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Title: Elsie Marley, Honey

Author: Joslyn Gray

Release date: September 30, 2007 [eBook #22819]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELSIE MARLEY, HONEY ***

E-text prepared by Al Haines



**Elsie . . . repeated the performance
in a manner that was only the more
captivating.**

ELSIE MARLEY

BY

JOSLYN GRAY

AUTHOR OF "KATHLEEN'S PROBATION"

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK
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TO
MARY BULLIONS GRAY ANDERSON

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Elsie . . . repeated the performance in a manner that was only the more captivating *Frontispiece*

"Well, I mustn't stay here and keep you from 'redding' up your kitchen, as you call it"

"You and I will do better with checks, Elsie, though Aunt Milly will have none of them," he remarked

"Well, Elsie, we know the whole story now"

ELSIE MARLEY, HONEY

CHAPTER I

Mrs. Bennet, her travelling companion from San Francisco, having proved to be talkative and uninteresting, Elsie Marley was more than content to find herself alone after the change had been made and her train pulled out of Chicago. It was characteristic of the girl that she did not even look out of the window to see the last of Mrs. Bennet, who, having waited on the platform until the train started and waved her handkerchief in vain, betook herself indignantly to her carriage. Quite unaware of any remissness on her part, Elsie settled herself comfortably—Mrs. Bennet had disposed of her luggage—folded her hands in her lap, and gazed idly out the window opposite.

A pale, colorless girl, the simplicity of her dress was in almost too great contrast with its elegance—a contrived simplicity that left no room for any trace of careless youth or girlishness. Slender and rather delicate-looking, she had brown eyes, regular features, and soft, light-brown hair waving loosely about her face and hanging in two long, demure curls from a shell clasp at her neck. But her eyes were of rather a shallow brown, her brows and lashes still lighter; her features were almost too regular, and her skin, though soft and clear, was quite colorless. Even so, she might have been pretty, perhaps lovely, had she possessed any animation. But the girl's face and even her eyes were as nearly expressionless as human features may be. She was like a superior sort of doll with white cheeks in lieu of red.

After a little she opened a small leather satchel, took out a letter, and perused it attentively. It was the last she had received from her guardian and only living relative, Cousin Julia Pritchard, and, as she was to see her soon, it behooved her to prepare herself so far as she might for that occasion. For Elsie Marley realized, though dimly, that she was to encounter a personality unlike any with which she had come in contact in all her sheltered, luxurious life.

"My dear Elsie," the letter ran, "I find myself very much pleased at the thought of having you with me. The heart of a woman of fifty cannot but rejoice in anticipation of the company of a young girl with the ideals, the vigor, and buoyancy of sixteen. And since we are both alone in the world, you representing all my kith and kin as I believe myself to represent all yours, it is only fitting that we should be together instead of being separated by the breadth of our great American continent.

"You will, I am sure, like this great, busy, restless, humming city, though the only home I have to offer you, I am truly sorry to say, is in a boarding-house, comfortable though it is. Remembering Aunt Ellen's beautiful home in California, which I visited fifteen years ago, I fear the change may be difficult, though, for a young person, not too painfully so, I trust. A boarding-house is the only home I have myself known for thirty years, and this particular one is excellent and full of interesting people, though the youngest among them are middle-aged.

"I am, I repeat, happy to say that I can give you a home here and clothe you suitably. That will release your income, which can be put to any use which we may decide upon after consultation together. Your lawyer tells me that you are through school, and neither you nor he speak of any desire on your part to go to college. I suppose, however, like most young girls, you will wish to take up some study or occupation to fit yourself to become self-supporting or to be useful to the world in some definite manner. I heartily sympathize with such an aim, having worked since my eighteenth year myself, and shall be cordially interested in helping you either to plan or to carry out a future for yourself."

Here Elsie broke off. Cousin Julia was certainly absurd! She had always been regarded, indeed, by the California Pritchards as a singular, eccentric person, rather wanting in refinement and careless of social amenities—one from whom they were quite content to be separated by the "breadth of our great American continent." She had taken after her mother, who came from Nebraska—or some such place—and the family had considered it a pity that she should have been and remained Pritchard by name, particularly since Elsie herself, Pritchard of Pritchards, had to go by the name Marley.

Still the girl's smooth brow did not contract. In any event, she said to herself, after Cousin Julia had seen her, it wasn't likely that she would suggest that she go out and earn her living. And as for her future, which the letter mentioned—why, her future was of course far ahead. Elsie had rather taken it for granted that she should marry when the proper time came, as girls did in books, as her grandmother and mother had done, and as Aunt Ellen would have done had she not been so frail. Once it had even occurred to her that it would be rather appropriate if she should marry some one named Pritchard, though she realized that to be only a remote possibility. In any event, she didn't know why going to New York should necessarily make any essential difference in her future, and she was thankful that she hadn't to consider it for some years yet. Meantime, the boarding-house confronted her.

Very likely, however, she could endure even that. She knew it would be comfortable, so far as that went, and she needn't mingle with the other people. She could have a piano and continue her lessons, and she might study vocal music. She could buy books and attend concerts and perhaps even the theatre and opera. She could go alone in a carriage to matinée performances, and quite likely there would be some reduced gentlewoman living at the boarding-house who might be glad of the chance to accompany her as chaperon in the evenings.

For Elsie took it for granted that Cousin Julia wouldn't care for the sort of things she was accustomed to any more than she herself would be interested to go about with her. Somehow the girl felt that Miss Pritchard would be devoted to vaudeville and even moving pictures—she might even refer to the latter as "movies"! Of course, that was the worst of the whole situation—Cousin Julia herself! For, no matter how singular or even coarse she might be, Elsie had to live with her and to put up with a certain amount of her society.

That would be very difficult; still, even now, the girl seemed to see wide spaces between. Except for Sundays and evenings when neither of them went out, she wouldn't have to see a great deal of the older woman. She might have to dine with her every night, but, as she worked in a business office, she probably wouldn't be home to lunch, and of course Elsie would have her breakfast in her room. Sunday might be long and boring, but, whatever Cousin Julia's ideas might be, Elsie would always insist upon going to service, and that would occupy a part of the day.

An hour had passed since Mrs. Bennet had left Elsie Marley. As she returned the letter to the satchel she became aware that the train was at a standstill and not before a station. Indeed, there was not a building in sight: only a dreary waste of sunburnt prairie-grass extended flatly to the glare of the burning horizon. She looked about wonderingly, vaguely aware that they must already have waited some time.

Her gaze included the rear of the car and emboldened a young girl who had been watching her longingly a great part of the way from San Francisco, to act upon her desire. Immediately she donned a coquettish little red hat and linen top-coat, and made her way to the other girl's seat.

"Don't you want to come out and walk a little?" she asked in a singularly sweet, eager voice. "There's a hot-box, or some such thing, and they say it'll be an hour more before we get away. It might seem good to stretch our legs on the prairie yonder?"

Elsie Marley didn't care at all to go. Indeed, she didn't wish to make the acquaintance of this conspicuous-looking girl with her dark hair cut square about her ears who had travelled alone all the way from San Francisco and seemed to know every one in the car. If she should give her any encouragement, no doubt she would hang about her all the rest of the way. She excused herself coldly.

"Oh, please do, please come for just a wee turn," urged the other, smiling and displaying a pair of marvellous dimples. And Elsie Marley surprised herself by yielding. Possibly she was too indolent to hold out; perhaps she felt something in the stranger that wouldn't take no for an answer, and didn't care to struggle against it. Again, she may have felt, dimly and against her will, something of the real charm of the other. However that was, she yielded listlessly, put on her neat sailor hat reluctantly, drew on the jacket of her severe and elegant dark-blue suit, and followed the stranger slowly from the car.

CHAPTER II

The stranger, who was dressed in a rather graceful and perhaps rather flamboyant adaptation of the prevailing fashion, was picturesque and radiant to the extreme: slender, dark, vivid, with big, dark eyes in a small pointed face, dark hair "bobbed" and curling sufficiently to turn under about her ears

and neck, a rather large mouth flanked by really extraordinary dimples, and an expression at once gay and saucy and sweet and appealing withal. Her voice was very sweet, her unusually finished pronunciation and enunciation giving a curious effect to her slangy speech. She wore her clothes jauntily, carried herself with charming grace, and her great dimples made her frank smile irresistible.

"Do you know, I've been simply crazy all the way to come and speak to you," she confessed as soon as they were outside. "I spotted you the very first thing, but I was rather phased by that woman with you. Wasn't she the—goodness gracious! I hope she wasn't any relation—your aunt or mother?"

"Oh, no indeed, scarcely an acquaintance," returned the other, surprised that any one should even conjecture that Mrs. Bennet might be connected with her. Then it occurred to her that Cousin Julia might be even worse!

"I never met her until a week ago," she went on languidly. "She happened to be a friend of my lawyer's wife, and he wished me to come as far as I could in her company. I suppose I oughtn't to travel the rest of the way alone, but he didn't make any other arrangement."

"Oh, it isn't bad. I've come all the way alone and everything's been jolly. I've made awfully good friends, though they're all either elderly or children. So your being about my age only made me want to know you the more. Well, now that we're acquainted, we'll have to make the most of what's left of the way. I am Elsie Moss and I was sixteen Christmas day. Aren't you about that age?"

"I am sixteen, Miss Moss," returned Elsie Marley formally.

"But don't call me *Miss*," pleaded the other. "*Everybody* calls me Elsie."

Elsie Marley did not reply. She disliked the idea that the unchaperoned stranger should be Elsie, also, and should even have the same initials. Her imagination was limited; still it occurred to her that the situation would have been much worse had the girl happened to bear the surname Pritchard.

She stifled a sigh. They seemed to be getting acquainted perforce. Now that she was out, however, she didn't care to go back at once, even though the sun beat down upon them fiercely, and the dry grass was full of dust and cinders. She glanced about irresolutely.

"Now if this were a scene in a play," remarked Elsie Moss reflectively, "the engine would have broken down near a grove with immemorial trees, or there'd be a dell hard by where the hero and heroine could wander by a stream. Or else—" she hesitated. "You don't feel comfy, do you?"

"The sun is so hot, it's hardly safe to be out. I'd better go in again," replied the other.

"But the car'll be awfully hot, too, standing right in the sun. I know—I'll get an umbrella."

She rushed off at full speed lest the other should remonstrate—something that Elsie Marley didn't think of doing. She accepted the favor as a matter of course, and they walked on slowly, the one restraining her eager feet with difficulty.

"Oh, dear, I suppose *you're* going to New York, too?" she asked. "Everybody seems to be except poor me."

The other returned a spiritless affirmative.

"Of course! Oh, dear, and I'm simply *perishing* to go! But I'm due in a poky little place in Massachusetts called Enderby. Isn't that the limit? The name alone would queer the place, don't you think so? It's fairly near Boston, but they say Boston's slow compared with New York or even with San Francisco."

She waited a moment, then rattled on.

"Do you know, sometimes it seems my *duty* to go to New York. I've got five hundred dollars all my own. Dad had a long sickness, and, anyhow, he never got much ahead; but he left me that clear, and I'm just going to beg and implore my uncle on bended knee to let me take it and go to New York to study. I could get a start with that, I'm sure."

She looked up so eagerly that something strange seemed to stir within the quiet girl. It was almost as if she would have liked to express her sympathy had she known how. And when the light suddenly died out of the sparkling eyes and even the shadows of the dimples disappeared, she felt almost at fault.

The other girl did not resent her want of sympathy, however.

"But he'll never, never consent," she went on mournfully, "because he's an orthodox minister and I want to be an actress. Of course he couldn't approve, and I ought not to blame him. And yet, if I wait until I'm of age, I'll be too old. I'd like to run away right now, but for the row it would make and for frightening auntie. Really, you know, I'd rather join the circus than go to Enderby."

"But I have always understood that to be an actress one must go through much that—isn't nice," remarked Elsie Marley in her colorless voice.

"Oh, but that's half the fun—the struggle against odds," exclaimed Miss Moss with the assurance of untried youth. "Our class motto at the high school was 'Per aspera ad astra.' Isn't that fine and inspiring?"

The other assented listlessly,

A breeze had arisen, and now, at a little distance from the track, the air, though warm, was fresh and sweet. The yellowed grass extended to the brilliant blue of the sky as far as the eye could reach. For the first time, perhaps, in centuries, the plain was peopled by a throng; for by now nearly every one in the long train had come out. Men stood in groups discussing politics and the Mexican affair; women wandered sedately about, most of them keeping a watchful eye upon the engine, as if it might suddenly start and plunge on, dragging an empty train of cars; children ran and frisked and shouted, making the most of the occasion, as only children can. The two Elsie's happened to be the only young girls.

They had gone some little distance beyond the others. Failing to draw out her companion, Elsie Moss took it for granted that she was shy, and chatted on about her own affairs, hoping presently to effect an exchange of confidences.

"I can't help wondering what my uncle will be like," she said soberly, thrusting her hand into the pocket of her coat. "You see, I've never seen him, though he and my mother were the greatest chums ever when they were young—almost like twins, though he was heaps older. But mother went to California when she married and I was born there, and though he always meant to, he never got out to see us. His wife couldn't stand the journey. And when mother died, he was way over in Egypt, so of course he didn't come. All that I know is that he's handsome and dignified and lives in a very proper place where they have everything correct and conventional—musical advantages and oratorios and lectures on Emerson, and village improvement and associated charities and all that, but no vaudeville nor movies. I suppose if there were a theatre they'd only play Ibsen and Bernard Shaw."

Elsie Marley opened her eyes rather wider than usual. For it all sounded attractive to her, particularly in contrast with the boarding-house and New York.

"He's awfully religious-looking, you know," Elsie Moss continued. "He wears the same sort of waistcoats and collars the Episcopalians do, though he's a Congregationalist, and his picture is more than dignified, I can tell you. Well, no doubt he's dreading me just as much as I am him, or else he's expecting me to be just like mother and will have the surprise of his life."

She hesitated. "I suppose I do look like her," she added gently and quite as if she believed the other girl to be deeply interested. Then her voice dropped suddenly and her eyes filled with tears. "Mother died—in the earthquake," she added.

Something vaguely uncomfortable just stirred the surface of Elsie Marley's consciousness, though it wasn't sufficiently acute to be called a pang. The earthquake had happened seven or eight years ago—and this girl's grief seemed fresh to-day. Her own mother had been dead less than three years.

She did not acknowledge that her mother was only a memory. She hardly realized it, indeed. Only, conscious of that vague, strange discomfort, she had an impulse to get away from it. She put a languid question.

"What have you done since?"

"I've learned what a difference mothers make," returned the girl soberly. Then she darted suddenly outside the range of the umbrella.

"What's that? A gopher?" she cried. "Oh, my goodness, it's only one of those ridiculous Dutch dogs."

"It might have been, you know," she said as she returned to the shade. Then she resumed the subject she had dropped. Elsie Marley said to herself that she needn't listen, but as a matter of fact she heard every word.

"I was so small I couldn't do much, and we had an awful time for a year. Dad was always more or less hard up, but he was worse after the earthquake, and if we had a servant she wasted things so that he was wild. He married again—a schoolteacher, and it wasn't a year, quite, after—the earthquake. Most people didn't blame him, but Uncle John where I'm going did, and wanted me to come right on East and live with him, but dad wouldn't hear of it. And, anyhow, she was the nicest thing. I loved her dearly at the end of a week. She wanted to keep me with her after dad died, but my uncle insisted upon my coming to him, so here I am."

She looked into the other girl's eyes half appealingly, though her big dimples were dimly visible.

"She wouldn't stand for my being an actress, either, so there you are. And I liked her so much I couldn't half urge her. And that's the worst of it; if I stay with my uncle the least little while I shall get to liking him so much I shan't be able to run away. It's perfectly terrible to get so fond of people when you want a career. I suppose the thing to do would really be to disappear right now. Oh, not this moment, but simply never to go to Enderby. Suppose I should go right on to New York with you?"

Elsie Marley gazed at her without a word and almost without expression. But within, she was secretly roused. She marvelled at the stranger's audacity. She was surprised to feel that she was not

bored. She decided that she would not return to the car until they should be summoned.

As she was fumbling in her mind for the response the Moss girl evidently awaited, one of the children whose acquaintance the latter had made came running up to her and shyly took her hand and kissed it. Again putting the umbrella into the other girl's hands, Elsie Moss impulsively caught the little thing into her arms and fondled her. Then dropping her gently, she took both the little hands in hers and danced away with her.

They made a charming picture against the long, yellow prairie-grass. The little girl moved with the grace of a child, but Elsie Moss danced like a fairy. Her cheeks glowed, her dark eyes shone, her dimples twinkled, her feet scarcely seemed to touch the ground. Her red hat was like a poppy-cup, and the dark hair tumbling about her little face, elf-locks. Elsie Marley gazed spellbound.

But only for a moment; on a sudden she turned and made her way back to the car, which was almost empty. She returned not because she wanted to, not even because she was indifferent as to what she did. She went because she didn't want to. Unconsciously she was struggling against yielding to the charm of the vivid young creature who threatened to take her by storm. In all her life she had never been deeply or warmly affected by another personality. Perhaps now she realized this dimly, and some instinct warned her subtly to avoid any departure from old habitude, even when avoidance meant the first real struggle she had ever made against definite inclination.

It seemed long before the other occupants of the car began to stroll in. Then the engine whistled sharp warning, the laggards trooped back, and the train started briskly. Elsie Moss entered by the rear door, as Elsie Marley knew, though she did not turn around. She said to herself that no doubt she would be upon her directly, that she would have her company for the rest of the day and the remainder of the journey. But she established herself in the middle of the seat lest she seem to give any invitation.

CHAPTER III

Elsie Marley was not interrupted, as it happened. Some little time passed and still she was alone. The girl could not understand a certain unrest that was upon her. She waited a few moments longer, then she moved close to the window so as to leave more than half the seat vacant. Still nothing happened.

At length she turned and looked back. Elsie Moss, who sat between an old lady and a little boy, smiled and nodded. Elsie Marley half smiled. Still the other made no move. Then she looked back, really smiled, and beckoned her to a place beside her.

Elsie Moss, more than willing to be summoned, had some difficulty in getting away from her present companions. But the grandmother prevailed upon the little boy to spare her, and she presented herself at Elsie Marley's seat smiling in her irresistible way with the big dimples indented, and looking as if she would like to hug her as she had hugged the little girl outside. And Elsie Marley had a curious intimation that she shouldn't have minded greatly.

"What do you think," exclaimed Miss Moss as she seated herself, "you know all my family history and I don't even know your name. I've been guessing. It ought to be either Isabel or Hildegarde. Is it? Oh, I do wish it were, they're both so sort of stately and princess-like that they'd just suit you."

"It isn't either," responded the other with a curious sense of disappointment. "My name is Elsie also."

"Of all things! But it's rather jolly, after all. And what's the rest?"

"Marley, Elsie Pritchard Marley. But at home they called me Elsie Pritchard, because I am—all Pritchard."

Unacquainted with the Pritchard distinction, Elsie Moss was not impressed. But she exclaimed gleefully over the real surname.

"Elsie Marley!" she cried. "Why, isn't that funny, and oh, isn't it dear! Elsie Marley, honey!"

The other girl looked blank.

"Of course you know the song, or at least the rhyme?"

"Song? Rhyme?"

"Why, yes. You must have heard it: 'And Do You Ken Elsie Marley, Honey?'"

"Is it really and truly Elsie Marley?" queried the pale Elsie speaking for the first time like a real girl, though she had no girlish vocabulary from which to draw.

"Sure," asserted the other, delighted to be able to surprise her seatmate. And she sang a stanza in the sweetest voice Elsie Marley had ever heard, though she had heard good music all her life, and famous singers.

"Do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?
The wife who sells the barley, honey?
She won't get up to serve her swine,
And do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?"

"Is there—any more?" demanded Elsie Marley almost eagerly.

"One more, and then you just repeat the first. I've known it all my life. Mother used to sing it to me when I was a baby. Then a few years ago when I first went to see vaudeville, I 'got it up,' as they say, with dancing and a little acting. I used to spring it on people that came to the house. Dad liked it, but it made my stepmother feel bad—dad said because I was too professional."

She sighed deeply.

"Sing the rest, please, Elsie?" asked the other, using her name for the first time.

"I will if you'll let me call you Elsie-Honey? You see it really belongs."

Elsie knew that it was silly, but she found herself quite willing. She seemed under a strange spell.

"Only," she added, with a stronger sensation of discomfort, "after to-morrow it isn't likely we'll ever see one another again."

"Oh, yes we will, sure. Why, we just *must*—at least if you want to half as much as I do, Elsie-Honey?"

"I do," Elsie confessed shyly and now with a curiously pleasant feeling. "And now, Elsie, please sing the other stanzas."

"It sounds just dear to say *stanzas*," cried the other. "I should always say *verses*, even if I didn't forget which was which."

With an absurd little flourish of her hands, she turned slightly in her seat. The dimples came out strongly, and though she sat quite still, there was truly something dramatic in the manner in which the would-be actress sang the lines.

"Elsie Marley is grown so fine
She won't get up to feed the swine,
But lies in bed till eight or nine,
And surely she does take her time.

Do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?
The wife who sells the barley, honey?
She won't get up to serve her swine,
And do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?"

Both girls broke into natural, infectious laughter. Mr. and Mrs. Bliss, or any one who had known Elsie Marley, could scarcely have believed their eyes or credited their hearing. But Elsie's father, who had died while she was an infant, had had a warm heart and a keen sense of humor, and it might well be that his daughter had inherited something of this that had lain dormant all the while. For truly, the wholesome, hardy qualities brought out in others through simple human association had had little chance to germinate in her hothouse existence in the Pritchard household.

Despite the rumble of the train, four children in the rear of the car caught the sound of the singing and came trooping up begging for more. A pretty nursemaid followed with a fat, smiling infant. Elsie Moss made her sit down with it (beside Elsie Marley!) and she herself perched on the arm of the seat and sang song after song until it was time to go into the dining-car. The children, wild with enthusiasm, were not in reality more appreciative of the lovely voice than Elsie Marley herself. The two girls went in to dinner together in happy companionship.

CHAPTER IV

Elsie Marley lay in her berth that night for some time in a state between musing and actually dreaming. She was conscious—partly conscious, that is—of a new sensation of happiness. She did not, however, at all realize how fortunate she was. She did not know that for the first time in her life the door of her heart had been opened in response to another. It was, perhaps, open only a crack. Possibly it had been fast so long that it would not remain open. None the less, at the moment it stood ajar.

After dinner the girls had talked late—late for sleeping-car hours, that is to say. Elsie Marley

herself had talked; had said more in an hour than she had ever before said in a day. Questioned in a frank, sympathetic manner by the other Elsie, she had been led to speak of her grandmother's household and of her daily life there, going into details so far as she knew how, as she found the other so generously and romantically concerned. Then she had gone on to speak of Cousin Julia Pritchard and the boarding-house, confessing her apprehension and dread, which seemed somehow to have become more definite in the interval. She even showed the stranger Cousin Julia's letter.

Having perused it, Elsie Moss acknowledged that it wasn't altogether a pleasant outlook for such a one as Elsie Marley, honey, though she herself wouldn't mind it. Indeed, she declared that she should have liked it immensely. And finally, as she left to go back to her berth, she exclaimed with fervor that she only wished that Miss Pritchard were her cousin, and the Reverend John Middleton Elsie Marley's uncle and guardian.

As those were Elsie Moss's last spoken words that night, so that thought was uppermost in her mind as she fell asleep shortly after her cropped head touched the pillow. And next morning when she woke early with a startlingly delightful idea, it almost caused her to bound from her upper berth as if it had been a bed in the middle of a stationary floor. For it came not in embryo, not in the egg, so to speak, but full-fledged. It seemed as if she couldn't possibly wait until she was dressed to divulge it to Elsie Marley.

But Elsie Marley was, like her prototype, late in rising, and the other Elsie's eagerness grew yet keener as she waited. Finally, however, they were alone together in the former's seat, as the train sped rapidly eastward.

Elsie Marley's countenance seemed almost to have changed overnight. There was truly something in it that had not been there before. Of course it was not animated now; nevertheless, it was not so utterly wanting in expression as it had been the day before, even in juxtaposition with the vivid little face beside her.

"Oh, Elsie-Honey, I've got something perfectly gorgeous to tell you," cried the dark Elsie. "Listen—you're not very keen about going to your cousin's, are you?"

Elsie confessed that she liked the idea less than ever.

"And I just *hate*—the short of it is—I simply *cannot* go anywhere but to New York. You'd ever so much prefer Enderby because it's select and has culture and advantages, and you'd sooner have a dignified clergyman uncle than a newspaper cousin. As for me, I should adore Cousin Julia."

"It seems a pity, surely," admitted Elsie quietly.

The other looked at her. "You see what's coming, honey?"

She shook her head, perplexed.

"Oh, Elsie-Honey! It's plain as pudding. Presto! change! That's all. Aren't we both Elsie, and don't we both want just what's coming to the other? All we have to do is to swap surnames. See?"

Still Elsie Marley did not understand.

"Shake us up in a box, you know," the other explained, her dimples very conspicuous, "and you come out Elsie Moss and I, Elsie Marley, without the honey. You go to live with Reverend John Middleton and I'll go to New York and try to persuade your Cousin Julia to let her supposed relative study for the stage. What could be better? It's simply ripping and dead easy. Neither of them has seen either of us. Uncle John would draw a prize instead of me, and—I'd be awfully good to your cousin, Elsie-Honey."

Really to grasp a conception so daring and revolutionary took Elsie Marley some time. But when she had once grasped it, she considered it seriously. It did not seem to her, even at first, either unreasonable or impossible. Indeed, influenced by the enthusiasm of the other girl, she began to feel it both reasonable and fitting. In a way, too, it was only natural. For after all, the girl had always had her way made smooth for her, and this appeared only a continuation of that process. She certainly *didn't* want to go to Cousin Julia's, and she liked the idea of living in the quiet parsonage of the aristocratic country town.

Indeed, she agreed to the proposal more readily and unquestioningly than a girl of more imagination or experience could have done. For her part, Elsie Moss foresaw certain complications, though in truth only the most obvious ones. They discussed these gravely, yet with much confidence. Indeed, an older person must have been both amused and amazed at the youthfulness, the inexperience, and the ignorance of life the girls exhibited, at their utter unconsciousness that they were not qualified to act as responsible human beings and shuffle blood relationships about like pawns on a chess-board.

"There's certainly nothing about it that even my stepmother could object to," Elsie Moss concluded. "Nobody's being cheated: they are both going to get what they would really choose if they had a chance, and to escape what might be very uncomfortable, and so are we. We're both Elsies, and about the same age, and have brown eyes: if Uncle John were to take his pick, wouldn't he take a quiet, dignified, ladylike Elsie, instead of a harum-scarum one with short hair that was mad for the stage? And

Aunt Milly being rather frail, I should have driven her to drink, while you're used to an invalid aunt. Isn't it just wonderful? The more I think of it, the *righter* it seems. I almost feel now as if it would be wrong *not* to do it, don't you?"

Like one in a dream, Elsie Marley assented. She was almost giddy at the swift flight of the other's imagination. She listened spellbound while Elsie Moss spun plans, able herself to contribute nothing but assent and applause. Under skilful questioning, however, she related all the Pritchard traditions and family history that Cousin Julia might be expected to be familiar with, and endeavored in a docile manner to learn enough of Moss and Middleton annals to take her part in the Middleton household.

Elsie Moss possessed a certain sort of executive ability which enabled her to make the practical arrangements for carrying through the plan. Quite self-reliant, she planned to accompany the other to Boston to make sure that all went well, going thence herself to New York. After consultation with the conductor in regard to time-tables, she sent a telegram asking Miss Pritchard to meet a later train. The change in the destination of their respective luggage was more difficult to effect, but she accomplished that also, and both girls changed cars for Boston.

Indeed, presently it seemed as if the only difficult part of the whole affair would be the parting from each other. They were to write frequently, of course, and not only for the sake of mutual information; but it seemed, particularly to the pale Elsie, who had never had a friend, cruelly hard to have to be separated so soon from this most charming companion. She gazed at her wistfully, unable to express herself.

The other Elsie, as quick, nearly, to read as to express feeling, and naturally the more impulsive, answered from her heart.

"Oh, we'll see each other often, we'll just have to, Elsie-Honey," she cried. "And anyhow, we'll want to compare notes and brush up on our parts. We'll visit back and forth. You come to New York and I ___"

She stopped short.

"My goodness, that'll never do! I can never come to Enderby. You'll have to do all the visiting, honey. I'm the very image of my mother, and I'd give it all away."

"Oh," said the other feebly.

"You've noticed that I have dimples, I suppose?" inquired the other gloomily.

Elsie could not deny it, though denial was evidently what the other craved.

The latter sighed deeply. "Then they're just as plain as ever, and would give me away first thing," she said. "Dad used to say he had never seen such big dimples as mother's, and that mine were just like 'em. He said if I had straight yellow hair and blue eyes, any one that had seen her would know me. Oh, dear, aren't you lucky to have nothing conspicuous about you? I'm sure you're not the image of any one, Elsie-Honey, and you'll come to see me often enough to make up, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, Elsie, unless he—Mr. Middleton—should object to my coming to New York alone?"

"You'd better begin right away calling him Uncle John, so as to get used to it as soon as you can," suggested the other. "And I'm sure he won't object. I'm sure from his letters that he's not an old fuss, and it's a straight trip with no changes from Boston to New York. And Cousin Julia and I will meet you at the Grand Central!"

She grinned at her own *cheek*, as she called it, and the other Elsie smiled happily.

"Just the same, I'm more than sorry not to be able to come to Enderby to visit," Elsie Moss declared. "You know it would be simply stunning practice, playing the stranger in my uncle's house—something like the real wife in 'East Lynne,' you know."

"I never saw 'East Lynne.'"

"Dear me, I cried quarts and bucketsful over it. It's the most tragic play! If I had time I could show you how it goes. I always act things out over and over after I've seen them, making up words where I don't remember them. But, alas! we haven't any time to spare with what we've got ahead of us, have we, honey? Now we must arrange for meeting Uncle—no, I must call him *Mr.* Middleton."

On a sudden the girl clasped her hands in apparent distress.

"Oh, I never thought!" she cried. "It won't even be safe for Uncle John to see me at the station in Boston. Well, I shall have to drop behind and keep perfectly sober. I'll just watch out to see that everything's all right with you, and then I'll skidoo. Dear me, I hope I don't look so awfully unlike the Marleys as to frighten Cousin Julia?"

Had she said the *Pritchards*, Elsie would have been in a quandary; as it was, her face brightened.

"She never knew the Marleys, and there aren't any now," she said. "She knows only the Pritchards."

"Hooray! I shall harp on the Marleys morning, noon, and night!"

"She'll like you," observed Elsie wistfully. "You know she spoke in her letter of young life."

"I shall adore her, dear old thing!" cried the warm-hearted girl. "And Uncle John will adore you. He adored my mother, who was quiet and deep like you. He was always sending her rare things, and pitying her because she was poor and longing to send her money, though dad wouldn't have that."

The appearance of an expressman warned them that they were nearing Boston.

"You're perfectly sure that you're willing to exchange New York for Enderby?" demanded Elsie Moss suddenly.

"Oh, yes, indeed, Elsie."

"And you don't yearn for Cousin Julia?"

Elsie Marley half smiled. "Oh, no," she declared.

But the other was determined not to take any undue advantage.

"Now listen," she said; "if after you see Uncle John you don't fancy him, just say the word or nudge me or wink and I'll swap back without a word. I'll simply step up and say, 'Oh, Uncle John, you've kissed the wrong girl!' though, of course, he may be too dignified to kiss at a train. And then I'll introduce you properly."

They sped on. Soon a trainman entered to say that the next station was Boston and request them not to leave any articles in the car. They said good-by to each other before the train stopped, kissing warmly like real friends. Then Elsie Moss tied a large, dark veil over her hat and well down over her forehead and eyes. It looked as inappropriate for the hot day as the scowling expression she assumed to cloak the dimples was ill suited to her charming little face.

As they alighted, and a handsome, distinguished-looking gentleman in grey clerical garb advanced to meet them, she fell behind. Raising his hat, he took the hand of the girl who was not his niece.

"And this is Elsie?" he said in a fine, kindly voice.

She murmured a weak affirmative. He kissed her affectionately, took her portmanteau from the porter, and turned to the girl who had come from the car with her.

"And this is your friend, Elsie?" he inquired.

Elsie Moss came forward, scowling so fiercely that the other, despite her blunted sense of humor, could scarcely keep from laughing out.

"My friend, Miss M-Marley," she stammered.

Mr. Middleton shook hands with his sister's daughter, took her satchel, and asked how he could serve her. The girl replied in a thin falsetto voice, which she realized immediately didn't go with the scowl so well as a gruff tone would have done, that she had only twenty-five minutes to get the train for New York and must say good-by at once and take a cab for the other station.

However, he didn't let her go so easily. Assuming charge in a simple, offhand manner, he found a taxicab which took them to the South Station, led her to the ticket-office, secured a chair, and put her on the train.

She kissed Elsie Marley again, squeezing her hand meaningly. And she nearly forgot and showed her dimples, looking out of the window as her train pulled out, to see them together, her uncle with his hat in his hand, Elsie waving her pocket-handkerchief.

"He's a darling," she said to herself as they moved toward the Trinity Place Station, "and it's mighty lucky for my career that I didn't see more of him. But he'll be far happier with that lovely honey-princess, and I'm glad she's drawn a prize. As for me, hooray for Cousin Julia and the footlights!"

CHAPTER V

"I hope, Elsie, your friend wasn't in pain?" Mr. Middleton inquired with concern shortly after they were established in the train for Enderby.

"Oh, no," the girl assured him, trying, but vainly, to add "Uncle John."

"I thought she might be suffering from toothache or neuralgia, wearing that scarf about her face on

such a warm day—particularly as she frowned and screwed her mouth in a rather distressed way," he explained.

Elsie smiled. Indeed she almost laughed, partly because she was herself struck by the humor of it, partly because it would so amuse Elsie Moss when she wrote her about it.

"Oh, no," she repeated. "Oh, no, Uncle John"—resolutely—"she was just—well—she was acting, I suppose. She wants very much to go on the stage."

"And doesn't lose any opportunity for practice?" He smiled, but rather ruefully. "Poor child! Somehow, of all ambitions, there seems to be more tragedy, more pitifulness, underlying that than any other. Where one succeeds, so many fail—go down into darkness and obscurity. Your mother had the fever at one time as a very young girl, Elsie. As a matter of fact, she had some little talent in that direction, but fortunately we were able to persuade her to give up the idea entirely." He sighed. "She was so tender-hearted and affectionate that she could have been induced to give up far more precious things than an ambition of that sort."

Elsie was gazing out of the window. He pointed out a country club and several fine estates at a distance, then asked:

"What is your friend going in for, Elsie, comedy or tragedy?"

Elsie didn't know. She explained that while Miss M-Marley seemed like an old friend, she had only met her on the train as they had left Chicago.

"Ah, that's just like your mother!" he exclaimed. "She was just that way, quick to make friends, and yet as loyal and true as any slower and more cautious person could be."

Again he sighed; then added in a lighter tone: "*She* wanted to play tragic parts—youth is apt to—but of course with those dimples she would have been doomed to comedy, if not farce."

He gazed reminiscently at her.

"Your baby pictures had her dimples in small, but I see that as you have grown thin you have lost them. You scarcely resemble her at all, and yet already I see how very like her you are."

Elsie could think of no response, and fearing that he was awaking painful feelings, Mr. Middleton changed the subject by inquiring kindly after her stepmother. Elsie replied according to instructions that she was quite well and much gratified to have secured her former position in one of the San Francisco high schools for the coming year.

As he went on to ask about her journey and to exhibit points of interest along the way, he was so chivalrous and thoughtful that the girl realized that she would be considered and cared for as she never would have been with Cousin Julia, and was genuinely relieved. Then her thoughts flew back to those hours with Elsie Moss between Chicago and Boston, which seemed to her the happiest she had ever known. It came to her that if she could have the other girl's companionship, could see her every day, she didn't know that she would greatly care where she was. Perhaps she could even endure hardship. How serious Elsie Moss had been about her motto, "Per aspera ad astra." For all her gayety, she felt she could go through hardship bravely. Ah, she was a rare person! For the first time in her life Elsie Marley was homesick—and for a stranger!

Happily, there was that about Mr. Middleton which reminded her of his niece. She glanced at him from under her long, pale lashes. A man of fifty, he was tall and thin, with a fine florid face set off by a mass of thick, white hair. His eyes were brown and youthful, full of serenity and kindness, with a shadow of the idealism that characterized his whole face. His voice was good, his speech elegant, appealing particularly to one accustomed to the tones and inflections of the West. Looking forward to meeting his wife, who would probably be equally pleasing, Elsie felt that in any event she should be as happy between visits as it would be possible to be anywhere without Elsie Moss.

A short drive through the quiet, shady streets of what seemed to be an old, historic town brought them to the parsonage, one of a group of handsome, rather stately buildings near and about a green common. Of colonial style, built of brick, it had a portico with great Corinthian pillars, window-frames and cornices of wood painted white, and stood far back from the street with a beautiful lawn studded by great elms and a glimpse of a garden in the rear.

The driveway led to a side entrance under a porte-cochère. As the carriage drew up, Mr. Middleton glanced eagerly toward the door. His face fell.

"Your Aunt Milly will be here directly," he said and ushered her in. As she entered the beautiful hall, Elsie couldn't help feeling how fortunate she was to escape the boarding-house.

There was no one in sight. Mr. Middleton looked about, then led her into one of the great front rooms on either side of the wide hall and asked her to make herself comfortable while he went to see if her aunt were ill.

"She is not very strong, as you know, Elsie, and the excitement may have been too much for her," he explained. "She has looked forward so eagerly to your arrival."

Fortunately he did not await any reply. Elsie felt suddenly stunned as by a blow. Left alone, she gazed about her in amazement that was almost horror. The large, square, corner room lighted by four great windows that reached from the floor to the heavy cornice was comfortably, even luxuriously, furnished, but—the girl could scarcely believe her eyes—it was the most untidy-looking place she had ever been in! The heavy crimson hangings, faded by the strong summer sunlight, lost further color by their layer of dust, quite visible even at this distance and at first sight. There were ashes on the hearth, though the heap of waste-paper, dust, and miscellaneous rubbish in the fireplace showed that it hadn't been used for some time. The piano, a baby-grand, stood open, with dust on its dingy keys and more dust on its shining case. The centre-table held a handsome reading-lamp and some books, but was littered with piles of old newspapers and magazines without covers. A kitchen-apron was flung across an armchair; a dirty, paper-covered book lay on a little table with a plate beside it covered with cake-crumbs, and there were crumbs on the richly colored Turkish rug and on the arm of the tapestry-covered chair on the edge of which Elsie perched.

Surely there was some mistake, some monstrous mistake! She had somehow been brought to the wrong house. It wasn't possible that a gentleman like Mr. Middleton could belong to a household such as this, she was saying incredulously to herself, when a shadow fell athwart the threshold and she looked up to see Mrs. Middleton entering on her husband's arm.

Mrs. Middleton was the key to the enigma, though Elsie's mind wasn't sufficiently alert to grasp the fact at the moment. She stood beside her tall, immaculate husband, a short, rather stout, flabby-looking woman with a sallow face wherein keener eyes than Elsie's might have detected traces of former prettiness, and frowsy, ginger-colored hair that had been curled on an iron. She wore a dingy pink tea-gown bordered with swan's-down, cut rather low and revealing a yellow, scrawny neck. A large cameo brooch took the place of a missing frog, and a pin in the hem disclosed missing stitches. Her hands were covered with rings, her feet thrust into shapeless knitted boots.

She smiled, cried, "Elsie!" in a weak, sentimental manner, and opened her arms wide as if expecting the girl to fly into them.

Elsie, who had risen, advanced stiffly and reached out her hand in gingerly fashion. But Mrs. Middleton gathered her, willy-nilly, into a warm embrace, holding her close against the dingy pink flannel.

Elsie could not struggle against it, as she was moved to do; she could not burst into tears at the indignity; she could not rush out of the house and back to the train, as she longed to do, with the sense of outrage goading her. She was forced to sit down weakly with the others.

Mrs. Middleton gazed at her fondly.

"Dear child! Little orphan stranger!" she cried. "How I have longed for this hour! Indeed, I so longed for it that at the last moment my strength failed me, and when the train whistled I had to drop on my bed in exhaustion. But enough of that. Welcome to our home and hearts!"

Murmuring some chill, indistinct monosyllable, Elsie glanced dumbly at Mr. Middleton, who was looking at his wife as tenderly as if she had been all that Elsie had expected her to be. Were they both mad?

"Jack, dear, you have never asked Elsie to take off her things—your own niece!" exclaimed Mrs. Middleton reproachfully. And she turned to Elsie with her sentimental smile.

"These men, my dear!" she said, and coming to her side begged the girl to let her have her wraps.

Elsie wanted to cry out that she wasn't going to stay, that she was no kin of theirs, and was going away on the next train. But she couldn't utter a word. She removed her hat and jacket dumbly, wondering which dusty surface they would occupy. As Mr. Middleton carried them into the hall, she could only guess.

On his return, he noticed the kitchen-apron, picked it up and held it a moment irresolutely. Then opening a door in the wainscot near the fireplace he flung it in. Before the door went to, Elsie had a glimpse of worse disorder—of the sort that is supposed to pertain to a junk-shop.

"That's Katy's apron," remarked Mrs. Middleton plaintively. "Do you know, Jack, I feel sure she sits in here when there's no one around. Now that book on the table by the window must be hers."

"It's no harm for her to sit here when the room is not in use," returned Mr. Middleton kindly, "but when she goes, I wish she would take her things along." And he picked up the novel and was about to consign it to the same dump when his wife held out her hand for it.

"What mush!" she cried as she fingered the greasy pages, while Elsie flinched inwardly. And unobservant as the girl naturally was, she could not help noticing that Mrs. Middleton retained the book.

"Don't think, dear Elsie, that we're unkind to our poor but worthy Kate," the latter remarked, sitting down next to Elsie and taking the girl's limp hand in hers. "As a matter of fact, she has a sitting-room of her own. This house, you know, is very old. It matches the other, newer buildings only because they were built to suit its style. The original owners, the Enderbys, for whom the town was renamed,

had many servants and provided a parlor for them. Of course your uncle and I can afford to keep only one, but we gave her the parlor, hoping she would appreciate it. But it doesn't look out front, so she doesn't care for it and uses it as a sort of store-room."

"I wonder if Elsie wouldn't like to go to her chamber now," Mr. Middleton suggested, remarking suddenly how tired the girl looked. He had thought her surprisingly fresh after the long journey, but apparently only excitement had kept her up.

Elsie looked at him gratefully. She was longing to be by herself in order to determine what she was to do.

"Yes, Jack, that's exactly what the poor dear wants; I've been trying to get a word in to ask her," agreed Mrs. Middleton plaintively. Elsie rose.

"Where did you decide to put her, Milly? In the blue room?"

"Yes, dear, but I'm not perfectly sure whether Katy got it ready. Do you mind calling her?"

He fetched the handsome, slatternly maid servant, who drew up the lower corner of her apron crosswise to disguise its dirt, but openly and unashamed, and only to uncover a dress underneath that was quite as untidy.

"Katy, this is our niece, Miss Moss, who has come to live with us," Mrs. Middleton announced. "Have you got the blue room ready for her?"

Katy bowed low to Elsie before she replied.

"No'm, not yet," she said.

"Oh, Katy, when I told you to be sure?"

"No'm, you didn't," responded the woman pleasantly.

"Dear me! Well, I meant to; I suppose it slipped my mind."

She turned to Elsie. "I've been particularly wretched all day, scarcely able, with all my will-power at full strain, to hold up my head."

"It seems to me," she addressed Kate reproachfully, "you might have done it anyhow. You knew what Mr. Middleton was going in town for."

"I'll get a place ready for her right now in no time, ma'am," Katy assured her cheerfully. As she was leaving the room with an admiring look at Elsie, she glanced suspiciously at Mrs. Middleton, whose hand was hidden in a fold of her wrapper.

"Is that my story-book you've got, ma'am?" she inquired.

Mrs. Middleton drew forth the book, looked at it as if in great surprise, and gave it to Kate, who disappeared at once. Mr. Middleton followed with Elsie's luggage.

Elsie, who did not resume her seat, walked to the window and gazed out, without, however, seeing anything. Mrs. Middleton began to rhapsodize over the elms and oaks and some rooks in the distance that were really crows. But before she had gone far, Katy appeared to say that the room was ready. If she had not done it in no time, as she had proposed, she had certainly spent as little time as one could and accomplish anything. Mrs. Middleton led Elsie up-stairs, threw open the door of the room with a dramatic gesture, kissed and fondled her, and finally left her to get a good rest.

Elsie closed the door after her, dropped into a chair and, burying her face in her hands, sat motionless.

CHAPTER VI

For some time Elsie could not think. She could only sit there in a sort of dumb horror. Presently she raised her head, opened her eyes, and deliberately surveyed the room.

Like the others she had seen, it was large and handsomely furnished. There was a great brass bed and heavy mahogany furniture. The walls were hung with blue, the large rug was blue-and-gold, and the chintz hangings and covers blue-and-white. There was a great pier-glass, a writing-desk, and a bookcase. In spite of the fact that everything bore the appearance of having been hastily dusted, it was fairly neat and very attractive.

Still confused, with a stunned sensation that precluded decisive action, Elsie decided that she

might as well remove the dust of travel, and rising, slipped off her blouse.

As she turned on both faucets in the bowl in the small dressing-room adjoining, a thick scum rose to the surface of the water, and she realized the bowl had not been washed for some time. At first she gazed at the dust helplessly. Utterly unused to doing anything for herself, she looked about anxiously. Two towels, clean but not ironed, lay on the rack. She hesitated, then grasping one of them as if it were the proverbial nettle, she attacked the bowl, gingerly at first, then with some vigor; and presently, with the aid of some dirty fragments of soap she found in the receptacle, using the second towel to dry it, she had the enamelled surface clean and shining. With an odd sense of satisfaction, she threw the towels to the floor, opened her portmanteau, took out her own toilet-case, and proceeded to wash.

Refreshed physically and even a trifle in spirit, she slipped on her dressing-gown and sat down by the window to consider. She knew now that she should have spoken immediately upon seeing Mrs. Middleton, thus avoiding more unpleasantness than the caresses. Having delayed her explanation of the masquerade, she had made it the more difficult. Even now she dreaded shocking or even hurting Mr. Middleton.

She rose and moved about irresolutely. The dress she had taken off lay on the couch against the foot of the bed, and though she had never been accustomed to caring for her clothes, she started instinctively to hang it away. Opening the door into the clothes-press, she shrank back.

A commodious closet with shelves and drawers, it was as much worse in its confusion and disorder than the cupboard down-stairs as it was larger. Each hook bulged and overflowed with clothing: tawdry finery, evening-gowns, old skirts, wrappers, sacks, bath-ropes, knitted jackets and shawls and miscellaneous underclothes. The drawers were so crammed that none would shut. The shelves were piled high with blankets, comfortables, old hats, a pair of snow-shoes, pasteboard boxes, and bottles without number; while on the floor were boots, shoes, and slippers in all stages of wear, overshoes, a broken umbrella, a walking-stick, a folding-table, and more boxes. And everywhere the dust lay thick.

Shutting the door hastily, Elsie flung herself upon the couch, covering her face and pressing her fingers upon her closed eyes. What a—*heathenish* place! She really didn't possess the sort of vocabulary to express the enormity of it. How should she get away? Suppose there were no train to-night? Suppose she should have to remain until morning?

If only it were a hotel! If only Mr. Middleton weren't so fine, or if Mrs. Middleton had gone into Boston! One look at her would have been enough: she would have known she could never endure her. Better Cousin Julia with all her oddities. She would have made the sign agreed upon and gone straight on to New York. And then—poor Elsie Moss! After all, Mrs. Middleton wasn't any real relative of hers, either. She only hoped that the other girl might find Cousin Julia so very disagreeable that she wouldn't too painfully mind being dragged back here.

Some one knocked at the door. Feeling that she couldn't possibly encounter Mrs. Middleton at this juncture, the girl remained silent.

"It's only Katy," said a pleasant voice, and Elsie bade her come in.

The warm-hearted Irishwoman knew in an instant that something was wrong, and suspected homesickness. She spoke fondly, as to a child, saying that tea was nearly ready, and added: "Have you got everything that you want, miss?"

Elsie could have laughed at the unconscious irony.

"The clothes-press is full of mussy things, and the wash-bowl was dirty, and there weren't any clean towels," the girl almost wailed.

"Bless my soul, I guess that wash-bowl was forgot for a matter of a few days!" Katy exclaimed. "Dear me, I'm so sorry. But them towels was clean, only not ironed. I hadn't got round to 'em yet, and I didn't know where to lay my hands on any that was put away. There's a lot somewheres, for we keep a-buyin' and a-buyin'. And I'll just go at this room the first thing after breakfast in the mornin' and make everything clean and shinin'. I meant to 'a' done it to-day, but I didn't get a minute, and I thought one night wouldn't make much matter."

While Elsie was endeavoring to frame some sentence to inform Katy that she needn't take the trouble, the latter suddenly remembered something in the oven and disappeared. Elsie rose and dressed. She couldn't eat in such a place, but she couldn't get away without explaining and, perhaps, the tea-table would be a suitable occasion for that.

Mr. Middleton met her at the foot of the stair and led her to the dining-room. Another surprise! The room was not only large, pleasant, and airy, overlooking a beautiful garden, but it was neat and tidy, and the table was spotless, with fine damask, delicate china, and beautiful silver. The food was delicious—Elsie had taken her place perforce—and was particularly appetizing after five days on the train.

Mrs. Middleton still wore the pink wrapper, but she had little to say, and her husband was so elegant and attractive, was in such good spirits and talked so entertainingly, that Elsie almost forgot. In any event, before the meal was over she had decided to remain overnight, and to postpone her confession until morning.

The evening passed pleasantly. Mrs. Middleton excused herself directly after tea, and Mr. Middleton took Elsie out to show her the garden, which he tended himself, an old-fashioned garden with formal beds radiating from a sun-dial. Thence they went to his study, an attractive room lined with books, which, though untidy, was not startlingly so, not, perhaps, far beyond that peculiar limit of disorder allowed to a student's sanctum.

Here the Reverend John Middleton, unmistakably and infectiously happy, talked with his supposed niece for an hour. Full of enthusiasm, quieter but almost as youthful as that of Elsie Moss, of ideas and ideals, he had not realized his want of companionship and sympathy, nor understood why he had looked forward so eagerly to the coming of the daughter of the sister who had been the companion and intimate friend of his youth and young manhood. Believing he saw already much of the mother in the girl, he seemed to feel no need of preliminaries, of getting acquainted. He strove only to make her feel at home, hoping there might be no strangeness even on the first night.

His powers being by no means inconsiderable, he succeeded so well that Elsie Marley went to her room in a state of real exhilaration that was almost tumult. The door of her inner nature, set ajar by Elsie Moss, had opened wide. She had never in all her sixteen years been really roused out of herself until she met the former; and she had never come in contact with a nature so rich and fine as that of the clergyman. Further than this, something else stirred in the girl's heart—something better than the desire to hold this friend for her own. Unawares, dimly, she felt his reaching out for sympathy, realized dimly that there was something that even a young girl could do for him. And suddenly a feeling of depression that was like regret or even remorse took possession of her. The confession she had to make would hurt him deeply, even now.

Her trunk had been brought in and the straps unfastened. For an instant Elsie wavered. Finally she got her key from her pocketbook. But even as she crossed the room, she thought of Mrs. Middleton, the dingy swan's-down and the caresses, and decided not to unlock the trunk.

She stood by the window looking out absently over the soft, starlit landscape. She felt sorry for Mr. Middleton and sorry for Elsie Moss; and curiously enough those two were the two persons in the world in whom she had any real interest! Perhaps the latter wouldn't mind her aunt as she did; and of course she would be, to use her own expression, "crazy over" her uncle. Then, too, with all her charm and vivacity, she could do much more to brighten the monotony and squalor of his life. And yet, her heart was set upon becoming an actress, and it would be much harder now to give it up than if she hadn't seemed to have a fair chance to pursue her studies. Elsie remembered dimly tales she had heard of people dying from broken hearts. Somehow, it seemed almost as if that vivid, sparkling Elsie Moss would be of the sort to take things so hard that—

She broke off, turned from the window, and began to undress. So far as Mr. Middleton was concerned, it occurred to her that possibly some one who hadn't any ambition might learn to do even better toward helping him than one whose heart was divided. She said to herself that she wouldn't decide definitely against opening her trunk until morning. If she should find, for instance, that Mrs. Middleton kept her room the greater part of the time, it might make some difference.

Ready to put out the light, she noticed that the covers of the bed had not been turned down—an omission unparalleled in her experience. With a sigh, she drew down the counterpane, only to discover, with actual horror, the bare mattress underneath. The bed had not been made!

Such was Elsie Marley's consternation that had she been a person of resource, she would have dressed and left the house at once; but if she possessed any such quality, it was wholly undeveloped. As it was, however, she said to herself she could not even stay for breakfast. She would go at daybreak!

CHAPTER VII

Kate came to the door next morning just as Elsie had finished dressing, and, being admitted, asked if Miss Moss wouldn't come down and pour her uncle's coffee and eat breakfast with him.

"He's sort o' hangin' off as if, perhaps, he was hopin' you might," she added, eying the girl admiringly.

Elsie's purpose to go immediately had been with her as she awoke, but it didn't seem worth while to hold out at the moment: possibly she might have a favorable opportunity to explain at the table.

But she resented Kate's beaming face, and looked reproachfully toward the bed, which told its own shocking story of having no linen nor blankets. Still Kate was oblivious. Elsie really hardly knew how to complain, but perhaps to learn that is easier than to learn to praise; and there was a certain amount of indignation in her voice as she told how she had been obliged to sleep on the couch in her dressing-gown.

Kate was quite as shocked as the mistress of a well-regulated household would have been. As she accompanied Elsie down-stairs she was voluble in her sympathy, and promised all sorts of

improvements for a future Elsie knew was not to be hers. And yet the girl, who had always been on the most distant terms with her grandmother's servants who had been in the house for years, found herself confessing to this good-natured slattern that she had nevertheless slept soundly and felt refreshed.

Breakfast was so pleasant as to cause visions of an unlocked trunk to float through Elsie's mind. The dining-room was yet more attractive with the morning sun on the garden. Mrs. Middleton did not appear. The girl found a curious pleasure in pouring out the coffee, which was curiously intensified when Mr. Middleton asked for three lumps of sugar. And when he passed his cup the second time she was elated.

While he seemed fully to appreciate the novelty of her company, he seemed also to take it for granted, as if they were to go on so, breakfasting together, indefinitely. He chatted in his easy way, glanced at the paper, reading bits of it to her, commenting on the situation here and across the border. Fortunately, her mind had seemed to quicken with her sensibility, so that she grasped, or partly grasped, ideas that might well have meant nothing to her.

He proposed to take her out to see the town after he had spent an hour in his study. Though it would again postpone her explanation, Elsie decided she might as well go a step further and get a better idea of the place for which Elsie Moss was to exchange New York and her ambition. The day promised heat; the girl was so tired of her travelling-suit that she was tempted to open her trunk and get out a linen frock and her Panama hat, but she wouldn't allow herself to yield.

They were out nearly two hours, strolling leisurely through the quiet old streets. The church and parish-house and a large hall were across the common, the library and museum nearer the centre of the town—all dignified, rather stately, very attractive buildings in harmonizing styles of architecture, whose low and rambling character, with the ivy that well-nigh covered them, and the wonderful green of their lawns, gave them an air of age, particularly appealing to one whose home had been in the West. Handsome houses and charming cottages bespoke their attention as they walked through the wide avenue with double rows of elms on either side, and grass-plots separating the walks from the highway. Just to wander under that leafy arch of a June morning, with glimpses of blue sky and white cloud, was a sensation that made the thought of New York appalling. Cousin Julia had, indeed, spoken once of going to the shore; but who wanted to go to the shore! For herself, nothing seemed so attractive as tall old trees, abundance of green turf, New England, and—*Enderby!*

And all the while she became more aware of the unconscious appeal on the part of Mr. Middleton. As they went on, more and more the girl felt how eagerly he had looked forward to the coming of his niece, how he had anticipated her companionship. And she understood dimly that his eagerness to show her the finer points of everything was not only the desire to make her share his enthusiasm, but a desire to begin at once—to start out friends and companions.

She returned only the more oppressed by the sense of remissness—of remorse. Kate met her at the door of the chamber she had occupied and proudly ushered her in. A real transformation had taken place. Kate could accomplish wonders when she set out, and the great handsome room had been so thoroughly swept and garnished that everything was like new, only with the sense of the dignity of age. The clothes-press, too, had been cleared out (at the expense of the corresponding one in the chamber opposite!); the little wash-room shone; there was abundance of towels and fresh bed-linen, and a vase of sweet peas stood on the freshly laundered cover of the dresser.

Elsie turned gratefully to Kate, but spoke regretfully.

"Oh, Katy, thank you, but I'm sorry you have taken so much trouble. I——"

"Oh, Miss Moss, dear, I love to do it, and I'll keep it so all the time if you'll only stay," urged Kate. "Now don't tell *me*, I've seen it in your eyes that you're homesick and don't like the look o' things, and then you ain't opened your trunk, and your dresses all packed in wrinkles like as not. Do try it a bit longer, please, miss. I promise you things'll be better all over the house. You know there'd be more satisfaction keepin' things up for a pretty girl like you as would appreciate than for a woman as lays round all the time and don't take no interest, though believe *me*, she eats as good as any one, and I can't keep my story-books long enough to find out how they come out at the end if she gets her eye on 'em. All she does is to throw things round for me to pick up, though I will say for her she's pleasant and good-natured, and always a born lady. And Mr. Middleton don't hardly know whether things is upside down or right side up; but he's good as gold and lonesome, though he don't never let on. You can be such a comfort to him; all he hears at home now is about her aches and pains. You couldn't guess how he's blossomed out since you come. He ain't talked so much for years, and he was a-singin' to hisself this mornin' as he hung round wonderin' if you was coming to breakfast—*she* never does. Now Miss Elsie, you jest stand by him. Let me tell you, you'll run up against lots worse things if you set out to earn your own livin'."

Elsie was tempted, but again the thought of Mrs. Middleton arrested her. And by the time Kate shouted inelegantly up the stair that lunch was ready, the girl had decided to explain everything directly afterward and go to Boston to catch the same train Elsie Moss had taken yesterday. And if Mrs. Middleton should appear and attempt to embrace her, she would say: "Wait, please, I have something to tell you that will change everything!"

That lady stood at the newel-post awaiting her. She wore a wrapper of lavender cassimere to-day, elaborately trimmed with lace and knots of pink ribbon. Somewhat fresher than the pink one, it was not

conspicuously so, and her hair was truly a "sight." Elsie was dumb: she couldn't make the prepared speech nor any other. She tried to keep at a distance by reaching out her hand formally. But it proved useless, and again she was gathered to her hostess's heart.

The strangest feature was Mr. Middleton's behavior. He seemed as surprised and delighted to see his wife appear at lunch, as fearful lest she overtax herself, as if she were her own very opposite. The girl couldn't comprehend how one so intelligent, so refined, of such exquisite taste, apparently, could be so blunt in this one particular. She couldn't understand how he could endure, much less care for, this ugly, withered, yellow, untidy woman. However, it made her own position somewhat easier. If he were really aware how impossibly vulgar she was, and took it seriously to heart, Elsie wasn't sure if even thus early she should be able to leave him to bear such misery alone. His unconscious loneliness was appealing enough; conscious unhappiness might have proved more than she could have withstood.

He was called from the table to the telephone. Elsie hoped he wouldn't make any engagement for directly after lunch. If he should, she couldn't risk missing her train. She would speak out at once. She would say: "Oh, Mr. Middleton, I'll say good-by, for I shan't be here when you return." And then she would explain briefly and he wouldn't have time to take it hard while she was there to witness.

CHAPTER VIII

Returning to the table, Mr. Middleton announced with troubled face that Miss Stewart, the librarian, was ill, and he must find some one before three o'clock to take her place. He glanced at Elsie hesitatingly.

"I suppose you are tired, Elsie, dear?"

"Oh, no," she returned and added, almost unconsciously, "Uncle John."

"Then I wonder if I can't work you in at the library for a day or so? It isn't at all taxing, indeed, it's really very pleasant. It's open every day from three to six, and except on Saturday, when there's apt to be a crowd, people drop in in a leisurely way. I could go over with you and get you started and stay until nearly four, when I have a committee meeting. Would you be willing to try, dear?"

"Oh, I'd like it ever so much," she returned, really captivated by the idea. He looked relieved and smiled gratefully.

"There, Jack, it's just as I told you it would be," exclaimed Mrs. Middleton, patting a pink satin bow complacently. "I said to your uncle, Elsie love, that a girl of sixteen is almost a woman—I was only seventeen when I was married—and that he could make an assistant of you right away."

Her smile faded and her hand went to her heart in an affected way.

"My being such a sad invalid is a terrible drag on your uncle, though he won't confess it," she added feebly. "I often and often drop a secret tear over it, I own; but now that there'll be some one to help with the little services that would naturally fall to a pastor's wife, I shall be quite content. You know how the poet says that others shall sing the song and right the wrong? 'What matter I or they?' That is how it seems to me."

Mr. Middleton gazed at his wife tenderly, but Elsie's youthful scorn increased. She was not sufficiently mature to understand that it shows something of character to look on kindly while another younger, fairer person steps in to fulfil duties that should have been one's own, even though one may have repudiated them.

Directly lunch was over, Elsie ran up-stairs—something she seldom had done—unfastened her trunk, took out an embroidered white linen suit and dressed quickly. She could scarcely wait until time to go to the library. She was ready to lose the train to-day, and even to-morrow if need be.

At the library, she found the procedure simple and easily acquired. It was fascinating, also, as was the great airy room; and she wandered about through the stacks, and gazed at the books, magazines, pictures, maps and bulletin-board in a sort of dream. It was a warm day and no one came in during the first half-hour.

Mr. Middleton had scarcely left, however, when a little girl in a scant, faded frock that was clean, however, and freshly starched, came shyly in with a book—a child of nine or ten with an anxious expression on her old, refined little face which hadn't yet lost all its baby curves.

"Why, where's Miss Rachel?" she asked, the look of anxiety fading and a shy little smile appearing in its stead.

Elsie explained.

"Well, I think you're ever 'n' ever so much nicer, and so pretty!" said the child. Then her face clouded again as she opened the book that she held in thin little hands that were like claws.

"The baby did it," she said sorrowfully as she exhibited a picture torn across. "He isn't a year old yet and don't understand. He isn't the least naughty, only *mischeevious*, you know. Ma says I ought not to have been reading it while I was minding him, but you see I'm *always* minding him except when he's asleep—and then he wakes right up, mostly."

She sighed. "Do you s'pose you can mend it?" she inquired.

"Yes, indeed," returned Elsie promptly, and smiled involuntarily.

The child fingered her frock. "Miss Rachel would scold," she faltered,

Elsie didn't know what to say. Neither did she understand why tears should come to her eyes, except that the little girl was so small, so thin, so clean and sweet, and so very childish in spite of her responsibility.

She found some gummed paper, cut a strip, brought the torn edges carefully together and mended the picture as neatly as if she had not been a week ago as helpless an able-bodied girl of her age as there was anywhere to be found. Her sense of satisfaction was certainly commensurate, perhaps extravagant.

"There! Miss Stewart will never know," she said. "Do you want another book now?"

"Yes, please; but—is it right for Miss Rachel not to know?"

Elsie considered. "Perhaps not," she admitted, "but at any rate she won't mind since it looks as well as before."

"And I'll be very careful after this," added the child.

She selected another volume from the children's shelf, and having had it charged, turned to go. But somehow Elsie was loath to have her.

"Why don't you sit down at the table and look at the picture papers?" she suggested.

"Oh, I've got to mind the baby," said Mattie—Mattie Howe was the name on her card. "I must be home when he wakes up. Good-by."

She started—came back—stood irresolute.

"Thank you for mending the book so good—so *goodly*," she said shyly, "and—I'd like to kiss you."

With a curious sensation that had no admixture of reluctance, Elsie bent over and received the kiss.

"You're prettier than the princess," the little girl declared, and ran away with her book.

Elsie Marley hardly knew what would have happened if an elderly lady hadn't come in at that moment and asked for "Cruden's Concordance." She had some difficulty in finding it, but the lady was very pleasant and grateful, and after that there was a constant succession of visitors. Many children came in, all attractive, to Elsie's surprise, though none so appealing as Mattie Howe; and older people in surprising numbers, considering Mr. Middleton's prophecy.

But word had somehow gone round that the minister's niece was "tending library," and things being rather dull in the midsummer pause of most of the activities of the place, no doubt more than one came out of curiosity.

It was a very friendly curiosity, however, expressed in the pleasantest manner, and Elsie found herself responding to their advances without knowing how. She wondered at herself. The girl did not realize that being in the library made a difference. It was her first experience of work, or of doing anything whatever for any one else, so that even the service of getting out books for another established a sort of relationship between them. At the close of the afternoon, though tired, she was strangely happy.

But she couldn't understand it—didn't know herself. She found herself wondering who the stranger was who had worn her frock and occupied the chair of the librarian that afternoon. Grandmother Pritchard wouldn't have recognized her, nor Aunt Ellen. Had she, in assuming another name, changed her nature also?

Shortly before the death of her aunt in California, Miss Julia Pritchard had made up her mind to give up her position at the city desk on her fiftieth birthday, and retire to some pleasant country town to pass the remainder of her life quietly, in friendly intercourse with her neighbors. She felt that she had more than enough to "see her through," as the phrase is, very comfortably. She had worked for over thirty years, her responsibilities and salary increasing periodically; and though she had lived and dressed well and given liberally, she had added each year to a small inheritance that had come to her through her grandfather, and had gained further by judicious investment.

But when both her aunt and cousin died, and she was left guardian of the sixteen-year-old Elsie Marley, whose inheritance was small, Miss Pritchard decided to remain where she was a few years longer. It wasn't imperative, indeed, yet she felt that the last little Pritchard should have the best chance she could give her, and until she should have put her on her feet, the woman of fifty, who was strong and well and at the height of her powers, would gladly remain in harness. Her announcement to this effect was hailed with delight at the office, and another increase made in her salary so substantial that she declared she ought to adopt a whole family.

Though the sacrifice was greater than any one dreamed, nevertheless she made it quietly and cheerfully, expecting no reward nor desiring any. She didn't expect much of Elsie Marley, indeed, recollecting the atmosphere of the household in which the girl had been reared, which she had herself found impossibly stifling during a short visit there fifteen years before.

At that time her Cousin Augusta had been living with her husband and baby in Portland, Oregon. What with her knowledge of the Pritchards in general, however, her observation of that stereotyped family after a long interval of years, and their intense anxiety lest the one descendant of that branch become in any way a Marley rather than a Pritchard, she was able to gather a very fair idea of what Elsie's upbringing must have been. Unless she might have inherited a sense of humor from the Marley side (which was unlikely, since no one possessing a sense of humor would have married Augusta Pritchard), the girl could hardly have escaped becoming a prig at the mildest. Cold, colorless, correct, self-sufficient, Elsie Pritchard would doubtless make her mother's cousin feel keenly her fifty years, her lack of grace, and her general and utter lack of claim to the royal name she bore.

On the other hand, she was also, willy-nilly, Elsie *Marley*, and she was only sixteen. She couldn't have, at that age, completely compassed the woodenness of her adult relations. She might still be amenable to change, to development. In any event, as Miss Pritchard remarked to a friend in the office, any sort of young female connection cannot but be welcome to the heart of a lonely spinster who reaches her half-century milestone on midsummer's day.

Miss Pritchard occupied two large, handsome rooms on the second floor of a boarding-house near Fifth Avenue, a few blocks from the lower end of Central Park. In preparation for the young girl, she had the large alcove of the parlor shut off by curtains and her bed and dressing-table moved into it, and gave over her bedroom to Elsie. She spent much time and thought and not a little money in making it an inviting and attractive place for a girl, and would have felt quite satisfied had it not been for her remembrance of the rather heavy but stately elegance of the mansion in San Francisco.

On the June day on which Elsie was expected, Miss Pritchard confessed to the friend at the office to whom she had spoken before, that she was beginning to feel nervous.

"I almost wish she weren't coming until a week later," she said. "Do you know, I think if I had actually passed my fiftieth birthday, I might feel somehow more solid and fortified. It's really an ordeal for an old-fashioned woman like myself to encounter the modern girl of sixteen. Fifty might pull through, but oh, dear, what of forty-nine plus?"

She was interrupted by the telephone. A telegram which had come to the boarding-house for her was read to her. She was smiling as she hung up the receiver.

"Well, what do you think!" she cried. "My young relative has decided for some reason to take a later train and has telegraphed me to that effect. Now there's something rather alert and self-reliant about that. That girl must have something in her, after all. I can no more imagine her mother or any of the family getting off at any stage of a through journey than I could fancy myself not getting off for a fire or an earthquake or, perhaps, for a wild West show. At the very least, there's a sort of suppleness of mind indicated."

She stood that evening in the station watching the throng emerging from the coaches of the train her cousin had given as hers. A tall, straight woman, large without being stout, her plain face, with large, irregular features, framed in plainly parted iron-grey hair, was singularly strong and fine, and her grey eyes betokened experience bravely met. As she scanned the face of every young girl in the procession, there was something so staunch and true in her appearance as to make it almost striking.

Then on a sudden, right in the midst of it, for a moment she forgot all about Elsie Marley, and what she was standing there for, in the vision that confronted her and surprisingly and instantaneously took her romantic heart by storm. A young girl came straight toward her—such a piquant, sparkling, buoyant young thing as she had never seen before—a small, slender, dark-eyed creature with short brown hair cut square like a little boy's and a charming mouth flanked by dimples that were almost like pockets.

So much she took in in that one long glance. Then, recovering herself, fearful lest she had been lost

to all else about her longer than she knew, she glanced anxiously about for the fair, pale little Pritchard. But the radiant child stopped short before her and looked up into her face.

"Cousin Julia?" she asked in the sweetest voice Miss Pritchard had ever heard. She smiled half-shyly and the dimples deepened.

For a single instant, Miss Pritchard stood still and stared at the girl, not so much incredulous as stunned. Then she cried out:

"Elsie—Elsie Marley?"

"Sure," said the smiling child, holding out her hand. Miss Pritchard gathered her to her heart.

CHAPTER X

From that moment, all idea of sacrifice vanished forever. Miss Pritchard felt suddenly, amazingly, and incomparably blessed. Her realization that the girl's charming face and figure were matched by a most lovable personality came so quickly as to seem instantaneous. In very truth, Elsie's bubbling gayety and sweetness of disposition were as natural and inseparable as her very dimples.

At once, Miss Pritchard's life took on new color, new meaning. The change for her was far greater than if she had carried out her former intention and gone from work in the city to leisure in the country. She was in a new, strange, wonderful country where life was interesting, even thrilling, beyond anything she had ever known. She had not dreamed that youth could be at once so gay and blithe and yet so simple and generous, so spontaneous, so affectionately considerate of the older and the less richly endowed.

For her part, the eager, warm-hearted girl adored Miss Pritchard almost at sight. The strength and sincerity of the woman, her utter unselfishness, her wisdom, her humor, and her keen intelligence combined to make her the most impressive personality the sensitive young girl had ever encountered. Quite untroubled by the ethical aspect of the situation, she gave herself up to it wholly, only troubled lest she had gotten the better part of the exchange she had made with the real Elsie Marley; lest she be cheating the other out of companionship with this wonderful Cousin Julia.

No difficulty offered itself. Keen as she was, Miss Pritchard was without shadow of suspicion. Stare as she would, she couldn't discover any slightest resemblance to the Pritchards in the girl, yet she drew only the one conclusion.

"Elsie, you must be altogether a Marley," she said to her as they sat happily together on the third evening after the girl's arrival. And her voice indicated that she was quite satisfied to have it so.

"I'm certainly no Pritchard," returned Elsie coolly, and not without enjoyment, "begging your pardon, Cousin Julia."

"Well, of course, I ought to regret it, you being the last of the family; but I'm afraid I don't," returned Miss Pritchard. "You see I rather dreaded your coming as that of a double-dyed Pritchard. The Pritchards of my father's generation were pretty stiff, I confess, heavy and solemn and rather pompous. My mother who was a Moore, as no doubt you have heard, had a strong sense of humor, and didn't bring me up in very great awe of the family. She was thankful I didn't take after them, and so have I always been. I often think, what a misfortune had I had to have a Pritchard as a bedfellow and roommate all these years, as I must have had if I had taken after my father—who was, I believe, however, the mildest of the Pritchards, and very much altered by my mother's influence. And girls are usually like papa—as you are—and boys like mamma, they say. Surely, no girl could be less like her mother than you, dear."

Elsie sobered. One of the facts she most cherished was the knowledge that she resembled her adored mother in nature as well as in manner and personal appearance. It would be hard, nay, impossible, to give over that solace. But she told herself she must think *Augusta Pritchard* (what a name!) whenever Cousin Julia said *mother* to her.

"Of course, you don't remember your father, Elsie, but do you remember any other of the Marleys or know anything of them?"

"Just one member of the family," said Elsie, getting down from the window-seat. "I've heard about her ever since I can remember." And bowing low, she began to sing:

"Do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?
The wife who sells the barley, honey?
She won't get up to serve her swine,
And do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?"

Elsie Marley has grown so fine

She won't get up to serve the swine,
But lies in bed till eight or nine,
And surely she does take her time.

Do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?
The wife who sells the barley, honey?
She won't get up to serve her swine,
And do you ken Elsie Marley, honey?"

The wonder and admiration in Miss Pritchard's eyes couldn't be hidden. Elsie threw herself down on the settee by her side.

"That's the only Marley I've ever known, Cousin Julia, but she's rather a dear old body," she said and squeezed Miss Pritchard's arm affectionately.

CHAPTER XI

"How very difficult it's going to be to explain now," Elsie Marley said to herself as she dressed on Friday morning. "How I wish I had done it that very first hour. Mr. Middleton would have understood, then, for I had just told him Elsie liked to act; and he wouldn't have cared. He couldn't have been really hurt as I am afraid he will be now. And yet, how can I help feeling glad I was here to take the library for him? And I did so enjoy doing it, too."

She decided that if Miss Stewart were able to go back this afternoon, she would leave directly after lunch and get the only train for New York that she knew—the one Elsie Moss had taken. And if she couldn't possibly explain in any other manner, she would have to write a note and steal quietly away. It wasn't a nice thing to do; yet she couldn't afford to let the difficulty of explaining the situation keep her here until Elsie Moss should have become so firmly established that it would be cruel to drag her back to Enderby.

On the other hand, as long as she had started in with the library work, if Miss Stewart wasn't well enough to attend this afternoon, she would remain one day more. And if she found that that was to be the case, she would spend her morning writing the note to Mr. Middleton to fall back upon in case of need, and a letter to Elsie Moss warning her of the change.

When she went down to the dining-room, Mr. Middleton had that same air of eagerness mingled with what seemed to Elsie assurance of the permanency of their relationship. After a little he inquired whether her unfamiliar work of the day before had tired her overmuch.

"Oh, no—Uncle John, not at all," she replied, consciously hampered by lack of vocabulary or of tone to express enthusiasm that was new to her.

"Well, then, what should you say to giving Miss Rachel another day of rest?" he suggested. "I have been afraid for some time that she's rather letting people get on her nerves, and possibly a few days off would be a benefit for all concerned. She has lived alone for years, and, good as she is, has grown narrow and notional as one inevitably will who hasn't other personalities in a household to rub against. I dare say if she had her way she wouldn't allow a boy under fifteen in the library."

"She's afraid they'll soil the books?" Elsie remarked lamely, striving to be adequate to the occasion. But somehow, he seemed rich enough to lend her something unawares.

"Yes, dear, that's it, of course, and perfectly natural and legitimate in its place such caution is. But the trouble is, she puts it first and foremost. We want certainly to keep the books as neat as is consistent with constant use, and it's always safe to ask to see a lad's hands; but there are different ways of going about the business. The main thing about a library is, of course, its usefulness to the people; perhaps, most of all to the younger among them. You agree with me, dear, that that consideration comes before everything?"

"Yes, indeed, Uncle John," she said primly.

He smiled suddenly and very charmingly.

"Elsie dear, if I hadn't known that your step-mother was a schoolmistress, I should have guessed it," he declared. "Externally, her influence upon you has almost blotted out your mother's. I'm thankful you didn't stay with her long enough for it to go deeper, excellent woman as I know her to be. As it is, your speech and manner conceal rather than reveal your likeness to your mother, but it struggles through for all that."

He paused and his face grew grave.

"I hope—I trust, dear, you didn't feel—*repressed*?" he asked anxiously. "You are so quiet and reserved and docile for a young girl—especially for your mother's daughter. Your stepmother was—kind

to you, surely?"

"Oh, yes, sir," she faltered, distressed at the dilemma. Vaguely aware that she had an opening for her confession, she made no attempt to use it. "I know I am—everything is"—she faltered.

"You're just right, Elsie dear," he said kindly. "Just be yourself. And if you have learned not to be spontaneous, try to forget it. In any event, never repress any desire for gayety or romping or what-not in this house. You don't at all need to be quiet on your Aunt Milly's account. She isn't strong and she is excitable, and yet she isn't somehow what is called nervous at all. She doesn't mind noise or even tumult; indeed, she likes to feel that things are going on in the house even if she cannot share them."

Even now, Elsie understood that this was quite true in regard to Mrs. Middleton. There was, in spite of what the girl called her falsity, something generous about her. Elsie wasn't herself any the more drawn to her—or any the less repelled—but now she first had a slight inkling of any foundation for Mr. Middleton's strange infatuation. There was, somehow, in the midst of all that sentimentality, some genuine feeling which for him transmuted the whole into pure gold.

Well, for her part, she could stand it another day for the sake of going to the library.

"What are you going to do this morning, Elsie?" Mr. Middleton inquired as they returned to the house after a few minutes spent in the garden.

Elsie colored faintly.

"Write some letters," she said.

Indeed, she spent the whole morning in the attempt, though she accomplished nothing. She made half a dozen beginnings of the letter which was to set forth the scheme Elsie Moss had concocted and she had entered into; but none went further than three sentences, and it began to seem that that expedient were the more difficult. In any event, before she made a seventh trial she turned to the note that was to acquaint Elsie Moss with the situation. Here, she only failed the more dismally. When it was time to dress for lunch, she seemed to be forced to explain to Mr. Middleton just as she was leaving, and to come upon poor Elsie Moss quite unexpectedly. It seemed as if it would almost kill her to do either.

Mrs. Middleton did not appear at lunch and everything was so pleasant that Elsie's spirits rose until she was almost gay. She talked more than she had done since she came—almost more than she had ever done before until she met Elsie Moss—and she was at once gratified and appalled to perceive that she was reminding Mr. Middleton of his sister. Of course, his real niece would remind him still more, but Elsie knew that the wrench to his feelings before she should be established in the parsonage would be severe, even terrible. If only Mrs. Middleton kept her room continually! And yet, he might not like that.

The library was only the more engaging that day. Mattie Howe came in early and they went through a number of shelves in the children's department together in selecting her book. Then Elsie took the little girl in her lap—in a curiously easy fashion—and they looked at the colored pictures in a large book that did not circulate until some one else came in and claimed the librarian's attention.

A roguish-looking boy with a tousled head entered, stared at Elsie in amazement, and went abruptly out. Returning a little later with shining face and wet, parted hair, as he asked at the desk for a book, he spread out a pair of very clean hands in a manner intended to be nonchalant. He was ready and eager to talk and very amusing. Before Elsie got through with him, she had assured him that she meant to read "Robinson Crusoe" within the next fortnight.

Then a lad apparently of about her own age, a high-school boy, shy, but with very gentle manners, who started as if to retreat as he saw her, gathered his courage, returned his book, and stood there undecided.

"Do you want another book?" Elsie asked.

"Have you got anything about Edison?" he asked. "I've got to write a composition about electricity, and I thought I might start with him."

Elsie consulted the catalogue, but greatly to her disappointment was unable to find anything. The boy had such nice manners and such honest, deep-set eyes that she wanted to help him.

"You might start with Benjamin Franklin," she suggested, not very confidently.

"Sure!" he returned, smiling frankly. She got him a biography of Franklin, and he sat down at one of the tables with note-book and pencil and was soon deep in it.

There were a number of references to Franklin in the catalogue, and as Elsie went back to it to see if she might have made a better choice, she saw that one referred to the proper volume of a "Dictionary of American Scientists." It came to her that she might discover Edison in the same place. She was pleased to find several pages of a recent volume of the work devoted to that inventor. She carried it to the boy and pointed out the pages with a feeling of satisfaction almost like triumph.

The afternoon flew. She closed the library regretfully, for she never expected to enter it again. For

to-morrow was Saturday, and if she should stay beyond the afternoon, it would mean she could not get away until Monday. And that she could never stand. For she had gathered somehow that Mrs. Middleton made a special effort to sit up all Sunday except during the time her husband was at church. If it was mostly a case of nerves, Miss Stewart might as well come back one day as another.

But again at dinner Mrs. Middleton was absent from her place. She sent a special request to Elsie to occupy it, and Elsie spent a very happy half-hour telling Mr. Middleton about the happenings of the afternoon, hearing his explanatory comment on persons and things, and serving the pudding. And when he told her he had seen Miss Stewart, who thought she would hardly feel like coming back until Monday, and had assured her that his niece would be glad to take her place another day, Elsie was quite undisturbed.

CHAPTER XII

Elsie Marley was very tired as she locked the door of the library Saturday night and started for *home*, as she caught herself calling the parsonage. She had been there the greater part of the day. She had spoken to Mr. Middleton at breakfast of going over to familiarize herself somewhat with the encyclopaedias and reference-books, and he had asked her to look up certain passages and verify one or two quotations for him. The latter proved a more difficult task for the girl than the clergyman would have dreamed; but she was very happy in doing it, gratified, too, to realize that her handwriting was very clear as well as pretty. And the single cause of her dismay when he thanked and praised her and referred to her mother—or his sister—was that she should not be on hand to help him another Saturday.

The afternoon had been a very busy one, every one in town, seemingly, old, young, and middle-aged, desiring a book for Sunday. A goodly number of girls of near her age came in, sweet-faced girls who, though they couldn't compare with Elsie Moss (who was, however, in a class by herself), seemed more attractive than those she had seen at home. The tall boy who was interested in electricity came again and greeted her shyly, though rather as if they were old friends. Later, older girls and young men who worked in Boston during the week dropped into the library to inquire for the latest novel or to spend part of their half-holiday looking over the picture papers and magazines. All were extremely cordial and friendly. Without actually overhearing anything, Elsie, who wasn't at all quick in regard to matters of that sort, understood, somehow, that there was more or less comparison between herself and the regular librarian, which was not altogether complimentary to Miss Stewart.

As she went up the walk shortly after six o'clock, the girl saw some one gazing out of the window of the room she had first entered four days ago, and recalled her first view, which seemed now far back in the past. There was no one there when she went in, however, and as she realized that the place had not been touched since her arrival, suddenly the glow of satisfaction that had cloaked her weariness changed to wrath. She flew to her room for refuge.

And now real wrath descended upon her. For she found it as she had left it that morning. The bed was not made; her nightgown was on the floor, and the clothes she had worn yesterday scattered about on the chairs. Her brown eyes looked darker and there was a hint of color in her cheeks as she ran down to the kitchen and confronted Kate amid the chaos and confusion of her own domain.

"Katy, my bed hasn't been made, nor my room done to-day," she cried.

"Bless my soul, I clean forgot it," said Kate in real consternation. "I'll go right up this very minute as soon as I've cast my eyes on the oven, though, to tell you the truth, my feet ache like the toothache."

Elsie's feet ached, too, for the first time in her life. Wherefore she partly understood. Her indignation died out.

"Oh, don't bother then, Katy," she said kindly, "I can sleep on the couch to-night. And to-morrow, perhaps, you'll do it early before your feet get tired?"

Kate insisted upon going. "No, you don't sleep on no sofy; not while I can crawl about," she declared, and Elsie followed her up-stairs.

Watching her from her chair by the window, the girl saw that she looked tired, indeed.

"I could have slept on the couch, Katy," she protested.

Kate looked at her—frowned—then smiled.

"Oh, Miss Elsie, a body'd know you lost your mother young. Now if I'd 'a' forgot your uncle's bed, he'd 'a' made it hisself and said nothing. There's many young ladies as makes their own beds, and does all but the heavy sweepin'. I don't suppose you ever did such a thing in your life?"

Elsie confessed that she hadn't. She didn't say that it seemed a burden to turn down the covers.

Again Kate frowned and smiled. Clearly Miss Moss wasn't one to take a hint.

"How would you like to *learn*?" she inquired.

"Oh, I never thought," said Elsie. "Why, yes, of course, if you'll teach me some time, I'll do it every day after I get so that I can."

For the moment she had forgotten her stay was to be so limited.

"Bless you, you'll learn in no time; it's nothing to do," Kate assured her beamingly. "Come here, right now."

Somewhat taken aback, Elsie complied. She was surprised to find that it wasn't difficult nor even unpleasant.

"You see, Miss Elsie, I can't never go about my work and finish one thing before I take up another," Kate explained. "I'm up and down these stairs, up and down, up and down, from mornin' till night, a-waitin' on the missus. When it ain't eggnog, it's beef-tea or gruel, and then again it'll be frosted cake, icing that thick, upon my word and honor! And once she gets hold of me, I have to stay and tell her all the news I get from the grocer and the butcher's boy, and who goes by and what they has on. Not that I don't admire bein' sociable, and I can't help havin' a motherly feelin' for one old enough to be my mother; but I don't get no chance to redd up nowhere except the dinin'-room and his study. And then you know, I ain't no general housework girl, anyways, I've always cooked before; but here I have to do everything, besides waitin' on a woman as isn't any sicker than what I be. If you knew the money she spends on choc'late creams and headache powders and the trashy novels she reads, you'd wonder she ain't even yellower than what she is."

The next morning Elsie set about trying to do her own room. Before she had reached the point of attacking the bed, she had decided that she could save herself a great deal of work by putting things away when she took them off or used them, instead of dropping them, as she had always done, for some one else to pick up. Kate came in and insisted upon helping with the bed.

"But, Katy, don't you want to get ready for church?" Elsie suddenly thought to inquire.

"I went to early mass this mornin', miss. I declare to goodness, I'm that shabby that I don't like to appear out in broad daylight."

"Why, Katy, what do you do with all your money? Do you have parents to support?"

"No'm, I'm an orphan. But I don't have any ready money, and I don't like to take what little I have out of the savings-bank. I ain't been paid my wages sence Christmas."

Elsie was aghast. "But why don't you ask for them?" she cried.

"I do. And she keeps a-promisin', but money slips right through her fingers. I don't like to go to himself about it, because I hate to upset him, and then she's good to me, and I know them headache powders makes her forgetful. I don't know where the money goes: she has a fistful the first of every month, but she owes bills to everybody in town except the undertaker. What I'm afraid of is as some of 'em'll go to himself. The ice man is gettin' as sassy as he can live."

Elsie was shocked beyond expression. The situation would have seemed inconceivable except that anything was conceivable in connection with Mrs. Middleton. The girl had almost forgotten that she was departing shortly, but realizing it, she was the more relieved. Only it would be all the harder for Elsie Moss.

Still, even so, she found she couldn't dismiss the matter thus. Somehow her heart went out to that careless, slipshod, kindly, Irish Kate. Before she went to church, she slipped into the kitchen and insisted upon her accepting fifteen dollars to get herself some clothes before the next Sunday. And when Kate flatly refused to take the money, she developed a curious resourcefulness. She declared that unless she took it, she should go to her uncle and ask him to inquire into the question of her unpaid wages. And Kate succumbed.

After service, Elsie sat down to write to Elsie Moss. She didn't say anything she had meant to say. She knew she ought at least to give her some intimation of the situation, lest the other should be wholly unprepared and enter perhaps upon some course that must be rudely interrupted by the end of another week. But she wasn't clever enough for that.

She spoke of the place and the people and how much she liked them. She told of the three afternoons in the library, and remembering how the other had taken to the children on the train, tried, in her stiff, constrained way, to describe little Mattie Howe, who minded the baby all his waking hours and read a Prudy book a day.

She couldn't even mention Mrs. Middleton. She spoke freely of Elsie's uncle—almost enthusiastically, indeed—told how he had asked if she had toothache, and signed herself, rather abruptly, "Your loving friend, Elsie M——."

The following morning she found a letter on her plate. She had gone by the name of Moss nearly a week, yet it gave her a start to see the address and to break open the envelope.

It was a bright, amusing letter, as informal as her own had been stiff. Elsie Moss found Cousin Julia no end jolly, a perfect brick. The boarding-house was the most interesting place she had ever known, and the people just right; and though New York was stifling she loved it, and wasn't the least in a hurry to get to the shore. She expected very soon to confide her ambition to Miss Pritchard—honestly, she was so dear and splendid, that it was the greatest wonder that she hadn't told her she wanted to be an actress before they left the Grand Central Station....

"I'm simply perishing to hear from you, Elsie-Honey," the letter concluded. "Uncle's a darling saint, I know, but you must tell me about Aunt Milly so I can describe her to my stepmother. I sort of glossed her over in this letter I enclose for you to forward so that it will have the Enderby postmark. I came out strong on Uncle John and the station at Boston, however. And tell me about the servants. I know there's a servants' hall like in English books, so I suppose they have a lot. If there's a butler, I almost envy you, for that would be good practice for me, because most plays have a butler and a French maid. I shall probably be French-maid to the limit if I ever get a start, though I'd rather be a slavey or a chimney-sweep!

"Do you leave your shoes outside the door at night? I should never remember. The first day I was here I made my own bed! The chambermaid nearly fell over.

"Do tell me a lot to write to auntie (that's my stepmother); I have always told her everything I'm thinking about, and now it will be rather difficult for I only think now about the stage and Cousin Julia and you, Elsie-Honey. I hope you think of me?"

CHAPTER XIII

"Oh, Miss Moss, I think I can come earlier to-morrow afternoon and stay longer," said little Mattie Howe eagerly. "It's been such a good week for drying clothes that mother's way ahead on her work, and she'll mind the baby herself. Charles Augustus is going to take back the last load this afternoon with his cart."

"That's nice for you, Mattie, but I shan't be here. Miss Stewart's coming back to-morrow," replied Elsie.

The child's bright, thin little face clouded.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear, these changes are most too much for me, I declare!" she cried. "I mean changes-*back* is. The change that brought you here, Miss Moss, was just sweet. Only I wish it had turned into a *stay*."

Elsie drew the little thing close to her. At the moment she herself almost wished it had been a *stay*.

"I wonder if that's my *hard*," prattled the child. "Mother says everybody, even rich people, have hard things to bear. Do you bleeve so, Miss Moss?"

Elsie looked startled.

"Why, Mattie, I hardly know," she faltered. "Ye-es, I suppose every one does, really."

"Even you, Miss Moss?"

Elsie couldn't answer. On a sudden that first day she and Elsie Moss had been together came back to her. She recalled Elsie's fresh grief for the death of her mother and her own sense of remissness, and the class motto that signified through hardships to the stars. Since she had been at Enderby, things had been disagreeable enough almost to make up for her former immunity. And yet, she hadn't been here ten days, and she didn't really have to endure it. Furthermore, she was to escape from it very shortly.

"No, Mattie, I don't believe I have had so much that is hard as most people have," she owned.

"You are like the princess, you see," murmured the child. "But I s'pose you feel awfully sorry about your auntie being so poorly? When mother was sick once I felt as bad *here* as if I had the stomachache hard."

Elsie evaded the issue by hoping politely that the little girl's mother was quite well now.

"Oh, yes, Miss Moss, and does four peoples' washings besides our own," Mattie declared. "Father works steady most of the time, but there's five of us, counting the baby, and—sometimes he gets drunk. Not so very often, he doesn't, but nobody can ever tell when he will and when he won't, so mother has to help out. Well, I must go now. When will I see you?"

Elsie didn't know what to say. Miss Stewart's return had been delayed from day to day and she had postponed making her decision as to her course until that matter was settled. Only to-day had she

learned that the librarian would resume her work to-morrow, Saturday, and she expected to give up her evening to forming her own plans. Until this moment, she hadn't thought of Mattie as a complication. It didn't seem possible that one could become so attached to a child of ten years in—it wasn't yet ten days—that one not only hated to leave her, but even felt remiss, almost conscience-stricken, in so doing.

"Won't you come to see us, mother and me and the baby—you'll just love him, Miss Moss, he can pat-a-cake and by-by and almost talk and lots else, too. Won't you please come?" the child begged.

Even with her arm about the child's shoulders, the incongruity of calling upon a woman who took in washing came to Elsie Marley—likewise the fact that she wasn't likely to be in Enderby beyond Monday at the latest. But she surprised herself and delighted Mattie by suddenly agreeing to come the next day.

When she spoke of it to Mr. Middleton that night at dinner, expecting him to be surprised and, perhaps, to protest, she found him interested and eager.

"Oh, Elsie, that's capital!" he exclaimed. "She's the nicest sort of woman, Mrs. Howe is. She's hardly more than a girl in spite of that little brood of five. She gets out very little, and if you would go around once in a while it would mean a lot to her. Besides, I'm sure you'll enjoy her."

As Elsie sat in her room by the window that evening, she wondered whether one visit from a person one is never to see again would mean anything to Mattie's mother? Well, for that matter, whether it would or not, she had promised to make it and must keep her word. And she mustn't allow her thoughts to be diverted by that.

For the opportunity she had sought to complete her plans was hers. Mr. Middleton had gone out to attend a committee meeting directly after dinner. Mrs. Middleton she hadn't seen all day. The matter of the library had settled itself, and her way was clear.

But somehow her thoughts didn't proceed as she had expected them to do. She had rather looked for marshalled ranks of reasons standing at either hand—those saying *go*, of course, largely predominating—which she would only have to review. Instead her mind wandered, roving back to the conversation with Mattie, and the little girl's quoting her mother that every one has a hard to bear.

Was it really true? She supposed it must be. Mr. Middleton, despite his serenity, looked as if he had undergone all sorts of things. So had Elsie Moss. Even poor old Kate had had her share. On the other hand, there was Mrs. Middleton, there was Elsie's own grandmother and her mother. And there was Elsie herself. She had never had anything hard in her life until within a fortnight.

How curious it was that Mattie should have put her finger upon Mrs. Middleton as being her particular difficulty, mistaken though her sense of the situation was. Mrs. Middleton was truly the only *hard* Elsie had ever known. Undergoing a certain amount of her society and submitting to her caresses, sometimes once a day, often less frequently, was the only ordeal she had ever undergone. And severe though it was, there were wide spaces between, and those spaces were the happiest moments she had ever known.

Now she was planning to throw away all the happiness, the delight, because of the discomfort. It came to her rather vaguely that perhaps that was the way with people who seemed never to have had hardships. They evaded them somehow. And she wondered if some one else had to shoulder them as so much extra burden? It almost seemed so.

And yet, why should she remain and endure that dreadful Mrs. Middleton? What good would it do? Mightn't it, on the contrary, do real harm? The girl couldn't imagine it as being any easier as the days went by, but in case it should, what would it mean but that she herself was becoming coarse—even vulgar?

In a sense, there wasn't any one now to care whether she was coarse or not. Elsie Moss might, and Mr. Middleton. He liked her as she was. He wouldn't like her to be different. And yet, he not only endured Mrs. Middleton but actually cared for her, and he was as refined as any one she had ever known, besides being so much more interesting than any one except Elsie Moss. Possibly he would rather have her altered somewhat than have the shock of learning the truth of the matter, and of having a reluctant, and perhaps unwilling, Elsie Moss in the house.

Elsie Moss, too, liked her as she was. She had called her a princess. Surely she wouldn't endure any change. And yet again—what if enduring Mrs. Middleton would mean actually doing something for the other Elsie? What if not enduring her—flying from difficulty—would mean disappointment—breaking her ardent heart?

The clock struck nine, and immediately she heard Mr. Middleton enter the house. He called to her and Elsie went down.

He wanted to tell her of a plan they had been discussing at the meeting in regard to a course of lectures for the coming winter. All eagerness, he reviewed the whole situation for her benefit, then went on to tell her of the lectures they had had in other years, and to compare those in prospect. Elsie, who was already learning to talk, to express some of the interest she felt, enjoyed it the more that she was able to respond in a measure—quite enough to satisfy him completely.

When she went to her room again, it was only to postpone the decision. To-morrow she would go to

see Mattie Howe without knowing whether it was a farewell call or not. The next day, Sunday, she would decide. She promised herself solemnly that she would do so. She would shut herself up in her room directly after dinner, and would not emerge until she had made up her mind.

CHAPTER XIV

Had Elsie Marley been possessed of more imagination, or had she been accustomed to use what she had, she might have been better prepared to meet little Mattie's mother. The child was unusual and showed the influence of careful upbringing. Further, Mr. Middleton had spoken of her as looking like a girl and as worth seeking out; and already Elsie had had a chance to discern that, broad and tolerant as he was, he saw things as they were (except in the case of his wife), never misstated and rarely overstated. For all that, she set out on Saturday afternoon prepared to meet the typical washerwoman of fiction—worn, bedraggled, shapeless, and forlorn. She was prepared to go into a steaming kitchen with puddles on the floor and dirty children all about, and have this red-faced personage take a scarlet hand out of the tub, dry it on a dirty apron, and hold it out to her. And for her part she was prepared to take it, damp or clammy as it might be, without a squirm.

Wherefore, when Mattie ushered her proudly into a pretty, tidy living-room with a square piano in the corner, and she saw a tall, slender person with a plain, sweet, girlish face advancing to meet her, in spite of her resemblance to Mattie, Elsie had no idea who she might be. She had a confused sense of some neighbor having been brought in to receive her, and a vague idea of asking to be taken into the kitchen.

"Oh, mother, here's Miss Moss!" cried Mattie, then dropped her hand and exclaiming, "My goodness, there's that baby already!" fled into the entry.

"I'm so pleased to see you, Miss Moss," said Mrs. Howe quietly. "Sit there by the window where you get a view of the hill. It's more than good of you to come. I hope Mattie didn't tease you too much?"

"No, indeed, she asked me very prettily," said Elsie. "She's a sweet child."

"She's good as gold," said her mother. "And she's perfectly wild about you. She calls you the Princess Moss-rose and makes up stories about you after she goes to bed."

Elsie smiled and colored.

"Don't tell her I told you," warned Mrs. Howe, "she'll be right back. She had the baby's clean dress ready to pop over his head the moment he woke up."

Elsie looked up quickly as if she were about to speak. But though she said nothing, Mrs. Howe seemed to reply.

"She takes most all the care of him when she isn't in school," she admitted. "Some people think she's too young and that it's too hard for her. But I hardly think so. She's naturally thin, just as I am, but she's never sick, and she likes it, though, of course, like any child, she'd like more time to herself. But she's a born mother. And she really seems to make better use of her spare time than most of the little girls she plays with. And though I suppose I ought not to say it, she and Charles Augustus are ever so much better-behaved and better-mannered than most children who have nothing to do but play—and sometimes it seems they're happier. You see I taught school three years up in the State of Maine, which is my home, and I understand children pretty well, by and large."

Mattie came in at that moment with the baby, a fair, rosy, fat little fellow in a starched white dress and petticoats. She put him through all his tricks to please the visitor, and then asked Elsie if she wished to hold him. Elsie accepted the honor, though she felt rather apprehensive. It wasn't bad, however; indeed, the confidence with which the baby nestled into the arms that didn't know how to enfold him was rather sweet to the girl. And when he made a sudden dash for the pink rose in her leghorn hat, she didn't mind it at all.

Watchful little Mattie minded, however, and took him away quickly lest he injure any of the princess's royal finery. Then the mother took him from her, that the little girl might have the major part of Miss Moss's attention. For the same reason she forbore to call in the other two children, little girls of five and seven, who were playing with dolls in the yard.

But when Charles Augustus came home, his mother proudly summoned him into the parlor. Elsie had seen him at the library—a solemn, big-eyed little fellow with a prominent forehead and spectacles.

When he had shaken hands, his mother told Elsie how much she relied upon his help. He fetched and carried all the clothes she laundered, and had recently made a new body for his old cart which would carry a good-sized clothes-basket.

"I don't see how you do it—other people's washing," said Elsie suddenly.

"I couldn't if Mattie and Charles Augustus didn't help me so much," replied Mrs. Howe.

The girl glanced about the pretty room, at the attractive mother in her neat, faded muslin gown, at the thoughtful children, and the rosy baby. How dreadful it seemed to wash soiled clothing for four strange families!

"Don't you hate it?" she asked with a directness rare to her.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Howe quietly. "I love to iron, especially pretty things, and I don't mind washing, now that I've got set tubs. You wouldn't believe, would you, that your uncle is responsible for my having them? He thought of it himself. The first I knew of it was that the men came to put them in. Isn't that just like him?"

Elsie agreed.

"But don't you get awfully tired?" she demanded.

"Well, yes, Miss Moss, I do. But so does almost every mother of a little family. You come to take it for granted, you know. A mother rather sinks her life in that of her children, and—after all, she doesn't lose half so much as she gains. And getting tired—why, I know just from what Mattie has told me about the way you do at the library that you understand the satisfaction of doing for others, and that getting tired's a part of it."

Reaching the parsonage, Elsie didn't go in, but sat on a bench in the garden for an hour, not thinking, hardly musing, but in a sort of spell as it were. As she rose at the stroke of six, she was saying to herself: "I never knew life was like that!" And she repeated it as she entered the house.

On the hall-table was a letter from the Elsie in New York. Taking it to her room, she perused it eagerly. One paragraph she read over twice, and yet twice again at bedtime.

"Oh, Elsie-Honey," the passage ran, "I was so relieved and thankful to get your letter and feel convinced that you like Uncle John and Aunt Milly just as well as I do Cousin Julia—though I don't see how you can—quite. It came to me the night before I got your letter—suppose you should want to swap back? The cold shivers chased one another up and down my spine and nearly splintered it. Of course, I should have done it without a word, but oh, Elsie-Honey, I don't mind telling you now that it would have broken my heart for sure. For I'm simply mad about Cousin Julia—so dotty over her that I believe if she'd told me I couldn't on any account study for the stage, I should have kissed her hand like a meek lamb. Instead of which she knows and approves—that is, she is willing. Only an angel from heaven would really approve—and I suppose he (or she) wouldn't. At any rate, my present job is trying to keep from bursting with happiness."

CHAPTER XV

"Elsie, I rather want to hear that Elsie-Marley-Honey-thing again," remarked Miss Pritchard. "Would you mind doing it now?"

The two sat alone on the veranda of the hotel at an hour when other guests were resting after the midday meal. Before them, beyond a stretch of mosslike lawn and a broad sandy beach, rolled the sea, brilliantly blue, with the waves curling dazzlingly white. Miss Pritchard, comfortably dressed in a plain pongee-silk suit with a long jacket, was ensconced on a willow settee with some recent English reviews. Elsie, perched on the railing, her back against a pillar, gazed at the far-away sky-line. She wore a pale-pink linen frock. Her small face with its dark eyes and big dimples, her bobbed hair, and her exceeding slenderness of form gave her such an appearance of youthfulness that she seemed a very tall child, rather than the small girl she was.

"I like your manner of speaking of my specialty, Cousin Julia," she remarked. "Pray tell me why you want to hear it again, if you have such scant respect for it?"

Miss Pritchard smiled. "If you must know, child, I want to listen more critically this time. I'm quite sure I must have praised it far above its deserts. And now that I understand the situation I ought to be a better judge."

Despite her lightness of tone, Miss Pritchard was really desirous of applying the test. Less than a fortnight after the girl's arrival, she had learned of Elsie's desire to be an actress. The knowledge came like a blow, it must be confessed. Broad as she was, she couldn't help regretting that the girl's desires—and apparently her talent—seemed to lie in the direction of the stage. Though she had declared she had no patience with Pritchard notions and pretensions, she couldn't help feeling that it was hardly decorous for the last of the Pritchards to become an actress. Moreover, she feared that Elsie's capability did not point to what is called the legitimate drama; it looked from the first as if she would

make straight for vaudeville and, perhaps, never go further. After her training she might fill a soubrette's part acceptably for a few years, but Miss Pritchard sighed when she tried to look beyond that. To her it seemed like a limited outlook with a closed door blocking the way at a point long before the age when one's career should have reached the apex.

But Elsie's heart was set on it, and Miss Pritchard, despite her misgivings, was full of sympathy and entered cordially into plans and ways and means. Her newspaper work had given her friends among critics, managers, and various theatrical people, and she helped Elsie select a school wherein to begin her studies. That accomplished, Elsie reluctantly agreed to accompany Miss Pritchard to the shore to spend her six weeks' vacation.

"What I cannot understand," said Miss Pritchard at this time, repeating very much what she had said before, "is, how you ever did it—how you could possibly get any such idea into your head with your bringing-up. For the life of me, I can't imagine your family countenancing any such thing!"

"They didn't take to the idea with any enthusiasm," Elsie replied truly.

"You certainly are the strangest Pritchard ever. You're less Pritchard than I, and that's saying a great deal," said Miss Pritchard with a sigh. "Dear me, when I was at Aunt Ellen's when you were a baby, they were so worried for fear you should have any Marley traits whatever, so anxious for you to be all Pritchard!"

"Are you siding with them now?" the girl asked soberly. "Are you disappointed in me, Cousin Julia?"

"Bless your heart, dear, I'm so satisfied that I'm frightened, and I think I'll throw my precious ruby ring into the sea. I wish I could say that I'd like you to be just so far Pritchard as not to have any desire for the stage; but I somehow don't dare even say that. You see, I couldn't risk losing any particle of Marley other than the stage-madness."

Elsie came to her side and kissed her warmly.

"Then suppose we chuck the Pritchards for good," she proposed.

Miss Pritchard fairly gasped. Such temerity took her breath. But she didn't give expression to her amazement. Already she had come to the conclusion that Elsie had not been happy at home; she who was so frank in all else was so brief and guarded in all her references to the family or her home life. Now it seemed as if she must have been exceedingly unhappy, to be ready to renounce the Pritchards in that wholesale way. And yet, how could any girl whose life had not been happy—nay, brimming with sunshine—be so gay and blithe and girlish and care-free as she? Could the reaction from strict repression possibly have that effect? Could the opportunity to realize her ambition work such a miracle? Miss Pritchard shook her head. It was beyond her, she confessed.

"Now you're down, you may as well do your stunt and have it over, Elsie," she remarked. And Elsie, standing back a little, repeated the performance in a manner that was only the more captivating.

Then, resuming her seat on the railing, she looked eagerly toward Miss Pritchard. The face of the latter was a study. With every line, every word, indeed, of the simple song, the actress in the girl had come out strongly. Admiration of the grace and skill and charm of it all, and wonder at the extraordinary sweetness of the girl's voice, mingled with regret at the significance of it.

"Do you know what you look like, Cousin Julia?" Elsie asked.

"No, my saucy Marley, I do not."

"Like 'Heaven only knows'—the girl heaved a tremendous sigh—"whatever will become of the naughty Brier-Rose."

"My dear, if you exhibit that sort of keenness," said Miss Pritchard, laughing, "I'll make a newspaper reporter of you, willy-nilly. Then you'll be sorry for poking fun at your elderly relative."

"It's only that I'm so used to discouragement from my elders and betters that I'm familiar with the signs," returned Elsie. "Like as not, if any one were to say, 'Hooray! Bully for you! Go in and win!' I shouldn't understand. I should think they were kidding me."

"Poor child!" laughed Miss Pritchard, but she was really secretly touched.

At this moment an artist Miss Pritchard had known for years, who always spent his summers at this hotel, appeared before them. A man between fifty and sixty, it was said of him that he had never succeeded; younger, struggling artists said it was because of his handicap of a fortune.

"Oh, Miss Marley, I wish I could persuade you to sing that again," he said. "I caught a bit and a glimpse at a distance—just enough to tantalize me."

Elsie, who admired Mr. Graham immensely, was seized with sudden diffidence. He was a connoisseur in all matters of art. Suppose he should say right before Miss Pritchard, that she was only a silly tomboy, or whatever such a gentleman would say to express that idea? She glanced irresolutely at Miss Pritchard.

"Go ahead, dear," said Miss Pritchard cheerfully, and turning to her friend: "My little cousin thought I was scolding her, Mr. Graham. The truth is, I'm the one who should be scolded. I chose the work I cared for at about Elsie's age and went in for it; and yet when she chooses hers, which happens to be the stage, I act the hen-with-the-duckling."

"Oh, Cousin Julia, you're the only one that has ever let me even speak of it!" cried Elsie. Tears suddenly filled her eyes, and smiling through them, she stepped back and began the song. And this time she put in all the *frills*, as she expressed it. She danced and acted and sang, and, as always, she was quite irresistible. The artist was charmed.

"It's good enough for the vaudeville stage just as it is," he declared. "There's only one fault."

"Oh, what is that?" the girl cried eagerly, with the artist's desire for criticism, even though destructive.

"Your voice is too good—altogether too good. You could do it as well and perhaps better with a voice far inferior to yours in range, sweetness, and tone."

The girl gazed at him reproachfully. She had always had that to contend with. People had always tried to "buy her off," as she expressed it, by proposing that she become a singer instead of an actress. Now, as always, she rebelled at the idea, and again her vision of a public singer came to her—a very stout blonde lady in a very low-cut gown with a very small waist (the picture had not adapted itself to more modern fashions), placing a fat, squat hand on her capacious bosom, and uttering meaningless syllables that rose to shrieks. Anything but that, she said to herself!

Mr. Graham had fallen into a reverie. His hand shaded his brow. He frowned as he endeavored to recollect something.

"Just where did you get hold of that song?" he inquired.

"My mother used to sing it," replied Elsie, and Miss Pritchard wondered. So far as she had known, none of the Pritchards had sung, and it was difficult to fancy Elsie's mother warbling a ditty of that sort. The birth of her child must have altered Augusta greatly.

"It's an old nursery rhyme, I believe," the artist went on, still half in his perplexity. "Isn't it singular about the name—or perhaps you were named for it?"

"I was named *after* it," responded Elsie demurely.

He smiled, but he was only half attending. He was reaching for something in the depths of his mind which he did not find, and presently he sauntered on with bent head. Miss Pritchard took up the *Spectator*, and Elsie produced the "First Violin," and presently was lost in that.

CHAPTER XVI

The next day as the artist met Elsie on the beach on her way to the bath-house, his face lighted up.

"Oh, Miss Marley, it all came back to me, after twenty years," he exclaimed. "Something about you has haunted my memory ever since I first saw you last week, and the song yesterday made it more definite and more perplexing. I woke in the night and it all came back. I heard that very same song on the train going South as a young man—comparatively young, though you wouldn't call it so. Do you want to sit down a moment and let me tell you?"

"I haven't even thought of it for a dozen years," he said when they had found a convenient bench. "As I said, we were bound southward, and it was toward night. The seat in front of me was occupied by an exceedingly pretty young lady and a gentleman who must have been her brother or her husband—girls married younger in those days—for their name, which escapes me, was the same. Farther ahead, on the opposite side of the car, was a woman with an infant in her arms and a boy baby of under two years at her side. As it grew late, the older baby grew tired and cross. He wanted his mother, was jealous of the tiny one, and finally he just howled. The young lady before me said a word to her companion and went directly over.

"That kid, Miss Marley, was dirty and sticky beyond words, and she was the daintiest, freshest, sweetest girl imaginable. But she smiled and held out her arms and he just tumbled into them. She hugged the little beggar close, never minding her pretty gown, and brought him back to her seat. She seemed to know just what to do—took off his shoes, loosened the neck of his dress and all that, then cuddled him down and sang to him until he went to sleep and after. Her voice was as sweet as yours, and she sang the very same thing, 'And Do You Ken Elsie Marley'—I think she sang it twice or thrice."

Perhaps it was Elsie's fondness for children; perhaps it was because he told the story so well; in any event, the girl was touched. And as usual, to cover her feeling, she tried to smile, her dimples

rather at variance with the tears in her eyes.

He gazed at her curiously. "Wait, Miss Marley, that isn't all," he exclaimed. "As I recalled the young lady, I saw her face only dimly. Now do you know it suddenly comes to me that she had the largest, deepest dimples I had ever seen, one in either cheek. And I remember vowing then and there, in my youthful enthusiasm, that if ever I attempted to paint Madonna she should have just such dimples; they struck me as somehow significant, perhaps symbolic."

Elsie's heart was beating wildly.

"I wonder—could that have been your mother, Miss Marley?"

The girl could not speak for the tumult within her.

"It seems as if their name began with M, though it couldn't have been Marley, else I should have noticed on account of the song," he went on kindly, realizing her emotion. "May I ask what was your mother's maiden name, Miss Marley?"

Quite upset, Elsie started to tell the truth; said Mi—and stopped short.

"Middleton!" he exclaimed triumphantly.

"Pritchard," she said as quickly as she could get it out.

"*Pritchard?*" he repeated as if he must have heard wrong.

"Augusta Pritchard," the girl reiterated, her heart like a stone.

The artist was puzzled. But realizing that the loss of her mother might have been so recent as to be still a painful subject, he tactfully spoke of other things, cloaking his disappointment at not being able to work out his problem to final solution. He feared lest he might somehow have blundered upon some sad family secret. Even with twenty years between them, he couldn't believe that his senses had so deceived him, couldn't but feel that that young girl had been connected with this girl of the big dimples. And he couldn't but believe that the girl knew it. Only there was something that prevented her acknowledging it. It might be tragedy; perhaps it was disgrace? Though, somehow, he couldn't think it. Poor little thing! He let her go on her way to her bath.

But Elsie returned to the hotel and went straight to her room. She knew she would be undisturbed there, for Miss Pritchard had gone driving with old friends while she was to have had her swim. The girl flung herself upon her bed and, burying her face in her pillow, shed the bitterest tears of her life.

She had denied her mother—that darling, adorable mother who had taken the sticky baby to her heart, and sung "Elsie Marley" to him, just as she had later sung it to her own little girl. She had cast off her mother and taken on—*Augusta Pritchard!* What a name to exchange for Elizabeth Middleton! For even though the former were the mother of the lovely Elsie Marley who had gone to Enderby, she couldn't be compared with her beautiful mother. And, of course, her denial was far worse in that she was dead.

How proud, how happy, how humble, she should have been to say: "Why, of course, that was my mother! I knew it without the dimples!" What a wretch she must be! To have had such a mother as to have so impressed a chance stranger that he should wish to paint the Madonna in her likeness, and should have remembered her twenty years, and to have repudiated her utterly!

She felt that she could not bear it, could not endure such a weight on her heart. But what could she do? Say to Mr. Graham that it *was* her mother and her name *was* Middleton? Then she would have to tell Cousin Julia everything, and she would send her away, send her off to poke and fret in Enderby, and serve tea in a conventional parsonage drawing-room. And she would never be an actress, and the true Elsie Marley would be dragged on to New York.

It would be hard on Elsie-Honey, for already she seemed just to love that poky parsonage, and was apparently quite as attached to Uncle John as she herself was to Cousin Julia. And even Cousin Julia—already Elsie couldn't but realize that Cousin Julia had given her her whole heart; she wouldn't have liked the other girl so well in the first place, and now any such overturn would—it would just break her heart!

No, that couldn't be. After all, she couldn't have done otherwise. She *had* to say what she did on account of the game. Being cast for a part, she had to play it, even though it might be disagreeable at times. And it *wasn't* worse because her mother was dead; being in heaven, her mother would understand and condone. How did that hymn go?

She sat erect and sang, very sweetly, the stanza that applied:

"There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are so felt as up in heaven,
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given."

That comforted her strangely. "Uncle John couldn't have administered first aid himself more

successfully," she said to herself humorously as she dried her eyes.

She bathed her face and, standing before the mirror, addressed the charming reflection in the pink frock. She mustn't expect plain sailing all the time she warned her. She must expect to be *up against it* frequently. She must keep her class motto in mind and not expect everything to be dead easy. It was hard not to be able to claim one's beautiful mother; but she was playing a part; she was on the stage in costume, and the part-she-was-playing's mother's name wasn't Middleton nor Moss and was Augusta Pritchard. She must keep her motto in mind and say continually to herself: "Act well your part, there all the honor lies."

That very evening at dinner some one asked her where she got her dimples—whether they were inherited?

"Or, perhaps, Miss Marley's a freak like the white peacock at the gardens?" broke in a callow youth whom Elsie disliked.

"From my mother," she said quickly, and Miss Pritchard, sensitive to the least sound of hurt in Elsie's voice, introduced another subject.

Nevertheless, she wondered. She hadn't seen Augusta Pritchard since the latter was a girl of nineteen, but she couldn't recollect that she had any dimples or shadows of dimples. She couldn't even imagine the combination of dimples with her white, cold, rather expressionless face, nor reconcile them with the true Pritchard temperament. It seemed inconceivable that Elsie could have inherited them except through the Marleys; and yet, of course, Elsie remembered her mother who had died only three years ago.

She had to consider that the girl didn't like that fresh Jerrold boy and had been nettled by his remark. Possibly in her indignation she had said what first came into her mind, though it didn't seem like her. Miss Pritchard sighed, for she had worshipped at the shrine of truth all her life, and strive as she would, she couldn't but feel a deviation from Elsie's wonted frankness here.

She pondered much upon the subject and later in the summer—on the evening preceding their return to New York, it was—as they were talking about Elsie's studying, Miss Pritchard suddenly became serious.

"Elsie, there's something I want to say to you as an older woman to a young girl," she began. "You will have one difficulty to contend with that I had in newspaper work, only in your case the temptation will be greater, and your task correspondingly harder. There's a poem of a child-actor of Queen Elizabeth's time, little Salathiel Pavy, who constantly played the part of an old man. The verses relate that he acted the part so naturally that the fates mistook him for an old man and cut off his thread of life in his tender years. Now you, Elsie dear, concerned with make-believe—fiction—as you will constantly be in your study for the stage, eager, of course, to use every moment and occasion, with one subject dominating your thoughts, will need to be very, very careful with regard to your separate, personal life. In other words, in good old-fashioned terms, you'll have to guard your soul. Keep that good and pure and true. Keep that sacred, above and apart from your work, and then whether you are ever a great actress or not, you will be a good woman."

And then half shyly, but beautifully, she repeated Matthew Arnold's "Palladium":

"Set where the upper streams of Simois flow,
Was the Palladium, high 'mid rock and wood;
And Hector was in Ilium far below,
And fought and saw it not, but there it stood.

It stood and sun and moonshine rained their light
On the pure columns of its glen-built hall.
Backward and forward rolled the waves of fight
Round Troy; but while this stood, Troy could not fall.

So in its lovely moonlight lives the soul.
Mountains surround it and sweet virgin air;
Cold plashing, past it, crystal waters roll:
We visit it by moments, ah, too rare!

Men will renew the battle on the plain
To-morrow; red with blood will Xanthus be;
Hector and Ajax will be there again,
Helen will come upon the wall to see.

Then we shall rust in shade or shine in strife,
And fluctuate 'twixt blind hopes and blind despairs,
And fancy that we put forth all our life,
And never know how with the soul it fares.

Still doth the soul from its lone fastness high,
Upon our life a ruling effluence send:
And when it fails, fight as we will, we die;
And, while it lasts, we cannot wholly end."

CHAPTER XVII

"I suppose," observed the real Elsie Marley thoughtfully, drawing one of her long curls over her shoulder, "that if I'm going to be at the library regularly, I'd better put up my hair?"

She addressed Mr. Middleton, but his wife, who had of late fallen into the habit of sitting downstairs in the evening, replied. She had conceived a strong fancy to the girl, who secretly shrank from her, and bore herself toward her in a cold and distant manner.

"Oh, Elsie, love, it would be sweet to do it sort of *Grecian*," she cried in her sentimental fashion, "with a classic knot at the nape of your neck, and little curls hanging down behind your ears."

"Let her leave it as it is a little longer, Milly," her husband pleaded, "for it's just as her mother wore hers."

This was not the fact, even though Elsie had been truly his niece. His sister had worn her hair in curls, but they had been many and riotous, and caught at the top of her head with a ribbon; while Elsie's two were fastened at her neck by a neat clasp, and hung as demurely as a braid would have done.

"Of course," assented Mrs. Middleton. "Elsie's the picture of her mother, I suppose?"

"She reminds me of her mother more and more every day," he said, "but she doesn't look like her at all. You remember I told you that Elizabeth had enormous dimples? They were so large that I'm not sure that they wouldn't have disfigured another face; but they added the last touch to hers—made it irresistible."

He gazed at the fire. It was late September and a chill rain beat against the windows.

"I suppose if Elizabeth had had a son, *he* would have inherited the dimples," he remarked. "I believe they say girls take traits from their fathers and sons from the mother. Curious, isn't it?"

"Well, my dear, if Elsie had had dimples when she came, she would have lost them ere this," said Mrs. Middleton with unusual energy. "She's been put right into a treadmill, Jack. Only sixteen, sweet sixteen, and she hasn't had any of the gayety a young girl wants and needs, but has just slaved from morning until night ever since she came to us. At her age, she ought to be going to dances and lying late in the morning to make up sleep, and shopping and having beaux and all that sort of thing, just as her Aunt Milly did."

She sighed deeply, clasping her ringed hands. Elsie was indignant, even angry; but before she could protest, Mrs. Middleton went on.

"Instead of which, she started work at the library the first thing and has been off and on ever since, and is now going to do it permanently, besides teaching a class in the Sunday-school, looking after the choir-boys, running errands for you, and what not."

"My dear Milly!" cried her husband, really distressed; and went on to explain that when they decided to open the library in the evening as well as the afternoon, some one had to relieve Miss Stewart for two of the afternoon hours, and every one had clamored for Elsie.

"And I love to do it," added Elsie, "and I'm so pleased that I am to have the hours when the children are out of school."

"Of course," agreed Mrs. Middleton, smiling; "dear lambs! I should have felt just the same. Indeed, you're so like I was at your age, Elsie, dearest, that I feel as if it were to *me* that you are really related."

Elsie murmured a silent word of deprecation, forgetting, as she often did, that she wasn't related to Mr. Middleton, either.

The rain beat furiously. The minister rose and put another stick on the fire. He did not return to his seat but stood with his elbow on the mantel gazing at his wife. Though thin, John Middleton looked strong and well, in part, perhaps, because of his florid complexion, partly because of his serenity. But in moments of stress he had a way of seeming to grow worn and older under one's very eyes.

He felt the cogency of his wife's words. He had, indeed, he said to himself, taken possession of his sister's orphan child immediately upon her arrival, and had made a sort of drudge of her: he kept her constantly occupied, performing miscellaneous services for him—he wasn't sure that he could have demanded so much of a paid secretary. And she, like her mother, unselfish and devoted, had made no complaint.

He spoke before Elsie, who was slow of speech and was regretting that she didn't share the real Elsie Moss's gift of expression, was able to put her feeling into words that would convince him.

"No wonder you felt like putting up your curls and saying farewell to youth, Elsie," he said

whimsically yet ruefully. "Your aunt is just right, dear, and we'll make a change at once. What should you say to going on to New York to make your little actress friend a visit, and then starting anew after you come back?"

Now the color flew to Elsie's cheeks and words came.

"Oh, Uncle John, I wouldn't go now for the world!" she cried in genuine dismay. "I'm just longing to go to the library every day—I think it's just—splendid! And I like it all—everything—so very much. It isn't the least a treadmill, and I'm so happy doing it. Please, please, don't take anything away; only give me more."

He felt the sincerity of her words, and again said to himself that the girl was her mother over again. His wife went over to Elsie, and stroking back her hair, kissed her brow fondly. And the color died out of the girl's cheeks and the glow from her heart as she shuddered within herself. And presently when Mr. Middleton went to his study to work, she bade Mrs. Middleton a cool good night and fled to her room.

She sat by the window some time, then went to bed; but though the sound of the rain was soothing, she could not get to sleep. It came to her that it was very thoughtful of Uncle John to wish to send her to visit Elsie; and how she would have liked to go if it didn't entail leaving the library and all the fascinating round of her daily life, and leaving him to his wife's cold comfort. How she would like to see Elsie Moss at this moment, to confide her troubles and her happiness to that sympathetic ear. If they could talk together, she could make the other understand that even with Mrs. Middleton as a drawback, she was more content, happier, than she had ever been before. And she couldn't help feeling that she was useful, too, in a measure—that she would be missed if she were to go to New York.

Still she could not sleep, and presently she found herself puzzling over a problem that had been growing upon her and now bulked big. The truth was that already the weight of the top-heavy household had fallen upon the girl's shoulders. Utterly unprepared and ignorant, she had been thrust into a tangled labyrinth of domestic affairs. The more familiar she had become with the internal working of the household, the more was she baffled and daunted. And presently it seemed to her youthful inexperience as if it stood upon the brink of ruin.

Though the minister was unaware that the bills were not paid promptly at the beginning of each month, Mrs. Middleton owed practically every establishment in the place accounts that dated far back. At this time the small sums she could pay on account when her funds came in were insufficient to satisfy any one, and one and another began to threaten Kate with going to Mr. Middleton and demanding a settlement. They declared it wasn't respectable for him to be giving away so much money when he owed probably more than a year's salary.

Kate's only recourse was to her mistress, who would be temporarily depressed, now and then to the point of tears. But shortly she either forgot all about it or postponed consideration until another month; and meantime she never parted with her last penny: she always kept enough on hand for an ample supply of novels, chocolate drops, and headache-powders, the latter being especially expensive, according to Kate.

Ignorant as Elsie was, it did not take her long to understand that the household was managed—or allowed to run on—with the utmost extravagance and waste. She had prevailed upon Kate to set the greater part of the big house in order and to keep it tidy, and she tried to induce her to be less wasteful and reckless. But the girl was developing a certain sense of justice, and she rather doubted her right to insist. Devoted as Kate was to Mr. Middleton, and attached, in an apologetic, shame-faced way, to her mistress, overworked and unpaid, save for the sums Elsie forced upon her, how could she demand that Kate be more scrupulous about details? It would seem that she had all she could carry without that.

The girl fell asleep at last, and woke next morning with the pleasant reflection that she was to begin to-day at the library as a regular salaried assistant. Second thought was still more cheering. As soon as the minister was out of the house, and she heard Kate go down-stairs from Mrs. Middleton's room, she betook herself to the disorderly kitchen. At her entrance Kate rose suddenly and went and peered anxiously into the oven—which was empty. Elsie would have liked to tell her that she didn't begrudge her those stolen moments for resting her tired feet, but she hadn't yet learned to express her new sensations. It was sufficiently difficult to explain her errand.

"Katy, here are your wages for last week," she said rather brusquely, trying to press the money into her hands. "Mrs. Middleton will—I hope she'll pay you in full very soon, but at any rate she—that is, you're going to get your wages regularly every week, and I'm going to see to it so that it shan't be neglected. And always come to me if there's anything to ask. Please don't go to her unless about the back pay."

"Oh, Miss Elsie, you're so good!" cried Kate warmly, believing she had arranged it with Mr. Middleton. "I'm sorry I complained. You must 'a' known I didn't mean half what I said. I wouldn't really 'a' gone to himself about it. But honest, I ain't got a whole pair o' stockin's, and can't wear them pumps I got last summer on account o' the holes, and her a-growin' yellower every day and a-layin' round and eatin' chocolate drops and headache-powders that cost good money and ain't no benefit."

She stuffed the money into a drawer of the table with a miscellaneous assortment of less valuable things. While Elsie was wondering if she could speak about the condition of the kitchen, which Elsie

Moss would have pronounced unspeakable, Kate drew near to her with real appeal in her blue eyes.

"And, Miss Elsie, I wish you hadn't let what I've confided to you sort o' set you against your aunt. Everybody has their failin's, they do say, and after all if she don't do worse than eat choc'late-creams and munch headache-tablets, why, she's pretty harmless as ladies go. Mis' Jonathan Metcalf as goes to his church is just as yellow and I don't know but what yellower, and bedizened as well, and a regular shrew in her own house."

"Katy, I don't know what you mean," Elsie returned with dignity.

"Well, you call her Mis' Middleton, when you speak of her, with your voice like a buzz-saw, and it ain't because you're high and mighty with me, 'cause you ain't. You're like a sister to me, and I ain't once thought of up and leavin' sence you come as I did frequent before. And besides, when you talk of himself, you always say Uncle John. And she's good at heart, Miss Elsie; honest, she is. She'd be just as good as himself if she knew as much. Her heart's in the right place, and she takes to you and don't mistrust you don't to her."

"Well, I mustn't stay here and keep you from 'redding' up your kitchen, as you call it," said Elsie, rather neatly as she believed.



"Well, I mustn't stay here and keep you from 'redding' up your kitchen, as you call it."

"Oh, there's plenty of time for that," Kate assured her cheerfully; "if not to-day, why there's another comin'."

CHAPTER XVIII

The kitchen wasn't *redd up* that day nor the next. It remained, indeed, a sight to make a good housekeeper weep, and closets, cupboards, clothes-presses, and the celebrated servants' parlor remained untidy conglomerations of rubbish; but the general appearance of the place continued to improve. Kate's gratitude for the regular receipt of her wages was continual and practical. A chance visitor now could enter any room in the front of the house at any hour, and there was much comment among the people upon the change.

It was generally agreed that Elsie Moss must have been very carefully trained by her stepmother to bring about such a marvel. And presently some of the creditors of the household began to wonder if her

influence couldn't be extended. One and another began to drop hints to Elsie which became so broad that even one quite unaccustomed to any such thing could not fail to understand. The butcher's wife, the grocer's sister, and the draper's head bookkeeper had all but informed her in so many words that unless their respective relatives or patrons were paid in full by the 1st of November, they would present their bills to Mr. Middleton, if they had to do so in the vestibule of the church.

And they were only three out of a number that seemed legion. Others spoke more plainly to Kate, and Elsie began to dread seeing certain people enter the library during her hours there. The days being shorter, the Howe baby went to bed at five o'clock, and little Mattie, who had taken a violent fancy to Elsie, used to run to the library the moment he was off her hands, remaining until six to walk home with her. And Elsie, who was devoted to the child and never tired of her company, was also relieved because her presence protected her from any but veiled hints.

The situation wore upon her, and finally she decided to have a frank talk with Mrs. Middleton. She wasn't, it is true, on terms of frankness with her, and in a sense it wasn't her place to interfere. But she knew that Mrs. Middleton wouldn't want the bills presented to her husband any more than Kate did—nor, indeed, than Elsie herself. Not that she would have cared, except for Mr. Middleton's sake. It would serve Mrs. Middleton right to be brought up short, but she dreaded the thought of his being so distressed; she didn't want him to give up the few little comforts he allowed himself, and she knew it would hurt him cruelly to have to retrench in his giving.

She wrote to Mr. Bliss, her lawyer, asking him to send her five hundred dollars, mailing the letter to the other Elsie to be forwarded from New York. That seemed to her inexperience a large sum and able to work wonders. But before her letter had reached New York she began to feel as if it wouldn't be sufficient to make everything straight for a new start; and before there was time for an answer from San Francisco, she was sadly convinced that it would be only a drop in the bucket. Whereupon she decided that if Mr. Bliss sent it to her without comment, and didn't evidently consider it a very large sum, she would ask him to duplicate it.

With a certain relief, she put off the frank talk with Mrs. Middleton until she should have received the money. It did not arrive so soon as she expected it, and she was still waiting when Kate came to her in excitement one morning saying that the iceman wouldn't leave any ice unless he were paid cash. Elsie produced her portemonnaie.

"Oh, Miss Elsie, I hate to take your money," protested Kate with tears in her eyes. "I wouldn't 'a' come to you only I'm strapped myself, what with buyin' the hat with all them plumes, and the missus after borrowin' my last five-dollar bill."

"Katy Flanagan, what made you let her have it?" cried the girl almost fiercely.

"Well, Miss Elsie, the truth is, I couldn't resist her. There's something about her, you know—a askin' so airy like, and forgettin' how—goodness, the man'll clear out with his ice if I don't fly."

Thereafter, Elsie paid also for the ice and the milk, leaving, out of her allowance and the money she received for the library work, barely enough for postage. But she didn't mind that; it was really a slight sacrifice. She cared so much for the work at the library that she would have paid for the privilege of doing it; and she had come so well provided with all the accessories of clothing that she hadn't even to buy gloves for another year.

Looking forward, she began to speculate on the possibility of starting anew after finances were once straightened out. It appeared doubtful, she being herself more ignorant than Kate, but presently a happy suggestion presents itself to her. One afternoon she asked Mrs. King, a kind, motherly, grey-haired lady who taught domestic science at the high school and came to the library frequently, whether there were any book to teach one how much to spend each week on different articles for a household.

"Oh, Miss Moss, I'm so glad you spoke, for I've been wanting to tell you about our seniors in domestic science this year at the high school. I think I have the nicest class I've ever had. We meet three times a week at eleven o'clock, and I have wondered if you might not like to join? Knowing that your aunt is an invalid, I thought you might want to take the care off her shoulders, and I feel sure our course would help you. You know all the girls, I think, and I should be more than pleased to help you make up what they have been over already."

Elsie could scarcely express her delight. She spoke to Mr. Middleton that evening. He had no idea of her ultimate purpose; indeed, he did not realize the confusion in which he lived, and was rather amused at the idea, but considered it an excellent method of getting better acquainted with the young people, and was pleased at her eagerness.

She entered the class at once, found the study delightful and very helpful, and the days fairly flew by. She was, after all, only sixteen, and extraordinarily immature in many ways; and it was not perhaps remarkable that after a few lessons, with extra help from Mrs. King, she began to feel quite capable of shouldering the housekeeping at the parsonage. But the more ready she felt, the less did she desire to propose it to Mrs. Middleton.

Such a step was not made easier by the fact that the latter took a keen interest in her lessons at the school. She endeavored, not always successfully, to draw the girl out upon the subject, questioning her with some felicity, praising her ambition, and taking it for granted that she was an unusual pupil and a great addition to the class. And she constantly bemoaned the fact that it had been necessary for Elsie to

go outside for the instruction that she would herself have delighted to give her, had her strength permitted. Nothing could have gratified her more, she declared, clasping her hands and raising her eyes to the ceiling, but she didn't even dare allow herself to dwell upon it. For she had just enough strength to manage her own household (as every lady should do), and she hadn't the moral right to use it for other purposes.

Meantime, three weeks had passed since Elsie had written to ask her lawyer for the five hundred dollars, and she began to feel troubled. Of course, she had to allow for letter and answer going through Elsie Moss's hands, but three weeks should have covered that. She watched the mails anxiously. As she returned from the library on the twenty-fourth day since she had sent her request, she decided that unless she should hear that night, she would have Elsie Moss telegraph from New York. For the end of October approached, and she felt she couldn't face the crisis of the 1st of November, without the aid and the moral support of the money.

She was surprised to see the doctor's motor-car standing at the door, and startled when Kate, wild-eyed and dishevelled, met her at the threshold.

"Uncle John? Has anything happened?" she faltered.

"No, it ain't him. He's in the city, pore lamb, and it's myself is thankful you'll be here to tell him. It's her. Riggs was here a-dunnin' me for his money soon after you left, and nothin' would do but that I should go up to her while he waits in the kitchen. And a lucky thing it was, too, for there he was to go for the doctor—we both forgot clean about the telephone."

"But what is it?" cried Elsie.

"I found her on the floor like a log, Miss Elsie. She ain't dead at all, but she ain't come to, and maybe won't from taking of too many of them headache-powders as I knew was no good but didn't think no harm of."

On a sudden, without warning, Kate dropped her head upon Elsie's shoulder and began to sob wildly.

"Oh, Katy, don't," begged Elsie, truly distressed. "You and I must keep up for the sake of——"

"Of himself, miss, I know," sobbed Kate, "but, oh, I feel as if it was my own mother—or my own baby, I don't know which."

CHAPTER XIX

Elsie Moss's school was quite unlike her expectations, and her companions not at all like those of her eager dreams. Just as at art school one begins, she knew, with the study and copying of the antique, so the girl had supposed that in studying for the stage, one would approach it through the masterpieces of the drama. On the contrary, she didn't so much as hear the name of Shakespeare or of any other dead or classic dramatist during the first two months; and though she had to work as hard as she had expected to do, it sometimes seemed as if it were practice that didn't really count. The drill seemed to be all in the way of suppleness of limb and facility of facial expression without intellectual stimulus; indeed, it almost seemed as if the whole tendency of the school was rather narcotic than stimulating.

Further, the girls with whom she came in contact shared her ideals as little as their pasts had anything in common with hers. Many of them were not older in years, but one and all were incomparably older in other ways and painfully sophisticated. Pretty in a coarse way, painted and powdered, bold and often vulgar, they were almost without exception girls whose whole lives had been spent in the atmosphere of the stage, and that in its cheaper and poorer aspects. One or both parents, brother, sister, aunt, or uncle had figured in shows or exhibitions of some sort, and they had fallen into the profession in that manner. None had, like Elsie, chosen it as a calling.

Disappointed as she was, disheartened utterly at moments, the girl hugged her class motto to her breast and struggled on. So deep was her purpose, so strong her interest, that she not only pressed doggedly on, but forced a certain amount of satisfaction out of the struggle. How it might have been had she not possessed in Miss Pritchard a solace and refuge, it would be difficult to say. Elsie herself hardly knew how much courage and strength she gained during the evenings and other fragments of time spent with her. Looking forward to that companionship gave her patience to endure many a difficult hour which perchance she had not endured otherwise. But with that always before her, despite the hardships that were so different from those for which she had been prepared, she was nevertheless wonderfully happy—perhaps, happier than she had ever been before.

Sometimes, when the day had been unusually trying, she would greet Miss Pritchard at night with a warmth that almost frightened the latter, clinging to her as if she would never let her go. But she never confessed any of her troubles connected with the school. She talked much of it, but it was always

of the most interesting occurrences and of amusing incidents. For her heart was in the matter as much as ever, and Miss Pritchard wasn't so favorably inclined toward it as to make it prudent to let her know of the disadvantages.

But it was terribly hard for one of her nature to have no one in whom to confide, and she longed for Elsie Marley. If she could have talked things over with Elsie Marley it would have made it easier. Simply to unburden her heart would mean much. Ever since she had been in New York she had longed to see Elsie again; and with this added reason, and a desire to learn more of her life in Enderby than she could gather from her stiff and rather non-committal letters, she began to feel, about the time that she forwarded a letter to Elsie's lawyer in San Francisco, that she must induce her to come to New York for a visit.

A letter from her stepmother seemed to render it almost imperative. Mrs. Moss, who was devoted to Elsie and missed her sadly, was greatly troubled by the irregularity of the girl's letters and hurt by their want of frankness. Knowing that John Middleton had not approved of Elsie's father marrying her, she began to fear lest he be trying to turn his niece against her. Now she had written to protest against the perfunctory letters, which, instead of allowing her to share in any way in Elsie's life, shut her out.

Elsie was deeply moved and full of compunction. She loved her stepmother dearly and thought of her constantly, faithful soul that she really was. She was always wondering how *auntie* would take this or view that; but the very topics she was moved to enlarge upon in her letters were those which circumstances forbade her to mention. All her interests were connected with Miss Pritchard, of whose very existence Mrs. Moss was unaware, with the school, and less directly with Elsie Marley, whose name she was masquerading under. Leaving all these out of consideration, and depending almost wholly upon the fragments she received concerning life in the parsonage at Enderby, a brief letter once in three or four weeks was the utmost the girl could compass.

Immediately upon receipt of her stepmother's letter, she determined to ask Miss Pritchard if she might invite her friend Elsie Moss to come on for a week or a fortnight. As she waited for Miss Pritchard to come from the office that night, however, it suddenly occurred to her to wonder if it would be quite safe. Despite her enthusiastic admiration of Elsie Marley, which had not in the least abated, and despite the unfavorable impression she had of the Pritchards, which only deepened as the days passed, she had come to feel that in personal appearance and somewhat in manner her friend must resemble her kinsfolk.

In which case it would be as dangerous for the well-being of the one as of the other for her to be brought in contact with Miss Pritchard. For, stiff as were her letters and non-committal, Elsie knew that there was little difference in the strength of attachment that held the wrong Elsie to the place she had usurped in either instance. Whatever she might do, therefore, she mustn't bungle or err in that respect.

The Pritchard estate was not yet settled. The house had been sold and such personal effects and heirlooms as were to be kept for Elsie Marley put in storage for the time in San Francisco. Elsie Moss understood this, and knew that Miss Pritchard did so; but she felt that the latter wondered that she had no relics or keepsakes with her. She had had to confess one day that she had no photographs of her family she would be willing to show, leaving Miss Pritchard to make such inference as she would.

That evening at the dinner-table—she felt it would be easier to approach the matter in semi-public—Elsie asked her if she happened to have any old Pritchard photographs.

"Yes, dear, I have an old album in the chest by the window that has pictures of Aunt Ellen, Cousin Ellen, and Cousin Augusta. There are half a dozen, I think, of Cousin Ellen, and three or four of your mother, but no baby picture of you, nor any other, if that's what you're looking for. After my father died we began to lose connection with one another, and after that visit I made when you were a baby, all communication ceased. So I got no photographs after that."

"No, I wasn't thinking of my kid pictures, Cousin Julia. I was just—wondering," the girl returned. "Would it be an awful bother to get out the album?"

"No bother at all, child. To tell the truth, I love to get it out, for there are a lot of other pictures besides the Pritchards that I like to look over. There's a picture of my Cousin Arthur Moore, who fell in the battle of Lookout Mountain, that I'd like you to see."

When the old-fashioned, velvet-bound, nickel-clasped book was produced, Elsie almost forgot her immediate purpose in her interest in the likenesses. But one of Ellen Pritchard at fourteen, Miss Pritchard's cousin and supposedly *her* aunt, brought her up sharply. For Elsie Marley was the very image of it. Rearrange her hair, put her into the beruffled skirt and polonaise, and she might have sat for it. Or part this girl's hair and gather it loosely back, dress her in a tailored suit and correct blouse, and she would be Elsie Marley. What a frightful thing this family resemblance was! Elsie stifled a sigh. Her cake was dough, sure enough!

Partly to ease her dismay and postpone considering her problem until she should be alone, the girl gave herself up to the study of the other pictures. It wasn't difficult to lose herself, for she found them of absorbing interest.

Among the Pritchards, Elsie's grandmother was the most striking personage. The strength and sagacity of her handsome face, which the expression of pride could not conceal, related her to Miss

Pritchard unmistakably. Pride, mingled with frailty and general lack of other expression, characterized the invalid daughter; and pride that was arrogance, the bored face of Augusta Pritchard, who was supposed to be her mother.

It was late when the girl finally closed the album.

"Many thanks, Cousin Julia," she murmured rather absently, a far-away look in her dark eyes.

After a little she rose and began to wander about the room.

"Cousin Julia," she said presently, "I can't help wondering—honestly, don't you ever wish I looked more—I mean that I looked any like them? They're mighty aristocratic-looking guys after all."

"My dear, when you talk like that you know as well as I that you're fishing," insisted Miss Pritchard. "I have told you that I'm too well-satisfied. I have to watch out for flaws."

"Well, don't you ever think, anyhow, that such *whopping* dimples are—almost vulgar?"

"I adore them," responded Miss Pritchard calmly. "But anyhow, you know, they are supposed to be Pritchard. Didn't you tell that what's-his-name boy you got them from your mother?"

Elsie colored.

"I loathed that gump," she said.

Miss Pritchard did not press the matter, though she wished very much Elsie had explained or made other amends.

CHAPTER XX

"Oh, Cousin Julia, how perfectly gorgeous!" cried Elsie, "but oh, I don't need it, and—oh, please take it back. You just shower things on me, and I feel so wicked to have you spend so much on me."

"Elsie, child, don't you understand yet how happy I am to have you to spend it on?" returned Miss Pritchard.

It was quite true that the latter was constantly bestowing not only small, but rich and costly gifts upon the girl who had come to live with her and for whom she had come to live. In this instance it was an opera-cloak of rose-colored broadcloth, wadded, and lined with white brocaded satin, soft and light and warm. The two went often to the theatre, and it would be useful, though Miss Pritchard herself had never owned such a garment, and it was certainly rather elegant for a girl of sixteen.

"Now, Elsie," Miss Pritchard went on, "I want to ask you something—I have more money than I know what to do with. Whom should I spend it on if not on you?"

Elsie winced. Her little face grew wistful. "Then it's because I'm a Pritchard you do it?" she demanded.

Miss Pritchard laughed. "My dear, how you pin one to cold facts. If you must know, then, it's because you aren't a Pritchard. It's because you're yourself, through and through, and haven't a trace nor a look of the Pritchards that I love you so and long to have you happy here with me, who am not a Pritchard either. No doubt your family rubbed that fact in sufficiently, so you didn't expect me to be. To tell the truth, I could never abide the Pritchards. I was such a misfit when I visited Aunt Ellen's years ago, that I rather dreaded your coming, though I did feel that being so young you might not be inveterate, and that we might manage to hit it off, as they say."

Immensely cheered, Elsie kissed her warmly. Miss Pritchard threw the cloak over her shoulders, produced a rosy silk scarf to tie over her bobbed hair, and they were off.

The conversation came back to Miss Pritchard next day as she sat at her desk near a great window whence the streets below were like canyons.

"Dear me, how little Elsie must have had in her life to be so absurdly grateful as she is," she said to herself. "And what a life those women must have led her to make her so ready to refuse what meant so much to her if it came to her as to a Pritchard."

Which suddenly reminded her of the Pritchard family lawyer and a letter she had found on her plate that morning with the name of the firm Bliss & Waterman on the envelope. Not caring to open it before Elsie, she had brought it to the office.

Breaking the seal, she was amazed to learn that the lawyer wished to consult her in regard to a request for five hundred dollars Elsie Marley had recently made. He would not, of course, hand over a

comparatively large sum like that without her guardian's sanction, and he felt constrained to add that certain outstanding obligations against the residue of the property had recently come to light which might curtail the income for a year. He still felt that if Miss Pritchard remained willing to pay Elsie's general expenses, that the allowance which they had agreed upon and which he had sent regularly ought to cover pin-money and something more. Elsie had made no explanations. Of course, if the money were for educational purposes, he would arrange to send it. If Miss Pritchard would kindly make the situation clear to him, he would follow her instructions, but he awaited her reply before acting upon her ward's request.

Miss Pritchard felt absolutely at sea. She was as puzzled as she was troubled. Elsie had seemed so frank and open, and, despite her generous nature, had seemed so frugal in her expenditure, making a little go much further than Miss Pritchard herself could do, that she couldn't imagine her demanding this sum without consulting her in regard to it. She knew exactly what Elsie paid at the school—she had insisted upon paying her own expenses out of five hundred dollars she had brought with her and deposited. She knew, too, practically every penny she spent in other ways, the total of which was always far below the amount of her allowance; she knew her associates, and could have accounted for every hour of her time. She could almost believe that Mr. Bliss had made a blunder.

After pondering upon the subject all day, she telegraphed him not to send the money, and decided to question Elsie that night.

She had no opportunity that evening, however. A certain Madame Valentini, a former prima donna who had been a famous soprano in the early days of "Pinafore," and who came to Miss Peacock's each year for opera, had arrived during the day, and she and Miss Pritchard being old friends, the evening was devoted to her. Madame Valentini was white-haired now, and very stout, with chin upon chin; and the real Elsie Marley would have thought her vulgar, for she rouged her cheeks, laughed out heartily and frequently, and wore colors and fashions ill-suited to her age and size, with jewels enough for a court-ball. But she was full of life and spirit, warm-hearted, invariably cheerful, an amusing and fluent talker, and musical to the ends of her be-ringed fingers and the satin tips of her shoes.

Like every one else at Miss Peacock's, she took to Elsie at once. She understood that the girl was studying for the stage, but recognized in a twinkling that she had a singing voice, and finally prevailed upon her to try it. She herself played the accompaniment with a skill that was a revelation to Elsie, who had never enjoyed singing as she enjoyed it that night.

When she had done, the prima donna threw her arms about the girl and drew her to her bosom. Elsie Marley must have shuddered, but her namesake, thrilled with singing to the sympathetic accompaniment, kissed her warmly on her unnaturally pink cheek.

"Oh, my angel, what a voice, what a voice!" cried madame. "Entrancing! marvellous! It's simply perfect in tone and quality, and correct practice would increase its range. And when you put on a little more flesh (here, even Elsie Moss groaned silently) you'll get volume, too. Stop everything, child, and cultivate it. It's worth millions."

Elsie flushed. She couldn't help being pleased by the extravagant praise, but she couldn't bear to be advised to give up the dramatic stage.

The older singer turned to Miss Pritchard. "My dear Miss Pritchard, why do you let this charming child waste her time learning to do vaudeville stunts that any limber-jointed, pretty-faced chit could do, with a glorious voice like that?"

"It seemed wonderful to me, and Charley Graham confirmed me in the belief," Miss Pritchard owned, "and Elsie herself confesses that people have always advised her to study singing rather than acting."

"Only because they thought it was more respectable," protested Elsie, pouting.

"But, foolish child, wouldn't you far and away rather be a singer—a famous singer?" demanded madame. "You'd get into grand opera, you know. You'd be lovely as Juliet or Butterfly even now."

"I'd rather be an actress," pleaded the girl so sweetly deprecating that Madame Valentini hardly wondered that Julia Pritchard should give her her way.

So long as she remained at Miss Peacock's, madame devoted much time, very happily, to Elsie's musical education. She made the girl sing for her every day, giving her assistance that was really invaluable. She took her to the opera twice a week, where she was a wonderful companion, calling attention to fine points that all but a connoisseur must have missed, and discussing all sorts of pertinent musical topics between the acts. And she rejoiced with Miss Pritchard because of Elsie's obvious enjoyment.

Meantime, Miss Pritchard found occasion to speak to Elsie on the subject of Mr. Bliss's letter. She handed it to her; the girl read it quietly and passed it back without speaking, yet meeting her eyes frankly.

"I confess, Elsie, I can't conceive how you should want so large a sum at this time," Miss Pritchard began. "I trust you so thoroughly that I believe it must be for something worth while—at least you think it is, child. And I feel that you so trust me that you will explain to me if you can. In any event, I have

decided to give it to you out of my own pocket. I know that you are careful and economical and think it must be for your education in some manner, and don't feel that I am foolish in doing it. How will you have it, check or cash?"

Elsie had been growing weak after the first surprise. She had already cashed three huge checks (as they seemed to her), and sent them in money-orders to Enderby: and she had forwarded a letter some time before that Elsie had explained to be a request for money. But she was aghast at the sum. She couldn't imagine what the other girl could want it for.

The tradition had always been in her family, who were always poor, that Uncle John was rich; and though she had learned with some surprise that he had only one servant, she had heard nothing to indicate that he did not live in the "style" she had always imagined. She felt troubled if it was in order to keep up with that style that Elsie Marley wanted the money; but though she was reluctant to take it from Miss Pritchard, she by no means hesitated as she had in the case of the opera-cloak. For this was a legitimate case of Pritchard to Pritchard.

"A check?" repeated Miss Pritchard.

"Cash, please, Cousin Julia," returned the girl, her dimples almost visible. Then she looked straight into Miss Pritchard's eyes.

"Please tell me—are you doing this, too, because I'm not a Pritchard, or as my guardian?"

And whether it was because the girl's heart was so set upon that particular answer, or because Julia Pritchard was so staunch and true, with such a keen instinct for the real and right—in any event she returned promptly: "As your guardian, Elsie, Pritchard to Pritchard."

Elsie embraced her warmly, whispering that she couldn't explain, but it was truly all right. The next day she got a post-office order and sent the money to Elsie Marley without saying that it hadn't come from the lawyer in California as the other sums she had forwarded had done. Consequently, when a letter came from Mr. Bliss saying that he couldn't let Elsie Marley have the five hundred dollars she had asked for without an order from her guardian, she felt obliged to withhold it entirely.

It troubled her to do so, and weighed upon her mind afterward. She told herself that she would, of course, explain when she saw Elsie Marley, and meantime—it was, after all, nothing but a formal business communication, not a real letter, and of no account in that the business itself had gone through. Still, it seemed a great pity that there should be any concealment between herself and the other Elsie. As things stood, she was sufficiently involved in concealment, to give it no worse name, without that. It had been understood that she should read all the letters that came before sending them on to Enderby; but to keep one and never mention it, necessary though it was, and demanded by circumstances, seemed somehow almost like stealing.

And the worst was that circumstances might go on making demands, and she might have to do yet more reprehensible things—things that weren't merely *almost* like wrong-doing. Some day she might have to lie right out.

Well, as to that, what had it been when she said that her mother's name was Pritchard? That had been acting—a part of her rôle. And then, of course she constantly deceived Miss Pritchard, in a way, though not dishonestly. That was acting, too. She and Elsie Marley had entered into a contract, indeed, each to act the part of the other. They weren't hurting any one: each fitted into the wrong place as she couldn't have into the right. And yet in very truth it was very much like plain lying!

Elsie Moss flinched. Then she recollected how once at home some of the girls of her class at school had been discussing a subject given in the rhetoric they studied under "Argumentation"—"Is a lie ever justifiable?" These girls of the "Per aspera ad astra" motto had decided the question in the affirmative. They had agreed that lying to a burglar wasn't wrong—it might prevent him from robbing a widow or one's own mother—the same with regard to a murderer, an insane person, or one sick unto death. And one and all had declared with spirit that if they lived in England and a hunting-party should come along with their cruel hounds and ask which way the fox or hare had gone, they would point in exactly the wrong direction. Elsie herself had declared that she would have said that the little creature hadn't come this way at all.

Not that that was exactly similar. The girl owned that however she might please Miss Pritchard, and Elsie Marley might gratify Uncle John, in each case it was the girl herself who benefited chiefly by the scheme, and for whom it had been arranged and carried through. Pleasing Uncle John and Cousin Julia was what is called in chemistry a by-product.

Furthermore, there was the question as to whether Cousin Julia, in any event, would value satisfaction secured thus by indirection? Absolutely straight-forward, as she was, mightn't she judge their action severely, label it plain deceit, and—oh, no! she couldn't refuse to have anything further to do with her! It began to seem as if even failure in what she had always considered her life-work wouldn't be so terrible as that. The girl didn't put it into so many words, but as the days passed she seemed to have a vague sense of another life-work which might consist in growing up toward Miss Pritchard's standards of what is fine and good and worth while. But Elsie wouldn't dwell upon it, for she couldn't, of course, begin to approach any such goal—she couldn't even make a start—without confession. And confession wouldn't mean only the loss of her chance to realize her ambition; it would mean the loss of Cousin Julia herself.

CHAPTER XXI

Meantime, when the sum of money reached Enderby, Mrs. Middleton still lay unconscious—at death's door, it was said. And one whispered to another that it was, perhaps, better so, that it would be a blessing to the minister if she were to be taken away. She had been worse than a drag upon him all these years. Foolish, idle, lazy, extravagant, she had exaggerated her physical delicacy and given herself up to indolence and self-indulgence, running the household into debt until it was a disgrace to the minister and to the church. Mr. Middleton, dear saint, hadn't known order nor comfort nor companionship for years until his niece had come. And when all was said, she could do better for him without her aunt.

However that might be, the minister himself took his wife's sudden and terrifying illness sadly to heart. He hung over her bed and haunted her room, watching and praying for the return of consciousness and life. Not, perhaps, his peer in the first place, Mildred Middleton had not grown, had not kept pace with her husband, and she had truly of late fallen into deplorable habits for the head of a household. Nevertheless, he believed in her; loved her for her real warmth of heart, which her veil of sentimentality did not in any degree alter for him, for her optimism, her absolutely unfailing good nature, and for an intuitive womanliness he believed to be eminently her gift.

And presently when she rallied, his heart grew light, indeed. The doctor said it might be long before she would get her strength back, but he believed it possible that when she had regained it, she would be better than she had been for years. He told the minister quietly that it was fortunate she had been stricken as she had. The headache-powders she had been taking constantly contained a drug that had been slowly poisoning her. A little longer and her heart would have been permanently affected.

Meantime, before this, while she lay unconscious, the bills had begun to pour in. Along with the domestic science, Elsie had taken up bookkeeping at the high school, and fortified by that knowledge and the possession of the five hundred dollars, she summoned her courage, went to Mr. Middleton and asked if she might take the accounts in hand this month in Aunt Milly's place.

Pleased by her thoughtfulness, he proposed that they should do them together. Elsie begged to be allowed to try them alone, just for once, but he insisted upon sharing the task, though he confessed that she would find him very rusty about such things, his wife having taken them off his hands for so many years.

Elsie's heart sank. She knew that practically every tradesman had sent a bill in full, and apprehended that the totals would be appalling. She feared, too, that it would be awkward about the five hundred dollars. But there was nothing to do but to comply with his desire.

At his bidding, she brought the collection into the study that evening. He got out a check-book and they sat down, Elsie at the desk, and he by the side with one of the sliding shelves drawn out.

"You and I will do better with checks, Elsie, though Aunt Milly will have none of them," he remarked, and took up the pile of envelopes.



"You and I will do better with checks, Elsie, though Aunt Milly will have none of them," he remarked.

**"You and I will do better with checks,
Elsie, though Aunt Milly will have none
of them," he remarked.**

"We'll begin with the top one—Mason," he said. "Fill in the date and name—James S.—and now, let's see the sum."

He drew out the bill, glanced at it, then looked sharply as if it were hard to decipher.

"A hundred and seventy-five dollars!" he exclaimed. "Of course that can't be. It should be a dollar and seventy-five cents, I suppose, and yet—it's quite plain—see—one hundred seventy-five and two ciphers. There's some mistake. I'll just put it aside and telephone in the morning. Leave that and start another, dear. Andrew White's the next—no middle letter."

He opened the next with the same confidence. Eighty-six dollars was large for a milk bill. He glanced at it doubtfully. *Bill rendered* indicated that it wasn't all for this month. It must have slipped by, somehow. And of course Mrs. Middleton had to have egg-nog and cream and all that. He bade Elsie draw the check, feeling that they must have paid the largest first. But Elsie's heart sank as he took up the next envelope with Berry's name in the corner. Berry was the grocer.

"Four hundred ninety-two dollars!" he gasped. "Wait, Elsie, we'll look them all through before we do any more. There's something wrong. Now this goes back—let me see. Bill rendered—bill rendered—it seems to go back a year or more. I wonder if perhaps your aunt has asked for statements for a year in order to see what her expenditures amount to?"—He shook his head—"No, here's a credit. And this is plain enough 'Amount due November 1.'"

He opened the others one by one. None was so large as the grocery bill, though that of the market was above four hundred dollars, and the others large, the sum total being, as Elsie had foreseen, appalling. It did not take long to discover that Mrs. Middleton was behind in her accounts for a year or more.

It must have been hard for her husband to understand what had become of the monthly household allowance she had had in cash regularly. Credit was given here and there, indeed, but always in small sums. It must, too, have been hard for John Middleton to face the facts, but he stood the test. He looked weary and worn—he certainly grew haggard and seemed to grow old; but no word of impatience escaped him. Indeed, he did not appear to have an impatient thought.

"This has all been too much for your aunt, Elsie," he said finally. "She wanted to spare me, and when the task got beyond her strength she wouldn't give in. She has been a greater sufferer than any of us dreamed. Apparently she has had those terrible headaches almost constantly, hiding the pain from every one and trying to get relief by taking those strong tablets. And no doubt these accounts gave her no end of pain and worry, and got into confusion in spite of her."

He bowed his head in his hand and sat thus some little time, aware of Elsie's silent sympathy. He

smiled wearily when he raised it.

"We'll give it over for to-night, Elsie. I'll see what I can do to-morrow and then we'll tackle them again. I think I shall be able to do something, but we may have to go carefully for a time."

He hesitated.

"Kate's the most faithful soul in the world, but I doubt if she gives her orders carefully," he remarked.

"I've started in giving them since Aunt Milly's illness," said Elsie shyly. "Katy doesn't mind. I learned how at school, and I keep them in a little book so as to compare them with the bills at the end of the month."

"Elsie Moss, you are certainly a trump!" he cried. "Do let me see your book, dear."

She produced it and he examined the neat items with interest, praising her warmly and seeming greatly cheered already. And then the girl made an effort and mentioned a sum of five hundred dollars which she had on hand and wished he would use.

"My dear child!" he cried, smiling tenderly, "I wouldn't touch your money for the world. The truth is, I ought to pay you a salary as housekeeper and pastor's assistant, though I couldn't begin to compensate you for the better part. You have been like the daughter of the household, or such a sister as your mother was."

The following day Mrs. Middleton regained consciousness, and the next day the minister went into Boston and made arrangements to secure the money to meet his obligations by reducing his life-insurance policy one-half and disposing of some bonds. That evening they drew checks and settled everything in full. Thereafter Elsie gave the orders, checked the accounts at the end of the month, and made out the checks for Mr. Middleton to sign. On the whole she did remarkably well and reduced the general expenses considerably. She made mistakes, but they were few; for her mind was of the type that takes to figures and details, and she was naturally methodical and accurate. Mr. Middleton smiled at the neat little packets of receipted bills, docketed and filed, but he was extravagantly grateful to her for all that.

Mrs. Middleton gained slowly. One day, a fortnight or more after she was convalescent, the minister came to Elsie with a good-sized check in his hand made out to her. The girl looked at him in amazement, filled with vague dismay.

"For your winter clothes, Elsie," he explained. "Aunt Milly reminded me. In fact, she rather scolded me for not thinking of it earlier. And she suggests that you get one of the schoolgirls and go into Boston for a day's shopping on Saturday."

Elsie paled—she had begun to show a pretty color of late. This was her first realization of the discomfort of a false position. Long since, Mr. Middleton had come to seem her real uncle, and her affection for him was as deep as if he had truly been; indeed, nowadays she seldom realized that the relationship was not real. But to accept money from him—from that she shrank instinctively. And that proved the difference. For though not in the least drawn toward Cousin Julia, for all the other Elsie's enthusiasm, she could have accepted a larger sum from her without a qualm.

"Oh, Uncle John, I really don't need a thing!" she cried beseechingly, and he had to smile.

"Nonsense, my dear, I have the word of your aunt that you will need everything. Kate has told her that during the summer all the fashions have flopped completely over, so that last year's clothes wouldn't even keep one warm. Biases and bulges that formerly came at the top of the gown now come at the bottom; sleeves are big where they were little, and vice versa, and collars the same. As for hats—there the transformation is so great that I pause before it."

Elsie laughed. "Well, if it's so bad as that, I'll spend my five hundred dollars—blow it in, as—as my friend in New York would say."

"Ah, Elsie, I see through you now!" he exclaimed. "You think I can't afford it, because of those big bills. As a matter of fact, I could do it easily even if you weren't managing things so economically. And, besides, Aunt Milly has set her heart on it. And oh, Elsie, I'm so thankful to keep her with us that I should like to do something extraordinary, something really rash and extravagant. Please head me off by letting me do this simple, natural thing which is less than just, and which will please Aunt Milly more than anything I could do for her. Why, my dear Elsie, pray why shouldn't I do it? Wasn't your mother my only sister and dearest friend?"

On a sudden Elsie buried her face and wept—the only tears she had shed since her coming to Enderby.

CHAPTER XXII

Touched and perplexed, Mr. Middleton gave over for the moment; but presently he had his opportunity to be extravagant. As soon as his wife was able to leave her room, the doctor ordered her to pass a portion of every day out-of-doors. This was partly to strengthen her lungs and partly for the moral effect. Doctor Fenwick feared that if she should revert to the long days upon her couch or bed with the novels and chocolates, the headache-powders or a substitute would follow, soon or late, with more perilous results. She submitted to his dictum with resignation, being, indeed, rather captivated by the idea.

Her husband and Elsie went into Boston and selected a rich and warm fur coat, fur-lined gloves and overshoes, and three warm, dark-colored serge dresses which were a great improvement upon the wrappers. On the day after she received them, Mrs. Middleton spent two hours on the porch with ill-concealed delight. And, thereafter, rising and breakfasting with the others, she passed the whole of every forenoon out-of-doors, not only with beneficial results but with continued enjoyment.

The sentimental aspect, of course, appealed to her strongly. Sometimes she pleased herself by fancying that the doctor had discovered that one of her lungs was quite gone and the other a mere fragment, and feared to tell her. On such days her voice was feeble but breathed the same sweet patience that her face wore. Again, it was her heart "outwearing its sheath," as she put it. Always, however, she felt herself an interesting and picturesque invalid, and her martyr-like expression scarcely disguised her enjoyment of the rôle.

Unconsciously, her somewhat torpid mental powers quickened. The house being on the main highway, there was always something to look at against the background of the beautiful common, and she conceived a vivid interest in the passing show. An active in lieu of a passive mind did its part in the improvement of her health. The tables were turned. Now it was she who told Kate that the Berrys had a fine new motor-truck, and had apparently disposed of their dappled greys to the grain-man—she only wished *they* traded with the grain-man—couldn't one buy oatmeal of him? And Rachel Stewart actually had a new dress in which she looked very trim, though it was too long right in the back. Perhaps Elsie could speak to her about it at the library? Little Robbie Caldwell had begun to go to school alone since the new baby had come. And they had a new perambulator and had given the old one to the Howes, which would make it easier for little Mattie.

People passing began to run up and ask the minister's wife how she did. She was never very well; but she was so sweetly patient and so truly grateful that they lingered and their visits became frequent; children came on Saturdays and made children's long flattering stays; and presently there was never a morning when she did not have some one, and often she was not alone at all. And thus it came about that for the first time she came to know many of her husband's parishioners with some familiarity.

More than one reversed their judgment, and almost every one revised it. Mrs. Middleton was sentimental—there was no gainsaying that; she was rather gushing. Yet she was truly kind-hearted, generous to a fault, thoughtful in many ways, with really keen intuition in certain directions. As people came again and again, she guessed many a hidden trouble or vexation, and her sympathy was warm and very grateful; while now and again she had a flash of inspiration that was marvellously helpful.

No one's revision of judgment was more sweeping, perhaps, than that of Elsie Marley. Somehow her former shrinking had quite disappeared during the long illness, and the change in Mrs. Middleton's appearance helped bridge the way to a better understanding. The old wrappers and tea-gowns had gone to the ragman. The new afternoon gowns Elsie had selected were yet prettier than the morning ones and very becoming. The out-of-door air had already almost made over her complexion: her skin looked healthy, her color was good; and with the new fashion of wearing her hair, she began to look attractive and almost pretty.

She had not curled her hair since her illness, and now it was soft and smooth and seemed warmer in color. The nurse having parted it one day when Mrs. Middleton was convalescent, and coiled it upon her head simply, had declared it made her look like a Raphael madonna. The allusion was far-fetched, but it touched Mrs. Middleton's sentimental fancy, and she adopted that style of hair-dressing permanently.

In the morning, Elsie attended to her household duties and helped the minister. She fell now into the habit of spending the early part of the afternoon with Mrs. Middleton, going over to the library just before four. Doctor Fenwick having suggested knitting as a soothing indoor occupation, his patient sent for an immense quantity of wool—enough to keep half a dozen pairs of hands busy all winter—and began to make red-white-and-blue afghans for the Labrador Mission. Whereupon Elsie proposed reading to her while she worked. Mrs. Middleton was delighted, but when Elsie got "Adam Bede" from the shelves, she confessed that it tired her head. "Henry Esmond" was likewise too heavy, and Elsie groaned inwardly, expecting to be asked to read some of the paper-covered novels she was addicted to. She said to herself she simply couldn't: she had never in her life read any such trash and she would have to excuse herself. Then, looking up, something made her change her mind and decide to be a martyr. But before she could speak Mrs. Middleton herself had a happy inspiration.

"Oh, Elsie, I know what I'd just love to hear," she cried, "and what my poor head could take in as it couldn't Thackeray to-day, though when I'm strong I dote on him—I always took naturally to the classics. But now I feel like one of Miss Alcott's books. I suppose you have read them over and over?" she asked rather wistfully.

Elsie confessed that she had never done so, but would be glad to make their acquaintance.

Mrs. Middleton was truly amazed—as was the minister, indeed; for his sister had known them almost by heart. They had the whole set in the house, and Elsie began with "Little Women" that afternoon.

For the first time she was reluctant to go to the library when the hour approached. It was hard to stop reading. And they laughed together in an easy, natural way that was quite new to their intercourse as each exacted a promise from the other not to look at the story again until they should go on with it together.

They went through the whole set that winter and sighed when they had come to the last volume. Perhaps no single thing had influenced Elsie Marley more than the reading those sweet, wholesome stories at that time and in that manner. She had already changed much, and was perhaps just ready for the influence. Reading them with Mrs. Middleton, she was drawn to her as she would never have believed it to be possible, as they laughed and cried together over the pranks and trials, joys and sorrows of those New England boys and girls of a singularly happy generation. And, unawares, she was strengthened for the hour of trial that was to come to her as it comes to every one that tampers with the laws that are inherent in the structure of the universe.

Meantime, circumstances were leading on toward that hour.

CHAPTER XXIII

Late one afternoon early in December, Miss Pritchard telephoned to Elsie to say that she would not be home to dinner as she was going directly from the office to see a friend who had been taken suddenly to a hospital. She was to dine in town on her way back and would be late home. Mr. Graham, whom Elsie would remember, had spoken of calling in the evening, and Miss Pritchard asked her to explain the circumstance to him and keep him until her return.

As she turned away from the telephone, Elsie sighed deeply. Mr. Graham's name stirred up uncomfortable recollections. In any case, much as she had admired and liked him, she would have dreaded meeting him again; and to entertain him alone for an indefinite period, with his undivided attention focussed upon her, seemed an ordeal not only to be dreaded but truly to be shunned.

Suppose he should refer again to her darling mother—as he surely would! Acting or no acting, the girl felt that she couldn't deny her again. Should she do so, it would be like the Palladium ceasing to stand and Troy falling. And yet, what was she to do? If she didn't hold to her statement of the summer, wouldn't she hazard spoiling everything, not only for herself, but for the Elsie at Enderby?

Too wretched to allow herself the comfort of the window-seat in the bow, Elsie dropped down on the floor before one of the long, low windows of the adjacent side of the room, and gazing drearily out into the dusky street, tried to prepare herself for an impromptu scene with the coming guest wherein the matter of extraordinary dimples or sticky babies might come up at any moment and be skilfully parried. But stage-fright, confusion, and tears threatened imminently, like an ugly nightmare, and she said to herself there was no use, she simply dared not face it.

The temptation came to her to avoid the whole encounter by going to bed at once. She certainly felt queer—almost faint; and when she should be missed at the dinner-table and some one came up to see what had happened, she could truly say she didn't feel able to see Mr. Graham, and send word that he was to wait for Miss Pritchard.

As she considered the suggestion, reaching the point where Cousin Julia came in, the girl's heart smote her. Cousin Julia would be startled—yes, frightened. What a wretch she was deliberately to plan to cause her utterly gratuitous anxiety! And how practised, how *grounded*, in deceit she had grown, to turn thereto so readily for help out of difficulty! How very far she was getting from her class motto, "Per aspera ad astra"! And she recollected a word, strange hitherto to her, which Cousin Julia had used in the summer. She had mentioned her hope, as she had looked forward to the coming of the real Elsie Marley, that she shouldn't have, at sixteen, become *inveterate* in the ways of the Pritchard family. Well, wasn't she fast becoming *inveterate* in the ways of deceit? Wasn't she, perhaps, already inveterate? Truly, she must be perilously near it. And oh, wasn't this a far, far worse sort of *inveterateness* than the Pritchard sort? And if Cousin Julia had dreaded that, how, pray, would she feel in regard to this?

Rising suddenly, Elsie rushed into her own room as if she were running away from the visions she had conjured. As she made herself tidy for dinner, her desperation grasped at a third expedient, a middle way. Couldn't she get around the difficulty by preventing or forestalling the introduction of any doubtful topic into the conversation? During the time that would elapse between Mr. Graham's arrival and Cousin Julia's return—three-quarters of an hour at the longest, she supposed—she would keep him from bringing up any matter of resemblances, of big dimples, of madonnas, or sticky babies. She would monopolize the conversation, so far as she could, and direct it all the time. At the risk of utterly losing

the good opinion of one of Cousin Julia's most valued friends, of appearing forward, conceited, tiresome, she would rattle on like the empty-headed society girl in certain modern plays. She would introduce utterly impersonal subjects, such as—at the moment she couldn't think of anything but prohibition, which would last about two minutes—and chatter foolishly and fast upon them, one after another. Then, if she exhausted them and all else failed, she would make such pointed and brazen references to her own singing that he would be obliged to ask her to sing—and once going, she could easily keep that up until Cousin Julia came to the rescue. And she certainly wouldn't sing "Elsie Marley" nor anything that would in any way remind Mr. Graham of it. Either she would shock that elegant gentleman's taste with the ugliest of ragtime, or she would inflict him with a succession of the operatic selections she had taken up with Madame Valentini. The latter choice would probably, upon Miss Pritchard's arrival, serve to bring up the unhappy matter of her abandoning the stage for music, but that would be a minor evil.

Mr. Graham appeared promptly at the hour Miss Pritchard had predicted, and Elsie greeted him in the rôle she had chosen and proceeded to give him a gushing account of their journey back to New York at the end of the summer. The artist, who had looked forward to seeing again the charming little creature who had been such a vision of grace and loveliness as she had sung and danced on the hotel veranda that summer day, was surprised and dismayed at the change, the almost distressing change, that had come upon the girl meantime. At first he took it for granted that it was the coarsening effect of studying for the stage, but very shortly he had decided otherwise. Whatever his skill in reproduction, Charles Graham had the eye, the mind, and the heart of the portrait-painter; and now he read the little actress's behavior with a good measure of precision. Her restlessness, her chattering, the high, unpleasing pitch of her naturally lovely low voice, her assumption of the manner and speech of the blasé young person of the stage, he saw to be primarily the cover of nervousness. He understood that the girl was troubled about something, was perhaps suffering, and tried to conceal it in this way. Moreover, he felt that, whatever it was, she was bearing it altogether alone, hiding it from everybody.

So far, so good. But presently he jumped to a false conclusion. As he referred casually to Miss Pritchard as an *inveterate* optimist, suddenly all the color died out of the girl's face, the shadow in her eyes became momentarily genuine distress, and the bravado dropped from her manner. It struck him that there was some misunderstanding between his friend and her young cousin. And the pain this realization brought him was curiously acute.

"But, my dear child," he exclaimed earnestly, "hers is no cheap optimism. Miss Pritchard's wise, sane outlook upon life is the courageous, positive optimism of the seasoned soldier. She has known hardship and suffering, and it is victory over them that makes her serenity and strength so impressive."

As the artist paused, he glanced with searching kindness at the girl who was such a mere child, after all. But he seemed to feel a touch of hardness or of obstinacy in the way she set her lips. He couldn't bear the idea of her misunderstanding Miss Pritchard.

"I wonder, Miss Marley, if you ever heard about Miss Pritchard's love-story?" he asked rather hesitatingly. "It all happened of course before you were born; but your family may have spoken of it to you?"

Elsie raised her eyes quickly, regardless of the fact that there were tears in them.

"Oh, no, Mr. Graham, I never knew—anything about it," she almost gasped.

"Then I believe I will tell you," he said gravely. "If ever you should—well, it makes one understand why Miss Pritchard so impresses even a chance stranger with the strength of her personality."

He sighed. "It was years ago. Miss Pritchard was a newspaper woman at the time—the most brilliant reporter, man or woman, in the city, we thought her, in the little coterie of journalists and artists to which we both belonged. More than one of us would have given all he had to win her love. I don't mind saying to you, Miss Marley, that it was because I could not win it that I have never married. She bestowed it, however, upon an older man and a more brilliant than any of us. At that time he was city editor of one of the big dailies; he had invested a moderate inheritance wisely, and was worth millions when he died. Miss Pritchard was in her late twenties, and though she was called plain, possessed rare beauty of expression that is of course the highest beauty of all; and it was no mere girl's heart that she gave that man. She loved him with the intensity and maturity of a generous, noble woman. He returned the love and he appreciated her fineness; and yet he was unworthy of her. In the course of his business life, at a certain stage of his career, he did something which, while it wasn't dishonorable, wasn't strictly honorable. By means of this action, which no one else of the few who knew it deemed reprehensible, he gained prestige for his paper as well as for himself; but he lost Julia Pritchard. Had he yielded in a moment of temptation, though it would still have hurt her cruelly, I believe she would have overlooked his fault. But the act was deliberate; and though he regretted it bitterly and to his dying day, it was only because Miss Pritchard looked at it as she did. Of the act itself, he never repented."

When Miss Pritchard came in, she noticed at once that Elsie looked very pale—almost ill. After greeting her old friend warmly, she turned anxiously to the girl.

"Has it been a hard day, honey?" she asked tenderly.

"Oh, yes, Cousin Julia," Elsie returned mournfully. And Mr. Graham felt not only that his suspicion had been correct but that his relating the story had truly had the desired effect.

"I think I'll go now, and—write a letter," the girl faltered.

"Go by all means, dear," Miss Pritchard bade her, "but don't write the letter to-night unless it's imperative. I have tickets for 'The Good-Natured Man' for to-morrow night, so if you can put off the letter, hop right into bed and get a good rest in order to be fresh for it."

CHAPTER XXIV

It was Sunday afternoon, nearly a week later. Elsie sat alone by the window with a writing-tablet in her lap, gazing out at the row of houses across the street. But though the new-fallen snow on roof, cornice, and iron grating transformed the familiar scene, and though snow in such profusion and splendor was a new and wonderful experience to her, the girl wasn't really seeing the landscape any more than she was writing a letter. Realizing the fact after half an hour of stony silence, she rose, dropped her writing materials, and crossing the room, threw herself down on the hearth-rug with a gesture of despair.

It wasn't merely because she couldn't write the letter—which, by the way, was that which she had given as an excuse for withdrawing on the evening of Mr. Graham's call. It was true that writing to her stepmother—something that had been growing increasingly difficult for some time—had become practically impossible since that evening. But that was, in a way, a minor detail. For everything, *everything* had become impossible since the hour she had heard his recital of that experience of Cousin Julia's youth.

"There's no use," the girl cried out within herself, "I simply cannot stand it. I can't go on so. Cousin Julia's gone to a funeral. I'll have one while she's gone and bury everything deep down. There's nothing else to do. Now that I know for deadly certain that Cousin Julia would hate me if she knew, I can't go on being—as I am. Why, what *he* did wasn't dishonest. It was only, as Mr. Graham said, less than honest. And look at me!"

It was true that Cousin Julia hadn't *hated* him, even when he wasn't sorry about the wrong itself, Elsie repeated; for this was by no means the first or second time she had gone over the matter since that night; indeed, she had scarcely thought of anything else since. Still, she wouldn't have anything more to do with him, and must have despised him, which was worse. And it was also true that she would even have forgiven him utterly if he had sinned in a moment of temptation. And again the girl lamented bitterly that she hadn't done something even worse if it could have been committed in hot blood, and therefore followed by repentance, confession, and forgiveness. Only last evening Cousin Julia had read some verses from Browning which had filled her heart with a longing that was like remorse—something about a "certain moment" which "cuts the deed off, calls the glory from the grey." Were her wrong-doing only of the sort to be neatly cut off in that manner, how gladly would she own up. How certain would she be of obtaining full forgiveness, and how blissfully could she go on thenceforward!

But hers wasn't that sort. Hers was the sort that goes on and on and on. After making the beginning, there was no hope, any more than there was of stopping a ball when one starts it to rolling down a steep, smooth hill. And besides, it was of the very nature of that which had hurt Cousin Julia so cruelly in the case of her lover of twenty-odd years ago. For it was for Elsie's own advantage that she had entered upon the course of deceit, and it was she that was profiting by it, daily and hourly. She had imposed herself upon one whom she had no claim whatever upon for the sake of making things easier and pleasanter for herself—of gaining her own way. And wasn't she continuing the imposition largely for the same reason?

No, she wasn't doing that—at least not now. Absolutely selfish as her motive may have been in the first place, these last days had shown her that another element was now involved. Her longing to be an actress remained the same. Her distaste for the idea of life at the parsonage in Enderby had been increased almost to horror by the glimpses she had had through her friend's letters of what seemed to her its dreary and complacent domesticity. Nevertheless, at this moment she felt that she would give up the former and accept the latter without a murmur if she could thereby measure up to Cousin Julia's standard, and yet, in the process, hurt neither her nor Elsie Marley.

But there was no blinking the fact that Cousin Julia's heart was so bound up in her that the discovery of her duplicity would wound her cruelly; indeed, Elsie couldn't bear to contemplate what it would mean to her. As for Elsie Marley—she was apparently, for her part, equally bound up in the Middletons, and the shock and change would be terribly painful to her. Moreover, she was, in a way, almost as innocent as Cousin Julia herself. Her masquerading was only masquerading. She had only accepted, in her sweet, docile manner, her part in the plan that Elsie had made to further her own interests. The wrong was all her own, truly; but any attempt to undo it would hurt the innocent Elsie at least equally.

What could she do? Was she really, as it seemed, bound hand and foot? The girl wrung her hands, and there was no thought of the dramatic in the gesture. Must her punishment be to keep on and on with her wrong-doing, with the consciousness, increasingly more painful, of deceiving Cousin Julia, of being, not only *not* the person she believed her to be, but exactly the sort of person she most despised? Could that be her fate?

Looking ahead, Elsie said to herself she couldn't stand it—not now. Before, she had had her uncomfortable moments; but since that talk with Mr. Graham she had had no moment that wasn't agony. He had roused her out of her dream of making things right by calling them so. And yet, less than ever since that knowledge had come to her, was she ready to hurt Cousin Julia, as confession or discovery would hurt her. Could it be that it was impossible for her to straighten out her own conscience without wounding the hearts of others? Was there no way whereby she could make things right without involving Elsie Marley and Cousin Julia in misery?

Staring wretchedly into the fire, the girl was unaware that she was grappling with a big moral problem: that her personal perplexity was a part of the old problem of evil: that what daunted her was the old paradox that has confronted mankind since before the time of Job. She understood dimly that the lines between good and ill do not converge any more than unmoral geometrical parallels; but she still felt that it must be possible to limit the consequences of wrong-doing to the evil-doer so that the innocent should wholly escape.

But what, short of her own death, would bring that about? In that event, indeed, Cousin Julia's natural grief would not be bitterly painful; and Elsie Marley would simply go on as she was. But she wasn't likely to die, and besides, wretched as she was, she didn't want to. And even if she did, she wouldn't be so wicked or so cowardly as to do anything to hasten her end.

But her consideration of that solution of her problem made way for another. On a sudden a substitute solution presented itself to her mind. Having gone so far, it was but natural that the girl's dramatic instinct and her familiarity with romance and melodrama should suggest something that would answer the purpose of death without occasioning the same measure of pain—namely, her own disappearance. And the suggestion no sooner appeared than it was accepted. Before Miss Pritchard returned the idea was already so familiar as to seem to be of long standing.

Her mind was quick and her invention fertile, and before she slept that night her plans were well along. She was to lose herself utterly—where and how she would determine later. She would, at the proper moment, disappear absolutely and mysteriously, yet not without leaving behind her satisfactory and reassuring explanation for the two persons to whom it would mean most—nay, three—she mustn't forget her stepmother. She would write to Elsie Marley that she had felt obliged to take the step for the sake of her own future, and would entreat her to go on as she was and never to let any one know what had happened. And she would leave a long letter for Cousin Julia to discover on her return from the office the day of her departure. She would tell her how she loved her—better than any one else she had ever known except her mother—and how she had never been so happy in her life as with her. Then she would make the same enigmatical but satisfactory reference to her future and how it made the step imperative, adding that if Cousin Julia could understand, she would agree that she couldn't have done otherwise.

When she had reached this point, Elsie's heart sank. Disappearance might be preferable to death, but it seemed as if it were going to be quite as painful. But only for her, and after all, that was where the pain belonged. The girl cried herself to sleep that night, but she woke next morning with a sense of relief so active and positive that it seemed like refreshment and almost like joy. She realized why it was: her mind hadn't been wholly at ease before since the day in the summer when she had first seen Mr. Graham, and for the past days she had lived in torture. The removal of the burden was almost like unsnapping the cover of a Jack-in-the-box. She was going to be good and straight and honest again. She was going to make amends, so far as in her lay, for the wrong she had done. She was going—*away!*

Here Elsie faltered. But she sprang from bed before depression could swoop down upon her. And while she was dressing a suggestion came to her that sent her to the breakfast-table with a serene and even joyful face. It had come to her that she would better not attempt to carry out her resolve until after Christmas, lest she mar Cousin Julia's or Elsie Marley's enjoyment of the day. She would act immediately after Christmas, beginning the New Year with a clean slate. And meantime she would devote herself to making every one she knew as happy as possible, particularly Cousin Julia.

And she would be happy herself. There would be sufficient unhappiness coming to her later to pay her in full for all the mischief she had done; and she saw no harm in putting the matter from her thoughts for the interim, and making the most of the eighteen days. Then, Christmas being over, one day, or two at most, would suffice her to decide where to go and to make her preparations. Another day would give her time to write the letters with due deliberation, and on the third she would be off.

Wherefore, her resolve being fixed and her conscience accordingly clear, she adventured the first precious day with a light heart.

CHAPTER XXV

Elsie Marley had never been happier than as she prepared for her first Christmas at Enderby. But that festival seemed the high-water mark of her happiness. The close of the day found her strangely depressed and thereafter she had more frequent periods of being ill at ease.

She had learned to knit and had spent most of her leisure time for several weeks in making a soft white woollen shawl for Mrs. Middleton, into which went a rather surprising amount of affection. She went into Boston with one of the high-school girls and bought a charming little plaid woollen frock for Mattie Howe and a beautiful doll to fill the little mother's arms when they were not occupied with a real baby. For Charles Augustus, she selected an harmonicon, and toys for the other three Howes. She wanted to get a warm winter coat for her staunch ally Kate, the jacket she wore being short and so thin as to require an undergarment that spoiled what little shape it had. On the day before she was to go into town, she consulted Mrs. Middleton.

Thus far Elsie hadn't accepted a penny of pocket-money, and the Middletons were filled with dismay to have her spend her own money so lavishly. But Mr. Middleton had told his wife that he meant to give Elsie a check for Christmas, which being also her birthday, made a large one legitimate. Consequently, at this time Mrs. Middleton did not remonstrate. She only called herself heartless for not noticing poor Katy's need and so forestalling Elsie.

After she had sufficiently exclaimed over it, she asked what the girl meant to get.

"I thought of black broadcloth, rather plain. Should you think that would be right, Aunt Milly?"

"Quite right, dear. It would be, of course, the proper thing," Mrs. Middleton returned, "but I can't help wondering whether Katy herself wouldn't fancy something not so plain and rather more stylish. After all, we can hardly expect her to share our quiet tastes."

Elsie didn't resent the *our* nor question the fact. She was only very grateful.

"Oh, Aunt Milly, I'm so glad I spoke to you!" the girl cried with unwonted warmth, for she felt immediately the cogency of Mrs. Middleton's remark. "What do you think she would like? I might have her go in with me and pick it out herself, only——"

"Only half the fun would be lost not to have her surprised on Christmas morning? I don't know what she would like, I'm sure, but leave it to me and I'll find out from Katy herself and without letting her mistrust anything. Leave it to your Aunt Milly, dear. She is of so little use that she has to seize upon whatever she can discover."

And truly she learned the desire of Katy's heart and reported to Elsie that night. Green was Kate's first choice for color and blue next, and she admired especially a long, loose garment with "one of them fur collars that folds up like an accordion or a gentleman's opera-hat." And Elsie succeeded in finding the very thing—not a difficult task, Kate's choice being the latest fashion and very common.

Though her gifts gave extraordinary pleasure in every instance, the reaction upon Elsie herself was yet greater. Her satisfaction was increased by the fact that Mr. Middleton told her it was the happiest Christmas he remembered, and that her being with them was largely what made it so.

"Besides which," he added, "I realize that most of the other factors and changes that contribute are really due to you and to your influence, Elsie dear."

That was very precious to Elsie, but it couldn't ward off the reaction that was to follow. The lavishness of the Middletons' gifts to her, which they justified by reminding her that it was her birthday (she had quite forgotten that Elsie Moss celebrated hers on Christmas!), quite weighed down her spirits. On a sudden she seemed to herself to be accepting what didn't belong to her, what wasn't meant for her. Despite the placid way in which she had gone on acting the part of the real niece, she pulled up and shied, so to speak, at this instance of extravagant giving and a false birthday. It seemed as if she could not bear it, could not accept the money, the jewelry, furs, books, and other gifts showered upon her.

But there was no way out. She had to accept everything, and she had to keep everything but the money. That she sent directly to Elsie Moss, explaining that she couldn't possibly accept it, as it was especially for her Christmas birthday. But Elsie Moss, probably with her friend's recent request for the five hundred dollars in mind, sent it directly back. Whereupon she wrote again, saying that she had more money than she knew what to do with, and that she would be broken-hearted if Elsie returned it a second time.

The letter in which Elsie Moss returned the money was written on the very day when the girl had planned to write the letter announcing her disappearance. It was only a short note, however, and contained nothing of that nature. Her next letter, in which she reluctantly agreed to accept half of the Christmas-birthday gift, was long and surprising, but delightfully so rather than mysteriously or painfully.

Her Christmas had been quite as happy as that of the other Elsie. Indeed, her greater capacity for

blissful and ecstatic joy would have rendered it even happier but for the valedictory character all its details held secretly for her. Her youth and temperament, however, which had carried her through the days following her momentous decision, upheld her spirits even when she approached the brink of the crisis. Her determination to right the wrong she had done at what she believed the first possible moment had cleared her conscience so completely that in the interim she had been able to enjoy the fruits of that wrong-doing as never before since the very first.

She had herself made her gift for Cousin Julia and little things for Miss Peacock and nearly everybody in the house. On Christmas Eve she sang in the parlor for Miss Peacock, the servants, and those remaining in the boarding-house over the holidays. First she went through the carols. Then she sang the favorite song or songs of every one present, including several of Miss Pritchard's. And though the programme was haphazard it wasn't motley—only simple and old-fashioned and full of sweetness and melody. The girl must have been dull indeed not to have guessed something of the exquisite and genuine pleasure she gave.

In truth she lay long awake, thrilled by the remembrance. It had been her swan-song, she told herself, half-tremulously, half-buoyed by the excitement of it all. For she was passing out of their lives, in very truth—even out of Cousin Julia's, and—forever. And Cousin Julia, who, Elsie knew had basked in the enjoyment of the others, would have it for a happy memory, when——

But she mustn't go further now. It was hardly safe. To-morrow was Christmas Day. Until the day after, she wasn't going to think ahead. Only on the 26th of December would she begin to make definite, final preparations. She wouldn't spoil tomorrow by looking beyond it.

Christmas was a wonderful day. Elsie did not realize how delirious her enjoyment was nor how painfully she was keyed up because of her underlying apprehension of coming agony. Neither did she understand it when she waked suddenly from sleep the following morning, feeling so exhausted as to be almost ill, and with a terrible sinking at heart which settled into depression the like of which she had never experienced before.

It might have seemed that she was in no condition to complete the proposed plans. But as a matter of fact, there was little to do. Though the girl hadn't deliberately or consciously looked ahead, the matter had been in her mind; and now when she came to consider the question as to where she should go, she found it practically settled. When she brought up the idea of going to California and trying to get a chance as a moving-picture actress, she was ready with the objection that the films were most likely to reach New York and that her dimples would give her away at once. Her wisest move would be to take refuge in some place equally distant from her stepmother in San Francisco and from New York. Which, of course, was no other than Chicago. She had enough money to take her thither and take care of her until she should get a start—in some vaudeville house as she hoped. And then she would be truly lost—forever, in all probability, and perhaps in more senses than one.

Miss Pritchard was struck by the change in Elsie that morning at the breakfast-table. The child looked almost ill. She said nothing to her, however, feeling that it was the reaction from the excitement of Christmas, and believing she would be better for the distraction of the school. But she couldn't dismiss the matter from her mind all day, and the more she thought of it the more serious it seemed. She realized that Elsie hadn't looked merely tired or even exhausted. It was worse than that. For the first time since she had come East, Miss Pritchard thought she saw in the child indication of genuine, positive suffering.

She decided that she herself had been gravely remiss. The strain of giving herself so generously and whole-heartedly had worn upon the girl disastrously, and—she had had warning and hadn't heeded. Until recently, it is true, Elsie's blithe buoyancy had seemed always the normal, unconscious, almost effortless efflorescence of a lovely nature, as natural as playful grace to a kitten, as simple as breathing. But once or twice back in the fall, Miss Pritchard had been startled into wondering if the sweet instrument wasn't in danger of being strained through constant playing upon it, and to be fearful that Elsie might truly be rarely sensitive in a personal, as she seemed to be in an artistic, way.

The first time when this had presented itself to her mind had been a matter of a month or six weeks previous. At that time she had seemed to discover a shadow in the sparkling eyes and a transient pensive droop of the lips. Then on the night of Charley Graham's visit, she had been frightened by the worn look upon the beloved little face, and had feared some definite trouble.

It was not long after the affair of the five hundred dollars, and Miss Pritchard had wondered if the difficulty might not be somehow connected with that. She had just reached the decision to question the girl when suddenly the weariness, the sadness, the pensiveness, the shadow, vanished utterly, leaving Elsie not only herself again, but even more glowingly and infectiously happy and buoyant than before. And from that moment until this morning at the breakfast-table she had remained so.

It was natural that now Miss Pritchard's mind should hark back to those former suspicions. All day she vacillated between the fear that Elsie was beset by some secret trouble or by the solicitations of some unscrupulous person, and the apprehension that she was on the verge of nervous exhaustion. Her face was anxious indeed as she left the office that night.

She opened the door of her sitting-room with strange sinking of heart. Then she almost gasped.

Her breath was almost taken away by sheer amazement. Elsie was waiting for her—yet another Elsie. For, radiant and sparkling as the girl had been, she had never before been like this. She was fairly dazzling. If Miss Pritchard hadn't been almost stunned, she would have made some feeble remark about getting out her smoked glasses.

CHAPTER XXVI

"My dear child, what has happened?" Miss Pritchard cried as Elsie relieved her of her wraps and bag, and she dropped weakly into a chair. "I believe your dimples have actually doubled in size since morning. It's positively uncanny, you know, anything like that. Suppose it should go further?"

"Like the Cheshire cat's grin? Well—we should worry, Cousin Julia, dearest. But—what do you think has happened, truly?"

"Your friend from Enderby hasn't appeared?"

"No, this is another sort of bliss. This is—well, dearest darling, it's just that Mr. Coates has started me on something that—that I could go on the stage with!"

Miss Pritchard's face fell. "Oh, Elsie, child, what do you mean?" she asked anxiously. The dimples disappeared but though Elsie spoke quietly, still there was that wonderful lilt in her voice.

"Just this. He called me into his office this morning and spoke to me about—my specialty, you know, 'Elsie Marley, Honey.' One day back in the fall I was showing off with that to some of the girls that were eating their luncheon together, and he happened by and made me repeat it. To-day he said he had had it in mind ever since, and had found that he could adapt it and change the music and make it into a regular vaudeville feature. He thinks it's a real crackerjack. He's going to begin right away to give me training in it."

For a moment Miss Pritchard couldn't speak. Then she had to stifle what started to be a groan. "Oh, my dear child!" she exclaimed.

"It seemed such a lovely ending to a lovely Christmas," said Elsie wistfully. The girl was absolutely carried away by the excitement of it. It didn't even occur to her—until she was in bed that night—what the "ending" of the lovely Christmas was to have been—the ending that alone was to justify her enjoyment of the holiday and of the days since she had weighed her action in the balance and found it wanting.

"Oh, Cousin Julia, really when you understand, it's simply wonderful," she went on eagerly. "I'm the only one picked out thus far, and you know most of the others are related to the profession, too. And even if that thing is so old, I can't help liking it. Most of the things *are* rather awful, I must confess."

"But the first year—the first six months! I never dreamed of such a thing!" Miss Pritchard cried.

"Neither did I, darling dear; that's what makes me so wild with joy," said the girl softly.

Touched and almost remorseful, Miss Pritchard kissed her fondly. But she couldn't restrain a sigh.

"Surely it doesn't mean—going on the stage?" she inquired.

"Oh, no indeed, Cousin Julia, at least not right off. Only—well, just being ready if anything should happen, you know."

Then suddenly at the thought of that wonderful eventuality, the girl's dimples came out and her eyes so shone that Miss Pritchard felt as if she should burst into tears. It seemed as if she couldn't bear it! Again she lamented inwardly. Why should the child have had that crazy desire for the stage? Why shouldn't it have been a passion for music—for opera, indeed? Nearly every one who had heard Elsie sing on Christmas Eve had spoken to Miss Pritchard of the girl's wonderful voice, and the question of her cultivating that instead of working for the stage; and Miss Pritchard had yesterday decided to make a fresh plea to Elsie to that effect. What joy would it not be to share the child's enthusiasm, had it been a matter of music!

However, it would be worse than futile to drag in any such thing at this moment, she saw clearly. Carried away by her delight, Elsie would have no ears and no heart for anything else. Miss Pritchard told herself she must wait for the infatuation to cool—and when that might be, she couldn't in the least foresee. Would it ever happen in truth?

As she couldn't possibly force herself to rejoice with Elsie, and couldn't bear not to share in her joy, as they had come to share everything, she suddenly proposed attending a concert that evening to be given by a visiting orchestra from the Middle West. Elsie entered into the plan with spirit, and they went off gayly together. Miss Pritchard knew that Elsie was dreaming dreams to the strains of Bach

and Schumann, and wished with all her heart they were another sort of vision; still, it was a happy evening for both where it had threatened to be uncomfortable. But on the night when Elsie Moss had expected to lie awake in agony because of the imminence of her parting with all she loved most, she had only a brief moment of compunction, which she dismissed easily, falling asleep in the midst of radiant and enchanting visions of life on the stage. It was Miss Pritchard whose rest was troubled.

CHAPTER XXVII

The answer of the real Elsie Marley to the letter in which her friend enthusiastically related her advance toward the stage might have indicated how far she had gone since the day on the train when she had opined that the girl who thinks of becoming an actress has to undergo much that isn't nice. It so sympathized and rejoiced with the other in her happiness that it was solace and inspiration at once to Elsie Moss, who was living at a high and unhealthy pitch of excitement, and welcomed, indeed craved greedily, anything in the way of approval or sympathy. For the girl feared that if ever she should stop to consider, she should find her heart a black well of wickedness. But that she wouldn't do. She *would not* stop to consider. She had her chance now, the chance she had waited for all her life, and she wasn't going to hazard it. She was going to make the most of it, let her conscience go hang!

For her part, the real Elsie Marley was led at this time to consider, and the more seriously. To her inexperience, it looked as if Elsie Moss were very near the stage, as if another year might find her a fixed star in that firmament. And what then? She would be independent of Cousin Julia and the boarding-house, and might she not want to resume her own name and make herself known to her own relations? Or would she, out of her abounding affection for Cousin Julia, suffer the present state of affairs to continue?

The girl pondered long and rather sadly over the dilemma, but always inclined to the belief that the latter was really the only possible sequel. It wasn't that the question of what would become of her in the former instance was all-important; it wasn't that Elsie Moss would probably not think of any other course of action. It was the fact that some one very much like herself was needed here at Enderby. Mr. Middleton depended upon her. Mrs. Middleton would hardly know how to get along without her. Katy counted strongly upon her sympathy and co-operation. And even Mattie Howe and Dick Clinton would miss her.

And, after all, didn't the fact of Elsie Moss's securing her heart's desire almost immediately, together with the working out of her own presence at Enderby to the satisfaction of a few very dear people, quite justify the exchange they had made? Hadn't it really proved a beneficent idea?

Arrived at this point, the girl was reassured. The only difficulty was that the question didn't stay settled. It came up again and yet again and the whole argument had to be redebated. And finally she came to the conclusion that her wisest plan was to ward it off. Like the other Elsie, she decided to avoid meditation and plunge into action. And though the sort and amount of action to which she was limited wouldn't have seemed action at all to the other girl, it answered her purpose, nevertheless. Elsie Marley threw herself into the performance of the various duties she had assumed with more fervor than ever, and presently had recovered a good measure of her former serenity.

But it seemed only to have been regained to be threatened.

One night early in February, when Miss Stewart relieved her and she left the library, she found Dick Clinton waiting outside. He often did this, for he and Elsie had become good friends since the day he had first appeared at the library and asked for help. She had seen him at all the parties of the high-school pupils which she had attended, and had gone coasting on his double-runner with other girls a number of times. And no Sunday passed that he didn't seek her after service and walk home with her.

He was strangely silent to-night. His first shyness having worn off, he had since always had plenty to say. Elsie was always quiet, and not a word was spoken until they were next door to the parsonage.

"Oh, Miss Moss, would you just as lief walk back a little way?" he asked suddenly. "I had something I wanted to say to you, and there's the parsonage and I haven't begun. I won't make you late for your supper—or dinner, whatever it is."

Rather surprised, Elsie complied willingly, and they had no sooner turned than he began.

"It's something I've done," he blurted out. "I feel sort of—like thirty cents, you know. I should sort of like to know—what you think of it."

"Whatever it is, I don't believe you need to feel that way about it, Dick," she said gently.

"I do, just the same, though I'm not sure I should have before I knew you, Miss Moss, you're so awfully sort of square, you see," he owned. "I'm glad anyhow it ain't so bad but what I can tell you. This

is what it is: one of the other fellows that's about my height and build wanted to go to the motor-show in Boston last week and his dad wouldn't let him. He's simply wild over aeroplanes, and there was a model there, and when the last night came, he got me to help him out. He pretended to go to bed about a quarter of nine. Instead, he sneaked me up the back-stairs and left me in his room, and he caught the nine o'clock for Boston. I went to bed and put out the light. After a while his mother put her head in the door and asked if I was asleep, and then came in and kissed me. About two o'clock he came back, climbed in the window, and I vamoosed. It seemed all right, and I couldn't have refused him, and yet I felt queer."

"I should think you were innocent enough. It seems to me the other boy had all the responsibility of it," Elsie observed.

"That's just what I thought. And I'm dead sure it would only have seemed fun last winter. And I'd have to do it again if he asked me. But—you know that little Howe kid that's trying to stretch himself out to get big enough to be a boy scout?"

"Yes, indeed, Charles Augustus Howe."

"Well, he's always asking me things, and taking my answers so solemnly, and yesterday he wanted to know if I thought it was wrong to tell a lie to yourself in the dark. I tried to reason out the thing with him and—great snakes, but it made me feel queer all over! Talking to that kid about truth and honor and George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, I sort of hypnotized myself; but afterward it made me feel cheap. And—and there you are!"

"But you didn't get anything out of it for yourself, Dick," said Elsie.

"Nothing but feeling cheap before that kid."

"Then I don't believe it's wrong for you—only for the other boy," she averred.

They turned. Nothing more was said until they reached the parsonage.

"Much obliged, Miss Moss," the boy said quietly. "And that's good to remember—not getting anything out of it for yourself. Good night."

She heard him whistling cheerily as he went on his way. But her own heart was heavy. Not to get anything out of it for oneself! Oh, what would Dick Clinton think, what would every one think, to know that she wasn't Elsie Moss at all! He had been sadly troubled because he had played the part of another one night—a silent part that required no spoken words. What would he think to learn that she was an interloper at the parsonage? It was in part, it is true, for the sake of another. But it was also in part—in large part, now—for her own sake.

CHAPTER XXVIII

One evening in the early spring, during the interval between the films in a motion-picture theatre on lower Broadway, a thrill of excitement went through the audience, which was of the sort that desires to live on thrills.

Perhaps to-night, however, there was reasonable excuse for genuine anticipation. For the song-dance specialty that was about to take place was of a different order from anything that had been known in that theatre heretofore. There was real grace and beauty in the dancing, genuine melody in the voice of the singer, and something sweet and wholesome about the whole performance.

The act was entitled "And Do You Ken Elsie Marley, Honey?" And one whispered to another that the best of it was, that that was her real name—honestly it was—at least it had always been her stage name, so that probably the song had been written especially for her—and she that young—and it wasn't real ragtime either. And her dimples were real too; possibly they were enlarged and deepened by the make-up, but she had them off the stage.

Heavy applause greeted the entrance of the actress.

She was only a slip of a girl—a mere child she looked, partly, they said, because of her hair—the "Castle bob," you know. She tripped lightly before the footlights, smiled charmingly as she put the question of the first line, and sang the song through with dancing between the stanzas and dramatic rendering of the lines. She smiled and sparkled and dimpled; but though she was so pretty and piquant and coquettish, so graceful and vivacious, so completely the actress, there was a look of youth and innocence about her that pleased the blasé audience, and touched one alien member of it to tears.

Once and again was Elsie Marley recalled to repeat the act. The young actress had other things prepared, but though they might be well received, they were followed by clamor for "Elsie Marley, Honey," until only the forcible resumption of the pictures availed to quiet it.

And on Saturday night at the end of the second week, even that did not avail. The last appearance of that bill having been announced, the audience could not let Elsie Marley go. Finally, the manager came out and announced that Miss Marley had been engaged for another week. And again, while there was intense satisfaction elsewhere, to one person the statement was like a blow.

In truth, on the day when Elsie had announced the opportunity that had been offered her of appearing in a "specialty" on the stage of a second-class cinema theatre, Miss Pritchard had been aghast. The chance had come through the school in the person of Mr. Coates, who had first seen possibilities in the song the girl had known since childhood, and who had developed it to its limit, and trained her in a more artificial though still charming rendering, the music having been adapted more nearly to music-hall ragtime. When he had announced to her what he had known from the first—that she was to go upon the stage with it—Elsie had been so elated that Miss Pritchard had been powerless before her. She couldn't be a wet blanket; neither, however, could she force herself to express any gratification.

And when first she had seen this last member of her family before the footlights of the cheap little theatre, with the bad air, the mixed audience, and the poor pictures, she felt she couldn't endure it. The image of the stately, aristocratic Aunt Ellen Pritchard rose before her vision, overwhelmingly severe and reproachful. It would actually have killed her to witness once what Julia Pritchard had to witness every night for two weeks—or so she thought at first.

On this Saturday night when the engagement was extended, they were later than usual in getting to their carriage. Elsie was wrapped snugly in the rose-colored opera-cloak. Her eyes were very bright, her cheeks flushed. She had not really required any make-up, but they had insisted upon deepening the color of her lips and darkening the lower eye-lids. Miss Pritchard, too depressed to force any semblance of cheerfulness, saw her dimples appear and disappear in happy reverie. She sighed. Through it all, the child was absolutely enchanting to her.

Elsie, catching the sigh, snuggled up to her.

"Oh, Cousin Julia, I'm so happy, so happy I'm afraid I'll just burst like a circus balloon. Oh, dear darling, you're so good to me. And I suppose you're sick to death of the same old thing, and dread the thought of another week of it."

As a matter of fact, Miss Pritchard was as captivated by the song specialty as any of the audience. She confessed that it wore well. "But, oh, Elsie," she couldn't forbear adding, "I do wish you weren't going to have another week in that cheap place."

"Oh, but Cousin Julia, one can't begin at the top," remonstrated the girl. "Why, I'm the luckiest guy ever was. How much do you suppose I'm going to get for this next week?"

Miss Pritchard had no heart for guessing. The sum the girl mentioned was indeed surprising, but it only seemed to remove her further from her and from the family they both represented.

"I should be only too glad to do it for the experience alone," Elsie rattled on, "and of course what I get is only what is over and above what they pay the school. And I shall get other chances, Mr. Coates says, and—oh, Cousin Julia, I don't dare tell you—you don't"—there was a catch in her voice—"you don't sympathize. You were so different! And now you're just like—well, almost as bad as the others."

Miss Pritchard drew the little rose-colored figure close.

"Yes, I do sympathize, dear little cousin," she said, "only——"

She could not go on. And they went the rest of the way in silence. It was the first time that anything, recognized by both of them, had come between them. As the excitement that had buoyed her up for the evening began to die away, Elsie's heart was like a stone. Later it would ache. She wondered rather drearily how it would be after she was in bed. Even now she recognized something that would have been absurd if it weren't so terribly serious. To think of her demanding sympathy from Cousin Julia—of appearing almost aggrieved not to receive it—she who should be cowering beneath her scorn! How was it that she should so forget, should feel and act as if everything were true—and square?

It was being on the stage, she supposed, a real actress at last. At last! Why, it was almost *at first*. Who had ever been so fortunate as she! To be on the stage in New York well within a year of her first entering the city! And only to think that this might have been the last night of her engagement! How terrible that seemed now! How would she ever live without the evening to look forward to? How blissful to have another week before her—six more appearances before that vast, applauding throng! How happily would she go to sleep tonight to the music of the lullaby of the thought: "Another week at the Merry Nickel, another week at the Merry Nickel! Bliss! Bliss! Bliss!"

And yet it wasn't at all a blissful face which Miss Pritchard bore in memory to her own room that night after she had kissed Elsie, put out the light, and opened the windows. Since the girl had been at the theatre, Miss Pritchard had dropped into the habit of going in to her the last thing every night and tucking her in as if she had been a child. For somehow she had seemed, since striking out into professional life, only the more a child, more innocent, more appealingly youthful, more than ever to be sheltered and guarded. She had tried her wings, it is true; she believed she had proved them (and perchance she had!); but more than ever was she a precious and tender nestling.

As she sat by her window in the darkness, Miss Pritchard shook her head sadly. She said to herself this couldn't go on—this state of things couldn't continue. Despite Elsie's elation over the fact that she was booked for another week at the theatre, she looked more mournful and wistful and worn than ever. Some strain was wearing the child out. It wasn't the work, nor yet the excitement, for she lived on them, and not altogether unhealthily. There was no other possible explanation: it was nothing less than the strain of combating her own disapproval, tacit or expressed. Elsie was too warm-hearted to enjoy her legitimate happiness alone, too sensitive not to suffer from want of sympathy.

The change in the girl had begun to be apparent directly after Christmas. Elsie hadn't been herself since that time, which proved beyond peradventure that Miss Pritchard's suspicion was correct. The joyous, sparkling little creature whom she had found in her room on the day after Christmas, bubbling over with excitement, eager to share her good news, had become thin and wan. Her charmingly brilliant little face was not only peaked, but in repose was generally wistful or plaintive. Many a time one could have looked on it without suspecting the existence of dimples. Only in the evening did she resemble her real self. From dinner until the moment she lay in her bed, she was the Elsie Marley she had been (with negligible interruptions) since the night when she had walked straight into Miss Pritchard's heart before she had known who she was. At other times she was a pale shadow, the little ghost of the girl she had been or should be.

Miss Pritchard sighed deeply. If it were for want of sympathy—approving sympathy—the child drooped and pined, must she not have it, willy-nilly? But again she sighed, and yet more deeply. Whatever her effort, was such a thing possible?

As for Elsie herself, the lullaby didn't prove a lullaby at all, and, as usual these days, the girl cried herself to sleep. Every night, of late, the reaction came. Every morning she awoke with a sense of a heavy burden weighing her down. All day her heart ached, though dully and vaguely for the most part; for if the pain threatened to become acute, she could still drug it with anticipation of the excitement of the evening.

In the weeks that had passed, Elsie hadn't once faced her conscience. She had never squarely confronted the situation which was now so much further complicated. When the unexpected and thrilling opportunity had come to her the day after Christmas—the very day that was to consummate her renunciation—the girl had been completely carried away by it. She hadn't repudiated the decision she had come to so painfully, she had simply disregarded it—ignored it utterly as if there had been no such thing. And she had gone on ignoring it. In the very first of it, the excitement of working directly for the stage had rendered her oblivious of everything else. Then when certain faint murmurings of conscience began to be audible, came the actual prospect of the Merry Nickel to stifle them, and then there was the stage itself and the actual footlights. Nevertheless, avoid the issue as she would, more and more had her daylight hours come to be haunted with misgivings, and now her heart was never light except in the evenings. And combat any such direct thought as she might, she felt dimly that in giving over her purpose to square her conduct with the right, she had doubled and trebled the original wrong. Unvowing a vow must be equivalent to signing a covenant with the powers of darkness. Now and again lines from the poem *Cousin Julia* had repeated to her so impressively that she could never forget it, came to her suddenly in uncanny fashion. At such times, if questioned, Elsie would have acknowledged that her Palladium had indeed fallen, with all the awful consequences.

Lines from another and more familiar poem came to the girl the next day as she sat in the afternoon with Miss Pritchard in their sitting-room, the snow falling outside as if it were December. As she gazed at the steadily falling, restful, soothing curtain of flakes which deadened all sound and veiled all save its own beauty, unconsciously she was repeating verses of a poem she had learned as a child. But as she came to the words, "I thought of a mound in sweet Auburn," she recollected herself. And somehow her mind turned instinctively to Miss Pritchard's lover. It was because he, too, was dead, she supposed, and this snow was rounding above his grave. But before she made the natural application or drew the familiar comparison between his failure and her own, Elsie clapped the lid down on her thoughts with a thud. Turning resolutely to Miss Pritchard, she asked her, with strange intonation, if she thought the snow would continue all night.

"I rather hope so," Miss Pritchard returned in a quiet voice that was like a part of the silent storm, "for it's so late that we can't expect another snowfall, and it seems really a privilege to have it now—like plucking violets at Thanksgiving."

For a little, her gaze, too, lost itself outside. Then she turned and looked at Elsie with a kindness in which there was something wistful.

"I know what you have been thinking, dear," she said. "You're thinking that I'm not consistent nor fair—and you're right. I am neither. I agree with you absolutely. Having in the first place consented to your studying for the stage, I should have looked ahead and faced just this. As you say, one can't begin at the tip-top—nor yet at the top. One must make use of humble stepping-stones."

But it seemed that the struggle she had been through to bring herself to this attitude had been in vain. On a sudden she lost all that she had gained. Her heart sank as Elsie's face brightened eagerly—became transformed, indeed.

"The trouble is," she went on sadly, "that the stepping-stones—oh, Elsie, I'm so afraid the stepping-stones will only lead on and on and on—never higher. They'll be and remain on a dead level, and you will step from one to another, one to another, year after year, over the same dreary waste. I hate

awfully to say all this, dear, but when those people refuse to allow you to do anything but the Elsie-Honey business over and over, it comes to me what a fate it would be to be doomed forever to that one stunt."

"Oh, Cousin Julia!" Elsie cried deprecatingly.

"Yes, dear, that's what I am exactly, an old killjoy; but truly I cannot help it, though I have tried. I have struggled hard against my prejudice. Elsie, last night you stopped yourself as you were about to tell me something, but I fear I can guess what it was like. Some one suggested your going on the road, as they say, with that one thing as your repertoire—making a tour of the cheap moving-picture houses of a certain section?"

Elsie grew very pale; her lips trembled. One interested wholly in her dramatic career, seeing her at that moment, might have concluded that the girl had it in her to develop a capacity for tragedy as well as comedy.

"Cousin Julia," she said with tremulous dignity, "I don't want you to come with me this week. I can go back and forth in a carriage by myself. I've got to go through it, for I promised and they will have made arrangements, but—please don't come with me any more."

She gazed at Miss Pritchard through reproachful tears, but when she saw tears streaming down Miss Pritchard's plain, staunch face, she ran to her arms.

"My dear, it's only because I love you so, because you are the very apple of my eye, that I talk so," the latter declared, and the warm words went straight to the girl's sore heart. "I know I'm not just, but dear, we won't let anything come between us—ever. I'll do my best to see your side of it, and you must be patient with me. It's hard, I know, for youth to bear with age, for inexperience to hear the ugly words of experience; but now we'll just go through the week together and await what comes."

What came demanded further patience on her part and increased Elsie's infatuation. Before the end of the week the young actress had an offer from a rival establishment which would take her to the edge of summer at a salary that fairly made her gasp. The second theatre was perhaps a shade better, but not sufficiently so to reconcile Miss Pritchard to it. But she held her peace. Whereupon the first manager increased the sum offered by his rival, and, Miss Pritchard still tolerant, Elsie agreed to remain there until June.

CHAPTER XXIX

Miss Pritchard acknowledged to herself that Elsie Marley had the right stuff in her. She did not grow careless, never let herself down. The audience was uncritical and wildly demonstrative, but the girl did her level best at every performance. Up to a certain point, she even improved. The possibility of so doing in this case was limited, but having reached that point she held it. Further, her wonderfully sweet voice seemed to grow sweeter every day.

Therein lay Miss Pritchard's one hope. Presently, she sought out an old friend who had been a musician of note and later a teacher and musical critic on an evening paper, and confided her difficulty to him. Hearing her story, he was interested and very sympathetic. He advised her to drop the concert idea and dwell wholly upon the possibility of opera as a lure: only the dramatic form and setting could compete successfully in a case of stage-fever like that. And where Miss Pritchard had hoped only to be allowed to bring Elsie to him, he being an old man, he agreed to go to the theatre and hear the girl when she would be off her guard.

"I'll go any night you say, Miss Pritchard," he proposed.

"Don't make *me* choose, Mr. Francis," she begged. "There's so much at stake that if I knew when you were to be there, I should be so nervous I couldn't sit still."

"You *nervous*, Miss Pritchard!" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Alas, yes, Mr. Francis," she acknowledged, laughing. "These young people with their careers are too stimulating for spinster cousins who have never had anything more exciting than night-work on a city paper. Well, I dare say I have only my come-uppings. You see, I was afraid Elsie wouldn't be lively enough! I had visions of an extremely proper, blasé young person moping about, and rather dreaded her. Getting Elsie was like finding a changeling."

"Rather too much of a good thing? Well, we're all that way, Miss Pritchard. If we're looking for a quiet person, we want a peculiar sort of quietude; and the lively ones must be just so lively and no more. Do you remember in one of the old novels, where a sister enumerates in a letter to her brother the charms of the young lady she wishes him to marry? At the end of the list she adds that the lady has 'just as much religion as my William likes.' Now isn't that human nature and you and I all over?"

As she left the house, a suggestion came to Miss Pritchard in regard to a lesser matter she had had in mind. Elsie having agreed to drop everything for July and August and go into the country with her, she had been studying prospectuses and consulting friends as to the whither. Seeing Mr. Francis, suddenly recalled a summer twenty years before when he and his sister had passed a month at a place called Green River in eastern Massachusetts, and she had driven over a number of times from a neighboring town to dine with them. It came to her suddenly that Green River was exactly the place she had been looking for, and she believed it must be near Enderby, where Elsie's friend lived. And now she couldn't understand why she hadn't thought before of going where the friends might meet.

Making inquiries, she discovered that the name Green River had been changed to Enderby, and that Enderby Inn was considered quite as good a hostelry as the Green River Hotel had been. She wrote at once to the proprietor to see if she could engage rooms, saying nothing to Elsie lest the plan miscarry.

So eager was she, that when she found a telegram on her plate next morning (almost before her letter had left New York) she opened it anxiously, uncertain whether such promptness meant success or failure for her. But it was from Mr. Francis, asking her to lunch with him. She got through the morning in almost a fever of suspense.

He had gone to hear Elsie that very night of Miss Pritchard's call, and told her without preface that the girl had a marvellous voice.

"Now, Miss Pritchard, can't you shut down at once on that vaudeville business and set her to studying under a first-rate teacher?" he demanded. "She ought not to lose a minute. Of course she is rather small—too bad she isn't taller—but for all that I believe such a voice will carry her anywhere. I shouldn't wonder if she should turn out a star of the first magnitude."

He named a teacher with a studio in Boston who could take her as far as she could go in this country. He usually went to Naples in the late spring with a pupil or two, but would be at his home near Boston all summer this year.

Of course the fact that Enderby was within easy reach of Boston added to Miss Pritchard's excitement. That night she received word that she could have accommodations at the inn, and a letter following next day offered her a choice of rooms. She engaged a suite of three with a bath, though aware that the single rooms would be satisfactory. And she smiled at herself for assuming airs already, as guardian of an operatic star, engaging royal apartments for her.

Filled with enthusiasm, she announced to Elsie that night that she had secured quarters for them at Enderby for the two months. At the first breath the girl was quite as surprised and delighted as she was expected to be. The delight was, it is true, but momentary, though it sufficed to irradiate her face and fill Miss Pritchard's heart with generous joy—also, to hide from the latter the fact that it was succeeded by profound dismay.

Those dimples! Those awful dimples! As she thought of them, Elsie Moss was overwhelmed by consternation. Of course she couldn't go to Enderby. She couldn't let Uncle John get even a second glimpse of her face. She fled from the room in a panic which Miss Pritchard believed to be excited eagerness to impart the good news to her friend at once.

Though, as the days had passed, Elsie had persisted in her refusal to face her conscience or look into the future, she had been vaguely aware of a day of reckoning ahead. She had dimly taken it for granted that when she stopped she would have to consider—there would be nothing else to do. When she should be out from under the influence of this powerful stimulant, she foresaw herself meeting perforce the questions she had evaded. But also she had foreseen herself with two clear months before her and with Cousin Julia beside her.

Now, on a sudden, all was changed. She seemed to have no choice. She had no control over her future. She had delayed so long that the choice was no longer hers. Her path was sharply defined. There was nothing she could do except to disappear on the eve of Miss Pritchard's departure for Enderby. And at that time there would be nothing to sustain her, no moral or redeeming force about an act that was compulsory. It was like being shown a precipice and realizing that at an appointed time one must walk straight over its verge.

CHAPTER XXX

Mrs. Moss, who had loved her brilliant, impulsive little stepdaughter like her own child, had given her up unwillingly. But it had been her husband's wish that Elsie should go to her uncle; the latter could give her advantages her stepmother could not afford; and she supposed it was right and natural for the girl to be with her own people, even though they had been strangers to her up to her sixteenth year.

At first her loneliness found some solace in Elsie's letters. They were short, but seemed brimming over with happiness. Mrs. Moss didn't get any dear idea of the household at Enderby, but it was apparently all that the girl desired. Then gradually the letters began to fall off, and before Christmas-time she felt a decided change in them. They had become unsatisfactory, perfunctory; the girl seemed to be slipping away from her. She began to wonder if Elsie were not concealing something, and soon after Christmas was forced to the conclusion that she was unhappy and would not acknowledge it.

She endeavored to regain the confidence that had been fully hers; she tried in her own letters to prepare the way, to make confession easy, but she received no response. In such circumstances letters are at best unsatisfactory, and it was maddening to Mrs. Moss that she was at such a distance that her warm words must grow cold in the five or six days that elapsed between the writing and the reading.

Christmas passed, and the winter, and she was unrelieved. She was busy with her teaching, but except when engrossed by that, was haunted by anxiety and apprehension. She had finally decided to go East during the long summer vacation, ill as she could afford to make the journey, to investigate for herself, when one night after school she dropped in to see a friend, and while waiting picked up a New York paper.

Some one in the house had that day returned from a journey East, and the paper was dated five days earlier. It happened to be folded with the page given over to amusements uppermost. Glancing carelessly over columns that devoted a paragraph each to an amazing number of cinema theatres, her eye suddenly caught the familiar name, *Elsie Marley*.

With a vision of her stepdaughter as she had sung the old rhyme, she mechanically followed the words until the word "dimples" arrested her attention. Then she read the paragraph with beating heart. She read it twice before she fully comprehended—understood that Elsie Marley had completed her sixth week at the Merry Nickel in her song-dance specialty, "And Do You Ken Elsie Marley, Honey?" Miss Marley was declared to be more popular than ever; managers were clamoring for her and she had engagements a year ahead. The notice added that despite the fact that her voice was so wonderful, her dancing and acting inimitable, some people declared that it was her dimples that wrought the spell—that she might stand dumb and motionless before the footlights if she would only smile.

Mrs. Moss's first clear sensation was indignation toward Mr. Middleton. She felt she could never forgive him for allowing this situation to come about without warning her. Then she realized that this was the key to the whole situation. She had not heard from the girl for six weeks—just the length of time she must now have been at the theatre. Excusing herself before her friend appeared, she hastened home in a tumult of emotion.

She did not know which way to turn. She couldn't bear the idea of Elsie being on the stage of a motion-picture theatre; it seemed as if it would break her heart. And still worse was the knowledge that the girl had deceived her; that she had written empty, non-committal notes calculated to make her believe she was staying quietly with her uncle, when she was all the time preparing for this. And she had always been so frank and upright, so easy to appeal to and to persuade! It seemed to Mrs. Moss that she must have come under unfortunate influence.

Her first impulse was to write to Elsie; her second, to Mr. Middleton; but she did neither. The situation was now too critical to be handled from a distance. There were only two weeks more of school. She secured accommodations on the railway for the evening of the last day of the term.

On the sixth day after, she appeared without warning at the parsonage at Enderby. A pleasant-faced woman who might be Mrs. Middleton, though she did not look like an invalid, sat on the veranda entertaining a little girl with a big baby in a perambulator. She asked at the door for Mr. Middleton and was shown into his study.

He came in directly, and the sight of his handsome, refined, strong and serene face, with a vague resemblance to Elsie's, revived her drooping spirits. Suddenly she felt that whatever he sanctioned must be right. She inquired falteringly for Elsie before she announced her name or her errand.

She learned that the girl was well, and, to her surprise, would be in presently. Then the season was over, she decided, and recollecting herself, gave her name.

He smiled. "I thought as much from the way you spoke her name," he said. "Elsie will be delighted. May I call Mrs. Middleton?"

"Just a moment, please. I felt troubled about Elsie, Mr. Middleton, and came on without writing or sending word. I'm impulsive too, like Elsie, though only her stepmother."

He had never felt that Elsie was impulsive, and as he looked up in some surprise, she wondered if he minded her comparing herself to Elsie, and so to his sister.

"Perhaps I should have sent word," she went on. "But I hesitated. I knew you didn't approve of Elsie's father marrying me."

"Oh, Mrs. Moss, if I had any such feeling, it has long since disappeared," he assured her earnestly. "From the moment I saw Elsie and realized what you have made of her, I have felt only the gratitude I am sure my sister would have felt for your devotion to her motherless child."

"Thank you," she said. "Now about Elsie——"

But she couldn't go on. A sudden wave of indignation swept over her. If he had felt kindly toward her, why hadn't he warned her?

He glanced at her with some concern. She seemed so fatigued and overwrought after the long journey that he begged her to let him call Mrs. Middleton that she might have a cup of tea and go to her room before Elsie's return. The latter had gone into town but would be back very soon, for she went into the library at four.

Mrs. Moss stared at him, and he asked if Elsie hadn't told her that she had been assistant librarian since September.

She shook her head. He wondered, and when she had again refused refreshment or rest, explained. As he did so, it came out that she knew little or nothing of Elsie's activities, and he launched into glowing descriptions. And the further he went, the more she marvelled. She couldn't understand how Elsie had become the sedate, dutiful girl he portrayed unless some great blow had fallen upon her. Then she recollected what had brought her hither.

"Elsie has been away lately?" she asked.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Moss, she only went into Boston to do some shopping."

"But she was in New York in May?"

"Why, no," he returned with some surprise. "I'm sorry to say she hasn't been away overnight since she came. But we have made up our minds she shall have a change this summer, and now that you are here, we shall surely be able to put it through. Perhaps you will go to the shore with her? Of course you will spend the summer with us? Mrs. Middleton will insist."

Mrs. Moss was too dazed to reply. Indeed, the only statement she had taken in was that Elsie had not been away since she came. For an instant she wondered if she could have mistaken. But that could not be. Surely there were no two girls in the country who would have selected that particular song and have had peculiar dimples into the bargain. On the other hand, Elsie couldn't have been in two places at once. Neither could she have been away without his knowledge. It wasn't conceivable that he——

It struck her coldly that he was not in his right mind—that this handsome, courteous gentleman was mildly insane. In spite of his fine manner and bearing, his every word had been irrational. She hazarded one last question.

"Has Elsie said anything—shown any interest in the stage?"

As she spoke, there was a curious expression on her face—it seemed to him so watchful as to be almost furtive. He began to suspect that something was wrong. She was certainly overwrought and almost hysterical—beyond anything the journey would bring about. Possibly that was the explanation of the mystery. Elsie had rarely spoken of her stepmother. Perhaps her husband's death had unbalanced her mind?

Whereupon he murmured something soothingly and courteously evasive that confirmed Mrs. Moss in her suspicion with regard to him, his mind was wandering now; he had illusions, without doubt. Quite likely Elsie was now in New York, and he constantly believed her to be in Boston for the day, coming back in time for the library. And Mrs. Moss wondered how she could get the ear of the lady on the porch.

She could see her through the window. Now she saw that she had a mass of wool, red, white, and blue, in her lap and was knitting a curious-looking article, and it came to her that perhaps she, too, was out of her mind? Perhaps this was a mental sanitarium? True, she had inquired for the *parsonage*. Could it be that in the cultured East that was a new euphemism for insane asylum?

But that idea was too ludicrous, and suddenly struck by the absurdity, she laughed out. Her laugh was so merry and infectious as to lay his suspicion at once, and he couldn't help joining her. And then, somehow, each understood the misapprehension of the other, and they laughed the harder.

Even as they laughed, there was a light step on the veranda outside, and some one cried *Elsie* in a tone of warm welcome.

Mr. Middleton had risen. "Shall I tell her who it is, or just send her in, saying that it's an old friend?" he asked in a low voice.

Her heart was beating violently. "Don't tell her who it is," she begged weakly and shrank back as he opened the door.

He closed it behind him and she waited breathlessly. She forgot everything except that she was to see Elsie. At the first sound she sprang to her feet, and as the door opened—not with Elsie's characteristic fling—she held out her arms.

"Elsie!" she cried, then started violently.

A total stranger stood before her, a pretty girl with a sweet face and long light-brown curls hanging from her neck.

"And who are you?" she cried wildly. "Am I mad or is this a lunatic asylum?"

For a moment the girl stared at her with sweet perplexed face. Was she another patient, then? thought the distressed woman.

"I am Mrs. Moss," she said in a sort of desperation. "Pray tell me who you are and where I am?"

All the pretty color left the girl's face. She stepped back and leaned against the door.

"This is the parsonage," she faltered. "I am Elsie Pritchard Marley. Your Elsie is in New York with my cousin. We exchanged."

CHAPTER XXXI

On the Saturday afternoon following the arrival of Mrs. Moss at Enderby, Miss Pritchard and Elsie had just seated themselves in the former's cool, pleasant room for the purpose of discussing summer clothes for the latter. A maid came to the door and brought in a card.

"Mrs. Richard Moss! I'm sure I don't know any such person; do you, Elsie?" Miss Pritchard exclaimed, frowning as she attempted to recollect whether that could be the married name of any one who had formerly been at Miss Peacock's. As she looked up she saw that Elsie was almost ghastly white.

She sprang from her chair and went to her.

"Elsie, darling, are you ill?" she cried.

Elsie almost gasped.

"No, Cousin Julia, only—startled, *scared*," she said in a strange voice that frightened Miss Pritchard still further.

But the maid waited. About to ask her to excuse her to Mrs. Moss, she looked again at Elsie.

"You don't know her, dear?" she said gently, putting the card before her.

"Yes—I do. That's what—fazed me," gasped Elsie. "It's my—stepmother. I'm afraid something awful has happened."

Now Miss Pritchard was white, too.

"My child, are you out of your head?" she exclaimed. "What are you talking about? You never had a stepmother. You couldn't have."

Then she half smiled.

"Oh, Elsie!" she cried reproachfully, "it's some of your stage friends come to see you. How you startled me! I'll settle with you later for that and give you a good scolding, but I won't stop now. Will you have her up here or down in the parlor?"

"Please, let's have her up here," said the white-faced girl in the same strained tone. "There's nothing to do now but go through with it. It serves me just right. But——"

Without understanding, her heart beating strangely, Miss Pritchard asked that Mrs. Moss be brought up.

They waited in silence. Presently the caller was ushered in, a slender woman clad in black, with a young-looking, sad face. Seeing Elsie, she too became very white. But the girl rushed upon her, flung her arms about her, and hid her face on her shoulder. And the stranger clasped her close.

Miss Pritchard stared in amazement. She hadn't known of any warm friend of Elsie's except the young girl in Enderby; but this was unmistakably an affection of long standing. For a moment she stood stock-still. Then somehow she got them both over to the sofa, relieved Mrs. Moss of her wraps, and sat down near.

"I don't understand," she said finally. "You are evidently an old friend of my little cousin's. Perhaps you are the lady she stayed with while she was finishing her school after Mrs. Pritchard's death?"

Mrs. Moss looked hard at Elsie, reproachfully yet lovingly. It was so good to see the girl that the

plans she had laid as she came on from Massachusetts escaped her. She spoke at random, and might have imparted the same impression of mental irresponsibility that she had given Mr. Middleton.

"She hasn't any grandmother. She never had one. And she isn't——"

"Oh, *Moss*, I have it!" exclaimed Miss Pritchard. "You're the mother of Elsie's friend at Enderby—though I believed her to be an orphan all this time."

"I am Elsie's stepmother, and she isn't your cousin at all," declared Mrs. Moss sadly. "She's only a very naughty girl playing a trick on you."

Then for the first time Miss Pritchard spoke sternly to Elsie.

"If this is a trick, a part of your stage business, won't you please bring it to a close right here!" she demanded. "It has gone too far already."

"My dear Miss Pritchard, will you allow me to explain?" said Mrs. Moss. Then she turned to the girl. "Or will you do it, Elsie? I went to Enderby to see you and found that other girl and learned the truth from her."

Elsie drew away a little.

"You tell her, please, auntie, I couldn't," she faltered. She clasped her hands tightly. Her face was whiter than before.

"Miss Pritchard, if you will have patience and bear with me for a little, I hope I can make things plain, though I can't make them right," said Mrs. Moss rather appealingly. "I have just come from Enderby, Massachusetts, where Elsie's uncle and guardian lives. I got worried and went there to see about Elsie. I came all the way from California."

Miss Pritchard stared at her in amazement.

"Oh, auntie!" cried Elsie in distress. Then she went to Miss Pritchard.

"Kiss me just once, Cousin Julia, kiss me hard," she entreated. And Miss Pritchard clasped her to her heart.

The girl resumed her place on the sofa and sat motionless, her eyes upon her clasped hands. Mrs. Moss endeavored to get the main fact out.

"I found there instead of this Elsie, instead of Mr. Middleton's own niece, a strange girl who has lived there since last June as Elsie Moss. Her first name happened to be Elsie, too, but her last name is Pritchard—Marley, I should say."

"Oh, Mrs. Moss, I must be stupid, but I cannot understand what you mean!" cried Miss Pritchard. And Elsie choked.

"I'll begin again," said Mrs. Moss with mournful patience. "A year ago this Elsie, *my* Elsie, Elsie Moss, started East to live with her uncle, John Middleton, in Enderby, Massachusetts. On the train she fell in with this Marley girl who was coming on to New York to live with her cousin, Miss Pritchard. Elsie was badly stage-struck and wild over New York, and the other girl didn't mind a quiet country town, and they calmly changed places—and names. Elsie Moss came to you—with no claim in the world upon your hospitality; and your relative, Elsie Marley, imposed upon the Middletons in the same fashion. And they have gone on with the imposture for practically a year."

As she continued, one detail after another fitted into the framework she made, and Miss Pritchard grasped the situation fully. Stunned and wholly at a loss, she glanced at Elsie. The girl sat like a statue, white with downcast eyes. Miss Pritchard went to the window and stood gazing out for some moments.

When she returned to her place, her expression was composed, but her face looked suddenly strangely worn and older. She looked into Mrs. Moss's eyes as who should say "How could she!" But she spoke to the girl.

"Well, Elsie?" she asked quietly.

"That was why I hedged about going to Enderby," said Elsie incoherently, "I didn't dare let Uncle John see my dimples. They would give me away, you see, Cousin Julia."

Then she suddenly bethought herself.

"Oh, but you're not my Cousin Julia any more!" she cried, and burst into a tumult of weeping.

Her stepmother gathered the girl to her, and Elsie sobbed wildly on her breast. Mrs. Moss, who had been more severe with Elsie Marley at Enderby than she had ever been with any one before, was now disposed to be very gentle—perhaps over-lenient—with the real culprit.

"Yes, Elsie, I am your Cousin Julia—to the end of things," Miss Pritchard assured her. And she spoke almost solemnly. "But tell me, dear—you didn't know what you were doing? Oh, Elsie, you didn't

realize that it wasn't—that it was—wrong?"

"Not at first—not when I did it," sobbed Elsie. Then she uncovered her face. "But I knew afterward. It came to me then, and I knew it was the sort of wrong you think worst of all. And so do I, honestly, Cousin Julia."

Again Miss Pritchard walked to the window. Elsie's eyes followed her in agonized appeal.

"Cousin Julia!" she cried desperately. And Miss Pritchard was at her side in a moment. But though her face was all tenderness and sympathy, the pain that shone through it would have been severe retribution even had Elsie been altogether impenitent.

"Oh, Cousin Julia, I was sorry!" the girl cried, "I was terribly sorry. But it only came on me when everything was—sort of—*fixed*, you know. I couldn't bear to break up Elsie Marley's happiness at Enderby, and—I couldn't bear to have it—hurt you—though I know this is a lot worse. So I was going to disappear. I had my mind all made up. I was going to leave a letter so that you wouldn't feel troubled. And I thought that would sort of make up for everything, because I never would have been happy again. And then—oh, Cousin Julia, then came that chance that I knew led straight to the stage, and I lost my head. I chose to be wicked, and I suppose I lost my soul as well as my head, only—there's something that hurts as if I still had one."

Again the girl wept wildly. But now Miss Pritchard's arm was enfolding her.

"No, precious child, you haven't lost it. And if you were sorry—but we won't talk more about it now. I'll hold that in my heart as comfort until to-morrow and then we'll see what we can do to straighten it all out. At this moment we must consider that there's the evening performance to go through, and being the last, it will be very taxing. Somehow, we'll make things right, among us all. You go to your room now and lie down. If you think of this, only say to yourself that it's over, and be thankful for that. And we two women who love you so that we're all but jealous of one another already will plan the next—or rather, the first move. Come, child."

At the door Elsie turned. "Is the other Elsie all right, auntie?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, dear," returned Mrs. Moss rather doubtfully. "At least—well, as a matter of fact the poor child is just—waiting. I made her promise not to say a word to the Middletons until I came on here and returned. I am afraid—dear me, I am sure I don't know *what* I said to the girl. I am afraid I must have been rather hard on her."

"Oh, auntie! And it wasn't her fault in the least! I just dragged her into it. It was all for me. And she's the sweetest, gentlest thing! And not the least little bit her fault! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

The girl wrung her hands in genuine distress. Mrs. Moss shook her head mournfully.

"I might have known," she acknowledged regretfully. "But, oh, Miss Pritchard, I was nearly distracted. It all came upon me so suddenly—not a whisper of warning."

Miss Pritchard could understand what that meant. She led Elsie into her room and established her upon the bed. Elsie talked incoherently and at random, until Miss Pritchard had to declare that she must go back to Mrs. Moss. Kissing the girl again, she bade her forget everything for the time being and rest. And though she stifled the deep sigh that rose involuntarily, Miss Pritchard felt as if she was staggering as she left the room.

CHAPTER XXXII

For some time Miss Pritchard and Mrs. Moss discussed, not as they had purposed, the way out of it, but the affair itself: the change of names and destinations and the year of masquerading. They marvelled equally at the audacity and the success of the scheme, and the various circumstances that had favored it. Miss Pritchard reviewed the year aloud in the light of the discovery, with eager comment from the other.

"How Elsie could have accepted so much from you, knowing all the while she was deceiving you, I cannot understand!" cried Mrs. Moss, shaking her head sadly.

"Accepted! Oh, Mrs. Moss, if you could only know half the girl gave, you wouldn't speak of accepting!" protested Miss Pritchard. "She has made this year the happiest of my life, that captivating, lovely child has. As for deceiving—she didn't mean any such thing, and it wasn't real deceit in her case. She said just now she always felt as if I were really her cousin. When she swapped, she did it in such a whole-hearted way that she was herself almost as deluded as I. And later, when she began to realize, she suffered—looking back, I begin to understand that she has suffered torture."

Mrs. Moss suddenly bethought herself.

"The question is, what is to be done?" she repeated. "You see, I have left that girl in Enderby in a most uncomfortable position. The Middletons as yet know nothing. I shall have to break it to them, but before I do so, I want to come to some sort of an understanding with you."

"I confess, I don't see any way out of it at this moment," returned Miss Pritchard. "Dear me, I can't yet really realize we're in it."

"The simple thing would seem to be to just——"

"Swap back? Oh, it wouldn't be possible after all this time, my dear Mrs. Moss!" cried Miss Pritchard, really aghast.

"We shall have to see how the Middletons feel, of course," admitted Mrs. Moss. "Oh, Miss Pritchard, couldn't you go back with me to-night and then all of us talk it over together? I don't believe we'll ever come to any understanding unless you do. My flying back and forth between you like a shuttlecock isn't going to amount to anything."

"Yes, I will go on to Enderby—there's no other way," agreed Miss Pritchard, "but I can't go tonight, because Elsie has an engagement. It's her last appearance at that wretched place, I'm thankful to say. She and I will follow you to-morrow. Meantime, you can give them the plain facts to digest."

She smiled half grimly. "As a matter of fact, I have a suite of rooms engaged at the inn at Enderby for the last two weeks in June and for July and August, though I never dreamed of any such complication, as you know. Like as not we all—you and Elsie and I—can occupy them now—I can telegraph presently. Dear me, dear me! what a pair of thoughtless scamps these children were. And yet—what hasn't it meant to me to know Elsie? Oh, Mrs. Moss, I can't face giving her up. I simply cannot face it."

"Of course, Mr. Middleton is her guardian," remarked Mrs. Moss, who sympathized with Miss Pritchard, but felt she might remember that she had had to part with Elsie a year ago, after having had her from a child. "He seems like one who would do the right thing," she added, "but of course he was devoted to Elsie's mother."

"No doubt he'll be glad to hand over little Pritchard to me?"

"Well, he seemed attached to her. But of course being a clergyman he may judge her very severely."

"I wish we could all go to Enderby this very moment," cried Miss Pritchard impatiently. "If it weren't for that old movie-show!"

Then the other forgot Enderby. "Oh, Miss Pritchard, tell me, is Elsie very deeply concerned?" she asked anxiously.

Miss Pritchard related the matter in detail. Mrs. Moss was distressed beyond words, though she was cheered when the other repeated Madame Valentini's dictum in regard to the girl's voice, and the yet more authoritative word of Mr. Francis. And then and there the two women who cared deeply for one little girl decided that that night should close her theatrical career, not only for the season but forever. And they added that whatever be the outcome of the conference at Enderby, Elsie must begin in the late summer or early autumn to study with the teacher in Boston recommended by Mr. Francis.

"The child has actually grown rich overnight," observed Miss Pritchard. "She has saved all she has earned and if need be could pay for her own lessons for a time at least. But I should like nothing better than to retire and take her to live in some quiet place near Boston, and then go abroad with her when the time comes. I've got enough to do that and yet do something for that girl at Enderby."

She paused in her pacing, sat down suddenly and frowned deeply.

"There's no use," she groaned. "That Mr. Middleton will take her away from me, mark my word. What sort of a man is he, anyhow?"

Mrs. Moss didn't confess that she had taken him for a lunatic; but her description was colorless.

"Of course, I should be only too glad to take Elsie back with me," she added wistfully, "though I couldn't give her advantages."

Miss Pritchard gave her a look of sympathy, though she couldn't conceive of her wanting Elsie as she herself did.

"Neither you nor I will have any chance," she returned gloomily. "He'll snap her up—that minister. And I shall be desolate in my old age—for I shall grow old in a night if I lose Elsie."

"But there's the other Elsie," rejoined Mrs. Moss plaintively. "There seems to be one apiece for every one except me."

"Oh, *Elsie Pritchard!* Good heavens!" Miss Pritchard began her pacing again. "I shall have her on my hands. I never thought of that!"

"I suppose you'd hardly expect to have them both," remarked the other mildly.

"I certainly won't have Elsie Pritchard by herself!" Miss Pritchard retorted. Then she laughed at herself, though ruefully.

"Ah, that accounts for the five hundred dollars!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"I don't understand what you mean," murmured Mrs. Moss plaintively. Now even Miss Pritchard had begun to talk like Alice in Wonderland.

Miss Pritchard paused in her walk and explained rapidly and in great detail, leaving Mrs. Moss as much in the dark as before. Again she went the length of the room, pausing before Mrs. Moss to demand: "What sort of a girl is this Elsie Pritchard?"

"To tell the truth, I was so taken aback, I scarcely noticed. She's a pretty girl and ladylike."

Miss Pritchard groaned.

"Well, I think she looks as if she had character," Mrs. Moss added.

"Any ginger?"

"Well, perhaps not," the other admitted. "But you should have heard Mr. Middleton talk about her—er—work in the parish."

"Good heavens! Visiting the sick and distributing tracts?"

"Not exactly," Mrs. Moss smiled. "He spoke about the library and—well, I'm afraid I didn't take in the rest."

"Never mind, I can guess. And I see my finish when she gets hold of me. She'll endeavor to reform me. A year ago, now, I was prepared for a superior person. But after Elsie——"

"What mischief they made! And yet, Miss Pritchard, it was all done thoughtlessly."

"I know. And poor Elsie—I'm afraid we came down pretty hard on her. I think I'll just go and see how she is."

Mrs. Moss followed. Miss Pritchard tapped lightly at Elsie's door. There was no response and she opened it softly. Then she beckoned the other with a look on her plain face that made it very sweet.

Together they stood over the little figure on the big bed. Elsie had cried herself to sleep. She looked young and sweet and innocent, her brown head with its short locks against the pillow, her lips parted, her hand under one cheek, and the shadow of a dimple visible.

They turned away, the eyes of both being filled with tears. And when they were back in Miss Pritchard's sitting-room they seemed somehow nearer one another, almost like old friends.

"She's too sweet and good for the stage," cried Mrs. Moss. "Do you suppose we can get her away? Do you think she'll be willing to give up and cultivate her voice instead?"

"*Willing?* Not Elsie! The child's more crazy about the stage than ever. And as for easily persuading her to settle down to daily drudgery with no excitement in view for years—" She shrugged her shoulders.

"She doesn't look now as if she had a will of her own, does she, with her hand under her cheek and her darling baby lips parted?" cried her step-mother.

Miss Pritchard's eyes filled a second time. Then suddenly an idea flashed into her mind.

"Oh, Mrs. Moss, you'll be awfully shocked, but do you know what your words have put into my head? I feel like a wicked conspirator collecting his pals, but—listen—you and I must attack Elsie at once and get her to forswear the stage and take up music."

Mrs. Moss couldn't see any difference in this proposition from anything previously proposed.

"What I mean is, we must do it this very day," the other went on. "We've got to strike while the iron is hot. The child is in a chastened state; she's sorry and ashamed and unusually meek. We've got to be wolves and prey upon the poor lamb in her moment of defenselessness. She'll agree to anything to-day. Oh, Mrs. Moss, it sounds cruel and hateful, but it's really for her good. If you'll stand by me, I'll attempt it."

Elsie Marley had let Mrs. Moss out by the side-door, and half an hour later she passed out that way herself. She had promised not to say anything until she returned, and so couldn't even leave a note to explain her own going. She would write one to-night to bid them wait for Mrs. Moss's explanation. And afterward she could tell them that she couldn't bear to see them again. And by that time they would have their own Elsie with the dimples.

And she would be with Miss Pritchard? She supposed so, but she couldn't go there to-night. Eventually, she must; she wasn't sufficiently clever or self-reliant to take care of herself; but she wouldn't go to New York while Mrs. Moss—that terrible Mrs. Moss—was there. What she had said was quite true, but oh, it had been hard and cruel, and Elsie could never forget it!

She had made up her mind to go into Boston to a hotel where she had lunched several times, write Cousin Julia from there, and wait until she should hear from her. She was anxious to get away before Mr. Middleton, who had gone to the library in her place, should return. And yet she took a wide detour that doubled the way to the station; for she could not bear to go near the street on which the library stood.

Forgetting her haste, before she had gone far, she turned and looked back at the parsonage. It was like home to her. Leaving it forever, she realized dimly that it was home to her, the only real home her life had known. And Aunt Milly? Once, not so long ago, Elsie couldn't have imagined herself wanting to go back and throw her arms about her and tell her she wished she had understood and loved her long before. And Katy—dear old Katy!—

Turning away, she almost ran. She met no one in the out-of-the-way path she chose, and she was to take the six-two train for Boston, which Enderby people rarely used.

The station stood on a hill. As she climbed it, Elsie decided to ask the agent, whom she knew slightly, to telephone to the parsonage after the train had gone to say that something had called her away, and that Mrs. Moss would explain. Fearing lest he might forget the latter clause, she stopped and wrote the message out. As she did so, it came to her that they might think she had gone away with her stepmother, and wouldn't be disturbed.

As she took up her satchel again, she heard some one behind her on the wooden walk. Kate had come by the direct way, but she had stopped to put a skirt and jacket over her kitchen-dress and to squeeze her feet into boots to hide the holes in her stockings. Warm with the extra clothing and the unusual effort, Kate actually panted as she caught up to Elsie and seized hold of her as if she were rescuing her from drowning.

"Why, Katy, has anything happened?" the girl inquired anxiously.

"Anything happened? Well, I like that!" ejaculated Kate between her gasps. "No, nothin's happened yet, but I suspicioned something was a-goin' to and so I hiked along after you. What are you a-doin' up here and himself gettin' all tired out at that library?"

Elsie's heart sank yet lower. "There won't be many in to-day, Katy," she said meekly. "And anyhow—but don't keep me, Katy, I must—"

"No, you mustn't, Miss Elsie, no such thing. You're a-comin' straight home with your own Katy. Do you want your aunt a-fallin' down in one of her heart-spells, and her so well and happy for the first time sence I come? She'll have one sure's you're born if you ain't there for your supper—and me after makin' shepherd's pie!"

Elsie paled. "Oh, Katy, I can't go back, honestly I can't, but you'll make it right with them, won't you? Tell them I *had* to go and she—Mrs. Moss—will explain when she comes back."

"You just come back yourself and wait for her, Miss Elsie. The missus will have one of them floppers the first thing if you don't, and then for himself to come home tired from the library and find her in that state and you not by to break it to him, and him not so young as he was once, you know!"

Tears streamed down the girl's distressed face. Kate took her satchel while she got out her pocket-handkerchief, and then would not loose her hold on it. Elsie started on, Kate by her side.

"If you're bound to go, then, you might as well get two tickets, for I'm goin' with you," the latter said stoutly.

Elsie looked at her in amazement.

"Sure thing. If you go, I go," Kate insisted.

"But, Katy, you wouldn't do such a thing? You wouldn't leave—them?"

"Indeed I would," Kate returned exultantly, feeling that she had scored. "I'll go by the same train. I've got some money in my stocking. I couldn't face the music with her in a dead faint, and himself like as not havin' a shock."

Elsie stopped short. "Katy, why will you say such dreadful things?" she cried. "Honestly, it's only a question of a day or two. I've got to go away, and why can't you let me do it quietly now instead of waiting and having it still harder."

"You don't mind the easiest way for you bein' the hardest for them?"

"Yes, I do. But I can't go back. I cannot—act another day."

"Oh, yes you can," replied Kate soothingly. "And, besides, it'll all come right if you just hang on. I knew something was strange—I've suspicioused it ever sence you come. Wasn't it me as went around and took all your baby pictures out o' the old albums and others with big round dimples out o' velvet photograph-frames, and himself lookin' everywhere for 'em and me never lettin' on? I says to myself you wasn't really yourself, but like enough a cousin or foster-sister, and just as good and perhaps more satisfactory. Come, we'll just race around home and go in by the back-door so as to be there for supper as if nothin'd happened."

Just before they reached the kitchen door, Elsie spoke.

"Oh, Katy, couldn't I stay in my room until she—Mrs. Moss comes? My head does ache—terribly."

"Well, child, you go up there now, anyhow, and Katy'll see what her big head can do."

The quick-witted woman got out of her suit and into her sliphshod shoes and went straight to Mrs. Middleton.

"That Mis' Moss flew right off, ma'am—forgot somethin' she had to do in New York, it seems, and off she goes. Them Westerners, you know, is reg'lar globe-trotters. She's comin' back to accept our hospitality on Sunday, it seems, but here I am with a company supper fit for the Empress of Injy and plans for meals all day to-morrow and a bed made up. I suppose you wouldn't want to ask Miss Dunham to make her visit now and help eat things up? The pineys are all in blossom, too."

Miss Dunham was an elderly, crippled parishioner who lived a little out of town and came each year to the parsonage for a day or two. Mrs. Middleton threw her arms about Kate.

"Oh, Katy, what a dear you are to think of it! It's just the thing. Day after to-morrow is children's Sunday and she'll enjoy that, and I'm going to church myself and surprise Mr. Middleton. That is why Elsie went into Boston to-day—to get me some gloves and a dove-colored sunshade. Do you think you can get her here to-night, Katy?"

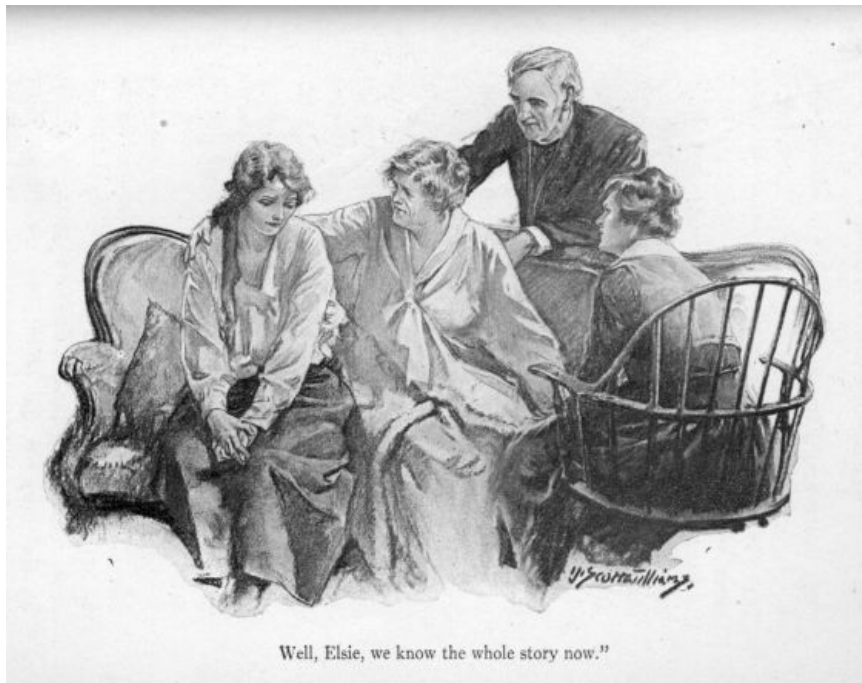
"I'll telephone to himself at the library," said patient Kate, who hated the telephone. "And we'll wait supper."

The plan worked perfectly. The minister fetched Miss Dunham in a motor-car in time for a late tea. Only Kate and Elsie knew what her visit meant to the latter, and Kate didn't understand fully. Mrs. Moss arrived on Sunday shortly after the guest had gone.

But at best Elsie had suffered keenly, and when Mrs. Moss found her pale and hollow-eyed, she felt conscience-stricken. But she had no opportunity to give her any of Elsie Moss's cheering messages, for she went into immediate conference with the Middletons.

They talked for an hour. The waiting was agony for the girl, and she was at once relieved and desperate when at length she was summoned down to the study. Mrs. Middleton beckoned her to a place beside her on the couch, and Elsie dropped gratefully into it. She could not raise her eyes; she sat with her hands clasped tightly, very pale, yet aware somehow, at the very first, of the kindness, the sheltering kindness, as it were, of the woman at her side. And while she had steeled herself to endure the coldness of Mr. Middleton's voice, it had never been more gentle.

"Well, Elsie, we know the whole story, now. It seemed a sad mix-up at first—what a friend of mine up-State would call a 'pretty kettle of fish'; but with Aunt Milly's assistance we managed to get at the crux of the affair and see things more clearly. Aunt Milly declares it was just child's play: that you girls had no more idea of doing anything wrong, of deceiving, than she had last winter when her new hat came from the milliner's and she decided to wear it back foremost and never told any one what she was doing."



Well, Elsie, we know the whole story now."

"Well, Elsie, we know the whole story now."

Elsie knew from his voice that he was smiling. She wanted to thank him for his kindness; she longed to raise her eyes gratefully to Aunt Milly, but she was powerless to do even that. He went on:

"Mrs. Moss brings word that Miss Pritchard has become deeply attached to—er—the other Elsie. Now that isn't a circumstance to our case. For my part, I couldn't possibly have cared more for my dear sister's daughter than I have come to care for you, Elsie, and Aunt Milly is convinced she couldn't have cared for her nearly so much. In any event, we cannot give you up. Somehow we shall have to come to an agreement with your guardian, Miss Pritchard—that is, if you are willing?"

Elsie knew she should burst into tears if she attempted to answer.

"I'll speak for her. Elsie won't leave us," Mrs. Middleton declared.

"Not if—if you——"

The bell rang violently.

"That sounds like Miss Pritchard now," remarked Mrs. Moss, thankful to have the tenseness relieved. And, in truth, Kate, who was suspiciously near the front door, ushered that lady in at once.

Introductions were gone through hastily. The Middletons felt their prejudice vanish at sight of her kind, worn, genuine face, and she was deeply impressed by the minister. Of his wife, she reserved judgment.

She kissed her young relative with more warmth than she had expected to feel, for there were tears on the girl's white cheeks, and she looked sweet and sorry and appealing. She was indeed a Pritchard, though not so typically so as she had anticipated.

The minister mentioned the point at which they had arrived in the discussion, and for a little they talked all round the matter. Then Miss Pritchard presented her conclusions.

"Those babes took things into their own hands in great style a year ago," she declared. "They got hold of a deck of cards and shuffled them to suit themselves, not realizing that isn't the way to play the game. They shouldn't have touched the cards and they shouldn't have shuffled them; but somehow they happened to make a good deal all round. As the game has come out, we all like it. We shouldn't, indeed, be willing to go back and deal out fresh hands. Am I wrong?"

The rejoinder indicated that she was wholly in the right.

"Now, for my part, I'm used to Elsie Moss and I want to keep her, but I wouldn't take her out of reach of her own kin—at least not for some time. There's a man in Boston I want her to study with—she's going to be an opera-singer—and we're to be here at the inn all summer so that we can get respectively acquainted with our shuffled kith and kin—I want a chance to know my little Pritchard cousin, too."

It seemed easier to speak beside the point than to the question. Thereupon the minister suggested that Miss Pritchard should remain permanently at Enderby. That might well have waited, but Miss Pritchard declared she had already thought of taking a house in the fall.

"I thought if you insisted upon trading back, we'd all be in sight of one another that way, even though we elders might be mutually hating each other," she added.

Whereupon they began to mention particular houses, and would have gone on indefinitely but for Mrs. Moss. It was she, the outsider, for whom, whatever the sequel, there would be no place in the plans, who called them back to the real matter at issue.

"Apparently, then," she said, "you're going to let things remain largely in the *status quo*. But one difficulty comes to my mind. When all is said, my Elsie was wholly at fault in all this. She's sorry now, but for all that, I'm afraid she hasn't taken it so hard as this Elsie here, and what's more—this is what I'm getting at: Elsie Moss can drop the name she assumed falsely and, going elsewhere, resume her own as a matter of course. But this Elsie, who has become well acquainted here and entered into the life of the place, cannot suddenly change from Moss to Marley without a great deal of pain to herself."

Quite true. No one had thought of that. It seemed appalling!

"Of course," Mrs. Moss went on rather doubtfully, "she could keep on with the name. It's perfectly possible to have two Elsie Mosses in one family. People would only take them for cousins."

"It's possible," the minister acknowledged, "but it wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be honorable for Elsie to continue to use the name now."

"Ah, but Jack, it would be cruelly hard for her to change back to Marley!" cried his wife; and he sadly agreed.

"Do you think you could go through it, dear?" he asked, turning to Elsie.

"I ought to bear something a great deal harder," cried Elsie suddenly.

"No, you ought not, my dear," rejoined Mrs. Middleton. "No, Jack, it would be too hard on Elsie—on any young girl; and, besides, it would hurt her influence at the library and with the schoolgirls. If people could understand everything clearly, it would be another matter, but they couldn't. Elsie's best friends know it. For my part, I don't believe she deserves any punishment for doing wrong unconsciously—especially since she's been such an angel of mercy to this house. But even if she had, she's suffered enough already to atone—with plenary grace."

"She's got to go by some name," Miss Pritchard remarked palpably, but that gave Mrs. Middleton a suggestion.

"I know," she cried. "Oh, Jack! Oh, Elsie!" and her face was quite irradiated with love and good-will. "I know exactly what we'll do! Elsie is just seventeen. We'll adopt her, Jack, for our own daughter, and she shall wear our name henceforth. She shall be Elsie Middleton, and Elsie Moss shall remain Elsie Moss, and they'll really be cousins."

She held out her arms, and Elsie nestled into them.

"My dearest Mildred!" cried her husband, going over to them in his enthusiasm. "Isn't she wonderful?" he demanded, and almost in the same breath asked Miss Pritchard's consent to legalize the adoption.

"Of course, only after suitable arrangements and provision were made, Miss Pritchard. All we want now is your general or conditional approval."

Miss Pritchard smiled as she sighed. "I'm sure I don't know what the Pritchards would say, but if Elsie's willing I confess I don't see any objection."

Elsie's expression made any questioning of her unnecessary.

"My own Elsie, my darling daughter," murmured Mrs. Middleton in her sentimental way, stroking Elsie's hair. But, strange to say, Elsie found it all very grateful.

"As to Elsie M—" Miss Pritchard began, when she was interrupted by a knock on the door, which she had left ajar (greatly to Kate's approval), and Elsie Moss burst in.

In the excitement of the moment, she seemed her old self again—though Miss Pritchard knew it to be a lovelier self. She stood a moment in the doorway, a charming little figure in a smart rose-colored linen suit with a large drooping hat perched coquettishly upon her short locks, her dimples very conspicuous. Then she rushed upon Elsie Marley, who had come forward shyly, and flung her arms about her.

Then she turned, her arm still about the other girl, to Miss Pritchard.

"I couldn't wait any longer, Cousin Julia," she said sweetly. "I just had to see Elsie-Honey."

"We're to be real cousins," the other whispered, and the quick-witted girl understood at once.

"How perfectly ripping!" she cried. "Oh, everybody's so dear and darling that I should simply die of shame and remorse if I didn't just have to stay alive to worship Cousin Julia and get acquainted with Uncle John and Aunt Milly and—love my honey!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ELSIE MARLEY, HONEY ***

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