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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE MIST OF THE MOUNTAINS ***

IN THE MIST OF THE MOUNTAINS

*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

(Uniform with this volume)

SEVEN LITTLE AUSTRALIANS

THE FAMILY AT MISRULE

THE LITTLE LARRIKIN

MISS BOBBIE

THE CAMP AT WANDINONG

THREE LITTLE MAIDS

THE STORY OF A BABY

LITTLE MOTHER MEG

BETTY AND CO.

MOTHER’S LITTLE GIRL

THE WHITE-ROOF TREE

THE STOLEN VOYAGE

"'I'm so sorry, chickies,' she said kindly." (Page 19.)

# IN THE MIST OF THE MOUNTAINS

By

ETHEL TURNER

(Mrs. H. R. Curlewis)

*Author of “Seven Little Australians,” “The Little Larrikin,” “Miss Bobbie,” etc., etc.*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY J. MACFARLANE

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1908

TO

H. R. C.

“They that have heard the overword
Know life’s a dream worth dreaming.”

*Henley.*

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# CHAPTER I

## SOMEWHAT CONTAGIOUS

IT is October and the mountains are waking from their short winter sleep.

It is October, the month of the moving mists.

Come and let us take a walk, not down Fleet Street with Dr. Johnson, but up a mountain side with Nature,—nay, with God Himself. There is nothing to see, absolutely nothing at all. You know that there are trees on either hand of you, and that the undergrowth is bursting into the stars and delicate bells of its springtime bloom. But your knowledge of this is merely one of the services your memory does for you, for the mist has covered it all away from sight.

You look behind you and your world is blotted out.

You look in front of you,—nay, you cannot look in front of you, for the mist lies as a veil, actually on your face.

“I breathed up a whole cloud this morning,” Lynn remarked once.

“I eated one—and it was nasty,” said Max.

Still you continue to look in front of you as far as may be.

And the next moment the veil lifts,—clean up over your head perhaps, and you see it rolling away on the wind to one side of you, yards and yards of flying white gossamer, its ragged edges catching in the trees.

And now your gaze leaps and lingers, and lingers and leaps for miles in front of you. You look downward and the ball of the earth has split at your feet and the huge fissure has widened and widened till a limitless valley lies there. You look down hundreds of feet and see like sprouting seedlings the tops of gum trees,—gum trees two hundred feet high.

The far side of the valley shows a rolling mountain chain washed in in tender shades of purple, paling nearer at hand to blue, the tender indescribable mountain blue. Great jagged headlands hang perilously over the deep, and the silver thread of a distant waterfall gleams here and there down the face of the gorges of whose wonderful beauty the tourist has heard and comes thousands of miles to see.

A billowy cloud, soft and dazzling as snow, has fallen from the sky or risen with the mist, you are not sure which, and lies bewilderingly low and lovely on the purple hills. Then there comes that damp, delicate sensation on your face and all is mist again.

It is just as if a lovely girl now playfully hid her exquisite face with the gauzy scarf twined round her head, and now showed it, each fresh glimpse revealing a newer and tenderer beauty.

Lynn, who, though but eight, is given to quaint and delicate turns of thought, calls it all “God’s kaleidoscope.”

Nearer to the station cluster the weatherboard business places of the little township of Burunda. The butcher does a trade of perhaps two sheep a week during the winter, but leaps to many a score of them when “the strangers” begin to come up from the moist city at the first touch of November’s heat. The bakers—there are two of them—fight bitterly for “the strangers’” custom.

All the winter a few decrepit-looking tarts and buns form the shop window display of each. But when signs of life begin in the cottages the battle starts.

“Seven for sixpence,” Benson writes in red letters on a card in the midst of his “drop” cakes.

“Eight for sixpence,” Dunks retorts in larger type in the midst of *his* heap of the popular confectionery.

“Nine for sixpence,” is Benson’s desperate challenge,—the cakes of course shrinking somewhat in size.

The baker does not live who can afford to give ten for sixpence.

Benson has now to create new signs. "No second-class flour used in the cakes of *this* establishment," is one of his efforts.

Dunks caps it.

"No miserable counting out of currants in cakes baked *here*. Visitors are invited to sample." And on his counter is a very fruity specimen cut across. As a result of this competition "the strangers" may count on quite respectable cakes for their tea.

There are two grocers—brothers, oddly enough, though not connected in trade; steady, peaceable old men with whom brotherly love continues despite trade rivalry.

But they possess a live young assistant each, and it is war to the knife between these lads.

They fall on the startled stranger before he is fairly out of the train and thrust before him the merits of their respective establishments.

Howie, the boy of Septimus Smith, is lean and lanky and can stretch a long arm and a trade card for an amazing distance to just beneath your nose. But Larkin is small and wiry and has a knack of squeezing himself right into the midst of your mountain of luggage and children and porters, and earnestly informing you that Octavius Smith keeps the best bacon in the district, and promising you that if you deal with him, he, Larkin, will bring your letters with him from the post office every morning when he calls for orders.

It is said that the loser invariably fights the winner after these contests unless there falls to his lot another passenger by the same train. But if it happens that the luck is to neither,—that is, if all are hotel or boarding-house visitors, or (an unforgivable thing in the eyes of both) if the newcomers are people who bring their own groceries from the metropolis, then the two go off almost friends and help each other up with any boxes the train may have brought for them.

The Lomax children took a keen interest in the warfare, and always asked Larkin, when he came for orders in the morning, how many of the new people's custom he had secured.

For it was Larkin's trick of insinuating himself among the portmanteaus and confused servants and children, and then talking rapidly of bacon and letters, that had gained him Mrs. Lomax's custom when the family first came to Burunda. That bewildered lady simply had to consent that he might call to get him out of the knot of seemingly inextricable confusion with which she had to deal.

There are two photographers, two shoe-menders, two house agents, two visiting doctors.

It is conceivable that if a third man of any trade come along the character of business in Burunda may entirely change. But while there are but two of each, the chances are that any day the visitors may have the quiet monotony of the place broken up by a civil war.

Not far from the station stand the hotels and the more modest boarding-houses.

And then begin the cottages and villas—nearly all of them weatherboard—of people who like to have a foothold a few thousand feet in the air when summer's shroud of damp enwraps the Harbour city.

The Lomax children swung disconsolately on the gate of their summer home. All they could see was the road in front of them, now clear, now filled with flying mist, and their senses were wearied of it.

Might they go down the gully?

No, they might not go down the gully. Who had time on a busy day like this, and Miss Bibby writing to New Zealand, to go trapesing down all those rough places with them?

Couldn't they go alone?

No, they could not go alone. A nice thing it would be for the Judge’s children to be lost down a gully and sleeping out all night.

Well, might they go down to the waterfall? They couldn’t get lost on made paths and with picnickers everywhere.

No, they might not go down to the waterfall. What would the Judge say if he heard his children had been down a dangerous place like that and no one with them!

“Well, let us go up to the shops and the station. We’ve got twopence between us, and we want to spend it, and besides——” But Pauline broke off, recognizing it was worse than useless to explain to a person like Anna the pleasure they could obtain from watching to see whether Howie or their own Larkin got most of the customers by the excursion train. But Anna was horrified at the idea.

“In those dusty clothes and with your sandals off! A nice condition for the shopkeepers to see a Judge’s children in!”

“Oh, hang a Judge’s children,” muttered Pauline, but not until Anna had returned to the house.

“Wish daddy was a butcher,” said Muffie.

“Not a butcher,” said Lynn, who was sensitive and never could pass the shop of hanging carcases without a shudder,—“but a baker would be *very* nice, and make drop cakes seven for sixpence. Oh, I *could* eat a drop cake,—couldn’t you?”

“A Benson’s one,” said Pauline dreamily; “they’re the sweetest.”

“But there are more currants in Dunks’s,” said Muffie. “I shall spend my penny there.”

“You won’t,” said Lynn, who was subject to fits of pessimism, “you’ll never spend it. Anna will never have finished washing up. Miss Bibby will never have finished writing to mamma. We’ll never get up to the shops. We’ll have to stop shut up here *for ever*.”

“But why,” said Muffie, who was only six, and easily bewildered by words, “why can’t we do like always and ever when we come up here?”

“Why, indeed!” said Pauline with much bitterness.

Max, the only son of the Judge and aged just four, had a clear way of his own of arriving at the cause of various effects.

“Wish a late big lecipice would fall on Anna,” he said.

“Really, Max,” said Lynn, whose unspent penny was burning a hole in her temper, “you are getting too big to talk like that. Late big lecipice! Say, *great big precipice.*”

“I did,” said Max indignantly,—“I’ll push you off the gate in a minute.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

“If you move your foot I’ll jerk you off.”

“Now, don’t begin that,” said Pauline, “you’ll make him cough again,—let him alone, Lynn.”

“Well, he mustn’t say he’ll push me off,” said Lynn. “I’m only trying to teach him to talk prop’ly. This morning he asked Larkin to come and look at his lee lowing in the lound. And I had to explain that he meant ‘tree growing in the ground.’”

Max was red with anger.

“I didn’t say that,” he shouted, “I said plain’s anything lee lowing in the *lound*.”

He sent each of the difficult words from his mouth with a snap, as if he were discharging them from a pistol that jammed.

But Lynn jeered again.

He could not jerk her from the gate, though he tried hard; eight years old can effect a much firmer lodgment than four years. He sheltered himself behind his weakness.

“You’ll make *me* cough in a minute,” he said, and began to draw in his breath.

"You'll make me cough," said Lynn.

"I cough worser than you," insisted Max.

"You don't,—I get *much* redder," said Lynn.

"I go purple, Miss Bibby says so," said Muffie complacently.

"I go nearly lack in the face," said Max.

It was possible that Pauline, who being ten was always superior, would have laid claim herself to some still darker shade of complexion but that a diversion occurred at the moment.

One or two people carrying golf clubs had passed along the monotonous road during the morning and Max had longed to be a caddie. Once a woodcutter had gone along with his axe over his shoulder and Lynn had been moved to recite—to the disgust of the others—"Woodman, spare that tree." And once Larkin had flashed past on horseback, Howie tearing along not far behind, it having come to their ears five minutes before that a cottage far away through the bush was opened, its occupants having come up by the night train.

"When I grow up," said Muffie enviously, "I'll be a grocer's boy."

"An' I'll be the other one," said Max, so filled with glorious visions suddenly that he forgot his original intention of coughing.

But now there came briskly round the corner one of the big Burunda wagonettes, overflowing with ladies and children and picnic baskets and plainly bound for the waterfall.

"Why," said Lynn excitedly, "there are Effie and Florence."

"And Frank," cried Muffie joyously.

"Why," said one of the ladies in the wagonette, "there are the little Lomaxes,—I didn't know they were up." She stopped the driver.

Lynn and Muffie and Max were for rushing out and charging bodily into the vehicle, and indeed one of the ladies was beckoning encouragingly to them all.

Lynn's swift imagination saw themselves borne joyously off to the loved waterfall; she felt the very water of the cool delicious pools on her hot feet.

But Pauline, with a look of absolute tragedy on her fair little face, banged the gate and kept her brothers and sisters on the hither side of it.

"We're contagious," she shouted.

"Wha-a-at?" said the lady.

"Whooping cough," said Pauline with extreme dejection in her tone, and as if for a guarantee of her veracity Max was seized with a paroxysm then and there, and Muffie followed suit.

"Oh, drive on!" cried the lady hastily to her man, and gave an alarmed look at her own little flock. But she pulled up again fifty yards away and came back on foot and stood a very respectable distance away from the infected spot.

"I'm so sorry, chickies," she said kindly; "that's a wretched visitor for the holidays. Have you been very bad?"

"I go nearly lack in the face," said Max, not without pride.

"Is mother with you?" said the lady, Mrs. Gowan by name, somewhat anxiously, "and your father?"

"No," said Pauline sadly, "they've gone to New Zealand,—mamma got quite ill with nursing us, and daddie got it too, and he wouldn't come up here."

Muffie giggled. "People's laugh 'cause daddie's got it," she volunteered.

"But in New Zealand, you see," explained Pauline gravely, "no one will know him."

Mrs. Gowan smiled a little—as others had done. For indeed the thought of a dignified Judge drawing in his breath and whooping on the bench like a frightened child was not without its humorous side.

The poor Judge had become quite sensitive about the ridiculous complaint his children had given to him, and after struggling with it pettishly for some time, and the vacation coming along, he had finally proposed the New Zealand trip to his wife, the children being sent to complete their cure to the summer home he had long since built on the mountains.

"Well," said Mrs. Gowan, "I am really sorry, dears, for we could have had such fun, all of us up here at the same time, couldn't we? But you won't speak to Effie and Florence if you meet them anywhere, will you? Even if they try to speak to you? I have such a dread of whooping cough."

"Paul told you straight away off that we were contagerous," said Lynn, a little hurt that after her sister's magnificent honesty such admonition should be deemed necessary.

"Yes, I know, dear," said the lady, "and indeed I thank Pauline very much for being so considerate. It is Effie and Florence I am thinking of; they are so thoughtless, I am afraid they will try to come over to you."

"You'd better not let them come down to this part of the road then," said Pauline sagely.

"But that's the difficulty," said Mrs. Gowan, "their uncle has taken 'Tenby'"—she waved her hand to the cottage opposite that had stood irksomely monotonous with closed shutters and chained gate ever since the Lomaxes had come to Burunda this year, "and of course they will often want to come down to him to listen to his stories. He is Hugh Kinross, you know."

They did not know, and even now the name was a name to them and nothing more. Mrs. Gowan evidently took it for granted that even children must have heard of her brother, the famous author.

"So you will help me, won't you, Pauline?" she said appealingly, —"you won't let Max and Muffie run out and talk to them! And if they try to come here you will send them away, won't you, dear?"

Pauline promised her co-operation, though indeed her heart sank at the prospect of seeing her merry little friend Effie day after day as close as the opposite fence and never as much as exchanging chocolates with her.

"When is he coming?" she said heavily.

"To-morrow," said Mrs. Gowan—then she laughed—"but I think he would be afraid to come, don't you, if he knew he was going to have four little rackets like you for such near neighbours. He has come all this way to be perfectly quiet and write his new book."

Lynn looked quite impressed.

"I think we'd better stop in the orchard," she said soberly.

Mrs. Gowan kissed her hand to them and went off laughing to her wagonette.

## CHAPTER II

### TREATING OF LARKIN AND HIS COMMISSION

"WELL," said Lynn, looking across at "Tenby," "I'm glad it's going to be lived in at last, poor thing. It makes me quite mis'rable to see it standing there in the sun with its eyes shut up tight as if it wanted to wake up on'y it darerunt."

"Like the Sleeping Beauty," said Pauline.

Lynn, in whose composition had run from babyhood a marked vein of poetry, shook her hair back from her face.

"I made a song about it down at the waterfall the other day," she said. "Only mamma wasn't here to write it down, and I didn't know if you could spell all the words, Paul."

"What nonsense!" said Paul, "as if I couldn't spell any word a child like you could think of."

"Well, write it then," urged Lynn, "and I can send it in my next letter to mamma; the rhyums in it came quite right this time."

So Pauline, having nothing better to do, and anxious to display her spelling prowess, fished out of her pocket a bit of pencil and one of Octavius Smith's trade cards that drew attention to his prime line of bacon. This last Larkin had pressed upon her that very morning, and urged her to put it on the mantelpiece, where their visitors could see it. They owed him a return. Morning after morning did he, after receiving his orders from Miss Bibby at the kitchen door, ride his horse to the road at one side of the house, where some well-grown pines made a kindly screen, and there let the children, one after the other, have all the delights of a stolen ride. The ever-present dread of Miss Bibby's discovery naturally added a fearful joy to the proceedings "A judge's eldest daughter astride a grocer's horse!" Pauline could readily imagine the lady's tone of horror.

It seemed very easy repayment for the happiest moment of the dull day to promise to put this advertisement in evidence. But at present it was only the white back of the card that was pressed into service.

Lynn's eyes grew round and solemn, as they always did when she was delivering herself of a "song." She stared hard at the shuttered house.

"Call it 'The Very Sad House,'" she said.

"'The Very Sad House,'" wrote Pauline obediently.

"No, cross that out," said Lynn; "I remember I thought of a better name. It's called 'Forsaked.'"

Pauline grumbled at this. "You mustn't alter any more," she said; "even writing very small I can't get much in."

"Well," said Lynn, "write this down." And she dictated slowly. And slowly and a little painfully, for the space was cramped, Pauline wrote:—

"'Silent and sad it wates by the road,
And it's eyes are shut with tears.
Oh, Tenby, my heart is so greavous for you,
You haven't woked up for years.
Why don't you open your eyelids up wide
And laugh and dance and frolick outside?
And why don't—'"

"There can't be any more," said Pauline inexorably; "I'm at the bottom of the card."

"Oh," said the little poetess piteously, "you must put in the end lines,—can't you turn over?"

"Well, go on," said Pauline—"but it's very silly. As if a house *could* frolic outside of itself! Mother will laugh like anything."

But Lynn's face was trustfully serene. Mother never laughed.

"Go on," she said,—"the next line is, 'Out on the grass.'"

"I won't write stories," said Pauline decisively. "There's not a bit of grass in that garden, and you know there isn't."

Lynn looked distressed.

"But there ought to be," she said.

"But there *isn't*," repeated Pauline; "and I tell you I won't write untruths."

"Very well," said Lynn meekly, "it can be earth, only it doesn't sound so green. Say,

'Out on the earth where the fairies play;
Come and play with us, oh, come and play.'"

"'Out on the earth where the fairies play,'" wrote Pauline, and the next line said, "Prime middle cuts at Octavius Smith's, Elevenpence a pound."

"Here's Larkin," called Muffie excitedly, "an' he's coming very slowly, so he can't be in a hurry. Let's ask him for another ride."

The four clambered on to the gate again.

Larkin was riding back with lowered crest.

He was a thin lad, small for fourteen, with sharp features and blue eyes, and a head of hair nearer in shade to an orange than to the lowly carrot to which red hair is popularly likened. He wore a khaki coat a size too small for him, and an old Panama hat some big-headed "stranger" had left behind. Round this latter dangled a string veil that he had manufactured for himself against the ubiquitous and famous mountain fly.

But the flamboyant head drooped wretchedly just at present.

He pulled up at the gate, seeing Miss Bibby was not on guard, and poured out a graphic account of the ride between himself and Howie. Browning's "Ghent to Aix" was nothing to it, and "How we beat the Favourite" was colourless narrative to the early part of Larkin's recital. But then the tragedy happened. Larkin's horse got a pebble in its foot, and went dead lame. Howie shot ahead and caught the lady of the house just as she was reluctantly sallying forth to find one of his trade and leave her order.

"An' she's got a baby—patent foods and biscuits," said Larkin in a choked voice, "and I saw quite four boys,—oatmeal, tins of jam, bacon, butter,—I wouldn't have lost her for anything. An' only for giving you kids a ride this morning I'd have heard sooner, an' got the start of Howie."

The children felt quite crushed to think they were the cause of Larkin's great loss. For a loss it was indeed; both boys received commissions on the accounts of the new customers they obtained, and a lady with a baby and four hungry boys, not to mention a maid or two, and possible visitors, was not to be picked up every day.

Then Pauline had a brilliant thought.

"We know of another new one," she cried.

"'Tenby' is taken; a man's coming up by to-night's train. Howie doesn't know, no one knows but ourselves,—that will make up to you, Larkin. Men eat more than babies."

Larkin was greatly excited. He made rapid plans: he would slip his cards under the door to-night; he would present himself at the house the moment it was unlocked in the morning. He would take butter, eggs, sugar, with him, so that breakfast at least would be comfortable, and the wife or housekeeper, or maiden sister, whichever the "man" brought with him, would bless his thoughtfulness, and promptly promise her custom.

Then his jaw dropped with a sudden recollection.

To-morrow was his holiday—the only whole week-day holiday he received in six months. He had arranged to go home, as he always did, catching the 11 o'clock train that night, and travelling through the midnight to the highest point of the mountains, and into the early dawn down, down the Great Zigzag on the other side, till he came out on the plain to a little siding, where he scrambled out with

his bundle, and shouldered it briskly, and trudged along eight miles, perhaps, to a wretched selection where his father, for his mother and six or seven children younger than Larkin, fought the losing fight of the Man on the Land. A few hours here, slipping his wages into his mother's reluctant hand, escorted by his father round the place to see the latest devices for trapping rabbits and other pests, telling his brothers stirring tales of the struggles between himself and Howie, then the long tramp to the station, and the travelling through the night again, snatching his only chance of sleep sitting upright in his crowded carriage, he fitted his holidays naturally into the Railway Commissioners' Cheap Excursion seasons. And then the fight again in the new-born day with Howie.

The lad looked miserable. How could he give up such a holiday? Yet how allow Howie an uncontested victory with the latest stranger?

Max and Muffie had run back along the path in pursuit of a lively lizard. Only Lynn and Pauline, their sweet little faces ashine with sympathy, hung on the gate.

The lad blurted out his highest hope to them. He gave his mother his wages, of course, he told them, but he had been saving up his commissions for a special purpose. He wanted to put "a bit of stuff" on the Melbourne Cup.

"I know I'll win," he said, with glistening eyes. "It'll be five hundred at least,—p'raps a cool thou,—then I'll buy Octavius and Septimus out, and mother and the old man shall chuck up that dirty selection, and come an' get all the custom here. And the kids can go to school, an' I'll get Polly an' Blarnche a pianner." The rapt look of the visionary was on his face.

But he was torn with the conflict; it was plain he must give up either his holiday or his commission on the new "stranger."

Pauline's position as eldest had developed her naturally resourceful and intrepid disposition.

"Larkin," she said, "I've thought what to do. You go and see your mother. *We'll* get you the new man's custom. And before Howie gets a chance of it."

Then Anna appeared on the verandah, ringing the lunch bell violently, and Larkin rode home his dead lame horse, and Pauline marched into the house with her head up, the other children following and clamouring to be told of her great plan.

# CHAPTER III

## MISS BIBBY

THE Judge's mountain home had an inviting aspect. It was not large,—it was not handsome,—simply a comfortable brick cottage with a gable or two cut to please the eye as well as meet architectural requirements, and a fine window here and there where a glimpse of far-off mountain piled against mountain could be obtained.

It stood back from the road and hid itself from the picnickers' gaze in lovely garments of trees and green vines that would take the envious newly-sprung cottage ten years at least to imitate.

Yet "Greenways" had never looked crude and painful as the naked places about did, even when it emerged years ago fresh from the hands of the local builder. For the Lomaxes, unlike many Australians, respected the hand of Nature even when it had traced Australian rather than English designs on their land. And the young gum trees still tossed their light heads here and there, and clumps of noble old ones stood everywhere smiling benevolent encouragement to the beginners.

It had been the Judge's original intention to have nothing but native trees and shrubs and flowers on this summer estate, and a well-clipped hedge of saltbush at present flanked the drive, and a breakwind plantation of Tasmanian blue gum, alternated with silver wattle, ran for several hundred feet where the westerly winds had at first caught one side of the house.

The tennis-court was guarded along both ends by soldierly rows of magnificently grown waratahs, that from October to Christmas time were all in bloom and worth coming far to see. And you approached that same tennis-court through a shady plantation, where every tree and shrub was native-born, and the ground carpeted with gay patches of boronia and other purely aboriginal loveliness. Rarely did the Judge take his walks abroad on the hills or in the gullies but he returned carefully cherishing in one hand some little seedling tree or plant he had dug up with his penknife. And he would set and water and shade it in his plantation, and tell you its name and its species, and its manner of growth, for the bushland was an open book to him and every letter of it had been lovingly conned.

But Mrs. Lomax, English-born, while he was Australian, through two or three generations, hankered, after a year or two of this native garden, for the softer and richer greens and more varied loveliness of the trees and flowers of English cultivation. So they laughingly drew a line of division through the estate; and it must be confessed that, whatever the Judge's opinion, the average eye gathered more permanent pleasure and refreshment from Mrs. Lomax's division than from the stiff, though brilliant, portion under the Judge's jurisdiction.

After ten years the demarcation was not so clearly defined: pines and young oaks, ashes and elms, stood about in perfectly friendly relations with the gum trees and wattles, and the boronia looked up at the rose and saw that it, too, was good.

"Have you washed your hands? Max, Muffie—go into the bathroom instantly, please, and wash your hands," said Miss Bibby, as the children trooped in after their interview with Larkin.

Dinner was spread in the dining-room as usual. The children sighed for the times when their mother had been with them, and had had such a delightful habit of having that meal served in all sorts of unexpected places, even on days when they could not go for an orthodox picnic. Behind the waratahs one day—and of course they imagined themselves waited on by a row of stiff and magnificent footmen in red plush. Among the wattles another time,

and the wattles just in bloom. Once in the vegetable garden with big leaves for plates, and the tomatoes that made the first course bending heavily on the trellis behind their seats, and the purple guavas that made the last hiding among their leaves just the other side of the path.

It would have required an earthquake to dislodge Miss Bibby from the stronghold of the dining-room table.

She sat at the head of that table now, a thin delicately-coloured woman not far from forty, with a nervous mouth and anxious blue eyes. Possibly she had been quite pretty in youth, if ever peace and the quiet mind had been hers. But the unrest and worry of her look left rather a disturbed impression on the beholder.

She sat at the head of the table and carved a leg of mutton, and saw Anna putting vegetables upon the children’s plates under silent protest.

She did not believe in meat. She did not believe in vegetables. She did not believe in puddings. Pauline had drawn her into confessing this at the first meal she had had with them, and the shock was so great that Muffie had actually burst into tears, and Max had clambered down from his chair with the half-formed intention of setting out at once for New Zealand, and dragging his mother back to her proper place.

Miss Bibby, however, set their minds at rest. She had no intention of interfering with the food they were accustomed to; only she begged to be excused from partaking of such herself.

No meat, no vegetables, no pudding, and still alive! The children took an abnormal interest in watching her preparations for eating at each meal.

She began each day, they found out, with a pint of hot water. Indeed they found it out to their sorrow, for she had Mrs. Lomax’s entire permission to work upon themselves one or two of her hygienic reforms—if she could only manage it.

So at seven o’clock, when in various stages of their morning toilet, they were confronted by Miss Bibby, armed with a tall jug of hot water and five tumblers. And they found they had to sit down on the edges of their beds and, receiving a full tumbler, hand back an empty one. If it had been their mother now, they might have protested and wheedled and got out of it in some way. But Miss Bibby was so strange to them, so new—and then mother had bidden them, even as she gave them their last kiss at the station, do all she bade them—that they found themselves making an absolute habit of this watery beginning to the day. Worse still, instead of being rewarded for such heroic behaviour, they were, in consequence of it, deprived of the pleasant cup of cocoa or hot milk that had always hitherto formed part of their breakfast.

“I consider it perfectly uncivilized to eat and drink at the same meal,” Miss Bibby said.

Pauline blinked at her very fast, in a way she had when angry.

“Daddy and mamma always do,” she said.

“For children, I mean,” said Miss Bibby, correcting herself. “I trust, Pauline, you do not think me capable of reflecting upon the conduct of your father and mother.”

But Pauline was engrossed with her breakfast again.

“All food should be taken dry,” Miss Bibby continued; “and your mother is anxious that I should get you *into* good ways. At the same time the human system needs a certain degree of liquid, so I shall call you in for your drink meals at eleven, and at three, and you may also have a glass of water each upon retiring.”

Sometimes it made the children quite depressed to watch her. Pauline used to say she would feel perfectly happy if she could once see Miss Bibby eat a big, lovely woolly currant bun or a plate of rich brown sausages dished on buttered toast.

And Lynn—it actually moved Lynn to poetry, the tragedy of this meagre fare. Pauline was bidden write “the song” down.

“And the name of the song,” added the poetess after a melancholy verse or two, “is ‘Sorrow,’ or ‘Miss Bibby.’”

Muffie told of the appearance of Mrs. Gowan and the heroic conduct of Pauline in announcing their contagion.

Lynn paused in her agreeable occupation of slicing up her banana and adding strawberry jam and milk to it.

“From to-morrow,” she said, “we have to keep in the orchard when we’re at home, so the man won’t hear us shouting.”

“What man?” asked Miss Bibby.

“The one who writes books,” said Lynn.

“What is the child talking about?” said Miss Bibby, looking at Pauline.

“At ‘Tenby,’” said Pauline. “Well, he should have asked were there any children near when he took the cottage. Why should we give up swinging on the gate? He can take his old books and sit on the Orphan Rock to write them. No one will disturb him *there*.”

“What *are* you talking about, children?” said Miss Bibby. “Pauline, answer me properly. I didn’t know ‘Tenby’ was let. Who has taken it?”

“I forget his name,” said Pauline; “please pass the bananas. Oh, Lynn, you’ve taken all the jam. Will you ring for some more, Miss Bibby?”

Miss Bibby rang absent-mindedly, though she had made the observation that any one eating bananas and strawberry jam together was actually inviting an attack of acute indigestion.

“I suppose you have confused the account,” she said, and sighed.

But a momentary agitation had shaken her.

She was a woman with one absorbing ambition—to publish a book. She carried a most pathetic tin trunk about with her—the sepulchre of the hopes of years. The MS. of at least seven novels lay inside, each neatly wrapped in paper, and with a faithful docket of its adventures pasted upon it.

It is enough to examine one of them:—*The Heirs of Tranby Chase.* It weighed four or five pounds. The publishers would never have had to grumble at its brevity, or have been compelled to use large type and wide margins to “bulk up.” It was written in the thin, early Victorian handwriting not often met with in this generation of writers. It subscribed faithfully to the great canons of publication—for instance, it was written on “one side only of the paper”; it was pinned together at the “left-hand top corner”; no publisher had ever found it necessary to gnash his teeth because it reached him rolled instead of flat.

Yet behold the piteous history!

“*The Heirs of Tranby Chase*, by Katherine J. Howard Bibby, Author of *The Quest of Guy Warburton*, *Through Darkness to Light*, or *Lady Felicia’s Peril*, etc., etc. Commenced Jan. 1, 1895. Finished March 6, 1896. Copied out (three times) December, 1896. Submitted to Messrs. Kesteven, Sydney; but they say they are publishing very little at present, as times are depressed. To James & James, Melbourne; returned. And unread, I am sure; the package had hardly been touched. To Brown & McMahon, Melbourne. A most polite note, but they do not care to publish so long a story. Shortened it, and copied again (July, 1898). Sent again to Brown & McMahon. A printed refusal: ‘Regret cannot use.’ December, 1899, posted to London to Messrs. Frogget & Leach. No reply. Wrote five times, but could not get packet back again, though I enclosed postal note for return in case of rejection. (Memo., never submit another MS. to this firm.) Copied story again, and sent to Bailey & Thompson, Paternoster Row. An extremely kind and flattering reply; their reader evidently thinks highly of the story. Will be glad to publish it at my own expense. Consulted Thomas. He thinks this

would be unwise, and will not allow me to withdraw my savings from the bank for the purpose until I have tried other firms. Sent to Mr. Lance Rankin, the great author's agent, together with the five-guinea fee which I found was necessary. April, 1902. Returned by Mr. Rankin, who says he has submitted it to fourteen different firms, but that there is a great depression in the book market at present. Possibly my plot is weak—must try another story."

And so on, and so forth. The pluck of the woman! The marvellous patience and endurance! Did this extinguish her spirit? No; she refreshed herself with reading tales of other writers worsted in the fight—Gissing's *New Grub Street* afforded her the maximum of melancholy satisfaction—and then she fell to work on a new book. And what the character of the new book was the latest popular success decided. Among the seven novels the trunk secreted was a historical romance, a religious novel, a detective tale, some "bush studies," and a book of political character.

Lynn disposed of a second saucerful of the banana compound that she called her ice cream. It seemed to quicken her memory.

"Hugh Rosskin is his name," she said deliberately, "and if Howie gets him it will be a great big shame, 'cause Larkin——"

But Miss Bibby was standing up, trembling from head to foot, and with a spot of scarlet colour in her cheeks.

"Hugh Kinross,—oh children, children—was that really the name? Oh, Pauline, my dear, my dear, try to think!"

"Yes," said Pauline, "Hugh Kinross—that was it."

"Hugh Kinross! Hugh Kinross! And at 'Tenby'!" Miss Bibby looked as excited as Muffie had done, when, going to feed her guinea-pig the day before, she found five little pinny gigs, as she tumultuously expressed it, had been unexpectedly added unto her stock.

Then she tried to pull herself swiftly together and to look—as Miss Bibby should look.

"If you have finished, children, you may go," she said. "Yes, Anna, you may clear the table."

She hurried away out of the room.

"It's my belief she's in love with 'im, and p'raps they've 'ad a quarrel," said Anna, who was aching in this quiet country place for a spice of adventure. Miss Bibby had not noticed that the girl had come into the room at Max's request with "more lawberry leserve."

The little girls looked at each other with sparkling eyes. They loved a mystery as much as Anna did.

"Oh," said Pauline, "won't it be lovely? Let's go and watch at the gate."

They flew off to stare at "Tenby"—"Tenby" with the local charwoman already there, throwing up the windows and sweeping away the dust of the winter.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE FAMOUS NOVELIST

IT was very early morning, seven o'clock perhaps, and Hugh Kinross, the famous novelist, sat in a camp chair at "Tenby," his feet on the verandah rail, and marvelled at his fame.

It was not his custom to rise quite so early to do this, but circumstances over which he alone had any control, namely the mountain fly, had driven him out of bed. There are no mosquitoes on the mountains; consequently many householders will not go to the expense of mosquito nets.

But the mountain fly rises earlier than any other fly extant, and the stranger who is not provided with a guardian net, leaping desperately up with it, has the early-rising virtue forcibly thrust upon him.

Later in the day, his wrath forgotten, the novelist writes to his city friends and boasts of the light atmosphere of the mountains, as if he had had something to do with the manufacture of it.

"I actually find myself rising at six," he writes, "simply to get out into the delicious air." And not one mention does he make of the debt he owes to the fly.

Hugh Kinross had been routed out at six and, his first choler spent, was quite pleased with himself. He discovered a path leading to a gully, and in the gully a pool beneath a fall, and here he had a circumscribed but delightful swim. Then he climbed up the gully side again, and the Lomaxes' home caught his eye, and so pleased the artistic side of him that he leaned over one of its hedges to gaze at it.

And "Greenways" in the clear morning air, nestling in its setting of tender green, splashed everywhere with the light tints of flowers,—"Greenways," with its eyes turned to the mountain where the marvellous morning lay in the first fresh indescribable blueness that creeps there after the pinks and purples and yellows of the dawn,—"Greenways," with a chimney at the rear sending up the friendly line of its earliest smoke, begot in him a vague emotion that all the bricks and mortar in the city were incapable of doing. He told himself that he, too, wanted a home;—not the boarding-house life that had been his before fame swooped down on him, nor the more luxurious club life that had followed, nor a holiday-month like this present one, in a rented cottage with his favourite sister for companion; but a home—like "Greenways"—with a slender woman in white, like the one there moving about the paths. There was no question in his mind but that she must be slender, for he himself and his sister were both stout. How Miss Bibby's heart would have leapt could she have known whose eyes were watching her as she walked perseveringly up and down, practising the early deep-breathing exercises that she maintained were so essential to health!

And it must be a home with signs of children's occupancy about—he was quite sure of that. Max and Muffie would have been amazed to know that the little red tricycle on the verandah, and the doll's perambulator overturned on a path, were assisting a celebrated man to this vague emotion.

"Ridiculous!" he said. "I'm hungry; that's what it is; this mountain air is doing me good already."

He crossed the road and went back to "Tenby," where his sister's bedroom was yet darkened, and the very servant still slept serenely. He was good-hearted, and could not bring himself to hammer on the doors; but as he went to the pantry to find something for himself, he concluded that they had fortified themselves against the fly by drawing the sheets over their heads.

The pantry and kitchen left him rueful. Boxes of every size stood about in what seemed to him the same wild confusion that they had

worn last night when they had been tossed out of the carrier’s cart. He foraged everywhere and could find no bread; in none of the tins or jars in which he peered lurked there any butter. Yet he realized that he had no one to blame but himself for this confusion. Matters had been beautifully arranged. His married sister, Mrs. Gowan, had taken “Tenby” for him, and seen to it that it was spotlessly clean; his unmarried sister, Kate, with an efficient servant, was to come up a week ahead of himself to get everything in perfect order and comfort for him, since he was supposed to be overworked and in need of a change.

And then, what must he do but upset everything! He had told Kate he would come to the station and see her comfortably off; but, indeed, she had seen all the luggage into the van, and the servant into another carriage, and bought her own magazines and ensconced herself comfortably in an empty first-class compartment before there was a sign of him. But then he came, and with a vengeance. She saw him, red-faced with hurrying, come striding along the platform, a Gladstone bag in his hand, plainly looking for her. She waved to him and he seized on a guard to unlock her door for him.

“You’ll be carried on,—quick, quick, get out!” she gasped, for the bell was ringing.

But he had dropped comfortably on to the seat opposite to her, after putting his portmanteau on the rack.

“I’m coming, too,” he said.

“You’re not,” she cried,—“you can’t,—I shan’t be ready for you; there’ll be no breakfast. Get out immediately, Hugh, and don’t be so foolish.” She actually dragged at his coat to pull him up from his seat.

But then the train gave a jerk, and she recognized the matter was out of her hands.

“Well, of all the wild doings!” she said; “you really might be twenty again, Hugh, and going off to England at two days’ notice with your very socks undarned.”

“I wish I were,” he said, and ruefully smoothed a bald patch on the top of his head.

“But—but—you don’t realize things a bit. I haven’t ordered anything,—the very beds aren’t made,—there won’t be a meal fit to eat for at least two days.” Kate looked as nearly put out as a stout, bright-faced woman of forty-five could look.

“I’ll sleep on a sofa,” he said, good-humouredly.

“It will have to be made up,” she snapped, or tried to snap.

“Very well, I’ll sleep under it.”

“And what about breakfast? Well, you will simply have to go to the hotel till I’m ready for you.”

“I’ll go to no hotel,” he said; “I’m sick of them. I’ll have half of your breakfast.”

“A boiled egg and bread, and the possibility of no butter,” she said scornfully.

“A boiled egg and bread, and the possibility of no butter be it,” he answered.

“But what on earth induced you to do such a mad thing?” she persisted.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I think it was chiefly because the beggar wouldn’t propose,” he said.

“What are you talking about, you mad boy?”

“You see,” he said, “he was a decent fellow—I’d quite spread myself on him, and she was no end of a girl, quite the best I’ve done. And I’d got him right up to the fence, and I’m hanged if I could get him over. He perorated, he posed like a shop-walker, you could see him hanging limp like a broken puppet, and me behind with beads on my forehead uselessly jerking the wires.”

“Poor old boy!” said Kate sympathetically. “Oh, he’ll do it beautifully when once you’re on the mountains. Now I look at you I can see you really are run down. I’ve been planning how I will make you a comfortable little study out of one of the bedrooms, and fix up your writing-table under a window that has a view, and give you a verandah to stalk up and down on when the fine frenzies seize you. But I don’t want you to come in for all the confusion of the first day.”

“Nonsense,” he said; “if you can stand it, I ought to be able to.”

But that noble sentiment was uttered at night, after a comfortable dinner at the club, and with the grateful appreciation of the sacrifice this loyal sister was making in breaking all her engagements to come to look after his welfare. It was before breakfast now, a time when the sentiments are absolutely raw, and the noblest mind is capable of resentment when not fortified with food. Hugh went out of the pantry and settled himself gloomily upon a side verandah, uncertain which to anathematize, the flies that had broken in upon his slumbers, or the ones that evidently were studiously refraining from awakening his sister and her handmaid.

But after a time the peace of the perfect morning soothed him, and he put his feet up on the verandah rail, and fell to marvelling at his own fame.

Five years ago he had been quite unknown—a struggling journalist savagely treated by Fate. And for sheer need once of saner employment for his leisure hours, he poured out some of the bitterness that a severe attack of indigestion had deposited on the wholesome substratum of his nature in perhaps as fierce a novel as had yet been written.

Five publishers rejected it with their customary regret; to the stereotyped refusal of the sixth the reader added a few lines, saying he had found much to admire in the work, but that a gracious public full of nerves would not stand so much cold water poured upon it. The seventh firm to whom he submitted the tale was on the verge of bankruptcy. Kinross was absolutely startled when he received a laconic note accepting his MS., and offering a very fair royalty. He was not to know that these publishers had taken it in the spirit of a man who with six shillings for his only capital puts five of them in a sweep where the odds are a thousand to one.

And then Fortune, who for more than forty years had pretended she did not know that there was any such person as Hugh Kinross cumbering the globe, suddenly veered round and smiled one of her most gracious smiles upon him.

He fairly leapt into fame. The inscrutable reading world, long bored almost to death by a sameness of methods, actually rose up and waved its hat at this savage treatment, and demanded that he should continue so to deal with it.

So Hugh, marvelling more than any one, continued to “lay about him with a knotted stick” as Kate, who had long typed his stories unsuccessful and successful, expressed it.

And he found himself wealthy, or at least comfortable, beyond the hopes of his most avaricious days, and famous beyond the wildest dreams that had flamed up in him when he had read his first journalese in print.

Even at forty-nine he had made no close ties. One sister, Mrs. Gowan, was married to a somewhat consequential brewer, who in the journalistic days had rather patronized Hugh. So there was no corner in that home the author cared to accept for his own.

The other sister, Kate—

> “Fair, fat and fortiter in re,
> And suave in manner”—

had long since refused the brewer’s patronage and pompous proposal that she should make a home in his house, and in return

act as governess to his children. She had thrown in her lot with Hugh, and was soon making, as a typewriter who could be relied upon for faithful work, a very comfortable income. The brother and sister boarded generally at the same house, and, absorbed in their work, drifted over the borderland of middle age together, and together lost their respective waist lines. They were the best of chums and respected each other's weaknesses. It was rather a trial to Hugh, perhaps, that Kate, being fat, had taken ardently to the bicycle and was therefore a joke among onlookers. But seeing the extreme enjoyment she got from her machine, and recognizing that a healthy, hardworking woman, without home or children, must break out somewhere, he had never tried to make her desist from her pleasure.

And Kate had to bear with Hugh.

He had a maddening habit of casting forth the match with which he lighted his pipe.

He would sit at a table surrounded with match-holders of every variety—one Christmas Kate had put six of the latest novelties in this line in his sock—and he would strike a light, and then thoughtlessly throw the dead match either towards the window or the fireplace.

As he pointed out to Kate, the wish to do well was plainly imbedded in his breast, or he would simply fling the useless thing down at his feet. Conscience was not deadened in him; he was quite aware that matches should not be casually strewn upon a carpet, and in his most absent-minded moods he sent them in the direction of those approved receptacles—the window or fireplace. Let her blame others if the window was closed—the sole use of a window, as far as he could see, was to throw matches through,—or if the fireplace was ridiculously decorated with plants and such foolishness, instead of holding its rightful consuming element for used vestas.

When Fortune smiled so marvellously on Hugh, one of the first things he did was to go down to the city, and with his own hands take down the strip of painted tin that, in a building of offices, announced "Miss Kinross, Typist."

He was on the verge of following this act by dropping the typewriter out of the window, when Kate came in just in time to point out to him that some one might be passing beneath, and so receive a worse headache from the thing than it had ever given her. She accepted, as wholeheartedly as he gave it, an income of two hundred a year from him. But she clung to her old typewriter, and copied lovingly all his stories for him.

A deprecatory little cough just below him took Hugh's attention from himself, and the place he had come so unexpectedly to occupy in the economic scheme of Nature.

## CHAPTER V

### ANTE-PRANDIAL VISITORS

HE looked and beheld a small maiden clad in a holland frock, with a white linen hat on the back of her gold-brown curls, instead of being set in orthodox fashion upon her head. Her white shoes and socks, fresh with the morning, were a little reddened with walking through the "Tenby" garden, which, as Pauline had borne witness, contained no grass whatever.

Just behind her was a small boy, sitting very firmly on a little red tricycle.

"Hello!" said Hugh; "very glad to see you, I'm sure. Friends who look you up in the low ebb of the hours before breakfast are friends indeed. Come along up, both of you, and tell me your names."

But Lynn stood loyal and steadfast at the foot of the steps, while she put the first necessary and searching question that was his due.

"Have you had whooping cough?" she said.

Hugh clutched his hair. He told her he was searching himself through all the crannies of his boyhood years. Yes, he remembered. He *had* undergone the affliction. There was a birthday party away back twenty, thirty, forty years through the mists, and *she* would have been at it, with her hair done in two little plaits and tied with blue ribbon. And he had to stay away because he had whooping cough.

Lynn looked very much relieved.

"What a good thing!" she said. "It is very seldom you get it twice, so we shan't hurt you."

"No," he said gravely, looking down on them, "you really don't look as if you would hurt me—much. But won't you come on the verandah? And can the gentleman alight by himself?"

Lynn came up the steps a little shyly.

But Max, though he got off his tricycle, looked a bit worried.

"He won't stand," he said. "Will you lend me your hank'fust to tie him to the post? he's a lood horse."

"He means a blood horse," explained Lynn in a low tone; "he always pretends his tricycle is a race-horse."

Hugh lent the handkerchief—even offered to assist in the tying.

"I'd like to have given him a feed, poor old Trike," said Max, "only—" and he looked regretfully around the garden—"you've no grass, have you?"

"I've no grass," said Hugh; "but did you never try him on white daisies? It wouldn't do, of course, to feed common horses on them, but a blood steed like yours, why, it would make his coat shine like varnish."

Max's eyes grew brilliant at the notion, and he rattled his charger up to a bank near, that was white with the flowers, and stuck the thing's head into it and fed him with handfuls of petals.

"Why, why," he shouted, "he's getting shinier every minute—and his mane's growing longer and longer."

From that moment he regarded Hugh as a man and a brother.

But Lynn had got to business.

"No," she said when offered a chair—"oh, no, thank you, we can't stay—Miss Bibby doesn't know we've come. But will you please deal with Larkin?"

"Deal with Larkin?" Hugh repeated.

"Yes, he's Octavius Smith, not Septimus, and much better. Mamma deals with him, and his bacon is only elevenpence, and he'll always bring your letters, too."

"Bacon!" said Hugh, hungrily. "I'd deal with any one who has bacon if it is fried and eggs are thrown in with it."

“Oh,” said Lynn, “he never throws them; they’re always packed very carefully in sawdust. And he doesn’t mind how often he comes with the things you’ve forgotten, and he gives you rides on his horse, and everything. He’s really *much* better than that horrid Howie, and he does so want to get a piano for Blanch and Emma, and buy out Octavius and Septimus, and put his mother in, because she works too hard on the farm. You will deal with him, won’t you?”

By dint of a few questions Hugh put himself in possession of the facts, and found out that his visitors were also his nearest neighbours. He discovered, too, that he would have been called upon by the whole quartet, but that it had been considered, in family conclave, that four was perhaps too great a number for a morning call. And further, it was necessary for Miss Bibby to see some figures about the garden. So the question was solved by drawing lots, which fell, greatly to the disgust of Pauline and Muffie, to Lynn and Max.

“I *know* you’ll go and spoil it all,” said Pauline. “I could do it so much better.”

So Lynn was on her mettle and fought hard in Larkin’s cause.

“I tell you what we’ll do,” said Hugh, struck with a brilliant idea, “you shall come with me, and we’ll go straight up to this Larkin’s. You have made me feel that I can exist no longer without some of the prime, middle cuts of his bacon at elevenpence.”

“Oh,” said Lynn, “Miss Bibby!” She was torn between Larkin and duty.

“Oh, of course, we’ll go and ask permission first,” said Hugh; “and we might leave Trike behind, eh, Max? After a feed like that he’ll want a rest.”

Away they went out of the gate and across the road.

Miss Bibby was down at the gate, fluttering with vexation. She had just found out that two of her naughty charges had actually dared to go and trouble the sacred peace of the famous novelist, and before he could have breakfasted!

She positively could hardly keep the tears back.

# CHAPTER VI

## A GROCERY ORDER

MISS BIBBY had been awake nearly all the night, her blood at fever heat.

Hugh Kinross a stone's-throw away! Hugh Kinross, the author of *Liars All*, and *In the Teeth of the World*, and other books, that had thrilled her and set her nerves tingling as if a whip had been applied to her back!

No book had ever so agitated her as *Liars All*. And she had paid it the highest compliment in her power—she had flung aside her political novel, and the historical one that she had been touching up, and the detective tale that she had been copying afresh, and she had started feverishly upon a short story that she had entitled *Hypocrites*. And *she* had tried desperately to "lay about her with a bludgeon," and say biting, savage things of hypocritical human nature, and hold a relentless mirror up to its little faults. Kinross would have been convulsed could he have seen it.

Miss Bibby lay in her quiet bed and illustrated Kinross for herself, since she had never been able to find a portrait of him in any magazine. He was very tall, austere-looking, very thin; the only smile that ever crossed his face was a cynical, a sardonic one. His hair and his eyes were black. He was clean-shaven and his lip and chin were blue.

And she would meet him—she could hardly help meeting him. Possibly she would never get so far as knowing him to speak to, but she would see his tall, spare figure moving slowly about the verandah as he wove his plots, and perhaps the shadow of his head on the blind of a lighted window far into the night.

The fever in her blood drove her from bed. She got up and bathed, and dressed herself with the punctilious care she always bestowed upon her toilet.

Over the choice of her morning dress she hesitated a moment. She wore dainty washing blouses, and neatly-cut serge skirts as a rule; but this morning something induced her to don a limp lavender muslin that took all the freshness from her cheeks.

Then she went out to the faithful performance of her duties, which no amount of fever in her blood could make her neglect. The hot-water ordeal was gone through, the children were turned out speckless from their bedrooms, the bedclothes were put to air, and not even her own "deep-breathing exercises" were omitted.

But then she missed Max and Lynn. And after a world of trouble dragged it from Pauline that they had actually gone across to "Tenby" to try to induce Hugh Kinross to give his orders for bacon and such things to Larkin.

Hugh Kinross and bacon! Miss Bibby ran down to the gate almost choking with agitation and distress.

There was a figure crossing the road, with Lynn held by the hand, and the red tricycle, and Max flanking it on the other side. It was a figure of merely medium height, more than a trifle inclined to stoutness, with an ordinary kindly face and shrewd eyes. He wore a white linen suit, creased all over with bad packing, and a soft shirt with a low collar. When he took off his old Panama hat, Miss Bibby saw, quite with a shock, the bald patch at the back of his head.

"Good-morning," he said pleasantly; "my little friend here tells me you are Miss Bibby. May I introduce myself? My name is Kinross. I have met the Judge on several occasions and I think he will vouch for my respectability. May I take these small ones up the road with me? We are going in hot pursuit of two of the world's best things—eggs and bacon. I will return them safely—thank you very much. Good-bye."

That was all. Not another word, though Miss Bibby, going over and over again in her mind the great meeting, tried hard to imagine that she had forgotten some notable thing he had said. Then she began to torture herself with fears that she had behaved stupidly. The suddenness had been too much for her; she could not recollect one solitary thing that she had said except a fluttering "Certainly," when he asked permission to take the children with him. What must he have thought of her?

Ah, if it could only happen over again when she should have had time to collect her faculties and make some brilliant and scathing repartee as the women in his books so frequently did. But then again, what chance had his speech offered for repartee? What kindling of conversation could there be when the only tinder provided was—eggs and bacon?

She worried herself to such a degree that when breakfast-time came, her appetite, usually small, had almost reached vanishing-point.

The cause of her flutterings was striding along the red dusty road, Lynn and Max having all they could do to keep up with him.

He, too, had had his moment of disappointment. Lynn had told him there was no other lady in their house but Miss Bibby; and then the figure that had given him some pleasurable emotions an hour ago—the slender white figure that had walked on the path between the flowers—turned out on close view to be merely a thin woman of almost forty, in a floppy puce-coloured muslin gown.

And Lynn was unwittingly merciless to the temporary occupant of her mother's place. When Kinross had asked her if it was Miss Bibby who was up so early and walking among the trees, she volunteered, in addition to the affirmative—which would have been quite enough—that she walked about like that when she was doing some of her deep-breathing exercises. And that after her deep-breathing exercises she always skipped backwards for five minutes, and after the skipping she lay down flat on the floor and kept lifting up her head in such a funny way.

And of course this led to an account of Miss Bibby's eccentricities of diet, of which Kinross soon knew all that seemed worth knowing. At first he had hardly listened as the irrepressibles chattered away, or he might have bidden them respect the lady's idiosyncrasies. But a sudden image confronted him of the figure in limp muslin, solemnly skipping for the good of her health, and he gave a great roar of laughter and vowed to himself he would use her for "copy" some day.

But now they were at the shops and Lynn and Max were greatly excited.

They pointed out the different places to him.

This was Benson's, and he made the most *delicious* drop cakes that ever were; they always bought some when they were going for picnics, and gen'ally on a Saturday, when Anna had no time to make cakes, they had them again. Hugh was solemnly warned not to be beguiled into dealing with Dunks. Dunks did give, it was true, nine for sixpence; but then Pauline had measured them once with Miss Bibby's tape measure—measured them "longways, and broadways, and fatways," and Benson's had been fully half an inch superior.

These were the two photographers. It was advisable to deal with this one, for he always gave you the whole tray down to choose from when you went to buy picture post-cards, and the other man didn't, 'cause he was afraid your hands were dirty. But they never were when you went for a walk, only Max's sometimes, because he still fell down a lot (this point Max contested hotly).

These were the two shoe-makers: if you broke the strap of your sandals this one could fix it best; but if you wore out your climbing shoes, and wanted a new pair made, it was advisable to patronize this one.

And *these* were the grocers. Poor old Septimus Smith would have stirred uncomfortably in the dreams that still held him, could he have heard Lynn and Max vigorously advising Burunda's latest stranger never on any pretence whatever to buy as much as half a pound of butter at his establishment.

And Octavius, sleepily sweeping his shop and doing the manifold duties of little Larkin, who was fast nearing the poor selection for his dearly-earned holiday,—Octavius would himself have been amazed at the number of good points his business had. His currants—how *much* cleaner than the currants of Septimus,—his bacon—words seemed inadequate to describe his bacon. He gave you a whole penny box of chocolates each when you went with Anna to pay his bill. He saved you the tinfoil from his tea-boxes and the lovely paper ribbon off the boxes of raisins.

Hugh heard again about Blanche and Emma and the piano, and the rapt vision of the buying up of both the Smiths, and the future conduct of one grocery business only by a person of the name of Larkin.

"Not another word," he said; "you have more than convinced me that no one who has any regard for his immortal soul would deal anywhere but at Octavius Smith's. Let us go on and swell Larkin's commission at once. You are probably better up in housekeeping than I am, Lynn,—if I forget any item you must jog my memory. My sister will be quite delighted that we have saved her all this trouble."

Octavius was speedily wide-awake.

He had always liked the Judge's children, and took a special interest in Lynn, who had composed the following song for him:—

> "You must deal at the shop of Octave
> Ius Smith if you're anxious to save.
> But into the small shop of Sept
> We hope that you never have stept."

But this was beyond everything good and thoughtful of the child. And as to Larkin, who had obtained her interest so well—well, the lad should have a "thumping" commission on the order.

The old man's hand began positively to shake as he wrote and wrote at the order.

It was Lynn who suggested everything, with Max occasionally coming in with a brilliant thought like "hundreds and lousands of laspberry jam."

As for instance—soap. "Yes, you will need soap," Lynn said; "how much? Oh, I think you always order grocery things in half-dozens."

"Half-dozens be it," said Hugh.

"Six bars of soap," wrote Octavius, who was a little deaf, and had not heard the quantity difficulty. "Six pounds of sago, six tins of curry-powder, y-y-yes, six jars of honey, certainly, six tins of tongue, six tins of asparagus, six pounds of pepper, six clothes pegs. Bacon? Any favourite brand?"

"Well, all I'm particular about," said Hugh, with a twinkle in his eye, "is that it shall be prime middle cut and elevenpence a pound."

"Just the very thing I make a speciality of!" cried the old man marvelling.

Finally the order was complete; it took two pages of the order book. Octavius would have to borrow Burunda's one cart to deliver so tremendous an order; the usual thing was for Larkin to carry goods in a basket on horseback.

He would have to go over to his brother Septimus and borrow some things,—asparagus, for instance; he never kept more than two tins at a time of so expensive an article. And pepper—his whole stock of pepper at present was but three pounds!

He bowed his customers out, rubbing his hands together, praising the day, the view—everything. Some enormously wealthy

friend of the Judge, without a doubt. Possibly the Premier from some other State—yes, most likely a Premier—who else could want six tins of tongue? Doubtless he was going to entertain the Ministers at a picnic at the waterfall.

"The Premier" came back after he had gone a step or two.

"Look here," he said, "just wrap me up some of that bacon and a few eggs, and I'll take them with me now. We've nothing for breakfast at our house."

Half-way down the hill again, Lynn, speechless with the thought of telling Pauline and Muffie about her brilliant success, Max, a little depressed—he could never walk before breakfast without feeling very large and hollow inside—Hugh, blandly holding to him the parcel of eggs and bacon, met an unexpected sight—Kate toiling along up the steep grade on her bicycle.

"He-he-he!" giggled Lynn; "look at that funny fat woman on a bicycle."

"It's only a lack bicycle," said Max critically, "mine's led."

The funny fat woman got off in a most agile fashion when they came alongside.

"My *dear* Hugh!" she said, "and I imagined you still sound asleep. What on earth are you after now?"

"Eggs and bacon," said Hugh promptly, "and you can just come home and fry them for me. Exercise must wait for a more suitable time."

"Exercise!" panted the lady indignantly, "why, I was just killing myself to get up to a store, and buy some butter for your breakfast, I had quite forgotten to bring any."

"We have ordered it," said Hugh—"six pounds of it. My little lady friend here informs me that it is the correct thing to order groceries in half-dozens. I like doing the correct thing, though a doubt did cross my mind as to the advisability of laying in six pounds of pepper."

"Six pounds of pepper! Oh, Hugh, you are joking."

She looked helplessly at Lynn.

But Lynn's sensitive little face was scarlet; she had called this bicycle lady "a funny fat woman," and here she was a friend of this very nice man's.

She did not know whether to gasp out an apology or remain silent. The latter course commended itself, however, to her, as it ever does to children.

"You don't mean to say you have given a grocery order without consulting me, Hugh?" insisted the lady.

"Just a little one to see us over to-day," said Hugh. "Half a dozen ox-tongues, half a dozen bars of soap—I forget the rest. I thought they would come in useful."

"Why, man," cried Kate, "the kitchen is full of packing-cases of groceries that I brought from town. You don't imagine I was going to let you run the risk of inferior things from a country store!"

"It is prime middle cut, I assure you," said Hugh seriously.

"I am going up to cancel your ridiculous order," said Kate determinedly, preparing to mount. "I shall explain to the storekeeper that you are not responsible for your actions."

"You are going home to fry my bacon," said Hugh, as he whirled her bicycle round; "if you don't I swear I'll sit down here and eat it raw."

# CHAPTER VII

## LETTERS TO A MOTHER

ONE morning, not long after this, there came to Miss Bibby at "Greenways" a letter from Thomas Bibby in the city.

Thomas was the sole male member of the family of Bibby, and was a hard-headed young clerk in the commercial department of a big evening newspaper. He had been brought up by his sisters;—there were three more Misses Bibby scattered about the State, teaching, or in similar positions of trust to the "Greenways" Miss Bibby. And they were all inclined to be literary. Clara Bibby wrote verse; if you happened to be a reader of obscure country newspapers you would frequently come across a poem entitled *Australia—my Country*, or *Wattle Blossom*, with the signature "Clara L. C. Bibby" beneath it. Alice, the quietest, gentlest little person in the world, wrote vehement articles in the suburban *Woman's Political Organ*. And Grace had actually brought out a book. A publisher had been touched at her despair when he handed her back her useless MS., and suggested she should compile a cookery book for him, which after a little time of dignified sulking she did; and the book came out and, there being room for it, had a most successful sale. And Grace, quite pleased and surprised, positively taught herself to cook from it, and found the subject so full of interest that she abandoned her heroines and started a second volume of *Cookery Hints for Busy Housewives*. But it galled the pride of Agnes, the "Greenways" Miss Bibby, and Clara, the poetess, and Alice, the *Woman's Voice*, that she signed it with her own name. They were confronted everywhere with *Bibby's Cookery Book.*

Thomas, after he had finished being brought up by these ladies, surprised every one by his faculty for business. They took him in his eighteenth year to the editor of an evening paper who was known to them, and begged that he should be received into the office to gain an insight into literary life, as they hoped in a few more years he would become a novelist.

"Suppose I'll have to give you a trial," growled the editor to the sulky-looking novelist-to-be, when the ladies had fluttered away. "Here you are, here's a bank manager made a mess of his accounts—no roguery about it, simple confusion, and he goes and shoots himself and his wife—can you turn that into a novel of two hundred words?"

"No, I can't," said Thomas, who hated all things literary. Then his sulky look vanished and his eyes brightened. "But I tell you what I *could* do—go and straighten out the poor chap's accounts."

"Here," said the editor, "you'd better go downstairs, my fine fellow, and ask Mr. Gates to give you a stool in the office."

So Thomas became a valued clerk in the counting-house. And presently when a foolish, feminine speculation swept away the income of the sisters, Thomas established himself as guardian of their bank-books, and general business man of the family.

The sisters, though a little money was still left, decided to take situations as governesses and companions, telling each other it would widen their outlook on life, and give them experiences that might prove invaluable in their literary work. Judge and Mrs. Lomax felt themselves fortunate when Miss Agnes Bibby, with such unquestionable credentials, appeared in answer to their advertisement for some one to take charge of their family during their absence.

And now came a letter from Thomas in the city to Agnes at "Greenways":—

"Dear old Ag.—

"Here's a chance for you if you can only take it. We've just heard that writing chap, Hugh Kinross, has gone to Burunda for a holiday. The beggar has dodged every attempt at an interview, though we and every other paper, for the matter of that, have lain for him in every possible place. Well, I was talking to the editor the other day —he's no end affable to me, and often has a chat—and I happened to say you were at Burunda. And he said, 'Burunda! why that's where Kinross is taking a holiday. Tell her to get any interesting information she can about him, and I'll pay her well for it. If she can manage an interview—a woman can rush in sometimes where a man fears to tread—I'll give her six guineas. Yes, and take one of the stories with which she is always bombarding me, hanged if I won't!'

"You can see it's worth trying for, old girl. Six guineas down for the interview, and say another four for a short story, not counting getting into print at last. Go in and win, say I. I'm sending with this an English mag. or two, with interviews in to show you the style of thing they need.

"You can easily find him out; he's sure to be at one of the hotels. Dog him on a walk some day, and then when you've got him cornered somewhere where he can't escape, whip out your note-book and make him hold up his arms. Butter him up a bit, and he'll give in; he's not been famous long enough not to feel inclined to purr if you rub him the right way.

"He's written two or three books; *Liars All* is one of them. They're not in your line, of course, but I must say they're not at all bad. Well, go in and win.

"Yours,

"Tom.

"PS.—I banked thirteen pounds six to-day for Grace—more royalties from the *Cookery Book.* Why don't you try something in the same line? *Poultry Keeping for Retrenched Incomes*, for instance; it would sell like penny ice creams on a heat-wave day."

Miss Bibby, after reading this letter for the third time that day, hastened into the dining-room where the children were awaiting her, a red spot on her cheek, and a hole burning inside her sleeve near her elbow, where, being pocketless as any modern woman, she had tucked the letter.

"She exacted half-an-hour a day at the piano, from each of the little girls."

She kept her thoughts away from it only by desperate expedients, such as sternly reminding herself that her time at present was paid for by Judge Lomax, and therefore belonged absolutely to him. Later in the day it would be a different matter, but now to her duties,—

"Pauline, Lynn, get out your pens this moment;—no, Muffie, you must write in pencil, you have spoiled the cloth with the ink you have spilled;—yes, yes, in a minute; Max, you sit here, dear, on the nice high chair, and then you can reach beautifully."

Max firmly refused the nice high chair, which he long had considered beneath the dignity of a man with a pocket, and had to be established as usual on two or three fat music books placed on a "grown-up" chair.

There were no regular lessons during the holidays, but Mrs. Lomax having said vaguely, at leaving, that she hoped the little girls would not have quite forgotten their scales, and how to write and read, before the governess returned, Miss Bibby had considered it her duty to see to these things.

So she exacted half an hour a day at the piano from each of the little girls, and faithfully sat beside them saying: "One, two, three, four, don't droop your wrists, Lynn; one, two, three, four, count, Pauline; one, two, three, four, thumb under, Muffie."

And she established two letter hours a week, and saw to it that the children wrote to their parents in their best hand for one page, though she allowed a "go-as-you-please" for the other pages, judging that that would give most pleasure across the wash of the Pacific seas.

"My dearest Mummie and Dad," wrote Pauline this afternoon, "I played my Serenade through yesterday without one single solitary mistake."

Then she looked up with trouble in her eyes.

"Miss Bibby," she said, "you know just where you turn over and the chords begin, are you *sure* I didn't play D flat there, instead of D natural?"

Miss Bibby started guiltily; as silence had settled slowly down over the room her thoughts began to drop nearer and nearer to her elbow.

"I don't remember, dear," she said; "didn't I praise you—didn't we say you could tell mother that you had it quite correct at last? Yes, I remember quite well."

Pauline sighed. There was no help for her spiritual difficulty here. That doubtful D flat had made her toss restlessly for half an hour before she slept last night. She was consumed by the desire to write the glorious news to her mother, and even Miss Bibby, exigent Miss Bibby, had said the piece was perfect. But Pauline herself had a lurking, miserable doubt in her mind; she seemed to recollect just one mistake, just one tiresome finger jumping up to a black note, when it should have played a white one with a slur. She stared wretchedly at the written statement before her. Suppose it were not true—think of writing a lie, an actual lie to mother! But, indeed, if she really knew for certain that she had played D flat she would not dream of writing so. It was the doubt that tormented. She had better not write so certainly—yes, she would add something that would leave the question more open. "Perhaps" was the word, of course, —"perhaps" excused many, many things. She read over the beginning once more, imagining it to be her mother's eye perusing.

"'My dearest Mummie and Dad,—I played my Serenade through this morning without one single solitary mistake perhaps.'" Oh, how the wretched word pulled one up, tarnished the brilliant achievement!

"Pauline, you cannot have finished; sit down," said Miss Bibby.

Pauline shook her head gloomily. "I can't write yet," she said; "I think I'll just go and play it over once more to be certain. That might have been D flat."

"Oh," said Miss Bibby excusingly, for the Serenade was long, like the lay of the Last Minstrel. "Mother won't mind, dear—just say you played it very well, and I was much pleased."

But Pauline shook her head wretchedly.

"I think I'll play it again," she said, and crossed over to the piano with melancholy eyes.

Lynn was wrestling with her first page.

"'Dearie mother, we don't cough so mush' (how do you spell cough, Miss Bibby? There's a horrid g or q in it somewhere, I know) —'I don't smudg so mush.' I wish (Oh, dear, you said we oughtn't to say we wished she'd come back, didn't you, Miss Bibby, cause she might stop enjoying herself? What else could I put after 'I wish'? I've got that written)."

"Suppose you say you wish you could write better," suggested Miss Bibby.

"I suppose that will have to do," said the little girl sadly. "No, I'll tell you, 'cause I don't *much* want to write better, I'll say I wish words would ryum better. Look at beauty, nothing will go with it but duty, and duty is such a ugly word in a song, isn't it?"

"No, I think it is a beautiful word," said Miss Bibby; she expected herself to say this, and was not disappointed.

"Well, I don't," sighed Lynn. "I could have made a lovely song this morning. It began—

'Oh, the bush is full of beauty,
    And the flowers are full of love,'

but I couldn't go any farther, 'cause there was nothing to ryum but that horrid duty."

"I think you could have made it very pretty, dear, with that word," said Miss Bibby. "And say rhyme, Lynn, not ryum. You could have said,—

'Oh, the bush is full of beauty,
    And the flowers are full of love,
And if we do our duty,
    We——we——'

—something like that, you know, dear."

"'We'll soon get up above,'"

finished Lynn discontentedly. "No, I didn't want it to go like that; it was just going to be a springy sort of a song, with wild birds in it, not a lessony sort."

"Well, get on with your letter, my dear," said Miss Bibby, who was often helpless before the fine instinct for the value of words with which Lynn had been gifted.

So Lynn continued in a cramped hand, "I wish there were more nice words—duty won't do."

This was a sentence calculated to puzzle even parents intelligent as Judge and Mrs. Lomax imagined themselves.

Then the child turned over to her "free" sheet, on which she might write and spell as she pleased, and gazed at it wistfully.

Oh, to purr out her little heart upon it so that the mother so far away might hear her speaking, whispering, just as if she were cuddled up in the dear arms!

What a tragic thing this was in her hand, this red pen with the end sucked nearly white, so powerful, so powerless!

"I love you," she wrote, and then covered a line or two with black crosses, that meant a passion of kisses. Oh, to catch at all the words that were surging in her heaving little breast, and to force them down on the white sheet, and to send them away red-hot across the sea!

She dipped wildly in the ink, she breathed hard and held the pen in almost a convulsive way. But the pitiful steel thing only

spluttered, and left a few lines of black scribble. Could the mother understand that? Ah, perhaps, perhaps.

"I hop you are well, from Lynn."

And so concluded the bi-weekly letter, with a big tear as usual, for Lynn simply could not write to mother without crying a little, though for the rest of the time she was a merry little grig.

Muffie was still blissfully untroubled by the need of orthography, and scribbled steadily over four pages, her lips moving all the time to such tune as "'so we went down the gully and ferns, such a lot. And I got the best of all, and it's under the house for you in a tin from Anna, and all of it's for you in the bushhouse at our proper house and daddie.'"

After a time the Serenade began to get upon the nerves of all the room.

Eleven times did poor Pauline attack it and eleven times did she have a breakdown. It was not always the D flat that caused the downfall, though Miss Bibby found herself listening with nerves a-stretch every time the difficult bar approached. And she felt inclined to cry with thankfulness everytime the child went smoothly past. But then just as surely as her nervous tension released itself, and she began to comfort herself that the concluding page could not fail to go well, a stumble, a slip, a despairing cry from the piano stool, and the whole performance began again.

"Oh, make her stop, Miss Bibby," implored Muffie; "she intrupts me dreadf'lly, and I'm in the middle of telling about the fat lady that rides on a bicycle."

"Make her stop," said Max, she "intlups me worse. I'll never get my letter done." Max, except for a wavy line or two in red chalk generally confined his correspondence to enclosing tangible sections of things in which he was interested at the time. To-day he had stuffed into his envelope a clipping from the tail of Larkin's horse, one of the white daisies Trike was being nourished upon, some shavings of coloured chalks from a box on which he had just expended his final penny, and a few currants from his last drop cake.

"I'm getting all my chalks mixed up with her intlupting me," he complained, looking angrily towards the piano where the devoted Pauline still battled madly with the Serenade.

"Pauline, my dear child, I shall go out of my senses if you play the thing again," Miss Bibby said desperately, as Pauline for the twelfth time began the clashing chords that opened the piece, and served as contrast for the gentler music of the Serenade itself.

"I've—I've *sworn* to myself to get it right," said Pauline wildly. Her lips were quivering, her eyes were full of tears, her very hands were shaking with weariness.

"You shouldn't swear," began Miss Bibby.

"The butcher does," volunteered Max.

"I—I mean it is wrong to bind oneself by a promise one may not be able to keep," Miss Bibby added hastily. "And you are not to talk to the butcher, Max. Shut the piano now, Pauline, and another time when you are quite calm——"

"I've got it w-w-written," sobbed Pauline, fighting with the keys through a mist of tears.

"You can easily start another letter," said Miss Bibby distractedly; "don't mention your music this time—your mother won't mind."

"No, I can't stop; I can't stop," wailed Pauline, playing on as if under a spell.

At this point Anna stalked into the room.

"Which I'm quite aware it isn't my place, Miss Bibby; but I'm here to look after the children as well as you," she said, "and them down with whooping cough that dreadful they can't eat potatoes, and getting punished like this till the very kettle in the kitchen is

ready to scream, and the Missus don’t believe in punishing, no, she don’t, and it’s a good deal longer I’ve lived in the fambly than some people, and knows the ways better, and the tears streaming down the poor child’s face like you never saw.”

Pauline had quivered once or twice during this heated speech, but as it finished she crashed on to D flat yet again, fell off her stool on to the floor, and rolled about screaming with laughter.

Even Miss Bibby was forced to smile a little, for Anna was plainly suffering keenly, and had bottled it up for some time.

“You mean well, Anna,” she said quietly, “even if you don’t express yourself well. You can put on your hat and take the children to the waterfall; it will do you all good, for it will be cool down there. I will go to the post, lock the side door, and put the key under the mat.”

In ten minutes “Greenways” lay still and peaceful once more among its trees, as if no Serenade had ever troubled its repose. The children were scampering down the gully with Anna following warily, certain she heard a snake at every step.

And Miss Bibby, the letters under her arm, was buttoning her gloves inside the gate, and settling her veil for the walk up to the township.

## CHAPTER VIII

### ACROSS THE RUBICON

BUT Larkin came along, Larkin, his auriferous hair glinting in the sun, Larkin, with his empty grocery basket swung on his rein arm, and a sheaf of papers under the other.

Larkin came along. And the whole course of Miss Bibby's life was thereby changed.

"Good-morning, ma'am," said the boy; "anything I can fetch yer down fer tea?"

"No, thank you," said Miss Bibby.

"I'll post yer letters for you," continued the youth; "I'm going straight back."

Miss Bibby reflected a moment.

It would certainly save her some time if he did so, and she had nothing now to do until tea—yes, it would give her a chance to read Thomas's letter once more, and consider things quietly.

"It's a bit 'ot, walking," Larkin said encouragingly. She handed him the letters.

"Put them in your pocket," she said, "and be sure to post them very carefully."

"I posts a good few 'ereabouts, and no complaints," smiled Larkin. "So nothing's wanted?" There was a note of sadness in the last question.

"Well, perhaps I could do with a tin of sponge fingers," said Miss Bibby softening.

"Thank you, Miss Bibby, ma—am, twopence," said Larkin, digging his heel into his horse and flying off. Twopence represented his commission; of course, without knowing it, he was falling into the habit of calculating it aloud.

Miss Bibby walked slowly back along the path, and with one slender white hand drew out again from her sleeve the agitating letter from Thomas. Again she read it steadily. Again she walked back to the gate, thinking deeply.

Actually at the gate she lifted her eyes and looked, with a quivering sigh at "Tenby," blinking shadeless in the afternoon sun.

The thing was impossible, of course. Not for anything in the world could she march up to that dread door and calmly propose to interview its almost sacred tenant.

Yet what a chance it was—in very truth the chance of all her lifetime! To have a story in print and paid for, she had craved this during all the long years that separate fourteen from thirty-six.

Again she walked towards the house, again back, this time along a higher path, to look yet again across the front hedge to the fateful cottage opposite.

And this time the higher position disclosed a view of the cottage not obtainable from the big gate. And this view included a little side verandah. And the little side verandah included Miss Kinross, her ample proportions disposed upon a small rocking-chair,—Miss Kinross amiably engaged in eating bananas, and reading a penny woman's paper in the hope of finding therein some new dish with which to tempt Hugh's appetite.

How very ordinary she looked, how very good-natured and stout!

Sudden and brilliant ideas came more seldom to Miss Bibby than to the children she was "care-taking." But undoubtedly one seized her now. The author himself was plainly either out, pacing a mountain top as he worked out his ideas, or else shut up securely in his study.

What if one threw oneself on the mercy of the stout, kindly-faced lady over there and implored her aid in the delicate task!

Miss Bibby did what she had probably never done since she was twenty—acted upon a sudden impulse instead of weighing and considering her action for days and weeks. She found herself moving across the road, lifting the latch of "Tenby's" gate, walking, not to the front door and ringing the bell in a respectable fashion, but forcing her trembling knees to carry her directly round to the side verandah.

Miss Kinross looked annoyed; few of us like to be caught by a stranger when we are tilted well back in a rocking-chair eating bananas in our fingers instead of upon a fruit plate and with orthodox knife and fork.

"Oh," said Miss Bibby, "pray don't be vexed; pray forgive me, it must seem unpardonably rude, but I—I——" She put her hand to her throat a moment, too agitated to continue.

Miss Kinross laid down her banana skin and rose to her feet, rapidly disarmed.

"It is Miss Bibby, is it not?" she said, holding her hand out with her most pleasant smile. "My brother told me your name; now where will you sit, do you like a low chair? try this one. It is kind of you to look us up so early."

Miss Bibby sat down still struggling with her agitation.

"I," she said—"I—not a visit—should not presume—an author's time—I came simply to ask a favour of you—so great a favour I—simply feel now I am actually here that it is impossible to ask it."

"Well, you must think better of that feeling, for I really love any one to ask me a favour. I believe all stout people are the same, a little weakness of the flesh, you know"; and Miss Kinross gave her visitor a smile so winning, so encouraging, that Miss Bibby's heart began to beat in its normal fashion again.

"But first," continued Miss Kinross, "we will have some tea. Now don't say you have had yours, if there is one thing I dislike it is drinking my afternoon tea in solitary state."

No, Miss Bibby had not had tea; Thomas's letter and the Serenade together had put even her severe afternoon drink of plain cold water out of her head.

But when Miss Kinross made a favour of it like that, how could she refuse to receive a cup when the maid carried out the tray?

"Yes," she said to the query about sugar, and "Yes" to milk. And "Yes, fairly strong," when asked how she liked it. No one would have dreamed it was more than six years since her last cup.

Possibly it was the unaccustomed stimulant that loosened her tongue; possibly it was the warm womanly sympathy that shone in her hostess's brown eyes—eyes that had made more than one person declare that Kate Kinross was absolutely beautiful, despite her avoirdupois. At any rate, Miss Bibby found herself pouring out all the story of her thwarted life, all the long tragedy of the seven declined novels in the trunk across the road.

Miss Kinross gave eager sympathy. That was nothing, nothing; many authors now famous had been declined again and again.

"Seven times?" asked Miss Bibby, with gentle mournfulness.

"Certainly," said Miss Kinross stoutly. "Why, look at Hugh, it is his favourite boast that there isn't a publisher in England who has not refused him at one time or another; nor one who wouldn't be glad to accept him to-day."

"Mr. Kinross—refused!" echoed Miss Bibby. Her world seemed in need of reconstruction for a minute. Then a strange warmth and comfort gathered about her poor heart. This made the author less terribly aloof, less altogether impossible to question if she should have the happiness of obtaining an interview.

She put her request at last very timidly to her new friend.

"Do you think he would give me an interview—just a very, very short one?"

But now Kate Kinross was perturbed.

“My dear girl,” she said (all women she liked were “dear girls” to Kate), “I simply dare not ask him. He has stood out against it so persistently all these five years. He simply hates publicity; he says all he asks is to do his work, to do it as he likes, and to go his own way as unmolested and as privately as a bricklayer does.”

“But just a very, very short one,” pleaded Miss Bibby. She went on to tell Kate about Thomas’s letter, the editor’s offer, this chance of a lifetime for herself.

Kate almost groaned.

“Five years have I kept them off him,” she said, “five whole years, and not one interviewer have I even allowed to get across the doorway! And you would have me plot against his peace like this!”

Miss Bibby urged no more, just sat still and swallowed heroically once or twice, and then said smilingly that it “didn’t matter at all.”

But Kate’s keen eyes were on her all the time. Something about this slender woman with the grey, half-startled eyes, and the soft mouth that quivered so easily, and the soft, thin cheek where the pink pulsed to and fro as rapidly as in a young girl’s, touched her curiously.

She stood up at last and put a hand on her visitor’s shoulder in a hearty, encouraging way.

“My dear girl,” she said, “come along, you shall have your chance. He had his, I’ll remind him of that. He will probably never forgive me, but I will risk that. Come along.”

“But not now—you don’t mean now?” gasped Miss Bibby, shrinking back in actual alarm, for her hostess seemed seeking to pilot her into the house. It would certainly take a week or two to persuade the author, she counted, and she herself would consequently have that length of time in which to screw up her courage.

“Certainly now,” said Miss Kinross, “this minute. Why not? He’s only in that room across the hall.”

“Oh, oh,” gasped Miss Bibby, “I—I must have time—I—I daren’t—Oh, Oh—don’t knock at the door—for Heaven’s sake.”

Kate laughed and drew back one moment.

“My dear girl,” she said, “he’s not in the least brutal, as he seems from his books. You couldn’t meet with a more harmless man if you hunted for a year. Don’t you be alarmed—why, you silly girl, you are actually trembling! He is nearly as stout as I am, and much more good-natured, and you’re not afraid of me. Now, come along.”

She opened a door without knocking and put in her head.

“Hugh,” she said, in as bland a tone as she could call up, “I have brought a lady to interview you for the *Evening Mail*. I have assured her you will not object. Well, I shall see you again in half an hour, Miss Bibby.”

And Miss Bibby felt herself pushed gently into the study of Hugh Kinross, and all retreat cut off behind her by the silent closing of the door.

# CHAPTER IX

## THE INTERVIEW FOR THE "EVENING MAIL"

KATE could hardly have chosen a more inopportune moment. The hero, who had troubled Hugh's repose in the moist atmosphere of the city, persisted in behaving in an untoward fashion, even when translated to an altitude of three thousand feet or so. He still perorated, still posed like a shop-walker, still behaved like a puppet, with its pulling strings in plainest evidence.

It was a mercilessly hot afternoon. All over the mountains the tourists were asking themselves in bitterness of spirit why they had left their comfortable homes in the city to subject themselves to weather like this. They all had the feeling of being wronged out of their money; the hotel-keepers, the house-agents, had lured them here under false pretences, and positively deserved punishment.

The sweat of heat and mental exertion poured down Hugh's face. He had followed his usual plan of work this year, that of drifting pleasantly along for nine months, jotting down a few notes, and writing a chapter now and again; and then pulling himself sharply together, and trying to work like a horse, and get all his ideas reduced to paper, corrected, re-written, and made ready for Kate to type in three months. Every New Year's Day he sat with Kate and mapped out a plan of work for the fresh year, that was to be utterly dissimilar to this reprehensible practice. Sometimes they got paper, and planned out each month's work, so many chapters to the month; it was surprising how simple it all looked, put down like that. For instance, one book a year, when a year consisted of three hundred and sixty-five days, was not too much to expect from a moderately active man in full possession of his health and faculties. One book a year represented say, thirty chapters, sixty or seventy thousand words. Seventy thousand words, divided by three hundred and sixty-five days, represented less than two hundred words a day. It looked like child's play—on the sheet of paper. It fairly astonished Hugh when he saw the whole question of his authorship thus reduced to its simple factors in black and white. Kate had typed the remarkable memorandum for him last year, and pasted it on a card, so that he might prop it up before him on his desk as a constant reminder.

Two hundred words a day! He used to spend much of the early part of January leaning back in his chair, happily planning out the accomplishment of two or three books which had long been in his head, but which want of time had hitherto prevented from getting as far as his writing-block. Yes, he determined (in January) that it was more than possible to have the whole three finished by next December; he was not married, his time was his own, he could order his days as he pleased, and turn night into day, and day into night, exactly when he chose. Why, when the good moods came, did he not write five thousand words a day, easily, eagerly! And this steady writing of a couple of hundred words a day would bring the good mood often, no doubt.

Yes, he would finish the three books this year—the subjects were all to his hand—and possibly the play he had had tucked away in his mind so many years. And some verse, too—the luxury of verse was very dear to him.

Brave January with the sun of resolution flaming high in the sky!

It was December now.

The poet might have as truly spoken of the *facilis descensus* to December as to the torrid region he mentioned.

It was December, and Hugh's first book still wanted forty thousand words to complete it. The other two works, the play, the verses, were still in the pale nimbus that ever plays tantalizingly around an author's desk.

It was December and the publisher was clamouring for copy. In the proud insolence begot of January’s shining possibilities and Kate’s neat memorandum, Hugh had promised his book by August.

And the long-suffering, kindly publisher, sympathetic over an author’s mood, had refrained from overmuch pressing of his claim for three months. But it was December now and he was growing restive; the MS. had to be typed, had to waste five weeks at sea, to be read in London, to be placed as advantageously as possible for serial rights in various countries, to be illustrated, to be printed, proofs had to be sent out for correction, to be returned, ten more weeks had to be lost at sea, and yet the book be published in the sacred season of autumn, nine short months hence.

The publisher was restive and Hugh desperate.

He had sworn to himself this afternoon nearly as fiercely as Pauline had that he would not leave the room until he “got it right.” Pauline was granted the relief of tears. Hugh could only give vent to his tumult of mind by tearing off his collar and hurling it into one corner of the room, peeling off his coat and flinging it under his table, and kicking off his white canvas shoes. These last he had purchased from one of the shoe-makers in the township only this morning, having neglected to put any footgear at all in his portmanteau. And being only two and elevenpence—none better were kept in stock—the shoes were badly cut and pinched him atrociously.

One at present reposed, sole upwards, on a chair where it had alighted after a vigorous aërial flight, and the other stood its ground in the middle of the floor.

And this was the manner of author Miss Bibby found herself suddenly shut up with for an interview destined for the *Evening Mail!*

Hugh spun round in his chair at Kate’s bland voice. He probably imagined he was in his revolving-chair at home, but he was not, and the frail article beneath him, unused to gyration upon one leg, gave way instantly and all but precipitated him at full length before his visitor.

Max, who an hour before had impugned the butcher’s impurity of language, would have found that in some respects a butcher and an author were men and brothers.

“Hugh spun round in his chair at Kate’s bland voice”

There was only one word; but the vigorous deliverance of it made Miss Bibby catch her breath and clasp her hands.

"I have startled you, madam," said Hugh, facing the "limp lavender lady" as he had called her to Kate; "and I ought to apologize, I am aware, but I don't. I would have apologized had I been betrayed to it in a drawing-room. But this is my work-room, *where I see nobody*." The last four words were almost thundered.

Agnes Bibby was praying—actually praying for courage. Her throat was working, her grey eyes had their most startled look. She was twisting her hands nervously together.

Hugh was not in the least conscience-stricken at her evident lack of composure.

He seriously considered for one second the expediency of repeating the word, and adding a few others to it, and so scaring the lavender lady out of his room and out of his life for ever.

But then he noticed she was actually trembling, and though his savage impulses were still well to the fore, he dragged up a chair and said "Sit down."

Miss Bibby sat down uncertainly, still gazing at him as if half expecting he might pounce on her and eat her at any second.

"And now what incredible thing was it I heard my sister say?" he asked.

"She—Miss Kinross—was good enough to try to help me to—an interview—a very short one—with you," said Miss Bibby, gathering breath and strength with the opening of her mouth.

"An interview! And my sister—my sister, Kate Kinross—is party to it!"

"She was willing to help another woman," said Miss Bibby.

"Ah," said Hugh, "I see, the two of you have plotted together to entrap a defenceless man."

Miss Bibby ventured on a faint smile, for the author was certainly smiling now. How was she to know, as Kate might have done, that it was his dangerous smile?

"Well, I hope you are going to forgive me, and grant my request," she said.

"And if I don't—if contumaciously I refuse?" said Hugh.

Surely Miss Bibby's prayer for courage was answered. She looked him gently in the eyes.

"I should try again," she said; and when he laughed at her fluttering audacity, she actually added, "and still again."

"I see, I see," he said, "I'm plainly powerless. Well, 'if 'twere done at all, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' Fire away, Miss Bibby; just regard me as a lamb led to the slaughter." There was a twinkle in his eye so demoniac that Kate would have been truly alarmed.

But now Miss Bibby was at a disadvantage. "I—unfortunately I have come unprepared," she said. "I did not expect to get the interview for quite a week. I brought no pencil and paper, and I might forget something you say." She looked distressedly at his table.

"Oh, don't mention a trifle like that," said Hugh urbanely; "permit me to lend you my fountain-pen"—he handed it to her—"and, this writing-block, is that sufficient paper?"

"Oh, quite," she said gratefully.

"Now then," said Hugh, and he leaned back in his chair and lowered his eyelids over his wicked eyes, "I will answer any question you like to put to me."

"How good you are!" breathed Miss Bibby.

Then there was a dead silence in the little room.

"Well," said Hugh, opening his eyes, "why don't you begin? It cannot be that compunction has suddenly seized you, I fear."

The woman’s grey eyes wore their startled look again, there was the pink flag of distress on her cheeks.

“I—I cannot think of any of the questions I should ask,” she said chokingly. “I meant to have carefully studied other interviews; I did not expect to have it so suddenly. Oh, what can you think of me for wasting your time like this?” She made a motion as if to rise and go. But Hugh waved her back to her chair.

“Possibly,” he said with smoothest courtesy, “I may be able to help you. It would be a pity to let such trifles prevent you from earning money. I presume you will be paid for this?”

“Oh yes,” said Miss Bibby, “I am offered six guineas for it.”

“Ah! And you need the money?”

“Well, I am not actually in want of it,” said Miss Bibby, “but——”

“But you could do with it, I see; most people can, can’t they? Well, let us get on. You want to know all about my private life, don’t you?”

“Oh,” said Miss Bibby, shocked. “I should not like to intrude like that. Just simple questions, I—I think they generally ask where you were born.”

“No, no,” said Hugh; “you haven’t studied the question, it’s plain. The public don’t care a hang nowadays where or how or when a man’s born. What they want to do is to lift the curtain suddenly from his home and see him going through the common round of his daily life. By George, wouldn’t they like to catch him beating his wife! A glimpse like that would make an interviewer’s fortune. ’Pon my soul, Miss Bibby, I’d give you the chance—you are so indefatigable—if I had such a thing as a wife.”

Miss Bibby laughed nervously,

“I—I think they like to know about an author’s methods of work,” she said, “if you would be so very kind.”

“Certainly, certainly,” said Hugh. “I rather pride myself upon my methods, now you come to mention it. I don’t believe there’s an author extant or underground with similar. See this card?” He rummaged on his table for Kate’s neatly-typed little memorandum.

“Yes?” said Miss Bibby breathlessly.

“That’s my daily allowance, two hundred words. Couldn’t sleep a wink if it were a hundred and ninety-nine. Pull myself up sharp even in the middle of a speech if I find I’m likely to make it two hundred and one.”

“How very interesting!” said Miss Bibby, scribbling hard. “A whole day, polishing two hundred words! No wonder the critics speak of your crystal style, Mr. Kinross. It reminds me of what I have read of Flaubert’s methods.”

“Then,” said Hugh dreamily, “I have a few other little methods of work, though so trivial and so essentially personal I don’t know whether you would find them worth mentioning.”

“Oh, anything, anything, Mr. Kinross, if you will be so kind,” said Miss Bibby enthusiastically.

“Well,” said Hugh, looking pensively around his work-room, “I am a man of rather curious habits. I may say my habits have become part of my nature. Certain spells are necessary to get me into proper vein for my two hundred words. For instance, my collar—you may have been surprised to find me collarless, Miss Bibby.”

Miss Bibby hastily expressed the sentiment that nothing he could do could surprise her; then saw the difficulties of the sentence, and grappled hard with it to reduce it to a polite form that should express the fact that a great author is above all the petty bonds that bind the rest of the world, and must be expected to act accordingly.

But Hugh was evidently not listening to her.

“Most authors, I believe,” he said, “when working, wear their collars in the place intended by nature—or should I say the manufacturers?—namely, around their neck. I cannot write one word until it is in the corner of the room.”

Miss Bibby made a note of the curious fact.

"And, mark you," said Hugh impressively, "it has to be the left-hand corner, facing the door, or the charm won't work."

"How *very* strange!" murmured Miss Bibby.

"Then my shoes," said Hugh. "There are authors, doubtless, who can write with these in their customary place—upon their feet. I cannot. My soul is too large, too chaotic. But perhaps you are not interested in men's shoes, Miss Bibby?"

He was regarding sadly the one of his own that stood in the middle of the floor.

"Oh, an author's shoes," murmured Miss Bibby.

"Well then, curious as it may seem to you, that, too, has become one of my spells," said Hugh, "my feet unfettered beneath my table. One shoe a little pointed to the right in the middle of the room; another, sole upwards, on a chair three and three-quarter feet distant from its fellow."

"Absolutely remarkable!" gasped Miss Bibby. She looked at him, a pencil poised a little hesitatingly. Was this thing possible? Was the great author then not quite, quite——she hardly liked, even in thought, to use the word sane?

"Oh, of course," said Hugh diffidently, "the fact may not seem worth mentioning in your article, but it is my experience that there is nothing which so endears a celebrity to his public as his little eccentricities."

"You are quite right," said Miss Bibby, "perfectly right, and indeed you are very, very good to make them known to me."

"Not at all, not at all," said Hugh graciously. "Anything else? I like to read myself, in these interviews, what time a writer gets up and goes to bed."

"Oh yes," said Miss Bibby, "that will be very interesting."

"Well," said Hugh, carefully fitting the finger tips of one hand on to the tips of the other, "I rise at a quarter to five, winter and summer, and get a cool two thousand off my chest while yet my fellow men are buried in slumber. And——"

"Excuse me," said Miss Bibby, "I don't quite follow—two thousand what, Mr. Kinross?"

"Words, of course," said Hugh.

"B—b—but," hesitated Miss Bibby, "I thought you said two hundred a day."

Hugh blinked a moment.

"My dear Madam," he said, "you have doubtless heard me called a stylist. Every one of those two hundred words I erase five to ten times, polishing, substituting, seeking to express myself better."

Miss Bibby was writing fluently again.

"This," said the author, "occupies me until half-past six, when I take three baths, one hot, one cold, one—like the church of the Laodiceans—neither. This stimulates me marvellously."

Scratch, scratch went the fountain-pen.

"After this," said the author, "I walk ten miles along a level road, and three through a hilly country, during the last mile of the latter practising the deep-breathing exercises so highly recommended by the medical faculty."

Scratch, scratch, the pink cheek flag deepening with pleasure.

"On my return I go through a short course of exercises for the muscles, answer a few letters while I am cooling down, and then breakfast."

"It must be eleven o'clock by then," ventured Miss Bibby.

"Eleven o'clock it is," said Hugh, after a moment's consideration.

"And for breakfast," said Miss Bibby. "Do you—do you eat ordinary things? It would be so interesting to know."

Hugh was about to instance eggs and bacon in exaggerated quantities, when he realized that they were much too gross for such

a paper. So he shook his head.

"I attribute my perfect health and clear and active brain solely to the cautions I observe with my diet," he said slowly. "No meat, no drinking at meals, no bread, no puddings. There are excellent substitutes," he picked up negligently from his desk a small packet that had been sent—an advertisement sample—to him by the morning's post, and had not yet been disposed of.

Miss Bibby wrote on, glowing with fellow-feeling.

"In conclusion," he added, "I am a strict teetotaler, and I never smoke."

Then it occurred to him "Greenways" might have seen the red end of a cigar on the "Tenby" verandah, and he added, "except an occasional cigar under medical orders."

He rose from his chair and gazed pensively at his black socked feet.

Miss Bibby fluttered up at once, handed back his pen, and hurriedly tore off from the block her last written sheet.

"I can never, never thank you enough," she said, and held out to him a hand that somehow pleased him, and made him compunctious at the same time—such a white, slender, gentlewoman's hand it was.

But then he remembered his hero had not yet proposed, and assuredly would not to-day after such an interruption. He told himself that she had deserved all she got, and that she would, at all events, earn the six guineas she was so eager about.

"Oh, don't mention it," he said gallantly, and turned her over to Kate, who was just coming along to satisfy herself that actual murder had not been committed.

She fluttered back one moment, however, just as he was closing the door.

"I believe interviews have to be signed as authentic by their subject, have they not?" she said; "forgive me for troubling you again."

"Oh, have they?" he said. His fountain-pen was in his hand. "Where shall I put the signature? I suppose you will copy all this out again; suppose I write on this blank slip?"

"That will do nicely," she said.

"I guarantee this to be an authentic interview, Hugh Kinross, his mark," he scrawled lazily across the page.

When he took his seat at the tea-table that night Kate came behind him and kissed the top of his head, an unusual mark of affection, for they were an undemonstrative couple in general.

"Dear old Hughie," she said, "you have given delight to more than one person."

"I believe I have, K," he said genially.

## CHAPTER X

### ANNA ENJOYS ILL-HEALTH

"ANNA," said Miss Bibby, with happy eyes the next morning, "I am going to take a whole holiday to-day."

"An' about time," said Anna, "I've been wonderin' how long you could keep it up, Miss Bibby. You've not had one yet, and me half a dozen. I don't have half as much to do with those childerun as you, but if I didn't get away from them sometimes I'd get hysterics."

"I am sure they are very good children—wonderfully good, Anna," said Miss Bibby.

"Oh yes, they're good enough," said Anna, "but so uncommon lively. And talk! They keeps it up, one after the other, and sometimes all four at a time, till your head spins round like a top. I got quite giddy goin' down to the waterfall with them yesterday, and it wasn't the steps, neither, it was just their tongues going at it, clackerty-clack all the time. What time will you be back, Miss Bibby?"

"Oh," said Miss Bibby, "I should not think of going *away* for my holiday, Anna. Mrs. Lomax knows nothing would make me leave the children so long, while she is so far away. But since she begged me to take a day a week to myself, I am going to shut myself in my room to-day. I have very important work."

"Working him a pair of slippers, I'll undertake," ran Anna's thoughts. But aloud she said, "Yes, you do, Miss Bibby. I'll keep them youngsters away from you; you get a good rest while you're about it."

The heartiness in her tone was due to the fact that she was about to ask for an extra special holiday for herself in a day or two to attend the Mountain Bakers' picnic at a distant waterfall.

So Miss Bibby disappeared into her room for the day, after having written down the children's meals in her painstaking fashion on the kitchen slate, and given the tradesmen's orders, and seen the children happily engaged in their favourite game of Swiss Family Robinson.

Anna sighed with relief; gentle as Miss Bibby was she had a way of keeping people up to the mark, and on a warm day like this, a well-executed policy of "letting things slip" appealed to the imagination.

Miss Bibby came back a moment.

"Anna," she said, "I have neglected to give Master Max and Miss Lynn their medicine, will you call them in and give it to them? I do not want to waste time."

Anna undertook the commission.

"Don't know what I'm thinking of; I forgot my own doses," she muttered as she went to the dining-room for the bottles. Max had been ordered a pleasant preparation of malt to fortify his little system during his convalescence, and Lynn an iron tonic. The other two were making such excellent recoveries nothing was needed.

Anna reached the two bottles from the cupboard, measured out with a steady hand a tablespoon of the malt, and swallowed it, then followed it by a teaspoonful of Lynn's iron. She looked at herself in the sideboard mirror as she did so. "I don't think I'm looking any better," she said mournfully.

Anna keenly enjoyed the worst of health.

She was an anæmic-looking girl with a pasty complexion, and hair several shades too light to correspond comfortably with it.

Ill-health was the only subject in life in which she took a genuine interest.

Miss Bibby supposed Anna quite a reader, so often did she find her deep in a paper, and so the girl was—of medical advertisements. The marvellous recoveries of persons like Mrs. Joseph Huggins, of

Arabella Street, Chippendale, who had been given up by six leading doctors after suffering from a blood-curdling list of ailments for seventeen years, and had been cured after taking one bottle, were a source of unfailing interest to Anna.

And never did an advertisement offer free a sample bottle of any drug, no matter for what purpose, but Anna sent instantly and claimed it.

It needed nothing but the announcement on Max's malt bottle of its tissue-building qualities, and its power of restoring the waste of nature in the human frame, for the girl at once privately to take a course of the same treatment and, as the chemist's bill might have testified, from the same bottle.

Similarly with Lynn's tonic; the accompanying pamphlet said something about its invigorating powers and the restoration of red corpuscles to the blood, so Anna at once prescribed it for herself also—out of Lynn's bottle.

And Miss Bibby's Health Foods that that lady paid for out of her slender purse—Anna determined that it was these things that gave the temporary head of the house that curiously delicate clear skin of hers; so being by no means satisfied with her own complexion, she consistently assisted herself to a small quantity of each, without, it need hardly be stated, foregoing any of her hearty meals at the kitchen table with Blake the gardener.

Miss Bibby had certainly been vaguely surprised at first at the rapid lowering both of the children's medicines and her own tins, but never dreaming of suspecting so unusual a cause, soon grew entirely accustomed to it, and imagined it was the normal consumption.

Her own constitution thus fortified, this morning Anna called loudly through the window for Max and Lynn to come in this instant and take their "medsuns."

Max came eagerly; he was so fond of his treacley spoonful it was a marvel he had not of his own accord jogged some one's memory and insisted upon the omission being rectified.

But Lynn's tonic embittered life for her for a considerable time before taking, as well as for several minutes afterwards, until a long drink and a chocolate removed the nauseous taste.

She was playing this morning, before Anna's call, in a mood of chastened joy.

Her conscience was always a prickly little affair, and forced her to confess to her sins almost before she had committed them. But she told herself this morning that it was certainly no business of hers to point out to Miss Bibby Miss Bibby's forgetfulness. And she was just comfortably settled up in the big quince tree as Fritz, in "Falconhurst," when that soul-vexing cry about "medsun" shrilled through a window.

"'Tend you don't hear; it's only Anna," said Pauline in swift sympathy.

Lynn flattened her body along a bough and drew up a possibly betraying leg.

"Do I show?" she whispered.

Paul shook her head, and moved with Muffie hastily away from the tree and began to run towards Anna, who, failing to obtain her quarry with a shout, was now seen rapidly coming to the Island of the Robinson family, late of Switzerland.

"Anna," shouted Pauline, one of the most resourceful young people in the world, "have you seen Lynn anywhere?"

Anna pulled up.

"No, I haven't," she said.

"Are you *sure* she's not in the house?" persisted Paul.

"If she is and heard me calling, I'll give it to her, or my name's not Anna," said that maiden irately.

"Do you think she can have gone again over to 'Tenby'?" pursued Pauline.

"That's it—that's what's got her," said Anna; "and fine and mad Miss Bibby will be with her, going worrying that book-man again. Well, I'm not going trapesing over there in this sun, but I'll make her take two doses at lunch if I have to put it down her back."

And with this frightful threat Anna returned to the house.

Poor Fritz nearly fell out of "Falconhurst" in his agitation.

"Oh, I think I'll go up and take it, Paul," she said; "two doses together would be too awful."

Her eyes grew round with horror at the mere thought.

"You could shut your teeth hard, after the first spoonful," said Paul, "and refuse, firmly refuse more."

"You could spit it out," said Muffie eagerly, "like when they gave me the castor-oil; and it was the last in the bottle, so they couldn't give me any more."

"But there are *gallons* more in my bottle," Lynn said dolefully, "and you heard what she said about putting it down my back."

"Look here," said Pauline, the judicial look of her father in her eyes, "that's just talk about putting it down our backs. I thought it all out that day Muffie ate the green peach. You know Miss Bibby said then she'd put it down her back—the castor-oil, you know. Well, if I'd been Muffie I'd just have said, 'All right, do.' Do you think they would have done so, and got her clothes all nasty and greasy? Not they, they think far too much of clothes. But even if they *had*—well, it might have been a bit sticky, but it would be better than taking stuff like that down your mouth."

This was marvellous perspicacity of thought; Lynn looked admiringly down at her sister, and Muffie stood, with her mouth open, digesting this freshly-minted fact, and making clear resolutions for all future consequences of green peaches.

They fell to playing again, Lynn remaining in the tree, however. Mrs. Robinson now engaged in sewing skin coats with a porcupine needle and flax, since the more active part of Fritz, shooting and shouting down below, was fraught with too much danger.

"I can't make Tentholm, 'less I have the diny-room tablecloth," said Muffie.

"Well, go and get it," said Pauline.

"All right," said Muffie, making a line for it, then calling back, just as a little sop to duty, "she said we weren't to, though."

"Run up and ask her," said Lynn, a law-abiding little person so long as the iron did not enter her soul or body.

Muffie dashed into Miss Bibby's bedroom after the briefest knock, and made her request.

"Yes, yes," murmured Miss Bibby, looking up with bright eyes from some writing she was engaged upon, "just this once, dear, but be careful not to——"

But Muffie had sprung away again, and what she had to avoid with the cloth, whether tearing it into holes, or getting mud on it, or losing it, or wetting it, she did not wait to hear. It is possible Miss Bibby did not even finish the sentence—her eyes looked absent-minded enough for such a lapse.

Muffie went gleefully back to Robinson Island, the art-green serge trailing behind her.

"We can have it, we can have it!" she announced gleefully, "only we're to be careful not to—come on, fasten it on to the sticks, Paul."

Miss Bibby had reached the chronicle of Hugh Kinross's "endearing little eccentricities."

A small pile of neatly written sheets lay to the right of her. In front of her lay more sheets, scored through, corrected, polished, until Flaubert himself would have been satisfied with the labour bestowed.

She had worked steadily through the night, the silent night in the hills, her lamp the only household eye still open in miles of black slumbering country.

At three o’clock she had flung herself down and snatched a few hours’ sleep, but by seven she was up again, the same quivering excitement in her veins. A little more polishing, then a fair copy in her very neatest hand, and she might bear it up to the four o’clock post, and send it flying forward to the *Evening Mail.*

The envelope that would hold it would hold also her destiny, she told herself. This was the most important crisis of her life; she had travelled nearly forty years—thirty-six to be exact—along a road of life, not rough and stony as many a road is, but just dull and level and monotonous and dusty, as are so many excellent highways. But now she stood at two crossroads, and saw stretching before her one in no wise different from that she had traversed so long, and the other a glittering tempting path springing joyously up a high hill, on the top of which, in the shade of laurel trees, sat at ease the whole goodly company of great authors. She fancied they were beckoning to her; she heard sweet voices from them throughout that feverish night—“Come up higher, Agnes Bibby,” they were saying.

The interview was the first step along this second path. The story, already promised space for, would be the second. And then, from out the bitter gloom of the trunk, the novels would emerge, one after the other, the world graciously holding out its hand for them.

“Miss Bibby,” said a mournful voice at the door, “Miss Bibby.”

“Oh, dear,” sighed Miss Bibby, “what is it now, Max?”

Max entered with a wool door-mat depending from his collar and just reaching his shoes.

“I have no tail,” he said, his lip drooping, “an’ Paul an’ Muff’s got late big long ones.”

“Oh, dear!” said Miss Bibby, after a frantic glance round her own apartment in search of an appendix, “I have nothing that would do, Max. Do run away, darling. Pretend you’ve got a tail, that is just as good.”

Max gulped threateningly.

“Laindeers have leal tails,” he said.

Again a frantic glance around. “Would a towel do if I pinned it on, dear?”

Max shook his head.

“In the lawning-loom lere’s a tail on the curtains,” he said, “but it’s showd on tight.”

“Well, ask Paul, ask Anna, ask some one else to look for something for you; but you mustn’t come to me, darling, this is Miss Bibby’s holiday, you don’t want to spoil it for her, do you?” Miss Bibby looked at him beseechingly.

But Max’s lip drooped lower and lower. Outside in the garden pranced Muffie and Pauline, a long tasselled drawback from the dining-room curtains, sweeping magnificently after each of them.

They had thought of them first, they insisted and, strongest reason of all, had got them first. Max had better be a sheep or a Manx cat, and not bother about a tail.

But Max, after a heart-breaking attempt to remove the drawing-room tie-back, which some over-provident person had stitched firmly in its place (as if anticipating unhallowed use being made of it), Max had gone bursting with his woes to the one who held his mother’s place.

“Please run away, darling,” said Miss Bibby again.

But Max sank down to the ground, and lifted up his voice in a bitter howl.

“Mamma—I want my mamma,” he yelled, as if he thought that by pitching the key high his voice might sound across the watery waste that separated her from him.

Miss Bibby was not proof against this; in fact it is just possible that Max had long since discovered that this mode of appeal was the most successful one he could essay.

She kissed and comforted him and, holding his hand, went out of the room in search of some article that would lend itself to the present necessity.

Max dragged her to the drawing-room.

“Cut it off,” he said, temptingly, “you’ve got lissors.”

There is no doubt whatever that in the circumstances Mrs. Lomax herself would have promptly given the much-desired article.

But Miss Bibby had established herself as anxious caretaker of the household chattels as well as children.

“Oh, darling!” she said, “I couldn’t possibly. Mamma’s pretty tie-back to trail in the dust!”

“I wouldn’t lail it on the paths, only on the lass,” said Max.

But Miss Bibby still shook her head, and Max began to work up from low down in his breast another howl.

Then Miss Bibby had a brilliant notion. She caught sight of a length of rope hanging on the verandah post, relic of a hammock that had gone the way of most hammocks.

“Where is a knife?” she said, “and run and get me a comb, Max.”

In five minutes she had half a yard of the excellent material beautifully unravelled, and Max was crazy with pride and eagerness to burst out upon the envious gaze of his sisters thus caparisoned.

He could hardly wait for the realistic affair to be fastened firmly to his belt, but kept saying, “be quick, be quick, Miss Bibby.”

“I think I deserve a kiss, Max,” she said wistfully, holding the eager little man a moment to her; this baby of the family had made himself a very warm corner in her heart.

“Then he shot away through the door.”

Max kissed her hurriedly.

“How much do you love me, darling?” persisted the misguided lady.

Quite conceivably Mrs. Lomax was in the habit of putting this question also, but had learned the wisdom of confining it to sleepy and leisure moments, and not obtruding it upon the strenuous time of play.

Max struggled away. “Big as th’ sea, big as th’ stars, big as this loom, big as anything,” he said hastily. It was his customary formula after this troublesome question.

“You dear little boy!” said Miss Bibby, kissing his soft young cheek. Then he shot away through the door, and she went back with rapid steps to the collar habit of Hugh Kinross.

# CHAPTER XI

## MISS BIBBY'S HOLIDAY

MISS Bibby worked another half-hour, perhaps. She was nervous and excited; she had set herself to catch the four o'clock post, and there still were numbers of pages with which she was dissatisfied. She was essaying, indeed, an impossible task—trying to couch Hugh Kinross's eccentricities in dignified English prose. And the shoes, at least, absolutely refused to be so treated; they seemed to stand out from the article just as prominently as they had stood out among the furniture of his room.

Miss Bibby sighed despairingly—the strain and the loss of sleep were telling upon her.

"Miss Bibby," shouted Pauline, bursting into the room, "Miss Bibby, Miss Bibby!"

"Run away," said Miss Bibby; "run away at once, Pauline. Surely it is not much for me to ask to have one day—just one day to myself."

"Quick, quick!" cried Pauline, "Muffie's stood on an ant-bed, and she's swarming!"

The shoes and the far shade of the laurel trees dropped instantly from Miss Bibby's horizon and, the horrors of the situation overwhelming her, she flew after Pauline to the victim.

The child's condition was piteous; absolutely mad with terror and pain, she was rushing about on the path, Max, yelling with sympathy, tearing after her. Lynn, at the first frantic moment when she saw her sister's high white socks turned black with their live covering, had leapt towards her and, with hands and pinafore, had essayed to sweep the things off. But the assailants were as alarmed and angry at their position now as the attacked and, while some sought safety by running up Lynn's sleeves, thus forcing her also to dance and scream, the remainder swarmed higher and higher up the luckless Muffie.

Miss Bibby's presence of mind quite deserted her. The whole of her note-book seemed to zig-zag vainly across her brain—her note-book where she had carefully written down antidotes for any poisons the children might swallow, remedies for scalds, burns, cut fingers, sprains, snake-bites. There was nothing about ants! Yet something must be done and instantly—the feet were the worst.

"Quick, quick! give me your foot, Muffie," she cried.

The child wildly stuck out one leg.

And Miss Bibby with her slim white hands seized the shoe—the shoe all black with its fierce, prickly living mass—unlaced it and dragged it off. Her own arms were alive in a moment, but she merely bit her lip and began to pull at the sock.

"What insanity of folly!" cried Hugh Kinross, sweeping her nearly off her feet, "here, where's the bath-room?"

Pauline dashed on to lead the way, and Hugh ran the two afflicted little girls hurriedly before him with one hand, and Miss Bibby grasped firmly by the shoulder with the other.

Once in the room, he turned on the three taps, hot, cold and shower, all at the same time, and followed this by dropping both children into the water.

"You'd better follow them," he said, for Miss Bibby was fidgeting about as if afflicted with St. Vitus's dance in her arms and shoulders. "Is there any ammonia in the house? Never mind, I'll go across and get some from Kate."

He strode away and Miss Bibby did not lose a minute in following his advice.

He gave the bottle to Anna on his return, Anna, who had only just come back from the end of the orchard where she had found it

necessary to go and ask Blake—leisurely—for some parsley. She was open-mouthed at what had happened.

"Here's the armonia, Miss Bibby," she said, going into the bath-room, "and you're to—to pollute it with some water and rub it on hard. Here, will I be doing, Miss Lynn?"

The children were gasping and gurgling now with laughter at the funniness of the whole affair, and even Miss Bibby was smiling a little at the drowned appearance of all of them.

She applied the ammonia to the bites, then left Anna to help the children into dry clothing, while, having carefully ascertained that Mr. Kinross had quite gone, she ran along the passages to her own bedroom, a limper lavender lady than ever.

While dressing she peeped between the laths of the blind, agitated, now the disturbance was over, to think of the sudden arrival of Hugh upon the scene. What a masterful man he was! How he had grasped her shoulder and pushed her along! But, oh! how stupid—how stupid he must have considered her for not thinking of water for the poor children herself! Yes, he had called it an insanity of folly! She peeped mournfully through the blind.

And across at "Tenby" now was a wagonette, with Mrs. Gowan and two such pretty, fashionable girls in it! And out came Hugh with a small portmanteau in his hand, and rather a better suit on than he generally wore, and certainly a better hat.

And Kate came after and kissed him good-bye!

Was his holiday, then, over? Was he going back to town? Oh, no, of course! Had not Lynn said he was going to the Jenolan Caves for a week with his other sister and her party? But Lynn had not said anything about those very pretty girls! Miss Bibby sighed, she knew not why, as the wagonette drove away.

Then, in a mood from which all buoyancy had fled, drowned probably with the ants in the unexpected bath, she began to work at the interview again.

A mile along the way Hugh gave an exclamation of annoyance; not so strong certainly as the one Miss Bibby had overheard, but still indicative of much vexation.

"I went expressly to 'Greenways'," he said, "to deliver a communication, and that ant business drove it out of my head. I'm really afraid I shall have to turn back."

The ladies protested a little. Was it very important? As it was they would barely make the first twenty-five miles of the journey, and reach the first hotel of their route before dark.

"Yes," said Hugh, really perturbed, "it is important—rather. I'm afraid I'll have to go back."

The coachman sulkily brought his horses round; the "ant business" had kept him waiting at "Tenby" gate nearly half an hour, and he had a strong objection to arriving at hotels when the dinner hour was long past and the cook, pettish at having to set to work again, quite callous about what she set before him.

But at the critical moment Larkin appeared—Larkin who had a perfect genius for appearing on the spot when he was wanted.

"Hello! here's Middlecut to the rescue," Hugh cried, hailing him with a shout. "Hi, young man, can you go off on a message for me?"

Larkin grinned and nodded assent. He had no notion why the book gentleman always gave him this name of Middlecut, but he had also no objection. Any gentleman who made his commission advance by leaps and bounds, as this one had done, was at liberty to call him any name that came handy.

Hugh had his fountain-pen, but no further vehicle for his message; none of the ladies could help him with as much as a visiting card—what help in emergencies can be expected from pocketless persons?

Larkin came to the rescue with the eternal card of Octavius Smith and his bacon at elevenpence.

"Dear Madam" (wrote Hugh upon the back of this choice stationery), "kindly burn any nonsense I may have said to you yesterday. On my return in a week I will see what I can do to give you better information. I was on my way to tell you this when Muffie's engaging adventure drove it out of my head. Pray excuse this card—necessity knows no etiquette.

"Yours,
"Hugh Kinross."

A minute later the wagonette was gaily upon its way again, Hugh in excellent spirits now he had laid the little demon of compunction that had been troubling his kind heart since breakfast.

And Larkin was cantering happily down to "Greenways," his own pocket (he kept his right-hand pocket for the money due to Octavius, and his left-hand for his own tips) the heavier by a shilling.

"Miss Bibby, Miss Bibby!" cried Pauline.

"And now what is it?" said Miss Bibby, whose nerves by this time were in a condition that made the reiteration of her own name a positive offence to her. She was dressed for going to the post, and had a long official envelope directed "To the Editor of the *Evening Mail*" tucked under her arm. But she had paused by the kitchen fire on her way out to superintend the blancmange which Anna was making for the children's tea, and which, they complained bitterly, she always made lumpy.

"Larkin is at the door," said Pauline, "and he's got something for you from Mr. Kinross."

"Where, where?" said Miss Bibby, fluttering forward. Larkin passed the card to Pauline. Pauline passed it to Miss Bibby—and on such small things does our destiny hang—the wrong side up.

That is to say the nauseating statement about the prime middle cut at elevenpence a pound was what met the eye of the eager Miss Bibby.

An ebullition of anger such as rarely visited the gentle lady rose within her now.

She flung the card angrily into the fire.

"You are a very rude little girl, Pauline," she said; "it is excessively ill-bred to play jokes upon people older than yourself. And as for Larkin——"

But Larkin had disappeared, his shilling being earned, and some business urgently needing his attendance.

Pauline slipped away to the garden, a resigned look upon her face. She had not meant to be ill-bred; she had no idea she was playing a joke. But she remembered now that Miss Bibby had several times swept down the cards of Octavius that they had placed on the drawing-room mantelpiece as a means of attracting any visitors' custom to Larkin. Still she need not have spoken in that angry tone, and called her "ill-bred." "Ill-bred" was a very uncomfortable word to have suddenly thrust upon one. Pauline leapt up at the gymnastic bar, and swung and wriggled there to shake it off.

Hot and perspiring after several brilliant efforts, that included hanging by the feet, and swinging upwards again, and resuming the perpendicular, Pauline climbed up and sat on the bar, holding to a post and dangling her legs.

From here through a break in the trees she could see the hill, and climbing up it steadily, steadily, Miss Bibby with her long precious envelope for the post tucked beneath her arm.

# CHAPTER XII

## IN BLACK AND WHITE

Four days later Kate was reading, rocking and eating banana again in the privacy of the little side verandah, when there came a familiar tramp across the room behind her.

"It can't be Hugh," she said aloud, for it had been allowed by the whole party that the seven days of a week were not too long to devote to the thorough "doing" of the marvellous caves.

"By George though, can't it?" said that gentleman as he came through the doorway, dropped his bag on one chair, and sat down heavily on another.

Kate laughed at him outright; his linen suit was red over with fine dust, dust lay half an inch deep on the brim of his Panama, his very eyebrows were red with the molecules of the mountain roads.

"Well, my girl," he said, "it was worth it—well worth it. Blessed be motor-cars henceforth and forever, though hitherto I've never had a good word to throw at one. Great Scott! to think of it; but for the chance of one chap laying another fifty to a hundred that his car could do the journey down in ten minutes under the other chap's, those girls would be jabbering in my ears yet."

"But I thought they were such wonderful girls," said Kate amusedly; "'ducky little girls', you called them, and 'little pets'."

"That's all very well," said Hugh; "little pets are very nice in their place, and no one appreciates them better than faithfully yours, for an hour or so. But when you get 'em for breakfast and lunch and dinner. And they even insist upon trifling with the holies of your smoking times, trying to light up cigarettes themselves, and jabbering all the time, why then you seize on a civil offer to risk your neck in a racing car as a drowning man would catch at a torpedo if he found it floating handy."

"You seem to have returned heart-whole, at all events," said Kate; "and I've had my suspicions of you."

"No," said Hugh, fanning himself composedly with a newspaper, "my day is not yet, though as I've told you before I'm like the fellow in the comic opera, there is that within me that tells me that when my time *does* come the convulsion will be tremendous! When I love, it will be with the accumulated fervour of sixty-six years! But I have an ideal—a semi-transparent Being filled with an inorganic fruit jelly—and I have never yet seen the woman who approaches within reasonable distance of it. All—all opaque—opaque—opaque."

Kate laughed. "Then I'm afraid you don't feel much better for the change," she said.

They had both hoped that a week's "junketing" with lively companions might bring back the pen's good hour.

"Better!" he groaned, "why the day you let that Bibby woman loose on me I was a flowing river compared to my mood to-day."

At that a recollection evidently came over Kate, some memory that the unexpected arrival had driven away, for she froze visibly.

"I will go and make you a lemon-squash," she said coldly; "you are possibly thirsty."

"Thirsty!" said Hugh, "my outward and visible dust is nothing to what I've swallowed! Make me six lemon-squashes. But what's the matter, Kit?"

She made no answer, merely turned one severe glance on him and went off to the pantry.

"Do tell me, Kate," he said, after he had lowered the large jugful she brought him, and still she had made no further remark. "Nothing's happened to the bike, has it? You've not smashed your precious nose? No, it seems intact. Has the low-spirited Ellen given notice? Has Octavius been charging more than elevenpence for his bacon?"

But Kate preserved a stony silence; she even picked up her book again and affected to read. He drew the volume out of her hands.

"I pray thee, Rosalind, sweet my coz, be merry."

"I don't feel as if I could ever be merry again with you, Hugh," she said.

"And here have I," he said, addressing the verandah ceiling, "passed through dangers enough to make me loved, Othello-wise, for themselves alone. Dangers of culverts, dangers of sharp turnings, dangers of blue metal, of precipices, of wandering cows, of naphtha explosions. Here have I turned myself into a demd damp moist unpleasant body just to get to her sheltering bosom and she repulses me like this."

"It is because I am what I have never been before, Hugh," said Kate, "and that is ashamed of you."

"Ashamed? Of me, my joy!" said Hugh, but he knew now that it was the interview outrage that was disturbing Kate. "It knows it is talking demd charming sweetness but naughty fibs. It knows it is not ashamed of its own popolorum tibby."

"Which is entirely attributable," said Kate, unable to resist keeping up the vein, "to the gross misconduct and most improper behaviour of Mr. Mantalini."

"Of me, my essential juice of pineapple!"

"Of you, Sir!"

"Will she call me, Sir!" cried Hugh, "me who doat upon her with the demdest ardour! She, who coils her fascination round me like a pure and angelic rattlesnake! It will be all up with my feelings; she will throw me into a demd state."

"Hugh," said Kate, "it is far too serious a matter for nonsense. I consider it was not only unkind but unmanly."

"My cup of happiness's sweetener," said Hugh, as he took out his pipe and his tobacco and his matches with much deliberation. "You brought it upon her yourself and she has *you* to blame." He filled his pipe with tobacco and rammed it well in. "It will be a lesson to you"—he struck a match—"and I trust to her"—he tilted his chair back and puffed once or twice—"to let an inoffensive man go on his way unmolested. And now my sweet Rose, my dear Rose, be merry."

"But you might have given her the lesson privately," persisted Kate, and her eyes kindled. "The unmanly part comes in when you callously allow her to become the laughing-stock of town."

"What!" thundered Hugh, and he brought his chair so suddenly and heavily back to its four-legged condition that the frail thing responded with an ominous creak. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Didn't you know she was going to sign the interview with her own name?" asked Kate, glad to find there might be some extenuating circumstances.

"You don't mean seriously to tell me she's gone and published that fool of an interview?" Hugh shouted.

"I do seriously so mean," said Kate.

"Go and get me the paper," he said.

Kate brought him the *Evening Mail* of two days back.

And there in black headlines he read—

"The only interview Hugh Kinross has ever granted."

"A lady beards the lion in his den and extracts most interesting particulars."

"The eccentricities of a great author."

When Agnes Bibby's neat MS. had reached the Editor of the *Evening Mail* that gentleman had fairly shouted with laughter, for he knew Kinross and his habits well. And this perfervid and most serious account was in truth very funny.

He found himself quite unable to resist so unique an opportunity of raising a roar of laughter among his readers. Therefore, telling himself that Kinross had too much humour to be seriously annoyed,

and holding himself protected by the well-known signature authenticating it, he had at once blue-pencilled the article and sent it precisely as it stood into the hands of the foreman printer. His twinkling eye had practically swept over without noticing the modest signature at the end of the article, “Agnes Bibby (Burunda).” Else, for the sake of Thomas downstairs, if not for the lady herself, he would have scored it through and let the laugh go against an anonymous contributor.

But things move rapidly in the office of an evening paper, and the foreman ran through the first proofs and the sub-editor through the second, and neither thought of removing that poor little name at the end.

And now the article was two days old and quite famous. There had not been a copy left of any of the editions.

“Well, well,” said Hugh as he seized the paper, and ran his eye over the paragraphs concerning his collar habit and his shoe habit, and his ante-prandial energy,—“the laugh’s only up against myself, and I’m not thin-skinned.” Then he saw the signature at the end, “Agnes Bibby (Burunda),” in large, clear type.

“By George!” he said; “by George, Kate! That’s rough on her.” He breathed hard. “Do you think she has seen it yet?”

“Seen it!” said Kate, and her voice actually choked a little. “The poor girl is breaking her heart over it. I have never known any one feel anything so acutely. Of course she must have realized it was all a joke the moment she read the Editor’s facetious comments. And then it seems she has a brother in the office, and he has written to her a brotherly letter explaining elaborately how she is the laughing-stock of the whole town.”

“By Jove!” repeated Hugh; “by Jove!” He seemed quite stunned. “Have you seen her yet, K? Does she seem at all cut up?”

“Seen her!” repeated Kate, her mouth a-tremble with sympathy. “Yes, I went over at once, and she saw me coming and ran this way and then that to get away from me. And when she couldn’t she just dropped down against the bank on the lawn and sobbed and cried as heartbrokenly as Muffie might have done.”

“I say!” said Hugh. He gulped a lump from his throat. “I say!”

Then he turned on his heel and strode through the cottage and over the verandah and through the “Tenby” garden and across the road and away down “Greenways” drive.

“Bless the boy!” said Kate, wiping her eyes. “I know he didn’t mean to hurt the poor thing.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### AN INTERVIEW WITH THE INTERVIEWER

HE could hardly wait to ring the bell; the front door was open and seemed to suggest that he should stride in and march directly to the room from which children’s voices were coming and where the victim of his brutality most likely also was sitting.

But he thought better of such behaviour and loudly rang the bell.

Anna came down the hall, evidently trying to restrain a giggle at his dusty appearance.

“Is Miss Bibby in?” he demanded sternly.

Anna looked uncertainly at the sitting-room door. “I—don’t know for certain. Will I go and see?”

“Yes, immediately, please,” said Hugh.

She did not ask him in at once: instead she took a few steps to the sitting-room door, opened it, giggled at the children, smoothed her face and turned round again.

“She’s not in there, sir,” she said. “Will you come in and sit down, and I’ll go and see if she’s anywhere else?”

Hugh strode into the sitting-room.

“Well, you’d think he’d wash hisself afore he came calling on a lady,” said Anna to herself as she went in search of Miss Bibby, “an’ brush his dirty hat. If that’s what making books brings you to, give me bread,” and she sent a loving thought to a certain dapper baker of her acquaintance.

In the sitting-room Pauline had screwed herself round and round on the piano stool till her knees were higher than the keyboard and she was able to contemplate her Serenade from a new point of view. She looked at Hugh in some excitement but without speaking.

Lynn, Muffie and Max had evidently been at work on their letters, but had all evidently pulled up suddenly, for each displayed a blot as a full stop.

Max was the first to recover himself. He remembered he had a use for this man.

“Did you ling me a lalagmite?” he demanded.

“Oh, yes,” cried Muffie, “our stalagtites,—did you break some off? We knowed a boy that got one in a dark cave when the guard wasn’t looking and pushed it up his sleeve to carry. Did you?”

“Not this time,” said Hugh; “but look here, young people, I didn’t come to see you to-day. Where’s Miss Bibby?”

At this question Paul began to revolve faster and faster on a downward journey simply to save herself the embarrassment of answering, and Lynn fell to writing a new sentence in her letter with great assiduity.

But Muffie had no qualms.

“She doesn’t want to see you, and she said we could talk to you and she wasn’t at home,” she answered.

“But she doesn’t know yet who it is,” objected Hugh.

“Yes she does,” said Muffie, “she sawed you coming up the path.”

“An’ she lushed out of the loom,” volunteered Max.

“Well,” said Hugh, “she’s got to see me, for it’s very important. Will you go to her room, Muffie, and say Mr. Kinross begs to see her as a special favour?”

“Oh,” said Muffie, “she isn’t in her room. When you say you’re not at home you go and stand out in the garden till the visitors go.”

“You don’t,” argued Lynn, “only Mrs. Merrick; but mother says ‘No,’ an’ she never does, an’ it just means ‘engaged,’ only it’s not so rude.”

“Well,” said Hugh desperately, “will you penetrate to the spot in the garden where Miss Bibby’s notions of honour may have taken her, Lynn, and say Mr. Kinross will be greatly obliged if she will see him for five minutes?”

“I really couldn’t,” said Lynn distressedly. “I’m very sorry, but I’m sure she wouldn’t like me to.”

“Very well,” said Hugh, “I shall simply go and find her myself,” and he pushed up the French window and stepped out into the garden.

“*We* gen’ally hide ahind the waratahs or the bamboos, or up a tree’s a good place,” said Muffie, much interested.

If it were hide-and-seek about to begin, this is where Max shone. He laid down his pen and slipped down from his chair.

“I’ll find her for you,” he said. “I find licker than any one. Once I found Paul an’ she was lapped up in the sheets in the linen less.”

But Hugh had made off towards the bamboos without any help. He could see a moving dress beyond the loose striped leaves.

At the sound of footsteps on the gravel the skirts moved rapidly away.

“So!” he said to himself. “Very well, Miss Bibby, it’s not dignified for persons of our age, but you’ll give up this chase before I do.”

She must have realized this, for, when they neared the waratahs she stood absolutely still and waited.

“You’re in for it now, my fine chap,” Hugh said to himself, “and she’ll weep—she’s just the sort to weep. Well, you jolly well deserve it, you brute.”

Then he walked up to her.

She wore a dark blue cambric to-day with a soft leather belt and dainty white muslin cuffs and collar as a relief. The costume suited her infinitely better than the limp lavender had done.

The colour was ebbing and flowing in her cheeks; her grey eyes wore their startled expression. But she held out her slim hand, albeit it trembled a little.

“Good-morning, Mr. Kinross,” she said, “slightly pleasanter weather, is it not? Though I rather expect a thunderstorm, and then perhaps that will be the end of heat waves this summer. What do you think? Must we expect another?”

“Er——” said Hugh, “I really don’t know.”

“Mrs. Lomax writes that it is delightful in New Zealand just now—just like fresh spring weather all the time. Both she and the Judge are feeling better.”

“Glad to hear it,” said Hugh, “but——”

“They are at Rotorua at present,” Miss Bibby persisted. “The Judge is fortunate enough to have among his memories that of the country before the Pink and White Terraces were swallowed up. But they write that all is very beautiful still. Of course you have been in New Zealand, Mr. Kinross?”

“Miss Bibby,” said Hugh, “I did not come to talk of Pink and White Terraces to you before I removed the dust of my journey. I want to tell you how sorry——”

“I would rather talk of the Terraces, Mr. Kinross,” Miss Bibby said, with a gentle dignity of manner that surprised him. But her soft lip quivered one moment.

“And, by George, Kate,” he said afterwards, recounting the interview to his sister, “I nearly kissed her on the spot—just like I do you when I’ve been ramping round and have hurt you and want to make up. She was taking it so gamely.”

“But I must talk of it,” he insisted. “What a low ruffian you must consider me! I——”

“Oh, no,” she said, “I—I quite understand now. I was importunate and at an infelicitous time. I recognize that I brought it upon myself. Well, people will forget about it presently—a new sensation will come along,” she smiled faintly.

“I was in a vile temper that afternoon, certainly,” he said, “and I treated you shamefully. But what I do want to make you realize is that I would have cut off my hand rather than have made you—or any one—publicly ridiculous. Will you believe that?”

She only looked at him very gently and without speaking.

“Don’t you remember my coming up here—four or five days ago now? I was coming to tell you to burn the stuff, and then you know one of the youngsters stirred up an ant-bed and drove it out of my mind.”

“Yes,” she said politely; “oh, yes, that was quite enough to put it out of your head.” But she looked away from him.

“Then, as you know,” pursued Hugh, “I have been at the Caves ever since. But I took the precaution the moment I remembered to send you word.”

Now she was looking at him. “I received no message.”

“That scoundrelly young Larkin—do you say that he did not bring you a note from me?” he cried.

“No, I had no note,” she said faintly. “He must have lost it or have forgotten to bring it.”

“That is it,” said Hugh, “but I still blame myself. I ought to have turned back when I remembered and not have trusted a lad.”

“There he is now. Oh, Larkin! Larkin!” murmured Miss Bibby in the tone Sir Isaac Newton must have used when his dog Diamond did him the irreparable mischief.

Yes, there was Larkin, riding gaily off down the path to the gate, an empty basket swung on one arm. He had just received another commission from Anna—a large bottle of patent medicine and a complexion remedy, and as he had lately extended the field of his operation by acting as a sort of travelling agent (on commission) for a chemist in an adjoining village, it brought the piano and the grocery emporium a little closer.

Hugh gave a peremptory whistle and the boy looked over his shoulder, then responded to the beckon by bringing his horse sharply round and cantering briskly across to the waratahs.

“Something else, Miss Bibby, ma’am?” he said, whipping out his order book.

“What do you mean by not delivering the note I gave you from the wagonette on Thursday?” said Hugh angrily.

“I did deliver it!” said Larkin in much indignation, “which I can say honest, sir; I never neglected a message yet. And that’s why our business is what it is.”

“Whom did you give it to?” said Miss Bibby. “Was it to one of the children?”

“Not much, ma’am,” said Larkin, in open scorn. “I don’t do business that ways, knowin’ well what kids—begging yer pardon, children are. I did hand it to the oldest of ’em, certainly, but I took the precaution, Miss Bibby, ma’am, to stay at the door till I seen her hand it to you. You was standin’ by the fire and I seen it *acshally in yer hand*.”

“But that was no letter,” said Miss Bibby, a faint recollection stealing over her, “it was one of your trade cards.”

“It was on one of those I wrote,” said Hugh, “having no other paper. I remember apologizing for using it.”

“And I burnt it!” said Miss Bibby in a stricken tone. “Tossed it on the fire without a glance—I thought they were playing me a trick! Poor Pauline—I—must apologize to Pauline.”

“You can go,” said Hugh to Larkin, “and here’s a shilling to wipe the momentary slur off from your character.”

And Larkin rode off, vindicated, slapping the left-hand pocket of his trousers.

“Does it make my crime a little less brutal?” said Hugh gently.

She put out her slim white hand again.

“Let us forget about it,” she said; “I shall soon live it down.” Her eyes flashed for a moment bravely up to his.

He gripped her hand hard, shook it several times, and told her she had behaved in a manner altogether more generous than he deserved.

“If you want to make me a little more comfortable in my own mind,” he said as he was leaving, “you will give me something to do for you. Can I—my sister tells me you write a great deal and—and have not had any very great fortune with the editors and publishers yet. Is there any MS I could read—and perhaps presume to offer a little advice upon? It would make me very happy—that is, if you have sufficient confidence in me.”

The humble, anxious note in his voice would have amazed several score of his readers who had written to him to ask him, since he was a literary man, to read through an accompanying bulky parcel of MS, advise about its faults and give hints about publishing. For these persons—anathema maranatha to all authors—received by return of post one of a large packet of printed slips that stood ever ready on Hugh’s desk, and learned briefly that “Mr. Hugh Kinross, being neither a literary agent nor a philanthropist but merely a working man with a market value on every hour, begs to repudiate

the honour his correspondent would do him, and informs him that his MS will be returned on receipt of stamps to cover postage.”

Miss Bibby was not proof against this offer. She gave Hugh one look of intense gratitude and hurried into the house, returning presently with a small roll of typewritten MS—her latest creation, *Hypocrites*.

“This story,” she said quite tremulously—“Oh, I am so anxious, so very anxious about it. The editor of the *Evening Mail*—has promised to use one of mine; it will be—well, not quite my first story in print, but certainly the first one paid for. There is such a difference, isn’t there? Nearly any one can get a story into print if they want no remuneration. You can understand how anxious I am that it should be good. I sent it to be typed in town so that it would present a better appearance. It has just come back by the post. Oh! if you *could* spare time to glance at it. Is it too much to ask?”

He laughed at her. “A bit of a story like that—three thousand words at the most! You are too modest, Miss Bibby. You should have brought me a packet weighing about half a hundredweight as the rest of them send me.”

“No, no;—just that I am pinning all my hopes on *Hypocrites*.” A wave of pink was in her cheeks, her eyes shone softly.

“With the greatest pleasure in life,” said Hugh heartily, and tucked the little roll beneath his arm. “And now I had better go and wash my face, or Kate will be coming after me with a sponge and towel.”

“A wave of pink was in her cheeks, her eyes shone softly.”

And back he went to "Tenby," while Miss Bibby with a much less heavy heart returned to her interrupted "one, two, three, four" with Pauline.

# CHAPTER XIV

## THE LITERARY MICROBE

"WE are contagious," Pauline announced honestly and courageously at the advent of every stranger, however interesting.

And Lynn, equally careful it has been seen, refused to hold any intercourse with the author at "Tenby" until the searching question, "Have you had whooping cough?" had been put to him.

Yet here was Hugh Kinross himself taking no precaution whatever to protect the neighbouring "Greenways" from contagion, and the result was that the literary microbe was wafted across the road in a surprisingly short space of time.

Miss Bibby certainly could not be said to be infected for the first time, though there was no doubt that since the new tenants had come to "Tenby" the disease had taken a much more aggravated form with her.

But Anna one afternoon made a solemn excursion to the store of Septimus Smith and purchased one exercise-book, one pen, one bottle of ink and one blotting-pad.

She had hitherto regarded the making of books as some occult art practised by certain persons, mostly as dead and as distant as one Shakespeare whose fame had faintly reached her.

But when there came into the unpretentious cottage across the road the actual author of a printed book that lay on a table in the drawing-room; and when this actual author was discovered on near view to be a rather stout man with a shockingly bad hat and creases all over his linen coats; and when the maid who dwelt in the same house with this actual author testified, during the course of a gossip, that he was in no wise different from other men—which is to say, he made no end of a fuss if the toast was not to his liking and threw his burnt matches down anywhere, and shouted angrily if there was no soap in the bathroom—why then, when all these things were discovered, Anna simply walked up to the store one fine afternoon and set herself up in the stock-in-trade of an author, marvelling that it had never before occurred to her to write a book.

But after she had done a very few chapters she craved a reading audience. Blake the gardener, she determined, was too surly for this office, and too sleepy; his day's work so near to Nature's heart and at such an altitude made him nod by seven o'clock in the evening. And one could hardly follow after him as he trundled about with his barrow in the daytime and read aloud to him how it was discovered that the lovely Annabell Deloitte, who was a nursery governess in a lord's family, had been changed in the cradle and was really the Lady Florentine Trelawney.

And Miss Bibby, for all her gentleness, was too "stand-offish" for the position of listener. Anna at once rejected any idea of asking that lady to undertake the work.

But the children made a delightful audience and clamoured eagerly, the moment they reached the foot of the waterfall, for the "book" to be produced from the secret recesses of Anna's umbrella (in which it hid itself from Miss Bibby's eyes), and for the enthralling woes of the Lady Florentine Trelawney to be at once continued.

So it may be concluded that it was Anna who acted as the direct vehicle for the transmission of the literary infection to the children themselves.

The logic of the matter was very simple.

If Anna could write a book—Anna who was to be frequently seen with black smuts from the stove all over her face; Anna who did not know that the reign of William the Conqueror was 1066 to 1087, nor where sago came from, nor what were the calyx and the stamen of a flower (had they not themselves tested her?)—well, if Anna could make up a book, so could they—every one of them.

“It will cost us twopence each,” said Pauline calculatingly, “but we can afford it; it’s nearly the day for our sixpences again.”

“I wanted my last tuppence for some pink wool—can’t you find some paper in the house?” said Muffie on discovering that the disbursement Pauline declared necessary was for mere paper.

“No,” said Pauline firmly; “authors always have plenty of clean paper. I won’t use the half sheets Miss Bibby gives us to scribble on.”

“No, no; *do* let us use proper paper,” cried Lynn, who had had far too many poetic fancies nipped in the bud for want of this precious transmitting material.

So the purchases were made and the eightpennyworth of paper made a very respectable show upon the table of the summer-house, to which they had retreated to ensure privacy to themselves for the arduous undertaking.

Pauline sat at the head of the table, the others ranged almost meekly around her. Hers was a responsible position and she intended them all to realize it.

For while it was one thing for all to say lightly, “We will write a book each,” the matter resolved itself into all the actual writing falling to Pauline, for the sad and simple reason that none of the others *could* write.

So Pauline leaned back and gave herself airs.

“I shall write my own story first,” she said, “and you are none of you to speak a word to interrupt me, or I won’t write yours at all. Max, stop scratching on the table; Muffie, don’t shuffle your feet like that, you put my vein out.” The last was a slightly tangled remark picked up from Miss Kinross who had been heard to speak of various interruptions putting her brother out of vein.

Muffie, thwarted in her desire to scratch a horse upon the surface of the table, fell to filling up a crack in it with sand scooped up from the floor and mixed, when the writing lady was not looking, to a pleasing consistency with ink.

Lynn lay face downwards on a bench and bent all her energies to composing the story that Pauline would shortly write at her dictation.

Max simply strolled to the door; the little girls might be under Pauline’s thumb, but no one expected him really to obey any one except his father.

“Call me when you’re leady,” he said to Pauline, “I’ll be sitting on the loof.”

And Muffie, suffering from her enforced inactivity, soon had the tantalizing sight of sections of his brown legs displayed through the lattice work above her head.

Scratch, scratch went Pauline’s pen—scratch, scratch along line after line. Evidently she was not troubled with any lack of ideas.

Twenty minutes, half an hour slipped away. Lynn had long since composed her tale and had fallen to playing a fairy drama at the end of her bench with bits of moss and white pebbles from the floor.

Max had tumbled twice through a hole in the lattice roof, and had on each occasion blotted Pauline’s precious MS by the precipitation of his whole body upon it.

Sore, therefore, about his knees and elbows, he had given up his lofty perch and betaken himself to his oft-essayed task of digging a hole in the ground, to reach the fire that the kindergarten governess had informed him burnt in the middle of the earth.

And Muffie now occupied the seat on the summer-house roof, and did not lose the opportunity of demonstrating to Max that girls kept their balance much better than boys.

"I've finished—come and listen," cried Pauline at last.

Lynn sat upright at once and tried to disentangle her drama from her story. Muffie slid comfortably down from her perch. But Max was not ready.

"Wait a minte," he cried, "I'm nearly down to the fire—oh, oh, I can feel it on my hand—I b'leeve my spade's aginning to melt."

But Pauline insisted on his instant attendance within doors.

"'Once upon a time'," she began, "'there was a beautiful mother'."

"As beautiful as ours?" asked Lynn.

"Beautifuller," said Pauline.

Lynn argued the point hotly, with Muffie to back her.

"She *couldn't* be," they said.

"Yes, she could—in a book," said Pauline. "I'm not talking about really truly, of course. But in a book they can be as lovely as lovely."

"So is mother," said the little girls stoutly.

"Oh, of course," said Pauline, and her heart softening to the distant dear one, she said, "Well, 'once 'pon a time there was a mother as beautiful as our mother, and she died'."

"Oh, oh," said Lynn. "Oh, I wish mamma was here. Oh, I don't like your story a bit, Paul."

"Silly," said Paul, "this is only a book mother—it doesn't hurt book mothers to die. Now just stop interrupting me. Well, she died—she's just got to die or the rest of the story can't happen. The beautiful mother died, 'and one day when Emmeline was sitting in the spachius drawing-room of the castle—'"

"Who's Emmeline?" asked Muffie.

"Oh, how stupid you are," cried Pauline; "she's the daughter, of course,—'sitting in the spachius drawing-room of the castle her father strode in, and he led by the hand a very horty lady. "This is your new mother and I command you to obey her, my lady Emmeline," he said. Emmeline fainted to the ground.

"'Her father the noble lord was always out at his office and didn't know how the horty step-mother treated Emmeline, but she grew thinner and paler every day, and all her face went transparant and the blue veins were trased in their pallor and her little hand was like a skellington's; and the cruel step-mother made her do all the scrubbing and hard work, and treated her like a menient. And one day the Lady Emmeline disappeared and was never found again. But twenty years afterwards the wainscotching in the castle was being mended, and they found her lying behind it, her long eyelashes resting on the marble pallor of her cheeks, her little hands clasped in their last long sleep, quite dead. And the noble lord wept bitterly and resolved never to have another step-mother, and he built a monyment with a white angel to her memory'."

Lynn was quite moved by the story, and gulped down a sob which made Paul most gracious and grateful to her.

But Muffie sniffed. "Well, she was a silly," she said. "Why didn't she bang and kick on the wall like the time I hid in the cupboard and the door got shut? Every one heard me in a minute."

"Wainscotching's much thicker than common cupboards," said Paul disdainfully.

"I'd have got my axe and chopped and chopped and walked light out and chopped off the woman's head and put her down my hole," said Max.

Then it was Lynn's turn.

She dictated rapidly, occasionally waving her arms dramatically to heighten the effect.

"'A key lay on the ground. The moon was up. Purple was on the mountains, and all in the valley lay the snow-white mist. Black pine trees stood in a long, long row, like the ghosts of tall soldiers. The sun was setting, and orange and purple flamed in the sky. The moon was very young and thin and was just climbing up the other side of the sky. The sun——'"

"Oh, I say," said Pauline, "isn't anything ever going to happen? I'm tired of the sun and the moon. I always skip that kind of thing in books."

"Oh, Paul!" said Lynn, "that's the best part. You can make such lovely pictures."

"Go on," said Paul.

"'The sun was——'"

Pauline folded her arms. "I won't write another word about the sun," she said.

"Well, the moon—" said Lynn beseechingly. "Just say 'the moon looked like a far-off silver boat.'"

"No," said Paul; "you've said once it looked like a starved baby."

"I didn't," said Lynn indignantly.

"Yes—'young and thin,' that's the same thing," said Pauline. "Now get on to something else. What about the key?"

"'The key lay on the ground'," said Lynn resignedly, "'and sparkled in the darkness'."

"Keys *don't* sparkle in the darkness, but go on," said Paul, writing away.

"This one did," persisted the poor little authoress; "the fairies had smeared it with that phis,—phos,—oh, you know, that lovely shiny stuff we saw on the sea at night when we were in the ship."

"I know," shouted Max; "lat-poison, like they put down at the tables to kill the lats."

"It wasn't," said Lynn angrily,—"rat-poison indeed,—it was like burning gold."

"Go on," said Pauline wearily.

"'Su'nnly out of a snow-white lily stepped a beautious fairy. She had——'"

Scratch, scratch went Pauline's pen over a couple of pages; the fairy's eyes were described and likened to stars and other shining things; her ears, her teeth, her neck, her arms and hands were all lingeringly and lovingly enumerated and described.

Max went back disgustedly to his digging for fire.

Muffie nearly fell asleep, Pauline's hand grew cramped, and still the fairy continued to "have" things.

"'Her dress was of silver spider's silk studded all over with dewdrops'," went on Lynn, beginning now energetically upon every detail of the wardrobe of the "beautious" being.

And Pauline bore even with this, though she heaved a huge sigh of relief when from crown to shoes the entire toilette of the fairy had been dealt with.

But Lynn held her, like the ancient mariner, with a glittering eye.

"'She was followed by six handmaidens'," she said, "'and the first one had——'"

But here Pauline struck. The prospect of describing six more beauteous beings and their toilettes was more than she could contemplate.

"You've had your amount," she cried; "mine only took five pages, and I've done five for you." And despite Lynn's wild entreaties, she wrote "The End" at this point of the story, and shook Muffie and informed her it was her turn.

Muffie yawned.

"'Oncepon a time'," she said.

"Go on," said Pauline.

"'Oncepon a time there was'——"

“I’ve got that, be quick,” said Paul.

“‘Oncepon a time there was a—a——’” Muffie looked appealingly at Lynn.

“A fairy?” suggested Lynn.

“A little dog?” said Max who had strolled back.

“Yes, a little dog,” said Muffie gratefully.

“Go on, I’ve got that,” said Paul.

“‘Oncepon a time there was a little dog and it—it——’”

“Was really a fairy under a enchanting spell?” whispered Lynn.

But Muffie was too sleepy to rise to the occasion. She repeated her formula once more in the hope of helping herself.

“‘Oncepon a time there was a—a dog—and it—it——’”

“Barked?” said Max.

“Yes,” said Muffie thankfully. “That’s all, Paul—write it big, and it will make a lot. Le’s go and see if tea’s ready.”

“I haven’t lote *my* book,” said Max, and looked ready to cry.

“Don’t be so mean, Muffie; sit down and wait,” said Pauline. “Come on Max, darling, Paul will write yours the neatest of all. Now then.”

Max thrust his hands into his ridiculous pockets and stood with his legs well apart. He always told the same class of story though the variations were several.

“Well,” he said slowly, “‘’was a ittle boy, an’ him said to hims mover, can I go down in the deep foresh all by myself, an’ she told him no. And’”—here Max paused very impressively till he had collected the eyes of all his audience—“‘he went. An’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he met’”—another pause, calculated to thrill his listeners—“‘a snake. An’ it clawled light up him an’ it ate him all up. Evly bit of him. Escept hims legs. An’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he met a tiger. An’ e tiger eat ’em up. Evly bit of ’em. Escept hims feet. An’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he walked along, an’ he met a horsh. An’ e horsh ate ’em all up. Evly bit of ’em. An’ nofing was left. Ony hims button. An’ hims mover had no dear ittle boy left’, so there.”

The unique part of the stories Max told was, he invariably managed to leave the impression that the moral of the tale was the mother should not have refused her consent to his going down the dark forest all alone and that she was the sole sufferer.

Pauline opened and shut her cramped hand half a dozen times.

“Thank goodness they’re done,” she said. “Give me that piece of paper to wrap them in, Muffie, and you go and get some string, Lynn, while I write to him.”

For the final destination of the tales had long since been settled.

So it happened that Hugh Kinross, coming home from the golf links at tea-time, was greeted by a bulky newspaper parcel on his desk, and the laconic note, “Please corect our mistakes and have them made into books like yours, only nicer covers. We like red except Lynn, and she likes green. And we like gold edges and plenty of pictures, and our names at the front in big letters.”

# CHAPTER XV

## "OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES"

"THAT excuse about inspiration was all very well," said Dora, rubbing away hard at an obstinate spot on a pink silk blouse, "but I would give a good deal to know why he *really* went off in such a violent hurry, Bee."

"Well, I fancy he does not get on too well with Mr. Gowan," said Bee. "It always seemed to me when I saw them together that the one despised the other for brewing beer and the other despised the one for brewing books."

"Why, Bee," said the other girl admiringly, "that was almost clever. I wish I could think of that sort of thing to say."

"Must be evil communications," laughed Bee. "I never used to be accused of such a thing as cleverness. I must tell Mr. Kinross he's contagious."

"But why do you suppose he went?" persisted Dora. "I don't think he bothered much over Mr. Gowan; he just used to avoid him. And you can see he likes Mrs. Gowan well enough, though I suppose not so well as that fat sister he lives with. What *could* have driven him away?"

Bee, with a little iron that she heated at a gas ring on her washstand, was carefully smoothing out some crumpled chiffons and ribbons.

For it was wet weather on the mountains, and in the big hotel where the Gowans were staying the two girls whom Hugh was pleased privately to call "little pets" had foregathered in Bee's bedroom, to gossip happily and repair little ravages in their many and bewilderingly pretty toilettes.

Bee held her tiny iron against her cheek a moment to test its heat.

"You've accounted for every one but ourselves, Doady," she said; "it must have been one of us, or both. That is it; he likes us both so much, and was so afraid of proposing to the wrong one, that he dashed off in a motor-car to consider the matter in solitude."

Dora held her blouse up to the light. "I believe I'm making it worse," she said, pensively regarding the spot. Then she poured out a little more benzine and fell to rubbing the place again.

"What shall you say if he proposes to you, Bee?"

Bee ironed out with much deliberation the blue chiffon hat strings that made her a joy to all beholders.

"I haven't *quite* decided," she said thoughtfully; "I might say briskly, 'With much pleasure, my dear Mr. Kinross.' Or I might put my finger in my mouth and hang back a little time."

"But you would accept him, Bee?"

"Oh, of course," said Bee; "wouldn't you?"

"I—I suppose so," said Dora.

Then both girls sighed.

"I wish he hadn't started to go bald," Bee said pathetically.

"I wish he hadn't started to grow stout," Dora added.

Bee pulled herself together.

"Charlie and Graham may be stout themselves by the time they are his age," she said.

Dora felt obliged to follow suit.

"And of course you can't expect an author to have as much hair as—as Charlie, for instance, can you?" she said.

"Oh, Charlie, Charlie!" sighed Bee. "But what shall you say if it is *you* he wants, Dora?"

Dora looked absolutely nervous.

"Oh, Bee—tell me, for goodness' sake, so I can be ready. Oh, I wish you could be there to help me, if he does. I *know* I shall just

giggle."

"You mean 'should,'" said Bee calmly. "You know it is quite probable that it is I he likes."

"Oh, yes, of course, Bee, you know that is what I mean," said the younger girl; "but do tell me what to say. I should want him to understand distinctly that I couldn't think of being married for ages. Oh, Bee, I must have a bit more fun. Don't you feel like that?"

"Oh, yes, that's all very well, Do," said Bee gloomily, "but it is quite time we were engaged. It is a very serious matter and we must face it."

They faced it, sitting side by side on the edge of the narrow hotel bed, with their pretty little feet in their high-heeled shoes dangling several inches from the ground.

"I am nineteen now," Bee continued, "and I can see plainly if you don't get engaged by the time you are as old as that there is very little chance for you nowadays. Look at my sisters, four of them older than I and not one of them engaged. And poor old Floss is thirty-four—though of course that's a secret, Dora."

"Oh, of course," said Dora.

"Well, I'm not going to take any risks," continued Bee; "I decided that before I left school last year. Five disengaged Miss Kings are too frightful to contemplate. I shall not be as particular as the girls have been; Floss threw away one excellent chance just because the man was only five feet."

"Oh, Bee," said Dora pathetically, "of course she did! Five feet! Why, I am five feet!"

Bee shook her wise head.

"If there aren't enough six-foot men to go round you've got to put up with the five-foot ones," she said inexorably. "I have quite decided that the first real man who asks me I shall accept. I don't mean silly boys like Charlie and Graham, of course, who are only just starting their medical course and then have to buy a practice and make it pay before they can marry. Why, we should have crow's-feet round our eyes, and thin, scraggy necks"—she passed a hand over her plump young neck—"and be left to sit out at dances, if we waited for *them*!"

"I—I suppose so, Bee," said Dora faintly.

"Now, Dora!" said Bee sternly, "this won't do. I saw you trying to hide the address on the envelope you posted this morning. You've written another letter to that Graham."

"It was a very short one, Bee," said Dora meekly.

"Well, it won't do. Do, dear, you be guided by me and you will live to thank me," said Beatrice.

"But, Bee," began Dora imploringly, "it is not *quite* the same with me as with you, is it? I'm only seventeen, and I'm the eldest. Don't you think I could have just a little more fun?"

But the marvellous product of a worldly mother and a fashionable boarding-school shook her pretty head vigorously.

"It's every bit as serious for you, Dora," she said. "Look at you, your father's only a barrister, and you know you don't get a big dress allowance, and there are lots of things you can't go to for want of money. Then you have three sisters coming on. You owe it to them to marry early and get out of the way. If Floss had taken that man——"

"The five-foot one?"

"Yes, certainly—don't be so frivolous, Dora—I repeat if Floss had married—he was well off and clever, and really very nice, she owns—the chances are the other three girls would have gone off early and been the heads of beautiful homes to-day instead of dragging the rounds of season after season and making me stay up at school till I simply refused point blank to keep my hair down another day."

Dora heaved a submissive sigh. Those three chubby, pretty little sisters of hers at home were very dear to her. And it was true they

were “coming on;” Amy, the eldest of them was thirteen. She would not stand in their light.

“There’s one thing,” she said a little more hopefully, “I’m sure it won’t be me—he talks to you a lot more, Bee.”

“That’s only because I talk a lot more to him,” said Bee, nipping the hope. “I notice he looks at you most.”

Dora gazed at herself in the glass, and the reflection of the young rounded face and the candid eyes and the pretty hair was so pleasing that the instinct of conquest braced her.

“After all, Bee,” she said more brightly, “he is really *very* nice. And except when you’re behind him you don’t notice he’s going bald. Perhaps he’s a man you’d get to like a good deal after you were married to him.”

“That’s what I feel,” said Bee, and added in an extremely virtuous tone, “if I didn’t I should not think of him for one minute. How girls can marry really old men or horrid men, I simply don’t know. I think it’s just disgraceful. But with Hugh Kinross it is *very* different and people think a lot of you if your husband’s an author and you get asked *everywhere*.”

She returned energetically to her chiffon and twisted it in a most artistic fashion upon a charming hat.

“She returned energetically to her chiffon, and twisted it in a most artistic fashion.”

Dora jumped down also from the bed and began to collect her own belongings. Then she stopped short one second; pretty as she was she had a latent sense of humour.

"It would be rather funny, Bee, after all this talk if he'd never given either of us a serious thought," she said. "What makes you so sure?"

"Oh, lots of things," said Miss Bee. "Look at the chocolates and things he brings us—and didn't he make Mrs. Gowan ask us to join his party for the Caves? And look at the things he says actually to us—that quotation, for instance, when we were on the seat in the summer-house,—"

"'How happy could I be with either,
Were t'other dear charmer away!'"

murmured Dora softly.

"Yes, and lots of things like that. A man of his age doesn't say them as Charlie or Graham might. Love is a much more serious thing with a real man than with a boy."

"Yes, I suppose so," sighed Dora.

"And don't you remember what Effie Gowan told us she had heard her mother laughing and telling her father? That when he asks after us he always says, 'Well, how are the ducky little girls?' Or else, 'When are you going to bring the little pets down?'"

"Y-yes," said Dora, "yes, I suppose he must be serious then—as he's not a boy."

"And Mrs. Gowan told me privately that she really did hope Hugh would marry and that she thought a bright young wife would do him a world of good and get him out of all his old-fashioned ways. Said it meaningly, too."

"Oh, well," said Dora, "I had better go. It must be nearly time to dress for dinner. What are you going to wear, Bee?"

And Hugh was promptly shelved to permit of this more important point being properly discussed.

# CHAPTER XVI

## WOOING THE MUSE

"FIVE thousand words," muttered Hugh, and then tilted back in the steady chair he had abstracted from the kitchen for the very purpose. Yes, this was going to be one of his good days—he willed it so. The mood was not there certainly, but then, now the finishing of the book had become a pressing necessity, the mood never was there; it was like a tantalizing butterfly that flitted a second in his face and then led him a desperate chase through a tangle of undergrowth that never ended.

Five thousand words! Yes, he could if he would. Let him brace up his sinews, summon up his blood! The mere act of battling for it hard and earnestly would probably bring the mood back—it had done so many a time ere this.

Let him read over the last chapter or so to get in touch again with his characters.

Great heavens, what balderdash it all was! He crashed his chair on to its four legs again and reached out blindly for his pen. And now he scored pages and pages across with heavy black lines; he seemed to take a vicious pleasure after a little time in destroying what he had written and went along with his lips tight and a hard look in his eye, weighing every sentence in the balance and adjusting that balance to such nicety that he found nearly every sentence wanting. Out they came: occasionally a fierce black zig-zag on the page he considered sufficient for future deliberations, but more frequently it needed greater physical activity to relieve his state of mind and he ripped the page fiercely off the block, crumpled it in his hand and sent it flying across the room.

If Miss Bibby had happened in that morning she would have come to the conclusion that the eccentricity of genius led it to divert itself at times with the game of paper snowballs.

The heavy slaughtering brought a degree of relief; he looked over his shoulder at the paper-strewn floor and felt a twinge of self-satisfaction: there were authors who would have passed the work quite complacently or at most have considered a little polishing was all it needed. For him it was satisfaction or snowballs—no medium course. But then he groaned, for his eye of a sudden fell on a calendar. Fell on *the* calendar, to be exact. Many of his lady friends and admirers invariably presented him with calendars at Christmas time (“Such a suitable present for an author, my dear!”); exquisite works of art some of them were, whose dainty strips of ribbon, adroitly pulled, brought into more or less perfect view the day of the month nestling in the heart of a flower. Or you would turn a gilded handle perhaps and a day of the week would appear on the silver sail of a ship, while another turn would bring the date to the figure head and the pressing of a spring send the name of the month fluttering as a flag on the top of the mast. Hugh had a sincere admiration for this ingenious trifle, and frequently when a hero was behaving untowardly idly amused himself with spinning up the signs.

But of course, if one really wanted to know the date one looked at the plainest one had: this year it happened to be a gratis one, presented with the advertisement pamphlets of some patent medicine, and it had stood Hugh in good stead from January to now, when November’s cloud of heat clung closely to the mountains.

But the sight of it caused him to groan and to realize that the just passed Berserk mood had cost him perhaps seven thousand words; and the seven thousand words represented all the work he had done up here at “Tenby”—“Tenby” that he had taken expressly for the performance of doughty deeds of literature.

He looked ruefully at his snowballs;—perhaps after all he had been hypercritical, perhaps one or two of those pages might be rescued and smoothed out and made to answer. After all, who else would be the better or the worse for it? All the public wanted of him was a piquant flavour for its jaded appetite and the details on which he bestowed such a fever of care would probably escape its attention altogether. Yes, after all, what was he? Just the paid provider of certain species of mental refreshment,—a sort of fashionable drink that the hurrying public, coming along and seeing others drinking, took a gulp at and went on with its much more important work nor better nor worse for the quaff. Why, an orange boy, selling his honest juicy fruit to a thirsty crowd was a better public benefactor than himself! Pah! he had been over-estimating himself of late; he was not of the authors who might legitimately claim to refresh and stimulate the race to higher things. He was just a maker of “bitters,” and the public, in its charmingly inscrutable fashion, declaring for it as its favourite beverage for the moment, he had become “popular.” Why worry himself ill over the concoction of the bitters; sharp and strong that was all it asked? Yes, yes, those snowballs on the floor were quite good enough, let him pick them up and uncrumple them and pin them back in their places ready for the typewriter.

But Kate came in,—Kate in one of her fresh-looking pin-spot print frocks. She seemed to exhale something clean, wholesome, stimulating, though she spoke no word and only laid the morning letters down beside him and, when he looked round at her, gave him her cheery smile.

He clutched at her plump, print-covered arm.

“For the love of heaven, K,” he said, “pick all that paper up off the floor and take it away.”

Kate gave him the soothing hand-stroke that nurses keep for feverish patients.

“Of course,” she said, “certainly, straight away, old boy.” She groped about beneath his knees for the wastepaper basket that would be needed as vehicle.

Then he heard her breathing a little hard as she stooped here, there and everywhere for the snowballs.

He did not turn round, but talked during her labours.

“It’s not etiquette I know, girl,” he said, “I wouldn’t dare to present a hero to the public who let a woman pick up her own handkerchief. But I always was a cowardly chap, wasn’t I? You remember the time I took Jack’s licking at school because I knew if I turned round and let him see it was the wrong fellow, the master would notice my cheek was puffed out with toothache and send me straight off to the dentist’s.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Kate, puffing and panting cheerfully about the room.

“Hurry up, old girl,” he said. “In a second I shan’t be able to restrain myself from clutching some of that stuff back.”

“And it’s genuinely bad?” said Kate, working hard: you might have imagined her engaged in gathering mushrooms at so much a minute.

“The scum of literary abomination,” groaned Hugh.

“And you’re certain you’re not deceiving yourself.”

“Oh, perhaps I am,” he said swinging round, “y-y-yes, I’m pretty sure it’s good enough. Seven thousand words, K, seven thousand p-p-precious words—human nature won’t stand it, will it? Let me have another look at it.”

But now Kate was adamant.

“Good enough is not good enough for Hugh Kinross,” she said sternly and made straight off to the kitchen fire with the overflowing basket clasped firmly in her arms.

And now Hugh heaved a sigh of relief and settled down in better heart to his work. He took out a fresh writing-block and firmly and with inspiring assurance inscribed upon it the number of his chapter.

But after regarding this effort with an uplifted look for a second or two his eye fell upon the letters beside him that Kate had laid down.

Now there is something insidiously insistent about the morning post when one is away from all the other corrupting effects of the civilization of cities.

Hugh knew perfectly well that he was trembling on the verge of his precipice when he let his eye linger upon the envelopes; he knew perfectly well that the act of opening one would send his already nearly maddened Muse clean out of the window for the rest of the morning. But yet he dallied.

It was more than possible that there was a highly important letter there, and two or three hours’ delay in opening would mean a serious loss. His last story, for instance, that his London agent was serializing in several countries—yes, it was quite possible some instant information was wanted about it. Or that tale he had offered to an American magazine—probably there was news about it here; it was a decent story too, he would like to find out if it had been appreciated. And then there were those shares he had taken in that Transvaal concern, suppose news had come of a fall or rise in them? He would not listen to the cold-headed remembrance that whispered that no English, nor American, nor African mail was due to-day. It was perfectly possible that in an undermanned country post office like this these important letters had been left over since last mail and only just delivered. It was really highly important that he should make sure.

He drew the little stack of envelopes towards him and tilted comfortably back while he opened them.

He owed his tailor thirteen pounds eleven and six, he discovered. He discovered that by employing the Reliance Carpet Company his Axminster carpets would be entirely freed from dust and in such a way that he need fear no microbes for his nursery.

The Mission to the Chinese of Wexford Street, and Lower George Street, would be glad of a subscription from him, he learnt.

A Consumptive Hospital, a Crêche for Neglected Infants, a Convalescent Home, an Inebriates' Retreat all had a similar use for him. While slightly more cheerful, if less urgently necessary methods of spending his money were suggested by requests, (1) to take a few five-shilling tickets for a concert for the purpose of sending a deserving young singer to Italy; (2) to purchase at a reduction a calf-bound set of the *Encyclopædia Cosmopolitana* with which the owner, being short of money, was reluctantly compelled to part, and which he, as an author, would doubtless find it to his benefit to acquire; (3) to be present at the banquet of a fellow author, departing for the old country, tickets one guinea. Then there was one typewriting lady who offered to do his work at so much a thousand words, and submitted a sample of her work. And another typewriting lady, who submitted no sample, stated that reverses of fortune had driven her from a high position in the best society to the bitter one of a typist, and she was therefore compelled to solicit his work to enable her to keep herself.

It was quite a pleasant change to discover two people merely wanted his autograph. "Dear sir, I am collecting autographs and have 637; will you please send yours by return post as I enclose a stamp."

"She encloses a stamp," murmured Hugh admiringly.

The other seeker accompanied her request with a perfervid letter of praise about his work, but on the heavy autograph album that accompanied the letter he noticed Kate had had to pay tenpence deficient postage and there were no stamps enclosed for the return of the precious volume.

A jeweller's catalogue provided a few minutes' lighter reading, and its diamond rings and its pearl and diamond necklets and pendants and brooches were so temptingly illustrated, that they awoke the present-giving instinct in the man's heart and he revolved the question whether etiquette would permit him to give Dora and Beatrice a necklet apiece for their pretty necks and Miss Bibby a chaste brooch. Kate, he reluctantly remembered, cared nothing for jewellery.

But it was upon the last opened missive he wasted most of his time,—possibly because it was the last and Chapter eleven looked large on the horizon again.

It was an advertisement of enamel paint and was accompanied by a most pleasing picture of a gentleman in a frock coat and a lady in a most complicated costume, delicately engaged in making "better than new," by the aid of this enamel paint, a whole bedroom suite.

Something in the elegant *négligé* of the attitude of the gentleman in the frockcoat depicted pensively painting the bedstead stimulated Hugh marvellously.

He felt an insane desire to get a pot of the famous paint and set to work himself upon a similar labour.

Kate came gently across the floor and placed a jug of iced lemon water and a tumbler at his elbow.

She was about to withdraw in perfect silence, but he detained her.

"Kate," he said.

Her most motherly look was on her face.

"What is it, dear lad?" she said, for her heart was full of futile sympathy for his straits.

"Kate," he said yearningly. "Do you think Larkin could get me a pot of Perfect Perfection Enamel warranted to dry in ten minutes, all

colours kept in stock? If I can’t enamel a bedstead this very minute I won’t answer for my reason.”

Kate walked deliberately across the room and boxed his ears.

## CHAPTER XVII

### LITERATURE IS LOW

BUT after half an hour’s further struggle he got up and drifted aimlessly out of the room, finally bringing up in the kitchen.

Kate was here concocting a savoury and an *entrée* and two or three other things for his dinner, for she had packed the depressed and depressing Ellen off to the bakers’ picnic with Anna from “Greenways” and was sole mistress of her hearth and home for the day.

Here she was when her brother found her, covered up in a spotless apron and, with sleeves rolled engagingly back over her plump white arms, energetically pounding up some anchovies. Hugh sat down heavily on the edge of the dresser.

“A writer’s a miserable beast, K,” he said dejectedly.

“Give it up to-day, boy,” she said. “I can see you can’t help yourself. Go for a walk,—go and look up the little pets. Or have a romp with the children across the road. Don’t break your back to-day over a load that another day you will snap your fingers at.”

He took no notice of her suggestions.

“Can you deny that it is a miserable trade? A womanish sort of business? You sit twiddling your pen, your nerves so a-stretch that if a door bangs the mood shuts down on you for the day. And there’s that fellow across the road swinging away with his axe among the trees just as he has been ever since breakfast. He’ll leave off presently and boil his billy and eat his bread and cheese and have his smoke, and then back he’ll go to his work. There it is spread out straight before him, and the muscles on his arms—have you ever noticed the fellow’s muscles?—tell him that he is equal to it. Do you ever see *him* pacing distractedly about, wondering if the mood will come to him? Do you ever see *him* sitting dejectedly twiddling his axe, and rendered quite incapable because he has been interrupted at a critical time and put out of vein? I tell you, my girl, that fellow’s a man, and I’d like to go out and shake hands with him.”

“And doubtless,” said Kate, hastily sprinkling coral pepper over her savouries, “doubtless every time that fine fellow stops to wipe his beaded brow, he glances over here to envy a man who has nothing to do but sit in a comfortable chair in the shade and scribble any nonsense that comes into his head.”

“Now, why,” said Hugh addressing the rows of plates ranged beside him, “why does a woman feel it her bounden duty to clap down with a conventional remark like that every time a man lets off a little steam? Besides I deny it,—the chair is *not* comfortable.”

Kate gave a sidelong glance at the clock and began to chop parsley as if against time.

“No,” said Hugh, “I will *not* take the hint, my good woman. I hold you with my glittering eye and listen to me you shall. ‘Litteratoor is low’,—Artemus Ward says so. Worse than that it’s no longer exclusive,—Mr. Dooley maintains that it is not. Do you remember the verse and chapter, madam?”

“Something about turning Miranda into authoreen does her skirt sag,” murmured Kate.

Hugh held up a hand commanding silence and rolled out his Irish with gusto: “‘Th’ longer th’ wurruld lasts th’ more books does be comin’ out. They’s a publisher in ivry block an’ in thousands iv happy homes some wan is plugging away at th’ romantic novel or whalin’ out a pome on th’ typewriter upstairs. A fam’ly without an author is as contemptible as wan without a priest. Is Malachi near-sighted, peevish, averse to th’ suds, an’ can’t tell whether th’ three

in th' front yard is blue or green? Make an author iv him! Does Miranda prisint no attraction to the young men iv th' neighbourhood, does her over-skirt dhrag an' is she poor with th' gas range? Make an authoreen iv her!' That's it, Kit, it's a poor sort of life at best, no manliness about it. Picture the contrast, girl—those fine fellows who stood at attention by their gun at Colenso when it was all up with them, and your blessed brother tinkering away at a pink and white muslin heroine that never was on land or sea."

"But, but, but," said Kate, "you can't have a world made up of axemen and fine soldiers. It seems to me Nature has made a use for your contemptible authors in letting them inspire others to fine deeds. Those men at Colenso, for instance,—I grant you it *was* a fine thing to do, to stand at attention while awaiting death. But I believe if such a thing ever could have been inquired into with the minuteness that the Psychic Research Society brings to bear upon the problems that confront it, it would have been found that something far back in the minds of one or more of the three, some fine deed in a book, some shining act witnessed on a stage, gave the cue for the act at which the civilized world thundered applause."

"It's a pretty notion," said Hugh, "and a kind one to a writer sunk in a slough of despond. But I hae ma doots."

"I haven't," said Kate stoutly. "In point of fact I truly believe that one half of our actions—especially our better ones—spring from an unconscious desire to be like or unlike some character of some book or play. Where a sincere Christian struggles desperately to live like Christ of the Great Book, the less courageous aim lower and substitute a panorama of book characters that shift with their stages of growth. Many a meanness of life is left uncommitted, not solely because it is a meanness but because it would look execrable in the pages of a novel. Why, only for being terrorized by the Old Maid of Fiction, I'd be keeping a cat and a parrot myself by this time, Hugh Kinross, and you know it."

"And what should I be doing?" asked Hugh, amused.

Kate cogitated for a moment.

"You would have been an Egoist, only Meredith made you ashamed to be one," she answered.

Hugh nodded approval at her hit.

"But I'm still a posturing, narrow-living ass, ain't I?" he said, "like the rest of the writing tribe."

"Oh," said Kate comfortably, "of course one hates an author that's all author—how does it go? fellows in foolscap uniforms turned up with ink? But you're not that sort, Hughie. I will say for you that when you haven't the pen in your hand you are just plain man."

"Thanks, old girl," said Hugh, grateful for a moment. But then he soon drooped again.

"No, no, the trail of the serpent is over the artistic temperament, Kit. Look at me,—if I get into a company where I'm pointed out, *monstrari digito*, as Hugh Kinross, I'm bored—and no doubt show that I am."

"Yes, I've often noticed that," said Kate, who had long secretly considered this rather a noble trait in her brother's character.

"Yes," said Hugh pensively, "and then when I get into a company where no one knows me from Smith the chemist's clerk, a childish resentment comes over me."

"Good heavens!" cried Kate.

It was not Hugh's pettiness that called forth the exclamation, but the saddening circumstance that she had put her chopped and seasoned parsley into the sweet mixture that represented the pudding.

"How," she asked pathetically, "can I get ready to feed a lion when it gets under my feet all the time like this? Is there *nothing*

you can do? Couldn’t you go and play wild beasts under the piano for a little time? Max and Muffie would help you growl.”

Hugh abandoned the dresser which rattled ominously as he took his solid weight off.

“Max and Muffie remind me of Miss Bibby, and Miss Bibby reminds me of a duty to be performed,” he said; “I’ve promised to read her story. Well, if England expects every man this day to do his duty, Australia may expect duty this day to do a man.”

Kate heard him going heavily back to his study.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### AN EDITING PENCIL

AND now he swept all his own work out of the way and, sitting firmly down once more upon his chair from the kitchen, spread out upon his time-be desk, Miss Bibby's MS.

He had read it through no less than three times.

At the first reading he had laughed, indeed he had leaned back in his chair and fairly yelled with laughing.

For he could so plainly recognize his own influence, and the incongruity of it against the gentle, colourless background of the tale was in truth amusing. A more ludicrous effect could hardly have been obtained, if Miss Bibby herself, clad in the limp lavender muslin, had been encountered lashing about with a stockwhip or hurling blue metal wildly in all directions.

But then he sobered himself with an effort and read the tale again. And this time a hopeless look settled upon his face. It would have been so pleasant, so easy to praise warmly, point out a trifling error or two and so have done with his self-imposed task.

But it was so plain, so very plain that the woman could not write,—would never write. Her characters were paper dolls and lay on the typed sheets as flat as paper dolls. No breath of air, of motion, was in all the tale. No glint of humour, no suspicion of literary grace, not one even faintly original observation made it possible for him to hope there might be any promise of success before the woman. Stereotyped characters talking stereotyped talk and working out a thin stereotyped little plot, such was the hopeless material before him, while here and there on the dull grey of it, like patches of amazing scarlet clumsily stitched on, were cutting phrases and sardonic observations closely imitated from *Liars All*.

He tossed the stuff aside impatiently after the second reading and shot an indignant glance through the window at "Greenways." But "Greenways" only showed dimly through a mist that was rolling through the garden, so imagination had to call up the offending figure of the would-be authoress. And call her up it did,—kindly tender imagination! It flashed two glimpses of her before Hugh's eyes, one as she knelt on the path and dragged at a child's obstinate shoe biting her lips while the marauding ants ran up her own sleeves. And the other as she faced him, white-cheeked against the ruddy waratahs, and told him she "preferred to talk of the New Zealand Terraces."

He drew the poor MS towards him again and glanced through it once more desperately.

Then he took off his coat as a signal of earnest determination and filled his pen afresh and pulled a sheaf of paper towards him and settled down to see what might be done.

Two hours later he was still battling with it. He told himself it was his expiation. He had galvanized a few of the paper dolls into something a little resembling life, had put a dash of humour here and there and in some slight degree strengthened the plot. All this by putting in slips between the pages or by writing in the margin. But it was still a sorry story.

He stood up, yawned relievedly and went to the window. "Greenways" was smiling in the sunshine now as if it had never had such a garden guest as mist.

"My dear lady," he said—he had a habit of thinking aloud when he was alone like this—"that is not a kind action I have done you, though you will probably thank me profusely. You can't always be edited like this, and even with all this assistance you won't have the least idea how the thing is done. As the Snark said,

'The method employed I would gladly explain,
While I have it so clear in my head,
If I had but the time and you had but the brain—
But yet much remains to be said.'

Anyway I've done my best to atone."

Kate came in with a telegram in her hand.

"And have you sixpence about you?" she said. "Of course it's not in Larkin's day's work to deliver telegrams."

It was not—officially. But your telegram would lie on the little counter of the post office for a whole day waiting for you to chance in—unless Larkin looked to the matter. So he used to pop his red head in at the post-office door, whenever he was near, just to ascertain if there were a blue envelope lying there for one of his clients. And if there were, that client was in possession of it in a few minutes.

"By George, K,—I've got to catch the one-thirty," said Hugh, and he strode this way across his little room and then that way, and knocked a chair over, and seized hold of his coat and began to struggle into it, and still seemed no farther on his way.

"All right,—don't get excited, old fellow," said Kate, "I'll manage it,—no, never mind that coat, you can't travel in it. Shall I pack your bag for only one day or longer?" Hugh read the message again, but it did not seem to help him with the amount of clothing he would need; indeed it merely sent his thoughts off at a tangent.

"Never mind," Kate said briskly, "a few extra things won't be in the way. Now see here, Hugh, go in and shave, I'll bring your hot water, then dress, your brown suit and your new Panama—I wonder where your travelling cap is? No need to get flurried, you can have twenty minutes to dress and then take a comfortable half-hour for lunch. Larkin's here, luckily; I can send him for a wagonette, so you won't have to waste time walking to the station."

Hugh felt his chin.

"I suppose I must shave? I shouldn't meet any one by this train." He looked at her anxiously for indulgence.

"Certainly you must," she said severely, and then he knew there was no hope.

"Do you want any of this with you?" she added, nodding across to his paper-strewn table, "or shall I put it all in a safe place till you come back?"

"Oh, by Jove," he said,—"yes, there's that short story of mine, 'Fools of Fortune'—I've promised that for the *Melbourne Review*, it ought to have been posted last night. And then there's that woman's stuff—I suppose there's no time for me to run across to Miss Bibby, eh, K?"

"Certainly there is not," said Kate decisively, "you don't stir from here without a comfortable lunch."

"Well," said Hugh, "see here, K, I'll leave her stuff here on the desk in this envelope, and you take it over to her and tell her I think if she goes more on these lines the tale will be stronger."

"All right," said Kate, "and what about the other tale,—the one for the *Melbourne Review*?"

Hugh hastily stuffed some more MS into an envelope, wrote a few lines to accompany it, and scribbled an address.

"See it is posted at once," he said; "I've addressed it to Miss Brown, and told her to type it and to post it on to the *Review*."

"I'm sure I could start again," said Kate, "let me do it as usual."

But a slight eye trouble she had suffered from lately had made Hugh lock his sister's machine for the time.

"Don't waste time talking," he said, "just send it to the post as it is."

"Oh, very well," said Kate, "Larkin can take it with him. Now go and shave *instantly* and, remember—your *brown* suit."

All was managed so well that Hugh had nearly ten minutes to spare after lunch in which to smoke and luxuriate in the knowledge that all was well with him, his bag properly packed, his cap in his pocket, his flask filled, and money for the journey in the pocket of the suit on his back instead of in the one dangling in his wardrobe as had occurred before this, when Kate had not been there.

He looked at her gratefully. She was as good-tempered as ever; not in the least flustered or put out.

"Jove, K," he said, "I should be a fool to marry. For real solid satisfaction give me a sister."

"Why?" said Kate amusedly. "Do you think your wife wouldn't pack your bag for you?"

He considered Bee for a moment in a wifely, packing attitude, then Dora.

"Not all wives," he said a little vaguely. "At all events they'd pout and worry to know why I was going and what the horrid telegram was about, and when was I coming back, and where was I going to stay—and so on till the train was lost. And look at you—not a word!"

"Oh, I should have asked you fast enough—when you came back," said Kate, "and that is the same thing."

"No, faith, it's not, Kate; I'd have had leisure to invent my own account by that time," said Hugh.

"Very well," said Kate, "next time I shall pout."

Hugh struck a match.

"I can tell you now, as there's time. I felt I wasn't making money fast enough by books for our old age, K, and I've been speculating a bit. It's helped to worry me and keep me from work lately. But the shares are rising and I'm going down to be on the spot."

Then the wagonette drove up and he seized his bag and his hat, and Kate ran after him to the gate with his pipe.

When Miss Bibby heard from the children that he had gone away, she sighed deeply. And at night when the little ones were all asleep, and Anna, her face smeared with Pauline's sunburn cream, her hair damp with the preparation bought to improve Muffie's thin hair, and her teeth ashine with the family tooth powder, was on her way to bed, and the mist had crept up to the windows and wrapped everything in its eerie shroud, Miss Bibby sighed again.

# CHAPTER XIX

## MAX RUNS AMUCK

GREENWAYS was overwhelmed with horror. It felt it ought to draw a veil of mist round its face and shrink from the public gaze instead of standing there brazenly smiling as usual amid its trees and flowers and pretending it was the abode of innocence and content.

Miss Bibby was extremely upset, sufficiently so to be nearly helpless in the crisis. The little girls whispered together with horrified and excited eyes and more than inclined to a theory that nothing short of a cable to New Zealand recalling their parents could adequately deal with the present situation.

Anna, who had quarrelled with her baker, said she was not in the least surprised, for men and boys were all the same, downright black at heart.

But Max stood fast in his iniquity.

Max, four-year old Max—whose “trousers” did not measure three inches in the inner seam of the leg—Max, who was not yet entirely initiated into the difficulties of speech, had broken forth into “language!”

No one knew where he could have possibly heard the hair-raising phrase. Certainly there was the gardener, Blake, about the premises who, being of the downright black-hearted sex, might have let fall the words Max had evidently garnered and laid by with such care and accuracy until occasion offered.

But he was so surly and monosyllabic a man that the children gave him the widest of berths, and therefore that theory was unlikely.

Anna aspersed the character of Larkin. A boy with hair that colour, she maintained, must be subject to periodical explosions, and it was probably during one of them that Max had secreted his bit of dynamite. But the little girls gave Larkin the warmest testimonials. In all the time they had known him he had never been guilty of anything stronger than “My jiggery!”

It all began with a bib at breakfast time.

When Anna would have tied it around Max’s neck, as she or some other person in her position had done for years, he jerked his head suddenly aside. “Take it away,” he said.

“But, darling,” said Miss Bibby, who was serving out the porridge, “you must have your bib on; don’t be naughty. Look, it’s the pretty one with Jack Sprat on it. Tie it on, Anna.”

Max ducked skilfully just as Anna brought the tapes together.

“Just look at ’im,” said the girl.

“Come, come, Max,” said Miss Bibby, “you don’t want to spoil that pretty coat with your porridge. Why, it’s your new coat with a pocket in! Let Anna tie it now, quickly.”

Again Anna essayed her task. Max held still till the square of huckaback portraying the economic existence of Jack Sprat and his wife was well beneath his chin, and the tapes gathered once more up into Anna’s hands.

Then he gave a movement like a plunging horse, seized the offending article and flung it with all his force across the table where it fell and floated upon the milk Muffie had poured over her porridge.

“Very well, Anna,” said Miss Bibby, “take the bib away and you need not wait. Master Max does not want any breakfast.”

This was quite true, for Master Max had quite satisfied his morning appetite by a surreptitious ten minutes at the mulberry tree while the three little girls were having their hair brushed.

“Can I go?” he said eagerly.

“You mean, may I?” Miss Bibby said mechanically.

“Well, may I?”

“Certainly not. You will sit quite still as a gentleman should when ladies are still eating.”

Max cast a lowering glance at the ladies.

“Well, make her hurry,” he said; “look at her taking anover lot of leam.” He glared at Muffie.

“I shall take six lots of cream, if I choose,” said Muffie. “I’ve got to put something on to take away the taste of your horrid dirty bib.”

“It was a clean one, Muffie, or I should have passed you a fresh plateful,” said Miss Bibby; “at the same time that does not excuse Max for his ill-behaviour. Max, before I can overlook your conduct you must apologize to Muffie and to Anna.”

Muffie looked important; she rather enjoyed being apologized to.

Max sat very square on the big books of his chair; possibly their presence beneath him encouraged his rebellion by reminding him that until he took a firm stand against it a month or two ago a high chair had been considered fitted to his dignity.

“I’ve done wiv bibs,” he announced, and he looked the whole table fairly in the face.

Pauline and Muffie and Lynn giggled a little. They had begun to recognize vaguely that Max was not exactly as they were.

When he stood with his little legs planted far apart and his little hands thrust deep in his knickerbocker pockets, and his little head cocked on one side, some subtle breath of a spirit, masculine and essentially opposed to their own, was wafted towards them.

“I’ve done wiv bibs,” he repeated.

“That will do, Max,” said Miss Bibby, coldly. “I shall consider you in disgrace, until you have told Anna and Muffie you are sorry.”

“I’ve done wiv bibs,” shouted Max.

“Go and stand in that corner, Max,” Miss Bibby said with unexpected sternness in her tone.

Max scrambled off his chair as if he could hardly reach the place indicated fast enough.

He ran right into the corner—gave a hard kick at the skirting board and made a rush for the door.

“I’ve done wiv bibs,” he shrieked, and tore away as fast as his legs could carry him into the garden.

“Go on with your breakfast, Lynn,” said Miss Bibby with as much calmness as she could muster,—“sit down immediately, Muffie—” for Muffie, excited by the unusual happening, had flown to the window to see where the rebel was heading for, “Max has forgotten himself, I am afraid.”

This was ever Miss Bibby’s phrase—ever her gentle optimism. If you lost your temper, your manners, your courage, any of your higher qualities, you had “forgotten yourself,” forgotten the fine, upright man you were by nature and become for a moment the shadowy ghost of that black unknown self that ever dogs one.

“As I have finished, I will ask you to excuse me, little girls,” Miss Bibby continued, rising from her seat. In point of fact, she had not yet consumed the whole of her slender meal, but who was to say what a boy with such a red, fierce little face might be doing?

She crossed the grass with troubled eyes. Max was too busy a little man to have fits like this often.

Now and again in wet weather, certainly, when he could not work off any superfluous steam in the garden, he had lately taken to flinging himself flat on the floor and kicking, if thwarted in any way. And Miss Bibby had vaguely recognized that this was due to his being deprived so long of the healthy moral tone of the presence of his mother and father—the latter in especial.

Anna opined that the easiest way to get him out of these “tantrums” was to bribe him with the offer of a large piece of

chocolate.

"He's only a baby," she would say excusingly, "and besides, he's a boy—it's in him and it's got to come out,—same as a measle rash. You'd think there'd be some med'cin for it, wouldn't you?"

Kinross would have enjoyed the notion—the need of a Tonic for Eliminating the Black Corpuscles from the Blood of Boys.

Max saw Miss Bibby coming. In truth he had almost forgotten his recent revolt against law and order, for during his tumultuous passage through the garden, he had come across one of the guinea-pigs that had escaped from its bondage. An exciting chase had followed, but he had won, and in the satisfaction consequent upon victory he might have even been induced to overlook Miss Bibby's behaviour.

But then he saw the gentle reproach in her eyes, and noted (the Judge himself had not the faculty of lightning observation possessed by his son) the nervous, half-conciliatory trepidation of her manner. He thrust his hands as deeply as they would go into his inadequate pockets and met her gaze unblinking.

"Why, Maxie," she said, "I can't believe this is the good little boy who was here yesterday. No, it is some other bad little fellow who has taken his suit and looks like him. Do you think if I look carefully about I could find my good little boy again?"

Max would have none of such folly.

"I'm me," he said determinedly.

Miss Bibby sought to gather him up in her arms—the natural instinct. For indeed when your rebel's "trousers" measure but three inches in the inner seam you cannot regard him as other than a baby.

But he held fast to the wire fence of the guinea-pigs' run.

"I *won't* be nursed," he said. She stood ten minutes cajoling him, wheedling, coaxing, threatening. No, he would not return to his corner and work out his punishment, even though the punisher was eagerly offering to reduce the duration of it to "exactly three minutes, Max darling,—see, by this pretty little watch, and then we can all be friends again."

No, Max would have no traffic at all in the offer of such an ignominious position.

"Well, see here, Max," said the helpless lady recognizing and bowing at last to the stronger will, "if I let you off the corner will you run in and kiss Muffie and Anna to show you are sorry?" (The word "apologize" was eliminated now from this last treaty.)

No, Max would *not* kiss either Anna or Muffie. They were both "bad girls."

"Very well, Max," said Miss Bibby, "you only leave me one resort. I shall shut you up until you are good."

"I can run licker than you," was Max's reply, and he ducked beneath her arm and dashed across the garden.

Miss Bibby's blood rose high and she started to follow him. But how may a lady who for at least twenty years has done nothing but walk sedately ever expect or wildly hope to catch up a pair of brown muscular little legs? She was brought up panting, with her hand at her side before they had circled the bamboos three times and the quarry was plainly as fresh as ever. But:

> "Escape me never, beloved,
> While I am I and you are you."

was Miss Bibby's attitude now. She called to Anna to help with the chase. And Anna came cheerfully as well as of necessity, for Max had crushed mulberries on her snowy kitchen table, in an endeavour to "invent cochineal," and it would take her hours to eradicate the stain.

The little girls came too—they felt it was more than half a game, for Max's face was perfectly smiling and good-natured.

So Pauline stood guard at the waratahs, and Lynn and Anna prevented any more dodging at the bamboos, and Miss Bibby cut off the retreat to the house and Muffie worried him in the rear.

Surely, surely by tactics like these they drove him right into a corner. Had there been a fence he would have shown fight a little longer by scrambling up it and continuing the chase on the other side. But they had headed him to a hedge, an African box thorn hedge, and there was nothing more to be done. So he stuck his legs apart, and put his hands in his pockets and surveyed his captors as they closed in round him. And it seemed satisfactory to his self-respect that it had taken five of them—two quite grown-up, too—to beat him.

But Anna was singularly without the capacity for admiring fine deeds and simply grasped him firmly around the middle and bore him to the house.

He kicked all the way, merely to maintain his self-respect.

“Where shall I put ’im?” gasped the girl, stumbling along the hall, the other four at her heels.

“Here, here,” said Miss Bibby, opening the sitting-room door, and running across the floor to close and lock the French windows.

Anna stood him down on his feet and gave him one good, if unauthorized, shake for all the kicks she had received.

“There!” she said, as a woman will.

“The boy glared round at his victors.”

And it was precisely at this point the “language,” feelingly alluded to before, happened.

The boy glared round at his victors, now all grouped at the door.

“You beasly girls,” he said.

## CHAPTER XX

### A LESSON IN DISCIPLINE

THAT is why “Greenways” should have hidden its shamed head in one of the mountain’s tender mists instead of gaily smiling out at the world that morning.

When Miss Kinross rode briskly up the drive, perhaps an hour later, she had no suspicion that so truly shocking an occurrence had befallen the sunny place.

She leaned her bicycle against a ficus-covered post and crossed the verandah, a little surprised at the silence, for she was accustomed on her morning visits to being run into by Max on the red tricycle and to find little girls everywhere swinging, skipping, hoop-bowling, or doll-carrying.

She crossed the verandah and rang the bell; the door was closed —a most unusual thing.

Anna appeared and seemed to hesitate about asking her in.

“Would you mind coming into the dining-room, ma’am?” she said at last; for how might a sitting-room be used for its legitimate purpose with a ramping rebel at large in it?

“Certainly,” said Miss Kinross. “Is Miss Bibby in?”

“Ye-e-es,” said Anna, and opened the dining-room door.

The little girls were all here. Miss Bibby had said they might do exactly as they liked this morning. Pauline sat crocheting at a grey woollen shoulder cape which was destined for some old woman in some old asylum, and was among the least interesting of her work. Lynn was reading. Not face downward, on a rug and with swiftly-moving eyes and hurrying breath, as was her custom with a living book, but she had merely picked up the *History of England* and sat with it quite listlessly on a chair. And Muffie was standing at the window, breathing on a pane from time to time and then drearily drawing figures upon her breath.

How could one be gay and do as one liked with the sitting-room door shut and locked on Little Knickerbockers?

Miss Bibby herself was standing before the bookcase, turning over a volume here and another one there. When Miss Kinross came in she was at Herbert Spencer’s *Education*, thinking that surely so wise and practical an observer of youth as he must have offered some recipe for such a situation as had just passed.

But Spencer held out no helping hand. The lines on her forehead deepened.

“Are you all well?” said Miss Kinross, coming forward to shake hands with her. “How do you do, little girls? How are the coughs? And where is my little cavalier?”

“He—he—” said Miss Bibby, hesitating a second, then deciding not quite to conceal the outrage since here might be wisdom. Surely here *must* be wisdom; for could any one dwell side by side with an author like Hugh Kinross and not absorb it in every pore?

“Max has been,” said Miss Bibby, “not—not quite good, I am sorry to say. He—I have been obliged to leave him by himself in the sitting-room.”

“Oh dear,” said Kate, “poor little chap; what has he done?”

Miss Bibby looked helplessly from one little girl to the other. She could not actually repeat the terrible language, and yet she did so badly need help in the emergency.

“He—I regret to say he quite forgot himself and used some naughty words,” she said. “What would you do in my position, Miss Kinross?”

“Oh,” said Kate with a comfortable smile, “I’d let him out. He’s such a little fellow.”

"But he hasn't said he is sorry," said Miss Bibby anxiously. "I told him that when he rang the sitting-room bell I would go at once, for I should know it meant he was sorry."

"And hasn't he rung it, the young scamp?" said Kate, smiling.

"Well, yes, he did, several times," admitted Miss Bibby unhappily; "but when I opened the door he said he had rung to say he wasn't sorry."

Kate laughed outright.

"What a man he will make!" she said admiringly.

Miss Bibby looked as if she did not quite follow the train of reasoning.

"So I took the bell away," she continued, "and told him I would come every half hour and ask through the door if he was sorry. The second half hour is nearly up."

"Oh," said Kate impulsively, "let's go and peep through the verandah window. Half an hour is a frightful time, Miss Bibby; he will have cried himself sick. Think what a baby he is!"

They tiptoed round to the verandah, the little girls at their heels, and they peeped cautiously through the window.

Max was riding his tricycle. He had arranged the furniture to suit himself—a little table here, a chair there, and the rest of the things pushed out of the way; and he was earnestly practising some sharp turns and curves, in and out, out and in of the articles he had stood about. He had his tongue a little way out, a sure sign of the undivided attention he was giving the work. The way he manipulated the handles, the command he had over the little machine was really admirable.

Kate was convulsed.

"Why—why," said Miss Bibby, "how did he get his tricycle? It certainly was not there when I went in last. Who gave him his tricycle?"

"I did, Miss Bibby," said Lynn meekly. "I didn't think you'd mind."

"Oh, Lynn!" said Miss Bibby.

"But he looked so lonely," said the little girl piteously.

Miss Bibby went round at once to the other door and demanded "Trike," though Kate strongly advised against it.

"I've quite fin'shed with it," said the rebel sweetly, and dismounted without a struggle.

Miss Bibby wheeled it out, somewhat ignominiously.

"I want you to sit down quietly and think how very naughty you have been, Max," she said. "Remember, I am coming in a few minutes to ask you if you are sorry."

"A'right," said Max cheerfully.

The ladies went back to the dining-room and conversation took a wider trend, for Miss Bibby seemed not too certain now of the judgment of the author's sister.

"I brought you round that book I promised," said Miss Kinross, "but I haven't found your story yet. I have hunted everywhere again for it, and I *cannot* think where Hugh could have put it. Are you sure you are not in a hurry for it? I *could* write to Hugh, of course, though I really don't know his address; he only told me Melbourne."

"Oh, no," said Miss Bibby, "I would not have him worried on any account. A few days will not make any difference. I can wait until he returns. And it is possible"—her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkled with the hope—"that he has taken the MS with him and means to look through it while he is away."

"But he did look through it," said Kate; "he told me he had spent all the morning over it. That is what makes me doubtful that he can have taken it. He said so distinctly that it was on his desk and that I was to take it across to you."

Her eyes held a troubled look. Hugh was so hopelessly untidy with his papers that it was just possible the precious MS had fallen into the waste-paper basket and been reduced to smoke by Lizzie. Still it seemed unwise to meet trouble half-way. Hugh would be back now any day, so there was no use to worry the poor authoress unnecessarily.

"Well," she said, "I must be off if I am to get my ride. But I tell you I shall not enjoy it a bit without the little man on the little red tricycle pounding along behind me to the corner as usual. You couldn't find it possible to let him out now? He *must* feel good by this. You never feel naughty as long as this, do you, Muffie?"

"Never," said Muffie stoutly.

"Boys are so different," sighed Miss Bibby.

"Well, let us have one more peep before I go," pleaded Kate.

They tiptoed round to the verandah window again. But this time there was no sign whatever of the rebel though both doors were still locked on the outside. Miss Bibby flew back in terror to the door that opened into the hall; she had taken the key of the verandah doorway. But as her eyes went wildly searching among the furniture they fell upon a dusty little sandal with a brown little foot attached. The boy had crawled so completely underneath the low sofa that nothing more of him was visible.

"Max," said Miss Bibby.

Not a toe quivered.

Miss Bibby stooped down and laid a hand on the foot; the muscles of it lay soft and resistless beneath her fingers.

"Max," she said again.

"Oh, oh," said Lynn, whose nature was easily strung high, "is he dead! Oh, is he dead!" She leapt across the room.

But Miss Bibby was gently drawing more of the unresisting body into view—the scratched and chubby knees that succeeded the brown feet, and that were perfect little "calendars of distress," the three-inch "trousers," the crumpled tunic, the little smudgy face.

"Fast asleep!" she said tenderly, and gathered him very softly up into her arms.

"Fast asleep!" said Kate, and something stirred at her heart and made her long to gather up the chubby rogue herself.

"I will lay him down on the sofa," whispered Miss Bibby, but made no haste to do so, so sweet was the sense of the warm, helpless child body in her arms.

But when the little girls had flown to make a nest with cushions and proclaimed it ready, what further excuse had she? She moved gently across the floor with her burden. But the motion broke the boy's light sleep and he stirred in her arms and opened half an eye. It fell on Kate.

"I'm coming," he said sleepily, "wait for me," and sank away again—"wait for me," and struggled back almost to wakefulness.

Miss Bibby sat down on the sofa with him.

"There," she said soothingly; "hush, go to sleep, love."

Love of course instantly opened his eyes wide.

"I'm going wiv her," he said, looking at Kate. "I always go wiv her to the corner."

"But my little boy was naughty," murmured Miss Bibby in his ear. "Is he my own little good boy again?"

Max nodded.

"Get the licycle," he commanded the three little sisters who were looking at him yearningly.

They flew to obey.

"I'm hungly," he announced.

"Yes, yes—you had no breakfast, darling—Pauline, quickly, some arrowroot biscuits and a glass of milk."

Anna herself brought in the little tray; she had a soft spot in her heart for this member of the black-hearted sex after all.

"I put cream on them for you, darling," she said, and proffered the biscuits.

Max munched away. "I like cleam," he said, licking it lovingly off one biscuit.

"Well, I am thankful the insurrection is over and that discipline has been so firmly maintained," said Kate with a twinkle in her eye.

Miss Bibby blushed.

"You are sorry, aren't you, darling?" she said, feeling after her formula as a matter of duty.

Max nodded again.

"Say you are sorry, darling boy," she whispered.

Max patted her cheek and then stole his little arm round her neck in a perfectly cherubic way.

"I'm solly," he said; then he seemed to realize more clearly that the lady's honour had to be vindicated before all these "girls," and he repeated more loudly and without being asked, "I'm velly solly."

"You darling!" cried the delighted Miss Bibby, and clasped and kissed him again.

Pauline wheeled "Trike" out to the foot of the steps, Lynn rushed for the ever lost boy-hat, Muffie flew to pick a stone up from the path before the little wheel.

Then a flash of irresistible humour shone in Kate Kinross's eyes.

"Max," she said with exceeding suddenness, "what are you sorry for?"

Max mounted his machine from behind and settled himself in his saddle.

"Solly cos I was shut up," he said in the most perfect faith, and then pushed at his little red pedals and started slowly away.

# CHAPTER XXI

## IN PRINT AT LAST

PAULINE and Muffie had gone flying down to the gate to run behind the bicycle and tricycle as far as the corner where the little red tricycle had always to turn and come back.

Lynn hung back a moment.

“Take care of this till I come back, will you, Miss Bibby?” she said, “I’m keeping it for Max.”

*This* was a paper boat that Kate had cleverly folded for Lynn while she waited, using a sheet she tore haphazard from a periodical that she had under her arm, part of the morning’s post.

Miss Bibby took the boat, and when Lynn had darted off after the other young ones, she examined it with a view to finding out how Kate made these clever little things that the children so greatly delighted in.

And there leaped up at her eyes from the printed sheet one of the cutting sentences she had put into the mouth of the hero of her story, the *Hypocrites*! Another and another sentence followed—there stood out her own heroine’s name in the heavenly black of type! At last, at last. Oh, how good of him, how very good—he had plainly taken the tale with him, and got it into this *Melbourne Review*, which was an infinitely better medium than the *Evening Mail*! How very, very good of him—this explained Kate’s inability to find the MS!

Her eyes tore up and down the folded sail;—this sentence was different—sharper, pithier, better rounded than she had written it. A soliloquy was missing there—and better so, its inclusion would have been a mistake. Oh, how good, how good he was! Her quivering fingers fumbled with the folding—Lynn and Max would forgive her for spoiling their boat when they knew—when she showed them her name in print.

Ah, how hungry were her eyes for the sight of it, the sight of the simple name “Agnes Bibby” at the head of her first signed story—the story that was to take away the reproach from the name that the ill-starred interview had brought!

Then the heavens clapped down on her head and the deadliest sickness assailed her.

The heading of the columns said the *Hypocrites*, and the line beneath “By Hugh Kinross.”

# CHAPTER XXII

## A MASTER MIND

HUGH had come back. When he had gone away he had taken with him one small portmanteau that went easily into the luggage rack above his head. But on the return journey he had quite a little sum to pay for excess luggage.

For instance no railway carries a motor bicycle for the consideration tendered to it for a passenger ticket. And a motor bicycle was amongst the things turned out on the Burunda platform when Hugh came back, and, to the astonishment of Kate who had gone to meet him, claimed by him.

“My dear fellow,” she exclaimed when assured it was unmistakably his, “how glad I am! I knew you would come to it sooner or later. Oh, what rides we will have together!” Her face beamed.

“Preserve us!” said Hugh; “Melbourne is not responsible for developing maniacal symptoms in me, I assure you. It’s for you, of course.”

“You mad boy,” said Kate, “haven’t I already the best you could buy?”

“But it turns your little face red,” said Hugh, “and makes your little heart beat too fast on these hills. This one won’t.”

And then it was that Kate discovered the motor attachment of the new machine and was divided between ecstasy and economic qualms.

Hugh swiftly laid the latter. The speculation had gone well—better than his best expectations; he had to break out somewhere, he said.

The breaking out included a tricycle for Muffie, who was ever in hot water with Max for stealing rides on “Trike” just when that gentleman needed the steed himself. A splendid set of croquet was for Pauline, who delighted in the game and had been overwhelmed with sorrow because one night, when mallets and balls “happened” to be left out on the lawn all night, a vagrant cow with a depraved appetite came in and, as Paul said mournfully, “went and chewed corners all over the balls.”

For Lynn, who had been heard bewailing the fact that all the books she loved had been left in the other house, was a large parcel containing six of the most delightful fairy-books in the world.

And, most exciting of all, there were four volumes, thin certainly, but most gaily bound and gilt-edged and padded up as well as possible with thick paper and pictures—the books they had all written that day in the summer-house.

There they lay, three bound in scarlet and one in green, *The Horty Stepmother*, by Pauline Lomax; *The Fairy who Had*, by Lynn Lomax; *There was a Dog*, by Muffie Lomax; and *The Mother who said No*, by Max Lomax. Kate was delighted with them and said she would give much to be at the elbow of the Judge and Mrs. Lomax in New Zealand when these choice volumes from their gifted offspring reached them.

For Miss Bibby too there was an offering.

“There aren’t many modern women left who can fitly wear these things,” Hugh said when he showed it to Kate, “but it struck me that it would become a certain old-world air that lingers about Agnes Bibby.”

“Ho, ho,” said Kate to herself, and stole a glance at him; but she allowed warmly that the thing was very pretty.

It was a chatelaine made of finely-fretted silver. The customary thimble, scissors and other useful and feminine trifles dangled there, but there was also added a delicately-chased case that might

have been expected to hold a bodkin, but contained indeed a very up-to-date fountain-pen, gold-mounted.

“A woman without a waistcoat pocket for her fountain-pen has always seemed such a pathetic object to me,” Hugh said. “When you were a business woman, K, it often moved me to internal tears to notice the disadvantage you were at in this respect.”

Kate acknowledged the disadvantage.

“Though I did stick to a skirt pocket long after the dressmakers had declared them anathema,” she said, “but there was always the danger of sitting on your pen or having it leak a wide black mark in the back width of your best frock. Even the sacred repository behind the ear that will lodge a penny pen refuses to accommodate a stout and slippery fountain one. But with that arrangement she will be able to make notes all day.”

Hugh hastened to display a miniature note-book, also made to hang suspended from the waist.

“She will be armed at all points, you see,” he said, “and the minute she sees men like columns walking, as some one says, she can jot them down.”

“But what are all the other things?” asked Kate, pointing to several still unaccounted-for parcels and hampers standing about the verandah just where the driver had set them down.

“Oh, by George, yes,” said Hugh. “You must look after those things, K, or they won’t keep. It’s to-morrow’s dinner.”

“To-morrow’s fiddlestick!” said Kate unbelievingly.

“’Tis, I assure you,” said Hugh; “I’m giving a grand picnic to-morrow at the Falls to celebrate my safe return. Thought of it in bed last night, telephoned the X.Y.Z. Company to pack a bit of lunch that would keep a day and to meet the train with it, and there you are,” he waved his hand at the hampers.

“A bit of lunch!” said Kate sarcastically. “Are you sure there is enough there to take the edge off our appetites?”

“Don’t get anxious,” said Hugh, “there’s a little more to follow in the morning—little things that don’t keep well, you know. We can easily pick them up at the station as we pass.”

“Little things like——?” said Kate.

“Oh, mustard,” said Hugh—“I remembered how you dislike stale mustard. And butter—you can’t leave butter shut up, you know—and other little things.”

“Half a dozen of everything, I suppose,” Kate said, attacking the hampers. “H’m, champagne.”

“Well, you’ve got to drink the health of those shares.”

“Poultry.”

“It will keep, won’t it? They assured me it was only cooked at 2 o’clock to-day.”

“Oh, it will *keep*.”

“Peaches—pineapples—French confectionery.”

“Well, my dear girl, you will all want a square feed when you get to the bottom of those Falls.”

“And who are we all, pray?” inquired Kate.

“Well,” said Hugh, “there are the ducky little girls, that’s two. I sent them a wire each this morning and had their acceptances before the X.Y.Z. got to work.”

“That was smart,” said Kate.

“Yes, I rather pride myself on my executive abilities when I’ve once got going,” said Hugh. “Next I wired Edith and told her to stay away and Gowan, too. Told her you’d chaperone. I don’t want the gloomy brewer’s soul going by me like a stork at my own picnic. Told her to send along the kids though—all five of them.”

“That’s seven,” said Kate, “and ourselves, nine,—anyone else? I hope so, for there’s enough here for nineteen, and I hate waste.”

“Oh, I sent wires over the road, of course.”

"Half a dozen wires?" said Kate.

"Oh, no," said Hugh innocently, "there are only five of them."

"Five separate wires,—Hugh Kinross, you want a keeper!"

"Well," said Hugh, "I *was* only going to send one to Miss Bibby, but then it struck me how pleased a kid would be to get a telegram. I know I never did or I'd have burst with pride in my promising youth."

"Twelve wires at—at? How many words, sir?"

"Well," said Hugh, "they wouldn't have cost so much only I took a fancy to drop into poetry with them. And in spite of precedents the operator declined to do it as a friend."

"Just a minute," said Kate, "half of those wires are doomed to be wasted. Your executive ability is a thing to marvel at, I grant you, but you overlooked the little fact that Lomax-*cum*-Whooping-Cough may not foregather round a tablecloth with Gowan-*plus*-Perfect-Health."

Hugh certainly looked nonplussed at this.

"It would be a moral impossibility for one of the parties unaided by the other to eat all this," pursued Kate.

"My good woman," said Hugh, "go and put the perishables in the ice-chest. My master mind will soon deal with the difficulty."

So Kate moved backwards and forwards between the kitchen and the verandah and Hugh tilted his chair and took out a cigar to help meet the situation.

"Well?" said Kate when only a heap of fine ash remained.

"Quite well," said Hugh. "Both parties shall attend and not the ghost of a whoop shall be exchanged. I ordered two large sociables,—the drivers will have instructions not to approach nearer than thirty feet within each other. A whoop microbe would hardly travel thirty feet."

"Well," said Kate, "as far as that is concerned I don't see that Edith need have any anxiety. She might pass a wagonette with scarlet fever convalescents herself any day. But what about the actual picnic? Muffie defines this word as eating nice things down a gully. Could we comfortably pass sandwiches to each other there at a distance of thirty feet?"

"Knowing what a fidget Edith is I propose to make the distance several hundred feet," said Hugh. "See here, it is plain I've got to have two picnics now to-morrow. At the head of the Falls I disembark my first contingent,—say the 'Greenways' one. I give them instructions to go straight down to the bottom of the second Fall,—they are all good climbers. When they've got a good start,—say twenty minutes, I call up the second contingent, the little pets and Edith's youngsters and start them down. You will go with these as chaperone and camp at the foot of the first Fall. We must explain to Miss Bibby that your wing extends over both Falls and that she as well as the little pets are brooded beneath it. I've already bespoken two caddies from the links to carry the hampers, and they will have plenty of exercise going up and down the steps. As host I shall endeavour to divide myself equally between my two divisions of guests. And probably the exercise between the two tables will rid me of any superfluous flesh I may have about me."

"Well," laughed Kate, "it is one way out of the difficulty. I certainly should not have thought of anything myself but of postponing one party until another day."

"No," said Hugh complacently, "it takes the strategy of a general or a genius to fix up little things like this."

Four breathless figures came dashing over the road and through the "Tenby" gate round to the side verandah.

"Oh, oh," said Lynn imploringly, "you have finished your tea, haven't you? Miss Bibby wouldn't let us 'sturb you before."

"We counted up to a thousand to give you time," said Pauline, "and *we* could eat enough tea in a hundred and fifty—unless there

were drop cakes."

"We've got to go to bed in ten minutes," said Muffie tragically.

"We're coming," shouted Max, and he flourished the rhymed blue telegram that he had carried about all day.

"Did you get our answers?" cried Lynn.

"We paid for them ourselves," said Pauline. "Miss Bibby just wanted to send one answer and say 'All accept with pleasure'! But we just *wouldn't*, and we all went to the post and we told the woman just what to put, and it would have been a lot better only we didn't have much time to think, only while we walked up the hill, and Lynn did the most, 'cause she can always think of the rhymingest words, and we'd have made them much longer only we could only afford ninepence each, and we had to lend Max threepence, 'cause he'd only got sixpence left."

She stopped for sheer lack of breath.

"Ninepence each!" cried Kate, "and you once thought of writing some articles on teaching Thrift to young Australia, Hugh!"

"But that was before I was really acquainted with young Australia," said Hugh.

"Did you like them?" asked Lynn anxiously, "I was 'fraid you wouldn't like grin, but nothing else would rhyme."

"Like them!" said Hugh, "I shall keep them in my desk among my Correspondence from Celebrated Persons. As a special and particular favour I will allow Kate to see them," and he drew out the budget of telegraph forms.

> "Your friend Pauline
> Will be glad to be seen,"

was the uniquely *apropos* answer to his invitation to the eldest daughter of the Judge.

> "Max will come quick
> To your nice picnic"

was effort number two. There had been a variant reading of this—

> "Max a plate will lick
> At your nice picnic,"

and the matter had been fought out before entering the post office, Lynn liking the first and Pauline and Max himself inclining to the second. But Miss Bibby being made umpire declared against the second as not very "nice." So Hugh knew only the fact that Max would come quick.

> "Please take enough
> To the picnic. From Muff"

would assuredly not have been allowed by Miss Bibby one little month since, to be sent as an acceptance to the invitation of a person nearly eight times her own age. The fact that it was handed across the counter—and with a smile, too—was a sign that the foundations of a liberal education may be successfully laid even at thirty-six.

> "Your loving friend Lynn
> With much joy doth grin,"

in no way satisfied Lynn's ideas either of composition or beauty, but she had been so occupied helping with the couplets of the others that she was forced to compose hers standing on the door step of the post office. The word "grin" vexed her; yet "thin" would not allow itself to be worked in and no other "ryum" that would make sense would suggest itself, so she quite mournfully sent on the information that with joy she did grin.

Pauline pounced on the formal telegram from Miss Bibby—"Will bring my charges. Many thanks for thinking of them."

"We did a *much* better one for her," she said, "only she wouldn't send it. I liked it best of all."

"What was it?" asked Hugh, and learnt that the "rejected address" was—

> "Won't it be nibby?
> Yours truly, Miss Bibby."

But at this point Miss Bibby's slender figure in its pale grey muslin was seen crossing the road, so the presents were hastily distributed, and four pairs of young eyes tried to outrival in brightness the just peeping stars of the early evening.

Miss Bibby shook hands with Kate, then with Hugh, on whom she bent a curious glance: she had half expected to see him turn aside and dive through the doorway at the sight of herself, yet there he stood as calm and unashamed as possible.

He took her hand and held it in a pleasant grasp. He looked down at her in the half-fatherly, bantering fashion he adopted to the "ducky little girls."

"Well," he said, "and how is the poor little pen?"

Miss Bibby shot one keen glance at him.

He decided that she did not like the slighting reference to that pen and strove to rectify his mistake. "You know, however good an instrument it is, I don't like to see it in a woman's hand," he went on, "it's an edged weapon and cuts into even the hard hand that holds it; your little hand would bleed if you grasped it perpetually. I better like to think of it smoothing these little heads."

He looked—he knew not why himself—half sadly at the eager children.

"Isn't he an anachronism?" laughed Kate, "I often tell him the reason he has not married is he has never been able to find any one sufficiently Early Victorian for him. Imagine preaching a doctrine of 'Thou shalt not write' to women to-day! Every woman her own authoress is the accepted thing."

"Ah well," said Hugh, "I know a better thing." But though Kate pressed him he might not tell to these two spinsters that "Every woman a mother" was in his thoughts.

"I will say good-night," said Miss Bibby, "come children—at once, if you please." She shook hands with Kate and this time only bowed to Hugh.

"Did you give her her present?" asked Kate when the gate closed and the grey figure and the little running ones were merged in the grey of the tender dusk.

"No," said Hugh, "I'll have to find a better chance; I evidently put my foot in it, didn't I?" He pondered over the keen eye-glance that had met his once or twice.

"I tell you what it is, Kate," he said, when, his cigar finished, they went into the house, "that girl will never really forgive me for the interview, however much she may think she does."

# CHAPTER XXIII

## THE PICNIC AT THE FALLS

THE morning rose in mist; the sun moved upwards and still the mist lingered, as if anxious to drape and hide the rough edges of this oddly-arranged picnic.

Sometimes the wagonette in front was lost to sight by a rolling curtain of gauze; sometimes a wind swept the road clear and then the children waved hats and kissed hands to each other.

Dora and Beatrice were visions of beauty and fashion in smartly-cut linen gowns and the latest thing in stocks and belts and shoes and hats and gloves and parasols; not over-dressed in the least, but so correct, so up-to-date, so “well-planned,” Miss Bibby involuntarily drew a heavy sigh as she looked at them.

In their turn the two young girls pleasantly patronized Miss Bibby. It was the first time they had seen her, though they had heard of her often, and indeed were a little anxious to meet her, for Mrs. Gowan had teased Hugh before them, ever since the interview, about the “fair and mysterious Miss Bibby.” But this figure in its plain blue serge and its out-of-date, if spotless, cuffs and collar! This gentle, tired face with faint lines at the eye corners and its brown hair simply waved back from the forehead instead of bulging out on a frame as Fashion insisted!

“We need not have been afraid,” they whispered to each other.

Effie and Florence, second and third in age of the five little Gowans and mustering some fifteen years between them, sat up on the box next the driver and whispered together. All the way they hardly moved their eyes from the wagonette in front, where the faces of their loved little friends appeared and disappeared like flowers of the vapour.

The driver was an unemotional man, long used to being squeezed up on his seat by more people than that seat was ever built to accommodate; used, too, to having his ears filled with every sort and condition of conversation. City men talked to each other beside him of stocks and shares; tourists compared the views along the roads with New Zealand views, and American ones and German and Swiss: mothers babbled of their babies and their servants; girls whispered to girls of “Jack” and “Jim”—lovers—and these allowed him more seat space—of love.

Why should he lend a more than quarter ear as usual to the chatter of two little bits of girls? How should he know the demure holland frocks beside him covered revolutionists?

Hugh started off his first party, Paul and Lynn, Muffie and Max and Miss Bibby.

The children besought him to come, too.

“It will be just a common picnic, if you don’t,” Pauline said, looking disparagingly round her family party.

Hugh promised to divide his time equally between his two sets of guests.

“Let the boys bring your basket down with the other things, Miss Bibby,” he said, seeking to relieve her of a tiny basket she carried, “then you will have your hands free when you come to the ladder.”

“Thank you, it is very light, I can manage it quite well,” said Miss Bibby, holding fast to the handle.

“It’s her lunch,” volunteered the ever ready Muffie, “she doesn’t eat things like you’ve got. But we do,—and we’re getting hungry now, aren’t we, Paul?”

“Rather!” said Paul. “Can we begin to set the tables as soon as we get down?”

Hugh looked disappointedly at the miserable little basket.

“Won’t you even make a feast and be merry to-day?” he said.

Miss Bibby glanced away from the kindly eyes. How could they look so clear and merry when he had stolen the work of her brain?

“Thank you,” she said coldly, “I prefer my own things.” And when he turned away instantly, quite hurt at the unfriendly tone, she caught hold of Max’s hand and began the steep descent with a mist, not entirely of the mountains, blinding her eyes. For she was heartsick this morning, and it was not only the loss of the story that had occasioned the wretchedness, but her faith and admiration for this man had been torn away so roughly that certain sensations she hardly realized seemed numbed.

“Come along, dear, hold my hand,” she said to Max,—“Lynn, Muffie,—walk carefully! Hold to the rail at the steep places, Paul.”

But she always said this as a matter of duty, and equally as a matter of duty they never heeded her, for even Max knew every step of the way and had manfully climbed the ladders alone, and crept sure-footed over the great fallen trees that formed bridges, since he was three.

Down, down they went through the exquisite gorge; greener and still more green grew the way as the path wound farther and farther away from the sunburnt lands overhead. Giant tree ferns grouped themselves together in one place and in another guarded the path in sentinel-like rows. You looked up and sheer walls of rock towered thousands of feet above your head—brown, naked, rugged walls here—and there, where the waterfalls dripped, clothed in a marvellous mantle of young ferns. Here a huge, jagged promontory stretched across your way, and the diplomatic path, unable to force a way through, simply ceased in its downward bent, and with handrails and steps led you up again.

As a reward for expended breath, a rail at the top encircled a stone peninsula and gave you a resting-place and an outlook—an outlook startlingly beautiful by reason of its unexpectedness. For the promontory had hidden the valley’s loveliness, and here you found a sudden glorious peep at it. And then your eyes looking down, down below the rail, saw that cascades had met and the water was plunging in a wide glistening sheet down the dizzy height.

The path led downwards again; the heart of the traveller has seen the falling of the water and cannot have its desire until it stands somewhere where the same down-dropping stream forms a deep pool and ceases.

Down, down they went, Miss Bibby, Muffie and Max leading and, far behind, Pauline and Lynn, lingering as was their wont (they had a passion for pretending they were wandering quite alone in the gully)—but occasionally sending downwards a cooee to assure Miss Bibby of their safety.

They were dangling their legs on a seat in “The Lovers’ Cave,” two little figures in blue zephyr, when Paul gave a sudden exclamation of dismay.

“Quick, quick,” she said, “we’re going too slowly. Here come the others.”

She seized Lynn’s hand and the two began to hurry along the path again, for at a bend just above them were the holland frocks and mushroom hats of Florence and Effie.

Down, down, a hundred steps here, round a bend there, down a damp ladder, hard as they could go, and yet the holland frocks gained on the blue every moment. Lynn was panting, Pauline’s face streamed with perspiration, and still they sought to increase the distance; they could not have run more conscientiously from their little friends if they had been lepers.

But on, on, resistlessly came the holland frocks. Driven to bay Paul wheeled round—“We can’t go any faster,” she shouted desperately, “you’ll just have to sit down and wait.”

“Driven to bay Paul wheeled round.”

On, on came Florence and Effie while Lynn who had pulled up, too, regarded them in horror. When they were within a distance of ten feet she caught at Pauline’s hand and began to run again. But the newcomers who had dropped into a comfortable walk began to run even faster.

Paul and Lynn dodged into “Lurline’s Bower” that came along opportunely.

“We’ll wait here while you go past as you’re in such a hurry,” Paul shouted.

But the holland frocks came on steadily, steadily till they stood in the opening of the bower, till they crushed themselves on the very seat with the amazed blue ones.

“You’ll catch our whooping,” began Paul.

“We want to,” said Effie and Florence succinctly.

“But—but—” said Paul and Lynn agitatedly.

“It’s all right,” said Florence, “we ’cided all about it coming along, didn’t we, Eff? It’s we’s who haves to cough, not mother, an’ we don’t mind, do we, Eff?”

“Not a bit,” said Effie stoutly.

“But,” said Paul, looking at the opening of the bower as if she would dash out, “we promised your mother.”

Effie and Florence cut off any possible escape by jumping up and standing with their backs to the opening. “It’s too late, we’ve caught it by now,—haven’t we, Eff?” said Florence.

“Of course we have,” said Effie, “we’ve got it as much as you have now. Oh we are glad. Aren’t we, Florence?”

“Rather,” said Florence.

“Won’t your Aunt Kate be coming after you?” asked Paul, looking fearfully along the side of the gorge for the sight of a stout figure of vengeance crushing downwards to separate them.

“She thinks we’re only a little way in front,” chuckled the naughty children.

“But who’s taking care of you?” persisted Paul.

“Oh, Miss Dora and Miss Bee said they would, but they always let us do anything,” said Effie easily, “it was such a lovely chance.”

“Well, I think you are big sillies,” said Pauline virtuously, but she began untwisting Effie’s tight brown curls and twisting them together again in the way she had ever loved to do.

While as to Lynn and Florence, they were almost rubbing noses in the joy of the reunion.

“It’s just *too* dreadful at the hotel,” said Effie, “we’d rather be at school. There’s nothing to do all day.”

“’Cept walk along the road with nurse, and mind you don’t get your good school frock spoiled”—Effie’s was the complaint. “Can’t have fun in the hotel garden or you spoil their silly old beds.”

“Can’t shout in the house or a lot of old ladies put their fingers up at you.”

“Can’t make a mud pie like at your house, ’cause you’ve got to be clean all the time.”

The angry duet went on and on till the spirits of the little holland frocks were somewhat relieved, after the restrictions imposed upon them by the residence of their parents for a “holiday” in a fashionable hotel.

“We just long and long for ‘Greenways’.”

“We talk in bed about the fun we used to have in the orchard till we nearly cry. Don’t we, Eff?”

“Rather,” said Effie, mournfully, “but now we’ll be able to come, ’cause we’ll all have whooping cough, too. Frank and Ted and Nellie all say they’d rather have it than stop away from ‘Greenways’ any longer.”

Up through the ferns came the thin note of Miss Bibby’s cooee.

“Coo-ee-ee,” shouted Pauline instantly in return. Then looked a little troubled, for cooee was to be interpreted that all was well.

“At all events it’s not our fault,” she said resignedly.

A stout figure of vengeance was indeed coming along the path in the shape of Uncle Hugh.

Tiny Nellie Gowan who could never keep a secret ten minutes had suddenly revealed the horrifying fact that “Effie and Florence were going to run and run till they catched the whooping cough and all could go to Muffie’s house again.”

So Hugh had followed in their wake promptly enough, but then he was stout, while they were slim, and the race was consequently not to him.

He drove Paul and Lynn downwards with threats of dry bread and spring water for lunch. And he bore his nieces, who cheerfully exculpated their friends from blame, back to the tables at the foot of the first Fall, where Kate and the others were beginning to spread the lunch.

And here nothing in the shape of wrath and reproaches and argument could shake them from the position behind which they had entrenched themselves, namely that since the coughing would have to be done by themselves it mattered nothing to anybody if the affliction came upon them.

Kate unpacked the baskets with a melancholy air. It was useless, of course, to preserve an appearance of anger towards the offenders, but a bad quarter of an hour was undoubtedly in store for her with their mother.

Hugh was optimistic. He declared that the whooping cough microbe meeting the fresh air microbe on such a fighting ground as a mountain gully would be “laid out in one act.”

He stretched himself along a seat and indulged in a smoke after his exertions, while Kate and Florence and Effie made all ready for lunch.

Dora and Beatrice had gone to sit in the “Lovers’ Nook” and try to feel romantic. Kate had rejected their offers of assistance in her work.

“Why did you send away my little girls?” said Hugh lazily,—“I don’t mean bad little girls like those,” he looked at the shamelessly cheerful Florence and Effie, who were gathering ferns for the tables, “but my good little girls.”

“Silly little things,” said Kate, “they get on my nerves frightfully. I wanted to keep my faculties clear for my work.”

“Ah,” said Hugh, looking at his pipe, “they strike you that way, do they, K? They seem rather charming to me to-day. Perhaps apart—one cannot have both unfortunately—perhaps one at a time, K, they might seem to have more—er sense, eh?”

His hat was over his eyes, Kate could only see his mouth.

“Oh, my little me,” said the woman’s heart, “the boy is serious!”

She cut up a lettuce before she could trust herself to speak and even ate a few shreds in her agitation.

When she did speak her tone was motherly.

“Hughie,” she said, “they are charming little girls,—for a summer day on the mountain. But we’re in our autumn now, you and I, and for daily companionship I assure you you would get more satisfaction from Lynn or Muffie.”

The hat was pushed an inch or two lower still.

“K—you’re a good sort, of course, but—I get lonely sometimes, girl.”

“Yes, yes, boy. God knows it’s natural. But—not a pretty butterfly, Hugh. A woman nearer your own age, dear boy, some one to be a restful companion for you, able to appreciate your work, and fit in with your angles instead of your having to attempt to unmake yourself at your age and fit into hers.”

“All right, don’t disturb me, I’m going to sleep,” said Hugh sulkily. What was the use of asking a woman’s advice on any subject under the sun?

The escaped caddies brought down more hampers. In the strap of one of them were the morning letters, forgotten till now.

Hugh opened them irritably, while Kate meekly went on with her task of making a salad.

She was engaged in the critical operation of squeezing the juice from her sliced cucumber, by pressing the top plate heavily down on the bottom one, when the author gave so sudden and strong an exclamation that she dropped the whole concern.

“What Tommy rot is this?” he demanded of her angrily. “What lunatic trick have you played me now, Kate? Where’s the last number of the *Melbourne Review*?”

She took the letter from his hand and read it. It was from the editor of the *Review*, a one time “chief” of Hugh’s.

“I enclose you cheque for ten guineas as arranged,” it said, “and, of course, now you’re a celebrity, old man, I’ve had to print it and be thankful. But you wouldn’t have had the cheek to send me a rotter of a story like that six years ago, and you know it. You want a change, that’s what it is, old man, you’re attempting too much. Take a run over to New Zealand, or go home. And if you’ve been turning out any more stories like this choice *Hypocrites*, take my advice and burn ’em before you blast your brand-new reputation.”

“Where’s the last *Melbourne Review*, I ask you?” roared Hugh. As if it were part of Kate’s duty to bring files of the latest magazines with her to picnics!

She delved instantly into her memory to try to help him; another woman might have chosen the moment to sulk, offended at his tone.

“It came on Thursday,” she said, “I remember tearing a page out to make a boat for Muffie—I meant to have torn an advertisement page, but found later it had part of a story of yours on it.”

“What was the tale called?”

“*The Hypocrites.*”

“And my signature to it?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Great heavens, girl, don’t you see what your carelessness has done? You’ve sent that confounded woman’s tale to the editor as my work!”

Kate was forced gently to remind him that he had enclosed the MS himself in an envelope and addressed it to a typist with instructions to forward to the *Review*.

Hugh sat down chapfallen. “What a fool I am!” he groaned. “The tale was unspeakable. It is enough to ruin any reputation. And Wilkie’s not the man to retract either; he’ll tell me the mistake’s my own and I’ll have to grin and bear the ignominy.”

“And that poor girl,” said Kate—“her story lost to her! No wonder I couldn’t find her MS. I meant to have made you hunt for it to-day, but this picnic put it out of my head.”

And now Hugh gave a sudden roar of laughter.

“By George, K,” he said, “don’t you see the shrieking humour of the situation? The woman thinks I’ve boned her precious story. That’s why she has been treating me with such cold dignity. Oh, hold me up, hold me up, I feel ill!”

But soon his hilarity sobered. The situation also had a pathetic side. He remembered the quiet shining of the authoress’s eyes when she gave him the unfortunate roll of MS. What must she be thinking of him?

“K,” he said, “I’m going down at once to explain to Miss Bibby.”

“But what will Dora and Beatrice say?” said Kate doubtfully.

“Oh, hang Dora and Beatrice,” said their gallant host, “you’ll have to make an excuse for me. Besides, Agnes Bibby is as much my

guest as they are. I'll eat my chicken down there and my strawberries up here. You've sent everything down for them, haven't you."

"Everything," said K.

"Champagne?"

"Oh no—Miss Bibby does not touch such things, I know."

"Give me a bottle of champagne?"

Kate handed him one and he tucked it under his arm.

"Forgive my spleen, old girl," he said, his hand held out. "I fear there's a good deal of the unvarnished brute in me."

"Yes, you want a tamer, my boy," said Kate, squeezing his hand.

"Well," said Hugh, "I'll go and make my expiation. Again. I seem to be always doing it. I tell you what it is, K, if I injure that girl again I'll have to marry her."

He went swinging off at a comfortable jog-trot down the path, his bottle sticking out from beneath one arm.

A look of thoughtful surprise dawned in Kate's eyes.

"And upon my soul you might do worse," she said—"you might do worse."

# CHAPTER XXIV

## AT THE SECOND FALL

MISS BIBBY had prepared a delightful meal for her charges from the generous hamper the caddies carried down to her. Slices of chicken lay in nests of finely shredded lettuce with a delicate cream dressing lightly poured on top. A mountain of ruddy strawberries formed a centrepiece,—delicious and novel cakes made side dishes, jellies quivered and reflected on their sides the foaming waterfall. While here, there and everywhere were scattered evidences of the high skill chocolate manufacturers are attaining to —hatchets, saws, garden rakes, dolls' tea-sets, animals of every description—all in the most delightful kind of chocolate.

The children buzzed round the tables like eager flies, but Miss Bibby would not have them begin until their host had paid the visit he had promised.

"But I may as well get mine over," she said, "and then I can help all of you. And it would be too depressing for you, wouldn't it, Paul, to see me eating what you think my poor meal while you revel in all these delicacies?" She got out her tiny basket and hastily emptied the contents of one of the packets on to a plate.

"Dear, darling Miss Bibby," implored Lynn, clinging suddenly to her, "do eat something nice, just to-day. Oh do, do throw your horrid basket away, and eat really truly food for once."

"I can't, darling—I really can't," said Miss Bibby, quite distressed at having to refuse such a lovingly-put plea; "some other day,—next time you have a picnic. But not to-day." She almost said "Not *his* food."

"Here he comes, here he comes," shrieked the children.

"Can I begin—can I have a lawberry?" cried Max, fairly dancing in his impatience.

Hugh came down wiping his hot face with his handkerchief. He took in the scene at a glance,—the eager children, waiting for him before they began, Miss Bibby seated at the adjacent slab table where she had piled the empty hampers, hastily eating a poor meal from a plate before her.

"Fall to, chickens," said Hugh, and the four children made a glad, mad dash for their seats and with glowing eyes "fell to."

Hugh went to the grey slab table.

"My dear Miss Bibby, am I always to be doing you an injury?" he said.

And at that instant there rolled away from Agnes Bibby's soul all the heaviness that had oppressed it, and the sun shone out.

Of course, of course there was some mistake,—he had never meant to take credit for her work!

"Oh," she gasped, "it was a mistake, of course. You—you sent them the wrong MS, that is all." Why had no lightning flash of this possibility come to her before in her darkness?

Hugh looked at her in speechless admiration.

Then he spoke, and slowly. "I think," he said, "you are without exception the most sensible woman I have ever met."

And now there ran into Agnes Bibby's face a flood of colour, quite as delicate and beautiful as that which sometimes stained the fresh young skins of Dora and Beatrice. She felt so guilty—she had thought—what had she not thought? She began to try to tell him she was not as sensible as he imagined, but he was so busy explaining to her how it all happened, and pressing the ten-guinea cheque upon her which he insisted her story had earned, that she simply was afforded no chance.

"But," she said, pushing back the cheque gently—"I can only accept four guineas of this—that is the most my story would have earned. The rest your name commanded!"

"Nonsense, nonsense," he said, "that *Review* always pays well, this is your own cheque, fairly earned; remember I have deprived you of all the glory of the story. For I know Wilkie too well to be able to hope that he will condescend to explain such a mistake in his columns."

So Miss Bibby, dazzled, tucked the bit of pink paper away in her little basket.

"And now," said Hugh, "will you just see if the children have enough to eat?"

"Oh dear, oh dear," said Miss Bibby, fluttering up, "I really had forgotten them for the moment. I—I hope they have not made themselves ill."

When she had obtained doubtful satisfaction on this point and turned her head again towards Hugh, she found him in the act of tossing all her packets of eatables one after the other over the edge of the rock where the water went plunging down to yet another fall.

"Hurrah! hurrah!" shouted Lynn, who had seen the act, "now she'll have to eat some of our lovely things."

"Have a lawberry, Miss Bibby, go on," Max enjoined, his little mouth full of the delicious fruits and red juice dripping down his tunic.

"I—I—" began Miss Bibby.

But Hugh calmly tucked her hand in his arm and led her to the children's table. "I am taking you into dinner, madam, and I insist that you eat everything I put before you."

And she did—or almost. Hugh let the children revel as they liked in the good things, and assured their anxious guardian that he had chosen the lunch expressly from the point of view of suitability for the delicate digestions of children. And he laid down the maxim that appetite was the safest guide in the world, and when it said "More" no one but a Bumble would say it nay.

He ate excellently himself; he uncorked the champagne, and insisted upon her joining him with it; the sparkling stuff filled all her veins with fire. She ate chicken and found that it was good—and very good. She ate of other delicacies with which he plied her plates and found all her system rejoiced. In very truth she had lately pushed her diet theory so far that she was in a state of semi-starvation. She laughed, she chatted gaily, she made as entertaining a companion for that little lunch at the foot of the Fall as a man need wish to have. Hugh stared at her in amaze once or twice; it was as if a white tightly-closed rosebud had suddenly blossomed into beautiful bloom.

"Happiness," said Hugh to himself, "that is all she needs, and the independence and responsibilities of a home of her own."

The merry lunch progressed; the talk fell upon the author's own books—and other books. Again Hugh was surprised—and delighted —at the lady's discrimination and genuine culture. It was difficult to realize that any one who wrote so atrociously could think and speak so well.

"It's like Kate's bicycle," he said to himself, "a single woman must break out somewhere. The probabilities are, if she had a home of her own, that she would never want to touch a pen again."

Round and round the subject hovered his thoughts; this gentle, quiet companion for the autumn of his life—the thought was singularly attractive—infinitely more so than the thought of Dora or Bee that had always possessed also an element of distraction alarming to a man of staid habits.

He looked at her with new eyes.

She saw the look and drooped and flushed beneath it.

Then down came Kate, panting and puffing, but quite genial.

"A nice way to treat your guests, Sir," she said, "do you know you have been away an hour? I don't know what Dora and Bee can think of you."

“By George,” said Hugh, “I had forgotten their very existence!”

“Well,” said Kate, sinking comfortably on a seat, “others have not been so forgetful. Two young men have arrived and have been helping us to eat up the picnic. I have forgotten their surnames, but the girls call them Charlie and Graham. Medical students, I find, who decided not to attend lectures, but to take a run up here for the day. Clears the brain, they told me. Heard at the hotel that their friends were at the Falls, so just ran down in the hope of stumbling across them. Stumbled across them in the ‘Lovers’ Nook.’”

“Ah,” said Hugh, “and do the little girls seem pleased to see them?”

“Well,” said Kate, “all I can say is one of them, Bee to be exact, has a ring on her finger that she did not start the day with. I discovered this by the painful efforts she made at lunch to hide it. And I expect by this time Dora’s finger can keep Bee’s company. They are plainly very masterful young men, and I fancy had determined that the mountain trip should settle their hearts as well as clear their brains.”

“Ah,” said Hugh, “I am delighted. I’ll go up presently and drink their healths—if there’s a bottle of champagne left. Any more news your end of the world?”

“Yes,” said Kate, and calmly helped herself to some jelly, “Effie has developed whooping cough while you have been away.”

“Oh, oh!” said Muffie, jumping with joy, “may we go up and play with them now?”

“Look here,” said Hugh, “I protest. This is too staggering. I may not know as much of medicine as this Charlie and Graham you speak of, but I do know a germ’s got to be incubated. There simply has not been time.”

“Oh, yes,” said Kate. “I have dragged it from Florence that they foregathered purposely some time ago with the laundress’s little boy who has the same complaint, but since it did not seem to have communicated itself to them they made another trial to-day. Well, Edith will have to leave the hotel now and take a cottage for them.”

The little Lomaxes were dancing with delight. Only Max was a little quiet. Teddie Gowan did everything a little better than he, Max, could do; it would be insupportable if Teddie were able soon to brag that he whooped louder than Max.

“Praps mine will get worser again,” he said hopefully.

“See here,” said Kate, “I must go back before much longer. Miss Bibby and I will pack up, Hugh, and you stay quietly at the tree ferns and mind the children.”

“No,” said Hugh gently, “you and the children pack up, K, and I will mind Miss Bibby.”

A delicate wave of colour pulsed over the woman’s face.

THE END.

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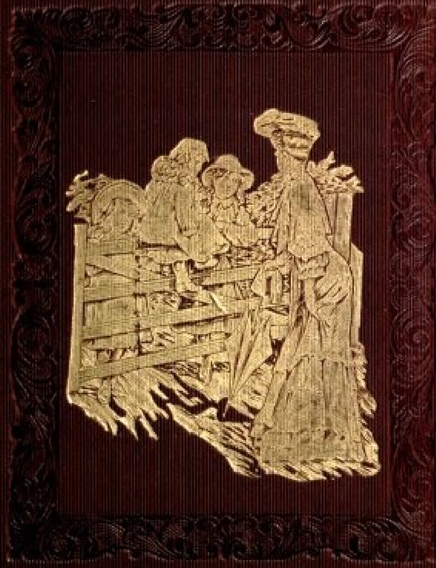
In the Mist of the Mountains
Ethel Turner

## Transcriber’s notes:

Inconsistent hyphenations (everyday/every-day, wastepaper/waste-paper, bathroom/bath-room) have been retained.

On p39 Miss (Agnes) Bibby’s rejected novel is listed as being written by “Katherine J. Howard Bibby”. This is the only occurrence of “Katherine” in the text and has been left as printed.

On p177 the punctuation preceding the quotation “How happy could I be with either” has been adjusted to clarify who is speaking.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN THE MIST OF THE MOUNTAINS ***

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