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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRASS BOUND BOX ***



THE BRASS BOUND BOX

BY EVELYN RAYMOND

AUTHOR OF "THE DOINGS OF NANCY," "MIXED PICKLES," "MY LADY BAREFOOT"

ILLUSTRATED BY DIANTHA W. HORNE



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THE BRASS BOUND BOX

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"AT LAST IT WAS OUT"

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. LEGACY AND LEGATEE	11
II. MASTER MONTGOMERY STURTEVANT	25
III. WHY MONTY DID NOT GO A-FISHING	40
IV. FOXES' GULLY	50
V. CHESTNUTS AND GOLD MINES	64
VI. THE BRASS BOUND BOX	82
VII. THE GRIT OF MOSES JONES	95

VIII. HAY-LOFT DREAMS	110
IX. SQUIRE PETTIJOHN	126
X. ALFARETTA'S PERPLEXITY	142
XI. THE FACE IN THE DARKNESS	154
XII. A STURTEVANT—PERFORCE	168
XIII. BUT—STURTEVANT TO THE RESCUE	187
XIV. ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON	203
XV. BY THE OLD STONE BRIDGE	220
XVI. THE COTTAGE IN THE WOOD	234
XVII. A SELF-ELECTED CONSTABLE	248
XVIII. REUBEN SMITH, ACCESSORY	263
XIX. WHAT THE MOON SAW IN THE CORNFIELD	278
XX. UNINVITED GUESTS	292
XXI. A NEIGHBORLY TRICK OF THE WIND	310

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
"AT LAST IT WAS OUT" (<i>See page 81</i>).	Frontispiece
"He now lay stretched upon his owner's lap as she still sat on the floor"	27
"I feel so queer every little spell, an' I must get home"	97
"There, all anxiety forgotten, they dreamed dreams and saw visions"	120
"Ma'am Puss extracted her own supper in advance of the family's"	148
"Already one pumpkin pie was half-devoured"	230
"But the late rising moon looked down upon a curious scene"	290
"Each armed with a grinning Jack and somebody driving Whitey as a snowy guide"	324

THE BRASS BOUND BOX

CHAPTER I.

[Pg 11]

LEGACY AND LEGATEE

Marsden was one of the few villages of our populous country yet left remote from any line of railway. The chief events of its quiet days were the morning and evening arrivals and departures of the mail-coach, whose driver still retained the almost obsolete custom of blowing a horn to signal his approach.

All Marsden favored the horn, it was so convenient and so—so antique! which word typified the spirit of the place. For if modest Marsden had any pride, it was in its own unchanging attitude toward modern ways and methods. So, whenever Reuben Smith's trumpet was heard, the villagers knew it was time to leave their homes along the main street and repair to the "general store and post-office" for the mail, which was their strongest connecting link with the outside world.

Occasionally, too, the coach brought a visitor to the village; though this was commonly in summer-time, when even its own stand-offishness could not wholly repel the "city boarder." After the leaves changed color, nobody went to and fro save those who "belonged," as the storekeeper, the milliner, and Squire Pettijohn, the lawyer; and it had been ten years, at least, since Reuben's four-in-hand was brought to a halt before Miss Eunice Maitland's gate. Now, on a windy day of late September, the two white horses and their two black companions were reined up there, while the trumpet gave a blast which startled the entire neighborhood.

[Pg 12]

"My heart was in my mouth the minute I heard it!" declared the Widow Sprigg to a crony, later on; although this curious disarrangement of her anatomy did not prevent the good woman from being foremost at the gate to learn the cause of this salute, thus rudely anticipating her mistress's rights in the case. Therefore, it was upon a time-damaged, cap-frilled countenance that Katharine Maitland's dismayed glance fell as she sprang from the stage and inquired:

"Are you my Aunt Eunice?"

"Your—Aunt—Eunice! Thank my stars, I ain't aunt to nobody!" returned the widow, almost as much alarmed by the appearance of this strange maiden as she had been by the coachman's blast.

[Pg 13]

"It is a matter of thankfulness," retorted the girl, pertly, and surveying the other with amused and critical eyes, which made Susanna Sprigg "squirm in her shoes."

Reuben now slowly climbed down from his high seat, and removed from the rumble a great trunk, a suit-case, a parcel of books, and a dog-basket; and the stranger at once occupied herself in releasing from his confined quarters a pug so atrociously high-bred that Susanna instantly exclaimed:

"My stars! That dog's so humbly he must ache!"

Katharine would have given a crisp reply had not her attention been distracted by Reuben's movements, who was waiting to receive his fare, yet in such terror of the pug's snapping jaws that he was stepping up and down in a lively fashion, as he rescued one foot and then the other from his enemy's attack.

"'Pears to blame *me* for bein' shut up in that there basket, don't he? When anybody knows 'twasn't my fault at all. I hain't enj'yd the trip no more'n what he has, hearin' him yelp that continual, an' I must say I didn't expect, at my time o' life, to commence drivin' stage for dogs. Here, sis, is your change. Good day to ye, an' a good welcome, I hope."

"Humph! You don't speak as if you really 'hoped' it, but quite the reverse!" returned Punch's mistress, more shrewdly than courteously.

[Pg 14]

"Dreadful smart, ain't ye?" said Reuben, and drove away, putting his horn to his lips, and thereby drowning any further remarks which the stranger might have addressed to him.

Lifting the ungainly brute in her arms, the girl now turned and surveyed the house beyond the gate, her heart far heavier with homesickness than seemed consistent with her outward, flippant bearing.

What she saw was a wide, rambling frame house; wherever they showed between the clambering vines which encircled it, its clapboards glistening white and its shutters vividly green. The few leaves still left upon the vines were scarlet, while behind the low roof rose maples in the full glory of their autumn reds and yellows. The long front yard was green and well kept, and the borders beside the path were gay with chrysanthemums, though between these showed the frost-blackened foliage of tenderer plants. Upon the porch was a woman with a shawl over her head, apparently shivering in the wind which tossed the maple boughs, and awaiting an explanation of this arrival.

"A pretty picture!" admitted Katharine, who fancied herself artistic, "but so lonesome it gives me the hypo! And that—that, I suppose, is my Aunt Eunice. Well, Punch, come on! Let's get it over with!"

[Pg 15]

The Widow Sprigg had remained motionless, but keenly observant, and her thoughts were:

"If that ain't a Maitland, I never knew the breed. And I reckon I do know it, bein's me an' my fam'ly has lived cheek by jowl with them an' their fam'ly since ever was. But which Maitland it is, or what in reason she's come for, beats me."

Then, as the stranger walked coolly through the gateway, leaving her luggage on the sidewalk outside, Susanna sniffed, and remarked—for anybody to hear who chose:

"What's that mean? Expect me to fetch an' carry for such a strappin' girl as that? Well, not if I know Susanna Sprigg, an' I think I do."

Whereupon, the widow, long time "assistant" to her more affluent "neighbor," Miss Maitland, shrugged her shoulders at the wind and this absurd notion, and followed Kate. She wouldn't have missed the interview between that young person and her enforced hostess "for a farm," and yet she was extremely anxious concerning the trunk and the parcels. But curiosity prevailed over caution, and she was in time to hear the rather nervous inquiry:

"Are you my Aunt Eunice—so called?"

"I am Eunice Maitland, and though I am not aunt in reality to any one, I have been lovingly nicknamed 'aunt' by many of my kin. But no matter what our relationship, you are a Maitland, I am sure, and I am very glad to see you in Marsden. Come in, come in at once. The wind is chill, and you have had a long ride," responded the precise old gentlewoman, extending her hand to Katharine, and cordially attempting to draw the girl within the shelter of the great hall. [Pg 16]

But this hospitable attempt was rudely misunderstood by Punch, who snapped at the hand, and caused its owner to withdraw it hastily, saying: "It will be better to leave your dog outside."

"Leave my dog outside! Leave Punch, my—my—my darling! Oh! I can't do that. He has been so tenderly brought up, and is so sensitive to the cold. He has really suffered on that dreadful ride."

Miss Eunice frowned slightly, and merely remarking, "Very well, bring him in, though I caution you against Sir Philip. He is old and irritable," led the way through the wide hall into a sitting-room beyond, where a wood fire was burning on the hearth, and the furnishings were of the sort in vogue a hundred years ago. Even the disturbed young visitor thought she had never seen anything so charming as that simple interior, where everything was in keeping, and so spotlessly neat, and over which fell the cheerful radiance of the blazing logs. Unceremoniously dropping Punch, she clasped her hands in admiration, exclaiming: [Pg 17]

"Oh, how quaint! How interesting! How unlike anything I expected to see!"

Although Miss Eunice was gratified by this tribute to her familiar surroundings, she fancied that its expression was overdone, and resented its seemingly patronizing insincerity. Placing a chair directly in the glow of the fire, she invited Katharine to take it, while she herself sat down on a straight-backed settle beyond.

Sensitive to feel the lessening cordiality of her hostess's manner, Katharine hid her feeling behind an added flippancy, as she tossed her palms outward, in a manner wholly natural to herself, but which the house-mistress again fancied an affectation, and exclaimed: "Well!"

"Well?" returned Miss Eunice, quietly but inquiringly.

"Well, I suppose you're the legatee and I'm the legacy. I hope you won't be half as unwilling to accept me as I am to be left to you. If you are, there'll be some high times in Marsden."

This mixture of frankness and bravado brought a second frown to Miss Maitland's fine face, but she said, quite courteously:

"Kindly explain, my child, who you are, and to what I am indebted—"

"For the nuisance of your legacy," interrupted the girl, excitedly, and, thrusting a sealed letter into the other's hand, drew back in her own chair and covered her face with her hands. Under all her self-confident manner her heart was throbbing painfully, and she felt as if she must get up and run away. Somewhere in the great forest through which Reuben had driven his coach lay an apparently deserted little cabin, which had attracted her by its overgrowth of woodbine—that hereabout seemed to envelop everything upon which it could clasp its tendrils—and whose memory now returned to her invitingly. Exiled from her own home, an alien here, such a spot as that would be a haven of refuge. She had not known exactly what was in the letter she had tossed Miss Maitland, but she had guessed sufficiently near to know its contents could not be flattering to herself. Beneath her hiding hands her cheeks were flushing with shame when she heard her name spoken with utmost gentleness and affection. [Pg 18]

"So you are John's only child! I should have known it without being told, only it is so many, many years since he left me, a wild little lad who found the old home too dull. He was not as close of kin as some others I have reared here, and he was but fifteen when he went away. But I have always loved him, and hoped for his return; and now—"

"Oh, my stars!" inadvertently exclaimed the Widow Sprigg, thus disclosing the fact that she had been listening beyond the door. [Pg 19]

"And now, Susanna, I smell your bread scorching," went on the mistress as calmly as if the other had not betrayed herself. Then, when the kitchen door had been slammed by the retreating hand-maiden, with an emphasis that said as clearly as words that her mistress might go on and talk, and things might happen enough to turn a body's head, for all she, Susanna Sprigg, cared or noticed, so there! Miss Eunice left her own seat, and, going around to Katharine's, gently drew the hiding hands away from the troubled young face, and, putting the letter into them, said: "There, my dear, read it."

"No, no! I can't! I won't! I hate it. I hate her, and all—all—belonging to her! I never want to see or hear of her again. And I won't stay. I see you don't want your legacy, and I'll go at once. I have ten dollars, I can live—"

"Why, there's some mistake, little girl. This is from no 'her,' but—a message from the dead."

The sudden break in the quiet old voice touched the listener more than the words, and she mechanically took the letter as she repeated:

"A message from the dead? What can you mean?"

"Read it and see."

Then Katharine read what her idolized father had written many months before, when the knowledge of his own approaching death had come to him; and it seemed to her that it was his own voice saying:

[Pg 20]

"DEAR AUNT EUNICE:—FOR dear you are, notwithstanding all these years of silence, during which your wild little lad has grown into a busy, care-burdened man. That you heard of my first marriage, and my wife's early death, leaving me with one little girl—your legacy—I know; because that all happened before the habit of our correspondence lapsed. But you may not know that two years ago I married again, a widow with four little sons; and though she has been the best of wives to me, she and my darling Katharine have not been happy together. Kate is a passionate, self-willed, but great-hearted child, so full of romantically generous impulses that I long ago nicknamed her my 'Kitty Quixote.' Her stepmother's nature and temperament are of quite another mold; and knowing what I have just learned concerning my own health, I foresee nothing but misery for these two, should they be left to live together without my presence.

"So, since my motherless daughter is my most precious possession and you have been my most devoted friend, I find it the most natural thing in the world to bequeath my treasure to my friend. If, for any reason unknown to me, you cannot accept my legacy I have made other arrangements for Katharine's future, which you can learn by applying to my lawyers, Messrs. Brown and Brown, Blank Street, New York.

[Pg 21]

"My wife knows of this letter, and we have arranged that after my death, should it occur, Kate is to remain with her for six months, as a final test of their ability to live happily together, and for the benefit of the schools in this city. At the end of that time, if these two well-meaning but uncongenial people decide that it is wisest to part, 'Kitty Quixote' will be sent to you, to do with as you see fit. In any case, she will be no pecuniary charge to any one; her own mother's little fortune, with such a portion of mine as is justly hers, being all-sufficient for ordinary needs.

"In loving remembrance of my boyhood, made happy by your care, and in firm reliance upon your friendship, your troublesome John bids you farewell."

Katharine had expected to find the sealed letter she had been commissioned to deliver to Miss Maitland but a complaining missive from her stepmother, setting forth the girl's faults and failures with that accuracy of detail so characteristic of the "second Mrs. John." That lady's handwriting upon the envelope had helped her to this impression, yet so honest was she that she had not once thought of protesting or refusing to deliver it. The revulsion of feeling was now so strong that she could not restrain her tears, nor the impulse to throw herself headlong upon Aunt Eunice, crying wildly:

[Pg 22]

"Oh, it's all true! But he loved me, my father loved me, bad as I am! And for his sake I wish—I wish I could be good. So folks, his folks, or—or anybody could stand it to live with me! But I can't. I've tried. I've tried ever so hard, yet the goodness gets down below and the badness stays on top, and then things go—smash!"

Aunt Eunice waited a moment, then replaced Katharine in her chair, thinking what a child she still seemed, despite her fourteen years and her city training. Also, recalling with a thrill of pride that she herself, at fourteen years, had been the head of her own father's widowed home and a woman, by contrast. "Though I was reared in Marsden," she complacently reflected, as she said:

"I should be glad to hear whatever you choose to tell me, my dear, of your life. Especially, what caused the final break between you and Mrs. Maitland."

"Why, it wasn't badness at all, that time! It was meant in kindness. Some other girls and I had fixed up a sort of house-picnic for washer-woman Bidley's children, who were all down with the measles, and just to amuse them I took stepmother's boys, the four young Snowballs—haven't they the absurdest name?—along; and she—she didn't like it. She said things. That I'd wilfully exposed them to danger, though I ought to be as careful of them as if they were my real brothers. And there I was trying to be, only she didn't understand. Then, another day, not long before, I coaxed some big boys who have a naphtha-launch to give the 'Balls a sail on it down the bay. The thing happened to explode, and, though nobody was hurt, she went on just terrible because I'd taken the children without asking her. How could I ask her when she was off shopping, or somewhere, just at the very moment the idea popped into my head? And nothing befell the little fellows except getting their clothes wet, and they always needed washing, anyway. The nice part of it was that they were scared into behaving themselves as they should for a whole week afterward, and she might have been pleased. But it was always like that. I'd have perfectly lovely plans for making everybody happy, all around, and they'd all end just the other way. So here I am. Mrs. John has cast me off; do you accept me?"

[Pg 23]

"First, let me ask if you were accustomed to speak of your father's wife in that manner?"

The girl was surprised by the other's tone, yet promptly answered: "Certainly. Everybody amongst father's artist friends called her either 'the second Mrs. John,' or 'Stepmother.' Either one it happened. Why?"

[Pg 24]

"It was most disrespectful."

At this uncompromising reply, Kate stared, exclaiming: "Why, you're a truth-teller yourself, aren't you?"

"I am. Did you not suppose so?" returned Miss Maitland, amused.

"Well, you see, I've been told you were very agreeable, and most of the really agreeable people I know lie like the mischief."

"Katharine!"

"Fact. And I've got into more scrapes for telling the truth than for any other thing I've done, except being kind to the little Snowballs. But—hark! What's that? Punch—*Punch*—You flippety-cap woman! Stop! Stop! Stop!"

An eruptive, agonized bark from the hall sent the girl thither at a bound, while Miss Eunice hastily followed, anxiously crying: "Philip! Sir *Philip Sidney*!"

CHAPTER II.

[Pg 25]

MASTER MONTGOMERY STURTEVANT

Wildly beating the air with a long-handled broom, her cap-frills flying, her spectacles awry, the Widow Sprigg was vainly endeavoring to restore peace between Punch, the newcomer, and Sir Philip Sidney, the venerable Angora cat which had hitherto "ruled the roost."

The pug, with a native curiosity almost as great as Susanna's own, had slipped from the sitting-room unobserved and had wandered to the warm kitchen where Sir Philip lay asleep on his cushion, unmindful of interlopers till an ugly black muzzle was poked into his ribs, and he found his natural enemy coolly ruffling his silken fur.

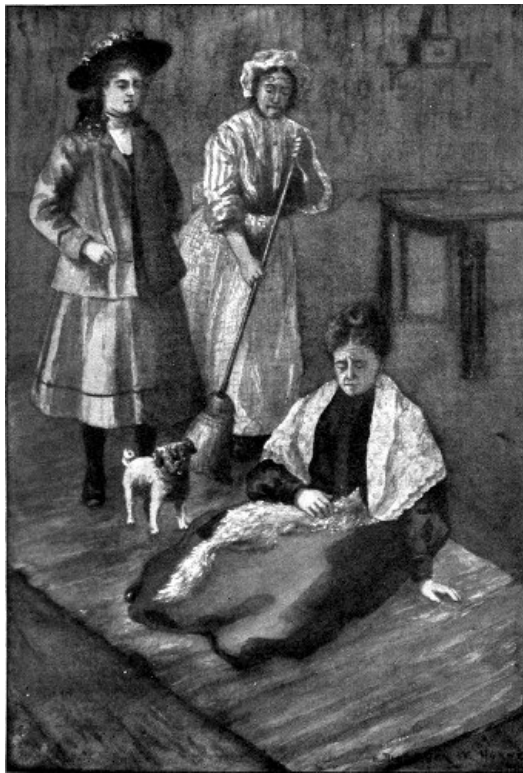
Until then, Miss Eunice had boasted of her pet that he was as like his famous namesake as it was possible for any animal to be like any human being, and quoted concerning him that he was "sublimely mild, a spirit without spot." Indeed, Miss Maitland's beautiful "Angory" was one of the show animals of Marsden. He had been brought to his mistress by a returning traveller more years ago than most people remembered, and had continued to live his charmed and pampered life long after the ordinary age of his kind. With appetite always supplied with the best of food, his handsome body lodged luxuriously, it was small wonder that hitherto he had worn his aristocratic title with a gentleness befitting his historic prototype.

[Pg 26]

Now, suddenly, the pent-up temper of his past broke out in one terrific burst; and he bit, scratched, tore, and yowled with all the ferocity of youth, while Punch, realizing that he had stirred up a bigger rumpus than even his mischievous spirit desired, vainly sought to elude his enemy's attacks.

"Why, Philip! Sir Philip!" cried Miss Eunice, stooping to grasp her favorite's collar, and by his unlooked-for onrush against her own feet losing her balance and falling to the floor.

"Punch! You bad, bad dog! There—you woman! Don't you dare—don't you dare to strike him with that awful broom! If he needs punishing—I'll punish him myself! Oh, what a horrid place, what horrid folks, what a perfectly fiendish cat!" shrieked Kate, folding both arms tight about the pug's fat, squirming body, and rushing out-of-doors with him. But by this time his courage had returned, and, wriggling himself free, he rushed back to the battle.



**"HE NOW LAY STRETCHED UPON
HIS OWNER'S LAP AS SHE STILL
SAT ON THE FLOOR"**

Alas! that exciting affair was all over. Sir Philip's unwonted anger had proved too much for his strength, and, utterly exhausted, he now lay stretched upon his owner's lap as she still sat on the floor, stroking and caressing him most tenderly.

[Pg 27]

Katharine had followed Punch back to the kitchen, and was as startled as he was proud at the sight before them. Cocking his square head on one side, curling his tail, wrinkling his nose, and protruding his pink tongue even more than usual, he regarded his fallen foe with such comical satisfaction that Katharine's alarm gave place to amusement, and she laughed aloud. But the laugh died as quickly as it had risen when Aunt Eunice looked up and said, reproachfully:

"I fear it has killed him, poor fellow!"

"Oh, no, no! A little bit of a scrap like that kill a cat? I thought they had nine lives, and such a trifle—Why, Punch is as fresh as a daisy, and that proud! Just look at him!" cried the girl. Yet her enthusiasm was dashed by the expression of deep sorrow on Miss Maitland's face, and there were real tears in the widow's eyes as she now advanced, broom in hand, though without apparent anger, to sweep Punch out of the room.

Katharine was too surprised to protest, beyond quietly motioning the broom aside and lifting the now submissive pug to her shoulder, where he perched calmly contemplative of the disaster he had evoked.

[Pg 28]

"There, Eunice, don't fret. What can't be cured must be endured, you know, and even a cat can't die but once. Only he was *such* a cat! We sha'n't never see his like again, an'—Take care there, sis! Don't you know he always hated water?" exclaimed Susanna, resting upon her broom-handle, and bending above her anxious mistress till a dash from the dipper deluged both cat and lap.

Yet now full of sympathy and regret Kate did not pause in her work of restoration, and either the bath did revive Sir Philip or he had been on the point of recovery, for he suddenly sprang up, shook his drenched head, and staggered toward his cushion on the hearth, where he lay down and proceeded to smooth his disordered fur.

Then Kate put her arms around Miss Maitland and helped that lady to her feet, saying, earnestly:

"Oh, I am so sorry, and I am so glad! but it will never happen again. Poor old Sir Philip won't be in a hurry to fight, and Punch never does if he can help it. Do you, you darling?" she finished to the perplexed dog, which she had unceremoniously dropped from her shoulder when she had rushed for the water.

[Pg 29]

The pug gave a funny little wink of one intelligent eye, as if he fully understood; then slowly waddled across the rag-carpeted floor and curled himself up at a safe distance from Sir Philip, upon whom he kept a wary watch. But he was a weary dog by that time, and so glad of warmth and repose that he left even his own damaged coat to take care of itself for the present.

However, if he was calm, the Widow Sprigg was no longer so. Kate had not only drenched the cat and his mistress, but she had left a large puddle in the very centre of Susanna's "new brea'th" of rag carpet, its owner now indignantly demanding to know if Miss Eunice "was goin' to put up with any such doin's? That wery brea'th that I cut an' sewed myself, out of my own rags, an' not a

smitch of your'n in it, an' hadn't much more'n just got laid down ready for winter. An' if it had come to this that dogs and silly girls was to be took in an' done for, cats, or no cats, Angory or otherwise, she, for one, Susanna Sprigg, wasn't goin' to put up with it, an' so I tell you, an' give notice, according."

During the delivery of this speech the widow's black eyes had glared through her spectacles so fiercely that the young visitor was alarmed, and said to Aunt Eunice, appealingly:

"Oh, please don't let her go just because I've come! I'll not stay myself, to make such trouble, even if you'll have me—and you haven't said so yet. There's that boarding-school left—" [Pg 30]

Miss Maitland ignored the appeal, but looking through the window remarked to her irate assistant:

"That luggage shouldn't be left on the sidewalk, Susanna. Get Moses to help you bring it in. If a tramp should happen to pass he might make off with it."

By which quiet rejoinder Kate understood that she had been "accepted;" also that the house-mistress was not disturbed by the threat of her handmaid. Indeed, she discovered afterward that it was the widow's habit to threaten thus whenever her temper was a trifle ruffled; also, that nothing save death was apt to sever her relationship with the Maitland family, which she held far dearer than her own.

"Tramps? Do you have tramps in this out-of-the-way village? I'm afraid of tramps, myself, and they're about the only things I am really afraid of," said Kate, following Aunt Eunice back into the sitting-room.

"I never knew one to pass through Marsden, and I've lived here always; but Susanna has read of them and their depredations, and is constantly on the lookout for one. Except for the trouble between the cat and dog she wouldn't have left your things in the street a moment after she had satisfied her curiosity concerning you. But you will like Susanna when you have become accustomed to her. A better-hearted woman never lived." [Pg 31]

To this assurance the girl replied with a doubtful laugh and the words:

"I never should have dreamed it;" then stationed herself at the window to watch the proceedings outside.

The Widow Sprigg had vanished through a back kitchen and now appeared around the corner of the house, having in tow an elderly man, who followed her with evident reluctance. She had thrown on a "slat" sunbonnet, and pinned a red shawl about her shoulders, but had shaken her head so vigorously that the shawl had slipped down and the sunbonnet back, while the frills of her muslin cap waved blindingly before her spectacles.

"Who is that? Is he 'Moses'? Does he live here?" asked Kate, laughing not only at the appearance but behavior of the two.

"Yes. He is my hired man. His name is Moses Jones. He is not as old as he looks, and is one of our likeliest citizens. He's quite intelligent, and has even been mentioned for a constable—if Marsden should ever need one. If enough city people should come here to warrant such an office," finished the lady, with unconscious sarcasm. [Pg 32]

Kate's head came around with a jerk. "Constable? That's a policeman, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And is it only 'city people' who do wrong and need arresting? Because, you see, I'm a 'city' person myself, and resent that idea!" laughed the girl, mischievously. Yet the next instant she regretfully observed that she had again annoyed her dignified hostess.

Indeed, the annoyance was so great that Miss Maitland's brow clouded, and her eye swept the stylishly garbed small figure at the window with renewed misgiving. She knew little of the latter-day young folks, with their study-sharpened intelligence, their habit of repartee, and their self-assumed equality with their elders. Such few of the Marsden lads and lasses as visited her belonged to the old-fashioned families, and were trained to strict habits of obedience, and "to speak when they were spoken to." They were supposed to have no opinions on any subject save such as were formed for them by their parents and guardians; and—well, they were altogether different from this alert, dark-eyed maiden, who had been in the house less than an hour, yet had already upset it to a degree!

Kate's gaze had again returned to the scene without, and she had forgotten her momentary regret, as she observed, from time to time:

"She's the funniest thing I ever saw, and he's funnier than she! He doesn't want to lift the trunk. No. She doesn't want him to. Yes, she does. She's getting mad. He won't do it her way. She won't do it his. They're both coming in and leaving it on the sidewalk. He's saying something to her and now she's faced about again. Maybe he said 'tramp,' because she's looking all up and down the street as if she were scared, and he's laughing. I guess he's laughing—he shakes as if he were, yet his face is as sober as ever. Now they're off! Here they come. But do look, Aunt Eunice, oh, do look! He's just barely lifting his end off the ground, and she's raised hers real high. She's doing the most of the work, I believe, yet he's crouching down as if he were half-crushed by the weight." [Pg 33]

The idea! He sha'n't do that! I won't let any woman be treated that way!"

Out she sped, leaving all doors open and thus obliging Miss Maitland to close them after her or let the rooms be cooled by the inrush of wind. But her swift comprehension of the habits of the two household helpers, and her vivid description of their present movements, had so amused the lady that she also took up a point of observation, and was just in time to see Katharine indignantly push Moses' hand from the trunk-handle and seize it herself. It was evidently a heavier load than she had expected, for, at first, her end went down even lower than when Moses held it, yet she rallied instantly, and with all her might lifted it to a level with Susanna's, who was as instantly won by this action, and exclaimed, exultantly:

[Pg 34]

"There, Moses Jones! What did I tell you? Ain't no heft in it, not a mite. Nobody but a man—a man—would make such a how-de-do over a trunk. Just a trunk!"

The infinite scorn of words and manner provoked nothing further from her "shif'less" housemate than another silent chuckle, and a keen glance at Katharine from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

Yet he did look a trifle ashamed when his mistress herself opened the hall door again to admit the trunk-bearers, and without more ado hurried back to the sidewalk and brought in the rest of the luggage. It was noticeable that he no longer stooped or affected fatigue; and that as soon as Susanna let go the trunk at the foot of the stairs he immediately shouldered it, like the lightest of parcels, and carried it swiftly above. Then, pausing at the top of the flight, he asked, in a brisk tone:

"Which room, Eunice?"

"The sitting-room chamber, Moses."

Katharine listened, astonished, then exclaimed:

"Why—I thought he was your 'hired man.' That's servant, isn't it?"

"About the same thing, my dear," answered Miss Maitland, smiling ever so slightly, and quite conscious that Susanna's black eyes and keen ears were alert for her reply.

[Pg 35]

"But he called you by your first name! just as if he were your brother, or—or—somebody."

"There is little giving of titles in Marsden, Katharine, but that does not imply any lack of respect. Moses and Susanna and I were schoolmates together in the little red schoolhouse at the crossroads, and none of us—none of us—wish to forget it. The same old schoolhouse where your father learned his letters, and where you will go if you are happy enough with me to remain. Now, Widow Sprigg, let John's little girl see what sort of a supper you used to fix for him when he was hungry."

All fancied slight at the term "servant" thus atoned for by the formal "Widow Sprigg," and her favor swiftly won by Kate's behavior with the trunk, the housekeeper departed in high good-humor, her cap-strings flying, spectacles pushed to the top of her head, and cheerily remarking:

"So she shall, so she shall. I'll show her. For Johnny was the boy to eat an' enj'y his victuals. 'Twas a comfort to cook for him, he was that hearty. I'll have it ready in the jerk of a lamb's tail."

Moses came down the stairs and went out "to do his chores," casting another keen glance at the stranger ascending them with Miss Maitland to the sitting-room chamber. For the girl's marked resemblance to a boy he had known and taken fishing many a time, he was inclined to like her; but because of the probable altered household life, and her swift perception of his whimsies, equally inclined to dislike; and he shifted the straw from one side of his mouth to the other, reflecting:

[Pg 36]

"Well, it's more'n likely she an' Eunice won't gee. Eunice has raised six seven of her folkses' childern, an' I 'lowed she'd got done; but there ain't no accountin' for silly women—silly women. Get out, there, you! Strange that a body can't leave a gate open a single minute here in Marsden village, without somebody's stray cattle trespassin'. Get out, I say!"

The plump white cow, which had obtruded its nose through the gateway, calmly withdrew it and proceeded on its way undisturbed by Moses' frantic gestures. Miss Maitland's was not the only dooryard in the village where grass was still abundant, and Whitey knew it.

"That's old Mis' Sturtevant's critter again! She's no right to turn it loose to feed along the street, that-a-way. Course, she's set Monty to watch, an' he's gone off a-fishin'. That's as plain as a pike-staff. Pshaw! Folks so poor they can't feed their stawk hain't a right to keep any, I declare! When I get to be constable I'll straighten some things in Marsden township that's terrible crooked now; an' the very first one I'd complain of or arrest would be that lazy little stutterin' Monty Sturtevant!"

[Pg 37]

"W-w-w-wo-would it?"

The voice came from beneath the white lilac bush, but it seemed to come from the earth, and Katharine, at the just opened sitting-room chamber window, saw the whole affair, and laughed aloud.

Her laughter startled the intruder as much as he had startled Moses, and he came out of hiding, demanding:

"W-w-who's t-t-that? Aunt Eu-Eu-Eu-Eunice got comp-p-pany?"

"Yes. But that's no concern of yours," snapped the hired man, "and you best go 'tend your cow;" finishing his advice with a threatening nod.

"Oh, f-f-f-fudge! Wait till you get to *be* co-co-constable, then shake your h-head. W-w-who is it, I say?"

"I hain't been told, but I 'low she's some cousin forty-times-removed to Eunice, come to sponge a livin' out of us. But she needn't worry you none. She hain't come to your house to upset things."

"G-g-glad of it!" returned this ungallant young Marsdenite. "But say, Un-un-uncle M-Mose."

"Now, Monty, none o' that. I know what's afoot when any you boys begin to 'uncle' me, an' I say 'No.' I ain't goin' to give up my night's rest for a fishin'-trip. You hear me?" [Pg 38]

"B-b-but, Uncle Mose! I've got the b-ba-bai-bait all dug, and it'll be p-p-prime for fishin'. Say, Uncle Mose, we haven't had a s-s-s-single speck o' fresh me-me-meat 't our house for a w-w-week!"

"Montgomery Sturtevant! That ought to make you stutter an' choke! Eunice sent your grandma a pair o' pullets no longer ago 'n yesterday. You—"

But Monty had already departed to summon his chums for an evening's sport. Well he and they knew that the shortest road to the hired man's heart was by the suggestion of hunger; and the surest way to secure parents' consent was the announcement:

"Uncle Moses'll take us fishin', if you'll let us go."

Moses again turned his face chore-ward; yet it was noticeable that he paused to examine his "tackle" before he fed the poultry, and that he softly whistled as he went about his work. He was even first at the rendezvous, on the old "eddy road;" and though others joined him there, Montgomery—at once his dearest delight and greatest torment—did not appear.

Alas! at that moment the impecunious heir of all the Sturtevants was himself in anything but a whistling mood; and was thinking direful things concerning a girl with whom he had not yet exchanged a word. [Pg 39]

"The h-h-h-hateful young one! Un-un-uncle Mose said 'none o' my wor-r-ry,' an' that's all he k-k-knew! Plague take her! W-w-what she come to M-M-Ma-Marsden for an' drive me plumb cr-cr-craz-crazy!"

CHAPTER III.

[Pg 40]

WHY MONTY DID NOT GO A-FISHING

Montgomery's love of gossip was his own undoing. When, after the manner of Moses, worthy guide, the young angler had put his own fishing-tackle in order, he sought the dining-room, where supper awaited. For once he was on time, and received a word of commendation from his grandmother, which so elated him that he mentally reviewed the day's events for a bit of news with which to enliven her monotony. Then like a flash arose before him the picture of an unknown girl at Miss Maitland's window. This was something worth telling, indeed.

With his mouth full of chicken, remnant of Eunice's pullets, he burst forth.

"A-a-aunt Eunice's got comp'ny."

The punctilious old lady opposite raised her thin hand, protesting: "My son, you should never attempt to talk when you are eating."

Nothing abashed, the boy swallowed hastily and reiterated his statement. At which Madam Sturtevant exclaimed, with as much excitement of manner as she ever showed: "Company? Dear Eunice entertaining guests? Why, son, how did you learn that? Who are they, pray?" [Pg 41]

"D-d-didn't say 'g-guests.' She's a g-g-gir-rl. How I learned, I s-s-saw. With my own eyes. M-m-more chicken, g-gramma."

"Yes, dear heart. It is delicious poultry, and so sweet of Eunice to remember us. We were always close friends, and she is still a lovely woman. So fresh and young looking. But then, Eunice never married nor was widowed, nor exchanged wealth for poverty, nor reared a—a grandson," concluded the dame, fixing a too thoughtful gaze upon Montgomery's freckled face, whose only aristocratic feature was a pair of exceptionally fine eyes. Her mind was already wandering back into that past which held so much more of interest to this decayed gentlewoman than the present; but, wriggling under her survey of himself, the lad reminded her that Miss Maitland had also had her trials, in that:

"Un-un-uncle Mose s-says she's raised s-s-s-six sev—en other folks' ch-ch-ch-children, anyhow."

"Sixty-seven children! My dear, you must certainly have misunderstood. But no matter. Finish

your food at once. Our duty is plain. I dislike going out, except on Sundays, and especially at evening, yet dear Eunice would think me most remiss if I delayed to pay my respects to any guest of hers. I am dressed sufficiently well for an informal visit, but—" here the old lady put on her glasses and critically regarded her grandson's attire, then remorselessly continued: "But you, my son, must take a bath and put on your best suit. As soon as possible; because the stranger will be tired and wish to retire early. Finished? That is well. Strike the bell for Alfaretta."

[Pg 42]

Though his plate was still heaped with the choice portions of the fowl, which his doting grandmother had preserved for him, and though he was still hungry, unlucky Monty sank back in his chair, a limp, crestfallen lad. With his dejected stare fixed upon her unrelenting face, he stammered forth:

"B-b-but, g-g-gr-gramma! I'm goin' a-f-f-fishin'!"

"Nonsense. Get ready immediately," said Madam, rising from table, and measuring out the supper portion of Alfaretta, the one small servant of a house which had once sheltered many.

Then he also rose, but so languidly that "Alfy" stared, and, glancing toward his still full plate, inquired: "You sick?"

"No, I ain't. I'm m-m-mad!"

"At me?"

"N-no. Y-y-yes. You're another of 'em. She's a g-g-girl. I've got to go s-s-s-see her! Just a p-p-plain girl!"

[Pg 43]

The infinite scorn with which this reply was hurled at her touched Alfaretta's pride. Was she not, also, a girl? Said she, with intent to "get even" for some of his former toplofty remarks: "Oh! I thought you was goin' fishin' with Uncle Mose. I saw Bob Turner go past, quite a spell ago, and he was whistlin' like lightnin'. And I heard you say, more'n once, 't *you* 'hadn't no man to boss you—you could do as you pleased."

"So I can when—when g-g-gr-gramma ain't r-r-round," replied he, so meekly that Alfaretta relented. She had been intending to add the contents of Monty's plate to the less appetizing portion set out for herself, but now determined to put aside for a future luncheon whatever he had left. Food was never overabundant at the Madam's, and Alfaretta made it her business that none of what there was should ever go to waste.

"Never mind, Monty. To-morrow ain't touched yet, an' there'll always be fish in the pool," comforted the little maid with real sympathy, for, despite the fact that he teased her continually, she loved him sincerely.

But he merely banged the door behind him as he departed to his toilet, feeling himself the most abused of mortals. For if there was anything which this "last of the Sturtevants" hated worse than paying a visit it was taking a cold bath in a tub, an ordinary wooden wash-tub! To have both bath and visit imposed upon him in one fell hour, was an undreamed-of calamity.

[Pg 44]

Therefore, it was a very different appearing youth from his ordinary merry self who was presented to Katharine in Miss Eunice's lamp-lighted sitting-room an hour later. In outward matters, also, a vastly improved one, since his rough denim blouse and overalls had been exchanged for a fairly modern suit, thoughtfully supplied him by wealthier relatives; his tangle of close-cropped curls brushed smooth, and his face freed from all spots save freckles.

"Katharine, you may take Montgomery over to that little table where the photograph albums are, and show them to him. You and he should be good friends, as all the Sturtevants and Maitlands have been for generations before you," said Miss Eunice, after the presentation had been made, and during which ceremony Monty had wisely refrained from speech.

"Come on, then, and I'm awfully glad to see you. I began to think there wasn't a single young person in this Marsden, for all I've seen so far have been gray-haired," said Kate, leading the way to the table, where a shaded lamp shed a pleasant radiance. But, having arrived there, she coolly pushed the albums aside, and remarked:

"I hate looking at photographs. Don't you? They're commonly so inartistic. I'd much rather talk."

[Pg 45]

By this time Monty was staring with wonder at this creature, who was one of the despised "girls," who had laughed at him from the window, and whose speech and appearance were so unlike those of all other girls he knew. She didn't act shy nor silly, nor drop her g's, nor pretend "politeness," nor wear her hair or clothes as they did. She was just as frank and unabashed as a boy among boys, and the visitor began to be glad that he had come. It would be something worth while telling at school to-morrow, that he had already made acquaintance with Aunt Eunice's unexpected company, and that she was real nice.

Something of her charm vanished, however, when she ordered, peremptorily: "You begin."

Now, although the boy outwardly made light of his own affliction, he was in reality extremely sensitive concerning it, and naturally he was not inclined to open conversation with this stranger whose own tongue was so glib. He, therefore, contented himself with turning his great blue eyes, fringed with such wonderful lashes, full upon her, and smiling beatifically. So cherubic was his expression, indeed, that at that instant Madam, chancing to turn her gaze that way, touched Miss

Maitland's arm and directed that lady's attention toward him, whispering:

"Isn't he lovely? Isn't he clear Sturtevant?"

"Yes, he is Sturtevant, indeed," assented Aunt Eunice, but with a sigh that did not betoken satisfaction. "He has the Sturtevant vanity, Elinor, to the full. You should correct him of it at once. He's a fine lad—in some respects." [Pg 46]

It proved that Montgomery was to be corrected, and at once, though not by his indulgent guardian. It was Katharine's part to do that, as she opened her own dark eyes to their fullest, and exclaimed:

"Well! You're the first boy I ever saw make goo-goo eyes! The very first boy. They're quite pretty, but I'd rather hear you talk than look at *them*. Tell me things. I've come to this village, and I've got to stay. I'm a legacy. I'm left to Aunt Eunice yonder, and she can keep me long as she likes. When she doesn't like, she can send me to boarding-school. I'm an orphan. I hope she *will* like, because I love her already, only she's so correct I know I shall shock her a dozen times a day. I'm fourteen years old. My home was in Baltimore. I came on to New York yesterday with a friend of the second Mrs. John's—I mean, of Mrs. Maitland's—and stayed there last night. To-day I came on the train as far as it went, then in the stage with the queer driver blowing a horn. It was just like a story-book. This home, too, and everybody might be out of a story-book, all so unlike anything I ever saw. But, I beg your pardon. I've just thought that, though you seem to hear well enough, maybe you are dumb. Are you? Because if you are I can talk a little myself in the sign language." [Pg 47]

This was too much. Monty burst forth in self-defence, and to stop that running chatter of hers:

"N-n-n-no! I-I-I—I—"

Then silence. Katharine had never before met a person who stammered, and she was utterly astonished. At that moment, also, there was a lull in the animated conversation which the two old ladies opposite had hitherto kept up, so that Montgomery's loud yet uncertain protest fell like a bomb on the air.

However, the silence was not to last. Katharine recovered from her surprise, and demanded, indignantly:

"Why do you say 'I-I-I-I'? Are you mocking me? because if you are, I consider that more ungentlemanly than to make eyes."

"No, Kate, Montgomery is unfortunate. He stutters. You should apologize. To jeer at the infirmity of others is the depth of ill-breeding," interposed Miss Maitland, hastily crossing the room and laying a reproving hand upon the girl's shoulder. Then she continued, smiling affectionately upon the lad: "But we who all know and love Montgomery are sure that he will, in time, overcome his impediment. 'Tis only a matter of practice and patience."

The boy made no reply, but sat with down-bent head and flushing face, wishing again, as when this dreadful visit was appointed him, that Katharine Maitland had never set foot in Marsden village. Longing, too, with a longing unspeakable, to retort upon her with a volubility and sharpness exceeding even her own. But all unconsciously his pride had received just the sting needed, and his angry thought, in which there was no halting stammer, was this: [Pg 48]

"I'll show her! I'll let her see a Sturtevant is as good as a Maitland any day! I ain't vain. She sha'n't say it. I have got nice eyes, folks all say so, and it's easier to talk with them than with my crooked old tongue. But I'll conquer it. I will. Then I'll show her what kind of a girl she is to dare —"

To dare what?

In all his previous ignominy there was naught compared with this. For here was Kate, remorseful, warm-hearted Kate, who never meant to give a single creature pain, yet was forever doing it, Kate—down upon her knees clasping Monty's neck with her arms, kissing and beseeching him "not to mind," exactly as she would have kissed the smallest of all the Snowballs, and not resenting it in the least because he did not instantly respond to her entreaties.

Respond?

For the space of several seconds it seemed to the lad that his head was whirling on his shoulders like a top. Then, with all the rudeness of his greater strength, he flung the demonstrative girl aside and rushed from the house. One idea alone was clear in his troubled brain: that he must get away from everything feminine and go where there were "men." The fishing-pool. Uncle Moses and the boys. The thought of them was refreshment, and put all other thoughts, of disobedience and its like, far from him. Striking out boldly, yet half-blindly through the dim light, he crossed Miss Maitland's orchard, took a short cut by way of the great forest—which he nor no other Marsden lad would ordinarily have entered alone after nightfall—on past the "deserted cottage" in the very heart of the wood, and then—oblivion. [Pg 49]

CHAPTER IV.

FOXES' GULLY

When next Montgomery opened his eyes his head lay on something soft, and he confusedly tried to understand what and where it was. But thought seemed difficult, and he closed his lids again, wondering what made him feel so weak, and drowsily deciding that he must be in his own bed and this the middle of the night.

In one thing he was correct—it was the middle of the night; a later hour than the boy had ever been absent from home, even upon the most prolonged of fishing-trips. Yet the softness beneath his head was not that of a pillow in its case, but the lap of a white-frocked girl, who was holding him tenderly and sobbing as if her heart would break.

"W-w-wh-where 'm I a-at? Who's a-c-c-cr-cry—in'?"

"Oh, you darling boy! you didn't die, did you, after all! Oh, I'm so glad, so glad, so glad! And I thought I had killed you. I'd never killed anybody before, though stepmother said I'd tried. I mean I—I suppose I scared you some way, I don't see how, for the minute I was good to you and sorry, you ran away."

[Pg 51]

Montgomery moved uneasily. He began to remember events distinctly; quite too distinctly, in fact. He had run away from that horrid girl, and he had forgotten the ravine beyond "deserted cottage." He had fallen down it and hit his head. He could recall the dreadful sensation of pitching forward into a seemingly bottomless pit, and shivered afresh at the memory.

Feeling him shiver thus, Katharine drew her white skirts around his shoulders, and cosseted him as if he had been a baby. He tried to wriggle away from her on to the ground beyond, but this she sturdily prevented, and the late-rising moon cast its light just then upon a face, oddly set and determined for that of so young a girl.

Finding himself helpless in that strange weakness, Monty ceased to wriggle, and demanded: "How y-y-y-you get here, a-a-a-nyway?"

"Oh! I just followed. When you ran away I ran after."

"A-a-a-aunt Eu-Eu-nice let you?"

"I didn't stop to ask her permission. I saw I'd hurt your feelings, and I couldn't let you go without telling you I was sorry. But, you see, I never before knew anybody who stammered, and I didn't think how rude I was to mention it. Not till Aunt Eunice pointed it out. I do beg your pardon, sincerely. Will you forgive me?"

[Pg 52]

It was not in the spirit of any Sturtevant, past or present, to decline an apology so sweetly and earnestly offered. Besides, that was as it should be. Humility was the correct attitude for insignificant girls toward such superior creatures as boys, and Monty waxed magnanimous, replying:

"Oh, y-y-es! I'll f-f-forgive you. But I don't see. G-g-gir-ls can't run like boys."

"Can't they, indeed? Well, you ran like a hare, and I just as fast. There was mighty little space between us, honey, and you may believe it. How else should I have known the way? I had to keep you in sight, of course. It was so fearfully dark in that forest that I nearly lost you once, but I could hear if I couldn't see; and it wasn't so bad when we got outside again. Yet whatever should make you, a boy—a boy!—go and hurl yourself over a precipice, when you knew all the time it was there, while I, a girl—a girl, if you please! who didn't know a thing about it—stopped short on the brink, amazes me. Explain it, won't you?"

"Oh, f-f-f-fudge! Must be aw-aw-awful late. Moon don't rise now t-t-till 'most m-m-morning," observed Montgomery, declining explanations, and wondering how she had perceived his distaste for girls. Besides, he was rapidly regaining strength, and now when he raised himself an inspiration came to him. The inspiration found voice in the words:

[Pg 53]

"M-m-m-might's well be hung for a s-s-s-sheep as a l-l-l-lamb."

The observation was apparently so senseless and Katharine's love of mimicry so strong that she couldn't help replying and laughing: "J-j-j-just as w-w-well. But where's the s-s-s-s-sheep and l-l-lamb in the case?"

Montgomery did not now resent her imitation of his very tone. He even condescended to laugh back; then ungallantly remarked: "I wish y-y-you'd go h-h-home."

"Meaning to Aunt Eunice's. That's exactly what I want to do. So let's be off."

"I s-s-said y-you," corrected Master Sturtevant, rising and taking a few cautious steps to test the state of his legs. He found them usable, though rather wobbly about the knees, and would have started off across the ravine's bottom had not Katharine caught and held him. She was herself shivering violently, but only from the cold of an autumn midnight, against which her light summer dress was small protection. She ached from long sitting on the stony ground, and from holding the heavy shoulders of her companion. She was frightened by the lateness of the hour

and the intense loneliness of the place; and she felt that she had sacrificed herself for just the very meanest boy who ever lived. Though she was not a girl who often cried, tears came then, and that worst of all feelings—homesickness—seized her and turned her faint.

[Pg 54]

Poor Monty! Here was a situation, indeed, for a boy who despised girls! Yet also a boy who was a gentleman by birth; so that, while his first impulse was to run away, his second was to offer such comfort as he could.

"W-w-what you cryin' for, a-a-anyway? I-I-I'm all right, I guess."

"Well, if you are, I'm not. I'm just as anxious to go home as you are, only how can I? I don't know the way, and I'm afraid. I'm afraid of everything! Of that terrible forest, of Aunt Eunice's anger, of her refusing to keep me and sending me off to that boarding-school, of—Oh, dear! I wish I was back in Baltimore!"

Never had the cold countenance of the second Mrs. John or those of the round little Snowballs seemed so humanly lovable to Katharine as they did at that moment, remembering them in her banishment.

"F-f-fudge! Q-q-quit it! If we're goin' to get scolded for part, might's well b-b-be for the w-w-w-whole. 'Tain't far to the pool. We can go f-f-fishin', after all, if you behave. I th-th-thought you was good as a boy, an'—Will you?"

Kate dried her eyes. She didn't enjoy grief, and the prospect of any novelty was delightful. She forgot that she was cold, that it was late and she was where she should not have been at such an hour, and exclaimed, with an eagerness equal to Montgomery's own:

[Pg 55]

"Oh, let's! I never went fishing in my life!"

"Come on, t-th-then!" cried the relieved lad, now readily taking her cold hand and setting off with all the speed he could attain.

The moon was shining brilliantly, making every object as distinct as day, and to the city-reared girl the scene was like fairy-land. Her spirits rose to the highest, and none the less, it may be, because all the time she was conscious of a certain daring and danger in their escapade; and her pace more than outstripped Monty's as they crossed the short distance to the river, warming themselves by their own speed, and listening intently for the sound of voices which should have reached them long before.

"Oh, I'm so delightfully goose-fleshy! This is the most thrilling adventure of my life! I begin to feel as if I were part of a story-book myself, like all the rest of Marsden!" said Kate, half-breathless with running, when her mate came to a sudden halt among the shadows of the trees beside the famous pool.

"S-s-s-sh!" warned the other, leaning forward at the risk of a tumble into the still, deep water, listening and peering up and down the stream. Then, with disappointment depicted in every line of his suddenly weary body, he gloomily stammered: "Th-th-th-they've gone home!"

[Pg 56]

There was nothing left but for themselves to follow; but surely, there were never fields so wide and rough as these over which Master Sturtevant now guided Katharine; herself, also, so tired from her day of travel and her night of adventure; and finally, feeling as if the stubble pierced every inch of her thin shoes, and that she could endure the discomfort no longer, she begged:

"Oh! please do go by some road, and not on this grass any longer."

"Huh! 'T-t-tain't grass. Oat-st-st-stubble," he explained, doggedly keeping on his way, which he knew was shorter, and for the further reason that he could rid himself of her at Miss Maitland's back garden fence. From there he meant to make his own rapid transit to his grandmother's low kitchen roof and through a window to his bed, as he fondly hoped, forgotten and unobserved. He didn't intend that any strange girl should throw all his plans a-gley, for she had done more than mischief enough already. Yet even as he spoke, he looked furtively around and was dismayed to see how white she was, and how big and troubled her dark eyes were. Fudge! They were even larger and finer than his own blue ones, yet she had not once seemed conscious of the fact.

It was the Madam's opinion that "blood would tell," and the good blood of many past Sturtevants stirred now in their descendant's veins, rousing his unselfishness, and making him say:

[Pg 57]

"F-f-fudge! You look b-b-beat out. I'll go the road, all right. I don't m-m-m-mind it—m-m-much, not much;" for even chivalry could not prevent this last truthful word of regret.

So by the road they went; and by the road—retribution came. Nemesis in the form of Moses Jones; no longer in a mood to be "uncled" by any boy, not even Montgomery, and in his sternness grown almost unfamiliar. He was not alone. Two neighbors were with him, and, despite the fact that the moon was shining, all three men carried lighted lanterns. They were overcoated and muffled to a degree, and Moses' first action was to unfold a great shawl which he had carried on his shoulder, and wrap Kate in it. He did this in silence, not so much as asking "by your leave," and not observing that he was smothering her at the same time. Then he took hold of her arm through the folds of the shawl, and, facing about, started back along the route he had come.

They were well outside the village limits, and a weary tramp yet lay before them, the longer strides of the men taxing the fatigue of the children, till it seemed to them both as if they must

fall by the way. That terrible silence, too, and the firm grip of her arm, made Kate wonder if Mr. Jones had suddenly become a constable in fact, and if she were the first victim to be arrested. Once she wriggled herself free from her captor's hand, only to find herself again secured and even more rigidly.

[Pg 58]

As for poor Montgomery, the pain and confusion had returned, and he could think of nothing save that tormenting headache. His temple was swollen and throbbing, and the one idea he still retained was a longing for rest. It seemed to him that he had been hurried and tramping along ever since he was born. That never had he done a single thing besides lifting one heavy foot after another and planting each a bit farther along that glaring road. The lanterns bobbed about outrageously, as if they were trying to make him more dizzy still; and he scarcely knew when they entered the now deserted village street and came to a halt at Miss Maitland's gate.

There, he fancied, some women rushed out and grabbed Katharine, for he dimly saw her borne away into the house where more dazzling lights were gleaming. To avoid their bewildering rays he closed his eyes a moment; and when he opened them again he found himself being carried swiftly homeward in Moses' strong arms. He being carried! like one of Mis' Turner's babies! More ignominy still. As if his having been coddled and wept over by a strange little girl hadn't been mortifying enough. But his own voice sounded queer to him as he tried to say, with unstammering distinctness and dignity:

[Pg 59]

"You—needn't carry me n-n-none, Un-un-uncle Mose. What you doin' it for? Put me d-d-down!"

The other two men had vanished, and there was nobody to hear Uncle Moses' tender, troubled answer:

"Why, you poor little shaver, lie still. I don't know what's happened ye, nor what sort of scrape you've been in. You an' that t'other one, who's come to turn things topsyturvy. But betwixt the pair of you you've nigh druv two old women crazy, and set the whole village a-teeter. Just because I walked through it ringin' a bell an' cryin', like any respectable constable would have done if I'd been one, and this 'most makes me feel I am, just cryin': 'Child lost! Boy lost! Girl lost!' and a couple of the neighborin' men j'inin' in the search, with our lanterns lit, sence we didn't know what sort of a hole or ditch you might fell into—"

"F-F-Foxes' Gully!" exclaimed Montgomery, no longer resisting the relief of walking on somebody else's feet, so to speak.

Uncle Moses stopped short, amazed and alarmed. "What? What's that you say?"

"F-f-fell down it. An' she come to say she was s-s-s-sor-ry."

"And wasn't killed? Well now, and forever after, I'll believe in guardeen angels! Fell down it an' wasn't killed! But what made ye? Hadn't you any sense? Why, there's been more'n a half-dozen cattle killed in that plaguey hollow sence I can remember. Yet you wasn't. Well, I'm glad of it," and though this seemed a very mild expression of his satisfaction, the sudden squeeze which Moses gave his burden emphasized it sufficiently.

[Pg 60]

For a few minutes neither spoke again, then Monty suddenly asked: "How many you catch, Un-un-uncle Mose?"

"Enough for breakfast. But I missed ye, sonny, I missed ye. An' I'm real glad you wasn't killed. As for that t'other one, I declare, I wish't she hadn't come. 'Peared like Eunice would lose her seventy senses, a-worryin' lest the child take cold or get hurt or somethin'. And there she has landed on her feet sound as a cat. Though speakin' of cats, Sir Philip has had the bout of his life, and he looks pretty peaked to me. But here we are to home, an' your grandma ain't likely to scold you none if you just mention to her 'Foxes' Gully.' 'Twas one of the Sturtevant calves got killed there, the very first off, an' she will remember. As for me, a respectable hired man, kep' out of my bed like this—why, sonny! Soon's you get over it I'll teach you a lesson you'll remember!"

So, still grumblin' and petting, Moses set his burden down in Madam Sturtevant's presence, and saw her open her lips to reprove her erring grandson, then as suddenly close them again and strain the boy to her heart, while her stately figure shook like an aspen. But Moses knew the lady's temperament of old, and how her alternate severity and indulgence had been bad for the child she idolized, and, fearing that severity might have the upper hand now, when it was least needed, he remained long enough to mention:

[Pg 61]

"Nothin' much the matter with the little shaver, Madam, only he fell down Foxes' Gully, and is—he's sort of tuckered out."

Then he quietly withdrew, and of Montgomery Sturtevant he had no further glimpse during what he himself termed "a consid'able spell."

As for Katharine, she was sound asleep long before Moses returned from Madam Sturtevant's. To the anxiety and reproof with which she had been received, she had, fortunately, but little to say beyond the statement that, "I went to apologize, and I stayed to—to fish, I guess." The relief of being safe indoors again was all she realized, just then, and she submitted to being warmed, blanketed, and dosed with hot sage tea, with a meek humility that won her pardon.

Indeed, when at last the dark curls rested on the pillow, and the childish face softened in slumber, she looked so like Aunt Eunice's lost "little John," that the lady stooped and kissed her

[Pg 62]

for his sake. But she confided to the faithful Widow Sprigg, who had also watched and waited:

"I'm afraid, Susanna, that our peaceful days are over. While she was out to-night, and I knew not where, and I was so troubled and anxious, I felt that it would be wrong, really wrong to burden myself with such a charge. For years her father left me ignorant of how his life was passing, and it seemed to me he had no right to impose the care of his daughter upon me, just because I had once tried to be good to him and he had once seemed to love me. And I knew it would be hard for you and Moses, too. We're all old together; and to rear another child—such an odd child, at that—I wonder, is it right?"

Now it so chanced that old Susanna had been entirely won by the manner in which Kate had chosen to be undressed and tended by the servant rather than the statelier mistress. Also, in the old days when "Johnny" had been with them, though the aunt had loved she had, also, reproved him; but childless Susanna, whose own little son had died, simply loved and never reproved. She now answered, promptly:

"Yes, Eunice Maitland, it's as right as right. She wouldn't have been sent if she hadn't been meant, would she? And she's the cut an' dried image of her own pa, bless him. Send her off? Course you'll do nothin' o' the kind. If you do, I'll leave, an' you can get somebody else to take my place. So there, that's my say-so, an' you're welcome to it."

[Pg 63]

At the thought of Katharine's mobile little face being a "cut and dried image" of anybody Miss Eunice smiled, and her perplexity vanished—for the time, at least. Then, hearing the kitchen door unclose, she remarked:

"Well, I hear Moses coming in, and we three old people must get to rest. I am surely obliged to you for the help and comfort you are to me, Susanna, and to Moses, too. We'll do the best we can, and day by day."

"Certain, Eunice. That's the way to live, an' all's well 'at ends well, as we hope she will—this little orphan thrust upon us without no druther of our own, an' a bad beginnin' gen'ally makes a good ending; an' I 'low I'd best take one more peek into the sittin'-room chamber, afore I go to bed myself. Good night. Don't worry. I've fixed fish-cakes for breakfast."

With which comforting assurance for the morrow, the Widow Sprigg took herself out of the room, and quiet fell upon the old home.

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 64]

CHESTNUTS AND GOLD MINES

"May I help? I think I could do that. It doesn't look hard," said Katharine, wandering into the kitchen where Susanna was seeding raisins—more raisins than the girl had ever seen together, save at a grocer's counter. "What are you doing it for?"

"Fruit-cake. For Thanksgivin' an' Christmas. I ought to of done it long ago, but the weather kep' so warm, an' one thing another's hendered. I'm all behind with everything this fall, seems if. I've got to make my soft soap yet, and—Laws, child, what do you lug that humbly dog all round with you for? A beast as ugly favored as he is ought to do his own walkin', and would, if he belonged to me."

"That's just why, I suppose. Because he 'belongs.' And because he isn't old. Not so very. He isn't gray, anyway."

The Widow Sprigg looked over her spectacles and saw such a dejected face that she immediately suggested caraway cookies. A delicacy which had used to bring smiles to "Johnny's" countenance, even after he had suffered that worst of all boyish trials,—a "lickin',"—and if there was anything in heredity should restore cheer to the heart of "Johnny's" daughter.

[Pg 65]

"No, thank you. But I'd like to help. I shall—shall burst if I don't do something mighty soon," said Kate, excitedly. "I am hungry, but it's for folks, not cookies. And why do you make cake for Christmas now when it's forever and ever before it will come?"

"'Tain't so much for Christmas. Marsden folks don't set no great store by any other holiday than Thanksgivin'. Another why is that fruit-cake ain't fit to put in a body's mouth afore it's six seven months old at the least. This here won't be worth shucks, but Eunice says better late 'n never, an' if it ain't ripe then t'will be for Easter. We never used to hear tell of Easter, here in Marsden, till late years. Though Madam, she always kep' it. She's met with a change of heart, however, sence she became a Sturtevant, an' I'd ruther you wouldn't mention it, as comin' from me, but—" here Susanna leaned forward and whispered, sibilantly—"they say she used to be a Catholic when she was a girl! Nobody lays it up ag'in her, an' folks pertend they've forgot it; and if there is a good Christian goin', I 'low it's Madam Elinor Sturtevant. Your Aunt Eunice—though she ain't your real aunt at all, only third cousin once removed—she was promised to Schuyler Sturtevant, Madam's husband's brother, but he was killed out on a fox-hunt, an' she ain't never married nobody sence. That's one why she an' Madam are such good friends, most like sisters; as they would have been hadn't things turned out different. But there, my suz! Don't stan' there lookin' so wishful. Put the

[Pg 66]

dog in the lean-to an' shut the door. There's a strong air comes through it an' I feel it, settin' still. Then you can tie my check aporn over your white frock. Don't you never wear no other kind of clothes, Katy? 'Cause I don't know who'll do your washin' an' ironin', if you don't."

Having finished a certain portion of the raisins, Susanna rose, washed her hands and tied the apron around Katharine's neck, bringing the strings forward under the arms with such firmness that the band choked the girl, and made a puffy blouse of the gingham. The whole arrangement was so uncomfortable that it was promptly taken off and hung upon its nail.

"I can't endure that, you know. If I must wear an apron, like a coon, I'll have one that fits. Why do I need it, anyway? This dress is only white piqué, and wears like iron. I heard stepmother say so when she gave it to the dressmaker. She never bought me anything but piqués and ducks and things that would stand wearing without tearing. I mean—May I do this many?"

[Pg 67]

Susanna fairly snatched the dish away and shook her helper's fingers free from the cluster of raisins she had lifted, exclaiming:

"Why, I am surprised at you, Katharine Maitland! You takin' a bath every mornin', in cold water, too, an' keepin' yourself so tidy all the time, to go an' stun raisins after handlin' a dog! Wash 'em, an' clean your nails with this pin, an' tie that aporn back—loose if you want—but wear it you must, or I won't be responsible for no smutch you get on you. Here's your basin for the hull ones; an' here's an earthen bowl for them 'at's done, an' a penknife to do 'em with. I declare! It's more work to get you ready to 'help' than 'twould be to do it all myself."

Katharine's spirits rose. Though she blushed at the reprimand for untidiness, a kind of reproof she seldom deserved, she was so accustomed to corrections that she scarcely listened to any, and sprang to a seat on the end of the great table with an outburst of rollicking "rag-time" song.

Safe to say that that sort of music had never before been heard within the dignified walls of that old mansion, and though Susanna was delighted to see "Johnny's girl" happy again, she was, also, somewhat shocked.

"Why—why, Katy! What's that you're saying? Don't sound like reg'lar English. Not like 'Old Lang Syne,' nor 'The Old Oaken Bucket,' nor 'Send Round the Bowl,'—nor—My suz, child! What be you doin'?"

[Pg 68]

"Just, 'Sendin' Round the Bowl,' since you like it!" cried Kate, hilariously spinning the receptacle which had been given her for the "stunned raisins" across the table to where Susanna sat; then adding, mischievously, "And that's the first time that I knew that 'Old Lang Syne' was good English; I thought it was Scotch. As for 'rag-time,' all papa's friends said I could do it excellently well. You see, I was brought up with the coons and can mimic them easily. And you should see me do a cake-walk. I will after I've helped you awhile."

Susanna looked rather foolish at being herself set right. She had never aspired to much literary knowledge, but she did know that the words Katharine had sung were senseless, though they might sound funny. To cover her annoyance she demanded, rather crisply:

"What do you mean by 'coon' and 'duck'? Your pa always had odd notions, but I never 'lowed his daughter'd be raised with coons and ducks and animals of that natur'. I give him credit for some sense, even if he did paint pictures for a living."

Katharine's eyes flashed, then softened till they were on the verge of tears, and she announced with a finality that brooked no contradiction:

[Pg 69]

"My father was the sensiblest, cleverest, dearest gentleman that ever lived. If I didn't come 'up' as I was 'brought' it wasn't his fault. And I'd rather not talk about him—not yet. Not to-day. 'Coons' are the colored people. Baltimore's full of them. They're our servants. Stepmother says they're worthless, nowadays, and I know she was always changing them. But they're the only kind we have down there. We couldn't get nice white ones like you. Why—what's the matter?"

The Widow Sprigg had risen very suddenly. Her face had flushed and a glitter come into the eyes behind the big spectacles, while her lips had closed with a sort of cluck. Leaning across the table, she demanded:

"Give me that bowl, please. I don't need no more your help."

Katharine extended the bowl, as desired, her own face clouding again at sight of the other's darkened one. And she fairly jumped as the housekeeper asked:

"Where's the raisins?"

"Oh! the raisins? Why—I hadn't begun yet. I ate the few I seeded. I'll begin now. I can work right smart if I try."

"Huh! go clean yourself an' clear out. I like to have my kitchen to myself."

Kate leaped from the table, having that odd homesickness stealing over her again, and as much to dispel her own gloom as to keep her word, which she never broke if she could possibly help it, she cake-walked down the long kitchen with the gravest of faces and the most ludicrous of gestures. Down and back, down and back, head thrown sidewise over her shoulder, body bent at an angle which threatened a tumble backwards, and her feet alternately tossing the engulfing apron high on this side, then on that, and now become utterly oblivious of Susanna in her

[Pg 70]

earnestness to distinguish herself—the girl seemed the absurdest creature it had ever been the housekeeper's lot to see.

She still felt insulted by Katharine's term of "servant," but could not repress a smile, and turned into the pantry to hide that telltale weakness.

Looking in through that same pantry window, his mouth agape, his eyes twinkling, was her housemate and natural enemy, Moses. Hitherto he had taken slight notice of the small new member of the household, and Kate had been rather afraid of him. It would, therefore, be killing two birds with one stone, or punishing two annoying people at one time, to pair them off together, thought Susanna, remarking:

"Well, Mr. Jones, when you get done staring at the monkey-shines of that young one you can just take her in charge a spell. Goin' to the wood-lot, ain't ye?"

[Pg 71]

"You know I be. Said so at breakfast, didn't I? Silly women always do have to have idees druv into their heads, like nails, 'fore they can clinch 'em. Eunice 'lowed that we'd ought to have a lot more small sticks chopped," answered the man who managed the estate but was presumably managed himself by Miss Maitland. He had his axe over his shoulder, and had merely stopped at the pantry window, kept open for his benefit, to take a drink from the pail of buttermilk which stood there.

"Well, Eunice has gone down to Madam's. And I've no time to bother, and you'll have to take her 'long with ye. If she ain't under somebody's eye no tellin' what'll happen. Harm of some kind, sure's you're born."

Moses was about to retort and decline, but a second glance at the child, who had now finished her cake-walk and was listening to her elders, reminded him that, as yet, he had heard no details of that night's escapade when his beloved Monty had so wonderfully come out safe from peril of death. This had been some days before, and rumor had it that the lad was still confined a prisoner in his chamber. Whether because of real illness or for punishment, nobody knew, nor dared anybody question the dignified Madam. Eunice had heard the rumor that morning and had immediately gone to see her friend and offer her own service as nurse, should nursing be necessary. Therefore, it was more to please himself than oblige Susanna, that he called through the window:

[Pg 72]

"Sissy, do you like chestnuts?"

"Oh, I love them! Why? And please, please don't call me 'Sissy.' It makes me feel so silly. My name is Katharine Maitland, though at home—" there came a little catch in her throat, which nobody else observed—"they used to call me 'Kitty Quixote,'" answered the girl, running to the window, and looking through the half-closed blind to the hired man.

"Hm-m. Ke-ho-ta. Kehota? Kee-ho-tee? Why, I thought I knew the Maitland family, root an' branch, twists an' turns an' ramifications, but I never heerd tell of a Keehotey amongst 'em. Not even 'mongst their wives' folks, nuther. Your own ma was a Woodley, and your pa's second was a Snowball, Eunice says, so how happens—"

"Oh, you dear, funny old fellow! Quixote wasn't any of our folks, but a fiction-y man, who was always doing chivalrous things in the wrong place, or where there was no occasion, as papa said—just like me. Wait till I come, please. I'll put on my hat and jacket and be back in a minute. For I've guessed what you mean about liking chestnuts. I'm to go to the wood-lot with you and gather them for myself. And I never, never, never in all my life gathered chestnuts! I've just bought them from the stands."

[Pg 73]

Away she flew, leaving Susanna rather doubtful of the success of her intended punishment. From present appearances Katharine was going to enjoy a morning in the woods with Moses far better than she would have done in the kitchen seeding raisins.

"An' she must have et as much as two whole bunches, even in that little spell. So, after all, it's a good thing for the cake, 'lowin' 't we want to have it rich in fruit, that she is goin'. But Eunice will have to see about her clothes. The idee! Wearin' white every day same as if it was Sunday in the summer-time. She told Eunice that her stepmother thought white was the sensiblest, for it would wash and bile, and she always needed bilin'. But she looks real peart, and sort of different set-up from Marsden girls in that little blue flannel suit she wore to come in. Dress an' coat an' hat all the same color, an' fittin' her's if she'd been run into 'em, yet easy-loose, too, an' not a bit of trimming on anything," continued Widow Sprigg with herself, having none other present with whom to commune; and, as Katharine reappeared, garbed in the same blue coat and hat, with her short dainty skirts showing below the coat and her face now glowing with anticipation, remarking aloud: "Well, your step-ma may not have been any great shakes for pleasantness, but she did manage to make you look real neat."

[Pg 74]

"Oh, she had beautiful taste! Everybody said that. When she was dressed to go out herself she always looked so just right that nobody could tell what at all she wore; and that, papa said, was the perfection of dressing. Indeed, do you suppose that my father, an artist, could have married a person who would offend his eye all the time? Why, what is that for, Susanna?"

While Katharine had been discussing her stepmother, the widow had been filling a quaint, old-fashioned, tight covered basket with caraway cookies and a red apple. The basket had a wreath of flowers painted on its sides and another on its cover. It was carried by two slender handles, and was unlike any which Kate had ever seen.

"There, deary, that is a lunch to eat whilst you're in the woods; crisp air makes a body hungry. Moses'll show you where the spring is, and there's a gourd dipper hangs by it to drink out of. But take dreadful care the basket. It was your own pa's meetin' one."

"My father's 'meeting one.' What was that? and how fearfully old it must be. 'Cause he ran away when he was a little boy, only a year or so older than I am now."

"He was old enough to have had more sense, and so're you. A 'meetin'-basket' was a basket to take to meetin', course. What else you suppose? We didn't have two three hours betwixt times, them days. We went in the morning and stayed till the afternoon service was over. We took our dinners with us an' et 'em on the graves in the graveyard back the church. Moses an' Eunice an' me gen'ally took all we needed in the big willow, but the childern liked their own by themselves. They used to eat in the hollow below the graveyard, and if any of 'em got too noisy, or played games wasn't Sabbath ones, one the deacons or head men would go down an' stop 'em. Oh, childern was raised right in them days, an' grown folks, too!"

[Pg 75]

This was all very interesting, and Katharine received the old round basket, which her dead father's boyish hands must have treated gently, indeed, to have left it so well preserved, with a reverent feeling that he must be there and see her. She hoped he did. She wanted him to know that she was back in his old home, following the haunts which he had loved, knowing the very same people who had cared for him. She wondered, as many an older person has wondered, if he did know, and she put the question eagerly to Susanna, who was herself so old and should, therefore, be so wise.

"Oh, Widow Sprigg! Do you believe he can see me, does know, is glad? Do you suppose that right now, while I hold this basket, his basket, up high toward the sky, careful and loving and not afraid, he is looking down and loving, too? *Do you?*"

[Pg 76]

Susanna pushed her spectacles very high, indeed, that she might better observe this strange child who now confronted her with gleaming eyes and that exalted expression; and the face startled her. She was not much used to children, and this one was of a sort so novel that she made one uncomfortable. She'd have given "Johnny's girl" the old egg-basket instead of this "meeting" one, could she have foreseen results. But she could and did bring the girl out of the clouds with the exclamation:

"My suz! You're enough to give a body the creeps. All I meant was that Johnny was a good boy and took care. If you want to be like him you'll take care, too. When he didn't take care, it was Moses' business to lick him, an' if you keep him much longer at that lane gate, he'll feel like lickin' you, too. So, off with you."

Katharine lowered the basket. Also, lowered her gaze from the ceiling it had seemed to pierce till it rested on the old woman's face. What she saw there was something very different from what the harsh words had suggested, and, with an impulse of affection, she threw her arms, basket and all, about Susanna's neck and kissed her ecstatically.

Poor Widow Sprigg caught her breath and gasped it back again before her surprise allowed her to say: "There, there, deary, run along. Don't keep Moses waitin' a minute longer. He'll be terrible cross. Yes, you can take Punchy. I'd ruther you'd take him 'an not, for Sir Philip looks peakeder 'n ever to-day. The very sight o' that humbly dog 'pears to make him sick. After you've et your cookies you can put your chestnuts in the basket to fetch 'em home—if you get any."

[Pg 77]

Moses had lost his patience, as was to be expected, but he soon regained good nature while Katharine related to him all that her father had once told her of the famous Don Quixote for whom he had nicknamed her. Then, in turn, he pointed out to her the old meeting-house and graveyard, long since disused, where the Marsdenites had repaired to take their Sunday lunch.

"But it was so—so funny! So absurd, so sort of—of ghastly, wasn't it? But what a perfectly glorious place for a hallowe'en party—if there was anybody to give a party to. I wish there was somebody to play with, Uncle Moses."

Moses ignored the wish. He was not anxious that Katharine should enlarge her acquaintance, which would mean more trouble for all concerned. He merely continued to discourse upon the ancient customs, of how not only did the people bring their dinners to the church, but the mothers their babies, with rocking-chairs furnished galore by the congregation, and ranged in the roomy vestibule. There the mothers could sway their offspring gently to and fro without losing their own religious privileges or disturbing anybody.

[Pg 78]

Kate listened in silence till a bend of the road hid the meeting-house from view, then exclaimed:

"I can see the whole picture. I mean to paint it when I grow up. But I shall give the babies cherubic faces, like the old masters, because I suppose most of them are angels now. I hope they know I'm thinking about them, and I wonder if papa sees any of them there, up in heaven. What do you think?"

Even as Susanna had done, the hired man stared at Katharine, saying:

"I think—I don't know what I do think! I think I know some of them babies that grew up to be anything but angels. If they'd been made into angels a little earlier in their lives 'twould ha' been better for Marsden, an' I shouldn't feel it my painful duty to 'rest 'em when I get to be constable—if ever I'm elected," and then Moses sighed so profoundly that Katharine's thoughts flew from

this old-time reminiscence to the present day's ambitions. Slipping her hand softly into the one of his that swung at his side, she gave it a little squeeze, and asked:

"Do you awfully want to be a constable? Just awfully, Uncle Mose?"

There was so much of sympathy in the small face at his elbow that Mr. Jones was caught unawares. [Pg 79]

"Well, 'Kitty Keehoty,' wild horses wouldn't have drug it out of me to anybody else; but I don't mind lettin' on to you, just you, that I'd admire to be one. I'd like it real well. But, that's nuther here nor there. Likin' things an' havin' 'em is as different as chalk an' cheese. An' here we be to the woods. The best chestnut-trees is yender, the best shellbarks t'other way. 'Tain't time for hickories yet, not till a heavier frost comes, but chestnuts you've got to get early if you get any at all. The squirrels an' boys are smart round this way. Why, 'most every year they gather Eunice's nuts off her own trees, then march up to her front door an' sell 'em to her. Fact. An' the silly woman only laughs an' says she don't begrudge 'em a little pocket-money. An' she don't need. Eunice is real forehanded, Eunice is; and does seem 't the more she gives away the more comes in. Now, I'll cut a saplin'-pole an' thrash a tree for you. Then, whilst I'm choppin' down in that clump of pines over there, you can be pickin' up nuts. Make up your mind to prick your fingers with the burrs. A body has to fight for most anything worth while."

"Oh, if I only had somebody to pick them up with me!" sighed Kate, as she fell to work. Then her thoughts travelled far afield, for a delightful notion had taken possession of her, and her young brain was teeming with a scheme so great it was—well, it was fully worthy of itself. [Pg 80]

Almost unconsciously she gathered the fallen chestnuts, scarcely realizing the novelty of the task so absorbed was she in her sudden Quixotic project. Yet, as she groped among the brown leaves at the foot of her tree, her fingers came in contact with something wholly different from chestnuts or their thorny burrs. It was hard as a stone, yet it wasn't a stone. It was half-buried in the leaf-mold and moss, though the rain of the previous night had washed it free in one corner.

That corner glistened so that it dazzled the digger's eyes, and she exclaimed aloud:

"Oh, I've found a gold mine! Right here in Aunt Eunice's woods. I must get this great piece of gold out and take it to her. And I won't tell anybody, not anybody, not even Uncle Moses, till I've told her. For whatever is in her woods must be hers, of course."

Away went the last great scheme, which had been wholly connected with Mr. Jones and his aspirations for town office; and up rose another far more gigantic, by which everybody who was poor, "everybody in the whole wide world," should benefit. For, of course, the mine was to be inexhaustible, and Aunt Eunice would be able to give away money hereafter without stint or measure. [Pg 81]

If only she could get out that first great shining lump of gold!

And at last it was out, yet, after all, no gold whatever. Something almost as splendid, though, since this was a mystery. A mystery with a capital M! For if there were no mystery in the matter why should anybody hide that strangely shaped, glittering brass bound box beneath a chestnut-tree?

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 82]

THE BRASS BOUND BOX

A moment later Kate had sped through the wood to the spot where Moses was chopping, exclaiming:

"Oh, Mr. Jones, I've got to go home, back to Aunt Eunice's right away, quick. Is there a shorter way than we came, or can I find that by myself? Please tell me, quick, quick!"

Moses paused in his work and looked at the girl in great surprise. None of his fishing-mates, if given such a chance as she had, would have gone home till driven there; for the chestnuts had rattled out of their burrs at a fine rate when he had threshed the trees, and it was impossible that she should have gathered all or even many.

"Why, little Keehoty! Tired a'ready? An' I was plannin', by an' by, to make a speck of fire in a safe place I know an' roast some the nuts. Ever et hot roast chestnuts out in the woods?"

"No, no, never! Oh, dear! I'd like to. It—it makes me terribly hungry to hear you speak of them, but—I must go home. Something has happened. Something so important, I must, I must. Is there a shorter way? And if I go by myself shall I meet a tramp?" [Pg 83]

"'Tramp!' Bosh! That's Susanna's foolishness put into your head a'ready. I only wish I could see a tramp, just to know the breed. But what is it so important, if you please?"

"I can't tell you."

Moses whistled. "That's plump spoke, anyhow. Why can't ye? Are you sick? Got a pain

anywheres? Pep'mints are good for the stummick-ache, an' I always carry a few in my pocket. See?" said the kindly old man, pulling forth a paper bag and alluringly displaying its pink and white contents.

But to his further surprise Katharine declined the "pep'mints" and indignantly denied the stomach ache, declaring that she must go home and at once, and asking "which way first."

"Foller your nose, I reckon," retorted Mr. Jones, rather testily. He had enjoyed the tale of Don Quixote, had taken a sudden fancy to Katharine, had discovered that she knew "Oh, lots and lots more of stories just as delightful," and had intended to do a small amount of chopping that day, but a large amount of resting. The forest was in a glory of color, the air was "mild as midsummer," and in his capacious pocket he had brought his "tackle." His axe would furnish a couple of rods, and Katharine should have her first lesson at angling in the near-by brook, where trout were plentiful, it mattering little to this embryo constable what the game laws were; and it would have amazed him to learn that had he been in office he would have had to fine himself as the first, chief, and habitual trespasser. Now all this pleasant prospect was altered, and Moses "never liked to have his 'rangements upshot."

[Pg 84]

"Nor do I. Oh, dear! The more you talk the more I want to stay, and the very more I mustn't. Good-by, I'm going. You can have the caraway cakes and the red apple, and please, please take care my father's 'meetin'-basket.'"

But he laid a detaining hand upon her arm, and demanded:

"First tell me what you've got under your jacket!"

At her mention of the "meeting-basket" he had glanced across to the chestnut-trees and had seen that precious receptacle carefully hung upon a low branch out of harm's way. Yet here was the girl, hiding something beneath her long blue coat, and acting as if she had great ado to keep it there. It must have been a heavy, slippery something, because all the while she talked she kept hitching it up and clenching it till her knuckles turned white under the strain.

"I can't tell you, please," was the exasperating reply, as she wriggled her arm free and set off at a swift pace.

[Pg 85]

Again Moses whistled, but now in disappointment rather than surprise. He would have stoutly denied that he, a man, was possessed of curiosity such as he attributed wholly to "silly women," yet it is certain that he suddenly found the beautiful forest a disagreeable place, and reflected that it was his duty to follow the young stranger.

"She's queer actin', at the best, an' sharp as a razor; but what caper she's up to now beats me. Eunice ain't to home, an' Susanna never had sense. If there's anything goin' on there'd ought to be a man 'round with some sort of judgment in his head. Don't know what need there is for more small wood bein' cut, anyway. We've got two woodsheds full of kindlin' a'ready, besides the big ones of cord-wood for the reg'lar fires. We could stand a siege an' not suffer, though Eunice never does feel content 'less she's got fuel enough ahead to last two years. Hm-m. It's gettin' too hot to chop, anyway. Must be Indian summer comin' on, though I claim 'tain't due till November. Susanna, now, *she* says October, an' Eunice, *she* calls that warm spell we always have the first the winter an Indian summer. Seems if there was as many Indian summers as there was folks, most, but I don't care. It's somethin' or other warm enough to-day, an' I'll go home. I can set in the barn an' sort apples. That won't be a heatin' job, an' 'll give me a chance to have an eye on things. Oh, hum! I wish Monty would happen along. Strange! how I miss that worthless, stutterin', big-hearted little shaver! I wouldn't offer to take *him* fishin' more'n once without bein' took up on my word."

[Pg 86]

His cogitations at an end, his belongings secured, and his little-used axe again over his shoulder, Moses went down to the chestnut-tree and secured the "meeting-basket." But he was surprised to see how the leaves at the foot of it had been scattered about, and that there was a hole in the ground itself. There was also in this hole the imprint of something square and solid, for the moist leaf-mold still retained the shape of the brass bound box, and heaped at one side were the nuts Kate had collected ready to put in the basket when once it should be empty.

"Must ha' been somethin' 'important,' sure enough, or she'd never have left them nuts. Well, I guess I can store 'em in my pockets, an' I'll coax her secret, whatever 'tis, out of her by givin' them back to her," mused this incurious man.

As fast as she could, and keeping an occasional glance upon certain trees she remembered, Kate made her way back through the wood. But it seemed confusing now and the ground rough. Coming in she had thought the ferns and fallen branches "mighty pretty," but going out they hindered her. The box, too, was heavy and difficult to hold, though as soon as she was out of sight of Moses she took it from beneath her coat and balanced it upon her arm. Then she laughed at her own precaution, thinking how foolish she had been to hide it, for, of course, he would know about it eventually.

[Pg 87]

"Only it is Aunt Eunice's, and I want her to see it first of all. I wonder what is in it. And I wish it wasn't quite so heavy. Can it be filled with gold? or diamonds, maybe. Oh, if it were diamonds—think! Oh, dear! there goes my shoe-string untied again, and it trips me up so. I must stop and tie it and see if I am going right. Seems as if I ought to see that old church by this time, yet the trees are just as thick as ever—or thicker. Now, old string, I'll knot you so tight you'll bother me no

more till I go to bed."

Placing the strangely fashioned box or casket carefully on a large stone, Katharine flung herself down to tie her shoe. Which, having done, and finding her position restful, it was natural that her imagination should dwell upon the treasure she had found; and once at her day-dreams, Kate was very apt to forget other things. Nor did she rouse from her reverie till somebody close at hand demanded:

"I-I-I say! W-w-what's that?"

Instantly upon her feet she faced the intruder, vainly trying to hide with her short skirts the glittering casket, as she demanded, in return: [Pg 88]

"How dare you come upon a person that way? Why—you might have frightened me into a fit. I don't like to be scared."

"Oh, f-f-fudge! I saw you if you d-d-didn't see me. What is t-t-that?"

Katharine coolly sat down upon the casket and thus effectually screened it from view. "I thought you were sick, or—or shut up. Aunt Eunice went to see if you needed nursing."

Montgomery sat down beside her. The small boulder upon which she had placed the box was round, and it was difficult to maintain one's position upon it without slipping. Doubly difficult if one were perched upon a sharp-angled cube, and one's piqué skirt was stiffly starched. He comprehended the situation and meant to be upon the spot when the slipping occurred. He really didn't care very much to know what she was hiding, but was grateful for a chance to tease somebody.

During the few days of his retirement he had not enjoyed that privilege. The fact was that it was Alfaretta, not he, who had been ill; and that he had been promoted—or degraded—to her position in the household. It all depended upon the point of view; his grandmother maintaining that he should feel proud to have the chance of serving her, who was unable, or unaccustomed to serving herself, and he feeling that to be tied up in a girl's pinafore and with bared arms set to washing dishes, peeling potatoes, and scrubbing floors was a disgrace. In vain did the stately old gentlewoman show him by her example that one could cook and clean and still be dignified; her grandson remained unconvinced and rebellious. He didn't believe that poor Alfaretta was sick. He knew she was shamming just to get out of her work and make him do it for her. And as for his being set to carry trays to a bound-out girl from the almshouse—that was the bitterest drop in his cup of woe. He had been sternly prohibited from "hectoring" the little maid, and the prohibition sat heavily upon him. So heavily, indeed, that no matter who had crossed his path when he was again liberated, that person was doomed to suffer what Alfie had been spared. [Pg 89]

That person proved to be "Kitty Quixote," never more worthy of her name than as she sat in the forest dreaming marvellous dreams of the future; of wrongs to be righted, of poverty banished, and all dependent upon the unknown contents of a brass bound box. Under other circumstances she would have rejoiced to see Montgomery, as the only young creature of her own species yet met in Marsden, but not with this wonderful mystery upon her mind. When he had appropriated a full half of her boulder, uninvited, she waited a moment, then icily inquired: [Pg 90]

"Where are you going?"

"N-n-n-nowhere."

"That's a good place. When?"

"Oh, b-b-bime-by," answered the lad, with easy indifference.

"You might be late," suggested Katharine, sweetly, yet inwardly longing to mimic his stammering speech.

Then, all at once, she began to slide. There had been no perceptible movement on Montgomery's part. Assuming an indifference as great as his own, Katharine had leaned forward to inspect her second shoe-string, and afterward attempting to regain her former uprightness, felt, instead, that she was slipping downward. She landed angrily upon her feet, and, facing about, she upbraided him as a "rude, unmannerly boy."

However, the mischief was done, her secret was out. Monty forgot his desire to "plague her" in his surprised curiosity. Bending over the box he examined it critically, and finally announced:

"T-t-that's the most b-b-beautifullest thing I ever saw. W-where'd you get it?"

"Found it. But it isn't mine. It's Aunt Eunice's, and I think you are horrid mean. I didn't want a person should know anything about it till I could put it into her own hands, and then you went and came. Now the whole charm of it is gone. Oh, dear!" [Pg 91]

Montgomery ignored her unflattering remarks, and, lifting the casket, exclaimed:

"H-h-h-heavy! H-h-heavier 'n lead. What you s-s-s-suppose is in it? Where'd you find it? W-w-w-when?"

Since secrecy was no longer possible, Kate was only too glad to tell everything, and now all desire for teasing had left the listener. He was even ashamed that he had forced the girl from the

rock, though glad of the result, and in another instant both tongues were busy with speculation concerning the astonishing find.

"It's so queer. It has no opening that I can see, for this broad band around the middle looks perfectly smooth, as if it were all in one piece. The band won't slip down nor up. The corners, the brass tips, don't budge. It's a perfect cube—let's measure. Yes. Just as big one way as another. The wood is as fine as satin and looks as if it had been polished to the last degree. Do you suppose it is brass or gold that trims it? And where, where did it come from? The earth on it was so fresh I don't believe that it had been buried but a little while, and oh, I'm just wild to know all about it. Come on. Let's go home. You may carry it part of the time. But don't drop it. Don't, for your life!" chattered the girl, placing the box in Monty's outstretched palms and anxiously regarding his manner of holding it.

[Pg 92]

His face was a study. Boys, in general, are supposed to be intensely practical and less gifted with imagination than girls, but this is a mistake. Youth is the time for air-castle building, and whether it be lad or lass who "dreams" there is but little difference. Poor Monty! Unable to put his soaring thoughts into speech as his companion so readily could, he had to be content with just thinking them. But as he turned his beautiful eyes upon her she understood all that he would have said and clapped her hands, crying ecstatically:

"Oh, I'm so glad! You're one can make-believe everything lovely, too! I see it. What fun we'll have! Let's begin at once. We're in the enchanted forest. We've been enchanted ourselves. But the fairy king has come and shown us where to find the magic treasure that will unlock the whole world for us and make us back into the real prince and princess that we are all the time, though other people don't know it. He has given us the magic box with the key in it, only he has forgotten to tell us how to open it. We are on our way now to the Wise Woman. The Wise Woman lives in the stone castle beyond the forest, and she will show us how to open the box and to use the key. Because the box was hers once, before she gave it to the fairy king to keep for us. She knew that one day we should come into the forest and that all would happen that has happened. That's what makes her the Wise Woman. She has lived a long, long time. So long that her hair is quite gray and there are wrinkles around her eyes. But the eyes are still clear and gentle and there is a pretty pink color in her cheeks. She wears a soft gray gown with an old-fashioned kerchief crossed over her breast, and sometimes, most always, there is a flower thrust into the lace kerchief. Her hands are white and slender and blue veined, but they look old, and her voice is sweet and gentle like her eyes. Yet sometimes—sometimes, when other people who are not at all wise but very troublesome come before the Wise One and displease her, a little sharp fire gets into the eyes and a sour little tang into the voice, and then the Troublesome One wishes she hadn't come!"

[Pg 93]

They had been walking swiftly toward the village, for to Montgomery every step of the way was so familiar that he need not look for landmarks, and his eyes had remained fixed in fascination upon the girl's radiant face as she spun this fairy-tale without stop or hesitation. It had been as real to him as to her, but now there came over him a disappointment even more real. Pausing abruptly on the path, he burst forth, indignantly:

[Pg 94]

"Oh, f-f-fudge! That Wise Woman's nobody but Aunt Eu-Eu-Eu-nice!"

At the same moment something heavy crashed through the underbrush, and a man fell sprawling at their feet.

CHAPTER VII.

[Pg 95]

THE GRIT OF MOSES JONES

An axe flew gleaming through the air and Montgomery vanished, the brass bound box with him.

Katharine was too startled to move, and stood listening to the distressing, almost blood-curdling groans which issued from the man's lips, as, for a moment, he lay face downward before her. Then she recognized the apparel of Moses Jones and bent over him pityingly.

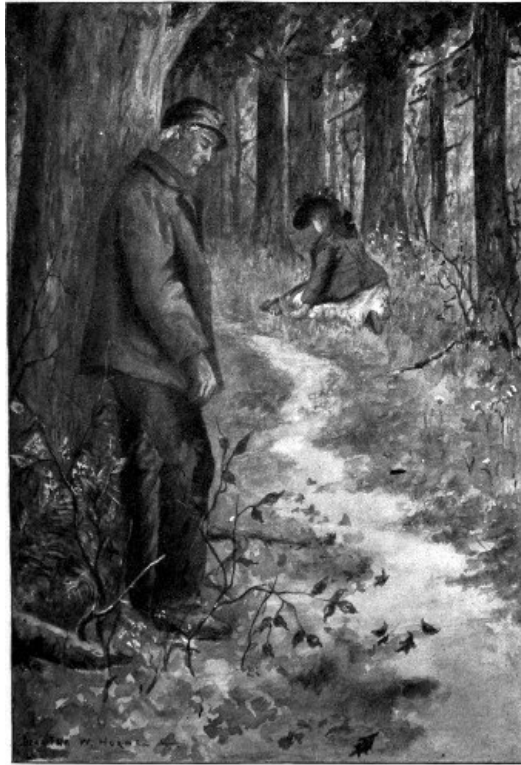
"Why, Uncle Mose! What is the matter?"

For only answer more groans, which presently began to thrill her with an unspeakable terror. What made him do that? What had befallen him? Was he dying, and she alone with him, there in the strange forest? The thought was torture, and, nerving herself to the task, she laid her hand upon him, though her repugnance to the act was a fresh torment. It had always been one of the girl's peculiarities that she could not bear to touch any ailing thing. She would wait upon people who were ill most cheerfully, even eagerly, but she hated to come in personal contact with them. It had been so even in the case of her father whom she idolized, and had been one of the small items in stepmother's list against her. But she had heard so much upon the subject then, and of its enormity, that she had set herself to overcome the failing, since failing it was. And had poor Moses known it, she would almost rather have borne his pain herself than to have helped him turn upon his back as she did. To do more for him than this was impossible, and again she besought him to say how he was hurt.

[Pg 96]

Finally, he opened his eyes and glanced about him, then angrily shook his fist toward a projecting tree-root which had been hidden from his sight by a group of ferns and over which he had stumbled.

"That's it! That's the mis'able thing 'at done it!" he cried, then groaned again, but weakly. The pain had suddenly become so severe as to turn him faint while the brilliant branches overhead began to dance and sway before his dizzy sight as no wind could make them do. "I—I'm gettin' light-headed. Help me up, Keehoty. I'm broke. I'm broke all to smash. My leg—my side—oh, oh, ouch!"



"I FEEL SO QUEER EVERY LITTLE SPELL, AN' I MUST GET HOME"

His increasing pallor frightened Katharine till pity overcame repugnance, and with a strength unknown before she clasped her arms about his neck and struggled to lift him to his feet, all the while protesting: "You mustn't be broken! You can't be. Just a little crooked root like that and a big man like you. Not quite so hard, please! Not quite so tight! 'Cause you're pulling me down instead of me you up. There, that's better!" [Pg 97]

Susanna had often declared that Moses was "just like any other man, scared to death if even his little toe ached," and it was true that he was so unused to illness that his few attacks of it had always frightened him. Yet now he realized that something far worse than ordinary had befallen, and that he must rally his grit and his strength together. With an heroic effort he got upon his feet—or foot, for one was useless, and braced himself against the tree-trunk beside them.

"Now, sissy, go find an' fetch my axe that got flung off my shoulder when I stumbled. I didn't think when I brought it to chop with 'twould prove a crutch for broken bones. Oh, I wish we wasn't so far from home. I wish you'd kep' in the right road an' not come flarrickin' clear off here out the beaten track."

"Why—isn't this the right, the shortest way back?" asked Katharine, surprised.

"No, 'tain't. I s'pose all trees look alike to city gals, but don't stop to gabble. Find the axe. Pick up your basket. I feel so queer every little spell, an' I must get home. That shin-bone's broke, true as preachin', an' six seven my ribs, by the feel of 'em, for my foot wobbles 'round as if it was hung on a string, an' my side! The axe, Keehoty, the axe!" [Pg 98]

She found and brought it, weeping bitterly. She had never felt so sorry for anybody as for this brave old fellow who was now forcing himself to overcome his own misery for the sake of others. For when she begged him to stay still where he was and let her run to the village and bring somebody to help he vigorously refused.

"Scare the hull community just 'cause I was fool enough to tumble down and crack my leg? Me, an old woodman, that'd ought to have some sense. An' Eunice! Why, 'twould scare Eunice out of a year's growth to see me fetched home 'stead of walkin' there on my own pins. Half a loaf's better'n no loaf, an' one leg's better'n none. As for my plaguey old ribs—they can take care themselves. But once we get there you just clip it to the doctor's an' have him come 'round an' patch me up. He'll have to do it so's I can be workin' reg'lar, 'cause I'm the only man there is. Besides, town meetin's comin' on, an'—My sake! I'm beat!"

Beaten he was into the silence which he had dreaded, wherein he realized his own agony. He had kept talking to prevent thinking, but had now passed beyond that. By nods and glances he

directed Kate along the shortest way, but it seemed to the sufferer as if the familiar big stone house grew steadily more distant rather than nearer. [Pg 99]

Katharine never forgot that walk. To her, also, the distance seemed interminable, and the firm clutch of his hand upon her shoulder for its support almost to break her own bones. His face, when she now and then glanced toward it, was pallid with suffering, but his lips were grimly shut, defying his own misery. As he shaved only once a week, on Sunday morning, his half-grown stubble of beard enhanced his pallor, but did not add to his beauty; and Katharine, reared among city folks who made such "Sunday habits" their every-day ones, felt something like disgust.

"I'm awful sorry for him, but—but he looks horrid. And he hurts me, too. Oh, I wish we had never come into this dreadful forest, pretty as it is; but, joy! there's a house. We'll be in the village soon and at home. What will Aunt Eunice say? And where did that mean boy go?"

As Katharine's thoughts ran on this wise they were steadily though slowly passing over the rough ground of the wood to the smoother fields beyond; and as they came in sight of the Maitland barns, there was Montgomery peeping around a corner and on the lookout for somebody. His release from confinement at home had been the result of Aunt Eunice's call, he having been permitted to walk home with her, and to spend the day with Katharine. Alfaretta was recovered and able to do her own dish-washing, and on the Monday the boy must return to school. So Madam had made him array himself once more in his best attire and had duly instructed him how young gentlemen of the Sturtevant race should conduct themselves toward young ladies of the Maitland family. [Pg 100]

Arrived at the stone mansion, Susanna had promptly sent the boy to the woods to hunt up his playmate, if he desired her, and in any case to remind Moses that he had gone off without killing the chicken for dinner.

"You tell him to come right straight back here an' do it now, if he wants a bite to eat. I ain't never wrung a fowl's neck nor chopped off her head, nor Eunice hain't, nuther, an' we ain't a-goin' to begin at our time o' life. Killin' poultry or pigs, ary one, is man's work an' not woman's, an' so say to him 't if he wants his dinner he can come kill it. He's gettin' so forgetful lately 't he can't remember nothin' 'cept fishin', an' though he took his axe along I 'low he'll do more threshin' nut-trees for that young one than choppin'; an' you remember, Montgomery Sturtevant, that you've got on your Sunday clothes; and no matter if your rich city relations do give 'em to you without no trouble to you nor your grandma, 'at you ought to take care of 'em and keep 'em clean. Don't go climbin' trees with 'em on, but just pick up what's on the ground an' you'll eat enough then, fat white worms an' all, to make you sick. Katy, she can give you part her cookies, but don't you get carryin' on with her little basket, 'cause it was her pa's, an' she's goin' to set great store by it. Tell him it's half-past nine if it's a minute, an' them old fowls what we're killin' off first is ruther tough. I ought to have her in the pot right now, an' there she ain't caught yet, runnin' 'round the hen-yard at loose ends, an' I'll try to catch her an' that'll help, an—My suz! if that boy ain't half 'crost the pastur' an' me not done talkin' to him. The sassy thing! If I'd had my way makin' this world there wouldn't have been nobody in it 'cept girls, an' them grown up and come to their gumption. But that hen—I'll try catch her or she'll never be caught." [Pg 101]

Which was very true; as also the fact that before the garrulous housekeeper had more than suggested "chicken" and "chestnuts," Montgomery had vanished to set them in train. After all, there might be compensations, he thought, for a day wasted upon a girl's society. There still seemed to linger upon his palate the flavor of Aunt Eunice's pullets, from which he had been despoiled by his first enforced call upon her ward, and though he had regretfully heard Susanna say "chicken" without the plural "s," he knew that, being himself "company," he would get his full share of the fowl, which he trusted might be a large one. [Pg 102]

Which explains his presence in the wood and his lingering in the barn-yard now, where he could command a first view of any person issuing from the forest on the shortest way home. He had retreated here after what he had supposed was a robber had fallen at his feet, and at the cost of a breathless run had preserved the mysterious brass bound box from theft. He had now safely hidden it in the hay-mow, and awaited Kate's return to tell her where. It had been almost beyond his power to keep the secret from Miss Maitland, even thus long, but loyalty to the discoverer had restrained him. And at last there she was coming across the pasture, Uncle Moses with her; and what was most astonishing, the pair were leaning upon one another in an intimacy which made Montgomery feel rather jealous.

"F-f-fudge! I didn't know he liked g-g-girls! He's got his hand on her s-s-shoulder, an' my, how they do just c-c-cr-creep! Even the pug dog just bare w-w-waddles, like he's tuckered out," remarked the watching lad to Sir Philip, who had taken advantage of the day's warmth to visit the mouse-infested barn and now lay sunning himself on its southern threshold.

But at the name of dog the Angora sniffed the air and withdrew with dignity to his throne indoors. He had already learned that Punch knew a good cushion when he saw it; and, though early provided with one for himself, preferred the satin couch of Sir Philip to the carpet-covered one which Susanna declared "plenty good enough for ary dog humbly as that one." If Punch secured the cushion first he was not easily dislodged, and since his one great battle the Angora shrank from contest. Evidently Sir Philip judged discretion better than valor, and the behavior of the two animals afforded the family much amusement. [Pg 103]

Thus deserted of all society save his own thoughts, Monty fixed a keener attention upon the

slowly advancing pair, and presently exclaimed:

"F-f-fudge! Somethin's happened. Uncle Mose's leanin' on her; she's a h-h-helpin' him! She's a w-w-wav-in' to me like blazes! That's no 'how-de-do' salute, that's a 'come r-r-right here' one! He's got his axe, looks like, an's l-l-leanin' on it. F-fudge! I bet he's chopped his foot 'stead of a t-t-tree!"

Monty's legs flew up and down like the rapidly revolving spokes of a wheel as he hurried toward the man and girl. But after one hasty glance at the feet of Mr. Jones, and seeing no blood on either, he knew that whatever was amiss it was not what he had fancied. Without a word he seized the axe from its owner's trembling hand and placed his own sturdy little shoulder in its place. Katharine was not crying now, but her anxiety altered her appearance strangely, and Moses was wholly past speech. Every nerve of his tortured body was strained to reach a spot where he could sink down and yield to the dreadful weakness which assailed him. Even the hard floor of the barn seemed a paradise of rest, and he fixed his eyes upon the wide doorway with a last effort of his will.

[Pg 104]

He did reach it, but there both will and consciousness gave way to the strain of the last hour, though the story of his pluck and endurance was to make him more highly respected in his native town than he had ever been before.

When he sank down fainting the children loosed their hold on either side, Montgomery standing still in a frightened wonder, but Kate hastening indoors for help. Rushing breathlessly into the sitting-room where Miss Eunice was quietly arranging some yellow 'mums in a quaint glass jar, she caught the lady's hand with a vehemence which sent the flowers in one direction, the pretty jar in another.

"Oh, Aunt Eunice! Come quick, 'cause now he truly must be dead, after all. Quick, quick!"

"Katharine—my dear! Why will you do such startling things? My precious jar that has held flowers for us these generations just rescued from destruction! And the poor flowers themselves —"

[Pg 105]

"Oh, don't bother! Please, please come. There's only Monty out there, and I—I did what I could, but he's dead, anyway."

"Dead, child? Sir Philip dead?" asked Miss Maitland, her thoughts instantly reverting to the only ailing member of the household.

"No, Aunt Eunice, but a person, a man—Uncle Moses."

Then, indeed, did Eunice's own hand tremble so that she set the jar she had just preserved back on the mantel while her face paled in distress. But she caught the girl's guiding hand firmly in her own, called to Susanna in the kitchen, and on the brief journey to the "further barn" learned the main facts of the affair.

Two hours later Katharine and Montgomery sat down in the kitchen to a dinner of bread and milk, while over the rest of the house hung a strange silence which made even its former quietude seem noisy by contrast. Aunt Eunice had gone to lie down, being greatly shaken by the sad accident, which, while being much less tragic than the death Katharine had reported, was trouble sufficiently serious. In the kitchen chamber above, Moses' own room, they could hear Susanna softly stepping about in list slippers, only the jar of the floor beams betraying her movements, and occasionally a muffled voice, strangely unlike the gruff tones of the hired man, would float down to them. Sir Philip lay purring himself to sleep, after a strenuous season of unrest, during which nobody had had time to protect him from mischievous Punch. As for the latter, he had been fatigued by his trip to and from the forest, as well as his man[oe]uvres with the Angora, and now took his own rest by sleeping with one eye open.

[Pg 106]

The children themselves were weary. Katharine from the excitement of the morning, and Montgomery from physical exercise. He had never done so many useful things in his life as he had crowded into the space of two short hours. It was he who had summoned the doctor, run back and forth between that gentleman's office and Miss Maitland's house, carried a plain statement of facts to Madam Sturtevant, as well as a highly furbished one to every householder between the two mansions, and had manfully attended to Mr. Jones's noon "chores." He had, indeed, already a wild ambition to be engaged in the hired man's place, since the doctor said that that sufferer would be laid up in bed for at least three months.

"I'd r-r-rather do chores any day than go to s-s-school," he announced to his companion, swallowing a large bit of bread at the same time, and thereby causing that young person to tilt her nose upwards, disdainfully.

"You ought to be as nice in your manners out here alone with me as you would be in the real dining-room with Aunt Eunice and grown-up company," she reproved, daintily balancing her own spoon with an ease which the other would scarcely admit to himself that he admired.

[Pg 107]

"F-f-fudge. You ain't c-c-com—pany no more. You belong, don't you?"

"I—I guess so. I begin to hope so, for this is the most delightfully happening place I ever was in. Though I never was in, to stay, but one other. First you fell over a precipice, and then I found a nest of little turkeys all dead, out in the black currant-bushes, Susanna says they are, that had

stolen themselves—whatever that is. Then that mystery of a brass bound box; and now Uncle Moses breaking his bones, and so much going on. But—Montgomery Sturtevant! That box! What did become of it? Would we dare, do you suppose we might go back to the woods and find it? It was all your fault. If I hadn't let you carry it—All this about poor Uncle Moses has put it out of my mind, but now it comes back and it's more important than he is. I'm sure of it. We must find it. Come, quick!"

Katharine pushed back from the table and; sprang to her feet, her weariness forgotten in this fresh anxiety.

But Monty was neither anxious nor excited; at least, not about the box, though he held it scarcely less important than she did. He was busy over a "sum" in mental arithmetic, a branch of study he little favored, though it had now come to assume considerable importance to him. Yet the problem was beyond his capacity, though this keen-witted girl might solve it. He'd try her. Therefore, still gurgling his milk, he spluttered:

[Pg 108]

"S-s-s-ay, Katy! if a man, if a m-m-man can earn a dollar a day doin' c-c-chores, all the c-c-chores, how much can a boy earn doin' h-h-ha-half of 'em?"

"Not a single cent, if I had to pay him, and he were such a boy as you. A boy so mean he'd take a brass bound box out of a girl's hands and lose it for her, and then wouldn't budge to go get it. You do try me so, Montgomery! And there's one thing I know. That is, that if I had the management of you I'd break you of that detestable habit of stuttering, or know the reason why. It's all nonsense. You can talk as well as anybody else, only you're too lazy. Now, will you come?"

To her surprise and to her shame, also, he neither resented her sharp speech nor her reply to his money question. Leaning forward, his blue eyes took on an earnestness which effectually dispelled all notion of vanity in their possessor, demanding:

"C-c-c-could you do it? C-c-can you? *W-w-w-wi-will you?*"

[Pg 109]

"Yes, I might, could, would, and should—if you'd go find my brass bound box!"

"Cross your heart, honest Injun, h-h-hope to d-d-die?"

"No. Neither one. Just plain 'Yes.' I know a way. I've read all about it in the Cyclopeda in the big bookcase. I hunted it up right away, that first day after the first night when I—I mocked you. I made up my mind then, and I never unmake minds, that if you'd be decent I'd cure you. It's nothing but a dreadful bad habit, anyway, and easy done. But not until you find my—the—Aunt Eunice's brass bound box."

He was gone and back in a flash.

Katharine, starting to follow, paused in the middle of the floor, arrested by the sight of him standing in one doorway with the glittering casket in his hands, and of Miss Maitland in another staring at that which he held as if she saw a ghost.

CHAPTER VIII.

[Pg 110]

HAY-LOFT DREAMS

All the pretty pink color which had hitherto tinged the lady's cheek had vanished, and she visibly trembled, so that Katharine darted forward to her support. But Aunt Eunice raised her hand protestingly, and tottered forward to the nearest chair. With dry, white lips, she asked in a voice so low it could barely be heard:

"Montgomery Sturtevant, where—where did you find *that*?"

Her appearance alarmed both the children, who fancied she, also, was about to faint as Moses had done, yet she did not fall nor did her gaze waver; and impelled by its sternness to make reply, Monty finally stammered:

"H-h-h-hay-m-m-ow."

"Hay-mow! Impossible!" returned Miss Maitland, becoming a bit more natural in appearance, while Kate indignantly turned upon her playmate, demanding and denying:

"How dare you? He didn't. 'Twas I—under a tree in your own big forest. I dug it up and fetched it—he fetched—there wasn't a hay-mow anywhere near it. Oh, Aunt Eunice, it's the Magic Treasure. It holds the key to all the world—to all the good things in the world, anyway. And you're the wonderful Wise Woman will open it and let us use the gold and diamonds and precious stones to make all the poor people rich and glad. 'Tis yours, I know, and quick, quick!"

[Pg 111]

With a bound she seized the box from Monty's hands and brought it to the disturbed lady, who, when the girl would have placed it on her lap, recoiled as from some venomous thing.

"No, no! Don't bring it to me. I wouldn't touch it. It has wrought evil already, and so great—"

Then she abruptly paused and steadfastly regarded the quaint old casket which, as Katharine had discovered, seemed to have neither lock nor fastening, and was in itself a marvellous piece of mechanism. As she gazed her thought was busy as painful, but out of the chaos one idea at last grew clear: The Brass Bound Box must be safely hidden and none must know that it had ever been found. To hide it she would have to touch it, no matter how unwillingly. But the secret of its existence must be kept, although that secret was already in the possession of these two others.

She called them to her and held out her hands now for the box. They approached her with a sort of awe, for there was that still in her face which altered its ordinary kindness. Not that it was unkind, for there was even more than usual sweetness in the glance she gave Montgomery, yet he felt as if he had been guilty of some terrible sin without in the least knowing what or why.

[Pg 112]

"Children, you are young to be asked to promise so serious a thing as I now ask you, but you must promise it, and you must keep your word. Will you?"

"I never broke my word in my life, Aunt Eunice! I wouldn't begin now after I've grown to be such a big girl," said Katharine, promptly. "But it's honest to tell you I hate promises, and I never feel so tempted to lie as when I've made one. I'd rather not promise, if you please; and I guess—I guess I'd rather not hear any secret. I'll go out and let you tell it to Monty alone."

Montgomery shot out a restraining hand and clutched her vanishing skirts, while a faint smile stole to Miss Maitland's lips at this evidence of moral cowardice. The boy felt, and with justice, that it was "Kitty Quixote" who had got him into this scrape, with her wild woodland adventures and her fairy-tales, and that it was but fair she should share in it.

"Unfortunately, you already know it. What you must promise is—that you will never, never speak of this box or its strange reappearance to any person, young or old. I shall put it out of sight where it will not be easily found again, and then forget it. You must forget it, too. You are Sturtevant and Maitland, descendants of honorable men and women, and for the sake of your forebears you must hide this thing."

[Pg 113]

It was all so solemn that Katharine shivered, yet could not help wondering a little. "Forebears"—that meant dead people; and how could it harm people already dead to have that box found, even supposing it to be full of poisons or other dreadful stuff, as she now began to imagine?

Now, if Kate merely shivered and speculated, poor Montgomery was in an ague. When he fixed his great eyes upon Aunt Eunice's face they were so full of terror that she pitied him, and tried to comfort, saying:

"Don't look so frightened, dear. It's only to keep from speaking of what has happened this morning. That's easy, isn't it? Besides, you are so young you will not remember long. Other things will drive it from your minds. At least, I trust so. In any case, you are in honor bound."

With that she rose as if to dismiss them, and went away toward the seldom used west wing of the great house, carrying the box with her. Her step was no longer uncertain, but firm and decided. A terrible situation had suddenly confronted her, and made, for a moment, even her clear judgment dim; but she had swiftly weighed the consequences, pro and con, and had settled the wisest course to follow.

[Pg 114]

Left alone, these young "descendants of honorable men and women" regarded one another in dismay; and Montgomery was the first to speak, crying out with all the intensity words could express:

"Oh, ain't it a-a-aw-ful!"

"Huh! I don't see anything 'awful' about it, 'cept your hanging on to me and making me stay whether or no. That was a dirty mean trick—keeping me here when I might have got away without hearing."

"Y-y-you knew it a'ready. An' it *was* in the h-h-h-hay-mow. I'd hid it there the min-ute I g-g-got to the barn, waitin' for y-y-you. But come out there n-now. I've got s-s-s-somethin' to tell you," said the unhappy lad, far too disturbed to resent her sharpness. At which she became instantly regretful, and slipped her arm consolingly within his, as they walked toward the great barn, which had from the first seemed to the city girl the most delightful of structures.

It was further proof of Monty's dejection that he did not jerk his arm away, nor would he have cared at all who saw him thus being petted by a "girl." However, once arrived at the great sun-lighted doorway, and secure even from Susanna's ears, the trouble came out.

[Pg 115]

"Oh, w-w-what shall I do? I've told it all over t-t-town, a'ready, an' it's no s-s-se—cret at all!"

Katharine stuck her arms akimbo and stared mercilessly at the abject creature before her, who seemed to droop and wilt under her gaze as if he were sinking through the hay-strewn floor.

"You told it?" she repeated, indignantly.

Monty nodded mournful acquiescence.

"Then you—you—you ought to be set washing dishes again, and kept at it for the rest of your life. So there."

One blue eye was raised a trifle in surprise. How in the world had she known that? He didn't

remember mentioning the cause of his recent retirement from public life, indeed, he was positive that this had been a "secret" really worth keeping. However, it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered except that he, who came of such "honorable" people, had betrayed his friends.

"W-w-what'll happen, s'pose?"

"I don't know," answered Kate, slowly. "Something dreadful ought. For before it was Aunt Eunice's secret the box was my secret, too. I was the first who should have told it, and only to her. You had no right to speak of it till I gave you leave."

"Un-un-uncle Mose broke his bones, and I h-h-had to go 'round, didn't I? An' when I told about him the o-o-other j-j-j-just slipped out itself. T-t-t-that's all." [Pg 116]

"Humph! 'All!' And more mischief done than you or I can guess, maybe. For though I can't imagine why Aunt Eunice should be so overcome and anxious at sight of just a box, there must be some good reason. She has seen that box before and it doesn't suggest pleasant memories to her. That's plain. She would have been glad if it had never been found, and all my pretty romance about treasure and helping people turns out just horrid. I wish I had never gone to that wood, then things wouldn't have happened. The box would have stayed in its hole, I wouldn't have hurried home with it by the long wrong way and met you, and poor Uncle Moses wouldn't have followed nor fallen over that root. Aunt Eunice would have been like the saying, 'Where ignorance is bliss,' and wouldn't have been worried so, and we shouldn't have been forbidden to tell things that I wouldn't have cared to tell, if I hadn't been forbidden. And, oh, dear! What a terrible hard world it is! and what a lovely old barn! I think—Do you suppose I could climb up that hay-mow? Susanna's sure there are hens' nests 'stolen' up there, and she needs the eggs. I wish we could find them. I wish we could do something—anything that is pleasant and so helps us to 'forget,' as Aunt Eunice wished us to do. But I guess I can't climb much. I never had a chance to try." [Pg 117]

"I'll s-s-show you!" cried the lad, eagerly, and delighted to think there was something in which he could excel this clever city girl. With a bound he had risen from the floor, where both had sat during the last of their talk, had promptly spit upon his palms and rubbed them together, then leaped to catch an upright beam. "Shinnying" up to the slippery mow with real agility, he there paused and regarded Katharine with an expression of great pride. But instead of admiration her mobile countenance expressed only disgust, and to his question, "H-h-how's that?" she retorted: "Nasty, dirty thing! You go wash your hands before you touch a single one of our eggs!"

"'O-o-our' eggs!" repeated Monty, scornfully, to hide his own chagrin. "H-h-how long since th-th-they were 'ours'?"

"Oh, dear! Do come down and wash, and let's quit quarrelling. Seems as if we never could agree about things, yet we must. We've got to be friends if we have to keep Aunt Eunice's secret, for even though you did tell it before it was hers you needn't make it worse and speak of it again. If anybody asks you about it now, all you must do is to keep perfectly still. Not say a word. Let them think what they please, but don't you talk. Now, isn't there any other way to go upon the hay except by that beam? The Widow Sprigg said she was going up there herself soon as she got time, and I'm sure she doesn't do what you did." [Pg 118]

"C-c-couldn't do it with—out," asserted the climber, referring to the moistening operation.

"I mean she would never 'shinny' up a straight, slivery beam."

"Huh! I s'pose there's a l-l-lad-der, do for g-g-girls," asserted Montgomery, indifferently.

"Then show it to me and I'll begin to teach you how not to stammer."

He looked at her sharply, but there was such perfect sincerity in her face that he accepted her promise joyfully, and led her to the rear of the barn where a rude but strong ladder led from the "bay" at the bottom to the top of the hay, almost touching the roof. Jumping from the higher board floor of the barn into this bay Montgomery ran nimbly up the perpendicular ladder, which was so straight it seemed fairly to tilt backwards, like an overerect person, and Katharine followed as best she might. She was afraid but determined, and, though the slippery blades of the dried grass fell over the rounds of the ladder, making foothold difficult, she managed to reach the level beneath the eaves and was pulled over into safety by the boy.

"Isn't this delightful? I was never in such a lovely place before, so smelly and sweet and warm. I don't wonder hens like it up here, though it's scarey coming up. Don't you think so?" she asked, looking around upon the lofty mow with curious gaze. [Pg 119]

"S-s-scary? Pooh! That's 'cause you're a girl. G-g-g-irls wasn't made to climb. B-boys were. I can climb first-rate. Yes, sir. I c-c-can climb anything. I can cl-cl-climb any tree in Aunt Eu-Eu-Eunice's woods. I can climb any tree in Deacon Meakin's woods. I—I can climb all the trees in Sq-Sq-Squ-Squire Petti—john's woods, top the mountain. I can climb any tree in the whole w-w-world! I c-c-co-could climb the church steeple!"

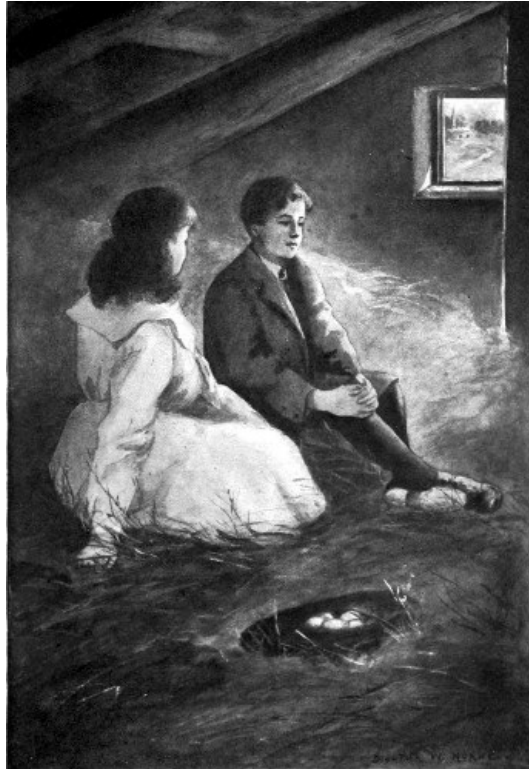
Katharine listened to this boastful statement with interest. She not only believed it, but had observed that as Montgomery neared his climax his stammering became less pronounced. This coincided with the Cyclopedia and suggested the first lesson she should give. But she had herself "climbed" to this height for another matter besides instruction. To descend with a quantity of fresh eggs for Susanna's depleted larder would be to bring one ray of sunshine into that

darkened house. For as the widow had pertinently inquired of the hired man, only the night before, "How can a body cook good victuals without ingrejuce? An' what's the greatest ingrejuce in punkin pies if it ain't eggs? Or cake, uther?" to which Moses had jocularly replied: "It might be punkin or flour." And again, Susanna: "My suz! But you air smart, ain't ye? Well, eggs I haven't, an' eggs I shall an' must. An' up that loft I go, tromple or no tromple the hay, an' before the sun sets another time on this deceivin' world."

[Pg 120]

Therefore, eggs Katharine would obtain and then instruct; and, announcing this decision, Montgomery did his best to aid her in the search. Nor was it unsuccessful. There were three nests, safely placed beneath the eaves where their builders had supposed in their hen-minds that no human being would ever come, while another adventurous fowl had lazily scooped a hole in the very centre of the mow and deposited her eggs. In any case, eggs there were in abundance, and, having filled Montgomery's pockets and Kate's hat with them, they took their own well-earned rest upon the fragrant hay beneath the slatted window.

Sunshine and air came through it, and the song of birds in the trees; and beyond another distant wide-opened shutter they could see the roofs of village homes and the spire of the church which Monty felt he could so easily climb. There, all anxiety forgotten, they dreamed dreams and saw visions; and in each and all they were both to be good and great and world beneficent.



**"THERE, ALL ANXIETY FORGOTTEN,
THEY DREAMED DREAMS AND SAW
VISIONS"**

"I shall be a great artist some day. As great as my father, or maybe, if one could be—even greater. Because, you see, poor papa had to work for money, not for love of his art. I've heard him say so, time and time again. When he wanted to paint great pictures he had to paint mean little ones, such as common persons liked and would buy. 'Pot boilers' he called them, because they brought the cash, the 'fuel,' to keep the 'pot' a-boiling. Course, we had to have clothes and a house and things to eat, and nobody to buy them except papa darling. Maybe, up in heaven, he is painting his 'great picture' now. What do you suppose?" asked Katharine, gazing through the slats at the blue sky overhead.

[Pg 121]

"I d-d-don't know much about heaven. I never had time to think. T-t-t-there's always so much doin'," answered Monty. Yet, following Katharine's rapturous gaze skyward, his own blue eyes had filled with dreamy speculation, and he began to picture to himself the wonders of that world beyond Marsden village which he meant sometime to find.

"B-b-but I'll tell you somethin', Katy Maitland. I'm not goin' to stay here always. I'm goin' to be a big man and—and do things," he observed, after a prolonged meditation.

"How big? What things?"

"Oh! Big as they g-g-grow. Big as the postmaster. B-b-big as Sq-Sq-Squ-Squire Petti—john. I'm goin' to be either a s-s-sailor, or—maybe P-P-Pr-President."

[Pg 122]

"If you're President you'll be a—a, what is it they call them? Politicalers, I guess," returned the girl.

"P-p-p-pol-er-tic—ian," corrected Montgomery, with stuttering eagerness.

Katharine accepted the correction without comment, though her lips twitched and her eyes

twinkled; and after a pause she continued: "Politicians can do things. They can get folks elected. Anybody to anything. Plain storekeepers to be postmasters; postmasters to be Senators; Senators to be Presidents; and—and hired men to be constables. Can't they?"

"Y-y-yes. Why?"

Katharine sat upright so suddenly that her hat rolled over and the eggs spilled from it. However, the hay was soft, and no harm was done, nor was her enthusiasm cooled by a trifle of that sort. Claspng her hands ecstatically, she exclaimed:

"We must do it! You and I must get Uncle Moses Jones elected constable. Now, while he's sick, for a surprise. Won't that be grand?"

"Grand!" assented Montgomery, with such eagerness that he forgot to trip in his speech. Then doubt and stammering returned together. "W-w-we c-c-c-couldn't."

"Yes, we could, if we had any s-s-sp-spunk!" retorted Katharine, heartlessly. "Folks have to be little politicians before they are big ones, I suppose, just like children before they are grown-ups. Well, you're a little politician now, a teeny tiny one, and it will be just splendid practice for you to get a village constable elected. I believe that although Uncle Moses and even Aunt Eunice speak so proudly of that office, that it isn't as great as some others. I don't know, and I wouldn't care at all except for him. But we must do it. I've heard him talking with Widow Sprigg how that now the 'law was changed,' 'town meeting' was no 'great shakes' any more, for the Presidents and constables all got mixed in together till a 'body couldn't tell t'other from which.' For his part he'd 'ruther be 'lected in the spring when crops was growin' an' tramps a-trampin', though if he was forced into it, better one time than never,' and a lot more funny grumble. She told him not to worry, that he'd never be 'forced,' much as he'd like it. I've decided that he must be elected, and without any 'forcing,' and I've the splendidest plan you ever heard. First, I'll give you a lesson. Then I'll tell you, else you'll believe I'm forgetting my promise. I'm not. I'm only considering the best way to begin. Well, Montgomery Sturtevant, that bad habit of yours comes from laziness and nervousness. Pure laziness, pure nervousness," she added, with emphasis.

[Pg 123]

"D-d-don't neither!" denied the stammerer, indignantly. "Ain't got no nerves. G-gr-gramma says so, and she knows. She's older 'n you, an' she's got 'em worst kind. Always gets 'em when I play the f-f-fiddle."

[Pg 124]

"Maybe there are two kinds of nerves. She doesn't stammer. Besides the Cyclopedia said so, and it tells the truth. Here. Put this pebble in your mouth. It's a nice smooth round one. I picked it up in the garden and washed it clean. You put it in and then say just—as—slow—as—slow: 'Betsy Bobbins baked a batch of biscuit.' After you learn to say it slow, without once stammering, then you begin to say it faster. Either that or any other jingle that's difficult without tripping. 'She sells sea-shells,' or, 'Peter Piper.' Why don't you put the pebble in?"

"I don't want t-to. You're mocking me!"

"There! I knew you needn't if you really wouldn't. When you are a little angry or in real earnest you can talk well. Listen to me and think if I'm not in earnest myself, since I took the trouble to copy all this for you."

Thereupon, from the little pocket of her blouse, which had held the pebble, the teacher took a folded paper, closely covered with her neatest script, and read therefrom paragraphs which alternately plunged her pupil into despair or exalted him to extravagant delight. And the fortunate result of this first lesson was that when it was ended Montgomery had repeated an entire sentence with reasonable smoothness. But he had accomplished this without the pebble and with almost interminable pauses between words.

[Pg 125]

"Yet you did it, you did it!" cried Katharine, exultantly; "and now for a reward you shall hear the most glorious plan I ever thought out. Listen to me, Mr. President-that-is-to-be!"

So Montgomery listened in astonishment, doubt, and delight, after his habit of mind; yet also, because of her zeal in his cure, with unquestioning allegiance. In any case, it was a scheme that would have appealed to him irresistibly and was one full worthy of the brain of "Kitty Quixote," so that he was fast outstripping even her ingenuity in the matter of detail, when the sudden call of Widow Sprigg fell like a dash of cold water upon their glowing spirits:

"Montgomery Sturtevant! You come right down out that mow this minute! Here's Squire Pettijohn after you!"

CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 126]

SQUIRE PETTIJOHN

Katharine should have grown familiar, by this time, with Monty's spasmodic disappearances, but this last was the most amazing of all. It seemed that at the sound of "Pettijohn" the hay had opened and swallowed him. There had been no other summons and she had heard only a faint swish of something sliding, then found herself alone.

"But he'll come back, of course," she reflected, "after he's seen that gentleman. Must have been somebody he liked or he wouldn't have hurried so. Anyway, I don't mind being here a little while by myself to think things out all clear, and a hay-mow is the loveliest place in the world for dreaming."

It proved such in reality for Katharine, who, burrowing herself a fresh, chair-like "nest" in the sweet-scented hay, laid her head back and fixed her gaze upon the clouds floating above the slatted window. Soon her lids dropped and she fell fast asleep.

[Pg 127]

When she awoke the loft was dusky in twilight and she was very cold. The wind had risen, and little tufts of the hay about her blew here and there, clinging to her clothing and lodging among her short curls. Montgomery had not returned, and after lying still a moment longer, till she was fully awake, she grew frightened, thinking:

"I never heard such a moaning and whistling as the wind does make up here. I wonder if it is always so in a barn, and how I am to get down. It was hard enough coming up, but in the dark, like this, and I not remembering just where that ladder was; and if I don't find it—what shall I do? Yet how silly to be afraid of things, a big girl like me; and how impolite of that boy to go away and forget me. No matter how much he likes Squire Pettijohn, he shouldn't forget his manners; especially since it is I, not that gentleman, who is going to cure him of stuttering. And what a stupid I am not to call him! If he's forgotten I must remind him."

With that she crept as near the edge of the mow as she dared, and shouted: "Montgomery! Monty Sturtevant! Boy! Come back and help me down!"

While she listened for a reply she thought of the eggs she had collected for Susanna, and crawled back to find her hat and them. The hat she slipped over her head, its elastic band clasping her throat, and the eggs she stored within her blouse. They were heavy and made it sag inconveniently, but she could soon get rid of them if only that wretched little Sturtevant boy would come back. She must try again!

[Pg 128]

"Mon-ty! *Mont—gom—ery!*"

Nothing save the wind sighing dismally among the rafters responded to her call, uttered with her loudest voice, and a fresh shiver of fear crept over her. Then she rallied, growing angry, which, under the circumstances, was the best thing that could have happened. Her indignation made her half-forget her terror so that she could plan her descent with something like courage.

"Let me think. I noticed that the top of that straight little ladder came high above the hay, almost to the roof in one place. I'd better get on my stomach and just crawl along, ever so slowly and carefully, till I find it. But—hark! Oh, joy!"

From somewhere in the darkness below a familiar yelp and whine sounded faintly. The roaring of the wind almost drowned it, yet she recognized that Punch had traced and followed her. She had always loved him, but never had he been so adorable as at that moment. His unseen presence comforted her so that she called back to him quite cheerfully:

"Yes, you precious, beautiful dog! Mistress is up here. She's coming! Wait for her, darling, darling fellow!"

[Pg 129]

It is possible that the ugly-favored little animal appreciated this flattery, or he may have had troubles of his own which needed comforting. Since his arrival at Marsden, life had not been all chop-bones for him any more than it had been all catnip for Sir Philip, and the short, gay bark with which he now responded to his mistress' cry proved their mutual satisfaction.

At last, Katharine's cautious passage came to a pause as her fingers touched the ladder, but she realized that a misstep would send her over that precipice of hay into the bay below, which now seemed a gulf of unfathomable depth. Inch by inch, with greater prudence than she had ever exercised, she moved onward in the gloom, now become almost impenetrable, till she got one foot upon a round of the ladder.

"That's good. But I guess I'd see better if I closed my eyes, and I must go down it backwards. Now I've both feet on and—dear me! How far it is between steps. Why don't people put their rounds closer together, so they wouldn't be so hard to climb? I was never on a ladder before except a step one, and that not often, and—But I'll manage."

Manage she did and very well, until she had nearly reached the bottom. Then, pushing her foot downward where one of the rounds had been broken out, it found nothing to rest upon though she stretched it to her utmost, and all at once everything seemed to give way and she fell backwards. Fortunately, the distance was so slight and the bay so carpeted with hay that no serious harm resulted; and when a cold wet nose was thrust into her face she sprang to her feet, catching Punch in her arms and in her great relief caressing him till he rebelled and wriggled himself free.

[Pg 130]

The wind did not roar so loudly down there, and, presently, she could hear things; the sound of somebody moving about on the barn floor, the opening and shutting of feed-boxes and stalls, the swish of fodder forked to the cows in the shed beyond, and could also see the gleam of lantern-light as it was carried to and fro.

"Hello!" cried Katharine, hurrying to the square window through which she and Montgomery had

leaped into the deep bay, but whose lower frame even was so far above her head that she could only touch it by stretching her arms to their utmost. She had thought it a big jump then and had not considered how she was to return, but now the full difficulty of the situation presented itself, and her heart sank.

"Oh, Punchy, dearest! I guess this is a good deal like Susanna's saying, 'out of the frying-pan into the fire.' Off the hay-mow into the bay. I don't see why folks build barns such ways. Why don't they have just regular straight floors and things? Wait, pet. Don't rub against my ankles so hard, you nearly knock me over. The man'll come back in a minute and help us up. I don't see how you ever got down here unless you fell down. Hello! Man! *Man!* Hel—lo! HELP!"

[Pg 131]

The lantern glimmer appeared once more, but at the extreme end of the building, and seemed rapidly receding. Then there came the sound of a heavy door slammed forcibly against the wind, the rasp of a bolt in its lock, and Katharine knew that she had not been heard, and that she had been shut up alone in the great, desolate place.

It was not liking for Squire Pettijohn which had caused Montgomery to vanish when called to meet him. Quite the reverse. The name of that man of mighty girth and stature struck terror into the soul of every young Marsdenite. He was a person of fierce temper and a propensity for managing his neighbors' affairs, especially the affairs of his youthful neighbors. Report said that his wealth equalled his temper, and that the two together made most of the villagers stand in awe of him is certain. It was his boast that he represented the cause of law and order in his native town, and he often wondered how it had gotten along before he was born, or how it would manage when he was dead.

That day he had come home from attending court and found the community in a ferment. It would have been excited even by the news of Moses' accident and pluck, but the tidings of treasure-finding, scattered broadcast by Montgomery during the morning's errands, had stirred its profoundest depths.

[Pg 132]

When the lawyer tied his horse at the post-office, he was greeted by statements as various as many. "Miss Maitland has discovered a gold mine on her property;" "Monty Sturtevant has dug up buried treasure in Eunice's woods;" "'Johnny' Maitland's girl has been sent home to fetch Eunice a box of diamonds;" and "There's been gold found right here in Marsden township."

These were but the beginnings of the garbled reports which a gossip-loving lad had originated; yet all pointed to one and the same thing,—Marsden would now become famous. So that more than ever Squire Pettijohn felt it good to be a great man in the right place. In all the newspaper notices which would follow, his name, also, would appear, and notoriety was what he coveted.

Having listened to one and all versions with fierce attention, he repaired to his dinner and consumed it in a silence which his observant wife knew betokened affairs of unusual weight. But it was not until he finished his dessert and pushed back from table that he informed her:

"I am going to Eunice's. Vast wealth has been found upon her premises, and she needs me. Deny me to all smaller clients until further notice."

[Pg 133]

Then, assuming his Sunday attire and stiffest stock, he set pompously forth down the tree-bordered street, caning a stray dog here, there reprimanding a boy who might be playing "hookey,"—though was not,—and shaking his fist at old Whitey, taking her accustomed stroll in and out of inviting dooryards. Yet when he came to the wider yard before the stone house something of his complaisance left him. "He and Eunice Maitland had never hitched." She was always perfectly courteous, and never failed to attend the sewing-meetings of the church when they were held at his house, and she had even been heard to say that she had "a great respect for Mrs. Pettijohn." She might have put a peculiar emphasis upon the "Mrs.," but then, everybody has his or her tricks of speech which mean nothing.

There was no door-bell at The Maples, but a polished brass knocker announced the arrival of any visitor; and it seemed to the worried Widow Sprigg as if that "plaguey knocker had done nothin' but whack the hull endurin' time sence Moses got hurt. I wonder who 'tis this time!"

Consequently, the door was opened with more impatience than courtesy as it now heralded the arrival of the Squire, who was for passing at once into the hall had not something in Susanna's manner caused him to hesitate.

[Pg 134]

"Miss Maitland. Is she at home? Will you present my card to her and say that I have called in person—in person—"

"Don't see how you could have called any other way," answered the greatly tried housekeeper, remembering him rather as "little Jimmy Pettijohn," whom her own mother had used to feed and befriend, than as the important personage he had since become.

"Ah, Susanna, my good woman, you were always facetious! I would like to see your mistress. Please announce me to her and conduct me to the drawing-room."

It was a mistaken tone and the widow hesitated at no rudeness which would protect the beloved "friend" with whom she dwelt, and whom it was her privilege to openly call by the familiar title of "Eunice," which this "Jimmy" dared not do save behind the lady's back.

"We hain't got no drawin'-room here, an' Eunice ain't seein' no more folks to-day, not if I can help

it. I'm sure she won't see no men folks, anyway. We've been overrun with them, a'ready, just 'cause Moses has broke his leg and a few his ribs. Accidents happen to anybody if they're keardless, an' he admits he was. But he's as comfortable as can be expected, thank ye, and good day."

[Pg 135]

"But, Susanna, not so fast. I came to offer my services in regard to this—er—gold mine which the little Baltimore girl has discovered."

"W-h-a-t?" gasped the widow in utter amazement. Had the man taken leave of his senses?

"The gold mine, or—or hidden treasure—or casket of diamonds,—reports vary; yet all agree in the fact that extraordinary wealth has been unearthed in the old Maitland woods. Of course, Eunice being unused to the management of large affairs and only a woman—a woman—she would appreciate the help of an experienced man. I trust my advice may prove of benefit to her."

The Widow Sprigg listened with an attention that would have been flattering had not her face evinced her incredulity. As it was, she stood for a brief time, staring over her spectacles at the big man, as if gazing at some curiosity, then she laughed, scornfully:

"Why, Squire, upon my word I'm sorry for ye! Though I don't know who 'twas 'at made a fool of ye, but fool you have been made, and no mistake. Such a balderdash as that! Why, man alive, don't you s'pose if anything worth findin' had been found on Eunice's property she'd ha' told me the first one? An' me an' her livin' like sisters, so to speak, even sence I growed up, savin' the spell whilst Mr. Sprigg, he was alive. Two years I spent in my own house 't Mr. Sprigg he built, on his own piece of woodland 'j'inin' hers, and she buyin' it off me soon's he departed. The prettiest little house in the hull township, 'tis, too, an' where I 'xpect to end my days if I outlive her, which I hope I won't. An' her needin' business 'advice,' indeed! When there ain't a man in Marsden, let alone all the women, can hold a candle to her for gumption an' clear-headedness. An' her sayin' to me then, 'Susanna, it will do you more good to sell to me an' put your money out to int'rest 'an to have a lot of wuthless land on your hands, an' you shall keep the little cottage for your own as long as you live.' So we done it, an' she paid me more'n the market price; an' has left me the house all untouched, with my own furniture in it, an' me goin' out there twicet a year for spring an' fall cleanin,' an' even leavin' the kitchen-bedroom bed made up, case I get the hypo an' feel like bein' by myself a spell."

[Pg 136]

"I know, I know, Susanna. I've heard of Eunice's generosity to you, and of your whimsical retention of an empty house. You ought to let it to some decent tenant and get some benefit of it. Upon second thoughts, I would advise you to sell it. Now that this treasure has been found you might realize well on it. I—Why, I don't know but I might be induced to take it off your hands myself, just to do a friendly deed to an old schoolmate."

Squire Pettijohn had managed to stem the tide of her garrulity long enough to interpose this speech of his own, and to act upon an idea which had just occurred to him. The value of the old Maitland forest would leap to fabulous height if the rumor that gold had been discovered there proved true. But he did not intend to offer much for the "deserted cabin," convenient though it might be to the possible mine, upon the strength of a mere rumor, and even though the chance existed of the same vein of wealth extending even so far. He would first get confirmation of the story from Miss Maitland's own lips and would then act with his eyes open.

[Pg 137]

He was not succeeding very well in his errand of "neighborly kindness," for Susanna still held the door so nearly closed that he could not force an entrance, even though he kept his foot firmly in the aperture. The woman still regarded him with a pitying amusement; yet gradually curiosity got the better of her common sense, which told her that he was the victim of some hoax, and she inquired:

"Who told you such a yarn, Squire?"

"Please admit me. I am not accustomed to being kept on people's thresholds when I take time out of my busy life to call upon them; and no one person in especial told me. The talk is in everybody's mouth, and the whole village has gone wild over the matter."

"But it must have had some sort o' beginnin'. Wild goose gabble like that don't spring full-fledged out the ground, I know. Who—started the ridic'lous business?" persisted the housekeeper, almost unconsciously opening the door somewhat wider.

[Pg 138]

Squire Pettijohn improved this opportunity and made his way into the hall before she remembered that she had not intended to admit him. In any case, she instantly reflected he shouldn't see her mistress, whom he had had the impertinence to speak of as "Eunice."

But her reflection came too late. Miss Maitland was already descending the wide stairs, and had paused at the half-way landing, to observe who was this latest visitor of the many who had called to ask for Moses. Called, also, it may be, to learn something further concerning the interesting "treasure."

But none save this gentleman had ventured to speak to her of what was, in reality, her own affair, and she had not encouraged inquirers to remain. Privacy had never seemed so desirable to her as on that fateful morning nor so difficult to maintain; and though there was no rudeness, her neighbors went away with the feeling that:

"Eunice Maitland's just as proud and reserved as ever. Moses' trouble and her own great fortune

don't make a bit of difference, and she makes you feel, without saying a word, that your room is better than your company; and that she'll keep her own counsel in this matter as she has always done in smaller ones."

[Pg 139]

"Good afternoon, Miss Eunice! Accept my hearty congratulations!" cried Squire Pettijohn, pushing eagerly forward to the foot of the stairs, and bowing to her descending.

"Good afternoon, Squire Pettijohn. You are very kind to come and inquire for my poor friend, Mr. Jones. I am glad to tell you that the doctor says he will do very well, but sorry to add that he will be a prisoner indoors for a long time. Is Mrs. Pettijohn quite well?"

So speaking, and with the manner of one who has expected but one kind of interest in affairs at The Maples, yet knowing perfectly well that the Squire would never have troubled himself about a "hired man's" misfortunes, Aunt Eunice walked with her visitor toward the door. She was puzzled by his presence, but did not enjoy it, and was herself going just then to read the *Weekly Journal* to her injured helper. She did not take the hint given by the Squire's pause beside the sitting-room door, and moved gently forward to the outer entrance, as if to terminate the interview.

"Make my regards to your good wife, Squire, and thank her for sending to inquire. Moses is much touched and gratified by the good-will of his neighbors, and has had many calls already. But doctor says he should see nobody except ourselves for the present. Good afternoon."

[Pg 140]

They had now reached the doorway and Susanna stood at one side, keenly observant of the other two, and suddenly breaking into their talk with the exclamation:

"Well, Eunice! What do you think's sent Jimmy Pettijohn a-visitin' us? Not none of Moses' troubles, but to hear about the 'gold mine' was found in the big woods this mornin'! Did you ever hear the beat?"

"A gold mine? Surely, he knows how absurd such an idea would be," answered Aunt Eunice, quietly bowing and turning away.

As she disappeared in the hall beyond the stair-way the Squire coughed and started to follow, then apparently thought better of it, for he merely reproved Susanna with his most judicial sternness, saying:

"If you women would be careful to repeat things as you hear them you would save much confusion. It is true I did mention 'gold mine,' but I also mentioned a hidden box of treasure. The majority of the villagers claimed the latter was what was really found, and—"

"Who started such a cock-an'-bull story? Must have had a beginnin' in somebody's mouth."

Susanna had now become not only indignant but profoundly curious. She would find out who was responsible for this strange rumor, then she would promptly interview that person and cross-examine him as only a woman could. But the reply which she received astonished her more than the story had done.

[Pg 141]

"It was that stammering little grandson of the Madam's. He and the little girl who's staying here were the discoverers. So I was told," answered the Squire, making ready to depart.

"Well, I declare! If 'twas ary one o' them we can soon settle their hash. Come with me, Squire, I saw the pair goin' into the barn a little spell ago, an' I hain't seen 'em come out. Katy, she don't know you—an' so ain't afraid of ye. She ain't afraid of anything I've seen yet; but Monty—Hm-m. I can leave Monty to you to deal with. My suz! If this ain't been the greatest day that ever I saw!"

With which remark she led the way to the foot of the hay-mow and sent up the summons which had caused Montgomery's sudden disappearance.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 142]

ALFARETTA'S PERPLEXITY

"Alfy! A-A-Alfy!"

Her name hissed into her ear partially roused the bound-out girl from a nap she had been taking with the towel in one hand, an unwiped dish in the other. She had the faculty of going to sleep anywhere and any time opportunity offered. She now leaned comfortably against the wall beside the sink, her eyes closed and her mind oblivious to her surroundings, and dimly hearing through her dreams that sibilant call:

"A-A-A-Alfy!"

Then her ear was pinched and she brought back to reality.

"What you doin' to me, Montgomery Sturtevant? I'll tell your grandma!"

"Ain't meanin' to hurt you, A-A-Alfy. I—Don't you d-do that. I—Say, I'm goin' to h-h-hide in the s-s-

secret chamb—er. Don't you t-t-tell anybody. You fetch my s-s-s-supper up after dark. An' some w-w-water. Fetch enough to l-l-last—forever! I don't know as I s-s-shall ever—ever—dare to c-c-come down."

[Pg 143]

The Mansion where the Sturtevants had lived during many generations was a house even older than The Maples. It was far more quaintly ancient in style, and had been one of the many "Headquarters" of our Revolutionary generals. The earliest built house in the county, the part first erected still stood strong and intact, though little used now. On this portion of the Mansion the roof ended sharp at the eaves on one side, and but a few feet above the ground; the opposite side being two full stories and attic in height. Within this "old part" were many curious rooms, one having the peculiarity of seven doors and but one window; a monster fireplace, wherein one could stand and look straight up to the sky through the great stone chimney, and where still hung a rusty gigantic crane, once used for the roasting of meats and boiling of pots; but, most curious of all, a perpendicular shaft leading to a "secret chamber" beneath the sloping roof. To ascend this shaft one climbed upon small triangular steps fitted alternately in the rear corners of it; and it was entered through a sliding, spring-secured panel of the "keeping-room." No stranger would have discovered that the panel was a doorway, and even to Alfaretta it suggested deeds of darkness and treachery. The utmost Montgomery had yet been able to persuade her to do was to

[Pg 144]

peep fearfully up that uncanny stair-way, from the dimness below to the utter gloom at top. To ascend it, as he did, nimbly hand over hand—the mere thought of it set her shuddering.

Now he was gone, and—there! She knew it. She heard him softly crossing the bare floor of the "old part" in his stockinged feet, heard the rusty squeak of the ancient spring-fastening, fancied that she heard—though she could not—his swift ascent of the ladder stairs, and—heard no more.

But she was now far wider awake than the pinch on her ear had made her, and she was terribly disturbed. In that house everybody, meaning Madam and herself, did what its young "master" desired. Of course on the lady's part there were some exceptions to this rule, but none whatever on Alfaretta's. The lad was at once her delight and her torment; in his wilder moods teasing her relentlessly, but in his more thoughtful ones pitying her for her hard lot in life. Yet, in fact, since the girl had been taken from the "county farm" to serve Madam Sturtevant until she should be eighteen, she was scarcely poorer than the mistress who employed her, and who scrupulously shared her own comforts with her charge.

Big as the house was, there was very little money in it. None whatever would have been there save for the generosity of distant relatives who regularly sent a small cheque to the Madam, as well as a box of clothing for the grandson; nor did they even dream that upon that cheque and the neighborly kindness of Eunice Maitland the household at the mansion existed.

[Pg 145]

Fortunately, for the present, Alfaretta demanded nothing in the matter of wages. When she should be eighteen she, to her, almost fabulous sum of one hundred dollars would be her due as well as a decent "fitting out" of wearing apparel. Then she would be free to go or stay, work for "real wages" for this mistress, or engage herself to another. But eighteen was a long way off as yet, and though sometimes a wonder as to where she should get the pledged one hundred dollars did cross Madam Sturtevant's mind, she put the thought aside as soon as possible. Sufficient unto that day would be its own evil, and there had been days in the past far more evil than Alf's coming of age could ever be.

Had relic-hunters known it the Mansion was a storehouse of genuine "antiques" which would have been eagerly purchased at fancy prices; but Marsden was far out of the line of such persons, and, save in extreme necessity, the old gentlewoman would have refused to part with her belongings.

Eunice, who was better informed on such matters because of her wider reading, had once delicately suggested to her friend that such or such an old "claw-foot" was worth a deal of money, and that it wasn't really necessary to have four tall clocks, each more than a century old, ticking the hours away in that empty house.

[Pg 146]

But her suggestion was wholly misunderstood. Madam had rather crisply replied that she was perfectly capable of winding the clocks on the one day in eight when they required it, and hoped to continue so till her life's end. Indeed, it had used to be a rather formal little household ceremony—that winding of the clocks on every Sunday morning. A ceremony that had always been performed by the two reigning heads of the "family" in each succeeding generation. It had been Madam's place to walk with her husband from room to room and stand beside him while with the queer old keys he wound the weights up from the bottom of the upright cases to the top, whence they would again begin their slow descent to the bottom, reaching it as another Lord's Day came around.

Nowadays, Montgomery, as the last of his race, had been promoted to accompany his grandmother on this clock-winding tour, and had once innocently asked:

"Did my father use to go with y-you, as I-I-I do?"

Strangely enough, he had never before inquired much about his parents, but had somehow imbibed the knowledge that both were dead. His father had once "gone away" and never returned; but his mother had come home, bringing him an infant, had placed him in the Madam's arms, had taken to her bed, and had left it only to be carried to the burying-ground on the hill. Of her the old lady often talked, and once when they had carried roses to the unmarked grave he had heard her softly quote: "A sweeter woman ne'er drew breath, than my son's wife, Elizabeth."

[Pg 147]

But of that son, her own only child, she said nothing till he asked that unfortunate question. Then she had turned upon him with a face so unlike her own that he was frightened and needed no command to make him avoid that subject forever after.

"Your father is—gone; has died to us. Speak of him no more."

The tragedy of her expression haunted him for a time, and he wondered why she was so much more distressed by mention of her son than of her husband, since both were dead. However, he soon forgot the matter save to obey her wish, though afterward this clock-winding, which he had thought a "bother an' n-n-nuisance," seemed fully as sacred an act as the church-going which followed it.

This, then, was Montgomery's home and life, and why he who was so petted and indulged should put himself in hiding, and, of all places, in that dreadful "secret chamber," puzzled Alfaretta.

[Pg 148]

"He told me not to tell Madam, an' he told me to bring his supper. How can I? How dast I? I—I'd be more afraid to go up that stair 'an to walk through the graveyard alone at midnight. I would so, Ma'am Puss, an' you keep your nose out that suppawn, I tell you!"

The perturbed little maid felt that it was good to have even a cat to talk to, and vented some of her vexation by kicking the unlucky animal aside from the pot, whose hot contents she was merely sniffing. Suppawn and milk was the customary supper at the Mansion, and as its mistress liked to have the pudding cooked for a long time and also continually stirred during that operation, Alfaretta had become expert in the matter of managing. The pot was duly put on at the hour appointed, and the Indian meal carefully sifted into the salt, boiling water. When the mixture appeared fairly smooth and Alf's arm was tired the pot was set upon the hearth and the young cook went to sleep. When the sleep was of sufficient length to cool the porridge Ma'am Puss extracted her own supper in advance of the family's, and nobody was the wiser. But to-day, Alfaretta had forgotten to remove the pot from the stove while she did her "noon dishes" and taken her intermediate nap, with the result that the suppawn was burned and even the cat wouldn't touch it. And although she had whisked it off the fire as soon as Monty had disappeared, her trained nose told her that this was a supper spoiled for everybody. She was very sorry for Madam, who would try to eat it, and always bore more patiently with her young handmaid than that person wholly deserved, but there was a silver lining to that cloud! Montgomery would never touch suppawn if it were scorched: therefore, she need carry him none of it.



"MA'AM PUSS EXTRACTED HER OWN SUPPER IN ADVANCE OF THE FAMILY'S"

"Couldn't have got any milk up there, anyway, without spillin' it, Ma'am Puss, an' you know it. Goody! Course he'll come down. He'll have to if he gets starvin' hungry. No harm done—much. I wonder what he's been up to now! Well, I can't help it. I didn't get him into no scrapes. An' I'll work real hard the rest the afternoon, hemmin' that petticoat Madam's give me to make over for myself. It'll be a real good petticoat if I ever get it done, though it's about forty rods around the bottom, I believe."

[Pg 149]

Full of good intentions, Alfaretta carefully set the burned pudding back on the stove, wherein the wood fire had nearly gone out, and sat down to her task of needlework. In reality, she was a very tired little girl. Madam was daintily neat and vigorous for a woman of her years. Never very robust, she still exercised what strength she had in a ceaseless round of sweeping and dusting.

All the empty old rooms were as orderly as when there had been many servants to attend them, but this was accomplished at a cost of incessant labor and watchfulness, which the mistress really enjoyed since it filled her days with "things to do," but which was not so well liked by her bond-maid.

[Pg 150]

Ma'am Puss curled herself at Alf's feet and purred herself to sleep so soundly that a tame mouse, the girl's own especial pet, came out from hiding and scampered merrily about the kitchen floor. The chorus of clock-ticks sounded drowsily through the silent house, Madam was taking her daily rest on her lounge in the sitting-room, and after a time the seamstress's good intentions passed into a maze of dreams. In them she seemed to be eternally climbing steep stairs into a chamber of horrors tenanted by one starving boy; or she was watching Madam choke to death over a lump of hot scorched porridge; or she was being tossed on the horns of Squire Pettijohn's black bull,—the terror of all young, and some old, Marsdenites,—and from this last dream she awoke to find the kitchen quite dark, and Whitey mooing outside the window.

It was Montgomery's place to "tend cow," the lonely remnant of a once large herd, but it was Alfaretta's duty to milk it.

"Yes, Whitey! It's all right, an' for once you've come home by yourself. A good job, too. Let me see. How fur have I sewed? To there—to there!" sleepily murmured the maid, and realizing that she had on that afternoon of best intentions accomplished the magnificent distance of two inches! "Two inches, if it's a stitch. Two inches a day for—How many days will it take to hem—to hem—Huh! I can't bother! But if I'm to go to school next quarter as Madam says I may, I'll have to do faster 'n that. Might get it ready for my outfit, like Monty says," remarked the sewer to herself, laughing carelessly.

[Pg 151]

Folding the garment neatly, she put it back in the work-basket her mistress had given her, and taking her pail, went out to milk old Whitey. But first she attended to what was properly Montgomery's part of the evening's chores, stalling the cow and throwing into her manger the scanty supply of night fodder that could be afforded. Then she sat down to milk, and accomplished that operation so slowly that Whitey turned her head as far as the stanchions would permit to see what this slowness meant.

With the coming of the dusk Alfaretta's perplexities had returned and brought others with them. It was not only a question of the boy's going supperless—nor her courage, nor of burned porridge and Madam's lifted eyebrows when it was tasted, which to the bond-girl was "Worse 'an a lickin';" it was that further one of the grandmother's inquiries. How should she answer them?

She loitered as long as she could, but the evil hour could not be indefinitely postponed. Madam's habits were as exact as those of her ancient clocks, and precisely as the four of them were striking six the little silver bell tinkled in the dining-room.

[Pg 152]

With an air of every-day indifference, Alfaretta dished the burned porridge upon a delicate china platter and filled a cut-glass pitcher with milk. These she placed upon a silver tray and carried to the shining mahogany table where the mistress was already seated. Then she took her own place behind the lady's chair, as she had been trained, ready to serve the simple meal; yet hardly had she stationed herself there than the dreaded question came:

"Where is Montgomery, Alfaretta?"

"Oh, dear! How not to tell the truth an' how not to lie!" reflected the perplexed girl, but not till the question was repeated did she reply: "I s'pose he's—he's somewheres."

Madam's eyebrows were lifted then. "Why, Alfaretta!"

"Yes, Madam. I'm sorry the suppawn scorched. I—I was terr'ble sleepy an' I stopped stirrin' a little minute an' first I knew—"

"I asked for Montgomery. Did you tell him that supper was served?"

"No, Madam."

"Please do so."

Glad of any reprieve from giving the answer she hated to make, the girl left the room in haste, as if intent upon summoning the lad. But she was gone longer than seemed necessary, nor did the waiting grandmother hear the boyish voice she loved, despite its stammering; and she was herself just rising to look for the lad herself when the maid reëntered, pale and breathless, and evidently frightened in extreme.

[Pg 153]

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 154]

THE FACE IN THE DARKNESS

Miss Maitland had promptly engaged Deacon Meakin to take Moses' place during the latter's enforced idleness, and the arrangement promised to be satisfactory to all concerned.

Susanna had observed:

"You couldn't do better, Eunice. The deacon's forehanded himself, but he likes money—all them Meakins do—an' he's been as oneasy as a fish out o' water sence he sold his farm an' moved into the village. A man 'at's been used to workin' seventeen hours a day, ever sence he was born till he's turned sixty, ain't goin' to be content to lie abed till six seven o'clock in the mornin' an' spend the rest the day splittin' kindlin'-wood to keep a parlor stove a-goin'. He'll be glad o' the job, an' he'll be glad o' the wages, an' he'll break his neck tryin' to do more an' better'n Moses ever did. You couldn't do better. It's a ill wind that blows nobody good, an' Moseses misfortune is the deacon's blessin'."

[Pg 155]

There was something else which made the good deacon accept Miss Maitland's offer with so much alacrity. According to his own wife:

"The deacon he feels terr'ble sot-up bein' selected to become one the family, so to speak, right now on the top of that treasure findin'. I ain't seen him walk so straight or step 'round so lively, not sence we moved in. An' whatever the truth is in this queer business, he'll fathom it, trust him! or bust."

This, to a next-door neighbor, as the gentleman in question set off down the street to enter upon his new duties.

So it was the deacon whom Katharine had heard busy about the barn and the glimmer of whose lantern had disappeared in the distance. With a precaution his predecessor in office had never practised, he had secured every shutter and window and locked every door before he crossed the driveway between barn and house and entered the kitchen, where Susanna was toasting bread for supper. As he blew out the candle in the lantern and deposited that ancient luminary on the lean-to shelf, he rubbed his hands complacently, and observed:

"Well, Widow Sprigg, I cal'late I've done things up brown. Winds may blow an' waves may roar, as the poet says, but nobody nor nothing can't break into Eunice's buildin's whilst I have the care on 'em. How's he doin'?"

[Pg 156]

As Moses was the only "he" on the premises the question naturally referred to him.

"Oh, he's all right enough. I mean, right as he can be, stove to pieces like he is. One good sign about him—He's crosser'n fury. All said an' done that me or Eunice could to please him, and he won't be pleased. Wants them childern, an' the mis'able things have skedaddled somewheres an' can't be found."

The deacon recognized an opportunity. He drew his chair up to the fireplace, where, above a bed of glowing coals, Susanna was making her toast, and said:

"There, neighbor, you look clear tuckered out, an' no wonder with what all you've gone through to-day. Hand me the fork. I'll help you. I hain't been ma's husband forty year without learnin' how to toast a slice of bread. An', my sake! Ain't it all just wonderful! An' what in power do you s'pose she'll do with it all?"

Susanna rather reluctantly yielded the toaster, looking speculatively over her spectacles at her would-be helper. Here was another man gone daft, or apparently so. Then she remarked, testily:

"I don't see what's happened all you men to talk so odd. Here's Jim Pettijohn been here a-offerin' his services to help Eunice look after a gold mow, or somethin'. An' me that surprised you could knock me down with a feather, just to see him walkin' up our front path. We ain't never had no 'casion for visits from the Squire—not sence he got to be one. Before then, years ago, when he was a humbly little barefoot shaver runnin' 'round loose, 'cause his ma was too poor to feed him, why the Maitlands used to half keep him. We none of us Maitlands has ever liked him, though. And now you—It ain't for the love of toastin' bread that you've set yourself down 'longside this fireplace, Deacon Meakin, and I do wish you'd put me out my misery an' tell plump and straight what's possessin' this village of Marsden this day!"

[Pg 157]

"You pretend you don't know, widow?"

"No, I don't pretend. I never 'pretended' a thing in my life. I say plain an' square what I mean an' no hints nor inyendys about it. Now, I ask you as man to man, or widow to deacon, what's all this fuss beyond just Moses gettin' his bones broke? There's something, and it seems to belong to our folks, yet me nor Eunice don't know a touch about it, nuther one. Now, tell."

The slice of bread fell from the two-pronged fork into the fire, but neither of this worthy pair observed the fact. For at once the deacon plunged into his story, relating the varied rumors which were at that moment being excitedly discussed by every other fireside in Marsden, as by this; and the grain of truth extracted from the mass was that—something out of the common had happened, yet nobody knew just what; that Katharine and Montgomery were the chief actors in the drama, with Moses a possible accessory. Also, that to Miss Maitland the whole affair was known "root and branch," and that she had been true to her character and refused to share her affairs with even the friendliest of neighbors.

[Pg 158]

"And now, Susanna Sprigg, what do you say to that?" demanded the deacon, exultantly, when he had finished his garbled narrative.

"I say—*bosh!* And you've burned the toast. But I've got enough done, anyway. We always 'feed' at

five o'clock in the mornin' an' milk right after. And you needn't bother to lock the buildin's another night. Course, we do have keys an' keep 'em hung in their places, but as for usin' 'em—Why, who in Marsden would steal a cent's worth?"

The deacon felt he had been bidden to take himself away, yet with nothing learned; and as he slowly adjusted his plush cap and pulled its ear-tabs down, he fixed a facetious glance upon the housekeeper, making one more effort toward enlightenment, saying:

"I admit Marsden an honest village, less I never'd a-sold the farm an' moved in. But what's been in the past ain't no pattern for the futur'. Course, you hain't had no occasion for bars an' bolts, heretofore, but hereafter—hereafter—with that bag or box or trunk of diamonds—a gold box it is, too, they say—or them big lumps of gold out the mine—prudence is advisable. Good night."

[Pg 159]

He went out, rather noisily closing the door behind him; and, fairly snatching up the plate of toast, Susanna repaired to the room where, in an unlighted gloom, Eunice awaited her supper.

"My suz! Eunice, why didn't you light up 'fore this? I meant to do it myself, but what with runnin' up-stairs to tend to Moses an' showin' that blunderheaded deacon the ways of doin' our chores, I let it go."

Eunice rose to do as suggested. Indeed, she had been sitting so absorbed in her own thoughts that she had not observed the coming of nightfall; but Susanna interposed:

"You set still, Eunice Maitland, till I get all the lamps lit there is. I've got to have a chance to see whether I'm awake or dreamin'. I want to see square into your own face, an' learn if you're bein' deceived or are deceivin' me. Here's that little mis'able Jimmy Pettijohn—"

"Little, Susanna?"

"Yes, little. Always was an' always will be. His outside has growed big enough in all conscience, but his inside has stayed the size of a pin-point, same as it was born. And Deacon Meakin, that's always had the reputation of common sense, a-insistin' that a gold mow has been found in our woods; or if not that, then a box—a shiny box of—My suz! Eunice—Eunice—what is the matter?"

[Pg 160]

Miss Maitland had risen and stood staring incredulously at the housekeeper. She was trembling violently and her face had turned paler than the other had ever seen it. She opened her lips to speak, but words seemed slow in coming, and after a moment she sank back in her chair, murmuring only:

"Oh, Susanna! How dreadful!"

"Eunice, be you sick?"

"No. Oh, no, no."

"Then there's somethin' in this, after all. An'—an'—you never told me!" cried the widow, for the first time in her life feeling really angry with this good friend.

"I couldn't tell you, dear Susanna. I could tell nobody. It does not concern—any one now living."

Her hesitation was not lost upon the eager woman opposite, whose curiosity was greater even than her anger; making her demand, promptly:

"Which was it? Box or mow?"

"I cannot tell you. I shall not say another word upon the subject. Where are the children?" But though the tone was decisive, it was also very gentle; and now smiling across to her irate housemate, she added: "Be faithful to me in this matter, dear friend, as you have always been in others. The secret is not mine to impart. You will help me to silence all these dreadful rumors by simply ignoring them. Nothing has happened, save Moses' trouble, to affect our life in any way. I am astonished that people should make so much of so little, and I am both surprised and disappointed that any rumors have been set afloat. It seems impossible to trust anybody, nowadays, even a child! But where are the two who belong to us? Where is Katharine? Where is Montgomery? He should be going home, or his grandmother will worry. But be sure to put him up a basket of food. There's that half of a boiled ham, and yesterday's bread was extra fine. A loaf of that and a square of gingerbread should satisfy him for the bread-and-milk dinner he was forced to put up with. He was very helpful in running errands, I must not forget that."

[Pg 161]

Miss Eunice continued talking as if she wished to recall to herself all the good qualities of one who had bitterly disappointed her. How could a Sturtevant be so dishonorable? Or was it a Maitland? Which of the two young things who had found the box and had given her their promise, had so soon broken their word? For, of course, only by and through them could these wild rumors have been set astir.

Susanna had listened in silence, which was not her habit. She was still disappointed and hurt, and was trying in her own mind to put several things together. But she rallied as Eunice paused, and said:

[Pg 162]

"I don't know where they are, ary one. The Squire he was after Monty, hot foot. 'Twas him, he said, 'at had set the yarn a-goin'. After all, it might be one his own wild goose make-believes, if—*if you* hadn't owned it was true. Of course, I'll do what you want. I always have, or tried to; but I will say this much, Eunice Maitland, 'at I don't feel you've the confidence in me you ought to

have. That's all. I'll say no more. And as for where them two oneasy young ones are, I can't guess. I heard 'em talkin' or I heard Monty, up in the hay-mow, just after the Squire wanted him. I heard him as I was crossing the gravel road to the barn, yet when we got there an' called to him—he simply wasn't. He knowed he'd been doin' wrong, most like, else he'd have come down."

"Did you tell him that it was Squire Pettijohn who wished to see him?"

"Yes. Course. I thought that would scare him into comin' right away."

Miss Maitland laughed, and answered: "My dear, misguided woman! You might have known Monty well enough to understand how fast he would disappear in some other direction. He has probably gone home and Katharine with him. I hate to put any further task upon you, but I—I'm rather upset by to-day's events and shall have to ask you to go for Kate. I must tell her to remember hours and always be on hand at meal-time. She is a winning child in many ways, but—I fear I'm too old to get used again to any child."

[Pg 163]

Susanna went out without a further word. In her heart she was glad of the rather long walk to Madam Sturtevant's, since during it she would have opportunity to stop at some neighbors' doors, hear what they had to say, and promptly disabuse their minds of whatever wild notions they had that day acquired. For despite her personal vexation with Eunice she was loyal to her, and felt that she had but to say "Bosh!" in her most emphatic way to any rumor repeated in order to dispose of it. Mistaken woman! As well try to stem the ocean's flood as to silence a secret once betrayed!

These several calls, brief though they were, brought her somewhat late to Madam Sturtevant's, and at that very moment when Alfaretta rushed into the dining-room, frightened and breathless. Now the Widow Sprigg so rarely paid a visit to the Mansion that she meant to make this one as formal as possible; so, instead of tapping at the side door, she stepped to the front one and gave a resounding whack upon the big brass knocker.

"Ouch!" screamed Alfaretta.

"Why—what's that!" exclaimed the Madam. After-dark callers were an unknown thing at that house, and instant premonition of evil chilled its mistress's heart.

[Pg 164]

"D-don't be s-s-scared!" said the little maid, hurrying to the lady's side and clinging to her skirt, stammering as readily as Montgomery would have done and ostensibly to reassure her mistress, but, in reality, for her own protection. Madam could be so stately and grand that she must awe any intruder who looked upon her, and behind her black skirt the girl felt safer.

"Scared, Alfaretta? How absurd! But coming so suddenly upon our quietude the summons surprised me. Take the candle from the side table and open the door."

The Mansion was still lighted by candles which its mistress herself prepared, molding them in tin molds exactly as had been done by the first lady who had ever ruled there, but for economy's sake as few were burned as possible. One now glimmered upon the supper-table and another, unlighted, waited elsewhere for just such an emergency—but an emergency so long delayed that Alfy had never expected it to arrive.

She had learned to polish the antique stick to a dazzling brilliancy, its snuffers and extinguisher as well, "in case we should have an evening call," being the weekly remark that accompanied the polishing. But till now the wick of the candle thus prepared had remained white as when removed from the mold, and Alfaretta's hand trembled as she now left her ambush of black serge and tried to obey.

[Pg 165]

"Take care, child! You're lighting the candle—not the wick! Take another lighter and try again."

Even matches were a luxury to be reckoned with in that impoverished home; and besides, all the family had always used paper "lighters" daintily twisted, and crimped at top, nor was Elinor Sturtevant one to go behind her own traditions. But, at that moment, Alfaretta had already wasted three lighters without igniting the new wick when again that loud knocking was repeated.

Madam's patience fled.

"You clumsy child! Don't delay any longer. Whoever it is will think us most inhospitable. Take this one already burning and go to the door at once."

"I—I dassent!" quavered Alfaretta, retreating toward the kitchen.

"You—dare—not? How ridiculous. Then I will go myself! though when one has a maid one expects her to attend the door. That's a point upon which I am very particular. Remember that, in future."

"Yes'm," murmured the girl, absently. There were so many "points" upon which the old gentlewoman insisted that some of them fell on unheeding ears. At present, she was conscious only of two things: she must either remain alone behind in a dark room or she must go with her mistress and face whatever lay beyond that great front door. Deciding the latter course to be preferable, she timidly followed the vanishing candle down the long hall to where a barricade of bars and chains and bolts made admission from without a matter of some moments.

[Pg 166]

"Hold the candle, Alfaretta, while I unfasten the door," commanded the Madam, and the girl had to obey. But her hand shook so that she scattered "droppings," which even at that moment did not escape the mistress's critical eye and which would have to be cleaned up as soon as morning

came.

At last the door was opened, and to Madam Sturtevant nobody was visible save Susanna Sprigg, wearing her Sunday bonnet and her most polite manner, while her spectacles gleamed like balls of fire as the candle-light fell upon them. But what Alfaretta saw was another face, so wild and fierce and terrible to look upon that her heart almost ceased beating. A white and haggard face, that seemed imprinted upon the darkness as if it belonged to no body nor substance but was a ghostly apparition of the night. All the eerie stories the poor child had heard during her life at the "County Farm," from the lips of the garrulous pensioners who had nothing better to do than invent them, came back to her now; and as the face appeared to be coming nearer, growing more and more distinct, she uttered a piercing shriek and slammed the door with such violence that the candle went out and the darkness she dreaded enveloped them all.

[Pg 167]

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 168]

A STURTEVANT—PERFORCE

"Alfaretta!" cried Madam Sturtevant, "what does this mean?" Something of the girl's panic had seized her, also, though she tried to hide her own agitation by sternness.

"My suz, Alf Brown! What ails ye? You nigh knocked me down, slammin' the door right in my face, that way!" exclaimed Susanna, who had, fortunately, stepped within before this strange thing had happened. She was herself in an excited mood, having passed through what she had during the past day, and having had her mind further disturbed by the tales she had gathered during her progress. Now here at the Mansion, where was always dignified composure and serene hospitality, to find such tardy admission and such hysterical welcome—it was too much! Her reflections were swift and angry, and while all still stood in the dark, as yet too surprised to move, she demanded, crisply: "I want Katharine."

[Pg 169]

"Come this way, Mrs. Sprigg. Let me take your hand and lead you. I'll soon get a light, and please excuse Alfaretta. I don't understand what has happened to her. Don't cling to me like that, child. You hinder me."

"Oh, didn't you see—It?" whispered the unhappy little maid, paying no heed to her mistress's words, but clinging all the closer to her in a fresh access of terror as she heard, or fancied that she did, footsteps on the piazza without.

Susanna's anger cooled in a new curiosity, and she said:

"You needn't bother to lead me, Madam Sturtevant, I know the ins an' outs of this old house pretty well, even if I don't come to it often. You go right on ahead an' strike a match; an' Alf Brown, let go her skirt. Your manners this night ain't none your mistress's teachin', I know that. They must be some left over from the 'Farm.'"

Now Susanna must have been sorely tried to have reminded the girl of her unfortunate start in life, and Madam hastened to cover the remark by saying: "There, that's better!" and rising from the open fireplace where she had relighted the candle from the carefully covered embers. It had been so mild until now that only a fragment of fire had been kept upon the hearth, where, however, it was never permitted to wholly die "from equinox to equinox." Fortunately for the comfort of the household, there was woodland sufficient still belonging to the estate to supply all necessary fuel, and in cold weather this impoverished gentlewoman enjoyed her blazing wood fires—a luxury which even wealthy people cannot always command. Miss Maitland made it Moses' business to see that the Mansion wood-piles were high and broad, long before the autumn came, and the hardship of splitting smaller sticks for kitchen and kindling fell upon the reluctant Montgomery.

[Pg 170]

Susanna watched the candle-lighting with real admiration. Neat as she was herself, she had never yet attained to that exquisite daintiness with which Madam Sturtevant did all things; and she now exclaimed, with keen appreciation:

"My suz! You do beat all! Why, most anybody tryin' to light a taller candle by wood coals would ha' melted the candle—but you hain't dripped a drip. Where's the children? I've come for Katy. She's a terr'ble hand for runnin' away, or, ruther, for not bein' where she should be when wanted. The wind has riz awful. It don't rain none yet, but's goin' to right off. I didn't think to fetch an umberell an' couldn't have used it if I had. Not again' this blow. Alf, you call Katharine, and we'll start back prompt. No, thank ye, Madam, I won't stop to set down, not this time. Eunice, she's alone with Moses so helpless, an' I don't believe half the shutters is tight nor nothin'. Seems if a body had more on their hands than they could 'tend to times like these. Why don't you move, Alf? An' not stand stock starin' still, like an idjut? If the wind sounds that way indoors, what you s'pose it is outside? An' that child hain't got a thing on but that white ducky dress and maybe a hat. She wasn't fixed proper for livin' in the country, though she does become her clothes real likely. She's clear Maitland, Katy is, an' as like Johnny was as two peas in a pod. I can't help lovin' her, try as I will," concluded the widow, so exhausted by her own volubility that she unconsciously sat down to rest herself, even though she had earlier declined her hostess's offer of the spring-rocker by the sewing-table. "A chair 'at looks comf'table enough to take a nap in its

[Pg 171]

own self," as she had once observed concerning it.

Thus enabled to edge in a remark of her own, Madam replied, with some anxiety in her tones:

"The little Katharine has not been here. Not that I know. Has she, Alfaretta?"

"I—I hain't seen her," faltered the maid, shivering as a fresh gust of wind rattled the casement and a flash of lightning made everything visible without. But she had closed her eyes against whatever might be revealed and still delayed her mistress's direction:

"Go and look for Montgomery and see if he knows anything about Katharine;" then, turning to Susanna, she added: "I am so glad that they are going to be such friends. It's a good thing for a growing boy to be associated with a young lady of his own—his own position in life."

[Pg 172]

Susanna sniffed. She was democratic by profession and did not feel called upon to explain that as a matter of fact there was nobody living so appreciative as herself of "good family"—as represented in Marsden by the Sturtevents and Maitlands. She merely ignored the remark, starting from her seat as a terrible blast set the old Mansion trembling on its stout beams and an east side shutter blew from its hinges.

"My suz! We've never had such a storm sence I can remember, an' Katy in nothin' but ducks! Eunice has wrote right away, soon's she made up her mind to keep her, to that stepmother o' hers to take an' buy the child some good strong shoes an' dark warm dresses, fit for a girl to wear in a country village. She's goin' to begin school, soon's town meetin's over an' Moses'll have time to drive her there. Oh, I forget he's broke. Well, she'll go sometime, if the proper clothes come an' things turn out accordin'. But come she must now, an' to oncet, if she's anywhere's hereabout, 'cause I dassent stay a minute more. I shall be blowed off my feet, I 'low, an' I wish, I do wish, I hadn't wore my best bunnit."

"Take it off and leave it here, Susanna. I will lend you a scarf to tie over your hair, and Montgomery shall carry it home to you in the morning. I will go myself and see if the children are on the place. Though I doubt it, if Alfaretta hasn't seen them, or if they haven't come in here to be with us during the storm. Maybe it will soon pass. Wouldn't you better wait and see?"

[Pg 173]

"Not a minute longer 'an to look," answered the widow, really more alarmed for the comfort of her home folks than for herself. Laying her bonnet carefully upon the side table, she followed Madam into the kitchen, yet would not permit that lady to explore the barn as she set out to do.

"Come along with me, Alf, but get a lantern. I hear the barn door swingin' an' old Whitey mooin' as if even she was scared. You or Monty must ha' been careless about shuttin' up to-night, which uther one of you done it, or didn't do it."

A lantern was procured and lighted, but there Alfaretta's assistance ended. Nothing would have induced her to visit that barn again that night, no matter how well protected by such a valiant woman as the Widow Sprigg. As the latter disappeared toward the outbuildings, carefully shielding the lantern with her shawl, Alfaretta's conscience drove her to say:

"It ain't no use. She won't find him. He—he ain't there."

"Isn't there? Then why, child, did you do such a rude thing as to let her go on a useless errand? I really don't understand what has come over you to-night. You are trying my patience severely."

[Pg 174]

"Yes'm," admitted the bond-maid, meekly.

Madam laid her hand upon the girl's shoulder and turned her face toward the light of the candle which she was herself holding behind the uncurtained kitchen window, the better to guide Susanna on her way.

"Tell me, child, what has frightened you so? Do you know where my dear grandson is? It terrifies me to think he may be somewhere out-of-doors, unprotected in this tempest. Did he go fishing? Nutting? To play ball? Do you know where he is?"

"Yes'm," again answered the little maid, but to which of these several inquiries was not disclosed. At that moment a blinding flash of lightning illumined the whole space between house and barn, showing Susanna wildly flinging her arms aloft, her lantern flying in one direction, herself in another, while distinctly silhouetted against the glare was another figure, so strange and uncouth that even Madam retreated a pace in sudden alarm.

They could hear Susanna still screaming as she fled, but a second flash showed the man who had alarmed her standing motionless on the spot where they had discovered him.

Whoever or whatever he might be, it wasn't a pleasant situation for these two, so isolated from their neighbors, and without even Montgomery's presence. Mere lad as he was, he was still something masculine, and at least his grandmother believed him to be a very hero for courage. But he was not there to "protect" them from the possible annoyance of this unknown creature, and now, gently leading the frightened maid, Madam went back to her untasted supper and sat down in her place. She also motioned the girl to take a chair close beside her own, and when she had done this, again asked:

[Pg 175]

"What frightened you so, just as Widow Sprigg arrived? Did you see this man—outside—then?"

"I—I didn't see a man. I saw a face! I'd finished milkin' Whitey and a'ready 'twas gettin' dark

awful fast an' early. I felt the wind blowin' and I knew the back shutters was loose. So I scuttled 'crost to pull 'em to, lest they got blowed clean away, an' there—there—right in the square of window by the old box-stalls was—was—the face! I got one look, 'cause first off I couldn't somehow move hand or foot, an' I saw how white it was, how its eyes blazed, how wild and stand-uppish its hair was, an' it smiled—Oh, what a dreadful smile! An' then I knew 'twas a ghost! It's just the night for 'em, such as I used to hear the old folks talk about out to the 'Farm,' An' which of us do you suppose, oh, which has got to die? 'Cause it's a 'call,' a 'warnin',' to somebody."

[Pg 176]

The little maid's terror was so real and her mental suffering so intense that the Madam pitied her profoundly, though she smiled as she answered:

"I wish it may prove nothing more troublesome than a 'ghost,' a creature of one's imagination. Ah, my child! When you reach my age you will know that the only 'ghosts' who can really trouble us are our unhappy memories. I suspect that it is one of those 'tramps,' for which Susanna is always looking, but who have thus far avoided peaceful Marsden. Unlucky woman! whose first meeting with her expected 'tramp' should be on such a night and alone. Wind or no wind, she'll make a short journey of the long road home."

Already, safe once more in the sheltered dining-room which was on the side of the house least exposed to the storm and that did not face the outbuildings, the housemistress's confidence returned. If only Montgomery were with her, so, that she knew him also safe, she would have been content. As it was, even, she began to think kindly and pityingly of whatever poor wretch had sought shelter at her door. If he didn't smoke, and so endanger the buildings, she wished he would seek cover with old Whitey till the storm was past.

[Pg 177]

Meanwhile, one crouching in the hay-strewn bay, hugging a squirming dog for company, and one lying upon a narrow stretcher beneath the eaves,—the missing Katharine and Montgomery listened to the roar of the tempest and believed that the very day of doom had arrived. Neither had ever heard anything like that wind. Indeed, none in Marsden ever had, and the morning was to reveal many ruined buildings and uprooted trees. But thus far the darkness hid all this, and Widow Sprigg raced homeward unharmed save by the rain, which now began to fall in torrents.

Miss Maitland was watching her arrival in great anxiety. She had early secured every door and shutter, save at this one window which commanded the path from the gate. Here she had placed a brightly burning lamp to act as beacon to the wanderers, and she had also set the fire to blazing brightly. Before the fire hung warm clothing for the pair, and, having done all that she could think of for their comfort, she had passed to and fro between the sitting-room and Moses' chamber. He was almost as uneasy as the storm itself; alternately berating himself for a "fool," and speculating upon the deacon's management of affairs at the barn.

"I'll bet—I'll bet a continental he never cut the fodder for the cattle but just give it to 'em hull! He was no 'count of a farmer, the deacon wasn't. Good man, yes. I ain't sayin' he ain't that; but did it ever strike you, Eunice, that most good folks is pesky stupid? Or 'clever' ones, uther? I call it plumb equal to tellin' you you're a reg'lar tomnoddy to say a fellar's uther 'clever' or 'good.' I 'low little stutterin' Monty Sturtevant could ha' done the chores well enough till I get 'round again, an' I could ha' bossed *him*." Then, after a moment: "But I can't boss the deacon."

[Pg 178]

"No, you poor old grumbler! I reckon he isn't that kind. And your judgment of your neighbors is a bit extreme. Never mind. It's such a good sign to hear you scold that I'm encouraged to think you'll soon be well again. Now I'll go down and be ready to open the door for Susanna and Katharine. It's terrible to have them exposed to this storm."

But there was nobody visible, and at length Miss Eunice felt assured that she should not see them till the tempest lulled. So she returned once more to the kitchen-chamber, to comfort its occupant and herself as well. She had just remarked, for the third time:

"No! I'm sure Elinor would never let them set out in such weather as this. She has kept them to supper, and I do hope Susanna will have forethought enough to decline the ham and bread she carried for Monty, and confine herself to whatever the family was to have had by itself. Susanna is very hearty, I'm glad to say—"

"Eats so much it makes her thin to carry it around!" growled Moses, interrupting. "As for Montgomery, that little shaver's never had—"

[Pg 179]

What he would have added is not known.

Out upon the kitchen stairs sounded the rush of sodden feet, which seemed to stumble from sheer weariness even in their maddened haste; and the next instant there burst into the room what looked like a wretched caricature of poor Susanna. Bonnetless and spectacle-less, her gray hair streaming in snake-like strands, her garments dripping pools, her fine black Sunday shawl trailing behind her like a splash of flowing ink, she dropped upon the floor gasping and sobbing, and, apparently, at her wits' end.

A second's hesitation at touching so draggled and dripping a creature held Eunice aloof; and then she was down beside her friend, wiping the rain-wet face and begging to be told what had befallen.

"Surely, something worse than a storm has brought you to this pass, my poor dear. You look frightened—you tremble—You—Oh, Susanna! Where is Katharine? Has harm happened her?"

"Her? 'Tain't her! It's me. It's come at last, an' I always—knew—it would. Oh, say! Am I alive or—
or—dead?"

Then as the absurdity of her own question flashed upon her, she began to laugh hysterically, and soon to sob with equal fervor. She was wholly overdone and unnerved, and, realizing that nothing could be learned till she was calmer, her mistress put no further inquiries, but led her away down the stairs, still dripping moisture,—a fact that no stress of emotion could hide from the critical sight of two such housekeepers.

[Pg 180]

"Them stairs! An' I washin' 'em all up clean just afore sundown! Lucky I hadn't put down the carpet yet, though I'd laid out—Oh, my suz!"

This was the first coherent sentence, if such it can be called, which escaped the terrified woman, while she was being undressed and freshly clothed in the warm things Eunice had provided.

"Yes, dear heart. But never mind the stairs. Did you find Katharine?"

"Nuther hide nor hair of her. Likely she's gone visitin' some the village little girls. She's that friendly she's been into most every house a'ready. She's safe enough. She won't never come to harm, Katy won't. But, Eunice, he's come! I've seen him!"

"Who's come? What 'him,' dear?" asked the other, gently, and thinking that exposure and fright had made this usually clear-headed Susanna a little flighty. "Here, take a cup of tea. I made it fresh but a few minutes ago. It will refresh you and quiet you wonderfully."

Now, as a rule, the Widow Sprigg needed no urging to drink her favorite beverage, which, like many another countrywoman,—more's the pity!—she kept steeping on the stove all day long. But now, for an instant, she looked doubtfully upon the cup; then, as a sudden whim seized her, caught it up eagerly and again ascended the stairs to Moses' bedroom. He lay motionless, his leg kept taut by a ball and chain and his poor body encased in plaster, but he could use his arms and eyes, the one thrown restlessly here and there and the other glittering with impatient curiosity.

[Pg 181]

"Well, there, Moses Jones! How many times have you jeered an' gibed at me for believin' in 'tramps'? Wasn't 'none,' was there? Well, there *is*. I've seen him. *He—he chased me!* All the way from the Mansion till I got clean to the post-office—an' then—then—he—he cut for the woods! Oh, my suz! Be I dreamin' or awake?"

The recalling of her frightful experience again so unnerved her that she sat down trembling on the edge of Moses' cot, and would have spilled her tea had not Eunice caught the cup in time to prevent.

"You're crazy!" retorted Mr. Jones, unconvinced. "And there ain't no call, as I can see, for you to set down on my broke leg. That awful ball the doctor tied to it'll keep it straight enough, I 'low."

Susanna sprang up as if she had been tossed to her feet, her face quickly becoming normal and compassionate again.

[Pg 182]

"Oh, I didn't mean to do that! I hope I hain't hurt it none," she apologized, frankly distressed.

"Well, seein' 'at you didn't touch it, I 'low there ain't no great harm done. I was only providin' against futur' trouble. Now go on with your 'trampy' talk."

By this time Susanna was able to give an account of the man she had seen on Madam Sturtevant's premises, and who, when she ran, had soon followed in pursuit. According to her highly embellished version, his attire had been collected from somebody's rag-bag, his hair and beard had never known shears or razor, his eyes were as big as saucers and gleamed with an unholy light, and his color was like chalk. But fierce! There was no word could describe the ferocity of the terrible creature's pallid countenance! and, as for speed—Well, Susanna herself had made the record of her life, yet he, with several minutes' disadvantage, had actually overtaken her and grabbed at her shawl. Witness! said shawl dragging behind her when she entered.

"Hm-m! What puzzles me is that any tramp—any tramp in his senses—should take after an old woman like you, Susanna. An' how in reason did you get a chance to investigate the cut of his features an' the state of his wardrobe in the dark, as it is?" inquired Moses, humorously.

[Pg 183]

But there was no humor in Susanna's grim countenance, as she contemptuously replied:

"How but by the lightnin'? Playin' all around everything every minute, makin' more'n daylight to see by. An', though I was scared nigh to death, for the soul of me, I couldn't help lookin' 'round every now an' again to see what he was like. I'd never had a chance to see a tramp afore, an' I never expect to again, so I had to improve my opportunity, hadn't I? Scared or no scared."

This view of the situation made both her hearers laugh; but in Moses' mind was slowly growing a desperate regret, which finally expressed itself in the exclamation:

"An' to think I hadn't even been elected constable, an' hadn't no chance to arrest the first tramp an' vagrant ever set foot in this village of Marsden!"

Back at the Mansion there was no further disturbance. Madam Sturtevant comforted herself with the supposition that her grandson was at the home of some boyish chum or other; and she even ate a considerable portion of the now cold porridge, steadfastly refusing Alf's entreaty to take

some of the good things which Susanna had brought for him.

"You may eat your supper in here to-night, Alfaretta, at the little table; but that basket was for Montgomery, and we will leave it to him to open. We shall get our share of its contents, never fear." [Pg 184]

With more faith in the lad's generosity, where appetite was concerned, than Alfaretta had, the grandmother set the basket aside in the closet, and took up her knitting of stockings for her boy's winter wear.

And then, as if he had felt himself under discussion, or more likely—as Alfie surmised—had smelled the odor of good things even through many partitions, the door softly opened, and there appeared a tumbled head, a frightened face, and a pair of beseeching eyes. Whatever reproof was in store for him, he meant those eyes should do their part toward modifying it.

And for a time all went well. Madam was so full of the incident of the tramp and the horror of the storm that she forgot to ask him where he had so long delayed, and how it chanced that he was so perfectly dry. However, this all came out of itself. While she was describing the gust which had blown the shutter free, he burst forth:

"I-I-I heard that! Yes, siree! An' I thought the whole r-r-r-roof was goin'. An' then I w-w-went to sleep a s-s-s-sp-ell. When I woke up, 'twas so p-p-pit-chy dark I dassent stay no l-l-longer."

With which he coolly sliced himself a portion of the ham which his grandmother had promptly produced. She watched him in silence for a moment, then, as a sudden thought occurred to her, demanded: [Pg 185]

"Montgomery, have you been in the secret chamber again? Was Katharine with you?"

With his mouth full, he stammered: "Y-y-yes, I've been. You never said not. But K-K-Katharine she w-w-wasn't with me."

"Montgomery, where is she? It was for her Susanna came. Eunice does not know, nobody has seen her, can you tell where she is? You were at The Maples all day—you played with her—*where is she?*"

Even in her sternest moods, "Gram'ma" had never been like this. And all at once a horrible chill ran down poor Monty's back. Memory returned; all his treachery; his unchivalrous desertion of a helpless girl in a dangerous place; and, to his honor be it said, did for a moment turn him deadly sick. But his natural temperament soon rallied. Of course she would have found a way to get down and out. Yet,—and again he felt faint,—what if she had not? What if she had had to pass the hours of this dreadful storm on the top of a hay-mow under a barn roof, where, even on mild days, a strong breeze blew through.

Madam leaned forward, austere, intent. "My son, tell me everything."

Under the spell of those piercing eyes, he did tell. Indeed, he was glad to tell. He felt she would find a word of comfort for his remorseful conscience. Alas! the word she did find was simply this: [Pg 186]

"Montgomery, put on your jacket and go to Aunt Eunice's at once."

"*Gr-gr-gram'ma!* In this awful s-s-storm? An' that t-t-tramp?"

There was no relenting. The gentlewoman's glance was now not only stern but scornful, as she returned:

"Are you a Sturtevant, and ask me for delay?"

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 187]

BUT—STURTEVANT TO THE RESCUE

All the conflicting emotions which whirled through Montgomery's mind pictured themselves in his face as he confronted the stern old gentlewoman opposite. The silence in the room was unbroken save by the roar of the tempest, and it seemed an age before she asked, coldly:

"Are you afraid?"

But there was no hesitation as he hastily stammered:

"Y-y-yes, gr-gram'ma, I am afraid. So 'fraid I—I—can't hardly think nor feel nothin'. B-b-but—I'm—*going!*"

His ruddy cheeks were now colorless save where the freckles spotted them, and his great eyes seemed to have grown in size; but though there was piteous terror in their blue depths there was no flinching from the duty. It took him a long time to button his jacket and adjust his cap. He even inspected his shoe-laces with a hitherto unknown care, and thoughtfully placed a stick of wood upon the dying embers. He wished—oh, how devoutly he wished—that he had been born just a common boy, like Bob Turner, or any other village lad, and not a Sturtevant! These hateful [Pg 188]

traditions about family and gentlemen—Cracky! How that wind did blow! That tramp—Well, he dared not think about the tramp, and there was nothing more he could find to delay the awful moment of departure. With a last imploring glance toward Madam, to see if there was no relenting, or if she would not suggest some easier way, "'cause she knows all 'b-bout honor an' such p-pl-plag—uey things,"—yet finding none, he dragged himself to the side door, fumbled a moment with the latch, and went out.

Had he known it, Madam Sturtevant was suffering more than he. She would far rather have faced the elements and the darkness on that mile-long walk, unused to exposure though she was, than have sent this last darling of her heart out alone and unprotected. Indeed, she sat so still, and looked so anxious for a time after he had gone, that Alfaretta ventured to touch her hand, and to comfort, saying:

"Don't you worry, dear Madam. Nothin' 'll happen to Monty. Mr. Jones, he's well acquainted with him, an' he says 'at Monty's got as many lives as a cat. He's fell down-stairs, an' out of a cherry-tree, an' choked on fish-bones, an' had green-apple colic, an' been kicked by Squire Pettijohn's bull, an' tumbled into Foxes' Gully,—and that ain't but six things that might ha' killed him an' didn't. Besides, Monty's a good runner. Why, Madam, he's the fastest runner goes to school! True. He's more'n likely half-way there whilst we're just a-talkin'. Shall I fetch your specs an' the *Chronicle* newspaper? Readin' might pass the time till he gets back, an' I guess—I guess I won't be too scared to wash the dishes in the kitchen, if—if you'll let me leave the door open between."

[Pg 189]

Alfaretta had enumerated the various disasters which had befallen Montgomery upon finger after finger, and with such perfect gravity that the anxious grandmother was amused, in spite of her fear, and felt herself greatly cheered. With a kindly smile, she answered:

"Yes, Alfy, please do bring it; and, of course, you need not close the door. We are sadly late with the work to-night, but you may sit up till my son comes back. You are a dear, good child, Alfaretta, doing your duty faithfully in that state of life to which you were born, and you are a comfort to me."

The happy girl fairly flew to bring the "specs" and the last number of the religious weekly which Eunice regularly sent to her old friend. Conscience was rather doubtful about that ever faithful performance of duty; but why worry? Praise was sweet, doubly sweet from one so fine a pattern of all the virtues as her mistress, and Alfaretta had found comfort for her own self in comforting another. Besides, now she was either getting used to it, or the storm was lulling, for the blinds did not rattle as they had, and that mournful souging of the wind in the tall chimneys had nearly ceased.

[Pg 190]

The bond-maid had rarely "done" her dishes so swiftly or so well, and, having set them in their places, she put out the kitchen candle, fetched her knitting, and sat down on her own stool beside the fireplace. For a wonder she was not sleepy. Too much had occurred that day to fill her imagination, and now that the "face" which had terrified her was safely out of sight, she began to recall it with a sort of fascination. If it were a ghost, it must have been that of somebody she had once known, for it was oddly familiar. The heavy features had a ghastly resemblance to—Who could it be? Uncle Moses? Mr. Turner? The stage-driver? No, none of these; nor of any old pensioner at the "Farm." Then, suddenly, she thought of Squire Pettijohn, terrible man, who had used to visit that "Farm," inspect its workings, suggest further extreme economies, where, it seemed to the beneficiaries, that economy had already reached its limit, ask personal questions, such as even a pauper may resent, and make himself generally obnoxious. Alfaretta had frankly hated him, and had never been more thankful than when she was assigned to Madam Sturtevant rather than to Mrs. Pettijohn—both ladies having entered application for a "bound-out" servant at the very same time. Already ashamed of misfortunes which were not at all her own fault, she had resented his pinching of her ears, his facetious references to her worthless parents, his chuckings under the chin, and the other personal familiarities by which some elderly people fancy they are pleasing younger ones.

[Pg 191]

"Madam! May I speak?"

"Certainly, Alfaretta. I haven't been able to keep my thoughts on my paper. I shall be glad to hear anything you have to say."

"Well, then! I'd hate to think it of any—any *good* ghost, but there was somethin' 'bout that *face* 'at made me remember somebody I'd seen, an' the somebody was—Squire Pettijohn!"

"Child, how absurd!"

"Yes'm, I s'pose it is. But there was them same big eyebrows standin' out fur from this white *face* as his'n does from his red one. There was the same sort of bitter look in the eyes, only these ones was afire. Ain't that queer?"

"Exceedingly queer. So queer that you must banish the notion at once from your mind. I am convinced that it was some poor, homeless wanderer estrayed into this quiet, and, I fear, inhospitable village, where there is no provision for such as he. I'm sure I wish he were safely housed in one of our own outbuildings rather than roaming the fields on such a night. Even an old blanket thrown into one of the box-stalls would have been comparative comfort."

[Pg 192]

"Y—es'm," assented Alfaretta, with small enthusiasm. But what she did like to hear was Madam's talk of the old times when the now empty stable was full of spirited horses, when guests filled the

silent rooms, when servants were many and the larder abundant, and life and laughter ruled where now were only memories. It always sounded like make-believe; and, humble poor-house child though she was, Alfie delighted in make-believe.

A hint was commonly sufficient to set the house-mistress reminiscent, and once started upon such retrospections she was as contented to continue as her little maid to listen; and now there followed for the pair an hour of real enjoyment.

Once really past the threshold Montgomery's reluctance vanished. If he had anything disagreeable to do he liked to get it over with at once. The walk to The Maples in that storm was certainly disagreeable, as would, doubtless, be his reception there. He wouldn't think about that part of the affair till it faced him, and he wouldn't let any grass grow under his feet for loitering upon his road. Then a thought of Katharine, alone and in terror, roused all his real manliness, so that he cared no further for anything save to set her free. He would now promptly have knocked any other boy down for calling him the hard names he called himself all the way from the Mansion to Aunt Eunice's, and he disdained to think of tramps, thunder-claps, or broken tree-limbs, even though he stumbled over some of these along the path. Despite the obstructing wind, he had never run so swiftly, and the resounding whack he gave the Maitland knocker startled all within the house.

[Pg 193]

Poor Aunt Eunice required but little now to set her nerves a-quiver, and was anxiously pacing the sitting-room floor, wondering how and where to begin that search for little Katharine, which must be deferred no longer. But after the first shock of the summons she ran to answer it, feeling sure that here was news at last; and there almost fell into the hall a drenched, breathless lad, who could only stammer, feebly:

"H-h-hay—mow!"

Then he dropped upon the floor to catch his breath.

Miss Maitland stared at him, wondering if here was another storm-crazed victim. Then she remembered that "H-h-h-hay—mow!" was the one and only word the boy had uttered during that scene of the brass bound box. Now again just "H-h-hay-mow!" She passed her hand wearily across her eyes trying to understand.

[Pg 194]

Then said the last of the Sturtevents, recovering, and stammering but slightly in his earnestness:

"F-fetch a lantern, quick! We went up h-h-hay-mow huntin' eggs—an' mine are in the s-s-s-secret ch-amber—an' Squire c-come, an' I skipped an'—forgot!"

The boy was himself so familiar with the premises that he knew exactly where to find the lantern, and, having confessed his fault, he ran to light it. He was also first at the barn, though Miss Maitland and Susanna both followed promptly and unmindful of the rain.

But alas for Deacon Meakin's overcare! He had not only locked the doors, but he had hidden the keys.

Susanna sped back to the house, seeking on the shelf where he had placed the lantern for them, but failing to find them, while at Eunice's direction Montgomery felt everywhere under the flat stone which served as door-step to the main entrance. In the crannies of window casings, at the tops and bottoms of all the doors, in the cattle-shed and poultry-house, in any sort of place where a Marsdenite would naturally deposit keys, they searched without avail.

Then Miss Maitland bethought herself that if Katharine were still within the barn and heard all this attempt at forcing an entrance she would be further frightened, and said:

[Pg 195]

"We must break the glass in that window behind the stalls, and you, Montgomery, must climb through. As soon as you are within, call to the poor child and tell her that we are outside and have come to get her. Then you hand us out some heavy tools,—an axe, if you can find one, would be best,—and we'll break down the door."

With that the lady herself took a stone from the barn-yard wall and crashed the glass, but Susanna interposed:

"You go right back into the house, Eunice Maitland, and not stay out in this damp to get your death of cold. And no need to break good doors. Katy ain't no bigger'n Monty, nor so big, an' a hole he can get into she can come out of. Trust her!"

Miss Maitland would not go indoors, but she did fold the shawl she had caught up more closely about her and retreated to the shelter of the cowshed, while Susanna stood listening beneath the window through which Monty had swiftly disappeared. Fortunately, the storm had greatly abated and there was less external noise to drown the sounds within, where Montgomery was now shouting at the top of his voice:

"K-K-Kath-arine! Katy! K-Kitty-kee-hotee!"

"Yelp! Snip! Snap! Gr-r-rrr!" came in response, and Katharine waked from the dreamless sleep into which exhaustion of grief and terror had thrown her.

[Pg 196]

At first she could not comprehend what it all meant. She could only make an effort to restrain the angry pug now escaping from her arms. Then she saw Montgomery's face at the opening above the bay, brilliantly illuminated by the lantern held close to his head as he peered inwards

preparatory to a leap. With a scream half of relief, half of dread lest she should again be deserted, she ran toward the window and held her arms up.

The light disappeared, but before she had time for a fresh fear, she felt her hands clasped by Montgomery's sturdy ones, and she was bidden:

"Give a s-s-sp-spring—an' I'll haul you!"

She tried once, twice, and again, but there was no "spring" left in the usually active limbs, and she sank back to the bay, sobbing:

"Oh, I can't! I can't! I've tried and tried and tried! But I shall never get out. Never, never, never." And it was proof of the suffering she had undergone that there was no indignation left against the boy who had caused it, but only a hopeless acceptance of a terrible position.

This was too much for Monty. He would far rather have had her rail at him than sob so heart-brokenly. He began to sob himself in sympathy, and called back:

[Pg 197]

"D-d-don't! Qu-qu-quit it! See. Look up. I'll h-h-hang the lantern on the sill. I d-d-dassent take it down there, might s-s-set fire to the hay. I'm all r-r-r-right—I mean you're all r-r-r-right. Get out the way. I'm c-c-c-comin'!"

In an instant he had leaped down beside her and put his arm around her quivering shoulders. In all his life he had never been so sorry for anybody or anything as now for her and for his own neglectful selfishness, which had brought her to such a pass. Yet, heedless Monty had had many causes for regret during his previous career!

"I thought I should die! Oh, it was so awful! I thought I should certainly die here alone in this place. The wind would almost tear the roof off, and Punchy howled—he thought he was dying, too, maybe. But it was he kept me from it—quite. I never loved him so in all my life! Can—is there a way—you've got in, too, but is there a way out? I was hungry, I thought I would starve. Then I forgot that—listening. And the lightning—I was sure it had struck again and again. I waited to see the hay blaze up. Lightning always does strike barns, doesn't it?"

With a philosophy beyond his years Montgomery changed the subject.

"I shall have to boost you, i-i-if you c-c-can't climb without. P-p-put your feet right th-th-there—I'm b-bo-boo-boostin' my best! Catch hold the s-sill! Cracky! Up you g-g-go!"

[Pg 198]

Up she went, indeed, fear forgotten, every nerve strained, eager already to attain and excel in this new feat of climbing. Folks who lived in the country had to climb—or perish—it seemed. And once upon the sill she rolled over it to the broad floor of the barn and felt herself at last in safety.

But there still remained that other climb, to reach the broken window and through it freedom and friends outside. However, this was a trifle. Montgomery brought a short ladder, which he placed beneath the window that he had had the forethought to unbolt from the outside, and when the sash rolled back in its groove Katharine was already on the ledge, Susanna's strong arms clasping her and Aunt Eunice standing near.

Such an hour as followed! Such indigestibly delightful foods as Susanna brought from her storeroom—harbingers of holiday feasts to come—and of which the children were permitted to partake without any harm or restriction.

"Let the poor little creatur's get their stummicks full for once, sence nary one hain't had a mouthful of victuals, scurce that, to-day," cried Susanna, herself feasting her eyes upon the now joyous faces of the youngsters.

Then what a tap-tap-tapping sounded on the floor of the kitchen chamber! Aunt Eunice interpreting the same to mean:

[Pg 199]

"Poor Moses is feeling left out of all our rejoicing and feels aggrieved. He wants us all to come up and tell him the whole story, since he cannot himself come to us. But alas for Deacon Meakin! I don't envy him his forthcoming interview with my hired man to-morrow morning. It is Moses' right to still direct matters, even if he cannot work. Both men are what Mrs. Meakin calls 'sot,' and I foresee some jarring of wheels, so to speak, before they run smooth. But let us go up at once, and then Monty must be starting home."

The boy sighed. This was all delightful. Badly as he had behaved, he had received no reproof. Instead of that, there was such rejoicing over Katharine's safety that his sins had, apparently, been forgotten. Yet it must end—there still remained the long and desolate road home!

Monty talked as fast as ever a boy could, nor did Katharine's tongue lag far behind, and for a time Moses listened eagerly. Then there came pangs of physical suffering which banished interest in all else, and while he was meditating how now best to rid himself of his guests, the hall clock struck nine.

"Nine o'clock! My suz! I didn't know it was half so late!" cried Susanna, honestly surprised. "Time you was home and abed, Montgomery Sturtevant, keepin' your poor grandmother up all hours like this, just account your pranks. My suz! and such a day. May I never see another like it!"

[Pg 200]

"Amen!" echoed poor Mr. Jones, so devoutly and in a voice of such suffering that they all silently withdrew.

"Only nine o'clock? Does nobody ever sit up till a respectable hour, here in Marsden? Why, at home, our evenings never began till after this time," remarked Katharine, now so wide-awake, and, it must be confessed, having had her nerves freshly excited by the recital of her woes to the sympathizing ear of Uncle Moses.

"Pooh! N-n-nine o'clock's n-n-nothing," assented Monty, who had never been out so late before in all his life.

"Isn't it?" asked Aunt Eunice, smiling. "Well, all the same, though it is rude to dispatch a guest, I'm sure it is full time for you to be with your grandmother, as Susanna justly remarked. She is doubtless anxious about you; and as for you, Katy dear, you are living in quiet Marsden now and not your city home."

The storm was fully over when they opened the great front door, and the moonlight set all the rain-drenched shrubs and trees a-glitter, so that Katharine exclaimed:

"Oh, look! It seems as if the world was just laughing at itself for having been so naughty a little while ago!" [Pg 201]

Aunt Eunice gave the child a little squeeze, thinking how "Johnny" would have had just such a fancy, and Monty, wondering if all girls had queer ideas, bade them good night and started whistling down the path.

"We'll stand here till you get beyond the first big tree, my lad, and we'll follow you in our minds all the way," said Miss Maitland, kindly. Then to Katharine she added, softly: "He's doing that to keep his courage up."

"All the same he whistles beautifully," answered the girl, loyally. "If he could only speak as well as he whistles it would be splendid. Why, up there on the hay-mow to-day, some sort of bird—I think he said it was a meadow-lark, or skylark, or something—anyhow, it sang ex-quis-ite-ly! And he mimicked it so well I almost thought another bird had come through the window into the barn. He's a real nice boy, Monty is, but—but he needs some 'retouching,' as papa darling used to say of his pictures."

"God bless him—and his own 'Kitty Quixote,'" murmured the old guardian, touched to a tender softness by—ah, many things! and promptly marshalling her latest charge to bed.

Lights were out all along the street as Montgomery's passing whistle disturbed the early naps of these quiet folk, who had been so greatly interested and wearied by that day's unusual events. But the clear, birdlike tones were comfort to one harassed wanderer. [Pg 202]

Shivering in his wet rags, he crept out from the shelter of a porch to hearken, as those boyish lips sent forth in flute-like tones the melody of "Home, Sweet Home." Harkening, he followed, fearing he should lose the music which impressed him, all unknowing why; and as the whistler left the last village house behind him and set out to run over the long stretch of lonely road, which lay between that and the Mansion, the follower also ran.

Had Montgomery known this his pace would have been even swifter than it was, and the mere fear he now felt would have become abject terror.

But he did not know; and the unknown tramp soon lagged far behind. He had neither strength nor desire left to overtake the fleeing lad, since the whistling had ceased, and consciousness of his own misery returned upon him. So, presently he left the highway and limped across the fields toward the woods where instinct told him was safe hiding; and Montgomery reached the stately home of his forefathers in good time. Between the man and the boy there seemed no possible connection, yet circumstances were already linking their lives together as with a chain.

CHAPTER XIV.

[Pg 203]

ON A SATURDAY AFTERNOON

When Deacon Meakin found that a barn window had had to be broken because of his forgetfulness to mention where he had put the keys, he insisted upon paying for and inserting the new glass himself. This distressed Miss Maitland and delighted Moses; but the new caretaker carried his point, declaring:

"If I can't do that I'll throw up the job. My own hired men, 'fore I moved in, had to pay for their breakin's, and sence I've turned myself into a hired man, well, it's a poor rule that don't work both ways, as the poet says, an' what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, or visy versy. There'll be no foolin' done on these premises whilst I'm in charge, an' the very first thing I'll tackle is—cleanin' up."

"Why, is that necessary? Beyond the work that comes with every day? Surely, Moses is very neat," protested Eunice, on behalf of her old disabled helper. [Pg 204]

"Hm-m. There's neatness—an' neatness; an' my friend Jones, he's a fisherman first, an' a farmer afterward;" returned the deacon, grimly.

The real truth was that the deacon had an idea of the wonderful casket's being hidden somewhere in that barn. As he reasoned with himself: "A barn's the least likely place for robbers to search for hid treasure, whether it is a gold box or a gold mine. Eunice, she is long-headed. She wouldn't want things in the house that might induce folks' breakin's in, more particular sence Widow Sprigg seen that tramp. She was tellin' me 'bout it when I come on the place this mornin'; an' nobody needn't tell me it was just to get a girl out the bay that that winder was stove in. That's all cock-an'-bull yarn; to throw me an' others off the track. But I'll find out, I'll find out."

Which shows how far one's imagination may lead in the wrong direction; and also explains why the curious, but well-meaning, man put himself to endless trouble, yet also did his own part in silencing the rumors of the previous day. Though, of course, his labors occupied him for several days, since the barn was big and his work so thorough. After emptying and refilling every bin and box, after cleaning every set of harness which had or had not been used for years, brushing the few cobwebs from the rafters, sweeping the floors over and over, he repaired to the hay-mow and industriously forked over the whole mass.

[Pg 205]

While he was engaged in this operation Susanna visited the barn and asked if he had gone crazy. His answer was:

"No, not crazy, but come to common sense. Don't suppose I'd feel very Christian-like, do ye, to loaf around doin' next to nothin' an' lettin' a neighbor's hay heat? Might burn ye all up in your beds."

The widow reëntered the house laughing, but indignant. "Says your hay's in danger o' heatin', Moses! As if you hadn't cured it till it was dry as tinder 'fore you mowed it up. Well, 'twon't do no harm, an' will keep him out of mischief. He's a reg'lar poke-noser, Deacon Meakin is. But he's routed them hens so there won't be no more egg-layin' in high places, breakin' a body's neck to hunt 'em. But, my suz! I wish you could ha' seen that man's face when he handed me over your fishin'-tackle. You'd ha' thought 'twas poison, the way he touched it."

Moses was both angry and amused, but contented himself with remarking:

"Si Meakin never could catch fish even when he was boy goin' to school. He was always a gabblor, an' fish has got sense. They won't bite for noisy folks. Slow an' gentle, bide your time an' keep your mouth shut—that's fishin' for ye. Oh, shall I ever get to go again!"

[Pg 206]

"Sure. But it's time for your chicken broth. I've stewed it down rich an' tasty, an' there's one good thing 'bout broken legs an' ribs: they ain't broken stummicks. I'd ruther you'd have forty broken legs than the dyspepsy, 'cause when I take the pains to cook good victuals, I like to have 'em et. Now, turn your head a mite. Here's a nice new straw to drink your broth through, an' a pile more for you to chew on, like you're always doin'. Seems if a man must always have somethin' in his mouth, an' if it ain't tobacco it's straws. Spriggs he—"

"Don't give me no 'Spriggs,' to-day; I couldn't stand him. You've told more things 'at Spriggs done in his thirty years of life than would ha' kept most men busy till they was a hundered!" cried Moses, petulantly. "And if Kitty Keehoty, or Monty, ary one, comes 'round, do for pity's sake send 'em up. Here I lie, ball-an'-chained to a bed and things—Oh, dear!"

It was Saturday and a busy time for the housekeeper. She had neither leisure nor inclination to argue with a fretful patient, so went away and left him to himself. But she found his desire for Katharine's society an excellent thing. As she had said of Deacon Meakin, "it kep' her out of mischief" to act as nurse to the injured farmer, and he now delighted in her. The stories of her old life in the Southern city were almost like the fairy-tales she retold from printed books; and her little provincialisms of speech amused him as much as his country dialect did her. She had soon dropped into the habit of taking his meal-trays to him and strictly enforced his eating a "right smart" of all the nourishments provided.

[Pg 207]

At noon of this Saturday she was perched upon the edge of his cot, daintily feeding him with bits of food she had cut up, when there was a clatter of feet upon the stairs, and, breathless as usual, Montgomery rushed in, announcing, without even a nod to Moses:

"I-it-it's true! Mis' Turner's seen it in her w-w-wood-shed! Widow Sprigg wasn't m-m-mis-took!"

"Say 'mistaken,' Montgomery Sturtevant, and say it slow," corrected Katharine, severely, yet immediately turning an inquiring look toward Uncle Moses. Thus far her efforts to improve her playmate's speech had been a safe secret between the two. They hoped to keep it such until the lad could speak a "whole piece" without stammering.

But the hired man had not observed her remark, or, if he had, probably considered it but one of her naturally dictatorial sort.

"A reg'lar tramp, Monty?" he asked, eagerly.

[Pg 208]

"R-r-r-regular. Mis' Turner'd put her p-p-pies out to cool on the wood-shed r-r-roof an' they was six seven of 'em, an', sir, w-w-w-when she went t-t-t-to take 'em in one was g-one! Yes, sir! An' she seen somethin' b-b-b-lack scooting cross lots, l-l-li-lic-lick—ety c-c-c-ut!"

"Monty, if I were you, I wouldn't try to say 'lickety-cut,' till—" again reproved the girl-teacher, still forgetful of secrecy. And again Mr. Jones ignored her, asking the boy:

"Where was Bob, son of Mrs. Turner, about that time?"

"F-f-fudge! I don't know. Somewhere's r-r-round, m-maybe. But it wasn't him. 'Twas a b-b-bigger, b-b-be-beard-d-er feller'n him."

"You said 'six seven' pies. If she didn't know how many she made how'd she know she lost any?"

"Well, sir! An' there was old Mr. Witherspoon, d-dr-driv-in' down mountain with a load o' c-c-carrots, he—he seen him cr-cr-cross—in' Perkins's corn-field an' he t-thought 'twas a sc-sc-scarecrow, till it walked. Sc-sc-sc-scarecrows couldn't do that he kn-kn-knew, an'—"

Although Eunice had done her utmost to keep the story of the brass bound box a secret from even her own household, it was inevitable that knowledge of it should come to the ears of the sick man, since it was the chief interest of the many neighbors who called to see him. Yet all he could gain from his callers was the vague suspicion each entertained. He meant now to get at the facts of the case. Montgomery had spread the tale, but had strangely kept silence with him, his old chum. Montgomery should speak now, or Moses would know the reason why; and if he still declined to explain matters he should be punished by being left out of the next fishing-party Uncle Mose would organize—if he ever fished again! He interrupted, saying:

[Pg 209]

"Never mind Witherspoon an' the carrots, Monty. Nor tramps, nuther. Sence I ain't constable, to do it myself, I hope the poor creatur' won't get 'rested. Don't know where'd he be stowed, anyway, in this benighted Marsden, where there ain't neither a jail nor a touch to one. What I want to know is: What did you find in Eunice's woods?"

Monty did some rapid thinking, the question had been a surprise, but he answered, promptly:

"N-n-not-nothing."

"Montgomery Sturtevant! How dare you? An' I will say that's the first lie I ever heard you tell. You're bad enough, oh, you're as bad as you need to be, but—a liar! Whew!"

The lad sprang to his feet, furious. His hands clenched, and it was well that his accuser was a disabled old man, else the "hot blood of the Sturtevants" might have driven their young descendant to do desperate deeds. As it was, he choked, glared, and finally stammered:

[Pg 210]

"I-if you was a boy, an' not old l-li-like you are, I'd make you t-t-take that back, or—k-k-kill you! It's the tr-tr-truth! I don't lie! Do I, K-K-Katharine?"

The girl had never seen anybody so angry. Her own temper was quick enough, but its outbursts short-lived, and she certainly had never had the least desire to "kill" anybody. Montgomery looked as if he meant it, and in distress she threw herself upon him forcibly, unclasped his clenched fingers, and begged:

"Don't say that, Monty! Oh, don't say such dreadful things!" Then faced around toward the cot, declaring: "He didn't 'lie,' Uncle Moses. It's true. He didn't find—"

Oh, she had almost betrayed herself in her eagerness to defend her friend.

"Didn't find what, 'Kitty Keehoty'? An' if you didn't yourself, lad, why, you was along at the time. How else—But I'm sorry I used that hateful word. I don't blame you for your spunk. I'd knock a feller down 'at called me 'liar' to my face, even now, old an' bedrid' as I be. I take it back an' call it square—if you will. But tell the hull business now, to your poor old fishin' teacher, an' let's be done with mysteries. Eunice, she's as mum as an oyster; an' Susanna, she talks a lot of explaining yet don't explain nothin'. What's all about, anyway, that's set Marsden crazy? Why, one man come to see me, was tellin' of searchin'-parties ransackin' our woods, prospectin', or somethin'. D'ye ever hear such impudence? Why, if I was constable, I'd arrest every man-jack of 'em that's dared to put pickaxe or spade in our ground! I'd have the law on 'em, neighbor or no neighbor. Well, they won't find a thing. 'Cept maybe a few chestnuts or such. As for gold—Hm-m! But somethin' was found—what was it, Monty?"

[Pg 211]

The lad's anger was ebbing, but he was still in an unfriendly mood. Besides, he remembered the promise he had made to Aunt Eunice,—broken beforehand,—and resolved that he would keep silence now, even if the harm were already done. So he closed his lips very tightly, and looked steadily out of the window. Katharine followed this good example, and the pair seemed wholly absorbed—in nothing at all.

"Can't you speak? Are you both struck dumb all to oncet? Is that the manners you think's polite?" demanded Mr. Jones, testily.

Then Monty spoke. "Gr-gram-ma sent me to ask how you w-w-were. I'll go an' tell her."

"Won't you stay and play? And, oh, let me tell you. Mr. Deacon Meakin is cleaning up the barn just splendidly, and it will be all ready for—you know what!" cried Katy, excitedly, and forgetful of the keen ears of the man on the cot. She was reminded of them, however, when he again demanded:

[Pg 212]

"What's that? What'll the barn be ready for? I want you young ones to understand there's to be no monkey shines of any sort whilst I'm laid up. An' you're a sassy pair, the two of ye!"

"I don't mean to be saucy, but you make me. And I guess you must be getting well very fast, 'cause widow says that being cross is a good sign—and I'm sure you're perfectly horrid, so there!" cried Kate, pertly, and seizing Monty's hand hurried him down the stairs.

She had no sooner reached the bottom of them than she regretted her impertinence, and would have returned to apologize, had not Aunt Eunice just then appeared in the doorway, wearing her street things, while Deacon Meakin was also bringing the top-buggy around from the carriage-house. Katharine loved driving, of which luxury she had had very little; and the few times she had been out with Miss Maitland since her arrival at The Maples had been her happiest hours. The whole countryside was rich in autumn coloring, and through her artist father the child had learned to "see things." She was continually surprising all around her by finding such a store of beauty in every simple thing. A yellow or scarlet leaf was far more than that to her; it was a picture of varying tints and shades, which she would study with keenest interest. She had pointed out to Aunt Eunice, upon that last drive up-mountain, at least twenty-five tones of green, and had seized the reins suddenly to stop old Dobbin that she might gaze her full upon a decrepit cedar-tree robed and garlanded with scarlet woodbine. Marsden village might seem dull to her after her city life, but nature more than compensated; so that now her fear was not that she must stay, but that her guardian—perforce—would tire of her.

[Pg 213]

"Oh, aunty! May I go?"

"No, Katharine, not to-day. I am going to visit an old friend, who is very ill. I do not know when I shall be back, but be a good girl and do whatever Susanna tells you. Good-by. Good-by, Montgomery. Please give my love to your grandmother, and thank her for sending to inquire after Moses."

Then the lady stepped into the buggy, the deacon chirruped to Dobbin, and they rode away. At the same moment came a shrill whistle from the street, and Monty ran to the gate. Bob Turner and a lot of boys were waiting near, rods over their shoulders and fish-hooks in their pockets, intent upon a Saturday half-holiday at their favorite sport. Besides their tackle they had great sacks of burlap, or canvas, because when they had caught all the fish in the river they expected to gather all the chestnuts in the woods. In any case, they were bound for a good time, and Montgomery did not hesitate in joining them. He delayed just long enough to go into the house and secure Moses' oldest line and rod, catch up a basket for nuts, and was off, leaving a very lonely girl standing on the path and wishing most earnestly that she had been born a boy so she, too, might do things worth while. She had already heard so much about the delightful art of angling that she longed to try it for herself; but with Uncle Moses helpless, and Monty—so mean!—He might have taken her. He might have stayed and talked over their secret scheme, which Deacon Meakin was unconsciously furthering by his ultra tidiness. He might, at least, have promised to bring her some chestnuts. But he had done none of these thoughtful things. He had been just plain—boy! Girls? Were there any she might visit uninvited? Aunt Eunice was very particular about that. She had explained that the Turner girls, Sophronia Walker, and even the Clackett sisters, Mercy and Lucinda, had many household duties to perform. Especially on Saturdays were their services in demand, since at this time of year there was pickling and preserving, soap-making and carpet-weaving; even among the more thrifty households "butchering and packing." Most families deferred the latter operation until much colder weather, but, as Susanna expressed it, "there's some in Marsden township 'at if they knowed they was to be hung 'd want it done the day afore, they're so forehanded." Even the widow herself, Katharine fancied, leaned a little toward this "forehandedness," since she made fruit-cake six months before it was to be eaten; and on that memorable night of the storm had actually produced for each child a piece of the same sort of cake, meltingly luscious and moist in one's mouth, with the statement that it had been baked just seven years before. And when Katharine had exclaimed in amazement, had replied:

[Pg 214]

[Pg 215]

"My suz! That's nothin' to what some keeps it. Mis' Turner, she's got part her weddin' loaf yet, an' she's been married more years 'an I can exactly recollect; while her own mother has some 'at's twenty-five years old. Fact. Hers is gettin' ruther dry, but it's always been kep' in a stone crock in a tin case an' only opened a-Thanksgiving time, when everybody in the hull connection is to dinner, and is give a tiny bit for remembrance' sake."

Thinking over her guardian's information, there seemed to be no house where the young folks would have leisure for company, and the home prospect was rather lonely.

"Oh, for even a little Snowball to play with! Uncle Moses—I was rude to him, but he's so cross I can't go back and be shut up with him this beautiful afternoon. If I go just to say that I'm sorry he'll make me tell him a lot of stories to prove my sorrow. That's one of his ways. The Widow Sprigg is sufficient unto herself and her scrubbing—of a Saturday. I've found that out. Deacon Meakin isn't at the barn and I might go there, but he's spoiled the barn for me. I feel just as if I was in somebody's parlor, some Marsden body's parlor, that's so much in order it makes everybody who goes into it as stiff as itself. I've found that out, too, going calling with Aunt Eunice. I wish—"

[Pg 216]

Susanna suddenly called out to the girl sitting upon the porch step and thus ruefully communing with herself:

"Ka-ty! Katharine!"

"Yes, Widow Sprigg! Here I am—coming. What is it? Something to do?"

"Well, I should say 'twas somethin' to do! Here's that wild-headed Monty took an' scampered off just as I was takin' this batch of punkin pies out the oven. Eunice wants me to send a couple of 'em to Madam, an' this currant-jell-roll. I laid out to add a loaf of brown bread an' a pat of butter,

'cause, say what they will, an' let Madam Sturtevant be as good butter maker as they claim, I 'low old Whitey's milk can't hold to richness alongside our young Alderneys; an' besides, can't be much milk left for butter after Monty an' Alfy's drunk their fill. 'Tain't much besides milk they do get, nuther, 'cept what we send 'em. Well, it's most like two families bein' one the way Eunice she feels. I wonder, could you be trusted to carry the things to the Mansion?"

[Pg 217]

"Could I not?" cried Katharine, gaily, skipping about the kitchen in her fanciful way at this prospect of a change. "And I'd go that cross-fields road Monty showed me. Over the meadows amongst the goldenrod, past the stone walls where the woodbine and clematis run over each other trying to make the old gray rocks beautiful. There's a corn-field down beside the river so like a picture papa painted that I can almost see his dear hand holding the brush. And the forest is like a great palette set full of reds and blues and greens and yellows, out of God's own color-box. Oh, it's such a glorious old world, Susanna, and I'm so glad, so glad to be alive!"

The widow put her arms akimbo and looked at Katharine over her spectacles, as she might have studied some new and rather formidable insect. Then she remarked:

"My suz! you didn't look none too peart when I first called ye. If I'd had an opinion to give I should ha' give it that you was down in the mouth. Well, never mind. You're a funny child, but I guess you'll make some kind of woman if you live long enough. Hand me down that basket from the second pantry shelf, whilst I wrop that jell-roll in a napkin. Take notice of the basket. Eunice, she had it made to the basket-maker's up-mountain. She's dreadful good to the basket-makers, Eunice is."

[Pg 218]

"Widow Sprigg, I think she's 'dreadful good' to everybody—to everybody lives. Yet she looks so sort of stern and dignified sometimes I feel afraid of her. But it is a curious basket, truly. What—"

"Watch an' see, an' don't ask so many questions. Girls' eyes ought to save their tongues."

The basket was beautifully woven of finest willow, and was like a tiny cupboard in the matter of shelves, each shelf fitted with a little rim to keep whatever might be placed upon it from slipping off. There were six of these shelves, all removable at will, and Susanna now took out all but two. Upon these she placed the pies, and in the larger spaces left bestowed a monster loaf of brown bread, the jell-roll and the butter. As there was still a small part unfilled she added a tumbler of strained honey, covered the whole with a napkin, hooked down the lid, and said:

"Now get your hat and jacket. See 't your shoes is tied; them silk strings is too fancy for use. Got a handkerchief? All your buttons fastened? Feel just comf'table everyways?"

"Yes, you dear old caretaker! I'm what Uncle Moses calls as 'right as a trivet,' whatever that may be."

Katharine sped away for her jacket, and in passing a hall shelf noticed lying upon it a pile of Uncle Moses' "tackle," including a wonderful jointed rod that he had always thought too fine for use, but one which her own father had sent as a gift years before she was born. It had been brought forth and exhibited to her, and had since reposed among less valuable belongings in this conspicuous place. Her father was much in her mind that day, and the rod seemed to bring him even nearer. A whim seized her. Since there was nobody to teach her about fishing she would even teach herself. What her father had done as a little boy must be right for her, his child. So, when she left the house a few minutes later, the rod was in her hand, line and fish-hooks in her pocket. Nor had she thought it necessary to mention this fact to Susanna when she appeared before the housekeeper to receive her basket.

[Pg 219]

"Take dreadful care of it, Katy. I know it's heavy, but 'twon't be only one way. It'll be empty comin' back, and I do hope the victuals will eat well!"

They were destined to "eat" uncommonly "well;" but, alas! not by the mouths for which they were intended.

CHAPTER XV.

[Pg 220]

BY THE OLD STONE BRIDGE

One came down into the long, main street of Marsden village from a hill at either end, and through an avenue of trees whose branches met overhead. There were a few side streets, with scattering houses, and the "Crossroads" nearly midway of the chief thoroughfare, with its four corners occupied by the church, the schoolhouse, the post-office, and the tavern. On the north side the ground rose gently for a distance, then climbed abruptly to the "mountain," in reality but a high, wooded hill. On the south there were rich meadows, wide pastures, and the winding noisy river, that darted here and there through the valley as if having no mind of its own which way it should run. On this south side was also the great forest called "Maitland's woods," that already Katharine had learned to love almost as warmly as did Aunt Eunice. To the latter the forest was as something sacred, a spot where nature should have her will and not despoiling man. When firewood must be cut from it, for coal was an unknown fuel in Marsden, she went herself to select such trees as must be sacrificed—always the unsightly ones which storms had broken, not

[Pg 221]

trusting even Moses to cut one till she had condemned it.

As that unfortunate man had observed:

"If Eunice she had let me trim out the under-bresh now an' then I shouldn't ha' broke my leg a-stumblin' over old tree-roots. But, no! Things must be kep' just as they was in the old Colonel's time, no matter what! She 'pears to think that timber's got as much feelin' as folks, an' I 'low there ain't no other oaks an' pines an' maples to compare with 'em left this section of the State. It makes me plumb wild to lie here helpless, an' think o' them villagers a-trompin' her brakes an' scarin' them gray squir'ls that there's so few of, anyway, let alone the birds an' chipmunks! Oh, hum!"

Surely, there was no lovelier spot in the world, so Katharine felt, finding the basket rather heavy, and running across fields the sooner to be rid of it. But this by-path led to the river and a quaint old-time bridge which spanned it; and here the girl meant to rest and give herself a lesson in angling. Setting her basket down in the shade of some alder-bushes, she swung her feet over the stone ledge of the bridge and prepared to arrange her tackle. To fit the jointed rod into a desirable length was simple enough, and to attach the line with its hook as easy; but there trouble began.

[Pg 222]

"I never thought a thing about bait, and where shall I get it? I suppose the ground is just as full of worms here as it is in the garden where the boys dig them. But—ugh! Shall I dare to touch one if I find it?" she asked herself. Then as promptly exclaimed: "I must! I just must! I'll catch the nicest fish out the water and take it home to Uncle Moses for his supper. Susanna will cook it, I'm sure—or, maybe, let me do it myself. Then I'll take it to that poor sick man on one Aunt Eunice's prettiest dishes, and he'll forgive me for saying such impudent things to him. It will make it easier to apologize if I have a gift in my hand," said this wise little maid. Unfortunately, she said it aloud, having the bad habit of talking to herself whenever there was nobody else to talk to.

Then, picking up a sharp stick, she resolutely set to work to unearth an angleworm. But this was difficult. The mold was hard and sunbaked, and the stick of little use. Its point broke repeatedly; yet the longer she labored the more determined she became, and finally she did succeed in driving a red earthworm from its haunts. No sooner had it come to the surface than she sprang away in disgust, exclaiming:

"Oh, you nasty, dirty, squirmy thing! I wouldn't touch you for anything! Indeed, I'll never learn to fish if I have to handle such beasts as you. Monty takes them in his fingers, and even cuts them in pieces if he doesn't have enough without. The horrid boy! He says it doesn't hurt them, that they're so used to it, an' till this minute I never thought how little sense there was in that. I—I guess I'll put a leaf on the hook and throw that in. I should think a fish would rather eat a nice clean leaf than a worm."

[Pg 223]

Selecting a bit of the red sorrel growing near, she baited her hook and cast her line. She had learned how to do that from seeing Uncle Moses test his various rods at home, and set herself to wait and watch with the "patience" he prescribed for any successful angler.

Waiting, she fell to day-dreaming, and, for her further ease in this line, curled herself down in the shade of the alders and closed her eyes. Beautiful pictures came to her behind those shut lids, none more lovely than this very scene of which she fancied she was the only living human feature.

"All alone in God's beautiful world! With the sky so blue and white; the woods so—so every wonderful color; the river so dark and babble-y, chattering over the stones that it had more to say than it had time to say it in; the birds singing and flying; the air so soft and warm; and nobody here but me! Well, I'm glad that even I am here, just a little girl like me, to tell Him there is somebody who sees and thanks Him!"

[Pg 224]

Then away she drifted into thoughts she could not have framed in words, but which kept all fear from her and filled her young soul with a longing to be good and to do good.

But she was not alone as she believed. Among those same alders lining the river bank lay another of God's creatures, whose dreams were unlike the child's, indeed, but upon whose clouded mind the beauty of that hour was not wholly lost. He had been asleep, as she afterward declared she had not been, and her converse with herself aroused him. He had lain down where the bushes screened him well—for hiding was a second nature to this man—and he did not move when he awoke. He merely fixed his eyes upon Katharine as he saw her through the branches and watched what she would do. He saw her fix her tackle, her struggle with herself concerning the earthworm, and smiled dully. Once he had fished from that same bridge. From among many later and less pleasant memories that stood out as clearly as anything in these later days was ever clear to this unfortunate. Ah! the girl was going to sleep! and he would fish again!

Very slowly and cautiously, lest he should awaken her, he crept forward through the bushes, out upon the bank where the smooth grass made creeping easier, inch by inch forward till he had come face to face with her. Then a sudden grasp at the rod in her hand and she awoke, sprang to her feet, beheld him, and in her fear leaped backward, unheeding where she set her foot. It had chanced to be upon a loose rock which rolled downwards with her, and she felt herself falling into the stream.

[Pg 225]

But she did not reach the water. Her skirts were clasped firmly and herself dragged backward, to

be dropped upon the ground with more force than needful. It was all done in a second or two of time, but it sufficed to show her that she had escaped one peril but to encounter another. The man who had pulled her from the river, the man who sat now close beside her, was Marsden's much discussed—tramp!

For a moment her heart almost stopped beating, and she turned her eyes with a hopeless glance across the fields by which she had come. Oh, how wide they were and how desolate! All their glorious beauty faded from her vision till they seemed but an endless waste between her and safety. Oh, if she had only gone by the straight and longer road, instead of yielding to a whim she had not dared to speak of to Susanna! If she hadn't stopped to fish she would already have been at the Mansion, which now it seemed she would never see again. A tramp. It was the one thing in the world of which she had the greatest fear, and the behavior of Widow Sprigg, as well as the other villagers, had convinced her that here was a tramp of the worst variety.

[Pg 226]

Then her sense of what was "fair" made her force her eyes toward her unwished-for companion. To her surprise he was not paying the slightest attention to her, and he didn't look so—well, not so fearfully wicked. He certainly was clothed in the poorest and dirtiest of rags. His bare feet showed through the holes in his shoes. His hat had a brim but half-way around. His hair had not seen a comb for so long that he must have forgotten what a comb was like. His face was roughly bearded, but it was very pale and not so dirty as his hands. His eyebrows stood out at an angle above his wild eyes, and were the bushiest she had ever seen, except Squire Pettijohn's. He wasn't a bit like that sleek and portly gentleman, yet, even as he had done in Alfaretta's case, he brought the village potentate to mind. And—what was it he was doing?

With an old clasp-knife he had drawn from his rags he was digging bait! Not as she had dug, with timid, tentative jabs from the point of a stick, but systematically, thoroughly, just as Monty would have done. He had found a spot where the earth was soft and rich, and was wholly absorbed in his task. So absorbed that Katharine felt it safe to attempt flight, and got upon her feet.

But he pulled her roughly down again. Yet he showed no enmity toward her, and with the swift intuition of youth she comprehended that he wished her to stay and see him fish. He, the tramp, was to give her her first lesson in angling! What, what would Uncle Moses say?

[Pg 227]

Always quick to see the comic side of any incident, Katy laughed. She couldn't have helped it even if he had struck her the next instant. He didn't strike, he merely laughed in response—his first laughter of many days. Then he looked into her face, stared, and stared again. Stared so long that Katharine put her hand to it wondering what was amiss. When he turned his gaze aside he fixed it on the chattering river and became oblivious to everything else. Within his brain there was working another memory, evoked by her brown eyes; eyes so like her father's that when she sometimes looked at Susanna, that good woman begged her turn her glance away, saying:

"You're so like Johnny you give me the creeps!"

Susanna was often getting the "creeps," and Katy wondered if she had given them to this poor wretch also, since, though he had seemed so anxious to fish a few moments ago, he had now apparently forgotten all about it. She gathered all her courage and put out her hand to take the rod.

"If you please, mister, I must be going now. Will you give me my things?"

[Pg 228]

"Bime by. Wait. Don't talk. In a minute I'll have a whopper."

It was a relief to hear him speak in such an ordinary way. She had supposed that the language of tramps was something wholly vile. His voice was husky, but that might be from illness, for he certainly did look ill. Well, if he wanted her to stay she would better please him. He would tire of keeping her there after awhile, or so she hoped. Even a tramp couldn't go on fishing forever, and somebody might come.

He was really very skilful. Almost as soon as Uncle Moses could have done so he had landed his first catch and left it floundering on the bank. Katharine had never thought about the cruel side of angling. It was left for this forlorn creature to teach her that of this pretty pastime there is something else than lounging beside charming waterways and beneath green boughs. Anglworms might not suffer much, might even get used to being tortured, as Montgomery averred; but how about that beautiful shining thing done to slow death on the sward beside her? A new pity for this humbler of God's creatures made her forget her lingering fear of the man. With a cry she snatched the rod from his hand, exclaiming:

"You sha'n't do that any more! It's wicked! Oh, the poor, pretty thing! We have taken away its life and we can never give it back again. I feel as if I had seen murder done. I understand Aunt Eunice now about the poultry. Oh, it is dreadful!"

[Pg 229]

This was the girl's first knowledge of killing, and she was extreme in her revulsion as she was in all things. But her emotion was a good thing because it recalled her to the fact that she had something else to do. She must be about it at once, and if the man followed or annoyed her—why, she must trust she could escape him.

Rapidly unfolding the rod, she was conscious that the tramp was again regarding her with that intent gaze which had nothing menacing in it, but was rather wistful and sad. He did not resent her stopping his sport, and, turning away from her, he picked up the fish and tossed it back into the water. Then she went a few steps to where she had placed the basket and drew it out from

the alders.

Now his whole attitude changed. He had not suffered greatly from hunger heretofore. The gardens and fields were too rich just then with fruits and vegetables, and nobody missed a few potatoes from the heaps dug, nor corn from the shocks. There were apples galore, and in some orchards pears and even plums. The stone walls bordering the farms were hung with wild frost-grapes, while the nut-trees offered their abundance to whomsoever would accept. Beneath these same trees there was game to be ensnared even by one who carried no gun, and as for poultry-yards, nearly every householder had one. Nobody, not even a tramp, need go hungry on that countryside, unless his scruples prevented him from helping himself.

[Pg 230]

This particular tramp had no scruples of that sort whatever. As Katharine picked up her heavy basket, he was upon his feet and relieved her of the burden at once. She tried to retain her hold of the handle, but was no match for him in strength, and had to watch him drop down upon the bank, tear apart the two halves of the cover, and explore the contents.

She made one effort to rescue Susanna's good things from this "thief," as she now knew him to be, but he flung her hands aside so rudely he hurt them; and when she cried to him: "You mustn't! You must not touch those things, they aren't mine!" he did not notice her.

Already one pumpkin pie was half-devoured. Uncooked food from the fields may, indeed, prevent starvation, but here was luxury. If "the proof of the pudding is in the eating," Susanna Sprigg should have been highly flattered. Katharine had never seen anybody eat as this man did. Before she could say, "Well, you sha'n't have the basket, even if you do steal the things from it!" the first pie had wholly gone. He tried a little variety: broke the brown loaf in two, and, unrolling the pat of butter, generously smeared it, using his dirty hands for knife.



**"ALREADY ONE PUMPKIN PIE WAS
HALF-DEVOURED"**

This was wretchedly disgusting but—fascinating. It reminded the young Baltimorean of feeding-time at the Zoo. She also dropped upon the sward to watch, and to recover her basket when he should have done with its contents.

[Pg 231]

He left none of them. The honey followed the bread and butter, and the jell-roll followed the honey. Then he returned to his first delight and finished the second pie. By this time satiety. Full fed and rested he crawled back among the alders and lay down to sleep. Crawled so far and so deep among them that even the watching girl could scarcely see him.

But she had no desire left for further observation. He had proved himself a harmless bugaboo, and she would not be afraid of him, meet him where she might—so she felt then.

Yet there remained some ugly facts to be dealt with. One, the empty cupboard at the Mansion, always so faithfully replenished for the Sabbath by the untiring care of Aunt Eunice. One, the cherished rod that had snapped asunder as she forced it from the tramp's grasp. And one—the well-deserved anger of the Widow Susanna Sprigg.

She gathered what comfort she could, hoping against hope that for once Madam Sturtevant had made provision for her own Sabbath feasts; and that, though the rod might be broken, and because of its association not to be replaced, she could buy another even better. She had ten dollars of her own, her very own. It was as yet unbroken even if in her intention she had already expended it on many, many things. But there remained that other formidable fact—the Widow

[Pg 232]

Sprigg.

How meet her inquiring glances? How convince her that she was still worthy of trust who had proved herself unworthy? How endure the torrent of indignation, certain to be let loose upon her when she reappeared at the kitchen door?

Well, she had the basket! That was yet another and comforting fact. She hugged it close as she entered the back yard where the housekeeper was washing the stone path with a vigor as great as if it were the beginning and not the end of the day. As the gate-latch clicked Susanna looked up, and Katharine saw that she was "just as cross as she always is on Saturday afternoon."

"My suz! You back a'ready?"

"Yes, Susanna."

"Well, what you so mealy-mouthed about? You ain't nigh so peart and hop-skippin' as you was when you started. Didn't you get a good welcome to the Mansion? Wasn't Madam to home? Don't squeeze that basket so tight. Eunice won't admire to have it smashed."

"I won't smash it, Susanna."

Katharine wondered why she should be so afraid of this sharp-tongued woman when she hadn't been really afraid of the disreputable tramp. She wondered why she couldn't burst forth with her story, which certainly was a strange one, as sure of sympathy here as she would have been with Aunt Eunice. Perhaps that dear, if dignified, old lady had returned, and if so she would go straight to her.

[Pg 233]

"Has aunty come, Widow Sprigg?"

"No. She hain't. Nor likely to. Word's come, though, that we needn't look for her till we see her. That sick woman is so glad to have her she's goin' to keep her over Sabbath, an' I warn you, what with Moses on my hands an' the hull house to look after, I want no monkey-shines from you. Well, what did Madam say? Didn't she think my butter was as good as hers? Hey? What?"

Hope died in Katharine's breast. At first she had loved Susanna best, better than Miss Maitland. Now, for just one look into Eunice's face!

But she wouldn't be a coward. Feeling that she had done something very wrong, yet not knowing how she could have helped it, she looked straight into Susanna's eyes, and answered:

"I haven't seen Madam Sturtevant. I didn't go there."

Over the rest of that interview it is well to draw a veil.

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 234]

THE COTTAGE IN THE WOOD

After having cried herself to sleep in the sitting-room chamber, feeling very lonely and forlorn because Aunt Eunice was not in her own adjoining room, Katharine awoke to find another beautiful day gladdening the world and herself as well. Who could be unhappy with such sunlight shining through such golden maples, underneath a sky so blue?

"Every day is a fresh beginning,
Every morn is the world made new,"

sang the girl, springing from bed and running to her bath; a daily habit which surprised and pleased both Miss Maitland and the housekeeper, accustomed as they were to the rebellion of young Marsdenites to even a weekly tubbing. A habit which had done much to win Eunice's favor toward the "second Mrs. John," and between whom and herself now existed a friendly and frequent correspondence. "She is a good woman, intensely practical; and Katharine is a good child, intensely romantic; and not all good people may live comfortably together. But there is no 'cruel stepmother' in her, and I mean to invite her and the little Snowballs out to visit us next summer. It shall not be my fault if there does not yet grow the closest affection between Johnny's chosen wife and Johnny's daughter," had remarked the mistress of The Maples, some time before.

[Pg 235]

To which Susanna had pertinently replied:

"Well, next summer ain't tetched yet, an' we may all be in our graves before that time."

"Very true, my friend, though I don't expect to be in mine," answered Eunice, cheerfully, and wisely changed the subject, though not her intention.

Not only had Katharine forgotten her unhappiness of the night before, but Susanna had also rested and recovered her good nature. She felt that it would never do for an old lady like herself to apologize to a child for the hard words spoken "in the way of discipline," but now that she had had time to think it over she did not see how Katy had been so greatly to blame. Besides, she was just wild to ask questions concerning the tramp, and privately looked upon the little girl as a very

heroine for bravery, in that she had neither fainted nor been greatly afraid during her interview with the wanderer.

[Pg 236]

Katy had been given a bread and milk supper and sent to her room, feeling herself in disgrace. She had not even been allowed to visit Moses and offer her apologies for her rudeness to him; so that if it had not been a wholly "black" Saturday, it had been a very dark Saturday evening.

But Saturday was past, a beautiful Lord's Day was blessing His earth, and it was not for His children to keep offence with one another.

As her own overture to a Sabbath peace, Susanna went to the foot of the stairs and called, in her cheerfullest voice:

"Time to get up, 'Kitty Keehoty'!"

"Oh, yes! Good morning, Susanna! I've been up ever so long—much as ten minutes, I guess."

"Flannel cakes an' maple syrup for breakfast," returned the housekeeper, as a parting salute, and really very happy to have all clouds blown free of the domestic sky.

Moses had already breakfasted, and had by this time become so far accustomed to his hard position on the cot that he had ceased to grumble at it. That is, he had not grumbled on that morning, and had forgotten his growls of yesterday. He was ready with a smile for his little nurse when she came in with the new copy of the *Chronicle*, to read him a few paragraphs while Susanna fried the cakes. Later, she brought a big bunch of chrysanthemums and put them on his bureau; then tidied the room even beyond its usual order, since on Sundays, when his neighbors had leisure, the invalid was sure to have many visitors.

[Pg 237]

Indeed, as Susanna informed Katharine at breakfast, Deacon Meakin himself was coming to sit the whole afternoon with his afflicted predecessor. Kate, herself, was to go alone to church in the morning, and remember that she was to behave exactly as if Eunice were beside her. In the afternoon, during the deacon's temporary charge of the house, Susanna would take Katharine on that long promised walk to "my cottage."

"I've been terr'ble anxious 'bout it ever sence that tramp come to town, an' now sence you've seen an' talked with him, an' I know that he's runnin' 'round loose still, I must go take a look. That's the worst o' prope'ty, it's a dreadful care."

"But it must be just delightful to own such a cute little cottage as yours, all vines and trees—"

"The chimbley smoked," interjected the widow, feeling free to disparage her own "prope'ty," though she would have resented such a remark from another.

"That could be fixed, I reckon. When I saw it from the stage, coming, I thought it was just like a doll-house, or a child's playhouse."

"Huh! You did, did you? Well, let me tell you, Katharine Maitland, that house is a good one. Spriggs, he had it built first-class, with a room finished off in the roof—attic, he called it—three good rooms on the ground floor, white-painted clapboards an' reg'lar blinds, green blinds with slats turnin' easy as nothin'. Not like the old-fashioned wooden shutters, so clumsy 't you can't see out to tell who's comin' along the road without openin' the hull concern. And it has as good a system of water as Squire Pettijohn's, only not so big. Sprigg, he bricked it all up, hauled the bricks himself clean in from the county town, an' it's got a manhole 'twill let ary man down it that wants to go. My house may not be as big as the moon, but it's got as good a system of water as Eunice's even."

[Pg 238]

Katharine's eyes twinkled. Until she came to Marsden she had never heard of a cistern; all the water used in her city home had been piped into it from a reservoir, which supplied all the other houses also; but she had learned what Susanna meant by "system," because the Turners had had theirs cleaned out only the week before.

"What's the 'manhole,' Susanna?"

"My suz! You do ask the ridicylousest questions. It's a hole left in the top for folks to go down into it, if they want to."

"Well, I shouldn't think they'd ever want to. And the Turners' manhole must be very small, smaller than yours, maybe; because they sent Bob down to clean it, and he got stuck coming out. His mother was scared almost into a fit, and the girls cried and Mr. Turner—said things. He told Bob if he ever got him out alive he'd teach him to live on light rations for awhile. Bob's so fat, you know. It was so funny, and yet I was frightened, too. I suppose if he had stuck too tight they'd have had to break the bricks away, but he squeezed through all right. He hasn't spoken to me since, though. Just because I laughed."

[Pg 239]

"My suz, Kitty! if you ain't the greatest one for bein' everywhere 't anything's goin' on. You hain't been here but a month, yet you know more folks, been into more houses, seems if, than I have, who've lived here all my life. An' the idee! Tearin' away good bricks just to get a wuthless boy out, like that Bob. I cal'late his pa would ha' thought twice 'fore it come to that. He'd have made the young one scrouge himself up dreadful narrow an' wriggle himself free, somehow. But there. No use worryin' about my system, 'cause I had the leader-pipe turned t'other way so no rain could run into it. It's as dry as a floor now. My suz! What a long walk it is, an' how warm it does

keep. I never knowed such a fall, no weather fit for killin' nor nothin', but just like midsummer," bewailed Susanna, lagging on the long woodland path.

"I never knew such a fall, either. I never dreamed that the world could be so lovely. I have only been in the country a fortnight at a time in August, until I came to Marsden, but I love it, I love it! And I think you're dressed too warm. What made you put on that heavy wool gown and shawl? And a veil, too. I should think you'd roast, and your face is the color of boiled lobster," said Katharine, with hapless frankness.

[Pg 240]

Their talk had been along the way, and their goal was already in sight through the trees. Poor Susanna had scarcely breath to retort, but managed to say:

"Ain't it the time o' year to put on thick clothes? an' am I to blame if the weather don't know its own business?"

Then, for a peace-offering, Katharine handed her companion a beautiful fern, which the widow tossed aside contemptuously, with:

"Huh! What do I want with a brake? Eunice, she litters the house with 'em bad enough. I ain't a-goin' to add to the muss. Well, here we be, an' there's the key. I've come here alone time an' time again an' never felt the creeps a-doin' it afore to-day. But—my suz! I wouldn't ha' come now without you to keep me comp'ny, not for anything."

"That's flattering! Am I so brave, then?" asked the girl, giving the housekeeper a sudden little hug.

"Yes, you be. But, my suz! You needn't knock my bunnit off with your foolishness. Seems if this key's gettin' rusty, or else—can't be the door's unlocked, can it?"

[Pg 241]

"I'm sure I don't know. I was never here before." Then, as the door opened, sniffing a little at the musty odor incident to a tightly closed apartment: "Whew! It needs airing, anyway. Let's throw up all the sashes and set the blinds wide, then it will be the sweetest little cottage in the world."

"Well, you may. And when you've done these down here, you might—you might go up attic and open that winder, too. It's there I've got my things stored that I've been layin' out to show you, soon's I could. Me an' Moses an' Eunice is all a-gettin' old. It's time somebody younger an' likelier to live longer should know. This walk to-day tells me 'at I ain't so spry as I used to be. No tellin', no tellin'. We're here now, an' there some other time, an' life's a shadder, a shadder," ruminated the widow, sitting down on the door-step, and not anxious, apparently, to enter the cottage first.

Which fact Katharine was quick to observe and comment upon, with a laugh: "Oh, you blessed old coward! You're afraid that tramp has shut himself up in your 'prope'ty,' and you'll come upon him unawares. You'd 'risk' me, just as Monty 'risked' Ned Clackett to climb the schoolhouse roof after a ball, not daring to go himself. Well, here goes! You keep watch without while I search within."

Susanna laughed. She was afraid, and owned it frankly; but after Katharine had ransacked the few rooms thoroughly, peeped under the bed in the kitchen-bedroom, opened the few closet doors, and even examined the wall cupboard, she gathered courage to enter, and promptly led the way up-stairs.

[Pg 242]

The little home was plainly furnished, but represented the romance of her life to old Susanna. Memories of her youth came back and softened the asperity of age, her wrinkled face taking on gentler lines and her harsh voice a tenderer tone. But to-day she was in haste. She felt herself needed at The Maples, even with the capable Deacon Meakin left to "hold the fort," as he expressed it. Going to a chest of drawers she opened the top one and displayed a store of blankets, different from those Katharine had seen. They looked like very coarse and heavy flannel, and were yellow with age. "Them was part of my fittin' out. I spun an' wove 'em myself, whilst Sprigg an' me was walkin' out together," she explained, carefully peering into the folds of the cloth, in search of any vagrant moth.

"Why, how in the world could you do that? I thought when one spun and wove they had to have wheels and looms and things. How could you carry such about with you, even with Sprigg, I mean Mr. Sprigg, to help?"

Susanna looked over her spectacles more hurt than angry. But she saw only honest surprise on the girl's face, and, after a pause, explained:

[Pg 243]

"'Walkin' out together' means keepin' comp'ny; as men an' women do who've promised to marry each other."

"Oh, an engagement! I remember quite well, too well, when papa and Mrs. Snowball 'walked out together.' It quite did away with the delightful 'walkin' out' I had always had with him before that time."

"Well, Katy, be sure if Johnny picked her out she was the right one, an' me an' Eunice hopes to see the pair of ye good friends yet. We're layin' out to have all them little Snowballs down here, or up here, next summer, if we live to see another summer, an' make up our own minds as to how things is. We've settled that."

Which shows that even strong-minded women like Susanna may sometimes change their minds; also lay claim to ideas not originally their own. But the effect upon Katharine was to sober her

completely, and, oddly enough, make her a bit homesick for the old life and the noisy little brothers. She fell to thinking about them so earnestly that she scarcely heard what else the widow was saying, until she was touched upon the arm, and bidden:

"Now, look sharp an' remember. Here 'tis, my shroud an' all goes with it."

"Your—w-h-a-t?" gasped Katharine.

[Pg 244]

Susanna again looked her surprise, but she was perfectly calm, even cheerfully interested; and, to enlighten the other's ignorance, patiently explained.

"I said my shroud, that I am to be wropped in when I'm buried. I made it years ago, an' styles has changed some, I hear. But this is good, an' 'll be easy for 'em that does it to put on me. It's keepin' real well, nice an' white. Here's the suit of underclothes goes with it, all new, white stockin's—loose an' roomy, an' pins an' needles an' thread—not a thing wantin', so fur as I know. Why, child, what ails you? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

Poor Katharine was so shocked by this revelation which the other made so calmly, that she had turned quite white, and found some difficulty to control her voice, as she returned:

"It's so—so horrible, so ghastly! Right here in all this glory of life to be anticipating the grave! Give the dreadful things to me. I hate to touch them, but I'll make myself. I'll carry them right down into the kitchen and make a fire in the stove and burn them up, up, up! Oh, Susanna! how could you?"

The old housekeeper was in her own turn as genuinely surprised. In many a household she knew just such provision for a sad day had been made. She had even once assisted at a "bee," where several women had assembled to prepare a burial garment for an old, bedridden neighbor, who, less "forehanded" than Marsdenites in general, had neglected to provide one for herself. The careless creature was living yet, and likely to outlive many a stronger woman, but that didn't matter. However, such ignorance as Katharine's did not surprise her so much as it would have done had the child's "raising" been in the more favored environment she had herself enjoyed. Of course, she did not yield her treasures to the destruction suggested. She merely closed that drawer and opened another; and here, indeed, her whole bearing changed. Uncovering a big paste-board box, she showed a quantity of little garments, oddly fashioned, but beautifully preserved, the very folds in which they had been laid away still crisp and fresh.

[Pg 245]

Over and over the time-yellowed muslin her work-knotted fingers passed and repassed. Her touch was the touch of a mother upon her first-born, and the years that had been between the day of his coming and this were forgotten.

Katharine watching, understood. Her sympathy brought a moisture to her own eyes, which now regarded the childless old woman in a new and reverent light. Never again would Susanna be just the same to her young housemate that she had been. The girl was learning life. Yesterday her lesson—that not all of God's vagrants are vile; to-day—that all sharp-tongued women are not viragoes.

[Pg 246]

After a time, said the widow, simply: "Them was my baby's," and softly closed the drawer.

They were well on the way home when Susanna suddenly exclaimed:

"My suz! Ever see such a simpleton? I clean forgot to lock the door; an' that kitchen-bedroom winder, I doubt that you went near it."

"No, I didn't. I forgot, too. Never mind, you sit here and rest. I'll run back and fasten the whole house, and won't be long. Or you go on toward home and I'll overtake you."

"Sure you just as lief? Well, I don't s'pose you would be afraid now, after I've been there with ye to show you there wasn't nothin' nor nobody there, an' I 'low I'd ought to be back soon's I can," responded the housekeeper.

"Afraid? Why, it was you yourself was afraid, you dear old make-believe! But go on, just the same. I'll make haste," cried Kate, laughing at the other's altered mind, and immediately darting backward through the forest toward the cottage.

The Widow Sprigg walked forward, slowly; pausing here to pick up a nut, or there to examine a tree which she would tell Eunice might better be felled. As she walked she became uneasy, feeling that she had really imposed an unpleasant, possibly perilous, task upon the girl she scolded so freely yet already loved so dearly. Gathering a sprig of wintergreen she chewed it thoughtfully, and scarcely knew when she turned back to retrace her own steps to the cottage and learn what had befallen Katharine, who surely should have been in sight long before.

[Pg 247]

She came, at last, breathless and excited, catching the widow's arm and dragging her farther into the wood, but saying nothing save that imperative: "Come! Oh, come quick! Quick! We may be too late!"

Perforce the other "came," and there, on her kitchen-bedroom bed, lay Marsden's "tramp," seemingly sick unto death.

A SELF-ELECTED CONSTABLE

If Susanna could ever have been "knocked down with a feather," as she often averred, she might have been then.

Indignation, consternation, amazement, all the emotions which have to be expressed in polysyllables, pictured themselves on her countenance as she paused on the bedroom threshold and looked at the intruder over her spectacles, through them, and below them. He lay face down upon the pillows, his dirty boots reposing on her choicest log-cabin quilt, and his groans fairly chilling the blood even in her veins, used though she was to the habits of men in illness. Moses, in his groaniest days, had rarely equalled this.

After the moment's pause her mind worked quickly, and she expressed it in words, spoken more to herself than to Kate, close beside her.

"He mustn't lie there, that way, with them filthy old shoes on. He acts as if he was at the p'int o' death, though folks a-dyin' don't gen'ally caterwaul like that. I bet I know what ails him! It's them pies an' things he stole! If 'tis, I'm glad of it, serves him right!" she finished, triumphantly, and in her satisfaction went so far as to approach the bed and shake the man's shoulder.

[Pg 249]

At first he paid no attention to her, and his groans did not cease, though they became rather intermittent, as if the paroxysms of pain were less frequent. Finally, her voice, now pitched to its shrillest, penetrated his consciousness, and at her question: "What's the matter with ye? Got the colic?" he turned upon his side and his face was revealed.

Then, indeed, did Susanna's countenance undergo a more wonderful change. All the emotions which had earlier crossed it concentrated in one prolonged stare, while she felt her strength oozing from her till she knew she should fall. Her hand left the stranger's shoulder and dropped limply to her side, her jaw fell, and she would have sunk down upon the floor had not Katharine slipped a chair forward to receive her. Upon this she settled, still staring and speechless; and as if he, too, were profoundly moved, the tramp ceased groaning altogether and fixed his burning gaze on her. So they remained, and for so long, that Kate grew frantic, and begged:

"Oh, Susanna! what is wrong? Why do you look at him like that? Why does he look at you? Is he dying? Do you know him? Does he know you? Can't we do something for him? It's so dreadful to see anybody suffer. Even he, poor fellow, who—"

[Pg 250]

The Widow Sprigg held up a shaking hand protesting against this volley of questions and answering none. But after a little time the woman in her got the better of the judge, and, rising, she went to the wall cupboard and took from it a bottle containing brown fluid and plainly labelled, "Cholera Mixture. Poison." Pouring a generous dose into a glass, she diluted it with water and was returning to the bed when Katharine caught her hand to stay it, crying:

"Why, Susanna! How dare you? That's marked poison!"

The widow shook the girl's hand off, calmly replying:

"My suz! I guess I know what I'm about. That 'cholera mixture' 's one the old doctor's own prescriptions, an' I've give more of it to more folks 'an you could shake a stick at. It's marked 'poison' so's to keep childern like you from meddlin' with it. A dose of it won't hurt nobody, an' if his malady is the sort I cal'late, I'm treatin' him like the Good Samaritan would on the Sabbath Day. I've made it a powerful dose, an' I 'low it'll settle his hash one way or other. But I hate to touch him. I certainly do."

A last faint moan issued from the sufferer, and his eyes turned upon the girl. He looked so wan and so forlorn that her own natural repugnance left her, and she caught the medicine-glass from Susanna to present it to the sick man's lips. He opened them and drank obediently, even smacking his lips over the fiery mixture, and Kate, having finished her task, hastily withdrew to the outer room.

[Pg 251]

But what had come over the Widow Sprigg? Her whole manner had changed. Fear seemed to have left her and a stern determination taken its place. Katharine could only observe, wondering, as the mistress of the cottage caught up a pail, and going to the well drew it full several times, throwing out all but the last pailful, which she brought back into the house and set on a table in the bedroom. Beside it she placed a dipper, and observed:

"That water's all right. Moses, he had the well cleaned out for me only last month. We always do do it twicet a year, lest somebody comes along an' drinks it stale. More'n that, the well's fed by a spring, runnin' in an' out, so really don't need any cleanin', but—"

Such solicitude on account of that detested tramp! It was amazing. Yet her next procedure was even more so. Going up-stairs, she looked that the window was shut, and the nail, its only fastening, put in above the lower sash. Anybody inside could have opened it, of course, but that did not occur to her. Each of the windows was thus treated, and, beckoning to Katharine, she led the way out-doors. The door was locked on the outside and Susanna started homeward. She was no longer a weary or a sad-faced woman. She was alert, silent, but unmistakably cheerful.

[Pg 252]

Kate kept close pace with the now swift steps of the housekeeper, and finally ventured to ask: "Who is he?"

"We may not all hope to be constables, but some of us is constables without ever runnin' for office! Well, well, well! I shouldn't be surprised if the end o' the world happens along now, any time," said Susanna, irrelevantly, and fell into such a brown study that Katy dared not interrupt her, and the rest of the way home was passed in silence.

The deacon was waiting restlessly. He had not liked to desert his post and leave the disabled Moses alone in the house. Neither had he liked to lose his Sunday afternoon nap, well-earned refreshment of a diligent man. One other thing he had not liked: Moses' flat refusal to discuss their employer's affairs. This had led to other controversies, and two disgruntled men were ready to greet the tardy wanderers.

"Hm-m. Thought you never was a-comin' back. That's all the sense a silly woman has; let her get off grounds an' she don't know when to step on to 'em again. The deacon, he's been purty patient, but—I guess we'll be better friends if we part for a spell now," was Moses' greeting; and, instead of resenting it, Susanna said never a word. [Pg 253]

In silence she brought him his cup of beef tea. In silence she went out and fed the poultry; came in and gave Sir Philip his bowl of milk and Punch his plate of scraps. She had long since taken the feeding of both animals upon herself, declaring, with some show of truth, that they did not dare "muss around" for her as they did for Eunice or Kate.

Till it was supper-time she sat in absolute silence beside the sitting-room window, her eyes fixed upon vacancy, and an expression of great perplexity.

Katharine bore this as long as she could, then stole softly up to the hired man's room, careless whether he were asleep or not. She had not been bidden to secrecy, and, finding him awake, she poured out the story of the afternoon so fast that her words fairly tripped each other up. Then Moses made her go back and tell it all over again, and when she had finished, exclaimed:

"Beats thunder! A silly woman! An' me, a man! Bedrid here, like an old block of wood, an' her—She thinks she's arrested somebody, Susanna does! She thinks she's made herself into a constable, does she? Turned her house into a jail—an' forgot to fasten the winders outside! Ho! Ho! Silly women!" [Pg 254]

The disappointed old fellow got as much enjoyment as he could out of the situation, and was more than delighted by thought of a tramp's shoes smirching the log-cabin quilt. It served the widow right, he maintained, because she had wasted so much labor on the thing. "Bought good new Merrimac print, she did, an' then set there o' nights a snip-snip-snippin' it up into little scraps an' sewin' 'em together again. If a woman'll do that, it's proof what sort o' brains she's got." Then, with sudden energy, he advised: "Don't you never let her set you a sewin' patchwork, Kitty Keehoty. It's all on a piece with knittin' mittens for the Hottentots—a waste of time. A waste o' sinful time, I mean a sinful waste of—Oh, hum!"

She waited till he had cooled off from his own vexation, and then asked:

"Uncle Moses, will you tell me all about Montgomery's father?"

If she had surprised him before she startled him now. Flashing his keen old eyes upon her, he asked in return:

"Why do you want to know? Who egged you on to say that?"

"Nobody. Why, surely, nobody at all. But it seems so queer that none talk of him, yet of his mother speak so often and so lovingly. Aunt Eunice says she was a Marsden lady, a farmer's daughter, and 'as lovely as a flower.' Even Madam, who didn't like her at first, grew to be fond of her and to call her 'my sweet daughter.' But when I asked Monty of his father, and had told him all about mine, about everything, about the second Mrs. John, the Snowballs, and all—he just said: 'I guess I'll go hunt old Whitey,' and off he went, without saying 'excuse me.' His face was as red as red, and there came a queer look in his eyes as if—as if he was ashamed. Was his father a wicked man, Uncle Moses?" [Pg 255]

Quite diverted by this time from his own vexations, the hired man lay silently thinking for a moment. Then he said:

"Well, little Kitty Keehoty, I hain't seen that your warm heart gets any colder toward folks when they get into trouble 'an when they don't. That tramp, now, that stole your victuals—Oh, I know! I did know last night, though you didn't know that I knowed—"

"I saw Esau kissing Kate, Esau saw that I saw," quoted this other Kate, in laughing interruption.

Moses laughed, too, as he was glad to do. He had had enough of gloom and grumble for that sweet Lord's Day, now so near its close. And though the story he was going to tell was anything but a bright one, he meant to tell it in such wise that his young listener should be the tenderer and more compassionate because of hearing it.

"Well, Keehoty, it's ruther a long yarn. That is, it goes a good way back, clean to the old Squire's time—no such a Squire as Pettijohn, forename James, mind ye—but a good, high-sprung, old-fashioned gentleman; with high-up English blood in his veins, an' a reg'lar English temper to [Pg 256]

balance the blood. Never did a dirty trick in his life nor an unjust one—except to his own and only son. That was Monty's father, poor little stutterin' shaver! Well, along of his late years the old Squire had bad feelin's in his head, suffered terr'ble agony, an' hardly knowed what he did do or say. He got a notion that he was goin' to be robbed, an' used to carry 'round with him a cur'ous old box that folks said held his bonds an' money an' the old family jewels that had been brought over from England a hunderd years afore. If he went a-ridin'—an' he was the splendidest horseman ever seen in these parts—he'd have the thing on the saddle afore him. If he druv, 'twould be in the box o' the carriage-seat. Nobody ever seen the inside that box, an' 'twas 'lowed there wasn't none could open it, except him an' the Madam."

"Oh!" gasped Katharine, leaning forward, breathlessly intent. Naturally such close attention flattered the narrator, who went on with renewed earnestness:

"The old Squire an' his son didn't hit it off together very well. Never did from the time Verplanck, 'Planck he was called for short, was born. He was a good deal like Monty is, only more oneasy—if anybody could be; an' from the time he could toddle he was hand in glove with Jim Pettijohn's little tacker, Nate. Nate, he wasn't so smart as some folks. Not a fool, uther, an' consid'able better'n half-witted, but queer—queer. He just worshipped Planck Sturtevant, an' where you see one you see t'other, sure. Well, they growed up, an' Planck got married. That seemed to 'bout break Nate's heart, an' he got queerer an' queerer. Old Squire got queerer, too. Nothin' Verplanck could do or say was right in his father's eyes; an' though he managed to work the farm fairly well, he never made any money off it, an' that made the old man mad. Planck, he bore it patient for a spell, 'cause his wife—she that was Elizabeth Morton from up-mountain—thought the world an' all of the old folks an' they o' her. She'd been raised on a farm an' could an' did turn her hand to every sort o' work, but 'twasn't no use. She loved them, but she loved her husband better; an', one night, after there'd been more hard talk 'an common 'twixt the Squire an' Verplanck, there was three folks missin' from Marsden township. They was somethin' else missin', too, an' that was the queer brass bound box with all the Squire's money an' vallybles. The hired man told 'bout the box, else nobody might ever have heard that part. He was carryin' in the day's wood next mornin' an' overheard the Squire an' the Madam talkin' 'bout it; him callin' his son a 'thief,' an' forbiddin' his name ever to be spoke in that house again. She declarin' that no child of them two honest people could ever be a thief. Hot an' heavy they had it, though nobody had ever heard them two quarrel afore. An' right on top of that stalks in Jim Pettijohn—him that's a sort o' Squire, a justice of the peace, now—an' demands his son. He'd let the feller grow up without good trainin' or lookin' after of any kind, though 'twas needed bad enough. All Nate did know, or the little he knowed, was badness an' deviltry. Why, he used to go with your own pa, Johnny, consid'able, an' 'peared to like him almost as well as he did Verplanck, an' many's the time I've had the three on my hands a-fishin'. But Johnny didn't tackle much to ary one them other boys. He was all for trompin' 'round by himself, drawin' pictur's on whatever come handy, or lyin' under the trees a-dreamin' the summer days through. In the winter he'd dream afore the wood fire just the same idle way, an' finally he dreamed himself out o' Marsden an' run away to be an artist. Eunice, she was set an' determined he should be a minister, else maybe 'twouldn't never ha' turned out as it did. But Johnny was good, good clean through to the core, parson or artist or what not; an' 'twasn't o' him I set out to tell. An' I must hurry up, anyway, 'cause Susanna she'll be in purty soon, an' that'll end all our nice time."

[Pg 257]

[Pg 258]

[Pg 259]

"Oh, Uncle Moses! I like Susanna better to-day than I ever did before. She showed me the real inside of herself, and it isn't half as crusty as the outside."

"Huh! What'd she do to manage that? She seems powerful still an' sot-lookin' sence she come back from inspectin' her 'prope'ty.' By the way, did you happen to notice whuther the slat top to that cistern o' hers was over the manhole? Out in the open shed, or lean-to? 'Cause she's a great notion of leavin' it off to 'air'—as if a cistern that hasn't had no water in it for fifteen twenty years wasn't dry as a pipe-stem a'ready or needed 'airin'! Gen'ally, after she's been out there I take a look 'round myself. I wouldn't admire to have anything, even a tramp, fall down that cistern, though it might not hurt 'em much, 'cause it's shallower 'n it's broad. A real good 'system,' I 'low, even if that everlastin' Sprigg did build it. But what's the inside o' Susanna 't you saw an' liked?"

"She showed me her baby's things, an' looked as sad as if it had died only yesterday. But she showed me, too, her shroud—her *shroud!* Just think of it, Uncle Moses! And that was horrible."

"Pooh! That's nothin'. Lots of women has 'em laid by. Same's some fool-men has a coffin built an' kep' handy. As for me, I'm goin' to worry 'bout things only up till the day o' my death, an' not a minute beyond. But, I was tellin' of Verplanck Sturtevant, an' must finish the job. Squire, he had always given the cold shoulder to Jim, an' despised him out an' out. Jim was crafty an' underhand, Squire was open an' above board—an' them two kinds don't mix. Still, Jim had been able to get his claw on the Squire's meat, so to speak; that is, he'd made money himself, lawin' an' grindin' the face of them worse off 'an he was, an' the Squire needin' ready cash, to make some improvements he'd better ha' let alone, Jim advanced it an' Squire give a mortgage. That was the beginnin', an' now, they say, Pettijohn owns about every acre of the old Sturtevant property, an' could turn the Madam out any day. Yet, somehow, he dassent. Indeed, I'd like to see the man could walk straight up to that old lady an' say: 'Your house is mine. Please to get out.' Out she'd go at the first word; head up, back straight as one her own hall chairs, but a look in her eye that that man wouldn't forget in his lifetime. Verplanck, he was of the same sort—prouder'n Lucifer; an' even if she'd knowed where to send for him his mother would ha' understood 'twouldn't done a mite o' good. But she didn't send. She obeyed her husband to the last say-so. An' he didn't live long after that, anyway. Elizabeth, she come back, bringin' Monty with her; but her own folks tell

[Pg 260]

[Pg 261]

as how there was never a thing said betwixt even them two, except Elizabeth sayin': 'I've come home, Mother Sturtevant, to bring your grandson to the old place. I haven't long to live; but Verplanck will never come till he has made a fortune and redeemed everything. Let us not talk of him.' They never did. Where he was or how, his old mother could only guess. Then Elizabeth died and there was just them two—Madam an' Montgomery—left in the Mansion. Every year she let Jim Pettijohn get a tighter clutch on the property, till, as I tell ye, he prob'ly owns all.

"That's all of Monty's father. 'Twas ten years or more ago when Elizabeth fetched him; why, my sake! it must be full twelve or up'ards, but time does fly so I forget. I never believed Verplanck stole a thing. I misdoubt if the box ever was took. The Squire bein' queer might ha' hid it somewheres, more'n likely. But there's them that does believe, an' I hear the Madam's amongst 'em. She's searched the Mansion from A to Izzard, knowin' every crane an' cranny of it, an' found nothin'. So that's why Monty's face got red when you asked about his father. Marsden's like every other village, full o' gossip, an' what his grandmother has tried to keep from him hearin' there's been plenty loose tongues to let slip. More'n once I've seen the poor little shaver sit broodin' an' solemn as if his heart was breakin', an' I've fancied he was thinkin' 'bout his pa. But he ain't one the broodin' kind, thanks be; an' the very next thing I knowed he'd be up to some mischief or other, lively as a cricket. But don't you ever let on what I've told ye, 'less he speaks of it himself. I'm glad you're good friends, an' likely enough he'll out with the hull business an' all he's thought an' felt about it. If ever he does, Kitty Keehoty, you remember that it's a woman's part—such women as Eunice an' the Madam an' her that was Elizabeth Morton—to comfort an' cheer them 'at are downcast. Though I needn't caution ye, I guess, sence I found out some time ago that you've got a power o' sympathy in your fly-about little body. Hm-m. I've 'most talked the legs off the iron pot, hain't I? It's time to quit, an'—hark! Them's wheels! They're drivin' in here. They're on our gravel, sure. Look out the winder, child, an' see who 'tis. I'm most too tuckered out for more comp'ny to-night. The deacon, he's a good man, but he dreadful fatiguin'."

[Pg 262]

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 263]

REUBEN SMITH, ACCESSORY

The wheels belonged to Squire Pettijohn's buggy, in which were seated Aunt Eunice and himself. This was a combination which, as Katy related it from the window, greatly astonished Moses. Yet there was nothing surprising in the fact, after all. The gentleman had chanced to be up-mountain, calling at the same house where Miss Maitland was visiting, and had offered to take her home, hearing her say that she was anxious to be there early on the morrow.

She had not enjoyed her ride, yet blamed herself for her aversion to a neighbor who, if not a gentleman, had learned sufficient good manners to conduct himself as nearly such. The worst annoyance he had given her was by continual and roundabout references to what had happened in the forest. The more she evaded his questions the more direct they became, till she was almost forced to tell everything or be imputed a liar.

As they turned into the village street he made a final effort for enlightenment, saying:

[Pg 264]

"You must know, Miss Maitland,"—he did not call her "Eunice" to her face as he had done behind her back to Susanna,—"you must know that in keeping this treasure, or whatever was found in your woods, a secret from others, you are injuring somebody. They say you are conniving at the escape of a tramp, even. A tramp! One of those dangerous creatures which infest our State, but have not before invaded Marsden. I flatter myself that I—that I—have so far prevented their coming, and I am certainly making it my business now to unearth this one who, I am told, lurks principally in your forest. You are a large-hearted, generous lady, Miss Maitland; one who is an honor to her township and whom I am proud to call a neighbor—"

"Indeed? I thank you," said Aunt Eunice, stiffly.

Squire Pettijohn ignored the interruption. He meant to make the most of this unlooked-for chance to satisfy his curiosity and his self-importance, and continued as if she had not spoken:

"But who, I fear, sometimes lets her heart run away with her head. In pitying the individual, namely, the tramp in present question, you should also remember that you are endangering the community."

"Nonsense. But may I ask, in turn, from whom you gained your information that I protected the tramp?"

[Pg 265]

"Hm-m—Er—Ah! I believe it was Mrs. Turner who said that you said you 'hoped if any poor hungry wretch strayed into this village of plenty he would get enough to eat for once.' That you 'had always regretted we had no really poor people in Marsden, where they could be cared for, and so lessen the number of starving persons elsewhere.' Mrs. Turner made a personal application of the remark, and suggested that if it had been *your* pies which had been purloined you might feel differently."

Eunice laughed as gaily as a girl, and exclaimed:

"So it has grown to be 'pies,' has it? The last time I heard the matter mentioned it was one possible pie, and Robert, as well as a tramp, had been in the locality where they were set to cool. Besides, it would be an excellent thing if they had all been taken. Mrs. Turner is a nice woman, but she can't make pastry fit to eat, as witness her husband's dyspepsia. Monty says they have pie at the Turners three times a day, and it's a paradise for hungry small visitors who can digest anything. Indeed, I am surprised to learn I gave my neighbor offence on this same pie subject. We talked for some time over it and she fell into my idea that fruit for dessert would suit Mr. Turner far better than pastry, and save her a world of trouble. It would also diminish the number of the children's playmate 'droppers-in' at meal-times. Yes, I am surprised."

[Pg 266]

They had come within sight of The Maples, and Squire Pettijohn had, with apparent carelessness, let back the top of the buggy so that any who cared might observe him riding with the mistress of that fine old estate and the present centre or heroine of so much mystery. This was an unusual thing to do, for letting carriage-tops back is apt to crack the leather, and "Jim" Pettijohn cracked nothing which could be preserved. Eunice comprehended and smiled quietly in her corner of the seat, talking at length as she had done to stave off any further prying into her affairs.

Even yet she was not to be let free. Said the gentleman, with a preliminary cough:

"I do hope and trust, dear Miss Maitland, that you will forego a mistaken expression of sympathy, should an appeal be made to you, and assist me as a magistrate to nip this evil in the bud. In other words, to send this vagrant to the lockup at the earliest possible moment. As I observed, you owe it to your community to protect it, not endanger it."

Eunice turned her glowing eyes upon him. "And I owe to the Great Father, who has given us this day, to be good to every child of His, however humble. If the tramp comes to my door he shall be fed. If he needs shelter I will shelter him. If he needs clothing I will clothe him. Why, look, man, look!" spreading her hand wide to point out the lovely surroundings: "Should anybody come into all this and go away not the better for it? How do we know what chance has brought this stranger hither? Or what and where his life began? Maybe, in just some such favored country village; and once, at least, he was—somebody's son."

[Pg 267]

The tenderness of her compassionate tone but hardened the other's purpose.

"Huh! If he were my *own* son, even, I would have the law on him to the fullest extremity!" he answered, harshly; and Eunice shivered, remembering, as he seemed to have forgotten, that poor son of his who had gone astray and might be roaming the world then, as was this unknown who had so stirred the lawyer's wrath.

Baffled yet persistent, as he helped her alight at her own threshold, the Squire put one more sudden question:

"But, after all, there was something—*something*—found in your woods that day, wasn't there?"

It was not even in Eunice's patience to endure thus much. Caught unawares, she burst out, indignantly:

"Yes, there was something found, but it does not concern anybody to know what. Thank you for your courtesy, and—good evening."

The lawyer drove homeward satisfied. She had admitted "the find." He would now proceed to unearth it. Incidentally, he would unearth the tramp, but that was, in his estimation, a secondary matter.

[Pg 268]

Eunice reëntered her home, glad to be there, but as Susanna saw at first greeting, "all stirred up and upset." She would not allow herself to talk till she had recovered her composure. She even promptly, though affectionately, dismissed Katharine to her bed, reminding her that the morrow brought school again and she must be awake early.

The little girl was disappointed. She had longed for a long, cosy talk with her guardian over so many, many things. Not least of all concerning the brilliant scheme which had occurred to her and Monty that day on the hay. Nor did it please her any too well to lie and listen to the voices of Eunice and Susanna, murmuring on and on indefinitely, in the sitting-room below. Commonly the housekeeper went early to sleep on Sunday nights, for it was her habit to rise before daybreak and set about her Monday washing. To-night the great clock struck eleven, actually eleven, before this conference broke up; only to be resumed at intervals during the next morning, whenever the pair were alone.

However, Katharine had other matters on hand so absorbing that even the mysteries of tramp and brass bound box sank out of mind. She was off to school a half-hour before time, and strangely enough Montgomery was equally prompt. Together they repaired to the wooden bench under the beech-tree, and while the lad suggested things to be written down, Kate wrote them rapidly on little slips of paper, which suspiciously resembled a leaf from a copy-book.

[Pg 269]

Other scholars came along and stared, wondering what had sent this usually tardy boy so far in advance of the bell. Little girls tittered. Phrony Walker tossed her braid flippantly over her shoulder, casually displaying a new hair ribbon with which she meant to impress the city girl who wore and needed none. Sophronia's hair did not kink and curl as Katharine's did, but it was "a hunderd times as long and a great deal prettier colored." Kate had said so herself, yet here was she who was so generously admiring, almost covetous, calmly unobservant of braid, ribbon, and

all.

Martha and Mary Turner came, swinging their lunch-basket between them, delightfully conscious that in its depths were stored three apple turnovers, one for each of them and one for Kitty Keehoty, who was never allowed to carry pie to school. With a child's fondness for the indigestible, she had once declared that Mrs. Turner's turnovers were "sim-ply de-lic-i-ous," and they had teased their mother ever since to make one for their new friend. But they stopped short at sight of the light and dark head so close together over something they did not know about, and when Martha drew nearer and informed the dark-haired scribbler that she had "brought it," Kate merely nodded her head and continued scribbling.

[Pg 270]

Bob and Ned arrived, tackle over shoulder, intent upon playing hookey at afternoon session, and disgusted that Monty was so little excited by their grimacing pantomime, as they demonstrated how they would escape to the woods and invited his company. Then they tried ridicule, calling "girl-boy, girl-boy," as loudly as they dared, with Katharine's scornful glances upon them. Monty grew fiery red and tossed his blond head as if shaking an obnoxious insect from it, but did not cease to scratch it for ideas, which he whispered to his companion as fast as he dug them out.

Even when the teacher came and Kate sprang to her feet to bid him her always courteously ready "Good morning," also dragging Montgomery to his own feet as a reminder of what was correct, that excited, exalted expression left neither young face.

Matters continued thus all through school. Monty was worse than ordinary in the matter of lessons, and that was saying much. Katharine, having had better advantages, stood far in advance of her class, so had no need to study, and kept her slips of paper in her book all the time she sat at her desk. She was not a rapid writer and she certainly had a deal of writing to do. At recess the before-school performance was repeated; and when the truants, Bob and Ned, disappeared in the direction of the "Eddy" after "noonin'," Monty failed to send one regretful glance thither. He was more occupied in watching the face of the clock than anything else, and as soon as dismissal-bell rang, darted from the schoolroom as if propelled by a gun. Just then, too, the first warning notes of Reuben Smith's horn came floating through the trees and down the street, and thereafter all that was seen of the boy was a pair of heels vanishing in air.

[Pg 271]

"Why, what in the world ails Monty? And say, Katy, didn't you like your turnover?" asked Martha Turner, drawing near to her heroine and showing that she felt somewhat aggrieved.

"Oh, Monty's all right. He—Don't you worry. You'll all know sometime. And didn't I eat it?"

"Yes. You ate it fast enough, but you didn't say whether you liked it or not. I think ma, she—"

"Oh, you dear thing! Of course I liked it; and please make my regards to your mother and tell her that I thank her very much. It was the nicest turnover I ever had, and—and it was the first one."

[Pg 272]

To an older mind this might not have been so convincing an argument, but it satisfied Martha. She considered that Katharine Maitland had the "perfectly sweetest manner of any girl in the world," and was daily trying to improve her own by the pattern set. "Make my regards." She had never heard that phrase before, but it impressed her as very stately and "Miss Eunicey," so put it away in her memory for future use. She was further delighted by Katharine's begging her and Mary to walk home with her, as far as they went her way, for she had something to talk over with them.

But when she revealed this "something" it proved not so much after all. She merely inquired exactly how many boys and girls there were in their school and out of it. "I want to get the name of every single child that isn't more than sixteen years old. As much younger as you please, but older than that would be grown-ups. At least, they would be in Baltimore."

That settled it. Whatever was done "in Baltimore" seemed to these young provincials as the acme of correctness; little knowing that to a wider world even "Baltimore" was also provincial.

But it was easy enough to "count noses," as Mary phrased it, and the list of names Katharine had already prepared swelled considerably. She wrote as she walked, the cover of her book her desk, and with such haste that the writing was almost illegible. However, a trifle of that sort could be overcome.

[Pg 273]

"No, Mattie, I know it isn't very plain, but I guess I'll make it out. Let's hurry. Reuben Smith's blowing his go-away horn, and I want to see—Oh, yes! There he is! The stage-driver keeps blowing every little while, yet he keeps talking, too, so I know it's all right! Oh, just fancy! It's going to be perfectly, perfectly splendid! Oh, you dear, dear things!"

Katharine's playmates were accustomed to being caught up and hugged whenever anything pleased her more than common, and she was usually as free in explaining her delight as in expressing it physically. But she explained nothing now. She merely squeezed their hands, and stared at Mr. Smith still arguing with Montgomery, till suddenly looking around she saw their puzzled faces.

"Never mind me, girls. I can't tell yet, not just yet, because it's a beautiful secret. But you'll all know right soon. You're going to be in it, too; we're all going to be in it! Oh, the happy old man! Oh, the fun! Oh, the queer crazy decorations! I believe *I'm* just too happy to live! But the stage is going and I must run to Monty. Good-by. Be sure to be at school to-morrow. Then you'll know."

Reuben Smith mounted to his high seat, blew a farewell blast on his ancient horn, and drove away out of the village, while Montgomery fairly tumbled over himself in his haste to meet Katharine, who greeted him with the question:

[Pg 274]

"Well, will he do it?"

"Y-y-y-e-es!" gasped the breathless lad, and sat down on the edge of the path to recover.

For once careless of dust, Kate dropped down beside him and counted questions off upon her fingers so fast that Monty could only nod his head in acquiescence. Then she drew a small chain purse from her blouse pocket, where it had been carefully pinned ever since she left home in the morning. From this she took a pile of new one-dollar bills—ten in all—and laid them one by one on Montgomery's outstretched palms. It was the largest amount of money Kate had ever owned, it was almost the largest the boy had ever seen. A feeling like awe stole upon him and he whispered,—without a stutter,—"S'pose he should lose it!"

"That's a good boy. Monty, you're improving so fast, you'll beat the time I set for you to conquer in. Have you said your piece to-day? And, of course he won't lose it. Men don't lose things. Except Uncle Moses his 'specs' and the deacon his two-pronged fork, that's never in the hay-mow when he wants it there. Stage-drivers don't lose, anyway, and I'm glad it's you, not I, who have to deal with him. He doesn't like me much. I was saucy when I came. I don't think I am quite, not quite so saucy spoken as I was when I came. Do you, Monty?"

[Pg 275]

"O-o-oh, not n-n-nigh!" he easily replied, never having thought at all about it. He was still entranced with the possession, even temporary, of such vast wealth as he was now bestowing in an old and hitherto useless purse. The crisp new bills. How fat they made it! How utterly and entirely delightful was this girl from the outside world who had such wonderful ideas and the ability to carry them out!

Then the purse was put away in the innermost of all his many inner pockets, and around his blouse, beneath his jacket, Monty fastened a leather strap. Buckling this so tight he could hardly breathe, and fastening the coat over all, he slapped his chest admiringly, and valiantly declared:

"A-a-anybody get that a-a-away from me'll have to k-k-kill me f-f-first!"

Katy jumped up. "Let's go ask Aunt Eunice about the pumpkins!"

In an instant they were off down the street, and some, looking out of window as they raced past, remarked:

"There they go again, Sturtevant and Maitland, each generation as close friends as the other. But chummy as they've been ever since Johnny's girl came to Marsden, there's something more than common on the carpet now."

[Pg 276]

There certainly was. They burst in upon Miss Maitland's solitude, forgetful to tap at door as they both knew they should, and simultaneously besought the startled lady:

"Please, Aunt Eunice, may we have all the pumpkins in the south corn-field?"

At least, that was what Katharine said. Monty's request was proffered stammeringly but not less earnestly, and he said "punkins" with no attempt at correctness of speech.

"Children! What a pair of noisy creatures you are! Where have you come from? You are late if just from school. And, Montgomery, does your grandmother know that you are here?"

"N-n-no, Aunt E-E-E-Eunice. Nev' mind her. She w-w-won't care. C-c-c-can we?"

"I—don't think I quite understand. Did you ask me for a pumpkin? Please repeat."

"A pumpkin'—that's one; no, indeed!" said Katy, scornfully. "We want the whole field full of them. We sha'n't hurt them any, Monty says, and he knows 'bout country things better than I do." Here she bestowed such an approving smile upon her comrade that he flushed and smiled beatifically. There were so few, so very few, things in which he could really excel this superior city creature, yet she was so generous as to perceive them even before he did himself.

[Pg 277]

Just then Susanna came in greatly flurried, and, catching Eunice's arm, tried to draw her hastily out of the room. Miss Maitland herself had swiftly caught her housemate's perturbation. Indeed, she had already been perturbed when the children intruded upon her, and had, apparently, now forgotten them.

Katharine saw their opportunity slipping from them, and opportunity was something that girl never wasted for want of readiness to seize it. Running after the departing lady, she clasped her skirt and stayed her long enough to put her question once more:

"May we, aunty? Oh, please, before you go, say—yes!"

"Yes. Why, of course, yes, yes," returned the lady, all unheeding unto what she had given her consent.

But she was to learn. Ah, yes! She was to learn in good time.

WHAT THE MOON SAW IN THE CORN-FIELD

October had now nearly gone, and there was a chill in the air which would, under ordinary circumstances, have made both Eunice and Susanna pause before setting off into the woods at that hour in the afternoon. Certainly they would not have gone without wraps and shawls galore, but neither paused now. As swiftly, almost as secretly, as two guilty schoolgirls would have started upon some surreptitious adventure, they left the house by the back door and passed through the back garden. From thence they struck into the path to the woodland and hurried forward. Between strides the widow managed to interject a few explanatory sentences.

"I got the wash off the line." Pause. "An' I got oneasy." Another pause. Resuming: "I felt druv to go out there, alone even, an' see. What you said about starvin' him worked on me, dreadful. I took a basket o' victuals. Bad as he is—Oh, my suz!"

"Walk slower, Susanna. We shall be overdone if we keep this pace. What then?" asked Miss Maitland. [Pg 279]

"Well, I went. I run 'most all the way. I got there—an' he wasn't. He wasn't at all!"

"Do you mean that he had left the cottage?"

"My suz! I should think he has. He's left, an' my log-cabin quilt's left, an' my best feather tick, an' pillows, an' a pair blankets—that kitchen-bedroom bedstead's stripped as clean as 'twas the day it was born—I mean, sot up. Now—what do you think of that?"

"I think—Oh, what a miserable business it all is! I am so worried I cannot sleep. Right and wrong, right and wrong, like the pendulum of the clock the two sides of the matter swing in my mind till I'm half-distracted. I hardly know what I am doing or saying, I am so anxious to do the best for everybody, yet what is best? I have a fear that those children asked me something absurd a few minutes ago, and I said 'yes' to them without comprehending. I think they said 'a field of pumpkins.' What could they want with a field—a *field*—of pumpkins?"

"Didn't want 'em, of course. Some their silliness. Don't worry. What's punkins, anyhow, compared with that log-cabin quilt?"

"Little, to be sure. And I hope it isn't really lost. Are you certain that the poor wretch is he you said?" [Pg 280]

"As sure as I draw my breath," averred Susanna, solemnly.

"Then Squire Pettijohn must never know," said Eunice, with equal solemnity.

After that they hurried silently onward again, reckless of the fact that they had left a bedridden man alone in the house, for although the deacon was still about his evening chores, such kept him wholly outside. As for Katharine, she might or might not be on hand if Moses summoned her. Evidently she and her boy-chum had some fine scheme on hand and were away to put it in train, since they had both been more than commonly excited and eager.

Never mind. There are times in life when its commonplace affairs must yield to the extraordinary. These two quiet householders had come to such a time on that late October day.

They had walked almost as far as Susanna's cottage when Eunice paused, and held her companion also back, as she pointed through the darkening wood to a wild-looking creature prowling among the trees. He was evidently looking for something. His search so earnest and troubled that the caution he had heretofore displayed had deserted him. Stooping, poking among the leaves and bracken, rising, moving toward another tree, stooping again—repeating endlessly this same proceeding, the watchers soon tired of simply observing him. [Pg 281]

"Stay here, Susanna. You were right. It is he. I will go and speak to him."

"Alone? Oh, Eunice, don't! Let the old quilt go! I wish I hadn't told ye. Besides, who'd ever want to sleep under it after he'd touched it?"

But though she caught at her mistress's hand to prevent such foolhardiness, Susanna could not stop her. She was walking swiftly toward the searcher and almost noiselessly, and had come up to him before he was aware. When she was close at his side, so close that her firm fingers rested on his ragged shoulder, he discovered her and started away. But she held him quiet, more by her will than her grasp, while, looking steadily into his eyes, she spoke his name, gently, kindly, as one who welcomes a long absent friend:

"Nathan! Why, Nathan! How glad I am to see you!"

The tramp no longer struggled to free himself, but as if spellbound by her gaze returned it in silence. Gradually there stole over his haggard features the light of recognition, and, instead of remembering later events, his mind reverted to his boyhood.

"Be you Miss Eunice? But—I hain't got my lesson."

Again he would have slunk away expecting a reprimand; yet none came. Quite to the contrary,

"Never mind the lesson, laddie. We're not little boy and young woman to-day, Sunday scholar and Sunday teacher. We're just two old friends well met, with other things to learn besides printed lessons. What have you lost? Can I help you find it?"

"A box. His'n. I fetched it safe so fur—an' now—now—I can't see it nowhere. Planck'll frown an' make me feel mean. I promised—"

There a pitiful stupidity took the place of the intelligent recognition he had momentarily displayed, and he resumed that fruitless search under the trees.

"Wait, Nathan. Maybe I know. Maybe I can help you. The box was an old, old box. It was of mahogany, heavy, bound with brass, with neither key nor keyhole, and only those who had been shown how could open it. Is that the one, Nathan?"

"Yes, yes! It's all safe inside. He put it there—just when—just—"

With a sudden outburst of grief he began to weep. The great tears ran down his dirty cheeks and streaked them. His breath came in great blubbering sobs which he made no effort to check.

Eunice Maitland also went back in spirit many years and saw before her now, not the repellent vagrant, but a forlorn child who must be comforted. Without shrinking she clasped his vile hand in her dainty one and turned him back toward Susanna's cottage. That good soul had now drawn near and was herself crying bitterly. Why—she could hardly have explained. Surely, not from any affection for Nathan Pettijohn, returned rascal, nor from any sentimental memory of bygone years, such as her mistress's; but just naturally, in sympathy with two other tear-wet faces. She found the tears a relief. Indeed, they all appeared to do so, and began to retrace the way to the woodland cottage with swifter steps. The two women, because they were feeling the cold and now realizing what a foolish thing they had done in coming out unprotected from it. The vagrant, because it was his nature to follow rather than lead. Arrived there, they found the door wide open and the furnishing sadly disordered. Evidently, Nathan had rummaged the place thoroughly.

[Pg 283]

The Widow Sprigg had long since dried her unaccountable tears, and was freshly indignant at the state of affairs. So soon as they were within doors she turned upon the intruder, and demanded:

"What did you mean by such doin's as these, Nate Pettijohn? Ain't you ashamed to destroy folkses prope'ty this way? Where's my log-cabin quilt? My pillows? All my things?"

The man paid no heed to her, but fixed a hungry gaze upon the basket she had brought earlier in the afternoon, and Eunice interposed:

[Pg 284]

"Wait, Susanna. Let us feed him first, and hear his story afterward."

With that she opened the basket and set fresh food before him, while, with that thoughtfulness which was so constantly belying her sharp tongue, the cottage mistress went to the well and brought in a fresh pail of water. Though not as ravenous as he had been that afternoon by the riverside, he even now devoured, rather than ate, the sandwiches and cakes, swallowing them noisily and so rapidly that what the housekeeper had supposed would be sufficient to last any one for at least twenty-four hours disappeared in less than as many minutes.

"Well, my suz! If that don't beat the Dutch! I shouldn't think, if I hadn't knowed better, 'at you'd seen a mouthful o' victuals sence you scooted out o' Marsden a dozen years ago! An' as for manners—why, our pigs is better behaved. Water? Drink your fill, an' then, Nate Pettijohn, you walk right straight out to that wash-dish in the lean-to an' scrub yourself well. Of all the dirty creatur's—Why, what?"

The vagrant had been seized by a violent fit of coughing, so fierce that it threatened hemorrhage; and Susanna's wrath died.

"Consumption!" she whispered to Eunice, and shivered. It was of consumption "Spriggs, he" had died.

The paroxysm passed and left its victim exhausted. With a longing for rest, he tottered out of the kitchen into the lean-to, but not to wash as its owner had suggested. He went directly to the now uncovered manhole of the cistern and slowly descended a short ladder which protruded from it and had always hitherto hung upon the wall. The women watched him in astonishment, then Susanna hastily procured a candle, and, lighting it, held it above the opening.

[Pg 285]

As she had herself once said, the cistern was as dry as possible, and was in reality like a low-ceilinged little room, with the manhole for sky-light. Into this place the vagrant had tossed the missing bedding, and with his habit of hiding had bestowed himself upon it. In all probability, he had rarely occupied so snug and comfortable, though peculiar, a bedchamber.

"My—s-u-z!" gasped the widow, and sat down on a wash-bench to recover from her amazement.

Miss Maitland said nothing, yet an expression of great satisfaction settled upon her countenance, and, motioning her friend back into the kitchen, explained its cause.

"Nathan himself has decided what should best be done with him. He is perfectly safe and comfortable in that cistern. It is warm and sufficiently aired. He will not be apt to build a fire, as you feared, especially if we see to it that he has enough to eat. Nobody will think of looking for

[Pg 286]

him in such a place, even though, as he declared he should, his father organizes a search for him. Unhappy father, if he does, and—poor, unhappy son. He looks very ill, and he certainly is no more intelligent than when he went away. But he is evidently faithful to Verplanck Sturtevant, as he always was. It is he that has brought back and for safe-keeping, presumably, hidden the brass bound box that Katharine found, and that has led to so many wild rumors. Do you not think we would better leave him undisturbed for the present, until I can secure better clothing for him? Also, can decide that awful question—whether or not to tell Elinor the stolen box is found. It will be like deliberately trying to break her heart over again if I give it to her and it is empty. Yet, it is not mine, and it rests on my conscience like an actual weight. Do advise me, Susanna."

From which it appears that the widow's curiosity had already been satisfied concerning the fabulous "find" in the Maitland forest, and she readily assented to her companion's idea.

"No, Eunice, we couldn't do better. Let him be. Poor wretch, he won't trouble nobody long, by the sound o' that cough. An' if Squire Pettijohn is mean enough an' onfeelin' enough to treat him like he vowed he would ary tramp, 'even his own son,' I guess we can let the Lord 'tend to *him*. He wouldn't know another day's peace, not if he's human; 'cause once that mis'able creatur', no matter what he is now, was a baby—a baby in arms. But—my suz, Eunice! I've just figured it out! How can the Squire 'rest anybody? He ain't no constable. Nobody ain't a constable here in Marsden. Ain't been none sence Isaac Brewster died, an' nobody would take his place. 'Less I'm one, myself, as Moses said."

[Pg 287]

At which she laughed heartily, then hastily added:

"But we must be gettin' home to oncet. I'll step up attic an' get a couple o' shawls to wrop 'round us, heads an' all. I do hope we shall be pervented from takin' cold temptin' Providence the way we have, at our time o' life. Nate, he won't stir no more to-night. He's too tuckered out an' too well fed. Sleep's the best medicine for him, so we'll shut up quiet like an' start. But where in the world'll you get clothes, as you said? Man's clothes, you an' me, old women without a man betwixt us, except Moses, an' it bein' kep' secret from him still. If you tell him he'll tell the deacon, an' what the deacon knows belongs to the hull community."

"I'll find them, Susanna; I'll send an order for all he needs by the morning stage."

"Tell Reub Smith! My suz! Might as well proclaim it from the church steeple!"

"No, indeed. I shall not tell him, but simply send an order by him when he goes to town in the morning."

[Pg 288]

Then they hurried home, and Miss Maitland rested better that night than she had done since the children brought her the brass bound box from out the forest.

Next morning Monty "hooked school." Not that this was an extraordinary thing to happen, although its purpose was mysterious. He did not seek either woods or river, for nuts or fishes, but hung about the post-office till Reuben Smith drove tooting down South Hill into the village street on his way outward toward the county town. The stage drew up with a jerk, Reuben stepped down with unusual liveliness, and behold! there were two patrons ready with orders to be executed.

Miss Eunice and Montgomery Sturtevant. They faced each other in mutual surprise. Each held a sealed letter in hand and each was in haste. The lady spoke first: "Why, Monty! Is your grandmother trusting you to take care of her business matters already? That's fine."

"N-n-no, Aunt Eu-Eu-Eunice. I-I-I-I—" The afflicted lad had never stammered worse nor seemed so uncomfortable.

Puzzled, but too well-bred to pry into other people's affairs, Miss Maitland finished her directions to the stage-driver and general express agent for the village, and went home. Montgomery's relief at her departure made Reuben laugh, but he liked the lad and listened very patiently to the almost endless details stammered at him. Then he most carefully, with an exaggerated caution indeed, bestowed the fat envelope which contained ten whole crisp new dollars where nobody but himself would be apt to look for it—not in the wallet with his other commissions, but in his boot! This gave the whole transaction a touch of the romantic, and suggested possible "hold-ups" in a way to set Monty's eyes a-bulge. Then the stage rattled away to the north, and the day's monotony settled upon Marsden village.

[Pg 289]

There was much whispering that day in school, and a prompt departure from the building at close of the afternoon's session. It had been noticeable, also, that at "nooning" every scholar, old or young, had repaired to the rear of the play-ground, out of hearing of the teacher. There they had grouped themselves about Katharine Maitland, with Montgomery Sturtevant as her supporter, and had listened breathlessly to some matter she divulged. Only one sentence had reached the master's ears, as he tapped the bell for them to come in again to later lessons:

"Everybody don't forget a knife. And everybody'll get an invitation to-morrow. Then everybody will understand, and if everybody isn't perfectly delighted, I shall be surprised. Teacher will have his, too; I'm workin' on it with nice red ink."

[Pg 290]

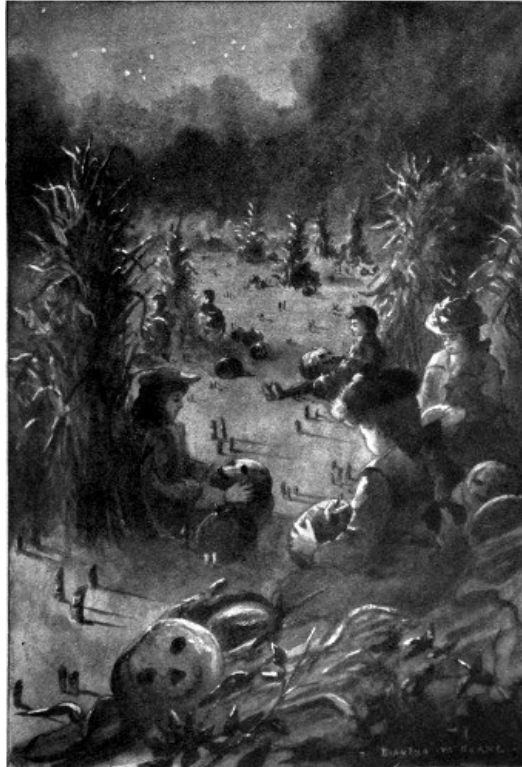
That some exciting affair was on foot, and that he was to be included in it was evident; and being himself not many years older than his "big boys," he was patiently indulgent over the many blunders at recitations which followed.

Never had Marsden school children arrived at their respective homes so early, nor so promptly availed themselves of parents' satisfaction in this promptness. Books were bestowed in tidiness, lunch-baskets hung in place, and in every house in the village there was simultaneously preferred the request:

"May I go out to play?"

Consent obtained—and what mother could refuse it to so deserving a petitioner?—there followed a stampede of youngsters toward Eunice Maitland's south corn-field.

Late October brings early nightfall, and even playtime seems over with the dusk, but that night there were many, many empty places at waiting supper-tables, and many mothers' ears grew anxious listening for the clatter of young feet which came not.



**"BUT THE LATE RISING MOON
LOOKED DOWN UPON A CURIOUS
SCENE"**

But the late rising moon looked down upon a curious scene. Throughout that same south corn-field had been scattered hundreds of golden pumpkins ripe for the harvest; and all among them, each with his or her allotted pile of the great fruit, was every truant youngster. Corn shocks had been overturned for the more comfortable seating of the toilers, and knives gleamed in the moon-rays as the diligent fingers fashioned Jack-o'-lanterns sufficient in number, as Monty declared, to "l-l-light the w-w-wh-whole world!"

[Pg 291]

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 292]

UNINVITED GUESTS

Katharine escaped the chiding she deserved because, when she reëntered the house, Miss Eunice was engaged with company and Susanna was preparing a tray of refreshments to be served the guests. Montgomery escaped because Madam supposed he had been at The Maples where so much of his time was now passed. He went supperless to bed, but Katharine, most guilty of all delinquents, fared sumptuously upon a portion of the dainties from the housekeeper's "company tray." The Turner trio of culprits ate wedges of cold pumpkin pie, eaten standing by the kitchen sink, and went to bed to dream that all the world was made of pumpkins which it was their destiny to consume before a general illumination began. At least, that was what Martha dreamed, and, having roused the other pair to relate it to them, they were sleepy enough to believe they had dreamed it, too.

Other children—But why prolong the story? Many of the pumpkin artists had reason to remember that night for some time to come; yet not one ever admitted that they had not found their fun outweigh their punishment.

[Pg 293]

Some days previous Katharine had put a very mild request to Aunt Eunice, in the words:

"Aunty, would you mind if I had a little Hallowe'en party? Out in the barn, where it wouldn't be any trouble to anybody?"

And the lady, always glad to make her young charge happy, had replied:

"Why, no, dear. Certainly, you may have one if you wish."

"Oh, thank you, thank you, you darling Aunty Eunice!" springing up to hug her guardian ecstatically. Then, with her young cheek against the older one: "And would it be too much to ask—Deacon Meakin to—to stay away that day?"

"Why, Katharine, that couldn't be. Besides giving him offence, how could we spare him?"

"Monty and I could do the chores. Bob Turner could milk. Bob's a first-rate milker, Martha says so."

"Well, well. Maybe it can be arranged. I'll see."

"Because, Aunt Eunice, it's to be such a beautiful benefit to—Oh, I forgot. But if he could stay at home just once; he's so what Widow calls 'pernickity,' and he says children ought to be born 'grewed up.' They can't be that, can they? So I do think, I just do think they might be let to have some nice times without folks scolding and acting hateful."

[Pg 294]

"The deacon doesn't mean to be hateful, Katy. We'll see."

Fortune favored the child as it so often did. After a particularly wearisome contest of wills between the original hired man and his successor, the deacon resigned his position and left in a huff. A neighboring youth was sent for to take his place, but, as far from being a hindrance to Katharine's schemes, proved her very best ally. Montgomery knew William well, and his wheedling, if stammering, tongue soon persuaded the young man that in furthering the success of the party he was furthering his employer's also.

In due time every boy and girl in the township received a laboriously written invitation, and all accepted, of course. This was understood without the trouble of replies.

Even the schoolmaster was not forgotten, though he waited until school was dismissed before he opened his neatly folded bit of paper, and read:

"The favor of your presence is requested at the Big Barn of Miss Eunice Maitland at The Maples, on the evening of October 31st, to a Hallowe'en Corkis. At seven o'clock by the church steeple. Please bring your teaspoon with you."

[Pg 295]

"Yours respectfully,

"KATHARINE MAITLAND."

This unique invitation was the joint production of Katharine and Montgomery. The first part was hers, recalled from wedding-cards often seen at her old home in the city; the latter part was due to Monty's forethought. Katharine had never heard of a "corkis;" but, by way of dabbling in politics through loiterings at the village store, the boy had acquired some technical terms, and insisted that this was what best befitted their case. As he could not spell the word, and she couldn't find it in the dictionary, though she searched all the "Cor" columns through, she adopted phonetic spelling with the above result. Also, since there was as much variety in "time" as there was in clocks, the guests were advised to regulate their arrivals by the biggest one visible. As to the teaspoon clause—that was positively necessary. "How could a boy eat ice-cream without a spoon? And how could anybody, even Aunt Eunice, who had a trunk full of silver, lend a body spoons enough to go around, admitting that one dared ask for them? For if everybody came who was asked, and everybody certainly would since they hadn't been polite enough to send regrets (even before the cards were out), what would a body do, I should like to know?"

[Pg 296]

As there was altogether too much body in this argument for Montgomery he yielded the point and waited the great event with what patience he might. Not so much patience was required, however, since there was much labor to accomplish. William hitched up the team, thoughtfully taking an opportunity when Miss Maitland had gone to pay a visit to the distant Mansion, and brought the field full of Jack-o'-lanterns up to the barn; into which, carefully keeping the sound sides of the pumpkins toward the kitchen windows and Susanna's eyes, he conveyed them. Then the doors were closed and the decorating began.

"C-c-can't make 'em hang," lamented Montgomery, after a few moments' unsuccessful effort.

"Course not. That string's too light. Wait. I'll fetch something," said Katharine, as decorator in charge. Then she sped into the house and borrowed Susanna's clothes-line.

"My clothes-line, child? What on earth for?"

"Oh, you'll see sometime. I sha'n't hurt it!" returned the eager girl, skipping away.

The widow was glad to have "the children" out of the way for the time being. She, also, was planning a "surprise," for Eunice had told her of Katharine's "little Hallowe'en party," and the good housekeeper determined that not a single young guest should return home after that event

[Pg 297]

without carrying a report of a fine repast.

As she said to Moses, when fixing him up for the day:

"It does seem good after all our worries lately to do somethin' just plain plumb foolish, like lettin' young ones have a nice time. Me an' Eunice, we have more on our minds 'an we let on to you, but I'm goin' to forget 'em."

"Forgettin' your mind won't be no great job, nor loss nuther. Wouldn't be much matter if 'twasn't never found again," he retorted, half-facetiously, and half-vexed that, as she hinted, there were still confidences withheld from him.

Susanna ignored his playfulness, and went on as if he had not interrupted:

"I'm goin' to make jumbles, an' little frosted cakes, an' teeny-tiny riz biscuit, an' raisin-loaf. I've got a ham on b'ilin', an'—my suz! It most makes me feel a dozen years younger, just the mere idee of havin' a childern's party. We hain't had none sence Johnny run away, an'—"

"Oh, hum! An' here I must lie like a log o' wood an' no share in it. Me that always thought more of young ones 'an you did. Anyhow, I don't see what great call *you* got to mix up in it. S'pose you expect to be invited, don't you? What you goin' to wear? White with pink ribbons, like all the other little girls?" demanded the imprisoned man.

[Pg 298]

"Well, I hain't thought much about my clothes, but I did lay out to wear my common sense an' trim it with a wreath o' good nature, an' maybe a sprig of patience fastenin' the hull. Never mind, Moses. Maybe you'll get more share in it 'an I shall. Somethin' may happen to keep me from enjoyin' myself any more'n you are this minute. An'—my suz! I smell that ham water b'ilin' over this instant. An'—what next! There's Kitty Keehoty comin' out the tool-house with that roll o' grapevine wire that you put away so careful—an' it's most more'n she can lug. But she'd tackle it. She'd tackle it if it was twicet as heavy. She's got more ambition an' gumption than ary young one I ever knowed. My suz! She couldn't carry it, after all, so she's put it down an' is draggin' it. She looks a pictur'! Her hair blowin' all 'round her head, her cheeks like roses, her feet fairly dancin' with happiness, her eyes like stars. Well, a body'd ought to take a bit o' trouble, now an' then, whilst they're little. It does take such a mere mite to make childern pleased. She—"

Poor Uncle Moses could bear no more. There had never been so many interesting things happening as since he had been in bed, unable to take part in them. Within his age-worn body beat the heart of a little child, and he was nearly frantic, imagining what might be going on beyond those closed barn doors and he shut out.

[Pg 299]

"Clear out, Susanna Sprigg. Get away from that winder. Don't ye let me hear another word about that party. If a miracle happens so's I can go to it, all right. If not—the sooner you look after that ham the better."

Susanna turned from the pane, saying quite gently:

"I don't know as the days of miracles is past. Seems if there was some been done right here in Marsden township. I am sorry for ye, Moses. I'd almost ruther stay to home myself than have you miss the fun. Maybe you won't. Maybe a fresh miracle will be done. Maybe I shall see you the chief sinner in the synagogue, I mean the most invited comp'ny—My suz! You know what I mean better'n I can say it. I'll fetch you up a sandwich, soon's that ham is cooked."

She hurried below, and the unhappy hired man turned his face from the light and went to sleep, or tried to, though the odors of good things wafted to him from the kitchen beneath kept his thoughts on the disturbing party and angered him against the two children he loved.

"Should ha' thought they'd waited till I was up an' 'round again. 'Twouldn't have hurt 'em an' would ha' been showing some decent feelin' fer me," he grumbled. And little did the old man dream that he was, indeed, the very heart and centre of the whole festivity!

[Pg 300]

Oh, what a day that was! The toilers in the barn sent in word that they were too busy to stop for any dinner, and Susanna retorted that she was herself fully too busy to cook it for them. Everybody had a slice of bread and butter and a glass of milk, which didn't take a minute to dispose of. Even the mistress, who had returned, fared thus.

That afternoon Reuben Smith tooted up to Miss Maitland's front gate and handed out a paste-board box, very large and weighty, which Susanna hastily received and carried into the house. There it was hurriedly opened behind closed doors by Aunt Eunice, with her housemate to assist, and was found to contain a new suit of men's clothing, with all accessories needful.

"I'll carry them to poor Nathan at once, and make sure he puts them on. Then, if you're willing, we'll light a fire in your stove and burn all his old rags," said the mistress.

"Not alone, Eunice Maitland, not alone!" cried the old housekeeper, who wouldn't have missed this business if all the jumbles she had made had burned themselves to a crisp. Fortunately, they were out of the way, and though she had mixed dough for raisin-cake she hadn't yet put in "the lightenin'." "If we start to oncet there ain't nothin' to harm, an' the childern's so busy they'll never notice. Moses is asleep. Let's go right away. My suz! Seems if I couldn't wait to make that poor feller into a decent man!"

[Pg 301]

As excited and eager over their own secret as the young folks over theirs, they seized bonnets

and wraps, and, carrying the box between them, slipped unobserved from the house in the direction of the woods.

Thus it chanced that they did not see what an unusual thing the stage-driver did; how that, leaving Miss Maitland's parcel at the front of the house, he drove by a roundabout lane to the back door of the barn, and there set down, with William's help, two barrel-like tubs, weighty with broken ice and carefully covered with bits of old carpet. Similar tubs had sometimes been brought to Marsden by the same messenger, but only for such occasions as the Fourth of July or the Sunday-school picnic. Never before for any private function, and the news of the present arrival spread swiftly through the village, suggesting to interested parents that, though themselves uninvited, it might be as well to go along and see what the children were doing!

And it came at last! The delightful hour, the culmination of all this preparation. At last, at last, the wheezy clock in the church steeple announced that it was seven o'clock!

Then from out the many homes of Marsden and its by-ways issued the eager guests. Girls in white frocks; boys in Sunday suits; all uncomfortable in freshly donned winter flannels—since this was to be a sort of out-doors party and there must be no afterclaps of croup; and elders in their second-best attire, worn with an affected indifference of its just happening so.

[Pg 302]

Said Mrs. Turner to Mrs. Clackett: "Course we wasn't asked. It's just a children's party that Johnny Maitland's little girl is giving as a sort of youngsters' 'infair.' Pa and me thought 'twas better to come along and see the children got there safe, them not being used to going out evenings."

To which her neighbor replied: "Yes, we feel that way about our girls and boy. But I confess, we're sort of curious to know what the 'Corkis' part of the invitation means. Clackett, he says he guesses Katy meant 'caucus,' but that don't throw no more light on the matter, if it does. What on earth a lot of young ones want with a 'caucus,' beats me. But here we are, and—My! Isn't it pretty?"

Pretty it was, and far, far more than pretty. To these unused eyes such a scene as might have come from fairy-land. Even to Aunt Eunice, newly admitted, the old barn seemed an unknown spot; and she sat enthroned upon her seat of honor—an oat-bin transformed by cushions of straw and sheaves of corn—amazed but equally delighted. The whole great structure was ablaze with radiance. Susanna's clothes-line and Moses' grapevine wire supported grinning Jacks innumerable. The glowing yellow heads looked down from rafter and beam, peeped from the stalls, dangled from stanchions. Between them gleamed also oddly shaped Chinese lanterns, and these were a form of illumination wholly new to that inland village. There were sheaves and vines and branches everywhere, and those who observed could scarcely believe that the whole transformation, save and beyond the carving of the pumpkins, had been wrought by three pairs of young hands.

[Pg 303]

What cared happy Kitty Keehoty that of all her crisp ten dollars there remained but thirteen cents? Hadn't they paid for all these shining candles, those tubs of cream, the grotesque lanterns which her new friends so admired, and the heaps of candy on the table at the far end of the great floor? The table was improvised by a couple of planks laid upon barrels and covered by a cloth borrowed from the linen closet. It would have been covered with nothing else, save the candy and a pile of wooden plates for the cream, had not Susanna produced her own surprise—in such stores of cakes and sandwiches and toothsome dainties as made the small giver of the function open her own eyes in amazement.

Oh, how delightful it all was! And didn't the pleasure in so many faces more than pay for the ten dollars spent and the proudly weary widow's hours at an oven door?

[Pg 304]

But how they came! So fast, so eager, so cordially willing to be pleased! All the young guests who had been bidden by such a painful outlay of pen and ink, and all their fathers and their mothers, "their uncles and their aunts and their cousins!" All the merrier, all the better, all the surer of success! For the best was yet to come. The delicious, ambitious, loving secret scheme which had originated in the teeming brain of Kitty Keehoty, and, aided and abetted by Montgomery, her knight, was now to be divulged.

"My—suz!" quoth Susanna, dismayed by the vast proportions of Katharine's "little party," "however—shall I give such a multitude—even a bite apiece?"

"I'll help!" cried Mrs. Clackett, quite understanding "a bite apiece" meant no personal violence. "I've lots of stuff baked at home. I'll fetch a basket of it in a jiffy."

"I, too!" echoed Mrs. Turner, and the pair set briskly homeward in neighborly kindness. Other matrons, not to be outdone, also disappeared from the assembly for a brief time; and soon thereafter William was called upon to improvise another table, till both were groaning with the weight of good things.

"My! It's most like a Sunday-school picnic, ain't it?" exclaimed the village seamstress, who at seventy years still had the same innocent enjoyment in such affairs as she had had at seven. "But, hush! Somethin's a-doin'!"

[Pg 305]

Something was certainly "a-doing!" There was a great bustle and stir at the double doors and in came Deacon Meakin, William, Mr. Clackett, and the schoolmaster, carrying a cot between them on which lay Moses Jones, at last minus his ball and chain, and feeling as if he didn't know

himself—so utterly amazed was he. Amid a sudden outringing cheer the cot was carefully deposited in an open space that had been kept for it, close beside that throne where Eunice still sat smiling in gracious hospitality.

The fresh excitement incident to this arrival had scarcely died, when Madam Sturtevant appeared, with her small handmaid in train. The lady had been somewhat doubtful about accepting the invitation for herself, having been informed by her grandson that, outside The Maples' family, she was the only grown-up so favored except the schoolmaster; and she was more than doubtful for Alfaretta. For a time the anxious girl's fate hung in the balance. It did not strike Madam as just the correct thing to take a servant—Alfy was really that, of course—to a Maitland party. Yet the child had just as good blood in her veins as many others who would attend, even if her lot in life were less fortunate. Besides, was it right to disturb her quiet habits by such frivolity? While the matter was pending, Alfaretta could only calm her perturbed mind by gathering every belated daisy she could find and testing her fortune upon its white petals. "Shall I be let to go? Shall I not?" Mostly, the daisies said: "I shall!" Yet it was old Whitey who, after all, decided the question.

[Pg 306]

That mild-eyed bovine had the spirit of an Arab steed. Had she been born a colt and not a calf she would have "pricked it o'er the plain" with the best of her race; but being merely a somewhat venerable cow, she could only wander. In the wide fields still surrounding the Mansion there was sufficient pasturage for many cows, and certainly too much for one; so there was not the slightest reason why she should trespass upon village dooryards except the fact that she delighted to do so. Broken gates, which there was nobody to repair, made wandering easy; and it may be that she had, in part, acquired the habit in the days of her youth, when Verplanck Sturtevant had 'tended her as his son did now. Both masters were far better content elsewhere than at home, and Whitey fully shared their preferences. She had wandered again, some two days since, and had not returned at nightfall, as was her habit. Therefore, remembering that at the "Hallowe'en Corkis" there would be many children assembled, and that children "know everything" of village happenings, Madam had come, meaning to ask for news.

[Pg 307]

So the daisies had it, truly; and to the young bond-maid the longed-for happiness had been given.

When Madam had been assigned a place beside Miss Eunice, and the murmur of voices had recommenced, somebody struck a bell and every ear and eye became attentive. Katharine did not know whether this were the approved method of bringing a "Corkis" to silence, but it was one that served in school and proved to do so here. While the silence lasted and the crowding guests craned their necks forward, she was seen to lead, push, or in some manner propel a reluctant boy toward a ladder resting against the hay-mow and in full sight of most.

The boy was Montgomery, of course, and he was positively shaking with fright; but the girl whispered something in his ear—"For Uncle Mose!" and he rallied to his duty. Tossing off her guiding hand, he ran to the ladder, mounted it half-way, and faced about upon the multitude. He had been well tutored. He fixed his eyes not upon the faces below but at an exalted roof-beam, and addressing that began:

"Girls and boys, gentlemen and ladies: You have been invited here to-night to enjoy yourselves and to make somebody else enjoy himself. That somebody is Uncle Moses Jones, whom we all love, and who has had lots of trouble and broken bones lately. Next Tuesday is going to be election when our fathers and mothers vote, or—or—fathers do, anyway. If we ask our folks to do things they generally do them. What I ask now is that every one of you shall ask your father to vote for Uncle Mose to be constable, and I now nomernate him to be a constable. All in favor of his being constable—say 'aye!'"

[Pg 308]

Amid the uproar of "ayes" that followed Monty jumped headlong from his rostrum and would have run straight to his grandmother, had not Kitty Keehoty caught him midway and hugged him her stoutest, crying: "Oh, you splendidest brave boy! You did it, you did it! You never tripped once. You never stuttered a single stutter from beginning to end! Who says you sha'n't be President some day, an' be nomernated in a grown-up corkis? But—my sake, Montgomery Sturtevant! You forgot the most important part. I'll have to say that myself, 'cause it's that will count. That will be the promise."

Another stroke of Aunt Eunice's table-bell and a white-clad little figure was in Monty's place upon the ladder, holding up her hand for close attention. Without preliminary she informed the audience that there was one thing had been forgotten, and that was "the cranberries."

"Right by the head of the table is a basket of cranberries. *A cranberry is a promise.* There's another empty basket beside the full one. Everybody, girl or boy, who wants Uncle Moses to be constable must take a cranberry out one basket and drop it into the other; and—*those who don't drop cranberries can't have—ice-cream!*"

[Pg 309]

Squire Pettijohn had come—in a case of general town interest as this seemed to be it was important the great man should be present—and it was he who cried so loudly: "Hear! Hear!" and it was he, also, who started the laughter which followed, and pinched Kate's cheek as she passed him, saying something about "intimidation" and "lobbying," at which there was more laughter—Katy wondering why.

But the laughter did not continue long, since it was surely now time for supper; and, having swiftly decided that however little she might like him, yet the Squire's influence might be a powerful factor in carrying out this secretly designed plan of the children's, Miss Eunice was just

descending from her oat-bin throne to ask him to open the feast, when another slight commotion occurred near the door. A woman screamed, and every eye turned upon two tardy and uninvited guests, who, leading each other as it were, now entered the scene.

Whitey, the cow, and Nate Pettijohn—tramp!

CHAPTER XXI.

[Pg 310]

A NEIGHBORLY TRICK OF THE WIND

THE silence which followed lasted for a long time, during which Whitey stared mildly about upon her many acquaintances as if daring one of them to accuse her of vagrancy. Nathan, newly clothed and decent of apparel, but, as to unkempt hair and besmirched skin, still unmistakably the tramp, let his wild, frightened eyes roam ceaselessly from one guest to another till, finally, they fixed their gaze upon one face and rested there.

The face was that of Squire Pettijohn, hitherto complacent, self-satisfied village magnate. Now suddenly grown haggard and old, confronting that other face so curiously like his own. His son! Whose scant intelligence had always been a shame to him and because of which he had given neglect where care should have been. Whom he had been secretly thankful to lose and whom he had hoped would never again be found.

But he had found himself, and for a time the misguided parent and most unhappy child studied each other in mutual shrinking and dismay. All the adult guests recognized poor Nathan, now restored to the outward semblance of the decent citizen he had once been, and understood how it was that in their fleeting glimpses of the recent "tramp" there had been something puzzlingly familiar. The children gathered in knots, staring and quiet, and more than half-afraid. Unconsciously they felt that here was tragedy where but a moment since had been their merry comedy.

[Pg 311]

Then Katharine, as little lady of the feast, resolved to end this dreadful silence which was spoiling all the fun; and, running to Nathan's side, took his hand in hers and led him forward, saying:

"This is a friend of mine, people, and he's just in time for supper. I know him very well. I spent an afternoon with him down by the river, and you ought to know him, too, Uncle Moses, 'cause he's such a good fisher."

Then she pushed Nathan's soiled hand toward the man on the cot, who hesitated for one second, glancing toward the Squire's set face, then grasped it cordially, exclaiming:

"Why, Nate, hello! When'd you come to town? Hain't never lost your vote, have ye? 'Cause I 'low you'll have to cast it for me for constable next Tuesday, sence I've just been nomernated for the office. Hey?"

The tramp's eyes left his father's person and looked down upon the genial, helpless man beside him, and a slow smile stole into them.

[Pg 312]

"Hello, Uncle Mose. I've got here—eh?"

"Yes, you've got here, got home, all right. Better stay now. We're all—I say we're *all* glad to see ye. Marsden ain't such a big community she can afford to lose anybody. Where'd ye hail from, anyway?"

The hired man had grasped the situation promptly. Recognizing Nathan, he also recognized, as he supposed, the solution of the mysteries which had surrounded him of late. Eunice and Susanna had found the vagrant out, and had kept his identity secret, fearing the Squire. Now to Moses' intense satisfaction in his nomination—irregular though it was—was added the reflection that no harm could result, since at present there was no constable in Marsden, nor would be one until he himself was elected. He would be elected, of course. There was now no doubt of that. Kitty Keehoty, bless her! had put her small hand to the wheel of fortune and given it a whirl which was fast sending all good things his way. Then, if he was so favored, should his first official act be the punishment of a fellow townsman? A fishing townsman, at that? Not if he, Moses Jones, knew himself; and though he was still a "bedrid block o' wood," the block was fast repairing and would soon be as good as a freshly growing tree.

[Pg 313]

"From—from him. From Planck. I—I come to bring the box. But—I lost it. Oh, Madam! he sent it to you—he was dyin' then—and I've lost it—I've lost it! Planck'll be mad. He'll scowl and talk—Has anybody seen Planck's box?"

The forlorn fellow had left Moses' side and crossed to where Madam Sturtevant sat rigidly upon her elevated throne. The memories this returned wanderer had roused in her were so painful that they seemed to strangle her. Her throat grew dry, her lips parched, and her gaze was glued to the face of the vagrant who had been her lost son's chosen companion, vassal, possible friend. Why, why had he come?

Eunice laid her hand on the gentlewoman's arm. She felt that this tension must be loosed, even at

the cost of fresh pain. "Elinor," said she, "you have borne much. Can you endure a further shock? it may be of fresh sorrow, but it may be of joy. Your brass bound box is found. Nathan brought it, Katharine found it, I have it."

Squire Pettijohn coughed, and strode majestically forward. He was once more the man of position who must see to it that his townsmen's interests were protected. This woman had maligned him. He had heard that she complained of his usuries, that he had taken advantage of her misfortunes, that he was a hard and cruel man. Worst of all to him—had said that he was not a gentleman! Conquering his disappointment at Nathan's return, he improved his opportunity of punishing and humbling her.

[Pg 314]

"Madam Sturtevant, ah—er—hm-m—at the time your guilty son disappeared, taking my son—whom his influence had ruined—with him, it was said that a certain casket of valuables disappeared as well. In behalf of the interest Marsden took in the case, and of my own—my own personal interest, I demand that if that casket has been restored it shall be opened here in the presence of your townsmen. I—er—my accommodation in times of your necessities, the large amounts now due me—I claim the right, the authority to say—Let the casket be produced."

Madam said nothing. She fixed her large eyes, still guiltless of spectacles (save in the privacy of home), and regarded him as she might have regarded some reptile.

Nathan seemed struggling with words which fear of his father prevented his speaking. But Miss Maitland stepped down, and, by a nod, summoned others to her, so that the vagrant presently felt himself surrounded by a group of kindly faces, which beamed upon him in protection. William, Deacon Meakin, the chivalrous schoolmaster, Susanna, and Katharine, quite unafraid to fling her small arm around his stooping shoulders and to pat them encouragingly.

[Pg 315]

Then Aunt Eunice went out, but was back again so quickly she had hardly been missed. She carried her hands quite high, so that all might see the strange, glittering, brass bound box they held, and, going swiftly forward, laid it on the Madam's lap, who recoiled from it, at first shrinking back and letting her clasped hands drop limply to her sides, yet rallied her courage and her pride as Eunice's tone of command touched both.

"Open it, Elinor. It is right. It is just. Let the truth be known at last."

Everybody crowded forward, the Squire among them, as with a simple touch, known only to the initiated, the keyless casket was unbanded and opened to the sight of all. Those who had anticipated the blaze of jewels, or, at least, the bulk of valuable papers and bonds, fell back disappointed. The box was absolutely empty save for a small folded sheet which looked like an ordinary letter.

A sigh, like a great sob, swept over the multitude, and now the fear which had troubled the tramp vanished, and, breaking free of the group about him, he laid his hand on Madam's knee and cried, exultantly:

"I did it! I fetched it safe. I was sick—oh, I was sick!—I was in jail—I was on an island—I was shipwrecked—I was in the water, with big, big waves—I was—so long, so long. But I wore it on a strap around my neck. Planck wrote it all and sealed it and put it in the box. Then he died, and I had promised; so I had to come, else I would have died, too. I wanted to, without Planck. But we'd told it to each other. We was good friends. Planck never called me 'fool,' not once, not in all our lives. When he went away with not a cent in his pocket, I couldn't stand it. Old Squire was rough. Old Squire was rich. Planck should be rich, too, just one little box full, anyway. But—He wrote it all down—read it, read it. Read it out real plain, like he was saying it again. My head aches. I can't think. Planck could think. But—Planck is dead."

[Pg 316]

In a dull despair the poor wretch who had journeyed so many leagues, across so many lands, through so many weary years, dropped his face in his hands, and wept like a child.

But with dry eyes, if tremulous hands, Elinor Sturtevant opened the letter as she had been besought. It bore date of a day long past, and address of Majomba, Africa, in the familiar script of her idolized son; yet keeping nothing secret to herself, she did "read it out," and this it was:

"MY DEAR MOTHER:—I send my farewell to you from this distant corner of the earth, where I came seeking fortune and finding death. Nathan has just got well of the fever from which I am dying, and promises to carry this letter to you. I have no money to send it by post even if I did not think it kindness to entrust him with it. He has loved me, been faithful to me even unto death, and it will be a last trust to comfort him. I foresee that he will have many vicissitudes before he reaches home—if ever he does; though it is my prayer that he may and that dear old Marsden will receive him kindly.

[Pg 317]

"It is his wish, and it is but just, to explain that he stole your brass bound box, in which I enclose this, and why. Simply for my unworthy sake. He believed that it held money, and a fear that I would be angry with him if I knew of the deed, made him keep it secret for a long, long time. Then once, in dire necessity, after Elizabeth was gone, he did confess and give it to me, and we opened it together.

"It was absolutely empty. I tell you this, dying; when a man speaks the truth. If ever it held valuables they had been removed, and, presumably, by my father. I supposed you, also, knew this, and so would not break the silence my angry pride

imposed for the sake of a mere empty box. Do not blame poor Nate—he is scarce blameworthy, and he has loved me blindly all his life. So would he have loved his austere father if he had had a chance. And of all the lessons my life has brought me this I hold the highest—that love is best.

"I think of Elizabeth, sweetly resting under the turf at home. I think of my little son, and pray our Heavenly Father to be kinder to him than his earthly one has been. I think of my mother, whose heart I broke, and, dying, I cry—God bless her.

[Pg 318]

"VERPLANCK."

When the clear old voice quavered into silence there was not a dry eye left among the enrapt listeners. There was not a heart of man or woman that did not feel a sting at its own unjust judgment of the past. Nor was there one, either old or young, who did not pity rather than blame the poor sinner who had "loved much."

Some one was seen to go softly away. It was Squire Pettijohn, forgetful of his dire threat against any son of man who dared to "tramp" God's earth, unwarranted. Squire Pettijohn, with head bowed, heart humbled, who had always branded another man's son as "thief," only to find that self-confessed offender the child of his own home. Nobody sought to hinder him. In silence let him suffer his own shame—that would be punishment sufficient.

Madam sat so long with the opened box and letter in her lap, and with her eyes staring so at vacancy, that Katharine could not bear it. Nor could she bear that Monty should cry, as he was doing in that dreadful, quiet way. Boys shouldn't cry—it meant something terrible when they did. Besides, why should he now, anyway? The knowledge of his father's death was nothing new; and here was all the mystery explained, and the suspicion which had clouded his name completely removed.

[Pg 319]

"Why, Monty, darling, splendid Monty! Don't! Don't! You ought to be the gladdest boy who ever lived. See. Look at your grandmother. She isn't saying anything, and there is sorrow in her face, but there's wonderful pride in it, too. Why, think, boy, think! If for years and years you had thought somebody you loved was bad and then suddenly found they were good, after all, would you cry? No, indeed. Anyhow, I shouldn't. I should just hip-hip-hurrah! Three cheers for your father, that all can talk of and love now, and was, Uncle Moses says, one of the splendidest boys ever grew up in Marsden. Only he didn't like to stay at home, and that got him into trouble. That took away his chance of ever being President. But you can be if you want to. Any boy who stays at home and cures his own stuttering by just taking care and practising and going slow—and being dreadful nice to his grandmother—or mothers and fathers, like Ned's and Bob's—they can grow up to be Presidents or constables, 'ary' one. Let's give them, the cheers! Three for Montgomery Sturtevant, who's never going to do a wrong thing again, because he's found a father to talk about and love, just as I do 'Johnny,' who was mine! Three cheers for Nate Pettijohn, who brought the good news home! Three cheers for the brass bound box, that tried to be a gold mine, but turned out something ever and ever so much better! And three times three cheers for Uncle Moses Jones, who is going to be constable, after all, and looks this minute as if he wanted to arrest me, the first one, because I don't fetch him his supper, and who knows as well as I do that all that ice-cream is melting lickety-cut, while I stand here talking! Hip! Hip! Hurr-a-ah! And a tiger! Hip—hip—hurrah!"

[Pg 320]

How the rafters rang! and how surprised was every one to hear a girl, a mere little girl, deliver such an oration, and with such an entire forgetfulness of self. Not knowing then how great her heart was nor how she longed to make glad every single person in the world, even though most of her schemes went so wide of the mark that her own father had dubbed her his little "Quixote."

This brought all the company safely back from the realm of sentiment and deep emotion to the commonplace level of hunger and good cheer awaiting it. So Eunice Maitland herself led the way to table with Nathan Pettijohn close beside her, and, since there were no chairs to sit upon, took her stand at the end, and, bowing her graceful old head, gave silent thanks to the Giver of a feast so glorious as this had proved.

[Pg 321]

Even Madam, who could not be persuaded to leave her lofty isolation upon the oat-bin, nor to loose her hold of her brass bound box with its precious enclosure—so much more valuable than the diamonds which had once sparkled within it—even she did consent to taste of that rare delicacy which had come to Marsden in ugly wooden tubs. Her portion, though, was brought upon a china dish, because Susanna feared the gentlewoman's fastidious palate would dislike the flavor of a wooden plate. But then, intimate as she was through hearsay with the Mansion household, Susanna had yet never heard about burnt suppawn, and how an old-time gentlewoman can eat it without grimacing, even though she choke in the event. And Alfaretta—Her happiness must be guessed at. There isn't time to tell it; nor how many times her wooden plate was filled and refilled. It seemed to Katharine, observant, as if the poor girl's mouth opened and closed like a trap over every morsel presented to it, and that there was no evidence of swallowing. But, then, Alf had never before attended a Hallowe'en Corkis, and probably never would again.

Still observant, Katharine saw Aunt Eunice's dear face grow more and more thoughtful, yet with a thoughtfulness in no measure sad. Finally, she left Nathan to Mrs. Clackett's care and hastily crossed the room to Madam's side.

"Elinor, do you remember how hard the old Squire tried to tell us who were watching his last

[Pg 322]

hours of something that troubled him? And how we failed to comprehend?"

"Surely, Eunice, I remember," answered the old wife, slightly aggrieved. "Why should I not if you do?"

"Because one night when you had dropped asleep he roused, almost like himself again, and saw me. Then he said: 'Eunice, I am very forgetful. But I remember something now that I must tell Elinor.' I was so foolish, I fancied some other time would do, and you were so tired. I couldn't bear that you should be awakened, and nodded toward the sofa where you lay. He seemed to understand, and murmured: 'Never mind. I'll tell you. There is provision ample. He didn't take it. I accused him because I missed it. I—I—secret chamber—Oh, my head!' Then he dropped away again, and afterward came only those hopeless efforts which you saw as well as I. Now, I believe I've had an inspiration. Verplanck's father, sane, recalled the fact that he had wrongly accused his son while his mind wandered. It was he who had emptied the brass bound box and bestowed its contents in some place he felt was safer. In the secret chamber, I believe. Let us go and search for them!"

"Eunice, how silly! As if I hadn't ransacked every inch of every room in the old Mansion—all for nothing. Besides, what could one do at night?" [Pg 323]

"What may we not do? What is one pair of eyes to many? What one tallow dip to a hundred Jack-o'-lanterns, lighted with real 'store' candles? May we try? Shall I give the word?"

Madam stood up. She was so happy in her letter that she cared not what else might happen. Besides, it was impossible to avoid sharing the enthusiasm shining in the face of her lifelong friend.

"Eunice, you are positively as childish as Katharine herself. But do as you please, do as you please. All the world is welcome to the Mansion now that it's honor has come home! And, servantless almost as I am, I can comfortably feel that there is no room, nor closet even, in the old place that is not fit for the inspection of every Marsden housewife. Yes, thank God! I have never felt myself demeaned by any household task that presented, and cleanliness is part of pure religion. Do as you like, dear, do as you like."

This was glorious! All Marsden felt that the night held too much of wonder to be true. After the party, after the restoration of the brass bound box, after Nathan Pettijohn's rehabilitation, after the establishment of Verplanck Sturtevant's innocence, after Moses' nomination, after the fine feast, to be admitted, to visit and examine—nay, more, authorized to pry into the famous but exclusive Mansion—Well, words simply failed. [Pg 324]

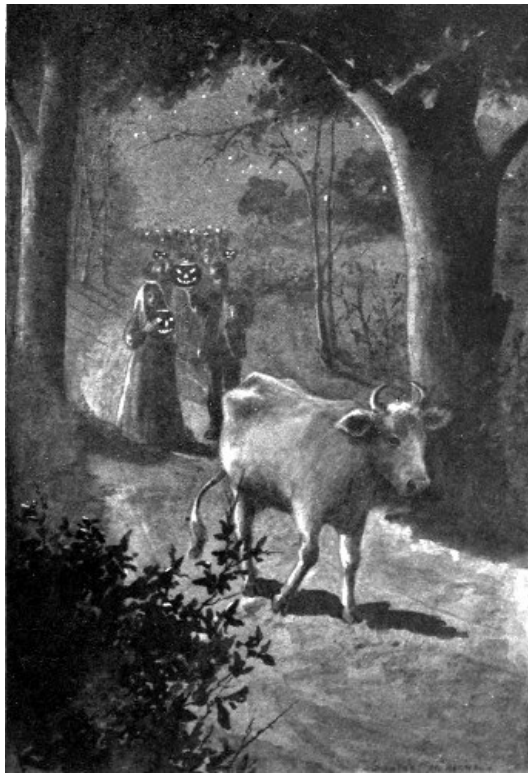
The elders in that astonishing procession conducted themselves more hilariously than their children. Each armed with a grinning Jack, and somebody driving Whitey as a snowy guide, they marched two abreast down Marsden thoroughfare, into the Mansion grounds, through the wide entrance hospitably thrown open, into and over the house as will or curiosity dictated.

But everywhere with eager eyes, searching, hoping for the stately impoverished mistress of the Mansion that her treasures might be found.

Only the most nimble followed Monty and Katharine up the queer stairs of the "old part" into the chamber under the eaves where soldiers had once lain hidden. But even they, with their gleaming Jacks, were sufficient to set the whole low room aglow, yet was there no longer need for search.

The wind, which had done such devastation in the town, which had blown a welcome tramp back to his native haunts, had done even more. It had revealed the secret of years. Part of the chimney lay heaped on the floor, and among the fallen bricks and stones appeared a big tin box. A most ordinary box, such as many people use for insignificant belongings.

Somebody dubiously suggested that "It might be *it!*"



**"EACH ARMED WITH A GRINNING
JACK, AND SOMEBODY DRIVING
WHITEY AS A SNOWY GUIDE"**

There was nothing dubious about Montgomery. Tossing his lantern to Bob Turner, he seized the tin case and scampered down the ladder stairs with a speed nothing but habit could have secured. Rushing into the ancient drawing-room, so oddly lighted now, he flung himself headlong upon Madam, stammering excitedly:

[Pg 325]

"Gr-gr-gram-ma! I've found i-i-i-it!"

Madam remembered the box, so valueless in itself. She had not seen it for years. She had no faith that it held aught but trifles now. Let the good neighbors see. A simple turn of the wrist, the commonplace key clicked in the lock, the flat cover fell back and—the lost treasure was revealed! All the missing jewels in their cases, all the bonds whose value would more than lift the mortgages upon the fine old property, all the gold in canvas sacks which would take Montgomery through college and train him for that possible Presidency to which he aspired.

Was ever such a night? Was ever such honest neighborly rejoicing? And were ever Marsden townfolk so late out of their comfortable beds? For the candles in the Jacks had long burned out before that procession of happy people took their now darkened way homeward and Kitty Keehoty's Hallowe'en Corkis came to its final end.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BRASS BOUND BOX ***

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