for the afternoon, leaving the arrangements for dinner in the care of the young mistress, and a still younger parlourmaid.

Mary's excuse for requesting leave of absence at so inconvenient a time was somewhat contradictory and involved. Her mother was failing fast, and as it was a custom in the family to die in December, it was a daughter's duty to visit her as often as possible; the shops were all dressed-up for Christmas, and it was hard that a body should not get a bit of pleasure sometimes, and the steak was stewed, and could be "hotted up" at a moment's notice. The invalid mother sat up for a couple of hours in the afternoon only, so Mary must get to the house by three o'clock at the

latest, and would it matter if she were after eleven in returning, as Christmas came but once a year?

Sweet Bridgie assented warmly to each proposition as it was put before her, urged a speedy departure, and was rather inclined to think it would be wise to stay at home for the night. She could never find it in her heart to deny a pleasure which it was in her power to grant, and was gaily confident of managing “somehow” to prepare a palatable meal for her guest, indeed, in the ardour of hospitality was rather pleased than otherwise to have a hand in the preparations.

On the principle of “first catch your hare, then cook it,” she looked critically over the contents of the cupboards to find some ingredients which commended themselves to her limited knowledge of the culinary art. Gelatine had endless possibilities, but time was against her, and she had the dimmest notions as to the quantity required; pastry was always attainable, but on the one occasion when she had experimented in this direction, Jack had taken the nutcrackers to divide his tartlet amidst the cheers of an admiring audience, so that there was plainly no fame to be won in this direction.

Milk puddings were too painfully ordinary, but a bag of macaroni seemed to offer at once an easy and a tasty alternative. Bridgie felt herself quite capable of boiling the sticks into tenderness, and scraping down cheese to add to the milky concoction, and a further search discovered a dark yellow lump stowed away in the corner of a cupboard evidently destined for such an end. It was wonderfully hard; Bridgie’s fingers ached with the strain of cutting it, and she shook her pretty head solemnly over the wastefulness of servants in not using up materials before their freshness was lost. She had intended to use the whole of the piece, but it took so long to prepare that she stopped half-way, and to judge by the mellow brownness of the pudding when she peeped at it in the oven, quality had more than made up for quantity.

Sylvia sniffed delicately as she limped over the threshold, for the pudding had a strangely powerful smell, not exactly savoury perhaps, but distinctly fresh and wholesome. Bridgie bridled in proud consciousness of success the while she tucked up her guest on the drawing-room sofa.

“I’ve been making a pudding for you, dear. Mind you enjoy it! Mary is out, so you are to excuse everything that goes wrong. There’s a pretty pink cushion to match your dress. I never saw that dress before! You are wonderfully smart, Miss Sylvia Trevor!”

“It’s for the boys,” said Sylvia, laughing. “I want to make a good impression, for I am dreadfully afraid they mayn’t like me. I know nothing about young men. They never penetrate into Number Six, and Aunt Margaret thinks it is proper to ignore their existence between the ages of six and sixty. I thought if I put on the bright dress and my pet chiffon fichu, they might not notice how thin my hair is at the top!”

“I’ll tell them not to notice,” said Bridgie gravely. She crossed the room and poked the fire with the best brass poker, a real, live coal fire and no wretched asbestos imitation, and knelt on the rug holding out her hands to the blaze and scorching her cheeks with undisturbed complacency.

The room was mathematically the same in size and shape as the one across the road, but oh, how different in appearance! The one was a museum for the preservation of household gods, the other a haven for rest and amusement, where comfort was the first consideration and appearance the last. Bridgie’s mending-basket stood on the floor, Jack’s pipe peered from behind a chimney-piece ornament, and a bulky blotter and well-filled ink-bottle showed that the writing-table was really and seriously meant for use.

There was a writing-table in Miss Munns’s drawing-room also, on which were set out, in formal order, a *papier-maché* blotter embellished with a view of York Minster by moonlight, a brass ink-stand, which would have been insulted by the touch of ink, and a penholder with a cornelian handle which had never known a nib. Not the most daring of visitors had ever been known to desecrate that shrine. When the mistress of the house wished to write a letter, she spread a newspaper over the dining-room table, and a sheet of blotting-paper over that, and carefully unlocked the desk which had been a present from Cousin Mary Evans on her sixteenth birthday!

It is extraordinary what a complete change of air may be obtained sometimes by merely crossing a road, or going into the house at the other side of a dividing wall! Sylvia felt that she might have travelled a hundred miles, so entirely different were the conditions by which she found herself surrounded.

By and by the three brothers arrived in a body, letting themselves into the house with a latch-key, and talking together in eager undertones in the hall. Bridgie sat still with a mischievous smile on her lips, and presently the drawing-room door was noiselessly opened for half a dozen inches, and round the corner appeared a brown head, a white forehead, and a pair of curious brown eyes. Sylvia’s cheeks were as pink as her dress by the time that those eyes met hers, but she was the only person to show signs of embarrassment.

“Pat” came forward to shake hands with swift cordiality, followed in succession by Jack and Miles, and the three big brothers stood beside the sofa, looking down on their guest with kindly scrutiny. Pat’s twinkling smile was an augury for future friendship; Miles’s air of angelic sympathy was as good as a tonic; while the rapt gaze of Jack’s fine eyes seemed to imply that never, no never, had he beheld a girl who so absolutely fulfilled his ideal of womanhood! It was nothing that the conversation was most ordinary and impersonal, concerning itself mostly with such matters as the weather, the trains from the city, and the Christmas traffic.

The atmosphere was full of subtle flattery, and Sylvia purred with satisfaction like a sleek little kitten that stretches up its neck to meet an unaccustomed caress. Nothing is so inspiring as appreciation, and she was quite startled by the aptness and brilliancy of her own remarks during the meal which followed.

Jack helped his guest in to dinner, and once again the pungent odour from the kitchen attracted notice and remark, whereat Bridgie bridled complacently, and when the macaroni was brought to table it did indeed look a most

attractive dish to be the work of an amateur. So brown was it, so mellow of tint, with such promise of richness, that the general choice settled on it in preference to its more modest neighbour.

Sylvia was naturally helped in advance, and the moment of swallowing the first spoonful was momentous, and never to be forgotten. What had happened she could not tell; the room swam round her, the tears poured from her eyes. She recovered from a paralysing shock of surprise just in time to see Pat's mouth open wide to receive a heaped-up spoonful, to hear him roar like a wounded bull, and make a dash from the room.

"What is the matter?" cried Bridgie in amaze, and Jack smoothed out the smoking macaroni on his plate and replied cheerfully—

"Scalded himself as usual! He is so impetuous with his food. Do him good to have a lesson." Then he in his turn partook of the dainty, and his eyes grew bigger and bigger, rounder and rounder, the Adam's apple worked violently in his throat. For one moment it seemed as though he too would fly from the room, but presently the struggle was over, and he leaned back in his chair, pale and dejected, his glance meeting Sylvia's with melancholy sympathy.

"What *is* the matter?" queried Bridgie once more, and this time there was a touch of testiness in her voice, for it was trying to have her efforts treated with such want of appreciation, and even if the dish were not all that could be desired, consideration for her feelings might have kept her brothers silent before a stranger. "Miles, *you* taste it!" she cried, and Miles smacked his lips for a thoughtful moment, and pronounced sturdily—

"It's very good!"

Sylvia groaned involuntarily; she could not help it, and Jack gasped with incredulous dismay, staring at his brother as if he could not believe his senses.

"Well, I always did say that there was nothing in this wide world which would quell your appetite, but this beats everything! Take another spoonful—I *dare* you to do it!"

"All right, here goes! It's a very good mixture," said Miles complacently, swallowing spoonful after spoonful, while his *vis-à-vis* looked on with distended eyes, and Pat stood transfixed upon the threshold. As for Bridgie, her face brightened with relief, and she smiled upon her younger brother with grateful affection.

"That's right, Miles; never mind what they say! You are the greatest comfort I have. Some people are so saucy there is no pleasing them. You and I will enjoy it, if no one else will."

So far she had prudently refrained from experimenting on her own account, but now she took up her spoon, and there was a breathless silence in the room while she lifted it to her lips. It fell back on the plate with a rattle and clang, and an agonised glance roamed round the table from one face to another.

"Oh—oh—oh! How p–p–p–perfectly awful! What can have happened? It was so nice when I left it! Has anyone"—the voice took a tone of indignation—"have any of you boys been playing tricks on me?"

"How could we, now, if you think of it? We have been upstairs or in the drawing-room ever since we came back. It's not the will that's wanting, but the opportunity!" cried the boys in chorus; but it was not a time for joking, and Bridgie smote upon the table-gong with a determined hand.

"Then it must be Sarah's fault. She has done something to it. It is too bad—I took such pains!" She looked pathetically at the red marks which still lingered on her fingers from that painful cutting and scraping, and there was a distinct air of resentment in the voice in which she questioned her assistant a moment later.

Sarah was a round-faced, vacant-looking damsel of sixteen summers, who had come straight from an industrial home to serve in the O'Shaughnessy family. She was scrupulously clean, admirably willing, and so blindly obedient that in the bosom of the family she was known by the title of "Casabianca." She understood to a nicety how to dust and sweep, make beds and turn out a room, but the manners and customs of gentlefolk had been an unknown science to her before entering her present situation, and anything that Bridgie chose to do was, in her eyes, a demonstration of what was right and proper. She adored her young mistress, and trembled at the new tone of severity in which she was addressed.

"Please, ma'am, I did nothing at it!"

"But something has happened to it, Sarah—that's quite certain. Think now—think carefully what you have done since I left the kitchen. I am not angry, only anxious to find out what has gone wrong."

It was really most embarrassing. The three young gentlemen were watching her with laughing eyes, the pretty young lady in the pink dress was staring at her plate and twisting her lips to keep from smiling, the Missis sat up straight in her chair and looked so grave and masterful. Like Topsy of old, Sarah tried hard to find something to confess, but failed to recall any delinquencies.

"I took it out of the oven when you said, and put it on a plate. I brought it into the room—"

"You are quite sure you didn't let anything fall into it by mistake?"

"Please, ma'am, there was nothing to fall. I had tidied the things away before I touched it. I put the macaroni sticks back in the bag and the beeswax along of the turpentine for to-morrow's cleaning—all that you didn't use for the pudding."

"The—the—what?" gasped Bridgie breathlessly.

But the next moment a great burst of laughter all round the table greeted the solution of the mystery. Pat capered about the floor, Jack put his elbows on the table and peered at Sylvia with dancing eyes, Miles undauntedly helped himself to another spoonful, and wagged his head as who should say that, beeswax or no beeswax, he stuck to his favourable verdict on the “mixture.” Bridgie’s soft, gurgling laugh was full of unaffected enjoyment.

“Did ever I hear the like of that? It was a lump of beeswax, and I mistook it for cheese! It looked just like it—so smooth, and yellow, and hard—too hard, maybe—but I was blaming Mary for that, not the cheese, and thinking myself so good and economical to use it up! Beeswax and macaroni! Oh—oh—I’ll never forget it while I live!”

“It’s a very pretty nose you’ve got, dear, but it’s not much use to you, I’m afraid,” said Jack teasingly. “Did it never occur to you one moment that it was rather highly scented, and the scent a little different from the ordinary common or garden cheese?” and Bridgie shook her head in solemn denial.

“Never the ghost of a suspicion! It shows how easily our senses are deceived when we get a fixed idea in our heads; but indeed you were not much cleverer yourselves. Every man of you had something to say about the smell, but not a hint of what it was!”

“I thought it was rather spring-cleaningey,” Sylvia said mischievously. “Never mind, Bridgie dear—it has been a great success. I do feel so much at home—more so than I should have done after a dozen formal dinners where everything went right. I shall always remember it too, and how Mr Miles declared it was nice!”

“Don’t call him ‘Mr,’ please! He is only seventeen, though he *is* the champion eater of the world. I wonder what exactly is the effect of beeswax taken internally! You must tell us all about it, Miles, if you live to the morning!”

“How pleased Pixie will be!” murmured Bridgie reflectively, leaving her hearers to decide whether she referred to Miles’s problematical disease or the latest culinary disaster, and once again Sylvia admired the happy faculty of seizing on the humorous side of a misfortune which seemed to be possessed so universally by the O’Shaughnessy family.

Chapter Seven.

A Happy Inspiration.

Mrs Geoffrey Hilliard stood in the long gallery of Knock Castle and drummed wearily on the window-pane with a white, heavily-ringed hand. It had rained for a whole week without stopping, and for the happiest girl in the world, as she proclaimed herself to be at least three times a day, she came perilously near feeling shedding tears of depression.

Geoffrey was out shooting, and the old Castle seemed full of ghosts—ghosts of the living, not of the dead—of those dear, gay, loving, teasing, happy-go-lucky brothers and sisters who had filled the rooms with echoes of song and laughter. Geoffrey was the dearest of husbands, but he had one great, insuperable failing—he was not Irish, and one phase of his wife’s character was even yet an inexplicable riddle in his eyes. Why should she consider it monotonous to have her meals served regularly at a stated hour; why should she find infinite enjoyment in arranging a festivity in a rush and scramble, instead of making her plans with due leisure and decorum; why should she wear the latest Paris fashions on a day when the thermometer pointed to rain, and walk about in the sunshine in an ulster and deerstalker?—these, and many similar questions, were as puzzling to him as the fact that she found it absolutely impossible to do a thing twice over in the same way, or to master the very rudiments of method.

Geoffrey inherited the business instincts which had made his fathers successful above their competitors, and when he had become temporary owner of Knock, he had striven hard to introduce order and punctuality into the establishment, with more success in the servants’ hall than in those regions where the mistress reigned supreme.

Esmeralda was a devoted wife, who would have gone through fire and water to ensure his happiness; she would have shared his poverty with a smiling face, and have worked her fingers to the bone on his behalf, but she seemed quite incapable of replacing the match-box on his dressing-room mantelpiece when she had borrowed it for her own use, or of refraining from taking his nail-scissors downstairs and then forgetting where she had put them.

Geoffrey on his part adored his beautiful wife, and would have fought a dozen dragons on her behalf, but when he groped in the dark for his matches, and knocked his pet ornaments off the chimney-piece, and barked his knee against a chair, and tried vainly to get out of the room through a blank wall—well, he was only a man after all, and he was not precisely lamb-like in temper.

Some such incident had happened this afternoon when the husband had made a complaining remark, and the wife had poured oil on the troubled waters by murmured allusions to people who were not really men, but “finnicky old maids.” Geoffrey had stalked majestically from the room, leaving Esmeralda to reflect sadly how very unsatisfactory it was to quarrel when your adversary was dignified and English. With either of her three brothers such an introduction would have meant an enjoyable and lengthy wrangle; even “Saint Bridget” could snap on occasion, while Pixie was capable of screaming, “It is not—it is not!” until her breath failed, for pure love of contradiction.

Esmeralda yawned, and wondered what in the world she could do to while away the long afternoon. As the wife of a millionaire, with a professional cook in the kitchen who tolerated her mistress’s incursions at stated hours only; with a wardrobe full of new clothes, and a French maid to sew up every hole almost before it made an appearance; with a gardener who did not like interference, and a patriarchal butler who said, “Allow me, madam!” if she dared to lift a hand for herself, life was not really half so amusing as in the dear old days, when she could make potato cakes for tea, re-trim old dresses, with Bridgie as model, and sit perched on one of the empty stages in the conservatory, while

Dennis confided his latest love experiences and the gossip of the countryside.

Esmeralda had longed for riches all her life, and for the most part found the experience to her taste, but there were occasions when she felt fettered by the golden chains. When Bridgie wrote of her experiences in that funny, cramped little house, of her various devices for making sixpence do duty for a shilling, of excursions about London, when she rode with the boys on the tops of omnibuses and dined luxuriously at an ABC, it was not pity, but envy, which filled Esmeralda's bosom as she drove in state behind coachman and footman to pay dull, proper calls on the county magnates.

It was cold and dark in the gallery this December afternoon, so she went downstairs into the room which had been dedicated to lessons, when Miss Minnitt the governess tried to instil knowledge into half a dozen ignorant heads. It was now metamorphosed into a luxuriant little boudoir, with pots of hothouse plants banked on the table, a couch piled with silken cushions taking the place of the old horsehair sofa, a charming grate, all glowing copper and soft green tiles, and beside it a deep arm-chair and a pile of books to while away an idle hour. Esmeralda yawned and flicked over the pages of the topmost of the pile, looked at the beginning to see if it promised excitement, peeped at the last sentence of all to make sure there was no heart-breaking separation, finally sank down into the chair, and settled herself to read.

There was something wanting for perfect enjoyment, however, for in the old days she and Bridgie had agreed that the charms of an interesting book could only be thoroughly appreciated to an accompaniment of crisp sweet apples. Esmeralda O'Shaughnessy had been wont to climb up into the loft and bring down as many rosy baldwins as she could carry in the crown of her cap; but Mrs Geoffrey Hilliard crept down her own passages like a thief, listened breathlessly at the pantry door to make sure that Montgomery was absent, then abstracted an apple from each of the two pyramids of fruit already prepared for dinner, and flew back to her room, aghast at her own temerity.

The presence of the apples seemed to bring back other schoolgirl impulses, for instead of seating herself in dignified, grown-up fashion, she stretched herself on the rug before the fire, her back supported against the chair, her head drooping ever nearer and nearer the cushions, as warmth and quiet wrought their usual work. She slept and dreamt, and awoke with a start to hear a voice observing, "Tea is served, madam!" and to see Montgomery the immaculate standing over her with an unmoved expression, as if, in the many noble families in which he had served, it was an invariable custom to find his mistress fast asleep on the floor, with a half-gnawed apple in her hand!

Esmeralda crawled to her feet, trying vainly to look dignified, but she had no appetite for muffins. She felt like a child who has been found out, and blushed at the thoughts of her embarrassment that evening when the fruit pyramid was handed for her selection. Tea did not taste half so nice out of the Queen Anne silver as when it had been poured from the old brown pot, which had to be refilled so many times to satisfy clamorous appetites, and the longing for companionship made her hurry through the meal, and run upstairs to a wide room overlooking the park.

With the opening of the door came that sweet, flannely, soapy, violet-powdery smell which is associated with a well-kept nursery, and there on the rocking-chair sat Mistress Nurse with a bundle of embroidery on her knee, which purported to be O'Shaughnessy Geoffrey, the heir of the Hilliards.

"Oh, I'm so glad you have come, ma'am! I did so want you to see him. He has been so pert this afternoon. I don't know what to do with him, he is so pert! I never saw such a forward child for his age!"

Esmeralda's face softened to a beautiful tenderness as she turned down the Shetland shawl and looked at her little son. The pert child had a fat white face, with vacant eyes, a button of a nose, and an expression of preternatural solemnity. His head waggled helplessly from side to side as his nurse held him out at arm's length, and stared fixedly into space, regardless of his mother's blandishments.

"There now, *isn't* he pert?" repeated the triumphant nurse. "You know your mammie, my precious—yes, you do! The cleverest little sing that was ever seen! He will begin to talk, ma'am, before he is many months old, I'm sure he will! I was speaking to him just now, and he tried so hard to copy me. I said 'Goo-oo!' and he said 'Coo-oo!' Oh, you would have loved to hear him! He is a prince of babies, he is! A beautiful darling pet!"

Esmeralda beamed with maternal pride.

"He *is* clever!" she cried. "Fancy talking at three months old! I must write and tell Bridgie. And he looks so intelligent, too—doesn't he, nurse? So wise and serious! He stares at the fire as if he knew all about it. I believe his hair has grown since yesterday! I do, indeed!"

"He has beautiful hair—so fine! It's going to curl, too," declared the optimistic nurse, holding the child's head against the light, when the faintest of downs could be dimly discerned across the line of the horizon. "He will smile in a moment if you go on talking to him, ma'am. Perhaps you would like to sit down and take him for a bit?"

Yes, Esmeralda was only too willing, for it was only by act of grace and when Mistress Nurse felt inclined for a gossip in the servants' hall that she was allowed to nurse her own baby. She took the dear little soft bundle in her arms and rocked gently to and fro, studying the little face and dreaming mother dreams of the days to come.

If God spared him, the tiny form would grow strong, the vacant face would become bright and alert with life, the mite of a hand would be bigger than her own—a man's hand with a man's work as its inheritance. There was something awful in the thought, and in her own responsibility towards his future. Esmeralda never felt so serious, so prayerful, so little satisfied with herself, as when she sat alone with her baby in her arms. She knew nothing about children—very little, poor girl, of the wise training of father and mother, but the very consciousness of her own defects added earnestness to the resolve to bring up this child to be wise, and strong, and noble—a power for good in the world.

That was her resolve, renewed afresh from day to day, and after the resolve followed the relentless conviction that

the change must be wrought in herself before she would have power to teach another. It would need a noble mother to train a noble son, a mother who was mistress over her own tongue to teach the lessons of self-control; a mother who had fought her own giants of vanity and self-seeking before she could hand on the sword. Esmeralda trembled and shrank weakly from the conflict, but the baby turned its wondering eyes upon her and straightway she was strong again.

“My son!” she murmured tenderly. “My little son! We shall love one another. Oh, how we shall love one another—you and I!”

The beautiful dark head bent low over the shapeless little bundle, and the croon of a cradle song accompanied the regular rocking of the chair. It was the most peaceful and charming of pictures, and the husband and father stood noiselessly on the threshold, almost unwilling to speak and destroy the effect.

All the afternoon he had been regretting his hasty words, and reproaching himself for want of forbearance towards his impetuous girl-wife. It was unreasonable to expect the habit of a lifetime to be outlived in a few short months, and at this season there were especial reasons for judging her tenderly. Poor darling! She had suffered a bitter disappointment!

Bridgie and the boys had found it impossible to spend Christmas at Knock, and although Joan had not confessed as much in words, the slackness of her preparations showed that she had lost all zest in the season. She had had a dull time of it since the birth of the boy, and it was only natural that she should long for her own people, especially those two dear sisters whose names were so constantly on her lips. If it were only possible to indulge her—to hit upon some plan by which Christmas could be made all she could desire!

Geoffrey knitted his brows in thought, then suddenly came the inspiration, and with it an exclamation of satisfaction which brought Esmeralda’s eyes upon him. She smiled softly, and held up her face to receive his kiss—such a different face from the one which he had seen two hours before, with its curling lips and flushed, contemptuous smile! In its sweetness and subdued tenderness it was a type of the youthful Madonna, and Geoffrey’s own expression softened in sympathy.

“Well, my dearie! Nursing your boy?”

Esmeralda turned back the shawl once more and held up the child for his father’s inspection.

“There! Isn’t he splendid? Nurse is quite excited about him this afternoon. She says it is wonderful how he gets on. He has been so ‘pert,’ as she calls it, that she hardly knew how to manage him.”

“H’m!” The young father regarded the little face with amused, speculative eyes. “‘Pert’ does not commend itself to me as precisely the best word which could be found. Solemn little beggar, I call him! He seems quite oppressed by the wickedness of the world. I say, that’s rather a peculiar mouth, isn’t it? Something funny about the upper lip!”

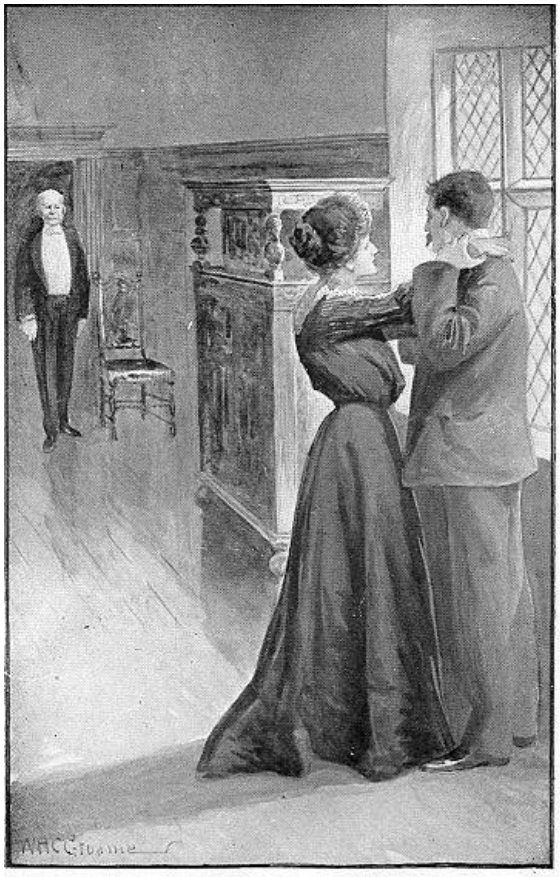
“It’s exactly like yours—the image of it!” said Esmeralda firmly. “You can’t judge because naturally you can’t see yourself. But it really is. Look at that old picture when you were two years old.”

Geoffrey stroked his moustache to one side, and regarded himself critically in the mirror.

“Oh, well, there’s hope for him yet!” he pronounced complacently. “I suppose babies are all ugly in the beginning, but considering his parentage he ought to come out all right by and by. How long do you suppose it will be before he gets his hair, and begins to be intelligible?”

“He has hair now, and he is beginning to speak. He said ‘Coo-oo!’ this afternoon quite distinctly. It’s horrid of you, Geoff, to call him ugly! Everyone says he is a beautiful boy and the image of you!”

“Much more chance of being beautiful if he were like you, darling! Spoke, did he? Well, I take your word for it, but it’s rather a stretch of imagination. He is a jolly little chap, anyway, and I’m very proud of him. Here is nurse coming to



'ANY LETTERS FOR THE POST, MADAM?'

take possession. Hand him over and come along with me. I have something to tell you."

"Something nice, I hope! I want a distraction," said Esmeralda wistfully. She slid her hand through her husband's arm as they walked down the corridor and peered up in his face. "Somebody was rather vicious this afternoon! I'm sorry you put me in a temper. It's stupid to quarrel when we are so fond of one another. You'll never do it again, will you?"

"Never, never! It was all my fault, and I apologise abjectly to your temper for taking liberties with it. I ought to know by this time that it's in delicate health. Never mind, I've planned a delightful programme for you! What would you like best for a Christmas present if you had the choice?"

He was all radiant with smiles, but Esmeralda sighed, and a far-away expression came into her beautiful grey eyes.

"I'd like—Oh, what's the use of speaking of it, Geoff? They can't come, and that's all about it! I haven't thought of any present. I don't seem to care about anything else."

"Whisper!" cried Geoffrey triumphantly. "Whisper!" He bent his head, and Esmeralda put her ear to his lips, her face alight with expectation.

"Oh!" she cried rapturously, and again, "Oh!" and "*Oh*" in ever-ascending tones of delight. "Do you mean it, Geoff—really—really? It's like a fairy-tale—so perfectly lovely and charming! I shan't sleep a wink—I know I shan't! Geoffrey, you darling, I do love you for thinking of it!" and in an ecstasy of delight she threw her arms round his neck and kissed him rapturously.

"Any letters for the post, madam?" asked an even voice from the end of the corridor, and the husband wrenched himself free, while the wife stared after the departing figure with gloomy eyes.

"He saw me kiss you! The only marvel is he didn't offer to do it for me. The strain of behaving properly before that man will be the death of me, Geoffrey Hilliard!"

Chapter Eight.

A Surprise Visit.

The next two days Jack came home early from the city, where a remarkable cessation of work had happened simultaneously with the arrival of Miss Sylvia Trevor at Number Three, Rutland Road. Bridgie trotted about the house preparing for the festival on Thursday, and Sylvia lay idly upon the couch, with nothing better to do than to listen, sympathise, and admire.

It was easy to listen, for in truth Jack gave her no opportunity to do anything else; it was impossible to resist admiring, for he made a handsome figure, with his broad, muscular shoulders, graceful carriage, and clean-shaven face; it had seemed at first sight as if sympathy were not required, but Master Jack invented a fresh crop of imaginary woes every time that he met a pretty girl, for the express purpose of receiving consolation. Sylvia beheld in him an

exile from home and country, toiling at an uncongenial task, for the maintenance of his orphaned brothers and sisters, and was vaguely given to understand that since meeting her, his poverty had become an even more painful barrier to his hopes. He confided in her details of business, which she understood as well as a buried language, and asked her advice on knotty points in such a flattering manner that she forgot to notice that he never paused for a reply, and when at last he reluctantly rose to leave the room he sighed profoundly, and in a voice touched with emotion declared that she had helped him as he had never before been helped!

“I cannot thank you enough for your sympathy and counsel, but I shall never forget what you have said to me to-day. It will help me through many a dark hour!” he declared, and Sylvia blushed and gasped, and lay back on her cushions, all tremulous with excitement. It was her first experience of the art of flirtation, and she was pleased and flattered as it was natural for a girl to be, but she was a sensible little woman, despite her hasty speeches, and her vanity was not big enough to cloud either her judgment or a remarkably accurate memory. She carefully recalled to mind the late conversation, and found that her own share therein had been limited to monosyllabic assents and denials; an occasional, “Really!” and three or four exclamations of, “How sad!”

These, then, were the vaunted sympathy and counsel, these the eloquent words which Mr Jack had vowed to treasure in deathless remembrance, and which were to strengthen him in hours of trial! Sylvia blushed once more, from mortification this time, and registered a vow to adopt a new tone with this disciple of the Blarney stone, and put an end forthwith to sentimental confidences. She was still looking hot and flurried when Bridgie came into the room to prepare for tea, and to rest after the day’s labours.

“You look tired, dear!” she said anxiously. “I hope Jack has not been talking too much. He just dotes upon romancing when he can get a listener, and I didn’t like to interrupt when I knew he had come home especially to see you. Jack falls in love with every fresh girl he meets, and they mostly fall in love with him too. He has such lovely humbugging eyes!”

“Do they, indeed! He shan’t humbug *me*, that’s one thing certain!” was Sylvia’s mental comment. Aloud she assented cordially. “Most handsome eyes! I call him unusually good-looking for a man, and he has amused me very much, but I am more than ready for tea, and a little of your society. There’s the clatter of the cups. Welcome sound, it’s music in my ears! How I used to long for it when I was ill!”

“I’ll draw the curtains and make the room look cosy. That is one good thing about a tiny house—you can keep it warm. We were frozen in the great draughty barns of rooms at Knock, and Pixie used to look so quaint with her feet in snow-boots, and her hands in a muff, and her little nose as red as a cherry. It was so cold that it kept her awake at nights, until the Major bought an elegant little egg-cosy at a bazaar in Dublin, and she slept in it regularly through the frost. We used to go to kiss her last thing every night, every man Jack of us, for the pleasure of seeing her lying there, so peaceful, with the cosy perched over her nose! Muffins, dear? I didn’t make them, so you may eat them with an easy mind.”

Jack came downstairs at the summons of the tea-bell, looking in languishing fashion at his comforter as he entered the room, when, to his surprise, back came an answering glance, as it were parodying his own, the sentimental attitude belied by twinkling eyes and mischievous lips. The blush and tremor of an hour ago were conspicuous by their absence, and the change was by no means appreciated by the startled onlooker. In vain he tried to return to the old footing, accompanying the simplest remark with a hint of secret understanding, and waiting upon her with a deference which seemed humbly to inquire the reason of the change.

Sylvia bluntly inquired, “What is it?” in reply to his appealing looks, kept him trotting to and from the tea-table, and said, “How clumsy you are!” when his fingers touched her own over the cake-basket. Even Jack O’Shaughnessy found it impossible to continue flirting under these conditions, and devoted himself to the consumption of muffins with a crestfallen air, while Bridgie regarded him with fond commiseration from behind the tea-tray.

It was at this opportune moment that the clatter of wheels stopped at the door and the peal of the bell rang through the house. Sarah went to the door, and there was a movement and bustle in the hall, at the sound of which Bridgie nodded complacently.

“The Parcels Delivery van! I thought something must be coming. Have you any change, Jack? I’ve nothing smaller than sixpence, and the man will want a Christmas-box—a few coppers, perhaps.”

“Oh, give the poor beggar half a crown. Don’t insult him with coppers,” said Jack in his lordly way, pulling a handful of silver from his pocket and selecting the largest coin of the number. “I’ll take it to him myself. You might give him some tea if there is any left. It is perishingly cold outside!”

He stepped towards the door, but before he reached it, it was opened from without, a tall figure precipitated itself into the room, and with two separate cries of rapture the sisters flew to meet each other, and stood with locked arms, kissing, laughing, and questioning, with incredulous delight.

“Esmeralda darling! Is it really you? You are not a dream, dear, are you? I can’t believe it’s true!”

“It was Geoff’s doing! He saw I was fretting for you, and suggested that we should come to town and stay over the New Year at an hotel. There was not time to get the house ready. A whole week, Bridgie! Won’t we talk! There are such oceans of things to tell you. Baby is beginning to speak!”

“The precious mite!” Bridgie disentangled one hand and held it towards her brother-in-law in beaming welcome. “I always did say you were a broth of a boy, Geoffrey, but you have eclipsed yourself this time. I am so happy I don’t know how to bear it. Now Christmas will be something like Christmas, and—” she smiled encouragingly into Sylvia’s embarrassed face,—“we have a visitor staying with us to make things still more festive. My new friend, Miss Sylvia Trevor, who is recovering from a long illness.”

Esmeralda wheeled round to face the sofa and stared at the stranger with haughty scrutiny. Her flowing skirts seemed to fill the little room; her cloak was thrown back, showing a glimpse of costly sable lining; her imperious beauty made her appear older than the gentle Bridgie, a hundred times more formidable. The formal bend of the head brought with it an acute sense of discomfiture to the recipient. For the first time since crossing that hospitable threshold she realised that she was a solitary unit, a stranger set down in the midst of an affectionate family party, and if it had not been for the crippling foot, she would have rushed away to the haven of the room upstairs. As it was, however, she was condemned to lie still and return Esmeralda's commonplaces with what grace she might.

"I am pleased to see you," said Esmeralda's tongue. "What a nuisance you are!" said the flash of the cold grey eyes. "Such a pleasure for Bridgie to have a friend." "But now that I have arrived, you are not wanted any longer, and are terribly in my way!" One set of phrases were as intelligible as the other to the sensitive invalid, and if Esmeralda's anticipations were dashed by her presence, she herself abandoned all prospect of enjoyment, and only longed to be able to return home forthwith.

Bridgie would not need her companionship any longer; she could be but a restraint and kill-joy in the conferences of newly-united sisters. She stared dismally at the floor, then looked up to see Jack carrying the tea-table bodily across the room and setting it down by her couch. Sarah had brought in fresh tea and cakes for the refreshment of the travellers, and he motioned slightly towards his sisters, saying in an undertone,—"Bridgie will be incoherent for an hour. Will you come to the rescue? If we don't look after the tea, no one else will."

He smiled at her as he spoke, not sentimentally this time, but with a straightforward kindliness which showed that he had understood and sympathised with her embarrassment. Occupation for hand and mind was the most tactful comfort which he could have administered, and Bridgie's eager, "Oh, thank you, dear! How good of you!" showed that she was indeed thankful to be relieved of every duty but that of talking to her sister and watching her with adoring eyes.

Sylvia's post was no sinecure, for everyone started tea-drinking afresh to encourage the travellers, and amidst the babble of voices Jack's *sotto voce* explanations made the conversation intelligible, and took away the feeling of being left out in the cold. At a touch of real sympathy the false sentiment had disappeared, and her heart warmed towards the young fellow for his kindly concern for her comfort. It was a bond of union also to remember that he himself was apt to resent the incursions of this domineering young matron, and she noted with delight that, while Bridgie was apparently delighted to be trampled underfoot, he was ready and able to hold his own.

"We came over in a rush, and arrived only two hours ago. I'm a disreputable object!" said Esmeralda, glancing complacently over her sweeping skirts, and arranging the immaculate frills at her throat. "Geoffrey was in such a hurry to get off that he gave me no time to make myself decent."

"She had only an hour, poor thing, not a moment longer! She sent me flying off to look for trains and whistle for a hansom, and then kept me kicking my heels while she prinked before the glass, putting on her best dress and the newest hat to impress you with her magnificence. She is disappointed that you have not noticed them yet, that's why she pretends to be humble!" explained Geoffrey in self-defence, whereat his wife grimaced at him in a manner singularly undignified and eloquent. Then she glanced hastily across the room at Sylvia, looking so girlish, so abashed at having been discovered in her schemes, that Sylvia laughed involuntarily, and forgot the old offence.

"Husbands are such blighting creatures; they are always telling the truth upon you!" sighed Esmeralda sadly. "I intend to bring up Bunting to agree with all I say, and then there will be some chance of making an impression. He is left at home, for he is too young to miss us, and it was bad weather for moving a nursery.

"Now about to-morrow! We have arranged for you to spend the day with us, and have lunch and dinner in our private room. The servants can eat up your turkey, or it can wait until the next day. You must come to us directly after church. What train will you be able to catch?"

Bridgie knitted her brows and looked embarrassed and distressed. The invitation could not, of course, be accepted, and it was thoughtless of Esmeralda to have given it under existing circumstances. Had not Sylvia been introduced as a convalescent, and did not her position on the couch prove that she was unable for a journey to town? It would make the poor dear so uncomfortable if she were cited as the obstacle; yet what other excuse could be made?

Esmeralda had travelled all the way from Knock for the pleasure of entertaining her brothers and sisters, and would not be lightly turned from her plans. Bridgie looked across the room, and met Jack's eyes turned upon her with a flash of indignation in their clear depths.

"Well, Bridgie, you can do as you like, but I give you full notice that I stay at home!" he said firmly. "I have never yet eaten my Christmas dinner in an hotel, and I never shall so long as I have a roof of my own to cover me. Choose between Esmeralda and me; I am the head of the family, and it is my privilege to play host on such occasions, but if the house is too small—if we are not grand enough for Mrs Hilliard—"

"Jack!" cried Esmeralda sharply. She pushed her cup on one side, and, springing across the room to her brother's side, laid her hands on his shoulders and shook him vigorously to and fro. "Come down this minute from that high horse! I won't be snubbed, when I've come all the way over from Ireland to see you. I thought you would like it, dear, because you enjoyed dining with us so much before, and we should have been quite private in our own room; but I don't mind where we are, so long as we are together. We will come and dine with you if you will ask us. I would far rather have stayed here altogether if you could have put us up!"

"We could stow you away, but we can't manage the retinue. Miss Trevor occupies the north-west Tudor corridor, and there is only Pixie's little den at liberty," said Jack, laughing, and recovering his complacency with wonderful quickness. "The servants' hall accommodation is also limited, and your maid and valet might not appreciate our *ménage*. We had a very stylish pudding the other night. You might give Esmeralda the recipe, Bridgie."

Esmeralda listened to the history of the beeswax and macaroni with a joy tempered by regret.

“We never have anything so nice as that!” she sighed. “Never a bit of excitement as to how things will turn out. D’you remember the day when old Sukey mixed the lettuce with furniture cream instead of salad-dressing, and Major Denny was so polite, with a crust of bread under one end of his plate to let it drain down to the bottom, while he ate his meat high and dry at the top! ’Twas bad luck that none of us fancied lettuce that day, but kept pressing him to a second helping.”

“Well, we will come here to-morrow morning, then. Don’t stay away from church, for, truthfully, I would rather you were out when we arrived. I have some rather—large—Christmas presents which must be smuggled in unobserved. I have some—er—preparations to make to-night, so we can’t stay very long.”

Half an hour later husband and wife took their departure, and after seeing them off, Jack came back into the drawing-room and stood by Sylvia’s couch.

“Esmeralda invariably speaks before she thinks!” he said apologetically. “There’s a lot of pretence about her, but you will be astonished to find out what a good sort she is when you know her better.”

Sylvia smiled with a whimsical twist of the lips. She thought that that prediction might apply to more than one member of the O’Shaughnessy family, and cherished a pleasant conviction that Jack’s outburst of indignation had been more on her account than his own. He was not the type of man to stand on his dignity, and his quick glance into her face as Esmeralda gave her invitation had been eloquent of understanding. His protest had saved her from a most distasteful position, and once again she felt a debt of gratitude towards him.

Chapter Nine.

Christmas Presents.

Christmas morning was heralded by the luxury of a late breakfast, when no one need hurry off to town, and even Miles could satisfy the demands of appetite without casting a thought to the time-table. Porridge, bacon, eggs and sausages laid the foundation of his meal, before he tackled marmalade, strawberry jam, fresh oranges and honey, accompanied by numerous draughts of tea and coffee, and finally by a cup filled with the united drainings of both pots, which he drank with obvious relish.

If it had been merry Pat who was so difficult to appease, there would have been no cause for astonishment, but Miles’s rapt eyes and ethereal expression seemed to bespeak no stronger diet than moonbeams and mountain dew, and to hear him accompany his last mouthful with an eager “When’s lunch?” was a distinct shock to the visitor. Jack, too, had sustained a relapse into sentiment, and was only awaiting opportunity to wax melancholy and confidential. With a word of encouragement he would have stayed away from church to bear her company, but Sylvia was provokingly obtuse, and he went off looking unutterable reproaches with his “humbugging eyes.”

Left to herself, Sylvia hobbled to the piano and sang Christmas hymns in a weak little voice, which wavered suspiciously towards the close. Christmas is the day of all others when families are united, and it seemed hard that when she possessed just one beloved relation, he should be away off at the other end of the world. The strange house, the unusual silence, and her own inability to move about, added to the feeling of depression, and her thoughts turned towards Aunt Margaret with unusual yearning. The old lady was at times a sore trial to her niece’s patience, but at least they had a claim on each other’s affection; she was the dear father’s sister, and her own legal guardian during his absence!

Sylvia wondered how the two ladies would pass their day—church in the morning as a matter of course; early dinner and reminiscences of the brougham and peach-houses; arrival of the postman with cards; renewed reminiscences and family histories of the various senders; one arm-chair at each side of the fire; two white caps nodding sleepily forward; two pairs of cashmere boots reposing on footstools. Arrival of tea and exchange of recipes and household experiences. Letters of thanks to valued friends for seasonable gifts. Supper of cold turkey and cocoa, with anecdotal references to Christmases of long ago. Mutual exchange of compliments, bed, nightcaps, and sleeping-socks.

Oh dear me! It all seemed very flat to one-and-twenty, and why should one girl have health and beauty, and brothers and sisters, and an adoring young husband into the bargain, and another be a solitary unit, with no one to cosset her and help her to bear her manifold infirmities?

Sylvia’s tears were still rather near the surface, and she mopped her eyes with her handkerchief, and mopped them again, and then carefully dried them on a dry place, and craned forward to look in the glass and see if they looked very red and tell-tale. The bleared reflection had a wonderfully calming effect, and she limped to her couch and read persistently to distract her thoughts, until the peal of the bell announced the Hilliards’ arrival. From her corner she could not see the doorway, but judging from the sounds of coming and going, of dragging heavy weights, of scurrying along the passage, of whispered colloquies, and sudden explosions of laughter, it was evident that some great mystery was in the air.

Then the cab drove away, the dining-room door closed with a bang, she heard the furniture being dragged to and fro, and wondered how long it would be before the drawing-room was raided in its turn. For a quarter of an hour the conspirators remained shut up together, then Esmeralda came sailing into the room, all smiles and amiability.

“A happy Christmas to you, Miss Trevor! Excuse me for not coming in before, but I am so anxious to arrange my presents before the others come home from church. I want the easel from that corner, and I want you to promise faithfully that you won’t come into the dining-room before you are allowed!”

“I can’t walk so far without help. You are quite safe so far as I am concerned,” said Sylvia regretfully, and Esmeralda looked at her with quick scrutiny.

“So bad as that! I didn’t know. Is that why you have been crying?”

“No—oh no! I am used to that now. I felt a little lonely, that’s all. I wanted my father.”

The beautiful face changed suddenly, the lips tightened, the eyes grew large and strained. There was a ring of pain in the clear voice.

“Is he dead?”

“No, no, only so far-away. At the other end of the world, in Ceylon!”

“You will see him again!” said Esmeralda shortly. She looked at the portrait of a handsome, reckless face which hung on the wall above the sofa, and drew a fluttering sigh. “That was my father. It is nearly two years since he had his accident, and I thought I could never be happy again. If I could write to him, if I could get his letters, and think that some day, it might be in twenty years to come, he would be back among us again, I should feel as if there was nothing else to wish for.”

She sat down suddenly by the couch with an air of having forgotten all about the errand which had brought her into the room, clasped her hands round her knee, and began a series of disconnected childish memories, while Sylvia gazed spellbound at the beautiful, dreamy face, and wondered how she could ever have thought it cold and unfeeling.

“We were always such chums, from the time that I was a mite in pinafores. I remember his first explaining to me what happened when people died—how their bodies were put into the grave, while their souls went straight to heaven; but I didn’t understand what a soul was, and I was frightened and cried out, ‘Well, I won’t go one step without my body!’ I used to play tricks on him, and he would catch me up and carry me into his room, and say, ‘Will you rather be poisoned, or buried alive?’ and I would prefer the poisoning because it was chocolates out of the corner cupboard.

“He used to wake me in the mornings coming battering at my door, and singing, ‘Come awake thee, awake thee, my merry Swiss lass!’ and when we were learning French fables from Miss Minnitt, we used to take arms, Bridgie and I, and walk up and down before him reciting, ‘Deux compagnons pressé d’argent!’ It didn’t make any difference whether he had the money or not—he always gave it to us.

“One day we were going for a picnic, and he walked on with the men, leaving me to drive after them in the cart with the provisions. There was only one thing he told me to remember, and that was just what I forgot—his camera, to take a special view which he’d wanted for an age. Four miles from home it jumped into my mind, and I sat in misery the rest of the way. The Major laughed when I told him, and sympathised with me for my upset. ‘You’ll forget your own head next, and it will be a pity,’ he said, ‘for it’s a very pretty one.’

“I hated to vex him just because he was so sweet about it. No one ever understood me as well as the Major, and when I was in a tantrum he would say, ‘Think it over till to-morrow, my girl. If you are of the same mind then, we will discuss it together,’ and, of course, I never did think the same two days running.

“When he was ill he used to lie looking at me, and his face was quite different from that in the picture—so sad and wistful. ‘I’ve not done much in the way of training you, my girl,’ he would say, ‘but I’ve loved you a great deal. Maybe that will do as well. You are not one to stand a bridle.’ He loved to have me with him; to the last he would stretch out his hand—”

Her voice quivered and stopped, and Sylvia sat with lowered eyes, murmuring incoherent condolences. Esmeralda’s love for her dead father was very sweet and touching, but to the more reserved nature it seemed an extraordinary thing that she could speak so openly to a stranger, and in the twinkling of an eye change her mood from gay to grave.

The hands of the clock were approaching the hour when the rest of the family might be expected to return from church, yet there she sat dreaming over the past, and apparently absolutely forgetful of the demands of the present. Sylvia dare not risk a reminder which would seem in the last degree unfeeling, but presently the door opened, and Geoffrey Hilliard appeared on the threshold, looking round with anxious inquiry.

“Good morning, Miss Trevor. The compliments of the season.” Then he looked at his wife, all incredulous and aghast. “My dear girl, what are you about? Do you know that at any moment Bridgie may be here? I thought you had come for the easel.”

Esmeralda leaped to her feet with a cry of dismay. “Hurry! hurry!” she cried. “Oh, what are you waiting for? Carry it for me. Be quick! be quick!” and off she rushed with a swirl of flounces, a rustle of silk, a wild waving of arms, while her husband chuckled with amusement, and confided in Sylvia—

“That’s the usual programme! First keeps me waiting for hours, and then upbraids me for being slow. Keep Bridgie occupied if she comes in too soon, please, Miss Trevor. This little surprise needs a good deal of preparation.”

What could it be? Sylvia grew quite excited as once more peals of laughter echoed from the dining-room. Esmeralda was evidently sparing no pains to display her presents to the best advantage, and, lucky girl, no want of money had hampered her choice of what would be appropriate and welcome.

“I’m glad I gave Bridgie my minute offering this morning, so that it won’t be shamed by contrast. I shall be out of this

distribution, so it doesn't matter, but I do hope they will ask me to go in," said Sylvia to herself. "I hated Esmeralda last night, but I rather love her this morning. She is like the little girl in the rhyme—when she is nice she is very, very nice; but when she is bad she is—horrid!"

After all, the mysterious preparations were completed before the return of the church party, for the service had been unusually lengthy, and Esmeralda was champing with impatience before the latch-key clicked in the lock. There was great kissing and hugging beneath the mistletoe, and Bridgie was sent flying upstairs to take off her wraps, in preparation for the great exhibition.

"I have laid out our presents in the dining-room, and they take up all the table, so there will be no dinner until they are distributed. I've lighted the lamp, dear, to make it look more festive. Hope you don't mind? It was just the least thought in the world gloomy in that back room this morning."

"Anything you like, dear! anything you like!" cried Bridgie the docile; then she looked at Sylvia, and beamed with satisfaction as Geoffrey offered his arm to support the invalid's halting footsteps.

They led the way together, and she seated herself in state in an arm-chair, while the brothers and sisters crowded in at the doorway, exclaiming volubly at the sight which met their eyes.

The table had been pushed lengthways against the window, the crimson curtains making an effective background to its heaped-up treasures. The lamp stood at the farther end of the room, casting a subdued rosy light on the eager faces. It was not exactly a "cheery" illumination, but it was certainly becoming, and lent an air of mystery to the everyday surroundings.

"A new lamp-shade! How lovely! Pink silk and roses. Wouldn't it make a sweet garden hat?" exclaimed Bridgie rapturously. "Is that my present, Joan? How did you know I wanted a shade?"

"That's a present for the house; yours is over there in that round box; Geoffrey will hand it to you. There's a present for everybody, and one for you all together. You'll see that last!"

At that every eye turned curiously at the curtained picture-frame which stood artfully supported by boxes at the place of honour at the farther end of the table. Evidently this was the grand climax of the entertainment, but meantime there were half a dozen excitements in store, all calling for rapturous acknowledgments.

Bridgie's round box was found to contain a muff of real Russian sable, on receiving which, to use her own expressive phrase, she "nearly swooned with delight." She sat purring over it, and rubbing it fondly against her cheeks, while dandy Jack was presented with a dressing-case, fitted with silver and ivory, Pat with a handsome camera, and Miles with a bicycle deftly wheeled from behind the curtains.

Even the servants had been remembered, for there was a bulky parcel addressed to each name, and Sylvia grew red with mingled pleasure and embarrassment as a casket of French bon-bons was deposited on her knee. It was a delightful scene, and not the least delightful part of it was the enjoyment of the young couple themselves, and their whole-hearted participation in the pleasure of the recipients.

It is the custom of most donors to depreciate their gifts, but that was not Esmeralda's way. Not a bit of it! She was a capital show-woman, and if by chance any detail of perfection passed unnoticed, she pointed it out forthwith, and dilated at length upon its virtues. Jack turned over the silver-topped bottles, and peeped at his reflection in the mirror; Miles tingled his bicycle-bell, and balanced himself on the saddle; Sylvia handed round bon-bons and surreptitiously fumbled to discover how many rows the box contained; and Pat demanded immediate orders for family groups. It took some little time to restore order, but Geoffrey stood patiently waiting until he could make himself heard, his hand stretched out to uncover the curtained frame.

"Now for the general present! With best wishes to the family circle, from Joan and myself. Are you ready? Very well, then, here you are! One, two, three!"

With the last word he whisked off the cloth, and a gasp sounded through the room, followed by a silence more eloquent than words.

Sylvia stared with widened eyes at the picture of a girl's head, strangely like and yet unlike that precious photograph which Bridgie had exhibited with so much pride. It was Pixie—that was quite evident—but an older, bigger, wonderfully smartened edition of the elf-like child. The dark locks were rolled back in pompadour fashion over a high cushion, the plait turned up in a queue, fastened at the nape of the neck by an enormous outstanding bow; the cheeks were fuller in outline, and the disproportion between nose and mouth less marked. She was by no means pretty, yet there was a charm about the quaint little face which made the onlooker smile involuntarily and feel a sudden outgoing of affection.

"P–pixie!" gasped Bridgie in a breathless whisper. She rested her cheek against the muff, and stared before her with rapt grey eyes. "Pixie's portrait! Oh, Esmeralda—what a lovely thought! You had it taken for us? You sent to Paris for it?"

"Yes—yes!" cried Esmeralda gleefully. "I knew it would please you more than anything else to have her with us. Do you like it? Do you think it is good? Is it quite like her?"

"It's like—yes, but not quite lifelike. Does she really do her hair like that? I can't imagine Pixie looking so neat. She looks grave, too—graver than she ever looked, except when she was up to mischief. I hope she is not fretting, poor child! Oh, it makes me long for her more than ever! I could look at it all day long!"

Jack stroked his chin, and smiled contentedly.

“That’s what I call something like a present! It’s a rattling good portrait of the Piccaninny, judiciously flattered as portraits ought to be. We can’t see it, though, in this light. Let me put the lamp a little nearer, or take off the shade.”

Esmeralda, however, was standing next the lamp, and refused to move aside.

“We arranged it to give the best light, so it’s no use trying to improve it. The best view is from over there by the door,” she said in her masterful fashion which would brook no contradiction. “One can never see a picture to the best advantage by lamp-light, but you must make allowances for that. Do you think it is well done? It is by a very good master!”

“Rather starry about the eyes!” said Pat critically.

“Laid on the red rather too thickly about the cheeks!” objected Miles.

Bridgie put down her muff, and went stooping across the room to get a nearer view.

“Is it oil or water-colour? I seem to know the frame. Oh, it *is* like her, Esmeralda—oh, so like! Pixie, Pixie, my little Pixie!”

“*Bridgie*!” cried an answering voice. The picture swayed, rocked forward, and fell on its face on the table; a little figure stood squeezed in between the table and the window. It was no picture, but a reality. Pixie herself stood among them in warm, living flesh and blood!

Chapter Ten.

Pixie’s Reminiscences.

It is wonderful what money can do—in conjunction with generous impulse and ingenious brain. Esmeralda hung on to Bridgie’s arm relating in breathless accents how, being herself unable to go abroad until after the New Year, the happy inspiration had occurred to Geoffrey of despatching the French maid to her native city to bring back the dear living Christmas present which now stood before them; how the travellers had arrived on the previous evening, afire with delight at their own share in the conspiracy; how she herself had conceived the idea of presenting Pixie in the form of a portrait, and had brought the frame from home, and tacked across it a piece of black gauze to heighten the picture-like effect.

“And I put the lamp as far-away from it as possible, and covered it over so that she might not have to keep still too long. Oh, if you could only have seen yourselves staring at her, and taking it all in grim earnest! I never, never enjoyed anything so much in my days!”

“Is it oil colours I am, or water? I’m flattered, ain’t I, as a portrait ought to be? Ye couldn’t imagine I could be so neat!” cried Pixie tauntingly, as she pirouetted to and fro on the top of the table, to which she had lightly sprung at

AND PERE TOOK SNUFF TO CONSOLE HIMSELF.

the first moment of discovery. She looked like a big French doll, as she swung from side to side, her hands outheld, her shoulders raised, her tiny feet twinkling to and fro. Her pink frock was marvellously smart, the flounces stood out in jaunty fashion around the ankles, the sash encircled a tiny waist, and the brothers and sisters stood looking on, joy, incredulity, amaze written upon their faces.

Bridgie's arms kept stretching out and falling back to her side with automatic regularity, and still the little figure pranced, and gesticulated, and blew kisses to right and left, at one moment a merry Irish vagabond, at the next a French marionette—all smirks and bows and shrugging shoulders.

"We got the better of you that time, I'm thinking! Oh, la-la! how it was droll to hear you all making your pleasantries upon me while I kept still—so still! I have never been so still but when I am up to mischief. If ye could have seen under the table, I was shaking like a jelly, but Esmeralda said, 'I'll pack ye back as quick as ye came if you spoil it on me, after all me trouble!'"

"Figure it to yourselves; I was sitting so *triste* by myself in the *salon*, thinking of you all at home, and the fun ye'd have without me, and the slices of plum-pudding fried up the next day the way I like them best, and never a bite to come my way, when behold I the door opened, and there enters to me Marie, all smiles and complaisance. Everything is altered, she bears a letter from Madame Hilliard—I must pack my box, and say my farewells, and be ready to start by the train next day. Fortunately all is ready. Thérèse has already prepared for my return. There was nothing to do but lay the things in the box and drive away."

"And what did Thérèse say to it all? How did she and Père like parting from you in such a hurry?"

"They wept!" said Pixie tragically. Her shoulders approached her ears in eloquent gesture. "But how they wept! I also wept to see them weep, and Marie wept to leave her dear Paris." She paused, and the solemn expression gave place to a broad smile of enjoyment.

"There wasn't a dry rag between the four of us, and Père took snuff to console himself, and that started him crying harder than ever. I was so flurried I couldn't tell which was the topmost, joy or sorrow, until we had ham and eggs for breakfast this morning, and I felt I was at home. It's an awful thing to live in a country where there's never a bite of solid food to cheer your spirits in the morning! Many's the time me heart would bleed, thinking of Miles if he'd been there. Are ye glad to see me, boys, now you know that I'm real?"

There was no doubt about that. When at last the little sister condescended to step down from her perch, she was passed from one to another in a series of bear-like hugs, from which she emerged flushed and complacent, to step briskly towards Sylvia and kiss her effusively upon the cheek.

"How d'ye do, me dear, and how's your illness? I've heard so much about it that I expected to see you worse. You look too pretty to be an invalid!"

"Hear, hear!" muttered Jack softly.

Sylvia blushed and gripped the little hand which lay so confidingly in her own.

"Thank you very much. I am getting better, but I don't feel at all pretty. I'm lame, and have to limp about wherever I

go, and my hair is tumbling out. I have the greatest difficulty to make it look respectable. I shall be bald soon!"

Pixie craned forward and examined her head with sorrowful candour.

"It *is* thin! Ye can see the scalp shining through like shot silk. You'll look like an old man with a bald head; but never mind! Think of the saving in the morning! It will be so easy to do your hair!"

There was a burst of laughter from brothers and sisters, while Sylvia covered her face with her hands and rocked to and fro in mock despair.

"You need never be unduly elated by a compliment from Pixie, Miss Trevor," said Geoffrey Hilliard meaningly. "She is the most transparently truthful person I ever encountered, and favoured me with several character sketches of my wife before we were engaged, which might have warned me of my fate if I'd been a sensible fellow. I have remembered them, Pixie, many a time since then, and I'm glad to find your foreign experiences have not affected your candour. There's another thing that is not much altered, so far as I can hear—and that's your brogue, my dear! It sounds to me almost as pronounced as in the old days when you were running wild at Knock."

"But it's got a French accent to it now—that's better than English!" cried Pixie eagerly. "I was learning to speak quite elegantly in Surbiton, but Thérèse wouldn't listen to a word of English out of my mouth, and if you'll believe me, me dears, my very dreams are in French the last few months. There was a *jeune fille* in Paris who used to promenade with us sometimes for the benefit of hearing me talk English. She said the words didn't sound the same way as when they taught them to her at school. *Hélas le misérable*! The brogue of her put shame on me own before I came away."

The shoulders went up again, and a roguish smile lit up the little face. Bridgie watched it with rapt, adoring eyes; her Pixie, her baby, was now a big girl, almost grown-up, transformed from the forlorn-looking elf to a natty little personage, more like the pictures of *jeunes filles* on the back of French pattern plates than she could have believed possible for Irish flesh and blood. Imitative Pixie had caught "the air," and the good Thérèse had evidently taken immense pains with the costume in which her pupil should make her reappearance in the family circle.

Bridgie gazed at the buckled, high-heeled shoes peeping from beneath the flounces, and wondered if it could really be that they held the same little feet which used to patter about, buttonless, and down at heel; she looked at the jaunty, outstanding bow which tied back the hair, and contrasted it with the wisp of ribbon twisted to the proportions of a tape, and knotted like a cat-o'-nine-tails, which used to bind together the straggly locks, and as she looked, she felt—shall it be confessed?—a pang of longing and regret for the days that were no more. It passed in a moment, for whatever her external appearance might be, Pixie was transparently the same at heart, and quick to note the faintest shadow on the face of the dear mother-sister. She swung round to face Bridgie, the grey eyes bent upon her in earnest scrutiny.

They saw something written there that had not been visible two years before—the outward marks of an inward, and very bitter struggle, and Bridgie flushed beneath the scrutiny of that clear-seeing, childlike gaze, and trembled at the thought of what was to come.

"Has anyone been unkind to ye, Bridgie?" asked Pixie in deep, full-throated tones. She put up her hand and stroked the soft cheek with a tenderness of pitying love which was more eloquent than words. "There are dips in your cheeks, like Miss Minnitt's when she was getting over the fever, and your eyes look tired. What has happened to worry ye, me dear, and take the colour out of your face?"

"She has enough colour to satisfy you at the moment, hasn't she?" Jack said, laughing, and Pixie nodded with ruthless candour.

"Because she is blushing. What are you blushing for, you silly girl? It isn't as if I had asked about a heart affair. The girls in France were always talking of heart affairs, and asking if you were *fiancée*. They thought you were very old, and must be going to *coif* Saint Catherine. That means that you are going to be an old maid. I said yes, of course you were, because you were needed at home. Esmeralda was no use, but we could not get on without Bridgie!"

"You miserable, ungrateful child! This is my reward for all I have done for you!" declaimed Esmeralda with dramatic emphasis, but Bridgie's face lit up with a smile of whole-hearted satisfaction.

Thank God! Whatever her personal disappointment might be, she could never feel that she was alone in the world—that among all its teeming millions there was no human being whose happiness depended upon her presence; she had been spared that worst trial to a woman's heart, and Pixie's calm taking-for-granted that she was indispensable to the family circle was the greatest comfort which she could have given.

"No, I shan't leave you, darling. I have too much to do looking after you and those three big boys, and when you fly away to nests of your own, Sylvia and I have all sorts of plans for enjoying ourselves together. I have promised faithfully to wheel her about in her Bath-chair."

"And I will make your caps. I'm clever at millinery," said Sylvia, pretending not to hear Jack's murmurs of protest, and looking very pretty and animated as she sat erect in her chair and gesticulated with her thin little hands. "You shall have one with pearl dangles for high days and holidays, and nice, stiff little black bows for ordinary wear. We will knit socks and mittens, and play cribbage in the evening, and talk over the days of our youth. It's almost a pity we know each other now, for we shan't be able to romance as much as we would like!"

"Perhaps the romance will come in in some other way! Perhaps a husband may interfere with the claims of Saint Catherine!" said Geoffrey, putting into words the language of Jack's eyes, and everybody stared at Sylvia's face with embarrassing curiosity.

“I shall never marry!” she said obstinately. Not that she meant it in the least, for she did not, but she was one of the girls who foolishly think it the right thing to protest in public, and who are mistaken enough to feel a trifle ashamed of the natural womanly longing for someone to love and to protect them, which God Himself has put in their hearts. A few girls there may be who honestly mean such a decision, but they are very few indeed, while their hearers are invariably sceptical.

Not one of the O’Shaughnessys seemed in the least impressed by Sylvia’s disclaimer, and it was disconcerting to hear Pixie’s sympathetic, “Did no one ever ask ye? Never mind! They may still. You are not so very old!”

Sylvia made up her mind there and then that it was better to say exactly what one meant in the presence of Miss Pixie O’Shaughnessy!

Chapter Eleven.

Esmeralda Checkmated.

Three days after Christmas, Esmeralda and her husband returned to Ireland, scattering invitations, severally and in bulk, to all the inhabitants of Number Three, Rutland Road. Even Sylvia found herself invited for a long visit, and was the more surprised at this mark of favour because Mrs Hilliard’s demeanour towards her was tinged with jealousy and uneasy suspicion. She was willing enough to play Lady Bountiful, present offerings of fruit and flowers, and be gushingly sympathetic, but she liked to monopolise the whole attention of her sisters, and was not well pleased when they in their turn hung about the invalid’s couch. She had not been an hour in the same room, moreover, before she had intercepted one of Jack’s most melting glances, and the stare of the great grey eyes left no doubt as to the disapproval with which she viewed the flirtation.

Sylvia’s annoyance converted her into a very hedgehog of dignity, and the prickly quills kept the young fellow at such a distance that he lost faith in his own fascinations for the first and only time in his career. He bade Esmeralda an affectionate farewell, but was in truth well resigned to her departure—a fact which she was quite sharp enough to discover.

“Jack is pleased that I am going away!” she said to Bridgie as the two sisters sat together for the last confidential chat. “He knows that I watch him flirting with Sylvia Trevor, and thinks he will get on better without me. You really ought to be careful, Bridgie, and not let them be too much together!”

“Does he flirt with her? Not more than he does with every other girl,” said Bridgie leniently. “I don’t see why I should worry myself about it. Sylvia is a sensible girl, who is not given to fancying that every man is in love with her, and Jack is just a dear, soft-hearted boy, who can’t help making pretty speeches, but he would never make serious love if he did not mean it, and if he did—well, why not Sylvia as well as anyone else?”

But Mrs Geoffrey Hilliard was not to be so easily appeased. She threw back her haughty head, lowered languid eyelids, and drawled out—

“My dear Bridgie, remember whom you are speaking about! Jack is the head of the family—he’s O’Shaughnessy of Knock! Eventually, as we hope and believe, he will go back to take up his own position, and, thanks to Geoff, the property will be in a very different condition from what it was when he left. He must make a marriage which will be a help, not a hindrance. And who is she? Answer me that! What do you know about her?”

“She is a dear girl! She is very attractive! Her father is abroad. She lives with an old aunt.”

“Exactly! A pleasant girl in a London suburb!” Esmeralda’s voice was full of ineffable condescension. “There are thousands of them, and no doubt they are charming in their way, but not for Jack. He owes a duty to the family as well as himself, and you ought to tell him as much. You really ought, Bridgie! Speak to him at once, before it goes too far!”

“Suppose you speak to him yourself! When you are so hot upon it, it’s a pity to leave it to me.”

“No, I’d rather not. Jack is so stupid about taking advice. He would snap my nose off if I said anything.”

“I really don’t see why my nose is not as valuable as yours! Why should I do your disagreeable work for you?” retorted Bridgie with spirit. “You did not know that Geoffrey was a rich man when you promised to marry him, and it’s the last thing I would think of myself, so why should we expect any more of Jack? I am not going to interfere, whatever happens, and if you take my advice you won’t mention Sylvia’s name to him!”

“I don’t intend to, but—”

Esmeralda shut her lips tightly over an unspoken determination. There are more ways than one of nipping in the bud an incipient love affair, but she did not care about confiding her latest inspiration to any hearer, least of all to Bridgie, who would have given up her most cherished plans rather than hurt the feelings of a fellow-creature. She changed the subject, and talked lightly on impersonal topics until the moment of parting drew near, when there came a sudden softening over the beautiful face, and she said in gentle, diffident tones—

“I didn’t like to ask before, but I can’t leave without knowing, darling. Have you heard?”

Bridgie shook her head mutely, and the lines which Pixie had noticed deepened round her eyes and mouth, but the eyes smiled still—a brave, steady smile.

“I never shall hear now, Joan. I’ve made up my mind to that.”

“I don’t know how you bear it! I can’t think how you manage to be so composed and cheerful! If Geoff had treated me like that, it would have soured me for life. You were never sour from the first, and now you seem quite happy. Yet, as Pixie says, you have a pathetic look which shows that you have not really forgotten. You still care, Bridgie dear?”

“I shall always care,” said Bridgie quietly. “There’s an ache at the back of my heart, but there are so many things at the front that it gets crowded out. Besides, you know, Esmeralda darling, I don’t want to seem to praise myself, but it’s a trouble which God has sent me, and I ask Him every night to help me to bear it in the right way. It wouldn’t be the right way to let the shadow of it darken other lives besides my own. If I moped and grizzled, everyone in the house would be uncomfortable, and they have their own worries, poor creatures, without suffering for mine! I made an excellent rule for my own benefit—to laugh downstairs and cry in my own room, and it answers beautifully, for I’m so tired when I get to bed that I’ve no sooner begun repining than I wake up and find it’s morning. You try it, dear, when you’ve got a worry. You’ll find it splendid!”

Esmeralda shook her head.

“Not for me! What I feel I must show, and sooner than I feel it, if that is possible. If I tried to bottle up my feelings it would make me ill, and the explosion would be all the greater when it did come. My only chance is to get it over as soon as possible, but in your case it is a long slow suspense, which is worse than any definite trouble. You are an angel, dear, to bear it as you do! It’s mysterious that it should have come to you and not me, for you didn’t need discipline, and I, who was always the naughty one, have got all that I want—Geoffrey, and home, and the dear little boy. You must come soon, Bridgie, to see the boy. He will be getting teeth and all sorts of luxuries, and his godmother ought to be there to look after him.”

Esmeralda rose and strolled over to the glass to arrange her hat and pin on a filmy veil. “I must go downstairs now, and say good-bye to Miss Trevor. Don’t hurry, dear, if you have anything to do. We don’t leave for a quarter of an hour still.”

Unsuspecting Bridgie trotted away to the kitchen to give some orders, while Esmeralda sailed into the drawing-room, all smiles and amiability. A peal of laughter greeted her ears as she entered, and there sat Pixie perched on the end of the sofa, with her hands clasped round her knees, and her chin poked forward, enjoying to the full the discovery of a new audience, who was apparently as much interested in the sayings and doings of the O’Shaughnessy family as she was herself.

Both girls looked up as the rustle of silks heralded Mrs Hilliard’s approach, but while the younger remained serenely composed, Sylvia’s lips tightened, and her eyes gave out an ominous flash. It was as if she felt an antagonistic spirit in the air, and braced herself for the conflict. Yet nothing could have been more friendly than Esmeralda’s smile—more cordial than her voice.

“I told Bridgie I must really have ten minutes for a farewell chat with you before I go. It has been so pleasant to have you here, and I hope we shall soon meet again. Has Pixie been amusing you while we were upstairs? Come down from that couch, child! You must be quite cramped. I am here, so you need not mount guard any longer.”

“I’m very comfortable where I am,” said Pixie easily. She laid her head on one side, and stared at her sister with large, innocent eyes, which seemed strangely disconcerting to that young lady’s composure. She frowned, and snapped a bracelet together with quite a vicious snap.

“But you are too old for such inelegant positions. You are almost grown-up now, and must learn how to behave. For goodness’ sake get up before Geoff sees you! He is so very particular about nice behaviour in girls.”

“’Twas a bad relapse for him when he married you!” muttered Pixie beneath her breath. She straightened herself slowly and let her feet slip to the ground, but Esmeralda realised that nothing but a direct request would convince her of the extraordinary fact that her absence was for once more desired than her presence. For obvious reasons such a request could not be made, and as the time was quickly passing nothing remained but to clothe her hints even more circumspectly than she had intended.

“I am so glad that your foot is really getting better,” she said graciously to Sylvia. “Bridgie says the nurse is so pleased with its progress the last few days. You will be able to walk about soon, and then if you feel inclined for a change we shall be so pleased if you will come over to visit us. It is quiet at Knock, but I would drive you about, and the air is so delightful that I am sure it would do you good. You will hear all about the place from Pixie, so that it would not feel strange to you when you arrived, and we have a few nice friends within driving distance.

“She would like Mollie Burrell, wouldn’t she, Pixie? That’s a young girl who lives seven miles from us at Knock, but we think nothing of that distance in the country. She was always over at the Castle before Jack went away, and we used to say she felt like another sister. You remember how he used to drive over in the cart, and bring her back to surprise us?”

“I do so! And the afternoon when she went shopping into the post-office as they drove through the village, and Tim Hegan came up and began bidding for the old grey mare, and with that Jack took him into the cart and drove over to the farm, and never a thought of poor Mollie until the evening, when she cut him dead limping home through the mud. ’Twas a cruel thing to do, and the poor creature putting on new boots for the occasion to do him honour, and says Jack, ‘I’ve done for myself this time! It would take a cleverer man than myself to twist *that* into a compliment!’”

“Oh, that’s an old-world story!” cried Esmeralda, with her head in the air. Her cheeks had flushed despite her efforts for composure, and she was uncomfortably conscious that Sylvia was trying to restrain a smile at this most open contradiction of the implied attachment between Jack and his Irish neighbour. Her irritation urged her to stronger

measures, and she said testily—

“It proves how little dependence can be placed upon Jack’s promises. If he could forget Mollie, it is no wonder that he changes his mind every other day. But they made up that quarrel ages ago, and he was over there shooting in September and squiring her all over the county. You should not tell tales out of school, Pixie!”

“Was it me? I thought it was yourself. You began saying that they were such friends, and I thought maybe it would amuse Sylvia to hear—”

“So it does, Pixie. It amuses me extremely,” assented Sylvia with an intentional emphasis, which made Esmeralda wince once more, for, however innocent the little sister might be, she felt convinced that Sylvia Trevor thoroughly understood her implied warning, and was by no means docile in her manner of receiving it. She sat up stiff and erect, smiling into space with an expression of scornful superiority which filled the beholder with unwilling admiration. In just such a spirit would she herself have accepted interference from the lips of a stranger. She recognised a kindred spirit, and realised that, putting Jack out of the question, Miss Sylvia Trevor would be a friend after her own heart.

The repeated invitation had in it a note of sincerity which had been wanting in the earlier rendering, but Sylvia only murmured, “Thank you!” in a politely non-committal manner, and shrank back so decidedly from the proffered kiss that there was no choice but to substitute a formal handshake in its stead.

The sisters drove off together to the station, and Sylvia was left alone to relieve pent-up irritation by making one impetuous resolve after another, to replace each the following moment by one diametrically different.

“Thank goodness, she has gone at last! I can’t think how I ever could have liked her! I think I dislike her more than anyone I ever met. How dare she interfere with me! How dare she imply that I want to monopolise her precious brother! I shall never speak to him again as long as I live! I shall go home to-morrow, and take good care that I never come across when he is likely to be at home. Perhaps she has warned him too, as if he were not conceited enough already! He is worth a dozen of her all the same, and is far nicer than I thought at first. It’s perfectly absurd to think a man and a girl cannot be in the same house for a week without falling in love with each other. I won’t condescend to take the faintest notice of her insinuations. I shall be as nice as I like, and give up snubbing him from this minute. He can be engaged to fifty Mollie Burrells if he likes; that’s no reason why I should not treat him civilly!”

In the hours which elapsed before the return of the sisters she had had time to change her mind a dozen times over, to write letters to Aunt Margaret and burn them in the fire, to invent scathing sarcasms by which poor Jack was to be reduced to a condition of hopeless subjection, and rehearse melting scenes when her womanly sympathy would soothe ruffled spirits and restore him to calm.

All uncertainty as to her conduct was, however, removed by the first glance at Jack’s face when he returned home in the evening, for it bore the unmistakable marks of real anxiety, and the weary sigh with which he sank into his chair was something new to his vigorous manhood.

Bridgie bustled in with the tea which always awaited his coming, kissed him lightly, and hurried away to finish some letters. Pixie sat hunched up before the fire devouring a book, and Jack pushed his chair nearer Sylvia’s couch, staring at her in a dumb, melancholy fashion which had in it something singularly beguiling. Despite his great height and muscular form, he looked so helpless and appealing, like a nice child who has lost a toy, or a big collie dog which turns pathetic eyes towards his master’s face.

Sylvia smiled involuntarily, but it was a very friendly smile, and her voice had lost its mocking tone as she inquired—

“Well—what’s the trouble?”

Jack put his cup on the table and leant towards her, his elbows resting on his knees, his chin supported on clasped hands. Pixie read on undisturbed, soft gurgles of laughter marking her enjoyment of sensational passages.

“I’ve had a blow,” said Jack, “a ghastly disappointment! This is the day when the firm announces the various arrangements for the year, increases in salary and so on. I quite understood that I should come in for a substantial rise, if not a junior partnership. It was talked about when I joined four years back, and as nothing was done last January I made a certainty of it coming off now. Instead of that, I get nothing—nothing! No advance at all upon the payment of the last two years. I had it out with the partners this afternoon, and they seemed to think I had done unusually well. They implied that it was a piece of pure imagination on my part to have expected to be taken into the firm.”

“But—I know nothing about business except what I have read—but is it not usual to have something written—a definite agreement which settles things without the possibility of argument? If you joined this firm with the idea of being made a partner, was not an agreement written down in black and white?”

Jack waved his hand in airy dissent.

“No, there was nothing definite, but we talked it over.—The old fellow certainly held out hopes for the future! I made so sure of a partnership that we took this house in the prospect of being able to pay for it out of my increased earnings. It’s too expensive as it is for people brought up as we have been. I’m the most practical of the bundle, and with care and attention can make half a crown go almost as far as an Englishman’s shilling; but Bridgie, bless her! wears herself out saving pennies, and throws away pounds with the best. In my father’s time there was never any money to trouble about, so she got into the way of ordering things without thinking what they would cost, and it’s a difficult plan to forsake. She’s done her best, poor creature! I wouldn’t blame her for the world.”

“And—and will you have to leave the house?” Sylvia’s heart sank drearily at the prospect. What if the

O’Shaughnessys flitted away to a suburb at the opposite end of the city, and Number Three, Rutland Road was deserted once more, or tenanted by an ordinary, commonplace family, such as inhabited every other villa in the neighbourhood! After the sweet friendship of Bridgie, the fascinations of Jack, the audacities of the two boys, the witcheries of Pixie, and last but not least, the incursions of Esmeralda, exasperating, but to the last degree romantic and beautiful, Sylvia felt a shudder of distaste at the thought of a stout mamma and papa, one baby in a perambulator, another in a mail-cart, and a graduated line of school-boys and girls sallying forth daily to their appointed tasks. “Oh, I’m so sorry you will have to leave!” she sighed, and Jack smiled at her in grateful acknowledgment of her regret.

“I’m glad you are sorry, but I don’t intend to leave. We have been here only four months, and I can’t face another removal for—many reasons! We will have to squeeze along somehow until things look up. A crop of bills have come in during the last few days to make matters worse, and I will have to talk things over with Bridgie to-night. I hate to worry her, but there must be some system, or we shall find ourselves in the workhouse some fine day. And now there is the child to think of. She will be an extra expense!”

Sylvia glanced quickly across the room at the figure in the depths of the arm-chair. She sat motionless, her head bent over her book, but Pixie was one of those intensely alive little creatures who seem to infect their very surroundings with vitality. It seemed to Sylvia that the pages fluttered in agitated fashion, the bow of ribbon holding back her hair seemed of a sudden to stand out at attention, the knotted ends looked like two alert, curious ears at the back of her head.

How much had Pixie heard?

Chapter Twelve.

A Family Council.

That night after dinner Jack broke the news of his disappointment to the assembled family, who bore the shock with surprising resignation. Pat whistled, and said, “Just our luck! Ah, well, if it’s no better, let’s be thankful it’s no worse!” Miles suggested cheerfully, “Why don’t you chuck it and keep a shop? Then we should get all our food for nothing.” And Bridgie’s sigh turned into a smile as she cried, “What a blessing we took this house when we did! Now we should not have been able to afford it, and we should never have known you, Sylvia dear! It’s funny, isn’t it, to think that this little crib is too big for us?”

“Oh, awfully funny!” said Jack drily. He had opened the topmost drawer in the writing-table and taken out half a dozen red-backed books and a bundle of bills. “The fact remains that we shall have to spend at least a hundred a year less than we calculated if we want to keep out of the Bankruptcy Court. I don’t know how it is, but I seem to have given the money for half these bills, and yet here they are again! I was perfectly horrified to see them. This coal bill, for instance,—I remember distinctly giving you two sovereigns one morning just as I was starting for town—”

Sylvia sat up hastily and fumbled for the stick by which she supported herself about the house. It seemed to her impossible that such intimate family affairs could be discussed before a stranger, but at the first movement Jack inquired eagerly where she was going, and both he and Bridgie laughed to scorn the idea of privacy. The presence of a stranger seemed indeed to whet their interest in the forthcoming discussion, which was conducted throughout with a cheerfulness and composure which contrasted strangely with Miss Munns’s weekly lamentations over her tradesmen’s accounts.

“’Deed, I remember quite well!” said Bridgie, referring to the money which had been given to her in settlement of the coal bill. “It was the morning the cat got lost in the oven, and all of us searching the house over because of the piteous mews of it. It crept in, Sylvia, when the door was open, after the bacon came out, and Sarah pushed it to as she passed, so the poor creature had a fine Turkish bath of it before we found her. Did I not pay the bill, after all? I suppose I was short of money for something else. It’s wonderful the way it slips away when you are keeping house!”

Jack sighed and took up another paper from the table.

“There’s another here. I know I gave you ten shillings to settle this ironmonger fellow. Eight and threepence! It’s ridiculous running on bills for little sums like this.”

“I paid it! I paid it!” cried Bridgie triumphantly. “I distinctly remember, because there is such a funny little man in the shop who says, ‘What is your next pleasure, madam?’ when you buy a box of tacks. I remember distinctly going in and paying something.”

“Very well, then, you must have the receipt. Where have you put the receipt?”

Bridgie looked vaguely round the room, turned out the contents of her writing-pad, peeped into a drawer under the table, searched the bottom of the stocking-basket, the pocket of her dress, then stroked her chin meditatively, and said—

“Perhaps I was paying for something else! I remember now that I *did* buy a saucepan.”

Jack sighed again, and paced up and down the floor, but he showed no signs of anger or even surprise, and his voice was quite apologetic as he said—

“I’m afraid you will have to be more methodical, dear, if we stay on in this house. We shall never know how we stand if bills keep coming in when we think they are settled. We had better hold a cabinet council and decide how much we

can afford to spend in housekeeping and other departments, and cut our coat according to our cloth. It will be difficult after the way things went on at Knock, but it's our only chance. I tried to put down my private expenses this afternoon, and was horrified to find how heavy they were."

Bridgie cast an admiring glance upon him, and turned to Sylvia with an air of pride.

"Isn't he splendid, now, at his age, talking like an old man for wisdom and prudence! You may well say things are different from what they were at home, for there, if the worst came to the worst, you could always fall back on the pigs and the vegetables that grew for nothing at your door. The idea of paying fourpence for a cauliflower takes me heart out of me every time I go marketing, and the bacon is no sooner bought, than it is eaten. Well, I'm willing enough to learn method, but who's to teach me? Saving your presence, Jack, you're just a beginner yourself!"

Sylvia chuckled mischievously, and her eyes danced with amusement.

"There is a mistress in the art at your very door! Aunt Margaret would be enchanted to instruct you, and her housekeeping is a marvel of accuracy. She could tell you exactly how much she spent last year on soft soap, and the reason why it was more in ninety-six than in ninety-seven. She could walk about the house in the dark and put her hand on the blue-bag and the list of last week's washing. She makes lists of everything she possesses, from household linen to the Christmas cards which she sends out and receives. Her dresses last for best for four years before they are turned for afternoon wear, and two years later they are re-dipped for mornings. They have histories, like her relations, and make valuable Christmas presents to the charwoman on their eighth birthday. She thinks I am recklessly extravagant because my dresses are worn-out in a year!"

"I'll ask her to teach me at once! I'll begin making lists this very afternoon! I'll practise shutting my eyes and searching for the blue-bag," cried Bridgie ardently. "Jack dear, I'll be a model housekeeper, and save so much money that we shall be quite rich."

She was all smiles and complaisance, and sat down for the cabinet council with an unruffled brow, but, as we all know, it is more difficult to face one or two definite difficulties than an army of shadowy deprivations, and when the division of the family income made it necessary to subtract considerably from her housekeeping allowance, and to saddle her in addition with several outside expenses, Mistress Bridget sighed and showed signs of rebellion.

"Such a lot of trouble for such a trifling saving! 'Twill destroy me altogether to be fussing over every halfpenny. What would it matter if we were a trifle in debt at the end of the year? Geoffrey would pay a hundred pounds without knowing it, and be proud to do it into the bargain!"

"But I won't accept it. He has done quite enough as it is. He has paid for Pat's training, and will give him the agency as soon as he is ready to take it, and he paid for Pixie's lessons in Paris. I could not refuse what was good for them, but I'll keep my own house, or give it up altogether!" said Jack proudly, and Sylvia nodded her head in emphatic approval from her place of vantage on the sofa.

Pat and Miles also applauded the declaration of independence, and accepted their own share in the contemplated economies with unperturbed serenity, while Pixie sat solemnly in a corner, turning her eyes on the face of each speaker in turns, her shoulders heaving with suppressed emotion. Of all the members of the family it was evident that she took the present difficulty most seriously, and Sylvia was strengthened in the conviction that she had heard and taken to heart the reference to herself which had been made in the afternoon.

She made no reference to the subject, but three times over the next day Sylvia entered a room in time to hear a hurried rustle and scramble, and behold Pixie gazing into the fire with an air of elaborate unconsciousness—the newspaper rolled into a ball beneath her chair. It was always open at the advertisement sheet, moreover, so that the onlooker had not much difficulty in guessing the character of the letters which were inscribed with such deep-breathed earnestness in the afternoon.

They were posted in the pillar-box at the corner of the road, and Pixie marched back to the house and sat herself down with an air of mysterious importance. Her head was held proudly erect, her lips pressed tightly together as if nothing, no nothing, would induce her to put her secret into words, and Sylvia smiled to herself, and from the experiences of a week's acquaintance, gave her exactly five minutes in which to divulge the whole story.

"If you were threatened with a danger—a hidjus danger—what should you think would be the best way to avoid it?" asked Pixie earnestly, at the expiration of two minutes and a half.

Sarah had that moment brought in the lamp and brushed up the fire, and the little room looked wonderfully cheerful and cosy. It was just the time and opportunity for a confidential chat, and Sylvia sat herself down in the arm-chair with a pleasant sense of expectancy. She was allowed to sit up for an hour or two in the day, and that in itself was a cheering circumstance.

"If I were threatened with a danger, how should I try to avoid it? I really don't know, Pixie. What do you advise yourself?" she asked smilingly, and Pixie smote her fists together, and stamped on the floor with dramatic emphasis.

"Ye ought to march straight out and meet it! That's what Thérèse has been teaching me all these years, for, says she, 'Bridgie, the dear, is so soft-hearted that she'll never believe but that everything will come right if ye sit still and look pleasant.' The last thing but one that she said to me before parting was that I must look after the family and keep them out of trouble; so I've been reading over the papers to see how I can make some money, and it's wonderful the choice you can have! I thought at first about taking a situation, but it's better that I should stay at home to look after Bridgie, and teach her how to use up the scraps as they do in France. Me dear, the most elegant soup made out of nothing at all but the scraps ye would throw to the hens! There's one advertisement which says a lady like meself can earn a handsome income in her own home, without interfering with present duties. It sounds so

light and pleasant that it quite struck my fancy; and only two shillings for samples and directions!”

“Oh, Pixie, did you really send it? I’m so sorry you did that without telling me first. I’m afraid it’s a hoax, dear! It sounds too good to be true!”

“But it says so plainly in those very words. I’ll show it to you if you like. It’s printed!” cried Pixie in a tone of shocked reproof which silenced the protests on Sylvia’s lips. If her suspicions were correct, time would teach the lesson that even printed advertisements were not always accurately truthful, but she had not the heart to dilate on the perfidiousness of mankind in the presence of such innocent trustfulness. She murmured apologetic phrases, and Pixie beamed once more and continued her story.

“There’s another gentleman wants you to go round and sell books. I’ve written to him, but I’d rather do things at home. Did you ever hear of anyone making a fortune by addressing envelopes? They want someone to do that too, but I write so slowly meself, and it’s only a shilling a thousand. A literery lady is wanted to correct proofs. That would be nice, because they might be stories. How do you spell ‘literery’, Sylvia?”

“L-i-t-e-r-a-r-y!”

“Not ‘e-r-y?’ You are quite sure?”

“Absolutely sure!”

“I put ‘literery’!” said Pixie, with a sigh. Perhaps it will prejudice him against me! Spelling was never my strong point, but that was worse than ignorance—with the paper lying beside me for reference! The best of all is a shop that wants you to colour photographs. I love painting pictures, and the scrap-books I’ve done for hospitals would fill a museum. Of course, these would have to be done carefully, but I’ve seen Thérèse sketching at Versailles, and artists painting in the Louvre, and I’m quick at imitating. They wanted three shillings to sell you the paints and brushes, and it will be cheap if it brings in pounds a week. “Twas a good thing Esmeralda gave me a sovereign before she left, and I could get the stamps without anyone being the wiser. I thought, you see, it would be so nice to keep it a secret until I could go to Bridgie with my earnings in my hand. You will promise truly and faithfully not to tell?”

“If you will promise not to send any more money without asking my advice. I think you ought to do that, Pixie!”

“I shan’t need to, me dear. I’ll earn enough as it is. Will I get the replies to-morrow, do you think? The letters ought to be delivered to-night!”

Sylvia felt doubtful whether answers would ever be received, but as events proved, she was wrong, and Pixie was right, for her inquiries were answered by return of post, and on the first opportunity handed over for inspection. The philanthropist who provided remunerative work for gentlewomen at their own homes without interfering with present duties, forwarded samples as promised, the which Pixie spread out on the table with an air of depression. They consisted of a two-inch length of a simple stamping-off pattern, a fragment of black net, and a few dozen common jet beads, wrapped in a paper.

“You iron off the pattern on the net, and then you sew round it with the beads, and then ye cut off the scallops, and then it’s jetted lace!” she explained anxiously. “And when it’s jetted lace, ye go out and sell it to the shops.” She sighed deeply, and turned over the patterns with her fingers. “How much a yard is jetted lace, Sylvia?”

“I don’t know exactly, but I should think a narrow width like this could not be over a couple of shillings at the most.”

“And it would take me months to do, and be puckered at that! It’s such wobbly stuff to sew. Even if I did a lot, I’m afraid the shops would never buy it.”

“I’m afraid not, Pixie. I wouldn’t waste your time trying, dear!”

Pixie sighed again and carefully replaced the fragments in their envelopes.

“It was very kind of them to send them so soon, and if I was clever with my fingers, it would be a fine idea, but I know quite well it would be puckered. Will I send back the patterns, do you think? They might be useful for someone else.”

“I think whoever sent them can very well afford to send another selection to the next inquirer. I should not dream of wasting a stamp on them,” replied Sylvia drily, and as she spoke she pulled Pixie nearer to her, and kissed her with a fervour which was somewhat startling to the recipient.

“Are ye sorry for me?” she queried. “Ye needn’t be, because I shall have so much to do with the photographs that I am not disappointed a bit. They have sent me one to paint, and if I do it to their satisfaction they can keep me in constant work. They don’t say anything about paying, but I expect that will be settled next week. Here’s the paints, and here’s the lady!”

Sylvia looked, and beheld half a dozen cheap paints such as are found in a child’s sixpenny box, a thick and a thin brush, equally common, and a photograph of a buxom lady with a mop of tousled hair, swinging in a hammock-chair under some trees, while a flight of marble steps led up to a palatial mansion in the background. She read the letter, and found that Pixie had accurately described its contents. It appeared that the firm was in pressing need of outside help, and had practically unlimited work to bestow upon ladies “with artistic tendencies.”

Judging from the note-paper, the handwriting, and the style of the photograph itself, the critics could not be very severe, and for a moment Sylvia found herself wondering if by chance Pixie had indeed found some work within her scope. She herself knew little about painting, but after a long discussion of the different features of the photograph, she succeeded in dissuading the youthful artist from a somewhat violent scheme of colour, and in extracting a

promise that the completed picture should be brought across the road for her inspection before it was despatched, for by this time Miss Munns was once more settled at home, and the last evening of the happy visit had arrived.

Sylvia tried not to allow herself to think how quiet and dull the days would seem with only Aunt Margaret as a companion; how hard it would be to sit contentedly playing cribbage in the evenings, while across the road, within a stone's-throw from the window, was this dear, bright, homey room, full of young creatures like herself. She told herself that she had had a happy holiday, and ought to go home refreshed and cheered. She made noble resolutions to be more patient and considerate, and pretended that she was really quite relieved to be leaving Jack O'Shaughnessy, for it was far more difficult to withstand the humbugging eyes now that she knew what a dear kind fellow he was at heart, and he on his part seemed quite embarrassingly sorry to say good-bye!

"You have not been half so nice to me lately as you were the first few days," he said plaintively in the privacy afforded by the strains of a comb orchestra vigorously conducted at the end of the room. "I must have offended you without meaning it; clumsy fellow that I am!"

"Oh dear no, not at all. It is only that I am getting better, and my natural bad temper is asserting itself. Most people are mild when they are ill," she replied lightly, but Jack was not so easily silenced.

"That's not the reason. Saving your presence, you are better tempered, not worse, but there's a difference all the same. I suppose you don't like me so well now that you know me better?"

"On the contrary, I like you infinitely more." Sylvia hesitated a moment, then added with sudden resolution, "I thought you were a very agreeable flirt; you amused me, and I enjoyed being flattered; but now I think you are a real good friend, and I treat you in a different way. One gets tired of compliments, but friendship grows better and better all the time."

Jack coloured, and was silent. Sylvia wondered if he were offended by the plainness of her words, but when he turned to her again, there was the frank, manly expression in his eyes which she liked most to see.

"May I come and call upon you sometimes in the evening? I shall have no chance of seeing you in the daytime."

"I should like it very much, but it is not my house, remember, and Aunt Margaret is not fond of young men."

"But I am terribly partial to old ladies, and I never met the one yet that wasn't wrapped up in me before we parted. I've got a way with old ladies!" said Jack complacently. "There was an old dear in Ireland who managed everyone for miles around, but she was as soft as putty in my hands. The poor girl, her daughter, was not allowed to join in any of the fun that was on hand, and when there was anything special coming on, she'd write pitiful letters and ask me to lunch. I always went—she had very good eyes of her own!—and she'd meet me in the drive, and put me up to what she wanted. By the time the old lady had told me all about her hens, and her servants, and her latest quarrel with her neighbours, and I'd flattered her by saying her rheumatism was the pick of any in the county, she'd be ready to eat out of my hand. And I'd fix up to call for Mollie, and see her safely home after the show was over."

"Mollie? A pretty name! Is it common in Ireland?"

"It is so. We knew a stack of them at Knock, but Mollie Burrell was the best of the bundle."

Sylvia smiled, but her lips felt stiff, and the effort was not a success. A little weight of depression settled over her spirits. She felt anything but sympathetic for the deprivations of Miss Mollie Burrell.

Chapter Thirteen.

Bargain-Hunting.

Two days after Sylvia's return home, Pixie took the tinted photograph across the road for inspection. She had toiled at it with conscientious effort, but, alas! the result was pathetically bad, the paint being laid on in uncertain daubs, while carmine cheeks and scarlet lips laid the buxom lady under suspicion of sickening for fever or some other deadly complaint. Pixie herself was vaguely disquieted by the general effect, but, as she earnestly explained, you "got used to it after a bit, and it didn't look so bad. And even if it was only half price this time, it would be encouraging to the family!"

Sylvia refrained from criticism, but helped to pack the work of art between two sheets of cardboard in readiness for the post, and after that was done, took her visitor downstairs to be introduced to Miss Munns.

The old lady was sitting darning stockings, with a newspaper spread over one half of the table and a little bowl standing ready to receive the snippings of worsted. On the baize cloth at the other end stood an indiarubber plant and four little artificial ferns. A gas fire flickered in the grate, a wire blind shut out the view, the chairs stood ranged in mathematical order against the walls, the very newspaper was folded into an accurate square and put away in the rack, and Pixie looked round with awed eyes the while she was introduced.

"This is Bridgie's youngest sister, Aunt Margaret—Pixie O'Shaughnessy."

"I hope you are quite well, my dear," said Miss Munns.

"Good morning, madame!" said Pixie in her most Parisian manner, not attempting to shake hands, but bowing with an air of gracious effusion from half-way across the room.

Aunt Margaret let the stocking drop in her lap and stared over her spectacles, shaking her head solemnly as Sylvia related how the new-comer had just returned from Paris, where she had been living under the charge of an old governess.

“That accounts for it!” she said darkly, when the explanations were finished. “I never can understand why people want to go abroad when there are so many good schools at their door. When I was a girl I went to Miss Banks at Peckham, and it was most select. Every girl over fifteen wore a bonnet; mine was white Dunstable, with check ribbons, blue and white. I wore it with a dress with silk pipings, and it was very much admired. My cousin Gertrude went to Paris, because her father had business on the Continent, and she never got over it for years. They gave her dreadful food, and when she could not eat it, it was put aside and brought up meal after meal. She told me as a solemn fact that they used to put fruit in the soup, and there was something dreadful made of cabbages. Did they give you cabbages, my dear?”

“Mais oui, madame!” returned Pixie, involuntarily returning to the language of the place of which they were speaking. “But they were delicious, those cabbage! Mademoiselle has without doubt had an unhappy experience. The cabbage of France is a most excellent cabbage. He resembles himself absolutely to an English cabbage, but he is more well prepared.”

“Speak English, my dear, for pity’s sake! I never could understand that gibberish. My poor father paid extra for me to learn under a native, but it seemed as if I always turned against it. Well, I don’t understand about the cabbages; Gertrude certainly said they were quite sour, and mixed with all manner of horrible things!”

“Perhaps you mean sauerkraut, Aunt Margaret. She would hardly have that in Paris. Are you quite sure it was not Germany where she was at school?”

“Berlin, was it? Berlin!” said Miss Munns, meditating with her finger to her lip. “Yes, I think it was, because I remember I always associated it with the wool. All these foreign schools are alike. Nothing comes of them but bowing and scraping. Give me a good sound English education!”

Miss Munns threaded her needle through the heel of the black stocking with an expression which seemed to imply that the last word was spoken on that subject, and Pixie put on her most engaging manner as she replied, as if anxious to prove that she was not altogether ruined by her Continental experiences—

“Madame is without doubt so clever that she does not need to be taught. Sylvia has told us that you could teach Bridgie better than anyone else. She is the best meaner in the world, is Bridgie, but it comes natural to her to forget. Sylvia said it was wonderful the way you managed the house. You could find the blue-bag in the dark!”

“Find—the blue-bag—in the—dark! Why should I find the blue-bag in the dark? What do I want with it in the dark? The blue-bag! Why should I look for the blue-bag?” cried Miss Munns, all anxiety to fathom the meaning of this perplexing statement.

The most elaborate explanations on Sylvia’s part failed to solve the mystery, and she kept on reiterating, “Why blue-bag?” in tones of baffled curiosity, while Sylvia lay back in her chair and sighed, and raised her eyebrows and stared hopelessly at the corner of the ceiling. It was a trying moment, but Pixie entered gallantly into the breach, and succeeded in diverting attention into another channel.

“It was just to shame us beside you, because we couldn’t find it in the light. The sugar-basin would have done just as well. My family had gone on spending money when there was none to spend, until now at last it’s all gone, and Jack says we must begin to be careful. Bridgie thought maybe if you would give her a hint it would be useful, as she has no one to teach her.”

“I never earned a sovereign in my life, but I should be afraid to say how many I have saved!” said Miss Munns complacently. “There is nothing wasted in my house, my dear, and I should be only too thankful to tell your sister the way your servants behave when her back is turned. The light is flaring in their bedroom until after eleven at night, and I’ve seen them myself running after the grocer’s lad to give him extra orders. Does your sister allowance them in butter and sugar? Depend upon it, if she doesn’t, they eat twice as much as they should.

“If she brings her books over to me, I will tell her exactly what quantities she ought to order. It’s hard on a young man like your brother to have to provide for such a long family. I suppose you will be doing something for yourself in a couple of years when you are old enough to go about alone. You will be able to turn your education to account, and give lessons in the French language. You look more French than English, as it is, and have just their way of twisting yourself about as you talk.”

“Aunt Margaret!” cried Sylvia reproachfully, but Pixie’s eyes brightened as at a sudden suggestion, and she cried eagerly—

“Do I? Do I really? Oh, I’m so glad! If you saw me in the street, would you think I was a Parisian? Oh, thank you so much for saying so!”

“Humph! You’re easily pleased. I should not take it as a compliment if anyone said that to me. I’m an Englishwoman, and a good subject of Queen Victoria, and I’m thankful to say I look it. No one would mistake me for a French madam!”

“No, they wouldn’t. You are a different shape,” said Pixie truthfully, whereupon Miss Munns sent a sharp inquiry over the edge of her spectacles, but the glance which met hers was so guileless that no suspicions could live in its presence. So she said, “Humph!” once more, and that ended the discussion.

Pixie renewed her study of the newspapers with fresh interest after this conversation, and made marks against quite a number of advertisements, which, however, she took no active steps to answer, pending the verdict from the photographic company. It came at last, and proved to be a judicious mingling of praise and blame.

The painting of the photograph, said the critic, displayed great taste and artistic promise, though unfortunately the execution did not quite come up to the high standard of excellence required by the firm. No doubt this deficiency was largely caused by a lack of proper materials, and he would strongly recommend further expenditure of five shillings, for a complete artist's outfit, given which, and a little more practice, he had no doubt whatever of being able to send a constant supply of work, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

Sylvia was shown this missive in due course, and tossed it from her with impatient hand.

"You must not send it, Pixie! You must not dream of sending it. Don't you see, dear, they only want to get money from you instead of giving it themselves? You have already sent three shillings, and now they want five more, and probably next time there would be another excuse for getting some more. You can't afford to throw away money like that, especially without Bridgie's knowledge or consent. Give it up, dear, and have no more to do with them."

"I will!" said Pixie sadly; "but you mustn't blame them, poor creatures, for it's my own fault. It's the truth that I was short of paints, for the ones they sent were so dry I could hardly get them to mark, and the colours wouldn't seem to come right. It's very kind of them to promise me work, but I must give it up, for I can't do better without taking lessons, and where would be the profit in that? I took hours, and hours, and hours painting that lady, and ye saw yourself she looked more like a beetroot than a human creature. Don't you say a word to Bridgie, and I'll promise you faithfully I won't send another penny. I've a new idea in my head, which maybe will turn out best of all."

She refused to say anything more explicit on the subject, but hinted that definite information might be forthcoming on the following evening, and Sylvia wondered what new web for the unwary had caught this most innocent little fly in its meshes. She concluded that Pixie must be expecting another prospectus, but next day the two sisters came across the road for a few minutes' chat *en route* for a shopping expedition, and all the time that the elder was speaking, the younger stood in the background, rolling her eyes and mouthing unintelligible messages, evidently intended to convey the information that some great issue was at stake.

"Don't you envy me, me dear? I am going to buy new clothes!" announced Bridgie, beaming. "Esmeralda gave me a five-pound note before she left, and, 'For pity's sake,' she said, 'buy yourself a decent gown! You're a disgrace to be walking about the streets, and with Pixie so smart as she is, too. Now's your chance to get something cheap at the sales!' and with that you should have heard her groan to think she'd lost all the pleasure of hunting for bargains through marrying a rich man! I want a dress, and a jacket, and a hat, and a blouse or two for the house, and gloves, and—"

"Don't you wish you may get them!" cried Sylvia mockingly. She watched the two girls walk down the road, and noted that Pixie was arrayed in her very best clothes to do honour to the mysterious errand, whatever it might be. Her felt hat was tilted at an extraordinary angle; the smart little jacket looked quite different from the ordinary bulky winter garments which one was accustomed to see; her boots were of patent leather, and her muff was decorated with a huge rosette, and ends of ribbon.

Miss Munns might have truthfully declared that she looked French this morning, and there was a suggestion of a strut in her walk which seemed to speak of personal satisfaction in her appearance. Bridgie did indeed look shabby beside her, but then no clothes, however poor, could ever make the sweet thing look anything but a lady, and she too held up her head in triumphant fashion, for was she not going shopping with five bright golden sovereigns in her purse?

When Oxford Street was reached, the novices eagerly examined the windows of a famous drapery establishment, in which the most thrilling bargains were displayed to decoy the passers-by, and on the happy Irish principle of placing the pleasantest duty first on the list, elbowed their way upstairs to the millinery department. The room was blocked with a throng of excited females all engaged in lifting hats from their pegs and trying them on before the various mirrors. Sometimes two of the number would set their affections on the same treasure, and then the one who had been unsuccessful in obtaining possession would stand gloomily by ready to pounce upon it the moment her adversary laid it down. Two or three assistants stood at bay trying to answer a dozen questioners at once, and experienced bargain-hunters were turning over the contents of the drawers with one hand, and grasping four or five bonnets in the other.

For a few moments the new-comers were too much bewildered to know what to do first, but the spirit of plunder soon laid hold of them in their turn, and they began to pounce upon the most fascinating of the spoils and to try them on in breathless excitement.

Bridgie looked charming in all, her small head and cloud-like hair making her an easy person to suit, but, alas! the prices still seemed ruinous to her innocent mind, and she sadly turned her attention to the more simple of the models. These were by no means so becoming as their predecessors, and Pixie's criticisms were as usual strictly truthful as she regarded them.

"Ye look a fright. Ye look old enough to be your own mother. It takes all the colour out of your face. You look quite yellow!"

Bridgie tore the hat from her head, and seized upon a modest brown toque which lay close at hand.

"Is that better, then? Is that dowdy enough to suit you?"

"It's hidjus!" cried Pixie with emphasis. "It's uglier than the other. I wouldn't have it given to me as a present. You look an object from the side!"

“But it’s useful—it is useful!” sighed Bridgie dejectedly. Buying hats was not so exciting as she had imagined if she were obliged to abjure the pretty ones, and buy the useful in which she appeared to such painful disadvantage. “And I expect it is cheap, Pixie. Very cheap! I have, to think of that, remember!”

She tilted the hand-glass to the side to study the effect which had been condemned, and as she did so, a sepulchral voice said grimly in her ear, “When you have quite finished with my hat!” and she turned to behold a severe-looking, elderly lady staring fixedly at her headgear, and holding out her hand to claim it as her own. Poor Bridgie! her cheeks flamed for the next hour. She was so hot, and breathless, and agitated that she would have rushed straightway from the department, but Pixie stood her ground and remained serenely unperturbed.

“’Twas true!” she cried. “’Twas only the truth she heard. *’Twas* hidjus, and no words of yours would make it pretty. And as for cheap, she ought to take that for a compliment, seeing the pains she’s taking to get another like it! Somebody must be trying on your own hat, I’m thinking. It was lying over the rail of that chair where the fat lady is resting. You’d better be asking her what she’s done with it.”

Bridgie walked forward and put an anxious Inquiry, whereupon the fat lady leapt up in alarm, and there against the back of the chair lay a poor flattened object, with battered crown and crestfallen bows—all that was left of Bridgie’s very best hat! She was horrified at the sight, but the fat lady was more horrified still, and so lavish in her apologies that it was impossible to cherish anger against her. She insisted upon herself smoothing out the ribbons and moulding the crown into something like the original shape, and in doing so bestowed the information that there was another millinery department downstairs, where there might possibly be less crowd and more chance of attention.

Chapter Fourteen.

“A French Lady.”

The sisters agreed to adjourn forthwith, but just at the moment of departing a hat was discovered which was in every way what was required, so they proceeded straight to the remnant counter where a mountain of material was being tossed about hither and thither by a crowd of purchasers three rows deep.

“First catch your hare, then cook it,” so runs the old proverb, and in this case the adventure was by no means concluded when the selection was made. It was necessary to pay for what you had bought, and that necessitated a wait of a long half-hour before anyone could be induced to receive the money. The glove department was, if possible, still more crowded, and it was a relief to see through a doorway a vista of a great hall filled with cases of beautiful ready-made dresses, where, despite the presence of a goodly number of customers, there was still enough room to move about, without pushing a way with your elbows.

“Let us come in here and breathe again!” cried Bridgie. “I don’t think I was ever so tired during my life, but I’m enjoying myself terribly. It’s so exciting, isn’t it, Pixie?—and those blouse lengths are quite elegant. They will take a lot of making, though. Wouldn’t it be nice if I could buy a dress all ready, and be spared the work?”

“It would!” agreed Pixie. “Tell one of the ladies what you’re wanting, and maybe she’ll have the very thing. Here is one coming this way. Speak to her.”

Bridgie cleared her throat nervously as she made her request, for the show-woman was a most impressive figure, tall, incredibly slight, with elaborately arranged hair, satin skirts sweeping the ground, and a manner that was quite painfully superior. She swept a scrutinising glance over the sisters as she listened to the request for a simple house dress, volunteered the information that, “Our cheapest costumes are in this stand!” in a blighting tone, and began pulling out the skirts and exhibiting them in professional manner.

“That is a very nice little dress, madam, very neatly made—quite in the latest style! Too light? We are selling a great many light shades this season.—Do you care for this colour? This is a very well-cut gown. Too dark? I am afraid I have not many medium shades.—Here is a pretty gown, very much reduced. Quite a simple little gown, but it looks very well on. This embroidery is all hand-done. The bodice is prettily made.”

Bridgie privately thought the simple little gown a most elaborate creation, but her hopes went up as she heard that “very cheap,” and she asked the price with trembling hope, whereupon the show-woman referred to the little ticket sewn on the belt, and said airily,—“Eight and a half guineas, madam. Reduced from twelve. It really is quite a bargain.”

“Ye might as well say a thousand pounds!” said Bridgie hopelessly, relapsing into a deep, musical brogue in the emotion of the moment, and, wonder of wonders, the bored superiority of the great lady’s manner gave place to a smile of sympathetic amusement.

She was accustomed to customers who asked the prices of a dozen dresses in succession, and then floated away declaring that they would “think it over,” never, as she knew well, to return again; but not one in a thousand was honest enough to make a confession of poverty! She lived in an atmosphere of vanity and affectation, and put on her haughty manners every morning with her black satin dress; but at night she was only a poor, tired, working woman, going home to a dingy lodging, and dividing her earnings with an invalid mother and a family of struggling brothers and sisters. Her heart went out to this other girl who was so evidently a lady despite her poverty, and when Bridgie mentioned a ludicrously small sum as the limit to which she was prepared to go, she showed neither surprise nor the thinly-veiled contempt which is usual under the circumstances, but volunteered some really useful information in its place.

“You will not be able to buy any ready-made costume for that price, madam, but there will be a special sale of dress

materials on Tuesday next. If you could be here quite early in the morning, and go straight to the counter under the clock, you would find some wonderful bargains. I should advise you to leave it until then, but perhaps there is some other department to which I could direct you."

"Thank you, I'm dreadfully tired. Could we go somewhere, and have a cup of tea?"

The way was pointed out, and the sisters mounted the stairs once more, took possession of a little table in a corner, and leant back wearily in their chairs. The room was crowded like the others, but it was comparatively quiet, for the ladies were resting after the fray, stifling surreptitious yawns, and sipping tea with languid enjoyment.

It was a long time before Bridgie could find anyone to attend to her wants, and meantime the temptation of the parcels lying before her was too great to be resisted. "I really must look at those gloves and the lace ties that are wrapped up with them! I never had so many new pairs in my life, but they were so cheap that I hadn't the heart to leave them. 'Twill be a refreshment to gloat over them until the tea comes!" She untied the string and complacently folded back the paper, but, alas! what was then revealed was the reverse of refreshing, for, in some mysterious manner, the gloves and laces had disappeared, and in their place lay a fragment of dull, prosaic flannel, at which the poor bargain-hunter stared with dilated eyes.

"F–flannel!" she gasped. "Flannel! It was gloves when it was made up. What's the matter with it—is it witchcraft?"

"I'd call it stupidity, if you asked my opinion," said Pixie calmly. "You've stolen a poor creature's parcel, and perhaps she wanted to make a poultice with it. It will be awful for her when she goes home, and her husband groaning in agony, and nothing to relieve him but two lace ties! I pity her when she finds it out."

"She has stolen my gloves. I'm not sorry for her at all, and if she is an honest woman she will bring them back at once and hand them in to the office. I shall take the wretched flannel there the moment we go downstairs, but I've a conviction that I'll never see my parcel again. I suppose they got changed at one of those crowded counters. I don't think I care for sales very much, Pixie; they are too expensive. We will go straight home after we have had tea."

"We will so, and make haste about it. I wanted specially to be back by four o'clock."

To Bridgie's surprise, however, ten minutes before the omnibus reached the corner at which they were wont to alight, Pixie beckoned to the conductor to stop, and announced her intention of walking the rest of the way. There was no time to discuss the point, and as she herself was too tired to walk a step farther than she was obliged, she sat still and watched the little figure affectionately until the omnibus rounded a corner and it was hidden from sight.

She would have been astonished if she had seen the sudden energy with which Pixie immediately turned right about face and walked away in the opposite direction, taking a crumpled square of newspaper from her pocket, and reading over a certain advertisement with eager attention.

"'Wanted a French lady.'—I'm not whole French, but I'm half. Haven't I been in their country nearly two years? 'To amuse two children.'—I'd amuse a dozen, and never know I was doing it! 'And perfect them in the language for a couple of hours every morning.' Look at that, now, it's better than the jetted lace! Two hours wouldn't interfere with me one bit, for I've all the day to do nothing. 'Apply personally between four and six at Seven, Fitzjames Crescent.' Only ten minutes' walk from me own door, as if it had been made on purpose to suit me! And quite a good-looking house it is, with real silk curtains in the windows."

She tripped undauntedly up the steps and pressed the electric bell, and, all unseen to her eyes, the little god of fate peered at her from behind the fat white pillars of the portico, and clapped his little hands in triumph.

Chapter Fifteen.

Pixie Scores a Success.

A butler came to the door, a solemn-looking butler, with a white tie and immaculate black clothes, but he seemed rather stupid for his age, for he asked twice over before he could grasp the fact that Pixie had called in answer to the advertisement, and then stared fixedly at her all the time he was escorting her to the room where the other lady applicants were waiting their turns.

Pixie gasped as she looked round and saw ladies, ladies everywhere, on the row of leather chairs ranged along by the wall, on the sofa, on the two easy-lounges by the fireside,—old ladies, young ladies, middle-aged ladies, elderly ladies, shabby and dressy, fat and thin, but all distinctly past their first youth, and all most obviously French. They gaped at the new-comer, even as the butler had done, and she bowed graciously from side to side, and said, "Bon jour, mesdames!" in her most Parisian manner, then squeezed herself into a little corner by the window and listened entranced to the never-ending stream of conversation.

A room full of Englishwomen would under the circumstances have preserved a depressed and solemn silence, but these good ladies chattered like magpies, with such shruggings of shoulders, such waving of hands, such shrillness of emphasis, that Pixie felt as if she were once more domiciled in the Avenue Gustave.

The lady in the plaid dress, who occupied the next chair, asked her with frank curiosity to recount then how she found herself in such a position, and, being assured that she was indeed applying for the situation, prophesied that it would never march! She turned and whispered loudly to her companion, "Behold her, the poor pigeon! One sees well that she has the white heart!" But the companion was less amiable, and enraged herself because there were already applicants enough, and with each new-comer her own chance of success became less assured.

At intervals of five or ten minutes the butler returned and marshalled the next in order to the presence of the lady of the house, but, short as were the interviews, it was a weary wait before it came to Pixie's turn, and she wondered fearfully whether Bridgie had taken fright at her absence, and was even now searching the streets in a panic of alarm. The hands of the clock pointed to ten minutes to six before the butler gave the longed-for signal, and she smiled at him in her most friendly manner as she crossed the room towards him. Without any exchange of words she divined that he took more interest in herself than in any of the other applicants, and also that for some mysterious reason he was sorry for her, and imagined that she was making a mistake, and the smile was meant at once as thanks and reassurement.

They walked together down the slippery floor, such a slippery, shiny floor, that one felt as if skates would be almost more in keeping than boots, and finally arrived at a cosy little room at the back of the house, where a tired-looking gentleman and a bored-looking lady stood ready to receive her. They looked at each other, they looked at the butler, they looked again at the little pig-tailed figure, with short skirts and beaming, childlike face, and their faces became blank with astonishment.

"Bon jour, mademoiselle!" began the lady uncertainly.

"Good day to ye!" said Pixie in response, and at that the bewilderment became more marked than ever. The lady sat down and drew a long, weary sigh. She was handsome and young, but very, very thin, and looked as if she had hardly enough energy to go through any more interviews.

"Then—then you are not French after all?"

"I forgot!" sighed Pixie sadly. She sat down and hitched her chair nearer the fire in sociable fashion. "It's just like me to make up me mind, and then forget at the right moment! I intended to let you hear me speak French, before I broke it to you that I'm Irish and all my people before me."

"I almost think I should have discovered it for myself!" said the lady, looking as if she were not quite sure whether to be amused or irritated. "But if that is so, what is your business here? I advertised for a French lady."

"You did. I read the advertisement, but if I'm not French I'm just as good, for I've just last month returned from Paris, and the lady where I was staying was most particular about my accent. Over in Ireland I was so quick in picking up the brogue that I had to be sent to England to get rid of it, and I was just as handy with another language. If I'd remembered to answer you in French, you would never have known the difference between me and those old ladies who came in first."

"Old ladies, indeed! I'll never advertise again if this is what it means!" sighed the lady *sotto voce*. She looked across the room, met a gleam of amusement in her husband's eyes, and said in a tolerant voice, "Well, then, let me hear you now! I am a pretty good French scholar myself, so you won't find me easy to deceive!"

"Perfectly, madam, perfectly!" cried Pixie, gesticulating assent. She found none of the difficulty in settling what to talk about which handicaps most people under similar circumstances, but poured forth a stream of commonplaces in such fluent, rapid French as showed that she had good reason for boasting of proficiency. When she finished, the lady looked at her husband with a triumphant air, and cried—

"There! It shows how important it is for children to learn a language while they are still young. It can never be mastered so well if it is left until they are grown-up."

Then turning to Pixie—

"Yes, indeed, you speak French charmingly. I congratulate you, and hope you may find it very useful. You are so young that you cannot have finished your own education. Perhaps you are going to school in England?"

"'Deed I am not. I want to teach instead. My brother is a very grand gentleman, but he's in difficulties. He has a fine estate in Ireland, but it is let, and he's over in London trying to make enough money to get back again, and that's none too easy, as you may know yourself, and if I can earn some money it will keep me from being a burden on me friends. I've answered quite a lot of advertisements, but there was nothing really to suit me until I saw your own yesterday morning."

"I see! May I ask if your mother knows what you are doing—if you are here with her consent?"

Pixie sighed at that, and shook her head in melancholy fashion.

"I've no mother. She died when I was young, and the Major's horse threw him two years ago, and I've been an orphan ever since. There's only Bridgie now!"

"Poor child!" The lady looked at the quaint figure with a kindly glance, thinking of the two little girls upstairs, and picturing them starting out to fight the world when they should still have been safe within the shelter of the schoolroom. "I'm sorry to hear that. Bridgie, I suppose, is your sister? Does she know what you are doing? Would she be willing for you to apply for a situation in this manner?"

"Maybe not at first, but I'd beguile her. I'm the youngest, and I always get my own way. I told Sylvia Trevor, who was staying with us, and she was very kind, giving me good advice not to do it, but it is to be a surprise for Bridgie to help her to pay the bills. If ye want money, what else can you do than try to earn it?"

"But not at your age, dear! You are too young yet awhile!" Mrs Wallace crossed the room and seating herself in a chair by Pixie's side, laid a hand on her shoulder with quite affectionate pressure. "I appreciate your kindly intention, but I am afraid it will be a good many years before you are ready to take a governess's place. You saw yourself what

a difference there was between yourself and the other ladies who came to see me to-day!”

“I’m more amusing! Ye wouldn’t believe how amusing I can be when I try! At school there was a prize which was given to the girl who was nicest to the other girls, and they all voted for me, and I’ve got it now and could bring it to show you if you liked. I’m not exactly clever, and there was no chance for anyone else at the bottom of the class, but you didn’t say a word about teaching, except French, and I could talk that all day long!”

“Yes! I should be quite satisfied if my girlies spoke as well as you do. Your accent is charming, and you have just the air, but—but you are so young—so ridiculously young!”

“So are the children. They’d like me best!” maintained Pixie sturdily, and at that Mr Wallace burst into a laugh. His eyes had been twinkling for some time past, and he had been stroking his moustache as if to conceal his amusement, but now he made no more disguise, but laughed and laughed again, as if he were thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Upon my word, Edith, I believe she is right! If you consider the children’s feelings, there is no doubt how they would decide. If you want them kept happy and bright, now’s your chance! After our earlier experiences this is really quite refreshing, and I am beginning to think your advertisement has been of some use after all. How would it be if you interviewed Miss Bridgie—I didn’t catch the second name—and if she is agreeable, you might perhaps make some temporary arrangement!”

“O’Shaughnessy. It’s Irish! I’m sure Bridgie would say yes, for it would be occupation for me in the mornings, and so near that I could come by myself. We live in Rutland Road, but the house is so small ye would hardly notice it if you passed by. Jack says if he could get London rents in Ireland, he’d never do another honest day’s work while he lived. You could put the whole place down in the hall at Knock Castle, and never know it was there, and Bridgie says she knows every blade of grass in the garden. We had the loveliest grounds at Knock, all the flowers coming up anyway, and volunteers drilling in the park, and the glass-houses full of ferrets and white mice, and tomatoes, and everything you can think of. If I could make some money we should be able to go back sooner than we thought, and Bridgie would be so pleased. When shall I say you are coming to see her?”

“I have not promised to come at all. You must not leap at conclusions. It is a most ridiculous scheme, but really—”

Mrs Wallace laughed in her turn, and going up to where her husband stood, exchanged a few whispered confidences, some scattered words of which reached the listener’s ear. “Typically Irish! Preposterous! No harm trying. What about Viva? So difficult to manage.”

The discussion was still progressing when from above sounded a sudden piercing cry, mounting ever higher and higher, the note sustained in evident but determined effort. Footsteps raced across the floor, followed by a bang as of some heavy wooden structure, a murmured protest, and two distinct sets of shrieks, each warring against the other.

Mr Wallace pressed his hands to his head, Mrs Wallace sighed, “Oh dear, dear, dear!” in tones of hopeless distress, but Pixie cried eagerly—

“Will I run upstairs and try what I can do? Will I make them stop, and laugh instead?”

“You’d deserve the Victoria Cross!” the father declared, while the mother hurried to the door, and led the way with rapid footsteps.

“They have been brought up by an Indian ayah, and this English nurse doesn’t understand them a bit. They *have* trying tempers, there is no use denying it, but they are dear little creatures *if* rightly managed. Oh dear, dear, dear! these dreadful shrieks! They go through my head.”

“Let me go in alone. They will listen better if they don’t see you,” said Pixie, and walked undauntedly on to the field of battle. In this instance it was represented by a remarkably handsome and well-filled nursery, and the belligerents took the form of two little girls of four and five, who were seated on the floor, dry-eyed, but crimson-faced from the effort to sustain their shrieks. A box of bricks lay scattered by the window, and an anaemic nurse leant against the wall in an attitude of despair.

Pixie walked forward, seated herself on the floor immediately in front of the children, and gazed at them with benign curiosity. There was no anger in her face, no warning of punishment to come, her expression was in such striking contrast with that which they were accustomed to behold on such occasions, that from pure amazement they stopped crying to stare at her in their turn. The moment was hers, and she lost no time in using it.

“The fat one,” she said, pointing gravely to the younger of the sisters, “the fat one shouts higher, but the thin one,”—the eloquent finger was turned towards the maid with the golden locks,—“the thin one keeps on longer. You have both won! The prize is that I tell you a story about the Spoopjacks, when they went to fight the Bobityshooties in the Christmas holidays!”

Silence. Viva laid her head on one side and considered the project. Inda pouted her lower lip, and burst into the story of her woes.

“An’ I was jest finishin’ ze house, and ze chimbleys was getting ready, and she comed against me, an’ I pinched her leg, and she throwed it down, an’ it was all spoiled, an’ the dolls was going to live in it, an’—”

“The Spoopjacks live in the lamp-posts. There are seven of them, and they have tin whiskers, and they went to war with the Bobityshooties because they ate all the muffins, and there were none left for tea. So Nicholas Spoopjack bought six rolling-pins and a watering-cart, and melted down his whiskers for guns, and they put on red gaiters and clean pinafores, and marched across the park. The Bobityshooties were resting under the trees, and all the little birds

were eating up the muffin crumbs. The Bobityshooties really live in the pantry cupboard, so that was how they found the muffins, but they were spending the day in the country, and Selina Bobityshooty said to her mother—”

“Is that in a book?” queried the elder Miss Wallace suddenly. She was an exceedingly precocious young lady, and quick to note the unusual style of the narrative. Sometimes the stories in books were about good little girls with whom she had no sympathy, and even if the heroine were naughty to begin with, she invariably improved at the end, and never, never knocked down her sister’s bricks. The Spoopjacks and Bobityshooties were new acquaintances and promised well, but she wished to be reassured as regards the moral. “Is that written in a book?”

“No, it’s out of my head. There are billions and billions of little girls in the world, and not one of them has ever heard what Selina said to her mother. If you will kiss your sister and say you’re sorry, I’ll tell you as a secret. It’s awful exciting!”

“All right, I’m sorry, only you pinched me too—go on about Selina!” cried Viva in a breath. She kissed her sister on the cheek, and fat little Inda smiled complacently, and repeated, “Go on ’bout S’lina!”

Outside in the passage father and mother looked at each other with sparkling eyes.

“My dear, she is worth a fortune to us!” cried Mr Wallace rapturously. “She understands children, and they understand her; the girlies will be as good as gold under her care. I’ll tell Spencer to bring round the carriage and send her home in state, and to-morrow afternoon without fail you must strike a bargain with Mistress Bridgie!”

Chapter Sixteen.

Viva’s Story.

Pixie drove home in state, so puffed up with her own importance that it was a distinct blow to find the curtains comfortably drawn, and hear the echo of laughter from the drawing-room. In all the books which she had ever read, candles were left burning in the windows to guide the footsteps of wanderers from the fold, to say nothing of bellmen parading the streets, and anxious relatives rushing from one police station to another. Here, however, all was peace and contentment, and, incredible as it appeared, no one seemed to have been the least agitated about her prolonged absence.

Bridgie was perched on a stool in the centre of the fire rug, relating the history of the day’s shopping to the three brothers, and she nodded cheerily at the little sister as she entered, and saluted her with unconcerned composure.

“Well, dear, here you are! Tired after your long day?”

Pixie sank down on the corner of the sofa, and yawned with a nonchalant air. If there was one thing which she loved above everything else in the world, it was to make an impression and be the centre of attraction, and it was not likely that she was going to let slip such an opportunity as the present.

“’Deed I’m not tired,” she said genially. “Carriage exercise was always more to my fancy than walking about the streets. If we’d been meant to walk, wouldn’t we have had four legs the same as the horses, and if we haven’t, doesn’t it show that they were meant to do it for us? So when he said the butler should get me the carriage, it wasn’t likely I was going to refuse, and up I drove to the very door!”

Jack stopped short in the middle of crossing the room, Pat peered round the corner of his chair and twinkled with mischievous enjoyment, Bridgie’s eyes opened as wide as saucers.

“Which door? What carriage? What romance are ye telling me? Haven’t you been with Sylvia since I left you?”

“’Deed I have not. What made you fancy I had?”

“There was nowhere else to go, and you had not come home. I made certain you were with Sylvia!”

“It’s a bad thing to be certain about what you don’t know. If any mischief had happened to me, it would be annoying to you to remember how you were laughing with your back to the fire, while I was run over in the street, and having my legs sawed off at the hospital.”

Jack frowned at that, and put a quick question.

“Have you been walking about by yourself? I won’t have it at this hour of the night. You can find your own way about the neighbourhood in the daytime, but I won’t have you going into town by yourself, or even across the road in the dark. London is not Knock, remember, and it would be the easiest thing in the world to get lost. Don’t let her roam about without you, Bridgie!”

“’Twas only a step, and barely four o’clock!” Bridgie’s forehead was fretted with anxious lines, but Pixie nodded back cheery reassurement.

“Don’t you repine about me, for I got on famously, and Mrs Wallace is coming herself to see you in the afternoon. I’ve engaged myself as a French lady to amuse the children, and you shall have the money to pay the bills. It was an advertisement in the paper, and you had to call between four and six, so I didn’t want you to know before everything was settled. I don’t know how much it will be, but Mr Wallace said I was worth a fortune, because I made them stop howling. There are only two, but outside the door you would think they were a dozen, and I made them laugh, and they sent me home in a carriage.”

“What *is* she talking about?” Bridgie and Jack exchanged bewildered glances, and stared in incredulous silence at the little figure on the sofa. She had pulled off her hat, and with it the bow of ribbon, and the loosened hair hung down her back; her hands were crossed on her lap, there were dark shadows under her eyes. She looked so small and frail and childlike that Bridgie felt a lump rising in her throat at the thought of help coming from this strange and most unexpected quarter. She rose, and, going over to the sofa, took Pixie’s hand between her own.

“Is it the truth that you are telling us?”

“It is, then! The solemn truth! Every word of it.”

“What made you think there was any need for you to disturb yourself? What put it in your head to answer an advertisement at all?”

“Because I didn’t want to be a burden to ye, my dear, after all the money you’ve spent on me education!”

“A little midget like you to speak of being a burden! No one would guess you were there if you weren’t so upsetting! It’s no use fifty Mrs Wallaces coming to see me. Some other French lady will have to amuse her children. This one is wanted at home!”

Pixie smiled composedly, and squeezed the clinging hands.

“I knew you’d say ‘No’ at the start. So did she. She was first cross, and then she laughed, and said it would be a long, long time before I was ready to teach. But she didn’t really want teaching, only someone to be funny in French, and when she heard me telling tales, and the little girls both laughing, she began to think she would love to have me. You remember the stories you used to tell me, Jack, about the Spoopjacks and the Bobityshooties? I made up a new bit, and they simply loved it. It’s two hours every morning, and only ten minutes’ walk, and Thérèse says it’s no use beginning to be proud till you’ve paid your bills. You would like me to help you, wouldn’t you, Jack?”

“Shades of Mrs Hilliard!” muttered Jack, and shrugged his shoulders recklessly. “She will have a few volumes to write to me if I say ‘Yes!’ You are bound to help me, Piccaninny, whatever you are about, but I can’t bind myself to allow you to go out governessing before you are out of short frocks. It is Saturday to-morrow, so I shall be home in the afternoon, and see this Mrs Wallace for myself. It’s a bad scheme on the face of it, but it’s just possible it may be more feasible than it sounds.”

That was all the length which he would go for the moment, and Pixie was content to drop the subject, secure in her conviction that time and Mrs Wallace would win the victory. She was petted and fussed over to her heart’s content for the rest of the evening, and the story of her various efforts to retrieve the family fortunes was heard with breathless attention. She wondered why the listening faces wore such tender, pitiful expressions, why lazy Pat flushed, and Bridgie went over to her desk and spent a whole half-hour sorting out her bills. It never occurred to her that her earnest effort to take her own share of responsibility was a more eloquent stimulus than twenty lectures!

Next afternoon at three o’clock the two sisters and Sylvia Trevor stationed themselves in positions of vantage behind the curtains, and looked out eagerly for the advent of Mrs Wallace. Bridgie could not divest herself of a suspicion that the promise might have been given as the easiest way out of a difficulty, but before the half-hour struck a well-appointed carriage turned the corner of the road, the coachman glanced at the number on the door, and drew up his horses, when a fluffy head peered out of the window, and Pixie cried excitedly—

“That’s the thin one! That’s Viva! I expect she howled, and they could not keep her away. That’s Mrs Wallace! Isn’t it an elegant hat?”

Bridgie peeped and grew quite pink with excitement, for, truth to tell, mother and daughter made a charming picture as they came up the little path. Mrs Wallace looked almost like a girl herself in her becoming hat and veil, while the golden-haired child wore a white coat and cap edged with fluffy swan’s-down. Sylvia retreated to the dining-room.

Pixie ran to meet the visitors at the door, and the voice that exclaimed, “Bon jour, Mamzelle Paddy!” was in itself an augury of friendship. The next moment they were in the drawing-room, and Mrs Wallace was smilingly explaining the title.

“I am sure you must have been very much surprised to hear of yesterday’s interview, Miss O’Shaughnessy! ‘mamzelle Paddy,’ as my husband has named your small sister, has made quite a conquest of my little girls, and Viva refused to be left behind when she heard where I was going. I hope you were not very anxious about her absence yesterday?”

“Indeed I was not, for I took it for granted she was with some friends near by. Please sit down, and get warm. ’Twas a ridiculous idea of the child’s to suppose for one moment that she could fulfil your requirements; but she’s the baby of the family, and has never been thwarted, and such a kind little creature that she must try to help if there is any difficulty. It is good of you to take the trouble to come and explain, but indeed we have decided already that it is quite, quite impossible!”

Mrs Wallace gave a start of consternation, and the smile faded from her lips. She looked first at Bridgie, then across the room to where Viva stood on tiptoe dragging at Pixie’s sleeve, and reiterating, “Mamzelle! Mamzelle Paddy, will you come again to my nursery? Will you tell me more stories about those peoples in the lamp-posts?”

“Oh, don’t say it is impossible!” she said softly. “I want her to help me too, and I am so troubled about my children. Could she—could they both go into another room for a few minutes, while we talk it over together?”

“Certainly they could!” Bridgie raised her voice a tone higher. “Pixie dear, go to Sylvia in the dining-room and take

the little girl with you. Show her some of your treasures!”

“I like cake!” remarked Viva pointedly. She skipped to the door, and stared round the hall with curious eyes. “You do live in a poky little house, don’t you? My mamma’s house is much bigger than your house. Where does the dining-room live? Is there a cupboard in it that you keep cake in? Is Sylvia your ’nother sister? Who is the man?”

The man was none other than handsome Jack himself, who was enjoying the rare luxury of a *tête-à-tête* with Sylvia Trevor, and was not too well pleased by this speedy interruption. He frowned when he heard the opening of the door, but when he turned round and saw the vision of pink and white and gold, he smiled in spite of himself, as most people did smile at the sight of Viva Wallace, and held out his hand invitingly.

“Hallo, whom have we here?”

“Quite well, thank you. How are you?” replied Viva fluently. She paid no attention to Sylvia at the other side of the fireplace, but leant confidingly against Jack’s chair, staring at him with rapt attention. His eyes looked as if they liked you very, very much; his moustache had sharp little ends which stood out stiff and straight, there was a lump in his throat which moved up and down as he spoke—altogether he was a most fascinating person, and quite deserving of attention. “Are you the papa?” she asked enviously. “My papa has got a brown face with lines in it. He is very old. My muzzer is old too. She is talking to the lady in the ’nother room, and she said I was to be amused. You are to amuse me!”

“No, no, quite a mistake. You must amuse me!” said Jack solemnly. “I have been out all day, and am tired and sleepy, so you must do something to cheer me up. What can you suggest, now, that would be really lively and entertaining?”

Viva reflected deeply.

“I’m learning the ‘Pied Piper of Hamelin’!”

“You don’t say so!”

“Yes, I am. I’ll say it to you now, from the beginning right to the very miggle!”

“Thanks awfully. I should be delighted—another time. Not to-day, I think, if you don’t mind. I have rather a sore throat.”

Viva opened her eyes and stared at the Adam’s apple which showed above the white necktie. She was trying to puzzle out the connection between Mr O’Shaughnessy’s throat and the Pied Piper, but the difficulty was too great. She heaved a sigh, and hazarded another suggestion.

“You tell *me* a story!”

“That would never do. I should be entertaining you, and it ought to be the other way about.”

“I’ll tell you a story!”

“That’s better. Go ahead, then. What is it to be about? Fairies?”

“No, it’s not going to be about fairies,—fairies is silly. Giants are more sensibler than fairies, because there was a giant once. There was Golosher!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Golosher!”

“Don’t know the gentleman.”

“Oh, you naughty! And David killed him in the Bible. I’ll tell you a story about giants.”

“I don’t think I am interested in giants.”

“Princesses, then, beautiful princesses, and cruel people trying to be unkind to them, and princes running away and marrying them, and living happily ever afterwards.”

“That’s the style for my money! Fire away, and let us have plenty of adventure. I’ll lean back in this chair and listen to you.”

Viva moistened her lips, swallowed rapidly once or twice, and began her story in a shrill, high-pitched voice.

“Once upon a long, long time ago, there was a princess, and she was the most beautiful princess that was ever born. Everyone said so, and her face was as white as snow, and her hair as yellow as—”

“Excuse me—brown!”

“No, it wasn’t brown. Bright, curly, golden, down to her—”

“Then she couldn’t have been the most beautiful princess in the world, because I’ve seen the lady and her hair is brown.”

Jack stroked his moustache with a look of lamb-like innocence, and Sylvia could have shaken herself with annoyance

because she could not help blushing and looking stupid and self-conscious. Pixie's melodious gurgle sounded from the background, and Viva cried severely—

"You couldn't have seen her, because she lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago, when you were a teeny baby. Golden hair down to her feet, and her teef were like pearls, and all the godfathers and godmuzzers came to the christening and gave her nice presinks, only one wicked old mugian who—"

"Pardon me! One wicked old—?"

"Mugian! He's a man what does things. They always have them in stories—that the mamma had forgotten to ask, so he was angry and said she should tumble downstairs when she was grown-up and be lame ever after till a beautiful prince made her better. Oh, but I shouldn't have told you that jest now. You must pitend that you forget I have told you. So then the beautiful princess—her true name was Mabel, but only I call her Norah because her hair was gold—"

Now it was Jack's turn to gasp and search in vain for the connection between Norah and golden hair! It proved as impossible to discover as that between a sore throat and the Piper of Hamelin, but there was another allusion in the story which was too fortunate to be allowed to pass unnoticed.

"The princess was lame, was she? and no one could make her better but the prince? That's very interesting. Could you tell me, now, how he managed the cure? It might be useful to me someday."

"Was your princess a lame princess?"

"I think you had better go on with your story, Viva!" Jack said hurriedly. "Your mother may call you away before it is finished, and I should be disappointed. When did the prince arrive on the scene?"

"It doesn't get to that yet. So the princess lived in a house where there were no stairs. Only one day when she was walking through the wood, there was a little house and she went in, and she said, 'Oh, what funny things!' and she went up them, and she tumbled down, and her foot was underneaf, so she was lame. An' she lay on the sofa, and the queen-mamma cried, and the godfathers and the godmuzzers came flying up, only they could do nothing, and the king said anyone should have the land who made her better, an' thousands an' thousands tried, an' at last the prince came riding along on a white horse, an' he looked froo the window—"

"Jack dear, will you please come to the drawing-room? We want to consult you!" Bridgie's head peered round the corner of the door, her cheeks quite pink, her eyes shining with excitement. She gripped her brother's arm as he came to meet her, and whispered, "It's the most extraordinary thing—she really means it! She is charming, Jack, charming; I can't say 'No' to her. Come and try what you can do!"

But Jack was not a good hand at saying "No," least of all to charming ladies, and Mrs Wallace took his measure at once, and felt that she had gained a friend.

"I am trying to persuade Miss O'Shaughnessy to lend your little sister to me for a short time every day, to help me with my children," she said, smiling at him under lifted brows. "I understand that you knew nothing about her application, and when I first saw her I felt, as you must have done, that the idea was preposterous, but Viva and Inda fell desperately in love with her, and have talked of nothing else since she left. I think I followed their example, and I am quite sure my husband did. He thinks Mamzelle Paddy would be the solution of all our nursery troubles, if you could be induced to spare her to us. I would be very careful of her; I promise you that!"

Jack looked at Bridgie; Bridgie looked at Jack.

"I'd be delighted that she should help you, and it would be an amusement to her to play with the dear little girls. If she might come as a friend—"

"Oh, Miss O'Shaughnessy, how cruel of you, when her great idea was to help you! She would be a most welcome friend, but I could not consent to using her time without paying for it."

Mrs Wallace had approached this question before, and had discovered that Bridgie was no more embarrassed by a reference to her poverty than had been Mamzelle Paddy herself. "We should think any sum cheap which ensured our little girls being happy and occupied, instead of crying and quarrelling, as I am sorry to say they do now for the greater part of the day. They are too young for regular lessons, but they already know French fairly well, and would soon be able to speak fluently."

"I can't judge of Pixie's French, but her English is so Irish that it was a stroke of genius to offer herself in the character of a foreigner!" said Jack, stroking his moustache, and smiling to himself in whimsical fashion. "Of course, she is quite confident that she could do all you require, but you must not listen to her own account of herself. If you offered Pixie the command of the Channel Fleet, she'd accept without a qualm! If you want the kindest-hearted, most mischievous little ignoramus in the world, Mrs Wallace, it would be waste of time to search any farther, for you have found her already! She will keep your children happy, and never say a word that they wouldn't be the better for hearing, but it won't be the orthodox training! I fancy Pixie was a big surprise to the English boarding-school when she first arrived."

"But she left with the prize for being the most popular and unselfish of the girls! Your sister has just shown me the books with the touching inscription. If she can teach my girlies to be as sweet and helpful, I shall not mind a few eccentricities. Two hours in the morning would not take her away too much from home, and she would have plenty of time left for her own music. Her ambition seemed to be to pay for her own lessons, so if I gave her thirty pounds, she could go to a really good master without feeling that she was overtaxing you. It would be such a pleasure to me too, Miss O'Shaughnessy. I feel sure your brother will agree, if you consent. Please say 'Yes'!"

So it was left to Bridgie to make the final decision, and in after years she used to wonder what would have happened if she had refused her consent! It was a difficult problem, for to her old-fashioned notions it was a trifle *infra dig* for a girl to work for herself, and it hurt her tender heart that the Piccaninny of all others should be the one to go out into the world.

What would the dear dead mother have said to such a project? What would the Major have said? What would Esmeralda think now, and, thinking, say, with all the impassioned eloquence of which she was mistress? Bridgie reflected earnestly on the questions, while Mrs Wallace watched her face with anxious eyes.

The dear mother had never been able to resign herself to the happy-go-lucky Irish customs, and had died before her time, worn-out with the strain of trying to make both ends meet. When she looked down from heaven with those clear angel eyes, would it seem more noble to her that her baby should preserve a puny social distinction at the cost of a purposeless life, or that she should use the talents which had been given to her for her own good and the good of others?

There could be little doubt how the mother would have decided, and as for the Major, Bridgie smiled with indulgent tenderness as she pictured, one after the other, the swift stages of his behaviour if he had been present to-day. Horror and indignation at the possibility that the Piccaninny should be in subjection to anyone but himself; irritated impatience that the O'Shaughnessys should be expected to pay for what they desired, like any ordinary, commonplace family; chuckling delight over the smartness of the child; and finally an even greater inability than his sons to say "No" to a charming woman! Storm he never so wildly, the Major would undoubtedly have ended by consenting to Mrs Wallace's plea, while Esmeralda's wrath would be kept within bounds by Geoffrey's strong common sense.

Bridgie sighed and looked across the room to where Jack sat.

"If it is left to me," she said slowly, "if I am to decide, I think I will say 'Yes'! She shall come to you for a month on trial, Mrs Wallace, and we can see how it works."

Mrs Wallace beamed with relief and satisfaction.

"That's very kind!" she said. "I am truly grateful. I realise that your decision is unselfish, but believe me, you shall never regret it!"

And Bridgie remembered that prophecy, and smiled over it many times in the happy years to come.

Chapter Seventeen.

Jack's Discovery.

Pixie received the intelligence that she was to begin her new duties on the following Monday with the unruffled composure of one who has expected no other decision. She asked eagerly what salary she was to receive, and was a trifle depressed to find that it did not run to three figures. Thirty pounds sounded very little, though she had only the vaguest notion of its purchasing value, but her ambition had been to supply the whole additional sum which was needed for the support of the household.

Innocent Bridgie had no idea as to what might be expected under the circumstances, but Miss Munns, who knew everything, declared that the offer was a handsome one, and ten pounds in excess of the ordinary rate of payment. Still, as she sagely remarked, one could never tell! People sometimes seemed very generous and pleasant-spoken at first, and then turned out everything that was exacting and unreasonable. Several young friends of her own had gone out as governesses, and met with tragic adventures. Marianne Summers, the cousin of Summers' Celebrated Snowflake Soap, was with a family at Rochester, and nursed a little boy all through scarlatina, and when she had toothache herself the lady said it was most inconvenient because a dinner-party was coming. No consideration whatever, and the food very poor. She was never so much as asked to have a second helping!

"Maybe the lady had so many to help that she forgot to ask her. Couldn't she ask herself? It would have been more friendly than grumbling behind her back," said Pixie severely. "When I go out to meals with people I make myself at home. I went to *déjeuner* with some friends in Paris, and I was so much at home that when they had cabbage, I remarked that I wished it had been cauliflower. They smiled, and looked quite pleasant!"

Miss Munns looked over her spectacles, and grunted to herself. She considered Pixie O'Shaughnessy a most uncomfortable girl, and was never at ease in her society. She asked embarrassing questions, stared with unconcealed curiosity, while her innocence had a trick of developing into quite remarkable shrewdness at sudden and inappropriate moments. Miss Munns recalled several incidents when the gaze of the childlike eyes had filled her with a most unpleasant embarrassment, and declared that not for fifty thousand pounds would she have that child living in her house!

Bridgie was different. She was invariably anxious to hear further anecdotes concerning relations and friends, and was such a docile pupil in domestic matters, that the old lady had the felicity of practically ruling two households instead of one. In the fervour of her resolve to turn over a new leaf, Bridgie had made no reservations, but had placed herself and her accounts in Miss Munns's hands, and from that moment there was no drawing back. The weekly orders were supervised and cut down, the accounts carefully checked and paid to the hour, the receipts were endorsed and filed,

SHE DOUBLED UP WITH SILENT LAUGHTER.

so that they could be produced at a moment's notice; extras were faithfully entered into the housekeeping ledger at the end of each day, and the whole account balanced to a laborious penny. When the penny was very difficult to find, Bridgie pleaded hard to be allowed to supply it from her private purse, and could never be quite brought to see that the result would not be the same, but it was a proud moment when Jack surveyed the ledger on Saturday evenings and wrote, "Examined, and found correct!" with a big flourish underneath the final addition. Then he would stroke his moustache and twinkle at her with amused eyes, as he said—

"Bravo, Bridgie, right to a fraction! I'll ask Miss Munns to take me in hand next—since she has scored such a triumph out of you. Evening classes two or three times a week, with Sylvia to sit by me and sharpen my pencils—that would be a happy way of combining instruction and amusement for the winter evenings, wouldn't it?" and—shades of Esmeralda!—Bridgie smiled, and ejaculated, "You naughty boy!" in a tone as far removed from fault-finding as it is possible to imagine.

Sylvia Trevor, however, being a young woman of spirit, was by no means disposed to provide amusement for Master Jack or any other masculine flirt. If any man wished to win her, she was worth wooing seriously, so she told herself with a tilt of the pretty dark head, but when Jack said one thing with his lips, beseeching Miss Munns to take pity on his ignorance, and put him on the path whereon he should walk, and another with his eyes, mutely inviting her to stay and flirt with him the while he pretended to listen—then her pride was roused, and she determined to teach him a wholesome lesson. She waited until Miss Munns had produced half a dozen ledgers to demonstrate the elaborate system of book-keeping by which she conducted her miniature establishment—until Jack had seated himself by her side and was irrevocably victimised for the evening; then she rose from her chair and said amiably—

"I mustn't disturb you. You will like to be quiet, so I'll run across and chat to Bridgie for an hour, while you are away!"

The "running" was a polite fiction, for in spite of massage and the most careful doctoring it would be many months before Sylvia could run again. By walking very deliberately she could just conceal her limp, and now as she turned towards the door she had a good view of Jack's petrified glare of disgust.

The picture of him sitting by the old lady's side, while she prepared to teach him what he himself knew a dozen times better than herself, was too much for Sylvia's composure, and around the corner of the door, where her aunt could not see her, she doubled up with silent laughter and cast on him a glance of such mocking triumph, such sparkling, dimpling, deliciously girl-like derision, as was more eloquent than a thousand gibes.

Jack leapt to his feet; at that moment he would have given half he possessed to have rushed after the tantalising creature, to have stood over her, and watched her self-confidence give place gradually to embarrassment, and the pink flush rise to the pale cheeks as it had a trick of doing under his scrutiny, but, alas! the door was shut, and Miss Munns's voice inquired soberly—

"Do you want the lamp? Put it on the mat, please. You can't be too careful of lamps. If the oil gets on the cloth, nothing will take it out!"

"'Twill be a lesson to me while I live!" sighed Jack sorrowfully to himself. He was smarting with annoyance and impatience, but he managed, as not one man in a hundred could have done, to keep his irritation to himself, and be absolutely amiable and courteous to his instructress. Miss Munns thought him a most well-disposed young man, and

did not discover one of the anxious glances at the clock, nor the yawns so dexterously hidden beneath strokings of the moustache.

When three-quarters of an hour had passed by, Jack felt as if the interview had lasted a fortnight, but fate was kinder to him than he deserved, and sent relief in the person of the widow occupant of Number Ten, who arrived to pay an evening call, cribbage-board in hand. Then Mr Jack departed, and paced up and down the road smoking cigarettes, and meditating on revenge. He caught the echo of girlish laughter from within his own threshold, and could easily picture the scene within—the two sisters huddling over the fire, Sylvia seated in state in the grandfather chair, Pat, her devoted admirer, perched on the end of a table, and placidly maintaining his position in spite of repeated injunctions to run away.

He pictured Sylvia's face also as he had often seen it—the sharply-cut little features, the suspicion of pride and self-will in aquiline nose and firmly-moulded chin, the short, roughened hair, which was such a cross to its owner, but which gave her a gallant, boyish air, which one spectator at least found irresistibly piquant. He saw the firelight play upon the pretty pink dress and the rings on the restless hands, saw the brown eyes sparkle with laughter, and grow suddenly soft and wistful. It seemed to him that they were turned towards himself, that her thoughts were meeting his half-way, that she was already repenting, and dreading the result of her hasty flight.

Jack O'Shaughnessy stopped short in his pacings up and down, and stood staring before him with a strange, rapt expression. Out there in the prosaic street the greatest discovery of his life had come to him, and the wonder of it took away his breath. Young men often imagine themselves in love with half a dozen pretty faces before they have reached five-and-twenty, but to most of them there comes at last, in the providence of God, the one woman who is as far removed from the passing fancies of an hour as the moon from her attendant stars. She has appeared, and for him thenceforth there is no more doubt or change; his life is, humanly speaking, in her hands, and her influence over him is the greatest of all the talents which has been entrusted to her care. Too often he is careless about religious matters, if not actively antagonistic, and her light words may confirm him in a life of indifference; but, on the other hand, his heart is never so tender and ready to be influenced as at the moment when she has given her life into his charge, and this golden opportunity is hers to seize and turn to lasting good. In the best sense of the word she is his Queen and he is her knight, who will perform noble and gallant deeds at her behest.

Jack of the humbugging eyes, handsome, happy-go-lucky Jack O'Shaughnessy, had been what he called "in love" since the days when he wore pinafores and little round collars with frills at the edge, but he had never known what love meant until this winter evening, when at the vision of Sylvia's face his heart leapt with painful violence, and he stood still appalled by the strength of his own emotions.

He had known Sylvia Trevor for one month, four short weeks in all, yet now here she was occupying the foremost position in his thoughts, making the past years seem blank and empty, blocking the gate of the future with her girlish figure. Jack felt dazed and bewildered, a trifle alarmed, too, at the extent of the journey which he had travelled so unthinkingly, but he never attempted to deny its reality. He loved Sylvia—that was an established truth; the only question which remained concerned the next step in the drama.

When a man loved a girl, when a girl blushed when he appeared, and, despite all her little airs of superiority, could not hide her pleasure in his society, it was generally easy enough to prophesy a speedy engagement and marriage, but what if Providence had made other ties for the man before the Queen's appearance? What if, though unmarried, he was still master of a household, a bread-winner to whom brothers and sisters looked for support?

Jack's thoughts drifted longingly towards a little home of his own, where Sylvia reigned as mistress, and cast pretty, saucy glances at him from the other side of the table, but he knew all the time that it was the veriest castle of dreams. He could not keep a wife who was hard pressed to fulfil his present obligations; marriage was out of the question until the boys were self-supporting, and the girls either settled in homes of their own, or comfortably portioned off. That being so, it was plainly the duty of an honourable man to keep out of the girl's way, to make no attempt to win her affections, but to hide his love both from her and those at home, who would otherwise be made to feel themselves in the way.

Jack turned and renewed his pacings up and down. There was a heavy weight of depression on his spirits, but he never flinched from the right path, nor did it occur to him that there was anything heroic in this simple accepting of a hard duty. Family affection was very strong among the O'Shaughnessys, and not even the glamour of first love could make him grudge anything to Bridgie and Pixie, or the two big boys who looked up to him with such touching confidence. His first duty was to them, and it would be "caddish" to let them suspect any sacrifice in its fulfilment. A poor, commonplace word, which it is safe to say would have a nobler translation in the Great White Book, wherein are written the records of men's lives!

Sylvia blushed as she heard the key turn in the latch, and cast an apprehensive glance at the door. Would Jack be angry? How would he look? What would he say? The first glance showed him graver than usual, but with no shadow of offence in look or bearing, and for some unaccountable reason her spirits sank as she met his unclouded smile. He sat down and held out his hand to Pixie, who promptly seated herself on the arm of his chair, and amused herself by trying the effects of various arrangements of the curling brown hair. Parted in the middle, it gave a ridiculously dandified expression to the handsome face; pulled forward in shaggy locks over the forehead, the dandy died a sudden death, and Pat of the cabin and clay pipe appeared in his stead; combed upward by ten little fingers until it stood erect above the forehead, nationality underwent an even more startling change.

"*Voilà*, Adolph!" cried Pixie triumphantly. "Me I have seen a hundred men, but a hundred, all the same as thou every day I promenade me in Paris!" And Jack smiled and, to Bridgie's surprise, allowed himself to be disfigured without a protest—a surprising thing when a pretty girl was among the spectators.

When the hairdressing operations were concluded, he held Pixie's hand in his own, as if unwilling to let her go, and

turned towards Sylvia with a smile.

“I think your aunt quite enjoyed giving me a lesson, and I was very much interested in her original system of book-keeping. What a wonderful old dear she is, so energetic and full of interest in her fellow-creatures! I must go to see her again, and have a game of cribbage, which appears to be her pet dissipation. I’m fond of old people, but I daresay they get a little trying if you have no variety. If I relieve guard sometimes, it will set you free to have a chat with the girls!”

Was he sarcastic? Was he paying her back in her own coin? Sylvia stared dumbly, but could see no hidden meaning in the glance which met hers so frankly. “Thanks awfully. You are kind!” she cried with enthusiasm, but in her heart she thought the kindness the most cruel treatment she had ever experienced. As soon as she could leave naturally she rose to say good-bye, and then came a fresh blow, for, instead of escorting her across the road as he had insisted on doing hitherto, Jack kept his arm round Pixie’s shoulder, and deputed Pat to take his place.

“Now, then, you lazy fellow, get your hat, and see Miss Trevor home!”

Pat was delighted, and after all it was natural enough that Jack should not care to turn out in the cold so soon after coming in, and yet—and yet—Sylvia stood at her bedroom window looking at the lights across the road, and as she looked they grew strangely dull and faint. Triumphs are dearly won sometimes, and her mood to-night was the reverse of victorious.

Chapter Eighteen.

At the Circus.

Mamzelle Paddy began and continued her work in the Wallace nursery with complete satisfaction to all concerned. Esmeralda, it is true, had surpassed herself in violence of diction in the letter which came in answer to the one breaking the news; but while Bridgie shed tears of distress, and Jack frowned impatience, the person against whom the hurricane of invective was hurled, received it with unruffled and even sympathetic composure.

As Pixie read over the crowded sheets her eye flashed approval of dramatic points, she set her lips, and wagged her head, entering so thoroughly into the spirit of the writer that she unconsciously adopted her manner when aroused, and when the concluding words were read, heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction. “She’ll feel a lot better after that!” she remarked tersely, and the prophecy could not fail to be comforting to those who knew Mrs Hilliard’s temperament.

After such an outburst, repentance might be expected to set in even more speedily than usual, and a peace-offering in the shape of a hamper crowded with good things could be confidently looked for in the course of the next few days. Esmeralda disliked formal apologies, and from the boys’ point of view, at least, turkeys and game made a more eloquent *amende*.

Viva and Inda Wallace were loving and lovable children, but possessed with a nervous restlessness, an insatiable curiosity, and with such easily-roused tempers as would have reduced an ordinary adult governess to despair within a very short period. Their delicate mother was occupied with many social duties, and the father, though devoted to his pretty daughters, had little patience with their vagaries, while the frequent screaming attacks which sounded through the house had a trying effect on nerves already strained by long residence abroad.

Parents and servants alike breathed sighs of relief when each morning punctually as the clock struck ten, Mamzelle Paddy came running upstairs primed with half a dozen thrilling devices for amusement and occupation. Viva, as ringleader and rebel-in-chief, had flatly refused to speak, or listen to, a word of French, but when it was presently revealed to her that the Spoopjacks understood no other language, there was no course left but to withdraw her opposition. The Bobityshooties were English, and stupid at that, but by the time that Nicholas Spoopjack had succeeded in teaching them how to address him with propriety, the two unsuspicious listeners to the conversation had themselves mastered the lesson without once suspecting what they were about.

The adventures which those two enterprising and admirable families went through, were as varied as they were endless, and each day brought a thrilling development of the situation. Nicholas Spoopjack thought nothing of going out in a diving-bell in the morning, and a balloon in the afternoon, while the Bobityshooties entertained royalty to dinner in the kitchen cupboard, and feasted luxuriously on the cruets, and the pinked-out paper which covered the shelves.

“She don’t teach us nuffin’: we only plays!” was little Inda’s summing up of the situation; but a moment later she would repeat a dialogue which had taken place between the rival factions during the morning, reproducing, with the wonderful imitative faculty of children, the very accent and gesture with which it had been delivered, and her parents would look at each other with delighted appreciation.

Mamzelle Paddy was a grand institution, and being generously disposed people, Mr and Mrs Wallace endeavoured to show their gratitude by including her in the many amusements which were arranged for the children’s benefit. She accompanied them on sight-seeing expeditions, organised games at evening parties, and on one memorable occasion paid a visit to the circus. Pixie had always cherished a passion for clowns, and when in Paris had appreciated nothing more than an evening at the “Nouveau Cirque,” where Auguste the Frenchman played a secondary part to his English brother, and the performance concluded with a play in which the British tourist played a large part, conspicuous in plaid suits, sailor hats, and thick-soled shoes. She was all eagerness to see the London circus, and nearly as much excited as her pupils, as they drove up to the door, and took their seats on the red velvet chairs.

Inda sat by her mother and stared solemnly around, but Viva insisted upon being next her dear Mamzelle, and pranced up and down in a manner which augured ill for future comfort. Once she began to fidget, adieu to all hope of peace for her companions. Once she began to ask questions, it was safe to predict that she would go on until despair seized those who were obliged to answer. Pixie recognised signs of the coming attack, and managed an adroit change of places which would leave Mrs Wallace free to enjoy the afternoon, and punctually at three o'clock the performance began.

The ring-master walked in and cracked his whip; the clown tumbled head over heels into the arena, and cried, "Here we are again!" the lady rider jumped through paper hoops, and blew kisses to the audience. Viva's cheeks grew a vivid pink, and at each change in the performance she adopted a change of position. When the hook of her jacket had been extricated from the hair of the lady in front, she perched herself on the arm of her own chair; when she had applauded herself backward into Pixie's arms, she leant against the supercilious-looking gentleman in the next seat, and tickled his cheeks with her fluffy hair. Then the first wonder wore away, and she found her tongue.

"Why does the clown look like that?"

"It's a way they have in the family. They always have those funny eyes, and red and white faces."

"Did he always look like that?"

"He did—all the time he has been a clown."

"Is it the same clown that was here before?"

"It says on the paper it's a new one for the occasion."

"Then why does he say he is here again?"

"I'll ask him next time we meet! Hush now, and listen to what he is saying. See how they are all laughing!"

"Does the clown sleep in the circus?"

"'Deed he does not, poor creature! There are no beds, and the seats are too hard."

"Where does he sleep, then? What is his true home?"

"Number Seven, Poplar Gardens, corner of Phillamore Park—the corner house with the red curtains!"

Pixie understood her pupil's love of detail by this time, and Viva put her head on one side and stared at her with gratified admiration. If she had asked her mother, she would have looked tired and sighed, and said, "My dear child! how should *I* know? Don't ask ridiculous questions," but Mamzelle Paddy knew better than that.

Her face assumed an expression of radiant satisfaction as she pondered on that house in Poplar Gardens. Big and grey, with flower boxes in the windows and little clowns looking out of the nursery windows. Delightful! She was silent for several minutes, and the supercilious gentleman took advantage of the pause to examine the party with curious eyes. The elegant-looking woman was plainly the mother of the little girls, but who was this, who was scarcely more than a child herself, who was addressed as "Mamzelle" and spoke with a strong Irish accent? He stared at her, and Viva discovering his glance turned round with her back to the ring, and stared back with leisurely enjoyment.

At first her face expressed nothing but curiosity, but gradually her features became twisted, the lips down drawn, the eyebrows elevated to an unnatural height, until the beholder realised with horror that she was experimenting on his own expression, and endeavouring to copy it on her own small visage. Many a long year had passed since he had known what it meant to blush, but he blushed then, and hitched round in his seat to hide his scarlet face from view, while Viva once more turned her attention to the ring.

The white-skirted lady had disappeared and another was cantering round, clad in a riding habit and gentleman's hat. The horse was black, and shone like satin; he pawed the ground with dainty, cat-like tread; the ring-master followed him as he went, and cracked his whip in encouraging fashion. Viva planted one foot on Pixie's toe, and jumped up and down to attract attention.

"Is the gentleman really angry, that he cracks his whip? Does he pitend to be angry? If he pitends to be angry, why do all the others pitend that they think he doesn't pitend, but only,—Why does the gentleman crack his whip?"

"Maybe he hears you talking! I saw him cast his eye upon you," replied Pixie sagely, and the supercilious gentleman pointed the sentence with a sigh, and privately resolved to remove his seat at the first opportunity.

The threat of the whip, however, had the effect of quietening Miss Viva for a good two minutes, and in the meantime Fate sent an unexpected deliverance. Certain portions of the auditorium were portioned off into squares, which did duty for private boxes, and into the nearest of these there now entered a party of ladies and children, in whom he recognised some intimate friends. To advance towards them and beg the use of a vacant chair was the work of a moment, when he proceeded to pour the story of his woes into the ear of the young lady by his side. She was fair and pretty, charmingly dressed, and almost as supercilious in expression as he was himself.

"Little wretch! How impossible of her!" she ejaculated, and bent forward to examine the wretch forthwith.

Viva had climbed on the empty seat, and was craning her little face to right and left to discover where the deserter had fled. With her great blue eyes and rose-leaf complexion set in a frame of golden hair, she looked like an angel from heaven, or one of the sweet-faced cherubs who float in space at the top of Christmas cards and valentines.

But it was not on Viva that the young lady's attention was riveted, but upon the figure by her side—Mamzelle Paddy in all the glory of a French hat, wearing the very biggest hair-ribbon in her possession, in honour of the occasion. At sight of the profile the young lady started and cried, "It is! It must be!" Then she dodged backwards, saw the hat, and became filled with doubt. "No, it can't be! It's much too smart!"

Finally Pixie turned round to apostrophise Miss Viva, who was in the act of striding the back of her chair, and immediately a flash of recognition leapt from eye to eye. The French hat nodded until the feathers fairly quivered with the strain, and the face beneath became a beam of delight, in which eyes disappeared and the parted lips stretched back to a surprising distance. The fair-haired young lady had more respect to appearance in her recognition, but all the same she grew quite pink with pleasure, and cried eagerly—

"It's my dearest friend! We were at school together, but she has been in Paris finishing her education, and I have not heard from her since her return. I must speak to her in the interval—I really must! You can't think what a fascinating little creature she is when you get to know her."

"Ah, really! She looks distinctly—er—out of the common," drawled the supercilious man lazily. "Rather interesting-looking woman, the children's mother. Some relation of your friend, I suppose?"

"Oh, I suppose so! The O'Shaughnessys are a very good family. Very well connected. Beautiful old place in Ireland," drawled the young lady in her turn, and in the intervals of the performance she proceeded to expatiate on the grandeur of the O'Shaughnessy family, the beauty of Esmeralda, and the riches of her husband, until her companion looked forward with increased interest to the coming introduction.

At the first interval Pixie came forward in response to eager beckonings, and stood leaning against the side of the box talking to her friend, with superb disregard of the more extended audience.

"Fancy, now, the two of us meeting without knowing that we were here! You look quite old, Lottie, with your hair done up. Turn your head and let me see the back! D'you still curl it with slate-pencils, like you did at school? I came home at Christmas, and I've thought of writing ever since, but I've been too busy. I suppose you're busy too, now you are grown-up and living at home. Have you come out, and gone to dances in low necks? We had an old servant at Knock, and one day a friend came to lunch and she says to Bridgie, 'That's a fine, handsome young lady!' 'She is,' says Bridgie. 'She's just come out!' 'Out of w'ere?' says Molly, staring."

Pixie darted a quick glance round the box to enjoy the general appreciation of her joke, then gave a low chuckle of satisfaction. "Ye'll never guess what I'm doing!"

"No," said Lottie Vane complacently. She too had noticed the smiles of the audience, and was anxious to encourage her friend in her reminiscences. In society people were always grateful for being amused, and if in her recital Pixie let fall further references to the standing and importance of her family, why, so much the better for all concerned.

"What mischief are you up to now, you funny little thing?"

"I'm in service!" said Pixie proudly.

The shocked amaze of Lottie's expression, the involuntary rustle of surprise which went round the box, were as so many tributes to the thrilling nature of the intelligence, and she waited a moment to enjoy it before pointing unabashed in the direction of the two children, and condescending to further explanations.

"Me pupils! I've been with them now for over a month."

"What do you mean? How absurd you are, Pixie!" cried Lottie irritably. "In service—you! I never heard such nonsense. As if you were a servant! I don't know what you are talking about!"

"I get wages, anyhow, and that's all I care about. They are my pupils, I tell you, and I've brought them here with their mother for a little diversion. I've the training of them every morning for a couple of hours, and thirty pounds a year paid every month. Jack and I make enough between us to support the family."

"You don't really mean it?" gasped Lottie, horrified. Her cheeks were scarlet, and it was evident that she was profoundly uncomfortable, but as she met the triumphant eyes her face softened, and she made a valiant effort to retain composure. "You mean to say you have turned into a governess at sixteen—you who were always at the bottom of the class, and couldn't get a sum right to save your life! Poor little girls, I pity their education! How did you ever persuade the mother to take you?"

Mamzelle Paddy tossed her head with complacent pride.

"'Deed, me dear, the room was packed with them, and natives at that, and she chose me before the whole bunch. I'm not supposed to teach them anything but French, and I don't teach that except by playing games. But I keep them from crying and quarrelling, and ye don't need to be head of your class for that! 'Twasn't cleverness she took me for, as she told me plainly the first day I went; 'twas m'influence!"

A smothered laugh went round the box at the sound of this curious compound word, uttered in tones of complacent pride; but Lottie Vane did not laugh, and her hand stretched out involuntarily and clasped the little fingers which lay on the side of the box. Her face lost its supercilious expression, and grew sweet and womanly.

"Dear little Pixie," she said softly, "I don't pity the pupils after all. I think they are very well off. May I come over and be introduced to them and their mother? She must be a very wise woman."

The two girls walked forward together towards the spot where Mrs Wallace was sitting, and the supercilious man

looked after them with thoughtful eyes. He had always admired Miss Lottie Vane, though he had privately sneered at her snobbish tendencies, but it occurred to him to-day that he had been over-hasty in judgment. How sweet she had looked as she answered her little friend, how kindly had been the tones of her voice! He felt his heart thrill with the beginning of a new and deeper interest.

Chapter Nineteen.

A Tea-Party.

Jack kept his resolve of avoiding dangerous *tête-à-têtes* with Sylvia Trevor, and kept it in so pleasant and friendly a manner that no one suspected his motives save the person most concerned. She knew only too well that a wall of division had suddenly risen between them, but though her heart ached she carried her proud little head more erect than ever, and was so very, very lively and pleasant that Jack in his turn was deceived, and believed that she was relieved by his absence. When they met, as meet they did from time to time, they laughed and joked, and teased each other about little family jokes, and Bridgie listened delightedly, and told herself that it did Jack all the good in the world to meet Sylvia, for he was growing so much quieter, and seemed so worried over that horrid old business. Miss Munns, however, had the same complaint to make about her niece, and delivered herself of many homilies on the subject.

“Extremes,” she said, “extremes, my dear, ought always to be avoided. To be constantly running from one extreme to another shows an unbalanced character. A medium path is the wisest which one can choose, and one should show neither undue elation nor foundless depression at the events of life. I remember a proverb which we used to quote as children: ‘Laugh in the morning, cry before night!’—and there is a great deal of truth in it, too. High spirits are bound to be brought low before very long.”

“Well, I think it’s a horrid proverb and a very wicked one into the bargain!” cried Sylvia hotly. “It sounds as if God disliked seeing one happy, and I believe He loves it and means it, and tries to teach us that it is a duty! He made the world as bright as He could for us to live in, with the sunshine and the flowers, and He made all the little animals skip and bound, and play games among themselves, so it stands to reason that He expects men and women to be happy too, especially young ones.”

“Exactly! Precisely! Just what I say! I was just pointing out to you, my love, that it is over an hour since you made a remark, and that such depression of spirits was very trying to me as your companion,” cried Miss Munns, with an air of triumph. “After the long period of anxiety through which I have passed, I think I am entitled to expect some cheering society.”

“But then, you see, I might cry before evening!” retorted Sylvia pertly, and had the satisfaction of feeling that she had been rude to her elders, and put herself hopelessly in the wrong, as Miss Munns took up her stocking-bag and began to darn, drooping her eyelids with an air of stony displeasure.

Sylvia glanced at her from time to time during the next half-hour, and felt ashamed of herself, and wished she were sweet-tempered like Bridgie, and thought how nice it would be if she could learn to think before she spoke, and be cautious and prudent, and never say what she was sorry for afterwards. She also wished that Aunt Margaret would not look so particularly old and frail this morning of all others. How thin she was! What great big hollows she had in her cheeks! It was rather dreadful to be old like that, and have no one to love and care for one best of all, no one but a thoughtless girl, who was never so grateful as she ought to be, and sometimes even really impertinent. The wave of penitence could not be repressed, and she jumped from her seat with her characteristic impetuosity, and threw her arms round her aunt’s shoulders.

“I’m sorry I answered you back, auntie; it was horrid of me. I’ve been a great trouble to you this winter, but I really am awfully grateful for all your goodness. Do give me a kiss, and say you forgive me!”

“Well, well, well, my dear child, don’t be so impetuous! You have nearly pulled the cap off my head. Extremes, as I said before, always extremes! Do please try to exercise some self-control. I quite understand that you are troubled about your foot, but as the doctor says it is only a question of time, and if you are patient for a month or two more, you will be able to go about as well as ever. There is no necessity to brood about it as you do, no necessity at all!”

Sylvia was not brooding about her foot, but she did not choose to say so to Miss Munns, and her silence being accepted as a sign of submission, the old lady became so mollified as to suggest that the two Miss O’Shaughnessys should be invited to tea forthwith.

Afternoon tea under Miss Munns’s *régime* was a more formal meal than is usually the case, and also a trifle more solid, for it was followed by no dinner, but a supper of cocoa and potted meat served at nine o’clock. This arrangement was one of Sylvia’s minor trials in life, but Pixie O’Shaughnessy saw great compensations in a tea where you really sat up to the table, and had jam in a pot, and a loaf, and scones, and eggs. It fascinated her to see how the table was laid, with a white cloth spread diamond-wise under the tea-tray, and the different viands dotted about on the green baize.

Miss Munns boiled her own water, and ladled the tea out of a little silver caddy, and dipped the bottom of each cup in water before it was filled to prevent slippings on the saucer. She had a kettle-holder worked in cross-stitch—red wool roses on a black wool background—and a cosy ornamented with a wreath of bead flowers. The eggs were boiled to order, hard or soft, just as you liked, in a silver pot filled with methylated spirits out of a fascinating, thimble-like measure. Pixie watched the various preparations with rapt attention, while the two elder girls chatted together at the end of the table.

“I want you to give me Whitey’s address,” Bridgie said, “so that I can send her some flowers. Esmeralda sent me a hamper this morning, so I am rather rich and would like to share my goad things. You said she was nursing a case in the city, so she probably has no flowers, and it’s cheery to have boxes coming in as a surprise. It’s so hard for nurses to live in a constant atmosphere of depression and sickness. When one is ill for a long time, as you were, one gets so bored and wearied by the monotony of the sick-room, and it’s such bliss to be free again, and speak at the pitch of your voice, and be done with medicines, and pulses, and temperatures, and tiresome rules and regulations, but the nurse never gets free. Just when things are beginning to get cheerful, she goes away to another darkened room and another anxious household, and the whole programme begins over again. They love their work, of course, but it must be very hard sometimes. Don’t you think so?”

“I—I—” Sylvia pursed up her lips and elevated her eyebrows in deprecatory fashion. “I never thought of it! It does sound horrid when you put it like that, but I’m afraid I just took it for granted that it was their work. Whitey never grumbled. She left that to me, and was always cheerful, though I found out afterwards that she had been awfully anxious about her sister. I wish I had thought of sending her flowers!”

“Send these—do!” cried Bridgie eagerly. “She will like them better from you, and I don’t mind a bit so long as she gets them. I’ll send over the box, and you shall address it and put in a little note. Yes, you must, because I felt rather mean about not bringing some for yourself, but there were not very many, and as I was going into town I couldn’t resist taking some to the woman in the waiting-room.”

“The woman in the— What do you mean?”

Bridgie laughed easily.

“At London, of course. There are several waiting-rooms at our station, but I go to the dullest of all, where there is hardly a gleam of light, and one day I saw the woman staring so longingly at some flowers which a lady was carrying. Since then I have generally taken her a little bunch when I go up to town, and it is quite pathetic the way she grabs them. She knows me now, and looks so pleased to see me!”

That was an easy thing to imagine. Sylvia pictured to herself the long, monotonous day in that dreary little room, the constant hope which reached its fulfilment when the door swung open and Bridgie’s face smiled a greeting, leaving behind her the fragrant blossoms to sweeten the hours with their own perfume, and the remembrance of another’s care. Such a simple thing to do! Such an easy thing! Why had she never thought of it herself? She would have done it gladly enough if it had occurred to her mind: it was not heart that was wanted, but thought! Oh, what a number of lives might be brightened, what an army of good deeds would be accomplished if people would only “think!”

“Well, my dear, I only hope she was a decent woman, and worthy of your kindness,” said Miss Munns primly. “A lazy life, I call it. I’ve no opinion of people who make their living by sitting still all day. I had occasion to wait at a station some little time ago, and entered into conversation with the woman in charge. She said she was a widow, and I advised her to use my furniture-polish, for the woodwork was in a disgraceful condition, and she answered me back in a most unbecoming manner. I have done a great deal of charitable work in my day, and am on three committees at the present moment, so I am not easily taken in.

“I have been investigating cases for relief this very afternoon, and if you’ll believe me in one house where they asked for help there was a musical-box upon the table! The woman said it was given to her by an old mistress, and that it amused the children while she did her work. I told her we did not undertake to relieve cases who could afford to keep musical instruments. I don’t know what the poor are coming to in these days. She must dispose of it before I can have anything to do with her.”

“But ’twas a present to her! It’s not polite to give away presents. Who do you want her to give it to?” queried Pixie, with the wide-eyed stare which always made Miss Munns feel so hot and discomposed. She frowned and fidgeted with the kettle, while Pixie continued to discuss the situation. “I know what it is to have children about when there’s something to do. Mrs Wallace gave me a book the other day, and the schemes I made to get time to look at the pictures! I was supposed to have gone out for a walk, and they were to prepare a surprise for me when I got back. And ’twas a surprise! They’d pretended to be savages, and pulled all the feathers out of my hat to stick in their hair!”

“Very ill-mannered and impertinent I call it! I hope you gave them a good scolding?”

“I did not,” said Pixie calmly. “I don’t like scolding meself, and it makes me worse. I merely remarked that it was a pity, as I’d have to sew them back again instead of playing games. ’Twas dull work watching me sew, and I didn’t disturb myself with hurrying. Ye couldn’t bribe them within yards of me hat this last week!”

“Humph! When I was a child I was whipped when I did wrong, and that was the end of it. But things have changed since then, and time will prove which was the best system. Another cup of tea, Miss Bridgie? I hope you have good news of your sister and the little boy?”

“Yes, thank you, Miss Munns. They are both well, and we are hoping to see them quite soon. They come up to their town house at the beginning of May, and we expect to have quite a gay time. Esmeralda is bringing a house-party of old Irish friends with her, and it will be delightful to meet again. She always loved entertaining, and was clever in devising novelties, and now that she has plenty of money she can do as she likes without thinking of the cost. You must get your fineries ready, Sylvia. There will be lots of invitations for you next month.”

Sylvia’s smile was less whole-hearted than it would have been if one sentence had been omitted from Bridgie’s announcement. “Old friends from Ireland” would of a surety include Miss Mollie Burrell, and Esmeralda would see that Jack made the most of his opportunity. It would not be exactly pleasure to accept invitations for the sake of seeing other people flirting together, while she herself sat alone in a corner.

“I shan’t go!” she told herself. “If she asks me I shall refuse. I don’t care to be patronised at Park Lane or anywhere else. I’d rather stay at home and play cribbage in Rutland Road.” But all the same in the depths of her heart she knew well that when the time came she would not have enough resolution to say no. The temptation to obtain a glimpse of the fashionable world of which she had read so much and seen too little would be too great to be resisted; she would go even if it were to have her heart stabbed with a fresh pain, and to come home to weep herself to sleep!

“My dear, your sister will have plenty of friends to ask without thinking of Sylvia. She won’t find it plain sailing looking after a big house like that. I should advise her to engage a housekeeper if she doesn’t want to be cheated right and left. I know what servants are when the mistress is never in the kitchen to look after the scraps. I daresay I might be able to help her to find a suitable woman in connection with our different agencies. I’ll inquire for you if you think she would like it.”

“Dear Miss Munns, how kind of you! I’ll write to Esmeralda at once, and I daresay she would be most grateful. You make me quite ashamed of myself when I think of all the work you do, and how lazy and useless I am in comparison!” cried Bridgie earnestly. Her grey eyes were fixed on Miss Munns’s face with the sweetest, most unaffected admiration, and Sylvia looked at them both and thought many thoughts.

Miss Munns did indeed give both time and strength to charitable work, and withal a generous share of her small income, but her interest was of the head, not of the heart, and she was sublimely ignorant of her failure to help or comfort. Bridgie thought she was not helping at all, and was ashamed of herself because she was on no committees, and knew nothing of authorised agencies. Her ignorance was so sweet that it would be a sin to enlighten it, but there was something in Sylvia’s expression which aroused her friend’s curiosity.

“What are you thinking of, Sylvia?” she asked. “Something nice?”

“Very nice!” said Sylvia, smiling. She had just recalled a quotation which seemed as though it might have been written to describe Bridgie O’Shaughnessy—

> “Sweet souls without reproach or blot,
> Who do God’s will and know it not!”

Chapter Twenty.

A Luncheon Basket.

Esmeralda announced her arrival in town on the first of May, a week in advance of her house-party, so that she might have leisure to visit her brothers and sisters, and put the final touches to her own preparations. She did not mention the hour of her arrival, but this was easily calculated, and at home in Rutland Road, Bridgie and Pixie held eager committee meetings as to the best method of welcome. It was decided not to go to the station, as Esmeralda did not appreciate being taken unawares, and would of a certainty be annoyed if her son and heir were beheld at a disadvantage.

“Babies are bound to be cross at the end of a journey, and his little frock would be soiled and crumpled, and she will want him to look his very, very best. No! we will go straight to Park Lane,” Bridgie decided, “and arrive an hour after they are due, so that they will have had time to get tidy. The house will be upset, of course, for it has been closed for so long, and we may be able to help. I shall never forget the day we came here—all the furniture piled in the middle of the rooms, and nowhere to sit down, and nothing to eat, and my poor back aching as if ’twere broken. That’s another thing I was thinking about. We’ll take lunch with us all ready prepared—a cold chicken, I think, and some fruit for dessert, and enjoy it together, we three girls, if we have to sit on the floor to eat it. How lovely it will be to meet again! It seems too good to be true.”

Pixie was delighted at the idea of the luncheon basket, and when the eventful day arrived one little extra after another was added to the original list, until the weight became quite formidable, but Bridgie declared that an omnibus ran to within but a short distance of their destination, and the two girls set off in high spirits, each holding a handle of the basket, and swinging it gaily to and fro. Curious glances were cast towards it *en route*, whereat Pixie beamed with pride. It looked so like a picnic basket, with the top bulging from the sides, allowing glimpses to be seen of the fruit bags, and the white linen serviette enfolding the chicken; she was convinced that the beholders were consumed with envy and curiosity!

Arrived at Park Lane, Pixie was much concerned to realise that Esmeralda’s much vaunted town residence was situated in this dull and narrow street! In vain Bridgie represented that the site was famous the world over; the little sister smiled quietly, and retained her own opinion. Bridgie as usual was making the best of the situation, but it was evident that Geoffrey’s riches had been much exaggerated, since this was the best he could do for his wife.

Poor Esmeralda! how disappointed she would be! What a good thing it was that they had brought the cold chicken to take off the first edge of disappointment! The house itself looked dark and gloomy, but there were a great many windows, and looking upwards Pixie espied a glimpse of a graceful head inside the line of one of the curtains. The travellers had indeed arrived, and in another moment the three sisters would be reunited, after four months’ separation.

“Ring again, darling! I can’t. This basket weighs me down!” said Bridgie, straining at the heavy handle, and then came surprise number one, for even as she spoke the door was flung back, and there appeared on the threshold one immaculate-looking man-servant, while farther down the hall stood two more in attitudes of attention. Three whole men to open one door! This was indeed a height of luxury to which the simple Irish mind had never soared; and where was the upset and confusion which had been expected, where the signs of recent arrival, where the smallest,

most trifling evidence of confusion? The stately hall looked as if it had been undisturbed from immemorial ages, and the butler stared at the two girls and their basket with lofty disdain.

“Not at home, madam!”

Bridgie gasped, and looked blank dismay, but Pixie’s shrill protest could not be restrained.

“Not at home, when I saw her meself not a second ago looking out of the window?”

What would have happened it is difficult to say, but at that moment a voice sounded from afar, an eager voice repeating two names over and over again in tones of rapturous welcome. The man stepped aside, and Bridgie pressed the basket into his hands and raced along the hall, past the staring footmen to the bend of the stairs, where Esmeralda stood with arms stretched wide. Pixie was only a step aside, and Esmeralda escorted the two girls upstairs to her own room, talking breathlessly the while.

“Of course he said I was not at home! We arrived only an hour ago, so I can hardly be ready for visitors yet, but I saw the top of your hats from the nursery windows. You must come this very minute and see the boy. He is sweeter than ever. Everyone says he is a perfect beauty. Oh, me dears, how glad I am to see you! How sweet of you to come!”

“Of course we came; we thought perhaps we might be able to—help!” Bridgie said, looking around the gorgeous staircase with pensive regret. “We imagined you in such an upset, dear, with the carpets up, and the furniture covered with dust-sheets, and we thought we could dust, and put things straight as we used to do at Knock. You told us you were coming to open the house!”

“You didn’t expect I was going to work myself?” drawled Esmeralda, her impetuous manner changing suddenly to one of drawling affectation. “The servants have been here for a week, getting ready for our arrival. I have nothing to look after but a few frocks, and preparations for the fray next week! Did you expect to see me in an apron, with a duster over my head?”

“It makes no difference to me what you wear!” said Bridgie quietly, and at that Esmeralda laughed, and became herself once more.

“It does to me, though. The best of everything is good enough for me, nothing less! You dear old thing, it’s like old times to have you looking at me with that solemn face. No one keeps me in order now. Geoff tries occasionally, but it’s such an evident effort that it doesn’t have much effect. It will be quite good for me to have some family snubbings once more. This is the way to the nursery—this door! Now, my beauty, come to mother. She’s brought two new aunties to see you!”

The beauty regarded his relations in stolid silence for a moment, then hung his lower lip and began to howl. His mother walked him up and down the room, striving by various blandishments to win him back to smiles, but he kept turning his head over his shoulder to gaze at his new relatives with an expression of agonised incredulity, as though loath to believe that such monsters could really exist on the earth. He was very fat and very bald, and, if the truth were told, not a beauty at all, but Esmeralda made a fascinating mother, and was so happily deluded about his charms that it would have been cruel to undeceive her.

Even Pixie managed for once to preserve a discreet silence, while Bridgie’s ejaculations of astonishment at size and weight passed muster as admiration with the complacent mother and nurse.

“You shall see him again later on,” Esmeralda announced, as though anxious to soften the pain of separation, as she led her sisters from the room. “I must show you over the house before lunch. Geoffrey had the drawing-rooms redecorated before we were married, but this is the first time I have been able to entertain. I wish you could come and stay here, Bridgie, but I suppose nothing would make you desert the boys. Never mind, you will be here every time that there is anything going on, and it is not much fun preparing when one has a houseful of servants. Do you remember how we used to be making jellies and creams all the day before, and running about arranging the house until a few minutes before the time when the people arrived? That’s all over now, and I do nothing but give orders and grumble. This way! There! What do you think of that for an imposing vista?”

It was indeed very imposing, for one long yellow room opened into another decorated in palest blue, which in its turn showed a glimpse of a conservatory gay with flowers.

The rooms were so huge, so lofty in stature, that Pixie was puzzled to understand how the unimposing exterior could contain such surprises, while Esmeralda strutted about displaying one treasure after another, giving detailed descriptions of exactly how the rooms were to be arranged for the contemplated entertainments, and glancing complacently at her own reflection in the long mirrors. She looked ridiculously young to be the mistress of this fine establishment, and despite occasional affectations, there was more of the schoolgirl than of the woman of the world, in her happy voice and eager gestures.

From the reception-rooms the sisters adjourned to the dining-room, a big, somewhat gloomy apartment facing the street, very handsome, very severe, and evidently dedicated to one purpose only, and never by any chance entered from the time one meal ended until another began. The butler was arranging dishes on the sideboard, the table was spread with a glittering profusion of glass and silver, and an array of cold dainties, at sight of which Bridgie blushed, and stared at the floor. She waited, trembling, to hear Pixie’s exclamation, but none came, and as they adjourned towards the library she slipped her hand through Esmeralda’s arm, and said, half laughing, half nervous—

“I don’t understand the ways of grand ladies yet, Joan dear! I shall have to get into them by degrees. You wrote that you were coming to open the house, and I imagined you in the same sort of confusion which we were in at Rutland Road, only of course ten times worse, as your house is so big. We thought you would be tired and hungry, and

perhaps have nothing to eat but sandwiches or biscuits, and we—we brought some lunch for you and ourselves!”

Esmeralda threw back her head and laughed with much enjoyment.

“You funny dear, I never heard of anything so quaint! It was sweet of you all the same, and I’m ever so grateful. But, oh dear! what would the servants say if they knew! They would think my relations had come out of the Ark. And where in the world have you put the provisions?”

“I—I—” Bridgie looked round for Pixie, but she had lingered behind, and there was no one to help her out of her plight. “I had the basket in my hand, and we were standing at the door, and I heard you calling and I rushed in. I gave it to someone. I was in such a hurry I hardly noticed who it was. I think it was the man in the dining-room now!”

“Montgomery!” echoed Esmeralda blankly. She stood staring at Bridgie with horrified eyes. “Bridgie, how *could* you? What do you mean by it? What did you bring, and how was it made up?”

“A chicken, and pies, and apples, and a tin of toffee. Everything you liked—and some little rolls and a pot of butter. They were in a basket—a big basket with a serviette over the top!” cried Bridgie, with desperate candour, determined to tell the worst at once and get it over.

At home at Rutland Road it had seemed such a simple and natural thing to do, but ten minutes’ experience of Park Lane had shown clearly enough how unnecessary had been her anxiety, how ridiculous it must seem in the estimation of the household! She looked at Esmeralda with troubled eyes, and Esmeralda flushed, and cried testily—

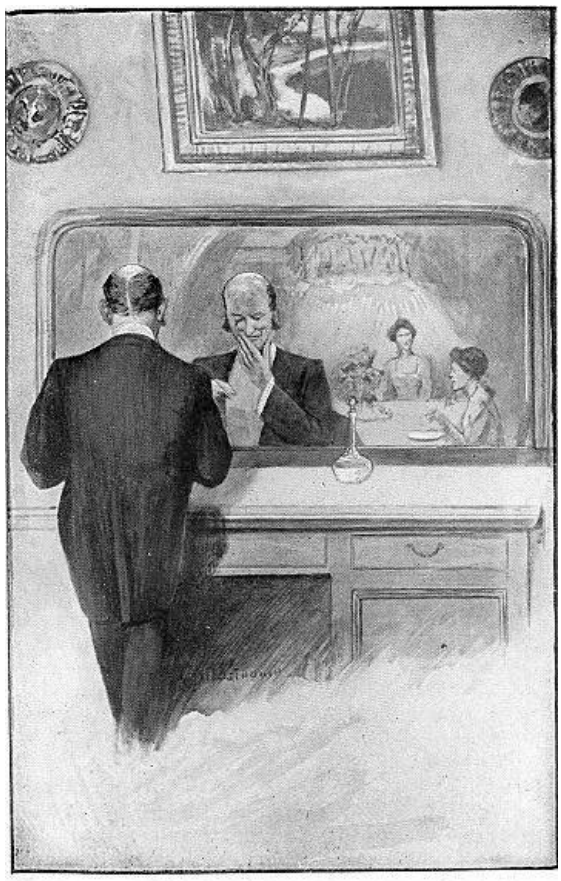
“A basket of provisions, and you handed it to Montgomery! He would think, of course, that it was his duty to open it, and— Oh, Bridgie, how could you? He will tell the story in the servants’ hall, and they will all laugh and make fun. It’s too tiresome! I can’t think how you can have made such a mistake!”

“I thought of you, you see, and not of the servants. It never occurred to my mind that you could be ashamed of me, whatever I did!” said Bridgie quietly.

“I’m not in the least ashamed of you, I’m ashamed of the basket! You ask Jack when you go home, and he’ll tell you ’twas a foolish thing to do, and you walking, too, and not driving to the door. We won’t talk about it any more, or we shall both get angry, and it’s done now and can’t be helped. What do you think of this room? Geoffrey is quite proud of his books, and we mean to make this our private little den, and retire here when we are tired of living in public. Here’s the electric light, you see, switched on to these movable lamps, so that one can read comfortably in any position!”

“Very nice! So convenient! It looks most comfortable!”

Bridgie’s voice sounded formal and ill-at-ease, and both sisters felt the position a trifle strained, and were unaffectedly relieved to see Pixie strolling towards them at this critical minute.



‘TURNS HIS BACK TO THE SIDEBOARD WHEN I TALK’

She was smiling to herself as at a pleasant remembrance, and lost no time in entering into conversation.

“I don’t know how it is about butlers—they all love me!” she announced thoughtfully. “The Wallace one turns his back to the sideboard when I talk, and the vegetable-dishes wobble when he hands them round. He tries hard not to laugh, because it’s rude for servants to see a joke, but he really appreciates them frightfully much. Your one has whiskers, too, and isn’t he pleasant to talk to? Not half as proud as he looks. We have just been talking about the basket, because he’d got chickens already, and he asked what he should do with ours. I said we’d take it back, of course, because it would be a treat to us to-night. That was quite right, wasn’t it, Bridgie?”

“Yes, darling, perfectly right!” said Bridgie.

Esmeralda frowned, bit her lip, and finally succumbed, even as the butler had done before her, and laughed with a good grace. She hugged Pixie, and Pixie hugged her back, and chattered away so freely and naturally that it was impossible for restraint to live in her presence.

Esmeralda as usual avoided a formal apology, but when Geoffrey arrived and the little party were seated round the luncheon-table, she made the *amende honorable* by telling him of the basket incident in the presence of three men-servants with as much unction as if it had given her the most unmitigated delight.

“Thank you, Bridgie, you *are* a brick! How jolly of you to have taken so much trouble! If I’d known of that chicken before I began lunch, nothing would have induced me to eat anything else!” cried Geoffrey heartily.

There was no snobbishness about him at any rate, and to judge from the glance which his wife cast upon him it was evident that she was quite able to appreciate a quality that was lacking in her own composition.

They seemed very happy together, this young husband and wife, and as Bridgie saw them smile at one another across the table, for no other reason than pure happiness and content in each other’s presence; when Esmeralda announced “Geoffrey says,” as the definite conclusion of any argument, and Geoffrey said quietly, “Esmeralda likes it!” as though the fact debarred all further discussion—when she heard and saw all this, the pain which was so bravely buried in Bridgie’s heart seemed to take a fresh lease of life, and stab her with the memory of dead hopes.

It was not that she envied Esmeralda her happiness—Bridgie had none of the dog in the manger in her composition—but she felt suddenly oppressed by loneliness and a sense of want, which the quiet home-life failed to satisfy. Once she had imagined that this happiness would be hers in the future, but that hope was dead, and it did not seem possible that it could ever come to life again. Even if by chance she met Dick Victor in the future, what explanation could he have to offer which would wipe away the reproach of that long silence? Bridgie hoped they might never meet; it would be too painful to see her idol dethroned from his pedestal.

“Are they worth a penny, dear? I’ve asked you the same question twice over!” cried Esmeralda mischievously, and Bridgie came back to the present with a shock of remembrance.

“I was wool-gathering again. So sorry! What did you want to know?”

“I was talking about our invitations. Do you want any cards for friends? Is there anyone whom you would like me to ask?”

“Lottie Vane, please, and Mr and Mrs Wallace,” cried Pixie eagerly, and Esmeralda smiled at the first name, and frowned at the second. She remembered having seen the Vanes at a school festival, and being favourably impressed by their appearance, but the name of Wallace was still repugnant to her ears, and could not be heard unmoved.

She did not care, however, to appear ungracious in Geoffrey’s presence, and reflected that it might be judicious to impress Pixie’s employers with the grandeur of the O’Shaughnessy family, and thus nip in the bud any ideas of patronage. A moment later she was thankful that she had made no objections, as Sylvia Trevor’s name from Bridgie’s lips convinced her that here at least a stand must be made.

“Oh, my dear, it is no use asking Miss Trevor. She is lame, and I shall have enough to do without looking after invalids.”

“She would come with us, and we would take care of her. The boys are so fond of Sylvia. They’d think it a pleasure!” pleaded innocent Bridgie, all unconscious of the fatal nature of her argument, and Esmeralda frowned again and said impatiently—

“She’d much better stay at home. Crowded rooms are no place for people who need such care.”

“No, but that is all the more reason why she should get what enjoyment she can. She would love one of the receptions you spoke of, when you will have music and other entertainments, and her limp can scarcely be noticed now. She would be no trouble to you. You asked her to visit you in Ireland, Esmeralda!”

“’Deed I did, and she snubbed me for my pains. I don’t like Miss Trevor, and I don’t mean to give her the chance of refusing any more invitations.”

Bridgie looked aghast, as well she might, and made no attempt to hide her discomfiture.

“But—but I told her you would! I made quite sure of it, and told her she would have such a good time. The poor girl is counting upon it.”

“And she is Bridgie’s friend. Bridgie wants to bring her. That settles the question surely!” said Geoffrey quietly. He looked across the table with uplifted brows, and, wonder of wonders, Esmeralda blushed, and murmured vaguely about being “much pleased.”

“What a mercy it was that Geoffrey was at home! But oh, if you love me, Pixie, never, never let Sylvia guess that we had to plead for her invitations!” pleaded Bridgie earnestly, as the two sisters made their way home an hour later on.

Chapter Twenty One.

An “At Home.”

Fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, there is no hall mark of sincerity to distinguish one invitation from another, and the printed cards which were in due time received by Sylvia Trevor differed in no respect from those sent to the most favoured of Esmeralda’s guests. Fortunately also the remarks with which invitations are received are not overheard by the prospective hostess, else might she often feel her trouble wasted, and repent when it was too late.

Mrs Hilliard’s fashionable acquaintances yawned when they received her cards, and exclaimed, “Another engagement for Thursday! We shall have to accept, I suppose, but it’s a dreadful nuisance! We can just look in for a quarter of an hour on our way to Lady Joan’s dance;” and unfashionable Sylvia pursed up her lips and remarked to herself, “Humph! I suppose she wants to dazzle me with the sight of her splendours. Much ‘pleasure’ my company will give her! I shall go, of course. I don’t think I *could* stay quietly at home and play cribbage, and know that Bridgie and the boys were driving away, and that I might have been with them. Yes, I’ll go, and I will get a new dress for the occasion—a beauty! Dad said I might be extravagant once in a way, without emptying the exchequer; and he would like me to look nice. Perhaps Bridgie will go to town with me and help me to choose. It is nice to have some excitement to look forward to. What with typhoid and—Jack,—this has been the dullest winter I ever knew.”

The advent of the Hilliards did indeed make a great difference to the two quiet households in Rutland Road. Esmeralda was too much occupied with her guests to pay many visits in person, but she appeared at intervals, leaning back against the cushions of the carriage, and looking like some wonderful princess out of a fairy-tale, and as far removed as possible from the good ladies of the neighbourhood.

The coachman would draw up before the door of Number Three, the footman would throw open the door, and Mistress Esmeralda would saunter up the little garden, dragging yards of chiffon and lace in her train, and acutely, delightfully conscious of the heads peering from behind the curtains on either side of the road. Acknowledged beauty as she was, her advent caused a greater sensation in this suburban district than among her own associates, and though she affected to despise its demonstrations, they were yet very dear to her vain little heart.

Sometimes the two sisters were spirited away to lunch or a drive in the Park, and on their return would adjourn into Number Six, and entertain Miss Munns and her niece with the story of their adventures. There was a party every single day at Park Lane—titled creatures, and “men who did things,” as Pixie eloquently explained, and Miss Munns recognised every name as it was repeated, and inquired anxiously concerning clothes, if the celebrity were of the female sex, concerning manner and choice of eatables, if he were a man.

Once, too, before the date of the formal invitation, Sylvia herself was invited to accompany her friend to an afternoon reception, when she beheld the fabled glories with her own eyes. Never before had she entered such a house, or met so distinguished a company, but not for worlds would she have allowed her surprise to be visible to Esmeralda’s eyes. The fashionable expression, she noticed, was one of bored superiority, so she looked bored and superior too, refused offers of refreshments which she was really longing to accept, and lounged from one room to another with an abstracted air, as if unconscious of her surroundings. All the same she felt very lonely and out of her depth, for Bridgie was helping her sister to receive her guests, and Pixie as usual roaming about in search of adventure.

It is very difficult to sit alone in a crowd and keep up an appearance of dignity, and Sylvia was grateful when a girl of her own age took possession of the chair by her side, and began to talk without waiting for the formality of an introduction. She was a pleasant-looking, much-freckled damsel, with a wholesome, out-of-door atmosphere, which distinguished her from the other ladies present, and she seemed for some reason quite interested in Sylvia Trevor.

All the time that they talked the honest blue eyes—studied the little clear-cut face of her companion, and though Sylvia was puzzled to account for the scrutiny, she was quite conscious of its presence, and anxious that the decision should be in her favour. She dropped her artificial airs and graces, and talked simply and naturally, asking questions about the different people present, and listening to the biographical sketches which were given in return, with much greater interest than was vouchsafed to her aunt’s more humble reminiscences.

It was so interesting to meet a celebrated author in flesh and blood, and find that she talked about the weather like any ordinary stupid person; a statesman in whose hands lay the destiny of a nation, yet could discuss with seriousness whether he should choose pink cakes or white. So extraordinary to discover that this gorgeously-attired lady was plain Mrs Somebody, while the funny, shabby-looking old woman in black was a celebrated Duchess, whose name was a household word.

Sylvia understood now why Esmeralda had been so anxious to place this guest in the most comfortable chair, and had waited on her with such assiduous care; she understood, too, why the Duchess herself wore an expression of patient resignation, and cast surreptitious glances at the clock. Poor creature, these so-called amusements were the business of her life, and one was so much like another that it was impossible to get up any feeling of interest, much less amusement. She yawned behind her glove, and vouchsafed the briefest of answers to her companions; it was abundantly evident, in short, that the Duchess was bored, and as this was the first time that she had honoured his house by a visit, Geoffrey was naturally anxious that this state of things should not continue. Esmeralda had done her utmost, but her airs and graces had failed to make any impression on one who had been acquainted with the beauties of the last fifty years, and there seemed no one present who possessed the requisite qualities to help him out of his difficulty. The Duchess was already acquainted with every visitor of note, and would not care to be

introduced to insignificant nonentities.

Stay, though! What of the most insignificant of his guests? What of Pixie O'Shaughnessy, of the ready tongue, and the audacious self-confidence, which would flourish unchecked in the presence of kings and emperors? "Pixie for ever! Pixie to the rescue!" cried Geoffrey to himself, and promptly stole across to the room set apart for refreshments, where his small sister-in-law sat eating her fourth ice, waited upon with assiduous care by her friend Montgomery.

"Pixie," he said, "there's an old lady in black sitting under the big palm in the yellow drawing-room and looking dreadfully bored! Just go and talk to her like a good girl, and see if you can amuse her a little bit before she goes."

"I will so!" responded Pixie heartily. "It's a very dull party when there's nothing to do but be pleasant. I was bored myself, before I began to eat. I'll leave the ice now, but maybe I'll venture on another by and by.—In black, you said, under the palm?"

She flicked a lapful of crumbs on to the floor, and pranced away with her light, dancing step. Geoffrey watched her from the doorway, saw her squeeze herself into the corner of the lounge on which the Duchess was seated, and gaze into her face with the broadest of broad beaming smiles, while the great lady, in her turn, put up a lorgnon and stared back in amazed curiosity.

"Well, little girl," said the Duchess, smiling, "and what have you got to say?"

"Plenty, thank you! I always have. Me difficulty is to find someone to listen!" replied Miss Pixie, with a confidential nod.

The old lady looked extraordinarily thin; the lines on her face crossed and re-crossed like the most intricate puzzle, her lips were sunken, and the tips of nose and chin were at perilously close quarters, but her eyes were young still, such sharp, bright little eyes, and they twinkled just as Pat's did when he was pleased.

"Talk to me, then. I'll stop you when I'm bored!" she said, and at that Pixie nodded once again.

"Of course. We always do. Jack stamps on me foot, and Pat snores, the same as if he were asleep. He says he is strong enough to hear a tale six times over, but he won't listen to it a seventh, to please man nor woman. Bridgie says jokes are one of the trials of family life, because by the time you've improved the points so that no one would recognise them for the same, your relations won't give you a hearing. It's a curious thing, when you think of it, that you get so exhausted with other people's stories, while you go on laughing at your own. Bridgie says you'll find fifty people to cry with you, for one who will sympathise about jokes. Have you found it that way in your experience?"

"Upon my word," cried the Duchess with unction, "this Bridgie appears to be a remarkably sensible young woman! My experience has been that I rarely meet a joke that is not my own exclusive property, to judge by the faces of my companions. Do you happen to possess a name, my youthful philosopher? I should like to know to whom I am talking."

'WELL, LITTLE GIRL,' SAID THE DUCHESS, 'WHAT HAVE YOU TO SAY?'

"I'm Pixie O'Shaughnessy, and Geoffrey married my sister Esmeralda. He came over to Ireland and fell in love with

her in spite of me telling him about her bad temper, thinking of course that he was a perfect stranger. I apologised to him after it was settled and said there was nothing really wrong with her, for she'd always rather be pleasant than not, only at times it's easier to be nasty, and she's been lazy from her youth. The night they met they mistook each other for ghosts, and Esmeralda clung to his arm and screeched for help.

"There was never a thing that girl was frightened at, all her life, until now, and, would you believe it?—it's her own servants! Of course in Ireland they were like friends, as free and easy as we were ourselves, and entering into the conversation at table; but Geoffrey's Englishmen are so solemn and proper that she lives in terror of shocking their feelings. One day the butler found her kissing Geoffrey, believing they were alone, and she waited for him to say, 'Allow me, madam!' as he always does if she ventures to do a hand's turn for herself. She's says it's dispiriting to think you can't even quarrel in peace for fear of interruption, and it takes a good deal to interrupt Esmeralda when once she's started."

The Duchess screwed up her bright little eyes, and her shoulders shook beneath her black lace cape. Sylvia and her companion, watching the strangely assorted pair from across the room, saw Pixie move nearer and nearer, and whisper a long dramatic history; saw the Duchess nod her head in appreciation of the various points, and heard the burst of laughter which greeted the *dénouement*. Everyone stopped talking and stared with inquiring eyes. Esmeralda turned towards the lounge, anxiety thinly disguised by smiles, and, seeing her, the Duchess rose from her seat with a sigh of regret.

"Your sister is a born story-teller, Mrs Hilliard. I wish I had more time to listen. Please ask me to meet her again! It is a long time since I have been so amused."

Here was praise indeed! Esmeralda beamed with satisfaction, and seized Pixie's hand with an unusual outburst of affection.

"How noble of you, dear! She was looking as bored as bored, and I was at my wits' end. What did you tell her that made her laugh like that?"

"Oh, nothing much. Just things about ourselves, and the adventures at home. 'Twas the beeswax pudding that pleased her most," said Pixie easily, and wondered at Esmeralda's sudden extinction of interest.

"Now what disclosures has that child been making next!" cried the freckled girl, looking on at this little scene with curious eyes. "I doubt whether Esmeralda appreciates them as much as the Duchess. We used to say at home that if there was one thing which should not be revealed, Pixie was bound to choose it as the subject of conversation on the first possible occasion! And she was so sweet and innocent about it, too, that it was impossible to be angry. I expect you have found out that for yourself?"

"Yes—No!" said Sylvia absently, for she was thinking less of what she was saying than of certain phrases which her companion had just uttered. "We used to say at home." Who was this, then, who had known Pixie O'Shaughnessy in bygone days—could it by any chance be the dreaded rival towards whom she was prepared to cherish so ardent a dislike? She stared at the honest, kindly face, and felt that it would be difficult to harbour a prejudice against its owner, even if—if— "Are you Miss Burrell?" she asked, and Mollie smiled assent.

"I am that, and you are Sylvia Trevor. I've heard about you from—"

"Bridgie—yes! We have been great friends all winter."

"Not Bridgie—no! We had so much to discuss about the old place and its people, that I'm afraid we have never mentioned your name. It was not Bridgie."

"Oh!" said Sylvia, and stared across the room. It might, of course, have been Esmeralda herself who had enlightened Miss Burrell's ignorance, but there was a mysterious something in the girl's manner which gave a different impression. She was too proud to ask questions, and Miss Burrell volunteered no information, but smiled to herself as at an interesting reminiscence. It seemed as though what she had heard had been of a distinctly pleasant character!

Sylvia returned home feeling mysteriously happy and elated, and the sight of a letter addressed to herself in her father's handwriting put the finishing touch on her satisfaction. She took it upstairs to her own room, and sat herself down on the one comfortable chair which she possessed, to read its contents with undisturbed enjoyment. She was in no hurry to break the seal, however, for it was so pleasant just to hold the letter in her hand, and lean back comfortably against the cushions, and dream.

The dreams, it is true, were mostly concerned with the events of the afternoon, and Mollie Burrell's intent and kindly scrutiny; but it was like the old times when she had thought her own thoughts with her hand clasped in that of the dear old dad, and the touch of the sheet on which his fingers had rested brought back the old feeling of strength and security. She had told him much about her new friends, and he seemed always to wish to hear more, asking carefully veiled questions, the meaning of which were perfectly understood by his shrewd little daughter.

Dad was anxious about this friendship with a family which included a handsome grown-up son among its members; a trifle afraid lest she should be spirited away to another home before he had enjoyed his own innings.

"Poor old darling!" murmured Sylvia remorsefully, for at the bottom of her heart she knew well which home she would choose if the choice were given, and it did seem hard—horribly hard—that a parent should love and guard and work for his child from the hour of her birth, and that when she had grown old and sensible enough to be a companion instead of a care, she should immediately desert him for another! "But I could never love dad any less, never, never! I'd give anything in the world to see him again!" Sylvia cried mentally as she opened the envelope and straightened the thin, foreign sheets.

It was a long letter, and took a long time to read, and in the process Sylvia's expression changed once and again, and finally settled into one of incredulous dismay. It was not that the news was bad; on the contrary, it was good—very good indeed—the thing above all others which she would have wished to hear, but it threatened a complete uprooting of her life just as it was growing most interesting, and full of possibilities. Dad was coming home, was even now on his way, and had desired her to meet him on his arrival at Marseilles. It was incredible, quite incredible in its startling unexpectedness. She turned again to the wonderful paragraph, and read it over once more slowly and carefully.

> "And now, my darling, I have a piece of news, which I hope and believe will be welcome to you. Certain business changes have taken place of late, which you would not understand even if I tried to explain them, but such as they are they set me free to return home at my own convenience. I have been impatiently waiting this settlement of affairs for some time back, as I have been most anxious to see you after your long illness, and to satisfy myself that the best means are being used to restore the full use of your foot.
>
> "I have made inquiries here, and believe that a course of baths of the German Spa B— would probably put the final touch to what has already been done. I propose, therefore, that you engage in good time a trustworthy lady courier from an office in London, and travel in her company to Marseilles, where I will meet you in the first week of June, having previously spent a week or ten days in Italy with my old friends the Nisbets, who return in the same boat.
>
> "Come prepared for a summer abroad, and we can fit you up with any extras that are needed before we start on our travels. After you have finished your course of treatment and are, I trust, thoroughly convalescent, we will have a tour through Switzerland, and settle down at some mountain hotel, where the air will brace us up after our sufferings, climatic and otherwise.
>
> "For the future, I have as yet no definite plans, except that, of course, you will not return to your present quarters. Perhaps we may eventually find a house that suits us in the south of England, but I can't face English winters after my long residence in this sunny land, and you must make up your mind to humour a restless old Anglo-Indian for the next few years to come. Perhaps by that time I may have regained my old strength and nerve, which have sadly failed of late. I will wire from Brindisi as to definite arrangements."

Sylvia let the letter drop on her lap, and stared before her with blank eyes. Through the curtains could be seen a glimpse of the house opposite, the blind at Bridgie's window drawn up at its usual rakish angle.

In three weeks, in less than three weeks, she would say good-bye for ever to Rutland Road and its inhabitants; good-bye to England itself, it appeared, for at least a year to come, and at two-and-twenty a year is as long as a lifetime, if it divides us from those we love. She would drift away out of sight, and the last six months would become but an episode in her own life and those of her friends.

"D'ye remember Sylvia,—the girl with the bark on the road?" In imagination she could hear Pixie putting the question in the years to come, and Bridgie would remember quite well, because she had not the faculty of forgetting, but other people—other people were reputedly fickle, and tempted to forget old friends in favour of new! Other people would probably be in love with a fair-haired beauty by that time, and have forgotten all about Sylvia Trevor!

The pain which shot through the girl's heart at these reflections was so sharp that it startled her into a realisation of her own position. Dad was coming home, she was going to live with him once more, and instead of being happy and elated she was miserable—miserable! She was going to leave her aunt's home, with the restrictions and lack of sympathy which had made it so trying, and was once more to live with the fondest and most indulgent of parents, and instead of filling her with delight the news seemed like a sentence of banishment from all that made life worth living!

To do Sylvia justice she was shocked at her own thoughts, and made a valiant effort to look at the prospect in a more dutiful spirit. At least, she determined, no one should suspect a want of loyalty to that best and kindest of men! Aunt Margaret would take for granted that she felt nothing but delight, and she would postpone breaking the news to Bridgie until she had grown accustomed to the idea of separation, and could discuss it with composure.

It would be easier than usual to keep this resolve, for since Esmeralda's arrival the neighbours necessarily saw less of each other than in the long winter days when there had been no rival claims on their time and attention. Aunt Margaret would be pleased to find that she was chosen as counsellor and adviser-in-chief, and during the short time which was left she must do her utmost to gratify the old lady, who had been on the whole very kind and forbearing during the two years which they had spent together.

"I wish I had been nicer to her!" sighed Sylvia regretfully. "I was always meaning to be, but now it's too late. That's the worst of putting off things in this world; the chance may never come again!"

Chapter Twenty Two.

Great Expectations.

A whole week passed by before Sylvia had an opportunity of telling her great news to her friend. To begin with, Bridgie was absent from home for three days and nights, attending a ball and a water-party given by Esmeralda for the entertainment of her house-party, and to neither of which Sylvia had received an invitation. To be sure, it was no use going to a dance when dancing was an impossibility, and the getting in and out of boats would have been painful and difficult, but all the same Sylvia felt slighted and out in the cold, and, though absent in the flesh, mentally followed every stage in the two entertainments, and tortured herself by imagining Jack's light-hearted enjoyment and

absorption in other company than her own.

When Bridgie returned home, Miss Munns insisted on several expeditions to town, and also to surrounding suburbs, where lived those family connections to whom it was clearly the girl's duty to say good-bye. The old lady was quite inclined to enjoy the little stir of preparation involved by the trip abroad, and would allow no one but herself to interview the lady in whose charge her niece was to travel. That she was entirely satisfied was the best possible guarantee for Sylvia's safety, and Mistress Courier Rickman promised to be ready to start the moment the expected wire was received.

Miss Munns laid in a store of patent medicines, stocked her niece's workbox with every imaginable useful, and waxed quite affectionate in her manner, but all the same it was easy to see that she would be relieved to get rid of her charge, and settle down once more in the old groove. It requires a great deal of forbearance and unselfish imagination to enable a young person and an old to live together happily, and the lack of these qualities is the explanation of many miserable homes.

Old people should remember that the peaceful monotony which has become their own idea of happiness, must by the laws of nature spell a very different word to buoyant, restless youth, and also that there comes a stage when the children are not children any longer, when they are entitled to their own opinions, and may even—most reverently be it said—understand what is best for themselves, better than those of a different generation; and the young people in their turn should remember the long years of tender care and devotion which they have received, and be infinitely patient in their turn. They, who are so impatient of passing ailments, should try to imagine how it would feel to be always feeble, and to see in the future the certainty of growing more and more suffering and incapable. They should realise that it is in their power to make the sunshine of declining days, and thereby to store up for themselves a lasting joy, instead of a reproach.

In looking back upon those two years spent in Rutland Road, Sylvia forgot her aunt's lack of sympathy, her prosy talk, and repeated fault-finding; they were lost in remembering the true kindness of heart which lay beneath all mannerism. What she was never able to forget was her own impatience and neglect of opportunity.

Once or twice as the days passed by, Bridgie O'Shaughnessy ran to the gate to intercept her friend as she passed, and exchange a hurried greeting, but Sylvia would not trust her great news to such occasions as these. She waited until an opportunity arose for an uninterrupted talk, and as she waited a desire awoke and grew in intensity, to herself tell Jack of the coming separation. Bridgie must, of course, be informed of the journey to France and Germany, but she would wait until the evening of Esmeralda's reception before disclosing the full extent of her travels.

When she and Jack were sitting together in one of the charming little niches in which the rooms abounded, he would naturally begin to talk of her journey, and she would smile and look unconcerned, and, in the most cheerful and natural of tones, announce that she was not coming back to Rutland Road, that it would probably be a year at least before she saw England again.

Surely when he heard this for the first time, when it was burst upon him as an utter surprise, she would read in his face whether she had been right in imagining that he really "cared," or if it had been a delusion born of girlish vanity. She would be quite calm and serene, would not in any way pose as a martyr or seem to expect any expression of distress, but she could not—could not bring herself to go away without making this one innocent little effort to solve the mystery which meant so much to her happiness and peace of mind.

So Sylvia purposely kept out of Bridgie's way during the ten days after the receipt of her letter, and when they met it was easy to tell just what she chose, and keep silent about the rest, for Bridgie was not one of the curious among womenkind, and never dreamt of questioning and cross-questioning as to the plans of another. She simply took for granted that Sylvia would return to her old quarters, after a pleasant summer holiday, just as she was happily assured that her friend felt nothing but purest joy and satisfaction in the prospect before her.

"Oh, me darling," she cried rapturously, "I am delighted for you! Isn't that the very best news that could happen? So soon, too, and a lovely jaunt together in the beautiful summer weather. 'Twill make you strong again in no time, and you will write me long letters telling me all your adventures, and 'twill be almost as good as having them myself. I couldn't tell you when I've been so pleased!"

"Humph!" said Sylvia disconsolately. Would Jack be delighted also, and hail her departure with rapturous congratulations? "Won't you miss me? Won't you feel lonely when I'm not here?" she questioned earnestly, and Bridgie smiled a cheery reassurement.

"I'll have Esmeralda, you see! She will be here until the end of the season, and then we are going up to Scotland with her. We shall be so busy and taken up with one thing and another that I shan't have time to miss you, darling."

"Humph!" said Sylvia once more. This was intended for comfort, she was aware, but it was not the kind of comfort that was required. Bridgie O'Shaughnessy might be so unselfish as to rejoice because a friend did not suffer by her absence, but Sylvia longed to hear that she was indispensable, and that nothing and no one could fill her place. It was another bitter drop in her cup to realise that the O'Shaughnessy girls were so closely united that any friend must needs be at a discount in comparison with a sister.

"Ye don't seem as excited as I should have expected. Is anything worrying you, dear?" Bridgie inquired, and Sylvia hurriedly searched for a plausible excuse and found it in her father's health.

In reality she was not disquieted by his reference to his own weakness, for he had been complaining for months back without apparently growing worse, and she was convinced that the coming rest would speedily restore him to health. It made an excuse, however, and Bridgie sympathised and offered a dozen kindly, unpractical suggestions as her

custom was.

Then the conversation drifted to the all-important reception which was so close at hand, and to which both girls were looking forward with such expectation. Bridgie related the latest arrangements for the entertainment of some three hundred guests, while her friend listened with eager attention. Esmeralda was sparing neither money nor pains to make the evening one of the events of the season. Singers and musicians whose names were known throughout Europe were to perform at intervals in the great drawing-room; the hall and staircase were to be transformed into a bower of roses, pink La France roses here, there, and everywhere, wreathed round the banisters, massed on the window-sills and mantelpieces, hanging in great golden baskets from the ceiling. Rose-coloured shades were to soften the glare of the electric lights; the air was to be kept cool by great blocks of ice, and scented fountains rising from banks of moss and ferns; the conservatory was to be illuminated by jewelled lanterns.

It sounded like a fairy-tale to the girl in the unfashionable suburb, and she would have been less than human if she had not counted the hours which must elapse before the evening arrived. Bridgie thought it a pity that the guests could not be labelled for the edification of the unsophisticated, but Sylvia's greatest interest was centred on figures which were too familiar to be mistaken. The whole entertainment was, in truth, but a gorgeous setting to that conversation with Jack, which might be their last *tête-à-tête* for so long to come.

The dressmaker who was preparing Miss Trevor's dress for the great occasion had seldom had more difficulty in satisfying an employer, and the sum total expended on fineries would have horrified Miss Munns if she had been allowed to see the bills. Even Sylvia winced when she added up the figures, but she repeated sturdily the old phrase, "Dad won't mind!" and felt secure that she would meet with no worse reprimand than a little good-natured banter. On the whole she had been very economical during her stay in England, and her conscience did not upbraid her concerning this one extravagance.

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Telegram.

As soon as her room was in order on the day of the reception, Sylvia began the delightful task of opening boxes and parcels, and laying their contents on the bed. The satin skirt was spread out with careful fingers, and over it a foam of frills and flounces which must surely have grown, since it was inconceivable that they could have been fashioned by mortal hands. Fan, and gloves, and little lacy handkerchief lay side by side on the pillows; little satin shoes stood at a jaunty angle, the crystal buckles shining in the sun. The pearl necklace, which had been a present from dad on her twenty-first birthday, lay on the toilet-table ready to be snapped on, and a spray of white roses and maiden-hair floated in a basin of water.

All was ready, and Sylvia beamed with delight at the result of her preparations. She had come upstairs ostensibly to rest, but in reality she was far too excited to settle down even to read, and could only wander about the room inventing one little duty after another, and weaving endless day-dreams. In a corner of the room stood her travelling-box, a convenient receptacle into which to put the new purchases as they arrived from the shops.

The travelling dress, the piles of cool garments for summer wear lay neatly packed away, looking fresh and dainty enough to have charmed any girl's heart, but this afternoon Sylvia had no thought for the future; every hope and ambition was centred on the events of the next few hours.

Three o'clock! How slowly the time passed! Four, five, six, seven, eight, nine—six hours still to while away before she would drive from the door with Pixie by her side, and Jack *vis-à-vis*, leaning forward to look her over, and exclaim in admiration at her fine feathers.

Sylvia could almost imagine that she heard him speak, and saw the sudden softening of the handsome eyes, and for once in her life she was inclined to rejoice that Bridgie was again staying at Park Lane, since Pixie and Pat would be so much engrossed in their own discussions as to ensure a virtual *tête-à-tête* for their companions. She rose restlessly from her seat and walked to the window. Was Pixie occupied even as she had been herself in laying out her dress for the evening? She peered curiously through the opposite windows, but no sign of the inhabitants was to be seen; she yawned, drummed her fingers against the pane, and stared idly down the road.

It was not a lively neighbourhood at the best of times, and to-day it seemed even duller than usual. A nurse was wheeling a perambulator along the pavement, a milkman's cart was making slow progress from door to door, a telegraph-boy was sauntering down the middle of the road whistling a popular air. Sylvia wondered where he was going, and what was the nature of the message which he bore. Some people were so nervous about telegrams—Aunt Margaret, for instance! It was so rarely that her quiet life was disturbed by a message of sufficient importance to make it worth while for the sender to expend sixpence on its delivery.

Sylvia's heart gave a leap of apprehension as the thought arose that perhaps the message was for the O'Shaughnessy household to tell of some dire accident which had interfered with the festivity of the evening. She had hardly time to breathe a sigh of relief as the boy passed the gate of Number Three before apprehension re-awoke as he approached her own doorway.

A telegram for Aunt Margaret! What could it be? Ought she to go downstairs to lend the support of her presence, or stay in her room where she was supposed to be enjoying a refreshing nap? She heard the opening of the door and the sound of voices in the hall, then to her surprise footsteps ascended the stairs, and someone whispered a gentle summons—

"Sylvia! Are you awake? A telegram has arrived for you, my dear. You had better see it at once."

Miss Munns looked flurried and anxious, but her niece smiled a placid reassurement.

“I expect it is from father, fixing the date of my journey. He said he would wire.” She tore open the envelope and glanced hurriedly at the address. “Yes, it is! He is at Marseilles. ‘Come at—’” Her voice died away, and she stood staring at the words in horrified incredulity, while Miss Munns stepped forward hurriedly, and peered over her shoulder.

“Come at once. Father dangerously ill. Remain in charge till you come.—Nisbet.”

“Nisbet! Nisbet! That was the name of the friends with whom he was to travel. ‘Dangerously ill!’ ‘At once!’ What can it mean?”

Sylvia laid the paper on the bed and pressed her hands against her head. She was deathly pale, but perfectly composed and quiet, and the expression of her eyes showed that so far from being stunned, she was thinking in quick, capable fashion.

“There is a train from Charing Cross at four o’clock,” she said presently. “I should arrive in Paris at midnight, and at Marseilles some time to-morrow. It is three now. My box is more than half packed. I shall have time. Mary must go out and order a cab!”

“My dear, it is impossible! You cannot possibly leave to-day. I will go with you myself, and I cannot get ready at an hour’s notice. Wait until to-morrow, and—”

Sylvia turned round with a flash of anger in her eyes, but suddenly softened and took both the old lady’s hands in her own, holding them in a tender pressure.

“Listen,” she said, and her voice, gentle though it was, had in it a new quality which awed and impressed the hearer. “Listen!—there is not one single minute to spare. If there was a train at half-past three, I should catch that, box or no box, for father is dying, Aunt Margaret—he would not have let me be summoned like this for any passing ailment. Nothing in all the world would make me wait here until to-morrow, so please, dear, do not hinder me now. I know it is impossible for you to come with me, but I will telegraph the moment I arrive, and if—if there is still time, you can follow then.”

“But you can’t travel alone! Edward would not like it. He is so particular. How can you manage about the trains?”

“Listen! I have thought of that too. Put on your bonnet and go to the telephone office at the corner. Ask the people at the agency if they can possibly send a lady courier to meet me at the train at Charing Cross. If they can, very well! If they can’t, I am twenty-two, and can speak French easily, and am not afraid of travelling by myself. I will telegraph to Cook’s agent to meet me in Paris, if it will make you any happier, but I am going, auntie dear, and I have not a moment to spare. I will get dressed now, and the cab must be here in half an hour.”

Miss Munns turned without a word, and left the room. She had the sense to know when she was beaten, and, having once faced the situation, set to work in her usual business-like fashion, and proved the most capable of helpers. Having been successful in arranging for a lady courier through the convenient medium of the telephone, she returned home to write labels, fasten together cloaks and umbrellas, and order a hasty but tempting little meal for the refreshment of the traveller. This accomplished, she returned once more to the bedroom, where Sylvia was putting the last touches to her packing.

“Nearly finished? That’s right, my dear. You have eight minutes still, and tea is waiting for you downstairs. Don’t trouble to tidy the room, I’ll attend to that after you have gone. All these things on the bed—they had better be packed away in the attics, I suppose. It’s a pity they were ever bought, as things have turned out. You may never need them now.”

“No, I may never need them now!” said Sylvia steadily. “In one minute, aunt, just one minute. You go down and pour out my tea, and I’ll follow immediately. I’ve just one thing more I want to do.”

“Don’t dawdle, then—don’t dawdle! Mary will fasten the straps—don’t wait for that.”

Miss Munns departed, unwillingly enough, and Sylvia shut the door after her, and gave a swift step back towards the bed. The satin dress, and the fan, and the gloves, and the jaunty little shoes lay there looking precisely the same as they had done an hour ago—the only difference was in the eyes which beheld them.

Sylvia had read of a bride who was buried in her wedding dress, and she felt at this moment as if she were leaving her own girlhood behind, with that mass of dainty white finery. What lay in the future she could not tell; only one thing seemed certain, that those few words on the slip of brown paper had made a great chasm of separation between it and the past. The opportunity for which she had longed was not to be hers; she must leave England without so much as a word of farewell to the friends who of late had filled such a large part of her life.

If her plans had been frustrated by one of the annoying little *contretemps* of daily life, Sylvia would have exhausted herself in lamentations and repinings, but she was dumb before this great catastrophe, which came so obviously from a higher Hand. When her father lay dying, there was no regret in her heart for a lost amusement, but this hurried departure might mean more—much more than the forfeiture of Esmeralda’s hospitality. She stretched out her hand, and smoothed the satin folds with a very tender touch.

“Good-bye!” she whispered softly, in the silence of the room. “Good-bye, Jack!”

Chapter Twenty Four.

Too Late.

Sylvia's journey was quiet and uneventful, and her companion was tactfully silent, leaving her at peace to think her own thoughts. As time passed by, the natural hopefulness of youth reasserted itself, and she began to think that she had been too hasty in taking it for granted that her father was hopelessly ill.

After all he had not despatched the telegram; it had been signed by his friends, the Nisbets, who, no doubt, were unwilling to accept a position of responsibility. When she arrived she would nurse him so devotedly, would surround him with such an atmosphere of love and care, that he could not help recovering and growing strong once more. He would be longing to see her, poor dear old dad, working himself into an invalid's nervous dread lest they might never meet again, as she herself had done a few months earlier, and the sight of his child would be his best medicine.

They left the train and took their places in the boat. It was a cloudless summer afternoon, and the white cliffs stood out in striking contrast to the blue sky and sea. What a change from the big grey city which even now was beginning to grow close and dusty, what a glorious open prospect for one who had been shut up for months in the confines of a narrow street, and yet Rutland Road had been far more beautiful to one voyager at least, for at that moment, exactly at that moment, as timed by the little watch at her wrist, Jack O'Shaughnessy would have turned the corner of the main road to saunter towards his own home.

Jack always sauntered, with the air of a gentleman at large who had never known the necessity of hurry. Sylvia had watched him many times from the shelter of her window curtains, and knew exactly how he would carry his head, and twirl his stick, and glance rapidly across the road as he unlatched the gate. Pixie would open the door and breathlessly unfold the news with which she had by this time been made acquainted, and how would Jack look then? Would the smile fade away, would he feel as if all zest and interest had departed from the evening entertainment, or would he make the best of things in happy O'Shaughnessy fashion and console himself in Mollie's smiles?

The breeze grew fresher and more chill, and the stars began to peep; the travellers had reached the shores of France; and far-away in London Esmeralda's guests were beginning to arrive, the carriages were jostling one another in the narrow street. Then came Paris, and a space for rest and refreshment before starting on the next stage of the journey.

Sylvia had hoped that a telegram might be waiting for her at this point, but none was forthcoming, and its absence was a bitter disappointment despite the old adage that no news is good news. She sat in the big deserted buffet, drinking bouillon and eating poulet and salad; and catching sight of her own pallid reflection in one of the mirrors, smiled feebly at the contrast between the present and the "might have been"! This white-faced, weary-looking girl was surely not the Sylvia Trevor whose day-dreams had woven such golden things about this very hour.

The lady courier engaged a sleeping compartment for the first stage of the long journey to Marseilles, but though it was a comfort to lie down and stretch her weary limbs, there was little sleep for Sylvia that night. She was up and gazing out of the window by six o'clock in the morning, and the day seemed endless despite the interest of the scenes through which she passed. "Through thy cornfields green, and sunny vines, O pleasant land of France."

The lines which she had read in her youth came back to memory as the train crossed the broad waters of the Loire and sped through valleys of grapes and olives, surrounded by hills of smiling green. The sun was hot in these southern plains, and the dust blew in clouds through the windows; it was a relief when evening fell again, and brought the end of the long journey.

Sylvia stepped on to the platform and looked around with eager gaze. Although she had never met her father's friends, she knew their appearance sufficiently well from photographs and descriptions to be able to distinguish them from strangers, but nowhere could she see either husband or wife. It was unkind to leave her unwelcomed and with no word to allay her anxiety, and she had hard work to keep back her tears as her companion ran about collecting the scattered pieces of luggage.

She was so tired mentally and physically that this last disappointment was too much for her endurance, and she thanked God that in a few minutes the strain would be over, and she would be seated by her father's side. They drove along the quaint, foreign streets, and presently arrived at the hotel itself, a large building set back in a courtyard in which visitors sat before little tables, smoking and drinking their after-dinner coffee.

They looked up curiously as Sylvia passed, but no one came forward to meet her, and the waiter gesticulated dumbly in answer to her questionings, and led the way upstairs without vouchsafing a word in reply. It was humiliating to think that her accent had so degenerated as to be unrecognisable in his ears, but there was no other explanation, and it was at least evident that she was expected, since he seemed in no doubt as to where to conduct her first. He turned down a corridor to the right, stopped at the second door, and threw it open, and Sylvia saw with surprise that it was not a bedroom, but a sitting-room, in which a lady and a gentleman were already seated.

The gentleman leapt to his feet, wheeled round and stood with his face to the window; the lady shrank back into her chair, then suddenly jumped up and ran forward with outstretched hands. It was Mrs Nisbet, though looking older and more worn than Sylvia had expected to see her, and nothing could have been kinder or more affectionate than her greeting.

"My dear child—my poor dear child, how tired you must be! You have had an awful journey. Come in, dear, and rest a few minutes while I will make some tea for you. English people always like tea, don't they? And I will make it myself, so that it shall be good. Come, dear, sit down! Let me take off your hat."

She stroked the girl's cheek with her hand—such a hot, trembling hand—and there was an odd, excited thrill in her voice which filled Sylvia with a vague alarm. She stepped back a step, and drew herself up straight and determined.

"Thank you very much, but I don't want any tea. I want to go at once to father. It has been such a long, long journey. I mustn't waste any more time!"

"No, no, but you are not ready just this moment. You must have something to strengthen you first. If you won't wait for tea, here is some wine. Drink a glass, dear, do. To please me!"

Sylvia stared at her fixedly, and from her to that other figure which stood motionless by the window without so much as a glance for his friend's child. A cold fear seized her in its grip, the room swam before her eyes, and out of the confusion she heard a weak voice saying brokenly, "Tell me quickly, please! It won't help me to drink wine. Father—"

Mrs Nisbet burst into a passion of tears, and clasped the girl tightly in her arms.

"You are too late, dear. An hour too late! We did everything we could. He left you his last love and blessing."

It was all over. The two long days of waiting, the last glimpse of dad's still face, the funeral in the foreign cemetery, and Sylvia sat alone in the hotel sitting-room, striving to recover sufficiently from the shock to decide on the next step which lay before her.

In the crushing weight of the new sorrow it seemed as if it were impossible to go on living at all, yet it was absolutely necessary to make her plans, for she could not be an indefinite burden on her father's friends. They had come home to enjoy a hard-earned rest, and as the holiday had begun so sadly there was all the more reason why the remainder should be passed under cheerful conditions. Mr and Mrs Nisbet had pressed the girl to spend the next few months travelling in their company, but Sylvia was resolute in her refusal.

"I should be a constant care to you, and a constant kill-joy, and that would be a poor return for all you have done for me," she said sadly. "It will comfort me all my life to remember that you were with dad during those last dreadful days, and some day I should like very much to visit you when I can be a pleasure instead of a burden. It does not seem now as if I could ever be happy again, but I suppose it will come in time."

"It will, if you trust in God and ask Him to help you. He sends troubles to teach us lessons, dear, and to draw our thoughts to Him, but never, never to make us miserable," said Mrs Nisbet softly. "You did not feel that you had lost your father when he was far-off in India, and he is a great deal nearer to you now in the spirit world. Never think of him as in the grave, think of him in heaven, and it will grow dear and home-like to you just because he is there. It would have grieved him to the heart to see your young life clouded, so you must try to be happy for his sake. I don't mean by that that you can be lively, or care for the old amusements; that can only come with time; but unhappiness comes from rebellion against God's will, and if you submit to that and leave your life in His hands, you will find that all the sting has gone out of your trouble."

The slow tears rose and stood in Sylvia's eyes.

"Thank you!" she said meekly. "I will try, but it's hard to be resigned when one is young, and all one's life seems shattered. I don't know what to do next. Every arrangement so far has been made, 'till dad comes home,' and now that hope has gone, and what am I to do? I have no home, and no work, and nobody needs me. Aunt Margaret would take me in, of course, but she would not like it as a permanency any more than I should myself. She has her own way, and I have mine, and we did not agree very well. She was very kind when she thought I was going away, but at the bottom of her heart she was glad. She doesn't need me, you see! I don't help her at all."

"But you could *make* her need you! You could help her if you went back determined to make it your work in life!"

Mrs Nisbet took the girl's hand in hers and pressed it gently, and Sylvia looked into her face with miserable, honest eyes.

"Yes—I could! I could shut my lips up tight and never answer back, and look interested when I was bored, and go little walks up and down the terrace, and play cribbage when I wanted to read, and read aloud dull books when I wanted to read lively ones to myself, and pretend to like what I really hate and detest."

"Poor lassie! It does sound dull. I'll tell you a secret, though. It would not be pretence very long, for it is one of the blessed recompenses in life that if we conquer self, and perform a duty whole-heartedly and cheerfully, it is distasteful no longer, but becomes more interesting than we could have believed possible in the old rebellious days."

"Does it? But I don't think I quite want to be satisfied with that kind of life," Sylvia said slowly. "I don't wish to seem disrespectful, but really and truly Aunt Margaret's ideas are terribly narrow and old-fashioned, and I shouldn't like it a bit if I were like her when I was old. I have managed pretty well so far, for I had nice friends, and was always looking forward to the time when I should have my own home, but don't you understand how different it is now, and how dreary it seems to settle down to it as a permanency?" She looked up wistfully in Mrs Nisbet's face, and met a smile of kindest understanding.

"But there is no necessity to grieve over the future, child! At your age arrangements are rarely 'permanent,' and you are concerned only with the next step. It seems for the moment as if it were the right course to return to London, so try to look upon the situation from a new standpoint, and face it bravely. Forget your aunt's shortcomings, and remember only that she is your father's only remaining relative, the playmate and companion of his youth, and that you are connected by a common sorrow and a common loss. Set yourself to brighten her life, and to fill it with wider interests; forget yourself, in short, and think about other people. When you have learned that lesson, dear, you will

have solved the great secret of life, and found the key to happiness and peace of mind."

"Yes," sighed Sylvia faintly. It sounded very sweet and very beautiful, but, oh, so terribly difficult to accomplish! If it had been a big thing, on great, heroic sacrifice which she was called upon to make, she could have braced herself to the effort, and have borne it with courage, but the little daily pin-pricks, the chafings of temper, the weariness of uncongenial companionship—these were the hardest test, the most cruel tax upon endurance.

Day after day, week after week, month after month, the same uneventful, monotonous existence—and suppose for one moment that Jack married Mollie Burrell, and Bridgie returned to her Irish home! Sylvia shivered and shut her eyes as at an unbearable prospect, and Mrs Nisbet's voice said softly in her ear—

"'I do not ask to see the distant scene. One step enough for me!' Take each day as it comes, dear, and try to live it bravely without thinking of to-morrow. We will travel with you as far as Paris, and have a few days together before you go on to London. I wish you would have stayed with us longer, but perhaps it will be better for us all to be apart for a time, and meet again later on. We shall be in London in autumn, and one of my first visits will be to you. Your father has been like a brother to my husband for years past, and we shall always feel a very close interest in your welfare.

"By the way, dear, how are you off for money? Would it be a convenience if I lent you some to pay for mourning and the return journey? You came away expecting to be responsible for a few days only, and, as you know, when a man dies it is not possible to touch his money until certain legal formalities have been observed. We should be only too delighted to act as your bankers until matters are settled."

"Thank you very much, but I think I shall have enough. I drew out what money was in the bank before leaving home, and I would rather not get into debt until I know exactly how I am placed. There may be very little left. Father always spoke as if he were poor."

"He told you nothing about his affairs, then? You know nothing about them?"

Mrs Nisbet looked at her curiously as she spoke, and Sylvia's heart gave a throb of fear. She knew something; there was evidently some secret with which she herself was unacquainted, and in her present depressed condition of mind and body it was only natural that she should leap to the conclusion that the news must be bad, and, ostrich-like, tried to hide her head in the sand.

"He told me there had been some changes lately, which I should not understand. His lawyers will write to me some time, I suppose, but I don't want to think about money yet. I have sufficient for the next few months, for I shall go nowhere, and need no more clothes."

"Yes, yes, dear! It's all right. You will get along nicely, I'm sure," said the other soothingly, and Sylvia felt another thrill of foreboding.

"Get along nicely!" Did that mean that she would have to earn her own living? She dared not inquire further, shrinking from the possibility of another blow, but it was impossible to keep from wondering what she should do if indeed there was no provision for her support.

Pixie's adventures in search of employment had proved how difficult it was for an inexperienced girl to escape becoming the prey of fraudulent advertisements, and it was humiliating to reflect on her own incapacity. What could she do that a thousand other girls could not accomplish equally well? She could play fairly well, sing fairly well, paint fairly well, trim a hat so that it did not look obviously home-made, make a trifle or creams, though she was densely ignorant about boiling a potato. She possessed, in fact, a smattering of many things, but had not really mastered one which, if needs be, would be a staff through life.

A hundred poor girls find themselves in this position every year, yet their short-sighted sisters continue to fritter away their time, oblivious of the fact that to them also may come the rainy day when they must face the world alone. Learn to do one thing *well*, compare your productions, whatever they may be, not with those of other amateurs, but with perfected professional specimens, and do not be content until your own reach the same standard. This is a golden rule, which every girl ought to take to heart.

During the ten days which elapsed before Sylvia's return to London, she was haunted by the fear of monetary troubles which would make her either dependent on her own efforts, or a burden upon her aunt's narrow income, but neither Mrs Nisbet nor her husband referred again to the subject, and some time must still elapse before she could hear from her father's lawyer in Colombo.

The week in Paris passed away quietly, but more pleasantly than she could have believed possible under the circumstances; for nothing could have been kinder or more considerate than the way in which she was treated by her father's friends, while the brilliant sunshine acted as a tonic to the spirits. Every day they went long drives in the Bois, or took the train to Versailles, and spent long quiet hours in the woods, and Sylvia even found herself able to enjoy a visit to one of the huge Magasins, where Mrs Nisbet invested in quite a collection of presents to send home to English friends. Sylvia was tempted to buy some on her own account, and it was a new and depressing experience to feel that she must not spend an unnecessary penny. Her little hoard was diminishing rapidly, and she was growing more and more anxious to be safest home, and free from at least immediate anxiety.

There was no lady courier to accompany her on this journey, for the days of independence had begun, and she preferred to be alone to wrestle with her forebodings, and try to bring herself into a fitting frame of mind for that trying return to the old scenes.

The parting from the Nisbets was like saying good-bye once more to the dear dad, and she felt hopelessly adrift

without their wise and tender counsels, and the feeling of loneliness grew ever deeper and deeper as she approached the English shores.

The great shock through which she had passed had loosened all the ties in life, and made the friends of a few weeks ago seem but the merest of acquaintances. Bridgie had written the sweetest of sympathetic letters, but sorry though she might be, the force of circumstances kept the two girls so far apart, that what had been the saddest time in her friend's life had seen the climax of her own gaiety. She had been dancing, and singing, and pleasure making while Sylvia shed the bitter tears of bereavement, and in a few weeks more she would be spirited off in Esmeralda's train to another scene of gaiety. The O'Shaughnessys were by nature so light of heart that they might not care to welcome among them a black-robed figure of grief!

Sylvia felt as though the whole wide world yawned between her and the old interests, and did not yet realise that this feeling of aloofness from the world and its interests is one of the invariable accompaniments of grief. She was young and not given to serious reflection, and she knew only that she was tired and miserable, that the white cliffs about which she had been accustomed to speak with patriotic fervour, looked bleak and cheerless in the light of a wet and chilly evening.

June though it was, she was glad to wrap herself in her cloak, and pull her umbrella over her head as she passed down the gangway on to the stage. In Paris it had been a glorious summer day, and the change to wet and gloom seemed typical of the home-coming before her. The cloaked and mackintoshed figures on the stage seemed all black, all the same. She would not look at them lest their presence should make her realise more keenly her own loneliness; but someone came up beside her as she struggled through the crowd, and forcibly lifted the bag from her hand. She turned in alarm and saw a man's tall figure, lifted her eyes, and felt her troubles and anxieties drop from her like a cloak.

It was Jack O'Shaughnessy himself!

Chapter Twenty Five.

A Comforter.

Think of it! Think of it! The grey, inhospitable skies, the rain-swept stage, the feeling of hopeless loneliness, as one traveller after another was greeted with loving exclamations, and borne away by friendly watchers; and then suddenly to feel your hand grasped, and laid tenderly on a protecting arm, and to see, looking into your own, the face of all others which you would have wished for, had the choice been given! To feel no longer a helpless unit, belonging to no one, and having no corner of the earth to call your own, but to know that someone had watched for your arrival, and to read how you had been missed, in the flash of eloquent eyes.

"Oh, Jack!" cried Sylvia involuntarily; "oh, Jack!" and clung to his arm with a sob of pure joy and thanksgiving. "Oh, I'm so glad! I was so lonely. How did you—whatever made you come?"

"A great many reasons, but principally because I couldn't stay away!" replied Jack, not smiling as was his wont, but looking down upon her with an intent scrutiny, which aroused Sylvia's curiosity. She did not realise how changed she was by the experience of the last few weeks, or what a pathetic little face it was which looked up at him between the dead black of hat and cape.

The brown eyes looked bigger than ever, the delicate aquiline of the features showed all the more distinctly for their sharpened pallor, and Jack looked down at her through the mist, and thanked God for the health and strength which made him a fitting protector for her weakness. The sound of that involuntary "Oh, Jack!" rang sweetly in his ears, and gave a greater confidence to his manner, as he steered her through the crowd.

"Miss Munns told us when you were expected, and we talked of meeting you at the station, but I decided that I had better stay away; then I wrote a letter to welcome you, and tore it up; then for no purpose at all I began looking at Bradshaw, and it seemed there was a train which I could catch. And it rained! It's dismal arriving in the rain. Next thing I knew I was in the station, and the train started when I was sitting inside, and—here I am!"

Sylvia laughed softly, it was such an age since she had laughed, and it was such a happy, contented little sound that she was quite startled thereat. The custom-house officials were going through the farce of examining the luggage, and while the rest of the passengers groaned and lamented at the delay, Jack and his companion stood together in the background, blissfully unconscious of time and damp.

"Are you glad to see me, Sylvia?" he asked, for the joy of hearing her say in words what voice and eyes had already proclaimed; and she waved her hand round the bleak landscape, and said tersely—

"Look! It felt like that; black and empty, and heart-breaking, and all the others seemed to have friends—everyone but me. I think I was never so glad before. I shall bless you for coming all my life!"

Jack laughed softly, and pressed her hand against his arm. "Poor little girl! I knew just how you would be feeling; that's why I came. Wouldn't you have come to meet me, if you had been the man and I the girl?"

"Yes, to the ends of the earth!" Sylvia replied, but not with her lips, for there are some things which a self-respecting girl may not say, however much she may feel them. Instead she murmured a few non-committal phrases, and gave the conversation a less personal tone, by inquiring after the various friends at home—Miss Munns, Bridgie, Pixie and the boys, and Jack answered in his usual breezy fashion, relating little incidents which made Sylvia smile with the old happy sense of friendship, repeating loving speeches, which brought the grateful tears to her eyes. The world was

not empty after all, while she possessed such faithful, loving friends.

When the luggage had passed the inspection of the custom-house and received the magic mark in chalk, Jack led the way down the platform, before which the train was already drawn up, and passed by one carriage after another, until at last an empty compartment was discovered, of which he immediately took possession.

“Now we can talk!” he said, and sat himself down opposite Sylvia, looking at her with compassionate eyes.

“I have gone through it myself,” he said. “Tell me all you can.”

And as the train steamed onward, Sylvia told the story of the past weeks, told it quietly, and without breakdown, though the dark eyes grew moist, and tears trembled on the lashes which looked so long and black against the white cheeks. It was a comfort to tell it all to one who understood, and was full of sympathy and kindness, and strange though it might seem, separation, instead of widening the distance between Jack and herself, had only drawn them more closely together.

The old formalities of intercourse had dropped like a cloak at the first moment of meeting; they were no longer Miss and Mr, but “Jack” and “Sylvia”; no longer acquaintances, but dear and intimate friends.

“Miss Munns has been terribly distressed,” Jack said, when at last the sad recital came to an end. “She loved your father more than anyone in the world, and you come next as his child. Poor old lady! it was quite pathetic to see her efforts to make your home-coming as cheerful as possible. Bridgie says she has put up clean curtains all over the house, and discussed the menu for supper for the last week. It’s her way of showing sympathy, the creature! and you understand better than myself all that it means. Different people have different ways, haven’t they, Sylvia? *I* came to Dover!”

“Yes!” assented Sylvia, with a flickering smile. “You came to Dover, and Aunt Margaret put up clean curtains, and ordered a roast fowl for supper—I know it will be a roast fowl!—and if you had not warned me in time, I should probably have said I could not eat anything, and gone to bed supperless, without even noticing the curtains. I am afraid I have been horrid to the poor old soul in that sort of way many times in the last two years. It is good of her to take such trouble, because, honestly speaking, she won’t be any more pleased to have me back as a permanency than I am to come. We have mutually comforted ourselves with the reflection that it was ‘only for a time,’ but now it is different. I want to be good—I have made, oh! such a crowd of good resolutions, but I don’t know how long they will last!”

Jack looked down at his boots, and drew his brows together thoughtfully.

“You—er—it’s too early, I suppose, to have made any plans for the future. You hardly know what you will do?”

“No: my natural home is, of course, with Aunt Margaret as father’s sister, but there are other considerations.” Sylvia hesitated a moment, then added impetuously—it seemed so natural to confide in Jack!—“About money, I mean. I don’t know what I have, or if I have anything at all. Father always said he was poor, though he seemed to have enough for what he wanted, and to give me all I asked. Perhaps he made enough to keep us, but had nothing to leave behind. Mrs Nisbet just referred to the subject one evening, and I could see from her manner that there was something I did not know, so I turned the conversation at once. I had had so much trouble that I felt as if I simply could not bear any more bad news just then, and would rather remain in ignorance as long as possible. It was weak, perhaps, but—can’t you understand the feeling?”

“Me name’s O’Shaughnessy!” said Jack simply. “We never face a disagreeable fact until it comes so close that we hit ourselves against it. I’m sorry; but don’t worry more than you can help. I’ve been short of money all my life, but I don’t know anyone who has had a better time. So long as you have youth and health, what does it matter whether you are rich or poor? It’s all in the way you look at things. For useful purposes, most people can make their money go farther than mine, but for sheer fun and enjoyment I’ll back my half-crown against another fellow’s sovereign!”

“Ah, but you’re Irish! You have the happy temperament which can throw off troubles and forget all about them for the time being. They sit right down upon my shoulders—little black imps of care, and anxiety, and quaking fears, and press so heavily that I can remember nothing else. Perhaps I could be philosophical too, if I were one of a big, happy family—but when one is all alone—”

“All alone—when I’m here! How can you be all alone, when there are two of ye!” cried Jack impulsively.

He had resolved, not once, but a hundred times over, that he would speak no words but those of friendship; that no temptation, however strong, should make him break his vow of silence; but some impulses seem independent of thought. He did not know what he was going to do, he was conscious of no mental prompting, but one moment he was quietly sitting in his corner opposite Sylvia, and the next he was seated beside her, with both arms wrapped tightly round her trembling figure, and she was shedding tears of mingled sorrow and happiness upon his shoulder.

“I’ve been in love with you ever since the first evening you came to our house. Before that! Ever since I saw you sitting up at your window in your little red jacket. You knew it, didn’t you? You found that out for yourself?”

“No—Yes! Sometimes. Only I thought—I was afraid it couldn’t be true, and there was—Mollie!” faltered Sylvia incoherently, hardly knowing what she was saying, conscious of nothing but an overwhelming sense of content and well-being, as the strong arm supported her tired back, and the big, tender finger wiped away her tears.

Jack laughed at the suggestion, but did not indulge in the depreciatory remarks concerning Miss Burrell which many men would have used under the circumstances.

“Good old Mollie!” he said. “She’s a broth of a girl, but I would as soon think of marrying Bridgie herself. She was my confidante, bless her, and cheered me up when I was down on my luck. You might have noticed how interested she was in you that night at Esmeralda’s crush!”

At that Sylvia opened her eyes wide, with a sudden unpleasant recollection.

“What will Esmeralda think? Oh, Jack, what will she say?”

“Plenty, my dear! You may be sure of that,” replied Jack, laughing; then he, too, gave a little start of surprise, and, straightening himself, held Sylvia from him at the length of his strong young arms. “I say—what’s this? You little witch, what have you done to me? I had made a solemn vow not to speak a word of love-making, and it seems to me I have broken it pretty successfully. Have I been making love to you, Sylvia—have I?”

It was a very charming little face that laughed back at him, pale no longer, but flushed to a delicate pink, the dark eyes a-sparkle with happiness, and a tinge of the old mischievous spirit.

“Yes, you have! Do you want to draw back?”

Jack’s answer was wordless but convincing, but the next moment he sobered, and said in that charming way of his, which was at once so manly and so boyish, “But I didn’t want to bind you, I spoke only for myself. I am your property, darling, and your slave to command, but I can’t ask you to marry me yet awhile, for I’ve the children on my hands, and until they are settled I can’t think of myself. I am the head of the house, and must do what I can for them, poor creatures.

“Pat will be off to the Agricultural College next term, and then back to Ireland to do agent’s work; Miles is doing well in the city, but can’t keep himself for several years to come; and then there are the girls. I had no right to speak as I did; it wasn’t fair to you. I won’t bind you down to a long, uncertain engagement. You must feel yourself free, perfectly free.”

“I don’t want to be free! I like to be bound—to you, Jack!” Sylvia said firmly. “I’m so thankful that you did speak, for it makes just all the difference in my life. I am young, and can wait quite happily and contentedly, so long as I know that you care, and can look forward—”

Sylvia stopped short, awed at the prospect of happiness which had suddenly opened before her, and Jack was silent too, holding her hand in a close pressure. His face was very tender, but troubled through all its tenderness, and when he spoke again, it was in very anxious accents.

“But are you contented to leave it a secret, darling, a secret between you and me? You see, if Bridgie knew we were waiting, she’d know no peace, feeling that she was in our way, and the young ones would get the same fancy, and be wanting to turn out before they were ready. They have no one but me, and I couldn’t have them feeling upset in their own home. That was why I determined to keep silent, and it’s bad of me to have broken my vow, but it’s your own fault, darling! I couldn’t be with you again, and keep quiet. Do you care for me enough to wait perhaps for years before we can even be publicly engaged?”

Sylvia smiled at him bravely, but her heart sank a little, poor girl, as it was only natural it should do. A girl is by nature much quicker than a man projecting herself into the future, and in realising all that is involved.

Jack was conscious only of a general regret that he could not claim his bride before the world, but Sylvia saw in a flash the impossibility of frequent meetings, the minute chance of *tête-à-têtes*, the quicksands in the shape of misunderstandings, which must needs attend so unnatural a position. On the other hand, she honoured Jack the more for his loyalty to his home duties, and agreed with the wisdom of his decision.

“Yes, Jack, I do. I’d like to wait. I love Bridgie with all my heart, and could not bear her to suffer through me. It shall be exactly as you think best for them in every way.”

Jack bent and kissed her, even more tenderly than before.

“My little helpmeet!” he said, and Sylvia found her best reward in the sound of that word, and the knowledge that she was strengthening him in the right path. Surely it was the best guarantee for the happiness of their new relationship, that it was inaugurated in a spirit of self-sacrifice and care for others.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Reminiscences.

Bridgie was not waiting at the station. “She heard me saying that I might be here myself, and maybe remembered that two are company,” said Jack, with a laugh.

But when Rutland Road was reached someone stood waiting to open the door of the cab and welcome the wanderer in the sweetest tones of a sweet contralto voice. She said only a few words, but with true Irish tact chose just the ones which were most comforting under the circumstances.

“Welcome back, dear. I’ve missed you badly. So have we all.” Then she looked at Jack, and smiled as if his presence were the most natural thing in the world. “You have brought her home safely. That’s right,” she said. It was one of Bridgie’s most lovable qualities that she never asked awkward questions, nor showed undue curiosity about the affairs of others.

Brother and sister said good-bye at the door, leaving aunt and niece alone, and, as the door closed behind them, Sylvia felt a spasm of loneliness and regret. It was hard to part from Jack with that formal shake of the hand, to feel that days might elapse before they met again, and, as she looked round the ugly little dining-room, she felt like a prisoned bird which longs to break loose the bars and fly to its mate.

It seemed impossible to settle down to the old monotonous life, and yet—and yet—how much, much worse it might have been! How thankful she ought to be! If one hope had been taken away, another had been granted in its stead. The path ahead was still bright with promise, and a sudden pity seized her for the woman whose youth was gone, and who had lost the last tie to the past. She returned her aunt's kisses with unusual affection, and roused herself to notice and show appreciation of the efforts which had been made on her behalf.

The table was laid with the best china, the red satin tea-cosy had been brought from its hiding-place upstairs and divested of its muslin bag and holland wrappings; the centre mat presented by Cousin Mary Ferguson two Christmases ago was displayed for the first time; the serviettes were folded into rakish imitations of cocked hats.

It was half touching, half gruesome, to find the occasion turned into a *fête*, but Sylvia was determined to be amiable, and said gratefully—

"How kind of you to have supper ready for me, Aunt Margaret! I could not eat anything on the boat, but now I believe I am hungry. It all looks very good. The chickens one gets in France are not the least like the ones at home."

"They don't know how to feed them, my dear. I am glad you have an appetite. I always find that when I am in trouble nothing tempts me so much as a cup of tea and a slice off the breast. Just take off your hat, and sit down as you are. Everything is ready."

Miss Munns was evidently gratified to receive an acknowledgment of her efforts, and insisted upon waiting upon her niece and loading her plate with one good thing after another; but after the meal was over there followed a painful half-hour, when Sylvia had to submit to a searching cross-questioning on the events of the past weeks.

Unlike Bridgie, Miss Munns insisted upon detail—had a ghoulish curiosity to know in exactly what words Mrs Nisbet had broken the sad news, in exactly what words Sylvia had replied, in exactly what manner the first black days had been spent. Her spectacles were dimmed with tears as she listened to what the girl had to tell, and her thin lips quivered with genuine grief; but she was still acutely interested to hear of the number of carriages at the funeral, of the meals in the hotel, and the purchase of Sylvia's mourning garments.

"You must show them to me to-morrow. I expect they are very smart—coming from France. I always wear black, so there was not much to be done. I had the black satin taken off my cashmere dress, and folds of crape put in its place, and some dull trimming, instead of jet, on my cape. I haven't decided about my bonnet. You must give me your advice. Of course, I wish to do everything that is proper, but it's been an expensive year."

"Yes," assented Sylvia absently. She rose from her seat and, walking across the room, leant her elbow on the mantelpiece. There was something she wanted to say, and it was easier to say it with averted face. "Aunt Margaret, I want to ask you a question. Please tell me the truth. Shall I have any money? Was father able to provide for me? I know you are not well off, and I could not bear to be a burden to you. If I have no money of my own, I must try to earn some."

"I should be telling you the truth, my dear, if I said that I knew less about it than you do yourself. Your father was very close about business matters—very close indeed. He was supposed to have a good business a few years ago, and was always very handsome in his ways, but he has grumbled a good deal of late, and I don't know how things will be now he is gone. He had a lawsuit with an old partner in Ceylon, which hung on a long time. I don't know if it is settled yet; and, if not, we shall have to let it drop. You can always have a home with me; but there will be nothing to spare for lawyers' expenses. Give me a bird in the hand, as I said to your father the last time he was home.

"If the worst comes to the worst, you can give some music lessons in the neighbourhood. Mrs Burton was telling me on Monday that her little boy has quite a taste—picks out all the barrel-organ tunes on the piano with one finger. You might get him as a beginning."

"Yes," assented Sylvia faintly; and to herself she cried, "Oh, Jack dear—how good of you to love me! How good of you to give me something to live for! How dreadful, dreadful, dreadful I should be feeling now if you had not met me, and made the whole world different!"

Miss Munns was watching her anxiously, fearing a burst of tears, and was greatly relieved when she turned round and showed a composed and even smiling face. "I'll find some work if it is necessary, auntie; and I'll try to help you too. You have been very good to me, and I'm afraid I have been rather horrid sometimes. I thought of it when I was away, and determined to make a fresh start if you would forgive me this time. We are the only two left, and we ought to love each other."

"I am sure I am very much attached to you, my dear. I was saying so to Miss O'Shaughnessy only to-day. I don't deny that your manner is rather sharp at times, but there's nothing like trouble for taming the spirits. I shouldn't wonder if we got along much more happily after this. Miss Bridgie brought a little parcel for you—I mustn't forget that. It is on that little table. She told me to give it to you at once."

"What can it be, I wonder?—something I left over there by mistake, I suppose," Sylvia said listlessly, as she unfolded the paper; but her expression altered the next moment as she beheld a flat leather case, inside which reposed a miniature painting of the same face which used to smile upon her from her own chimney-piece.

Surprise held her speechless, while a quick rush of tears testified more eloquently than words to the faithfulness of

the portrait. The painting was exquisitely fine and soft, the setting the perfection of good taste in its handsome severity. It seemed at the moment just the greatest treasure which the world could offer. Who could have sent it?

Sylvia reluctantly handed the case for Miss Munns's curious scrutiny, the while she opened the note which had fallen from the paper. Bridgie's handwriting confronted her; but she had hardly time to marvel how so costly a gift could come from such an impecunious donor, before surprise number two confronted her in the opening words.

"Esmeralda told me to give you this miniature from myself, but I want you to know that it is entirely her idea and present from the beginning. As soon as she heard your sad news, she asked me to borrow the best photograph of your father, to be copied by the same artist who painted the Major for her. She has been to see how he was getting on almost every day, till the poor man was thankful to finish it, just to be rid of her, and here it is to welcome you, dear, and, we hope, to be a comfort to you, all your life."

"Esmeralda!" echoed Sylvia blankly. It seemed for a moment as if Bridgie must be romancing, for the staid English mind refused to believe that one who had at one time appeared actively antagonistic, and at the best had shown nothing warmer than a lofty tolerance, should suddenly become the most thoughtful and generous of friends. Yet there it was, specified in black and white. Esmeralda had originated the kindly plan; she had engaged no second-rate artist, but one to whom her own work had been entrusted, and had given freely of what was even more value to her than money, her time, in order that the gift should arrive at the right moment.

Sylvia flushed with a gratification which was twofold in its nature, for here at last seemed an opening of drawing near in heart to that beautiful, baffling personality, who was Jack's sister, and might some day—oh, wonderful thought!—be her own also. It would be a triumph, indeed, if in these days of waiting she could overcome the last lingering prejudice, and feel that there would be no dissentient note when at last the great secret was revealed.

Aunt and niece hung together over the case with its precious contents, the one exhausting herself in expressions of gratitude and appreciation, the other equally delighted, but quite unable to resist looking the gift horse in the mouth, and speculating in awed tones concerning the enormous cost of ivory miniatures. That jarred, but on the whole the evening passed more pleasantly than Sylvia could have believed possible, the unexpected excitement breaking the thread of that painful cross-examination, and carrying the old lady's thoughts back to the far-off days when she and her brother had been sworn friends and playmates.

"Tell me what you used to do, auntie! It must be so nice to have someone to play with. Do tell me some of your escapades!" she pleaded wistfully, and Miss Munns shook her head, and assumed a great air of disapproval, though it was easy to see that she cherished a secret pride in the remembrance of her own audacities.

"I am afraid we were very naughty, thankless children. One day, I remember, Teddy, as we used to call him, had been very rightly punished for disobedience, and he confided in me that he intended to run away, and go to sea, as a cabin-boy. We always did everything together in those days, so of course nothing must suit me but I must go too. We got up early the next morning, and ran out into the garden, where we were allowed to play before breakfast, and then slipped out of the side door, to walk to Portsmouth.

"Portsmouth was eighteen miles away, and I was only six, and before we had walked two miles, I was crying with fatigue and hunger. Teddy had brought some bread-and-butter, so we sat under a hedge to eat it, and he told me we must be very nearly there. Just then up came a tramp, and stopped to ask why we were crying, and what we were doing out there in the road at that hour in the morning. 'We are going to Portsmouth to be cabin-boys,' we told him, and I can remember to this day how he laughed. 'If you are going to be cabin-boys, you won't want those clothes,' he said. 'You had better take them off, and give them to me, to change for proper sailor things.'

"We thought that a splendid idea, so he took Teddy's suit, and my frock and hat, and left us shivering under the hedge waiting his return. Of course he never came, and an hour or two later, my father came driving along to look for us, and we were taken home, and punished as we deserved. That is to say, Teddy was whipped, and I was only put to bed, for he insisted that the idea was his, and that he alone was to blame."

"Nice little Teddy!" murmured Sylvia fondly, looking down at the pictured face, which, despite grey hair and wrinkles, had still the gallant air of the little boy who shielded his sister from blame.

Having once started, Miss Munns told one story after another of her childhood's days; of the lessons which brother and sister used to learn together—a whole page of Mangnall's Questions at a time, and of the dire and terrible conspiracy, by which they learnt alternate answers, easily persuading the docile governess to take the right "turns." Thus Teddy, when asked "What is starch?" could reply with prompt accuracy, while remaining in dense ignorance of the date when printing was introduced into England, concerning which his small sister was so well informed.

Sylvia was told of the books which were read and re-read, until the pages came loose from their bindings; of the thrilling adventures of one Masterman Ready, whose stockade, being besieged by savages, it became an immediate necessity to guard the gate at the head of the nursery stairs, and to hurl a succession of broken toys at the innocent nurse, as she forced an entry; of a misguided and stubborn "Rosamond" who expended her savings on a large purple vase from a chemist's window, and found to her chagrin that when the water was poured away, it was only a plain glass bottle; and of a certain "Leila," who sojourned on a desert island in the utmost comfort and luxury, being possessed of a clever father who found all that he needed on the trees in the forest.

An hour later, when Sylvia went up to her room, it was impossible to resist drawing aside the blind to look across the road, and in an instant, another blind was pulled back, and a tall dark figure stood clearly outlined against the lighted background.

Sylvia understood that Jack had been watching for her advent, and felt comforted by his presence, and all that was meant by that waving hand. She wondered whether she had better write to Esmeralda, or try to see her in person,

but the question was decided by Pixie, who came over early the next morning to announce Mrs Hilliard's arrival in the afternoon.

"She wants to see you, and say she's sorry," she explained, and when Sylvia exhausted herself in expressions of gratitude and delight, "Oh, Esmeralda would give you her skin if it would fit ye!" she said coolly. "She's the kindest of us all when she isn't cross. Give her her way, and you may have all the rest. I've known her raise the roof on us, and appealing to every relation we owned, to get what she wanted, and then wrap it up in brown paper that very day, and post it back where it came. I'm glad ye like it so much. Now if I'd been clever, and bought some more paints when those people wanted me, maybe I could have done it for you meself." Her face grew suddenly grave and wistful.

"When I got my telegram at school, the girls all brought me home presents from the walk—pencil-boxes, and jujubes, and a little toy rabbit that wagged its head. I don't know how it was, but they soothed my feelings! I should have liked to buy you something, Sylvia, but I don't get my wages till the end of the month, and then they are spent. You'll excuse me, won't you, me dear, for you know I am sorry!"

"My darling girl, I don't want presents! Come to see me as often as you can, and go on being fond of me—that's all I want," cried Sylvia warmly, and Pixie brightened once more.

"There's no credit in that. It isn't as if you were nasty. I'll not be able to call on ye as often as I'd like, for I'm off to the seaside. Mrs Wallace has taken a house on the Thames, and her cousin is coming home from the wars and a friend with him, and lots of ladies and gentlemen all staying in the house to be entertained, so they want me to go too. Of course!"

"Of course," repeated Sylvia gravely. There was something so charming in Pixie's simple assumption that everyone desired her company, that she would not for the world have tried to destroy it. "I hope you will enjoy yourself very much, dear, and come back with some colour in your cheeks, though I am afraid that particular part of the 'seaside' is not very bracing. Tell Mrs Hilliard with my love that I shall be charmed to see her this afternoon!"

Chapter Twenty Seven.

Esmeralda's Visit.

Miss Munns was greatly excited to hear of the expected visit, and busied herself taking the holland covers off the drawing-room chairs, and displaying the best antimacassars in the most advantageous position.

Sylvia longed to introduce a little disorder into the painful severity of the room, but it would have distressed her aunt if she had moved a chair out of the straight, or confiscated one of the books which were ranged at equal distances round the rosewood table, and, as it was one of her resolves not to interfere with domestic arrangements, she shrugged her shoulders resignedly, and hoped that Esmeralda might be as unnoticing of her surroundings as were her brothers and sisters.

At four o'clock a carriage drove up to the door, and Esmeralda alighted, clad from head to foot in black, as Sylvia noticed at the first quick glance. She was waiting in the little drawing-room, and scarcely was the door opened when the tall figure was at her side, and her hands were crushed with affectionate fervour. She looked up, and was startled by the beauty of the face above her, startled as even Esmeralda's brothers and sisters were at times, when as now the grey eyes were misty with tears, and the lips all sweet and tremulous.

"If I'd known—if I'd had the slightest idea he was ill, I would rather have killed myself than have behaved as I did! Oh, don't pretend you didn't notice! I was hateful to you when you were ill, too, poor creature, and my sister's guest. I told Geoff all about it. I hate telling him when I do wrong, so I did it just as a penance, and he was so vexed with me. Do you know why I spoke as I did? Did you guess the reason?"

Sylvia shrank into herself with an uneasy foreboding, for Esmeralda was an impetuous creature, who might be expected to be as undisguised in her penitence as in offence.

"Oh, please don't say anything more about it!" she cried hurriedly. "It was very trying for you finding me there when you came over for a visit. I have forgotten all about it, if there is anything to forget; and now there's this lovely miniature. How can I thank you?"

"Oh, that is nothing—that's nothing!" cried Esmeralda, waving aside the subject, and insisting upon a full confession of her fault. "I was jealous of you—that is what it was—jealous because they all seemed so fond of you, and I wanted their attention for myself. It was horribly mean, because I have Geoff and the boy, and it is only natural that they should want their own interests.

"I daresay Pixie has told you how father spoiled me all my life, and Bridgie gave way to me until it seemed natural to think first of myself. But I don't now. I think of Geoffrey and the boy, and I'm trying to be better for their sake. Geoff says he got me only just in time. He is rather stern with me sometimes, do you know. He doesn't say much—perhaps I don't give him the chance—but his face sets, and his eyes are so large and grave. I can't bear it when he looks at me like that, because, as a rule, you know,"—she gave a soft, happy little laugh—"he loves me so frightfully much, and we are so happy together. I ought to want every girl to be as happy as I am, and I do—really I do.

"In a month or two, when we are home at Knock, will you come and stay with me, Sylvia, and learn to be fond of me too? I'm rather lonely over there now that all the others have left, and I have not many girl-friends. The one I cared for most will be engaged soon, I think, and the man lives abroad, so she may be leaving the neighbourhood. It is not settled yet, but I think Mrs Burrell will give in."

She stared ostentatiously through the window, and Sylvia blushed, and had some ado not to smile at this very transparent intimation of hostility withdrawn.

“Thank you so much! I’d love to come,” she said simply; and then the two girls talked quietly together for a few minutes before Miss Munns came in and dispensed tea and reminiscences of all the grand people whom she had ever met, with a view of impressing her visitor, who, of course, was not impressed at all, but secretly amused, as listeners invariably are under such circumstances.

Esmeralda was just rising to leave when a loud rat-tat at the knocker made Sylvia’s heart leap in expectation; and the next moment Jack came into the room in his most easy and assured manner.

“I thought I would come across for my sister, and inquire how Miss Trevor was after her journey,” he announced; and once more Sylvia smiled to herself as she noted how Esmeralda immediately plunged into animated conversation with Miss Munns, to keep her attention engrossed at the opposite end of the room.

Jack O’Shaughnessy stood by the window, and looked down upon his little love with tender, dissatisfied eyes.

“I say,” he said softly, “I can’t stand this sort of thing! Two minutes’ talk, with two other people in the room. How much longer do you suppose I can stand this?”

“You have had only one day yet. It’s too soon to complain. You may have seven years!” retorted Sylvia saucily; but at the bottom of her heart she was glad that he found it difficult to be patient.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

By the River.

Pixie went off in great spirits to join the Wallaces at the riverside cottage which they had rented for the remainder of the summer. The heat in town was already growing oppressive, and it was delightful to think of being in the country again and running free over the dear green fields. Esmeralda had presented her with quite a trousseau of summer dresses, with a selection of hair-ribbons to match, at least an inch wider than any which she had previously possessed, and she piled up her pompadour higher than ever, and pulled out the bows to their farthest extent in her anxiety to do justice to the occasion, and the importance of her own position as the instructor of youth.

A pony-cart was at the station to meet her, with Viva and Inda clinging together on the front seat, ready to pour breathless confidences into her ear the moment she appeared. They spoke with a curious mingling of tongues, but had apparently no difficulty in understanding her when she replied in rapid, colloquial French, so that it was evident that the hours of play had not been wasted, but had the effect of successful study.

“Mamzelle! Mamzelle Paddy, we have boats in our house!” cried Viva eagerly. “Three boats with cushions, and a punt, and one with a funnel in the miggle. And Cousin Jim takes us out with the ’nother gentleman, and we splash with our hands, and the lady was cross because of her sash, and she dried it in the sun. And there’s tea in the garden, and a big steamer that makes waves, and muzzer says if we are very good you will play with us at being gipsies under the wheel-barrow.”

“An’ we got in a box, and the water went up, an’ up, an’ up, an’ then it went down, an’ down, an’ down, an’ then we came home,” contributed fat little Inda in her deep, gurgling voice, and Pixie turned from one to the other and cried, “Vraiment!” “Sans doute!” “Bravo!” and beamed in delighted expectation.

The house-party were assembled on the lawn drinking tea when the pony-carriage turned in at the gate, and Pixie looked round with sparkling eyes, quite dazzled by the beauty of the scene. The narrow road, running at the back of the houses, had been dull and uninteresting, but before many yards of the drive had been traversed, there came a view over the wide sunlit river, and beyond it green meadows stretching away as far as the eye could reach.

The house was not a cottage after all, but quite a large, imposing-looking house, and the lawn sloping to the river bank was smooth and soft as velvet. Baskets of flowers hung from the verandah; picturesque stumps of trees were hollowed out to receive pots of geraniums; a red and white awning shaded the tea-table; and the wicker chairs were plentifully supplied with scarlet cushions. It was Pixie’s first peep at the summer glories of the river, and she felt as if she had stepped into fairyland itself.

The little girls seized her hands and dragged her in triumph across the lawn, and Mrs Wallace looked round, and said smilingly to her friends—

“Here’s my French governess—the latest addition to the household. What do you think of my choice?”

“Governess! That girl! She looks a child herself. Edith, what nonsense are you talking?”

“Sense, my dear, I assure you. The wisest thing I ever did, as you will see before many hours are past. We shall have some peace now that she has arrived. Bon jour, Mamzelle. How I am happy to see thee again! Thou are not fatigued —no? Seat thyself in this chair, and I will make known to thee my friends.”

She spoke in French, and evidently wished her governess to appear as French on this occasion at least; and Pixie rose to the occasion, sweeping elaborate bows from side to side, unconsciously elevating her shoulders, and waving expressive hands. She discoursed volubly about her long and adventurous journey of three-quarters of an hour’s duration, and Mrs Wallace’s guests looked on with smiling faces, putting an occasional laborious question as she appeared to be reaching the end of her story.

There were several ladies, all young and pretty and beautifully dressed, and three strange men, including Cousin Jim and his soldier friend from India. Cousin Jim had bright, twinkling eyes, and looked full of life and spirit; but his friend's brown face was lined and haggard, and his smile was half-hearted, as if his thoughts were not in the present.

Pixie noticed, however, that it was to his side that little Inda crept for support, and that his disengaged hand softly stroked the child's head from time to time, as if he found comfort in her presence. Such good friends did they appear that after the meal was finished she refused to be separated from him, and implored his company in the gipsy tent in the paddock. Mrs Wallace protested, but the young fellow declared that he enjoyed being victimised, and walked off with the schoolroom party with the utmost good humour.

"But I can't speak French, Viva," he explained—"not well enough to be able to converse with Mademoiselle, at least! You must explain to her that I am only a stupid Englishman, and ask her to excuse me. You can translate that for me, I suppose?"

"She's not French either; she's only pitending. She's only English the same as me," protested Viva sturdily; and Pixie nodded at him with complacent smiles.

"But I've lived abroad; so I speak it to them for their good. You've been away too, haven't you? I hope you enjoyed yourself?"

He smiled, but it was rather a sad little smile, despite its amusement. "I went for work, you know, not pleasure. We accomplished what there was to do, which was satisfactory; but I can't honestly say I enjoyed it."

"I hate work!" agreed Pixie sympathetically. "We all do; it's in the family. 'Never do to-day what you can put off till to-morrow,' my brother used to tell me, for you never know what may happen, and you may get out of it altogether if you wait. But if we are obliged to do it, we pretend we like it, for it's so dull to be unhappy. And if it was horrid abroad, it makes it all the nicer to come back, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes," he said shortly.

They had reached the gipsy encampment by this time, and were peremptorily commanded to sit down on a bench pending certain important preparations under the wheel-barrow; so he took possession of one corner, and Pixie took the other and stared at him with unabashed scrutiny. He was unhappy, she decided, and that was enough to enlist her whole-hearted sympathy; but besides being unhappy, he was very good to look upon, with his bronzed skin, well-cut features, and soldierly bearing. She admired him immensely; and the admiration was mutual, though of a different nature.

She was a quaint-looking little soul, the young fellow decided—plain-looking, he had thought on first sight, but there was something oddly attractive about the wide eyes and large curving lips; you wanted to look at them once and yet again, and each time you looked the attraction increased. What was it? Not beauty, not intellect, not wit—nothing, it appeared, but a crystalline sincerity and sweetness of heart, which exercised an irresistible claim on the affections. His face softened, and he bent towards her with a kindly questioning.

"How do you come to be governessing these children? You are so young still—sixteen—seventeen, is it? You ought to be in the schoolroom yourself!"

"There was nothing else I could do, and I wanted to earn some money, because we're poor. I'm small, but I've known a lot of trouble," replied Pixie, with a complacent air which was distinctly trying to her companion's composure. He stroked his moustache to hide the twitching lips, and said solemnly—

"I'm sorry—very sorry to hear that! I hope, however, it is all in the past. You look remarkably cheerful now."

"That's because I'm helping; and we are such a nice family at home. If you are with the people you like best, that makes you happy, doesn't it, without thinking of anything else?"

"Yes," he said shortly, and rose from his seat to walk across to where the children were scrambling on the grass. They leapt on him, and hung on his arms; and he played with them for five or ten minutes, then produced a packet of chocolate from a pocket, and giving it to Pixie to distribute, made his escape to the house.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

A Confidence.

During the next few days the "Capting," as Viva called him, was constantly deserting his companions to join himself to the schoolroom party in their walks and games.

As Pixie had suspected, his heart was sore, and the innocent affection which the children lavished upon him made their society more congenial than that of his own companions, who were enjoying their stay in the country in merry, uproarious fashion.

Viva and Inda were interesting and original children, while "Mamzelle Paddy" was a house-party in herself—a delicious combination of shrewdness and innocence. He had little chance of private conversation with her, for the children were exacting in their demands; but their intimacy rapidly increased, as was only natural under the circumstances.

It was impossible to remain on formal terms with one who was united with yourself to withstand an assault of wild

savages, as portrayed by two little girls with branches of bracken waving above their heads, and geranium petals stuck in ferocious patterns about their cheeks; impossible not to feel an affection for the tallest member of the battalion which marched regularly every morning to the corner of the paddock to be drilled by their commander, scarlet sashes crossed sideways over holland dresses, and Panama hats fastened by immaculate black chin-straps.

In the afternoon, when the grown-up members of the household drove off in state to attend garden parties at neighbouring mansions, the Captain found it infinitely more enjoyable to punt slowly down the stream, dreaming his own dreams, or listening with a smile while the older child amused her juniors by quaint and adventurous stories.

She was always happy, this little Mamzelle Paddy. Another girl of her age might have felt lonely and diffident in this large, bustling household, but she was sunshine personified—content to work, content to play, content to go on an expedition, content to be left behind, having no desires of her own, it would appear, excepting only this one—to love, and be loved by those around.

“Some day, Mamzelle,” the Captain said, “I will take you and the children a little jaunt on our own account. We will take a boat and go up the river to a dear little spot which I know very well, and there we will have tea and pretend to be Robinson Crusoes on a desert island. It is an island, you know; and we will take a basket of provisions with us, and boil our own kettle, and spread the tablecloth under the trees. Robinson didn’t have tablecloths, I believe; but we will improve on the story, and go shopping in the village to see what we can buy.”

“Wants to go now!” Inda insisted; while Viva executed a war-dance of triumph, and Pixie murmured deeply—

“I love picnics! We had a beauty once when I was young. ’Twas some friends near by, and they asked me and Miles; and ye could smell the cooking coming up the drive—all sorts of things cooked for days before, and packed in hampers. We went there by train—to the place we were going to, I mean—but by bad luck the hampers went somewhere else, through leaving them on the platform without seeing them put in. Ye get very hungry when you are enjoying yourself, and there was nothing to be bought in the village but bread and spring-onions and herrings in barrels. ’Twas a lucky accident, all the same, for we had the picnic, and a party next day to eat up the food.”

“Well, we’ll look after the hamper this time. We should not find even the onions on our island,” said the Captain, laughing. “We will ask Mrs Wallace’s permission when she comes home, and begin preparations to-morrow morning if it is fine.”

Mrs Wallace protested that the children were being spoiled by so much kindness, but was delighted to give her consent, and the next morning was happily employed in packing the tea-basket, and purchasing strawberries, cakes, and chocolates from the shops in the village.

Several of the visitors pleaded to be allowed to join the party, and tried to wheedle invitations from the children during the luncheon-hour, to their own humiliation and defeat.

“You would like to have me with you, wouldn’t you, darling? You would like to sit next to me in the boat?” pleaded one pretty young lady of the chubby baby; but Inda wriggled away, and replied sturdily—

“Don’t want you in the boat! Don’t want nobody only the Capting and Mamzelle. You go anuzzer picnic by yourself!”

“You must forgive us, Miss Rose, but this is strictly a limited expedition. We children want to be as mischievous as we like without the controlling influence of grown-up people. No best frocks, please, Mrs Wallace! Just holland pinafores that we can soil as much as we like!” pleaded the Captain, feeling more than rewarded for his firmness as he met the adoring glances of three pairs of innocent eyes.

There was quite a little assembly by the boat-house to speed the expedition on its way, and it is safe to say that no boat on the river that afternoon carried a happier, more excited party. The Captain rowed; Pixie sat in the stern and pulled the rudder-lines according to instructions, with occasional lapses of memory when she mistook her right hand for her left, and was surprised to find the boat going in an opposite direction from what had been intended; the little girls sat on either side, as yet too mindful of their promises of good behaviour even to splash the water. They snored with excitement at the mystery of the first lock, and wrapped their hands in their pinafores to keep them safely out of the way, since the Captain said that it was impossible to be too careful in such places.

Along the banks were dotted beautiful houses set back in luxuriant gardens; round the bend of the river stood a house-boat known by the fascinating name of The Yellow Butterfly. The paint was white, but everything else was a rich, glowing yellow—yellow plants and flowers in baskets; yellow curtains to the windows; yellow cushions on the chairs; actually—if you can believe it—a yellow parakeet in a golden cage on the top deck.

“I should like to live and *die* in that house-boat!” cried Viva rapturously.

Presently came the sound of music from afar and a thud, thud, thud, which foretold the advent of a steamer. Now there would be waves—real, true, up-and-down waves, and you could pitend you were going to be drowned, and the boat go upside down. What fun! What fun! The gurgles of excitement, the clutchings of Mamzelle’s skirts, the shrieks of exultation as the happy moment drew near, were as charming to the beholder as to the children themselves.

In the sunny reaches of the river the boats carried Japanese umbrellas which made charming touches of colour against the green. Under the great trees more boats were moored in the shade, while their occupants brought out the tea-baskets from beneath the seats.

Viva and Inda regarded all such proceedings as deliberate offences against their exclusive rights, and angrily pointed out the fact that “other people” were having picnics too; but the Captain soothed them by a promise that the island should be their private property, and that he would fight to the death to keep off foreign invasions. Already this land

of promise was looming in the distance, and presently they were rowing slowly round and round looking for a convenient place of landing, tying the rope to the trunk of a willow whose branches dipped in the stream, and stepping cautiously ashore.

The children were wild with excitement, but the Captain claimed for himself a quarter of an hour's rest and smoke before proceeding to the difficult business of boiling the kettle; and the two little girls scampered off to explore the island, promising faithfully to keep clear of the banks.

"Mamzelle shall stay and talk to me! It's my turn to be amused," he said; but for once Pixie did not seem in a talkative mood, but leant silently against the stump of a tree, staring around her with dreamy eyes.

The young fellow watched her curiously as he pulled his pipe out of his pocket and prepared for the longed-for smoke. "What are you thinking of, Mamzelle?" he asked; and Pixie looked round with a little start of remembrance.

"I don't know. Everything. Nothing in particular, only that it's so warm and sunny and pretty; and you are so kind. I wasn't thinking anything, only being happy."

"'*Only* being happy,' were you?" he repeated softly. "Does it seem so easy, little Mamzelle? Some of the richest men in the world would give all their money if you could teach them that little secret. 'Only being happy' is a very difficult thing to some of us as we grow older in this world."

Pixie looked at him with an anxious scrutiny.

"But you were happy once, weren't you," she asked, "before you were miserable? People have been kind to you too, and made you happy before you began to be worried?"

"I worried! I miserable! Mamzelle, what can you mean? I am out for a picnic, with three charming ladies for my guests. How can I be anything but proud and delighted?"

He spoke with affected hilarity; but Pixie was not so easily convinced, and shook her head incredulously as she replied—

"No—you are not happy, really—not through and through! Ye sigh in the middle of laughing, and think of something else when you pretend to listen. I've been in trouble meself. Once there was an awful time when the girls sent me to Coventry for weeks on end, and there was a horrid dull pain inside me, as if I'd swallowed up a lump of lead. Was someone unkind to you too?"

He laughed—a short, mirthless laugh—and pushed his hair from his brow. It was a strange thing that he should dream of confiding his story to this bit of a girl, yet never before had he known such an impulse to speak.

"No, Mademoiselle," he said,—"not unkind; it was not in her nature to be that. The mistake was all on my side. I was a conceited coxcomb to think that she could ever care for me; but I did think it, and went on dreaming my foolish castle in the air, until one day it fell to the ground, and left me sitting among the ruins."

"It was a heart affair, then! I thought it was," cried Pixie shrewdly. "I heard a lot about heart affairs in Paris, and I had a sister once who was married. Her husband used to look just like you do when she was cross to him; but really and truly she wanted to be kind, and now they are married and living happily ever after. It will come all right for you too, some day!"

"No, never! There's no hope of that. She married someone else. That was the news which came to me one day and wrecked my castle!"

"Oh, oh!—how could she! The misguided creature! And when she might have had you instead! I'd marry you myself if I were big enough!" cried Pixie in a fervour of indignation which was more soothing than any expressions of sympathy; and the Captain stretched out his hand and patted her tenderly on the shoulder.

"Would you really? That's very sweet of you. Thank you, dear, for the compliment. We will be real good friends in any case, won't we? and you will keep my confidence, for no one in this place knows anything about it. And we won't talk of it any more, I think; it's rather a sore subject, don't you know. We might begin unpacking those baskets. The children will want their tea."

Chapter Thirty.

In the Lock.

The tea-making was attended with the usual excitements, and the kettle-boiling with the inevitable misadventures. A scouting party was organised to discover a sheltered spot in which to lay the fire, but although until this minute the day had appeared absolutely calm and tranquil, all the winds of heaven seemed to unite in blowing upon that unfortunate fire from the moment that the match was applied!

When at long last a feeble flame was established, the sticks promptly collapsed and precipitated the kettle to the ground; when rebuilt more solidly, it died out for want of a draught; and when at last, and at last, and at very long last, the smoke was seen issuing from the kettle-spout, lo, the water was smoked, and unfit to drink! So decided the Captain, at least, but while he drank milk with the little girls, Pixie emptied the tea-pot with undiminished enjoyment.

"It gives it a flavour," she said. "I like to taste what I'm drinking."

It was not a trifle like smoked tea which would mar Mamzelle Paddy's enjoyment when on pleasure bent!

The Captain's preparations had been on so lavish a scale that there was quite a supply of good things left when the meal was finished, and by a kindly thought these were packed together to give to the children of the lock-keeper on the way up stream.

When every odd piece of paper had been religiously collected and packed in the hamper with the cups and saucers, the little girls were lifted into the boat, Pixie pulled the rudder-ropes over her shoulders, and the Captain pushed the boat from the shore and jumped lightly into his seat.

They were off again, rowing homewards and passing once more all the fascinating landmarks which they had noticed on the way down. The picnickers on the banks were fastening hampers and preparing to depart; on the green lawns by the waterside servants were flitting to and fro carrying trays into the house. Inda was beginning to yawn and long for bed. She leant against Pixie, the weight of the small head becoming ever heavier and heavier, but roused up again as the boat entered the "box," as she persisted in calling a lock. She wanted to hand out the parcel of good things without a moment's delay, but the Captain told her to wait until the water had lifted the boat nearer to the bank.

It seemed an extraordinary thing that, whereas, in passing through the lock before they had gone down, down, down, they should now rise higher with every moment that passed. The children had a hundred questions to ask, while the Captain stood up and kept the boat in position with a boat-hook. He explained the mystery as simply as possible, and also why he was at such pains to keep at a safe distance from the walls.

"You see those things sticking out from the side of the boat into which I put my oars? They are called 'rollocks,' and when you are coming up stream through a lock you have to be careful indeed not to let them catch under any of the beams. It would be almost impossible to get them loose again, you see, because every moment more water would pour in, and press them tighter and tighter!"

"And what would it do to us if it did press them?" Viva inquired curiously, whereat the Captain smiled and shook his head.

"Something very disagreeable, I'm afraid—give us all a good wetting in the water! You needn't be afraid of that, though, when you are with me, for I shall take good care of my little crew. You see how far I keep away with this oar."

"Yes, I see. But why does one end of the boat stick out into the middle, and the other into the side?"

"It's the current that sweeps it round, the force of the water that is coming in under the gates. That doesn't matter so long as we are not caught."

"But the end *is* caught, isn't it? That little bit of iron that sticks up at the pointed end!" cried Pixie suddenly. She was densely ignorant of all that concerns boats, and invariably alluded to the bow and the stern as the "blunt" and "pointed" ends, to the Captain's intense amusement.

This time, however, he did not smile. Pixie saw his face set suddenly as he turned his head to look in the direction of her outstretched finger, but his voice sounded reassuringly confident.

"Oh, I see! Yes. Let me pass you, dear, for a moment. Sit quite still!"

He stepped past her into the space occupied by the hampers, and stamped vigorously first with one foot, then with two, jumped with all his weight, then stepped quickly back to the centre of the boat and called to the man at the sluices—

"Hi, there! *Stop*! My boat is caught! Turn off that water! Quick, man, do you hear me!"

But the man's head was turned in the opposite direction, and he was so much engrossed with his work that it was some moments before he heard, and meantime it was terrifying to see how swiftly the water arose, how dangerously near to its edge grew the side of the boat! The children began to shriek and stand on their seats, and the Captain seized Inda in his arms and held her up, calling loudly for help.

The lock-keeper was hurriedly dropping the sluices, but at the sound of the continued cries his wife ran out of the house and across the bridgeway. In another moment she would be able to lift Inda ashore; but Viva, frantic with terror, was clamouring to be taken too, and Pixie impetuously lifted her towards the bank.

What happened next it is difficult to describe, so swiftly did it happen, so like a nightmare did it appear for ever after in the memories of those concerned. The woman came rushing forward, followed by her husband; they seized the children and dragged them on the bank.

The boat, relieved suddenly of a weight, gave an unexpected lurch, and the next moment Pixie and the Captain were in the water. The children screamed aloud in terror, but the Captain had hardly disappeared before he was up again, capless, and shaking the water from his head, but looking none the worse for his ducking. But it was a long, agonising minute before there came a swirling and bubbling at the end of the lock, and Pixie's white, unconscious little face floated on the surface. The Captain's arm was round her in an instant, the lock-keeper threw a rope to help him to the iron ladder fixed in the walls of the lock, and between them the two men carried the dripping figure along the bank and into the house.

There was a sofa in an inner room, and there they laid her, while the woman, assisted by her eldest daughter, took off the wringing garments and wrapped her round with warm blankets and coverings. The Captain ran out into the village, sent a messenger flying for a doctor, and rushed back again in terror lest the two little girls should have

taken advantage of his absence to get into fresh mischief.

This was a pretty ending to their expedition! What would Mrs Wallace say to him when he got home, and what should he say to himself if through any fault or carelessness a serious injury had happened to sweet little Mamzelle!

“Why on earth do they want to put these irons at the end of a boat? Wretched, dangerous things!” cried the distracted man to himself. “To think that I have been through a thousand locks in safety, and that this should have happened just when I had made myself responsible for a party of children! Never again! Never again, if I get safely out of this! I wonder how long that doctor fellow will take to come along?”

Viva and Inda were sitting in the front kitchen, glancing askance at several rosy, curly-headed children who were shyly huddled together by the door. The fascination of new surroundings and possible new playmates had diverted their minds from their misfortunes, and the Captain heaved a sigh of relief as he passed into the inner room.

The lock-keeper’s wife had filled two bottles with hot water, and put one to Pixie’s feet, and another between her cold hands; a towel was wrapped round the wet locks with somewhat ghastly effect, and the young man shivered as he looked down at the still, white face.

“She is not—she can’t be—” he faltered, not having the courage to pronounce the dread word; and to his inexpressible relief the woman smiled at the thought.

“Not she! Stunned a bit, that’s all. Perhaps hit her head in falling. I’ve often had them like this before, and they are pretty well all right in a few hours. We have a lot of people up here in summertime who know nothing about managing a boat—no offence to you, sir—I daresay you are well accustomed to them, but accidents will happen!”

“I thought I was!” sighed the Captain dismally. He knelt down by the couch, and touched the cold cheek with his fingers. “Feels a little warmer, doesn’t she? For goodness’ sake, take that thing off her head, I can’t bear to see it.”

The woman lifted the head from the pillow to unloosen the tight folds, and at the movement Pixie sighed, and opened wide, bewildered eyes. For the first moment they held nothing but blankest surprise at finding herself in so extraordinary a position, but, even as the Captain held his breath in suspense, a spark of remembrance came into the clear depths, and the face lit up with a flickering merriment.

“Were we drowned?” she whispered hoarsely. “The two of us?—Viva jumped, and the boat slipped, and my feet went down. Who saved me? Was it you?”

“I suppose it was, but it was not a very heroic rescue—only a few yards to the bank. You are sure you feel all right? Quite warm and comfortable? Your head doesn’t ache?”

Pixie shook her dishevelled head from side to side, frowning the while in speculative fashion.

“I think it does—a little bit, but I’m not quite sure. It feels muzzy!” she declared, with a gesture and accent which lent some enlightenment to the enigmatical expression. Then she stretched out a hand, and touched him anxiously on the shoulder. “You’re drenched! You’ll catch all sorts of diseases in those wet clothes. Can’t you have some blankets too? I’m so lovely and warm.”

“My husband is putting out some clothes for you upstairs, sir. You had better go and change. The young lady is all right now, and I will tell you when the doctor comes.”

“Doctor! Is a doctor coming? To see me?” Pixie asked, rapturously incredulous.

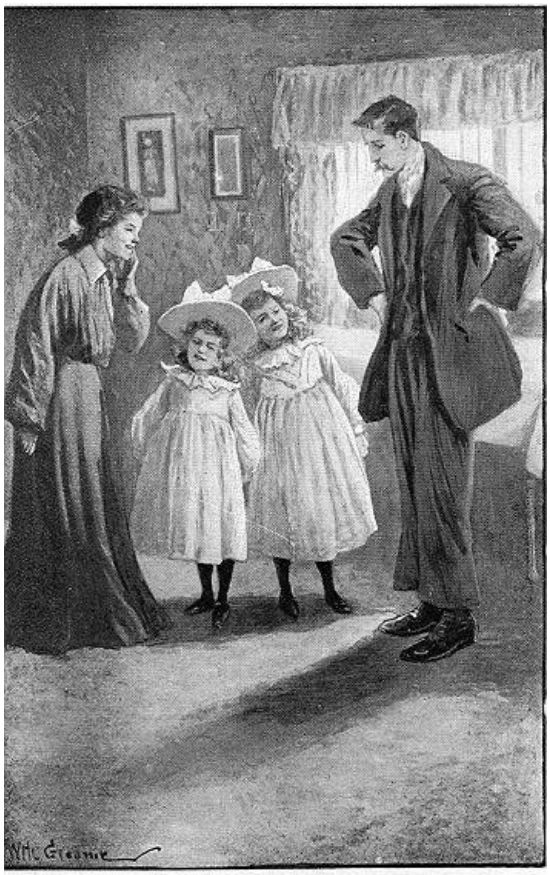
To find herself the heroine of an adventure, a genuine thrilling adventure, to lie stretched upon a sofa, wrapped in blankets, with two attendants anxiously inquiring her symptoms; to know that a doctor was hurrying to her side—this was indeed a glorious ending to the day’s enjoyment! She lay back on the cushions wreathed in smiles, and the doctor, coming in hurriedly, was somewhat taken aback to behold so radiant a patient.

“I fainted!” cried Pixie proudly. “I never fainted before in all my life. I don’t remember a single thing after I slipped, until I woke up on this sofa.”

“Indeed!—and a very sensible arrangement. Just as well to know nothing about these disagreeable experiences.”

The doctor smiled, and fingered her head with a careful touch. “Does that hurt you? No? Does that? Do you feel any tenderness there? A little bit, eh? You don’t like me to press it? You probably grazed yourself slightly as you fell, and that caused the ‘faint.’ Nothing serious, though. You need not be frightened.”

“I like it!” said Pixie stoutly, and the burst of laughter with which the two hearers greeted this statement, sounded pleasantly in the Captain’s ears as he dressed himself in the lock-keeper’s Sunday garments in the room overhead.



MADE MERRY OVER THE CHANGE IN THEIR APPAREL.

Chapter Thirty One.

Lovers' Meetings.

The doctor saw no reason why Pixie should not be driven home, and offered to order a closed carriage in the village, and pending its arrival, the adventurers enjoyed another cup of tea, not smoked this time, and made merry over the change in their appearance, wrought by the borrowed clothing.

Pixie's red merino dress was the pride of little Miss Lock-keeper's heart, but about two sizes too big for its present occupant. The bodice hung in folds about her tiny figure, the sleeves came down to her finger-tips; the Captain's shiny black suit made him appear quite clumsy and awkward, but that was all part of the fun, in the estimation of three members of the party, at least.

Mrs Wallace was undecided whether to laugh or to cry as she welcomed her truants and listened to the story of their adventures. Nothing would satisfy her but to despatch Pixie to bed forthwith, to that young lady's intense mortification, and to order the Captain upstairs to have a hot bath and a dose of quinine. When he came downstairs, she was putting a letter in the post-box in the hall, and, motioning towards it, explained its purport.

"I've been writing to Mamzelle's sister in London. These lock accidents get into the papers sometimes, and are generally exaggerated into something really so thrilling and terrible. It's best to tell the true story ourselves."

"And I have brought this trouble upon you! I could kick myself for my stupidity. You will never trust me again, but please make me the scapegoat to the sister, and let her wreak her wrath on me. It's not fair that you should be blamed."

"Oh, I am not afraid of any wrath, I assure you. She's a charming girl, and as sweet as Mamzelle herself. I have asked her to come down to-morrow and see for herself that there is no harm done. I thought that was the best way out of the difficulty; and please don't blame yourself too much. It was an accident, and we must just be very, very thankful that you were all preserved from harm."

The next morning the Captain took himself off for a long walk, ostensibly to call on some friends, in reality to avoid meeting the visitor from town; for though a man may boldly acknowledge his responsibility and offer to bear the blame, he has an instinctive shrinking from the society of females in distress, and will walk a very long distance in order to avoid anything like a scene.

It seemed the height of bad fortune that this particular visitor should arrive in the afternoon, instead of the morning, and that he should stumble into the library almost immediately after she had arrived. She was seated on an ottoman with her back towards him, but Mrs Wallace's quick exclamation took away any chance of retreating unseen.

"Why, here he is!" she cried. "This is the culprit, or the hero, whichever you choose to call him. Come and tell your own story, Dick. This is Mademoiselle's sister, Miss O'Shaughnessy."

But he had recognised her already. She had turned her head as Mrs Wallace spoke, and beneath the curving brim of the hat he had seen the face which had been enshrined in his heart for three long years, the sweet face which had brought to him at once the greatest joy and the bitterest sorrow of his life! He stood still in the middle of the room, staring at her as if suddenly turned to stone, and Bridgie rose to her feet, the pretty colour fading out of her cheeks, her lips a-tremble with emotion.

Mrs Wallace looked from one to the other, and with a woman's intuition divined something very nearly approaching the truth. Dick was quite changed from his old happy self—everyone had noticed it, and speculated as to the cause. In his last furlough he had stayed some time in Ireland. Could it be—could it possibly be—

"You have met before?" she said quickly. "That is very nice. You know each other, and can talk over yesterday's adventure without my help. Will you excuse me if I leave you for a few moments, while I give some orders to the maids?"

No one answered, but she lost no time in hurrying from the room, and as the door closed behind her, the Captain came slowly across the room, staring at Bridgie's white face.

"*Miss O'Shaughnessy*! She called you '*Miss O'Shaughnessy*'!"

She shrank before him, scared by his strange, excited manner.

"Yes, it is my name. I am Bridgie O'Shaughnessy. Don't you remember me?"

"Remember you!" he repeated with an emphasis which was more eloquent than a hundred protestations. He seized her hands in a painful pressure. "You are not married, then? It was not true! You did not marry him as they told me?"

"I? You thought I was married! Oh, what put such an idea into your head?"

"I heard it eighteen months ago—shortly after your last letter arrived, telling me about your father, and hinting at other changes which might follow. My friend wrote that Miss O'Shaughnessy was engaged to a fellow with a lot of money—Hilliard—that they were going to be married almost at once. Was it all an invention? Was there no truth in it at all?"

"It was quite true—quite, but it was Esmeralda, not me! She married him over a year ago."

"Esmeralda! your sister—but he said the eldest daughter, and you are the eldest. I knew I was not mistaken about that, for I remember every word you had told me."

Bridgie smiled faintly; the colour was coming back into her cheeks, and the grey eyes met his with shy, incredulous happiness.

"But most people give her the credit for it, all the same. There's so much more of her, you see. You never wrote to—to ask if it were true?"

"I was too proud and hurt, badly hurt, Bridgie—mortally badly! And you never wrote to ask why I was silent. Were you proud too, or contemptuous—which was it? Did you think I was nothing but a flirt, and a heartless one at that?"

"I never thought unkindly of you, but I suppose I was proud, for I couldn't write when all the money was gone, and I was so poor. I thought you had forgotten, or met someone else! I hoped you were very happy, only I—wasn't!" faltered Bridgie, with a little break in her voice as she spoke that last word, which brought the tears to the Captain's eyes. He bent his head over the clasped hands, and kissed them a dozen times over.

"Bridgie, Bridgie!" he cried brokenly. "Is it true? Have I found you again after all these years? Can you forgive me for this wretched blunder which has brought such unhappiness upon us both? I am thankful to know you were unhappy too, for I had nothing to go on, Bridgie, no claim whatever upon you, only you must have guessed how I felt. I could not believe that you had really given yourself to me in that short time."

"I couldn't myself!" said Bridgie naïvely. "I tried to pretend that it was all a mistake, and that I was quite happy without you." She looked up at him shyly, and shook her head in the most beguiling denial. "'Twas not a mite of use. I remember all the same! And are you sure—quite sure—that you thought of me all the time? Was there never anyone else all these long, long years?"

The Captain smiled and stroked his moustache in amused, contemplative fashion.

"There was never anyone, except one girl! I met one girl who quite stole my heart, and I think I stole hers into the bargain."

"Oh! oh! How dreadful! Why did you tell me? But you didn't—you never thought of marrying her, did you, Dick?"

"I'm not so sure. She did!" He laughed, and seized her hands once more. "No, it is too bad! I won't tease you. It was Mamzelle Paddy, darling, to whom I confided my story, and who comforted me in her own sweet fashion. And she is your sister, and it is she who has brought us together! Bridgie, if I didn't love you with all my heart, I believe I should still have to marry you, for nothing else than to be Mamzelle's brother."

But Bridgie did not affect to be jealous. She threw back her head, and smiled happily as she answered, "I'm thankful to hear you say it, for whoever marries me must love Pixie too. I can never leave her behind me!"

Chapter Thirty Two.

Conclusion.

The news of Captain Victor's engagement and long attachment to the charming Miss O'Shaughnessy caused the greatest interest and excitement among the guests at the cottage, while his old friends rejoiced to see the happy brightness on his face.

"Welcome home, Dick!" Mr Wallace cried, shaking him warmly by the hand. "Thankful to see you back again, instead of that other fellow who has been moping about in your clothes!" and Pixie commented on the announcement with her usual outspoken honesty.

"I told ye it would come all right! I suppose it was you Bridgie was fretting about, when I thought it was the bills! She's got dips in her cheeks, only you can't see them now, because she's blushing. I'm glad you are coming into the family, but I don't see how you can ever be married! She can't be spared!"

The Captain laughed at that statement, and vowed that she would have to be spared, and that at an early date; but a shadow fell across Bridgie's face, and as they sat alone in the garden she said anxiously—

"I am afraid I have been selfish, Dick! I can think of nothing but you, but, after all, Pixie was quite right—I can't possibly be spared for a long time to come. She won't be old enough to take charge of a house for three years at the soonest, and Jack has been so good and unselfish that I couldn't possibly leave him in the lurch. You have waited so long that you won't mind waiting a few years longer, will you?"

"It doesn't seem to me a particularly logical conclusion, sweetheart!" the Captain said, smiling. "Personally I feel that I ought to be rewarded at once, but I won't make any promises one way or another until I have met your brother and heard his views. Don't worry yourself, you shan't do anything that you feel to be wrong, but I don't despair of finding a solution of the difficulty. When it is an alternative between that and waiting for you for three years, Bridgie, I shall be very, very resourceful!"

"I don't know what you can do. It's no use suggesting a housekeeper—the boys would not hear of it, and she'd be destroyed in a week with the life they would lead her!" So argued Bridgie, but she was willing to be convinced, and too happy in the present to feel much concern for the future.

The weight of depression which had lain on her heart despite her brave cheeriness of manner was lifted once and for ever now that she was convinced of Dick's faithful love, and it seemed impossible that she could ever be more content than at this moment. Until now almost all the joys of her life had come from an unselfish pleasure in the good fortune of others, but this wonderful new happiness was her very own, hers and Dick's, and she could hardly believe that it was true, and not a wonderful dream.

Mrs Wallace's letter had conveyed an invitation to stay for the night, so the lovers had two days to sit and talk together in the lovely summer garden before returning to give an account of themselves in Rutland Road.

Jack was not prepared to see a stranger accompanying his sister, but he welcomed him with Irish heartiness, and guessed how the land lay at the first glance at Bridgie's face. So did Pat; so did Miles; but they concealed their suspicions with admirable tact, and talked persistently through the evening meal with intent to relieve the embarrassment which was so evidently experienced by the hostess.

Poor Bridgie was painfully conscious of the enormity of her conduct as she looked from one to the other of her three big brothers. Jack's manner was nervous and excited. Poor fellow! he was evidently dreading the explanations which were in store. Pat was looking pale; he grew so fast that he needed constant care. Miles kept handing her the mustard with sympathetic effusion; he had a heart of gold and could be led with a word, but it must be the right word, and woe to the housekeeper of the future if she tried to rule by force! She smiled at him with wistful apology, and Miles patted her hand affectionately under the tablecloth.

It was a pity when a sensible girl like Bridgie made an idiot of herself by falling in love, but they all seemed to do it sooner or later, and there was no use making a fuss, Master Miles told himself resignedly. She seemed to have met this Captain Victor years ago, and to have corresponded with him in India, but she had never mentioned his name at home. How strange to know that Bridgie had had an interest beyond her own brothers and sisters! Miles felt mildly aggrieved, but consoled himself by the reflection that the Captain seemed a decent sort of fellow with plenty to say for himself. He had been on active service twice already, and though he refused details of manslaughter, gave such a graphic account of tiger-shooting expeditions as made Miles's lips water, and aroused rebellious repinings at his own hard lot in living in a miserable suburb where the only sport to be obtained was the tracking of a few superfluous cats!

When dinner was over, the two boys discreetly lingered behind while their elders retired to the drawing-room, and Bridgie grew rosy red with embarrassment as the door closed behind them.

"We wanted to tell you, Jack—" she began nervously. "I would have told you before, only there was nothing to tell. There isn't now! At least, I mean, it won't be for a long, long time, dear. Not until you don't want me any more."

"Better let me try, Bridgie!" cried the Captain, laughing. He put his hand on her shoulder in a proudly possessive fashion, and looked Jack full in the face. "She is dreadfully afraid of what you will say, and ashamed of herself for daring to think of anything but her home duties. It doesn't seem to strike her that she has a duty to me too, when I have been thinking of her for the last three years. I must explain to you, O'Shaughnessy, that a friend wrote to tell me that your eldest sister was about to be married to a man called Hilliard, and by an unfortunate coincidence

Bridgie herself had vaguely referred to coming changes in her last letter, so I believed the report, and we have mutually been eating our hearts, and believing the other to be faithless. There was no engagement, you must understand, but I made up my mind about her the first day we met, and she now acknowledges that she ran away because she was afraid I might interfere with her home claims. You see, I have already spared her to you for three good years, so I think it is my turn now! My friends will tell you that I have been miserably dull and surly, and for their sakes alone I feel I ought to make a stand."

"And Bridgie has been always sweet and cheerful. We have each expected her to be sorry for us in turns, and never once suspected that she needed us to be sorry for her too. Thank you, Bridgie!" said Jack, looking across at her with a loving look which was the sweetest reward which she could possibly have received for the struggles which had been so gallantly concealed.

"It was my greatest comfort to have you all to work and care for when I thought he had—forgotten!" she cried hastily. "And I have loved helping you, Jack! Please speak honestly, dear, let us all speak out honestly. Of course I want to be with Dick, but I want most of all to do what is right—we all do—and the children must come first. You can't be left alone, Jack, and there is no one else to take my place."

"Unless—" began Jack slowly. Bridgie looked at him in surprise, and saw the red flush come creeping up from beneath his collar, touch his cheeks, and mount up and up to the roots of his curling hair. "Unless I married myself!" he said breathlessly, and at that Bridgie darted forward and caught him by both hands.

"What? What? What? Jack, what do you mean? Is it Sylvia? Of course it is Sylvia! And does she—Jack, what does it mean? Are you engaged too? Have you been keeping it from me because you thought—"

"We wouldn't let you think you were in our way; we loved you too much, old girl, so we were quietly waiting until—"

"I came along!" concluded Dick Victor tersely.

The three young people stood staring at each other for a moment, and the tears brimmed over in Bridgie's eyes, but presently she began to laugh, and the young men joined in with a sense of the happiest relief. Each one had been thinking of the other, and putting personal hopes in the background, and lo, in the simplest, most delightful of fashions, the knot was cut, and each was left free to be happy after his heart's desire.

"Oh, it's perfectly, perfectly perfect!" Bridgie cried rapturously. "The boys adore Sylvia, and will be her devoted slaves; she is twice the housekeeper that I am, and she has been so lonely, poor darling, without her parents. Oh, Jack, how nice of you to care for her, and give her a home!"

"That's what she says!" replied Jack naïvely. "Shall we send for her to join the council? She ought to have her say. I'll run across—"

"No, no! Send Mary. I want to see her first—I want to see exactly how she looks when she knows she is found out," Bridgie insisted; so Mary was promptly despatched on her errand, and back came Sylvia, wondering and excited, and not a little mystified by the presence of the tall stranger.

"Master Jack has good taste!" said the Captain to himself as he looked at the dainty figure and erect little head with its crop of curls. "Rather an embarrassing position for the poor girl! Hope they break it to her gently!"

But it was not the O'Shaughnessy custom to break news gently, or in a circuitous fashion, and the moment Sylvia entered the doorway, Bridgie flew at her with outstretched arms, crying incoherently, and with sublime disregard of grammar—

"Oh, Sylvia, Sylvia, I'm engaged! That's him! It's been a mistake all the time, and we are going to be married at once. We are all going to be married! Dick and me, and you and Jack, and you are coming here to look after the house! I thought I couldn't be married because of Jack, and he thought he couldn't be married because of me, and now it's all right, and we can all be happy. I congratulate you, Sylvia! Congratulate me! I made Jack let me tell you, for I knew you would be so surprised. Don't you feel too bewildered to take it in?"

"I do!" replied Sylvia, with much truth. Red as a rose was she, at this sudden and public announcement of her engagement, not knowing where to look, or what to say, yet with a consciousness of immense happiness to come, and unfeigned delight at the happy ending to Bridgie's love-story.

Dick Victor came forward and introduced himself, and presently they all seated themselves, and tried to discuss the future in staid, responsible fashion. The Captain expected to be quartered in England for the immediate future, but could not of course be certain of his ultimate movements. He proposed that he and Bridgie should look out for a furnished house, so as to have a home of their own and yet be ready for such changes as might arise.

Jack anxiously questioned Sylvia as to the responsibility which would be hers, and she professed herself only too ready to sister the two dear boys.

"And Pixie—I should love to have Pixie!" she cried, whereat Bridgie frowned, and fidgeted restlessly on the sofa.

"We will make definite arrangements later on," she said. "Everything cannot be decided at once. The boys will be quite enough trouble for you, me dear! They are as good as gold, but they will grow, and their clothes wear out so fast, and since we came to town they've taken a distaste to patches, and they want money in their own pockets, the same as the other boys they meet. 'If I give you some shillings just to jingle, and show they are there, will that satisfy you?' I asked Pat only last week, and he laughed in my face! It's hard to say 'No' when they smile at you, Sylvia, but you'll have to do it."

“I—don’t—know!” said Sylvia slowly. The others looked at her questioningly, and she turned to Jack with a sparkling face. “I was waiting for a chance of telling you. Mr Nisbet telegraphed to Ceylon about father’s death, and I’ve had a letter from his lawyers. It came last night, and I’m rich, Jack! Isn’t it lovely?—really quite rich! The lawsuit was settled in his favour, and he was coming home to settle, and now everything comes to me. I can help with the boys, and some day, when you are ready, we can go back to Knock, and live in the old home again! I’ve been so happy since I heard, thinking that at last I could do something for you too. You are pleased about it, aren’t you, Jack? Do say you are pleased!”

Jack’s beaming smile was the best answer to that question.

“’Deed, I’m delighted!” he declared. “I’ll spend money with any man alive, and the more there is, the better I’m pleased. We will stay where we are and see the boys settled, and let Geoffrey enjoy his lease, and then we’ll go home, and I shall probably have some savings of my own to add to yours by that time, and not feel I am living on my wife. I’m thankful you have the money, and I’m thankful that I knew nothing of it before we were engaged.”

“And so am I!” said Sylvia softly.

A week later there was a second conference, at which every member of the family put in an appearance, and the question of the hour was, “Who shall have Pixie? Where shall Pixie have her home?”

“I am the head of the family. It is the right thing that she should be with me. Sylvia and I would both like to have her, so it is unnecessary to discuss the point any further,” said Mr Jack, with an air.

“I don’t wish to say anything in the least unkind to Sylvia—you know that, don’t you, dear?” cried Esmeralda the magnificent, sitting amidst billows of chiffon and lace, and smiling sweetly across the room. “But the fact remains that I am Pixie’s real sister, and she is not; and I think a sister’s claim comes before a brother’s. Bridgie will have no settled home, and I am at Knock. Anyone might see at a glance that her home ought to be with me, under the circumstances.”

“I want Pixie!” said Bridgie softly. “I want Pixie!”

And Pixie sat on the edge of the sofa, and looked from one to the other with bright, bird-like glances. Everyone wanted her, everyone had an argument to prove a prior claim; they were all arguing and struggling for the supreme happiness of welcoming her into their households. It was the happiest moment of her life.

“It’s like Solomon and the babies!” she cried exultantly. “Ye’ll have to cut me in threes, and divide the pieces. Esmeralda shall have my head, for the times when she loses her own; Sylvia shall have my feet, because she limps herself; and,”—she looked across the room deep into Bridgie’s eyes—“Bridgie shall have my heart! It would be with her, anyway, wherever she went.”

The tears brimmed over in Bridgie’s eyes; Esmeralda frowned quickly, then glanced at Geoffrey, as he stood by her side, and softened into a smile.

Jack stifled a sigh, and said gravely—

“Pixie has settled the question for herself. After that confession there can be no more to say. Take her, Bridgie, but be generous and spare her to us for part of the year. We all need you, Pixie—wise little head, willing little feet, loving little heart—every single bit of you. Come and help us as often as you can.”

The End.

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