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GIRLS OF THE FOREST



GIRLS OF THE FOREST

L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF ALWYN'S FRIENDS, BEYOND THE BLUE MOUNTAINS,
GOOD LUCK, PLAYMATES, PRETTY GIRL AND
THE OTHERS, THE PALACE BEAUTIFUL, ETC.

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BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

L. T. Meade (Mrs. Elizabeth Thomasina Smith), English novelist, was born at Bandon, County Cork, Ireland, 1854, the daughter of Rev. R. T. Meade, rector at Novohal, County Cork, and married Toulmin Smith in 1879. She wrote her first book, *Lettie's Last Home*, at the age of 17, and since then has been an unusually prolific writer, her stories attaining wide popularity on both sides of the Atlantic.

She worked in the British Museum, lived in Bishopsgate Without, making special studies of East London life, which she incorporated in her stories. She edited the *Atlanta*, a magazine, for six years. Her pictures of girls, especially in the influence they exert on their elders, are drawn with intuitive fidelity, pathos, love, and humor, as in *Girls of the Forest*, flowing easily from her pen.

She has traveled extensively, and is devoted to motoring and other outdoor sports.

Among more than fifty novels she has written, dealing largely with questions of home life, are: *A Knight of To-day* (1877), *Bel-Marjory* (1878), *Mou-setse: a Negro Hero* (1880), *Mother Herring's Chickens* (1881), *A London Baby: The Story of King Roy* (1883), *Two Sisters* (1884), *The Angel of Life* (1885), *A World of Girls* (1886), *Sweet Nancy* (1887), *Nobody's Neighbors* (1887), *Deb and The Duchess* (1888), *Girls of the Forest* (1908), *Aylwyn's Friends* (1909), *Pretty Girl and the Others* (1910).

GIRLS OF THE FOREST.

CHAPTER I.

THE GUEST WHO WAS NEITHER OLD NOR YOUNG.

It was a beautiful summer's afternoon, and the girls were seated in a circle on the lawn in front of the house. The house was an old Elizabethan mansion, which had been added to from time to time—fresh additions jutting out here and running up there. There were all sorts of unexpected nooks and corners to be found in the old house—a flight of stairs just where you did not look for any, and a baize door shutting away the world at the moment when you expected to behold a long vista into space. The house itself was most charming and inviting-looking; but it was also, beyond doubt, much neglected. The doors were nearly destitute of paint, and the papers on many of the walls had completely lost their original patterns. In many instances there were no papers, only discolored walls, which at one time had been gay with paint and rendered beautiful with pictures. The windows were destitute of curtains; the carpets on the floors were reduced to holes and patches. The old pictures in the picture gallery still remained, however, and looked down on the young girls who flitted about there on rainy days with kindly, or searching, or malevolent eyes as suited the characters of those men and women who were portrayed in them.

But this was the heart of summer, and there was no need to go into the musty, fusty old house. The girls sat on the grass and held consultation.

"She is certainly coming to-morrow," said Verena. "Father had a letter this morning. I heard him giving directions to old John to have the trap patched up and the harness mended. And John is going to Lyndhurst Road to meet her. She will arrive just about this time. Isn't it too awful?"

"Never mind, Renny," said her second sister; "the sooner she comes, the sooner she'll go. Briar and Patty and I have put our heads together, and we mean to let her see what we think of her and her interfering ways. The idea of Aunt Sophia interfering between father and us! Now, I should like to know who is likely to understand the education of a girl if her own father does not."

"It is all because the Step has gone," continued Verena. "She told us when she was leaving that she meant to write to Aunt Sophia. She was dreadfully cross at having to go, and the one mean thing she ever did in all her life was to make the remark she did. She said it was very little short of disgraceful to have ten girls running about the New Forest at their own sweet will, without any one to guide them."

"Oh, what a nuisance the Step is!" said Rose, whose pet name was Briar. "Shouldn't I like to scratch her! Dear old Paddy! of course he knows how to manage us. Oh, here he comes—the angel! Let's plant him down in our midst. Daisy, put that little stool in the middle of the circle; the Padre shall sit there, and we'll consult as to the advent of precious Aunt Sophia."

Patty, Briar, and Verena now jumped to their feet and ran in the direction where an elderly gentleman, with a stoop, gray hair hanging over his shoulders, and a large pair of tortoise-shell spectacles on his nose, was walking.

"Paddy, Paddy! you have got to come here at once," called out Briar.

Meanwhile Verena took one of his arms, Patty clasped the other, Briar danced in front, and so they conducted him into the middle of the group.

"Here's your stool, Paddy," cried Briar. "Down you squat. Now then, squatty-*vous*."

Mr. Dale took off his spectacles, wiped them and gazed around him in bewilderment.

"I was construing a line of Virgil," he said. "You have interrupted me, my dears. Whatever is the matter?"

"We have brought the culprit to justice," exclaimed Pauline. "Paddy, forget the classics for the time being. Think, just for a few moments, of your neglected—your shamefully neglected—daughters. Ten of them, Paddy, all running wild in the Forest glades. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Don't you feel that your moment of punishment has come? Aunt Sophia arrives to-morrow. Now, what have you got to say for yourself?"

"But, my dear children, we can't have your Aunt Sophia here. I could not dream of it. I remember quite well she came here once a long time ago. I have not got over it yet. I haven't really."

"But she is coming, Paddy, and you know it quite well, for you got the letter. How long do you

think you can put up with her?"

"Only for a very short time, Pauline; I assure you, my darling, she is not—not a pleasant person."

"Describe her, Paddy—do," said Verena.

She spoke in her very gentlest tone, and held out one of her long white hands and allowed her father to clasp it. Verena was decidedly the best-looking of the eight girls sitting on the grass. She was tall; her complexion was fair; her figure was naturally so good that no amount of untidy dressing could make it look awkward. Her hair was golden and soft. It was less trouble to wind it up in a thick rope and hairpin it at the back of her head than to let it run wild; therefore she was not even untidy. Verena was greatly respected by her sisters, and Briar was rather afraid of her. All the others sat silent now when she asked the old Padre to describe Aunt Sophia.

"My dear," he answered, "I have not the slightest idea what her appearance is like. My memory of her is that she was fashionable and very conventional."

"What on earth is 'conventional'?" whispered Pat.

"Don't interrupt, Patty," said Verena, squeezing her father's hand. "Go on, Paddy; go on, darling of my heart. Tell us some more. Aunt Sophia is fashionable and conventional. We can look out the words in the dictionary afterwards. But you must know what she is like to look at."

"I don't, my dears; I cannot remember. It was a good many years ago when she came to visit us."

"He must be prodded," said Briar, turning to Renny. "Look at him; he is going to sleep."

"Excuse me, girls," said the Squire, half-rising, and then sitting down again as Verena's young hand pushed him into his seat. "I have just made a most interesting discovery with regard to Virgil—namely, that—"

"Oh, father! we don't want to know about it," said Briar. "Now, then, Renny, begin."

"Her appearance—her appearance!" said Verena gently.

"Whose appearance, dear?"

"Why, Aunt Sophia's; the lady who is coming to-morrow."

"Oh, dear!" said Mr. Dale; "but she must not come. This cannot be permitted; I cannot endure it."

"Paddy, you have given John directions to fetch her. Now, then, what is she like?"

"I don't know, children. I haven't the slightest idea."

"Prod, Renny! Prod!"

"Padre," said Verena, "is she old or young?"

"Old, I think; perhaps neither."

"Write it down, Briar. She is neither old nor young. Paddy, is she dark or fair?"

"I really can't remember, dear. A most unpleasant person."

"Put down that she is—not over-beautiful," said Verena. "Paddy, must we put on our best dresses when she comes—our Sunday go-to-meeting frocks, you know?"

"Children, wear anything on earth you like, but in Heaven's name let me go away now! Only to think that she will be here to-morrow! Why did Miss Stapleton leave us? It is really too terrible."

"She left," said Briar, her eyes twinkling, "because we would call her Step, which means step-mother. She was so dreadfully, dreadfully afraid that you might find it out."

"Oh, children, how incorrigible you are! The poor woman! I'd sooner have married—I—I never mean to marry anybody."

"Of course you don't, Padre. And you may go now, darling," said Verena. "Go, and be happy, feeling that your daughters will look after you. You are not lonely, are you, darling, with so many of us? Now go and be very happy."

Eight pairs of lips blew kisses to the departing figure. Mr. Dale shambled off, and disappeared through the open window into his study.

"Poor dear!" said Verena, "he has forgotten our existence already. He only lives when he thinks of Virgil. Most of his time he sleeps, poor angel! It certainly is our bounden duty to keep him away from Aunt Sophia. What a terror she must be! Fancy the situation. Eight nieces all in a state of insurrection, and two more nieces in the nursery ready to insurrect in their turn!"

"Something must be done," interrupted Pauline. "Nurse is the woman to help us. Forewarned is forearmed. Nurse must put us up to a wrinkle or two."

"Then let's go to her at once," said Verena.

They all started up, and, Verena leading the way, they went through the little paddock to the left of the house, and so into a yard, very old-fashioned and covered with weeds and cobble-stones. There were tumble-down stables and coach-houses, hen-houses, and buildings, useful and otherwise, surrounding the yard; and now in the coach-house, which for many years had sheltered no carriage of any sort, sat nurse busy at work, with two little children playing at her feet.

"Don't mind the babies at present," said Verena. "Don't snatch them up and kiss them, Briar. Patty, keep your hands off. Nurse, we have come."

"So I see, Miss Verena," said nurse.

She lifted her very much wrinkled old face and looked out of deep-set, black eyes full at the young girl.

"What is it, my darling child?"

"How are we to bear it? Shall we fall on our knees and get round you in a little circle? We must talk to you. You must advise us."

"Eh, dears!" said nurse. "I am nearly past that sort of thing. I'm not as young as I was, and master and me we're both getting old. It doesn't seem to me to matter much now whether a body's pretty or not, or whether you dress beautiful, or whether a thing is made to look pretty or otherwise. We're all food for worms, dears, all of us, and where's the use of fashing?"

"How horrid of you, nurse!" said Verena. "We have got beautiful bodies, and our souls ought to be more beautiful still. What about the resurrection of the body, you dreadful old nurse?"

"Oh, never mind me, dears; it was only a sort of dream I were dreaming of the funeral of your poor dear mother, who died when this dear lamb was born."

Here nurse patted the fat arm of the youngest hope of the house of Dale, little Marjorie, who looked round at her with rosy face and big blue eyes. Marjorie was between three and four years old, and was a very beautiful little child. Verena, unable to restrain herself any longer, bent down and encircled Marjorie with her strong young arms and clasped her in an ecstatic embrace.

"There, now," she said; "I am better. I forbid all the rest of you girls to touch Marjorie. Penelope, I'll kiss you later."

Penelope was seven years old—a dark child with a round face—not a pretty child, but one full of wisdom and audacity.

"Whatever we do," Verena had said on several occasions, "we must not let Penelope out of the nursery until she is quite eight years old. She is so much the cleverest of us that she'd simply turn us all round her little finger. She must stay with nurse as long as possible."

"I know what you are talking about," said Penelope. "It's about her, and she's coming tomorrow. I told nurse, and she said she oughtn't never to come."

"No, that she oughtn't," said nurse. "The child is alluding to Miss Tredgold. She haven't no call here, and I don't know why she is coming."

"Look here, nurse," said Verena; "she is coming, and nothing in the world will prevent her doing so. The thing we have to consider is this: how soon will she go?"

"She'll go, I take it," said nurse, "as soon as ever she finds out she ain't wanted."

"And how are we to tell her that?" said Verena. "Now, do put on your considering-cap at once, you wise old woman."

"Yes, do show us the way out, for we can't have her here," said Briar. "It is absolutely impossible. She'll try to turn us into fine ladies, and she'll talk about the dresses we should have, and she'll want father to get some awful woman to come and live with us. She'll want the whole house to be turned topsy-turvy."

"Eh!" said nurse, "I'll tell you what it is. Ladies like Miss Tredgold need their comforts. She won't find much comfort here, I'm thinking. She'll need her food well cooked, and that she won't get at The Dales. She'll need her room pretty and spick-and-span; she won't get much of that sort of thing at The Dales. My dear young ladies, you leave the house as it is, and, mark my words, Miss Tredgold will go in a week's time at the latest."

CHAPTER II.

A HANDFUL.

The girls looked full at nurse while she was talking. A look of contentment came into Verena's face. She shook herself to make sure she was all there; she pinched herself to be certain that she was not dreaming; then she settled down comfortably.

"There never was anybody like you, nurse," she said. "You always see the common-sense, possible side of things."

"Eh!" said nurse. "If I hadn't seen the common-sense, possible side of things many years ago, where would I be with the handling and bringing up of you ten young ladies? For, though I say it that shouldn't, there ain't nicer or bonnier or straighter children in the whole Forest; no, nor better-looking either, with cleaner souls inside of them; but for all that, anybody else"—and here

nurse gave a little sort of wink that set Pauline screaming—"anybody else would say that you were a handful. You are a handful, too, to most people. But what I say now is this. You needn't take any notice of me; you can keep your own counsel and say nothing; but if you want her to go—the lady that has no call to be here—the lady that's forced herself where she ain't wanted—why, you have *got* to be handfuls. And now I'll go into the house with my two precious lambs."

The elder "precious lamb" looked very cross at being suddenly informed that she was to go indoors while the sun shone so brightly and the summer warmth surrounded her.

"No, I won't," said Penelope. "I am going to stay out with the others. I'm a very big girl; I am not a baby any longer. And you aren't to keep me in the nursery any longer, Verena. And I won't be naughty. I'll make up to Aunt Sophia like anything—that I will—if you keep me in the nursery any longer."

This was such a daring threat that, although Penelope was not thought much of as a rule, the girls looked at her now with a sort of awe.

"She might as well stay for a quarter of an hour longer, mightn't she, nurse?" said Briar.

"No, that she ain't to do, Miss Rose. She comes right indoors and prepares for her bed like a good child. Is it me that's to be shortened of my hours of rest by a naughty little thing like this? Come along this minute, miss, and none of your nonsense." 7

So Penelope, her heart full of rage, retired into the house with nurse and baby Marjorie.

"I hope she won't do anything mean and nasty," said Pauline. "It's the sort of thing she would do, for she's frightfully clever."

"Oh, we needn't consider her," said Verena. "Do let's make up our minds what to do ourselves."

"I have all sorts of things in my head," said Patty. "The pony-carriage might break down as it was coming from the station. I don't mean her to be badly hurt, but I thought she might get just a little bit hurt, so that she could stay in her bed for twenty-four hours. An aunt in bed wouldn't be so bad, would she, Renny?"

"I don't know," said Verena. "I suppose we must be polite. She is mother's half-sister, you know. If mother were alive she would give her a welcome. And then Padre will have to talk to her. He must explain that she must go. If he doesn't, we will lead him a life."

The girls talked a little longer. They walked round and round the ugly, ill-kept lawn; they walked under the beautiful trees, entwined their arms round each other's waists, and confabbed and confabbed. The upshot of it all was that on the following day a very large and very shabby bedroom was got ready after a fashion for Miss Tredgold's arrival; and John, the sole factotum of the establishment—the man who cleaned the boots and knives, and swept up the avenue, removed the weeds from the flower-beds, cleaned the steps whenever they were cleaned, and the windows whenever they were cleaned—appeared on the scene, leading a tumble-down, knock-kneed pony harnessed to a very shabby pony-cart.

"I'm off now, miss," he said to Verena, pulling a wisp of hair as he spoke. "No, miss, there ain't any room. You couldn't possibly sit on the back seat, for it's as much as ever I'll do to bring the lady home in this tumble-down conveyance. Our own is too bad for use, and I had to borrow from Farmer Treherne, and he said he wouldn't trust any horse but old Jock; this carriage will just keep together until the lady's here."

"But whatever he thinks," said Verena, "do you suppose we can have a smart, neat carriage ready to take Miss Tredgold back again this day week? You will see about that, won't you, John?"

"I will, miss. There'll be no difficulty about that; we'll get the lady away whenever she wants to go."

"Very well. You had better be off now. You must wait outside the station. When she comes out you are to touch your hat and say, 'This is the carriage from The Dales.' Be sure you say that, John. And look as important as ever you can. We must make the best of things, even if we are poor." 8

"You never saw me, miss, demeaning the family," said John.

He again touched his very shabby hat, whipped up the pony, and disappeared down the avenue.

"Now, then," said Briar, "how are we to pass the next two hours? It will take them quite that time to get here."

"And what are we going to give her to eat when she does come?" said Patty. "She'll be awfully hungry. I expect she'll want her dinner."

"Dinner!" cried Josephine. "Dinner! So late. But we dine at one."

"You silliest of silly mortals," said Verena, "Aunt Sophia is a fashionable lady, and fashionable ladies dine between eight and nine o'clock."

"Do they?" said Josephine. "Then I'm glad I'm not a fashionable lady. Fancy starving all that long time! I'm always famished by one o'clock."

"There's Penelope!" suddenly said Patty. "Doesn't she look odd?"

Penelope was a very stout child. She had black eyes and black hair. Her hair generally stood upright in a sort of halo round her head; her face was very round and rosy—she looked like a

kind of hard, healthy winter-apple. Her legs were fat, and she always wore socks instead of stockings. Her socks were dark blue. Nurse declared that she could not be fashed with putting on white ones. She wore a little Turkey-red frock, and she had neither hat nor coat on. She was going slowly and thoughtfully round the lawn, occasionally stooping and picking something.

"She's a perfect mystery," said Pauline. "Let's run up to her and ask her what she's about."

Catching Patty's hand, the two girls scampered across the grass.

"Well, Pen, and what are you doing now? What curious things are you gathering?" they asked.

"Grasses," replied Penelope slowly. "They're for Aunt Sophia's bedroom. I'm going to make her bedroom ever so pretty."

"You little horror!" said Pauline. "If you dare to go against us you will lead a life!"

Penelope looked calmly up at them.

"I'll make a bargain," she said. "I'll throw them all away, and be nastier than you all—yes, much nastier—if you will make me a schoolroom girl."

Pauline looked at her.

"We may be low," she said, "and there is no doubt we are very poor, but we have never stooped to bribery and corruption yet. Go your own way, Penelope. If you think you can injure us you are very much mistaken."

Penelope shook her fat back, and resumed her peregrinations round and round the lawn.

"Really she is quite an uncomfortable child," said Pauline, returning to her other sisters. "What do you think she is doing now? Picking grasses to put in Aunt Sophia's room."

"Oh, let her alone," said Verena; "it's only her funny little way. By the way, I wonder if Padre has any idea that Aunt Sophia is coming to-day."

"Let's invade him," said Patty. "The old dear wants his exercise; he hasn't had any to-day."

The eight girls ran with whoops and cries round the house. Penelope picked her grasses with more determination than ever. Her small, straight mouth made a scarlet line, so tightly was it shut.

"I am only seven, but I'm monstrous clever," she whispered to herself. "I am going to have my own way. I'll love poor Aunt Sophy. Yes, I will. I'll kiss her, and I'll make up to her, and I'll keep her room full of lovely grasses."

Meanwhile the other girls burst into the study. A voice was heard murmuring rapidly as they approached. A silvery-white head was bending over a page, and some words in Latin came like a stream, with a very beautiful pronunciation, from the scholar's lips.

"Ah, Verena!" he said, "I think I have got the right lines now. Shall I read them to you?"

Mr. Dale began. He got through about one line when Patty interrupted him:

"It can't possibly be done, Paddy. We can't listen to another line—I mean yet. You have got to come out. Aunt Sophia is coming to-day."

"Eh? I beg your pardon; who did you say was coming?"

"Aunt Sophia—Miss Tredgold. She's coming to-day on a visit. She'll be here very soon. She's coming in an old cart that belongs to Farmer Treherne. She'll be here in an hour; therefore out you come."

"My dears, I cannot. You must excuse me. My years of toil have brought to light an obscure passage. I shall write an account of it to the *Times*. It is a great moment in my life, and the fact that— But who did you say was coming, my dears?"

"Really, Paddy, you are very naughty," said Verena. "You must come out at once. We want you. You can't write another line. You must not even think of the subject. Come and see what we have done for Aunt Sophia. If you don't come she'll burst in here, and she'll stay here, because it's the most comfortable room in the house. And she'll bring her work-basket here, and perhaps her mending. I know she'll mend you as soon as she arrives. She'll make you and mend you; and you need mending, don't you, dear old Padre?"

"I don't know, my dears. I'm a stupid old man, and don't care about dress. Who is the person you said was coming? Give her some tea and send her away. Do you hear, Verena? Give her tea, my darling, and—and toast if you like, and send her away. We can't have visitors here."

"Patty!" said Verena.

Patty's eyes were shining.

"Pauline!"

The two girls came forward as though they were little soldiers obeying the command of their captain.

"Take Padre by the right arm, Pauline. Patty, take Padre by the left arm. Now then, Paddy, quick's the word. March!"

Poor Mr. Dale was completely lifted from his chair by his two vigorous daughters, and then marched outside his study into the sunshine.

"We are not going to be cross," said Verena, kissing him. "It is only your Renny."

"And your Paulie," said the second girl.

"And your Rose Briar," said the third.

"And your Patty," said the fourth.

"And your Lucy," "And your Josephine," "And your Helen," "And your Adelaide," said four more vigorous pairs of lips.

"And we all want you to stand up," said Verena.

"Good heavens! I did think I had come to the end of my worries. And what on earth does this mean? Penelope, my child, what a hideous bouquet you have in your hand! Come here and kiss father, my little one."

Penelope trotted briskly forward.

"Do you like my red frock, father?" she asked.

"It is very nice indeed."

"I thought it wor. And is my hair real tidy, father?"

"It stands very upright, Penelope."

"I thought it did. And you like my little blue stockings, father?"

"Very neat, dear."

"I thought they wor."

"You look completely unlike yourself, Penelope. What is the matter?"

"I want to be a true, kind lady," said the little girl. "I am gathering grasses for my aunty; so I are."

She trotted away into the house.

"What a pretty, neat, orderly little girl Penelope has become!" said Mr. Dale. "But— You really must excuse me, my dear girls. You are most charming, all of you. Ah, my dears!—so fresh, so unsophisticated, so—yes, that is the word—so unworldly. But I must get back to my beloved Virgil. You don't know—you can never know—what a moment of triumph is mine. You must excuse me, darlings—Verena, you are nearly grown up; you will see to the others. Do what you can to make them happy—a little treat if necessary; I should not mind it."

"Give us fourpence to buy a pound of golden syrup for tea, please, Padre," suddenly said Briar. "If there is a thing I love, it is golden syrup. A pound between us will give us quite a feast—won't it, Renny?"

"Only we must save a little for the aunt," cried Patty.

"I do hope one thing," said Pauline: "that, whatever her faults, she won't be greedy. There isn't room for any one to be greedy in this house. The law of this house is the law of self-denial; isn't it, Padre?"

"I begin to perceive that it is, Pauline. But whom are you talking of?"

"Now, Padre," said Verena, "if you don't wake and rouse yourself, and act like a decent Christian, you'll be just prodded—you'll be just shaken. We will do it. There are eight of us, and we'll make your life a burden."

"Eh—eh!" said Mr. Dale. "Really, girls, you are enough to startle a man. And you say—"

"I say, Paddy, that Miss Sophia Tredgold is on her way here. Each instant she is coming nearer. She is coming in the old pony cart, and the old pony is struggling with all his might to convey her here. She is coming with her luggage, intending to stay, and our object is to get her to go away again. Do you hear, Padre?"

"Yes, my dear, I hear. I comprehend. It takes a great deal to bring a man back down the ages—down—down to this small, poor, parsimonious life; it takes a great deal. A man is not easily roused, nor brought back; but I am back now, darlings.—Excuse me, Briar; no more prodding.—Hands off, Pauline.—Hands off, Patty. Perhaps I had better tidy myself."

"You certainly would look nicer, and more like the owner of The Dales, if you got into your other coat," said Briar.

"Shall we all come up and help you, Padre?" called out the eight in a breath.

"No, no, dears. I object to ladies hovering about my room. I'll run away now."

"Yes, yes; and you'd better be quick, Padre, for I hear wheels."

"I am going, loves, this moment."

Mr. Dale turned and absolutely ran to the shelter of the house, for the wheels were getting near—rumbling, jumping, uncertain. Now the rumbling and the jumping and the uncertainty got into the avenue, and came nearer and nearer; and finally the tumble-down pony cart drew up at the house. The pony printed his uncertain feet awkwardly but firmly on the weed-grown sweep in front of the unpainted hall door, and Miss Tredgold gazed around her.

Miss Tredgold was a very thin, tall woman of about forty-five years of age. She was dressed in the extreme of fashion. She wore a perfectly immaculate traveling dress of dark-gray tweed. It fitted her well-proportioned figure like a glove. She had on a small, very neat black hat, and a

spotted veil surrounded her face. She stepped down from the pony cart and looked around her.

"Ah!" she said, seeing Verena, "will you kindly mention to some of the ladies of the family that I have arrived?"

"I think I need not mention it, because we all know," said Verena. "I am your niece Verena."

"You!"

Miss Tredgold could throw unutterable scorn into her voice. Verena stepped back, and her pretty face grew first red and then pale. What she would have said next will never be known to history, for at that instant the very good child, Penelope, appeared out of the house.

"Is you my Aunt Sophie?" she said. "How are you, Aunt Sophie? I am very pleased to see you."

Miss Sophia stared for a moment at Penelope. Penelope was hideously attired, but she was at least clean. The other girls were anyhow. They were disheveled; they wore torn and unsightly skirts; their hair was arranged anyhow or not at all; on more than one face appeared traces of recent acquaintance with the earth in the shape of a tumble. One little girl with very black eyes had an ugly scratch across her left cheek; another girl had the gathers out of her frock, which streamed in the most hopeless fashion on the ground.

"How do you do?" said Aunt Sophia. "Where is your father? Will you have the goodness, little girl, to acquaint your father with the fact that his sister-in-law, Sophia Tredgold, has come?"

"Please come into the house, Aunt Sophie, and I'll take you to father's study—so I will," exclaimed champion Penelope.

CHAPTER III.

PREPARING FOR THE FIGHT.

Penelope held up a chubby hand, which Miss Tredgold pretended not to see.

"Go on in front, little girl," she said. "Don't paw me. I hate being pawed by children."

Penelope's back became very square as she listened to these words, and the red which suffused her face went right round her neck. But she walked solemnly on in front without a word.

"Aunties are unpleasant things," she said to herself; "but, all the same, I mean to fuss over this one."

Here she opened a door, flung it wide, and cried out to her parent:

"Paddy, here comes Aunt Sophia Tredgold."

But she spoke to empty air—Mr. Dale was still busy over his toilet.

"Whom are you addressing by that hideous name?" said Miss Sophia. "Do you mean to tell me you call your father Paddy?"

"We all do," said Penelope.

"Of course we do," said Verena, who had followed behind.

"That is our name for the dear old boy," said Pauline, who stood just behind Verena, while all the other children stood behind Pauline.

It was in this fashion that the entire party invaded Mr. Dale's sanctum. Miss Tredgold gazed around her, her face filled with a curious mixture of amazement and indignation.

"I had an intuition that I ought to come here," she said aloud. "I did not want to come, but I obeyed what I now know was the direct call of duty. I shall stay here as long as I am wanted. My mission will be to bring order out of chaos—to reduce all those who entertain rebellion to submission—to try to turn vulgar, hoydenish little girls into ladies."

"Oh, oh! I say, aunty, that is hard on us!" burst from Josephine.

"My dear, I don't know your name, but it is useless for you to make those ugly exclamations. Whatever your remarks, whatever your words, I shall take no notice. You may struggle as you will, but I am the stronger. Oh! here comes— Is it possible? My dear Henry, what years it is since we met! Don't you remember me—your sister-in-law Sophia? I was but a little girl when you married my dear sister. It is quite affecting to meet you again. How do you do?"

Miss Tredgold advanced to meet her brother-in-law. Mr. Dale put both his hands behind his back.

"Are you sorry to see me?" asked Miss Tredgold. "Oh, dear, this is terrible!"

The next instant the horrified man found that Miss Tredgold had kissed him calmly and with vigor on each cheek. Even his own children were never permitted to kiss Mr. Dale. To tell the truth, he was the last sort of person anybody would care to kiss. His face resembled a piece of parchment, being much withered and wrinkled and dried up. There was an occasion in the past

when Verena had taken his scholarly hand and raised it to her lips, but even that form of endearment he objected to.

"I forgive you, dear," he said; "but please don't do it again. We can love each other without these marks of an obsolete and forgotten age. Kissing, my dear, is too silly to be endured in our day."

That Miss Tredgold should kiss him was therefore an indignity which the miserable man was scarcely likely to get over as long as he lived.

"And now, girls," said the good lady, turning round and facing her astonished nieces, "I have a conviction that your father and I would have a more comfortable conversation if you were not present. Leave the room, therefore, my dears. Go quietly and in an orderly fashion."

"Perhaps, children, it would be best," said Mr. Dale.

He felt as though he could be terribly rude, but he made an effort not to show his feelings.

"There is no other possible way out of it," he said to himself. "I must be very frank. I must tell her quite plainly that she cannot stay. It will be easier for me to be frank without the children than with them."

So the girls left the room. Penelope, going last, turned a plump and bewildered face towards her aunt.

But Miss Tredgold took no more notice of Penelope than she did of the others. When the last pair of feet had vanished down the passage, she went to the door and locked it.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Mr. Dale.

"My dear Henry, I locked the door because I wish to have a quiet word with you. I have come here—I will say it plainly—for the sole purpose of saving you."

"Of saving me, Sophia! From what?"

"From the grievous sin you are committing—the sin of absolutely and completely neglecting the ten daughters given to you by Providence. Do you do anything for them? Do you try in the least to help them? Are you in any sense of the word educating them? I scarcely know the children yet, but I must say frankly that I never came across more terribly neglected young people. Their clothes are in rags, they are by no means perfectly clean in their persons, and they look half-starved. Henry, you ought to be ashamed of yourself! I wonder my poor sister doesn't turn in her grave! When I think that Alice was their mother, and that you are bringing them up as you are now doing, I could give way to tears. But, Henry, tears are not what are required. Action is the necessary thing. I mean to act, and nothing will turn me from that resolution."

"But, my dear Sophia, I have not met you for years. To be frank with you, I had almost forgotten your existence. I am a terribly busy man, Sophia—a scholar—at least, I hope so. I do not think the children are neglected; they are well, and no one is ever unkind to them. There is no doubt that we are poor. I am unable to have the house done up as poor Alice would have liked to see it; and I have let the greater part of the ground, so that we are not having dairy produce or farm produce at present. The meals, therefore, are plain."

"And insufficient; I have no doubt of that," said Miss Tredgold.

"They are very plain," he answered. "Perhaps you like dainty food; most ladies of your age do. I must be as frank with you as you are with me. You won't like our table. Sometimes we do without meat for a week at a time."

"I do not care if you never touch meat again," said Miss Sophia. "Thank goodness, with all my faults, I am not greedy."

"What a pity!" murmured Mr. Dale.

"What was that you said? Do you like greedy women?"

"No, Sophia; but I want to put matters so straight before you that you will consider it your bounden duty to leave The Dales."

"Where my duty calls me I stay, whatever the circumstances, and however great the inconveniences," remarked Miss Sophia.

"Well, Sophia, your attitude and manner and words distress me considerably. But I must speak to you again. I am busy now over a most important matter. I have just discovered——"

"A gold mine on your estate?"

"No; something fifty times more valuable—a new rendering——"

"Of what, may I ask?"

"The noblest meter ever moulded by the lips of man.' Bowen is quite wrong in his translation; I am about to prove it. I allude to Virgil's *Æneid*."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Miss Tredgold, "is the man staring mad? Now, my dear fellow, you have got to put up with me. I can tell you plainly that it will be no treat to live with you. If it were not for my sister I would leave this house and let you and your family go your own way to destruction; but as Alice was so fond of me, and did her best for me when I was a little girl, I mean to do my best for your children."

"But in what way, Sophia? I told you I was poor. I am poor. I cannot afford a governess. Verena

can darn quite nicely, and she knows a little about plain needlework. She turned a skirt of her own a month ago; her work seemed quite creditable, for I did not notice it one way or the other."

"Oh, you man—you man!" said Miss Tredgold.

"And the other children are also learning to use the needle; and most of them can read, for all the novels that I happen to possess have been removed from the bookshelves. The girls can read, they can write, and they can use their needles. They are thoroughly happy, and they are healthy. They do not feel the heat of summer or the cold of winter. The food is plain, and perhaps not over-abundant, but they are satisfied with it. They don't worry me much. In short, it is only fair to say that I am not well enough off to keep you here. I cannot possibly give you the comforts you require. I should be glad, therefore, my dear Sophia, if you would be kind enough to leave The Dales."

"Now listen to me, Henry. I have resolved to stay, and only force will turn me out. My heavier luggage is coming by the carrier to-morrow. I brought a small trunk in that awful little conveyance which you sent to meet me. As to the money question, it needn't trouble you, for I shall pay for all extras which my presence requires. As to luxuries, I am indifferent to them. But I mean the girls to eat their food like ladies, and I mean the food to be well cooked; and also everything in the house shall be clean, and there shall be enough furniture in the rooms for the ordinary requirements of ordinary gentlemen. I shall stay here for at least three months, and if at the end of that time you do not say to me, 'Sophia, I can never thank you enough for what you have done,' I shall be surprised. Now I have stated exactly the position of things, and, my dear Henry, you are welcome to go back to your work. You can study your beloved Virgil and gloat over your discovery; but for goodness' sake come to dinner to-night looking like a gentleman."

"My wardrobe is a little in abeyance, Sophia. I mean that I—I have not put on an evening coat for years."

"You probably have one at the back of nowhere," said Miss Tredgold in a contemptuous tone. "But, anyhow, put on the best you have got. Believe me, I have not come to this house to sit down with my hands before me. I have come to work, to renovate, to restore, to build up. Not another word, Henry. I have put the matter into a nutshell, and you and your children must learn to submit to the arrival of Sophia Tredgold."

At these words the good lady unlocked the door and stepped out.

As she walked down the passage she heard the quick trampling of many feet, and it occurred to her that some of the girls must have been listening at the keyhole.

"I can't allow that sort of thing again," she said to herself. "But now—shall I take notice?"

She stood for a moment thinking. The color came into her cheeks and her eyes looked bright.

"For my sister's sake I will put up with a good deal," was her final comment; and then she went into the hall.

There was a wide old hall leading to the front stairs, and in this hall now stood the good child Penelope. She had brought in a quantity of fresh grasses, and had a piteous and beseeching expression on her face. Miss Tredgold took no notice of her. She stood by the open hall door and looked out.

"Might be made a pretty place," she said aloud.

Then she turned to go upstairs, sighing as she did so. Penelope echoed the sigh in a most audible manner. Miss Tredgold was arrested by the sound, and looked down.

"Ah, little girl!" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought perhaps you'd like me to help you," said Penelope. "I wor waiting for you to come out of Pad's room."

"Don't use that hideous word 'wor.' W-a-s, was. Can you spell?"

"No; and I don't want to," said Penelope.

"We'll see about that. In the meantime, child, can you take me to my room?"

"May I hold of your hand?" said Penelope.

"May you hold my hand, not *of* my hand. Certainly not. You may go on in front of me. You have got clearly to understand— But what did you say your name was?"

"Penelope."

"You must clearly understand, Penelope, that I do not pet children. I expect them to be good without sugar-plums."

Now, Penelope knew that sugar-plums were delicious. She had heard of them, and at Christmas-time she used to dream of them, but very few had hitherto come into her life. She now looked eagerly at Miss Tredgold.

"If I are good for a long time without them, will you give me two or three?" she asked.

Miss Tredgold gave a short, grim laugh.

"We'll see," she said. "I never make rash promises. Oh! so this is my room."

She looked around her.

"No carpet," she said aloud; "no curtains; no pictures on the walls. A deal table for a dressing-table, the muslin covering much the worse for dirt and wear. Hum! You do live plain at The Dales."

"Oh, yes; don't us?" said Penelope. "And your room is much the handsomest of all the rooms. We call it very handsome. If you wou to see our rooms——"

"Were to see——"

"Yes, were to see," repeated Penelope, who found this constant correction very tiresome.

"And may I ask," exclaimed Miss Tredgold suddenly, not paying any heed to the little girl's words, "what on earth is that in the blue mug?"

She marched up to the dressing-table. In the center was a large blue mug of very common delft filled with poor Penelope's grasses.

"What horror is this?" she said. "Take it away at once, and throw those weeds out."

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At that moment poor Penelope very nearly forsook her allegiance to Aunt Sophia. She ran downstairs trembling. In the hall she was received by a bevy of sisters.

"Well, Pen, and so you have bearded the lion! You took her to her room, did you? And what did she say? Did she tell you when she was going away?"

"Yes, did she?" came from Verena's lips; and Pauline's eager eyes, and the eyes of all the other children, asked the same question.

Penelope gave utterance to a great sigh.

"I thought I'd be the goodest of you all," she said. "I maded up my mind that I just would; but I doesn't like Aunt Sophia, and I think I'll be the naughtiest."

"No, you little goose; keep on being as good as you can. She can't possibly stay long, for we can't afford it," said Verena.

"She'll stay," answered Penelope. "She have made up her mind. She throwed away my lovely grasses; she called them weeds, my darlings that I did stoop so much to pick, and made my back all aches up to my neck. And she said she hated little girls that pawed her. Oh, I could cry! I did so want to be the goodest of you all, and I thought that I'd get sugar-plums and perhaps pennies. And I thought she'd let me tell her when you was all bad. Oh, I hate her now! I don't think I care to be took out of the nursery if she's about."

"You certainly are a caution, Penny," said Verena. "It is well that you have told us what your motives are. Believe me, there are worse places than that despised nursery of yours. Now, I suppose we must get some sort of dinner or tea for her. I wonder what Betty is doing to-day, if her head aches, and if——"

"Oh, come along; let's go and find out," said Pauline. "I feel so desperate that I have the courage for anything."

It is to be owned that the Dales did not keep an extensive establishment. Old John potted about the gardens and did what little gardening he thought necessary. He also did odd jobs about the house. Besides John, there was Betty. Betty ruled supreme as cook and factotum in the kitchen. Betty never asked any one for orders; she got what she considered necessary from the local tradesmen, or she did without. As a rule she did without. She said that cooking was bad for her—that it made her head and back ache. On the days when Betty's head or back ached there was never any dinner. The family did not greatly mind. They dined on these occasions on bread, either with butter or without. Betty managed to keep them without dinner certainly at the rate of once or twice a week. She always had an excellent excuse. Either the boiler was out of gear, or the range would not draught properly, or the coals were out, or the butcher had failed to come. Sometimes the children managed to have jam with their bread-and-butter, and then they considered that they had a very fine meal indeed. It mattered little to them what sort of food they had if they only had enough; but sometimes they had not even enough. This more constantly happened in the winter than in the summer, for in the summer there was always plenty of milk and always plenty of fruit and vegetables.

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When Betty heard that Miss Tredgold was coming to stay she immediately gave Verena notice. This was nothing at all extraordinary, for Betty gave notice whenever anything annoyed her. She never dreamed of acting up to her own words, so that nobody minded Betty's repeated notices. But on the morning of the day when Miss Tredgold was expected, Betty told nurse that she was about to give a real, earnest notice at last.

"I am going," she said. "I go this day month. I march out of this house, and never come back—no, not even if a dook was to conduct me to the hymeneal altar."

Betty was always great on the subject of dukes and marquises. She was seldom so low in health as to condescend to a "hearl," and there had even been a moment when she got herself to believe that royalty might aspire to her hand.

"She must be really going," said Verena when nurse repeated Betty's speech. "She would not say that about the duke if she was not."

"You leave her alone," said nurse. "But she's dreadful put out, Miss Renny; there's no doubt of that. I doubt if she'll cook any dinner for Miss Tredgold."

Verena, Pauline, and Penelope now rushed round to the kitchen premises. They were nervous,

but at the same time they were brave. They must see what Betty intended to do. They burst open the door. The kitchen was not too clean. It was a spacious apartment, which in the days when the old house belonged to rich people was well taken care of, and must have sent forth glorious fires—fires meant to cook noble joints. On the present occasion the fire was dead out; the range looked a dull gray, piles of ashes lying in a forlorn manner at its feet. Betty was sitting at the opposite side of the kitchen, her feet on one chair and her capacious person on another. She was busily engaged devouring the last number of the *Family Paper*. She had come to a most rousing portion in her story—that part in which the duke marries the governess. Betty was, as she said, all in a twitter to see how matters would end; but just at this crucial moment the girls burst in.

“Betty, do stop reading,” said Verena. “She’s come, Betty.”

“I know,” cried Betty. “I’m not deaf, I suppose. John told me. He brought her, drat him! He says she’s the sort to turn the house topsy-turvy. I’ll have none of her. I won’t alter my ways—no, not a hand’s-turn—for the like of her, and I go this day month.”

“Oh, Betty!” said Verena.

“I do, my dear; I do. I can’t put up with the ways of them sort—never could. I like you well enough, young ladies, and your pa; and I’d stop with you willing—so I would, honey—but I can’t abide the likes of her.”

“All the same, she’s come, Betty, and we must have something for dinner. Have you anything in the house?”

“Not a blessed handful.”

“Oh, Betty!” said Verena; “and I told you this morning, and so did nurse. We said we must have dinner to-night at seven o’clock. You should have got something for her.”

“But I ain’t done it. The stove’s out of order; we want the sweep. I have a splitting headache, and I’m just reading to keep my mind off the pain.”

“But what are we to do? We must get her something.”

“Can’t she have tea and bread-and-butter? We’ve half-a-pound of cooking butter in the house.”

“Are there any eggs?”

“No. I broke the last carrying it across the kitchen an hour ago. My hands were all of a tremble with the pain, and the egg slipped.”

“Betty, you are too dreadful! Won’t you put that paper down and try to help us?”

Betty looked at the three faces. In their shabby dresses, and with their pretty, anxious eyes, Verena having a frown between her charming brows, they made a picture that struck the cook’s heart. With all her odd and peculiar ways, she was affectionate.

“Are you fretting about it, Miss Renny?” she asked.

As she spoke she put down her feet and pushed the tempting number of the *Family Paper* from her.

“There!” she said; “poor little Miss Dunstable may marry the Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton just as soon as she pleases, but I won’t have you put out, Miss Renny.”

“I did want something nice for dinner,” said Verena.

“Then I’ll manage it. There ain’t a better cook than I anywhere when I’m put on my mettle. Miss Penny, will you help me?”

“Certainly,” said Penelope.

“Well, run into the garden and pick all the peas you can find. There’s a nice little joint in the larder, and I’ll roast it, and you shall have a beautiful dinner. Now off you go, dears. You shall have custard-pudding and cream and strawberry-jam afterwards.”

“Oh, how nice!” cried Penelope, with a little gasp. “Be sure you give us *plenty* of strawberry-jam, and make a very large custard-pudding, for there’s such a lot of us to eat the things, and I generally get the teeniest little bit.”

“You are a nursery child, and it’s in the nursery you’ll have your tea,” said Verena in a stern tone. “Go and pick the peas.”

“Not me,” said Penelope.

She sat down just where she was, in an obstinate heap, in the middle of the floor.

“If I are not to eat those peas I don’t pick ‘em,” she said. “I wor going to be kind, but I won’t be kind if I’m to be turned into a nursery child.”

“Oh! do let her come to the dining-room just for to-night,” pleaded Pauline.

“Very well, then; just for once,” said Verena.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LIFE OF MISRULE.

Dinner went off better than the girls had expected. But to Miss Tredgold it was, and ever would be, the most awful meal she had eaten in the whole course of her existence. The table was devoid of all those things which she, as a refined lady, considered essential. The beautiful old silver spoons were dirty, and several of them bent almost out of recognition. A like fate had befallen the forks; the knives were rusty, the handles disgracefully dirty; and the tablecloth, of the finest damask, was almost gray in color, and adorned with several large holes. The use of serviettes had been long abolished from The Dales.

The girls, in honor of the occasion, had put on their best frocks, and Verena looked fairly pretty in a skimpy white muslin made in an obsolete style. The other girls each presented a slightly worse appearance than their elder sister, for each had on a somewhat shabbier frock, a little more old-fashioned and more outgrown. As to Mr. Dale, it had been necessary to remind him at least three times of his sister-in-law's arrival; and finally Verena had herself to put him into his very old evening-coat, to brush him down afterwards, and to smooth his hair, and then lead him into the dining-room.

Miss Tredgold, in contradistinction to the rest of the family, was dressed correctly. She wore a black lace dress slightly open at the neck, and with elbow sleeves. The children thought that she looked dazzlingly fashionable. Verena seemed to remember that she had seen figures very like Aunt Sophia's in the fashion books. Aunt Sophia's hair in particular absorbed the attention of four of her nieces. How had she managed to turn it into so many rolls and spirals and twists? How did she manage the wavy short hair on her forehead? It seemed to sit quite tight to her head, and looked as if even a gale of wind would not blow it out of place. Aunt Sophia's hands were thin and very white, and the fingers were half-covered with sparkling rings, which shone and glittered so much that Penelope dropped her choicest peas all over her frock as she gazed at them.

John was requisitioned to wait at table, and John had no livery for the purpose. The family as a rule never required attendance at meals. On this occasion it was supposed to be essential, and as Betty refused point-blank to stir from the kitchen, John had to come to the fore.

"No, no, Miss Renny," said Betty when poor Verena begged and implored of the good woman to put in an appearance. "No, you don't. No, you certain sure don't. Because you looked pretty and a bit coaxing I gave up Miss Dunstable and the Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton two hours ago, but not another minute will I spare from them. It's in their select society that I spend my haristocratic evening."

Verena knew that it would be useless to coax Betty any further. So John appeared with the potatoes in a large dish on a rusty tray, each potato having, as Betty expressed it, a stone inside. This she declared was the proper way to cook them. The peas presently followed the potatoes. They were yellow with age, for they ought to have been eaten at least a week ago. The lamb was terribly underdone, and the mint sauce was like no mint sauce that Miss Tredgold had ever dreamed of. The pudding which followed was a pudding that only Betty knew the recipe for, and that recipe was certainly not likely to be popular in fashionable circles. But the strawberry-jam was fairly good, and the cream was excellent; and when, finally, Miss Tredgold rose to the occasion and said that she would make some coffee, which she had brought down from town, in her own coffee-pot on her own etna, the girls became quite excited.

The coffee was made, and shed a delicious aroma over the room. Mr. Dale was so far interested that he was seen to sniff twice, and was found to be observing the coffee as though he were a moth approaching a candle. He even forgot his Virgil in his desire to partake of the delicious stimulant. Miss Tredgold handed him a cup.

"There," she said. "If you were ever young, and if there was ever a time when you cared to act as a gentleman, this will remind you of those occasions.—And now, children, I introduce you to 'Open sesame;' and I hope, my dear nieces, by means of these simple cups of coffee you will enter a different world from that which you have hitherto known."

The girls all drank their coffee, and each pronounced it the nicest drink they had ever taken.

Presently Miss Tredgold went into the garden. She invited Verena and Pauline to accompany her.

"The rest of you can stay behind," she said. "You can talk about me to each other as much as you like. I give you leave to discuss me freely, knowing that, even if I did not do so, you would discuss me all the same. I am quite aware that you all hate me for the present, but I do not think this state of things will long continue. Come, Verena; come, Pauline. The night is lovely. We will discuss nature a little, and common sense a great deal."

The two girls selected to walk with Miss Tredgold looked behind at the seven girls left in the dining-room, and the seven girls looked back at them with a mixture of curiosity and pity.

"Never mind your sisters now," said Miss Tredgold. "We want to talk over many things. But before we enter into any discussion I wish to ask a question."

"Yes," said Verena in her gentle voice.

"Verena," said her aunt suddenly, "how old are you?"

"Fifteen," said Verena.

"Precisely. And on your next birthday you will be sixteen, and on the following seventeen, and on the next one again eighteen. You have, therefore, nearly three years in which to be transformed from a little savage into a lady. The question I now want to ask you is: Do you prefer to remain a savage all your days, uneducated, uncultured, your will uncontrolled, your aspirations for good undeveloped; or do you wish to become a beautiful and gracious lady, kind, sympathetic, learned, full of grace? Tell me, my dear."

"How can I?" replied Verena. "I like my life here; we all suit each other, and we like The Dales just as it is. Yes, we all suit each other, and we don't mind being barbarians."

Miss Tredgold sighed.

"I perceive," she said, "that I shall have uphill work before me. For you of all the young people, Verena, are the easiest to deal with. I know that without your telling me. I know it by your face. You are naturally gentle, courteous, and kind. You are easy to manage. You are also the most important of all to be brought round to my views, for whatever you do the others will do. It is on you, therefore, that I mean to exercise my greatest influence and to expend my heaviest forces."

"I don't quite understand you, Aunt Sophia. I know, of course, you mean kindly, but I would much rather——"

"That I went away? That I left you in the disgraceful state in which I have found you?"

"Well, I don't consider it disgraceful; and——"

"Yes? You would rather I went?"

Verena nodded. After a moment she spoke.

"It seems unkind," she said—"and I don't wish to be unkind—but I *would* rather you went."

"And so would I, please, Aunt Sophia," said Pauline.

Miss Tredgold looked straight before her. Her face became a little pinched, a little white round her lips.

"Once," she said slowly, "I had a sister—a sister whom I loved. She was my half-sister, but I never thought of that. She was to me sister and mother in one. She brought me up from the time I was a little child. She was good to me, and she instilled into me certain principles. One of these principles can be expressed in the following words: God put us into the world to rise, not to sink. Another of her principles was that God put us into the world to be good, to be unselfish. Another one, again, was as follows: We must give account for our talents. Now, to allow the talent of beauty, for instance, to degenerate into what it is likely to do in your case, Verena, is distinctly wicked. To allow you to sink when you might rise is sinful. To allow you to be selfish when you might be unselfish is also wrong. Your talents, and the talents of Pauline, and the talents of your other sisters must be cultivated and brought to the fore. I want to tell you now, my dear girls, that for years I have longed to help you; that since your mother's death you have scarcely ever been out of my mind. But circumstances over which I had no control kept me away from you. At last I am free, and the children of my sister Alice are the ones I think most about. I have come here prepared for your rebellion, prepared for your dislike, and determined not to be discouraged by either the one or the other. I have come to The Dales, Verena and Pauline, and I mean to remain here for at least three months. If at the end of the three months you ask me to go, I will; although even then I will not give you up. But until three months have expired you can only turn me out by force. I don't think you will do that. It is best that we should understand each other clearly; is it not, Verena?"

Verena's face was very white; her big brown eyes were full of tears.

"I ought to be glad and to say 'Welcome.' But I am not glad, and I don't welcome you, Aunt Sophia. We like our own way; we don't mind being savages, and it is untrue that we are selfish. We are not. Each would give up anything, I think, for the other. But we like our poverty and our rough ways and our freedom, and we—we don't want you, Aunt Sophia."

"Nevertheless you will have to put up with me," said Miss Tredgold. "And now, to start matters, please tell me exactly how you spend your day."

"Our life is not yours, Aunt Sophia. It would not interest you to know how we spend our day."

"To-morrow, Verena, when the life of rule succeeds the life of misrule, I should take umbrage at your remark, but to-night I take no umbrage. I but repeat my question."

"And I will tell you," said Pauline in her brisk voice. "We get up just when we like. We have breakfast when we choose—sometimes in the garden on the grass, sometimes not at all. We walk where we please, and lose ourselves in the Forest, and gather wild strawberries and wild flowers, and watch the squirrels, and climb the beech-trees. When it is fine we spend the whole day out, just coming back for meals, and sometimes not even then, if Betty gives us a little milk and some bread. Sometimes we are lazy and lie on the grass all day. We do what we like always, and always just when we like. Don't we, Renny?"

"Yes," said Verena. "We do what we like, and in our own way."

"In future," said Miss Tredgold, "you will do things in my way. I hope you will not dislike my

way; but whether you like or dislike it, you will have to submit."

"But, Aunt Sophia," said Verena, "what authority have you over us? I am exceedingly sorry to seem rude, but I really want to know. Father, of course, has authority over us, but have you? Has anybody but father? That is what I want to know."

"I thought you might ask something of that sort," said Miss Tredgold—"or, even if you did not ask it, you might think it—and I am prepared with my answer. I quite recognize that in the case of girls like you I have no authority, and I cannot act fairly by you until I have. Now, my dear girls, please understand that before I go to bed to-night I get that authority. I shall get it in writing, too, so that you can none of you gainsay it, or slip past it, or avoid it. When the authority comes, then will also come the happy life of rule, for the life of misrule can never be really happy—never for long. Believe me, I am right."

Pauline pulled her hand away from Aunt Sophia's. She ran to the other side of Verena.

"I don't like you, Aunt Sophia," she said, "and I don't want you to stay. Renny, you don't like her either, and you don't want her to stay. We don't believe all the things you are saying, Aunt Sophia. You can't look into our hearts, and although you are clever, you can't know all about us. Why shouldn't we be wild in our own fashion? We are very happy. To be happy is everything. We have only been unhappy since we knew you were coming. Please go away; please do."

"You cannot influence me, Pauline. I love you too well to desert you. Now I am going into the house. You can discuss me then with your sister to your heart's content."

Miss Tredgold went very slowly towards the old and dilapidated house. When she reached the hall door she turned and looked around her.

"I certainly have tough work before me. How am I to manage? If I were not thinking so much of Alice, I should leave these impertinent, neglected, silly girls to their fate. But no—I seem to see my sister's eyes, to hear her voice. I can so well understand what she would really want me to do. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my beloved sister. I am free, hampered by no ties. I will reform these wild young nieces. I will not be easily deterred."

Miss Tredgold clasped her hands before her. The moon was rising in a silvery bow in the sky; the air was deliciously fresh and balmy.

"The place is healthy, and the children are strong," she thought, "notwithstanding their bad food and their disreputable, worn-out clothes. They are healthy, fresh, good-looking girls. But this is summer-time, and in summer-time one puts up with discomforts for the sake of air like this. But what about winter? I have no doubt they have scarcely any fires, and the house must be damp. As the children grow older they will develop rheumatism and all kinds of troubles. Yes, my duty is plain. I must look after my nieces, both soul and body, for the future."

As Miss Tredgold thought these last thoughts she re-entered the house. She walked through the desolate rooms. It was now twilight, but no one thought of lighting lamps, or drawing curtains, or shutting windows. Miss Tredgold stumbled as she walked. Presently she found that she had wandered in the neighborhood of the kitchen. She had no intention of bearding Betty in her den—she had no idea that there was a Betty—but as she was near the kitchen, and as under that doorway alone there streamed a light, she opened the door.

"Is there any one inside?" she asked.

A grunt in the far distance came by way of response. The fire was out in the stove, and as Miss Tredgold grew accustomed to the gloom she saw in the farthest corner something that resembled the stout form of a woman, whose legs rested on one chair and her body on another. A guttering dip candle was close to her side, and a paper book was held almost under her nose.

"I am sorry to disturb you," said Miss Tredgold, "but I have come for a light. Will you kindly inform me where I can get a candle?"

"There ain't none in the house."

The book was put down, and the angry face of Betty appeared to view.

"Then I fear I must trouble you to resign the one you yourself are using. I must have a light to see my way to my bedroom."

"There ain't no candles. We don't have 'em in summer. This one I bought with my own money, and I don't give it up to nobody, laidy or no laidy."

"Am I addressing the cook?"

"You are, ma'am. And I may as well say I am cook and housemaid and parlor-maid and kitchen-maid and scullery-maid all in one; and I does the laundry, too, whenever it's done at all. You may gather from my words, ma'am, that I have a deal to do, so I'll thank you to walk out of my kitchen; for if I am resting after my day of hard work, I have a right to rest, and my own candle shall light me, and my own book shall amuse me. So have the goodness to go, ma'am, and at once."

"I will go," replied Miss Tredgold very quietly, "exactly when I please, and not a moment before. I wish to say now that I require breakfast to be on the table at nine o'clock, and there must be plenty of good food. Do you mean to say that you have not got food in the house? You can, I presume, send out for it. Here is a half-sovereign. Spend it in what is necessary in order to provide an abundant meal on the table to-morrow morning for the use of Mr. Dale, myself, and my nieces."

What Betty would have said had there been no half-sovereign forthcoming history will never relate. But half-sovereigns were very few and very precious at The Dales. It was almost impossible to get any money out of Mr. Dale; he did not seem to know that there was such a thing as money. If it was put into his hand by any chance, he spent it on books. Betty's wages were terribly in arrears. She wanted her wages, but she was too generous, with all her faults, to press for them. But, all the same, the touch of the gold in her hand was distinctly soothing, and Miss Tredgold immediately rose in her estimation. A lady who produced at will golden half-sovereigns, and who was reckless enough to declare that one of these treasures might be spent on a single meal, was surely not a person to be sniffed at. Betty therefore stumbled to her feet.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, ma'am; and it's badly we does want some things here. I'll get what I can, although the notice is short, and the dook's nuptials, so to speak, at the door."

"What!" said Miss Tredgold.

"I beg your pardon again, ma'am, but my head aches and I'm a bit confused. I'm reading a most wonderful account of the wedding of the Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton."

"I never heard of him."

"He's marrying a young girl quite in my own station of life—one that was riz from the cottage to the governess-ship, and from the governess-ship to the ducal chair. My head is full of Her Grace, ma'am, and you'll excuse me if I didn't rightly know to whom I had the honor of talking. I'll do what I can. And perhaps you'd like to borrow one of my dip candles for the present night."

"I should very much," said Miss Tredgold. "And please understand, Betty—I think you said your name was Betty—please understand that if you are on my side I shall be on your side. I have come here meaning to stay, and in future there will be a complete change in this establishment. You will receive good wages, paid on the day they are due. There will be plenty of money and plenty of food in the house, and the cook who pleases me stays, and the cook who displeases me goes. You understand?"

"Sakes!" muttered Betty, "it's nearly as exciting as the doocal romance.—Well, ma'am, I'm of your way of thinking; and here's your candle."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE STUDY.

Miss Tredgold was the sort of woman who never let the grass grow under her feet. She felt, therefore, altogether out of place at The Dales, for at The Dales there was time for everything. "Time enough" was the motto of the establishment: time enough for breakfast, time enough for dinner, time enough for supper, time enough for bed, time enough for getting up, time enough for mending torn garments; surely, above all things, time enough for learning. To judge by the manner in which the family at The Dales went on, life was to last for ever and a day. They never hurried; they put things off when it pleased them; they stopped in the middle of one pursuit and turned to something else when the fancy took them; they were unruffled by the worries of life; they were, on the whole, gay, daring, indifferent. There was no money—or very little—for the future of these girls; they were absolutely uneducated; they were all but unclothed, and their food was poor and often insufficient. Nevertheless they were fairly happy. "Let well alone" was also their motto. "Never may care" was another. As to the rush and toil and strain of modern life, they could not even comprehend it. The idea of not being able to put off an engagement for a week, a month, or a year seemed to them too extraordinary to be believed. They were too young, too healthy, too happy to need to kill time; for time presented itself to them with an agreeable face, and the hours were never too long.

But although they were so indifferent to weighty matters, they had their own enthusiasms, and in their idle way they were busy always and forever. To have, therefore, a person like Aunt Sophia put suddenly into the middle of their gay and butterfly lives was something which was enough to madden the eight healthy girls who lived at The Dales. Aunt Sophia was, in their opinion, all crotchets, all nervousness, all fads. She had no tact whatsoever; at least, such was their first opinion of her. She put her foot down on this little crotchet, and pressed this passing desire out of sight. She brought new rules of life into their everyday existence, and, what is more, she insisted on being obeyed. With all their cleverness they were not half so clever as Aunt Sophia; they were no match for this good lady, who was still young at heart, who had been highly educated, who was full of enthusiasm, full of method, and full of determination. Aunt Sophia brought two very strong essentials with her to The Dales, and there was certainly little chance of the girls getting the victory over her. One thing which she brought was determination, joined to authority; the other thing was money. With these two weapons in her hand, what chance had the girls?

It might have been supposed that Miss Tredgold had done enough on the first night of her arrival. She had to a great extent vanquished the cook; and she had, further, told Verena and Pauline what lay before them. Surely she might have been contented, and have taken her dip

candle in its tin candlestick and retired to her own room. But that was not Aunt Sophia's way. She discovered a light stealing from under another door, and she made for that door.

Now, no one entered Mr. Dale's room without knocking. None of the girls would have ventured to do so. But Aunt Sophia was made of sterner stuff. She did not knock. She opened the door and entered. The scholar was seated at the far end of the room. A large reading-lamp stood on the table. It spread a wide circle of light on the papers and books, and on his own silvery head and thin aquiline features. The rest of the room was in shadow. Miss Tredgold entered and stood a few feet away from Mr. Dale. Mr. Dale had already forgotten that such a person as Miss Sophia existed. It was his habit to work for a great many hours each night. It was during the hours of darkness that he most thoroughly absorbed himself in his darling occupation. His dinner had been better than usual, and that delicious coffee had stimulated his brain. He had not tasted coffee like that for years. His brain, therefore, being better nourished, was keener than usual to go on with his accustomed work. As Miss Sophia advanced to his side he uttered one or two sighs of rapture, for again a fresh rendering of a much-disputed passage occurred to him. Light was, in short, flooding the pages of his translation.

"The whole classical world will bless me," murmured Mr. Dale. "I am doing a vast service."

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Henry," said the sharp, incisive tones of his sister-in-law.

At Miss Tredgold's words he dropped his pen. It made a blot on the page, which further irritated him; for, untidy as he was in most things, his classical work was exquisitely neat.

"Do go away," he said. "I am busy. Go away at once."

"I am sorry, Henry, but I must stay. You know me, don't you? Your sister-in-law, Sophia Tredgold."

"Go away, Sophia. I don't want to be rude, but I never see any one at this hour."

"Henry, you are forced to see me. I shall go when I choose, not before."

"Madam!"

Mr. Dale sprang to his feet.

"Madam!" he repeated, almost sputtering out his words, "you surely don't wish me to expel you. You don't intend to stand there all night. I can't have it. I don't allow people in my study. I am sorry to be discourteous to a lady, but I state a fact; you must go immediately. You don't realize what it is to have a brain like mine, nor to have undertaken such a herculean task. Ah! the beautiful thought which meant so much has vanished. Madam, you are responsible."

"Stop!" interrupted Miss Tredgold. "I will go the moment you do what I want."

"Will you? I'll do anything—anything that keeps you out of this room."

"That is precisely what I require. I don't wish to come into this room—that is, for the present. By-and-by it must be cleaned, for I decline to live in a dirty house; but I give you a fortnight's grace."

"And the rendering of the passage is beyond doubt, according to Clericus—— I beg your pardon; are you still speaking?"

"Yes, Henry. I am annoying you, I know; and, all things considered, I am glad, for you need rousing. I intend to sit or stand in this room, close to you, until morning if necessary. Ah! here is a chair."

As Miss Tredgold spoke she drew forward an unwieldy arm-chair, which was piled up with books and papers. These she was calmly about to remove, when a shriek from the anguished scholar stopped her.

"Don't touch them," he exclaimed. "You destroy the work of months. If you must have a chair, take mine."

Miss Tredgold did take it. She now found herself seated within a few yards of the scholar's desk. The bright light from the lamp fell on her face; it looked pale, calm, and determined. Mr. Dale was in shadow; the agony on his face was therefore not perceptible.

"Take anything you want; only go, woman," he said.

"Henry, you are a difficult person to deal with, and I am sorry to have to speak to you as I do. I am sorry to have to take, as it were, advantage of you; but I intend to stay in this house."

"You are not wanted, Sophia."

"I am not wished for, Henry; but as to being wanted, no woman was ever more wanted."

"That you are not."

"I say I am; and, what is more, I intend to remain. We need not discuss this point, for it is settled. I take up my sojourn in this house for three months."

"Three months!" said Mr. Dale. "Oh, my word! And this is only June. From June to July, from July to August, from August to September! It is very cruel of you, Sophia. I did not think my poor wife's sister would torture me like this."

"For the sake of your family I intend to stay, Henry. You will have to submit. I do not leave this room until you submit. What is more, you have to do something further. I want you to give me authority over your children. The moment I have it—I want it in writing, remember—I will leave

you; and I will trouble you in the future as little as woman can trouble man. You will have better meals; but that you won't care about."

"The coffee," murmured Mr. Dale.

"Yes, you will have plenty of that delicious coffee. You will also have cleaner rooms."

"This room is not to be touched; you understand?"

"For the present we will let that matter lie in abeyance. Come, give me your authority in writing, and I leave the room; but if you don't, I stay in this chair—your chair, Henry Dale—all night if necessary."

If ever there was a poor, bewildered man, it was Mr. Dale at that moment. He did not give many thoughts to anything on earth but his beloved studies; but, all the same, when he had time for a momentary reflection that he possessed girls, he felt that he quite liked them. In his own fashion he was fond of Verena; and once when Briar had a very bad cold he sat with her for a very few minutes, and recommended her to try snuff. He did not wish to make his children unhappy, and he thought that the advent of Miss Tredgold would have that effect on them. But, after all, a determined woman like her must be humored; and what were the children compared to his own most valuable work? In the days to come they would be proud to own him. He would be spoken of as the very great English scholar whose rendering of Virgil was the most perfect that had ever been put into English prose. Oh! it was impossible to hesitate another moment. The woman was in his chair, and his thoughts were leaving him.

"Madam," he said, "you have taken me at a cruel disadvantage. I am seriously sorry for my poor children."

"Never mind about that now, Henry. You are, I perceive, a wise man. You can rest assured that I will do what is best both for you and for them."

"Very well, madam, I yield."

"You give me absolute authority to do what I think best for your children?"

"Ye—s."

"To reorganize this household?"

"Not this room."

"With the exception of this room."

"I suppose so."

"You will uphold my authority when the girls come to you, as perhaps they will, and ask you to interfere?"

"Oh, Sophia, you won't be hard on the poor children?"

"I will be just to them. You will uphold my authority?"

"Ye—s."

"If I think it necessary to punish them, you won't condemn the punishment?"

"Oh, please, Sophia, do go away! The night is passing quickly. I never think well by daylight."

"Put it on paper, Henry. Or stay! that will take too long. Give me a sheet of paper; I will write what I require. I only want your signature."

Poor Mr. Dale had to search among his papers for a blank sheet. Miss Sophia seized his special stylographic pen, pressed very hard on the nib, and wrote what she required. Mr. Dale felt certain he would find it quite spoilt when he came to use it again. But at last all her requirements were on paper, and Henry Dale wrote his signature at the end.

"Thank you, Henry; you have acted wisely. You have your study now to yourself."

Miss Tredgold bowed as she left the room.

CHAPTER VI.

TOPSY-TURVYDOM.

The fortnight that followed was not likely to be forgotten by the young Dales. It would live in the remembrance of each child old enough to notice. Even Penelope found the course of events interesting—sometimes irritating, it is true; sometimes also delightful; but at least always exciting. Miss Tredgold never did things by halves. She had got the absolute authority which she required from the master of the house, and having got it she refrained from annoying him, in any way whatsoever. His meals were served with punctuality, and were far more comfortable than they had ever been before. He was always presented with a cup of strong, fragrant, delicious coffee after his dinner. This coffee enabled him to pursue his translation with great

clearness and accuracy. His study up to the present was left undisturbed. His papers were allowed to remain thick with dust; his chairs were allowed to be laden with books and papers; the carpet was allowed to remain full of holes; the windows were left exactly as the scholar liked them—namely, tightly screwed down so that not even the faintest breath of heaven's air could come in and disarrange the terrible disorder.

But the rest of the house was truly turned topsy-turvy. It was necessary, Miss Tredgold assured the girls, to have topsy-turvydom before the reign of order could begin.

At first the young Dales were very angry. For the whole of the first day Verena wept at intervals. Pauline sulked. Briar wept one minute and laughed the next. The other children followed in the footsteps of their elders. Penelope was now openly and defiantly a grown-up child. She belonged to the schoolroom, although no schoolroom as yet existed at The Dales. She defied nurse; she took her meals with her sisters, and pinched baby whenever she found her alone. Miss Tredgold, however, took no notice of the tears or smiles or groans or discontented looks. She had a great deal to do, and she performed her tasks with rectitude and skill and despatch. New furniture was ordered from Southampton. She drove to Lyndhurst Road with Verena in the shabby trap which had first brought her to The Dales. She went from there to Southampton and chose new furniture. Verena could not help opening her eyes in amazement. Such very pretty white bedsteads; such charming chests of drawers; such nice, clean-looking carpets!

"Surely, Aunt Sophia," she said, "these things are not for us?"

"They certainly are, my dear," replied her aunt; "for in future I hope you will live as a lady and a Christian, and no longer as a savage."

The furniture arrived, and was put into the rooms. Pretty white curtains were placed at the windows; the paint was washed, and the paper rubbed down with bread.

"Fresh decoration and repainting must wait until I get the children to London for the winter," thought Aunt Sophia.

But notwithstanding the fact that paint and paper were almost non-existent by this time at The Dales, the house assumed quite a new air. As to Betty, she was in the most extraordinary way brought over absolutely to Miss Tredgold's part of the establishment. Miss Tredgold not only raised her wages on the spot, but paid her every farthing that was due in the past. She spoke to her a good deal about her duty, and of what she owed to the family, and of what she, Miss Tredgold, would do for her if she proved equal to the present emergency. Betty began to regard Miss Tredgold as a sort of marchioness in disguise. So interested was she in her, and so sure that one of the real "haristocrats" resided on the premises, that she ceased to read the *Family Paper* except at long intervals. She served up quite good dinners, and by the end of the fortnight few people would have known The Dales. For not only was the house clean and sweet—the drawing-room quite a charming old room, with its long Gothic windows, its tracery of ivy outside, and its peep into the distant rose-garden; the hall bright with great pots of flowers standing about—but the girls themselves were no longer in rags. The furniture dealer's was not the only shop which Miss Tredgold had visited at Southampton. She had also gone to a linen draper's, and had bought many nice clothes for the young folks.

The house being so much improved, and the girls being clothed afresh, a sufficient staff of servants arrived from a neighboring town. Betty was helped in the kitchen by a neat kitchen-maid; there were two housemaids and a parlor-maid; and John had a boy to help in the garden.

"Now, Verena," said Miss Tredgold on the evening of the day when the new servants were pronounced a great success, "what do you think of everything?"

"You have made the place quite pretty, Aunt Sophia."

"And you like it?"

"I think you mean to be very kind."

"My dear Verena, do talk sense. Don't tell me that you don't feel more comfortable in that pale-gray, nicely fitting dress, with the blush-rose in your belt, and that exceedingly pretty white hat on your head, than you did when you rushed up to welcome me, little savage that you were, a fortnight ago."

"I was so happy as a savage!"

"And you are not happy now?"

"I think you are kind, Aunt Sophia, and perhaps—I shall get accustomed to it."

Her aunt whisked round with some impatience.

"I hope so," she said; "for, whether you like it or not, you will have to put up with it. I fully intend to be kind, but I also mean to be very firm. I have now got the home in which you live into decent order, and you yourselves are respectably clothed. But I have not yet tackled the most important part of my duties, my dear Verena."

"Oh, please, Aunt Sophia, what else is necessary?"

Miss Tredgold threw up her hands.

"A great, great deal more," she cried. "I have not yet touched your minds; and I fear, from the way you speak, that I have scarcely touched your hearts. Well, your bodies at least are attended to, and now come your minds. Lastly, I hope to reach the most important of all—your hearts. Verena, I must probe your ignorance in order to stimulate you to learn. You, my dear, will be

grown up in three years, so that you in particular have a vast lot to do."

"But I hate learning, and I shouldn't like to be a learned woman," said Verena. "Mother knew a lot of things, but she wasn't learned like father."

"Good gracious, child! I don't want you to be like your father. To tell the truth, a bookworm such as he is is one of the most irritating persons in existence. But there! What am I saying? I oughtn't to speak against him in your presence. And your poor mother loved him, oh, so much! Now then, dear, to return to yourself and your sisters. I presume that you would like to be a useful and valuable member of society—a woman who has been trained to do her best, and to exercise the highest influence over all those with whom she comes in contact. Influence, which springs from character, my dear Verena, is the highest power that any one can get. Now, an ignorant person has little or no influence; therefore, to be kind and sympathetic and useful in the future, you must know many things. You have not a minute to lose. I appeal to you for your mother's sake; for my dear, dear sister would have liked her eldest child to be—ah, Verena!—so good and so true!"

"You touch me, Aunt Sophy," said Verena, "when you talk of mother. You touch me more than words can say. Yes, I will try to be good; but you must bear with me if I don't take the yoke too kindly at first."

"Poor child! I will try to make it light for you. Now what is the matter, Penelope?"

"Please, please, Aunt Sophy," said that young person, rushing up at the moment.

"Hold yourself erect, my dear; don't run quite so fast. There! you have got a rent already in your new frock. Now what do you want?"

"May I be a schoolroom little girl in the future?"

"What are you now?"

"Nurse says I'm nursery. But I don't want to be nursery; I want to stay always with my own good Aunt Sophy. That is what I want. May I be a schoolroom child?"

"In the first place, you are not to call me 'aunty.' I am Aunt Sophia to you. I dislike abbreviations."

"What's them?"

"Say, 'What are they?'"

"What are they?"

"I will tell you another time. How old are you, Penelope?"

"I wor seven my last birthday, one month agone."

"Your grammar is disgraceful, child. Please understand that the schoolroom has its penalties."

"What's them?"

"Again I shall have to correct you. 'What are they?' is the sentence you ought to use. But now, my dear, I don't approve of little girls learning much when they are only seven years old; but if you wish to be a schoolroom girl you will have to take your place in the schoolroom, and you will have to learn to submit. You will have to be under more discipline than you are now with nurse."

"All the same, I'll be with my own aunt," said Penelope, raising her bold black eyes and fixing them on Miss Sophia's face.

But Miss Tredgold was not the sort of person to be influenced by soft words. "Deeds, not words," was her motto.

"You have said enough, Penelope," she said. "Take your choice; you may be a schoolroom child for a month if you like."

"I wouldn't if I were you, Pen," said Josephine.

"But I will," said Penelope.

In her heart of hearts she was terrified at the thought of the schoolroom, but even more did she fear the knowledge that nurse would laugh at her if she returned to the nursery.

"I will stay," she said. "I am a schoolroom child;" and she pirouetted round and round Aunt Sophia.

"But, please, Aunt Sophia," said Verena, "who is going to teach us?"

"I intend to have that honor," said Miss Tredgold.

If there were no outward groans among her assembled nieces at these words, there were certainly spirit groans, for the girls did not look forward to lessons with Aunt Sophia.

"You are all displeased," she said; "and I am scarcely surprised. The fact is, I have not got any efficient teacher to come here just yet. The person I should wish for is not easy to find. I myself know a great deal more than you do, and I have my own ideas with regard to instruction. I may as well tell you at once that I am a very severe teacher, and somewhat cranky, too. A girl who does not know her lessons is apt to find herself seated at my left side. Now, my right side is sunshiny and pleasant; but my left side faces due northeast. I think that will explain everything to you. We will meet in the schoolroom to-morrow at nine o'clock sharp. Now I must go."

When Miss Tredgold had vanished the girls looked at each other.

"Her northeast side!" said Pauline. "It makes me shudder even to think of it."

But notwithstanding these remarks the girls did feel a certain amount of interest at the thought of the new life that lay before them. Everything had changed from that sunny, languorous, *dolce far niente* time a fortnight back. Now the girls felt keen and brisk, and they knew well that each moment in the future would be spent in active employment.

The next day, sharp at nine o'clock, the young people who were to form Miss Tredgold's school entered the new schoolroom. It was suitably and prettily furnished, and had a charming appearance. Large maps were hung on the walls; there was a long line of bookshelves filled partly with story books, partly with history books, and partly with ordinary lesson books. The windows were draped with white muslin, and stood wide open. As the girls took their seats at the baize-covered table they could see out into the garden. A moment after they had arrived in the schoolroom Miss Tredgold made her appearance.

"We will begin with prayers," she said.

She read a portion from the Bible, made a few remarks, and then they all knelt as she repeated the Lord's prayer.

"Now, my dears," said their new governess as they rose from their knees, "lessons will begin. I hope we shall proceed happily and quietly. It will be uphill work at first; but if we each help the other, uphill work will prove to have its own pleasures. It's a long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull all together that masters difficulties. If we are all united we can accomplish anything; but if there is mutiny in the camp, then things may be difficult. I warn you all, however, that under any circumstances I mean to win the victory. It will be much easier, therefore, to submit at first. There will be no use in sulkiness, in laziness, in inattention. Make a brave effort now, all of you, and you will never regret this day. Now, Verena, you and I will have some conversation together. The rest of you children will read this page in the History of England, and tell me afterwards what you can remember about it."

Here Miss Tredgold placed a primer before each child, and she and Verena retired into the bay-window. They came out again at the end of ten minutes. Verena's cheeks were crimson, and Miss Tredgold decidedly wore a little of her northeast air. Pauline, on the whole, had a more successful interview with her new governess than her sister. She was smarter and brighter than Verena in many ways. But before the morning was over Miss Tredgold announced that all her pupils were shamefully ignorant.

"I know more about you now than I did," she said. "You will all have to work hard. Verena, you cannot even read properly. As to your writing, it is straggling, uneven, and faulty in spelling."

CHAPTER VII.

NANCY KING.

The rest of the day passed in a subdued state. The girls hardly knew themselves. They felt as though tiny and invisible chains were surrounding them. These chains pulled them whenever they moved. They made their presence felt when they spoke, when they sat down, and when they rose up. They were with them at dinner; they were with them whenever Miss Tredgold put in an appearance. Perhaps they were silken chains, but, all the same, they were intensely annoying. Verena was the most patient of the nine. She said to her sisters:

"We have never had any discipline. I was reading the other day in one of mother's books that discipline is good. It is the same thing as when you prune the fruit trees. Don't you remember the time when John got a very good gardener from Southampton to come and look over our trees? The gardener said, 'These trees have all run to wood; you must prune them.' And he showed John how, and we watched him. Don't you remember, girls?"

"Oh, don't I!" said Pauline. "And he cut away a lot of the little apples, and hundreds of tiny pears, and a lot of lovely branches; and I began to cry, and I told him he was a horrid, horrid man, and that I hated him."

"And what did he answer?"

"Oh, he got ruder than ever! He said, 'If I was your pa I'd do a little pruning on you.' Oh, wasn't I angry!"

Verena laughed.

"But think a little more," she said. "Don't you remember the following year how splendid the pears were? And we had such heaps of apples; and the gooseberries and raspberries were equally fine. We didn't hate the man when we were eating our delicious fruit."

Pauline made a slight grimace.

"Look here, Renny," she said suddenly; "for goodness' sake don't begin to point morals. It's bad enough to have an old aunt here without your turning into a mentor. We all know what you want

to say, but please don't say it. Haven't we been scolded and directed and ordered about all day long? We don't want you to do it, too."

"Very well, I won't," said Verena.

"Hullo!" suddenly cried Briar; "if this isn't Nancy King! Oh, welcome, Nancy—welcome! We are glad to see you."

Nancy King was a spirited and bright-looking girl who lived about a mile away. Her father had a large farm which was known as The Hollies. He had held this land for many years, and was supposed to be in flourishing circumstances. Nancy was his only child. She had been sent to a fashionable school at Brighton, and considered herself quite a young lady. She came whenever she liked to The Dales, and the girls often met her in the Forest, and enjoyed her society vastly. Now in the most fashionable London attire, Nancy sailed across the lawn, calling out as she did so:

"Hullo, you nine! You look like the Muses. What's up now? I have heard most wonderful, astounding whispers."

"Oh, Nancy, we're all so glad to see you!" said Briar. She left her seat, ran up to the girl, and took her hand. "Come and sit here—here in the midst of our circle. We have such a lot to say to you!"

"And I have a lot to say to you. But, dear me! how grand we are!"

Nancy's twinkling black eyes looked with mock approval at Verena's plain but very neat gray dress, and at the equally neat costumes of the other girls. Then finally she gazed long and pensively at Penelope, who, in an ugly dress of brown holland, was looking back at her with eyes as black and defiant as her own.

"May I ask," said Nancy slowly, "what has this nursery baby to do in the midst of the grown-ups?"

"I'm not nursery," said Penelope, her face growing crimson; "I'm schoolroom. Don't tell me I'm nursery, because I'm not. We're all schoolroom, and we're having a right good time."

"Indeed! Then I may as well remark that you don't look like it. You look, the whole nine of you, awfully changed, and as prim as prim can be. 'Prunes and prisms' wouldn't melt in your mouths. You're not half, nor quarter, as nice as you were when I saw you last. I've just come home for good, you know. I mean to have a jolly time at Margate by-and-by. And oh! my boy cousins and my two greatest chums at school are staying with me now at The Hollies. The girls' names are Amelia and Rebecca Perkins. Oh, they're fine! Do give me room to squat between you girls. You are frightfully stand-off and prim."

"Sit close to me, Nancy," said Verena. "We're not a bit changed to you," she added.

"Well, that's all right, honey, for I'm not changed to you. Even if I am a very rich girl, I'm the sort to always cling to my old friends; and although you are as poor as church mice, you are quite a good sort. I have always said so—always. I've been talking a lot about you to Amelia and Rebecca, and they'd give their eyes to see you. I thought you might ask us all over."

"Oh! I daren't, Nancy," said Verena. "We are not our own mistresses now."

"Well, that's exactly what I heard," said Nancy. "Oh, how hot it is! Pen, for goodness' sake run and fetch me a cabbage-leaf to fan my face."

Penelope ran off willingly enough. Nancy turned to the others.

"I sent her off on purpose," she said. "If we can't come to you, you must come to us. We three girls at The Hollies, and my two boy cousins, Tom and Jack, have the most daring, delightful scheme to propose. We want to have a midnight picnic."

"Midnight picnic!" cried Verena. "But we can't possibly come, Nancy."

"My good girl, why not? You know I talked about it last year. We want to have one on a very grand scale; and there are a few friends at Southampton that I would ask to join us. You won't have any expense whatever. I'll stump up for the whole. Father gives me so much money that I have at the present moment over five pounds in the savings-bank. We will light fires in a clearing not far from here, and we will have tea and supper afterwards; and we shall dance—dance by the light of the moon—and I will bring my guitar to make music. Can you imagine anything in all the world more fascinating?"

"Oh, Nancy, it does sound too lovely!" said Briar. "I'd just give the world to go."

"Well, then, you shall come."

"But Aunt Sophy would not hear of it," said Verena.

"Nonsense!" cried Briar; "we must go. It would be such a jolly treat!"

Nancy favored the eight girls with a sharp glance.

"I have heard of that dreadful old body," she said. "Father told me. He said you'd be frumped up like anything, and all the gay life taken out of you. I came over on purpose. I pity you from the very bottom of my heart."

"But, Nancy, you can't think how things are changed," said Pauline. "All our time is occupied. Lessons began to-day. They are going to take hours and hours."

"But these are holiday times," said Nancy. "All the world has a holiday in the middle of the

summer.”

“That’s true enough,” said Verena; “but then we had holidays for over a year, and Aunt Sophia says we must begin at once. She is quite right, I’m sure; although of course we scarcely like it. And anyhow, Nancy, she won’t allow us to go to a midnight picnic; there’s no use thinking about it.”

“But suppose you don’t ask her. Of course, if she’s an old maid she’ll refuse. Old maids are the queerest, dumpiest things on the earth. I’m really thankful I’m not bothered with any of them. Oh! here comes Pen. It’s nonsense to have a child like that out of the nursery. We’d best not say anything before her. Verena and Briar, will you walk down to the gate with me? I thought perhaps we might have the picnic in a week. It could be easily managed; you know it could.”

“Oh, we must go!” said Pauline.

“I’m going,” said Josephine.

But Verena was silent.

“Here’s your cabbage-leaf. How red your face looks!” said Penelope.

Nancy turned and gazed at her. She was a bold-looking girl, and by no means pretty. She snatched the leaf angrily from Penelope’s hand, saying:

“Oh, my dear, go away! How you do worry, jumping and dancing about! And what a stupid, good-for-nothing leaf you’ve brought! Fetch me one that’s not completely riddled with caterpillar holes.”

Penelope’s black eyes flashed fire, and her face flushed.

“If I could, I would just,” she said.

“If you could you would what?” said Nancy.

“I know—I know! And I’ll do it, too.”

A provoking smile visited the lips of the child. She danced backwards and forwards in an ecstasy of glee.

“I can punish you all fine,” said Penelope; “and I’ll do it, too.”

She vanished out of sight. Now, it must be admitted that Penelope was not a nice child. She had her good points, for few children are without them; but in addition to being thoroughly untrained, to never having exercised self-control, she had by nature certain peculiarities which the other children had not. It had been from her earliest days her earnest desire to curry favor with those in authority, and yet to act quite as naughtily as any one else when she thought no one was looking. Even when quite a tiny child Penelope was wont to sit as still as a mouse in nurse’s presence. If nurse said, “Miss Penelope, you are not to move or you will wake baby,” then nurse knew that Penelope would not stir. But if this same child happened to be left with baby, so strong would be her jealousy that she would give the infant a sharp pinch and set it howling, and then run from the room.

These peculiarities continued with her growth. Nurse was fond of her because she was quiet and useful in the nursery, fairly tidy in her habits, and fairly helpful. But even nurse was wont to say, “You never can get at Miss Penelope. You can never see through what is brewing in her mind.”

Now, when Aunt Sophia appeared on the scene, Penelope instantly determined to carry out the darling wish of her heart. This was no less than to be removed from the dullness of the nursery to the fascinating life that she supposed the elder children led. To accomplish this she thought it would be only necessary to make a great fuss about Aunt Sophia, to attend to her fads, and to give her numerous little attentions. In short, to show that she, Penelope, cared very much for her new aunt. But Aunt Sophia did not care for Penelope’s fusses, and disliked her small attentions. Nevertheless, the small girl persevered, and in the end she did win a triumph, for she was promoted to the schoolroom, with its superior privileges and—alas! alas!—also its undoubted drawbacks. She, who hated lessons, must now try to read; she must also try to write, and must make valiant efforts to spell. Above and beyond all these things, she had to do one yet harder—she had to sit mute as a mouse for a couple of hours daily, with her hands neatly folded in her lap; and by-and-by she had to struggle with her clumsy little fingers to make hideous noises on the cracked old piano. These things were not agreeable to the wild child, and so uncomfortable and restrained had she felt during the first morning’s lessons that she almost resolved to humble her pride and return to the nursery. But the thought of her sisters’ withering, sarcastic remarks, and of nurse’s bitterly cold reception, and nurse’s words, “I told you so,” being repeated for ever in her ears, was too much for Penelope, and she determined to give a further trial to the schoolroom life. Now it occurred to her that a moment of triumph was before her. In the old days she had secretly adored Nancy King, for Nancy had given her more than one lollypop; but when Nancy asked what the nursery child was doing with the schoolroom folk, and showed that she did not appreciate Penelope’s society, the little girl’s heart became full of anger.

“I’ll tell about her. I’ll get her into trouble. I’ll get them all into trouble,” she thought.

She ran into the shrubbery, and stood there thinking for a time. She was a queer-looking little figure as she stood thus in her short holland overall, her stout bare legs, brown as berries, slightly apart, her head thrown back, her hair awry, a smudge on her cheek, her black eyes twinkling.

"I will do it," she said to herself. "Aunt Sophy shall find out that I am the good one of the family."

Penelope ran wildly across the shrubbery, invaded the kitchen-garden, invaded the yard, and presently invaded the house. She found Miss Sophia sitting by her writing-table. Miss Sophia had a headache; teaching was not her vocation. She had worked harder that day than ever in her life before, and she had a great many letters to write.

It was therefore a very busy and a slightly cross person who turned round and faced Penelope.

"Don't slam the door, Penelope," she said; "and don't run into the room in that breathless sort of way."

"Well, I thought you ought for to know. I done it 'cos of you."

"I did it because of you, you should say."

"I did it because of you. I am very fond of you, aunt."

"I hope so; and I trust you will prove your affection by your deeds."

"Bovver deeds!" remarked Penelope.

"What is that you said, my dear?"

"I say, bovver deeds!"

"I confess I do not understand. Run away, now, Penelope; I am busy."

"But you ought for to know. Nancy King has come."

"Who is Nancy King?"

"A girl. She's squatting up close to Renny on the lawn, and her arm is twisted round Pauline's waist. She's big, and dressed awful grand. She has gold bangles on her arms, and tinkling gold things round her neck, and she's here, and I thought course you ought for to know. I thought so 'cos I love you. Aren't you pleased? Aren't I the sort of little girl you could perhaps give a lollypop to?"

"No, you are not, Penelope. I do not wish you to tell tales of your sisters. Go away, my dear; go away."

Penelope, in some wonder, and with a sense of disgust, not only with Nancy King and Miss Tredgold, but also with herself, left the room.

"I won't tell her any more," she thought. "She never seems to like what I do for her. She'd be pretty lonesome if it wasn't for me; but she don't seem to care for anybody. I'll just rush away to nurse this very minute and tell her how I love being a schoolroom girl. I'll tell her I dote on my lessons, and that I never for the big, big, wide world would be a nursery child again."

"Queer little child, Penelope," thought Miss Tredgold when her small niece had left her.

She sat with her pen suspended, lost in thought.

"Very queer child," she soliloquized; "not the least like the others. I can't say that I specially care for her. At present I am not in love with any of my nieces; but of all of them, Penelope is the child I like the least. She tells tales; she tries to curry favor with me. Is she truthful? Is she sincere? I have a terrible fear within me that occasions may arise when Penelope would prove deceitful. There! what am I saying? A motherless child—my own niece—surely I ought to love her. Yes, I do love her. I will try to love them all. What did she say about a girl sitting on the lawn with my girls? It is nice to talk of the Dales as my girls; it gives me a sort of family feeling, just as though I were not an old maid. I wonder what friends my girls have made for themselves round here. Nancy King. I don't know any people of the name of King who live about here. If Henry were any one else he would probably be able to tell me. I will go and see the girl for myself."

Miss Tredgold left the room. She had a very stately walk. The girls always spoke of her movements as "sailing." Miss Tredgold now sailed across the lawn, and in the same dignified fashion came up to the secluded nook where the girls, with Nancy King in their midst, were enjoying themselves. They were all talking eagerly. Nancy King was seated almost in the center of the group; the other girls were bending towards her. As Miss Tredgold appeared in view Josephine was exclaiming in her high-pitched, girlish voice:

"Oh, I say, Nancy! What screaming fun!"

When Josephine spoke Lucy clapped her hands, Helen laughed, Verena looked puzzled, and Pauline's expression seemed to say she longed for something very badly indeed.

"My dears, what are you all doing?" suddenly cried Aunt Sophia.

She had come up quietly, and they had none of them heard her. It was just as if a pistol had gone off in their ears. The whole nine jumped to their feet. Nancy's red face became redder. She pushed her gaily trimmed hat forward over her heated brows. She had an instinctive feeling that she had never before seen any one so dignified and magnificent as Miss Sophia Tredgold. She knew that this was the case, although Miss Sophia's dress was almost dowdy, and the little brown slipper which peeped out from under the folds of her gray dress was decidedly the worse for wear. Nancy felt at the same time the greatest admiration for Miss Tredgold, the greatest dislike to her, and the greatest terror of her.

"Aunt Sophia," said Verena, who could be a lady if she chose, "may I introduce our special

friend—”

“And crony,” interrupted Nancy.

“Our special friend, Nancy King,” repeated Verena. “We have known her all our lives, Aunt Sophia.”

“How do you do, Miss King?” said Miss Tredgold.

She favored “the young person,” as she termed Miss King, with a very distant bow.

“Girls,” she said, turning to the others, “are you aware that preparation hour has arrived? Will you all go quietly indoors?—Miss King, my nieces are beginning their studies in earnest, and I do not allow the hour of preparation to be interfered with by any one.”

“I know all about that,” said Nancy in a glib voice. “I was at a first-rate school myself for years. Weren’t we kept strict, just! My word! we couldn’t call our noses our own. The only language was *parlez-vous*. But it was a select school—very; and now that I have left, I like to feel that I am accomplished. None of you girls can beat me on the piano. I know nearly all the girls’ songs in *San Toy* and the *Belle of New York*. Father loves to hear me when I sing ‘Rhoda Pagoda.’ Perhaps, Miss Tredgold, you’d like to hear me play on the pianoforte. I dote on dance music; don’t you, Miss Tredgold? Dance music is so lively; it warms the cockles of the heart—don’t it, Miss Tredgold?”

“I don’t dance, so it is impossible for me to answer,” said Miss Tredgold. “I am sorry, Miss King, to disturb a pleasant meeting, but my girls are under discipline, and the hour for preparation has arrived.”

Nancy shrugged her capacious shoulders.

“I suppose that means *congé* for poor Nancy King,” she said. “Very sorry, I’m sure. Good-day, madam.—Good-bye, Renny. I’ll look you up another day.—Good-bye to all. I’m off to have a bit of fun with my boy cousins.”

Nancy swung round and left the group. She walked awkwardly, switching her shoulders and swaying from side to side, a dirty train trailing after her.

“May I ask who your friend really is?” said Miss Tredgold when she had watched the departure of this most undesirable acquaintance.

“She is Nancy King, Aunt Sophia. We have known her all our lives,” said Verena.

“My dear Verena, I have heard that statement before. Nevertheless, the fact that you have known that young person since you were little children does not reply to my question. Who is she? Where does she come from? Who is her father? I don’t remember to have heard of any gentlefolks of the name of King residing in this part of the New Forest.”

“She is not gentlefolk,” said Pauline.

Pauline came a step nearer as she spoke. Her eyes were bright, and there was a red spot on each cheek.

“But although she is not born a lady, she is our friend,” she continued. “She is the daughter of Farmer King, who keeps a very jolly house; and they have plenty of money. We have often and often been at The Hollies.”

“Oh! we get delicious apples there,” interposed Adelaide; “the juiciest you ever tasted—the cherry-and-brandy sort.”

“I have never heard of that special apple, and I dislike its name,” said Miss Sophia.—“Now come into the house, all of you.”

She did not question them further. She walked on in front.

“I can’t stand too much of this,” whispered Briar to Verena.

But Verena said “Hush!” and clasped Briar’s little hand as it lay on her arm.

They entered the house and proceeded to the pleasant schoolroom.

“It is now four o’clock,” said Miss Tredgold. “At five tea is served. As the evening is so fine, I have ordered it to be laid under the cedar-tree on the lawn. For the next hour I expect close attention to lessons. I shall not stay in the room, but you, Verena, are monitress during my absence. Please understand that I expect honor. Honor requires that you should study, and that you should be silent. Here are your books. Prepare the lessons I shall require you to know tomorrow morning. Those girls who have not made due preparation will enter into Punishment Land.”

“What in the world is that?” burst from the lips of the irrepressible Briar.

“Don’t ask me,” answered Miss Tredgold. “I hope you may never have a personal acquaintance with that gloomy country. Now farewell. For an hour fix your attention on your tasks; and adieu.”

Never before had the Dale girls found themselves in such a quandary. For a whole long hour they were prohibited by a code of honor from speaking. They were all just bursting with desire to launch forth in a fiery torrent, but they must none of them utter a single word. Verena, as monitress, could not encourage rebellion. There are some things that even untrained girls, provided they are ladies, understand by intuition. The Dales were ladies by birth. Their home had belonged to their father’s family for generations. There was a time in the past when to be a

Dale of The Dales meant to be rich, honored, and respected. But, alas! the Dales, like many other old families, had gone under. Money had failed; purses had become empty; lands had been sold; the house had dwindled down to its present shabby dimensions; and if Miss Tredgold had not appeared on the scene, there would have been little chance of Mr. Dale's ten daughters ever taking the position to which their birth entitled them. But there are some things which an ancient race confers. *Noblesse oblige*, for one thing. These girls were naughty, rebellious, and angry; their hearts were very sore; their silken chains seemed at this moment to assume the strength of iron fetters; but during the hour that was before them they would not disobey Miss Tredgold. Accordingly their dreary books were opened. Oh, how ugly and dull they looked!

"What does it matter whether a girl knows how to spell, and what happened long, long ago in the history-books?" thought Briar.

"Aunt Sophia was downright horrid about poor Nancy," was Pauline's angry thought. "Oh! must I really work out these odious sums, when I am thinking all the time of poor Nancy?"

"I shall never keep my head if this sort of thing goes on for long," thought Verena as she bent over her page of English history. "Oh, dear! that midnight picnic, and Nancy's face, and the dancing in the glades of the Forest. It would have been fun. If there is one thing more than another that I love, it is dancing. I think I could dance for ever."

Verena could not keep her pretty little feet still. They moved restlessly under her chair. Pauline saw the movement, and a wave of sympathy flashed between the sisters. Pauline's eyes spoke volumes as they encountered the soft brown ones of pretty Verena.

But an hour—even the longest—is quickly over. Five o'clock struck, and quick to the minute each girl sprang to her feet. Books were put away, and they all streamed out into the open air. Now they could talk as much as they liked. How their tongues wagged! They flew at each other in their delight and embraced violently. Never before, too, had they been so hungry for tea; and certainly never before had they seen such a delightful and tempting meal as that which was now laid for them on the lawn. The new parlor-maid had brought it out and placed it on various little tables. A silver teapot reposed on a silver tray; the cups and saucers were of fine china; the teaspoons were old, thin, and bright as a looking-glass. The table-linen was also snowy white; but what the girls far more appreciated were the piles of fruit, the quantities of cakes, the stacks of sandwiches, and the great plates of bread-and-butter that waited for them on the festive board.

"Well!" said Briar. "Did you ever? It looks just like a party, or a birthday treat, or something of that sort. I will say there are some nice things about Aunt Sophia. This is certainly better than squatting on the ground with a basket of gooseberries and a hunch of bread."

"I liked the gooseberries," said Pauline, "but, as you say, Briar, this is nice. Ah! here comes the aunt."

Miss Tredgold sailed into view. She took her seat opposite the hissing urn and began to pour out cups of tea.

"For a week," she said, "I take this place. At the end of that time Verena occupies my throne."

"Oh, I couldn't!" said Verena.

"Why in the world not, Renny? You aren't quite a goose."

"Don't use those expressions, Pauline; they are distinctly vulgar," said Miss Tredgold.

"Bother!" said Pauline.

She frowned, and the thought of the gooseberries and the hard crusts that used to constitute tea on many days when there was no Aunt Sophia came back to her with a sense of longing and appreciation of the golden past.

Nevertheless the girls were hungry, and the tea was excellent; and when Miss Tredgold had seen that each plate was piled with good things, and that every girl had her cup of tea made exactly as she liked it, she began to speak.

"You know little or nothing of the world, my dear girls, so during tea I intend to give you some pleasant information. I attended a tea-party last year in a house not far from London. You would like to hear all about it, would you not?"

"If you are sure it is not lessons," said Briar.

"It is not lessons in the ordinary acception of the word. Now listen. This garden to which I went led down to the Thames. It was the property of a very great friend of mine, and she had invited what I might call a select company. Now will you all listen, and I will tell you how things were done?"

Miss Tredgold then proceeded to tell her story. No one could tell a story better. She made her narrative quite absorbing. For these girls, who had never known anything of life, she drew so vivid and fascinating a picture that they almost wished to be present at such a scene as she described. She spoke of the girls of the London world in their pretty dresses, and the matrons in their richer garments; of the men who moved about with polite deference. She spoke of the summer air, the beautiful appearance of the river, the charming punts and boats which disported themselves on the bosom of the waters.

"It must have been pretty; but rather stiff, wasn't it?" said Verena.

"To you, my dear, it would have been stiff, for you are not yet accustomed to self-restraint, but

to those who belong to that world it was nothing short of enchantment."

"But you were in fetters," said Pauline; "and I should hate fetters however jolly they looked."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Why, you know you are putting them on us."

"Hush, Paulie!" said Verena.

"You are, Aunt Sophy; and you can't be angry with me if I speak. I can't imagine any one getting accustomed to fetters; it is quite beyond me."

She shrugged her shoulders, and looked with her downright face full at Miss Tredgold.

"Never mind," said that lady after a pause. "I can't expect you to understand everything all at once; but my description of a real bit of the world can do you no harm. The world has its good points; you will find that out presently. Perhaps you may not like it, but some people do. In your case there is no saying. To-morrow I will tell you another story, but it shall be of the graver and sadder side of life. That story will also introduce the nobler side of life. But now the time has come for me to ask you a question, and I expect an answer. The time has come for me to ask a very straight question.—Verena, you are the eldest; I shall speak to you."

"Yes?" said Verena.

She felt herself coloring. She said afterwards she knew exactly what was coming. Pauline must have known also, for she pinched Verena's arm.

"Yes?" repeated the young girl.

"You are surprised at the story I have just related to you," continued Miss Tredgold. "You think that the courtly grace, the sweet refinement, the elegant manners, the words that speak of due knowledge of life and men and women, represent a state of fetterdom; but you must also have felt their charm."

"To a certain extent," said Verena slowly, "what you have said excited me."

"You feel it possible that, under certain circumstances, you, too, could belong to such a group?"

"Perhaps," said Verena.

"There is not a doubt of it, my dear. A few years' training, a little of that discipline which you call fetters, pretty manners, and suitable dress would make you quite the sort of girl who would appear amongst my cultivated friends in the garden by the River Thames. But now for my question: Could your friend, Nancy King, ever figure in such an assembly?"

"It would not perhaps be her world," said Verena.

"You have answered me. Now I am going to say something that may annoy you; nevertheless I must say it. Your acquaintanceship with that girl as a friend must cease, and absolutely. She is not your equal. You are not to know her as a friend. If you meet her, there is no reason why you should not be civil, but civility and friendship are different things. If the time comes when she is in need or in trouble, I should be deeply sorry to think you would not help her, but as a friend she is to cease to exist for you. This is my firm command to all of you girls. There are to be no two voices on the subject. You may not agree with me now, and you may think me hard, but I insist on having my own way. You cease to know Nancy King as a friend. I shall myself write to that young person and forbid her to visit here. I will try not to hurt her; but there are certain distinctions of class which I for one must insist upon preserving. She is not a lady, she was not born a lady, and she never can be a lady; therefore, my dear nieces, you are not to know her."

CHAPTER VIII.

MUSIC HATH CHARMS.

The girls were tired when they went to bed. The life of routine had fatigued them; although, of course, it would soon cease to do so. Notwithstanding, therefore, Miss Tredgold's startling announcement with regard to Nancy King, they slept soundly; and the next morning when nine o'clock struck they all appeared in the schoolroom, their persons neat, their hair carefully brushed, and each pair of eyes beaming with intelligence. Even Penelope looked her very best in a clean brown holland frock, and she went quite creditably through her alphabet, and did not squiggle her pot-hooks quite as much as she had done on the previous day.

Miss Tredgold was in an excellent humor. She praised the girls, told them she was much pleased with their performances, and said further that, if only they would meet her half-way by being attentive and intelligent and earnest in their work, she on her part would do all in her power to make lessons agreeable; she would teach them in a way which would be sure to arouse their interest, and she would vary the work with play, and give them as gay a time as the bright weather and their own happy hearts would permit.

The girls felt quite cheerful; they even began to whisper one to another that Aunt Sophia was developing more and more good points as days went on.

On that afternoon a great excitement was in store, for a beautiful new piano was to arrive from Broadwood's, and Aunt Sophia announced that she meant to play on it for the benefit of the entire household that evening.

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"For, my dears," said that good lady, "I have forgotten neither my playing nor my singing. I will sing you old-fashioned songs to-night, and I quite hope that I may lure your father from his retirement. There was a time when he was musical—very musical."

"The dad musical!" cried Briar. "Aunt Sophia, what do you mean?"

"It is true, Rose. In the days long ago, when your mother and he and I spent happy times together, he played his violin better than any other amateur that I happen to know."

"There is an old violin in one of the attics," said Verena. "We have never touched it. It is in a case all covered with dust."

"His Stradivarius," murmured Miss Tredgold. "Oh dear! How are the mighty fallen! My dears, you had better say no more to me about that or I shall lose my temper."

The girls could not imagine why Miss Tredgold's eyes grew full of a certain mistiness and her cheeks were very pink with color. The next moment she looked full at her nieces.

"When your mother died she took a great deal away with her," she said. "What would you have done, poor children! if I had not been able to come to the rescue? It does seem almost impossible that your father, my brother-in-law, has forgotten to play on his Stradivarius."

"Well, aren't you glad you comed?" said Penelope, marching up and standing before the good lady. "Don't you like to feel you are so useful, the grand piano coming, and all the rest? Then you has us under your thumb. Don't you like that?"

"I don't understand you, Penny. You are talking in a very naughty way."

"I aren't. I are only saying what nursesey said. Nursesey said last night, 'Well, well, drat it all! They are under her thumb by this time.' I asked nursesey what it meant, and she said, 'Miss Penny, little girls should be seen, and not heard.' Nursesey always says that when I ask her questions that I want special to know. But when I comed down this morning I asked Betty what being under your thumb meant, and she said, 'Oh, lor', Miss Penny! You had better look out, miss. It means what you don't like, miss.' Then she said, Aunt Sophy, that old ladies like you was fond of having little girls under their thumbs. So I 'spect you like it; and I hope you won't squeeze us flat afore you have done."

Miss Tredgold had turned very red.

"How old are you, Pen?" she said when the loquacious child became silent.

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Penelope tossed her head. "You knows of my age quite well."

"Then I will just repeat the remark made by your excellent nurse—'Little girls should be seen, and not heard.' I will add to that remark by saying that little girls are sometimes impertinent. I shall not say anything more to-day; but another time, if you address me as you have just done, I shall be obliged to punish you."

"And if I don't dress you," said Penelope—"if I'm awful good—will you give me sugar-plums?"

"That is a treat in the very far distance," said Miss Tredgold.—"But now, girls, go out. The more you enjoy this lovely air the better."

They did all enjoy it; after their hard work—for lessons were hard to them—freedom was sweet. With each moment of lesson-time fully occupied, leisure was delicious. They wandered under the trees; they opened the wicket-gate which led into the Forest, and went a short way into its deep and lovely shade. When lunch-bell sounded they returned with hungry appetites.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly. Even preparation hour was no longer regarded as a hardship. It brought renewed appetites to enjoy tea. And in the midst of tea a wild dissipation occurred, for a piano-van came slowly down the ruddy lane which led to the front avenue. It stopped at the gates; the gates were opened, the piano-van came up the avenue, and John and two other men carried the beautiful Broadwood into the big drawing-room.

Miss Tredgold unlocked it and touched the ivory keys with loving fingers.

"I will play to you to-night when it is dusk," she said to the girls.

After this they were so eager to hear the music that they could scarcely eat their dinner. Mr. Dale now always appeared for the evening meal. He took the foot of the table, and stared in an abstracted way at Aunt Sophia. So fond was he of doing this that he often quite forgot to carve the joint which was set before him.

"Wake up, Henry," said Miss Sophia in her sharp voice; "the children are hungry, and so am I."

Then the student would shake himself, seize the knife and fork, and make frantic dashes at whatever the joint might happen to be. It must be owned that he carved very badly. Miss Tredgold bore it for a day or two; then she desired the parlor-maid to convey the joint to the head of the table where she sat. After this was done the dinner-hour was wont to progress very satisfactorily. To-day it went quickly by. Then Verena went up to her aunt.

"Now, Aunt Sophy," she said, "the gloaming has come, and music is waiting to make us all

happy in the drawing-room."

"I will play for you, my dears," said Aunt Sophia.

She was just leaving the room when she heard Verena say:

"You love music, father. Do come into the drawing-room. Aunt Sophia has got her new piano. She means to play on it. Do come; you know you love music."

"Indeed, I do nothing of the kind," said Mr. Dale.

He pushed his gray hair back from his forehead and looked abstractedly at Miss Sophia, who was standing in the twilight just by the open door.

"You remind me, Sophia——" said Mr. Dale.

He paused and covered his eyes with his hand.

"I could have sworn that you were she. No music, thanks; I have never listened to it since she died. Your mother played beautifully, children; she played and she sang. I liked her songs; I hate the twaddle of the present day. Now I am returning to my Virgil. My renderings of the original text become more and more full of light. I shall secure a vast reputation. Music! I hate music. Don't disturb me, any of you."

When Mr. Dale reached his study he sank into his accustomed chair. His lamp was already lit; it burned brightly, for Miss Tredgold herself trimmed it each morning. His piles of books of reference lay in confusion by his side. An open manuscript was in front of him. He took up his pen. Very soon he would be absorbed by the strong fascination of his studies; the door into another world would open and shut him in. He would be impervious then to this present century, to his present life, to his children, to the home in which he lived.

"I could have sworn," he muttered to himself, "that Alice had come back. As Sophia stood in the twilight I should scarcely have known them apart. She is not Alice. Alice was the only woman I ever loved—the only woman I could tolerate in my house. My children, my girls, are none of them women yet, thank the Almighty. When they are they will have to go. I could not stand any other woman but Alice to live always in the house. But now to forget her. This knotty point must be cleared up before I go to bed."

The doors of the ancient world were slowly opening. But before they could shut Mr. Dale within their portals there came a sound that caused the scholar to start. The soft strains of music entered through the door which Verena had on purpose left open. The music was sweet and yet masterly. It came with a merry sound and a certain quick rhythm that seemed to awaken the echoes of the house. Impossible as it may appear, Mr. Dale forgot the ancient classics and the dim world of the past. He lay back in his chair; his lips moved; he beat time with his knuckles on the arms of his chair; and with his feet on the floor. So perfect was his ear that the faintest wrong note, or harmony out of tune, would be detected by him. The least jarring sound would cause him agony. But there was no jarring note; the melody was correct; the time was perfect.

"I might have known that Alice——" he began; but then he remembered that Alice had never played exactly like that, and he ceased to think of her, or of any woman, and became absorbed in those ringing notes that stole along the passage and entered by the open door and surrounded him like lightsome fairies. Into his right ear they poured their charm; in his left ear they completed their work. Virgil was forgotten; old Homer might never have existed.

Mr. Dale rose. He got up softly; he walked across the room and opened the door wide. There was a very bright light streaming down the passage. In the old days this passage was always dark; no one ever thought of lighting the lobbies and passages at The Dales. The master of the house wondered dimly at the light; but at the same time it gave him a sense of comfort.

Suddenly a voice began to sing:

"I know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows."

The voice was sweet, pure, and high. It floated towards him. Suddenly he stretched out his arms.

"I am coming, Alice," he said aloud. "Yes, I am coming. Don't call me with such insistence. I come, I tell you; I come."

He ran down the passage; he entered the central hall; he burst into the drawing-room. His eyes were full of excitement. He strode across the room and sank into a chair close to the singer.

Miss Tredgold just turned and glanced at him.

"Ah, Henry!" she said; "so you are there. I hoped that this would draw you. Now I am going to sing again."

"A song of the past," he said in a husky voice.

"Will this do?" she said, and began "Annie Laurie."

Once again Mr. Dale kept time with his hand and his feet. "Annie Laurie" melted into "Home, Sweet Home"; "Home, Sweet Home" into "Ye Banks and Braes o' Bonny Doon"; "Ye Banks and Braes" wandered into the delicious notes of "Auld Lang Syne."

Suddenly Miss Tredgold rose, shut and locked the piano, and then turned and faced her audience.

"No more to-night," she said. "By-and-by you girls shall all play on this piano. You shall also

sing, for I have not the slightest doubt that most of you have got voices. You ought to be musical, for music belongs to both sides of your house. There was once a time when your father played the violin as no one else, in my opinion, ever played it. By the way, Henry, is that violin still in existence?"

"Excuse me," said Mr. Dale; "I never touch it now. I have not touched it for years. I would not touch it for the world."

"You will touch it again when the time is ripe. Now, no more music to-night. Those who are tired had better go to bed."

The girls left the room without a word. Miss Tredgold then went up to Mr. Dale.

"Go back to your study and your Virgil," she said. "Don't waste your precious time."

He looked exactly as though some one had whipped him, but he took her at her word and returned to his study.

The music was henceforth a great feature in the establishment. Miss Tredgold enhanced its value by being chary in regard to it. She only played as a special treat. She would by no means give them the great pleasure of her singing and playing every night.

"When you have all had a good day I will sing and play to you," she said to the girls; "but when you neglect your work, or are idle and careless, or cross and sulky, I don't intend to amuse you in the evenings. I was brought up on a stricter plan than the girls of the present day, and I mean while I am with you to bring you up in the same way. I prefer it to the lax way in which young people are now reared."

For a time Miss Tredgold's plans went well. Then there came a day of rebellion. Pauline was the first to openly rebel against Aunt Sophia. There came a morning when Pauline absolutely refused to learn her lessons. She was a stoutly built, determined-looking little girl, very dark in complexion and in eyes and hair. She would probably be a handsome woman by-and-by, but now she was plain, with a somewhat sallow face, heavy black brows, and eyes that could scowl when anything annoyed her. She was the next eldest to Verena, and was thirteen years of age. Her birthday would be due in a fortnight. Even at The Dales birthdays were considered auspicious events. There was always some sort of present, even though it was worth very little in itself, given by each member of the family to the possessor of the birthday. Mr. Dale generally gave this happy person a whole shilling. He presented the shilling with great pomp, and invariably made the same speech:

"God bless you, my dear. May you have many happy returns of the day. And now for goodness' sake don't detain me any longer."

A shilling was considered by the Dale girls as valuable as a sovereign would be to girls in happier circumstances. It was eked out to its furthest dimensions, and was as a rule spent on good things to eat. Now, under Miss Tredgold's reign, Pauline's birthday would be a much more important event. Miss Tredgold had long ago taken Verena, Briar, Patty, Josephine, and Adelaide into her confidence. Pauline knew quite well that she was talked about. She knew when, the girls retired into corners that she was the object of their eager conversations. The whole thing was most agreeable to her sense of vanity, and when she suddenly appeared round a corner and perceived that work was put out of sight, that the eager whisperers started apart, and that the girls looked conscious and as if they wished her out of the way, she quite congratulated herself on the fact that hers was the first birthday in the immediate future, and that on that day she would be a very great personage indeed. As these thoughts came to her she walked with a more confident stride, and thought a great deal of her own importance. At night she lay awake thinking of the happy time, and wondering what this coming birthday, when she would have been fourteen whole years in the world, would bring forth.

There came a lovely morning about a week before the birthday. Pauline had got up early, and was walking by herself in the garden. She felt terribly excited, and almost cross at having to wait so long for her pleasure.

"After all," thought Pauline, "Aunt Sophia has done something for us. How horrid it would be to go back to the old shilling birthdays now!"

As she thought these thoughts, Patty and Josephine, arm-in-arm and talking in low tones, crossed her path. They did not see her at first, and their words reached Pauline's ears.

"I know she'd rather have pink than blue," said Patty's voice.

"Well, mine will be trimmed with blue," was Josephine's answer.

Just then the girls caught sight of Pauline, uttered shrieks, and disappeared down a shady walk.

"Something with pink and something with blue," thought Pauline. "The excitement is almost past bearing. Of course, they're talking about my birthday presents. I do wish my birthday was to-morrow. I don't know how I shall exist for a whole week."

At that moment Miss Tredgold's sharp voice fell on her ears:

"You are late, Pauline. I must give you a bad mark for want of punctuality, Go at once into the schoolroom."

To hear these incisive, sharp tones in the midst of her own delightful reflections was anything but agreeable to Pauline. She felt, as she expressed it, like a cat rubbed the wrong way. She gave Miss Tredgold one of her most ungracious scowls and went slowly into the house. There

she lingered purposely before she condescended to tidy her hair and put on her house-shoes. In consequence she was quite a quarter of an hour late when she appeared in the schoolroom. Miss Tredgold had just finished morning prayers.

"You have missed prayers this morning, Pauline," she said. "There was no reason for this inattention. I shall be obliged to punish you. You cannot have your usual hour of recreation before dinner. You will have to write out the first page of Scott's *Lay of the Last Minstrel*; and you must do it without making any mistake either in spelling or punctuation. On this occasion you can copy from the book. Now, no words, my dear—no words. Sit down immediately to your work."

Pauline did sit down. She felt almost choking with anger. Was she, an important person who was soon to be queen of a birthday, one about whom her sisters talked and whispered and made presents for, to be treated in this scant and ungracious fashion? She would not put up with it. Accordingly she was very inattentive at her lessons, failed to listen when she should, played atrociously on the piano, could not manage her sums, and, in short, got more and more each moment into Miss Tredgold's black books.

When recreation hour arrived she felt tired and headachy. The other girls now went out into the pleasant sunshine. Pauline looked after them with longing. They would sit under the overhanging trees; they would eat fruit and talk nonsense and laugh. Doubtless they would talk about her and the birthday so near at hand. At noon the schoolroom was hot, too, for the sun beat hard upon the windows, and Pauline felt more stifled and more headachy and sulky than ever.

"Oh! please," she said, as Miss Tredgold was leaving the room, "I can't do this horrid writing to-day. Please forgive me. Do let me go out."

"No, Pauline; you must take your punishment. You were late this morning; you disobeyed my rules. Take the punishment which I am obliged to give you as a lady should, and make no more excuses."

The door was shut upon the angry girl. She sat for a time absolutely still, pressing her hand to her aching brow; then she strolled across the schoolroom, fetched some paper, and sat down to her unwelcome task. She wrote very badly, and when the hour was over she had not half copied the task assigned to her. This bad beginning went on to a worse end. Pauline declined to learn any lessons in preparation hour, and accordingly next morning she was absolutely unprepared for her tasks.

Miss Tredgold was now thoroughly roused.

"I must make an example," she said to herself. "I shall have no influence over these girls if I let them think I am all softness and yielding. The fact is, I have shown them the south side of my character too long; a little touch of the northeast will do them no harm."

Accordingly she called the obstinate and sulky Pauline before her.

"I am very much displeased with you. You have done wrong, and you must be punished. I have told you and your sisters that there is such a place as Punishment Land. You enter it now, and live there until after breakfast to-morrow morning."

"But what do you mean?" said Pauline.

"I mean exactly what I say. You have been for the last twenty-four hours extremely naughty. You will therefore be punished for the next twenty-four hours. You are a very naughty girl. Naughty girls must be punished, and you, Pauline, are now under punishment. You enter Punishment Land immediately."

"But where is it? What is it? I don't understand."

"You will soon. Girls, I forbid you to speak to your sister while she is under punishment. Pauline, your meals will be sent to you in this room. You will be expected to work up your neglected tasks and learn them thoroughly. You must neither play with nor speak to your sisters. You will have no indulgence of any sort. When you walk, I wish you to keep in the north walk, just beyond the vegetable garden. Finally, you will go to bed at seven o'clock. Now leave the room. I am in earnest."

CHAPTER IX.

PUNISHMENT LAND.

Pauline did leave the room. She passed her sisters, who stared at her in horrified amazement. She knew that their eyes were fixed upon her, but she was doubtful if they pitied her or not. Just at that moment, however, she did not care what their feelings were. She had a momentary sense of pleasure on getting into the soft air. A gentle breeze fanned her hot cheeks. She took her old sailor hat from a peg and ran fast into a distant shrubbery. Miss Tredgold had said that she might take exercise in the north walk. If there was a dreary, ugly part of the grounds, it might

be summed up in the north walk. The old garden wall was on one side of it, and a tattered, ugly box-hedge on the other. Nothing was to be seen as you walked between the hedge and the wall but the ground beneath your feet and the sky above your head. There was no distant view of any sort. In addition to this disadvantage, it was in winter an intensely cold place, and in summer, notwithstanding its name, an intensely hot place. No, Pauline would not go there. She would disobey. She would walk where she liked; she would also talk to whom she liked.

She stood for a time leaning against a tree, her face scarlet with emotion, her sailor hat flung on the ground. Presently she saw Penelope coming towards her. She felt quite glad of this, for Penelope might always be bribed. Pauline made up her mind to disobey thoroughly; she would walk where she pleased; she would do what she liked; she would talk to any one to whom she wished to talk. What was Penelope doing? She was bending down and peering on the ground. Beyond doubt she was looking for something.

"What is it, Pen?" called out her sister.

Penelope had not seen Pauline until now. She stood upright with a start, gazed tranquilly at the girl in disgrace, and then, without uttering a word, resumed her occupation of searching diligently on the ground. Pauline's face put on its darkest scowl. Her heart gave a thump of wild indignation. She went up to Penelope and shook her by the arm. Penelope, still without speaking, managed to extricate herself. She moved a few feet away. She then again looked full at Pauline, and, to the amazement of the elder girl, her bold black eyes filled with tears. She took one dirty, chubby hand and blew a kiss to Pauline.

Pauline felt suddenly deeply touched. She very nearly wept herself.

"Oh, dear Penny," she said, "how good you are! I didn't know you'd feel for me. I can bear things better if I know you feel for me. You needn't obey her, need you? See, I've got three-ha'pence in my pocket. I'll give you the money and you can buy lollypops. I will really if only you will say a few words to me now."

"I daren't," burst from Penelope's lips. "You have no right to tempt me. I can't; I daren't. I am looking now for Aunt Sophy's thimble. She was working here yesterday and she dropped it, she doesn't know where. She's awful fond of it. She'll give me a penny if I find it. Don't ask me any more. I've done very wrong to speak to you."

"So you have," said Pauline, who felt as angry as ever. "You have broken Aunt Sophia's word—not your own, for you never said you wouldn't speak to me. But go, if you are so honorable. Only please understand that I hate every one of you, and I'm never going to obey Aunt Sophia."

Penelope only shook her little person, and presently wandered away into a more distant part of the shrubbery. She went on searching and searching. Pauline could see her bobbing her little fat person up and down.

"Even Penny," she thought, "is incorruptible. Well, I don't care. I won't put up with this unjust punishment."

The dinner-gong sounded, and Pauline, notwithstanding her state of disgrace, discovered that she was hungry.

"Why should I eat?" she said to herself. "I won't eat. Then perhaps I'll die, and she'll be sorry. She'll be had up for manslaughter; she'll have starved a girl to death. No, I won't eat a single thing. And even if I don't die I shall be awfully ill, and she'll be in misery. Oh dear! why did mother die and leave us? And why did dreadful Aunt Sophy come? Mother was never cross; she was never hard. Oh mother! Oh mother!"

Pauline was now so miserable that she flung herself on the ground and burst into passionate weeping. Her tears relieved the tension of her heart, and she felt slightly better. Presently she raised her head, and taking out her handkerchief, prepared to mop her eyes. As she did so she was attracted by something that glittered not far off. She stretched out her hand and drew Miss Tredgold's thimble from where it had rolled under a tuft of dock-leaves. A sudden burst of pleasure escaped her lips as she glanced at the thimble. She had not seen it before. It certainly was the most beautiful thimble she had ever looked at. She put it on the tip of her second finger and turned it round and round. The thimble itself was made of solid gold; its base was formed of one beautifully cut sapphire, and round the margin of the top of the thimble was a row of turquoises. The gold was curiously and wonderfully chased, and the sapphire, which formed the entire base of the thimble, shone in a way that dazzled Pauline. She was much interested; she forgot that she was hungry, and that she had entered into Punishment Land. It seemed to her that in her possession of the thimble she had found the means of punishing Aunt Sophia. This knowledge soothed her inexpressibly. She slipped the lovely thimble into her pocket, and again a keen pang of downright healthy hunger seized her. She knew that food would be awaiting her in the schoolroom. Should she eat it, or should she go through the wicket-gate and lose herself in the surrounding Forest?

Just at this moment a girl, who whistled as she walked, approached the wicket-gate, opened it, and came in. She was dressed in smart summer clothes; her hat was of a fashionable make, and a heavy fringe lay low on her forehead. Pauline looked at her, and her heart gave a thump of pleasure. Now, indeed, she could bear her punishment, and her revenge on Miss Tredgold lay even at the door. For Nancy King, the girl whom she was not allowed to speak to, had entered the grounds.

"Hullo, Paulie!" called out that young lady. "There you are! Well, I must say you do look doleful. What's the matter now? Is the dear aristocrat more aristocratic than ever?"

"Oh, don't, Nancy! I ought not to speak to you at all."

"So I've been told by the sweet soul herself," responded Nancy. "She wrote me a letter which would have put another girl in such a rage that she would never have touched any one of you again with a pair of tongs. But that's not Nancy King. For when Nancy loves a person, she loves that person through thick and thin, through weal and woe. I came to-day to try to find one of you dear girls. I have found you. What is the matter with you, Paulie? You do look bad."

"I'm very unhappy," said Pauline. "Oh Nancy! we sort of promised that we wouldn't have anything more to do with you."

"But you can't keep your promise, can you, darling? So don't say any more about it. Anyhow, promise or not, I'm going to kiss you now."

Nancy flung her arms tightly round Pauline's neck and printed several loud, resounding kisses on each cheek; then she seated herself under an oak tree, and motioned to Pauline to do likewise.

Pauline hesitated just for a moment; then scruples were forgotten, and she sat on the ground close to Nancy's side.

"Tell me all about it," said Nancy. "Wipe your eyes and talk. Don't be frightened; it's only poor old Nancy, the girl you have known since you were that high. And I'm rich, Paulie pet, and although we're only farmer-folk, we live in a much finer house than The Dales. And I'm going to have a pony soon—a pony of my very own—and my habit is being made for me at Southampton. I intend to follow the hounds next winter. Think of that, little Paulie. You'll see me as I ride past. I'm supposed to have a very good figure, and I shall look ripping in my habit. Well, but that's not to the point, is it? You are in trouble, you poor little dear, and your old Nancy must try and make matters better for you. I love you, little Paulie. I'm fond of you all, but you are my special favorite. You were always considered something like me—dark and dour when you liked, but sunshiny when you liked also. Now, what is it, Paulie? Tell your own Nancy."

"I'm very fond of you, Nancy," replied Pauline. "And I think," she continued, "that it is perfectly horrid of Aunt Sophia to say that we are not to know you."

"It's snobbish and mean and unlady-like," retorted Nancy; "but her saying it doesn't make it a fact, for you do know me, and you will always have to know me. And if she thinks, old spiteful! that I'm going to put up with her nasty, low, mean, proud ways, she's fine and mistaken. I'm not, and that's flat. So there, old spitfire! I shouldn't mind telling her so to her face."

"But, on the whole, she has been kind to us," said Pauline, who had some sense of justice in her composition, angry as she felt at the moment.

"Has she?" said Nancy. "Then let me tell you she has not a very nice way of showing it. Now, Paulie, no more beating about the bush. What's up? Your eyes are red; you have a great smear of ink on your forehead; and your hands—my word! for so grand a young lady your hands aren't up to much, my dear."

"I have got into trouble," said Pauline. "I didn't do my lessons properly yesterday; I couldn't—I had a headache, and everything went wrong. So this morning I could not say any of them when Aunt Sophia called me up, and she put me into Punishment Land. You know, don't you, that I am soon to have a birthday?"

"Oh, don't I?" interrupted Nancy. "Didn't a little bird whisper it to me, and didn't that same little bird tell me exactly what somebody would like somebody else to give her? And didn't that somebody else put her hand into her pocket and send— Oh, we won't say any more, but she did send for something for somebody's birthday. Oh, yes, I know. You needn't tell me about that birthday, Pauline Dale."

"You are good," said Pauline, completely touched. She wondered what possible thing Nancy could have purchased for her. She had a wild desire to know what it was. She determined then and there, in her foolish little heart, that nothing would induce her to quarrel with Nancy.

"It is something that you like, and something that will spite her," said the audacious Nancy. "I thought it all out, and I made up my mind to kill two birds with one stone. Now to go on with the pretty little story. We didn't please aunty, and we got into trouble. Proceed, Paulie pet."

"I didn't learn my lessons. I was cross, as I said, and headachy, and Aunt Sophia said I was to be made an example of, and so she sent me to Punishment Land for twenty-four hours."

"Oh, my dear! It sounds awful. What is it?"

"Why, none of my sisters are to speak to me, and I am only to walk in the north walk."

"Is this the north walk?" asked Nancy, with a merry twinkle in her black eyes.

"Of course it isn't. She may say what she likes, but I'm not going to obey her. But the others won't speak to me. I can't make them. And I am to take my meals by myself in the schoolroom, and I am to go to bed at seven o'clock."

Pauline told her sad narrative in a most lugubrious manner, and she felt almost offended at the conclusion when Nancy burst into a roar of laughter.

"It's very unkind of you to laugh when I'm so unhappy," said Pauline.

"My dear, how can I help it? It is so ridiculous to treat a girl who is practically almost grown up in such a baby fashion. Then I'd like to know what authority she has over you."

"That's the worst of it, Nancy. Father has given her authority, and she has it in writing. She's awfully clever, and she came round poor father, and he had to do what she wanted because he couldn't help himself."

"Jolly mean, I call it," said Nancy. "My dear, you are pretty mad, I suppose."

"Wouldn't you be if your father treated you like that?"

"My old dad! He knows better. I've had my swing since I was younger than you, Paulie. Of course, at school I had to obey just a little. I wasn't allowed to break all the rules, but I did smuggle in a good many relaxations. The thing is, you can do what you like at school if only you are not found out. Well, I was too clever to be found out. And now I am grown up, eighteen last birthday, and I have taken a fancy to cling to my old friends, even if they have a snobby, ridiculous old aunt to be rude to me. My dear, what nonsense she did write!—all about your being of such a good family, and that I wasn't in your station. I shall keep that letter. I wouldn't lose it for twenty shillings. What have you to boast of after all is said and done? A tumble-down house; horrid, shabby, old-fashioned, old-maidy clothes; and never a decent meal to be had."

"But it isn't like that now," said Pauline, finding herself getting very red and angry.

"Well, so much the better for you. And did I make the little mousy-pousy angry? I won't, then, any more, for Nancy loves little mousy-pousy, and would like to do what she could for her. You love me back, don't you, mousy?"

"Yes, Nancy, I do love you, and I think it's a horrid shame that we're not allowed to be with you. But, all the same, I'd rather you didn't call me mousy."

"Oh dear, how dignified we are! I shall begin to believe in the ancient family if this sort of thing continues. But now, my dear, the moment has come to help you. The hour has arrived when your own Nancy, vulgar as she is, can lend you a helping hand. Listen."

"What?" said Pauline.

"Jump up, Paulie; take my hand, and you and I together will walk out through that wicket-gate, and go back through the dear old Forest to The Hollies, and spend the day at my home. There are my boy cousins from London, and my two friends, Rebecca and Amelia Perkins—jolly girls, I can tell you. We shall have larks. What do you say, Paulie? A fine fright she'll be in when she misses you. Serve her right, though."

"But I daren't come with you," said Pauline. "I'd love it more than anything in the world; but I daren't. You mustn't ask me. You mustn't try to tempt me, Nancy, for I daren't go."

"I didn't know you were so nervous."

"I am nervous about a thing like that. Wild as I have been, and untrained all my life, I do not think I am out-and-out wicked. It would be wicked to go away without leave. I'd be too wretched. Oh, I daren't think of it!"

Nancy pursed up her lips while Pauline was speaking; then she gave vent to a low, almost incredulous whistle. Finally she sprang to her feet.

"I am not the one to try and make you forget your scruples," she said. "Suppose you do this. Suppose you come at seven o'clock to-night. Then you will be safe. You may be wicked, but at least you will be safe. She'll never look for you, nor think of you again, when once you have gone up to bed. You have a room to yourself, have you not?"

Pauline nodded.

"I thought so. You will go to your room, lock the door, and she will think it is all right. The others won't care to disturb you. If they do they'll find the door locked."

"But I am forbidden to lock my room door."

"They will call to you, but you will not answer. They may be angry, but I don't suppose your sisters will tell on you, and they will only suppose you are sound asleep. Meanwhile you will be having a jolly good time; for I can tell you we are going to have sport to-night at The Hollies—fireworks, games, plans for the future, etc., etc. You can share my nice bed, and go back quite early in the morning. I have a lot to talk over with you. I want to arrange about our midnight picnic."

"But, Nancy, we can't have a midnight picnic."

"Can't we? I don't see that at all. I tell you what—we will have it; and we'll have it on your birthday. Your birthday is in a week. That will be just splendid. The moon will be at the full, and you must all of you come. Do you suppose I'm going to be balked of my fun by a stupid old woman? Ah! you little know me. My boy cousins, Jack and Tom, and my friends, Becky and Amy, have made all arrangements. We are going to have a time! Of course, if you are not there, you don't suppose our fun will be stopped! You'll hear us laughing in the glades. You won't like that, will you? But we needn't say any more until seven o'clock to-night."

"I don't think I'm coming."

"But you are, Paulie. No one will know, and you must have a bit of fun. Perhaps I'll show you the present I'm going to give you on your birthday; there's no saying what I may do; only you must come."

Nancy had been standing all this time. Pauline had been reclining on the ground. Now she also rose to her feet.

"You excite me," she said. "I long to go, and yet I am afraid; it would be so awfully wicked."

"It would be wicked if she was your mother, but she's not. And she has no right to have any control over you. She just got round your silly old father——"

"I won't have dad called silly!"

"Well, your learned and abstracted father. It all comes to much the same. Now think the matter over. You needn't decide just this minute. I shall come to the wicket-gate at half-past seven, and if you like to meet me, why, you can; but if you are still too good, and your conscience is too troublesome, and your scruples too keen, you need not come. I shall quite understand. In that case, perhaps, I'd best not give you that lovely, lovely present that I saved up so much money to buy."

Pauline clasped her hands and stepped away from Nancy. As she did so the breeze caught her full gray skirt and caused it to blow against Nancy. Nancy stretched out her hand and caught hold of Pauline's pocket.

"What is this hard thing?" she cried. "Have you got a nut in your pocket?"

"No," said Pauline, instantly smiling and dimpling. "Oh, Nancy, such fun!"

She dived into her pocket and produced Miss Tredgold's thimble.

"Oh, I say!" cried Nancy. "What a beauty! Who in the world gave you this treasure, Paulie?"

"It isn't mine at all; it belongs to Aunt Sophia."

"You sly little thing! You took it from her?"

"No, I didn't. I'm not a thief. I saw it in the grass a few minutes ago and picked it up. It had rolled just under that dock-leaf. Isn't it sweet? I shall give it back to her after she has forgiven me to-morrow."

"What a charming, return-good-for-evil character you have suddenly become, Pauline!"

As Nancy spoke she poised the thimble on her second finger. Her fingers were small, white, and tapering. The thimble exactly fitted the narrow tip on which it rested.

"I never saw anything so lovely," she cried. "Never mind, Paulie, about to-morrow. Lend it to me. I'd give my eyes to show it to Becky."

"But why should I lend it to you? I must return it to Aunt Sophia."

"You surely won't give it back to her to-day."

"No, but to-morrow."

"Let to-morrow take care of itself. I want to show this thimble to Becky and Amy. I have a reason. You won't refuse one who is so truly kind to you, will you, little Paulie? And I tell you what: I know you are starving, and you hate to go into the house for your food. I will bring you a basketful of apples, chocolates, and a peach or two. We have lovely peaches ripe in our garden now, although we are such common folk."

Pauline felt thirsty. Her hunger, too, was getting worse. She would have given a good deal to have been able to refuse the horrid meals which would be served to her in the schoolroom. Perhaps she could manage without any other food if she had enough fruit.

"I should like some very much," she said. "Aunt Sophia has, as she calls it, preserved the orchard. We are not allowed to go into it."

"Mean cat!" cried Nancy.

"So will you really send me a basket of fruit?"

"I will send Tom with it the instant I get home. He runs like the wind. You may expect to find it waiting for you in half-an-hour."

"Thank you. And you will take great care of the thimble, won't you?"

"Of course I will, child. It is a beauty."

Without more ado Nancy slipped the thimble into her pocket, and then nodding to Pauline, and telling her that she would wait for her at the wicket-gate at half-past seven, she left her.

Nancy swung her body as she walked, and Pauline stood and watched her. She thought that Nancy looked very grown-up and very stylish. To look stylish seemed better than to look pretty in the eyes of the inexperienced little girl. She could not help having a great admiration for her friend.

"She is very brave, and so generous; and she knows such a lot of the world!" thought poor Pauline. "It is a shame not to be allowed to see her whenever one likes. And it would be just heavenly to go to her to-night, instead of spending hungry hours awake in my horrid bedroom."

The other girls were miserable; but Miss Tredgold had already exercised such a very strong influence over them that they did not dare to disobey her orders. Much as they longed to do so, none of them ventured near poor Pauline. In the course of the afternoon Miss Tredgold called Verena aside.

"I know well, my dear, what you are thinking," she said. "You believe that I am terribly hard on your sister."

Verena's eyes sought the ground.

"Yes, I quite know what you think," repeated Miss Tredgold. "But, Verena, you are wrong. At least, if I am hard, it is for her good."

"But can it do any one good to be downright cruel to her?" said Verena.

"I am not cruel, but I have given her a more severe punishment than she has ever received before in her life. We all, the best of us, need discipline. The first time we experience it when it comes from the hand of God we murmur and struggle and rebel. But there comes a time when we neither murmur nor struggle nor rebel. When that time arrives the discipline has done its perfect work, and God removes it. My dear Verena, I am a woman old enough to be your mother. You must trust me, and believe that I am treating Pauline in the manner I am to-day out of the experience of life that God has given me. We are so made, my dear, that we none of us are any good until our wills are broken to the will of our Divine Master."

"But this is not God's will, is it?" said Verena. "It is your will."

"Consider for a moment, my child. It is, I believe, both God's will and mine. Don't you want Pauline to be a cultivated woman? Don't you want her character to be balanced? Don't you want her to be educated? There is a great deal that is good in her. She has plenty of natural talent. Her character, too, is strong and sturdy. But at present she is like a flower run to weed. In such a case what would the gardener do?"

"I suppose he would prune the flower."

"If it was a hopeless weed he would cast it out of his garden; but if it really was a flower that had degenerated into a weed, he would take it up and put it to some pain, and plant it again in fresh soil. The poor little plant might say it was badly treated when it was taken from its surroundings and its old life. This is very much the case with Pauline. Now, I do not wish her to associate with Nancy King. I do not wish her to be idle or inattentive. I want her to be energetic, full of purpose, resolved to do her best, and to take advantage of those opportunities which have come to you all, my dear, when I, your mother's sister, took up my abode at The Dales. Sometime, dear, it is quite possible that, owing to what will be begun in Pauline's character to-day, people will stop and admire the lovely flower. They will know that the gardener who put it to some pain and trouble was wise and right. Now, my dear girl, you will remember my little lecture. Pauline needs discipline. For that matter, you all need discipline. At first such treatment is hard, but in the end it is salutary."

"Thank you, Aunt Sophy," said Verena. "But perhaps," she added, "you will try and remember, too, that kindness goes a long way. Pauline is perhaps the most affectionate of us all. In some ways she has the deepest feelings. But she can be awfully sulky, and only kindness can move her."

"I quite understand, my dear; and when the time comes kindness will not be wanting. Now go away and amuse yourself with your sisters."

Verena went away. She wondered as she did so where Pauline was hiding herself. The others had all settled down to their various amusements and occupations. They were sorry for Pauline, but the pleasant time they were enjoying in the middle of this lovely summer's day was not to be despised, even if their sister was under punishment. But Verena herself could not rest. She went into the schoolroom. On a tray stood poor Pauline's neglected dinner. Verena lifted the cover from the plate, and felt as though she must cry.

"Pauline is taking it hardly," thought the elder girl.

Tea-time came, and Pauline's tea was also sent to the schoolroom. At preparation hour, when the rest of the girls went into the room, Pauline's tea remained just where it had been placed an hour before. Verena could scarcely bear herself. There must be something terribly wrong with her sister. They had often been hungry in the old days, but in the case of a hearty, healthy girl, to do without any food from breakfast-time when there was plenty to eat was something to regard with uneasiness.

Presently, however, to her relief, Pauline came in. She looked rough and untidy in appearance. She slipped into the nearest chair in a sulky, ungainly fashion, and taking up a battered spelling-book, she held it upside down.

Verena gave her a quick glance and looked away. Pauline would not meet Verena's anxious gaze. She kept on looking down. Occasionally her lips moved. There was a red stain on her cheek. Penelope with one of her sharpest glances perceived this.

"It is caused by fruit," thought the youngest of the schoolroom children. "I wonder who has given Pauline fruit. Did she climb the garden wall or get over the gate into the orchard?"

Nobody else noticed this stain. Miss Tredgold came in presently, but she took no more notice of Pauline than if that young lady did not exist.

The hour of preparation was over. It was now six o'clock. In an hour Pauline was expected to go to bed. Now, Pauline and Verena had bedrooms to themselves. These were attic rooms at the top of the house. They had sloping roofs, and would have been much too hot in summer but for the presence of a big beech tree, which grew to within a few feet of the windows. More than once the girls in their emancipated days, as they now considered them, used to climb down the beech tree from their attic windows, and on a few occasions had even managed to climb up the same way. They loved their rooms, having slept in them during the greater part of their lives.

Pauline, as she now went in the direction of the north walk, thought with a sense of satisfaction of the bedroom she had to herself.

"It will make things easier," she thought. "They will all be on the lawn doing their needlework, and Aunt Sophia will be reading to them. I will go past them quite quietly to my room, and then —"

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These thoughts made Pauline comparatively happy. Once or twice she smiled, and a vindictive, ugly expression visited her small face.

"She little knows," thought the girl. "Oh, she little knows! She thinks that she is so clever—so terribly clever; but, after all, she has not the least idea of the right way to treat me. No, she has not the least idea. And perhaps by-and-by she will be sorry for what she has done."

Seven o'clock was heard to strike in the house. Pauline, retracing her steps, went slowly past her sisters and Miss Tredgold. Miss Tredgold slightly raised her voice as the culprit appeared. She read aloud with more determination than ever. Penelope flung down the duster she was hemming and watched Pauline.

"I a'most wish I wor her," thought the ex-nursery child. "Anything is better than this horrid sewing. How it pricks my fingers! That reminds me; I wonder where Aunt Sophy's thimble has got to. I did look hard for it. I wish I could find it. I do want that penny so much! It was a beauty thimble, too, and she loves it. I don't want to give it back to her 'cos she loves it, but I should like my penny."

Pauline had now nearly disappeared from view.

"Paulie is up to a lark," thought Penelope, who was the sharpest of all the children, and read motives as though she was reading an open book. "She doesn't walk as though she was tur'ble unhappy. I wonder what she's up to. And that red stain on her cheek was fruit; course it was fruit. How did she get it? I wish I knew. I'll try and find out."

Pauline had now reached her bedroom. There she hastily put on her best clothes. They were very simple, but, under Miss Tredgold's regime, fairly nice. She was soon attired in a neat white frock; and an old yellow sash of doubtful cleanliness and a bunch of frowsy red poppies were folded in a piece of tissue paper. Pauline then slipped on her sailor hat. She had a great love for the old sash; and as to the poppies, she thought them far more beautiful than any real flowers that ever grew. She meant to tie the yellow sash round her waist when she reached the shrubbery, and to pin the poppies into her hat. The fact that Miss Tredgold had forbidden her to wear this sash, and had herself removed the poppies from her Sunday hat, gave her now a sense of satisfaction.

"Young ladies don't wear things of that sort," Miss Tredgold had said.

"A young lady shall wear things of this sort to-night," thought Pauline.

Having finished her toilet, she locked her door from the outside and put the key into her pocket; but before she left the room she drew down the dark-green blind. She then slipped downstairs and went out through the back way. She had to go through the yard, but no one saw her except Betty, who, as she afterwards remarked, did observe the flutter of a white dress with the tail of her eye. But Betty at that moment was immersed in a fresh installment of the wonderful adventures of the Duke of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton and his bride, and what did it matter to her if the young ladies chose to run out in their best frocks?

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Pauline reached the shrubbery without further adventure. There she put on her extra finery. Her yellow sash was tied in a large bow, and her poppies nodded over her forehead.

It was a very excited dark-eyed girl who presently met Nancy King on the other side of the wicket-gate.

"Here I am," said Pauline. "I expect I shall never have any luck again all my life; but I want to spite her at any cost, so here I am."

"Delicious!" said Nancy. "Isn't it good to spite the old cat? Now then, let's be off, or we may be caught. But I say, how fine we are!"

"You always admired this bunch of poppies, didn't you, Nancy? Do you remember? Before you went to that grand school at Brighton you used to envy me my poppies. I found them among mother's old things, and Verena gave them to me. I love them like anything. Don't you like them very much, placed so in front of my hat?"

"Didn't I say, 'How fine we are'?"

"Yes; but somehow your tone——"

"My dear Paulie, you are getting much too learned for my taste. Now come along. Take my

hand. Let us run. Let me tell you, you look charming. The girls will admire you wonderfully. Amy and Becky are keen to make your acquaintance. You can call them by their Christian names; they're not at all stiff. Surname, Perkins. Nice girls—brought up at my school—father in the pork line; jolly girls—very. And, of course, you met Jack and Tom last year. They're out fishing at present. They'll bring in beautiful trout for supper. Why, you poor little thing, you must be starved."

"Ravenous. You know I had only your fruit to-day."

"You shall have a downright jolly meal, and afterwards we'll have fireworks; and then by-and-by you will share my bed. Amy and Becky will be in the same room. They think there's a ghost at the other side of the passage, so they came along to my chamber. But you won't mind."

"I won't mind anything after my lonely day. You are quite sure that I'll get back in time in the morning, Nancy?"

"Trust me for that. Haven't you got the key of your room?"

"Yes; it's in my pocket. I left the window on the latch, and I can climb up the beech tree quite well. Oh! that reminds me, Nancy; you must let me have that thimble before I return to The Dales."

"To be sure I will, dear. But you needn't think of returning yet, for you have not even arrived. Your fun is only beginning. Oh! you have done a splendid, spirited thing running off in this fashion. I only hope she'll go to your room and tap and tap, and knock and knock, and shout and shout, and get, oh, so frightened! and have the door burst open; and then she'll see for herself that the bird has flown. Won't she be in a tantrum and a fright! Horrid old thing! She'll think that you have run off forever. Serve her right. Oh! I almost wish she would do it—that I do."

"But I don't," said Pauline. "If she did such a thing it would almost kill me. It's all very well for you to talk in that fashion; you haven't got to live with her; but I have, and I couldn't stand her anger and her contempt. I'd be put into Punishment Land for a year. And as one day has very nearly killed me, what would a year of it do? If there is any fear of what you wish for, I'd best go back at once."

"What! and lose the trout, and the game pie, and the steak and onions, and the fried potatoes, and the apple turnovers, and the plum puffs, to say nothing of the most delicious lollypops you have ever tasted in your life? And afterwards fireworks; for Jack and Tom have bought a lot of Catherine-wheels and rockets to let off in your honor. And then a cosy, warm hug in my bed, with Amy and Becky telling ghost stories in the bed opposite. You don't mean to tell me you'd rather have your lonely room and starvation than a program of that sort?"

"No, no. Of course I'll go on with you. I've done it now, so I'll stick to it. Oh, I'm madly hungry! I hope you'll have supper the moment we get in."

"Supper will be delayed as short a time as possible. It rather depends upon the boys and when they bring the trout home. But here is a queen cake. I stuffed it into my pocket for you. Eat it as we go along."

So Pauline ate it and felt better. Her courage returned. She no longer thought of going back. Had she done so, she knew well that she would not sleep. People never slept well if they were hungry.

"No," she said to herself; "I will go on with it now. I'll just trust to my good luck, and I'll enjoy the time with Nancy. For, after all, she's twice as kind as Aunt Sophia. Why should I make myself miserable on account of a woman who is not my mother?"

The Hollies was a very snug, old-fashioned sort of farm. It had been in the King family for generations, and Mr. Josiah King was a very fine specimen of the British farmer. He was a big man with a red face, bushy whiskers, grizzled hair, and a loud laugh. The expression of his broad, square face was somewhat fierce, and the servants at the farm were afraid to anger him. He was a just enough master, however, and was always served well by his people. To only one person was he completely mild and gentle, and that person, it is needless to say, was his daughter Nancy. Nancy was his only child. Her mother was dead, and from her earliest days she had been able to twist her father round her little finger. He sent her to a smart boarding school, and no money was spared in order to give her pleasure. It was the dream of Farmer King, and Nancy's dearest ambition also, that she should be turned into a lady. But, alas and alack! Miss Nancy could not overcome the stout yeoman blood in her veins. She was no aristocrat, and nothing could make her one. She was just a hearty, healthy happy-minded English girl; vulgar in voice and loud in speech, but fairly well-intentioned at heart. She was the sort of farmer's daughter who would marry a farmer, and look after the dairy, and rear stalwart sons and hearty girls in her turn. Nature never intended her for a fine lady; but silly Nancy had learnt a great deal more at school than how to talk a little French very badly and how to recite a poem with false action and sentiment. She had learnt to esteem the world for the world's own sake, and had become a little ashamed of the farmer and the farmer's ways; and, finally, when she returned from school she insisted on the best parlor being turned into a sort of drawing-room, on her friends being regaled with late dinners, and on herself being provided with servants, so that she need not touch household work. She was playing, therefore, the game of being a lady, and was failing as she played it. She knew that she was failing, and this knowledge made her feel very cross. She tried hard to stifle it, and clung more than ever to her acquaintanceship with the Dale girls.

In her heart of hearts Nancy knew that she would very much like to milk the cows, and

superintend the dairy, and churn the butter. In her heart of hearts she would have adored getting up early in the morning and searching for the warm, pink eggs, and riding barebacked over the farm with her father, consulting him on the tilling of the land and the best way to make the old place profitable; for one day it would be her own, and she would be, for her class in life, a rich girl. Just at present, however, she was passing through a phase, and not a very pleasant one. She thought herself quite good enough to go into any society; and fine dress, loud-voiced friends, and the hollow, empty nothings which she and her acquaintances called conversation seemed the best things possible that could come into life. She was, therefore, not at all in the mood to give up her friendship with the Dale girls.

Now, there never was a girl less likely to please Miss Tredgold than this vulgarly dressed, loud-voiced, and unlady-like girl. Nancy was desired to abstain from visiting at The Dales, and the Dale girls were told that they were not to talk to Nancy. Nancy's rapture, therefore, when she was able to bring Pauline to The Hollies could scarcely be suppressed.

Amy and Becky Perkins were standing in the old porch when the two girls appeared. Nancy called out to her friends, and they ran to meet her.

"This is Paulie," said Nancy; "in other words, Pauline Dale—Pauline Dale, the aristocrat. We ought to be proud to know her, girls. Pauline, let me introduce my special friend, Becky Perkins. She's in pork, but that don't matter. And my other special friend, Amy Perkins; also in pork, but at your service. Girls, you didn't happen to notice if supper was being put on the table, did you?"

"I should think we did," said Becky. "I smelt fish. The boys brought in a lot of trout. I'm as hungry as hungry can be."

"Let's run upstairs first," said Nancy, turning to Pauline. "You'd like to take off your hat and wash your hands, wouldn't you, my fine friend of aristocratic circles?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Nancy," said Pauline, flushing angrily, while the two Perkins girls looked at her with admiration.

"Well, then, I won't," said Nancy; "but I'm always one for my joke. I meant no harm. And you know you are aristocratic, Paulie, and nothing will ever take it out of you. And I'm terribly afraid that nothing will take the other thing out of me. I only talk to you like this because I'm so jealous. So now come along and let's be friends."

The two girls scampered up the old oak stairs. They ran down an uneven passage, and reached a door of black oak, which was opened with an old-fashioned latch. At the other side of the door they found themselves in a long and very low room, with a black oak floor and black oak walls. The floor of the room was extremely uneven, being up in one part and down in another, and the whole appearance of the room, although fascinating, was decidedly patchy. In an alcove at one end stood a four-post bedstead, with a gaudily colored quilt flung over it; and in the alcove at the other end was another four-post bedstead, also boasting of a colored quilt. There were two washstands in the room, and one dressing-table. The whole place was scrupulously neat and exquisitely clean, for the white dimity curtains rivalled the snow in winter, and the deal washstands and the deal dressing-table were as white as the scrubbing of honest hands could make them. The whole room smelt of a curious mixture of turpentine, soap, and fresh flowers.

"I had the lavender sheets put on the bed for you and me," said Nancy. "They are of the finest linen. My mother spun them herself, and she put them in lavender years and years ago. I am heartily glad to welcome you, little Paulie. This is the very first time you have ever slept under our humble roof. So kiss me, dear."

"How snug and sweet it all is!" said Pauline. "I am glad that I came."

"This is better than lying down hungry in your own little room," said Nancy.

"Oh, much better!"

Pauline skipped about. Her high spirits had returned; she was charmed with the room in which she was to repose. Through the lattice window the sweetest summer air was entering, and roses peeped all round the frame, and their sweet scent added to the charm of the old-fashioned chamber.

"I hope you won't mind having supper in the kitchen," said Nancy. "I know it's what a Dale is not expected to submit to; but, nevertheless, in Rome we do as the Romans do—don't we?"

"Oh, yes; but I wish you wouldn't talk like that, Nancy. As if I cared. Whether I am a lady or not, I am never too fine for my company; and it was when Aunt Sophia wanted us to give you up that I really got mad with her."

"You are a darling and a duck, and I love you like anything," said Nancy. "Now come downstairs. We are all hungry, and the boys are mad to be at the fireworks."

"I have never seen fireworks in my life," said Pauline.

"You poor little innocent! What a lot the world has to show you! Now then, come along."

Pauline, deprived of her hideous hat, looked pretty and refined in her white dress. She made a contrast to the showy Nancy and the Perkins girls. The boys, Jack and Tom Watson, looked at her with admiration, and Jack put a seat for Pauline between himself and his brother.

The farmer nodded to her, and said in his bluff voice:

"Glad to welcome you under my humble roof, Miss Pauline Dale. 'Eartily welcome you be. Now then, young folks, fall to."

The meal proceeded to the accompaniment of loud jokes, gay laughter, and hearty talking. The farmer's voice topped the others. Each remark called forth fresh shouts of laughter; and when a number of dogs rushed in in the middle of supper, the din almost rose to an uproar.

Pauline enjoyed it all very much. She laughed with the others; her cheeks grew rosy. Nancy piled her plate with every available dainty. Soon her hunger left her, and she believed that she was intensely happy.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BURNT ARM.

After supper the excitement waxed fast and furious. The boys, aided by the farmer and one of his men, proceeded to send off the fireworks. This was done on a little plateau of smoothly cut lawn just in front of the best sitting-room windows. The girls pressed their faces against the glass, and for a time were satisfied with this way of looking at the fun. But soon Nancy could bear it no longer.

"It is stupid to be mewed up in the close air," she said. "Let's go out."

No sooner had she given utterance to the words than all four girls were helping the boys to let off the squibs, Catherine-wheels, rockets, and other fireworks. Pauline now became nearly mad with delight. Her shouts were the loudest of any. When the rockets went high into the air and burst into a thousand stars, she did not believe that the world itself could contain a more lovely sight. But presently her happiness came to a rude conclusion, for a bit of burning squib struck her arm, causing her fine muslin dress to catch fire, and the little girl's arm was somewhat severely hurt. She put out the fire at once, and determined to hide the fact that she was rather badly burnt.

By-and-by they all returned to the house. Nancy sat down to the piano and began to sing some of her most rollicking songs. Then she played dance music, and the boys and girls danced with all their might. Pauline, however, had never learned to dance. She stood silent, watching the others. Her high spirits had gone down to zero. She now began to wish that she had never come. She wondered if she could possibly get home again without being discovered. At last Nancy noticed her grave looks.

"You are tired, Paulie," she said; "and for that matter, so are we. I say, it's full time for bed. Good-night, boys. Put out the lamps when you are tired of amusing yourselves. Dad has shut up the house already. Come, Paulie; come, Amy; come, Becky."

The four girls ran upstairs, but as they were going down the passage which led to their pretty bedroom, Pauline's pain was so great that she stumbled against Becky and nearly fell.

"What is it?" said Becky. "Are you faint?"

She put her arm around the little girl and helped her into the bedroom.

"Whatever can be wrong?" she said. "You seemed so lively out in the open air."

"Oh, you do look bad, Paulie!" said Nancy. "It is that terrible fasting you went through to-day. My dear girls, what do you think? This poor little aristocrat, far and away too good to talk to the likes of us"—here Nancy put her arms akimbo and looked down with a mocking laugh at the prostrate Pauline—"far too grand, girls—fact, I assure you—was kept without her food until I gave her a bit of bread and a sup of water at supper. All these things are owing to an aunt—one of the tip-top of the nobility. This aunt, though grand externally, has a mighty poor internal arrangement, to my way of thinking. She put the poor child into a place she calls Punishment Land, and kept her without food."

"That isn't true," said Pauline. "I could have had plenty to eat if I had liked."

"That means that if you were destitute of one little spark of spirit you'd have crawled back to the house to take your broken food on a cold plate like a dog. But what is the matter now? Hungry again?"

"No; it is my arm. Please don't touch it."

"Do look!" cried Amy Perkins. "Oh, Nancy, she has got an awful burn! There's quite a hole through the sleeve of her dress. Oh, do see this great blister!"

"It was a bit of one of the squibs," said Pauline. "It lit right on my arm and burned my muslin sleeve; but I don't suppose it's much hurt, only I feel a little faint."

"Dear, dear!" said Nancy. "What is to be done now? I don't know a thing about burns, or about any sort of illness. Shall we wake cook up? Perhaps she can tell us something."

"Let's put on a bandage," said one of the other girls. "Then when you lie down in bed, Pauline, you will drop asleep and be all right in the morning."

Pauline was so utterly weary that she was glad to creep into bed. Her arm was bandaged very

unskillfully; nevertheless it felt slightly more comfortable. Presently she dropped into an uneasy doze; but from that doze she awoke soon after midnight, to hear Nancy snoring loudly by her side, to hear corresponding snores in a sort of chorus coming from the other end of the long room, and to observe also that there was not a chink of light anywhere; and, finally, to be all too terribly conscious of a great burning pain in her arm. That pain seemed to awaken poor Pauline's slumbering conscience.

"Why did I come?" she said to herself. "I am a wretched, most miserable girl. And how am I ever to get back? I cannot climb into the beech-tree with this bad arm. Oh, how it does hurt me! I feel so sick and faint I scarcely care what happens."

Pauline stretched out her uninjured arm and touched Nancy.

"What is it?" said Nancy. "Oh, dear! I'd forgotten. It's you, Paulie. How is your arm, my little dear? Any better?"

"It hurts me very badly indeed; but never mind about that now. How am I to get home?"

"I'll manage that. Betty, our dairymaid, is to throw gravel up at the window at four o'clock. You shall have a cup of tea before you start, and I will walk with you as far as the wicket-gate."

"Oh, thank you! But how am I to get into my room when I do arrive at The Dales? I don't believe I shall be able to use this arm at all."

"Of course you will," said Nancy. "You will be miles better when cook has looked to it. I know she's grand about burns, and has a famous ointment she uses for the purpose. Only, for goodness' sake, Paulie, don't let that burn in the sleeve of your dress be seen; that would lead to consequences, and I don't want my midnight picnic to be spoilt."

"I don't seem to care about that or anything else any more."

"What nonsense! You don't suppose I should like this little escapade of yours and mine to be known. You must take care. Why, you know, there's father. He's very crotchety over some things. He likes all of you, but over and over again he has said:

"I'm as proud of being an honest farmer as I should be to be a lord. My grandfather paid his way, and my father paid his way, and I am paying my way. There's no nonsense about me, and I shall leave you, Nancy, a tidy fortune. You like those young ladies at The Dales, and you shall have them come here if they wish to come, but not otherwise. I won't have them here thinking themselves too grand to talk to us. Let them keep to their own station, say I. I don't want them."

"Now you see, Paulie, what that means. If father found out that your aunt had written to me and desired me to have nothing further to do with you, I believe he'd pack me out of the country to-morrow. I don't want to leave my home; why should I? So, you see, for my sake you must keep it the closest of close secrets."

"You should have thought of that before you tempted me to come," said Pauline.

"That is just like you. You come here and enjoy yourself, and have a great hearty meal, and when you are likely to get into a scrape you throw the blame on me."

"You can understand that I am very miserable, Nancy."

"Yes; and I'm as sorry as I can be about that burn; but if you'll be brave and plucky now, I'll help you all I can. We'll get up as soon as ever the day dawns, and cook shall put your arm straight."

As Nancy uttered the last words her voice dwindled to a whisper, and a minute later she was again sound asleep. But Pauline could not sleep. Her pain was too great. The summer light stole in by degrees, and by-and-by the sharp noise made by a shower of gravel was heard on the window.

Pauline sprang into a sitting posture, and Nancy rubbed her eyes.

"I'm dead with sleep," she said. "I could almost wish I hadn't brought you. Not but that I'm fond of you, as I think I've proved. We haven't yet made all our arrangements about the midnight picnic, but I have the most daring scheme in my head. You are every single one of you—bar Penelope, whom I can't bear—to come to that picnic. I'll make my final plans to-day, and I'll walk in the Forest to-morrow at six o'clock, just outside your wicket-gate. You will meet me, won't you?"

"But— Oh! by the way, Nancy, please give me back that beautiful thimble. I'm so glad I remembered it! It belongs to Aunt Sophia."

"I can't," said Nancy, coloring, "I lent it to Becky, and I don't know where she has put it. I'll bring it with me to-morrow, so don't fuss. Now jump up, Paulie; we have no time to lose."

Accordingly Pauline got up, dressed herself—very awkwardly, it is true—and went downstairs, leaning on Nancy's sympathetic arm. Nancy consulted the cook, who was good-natured and red-faced.

"You have got a bad burn, miss," she said when she had examined Pauline's arm; "but I have got a famous plaster that heals up burns like anything. I'll make your arm quite comfortable in a twinkling, miss."

This she proceeded to do, and before the treatment had been applied for half an hour a good deal of Pauline's acute pain had vanished.

"I feel better," she said, turning to Nancy. "I feel stronger and braver."

"You will feel still braver when you have had your cup of tea. And here's a nice hunch of cake. Put it into your pocket if you can't eat it now. We had best be going; the farm people may be about, and there's no saying—it's wonderful how secrets get into the air."

Pauline looked startled. She again took Nancy's hand, and they left the house together.

Now, it so happened that the the morning was by no means as fine as those lovely mornings that had preceded it. There was quite a cold wind blowing, and the sky was laden with clouds.

"We'll have rain to-day," said Nancy; "rain, and perhaps thunder. I feel thunder in the air, and I never was mistaken yet. We must be quick, or we'll both be drenched to the skin."

Accordingly the two walked quickly through the Forest path. But before they reached the wicket-gate the first mutterings of thunder were audible, and heavy drops of rain were falling.

"I must leave you now, Paulie," said Nancy, "for if I go any farther I'll be drenched to the skin. Climb up your tree, get into your bedroom, and go to bed. If you can manage to send that white dress over to me, I will put on a patch that even your aunt will not see. Put on another dress, of course, this morning, and say nothing about the burn. Good-bye, and good luck! I'll be over about six o'clock to-morrow evening to talk over our midnight picnic."

"And the thimble," said Pauline. "You won't forget the thimble."

"Not I. Good gracious, what a flash! You had best get home at once; and I must run for my life or I may be struck down under all these trees."

Pauline stood still for a minute, watching Nancy as she disappeared from view; then slowly and sadly she went up to the house.

She was too tired and depressed to mind very much that the rain was falling in showers, soaking her thin white muslin dress, and chilling her already tired and exhausted little frame. The rattle of the thunder, the bright flash of the lightning, and the heavy fall of the tempest could not reach the graver trouble which filled her heart. The way of transgressors had proved itself very hard for poor Pauline. She disliked the discomfort and misery she was enduring; but even now she was scarcely sorry that she had defied and disobeyed Aunt Sophia.

After a great deal of difficulty, and with some injury to her already injured arm, she managed to climb the beech-tree and so reach the gabled roof just under her attic window. She pushed the window wide open and got inside. How dear and sweet and fresh the little chamber appeared! How innocent and good was that little white bed, with its sheets still smoothly folded down! It took Pauline scarcely a minute to get into her night-dress, sweep her offending white dress into a neighboring cupboard, unlock the door, and put her head on her pillow. Oh, there was no place like home! It was better to be hungry at home, it was better to be in punishment at home, than to go away to however grand a place and however luxuriant a feast.

"And Nancy's home isn't grand," thought Pauline. "And the food was rough. Aunt Sophia would even call it coarse. But, oh, I was hungry! And if I hadn't been so naughty I'd have been very happy. All the same," she continued, thinking aloud, as was her fashion. "I won't go to that midnight picnic; and Renny must not go either. Of course, I can't tell Aunt Sophia what I did last night. I promised Nancy I wouldn't tell, and it wouldn't be fair; but see if I do anything wrong again! I'll work like a Briton at my lessons to-day. Oh, how badly my arm hurts! And what an awful noise the storm is making! The thunder rattles as though it would come through the roof. My arm does ache! Oh, what lightning! I think I'll put my head under the sheet."

Pauline did so, and notwithstanding the tempest, she had scarcely got down into the real warmth of her bed before sleep visited her.

When she awoke the storm was over, the sun was shining, and Verena was standing at the foot of her bed.

"Do get up, Paulie," she said. "How soundly you have slept! And your face is so flushed! And, oh, aren't you just starving? We only discovered last night that you hadn't touched any of your food."

"I'm all right," said Pauline.

"You will try to be good to-day, won't you, Paulie? You don't know how miserable I was without you, for you are my own special most darling chum. You will try, won't you?"

"Yes, I will try, of course," said Pauline. "Truly—truly, I will try."

CHAPTER XII.

CHANGED LIVES.

After the mental storm of the day before, Pauline would never forget the peace of the day that followed. For Miss Tredgold, having punished, and the hours of punishment being over, said nothing further to signify her displeasure. She received Pauline kindly when she appeared in the

schoolroom. She took her hand and drew the little girl toward her. It was with a great effort that the poor girl could suppress the shriek that nearly rose to her lips as the unconscious Miss Tredgold touched her burnt arm.

"We will forget about yesterday, Pauline," said her aunt. "We will go back to work this morning just as though there never had been any yesterday. Do you understand?"

"I think so," said Pauline.

"Do you happen to know your lessons?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Well, my dear, as this is practically your first transgression, I am the last person to be over-hard. You can listen to your sisters this morning. At preparation to-day you will doubtless do your best. Now go to your seat."

Pauline sat between Briar and Adelaide. Adelaide nestled up close to her, and Briar took the first opportunity to whisper:

"I am so glad you are back again, dear old Pauline! We had a horrid time without you yesterday."

"They none of them know what I did," thought Pauline; "and, of course, I meant to tell them. Not Aunt Sophia, but the girls. Yes, I meant to confide in the girls; but the atmosphere of peace is so nice that I do not care to disturb it. I will put off saying anything for the present. It certainly is delightful to feel good again."

Lessons went on tranquilly. The girls had a time of delightful rest afterwards in the garden, and immediately after early dinner there came a surprise. Miss Tredgold said:

"My dear girls, there are several things you ought to learn besides mere book knowledge. I propose that you should be young country ladies whom no one will be ashamed to know. You must learn to dance properly, and to skate properly if there ever is any skating here. If not, we will go abroad for the purpose. But while you are in the Forest I intend you to have riding lessons and also driving lessons. A wagonette will be here at two o'clock, and we will all go for a long and delightful drive through the Forest. I am going to some stables about six or seven miles away, where I hear I can purchase some good horses and also some Forest ponies. Don't look so excited, dears. I should be ashamed of any nieces of mine brought up in the New Forest of England who did not know how to manage horses."

"Oh, she really is a darling!" said Verena. "I never did for a single moment suppose that we should have had the chance of learning to drive."

"And to ride," said Pauline.

She began to skip about the lawn. Her spirits, naturally very high, returned.

"I feel quite happy again," she said.

"Why, of course you are happy," said Verena; "but you must never get into Punishment Land again as long as you live, Paulie, for I wouldn't go through another day like yesterday for anything."

The wagonette arrived all in good time. It drew up at the front door, and Mr. Dale, attracted by the sound of wheels, rose from his accustomed seat in his musty, fusty study, and looked out of the window. The window was so dusty and dirty that he could not see anything plainly; but, true to his determination, he would not open it. A breeze might come in and disturb some of his papers. He was busy with an enthralling portion of his work just then; nevertheless, the smart wagonette and nicely harnessed horses, and the gay sound of young voices, attracted him.

"I could almost believe myself back in the days when I courted my dearly beloved Alice," he whispered to himself. "I do sincerely trust that visitors are not beginning to arrive at The Dales; that would be the final straw."

The carriage, however, did not stop long at the front door. It was presently seen bowling away down the avenue. Mr. Dale, who still stood and watched it, observed that it was quite packed with bright-looking young girls. Blue ribbons streamed on the breeze, and the girls laughed gaily.

"I am glad those visitors are going," thought the good man, who did not in the least recognize his own family. "A noisy, vulgar crowd they seemed. I hope my own girls will never become like that. Thank goodness they did not stay long! Sophia is a person of discernment; she knows that I can't possibly receive incidental visitors at The Dales."

He returned to his work and soon was lost to all external things.

Meanwhile the girls had a lovely and exciting drive. Aunt Sophia was in her most agreeable mood. The children themselves were quite unaccustomed to carriage exercise. It was a wonderful luxury to lean back on the softly cushioned seats and dash swiftly under the noble beech-trees and the giant oaks of the primeval forest. By-and-by they drove up to some white gates. Verena was desired to get out and open them. The carriage passed through. She remounted into her seat, and a few minutes later they all found themselves in a great cobblestoned yard surrounded by stables and coach-houses. The melodious cry of a pack of fox-hounds filled the air. The girls were almost beside themselves with excitement. Presently a red-faced man appeared, and he and Miss Tredgold had a long and mysterious talk together. She got out of the wagonette and went with the man into the stables. Soon out of the stables there issued,

led by two grooms, as perfect a pair of Forest ponies as were ever seen. They were well groomed and in excellent order, and when they arched their necks and pawed the ground with their feet, Pauline uttered an irrepressible shout.

"Those ponies are coming to The Dale in a fortnight," said Miss Tredgold. "Their names are Peas-blossom and Lavender."

"I believe I'll die if much more of this goes on," gasped Briar. "I'm too happy. I can't stand anything further."

"Hush, Briar!" said Verena, almost giving her sister a shake in her excitement, and yet at the same time trying to appear calm.

"Now, my dear children, we will go home," said their aunt. "The wagonette will come any day that I send for it, and Mr. Judson informs me he hopes by-and-by to have a pair of carriage horses that I may think it worth while to purchase."

"Aren't these good enough?" asked Verena, as they drove back to The Dales.

"They are very fair horses, but I don't care to buy them. Judson knows just the sort I want. I am pleased with the ponies, however. They will give you all a great deal of amusement. To-morrow we must go to Southampton and order your habits."

"I wonder I *ever* thought her cross and nasty and disagreeable," thought Pauline. "I wonder I ever could hate her. I hope she'll let me ride Peas-blossom. I liked his bright eyes so much. I never rode anything in my life, but I feel I could ride barebacked on Peas-blossom. I love him already. Oh, dear! I don't hate Aunt Sophia now. On the contrary, I feel rather bad when I look at her. If she ever knows what I did yesterday, will she forgive me? I suppose I ought to tell her; but I can't. It would get poor Nancy into trouble. Besides—I may as well be frank with myself—I should not have the courage."

As soon as the girls got home Penelope ran up to Pauline.

"You stayed for a long time in the shrubbery yesterday, didn't you, Pauline?" she asked.

"Yes," said Pauline.

"You didn't by any chance find Aunt Sophy's thimble?"

"I! Why should I?"

Pauline felt herself turning red. Penelope fixed her exceedingly sharp eyes on her sister's face.

"You did find it; you know you did. Where is it? Give it to me. I want my penny. Think of all the fun you are going to have. She doesn't mean me to ride, 'cos I asked her. I must have my penny. Give me the thimble at once, Paulie."

"I haven't got it. Don't talk nonsense, child. Let me go. Oh! you have hurt me."

Pauline could not suppress a short scream, and the next minute she felt herself turning very faint and sick, for Penelope had laid her exceedingly hard little hand on Pauline's burnt arm.

"What is it, Paulie? I know you are not well," said Verena, running up.

"It is 'cos of her bad conscience," said Penelope, turning away with a snort of indignation.

"Really," said Verena, as Pauline leaned against her and tried hard to repress the shivers of pain that ran through her frame, "Penelope gets worse and worse. Only that I hate telling tales out of school, I should ask Aunt Sophia to send her back to the nursery for at least another year. But what is it, Paulie dear? You look quite ill."

"I feel rather bad. I have hurt my arm. You must not ask me how, Renny. You must trust me. Oh dear! I must tell you what has happened, for you will have to help me. Oh, Renny, I am in such pain!"

Poor Pauline burst into a torrent of tears. Where was her happiness of an hour ago? Where were her rapturous thoughts of riding Peas-blossom through the Forest? Her arm hurt her terribly; she knew that Penelope was quite capable of making mischief, she was terrified about the thimble. Altogether her brief interval of sunshine was completely blotted out.

Verena, for her years, was a wonderfully wise girl. She had since her mother's death been more or less a little mother to the younger children. It is true, she had looked after them in a somewhat rough-and-ready style; but nevertheless she was a sympathetic and affectionate girl, and they all clung to her. Now it seemed only natural that Pauline should lean on her and confide her troubles to her. Accordingly Verena led her sister to a rustic seat and said:

"Sit down near me and tell me everything."

"It is this," said Pauline. "I have burned my arm badly, and Aunt Sophia must not know."

"You have burnt your arm? How?"

"I would rather not tell."

"But why should you conceal it, Paulie?"

"I'd rather conceal it; please don't ask me. All I want you to do is to ask me no questions, but to help me to get my arm well; the pain is almost past bearing. But, Renny, whatever happens, Aunt Sophia must not know."

"You are fearfully mysterious," said Verena, who looked much alarmed. "You used not to be like

this, Paulie. You were always very open, and you and I shared every thought Well, come into the house. Of course, whatever happens, I will help you; but I think you ought to tell me the whole truth."

"I can't, so there! If you are to be a real, real sister to me, you will help me without asking questions."

The girls entered the house and ran up to Pauline's bedroom. There the injured arm was exposed to view, and Verena was shocked to see the extent of the burn.

"You ought to see a doctor. This is very wrong," she said.

She made Pauline lie down, and dressed her arm as well as she could. Verena was quite a skilful little nurse in her own way, and as Pauline had some of the wonderful ointment which the Kings' cook had given her, and as Verena knew very nicely how to spread it on a piece of rag, the arm soon became more comfortable.

Just before dinner Miss Tredgold called all the girls round her.

"I have something to say," she remarked. "I want you all to go upstairs now; don't wait until five minutes before dinner. You will each find lying on your bed, ready for wearing, a suitable dinner-blouse. Put it on and come downstairs. You will wear dinner-dress every night in future, in order to accustom you to the manners of good society. Now go upstairs, tidy yourselves, and come down looking as nice as you can."

The girls were all very much excited at the thought of the dinner-blouses. They found them, as Aunt Sophia had said, each ready to put on, on their little beds. Verena's was palest blue, trimmed daintily with a lot of fluffy lace. The sleeves were elbow-sleeves, and had ruffles round them. The blouse in itself was quite a girlish one, and suited its fair wearer to perfection. Pauline's blouse was cream-color; it also had elbow-sleeves, and was very slightly open at the neck.

"Do be quick, Paulie," called out Briar. "I have got a sweet, darling, angel of a pink blouse. Get into yours, and I'll get into mine. Oh, what tremendous fun this is!"

Briar ran whooping and singing down the corridor. She was met by nurse with baby in her arms.

"Now, Miss Rose, what's up?" said the good woman. "You do look happy, to be sure. You don't seem to miss the old days much."

"Of course I don't, nurse. I'm twice as happy as I used to be."

"Twice as happy with all them lessons to learn?"

"Yes; twice as happy, and twice as good. She doesn't scold us when we're good. In fact, she's just uncommonly nice. And to-night she says she'll play and sing to us; and it's so delicious to listen to her! Dad comes out of his study just as if she drew him by magic. And I like to learn things. I won't be a horrid pig of an ignorant girl any more. You will have to respect me in the future, nurse. And there's a darling little blouse lying on my bed—pink, like the leaf of a rose. I am to wear it to-night. I expect Aunt Sophia chose it because I'm like a rose myself. I shall look nice, shan't I, nurse?"

"That's all very well," said nurse. "And for my part I don't object to civilized ways, and bringing you up like young ladies; but as to Miss Pen, she's just past bearing. New ways don't suit her—no, that they don't. She ain't come in yet—not a bit of her. Oh! there she is, marching down the corridor as if all the world belonged to her. What have you done to yourself, Miss Pen? A nice mess you are in!"

"I thought I'd collect some fresh eggs for your tea, nurse," said the incorrigible child; "and I had three or four in my pinafore when I dropped them. I am a bit messy, I know; but you don't mind, do you, nurse?"

"Indeed, then, I do. Just go straight to the nursery and get washed."

Penelope glanced at Briar with a wry face, and ran away singing out in a shrill voice:

"Cross patch, draw the latch,
Sit by the fire and spin."

She disappeared like a flash, and nurse followed her, murmuring angrily.

Briar ran into her bedroom. This room she shared with Patty and Adelaide. They also were wildly delighted with their beautiful blouses, and had not begun to dress when Briar appeared.

"I say, isn't it all jolly?" said Briar. "Oh, Patty, what a duck yours is!—white. And Adelaide's is white, too. But don't you love mine? I must be a very pretty girl to cause Aunt Sophia to choose such a lovely shade of rose. I wonder if I am really a pretty girl. Do stand out of the way; I want to stare at myself in the glass."

Briar ran to the dressing-table. There she pushed the glass into such an angle that she could gaze contentedly at her features. She saw a small, rather round face, cheeks a little flushed, eyes very dark and bright, quantities of bright brown curling hair, dark pencilled eyebrows, a little nose, and a small pink mouth.

"You are a charming girl, Briar Dale," she said, "worthy of a rose-pink blouse. Patty, don't you just love yourself awfully?"

"I don't know," said Patty. "I suppose every one does."

"The Bible says it is very wrong to love yourself," said Adelaide. "You ought to love other people and hate yourself."

"Well, I am made the contrary," said Briar. "I hate other people and love myself. Who wouldn't love a darling little face like mine? Oh, I am just a duck! Help me into my new blouse, Patty."

The three girls, each with the help of the other, managed to array themselves even to Briar's satisfaction. She was the neatest and also the vainest of the Dales. When she reached the outside corridor she met Verena, looking sweet, gentle, and charming in her pale-blue blouse. They all ran down to the drawing-room, where Miss Tredgold was waiting to receive them. She wore the old black lace dress, which suited her faded charms to perfection. She was standing by the open French window, and turned as her nieces came in. The girls expected her to make some remark with regard to their appearance, but the only thing she said was to ask them to observe the exquisite sunset.

Presently Pauline appeared. She looked pale. There were black shadows under her eyes, and she was wearing a dirty white shirt decidedly the worse for wear. The other girls looked at her in astonishment. Verena gave her a quick glance of pain. Verena understood; the others were simply amazed. Miss Tredgold flashed one glance at her, and did not look again in her direction.

Dinner was announced in quite the orthodox fashion, and the young people went into the dining-room. Mr. Dale was present. He was wearing quite a decent evening suit. He had not the faintest idea that he was not still in the old suit that had lain by unused and neglected for so many long years. He had not the most remote conception that Miss Tredgold had taken that suit and sent it to a tailor in London and desired him to make by its measurements a new suit according to the existing vogue. Mr. Dale put on the new suit when it came, and imagined that it was the old one. But, scholar as he was, he was learning to appreciate the excellent meals Miss Tredgold provided for him. On this occasion he was so human as to find fault with a certain entrée.

"This curry is not hot enough," he said. "I like spicy things; don't you, Sophia?"

Miss Tredgold thought this an enormous sign of mental improvement. She had already spoken to cook on the subject of Mr. Dale's tastes.

"Why, drat him!" was Betty's somewhat indignant answer. "In the old days he didn't know sprats from salmon, nor butter from lard. Whatever have you done to him, ma'am?"

"I am bringing him back to humanity," was Miss Tredgold's quiet answer.

Betty raised her eyebrows. She looked at Miss Tredgold and said to herself:

"So quiet in her ways, so gentle, and for all so determined! Looks as though butter wouldn't melt in her mouth; yet you daren't so much as neglect the smallest little sauce for the poorest little *entrée* or you'd catch it hot. She's a real aristocrat. It's a pleasure to have dealings with her. Yes, it's a downright pleasure. When I'm not thinking of my favorite 'ero of fiction, the Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton, I feel that I'm doing the next best thing when I'm receiving the orders of her ladyship."

Another of cook's ideas was that Miss Tredgold was a person of title, who chose for the present to disguise the fact. She certainly had a marvellous power over the erratic Betty, and was turning her into a first-rate cook.

"Are you going to give us some of that exquisite music to-night, Sophia?" asked Mr. Dale when he had finished his dinner. He looked languidly at his sister-in-law.

"On one condition I will," she said. "The condition is this: you are to accompany my piano on the violin."

Mr. Dale's face became pale. He did not speak for a minute; then he rose and went nimbly on tiptoe out of the room.

There was silence for a short time. The girls and their aunt had migrated into the drawing-room. The drawing-room looked sweetly pretty with its open windows, its softly shaded lamps, its piano wide open, and the graceful figures of the girls flitting about. Even Pauline's ugly blouse was forgotten. There was a sense of mystery in the air. Presently in the distance came the sound of a fiddle. It was the sound of a fiddle being tuned. The notes were discordant; but soon rich, sweeping melodies were heard. They came nearer and nearer, and Mr. Dale, still playing his fiddle, entered the room. He entered with a sort of dancing measure, playing an old minuet as he did so.

Miss Tredgold stepped straight to the piano and without any music, played an accompaniment.

"I have won," she thought. "I shall send him away for change of air; then the study must be cleaned. I shall be able to breathe then."

CHAPTER XIII.

NANCY SHOWS HER HAND.

It was not until after breakfast on the following morning that Miss Tredgold said anything to Pauline about the ugly shirt she had chosen to wear on the previous evening.

"My dear," she said then, very gently, "I did not remark on your dress last night; but for the future remember that when I say a thing is to be done, it is to be done. I had a pretty, suitable blouse put into your room for you to appear in last night. Why did you wear that ugly torn shirt?"

"I couldn't help myself," said Pauline.

"That is no reason."

Pauline was silent. She looked on the ground. Miss Tredgold also was silent for a minute; then she said decisively:

"You will wear the new blouse to-night. Remember, I expect to be obeyed. I will say nothing more now about your forgetting my orders last evening. Do better in the future and all will be well."

It was with great difficulty that Pauline could keep the tears from her eyes. What was to become of her. She did not dare expose her burnt arm; she could not possibly wear a blouse with sleeves that reached only to the elbow without showing the great burn she had received. If Miss Tredgold found out, might she not also find out more? What was she to do?

"What am I to do, Verena?" she said on the afternoon of that same day.

"What do you mean, Paulie? Your arm is better, is it not?"

"Yes; it doesn't hurt quite so much. But how can I wear the new blouse to-night?"

"Would it not be wiser," said Verena, "if you were to tell Aunt Sophy that you have burnt your arm? It is silly to make a mystery of it."

"But she will make me tell her how I did it."

"Well?"

"I daren't tell her that. I daren't even tell you."

"What am I to think, Paulie?"

"Anything you like. You are my own sister, and you must not betray me. But she must never know. Can't you think of something to get me out of this? Oh, dear! what is to be done?"

Verena shook her head.

"I don't know what is to be done," she said, "if you haven't the courage to speak the truth. You have probably got into some scrape."

"Oh! I——"

"I am sure you have, Paulie; and the sooner you tell the better. The longer you conceal whatever it is, the worse matters will grow."

Pauline's face grew crimson.

"I am exceedingly sorry I told you," she said. "You are not half, nor quarter, as nice a sister as you used to be. Don't keep me. I am going into the shrubbery to help Penelope to look for Aunt Sophy's thimble."

Verena said nothing further, and Pauline went into the shrubbery.

"I seem to be getting worse," she said to herself. "Of course, I don't really want to help Penelope. How should I, when I know where the thimble is? There she is, hunting, hunting, as usual. What a queer, unpleasant child she is growing!"

Penelope saw Pauline, and ran up to her.

"You might tell me everything to-day," said the child. "Where did you put it?"

"I have come to help you to look for it, Pen."

"Don't be silly," was Penelope's answer.

She instantly stood bolt upright.

"There's no use in my fussing any longer," she said. "I've gone round and round here, and picked up leaves, and looked under all the weeds. There isn't a corner I've left unpoked into. Where's the good of troubling when you have it? You know you have it."

"I know nothing of the kind. There! I will tell you the simple truth. I have not got the thimble. You may believe me as much as you like."

"Then I'll believe just as much as nothing at all. If you haven't got the thimble, you know where it is. I'll give you until this time to-morrow to let me have it, and if you don't I'll go straight to Aunt Sophy."

"Now, Pen, you are talking nonsense. You have no proof whatever that I have touched the thimble; and what will Aunt Sophia say to a little child who trumps up stories about her elder sister?"

"Perhaps she'll be very glad," said Penelope. "I have often thought that with such a lot of you

grown-up girls, and all of you so very rampagious and not a bit inclined to obey or do your lessons nicely, poor Aunt Sophy, what is really a dear old duck of a thing, wants some one like me to spy round corners and find out what goes on ahind her back. Don't you think so? Don't you think her'll love me if I tell her always what goes on ahind of her back?"

"If she's a bit decent she'll hate you," said Pauline. "Oh, Pen, how were you made? What a queer, queer sort of child you are! You haven't ideas like the rest of us."

"Maybe 'cos I'm nicer," said Penelope, not at all impressed by Pauline's contempt. "Maybe I shouldn't like to be made same as all you others are. There is something wrong about Aunt Sophy's thimble, and if I don't get it soon I'll be 'bliged to tell her."

Penelope's eyes looked like needles. She walked away. Pauline gazed after her; then she went into the house.

"That thimble is really a very trifling matter," she said to herself, "but even that at the present moment annoys me. Nancy has promised to bring it back to me this evening, and I will just put it somewhere where Pen is sure to find it. Then she'll be in raptures; she'll have her penny, and that matter will be set at rest. Oh, dear! it is almost time to go and meet Nancy. She must not keep me long, for now that that horrid dressing for dinner has begun, it takes quite half an hour to get properly tidy. But what am I to do? How can I wear that blouse?"

Pauline waited her chance, and slipped out at the wicket-gate without even Penelope's sharp eyes watching her. She found Nancy pacing up and down at the other side. Nancy was decidedly cross.

"Why did you keep me waiting?" she said. "It is five minutes past six, and I have barely another five minutes to stay with you, and there's a lot to talk over."

"I'm in great luck to be able to come at all, Nancy. I didn't think I could ever slip away from the others. As to the midnight picnic, we must give it up. It is quite impossible for me to come. And I know the others won't; they're all getting so fond of Aunt Sophy. What do you think? She has given us ponies, and we're to have carriage-horses presently; and we are obliged to dress for dinner every evening."

"Oh, you are turning aristocratic, and I hate you," said Nancy, with a toss of the head.

She looked intensely jealous and annoyed. She herself was to ride soon, and her habit was already being made. She had hoped against hope that Miss Tredgold would be impressed by seeing her gallop past in an elegant habit on a smart horse.

"Oh, Nancy!" said Pauline, "don't let us talk about ponies and things of that sort now; I am in great, great trouble."

"I must say I'm rather glad," said Nancy. "You know, Paulie, you are in some ways perfectly horrid. I did a great deal for you the other night, and this is all the thanks I get. You won't come to the midnight picnic, forsooth! And you won't have anything more to do with me, forsooth! You'll ride past me, I suppose, and cut me dead."

"I shall never do anything unkind, for I really do love you, Nancy. I have always loved you, but I can't get into fresh scrapes. They're not worth while."

"You didn't talk like that when you were mad and starving the other day."

"No, I didn't; but I do now. I have been miserable ever since I came back; and, oh, my arm has pained me so badly! You can imagine what I felt last evening when we were desired to wear pretty new blouses with elbow-sleeves; such sweet little dears as they all were. Mine was cream-color—just what suits me best—but of course I couldn't appear in it."

"Why not?"

"With my burnt arm! How could I, Nancy?"

Nancy burst out into a roar of laughter.

"What a lark!" she cried. "Well, and what did the poor little Miss Misery do?"

"I had to put on an old dirty shirt, the only one I could find. Aunt Sophia gave me no end of a lecture this morning. She says I am to wear my new blouse to-night or she'll know the reason why. Of course, I can't wear it."

"Then you can't have any dinner?"

"I am absolutely beside myself to know what to do," said Pauline. "Sometimes I think I'll go to bed and pretend I have got a headache. Oh, dear, what a bad girl I am turning into!"

Nancy laughed again.

"It is sometimes very tiresome to develop a conscience," she said. "You were a much nicer girl before that grand aunt of yours arrived to turn things topsy-turvy. As to the midnight picnic, you must come. I have made a bet on the subject. Jack and Tom say you won't come—that you will be afraid. 'Pauline Dale afraid! That's all you know about her,' says I. I have assured them that you will come whatever happens, and they have said you won't. So the end of it is that Tom, Jack, and I have made a bet about it. It is ten shillings' worth either way. If you come, I get three beautiful pairs of gloves. If you don't come, I give the boys ten shillings. Now you see how important it is. Why, Paulie, of course you will come! We are going to have a right-down jolly time, for father is so tickled with the notion that he is coming, too; and he says he will give us a real good lark. And we are going to Friar's Oak, eight miles away; and we are to take hampers

full of dainties. And Fiddler Joe will come with us to play for us; and there's a beautiful green-sward just under the beech-trees by Friar's Oak, and there we'll dance by the full light of the moon. Oh, you must come! I told father you were coming, and he was awfully pleased—as pleased as Punch—and he said:

"That's right, my girl; that's right, Nancy. If the Dales stick to me through thick and thin, I'll stick to them."

"You know, Pauline, you have always been at our fun before; so, aunt or no aunt, you can't fail us now."

"I'd like to go beyond anything," said Pauline, who felt intensely tempted by this description. "It is so horrible to be pulled up short. But I know I can't, so there's no use thinking about it."

"You needn't answer me now. I'll come back again. This is Friday night. I'll come back on Monday night. The picnic is arranged for Wednesday night. Listen, Paulie; you will have to change your mind, for if you don't—well!"

"If I don't?"

"I can make it very hot for you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll come and have a talk with your aunt. There!"

"Oh, Nancy. What about?"

"Such an interesting story, darling! All about our fun that night when you burnt your arm—all about our gaiety, and the fireworks, and your stealing away as you did, and your stealing back as you did. Oh! I shall have a jolly story to tell; and I will tell it, too. She'll turn me away, and tell me she'll never see me any more; but what of that? She's done that already. I will have my fun; you will have your punishment. That's fair enough, isn't it? You don't desert Nancy King for nothing, remember that, Pauline, so you had better say at once that you will come. Now, my love, I think that is about all."

Nancy's face was very red. She was feeling thoroughly angry. Pauline's manner annoyed her past description. She really imagined herself to be extremely kind and good-natured to Pauline, and could not endure the little girl taking her present high stand.

"I must be going now," she said.

She gave Pauline a nod which was scarcely friendly, but was, at the same time, very determined, and was about to run home, when Pauline called her.

"Don't go for a minute, Nancy. There's something else. Have you brought me back Aunt Sophia's thimble?"

"No, I have not. I have a story to tell you about that, and I was just forgetting it. I do hope and trust you won't really mind."

"Oh, what is it? You know I am quite likely to get into a scrape about that horrid thimble as well as everything else. What is the story? The thimble isn't yours. You surely haven't lost it!"

"Nothing of the kind. You look as though you thought I had stolen it. Mean as I am, I am not quite so bad as that. Now let me tell you. Becky, poor old girl! saw it. She's always mad about finery of any sort, and her people are rich as rich. I had the thimble in my pocket, and she was snuggling up close to me in her nice, engaging little fashion, and she felt the thimble hard against my side, much as I felt it when it was in your pocket. In she slipped her little bit of a white hand and drew it out. I never saw any one so delighted over a toy of the sort in all my life. It fitted her little finger just to a nicety.

"Why," she exclaimed, "I never, never saw a thimble like this before; did you, Nancy?"

"Guess not," I answered. "It's a cunning one, isn't it?"

"She kept turning it round and round, and looking at it, and pressing it up to her cheek, and trying to see her own reflection in that wonderful sapphire at the bottom of the thimble. Then what do you think happened? I own it was a little sharp of her, but of course you can't be so unfriendly as to mind. She took the precious little toy and put it into a dear, most precious little box, and covered it over with soft, soft cotton-wool, and placed a sweet little lid on the top. Dear me, Pauline! you needn't open your eyes any wider. And when she had secured the little box, she wrapped it in brown paper, and twined it, and sealed it, and addressed it to her sister Josephine in London."

"Then she stole it," said Pauline.

"Not a bit of it. What a narrow-minded girl you are! Just hear my story out. Becky sent the thimble to Josephine to their house in Bayswater, with directions that Josephine was to take it to their jeweller, Paxton, and ask him to make another in all particulars precise ditto the same. You understand? Precise ditto the same—sapphire, gold, turquoise, and all. And this beautiful thimble is to be worn on the dear little middle finger of Becky's dear little white hand. When it is faithfully copied you will have the original thimble back, my love, but not before. Now, then, ta-ta for the present."

Nancy ran off before Pauline had time to reply. She felt stunned. What did everything mean? How queer of Nancy to have suddenly turned into a perfectly awful girl—a sort of fiend—a girl who had another girl completely in her power; who could, and would if she liked, make that

other girl wretched; who could and would ruin that other girl's life. There was a time when the midnight picnic seemed the most delightful thing on earth; but it scarcely appeared delightful now to poor Pauline, whose head ached, whose arm ached, and whose whole body ached. What was she to do?

When she re-entered the shrubbery, her unhappy feelings were by no means lightened to see that Penelope was waiting for her. Penelope stood a little way off, her feet firmly planted a little apart, her straw hat pushed back from her sunburned face, her hands dropped straight to her sides.

"I didn't eavesdrop," she said. "I could have easy. There was a blackberry briar, and I could have stole under it and not minded the scratches, and I could have heard every single word; but I didn't, 'cos I'm not mean. But I saw you talking to Nancy, what kind Aunt Sophy says you're not to talk to. Perhaps, seeing you has done what is awful wrong, you'll give me a penny instead of Aunt Sophy; then I needn't tell her that you were talking to Nancy when you oughtn't, and that I think you have got the thimble. Will you give me a penny or will you not?"

Pauline put her hand into her pocket.

"You are a most detestable child," she said.

"Think so if you like," said Penelope. "Oh, here's my penny!"

She snatched at the penny which was reposing on Pauline's palm.

"Now I'll go straight off and get John to bring me in some cookies," she exclaimed.

CHAPTER XIV.

PAULINE CONFESSES.

Pauline was in such a strait that she made up her mind to tell a lie. She had never, so far as she could remember, told an actual and premeditated lie before. Now matters were so difficult, and there seemed such a certainty of there being no other way out, that she resolved to brave the consequences and add to her former sin by a desperate, downright black lie. Accordingly, just before dinner she ran into Verena's room.

"Renny," she said, "I have made up my mind."

"What about?" asked Verena. "Why, Pauline, you do look bad. Your face is as white as a sheet."

"I shall have to explain," continued Pauline. "I am going to tell how I got the burn on my arm."

Verena gave a great sigh of relief.

"I am glad," she cried. "It is far better to tell."

"So I think," said Pauline in an airy fashion. "Give me a kiss, Verena; I must dress for dinner, and I haven't a moment to lose."

"You will wear your pretty blouse?"

"Certainly."

Pauline dashed out of the room, banging the door noisily after her.

"I wonder what she means," thought Verena. "She is certainly getting rather queer. I am afraid she has a terrible secret on her mind. I am glad she means to confess, poor darling! I seem to have less influence over her than I used to have, and yet I love no one like Paulie. She is all the world to me. I love her far better than the others."

Meanwhile Pauline, with great difficulty, put on her pretty evening-blouse. How she hated those elbow-sleeves! How she wished the little soft chiffon frills were longer! At another time she would have been delighted with her own reflection in the glass, for a cream-colored silk blouse suited her. She would have liked to see how well she looked in this new and fashionable little garment. She would have been pleased, too, with the size and brilliancy of her black eyes. She would have admired that flush which so seldom visited her sallow cheeks; she would even have gazed with approbation at her pearly-white teeth. Oh, yes, she would have liked herself. Now she felt that she hated herself. She turned from the glass with a heavy sigh.

Having finished her toilet, she wrapped a soft muslin handkerchief round her wounded arm and ran downstairs. Her aunt was already in the drawing-room, but to Pauline's relief no one else was present. The little girl ran up to her aunt, dropped a curtsy, and looked somewhat impertinently into her face.

"Here I am," she said; "and how do I look?"

"You have put on your blouse, Pauline. It suits you. Turn round and let me see how it fits at the back. Oh! quite nicely. I told Miss Judson to make the blouses in a simple fashion, so that they could be washed again and again. But what is the matter, my dear? Your face is very white. And—why, my dear Pauline, what is wrong with your arm?"

"I have something to confess, Aunt Sophy. I hope you won't be terribly angry."

"Something to confess, my dear child? Well, I am glad you have the courage to confess when you do wrong. There is nothing like owning up one's faults, Pauline. There is nothing else that really strengthens the soul. Well, I am listening, dear. Now, what is it?"

Pauline slowly unfastened the handkerchief which she had bound round her arm, and showed the great burn to Miss Tredgold.

Miss Tredgold started, uttered an exclamation, took the little arm in her hand, and looked tenderly at the ugly place.

"My poor little girl," she said. "Do you mean that you have been suffering from this all this time? But how in the world did it happen?"

"That is what I want to confess. I did something extremely naughty the day you kept me in Punishment Land."

"What was it?"

"You sent me to bed at seven o'clock."

"Yes; that was part of the punishment."

"Well, I didn't like it. Oh! here comes Verena. Renny, I am confessing my sins."

Verena ran up, her face full of anxiety. She put her arm round Pauline's waist.

"See how bad her poor arm is," she said, glancing at Miss Tredgold.

"Yes," said Miss Tredgold, "it is badly hurt; but don't interrupt, Verena. I am listening to the story of how Pauline burnt her arm."

"You sent me to bed at seven o'clock," said Pauline, who, now that she had embarked on her narrative, felt emboldened and, strange to say, almost enjoyed herself. "I could not possibly sleep at seven o'clock, you know; so, to amuse myself, I tried on my new white dress; and then I lit a candle, drew down the blinds, and looked at myself in the glass. I was so pleased! I did look nice; I felt quite conceited."

"You needn't tell me how you felt, Pauline. I want to hear facts, not accounts of your feelings. You did wrong to put on your white dress, for it had already been fitted on by the dressmaker, and it was being carefully kept for Sunday wear. But proceed. After you lit the candle and drew down the blinds what happened?"

"A great puff of wind came in through the window, and it blew the blind against the candle, and the flame of the candle came towards me, and I had my hand up to arrange my hair. I was fastening it up with hairpins to make myself look quite grown-up."

"Well?"

"And the candle caught my sleeve and set it on fire."

Miss Tredgold now began to look so pale that Verena vaguely wondered if she were going to faint. The little culprit, however, stood bolt upright and gazed with defiant black eyes at her aunt.

"Yes," said Pauline, "I suffered awful pain, and the sleeve blazed up like anything; but I ran to the basin of water and put it out. I was afraid to tell you. I had to tell Renny that I had burnt my arm, but I didn't tell her how it happened, and I wouldn't allow her to breathe to you that I was in pain. That was the reason I could not wear my pretty blouse last night, and you were angry with me. I hope you won't be angry any more; but the sleeve of the dress is burnt badly. Perhaps you won't give me any birthday present because the sleeve of my new dress is so much injured."

"I will see about that. The thing is to cure your arm. The doctor must come immediately."

"But it is getting better."

"You must see the doctor," said Miss Tredgold.

She went out of the room as she spoke. Pauline sank into a chair; Verena looked down at her.

"Have you told the truth?" asked Verena suddenly.

Pauline nodded with such a savage quickness that it made her sister positively certain that she had not heard the right story.

Miss Tredgold came back in a minute.

"I have sent for Dr. Moffat," she said. "I hope he will be here after dinner. My dear child, why didn't you tell me before?"

"Are you going to forgive me?" faltered Pauline. "I—I almost think I'd rather you didn't."

"You are a very queer child, and I may as well tell you frankly you are talking nonsense. You did wrong, of course, to put on the white dress; but I think, my dear, your sufferings have been your punishment. We will say no more now about the burnt sleeve. Fortunately I have plenty of the same muslin in the house, and the mischief can be quickly repaired. Now, dear, lie back in that chair. No; you are not to come in to dinner. It shall be sent to you here on a tray."

For the rest of the evening Pauline was so pitied and fussed over, and made so thoroughly comfortable, that she began to think the black, black lie she had uttered quite a good thing.

"Here am I half out of my scrape," she thought. "Now, if I can only persuade Nancy not to force

us to go to that midnight picnic, and not to tell if we don't go, and if I can get the thimble back, I shall be once more as happy as the day is long. This wicked black lie shall not frighten me. There is no other way out. I cannot possibly tell the truth. What would Nancy think if I did?"

The doctor came. He ordered a healing lotion for the arm; he also felt the pulse of the little patient. He declared her to be slightly feverish, and ordered her to bed.

Half the next day Pauline stayed in her comfortable bed. She was fed with dainties by Aunt Sophia, was not expected to learn any lessons, and was given a fascinating story-book to wile away the time. During the morning, when she was not engaged in the schoolroom, Miss Tredgold stayed by the little girl's side, and mended the burnt dress, cutting out a new sleeve and putting it in with deft, clever fingers.

Pauline watched her as one fascinated. As she looked and observed the graceful figure, the kindly expression of the eyes, and the noble pose of the head, there stole over her desolate little heart a warm glow. She began to love Aunt Sophia. When she began to love her she began also to hate herself.

"I don't want to love her a bit," thought the child. "I want quite to detest her. If I love her badly—and perhaps I may—it will make things that must happen much more difficult."

Aunt Sophia left the room. She came back presently with a dainty jelly and some home-made biscuits. She put an extra pillow at Pauline's back, and placed the little tray containing the tempting food in front of her.

"What are you thinking about, Paulie?" she asked suddenly.

"About how nice you are," answered the child; and then she added, "I don't want you to be nice."

"Why so?"

"Because I don't. I can't tell you more than just I don't."

Miss Tredgold said nothing more. She resumed her work, and Pauline ate her jelly.

"Aunt Sophy," she said presently, "I want to be awfully good at my lessons next week. I want to learn real desperate hard. I want to turn into a very clever girl. You'd like me to be clever, wouldn't you?"

"Provided you are not conceited with it," said Aunt Sophia in her abrupt way.

"Perhaps I should be," said Pauline. "I was always thought rather smart. I like people to call me smart. You don't want me to turn stupid because I may get conceited."

"No, dear; I want you to be natural. I want you to try very hard to be learned, to be good, to be a lady. I want you to be the sort of woman your mother would have wished you to be had she lived. I want you to grow up strong in mind and strong in body. I want you to be unselfish. I want you to look upon life as a great gift which you must not abuse, which you must make use of. I want you, Paulie, and your sisters to be the best in every sense of that great word. You will fail. We all fail at times; but there is forgiveness for each failure if you go to the right and only source. Have I said enough?"

"Yes," said Pauline in a low voice.

Her conscience was pricking her. She lowered her eyes; the long black lashes trembled with tears. Miss Tredgold stooped and kissed her.

"I hear Briar in the garden," she said. "I will send her up to you. Be as merry as you please with her, and forget my words for the present."

Pauline got up in time for late dinner. She was, of course, excused wearing her dinner-blouse, and was still treated somewhat as an invalid. But on Sunday morning she was so much better that she was able to wear her white dress, and able also to join her sisters in the garden.

They all went to the pretty little church in the next village, and Miss Tredgold accompanied them.

Looking back on it afterwards, that Sunday always seemed to Pauline like an exquisite dream of peace. Her lie did not press at all against her heart. The discomfort of it was for the time in abeyance. She tried to forget Miss Tredgold's ideal girl; she was happy without knowing why. She was happy, but at the same time she was quite well aware of the fact that her happiness would come to an end on Sunday night. She was quite certain that on Monday morning her grave and terrible troubles would begin. She would have to see Nancy. She would have to decide with regard to the midnight picnic. There was no joy for Pauline in the thought of that picnic now, but she dared not stay away from it, for if she did Nancy would have her way. Nancy's temper, quick and hot as a temper could be, would blaze up. She would come to Miss Tredgold and tell her everything. If it had been awful to Pauline's imagination to think of Miss Tredgold knowing the truth before, what would it be to her now after the lie she had told?

"I must coax Nancy," thought the little girl to herself. "I must tell her that I can't go to the picnic, and I must implore her not to tell. Oh, what shall I do? How shall I persuade her?"

On Sunday morning, therefore, notwithstanding her promises, Pauline was inattentive at lessons. But Miss Tredgold was not inclined to be over-severe. The doctor had said that the child had not only been badly burnt, but had also received a nervous shock. He had further added that the more liberty she was given, and the more fresh air just at present, the better.

Accordingly Pauline was sent into the garden long before the others had finished their lessons. She presently sat down under the shade of a tree. She was not to meet Nancy till six o'clock.

By-and-by Penelope came out, saw her sister, and ran towards her.

"Have you got the thimble?" she asked.

"Of course I haven't. I don't know anything about the thimble. What do you mean?"

Alas for Pauline! Her first lie had made her second easy.

Penelope looked at her in puzzled wonder.

"I thought you did know about it," she said, disappointment stealing over her shrewd little face.

"I don't know anything about it. Don't worry me."

"You are so cross that I'm sure you have done something desperate naughty," said Penelope. "I want to find out what it is, and I don't want to stay with you. I think you are horrid."

She marched away defiantly, her squat little figure and bare legs looking so comical that Pauline burst out laughing.

"What am I coming to?" she said to herself. "This is lie number two. Oh, dear! I feel just as if a net were surrounding me, and the net was being drawn tighter each moment, and I was being dragged into a pit out of which there is no escape. What shall I do?"

Just then Mr. Dale, who seldom left the house, appeared in view. He was walking slowly, his hands thrust into his pockets, his head bent forward; he was murmuring some sentences of his beloved Virgil to himself. He took no notice of Pauline. He did not even see her. Neither did he notice the chair in which she was sitting. He came bang up against her before he knew that she was there.

"What have I done?" he exclaimed. "Oh, it is you, Pauline! How inconsiderate of you to sit like this on the lawn!"

"But we always sit on the chairs, dad," said Pauline, springing to her feet.

He forgot that he had made the remark. He laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I have been having a delightful time," he said—"truly a delightful time. All this morning I have been in contact with noble thoughts. My child, can you realize, even dimly, what it is to dip into those mines of wealth—those mines of illimitable wisdom and greatness and strength and power? Oh, the massiveness of the intellects of the old classic writers! Their lofty ideas with regard to time and eternity—where can their like be found?"

Pauline yawned.

"Are you tired?" asked her father.

"No—only worried," she answered.

She did not know why she made the latter remark; but at the same time she was perfectly well aware that anything she said to her father was safe, as he would absolutely forget it in the course of the next minute. He was roused now from his visions of the past by a certain pathos in the little face. He put his arm round the child and drew her to him.

"My dear, pretty little girl," he said.

"Am I pretty?" asked Pauline.

He gazed at her out of his short-sighted eyes.

"I think not," he said slowly. "I was imagining you were Verena, or perhaps Briar. Briar is certainly very pretty. No, Pauline, you are not pretty; you are plain. But never mind; you have perhaps got"—he put a finger on each temple—"you have perhaps got something greater."

"It doesn't matter if you are plain or not," said Pauline almost crossly, "when you are awfully worried."

"But what worries you, my child? I would not have one so young subjected to worries. My dear, is it possible that you already are perplexed with the ways of this present life? Truly, I am scarcely surprised. The life we lead in these degenerate days is so poor; the giants have left the earth, and only the pigmies are left. Don't worry about life, child; it isn't worth while."

"I am not," said Pauline bluntly. "I am worrying because——"

"Because of what, dear?"

"Because I am going to be desperately naughty."

Mr. Dale shook his head slowly.

"I wouldn't," he said. "It is very uncomfortable and wrong, and it sullies the conscience. When the conscience gets sullied the nature goes down—imperceptibly, perhaps, but still it goes down. If your worry is an affair of the conscience, take it to Him who alone can understand you."

Pauline looked at her father with awed astonishment.

"You mean God?" she said. "Will He help me?"

"Certainly He will. He is the Great Deliverer, and His strength is as immeasurable as it ever was. He gave power to the martyrs to go through the flames. He will help a little, weak girl if

she asks Him. Oh, my dear, it has struck twelve! I have lost a quarter of an hour. Don't keep me another moment."

The scholar and dreamer hurried to the house. Long before he got there he had forgotten Pauline and her childish worries. She was going to be desperately naughty. He certainly no longer remembered those words.

Meanwhile the child stayed behind with her hands clasped.

"I wish he had told me more," she said to herself. "I don't believe God could put this straight."

CHAPTER XV.

THE NET.

On Monday Pauline's troubles began over again. She ought to have been very happy on this special day, for the birthday—the great, important birthday, her very own, when she would reach the completion of her fourteenth year—was near at hand. But although Pauline was perplexed and unhappy, there was nevertheless a birthday feeling in the air. In the first place, there was a great and exciting sense of mystery. The girls were seen darting quickly here and there; in every imaginable corner there were whispered consultations. Aunt Sophia, in particular, never looked at Pauline without smiling. She was kindness itself. It seemed to the poor little girl that her aunt had taken a great fancy to her. This was the case. Miss Tredgold was interested in all her nieces, but even Verena with her daintiness and pretty face, and Briar with her most charming personality, did not attract Miss Tredgold as did the blunt-looking, almost plain child who called herself Pauline.

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"She has got character and independence," thought the good lady. "She will be something by-and-by. She will always be able to hold her own in the world. She is the kind of girl who could do much good. It hurt me very much to send her into Punishment Land, but she is all the better for it. Oh, yes, she must taste the rough as well as the smooth if she is to be worth anything. She will be worth a good deal; of that I am convinced."

Miss Tredgold, therefore, had compassion on Pauline's late indisposition, and made lessons as easy as possible for her. Thus Pauline had very little to do, except to think of that mystery which was growing thicker and thicker. In one way it helped her own dilemma. With her sisters walking in twos and threes all over the place, it would not be at all remarkable for her to slip down at the appointed hour to the wicket-gate. Even Penelope would not notice her, so absorbed was she in assisting Adelaide to make a special present for Pauline.

As the day advanced the little girl became terribly nervous. She felt a sense of irritation when one of her sisters looked at her, whispered to her companion, and then turned away. She would almost have preferred Miss Tredgold to be as stern as she was before. Her whole mind was in a state of tumult. She felt the net closing tighter and tighter around her. Even the birthday was scarcely interesting while such a weight rested on her heart. Miss Tredgold had said during the afternoon as they were all sitting together on the lawn:

"This is to be a great birthday. This is the very first birthday I have spent under your roof. You must all remember it as long as you live."

"Oh, can I ever forget it?" thought poor Pauline. "But Aunt Sophy little knows that I shall not remember it for its kindness and its sunshine and its presents; I shall remember it always because I am such a wicked girl."

Now as evening approached she could not help whispering to herself:

"The net is closing—closing round me. It is gathering me up into a heap. My legs and arms are tied. Soon the wicked, dreadful thing will press my head down, and I shall be powerless and lost."

She thought out this metaphor, and it seemed to haunt her footsteps.

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"It is right that a girl who told a black lie should be cramped up in it," thought Pauline. "Oh, why hadn't I courage to tell Aunt Sophy the truth? She might have been angry, but in the end she would have forgiven me. I would far rather have no notice whatever taken of my birthday than be as miserable as I am now."

"That child isn't well," said Miss Tredgold to Verena, as Pauline was seen slowly creeping in a subdued sort of way in the direction of the lower shrubbery. "Why is she always stealing off by herself? I have a good mind to call her back and take her for a drive. It is a lovely evening, and a drive would do her good."

"So it would, Aunt Sophy. You know how busy all the rest of us are finishing her presents. I am sure she would love to drive with you, for I think she is getting very fond of you."

"Perhaps, my dear; but I have made up my mind not to have favorites. As long as you are all good I shall love you all.—Pauline—yes, Verena, I shall offer her a drive—Pauline, come here."

Pauline hated to be called back, but she could not do otherwise than obey. She approached lingeringly.

"Yes, Aunt Sophy," she said.

"Would you like to take a drive with me? We might go and find out how soon Peas-blossom and Lavender will be ready to come to their new home."

At another time such a request on the part of Miss Tredgold would have enraptured Pauline; but she knew that it only wanted five minutes to six, and she doubted if Nancy would consent to be kept waiting long.

"No," she answered slowly; "my head aches. Please, I would rather not take a drive."

She did not wait for Miss Tredgold's response, but continued her slow walk.

"The poor child is certainly ill," said the good lady. "If she continues to look as poorly and as sadly out of sorts next week I shall take her to the seaside."

"Will you, Aunt Sophy? How lovely! Do you know that Paulie and I have never been to the sea? We do so long to see it!"

"Well, my dear, I shall take you all presently, but I can't say when. Now, as Pauline does not want to drive with me, I shall go into the house and finish some of my arrangements."

Miss Tredgold went indoors, and Verena joined Briar and Patty, who were in a great state of excitement.

Meanwhile Pauline had reached the wicket-gate. She opened it and went out. Nancy was waiting for her. Nancy's cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. She looked as if she had been quarreling with somebody. Pauline knew that look well. Nancy's two friends Becky and Amy were standing at a little distance. There was a small governess-cart drawn up not far away, and Becky was stroking the nose of a rough little Forest pony.

"Father gave me the cart and pony this morning," said Nancy. "There's nothing he wouldn't do for me. The pony and cart aren't much, perhaps, but still it is fun to have them to fly over the place. Well, and how goes her little high-and-mightiness? Frumpy, I can see. Grumpy, I can guess. Now, is Pauline glad to see poor old Nance—eh?"

"Of course, Nancy; but I have come to say——"

"We'll have no 'buts,' darling, if you please."

"I can't come to the picnic, Nancy; I really cannot."

"How white poor little Dumpy looks! Wants some one to cheer her up, or she'll be dumped and frumped and grumped all in one. Now, darling, I'm going to put my arm round your waist. I am going to feel your little heart go pit-a-pat. You shall lean against me. Isn't that snug? Doesn't dear old Nancy count for something in your life?"

"Of course you do, Nancy. I am fond of you. I have always said so," replied Pauline.

"Then you will yield, darling, to the inevitable."

"I am yielding to it now," replied Pauline. "I am not going with you because I can't."

"And you are going with me because you must," Nancy responded. "For listen, Pauline. Although I am affectionate, I can be—oh, yes—dangerous. And if you don't come, why, I can keep my word. Wednesday is your birthday. I wonder when the crown of the day will come?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, there always is a crown to a birthday. There is a time, either in the evening or in the morning, when the queen receives the homage of her subjects. She gets her presents, and there are pretty speeches made to her, and she has her dainty feast and her crown of flowers. Yes, that time is the crown of the day, and that is just the moment when the poor little queen shall topple down. The throne shall be knocked from under her; the presents will vanish; the sovereignty will cease to exist. Poor, poor little queen without a kingdom! How will you like it, Paulie? Do you think you could bear it? To have no kingdom and no crown and no presents and no love, and to be bitterly disgraced as well! How will you like it, Paulie?"

"I know that you can do all that you say," answered Pauline. "I know you can be dreadful, and everything is against me. You can ruin me if you like, but I want you not to do it, Nancy."

"And if you don't come with us I want to do it, dear; and I rather think that my will is stronger than yours."

"But if it kills me?"

"It won't do that, Paulie. You will feel bad, and, oh! as though somebody had crushed you; but you won't die. There's only one way out."

Pauline was silent.

"It is quite an easy way," continued Nancy. "It is easy and safe, and there's a deal of fun to be got out of it. You have got to come to the picnic. Once you are there you will enjoy yourself tremendously. I promise to get you home in the morning. You will come, and you will bring two of your sisters with you. Two will be enough. I have yielded that point. You will meet us here, at this very spot, at eleven o'clock on Wednesday night. We are going some distance away, so that no one in the neighborhood of The Dales need hear our singing and our fun and our jollity. We

will come back before daybreak and deposit you just outside the wicket-gate. You may think it very unpleasant just now, and very mean and all the rest, but it is the only possible way to save yourself. You must come to the picnic, and bring two of your sisters."

"But suppose they won't come?"

"They will if you manage things properly. It needn't be Verena. I expect Verena, for all she is so soft and fair, is a tough nut to crack; but you can bring Briar and Patty. My father will be quite satisfied if three of you are present. The fact is, he is awfully hurt at the thought of your all thinking yourselves too good for us. He says that the Dales and the Kings were always friends. My father is a dear old man, but he has his cranks, and he has made up his mind that come you must, or he'll make mischief. It won't be only me; it will be my father as well. He will appear at The Dales, and if I go straight to Miss Tredgold, he will go straight to Mr. Dale. Now, what do you think of that? I am determined to have you for reasons of my own, and I shall poke up my father to do no end of mischief if you don't appear. Now don't be a goose. Get up a little dash of courage and a little dash of your old spirit and everything will be as straight as possible."

Pauline stood quite still. Nancy danced in front of her. Nancy's face was almost malicious in its glee. Pauline looked at it as a child will look when despair clutches at her heart.

"I didn't know—I couldn't guess—that you were like that," she said in a sort of whisper.

"Couldn't you, dear little duckledoms? Well, you do know it now; and you know also how to act. Don't you see by the lines round my mouth and the expression in my eyes that I can be hard as hard when I please? I am going to be very hard now. My honor is involved in this. I promised that you would be there. There are presents being bought for you. Come you must; come you shall."

Pauline stood quite silent; then she flung her arms to her sides and faced her tormentor.

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"There was a time," she said slowly, "when I loved you, Nancy. But I don't love you now. By-and-by, perhaps, you will be sorry that you have lost my love, for I think—yes, I think it is the sort that doesn't come back. I don't love you to-night because you are cruel, because you have already got me into a scrape, and you want to push me into a yet deeper one. I am not the sort of girl you think me. However grand and stately and like a lady Aunt Sophia is—and compared to you and me, Nancy, she is very stately and very grand and very noble—I would not give you up. Aunt Sophy is a lady with a great brave heart, and her ideas are up-in-the-air ideas, and she doesn't know anything about mean and low and vulgar things. I'd have clung to you, Nancy, and always owned you as my friend, even if Aunt Sophy had taken me into good society. Yes, I'd have stuck to you whatever happened; but now"—Pauline pressed her hand to her heart—"everything is altered. You are cruel, and I don't love you any more. But I am in such trouble, and so completely in despair, that I will come to the picnic; and if I can bring two of the girls, I will. There is nothing more to say. You may expect us at eleven o'clock on Wednesday night."

"But there is more to say," cried Nancy.

She flew at Pauline, and before she could stop her Nancy had lifted the younger girl into her strong arms. She had not only lifted her into her arms, but she was running with her in the direction where Becky and Amy were minding the pony.

"Hurrah! I have won!" she cried. "She yields. Come and kiss her, the little duck.—Pauline, you silly, if you don't love me, I love you; and you will soon find out for yourself what a good time you are going to have, and what a goose you have made of yourself with all this ridiculous fuss. What a grand birthday you are going to have, Paulie! A birthday for a whole twenty-four hours—a whole day and a whole night! Remember, there will be presents, there will be surprises, there will be love, there will be sweetness. Trust us, you will never get into a scrape for this. Now run along home as fast as you can."

Pauline did not run. She closed the wicket-gate and walked soberly to the house. Strange as it may seem, once she had made her decision, the fact that she was to deceive her aunt, and do the thing that of all others would fill Aunt Sophia with horror, did not pain her. The conflict was over; she must rest now until the time came to go. She was a clever child, and she thought out the situation with wonderful clearness. She must go. There was no help for it. The sin must be sinned. After all, perhaps, it was not such a very great sin. Aunt Sophia would be happier if she never knew anything at all about it.

"If I go she will never know," thought the child. "Nancy is clever, and now that I have yielded to her she will not fail me. If I go it will never be discovered, and what has happened before will never be discovered; and Aunt Sophy will never have reason to distrust me, for she will never know. Yes," thought Pauline, "it is the only possible way."

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She saw Penelope coming to meet her. The other girls were still busy with their birthday surprises, but Penelope had just deposited her own small and somewhat shabby present in Verena's keeping, and was now, as she expressed it, taking the air. When she saw Pauline she ran to meet her.

"I suppose you are feeling yourself monstrous 'portant, and all that sort of thing," she said.

"No, I am not," said Pauline.

Penelope gave her a quick glance out of her sharp eyes.

"Does you like me to be nursery or schoolroom child?" she asked.

"Oh, I like you to be just what you are, Pen; and I do beg of you not to worry me just now."

"You is most ungrateful. I has been spending my teeny bit of money on you. You will know what I has done on your birthday. You are going to get a most 'licious present, and it will be I who has gived it to you. Sometimes I does wish I was two years older; but Aunt Sophy has got monstrous fond of me, Paulie, and of you, too. I know it. Shall I tell you how I know it?"

"How?" asked Pauline.

"I was standing near her when you said you wouldn't go for a drive, and she gave a big sigh, just as though she was hurted. I was hurted, too, for I thought I might perhaps sit on the little back-seat and hear more'n is good for me. People always say that little girls like me hear more'n is good for them. I love—I love hearing things of that wicked sort. Well, you didn't go, and I couldn't have my nice drive on the little back-seat. But Aunt Sophy did give a pained sigh. She loves you, does Aunt Sophy. She loves me, too."

"Do you love me, Pen?" said Pauline suddenly, for it occurred to her that perhaps Penelope was the child who would have to accompany her to the midnight picnic. She knew enough of Penelope to be sure that she could be bribed. She was not so certain about the others.

"Do you love me, Pen?" she repeated.

"When you speak in that softy, sympathy voice, I feel that I could just hug you," said Penelope.

"Then would you really help me?"

"Really and really. What am I to do? If you will whisper secrets to me, I will even forget that I am certain you know something most 'portant about that thimble, and I will cling to you like anything. You will be the oak, and I will be the ivy. It will be most lovely to be the close friend of the birthday queen. I do—oh, I do hope you are going to tell me a great secret!"

"Perhaps I am, but I can't tell you now."

"When will you tell me?"

"If I ever tell you, it will be before midday on my birthday. Now run away. Don't whisper a word of this."

"Not me," said Penelope. "I was borned to keep secrets."

She marched away in her usual stalwart fashion.

"I may have to take her with me," thought Pauline again. "If the others won't be bribed, I must fall back on her."

She felt a curious sense of relief, for of course Penelope could be bribed. A shilling would do it. Penelope would go to the end of the earth for a shilling, particularly if it was given to her all in pence. Twelve separate pence would send Penelope off her head.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CONFERENCE.

It was late on the following evening when Pauline found herself alone with Briar and Patty. Both these little girls had plenty of character; but perhaps Patty had more of that estimable quality than her sister. They were both straightforward by nature, upright and noble, and were already benefiting by the discipline which had at last come into their lives. The glories of the birthday which was so near were already beginning to shed some of their rays over Pauline, and her sisters felt themselves quite honored by her company.

"To think," said Briar, "that you are really only Paulie! I can scarcely bring myself to believe it."

"Why so?" asked Pauline.

"In twelve hours' time—in less—you will be a queen."

"It is rather like the Lord Mayor," said Patty. "It's all very grand, but it lasts for a very short time. Aunt Sophy was telling us to-day about the Lord Mayor and the great, tremendous Show, and I began to think of Pauline and her birthday. I could not help myself. It is a pity that a birthday should only last such a very short time!"

"Yes, that is the worst of it," said Pauline. "But then it comes every year. Perhaps it is all for the best that it should have a quick come and a quick go. Of course, I shall be very happy to-morrow, but I dare say I shall be glad when the next day arrives."

"Not you," said Briar. "I have known what the next day meant, even when we had only shilling birthdays. The others used to cry out, 'Your birthday is the farthest off now.' I used to keep my head covered under the bedclothes rather than hear them say it. Adelaide and Josephine always said it. But don't let's get melancholy over it now," continued Briar in a sympathetic tone. "When you lie down to-night you won't be able to sleep much; but you will sleep like a top to-morrow night. I expect you will wake about every two minutes to-night. Oh, it is exciting the night before a birthday! Even when we had shilling birthdays I used to wake the night before

every few minutes. Once I got up at four o'clock in the morning. I went out. I had a cold afterwards, and a bad sore throat, but I never told anybody how I got it. If I was excited about my poor little birthday, what will you be to-morrow?"

"I don't know," said Pauline. "Listen, girls. I am so excited in one sense that I couldn't be any more so. I am so excited that I'm not excited. Can you understand what I mean?"

"No, I'm sure I can't a bit," said Briar.

"And it's quite likely," continued Pauline, "that I shall have no sleep at all the night after my birthday."

"What do you mean now?" asked Briar.

Pauline looked mysterious. The two girls glanced at her. Suddenly Pauline put one arm around Briar's neck and the other arm round Patty's neck.

"You are the nicest of us all—that is, of course, except Verena," she said. "I have always been fonder of you two than of Adelaide or Josephine or Helen or Lucy. As to Pen, well, I don't suppose any of us feel to Pen as we do to the rest. She is so different. Yes, I love you two. I love you just awfully."

"It is sweet of you to say that; and, seeing that you are to have a birthday so soon, it makes us feel sort of distinguished," said Briar.

"How old are you, Briar?"

"I'll be thirteen next May. That's a long time off. I do wish my birthday had waited until Aunt Sophy came on the scene."

"And my birthday comes in the winter," said Patty—"near Christmas; but I dare say Aunt Sophy will give us a good time then, too."

"I do like her awfully," said Pauline. "Now, girls, I want to ask you a question. I know you won't tell, for you are not the sort to tell."

"Of course we won't tell, Paulie."

"And you love me, don't you?"

"Yes," echoed both little girls.

"This is my question. If I do something that is not just exactly absolutely right, will you still love me?"

"Why, of course. We're not so wonderfully good ourselves," said Briar.

"I know what you are thinking of," said Patty. "You are thinking of Punishment Day. But we have forgotten all about that."

"I was thinking of Punishment Day. And now I want to say something. I want to make the most tremendous confidence. I want to tell you the most tremendous secret."

"Oh!" echoed both.

"Light that candle, Briar," said Pauline.

Briar crossed the room, struck a match, lit the candle, and then turned to see what her darling Paulie wished further.

"Bring it right over here," said Pauline. "Put it on this table."

Briar did so.

"Kneel down, Briar, so that the light from the candle falls full on your face."

Briar knelt. Her eyes were beaming with happiness.

"Look at me," said Pauline.

Briar raised two honest and pretty brown eyes to her sister's face.

"I think," said Pauline slowly, "that you are the sort of girl to make a promise—a solemn, awfully solemn promise—and stick to it."

"Yes; you are right. I am made that way," said Briar proudly.

"I see you are. Patty, will you kneel so that the candle may shine on your face?"

Patty hurried to obey.

"I am made like that, too," she said. "I always was like that. When I said I wouldn't tell, you might pinch me black and blue, but it didn't change me. Pen has tried to run pins into me sometimes to make me tell. Pen is the only one who would tell when she promised not."

"I think so," said Pauline decidedly. "Pen would not do at all. Girls, I shall come to you to-morrow evening. To-morrow evening, very late, I will come to you here. Perhaps you will have gone to bed, but that won't matter. I will come to you whether you are in bed or whether you are up; and I will claim your promise. You will do what I ask, and you will never, never, never tell. You must help me. You will—oh, you will!"

"Of course," said Briar. "Darling Paulie, don't cry. Oh, how the pet is trembling! Patty, she's trembling like anything. Do kiss her and hug her, and tell her there's nothing we wouldn't do for her."

"There's nothing in all the world we wouldn't do for you," said Patty.

They both kissed her so often and with such deep affection that she found herself leaning on their innocent strength. She would not tell them yet; she would tell them just before the time tomorrow evening. Of course they would go with her. Pen would never do. It would be madness to confide in Pen.

Notwithstanding her excitement Pauline did sleep soundly that night before her birthday. No sooner had her head touched the pillow than sweet unconsciousness visited her. She slept without dreaming, and was at last awakened by the shouts of her sisters.

"Paulie, get up. It's your birthday. Oh, do dress yourself fast! There's such a lot of fun going on! We are to have a whole holiday, and Aunt Sophy is so delightful. And what do you think? She has dragged father out of his study, and he is standing in the very middle of the lawn. He has a huge, untidy-looking parcel in his hands, and he looks as if he didn't in the least know what to do with it. He is trying each moment to escape back into the house, but Aunt Sophy won't let him. She says he must not stir until you come down. Poor father does look in misery. Be quick and dress and come downstairs."

At this moment there was a shout from below, and the three girls who had summoned Pauline from the land of dreams rushed off, dashing through the house with whoops of triumph.

Pauline rose and dressed quickly. She put on the pretty pale lavender print frock that Aunt Sophia had decided she was to wear, and went downstairs. When she joined the others Mr. Dale greeted her with one of his slow, sweet smiles.

"How are you, darling?" he said. "I have a sort of idea that I am kept standing here on this lawn, exposed to the heat of a very powerful sun, on your account."

"Of course it is on Pauline's account, Henry," said Miss Sophia. "It is her birthday. Kiss me, Pauline, dear. Many happy returns of the day. Henry, give your daughter her present. She is fourteen to-day."

"Fourteen! Ah!" said Mr. Dale, "a charming age. The ancients considered a woman grown-up at fourteen."

"But no one is so silly in these days," said Miss Tredgold. "We know that a girl is never more childish than at fourteen. Henry, open that parcel and give Pauline what it contains."

Mr. Dale dropped the brown-paper parcel at his feet. He looked at it in bewilderment.

"It is heavy," he said. "I haven't the least idea what is in it."

"It is your present to your daughter."

"Ah!" said Mr. Dale, "I forgot; and I packed it myself last night. My child, I wonder if you are worthy of it."

"I don't suppose I am, father," said Pauline.

"For goodness' sake open it, Henry, and don't torture the child's feelings."

"I put it in an old bandbox," said Mr. Dale. "I couldn't find anything else. Pauline, in giving you what I am about to give you, I show a high appreciation of your character. I remember now what my present is. I had an awful night in consequence of it. I felt as though one of my limbs was being severed from my body. Nevertheless, my dear, I don't retract nor go back, for that is not my way. I give you this most noble gift with a distinct object. I have lately been examining all your foreheads. Although I have appeared to take little notice of you, I have watched you as day by day I have enjoyed the excellent food provided by your most worthy aunt. While my body was feeding, my mind was occupying itself, and I have at last come to the decision that you, my child, are the only one of my young people who has been blessed with a classical brow. As yet you have not even begun to learn the language of the ancients; but now that you have reached the mature age of fourteen, I shall be pleased to instruct you myself for one hour daily, in both that Latin and Greek which delighted our forefathers."

"But the Romans and Greeks were not our forefathers," said Miss Tredgold.

She snapped out the words quite angrily, and the look on her aunt's face caused Pauline to go closer to her father and take one of his long white hands and hold it close to her heart.

"It doesn't matter whether we are descended from them or not, does it, Padre?" she said.

"All that is noble in thought, all that is original, all that partakes of inspiration, has come down to us from the classics," said Mr. Dale. "But take your gift, Pauline. Now, my dear children, I beseech of you, don't keep me any longer from my important work."

He was striding towards the house, when Verena got in front of him, Briar stood at his left hand, Patty at his right, and Adelaide, Josephine, Lucy, Helen, and Penelope came up in the rear.

"You don't stir," they cried, "until Paulie opens her parcel."

So Pauline knelt down on the grass, untied the clumsy cord, and removed the brown paper. She then lifted the lid from a broken-down bandbox and revealed a musty, fusty tome bound in old calf.

"It is my precious annotated edition of Cicero," said Mr. Dale. "I have written your name in it—'Pauline Dale, from her affectionate father.' It is yours now, and it will be yours in the future. If you like to leave it on the shelf in my study, I shall not object, but it is yours to do what you

like with."

He sighed profoundly, and turned away with his lip trembling.

"Good gracious!" Miss Tredgold was heard to exclaim. Then she spoke to Adelaide.

"Run into the house and bring out a cup of coffee. The precious man gets queerer each moment. What a present to give the child!"

Pauline raised the big book and clasped it against her neat lilac frock.

"Thank you, father," she said. "I will learn to read it. Thank you very much."

"And you don't object to its occupying its old place on my shelf?"

"No. Shall I run and put it there now?"

"Do. You are really a wise child. Sophia, as I have given Pauline her present, I presume I need not stay out any longer wasting my precious time and running the risk of sunstroke."

Miss Tredgold nodded and laughed. Adelaide appeared with the coffee. Mr. Dale drank it off at a single draught. Pauline ran into the house with the treasure which was hers and yet not hers. For surely never during his lifetime would Mr. Dale allow that special edition of Cicero out of his study. She put it gravely and quietly into its accustomed place, kissed her father, told him she appreciated his present beyond words, and then went back to her sisters and aunt, who were waiting for her.

What a day it was! What a wonderful, magnificent day! The weather was perfect; the air was sweet; the garden was full of perfume. And then the presents. Every imaginable thing that a little girl could want was poured at the feet of the birthday queen. The story-books she had longed for; the little writing-desk she had always coveted but never possessed; the workbox with its reels of colored silks, its matchless pair of scissors, its silver thimble, its odds and ends of every sort and description; the tennis-bat; the hockey-club; the new saddle that would exactly fit Peas-blossom: all these things and many more were given to Pauline. But besides the richer and more handsome presents, there were the sort of pretty things that only love could devise—that charming little pin-cushion for her dressing-table; that pen-wiper; that bag for her brush and comb; that case for her night-dress. Some of the gifts were clumsy, but all were prompted by love. Love had begun them, and gone on with them, and finished them, and Pauline laughed and had brighter eyes and more flushed cheeks each moment as the day progressed.

After breakfast Miss Tredgold took her nieces for a drive. The little party were all packed into the wagonette, and then they went off. They drove for miles and miles under the trees of the Forest. Miss Tredgold told more interesting and fascinating stories of her own life than she had ever told before. The girls listened to her with the most absorbed attention. As a rule Miss Tredgold's stories carried a moral with them; but the birthday stories had no moral. Pauline waited for one. She waited with a sort of trembling dread. She expected it to intrude its sober face at each moment, but it did not put in an appearance anywhere. It stayed out of sight in the most delightful and graceful manner. Soon the girls, Pauline amongst them, forgot to look out for the moral. Then Verena began telling anecdotes of the past, and Pauline joined her; and the children laughed, and nearly cried with delight. That drive was the happiest they had ever enjoyed.

But it was somewhat late in the afternoon when the birthday treat came to its culmination. They were having tea on the lawn, a most fascinating tea, with a frosted cake in the middle of the table, on which Pauline's name was inscribed in golden letters, and round which were lighted fourteen little wax candles, denoting that she had now come to that mature age. The candles were protected by tiny glass shades, so that the soft summer air could not blow them about, and all the girls thought they had never seen such a wonderful sight. Mr. Dale was abducted from his study—there was really no other word to describe the way in which he was carried off bodily—and requested to light the candles. He did so looking very confused, and as though he did not in the least comprehend what he was doing. Nevertheless he was there, and he was obliged to seat himself in the centre of the group; and then garlands and garlands of flowers suddenly made their appearance, and Pauline was conducted to her throne, and a crown of tiny roses was placed on her dark head, and wreaths of flowers were laid at her feet.

"Now you are queen, Pauline," said Miss Tredgold. "Your father and I and your sisters are bound to obey you from now until ten o'clock to-night. This is your reign. It is short, but full of possibilities. What are we to do for you, fair queen? In what way do you wish to employ us?"

"May I wish for anything?" asked Pauline eagerly.

She had a flashing thought as she uttered the words—a quick, terrible, agonized thought. Oh, if only she might claim her birthright! If only she might put into use her grand privilege and ask for the one thing she really wanted—a free, absolute pardon! If she might confess her sin without confessing it, and get her aunt and father to say that, whatever she had done in the past, she was forgiven now! Just for an instant her black eyes looked almost wild; then they fixed themselves on Miss Tredgold, who was looking at her attentively. She glanced beyond her, and met the great black eyes of Penelope. Penelope seemed to be reading Pauline. Pauline felt a sudden revulsion of feeling.

"That would never do," she said to herself.

"Why don't you speak?" said Verena in her gentle voice.

"I was considering what to ask," replied Pauline.

"It isn't to ask, it is to command," said Miss Tredgold. "What sort of a queen would you make, Pauline, if you really had a kingdom? This is your kingdom. It lasts for a few hours; still, for the present it is your own. Your sway is absolute."

"Then let us have hide-and-peek in the garden," she said.

She laughed. The spell was broken. Penelope's eyes lost their watchful glance. The girls were all agreeable. Mr. Dale rose to his feet.

"I have had my tea," he said, "and the queen has received her crown. I am truly thankful that birthdays don't last longer than a day. I presume there is no reason why I may not return to my study."

"No, father, you mustn't stir," said Pauline. "You are my subject, and I command you to play hide-and-peek. You and Aunt Sophy must hide together. Now let us begin."

The games that followed were provocative of mirth. Even Mr. Dale was heard to chuckle feebly. This was when Josephine put her hand into his pocket and withdrew his handkerchief. He made a scholarly remark the next moment to Miss Tredgold, who replied:

"For goodness' sake, Henry, come down from the clouds. This is your child's birthday. It is all very well to know all that musty stuff, but there are times when it is fifty times better to be full of nonsense."

Mr. Dale groaned, and then Lucy seemed to spring out of the ground. She laughed in his face, and cried out that she had found him.

So the merry game proceeded. It had nearly come to an end when Pauline and Penelope found themselves alone.

"I waited for you at twelve o'clock," said Penelope, "but you never comed. Why didn't you?"

"I didn't want to, Pen. I have changed my mind. Think no more about what I said."

"I can't never forget it," replied Pen.

But then she heard a whoop from a distant enemy, and darted to another part of the garden.

The game of hide-and-peek was followed by another, and then another and yet another, and the cries of mirth and laughter sounded all over the place. Even Betty forgot the tragic end of the Duke of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton, who was killed by a brigand in Italy while defending his fair duchess. Betty had been weeping scalding tears over the tragedy when the sound of mirth called her forth. John accompanied her, and the other servants looked on in the distance.

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"There never was such a rowdy family," said Betty.

"Rowdy do you call it?" cried John.

"Yes; and the very rowdiest is Miss Tredgold. For mercy's sake look at the way she runs! She's as fleet as a hare."

"She have very neat ankles," said John. "I call her a neat figure of a woman."

"Don't tell me," said Betty. "Much you know what a neat figure of a woman means. Miss Tredgold's a haristocrat. Now, if you'll believe me, she's the moral image of the duchess."

"What duchess?" cried John.

"The Duchess of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton—her that's just made a widow, and is crying her eyes out over the murdered remains of the poor dook."

"Sometimes," said John, "I think that you have gone off your head, Betty. But I can't stay to listen to any more of these nonsenses. I have my garden to look after."

The final delight before the curtain of that birthday was dropped down for ever found its vent in music—music in which Mr. Dale took a part, and in which Miss Tredgold excelled herself. It was the music that awoke Pauline's slumbering conscience. It was during that music that her heart truly began to understand itself.

"I am wicked—a coward and a liar," she thought. "But, all the same, I am going on, for I must. Aunt Sophy loves me, and I love her, and I wouldn't have her love turned to hate for all the world. She must never find out what I did in the past, and the only way to keep it from her is to go on as I am going on."

CHAPTER XVII.

A WILD FROLIC.

The first part of the birthday was absolutely over, but the second part—the terrifying, awful part—was at hand. Aunt Sophy had kissed Pauline and had blessed her by a look. Her father had also put his trembling hand on her shoulder.

"When you want to read that lovely volume of Cicero," he said, "come to me and I will teach you. I will spare a few minutes of my valuable time to give you instruction."

Verena had also kissed her heartily, and she and the rest of her sisters had gone to bed. They were all tired. Verena came for a minute into Pauline's little room.

"I am too sleepy even to brush my hair in your room to-night, Paulie," she said. "I am too sleepy to talk about our long happy day. What a pile of presents you have got! Don't you think you have had a perfect birthday? I only wish mine was near at hand."

"It will come in good time," said Pauline; "and even birthdays——"

She broke off abruptly.

"What do you mean by 'even birthdays'?" asked Verena. "What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say that even birthdays had drawbacks. I know that I am dead-tired."

"You look it, darling. Do turn into bed and go to sleep."

Verena kissed her sister and left the room.

Pauline stood by the attic window. The window was a French one, and was wide open. The night was warm; the sky was without a cloud; stars like diamonds dotted the firmament; the sky itself looked darkly blue. Pauline felt a sudden thrill going through her. It was a thrill from the nobler part of her being. The whole day, and all that happened in the day, had wrought her up to her present state of feeling. A touch now and she would have confessed all. A touch, a look, would have done it—for the child, with her many faults, was capable of noble deeds; but the touch was not there, nor the word of gentle advice given. Had her mother been alive, Pauline would have certainly gone to her and confessed what she had done. As it was, she only felt that, in order to save herself from the past, she must do something much more wicked in the future.

She waited until she was quite certain that Verena was in bed; then she gently unfastened the door of her room and stole out on to the landing. There was not a light in the house. All the tired people had gone to bed. She reached the room, at the farther end of the same wing, where Briar and Patty slept. The sleeping attics occupied two wings of the old house, the centre part of the house being without rooms in the roof. Pauline, Verena, Briar, and Patty slept in one of the wings, the rest of the girls and the nursery children in the other. Mr. Dale had the room exactly under the large attic occupied by Briar and Patty. Miss Tredgold's room was under the nursery wing.

Pauline now very gently opened the door of the room where her two little sisters slept. They were not asleep; they were sitting up in their beds waiting for her.

"We thought you would come, Paulie," said Briar. "We are so excited! What is it you want us to do for you, darling Paulie?"

"To save me! To save me!" said Pauline.

Her tone was dramatic; her action was more so. She fell on her knees by Briar's bed; she clasped her arms round the little girl's neck; she laid her head on her shoulder and burst into tears. The birthday queen was weeping. Could emotion go beyond that fact? Patty bounded out of her bed and knelt by Pauline's other side. The two little girls clasped their arms round her. She had exercised a glamour over them all day, which now became greater than ever. Was she not their queen? Oh, yes, until midnight she was their own dear and absolutely beautiful queen. An hour was still left of her sovereignty. She had quite stolen their hearts; they loved her like anything.

"What is it, Paulie?" said Briar.

"I must tell you," said Pauline. "I know you won't betray me."

"Indeed we won't," they both answered.

"Well, then, this is what has happened."

She began to tell her story. She told it quickly, for the time was short. If they were to meet Nancy they must steal away almost at once. Pauline told her tale with scarcely any comment. When it was finished she looked at her sisters. The moonlight was in the room, and Pauline's face looked ghastly, but it looked beautiful also. Her eyes were very big and dark and solemn and beseeching. Briar and Patty glanced at each other.

"Shall we?" said Briar.

"It seems the only thing to do," said Patty.

"All the same, it is awfully wrong," said Briar.

"Think of poor Paulie," said Patty.

"If we are discovered——" cried Briar.

"Oh, bother!" interrupted Patty. "She's our queen. We must obey her. We are bound to help her. Let us go. She mustn't run into danger. You know what Nancy has said: two of us must go with her. She mustn't go alone."

Briar leant towards Patty, and Patty whispered in her ear; and then the two little girls began to dress.

"You are darlings," said Pauline. "I shall never forget this to you—never. I have everything else

managed. I am going back to my room. When you are dressed you must shut the door of your room very quietly behind you, and then you must steal along the corridor and you will find my door just ajar. We will get out of my window by the beech-tree, and we'll be back and safe in our beds before any one is up in the morning."

"It certainly is thrilling," said Briar, raising her voice in her excitement.

"Oh, don't speak so loud!" said Pauline. "Dress very fast. I will wait for you in my room. I shall be quite ready."

Pauline rushed back to her own room. She then put on a warm golf-cape and an old hat; and her arrangements having been completed, she bent out of the French window. In an incredibly short time Briar and Patty appeared. All three girls were now in the wildest state of excitement. Scruples were silenced for the time being. Pauline's conscience no longer spoke. She felt that a midnight picnic, stolen, partaken of under difficulties, sinned mightily to obtain, had its own inexplicable charm. It was certainly sweet to be naughty; there was a thrill about it, and a sense of adventure, which goodness never brought. Oh, yes, it was well worth the risk and danger. Her two little sisters partook of Pauline's feelings. They all easily reached the ground, and when they found themselves outside in the middle of the night, it was with difficulty that Briar could keep from giving a shriek of ecstasy.

"I suppose it's because I'm so awfully naughty that I enjoy it so," she said.

"Come along; don't speak," said Pauline.

She took a hand of each sister. They ran quickly over the dew-laden grass. Their feet soon got wet, for they had forgotten to put on strong shoes. But what mattered that? What did small discomforts signify when the grand total of pleasure was so enormous?

They opened the wicket-gate, and Pauline found herself immediately in the strong embrace of Nancy King.

"There you are, darling!" she cried, bestowing a resounding kiss on her cheek. "I feared that the she-dragon would waken and call you back; but you are here, and you have brought—let me see. Oh, you are Patty, are you not? And Briar? You are my friends for ever now. Oh, we shall have fun! The wagonette is here, and the dogcart; there are a party of us, and a lot more coming to meet us at the rendezvous. We shall have the most glorious time you ever imagined."

As Nancy spoke she called out to two girls who were standing in the shadow.

"Becky, this is Briar Dale—in other words, Rose Dale. You are to see after her. Amy, Patty Dale is your charge. Now let us get into the wagonette, for it is the snuggest of all the carriages, and the horses are so fleet. Listen how they are pawing the ground; they're mad to be off. Oh, here's father! Father, three of the young Dales have come."

"Pleased to see you, I'm sure," said the farmer. "It's a warm night for the time of year."

The little girls did not answer. Even Pauline, now that she had met the rest of the party, felt curiously silent. A weight seemed to rest on her. Her wild and riotous spirits had died down. Her conscience was not troubling her, but she felt depressed, she scarcely knew why.

"I want something to poke me up," she said to herself. "I thought I'd be quite riotous with bliss when I met Nancy. I don't feel riotous; and, oh, how white the moonlight is making Briar look! Briar," whispered Pauline suddenly, "are your feet very wet?"

"Very: and they're getting so cold," said Briar.

"What are you talking about?" said Nancy.

"The fact is," said Pauline, "we forgot to put on our outdoor shoes, and the dew is very heavy."

"Dear, dear! That will never do. Father, what do you think these silly little misses have done? They've come out in their house slippers."

"I never!" cried the farmer. "You are silly little ladies; that I will say. I tell you what it is, Nance; we don't want these children to catch cold. Shall we drive back to The Hollies and get them some of your shoes? You have enough, I take it, to shoe a regiment."

Nancy laughed.

"They wouldn't fit," she said. "They'd be too big for any of them."

"Well, then," said the farmer, "they shall all three take their shoes off and wrap their feet in these warm rugs. They can put them on again, and when the dancing begins they will soon dry."

"Are we to dance?" said Pauline, her eyes sparkling.

"You wait and see," said Nancy.

"Yes, you wait and see," cried the farmer. "There are all sorts of surprises. And there's a birthday queen of this here party, ain't there, Nancy?"

"I have heard tell that there was," said Nancy. As she spoke she took Pauline's hand and dragged the little girl forward to sit by her.

The drive took some time, and the farmer and his party were extremely loud and riotous and merry. As they passed under the huge oak-trees some one in a dogcart went by, and the light from a lantern fell on his face. Pauline recognized Dr. Moffat. The moment she saw him he looked round, and she fancied that he must have seen her, and that his eyebrows went up with an expression of astonishment. But he did not look again; he only continued on his way.

"I do hope he didn't see me," said Pauline to Nancy.

"What matter if he did? He's thinking of his profession, and not of a little girl like you. I wonder where he is going to."

"To Farmer Jackson," said Farmer King. "He broke his leg a fortnight ago, and they say mortification is setting in and he can't live. Poor Farmer Jackson! Here are we all on a rollick, so to speak, a midnight picnic in summer, and all our hearts as light as froth, and the farmer lying on the flat of his back and like to pass away before morning."

Pauline felt uncomfortable. She turned her head away. She did not wish to think of the sober events of life at that moment.

By-and-by the long drive came to an end. The girls again put on their wet slippers, and the next moment they found themselves inside a large marquee, with a boarded floor, where a magnificent feast was prepared at the farther end. The whole centre of the marquee was got ready for dancing, and a number of young people whom Pauline had never seen before were standing about in little knots, evidently waiting for the arrival of the farmer and his family.

"There!" said Nancy. "Now, Paulie, what do you think? Here's feasting for you at this end, and there's dancing at the other, and if the Kings don't do things in style I don't know who do."

"Ah, Miss King, and how are you?"

"Pleased to see you, I'm sure," was Nancy's response.

A bashful-looking young man with sandy hair and light-blue eyes now came forward. He was followed by a girl of similar type, and the two were introduced to Pauline as Mr. and Miss Minchin. The Minchins were accompanied by other neighbors, and the Dale girls found themselves in the midst of a party numbering at least fifty people.

Pauline felt suddenly shy. As a rule she was not remarkable for this quality. She had a certain pretty assurance, and never, as her sisters expressed it, lost her head; but now her principal desire was to creep into her shell, not to answer the inane remarks made by the young men of the party, and on no account to allow them to put their arms round her waist and carry her round in the dance. Her face grew first red, then pale. She realized that she was very tired, and more than ever did she wish that she had never yielded to Nancy's enticements.

Patty and Briar, on the other hand, were enjoying themselves very much. They had done this very naughty thing on account of Pauline; they were glad they were helping her—their consciences did not trouble them in the least. They leant upon Pauline more than they were themselves aware of. If trouble came, she would of course shield them. At present there was no trouble. A picnic in the middle of the night, miles away from home, was the most exciting thing they had ever imagined. It beat the joys of the birthday hollow. They were quite aware that by-and-by there would perhaps be repentance, but who could think of repentance now, with the feast—and such a feast!—on the board, and Fiddler Joe making such exquisite, mad, intoxicating music (it caused your feet to twitch so that they could scarcely keep still), and that floor as smooth as glass, and the summer moon entering through a chink in the big tent, and the gayly dressed people, and all the merry voices? Oh, it was an intoxicating time!

So Briar danced with the first man who asked her, and Patty did likewise. They danced with the ease and lightness and grace of children in whom the accomplishment is born. Nancy's clumsy efforts, and the clumsy efforts of her friends, were nowhere beside them.

"That little girl," said a rough-headed farmer, pointing to Patty as he spoke, "dances like the foam of the sea. I never saw anything like it in all my life."

"But why doesn't the elder Miss Dale dance?" asked Farmer King.

He had noticed that she was declining one partner after another.

"Come, Miss Paulie," he said, going to her side: "this won't do. May I have the pleasure of a barn-dance with you, miss? You can't refuse me."

Pauline did find it impossible to refuse the good man. He took her hand and led her out, and presently she, too, was being whirled round and round. But her sense of weariness increased, and the heavy pain and bewilderment at her heart grew worse. Oh, why had she come? Once the farmer, looking at her, saw tears in her eyes. In a moment he stopped dancing. He took her hand and led her to the other side of the tent.

"You dance beautifully, miss," he said; "not quite so light as your little sister, but I am proud to be seen with you, miss, all the same. And now, if I may make so bold, what is the matter with you, Miss Pauline Dale?"

"Nothing," answered Pauline.

"Don't tell me," replied the farmer. "Is it in reason that a little lady like yourself would have tears in her eyes at a moment like the present if there was nothing the matter? Is it in reason, miss?"

"Oh, I ought not to have come!" said Pauline.

The farmer's face grew rather red. He looked full at Pauline for a moment; then he said:

"I can't speak out now, for it's only the beginning of the fun. There's a great deal planned, and you are in the thick of it, but before you go back home I'll have a word with you; so cheer up, my pretty little miss, for things that aren't right can be put right. You trust Farmer King for that."

Pauline did cheer up. She felt that the farmer was her friend, and she also knew that he was a friend worth having. The other girls met her once or twice, and Patty whispered:

"Oh, there never was anything like this before! I could be naughty every single night of my life to have such fun!"

The dance was followed by the feast, and the feast was A1. When it was over there was a moment of silence. Then Nancy, accompanied by Briar and Patty, Becky and Amy, and the two boys, Jack and Tom, assembled round the seat where Pauline had placed herself.

"It is your turn, Paulie," said Nancy. "You are queen of to-night, for it is the night following your birthday. Come, queen, take your throne." 122

"I am sick of thrones," answered Pauline.

But Nancy took her hand.

"Whatever you feel, you must not show it," she said, "for that will spoil everything. Here is your throne; step up."

Pauline looked round her. Up to the present moment a curtain had been drawn across one end of the tent. It was now removed, and the little girl saw a deep chair covered completely with flowers and moss and ferns. A bright light was hanging just at the back of this throne. Now Pauline, as queen of the day, was led up to it, and requested to take her seat thereon. She did so, feeling queer and giddy. When she was seated the young people stood in groups at her right hand and at her left.

The farmer now appeared, carrying a table. All the guests stood in the background and looked on. The table was placed in front of Pauline. At the same instant Nancy bent forward and laid her hand across the little girl's eyes.

"Don't look just for a minute," she said.

Pauline heard the ecstatic whispers of her own little sisters, and for the first time a feeling of wonder and pleasure stole over her. She forgot all that had gone before, and for the time was both happy and excited.

"Now you may look," said Nancy.

As Pauline opened her eyes she felt something cool and soft descending on her head.

"Don't touch it," whispered Nancy; "it's your crown. But come, girls and boys, we must do more than this to make our queen beautiful."

As she spoke all the young people divided into two groups, crossed the floor, and came past Pauline as she sat on her throne; and each one, as she or he passed, threw a wreath of flowers either over the head of the little girl, or round her neck, or into her lap, until finally she found herself absolutely embedded in flowers.

"Look at yourself," said Nancy, suddenly slipping a looking-glass in front of the birthday queen. "Tell us what you see."

Pauline looked. The lights were so managed that she could see everything distinctly. The lights fell full upon her. She saw a pair of dark eyes, sweet, anxious, and beautiful; she saw a radiant and rosy face. Lilies of the valley, sweet-peas, and summer roses fell about her soft dark hair. Similar flowers fell about her neck. Her dress was hidden beneath its wealth of flowers; her charming face rose out of a perfect foam of flowers.

"Oh, I do look beautiful!" she said aloud, and at the naive remark the whole party shouted with merriment. Nancy cried, "Long life to the queen!" and Joe the Fiddler burst into his merriest strains; it was with the greatest difficulty that the desire for dancing could be suppressed, for the little ceremony was not yet quite over. It was Nancy's turn to come forward. 123

"Queen of the night," she said, "we hope that you will like what we, your subjects, have done for you, and we hope that you will never forget your happy birthday. There is just one thing I have to say. When the flowers fade—and they are fading already—you, dear queen, will have no longer a kingdom, so we have brought you something; we have subscribed among us for something that will not fade—something that you can always wear in memory of us. Look! isn't it beautiful?"

As Nancy spoke, she took a morocco case from the table, touched a spring, and revealed to Pauline's dazzled eyes, a necklace of thin pure gold, to which a little locket, with a diamond in the centre, was attached.

"This won't fade," said Nancy. "You can keep it all your life long. You can also remember that there are people in the world, perhaps born a little lower than yourself, who love you and care for you."

"Oh, you are good!" cried Pauline. "I will never forsake you, Nancy, or think myself better than you are."

"Didn't I say she was a brick?" said Nancy. "Stoop your head, queen; I will clasp the necklace around your neck."

Pauline did stoop her head, and the necklace was put in its place. The little diamond in the centre glittered as though it had a heart of fire. The flowers smelled sweet, but also heavy. Pauline was tired once again; but the music was resumed. Fiddler Joe played more enchanting music than before, and Pauline, suddenly rising from her throne, determined to dance during

the remaining hours of that exciting night.

But all happy things, and all naughty things come to an end, for such is the fashion of earth; and by-and-by the farmer said that if they wished to be home before morning they must get into the wagonette and the dogcart, and their guests must take themselves away. Now it was the farmer's turn to come up to Pauline.

"You have given us all pleasure to-night, Miss Pauline," he said; "and it warms our hearts to feel that, whatever the circumstances, you will always be true to us, who have been true to you and yours for generations. For, miss, the history of the Dales is almost bound up with the history of the Kings. And if the Dales were gentlefolks and lords of the manor, the Kings were their humble retainers. So, miss, the Dales and Kings were always good to each other; the Kings over and over again laying down their lives for the Dales in the Civil Wars, and the Dales on their part protecting the Kings. So, after all, miss, there's no earthly reason, because a grand aunt of yours has come to live at The Dales, why the traditions of your house should be neglected and forgotten. I am proud to feel that this will never happen, and that your family and mine will be one. We do not consider ourselves your equals, but we do consider ourselves your friends. And if I can ever help you, Miss Pauline, you have only to come to me and I will do it. That's all I've got to say. I don't want thanks. I'm proud that you and your little sisters have trusted yourselves to us to-night, and I leave the matter of whether it was right or wrong to your own consciences. But whatever happens, what you did to-night is the sort of thing that Farmer King will never forget."

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CHAPTER XVIII.

VINEGAR.

It was certainly not at all remarkable that the entire party should be drowsy and languid on the following day. Pauline had dark shadows under her eyes, and there was a fretful note in her voice. Nurse declared that Briar and Patty had caught cold, and could not imagine how they had managed to do so; but Miss Tredgold said that colds were common in hot weather, and that the children had played too long in the open air on the previous night. In short, those who were out of the mischief suspected nothing, and Pauline began to hope that her wild escapade would never be known. Certainly Briar and Patty would not betray her.

They had all managed to climb up the tree and get in at her window without a soul knowing. Pauline therefore hoped that she was quite safe; and the hope that this was the case revived her spirits, so that in the afternoon she was looking and feeling much as usual. As she was dressing that morning she had made a sort of vow. It was not a bit the right thing to do, but then poor little Pauline was not doing anything very right just then. This was her vow. She had said in her prayer to God:

"If You will keep Aunt Sophy from finding out how naughty I have been, I will, on my part, be extra good. I will do my lessons most perfectly, and never, never, never deceive Aunt Sophy again."

Now, Pauline, unaware that such a prayer could not possibly be answered, felt a certain sense of security after she had made it.

In addition to the beautiful chain with its locket and its diamond star in the middle, she had received several other presents of the gay and loud and somewhat useless sort. Nancy's friends, Becky and Amy, had both given her presents, and several young people of the party had brought little trifles to present to the queen of the occasion. There was a time when Pauline would have been highly delighted with these gifts, but that time was not now. She felt the impossible tidies, the ugly pin-cushions, the hideous toilet-covers, the grotesque night-dress bags to be more burdens than treasures. What could she possibly do with them? The gold chain and locket were another matter. She felt very proud of her chain and her little heart-shaped locket. She was even mad enough to fasten the chain round her neck that morning and hide it beneath her frock, and so go downstairs with the diamond resting on her heart.

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Miss Tredgold had wisely resolved that there were to be very few lessons that day. The girls were to read history and a portion of one of Shakespeare's plays, and afterwards they were to sit in the garden and do their fancy-work. They were all glad of the quiet day and of the absence of excitement, and as evening progressed they recovered from their fatigue, and Pauline was as merry as the rest.

It was not until preparation hour that Pauline felt a hand laid on her arm; two keen black eyes looked into her face, and a small girl clung to her side.

"Oh, what is it, Pen?" said Pauline, almost crossly. "What do you want now?"

"I thought perhaps you'd like to know," replied Penelope.

"To know what, you tiresome child? Don't press up against me; I hate being pawed."

"Does you? Perhaps you'd rather things was knowed."

"What is it, Pen? You are always so mysterious and tiresome."

"Only that I think you ought to tell me," said Penelope, lowering her voice and speaking with great gentleness. "I think you ought to tell me all about the things that are hidden away in that handbox under your bed."

"What do you mean?" said Pauline, turning pale.

"Why, I thought I'd like to go into your room and have a good look round."

"But you have no right to do that sort of thing. It is intolerably mean of you. You had no right to go into my bedroom."

"I often does what I has no right to do," said Penelope, by no means abashed. "I went in a-purpose 'cos you didn't tell me what you wished to tell me once, and I was burning to know. Do you understand what it is to be all curiosity so that your heart beats too quick and you gets fidgety? Well, I was in that sort of state, and I said to myself, 'I will know.' So I went into your room and poked about. I looked under the bed, and there was an old handbox where you kept your summer hat afore Aunt Sophy came; and I pulled it out and opened it, and, oh! I see'd— Paulie, I'd like to have 'em. You doesn't want 'em, 'cos you have hidden 'em, and I should like to have 'em."

"What?"

"Why, that pin-cushion for one thing—oh! it's a beauty—and that tidy. May I have the pin-cushion and the tidy, Paulie—the purple pin-cushion and the red tidy? May I?"

"No."

"May Aunt Sophy have them?"

"Don't be silly."

"May anybody have them?"

"They're mine."

"How did you get them?"

"That's my affair."

"You didn't get them from me, nor from any of the other girls—I can go round and ask them if you like, but I know you didn't—nor from father, nor from Aunt Sophy, nor from Betty, nor from John, nor from any of the new servants. Who gave them to you?"

"That's my affair."

"You won't tell?"

"No."

"May I tell Aunt Sophy about the handbox chock-full of funny things pushed under the bed?"

"If you do—"

Penelope danced a few feet away. She then stood in front of her sister and began to sway her body backwards and forwards.

"I see'd," she began, "such a funny thing!"

"Penelope, you are too tormenting!"

"I see'd such a very funny thing!"

Miss Tredgold was seen approaching. Penelope looked round at her and then deliberately raised her voice.

"I see'd such a very, very funny thing!"

"What is it, Pen? Why are you teasing your sister?" said Miss Tredgold.

"I aren't!" cried Penelope. "I are telling her something what she ought to know. It is about something I— Shall I go on, Paulie?"

"No; you make my head ache. Aunt Sophy, may I go in and lie down?"

"Certainly, my dear. You look very pale. My poor child, you were over-excited yesterday. This won't do. Penelope, stop teasing your sister, and come for a walk with me. Pauline, go and lie down until dinner-time."

Pauline went slowly in the direction of the house, but fear dogged her footsteps. What did Penelope know, and what did she not know?

Meanwhile Miss Tredgold took the little girl's hand and began to pace up and down.

"I have a great deal to correct in you, Pen," she said. "You are always spying and prying. That is not a nice character for a child."

"I can be useful if I spy and pry," said Penelope.

"My dear, unless you wish to become a female detective, you will be a much greater nuisance than anything else if you go on making mysteries about nothing. I saw that you were tormenting dear little Pauline just now. The child is very nervous. If she is not stronger soon I shall take her

to the seaside. She certainly needs a change.”

“And me, too?” said Penelope. “I want change awful bad.”

“Not a bit of you. I never saw a more ruddy, healthy-looking little girl in the whole course of my life.”

“I wonder what I could do to be paled down,” thought Penelope to herself; but she did not speak her thought aloud. “I mustn’t tell Aunt Sophy, that is plain. I must keep all I know about Paulie dark for the present. There’s an awful lot. There’s about the thimble, and—yes, I did see them all three. I’m glad I saw them. I won’t tell now, for I’d only be punished; but if I don’t tell, and pretend I’m going to, Paulie will have to pay me to keep silent. That will be fun.”

The days passed, and Pauline continued to look pale, and Miss Tredgold became almost unreasonably anxious about her. Notwithstanding Verena’s assurance that Pauline had the sort of complexion that often looked white in summer, the good lady was not reassured. There was something more than ordinary weakness and pallor about the child. There was an expression in her eyes which kept her kind aunt awake at night.

Now this most excellent woman had never yet allowed the grass to grow under her feet. She was quick and decisive in all her movements. She was the sort of person who on the field of battle would have gone straight to the front. In the hour of danger she had never been known to lose her head. She therefore lost no time in making arrangements to take Verena and Pauline to the seaside. Accordingly she wrote to a landlady she happened to know, and engaged some remarkably nice rooms at Easterhaze on the south coast. Verena and Pauline were told of her plans exactly a week after the birthday. Pauline had been having bad dreams; she had been haunted by many things. The look of relief on her face, therefore, when Miss Tredgold told her that they were to pack their things that day, and that she, Verena, and herself would start for Easterhaze at an early hour on the following morning, was almost beyond words.

“Why is you giving Pauline this great big treat?” asked Penelope.

“Little girls should be seen and not heard,” was Miss Tredgold’s remark.

“But this little girl wants to be heard,” replied the incorrigible child. “‘Cos she isn’t very strong, and ‘cos her face is palefied.”

“There is no such word as palefied, Penelope.”

“I made it. It suits me,” said Penelope.

“Pauline’s cheeks are rather too pale,” answered Miss Tredgold.

She did not reprove Penelope, for in spite of herself she sometimes found a smile coming to her face at the child’s extraordinary remarks.

Presently Penelope slipped away. She went thoughtfully across the lawn. Her head was hanging, and her whole stout little figure testified to the fact that she was meditating.

“Off to the sea!” she muttered softly to herself. “Off to the big briny waves, to the wadings, to the sand castles, to the shrimps, to the hurdy-gurdies, and all ‘cos she’s palefied. I wish I could be paled.”

She ran into the house, rushed through the almost deserted nursery, and startled nurse out of her seven senses with a wild whoop.

“Nursey, how can I be paled down?”

“Nonsense, child! Don’t talk rubbish.”

“Am I pale, nursey, or am I a rosy sort of little girl?”

“You are a sunburnt, healthy-looking little child, with no beauty to fash about,” was nurse’s blunt response.

“Am I healthy-looking?”

“Of course you are, Miss Pen. Be thankful to the Almighty for it, and don’t worry me.”

Pen stuck out her tongue, made a hideous face at nurse, and darted from the room. She stood in the passage for a minute or two reflecting, then she slipped round and went in the direction of Pauline’s bedroom.

The bandbox chock-full of those vulgar presents had been pushed into the back part of a dark cupboard which stood in the little girl’s room. Penelope knew all about that. She opened the cupboard, disappeared into its shadows, and then returned with an orange-colored tidy and a chocolate-red pin-cushion. Having made a bag of the front of her frock, she slipped the pin-cushion and tidy into it, and ran off to the kitchen. Aunt Sophia visited the kitchen each morning, but Pen knew that the hour of her daily visit had not yet arrived. Betty was there, surreptitiously reading a copy of the *Faithful Friend*. She started when Pen darted into her domain.

“Now what is it, Miss Penelope? For goodness’ sake, miss, get out of this. Your aunt would be flabbergasted to see you here.”

For response Pen planted down in front of Betty the orange-colored tidy and the chocolate-red pin-cushion.

“Here’s some things,” she said. “Here’s two nice things for a nice body. What will that nice body give for these nice things?”

"My word!" said Betty, "they're natty."

She took up the pin-cushion and examined it all over. She then laid it down again. She next took up the tidy, turned it from side to side, and placed it, with a sigh of distinct desire, beside the pin-cushion.

"Them's my taste," she said. "I like those sort of fixed colors. I can't abide the wishy-washy tastes of the present day."

"They's quite beautiful, ain't they?" said Pen. "I'll give them to you if you will——"

"You will give them to me?" said Betty. "But where did you get them from?"

"That don't matter a bit. Don't you ask any questions and you will hear no lies. I will give them to you, and nobody and nothing shall ever take them from you again, if you do something for me."

"What's that, Miss Pen?"

"Will you, Betty—will you? And will you be awful quick about it."

"I should like to have them," said Betty. "There's a friend of mine going to commit marriage, and that tidy would suit her down to the ground. She'd like it beyond anything. But, all the same, I don't hold with young ladies forcing their way into my kitchen; it's not haristocratic."

"Never mind that ugly word. Will you do what I want?"

"What is it, Miss Pen?"

"Palefy me. Make me sort of refined. Take the color out of me. Bleach me—that's it. I want to go to the seaside. Pale people go; rosy people don't. I want to be awful pale by to-night. How can it be done? It's more genteel to be pale."

"It is that," said Betty, looking at the rosy Penelope with critical eyes. "I have often fretted over my own color; it's mostly fixed in the nose, too. But I don't know any way to get rid of it."

"Don't you?" said Penelope.

Quick as thought she snatched up the pin-cushion and tidy.

"You don't have these," she said. "Your friend what's going to be married won't have this tidy. If you can't take fixed colors out of me, you don't have fixed colors for your bedroom, so there!"

"You are awful quick and smart, miss, and I have heard tell that vinegar does it."

"Vinegar?"

"I have heard tell, but I have never tried it. You drink it three times a day, a wine-glass at a time. It's horrid nasty stuff, but if you want to change your complexion you must put up with some sort of inconvenience."

"Suppose, Betty, you and me both drink it. Your nose might get white, and I might go to the seaside."

"No, miss, I'm not tempted to interfere with nature. I've got good 'ealth, and I'll keep it without no vinegar."

"But will you give me some? You shall have the pin-cushion and the tidy if you do."

"'Arriet would like that tidy," contemplated Betty, looking with round eyes at the hideous ornament.

"You sneak round to the boot-house, and I'll have it ready for you," she said. "Come at eleven, come again at half-past three, and come at seven in the evening."

This was arranged, and Pen, faithfully to the minute, did make her appearance in the boot-house. She drank off her first glass of vinegar with a wry face; but after it was swallowed she began to feel intensely good and pleased with herself.

"Will it pale me in an hour?" was her thought.

She ran upstairs, found a tiny square of looking-glass, concealed it in her pocket, and came down again. During the remainder of the day she might have been observed at intervals sneaking away by herself, and had any one followed her, that person would have seen her taking the looking-glass from her pocket and carefully examining her cheeks.

Alas! the vinegar had only produced a slight feeling of discomfort; it had not taken any of the bloom out of the firm, fat cheeks.

"It's horrid, and it's not doing it," thought the child. "I wish I hadn't gived her that tidy and that pin-cushion. But I will go on somehow till the color is out. They will send for me when they hear that I'm bad. Perhaps I'll look bad to-night."

But Pen's "perhapses" were knocked on the head, for Miss Tredgold made a sudden and most startling announcement.

"Why wait for the morning?" she exclaimed. "We are all packed and ready. We can easily get to Easterhaze by a late train to-night."

Accordingly, by a late train that evening Miss Tredgold, Verena, and Pauline departed. They drove to Lyndhurst Road, and presently found themselves in a first-class carriage being carried rapidly away.

"I am glad I thought of it," said Miss Tredgold, turning to the two girls. "It is true we shall arrive late, but Miss Pinchin will have things ready, as she will have received my telegram. We shall sleep at our new quarters in peace and comfort, and be ready to enjoy ourselves in the morning."

CHAPTER XIX.

GLENGARRY CAPS.

Penelope drank her vinegar three times a day. She applied herself to this supposed remedy with a perseverance and good faith worthy of a better cause. This state of things continued until on a certain night she was seized with acute pain, and awoke shrieking out the startling words, "Vinegar! vinegar!" Nurse, who was not in the plot, thought the child was raving. She scolded Penelope more than pitied her, administered a strong dose, and, in short, treated her as rather a naughty invalid.

"It's green apples that has done it," said nurse, shaking her head solemnly, and looking as if she thought Penelope ought certainly to return to her nursery thralldom.

"I mustn't take so much vinegar," thought the little girl; "but I do hope that being so ill, and taking the horrid medicine, and being scolded by the nurse will have made me a bit pale."

She doubtless hoped also that her illness would be reported to Miss Tredgold, who would send for her in double-quick time; but as Miss Tredgold was not told, and no one took any notice of Pen's fit of indigestion, she was forced to try other means to accomplish her darling desire—for go to the seaside she was determined she would. Of late she had been reading all the books she could find relating to the sea. She devoted herself to the subject of shells and seaweeds, and always talked with admiration of those naughty children who got into mischief on the sands.

"Lots of them get drowned," she was heard to say to Adelaide. "It is quite, quite common to be washed up a drowned person by the big waves."

Adelaide did not believe it, but Penelope stuck to her own opinion, and whenever she found one of her sisters alone and ready to listen to her, her one invariable remark was:

"Tell me about the sea."

Once it darted into her erratic little head that she would run away, walk miles and miles, sleep close to the hedges at night, receive drinks of milk from good-natured cottagers, and finally appear a dusty, travel-stained, very sick little girl at Aunt Sophia's lodgings at Easterhaze. But the difficulties in the way of such an undertaking were beyond even Pen's heroic spirit. Notwithstanding her vinegar and her suffering, she was still rosy—indeed, her cheeks seemed to get plumper and rounder than ever. She hated to think of the vinegar she had taken in vain; she hated to remember Betty and the tidy and pin-cushion she had given her.

Meanwhile the days passed quickly and the invitation she pined for did not come. What was to be done? Suddenly it occurred to her that, if she could only become possessed of certain facts which she now suspected, she might be able to fulfil her own darling desire. For Pen knew more than the other girls supposed. She was very angry with Pauline for not confiding in her on Pauline's birthday, and at night she had managed to keep awake, and had risen softly from her cot and stood in her white night-dress by the window; and from there she had seen three little figures creeping side by side across the lawn—three well-known little figures. She had very nearly shouted after them; she had very nearly pursued them. But all she really did was to creep back into bed and say to herself in a tone of satisfaction:

"Now I knows. Now I will get lots of pennies out of Paulie."

She dropped into the sleep of a happy child almost as she muttered the last words, but in the morning she had not forgotten what she had seen.

On a certain day shortly after Penelope had recovered from her very severe fit of indigestion, she was playing on the lawn, making herself, as was her wont, very troublesome, when Briar, looking up from her new story-book, said in a discontented voice:

"I do wish you would go away, Penelope. You worry me awfully."

Penelope, instead of going away, went and stood in front of her sister.

"Does I?" she said. "Then I am glad."

"You really are a horrid child, Pen. Patty and Adelaide, can you understand why Pen is such a disagreeable child?"

"She is quite the most extraordinary child I ever heard of in the whole course of my life," said Adelaide. "The other night, when she woke up with a pain in her little tum-tum, she shouted, 'Vinegar! vinegar!' She must really have been going off her poor little head."

"No, I wasn't," said Penelope, who turned scarlet and then white. "It was vinegar—real vinegar."

It was to pale me.”

“Oh, don’t talk to her!” said Patty. “She is too silly for anything. Go away, baby, and play with sister Marjorie, and don’t talk any more rubbish.”

“You call me baby?” said Penelope, coming close to the last speaker, and standing with her arms akimbo. “You call me baby? Then I will ask you a question. Who were the people that walked across the lawn on the night of Paulie’s birthday? Who was the three peoples who walked holding each other’s hands?—little peoples with short skirts—little peoples about the size of you, maybe; and about the size of Briar, maybe; and about the size of Paulie, maybe. Who was they? You answer me that. They wasn’t ghostses, was they?”

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Briar turned pale; Patty glanced at her. Adelaide, who had watchful blue eyes, turned and looked from one sister to the other.

“You are talking rubbish,” said Briar. “Go and play.”

“Who was they?” repeated Pen.

“I don’t know.”

“Am I baby or big wise girl?”

“Oh, you are an infant Solomon! I don’t know who the people were.”

“Don’t you?”

Penelope looked at Briar with a sigh of disappointment. Then she whispered to herself:

“It’s ’cos of Adelaide. Course they don’t want to say anything when Addy’s there.”

She strolled away.

“What was the child talking about?” asked Adelaide.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” replied Briar. “She’s the rummiest little thing that ever walked. But there’s no good in taking any notice of what she says.”

“Of course no one does,” answered Adelaide. “But I do wonder if ghosts ever walk across the lawn. Do you believe in ghosts, Briar?”

“Certainly not,” said Briar. “No girl in her senses does.”

“I don’t know at all as to that,” replied Adelaide. “There was a girl that came to stay with Nancy King last year; her name was Freda Noell. She believed in ghosts. She said she had once been in a haunted house. What is it, Briar? Why do you shrug your shoulders?”

“I don’t know,” said Briar. “I don’t want to talk about ghosts. I don’t believe in them.”

She got up and crossed the lawn. The next moment Pen had tucked her hand inside her arm.

“You needn’t keep it from me,” she said in a whisper. “It was you and Patty and Paulie. I knew who you were, ’cos the moon shone on Patty’s Glengarry cap. You needn’t deny it.”

“I do deny it. I didn’t go,” said Briar.

She felt her heart smite her as she told this lie. She walked quickly.

“Do leave me,” she said. “You are a little girl that doesn’t at all know her own place.”

“But I do know it,” said Penelope. “My place is at the seaside. I want to go there. I’m ’terminated to go there. If I don’t go one way I’ll go another. Why should Paulie, what is the naughtiest of girls, have all the fun? I don’t mind Renny being there so much. And why should I, what is the very best of girls, be kept stuck here with only nurse and you childrens to bother me? I am going. I’m ’terminated.”

She marched away. Patty came up.

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“Patty,” said Briar, “I’ve done it.”

“What?” asked Patty.

“I’ve told a lie about it. I said we weren’t on the lawn at all. I told her she was talking nonsense.”

“Couldn’t you have got out of it by any other way?” asked Patty. “It doesn’t seem right to tell lies.”

“I could with any one but Pen; but Pen can see through a brick wall. I had to tell it, and very plump, too, where Pen was in the question.”

“Well, it makes me feel horrid,” said Patty. “I am sorry we went. I think we did awfully wrong.”

“We did it for Paulie. We’d do more than that for her,” replied Briar.

“I suppose so. I certainly love Paulie very much,” answered Patty.

“And, Patty,” continued Briar, “having told such a great black lie to help her, we must go through with it. Pen means mischief. She’s the sort of child who would do anything to gain anything. She wants to go to the seaside, and she wouldn’t mind whom she got into trouble if it suited her own ends. We must remember she means mischief, and if she talks again about three figures on the lawn, you and I have got to stick to it that we didn’t go. Do you understand?”

“I do, and I consider it awful,” said Patty.

She did not add any more, but went slowly into the house. Presently, feeling much depressed, she sought nurse's society. Nurse was turning some of the girls' skirts. She was a good needlewoman, and had clung to the house of Dale through many adverse circumstances. She was enjoying herself at present, and used often to say that it resembled the time of the fat kine in Egypt.

"Ah, Miss Patty!" she cried. "It's glad I am to see you, darling."

"Can I do anything for you, nurse?" asked Patty.

"Of course you can, dear. You can help me to unpick this frock. I am cutting it down to fit Miss Pen. It will make a very neat frock for her, and it seems unfair that dear Miss Tredgold should be at more expense than is necessary."

"Why," asked Patty, with a surprised look, "doesn't father pay for the things?"

"Mr. Dale!" cried nurse in a tone of wrath, "I'd like to see him. It's not that he wouldn't, and for all I can tell he may have the money; but, bless you, darling! he'd forget it. He'd forget that there was such a thing as dress wanted in all the world; and servants and food, and the different things that all well-managed houses must have, couldn't lie on his memory while you were counting twenty. Do you suppose if that dear, blessed lady didn't put her hand into her pocket in the way she does that you'd be having the right good time you are now having, and the nice clothes, and the good education, and the pretty ponies coming next week? And Miss Pauline, just because she's a bit pale, taken to the seaside? Not a bit of it, my dear Miss Patty. It's thankful you ought to be to the Providence that put it into your aunt's head to act as she has done. Ah! if my dear mistress was living she would bless her dear sister."

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"Did you know mother before she was married?" asked Patty, taking up a skirt and the pair of sharp scissors which nurse provided her with, and sitting down happily to her task.

"Didn't I live with her when she was Miss Tredgold?" asked nurse. "And didn't I over and over again help Miss Sophia out of scrapes? Oh, she was a wild young lady!"

"You don't mean to tell me that Aunt Sophy ever did anything wrong?"

"Nothing mean or shameful; but for temper and for spirit and for dash and for go there wasn't her like. Not a horse in the land was wild enough to please her. She'd ride bareback on any creature you gave her to mount, and never come to grief, neither. She broke horses that trainers couldn't touch. She had a way with her that they couldn't resist. Just a pat of her hand on their necks and they'd be quiet and shiver all over as though they were too delighted for anything. Oh, she did follow the hounds! My word! and she was admired, too. She was a young lady in a thousand. And as for wanting to have her own way, she was for all the world like our Miss Pauline. It strikes me those two have very much in common, and that is why Miss Tredgold has taken such a fancy to your sister."

"Do you think she has?" asked Patty.

"Do I think it?" cried nurse. "For goodness' sake, Miss Patty, don't cut the material. Do look where you are putting the scissors. Do I think it, miss? I know it. Miss Marjorie, sweet pet, you shall thread these daisies. You shall make a pretty chain of them to put around your neck. There's my little precious."

Fat, lovely, little Marjorie shrieked with delight when nurse put a coarse needle, to which was attached an equally coarse piece of cotton, and a basket of daisies before her. Marjorie tried to thread daisies, and uttered little cries of happiness, while Patty and nurse talked together.

"Miss Tredgold was a wonderful young lady, so handsome and high-spirited. But if she didn't always obey, she never did anything mean or underhand. Everybody loved her; and your poor mother was that took up with her that when my master proposed that they should marry, it was a good while before she'd consent—and all because she didn't want to part with Miss Sophy. She said that if Miss Sophy would consent to live with them she'd marry Mr. Dale at once, for she was very much attached to him. But Miss Sophy put down her foot. 'Live with a married couple!' she cried. 'Why, I'd rather die.' Well, my dear, there were words and tears and groans; but at last Miss Sophy took the bit between her teeth, and went off to an old relative, a certain Miss Barberry, in Scotland, and arranged to live with her and look after her. And your mother married; and when Miss Barberry died she left Miss Sophy every penny she possessed, and Miss Sophy is very rich now; and well she deserves it. Dear, dear! I seem to see Miss Sophia over again in our Miss Pauline. She was very comical, and so high-spirited and wild, although she'd never do an underhand thing."

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"Never?" asked Patty, with a sigh.

"Of course not. What do you take her for? Noble ladies what is ladies don't do mean sort of things."

Patty sighed again.

"What are you sighing for, Miss Patty? I hate to hear young ladies giving way to their feelings in that sort of fashion."

"I was only thinking that you compared Aunt Sophy to Pauline."

"And why shouldn't I? Is it you who want to belittle your sister? Miss Pauline is as high-spirited as ever young lady was, but neither would she do a mean or underhand thing."

Patty suppressed her next sigh. For a long time she did not speak.

"Nurse," she said when she next broke silence, "did you in the whole course of your life ever tell a lie?"

"My word!" cried nurse—"Miss Marjorie, you'll prick your little fingers if you hold the needle like that. This way, lovey. Did I ever tell a lie, Miss Patty? Goodness gracious me! Well, to be sure, perhaps I told a bit of a tarradiddle when I was a small child; but an out-and-out lie—never, thank the Almighty!"

"But what is the difference between a lie and a tarradiddle?"

"Oh, Miss Patty, there's a deal of difference. A tarradiddle is what you say when you are, so to speak, took by surprise. It isn't a lie out and out; it's the truth concealed, I call it. Sometimes it is a mere exaggeration. You say a person is very, very cross when maybe that person is hardly cross at all. I can't quite explain, miss; I suppose there's scarcely any one who hasn't been guilty of a tarradiddle; but a lie—a thought-out lie—never."

"Is a lie so very awful?" asked Patty.

"Awful!" repeated nurse.

She rose solemnly from her seat, went up to Patty, and put her hand under her chin.

"Don't you ever catch me a-seeing you a-doing of it," she said. "I wouldn't own one of you Dales if you told falsehoods. A black lie the Bible speaks of as a thing that ain't lightly forgiven. But, of course, you have never told a lie. Oh, my dear, sweet young lady, you quite frightened me! To think that one of my children could be guilty of a sin like that!"

Patty made no answer.

"I am tired of work," she said; "I am going out."

She flung down the skirt that she was helping to unpick and let the scissors fall to the ground.

"You might put your work tidily away, Miss Patty. You aren't half as useful and helpful as you ought to be."

Patty laid the skirt on a chair and slipped away. Nurse continued her occupation.

"I wonder what the child meant," she thought. "She looked queer when she spoke. But there! with all their faults—and goodness knows they've plenty—they're straight, every one of them. A crooked-minded Dale or a crooked-minded Tredgold would be a person unheard of. Oh, yes, they're straight enough, that's a blessing."

Meanwhile Patty sought her sister.

"It's worse than I thought," she remarked. "It's not even a tarradiddle."

"What do you mean?" asked Briar.

"The lie you told—the lie I am to help you to hide. It's black as ink, and God is very angry with little girls who tell lies. He scarcely can forgive lies. I was talking to nurse, and she explained."

"You don't mean to say that you told her about Pauline?"

"No," answered Patty in a voice of scorn. "I am not quite as bad as that. But she was speaking about Aunt Sophy and how wild she used to be, and she compared her to Paulie, and said that Aunt Sophy never did anything mean or underhand, and that Paulie never did either. I felt as if I could jump, for we know, Briar, what Paulie has done."

"Yes, we know," answered Briar. "And you and I have done very wrong, too. But there is no help for it now, Patty. We can't go back."

"It certainly does seem awful to think of growing up wicked," said Patty. "I don't like it."

"Don't let's talk about it," said Briar. "We'll have to suffer some time, but perhaps not yet. Do you know that the apples are getting ripe, and John wants us to help him to pick them? Oh! and the mulberry-tree, too, is a mass of fruit. What do you say to climbing the apple-trees and shaking down the apples?"

"Say!" cried Patty. "Delicious!"

Without more words the little girls ran off to the orchard, and nurse's remarks with regard to the difference between lies and tarradiddles were forgotten for the time being.

The days went on, but Pen did not forget. There came a morning when, a letter having arrived from Aunt Sophy saying that Pauline was much better—in fact, quite herself again—and that she and both the girls would be home in about a week, the little girl was rendered desperate.

"I has no time to lose," she said to herself. "I am 'terminated to go; I am going some fashion or t'other."

On this occasion she took a bolder step than she had yet attempted. She resolved to walk alone the entire distance between The Dales and The Hollies, which was about three miles. Pen was the sort of child who was never troubled by physical fear. She also knew the Forest very well. She had but to slip away; none of her sisters would miss her. Or if nurse wondered where she was, she would conclude that Pen was keeping her elder sisters company. If the girls wondered, they would think she was with nurse. Altogether the feat was easy of accomplishment, and the naughty child determined to go. She started off an hour after breakfast, opened the wicket-gate, let herself out, and began to walk quickly. These were the days of early autumn, when the Forest was looking its best; the trees were beginning to put on their regal dresses of crimson

and brown and gold. Already the rich red leaves were dropping to the ground. The bracken was withering to a golden brown, and the heather was a deep purple. Everywhere, too, little bluebells sprang up, looking as if they were making fairy music. There were squirrels, too, darting from bough to bough of the beech-trees; and rabbits innumerable, with white-tipped tails, disappearing into their various holes. A walk in the Forest on this special day was the sort to fascinate some children, but Pen cared for none of these things. Her way lay straight before her; her object was never for a moment forgotten. She meant to reach the sea by some means or other.

She was a somewhat tired and hot little person when at last she appeared outside the broad gravel walk that led to The Hollies; and it so happened that when she entered this walk her courage was put to a severe test, for Lurcher, the farmer's bulldog, happened to be loose. As a rule he was kept tied up. Now, Lurcher was a very discerning person. He attacked beggars in a most ferocious manner, but as to ladies and gentlemen a fierce bout of barking was sufficient. Pen, however, looked like neither a beggar nor a lady or gentleman. Lurcher did not know what to make of Pen. Some one so small and so untidy could scarcely be a visitor. She was much too short and much too stout, and her little legs were bleeding from the thorny brambles that she had come through during her journey. Accordingly Lurcher, with a low growl and a swift bound, pinned poor little Pen by the skirt of her short frock. He was sufficiently a gentleman not to hurt her, but he had not the least idea of letting her go. He pinned her even more firmly when she moved an inch away from him, and when she raised her voice he growled. He not only growled, but he shook her dress fiercely. Already she felt it snap from its waistband under Lurcher's terrible teeth. She was a very brave child, but her present predicament was almost more than she could bear. How long it lasted no one quite knew. Then there came a stride across the gravel, a shout from Farmer King, and Pen was transferred from the ground into his sheltering arms.

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"You poor little thing!" he said. "You poor little bit of a lass! Now, you don't tell me you are one of the Dales? You have their eyes—black as black most of them are. Are you a Dale?"

"Course I am," answered Penelope. "I'm Penelope Dale. He's a shocking bad dog. I never thought I could be frightened. I was 'termined to come, but I never thought you kept such a shocking, awful dog as that."

"I am more sorry than I can say, my little dear. I wonder now who let the brute out. He'll catch it from me, whoever he is. Here, Nancy! Hullo, Nancy! Come along here, quick!"

Nancy, looking fresh and smiling, stepped out of the open French window.

"Why," she said when she saw Pen, "wherever did you drop from?"

Pen began to cry.

"I wor 'termined to come," she said. "I wanted to see you most tur'ble bad."

"Poor little thing!" said the farmer. "She's got a bit of a fright. What do you think, Nancy? Lurcher had little miss by her skirt. He'd pinned her, so to speak, and he wouldn't let go, not if she fainted; and she was that brave, little dear, that she didn't do anything but just stood still, with her face as white as death."

"Wor I paled down?" said Pen. "Do tell me if I wor paled down a bit."

"You were as white as death, you poor little pretty," said the farmer; and then he kissed the little girl on her broad forehead, and hurried off to expostulate with regard to Lurcher.

Nancy took Pen into the house, and sat down in a cosy American rocking-chair with the little girl in her lap. She proceeded to gorge her with caramels and chocolates. Pen had never been so much fussed over before; and, truth, to tell, she had seldom enjoyed herself better.

"I wor 'termined—'termined to come," she repeated several times. At last her sobs ceased altogether, and she cuddled up against Nancy and went to sleep in her arms.

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Nancy lifted her up and put her on the horse-hair sofa; she laid a rug over her, and then stooped and kissed her. Afterwards she went out and joined her father.

"Whatever brought little miss here?" asked the farmer.

"That's more than I can tell you, father."

"And why don't the others come sometimes?" snapped Farmer King. "They none of 'em come, not even that pretty girl we made so much fuss over, giving her a gold locket and chain. Now, I'd like to find out, Nancy, my girl, if she has ever shown that locket and chain to her aristocratic aunt. Do you suppose the aristocratic lady has set eyes on it?"

Nancy laughed.

"I guess not," she said. "Paulie's a bit of a coward. She wants to know us and yet she don't. She wants to know us behind the aunt's back."

"Left hand, not right hand," said the farmer. "I don't like that sort."

"At any rate she can't come to us at present, father, for Miss Tredgold has taken her to the seaside."

"That's it, is it?" said the farmer, his face clearing. "Then I suppose little miss has come with a message. What did missie say about your friend, Nancy?"

"Nothing. She's asleep at present. I mean to let her have her sleep out, then give her some

dinner, and drive her home in the dogcart."

"Do as you like, Nance; only for mercy's sake don't make a fool of yourself over that family, for it strikes me forcibly they're becoming too grand for us."

Nancy said nothing further. She returned to the house and sat down in the room where Penelope slept. Her work-basket was open. She was making a pretty new necktie for herself. Nancy was a very clever workwoman, and the necktie grew under her nimble fingers. Presently she dived into the bottom of the basket and took out a gold thimble with a sapphire top and turquoises round the rim. She slipped it on to the tip of her slender first finger.

"I must send it back again," she said to herself. "I'd have done it before, but Pauline is away."

Just then she was attracted by a sound on the sofa. She turned. Pen's big black eyes were wide open; she was bending forward and gazing at the thimble.

"So you got it after all!" she said.

"Oh, child, how you startled me! What do you mean?"

"Why, that's Auntie Sophy's thimble. I was to get a penny if I found it."

Nancy was silent.

"How did it get into your work-basket?" asked Pen.

"I borrowed it from Paulie, and I'd have given it to her long ere this, but I heard she was away." 141

"Give it to me," cried Penelope. Her voice quite shook in her eagerness. "Give it to me at once, and I will take it back to her."

"I wish you would, Pen, I am sure; but you must be very careful not to lose it, for it is a real beauty. See, I will put it into this little box, and cover the box up."

Penelope pressed close to Nancy. Nancy placed the thimble in the midst of some pink cotton-wool and looked at it affectionately; then she tied up the little box, put brown paper round it, tied string round that again, and then she held it out to Pen.

"You are quite positive you won't lose it?" she said.

"Positive. I has a big pocket, and no hole in it. See for yourself, there's no hole. Turn it out, will you?"

Penelope's pocket proved to be quite safe, and Nancy, with a qualm at her heart which she could not account for, allowed the little girl to put the thimble therein.

"Well, that is settled," she cried. "And now I want to know what you came for. You are going to have dinner with father and me after a bit."

"No, I'm not," answered Pen. "I'm going home at once."

"But why did you come? Did Pauline send me a message?"

"No, she wouldn't."

"Why not? I've done a great deal for her."

"She's ongrateful," said Pen. "She didn't send no message. I 'spect she'll have forgot you when she comes back."

Nancy's face flamed.

"I can make it a little too hot for her if she does."

"What's making a thing too hot?" asked Penelope.

"Oh, making it so that you squirm and tingle and your heart goes pit-a-pat," replied Nancy. "There! I'm not going to talk any more. If you won't tell me why you came, I suppose you will come into the other room and have some dinner?"

"I won't. I'm going home. As Paulie didn't send you a message, are you going to make it hot for her?"

"That I am. Somebody will come here—somebody I know—to see somebody she knows; and there will be a begging and imploring, and somebody she knows will do nothing for somebody I know. Now, can you take that in?"

"You are very funny," answered Penelope, "but I think I can. I'm glad, and I'm not glad, that I comed. I won't stay to dinner; I'm going straight away home this blessed minute."

CHAPTER XX.

PEN VICTORIOUS.

Penelope managed to reach home unattended. She was tired and draggled and dusty, and also

very much scratched. Her sisters received her with whoops of astonishment and welcome. They had not missed her, it is true, but when they saw her coming sadly and sheepishly in at the wicket-gate they concluded that they had. Adelaide was the first to reach her.

"Don't ask me any questions and you'll hear no lies," was Pen's remark. She waved her fat hand as she spoke. "I am going to nurse straight away. I has something I wants to say to nurse. Has the post gone? I want to catch the post immediate."

"You are too queer for anything," said Adelaide; "but go your own way. You'll catch it for being out all by yourself in the woods."

"I won't catch it, but there are others who will," replied Penelope. "And now keep out of my way. I want to find nurse."

She marched in a most defiant and even queenly style towards the house; and the others, after laughing for a moment, returned to their various pursuits and forgot all about her.

When nurse saw Penelope she uttered a groan.

"There you come," she said. "You are a handful! You never turned up at dinner-time, although we looked for you everywhere. Now, where were you hiding?"

"Never mind that, nurse. Get out your writing 'terials."

"Now, whatever does the child mean? Sakes! you are scratched, and your nice new holland frock is all torn, and you are dusty and pale and trembling—as pale and trembling as can be."

"Is it pale I am?" cried Penelope. "Is it? Is it? Nurse, I love you, love you, love you!"

With a flop Penelope's fat arms were flung round nurse's neck; her hot little lips caressed nurse's cheeks.

"Oh," she cried, "how much I love you! Get writing 'terials quick. Get pen and ink and paper, and sit down and write. I will tell you what to say. You must write this instant minute. It is the most 'portant thing in all the world. Write, and be quick. If you don't I'll go to Betty, and she'll do what I want her to do."

"You needn't do that," cried nurse. "You are a queer child, and more trouble than you're worth, but when you are in a bit of a mess I'm not the one to refuse my aid. Who have I to write to?"

"To my darlingest Aunt Sophy."

"My word! What on earth have you got to say to her?"

"Get 'terials and you'll know."

Nurse complied somewhat unwillingly. She produced a portfolio, got out her ink-bottle and pen, dipped the pen in ink, and looked up at Penelope.

"Go on, and be quick," she said. "I can't be fashed with the whims of children. What is it that you want to say?"

"Write, 'Dear, darling Aunt Sophia.'"

"You are too queer!"

Nevertheless nurse put the words on the sheet of paper, and Pen proceeded to deliver herself quickly.

"I am paled down, and want change of air. My breaif is too quick. My legs is all tored with briers and things. I has got a prickly feeling in my froat, and I gets wet as water all over my hands and round my neck and my forehead. It's 'cos I'm weak, I 'spect."

"Miss Penelope," said the nurse, "if those symptoms are correct, it is the doctor you want."

"I has a doubly-up pain in my tum-tum," proceeded Penelope, taking no notice of nurse's interruption. "I shrieks in my sleep. I wants change of air. I am very poorly. Nursey is writing this, and she knows I am very poorly. I feel sort of as though I could cry. It's not only my body, it's my mind. I has got a weight on my mind. It's a secret, and you ought to know. Send for me quick, 'cos I want change of air.

PEN."

"I never wrote a queerer letter," said nurse; "and from the looks of you there seems to be truth in it. You certainly don't look well."

"You will send it, nursey?" asked Pen, trembling with excitement.

"Yes, child; you have dictated it to me, and it shall go by the post. Whether Miss Tredgold will mind a word you say or not remains to be proved. Now leave me, and do for goodness' sake try not to run about wildly any more for to-day at least."

Penelope left the room. She stooped slightly as she walked, and she staggered a little. When she got near the door she coughed. As she reached the passage she coughed more loudly.

"It's my froat," she said in a very sad tone, and she crept down the passage, nurse watching her from the open door of the nursery.

She did not guess that when Penelope turned the last corner she gave a sudden whoop, leapt nearly a foot into the air, and then darted out of the house as fast as she could.

"I 'spect I's done it this time," thought Pen.

Meanwhile in the nursery, after a moment's reflection, nurse added a postscript of her own to Pen's letter.

"Miss Penelope is very queer, and don't look well at all."

That letter was put in the post, and in due time received by Miss Tredgold.

Penelope began to count the hours. She knew that no answer could come for some time after the letter was written. During the next day she went at intervals to visit Betty, and begged her for drinks of vinegar; and as she paid Betty by more and more presents out of Pauline's old bandbox, she found that individual quite amenable. After drinking the vinegar Penelope once again suffered from the "doubly-up pain in her tum-tum." She spoke of her agonies to the others, who pitied her a good deal, and Josephine even presented her with some very precious peppermints for the purpose of removing it. Towards evening she seemed better, and talked continually of the seaside and how she intended to enjoy herself there. And then she suggested that her sisters should come and help her to pack her things. The girls naturally asked why they were to do it, and she replied:

"'Cos I'm going on a journey, and it's most 'portant. None of you are going, but I am."

"You're not going on any journey," said Lucy. "You do talk rubbish."

"What you bet?" asked Penelope, who saw an instant opportunity of making a little money.

"Nothing," replied Lucy. "You are talking rubbish. Get out of my way. I'm very busy."

Pen looked wildly around her. She was in such a state of suppressed excitement that she could stop at nothing. Her sisters were all close at hand. Patty and Briar were sitting as usual almost in each other's pockets. Adelaide, Josephine, Lucy, and Helen made a group apart. Pen thought carefully.

"There's six of 'em," she said to herself. "I ought to make a little money by six of 'em. Look here!" she called out. "You all say I'm not going on a journey to-morrow; I say I am. Will you give me a penny each if I go? Is it done? Is it truly done? If I don't go I'll give you a penny each."

"But you haven't got any pence to give us."

"I will borrow from nurse. I know she'll lend me the money. But I shan't need it, for I am going. Will you give me a penny each if I go?"

"Oh, yes, if you want it," said Adelaide.

"But remember," continued Lucy, "we shall keep you to your part of the bargain if you don't go."

"All right," cried Pen; and, having received the promise, she walked sedately across the grass.

"Six pennies! I'll find them useful at the seaside," she thought. "There's nothing like having a little money of your own. It buys sweetmeats and cakes. I'll tell Aunt Sophy that my froat is so sore, and that I must have constant sweetmeats. Six pennies will get a lot."

She walked more slowly. She was in reality in excellent health; even the vinegar was not doing her much harm.

"How hungry I'll be when I get to the seaside!" she said to herself. "I'll swell out and get very red and very fat. My body will be 'normous. Oh, there's father!"

Mr. Dale was seated near his window. His head was bent as usual over his work.

"Father could give me something," thought Pen. "He could and he ought. I'll ask him. Dad!" she called.

Mr. Dale did not answer.

"Dad!" called Pen again.

He looked up with a fretful expression.

"Go away, my dear," he said. "I am particularly busy."

"I will if you'll give me sixpence."

"Go away."

Pen's father bent again over his book. He forgot Penelope.

"He's sure to give me sixpence if I worrit him long enough," thought the naughty little girl.

She stood close to the window. Suddenly it occurred to her that if she drew down the blind, which she could easily do by pushing her hand inside the window and then planting her fat little person on the window-sill, she would cause a shadow to come before the light on her father's page.

"That will make him look up," she thought. "When he does I'll ask him again for sixpence. I'll tell him I won't go away till I get it."

She sat down on the window-sill, cleverly manipulating the blind, and Mr. Dale found an unpleasant darkness steal over his page.

"Draw up that blind and go away, Penelope," he said. "Do you hear? Go away."

"I will 'mediately you give me sixpence. I will draw up the blind and I'll go away," said Pen.

"I will give you nothing. You are an extremely naughty little girl."

Penelope sat on. Mr. Dale tried to read in the darkening light. Presently he heard a sniff. The sniff grew louder.

"My froat," said Penelope.

He glanced towards her. She was sitting huddled up; her back looked very round.

"Do go away, child. What is wrong?"

"My froat. I want something to moisten it. It is so dry, it hurts me."

"Go and get a drink of water."

"Oh, my froat! Oh, my tum-tum! Oh, my froat!" said Penelope again.

Mr. Dale rose from his seat at last.

"I never was so worried in my life," he said. "What is it, child? Out with it. What is wrong?"

Penelope managed to raise eyes brimful of tears to his face.

"If you knowed that your own little girl was suffering from bad froat and doubly-up tum-tum, and that sixpence would make her well—quite, really, truly well—wouldn't you give it to her?" said Penelope.

"How can sixpence make you well? If you really have a sore throat and a pain we ought to send for the doctor."

"Sixpence is much cheaper than the doctor," said Penelope. "Sixpence will do it."

"How?"

"It will buy peppermints."

"Well, then, here it is, child. Take it and be off."

Penelope snatched it. Her face grew cheerful. She shot up the blind with a deft movement. She jumped from her seat on the window-ledge. She was no longer doubled up.

"Thank you, dad," she said. "Thank you—thank you."

She rushed away.

"I'll have another sixpence to-morrow," she thought. "That's a whole beautiful shilling. I will do fine when I am at the seaside."

Penelope could scarcely sleep that night. She got up early the next morning. She was determined to stand at the gate and watch for the postman. The letters usually arrived about eight o'clock. The postman hove in sight, and Pen rushed to meet him.

"Have you letters—a letter for me?" she asked.

"No, Miss Penelope, but there is one for your nurse."

"It is from Easterhaze," said the child. "Thank you—thank you, posty."

She snatched the first letter away from the old man and darted away with it. Into the nursery she rushed.

"Here it is, nurse. Open it, quick! I am to go; I know I am."

Nurse did open the letter. It was from Miss Tredgold, and it ran as follows:

"DEAR NURSE: Penelope is evidently too much for you. I intend to remain two or three days longer in this pleasant place, so do not expect me home next week. I shall have Penelope here, so send her to me by the first train that leaves Lyndhurst Road to-morrow. Take her to the station and put her into the charge of the guard. She had better travel first-class. If you see any nice, quiet-looking lady in the carriage, put Penelope into her charge. I enclose a postal order for expenses. Wire to me by what train to expect the child."

The letter ended with one or two more directions, but to these Pen scarcely listened. Her face was pale with joy. She had worked hard; she had plotted much; she had succeeded.

"I feel as though I'd like to be really quite good," was her first thought.

Nurse expected that she would be nearly mad with glee; but she left the nursery quietly. She went downstairs quietly. Her sisters were at breakfast. She entered the room and stood before them.

"Pennies, please," she said.

"What do you mean?" asked Briar, who was pouring out coffee.

"Pennies from all of you, quick."

Josephine put on a supercilious face; Lucy sniffed; Helen and Adelaide went on with their breakfast as though nothing had happened.

Penelope came a little nearer.

"Must I speak up?" she said. "Must I ask again? Is you all deaf? I am going to Easterhaze to Aunt Sophy. Darling aunty can't do without me. She has sent for me as she wants me so badly. I'm going by the first train. I am much the most 'portant person in the house, and I's won my bet. I like betting. A penny from you all if you please."

The girls were excited and amazed at Pen's news.

"You are clever," said Briar. "How in the world did you get her to do it?"

"Tum-tum and sore froat," said Penelope bluntly. "Oh! and vinegar and paling down."

"You are really such an incomprehensible child that I am glad Aunt Sophy is going to manage you," was Patty's remark. "Here are your pence. Shall we help you to pack your things?"

"They are a'most packed. I did some myself last night. I took your new little trunk, Briar. I don't 'uppose you'll mind."

Briar did mind, but she knew it was useless to expostulate.

By eleven o'clock Penelope was off to Lyndhurst Road station. By twelve o'clock she was in charge of a red-faced old lady. In five minutes' time she was *en route* for Easterhaze. The old lady, whose name was Mrs. Hungerford, began by considering Pen a plain and ordinary child; but she soon had reason to change her views, for Pen was not exactly plain, and was certainly by no means ordinary. She stared fixedly at the old lady, having deliberately left her own seat and planted herself on the one opposite.

"Vinegar will do it," she said.

"What are you talking about, child?" asked Mrs. Hungerford.

"You are so red—such a deep red, I mean—much the same as chocolate. Vinegar will do it. Take three small glasses a day, and pay your Betty with vulgar sort of things out of an old bandbox."

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"The unfortunate child is evidently insane," was Mrs. Hungerford's thought. She spoke, therefore, in a reassuring way, and tried to look as though she thought Pen's remarks the most natural in the world.

Pen, however, read through her.

"You don't believe me," she said. "Now you listen. I look a pale little girl, don't I? I am nearly eight years old. I don't see why a girl of eight is to be trampled on; does you? I wanted to go, and I am going. It's tum-tum-ache and sore froat and paling cheeks that has done it. If you want to get what you don't think you will get, remember my words. It's vinegar does it, but it gives you tum-ache awful."

The old lady could not help laughing.

"Now, I wonder," she said, opening a basket of peaches, "whether these will give tum-ache."

Penelope grinned; she showed a row of pearly teeth.

"Guess not," she said.

The old lady put the basket between Penelope and herself.

"I have also got sandwiches—very nice ones—and little cakes," she said. "Shall we two have lunch together, even if my face is like chocolate?"

"It's a beauty face, even if it is, and I love you," said Penelope. "I think you are quite 'licious. Don't you like to look like chocolate?"

The old lady made no answer. Penelope dived her fat hand into the basket of peaches and secured the largest and ripest.

"It is the best," she said. "Perhaps you ought to eat it."

"I think I ought, but if you don't agree with me you shall have it."

Penelope hesitated a moment.

"You wouldn't say that if you didn't mean me to eat it," she said. "Thank you."

She closed her teeth in the delicious fruit and enjoyed herself vastly. In short, by the time Mrs. Hungerford and her curious charge reached Easterhaze it seemed to them both that they had known each other all their days.

Miss Tredgold, Verena, and Pauline met the train. The girls looked rosy and sunburnt. This was an ideal moment for Penelope. She almost forgot Mrs. Hungerford in her delight at this meeting with her relatives. But suddenly at the last moment she remembered.

"How are you, Aunt Sophy? I am scrumptiously glad to see you. How are you, Verena? How are you, Paulie? Oh! please forgive me; I must say good-bye to the chocolate old lady."

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And the chocolate old lady was hugged and kissed several times, and then Pen was at liberty to enjoy the delights of the seaside.

The lodgings where Miss Tredgold was staying were quite a mile from the station. Pen enjoyed her drive immensely. The look of the broad sea rolling on to the shore had a curious effect upon her strange nature. It touched her indescribably. It filled that scarcely awakened little soul of hers with longings. After all, it might be worth while to be good. She did not know why the sea made her long to be good; nevertheless it did. Her face became really pale.

"Are you tired, dear?" asked Miss Tredgold, noticing the curious look on the expressive little face.

"Oh, no, not that," replied Pen; "but I have never seen the sea before."

Miss Tredgold felt that she understood. Pauline also understood. Verena did not think about the matter. It was Verena's habit to take the sweets of life as they came, to be contented with her lot, to love beauty for its own sake, to keep a calm mind and a calm body through all

circumstances. She had accepted the sea as a broad, beautiful fact in her life some weeks ago. She was not prepared for Pen's emotion, nor did she understand it. She kept saying to herself:

"Nurse is right after all; it was not mere fancy. Little Penelope is not well. A day or two on the sands in this glorious air will soon put her straight."

Pauline, however, thought that she did understand her little sister. For to Pauline, from the first day she had arrived at Easterhaze, the sea had seemed to cry to her in one incessant, reiterating voice:

"Come, wash and be clean. Come, lave yourself in me, and leave your naughtiness and your deceits and your black, black lies behind."

And Pauline felt, notwithstanding her present happiness and her long days of health and vigor and glee, that she was disobeying the sea, for she was not washing therein, nor getting herself clean in all that waste of water. The old cry awoke again in her heart with an almost cruel insistence.

"Come, wash and be clean," cried the sea.

"I declare, Pauline, you are looking almost as pale as your sister," said Miss Tredgold. "Well, here we are. Now, Pen," she added, turning to Penelope, "I hope you will enjoy yourself. I certainly did not intend to ask you to join us, but as nurse said you were not well, and as your own extremely funny letter seemed to express the same thing, I thought it best to ask you here."

"And you did quite right, Aunt Sophy," said Penelope.

Then the look of the sea faded from her eyes, and she became once again a suspicious, eager, somewhat deceitful little girl. Once again the subtle and naughty things of life took possession of her. At any cost she must keep herself to the front. At any cost she must assume the power which she longed for. She was no longer a nursery child. She had won her way about coming to the seaside; now she must go still further. She must become a person of the greatest moment to Aunt Sophia. Aunt Sophia held the keys of power; therefore Penelope determined to devote herself to her.

The lodgings were extremely cheerful. They were in a terrace overhanging the sea. From the big bay-windows of the drawing-room you could see the sunsets. There was a glorious sunset just beginning when Penelope walked to the window and looked out. Miss Tredgold had secured the best rooms in this very handsome house, and the best rooms consisted of a double drawing-room, the inner one of which was utilized as a dining-room; a large bedroom overhead in which Verena and Pauline slept; and a little room at the back which she used for herself, and in which now she had ordered a cot to be placed for Penelope.

Penelope was taken upstairs and shown the arrangements that had been made for her comfort. Her eyes sparkled with delight when she saw the little cot.

"There's no time like the night for telling things," she thought to herself. "Aunt Sophy can't get away from me at night. It's only to stay awake, perhaps to pretend to have a nightmare. Anyhow, night is the time to do what I have to do."

Being quite sure, therefore, that she would get her opportunity of talking to Aunt Sophia, she revived for the time being to enjoy herself. Her volatile spirits rose. She laughed and talked, and ate an enormous meal. After the sort of tea-dinner was over the three girls went out by themselves on the sands.

"You may stay out half-an-hour," said Miss Tredgold: "no longer, for Penelope has to go to bed. Afterwards I will take a walk with you two elder ones if you care to have me."

"Of course we care to have you, dear Aunt Sophy," said Verena in her gentlest tone; and then the three started off. Penelope, in honor of her recent arrival, was promoted to the place in the middle. She laid a hand on each sister's arm and swung herself along. People remarked the trio, and said to themselves what a remarkably fat, healthy-looking little girl the one in the middle was.

"Well, Pen," said Pauline as they approached the house, having discussed all sorts of subjects, "I can't see where the tum-ache and the sore throat and the pale cheeks come in."

"They're gone," said Penelope. "I knew the sea would cure 'em. I am quite perfect well. I am going to be quite perfect well while I am here. I love the sea; don't you?"

"Come, wash and be clean," whispered the sea to Pauline.

She was silent. Verena said, however, that she greatly liked the sea. They went back to the house. Penelope was escorted upstairs. Pauline helped her to undress, and presently she was tucked into her little bed.

"It seems a'most as if I wor still a nursery child," she said to her elder sister.

"Why so?" asked Pauline.

"Being sent to bed afore you and Renny. I am quite as old as you and Renny—in my mind, I mean."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Pauline almost crossly.

"Paulie," said Penelope, taking hold of her hand and pulling her towards her, "I went to see Nancy King t'other day."

"Why did you do that?" asked Pauline.

"Because I wanted to come to the sea, and there was no other way. Vinegar wouldn't do it, nor tum-aches, but I thought Nancy might."

"I don't know what you mean," said Pauline. "In what possible way could Nancy King have brought you here?"

"Only that I got so desperate after seeing her that I wrote that funny, funny letter, and nurse helped me; and now I'm here, and I think I can do what I like. You had best be friends with me now, for I can do just what I like."

Pauline felt just a little afraid. She knelt down by Pen.

"Tell me why you went," she said. "You know you disobeyed Aunt Sophy when you went."

"Yes; but what's one more in a family doing disobeying things?" answered Pen in her glib fashion. "But now listen. I will tell you."

She related her adventures with much glee—her walk through the woods, her arrival, the terrible way in which Lurcher had treated her, the kindness of the farmer, the proposed dinner, Nancy's manners. She was working up to the grand climax, to the moment when she should speak about the thimble.

"What do you think?" she said suddenly. "Nancy put me on a sofa, and I slept. I slept sound, and when I woke up I saw Nancy sitting by the window sewing. She was making a blue scarf, and her thimble went flashing in and out; and what do you think, Paulie? What *do* you think?"

"Well?" said Pauline.

"Pauline, dear, are you ready?" called a voice from below.

"I must go," said Pauline; "but tell me at once, Pen, what you mean."

"It was the thimble—the lost one," said Penelope—"the one with the dark-blue top and the light-blue stones round the rim, the goldy thimble which was Aunt Sophy's."

In spite of her efforts Pauline did find herself turning white.

"Pauline, dear, we can't wait any longer," said Miss Tredgold's voice.

"I must go," said Pauline. "Tell me afterwards."

"Whisper," said Penelope, pulling her hand. "I have got it. The deep-blue top and the light-blue stones and the goldy middle—I have it all. And I can tell Aunt Sophy, and show it, and I will if—if you don't tell me about—"

"About what?"

"About that time when three peoples walked across the lawn—the night after your birthday, I mean. Will you tell? I asked Briar, and she said she didn't know. She told a lie. Are you going to tell a lie, too? If you do I will— Well, I won't say any more; only I have put it in the safest of places, and you will never find it. Now you can go down and go out with Aunt Sophy. Now you know, 'cos I've told you."

Pauline slowly left the room. She felt dazed. Once again Miss Tredgold called her. She ran to her washstand, filled her basin with cold water, and dipped her face into it. Then she ran downstairs. She found it difficult to analyze her own sensations, but it seemed to her that through her little sister's eyes she saw for the first time her own wickedness.

"To think that Pen could do it, and to think that I could be afraid of her!" she thought.

She went out and walked with her aunt and Verena, but the insistent voice of the sea, as with each swish of the waves it cried, "Come, wash and be clean," hit like a hammer on her brain.

"What is the matter with Pauline?" thought Verena.

"The child is tired; she is not quite well yet," was Miss Tredgold's mental reflection.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WHITE BAY.

Penelope did not repeat her threat, but she watched Pauline. Miss Tredgold also watched Pauline. Verena felt uncomfortable, without quite knowing why. The keen vigor and joy of the first days at the seaside had departed. Pauline became pale once more, and Miss Tredgold's anxieties about her were revived. The Dales were a healthy race, but one or two of the Tredgolds had died of consumption. Miss Tredgold remembered a young—very young—sister of her own who had reached Pauline's age, and then quite suddenly had become melancholy, and then slightly unwell, and then more unwell, until the fell scourge had seized her as its prey. She had died when between sixteen and seventeen. Miss Tredgold seemed to see her sister's face in Pauline's. She did not for a single moment accuse the child of any wrong-doing. She did not

imagine that what ailed her could have to do with the mind. Nevertheless she was anxious about her. Miss Tredgold had a good deal of penetration, but she was not accustomed to children. She thought that children of Pen's age were more little animals than anything else. It did not occur to her that a small child like Pen could have a mind of a very extraordinary order, and that the mind of this child could work in a direction which might hurt others. She did not suppose such a terrible child could exist.

Pauline was therefore more or less a prey to the naughtiness of Pen, who used her as a weapon for her own enjoyment. Pen was quite determined to enjoy herself at the seaside. She would have her bucket and spade and make castles in the sand as long as ever she liked, and she would play with other children, and would make acquaintance with them. She insisted also on going very often to the shops to buy caramels or chocolates. In short, she was determined that during her brief stay at Easterhaze she would have as good a time as possible. It is quite on the cards that she would not have had so good a time as she did but for the agency of Pauline. Pauline, however, in spite of herself, sided with Pen. She almost hated Pen, but she sided with her. She used to throw her voice into the scale of Pen's desires, and Pen in consequence got pretty much what she wanted.

There came a day when two children, a boy and a girl of the name of Carver, ran up to Pen and asked her if she would join them in going round the next promontory and gathering shells in a wide bay on the other side, which was known as the White Bay. The way to this bay, except at low-water, was not very safe, as during high-tide the sea was apt to come up and cut off retreat. Pen, however, knew nothing about this. The moment she was asked to go it occurred to her that there could be no such delightful place as the White Bay anywhere else in the world. She knew well, however, that Miss Tredgold never allowed her to go fifty yards from the house on either side. She looked up. Pauline was walking along the upper walk. She had a story-book in her hand. She meant to reach one of the shelters and sit down there to read. Pen turned to the two Carvers and said that she must ask permission, but she would be with them in a minute. She then scrambled up the path and ran to Pauline's side.

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"Pauline," she said, "I am going to the White Bay with the Carvers—those two children there—that boy and girl; you see 'em. We are going at once. They have got a basket of cakes, and we are going to gather shells and have a jolly time. We won't be back till one o'clock."

"But you can't go," said Pauline. She did not know of any danger in going; she only thought that Penelope meant to disobey Miss Tredgold. "Aunt Sophy is out, and she has not given you leave," she said. "You must stay where you are, Pen."

"But you can give me leave, Paulie, darling, can you not?"

"I can't do anything of the sort; you mustn't ask me."

Pen's eyes danced. The children on the sands called out to her.

"Be quick, little girl, or we'll be cotched. If nurse comes out she won't let us go. We can go if we start at once."

"Well, I'm off. You must give me leave, Paulie. If you don't I will—"

"Don't!" said Pauline, backing away from her sister. She felt a sort of terror when Penelope taunted her with her superior knowledge and the cruel use she meant to put it to.

"Go if you like," she said, in a white heat of passion. "You are the worry of my life."

Pen gave her a flashing, by no means good sort of glance, and then tore down the winding path which led to the sands. Pauline got up; she left her seat by the shore and went inland.

"I don't know how I am to bear it," she said to herself. "Pen has made me so wretched. I was hoping that nothing would be known. I was trying to forget, and I was making a lot of good resolves, and I am loving Aunt Sophy more and more each day. Why have I got such a dreadful little sister as Pen? She is like none of the rest. It seems almost incredible that I should be in the power of such a small child. Nevertheless I am in her power. I had no right to let her go to the White Bay; still, I told her to go, for I couldn't bear the agonies I should have to go through if I refused. Oh, I am wretched! Pen practically knows everything; so does Patty, and so does Briar. But they're safe enough; they won't betray me—they wouldn't for all the world. As to Pen, I don't know what she is made of. She will be a terrible woman by-and-by."

Pauline walked on until she heard Verena's voice. She then turned back.

"Aunt Sophy said we were to go up to the town to meet her," said Verena. "She's doing some shopping. She wants to get a new autumn hat for you, and another for me. Come along, Paulie. We are to be at Murray's in the High Street at eleven o'clock."

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Pauline turned and walked soberly by her sister's side.

"Are you as tired as ever this morning, Paulie?" asked Verena.

"I am not tired at all," replied Pauline.

Verena considered for a minute.

"Aunt Sophy is often anxious about you," she said. "I can't imagine why, but she is. She says that she doesn't think you are at all strong."

"Oh, I am!" interrupted Pauline. "I wish she wouldn't worry about me. I wish you'd tell her not to worry. I am really as strong as any girl could be. Do tell her not to fret about me any more."

"Where is Pen?" said Verena suddenly.

Pauline did not speak.

"I suppose she is down on the beach as usual," said Verena again in a careless tone. "She's always down there. She is such a queer little mite!"

"Don't let's talk about her," said Pauline almost crossly.

The girls turned their conversation to other matters, and when they joined Miss Tredgold at Murray's shop they had both forgotten the existence of their little sister Penelope.

Meanwhile that young person was having a good time. Having gained her wish, she was in excellent spirits, and was determined to make herself extremely agreeable to the Carvers. She thought them quite nice children. They were different from the children at home. They had lived almost all their lives in London. They told Pen a good many stories about London. It was the only place worth living in, Harry Carver said. When you went out there you always turned your steps in the direction of the Zoo. Pen asked what the Zoo was. Harry Carver gave her a glance of amazement.

"Why, it's chock-full of wild beasts," he said.

Pen thought this a most exciting description. Her cheeks paled; her eyes grew big. She clasped hold of Harry's arm and said in a trembling voice:

"Are you joking, or do you mean real lions and bears and tigers?"

"I mean real lions and bears and tigers," said Harry. "Oh, if you only heard the lions roar! We see them fed, too. It is fun to hear them growling when they get their meat; and the way they lick it—oh, it's most exciting!"

"So it is," said Nellie Carver. "It's awful fun to go to the Zoo."

"You must be very courageous," said Pen, who did not know that the wild beasts were confined in cages.

Neither Eleanor nor Harry Carver thought it worth while to enlighten Pen with regard to this particular; on the contrary, they determined to keep it to themselves. It was nice to have a little girl like Pen looking at them with awe.

"It isn't everybody who can go to the Zoo," proceeded Harry. "There are people that the wild beasts don't ever care to touch. Nellie and I are that sort; we're made that way. We walk about amongst them; we stroke them and pet them. I often sit on the neck of a lion, and quite enjoy myself."

"My pet beast for a ride is a panther," said Nellie, her eyes sparkling with fun at her own delicious ideas; "but most children can never ride on lions and panthers."

"I don't believe you ride on them," said Pen. "You don't look half brave enough for that."

"Why don't you think us brave?" asked Harry. "You are not a nice girl when you talk in that way. You wouldn't even be brave enough to ride on the elephants. Oh, it's very jolly for the real brave people when they go to the Zoo."

"And is that the only place to go to in London?" asked Pen.

As she spoke she quickened her steps, for the children were now crossing the extreme end of the promontory round which was the celebrated White Bay.

"There are other places. There's the British Museum, full of books. There are miles and miles of books in London, and miles and miles of pictures."

"What an awful place!" said Pen, who had no love for either books or pictures. "Don't tell me any more about it. Go on ascribing the wild animals. Is there serpents at the Zoo?"

"Tons of 'em. When they have gorged a rabbit or a lamb or a girl whole, they lie down and sleep for about a week."

"They don't gorge girls!"

"They think nothing of it; that is, if the girl is the sort of child they don't like."

"I won't go," said Pen. "I am not the sort of child the wild beasts would love. I think maybe I might be crunched up by the lions. I shan't go."

"Well, no one asked you," said Harry. "You are quite certain to be eaten, so you had best stay away."

"Why do you say that?"

Harry glanced at his sister. Nellie laughed. Harry laughed also.

"Why do you talk in that way, you horrid boy?" said Pen, stamping her foot. "What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you, only you need not try to kill me with your eyes. The wild beasts only like good uns. You ain't good. The wild beasts would soon find that out."

For some extraordinary reason Pen found herself turning pale. She had a moment of actual fear. At this instant she would have resigned the thimble—the golden thimble, with its sapphire top and turquoise rim—to the safe keeping of Pauline. For if Pauline had the thimble Pen would have very little to say against her. As long as she possessed the thimble she felt that Pauline was

in her power. She liked the sensation, and she was honest enough to own as much.

The conversation was now quickly turned. The children found plenty of shells in the White Bay. Soon they were sitting on the sands picking them up and enjoying themselves as only children can.

"So," said Pen, pushing back her hat and fixing her eyes on Harry's face, "you comed here without leave?"

"Of course we did," said Harry. "Won't nurse be in a state when she finds we've gone! She will rush up and down in front of the house and cry, for father and mother have gone away for the whole day, and nurse is in sole charge. Oh, won't she be in a state! She went off to walk with her young man, and we thought we'd play a joke on her, for she's often told us not to come here. 'If you go near that White Bay,' she said, 'you will be drowned as sure as sure.' She daren't tell father and mother because of her young man. Isn't it fun?"

"Yes," said Penelope, "it's prime fun; but isn't this fun, too? You won't be able to go to that Zoo place any more."

"Now what do you mean?"

"Why, this: the animals will eat you up. You are bad, same as me. You two won't be able to go to any more Zoos;" and Pen rolled round and round in fiendish delight.

The other children looked at her with anything but approval.

"I don't like her," whispered Nellie to her brother.

"Of course you don't like bad little girls," replied Harry. "Let's run away at once and leave her. Let's."

They scrambled to their feet. To love a new playmate and yet without an instant's warning to desert her was quite in accordance with their childish ideas. In a moment they were running as fast as their legs would permit across the sands. The tide had been coming in fast for some time.

For a moment Pen sat almost petrified; then she rushed after them. She was wild with passion; she had never been so angry in all her life. There were many times when the other children at The Dales treated her with scant courtesy, but to be suddenly deserted in this fashion by strange children was more than she could endure.

"Oh, how bad you have got! You are so bad—so dreadfully, horribly bad—that the tide is certain to come in and drown you up," she cried. "You can't go away from me; you can't. Oh, see! it has comed;" and Pen danced up and down and clapped her hands in triumph.

She was right. She had gained a complete victory. Just at the extreme end of the promontory a gentle wave, peaceful, pretty, and graceful, curled up against the solid rock. It had scarcely retired in bashful innocence when another wave tumbled after it. They looked like charming playfellows. Then came a third, then a fourth and a fifth. Faster and faster they rolled in, flowing up the white sands and making a white foam round the rock.

The little Carvers stood still, transfixed with a curious mingling of delight, excitement, and horror. Pen ceased to jump up and down. Presently she ceased to laugh. She was only a very small girl, and did not in the least realize her danger; nevertheless, as she used her eyes to good purpose, and as she quickly perceived that the opposite side of the bay was now shut away by a great body of water, it did occur to her that they would have to stay in their present shelter for some time. Harry turned round slowly. Harry was ten years old, and he understood. He had heard his father talk of the dangerous White Bay. He went straight up to Pen, and, taking her hand, burst out crying.

"It don't matter," he said—"it don't matter whether we are good or whether we are bad. We can none of us ever go to the Zoo again. Nellie and I won't ever go any more, and you can never go at all."

"What do you mean?" asked Pen.

Her heart began to beat fast and loud.

"What do you mean? Oh, you dreadful bad——"

"Don't call names," said Harry. "You will be sorry by-and-by; and by-and-by comes soon. We have got to be drowned, all three of us."

CHAPTER XXII.

"OUR FATHER" IS BEST.

Pauline and Verena found Miss Tredgold waiting for them. They went into the shop, which was quite one of the best shops in the High Street. There Miss Tredgold asked to see hats, and presently the two girls and their aunt were absorbed in the fascinating occupation of trying on

new headgear. Miss Tredgold was buying a very pretty hat for herself also. It was to be trimmed with lace and feathers, and Verena had a momentary sense of disappointment that she was to have nothing so gay to wear on her own head. The attendant who was serving them made a sudden remark.

"Yes, ma'am," she said, "this little brown hat trimmed with velvet will exactly suit the dark young lady." Here she looked at Pauline. "And I should venture to suggest a very little cream-colored lace introduced in front. The autumn is coming on, and the young lady will find this hat very suitable when the weather changes."

"Well, the weather seems inclined to remain fine," said Miss Tredgold, glancing out of the window, where a very blue sky met her gaze. There were heavy white clouds, however, drifting quickly across the sky, and the young shop attendant said:

"I hear that there's a storm expected. And anyhow it is high-tide to-night. The tide will come up and quite cover the White Bay this evening. It is always more or less dangerous there, but it is specially dangerous to-day. I never like these high-tides; children and nursemaids are so apt to forget all about them."

Miss Tredgold muttered something conventional. Pauline suddenly sat down on a chair.

"How white you are, dear!" said Miss Tredgold. "Would you oblige me," she added, turning to the attendant, "by bringing this young lady a glass of water?"

But Pauline had already recovered herself.

"Please don't," she said. "I want to get out. I want to get the air. Don't—don't keep me."

Her movement was so sudden and so unexpected that neither Miss Tredgold nor Verena had time to say a word. The people in the shop saw a somewhat untidy-looking little girl rush wildly down the stairs and out of doors, and long before Miss Tredgold had time to recover her scattered senses that same little girl was tearing as though on the wings of the wind up the High Street. Panting, breathless, overpowered with emotion, she presently reached the long flat stretch of beach at the farther end of which was the dangerous White Bay. Never in all her life had Pauline run as she did now. Faster and faster flew her feet. There was a noise in her ears as though something was hammering on her brain. She was almost faint with terror. Should she be in time? Should she be too late? Oh! she must be in time.

Presently she saw the far end of the promontory. Her heart gave a bound and almost stood still. What was that white thing curling round it? Water? Oh, yes; but she did not mind. She had waded before now. This was a case of wading again. She reached the spot, and a moment later she had torn off her shoes and stockings, had gathered her skirts round her waist, and was walking through the waves. The water was already over a foot deep. There was also a strong tide, and she had some difficulty in keeping her feet. She managed to hold her own, however, and found herself a minute or two later, drenched all over, panting and trembling, but still safe in the White Bay. To her relief, she saw three terrified children crouching up as near as they dared to the water. Even now a great wave, deeper and stronger than its predecessors, rolled in. It took Pauline off her feet just as she was clambering to dry ground. She recovered herself, ran up to Pen, took her hand, and said:

"We have played pickaback before now. Get on my back this moment; don't stop to think."

"I daren't," said Pen.

"Little boy—I don't know your name," said Pauline—"put Pen onto my back whatever happens."

Harry Carver sprang towards Pen.

"You must," he said. "She is brave; she is a true heroine. The lions and tigers would love her. Get on her back and she will return for us. Oh! be quick—do be quick—for we don't any of us want to be drowned."

"Can you swim?" asked Pauline. "No; I know you can't. I haven't a moment to stay; I'll come back somehow."

She struggled towards the water, but Pen scrambled off her back and stood firm on the ground.

"I am bad," she said—"there never was anybody much badder—but I'm not going first. Take that little girl; I will go afterwards."

"Come, little girl," said Pauline.

Harry rushed towards his sister.

"Do go, Nellie. Let mother keep one of us. I don't mind being drowned—not a bit. You tell mother I don't mind. Go, Nellie; do go with the big brave girl."

So Pauline carried Nellie through the rising tide, and, marvellous to relate, did land her safely on the other side.

"Now look here," she said, "you must rush home as fast as you can, and when you get there you are to say that there are two girls and a boy in the White Bay, and that your people are to bring a boat immediately. Don't waste a second. Find somebody. If all your people are out, go to ours. Our house is No. 11. You understand? There isn't a minute to lose."

"Yes, see you go," shouted Harry Carver. "And if you are too late, be sure you tell mother that I wasn't afraid to drown."

Nellie Carver began to run as fast as she could across the sands. Pauline hesitated for a moment; then she deliberately waded back to the other two. The water was up to her waist now, and she had the greatest difficulty in keeping her feet.

"I couldn't face anybody again if Pen were drowned," she said to herself. "If she drowns, so will I. It is the only thing fit for me. Perhaps when God sees that I am sorry, and that I did try to save Pen, He will forgive me; but I am not sure. Anyhow, I deserve to be drowned. I could never, never face the others if Pen were to die because of me."

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She was just able to scramble again out of the water on the White Bay side. The tide was coming in with great rapidity. It was hopeless to think of carrying Pen across.

"Let us go to the top part of the bay, as close to the rocks as possible," said Pauline; "and don't let's be really frightened, for I am sure the boat will be in time."

"Oh, I am certain of it!" said Harry. "Nellie never does lose her head. She won't want us to drown, so she'll hurry up."

"Give me your hand, Pen," said Pauline. "You are a very brave little girl to let the other little girl go first. I am glad you did it."

"Will God remember that about me by-and-by?" asked Pen.

"I hope so," replied Pauline, with a shiver.

She took Pen's icy hand and began to rub it.

"It isn't at all good for you to shiver like this," she said. "Here is a bright piece of sunshine. Let us run up and down in the sunshine. It doesn't seem, somehow, as though anybody could drown when the sun shines."

"Maybe the boat will be in time," said Harry.

They ran up and down for some time, and then stood quiet. Pauline was very silent. Beside the other two children she felt quite old and grown-up. She had got Pen into this terrible scrape; it was her mission to help them both. If they must all die, she at least would have to show courage. She was not ready to die. She knew that fact quite well. But she had naturally plenty of pluck, and fearful as her present surroundings were, she would not have been afraid but for that ugly black thing which rested on her conscience. Penelope looked full into her face. There was something also pricking Penelope's conscience. The three children stood close together on the little white patch of sand which had not yet been covered by the waves. The wind was getting up, and the waves were mounting higher; they rushed farther and farther up the bay, and curled and swept and enjoyed themselves, and looked as though they were having a race up the white sands. Pauline made a rapid calculation, and came to the conclusion that they had about half-an-hour to live; for the bay was a very shallow one, and when the wind was in its present quarter the tide rose rapidly. She looked back at the rocks behind her, and saw that high-water mark, even on ordinary occasions, was just above their heads. This was what is called a spring-tide. There was not the least hope.

"If only we could climb up," she thought.

Then Penelope gave her hand a great tug. She looked down. Pen went on tugging and tugging.

"Look," she said; "stoop and look."

In the palm of Pen's hand lay the thimble.

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"Take it," said Pen. "I comed with it to make mischief, but I won't never tell now—never. Take it. Put it in your pocket. I am sorry I was so bad. Take it."

Pauline did take the little gold thimble. She slipped it into her pocket; then she stooped and kissed Pen.

"What are you two doing?" said Harry. "Why don't you talk to me? Can't I do something to help? I'm ten. How old are you?"

"I was fourteen a few weeks ago," said Pauline.

"Granny!" said the boy. "Why, you are quite old; you are withering up. I wouldn't like to be fourteen. You must know a monstrous lot. You are a very plucky one to come through the water as you did. I wish I could swim, and I wouldn't let the waves get the better of me; but I'm glad I let Nellie see that I wasn't afraid of drowning. Do you mind drowning, big, big, old girl?"

"Yes, I do," said Pauline.

"You have a queer sort of look in your eyes, like the little one has in hers. Are you wicked, too?"

"You have guessed it," said Pauline.

"I expect we're all wicked for that matter; but we can say our prayers, can't we?"

"Yes," said Pauline, and now her lips trembled and the color faded from her cheeks. "Let us say them together."

"By-and-by," said Pen. "We needn't say our prayers yet. It will be some time afore the water will touch us; won't it, Paulie?"

Pauline knew that the water would come in very quickly. Harry looked full at Pen, and then he nodded his head. He came to Pauline and whispered something in her ear.

"What is it?" she said.

"She's little," he said. "She's quite a baby—not eight yet. I am ten. When the water begins to come in we'll lift her in our arms and raise her above it; shan't we?"

"Yes; that is a very good thought," said Pauline. She looked back again at the rocks. They were smooth as marble; there did not seem to be a possible foothold. She felt a sense of regret that they had not gone to the farther end of the bay, where the rocks were lower and more indented, and where it might be possible for a brave boy and girl to get temporary foothold; but the sea had already reached those rocks and was dashing round them.

"I wish I had thought of it," said Pauline.

"What about?"

"The rocks—those rocks out there."

The words had scarcely passed her lips before Harry darted back. A wave from the incoming tide had rolled over his feet.

Pen uttered a sudden cry:

"I am frightened. I won't drown. I am awful frightened."

She began to shriek.

"Try and keep up your courage, darling," said Pauline. "It won't be long. It will be quickly over, and I will stay close to you. Paulie will be close to you."

"Let us get her to stand on our two shoulders, and we'll lean up against the rocks," said Harry. "She can steady herself against the rock, and I will support you both. Here, I will hoist her up. Now, missy, you look slippy. That's it."

Harry was a very active boy, and he did manage to lift Pen, who was stiff with cold and fright, and miserable with a sense of her own naughtiness, on to Pauline's and his shoulders. When she was established in that position she was propped up against the rocks.

"Now you are safe," said Harry, looking back at her and trying to laugh. "We'll both drown before you. See how safe you are."

Just for a moment Pen was somewhat consoled by this reflection. But presently a fresh terror seized her. It would be so awful when she was left alone and there was only a dead Pauline and a dead Harry to keep her company. She had never seen anybody die, and had not the least idea what death meant. Her terrors grew worse each moment. She began to cry and whimper miserably, "I wish that boat would come."

Another wave came in and washed right over both Pauline's and Harry's ankles. They were jammed up against the rocks now. This big wave was followed by a second and a third, and soon the children were standing in water very nearly up to their knees.

"Seems to me," said Harry in a choky voice, "that it is about time we began our prayers. It is like going to sleep at night. Just when you are preparing to sleep you say your prayers, and then you dump your head down on your pillow and off you go to by-bye land. Then mother comes and kisses you, and she says— Oh, bother! I don't want to think of that. Let's try and fancy that it is night. Let's begin our prayers. Oh, what a wave that is! Why, it has dashed right into my eyes."

"How far up is the water now, Pauline?" asked Penelope from her position.

"It is not very far up yet," replied Pauline in as cheerful a tone as she could. "We had better do what Harry says, and say our prayers."

"Shall us?" said Pen.

"I think so," replied Pauline.

There was a strange sensation in her throat, and a mist before her eyes. Her feet were so icy cold that it was with difficulty she could keep herself from slipping.

"Which prayer shall we say?" asked Harry. "There's a lot of them. There's our special private prayers in which we say, 'God bless father and mother;' and then there's 'Our Father.'"

"'Our Father' is best," said Pauline.

The children began repeating it in a sing-song fashion. Suddenly Pen violently clutched hold of Pauline.

"Will God forgive our badnesses?" she asked.

"He will—I know He will," answered Pauline; and just at that instant there came a cry from Harry.

"A boat! a boat!" he shrieked. "And it's coming our way. I knew Nellie was a brick. I knew she'd do it."

A boat rowed by four men came faster and faster over the waves. By-and-by it was within a stone's-throw of the children. A big man sat in the stern. Harry glanced at him.

"Why, it's father!" he cried. "Oh, father, why did you come home? I thought you had gone away for the day. Father, I wasn't a bit afraid to drown—not really, I mean. I hope Nellie told you."

"Yes, my brave boy. Now, see, when I hold out my hand, spring up carefully or the boat will capsize."

The next instant a stalwart hand and arm were stretched across the rapidly rising waves, and Harry, with a bound, was in the boat.

"Lie down in the boat, and stay as quiet as a mouse," said his father.

Pauline, already up to her waist in water, struggled a step or two and was dragged into the boat; while two of the men bent over, and, catching Penelope round the waist, lifted her into their ark of shelter.

"It was touch-and-go, sir," said one of the sailors who had accompanied Harry's father. "Five minutes later and we could have done no good."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DULL WEIGHT.

The rest of that day passed for Pauline in a sort of dream. She felt no fear nor pain nor remorse. She lay in bed with a languid and sleepy sensation. Aunt Sophia went in and out of the room; she was all kindness and sympathy. Several times she bent down and kissed the child's hot forehead. It gave Pauline neither pain nor pleasure when her aunt did that; she was, in short, incapable of any emotion. When the doctor came at night his face looked grave.

"The little girl is all right," he said. "She has had a terrible fright, but a good night's rest will quite restore her to her usual health; but I don't quite like the look of the elder girl." 165

Verena, who was in the room, now came forward.

"Pauline is always pale," she said. "If it is only that she looks a little more pale than usual——"

"It isn't that," interrupted the doctor. "Her nervous system has got a most severe shock."

"The fact is this," said Miss Tredgold. "The child has not been herself for some time. It was on that account that I brought her to the seaside. She was getting very much better. This accident is most unfortunate, and I cannot understand how she knew about Penelope."

"It was a precious good thing she did find it out," said the doctor, "or Mr. Carver's two little children and your young niece would all have been drowned. Miss Pauline did a remarkably plucky thing. Well, I will send round a quieting draught. Some one had better sleep in the child's room to-night; she may possibly get restless and excited."

When Miss Tredgold and Verena found themselves alone, Miss Tredgold looked at her niece.

"Can you understand it?" she asked.

"No, Aunt Sophy."

"Has Pen told you anything?"

"No."

"We must not question her further just now," said Miss Tredgold. "She will explain things in the morning, perhaps. Why did the children go to the White Bay—a forbidden place to every child in the neighborhood? And how did Pauline know that they were there? The mystery thickens. It annoys me very much."

Verena said nothing, but her eyes slowly filled with tears.

"My dear," said Miss Tredgold suddenly, "I thought it right this afternoon to send your father a telegram. He may arrive in the morning, or some time to-morrow; there is no saying."

"Oh, I'm sure he will come if he remembers," said Verena.

"That's just it, Renny. How long will he remember? Sometimes I think he has a fossil inside of him instead of a heart. But there! I must not abuse him to you, my dear."

"He is really a most loving father," said Verena; "that is, when he remembers. Why he should forget everything puzzles me a good deal; still, I cannot forget that he is my father."

"And you are right to remember it, dear child. Now go and sleep in the same room with Pen, and watch her. I will take care of Pauline."

Pauline was given her sleeping draught, and Miss Tredgold, placing herself in an easy-chair, tried to think over the events of the day. Soon her thoughts wandered from the day itself to the days that had gone before, and she puzzled much over Pauline's character and her curious, half-repellent, half-affectionate attitude towards herself. 166

"What can be the matter with the child?" she thought. "She doesn't really care for me as the others do, and yet sometimes she gives me a look that none of the others have ever yet given me, just as if she loved me with such a passionate love that it would make up for everything I have ever missed in my life. Now, Verena is affectionate and sweet, and open as the day. As to Pen, she is an oddity—no more and no less. I wish I could think her quite straightforward and honorable; but it must be my mission to train her in those important attributes. Pauline is the

one who really puzzles me.”

By-and-by Pauline opened her eyes. She thought herself alone. She stretched out her arms and said in a voice of excitement:

“Nancy, you had no right to do it. You had no right to send it away to London. It was like stealing it. I want it back. Nancy, I must have it back.”

Miss Tredgold went and bent over her. Pauline was evidently speaking in her sleep. Miss Tredgold returned again to her place by the window. The dawn was breaking. There was a streak of light across the distant horizon. The tide was coming in fast. Miss Tredgold, as she watched the waves, found herself shuddering. But for the merest chance Pauline and Pen might have been now lying within their cold embrace. Miss Tredgold shuddered again. She stood up, and was just about to draw the curtain to prevent the little sleeper from being disturbed by the light, when Pauline opened her eyes wide, looked gravely at her aunt, and said:

“Is that you, Nancy? How strange and thin and old you have got! And have you brought it back at last? She wants it; she misses it, and Pen keeps on looking and looking for it. It is so lovely and uncommon, you see. It is gold and dark-blue and light-blue. It is most beautiful. Have you got it for me, Nancy?”

“It is I, dear, not Nancy,” said Miss Tredgold, coming forward. “You have had a very good night. I hope you are better.”

Pauline looked up at her.

“How funny!” she said. “I really thought you were Nancy—Nancy King, my old friend. I suppose I was dreaming.”

“You were talking about something that was dark-blue and light-blue and gold,” said Miss Tredgold.

Pauline gave a weak smile.

“Was I?” she answered.

Miss Tredgold took the little girl’s hands and put them inside the bedclothes.

“I am going to get you a cup of tea,” she said.

Miss Tredgold made the tea herself; and when she brought it, and pushed back Pauline’s tangled hair, she observed a narrow gold chain round her neck.

“Where did she get it?” thought the good lady. “Mysteries get worse. I know all about her little ornaments. She has been talking in a most unintelligible way. And where did she get that chain?”

Miss Tredgold’s discoveries of that morning were not yet at an end; for by-and-by, when the servant brought in Pauline’s dress which she had been drying by the kitchen fire, she held something in her hand.

“I found this in the young lady’s pocket,” she said. “I am afraid it is injured a good bit, but if you have it well rubbed up it may get all right again.”

Miss Tredgold saw in the palm of the girl’s hand her own much-valued and long-lost thimble. She gave a quick start, then controlled herself.

“You can put it down,” she said. “I am glad it was not lost.”

“It is a beautiful thimble,” said the girl. “I am sure Johnson, the jeweller in the High Street, could put it right for you, miss.”

“You had better leave the room now,” replied Miss Tredgold. “The young lady will hear you if you talk in a whisper.”

When the maid had gone Miss Tredgold remained for a minute or two holding the thimble in the palm of her hand; then she crossed the room on tiptoe, and replaced it in the pocket of Pauline’s serge skirt.

For the whole of that day Pauline lay in a languid and dangerous condition. The doctor feared mischief to the brain. Miss Tredgold waited on her day and night. At the end of the third day there was a change for the better, and then convalescence quickly followed.

Mr. Dale made his appearance on the scene early on the morning after the accident. He was very much perturbed, and very nearly shed tears when he clasped Penelope in his arms. But in an hour’s time he got restless, and asked Verena in a fretful tone what he had left his employment for. She gave him a fresh account of the whole story as far as she knew it, and he once more remembered and asked to see Pauline, and actually dropped a tear on her forehead. But by the midday train he returned to The Dales, and long before he got there the whole affair in the White Bay was forgotten by him.

In a week’s time Pauline was pronounced convalescent; but although she had recovered her appetite, and to a certain extent her spirits, there was a considerable change over her. This the doctor did not at first remark; but Miss Tredgold and Verena could not help noticing it. For one thing, Pauline hated looking at the sea. She liked to sit with her back to it. When the subject was mentioned she turned fidgety, and sometimes even left the room. Now and then, too, she complained of a weight pressing on her head. In short, she was herself and yet not herself; the old bright, daring, impulsive, altogether fascinating Pauline seemed to be dead and gone.

On the day when she was considered well enough to go into the drawing-room, there was a festival made in her honor. The place looked bright and pretty. Verena had got a large supply of flowers, which she placed in glasses on the supper-table and also on a little table close to Pauline's side. Pauline did not remark on the flowers, however. She did not remark on anything. She was gentle and sweet, and at the same time indifferent to her surroundings.

When supper was over she found herself alone with Penelope. Then a wave of color rushed into her face, and she looked full at her little sister.

"Have I done it or have I not, Pen?" she said. "Have I been awfully wicked—the wickedest girl on earth—or is it a dream? Tell me—tell me, Pen. Tell me the truth."

"It is as true as anything in the wide world," said Pen, speaking with intense emphasis and coming close to her sister. "There never was anybody more wicked than you—'cept me. We are both as bad as bad can be. But I tell you what, Paulie, though I meant to tell, I am not going to tell now; for but for you I'd have been drowned, and I am never, never, never going to tell."

"But for me!" said Pauline, and the expression on her face was somewhat vague.

"Oh, Paulie, how white you look! No, I will never tell. I love you now, and it is your secret and mine for ever and ever."

Pauline said nothing. She put her hand to her forehead; the dull weight on her head was very manifest.

"We are going home next week," continued Pen in her brightest manner. "You will be glad of that. You will see Briar and Patty and all the rest, and perhaps you will get to look as you used to. You are not much to be proud of now. You are seedy-looking, and rather dull, and not a bit amusing. But I loves you, and I'll never, never tell."

"Run away, Pen," said Miss Tredgold, coming into the room at that moment. "You are tiring Pauline. You should not have talked so loud; your sister is not very strong yet."

CHAPTER XXIV.

PLATO AND VIRGIL.

Mr. Dale returned home to find metamorphosis; for Betty and John, egged on by nurse, had taken advantage of his day from home to turn out the study. This study had not been properly cleaned for years. It had never had what servants are fond of calling a spring cleaning. Neither spring nor autumn found any change for the better in that tattered, dusty, and worn-out carpet; in those old moreen curtains which hung in heavy, dull folds round the bay-window; in the leathern arm-chair, with very little leather left about it; in the desk, which was so piled with books and papers that it was difficult even to discover a clear space on which to write. The books on the shelves, too, were dusty as dusty could be. Many of them were precious folios—folios bound in calf which book-lovers would have given a great deal for—but the dust lay thick on them, and Betty said, with a look of disgust, that they soiled her fingers.

"Oh, drat you and your fingers!" said nurse. "You think of nothing but those blessed trashy novels you are always reading. You must turn to now. The master is certain to be back by the late afternoon train, and this room has got to be put into apple-pie order before he returns."

"Yes," said John; "we won't lose the chance. We'll take each book from its place on the shelf, dust it, and put it back again. We have a long job before us, so don't you think any more of your novels and your grand ladies and gentlemen, Betty, my woman."

"I have ceased to think of them," said Betty.

She stood with her hands hanging straight to her sides; her face was quite pale.

"I trusted, and my trust failed me," she continued. "I was at a wedding lately, John—you remember, don't you?—Dick Jones's wedding, at the other side of the Forest. There was a beautiful wedding cake, frosted over and almond-iced underneath, and ornaments on it, too—cupids and doves and such-like. A pair of little doves sat as perky as you please on the top of the cake, billing and cooing like anything. It made my eyes water even to look at 'em. You may be sure I didn't think of Mary Dugdale, the bride that was, nor of poor Jones, neither; although he is a good looking man enough—I never said he wasn't. But my heart was in my mouth thinking of that dear Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton."

"Who in the name of fortune is he?" asked nurse.

"A hero of mine," said Betty.

Her face looked a little paler and more mournful even than when she had begun to speak.

"He's dead," she said, and she whisked a handkerchief out of her pocket and applied it to her eyes. "It was bandits as carried him off. He loved that innocent virgin he took for his wife like anything. Over and over have I thought of them, and privately made up my mind that if I came

across his second I'd give him my heart."

"Betty, you must be mad," said nurse.

"Maybe you are mad," retorted Betty, her face flaming, "but I am not. It was a girl quite as poor as me that he took for his spouse; and why shouldn't there be another like him? That's what I thought, and when the wedding came to an end I asked Mary Dugdale to give me a bit of the cake all private for myself. She's a good-natured sort is Mary, though not equal to Jones—not by no means. She cut a nice square of the cake, a beautiful chunk, black with richness as to the fruit part, yellow as to the almond, and white as the driven snow as to the icing. And, if you'll believe it, there was just the tip of a wing of one of those angelic little doves cut off with the icing. Well, I brought it home with me, and I slept on it just according to the old saw which my mother taught me. Mother used to say, 'Betty, if you want to dream of your true love, you will take a piece of wedding-cake that belongs to a fresh-made bride, and you will put it into your right-foot stocking, and tie it with your left-foot garter, and put it under your pillow. And when you get into bed, not a mortal word will you utter, or the spell is broke. And that you will do, Betty,' said my mother, 'for three nights running. And then you will put the stocking and the garter and the cake away for three nights, and at the end of those nights you will sleep again on it for three nights; and then you will put it away once more for three nights, and you will sleep on it again for three nights. And at the end of the last night, why, the man you dream of is he.'"

"Well, and did you go in for all that gibberish?" asked nurse, with scorn.

She had a duster in her hand, and she vigorously flicked Mr. Dale's desk as she spoke.

"To be sure I did; and I thought as much over the matter as ought to have got me a decent husband. Well, when the last night come I lay me down to sleep as peaceful as an angel, and I folded my hands and shut my eyes, and wondered what his beautiful name would be, and if he'd be a dook or a marquis. I incline to a dook myself, having, so to speak, fallen in love with the Dook of Mauleverer-Wolverhampton of blessed memory. But what do you think happened? It's enough to cure a body, that it is."

"Well, what?" asked nurse.

"I dreamt of no man in the creation except John there. If that isn't enough to make a body sick, and to cure all their romance once and for ever, my name ain't Betty Snowden."

John laughed and turned a dull red at this unexpected ending to Betty's story.

"Now let's clean up," she said; "and don't twit me any more about my dreams. They were shattered, so to speak, in the moment of victory."

The children were called in, particularly Briar and Patty, and the room was made quite fresh and sweet, the carpet taken up, the floor scrubbed, a new rug (bought long ago for the auspicious moment) put down, white curtains hung at the windows in place of the dreadful old moreen, every book dusted and put in its place, and the papers piled up in orderly fashion on a wagonette which was moved into the room for the purpose. Finally the children and servants gazed around them with an air of appreciation.

"He can't help liking it," said Briar.

"I wonder if he will," said Patty.

"What nonsense, Patty! Father is human, after all, and we have not disturbed one single blessed thing."

Soon wheels were heard, and the children rushed out to greet their returning parent.

"How is Pauline, father?" asked Briar in an anxious voice.

"Pauline?" replied Mr. Dale, pushing his thin hand abstractedly through his thin locks. "What of her? Isn't she here?"

"Nonsense, father!" said Patty. "You went to see her. She was very ill; she was nearly drowned. You know all about it. Wake up, dad, and tell us how she is."

"To be sure," said Mr. Dale. "I quite recall the circumstance now. Your sister is much better. I left her in bed, a little flushed, but looking very well and pretty. Pauline promises to be quite a pretty girl. She has improved wonderfully of late. Verena was there, too, and Pen, and your good aunt. Yes, I saw them all. Comfortable lodgings enough for those who don't care for books. From what I saw of your sister she did not seem to be at all seriously ill, and I cannot imagine why I was summoned. Don't keep me now, my dears; I must get back to my work. The formation of that last sentence from Plato's celebrated treatise doesn't please me. It lacks the extreme polish of the original. My dear Briar, how you stare! There is no possible reason, Briar and Patty, why the English translation should not be every bit as pure as the Greek. Our language has extended itself considerably of late, and close application and study may recall to my mind the most fitting words. But there is one thing certain, my dear girls— Ah! is that you, nurse? Miss Pauline is better. I was talking about Plato, nurse. The last translation I have been making from his immortal work does not please me; but toil—ceaseless toil—the midnight oil, *et cetera*, may evoke the spirit of the true Muse, and I may be able to put the matter before the great English thinking public in a way worthy of the immortal master."

Mr. Dale had now pushed his hat very far back from his forehead. He removed it, still quite abstractedly, and retired with long, shuffling strides to his beloved study.

"No food until I ring for it," he said when he reached the door, and then he vanished.

"Blessed man!" said Betty, who was standing in the far distance. "He might be a dook himself for all his airs. It was lovely the way he clothed his thoughts that time. What they be themselves I don't know, but his language was most enthralling. John, get out of my way. What are you standing behind me like that for? Get along and weed the garden—do."

"You'll give me a cup of tea, and tell me more about that dream of yours," was John's answer.

Whereupon Betty took John by the hand, whisked into her kitchen, slammed the door after her, and planted him down on a wooden seat, and then proceeded to make tea.

But while John and Betty were happily engaged in pleasant converse with each other, Mr. Dale's condition was by no means so favorable. At first when he entered his study he saw nothing unusual. His mind was far too loftily poised to notice such sublunary matters as white curtains and druggets not in tatters; but when he seated himself at his desk, and stretched out his hand mechanically to find his battered old edition of Plato, it was not in its accustomed place. He looked around him, raised his eyes, put his hand to his forehead, and, still mechanically, but with a dawning of fright on his face, glanced round the room. What did he see? He started, stumbled to his feet, turned deathly white, and rushed to the opposite bookcase. There was his Plato—his idol—actually placed in the bookshelf upside-down. It was a monstrous crime—a crime that he felt he could never forgive—that no one could expect him to forgive. He walked across to the fireplace and rang the bell.

"You must go, Miss Patty," said nurse. "I was willing to do it, but I can't face him. You must go; you really must."

"Well, I'm not frightened," said Patty. "Come on, Briar."

The two little girls walked down the passage. Mr. Dale's bell was heard to ring again.

"Aren't you the least bit frightened, Patty?" asked Briar.

"No," answered Patty, with a sigh. "If only I could get the real heaviness off my mind, nothing else would matter. Oh, Briar, Briar!"

"Don't talk of it now," said Briar. "To-night when we are alone, when we are by ourselves in our own room, but not now. Come, let us answer father's bell."

They opened the door and presented themselves—two pretty little figures with rosy faces and bright eyes—two neatly dressed, lady-like little girls.

"Do you want anything, father?"

"Yes," said Mr. Dale. "Come in and shut the door."

The girls did what he told them.

"Who did this?" asked the master of The Dales. He swept his hand with a certain majesty of gesture round the restored room. "Who brushed the walls? Who put those flimsies to the windows? Who touched my beloved books? Who was the person? Name the culprit."

"There were quite a lot of us, father. We all did it," said Briar.

"You all did it? You mean to tell me, little girl, that you did it?"

"I dusted a lot of the books, father. I didn't injure one of them, and I put them back again just in the same place. My arms ached because the books were so heavy."

"Quite right that they should ache. Do you know what injury you have done me?"

"No," said Patty suddenly. "We made the room clean, father. It isn't right to live in such a dirty room. Plato wouldn't have liked it."

"Now what do you mean?"

Mr. Dale's white face quieted down suddenly; for his daughter—his small, young, ignorant daughter—to dare to mention the greatest name, in his opinion, of all the ages, was too much for him.

"You are always talking to us about Plato," said Patty, who grew braver and braver as she proceeded. "You talk of Plato one day, and Virgil another day, and you always tell us how great they were; but if they were really great they would not be dirty, and this room was horrid and dirty, father. It really was. Nice, great, good, noble people are clean. Aunt Sophy says so, and she knows. Since Aunt Sophy came we have been very happy, and the house has been clean and nice. And I love Aunt Sophy, and so does Briar. I am very sorry, father, but I think when we made your room sweet and pretty as it is now we pleased Plato and Virgil—that is, if they can see us."

"If Plato and Virgil can see mites like you?" said Mr. Dale.

He took up his spectacles, poised them on his forehead, and gazed at the children.

"There is the door," he said. "Go."

They vanished. Mr. Dale sank into a chair.

"Upon my word!" he said several times. "Upon—my—word! So Plato liked things clean, and Virgil liked things orderly. Upon—my—word!"

He sat perfectly motionless for a time. His brain was working, for his glasses were sometimes removed and then put on again, and several times he brushed his hand through his hair. Finally he took up his hat, and, gazing at the frills of the white window-curtains, he opened the French

windows, and, with an agile leap, found himself in the open air. He went for a walk—a long one. When he came back he entered his clean study, to find the lamp burning brightly, his Plato restored to its place by his left-hand side, and a fresh pad of blotting-paper on the table. His own old pen was not removed, but the inkpot was clean and filled with fresh ink. He took his pen, dipped it into the ink, and wrote on a sheet of paper, "Plato likes things clean, and Virgil likes things orderly," and then pinned the paper on the opposite wall.

For the rest of the evening the astonished household were much beguiled and overcome by the most heavenly strains from Mr. Dale's violin. He played it in the study until quite late at night; but none of the household went to bed, so divine, so restoring, so comforting was that music.

About eleven o'clock Patty and Briar found themselves alone.

"Well," said Patty suddenly, "I have made up my mind."

"Yes," said Briar, "I thought you had."

"When Aunt Sophy comes back I am going to tell her everything."

Briar went up to her sister, put her arms round her neck, and kissed her.

"I wonder what she will say," said Briar.

"Say!" echoed Patty. "She will be hurt. Perhaps she'll punish us; but that doesn't matter, for in the end she is quite, quite certain to forgive us. I am going to tell her. I couldn't go through another night like last night again."

"Nor could I," said Briar. "I stayed awake and thought of Paulie, and I seemed to see her face as it might look if she were really dead. I wish they'd all come back, for Paulie is better. And then we'd have just a dreadful ten minutes, and everything would be all right."

"That's it," said Patty. "Everything would be all right."

CHAPTER XXV.

"YOU ARE NOT TO TELL."

Pauline was certainly better, although she was not what she was before. In body she was to all appearance quite well. She ate heartily, took long walks, and slept soundly at night; but she was dull. She seldom laughed; she took little interest in anything. As to the sea, she had a positive horror of it. When she went out for walks she invariably chose inland directions. She liked to walk briskly over the great moors which surround Easterhaze, and to sit there and think, though nobody knew what she was thinking about. Her face now and then looked pathetic, but on the whole it was indifferent. Miss Tredgold was much concerned. She made up her mind.

"The seaside is doing the child no good," she thought. "I will take her straight back home. She is certainly not herself; she got a much greater shock than we knew of or had any idea of. When she gets home the sight of the other children and the old place will rouse her. She is not consumptive at the present moment. That is one thing to be thankful for. I shall take her to London for the winter. If going back to The Dales does not arouse her, she must go somewhere else, for roused she certainly must be."

Miss Tredgold, having made up her mind, spoke to Verena.

"We are going home to-morrow, Verena," she said.

"And a very good thing," answered the young girl.

"Do you really think so?"

"I do, Aunt Sophy. Pauline has got all she can get out of the sea at present. She does not love the sea; she is afraid of it. She may be better when she is home."

"And yet she is well," said Miss Tredgold. "The doctor pronounces her in perfect health."

"In body she is certainly well," said Verena.

"Oh, then, you have observed it?"

"Yes, I have," replied Verena slowly. "There is some part of her stunned. I can't make out myself what ails her, but there is undoubtedly one part of her stunned."

"We will take her home," said Miss Tredgold.

The good lady was a person of very direct action and keen resource. She had whisked Pauline and Verena off to the sea almost at a moment's notice, and quite as quickly she brought them back. They were all glad to go. Even Pen was pleased. Pen looked very still and solemn and contented during these days. She sat close to Pauline and looked into her eyes over and over again; and Pauline never resented her glance, and seemed to be more pleased to be with Penelope than with anybody else.

The nice landau which Miss Tredgold had purchased met the travellers at Lyndhurst Road, and

the first piece of news which Briar, who had come to meet them, announced was that the ponies had arrived.

"Peas-blossom and Lavender are so sweet!" she said. "They came yesterday. We are quite longing to ride them. As to Peas-blossom, he is quite the dearest pony I ever looked at in my life."

"Peas-blossom will be Pauline's special pony," said Miss Tredgold suddenly. "Do you happen to know if the sidesaddles have arrived?"

"Oh, yes, they have; and the habits, too," said Briar. "It is delicious—delicious!"

"Then, Pauline, my dear, you shall have a ride to-morrow morning."

Pauline scarcely replied. She did not negative the idea of the ride, but neither did she accept it with any enthusiasm.

There was a wild moment when the entire family were reassembled. All the girls surrounded Pauline, and kissed her and hugged her as though she had come back from the dead.

"You quite forget," said Penelope, "that I was nearly drowned, too. I was very nearly shutting up of my eyes, and closing of my lips, and stretching myself out and lying drowned and still on the top of the waves. I was in as big a danger as Pauline, every bit."

"But you didn't get ill afterwards, as Paulie did," said the other girls.

They kissed Pen, for, being their sister, they had to love her after a fashion; but their real adoration and deepest sympathy were centred round Pauline.

Meanwhile Pen, who never cared to find herself neglected, ran off to discover nurse.

"Well," she said when she saw that worthy, "here I am. I'm not pale now. I am rosy. The seaside suits me. The salty waves and the sands, they all agrees with me. How are you, nursesey?"

"Very well," replied nurse, "and glad to see you again."

"And how is Marjorie? Kiss me, Marjorie."

She snatched up her little sister somewhat roughly.

"Don't make the darling cry," said nurse.

"All right," replied Pen. "Sit down, baby; I have no time to 'tend you. Nursesey, when I was at the sea I was a very 'portant person."

"Were you indeed. Miss Pen? But you always think yourself that. And how is Miss Pauline?"

"Paulie?" said Penelope. "She's bad."

"Bad!" echoed nurse.

"Yes, all-round bad," said Penelope.

As she spoke she formed her mouth into a round O, and looked with big eyes at nurse.

"The seaside didn't agree with her," said Pen. "Nor does the fuss, nor the petting, nor the nice food, nor anything else of that sort. The only thing that agrees with Paulie is me. She likes to have me with her, and I understand her. But never mind about Paulie now. I want to ask you a question. Am I the sort of little girl that lions would crunch up?"

"I never!" cried nurse. "You are the queerest child!"

"But am I, nursesey? Speak."

"I suppose so, Miss Pen."

"I thought so," answered Pen, with a sigh. "I thought as much. I am bad through and through, then. They never eat good uns. You know that, don't you, nursesey? They wouldn't touch Marjorie, though she is so round and so white and so fat; and they wouldn't look at Adelaide or Josephine, or any of those dull ones of the family; but they'd eat me up, and poor Paulie. Oh! they'd have a nice meal on Paulie. Thank you, nursesey. I am glad I know."

"What is the child driving at?" thought nurse as Penelope marched away. "Would lions crunch her up, and would they crunch up Miss Paulie? Mercy me! I wouldn't like any of us to be put in their way. I do hope Miss Pen won't go off her head after a time; she is too queer for anything. But what is wrong with Miss Pauline? I don't like what she said about Miss Pauline."

When nurse saw Pauline she liked matters even less. For though her dearly beloved young lady looked quite well in health, her eyes were no longer bright, and she did not take the slightest interest in the different things which the children had to show her. When asked if she would not like to visit the stables, now in perfect restoration, and see for herself those darling, most angelic creatures that went by the names of Peas-blossom and Lavender, she said she was tired and would rather sit in the rocking-chair on the lawn.

The others, accompanied by Aunt Sophia, went off to view the ponies; and then at the last moment Pen came back. She flung herself on the ground at Pauline's feet.

"I has quite made up my mind for ever and ever," she said. "Not even lions will drag it from me."

"What?" asked Pauline.

"Why, all that I know: about who stole the thimble, and about the picnic on the birthday, and

about what Briar and Patty did, and about you, Paulie, and all your wicked, wicked ways. I meant to tell once, but I will never tell now. So cheer up; even lions won't drag it from me."

Pauline put her hand to her forehead.

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"I keep having these stupid headaches," she said. "They come and go, and whenever I want to think they get worse. I suppose I have been very bad, and that all you say is right, but somehow I can't think it out. Only there is one thing, Pen—if I were you I wouldn't do wrong any more. It isn't worth while."

"It is quite worth while getting you cheered up," said Pen, "so I thought I'd let you know."

That same evening Briar and Patty held a consultation in their own room.

"We must do it after breakfast to-morrow," said Patty.

Just then there was a slight rustle. Briar paused to listen.

"Those horrid mice have come back again," she said. "We must get Tiddledywinks to spend a night or two in this room."

"Oh, bother the mice!" was Patty's response. "Let us arrange when we must see her."

"I have planned it all out," said Briar. "We must tell her just everything we know. She won't be so terribly angry with Paulie, because poor Paulie is not well. But I suppose she will punish us terribly. I have been thinking what our punishment ought to be."

"What?" asked Patty.

"Why, not to ride either of the ponies until after Christmas."

"Oh! don't tell her to do that," said Patty, in some alarm. "I have been so pining for my rides."

"There's that mouse again," said Briar.

The children now looked under the little beds, and under the farther one there was something which would certainly have preferred to be thought an enormous mouse. On being dragged to the front, the stout, dishevelled figure of Penelope Dale was discovered.

"I comed a-purpose," said Pen, who did not look the least taken aback. "I saw by your faces that you were up to fun, and I thought I'd like to be in it. It is well I comed. I am willing to talk to you about everything. Call me a mouse if you like. I don't care. I meant to listen. I am glad I comed."

"You are too mean for anything," said Briar. "You are the horridest girl I ever came across. Why did you dare to hide under my bed in order to listen to what I had to say to Patty?"

"I knew it all afore," said Penelope, "so that wasn't why I comed. I comed to keep you from doing mischief. What are you going to tell to-morrow?"

"That isn't your business," said Briar.

"But I am going to make it my business. What you have to tell isn't news to me. You are going to 'fess 'cos of the pain in your little hearts. You must keep your pain, and you must not 'fess. You are going to tell Aunt Sophy about that wicked, wicked birthday night—how you stole away in the dark across the lawn, and wore your Glengarry caps, and how you didn't come back until the morning. But you mustn't tell. Do you hear me, Briar and Patty?"

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"But why not? Why should you talk to us like that?" asked Patty. "Why shouldn't we say exactly what we like?"

"You mustn't tell 'cos of Paulie. She is ill—more ill than you think. She mustn't be punished, nor fretted, nor teased, nor worried. If you tell it will worrit her, so you mustn't tell. Why do you want to tell? You have kept it dark a long time now."

"Because we are unhappy," said Patty then. "We haven't got hard hearts like yours. My heart aches so badly that I can't sleep at nights for thinking of the lies I've told and how wicked I am."

"Pooh!" said Penelope. "Keep your achy hearts; don't worrit."

"But it's past bearing," said Briar. "What we feel is remorse. We must tell. The Bible is full of the wickedness of people not confessing their sins. We can't help ourselves. We are obliged to tell."

"Just because you have a bit of pain," said Pen in a tone of deepest contempt. "I suppose you think I never have any pain. Little you know. I have done a lot of wicked things. I consider myself much the most desperate wicked of the family. Your little pains is only pin-pricks compared to mine. It would relieve me to tell, but I love Paulie too much, so I won't. We have all got to hold our tongues for the present. Now good-night. I am not a mouse, nor a rat, nor a ferret. But I mean what I say. You are not to tell."

CHAPTER XXVI.

DECEITFUL GIRLS.

Miss Tredgold was dreadfully puzzled to know what to make of the girls. The time was autumn now; all pretense of summer had disappeared. Autumn had arrived and was very windy and wet, and the girls could no longer walk in twos and twos on the pretty lawn. They had to keep to the walks, and even these walks were drenched, as day after day deluges of rain fell from the heavens. The Forest, too, was sodden with the fallen leaves, and even the ponies slipped as they cantered down the glades. Altogether it was a most chilling, disappointing autumn, winter setting in, so to speak, all at once. Verena said she never remembered such an early season of wintry winds and sobbing skies. The flowers disappeared, several of the Forest trees were rooted up in consequence of the terrible gales, and Miss Tredgold said it was scarcely safe for the children to walk there.

"The best cure for weather of this sort," she said to herself, "is to give the young people plenty to do indoors."

Accordingly she reorganized lessons in a very brisk and up-to-date fashion. She arranged that a good music-master was to come twice a week from Southampton. Mistresses for languages were also to arrive from the same place. A pretty little pony-cart which she bought for the purpose conveyed these good people to and from Lyndhurst Road station. Besides this, she asked one or two visitors to come and stay in the house, and tried to plan as comfortable and nice a winter as she could. Verena helped her, and the younger girls were pleased and interested; and Pen did what she was told, dashing about here and there, and making suggestions, and trying to make herself as useful as she could.

"The child is improved," said Miss Tredgold to Verena. "She is quite obliging and unselfish."

Verena said nothing.

"What do you think of my new plans, Verena?" said her aunt. "Out-of-door life until the frost comes is more or less at a standstill. Beyond the mere walking for health, we do not care to go out of doors in this wet and sloppy weather. But the house is large. I mean always to have one or two friends here, sometimes girls to please you other girls, sometimes older people to interest me. I should much like to have one or two *savants* down to talk over their special studies with your father; but that can doubtless be arranged by-and-by. I want us to have cheerful winter evenings—evenings for reading, evenings for music. I want you children to learn at least the rudiments of good acting, and I mean to have two or three plays enacted here during the winter. In short, if you will all help me, we can have a splendid time."

"Oh, I will help you," said Verena. "But," she added, "I have no talent for acting; it is Paulie who can act so well."

"I wish your sister would take an interest in things, Verena. She is quite well in body, but she is certainly not what she was before her accident."

"I don't understand Pauline," said Verena, shaking her head.

"Nor do I understand her. Once or twice I thought I would get a good doctor to see her, but I have now nearly resolved to leave it to time to restore her."

"But the other girls—can you understand the other girls, Aunt Sophy?" asked Verena.

"Understand them, my dear? What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't mean the younger ones—Adelaide and Lucy and the others. I mean Briar and Patty. They are not a bit what they were."

"Now that you remark it, I have noticed that they are very grave; but they always do their lessons well, and I have nothing to complain of with regard to their conduct."

"Nor have you anything to complain of with regard to Paulie's conduct," said Verena. "It isn't that."

"Then what is it, my dear?"

"It is that they are not natural. There is something on their minds. I am certain of it."

"Verena," said her aunt gently, "I wonder if I might confide in you."

Verena started back; a distressed look came over her face.

"If it happens to be anything against Paulie, perhaps I had better not hear," she said.

"I do not know if it is for her or against her. I am as much in the dark as you. I have not spoken of it yet to any one else, but I should like to mention it to you. It seems to me that light ought to be thrown on some rather peculiar circumstances or your sister will never get back her old brightness and gaiety of heart."

"Then if you think so, please tell me, Aunt Sophy," said Verena.

She got up as she spoke and shut the door. She was a very bright and pretty-looking girl, but her face sometimes wore too old a look for her age. Her aunt looked at her now with a mingling of affection and compassion.

"Come," she said, "sit on this sofa, darling. We can understand each other better when we are close together. You know how much I love you, Renny."

"There never, never was a better aunt," said the girl.

"I am not that. But I do love you. Now, dear, I will tell you. You remember when first I came?"

"Oh, don't I? And how angry we were!"

"Poor children! I don't wonder. But don't you think, Verena, I was a very brave woman to put myself into such a hornet's nest?"

"Indeed you were wonderful. It was your bravery that first attracted me. Then I saw how good you were, and how kindly you meant, and everything else became easy."

"But was it equally easy for Pauline?"

"I—I don't know. I am sure I do know, however, that now she loves you very much."

"Ah! now," said Miss Tredgold. "But what about the early time?"

"I don't quite know."

"Verena, if I am to be frank with you, you must be frank with me."

"I think perhaps she was not won round to you quite as easily as I was."

"You are right, my dear. It was harder to win her; but she is worth winning. I shall not rest until I bring her round altogether to my side. Now, little girl, listen. You know what a very odd child we are all forced to consider your sister Pen?"

"I should think so, indeed." Verena laughed.

"Well, your sister found out one day, not very long after I came, that I had lost a thimble."

"Your beautiful gold thimble? Of course we all knew about that," said Verena. "We were all interested, and we all tried to find it."

"I thought so. I knew that Pen in particular searched for it with considerable pains, and I offered her a small prize if she found it."

Verena laughed.

"Poor Pen!" she said. "She nearly broke her back one day searching for it. Oh, Aunt Sophy! I hope you will learn to do without it, for I am greatly afraid that it will not be found now."

"And yet, Verena," said Miss Tredgold—and she laid her hand, which slightly shook, on the girl's arm—"I could tell you of a certain person in this house to whom a certain dress belongs, and unless I am much mistaken, in the pocket of that dress reposes the thimble with its sapphire base, its golden body, and its rim of pale-blue turquoise."

"Aunt Sophy! What do you mean?"

Verena's eyes were wide open, and a sort of terror filled them.

"Don't start, dear. That person is your sister Pauline."

"Oh! Pauline! Impossible! Impossible!" cried Verena.

"It is true, nevertheless. Do you remember that day when she was nearly drowned?"

"Can I forget it?"

"The next morning I was in her room, and the servant brought in the dark-blue serge dress she wore, which had been submerged so long in the salt water. It had been dried, and she was bringing it back. The girl held in her hand the thimble—the thimble of gold and sapphire and turquoise. She held the thimble in the palm of her hand, and said, 'I found it in the pocket of the young lady's dress. It is injured, but the jeweller can put it right again.' You can imagine my feelings. For a time I was motionless, holding the thimble in my hand. Then I resolved to put it back where it had been found. I have heard nothing of it since from any one. I don't suppose Pauline has worn that skirt again; the thimble is doubtless there."

"Oh, may I run and look? May I?"

"No, no; leave it in its hiding-place. Do you think the thimble matters to me? What does matter is this—that Pauline should come and tell me, simply and quietly, the truth."

"She will. She must. I feel as if I were in a dream. I can scarcely believe this can be true."

"Alas! my dear, it is. And there is another thing. I know what little trinkets you each possess, for you showed them to me when first I came. Have you any reason to believe, Verena, that Pauline kept one trinket back from my knowledge?"

"Oh, no, Aunt Sophy; of course she did not. Pauline has fewer trinkets than any of us, and she is fond of them. She is not particularly fond of gay clothes, but she always did like shiny, ornamental things."

"When she was ill I saw round her neck a narrow gold chain, to which a little heart-shaped locket was attached. Do you know of such a locket, of such a chain?"

"No."

Miss Tredgold rose to her feet.

"Verena," she said, "things must come to a climax. Pauline must be forced to tell. For her own sake, and for the sake of others, we must find out what is at the back of things. Until we do the air will not be cleared. I had an idea of taking you to London for this winter, but I shall not do so this side of Christmas at any rate. I want us all to have a good time, a bright time, a happy time. We cannot until this mystery is explained. I am certain, too, that Pen knows more than she will say. She always was a curious, inquisitive child. Now, until the time of the accident Pen was

always pursuing me and giving me hints that she had something to confide. I could not, of course, allow the little girl to tell tales, and I always shut her up. But from the time of the accident she has altered. She is now a child on the defensive. She watches Pauline as if she were guarding her against something. I am not unobservant, and I cannot help seeing. From what you tell me, your sisters Briar and Patty are also implicated. My dear Verena, we must take steps."

"Yes," said Verena. "But what steps?"

"Let me think. It has relieved my mind to tell you even this much. You will keep your own counsel. I will talk to you again to-morrow morning."

Verena felt very uncomfortable. Of all the Dales she was the most open, in some ways the most innocent. She thought well of all the world. She adored her sisters and her father, and now also her aunt, Miss Tredgold. She was the sort of girl who would walk through life without a great deal of sorrow or a great deal of perplexity. The right path would attract her; the wrong would always be repellent to her. Temptation, therefore, would not come in a severe guise to Verena Dale. She was guarded against it by the sweetness and purity and innocence of her nature. But now for the first time it seemed to the young girl that the outlook was dark. Her aunt's words absolutely bewildered her. Her aunt suspected Pauline, Pen, Briar, and Patty of concealing something. But what had they to conceal? It is true that when Aunt Sophia first arrived they had felt a certain repugnance to her society, a desire to keep out of her way, and a longing for the old wild, careless, slovenly days. But surely long ere this such foolish ideas had died a natural death. They all loved Aunt Sophia now; what could they have to conceal?

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"I dare not talk about it to the younger girls. I don't want to get into Pen's confidence. Pen, of all the children, suits me least. The people to whom I must appeal are therefore Briar or Patty, or Pauline herself. Patty and Briar are devoted to each other. The thought in one heart seems to have its counterpart in that of the other. They might even be twins, so deeply are they attached. No; the only one for me to talk to is Pauline. But what can I say to her? And Pauline is not well. At least, she is well and she is not well. Nevertheless I will go and see her. I will find her now."

Verena went into the nursery. Pauline was sometimes there. She was fond of sitting by the cosy nursery fire with a book in her hand, which of late she only pretended to read. Verena opened the nursery door and poked in her bright head and face.

"Come in, Miss Renny, come in," said nurse.

"I am not going to stay, nurse. Ah, Marjorie, my pet! Come and give me a sweet kiss."

The little baby sister toddled across the floor. Verena lifted her in her arms and kissed her affectionately.

"I thought perhaps Miss Pauline was here, nurse. Do you happen to know where she is?"

"Miss Pauline has a very bad headache," said nurse—"so bad that I made her go and lie down; and I have just lit a bit of fire in her bedroom, for she is chilly, too, poor pet! Miss Pauline hasn't been a bit herself since that nasty accident."

"I am sure she hasn't; but I did not know she was suffering from headache. I will go to her."

Verena ran along the passage. Her own room faced south; Pauline's, alongside of it, had a window which looked due east. Verena softly opened the door. The chamber was tiny, but it was wonderfully neat and cheerful. A bright fire burned in the small grate. Pauline was lying partly over on her side; her face was hidden. Her dark hair was tumbled about the pillow.

"Paulie, it is I," said Verena. "Are you awake?"

"Oh, yes," said Pauline.

She turned round almost cheerfully. A cloud seemed to vanish from her face.

"I am so glad you have come, Renny," she said. "I see so little of you lately. Get up on the bed, won't you, and lie near me?"

"Of course I love to be with you, but I thought——"

"Oh! don't think anything," said Pauline. "Just get on the bed and cuddle up close, close to me. And let us imagine that we are back in the old happy days before Aunt Sophy came."

Verena did not say anything. She got on the bed, flung her arms round Pauline's neck, and strained her sister to her heart.

"I love you so much!" she said.

"Do you, Renny? That is very, very sweet of you."

"And you love me, don't you, Paulie?"

"I—I don't know."

"Pauline! You don't know? You don't know if you love me or not?"

"I don't think that I love anybody, Renny."

"Oh, Paulie! then there must be something dreadfully bad the matter with you."

Pauline buried her face in Verena's soft white neck and lay quiet.

"Does your head ache very badly, Paulie?"

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"Pretty badly; but it is not too bad for us to talk—that is, if you will keep off the unpleasant subjects."

"But what unpleasant subjects can there be? I don't understand you, Paulie. I cannot think of anything specially unpleasant to talk of now."

"You are a bit of a goose, you know," replied Pauline with a smile.

"Am I? I didn't know it. But what are the subjects we are not to talk about?"

"Oh, you must know! Aunt Sophia, for instance, and that awful time at Easterhaze, and the most terrible of all terrible days when I went to the White Bay, and Nancy King, and—and my birthday. I can't talk of these subjects. I will talk of anything else—of baby Marjorie, and how pretty she grows; how fond we are of nurse, and of father, and—oh!"

Pauline burst into a little laugh.

"Do you know that John is courting Betty? I know he is. He went up to her the other day in the garden and put his hand on her shoulder, and when he thought no one was by he kissed her. I hid behind the hedge, and I had the greatest difficulty to keep back a shout of merriment. Isn't it fun?"

"I suppose so," said Verena. "But, Pauline, what you say makes me unhappy. I wish I might talk out to you."

Pauline raised herself on her elbow and looked full into Verena's face.

"What about?" she asked.

Verena did not speak for a minute.

"Where are your dresses?" she asked suddenly.

"My dresses! You silly girl! In that cupboard, of course. I am getting tidy. You know I would do anything I possibly could to please Aunt Sophy. I can't do big things to please her—I never shall be able to—so I do little things. I am so tidy that I am spick-and-span. I hate and loathe it; but I wouldn't leave a pin about for anything. You open that door and look for yourself. Do you see my skirts?"

Verena got off the bed and opened the cupboard door. Pauline had about half-a-dozen skirts, and they all hung neatly on their respective hooks. Amongst them was the thick blue serge which she had worn on the day when she had gone to the White Bay. Verena felt her heart beating fast. She felt the color rush into her cheeks. She paused for a moment as if to commune with her own heart. Then her mind was made up.

"What are you doing, Renny?" said her sister. "How funny of you to have gone into the cupboard!"

For Verena had absolutely vanished. She stood in the cupboard, and Pauline from the bed heard a rustle. The rustling grew louder, and Pauline wondered what it meant. A moment later Verena, her face as red as a turkey-cock, came out.

"Paulie," she said—"Paulie, there is no good going on like this. You have got to explain. You have got to get a load off your mind. You have got to do it whether you like it or not. How did you come by this? How—did—you—come—by—this?"

As Verena spoke she held in her open palm the long-lost thimble. Poor Pauline had not the most remote idea that the thimble was still in the pocket of the blue serge dress. She had, indeed, since the day of her accident, forgotten its existence.

"Where did you get it?" she asked, her face very white, her eyes very startled.

"In the pocket of the dress you wore on the day you were nearly drowned in the White Bay."

"I told you not to mention that day," said Pauline. Her whole face changed. "I remember," she said slowly, but she checked herself. The words reached her lips, but did not go beyond them. "Put it down, Verena," she said. "Put it there on the mantelpiece."

"Then you won't tell me how you got it? It is not yours. You know it belongs to Aunt Sophy."

"And it is not yours, Renny, and you have no right to interfere. And what is more, I desire you not to interfere. I don't love anybody very much now, but I shall hate you if you interfere in this matter."

Verena laid the thimble on the mantelpiece.

"You can leave me, Renny. I am a very bad girl; I don't pretend I am anything else, but I won't talk to you now."

"Oh!" said poor Verena. "Oh!"

Before she reached the door of the room she had burst into tears. Her agony was so great at Pauline's behavior to her that her tears became sobs, and her sobs almost cries of pain. Pauline, lying on the bed, did not take the least notice of Verena. She turned her head away, and when her sister had left the room and shut the door Pauline sprang from the bed and turned the key in the lock.

"Now, I am safe," she thought. "What is the matter with me? There never was anything so hard as the heart that is inside me. I don't care a bit whether Renny cries or whether she doesn't cry. I don't care a bit what happens to any one. I only want to be let alone."

At dinner-time Pauline appeared, and tried to look as though nothing had happened. The other girls looked neat and pretty. They had not the least idea through what a tragedy Verena and Pauline were now living. Verena showed marks of her storm of weeping, and her face was terribly woebegone. Miss Tredgold guessed that things were coming to a crisis, and she was prepared to wait.

Now, Miss Tredgold was a very good woman; she was also a very wise and a very temperate one. She was filled with a spirit of forbearance, and with the beautiful grace of charity. She was all round as good a woman as ever lived; but she was not a mother. Had she been a mother she would have gone straight to Pauline and put her arms round her, and so acted that the hard little heart would have melted, and the words that could not pass her lips would have found themselves able to do so, and the misery and the further sin would have been averted. But instead of doing anything of this sort, Miss Tredgold resolved to assemble the children after breakfast the next day, and to talk to them in a very plain way indeed; to assemble all before her, and to entreat the guilty ones to confess, promising them absolute forgiveness in advance. Having made up her mind, she felt quite peaceful and happy, and went down to interview her brother-in-law.

Mr. Dale still continued to like his study. He made no further objection to the clean and carefully dusted room. If any one had asked him what was passing in his mind, he might have said that the spirits of Homer and Virgil approached the sacred precincts where he wrote about them and lived for them night after night, and that they put the place in order. He kept the rough words which he had printed in large capitals on the night when he had returned to his study still in their place of honor on the wall, and he worked himself with a new sense of zest and freedom.

Miss Tredgold entered the room without knocking.

"Well, Henry," she said, "and how goes the world?"

"The world of the past comes nearer and nearer," was his reply. "I often feel that I scarcely touch the earth of the nineteenth century. The world of the past is a very lovely world."

"Not a bit better than the world of the present," said Miss Sophia. "Now, Henry, if you can come from the clouds for a minute or two——"

"Eh? Ah! What are you saying?"

"From the clouds, my dear brother, right down to this present prosaic and workaday world. Can you, and will you give me five minutes of your attention?"

"Eh? Yes, of course, Sophia."

Mr. Dale sat very still, drumming with his right hand on his pad of blotting-paper. Miss Tredgold looked at him; then she crossed the room, took away the pad, his pen and ink, the open volume of Homer, and removed them to another table.

"Sit with your back to them; keep your mind clear and listen to me, Henry."

"To be sure."

"I want you to come into the schoolroom after breakfast to-morrow morning."

"To the schoolroom?"

"I have a reason. I should like you to be present."

"But it is just my most important hour. You commence lessons with the girls—when, Sophia?"

"We sit down to our work at nine o'clock. Prayers take ten minutes. I should like you to be present at prayers—to conduct Divine worship in your own house on that occasion."

"Oh, my dear Sophia! Not that I have any objection—of course."

"I should hope you have no objection. You will take prayers, and afterwards you will assist me in a most painful task which lies before me."

"Painful, Sophia? Oh, anything I can do to help you, my dear sister, I shall be delighted to undertake. What is it? I beg of you to be brief, for time does fly. It was only a quarter of an hour ago that I found Homer——"

"I could say a very ugly word about Homer," said Miss Tredgold. "Sometimes I wish that I were a man in order that I might swear hard at you, Henry Dale. As I am a woman I must refrain. Do you know that your daughter Pauline, your daughter Briar, your daughter Patty, and your extraordinary daughter Penelope are all of them about as naughty children as they can be. Indeed, in the case of Pauline I consider her worse than naughty. What she has done I don't know, and I don't know what the others have done; but there is a weight on their minds, and those four girls must be got to confess. And you must be present, and you must speak as a father to them. Now do you understand?"

"I am to be in the schoolroom to-morrow," said Mr. Dale, "and four of my girls are turning wicked, and I am not to know what they have done. I will be in the schoolroom at nine o'clock to-morrow, Sophia. May I thank you to hand me back my blotting-pad, my pen and bottle of ink, and my beloved Homer? Take care of the volume. Take it tenderly. Put both hands under the binding. Ah! that is so. You will have the goodness to leave me now, Sophia. To-morrow morning at nine o'clock precisely."

Miss Tredgold went out of the room.

"How my poor dear sister ever brought herself to marry that man," she whispered under her breath, "I know not. But he is capable of being roused, and I rather fancy I shall manage to rouse him to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVII.

PAULINE IN DISTRESS.

When Pauline went up to her room late that evening she gave Verena a very cold good-night. Her little fire was still burning, for nurse had taken care of it. Verena heard her lock the door. Had she not done so her sister would have gone to her, and begged and prayed, as such a sweet girl might, for the confidence of Pauline. Verena had to get into bed feeling lonely and unhappy. Just as she was doing so she heard a firm step walking down the corridor. A hand turned the handle of Pauline's door, and Verena heard Pen's voice say:

"It's me, Paulie. It's me. Let me in, Paulie."

Verena instantly opened her own door.

"Go away, Pen," she said. "Go straight back to your bed. You are not to go near Pauline to-night."

"Yes, but I want her," said Pauline, opening the door and putting out her head.

"Very well," said Verena. "You shall see her with me. I will ring the bell and ask nurse to fetch Aunt Sophy."

Pauline gave a shrill laugh.

"It isn't worth all that fuss. Go to bed, Pen. We shall have plenty of time for our chat to-morrow morning."

Penelope looked disgusted. Verena stood in the passage until her stout little figure had disappeared. She then turned, hoping that Pauline would speak to her; but Pauline had gone into her room and locked the door.

Now, Pauline Dale was at this time going through a curious phase. She was scarcely to be blamed for her conduct, for what she had lately lived through had produced a sort of numbness of her faculties, which time seemed to have no intention of restoring to her. To look at her face now no one would suppose her to be in the ordinary sense of the word an invalid; for she was rosy, her eyes were bright, her appetite was good, and she had plenty of strength. Nevertheless there was a certain part of her being which was numb and cold and half-dead. She was not frightened about anything; but she knew that she had behaved as no right-minded or honorable girl should have done. Verena's words that afternoon had roused her, and had given her a slight degree of pain. She lay down on her bed without undressing. She left the blind up so that the moon could shine through her small window, and she kept repeating to herself at intervals through the night the words that had haunted her when she was at Easterhaze: "Wash and be clean." It seemed to Pauline that the sea was drawing her. The insistent voice of the sea was becoming absolutely unpleasant. It echoed and echoed in her tired brain: "Wash—wash and be clean." After her accident she had hated the sea while she was there, but now she wanted to get back to it. She dreaded it and yet she was hungry for it.

As she lay with her eyes wide open it seemed to her that she was looking at the sea. It seemed to her, too, that she really did hear the murmur of the waves. The waves came close, and each wave as it pressed nearer and nearer to the excited child repeated the old cry: "Wash and be clean."

"Oh, if only I could get to the sea!" was her thought. She pressed her hand to that part of her forehead which felt numb and strange. All of a sudden the numbness and strangeness seemed to depart. She saw one vivid picture after another, and each picture revealed to her the sin which she had sinned and the wrong she had committed. At last she saw that fearful picture when she stood with her little sister in the White Bay, and the waves had so nearly drowned them. She sat up in bed. The idea of going straight to Aunt Sophia and of telling her everything did not occur to her. She wanted to get back to the sea. How could she manage this? She was not in the least afraid of Aunt Sophy; she was only afraid of the God whom she had offended. She got up, pushed back her black hair, tied it neatly behind her ears, and taking her little sailor-hat and her dark-blue serge jacket, she put them on. She would go back to the sea. She did not know exactly how she could manage it, but somehow she would. When she was dressed she opened a drawer. She must have money. Aunt Sophia was liberal in the matter of pocket-money, but Pauline was careless and spent hers as she got it. All she possessed now was a shilling. She put the shilling into her pocket. Turning round, she saw the flash of the gold thimble as it rested on the mantelpiece. She slipped that also into her pocket. She then opened the window, and, as she had done on a previous night long ago, she got out and let herself down to the ground. She was now out all alone about midnight. Once again the numb feeling had come back to her; nevertheless her mind was made up. She would at any cost get back to the sea.

She walked across the grass. By-and-by she found herself at the wicket-gate. When she reached the gate she had a sudden overwhelming memory of Nancy King. During the last few weeks she had forgotten Nancy. Now she thought of her. Standing with one hand on the post of the wicket-gate, she reflected on an idea which presented itself to her. If she, Pauline, was wicked—if she had been a naughty girl from the first—surely Nancy was worse! If it was necessary for Pauline to wash and be clean, it was still more necessary for Nancy. Together they could visit the seaside; together lave themselves in the waves; together reach that beautiful state where sin did not trouble.

Pauline smiled to herself. She walked through the Forest in the dead of night, and presently reached Nancy's home. Now, it would have been a very bad thing for Pauline, as it had very nearly been a bad thing for Penelope some weeks ago, had Lurcher been out. But Lurcher was ill, and had been sent to a neighboring vet.'s. And it also happened—just, as it were, in the nick of time—that Farmer King was returning very late from visiting a neighboring fair. He had been kept by a friend until past midnight, and had driven home through the woods. As Pauline got to the gate the farmer drew up his mare within a few feet of the tired girl. He saw a girl standing by the gate, and could not make out who she was or what she was doing. He said gruffly:

"You get out of this. What are you doing here at this time of night?"

Then Pauline raised a white face. He recognized the face, gave a smothered, hasty exclamation, sprang to the ground, flung the reins over the neck of the mare, and came towards the girl.

"Miss Pauline," he said, "what in the name of all that is wonderful are you doing here at this hour?"

Pauline looked full up at him.

"You said you would help me. You said you would if ever the time came. I want to be helped—oh, so badly!—and I have come."

"Because I said that?" exclaimed the farmer, his face flushing all over with intense gratification. "Then you be certain of one thing, my dear—sure and positive certain—that when Farmer King says a thing he will do it. You come straight in with me, missy—straight in with me this blessed minute."

Pauline gave him her hand. It was quite wonderful how he soothed her, how her fear seemed to drop away from her, how contented and almost happy she felt.

"You are very strong, aren't you?" she said. "You are very, very strong?"

"I should about think I am. I can lift a weight with any man in England, cut up a sheep with any man in existence, run a race with any farmer of my age. Strong! Yes, you are right there, missy; I am strong—strong as they're made."

"Then you are what I want. You will help me."

The farmer opened the hall door with his latch-key. Nancy had been in bed for an hour or more. The farmer unlocked the door which led into the kitchen.

"The parlor will be cold," he said, "and the drawing-room will be sort of musty. We don't use the drawing-room every night. But the kitchen—that will be all right. You come right into the kitchen, Miss Pauline, and then you'll tell me."

He took her into the kitchen, lit a big lamp which hung over the fireplace, and poked the ashes in the big stove.

"You do look white and trembly all over. Shall I call Nancy to see you, miss?"

"Please, please do."

Farmer King went noisily upstairs.

"Nancy!" he called to his daughter. "I say, Nancy!"

Nancy was in her first sleep. She opened her eyes at the sound of the farmer's voice, and said in a sleepy tone:

"Well, what now, dad? I wish you wouldn't call me just because you come in late."

"You get up, my girl. There's trouble downstairs. Missy has come."

"Missy? Miss Pen?"

"No, not Miss Pen; the other one—the one we love, both of us—the one who was our queen—Miss Pauline. She's downstairs, and she's shocking bad. She has come to me to help her."

"Why, of course she's bad, father," said Nancy. "Don't you know all that happened? Pauline was nearly drowned at Easterhaze, and they say she hasn't been quite, so to say, right in her head ever since. I have been nearly mad about it."

"Sane, you mean, to my way of thinking," exclaimed the farmer; "for you never said a word to me about it, eating your meals as hearty and contented as you please, buying your winter finery, and talking about going to London for Christmas. Give me a friend who will think of me when I am in trouble. But the lass knows what's what, and it isn't to you she has come; it's to me. She wants me to help her because I made her a promise, forsooth! But you come right down, for she will want a bit of cuddling from a girl like yourself. Come right down this minute and see her, for she badly wants some one to do something for her."

Now, Nancy was really fond of Pauline, notwithstanding her father's words, and she got up

willingly enough and ran downstairs to the kitchen; and when she saw her little friend sitting by the fire, looking very white, her head dropped forward, and her big black eyes fixed with an almost vacant expression straight before her, a great lot of Nancy's heart did go out to the sad and unhappy girl. She rushed to her side, threw her arms round her, and hugged her over and over again.

"Come," said the farmer, "it's a bit of something to eat she wants; then to go upstairs and share your bed with you, Nance. And in the morning, why, I am at her service."

"Yes, that's what you do want, isn't it, Paulie?" said Nancy.

Pauline nodded. She felt almost incapable of speaking. So the farmer brought her food, and made her eat and drink. And then she went upstairs with Nancy, and Nancy made her lie down by her side, and when they were both together in the dark, in the warm bed in the pretty room, Pauline flung her arms round Nancy and began to cry. It was really quite a long time since Pauline had cried. At first her tears came slowly and with great difficulty; but in a little they rained from her eyes more and more easily, until at last they came in torrents, and her tears hurt her and shook her little frame, and came faster, and yet faster, until from sheer exhaustion she dropped asleep. But when Pauline woke from that sleep it seemed to her that the numb part had greatly left her brain and that she could think clearly. Only, still she had no wish to go back to The Dales. She only wanted to wash and be clean.

"You are the queerest girl that ever lived," said Nancy. "You come right downstairs and have breakfast. Of course, they are sure to look for you and try to find you, but you must come straight downstairs now and hear what father has got to say."

Pauline got up willingly enough and went downstairs. There was a groaning breakfast on the board. On most occasions the farmers' servants ate below the salt, but now only the farmer and his daughter Nancy were present.

"Here's cake worth eating," said the farmer, "and new-laid eggs worth taking; and here's honey the like of which is not to be found anywhere else, even in the New Forest. And here's chicken rissoles, and here's cooked ham. Now, missy, fall to—fall to."

Pauline ate very little, and then she turned to the farmer.

"And now you want me to help you?" he said.

"I want you to take me to the seaside. I want Nancy to come, too. I want to go where the waves are high, and where I can wash and be clean."

"My word!" said the farmer, "what does the little lass say?"

"I don't want to go home. I can't go home. If I am alone with you and with Nancy I might get better. Don't let me go home."

"My lass, my lass, you have applied to Farmer King in your trouble, and Farmer King won't desert you. I have not the most remote notion what trouble it can be that worrits a poor little lass, but, such as it is, Farmer King will be your friend. There is no doubt, my dear, that when they miss you at The Dales they will come to look for you here, and what am I to do?"

"Hide me! Oh, hide me! I can't go home."

"What a lark!" cried Nancy. "We could, couldn't we, father?"

"And we won't," said the farmer, bringing his hand down with a great bang on the table. "What we do we'll do above-board. We did wrong that time in the summer when we took miss to that picnic and got her into trouble. Now we're bound to see her out of her trouble. It has to do with that night partly, hasn't it, missy?"

"I have never been happy since," said Pauline.

"Well, then, my dear, I said I would help you out if the time came, and I will. You shall stay here—I vow it—and I am just going to get on my horse Caesar, and I shall ride over to The Dales this blessed minute. You leave it to me. You leave it all to me, my dear."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FARMER KING.

Since Pauline's illness she had very often not been down in time for breakfast. The fact, therefore, that she did not appear on this special morning caused no excitement in the mind of any one. Miss Tredgold was so much absorbed in the task which lay before her that she scarcely noticed the little girl's absence; nurse would see to her, would take her a proper meal, would do all that was necessary. Very often nurse did not disturb Pauline until long after the others had breakfasted, for the doctor had said that she ought never to be wakened when asleep, and that she ought to have as much rest and sleep as possible. So breakfast came to an end. There was a weight in the air. Now, it happened that the day was a specially fine one, for the skies, after

crying so many tears, had cleared up, the sun had come out, and the few flowers that were left held up their heads gayly and tried to forget the storm through which they had lived and the winter days which were before them.

Mr. Dale had, of course, forgotten what he had promised his sister-in-law to do on the previous night. But Miss Tredgold had not the slightest idea of letting him off.

"Come, Henry," she said; "we will go into the schoolroom to prayers."

Accordingly they went, and Mr. Dale read prayers in his somewhat sleepy tones. The children, with the exception of Pauline, were all present. At last family worship was finished and the servants were allowed to leave the room. As nurse was going she looked at Verena.

"Miss Pauline is sleeping longer than usual," she said. "She asked me a few days ago never to waken her, and said she would ring her bell when she wanted breakfast or hot water. I had better find out if she is awake."

"Yes, do, nurse," said Miss Tredgold briskly; "and ask her to be quick and come downstairs. I want all the children except little Marjorie to be present."

"Oh, my dear Sophia!" said Mr. Dale at that moment, "you cannot expect me to wait here with all my morning's work neglected while one of the girls chooses to dress herself."

"Here's a very interesting paper on Plato," said Miss Tredgold suddenly, and as she spoke she handed Mr. Dale the last number of the *Spectator*. "I thought you might like to see it."

"Eh? What?" he cried. "An article on Plato. By whom?"

"By the great classical scholar, Professor Mahaffy," replied Miss Tredgold calmly.

Mr. Dale was in an intense state of excitement.

"When did this come?"

"On Saturday morning."

"But this is Wednesday. How is it I did not see it before?"

"To tell you the truth, Henry, I read it and kept it back on purpose. I want to keep your attention until all the family are assembled. Here is your chair, here are your spectacles, and here is the paper."

Mr. Dale took the paper, muttering to himself:

"Mahaffy—Mahaffy; one of the greatest scholars of the time;" and then he was lost to external things.

Yes, Mr. Dale of The Dales, the head of an ancient house, the father of a large family, forgot everything on earth except a certain disputed passage in which he and Professor Mahaffy diametrically disagreed. He continued to forget everything else, even when nurse rushed into the room.

"Why, she has gone!" cried the good woman. "She ain't in her bed; and what's more, she's been out of it for hours, and the window is open. Oh, whatever has come to the child? Where in the world is she?"

Miss Tredgold looked terribly startled. Verena's face turned like a sheet. Briar and Patty clasped each other's hands. Pen said to herself:

"This is the time for a good sort of child like me to do something."

Then a clatter of horse's hoofs was heard on the gravel outside, and a stoutly built, rubicund man, on a very large horse, drew rein at the front door.

"It's Farmer King!" cried Verena.

"Yes, it's Farmer King," said Pen.

"Penelope, be quiet," said her aunt.

The next moment the door was opened, and the parlor-maid said that Farmer King had come and was anxious to see Mr. Dale and Miss Tredgold.

"Show him in here," said Miss Tredgold. "Henry, have the goodness to give me that paper."

"But I— My dear Sophia, I have not finished reading it. I don't agree a bit with Mahaffy—not a bit. He takes the text in its literal meaning. He ought to read it with the context. Now, there is not the slightest manner of doubt that Plato meant—"

"Henry! Are you mad? Give me that paper."

It is to be regretted that Miss Tredgold snatched the *Spectator* from Mr. Dale's unwilling hand.

"Now, Henry, wake up," she said. "Pauline is lost, and Farmer King has come to speak to us both on a matter of importance."

Just then Farmer King came into the room. Now, the Kings may have been the humble retainers of the Dales for generations, but there was not the slightest doubt that Farmer King made a far more imposing appearance at that moment than did Mr. Dale of The Dales; for Mr. Dale stood up, thin, bewildered, shivering, his mind in the past, his eyes consumed by a sort of inward fire, but with no intelligence as far as present things were concerned; and Farmer King was intensely wide awake, and, so to speak, all there.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Dale," he said. "And I beg your pardon, miss. I presume I am speaking to Miss Tredgold?"

"You are, Mr. King," said that lady.

"Good-day to you all, misses," said the farmer.

He looked round at the somewhat frightened little group of sisters in the background.

"I have come to say something," said the farmer. "It is something about Miss Pauline. It is something about myself and Nancy, and it has to do with you, sir"—here he bowed low to Mr. Dale—"and with you, madam"—his bow was not quite so reverential when he turned to the lady.

"What is it? Please speak," said Miss Tredgold. "We are very anxious about Pauline. Our nurse has just told us that she is not in her bedroom. Do you know where she is?"

"Well, madam, about half an hour ago I left Miss Pauline seated in my warm kitchen, in the company of my good daughter, Nancy, and eating as good a breakfast as I could provide for her. She did not eat much, madam, but it is there for her acceptance. The young lady is heartily welcome. She prefers us to you for the time being. She did not want you to know anything about it, but that ain't quite my way, so I came to explain."

"Please, please, Aunt Sophy, don't be too angry," here came from Verena's lips.

"Silence, Verena!" said her father.

Surely there was quite a new note in his voice! He rose; his languor left him; he came up to Farmer King and held out his hand.

"Why, good old friend," he said, "it seems ages since we met. Do you remember that day when we were boys together and went in search of robins' eggs?"

"Don't I?" said the farmer.

He gave an embarrassed laugh, which ended in a sort of roar.

"And haven't I the eggs safe still?" he said. "I have parted with many things, but not with the eggs the young squire and I took together."

"It is ages since we met," said Mr. Dale. "You are looking very well, Robert—admirably well. I am pleased to see you. Sit down, won't you? Pray sit down."

"That man is enough to turn the brain of any one," was Miss Tredgold's private ejaculation. Aloud she said:

"I presume, Farmer King, that you have not come here without a story to tell."

"That is just it, madam. And now, if I may speak, I will tell you my story."

"We are all prepared to listen," said Miss Tredgold.

"Yes, Robert, and with attention—with attention and interest," said Mr. Dale. "Why, upon my word, this is almost as good as a fresh rendering of the immortal Plato. Sit down, farmer, sit down."

The farmer did not sit down.

"It's no use mincing matters," he said, "nor walking round the bush. It is just this. If there is a family on this earth that I have been proud to have to do with, it is that of the Dales. If there were children that I loved next to my own, it was the Dales. Why, I was brought up, so to speak, to look on them as my liege lords. My mother had the old feudal principles in her, and she never went with the times. She never held that we were as good as our betters. We were good enough, straight enough, honest enough, but we hadn't the blue blood of the Dales in us. That is how I was brought up. Well, you, sir, were married, and came to live here with your good lady. It was the will of the Almighty that she should be taken, and the children were left motherless; and my little Nancy and I, we used to watch to do them a kindness. They were right pleased to come over and see us, and to ride barebacked on my two Forest ponies, and have their fun whenever they could get as far away as The Hollies. And Nancy was free to come to your house, and much she enjoyed it."

"Well, Robert, very natural—very natural indeed," said Mr. Dale.

"So I took it; so I took it."

Here the farmer flashed an angry eye in the direction of Miss Tredgold.

"But never mind," he continued. "I did not presume—far from that—far indeed from that. It pleased the Almighty to give you ten daughters, Mr. Dale, and to give me but one. And I love my one as much, perhaps, as you love the whole of your ten. But be that as it may, when Nancy went to The Dales to have her fun and her larks and her gay time, I was as pleased as Punch. And then this good lady came, and she said to herself, 'Who is Nancy King?' and the young ladies told her the plain truth; and then this good lady did not take the trouble to inquire. A farmer's daughter was only a farmer's daughter to her. Oh, I am not blaming her; but a little thought, a little less prejudice, would have prevented a lot of mischief. Anyhow, the good aunt gave the word—my girl and the young ladies were to have nothing to do with each other in the future. Mark you that, sir, when they were brought up, so to speak, together—always tumbling about in the same hay-field, and riding the same ponies, and playing the same games. It was all to end because of madam. Now, Mr. Dale, I was real mad when Nancy came and told me what had happened. My feelings were hot and strong and bitter, and I thought the treatment dealt

out to my child and me none too just. So, sir, when Nancy asked me to help her, I helped with a will. When Miss Pauline came over to see us—which she did unknown to her aunt—I gave her the best of welcomes, and we started our midnight picnic for no other reason in life but to have her with us.”

“When did you have your midnight picnic?” asked Miss Tredgold very gently. “When? Kindly give me the date.”

The farmer looked into her face. When he saw how white she was, and when he glanced at the two little girls, Briar and Patty, his heart smote him.

“I was given over to evil feelings at that time,” he said, “and I don’t pretend for a moment I did right. Miss Pauline didn’t want to be coaxed, but Nancy was a rare temptress. We did our best, and the children came—three of them. You want to know the date, madam. It was the date of Miss Pauline’s birthday—the night after her birthday. Oh, yes, madam, we had our wild time—a right good time, too.” The farmer gave a short laugh. “You thought your young ladies quite out of the reach of the influence of Farmer King and his family; but you never guessed, madam, that all through one long beautiful summer night we had revels in the woods—dancing, madam; and a picnic, no less; and the young miss crowned with flowers as queen, and given the best presents we could give her. We took a drive under the oaks and elms and beeches of the New Forest, and you never guessed, madam—never. But Miss Pauline, Miss Briar, and Miss Patty were there, and Miss Pauline was our queen. Ah! she had a gay birthday, but you ask her what sort of a birthnight she had. It is true she was queen of the day, but that was nothing to the time when she was queen of the night. Well, sir”—the farmer’s eyes shone as he spoke— “I meant it as a big joke, and I was desperately proud of myself; but I saw even then that Miss Pauline was fretting, and I spoke to her quite seriously, and I said, ‘If ever the time comes when you want a friend, I am the man for your purpose. Don’t you forget that; because you are a Dale and I am a King, and you Dales have always been our liege lords, so don’t you forget that.’ And the child, sir, she believed me. Lots of things happened afterwards, but of them I have nothing to say until last night. Miss Pauline came back to me, and she reminded me of what I had said to her that night in the woods. And, sir—and, madam—I mean to keep my promise. I came home at midnight, and there she was standing at the gate, white and slim and pretty as though she was a moonbeam. And she said, ‘You promised to help me when I was in trouble, and I have come to you to get you to keep your promise.’ Now, sir and madam, I have come here about that. The young lady wants to be helped. She has got a shock, and wants a bit of humoring. She says some words which have no meaning to me, but they mean something to her, and she must be humored. ‘I want to wash and be clean,’ she keeps saying; and she wants Nancy and me to take her away to the seaside where the waves are big and strong, and she insists on it that she will only go with Nancy and me. So, Miss Tredgold and Mr. Dale, I have come here to-day to say that we mean to take her.”

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“Can I see her?” asked Miss Tredgold. “I have nothing to say. Perhaps I did wrong that time. We all make mistakes sometimes. I ought to have known you better, Mr. King. But that time is over. The important thing now is to restore the balance of Pauline’s mind. Can I see her?”

“You can, madam, when the right time comes; but that is not to-day, and it won’t be to-morrow. This is my business now, madam, and you must leave it to me.”

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CLEANSING WATERS.

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That very day Farmer King went away with his daughter and Pauline. They went to a small village called Rosestairs, not many miles from Easterhaze. The farmer was immensely proud and pleased at having the care of Pauline, and he was determined that if man could restore her to health, he would be that individual. Rosestairs was a very pretty little place, and quite sheltered. The Kings took lodgings in a tiny cottage, where they lived as plainly as people could. Here Pauline rested and took long walks, and, as she expressed it afterwards, found herself again. But although day by day the weight in her head grew less, the haunting words still clung to her: “Wash and be clean.” One night they entered into her dreams, and she awoke quite early with the words hovering on her lips: “Wash, Pauline; wash and be clean.” Nancy was sleeping peacefully by her side. Pauline raised her head. She felt well—absolutely well—but for those haunting words. She stole out of bed and went and stood by the window.

The sea was only a few yards off, and the waves were coming in fresh and lovely and sparkling. “Come, wash,” they seemed to say, and each soft thud of a wave on the shore seemed to repeat the words.

“I will—I will; I must,” thought the young girl.

She opened her trunk very softly, took out her bathing-dress, put it on, and ran down to the beach. There was no one about. In a moment she had entered the waves. She breasted them as far as her waist; she ducked and covered herself with the invigorating salt water. And as the

sparkling salt water rolled over her, it seemed to her fancy that a load rolled off her mind. She felt light of heart and gay. She felt cheerful and happy. A few minutes later she was back in the cottage. Nancy turned in her sleep, started, opened her sleepy eyes, and looked at the dripping figure standing in the middle of the room.

"Why, Paulie," she cried, "what are you doing? Oh, you are dripping wet; your hair and all. What have you been at?"

"I am wet because I have washed. I have washed and I am clean. Oh, Nancy, Nancy! it is as right as possible. The terrible, haunting words have gone, and the longing for the sea has gone. I know that I am forgiven. Nancy, do you hear? I am washed, and I am clean. Oh! I know at last what it means."

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"For goodness' sake take off those wet things and get back into bed and let me warm you up. You will catch your death."

"My death!" cried Pauline, "when I am so happy I scarcely know how to contain myself."

Nancy sprang out of bed, dragged Pauline towards her, and helped her to pull off her wet things. Then she wrapped her up in her warm night-dress, made her cuddle down in bed, and kissed her and hugged her.

"Oh, dear!" she said, "you are the queerest girl; but your face looks as it did long ago."

"I feel as I did long ago—or, rather, I feel different. I was a child then and did not understand much. Now, it seems to me, I understand a great deal—yes, a great deal. Oh! and there is your father in the garden. I must dress; I must go to him."

So Pauline jumped out of bed, got quickly into her clothes, and ran out to join the farmer.

"Mr. King," she cried, "I am quite well again."

"It looks like it, little missy," said the farmer.

"I am," repeated Pauline. "I am as perfectly well as a girl can be. You know how often I told you I wanted to wash and be clean. I had my wash this morning, and it was really what I did want, for that dull feeling has left my head. I know just everything, and how I behaved, and all the rest, and I am prepared to take the bitter as well as the sweet. It is very, very sweet living here with you and Nancy, and whatever happens, you will be my friends as long as I live. And it is very bitter to think that I must tell Aunt Sophia and Verena and the rest of them the whole truth; but, bitter or not, I am going to do it, and I am going back to them, for it is right. I want to go back to them this very day. May I?"

"Yes, my lass; I understand you," said the farmer gravely.

It was a lovely day for the time of year; although it was November, the sun shone brilliantly. Miss Tredgold stood on the lawn in front of the house and talked to Verena, who stood by her side.

"I understand all of you now, Verena," she said, "except Pauline. I never did understand her, and I sometimes think I never shall, poor child!"

"Oh, yes, you will," said Verena. "When Paulie comes back she will be as you never knew her—as she used to be, her sweetest and best. In some ways she is stronger and better and braver than any of us. I think she ought to make a splendid woman some day, for she has so much character and so much determination."

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"I think I have done the rest of you good by coming here; but if I have done Pauline harm, I sometimes wonder if I can ever be happy again," said the poor lady.

"You have not done her harm. Only wait until she comes back. She is just getting the right treatment now. She felt everything so terribly that her mind was quite numb and incapable of conducting her right for a time; but wait until she returns."

"Day after day I long and hope for her return," said Miss Tredgold, "but day after day there is a fresh excuse."

"And yet you say you want her to return," said Verena. "Oh, aunty, aunty! who is this coming up the path? Here she is—Paulie herself; and Nancy is following her, and there is Farmer King. They have entered by the wicket-gate and are coming up through the plantation. Oh, look, look! And she is well. I know by the way she walks, by the way she runs, by the way she smiles. She is as well as ever she was in all her life."

"Better—far better than ever!" cried Pauline's gay and almost rollicking voice. "Here I am, stronger than ever, and quite, quite well."

The next moment Pauline's arms were flung round her aunt's neck.

"You must forgive me first of all," she said. "I have come back to confess, and I want to get my confession over. I want all the others to stand round and listen. Ah! here they come. Don't rush at me for a moment, girls. Don't hug me or do anything of that sort. Stand still and listen, listen, listen. I was rebellious, and I did wrong, and——"

"My darling," interrupted Miss Tredgold, "we know the whole story. We only want you to confess that you did wrong, and then never, never to allude to it again; for I see, Pauline, by your eyes that you mean to do right now."

"I will obey you because I love you," said Pauline.

"There, madam! I think she is pretty well restored," cried the farmer. "And she is the best young lady in the world. Nancy and I have brought her home, and now, with your permission, madam, we will take our leave."

"Nothing of the sort!" cried Miss Tredgold. "If you did wrong, Pauline, I was by no means altogether in the right. I little knew when I told you, my dears, to have nothing more to do with Farmer King and his daughter, that I was preventing your enjoying the society of a gentleman. Please shake hands with me, Mr. King."

Farmer King's face was quite pale with emotion.

"I admire you; I thank you," said Miss Tredgold. "You are a man in a thousand;" and again she held out her hand.

This time Farmer King wrung it. But he was absolutely speechless; not a single word passed his lips.

"Nancy," said Miss Tredgold, "I revoke what I said. You must come and see my girls whenever you like."

"On condition, madam," said the farmer, "that the young ladies sometimes come to see Nancy and me."

"Certainly," said Miss Tredgold; "but I also must put in a condition."

"What is that, madam?"

"That I occasionally accompany them."

But at this the farmer gave such a cheer of hearty goodwill that all the children joined in in spite of themselves.

"Was there ever anything quite so jolly in all the world?" cried Pauline. "I feel younger than ever, and jollier than ever. Here comes father, too. We are all together. Father, I am back again, and it is all owing to Farmer King and Nancy that I am cured. Whom shall we cry three cheers for? You give the word."

"Aunt Sophy, of course," cried Verena.

"Hip! hip! hurrah!" shouted the Dale family.

"And I should like to suggest a hearty cheer for my good old friend, Farmer King," said Mr. Dale.

"And for his cure," said Pauline.

And then the Dale family and the King family joined hands and shouted "Hip! hip! hurrah!" once more.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GIRLS OF THE FOREST ***

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