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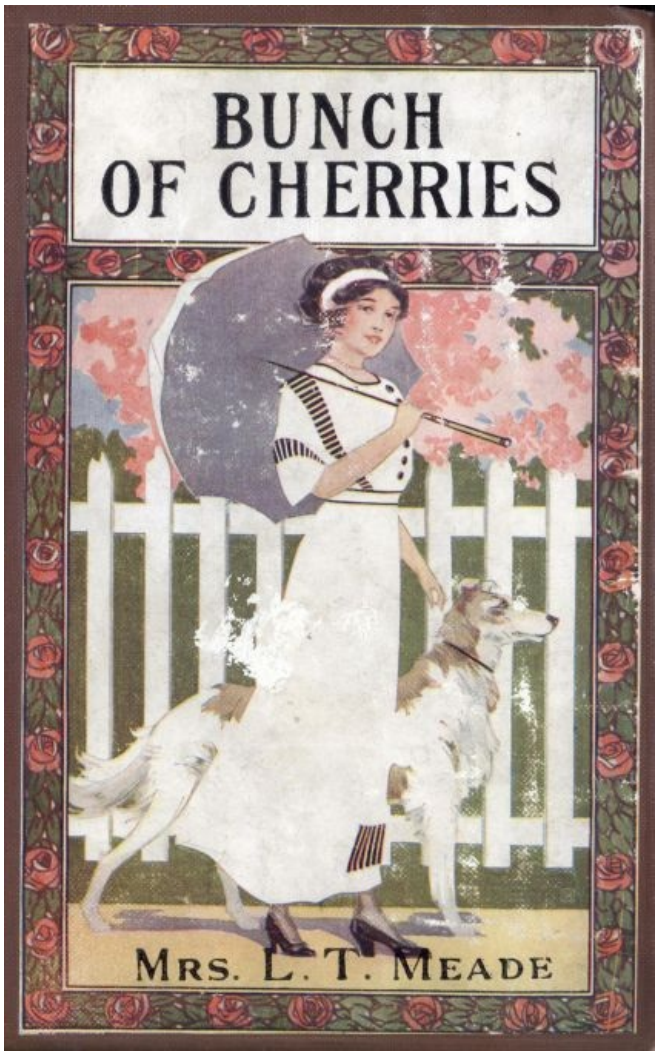

A Bunch of Cherries

A STORY OF CHERRY COURT SCHOOL

BY

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"A Modern Tomboy," "The School Favorite," "Children's Pilgrimage,"
"Little Mother to the Others," Etc.

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A BUNCH OF CHERRIES.

CHAPTER I.

THE SCHOOL.

The house was long and low and rambling. In parts at least it must have been quite a hundred years old, and even the modern portion was not built according to the ideas of the present day, for in 1870 people were not so aesthetic as they are now, and the lines of beauty and grace were not considered all essential to happiness.

So even the new part of the house had square rooms destitute of ornament, and the papers were small in pattern and without any artistic designs, and the windows were square and straight, and the ceilings were somewhat low.

The house opened on to a wide lawn, and at the left of the lawn was a paddock and at the right a shrubbery, and the shrubbery led away under its overhanging trees into the most perfect walled-in garden that was ever seen. The garden was two or three hundred years old. The oldest inhabitants of the place had never known the time when Cherry Court garden was not the talk of the country. Visitors came from all parts round to see it. It was celebrated on account of its very high walls built of red brick, its size, for it covered at least three acres of ground, and its magnificent cherries. The cherry trees in the Court garden bore the most splendid fruit which could be obtained in any part of the county. They were in great demand, not only for the girls who lived in the old house and played in the garden, but for the neighbors all over the country. A big price was always paid for these cherries, for they made such splendid jam, as well as being so full of juice and so ripe and good to eat that their like could not be found anywhere else.

The cherries were of all sorts and kinds, from the celebrated White Heart to the black cherry. There were cherries for cooking and cherries for eating, and in the season the trees, which were laden with ripe fruit, were a sight to behold.

In the height of the cherry season Mrs. Clavering always gave a cherry feast. It was the event of the entire year, and the girls looked forward to it, making all their arrangements in connection with it, counting the hours until it arrived, and looking upon it as the great feature of their school year. Everything turned on whether the cherries were good and the weather fine. There was no greater stimulus to hard work than the merest mention of this golden day, which came as a rule towards the end of June and just before the summer vacation. For Cherry Court School was old-fashioned according to our modern ideas, and one of its old-fashioned plans was to give holidays at the end of June instead of the end of July, so that the girls had the longest, finest days at home, and came back to work at the end of August refreshed and strengthened, and prepared for a good long tug at lessons of all sorts until Christmas.

The school consisted of twenty girls, never more and never less, for Mrs. Clavering was too great a favorite and had too wise and excellent ideas with regard to education ever to be without pupils, and never more, for she believed twenty to be the perfect number to whom she could give every attention and offer every advantage.

The school, small as it was, was divided into two sections, the Upper and the Lower. In the Upper school were girls from eighteen to fourteen years of age, and in the Lower some of the small scholars numbered even as few years as six. There was a resident French mistress in the school and also a resident German, and there was an English governess, and, of course, Mrs. Clavering herself; but the other teachers came from the neighboring town of Hartleway to instruct the pupils in all those accomplishments which were in the early seventies considered necessary for a young lady's education. I can assure those of my readers who are well acquainted with modern schools that no one could have been more particular than Mrs. Clavering with regard to her girls. In such things as deportment and nice manners and all the code which signifies politeness, and in the almost lost art of brilliant conversation, she could instruct as very few other people could in her day, and then what accomplishments she did teach were thorough. The girls were taught French properly, they understood the grammar of the language, and could also speak it nicely; and their German was also very fair, if not quite as thorough as their French. And their music had some backbone in it, for a little of the science was taught as well as the practice, and their singing was very sweet and true. They could also recite, those of them who had any gift for it, quite beautifully, and if they had a turn for acting that also was brought to the fore and made the most of. As to their knowledge of the English language, it bade fair to eclipse many of the High School girls of the present day, for they did understand in the first place its literature, and in the next its grammar, and were well acquainted with the works of Shakespeare and those other lions of literature whose names we are so proud of and whose works we love.

CHAPTER II.

THE GIRLS.

It was a lovely day in the beginning of June, and, being Wednesday, was a half-holiday. The girls of the Upper school, numbering seven in all, were assembled in the cherry garden. The cherry garden stood a little apart, to the left of the great general garden, and was entered by a low walled-in door.

Mrs. Clavering was so proud of her cherries and so afraid that the neighbors might be tempted to help themselves to the luscious fruit, that she kept the door locked between the cherry garden and the other, and only those girls who were very privileged were allowed to sit in it. But the girls in the Upper school were, of course, privileged, and they were now enjoying a fine time seated on the grass, or on little camp-stools and chairs, under the trees, which were already laden with the tempting fruit.

They were all eagerly discussing the great event of the year, the Cherry Feast, which was to take place in three weeks from the present day. Their names were Mabel and Alice Cunningham, two handsome dark-eyed girls, aged respectively seventeen and fifteen; Florence Aylmer, who was also fifteen and the romp of the school; Mary Bateman, a stolid-looking girl of fourteen; Bertha Kennedy, who had only lately been raised to the rank of the Upper school; Edith King, a handsome, graceful girl, who competed with Mabel for the honors of the head of her class; and Kitty Sharston, who had only lately come, and who had some Irish blood in her, and was very daring and very much inclined to break the rules. She was a hobbledehoy sort of girl, having outstripped her years, which were only thirteen, and was considered by some of her companions very plain and by others very fascinating.

Mrs. Clavering did not quite know what to make of Kitty, but hoped to break her in by and by, and meanwhile she was very gentle, and Kitty loved her, although she never could be got to see that so many restrictions and so many little petty rules were not good, but extremely bad, for her character.

On this particular lovely summer's afternoon Kitty was the last to make her appearance. She came skimming gracefully through the orchard under the cherry trees, with her hair down her back, her skirt awry, and a great stain on the front of her pinafore. In the seventies girls as old as Kitty wore long white pinafores. The stain was caused by some cherry juice, for Kitty had stopped many times as she approached the others to take great handfuls of the ripe fruit, and thrust them into her mouth. Mabel called to her to sit down.

"We are all busy discussing the great event," she said, "and I have kept a seat for you near me, Kitty; wasn't it good of me?"

"Awfully good," answered Kitty. She flung herself on the ground by her friend's side and looked up at her with affectionate eyes.

"I like you all," she said, glancing round at them, "and yet all the same I hate school. The great thing that I look forward to in the treat is that immediately afterwards the holidays follow. I shall go down to join my father in Cornwall. He said he would take me to Ireland, but I doubt if he will. Now, Tommy, what are you frowning at?"

This remark was made to Florence Aylmer. Kitty from the first had insisted upon calling her Tommy. She was the first girl in Cherry Court School who had dared to adopt a nickname for any of her companions, and Florence, who had begun by being indignant, could not help laughing now as the saucy creature fixed her with her bright eyes.

"What are you frowning at, Tommy? Aren't you glad, too, that the holidays are so near?"

"No, I am not—I hate the holidays," replied Florence Aylmer. As she spoke Mabel took one of Kitty's hands, gave it a slight squeeze, it was a sort of warning pressure. Kitty looked up at her with a startled glance, then she glanced again at Florence, who was looking down. Suddenly Florence raised her face and returned the girl's gaze fully.

"I have no home like the rest of you," she said; "my mother is very poor and cannot afford to have me at home."

"Then where are you going to spend the holidays?" said Kitty; "do say, dear old Tommy, where—where?"

"Here probably, or wherever Mrs. Clavering likes to take me," replied Florence; "but there, don't talk of it any more—I hate to think of it. We have three weeks still to be happy in, and we'll make the best of that."

"Do you know, Mabel," asked Mary Bateman, now bending forward, "if Mrs. Clavering has yet decided what the programme is to be for the 25th?"

"I think she will tell us to-night," replied Mabel; "she said something about it this morning, didn't she, Alice?"

"Yes, I heard her talking to Mademoiselle Le Brun. I expect we shall hear at tea-time. If so we

will meet in the oak parlor, and Mrs. Clavering will have her annual talk. She is always very nice on those occasions."

"She is nice on every occasion—she is an old dear," said Kitty.

"Why, Kitty, you don't know her very well yet."

"She is an old dear," reported Kitty; "I love her with all my heart, but I should like beyond words to give her a right good shock. I cannot tell you girls, how I positively tremble to do it. At prayers, for instance, or still more at meals, when we are all so painfully demure, I want to jump up and utter a shout, or do something of that sort. I have suppressed myself hitherto, but I really do not know if I can go on suppressing myself much longer. Oh, what is the matter, Edith—what are you frowning at?"

"Nothing," replied Edith King; "I did not even know that I was frowning. I was just thinking how nice it was to be trained to be ladylike and to have good manners and all that. Mrs. Clavering is such a perfect lady herself that we shall know all the rules of polite society when we leave the school."

"And I hate those rules," said Kitty; "but there, somebody is coming to meet us. Oh, it is little Dolly Fairfax; she is sure to be bringing a message."

CHAPTER III.

THE TELEGRAM.

Dolly came up in her brisk way. She was holding something concealed in her little pinafore. She looked very mysterious. She had a round cherub face and two great big blue eyes, and short hair, which she wore in a curly mop all over her head. Dolly was the youngest girl in the school and a great pet with everyone. When Bertha saw her now she sprang to her feet and went forward in her somewhat clumsy way.

"Come, little Dolly," she said; "what's the mystery?"

"It's not for you, Bertha," said Dolly, "and don't you interrupt. It's for—it's for Kitty Sharston."

"For me?" cried Kitty. "Oh, what a love you are, Dolly; come and sit on my lap. Is it a box of bon-bons or is it a letter?"

"Guess again," said Dolly, clapping her hand to her little mouth, and looking intensely mysterious. Her blue eyes rolled roguishly round until they fixed themselves on Edith King's face, then she looked again at Kitty as solemn as possible.

"You guess again," she said; "I'll give you five guesses. Now, then, begin right away."

"It's the book that Annie Wallace said she would lend me—that's it, now, isn't it, Dolly? See, I'll feel in your pinafore."

"No, it's not—wrong again," said Dolly; "that's three guesses—two more."

Kitty made another guess—wrong again. Finally Dolly was induced to unfold her pinafore, and inside lay an unopened telegram.

Now, in those days telegrams were not quite as common as they are now. In the first place, they cost a shilling instead of sixpence, which made a vast difference in their number. Kitty's face turned slightly pale, she gripped the telegram, shook little Dolly off her lap, stood up, and, turning her back to the girls, proceeded to open it. Her slim, long fingers shook a little as she did so. She soon had the envelope torn asunder and had taken out the pink sheet within. She unfolded it and read the words. As she did so her face turned very white. "Is the messenger waiting for an answer?" she said, turning to Dolly.

"Yes," replied Dolly; "he is waiting up at the Court."

"Then I must run away at once and answer this," said Kitty. "Oh, I wonder if I have got money enough!"

"I'll lend you a shilling if you like," said Edith King.

"Thanks, awfully," replied Kitty. "I'll pay you back when I get my pocket-money on Saturday."

There was a queer, troubled, dazed sort of look in her eyes. Edith handed her the shilling and she disappeared under the cherry trees.

Dolly proceeded to skim after her.

"No, do stay, Dolly," cried Florence Aylmer; "stay and sit on my lap and I'll tell you a story."

Dolly looked undecided for a moment, but presently she elected to go with Kitty.

"There is something bothering her," she said; "I wonder what it can be. I'll run and see; I'll bring word afterwards."

She disappeared with little shouts under the trees. Nothing could ever make Dolly sad long. The other girls turned and looked at one another.

"What in the world can it be?" said Florence. "Poor Kitty! how very white she turned as she read it."

Meanwhile Kitty had reached the house; the messenger was waiting in the hall. Mrs. Clavering came out just as the girl appeared.

"Well, my dear Kitty," she said, "I hope it is not very bad news?"

"I will tell you presently; I must answer it now," said Kitty.

"You can go into the study, dear, and write your telegram there."

Kitty went in; she spent a little time, about ten minutes or so, filling in the form; then she folded it up, gave it to the boy with a shilling, and went and stood in the hall.

"What is the matter, Kitty?" said her governess, coming out and looking her in the face.

"My telegram was from father. He—he is going to India," said Kitty, "that is all. I won't be with him in the holidays—that's all."

She tried to keep the tremble out of her voice; her eyes, brave, bright, and fearless, were fixed on Mrs. Clavering's face.

"Come in here and let us talk, dear," said Mrs. Clavering.

"I can't," said Kitty; "it is too bad."

"What is too bad, dear?"

"The pain here." She pressed her hand against her heart.

"Poor child! you love him very much."

"Very much," answered Kitty, "and the pain is too bad, and—and I can't talk now. I'll just go back to the other girls in the cherry orchard."

"But, Kitty, can you bear to be with them just now?"

"I can't be alone," said Kitty, with a little piteous smile. She ran out again into the summer sunshine. Mrs. Clavering stood and watched her.

"Poor little girl," she said to herself, "and she does not know the worst, nor half the worst, for I had a long letter from Major Sharston this morning, and he told me that not only was he obliged to go to India, but that he had lost so large a sum of money that he could not afford to keep Kitty here after this term. She is to go to Scotland to live with an old cousin; she must give up all chance of being properly educated. Poor little Kitty! I wonder if he mentioned that in the telegram, and she is so proud, too, and has so much character; it is a sad, sad pity."

Meanwhile Kitty once more returned through the orchard. She began to sing a gay song to herself. She had a very sweet voice, and was carolling wild notes now high up in the air —"Begone, dull care; you and I shall never agree."

The girls sitting under the finest of the cherry trees heard her as she sang.

"There can't be much wrong with her," said Mary Bateman, with a sigh of relief. "Hullo, Kitty, no bad news, I hope?"

"There is bad news, but I can't talk of it now," said Kitty. "Come, what shall we do? We need not stay under the trees any longer surely, need we? Let's have a right good game—blind man's buff, or shall we play hare and hounds."

"Oh, it's much too hot for hare and hounds," said Edith King.

"Well, let's do something," said Kitty; "we all ought to be very happy on a half-holiday, and I don't mean to be miserable. Now, then, start something. I'll go and hide. Now, who will begin?"

Kitty laughed merrily; she glanced from one to the other of the girls, saw that their eyes were

shining with a queer mixture of curiosity and sympathy, and felt that she would do anything in the world rather than gratify them.

"After all," she said to herself, as she ran wildly across the cheery orchard, "poor old Tommy and I will have our holidays together, for at the very best, even if father has not lost that money, I will have to stay here during the holidays. Oh, father! oh, father! how am I to live without you? Oh, father, dear, this is too cruel! I know, I am certain you have lost the money, or you would not be going to India away from your own, own Kitty."

She crushed down a sob, reached a little summer-house, into which she turned, pulled down some tarpaulin to cover her, and, crouching in the corner, lay still, her heart beating wildly.

"Begone, dull care," she whispered stoutly under her breath; and then she added, with a sob in her voice, "whatever happens, I won't give in."

That evening was a time of great excitement in the school, for the programme for the Cherry Feast was to be publicly announced, and the girls felt that there was further news in the air.

Immediately after early tea, between five and six o'clock, Mrs. Clavering called Kitty into the oak parlor.

"My dear," she said, "I want to have a talk with you."

Some of the wild light had gone out of Kitty's eyes by this time, and the flush had left her cheeks, leaving them somewhat pale.

"Yes, Mrs. Clavering," she said; "what is it?"

"I want you, my dear little girl, not to keep all your troubles to yourself."

"But what am I to do?" said Kitty, standing first on one leg and then on the other.

"Hold yourself upright in the first place, dear. After all, the laws of deportment ought to be attended to, whatever one's trouble."

Kitty gave an impatient sigh.

"There you are," she exclaimed, "that's what makes you so very queer; that's what makes it almost impossible for me to bear the restraint of school. When—when your heart is almost breaking, what does it matter how you stand?"

"My dear child, you will find in the events of life that it greatly matters to learn self-control."

"I have self-control," said Kitty, with a quiver in her lips.

"Well, dear, I hope you will prove it, for I fear, I greatly fear, that you are about to have a bad time."

"Oh, I am having a bad time," said Kitty; "don't you suppose that I am not suffering. I am suffering horribly, but I won't let anybody know—that is, if I can help it. I am not going to damp the pleasure of the others; you know that father is going, and I am his only child. He is coming just once to say good-bye to me; yes, he promises me that even in the telegram. He will come in about a fortnight from now, just a week before the Cherry Feast. Oh, I am miserable, I am miserable!"

All of a sudden the poor child's composure gave way, she covered her face with her trembling hands, and burst into a great flood of weeping.

A look of relief crossed Mrs. Clavering's face.

"Now she will be better," she said to herself; "she will understand what I have to say to her better. Shall I say it to her now or shall I wait until the morning? It is very hard; perhaps she had better know all at once."

So Mrs. Clavering led the weeping girl to the nearest sofa, and presently she stole her arm round her waist, and coaxed her to lay her head on her shoulder, and by and by she kissed the tired, flushed little face.

Kitty, who had the most loving heart in the world, returned her embrace, and nestled close to her, and felt in spite of herself a little better than she had done before.

"I know it is very bad, dear," said Mrs. Clavering, "but we can talk about it now if you like."

"I don't know that there is anything to say," said Kitty; "he would not have gone but for——"

"But for what, my child!"

"But for that dreadful money. He was very anxious when he sent me here. Oh, perhaps, I ought not to say anything about it."

"I think you may, Kitty, for I know, dear. I had a long letter from your father this morning. He told me then news which I considered very sad. You know, my love, that this is an expensive school. All the girls who come here pay well; most of the girls who are here have rich fathers and mothers."

"Oh, I know that," interrupted Kitty; "and how I hate rich fathers and mothers! Why should only rich people have nice things?"

"Then you do like this school, don't you, my love?"

"As much as I could like any place away from father; but what did he say this morning, Mrs. Clavering?" Kitty started restlessly and faced her governess as she spoke.

"He said, dear, that he must go to India because he had lost a very large sum of money. He said he would send you a telegram as soon as he had made arrangements, as there was no good troubling you before. He thought it best you should know by telegram, as the sight of the telegram itself would slightly prepare you for the bad news. But, my dear little Kitty, in some ways there is worse to follow, for your father cannot afford to pay my fees, and you must leave Cherry Court School at the end of this term."

Kitty sat silent. This last news, very bad in itself, scarcely affected her at first. It seemed a mere nothing compared to the parting from her beloved father.

"Yes," she said at last, in a listless voice, "I must leave here."

"I will keep you with me, darling, until the end of the vacation." Kitty gave a perceptible shudder. "I am going to the seaside with Florence Aylmer, and you shall come with us. I will try and give you as good a time, dear little Kitty, as ever I can, but it would not be fair to the other girls to keep you here for nothing."

"No, of course it would not be fair," said Kitty. "And where am I to go," she added, after a very long pause, "when the vacation is over, when the girls come back here again at the end of August?"

"Then, my dear child, I greatly fear you will have to go and stay with your father's cousin, Miss Dartmoor, in Argyleshire."

"Helen Dartmoor!" said Kitty, suddenly springing to her feet, "father's cousin, Helen Dartmoor! She came to stay with us for a month after mother died, and if there is a person in the whole world whom I loathed it was her. No, I won't go to her; I'll write and tell father I can't—I won't; it shan't be. Nothing would induce me to live with her. Oh, Mrs. Clavering, you don't know what she is, and she—why, she doesn't speak decent English, and she knows scarcely anything. How am I to be educated, Mrs. Clavering? I could not do it."

"There is a school not far from Miss Dartmoor's; of course, not a school like this, but a school where you can be taught some things, my poor child."

"I won't go to Helen Dartmoor—I won't!" said Kitty, in a passionate voice.

"I fear there is no help for it, my love; but when you see your father he will tell you all about it. I wish with all my heart, I could keep you here, but I greatly fear there is no help for it."

"And is that all you have to say?" said Kitty, rising slowly as she spoke.

"Yes, dear, all for the present."

"Then I am a very miserable girl. I'll go away to my room for a little. I may, may I not?"

"On this occasion you may, although you know it is the rule that none of the girls go to their dormitories during the daytime."

Kitty left the room, walking very slowly. She had scarcely done so before a loud ring, followed by a rat-tat on the knocker of the front door, was heard through the house.

A moment later the door of Mrs. Clavering's oak parlor was flung open, and Sir John Wallis entered the room.

Sir John Wallis was the great man in the neighborhood.

He was the owner of Cherry Court School, renting the house and beautiful grounds to Mrs. Clavering year by year. He was an unmarried man, and took a great interest in the school. He was a very benevolent, kindly person, and Mrs. Clavering and he were the closest friends.

"Ah, my dear madam," he said, bowing now in his somewhat old-fashioned way, and then extending his hand to the good lady, "I am so glad to see you at home. How are you and how are the girls?"

"Oh, very well, Sir John."

"But you look a little bit worried; what is wrong?"

"Well, the fact is, one of my girls, Kitty Sharston——"

"That pretty, queer-looking half-wild girl whom I saw in church on Sunday?"

"The same; she is the daughter of Major Sharston, a very estimable man."

"Sharston, Sharston, I should think he is. Why, he is an old brother officer of mine; we served together in the time of the Crimea. Anything wrong with Sharston! What's up, my dear madam, what is up!"

"Well, it's just this," said Mrs. Clavering. "Major Sharston has lost a lot of money, and is obliged to take an appointment in India, and he cannot afford to leave poor Kitty at the school longer than till the end of term. I intend to have her as my guest during the holidays, but afterwards she must go to an old cousin in Scotland, and the poor child has little chance of ever being very well educated. She is very much shaken by the blow."

"But this is fearful," said Sir John, "fearful! What can we do?"

"Nothing, I am afraid," said Mrs. Clavering. "Nothing would offend Major Sharston more than for his daughter to accept charity in any form. He is a very proud man, and Kitty, when all is said and done, although very wild and needing a lot of training, has got a spirit of her own. She will be a fine girl by and by."

"And a beautiful one to boot," interrupted Sir John. "Well, this is terrible; what can we do?"

"Nothing," repeated Mrs. Clavering again.

Sir John looked very thoughtful.

"Is it to-night," he said, "you announce your programme for the Cherry Feast?"

"Yes," answered the good lady.

"Then I have a crow to pluck with you; you never sent me notice to attend."

"I did not, for I thought you would be away, but will you come in this evening, Sir John, we shall all be delighted to see you?"

Sir John considered for a moment.

"I will," he said, "and you know I always offer a prize of my own, which is to be given at the Cherry Feast. Now, why should not we on this occasion offer a prize which Kitty Sharston runs a chance of winning, and which would save her from leaving Cherry Court School?"

Mrs. Clavering shook her head.

Sir John bent forward and began to speak eagerly.

"Now, come," he said, "I think I can manage it. Could it not be done in this way?" He spoke in a low tone, and Mrs. Clavering bent her head to listen.

"But, even if you did offer such a prize," she said, "which in itself would be very valuable, what chance has Kitty of winning it? She is not particularly forward in any of her studies, and then the girls who did not want it would get it."

"I am persuaded that Kitty has plenty of ability," said Sir John.

"I quite agree with you, and to work for such a prize would be an immense stimulus; but then, you know, the feast comes on so soon, and there are only three weeks in which to prepare."

"We can manage it by means of a sort of preliminary canter," said the baronet, in a musing tone; "I am sure we can work the thing up. Now, let us put our heads together and get some idea into shape before to-night. That child must be saved; her father's feelings must be respected. She must stay here and be under your wing, and I will go and have a chat with Sharston and see if I cannot make life endurable to the poor little girl, even though he is away in India."

"Well, it is very nice your being a friend of Major Sharston's. If you will stay here for about half an hour while I am attending to something else, I will come back and we will see what scheme we can draw up."

"Good," said Sir John, "and don't hurry back, for I am going to put on my considering-cap. This thing must be managed by hook or by crook."

CHAPTER IV.

SIR JOHN'S GREAT SCHEME.

It was in this way that the great prize which caused such excitement in Cherry Court School was started.

It was called the Scholarship prize, and was a new and daring idea of the early seventies. Girls were not accustomed to big prizes in those days, and scholarships were only in vogue in the few public schools which were then in existence.

Sir John and Mrs. Clavering between them drew up a scheme which put every other idea into the shade, for there was a great honor to be conferred as well as a very big money prize, and the girls were stimulated to try their very best. It was arranged that the prize was to be competed for between this day in early June and the day when the Cherry Feast was held by the entire Upper school, but that after that date the competitors were only to number three. The three girls who came out in the first list at the time of the Cherry Feast were to compete for the great prize itself in the following October, and Mrs. Clavering had made private arrangements with Sir John to keep Kitty at the school, in case she came out one of the first three, until October, when the prize itself was to be won.

There were three tests which were to qualify for the prize. First and above all, good conduct; an unselfish, brave, noble character would rank very high indeed. Second would come neat appearance and admirable deportment, which would include graceful conversation, polite manners and all those things which are more or less neglected in modern education; and last of all would come the grand educational test.

Thus every idea of the school would be turned more or less topsy-turvy, for Sir John's scheme was so peculiar and his prize so munificent that it was worth giving up everything else to try for.

The prize itself was to consist of a free education at Cherry Court School for the space of three years; accompanying it was a certificate in parchment, which in itself was to be considered a very high honor; and thirdly, a locket set with a beautiful ruby to represent a cherry, which was the badge of the school.

When the great day arrived it was decided that the happy winner of this great prize would receive the fees for a year's schooling in a purse presented to her by Sir John himself, also the scroll of merit and the beautiful ruby locket.

The news of Sir John's bounty and the marvelous prize which was to be offered to the fortunate girls was the talk of the entire school. Even Kitty, who little guessed how deeply she was concerned in the matter, could scarcely think of anything else. It diverted her mind from her coming sorrow. On the day that the prize was formally announced she sat down to write to her father to inform him on the subject.

"It is too wonderful," she wrote; "I was the most miserable girl in all the world when I got your telegram. I scarcely knew what I was doing, and then Mrs. Clavering took me into her oak parlor and told me still further bad news. That I—oh, father dear, oh, father—that I was to go and live with Helen Dartmoor. How could you think of it, father? But there, she said it had to be, and I felt nearly wild. You don't know what I was suffering, although I tried so very hard to be brave. I am suffering still, but not quite so badly, for what do you think happened in the evening.

"You know, or perhaps you don't know, that at the end of summer there is always such a glorious day—it is called Cherry Feast Day, and is given in honor of the school, which is called Cherry Court School. The whole day is given up to festivities of every sort and description, and all the neighborhood are invited to a great big Cherry Feast in the evening.

"The feast is held in the walled-in garden, which is lit with colored lanterns. In the very centre of the garden is a grass sward, the greenest grass you ever saw, father, and, oh, so smooth—as smooth as velvet, and on this grass, lit with fairy lamps, the girls dance all kinds of stately, wonderful, old-fashioned dances, and the neighbors sit round and watch, and then at the end we all go into the house, into the great oak hall in the middle, and Mrs. Clavering gives the prizes to the lucky girls.

"Of course, feasts of cherries are the order of the hour, and we wear cherry ornaments if possible. You cannot imagine how full of cherries we are in the school, even to cherry-colored ribbons, you know.

"Well, yesterday, when your dreadful telegram came, was the day when we were to draw up a programme for the Cherry Feast, and when all we girls came into the oak parlor in the evening—I mean all the girls of the Upper school, for the little ones, although they enjoy the feast splendidly at the time, are never allowed to know much of the preparations—well, when we were all in the oak parlor who should come in but Mrs. Clavering and such a tall, stately, splendid-looking man. His name is Sir John Wallis, and it seems, father dear, that he knows all about you, for he called

me up afterwards and spoke to me, and he put his arm round my waist, and when he said good-bye he even kissed me, and he said that you and he were some of the heroes before Sebastopol. Oh, father, he did speak so splendidly of you, and he looked so splendid himself, I quite loved him, I did really. But there, how I am digressing, father!

"Mrs. Clavering gave out the programme for the day—the usual sort, you know, the dancing on the lawn in the evening, and the crowds of spectators, and the assembling in the big hall for the prizes to be given out to all the lucky girls who had won them.

"Of course, I won't get any this year. I have not been at school long enough, although I am trying and working very hard. Well, Mrs. Clavering read out the usual programme and we all stood by and listened, and I could not help glancing at Sir John, although I had not spoken to him then, and did not know, not a bit of it, that he knew you, darling, precious father.

"But all of a sudden Sir John himself came forward and he took Mrs. Clavering's place on the little rostrum, as they call it, and he spoke in such a loud, penetrating, and yet beautiful voice, and he said that he, with Mrs. Clavering's permission, had a scheme to propose.

"He began by saying how he loved the school, how he had always loved it, how his own mother had been educated at Cherry Court School, and how he thought there was no school like it in the world, and then he said that he was anxious, now that he had returned home to live and was growing an old man himself, to do something for the school, and he proposed there and then to offer it a Scholarship.

"Do you know what a scholarship is, father? I thought only men won scholarships. Well, anyhow, he did offer a Scholarship, such a magnificent one. It was to be held by the girl who was best in conduct, best in deportment, and best in her educational work, in the following October, and she was to hold it for three years, and what do you think the scholarship was?

"Oh, was there anything so splendid! A lovely, lovely gold locket with a ruby cherry on the right side and a wonderful inscription on the left side, and a parchment scroll, father, in which the full particulars of the great Scholarship were written down, and besides that, a purse of money. Oh, father, a girl would not mind taking money in that way, would she?—and what was the money for?—it was to pay all her fees for a year.

"Every expense connected with the school was to be met by this wonderful purse of money; she was to be educated and called the Cherry Court Scholarship girl, and it was to be a wonderfully proud distinction, I can tell you, and at the end of the year Sir John Wallis was to give another purse of money, and at the end of that year another purse of money, so that the lucky girl who won the Scholarship was to be educated free of expense for three whole years.

"Oh, father, father! I mean to try for it—I mean to try with all my might and main. I don't suppose I'll succeed, but I shall have such a fit of trying—you never knew anything like it in your life. But do you know, perhaps, that what Kitty tries for with all her might and soul she generally wins.

"Oh, dear father, this has made me quite happy and has taken off the worst of my great pain. I feel now that there is hope, for at the end of three years I shall be a well-educated girl—that is, if I win the Scholarship, and then perhaps you will allow me to come out to you to India. I am not without hope, now, but I should be utterly and completely devoid of it if I had to go and live with Helen Dartmoor.

"Your loving and excited daughter, KITTY."

CHAPTER V.

FLORENCE.

It began to be whispered in the school—at first, it is true, in very low tones and scarcely any words, but just a nod and a single glance—that Mrs. Clavering was very anxious that Kitty should win the Scholarship.

There was really no reason for this rumor to get afloat, but beyond doubt the rumor was afloat, was in the air, and was talked of by the girls—at first, as I have said, scarcely at all, but by and by more and more plainly as the hours flew on towards the Cherry Feast.

Kitty herself knew nothing of these whispers. She was very busy planning and reconstructing all her previous ideas with regard to education. Her first object was to come out one of the happy three who were to compete for the Scholarship in the coming October. If she succeeded in this she felt sure that all would be well. She began now eagerly to examine her companion's faces.

Sometimes they turned away from her bright, almost too bright, eyes, but then again they would look at her with a certain compassion.

It would be very nice, they all thought, to win the Scholarship—there was no girl at Cherry Court School who would not feel proud to get so great a prize—but they also knew that what would be merely nice for them was life or death for poor Kitty Sharston, and yet nothing had been told them; they only surmised that there was a wish in Mrs. Clavering's breast that Kitty should be the lucky girl.

On a certain afternoon about a week before the Cherry Feast, Mabel and Alice Cunningham, with Florence Aylmer and Edith King, were once more assembled under one of the cherry trees in the cherry orchard.

"I am sure of it," said Alice. "Of course, it is nothing that I have heard, but it is a sort of look in Mrs. Clavering's face, and she is so eager to give Kitty all sorts of help. She has her by herself now every evening to coach her for an hour."

"Well, for my part, I don't call it a bit fair," said Florence Aylmer.

"Florry! Oh, surely you are not jealous, and of poor little Kitty?"

"I am not exactly jealous—oh, no, I am not jealous," said Florence, "but it rather takes the heart out of one. If after all one's trouble and toil and exertion one gets the thing and then Mrs. Clavering is discontented and Kitty Sharston's heart is broken, I don't see the use of having a big fight—do you, Mabel? do you, Edith?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Edith; "I only feel puzzled; perhaps it is a mere suspicion and there is no truth in it."

"I cannot imagine, if it is really Sir John's wish that Kitty should be the successful competitor, why he does not give her the money straight away and end the thing," said Florence again.

"But, you see, he could not do that," said Mabel, "for Kitty is very proud and——"

"Well, I don't like it," said Florence, "and I tell you what it is—now that the whisper has got into the air, I mean to know. I shall go straight to Mrs. Clavering and ask her. If it is true I for one will not enter the lists at all."

"But would you dare to ask her?" exclaimed Mabel, in a voice almost of awe. "You know, Mrs. Clavering, although she is the kindest woman in the world, never allows any liberties to be taken with her. I don't think you can dare to ask her, Florry—I really don't."

"Oh, I shall, all the same," replied Florence. "If this thing is fair and above board, and equal chances are given to us all, why, I shall go in for it and be delighted to have a chance, but if it is not, Kitty shall have it without much exertion, as far as I am concerned."

She got up restlessly as she spoke, and moved towards the house.

The day was a very hot one, and all the doors and windows stood wide open. Sir John Wallis was standing inside the porch talking to Mrs. Clavering.

Florence came slowly forward. Sir John held out his hand to her.

"Well, Miss Aylmer," he said, in his pleasant voice, "and how do the studies get on, and are you all agog to be one of the lucky three?"

"I am not at all sure about that," said Florence; "I was coming to you, Mrs. Clavering, to speak about it."

"Why, what can be wrong?" said the baronet; "I thought that you were one of the most promising pupils and had a very good chance."

"But what," said Florence, her face suddenly blazing into color, and her eyes fixing themselves first on Sir John's face and then on that of Mrs. Clavering, "what if you don't want me to win the prize!"

"Don't want you—what nonsense!" said Mrs. Clavering, but she colored faintly as she spoke.

Sir John gave Florence a very keen glance.

"I may as well speak out now that I am about it," continued the girl. "There is a rumor in the school—I cannot tell you who started it, but there is a rumor—that you, Sir John, want Kitty to get the prize."

"It is perfectly true that I should like her to get it," said Sir John, instantly, "but the prize shall be bestowed upon the girl who comes out best in deportment, best in conduct, and best in learning, whether she is Kitty Sharston or another. Now, that is all, Florence Aylmer. I have spoken. Don't, I beg of you, say a word of what you have just said to me to Kitty herself. You have

all equal chances. If Kitty fails she fails. I shall be disappointed, but I shall honor the girl who wins the great prize all the same."

"Thank you," replied Florence. She entered the hall; a moment later Mrs. Clavering followed her.

"My dear," she said, "what is wrong with you? I would not know you with that expression on your face."

"Things seem very hard," said Florence. "At first, when the prize was mentioned, it seemed quite too delicious, for you know, dear Mrs. Clavering, that I am poor, too, and if I were to win the prize it would be only too delightful; but if you do not wish me to take it"—tears filled her eyes; one of them rolled down her cheeks.

"I do heartily wish you to have it if you really win it, Florence. The competition is an open one, rest assured of that; and now, my dear, cease to think unkind thoughts of Kitty, and, above all things, don't breathe a word of what you have just said to me to her."

"That I promise," said Florence, but she went upstairs feeling discontented and depressed.

She sat down to write a letter to her mother.

"Dear mother," she wrote, "we are trying for an extraordinary prize here, quite a valuable Scholarship, such as are given to men at the Universities, and I am going to have a big try for it, but I should like to talk things over with you. I wonder if Aunt Susan would rise to the occasion, and let me have a third-class return ticket to Dawlish, and if you, Mummy, could secure a tiny room for me next yourself. I want to spend a week with you during the coming holidays. I have a good deal to say and am rather anxious and miserable. Try and arrange it with Aunt Susan. It won't cost very much really, and I promise to return at the end of a week.

"Your loving daughter, "FLORENCE."

"P. S.—I shall eat very little and be satisfied with the plainest food. You might mention that to Aunt Susan when you are writing."

"P. S. 2.—There is a new girl at the school; she came just at the beginning of term, but I never mentioned her name to you before. She is called Kitty Sharston, and I think she has a very great chance of winning the Scholarship. She is rather an awkward kind of girl, but will be handsome by and by. She is a great friend of Sir John Wallis, the man who is the patron of the school, and who is giving the Scholarship. I mean to have a good try for the Scholarship, Mummy, dear. Be sure you say so to Aunt Susan when you ask her for my third-class fare to Dawlish. Good-bye again, Mummy dear. FLORENCE."

Having written this letter Florence uttered a sigh of relief, put it into its envelope, addressed it, stamped it, and ran downstairs to put it in the school letter-box. Just as she was in the act of doing so the chaise drew up at the front door, a tall soldierly man got out, he came into the porch, and just as he was about to ring the bell, his eyes met those of Florence.

"This is Cherry Court School, is it not?" he said, taking off his hat to the girl.

"Yes," replied Florence; "can I do anything for you, sir?"

"My name is Major Sharston. I have come to see my daughter; can you tell me where I shall find her?"

"Are you indeed Kitty's father?" said Florence, her heart now shining out of her eyes. She had beautiful eyes, dark grey with very long, black lashes. Her face, which was somewhat pale, was quite quivering with emotion.

"Yes, I am Kitty's father," was the reply. "Shall I go into the house, and will you be kind enough to tell her that I am here; or perhaps," added the Major, looking as wistful as Florence herself, "you might take me to her straight away?"

"I will take you to her straight away, that's just it," said Florence. She turned back to drop her letter into the school letter-box, and then conducted the Major across the lawn and into the outer garden. In this garden every old-fashioned flower imaginable bloomed and thrived, and reared its graceful head. The Major walked down through great lines of tall hollyhocks and peonies of every color and description. Then he passed under a sweet-briar hedge and then along a further hedge of Scotch roses, red and white; and the scent from mignonette and sweet peas and the sweet-briar and the roses came up to his nostrils. Never to the longest day of his life did the Major forget the sweet scent of the old-fashioned garden and the pain at his heart all the time, for he was going to see Kitty, to bid her good-bye for years—perhaps, who could tell? for ever.

Florence seemed to guess some of his feelings, though she did not know the actual story, for Kitty was very reserved and kept her troubles to herself. The Major made no remark about the

garden, which in itself was somewhat curious, for strangers were always in raptures over this old-world garden, with its yew-trees cut in quaint shapes, and its high walls, and its flowers, which seemed, every one of them, to belong to the past.

At last the Major and Florence reached the postern-gate which opened into the cherry orchard, and then Florence stood still and raised her voice and called, "Kitty! Kitty Sharston!" and there came an answering call, clear and high as a bird's, and the next instant Kitty, in her white summer dress, was seen emerging from under the cherry-trees. She saw her father, uttered a cry half of rapture, half of pain, and the next instant was clasped in his arms. Florence saw the Major's arms fold around Kitty, and a queer lump rose in her throat and she went away all by herself. Somehow, at that moment she felt that she shared Mrs. Clavering's wish that Kitty Sharston should get the prize.

"Although it means a great deal to me, a great deal more than anyone can guess," thought Florry to herself, "for Aunt Susan is never very kind to the dear little mother, and she makes such a compliment of giving her that money term after term, and she insists on doing everything in the very cheapest way. Why will she not," continued Florence, looking down at her dress as she spoke, "why will she not give me decent clothes like other girls! I never have anything pretty. It is brown holland all during the summer, the coarsest brown holland, and it is the coarsest blue serge during the winter; never, never anything else—no style, no fashion, no pretty ribbons, not even a cherry ribbon for my hair, and so little pocket-money, oh! so little—only a penny a week. What can a girl do with a penny a week? Of course, she does allow me a few stamps, just a very few, to send Mummy letters, but she does keep me so terribly close. Sometimes I can scarcely bear the life. Oh, what a difference the Scholarship would make, and Sir John Wallis would think a great deal of me, and so would Mrs. Clavering. Why, I should be the show girl of the school, the Cherry Court Scholarship girl; it would be splendid, quite splendid! But then Kitty, poor Kitty, and what a look the Major had on his face! I wonder what can be wrong? Oh dear! oh, dear! my heart is torn in two. Why do I long beyond all words to win the prize, and why, why do I hate taking it from Kitty Sharston?"

CHAPTER VI.

KITTY AND HER FATHER.

Meanwhile the Major and Kitty went away by themselves. As soon as Kitty had hugged her father, one close, passionate, voiceless hug, she released him, stepped back a pace, looked him in the face, and then said eagerly, "Come away quickly, father; there is a meadow at the back of the cherry orchard which we can have quite to ourselves. Come at once. Did Mrs. Clavering send you out here? How good of her to let me see you alone!"

"She does not even know that I have come, Kitty," replied her father. "I met a girl—I don't know what her name is—just as I reached the porch, and she took me to you. I cannot stay very long, my love, as I must get back to Chatham to-night."

"All right," said Kitty; "let us make for the meadow; there is a big oak-tree and we can sit under it and no one need see us. We must be alone all, all during the time that you are here."

The Major said nothing. Kitty linked her hand through his arm. She was feeling wildly excited—her father and she were together. It might be an hour, or it might be two hours, that they were to spend together, but the time was only beginning now. They were together, and she felt all the warm glow of love, all the ecstasy of perfect happiness in their reunion.

They reached the oak-tree in the meadow, the Major sat down, and Kitty threw herself by his side.

"Well, Kitty," he said, "what is this that I hear? I read your letter; it is quite a wonderful letter, little girl. It was the sort of letter a brave girl would write."

"The sort of letter a girl would write whose father was a hero before Sebastopol," said Kitty.

"What has put that in you head, my darling?"

"Sir John Wallis spoke of it. Oh, father dear, won't you go and see Sir John Wallis—he is so nice and so kind? You were both heroes before Sebastopol, were you not, father dearest, you and he?"

"We were in the trenches and we suffered a good bit," said the Major, a grim smile on his face, "but those are bygone times, Kitty."

"All the same they are times that can never be forgotten while English history lasts," said

Kitty with a proud sparkle in her eyes.

"Well, no, little girl, I don't suppose England will ever forget the men who fought for her," replied the Major; "but we won't waste time talking on these matters now, my child; we have much else to say."

"What, father?"

"Well, your letter for instance; and you greatly dislike going to stay with Helen Dartmoor?"

Kitty's face turned pale; she had been rosy up to now. The roses faded out of her cheeks, then her lips turned white, and the brightness left her eyes.

"I should hate it," she said; "there are no other words."

"And you think there is just an off chance that you may win this wonderful Scholarship?"

"I mean to have the biggest try a girl ever had, and you know your Kitty," replied the girl.

"Yes, I know my brave, brave Kitty, the girl who has clung to her father through thick and thin, who has always tried to please him, who has a spirit of her own."

"Which I inherit from you," said Kitty. "Oh, I have lots of faults; I can be so cheeky when I like, and so naughty about rules, but somehow nothing, nothing ever frightens me, except the thought of going to Helen Dartmoor. You see, father, dear, it would be so hopeless. You cannot take the hope out of anybody's life and expect the person to do well, can you, father? Do speak, father—can you?"

"No, my child, I know that, but even if you have to go to her, Kitty, remember that I am working very hard for you—that as soon as possible I will make a home for you, and you shall come to me."

"How long will you be in India, father?"

"I do not know, my child. The appointment which I have just received under Government I can, I believe, retain as long as I please. My idea is, darling, to do very good service for our Government, and to induce them to send me into a healthy place."

"But where are you going now?" said Kitty; "Is the place not healthy, is your life to be endangered?"

"No, I am too seasoned for that," replied the Major, in a very cheerful tone which, alas! he was far from feeling. "You need not be a scrap anxious, my love," he added; "the place would not suit a young thing like you, but a seasoned old subject like myself is safe enough. Never you fear, Kitty mine."

"But go on, father; you have more to say, haven't you?"

"Yes, Kitty, I have more to say and the time is very brief. If you win the Scholarship, well and good. You will be well educated, and my mind will be relieved of an untold load of care. But, of course, darling, there is a possibility of your failing, for the Scholarship is an open one, and there are other girls in the school, perhaps as clever, as determined, as full of zeal as you, my Kitty."

"I am afraid, father, dear, there are other girls much cleverer than your Kitty, who know a vast lot more, and who are very full of zeal. But," added the young girl, and now she clasped her hands and sprang to her feet, "there is no one who has the motive I have, and this will carry me through. I mean first of all to come out one of the lucky three—that's certain."

"When is the preliminary examination to take place, Kitty?"

"On the day of the Cherry Feast," replied Kitty.

"Well, dear, I have been thinking matters over. If you fail you fail, but I am determined to give you this chance. I shall see Mrs. Clavering before I leave and arrange that you are to stay with her until October; then if you win the Scholarship your future is arranged; you take your three years' education, and then by hook or by crook, my darling, you come out to me to India, for by then, unless I am vastly mistaken, I shall have got into a hill station where it will be safe for you to stay with me."

"Oh, you darling, how heavenly it will be!" said Kitty. She clung close to her father, flung her arms round his neck, laid her head on his breast, and looked at him with eyes swimming in tears.

"Oh, I am not a bit unhappy, though I cry," she said, "it is only because I feel your goodness so much, for though I would have tried away with Helen Dartmoor I should not have had the chance I shall have here, for Mrs. Clavering is very good, and I know she wants me to get the prize, only she feels that I must compete fairly with the other girls."

"Of course, you must compete fairly with the other girls, Kitty," said her father; "if I thought

there was any special favoritism in this, well—" His bronzed cheeks flushed, an indignant light fired his eyes.

"What, father?"

"I am a proud man, Kitty, and Helen Dartmoor is your cousin, and would keep you for the very small sum which it is in my power to offer her."

"Your pride shall not be hurt, father, darling. I will win the Scholarship honorably and in open fight."

"That is my own Kitty."

"I vow I'll win it," said the girl.

The Major smiled at her. "You must not be too sure," he said, "or you will be doubly disappointed if you fail. And now there is one thing more to be said, and then we can talk on other matters. If you do fail, my Kitty, you will go to Helen Dartmoor with a heart and a half."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you will go to her and not allow hope to die out of your breast; you will go as a brave girl should, making the best of what seems an adverse circumstance. If you do this, Kitty, it will be severe discipline, but not too severe discipline for a soldier's daughter. Never forget that, my dear, and that, one way or other, at the end of the three years you come out to me."

"When I come out to you," said Kitty, "I want you to be proud of me. I want you to say, 'My girl is a lady, my girl knows things, she is not ignorant, she can deport herself well, and act well and she knows things.' But in any case, father, whether I am ignorant or whether I am not, I promise—yes, I promise—to make the best of circumstances."

"Then God bless you, child, you are your mother's own girl."

"And yours—yours," said Kitty, in a low tone of mingled pain and love.

"We will go back to the house, and I will see Mrs. Clavering, and afterwards I will ask her permission to let me take you up to see Sir John Wallis, for, strange as it may seem, I have lost sight of Wallis for quite fifteen years—such are the fortunes of war, my love. We were brothers, standing shoulder to shoulder during a momentous year of our lives, and since then Sir John retired from the service, and I have heard and seen nothing of him. It was almost immediately afterwards, I believe, that he came in for the great property and the title which he now possesses. But come, Kitty, we have not much time to lose."

Kitty never forgot the rest of that afternoon, for she and her father had so much to do, so many people to see, and so many things to arrange, that time flew on wings, and it was not until the last moment when the parting really came that she realized all it meant to her.

There was a hurried clasp in the strongest, bravest arms in all the world, a brief kiss on her cheek, a look in her father's eyes which was enough to stimulate the highest in any girl's heart, and then the parting was over.

The Major had left Cherry Court School, having given all possible directions for his little girl's comfort and well-being, and had gone away sorely broken down, crushed to the earth himself, but leaving Kitty with a courage which did not falter during the days which were to come. For the Major knew that, strong as he was, he was going to a part of India where brave men as strong as he are stricken down year after year by the unhealthy climate, and three years even at the best was a long time to part with a girl like Kitty, particularly when she was the only child he had, the light of his eyes, the darling of his heart.

CHAPTER VII.

CHERRY-COLORED RIBBONS.

The day of the Cherry Feast dawned bright and glorious. The girls awoke in the early morning of that splendid summer day, feeling that something very delightful was about to happen. One after another they peeped out and saw the sun on the grass and heard the birds sing and felt the soft zephyrs of the summer breeze blowing on their cheeks. Then they returned back again to their different little beds in their different dormitories, and remarked with intense satisfaction that the long wished-for day had come, and that to-morrow they were all going home —home for the holidays. Could anything be more fascinating, stimulating, and delightful? And each girl hoped to go back again to the beloved home with honor, for Mrs. Clavering had a

wonderful way with her pupils, a very stimulating way, and she so arranged her prizes and her certificates that no girl who had really worked, who had really taken pains, was excluded from distinction. It was only the hopelessly idle, the hopelessly disobedient, who could leave Cherry Court School without some token of its mistress's sympathy, regard, and encouragement.

Kitty Sharston was too new a scholar to expect to get any reward in the ordinary sense of this term, but, all the same, she had worked fairly well, and during the last three weeks had tackled her studies and regulated her conduct like a veritable little Trojan. Every moment of Kitty's day was now marked out. There was never an instant that she was off guard with regard to herself; there was no time left in her busy life for reckless speeches and reckless deeds. The goal set before her was such a high one, the motive to struggle for pre-eminence was so strong, that Kitty was quite carried along by the current. Her natural keen intelligence stood her in good stead, her marks for punctuality, for neatness, for early rising were all good, and she had little, very little fear of the results of this afternoon's brief examination.

The examination was to be very short, and was to be conducted on this special occasion by no less a person than Sir John Wallis himself. Mrs. Clavering having reckoned up the marks, Mademoiselle Le Brun having given her testimony, Fraulein having given hers, and the English teachers having further testified to the industry of the pupils, the girls of the Upper school were to pass muster before Sir John, who was to decide without prejudice in favor of the lucky three who alone were to compete for the great Scholarship in October.

Florence and Kitty were in the same class in school, and up to the date of the offering of the Scholarship had been excellent friends. They were still friends as far as Kitty was concerned, for she was a generous-hearted girl, and although the winning of the prize meant everything almost in her life, did another girl take it from her fairly and honorably in open fight, she would resign it without a trace of ill-will or any sore feeling towards the winner. But there were things in Florence's life which made her now look aloof at Kitty. She had been receiving letters from her mother, and the mother had been asking the girl strange questions, and Mrs. Aylmer was not a woman of lofty principle nor of strong courage, and some of the jealous thoughts in Florence's heart had been fanned into flame by her mother's injudicious words. So on the day of the great Cherry Feast she awoke with a headache, and, turning away from Kitty, who looked at her with anxious, affectionate eyes, she proceeded to dress quickly and hurried off to the school-room.

The dormitory in which Kitty slept was a long, low room with a sloping roof. It ran the whole width of the house, and was occupied by Kitty herself, by Mabel and Alice Cunningham, by Edith King, and by Florence Aylmer. Each girl had her little cubicle or division curtained off from her fellows, where she could sleep and where she could retire, if necessary, into a sort of semi-solitude. But one-half of the dormitory was open to all the girls, and they often drew their curtains aside and chatted and talked and laughed as they dressed and undressed, for Mrs. Clavering, contrary to most of the school-mistresses of her day, gave her girls a certain amount of liberty. They were not, for instance, required to talk French in the dormitories, and they were always allowed, provided they got into bed within certain limits and dressed within certain limits, to have freedom when in their rooms. They never dreamt of abusing these privileges, and better, healthier, brighter girls could not be found in the length and breadth of England.

"Well, I am glad the day has come at last," said Edith, as she rose that morning with a yawn. "Oh, dear, and it's going to be splendid, too. Kitty, what dress are you going to wear at the festival to-night?"

Kitty replied with a smile that she meant to wear her Indian muslin.

"And have you got your cherry-colored ribbons?" said Edith; "we all wear bunches of cherry ribbons in the front of our dresses and tying back our hair. Have you got yours, Kitty?"

"Yes," replied Kitty; "father sent me a quantity of cherry-colored ribbons last week."

She hardly ever mentioned her father's name, and the girls did not like to question her. Now she turned her head aside, and proceeded hastily with her dressing.

"Well, it is going to be a splendid day," said Alice, "and, you know, there are no lessons of any sort; all the examinations are over and the results will be known to-night; the day is to be a long and happy one—no lessons, nothing to do except to wander about and please ourselves; pack our trunks, of course, which will be truly a delightful occupation. Think of the joys of the evening and the further delights of to-morrow. I expect to reach home about six o'clock in the evening. When will you get to your place, Edith?"

"A little later than you," replied Edith, "for it is farther away, but father and mother have promised to come and meet me at Canterbury. I shall reach Canterbury about six o'clock in the evening. We have ten miles to drive then, so I don't suppose I shall be home till half-past seven. The boys are going to make a bonfire; there is to be no end of fun—there always is when I come home for the summer holidays."

Kitty gave a faint sigh and there came a cruel pang at her heart. She and Florence Aylmer were to spend the holidays together. She had tried to think she would enjoy this solitary time, but in her heart of hearts she knew that she had to make a great struggle with herself.

"But, never mind," she muttered now softly under her breath, "I shall spend most of the hours in studying; there is so much to get through before the Scholarship exam. comes off in October, and I know Florence will study, too, and, of course, I shan't be at all jealous of her, and if she does succeed in winning the prize, why, I will just remember father's words and make the best of things, whatever happens." But the next moment she was saying fiercely under her breath, "I shall win, I will win; whatever happens, I will, I must win."

The girls went down to breakfast, which was a very sociable meal that morning, the English tongue being allowed to be spoken, and the usual restrictions all being utterly withdrawn.

Florence appeared then and took her place at the table; she looked a little pale and untidy, and her eyes were red as if she had been secretly crying. More than one girl glanced at her and wondered what was the matter. When breakfast was over Kitty went up to Florence, slipped her hand through her arm, and pulled her out into the sunshine.

"Is anything wrong, Florry?" she said.

"Oh, it's only that beastly mean Aunt Susan," retorted Florence, shrugging her shoulders.

"Your Aunt Susan?"

"Yes, of course; you have heard me talk of her. I am dependent on her, you know; oh, it's the most hateful position for any girl!"

"I am very sorry, and I quite understand," said Kitty.

"I don't believe you do; you have never been put in such an odious plight. For instance, you have cherry-colored ribbons to wear to-night, have you not?"

"Such beauties," replied Kitty; "father sent them to me a week ago. A yard and a half to make the bunch for the front of my dress, and a yard and a half to tie up my hair—three yards; and such a lovely, lovely color, and such soft ribbon, corded silk on one side, and satin at the other. Oh, it is beautiful."

"Yes, of course, it is beautiful," said Florence; "you have told us about those ribbons a great many times." Florence could not help her voice being tart, and Kitty looked at her in some astonishment.

"But all the same," she said, "you're glad I have got cherry-colored ribbons, are you not?"

"I don't know," replied Florence, flushing; "I believe I hate you for having them. There, I'm nothing if I'm not frank."

"You hate me for having them? Oh, Florry, but you cannot be so mean."

"I wrote to Aunt Susan myself—there was no time to tackle her in a roundabout way through mother. I wrote to her and got her reply this morning. She sent me—what do you think? Instead of the beautiful ribbons which I asked for, three yards of which are absolutely necessary to make even a show of a decent appearance, six stamps! Six stamps, I assure you, to buy what I could for myself! Did you ever hear of anything so miserably mean? Oh, I hate her, I do hate her!"

"Poor Florence!" said Kitty; "but you must have the ribbons somehow, must you not?"

"I must; I dare not appear without. Mademoiselle Le Brun is going into Hilchester immediately after breakfast, and I am going to ask her to get me the best she can, but, of course, she will get nothing worth having for sixpence—a yard and a half at the most of some horrid cottony stuff which will look perfectly dreadful. It is mean of Aunt Susan, and you know, Kitty," continued Florence, her tone softening at the evident sympathy with which Kitty regarded her, "I am always so shabbily dressed; I wouldn't be a bit bad-looking if I had decent clothes. I saved up all the summer to have my muslin dress nicely washed for this occasion, but it's so thick and so clumsy and—oh, dear! oh, dear! sometimes I hate myself, Kitty, and when I look at you I hate myself more than ever."

"Why when you look at me? I am very sorry for you, Florence."

"Because you are so generous and so good, and I am just the other way. But there, don't talk to me any more. I must rush off; I want to have another look through those geography questions; there is no saying what Sir John Wallis may question us about to-night, and if I don't get into the lucky three who are to compete for the Scholarship, I believe I'll go off my head."

Florence dashed away as she spoke and rushed into the school-room, slamming the door behind her. Kitty stood for a moment looking after her. As she did so Mary Bateman, the stolid-looking girl in the Upper school, came slowly up.

"A penny for your thoughts, Kitty Sharston," she said.

"They are not worth even that," said Kitty. "Where are you going, Mary?"

"Into the cherry orchard; we are all to pick cherries for to-night's feast. By the way, will you be my partner in the minuet? You dance it so beautifully."

Kitty hesitated, and a comical look came into her face.

"You know we are to open the proceedings by dancing the old-fashioned minuet," continued Mary Bateman; "on the lawn, of course, with the colored lamps lighting us up. I believe I can do fairly well if I have you for my partner, for although you are awkward enough you dance beautifully."

"I'll be your partner if you like," said Kitty, with a sigh, "but look here, Mary, when is Mademoiselle Le Brun going into Hilchester?"

"I did not know she was going at all," replied Mary; "do you want her to buy you anything'?"

"I am not quite sure, but I'd like to see her before she goes."

"Well, there she is, and there's the pony cart coming round. I expect she has to buy a lot of things for Mrs. Clavering. Run up to her if you want to give her a message, Kitty. Hullo, mademoiselle, will you wait a minute for Kitty Sharston—she wants to say something to you?"

But Kitty stood still. There was a battle going on in her heart. She had very little pocket-money, very little indeed, but when her father was saying good-bye to her he had put two new half-crowns into her hand.

"Keep them unbroken as long as you can, Kitty," he said. "The money will be something to fall back upon in a time of need." And five shillings was a large sum for the Major to give Kitty just then, and Kitty cherished those two half-crowns very dearly, more dearly than anything else in the world, for they had been her father's last, very last present to her.

But perhaps the hour of need had come. This was the thought that darted into her heart, for Florence did want those cherry-colored ribbons, and Florence's heart was sore, and things were nearly as bad for her as they were for Kitty herself. Kitty had a brief struggle, and then she made up her mind.

"One moment, mademoiselle; I won't keep you any time," she called out to the governess, who nodded back to her with a pleased smile on her face, for Kitty was a universal favorite.

Then the young girl rushed upstairs to her dormitory, unlocked her little private drawer, took out her sealskin purse, extracted one of the new half-crowns, and was down again by the little governess cart, whispering eagerly to Mademoiselle Le Brun, within the prescribed time.

"All right," said mademoiselle; "I'll do the very best I can."

"And have the parcel directed to Florence," said Kitty, "for I don't want her to know about my giving it to her; I am sure she would rather not. If there is any change from the half-crown you can let me have it back, can you not, mademoiselle?"

"I'll see to that," said mademoiselle; "there is Florence's own sixpence towards it, you know. Oh I daresay I can give you a shilling back and get very good ribbon."

"Well, be sure it is soft and satiny and with no cotton in it," called Kitty again, and then the governess cart rolled down the avenue and was lost to view.

Notwithstanding that she had only half a crown in that sealskin purse Kitty felt strangely exultant and happy when she ran back to the cherry orchard and helped her companions in gathering the ripe fruit.

She had put on a large blue apron, for cherries stain a good deal when they are as luscious as those in Cherry Court orchard, and quantities had to be picked, for it was the custom from time immemorial for each of the guests to take a basket of cherries away with them, and the baskets themselves—long, low, broad, and ornamental—were filled now first with cherry-leaves, and then with fruit, by the excited and happy girls.

After Kitty had spent an hour or two in the cherry orchard she ran into the house, washed her face and hands, smoothed her hair, and ran down to the school-room, for she too wanted to look through her examination papers. They were not difficult, and she was very quick and ready at acquiring knowledge, and she soon felt certain that she could answer all the questions, and, having folded them up, she replaced them in her desk.

It was the custom of the school that each girl should keep her desk locked, and Kitty now slipped the key of hers into her pocket. As she did so the door was opened and Florence came in. Florence looked pale and *distrait*.

"Do you know," she said, "I have got the most racking headache; I wonder if you would hear me through my English History questions, Kitty. It would be awfully kind of you. I am so wretched about every thing and things seem so hopeless, and it is so perfectly miserable to think of spending all the holidays here, for I don't believe Mrs. Clavering is going to take us to the

seaside after all. Really, I think life is not worth living sometimes."

"Oh, but it is," said Kitty, "and we are only preparing for life now—don't forget that, Florry."

"I can't take a high and mighty view of anything just now," said Florence; "I am cross, and that's a fact. I wish I wasn't going to the feast to-night. If it were not for the chance of being one of the lucky three in the Scholarship competition I wouldn't appear on the scenes at all, I vow I would not, with that horrid bit of cottony cherry-colored ribbon—yes, I vow I wouldn't. Why, Kitty, how you have stained your dress; you must have knelt on a cherry when you were picking them just now in the orchard."

"So I have; what a pity!" said Kitty. She glanced down at the deep red stain, and then added, "I'll run upstairs presently and wash it out."

"Well, don't catch cold, whatever you do. But stay, won't you first hear me my English History questions?"

Kitty immediately complied. Yes, Florence was stupid; she did not half know her questions; her replies were wide of the mark. Kitty felt at first distressed and then very determined.

"Look here, Florence," she said, "this will never do; you must work through that portion of English History all the afternoon, and I will help you to the very best of my ability. I happen to know the time of Queen Elizabeth so well, for it was a favorite time with my father. He always loved those old stories of the great worthies who lived in the time of Queen Elizabeth. Yes, I'll help you. Shall we read these chapters of history together this afternoon?"

"I cannot, I cannot," said Florence. "My head aches and everything seems hopeless. Why, if that is so, Kitty, I shan't even have a chance of being one of the lucky three."

"Oh, yes, you will—you must," said Kitty. "Half of the pleasure of the competition would be lost if you and I were not to work together during the holidays."

"Well, there is something in that," said Florence, brightening as she spoke. "I forgot when I spoke so dismally that you, too, were to spend the holidays here. By the way, has your father sailed yet?"

"On Monday last," said Kitty, in a very low voice. She turned her head aside as she spoke.

"I believe you are the bravest girl in the world," said Florence, stoutly; "but there, you are a great deal too good for me. I wish you were naughty sometimes, such as you used to be, daring and a little defiant and a little indifferent to rules, but you are so changed since the Scholarship has come to the fore. Does it mean a great deal to you, Kitty?"

"I can't talk of it," said Kitty, "I'd rather not; we are both to try for it; I believe it means a great deal to us both."

"It means an immensity to me," said Florence.

"Then it is not fair for us to talk it over when we are both going to try our hardest to win it, are we not?"

"If that is the case why do you help me with my English History?"

"Because I should like you to be one of the lucky three."

"Are you certain? Although I don't know this history very well, I shall be a dangerous rival, that I promise."

"I don't care; I mean to win if I can, but I should like to compete with you," said Kitty, stoutly.

At that moment the sounds of wheels in the avenue was heard, and a moment or two afterwards Mademoiselle Le Brun entered the school-room and put a little parcel into Florence's hand.

"There, my dear," she said.

Florence let it lie just where it was.

"Thank you," she answered; "you did your best?"

"Yes, dear, I did my best."

The governess left the room without even glancing at Kitty. Kitty felt herself coloring; she bent low, allowing her curly hair to fall over her face and forehead.

A moment later there came an exclamation from Florence.

"Oh, I say, Kitty, what does this mean—look, do look!"

Kitty looked up. The flush had left her face now, and it was cool and composed as usual.

"Why, Florry," she exclaimed, "she has got you three yards, and it is absolutely beautiful, satiny and smooth, and not a scrap of cotton in the ribbon, and such a sweet color. What does it mean?"

"Kitty, do you understand?" said Florence.

"I am so glad you have got it," said Kitty, in a quiet voice; "yes, it is lovely ribbon; perhaps they had a cheap sale or something."

"Perhaps," said Florence, "but all the same I don't believe this ribbon could have been bought for twopence a yard. I must speak to mademoiselle; she could not—oh, no, no, that is impossible —mademoiselle is very poor and stingy—but what does it mean?"

"It means that you are going to wear cherry-colored ribbons to-night, doesn't it?" said Kitty, "and now cheer up, do, Florry, and work away at your history. I must run off now to wash my hands before dinner."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LETTER.

After dinner Mrs. Clavering called the girls of the Upper school into the oak parlor.

"My dears," she said, "I won't keep you a minute, but I have just had a letter from Sir John Wallis, and he wishes me to say that he would like the girls who are to compete for the preliminary examination for the Scholarship to write their answers to the English History questions. He has sent over the questions in this envelope, and you can all read them, and you are to write your answers in advance, and fold them up and put them into envelopes for him to open and read to-night. I believe there are ten questions, but his rule is that you are none of you to be helped by any book in the answers, and that no one girl is to assist another. That is all, my dears; you can go into the school-room and get the matter through in less than an hour if you like. And now hurry away, for there is no time to lose. I will have the question pinned up in the school-room for you all to see."

Mrs. Clavering hastened away, and all the girls of the Upper school, seven in all, presently found themselves seated by their desks, busily answering Sir John Wallis's questions on the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

When Mrs. Clavering had made her statement Florence had cast one anxious, half-despairing glance in Kitty's direction, and Kitty had slowly raised her arched eyebrows and looked at her friend with compassion and distress.

Kitty now walked quickly to her desk, glanced at the questions, and wrote the answers in a good bold, firm hand.

Her early training with her father stood her in excellent stead, and she was able to give a vivid account of the Spanish Armada and of other great events in the reign of good Queen Bess. She felt quite cheerful and hopeful as she wrote her answers, expressing them in good English, and taking great pains to be correct with regard to spelling. At last they were finished. She slipped them into her envelope, put them back in her desk, and left the room. As she did so she passed Florence, whose cheeks were flushed like peonies, and who was bending in some despair over her paper, for Florence was well known in the school to be ignorant as regarded all matters connected with history, although she was smart enough in her own line.

"Poor Florry, I am sorry for her," thought Kitty. Then she went away to her room and employed her spare time writing a long letter to her father, and did not give Florence any more thought.

Meanwhile Mabel and Alice Cunningham, Mary Bateman, Bertha Kennedy, and Edith King, one and all answered the English History questions; they slipped them into envelopes, and put them into their desks. They also left the room, and Florence was alone in the school-room.

When she found herself so she threw back her head, uttered a great yawn, and then glanced in despair at the ten very comprehensive questions set by Sir John Wallis.

"I shall never answer them," she said to herself; "it is quite impossible. I have not the faintest idea what he means by question five, for instance. She hated Mary Queen of Scots, I know that, and she got her to be imprisoned, I know that also; but what is the story in connection with the Earl of Leicester? I cannot, cannot remember it. Oh, how tiresome, how more than tiresome—this

may lose me my chance with the lucky three, for Alice Cunningham is trying quite hard, and Edith King is having a regular fight over the matter; and of course, there is no doubt that Kitty Sharston will be elected to try for the Scholarship, but I—yes, I must be elected—I will; but what shall I do?"

Florence paced restlessly up and down the school-room. As she did so she suddenly perceived with a quickening of her heart's pulses that Kitty through an oversight had left the key in her desk; all the other girls had locked their desks; but Kitty, who was generally careful enough in this matter, had left the key in hers.

Nothing in all the world would be easier than for Florence to open Kitty's desk, to take out the envelope which contained her replies to the English History questions, and to glance at the momentous question which related to the Earl of Leicester. Right or wrong, Florence felt she must stoop to this mean action.

"After all, being included in the lucky three does not mean winning the Scholarship," she said to herself, "and I should so like to be one of the three. I think I will take one look; there is no one in the house at present. I saw Kitty cross the courtyard and go in the direction of the garden not half an hour ago. No one will know, and I shall have an equal chance with the others; if not, I shall fail, and to fail now would drive me mad."

Just at that moment Florence, who had approached the window in her restless pacing up and down, saw the postboy enter the courtyard. She ran out to meet him. He brought several letters, and amongst others one for Florence from her mother. She took it back with her to the schoolroom. Mrs. Aylmer's letters were never particularly cheerful, but Florence opened it now with a slight degree of eagerness.

"I have good news for you, Florence," wrote her mother; "if you succeed in being elected as one of the three who are to compete for Sir John Wallis's Scholarship, I shall certainly contrive to give you a week at Dawlish with me. Of course, if you fail it will be utterly useless, and I should not dream of wasting the money; so try your very best, my dear child, for there is more in this than meets the eye. It will make the most immense difference in your life, my dear Florence, if you gain this Scholarship, and also in the life of your affectionate mother. I may as well add here that your Aunt Susan becomes more intolerable day by day, and it is extremely probable that she will soon cease to pay your school fees at all. If that is the case, my dear, I really do not know what is to become of you, as I certainly cannot afford to meet them. Try your best for the Scholarship, dear. If you win it write to me immediately and I will send you the money to come home."

"What a chance!" thought Florence, as she finished reading the letter. She folded it up and slipped it into her pocket; the next instant she had crossed the room, had opened Kitty's desk, and taken out the envelope with its folded sheet of paper within. She unfolded the paper and glanced at its contents. One quick glance was sufficient. She put back the paper into the envelope, shut Kitty's desk, and returned to her own.

Her cheeks were redder than ever and her heart was beating wildly, but she knew what she wanted to know. Florence folded up her own sheet of paper, put it into its envelope, and laid it in her desk. She felt pretty certain now of being elected as one of the lucky three, and no one need ever know that she had peeped at Kitty's answers. After all, but for this ridiculous and sudden prohibition on the part of Sir John Wallis, Kitty would have helped her with her English History all the afternoon. Now, of course, she could not ask her, but never mind, she knew what she wanted to know.

Her heart felt a little uncomfortable, and, notwithstanding the hope that she might spend a week at Dawlish with her mother, to whom she was devotedly attached, and the further hope of taking an honorable place in the coming competition, she felt a queer sense of depression.

She was just preparing to leave the school-room when the door opened and Mademoiselle Le Brun looked in. She did not see Florence at first, then she glanced at her and spoke hurriedly.

"I thought Kitty Sharston was here; I want her," she said.

"No," said Florence; "what is it; what do you want?"

"I have to give her a shilling back out of the change."

"A shilling out of the change; what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing, my dear; I ought not to tell you; I owe her a shilling, that's all."

"By the way, mademoiselle," said Florence, "I have not thanked you yet for getting me that lovely ribbon. How was it you managed to get it so cheaply?"

Mademoiselle looked very knowing.

"I am glad you like it," she said; "it was not particularly cheap."

She left the room, although Florence called after her to stay.

Florence walked quickly to the window. She looked out. The sun was still high in the heavens, for on this midsummer day it would take a long time before the evening arrived. Florence's heart beat harder than ever, for suddenly her eyes were opened, and she knew how she had got the cherry-colored ribbon. Kitty had given it to her, and Florence had stolen some of Kitty's knowledge and applied it to herself.

She hated herself for it, but not enough to retract what she had done. She went up to her room, threw herself on the bed, and burst out crying.

Yes, she would stick to it now, but, all the same, she hated herself. It was very unpleasant to be lowered in her own eyes, but she would go through with the matter now, whatever befell.

The chance of going to Dawlish, the chance of winning the Scholarship, meant too much to her; she must secure this good thing which had fallen in her path at any cost.

The evening drew on apace, and the whole school was in a perfect fever of excitement. The girls came up to their different dormitories to dress for the occasion.

Kitty, who was not too well provided with clothes, nevertheless did possess one very smart evening frock. It was made of lovely Indian muslin, exquisitely embroidered and beautifully made. She took it now out of her trunk, and looked at it with admiration. Her father had bought this Indian muslin for her, having sent for it straight away to India, and he had himself superintended the making of the beautiful dress.

Kitty's fingers trembled now as she slipped the soft folds over her head, and tucked in the spray of cherry-colored ribbons just above her white satin belt, and then she tied back her hair with the same shiny soft ribbon, and looked at her little pale face in the glass and wondered how soon she would see her father again.

"Oh, father! father!" she thought, "I am going to try my hardest, my very, very hardest, and all for your sake, and I'll be brave for your sake, and three years won't be very long passing if I spend every moment of the time in working my very hardest, and doing my very best for you."

When she had finished her dressing she turned to help the other girls. Mabel and Alice Cunningham were in soft pink dresses, a little paler in shade than the cherry-colored ribbons which as a matter of course they would wear, and one and all of the girls of the Upper school were becomingly and suitably dressed, with the exception of poor Florence; but Florence's muslin dress was coarse in texture and badly made, and notwithstanding the soft cherry-colored ribbons, she did not look her best. Also her head ached, and she was in low spirits.

Kitty was particularly affectionate to Florence, and she asked her now in an anxious tone how she had managed with regard to her English History.

"I am so dreadfully sorry," she said; "I meant to give you such a coaching in the reign of Queen Elizabeth all this afternoon, Florry, but there, it can't be helped. How did you manage, dear? Do you think you have answered all the questions?"

"Of course I have," answered Florence, in an almost cross voice, for she could scarcely bear Kitty's affectionate manners just then. "You take me for a great dunce, Kitty, but I am not quite so bad as you imagine."

"Oh, I know you are anything but a dunce," replied Kitty; "I don't take you for one, I assure you, Florence, only I did hope that I might help you in English History, for that is my strong point."

"You are quite conceited about it, I do believe," said Florence. "There, don't pull my dress about any more. Thank you, I like my cherry bow here better than in my belt. Don't touch me, please."

Florence hated herself beyond words for being so cross, but the fact was her heart ached so badly she could scarcely be civil to Kitty.

She ran downstairs, and for the rest of the evening kept out of Kitty Sharston's way.

Yes; it was a glorious evening, and everything passed off without a hitch of any sort. The guests consisted of all the best people in the neighborhood. They sat round and applauded all the girls, who danced the minuet with becoming grace and looked very pretty as they glided about on the lamp-lit lawn.

And then one or two of them recited, and one or two of them sang songs, and then there was a great chorus in which all the girls joined, and then they danced Sir Roger de Coverley to the merry strains of a string band, and presently the great occasion of all came when the girls, followed by the guests, entered the great central hall of Cherry Court, and the prizes were given away.

Florence obtained two prizes, a beautiful edition of Scott's poems, and also a little portfolio

full of some pretty water-color drawings, for Florence had a great taste for art, and had managed to come out at the head of the school with her own water-color sketches.

The other girls also obtained prizes, all but Kitty Sharston, who was not long enough in the school to be entitled to one.

Kitty found herself now close to Sir John Wallis, who motioned to her to come up to his side, and pointed to a chair near where she could sit.

"I heard from your father this morning," he said, "and I mean to send him a cable to Malta if you are elected as one of the fortunate three. He expects to touch Malta on Saturday, and the cable will be waiting for him with the good news, I make not the slightest doubt."

"Oh, will you? How splendid of you!" said Kitty; "but perhaps I shall not succeed."

"Oh, yes, I have no doubt you will. Now, pluck up your courage, answer your best; don't be a scrap afraid."

"But, Sir John, you must promise me one thing," said Kitty, looking earnestly into his face.

"What is that, my dear?" asked Sir John, smiling down into the eager little face.

"You won't favor me more than the other girls? You'll be quite, quite fair, and give the chance to those girls who are really in your opinion the best?"

"I will, Kitty, I will," said Sir John; "do you think I could do anything else as regards your father's daughter? And now, child, the time is up, and I am going into the oak parlor. You will all follow me in a moment."

Kitty never forgot the hour which was spent in the oak parlor with her companions of the Upper school. She did not know how she answered the questions put with great animation by Sir John. She only knew that her heart was beating wildly, and she was thinking all the time of that cablegram which would comfort her father when he reached Malta, and resolving as surely girl never resolved before not to disappoint him, to give him if she could, if it were any way within her power, that supreme pleasure. And so when the hour was over and the brief examination was made, and the names of the successful competitors called out, and Kitty Sharston's name appeared at the head of the list, she could only look at Sir John, and think of the cablegram, and not feel at all elated, although her companions clustered around her and shook her hand and wished her joy.

The two other successful competitors were Florence Aylmer and Mary Bateman.

Mrs. Clavering then read out certain rules which Sir John had made with regard to the Scholarship, and soon afterwards the proceedings of the evening broke up; the guests departed to their homes, carrying their baskets of cherries with them; and Kitty, Florence and Mary were surrounded by their companions, who wished them joy and cheered them three times three, and took them up to their dormitory in triumph.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LITTLE MUMMY.

It was a week afterwards when Kitty stood at the gate of Cherry Court School to wish Florence Aylmer good-bye, for Florence had obtained the darling wish of her heart, and was on her way to Dawlish to spend a week with her mother. She was to travel third-class, and the journey was a long one, and the day happened to be specially hot, but nothing could damp Florence's delight, and Kitty, as she watched her, could not help for a moment a slight pang of envy coming over her.

"Have a good time, Florry, and tell me all about it when you return," said Kitty.

And Florence promised, thinking Kitty a very good-natured, agreeable girl as she did so, and then Kitty turned slowly back to the house and Florence found herself alone. She was driving in a hired chaise to Hilchester railway-station. She had said good-bye to Kitty and to Mrs. Clavering, and her earnest wish was that the week might spread itself into two or three, and that she could banish all thought of Kitty and Mrs. Clavering and Cherry Court School from her mind.

"For, although I mean to win the Scholarship—yes, I shall win it; I have made up my mind on that point—I cannot help more or less hating Kitty Sharston, and Mrs. Clavering, and the school itself," thought the girl. "But there, I will forget every unpleasant thing now. I have not seen the little Mummy for a whole year; it will be heavenly to kiss her again. If there is anyone in the

world whom I truly, truly love it is the dear little Mummy."

All during her hot journey across England to the cool and delightful watering-place of Dawlish, Florence thought more and more of her mother. She was an only child, her father having died when she was five years old, and Mrs. Aylmer had always been terribly poor, and Florence had always known what it was to stint and screw and do without those things which were as the breath of life to most girls. And Florence was naturally not at all a contented girl, and she had fought against her position, and disliked having to stint and screw, and she had hated her shabby dress and unwieldy boots and ugly hats and coarse fare.

But one portion of her lot abundantly contented her—she had no fault to find with her mother. The little Mummy was all that was perfection. For her mother she would have done almost as much in her own way as Kitty would do for her father in hers.

And now her heart beat high and her spirits rose as she approached nearer hour by hour the shabby little home where her mother lived.

It was in the cool of a hot summer's evening that the train at last drew up at Dawlish, and Mrs. Aylmer stood on the platform waiting to receive her daughter.

Mrs. Aylmer was a plain dumpling sort of little body, with a perfectly round face, and small beady black eyes. She had a high color in each of her cheeks and fluffy black hair pushed away from her high forehead. She was dressed in widow's weeds, which were somewhat rusty, and she now came forward with a beaming face to welcome Florence.

"Oh, Mummy, it is good to see you," said Florence. She had a brusque voice and a brusque manner, but nothing could keep the thrill out of her words as she addressed her mother.

"I am not going to kiss you till we get into the cottage," she said. "Here's my luggage—only one box, of course. Oh, it is good to see you, it is good!"

"Then come right off home, Florry," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I have got shrimps for tea and some brown bread and butter, and Sukey made the bread specially for you this morning; you always liked home-made bread. Come along; the porter will bring your trunk in presently. You'll see to it, Peter, won't you?" said Mrs. Aylmer.

Peter, the rough-headed outside porter, nodded in reply, and Mrs. Aylmer, leaning upon Florence, who was head and shoulders taller than her parent, walked down the little shingly beach, and a moment afterwards entered the cottage door.

"Dear Mummy," she said, "it is good to see you. Now, turn round, Mummy, and let us have a right good hearty stare. Oh, you look just as well as ever, sunburnt—so much the better. Now then, for a hug."

Florence opened her arms, and the next moment little Mrs. Aylmer was clasped to her daughter's breast.

"There, that's nice," said Florence, "that's a right hearty hug. I am so glad you are well, Mummy. I am so thankful you were able to send me the money; I hope I didn't screw you up very tight."

"Well, it did, Florence," replied Mrs. Aylmer; "I shall not be able to have any meat for a whole month after you leave, dear. That was the way I managed, just docking the butcher's bill and the greengrocer's bill. I must have butter to my bread and milk in my tea, but the greengrocer and the butcher will pay your third-class return fare to the school. There now, Flo, don't worry. Come upstairs to our room; you will share my bed, dear; I could not afford to have an extra room; you will share my bed."

Florence followed her mother upstairs without a word. The cottage was a very, very tiny one, and, tiny as it was, Mrs. Aylmer only owned one half of it. She had a little sitting room downstairs, and a wee, wee bedroom upstairs, and the use of the kitchen, and the use of Sukey's time for so many hours every day, and that was about all. But a delicious sea breeze blew into the tiny sitting-room and filled the little bed-room; and clematis and honey-suckle and climbing plants of every description clustered around the windows, and Florence thought it the dearest, sweetest, most fascinating place in the world.

"It is rather a small bed for two," she reflected, as she entered the room, stooping to get beneath the lintel of the door; "but never mind, it's Mummy's little room and Mummy's bed, and I am happy, happy as the day is long."

So she tossed off her hat and washed her face and hands, and tidied her hair, and went down to enjoy the honey and bread and fruit and shrimps and tea with cream in it which Mrs. Aylmer had provided in honor of her daughter's arrival.

"There," said Florence, "that was a hearty meal. Now let us go out on the beach, Mummy. You will have a great deal to say to me, and I shall have a great deal to say to you."

"It is exciting having you back, Flo," said Mrs. Aylmer, "and we must make the week go as far as possible."

"We will sit up very late at night," said Florence, "and we will get up very early in the morning, for we must talk, talk, talk every moment of our precious time, except just the few hours necessary for sleep. You don't want much sleep, do you, Mummy?"

"Yes, but I do, my dear; I want my seven to eight hours' sleep within the twenty-four hours, or I am just good for nothing. I get muzzy in the head unless I sleep enough. Do you ever suffer from muzziness in the head, dear?"

"That's just like one of your dear old-fashioned words," said Florence; "if I did feel it I shouldn't be allowed to express it in that way at school. By the way, mother, what do you think of me? Haven't I grown a good lot?"

"Yes, you're a fine hearty girl, but you are not exactly beautiful, Florry."

Florence's eyes fell and a discontented look crossed her face. "How can I look decent in these clothes?" she said; "but there, never mind, you can't give me better, can you?"

"I, darling! How could I? I have not fifty pounds a year when all is told, and I cannot do more with my money. It's your Aunt Susan who is to blame, Florence, and she is worse than ever. I'll tell you all about her to-morrow; we won't worry to-night, will we?"

"No; let us think of only pleasant things to-night," said Florence.

"Well, come down on the beach, Flo. I am all agog to hear your news. What is this about the Scholarship?"

"Oh, Mummy, need we talk of this either to-night?" said Florence, frowning.

"Well, yes, I should like it," said Mrs. Aylmer; "you see, you know all about it, and I don't. You told me so little in your letter. You don't write half as long letters as you used to, Flo. I wish you would, for I have nothing else to divert me. I have turned and re-turned my best dress—I turned it upside down last year, and downside up this year, and back to front and front to back, and I am trimming it now with frills which I have cut another old skirt up to make, and I really cannot do anything more with it. It won't by stylish, try as I will, and your Aunt Susan hasn't sent me a cast-off of hers for the last two years. It's very stingy of her, very stingy indeed. She sells her clothes now to a dealer in London who buys up all sorts of wardrobes. Before she found out this wardrobe-dealer I used to get her cast-offs and managed quite nicely. It's horrid of her. She is a very unamiable character. Don't you ever take after her, Florry, be sure you don't."

"I hate her quite as cordially as you do, mother; but now come along by the shore and I'll tell you about the Scholarship, if you really wish to know."

Which Florence did, with one arm clasped tightly round her mother's waist, and Mrs. Aylmer almost danced by her daughter's side as she listened, and tried to fancy herself nearly as young as Florence, and was certainly quite as eager with regard to the winning of the great Scholarship.

"You must get it," she said at last, after a pause; "it would make the most tremendous, tremendous difference."

"Well, I mean to try," said Florence.

"And if you try, dear, you will succeed. You're a very clever girl, ain't you?"

"Don't say 'ain't,' mother; it is not quite——"

"Oh, don't you go to correct me, my love. I can't help having the rather rough ways of people with small means; but you are clever, aren't you?"

"I believe I am in some things. There are some things again which I never can get into my head, try as I will. I am a queer mixture."

"You are a darling old thing," said the mother, giving her arm an affectionate squeeze.

"And you are the sweetest pet in the world," said Florence, glancing down at her parent. "Oh, it is good to be with you, Mummy, again."

"Well, darling, you'll get the prize, there's nothing to prevent it."

"There are several things to prevent it," said Florence, in a gloomy voice.

"What, my dear, darling pet—what?"

"Well, for instance, there are two other girls."

"Oh, girls," said Mrs. Aylmer, in a contemptuous voice. "I am not going to be frightened by

girls. My Florence is equal to the best girl that ever breathed."

"Yes, but mother, you cannot quite understand. There's Kitty Sharston, for instance."

"Kitty Sharston," said Mrs. Aylmer; "what about her?"

"Well, she is really clever, and everyone seems to wish her to win."

"I call that shocking unfair," said Mrs. Aylmer.

"It is, mother, but we cannot get over the fact. She is a favorite with the school, and I must own she is a jolly girl. Now, what do you think she did for me?"

"What, my darling?"

"You know the Cherry Feast?"

"Of course I do—have not you described it to me so often? You would make a wonderful writer, I believe, you would make a lot of money writing stories, Florence."

"No, I wouldn't, Mummy, not really. It takes a good deal to be a good story-writer."

"Well, go on, pet, I am all agog to hear."

So Florence related also the story of the cherry ribbons.

"Wasn't it like Aunt Susan?" she said.

"Just," exclaimed the mother; "the stingiest old cat in existence."

"And wasn't it nice of Kitty, and didn't she do it well?" said Florence. "Oh, she is a splendid girl, and I ought not to hate her."

"But you do hate her?"

"I am afraid I do sometimes."

"And I'm not a bit surprised, dear, coming between you and this great chance. But, oh, Florry, you must win, it is all-important; I'll tell you why to-morrow. There is a letter from your Aunt Susan which will take some of the pleasure out of this little visit, but it makes the Scholarship absolutely essential. I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

CHAPTER X.

AUNT SUSAN.

Florence slept soundly that night, and awoke the next morning in the highest of spirits and the best of health.

"It is wonderful, Mummy," she said, "how you and I can squeeze into this camp bed, but there, I never moved all night; it was delicious to have you so close to me. I cannot understand why I love you as I do, for you are a very plain, ordinary sort of woman."

"I never was anything else," replied Mrs. Aylmer, by no means offended by Florence's frank remarks. "Your poor father always said, 'It's your heart, not your face, that has won me, Mabel.' Your poor father had a great deal of pretty sentiment about him, but I am matter-of-fact to the backbone. There, child, jump up now and get dressed, and I'll go down and prepare the breakfast. Sukey is rather cross this morning, and I always make the coffee myself."

Mrs. Aylmer bustled out of the room, and Florence slowly rose and dressed.

"I wonder what mother would think of me," she said to herself, "if she knew how I really secured my present position as one of the lucky three; I wonder what mother would think about it. Would she be terribly shocked? I doubt if the little Mummy has the highest principles in the world; in fact, I don't doubt, for I am quite certain that the Mummy's principles are a little lax, but there, she is the Mummy, and I love her. What a queer thing love is, for Mummy is not the highest-souled woman, nor the most beautiful in the world. Still, she is the Mummy, and I love her."

So Florence finished dressing and ran downstairs, and enjoyed a hearty breakfast of brown bread and butter, honey, and delicious coffee.

"I can't do much for you in the meat line, my dear," said her parent. "I don't indulge in meat more than once a week myself, but we'll take it out in fish. Fish is cheap and plentiful in Dawlish, and we can get dear little crabs for fourpence apiece."

"Oh, lovely," said Florence; "I adore crabs."

"We will go down to the fishwife after breakfast, and get her to boil some for us in time for supper," said the mother; "and now, Florence, if you are quite disposed to listen, I may as well get over this bad business."

"You allude to Aunt Susan, of course?" said Florence.

"Yes, my dear child, to her last letter. I could not read it to you, for really the tone is that aggravating it would make milk turn, and I know the contents by heart."

"What are they, mother? You may as well tell me; I am pretty well accustomed to bad news. Is she going to make your screw still smaller?"

"No, she says nothing about that. Florence, child, I wish it had been the will of Providence to have spared my brother, for if your Uncle Tom had lived I would not be in the sordid state I am now. If one of them had to go, why wasn't it your Aunt Susan?"

"She is not my real aunt, you know," said Florence.

"That's just it, dear, but she owns the money. Now, if she had left it to Tom he would have had me to live with him. I doubt, after his experience with your Aunt Susan, if he would ever have taken a second wife, and you and I would have had plenty."

"Dear me, mother," said Florence, frowning slightly, "what is the good of going over that now? Uncle Tom has been in his grave for the last six years, hasn't he? and Aunt Susan rules the roost. It's Aunt Susan we have got to think about. What did she say in that unpleasant letter?"

"Something about stocks and shares and dividends, dear—that her dividends are not coming in as well as usual, and that in consequence her income is not so large, and she finds it a great strain keeping you, Florry, at that expensive school."

"Oh, well, that's all arranged," said Florence, in a somewhat nervous voice.

"My dear Florry, don't you bear yourself up with false hopes and false ideas, for it seems, according to your Aunt Susan's letter, that the thing is not arranged at all. In fact, she declares positively that she won't keep you at Cherry Court School longer than another term."

"What, mother?"

"She says so, my love. I am sorry to have to tell you, but it is a fact. She says that you are going on sixteen, and that at sixteen you ought to be a very good pupil teacher at another school, where your services would be given in lieu of payment. She says she knows a school in the country where you would be taken, a place called Stoneley Hall, where there are sixty girls. It is up amongst the Yorkshire moors, in the dreariest spot, I make no doubt. Well, in her letter she said that she had arranged that you are to go to Stoneley Hall at Christmas, and that the next term is your last at Cherry Court School."

"If I win the Scholarship I need not do that," said Florence.

"No, no, dear, that's just it; and she says also that when she removes you from Cherry Court School she will allow me fifteen pounds a year more than I have at present, which will make my income of sixty-five pounds instead of fifty. I mean to give you that fifteen pounds a year to buy your clothes with, Florry. You shall have that, my poor dear child, whatever happens. I think you can dress yourself quite neatly on that."

"I should judge from the sort of clothes I have now," said Florence, giving her foot a pettish kick against the obnoxious blue serge, "I should judge they did not cost five pounds a year. Yes, the fifteen pounds would be delicious; and you would give it to me, Mummy?"

"Well, of course, darling, because you would have no income of your own at Stoneley Hall for the first two years, and after that it depends altogether on what you can do. You are not half educated yet, are you Florence?"

"Of course not, mother; a girl of fifteen is not educated, as a rule."

"That's just it, but your Aunt Susan does not care a bit. She reminds me in her horrid letter, that you are not her own niece at all, and that very few women would be as kind to her husband's people as she is to you and me. She says frankly——"

"Oh, what an odious frank way she has!" interrupted Florence.

"She says frankly," pursued Mrs. Aylmer, wiping the moisture from her brow as she spoke, "that we are the greatest worry to her, both of us, and that she does not care a pin for either of

us, but that she does not want to have it said that her husband's people are in the workhouse, and that is why she is doing what she is doing."

"Oh, Mummy," said Florence, "can you bear her? When you tell me those sort of things I just long to throw her gifts in her face and to say boldly, 'We won't take another halfpenny from you, we will go to the workhouse to spite you, we'll tell every one we can that we are connected with you. Yes, we'll go to the workhouse to spite you.'"

"That's all very well, Florence," replied Mrs. Aylmer, rising as she spoke and shaking the crumbs from her dress outside the window. "I doubt if it would vex your Aunt Susan very much, and it would vex us a considerable deal, my love. Your Aunt Susan's relations might not even hear of it, and we would be miserable and disgraced for ever. No, we must swallow our pride and take her money; there is no help for it. But if you get the Scholarship, Flo, she is the kind of woman who would be proud of you, she is really. If she thought you had any gift she would turn round in jiffy and begin to spend money properly on you. She asked me in her last letter what sort of girl you were growing up, and if you had a chance of being handsome, for, said she, 'if Florence is really handsome, I might take a house in London and give her a season. I enjoy taking handsome girls about, and I am a right good matchmaker.' That is what she said, the horrid old cat. But you are not handsome, Florry, not a bit."

"I know," replied Florence, "I know. Well, mother, we must make the best of things. You may be certain I won't leave a stone unturned to get the Scholarship."

"You will get it, dear, and then your education will be secured, and by and by you will get a post as governess, a good post in some fashionable family, and perhaps you would meet a nice young man who would fall in love with you. They do over and over in the story-books—the nice young man, the heir to big properties, meets the governess girl and falls in love with her, and then she gets a much higher position than her employer's daughters. That is what I would aim for if I were you, Florry."

"Oh, dear me, mother," said Florence. She stared very hard at the round face of her parent, and wondered down deep in her heart why she was so very fond of Mummy. "Let us go out and have a walk," she said, restlessly; "let us visit the little shrimp-woman; I'd like to see her and all the old haunts again."

"But before we go," said Mrs. Aylmer, "tell me, my darling, why are you nervous, why you fear you may not get the Scholarship."

"I told you last night, mother—can't you understand? I am your one pet chicken, but I am not anything at all really in the eyes of the world. I am not beautiful and I am not specially clever."

"But you got amongst the lucky three, as you call them; you must be clever to have done that."

Florence stared very hard at her mother; her face went a little pale and then red.

"What is the matter, Flo? Why do you stare at me like that?"

"I am going to tell you something if you will never tell back again."

"What is it, dear? Really, Flo, you make me quite uncomfortable; you have got a very bold way of staring, love."

"I am going to tell you something," repeated Florence; "I got into the lucky three because I was mean. I did a mean, shabby, low thing, Mummy."

"Oh, no, no," said Mrs. Aylmer, restlessly, "no, no, darling."

"I did, mother," said Florence, and now her lips trembled. "I did something very mean, and I did it to the girl who gave me those lovely cherry ribbons."

"That spoilt chit—Kitty Sharston you call her?"

"Yes, that girl. I opened her desk and looked at an answer which she put to a certain question in English History which I did not know myself. If I had not answered that question I make no doubt I should not have been included in the lucky three."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Aylmer. She looked restless and disturbed. She went again to the little window and looked out. "I don't see how you can help yourself," she said.

"But it was a mean thing, wasn't it, mother?"

"Poor people cannot help themselves," said the widow, in a restless voice, "but I wish you hadn't told me, Florence; it was—it was the sort of thing that your poor father would not have done; but there, you couldn't help yourself, of course."

"Then you don't think, mother, that I ought to tell Mrs. Clavering?" said Florence.

"Tell and give up your chance! No, no, no; that is the disadvantage of being so poor, one has to stoop sometimes. Your father would not have done it, but you could not help yourself. Come out, child, come out."

The mother and daughter wandered along the beach. They visited the shrimp-woman and then sat under the shade of a big rock and looked at the dancing waves, and talked of Florence's chance of winning the coming Scholarship.

By tacit consent they neither of them alluded to that shabby deed which Florence had done; they were both in their hearts of hearts uncomfortable about it, but both equally resolved to carry the thing through now.

"For it is too important," thought Mrs. Aylmer.

And Florence also thought, "It is too important, it means too much; I must take every chance of securing the Scholarship."

The two ladies returned home rather late, and there, to their astonishment, they found a telegram waiting them. It was addressed to Mrs. Aylmer. She tore it open eagerly and uttered an exclamation.

"There, Florry," she said, "read that."

Florence took the thin pink sheet and read the following words:

"Staying at Torquay. Going back to London to-morrow. Will put up at the hotel at Dawlish for one night on purpose to see Florence.—SUSAN."

"There," said the mother, "there's a chance for you, Flo; I hope you have brought a decent dress. Perhaps she will do something now that she sees you; it is a wonderful chance. Dear, dear, dear! I have not seen Susan for three or four years. She was a stylish woman in her day; perhaps she'll give me one or two of her cast-offs."

"Mother," said Florence, "we must make the best of things. You must look nice and I must look nice, and we won't plead poverty. I feel proud in the presence of Aunt Susan. I am sorry she is coming; I may as well say so frankly."

"But it's a great chance, child," said the widow; "what do you think about inviting her here to tea?"

"Nonsense, mother," replied the daughter; "she ought to invite us to tea."

"I wonder if she will. I wonder which hotel she'll go to. There is a splendid one on the beach, the 'Crown and Garter.' It would be very stylish to be seen going there, and Sukey would think a great deal more of me and also my friends, the Pratts, if they knew that we had tea'd or lunched at the 'Crown and Garter.' I hope she will ask me. But then, on the other hand, to see Susan in the cottage—she would probably drive up in a carriage and pair—I really wonder which would be best. It would have a great effect on the neighbors. I have spoken to them of my grand relations, but somehow, seeing is believing. It's wonderfully exciting—her coming, isn't it, Flo?"

But Florry had walked to the window and was looking out with a shade of disgust on her brow. The Mummy was the Mummy, but she certainly needed repression. Even if you had those sort of sentiments, if you were educated at all you would keep them to yourself.

The rest of the evening was spent in considerable excitement on the part of Mrs. Aylmer. Much as she professed to dislike her sister-in-law, Susan Aylmer, the thought of seeing her caused much more commotion than she had experienced at the thought of welcoming Florence home.

Florence was a dear old thing and her own daughter, but then she depended on Susan for her bread. Early on the following morning she was seen to put on her best and much-turned dress.

She went to the shop and even committed the great extravagance of getting a new white widow's front for her bonnet, and also a pair of new black silk gloves, and then she waited restlessly until the arrival of Mrs. Aylmer.

Mrs. Aylmer arrived in state by a train which reached Dawlish about noon, and the other Mrs. Aylmer—the poor one—and her daughter Florence watched her from afar.

"There she is," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, as she might truly be called, "there she is, Flo. She's grown stouter than ever, she promises to be a very large woman in her old age; and what a pompous way she does walk! I do declare—well, that beats everything—she is walking to the hotel, not even taking a carriage. That's just like Susan. Come, Flo, we'll go toward and speak to her; there's no good in having relations and keeping one's self in the background. Follow me, my dear, and pull yourself up and look as nice as you can. Everything depends on your aunt's first impression of you. Just push your hat straight—there, that's better; now come along."

Mrs. Aylmer and Florence pushed their way through a crowd of people who had just arrived,

and a moment later Mrs. Aylmer the less and Mrs. Aylmer the great were shaking hands in greeting.

"How do you do, Mabel?" said Mrs. Aylmer the great, "and is this your daughter?" A pair of light blue eyes traveled all over Florence from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot. "I'll see you both at the hotel," said Mrs. Aylmer, in a gracious tone, "after I have had lunch. I shall want a little rest immediately after, but don't keep me waiting. I shall expect you at three o'clock."

"Come home, Flo," said Mrs. Aylmer the less. "We must not disturb you, of course, Susan, and we'll be punctual to the moment. What do you think of her, Flo?" said the widow, as soon as she and her daughter were out of sight.

"I think she looks horrid, mother, just as she always did. How well I remember going to see her shortly after poor father died, and how she used to make you cry, and how cold she always was, and what miserable tea she gave us! We had better ask her to a meal unless we want to be starved, Mummy, dear."

"I can't afford it really, Flo, and she would remark upon every luxury we had at the table. She would write to me afterwards and say, 'From the style of your meal,' etc."

"Oh, don't mother; I wish she hadn't come," said Florence. "You and I could have been quite happy and cosy alone, but now she will contrive to make us truly miserable."

"She has come for a reason," said Mrs. Aylmer, solemnly, "and it behooves you, Flo, to put your best foot foremost. I have got a nice little white jacket for you to wear this afternoon, and white becomes you very much."

"A white jacket! What sort?" said Florence.

"One that your aunt sent me two years back, and which I altered by a pattern of yours. You can wear it with that serge dress, and you will look quite cool and nice. Now then, darling, let us have our own dinner, because we must be punctual; it would never do to keep Susan waiting."

Neither of the ladies did keep Aunt Susan waiting. They arrived at the hotel, which turned out to be the "Crown and Garter," just as the great clock in the hall struck three.

Mrs. Aylmer had never been inside the "Crown and Garter," and she now looked around her with intense pleasure, and when one of the waiters came forward asked him in a pompous voice for "my sister-in-law, Mrs. Aylmer."

The man withdrew, to return in a moment or two to say that Mrs. Aylmer was in her private sitting-room, number 24, and would see the ladies immediately.

CHAPTER XI.

"I ALWAYS ADMIRED FRANKNESS."

"Hold your head up, Flo, and don't be nervous," whispered the widow, as they walked down the long corridor, the waiter going in front. He paused opposite number 24, flung the door open, and announced in a loud voice, "Mrs. Aylmer and Miss Florence Aylmer," and then shut the door behind the two ladies.

The widow walked nervously up the room and then stood confronting her sister-in-law. The elder Mrs. Aylmer had just risen from a sofa on which she had been lying. Mrs. Aylmer the less was quite right in prophesying her sister-in-law would be a large woman in the future; she was a large woman now, stoutly built and very fat about the face. Her face was pasty in complexion without a scrap of color in it, and her eyes were of too light a blue to redeem the general insipidity of her appearance; but when she spoke that insipidity vanished, for her lips were very firm, and were apt to utter incisive words, and at such moments her pale blue eyes would flash with a light fire which was full of sarcasm, and might even rise to positive cruelty.

"Sit down, Mabel," she said to Mrs. Aylmer. "Now Florence, I wish to say a few words to you. You will have tea with me, of course, Mabel, you and your daughter."

"Thank you very much indeed, Susan," said Mrs. Aylmer the less. "It will be a real treat," she added *sotto voce*, but loud enough for her sister-in-law to hear.

"H'm! I have tea at four o'clock," said Mrs. Aylmer the great; "I will just ring the bell and give orders; then we shall have time for a nice comfortable conversation. My dear," she added, turning to her niece, "would you oblige me by ringing that bell?"

Florence rose and did so. There was an ominous silence between the three until the waiter appeared to answer the summons.

"Three cups of tea and some thin bread and butter at four o'clock," said Mrs. Aylmer the great, in an icy tone of command.

The waiter said, "Yes, ma'am," bowed, and withdrew.

Mrs. Aylmer the less thought of the hearty tea she and Florence would make at home, the shrimps and the brown bread and butter, and the honey and the strong tea with a little cream to flavor it; nevertheless, her beady black eyes were fixed on her sister-in-law now with a look which almost signified adoration.

"Don't stare so much, Mabel," said Mrs. Aylmer; "you have not lost that unpleasant habit; you always had it from the time I first knew you, and I see your daughter has inherited it. Now then, Florence, to business."

"Yes, aunt, to business," replied Florence, very brusquely.

Mrs. Aylmer stared at her niece.

"You speak in a very free-and-easy way," she said, "considering your circumstances."

Florence colored angrily.

"My circumstances," she answered; "I don't quite understand."

"Has not your mother told you about my, alas! unavoidable change of plans?"

"I have, Susan, I have," said the widow, in an eager, deprecating voice. "I told dear Florry the day after her arrival. By doing without meat and fruits and vegetables I contrived to pay her third-class fare from Cherry Court School to Dawlish, and on the night of her arrival I told her about your sensible letter."

"H'm, I am glad you think it sensible," said Mrs. Aylmer; "sensible or not, it is unavoidable. You leave Cherry Court School at the end of next term, Florence, and I am about to write to your governess, Mrs. Clavering, to give her due notice of your removal. I hope, my dear, you have profited much by the excellent education which I have given you during the last three years."

"I don't know that," replied Florence, in a sulky tone. "Where is the good," she said to herself, "of trying to please this horrid Aunt Susan, and I quite hate Mummy to fawn on her the way she is doing. I at least cannot stoop to it. No; and I will not."

"You have not profited by your time at school," replied Mrs. Aylmer the great; "what do you mean?"

"I have done my best, of course," replied Florence, "but I am quite a young girl still, only just fifteen. Girls of fifteen are not educated, are they, Aunt Susan? Were you educated when you were fifteen?"

"Oh, Flo, Flo," said the mother, in a voice of agony; "pray do forgive her, Susan."

"I wish you wouldn't interrupt, Mabel," said Mrs. Aylmer, lying back in her luxurious chair as she spoke, and folding her fat hands across her lap. "I like Florence to speak out. I hate people to fawn on me."

"Dear! dear!" said Mrs. Aylmer the less. She rolled her black eyes, then lowered them and fixed them on the carpet. It was impossible to understand Susan, she was a most extraordinary woman. If, after all, Florry was on the right track and won the day!

"Girls of fifteen are not specially well educated," proceeded Mrs. Aylmer, fixing her eyes again upon Florence's face, which was now a little red; "and I don't intend your education to be finished. I have been fortunate enough to gain you admittance into an excellent school for the daughters of the poor clergy. You are to go as a pupil teacher; you will not receive any remuneration for the first two years, but you can continue to have lessons in music, French, and German."

"And what about English?" said Florence.

"You are to impart English. I conclude that at your age you at least know your mother tongue thoroughly."

"But that's just it, I do not," said Florence. "I know French fairly well for a girl of my age, and I have a smattering of German, and am fairly fond of music. I don't care for English History nor English Literature, and I have not studied either of them; and my grammar is very weak, and my spelling—well, Aunt Susan, I can't spell properly. I am sorry, but I inherit bad spelling from my mother."

"Oh, Florence!" cried the poor little widow.

"I do, Mummy; you know perfectly well that you have never yet spelt 'arrange' right, nor 'agreeable.' You always leave out one of the 'e's' in the middle of agreeable. Oh, I have had such a fight with those two words, and I do inherit my bad spelling from you. Well, Aunt Susan, what more do you wish me to say?"

"I cannot admire your manners, Florence, and as to your appearance, it leaves very much to be desired."

Mrs. Aylmer looked very calmly all over Florence. Florence suddenly sprang to her feet, her temper was getting the better of her. She inherited her temper, not from her mother, for the little Mummy had the easiest-going temper in the world, but from her father. John Aylmer when he was alive had been known to plead his own cause with effect on more than one occasion, and now some of his spirit animated his young daughter. She rose to her feet and spoke hastily.

"I am not good-looking," she said, "and I know it; I cannot help my features, God gave them to me and I must be content with them. My nose is snub and my mouth is wide, but I have got some good points, and if I were your daughter, Aunt Susan—and I am heartily glad I'm not your daughter; I would much, much rather be Mummy's daughter, poor as she is—but if I were your daughter you would dress me in such a fashion that my good points would come out, for I have good points; a nice complexion, fine hair and plenty of it, and fairly good eyes, and my figure would not look clumsy if I wore proper stays and properly-made dresses; and my feet would not be like clodhoppers, if I had fine well-made boots and silk stockings; and my hands——"

"You need not proceed, Florence," said Mrs. Aylmer, rising abruptly. "Mabel, I pity you; I should like to wash my hands of your daughter, but I cannot forget my promise to my poor dead husband, who begged me on his deathbed not to allow either of you to starve. 'For the sake of the family, Susan,' he said, 'don't let my sister-in-law Mabel and her daughter Florence go to the workhouse.' And I promised him, and I mean as long as the breath animates this feeble frame to keep my word.

"As long as I live, Mabel, your fifty pounds a year is secured to you, and I shall allow you, after Florence leaves that expensive school, which has cost me from one hundred and twenty to a hundred and forty pounds a year, to give you an additional fifteen pounds, thus raising your income to the very creditable one of sixty-five pounds per annum. As to you, Florence, having gone to the enormous expense of your education and having placed you at Mrs. Goodwin's excellent school at Stoneley Hall as pupil teacher, I wash my hands of you."

"Very well, Aunt Susan, that's all right," replied Florence. "I never did like you and I like you less every time I see you, but I want to say something on my own account. It is quite possible that I may not go to Mrs. Goodwin's school at Stoneley Hall. There is a chance that I may be able to remain at Cherry Court School quite independent of you, Aunt Susan."

"Yes, Flo, that's right," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, rising now to her feet and giving her daughter an admiring glance. "I always knew you had spirit, my darling; you inherit it from your poor dear father. If John were alive he would be proud of you, now, Flo. Tell about the Scholarship, Florry, my pet; tell about the Scholarship, dear."

Mrs. Aylmer the great was now so speechless with astonishment that she did not open her lips. Florence turned and faced her.

"It is your fault that I am plain," she said, "you have not done what my uncle asked you to do. You have paid my fees at school, but you have not made it possible for me to grow up nice in any sense of the word. You have always thrown your gifts in my face, and you have never given me decent clothes to wear. It is very hard on a girl to be dressed as shabbily as I am, and to be twitted by her companions for what she cannot help; and although you kept me at Cherry Court School, there have been times over and over when I hated you, Aunt Susan, and but for my dear little Mummy I would have left the school and earned my bread as a dressmaker or a servant. But there is a chance that I may continue to be a lady and hold the position I was born to without any help from you. A great Scholarship has been offered to the girls of Cherry Court School. It is offered by Sir John Wallis, the owner of Cherry Court Park."

"Sir John Wallis! The owner of Cherry Court Park! Why, I know him," said Mrs. Aylmer. "I was staying in the same house with him last year—a most charming man, delightful, good-looking, most agreeable manners, and such a brave soldier! Do you mean to tell me, Florence, that you know him?"

"He is the patron of our school; I thought you were aware of that fact," said Florence.

"Your manners, my dear, are simply odious, but I listen to your words with interest. Ah! here comes the tea. Put it on that table, waiter!"

The waiter appeared, carrying the tray waiter-fashion on his hand. It contained three very small cups of weak tea, and about five tiny wafers of the thinnest bread and butter. There was a little sky-blue milk in a jug, and a few lumps of sugar in a little silver basin. Mrs. Aylmer glanced at the meal as if she were about to give her sister-in-law and her niece a royal feast. "This is most

exciting," she said; "we will enjoy our tea when you, Florence, have explained yourself. So you know Sir John Wallis. When you see him again pray remember me to him."

"Oh, I don't know him personally," said Florence; "there is a girl at the school he is very fond of, but I just go in with the others. He is giving the Scholarship, however."

"Go on, my dear; you interest me immensely. With judicious dress and a little attention to manners, you might be more presentable than I thought you were at first, Florence. Take this chair near me; now go on. What has dear Sir John done?"

"He is offering a Scholarship to the girls of Cherry Court School, and the girl who wins the Scholarship is to receive a free education for three years," said Florence. "I am trying for the Scholarship, and if I win it I shall remain at Cherry Court School for three years at Sir John's expense. I shall be known as the Cherry Court Scholarship girl, and be much respected by my companions; so you, Aunt Susan, will have nothing to say to my subsequent education. I shall be very pleased to wash my hands of you. I think, Mummy, that is about all, and we had better go now. There will be a better tea for us at home, and I for one am rather hungry."

Mrs. Aylmer the great was quite silent for a moment, then she spoke in a changed voice.

"Florence," she said, "you need much correction; you are a very bombastic, disagreeable, silly, ignorant girl, but I will own it—I do admire spirit, you have a look of your father, and I was very fond of poor John; not as fond of him as I was of my own dear Tom, but still I respected him. Had he lived you would have been a different girl, but your unfortunate mother—"

"If you say a word against mother I shall leave the room this instant, and never speak to you again," said Florence.

"Really, my dear, you do go a little beyond yourself—I who have done so much for you; but that Scholarship is interesting. Florence, you had better go home; I will have a word with your mother by herself. First of all, however, are you likely to win it?"

"I vow that I'll get it," said Florence.

"Florence is really clever, dear Susan," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, now bursting in in an irrepressible voice; "I believe Sir John is much struck with her. He did an extraordinary thing, and at the Cherry Feast, which always ends the summer term at the school, had a preliminary examination, and dear Flo, with two other girls, is eligible to compete for the great Scholarship. They call themselves the lucky three—their names are Kitty Sharston, Mary Bateman, and Florry. Yes, Florence is very clever."

"She has a good-shaped forehead," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I greatly admire genius. You can go, Florence; I'll speak to your mother."

"I think you had better come too, Mummy," said Florence; "surely it is not necessary for you to remain."

But Mrs. Aylmer glanced at her sister-in-law and then at Florence, and decided to remain.

"No, no, dear child," she said, "I have a great deal to say to your Aunt Susan; she has the kindest heart in the world, and the fact is, I am looking forward to my cup of tea. What delicious tea it looks! It is so kind of you, Susan, to give it to me."

Florence stalked to the door without a word, opened it, and shut it after her. When she had done so the widow glanced at the rich Mrs. Aylmer.

"You must forgive the dear child, Susan," she said.

"Forgive her! there is nothing to forgive," said Mrs. Aylmer.

"But she was very rude to you."

"I prefer her rudeness to your fawning, Mabel, and that I will say frankly."

"Fawning! Dear Susan, you certainly have a very peculiar way, but there—"

"We need not talk about my ways; my ways are my own. I wish to say something now. If my niece Florence wins the Scholarship, after her term at Cherry Court has expired I shall send her abroad for two years, paying all expenses of her education there. On her return, if she turns out to be a highly-educated, stylish woman, I shall take her to live with me, taking a house in London and giving her every advantage. I intended to do this for Florence if she turned out good-looking; she will never be good-looking, but she may be a genius which is equally interesting. All depends on her winning the Scholarship. If she loses it she goes to Mrs. Goodwin's school at Stoneley Hall, having clearly proved to me that her abilities are not above the average. If she wins it I do what I say, and in the meantime I wish you, my dear Mabel, to get her one or two pretty dresses, a nice hat, and a few suitable clothes. Or, stay, I have not the least doubt that your taste is atrocious; give me her measurements, and I shall write to my own dressmaker in London. Florence shall return to Cherry Court School as my niece, and I will write to Sir John Wallis

myself with regard to her. Now, I think that is all. Oh, you would like your tea. Take it, pray, and hand me a cup. That silly girl! but I always did admire frankness."

CHAPTER XII.

THE FAIRY BOX.

The rest of the week at Dawlish passed on the wings of speed.

Mrs. Aylmer took her departure on the following morning, and neither the little Mummy nor Florence saw her again, but at the end of the week a box arrived at the widow's cottage. It was a wooden box carefully nailed down, and labelled: "This side up with care." It was addressed to Miss Florence Aylmer, and caused intense excitement, not only in the breast of Florence herself and Mrs. Aylmer, but also in that of Sukey and the near neighbors, for Mrs. Aylmer's tongue had not been idle during the few days which had passed since her sister-in-law's visit, and the intentions of Aunt Susan with regard to Florence had been freely talked over and commented on.

Nothing was said about the Scholarship. Mrs. Aylmer thought it just as well to leave that out. Her remarks were to the following effect:

"Florence is about to be adopted by her very wealthy aunt; she is already keeping her at a good school, and is about to send her some suitable dresses. In the end she will doubtless leave her her fortune."

After this Sukey and the neighbors looked with great respect at Florence, who for her part had never felt so cross in her life as when these hints were made.

"Mummy," she said once to her parent, "if I want to keep my self-respect I ought to refuse those clothes and give up Aunt Susan."

"My dear child, what do you mean? If you wanted to keep your self-respect! My dear Florence, are you mad?"

"Alas, mother, I fear I am mad," replied the girl, "for I do intend to accept Aunt Susan's bounty. I will wear her pretty dresses, and all the other things she happens to send me, and I will take her money and do my best, my very best, to get the Scholarship; but all the same, mother, I shall do it meanly, I know I shall do it meanly. It would be better for me to give up the Scholarship and go as a poor girl to Stoneley Hall. Mother, there is such a thing as lowering yourself in your own eyes, and I feel bad, bad about this."

Florence made these remarks on the evening the box arrived. The box was in the tiny sitting-room still unopened. Mrs. Aylmer was regarding it with flushed cheeks, and now after Florence's words she suddenly burst into tears.

"You try me terribly, Flo," she said, "and I have struggled so hard for your sake. This is such a splendid chance: all your future secured and I, my darling, relieved of the misery of feeling that you are unprovided for. Oh, Flo, for my sake be sensible."

"I will do anything for you, mother," said Florence, whose own eyes had a suspicion of tears in them. "It was just a passing weakness, and I am all right now. Yes, I will get the Scholarship, and I will stoop to Aunt Susan's ways—I will cringe to her if necessary; I will do my best to propitiate Sir John Wallis, and I will act like a snob in every sense of the word. There now, Mummy, I see you are dying to have the box opened. We will open it and see what it contains."

"First of all, kiss me, Florry," said Mrs. Aylmer.

Florence rose, went up to her mother, took her in her arms, and kissed her two or three times, but there was not that passion in the embrace, that pure *abandon* of love which Florence's first kiss when she arrived at Dawlish had been so full of.

"Now, then," she said, in a hasty voice, "let us get the screwdriver and open the box. This is exciting; I wonder what sort of taste Aunt Susan's dressmaker has."

"Exquisite, you may be sure, dear. There, there, I am all trembling to see the things, and Sukey must have a peep, mustn't she, Flo?"

"If I acted as I ought," said Florence, "I would take this box just as it stands unopened to Cherry Court School to-morrow."

"Oh, no, my dear; you could not think of doing such a thing; it would be so unkind to me. I shall dream of you in your pretty dresses, my love."

Florence said nothing more; she took the screwdriver from her mother, and proceeded to open the box.

Inside lay fold after fold of tissue paper. This was lifted away and then the first dress appeared to view. It was a soft shimmering silk of light texture, fashionably made and very girlish and simple. Florence could not help trembling when she saw it. All her scruples vanished at the first sight of the lovely clothes, and she took them out one by one to gaze at them in amazed delight.

The silk dress was followed by a flowered barege, and this by one or two cottons, all equally well made, quite suitable for a young girl, and the sort of dress which would give to Florence's somewhat clumsy figure a new grace. Under the three lighter dresses was a very plain but smartly-made thin blue serge, altogether different from the sort of serge which Florence had worn up to the present. To this serge was pinned a label, on which the words were written: "Travelling dress, and to be worn every day at school."

Under the pretty serge were half a dozen white embroidered aprons, and below them piles and piles of underlinen, all beautifully embroidered, silk stockings, little shoes, plenty of gloves, handkerchiefs, also embroidered with Florence's name. In short, a complete and very perfect wardrobe.

"Dear, dear, is it a dream?" said Florence; "am I the same girl? What magic that Scholarship has worked!"

"You must try them on, Flo," said the widow; "we shall be up some time. You must try one and all of them on, and Sukey shall come in and see you."

"Oh, mother, is it necessary to show them all to Sukey?"

"I think so, love, for it will spread the news, and it will greatly enhance my position in the place. I quite expect the Pratts will ask me to tea once a week, and they give very good teas—excellent; I never tasted better hot cakes than Ann Pratt makes. Yes, Flo dear, Sukey must see you in your smart clothes. Come upstairs to our bedroom and let us begin the trying-on, dearest."

Florence was sufficiently impressed with her new position to agree to this. She went upstairs with her mother, and for the next two hours the ladies were very busy.

Sukey was called to view Florence in each of her frocks, and when Sukey held up her hands and said that Miss Florence looked quite the lady of quality, and when she blinked her old eyes and fussed round the young girl, Mrs. Aylmer thought that her cup of bliss was running over.

At last the trying-on was completed, the old dresses discarded and put away, and Florence came downstairs in her travelling serge, wondering if a fairy wand had been passed over her, and if she were indeed the same girl who had arrived at Dawlish a week ago.

"And here's a letter from your aunt; it arrived a quarter of an hour ago," said Mrs. Aylmer. "I have not opened it yet. I wonder what she says."

"Read it to me, mother; we may as well go in for the whole thing. Aunt Susan evidently intends to turn me out properly. Do I look much nicer in this serge, mother?"

"You look most elegant, dear, you really do. You will have a very fine figure some day, and your face now in that very pretty setting-off has a very distinguished appearance. You have an intellectual forehead, Flo; be thankful that you inherit it from your poor dear father."

"Well, read the letter now, mother," said Florence.

Mrs. Aylmer opened the envelope, and took out the thick sheet of paper which it contained.

Mrs. Aylmer the great generally wrote few words. It was only on the occasion of her last letter that she had indulged in a long correspondence. Now she said briefly:

"MY DEAR MABEL: I believe that Florence's box of clothes will arrive on Thursday evening, so that she will be able to return to Cherry Court School dressed as my niece. I wish her in future to speak of herself as my niece, as I am very well known in many circles as Mrs. Aylmer, of Aylmer Hall. If Florence plays her cards well and obtains the Scholarship she will have a good deal to say of Aylmer Hall in the future.

"I enclose herewith a five-pound note, and please ask Florence to exchange her third-class ticket for a first-class one, and telegraph to the station-master at Hilchester to have a carriage waiting for her, in order to take her back to the school as my niece ought to arrive. Tell her from me that during the next term I will allow her as pocket-money two pounds a month, so that she may show her companions she is really the niece of a wealthy woman. As to you, Mabel, I hope you will not interfere in any way with the dear child, but allow her to pursue her studies as my niece ought. If she fails to get the Scholarship all these good things will cease, but doubtless she has too much spirit and too much ability to fail."

"There," said Mrs. Aylmer, when she had finished the letter, "can you take your tea after that? Five pounds, and you are to go back first-class! That I should live to see the day! This is all Sir John Wallis's doing. There is not the least doubt that he had a wonderful effect upon Aunt Susan."

"Yes, a wonderful effect," said Florence, in a gloomy voice. She was wearing the neat and beautifully fitting serge, a white linen collar encircled her throat, and was fastened by the neatest of studs, and white linen cuffs also encircled her wrists; her figure was shown off to the best advantage. On her feet were the silk stockings and the dainty shoes which she had so coveted a week ago, and yet her heart felt heavy, heavy as lead. Her mother pushed the five-pound note towards her, but she did not touch it.

"Look here, Mummy," she said, "we will exchange the third-class fare for a first-class one, and then you shall have the balance of the five pounds. It will make up for what you denied yourself to have me here; it is only fair."

"Oh, Flo, you dear, sweet, generous child—but dare I take it?"

"Yes, Mummy, you must take it; it is the only drop of comfort in all this. I don't like it, Mummy. I have a mind even now to——"

"To what, my dear child?"

"To take off this finery and send back the money, and just be myself. I wish to respect myself, but somehow I don't now. Oh, Mummy, Mummy, I don't like it."

"Florence, dear child, you are mad. This sudden happiness, this unlooked-for delight has slightly turned your brain—you will be all right in the future. Don't think any more about it, love. We must go upstairs now to pack your things in order to get you ready for your journey to-morrow."

"All right," said Florence.

"You have not taken your tea, dearest. Is there any little thing you would fancy—I am sure Sukey would run to the butcher's—a sweetbread or anything?"

"No, no, mother—nothing, nothing. I am not hungry—that's all."

The next morning at an early hour Florence bade her mother good-bye and started back for Cherry Court School. It was very luxurious to lie back on the soft padded cushions of the first-class carriage and gaze around her, and sometimes start up and look at her own image in the glass opposite. She could not help seeing that she looked much nicer in her white sailor hat, her pretty white gloves, and well-fitting dark blue serge than she had looked when she went to Dawlish one week ago. And that trunk in the luggage-van kept returning to her memory again and again, and in her purse were ten shillings, and in her mother's purse were three pounds, for the difference between the third-class and the first-class fares had been paid, and Florence, after keeping ten shillings for immediate expenses, could still hand her mother three pounds.

"You don't know what it will be to me, Flo," the little Mummy had said. "I shall be able to buy a new dress for the winter. I didn't dare to say a word to your Aunt Susan about her cast-offs; I scarcely liked to do so. But there are your clothes too, dear; I can cut them up and make use of them. Yes, I am quite a rich woman, and it is all owing to the Scholarship."

The thought of that three pounds for her mother did comfort Florry, and her conscience was not accusing her so loudly that day, so she sat back on the cushions and reviewed the position. She was going back to Cherry Court School as a rich girl; what would her companions think of her?

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INVITATION.

The holidays had come to an end, and the girls were returning to the school. The three who were to compete for Sir John's Scholarship had special desks assigned to them, were instructed by special teachers, and were looked upon with intense respect by the rest of the school. The holidays had gone by and had been pleasant, for Mrs. Aylmer had written to Mrs. Clavering to beg of her to take her niece Florence for a week's change on the seaside, and Mrs. Clavering had insisted on Kitty accompanying them, and, as Mrs. Aylmer paid the greater part of the expenses, the girls had a good time.

Mrs. Aylmer now wrote twice a week, if not to Florence herself, at least to Mrs. Clavering; and Mrs. Clavering had to alter her views with regard to Florence, to give her every advantage possible, and to look upon her with a certain amount of respect.

"It certainly is most important that you should get that Scholarship," she said once to the young girl. "Mrs. Aylmer has explained the whole position to me, but then you won't get it, Florence, unless you earn it."

"I know that," said Florence.

"And Kitty has an equal chance with you. I think Kitty is a remarkably intelligent girl. It is just as important for her to get it as it is for you, you quite understand that?"

"Oh, I quite understand," said Florence.

"Then there is also Mary Bateman. Mary has not as brilliant an intellect as Kitty, and in some ways is not as scholarly as you are, Florence, but she is very plodding and persevering, and as a rule gets to the head of her class. Mary is neither rich nor poor, but she would be very glad of the Scholarship, and says that it would give her father and mother great happiness if she obtained it; so you see, dear, you three girls are to work for the same goal—it is almost as important to one of you as to another. I want you therefore to be perfectly fair in your dealings each with the other, and to try to keep envy and all ill-feeling out of your hearts. The one who wins this great generous offer of Sir John Wallis must not think more highly of herself than she ought, and those who lose must bear their loss with resignation, feeling that they have acquired a great deal of knowledge, even if they have not acquired anything else, and trying to rejoice in the success of the one who has succeeded. The next few months until October will be a time of strain, and I hope my dear girls will be equal to the occasion."

Florence got very red while Mrs. Clavering was speaking to her. "Sometimes——" she said, in a low voice, and then she paused and her tone faltered.

"What is it, Florence?"

"Sometimes I heartily wish that Sir John had not put this great thing in my way. Last term I was poor and had shabby clothes, and no one thought a great deal of me, but in some ways I feel less happy now than I did last term. Last term, for instance, I was very fond of Kitty Sharston and I liked Mary Bateman, but there are moments now when I almost hate both of them."

"It is brave of you to confess all this, Florence, and I think none the worse of you for doing so, and if you pray against this feeling it will not increase, dear. Now go away and prepare for your French paper. By the way, a special master is coming twice a week now to coach all three of you. This has been done by Sir John Wallis's orders. Go away now, dear, and work."

The one great subject of conversation in the school was the Cherry Court Scholarship, and the lucky three were looked upon with wonder and a little envy by their less fortunate companions, for their privileges were so great and the goal set before them so high. For instance, Mrs. Clavering had so contrived matters that the three could work at their special Scholarship studies in the oak parlor. She had given each girl a desk with a lock and key, where she could keep her different themes and exercises. They had a special master to teach them deportment in all its different branches, and once a week they spent an evening in Mrs. Clavering's drawing-room, where special guests were invited to see them.

On these occasions the young girls had to act turn about as hostess, pouring out tea, receiving the visitors, seeing them out again, and entering into what was considered in the early seventies polite conversation. The almost lost art of conversation was as far as possible revived during the time of Scholarship competition, and in order to give Kitty, Florence, and Mary greater opportunities of talking over the events of the day they were obliged to read the *Times* every morning for an hour.

Their companions, those of the Upper school, were invited to assemble in the drawing-room on the occasions of the weekly conversazione, as it was called, and a special subject was then introduced, which the girls were obliged to handle as deftly and as well as they could.

As to conduct marks, there was nothing said about conduct, and no one put down those marks except the head mistress herself. Florence sometimes trembled when she met her eyes. She wondered if those calm grey eyes could read through down into her secret soul, could guess that she herself was unworthy, that she had committed a deed which ought really to exclude her from all chance of winning the Scholarship. Then, as the days went on, Florence's conscience became a little hardened, and she was less and less troubled by what she had done with regard to Kitty Sharston.

Florence's change in circumstances were much commented upon by the other girls, and there is no doubt that in her neatly-fitting dress with her abundant pocket-money she did appear a more gracious and a more agreeable girl than she had done in the old days when her frock was shabby, her pinafore ugly, her pocket-money almost *nil*.

One of the first things she did on her arrival at the school was to present Kitty Sharston with

a white work-bag embroidered with cherries in crewel-stitch, and with a cherry-colored ribbon running through it. She had spent from five to six shillings on the bag, and had denied herself a little to purchase it.

Kitty received it with rapture, and used to bring it into Mrs. Clavering's drawing-room on the company evenings, and to show it with pride to her companions as Florence's gift.

"She had never had such a pretty bag in her life," she said, and she kissed Florence many times when she presented it to her.

Florence meant it as payment for the cherry-colored ribbons, but she did not mean it as payment for what she had stolen out of Kitty's desk. She knew that nothing could ever pay for that deed; but it comforted her conscience just a little to present the bag to Kitty.

The Scholarship was to be competed for on the thirtieth of October, and the girls reassembled at Cherry Court School about the fifteenth of August.

Three weeks after the school had recommenced, some time therefore in the first week in September, Mary Bateman, who had been bending for a long time over her desk with her hands pressed to her temples and her cheeks somewhat flushed, suddenly raised her eyes and encountered the fixed stare of Kitty Sharston. Kitty had done her work and was leaning back in her chair. Kitty's sweet pale face looked a little paler than usual. She was expecting a letter from her father, and on the week when the letter was to arrive she always looked a little paler and a little more anxious than she did at other times.

"Have you finished your theme?" said Mary, abruptly.

"Yes," answered Kitty.

"You write so easily," pursued Mary, in a somewhat discontented voice; "you never seem to have to think for words. Now, I am not at all good at composition."

"I am not at all good at other things," replied Kitty, in a gentle voice; "mathematics, for instance; and as to my arithmetic, it is shameful. Father wants me to be able to keep accounts very well for him. I shall do that when I go to India, but still I have no ability for that sort of thing—none whatever."

"How much you must love your father," said Mary.

"Love him!" answered Kitty. Her color changed, a flush of red rose into her cheeks, leaving them the next moment more pallid than ever.

"You don't look very strong," pursued Mary, who had a blunt downright sort of manner; "I wonder if India will agree with you; I wonder if you will really go to India."

"Why do you say that?" answered Kitty, impatiently, "when it is the one dream, the one hope of my life. Of course I shall go to India. I shall do that in any case," she added *sotto voce*.

"It is so strange all about this Scholarship," continued Mary, in an uneasy voice, "that we three should long for it so earnestly, and yet each feel that two others will be more or less injured if we win it."

"Don't let us talk of it," said Kitty. "I—I must get it."

"And I must get it," pursued Mary, "and yet perhaps it means a little less to me than it does to you and Florence. Florence is the one likely to win it, I am sure."

Kitty's face turned white again and her little hand trembled.

"I must get it," she said, in a restless voice. "I don't think I am selfish—I try not to be, and I would do anything for you, Mary, and anything for Florence; but—but I can't give up the Scholarship: it means too much."

She shivered slightly.

At that moment Florence entered the room. She sat down at her desk, unlocked it, and took out her papers. She was just about to commence her study—for the Scholarship study was all extra, and had to be done in odd hours and moments—when, glancing up, she met the disturbed and questioning gaze of Kitty Sharston.

"Look here," said Kitty, "we three are alone now; let us have a good talk, just once, if never again. Why do you want to get the Scholarship, Mary? Why?"

"Why do I want to get it?" said Mary.

"Oh, I wish to work now; if you mean to discuss that point I had better leave the room," said Florence.

"No, no, do stay, Flo; I won't be more than a moment. I want to understand things, that's all," said Kitty. "Please, Mary, say why is the Scholarship of great importance to you."

"Well, for several reasons," replied Mary. "I am not like you, Florence, and I am not like you, Kitty. I have got both a father and mother. My father is a clergyman; there are nine other children besides me—I am the third. It was extremely difficult for father to send me to this expensive school, but he felt that education was the one thing necessary for me. Father is a very advanced, liberal-minded man; he is before his time, so everyone says; but mother does not think it necessary that girls should know too much. Mother thinks that a girl ought to be purely domestic; she is very particular about needlework, and she would like every girl to be able to make a shirt well, and to be able to cook and preserve, and know a little about gardening, and know a great deal about keeping a house in perfect order. But father says, and very rightly, that every girl cannot marry, and that the girls who do not marry cannot want to know a great deal about keeping a house in order, and that such girls, unless they have fortunes left to them, will have to earn their own living. Of course, there are very few openings for women, and most women have to teach, so it is decided that I shall teach by and by. If marriage comes, all right, but if it does not come I shall earn my living as a governess.

"Now, to be a really good governess father wants me to be very well educated, and he is spending the little money that he might have left to me when he died in sending me to this good school. Whether I get the Scholarship or not, I shall remain at the school for three years. I am fifteen now; I shall remain here until I am eighteen. If I do get the Scholarship father means to save the money that the three years' schooling would cost, and he means to send me when I return home at the age of eighteen to a wonderful new College for Women which has been established at a place called Girton. He will spend the money which he would have spent on my education at Cherry Court School in keeping me at Girton, where I shall attend the University lectures at Cambridge, and learn as much as a man learns. It is wonderful to think of it. Mother is rather vexed; she says that I shall be put out of my sphere and cease to be womanly, but I don't think I could ever be that. You see that it is very important for me to win the Scholarship, and I mean to try very, very, very hard."

When Mary had finished her little speech she drooped her head once again over her desk. When at last she raised her eyes she encountered the bold black ones of Florence Aylmer, and the soft, lovely, dilated eyes of Kitty Sharston.

"And I want to win the Scholarship," said Kitty, taking up the theme, "because it means staying on here and being happy and being well educated for three years. It means getting the best lessons in music, and the best lessons in singing, and the best lessons in art, and it means also getting the best instruction in modern languages, and in all those other things which an accomplished woman ought to know. Then at the end of three years if all is well and father gets promoted to the hill station, I shall go out to join him in Northern India, and I want to be as perfect as possible in order to be father's friend as well as daughter, his companion as well as child."

"And if you don't get the Scholarship, what will happen?" said Florence, in a low, growling sort of voice.

"Why, then I am going to live with a lady whom I don't love; her name is Helen Dartmoor; she is a Scotchwoman, and a cousin of my mother's. She is not the least like my dear mother, and I never loved her, and I know that the best in me will not be brought to the fore if I am with her; and I shan't learn those things which would delight dear father; I shall not know modern languages, nor be a good musical scholar, nor be able to sing nicely, and I—I shall hate that life, and my nature may be warped, and I—but, oh! I will win the Scholarship."

Kitty sprang to her feet and went over to the window. "This makes me restless," she said; "I didn't mean to express all my feelings; I am very sorry for you, Mary, and for you, Florence, but, I mean to get the Scholarship."

"You have not yet seen the thing from my point of view," said Florence. "Perhaps in reality this means more to me than even to you, Kitty, for I—I in reality am horribly poor. I know, Kitty, that you are poor too—I know perfectly well that your father is poor for his position; but whatever happens, you are a lady, Kitty, and your father is a gentleman, and at the end of three years, whether you win the Scholarship or not, you will go out to him and lead the life of a lady. I don't suppose, when all is said and done, that it will make any difference in his affection whether you can speak French and read German or not, and I am certain he won't kiss you less often because you do not play charmingly and because you do not sing divinely. But I—if I lose the Scholarship I lose all—yes, I lose all," said Florence, rising to her feet and standing before the other two girls with a solemn and yet frightened look on her face. "For I shall sink in every sense of the word; I shall no longer be a lady, I shall go as pupil teacher to a common, rough sort of school, and my mother, my dear mother, will suffer, and I shall suffer, and all the good things of life will be taken from me. So it is more to me than it is to you, Kitty Sharston; and as to you, Mary Bateman, you are out of count altogether, for why should you go to that new-fangled college and be turned into a man when you are born a woman? No, no; I mean to get this Scholarship, for it means not only all my future, but mother's future too. It is more to me than to either of you."

Florence swept up her papers, thrust them into her desk, and abruptly left the room,

slamming the door after her.

Kitty looked at Mary, and Kitty's eyes were full of tears. "It is quite dreadful," she said; "how she does feel it! I never knew Florence was that intense sort of girl, and it does seem a great deal to her. What is to be done, Mary? Are we to give it up?"

"Give it up?" said Mary, with a laugh; "not quite. Kitty, for goodness' sake, don't allow Florence's words to trouble you. You have got to fight with all your might and main. You will fight honorably and so will I, and if you mean to give it up there will be the greater chance for me, but of course you won't give it up."

"No, I shan't give it up," said Kitty, "but all the same, Florence's words pain me."

At that moment a clear ringing little voice was heard in the passage outside, the door of the oak parlor was burst open, and Dolly Fairfax rushed in. Dolly's eyes were shining and her cheeks were crimson. "Here are two letters," she said, "both for you, Kitty Sharston; it isn't fair that you should get all the letters."

"Come and sit on my knee while I read them," said Kitty, stretching out her arms to Dolly.

Dolly sprang into Kitty's lap, twined her soft arms round her neck, and laughed into her face.

"I do so love you, Kitty," she said; "I do so hope you will win the Scholarship. I don't want you to get it, ugly Mary, and I don't want nasty Florence to get it; but I want you, sweet, dear, darling Kitty, to get it. You shall—you shall!"

"You are a very rude little thing, but I don't mind," said Mary, laughing good-humoredly. "I know I am plain, and I don't care a bit; I'll win the Scholarship if I never win anything else, so you may as well make up your mind, Kitty Sharston."

But Kitty never heard her, she was deep in her father's letter. Yes, it had come, and it was a long letter closely written on foreign paper, and Kitty took a very long time reading it, so long that little Dolly slipped off her lap and wandered restlessly to the window and stood there gazing out into the court, and then back again into the softly-shaded room, with the slanting rays of the afternoon sun making bars of light across the oak.

At last Kitty finished; she heaved a long sigh and looked up. "I had forgotten you were here, Mary," she said, "and as to you, Dolly—but there, it is beautiful, good news. Father has arrived and has begun his work, and he says he has every chance of going up into the hills about the time that I shall have finished my education here. Oh, it is such a relief to read his letter. If you are very good indeed, Mary, and if you are very good, Dolly, you shall both hear some of my letter—not the private part, of course—but the public part, which speaks about father's wonderful interesting travels, and his sort of public life, the life he gives to his country. Oh, dear! I never saw anyone grander than dear, dear father!"

"You have said that very often," said Dolly; "I have got a father too, but I don't think he is specially grand. I suppose it was because your father was a hero before Sebastopol. I shall never forget about Sebastopol now and the trenches since you told me that wonderful story about your father and Sir John Wallis, and the night they were both nearly frozen," said Dolly Fairfax. "I suppose that is why you love your father so much."

"No, it isn't," answered Kitty stoutly; "I love him just because he is my father and because, because, oh! I don't know why—I love him because I do."

"Well, read your other letter now; two have come—read the other."

Kitty picked up the other letter and glanced at it. "This is a private letter; it has come by hand," she said. "Oh, of course, it is from Sir John Wallis. I wonder what he has got to say to me."

Kitty opened the letter and read the following words:

"MY DEAR KITTY: I want you and Miss Florence Aylmer and Miss Mary Bateman to spend to-morrow with me at Cherry Court Park. Mrs. Clavering will accompany you, and I have written to her also on the subject. My dear child, my reason in having you three girls is simply that I want to study your characters. I say this quite frankly, and you may tell both your companions that such is my intention in having you to spend a long day with me. I will do all I can to make you happy, and I think it but fair to put all three of you on your guard, for please understand that the Scholarship is given, not only for scholarly attainments and correct deportment, but also for those lofty traits of character which are a greater possession to any woman than either ladylike manners or great accomplishments. Pray do not be anything but your natural selves to-morrow, for I shall never allude to this matter again. From now until the date when the Scholarship is to be decided, I will expect you three to spend one day a week at Cherry Court Park.

"Your affectionate friend,
"JOHN WALLIS."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT THE PARK.

The news that the lucky three were to spend a whole day at Cherry Court Park caused great excitement amongst the other girls of the school.

"It's nothing short of delightful," said Alice Cunningham to her sister; "I only wish I had such a chance."

"Well, you have not, so there's no use in fretting about it," replied Mabel. "They certainly are having a good time, but who will win? I vote for Florence."

"And I for Kitty," said Alice; "who has a chance beside Kitty? She is the most brilliant of the three girls, and such a favorite with Sir John."

"But for that very reason she may have less chance of winning, because Sir John is a wonderfully just man. Did you ever see anyone so terribly in earnest as Florence? Her eyes have quite a strained look at times, and she does not eat half as much as she did; then she gets such long, long letters from that wonderful aunt of hers. She did not get those letters at all last term, and her dress is so smart, and she has such heaps of pocket-money; there is a great change in Florence. Sometimes I feel that I want her to win, but at other times all my sympathies are for Kitty."

"No one seems to think of poor Mary Bateman," said Edith King, in a thoughtful voice, "and yet in reality she is one of the nicest girls in the school, and if she wins the Scholarship, for she has been telling me all about it, she is to go to Girton."

"Where in the name of wonder is Girton?" asked Alice Cunningham.

"Oh, it is a College for Women which has been opened near Cambridge."

"Then if I thought I had to go to a College for Women I should be rather sorry to win the Scholarship," said Mabel Cunningham; "but there, don't let us talk of it any more. We are to have something of a half-holiday to-day, for Mrs. Clavering is to take the three lucky ones to Cherry Court Park."

Florence dressed herself with great care for this expedition. Kitty had shown her Sir John's letter, and she had felt a queer tingling pain at her heart as she read it; but then a sort of defiance, which was growing more and more in her character day by day, arose to her aid, and she determined that she would not give Sir John one loophole to find out anything amiss in her conduct.

"We are going to be spied upon, and it is perfectly horrid," she said, under her breath, "but never mind, I am determined to stand the test."

The day happened to be a lovely one, and Florence looked carefully through her wardrobe. She finally decided to put on the light summer silk which Mrs. Aylmer had provided for her. She looked very nice in that silk, almost pretty, and as all its accompaniments were perfect, the lace ruffles round the neck, the lace hanging over her hands, the trimmings of every sort just as they ought to be, the hat which she was to wear with the dress, specially chosen by the London dressmaker for the purpose, no one could look more elegant than Florence did as she stood in the hall of Cherry Court School just before she started for Cherry Court Park.

Kitty, on the other hand, had thought very little about her dress; she had no fine clothes to wear, so she just put on a clean white muslin dress, tied a colored sash round her waist, put her sailor hat on her head, and ran downstairs, a light in her eyes and a pleased smile round her lips.

"I cannot be anything great," she whispered to her heart, as she glanced for a moment at Florence, who looked something like a fashion plate as she stood in the hall, "but at least I'll be myself. I'll try—yes, I'll try very hard to forget all about the Scholarship to-day. I want to make dear Sir John happy, and I hope, I do hope he'll tell me something about father and the time they spent together outside Sebastopol."

Mary Bateman was the downright sort of girl who never under any circumstances could trouble herself about dress. She wore her best Sunday frock, that was all, and her best hat, and her gloves were a little darned at the tips, but she looked like a lady and was not the least self-conscious.

Sir John's own carriage was to arrive to fetch the ladies to the Park. Cherry Court Park was between two and three miles away from Cherry Court School, and Mrs. Clavering and her three

pupils greatly enjoyed their drive to the splendid old place. Kitty had been there twice before, once with her father and once without him, but neither Florence nor Mary had ever seen the interior of the Park. Mary's exclamations of rapture as they drove under the overhanging trees and down the long winding avenue were frequent and enthusiastic. Florence, however, scarcely spoke; she was not a girl to be much impressed by external beauty; she was thinking all the time how she could keep the best and most amiable part of her character to the fore. What did Sir John mean to do? What sort of test was he going to apply to her? She felt that she must be armed on every point.

"My dear girls," said Mrs. Clavering, just as they were approaching the house, "I see you are all a little nervous, thinking that a somewhat strange test will be applied to you to-day, but I assure you, my dears, that nothing of the kind is intended, and I beg of you, as you wish to impress your kind host favorably, to be at any cost natural and true to yourselves. Florence dear, I would specially beg of you to remember my words. Don't set your heart too much on any earthly good thing, my child, for often those who lose gain more than those who win."

But Florence shook off the gentle hand; she could scarcely stand Mrs. Clavering's words just then, and avoided meeting her eyes.

Sir John stood on the steps of his magnificent old house to welcome his guests. As the carriage drew up beside the porch he came down and extended his hand to each.

"Welcome, welcome," he said, "thrice welcome! What a lovely day we have! Mrs. Clavering, I hope to have the privilege of taking you round my gardens, which are just in their autumn prime, and as to you three girls, will you amuse yourselves exactly as you please until luncheon-time?"

"Thank you so much," said Mary, in her blunt voice. She could never act a part to save her life. "That is just what I should like best to do," she added, smiling and dimpling. She had a jolly little face, somewhat tanned with the sun, two round good-humored brown eyes, and a wide mouth. Her teeth were white, however, and her smile pleasant.

"Kitty, my dear," said Sir John, turning to Kitty Sharston, "you have been here before and I depute to you the task of doing the honors. Take the girls wherever you please. If, for instance," added Sir John, "you three would like to have a row on the lake there is the boat all moored and ready. Kitty, you know how to handle an oar?"

"Rather," said Kitty; "I have rowed more or less since I could walk."

"Well, then, that is all right; but if you require any assistance you have but to call one of the gardeners, there are sure to be plenty about. Now off you go, all three; forget the old man, and enjoy yourselves as happy girls should."

As Sir John spoke he gave his arm with old-fashioned courtesy to Mrs. Clavering, and the two turned away.

"Now, is not this just like dear Sir John?" said Kitty, beginning to dance about. "Come, girls, I'll have greatest pleasure in taking you about."

"I am surprised to hear that you know all about Cherry Court Park," said Florence, in a somewhat cross voice, but then she remembered herself and made an effort to smile.

"I have been here twice before," said Kitty. "What do you say to having a row? Mary, what do you wish?"

"If you will allow me to do exactly what I like," said Mary, "I don't want anyone to guide me; I want to wander here, there, and everywhere just at my own sweet will. I have brought my little sketch-book with me, and mean to sketch some of these splendid old trees. Mother is so fond of outdoor sketches, and I could seldom indulge her with anything so fine as I could get in an old place like this. Just go off where you please, girls, and don't bother about me."

Off ran Mary on her sturdy legs, and Florence looked after her with a laugh.

"Poor Mary," she said, in a contemptuous tone.

"Why poor?" asked Kitty; "I think Mary is such a downright, jolly, sensible sort of girl."

"Oh, very downright and sensible," said Florence. "Kitty, do you really want to go in the boat?"

"Not if you don't want to go," said Kitty, looking somewhat anxiously at her companion.

"But I see you do; I notice the expression in your eyes."

"Well, it's very sweet in the boat, it does soothe one so; the last time I was there it was with father; but never mind, I won't go if you would rather not. Shall we sit under this tree and talk?"

"Yes, let us," said Florence. "I feel very cross to-day; I don't exactly know what is the matter."

"I wish you would tell me some of your troubles, Flo."

"How can I; you are my enemy."

"Nonsense, nonsense! how can you regard me in that light? You make me quite miserable when you talk as you do."

"And I meant to be amiable to-day," said poor Florence, "but somehow everything grates. It is Aunt Susan. Kitty, you cannot understand my position. I have to be civil and pleasant to one whom I—but there, don't talk of it."

"I don't quite understand; I wonder if you feel for your Aunt Susan as I feel for Helen Dartmoor."

"The lady you are to live with if you lose the Scholarship?"

"Yes," replied Kitty, sadly.

"You had better make up your mind to like her then, Kitty, for you will have to live with her."

"Why do you say that?"

"Only that I mean to get the Scholarship, and I think my will is stronger than yours."

"It is not a case of will," said Kitty, trembling a little as she spoke.

"Isn't it? I rather fancy it is. But there, we are to be amiable to-day, are we not? Look at Mary sitting under that tree and sketching as if her life depended on it. I wonder if she is really doing it hoping to please Sir John."

"Not a bit of it; that would not be Mary's way. All the same," added Kitty, in a thoughtful voice, "he will be delighted. Mary's sketches are very spirited, and Sir John loves people to appreciate his place. He will ask you what you think about it at lunch, Florry; you had really better let me show you round a bit."

"If that is the case, certainly," said Florence. She got up, and she and Kitty began to wander through the different grounds. They had nearly completed their peregrinations, having wandered over many acres of cultivated and lovely land, when the luncheon bell summoned them back to the house.

"Oh, I am so hungry," said Kitty, "and Sir John has the most splendid luncheons. I wonder where Mary is."

The girls looked to right and left, but could not see a sign of Mary Bateman anywhere. They approached the house. A great big colley came up, wagging his tail slowly, and thrust his nose into Kitty's hand.

"Dear old Watch, how sweet you are!" said the girl.

She bent down, flinging her arms round the colley's neck, and pressed a kiss on a white star on his forehead.

Just then Sir John's voice was heard calling them. "Hey, little women," he said, "I hope you had a pleasant time and enjoyed yourselves as much as I meant you to."

"Yes, I have enjoyed myself immensely," said Kitty. "Haven't you, too, Florry!"

"Yes," replied Florence, "I like the place and the gardens."

In spite of herself she spoke in a stiff, constrained voice; she felt that Sir John's eye was upon her. She wondered how Kitty could forget all that hung upon this visit.

Kitty's face was quite careless and happy, there was a wild-rose bloom on her cheeks which did not visit them very often, and her large pathetic grey eyes looked more beautiful than ever.

Mrs. Clavering now came forward.

"Come upstairs, dears," she said, "and wash your hands before lunch."

The girls followed their mistress up the great central hall and ascended the low oak stairs. They entered a bedroom magnificently furnished.

"What a great delightful place this is!" said Florence; "fancy any one person owning it!" She heaved a quick sigh as she spoke.

"It is a great responsibility having a place like this and so much money," answered Mrs. Clavering. "Florence dear, I don't want to preach—in fact, there is nothing I hate more, but I should like to say one thing. Happiness in the world is far more evenly divided than anyone has the least idea of. Riches are eagerly coveted by those who are poor, but the rich have immense

responsibilities. Remember, my child, that we all have to give an account with regard to our individual talents some day."

Florence stirred restlessly and approached the window.

"I wonder where Mary is," she said, and just as she uttered the words the silver gong in the hall sounded, and the three ladies hurried down to luncheon.

Still no sign of Mary, but just as they were all wondering with regard to her absence, the door was opened, and a girl, with a smudge on her face and her hat pushed crooked on her head, entered the room. She held her little sketch-book and came eagerly forward.

"Oh, I am sorry I am late," she said; "I hope I kept no one waiting. I forgot all about it—it was that wonderful old oak-tree."

"What, the grenadier?" said Sir John, with a smile. "Have you been sketching it, Miss Bateman?"

"I have been trying to, but it is awfully difficult."

"You must let me see your attempt."

He went up to Mary, took her sketch-book, opened it, and a smile of pleasure flitted across his face as he saw the very clever and spirited sketch which the girl had made.

"Ah!" he said, "I am delighted you like this sort of thing. Would you like to take many views from my grounds?"

"Certainly—better than anything in the world almost," said Mary.

"Well, let me offer you my arm now into lunch. Ladies, will you follow us, please?"

Florence's brow contracted with a frown. Mrs. Clavering took Kitty's hand, motioned to Florence to follow, and they went into the dining-room.

During the rest of the meal Sir John devoted himself to Mary; her frank, commonplace face, her downright manners, her total absence of all self-consciousness pleased him. He found her a truly intelligent girl, and discovered in talking over her father that they knew some mutual friends.

To Kitty he hardly spoke, although he glanced at her once or twice. Florence seemed not to receive the most remote share of his attention.

"And yet," thought Florence to herself, "I am the only girl present properly dressed for the occasion. Surely Sir John, a thorough gentleman as he is, must notice that fact. I wonder what it can mean. Why does he devote himself to Mary? Am I wrong from first to last? Do girls who are real ladies think little or nothing about their dress? Would Sir John have been more inclined to be pleasant to me if Aunt Susan had never interfered?"

As these thoughts came to the restless and unhappy girl's mind she only played with her food, became *distrait* and inattentive, and had to be spoken to once or twice by Mrs. Clavering in order to recall her wandering attention.

Just as the meal came to an end Sir John turned to Kitty, then glanced at Florence, laid his hand emphatically on the table, touched Mary on her sleeve in order to ensure her attention, and spoke.

"Now," he said, "I am just going to say a word before we go for our afternoon expedition."

"Afternoon expedition! Are we going to have anything very jolly this afternoon?" said Kitty, her eyes sparkling.

"I hope so, my little girl; I have ordered horses for us all. I understand that you can all ride, and I thought we could ride to Culner's Heath, where we may enjoy a gipsy tea."

Even Florence almost forgot herself at this announcement. Could she ride in her silk dress? Had Sir John thought of habits? It seemed that Sir John had thought of everything.

"You will find habits in your bedroom, ladies," he said, "and you can choose your horses when they come up to the door—but one word first."

Mrs. Clavering, who had half risen from the table, now paused, arrested by an expression on her host's face.

"Yes," she said.

Sir John glanced at her and then smiled.

"I am about to speak to the girls," he said, "on the matter which we discussed this morning,

my dear madam."

Mrs. Clavering smiled, and bowed her head.

"You know, my dear girls," continued Sir John, turning and addressing the three, "that the Scholarship competition will take place in a little over a month from now. Now, I mean that occasion to be a very grand occasion, I mean it to be strongly impressed upon the mind of every girl in Cherry Court School, and no pleasure which I can devise shall be omitted on the auspicious day. The happy winner of the Scholarship shall be truly crowned with laurels, bonfires are to be lighted in her honor, and the whole country-side is to be invited to attend the great function, which I propose to take place, not at the school, but in this house. I intend to invite the entire school to be my guests on the great day. They shall all come early in the morning and stay at this house until the following day. I am already making preparations for the delightful time. And now, there is one thing I want to ask. You three girls who are called by your companions the lucky three have it in your power to invite each one guest to witness your triumph. You are to name the guest to me, and I myself will send the invitation in proper style. I know who Kitty would like to have with her, but, failing that person, Kitty, is there anyone else whom you may think it perhaps not your pleasure, but your duty, to ask to be present?"

"There is only Helen Dartmoor," said Kitty, in a low voice, the crimson flush rising to her face, "and though it will be very unpleasant to have Helen here, if you think it right, Sir John, I—don't mind."

"That is very valiantly answered, Kitty, and I wish I might say at once that you need not have anyone present whom you do not wish to have present, but I rather think it would please your father if Miss Dartmoor received a proper invitation. I will ask her therefore, my dear child, if there is no one else you would rather have?"

"There is no one else that I can have, and I don't suppose I need see a great deal of Helen."

"Certainly not; she will only arrive at the Park the day before the Scholarship competition takes place."

"Then I suppose she must come," said Kitty.

"It would be a kindness," said Sir John, slowly. "I happen to know Miss Dartmoor; she has few pleasures."

Kitty nodded. Sir John turned to Mary.

"Now, then, Miss Bateman, whom am I to ask on your account?"

"Oh, father, father! How delightful! how he will enjoy it!" said Mary, her eyes sparkling, her face beaming. "He will so thoroughly appreciate it all, and it will be so splendid of you, Sir John."

"How very free and easy Mary Bateman is," thought Florry to herself.

Sir John smiled, took down Mr. Bateman's address, and promised that the invitation should reach him in good time.

"I wonder if he will come. How he would love it!" thought Mary.

Sir John glanced at her pleased face with marked approval.

"And now, Miss Aylmer," he said, turning to Florence, "who will you have present—the one you love best: your mother, for instance?"

Now, Florence had sent one wild throbbing thought to the little Mummy the moment Sir John had spoken of his plan. How the Mummy would enjoy it, how she would revel in the good food and the lovely house! What a red-letter day it would be to her all her life, for all the rest of her years! How Sukey and Ann Pratt and the neighbors down at Dawlish would respect her for evermore! And doubtless the Mummy's dress might be managed, and—but what about Aunt Susan? Would Aunt Susan ever forgive her? She dared not run the risk of her displeasure; too much depended on keeping her in a good humor.

"I should like my aunt to come," she said, in a steady voice; "she is very kind to me and specially interested in the result of the Scholarship."

"I know; I have heard from Mrs. Aylmer," said Sir John, in a pleasant tone; "if you would really prefer her to have the invitation to your mother, it shall be as you wish, Miss Aylmer."

"I think it would be right," said Florence. Her heart gave a heavy throb, then seemed to stand still.

Sir John gave her one keen glance, and took down Mrs. Aylmer's address in his pocket-book.

"I happen to know your aunt, Miss Aylmer, and shall be pleased to extend hospitality to her on the auspicious event."

CHAPTER XV.

THE PUPIL TEACHER.

At the beginning of the autumn term there happened to come to the school a girl of the name of Bertha Keys. She was between seventeen and eighteen years of age, and came to Cherry Court School in the capacity of pupil teacher. She was not a pleasant girl to look at, and had Mrs. Clavering seen her before she engaged her she might have hesitated to bring her into the midst of her young scholars.

But Bertha was clever and outwardly amiable. She performed her duties with exactitude and despatch. She kept the younger girls in order, and was apparently very unselfish and willing to oblige, and Mrs. Clavering, after the first week or fortnight, ceased to feel apprehensive when she looked at her face. For Bertha's face bore the impress of a somewhat crooked mind. The small light blue eyes had a sly gleam in them; they were incapable of looking one straight in the face. Bertha had the fair complexion which often accompanies a certain shade of red hair, and but for the expression in her eyes she might have been a fairly good-looking girl. She had an upright trim figure, and dressed herself neatly. Those watchful eyes, however, marred the entire face. They were as clever as they were sharp and knowing. Nothing escaped her mental vision. She could read character like a book.

Now, Bertha Keys was very poor. In her whole future life she had nothing to look forward to except what she could win by her own individual exertions. Bertha's apparent lot in life was to be a teacher—her own wish was to cringe to those in power, to obtain a footing amongst those who were likely to aid her, and she had not been a week in the school before she made up her mind that of all the girls at Cherry Court School no one was so likely to help her in the future as Florence Aylmer. If Florence won the Scholarship and became the adopted heiress of a rich aunt, the opportunities in favor of Bertha's advancement would be enormous. On the other hand, if Mary Bateman won the Scholarship nothing at all would happen to further Bertha's interest. The same might be said with regard to Kitty Sharston. Bertha, therefore, who was extremely sharp herself and thoroughly well educated, determined that she would not leave a stone unturned to help Florence with regard to the Scholarship. Nothing was said on the subject between Florence and Bertha for several weeks. Bertha never failed, however, to propitiate Florence, helping her when she could with her work, doing a thousand little nameless kindnesses for her, and giving her, when the opportunity offered, many sympathetic glances. She managed to glean from the younger girls something of Florence's history, noted when those long letters came from Mrs. Aylmer the great, observed how depressed Florence was when she received letters from Dawlish, noted her feverish anxiety to deport herself well, to lead a life of excellent conduct, and, above all things, to struggle through the weighty themes which had to be mastered in order to win the great Scholarship.

One day about three weeks before the Scholarship examination was to take place, and a week after the events related in the last chapter, Florence was engaged in reading a long letter from her Aunt Susan. Mrs. Aylmer had received her invitation to Cherry Court Park, and had written to her niece on the subject.

"I shall arrive the day before the Scholarship examination," she wrote, "and, my dear girl, will bring with me a dress suitable for you to wear on the great day. I have consulted my dressmaker, Madame le Rouge, and she suggests white bengaline, simply made and suitable to a young girl. Yours, my dear Florence, will be the simplest dress in the school, and yet far and away the most elegant, for what we have to aim at now is the extreme simplicity of graceful youth. Nothing costs more than simplicity, my dear girl, as you will discover presently. But more of that when we meet. One last word, dear Florence; of course, you will not fail. Were I to see you dishonored, I should never hold up my head again, and, as far as you are concerned, would wash my hands of you forever."

Florence's lips trembled as she read the last words. An unopened letter from her mother lay on her lap. She flung down Mrs. Aylmer's letter and took up her mother's. She had just broken the envelope and was preparing to read it when Dolly Fairfax rushed into the room.

"Florence, do come out for one moment," she said; "Edith wants to tell you something."

"Oh, I can't go; I am busy," said Florence, restlessly.

"I wish you would come; it is something important; it is something about to-night. Do come; Edith would come to you, but she is looking after two or three of the little ones in the cherry orchard. You can go back in five minutes."

Uttering a hasty exclamation, and thrusting her mother's letter into her pocket, Florence started up and followed Dolly. She forgot all about her aunt's letter, which had fallen to the floor.

She had scarcely left the room before Bertha Keys stepped forward, picked up the letter, read it from end to end, and having done so laid it back on Florence's desk. Florence returned presently, sat down by her desk, and, taking her mother's letter out of her pocket, read it.

The little Mummy was in trouble; she had contracted a bad cold, the cold had resolved into a sharp attack of pleurisy. She was now on the road to recovery, and Florence need not be the least bit anxious about her, but she had run up a heavy doctor's bill, and had not the slightest idea how she was to meet it.

"I do wish, Florence, my darling," she said, "you could manage to let me have some of that pocket-money which your Aunt Susan sends you every week. If I could give the doctor even one pound I know he would wait for the rest, and then there is the chemist, too, and I have to be a little careful now that the weather is getting chilly, and must have fires in the evening, and so on. Oh, I am quite well, my precious pet, but a little help from you would see me round this tight corner."

Florence ground her teeth and her eyes flashed. The little Mummy ill, ill almost to the point of danger. Better now, it is true, but wanting those comforts which Aunt Susan had in such abundance.

"I cannot stand it," thought the girl. "What is to be done? By fair means or foul, I must get that Scholarship. Oh, I fear nothing. I believe I am sure to win if only I can beat Kitty on her own ground. Her ground is history and literature. There is to be a horrible theme written, and a great deal depends on how that theme is handled, and I am no good at all at composition. I have no power with regard to picturesque writing. I cannot see pictures like Kitty can. I believe Sir John has set that theme on purpose, in order to give Kitty an advantage; if so, it is horribly unfair of him."

Florence muttered these words to herself; then she glanced again at her mother's letter. She put her hand into her pocket and pulled out her purse. That purse, owing to Aunt Susan's bounty, contained over two pounds. Florence resolved to send that two pounds to her mother immediately. She began to write, but had scarcely finished her letter before Bertha Keys, equipped for a walk, briskly entered the room.

"I am going to Hilchester," she said; "have you any message, Florence?"

"Oh, I should be so much obliged if you would post a letter for me," said Florence.

"I will, with pleasure," replied Bertha.

"Can you wait five minutes? I shall not be longer than that writing it."

"Yes," replied Bertha. She went and stood by the low window-ledge, and Florence bent over her sheet of paper. She wrote rapidly, a burning flush coming into each cheek.

"Oh, darling little Mummy," she wrote, "I am sending you all the money I have. Yes, you may be quite certain I will win the Scholarship by fair means or foul. I feel nearly mad when I think of your sufferings; but never mind, once the Scholarship is won and I am declared to the world to be the Cherry Court Scholarship girl, once I am crowned queen on the great day of the Scholarship competition, I shall, I perceive well, be able to do exactly what I like with Aunt Susan, and then be sure you shall not want. Please, dear Mummy, pay what is necessary of this to the doctor, and get yourself what you can in the way of nourishment. I am most, most anxious about you, my own darling little Mummy, and I vow at any risk that you shall have my ten shillings a week for the present. What do the girls at the school matter? What matters anything if you are ill? Oh, do take care of yourself for my sake, Mummy."

Bertha Keys moved restlessly, and Florence, having addressed the envelope and stamped it, went up to her.

"Look here," she said, eagerly, "I wish I could come with you, but I can't, for I have my lessons to prepare, and this is the night of the conversazione. If you would be truly kind, would you do something for me!"

"Of course I'll be truly kind," said Bertha; "I take a great interest in you, Miss Aylmer, but who would not who knew you well?"

"What do you mean by that?" said Florence, who was keenly susceptible to flattery.

Bertha gave a little contemptuous sniff.

"You are the only girl in the school whose friendship is worth cultivating," she said; "you have go and courage, and some day you will be very handsome; yes, I feel sure of it. I wish you would let me help you to form your figure; you might draw your stays a little tighter, and do your hair differently. I wish you would let me be your friend. You are the only girl in the school whose friendship I care twopence about."

"What!" said Florence, trembling slightly and looking full into Bertha's face, "do you think

more about me than you do of Kitty Sharston?"

The pupil teacher gave a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Miss Sharston," she said; "oh, a nice little girl, very nice and very amiable, but, my dear Miss Aylmer, you and she are not in the same running at all. But there, I must be quick; I have to return home in time to undress the little ones. Oh, what a lot is mine, and I pine for so much, so much that I can never have."

"Poor girl, I am sorry for you," said Florence; "but there, I won't keep you any longer. See, this is what I want you to do. Will you convert these two sovereigns into a postoffice order, and will you put it into this letter, and then fasten the envelope and put the whole into the post?"

Florence gave some more directions with regard to the postoffice order. In 1870 postal orders, much simpler things, were unknown. Bertha Keys promised, took in all the directions quickly, and started off on her mission.

She walked down the road as briskly as possible. The distance between Hilchester and Cherry Court School was between two and three miles. The road was a lonely one. Bertha presently crossed a stile and found herself in a shady lane. When she reached this point she looked behind her and in front of her; there was no one in sight. Then taking Florence's letter out of her pocket, she slowly and quietly read the contents. Having read them, a smile flitted across her face.

"Little Mummy," she said aloud, "you must do without your two pounds. Bertha Keys wants this money a great deal more urgently than you do. Florence must suppose that her letter has got lost in the post. Let her suppose what she will, this money is mine."

Having made these remarks under her breath, Bertha calmly tore poor Florence's letter into a thousand tiny fragments. These she scattered to the four winds, and then, humming a gay air to herself, proceeded on her way to Hilchester. She transacted her business, went to a shop and purchased out of one of Florence's sovereigns some gay ribbons and laces for her own bedizenment, and then returned home.

"Did you post my letter?" said Florence, who met her in one of the corridors.

"Yes, dear, I am glad to say it caught the evening post."

"Then that's right, and mother will receive it early to-morrow," thought the girl to herself.

The feeling that her money would relieve her mother contrived to ease her overburdened conscience, and she was more cheerful and happy-looking that evening.

The next day at an early hour, as Florence was standing in the oak parlor alone for a wonder, for neither Mary Bateman nor Kitty Sharston were present, Bertha Keys came into the room.

"The subject of the composition is to be set this afternoon," she said. "You are good at composition, are you not, Miss Aylmer?"

"No, that is it—I am very bad indeed," replied Florence.

"I am very sorry, for I believe a great deal turns on the way the themes are done. They must be very good ones."

"I must do my best," said Florence, in a gloomy voice; "there is not the least doubt that I shall beat Kitty Sharston in mathematics and arithmetic, and as to Mary Bateman, she has not a scrap of imagination in her composition."

"But the little Kitty has a great deal," said Miss Keys, in a reflective tone. "I have read some of her themes; she has a poetical mind. The programme for the great day is to be given out also this afternoon, and I believe Sir John intends to read the three Scholarship essays aloud, and the guests present are then to vote with regard to the fortunate winner. Of course, the theme will not quite decide the Scholarship, but it will go a very long way in that direction. I have seen Sir John, and I know that all his tendencies, all his feelings are in favor of Miss Sharston."

"There is little doubt on that point," replied Florence; "if it were not for Kitty Sharston this Scholarship would never have been offered. I wish it never had been offered," she continued, with a burst of confidence which she could scarcely repress. "Oh, Miss Keys, I have a great weight on my mind; I am a miserable girl."

"I see you are, but why don't you confide in me? I believe I could sympathize with you; I also believe I could help you."

"I will, I must win," said poor Florence. "Oh, I could scarcely sleep last night with thinking of my mother. I am so truly, truly glad that you were able to post that letter in time; but for your happening to go to Hilchester she would not have had it this morning. Now she must be feeling great relief."

"I can post as many more letters to your mother as you like," said Bertha Keys. "I will do anything in my power for you; I want you to believe that. I want you to believe also that I am in a position to give you serious and substantial help."

"Thank you," said Florence. She gazed into Bertha's eyes, and felt a strange thrill.

Bertha had a rare power of magnetism, and could influence almost any girl who had not sufficiently high principles to withstand her power.

She now hastily left the oak parlor to attend to her studies, and Florence sat down to begin her studies. Her head ached, and she felt restless and miserable. She envied Kitty's serene face and Mary Bateman's downright, sensible way of attacking her subjects.

"I cannot think how you keep so calm about it," she said to Mary, in the course of that morning; "suppose you lose?"

"I have thought it all out," answered Mary, "and I cannot do more than my best. If I succeed I shall be truly, truly glad. If I fail I shall be no worse off than I was before. I wish you would feel as I do about it, Florry, and not make yourself quite ill over the subject. The fact is you are not half as nice as you were last term when everyone called you Tommy."

"Oh, I know, I know," answered Florence, "but I cannot go back now. What do you think the theme for the Scholarship will be?"

"I have not the slightest idea. That theme will be Kitty's strong point; there is not the slightest doubt about that."

Florence bent again over her French exercise. She was fairly good at French, and her German was also passable, but as she read and worked and struggled through a difficult piece of translation her thoughts wandered again and again to the subject of the English theme. What would it be? History, poetry, or anything literary?

The more she thought, the less she liked the idea of this supreme test.

Dinner passed, and the moment for the reassembling of the school for afternoon work arrived. Just as all the girls were streaming into the large schoolroom, Mrs. Clavering came hurriedly forward.

"Before you begin your duties this afternoon, young ladies," she said, "I have received a communication from Sir John, and as you are all interested in the Scholarship, which may be offered another year to some further girls of Cherry Court School, I may as well say that I have just received a letter from him suggesting the theme for the essay. I will repeat to you what he has said."

Mrs. Clavering stood beside her desk and looked down the long school-room. The room contained at this moment every girl in the school, also the teachers. Florence glanced in the direction of Bertha Keys. She was standing just where a ray of light from one of the windows caught the reflection of her red hair, which surrounded her pale face like a glory. She wore it, not in the fashion of the day, but in an untidy and yet effective style. The girls of the day wore their hair neatly plaited and smooth to their heads.

One of Mrs. Clavering's special objections to Bertha was her untidy head. She often longed to ask her to get a brush and smooth out those rough locks.

Nevertheless, that very roughness of her hair gave her face a look of power, and several girls gazed at her now half fascinated. Bertha's light blue eyes flashed one glance in Florence's direction, and were then lowered. She liked best to keep her most secret thoughts to herself.

Mrs. Clavering glanced round the room, and then, opening Sir John's letter, spread it out before her.

"I will read you my friend's letter aloud," she said; "you will all clearly understand what he says." She then proceeded to read:

"MY DEAR MRS. CLAVERING: After a great deal of reflection I have resolved that the all-important essay which the lucky three are to write shall be on the following subject—Heroism. This opens up a wide field, and will test the capacities of each of the young competitors. The essay is to be written under the following conditions: It is to be the unaided work of the competitor; it is to contain not less than two thousand words and not more than two thousand five hundred. It is to be written without the aid of books of reference, and when finished is to be unsigned and put into a blank envelope. The three envelopes containing the essays are to be handed to you, who will not open them, but will place them before me on the night of the Scholarship competition.

"Further particulars with regard to the competition I will let you know in a few days, but I may as well say now that most of the examination will be *vivâ voce*, and will consist of eight

questions relating to the study of the French language, eight questions on the study of the German tongue, eight mathematical questions, eight arithmetical questions, eight questions on English History, and eight on English Literature. In addition, a piece of music will be played by each girl and a song sung by each; but the final and most searching test of all will be the essay, which in itself will contain, I doubt not, the innermost heart of the competitor, for she cannot truly write on Heroism without understanding something of what a hero or heroine should be. Thus that innermost spirit which must guide her life will come to the front. Her spelling and English composition will be subjected to the best tests by means of those written words; her handwriting will not go without comment; her style will be noted. She can make her essay rich with reference, and thus prove the varied quality of her reading. And the grace of her diction will to a certain extent testify to her ladylike deportment and the entire breadth of her education.

"I need add no more. I have thought deeply over this matter, and trust my subject will meet with universal approval.

"Yours very truly,
"JOHN WALLIS."

CHAPTER XVI.

TEMPTATION

Amongst the many duties which fell to the care of Bertha Keys was the one of looking after the postbag. Every afternoon she took the girls' letters and put them in that receptacle, hanging the key on a little hook in the hall. Morning after morning it was she who received the postbag, unlocked it, and brought the contents to Mrs. Clavering, who always distributed the letters herself. Thus it was easy for Bertha to abstract the letters which contained the Dawlish postmark. She did this for a reason. It would never do for Florence to find out that her mother had not received the letter with the postoffice order.

Bertha knew well that if enquiries were made it could be quickly proved that she had never obtained a postoffice order at all, and thus her own ruin would be the result of her theft. She had taken the two sovereigns in a momentary and strong impulse, and had since to a certain extent regretted her foolhardy and wicked deed. Not that she regretted it because she had stolen the money, but because she feared the consequences. She now, therefore, had a double object for putting Florence Aylmer into her power. If she could do that, if by means of some underhand action on her part she could win the Scholarship for Florence, Florence would help her in the future, and even if Bertha's theft was known to her, would never dare to betray her. It is well known that it is the first step which costs, and Bertha's first theft was followed by the purloining of several letters from poor Mrs. Aylmer to her daughter.

At first Florence, relieved with regard to her mother's financial condition, did not bother about this silence. She was very much occupied and intensely anxious on her own account, but when more than a week went by and she had no letter from Dawlish, she began to get alarmed. What could be wrong?

In these days it would be easy for a girl to satisfy her nervous terrors by means of a telegram, but in 1870 a telegram cost a shilling, and Florence was now saving every penny of her money to send to her mother. She hoped soon to have another two pounds to transmit to her by means of a post-office order. For Mrs. Aylmer the great was thoroughly generous now to Florence, and never a letter arrived which did not contain a money remittance.

"She never guesses that it all goes to the little Mummy, that it helps to cheer her life and to give her some of the comforts she needs," thought the anxious girl; "but why, why does not Mummy write?"

When ten days had gone by, Florence sat down one morning and wrote to her mother:

"DARLING MUMMY: I cannot understand your silence. You have not even acknowledged the post-office order which I sent to you. I meant to wait until I could send you another postoffice order for two pounds, but I won't delay any longer, but will send you a postoffice order for one pound to-day. Darling, darling Mummy, I do wonder how you are. Please write by return mail to your loving daughter, FLORENCE AYLMER."

Having written and signed her letter, Florence addressed it, stamped it, and laid it by her desk. She then took out some sheets of manuscript paper on which she was vainly endeavoring to

sketch out a scheme for her essay on Heroism. The conditions which attached to this essay were already neatly written out by Mrs. Clavering's directions, and were placed opposite to her on her desk: "The essay must contain not less than two thousand words. It must be the unaided work of the competitor. It must further be written without reference to books."

Florence, smart enough about most things, was altogether foiled when a work which must so largely be a work of imagination was required of her.

It was a half-holiday in the school, and Mary Bateman and Kitty Sharston were not sharing the oak parlor with Florence. They were out in the cherry orchard; their gay voices and merry laughter might have been heard echoing away through the open window.

Florence sighed heavily. As she did so she heard the handle of the door turn and Bertha Keys came softly in. Bertha brought a basket with her. It contained some stockings belonging to the little ones which she was expected to darn. She sat down on the low window-ledge and, threading her needle, proceeded to work busily. She did not glance in Florence's direction, although Florence knew well that she was aware of her presence, and in all probability was secretly watching her.

The silence in the room was not broken for several minutes. Bertha continued to draw her needle in and out of the little socks she was darning. Once or twice she glanced out of the open window, and once or twice she cast a long, sly glance in the direction of Florence's bent head. The scratch of Florence's pen over the paper now and then reached her ears. At last Florence stopped her work abruptly, leant back in her chair, stretched out her arms behind her head, uttered a profound yawn which ended in a sigh, and then, turning round, she spoke.

"I wish to goodness, Bertha," she said, "you wouldn't sit there just like a statue; you fidget me dreadfully."

"Would you rather I went out of the room, dear?" said Bertha, gently.

"No, no, of course not; only do you mind sitting so that I can see you? I hate to have anyone at my back."

Bertha very quietly moved her seat. The oak parlor had many windows, and she now took one which exactly faced Florence. As she did so she said, in a very quiet, insinuating sort of voice, "How does the essay on Heroism proceed?"

"Oh, it does not proceed a bit," said Florence; "I cannot master it. I am not a heroine, and how can I write about one? I think it was a very shabby trick on the part of Sir John Wallis to set us such a theme."

"Don't worry about it if your head aches," said Bertha. "You can only do work of that sort if you feel calm and in a good humor. Above all things, for work of the imaginative order you must have confidence in yourself."

"Then if I wait for the day when I have confidence in my own power and feel perfectly calm, the essay will never be written at all," said Florence.

"That would be bad," remarked Bertha; "you want to get that Scholarship, don't you?"

"I must get it; my whole life turns on it."

Bertha smiled, sighed very gently, lowered her eyes once more, and proceeded with her darning.

"I don't believe you have a bit of sympathy for me," said Florence, in an aggrieved voice.

"Yes, but I have; I pity you terribly. I see plainly that you are doomed to the most awful disappointment."

"What do you mean? I tell you I will get the Scholarship."

"You won't unless you write a decent essay."

"Oh, Bertha, you drive me nearly mad; I tell you I will get it."

"All the willing and the wishing in the world won't make the impossible come to pass," retorted Bertha, and now she once more threaded her darning-needle and took out another stocking from the basket.

"Then what is to be done?" said Florence. "Do you know what will happen if I fail?"

"No; tell me," said Bertha, and now she put down her stocking and looked full into the face of her young companion.

"Aunt Susan will give me up. I have told you about Aunt Susan."

"Ah, yes, have you not? I can picture her, the rich aunt with the generous heart, the aunt who is devoted to the niece, and small wonder, for you are a most attractive girl, Florence. The aunt who provides all the pretty dresses, and the pocket-money, and the good things, and who has promised to take you into society by and by, to make you a great woman, who will leave you her riches eventually. It is a large stake, my dear Florence, and worth sacrificing a great deal to win."

"And you have not touched on the most important point of all," said Florence. "It is this: I hate that rich aunt who all the time means so much to me, and I love, I adore, I worship my mother. You would think nothing of my mother, Bertha, for she is not beautiful, and she is not great; she is perhaps what you would call commonplace, and she has very, very little to live on, and that very little she owes to my aunt, but all the same I would almost give my life for my mother, and if I fail in the Scholarship my mother will suffer as much as I. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I am an unhappy girl!"

Bertha rose abruptly, walked over to Florence, and laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Now, look here," she said, "you can win that Scholarship if you like."

"How so? What do you mean?"

"Are you willing to make a great sacrifice to win it?"

"A great sacrifice?" said Florence, wearily; "what can you mean?"

"I will tell you presently, but first of all amuse yourself by reading this."

"Oh, I am in no mood to amuse myself; I must face my terrible position."

"Ah, I see you have written a letter to your mother; shall I put it in the postbag for you?"

"No, thank you; I mean to walk into Hilchester myself presently. I want to post that letter myself. I am anxious at not hearing from mother; she has never acknowledged my last postoffice order. I mean to send her another to-day, and I want to post the letter myself."

"Then I will walk into Hilchester with you after tea. We shall have plenty of time to get there and back before dark."

"Thank you," said Florence; "that will do very well."

"Now, then, read this. Put your essay away for the present. I can see by the expression on your face that you have a terrible headache."

"But why should I read that, Bertha? What is it?"

Bertha had thrust into Florence's hand a small magazine. It was called "The Flower of Youth," and had a gay little cover of bright pink. There were one or two pictures inside, rather badly done, for black-and-white drawings in cheap magazines were not a special feature of the early seventies. The letterpress was also printed on poor paper, and the whole get-up of the little three-penny weekly was shabby. Nevertheless, Florence glanced over it with a momentary awakening of interest in her eyes.

"I never heard of 'The Flower of Youth' before," she said. "Is it a well-known magazine?"

"It is one of the first magazines of the day," said Bertha, in a proud voice; "will you read this little paper?"

Florence's eyes lighted upon a short essay. It was called "The Contented Heart," and her first glance at it made her sigh.

"My heart is so terribly discontented I don't want to read about the contented heart just now," she said.

"Oh, but I do wish you would; it is not long, Florence."

Urged by a peculiar look in Bertha's eyes, Florence did read the short essay. It was couched in plain language and was forcible and to a certain extent clever. It occupied but a couple of pages, and having once begun, Florence read on to the end without a pause.

"Well," she said at last, "I should judge by that writing that the author had not a contented mind. It seems to say a great deal about things the other way round."

"Ah, but how do you judge the writing? Is that good or bad?"

"Good, I should say; it interested me immensely. I was full of worries and it seemed to lift them and smooth them away. I forgot them for the time being. Yes, I should say that essay was well written, but I didn't think about the writing at all."

"Ah, then it was well written," said Bertha. "But it is nearly tea time; don't let us say anything more about it now. I will tell you when we are walking to Hilchester."

She caught up the little magazine, thrust it into her pocket, and left the room without glancing at Florence again.

"What a queer girl she is!" thought Florence to herself. She had run up to her room to wash her hands, for tea, and presently joined her companions in the tea-room.

Half an hour later Florence and Bertha were on their way to Hilchester. Both girls were feeling anxious. Florence had that weight of care ever at her heart, and Bertha was wondering by what means she could smuggle the letter to Mrs. Aylmer out of her daughter's hands. Think and think as she would, however, she could see no way of preventing that postoffice order being obtained, of its being slipped into the envelope, and put into the post. She was noted for her ready wit, however, and ingenuity, and she could only now trust to what she termed a lucky chance. One thing, however, was more important than ever; she must as quickly as possible get Florence into her power.

"Well," she said, as the two girls strolled arm in arm down the shady lane towards Hilchester, "you wonder, don't you, why I showed you 'The Flower of Youth' this morning?"

"I had forgotten all about it," said Florence, frowning.

"I will tell you now. You admired that little paper on a contented heart!"

"It interested me," said Florence, "but why do you harp so about it? I have so much to think of, it is rather bothering for you to go back again and again to the same subject. The writer of that paper has not a contented heart."

"How clever of you to say that, for it is true."

"True! Do you know the writer?"

"I happen to know her."

"You know a real live author! Are you joking, Bertha? You must be joking."

"I know her," said Bertha, casting down her eyes, and a modest expression creeping over her face, "I know her well, for she—don't start away from me, Flo—she happens to be your humble servant."

"Now you must be joking! You are the author of 'The Contented Heart'?"

"I am, dear. I got five shillings for that little essay; not much, you will say, but better than nothing. The editor praised me and asked for more. I write occasionally in 'The Flower of Youth,' and when I am very hard up I am glad of the few shillings my writings bring me."

"Then you are a real genius," said Florence "and I respect you."

"I am glad you respect me; I always had a gift for writing."

"I should like to read your essay, 'The Contented Heart,' again."

"You shall, dear, you shall. I have always said that you could understand me, Florence, but you must not reveal my secret. I would not have it known in the school for worlds that I am an author. It would be fatal."

"But why? Are you not proud of the fact?"

"Oh, yes, I am proud of it, but perhaps Mrs. Clavering might not approve. People have strange ideas in these days. They think when a girl puts herself into print she makes herself too public."

"But they can't think that. Why, they would make you into a perfect heroine; you are a great, great genius, Bertha."

"I am glad you think I have a little talent," said Bertha, in a modest voice.

"But it is a great deal more. Have you ever written stories?"

"A few; but I have never published any."

"Some day you will write a great book, a book that will live. You will be a second Currer Bell."

"Ah, how I adore 'Jane Eyre,'" said Bertha, in a low, intense voice. "Currer Bell has a great soul; she lifts the curtain, she reveals to you her heart."

"I wish I could read 'Jane Eyre' again," said Florence. "I read it once when I was at home for the holidays, but Mrs. Clavering does not approve of novels."

"Mrs. Clavering is a little old-fashioned. Let us walk quickly, Florence. Do you know that I

write poetry, too?"

"Oh, then you are a tremendous genius."

"I have a little talent," replied Bertha once more; "but now, Florence, I have a suggestion to offer."

There was something in her tone which caused Florence's heart to beat; she seemed to guess all of a sudden what was coming.

Bertha turned and gazed at her. "Look here," she said, "I don't do things without a reason. I am anxious to be your friend because—well, because I do like you, and also because I think you may be useful to me by and by."

"I am sure I cannot imagine what you mean, for it is not in my power to be useful to anyone. Your friendship for me must be disinterested, Bertha."

"That is as it may be," answered Bertha, in a dubious voice; "we will say nothing on that point at present. You want to get the Scholarship?"

"I must get it."

"You shall, with my aid."

"Now what do you mean?"

"It all depends on yourself, Florence. How much are you prepared to sacrifice to win the Scholarship?"

"To sacrifice? to sacrifice?" Florence felt very uneasy. She tried to wriggle away from her companion, who held her arm firmly. "To sacrifice?" she repeated.

"Yes, that's just about it—how much?"

"Well, my time—my health even."

"You must go a little further than that, Florence, if you mean to win."

"What do you mean?"

"I will be quite plain with you," said Bertha. "If you are not prepared to sacrifice more than your time, more than your health, you will fail, for Kitty Sharston has what you have not. She has the imaginative mind and the noble heart."

"Oh," said Florence. She colored, and tried to wriggle once again away from her companion.

"I must speak plainly," said Bertha. "At a moment like this there is no good beating about the bush. Kitty will write an essay on Heroism which will win her the Scholarship; she will do so because she is animated by a very great and noble love. She will do so because she has got poetry in her composition. You must face that fact. As to Mary Bateman, she is out of the running. She is a good girl and might even go ahead of you were the theme not the supreme and final test; but that being the test, Kitty will win. You may as well put down your oars at once, Florence; you may as well lower your colors, if you cannot compete with Kitty on her own ground."

"I know it; it is shockingly unfair."

"But all the same, you can win if you will make the supreme sacrifice."

"What is that?"

"The sacrifice of your honor."

"Oh, no; oh, no; oh, what do you mean?"

"That is what I mean. You can think it all over. I will make my suggestion, for I know you won't betray me. I will write your essay for you. I can do it. I can write on noble things; I am well educated; I am to a certain extent a practiced writer. I may not have Kitty's talent, but I have—what she has not—the practiced pen. She will struggle, but she cannot succeed against me. I will write the essay on Heroism, and you shall accept it as your work. Now, think it over; don't answer me at once."

CHAPTER XVII.

The remainder of that walk was taken in complete silence. Florence's head felt as if it were going round. There was a buzzing noise in her ears. Higher and yet higher over her moral nature did the waves of temptation rise. She struggled, but each struggle was feebler than the last. They reached Hilchester, and Bertha looked at her companion.

"You are as white as a sheet," she said; "won't you go in and rest at Mrs. Baker's shop? I shall call there presently for buns and things I am bringing back for the conversazione to-night; she will gladly let you rest. The postoffice is quite five minutes' walk from here. Let me post your letter for you. Have you the money in your pocket for the order?"

"I think I will rest at Mrs. Baker's," said Florence. "You will be sure to get the order all right, Bertha? Here is the letter; put the order in, won't you, and then put the letter in the post?"

"Yes, yes," said Bertha; "I'll be as quick as possible."

She almost snatched the letter from Florence's hand, took the sovereign, slipped it into her purse, and walked down the street with rapid strides. In less than a quarter of an hour she had returned to Florence.

"It is all right," she said, briskly; "and now for my commissions here. I hope you are more rested, Flo."

"Oh, yes, I am quite rested," replied Florence; but there was a dead sort of look on her face and the color had gone out of her eyes.

Bertha walked briskly to the counter. She was in excellent spirits, her carriage was perfectly upright, her well-poised head looked almost queenly as it rested on her graceful shoulders. Her figure was Bertha's strong point, and it never looked better than now. Even Florence as she glanced at her was conscious of a dull admiration.

How clever Bertha was, and really, when you come to consider her carefully, how stylish and good-looking!

"I shall never again as long as I live say that I dislike red hair," thought Florence to herself. "Yes, Bertha certainly has a remarkable face; no wonder she is able to write; and as to her eyes, I shall end by liking her eyes. They do look as if they held a secret power."

Bertha having given her orders now, waited until Mrs. Baker, the confectioner's wife, had made up the cakes and biscuits and chocolate creams which were necessary for the evening conversazione. Each girl then carried a large parcel, and retraced her steps in the direction of Cherry Court School. Their walk back was as silent as the latter part of their walk to Hilchester.

Just as they were entering the porch of the school Bertha laid her hand on her companion's arm.

"Well?" she said.

"I cannot give you my answer to-night; I will to-morrow," said Florence.

"All right, Flo; but let me tell you in advance I know what that answer will be."

Florence felt a shudder run all through her frame. She ran upstairs to the dormitory. It was late, and time to dress for the evening festivities.

Kitty was in her cubicle. Mary Bateman in hers. Neither girl had drawn her curtain, and when they saw Florence they each began to talk to her.

"Do you know, Florence," said Mary, "that that little genius Kitty has absolutely written her essay, finished it all between tea and this hour. She means to polish it to-morrow, but the rough draft is done. I feel quite in despair when I look at her."

"Oh, you need not; I don't suppose it is good a bit," said Kitty.

"I dare not ask you what it is about," said Mary, "or I would love beyond words to read it. When I look at your face and then think that you were asked to write on Heroism, I feel that you were given a task which neither Florence nor I can execute."

"Speak for yourself, pray," said Florence, in a cross voice. She gave a vindictive glance at Mary, avoided meeting Kitty's eyes, and vanished into her own cubicle. Here she drew the turkey-red curtain, glanced wildly round, and the next moment had dropped on her knees.

"Oh, please, God, save me from myself," whispered the wretched girl. "Help me out of this somehow. Give me the strength to write the essay myself. Oh, please, God, I must—I must have the Scholarship. Please, please give me the ability, the genius to write the essay myself."

Her wild, distracted prayer was the reverse of soothing. She sprang up, poured some water

into her basin, and began to wash her face and hands; then she dressed herself neatly and gracefully. There were no lack of pretty dresses now for Florence Aylmer to bedeck herself in. She took great pains with her toilet. There was a certain satisfaction, as she donned her silken chains, in knowing that at least she could look as well as Kitty, nicer even than Kitty, as far as dress was concerned.

Mrs. Aylmer the great had excellent taste, and every one of Florence's frocks were suitable for Florence to wear. They were all girlish and simple. The frock she chose to-night was of a very pale pink. It was made of the simplest stuff, and was not trimmed at all. It gave grace to her figure and added to her height. A little ruffle of lace surrounded her girlish throat, and on her arm she slipped a gold bangle, Mrs. Aylmer's latest present. She then ran downstairs to the drawing-room. In her pretty shoes and silk stockings and well-fitting dress Florence made quite a graceful figure. She dropped a curtsey at the door as she was required to do, and then, going forward, took her place beside Kitty Sharston and Mary Bateman.

These three girls were, according to the rules of the competition, to entertain their companions. Neither Kitty nor Mary were in the least self-conscious, and to-night Florence also, in the pressure of a great misery, contrived to forget herself.

Mrs. Clavering looked at her with distinct approval.

"How that girl has improved," she said, bending towards Sir John Wallis, who invariably appeared on these occasions. "She will end in being handsome."

"Yes, she is a distinguished-looking girl," said Sir John, just glancing at Florence, and then looking away again, "but Kitty is my choice; give me the little wildflower Kitty. How sweet she is!"

"Well, of course, she belongs to a totally different order of being," said Mrs. Clavering, dropping her voice; "but what about the Scholarship, Sir John?"

"I dare not think of anyone else winning it," said Sir John; "but, of course, I have to face the fact that either of the other girls may succeed. Above all things, one must act fairly."

"I just doubted whether you gave a fair subject for the essay," said Mrs. Clavering.

"What do you mean?"

"Heroism," repeated the head mistress, speaking slowly and dropping her voice. "With such a subject you appeal so distinctly to the heart. If the heart does not respond, the essay on Heroism will never be done justice to."

"Ay, it is the supreme test, the supreme test," said Sir John, slowly. Again his eyes wandered to Kitty. From her charming, bright, anxious face he looked at Florence. It so happened that at that moment Florence had raised her own dark eyes and fixed them on him. The suffering she had lately lived through had added refinement to her face, and the baronet caught himself looking at her again and again.

"Yes, she has improved; there is something in her; but what is she so unhappy about, I wonder?" he thought.

Just then Mary Bateman skipped up, asked his opinion with regard to a fresh sketch she was making, and carried him away to chat with her in a corner.

Next to Kitty, Sir John certainly liked plain little Mary best.

Light refreshments were brought in on little trays, and the girls were invited to partake. The three young hostesses acted with *aplomb* and much tact. Dull girls were drawn out of themselves, lively girls were placed with suitable companions. Games were proposed, which were all conducted in a spirited and lively manner, and finally the proceedings ended with a gay dance. It was at this moment, just when the dance was in full swing, that Sir John Wallis came up and offered his arm to Florence.

"Will you waltz with me?" he said.

She looked up at him, colored with delight, and laid her hand on his arm. The two led the dance, and right merry was the music which was played to it.

The dance had just come to an end when Sir John looked full at Florence and spoke.

"I heard from your aunt, Mrs. Aylmer, and she is much pleased to accept my invitation. She will be my guest on the evening of the 29th, and I hope I may persuade her to stay a few days longer. You must see a great deal of her while she is at Cherry Court Park. You are a great favorite with her, are you not?"

"Of late I have been a favorite," said Florence, and now she looked full at Sir John and her lip trembled.

"There is something the matter with you, my dear," said Sir John.

"Oh, I don't know—nothing." Then she added, as if the words were wrung from her lips, "I hate Aunt Susan."

"Oh, come, come," said Sir John, truly shocked; "let me tell you that is a very unladylike way of speaking and scarcely fair to your aunt, who is doing so much for you."

"That is all you know, Sir John, but I dare not say any more."

"But having said so much, I am afraid you must. I asked you three girls what special friend or relation you would like to be present in the hour of your triumph, and you selected Mrs. Aylmer. If you did not like Mrs. Aylmer, why did you ask her to come? I would gladly have received your own mother."

"I will tell you," said Florence, in a hurried voice. "Mrs. Aylmer is much interested in your Scholarship, Sir John, and she says if I win it that she will adopt me. I shall be her—her heiress then. You understand that it means a great deal to me, the Scholarship?"

"Yes, I understand," said Sir John, gravely. His face looked troubled. "Sit down here, my dear," he said. Florence seated herself on a chair by his side. "I can understand, and I am sorry; it is scarcely fair that your young mind should be strained to this extent. And if you don't win the Scholarship?"

"Ah, if I don't, Aunt Susan will not need you to ask me much to Cherry Court Park. She will wash her hands of me."

"Indeed, this is disturbing."

"I ought not to have told you, and you must pretend that you do not know."

"I shall say nothing, of course; all the same, I am sorry."

Sir John sat very thoughtful for a moment. After a long pause he spoke.

"I ought not to give you any special advantage over the other girls," he said, "but suppose I do this?"

"What?" asked Florence, looking into his face.

"Suppose I have Mrs. Aylmer as my guest and allow you to choose another? What about your mother, Miss Aylmer?"

"Oh, do you mean it?" said Florence; her face flushed, and then turned pale. She had a wild, wild thought that even if she failed her mother would not turn from her. She had a choking sensation in her throat, which made her feel that even in the moment of absolute defeat the little Mummy's kisses would be supporting, cheering, encouraging. Tears brimmed into her eyes. "You are very good," she said.

"Then I'll do it; give me your mother's address. She shall be your guest; the other Mrs. Aylmer shall be mine. And now cheer up, my dear; we can never do more than our best."

Sir John turned aside, and soon afterwards the little party broke up.

That night Florence hardly slept. At a very early hour she awoke. She had prayed her prayer of the night before; she had asked God to help her. As to not winning the Scholarship, that was absolutely and completely out of the question. She must win it. The thought of disgrace was too intolerable; she must, she would win it. She determined to rise now and test her powers of composition. It was between five and six in the morning. She rose very softly, got into her clothes, and stole out of the dormitory.

The light was just beginning to dawn, but there was not light enough to work. Florence slipped softly down to the oak parlor; having secured a candle and a box of matches, she lit the candle and placed it on her desk, and, taking out a sheet of manuscript paper, she pressed her face on her hands, once again uttered a wild, passionate prayer, and then, dipping the pen in the ink, waited for inspiration.

"Heroism," she said, under her breath. "What did it mean?" All that it really meant rushed over her—self-denial, self-abnegation, the noble courage which comes to those who think of others, not themselves. "I cannot write," she said, passionately. She said the words aloud, dashing down her pen and making a blot on the fair sheet of manuscript paper. At that moment the door was opened and Bertha came in.

"I thought I heard a noise," she said; "so it is you? What are you doing there, Florence?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing; but why have you come to tempt me?" said Florence. She raised two haggard eyes to the pupil teacher's face.

"Not to tempt you, but to help you, poor child. Of course, you will do what I wish. There, Florence, I wrote your essay for you last night. It came over me and I wrote it without much trouble. Here it is, dear; you have only to copy it; put it in your desk for the present, there is plenty of time, and go back to bed, dear, for you look worn out."

Florence burst into tears. The next moment she had flung her arms around Bertha's neck and laid her head on her shoulder.

"There, there," said Bertha, "there, there, you are overcome, but it will be all right now."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE GUESTS ARRIVE.

It wanted three days to the Scholarship competition. The girls who were called in the school the lucky three now scarcely spoke on the subject—the other girls watched them anxiously. All lessons, except those in connection with the Scholarship, were suspended so far as Mary Bateman, Kitty Sharston, and Florence Aylmer were concerned.

The trial essays, the essays which were to be the supreme test of merit, were all written, and in sealed envelopes were handed in to Mrs. Clavering. Meanwhile exercises on history, French, German, arithmetic, were the order of the hour. The girls were busy all day long. The three faces were somewhat pale, and lines which ought not to have appeared round the young eyes and lips were beginning to make themselves manifest.

"I shall be truly thankful when the thing is over," said Mrs. Clavering to Sir John; "this is bad for them, very bad. In particular I do not like Florence Aylmer's expression. The girl thinks too much about this matter. If she fails she will have an illness."

"And if she succeeds Kitty will fail or have an illness," said Sir John, restlessly.

"Kitty will feel it, but she will not have an illness," said Mrs. Clavering; "you have but to see the expression on the two faces to know that. Kitty is anxious also and resolved, but there is a firm, steady, fine sort of expression about her, quite the reverse of poor Florence's."

"Yes, I confess I do not understand that girl," said Sir John; "and yet," he added, "I cannot help liking her; she has a good deal in her."

"I pity her, poor child," said Mrs. Clavering; "she is placed in a very false position. I once met her aunt, Mrs. Aylmer, of Aylmer's Court; that was on the occasion when Florence was brought to my school, and I confess I did not take to her."

Sir John shrugged his shoulders.

"It is invidious to speak of a lady who is soon to be one's guest," he said, "but I also have met Mrs. Aylmer."

On the morning of the same day Florence had received a letter from her mother. Bertha Keys had gone away on the previous evening to visit a sick cousin, and in consequence had not the charge of the postbag. She was very unwilling to leave at this critical moment, but the cousin was ill, required her services. Mrs. Clavering was willing to spare her for one night, there was no help for it; she must go. "I must only trust that no letter will come from Dawlish," she said to herself; "but after all, even if it does, it cannot really matter. Florence must sooner or later feel that she is in my power; perhaps the sooner the better."

Florence found the letter from her mother on the breakfast-table. She stretched out her hand, caught it with a firm grip, thrust it into her pocket, and then applied herself to her breakfast.

"Why don't you read your letter? You know you are allowed to do so," said Edith King, who was seated next to her.

"Oh, it will do after breakfast," said Florence.

"You don't look well, Flo; what is the matter with you?"

"I am a little anxious, if you must know," said Florence, turning round and glancing at her companion; "I have not heard from my mother for two or three weeks; but there, of course, it is all right. She has not even told me whether she has accepted Sir John Wallis's invitation. Sir John told me he had written, but I cannot tell whether she is coming or not."

"It will be delightful for you if she does come, will it not?" said Edith King.

"Oh, yes, delightful," answered Florence. She did not speak any more, but finished her breakfast somewhat hastily. At the first moment she could find herself alone Florence rushed into the cherry orchard and tore open her letter. It contained the following words:

"MY DARLING CHILD:

"Such a wonderful, extraordinary, delightful thing has happened. It is so unexpected that it quite puts out of my head a great deal which has made me anxious up to the present. I have received a letter from no less a person than Sir John Wallis, the distinguished owner of that magnificent place, Cherry Court Park, and he has invited me, my darling, to be present at the moment of your great triumph. He says, which I regret very much, that your Aunt Susan will also be there, but I am asked as your guest, my child. It is all most wonderful, unexpected, and truly fascinating. The effect on the neighbors is already so surprising that I have literally not been obliged to provide myself with a single meal since the news came. The Pratts have invited me each morning to breakfast, and Ann Pratt has assiduously catechized me, so much so that I have found an ancient book on the 'baronial halls of England, and have worked up some information for her benefit from this volume. I never saw anyone so eager as the creature is to find out Sir John's income and all about him. It is extraordinary, but still quite human nature.

"Sukey is wonderfully affected since the news came, and in fact right and left your poor Mummy is quite an honored individual.

"I feel like a heroine, my darling, and walk about Dawlish with my head well up. I am also quite extravagant, and am wearing that dress which I described to you as being turned for the fifth time. It is reckless of me, but I cannot help it. For what do you think, dear?—Sir John has sent me a check for my expenses. He says that he could not possibly ask me to be present if I were put to any expense in the matter, and he has absolutely sent me twenty pounds; so I shall be able to buy a suitable costume to be present in when I see my darling crowned with glory.

"Oh, what a supreme moment it will be! I have already got the black silk, and Miss Macgregor, in the Parade—you know what a fashionable dressmaker she is—is making it up. I shall, of course, wear my widow's bonnet, as it looks so *distingué*, and Mrs. Sweat, the milliner in the High Street, is making up a new one, most stylish.

"I can add no more now. My heart goes pit-a-pat. When you receive this I shall be packing for my journey. It will be splendid to see Susan in the moment of your triumph. Altogether, dear, I never felt more elated in my life. This great and unexpected excitement has perfectly restored my health. I say to myself—you know, Flo, I always was a reckless little woman—I say to myself, 'Never mind, enjoy the present, Mabel Aylmer, even if afterwards comes the deluge.' Good-bye, my dearest; we shall soon meet and embrace.

"Your most affectionate
"MOTHER."

Florence read the letter over once or twice. She then put it in her pocket and paced thoughtfully up and down the cherry orchard. The cherry trees were rapidly dropping their leaves now, and some of them fell over Florence. She shook them off impatiently.

"It was queer of mother never to mention those postoffice orders which I sent her," thought the girl; "she has not even thanked me for them; but there, I suppose it is all right, and she is very happy. It was good of Sir John to send her that twenty pounds, and yet—and yet it chokes me to think of it. He would not dare to send the money to Kitty's cousin, Helen Dartmoor, nor would he dare to send it to Mary Bateman's father. Oh, if I can only win this Scholarship I shall hold my head high and exercise that pride, which, after all, no woman ought to be without."

Florence went back to the house, and soon afterwards Bertha Keys entered the oak parlor. In the course of the morning she sat next to Florence, who bent towards her and said, "I have had a long letter from my mother."

"Oh, indeed," said Bertha, changing color in spite of herself; "and what did she say?"

"She is coming to Cherry Court Park. Bertha, it is rather queer she has said nothing at all about the postoffice orders. I wonder if she got them safely."

"Is it likely she didn't?" replied Bertha, in a calm voice; "of course she did. She was too excited to think of them; to have an invitation of that sort would absorb her very much."

"It does absorb her very much indeed," replied Florence. "Doubtless she forgot. Well, I shall soon see her and be able to ask her all about the matter."

Sir John Wallis had arranged that the three girls who were to compete for the Scholarship were to arrive at Cherry Court Park early on the morning of the great day. They were to sleep there that night, and return to the school the following day. The rest of the school were to arrive

in the evening, but the Scholarship girls were to have the run of the Hall, and were to be entertained as the honored guests during the whole of the important day.

No girls could possibly be more excited than these three when at last the morning broke. Florence, who had scarcely slept at all the previous night, felt that she would be almost glad, even if the worst befell her, to have the terrible ordeal over.

"By this time to-morrow I shall be the happiest girl in the world or the most truly miserable," she thought to herself. But the greatness of the ordeal now had a certain composing effect, and Kitty, Mary and Florence started off in Sir John's carriage in apparently high spirits.

"What do you think?" said Kitty, bending forward and touching Mary on the sleeve; "Sir John has promised if I succeed to send a cable to father. Isn't it perfectly splendid of him? He has not said anything to father about the cable. What a surprise and delight it will be if he gets it."

"I wish you would not tell me," said Mary; "when I look into your eyes and see all that this means to you I feel a perfect brute, and yet nevertheless I mean to play my very best to-night, and to sing with all my heart in my voice, and to answer each question as carefully as I can, for my dear, dear old father will be present. Oh, how happy, how delighted I shall be to meet him again!"

"Yes, it will be splendid for you; and you, Florence, how glad you will be to see your mother," said Kitty. "But, oh, dear! oh, dear! I wish it hadn't been necessary to ask Helen Dartmoor to be present on the great occasion."

The girls went to the Hall in neat morning dresses, but the white dresses they were to wear in the evening, which were by Sir John's orders to be pure white, had already been sent on to the Hall.

The day was a glorious one, and as they drove through the beautiful scenery in Sir John's immense park a golden mist lay over everything. At last they drew up before the great front entrance. A group of ladies were standing in the hall. Sir John came down the steps. The next moment a little figure was seen running briskly forward, and Florence was clasped in the arms of the little Mummy.

"My darling! my darling!" said little Mrs. Aylmer. Florence kissed her with a quick passion, held her then at arm's length, looked into her face, and crushed some moisture out of her own eyes.

Meanwhile a very trim, staid-looking woman, with faded hair, pale blue eyes, and a correct, old-maid sort of demeanor, had given Kitty a light kiss on her forehead. "How do you do?" she said, in an accent which was truly Scotch. "It was very kind of Sir John to invite me to the Hall. I hope, for your own sake, you will win the Scholarship."

Kitty answered as brightly as she could.

"If not, of course, you are fully aware that you will be my guest for the next two or three years. It is scarcely likely you will win the Scholarship, and I have already been making all the arrangements I could with regard to your instruction," said Miss Dartmoor. "Will you come round the place now with me; I should like to have some conversation with you. I have not seen you for some little time."

Kitty gave a wild glance round. Would not Sir John help her? Helen Dartmoor was the only person in the world that she truly disliked. She felt a restless sensation rising up in her heart, but there was no escape. Sir John had gone off with Mary Bateman and Mary's father. Florence and her mother had already vanished inside the house. Kitty had to submit to her fate.

Helen Dartmoor walked with prim, small steps. She had a little three-cornered shawl on her shoulders, and an old-fashioned bonnet was tied under her chin. Her perfectly cold, serene face glanced now and then at Kitty.

"You are not improved, Catherine," she said.

"Why do you say that?" replied Kitty.

"You look anxious and excitable. I dislike a woman showing any emotion. Of course, you are only a child yet, but I trust if I have the care of you, which I fully expect to have—for it is scarcely likely you will for a single moment win this ridiculous Scholarship—I trust that I shall send you out to your father a well-mannered and decorous woman. I have the greatest dislike to the manners of the present day, and the new sort of girl who is growing up so rapidly in our midst is thoroughly abhorrent to me."

"Well, Helen," said Kitty, glancing full at her, "I know you won't mind if I am frank. I certainly wish to win the Scholarship; I am struggling with all my might and main to win it. It is of the utmost importance to me, for I want to be as well educated as possible when I go to dear father in India; but if I fail—yes, Helen, I will try my very best to please you while I am under your roof."

"Hoots, lass, you cannot do more, but do not speak in such exaggerated phrases. Now let us walk down this avenue. What a beautiful view! How soothing is nature in all her aspects!"

Kitty could not help shuddering. "Oh, dear! oh, dear!" she whispered, under her breath, "how am I to live if I lose the Scholarship!"

Meanwhile little Mrs. Aylmer, clasping a firm hold of Florence's arm, had carried her off right through the house and into one of the gardens at the back. "Your Aunt Susan is not down yet," she said; "it is the most merciful Providence, for I judge from her manner of last night that she means to absorb you. Now, then, darling, tell me what are your chances?"

"Oh, I don't know, mother; I suppose they are pretty good, and I have tried my best—I can't do any more."

"Really, Florence, you look quite splendid; I would not know you for the same girl. How your figure has changed; you have attained quite an elegant shape, my love—small waist, rounded form, a little pale, paler than I should wish, but your eyes have greatly improved; they have got a sort of pathetic expression in them which is very becoming, very becoming indeed." Mrs. Aylmer danced in front of Florence, examining each feature critically, her own small eyes twinkling, and her round face flushing in her excitement.

"Oh, isn't it a magnificent place?" she said, "and such a dinner as they had last night—course after course, if you'll believe me. I should think there must have been fifteen courses if there was one. I kept counting them, and then my poor head got so confused, for I was seated not far from Sir John, and he talked to me in such a kind, marked sort of way, and your Aunt Susan kept glittering her pale blue eyes at me as if she was eaten up with jealousy. I tell you, my darling, I did enjoy myself; I gave myself away, and talked in a frank, pleasant, easy sort of style. I made several of the guests laugh, I did really. Florence, my dear, my dress is beautiful; it quite stands out with richness. I assure you, my love, you will have no cause to be ashamed of your little Mummy to-night. I got Miss Macgregor to put a yard and a half of train into the back—a yard and a half, Flo, and it quite adds to my height. I have not had such a lovely dress since your poor dear father's time—that I haven't. I thought I would like to thank Sir John in private, and to tell him that I have made the money for my expenses go so far that I was able to purchase the dress."

"Oh, mother, please, please, mother, don't!" said Florence, in a tone of agony.

"Why not, my sweet child? If Sir John knows that I am thoroughly poor he may give me another little *douceur*—there's no saying."

"Oh, mother, mother, you don't know what agony this gives me!"

"My poor child, but are not you glad that your little Mummy has got some money? Dear me, Flo, I have been ill since you saw me last. I was almost at death's door, and Dr. Hunt was so kind, coming in two or three times a day. But there, I have not paid his bill yet; it is fearful to think of it! Now, I should really like to take Sir John into my confidence. I would not ask him for the money, but I should just tell him exactly how I am placed, with so much a year—very, very little; a scrimped, tightened widow: that's the only way in which I can express my condition, scrimped and tightened, nothing else. A generous cheque from him would set all right."

"Mother, you must promise me here and now that you will say nothing on the subject to Sir John. And, Mummy dear, that reminds me, you never acknowledged my postoffice orders. I know I hadn't much to send you, but what I did have I sent, and I promised that you should have ten shillings a week, my pocket-money, until you had paid the doctor's bill. I could do no more. Mummy dear, what is the matter? Why do you look at me like that, Mummy?"

"I may well ask you what is the matter?" said Mrs. Aylmer, now standing stock still in front of her daughter and raising a round, agitated face to Florence. "Postoffice orders, and from you, Flo! Oh, my dear, darling, precious child, I have been wondering at never hearing from you. I wrote to tell you all about my illness—not until it was over, Flo; as I said to myself, 'No, the child shall not be disturbed; that Scholarship she must win. I will not tell her that her mother is ill until her mother is out of danger.' But when the danger was past I told you—oh, my darling, I have not had any postoffice orders from you nor any letters whatsoever—none whatsoever, Flo, and I have been so astonished. I have tried not to feel hurt. I am very sensible about most things. I was sure that you did not write because you were too busy to write, but still, in the dead of night, I did shed one or two tears—I did really, my own pet."

"But, mother, this is too extraordinary for anything. I sent you two postoffice orders, the first was for two pounds, the second for one. Do you mean to say that you never got them?"

"Never, my darling; I have been robbed. Who could have done it? Oh, Flo, this is fearful; three pounds sent to me by my own darling, and I never to receive the money! What can it mean, Florence—what can it mean?"

"Say no more, mother; I will see about this."

CHAPTER SIX.

TIT FOR TAT.

The long, bewildering, beautiful day was over and the three candidates for the coming competition were being dressed for the occasion.

The dressing took place in one immense room where the girls were afterwards to sleep, and the assistants at the dressing were no less people than Miss Helen Dartmoor, Mrs. Aylmer the great, and Mrs. Aylmer the less.

Mrs. Aylmer the great and Mrs. Aylmer the less fussed round Florence, fussed round her to such an extraordinary degree that she felt a mad desire to thrust them both out of the room.

The very beautiful dress which Aunt Susan had purchased for Florence in London was, after all, not to be used on this occasion, for Sir John had given forth his mandate that each of the three candidates was to be dressed exactly alike, and as this was his supreme wish he further said that he himself would purchase the dresses for the occasion.

These were made in Greek style, and were long, flowing, and simple. The material was the finest white cashmere edged with swansdown, and each girl had clasped round her waist a belt of massive silver, also Sir John's present. Their hair was unbound and hung down their backs, being kept in its place on the head by a narrow fillet of silver.

Nothing could be simpler and yet more graceful than the dress, the long flowing sleeves falling away from the elbow and showing the young molded arms distinctly.

It so happened that no dress could suit Kitty better, and doubtless Sir John had an eye to the appearance of his favorite in such a robe when he ordered it.

Florence also looked very well in her Greek costume; and even Mary Bateman seemed to acquire added grace and dignity when she put on the pretty classical robe. The girls wore sandals on their feet, and altogether nothing could be choicer and prettier than the dresses which Sir John had devised for them.

Little Mrs. Aylmer almost hopped round Florence as she was being attired in her festive robe.

"I am sure," she said, "I can guess the reason why; I have been wondering over it all day, and at last the solution has come to me. Listen, my dear Miss Bateman; listen, Miss Sharston; Susan, you cannot prevent my speaking. I see, Miss Dartmoor, you are thinking me a little fool, but I have guessed at the solution. It is because in the moment of triumph the brow of the young victor —victress, don't you say? no, of course, victor—will be crowned with a laurel wreath. Ah, how sweet! Florence dear, nothing could be more becoming to you."

Miss Dartmoor was heard to give an indignant snort. She went up to Kitty and looked at her with marked attention.

"I hate the heathenish sort of dress," she exclaimed, "but if it comes to that, I believe that Catherine Sharston will look just as well with a chaplet of leaves round her head as anyone else in the room."

"Oh, we are not disputing that point," said Mrs. Aylmer the less, chirruping away as she spoke, and dancing up to a neighboring looking-glass to take a side view of her own dress; "we are not disputing that point. The one who wins the Scholarship will look beautiful in her wreath of glory. Time will prove who that lucky person will be."

Here she winked at Florence, who turned away.

Her head ached; there was a heavy, heavy feeling at her heart. She had one great desire, which for the time being swallowed up all others, and that was to see Bertha Keys for a moment alone. Bertha was to arrive with the rest of the school in time for the great ceremony, which was to take place in the great central hall of the old house.

The hall had been decorated for the occasion, and in its dark recesses gleamed now many fairy lamps. In the middle of the hall was a dais, on which the judges were to sit, and before whom the young competitors were to appear when the crucial moment came.

A flood of light from many incandescent burners poured down upon this dais, making it one of dazzling light.

The rest of the girls of the school were to sit in a darker part of the hall; they were to be dressed in their best. The guests were to occupy a gallery to the left, except those guests who, by Sir John's special invitation, were to sit upon the dais and give their votes in favor of the essays.

Desks were provided also in the middle of the hall for the three young competitors, at which they were to sit to answer the questions which were to be asked them by three professors specially sent for from London by Sir John.

There was not to be the slightest indication of who the successful winner was to be until the crucial moment, and the examination from first to last was expected to occupy about an hour and a half.

While it was going on very soft music was to be played on a distant organ; the competitors were then to go forward and to stand in front of the judges while the three essays were read aloud by no less a person than Sir John himself.

The judges would retire, something like a jury at a court of justice, on hearing the essays, to give their votes for the lucky winner of the Scholarship, and then Sir John was to crown the successful girl with glory. A chaplet of silver bay-leaves was to encircle her brow, and the locket and chain were to be put round her neck. She was to receive the purse which would contain the expenses for one year at Cherry Court School, and the parchment scroll, which through all time would testify to her ability and her triumph, was to be put into her hand.

"Yes, nothing could be more perfect than the arrangements," said Miss Dartmoor, who had heard all about the programme during the course of the day; "but," she added, fixing her eyes now upon the elder Mrs. Aylmer's face, "I disapprove of this sort of thing immensely. I don't suppose for a single moment my cousin, Catherine Sharston, will get the Scholarship; but seeds of envy and discontent will be sown in her heart, and I shall have some trouble in bringing her into a proper frame of mind when she joins me in Scotland."

"I pity you," said Mrs. Aylmer, in reply to this speech, "but the girl looks well-meaning and easily influenced."

"Oh, am I?" thought Kitty, who overheard these words and who could not help giving her little head a toss; "I doubt it. Oh, if it were not for father I don't think I could go through with this evening."

Meanwhile Florence had slipped out of the room. In her pretty Greek dress she glided down the corridor, met a servant, and asked her if the young ladies from school had yet come.

"Yes, miss," was the reply, "and they are all unrobing in the green bedroom at the end of this corridor."

"I should be so much obliged if you would do something for me," said Florence.

"Of course I will, miss," was the reply. The girl gave Florence a long, admiring look. She could not help being struck with the elegant dress and the eager, passionate, quivering face. "What is it you want, miss?—I'll do anything you wish."

"I want you to go into the green bedroom and ask if Miss Keys is there. If she is, say that I, Florence Aylmer, would like to see her for a few moments."

The servant tripped off at once, and a moment later Bertha joined Florence in the corridor.

"Is there anywhere where we can be alone?" said Florence, clasping Bertha's hand.

"Oh, my dear Flo, how lovely you look! What a charming, charming robe!"

"Don't talk about my dress now, and don't say anything about my looks; I want to speak to you," said Florence.

For a wild moment Bertha Keys felt inclined to say, "It is impossible; I am engaged with my pupils, and cannot give you any of my time," but a glance into Florence's face showed her, as she vulgarly expressed it, "the fat was in the fire," and she had better face the position at once. Accordingly she said coolly, "I can give you two or three minutes, although I cannot imagine what you want to say now. I shall come to see you when it is all over. There is not the slightest doubt that you will win the Scholarship, so rest assured on that head."

"If I thought for a moment there was a doubt do you think I would have acted as I did?" said Florence; "but now that things have come to a crisis I wonder if I greatly care. I——"

"Oh, nonsense, Florence, how would you stand the disgrace? and the clergy school, you know —don't forget, Florence, what it means. Hold up your head, pluck up your courage. What is it you want to say to me?"

"Something—but I must see you alone."

"Let us come along this corridor; there are a great many bedrooms: we will open one on the chance of its being empty."

Bertha seized Florence's hand and began to fly down the corridor with her. She knocked at a door, there was no reply, she opened it.

"There, it is unoccupied," she said; "we will stay here for a minute or two. Come now, what is it?"

"It is this," said Florence; she turned and faced Bertha.

"Bertha Keys," she said, "my mother has told me, and I heard that of you this morning which ——"

"That of me, indeed," said Bertha, turning very pale; "what can you have heard of me?"

"I have heard that which shows me your true character. My mother never received those post-office orders. I gave you three sovereigns to change into postoffice orders for my mother, and she—she never had them; she never got any of my letters, she thought me cold, heartless, unfeeling—she, my mother, the one I love best in the world. You, you held back the letters, you kept the money—dare you deny it?"

"Oh, dear, what a fuss!" said Bertha. "But you can act just as you please, Florence; you can go down and tell all about me. Of course, having done so, my career will be ruined."

"What do you mean? What did you do?—speak, speak! Oh, this is driving me mad!"

"Calm yourself, my dear, and stay quiet; I won't attempt to conceal the truth from you. I took the money; I wanted it very badly. Whether I wanted it more badly than your mother is a matter of not the smallest importance to me. I wanted it, and I took it. Let that suffice."

"And what do you think I shall do; do you think I will submit to this sort of thing?"

"You can please yourself. Of course, if you tell about me, I can tell about you. Tit for tat—you quite understand."

"Oh, I quite understand," said Florence.

She sank down on the nearest chair, her face had turned quite grey.

Miss Keys regarded her for a moment silently, then she went up and laid her hand on her shoulder.

"Come, Flo," she said, suddenly dropping on her knees by the unhappy girl's side, "come, cheer up; don't look so miserable. You and I are in the same boat and we must sink or swim together. If you support me I'll support you. I can help you again and again, and think what I am doing for you to-night."

"Oh, I hate myself, I hate myself! I don't think I can go through with it," said Florence.

"Then what do you mean to do?"

"Tell Sir John all before he begins. It is Kitty's Scholarship—not mine; and how—how am I to take it?"

"Now this is utter folly," said Bertha, seriously alarmed at last, for if Florence were to develop a conscience, and a conscience of such a sensitive order, at this hour, all would indeed be lost as far as she was concerned.

"Come," she said, "think what it means. You love your mother; think of her position if you lose; and it was only three pounds, and I promise—there, I promise I'll save it out of my salary; you shall have it back. Oh, don't tell on me; I shall be ruined for ever; don't—don't—don't!"

Bertha clasped her hands, the tears rose to her eyes—a bell was heard in the distance. It was the bell which was to summon the guests, the girls of the school, and the three competitors to the great hall.

"There, I must be going," said Florence, "but I am miserable. My head aches, I doubt if I can go through with this."

"You will feel quite different when you get downstairs," said Bertha, "and now cheer up; only just remember one thing. If you fail me I will fail you, and *vice versa*."

Florence did not dare to look back at Bertha; she left the room. There was a noise in her ears and a swimming before her eyes.

Bertha stood for a moment, looking after her retreating form.

"I am almost sorry I did not tell her at the time," she said to herself; "when she has accepted the Scholarship I shall be safe; but she has had a shock. There is no saying what a girl of that temperament may do under pressure; but there, I believe the excitement will carry her through, and I don't believe for a moment she has the moral courage to stand the public disgrace which would be hers if she told now. Yes, she is in for it; she must go through with it."

Bertha patted her red hair and drew herself up to her full height, and presently accompanied

the pupils down to the great hall, where they took their seats in the places allotted to them; excellent seats from the point of view, for they could see every single thing and were themselves to a certain extent in shadow.

The different guests had assembled, all beautifully dressed. Mrs. Aylmer the great and Mrs. Aylmer the less found themselves side by side. Mrs. Aylmer the great was in a magnificent robe of violet brocade, open at the throat, displaying a quantity of rich lace. On her head glittered diamonds, and her light eyes flashed as she glanced from time to time at Mrs. Aylmer the less.

"Really," she said to herself, "the one drawback in adopting Florence is that most unpleasant little woman. Where did she get that splendid silk from? But what airs she does put on; how vulgar she is!"

Mrs. Aylmer the great did not look particularly happy. She was most anxious to force herself into what she termed county society, and she found up to the present that, although she was the owner of a magnificent place like Aylmer Court, she was not taken much notice of by those people who were, as she expressed it, really in the swim. It was a great feather in her cap to be invited to Cherry Court Park, and if Sir John would only favor her with a little attention she might get more invitations in consequence.

If her niece was the lucky winner of the Scholarship all would undoubtedly go well with Mrs. Aylmer. She would be the aunt, practically the adopted mother, of the heroine, the girl on whom all eyes were fixed, Sir John's special *protégée*, the Cherry Court School Scholarship girl. She could talk about Florence and her great abilities from time to time, and gently insinuate little hints with regard to the girl's unfortunate position and her great kindness in adopting her. Thus people would think her a most good-natured woman as well as a very rich one, the aunt of a girl of undoubted genius—yes, a great deal might follow in the train of such consequences.

Mrs. Aylmer the less on this occasion had many wild and exciting thoughts with regard to Miss Pratt and the other neighbors at Dawlish, also with regard to Sukey; but still, her thought above all other thoughts was the consciousness that soon her beloved child would be done honor to, and her eyes, silly enough in expression, were now so full of love that many people thought her a good-natured and pleasant-looking woman, and in reality gave her far kinder thoughts than they did to Mrs. Aylmer the great, whose cold face would never shine with any human feeling, and whose motives could be easily read by the proud county folk.

As Florence slowly entered the room, accompanied by Kitty and Mary, a little buzz of applause greeted the three graceful girls as, in their Greek costumes, they glided slowly forward and took their places at the little desks placed for them. Florence for one wild moment glanced at her mother, and the love and longing and delight in the little Mummy's face did more to reconcile her present evil plight than anything else.

"There," she whispered under her breath, "in for a penny, in for a pound. I cannot break the heart of the little Mummy—I can't—I won't."

A peculiar expression stole round her lips, her eyes grew feverishly bright, she looked handsome, and Mrs. Aylmer the great felt justly very proud of her.

"She is tall, her figure is improving every day; she will be a very good-looking girl by and by—what is more, a stylish one," thought Aunt Susan.

But most of the guests scarcely looked at Florence, for their eyes were attracted by the sweet expression, the inimitable grace of Kitty Sharston.

Florence's cheeks were deeply flushed, her eyes so bright that they looked dark as night; but Kitty, equally excited, her heart beating, every nerve highly strung, only showed her excitement by a dewy look in the great big grey eyes, and a wild-rose bloom on the delicate cheeks.

Mary's downright appearance did not attract comment one way or the other. All three were pronounced nice-looking, ladylike girls, and now the guests bent forward to listen to the *viva voce* examination, which immediately began.

CHAPTER XX.

"THE HILLS FOR EVER."

The examination began and was continued amidst a profound silence on the part of all the spectators. Necks were craned forward and ears were at attention point. When Florence answered a question correctly Mrs. Aylmer the less nodded her little head until the plumes which she wore in her hair quivered all over. Mrs. Aylmer the great bridled and glanced with her cold

eyes at the proudest of the county folk, as much as to say, "There's genius for you."

Mary Bateman's father, who sat very near Mrs. Aylmer the less, smiled also when Florence made a correct answer, and looked with sympathy at little Mrs. Aylmer; and when his own child Mary scored a point, as he expressed it, a gratified flush rose to his old cheeks, and he dropped his eyes, not caring to look at the girl whom he loved best in the world.

But when to question after question Kitty Sharston gave a correct reply, the *furore* and excitement in the breasts of several of the spectators rose to the highest pitch, for Kitty's soft voice, her gentle answers, her correct and lady-like utterances impressed everyone favorably. Then, too, it was an open secret that she was Sir John's favorite; it had been whispered by more than one visitor to another that it was on account of Kitty Sharston that this great fuss had been made, that the Scholarship had been opened to the competition of the school, that the girls were here, that they themselves were here—it was all on account of this slim little girl with the big eyes and the sweet pathetic face; and reminiscences of Sir John and Kitty's father together side by side, shoulder to shoulder, in the trenches before Sebastopol arose in the memory of one or two visitors present.

It was undoubtedly the wish of the guests who were assembled at Cherry Court Park that night that Kitty should be the successful winner. And now there were strong, more than strong hopes that such would be the case, for although Florence's answers were full of spirit and invariably correct, there seemed to those who listened to be a background of substantial knowledge behind Kitty's grave remarks.

Miss Helen Dartmoor sat bolt upright, her lips firmly compressed, and a disapproving expression in her eyes; but Miss Helen Dartmoor did not count. It was Sir John, whose eyes followed his favorite with keener and keener appreciation and admiration; it was Mrs. Clavering; it was also most of the girls themselves, for beyond doubt Kitty was the favorite. If she won the Scholarship it would give universal satisfaction.

And now most of the examination had come to an end. The questions on history had all been answered and duly marked by the patient professors who had come to Cherry Court Park for the great occasion. The girls one by one had approached the piano and played each her trial piece and had sung her trial song, and still it seemed to everyone that Kitty led the van; for her music, although not quite so showy and brilliant as Florence's, was marked with true musical expression, and her song, a sweet old English ballad, came purely and freely from her young lips.

Mary also acquitted herself extremely well in the musical examination, and old Mr. Bateman raised his head and listened with real pleasure as the wild warbling notes of "Annie Laurie" sounded through the old hall.

But at last the supreme test of all arrived. The three girls, Sir John leading the way, approached the central dais. There they stood side by side, their soft Greek draperies falling round their slim young figures. Sir John then stepped to the front and addressed the crowd of eager spectators.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "I need not tell you with what intense pleasure I have listened to the spirited answers our three young friends have made to the different questions put to them. The Scholarship, however, has yet to be won—the supreme test is now to be given—the trial essays are now to be read. In order that fair play should above all things be exercised on this important occasion, I have asked my three young friends not to sign their names to the essays they have written. The essays are in three blank envelopes, which now lie before me on the table." Here Sir John touched three envelopes with his hand. "I will proceed to read them aloud, taking them up haphazard, and having no idea myself who the writer of each essay is. I have selected as the subject of the test essay the great and wonderful subject of Heroism, for I feel that such a theme will give scope for the real mind, the real heart, the real soul of the young writer. I will say no more now. After I have read the essays we will retire into the outer hall for two or three minutes, and on our return I shall have the pleasure of declaring on whose head I am to place the crown of bay-leaves."

Sir John paused for a moment, the girls stood close together, they faced the crowd standing at one side of the dais. Florence glanced across the hall. Once again she met her mother's eyes—she saw no one in that intense moment of her young life except the little Mummy, and the love in her mother's eyes once again made her say to herself, "Nothing, nothing, nothing will make me break her heart; I will go through with it—yes, I will go through with it."

Kitty Sharston's clear eyes also gazed across the hall, but she saw no one present—only, far, far away, a lonely man with an iron-grey head, and a face which was the dearest face in all the world to her. She saw this man, and felt that for his sake no effort could be too great. If she won the Scholarship all would indeed be well; but if she failed she could at least be good, she could at least submit. Oh, yes; oh, yes; it would be fearfully hard, but God could give her strength.

As to Mary Bateman, she looked at her father and her father looked at her, and then she held herself erect and said to herself, "I can but fail, and in any case I have done my best."

Just then, the murmurs of applause having died away, Sir John took up the first of the

envelopes, opened it, unfolded the sheet of paper which lay within, and commenced to read.

The essay on Heroism which he first read happened to be written by Mary Bateman. It was practical, written in good English, the spelling all correct, and also contained some fairly well-chosen allusions to great heroes of history. The essay was thoughtful, and, although there was little originality in it, the guests listened with marked attention. The reading of the essay occupied exactly ten minutes, for Sir John read it slowly, pausing often to give full weight to the words which he read. He had a beautiful, mellow, perfectly-trained voice, and Mary's somewhat lame utterances could not have sounded to better advantage.

When he had finished the guests applauded, but without any intense enthusiasm. He laid the paper down before him on the table, and then proceeded to read the second essay. This had altogether a different note. The allusions to history were far less numerous, but the heart of the young writer made itself felt. It was the work of an immature mind, but here and there was a delicate touch which pointed to the possibility of future genius. Here and there was a graceful allusion which caused Sir John's own voice to falter, and above all things, through each word there breathed a lofty and noble spirit.

"Only the daughter of a soldier could have written those words," thought Sir John; "surely this must be Kitty's work, and surely no other essay could approach hers."

So he thought, and as he came to the last words his voice rang out clear and full, and when he ceased the applause was great, and Kitty's eyes shone, although she dared not meet anyone, for it was part of the code of honor amongst the three girls that the judges should not guess who had written each individual essay.

Then at last it came to be Florence's turn. Florence had copied Bertha Keys' paper, scarcely taking in its meaning. She had copied it in hot haste, with hot rage, defiance, determination in her heart. She scarcely knew herself what the words meant, she had not taken in their true significance. The essay was a little longer than the others, and began in quite a different way.

Sir John paused for a moment, glanced down the page, then adjusted his glasses, drew himself up very erect and began to read. He had not read one sentence before he perceived that he had now quite different metal to deal with. Although disappointment stormed at his heart, he was too true a gentleman and too brave a soldier to allow such a feeling to influence him even for a moment. Yes, he would do the spirited words with which he had now to deal every justice. So he read on, the fire in the paper communicating itself to him, and the guests who listened soon forgot all about the Scholarship and all about the three young candidates. They were interested in the words themselves; the words rang out; they were not remarkable so much for the heart element as for the strong, proud, intellectual touch.

The essay was rich in metaphor and still richer in quotation. From the Greeks, from the Romans, from the English, from America, from Australia, from all parts of the globe did the young writer cull incident and quotation. She used a brief and telling argument, and she brought it to a successful and logical conclusion. Finally she quoted some words from Tennyson, aptly and splendidly chosen, and when Sir John's voice ceased the entire hall rose up in a body and cheers and acclamations ascended to the roof.

Florence's face was white as death.

Sir John laid down the paper.

"We will now," he said, turning to his fellow-judges, "retire for a few moments to decide on the winner of the Scholarship."

Sir John and the other judges immediately left the hall, and the girls, still standing in that strained and painful position, waited with lowered eyes for the result. Amongst the three, however, all doubt was over. Mary Bateman knew that her poor and lame words had not the slightest chance. Kitty would not have taken the Scholarship even if it had been offered to her. Could Mary have written that brilliant essay? Could it by any possibility be the work of Florence? But whoever had written it deserved the Scholarship, deserved it by every rule which had been laid upon the young competitors.

So she thought, and Florence, who did not dare to meet Bertha's eyes, who did not dare at this moment even to look at her mother, wished with all her heart that the ground might open and swallow her up.

Could she take this undeserved honor? The words were crowding to her lips, "Oh, don't, for heaven's sake, give it to me; I could never have written it," but she did not speak the words.

Just then there was a pause amongst the crowd of spectators, and Sir John and the other judges returned. The judges sat down in their seats and Sir John came slowly forward. His face was very white.

"The examination for the Cherry Court School Scholarship is over," he began. "With one accord we have adjudged the prize. The three young competitors have all done admirably. The questions have been so universally well answered that there would have been a difficulty in

giving the prize to any one when all three so very nearly had earned it, were it not for the trial essay; but the trial essay has removed all doubt. The Scholarship, by every test of learning, of high endeavor, of noble thought, belongs to the girl whose motto on her paper has been 'The Hills for Ever.' She has indeed gone to the hills for her breezy thoughts, for her noble and winged words. May she to the longest day she lives retain all that she now feels, and go on truly from strength to strength. The names of the competitors are not attached to the essays, therefore I must request the girl who has adopted the motto, 'The Hills for Ever,' to come forward, for she is the winner of the Scholarship."

Sir John paused and looked down the room. He did not dare to glance at Kitty, for he knew only too well that, clever and sweet as she was, she had not written those words.

There was a dead silence. Mary Bateman looked at Florence—Kitty also looked at her. They felt sure she had written the splendid essay, and they wondered at her silence. She remained quite still for a moment.

"Miss Bateman, is this your essay?" said Sir John, holding up the paper to Mary.

Mary shook her head and fell back.

"Catherine Sharston, is this yours?" again said Sir John.

Kitty bent her head low in denial.

"Then Miss Aylmer—what is the matter, Miss Aylmer?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing," said Florence. She gave one wild glance in the direction of Bertha Keys, but Bertha was too wise to meet Florence's eyes just then.

"She feels it, but she must go through with it," thought the pupil teacher. "I did not know that I had such genius, but I shall never doubt my own power in the future. Is she indeed mean enough to take my work and claim it as her own? Of course she is; it would be fatal to me if she did otherwise."

As Florence slowly, very slowly, as if each step was weighted with lead, crept forward to the front of the dais without any of that look of triumph and pleasure which ought to have marked her face at such a moment, Bertha Keys threw back her own head and allowed her watchful light blue eyes to follow the girl, while a smile of sardonic import curled her lips.

When Florence got opposite Sir John she suddenly, as if overpowered by intense emotion, fell on her knees. She could not have done anything which would more completely bring down the house. Cheers, acclamations, hurrahs, every sort of congratulation filled the air. When they had subsided for a moment and Mrs. Aylmer the less had released the hand of Mrs. Aylmer the great, which she had clutched frantically in her intense agitation, Sir John took Florence's hand and with a slight motion raised her to her feet.

"Stand up, Florence Aylmer," he said; "you have done splendidly; I congratulate you. The Scholarship is yours, nobly won, splendidly won. Take your honors, my dear."

As he spoke he stepped to the table and brought back a small crown of filigree silver. It was a simple wreath in the form of bay-leaves. He laid it on Florence's dark head.

"This is yours," he said; "wear it with dignity; keep the great, the good, the true always before you. And this also is yours," he said. He slipped a thin gold chain with the ruby locket attached round Florence's neck. He then placed the purse which contained the Scholarship money for the ensuing year, and the parchment scroll, in her hand. "And now, young people," he said, "let us all cheer three times the winner of the Scholarship."

The girls cheered as lustily as schoolboys, the band in the corner burst forth with the gay strains of "See the Conquering Hero Comes," and after a brief signal from Sir John there was suddenly heard outside the report of a small cannon, which was the intimation that the bonfires were to be lit.

"Florence, Florence, come here!" said her mother, and Florence ran across the hall and buried her face in her mother's lap.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE STING OF THE SERPENT.

The day was over, the long, exciting, exhausting evening had come to an end. The girls had

danced to their hearts' content, had played and romped, and congratulated Florence with all the heartiness of which their frank natures were capable. They had wandered through the grounds in groups to watch the bonfires, they had partaken of the most delicious supper the heart of girl could conceive, and at last, worn out and intensely happy, they had retired to rest.

Three long dormitories had been fitted up for their occupation, but the lucky three had each a very small room to herself. Florence was glad of that. Yes, if she could be glad of anything on that awful, terrible evening, it was the knowledge that she might be alone, all alone for some hours. During those hours she could think, could collect her thoughts, could face the position which she had in future to occupy.

In the pleasure and delight of the evening no one had specially noticed how little Florence spoke. Mrs. Aylmer the less, as the mother of the heroine, minced about with her head in the air, so elated, so excited, so carried out of herself, that not the grandest county lady present had power to awe her.

"Yes, I am the mother of the dear child. Oh, I always knew that she was specially gifted," Mrs. Aylmer was heard to say. "She could learn from the time she was a baby in the most marvellous way, but even I was astonished at her essay; it wrung tears from my eyes."

"It was a very noble work," said the Countess of Archester, slightly bowing her own queenly head, and giving Mrs. Aylmer a half-quizzical, half-pitying glance. "How the girl wrote it, how that woman's daughter could have written such an essay, is a puzzle to me," said the Countess afterwards to her husband.

But Mrs. Aylmer was unconscious that any such remarks were uttered. She was thinking of her own dazzling future, of what Dawlish would mean to her in the time to come, of what Sukey would say, what Ann Pratt would say, what other neighbors would say. All was indeed well; she was the mother of a genius, a girl who had achieved such high honor that her name in future would always be remembered in the neighborhood of Cherry Court School. Yes, it was a proud moment for Mrs. Aylmer, quite the proudest in her life. It is true that Florence had said very little to her mother, that Florence had scarcely responded to Mrs. Aylmer when she had flung her arms round her neck, and pressed up close to her, and looked into her eyes, and said, "My darling! oh, my darling, my sweet, precious daughter, how proud your Mummy is of you!"

Florence had turned away just then, and Mrs. Aylmer had felt that her daughter's hand trembled as it lay for a moment in hers.

But Mrs. Aylmer the great was even more remarkable in her conduct than Mrs. Aylmer the less. She had called Florence to her, and before all the assembled guests had kissed her solemnly.

"You are my daughter henceforth," she said, "my adopted daughter. Not a word, Mabel; this girl belongs to me in the future."

And just then the queerest pang of jealousy had rushed through the heart of Mrs. Aylmer the less, for was it possible that Susan really meant to take her child from her altogether? Was Florence henceforward to be considered by the world as the daughter of Mrs. Aylmer the great? Was she, her real mother, the mother who had nursed her as a baby, who had put up with her childish troubles, to have nothing whatever to do with her in the future? Notwithstanding that crown of glory which seemed to quiver over the forehead of the little widow, she did not like this aspect of the question. She felt she could scarcely stand it. If Susan meant to have the child, then indeed the Scholarship would present a very serious drawback to the mind of Mrs. Aylmer.

Mrs. Aylmer the great, however, now pushed herself quite into the forefront of the county society. It was impossible to suppress her; she was past suppressing. Sir John himself took her into the great hall where supper was laid. She sat by his side during that auspicious meal, and when he talked of Florence she boldly told him that a golden future lay before the girl.

"It is a pity," was his reply, "that being the case, that Miss Aylmer should have got the Scholarship, for whether she got it or not, being your niece, she would of course have been well educated. The Scholarship money would have done more good to a poorer girl"—and here Sir John had quickly to suppress a sigh, for was he not thinking of Kitty—Kitty, who had never looked sweeter than during this evening of defeat, who had never, never been nearer to his heart?

Mrs. Aylmer the great looked at him in some astonishment.

"I am surprised," she said; "it almost sounds as if you——"

"As if I grudged the Scholarship to your niece; far from that," he answered; "she is a remarkable girl; any girl who could write that essay possesses genius. She will be heard of in the future."

Then the heart of Mrs. Aylmer the great swelled within her, and she absolutely loved her niece Florence.

But now the day was over and Florence was alone in her room. The door was closed; her

mother's last kiss and blessing had been given. Mrs. Aylmer the great had solemnly embraced Florence also, had given her to understand that there was no request which she would not grant, and then the tired girl had been left alone.

She went to the door of her room and locked it, then she stood for a moment in the centre of the floor. There was a large mirror fastened to one of the walls, and Florence could see her own reflection in it. She glanced at it for a moment in a puzzled way, a solitary young figure, tall and well proportioned, a head of dark hair, eyes very bright, a face somewhat pale now from excessive emotion, pathetic lines round the mouth. On the head shone the silver crown of bay-leaves, the Greek dress fell away from the graceful figure, on the neck gleamed the wonderful locket with its dazzling ruby. The light from a large lamp fell upon this ruby and caused it to gleam brightly. Florence went nearer to the mirror and looked into it. The fire from the heart of the ruby seemed to leap out. She hastily unfastened the gold chain from her neck and held the locket in her hand. The ruby with its heart of fire seemed now to the excited girl to possess an evil eye which could see through her. She felt that she hated it, she trembled a little, she hastily unlocked a drawer and thrust in the ruby locket and chain. She then removed the silver wreath of bay-leaves and put it also in the drawer with the ruby. Then she clasped her hands above her head and looked earnestly into her own face. Well she knew in that moment of bitter triumph what had happened to her.

"I am made for life," she said at last slowly, aloud; "all the good things of life can in the future be mine—all the wealth, all the glory, to a great extent also the love."

But when Florence thought of the love she paused; for she remembered her mother. Did anyone in all the world love her as the little Mummy loved her? In the future she knew well that she should see very little of her mother. Aunt Susan would not permit it for a moment; she might see her occasionally, but never again would they meet as child and mother. There would be a gulf between them, the gulf which ever and always separates the rich from the poor. For Florence henceforth would belong to the rich ones of the earth. Mrs. Aylmer the great was so pleased, so elated, so triumphant at her marked and brilliant success that there was nothing she would not do for her. Yes, Florence's future life was secure, she was fortunate, the world lay at her feet, her fortune was made.

She sat down on a low chair.

"It is all before me," she muttered, "the riches, the honor, the glory. I shall also, if I am dressed well, be beautiful. Mine is the sort of face that requires good decoration; mine is the figure which needs the best clothes. I shall have everything, everything. I ought to be happy; I wonder I am not. I ought to be very happy. Oh, I wish this fire did not burn in my heart, and that horrid, scorching, intolerable feeling, I wish it did not consume me. Oh, I suppose I shall get over it in time; and if life lasted forever I should be the happiest girl in the world; but of course it won't—nothing lasts forever, for age comes even to the youngest, and then—then there is illness and—and perhaps death. And I may not even live to be old. Rich and lucky and fortunate as I am, I may die. I should not like to die a bit—not a bit; I should not be prepared for the other world. Oh, I must shut away the thought, for there is no going back now."

Just at this point in her meditations there came a knock at her door. Florence started when she heard the sound. She wished that she had thought of putting out the candle. She could not bear to feel that anyone was coming to see her to-night. Her mother?—she dared not meet her mother alone; she would be prepared in the morning, but she could not meet her mother's searching glance just now.

She did not reply at all to the first knock, but the light from the candle streamed out under the door, and the knock was repeated, and now it was more insistent, and a voice said:

"It is only me, Florence; it is only me; let me come in."

Florence shuddered and turned very pale. She knew the voice: it was the voice of Bertha Keys. If there was anyone in all the wide world whom she would most dread to meet on that unhappy night it was Bertha Keys, the girl who knew her secret. There was no help for it, however.

With a shudder Florence arose, crossed the room, unlocked the door, and flung it open.

"I am so tired, Bertha," she said; "must you see me to-night?"

"I am sorry you are tired," replied Bertha, "but I must see you to-night."

Bertha slowly entered the room. When Florence shut the door Bertha turned the key in the lock.

"What are you doing that for?" said Florence.

"Because I do not wish to be interrupted; I want to see you alone."

"But I wish you would not lock the door; it is quite unnecessary—no one will come here at present."

"I make certainty sure—that is all," said Bertha. "Don't fuss about the lock. Now, then, Florence, I want to have a straight talk with you; you understand?"

"I suppose I do; but I don't think I can comprehend anything to-night."

"Oh, yes, you can, you certainly can; you must pull yourself together. You went through that ordeal very well, let me tell you. How do you feel now?"

"Miserable," said Florence.

Bertha went up close to her, sat down by her, and, suddenly putting her hand under Florence's chin, raised her face, and looked into her eyes.

"Bah!" she said, "it was a pity I did it for you; you are not worth it."

"What do you mean?" said Florence, turning pale.

"Because you are not; I don't believe you'll go through with it even now. Bah! such glory, such honor, such a proud moment, and to say you are miserable! May I ask what you are miserable about?"

"Because I have sacrificed my honor; because I am the meanest, most horrid girl on God's earth," said Florence, with passion. "Because the Scholarship so won turns to dust and ashes in my mouth. Because—because of Kitty, little Kitty, who wanted really what I have so basely taken from her. Oh, I hate myself and I hate you, Bertha. Why did I ever meet you?"

Florence was past tears, a dry sob rose in her throat, it half choked her for a moment, then she stood up and wrung her hands.

"Go away, please, Bertha; leave me now; I cannot have you."

"You can put things right, of course, according to your idea of right," said Bertha, in a sulky voice; "you can go to Sir John and tell him what has happened; you can do that if you please."

"I cannot—you know I cannot."

"I certainly do know you cannot," said Bertha. "Well, now, my dear, we will leave off heroics; it is all very fine for you to talk of your conscience, but I don't think that little monitor within is of a very active turn of mind. If he were he would have absolutely at the first idea shunted off the evil proposal which I happened to make to you. You would never have yielded to the temptation. Think just for a moment: would Kitty Sharston have done this thing?"

"Of course not; why do you ask?"

"Think again, would Mary Bateman have done this thing?"

"Again, why do you ask?"

"My dear Florence, I ask in order to reassure you that, sensitive and keen as you think your little inward monitor, it is at best but a poor weakling. Now, the conscience of Kitty and the conscience of Mary would have risen up in hot protest, and the temptation would not have been a temptation to them, but it was to you because of the poor health of your little monitor. Believe me, the monitor is in a bad way, and if you will struggle through the remorse of the next couple of days it will simply die."

"And then I shall be lost," said Florence, with a frightened look in her face.

"Oh, you will live a very comfortable life if you take care of your health; you have a good sixty years before you. You can do a good deal in sixty years, and now for goodness' sake stop talking about the matter. It is done and cannot be undone. I want to say something to you myself."

"But at the end of sixty years I shall die all the same," said Florence. "Oh, Bertha, I go mad when I think of dying. Oh, Bertha! Bertha!"

Even Bertha felt a momentary sense of terror when she looked into Florence's eyes. She backed away from her and stood by the table.

"Come, come, my dear," she said, "you'll get over all this," but still she avoided looking at Florence's eyes.

"What do you want with me?" said Florence at last, restlessly; "I must sleep. I wish you would go away."

"I will when I have made my request."

"What is that?"

"I want you to give me twenty pounds."

"Twenty pounds! Why, you know I have not got it."

"Practically you have, and I want it. I want it early to-morrow morning."

"Now, Bertha, you must be mad."

"Not at all; I am abundantly sane. That essay which so excited the spectators to-night was worth twenty pounds. I mean you to buy it from me, and those are my terms."

"You know I cannot. I cannot imagine what you mean by coming to me in this fashion."

"Without twenty pounds I shall be undone," said Bertha; "I need it to pay some debts. If the debts are not paid I shall be exposed, and if I go under, you, my pretty Florence, go under, too—understand that, please. Twenty pounds is cheap at the price, is it not?"

"But I have not got it, Bertha; I would give it you, but I cannot. You might as well ask me for my right hand."

"I tell you the great Mrs. Aylmer will do anything for her pretty and gifted niece. Ask her for the money to-morrow."

"For you?"

"By no means—for yourself."

"Bertha, I simply cannot."

"All right," said Bertha. "I give you until to-morrow at noon to decide. If by that time I have twenty pounds in my hand all right, your secret is respected and no catastrophe will happen, and your frightful deceit will never be found out. Only one person will know it, and that is I. But if you do not give me the twenty pounds I shall myself go to Mrs. Clavering and tell her everything. I shall be sorry; the consequences will be very disagreeable for me; I cannot even say if I shall quite escape the punishment of the law, but I expect I shall. In any case, you will be done for, my pretty Florence; your career will be over. Think of that; think of the little Mummy, as you call her, without the great Scholarship to back you up—think what it means."

"I do, I do; the only one I do think of at the present moment is my mother," said Florence. "When I think of her it gives me agony. But, Bertha, I cannot get that twenty pounds."

"You can; make an excuse to your Aunt Susan to obtain it. Now, my dear, you know why I have come to you; I will not trouble you any further. The twenty pounds at noon to-morrow, or you know the consequences." Bertha waved her hand with a light air, kissed the slim little figure in its Greek dress, then she opened the door and went out.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE VOICE OF GOD.

After Bertha had left her, Florence sat in a stunned attitude. She was just rising slowly from her chair when there came a knock a second time at the door. This time Florence had not even a moment to say "Come in." The door was softly opened, and the fair, sweet face of Kitty peeped round it.

"Ah! I thought you were not in bed," she said; "I came to see you just for a minute to wish you good-night."

"I wish you had not come," said Florence. She looked so pale and frightened that Kitty glanced at her aghast.

"I came," said Kitty Sharston, "because I thought you ought to know that Mary and I"—she paused to swallow something in her throat. Kitty had suffered that night and had hidden her suffering; she did not want Florence to think that she had gone through any great time of sorrow. She looked at Florence attentively. "Mary Bateman and I agreed that I could come and tell you, Flo, how pleased—yes, how pleased we are that you have got the Scholarship, for you won it so nobly, Florence—no one could grudge it to you for a minute."

"Do you really mean that?" said Florence, eagerly. She went up to Kitty and seized both her hands.

"Why, how hot your hands feel, and, oh, please do not squeeze me quite so tightly," said Kitty, starting back a step.

Florence snatched away her hand. "If you knew me," said Florence; "if you knew me!"

"I do know you," said Kitty. "Oh, Flo—Tommy, dear—let me call you by the old name just for once—we are all so proud of you, we are really. I thought perhaps you would be a little uncomfortable thinking of me and of Mary, but we don't mind—we don't really. You see, we hadn't a chance, not a chance against genius like yours. We never guessed that you had such great genius, and it took us slightly by surprise; but of course we are glad, awfully glad, and perhaps Sir John will offer the Scholarship another year, and perhaps I will try then and—and succeed. But no one else had a chance with you, Florence, and we are glad for you, very glad."

"But you—what will you do? I know this means a great deal to you."

"I shall go away with Helen Dartmoor; I don't feel unhappy, not at all. I am sure Sir John will be my friend, and perhaps I may try for the Scholarship even though I am staying with Helen Dartmoor; I just came to tell you. Good-night, Florence, good-night. Mary and I love you; we'll always love you; we'll always be proud of you. Good-night, Florence."

Kitty ran up to her companion, kissed her hastily, and ran to the door. She had reached it, had opened the door and gone out, when Florence called her. Florence spoke her name faintly.

"Kitty, Kitty, come back."

But Kitty did not hear. She shut the door and ran down the passage, her steps sounding fainter, until Florence could hear them no longer. Then Florence Aylmer fell on her knees, and the tears which all this time had lain like a dead weight against her eyeballs, were loosened, and she sobbed as she had never sobbed before in all her life. Exhausted by her tears, she threw herself on her bed and, dressed as she was, sank into heavy slumber.

It was very early in the morning when she awoke. It was not yet five o'clock. Florence struck a light and saw by the little clock on the mantelpiece that the hands pointed to a quarter to five.

"There is time," she thought, eagerly. She sat up on her elbow and reflected. Her eyes were bright, her face paler than ever. Presently she got out of bed and fell on her knees; she pressed her face against the side of the bed, and it is doubtful whether many words came to her, but when she rose at last she seemed to hear an inward voice, and the voice was saying, "Refuse the Evil and choose the Good."

The voice kept on saying, "Refuse the Evil and choose the Good," and Florence felt more and more frightened, and more and more intensely anxious to do something in great haste before she had time for reflection.

She lit the candles and put them on the writing-table at the foot of the bed, and then she sat by the writing-table and pulled out a sheet of paper and began to write. She wrote rapidly, with scarcely a pause. Whenever she stopped the voice kept saying louder and clearer, louder and clearer, "Refuse the Evil and choose the Good."

Florence went on writing. At last she had finished. She folded up the sheet of paper and put it into an envelope. Then she hastily opened the drawer which contained the silver wreath and the ruby locket and the purse of gold and the parchment scroll. She collected them hastily, scarcely glancing at them, wrapped up in tissue-paper, then in brown, tied the little parcel with string, slipped the note inside the string and laid it on the table.

The voice which kept speaking to her was now quieter; it ceased to say, "Refuse the Evil," but once again through the silent room she seemed to hear the echo of the words, calm, great, all knowing, "*Choose the Good, choose the Good*," and then she hastily, very hastily got into her clothes, for it seemed to her that there was nothing else worth while in all the world but the following, the obeying of this voice. To choose the Good was greater than to choose Happiness, greater than to choose Ambition, greater than to choose Wealth. It was the only thing.

So she dressed herself in her everyday clothes, and, taking the little parcel, she softly unfastened the door, and then she slipped down through the silent house and entered Sir John Wallis's study, and laid the packet which contained all the symbols of her success and her letter of confession on his desk. Having done this, she turned away, came upstairs softly, and, going down another corridor, opened the door of her mother's room and went in.

Mrs. Aylmer was lying sound asleep; it was not yet six o'clock. She was very tired and she was sleeping heavily; she was enjoying pleasant dreams in her sleep, dreams of Florence, her dear, her darling, the success Florence had won, the happy future which lay before her.

Mrs. Aylmer's dreams were all one glow of great bliss, and in the midst of them she felt a cold, small hand laid upon her own, and, opening her eyes, she saw Florence bending over her.

"Mummy," said Florence, "I want you to get up at once."

"My dear, dear child, what can be the matter?" said Mrs. Aylmer the less. She started up in bed, rubbed her sleepy eyes and stared at her daughter. "What is it, Flo?"

"I cannot tell you just yet, mother, but I want you, if ever, ever in the whole course of your life you really loved me, to stand by me now. Something fearful has happened, mother dear, and I cannot tell you at present, but I want you to help me. I want to go back to Dawlish with you; I want to go back by the very first train this morning with you alone, Mummy; I will tell you on the way home what has happened, and then—but I cannot say any more; only come, mother, come. No one else would stand by me—but you will, won't you?"

"You frighten me dreadfully, Florence," said Mrs. Aylmer; "I cannot imagine what you are talking about. Have you lost your reason, my poor darling? Has this great, great triumph turned your brain? Oh, my child, my child!"

"No, mother," said poor Florence, "I am quite sane; I have not lost my reason. On the contrary, I think I have got it back again; I never felt saner than I do now, but—but you must help me, and there is no time to lose. I have done what I could; you must come away with me, mother, and we must go at once. I have looked up the trains. I'll go myself and wake up one of the servants and get a trap ordered, and we will go. Have you got a little money—that's the main thing?"

"I have got five pounds left out of Sir John's cheque."

"Then that will be splendid. I only want just enough to get back to Dawlish, to the little old house and to you. Oh, come, Mummy! oh, come!"

Florence's words were very brave and very insistent, and Mrs. Aylmer roused herself. She got out of bed, feeling a dull wonder stealing over her. Florence now took the command, and hastened her mother into her clothes, and herself packed her mother's things.

"Oh, my dear child, my best dress! don't let it get crushed," said the little widow.

Florence's trembling hands smoothed out the rich folds, she placed the dress in the top of the trunk, and before half-past six that morning Mrs. Aylmer was dressed and her things packed.

Then Florence went down again through the house and awoke one of the servants, and got her to wake a groom, who put a horse to a trap and brought it round to a side door, and so it came to pass that before seven o'clock that morning Mrs. Aylmer and Florence had left Cherry Court Park forever.

When they got into the train poor Mrs. Aylmer turned to Florence and begged for an explanation.

"I guess something dreadful has happened, but I can't imagine what it is," she said. "What does this mean, Florence?"

"It means, Mummy," said Florence, "that I have done that which no one but a mother would forgive. Listen, and I will tell you."

And then she told the whole story, from the very beginning, and Mrs. Aylmer listened with a cold feeling at her heart, and at first a great anger there; but when the story was finished, and Florence timidly took her mother's hands and looked into her eyes and said, "Are you a true enough mother to love me through it all?" then little Mrs. Aylmer's heart melted, and she flung her arms round Florence's neck and whispered through her sobs, "Oh, my child! oh, my child! I had a dreadful feeling last night when your Aunt Susan said that you were my daughter no longer; but this—this gives you to me forever."

"Of course it does, Mummy; Aunt Susan will never speak to me again. Oh, Mummy, what it is to have you! What should I do without you now?"

The rest of this story can be told in a few words. It would be impossible to depict the astonishment, the consternation, the amazement which Sir John felt when he read poor Florence's confession. After thinking matters over a short time, he sent for Mrs. Clavering, and he and that good woman had a long conference together. The upshot of it was that the guests were allowed to depart without knowing what had really happened, Sir John saying that he would write to them afterwards.

Bertha Keys was sent for, severely reprimanded, and dismissed from her post with ignominy. She never returned to Cherry Court School, leaving Cherry Court Park for a distant part of the country that very day. This history has nothing further to do with her. Whether she succeeded in the future or whether she failed, whether she turned from the evil of her ways or not, must all be matters of conjecture.

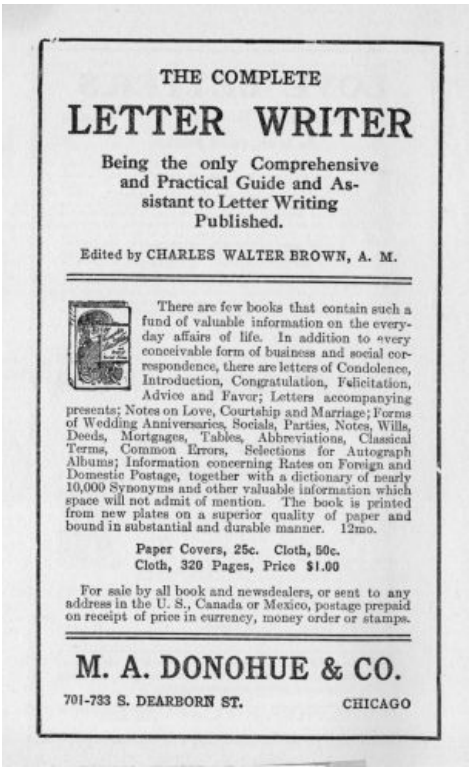
The main fact which concerns us is the following: Kitty won the Scholarship, after all, for the very next day Sir John visited Cherry Court School and told the bare outline of poor Florence's sin and confession. To Kitty was given the purse of gold, and the ruby locket, the crown of bay-leaves and the parchment scroll. They were given to a very sad Kitty, for the thought of Florence's sin completely overpowered both her and Mary Bateman, and indeed every girl in the school.

Sir John returned to his own house a sadder and a wiser man.

"After all, did I do right to offer this great temptation?" he said to himself, and this thought so affected him, and occurred to him so often, that a week later he went down to Dawlish and had an interview with Mrs. Aylmer and Florence, and the result was that Florence was sent to a good school and had a chance of educating herself. She was not too proud to take this help from Sir John, for it relieved her from all claims on her Aunt Susan in the future.

As to Mrs. Aylmer the great, never from the day when Sir John, in a few words, told her what her niece had done, has that worthy woman mentioned the name, Florence Aylmer. She still gives Mrs. Aylmer her fifty pounds a year, but, as she herself declared it, "I have washed my hands of that wicked girl once and forever."

THE END.



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