Title: A Pair of Clogs

Author: Amy Walton

Release date: November 15, 2007 [eBook #23501]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

Amy Walton

"A Pair of Clogs"

Story 1—Chapter 1.

Her First Home.

"My! What a pretty pair of clogs baby's gotten!"

The street was narrow and very steep, and paved with round stones; on each side of it were slate-coloured houses, some high, some low; and in the middle of it stood baby, her curly yellow head bare, and her blue cotton frock lifted high with both fat hands. She could not speak, but she wanted to show that on her feet were tiny new clogs with bright brass tips.

She stopped in front of all her acquaintances, men, women, children, and even dogs. Each of them, except the last, made much the same remark, and she then toddled cheerfully on, until nearly everyone in the village of Haworth knew of this wonderful new thing.

The baby's mother lived in Haworth, but all day long she had to work in the town of Keighley down below in the valley, for she was a factory-girl. From the hillside you could see the thick veil of smoke, never lifted, which hung over the tall chimneys and grey houses; the people there very seldom saw the sky clear and blue, but up at Haworth the wind blew freshly off the wide moor just above, and there was nothing to keep away the sunshine. This was the reason that Maggie Menzies still lived there, after she had taken to working in the factory; it was a long walk to and from Keighley, but it was healthier for the "li'le lass" to sleep in the fresh air. Everything in Maggie's life turned upon that one small object; the "li'le lass" was her one treasure, her one golden bit of happiness, the reason why she cared to see the sun shine, or to eat, or drink, or rest, or to be alive at all. Except for the child she was alone in the world, for her husband had been killed in an accident two years ago, when the baby was only a month old. Since then she had been Maggie's one thought and care; no one who has not at some time in their lives spent all their affection on a single thing or person can at all understand what she felt, or how strong her love was. It made all her troubles and hardships easy merely to think of the child; just to call to mind the dimples, and yellow hair, and fat hands, was enough to make her deaf to the whirr and rattle of the restless machinery, and the harsh tones of the overseer. When she began her work in the morning she said to herself, "I shall see her in the evening;" and when it was unusually tiresome during the day, and things went very wrong, she could be patient and even cheerful when she remembered "it's fur *her*." The factory-girls with boisterous good-nature had tried to make her sociable when she first came; they invited her to stroll with them by the river in the summer evenings, to stand and gossip with them at the street corners, to join in their parties of pleasure on Sundays. But they soon found it was of no use; Maggie's one idea, when work was over, was to throw her little checked shawl over her head, and turn her steps quickly towards a certain house in a narrow alley near the factory, for there, under the care of a neighbour, she left her child during the day.

It would have been much better, everyone told her, to leave her up at Haworth instead of bringing her into the smoky town; Maggie knew it, but her answer was always the same to this advice:

"I couldn't bring myself to it," she said. "I niver could git through the work if I didn't know she was near me."

So winter and summer, through the damp cold or the burning heat, she might be seen coming quickly down the steep hill from Haworth every morning clack, clack, in her wooden shoes, with her child in her arms. In the evening her pace was slower, for she was tired, and the road was hard to climb, and the child, generally asleep, weighed heavily. For the baby was getting beyond a baby now; she was nearly two years old. How pretty she was, how clever, what dear little knowing ways she had, what tiny feet and hands! How yellow her hair was, how white her skin! She was unlike any child in Haworth; she was matchless!

And indeed, quite apart from her mother's fond admiration, the baby was a beautiful child, delicately formed, and very different from the blunt-featured children of those parts; she was petted by everyone in the village, and had in

consequence such proud, imperious little ways that she was a sort of small queen there; the biggest and roughest man among them was her humble subject, and ready to do her bidding when she wished to be tossed in the air or to ride pickaback. She could say very few words yet, but nothing could exceed her brightness and intelligence—a wonderful baby indeed!

She had been christened Betty; but the name was almost forgotten in all sorts of loving nicknames, and lately the people of Haworth had given her a new one, which she got in the following manner:—

Nearly at the bottom of the steep village street there was a cobbler's stall which Maggie passed every day in her journeys to and from Keighley. It was open to the road, and in it hung rows and rows of clogs of all sizes—some of them big enough to fit a man, and some for children, quite tiny. They all had wooden soles, and toes slightly turned-up tipped with gleaming brass, and a brass buckle on the instep; nearly all the people in Haworth and all the factory-girls in Keighley wore such shoes, but they were always called "clogs." Inside the stall sat an old man with twinkling blue eyes, and a stumpy turned-up nose: he sat and cobbled and mended, and made new clogs out of the old ones which lay in great heaps all round him. Over his stall was the name "T Monk," but in the village he was always known as Tommie; and though he was a silent and somewhat surly character, Tommie's opinion and advice were often asked, and much valued when given. Maggie regarded him with admiration and respect. When she passed with her child in her arms he always looked up and nodded, though he seldom gave any other answer to her "Good-day, Master Monk." Tommie never wasted his words: "Little words mak' bonnie do's," he was accustomed to say.

But one evening the sun happened to shine on the row of brass-tipped clogs, and made them glisten brightly just as Maggie went by. It caught the baby's attention, and she held out her arms to them and gave a little coo of pleasure.

"T'little lass is wantin' clogs, I reckon," said Tommie with a grim smile.

Maggie held out the baby's tiny foot with a laugh of pride.

"Here's a foot for a pair of clogs, Master Monk," she said; "t'wouldn't waste much leather to fashion 'em."

Tommie said nothing more, but a week afterwards he beckoned to Maggie with an important air as she went by.

"You come here," he said briefly.

Maggie went into the stall, and he reached down from a nail a pair of tiny, neatly finished clogs. They had jaunty brass-bound toes, and a row of brass nails all round where the leather joined the wooden sole, and on the instep there gleamed a pair of smart brass clasps with a pattern chased on them.

"Fur her," said Tommie as he gave them to Maggie. As he did so the baby stretched out her hands to the bright clasps.

"See!" exclaimed the delighted Maggie; "she likes 'em ever so. Oh, Master Monk, how good of yo'!"

"Them clasps *is* oncommon," said Tommie, regarding his work thoughtfully, his blue eyes twinkling with satisfaction, "I cam' at 'em by chance like."

Maggie had now taken off her baby's shoe, and fitted the clog on to the soft little foot.

"Ain't they bonnie?" she said.

The baby leaned forward and, seizing one toe in each hand, rocked herself gently to and fro.

Tommie looked on approvingly.

"Yo'll find 'em wear well," he said; "they're the best o' leather and the best o' workmanship."

After six months more were gone the baby began to walk, and you might hear a sharp little clatter on the pavement, like the sound of some small iron-shod animal. Tommie heard it one morning just as it was Maggie's usual time to pass, and looked out of his stall. There was Maggie coming down the road with a proud smile on her face, and the baby was there too. But not in her mother's arms. No, she was erect on her own small feet, tottering along in the new wooden clogs.

"My word!" exclaimed Tommie, his nose wrinkling with gratification; "we'll have to call her Little Clogs noo."

It was in this way that Maggie's child became known in the village as "Little Clogs." Not that it was any distinction to wear clogs in Haworth, everyone had them; but the baby's feet were so tiny, and she was so eager to show her new possession, that the clogs were as much noticed as though never before seen. When she stopped in front of some acquaintance, lifted her frock with both hands, and gazed seriously first at her own feet and then up in her friend's face, it was only possible to exclaim in surprise and admiration:

"Eh! To be sure. What pretty, pretty clogs baby's gotten!"

It was the middle of summer. Baby was just two years old and a month, and the clogs were still glossy and new, when one morning Maggie took the child with her down to Keighley as usual. It was stiflingly hot there, after the cool breeze which blew off the moor on the hillside; the air was thick with smoke and dust, and, as Maggie turned into the alley where she was to leave her child, she felt how close and stuffy it was.

"'Tain't good for her here," she thought, with a sigh. "I reckon I must mak' up my mind to leave her up yonder this hot weather."

But the baby did not seem to mind it. Maggie left her settled in the open doorway talking cheerfully to one of her little clogs which she had pulled off. This she filled with sand and emptied, over and over again, chuckling with satisfaction as a stray sunbeam touched the brass clasps and turned them into gold. In the distance she could hear the noise of the town, and presently amongst them there came a new sound—the beating of a drum. Baby liked music. She threw down the clog, lifted one finger, and said “Pitty!” turning her head to look into the room. But no one was there, for the woman of the house had gone into the back kitchen. The noise continued, and seemed to draw baby towards it: she got up on her feet, and staggered a little way down the alley, tottering a good deal, for one foot had the stout little clog on it, and the other nothing but a crumpled red sock. By degrees, however, after more than one tumble, she got down to the end of the alley, and stood facing the bustling street.

It was such a big, noisy world, with such a lot of people and horses and carts in it, that she was frightened now, put out her arms, and screwed up her face piteously, and cried, “Mammy, mammy!”

Just then a woman passed with a tambourine in her hand and a bright coloured handkerchief over her head. She shook the tambourine and smiled kindly at baby, showing very white teeth.

“Mammy, mammy!” said baby again, and began to sob.

“Don’t cry, then, deary, and I’ll take you to mammy,” said the woman. She looked quickly up the alley, no one in sight. No one in the crowded street noticed her. She stooped, raised the child in her arms, wrapped a shawl round her, and walked swiftly away. And that evening, when Maggie came to fetch her little lass, she was not there; the only trace of her was one small clog, half full of sand, on the door-step!

The woman with the tambourine hurried along, keeping the child’s head covered with her shawl, at her heels a dirty-white poodle followed closely. The street was bustling and crowded, for it was past twelve o’clock, and the workpeople were streaming out of the factories to go to their dinners. If Maggie had passed the woman, she would surely have felt that the bundle in her arms was her own little lass, even if she had not seen one small clogged foot escaping from under the shawl. Baby was quiet now, except for a short gasping sob now and then, for she thought she was being taken to mammy.

On and on went the woman through the town, past the railway-station, and at last reached a lonely country road; by that time, lulled by the rapid, even movement and the darkness, baby had forgotten her troubles, and was fast asleep. She slept almost without stirring for a whole hour, and then, feeling the light on her eyes, she blinked her long lashes, rubbed them with her fists, and stretched out her fat legs.

Next she looked up into mammy’s face, as she thought, expecting the smile which always waited for her there; but it was not mammy’s face, or anything like it. They were sharp black eyes which were looking down at her, and instead of the familiar checked shawl, there was a bright yellow handkerchief over the woman’s head, and dangling ornaments in her ears. Baby turned up her lip in disgust, and looked round for someone she knew, but everything was strange to her. The woman, in whose lap she was lying, sat in a small donkey-cart, with two brown children and some bundles tightly packed in round her; a dark man walked by the side of it, and a dirty-white poodle ran at his heels. Discovering this state of things baby lost no time, but burst at once into loud wailing sobs and cries of “Mammy, mammy; me want mammy.”

She cried so long and so bitterly that the woman, who had tried at first to soothe her by coaxing and petting, lost patience, and shook her roughly.

“Be still, little torment,” she said, “or I’ll throw you into the pond.”

They were the first angry words baby had ever heard, and the experience was so new and surprising that she checked her sobs, staring up at the woman with frightened tear-filled eyes. She soon began to cry again, but it was with much less violence, only a little distressed whimper which no one noticed. This went on all day, and by the evening, having refused to touch food, she fell into an exhausted slumber, broken by plaintive moans. It was now dark, and being some miles from Keighley, the tramps thought it safe to stop for the night; they turned off the main road, therefore, tethered the donkey in a grassy lane, and crept into an old disused barn for shelter. The two children, boys of eight or nine years old, curled themselves up in a corner, with Mossoo, the poodle, tucked in between them, and all three covered with an old horse-cloth. The gypsy and his wife sat talking in the entrance over a small fire of dry wood they had lighted.

“You’ve bin a fool, Seraminta,” said the man, looking down at the baby as she lay flushed with sleep on the woman’s lap, her cheeks still wet with tears. “The child’ll git us into trouble. That’s no common child. Anyone ’ud know it agen, and then where are we? In quod, sure as my name’s Perrin.”

“You’re the fool,” replied the woman, looking at the man scornfully. “Think I’m goin’ to take her about with a lily-white skin like that? A little walnut-juice’ll make her as brown as Bennie yonder, so as her own mother wouldn’t know her.”

“Well, what good is she to us anyhow?” continued the man sulkily. “Only another mouth ter feed. ’Tain’t wuth the risk.”

“You hav’n’t the sperrit of a chicken,” replied the woman. “One ’ud think you was born yesterday, not to know that anyone’ll give a copper to a pretty little kid like her. Once we git away down south, an’ she gives over fretting, I mean her to go round with the tambourine after the dog dances in the towns. She’ll more than earn her keep soon.”

The man muttered and growled to himself for a short time, and said some very ugly words, but presently, stretched on the ground near the fire, he settled himself to sleep. The short summer night passed quickly away, and nothing disturbed the sleepers; the owls and bats flitted in and out of the barn, as was their custom, and, surprised to find it

no longer empty, flapped suddenly up among the rafters, and looked down at the strangers by the dim light of the moon; at the two children huddled in the corner, with Mossoo's tangled head between them; at the dark form of Perrin, near the ashes of the fire; and at the fair child in Seraminta's arms, sleeping quietly at last. Before the cock in the farmyard near had answered a shrill friend in the distance more than twice, the whole party, except the baby, was awake, the donkey harnessed, and the journey continued.

Day after day passed in the same manner, and baby still cried for "Mammy," but every day less and less, for the tramps were kind to her in their rough way, and fortunately her memory was short, and soon ceased to recall Maggie's loving care and caresses. So before she had led her new life a week, she had found things to smile at again; sometimes flowers which the freckled Bennie picked for her in the hedges, sometimes the gay rattle of the tambourine, sometimes a ride on the donkey's back; the poodle also, from having been an object of fear, had now become a friend.

Mossoo was a dog who had known trouble. He well remembered the days when he had had to learn to dance, and what it was to shrink from blows, and to howl with pain and fear under punishment. Times were not so bad for him now, because his education was over, but still he had to work hard for his living. In every town they passed he must stiffen his long thin back, raise himself on his small feet, and dance gravely to the sound of the tambourine; if this happened at the end of a long day's tramp, it was both difficult and painful, but he seldom failed, for he knew the consequences—no supper and a beating.

Accordingly, until a certain sign was given, he kept one pink-rimmed eye on his mistress's face, and revolved slowly round and round, with drooping paws and an elegant curtsying movement, the centre of an admiring ring. Sometimes, when the performance was over, and he carried round a small tin plate for coppers, the spectators would drop off one by one, and give him nothing; sometimes he got a good deal, and took it to his mistress with joyful wags of his ragged tasselled tail. Now, Mossoo had noticed the addition of baby to the accustomed party, and also her passionate sobs and cries. She was in trouble, as he had often been, and one day this trouble was even deeper than usual. They had stopped to rest in a little wayside copse, and after the donkey was unharnessed the man and the two boys had started off on a foraging expedition, or, in other words, to see what they could beg or steal from the farmyards and houses near. Mossoo was left behind. Crouched on the ground, with his nose between his paws, he kept a watchful eye on Seraminta, who was busying herself with the child. She was going to make her "so as her own mother wouldn't know her." And first with a piece of rag she smeared over her pretty white skin with some dark juice out of a bottle; next she took off the little frock and underclothes which Maggie had always kept so neatly, and put on her a frock and petticoat of stiff striped stuff. Then she proceeded to remove the one little clog, but this baby resented. She had been quiet till now, and allowed her things to be changed without resistance, but this last indignity was too much. She fought, and kicked, and cried, and pushed at the woman with her tiny hands. Poor baby! They were far too small and weak to be of any use. In no time the friendly little clog, with its glistening clasp and bright toe, was gone, and in its place there was an ugly broken-out boot which had once belonged to Bennie. Her work done, Seraminta put the child on the ground and gave her a hard crust to play with. Baby immediately threw it from her with all her strength, cast herself flat on her face, and shrieked with anger and distress. She was heartbroken to have the clog taken from her, and cried as violently for it as she had done for mammy.

"You've got a fine temper of yer own, my young queen," said Seraminta, looking down at the small sobbing form. She did not attempt to quiet her, but turning away proceeded to arrange some bundles in the cart which stood at a short distance.

Mossoo was not so indifferent; he had watched the whole affair, and if he did not understand why the baby cried, at least he knew she was in trouble. True he had not seen a stick used, but here was the same result. He went and sat down near her, and wagged his tail to show he sympathised, but as she was lying on her face she did not even know he was there, and the sobs continued. Finding this, Mossoo sat for some time with his tongue hanging out, uncertain how to proceed, but presently noticing a little bit of bare fat neck he gave it a gentle lick. Baby turned her head; there were two bright eyes with pink rims close to her, and a ragged fringe of dirty-white hair, and a red tongue lolling out; she was so startled at this that she screamed louder than ever, and hid her face again. Unsuccessful, but full of zeal and compassion, the poodle next bethought himself of finding her a stick or a stone to throw for him; Bennie was never tired of playing this game with him, and perhaps the baby might like it too. He ran sniffing about with his nose to the ground, and presently caught sight of something that glistened, lying in the grass near the cart. It was the little clog. Quite unconscious of making a lucky hit, he took it in his mouth, carried it to her, and placed it with gentle care close to her ear. This time Mossoo had done the right thing, for when she saw what he had brought, a watery little smile gleamed through baby's tears, her sobs ceased, she sat up and seized the clog triumphantly. Waving it about in her small uncertain hands, she hit the friendly poodle smartly on the nose with it as he stood near; then leaning forward, grasped his drooping moustache and pulled it, which hurt him still more; but he did not cease to wag his tail with pleasure at his success.

From that day "Mossy," as she called the dog, was added to the number of baby's friends—the other two were Bennie and the little clog. To this last she confided, in language of her own, much that no one else understood, and Seraminta did not again attempt to take it from her. She was thankful that the child had something to soothe her in the stormy fits of crying which came when she was offended or thwarted in her will. At such times she would kick and struggle until her little strength was exhausted, and at last drop off to sleep with the clog cuddled up to her breast. Seraminta began to feel doubtful as to the advantages of her theft, and Perrin, the gypsy man, swore at his wife and reproached her in the strongest language for having brought the child away.

"I tell you what, my gal," he said one day, "the proper place for that child's the house, an' that's where she'll go soon as I git a chance. She've the sperrit of a duchess an' as 'orty in her ways as a queen. She'll never be no good to us in our line o' bizness, an' I'm not agoin' to keep her."

They wrangled and quarrelled over the subject continually, for Seraminta, partly from obstinacy, and partly because the child was so handsome, wished to keep her, and teach her to perform with the poodle in the streets. But all the

while she had an inward feeling that Perrin would outwit her, and get his own way. And this turned out to be the case.

Travelling slowly but steadily along, sometimes stopping a day or so in a large town, where Seraminta played the tambourine in the streets, and Mossoo danced, they had now left the north far behind them. They were bound for certain races near London, and long before they arrived there Perrin had determined to get rid of the child whom he daily disliked more; he would leave her in the workhouse, and the burden would be off his hands. Baby's lucky star, however, was shining, and a better home was waiting for her.

One evening after a long dusty journey they came to a tiny village in a pleasant valley; Perrin had made up his mind to reach the town, two miles further on, before they stopped for the night, but by this time the whole party was so tired and jaded that he saw it would be impossible to push on. The donkey-cart came slowly down the hill past the vicarage, and the vicar's wife cutting roses in her garden stopped her work to look at it. At Seraminta seated in the cart with her knees almost as high as her nose, and her yellow handkerchief twisted round her head; at the dark Perrin, striding along by the donkey's side; at Mossoo, still adorned with his last dancing ribbon, but ragged and shabby, and so very very tired that he limped along on three legs; at the brown children among the bundles in the cart; and finally at baby. There her eyes rested in admiration: "What a lovely little child!" she said to herself. Baby was seated between the two boys, talking happily to herself; her head was bare, and her bush of golden hair was all the more striking from its contrast with her walnut-stained skin. It made a spot like sunlight in the midst of its dusky surroundings.

"Austin! Austin!" called out the vicar's wife excitedly as the cart moved slowly past. There was no answer for a moment, and she called again, until Austin appeared in the porch. He was a middle-aged grey-haired clergyman, with bulging blue eyes and stooping shoulders; in his hand he held a large pink rose. "Look," said his wife, "do look quickly at that beautiful child. Did you ever see such hair?" The Reverend Austin Vallance looked.

"An ill-looking set, to be sure," he said. "I must tell Joe to leave Brutus unchained to-night."

"But the child," said his wife, taking hold of his arm eagerly, "isn't she wonderful? She's like an Italian child."

"We shall hear of hen-roosts robbed to-morrow," continued Austin, pursuing his own train of thought.

"I feel perfectly convinced," said his wife leaning over the gate to look after the gypsies, "that that little girl is not theirs—she's as different as possible from the other children. How I should like to see her again!"

"Well, my dear," said Austin, "for my part I decidedly hope you won't. The sooner that fellow is several miles away from here, the better I shall be pleased."

"She was a lovely little thing," repeated Mrs Vallance with a sigh.

"Well, well," said her husband; "I daresay. But here's something quite as lovely. Just look at this Captain Christie. It's the best rose I've seen yet. I don't believe Chelwood has a finer."

"Not one of the little Chelwoods was ever a quarter as pretty as that gypsy child, even when they were babies," continued his wife gazing absently at the rose, "and now they're getting quite plain."

She could not forget the beautiful child all that evening, though she did not receive the least encouragement to talk of her from her husband. Mr Vallance was not so fond of children as his wife, and did not altogether regret that he had none of his own. His experience of them, drawn from Squire Chelwood's family who lived a little further up the valley, did not lead him to think that they added to the comfort of a household. When they came to spend the day at the vicarage he usually shut himself into his study, and issuing forth after they were gone, his soul was vexed to find footmarks on his borders, his finest fruit picked, and fragments of a meal left about on his smooth lawn. But Mrs Vallance grudged them nothing, and if she could have found it in her heart to envy anyone, it would have been Mrs Chelwood at the White House, who had a nursery and school-room full of children.

On the morning after the gypsies had passed, the Reverend Austin Vallance was out even earlier than usual in his garden. He was always an early riser, for he liked time for a stroll before taking the service in his little church. Just now his roses were in full perfection, and the weather was remarkably fine, so that it was scarcely six o'clock before he was out of doors. It was certainly a beautiful morning. By and by it would be hot and sultry, only fit for a sensible man to sit quietly in his study and doze a little, and make extracts for his next sermon. Now, it was deliciously cool and fresh. The roses were magnificent! What a pity that the blaze of the sun would soon dim their glorious colours and scorch their dewy fragrance. It would be a good plan to cut a few at once before they were spoilt by the heat. He took his knife out of his pocket and hesitated where to begin, for he never liked to cut his roses; but, remembering that Priscilla would insist on having some indoors, he set to work on the tree nearest him, and tenderly detached a full-blown Baroness Rothschild. He stood and looked at it complacently.

"I don't believe," he said to himself, "that Chelwood, with all his gardeners, will ever come up to my roses. There's nothing like personal attention. Roses are like children—they want individual, personal attention. And they pay for it. Children don't always do that."

At this very moment, and just as he was turning to another tree, a little chuckling laugh fell on his ear. It was such a strange sound in the stillness of the garden, and it seemed so close to him, that he started violently and dropped his knife. Where did it come from? He looked vaguely up in the sky, and down on the earth—there was nothing living to be seen, not even a bird. "I must have been mistaken," he thought, "but it's very odd; I never heard anything more clearly in my life." He picked up his knife, and moved further along the turf walk, a good deal disturbed and rather nervous. At the end of it there was a rustic sort of shed, which had once been an arbour, but was now only used for gardening tools, baskets, and rubbish: over the entrance hung a mass of white climbing roses. Walking slowly towards this, and cutting a rose or two on his way, Mr Vallance was soon again alarmed by the same noise—a low

laugh of satisfaction; this time it came so distinctly from within the shed, that he quickened his pace at once and, holding back the dangling branches, looked in with a half feeling of dread. What he saw there so astonished him that he stood motionless for some moments, as though struck by some sight of horror. On the floor was a large wooden marketing basket, and in this, wrapped in an old shawl, lay a little child of two years old. She had bright yellow hair, and a brown skin, and in her fat hands she held a queer little shoe with brass nails in it and brass clasps; she was making small murmuring sounds to herself, and chuckling now and then in perfect contentment. Mr Vallance stared at her in great perplexity; here was a puzzling thing! Where did the child come from, and who had left it there? Whoever it was must come and take it away at once. He would go and tell Priscilla about it—she would know what to do. But just as he let the creepers fall back over the entrance a tiny voice issued from the basket.

“Mossy,” it said; “me want Mossy.”

“Now, who on earth is Mossy?” thought the troubled vicar, and without waiting to hear more he sped into the house and told his tale to. Priscilla.

In a very short time Priscilla was on the spot, full of interest and energy. She knelt beside the basket and looked at the child, who stared back at her with solemn brown eyes.

“I suppose it’s one of the village children,” said her husband, standing by.

“Village children, Austin!” repeated his wife looking round at him; “do you really mean to say that you don’t recognise the child?”

“Certainly not, my dear; I never saw it before to my knowledge.”

“Why, *of course* it’s the gypsy child we saw yesterday. And now you see I was right.”

“What an awful thing!” exclaimed Mr Vallance. He sat down suddenly on the handle of a wheel-barrow close by, in utter dejection. “Then they’ve left it here on purpose!”

“Of course they have,” said Mrs Vallance; “and you see I was right, don’t you?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said the vicar getting up again, “by being *right*. Everything’s as wrong as it can be, I should say.”

“I mean, that she doesn’t belong to those gypsies. I was sure of it.”

“Why not?” asked her husband helplessly.

“Because no mother would have given up a darling like this—she would have died first.”

Mrs Vallance had taken the child on her knee while she was speaking and opened the old shawl: baby seemed to like her new position, she leaned her curly head back, stretched out her limbs easily, and gazed gravely up at the distracted vicar.

“Well,” he said, “whoever she belongs to, there are only two courses to be pursued, and the first is to try and find the people who left her here. If we can’t do that, there only remains—”

“What?” asked his wife looking anxiously up at him.

“There only remains—the workhouse, my dear Priscilla.”

Priscilla pressed the child closer to her and stood upright facing him.

“Austin,” she said, “I couldn’t do it. You mustn’t ask me to. I’ll try and find her mother. I’ll put an advertisement in the paper; but I won’t send her to the workhouse. And *you* couldn’t either. You couldn’t give up a little helpless child when Heaven has laid it at your very threshold.”

Mr Vallance strode quickly up and down the garden path; he foresaw that he would have to yield, and it made him very angry.

“Nonsense, my dear,” he said testily; “people are much too fond of talking about Heaven doing this and that. That ill-looking scamp of a gypsy fellow hadn’t much to do with Heaven, I fancy.”

“Heaven chooses its own instruments,” said Priscilla quietly; and Mr Vallance made no answer, for he had said that very same thing in his last sermon.

“I’ll have those tramps looked after at any rate,” he said, rousing himself with sudden energy. “I’ll send Joe one way, and drive the other way myself in the pony-cart. They can’t have got far yet.”

He hurried out of the garden, and Mrs Vallance was left alone with her prize. It was almost too good to be true. Already her mind was busy with arrangements for the baby’s comfort and making plans for her future—the blue-room looking into the garden for the nursery, and the blacksmith’s eldest daughter for a nurse-maid, and some little white frocks and pinafores made; and what should she be called? Some simple name would do. Mary, perhaps. And then suddenly Mrs Vallance checked herself.

“What a foolish woman I am!” she said. “Very likely those horrible people will be found, and I shall have to give her up. But nothing shall induce me to believe that she belongs to them.”

She kissed the child, carried her into the house, and fed her with some bread and milk, after which baby soon fell into a sound sleep. Mrs Vallance laid her on the sofa, and sat near with her work, but she could not settle at all quietly to it. Every moment she got up to look out of the window, or to listen to some sound which might be Austin coming back triumphant with news of the gypsies. But the day went on and nothing happened. The vicarage was full of suppressed excitement, the maids whispered softly together, and came creeping in at intervals to look at the beautiful child, who still clasped the little clog in her hands.

“Yonder’s a queer little shoe, mum,” said the cook, “quite a cur’osity.”

“I think it’s a sort of toy,” replied Mrs Vallance, for she had never been to the north of England and had never seen a clog.

“Bless her pretty little ’art!” said the cook, and went away.

It was evening when Mr Vallance returned, hot, tired, and vexed in spirit. His wife ran out to meet him at the gate, having first sent the child upstairs.

“No trace whatever,” he said in a dejected voice.

“Dear me!” exclaimed Priscilla, trying not to look too pleased, and just then a casement-window above their heads was thrown open, a white-capped head was thrust out, and an excited voice called out, “Ma’am! Ma’am!”

“Well, what?” said Mrs Vallance, looking up alarmed.

“It’s all come off, mum—the brown colour has—and she’s got a skin as white as a lily.”

Mrs Vallance cast a glance of triumph at her husband, but forebore to say anything, in consideration of his depressed condition; then she rushed hurriedly upstairs to see the new wonder.

And thus began baby’s life in her third home, and she brought nothing of her own to it except her one little clog.

Story 1—Chapter 2.

Wensdale.

The village of Wensdale was snugly shut in from the rest of the world in a narrow valley. It had a little river flowing through it, and a little grey church standing on a hill, and a rose-covered vicarage, a blacksmith’s forge, and a post-office. Further up the valley, where the woods began, you could see the chimneys of the White House where Squire Chelwood lived, and about three miles further on still was Dorminster, a good-sized market-town. But in Wensdale itself there was only a handful of thatched cottages scattered about here and there round the vicarage. Life was so regular and quiet there that you might almost tell the time without looking at the clock. When you heard cling, clang, from the blacksmith’s forge, and quack, quack, from the army of ducks waddling down to the river, it was five o’clock. Ding, dong from the church-tower, and the tall figure of Mr Vallance climbing the hill to read prayers—eight o’clock. So on throughout the day until evening came, and you knew that soon after the cows had gone lowing through the village, and the ducks had taken their way to bed in a long uneven line, that perfect silence would follow, deep and undisturbed.

In this quiet refuge Maggie’s baby grew up for seven years, under the name of Mary Vallance. She was now nine years old. As she grew the qualities which had shown themselves as a baby, and made Perrin call her as “orty as a duchess,” grew also, though they were kept in check by wise and loving influences. To command seemed more natural to her than to obey, and far more pleasant, and this often caused trouble to herself and others. True, nothing could be more thorough than her repentance after a fit of naughtiness, for she was a very affectionate child; but then she was quite ready on the next occasion to repeat the offence—as ready as Mrs Vallance was to forgive it. Mary was vain, too, as well as wilful; but this was not astonishing, for from a very little child she had heard the most open remarks about her beauty. Wensdale was a small place, but there were not wanting unwise people in it, who imagined that their nods and winks and whispers of admiration were unnoticed by the child. A great mistake. No one could be quicker than Mary to see them, to give her little neck a prouder turn, and to toss back her glittering hair self-consciously. So she knew by the time she was nine years old that she had beautiful hair and lovely eyes, and a skin like milk—that she walked gracefully, and that her feet and hands were smaller and prettier than Agatha Chelwood’s. All this strengthened a way she had of ordering her companions about imperiously, as though she had a right to command. “No common child,” she often heard people say, and by degrees she came to think that she was very *un*common indeed—much prettier and cleverer than any of the other children. “You’ve no call to be so tossy in your ways, Miss Mary,” said Rice, the outspoken old nurse at the White House; “handsome is as handsome does.” But Mary treated such a remark with scorn.

If the little clog, standing on the mantel-piece in her bed-room, could have spoken, what strange and humbling things it would have told her! For to belong to poor people would have seemed dreadful to Mary’s proud spirit. As it could not, however, she remained in ignorance of her real condition, and even in her dreams no remembrance of her real mother, or of the gypsies and her playfellows Bennie and Mossy, ever came to visit her.

Things at Wensdale had not altered much since Mary had been left there as a child of two years old. The roses still flourished in the vicarage garden under Mr Vallance’s loving care, and he still thought them much finer than Chelwood’s. At the White House there were now three children in the nursery and four in the school-room, of whom the eldest was a girl of ten named Agatha. These were Mary’s constant companions; she joined them in some of their lessons and in all their pleasures and plans of amusement. Not a picnic or a treat of any kind took place without her,

and though quarrels were not unknown, Mary would have been very much missed on these occasions. It was she who invented the games and gave names to the various playgrounds in the woods; she could climb well, and run swiftly, and had such a daring spirit of adventure that she feared nothing. In fact, her presence made everything so much more interesting, that, by common consent, she was allowed to take the lead, and no expedition was considered complete without her. Perhaps her contrast to the good, quiet, brown Agatha, who was so nearly her own age, made her all the more valued. Agatha was always ready to follow, to give up, to yield. She never tore her frocks, always knew her lessons, was always punctual; but she never invented anything, and had to be told exactly what to say in any game requiring imagination. So it came to pass naturally that Mary was at the head of everything, and she became so used to taking the command that she sometimes did so when it was neither convenient nor becoming. There were indeed moments when even Jackie, her most faithful supporter among the Chelwood children, rebelled against her authority, and found it poor fun for Mary always to have her own way and arrange everything.

Jackie was nine years old, and felt in himself a large capacity for taking the lead: after all, why *should* Mary always drive when they went out in the donkey-cart, or settle the place for the fire to be made when they had a picnic, and choose the games, and even order about Fraülein Schnipp the governess? Certainly her plans and arrangements always turned out well, but still it became tiresome sometimes. Jackie grew restive. He had a quarrel with Mary, who flew down the garden in a rage, her hair streaming behind her like the tail of an angry comet. But it did not last: Jackie had a forgiving spirit, and was too fond of her to be angry long. He was always the first to make up a dispute, so that Mary was not at all surprised to see him soon afterwards waiting outside the vicarage door in a high state of excitement. He was going to drive with father in the dog-cart to Dorminster—might Mary come too? Consent given, Mary lost no time in throwing on a hat and jacket, while Squire Chelwood's tall horse fretted and caught impatiently at his bit: then she was lifted up to Jackie on the back seat, and they were soon rolling quickly on their way. It was good of Jackie to have asked for her to go, Mary thought, after she had been so cross. She could not have done it in his place, and she determined to give him a very handsome present on his birthday, which was coming soon.

There were few things the children liked better than going into Dorminster with the squire. Beside the pleasant rapid drive, perched up on the high dog-cart, there was so much to see, particularly if it happened to be market-day; and, above all, Mr Greenop lived there. Mr Greenop was a bird-fancier, and kept an interesting shop in the market-place, full of live birds and stuffed animals in glass cases. There was always a pleasant uncertainty as to what might be found at Greenop's, for he sometimes launched out in an unexpected manner. He often had lop-eared rabbits to sell, and Jackie had once seen a monkey there: as for pigeons, there was not a variety you could mention which Greenop could not at once produce.

He was a nice little man, very like a bird himself, with pointed features and kind, bright eyes; when he wore a dash of red in his neck-cloth the resemblance to a robin was striking. The children applied to him when any of their pets were ill, and had the utmost confidence in his opinion and treatment. The most difficult cases were successfully managed by him; he had even saved the life of Agatha's jack-daw when it had swallowed a thimble. Mr Greenop was an object, therefore, of gratitude and admiration, and no visit to Dorminster was complete without going to his shop.

So when Jackie asked in an off-hand manner, "Shall you be going near Greenop's, father?" the squire knew that his answer was waited for with anxiety, and said at once:

"Yes, I'm going to the gunmaker's next door."

That was all right. Jackie screwed up his shoulders in an ecstasy.

"Father's always an immense long time at the gunmaker's," he said; "we shall have time to look at all Greenop's things. I hope he's got some new ones."

"And I want to buy some hemp-seed," said Mary.

Mr Greenop welcomed the children with his usual brisk cheerfulness, and had, as Jackie had hoped, a good many new things to show them; the nicest of all was a bullfinch which piped the tune of "Bonnie Dundee" "at command," as his owner expressed it. The children were delighted with it, and immediately asked the price, which was their custom with every article of Mr Greenop's stock, and being told, proceeded to examine further. They came upon a charming squirrel with the bushiest tail possible, and while they were admiring it Mr Greenop was called to attend on a customer.

"Jackie," said Mary suddenly, "if you might choose, what would you have out of all the shop?"

Jackie looked thoughtful. His birthday was approaching, and though he would not have hinted at such a thing, it did pass through his mind that Mary's question might have something to do with that occasion. He studied the matter therefore with the attention it deserved, for he had to consider both his own inclinations and the limits of Mary's purse. At last he said deliberately:

"The squirrel. What would *you* choose?"

"The piping bullfinch," said Mary, without an instant's hesitation.

"Why," exclaimed Jackie, "that's almost the most expensive thing in the shop!"

"I don't see that that matters at all," answered Mary. "You asked me what I liked best, and I like that best—much."

More customers and acquaintances had now crowded in, and the little shop was quite full.

"I believe we've seen everything," said Jackie; "let's get up in the dog-cart and wait there for father. Oh," he continued with a sigh, when they were seated again, "*how* jolly it must be to be Greenop! Wouldn't you like to be

him?”

“No,” said Mary decidedly, “I shouldn’t like it at all; I couldn’t bear it.”

“Why?” asked Jackie.

“Oh, because he’s quite a common man, and tucks up his shirt sleeves, and keeps a shop.”

“Well, that’s just the nice part of it,” said Jackie eagerly—“so interesting, always to be among the animals and things. And then his shop’s in the very best part of Dorminster, where he can see everything pass, and all his friends drop in and tell him the news. I don’t expect he’s ever dull.”

“I daresay not,” said Mary, with a shrug of contempt; “but I shouldn’t like to be a common vulgar man like that.”

Jackie got quite hot.

“I don’t believe Greenop’s vulgar at all,” he said. “Look how he stuffed those pheasants for father. I heard father say, ‘Greenop’s an uncommonly clever fellow!’ Father likes to talk to him, so he can’t be vulgar.”

Mary did not want another quarrel; she tried to soften her speech down.

“But you see I couldn’t be *Mr*. Greenop,” she said, “I could only be *Mrs*. Greenop, and sit in that dull little hole at the back of the shop and darn all day.”

“Oh, well,” Jackie acknowledged, “that might not be so pleasant; but,” he added, “you might be his daughter, and help to feed the birds, and serve in the shop.”

Mary tossed her head.

“What’s the good of talking like that?” she said; “I’m *not* his daughter, and I’m sure I don’t want to be.”

“But you’re always fond of pretending things,” persisted Jackie. “Supposing you *could* change, whose daughter would you like to be?”

“Well,” said Mary, after a little reflection, “if I could change I should like to be a countess, or a princess, or a Lady somebody. Lady Mary Vallance sounds rather nice, I think.”

Just then the squire came out of the shop, and they soon started rapidly homewards.

“Mary,” said Jackie, squeezing himself close up to her, when they were well on the way, and lowering his voice mysteriously, “I’ve got a secret to tell you.”

Jackie’s secrets were never very important, and Mary was not prepared to be interested in this one.

“Have you?” she said absently; “look at all those crows in that field.”

“Oh, if you don’t want to hear it—” said Jackie, drawing back with a hurt expression; “it’s something to do with you, too.”

“Well, what is it?” said Mary; “I’m listening.”

“I haven’t told Agatha, or Jennie, or Patrick,” continued he in an injured voice.

“Why, it wouldn’t be a secret if you had,” said Mary. “Go on; I really want to hear it.”

“It was yesterday,” began Jackie, lowering his voice again; “I was sitting in the school-room window-seat reading, and Rice came in with a message for Fraülein. And then she stayed talking about lots of things, and then they began to talk about you.” Jackie paused.

“That’s not much of a secret,” said Mary. “Is that all?”

“Of course not. It’s only the beginning. They said a lot which I didn’t hear, and then Rice told Fraülein a long story in a very low voice, and Fraülein held up her hands and called out ‘Himmel!’ But the part I really did hear was the last bit.”

“Well,” said Mary, “what was it? I don’t think anything of what you’ve told me yet.”

“‘These awful words fell upon my ears,’” said Jackie gloomily, quoting from a favourite ghost story: “‘As brown as a berry, and her name’s no more Mary Vallance than mine is!’”

“But I’m not as brown as a berry,” said Mary. “You must have heard wrong. They couldn’t have been talking about me at all.”

“I know they were,” said Jackie with decision, “for when Fraülein saw me she nodded at Rice and put her finger on her lip, and Rice said something about ‘buried in his book.’ You see,” added Jackie, “I didn’t really *listen*, but I heard—because I couldn’t help it.”

Wensdale was now in sight, and five minutes afterwards the dog-cart stopped at the vicarage gate.

“Don’t tell anyone else,” whispered Mary hurriedly as she clambered down. “I’m going to ask mother about it.”

She ran into the house feeling rather excited, but almost sure that Jackie was mistaken. He often made muddles. What was her astonishment, therefore, after pouring out the story breathlessly, when Mrs Vallance, instead of laughing at the idea, only looked very grave and kept silence.

“Of course I am Mary Vallance, ain’t I, mother?” she repeated.

“You are our dear little adopted daughter,” said Mrs Vallance; “but that is not really your name.”

“What is it then?” asked Mary.

“I do not know. Some day I will tell you how you first came here, but not until you are older.”

How mysterious it all was! Mary gazed thoughtfully out into the quiet road, at the ducks splashing about in the river; but she was not thinking of them, her head seemed to whirl. Presently she said:

“Do you know my real mother and father?”

“No,” answered Mrs Vallance.

“Perhaps,” continued Mary, after a pause, “they live in a big house like the Chelwoods, and have a garden and a park like theirs.”

“Perhaps they have,” said Mrs Vallance, “and perhaps they live in a little cottage like the blacksmith and his wife, and have no garden at all.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t like that at all,” said Mary quickly; then she suddenly threw her arms round Mrs Vallance’s neck and kissed her.

“Whoever they are,” she said, “I love you and father best, and always shall.”

She asked a great many more questions, but Mrs Vallance seemed determined to answer nothing but “yes” and “no.” It was very disappointing to know so much and yet so little, and it seemed impossible to wait patiently till she was older to hear more. At last Mrs Vallance forbade the subject:

“I don’t want you to talk of this any more now, Mary,” she said. “When the proper time comes, you shall hear all I have to tell; what I want you to remember is this: *Whoever* you are, and whatever sort of people you belong to, you cannot alter it; but you may have a great deal to do with *what* you are. We can all make our characters noble by goodness, however poor our stations are; but if we are proud and vain, and despise others, nothing can save us from becoming vulgar and low, even if we belong to very high rank indeed. That is all you have to think of.”

Excellent advice; but though Mary heard all the words, they did not sink into her mind any more than the water on the ducks’ backs in the river outside; they rolled off it at once, and only the wonderful, wonderful fact remained, that she was not Mary Vallance. Who was she, then? And, above all, what could Rice have meant by “brown as a berry?” Who was brown as a berry? Certainly not Mary herself; she was quite used to hearing that she was “as white as snow” and “as fair as a lily”—it was Agatha Chelwood who had a brown skin. Altogether it was very mysterious and deeply interesting; soon she began to make up long stories about herself, in which it was always discovered at last that she belonged to very rich people with grand titles. This was what people had meant when they whispered that she was “no common child.” Mary’s foolish head was in a whirl of excitement, and filled from morning to night with visions of grandeur. If the little clog could only have spoken! Mute, yet full of expression it stood there, while Mary dreamed in her little white bed of palaces and princesses.

“I was not made,” it would have said, “for foot of princess or lady, or to tread on soft carpets and take dainty steps; I am a hardworking shoe made by rough hands, though the heart they belonged to was kind and gentle; I have nothing to do with luxury and idleness.”

But no one understood this silent language. The clog was admired, and wondered at, and called “a quaint little shoe,” and its history remained unknown.

Mary longed now to tell Jackie her mighty secret, which began to weigh too heavily to keep to herself; but when he did come to the vicarage again, he was not nearly so much impressed by it as she had hoped. This was partly, perhaps, because his mind was full of a certain project which he wished her to join, and she had scarcely bound him by a solemn promise not to breathe a word to the other children of what she had told him, than he began eagerly:

“We’re going to spend the day at Maskells to-morrow—the *whole* day. Will Mrs Vallance let you go too?”

“Come and ask her,” said Mary; and Jackie, rather breathless, for he had run the whole way from the White House, proceeded with his request:

“The donkey-cart’s going,” he said, “and the three little ones, and Rice, and Fraülein, and all of us, and we’re going quite early because it’s so hot, and we shall stop to tea, and make a fire, of course, and mother hopes you’ll let Mary go.”

“Well, I can’t say no,” said Mrs Vallance, smiling at Jackie’s heated face; “but I’m not very fond of Maskells, there are so many dangerous places in it.”

“Oh, you mean the forbidden rooms,” said Jackie; “we don’t go into those now. There are three of them, where the

floor's given way, you know, with great holes in them. Maskells is *such* a jolly place," he added pleadingly; "we don't like any other half so well."

"You say Fraülein is going?" said Mrs Vallance.

"Yes, and Rice, too; but they won't be in the way, because Fraulein's going to sketch, and Rice will have to be with the little ones."

"I hope they *will* be in the way," replied Mrs Vallance, "and prevent you heedless children climbing about in unsafe places and breaking your limbs."

"Then Mary may go? And we start *punctually* at nine, so she mustn't be late."

Consent once given, Jackie took his departure, and his stout knickerbockered legs were soon out of sight.

Mary was delighted, for Maskells was the most charming place possible to spend a day in, and the prospect of going there made her forget for a time the one subject which had lately filled her mind—herself.

Maskells was a deserted house standing near the high-road between the White House and Dorminster; it had once been a place of some consequence, and still had pleasant meadows round it, sloping down to a river at the back; but the garden and orchard were tangled and neglected—much more interesting, the children thought, than if they had been properly cared for.

The house had two projecting wings, and quaint latticed windows; outside, it had the appearance of being in tolerable repair, but there was in truth scarcely a whole room in it, floors and ceilings had given way, and great rifts and gaps yawned in them. The rotten old staircases were all the more dangerous because they still looked firm enough to bear a light weight, and though Jackie had once crawled up to the top of one, out on to the roof, the attempt was never repeated. He had remained there for half an hour clinging on to the side of a tall chimney, unable to move, until a farmer had fetched a ladder and got him down. Since then staircases and upper rooms had been forbidden, and the children had to content themselves with playing on the ground floor and in the outhouses. There was a mystery hanging about the old place which added to its attractions, for they had heard that it had fallen into this decay and been uninhabited so long because it was "in Chancery." A mysterious expression, which might mean anything, and was more than enough to clothe it with all the terrors which belong to the unknown.

When dusk came on, and the owls and bats flapped their wings in shadowy corners, it was desirable to cling closely together and feel afraid in company—a tremor was excusable in the boldest. Patrick, indeed, always declared he had once seen a ghost in Maskells. Pressed for details, he had been unable to give any clear account of it, and was a good deal laughed at, especially by Mary; but it was dimly felt by all that there might be truth in it—anything was possible for a place "in Chancery."

Mary liked to imagine things about Maskells; it would do for the Tower of London with dungeons in it, or for Lochleven with Mary Queen of Scots escaping by night, or for a besieged castle, and hundreds of other fancies. She invented games founded on those scenes which were popular at first, but as she always took the leading parts herself, the other children soon tired of them.

"Don't let's pretend anything else," Jennie would say, who had a practical mind; "let's have a game of hide-and-seek."

And certainly no place could have been better fitted than Maskells for the purpose.

Story 1—Chapter 3.

The Adventure.

Mary did not fail to start in good time for the White House on the morning after Jackie's invitation, and reached the gates leading into the stable-yard just as the clock was striking nine. The donkey-cart was standing there ready, and the four elder children were busily engaged round it stowing away large parcels to the best advantage, and thrusting in a variety of small ones. There was an anxious look on all their faces, for they had so many things to remember and the cart was small. Rice, the old nurse, stood by with the youngest child in her arms; she was to ride in the cart with her three charges, who were too small to walk so far, but it seemed more than doubtful at present if there would be room by the time the packing was finished. Taught by experience, however, she wisely forebore to interfere with the arrangements and waited patiently.

"Have you got everything?" asked Mary as she entered.

There was not much more visible of Jackie than his boots, for he was making great exertions head-foremost in the cart, but he answered in a muffled voice:

"I think so. Read the list, Agatha."

"Potatoes and apples to roast—" began Agatha.

"There, now!" said Jackie, and the next minute he was plunging in at the kitchen door.

"I *knew* you'd forget something," said Mary triumphantly. "What a good idea it was of mine to have a list!"

Jackie soon came back with a knobbly-looking canvas bag in his hand, and followed by Fraülein Schnipp the German governess.

“I say,” he said, “we’ve forgotten Fraülein’s camp-stool and sketching things; and she says she can’t go without them.”

“Well,” said Jennie in a low tone, “I don’t believe you can get them in. I should think she might carry them herself.”

“Don’t,” said Patrick with a nudge of his elbow; “you’ll make her cry.”

It was a puzzling habit that Fraülein had, to weep silently at unexpected moments, and say her feelings were hurt. This was so distressing that the children were always anxious to avoid it if possible. She stood looking on now with a pleased smile, grasping her camp-stool, and understanding very little of the chatter going on round her. Fraülein was very good-natured looking, with large soft blue eyes and a quantity of frizzy fair hair.

At last the packing was done; camp-stool, sketching-books, and three small children on the top of everything. Rice would have to walk by the side of the cart. It really was a wonderfully hot day, and there was scarcely any shade; the donkey went even slower than usual, and by the time they reached Maskells the whole party was rather exhausted—Fraulein more so than anyone, and she sank at once on the ground under some beech-trees opposite the house. It was in this spot that the cart was always unpacked, the cloth laid, and dinner spread. Later on in the day a fire was made here to boil the kettle for tea, but until then the children were free to roam about and do as they liked.

As Jackie had said, Fraülein was anxious to make a sketch of the old house, and after dinner was over and she had a little recovered from her fatigue she planted her camp-stool conveniently and set to work. The children knew now that neither she nor Rice would be “in the way” that afternoon; they were both comfortably settled and would not be likely to stir for hours.

But it was almost too hot to play, and the games went on languidly until four o’clock, when it began to get cooler, and there were pleasant shadows round about.

“We ought to begin to pick up wood,” said the careful Agatha, “or the fire won’t be ready for tea-time.”

“Well, we’ll just have one game of hide-and-seek first,” said Jackie; and so it was agreed.

Agatha hid first, but she was soon found, for she was not fond of venturing far into the dark corners round Maskells; then it was Jackie’s turn, and then it came to Mary.

Determined to distinguish herself, and find a more difficult place than the others, she wandered round to the side of the house which looked upon the neglected orchard, and was furthest away from where Fraülein and Rice were sitting. She would not cry “Whoop!” for a long while, she thought, till she had found a very good place indeed. As she pushed her way among the low boughs of the apple-trees, and through the tall tangled grass which reached nearly to her waist, she felt very bold and adventurous, for the children seldom ventured on this side—it was unknown ground. Certainly the house looked far more mournful and ruinous here than it did in front. Wooden shutters were fastened outside most of the windows, and one of them had swung back and gave a dismal creak now and then on its rusty hinges. Trailing masses of convolvulus and ivy and Virginian creeper were hanging about everywhere, and the walls were covered so thickly that for some time Mary looked in vain for an entrance. But at last she saw a little low-arched door. How inviting it looked! No doubt it would be locked; but at least she would try it, and if she could get in it would be a splendid hiding-place. The others would never, never find her. She lifted the iron ring which hung from the lock, gave a little twist and a push, and was surprised to find that it yielded easily. Before her was an almost entirely dark room with a low vaulted ceiling; through the cracks in the closed shutters came faint streaks of light, and she could just see that at the end of it there was another door like the one she had entered.

Mary’s heart beat fast with excitement. What was on the other side of that door? Hidden treasure, perhaps, or a dungeon where some captive had been pining for years! Here was an adventure, indeed! Everything else was now completely forgotten. She had no doubt that she was on the very edge of some great discovery; and though she did wish for a second that Jackie was there too, she decided directly afterwards that there was more honour and glory in being quite alone.

So she went boldly up to the door with a fast-beating heart and turned the handle. Wonderful! It opened at once, and straight in front of her there rose a short steep flight of stone steps, with another door, partly open, at the top. But here she stopped uncertainly, and for the first time fear was mingled with curiosity, for plainly to be heard through that half-open door came the sound of voices. It was unpleasant to remember Patrick’s ghost just then. Was this where it lived? If so, she thought she would go back. Yet it would be a pity, now that she had got so far, and something urged her strongly to go and peep into the room above. Mary had many faults but she was no coward, and besides this, her proud spirit made her ashamed to run away, so after a little hesitation she crept softly up the stone steps. She hardly dared to breathe lest she should be heard, and as she went the voices became clearer and clearer: they certainly sounded just like a man and woman talking. When she reached the top she paused a minute to gather courage, and then peeped cautiously round the door.

It was a large room—one of those which Jackie had called forbidden rooms—for there was quite a big hole in one corner where the floor had given way. There was a wide open fireplace with a high carved stone mantel-piece, and on the hearth a fire of sticks crackled away under a black pipkin which stood on legs; from this there came a strange and savoury smell. A woman was crouching on the ground in front of it with her back to the door, and a tall dark man leant against the mantel-piece and fed the fire with some dry boughs which he broke into pieces. Here were no ghosts at any rate. There was something reassuring in the sight of the fire and the black pot and the smell of food; but what were they doing here, and who were they? It was perhaps some dark affair connected with “Chancery.”

Mary felt frightened. She could not see the woman's face, but the man looked so evil and dark, and had such bright black eyes! She drew back her head and prepared to creep softly down the steps and make her way out. Now that she had seen these ghosts she would have plenty to tell Jackie and the others, and they would all think her very brave. She began to feel anxious to be with them again.

Just then the woman spoke.

"Bennie's late," she said. "Supper's most ready."

"He's havin' a look round," answered the man, "against to-night."

"What's the old chap's name?" continued the woman.

"Chelwood," said the man. "He's a JP."

"What's that?"

"A bloke wot sits in court and sends yer to prison," answered the man.

Mary listened with all her ears and her eyes starting with horror. Here was some dreadful plot—they were going to murder Squire Chelwood, perhaps! Should she run at once and give the alarm, or wait to hear more? While she hesitated the woman spoke again.

"I suppose it's best to begin there?"

"There's nowhere else, not to speak of," answered the man, "'cept the parson's."

The woman gave a low laugh. "I wonder how he liked the present you made him this time seven years back," she said.

She got up as she spoke to lift the lid of the pot and stir its contents; and Mary, afraid of being discovered, turned to go, trembling with excitement. Treading with great care, and feeling her way with one hand on the wall, she was almost half-way down when there fell on her ear a sound which brought her to a sudden stand-still. Towards her, coming through the empty room at the bottom of the stairs, there were footsteps plainly to be heard! Without doubt it was "Bennie" returning. The thought darted through Mary's mind, leaving her cold with terror. What could she do? To go backwards or forwards was equally dreadful—she was caught in a kind of trap. Oh for Jackie, Fraülein, Rice, who were so near, and yet powerless to help her! All her courage gone, she sank down on the stone step, covered her face with her hands, and waited. The footsteps came nearer. In another minute the door at the foot of the stairs swung back, and a youth of eighteen or twenty came quickly up, almost stumbling over Mary in the dim light.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "it's a child!" He put his fingers in his mouth and gave a low strange whistle, and in a moment the gypsy and his wife came out of the room above.

"Here's a shine!" said Bennie.

He pointed to Mary, who still crouched motionless on the step with her hair falling over her shoulders. They all stood staring at her in surprise.

"Belongs to a party outside, I bet," said Bennie. "There's a lot of 'em t'other side of the house. Seed 'em as I wur comin' back."

"Did they see you?" asked the man.

"No fear," answered Bennie shortly. "Got over the wall."

They muttered hoarsely together over Mary's head, using a strange language which she could not understand; but she made out that they were annoyed, and that they could not agree what should be done. At last the woman stooped down to her.

"Where do you come from, my pretty?" she said in a wheedling tone.

Mary did not answer, but still kept her face hidden.

"Come alonger me, darling," continued the woman. She took Mary's arm, and half-dragged, half-led her into the room above. The child's hat had fallen off, and the light streamed down upon her bright yellow hair and her frightened brown eyes, as she raised them timidly to the dark faces round her. The woman started and gave a quick significant glance at her husband.

"You live at the parson's house in Wensdale, don't yer, dearie?" she said coaxingly.

"Yes," said Mary. She wondered how the woman knew.

"But you're not the parson's child," continued the woman. "Give me your hand." She bent, muttering over it: "No, no, not the parson's child—you belong to dark people, for all so white and fair you are."

Was the woman a witch? Mary gazed at her with eyes wide with fear, and the man and boy stood by with a cunning grin on their faces.

"Seven years ago," the woman went on in a sing-song tone, "you was lost. Seven years ago you was found. Seven

years you've lived with strangers, and now you've come to yer own people."

What did she mean? These dirty, dark, evil-looking tramps her own people! Mary took courage and drew herself haughtily upright.

"You're not my people," she said boldly. "I live at the vicarage, with Mr and Mrs Vallance. I must go back to the others—it's getting late."

"Not so fast, my little queen," said the woman, still holding her hand and gazing at the palm. "What's this 'ere little token I ketch sight on? Why, it's a little shoe! A little leather shoe with a row o' brass nails an' a brass toe. Now, by that 'ere token I know you belongs to us. Yonder's yer father, and yonder's yer brother; nobody and nothin' can't take you from us now."

Mary burst into tears. It was too dreadful to find that this woman knew all about her; was it possible that she belonged to her in any way?

"I can't stay with you," she sobbed, "I must go back. They wouldn't let you keep me if they knew."

"They couldn't help it," said the woman with a scornful laugh, "not all the parsons and squires as ever was couldn't."

Poor Mary! All her spirit had gone from her now, she stood helplessly crying in the middle of the room.

"Wouldn't yer like to come back to pore Seraminta, yer own mother, what brought yer up and took care on yer?" the woman said in coaxing tones, "an to father Perrin, and dear brother Bennie."

"No—no—no," sobbed Mary, "I must go home."

"Well, now," said the woman, with a side wink to the two men, "suppose we *was* to go agen our nateral feelin's and let you go back, what would you promise to do in return?"

"Anything—I'll do anything," said Mary, checking her tears and looking up with a gleam of hope.

"Then, look you here," said Seraminta, changing her soft tone to a threatening one, and frowning darkly. "First you've got to promise not to tell a soul of yer havin' bin in this room an' how you got 'ere. Next, to keep a quiet tongue about what you heard us say; and last, to bring all the money you've got and put it under the flat stone where the four roads meet, to-morrow at six o'clock in the evening. An' if yer do all these things we'll let you bide at the parson's. But if you breathe a word about what you've seen an' heard, whether it's in the dark or the light, whether it's sleeping or waking, whether it's to man, woman, or child, that very minute you'll be claimed for ours, and ours you'll be for ever."

The room was getting dark by this time, and the fire burning low gave a sudden flicker now and then, and died down again; by this uncertain light the dark figures standing round, and the lowering frown on Seraminta's crafty face, looked doubly awful.

Mary was frightened almost out of her wits, for she believed every word the woman had said, and thought her quite capable of carrying out her threat. The one thing was to escape. If she could only do that, she would gladly keep silence about these dreadful people and their possible relation to her.

"I promise," she said eagerly. "I never, never will. Not to anybody."

The gypsies drew together near the fire and talked in low tones, using the language which Mary could not understand: after a minute the woman came back to her.

"Give me yer handkercher," she said, and when Mary drew it tremblingly out of her pocket she tied it over the child's eyes and took hold of her hand.

"Come along," she said, and Mary followed meekly.

Although she could see nothing, she knew that they went down the stone steps and along the way she had come, and presently they were outside the house, for she felt the wind in her face and the long grass under her feet. Suddenly the woman stopped.

"Now," she said, "remember; if you speak it will be the worse for you and for your friends, an' you'll be sorry for it all your life long. An' it's Seraminta as tells you so."

"I won't," said Mary, "if you'll only let me go."

"It goes agen me," said Seraminta, pretending to hesitate, "it naterally goes agen me. But I dessay you'll be better off at the parson's than yer could be with yer pore mother. Don't forgit the money. Now count fifty, an' then take off the handkercher."

Mary began obediently; she had never been so submissive in her life. When she was half-way through the number she fancied she heard a rustle, and as she said the last one she pulled off the handkerchief and looked round. To her great relief she was quite alone, in the thickest part of the orchard; the woman had vanished, and it seemed for a moment as though it might have been some ugly dream. But no, it was too true. It had all really happened. "Ours you'll be for ever" echoed in Seraminta's harsh tones close to her ear. She shuddered, and began with feverish eagerness to push her way out through the thick growing boughs. Oh to be with the others again! After searching for some time she found a gate which led into the open fields. She could now see where she was. Oh joy! There in the

distance was the well-known group of beech-trees and the blaze of a fire, round which were small figures dimly moving. Mary could have shouted for delight and relief; she set off running as hard as she could, never pausing till she arrived breathless in the midst of them. They all crowded round her, exclaiming and asking questions.

“Here she is! Where *have* you been? Fraulein and Rice are still looking for you. Did you lose yourself? Did you tumble down? Have you been into the forbidden rooms?”

Fortunately for Mary it was impossible to answer all these questions, so she did not attempt to answer any of them.

“Anyhow you didn’t find me,” she managed to say as she threw herself on the ground near the fire.

“Oh, but isn’t Fraülein in a state of mind?” said Jackie. “She says she’s ‘out of herself’ with anxiety, and she’s been crying. Here she comes.”

Poor Fraülein now appeared with Rice. She was so greatly agitated, and yet so relieved to find that Mary had come back, that she could not express herself in English. For some moments she poured forth a torrent of German and French, half laughing and half crying, but Rice looked very cross, and said severely at once:

“You’ve given us all a deal of trouble and anxiety, Miss Mary, with them foolish pranks.”

Mary felt as though she must cry; it was hard to be scolded when she had just come through such a terrible trial. Her eyes filled with tears, and Jackie saw them; as usual, he was her comforter in distress, and drawing near, with a blackened potato and a roasted apple in his hand, he seated himself close to her in a friendly manner.

“I cooked ’em for you myself,” he said, as he made his offering; “they’re awfully good ones.”

This attention consoled Mary a little, and she managed to bear up, but a dulness had fallen over the whole party; Fraülein was still tearful, and Rice cross, so that none of the children were sorry when the wagonette arrived to take them back to Wensdale. To Mary it was the greatest possible relief; she never never wished to see Maskells again. When she found herself tightly squeezed in between Fraülein and Jackie, with friendly faces all round her, she began to feel safer, and very soon the last glimpse of the tall chimneys was lost to sight in a turn of the road. What a comfort it was to be with them all again! At another time she would have complained that Jackie was taking up too much room, and digging his elbow into her, but all that was altered. He could not possibly be too close, her only dread was to be left alone. She was so unusually meek, and looked so white, that presently Patrick, who was sitting opposite and staring at her with large round eyes, remarked:

“I expect Mary saw the ghost, only she won’t say so.”

This interesting subject once started, lasted for some time, and Mary was tortured with all manner of minute questions. She managed to answer them all somehow, but with so much less spirit than usual that it was plain to see something was wrong. Jackie made up his mind to ask her afterwards, and meanwhile Fraülein interfered.

“You shall not tease any more with your questions,” she said. “Mary is fatigue.”

But the questions had reminded Mary of something which till now she had forgotten—Squire Chelwood’s danger. She ought to warn Jackie; but if she did, the gypsies would come and take her away, perhaps that very night. She could not risk that. And yet, Jackie’s father! It would be too dreadful. “Ours you’ll be for ever” seemed to sound in her ear: she shuddered; no, she could not do it. Suddenly a thought struck her, and she pulled Jackie gently by the sleeve.

“Jackie,” she said softly, very softly, so that Seraminta might not hear, “where does Hamlet sleep at night?”

Hamlet was a Danish boar-hound belonging to the squire.

“Hamlet,” said Jackie. “Why, he sleeps just outside father’s bed-room door, and sometimes in the night he walks up and down the corridor, and his tail goes flop up against the door. Once father thought it was thieves.”

“I suppose Hamlet’s very strong?” said Mary earnestly.

“I should just rather think he was,” said Jackie. “He wouldn’t make much of a robber. He’d just rear up on his hind-legs and take him by the throat—so.” He launched himself forward as he spoke, and seized Patrick by the neck.

“And that would kill the robber?” asked Mary.

“Dead as a nail,” replied Jackie with decision.

“Don’t you wish robbers *would* come some night,” suggested Jennie.

“What would you do if they did?” said Agatha.

“I know what she’d do,” put in Patrick quickly; “she’d hide her head under the bed-clothes and keep on screaming for Rice.”

“If I had a pistol I should shoot them,” said Jackie, “only mine won’t go off.”

“And perhaps,” said Agatha, “*they’d* have pistols that *would* go off.”

“Oh! I say,” exclaimed Jackie suddenly, “if here isn’t Mary actually crying away like anything. What’s the matter with her?”

It was quite true. Overwrought and frightened, these dreadful pictures of robbers and pistols had a reality for her which was too much to bear. Mary the courageous, the high-spirited, who scorned tears and laughed at weakness, was now crying and sobbing helplessly, like the greatest coward of them all.

Fraülein put her arm round her compassionately. “She is quaite too tired,” she said; “it is an attack of nerfs. Nefer mind, dear shild. When you will sleep to-night you shall feel quaite better to-morrow.”

She drew her closely to her side; and Mary, who generally despised Fraülein and laughed at her broken English, was thankful now to feel the comfort of her kind protecting arm.

Story 1—Chapter 4.

A Gypsy Child?

The sun was streaming through Mary’s small window when she woke up somewhat later than usual the next morning. For a minute she lay with half-closed eyes, feeling very snug and comfortable, quietly gazing at all the well-known objects in the room—at the picture of the little girl reading, which hung opposite her bed, at the book-shelf with all the brightly-covered books she was so fond of, at her canary hopping restlessly in his cage, at the cuckoo clock, and finally at the little clog in the middle of the mantel-piece. But when she came to this her eyes opened wide, she sat up, rubbed them, and looked at it again; for all in a minute, just as we remember a dream, there came back to her the dreadful events of yesterday. The gypsies, the dimly-seen room, the flickering fire, Seraminta’s dark face as she described the little shoe. “Ours you’ll be for ever.” Could it possibly be true that she, Mary Vallance, was the child of such people? What a dreadful thing! She did not feel so frightened this morning, and, her natural spirit partly returning after her night’s rest, she was more inclined to believe that Seraminta had spoken falsely. “If I told father all about it,” she said to herself, “I don’t believe she’d dare to take me away.” And yet, when she thought it over, how could the woman have known about the shoe? And besides, Rice’s remark flashed across her, “brown as a berry,” certainly that would apply to Seraminta, she was a darker brown than anyone Mary had ever seen. It was true, then, she really was a gypsy child, and if so, they had a right to claim her if they wished. How could she escape it? Her only chance lay in keeping perfect silence as they had told her, and also in taking them the money she had promised this evening. How much had she? Mary wondered. Her money-box, a small red post-office, stood on the mantel-piece; she jumped out of bed and counted the contents; more than usual, because she had been saving it up for Jackie’s present. Now it must all go to those wicked people, and Jackie could have no present—Jackie, who was always so good to her, and who had not grudged the savings of a whole year in pennies to buy her a couple of white bantams. How unkind, how mean he would think it! Mary gazed mournfully at the money-box. It was a great trial to her, for she had a generous nature and was very fond of Jackie. Might she not leave just a little in the box? But no—she dared not. Perhaps even now there were dark eyes peering in at the window, and at night, who could tell from what unexpected quarter Perrin might appear to take her away? She must give them every penny of it. With a sigh she put all the money back, dressed herself and went down-stairs. Mr Vallance was speaking as she entered the breakfast-room, and she just caught these words:

“Such a fine fellow! I can’t think how the wretches managed to kill him without noise.”

Mary stopped short and turned very white; she looked anxiously at Mrs Vallance, who was pouring out tea. Was it Squire Chelwood they had killed, or was it Hamlet? She did not dare to ask any questions.

“Is anything the matter, my dear child?” asked Mrs Vallance. “You look frightened, and so pale.”

Mary murmured something about being tired, and crept into her place at the table.

“I never like those expeditions to Maskells,” continued Mrs Vallance; “you all run about so wildly and excite yourselves so much.”

“Morris says,” said Mr Vallance, turning round from the window, “that all his finest pullets are gone, too, and some of his ducks.”

Morris was the poultry-man at the White House.

“Do you hear that, Mary?” said Mrs Vallance. “Morris has just been down to tell your father that the poultry-yard was robbed yesterday.”

“And your old enemy the great turkey gobbler was found dead on the ground,” added Mr Vallance.

Mary breathed again. If it were *only* the turkey gobbler.

“Was anything else killed?” she asked in a trembling voice.

“How they managed it I can’t think,” repeated Mr Vallance; “and they appear to have got clear off with their spoil, there’s no trace of them.”

“Except the poor turkey gobbler,” said Mrs Vallance.

“Did they get into the house?” Mary now ventured to ask.

“No, my dear, no; they were not so daring as that. This sort of tramps is not too fond of going where there are likely to be dogs and pistols.”

“We must take warning by this, Mary,” said Mrs Vallance, “and be careful about our fowl-house; it would not do to lose my cochin-chinas or your pretty white bantams in the same way.”

“I don’t suppose there’s much fear of their attempting a second robbery in the same place,” said Mr Vallance. “They’re probably far enough away by this time; still, I’m sorry we’ve no dog now. Poor old Brutus! We miss him, don’t we?”

While all this was going on Mary felt as guilty as if she had stolen the fowls and killed the turkey gobbler. She knew where the thieves were, safely hidden in the old house, and no doubt planning some other dreadful deed. If she could only have spoken! Her food tasted like dry chips in her mouth, she swallowed it with the utmost difficulty, and it was only by taking great gulps of tea that she could get on at all. Mrs Vallance noticed her disturbed looks.

“I think you ran about in the sun too much yesterday, Mary,” she said at last. “I will send up to Fraulein and ask her to excuse your lessons this morning. You will be better for a quiet day at home with me.”

Mary was relieved not to go to the White House, for she dreaded more questions from the children, but as to spending a “quiet” day at home, that was not possible. It never would be possible any more, she thought, for now she had to consider and contrive how to get her money to the appointed place at six o’clock that evening. She knew the spot well, it was only a little distance beyond the White House. Just where the four roads met there stood a sign-post; near this was a large old oak-tree, and at its foot a broad flat stone with a hollow under one side. It was there she had to put her money, but how to get it there without observation?

Her mind was so full of this as the day went on that everything else seemed like a sort of dream; she heard Mrs Vallance talking to her, and answered, but so absently that her mother looked at her in surprise. “She is certainly very much over-tired,” she said to herself; “I always knew that Maskells was not a place for the children, and I shall tell Mrs Chelwood so.”

Meanwhile the dreaded hour drew nearer and nearer, the bell was ringing for evening service, and Mr Vallance came out of his study and put on his wide-awake.

“Would you rather not go to church this evening, Mary?” said Mrs Vallance.

“My head aches,” answered Mary. “If they will only go without me,” she said to herself, “I can do it.”

“Very well, darling,” said kind Mrs Vallance; “I will stay with you, and we will go on with that nice book you like so much.”

Mary’s face became as red as it had been white a moment ago.

“Oh, no,” she stammered; “I’d rather be alone. May I go and lie down on my bed until you come back?”

What a strange request from the ever-active Mary!

“Do as you like, dear,” said Mrs Vallance, and as she left the house she added to her husband, “I hope the child’s not going to be ill, she looks so dull, and flushes up so.”

Mary listened until she heard the click of the garden gate, then she sprang up from her bed, wrapped all her money in a piece of paper and put it in her pocket. She looked at the clock, in five minutes they would be in church, then she would start, and if she ran all the way she would be in time.

Concealment was so new to her that she felt as though she were doing something very wicked as she ran quickly along the familiar road; she met no one, but every rustle in the hedge, every innocent sound, made her start and tremble, and when in the distance she saw the tall sign-post standing there with outstretched arms she shook with fear. She reached it; no one in sight; all the four roads silent and bare; and having hidden her packet tremblingly under the broad stone she turned to go, with guilty footsteps, when suddenly, from the tree above, there fell at her feet a small screwed-up piece of paper. She looked up; amongst the thick leafy branches in the very heart of the oak there was a freckled face peering down at her. It was the youth Bennie. She stood motionless with terror, staring at him, and he pointed at the piece of paper, making signs that she was to pick it up. As she stooped to do so there sounded in the distance the steady trot of a horse, and looking round the tree she saw, coming along the road from Dorminster, a sturdy grey cob with a broad-shouldered man on his back. Even at that distance Mary knew the cob and she knew the man. It was Squire Chelwood: Bennie’s quick eye saw him too.

“Hide!” he said, in a low threatening voice, and pointed to a gap in the hedge opposite.

Mary’s brain reeled. Should she stop Mr Chelwood and betray Bennie? But then the gypsies would claim her, she would belong to them, they would take her away. Anything was better than that. She jumped through the gap, and crouched down behind the hedge.

On came the squire, nearer and nearer, his square shoulders rising and falling with his horse’s movement, his jolly brown face puckered with a frown of annoyance; no doubt he had been trying to find out the thieves. How strong he looked, how ready he would be to help her, how glad to know where Bennie was! Now he was passing close, close to her hiding-place; if she sprang out now she could stop him. But no, she could not; in another minute it was too late, the cob had turned briskly into the Wensdale Road, and the sound of his hoofs soon became faint in the distance.

She now saw Bennie slide nimbly to the ground, cast one quick glance round, and snatch the money from under the stone; then stooping low, he ran swiftly along under the hedge in the direction of Maskells, like some active wild animal, and disappeared.

Left alone, Mary also crept out of her hiding-place and took her way back to the vicarage as fast as she could. Humble and crest-fallen, how different to the Mary of two days ago, who had such lofty ambitions! How foolish now seemed those vain dreams and fancies! No “Lady Mary,” but a gypsy child; it was a change indeed. She got home before service was over, threw herself on her little bed, and hid her face on her pillow. How unhappy she was! No one could help her, and yet she had many kind friends near, who would be so sorry for her if they knew. But they must not know, that was the worst part of it, she must bear this dreadful thing all alone. She had been fond once of having “a secret,” a mystery she could share with Jackie only, and talk about in corners. What a different matter it was to have a real one to keep!

Presently she heard Mrs Vallance’s step on the stairs; Mary felt that she could not answer any questions about her headache, so she shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. When her kind mother bent over her and kissed her, how hard it was not to put her arms round her neck and tell her how miserable she was; but she must not, she must lie quite still, and soon she knew that Mrs Vallance was going softly out of the room. It grew gradually dusk; Mary got up and began to undress herself, she would not go down-stairs again that night, she would go to bed at once, she thought. As she put her hand into her pocket, she felt something there beside her handkerchief, and drew it quickly out. There was the dirty scrap of paper Bennie had thrown from the tree, and which she had quite forgotten. What did it mean? Was there anything inside it? With a thrill of fear she darted to the window, untwisted the paper, and by the dim light could just make out the following scrawl: “Leeve the en roost oppen nex Munday nite.” Mary gazed at it with horror, unable for the first few minutes to take in the sense, but when she did so she sank down on the ground and burst into tears. What wicked, wicked people they were! Not content with taking all her money, they wanted to rob the hen-roost, to steal her pretty bantams and Mrs Vallance’s splendid white cochin-chinas. It was too cruel. She clenched her fist passionately. “They sha’n’t do it,” she said to herself starting to her feet. “I will tell the squire; I will have them punished. They shall be put in prison.”

Then another thought came, and she drooped her head mournfully. “If I do that they will claim me for their child. ‘Not all the parsons and all the squires as ever was could prevent it,’ Seraminta had said. What would happen then? I should have to go away from Wensdale, from father and mother, from Jackie, and all of them at the White House. They would all know that I belonged to thieves—not only to common, poor people, but to bad people. I should have to tramp about the country in dirty old clothes, and perhaps no shoes. Anything would be better. I would rather they stole all the chickens. Perhaps after that they will go away, and I shall never see them again.”

She seized the scrap of paper and spelt it over a second time. Monday night—that was Jackie’s birthday, a whole week off. Surely something might happen before then. The squire might find out the gypsies’ hiding-place, and lock them up. Oh, if she might only give him the least little hint!

But she soon made up her mind firmly that she would risk nothing. She would do all they told her, she would leave the door unlocked, and help them to steal the chickens, and neither by word or look would she do anything to lead to their discovery. For she felt certain of what would follow if she did—disgrace, ragged clothes, and utter misery.

After many sorrowful thoughts of this kind she at last sobbed herself to sleep, and dreamed that she saw Perrin the gypsy man stealing stealthily out of the garden with a hen under each arm.

During the week that followed she felt as though she were dreaming still, though everything went on as usual with quiet regularity. She worked in her garden and fed her chickens, and went to the White House for her lessons with Fraulein. Outwardly it was all exactly the same, but within what a heavy heart she carried about with her! If she forgot her troubles for a few minutes in a merry game or a book, they all came back to her afterwards with double force. She belonged to gypsies; Monday they would steal the chickens; it was Jackie’s birthday, and she could give him no present. Those three things weighed on her mind like lead and altered her in so many ways that everyone was puzzled. She was submissive at home and obedient to Fraulein at the White House, never even smiling at her funniest English words; she was ready to give up her own will and pleasure to the other children; and more than once Jackie had discovered her in tears—she was “proud Mary” no longer.

As the days went on it became almost impossible to be so unhappy without telling someone. Often, when she and Jackie were alone together, her heart was so full that the words were on the very tip of her tongue, but fear kept them back. It was a heart-rending thing just now to feed the chickens and to hear Mrs Vallance talk so unconsciously about them, and say how many eggs they laid. Only three more days and they would all be gone; the fowl-house would be empty, and there would be no white cock to waken her in the morning with his cheerful crow.

There seemed no chance now that the gypsies would be discovered, for the stir which the robbery had caused had quite quieted down. No other theft had been heard of, and the village people had ceased to talk about the affair, and settled their minds to the idea that the scamps had got off to some great distance. Only Mary knew better.

The Chelwood children did not let the matter drop so lightly. They had composed a game founded on the event, which they called “Robbers,” and were much disappointed when Mary steadily refused to join them in it, for they had counted on her help in adding interesting details and finishing touches. She seemed, however, to shudder at the very idea.

“I believe Mary’s afraid,” said Patrick jeeringly; but even this taunt failed to rouse her. She took it quite quietly. What *could* be the matter with Mary?

“I shouldn’t be a bit surprised,” was Rice’s remark, “if Miss Mary’s sickening for something.”

The days flew past. Saturday now, and Mary came down to breakfast in a state of dull despair.

“Mary, dear,” said Mrs Vallance, smiling as she entered the room, “I have just made a plan for you that you will like. Your father is going to drive in to Dorminster, and you are to go with him and buy Jackie’s present.”

She waited for the look of delight which she felt sure of seeing, for she knew what Mary had set her heart on for Jackie—the squirrel out of Greenop's shop.

Poor Mary! Her thoughts flew to the empty post-office upstairs. Not a penny in it. No squirrel for Jackie, no drive to Dorminster for her. As she remembered what a jolly little squirrel it was, what bright eyes it had, what soft red-brown fur, and how Jackie would have liked it, her heart swelled. Now, she must go to his birthday party empty-handed, and it would have been the best present there.

With eyes full of tears and a scarlet flush on her cheeks she muttered very low:

"I've changed my mind. I don't want to buy the squirrel."

"You don't want the squirrel!" repeated Mrs Vallance in great surprise.

"N–no," stammered Mary, and she put her head suddenly down on the table and cried.

Mrs Vallance was much perplexed and very sorry for Mary's distress, for she knew how she had looked forward to giving the squirrel to Jackie. It was not like her to change her mind about such an important matter for any slight cause.

"I'm afraid you and Jackie have been quarrelling," she said, stroking Mary's hair gently; "but if I were you I should take this opportunity of making it up. Give him the squirrel and be friends, and then you'll be happy again."

How Mary wished she could! She made no answer, only sobbed more bitterly, and felt that she was the most miserable child in the world.

For now she had no longer any hope. Evidently nothing would happen to discover the gypsies and save the chickens. The days went on with cruel quickness, and Monday would be here in no time—a black Monday indeed.

Sunday morning came, and she sat with those thoughts in her mind by Mrs Vallance's side, and looked round at all the well-known objects in church with a half feeling that one of them might help her. They were such old friends. From the painted window opposite the twelve apostles in their gorgeous coloured robes had gazed seriously down at her every Sunday for the last five years. Much study of them during sermon time, though she always tried to attend, had made her quite familiar with their faces, and to-day she fancied that Peter would be the one she would choose to ask for advice and assistance. Turning from these her eye fell on another acquaintance of her earliest childhood—the life-size stone figure of a man. He lay in a niche in the chancel, peacefully at rest on his side, with closed eyes and one hand under his cheek. He had a short peaked beard and wore an enormous ruff; his face looked very grave and quiet—so quiet that it always filled Mary with a sort of awe. He had lain there for more than three hundred years, undisturbed by pain, or trouble, or joy. Would he be sorry for her, she wondered, if he knew how unhappy she was? But no—he would not mind—his calm face would not alter; "nothing matters any more," it seemed to say. There was no comfort for her there. With a sigh she turned a little to the right where the Chelwoods sat—the Squire and Mrs Chelwood in front, and Fraulein with the children behind. Restless Jackie, to whom it was torture to sit still so long, was not ready as usual to catch her eye, for he was following with breathless interest, which Patrick shared, the progress of a large black spider towards Fraulein's ungloved hand. Fraulein was very frightened of spiders, and there was every reason to hope that, when it touched her hand, she would give a great jump and shriek out "Himmel!"

Mary's glance wandered further, but suddenly it stopped short, for at last it was met and answered by another pair of eyes, dark and eager, with such longing earnestness in their gaze, that she felt as though she could not look away again. For a minute, which seemed a long, long time, she stared fixedly at them, and then began to wonder who it was that took so much interest in her. It was a tall woman of about thirty, who sat among the servants from the White House; a stranger, with nothing remarkable about her except the extreme plainness of her dress, and a certain hungry expression in her eyes. "I wonder who she is," thought Mary, "and why she stares at me like that."

She turned her head away again, and five minutes afterwards the service was over and the congregation clattering out of the church. As she stood in the porch waiting for the Chelwood children the strange woman came quickly up to her, and, bending down, said hurriedly:

"Might I ask, missie, what your name is?"

"My name's Mary Vallance," said Mary.

The woman shrank back, and the eager light died out of her eyes.

"Thank you, missie. I ask pardon," she murmured, and passing on went quickly down the churchyard to the gate.

What an odd woman! When the children were all walking together towards the vicarage they passed her, and Mary asked who she was.

"That?" said Agatha. "Oh, that's our new school-room maid."

"She only came yesterday," added Jennie. "She comes from Yorkshire. And what do you think? When Patrick first heard she was coming he said he was sure he shouldn't like her; and when Rice asked him why, he said, 'Because I hate Yorkshire pudding so.'"

"Well," said Patrick, "it's the only thing I know about Yorkshire."

"But you oughtn't to judge people by puddings," said Agatha reprovingly.

“Anyhow,” returned Patrick, “she doesn’t *look* nice—there’s such a great big frown on her forehead. I expect she’s cross.”

“No, she’s not cross,” said Jackie, “she’s sorry; mother told us all about it. She lost her child a long while ago. That’s what makes her look grave. Mother says we ought to be very kind to her.”

“Jennie and I shall have most to do with her,” remarked the matter-of-fact Agatha, “because she’s going to brush our hair instead of Rice.”

They had now reached the vicarage gate, and Jackie lingered after the rest to have a few last words with Mary.

“You’ll come early to-morrow afternoon, won’t you?” he said, “because I want to show you my presents before the others come. I know what two of ’em are going to be. Jolly! Something *you’ll* like as well.”

Jackie cut a high caper of delight as he spoke, in spite of its being Sunday and Fraulein quite near. His pleasure in anything was always doubled if Mary could share it. That was so nice of Jackie. It made it all the more distressing at that moment to remember that she could give him no present to-morrow, besides the mortification of appearing mean and stingy to the other children. She began to think that it would be almost better to give up going to his birthday party. But what excuse could she make? Then another idea came to her. Was there anything among her own possessions that he would like to have? She ran them over in her mind. Books? Jackie hated books; it was only under strong pressure that he would ever open one, and she could not pretend to be ignorant of this. If only Jackie were a girl! Then she could give him her work-box, which was nearly new, or a doll, or a set of tea-things, but it was no use to think of that. Still pondering the matter she went upstairs into her own little room, and the moment she entered her eye fell on the little clog standing in the middle of the mantel-piece. The very thing! Jackie had often and often admired it, and though everyone would know that she had not spent any money in getting it, still it would be much much better than having nothing at all to give. She took it off the mantel-piece and polished it up with her pocket-handkerchief. Dear little clog, she would be sorry to part with it, and it would leave a great gap among the other ornaments, but still it must go—after all it would not go far, only to the White House. Thinking thus, and rubbing it meanwhile, she noticed for the first time that there were two letters faintly scratched on the wooden sole, “BM.” Who was BM? “Perhaps that’s my name,” she thought; “but I don’t want to know it if it is. I’d rather be Mary Vallance.” And then the dark faces of Perrin and Seraminta came before her and she frowned. How hateful it was to belong to them! She, Mary Vallance, who had always been so proud and delicate in her ways, so vain of her white skin, and so sure, only the other day, that her people were rich and great. That was all over now; even Rice could not call her “Tossy” any more.

It was in a very humble and downcast spirit that she paid a farewell visit to the fowls on Monday afternoon, before starting for the White House. The white bantams had become very tame, and when they pecked the corn out of her hand it was almost too much to bear. It was the last time she should feed them! Angry tears filled her eyes as she thought how they would be stolen that night; she longed to punish the gypsy people, and yet she was powerless in their hands, and must even help them in their wickedness. Poor Mary! She was very unhappy, and surprised that nothing happened to prevent it. It seemed so hard and cruel. Nevertheless, every step she took that afternoon towards the White House was bringing her nearer to help and comfort, though she did not know it.

Jackie came running to meet her in the hall, arrayed in his best suit and best manners.

“Come along into the school-room,” he said, “and see the presents.”

While he was showing them to her, two little heads looked in at the open window from the garden. They were Patrick and Jennie.

“We’ve guessed what your present is, Mary,” they both cried at once.

The twins were such tiresome children! If there was an uncomfortable thing to say, they always said it.

“I’m sure you haven’t,” answered Mary sharply.

“It comes from Dorminster,” said Patrick grinning.

“And it begins with S,” added Jennie.

“It lives in a cage,” chimed in Patrick.

“And eats nuts,” finished Jennie in a squeaky voice of triumph.

Their little eager tormenting faces came just above the window sill: Mary felt inclined to box their ears.

Jackie, who was a polite boy, pretended not to hear. He knew quite well that Mary had brought him a present, and he more than suspected what it was, but this was a most improper way to refer to it.

“Shut up, will you,” he said, and just at that minute Agatha came into the room with some visitors. They had all brought presents, and Mary knew by the way Agatha stared at her that she was wondering where hers was. Perhaps it would be better to give the clog now, though she had intended to wait until she and Jackie were alone. She was drawing it out of her pocket when Fraülein, who had been admiring the various gifts and chattering away in broken English, said suddenly:

“And vair is Mary’s present? It is zumzing ver pretty, ver nice, ver wot you call ‘jollie,’ I suppose. Zumzing better zan all, as she and Jean are so attach.”

This speech changed Mary's intention. She was ashamed to produce the clog now. She drew her hand out of her pocket empty, gave a proud toss of the head, and said with crimson cheeks:

"I haven't brought anything."

There was silence in the room. Every eye was fixed upon her; it was the most cruel moment of her life. Even Jackie flushed hotly, turned away, and began to pull out all the blades of a new pocket-knife someone had given him.

How stupid it was of Fraulein not to let the matter drop, without saying anything more! Instead of this she held up her hands and exclaimed:

"Est-ce possible? Do I onderstand? Nozing? You have not brought nozing for Jean's jour de fête? But perhaps I do not onderstand?"

It was so irritating to see her standing there waiting for an answer, that Mary, never very patient, lost her temper completely.

"No, you don't understand. You *never* do," she said, and rushed out of the room into the garden. She ran quickly when she once got outside, for she felt that she could not get far enough away from the whole party in the school-room; from Fraulein with her stupid remarks, from the visitors who had all stared in surprise, even from Jackie who misunderstood. But it was natural, after all, that he should do that. How could he know she had brought anything for him? And now she had been rude to Fraulein, and made his party uncomfortable. She wondered presently whether they would come after her, and persuade her to go back; it would be unkind if they did not, and yet she would rather be alone just then. There was no one following her, and she thought she would go somewhere out of sight. The nut-walk would be best. So she turned into the kitchen-garden, and soon came to the nut-walk; the trees grew on each side of it with their branches meeting overhead, and in one of the biggest Jackie had contrived to fix a sort of perch made out of an old board. There was a convenient notch a little lower down, where you could place your feet, and it was considered a most comfortable seat, amply large enough for two. Mary was fond of sitting there, and now it seemed a sort of refuge in distress; she swung herself up into it, sat down, and leaned her bare head against the branches at the back. Through the thick leaves she could see a long way—all over the kitchen-garden, and a bit of the lawn near the house, and the brown roof of the stables, where the pigeons sat in a long row. When the children came out she should see them too, she thought, but she need not join them unless she liked. For some time the garden was very quiet, and she began to think that perhaps they meant to play indoors. That was not at all like Jackie, who always liked a game with a good deal of running in it, and besides, he *must* want to know where she was. It was rather dull, after all, to sit there alone, while the others were enjoying themselves. Should she go a little nearer the house? Just as she thought this, she was startled by a distinct cry of "Whoop!" which seemed to come from the walk below. She peeped down through the leaves. There was Jackie crouching in a frog-like attitude behind a tree, with his limbs gathered into the smallest possible compass. The rustling made him look up, and he held out his hand with all the fingers outstretched, and a sudden grimace which meant "Don't speak." They were playing hide-and-seek.

Mary knew better than to spoil the game, but she gave a beseeching glance at him, and beckoned. Jackie shook his head; evidently his feelings were hurt, and he did not mean to be friends just yet. Mary was in despair. How could she manage to speak to him? Perhaps this was her only chance of doing so alone. From her perch she could see the pursuers scouring wildly about in a wrong direction at present, but soon they could not fail to search the nut-walk, and then it would be too late. She took the little clog from her pocket, cautiously descended the tree, and creeping up to Jackie, placed the parcel noiselessly at his side. It was neatly folded in white paper, and had his name written on it in elegant fancy letters. Jackie turned his head and saw the inscription:

"For Jackie, with Mary's love."

His screwed-up mouth widened into a grin, he picked it up, turned it round and round, and at last whispered hoarsely:

"Why didn't you give it before?"

"Because of Fraulein," answered Mary in the same tone; "they're a long way off. Come up into the tree."

Both children were soon tightly wedged into the nut-tree seat, and Jackie at once began to examine his package; watching his face, Mary could see that he was surprised when the clog appeared, though he tried to hide it by another grin.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"It's the only thing I had," explained Mary hurriedly. "I meant to give you *such* a nice thing. I saved my money, and I had enough. You *would* have liked it so—" She stopped and sobbed a little under her breath.

Jackie said nothing. He was evidently wondering why she had not given him this nice thing. The reason was such a dreadful reason, and it was so hard not to be able to explain it all to him, that Mary could not keep back her tears: she bit her lip, and screwed up her face, but it was useless, they would come, so she leant her forehead against Jackie's velveteen shoulder, and cried in good earnest, without saying another word. Jackie was both startled and uncomfortable; the tree quite shook with the violence of Mary's sobs, and her long hair got into his eyes and tickled his face as he sat, screwed up close to her in the narrow perch. He did not mind that, but he was very sorry indeed to see her so unhappy, and could not think how to comfort her. Lately he had seen her cry several times, but never as badly as this. What could be the matter? With some difficulty he tugged out of his pocket a small handkerchief, which by a lucky chance was perfectly clean, and, raising her face a little, dabbed her eyes softly with it.

"Don't," he whispered. "I like the shoe awfully—*much* better than the other thing you were going to give me. Don't

cry."

But Mary cried on.

"You don't surely mind what that owl of a Fraulein said, do you?" continued Jackie.

"N–no," said Mary.

"What are you crying for, then?"

If she could only tell him!

"Is it anything about the Secret?" asked Jackie.

No answer.

"I expect it is," he went on in an excited whisper. "But you ought to tell me, you know, however horrid it is. Is it horrid?"

Mary nodded. There was comfort even in that, though she must not say anything.

Jackie leant eagerly forward. Splash! Fell a great rain-drop on the tip of his nose, and a pelting shower quickly followed. Patter, patter, fell the fast-falling rain on the leaves above the children's heads, sprinkling Mary's yellow hair and Jackie's best velveteen suit.

"We must go in," he said; "all the others have gone. *Won't* you just tell me first?"

"I can't tell you," said Mary mournfully. "And I don't want to go in. I should like to stop here always."

"Well, you couldn't do that, you know," said Jackie gravely. "There's no roof, and you'd get wet through, and hungry too. Come along."

He gave her hand a gentle pull, and prepared to descend. As he cautiously lowered one leg, a woman with a shawl over her head came running down the nut-walk; it was Maggie, the new school-room maid.

"Why, there you are, Master Jackie," she said; "we've been looking everywhere for you. You're to come in out of the rain this minute, please. And have you seen Miss Mary? Marcy me, my dear, where did you get yon?"

She pointed excitedly to the little shoe which Jackie still held.

"Mary gave it me," he answered.

Without further ceremony this strange woman seized the shoe from him, and with trembling hands turned it over and looked closely at the wooden sole. Then she clasped it to her breast, and with a sudden light in her eyes exclaimed:

"I knew it. I felt it was her. Heaven be praised!" and before Jackie had at all regained his breath, she had rushed away down the nut-walk, and was out of sight.

Mary, who had remained unseen, looked down from the tree.

"Isn't she an odd woman?" she said. "Do you think she's mad? Or perhaps those are Yorkshire ways."

"If they are," replied Jackie much ruffled and discomposed, "I don't like Yorkshire ways at all. What business has she to cut away like that with my shoe?"

There was something mysterious altogether about Maggie's behaviour, for when the children reached the house they found that the others were full of excitement and curiosity. She had been seen to rush wildly in from the garden with the little shoe hugged to her breast, and now she had been talking to mother alone for a long while. But soon tea-time came, all manner of games followed, and the school-room maid was forgotten in more interesting matters. Even Mary was able to put away her troubles for a little while, and almost to enjoy herself as she had been used before they began. She was to stop at the White House that night, because it was still wet and stormy, so she resolved not to think of the chickens or Perrin or Seraminta just for that one evening. It would be time enough to be miserable again when morning came.

Everything went on merrily until Jackie's guests were all gone away.

"What shall we do now?" he said, yawning a little, for there was still an hour to be filled up before bed-time. Just as he spoke Mrs Chelwood came into the school-room.

"Children," she said, "would you like me to tell you a story?"

Nothing could possibly be better, and the offer came at the right moment when things were feeling a little flat; the children received it joyfully, and gathered round their mother eagerly, and yet with a certain seriousness, for it was an honour as well as a delight to have a story from her—it happened so seldom.

"This is a story," began Mrs Chelwood when they were all settled, "which I have only just heard myself, and it is a true one. It has something to do with one of Jackie's presents to-day."

"I wonder which?" said Jackie, rubbing his knees.

“You shall hear,” said his mother. “Now, listen.

“Once there was a poor mother who lived far away from here in the north of England, and worked in a factory. She had only one child, which she loved so fondly that it was more than all the world to her, and though she had to work very hard all day, it seemed quite light and easy for the child’s sake.”

“Why didn’t the father work?” asked Agatha.

“The father was dead.”

“Was it a boy or a girl?” asked Patrick.

“And what was its name?” added Jennie.

“It was a little girl,” said Mrs Chelwood, “and she was called Betty.”

“But Betty isn’t a name,” objected Agatha, “it’s short for something.”

“In the north it is used as a name by itself,” replied Mrs Chelwood; “many of the children there are christened Betty, and so was this little girl, though she was very seldom called so.”

“Why?” asked Mary.

“Because the people in the village had given her a nickname. They called her ‘Little Clogs.’”

“What a frightful name to give her!” said Agatha. “What did they do it for?”

“Because she was so proud of a tiny pair of shoes which someone had made for her. They were exactly like that one Mary gave Jackie, and they are properly called ‘clogs.’”

“They’re not a bit like the clogs Mrs Moser, the charwoman, wears,” said Agatha.

“If you interrupt me so often I shall never finish my story,” said her mother. “Well, this poor mother couldn’t take her child with her into the factory, so she used to leave her with a friend close by, and fetch her after her work. But one evening when she went as usual there was no baby to be found—she was gone!”

“Where?” said Mary.

“No one knew. She had been stolen away, or lost, and on the door-step, where she had been playing, there was one little clog left.”

“Who had stolen her?” asked Mary anxiously.

“They heard later that a fair-skinned child had been seen with gypsies on the road to London, but that was not till long afterwards. For years the mother heard no news of her, and wandered up and down the country with the one little clog in her hand seeking her: she felt sure she should know her again, though all this time the child was growing up, and was a baby no longer. But the mother never quite despaired, and she had a feeling that somehow the little clog would help her in her search: on its wooden sole, as well as on that of the lost one, she had scratched two letters —BM.

“So the time went on and on. It was seven long years after she had lost her child that the mother heard of a situation in a place called Wensdale, and went there to live. Now you can tell me the mother’s name.”

“Why, of course, it must be Maggie,” said Jackie, who had been staring fixedly at Mary for the last two minutes with his mouth wide open; “and that’s why she caught hold of my shoe and—”

“Let me finish the story,” said Mrs Chelwood, “and then you shall talk about it as much as you like. In this very place there was a little girl living at the vicarage who had been left in the garden there by gypsies seven years ago. She had a funny little shoe with her when she was found, and had kept it ever since; and now, perhaps, you know who that little girl is.”

“It’s me!” cried Mary, starting up—“it’s my shoe—and I saw the letters—and I don’t belong to the gypsies after all, and—”

“My dear,” said the squire, putting his head in at the door, “I’m too muddy to come in, but you’ll all be glad to hear that we’ve caught those rascals and they’re all in Dorminster jail.”

Mrs Chelwood hurried out of the room, and the children all began to talk at once, to ask questions, to exclaim, to wonder if the gypsies would be hanged, and so on. Presently, however, it was found that Mary had strange and dreadful experiences to relate. A silence fell upon the others until she had finished, and then they looked at her with a sort of awe.

“So our chickens won’t be stolen,” she repeated, “and that dreadful Seraminta can’t take me away.”

“It’s a tremendously puzzling thing though,” said Jackie reflectively; “here you’ve got two mothers, you see, and two names. How will you manage, and where will you live?”

“She’s only got one *real* mother,” cried Patrick.

“And one *real* name,” said Jennie.

“And shall you mind,” continued Jackie seriously, “about not being grand? You’re not Lady anything, you see, but just ‘Betty.’”

“I don’t want to be grand any more,” said Mary earnestly, “and I don’t mind anything else one bit, now I don’t belong to the gypsies.”

“How glad your last mother—no, I mean your first mother—must be,” said Agatha, “that someone made you that Pair of Clogs.”

This was only one of many and many a conversation amongst the children on the same subject during several following weeks. And what a wonderful subject it was! Surely never had such a strange thing happened in a quiet village as this discovery of Mary’s mother, and as to Mary herself, she was now surrounded by an air of romance which was more interesting than any story-book. If she could only have remembered a little about that time she passed with the gypsies! But none of Jackie’s earnest appeals to “try hard” produced any results, for all that part of her life was wiped as clean out of her memory as when one washes marks off a slate with a sponge. It was all gone, and when she looked back it was not Seraminta and Perrin and the donkey-cart she saw, but the kind faces of Mr and Mrs Vallance and her happy, pleasant home at the vicarage. And yet, though her earliest recollections were of these, she did not in truth belong to them; they were not her people, and sunny Wensdale was not her place; Maggie was her mother, and cold, grey Haworth on the hillside was her real home. It was, as Jackie had said, a most puzzling thing, and the important question arose—would Mary have to go away? It was wildly irritating to be shut out from all the talks and conferences which were always going on now between Mary’s two mothers and Mrs Chelwood. The children felt that it was more their concern than anyone’s, but they were told nothing, and the air of the school-room was so full of excitement and curiosity that Fraulein was in despair. The slightest noises in the house during lesson time now seemed to carry deep meaning—perhaps only a bell ringing, or some one shutting the door of mother’s sitting-room, but it was enough to make Jackie put down his slate-pencil and look at Mary with an awestruck and impressive gaze. She would give an answering nod of intelligence, and Patrick and Jennie, not to be left out in the cold, would at once begin to nod rapidly at each other, as much as to say, “We understand too.” It was only Agatha who took her placid way undisturbed. But the day came when, matters being at last arranged, the children were told all about it, and this is what they heard:

Mary was to spend a year with her real mother at Haworth, and a year with Mrs Vallance at Wensdale, alternately, until she was eighteen years old. On her eighteenth birthday she might choose at which of these two homes she would live altogether.

“If you *could* choose,” Jackie had once said to her in jest, “whose daughter would you be?”

And now, in years to come, the choice would really have to be made—the choice between Haworth and Wensdale, hard work and idleness, poverty and riches. Which would it be?

“Of course,” was Jackie’s first remark, “you’ll choose Wensdale, won’t you?”

But so many strange things had happened lately to Mary that she did not just now feel as if anything was “of course.”

Story 2—Chapter 1.

Buzley’s Court.

“It’s a terr’ble lonesome part from what I hear tell. Miles from the rail, and the house don’t stand as it might be in the village street, but by itself in the fields. Mrs Roy—that’s the Reverend Roy’s wife—was very straight with me about it. ‘If you think, Mrs Lane,’ says she, ‘that your daughter’ll find the place too dull and far away I’d rather you’d say so at once, and I’ll look out for another girl. It’s not at all like London,’ says she, ‘and I make no doubt Biddy will feel strange at first.’”

Mrs Lane wielded a large Britannia metal teapot as she spoke, kept an eye on the sympathetic neighbour sitting opposite at the tea-table, and also contrived to cast a side glance at Biddy, who stood at the fire making toast and listening to the conversation. She had heard her mother say much the same thing a great many times since it had been settled that she was to go to Wavebury and take care of Mrs Roy’s baby, and she was now quite used to hearing that it was a “lonesome” place, though she did not know what it meant. At any rate it must be something impossible to get at Number 6 Buzley’s Court, Whitechapel, where she had lived all the thirteen years of her life. Perhaps she might find it pleasant to be “lonesome,” she thought, and yet her mother always added the word “terr’ble” to it, as if it were a thing generally to be disliked.

Meanwhile the conversation went on:

“And she goes to-morrow, then?” said Mrs Jones. “Now I dessay it’s a fairish long journey by rail?”

“We’ve got all directions wrote out clear, by the Reverend Roy hisself,” answered Mrs Lane proudly. “Biddy, reach me that letter out of the chany jug on the shelf.”

Receiving it, she flattened it carefully out on the table with the palm of her hand before the admiring eyes of Mrs Jones, and, pointing to each word, read out slowly and loudly the directions for Biddy’s journey.

“She gets out, yer see, at Canley station. That’s as far as the rail goes. There she’ll be met and druv over to Wavebury—eight miles, Mrs Roy said.”

“Dear!” exclaimed Mrs Jones, as the letter was folded up again, “what a outlandish place!”

“We’ve worked hard, Biddy and me,” continued Mrs Lane with a glance of pride at her daughter and a little sigh, “to get all her things nice and ready. Two new dark laylock prints I’ve got her.”

“With a spot?” inquired Mrs Jones full of interest.

“No, with a sprig—I always think there’s an air about a laylock print with a sprig. It looks respectable and like service. I don’t hold with them new-patterned bright cottons. Once in the wash-tub, and where are they afterwards? Poor ragged-out things not fit to wear. I remember I had laylock prints when I first went to service as a gal, and there’s bits of them very gowns in the patch-work quilt yonder.”

“Ah!” said Mrs Jones admiringly. Then looking at Biddy’s capable little square figure she added, “You’ll miss her at first a goodish bit at home.”

“If it wasn’t that baby’s out of hand now and runnin’ about I couldn’t let her go, not if it was ever so,” replied Mrs Lane emphatically. “But I shall rub along somehow, and seven pounds a year’s a consideration. Yes, she’s a handy gal, Biddy is, with children. She had ought t’know summat about ’em, for she’s helped to bring six of ’em up. There was Stevie—a deal of trouble we had with him. Always weakly, and cut his teeth in his legs. Never out of arms, that child wasn’t, till he was pretty nigh two year old. I never should a’ reared him if it hadn’t been for Biddy. That I own.”

On the subject of Stevie’s sufferings Mrs Lane had always a great deal to say, and when she paused, less from lack of matter than want of breath, Mrs Jones took up the tale and added experiences of a like nature. Biddy therefore heard no further reference to herself and her prospects, and pursued her own thoughts undisturbed. And she had a great deal to think of, for to-morrow she was going into the world! She would say good-bye to Buzley’s Court and to all the things and people in it she had known and lived with, and turn her face to meet new things and new people. Nothing would be familiar to her in that strange world, not even tea-cups with blue rims like these she was washing up for the last time. Everything new, down to the two lilac prints, made longer than ever before, lying at the bottom of the new black box. It was wonderful to think of, and very confusing to the mind. There would even be a new baby to look after. But when Biddy reached this point she smiled securely, for she had no fears about the baby, though Mrs Roy had looked so doubtfully at her and said that she was small. Small! What had that to do with it? Biddy felt in herself a large capacity for handling babies. Had she not brought Stevie through teething attended with alarming complications? She was not likely to think much of Mrs Roy’s baby after that.

And indeed Biddy was one of those people who seem formed by nature in body and mind on purpose to be nurses. The babies were comfortable in her strong capable arms, and their little woes and troubles were quieted and soothed by her patient placid temper. Then, too, she had, as her mother had said, a great deal of experience, for though she was only thirteen years old now, she had always, ever since she could remember anything, had a baby on her mind. A baby had always been the chief circumstance in her life from the time when she was too small to do anything but keep watch by its cradle, to that when she learnt her lessons for school with a baby in her arms. In her play-hours, when the children of Buzley’s Court gathered to enjoy themselves after their own manner in the summer evenings, Biddy looked on from the door-step—with the baby. By the time baby number one was beginning to stagger about, and seize upon knives and scissors and other dangerous playthings, baby number two—pink and incapable—was ready for Biddy’s closest attention. Life, therefore, without a baby on hand would have seemed to her unnatural and even impossible; and the baby at Wavebury, instead of something to be dreaded, was the only idea her mind rested on with the confidence of long familiarity.

“For babies,” she thought, “are pretty much alike. There’s fat ones and there’s thin ones. The fat ones don’t cry so much, and the thin ones do, and that’s about the only way they differ.”

That night was a very short one to Biddy, and it seemed to her that she was still asleep and dreaming as she and her mother hurried along the cold grey streets in the early morning. Even when they reached the station, much too soon for the train, she could hardly take in the sense of all her mother was repeating to her so earnestly, though she heard the words.

Not to lean against the door, not to lose her ticket, not to forget her box, or the name of the station she was going to. Finally, to be a good gal and mind her work, and remember to say her prayers, and to give Mrs Lane’s dooty to her mistress. All of which she promised, and presently found herself seated in a third-class carriage clasping in one hand her cotton umbrella, and in the other a small shiny black bag which Mrs Lane called a “ridicule.” Then, when she saw her mother standing alone on the platform, she began to wake up and to feel that it was no dream or anything like one. She was really setting forth by herself for a “lonesome” place where there would be no mother. Mother had scolded sometimes, and said sharp things on washing days, but she was fond of Biddy, and proud of her too, and Biddy knew it; the tears rose to her eyes as the train moved away, and as long as she could she waved the “ridicule” in answer to mother’s energetic farewells with her umbrella. But soon, the train quickening its pace, the familiar figure was lost to sight—checked shawl, best black bonnet, gingham umbrella, all vanished, and Biddy was alone, whirling along rapidly towards strange places and people.

Then, for one minute, she felt she must “give way,” but not having been used to such a luxury in Buzley’s Court, where there was never a moment to spare, she thought better of it, winked back the tears, and sat very upright.

Soon there were plenty of surprising things to be seen out of the window, and first the exceeding greenness of the landscape struck her with astonishment, although it was November and the trees were bare. Then, as she got further into the country, she wondered to see so few houses. “Where does the folks bide?” she said to herself. It seemed an empty sort of place, with nothing going on, and Mrs Roy had been quite right when she had said, “The country’s not at all like London.” Biddy’s round brown eyes were still staring out of the window with a fixed expression of surprise when the short winter day began to close in, and a misty gloom spread over the fields and hills as they seemed to

chase each other hurriedly past. But though she still tried to look out, and sat stiffly upright in her corner, her head nodded forward now and then, and the whirr and rattle of the train sounded with a sort of sing-song in her weary ears. She struggled to keep awake, but her eyelids seemed pressed down by some determined hand, and at last she gave it up and let them remain closed. After that she was conscious of nothing till she heard a shout of “Canley station!” quite near her, and she jumped up with a start and saw a porter holding the carriage door open; the light of his lantern shone on the wet pavement, but everywhere else it was quite dark and raining fast.

“Oh, please,” said Biddy, “I’m to get out; and is there anyone here from Wavebury?”

She had repeated this sentence so often to herself that it came out now without the least effort.

“All right!” said the porter good-naturedly, “you come alonger me;” and he helped Biddy out and opened her umbrella for her, and asked if she had any luggage. Then diving into the van he reappeared with the precious black box on his shoulder, and led the way along the dripping platform.

“There’s a gen’leman waiting for yer,” he said.

Outside the little station there was a flickering gas-lamp, and by its light Biddy saw a farmer’s spring-cart standing in the road with a small rough pony harnessed to it; in it there sat a young man very much muffled up in a number of cloaks—he wore a wide-awake pulled well down over his face, and was smoking a pipe. “Can it be the Reverend Roy?” thought Biddy.

But she had not time to wonder long, for he turned quickly towards her.

“Are you the little girl for Truslow Manor?” he asked; and then continued, speaking so rapidly that there was no answer needed:

“All right—here you are—give me your hand. Rather a high step. Take care. Capital!” as Biddy struggled up with the porter’s help, and arrived, umbrella and all, flat at the driver’s feet in the bottom of the cart.

“Now, then,” he went on, having picked her up and placed her on the narrow seat at his side, “put this on, and this, and this.”

He plunged into the back of the cart and produced numerous shawls and wraps, which he threw upon the breathless Biddy, talking all the while.

“You’ll find it fresh up on the downs. Where’s your box? In at the back? All right! Then off we go!”

Biddy was quite confused and “put about” by this impetuous behaviour, and she had just made up her mind that this was *not* the Reverend Roy, when her ideas were upset by the porter, who called out, “Good-night, Mr Roy!” as they drove away. Parsons in the country were, then, different from those in London, like everything else. It was surprising to find them so “short and free in their ways.”

To her relief he did not speak to her again, but puffed away at his pipe in silence while they crawled slowly up a long hill leading out of the town. But this quiet pace did not last, for, the road becoming level, the pony took to a kind of amble which seemed its natural pace, and was soon urged from that into a gallop by its driver. Rattle, rattle, bump! Went the little cart over the rough road; and Biddy, feeling that she must otherwise be tossed out like a nine-pin, clung desperately to her new master’s many wrappings. The Reverend Roy drove very wild, she thought, and how dark it was! She could just dimly see on either side of her, as they bounded along, wide open country stretching far away in the distance; great gently swelling downs were lying there in the mysterious darkness, and all the winds of heaven seemed to have met above them to fight together. How it blew! And yet it managed to rain too at the same time. The wind battled with Biddy’s umbrella, and tugged madly at her bonnet strings, and buffeted Mr Roy’s wide-awake, and screamed exultingly as it blew out his pipe!

“Fresh up here, isn’t it?” he remarked as he took it out of his mouth.

Fresh! Biddy had never felt so cold in her life, and could not have thought there had been so much fresh air in the whole world put together.

On they went, swinging up and down until her brain reeled; on, on, through the rain and whistling wind, over the lonely downs, while she strained her eyes in vain for sight or sound of a living creature. If this was what they meant by a “lonesome” place it was “terr’ble” indeed.

Hours seemed to pass in this way, and then the pony slackened its pace a little. Biddy peered from under the edge of the umbrella and could now make out that they were in a sort of lane, for instead of open country there was a hedge on each side of the road. They must be near Wavebury now, she thought, though she could see no houses or lights or people; her fingers were cramped and cold, and she could not cling on much longer either to her umbrella or Mr Roy’s cloak. But suddenly the pony was checked to a walk, the cart ceased to jump up and down so wildly, and she was able to relax her hold, with a deep sigh of relief.

“It’s an awkward bit just here,” said Mr Roy, “for they’ve been felling a tree, and left pieces of it lying about in the road.”

In front of them was a white gate which stood open and led into what looked like a farmyard, for there were sheds and outbuildings round it and straw scattered about. Through this they drove, jolting over a good many rough obstacles and then through another gate and stopped. They had arrived at last, and this was Truslow Manor. All Biddy could see, however, was a deep stone porch, with a seat on each side of it like the entrance to a church, and then a massive oak door, with heavy hinges and a great brass knocker. There was no light anywhere; but presently,

as Biddy, stiff with cold, was preparing to unwind her many wrappings, the door swung slowly back, and a little figure appeared with a lamp in its hand. By its faint glimmer she recognised her new mistress, Mrs Roy, whom she had already seen in London.

“Oh, Richard,” said a plaintive voice, “how glad I am you’re back! Is the girl there?”

“Here we are,” answered Mr Roy cheerfully, as he helped Biddy to climb out of the cart.

“It’s an awful night. How’s the baby?”

“I don’t think she’s *worse*, but the spots are still there, and Mr Smith hasn’t been. Come in, Biddy.”

Following her mistress Biddy found herself in a narrow stone passage, and caught through an open door to the left a glimpse of a panelled room lighted up by a great glowing wood fire. It looked splendidly comfortable after the cold dreariness outside. Mrs Roy opened another door at the end of the passage.

“Mrs Shivers,” she said to some invisible person within, “here’s Biddy Lane. Please, give her some tea, and let her get warm, and then send her to me in the drawing-room.”

The door closed on Biddy, and Mrs Roy returned to the panelled room, where her husband, having emerged from his wet wrappings, was spreading his hands over the blaze and shivering.

“Well, Richard,” she said earnestly, “what do you think of her?”

“Of whom?” asked Richard.

“Why, of the girl.”

“Well, I think, judging by myself, she must be cold and hungry.”

“She’s *very* small,” continued Mrs Roy, sitting down in a low chair and glancing thoughtfully at the cradle which stood near it—“smaller than I thought.”

“Who? The baby?”

“No. Of course, I mean the girl. I wish you wouldn’t joke, Richard, when you know how anxious I am.”

“I didn’t mean to, really,” said Mr Roy penitently, as his wife looked up at him with distressed blue eyes. “Only, as you always call the baby ‘She,’ how was I to know? As to being *small*, you know—well, the last girl was *big* enough, I’m sure.”

“And stupid enough,” added Mrs Roy sadly. “I couldn’t have kept her, even if she hadn’t insisted on going away.”

“I suppose you’ve cautioned Mrs Shivers not to gossip to this girl?” said Mr Roy in lowered tones.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” answered his wife, casting a nervous glance round the room. “She won’t hear anything about *that*. And I do hope, if she’s handy with the baby, that she’ll stay. It *would* be such a comfort. Only I wish she wasn’t so small.”

At this moment the door opened, and, after some hoarsely encouraging whispers from Mrs Shivers, who remained unseen, the small form of Biddy herself appeared. She had put on a white apron and a large cap; there was a great deal of cap and apron and very little of Biddy, and being nervous, she stood with her arms hanging forward in rather a helpless way which did not impress Mrs Roy favourably. Fortunately for Biddy, however, the baby, wakened just then by the noise of the door, began to cry, and its mother stooped over the cradle and lifted the child in her arms. Biddy’s shyness vanished. The cry of a baby was to her as the sound of trumpets is to a war-horse. She advanced eagerly and stood close to her mistress.

“The baby’s not at all well to-night,” said Mrs Roy appealingly. “She’s covered with tiny red spots, and *so* feverish. I’m expecting the doctor every minute.”

Biddy came still nearer, and examined the small face attentively.

“Lor’! Mum,” she exclaimed triumphantly, “you’ve no call to mind about that. That’s only thrush, that is. Three of ourn had it, and did beautiful. She’s bound to be a bit fretful, but she won’t come to no harm, so long as you keep her warm.”

The confidence with which Biddy spoke, and the manner in which she shortly afterwards took the baby in her arms, and soothed it to sleep with a proper rocking movement of one foot, comforted Mrs Roy immensely. And when the doctor came he confirmed Biddy’s opinion. It *was* thrush. After that Mrs Roy went to bed happier in her mind than she had been for weeks. Though small, her new nurse-maid would evidently prove a support and a treasure; the only thing to be questioned now was—would she stay?

Story 2—Chapter 2.

Truslow Manor.

Truslow Manor, where the curate and his wife lived, and Biddy had come to take care of the baby, had belonged in

days gone by to the ancient family of Truslow.

There were no Truslows in Wavebury now, but traces of them were still left there, for in the church there was not only an antiquely carved pew called the “Truslow Pew,” but also a tablet in the chancel bearing the date 1593, which set forth the virtues of a certain John Truslow in the following terms:—

> “The body of John Truslow here doth rest,
> Who, dying, did his soule to Heaven bequest.
> The race he lived here on earth was threescore years and seven,
> Deceased in Aprill, ’93, and then was prest to Heaven.
> His faith in Christ most steadfastly was set,
> In ’sured Hope to satisfy His debt.
> A lively Theme to take example by,
> Condemning Deth in Hope a Saint to dye.”

Notwithstanding this the people of Wavebury did not hold the memory of the Truslows in much veneration; they had been “a bad lot,” it was rumoured, and the old manor-house, which still bore their name, was looked on with suspicion as a place which had possibly witnessed many a deed of darkness. But the days both of its wickedness and grandeur were now over, and it stood in the fields with a forlorn and deserted air, although its mullioned windows and panelled rooms and tall chimneys gave it a look of decayed dignity. One wing of it, however, had completely disappeared; at the back, which was near the road, it was hemmed in by mean sheds and outbuildings, and the front was approached, not by a stately avenue, but by a little wicket gate leading through a field without a footpath. Small and needy farmers had been its only tenants for years, but when Mr and Mrs Roy came to Wavebury they took a fancy to the old house, and arranged to hire five rooms in it. Terms being satisfactorily settled with Mr Shivers, their landlord, who with his wife continued to occupy the other part of the house, they took up their abode with much comfort and contentment, and, when Biddy arrived, had been living there for nearly two years. They were fond of Truslow Manor, and found only one little drawback to it, which, they were accustomed to say to each other, was hardly worth mentioning; for the present, therefore, we will not mention it either.

Biddy looked out of her window with some curiosity the morning after her arrival; she wondered what she should see by daylight. Not much, but everything was in startling contrast to Buzley’s Court. A field, a row of tall elms growing at the end of it, which cut off any further view; a flock of geese, a flock of turkeys, a little black donkey, a foal, and a rough pony—that was all. She afterwards discovered that there was a gate at the end of the field, and that a little sluggish river, called the Kennet, flowed along under the row of elms; a narrow footway crossed this, and led directly through the churchyard into the village, or if you liked to turn to the left, it brought you at last into the high-road at the back of Truslow Manor. In dark evenings this way into the village was not without its perils, for an unwary traveller might easily step over the edge of the path as he crossed the river and find himself in its muddy bed.

Biddy soon knew this way to church very well; and amongst the many strange customs at Wavebury, she thought it curious that there should be two services every day, though the congregation was seldom more than two or three in number.

“Whenever you like to go to church, Biddy,” said her mistress, “I will always take the baby.”

So Biddy went sometimes, though she never ceased to wonder why the prayers should be read when there was scarcely anyone to listen to them. Once, indeed, there were only herself and Mr Roy in the church, and as they walked home together after the service she felt obliged to apologise.

“Please, sir,” she said, hurriedly drooping one knee as she walked, “I’m sorry you had to read all them long prayers jest for me.”

Whereupon Mr Roy tried to make her understand why he should still have read them, whether she had been there or not. Biddy did not feel very clear about it at the end of the explanation, though she was conscious that he “talked very kind,” and she fell back on the thought that after all it was the country, and quite different from London.

But this difference was “borne in upon her” most strongly of all when she went for the first time to the downs which closely surrounded Wavebury. Passing up the long straggling village with its thatched cottages, she came suddenly on them stretching away in the distance, pathless, and, as far as she could see, endless. Then she stood bewildered. Such lots of space everywhere; so much sky over her head; such a great green carpet under her feet, spread over the gentle rising and falling of the hills. All green, except for the scattered flocks of sheep, and the cairns of grey stones, and the groups of stunted thorn trees, bent and twisted and worried by the wind into a thousand odd shapes.

Looking back towards the village, where part of the land had been cultivated, she could see the oxen ploughing, their horned heads clearly outlined against the sky, and—stranger sight still—long rows of women in flapping sun-bonnets bending patiently to their labour in the fields. Beyond these, a little collection of thatched roofs, and grey church, and yellow stacks, made up the village of Wavebury; after that, downs again as far as the eye could reach.

It was, indeed, a “lonesome” place, and there was something “terr’ble” in its solitude compared to the comfortable closeness and crowding chimneys of Buzley’s Court; but, fortunately for Biddy, her busy life at Truslow Manor did not leave much leisure for dwelling upon this. As time went on she and her mistress, drawn together by one common interest, became really attached to each other; the baby’s crumpled red hand, which could just hold one of Biddy’s fingers, kept her a willing prisoner in its feeble yet mighty grasp, and all went on well. For Mrs Roy was not disappointed in her hope of finding her little nurse a support and comfort, and valued her opinion highly with regard to the baby’s ailments; true, it was sometimes rather irksome and annoying to hear so often that “our” Johnnie, or “Julia,” or “Stevie” had cut their teeth and felt their legs exactly in the same way as dear little Dulcie. Mrs Roy naturally felt it impossible that there should be another baby the least like Dulcie; but she was wise enough to

conceal this, and to allow Biddy's confidences about Buzley's Court and the Lane family to flow on unchecked.

So, despite the strangeness of many things in Wavebury, and their contrast to all she had been used to, Biddy was happy, and soon began to feel at home there; but she did not cease to wonder at some country customs, and amongst them the fact which specially struck her, that nearly all the women worked in the fields as well as the men. When in her errands to and from the village she passed these tramping along the roads, she stared at them with astonishment that did not lessen with time. Everything about them was so curious. Their deeply lined faces were red with wind and weather and old before their time—made harsher, too, than nature intended, because all the hair was tucked away under the cotton sun-bonnet, which were the most feminine-looking of their garments, the rest of which gave a general effect of coarse sacking ending in heavy boots.

Biddy singled out one of these women as an object of almost fearful interest, and got into a way of watching for her as she passed Truslow Manor every morning to her work. She was tall and very powerfully built, her features were coarse and swollen, and there was something repelling and yet fascinating to Biddy in her cunning, shifty glance. The way in which she strode along the road, too, swinging a rake, or hoe, or pitchfork in her hand, gave an impression of reckless strength which made the little nurse-girl shudder, and yet she felt unable to remove her gaze as long as the woman was in sight.

One day as Biddy was hastening home from an errand in the village she saw this well-known figure coming towards her with its usual rolling movement, and to her surprise it came to a stand in front of her, and, leaning on the handle of its pitchfork, surveyed her with a sort of leer. Biddy stopped too, and they looked at each for a minute in silence. Then the woman spoke:

"You be the new gal yonder?" she said with a jerk of her head.

"I'm Mrs Roy's nurse," replied Biddy, trembling a little, yet with some dignity.

The woman chuckled hoarsely.

"You don't sleep much at nights, I reckon?" she continued.

"Yes, thank you," said Biddy, who had been taught to be always polite; "the baby doesn't cry scarcely any."

For all answer the woman gave a loud stupid laugh and strode away, leaving Biddy standing in the road much discomfited. She stared after her for a moment and then hurried back to Truslow Manor, and told her mistress of the meeting.

"Oh!" said Mrs Roy quickly, "that was only poor Crazy Sall. She's half silly, and she has dreadful fits of drinking, besides. You mustn't mind anything she said to you, and you must promise never to speak to her again, or take any notice of her at all."

"I won't, mum," said Biddy; and indeed she did not feel anxious for Crazy Sall's further acquaintance, though the failing mentioned by her mistress did not surprise or shock her, she knew too many people in the neighbourhood of Buzley's Court who were troubled in the same way.

"And," continued Mrs Roy, looking earnestly at Biddy, "I want you to promise me another thing, and that is, *never* to stop and listen to any gossip when I send you into the village."

Biddy promised that too; but it was not quite so easy to keep this promise as the first, for she was a sociable character, and in London had become quite used to enjoying fragments of chat on door-steps and elsewhere. When, therefore, in the baker's shop at Wavebury, which was also the post-office, she sometimes found a busy knot of talkers, it was natural to her to stand open-mouthed and drink in the conversation. Really anxious to obey her mistress, she struggled hard with this bad habit, but it was so strong within her that she was not always successful, and lately she had caught a chance word now and then which was at once dreadful and attractive—the word "ghost." Not only several times at the post-office, where the speakers had nudged each other and become suddenly silent when she appeared, but once she was certain she had heard Mrs Shivers say it to Mrs Roy. They were talking earnestly together, and when Biddy threw open the door and bore in a trayful of clattering cups and saucers they stopped, but not before she had plainly caught that one terrible word. Her curiosity now reached an almost unbearable pitch, but it was soon to be further enlightened.

One bright morning, when she had been at Wavebury for nearly two months, she was walking up and down near the house with the baby in her arms, waiting for Mrs Roy, who had carefully warned her meanwhile not to go out of the sunshine or to stand still, and to keep within sight of the windows. Her walk, therefore, was rather a limited one; it lay backwards and forwards between the farmyard gate and the kitchen door.

On her way she passed and repassed an open cart-shed where Mr Roy, whistling cheerily, was engaged in his favourite pursuit of carpentering. He had cast aside his black coat, and for his better convenience wore a short blue-flannel boating-jacket; about his feet the yellow-white shavings curled in larger and larger heaps every minute, as he bent over his carpenter's bench in the all-absorbing enjoyment of measuring, smoothing, and planing. The shed was also occupied by two goats and a family of cocks and hens, some turkeys were perched on the empty wagon at the farther end, and an inquisitive pig looked in now and then in a friendly manner. These all eyed their human

BIDDY OVERHEARS THE TALK ABOUT THE GHOST.

companion thoughtfully from time to time, but without any alarm, for they had now discovered that both he and his various edged tools were perfectly harmless.

Up and down went Biddy in the sunshine, keeping up a low murmur of conversation with the baby, casting a glance at her busy master, and catching a scrap now and then of a gossip going on at the kitchen door between Mrs Shivers and Mr Peter Sweet, landlord of the village inn.

She did not take much heed of this until suddenly this sentence, uttered in the loud tones of Mr Sweet, sounded clearly in her ear: “And so the Truslow ghost’s been, seen again!” Biddy started; she could not help quickening her steps, so that she soon got back again to the kitchen door, where Mr Sweet’s broad back was turned towards her. She could not see Mrs Shivers, but she knew it was her voice that said:

“Jest as the clock strikes ten—crosses the Kennet at the end of the field.”

Biddy felt rooted to the spot. She must hear more about it, and she glanced round to see if Mr Roy noticed where she was standing. No. His earnest face and pursed-up mouth looked more engrossed than ever. Neither of the speakers could see her, for between her and them there was a small piece of thick yew hedge. So, secure in her wrong-doing, Biddy lent an attentive ear and forgot her duty, the baby, and everything else. She could hear every word.

“It’s my belief,” said Mrs Shivers, “and it’s what I’ve always held to, that it’s one of them old Truslows, as was a wicked lot, come out of his grave to see the place where he committed a crime. It’s likely he murdered some one in this very house, and that makes him oneasy. Some gambling quarrel, I make no doubt it was, for they say you may see a party of men playing cards in the drawing-room here any night after twelve. It’s only naturable to think it.”

“Well,” said Mr Peter Sweet reflectively, “I don’t say as you mayn’t be right, for it do seem to come straight out of the churchyard as it were. But what bothers me is, why it should go on all-fours. I don’t suppose them old Truslows were in the ’abit of doing that in their lifetime. And then there’s summat white on its head that flaps like a couple o’ large ears. What would that be?”

“That’s hid from us,” answered Mrs Shivers solemnly, “by the merciful workings of Providence.”

“It’s never seen after it crosses the Kennet?” resumed Mr Sweet.

“No one ever *stops* to see it,” replied Mrs Shivers; “everyone’s too scared. Why,” (in a lowered voice), “the last gal as was here she *met* it as she was going with a message to the rectory. She jest turned and rushed back to the house, and come into the kitchen in vi’lent ’isterricks.”

“Very natural,” said Mr Sweet approvingly. “Now, what does the curate think on it?”

“Oh, he jest laughs,” said Mrs Shivers rather contemptuously. “You know his way. But Mrs Roy, I can see she’s timid about it, though she won’t hear it talked on. She’s afraid this new gal will get frightened away like the other.”

At this moment, when Biddy’s ears were strained to the utmost, and her eyes had grown large and round with horror, her mistress’s voice calling her from the other side of the house roused her with a guilty shock. She recovered herself as well as she could and went hurriedly away, but the knowledge which she took with her destroyed her peace of mind for many a day. Things hitherto familiar and friendly now became full of terror, and the comfort of her life was gone. Even her own shadow, cast by the flickering fire and dancing in grotesque shape on the ceiling, made her shudder; and when at night she peered timidly out of her lattice, and saw the row of elms standing dark against the sky at the end of the field, she shook with fear. Turning hastily from this to the shelter of the bed-clothes she would find no refuge, but a place full of restless fancies; for now, instead of dropping at once into a dreamless slumber, she remained broad awake and seemed to hear fragments of the ghost story over and over again. The “old Truslow,” the

flapping ears, the terrible adventure of the last nurse-girl chased each other through her poor little worried mind and would not be forgotten. Crazy Sall's words came back to her, and she heard her repeat mockingly: "You don't sleep much at nights, I reckon?"

Biddy became very miserable, for even sunshine and the baby in her arms were powerless to drive away those dark fancies entirely, though they then became easier to bear. It was not only the consciousness of knowing about the ghost, but to know it *alone* and not to talk of it to anyone! That was doubly dreadful. Sometimes she thought she must tell her mistress or Mrs Shivers, but then she remembered she would also have to confess her disobedience. She could not do that, for Mrs Roy would never trust her again, and perhaps send her away. What would mother say then? A good place and seven pounds a year lost! It was impossible to risk it.

So she kept silence, but it was a heavy burden to bear, and under its weight she became downcast and gloomy, a different Biddy from the briskly alert one of two months ago. The baby was the first to notice this. She missed her nurse's cheerful voice, and looking up in her face found there a settled sadness instead of the usual ready smile. This she resented in her own fashion, and cried dismally, wrinkling up her tiny features in disgust, and when this had happened once or twice Mrs Roy's attention was also drawn to the change.

"Are you quite well and happy, Biddy?" she asked. "You don't look so bright as you used to."

Biddy twisted up the corners of her apron and hung her head on one side, but made no answer.

"*Are* you quite happy, Biddy?" persisted her mistress.

Biddy would have given worlds to say, "I'm terr'ble afraid of the ghost," but her tongue refused to utter the words, and after waiting a moment Mrs Roy turned away. But that night she said to her husband in mournful emphatic tones:

"Richard, I *hope* it's only my nervousness, but I *do* believe that somehow or other Biddy has heard something about *that*."

No one was quite happy and comfortable at Truslow Manor just now, for latterly the baby had been ailing; she had evidently caught a chill and was feverish and fretful. "How could Dulcie have taken cold?" Mrs Roy wondered many times in the day, while the conscience-stricken Biddy stood speechless, and thought of that conversation at the kitchen door. Mr Roy was made uneasy too by his wife's anxiety, and also felt deeply incapable of making any suggestion about the origin or treatment of Dulcie's illness; everything seemed a little ruffled and disturbed in its usual even flow.

"You know I have to take the service over at Cherril to-night," said Mr Roy to his wife one morning. "They've asked me to dine there afterwards. You won't mind my leaving you? I shall get back by ten."

"Oh, no!" replied Mrs Roy readily, though in truth she was not fond of spending the evening at Truslow Manor alone. "I shall have Biddy down to sit with me; and I do think baby seems better to-day. It's a long walk for you, though, Richard, and there's no moon."

"Oh, I'll take a lantern!" said the curate, and accordingly he started off that afternoon on his six-miles walk thus provided.

Biddy and her mistress spent the evening together, talking softly over their needlework, so as not to disturb Dulcie's sleep in the cradle near. The glowing fire, the cheerful room, and Mrs Roy's kind chat were almost sufficient to drive away Biddy's usual terrors; at any rate she forgot them for a time, and was peacefully happy. But this did not last long. Suddenly the baby's breathing became hoarse and difficult, and Mrs Roy, kneeling at the side of the cradle, looked up in alarm at her nurse.

"Oh, Biddy," she cried, "what is the matter with her? See how she struggles for breath!"

"Lift her up, mum," suggested Biddy, "perhaps she'll be more easy-like."

But Dulcie was not easy-like. On the contrary, her tiny face grew almost purple, she gasped, clenched her fists, and seemed on the point of choking.

"Biddy," said Mrs Roy calmly, but with despair written on every feature, "I believe it's croup!"

Biddy stood speechless. Here was a case outside her experience; she could offer no suggestion—not one of the Lane babies had ever had croup.

"Get hot water," said Mrs Roy, "and then run as fast as you can for the doctor. Take a lantern. Run, Biddy, run—" for the girl stood motionless—"every minute is of consequence."

But Biddy did not stir; she only gave one miserable despairing glance at the clock. Three minutes to ten! *It* would be crossing the Kennet just as she got there.

"Biddy, Biddy," cried her mistress, "why don't you go?"

Poor Biddy! She looked at Dulcie struggling for breath in her mother's arms, and fighting the air with her helpless little hands. It was pitiful, but she could not move; she only gazed horror-stricken, and as if turned into stone.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs Roy in tones of anguish, "why doesn't Richard come home? What *shall* I do?"

Biddy's heart was touched; she clasped her hands and exclaimed, almost unconsciously:

"Oh, mum, it's the ghost! I'm dreadful feared of meeting it!"

The secret was out now, but Mrs Roy scarcely noticed it at all. If the room had been thronged with ghosts she would not have minded them just then—her whole heart was full of Dulcie.

"Send Mrs Shivers then," she said, "and bring the hot water at once."

Recovering the use of her limbs Biddy quickly had a hot bath ready; but, alas! She came back from the kitchen with the news that Mr and Mrs Shivers were both out, and had taken the lantern.

"Then, Biddy," said her mistress looking up as she knelt by the bath, where the baby was now breathing more quietly, "there is only you. I can't leave her, and if this attack comes on again I don't know what to do. Most likely you'll meet Mr Roy long before you get to the village. Send him on if you do, and come back yourself. Only go, for my sake!"

Her beseeching eyes were full of eloquence, but still Biddy hesitated.

"Nothing can hurt you," continued Mrs Roy in a pleading voice; "and I shall bless you all my life long. Oh, Biddy, you wouldn't let Dulcie die!"

To go and meet the ghost, or to let Dulcie die—they were equally dreadful to Biddy. As she thought of the first, icy-cold water seemed to be trickling slowly down her back; and as she thought of the second, a great aching ball came into her throat and her eyes filled with tears.

"I'll go, mum," she gasped out. "Don't you lose heart."

Mrs Roy gave a trembling sigh of relief as Biddy's sturdy form moved towards the door.

"Put on my thick grey shawl hanging in the passage," she said; "and oh, Biddy, make him understand that he must come as quickly as ever he can."

Biddy threw the heavy shawl over her head and shoulders, and stepped out through the dark porch into the darker field. Mrs Roy had said there was no moon that night, but there was—a small pale one, just enough to make everything look dimly awful. The wind was high, rattling the bare branches of the trees, and chasing the clouds hurriedly along; it blew coldly in Biddy's face as she left the warm shelter of the house. She could see the track across the field and the white gate at the end of it, and the row of dark elms tossing their arms wildly. Towards these she set her face, and, bending down her head, ran steadily on. "Go back, go back!" the wind seemed to shout as it pressed against her with its strong outspread hands; "Go on, Biddy, for my sake!" whispered Mrs Roy's pleading voice behind her. And these two sounds were so distinct that in the middle of the field she stopped uncertainly. But the little voice from Truslow Manor and the thought of Dulcie's danger were stronger than the wind, and drove her on again till she stood with trembling knees close to the river, her hand touching the latch of the gate. What, oh! What was that, looming towards her, shapeless and awful, across the bridge! A cow, perhaps?—it was too low; a dog?—it was too large. On it came, slowly, nearer and nearer, and Biddy could see that where its head should have been there was something that napped about loosely; the rest of it was a formless, moving piece of darkness. Biddy could not stir—she clung in an agony to the gate-post and stared without making a sound. To run away would be impossible, even if her limbs had not been useless from terror: it would be far worse to feel this creature at her back than to face it. So she stood for a minute, which seemed a lifetime, and then, recovering her voice, uttered a shrill, despairing scream. At the sound the thing stopped, reared itself, as it were, on its hind-legs, and swayed about uncertainly in front of her. Still clinging to the gate, Biddy thought of her mother and began to say her evening prayers; her knees were giving way, and she felt she must soon sink upon the ground.

Then—oh, blessed moment!—there suddenly sounded out of the darkness, at the back of the awful figure, a cheerful human voice and a firm human footstep. Mr Roy's lantern flashed in the surrounding gloom.

"What's the matter? Who's this?" he said in comfortable human accents, and held the light full in the ghost's face. What did Biddy see? Not the spectral features of any strange old Truslow, but the earthly and familiar ones of—poor Crazy Sall!

Dulcie did not die. When, a little later, the curate came hastening back with the doctor, she was quite well and sleeping calmly in her cradle. It had not been croup, the doctor said, and Mrs Roy had alarmed herself without cause. Nevertheless Biddy had earned her mistress's undying gratitude by her conduct that evening, and she was quite as much praised and thanked as if she really had saved the baby's life.

"For it *was so* brave of her, you know, Richard, because she could not tell then that it was only poor Crazy Sall."

Only poor Crazy Sall, returning half-tipsy from the public-house!

Cunning enough to know that in this condition she could not safely trust her unsteady, reeling steps over the narrow bridge, it had occurred to her on one occasion to crawl on her hands and knees. This once done, it was often repeated, and, as surely as the night was dark and she had freely indulged at the village inn, the Truslow ghost might be seen crossing the Kennet at ten o'clock. Each fresh beholder adding some gruesome detail to the dimly-seen form in its flapping sun-bonnet, the ghost bit by bit took shape, and at last was fully created. Who can tell how many years longer it might have lived but for Biddy's scream and her master's flashing lantern?

The whole village felt the discovery to be mortifying; and after everyone had said that he, for one, had never given credit to the ghost, the subject was discreetly dropped. There was silence even at the inn, where for years it had

been a fruitful source of much conversation and many solemn opinions.

Mr Sweet did indeed refer to it once, for meeting Mrs Shivers he ventured to say derisively: “You and yer old Truslows, indeed!” But she was immediately ready with such a pointed and personal reply about “a couple of long ears” that he retreated hastily and felt himself to be worsted.

So the Truslow ghost vanished from Wavebury, and very soon from most people’s memories also, but Biddy had not forgotten it when she was quite an old woman.

Story 3—Chapter 1.

After All!—Albert Street.

> “The wealth of a man is the number of things which he loves and blesses, which he is loved and blessed by.”—*Carlyle*.

Albert Street is in a respectable neighbourhood on the outskirts of London—not quite in London, and certainly not in the country, though only a little while ago there were fields and lanes where rows of houses now stand. There are, indeed, bits of hedgerow still left where the hawthorn tries to blossom in the spring, and dingy patches and corners of field where flowers used to grow; but these have nearly all disappeared, and instead of them heaps of rubbish, old kettles, empty sardine-boxes, and broken crockery are scattered about. Only the dandelions are lowly enough to live contentedly amongst such vulgar surroundings, and still show their beaming yellow faces wherever they have a chance. It was difficult in Albert Street to feel that spring and summer meant anything else than heat and dust and discomfort. It was more bearable in the winter, Iris Graham thought; but when the warm bright weather came it was strange to remember that somewhere it was pleasant and beautiful—that there were flowers blooming, and birds singing from morning till night, and broad green fields and deep woods full of cool shadows. Iris dreamt of it all at night sometimes, and when she waked there was the cry of the milkman instead of the birds’ songs, and the cup of withered dandelions she had picked yesterday instead of banks of primroses and meadows full of cowslips. But in the daytime she did not dream, for she had no time; every bit of it was quite filled up with what she had to do—her lessons, her clothes to mend, her two little sisters to take out or amuse indoors, endless matters to attend to for the two boys who were at a day-school and came home in the evening, errands for mother, and other duties too numerous to mention. From the time she got up in the morning till she went to bed there was always something to be done, for she was the eldest, and everyone in the house seemed to expect something from her. There were five children and only one maid-servant to do all the work, so no one in Number 29 Albert Street had any idle moments on their hands. The small house was always full of noise and hurry and bustle—a baby crying or a boy rushing up and down stairs, the street-door slamming, or “Iris!” shouted in shrill impatient voices. It was hard to be for ever called upon to do something for someone else, to have no time of your very own, to be everyone’s servant—to be only thirteen years old, and yet to have so very few holidays. Iris had come to feel this more and more strongly lately, to long for ease and pleasure and idleness, and to leave off serving other people. These moods increased every day. She was tired of being busy, tired of the hurry and worry of Albert Street, she was tired of doing things for others; she should like to go quite away into the country a long way off and do just as she pleased all day. And because she kept these discontented fancies quite to herself they grew very strong, and at last took hold of her mind altogether. She began to feel that there never was such a hard-worked injured person as Iris Graham, or such a dull, unamusing life as hers. Even the sound of her little sisters’ voices as they said the verses they were learning about “the busy bee” provoked her beyond endurance. “I hate bees and I hate being busy!” she said to herself.

One warm morning in May she sat, with these thoughts in her mind and a basket of work by her side, in a little room at the back of the house called the “Boys’ Room.” Her mother was lying down upstairs with a bad nervous headache, and Iris had succeeded with great difficulty in keeping the house quiet for the last hour. The only other person in the room was her brother Max, mumbling over his lessons for the next day half aloud, and presently he threw his book across the table to her.

“Just hear me this,” he said.

Iris propped the book up against her basket and went on darning.

“Go on,” she said.

“Now came still evening on,” began Max, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling and his fingers drumming on the table, “and twilight grey had in her sober livery all things clad—all things clad—oh, bother! What’s the next?”

Iris prompted him, and he halted lamely through his task with many a sigh and groan.

“Why couldn’t Milton make his things rhyme?” he said impatiently as his sister returned the book. “I never knew such rotten stuff to learn as *Paradise Lost*.”

“You don’t half know it,” said Iris. “Oh, mustn’t it have been nice to be Adam and Eve!”

“Awfully slow,” answered Max, making a fancy portrait on the margin of his Milton.

“That’s just what I should like,” said Iris. “I’d rather things were slow. I don’t want them all to come huddling together. Fancy the whole long day in a lovely, lovely, garden with no lessons to do, no clothes to mend, and all your time to yourself.”

“You’d get jolly well tired of it,” said Max; “anyhow, I wish old Milton hadn’t written all this stuff about it.”

Abandoning the argument, he clasped his rough head with both hands and bent muttering over his task. The lines he had just repeated stayed in Iris's mind like the sound of very peaceful music, and changed the direction of her thoughts, for now they turned, as her long needle went in and out of the grey sock, to her godmother's house and garden in the country. It was called Paradise Court, and though Iris had not been there since she was eight years old, she remembered it all perfectly; a picture of it rose before her again, and in a moment she was far away from Albert Street. She saw wide stretches of green lawn, with quiet meadows beyond; snowy white blossoms in the orchard, radiant flowers in the garden, borders, a row of royal purple flags with their sword-like leaves, which had specially pleased her because their name was "Iris" as well as her own. How happy she had been for those two or three days. How the sun had shone, and the birds had sung, and what big bunches of flowers she had picked in the fields. It was paradise, indeed. And she had to live in Albert Street. With a sigh she turned her eyes from the bright picture of her fancy, and glanced round the room she sat in. It was very small, and had folding doors which could be opened into the dining-room, and it was just as shabby and untidy as Max and Clement could make it. The chief thing to be noticed about it was the number of blots and splashes of ink; they were everywhere—on the walls, on the deal table, on the mantel-piece, on the map of the world, on the dog's-eared books, and on Max's stumpy finger-ends—there was hardly an inch of space free from them. From the window you could see the narrow straight piece of walled garden, one of many such, stretching along side by side in even rows at the backs of the houses. They were all exactly alike, in shape, in size, in griminess, and in the parched and sickly look of the plants and grass. How hard Iris had tried to make that garden pretty and pleasant to look upon! With hope ever new, and always to be disappointed, she sowed seeds in it, and spent her pennies in roots for it, and raked and dug and watered it. In vain; nothing would grow but some spindly London pride and scarlet geraniums. And indeed this was not surprising, for the garden had many things against it in the shape of poor soil, scorching sun, and numerous sparrows, not to mention boys and cats. A constant warfare was going on in it, for the cats lay in wait for the sparrows, and the boys were always on the watch for the cats, with jugs of water, traps of string, and other cunning stratagems. There was not much chance for the flowers, and even the turf was worn away in mangy patches by the feet of eager and excited combatants. At the end of it, built against the wall, there was an erection of old wire and packing-cases, in which Max and Clement kept rabbits, white rats, and a squirrel. A strange mixed scent of animals and decayed cabbage-leaves was sometimes wafted into the house from this in the summer.

"Perhaps it would be better to shut the window," Mrs Graham would say to Iris. Iris thought it would be better for the boys not to keep rabbits; but to any hint of this kind her mother's answer was always the same: "They may be a little disagreeable sometimes, dear, but I couldn't deprive the poor boys of one of their few amusements."

Her words came into Iris's mind this evening as her eye rested on the unsuccessful garden, and she bent over her work again with a sigh.

Always someone else to think of, someone else to work for, never a little bit of pleasure that was quite her own. How could she be happy? And if she were not happy how could she be contented? It was hard to have nothing pretty to look at. Some people lived in the midst of pretty things; there was her godmother, for instance, who never saw anything ugly or disagreeable near her, but everything that was pleasant and beautiful. People who lived in places like Paradise Court could be patient, and kind, and gentle without any difficulty, but in Albert Street—A sharp scream from the other side of the folding doors, the sound of something thrown, and then a volley of angry sobs and cries. Iris started up and rushed into the next room; she had left her two little sisters there happily at play, but she now found a very different state of things. Dottie, a child of five, stood in the middle of the room, with clenched fists and puckered red face, screaming at the top of her voice, while Susie sat on the floor near nursing a rag doll with perfect composure and calmness.

"Naughty Dottie!" said Iris earnestly, "to make such a noise. What's the matter?"

Dottie could not speak, for she was using all her breath to scream with, but she held out an appealing dumpy arm, and pointed to the doll.

"Why, that's Dottie's doll, Susie," said Iris, turning to the other little girl; "did you take it from her?"

Susie nodded, still with an unmoved countenance, and Dottie redoubled her screams. Iris put both hands over her ears in despair.

"Dottie," she said, "if you don't try to leave off I shall put you to bed, and let Susie keep the doll."

It was not at all easy for Dottie to leave off when she was once well set going, but she checked herself a little.

"Give the doll back, Susie," said Iris.

Susie looked up to see if her sister were in earnest, and meeting a glance of great severity she rose and advanced towards Dottie sideways, with one finger in her mouth, and holding the doll by the legs, head downwards. Dottie, still sniffing and sobbing, made a convulsive snatch at it.

"Kiss each other," said Iris, for this was always a sign that the quarrel was over for the time and peace agreed on between the two little girls. They had hardly given each other the angry embrace usual at such moments when a boy's voice rang shrilly from the top of the stairs.

"Iris, Iris! Where's Iris? Oh, Iris, do just come here!"

Poor mother! Any chance of her getting some sleep must be over long ago. It was impossible to keep the children quiet.

"Clement," said Iris impatiently, as a boy in knickerbockers came tumbling down-stairs at headlong speed, "I do think you might remember that mother has a headache. Why can't you come and find me instead of shouting about like

that?”

“Oh, I say,” said Clement, stopping short and staring at her, “aren’t you just cross this evening! What makes you in such a tremendous temper?”

Iris felt almost inclined to cry.

“What do you want me for?” she said in a resigned and injured voice.

“Why, just look here!” Clement raised one knee and displayed a wide rent in his knickerbockers, of the shape known as a “trap-door.” Through this he stuck his fingers, that it might be shown to better advantage. “Caught it on a nail on the squirrel-house,” he said briefly.

“Oh, dear me!” said Iris wearily; “there’s an evening’s work. And I’ve only just finished Max’s socks. Pray, don’t make it any larger, Clement.”

“You’ll mend it, won’t you?” said Clement earnestly, still gazing at his knee. “You see it shows so awfully, and I shall want to put ’em on to-morrow.”

“Yes,” said Iris, “I suppose I must. I’m sure Mary won’t have time.”

“You’re a brick,” said Clement, and he gave her a rough kiss on the cheek and rushed off.

“How tiresome the boys are!” said Iris impatiently to herself; “how tiresome it is to be poor! How tiresome everything is!” and she sat down on the last step of the stairs and rested her head mournfully on her hand. Then her eye caught sight of a letter lying on a table in the passage. It was a fat rich-looking envelope, and it was directed in a stiff upright hand. Iris knew that writing—it was her godmother’s. “How funny,” she thought, “just as I was thinking of Paradise Court. I’ll take it up to mother.”

But there was something stranger still in store for her when Mrs Graham had read that letter. It contained an invitation for Iris to spend a whole month with Mrs Fotheringham.

“Mother!” exclaimed Iris.

It was the only word she could say for some moments. It seemed too wonderful and delightful to be true.

“Can I go?” was her next breathless speech.

“Would you like so very much to go?” asked her mother smiling.

It was an unnecessary question, for Iris’s whole face was alight with joyful anticipation. Her cheeks flushed, and she shook her long hair back impatiently as though eager to take flight at once.

“It will be a nice holiday for you,” continued Mrs Graham.

Suddenly it came into Iris’s mind that it was mother who wanted a holiday. How tired she looked, and how often her head ached!

“Mother,” she exclaimed impetuously, “I won’t go! It’s horrid of me to leave you with all the children. You ought to go instead.”

“But you see I am not asked. I don’t think that would quite do.”

“Well, at any rate,” said Iris, “*I’d* better not go,” and she sighed.

“That would be a pity, indeed,” said her mother; “and I should be sorry to refuse your godmother’s kind offer for many reasons. And though I sha’n’t see all the beautiful things at Paradise Court, I shall have pleasure, too, while you are there, because I shall know you are enjoying them.”

“How I wish we could all have them!” said Iris.

“And yet there’s something here in Albert Street,” said her mother, “which I’ve got, and you’ve got, and even Dottie and Susie have too, which is worth more, and costs more, and does more good than all those things, and which no one could buy, if he were the richest man in the world.”

At another time Iris would have paid attention to what her mother said; but now, although she heard the words, her mind was too full of Paradise Court to make any attempt to think of their meaning. She could only say to herself that she was to go quite away from Albert Street for a whole month—away from the noise and worry, and needlework and ugliness, to a place where birds sang, and flowers bloomed, and one might be idle all the day long.

Story 3—Chapter 2.

Paradise Court.

“No price is set on the lavish summer, June may be had by the poorest comer.”—*Lowell*.

Paradise Court, where Mrs Fotheringham lived, was not very far from a small country town. Far enough, however, and

sufficiently surrounded by its own garden and meadows, to prevent any vulgar sounds of toil and traffic from penetrating to it.

Mrs Fotheringham disliked the sight of poverty and dirt as much as the noise of hurry and bustle. “All she wanted,” she said, “was peace and quietness,” and she seldom stirred beyond the gates which opened to the high-road from her own grounds. Here, in the fine summer days, she was contented to take her exercise, to admire her flowers, to consult and scold her gardener, and to poke viciously at the weeds with her walking-stick. She was quite an old lady, a widow for many years, and lived alone, except for the society of a green parrot and a companion. The parrot might more justly have been called the “companion” than the lady who filled that post, for it was an old and valued friend, and in perfect sympathy with its mistress; the companion, on the contrary, was changed very often, and seldom stayed with her more than six months. “And yet,” Mrs Fotheringham was used to observe, “there was really *so* little she required!” There were only four indispensable things, and for the rest she was not difficult to please. On these points, however, she must be satisfied: The lady must have sound views on Church and State; she must have seen good society; she must read aloud well; and she must understand how to make chicken curry, in case the cook was changed. Strange to say, however, the ladies were constantly found wanting in one or other of these matters. There was always a wrong flavour somewhere, either in the curry, or the church opinions, or the reading aloud, and perhaps this result was partly caused by the close observation of Mrs Fotheringham and the parrot, who seemed to lie in wait for all shortcomings with cold and critical glances. The bird was accustomed often to sit on its mistress’s shoulder in which position it would trifle lovingly with the border of her cap and croon softly and coaxingly into her ear. At these times there was an air of most complete and confidential understanding between the two, which did not include the outside world, and there was something weird about it which might well affect the nerves of the lady on trial.

At any rate, though few other things changed much at Paradise Court, the companions were always coming and going, and shortly before Iris’s visit a new one had arrived. Her name was Miss Munnion.

Iris reached Paradise Court at five o’clock in the afternoon, after a long and dusty journey. The old sober grey house looked very peaceful and quiet, but all round trees and shrubs and flowers waved their little green hands and seemed to dance rejoicing in their new spring dresses. For it was May time, and the weather, which had hitherto been cold and wet, had suddenly changed, sunshine streamed over the country, and the air was as warm as summer. Everything smelt so sweet, and looked so luxuriant and gay, that Iris felt quite confused and giddy as she stood waiting for the door to be opened; her winter frock and jacket seemed hot and stuffy, and the scent of the great lilac bushes and syringas and hawthorns wrapped her heavily round in a sort of dream.

But the door opened and the dream vanished at the appearance of a stiff-looking maid-servant, who scanned the small dusty figure and the shabby box on the top of the cab with equal indifference. “Mrs Fotheringham was walking in the garden,” she said. “Would Miss Graham join her there, or would she prefer to go to her room?”

In a nervous flurry of shyness Iris replied that she would go to Mrs Fotheringham in the garden, though it was far from what she really wished, and the maid immediately led the way thither. There was no Mrs Fotheringham visible for some time, but presently, turning under a low archway, they entered a small walled garden, and then Iris saw her. She was inspecting her tulips, and was followed by Miss Munnion, and at a little further distance by the gardener. Over her cap she wore a comfortable white woollen hood, and in her hand she carried a stumpy blue umbrella; every now and then she stopped, and pointed out some special favourite with this, or shook it scornfully at something inferior, and in these criticisms Miss Munnion agreed with nods and shakes of the head. A fourth member of the party was the parrot, who, in his brilliant attire of emerald green, touched with glimpses of rose colour, matched the finest tulip there. Taking his pleasure after his own manner, he waddled along the turf border, turning in his crooked toes, and screwing his head sideways at intervals to look at the sky. Sometimes he stopped to tweak some tender stalk with his hooked beak, and sometimes he took a sudden and vicious little run at a sparrow or some other bird at a distance; when it flew away he flapped his wings and gave an exulting squawk.

Mrs Fotheringham came to a stand-still as Iris advanced, planted the blue umbrella firmly on the ground, and surveyed her gravely from top to toe. The old lady, with her high-bridged nose, was certainly a little like the parrot in the face, and though her eye had not the changing brilliancy of the bird’s, it was quite its equal in the unblinking fixity of its gaze.

“Well, child,” she said, when Iris was close to her, “you must have your frocks lengthened. You look positively gawky. Shake hands with Miss Munnion. Ah, mind the parrot! Moore!” raising her voice to call to the gardener, “is it possible I see that odious pink and white stripe amongst the tulips again?—you know I hate it. The most mawkish, foolish thing! It offends the eye. See that it is rooted up without delay. Miss Munnion, we will now go indoors, and you’ll perhaps be kind enough to show this young lady her room, and tell her when we dine and so forth. I forget your name,” (turning sharply to Iris). “Something tiresome and fantastical, I know. Ah! Iris. Well, Iris, when you want to know anything, or do anything, or go anywhere, you are to ask Miss Munnion. *Never* come to me with questions, or ask me ‘why.’ Miss Munnion doesn’t mind being asked ‘why.’ You are here, you know, with a distinct understanding that you are not to be troublesome, and that you are to amuse yourself. As long as you do that, I daresay we shall get on very well, and I don’t care how long you stay; but I’m not used to children, and, of course, if I find you in the way I shall send you home at once. I think that’s all I have to say. Oh, there’s one thing more. If you ever drive out with me I wish you to remember that I dislike talking in a carriage. I tell you all this because it’s always better to put things on a right footing from the first.”

They had reached the house by this time, and as Iris followed Miss Munnion meekly and silently upstairs she made up her mind on two points: She would *never* drive with her godmother unless she were absolutely obliged, and she would very seldom ask Miss Munnion “why,” or apply to her in any way. For she seemed a most uninteresting person; her features had a frozen, pinched-up look, and her eyes had no sort of brightness in them. It was impossible to imagine that she ever laughed; but at least, thought Iris, she might try and look cheerful. When she was left alone she looked round her room with mingled awe and satisfaction; everything was so bright and fresh and comfortable, and there were actually easy-chairs! From the window she could see far-stretching peaceful green fields, where the

grass was getting tall and thick. Cowslips would grow there, without doubt. The only sounds were the twittering evening song of the birds, the cooing of the pigeons in the stable-yard, and far off a distant cry of someone calling home the cows to be milked. How Iris loved it all! How different it was to Albert Street! If you looked out of the window from the bare little room she shared with Susie and Dottie you saw nothing green at all, only a row of staring ugly yellow houses—the most pleasant noise you could hope for was the rattle of a cart or the grinding of an organ. Just at this very minute she went on to remember it was tea-time in Albert Street. Dinner for father and mother at one end of the table, and tea for the children at the other. There was the big yellow jug full of tea, ready mixed with milk and sugar, which Iris always poured out for herself and her brothers and sisters. The only difference this evening would be, that mother would pour it out instead, and cut the thick bread and butter for the hungry boys. She saw it all, and as she saw it she shook her head. “Certainly,” she said to herself, “it is a bad thing to be poor.”

Dinner was at six o’clock, because it did not suit Mrs Fotheringham’s digestion to dine later; it was a solemn and delicately prepared little meal, served by a maid who stepped about silently, never clattering the dishes, and this absence of noise was in itself a strange thing to Iris, for she was used to associate food with much rattle of knives and forks and clash of crockery. There were many nice things to eat and pretty things to look at, but it was rather awful, too, to sit in almost perfect silence and listen to the remarks of Mrs Fotheringham and Miss Munnion. Opposite to Iris there was a long low window, through which she could see part of the lawn and a path leading to the kitchen-garden. She sat gazing vacantly out upon this, when suddenly she saw something very interesting.

This was a man, who came rushing along the path in the most frantic hurry, beating and dashing about him with his hat, and shaking his head incessantly. He was either pursued by some unseen and terrible enemy, or else he was crazy. Whichever it was, it was so exciting to Iris that she craned her neck to follow his movements as far as she could, and presently, moved by his increasing agitation, she exclaimed aloud:

“What *can* be the matter with him?”

Her godmother’s keen eye followed her glance to where the unfortunate man was still dodging about as though to escape something, and striking madly out into the air. She smiled contemptuously.

“It’s that idiotic Moore,” she said. “He irritates the bees, and I don’t wonder. I’m sure he irritates me.”

“He’ll be stung,” exclaimed Iris, getting up from her chair eagerly; “he’ll certainly be stung!”

“Yes,” said Miss Munnion, laying down her knife and fork, and looking mildly round at Moore’s struggles, “I’m really afraid he will.”

“Very likely,” remarked Mrs Fotheringham composedly; “he often is. I’ve always noticed,” she continued, with a pointed glance at her companion, “that bees, as well as birds and beasts, are quite aware when anyone’s frightened of them. Moore’s a complete coward, and they know it. They never touch me.”

The parrot and Mrs Fotheringham had already discovered that Miss Munnion was nervous. She was afraid of all animals, but specially of parrots.

“Once,” continued the old lady, “you show fear to man, woman, or child, you are their bond-slave for ever. And it’s the same with the lower animals.”

Miss Munnion said that she had often observed it, and that it was very true.

The following morning Iris woke up to remember that her holiday had really begun, and that there was a whole long day before her with no duties in it—nothing but idle hours and sunshine. It was the strangest thing in the world at first, and quite difficult to believe, that as long as she appeared at meal-times, no one would ask, “Where is Iris?” No one would say, “Fetch this,” or “Go there,” or “Do this.” Her time was her own at Paradise Court, and she was left to fill it up just as she pleased. And she spent most of it in the garden and fields, for fortunately the fine weather continued, and it was hardly necessary to be indoors at all.

How beautiful it all was! Every morning something new had budded or blossomed, and was ready to greet her with its fresh bright face; for the spring had till lately been so cold and wet that the flowers could not bloom at the right time, and now, called out by the mild soft air, they all came crowding eagerly together, looking over each other’s shoulders, as it were, and almost tripping each other up in their haste. So Iris found kingcups, primroses, and cowslips all in blossom together in different parts of the fields, and the garden was suddenly bright with all sorts of flowers which had seldom seen the sunshine in each other’s company before. And there were other interesting things too, for the birds were all busy just now about their domestic concerns, and she discovered more than one nest built so confidingly, that they were low enough for her to peep into them and meet the bright glance of the mother bird.

“If I could only show them to Max and Clement,” she said to herself as she stole away on tiptoe, holding her breath. Then there were the bees, Moore’s deadly enemies, which lived in a long row of hives under the kitchen-garden wall; they were quite friendly to Iris, and allowed her to watch their comings and goings without any show of anger. She had friends, too, in the pigeons, which soon learnt to come fluttering round her to be fed, and in the three sleek brown and white cows which she saw milked every evening.

In the midst of so much that was pleasant and delightful Iris sometimes felt almost beside herself with enjoyment. She was driven to jump and sing, and even to whistle in order to relieve her feelings, for there was no one to whom she could express them. There were, indeed, moments when she hardly restrained herself from rushing indoors to share some new-found delight with her godmother and Miss Munnion. It was almost impossible to keep it all to herself. One of these occasions was when, for the first time, she gathered her lap full of soft, faintly smelling cowslips. She sat and looked at them in lonely rapture.

Oh for Susie and Dottie to help her to make them up into balls! Then she remembered that she really had been very tired of Susie and Dottie; it was odd she should want them directly she got away from them.

Day followed day, each hour of them full of sunshine, and beauty, and leisure; but there was just one little drawback at Paradise Court, which Iris began to feel more and more strongly—there was no one to talk to. A hundred times a day she wanted someone to share her pleasure or amusement—to laugh with her, or wonder with her, or to search with her for fresh treasures. It seemed to take the edge off everything if she must enjoy it alone; and this desire for sympathy at last grew so strong that it caused her to be guilty of the grave indiscretion I shall now relate. A friend had once given Mrs Fotheringham a couple of half-wild white ducks of a peculiar kind, and these had so multiplied and increased in the quiet retreat of Paradise Court that they now threatened to become too numerous. Orders had accordingly been given that their eggs were to be taken wherever they were found, and as they were of a delicate flavour Mrs Fotheringham had them cooked for her private use. The poor ducks, therefore, were perpetually thwarted in their endeavours to bring up a family; but one of them continued its efforts in such an undaunted manner that Iris watched the struggle going on between it and Moore with the keenest interest. Nest after nest this duck made, laid its eggs, and settled itself comfortably, only to be disturbed with shouts and cries, and ruthlessly hustled off. Overcome for the moment, but “constant still in mind,” it waddled composedly away, sought a more retired position, and made further arrangements. The same thing happened all over again! Poor duck! Iris felt very sorry for it, and would willingly have helped it to hide itself from Moore if she could; but it was impossible to convey this sympathy to its mind, and in the end it conducted its own affairs with great sagacity, and completely baffled the enemy. For one morning as she passed the bee-hives, her attention was caught by some soft white object under one of them, almost concealed by the straw hackle which came low down on each side of it. She stopped; could it be her friend the duck? It really was; it sat there on its nest in a heavenly calm of perfect security, safe at last, and its round dark eye gazed serenely forth upon all the world, including Moore. It had nothing further to fear from him.

The duck had won, and Iris felt so glad that she longed to shake hands with it, and make it understand how clever she thought it. She was, indeed, so pleased that it was absolutely necessary to tell someone about it, and after she had smiled and nodded at the duck a great many times, to which it made no sort of response, she turned and ran quickly indoors. Now she lived so much alone at Paradise Court that she was ignorant that this very hour was sacred to Mrs Fotheringham’s nap; it was most important that she should not be disturbed, and no one would lightly have done so who knew how much depended on it. If she did not get her nap she did not relish her dinner; and if she did not relish her dinner she was cross; and if she was cross the whole household was uncomfortable, for she could by no means suffer other people to be at rest if she were uneasy.

On this particular afternoon she was well on the way to get a very comfortable doze. The day was warm; the room was carefully darkened Miss Munnion sat holding her book close to a crack in the Venetian blind, reaching aloud in a subdued and murmurous voice. Whether Mrs Fotheringham slept or not she had to go on for an hour. The old lady, drowsy with the unusual heat, was just on the edge of slumber, but still partly conscious; sometimes she lost a whole page of the book at a time, then she heard a little of it, and then Miss Munnion turned into a bee and buzzed in the window. Just at this critical moment Iris banged open the door and burst into the silent room.

“Oh!” she cried in her shrill childish voice, “what *do* you think the duck has done?”

It was so dark after the bright sunlight out of doors that at first she did not see her godmother at all, but only Miss Munnion, who dropped her book in her lap and stared at her with a helpless and frightened face.

Mrs Fotheringham started nervously; she grasped the arms of her chair and exclaimed half awake in an agitated voice:

“What’s the matter? Who’s there? Who’s done what?”

“It’s the duck,” stammered Iris in a more subdued manner.

“Is the chimney on fire?” continued Mrs Fotheringham. “I insist on knowing what’s the matter. Miss Munnion, where are you? Why don’t you find out what’s the matter?”

“It’s something about a duck,” said Miss Munnion slowly, “but I really—don’t—quite—”

By this time Mrs Fotheringham was fully awake, and had recovered from her confusion.

“You never *do, quite*,” she said sharply. Then to Iris:

“Child, come here and explain why you rush into the room in this abominable manner.”

Poor Iris advanced. She wished she could say that something was on fire, or that something more important had happened than the duck sitting under the bee-hive. It seemed nothing at all now, not the least amusing, and certainly not a sufficient reason for disturbing her godmother’s nap.

“I didn’t know you were asleep,” she began.

“Keep to the point,” said Mrs Fotheringham; “what did you do it for?”

Iris told her story very lamely, and conscious of an unsympathetic audience. The very parrot ruffled up his feathers and turned his glistening eye upon his mistress when it was over, as though he shrugged his shoulders and said:

“Here’s a poor affair!”

“Do you mean to tell me, you stupid and vexing child,” said Mrs Fotheringham, “that you woke me up merely to relate this nonsense?”

Iris had nothing to say, but she thought it unkind of Miss Munnion to murmur in the background:

“Most thoughtless!”

“If anything of this nature occurs again,” said Mrs Fotheringham severely, “I shall send you home at once. Other failings I can excuse, but selfish thoughtlessness is a thing I abhor. There, go away. No, Miss Munnion, you needn’t read any more, I shall not be able to sleep now. My nerves are quite shaken.”

Iris wandered disconsolately out into the garden. Everything looked as bright and gay as ever, but she felt sad. It was hard to be disgraced and scolded as though she had done something wrong, when she had only made a mistake. “I really *did* think they would like to hear about the duck,” she said to herself; “and how *could* I know she was asleep?” How they would have liked it at home! How often mother was waked up suddenly by the noise of the children, or the boys rushing in to ask her something! Her patient face came before Iris now, full of the gentleness and love which were always there as a matter of course, because she was “mother.” There was something wanting at Paradise Court—something that not all its radiant flowers, and pleasant luxurious rooms, and daintily prepared meals could supply.

“After all,” said Iris, “it doesn’t seem to make people kinder to have so many nice things as my godmother.”

She came to this conclusion with a sigh, and then, hearing the stable clock strike five, remembered that it was post time. Perhaps there would be a letter from home. At any rate she would run down to the lodge and meet the postman. It was such a cheering thought that she felt almost happy again, and ran along whistling and swinging her straw-hat in her hand. The drive was long and very winding, so that she did not at first perceive that there was someone in front of her who seemed to be bound on the same errand; when she did so, however, she had no difficulty in recognising the figure, which had a lop-sided movement like a bird with one wing. It was Miss Munnion. She was evidently in great haste, and walking, or rather running faster than Iris had ever seen her—so fast, indeed, that she was soon hidden in a sudden turn of the road, and was next visible coming back with the letters in her hand. Walking slowly now, she was reading an open one, and stopped now and then to study it more attentively. Iris ran up to her with the eager question, “Is there one for me?” on her lips; but when she saw Miss Munnion’s face she checked herself. For the frozen little countenance had thawed, the features worked and twisted about strangely, and the dull eyes were full of tears.

“What’s the matter?” said Iris bluntly. Miss Munnion looked up; she was completely altered in voice and manner; her hands trembled, her little lace head-dress was crooked; she was evidently deeply troubled.

“It’s my sister Diana,” she said—“my only sister. She is dangerously ill. She’s been asking for me.”

“Where is she?” asked Iris.

“Oh, that’s the worst of it!” cried Miss Munnion. “It’s all the way to Sunderland, right up in the north. Oh, what shall I do?”

“Of course you must go to her,” said Iris, with the confidence of youth.

“But,” said poor Miss Munnion, looking at the child without a spark of hope in her eyes, but a great longing for help and advice, “there’s Mrs Fotheringham. She’ll disapprove, she so dislikes being worried. When I came she told me she hoped I had no relations to unsettle me. And I haven’t. I haven’t a soul in the world that cares for me except Diana. And she was always so strong. How could I tell she would fall ill?”

“Perhaps you wouldn’t be gone long,” suggested Iris, “and I could read to godmother.”

“I’m so afraid,” said Miss Munnion, wiping her eyes meekly, “that Mrs Fotheringham will dismiss me if I go, and I can’t afford to lose the situation—I really can’t. And it’s such an expensive journey to Sunderland. And yet, there’s Diana; she comes before everything, and it cuts me to the heart to think of her asking for me.”

Iris stood looking at her gravely. She felt very sorry, but also a little contemptuous. Of course Diana ought to come before everything, and yet Miss Munnion did not seem able to make up her mind to go to her.

“Well,” she said, “you can’t go to Sunderland and stay here too.”

“Very true,” murmured Miss Munnion. She did not mean anything by these words, but they were so habitual that she could not help using them.

“Then you’d better come straight to my godmother and tell her,” said Iris, “if you *mean* to go.”

“Oh, of course I mean to go,” said Miss Munnion reproachfully. “How could I forsake Diana when she wants me?”

“Well, then, there’s no use in thinking of anything else,” said Iris.

It was an evident relief to Miss Munnion to be taken in hand firmly even by a child. Years of dependence on the whims and fancies of others had deprived her of what little decision and power of judgment she had possessed. She could hardly call her mind her own, so how could she make it up on any point?

Yet all through her troubled and dreary life one feeling had remained alive and warm—affection for her sister Diana. “Many waters cannot quench love,” and its flame still burned bright and clear in Miss Munnion’s heart.

“Although she really is very silly,” thought Iris, as they turned back together towards the house, “there’s something I like about her after all. She’s much nicer than my godmother.”

She hurried Miss Munnion along as fast as she could, almost as though it were Susie or Dottie she had in charge; and indeed the poor lady was so nervous at the prospect of Mrs Fotheringham that she was as helpless as a child. She stumbled along, falling over her gown at every step, dropping her letters, or her spectacles, or her pocket handkerchief, and uttering broken sentences about her sister Diana. Iris picked up these things again and again, and at last carried them herself, and so brought Miss Munnion triumphantly, but in a breathless condition, to the door of the house.

“Now,” she said, “you’d better take the letters in to my godmother and tell her all about it at once. I’ll wait here till you come back.”

She had not to wait long, for Miss Munnion reappeared in less than five minutes shaking her head mournfully.

“It’s just as I thought it would be,” she said. “Mrs Fotheringham thinks it’s very unreasonable of me to want to go to Diana.”

“Did you tell her she was ill?” asked Iris.

“Yes, and she said she supposed there were doctors in Sunderland who would do her more good than I should. She doesn’t seem to be able to understand why I should want to go. She says it’s fussy.”

“Did you tell her that I would read to her while you are gone?” asked Iris.

“No, my dear, I couldn’t get that in; she’s so very impetuous. And besides, the first thing she said was:—

405

IRIS MAKES A PROPOSAL TO MRS. FOTHERINGHAM.

“‘Of course you’ll understand, Miss Munnion, that if you feel obliged to go to Sunderland our connection is at an end.’ So I shall lose the situation after all,” ended Miss Munnion with a sigh.

Iris stood in silent thought for a moment.

“Did she look *very* angry?” she said at length.

“Well, yes,” said Miss Munnion. “I must say she seemed completely upset. I think she was vexed to start with, because, you know, she didn’t get her nap.”

“You stop here a minute,” said Iris suddenly, and ran into the house. She pushed open the door of Mrs Fotheringham’s sitting-room gently and peeped in. Her godmother was sitting very upright in her high-backed chair, a frown on her brow, and the parrot on her shoulder. She looked so alarming that Iris felt almost inclined to run away again, but the old lady turned her head suddenly and saw her.

“Well,” she said, with an air of sarcastic resignation, “what do *you* want? Any more ducks under bee-hives, or have *you* got a sick sister too?”

“Please, godmother,” said Iris, with a great effort, “I want you to let me read to you while Miss Munnion is away.”

“Oh!” said Mrs Fotheringham.

She stared silently at Iris for a moment, then resumed.

“I’ve no doubt it would be an immense pleasure to listen to you if you read like most children of your age. Anything more?”

Iris became scarlet under her godmother's fixed gaze, for both she and the parrot seemed to be chuckling silently at her confusion. But she thought of Diana, and of poor Miss Munnion waiting outside, and managed to gasp out:

"Please let Miss Munnion come back."

"She hasn't gone yet that I know of," replied Mrs Fotheringham, without removing her eyes from the child.

"But she *must*," continued Iris, "because of Diana."

"Well, I must say, you are a most extraordinary child," said the old lady, after another pause, "with your ducks and your Dianas! What is it to you, I should like to know, whether Miss Munnion goes or stays? It doesn't interfere with *your* comfort, I suppose."

Iris could not answer this question, but she stuck to her point, and said in a low voice:

"I should like her to see her sister and come back."

Mrs Fotheringham looked more and more puzzled, and her frown grew deeper. Iris felt that there was not a gleam of hope for Miss Munnion and Diana; but when at last the words came she found she was mistaken, for they were as follows:

"You may go and tell Miss Munnion," said the old lady, "that the sooner she starts on this wild-goose chase the better, and that I will spare her for one week, but if she wants to stop away longer she needn't come back at all. And this is on the condition that neither you nor she are to mention her sister Diana to me ever again, whether she is ill, or well, or anything about her. As to your reading to me, I've no doubt you either mumble or squeak, and I couldn't bear it, so pray don't imagine you'll be the least use while she's away, or let her imagine it."

She waved her mittened hand fretfully, and Iris, thankful to be released, flew with her good news to the trembling Miss Munnion.

Early the next morning, almost unnoticed by the household, and carrying her own little black bag, she started on her two-miles walk to the station. Iris went with her as far as the lodge gates.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand, "and I hope you'll find your sister Diana better." She felt inclined to add, "Take care of your purse, and don't lose your ticket," as though she were parting from a child; but Miss Munnion suddenly leaned forward, and gave her a hard little nervous kiss. It felt more like a knock from something wooden than a kiss, and Iris was so startled that she received it in perfect silence. Before she had recovered herself the small figure, more lop-sided than ever now, because it was weighed down by the bag, had stumbled through the gates, and was on its way down the road. Iris watched till it was out of sight, and then went slowly back to the house.

Story 3—Chapter 3.

The Lost Chance.

"For all is bright, and beauteous, and clear,
And the meanest thing most precious and dear,
When the magic of love is present—
Love that lends a sweetness and grace
To the humblest spot and the plainest face,
That turns Wilderness Row to Paradise Place,
And Garlick Hill to Mount Pleasant."—*Hood*.

Iris had no longer any completely idle days, for she soon found that her godmother expected her in some measure to fill Miss Munnion's place; she must be ready at Mrs Fotheringham's beck and call, to read to her, drive with her, and walk with her in the garden. They were none of them difficult duties, and could not in any sense be called hard work. A day at Paradise Court was in this respect still a very different matter from a day in Albert Street; yet sometimes Iris felt a heavy weariness hanging upon her, which was a new way of being tired—quite a different sort of fatigue to anything she had known before, but quite as uncomfortable. Most of all she hated the drives. To sit opposite her godmother in perfect silence in a close stuffy carriage, and be driven along the dusty roads for exactly an hour at exactly the same pace. Not a word spoken, unless Mrs Fotheringham wished the blinds pulled up or down, or a message given to the coachman. Iris longed feverishly sometimes to jump out and run up a hill, or to climb over the gates into the fields they passed on the way. There were such lots of lovely things to gather just now. Dog roses and yellow honeysuckle in the hedges, poppies and tall white daisies in the fields, and waving feathery grasses. But at all these she could only look and long out of the carriage window. She often thought at these times of poor Miss Munnion, and wondered how her sister Diana was, and whether she had been very glad to see her, and most of all she wondered how Miss Munnion *could* have been so anxious to keep the situation; she must be so very tired of sitting opposite Mrs Fotheringham and looking out of the carriage window.

These reflections were of course kept to herself, and indeed conversation of any kind was forbidden during the drives, but Iris was so used to talking that it was impossible to her to keep silence at other times. By degrees she lost her awe of her godmother, and chattered away to her about that which interested herself—her brothers and sisters, their sayings and doings, and their life at home. Sometimes she found Mrs Fotheringham's keen dark eyes fixed inquisitively upon her, as though they were studying some curious animal, and sometimes her funniest stories about Dottie or Susie were cut short by a sharp, "That will do, child. Run away."

But this did not discourage her, and she became so used to her godmother's manner that it ceased to alarm her, and once she even contradicted her as bluntly as though she had been Max or Clement. Even this had no bad effect, however, for shortly afterwards Mrs Fotheringham remarked:

"It's a positive relief not to have Miss Munnion here agreeing with everything I say. It's as fidgeting as a dog that's always wagging its tail."

But though she got on better than she could have expected with her godmother, and though Paradise Court was as beautiful and pleasant as ever, Iris's thoughts were now constantly at Albert Street. Albert Street, which was no doubt still ugly and disagreeable, hot, and glaring, and stuffy, and where even the summer sky looked quite different. Nevertheless there were some very delightful things there, seen from a distance. When anything amused Iris, Max's freckled face immediately came before her, with its sympathetic grin of enjoyment; when she was sad she felt Susie's and Dottie's soft little clinging fingers in her own; when she was dull she heard Clement's squeaky voice just ready to burst into a giggle at one of Max's stupid jokes. "It's a long time since I laughed till I ached," she said to herself. The peaceful repose of Paradise Court, the silence, which was only broken by a shriek from the parrot, and the murmurous coo of the pigeons outside, was indeed almost too complete. It would be nice to hear the hasty tramp of feet up and down stairs again, or someone shouting "Iris!" from the top of the house. Even the sound of Clement's one song, "The Ten Little Niggers," which he performed perpetually and always out of tune, would be pleasant to the ear. It had often made her cross in Albert Street, but now the thought of it was more attractive than the sweetest notes of the nightingales which sung every evening in the garden at Paradise Court.

One afternoon Iris was walking with her godmother in the little walled garden where she had found her on the first evening of her arrival. The tulips were over now, and Mrs Fotheringham's attention was turned to a certain border which Moore had been planting out under her direction; he had suffered a good deal during the process, for, being a slow thinker, he took some time to understand his mistress's meaning, which now and then escaped him entirely. Often, however, he was afraid to ask her to repeat an order, because it made her so angry, and in consequence his mistakes were many and frequent, which made her more angry still. This very day she had discovered that he had actually sown the sweet peas in the wrong place.

"The man's a perfect fool!" she exclaimed in great wrath; "after all the minute directions I gave him about this border. He gets stupider and stupider every day. One would think he had a thousand things to employ his mind, if he's got a mind, instead of these few simple facts."

"Perhaps," said Iris, "he's been thinking about his baby. It's been awfully ill. Bronchitis it's had."

"His baby!" said Mrs Fotheringham, glaring round at her; "what do *you* know about his baby?"

"Oh," replied Iris cheerfully, "I know all about it. It's teething, you know, and then it caught cold, and then it turned to bronchitis. It's been ill a fortnight, but now it's taken a turn."

"Has it, indeed?" said Mrs Fotheringham sarcastically.

"You see," said Iris, "I know all about bronchitis, because Dottie had it so badly a year ago. We had to keep her in one room for ever so long. It was Roche's embrocation that did her more good than anything. I told Moore that, and he got some. When Dottie got better the doctor said we ought to take her to the seaside, but that was out of the question, mother said."

"Why?" asked Mrs Fotheringham.

"Because it would have cost so much," answered Iris.

She thought it was rather dull of her godmother not to have known that without asking, but as she seemed interested in Moore's baby she went on to supply her with a few more facts about his family.

"Moore has seven children," she said; "the eldest is just Max's age, ten years old. *His* name is Joseph. Then there's another boy, *his* name is Stephen. Then there's a girl, *her* name is—"

"Stop!" said Mrs Fotheringham sharply.

Iris looked up startled, in the act of checking off the members of Moore's family on her fingers. There was an expression of decided displeasure on Mrs Fotheringham's face.

"May I ask," she said, "how and where you have gathered these details about Moore's affairs?"

Iris hung her head. She had done something wrong again.

"It was after he told me his baby was ill," she said; "*I* told *him* about Dottie being ill, and how many brothers and sisters I had, and their names and ages, and then he told me about his children."

"And what possible interest could that be to you?" asked Mrs Fotheringham. "You appear to have very strange tastes. Pray, remember for the future that I object to your talking in this familiar way to Moore, or to any of the servants. Also, that there is *nothing* I detest so much as hearing about people's sick sisters, and sick babies, and so on. Everyone near me appears to have a sick relative just now, and to neglect their work in consequence."

So Moore's baby was a forbidden subject now as well as Miss Munnion's sister, Diana. It was a new thing to Iris to keep silence about what was passing in her mind, and a hundred times in the day she was on the very edge of some indiscreet remark. She managed to check herself before it came out, but it was really very difficult and tiresome.

“At any rate,” she said to herself, “there’s *nothing* we mus’n’t talk about at home; and though we do all talk at once and make a great noise, it’s much better than not talking at all.”

Nevertheless the conversation had made some impression on Mrs Fotheringham, for the next day, after studying Iris in silence for some time, she said suddenly:

“Were you sorry not to go to the seaside after Lottie was ill?”

“Lottie?” said Iris; “oh, you mean Dottie. Her real name is Dorothy, you know, only she’s so small, and round, and pudgy, Max says she’s like a full stop. So she’s always called Dottie.”

“You’ve not answered my question,” said Mrs Fotheringham.

“Why, of course we were all dreadfully sorry,” answered Iris. “We did go once, but I’m the only one who remembers what it was like, because the others were too small.”

“Did you like it?”

“I *loved* it,” said Iris fervently, “The bathing, and the nice swishy noise the waves made on the beach, and the smell of the sea, and the rocks, and the sea-weed, and shrimps, and the tiny little crabs. It was lovely.”

“It’s a pity you can’t often go,” remarked Mrs Fotheringham.

“Yes,” said Iris with a sigh, “it is. But, you see, the lodgings are so dear, and there’s such a lot of us.”

“Ah!” said Mrs Fotheringham, “it’s a bad thing to be poor.”

Iris looked up quickly. Those were the very words she had said to herself when she first arrived at Paradise Court. It seemed almost that her godmother must have overheard them, and yet that was quite impossible. A bad thing to be poor! Somehow Iris felt now that there might be worse things than want of money. It flashed across her, as she looked at Mrs Fotheringham, that she should not like to be a rich old lady with only a green parrot to love her.

“How would you like to have plenty of money?” asked Mrs Fotheringham.

“It would be very nice,” said Iris, resting her chin on her hand, and proceeding to consider the subject. “I could buy presents for them all at home: lop-eared rabbits for Max, and a raven for Clement, and wax dolls for Susie and Dottie —they’ve only got rag ones.”

“Humph!” was her godmother’s only reply; “now you may run out into the garden.”

Always glad to be released from Mrs Fotheringham’s presence, and her shaded room, Iris took her straw-hat and ran out into the sunshine. As she went she turned over in her mind all the things she would buy and do if she were rich. This was not at all a new employment, for she and her brothers often did it at home, though they always differed widely as to the best way of spending the imaginary fortune. “I would buy mother a light green satin dress and pearls,” she thought, “and give father a whole lot of books all bound in scarlet and gold, and—”

“If you please, miss, might you happen to have seen Muster Moore just lately?”

Iris looked round and saw a stout young woman with a checked shawl over her head; she was very red in the face, and panted as though she were quite out of breath.

“They told me in the house I should find him hereabouts,” she went on; “but I’ve run all over the place and I can’t catch sight of him, and I do want him most pertickler.”

“He isn’t here, I know,” said Iris. “He’s gone over to Dinham in the donkey-cart to fetch parcels from the station.”

“Oh, dear!” said the young woman, wiping her hot face with her apron, “how orkerd things always do happen! There’s the baby took ever so much worse. She can’t hardly fetch her breath, poor lamb! And I want some more stuff to rub her chest with. I durs’n’t leave her to go so far as Dinham myself for it.”

“Can’t you send one of the boys?” said Iris, much interested and full of sympathy.

“Bless you, missie, they’re all at school. I’ve no one only the three little uns at home. Well, I must go back. There’s a neighbour holding of her now.”

“Stop a minute,” said Iris, as the woman turned sadly away, “*I’ll* go and fetch it. I know the way to Dinham.”

She felt quite excited, and eager for the adventure.

“Thank you kindly, miss, but I couldn’t trouble you, not to go all that way.”

“It’s only two miles across the fields,” said Iris. “Moore told me so; and I know exactly what to ask for—a bottle of Roche’s embrocation—I’ve often got it before.”

Mrs Moore took a bottle from under her shawl and looked at it.

“I *did* bring the bottle with me,” she said hesitatingly, “so as there shouldn’t be no mistake.”

“All right,” said Iris, taking it from her and nodding cheerfully; “I won’t be long, I can run very fast.”

“You *might* happen to meet Moore comin’ back, and then he could go and get it,” continued Mrs Moore in an undecided tone.

But Iris did not wait for any further suggestions, she only nodded again and ran down the garden towards the gate which led into the fields. What a delightfully free feeling it was! She ran along the narrow pathway between the tall grass growing on each side, and heard her skirts brush against it as she passed with a nice whispering noise. The cool wind blew in her face and rustled in the trees, and made the red sorrel and daisies and cow-parsley bend and wave at her pleasantly. “*Now* I know how a bird feels when it gets out of a cage,” she said to herself, and she was so happy that she sang a little tune. Added to her pleasure there was a great sense of adventure and even peril about the journey, for, though she did not confess to herself that she was disobeying her godmother, she yet knew that to rush over the fields to Dinham in this way to fetch medicine for Moore’s baby was the last thing she would approve.

Without stopping to consider this, however, or to gather any of the tempting things growing so near her hand, she ran on, swinging the empty bottle in the air; on, on, through three long fields, and then she checked her speed, for in the distance she could see the chimneys of Dinham, and she knew she could not be far off.

She had often been there with her godmother, but that was by the road, shut up in a close carriage—now she would arrive on foot, alone, with her garden hat on, no gloves, and her hair quite rough. It was a very different matter; the chemist might perhaps think she was some little wild girl and refuse to give her the medicine. She looked at the label on the bottle to see his name: Jabez Wrench, High Street, Dinham. She had been to his shop with Mrs Fotheringham, and she remembered Mr Wrench. He was a white-faced man with red hair, and he smiled a great deal. “I shall say I come from Paradise Court,” said Iris to herself, “and then he’ll know it’s all right.”

It was not difficult to find the way when she left the fields, for the road led straight into the High Street of Dinham, where the chemist’s shop was. Iris entered it rather shyly, for her first excitement was a good deal sobered; there was Mr Wrench behind the counter with his red head bent over a pestle and mortar; he hardly looked up as Iris presented the bottle. “Who’s it for?” he asked shortly, without ceasing his occupation.

“It’s for Mrs Moore’s baby,” said Iris; and added after a pause, “I come from Paradise Court.”

It was wonderful to see how Mr Wrench’s voice and manner altered at once. He looked up, bowed, and puckered his white face into the smile which Iris remembered.

“I beg pardon,” he murmured, “I did not for the moment recognise—Shall we have the pleasure of sending the medicine?”

But this Iris hastily refused, and in a few moments she left the shop in triumph with a bottle of Roche’s embrocation neatly done up in white paper and sealing-wax. Whether, however, she was too much uplifted in spirit to see where she was going, or whether the place looked different now to when seen out of a carriage window, she did a very foolish thing, for instead of turning to the left, as she should have done, she turned to the right, and walked on some distance without noticing her mistake. But when at length she arrived at a little grey church, she stopped in dismay: “I know,” she said to herself, “that I didn’t pass a church; I must be going the wrong way.” To her horror there now sounded from the church clock the hour of five. How late it was! There would hardly be time to get home and change her frock before her godmother missed her. How angry she would be! What dreadful things she would say, and how terrible she would look! If only it were possible to get back in time! She was just turning hastily to retrace her steps, when towards her, trotting briskly along with head erect, came a donkey drawing a small cart, and in the cart was a man standing up to drive. Iris stopped and waved her parcel in the air eagerly to attract his attention, for the man was Moore returning from the station, and the donkey was Mrs Fotheringham’s donkey, David.

Moore pulled up after a good deal of effort, for David did not wish to stop, and Iris rapidly and excitedly poured forth her story. She mixed up the baby, the medicine, the lateness of the hour, and how she turned the wrong way, in a manner which might have puzzled the quickest brain; but Moore did not show any surprise. That would come later when he had arranged his ideas a little; at present his face was perfectly stolid as he said:

“You’d best git up and ride home, missie. David’ll take you back quicker nor you can walk, now his head’s this way.”

Iris looked longingly at the cart. She really was a little tired now, and very much afraid of her godmother’s anger, and besides, the drive itself would be most delightful. She would not have hesitated a moment, but she remembered Mrs Fotheringham’s injunction about talking to Moore and the servants.

“But I needn’t say *much* to him,” she concluded, and the next minute she had taken the rough brown hand Moore held out to her, and clambered over the side of the cart. David, who had laid back one long furry ear as though listening to the conversation, now pricked it forward again and started off. Seated on the rough plank, which shook and rattled with every movement of the cart, Iris felt in the best possible spirits. This was indeed a pleasant way of travelling, and how wonderfully superior to the stuffy comfort of Mrs Fotheringham’s well-cushioned brougham! The Dinham road was full of new beauties seen in this manner; the evening breeze was soft and cool, and from some of the fields came the sweet smell of hay as they passed. There was plenty of variety, too, in the bumps and jolts of the springless cart, Moore’s way of driving was new and attractive, and David’s paces had at least the merit of unexpectedness. Sometimes, after trotting gallantly along for some minutes with uplifted crest, he brought himself up to a sudden and determined walk; then Moore would hurl himself forward in the cart with an energetic stamp, and growl out a number of strange and injurious remarks, of which Iris only heard the first three:

“*You* David! What are you up to? *Git* along with you!” The rest died away in a hoarse murmur as David quickened his movements. Iris enjoyed it all thoroughly, and sat holding on with both hands to the plank in the midst of the parcels, with a wide grin of pleasure on her face. The Dinham road was very quiet, and there were few people about; but as they approached Paradise Court an open carriage with a pair of fine chestnut horses drove rapidly by, and David, as was his custom on such occasions, drew up and stood quite still while it passed, in spite of Moore’s utmost exertions.

“Who was that lady in the carriage?” asked Iris, for she saw Moore touch his cap. “I think I’ve seen her before.”

“Very like, missie,” answered Moore; “that was Lady Dacre from the Towers yonder.”

He turned into the stable-yard, helped Iris carefully down, and said slowly, as though he were continuing a previous speech:

“And I take it main kind of yer, missie, to have fetched the stuff for the little un.”

To her relief Iris found that it was only half-past five, and that her godmother had not missed her from the house. The great adventure seemed likely to remain undiscovered, and she went to bed feeling glad she had fetched the medicine, though a little ashamed of keeping it a secret. She had no fear, however, that her disobedience would have any uncomfortable results; though in this she was mistaken, as is often the case when we judge of things too hastily. For the very next afternoon, while she was reading aloud to Mrs Fotheringham, the door opened and the maid-servant announced a visitor—Lady Dacre.

The name struck a chill to Iris’s very heart. She retired modestly to a corner of the room and bent her face over her book. Had Lady Dacre recognised her yesterday? Would she say anything about it if she had? Could anything be more unlucky? She sat and trembled as she turned these things over in her mind, and listened anxiously to the conversation, but at present it did not approach any dangerous subject. The ladies were discussing the weather, the want of rain, the new vicar, Lady Dacre’s rheumatism, and the unreasonable behaviour of Miss Munnion. So far all was safe. How would it do to slip out of the room while they were so busily engaged? Iris got up and moved cautiously towards the door, but, unfortunately, she was so occupied in trying to tread very softly that she forgot the book in her hand, and it slid to the floor with a loud thump. The conversation stopped, and Lady Dacre turned her good-natured face in the direction of the noise. She was a nice-looking pink-faced old lady, with silver hair, and a cozy black satin bonnet.

“So you have your little god-daughter with you still?” she said to Mrs Fotheringham. “Ah, I recollect we met yesterday in the Dinham Road.”

Iris looked beseechingly at her, but she only nodded and smiled comfortably.

“In the Dinham Road!” repeated Mrs Fotheringham, “what were you doing in the Dinham Road alone, Iris?”

“Oh, she wasn’t alone,” said Lady Dacre kindly, “she had a gallant steed and a charioteer to take care of her. She was coming along in very fine style. I remember thinking, as I saw her, what a capital thing it was to be twelve years old.”

She laughed, and got up as she spoke to go away, perfectly unconscious of poor Iris’s despair.

As her guest left the room Mrs Fotheringham’s darkest frown gathered on her forehead.

“*Did* you meet Lady Dacre yesterday?” she asked, and then added coldly, “Perhaps it was one of Moore’s daughters she mistook for you.”

For a brief moment the possibility of taking advantage of this idea darted through Iris’s mind, but she let it go, and answered faintly:

“I *did* meet her.”

“Where were you, and with whom?”

When her godmother spoke so very distinctly Iris knew how angry she was, and it was dreadfully difficult to answer at first. Presently, however, gathering courage she lifted her head and said almost defiantly:

“In the donkey-cart with Moore.”

“Did you drive to Dinham with him?”

“No.”

“How did you get there?”

“I ran across the fields.”

“And with what purpose beside that of disobeying me?”

“To fetch—” Iris stopped; she was approaching the fatal forbidden subject.

“To fetch what?”

“Medicine.”

“Don’t tell me untruths,” said Mrs Fotheringham still more icily; “what could you want medicine for?”

“I’m telling the truth,” said Iris indignantly; “it was for—”

“Well, well, well,” said Mrs Fotheringham impatiently, “for—”

“Moore’s baby,” finished Iris, almost in a whisper.

“Now,” exclaimed Mrs Fotheringham, falling back in her chair, “may Heaven grant me patience!” She remained leaning back in a flattened state for so long that Iris wondered if she were ill or going to faint; but just as she determined to call the maid her godmother raised herself into her usual erect position and beckoned.

“Come here,” she said, “I’ve something to tell you. Sit down.”

Iris sat down, feeling rather frightened, but yet as though the worst were over; at any rate she had nothing more to confess.

“I invited you here,” began Mrs Fotheringham, speaking very slowly and impressively, “with a certain object in view, and that was that I might judge whether it would be possible to offer to adopt you altogether. Had I done so it would have been an untold advantage to you in many ways, and a great relief to your parents, for your future would have been provided for. You have plainly shown me, however, that it would be impossible to have you here. You have shown selfish disregard for my comfort, disobedience, and low vulgar tastes. This last escapade has decided me. Your chance is over.”

“What chance?” asked Iris, who had not altogether grasped her meaning.

“Your chance of living here at Paradise Court, and of being rich, instead of going back to Albert Street, where you will always be miserably poor, and have to work for your living.”

“Oh, but anyhow,” said Iris, now quite roused, “I couldn’t possibly do that. I mean, I couldn’t *live* here even if you liked me.”

“Why not?”

“Why, of *course* I couldn’t. How could I possibly leave father and mother and the others? *They* wouldn’t like it either.”

“You like Albert Street better than this, I suppose,” said Mrs Fotheringham coldly.

“Oh, *dear*, yes—much. As long as the others are there.”

“You won’t like it best always,” said Mrs Fotheringham. “There will come a time when you’ll remember that you’ve missed a chance. Why, you foolish child,” she continued, speaking more earnestly and with a tone of half pity, “you don’t know what money can do. It can do everything. If you are cold it can warm you, if you are dull it can amuse you, if you are hungry it can feed you, if you are insignificant it can make you a power in the world. It can bring people to your feet, and make them serve you.”

“But not love you,” said Iris quickly.

“Pooh!” said Mrs Fotheringham.

She hardly spoke again for the rest of the evening, but remained deep in thought, from which Iris did not dare to rouse her by any question. The next day had been arranged for her return home, and when everything was ready, and the carriage waiting at the door to take her to the station, she went to say farewell to her godmother and Paradise Court. She found her sitting in the verandah, with the parrot on a stand close by, and there was such a lonely look about her that for a moment Iris felt sorry.

“Good-bye, godmother,” she said gently.

“Ah, you’re going,” said Mrs Fotheringham, holding out a hard white hand; then looking at her sharply:

“Are you glad to go?”

“I’ve enjoyed myself *very* much,” said Iris politely.

“But you like Albert Street better?”

“Well, you see, the others are all there.” She could not help smiling a little as she thought how the “others” would all be at the station to meet her, and how they would laugh, and talk, and wave things, and kiss her, and how much she would have to tell them.

“I’ll give you a proverb to take back with you,” said Mrs Fotheringham after a moment’s pause. “Try and remember it. ‘When Poverty comes in at the door, Love flies out of the window.’ There never was a truer word spoken.”

She leant back in her chair. The interview was ended. Iris’s visit to Paradise Court was over.

But not the memory of it, that dwelt freshly in her mind for years; and when Susie and Dottie demanded again and again to be told how the duck sat under the bee-hive, or how Iris had driven from Dinham in the donkey-cart, the whole place came before her like a brightly painted picture. And in the picture were two things which it pleased her most to look at and remember—Miss Munnion’s face when she had kissed her at the gate, and Moore’s when he thanked her for fetching the “stuff for the little un,”—these always stood out clearly, even when the background of Paradise Court became dim and indistinct. Neither were her godmother’s parting words and her proverb forgotten. Sometimes in after years, when Iris came to know what poverty really means, and when difficulties and troubles rose in Albert Street which a little more money would have relieved, she thought of them mournfully. Poverty had indeed come in at the door, and it might have been in her power to keep it out. She could not do that now, she had missed

her “chance,” as Mrs Fotheringham had said; but there still remained one other thing—Love should not fly out of the window. And he never did. Many hands, some of them small and weak, held him fast in 29 Albert Street, and he was always to be found there, though he might hide himself for a time.

“After all,” said Iris to herself, “there are flowers here as well as in Paradise Court!”

And so there were. There is a crop that flourishes sometimes better in the hard soil of poverty and labour than where beauty, culture, art, and all that wealth can produce spread their soft influences. These are the flowers called patience, unselfishness, simplicity, love. They grow best, not where life is most pleasant to the senses, but where cold winds often blow roughly and outward things are ugly and poor.

“Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing more courageous, nothing higher, nothing wider, nothing more pleasant, nothing fuller nor better in heaven and earth.”—*Thomas à Kempis*.

The End.

| Story 1 Chapter 1 | | Story 1 Chapter 2 | | Story 1 Chapter 3 | | Story 1 Chapter 4 | | Story 2 Chapter 1 | | Story 2 Chapter 2 | | Story 3 Chapter 1 | | Story 3 Chapter 2 | | Story 3 Chapter 3 |

---

laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

> This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”

- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.

- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on,

transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™’s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation’s EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state’s laws.

The Foundation’s business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation’s website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations ($1 to $5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any

particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.