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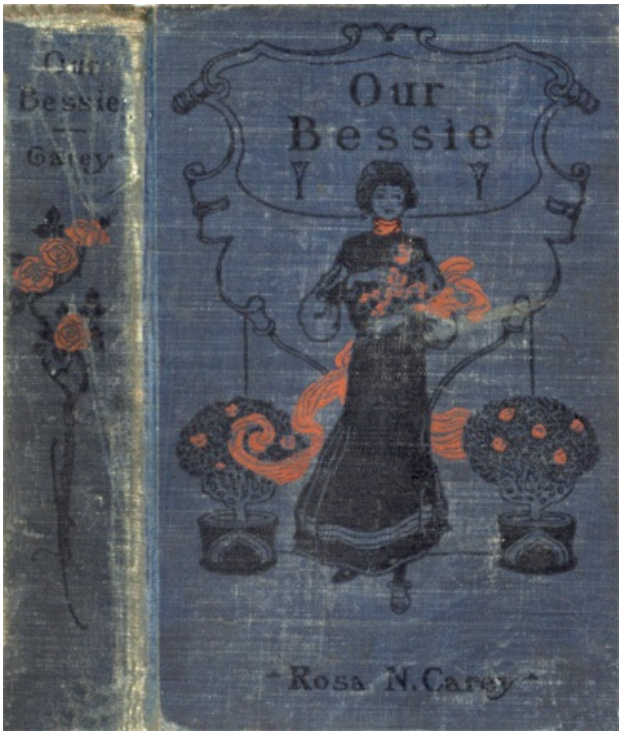
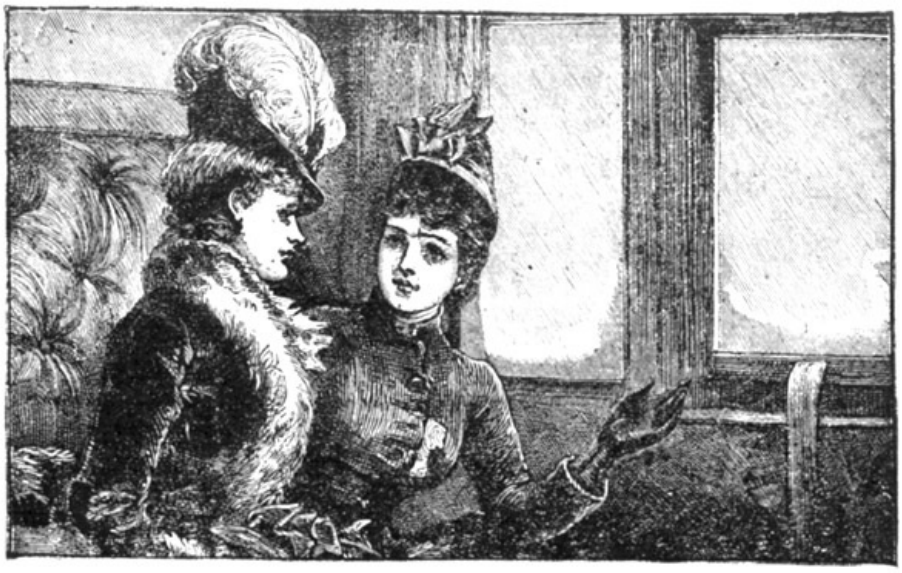
OUR BESSIE





"HOW GOOD OF YOU TO COME!" SHE EXCLAIMED.
BESSIE SAW SHE HAD BEEN CRYING.

OUR BESSIE

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF "MERLE'S CRUSADE," "NOT LIKE OTHER GIRLS," "ONLY THE GOVERNESS," ETC.

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OUR BESSIE.

CHAPTER I.

BESSIE MEETS WITH AN ADVENTURE.

[1]

It was extremely tiresome!

It was vexatious; it was altogether annoying!

Most people under similar circumstances would have used stronger expressions, would have bemoaned themselves loudly, or at least inwardly, with all the pathos of self-pity.

To be nearly at the end of one's journey, almost within sight and sound of home fires and home welcomes, and then to be snowed up, walled, imprisoned, kept in durance vile in an unexpected snowdrift—well, most human beings, unless gifted with angelic patience, and armed with special and peculiar fortitude, would have uttered a few groans under such depressing circumstances.

Fortunately, Bessie Lambert was not easily depressed. She was a cheerful young person, an optimist by nature; and, thanks to a healthy organization, good digestion, and wholesome views of duty, was not given to mental nightmares, nor to cry out before she was hurt.

[2]

Bessie would have thought it faint-hearted to shrink at every little molehill of difficulty; she had plenty of what the boys call pluck (no word is more eloquent than that), and a fund of quiet humor that tided her safely over many a slough of despond. If any one could have read Bessie's thoughts a few minutes after the laboring engine had ceased to work, they would have been as follows, with little staccato movements and pauses:

"What an adventure! How Tom would laugh, and Katie too! Katie is always longing for something to happen to her; but it would be more enjoyable if I had some one with me to share it, and if I were sure father and mother would not be anxious. An empty second-class compartment is not a particularly comfortable place on a cold afternoon. I wonder how it would be if all the passengers were to get out and warm themselves with a good game of snowballing. There is not much room, though; we should have to play it in a single file, or by turns. Supposing that, instead of that, the nice, white-haired old gentleman who got in at the last station were to assemble us all in the third-class carriage and tell us a story about Siberia; that would be nice and exciting. Tom would suggest a ghost story, a good creepy one; but that would be too dismal. The hot-water tin is getting cold, but I have got a rug, I am thankful to say, so I shall not freeze for the next two hours. If I had only a book, or could go to sleep—oh!" in a tone of relief, as the guard's face was suddenly thrust in at the open window.

[3]

"I beg your pardon, miss; I hope I did not startle you; but there is a young lady in the first-class compartment who, I take it, would be the better for a bit of company; and as I saw you were alone, I thought you might not object to change your carriage."

"No, indeed; I shall be delighted to have a companion," returned Bessie briskly. "How long do you think we shall be detained here, guard?"

"There is no knowing, miss; but one of our men is working his way back to the signals. We have not come more than three miles since we left Cleveley. It is only a bit of a drift that the snow-plow will soon clear, and it will be a matter of two or three hours, I dare say; but it has left off snowing now."

"Will they telegraph to Cliffe the reason of the delay?" asked Bessie, a little anxiously.

"Oh, yes, they will do that right enough; you needn't be uneasy. The other young lady is in a bit of a fuss, too, but I told her there was no danger. Give a good jump, miss; there, now you are all right. I will take care of your things. Follow me, please; it is only a step or so."

[4]

"This is more of an adventure than ever," thought Bessie, as she followed the big, burly guard. "What a kind man he is! Perhaps he has daughters of his own." And she thanked him so warmly and so prettily as he almost lifted her into the carriage, that he muttered, as he turned away:

"That's a nice, pleasant little woman. I like that sort."

The first-class compartment felt warm and snug. Its only tenant was a fair, pretty-looking girl, dressed very handsomely in a mantle trimmed with costly fur, and a fur-lined rug over her knees.

"Oh, thank you! How good of you to come!" she exclaimed eagerly; and Bessie saw at once that she had been crying. "I was feeling so frightened and miserable all by myself. I got it into my head that another train would run into us, and I was quite in a panic until the guard assured me there was no danger. He told me that there was another young lady alone, and that he would

bring her to me."

"Yes, that was so nice of him; and of course it is pleasanter to be able to speak to somebody," returned Bessie cheerfully; "and it is so much warmer here." [5]

"Take some of my rug; I do not need it all myself; and we may as well be as comfortable as we can, under the miserable circumstances."

"Well, do you know I think it might be worse?"

"Worse! how can you talk so?" with a shudder.

"Why, it can hardly be a great hardship to sit for another two hours in this nice warm carriage, with this beautiful rug to cover us. It certainly was a little dull and cold in the other compartment, and I longed to get out and have a game of snowballing to warm myself." But here her companion gave a little laugh.

"What a funny idea! How could you think of such a thing?" And here she looked, for the first time, rather scrutinizingly at Bessie. Oh, yes, she was a lady—she spoke nicely and had good manners; but how very shabbily she was dressed—at least, not shabbily; that was not the right word—inexpensively would have been the correct term.

Bessie's brown tweed had evidently seen more seasons than one; her jacket fitted the trim figure, but was not made in the last fashion; and the brown velvet on her hat was decidedly worn. How was the young lady to know that Bessie was wearing her oldest things from a sense of economy, and that her new jacket and best hat—a very pretty one—were in the neat black box in the luggage-van? [6]

Certainly the two girls were complete opposites. Bessie, who, as her brother Tom often told her, was no beauty, was, notwithstanding, a bright, pleasant-looking girl, with soft gray eyes that could express a great deal of quiet sympathy on occasions, or could light up with fun. People who loved her always said Bessie's face was better than a beautiful one, for it told nothing but the truth about itself. It did not say, "Come, admire me," as some faces say, but, "Come, trust me if you can."

The fashionably dressed young stranger had a very different type of face. In the first place, it was undeniably pretty; no one ever thought of contradicting that fact, though a few people might have thought it a peculiar style of beauty, for she had dark-brown eyes and fair hair—rather an uncommon combination.

She was small, too, and very pale, and yet not fragile-looking; on the contrary, she had a clear look of health, but there was a petulant curve about the mouth that spoke of quick temper, and the whole face seemed capable of great mobility, quick changes of feeling that were perfectly transparent.

Bessie was quite aware that her new acquaintance was taking stock of her; she was quietly amused, but she took no apparent notice.

"Is Cliffe-on-Sea your destination?" she asked presently. [7]

"No; is it yours?" with a quick note of alarm in her voice. "Oh, I am so sorry!" as Bessie nodded. "I hoped we should have travelled together to London. I do dislike travelling alone, but my friend was too ill to accompany me, and I did not want to stay at Islip another day; it was such a stupid place, so dull; so I said I must come, and this is the result."

"And you are going to London? Why, your journey is but just beginning. Cliffe-on-Sea is where I live, and we cannot be more than two miles off. Oh, what will you do if we are detained here for two or three hours?"

"I am sure I don't know," returned the other girl disconsolately, and her eyes filled with tears again. "It is nearly five now, and it will be too late to go on to London; but I dare not stay at a hotel by myself. What will mamma say? She will be dreadfully vexed with me for not waiting for Mrs. Moultrie—she never will let me travel alone, and I have disobeyed her."

"That is a great pity," returned Bessie gravely; but politeness forbade her to say more. She was old-fashioned enough to think that disobedience to parents was a heinous offence. She did not understand the present code, that allows young people to set up independent standards of duty. To her the fifth commandment was a very real commandment, and just as binding in the nineteenth century as when the young dwellers in tents first listened to it under the shadow of the awful Mount. [8]

Bessie's gravely disapproving look brought a mocking little smile to the other girl's face; her quick comprehension evidently detected the rebuke, but she only answered flippantly:

"Mamma is too much used to my disobedience to give it a thought; she knows I will have my way in things, and she never minds; she is sensible enough to know grown-up girls generally have wills of their own."

"I think I must have been brought up differently," returned Bessie simply. "I recollect in our nursery days mother used to tell us that little bodies ought not to have grown-up wills; and when we got older, and wanted to get the reins in our own hands, as young people will, she would say, 'Gently, gently, girls; you may be grown up, but you will never be as old as your parents—'" But

here Bessie stopped, on seeing that her companion was struggling with suppressed merriment.

"It does sound so funny, don't you know! Oh, I don't mean to be rude, but are not your people just a little bit old-fashioned and behind the times? I don't want to shock you; I am far too [9] grateful for your company. Mamma and I thoroughly understand each other. I am very fond of her, and I am as sorry as possible to vex her by getting into this mess;" and here the girl heaved a very genuine sigh.

"And you live in London?" Bessie was politely changing the subject.

"Oh, no; but we have some friends there, and I was going to break my journey and do a little shopping. Our home is in Kent; we live at Oatlands—such a lovely, quiet little place—far too quiet for me; but since I came out mamma always spends the season in town. The Grange—that is our house—is really Richard's—my brother's, I mean."

"The Grange—Oatlands? I am sure I know that name," returned Bessie, in a puzzled tone; "and yet where could I have heard it?" She thought a moment, and then added quickly, "Your name cannot be Sefton?"

"To be sure it is," replied the other girl, opening her brown eyes rather wildly; "Edna Sefton; but how could you have guessed it?"

"Then your mother's name is Eleanor?"

"I begin to think this is mysterious, and that you must be a witch, or something uncanny. I know all mamma's friends, and I am positive not one of them ever lived at Cliffe-on-Sea." [10]

"And you are quite sure of that? Has your mother never mentioned the name of a Dr. Lambert?"

"Dr. Lambert! No. Wait a moment, though. Mamma is very fond of talking about old days, when she was a girl, don't you know, and there was a young doctor, very poor, I remember, but his name was Herbert."

"My father's name is Herbert, and he was very poor once, when he was a young man; he is not rich now. I think, many years ago, he and your mother were friends. Let me tell you all I know about it. About a year ago he asked me to post a letter for him. I remember reading aloud the address in an absent sort of way: 'Mrs. Sefton, The Grange, Oatlands, Kent;' and my father looked up from his writing, and said, 'That is only a business letter, Bessie, but Mrs. Sefton and I are old correspondents. When she was Eleanor Sartoris, and I was a young fellow as poor as a church mouse, we were good friends; but she married, and then I married; but that is a lifetime ago; she was a handsome girl, though.'"

"Mamma is handsome now. How interesting it all is! When I get home I shall coax mamma to [11] tell me all about it. You see, we are not strangers after all, so we can go on talking quite like old friends. You have made me forget the time. Oh dear, how dark it is getting! and the gas gives only a glimmer of light."

"It will not be quite dark, because of the snow. Do not let us think about the time. Some of the passengers are walking about. I heard them say just now the man must have reached Cleveley, so the telegram must have gone—we shall soon have help. Of course, if the snow had not ceased falling, it would have been far more serious."

"Yes," returned Miss Sefton, with a shiver; "but it is far nicer to read of horrid things in a cheerful room and by a bright fire than to experience them one's self. Somehow one never realizes them."

"That is what father says—that young people are not really hard-hearted, only they do not realize things; their imagination just skims over the surface. I think it is my want of imagination helps me. I never will look round the corner to try and find out what disagreeable thing is coming next. One could not live so and feel cheerful."

"Then you are one of those good people, Miss Lambert, who think it their duty to cultivate cheerfulness. I was quite surprised to see you look so tranquil, when I had been indulging in a babyish fit of crying, from sheer fright and misery; but it made me feel better only to look at you." [12]

"I am so glad," was Bessie's answer. "I remember being very much struck by a passage in an essay I once read, but I can only quote it from memory; it was to the effect that when a cheerful person enters a room it is as though fresh candles are lighted. The illustration pleases me."

"True, it was very telling. Yes, you are cheerful, and you are very fond of talking."

"I am afraid I am a sad chatterbox," returned Bessie, blushing, as though she were conscious of an implied reproof.

"Oh, but I like talking people. People who hold their tongues and listen are such bores. I do detest bores. I talk a great deal myself."

"I think I have got into the way for Hatty's sake. Hatty is the sickly one of our flock; she has never been strong. When she was a tiny, weeny thing she was always crying and fretful. Father tells us that she cannot help it, but he never says so to her; he laughs and calls her 'Little Miss Much-Afraid.' Hatty is full of fear. She cannot see a mouse, as I tell her, without looking round

the corner for pussy's claws."

"Is Hatty your only sister, Miss Lambert?"

"Oh, no; there are three more. I am the eldest—'Mother's crutch,' as they call me. We are such [13] a family for giving each other funny names. Tom comes next. I am three-and-twenty—quite an old person, as Tom says—and he is one-and-twenty. He is at Oxford; he wants to be a barrister. Christine comes next to Tom—she is nineteen, and so pretty; and then poor Hatty—'sour seventeen,' as Tom called her on her last birthday; and then the two children, Ella and Katie; though Ella is nearly sixteen, and Katie fourteen, but they are only school-girls."

"What a large family!" observed Miss Sefton, stifling a little yawn. "Now, mamma has only got me, for we don't count Richard."

"Not count your brother?"

"Oh, Richard is my step-brother; he was papa's son, you know; that makes a difference. Papa died when I was quite a little girl, so you see what I mean by saying mamma has only got me."

"But she has your brother, too," observed Bessie, somewhat puzzled by this.

"Oh, yes, of course." But Miss Sefton's tone was enigmatical, and she somewhat hastily changed the subject by saying, plaintively, "Oh, dear, do please tell me, Miss Lambert, what you think I ought to do when we reach Cliffe, if we ever do reach it. Shall I telegraph to my friends in London, and go to a hotel? Perhaps you could recommend me one, or——" [14]

"No; you shall come home with me," returned Bessie, moved to this sudden inspiration by the weary look in Miss Sefton's face. "We are not strangers; my father and your mother were friends; that is sufficient introduction. Mother is the kindest woman in the world—every one says so. We are not rich people, but we can make you comfortable. To be sure, there is not a spare room; our house is not large, and there are so many of us; but you shall have my room, and I will have half of Chrissy's bed. You are too young"—and here Bessie was going to add "too pretty," only she checked herself——"to go alone to a hotel. Mother would be dreadfully shocked at the idea."

"You are very kind—too kind; but your people might object," hesitated Miss Sefton.

"Mother never objects to anything we do; at least, I might turn it the other way about, and say we never propose anything to which she is likely to object. When my mother knows all about it, she will give you a hearty welcome."

"If you are quite sure of that, I will accept your invitation thankfully, for I am tired to death. You are goodness itself to me, but I shall not like turning you out of your room."

"Nonsense. Chriss and I will think it a bit of fun—oh, you don't know us yet. So little happens in [15] our lives that your coming will be quite an event; so that is settled." And Bessie extended a plump little hand in token of her good will, which Miss Sefton cordially grasped.

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CHAPTER II. [16]

"HERE IS OUR BESSIE."

An interruption occurred at this moment. The friendly guard made his appearance again, accompanied by the same white-haired old clergyman whom Bessie had noticed. He came to offer his services to the young ladies. He cheered Miss Sefton's drooping spirits by reiterating the guard's assurance that they need only fear the inconvenience of another hour's delay.

The sight of the kind, benevolent countenance was reassuring and comforting, and after their new friend had left them the girls resumed their talk with fresh alacrity.

Miss Sefton was the chief speaker. She began recounting the glories of a grand military ball at Knightsbridge, at which she had been present, and some private theatricals and tableaux that had followed. She had a vivid, picturesque way of describing things, and Bessie listened with a sort of dreamy fascination that lulled her into forgetfulness of her parents' anxiety. [17]

In spite of her alleged want of imagination, she was conscious of a sort of weird interest in her surroundings. The wintry afternoon had closed into evening, but the whiteness of the snow threw a dim brightness underneath the faint starlight, while the gleam of the carriage lights enabled them to see the dark figures that passed and repassed underneath their window.

It was intensely cold, and in spite of her furs Miss Sefton shivered and grew perceptibly paler. She was evidently one of those spoiled children of fortune who had never learned lessons of

endurance, who are easily subdued and depressed by a passing feeling of discomfort; even Bessie's sturdy cheerfulness was a little infected by the unnatural stillness outside. The line ran between high banks, but in the mysterious twilight they looked like rocky defiles closing them in.

After a time Bessie's attention wandered, and her interest flagged. Military balls ceased to interest her as the temperature grew lower and lower. Miss Sefton, too, became silent, and Bessie's mind filled with gloomy images. She thought of ships bedded in ice in Arctic regions; of shipwrecked sailors on frozen seas; of lonely travellers laying down their weary heads on pillows of snow, never to rise again; of homeless wanderers, outcasts from society, many with famished [18] babes at their breasts, cowering under dark arches, or warming themselves at smoldering fires.

"Thank God that, as father says, we cannot realize what people have to suffer," thought Bessie. "What would be the use of being young and happy and free from pain, if we were to feel other people's miseries? Some of us, who are sympathetic by nature, would never smile again. I don't think when God made us, and sent us into the world to live our own lives, that He meant us to feel like that. One can't mix up other people's lives with one's own; it would make an awful muddle."

"Miss Lambert, are you asleep, or dreaming with your eyes open? Don't you see we are moving? There was such a bustle just now, and then they got the steam up, and now the engine is beginning to work. Oh! how slowly we are going! I could walk faster. Oh! we are stopping again—no, it is only my fancy. Is not the shriek of the whistle musical for once?"

"I was not asleep; I was only thinking; but my thoughts had travelled far. Are we really moving? There, the snow-plow has cleared the line; we shall go on faster presently."

"I hope so; it is nearly eight. I ought to have reached London an hour ago. Poor Neville, how [19] disappointed he will be. Oh, we are through the drift now and they are putting on more steam."

"Yes, we shall be at Cliffe in another ten minutes;" and Bessie roused in earnest. Those ten minutes seemed interminable before the lights of the station flashed before their eyes.

"Here she is—here is our Bessie!" exclaimed a voice, and a fine-looking young fellow in an ulster ran lightly down the platform as Bessie waved her handkerchief. He was followed more leisurely by a handsome, gray-haired man with a quiet, refined-looking face.

"Tom—oh, Tom!" exclaimed Bessie, almost jumping into his arms, as he opened the carriage door. "Were mother and Hattie very frightened? Why, there is father!" as Dr. Lambert hurried up.

"My dear child, how thankful I am to see you! Why, she looks quite fresh, Tom."

"As fit as possible," echoed Tom.

"Yes, I am only cold. Father, the guard put me in with a young lady. She was going to London, but it is too late for her to travel alone, and she is afraid of going to a hotel. May I bring her home? Her name is Edna Sefton. She lives at The Grange, Oatlands."

Dr. Lambert seemed somewhat taken aback by his daughter's speech.

"Edna Sefton! Why, that is Eleanor Sefton's daughter! What a strange coincidence!" And then [20] he muttered to himself, "Eleanor Sartoris' daughter under our roof! I wonder what Dora will say?" And then he turned to the fair, striking-looking girl whom Tom was assisting with all the alacrity that a young man generally shows to a pretty girl: "Miss Sefton, you will be heartily welcome for your mother's sake; she and I were great friends in the 'auld lang syne.' Will you come with me? I have a fly waiting for Bessie; my son will look after the luggage;" and Edna obeyed him with the docility of a child.

But she glanced at him curiously once or twice as she walked beside him. "What a gentlemanly, handsome man he was!" she thought. Yes, he looked like a doctor; he had the easy, kindly manner which generally belongs to the profession. She had never thought much about her own father, but to-night, as they drove through the lighted streets, her thoughts, oddly enough, recurred to him. Dr. Lambert was sitting opposite the two girls, but his eyes were fixed oftenest on his daughter.

"Your mother was very anxious and nervous," he said, "and so was Hatty, when Tom brought us word that the train was snowed up in Sheen Valley I had to scold Hatty, and tell her she was a goose; but mother was nearly as bad; she can't do without her crutch, eh, Bessie?" with a gleam [21] of tenderness in his eyes, as they rested on his girl.

Edna felt a little lump in her throat, though she hardly knew why; perhaps she was tired and over-strained; she had never missed her father before, but she fought against the feeling of depression.

"I am so sorry your son has to walk," she said politely; but Dr. Lambert only smiled.

"A walk will not hurt him, and our roads are very steep."

As he spoke, the driver got down, and Bessie begged leave to follow his example.

"We live on the top of the hill," she said apologetically; "and I cannot bear being dragged up by a tired horse, as father knows by this time;" and she joined her brother, who came up at that

moment.

Tom had kept the fly well in sight.

"That's an awfully jolly-looking girl, Betty," he observed, with the free and easy criticism of his age. "I don't know when I have seen a prettier girl; uncommon style, too—fair hair and dark eyes; she is a regular beauty."

"That is what boys always think about," returned Bessie, with good-humored contempt. "Girls are different. I should be just as much interested in Miss Sefton if she were plain. I suppose you mean to be charmed with her conversation, and to find all her remarks witty because she has *les beaux yeux*." [22]

"I scorn to take notice of such spiteful remarks," returned Tom, with a shrug. "Girls are venomous to each other. I believe they hate to hear one another praised, even by a brother."

"Hold your tongue, Tom," was the rejoinder. "It takes my breath away to argue with you up this hill. I am not too ill-natured to give up my own bed to Miss Sefton. Let us hurry on, there's a good boy, or they will arrive before us."

As this request coincided with Tom's private wishes, he condescended to walk faster; and the brother and sister were soon at the top of the hill, and had turned into a pretty private road bordered with trees, with detached houses standing far back, with long, sloping strips of gardens. The moon had now risen, and Bessie could distinctly see a little group of girls, with shawls over their heads, standing on the top of a flight of stone steps leading down to a large shady garden belonging to an old-fashioned house. The front entrance was round the corner, but the drawing-room window was open, and the girls had gained the road by the garden way, and stood shivering and expectant; while the moon illumined the grass terraces that ran steeply from the house, and shone on the meadow that skirted the garden.

"Run in, girls; you will catch cold," called out Bessie; but her prudent suggestion was of no [23] avail, for a tall, lanky girl rushed into the road with the rapturous exclamation, "Why, it is our Bessie after all, though she looked so tall in the moonlight, and I did not know Tom's new ulster." And here Bessie was fallen upon and kissed, and handed from one to another of the group, and then borne rapidly down the steps and across the terrace to the open window.

"Here she is, mother; here is our Bessie, not a bit the worse. And Hatty ought to be ashamed of herself for making us all miserable!" exclaimed Katie.

"My Hatty sha'n't be scolded. Mother, dear, if you only knew how sweet home looks after the Sheen Valley! Don't smother me any more, girls. I want to tell you something that will surprise you;" and Bessie, still holding her mother's hand, but looking at Hatty, gave a rapid and somewhat indistinct account of her meeting with Edna Sefton.

"And she will have my room, mother," continued Bessie, a little incoherently, for she was tired and breathless, and the girl's exclamations were so bewildering.

Mrs. Lambert, a pale, care-worn woman, with a sweet pathetic sort of face, was listening with much perplexity, which was not lessened by the sight of her husband ushering into the room a [24] handsome-looking girl, dressed in the most expensive fashion.

"Dora, my dear, this is Bessie's fellow-sufferer in the snowdrift; we must make much of her, for she is the daughter of my old friend, Eleanor Sartoris—Mrs. Sefton now. Bessie has offered her her own room to-night, as it is too late for her to travel to London."

A quick look passed between the husband and wife, and a faint color came to Mrs. Lambert's face, but she was too well-bred to express her astonishment.

"You are very welcome, my dear," she said quietly. "We will make you as comfortable as we can. These are all my girls," and she mentioned their names.

"What a lot of girls," thought Edna. She was not a bit shy by nature, and somehow the situation amused her. "What a comfortable, homelike room, and what a lovely fire! And—well, of course, they were not rich; any one could see that; but they were nice, kind people."

"This is better than the snowdrift," she said, with a beaming smile, as Dr. Lambert placed her in his own easy chair, and Tom brought her a footstool and handed her a screen, and her old acquaintance Bessie helped her to remove her wraps. The whole family gathered round her, intent on hospitality to the bewitching stranger—only the "Crutch," as Tom called her, tripped [25] away to order Jane to light a fire in her room, and to give out the clean linen for the unexpected guest, and to put a few finishing touches to the supper-table.

The others did not miss her at first. Christine, a tall, graceful girl who had inherited her father's good looks, was questioning Edna about the journey, and the rest were listening to the answers.

Hatty, a pale, sickly-looking girl, whose really fine features were marred by unhealthy sullenness and an anxious, fretful expression, was hanging on every word; while the tall schoolgirl Ella, and the smaller, bright-eyed Katie, were standing behind their mother, trying to hide their awkwardness and bashfulness, till Tom came to the rescue by finding them seats, with a whispered hint to Katie that it was not good manners to stare so at a stranger. Edna saw

everything with quiet, amused eyes; she satisfied Christine's curiosity, and found replies to all Mrs. Lambert's gentle, persistent questioning. Tom, too, claimed her attention by all sorts of dexterous wiles. She must look at him, and thank him, when he found that screen for her; she could not disregard him when he was so solicitous about the draft from the window, so anxious to bring her another cushion.

"I did not know you were such a ladies' man, Tom," observed Dr. Lambert presently, in a tone [26] that made Tom retreat with rather a foolish expression.

With all his love for his children, Dr. Lambert was sometimes capable of a smooth sarcasm. Tom felt as though he had been officious; had, in fact, made a fool of himself, and drew off into the background. His father was often hard on him, Tom said to himself, in an aggrieved way, and yet he was only doing his duty, as a son of the house, in waiting on this fascinating young lady.

"Poor boy, he is very young!" thought Edna, who noticed this by-play with some amusement; "but he will grow older some day, and he is very good-looking;" and then she listened with a pretty show of interest to a story Dr. Lambert was telling her of when he was snowed up in Scotland as a boy.

When Bessie returned she found them all in good spirits, and her fellow-traveller laughing and talking as though she had known them for years; even Tom's brief sulkiness had vanished, and, unmindful of his father's caustic tongue, he had again ventured to join the charmed circle.

It was quite late before the girls retired to rest, and as Edna followed Bessie up the broad, low staircase, while Tom lighted them from below, she called out gayly. "Good-night, Mr. Lambert; it was worth while being snowed up in the Sheen Valley to make such nice friends, and to enjoy [27] such a pleasant evening."

Edna really meant what she said, for the moment; she was capable of these brief enthusiasms. Pleasantness of speech, that specious coinage of conventionality, was as the breath of life to her. Her girlish vanity was gratified by the impression she had made on the Lambert family, and even Tom's crude, boyish admiration was worth something.

"To be all things to all men" is sometimes taken by vain, worldly people in a very different sense from that the apostle intended. Girls of Edna Sefton's caliber—impressionable, vivacious, egotistical, and capable of a thousand varying moods—will often take their cue from other people, and become grave with the grave, and gay with the gay, until they weary of their role, and of a sudden become their true selves. And yet there is nothing absolutely wrong in these swift, natural transitions; many sympathetic natures act in the same way, by very reason and force of their sympathy. For the time being they go out of themselves, and, as it were, put themselves in other people's places. Excessive sympathy is capable of minor martyrdom; their reflected suffering borders upon real pain.

When Bessie ushered Edna into her little room, she looked round proudly at the result of her [28] own painstaking thoughtfulness. A bright fire burned in the small grate, and her mother's easy chair stood beside it—heavy as it was, Bessie had carried it in with her own hands. The best eider-down quilt, in its gay covering, was on the bed, and the new toilet-cover that Christine had worked in blue and white cross-stitch was on the table. Bessie had even borrowed the vase of Neapolitan violets that some patient had sent her father, and the sweet perfume permeated the little room.

Bessie would willingly have heard some encomium on the snug quarters provided for the weary guest, but Edna only looked round her indifferently, and then stifled a yawn.

"Is there anything you want? Can I help you? Oh, I hope you will sleep comfortably!" observed Bessie, a little mortified by Edna's silence.

"Oh, yes: I am so tired that I am sure I shall sleep well," returned Edna; and then she added quickly, "but I am so sorry to turn you out of your room."

"Oh, that does not matter at all, thank you," replied Bessie, stirring the fire into a cheerful blaze, and then bidding her guest good-night; but Edna, who had taken possession of the easy chair, exclaimed:

"Oh, don't go yet—it is only eleven, and I am never in bed until twelve. Sit down a moment, and [29] warm yourself."

"Mother never likes us to be late," hesitated Bessie; but she lingered, nevertheless. This was not an ordinary evening, and there were exceptions to every rule, so she knelt down on the rug a moment, and watched Edna taking down the long plaits of fair hair that had crowned her shapely head. "What lovely hair!" thought Bessie; "what a beautiful young creature she is altogether!"

Edna was unconscious of the admiration she was exciting. She was looking round her, and trying to realize what her feelings would be if she had to inhabit such a room. "Why, our servants have better rooms," she thought.

To a girl of Edna's luxurious habits Bessie's room looked very poor and mean. The little strips of faded carpet, the small, curtainless bedstead, the plain maple washstand and drawers, the few simple prints and varnished bookcase were shabby enough in Edna's eyes. She could not understand how any girl could be content with such a room; and yet Bessie's happiest hours were

spent there. What was a little shabbiness, or the wear and tear of homely furniture, to one who saw angels' footprints even in the common ways of life, and who dreamed sweet, innocent dreams of the splendors of a heavenly home? To these sort of natures even threadbare garments [30] can be worn proudly, for to these free spirits even poverty loses its sting. It is not "how we live," but "how we think about life," that stamps our characters, and makes us the men and women that we are.

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CHAPTER III. [31]

HATTY.

THE brief silence was broken by Edna.

"What a nice boy your brother is!" she observed, in rather a patronizing tone.

Bessie looked up in some surprise.

"Tom does not consider himself a boy, I assure you; he is one-and-twenty, and ever since he has gone to Oxford he thinks himself of great consequence. I dare say we spoil him among us, as he is our only brother now. If Frank had lived," and here Bessie sighed, "he would have been five-and-twenty by this time; but he died four years ago. It was such a blow to poor father and mother; he was so good and clever, and he was studying for a doctor; but he caught a severe chill, and congestion of the lungs came on, and in a few days he was dead. I don't think mother has ever been quite the same since his death—Frank was so much to her."

"How very sad!" returned Edna sympathetically, for Bessie's eyes had grown soft and misty as she touched this chord of sadness; "it must be terrible to lose any one whom one loves." And then [32] she added, with a smile, "I did not mean to hurt your feelings by calling your brother a boy, but he seemed very young to me. You see, I am engaged, and Mr. Sinclair (that is my fiancé) is nearly thirty, and he is so grave and quiet that any one like your brother seems like a boy beside him."

"You are engaged?" ejaculated Bessie, in an awestruck tone.

"Yes; it seems a pity, does it not? at least mamma says so; she thinks I am too young and giddy to know my own mind; and yet she is very fond of Neville—Mr. Sinclair, I mean. She will have it that we are not a bit suited to each other, and I dare say she is right, for certainly we do not think alike on a single point."

Bessie's eyes opened rather widely at this candid statement. She was a simple little soul, and had not yet learned the creed of emancipation. She held the old-fashioned views that her mother had held before her. Her mother seldom talked on these subjects, and Bessie had inherited this reticence. She listened with a sort of wondering disgust when her girl acquaintances chattered flippantly about their lovers, and boasted openly of their power over them.

"If this sort of thing ever comes to me," thought Bessie on these occasions, "I shall think it too [33] wonderful and precious to make it the subject of idle conversation. How can any one take upon themselves the responsibility of another human being's happiness—for that is what it really means—and turn it into a jest? It is far too sacred and beautiful a thing for such treatment. I think mother is right when she says, 'Girls of the present day have so little reticence.'"

She hardly knew what to make of Edna's speech; it was not exactly flippant, but it seemed so strange to hear so young a creature speak in that cool, matter-of-fact way.

"I don't see how people are to get on together, if they do not think alike," she observed, in a perplexed voice; but Edna only laughed.

"I am afraid we don't get on. Mother says she never saw such a couple; that we are always quarrelling and making up like two children; but I put it to you, Miss Lambert, how are things to be better? I am used to my own way, and Mr. Sinclair is used to his. I like fun and plenty of change, and dread nothing so much as being bored—*ennuyée*, in fact, and he is all for quiet. Then he is terribly clever, and has every sort of knowledge at his fingers' end. He is a barrister, and rising in his profession, and I seldom open a book unless it be a novel." [34]

"I wonder why he chose you," observed Bessie naïvely, and Edna seemed much amused by her frankness.

"Oh, how deliciously downright you are, Miss Lambert. Well, do you know I have not the faintest notion why Neville asked me to marry him, any more than I know why I listened to him. I tell him sometimes that it was the most ridiculous mistake in the world, and that either he or I, or both of us, must have been bewitched. I am really very sorry for him sometimes; I do make him

so unhappy; and sometimes I am sorry for myself. But there, the whole thing is beyond my comprehension. If I could alter myself or alter Neville, things would be more comfortable and less unpleasantly exciting." And here Edna laughed again, and then stifled another yawn; and this time Bessie declared she would not stop a moment longer. Christine would be asleep.

"Well, perhaps I should only talk nonsense if you remained, and I can see you are easily shocked, so I will allow you to wish me good-night." But, to Bessie's surprise, Edna kissed her affectionately.

"You have been a Good Samaritan to me," she said quietly, "and I am really very grateful." And [35]
Bessie withdrew, touched by the unexpected caress.

"What a strange mixture she is!" she thought, as she softly closed the door. "I think she must have been badly brought up; perhaps her mother has spoiled her. I fancy she is affectionate by nature, but she is worldly, and cares too much for pleasure; anyhow, one cannot help being interested in her." But here she broke off abruptly as she passed a half-opened door, and a voice from within summoned her.

"Oh, Hatty, you naughty child, are you awake? Do you know it is nearly twelve o'clock?"

"What does that matter?" returned Hatty fretfully, as Bessie groped her way carefully toward the bed. "I could not sleep until you had said good-night to me. I suppose you had forgotten me; you never thought I was lying here waiting for you, while you were talking to Miss Sefton."

"Now, Hatty, I hope you are not going to be tiresome;" and Bessie's voice was a little weary; and then she relented, and said gently, "You know I never forget you, Hatty dear."

"No, of course not," returned the other eagerly. "I did not mean to be cross. Put your head down beside me on the pillow, Bessie darling, for I know you are just as tired as possible. You don't mind stopping with me for a few minutes, do you? for I have not spoken to you for three [36]
weeks."

"No, I am not so tired as all that, and I am quite comfortable," as a thin, soft cheek laid itself against her's in the darkness. "What has gone wrong, Hatty dear? for I know by your tone you have been making yourself miserable about something. You have wanted me back to scold you into cheerfulness."

"I have wanted you dreadfully," sighed Hatty. "Mother and Christine have been very kind, but they don't help me as you do, and Tom teases me dreadfully. What do you think he said yesterday to mother? I was in the room and heard him myself. He actually said, 'I wonder my father allows you all to spoil Hatty as you do. You all give in to her, however cross and unreasonable she is, and so her temper gets worse every day.'"

"Well, you are very often cross, you know," returned Bessie truthfully.

"Yes, but I try not to be," replied Hatty, with a little sob. "Tom would have been cross too if his head and back had ached as mine were aching, but he always feels well and strong. I think it is cruel of him to say such things to mother, when he knows how much I have to suffer."

"Tom did not mean to be unkind, Hatty; you are always finding fault with the poor boy. It is [37]
difficult for a young man, who does not know what an ache means, nor what it is to wake up tired, to realize what real suffering all your little ailments cause you. Tom is really very kind and good-natured, only your sharp little speeches irritate him."

"I am always irritating some one," moaned Hatty. "I can't think how any of you can love me. I often cry myself to sleep, to think how horrid and disagreeable I have been in the day. I make good resolutions then, but the next morning I am as bad as ever, and then I think it is no use trying any more. Last night Tom made me so unhappy that I could not say my prayers."

"Poor little Hatty!"

"Yes, I know you are sorry for me; you are such a dear that I cannot be as cross with you as I am with Tom; but, Bessie, I wish you would comfort me a little; if you would only tell me that I am not so much to blame."

"We have talked that over a great many times before. You know what I think, Hatty; you are not to blame for your weakness; that is a trial laid upon you; but you are to blame if that weakness is so impatiently borne that it leads you to sin."

"I am sure father thinks that I cannot help my irritability; he will never let Tom scold me if he is [38]
in the room."

"That is because father is so kind, and he knows you have such a hard time of it, you poor child, and that makes us all so sorry for you; but, Hatty, you must not let all this love spoil you; we are patient with you because we know your weakness, but we cannot help you if you do not help yourself. Don't you recollect what dear Mr. Robertson said in his sermon? that 'harassed nerves must be striven against, as we strive against anything that hinders our daily growth in grace.' He said people were more tolerant of this form of weakness than of any other, and yet it caused much misery in homes, and he went on to tell us that every irritable word left unspoken, every peevish complaint hushed, was as real a victory as though we had done some great thing. 'If we must suffer,' he said, 'at least let us suffer quietly, and not spend our breath in fruitless

complaint. People will avoid a fretful person as though they were plague-tainted; and why? because they trouble the very atmosphere round them, and no one can enjoy peace in their neighborhood.'"

"I am sure Mr. Robertson must have meant me, Bessie."

"No, darling, no; I won't have you exaggerate or judge yourself too harshly. You are not always [39]
cross, or we should not be so fond of you. You make us sad sometimes, when you sit apart, brooding over some imaginary grievance; that is why father calls you Little Miss Much-Afraid."

"Yes, you all laugh at me, but indeed the darkness is very real. Sometimes I wonder why I have been sent into the world, if I am not to be happy myself, nor to make other people happy. You are like a sunbeam yourself, Bessie, and so you hardly understand what I mean."

"Oh, yes, I do; but I never see any good in putting questions that we cannot answer; only I am quite sure you have your duty to do, quite as much as I have mine, only you have not found it out."

"Perhaps I am the thorn in the flesh to discipline you all into patience," returned Hatty quaintly, for she was not without humor.

"Very well, then, my thorn; fulfil your mission," returned Bessie, kissing her. "But I cannot keep awake and speak words of wisdom any longer." And she scrambled over the bed, and with another cheerful "good-night," vanished; but Hatty's troubled thoughts were lulled by sisterly sympathy, and she soon slept peacefully. Late as it was before Bessie laid her weary head on the pillow beside her sleeping sister, it was long before her eyes closed and she sunk into utter [40]
forgetfulness. Her mind seemed crowded with vague images and disconnected thoughts. Recollections of the hours spent in Sheen Valley, the weird effect of the dusky figures passing and repassing in the dim, uncertain light, the faint streaks of light across the snow, the dull winter sky, the eager welcome of the lonely girl, the long friendly talk ripening into budding intimacy, all passed vividly before her, followed by Hatty's artless confession.

"Poor little thing!" thought Bessie compassionately, for there was a specially soft place in her heart for Hatty. She had always been her particular charge. All Hatty's failures, her miserable derelictions of duty, her morbid self-accusations and nervous fancies, bred of a sickly body and over-anxious temperament, were breathed into Bessie's sympathizing ear. Hatty's feebleness borrowed strength and courage from Bessie's vigorous counsels. She felt braced by mere contact with such a strong, healthy organization. She was always less fretful and impatient when Bessie was near; her cheery influence cleared away many a cloud that threatened to obscure Hatty's horizon.

"Bear ye one another's burdens," was a command literally obeyed by Bessie in her unselfish devotion to Hatty, her self-sacrificing efforts to cheer and rouse her; but she never could be made [41]
to understand that there was any merit in her conduct.

"I know Hatty is often cross, and ready to take offence," she would say; "but I think we ought to make allowances for her. I don't think we realize how much she has to bear—that she never feels well."

"Oh, that is all very well," Christine would answer, for she had a quick temper too, and would fire up after one of Hatty's sarcastic little speeches; "but it is time Hatty learned self-control. I dare say you are often tired after your Sunday class, but no one hears a cross word from you."

"Oh, I keep it all in," Bessie returned, laughing. "But I dare say I feel cross all the same. I don't think any of us can guess what it must be to wake depressed and languid every morning. A louder voice than usual does not make our heads ache, yet I have seen Hatty wince with pain when Tom indulged in one of his laughs."

"Yes, I know," replied Christine, only half convinced by this. "Of course it is very trying, but Hatty must be used to it by this time, for she has never been strong from a baby; and yet she is always bemoaning herself, as though it were something fresh."

"It is not easy to get used to this sort of trouble," answered Bessie, rather sadly. "And I must [42]
say I always feel very sorry for Hatty," and so the conversation closed.

But in her heart Bessie said: "It is all very well to preach patience, and I for one am always preaching it to Hatty, but it is not so easy to practice it. Mother and Christine are always praising me for being so good tempered; but if one feels strong and well, and has a healthy appetite and good digestion, it is very easy to keep from being cross; but in other ways I am not half so good as Hatty; she is the purest, humblest little soul breathing."

In spite of late hours, Bessie was downstairs the next morning at her usual time; she always presided at the breakfast-table. Since her eldest son's death, Mrs. Lambert had lost much of her strength and energy, and though her husband refused to acknowledge her as an invalid, or to treat her as one, yet most of her duties had devolved upon Bessie, whose useful energy supplemented her mother's failing powers.

Bessie had briefly hinted at her family sorrow; she was not one at any time to dwell upon her feelings, nor to indulge in morbid retrospection, but it was true that the loss of that dearly loved son and brother had clouded the bright home atmosphere. Mrs. Lambert had borne her trouble

[43]

meekly, and had striven to comfort her husband who had broken down under the sudden blow. She spoke little, even to her daughters, of the grief that was slowly consuming her; but as time went on, and Dr. Lambert recovered his cheerfulness, he noticed that his wife drooped and ailed more than usual; she had grown into slow quiet ways that seemed to point to failing strength.

“Bessie, your mother is not as young as she used to be,” he said abruptly, one morning, “She does not complain, but then she is not one of the complaining sort; she was always a quiet creature; but you girls must put your shoulders to the wheel, and spare her as much as possible.” And from that day Bessie had become her mother’s crutch.

It was a wonderful relief to the harassed mother when she found a confidante to whom she could pour out all her anxieties.

Dr. Lambert was not a rich man; his practice was large, but many of his patients were poor, and he had heavy expenses. The hilly roads and long distances obliged him to keep two horses. He had sent both his sons to Oxford, thinking a good education would be their best inheritance, and this had obliged him to curtail domestic expenses. He was a careful man, too, who looked forward to the future, and thought it his duty to lay aside a yearly sum to make provision for his wife and children.

“I have only one son now, and Hatty will always be a care, poor child,” he said more than once. [44]

So, though there was always a liberal table kept in the doctor’s house, it being Dr. Lambert’s theory that growing girls needed plenty of nourishing food, the young people were taught economy in every other matter. The girls dressed simply and made their own gowns. Carpets and furniture grew the worse for wear, and were not always replaced at once. Tom grumbled sometimes when one of his Oxford friends came to dinner. He and Christine used to bewail the shabby covers in the drawing-room.

“It is such a pretty room if it were only furbished off a bit,” Tom said once. “Why don’t you girls coax the governor to let you do it up?” Tom never used the word governor unless he was in a grumbling mood, for he knew how his father hated it.

“I don’t think father can afford anything this year, Tom,” Bessie returned, in her fearless way. “Why do you ask your grand friends if you think they will look down on us? We don’t pretend to be rich people. They will find the chairs very comfortable if they will condescend to sit on them, and the tables as strong as other people’s tables; and though the carpet is a little faded, there are no holes to trip your friends up.”

“Oh, shut up, Betty!” returned Tom, restored to good humor by her honest sarcasm. “Ferguson will come if I ask him. I think he is a bit taken with old Chrissy.” And so ended the argument. [45]

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CHAPTER IV. [46]

A COSY MORNING.

Breakfast was half over before Miss Sefton made her appearance; but her graceful apology for her tardiness was received by Dr. Lambert in the most indulgent manner. In spite of his love of punctuality, and his stringent rules for his household in this respect, he could not have found it in his heart to rebuke the pretty, smiling creature who told him so naïvely that early rising disagreed with her and put her out for the day.

“I tell mamma that I require a good deal of sleep, and, fortunately, she believes me,” finished Edna complacently.

Well, it was not like the doctor to hold his peace at this glaring opposition to his favorite theory, and yet, to Tom’s astonishment, he forebore to quote that threadbare and detestable adage, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise”—proverbial and uncomfortable philosophy that Tom hated with all his foolish young heart. Tom, in his budding manhood, often thought fit to set this domestic tyranny at defiance, and would argue at some length that his father was wrong in laying down rules for the younger generation. [47]

“If my father likes to get up early, no one can find any fault with him for doing it,” Tom would say; “but he need not impose his venerable and benighted opinions upon us. Great men are not always wise; even intellectual veterans like Dr. Johnson, and others I can mention, if you only give me time, have their hallucinations, fads, fancies, and flummeries. For example, every one speaks of Dr. Johnson with respect; no one hints that he had a bee in his bonnet, and yet a man who could make a big hole for a cat and a little one for a kitten—was it Johnson or Newton who did that?—must have had a screw loose somewhere. And so it is with my father; early rising is his

hobby—his pet theory—the keystone that binds the structure of health together. Well, it is a respectable theory, but my father need not expect an enlightened and progressive generation to subscribe to it. The early hours of the morning are not good for men and mice, only for birds and bricklayers, and worms weary of existence."

Tom looked on, secretly amused, as his father smiled indulgently at Miss Sefton's confession of indolence. He asked her how she had slept, and made room for her beside him, and then [48] questioned her about her intended journey, and finally arranged to drive her to the station before he went on his usual round.

An hour afterward the whole family collected in the hall to see Miss Sefton off. Edna bid them good-bye in her easy, friendly fashion, but as she took Bessie's hand, she said:

"Good-bye, dear. I have an idea that we shall soon meet again. I shall not let you forget me;" and then she put up her face to be kissed.

"I am not likely to forget you," thought Bessie, as Edna waved her little gloved hand to them all; "one could soon get fond of her."

"How nice it must be to be rich," sighed Christine, who was standing beside Bessie. "Miss Sefton is very little older than we are, and yet she has lovely diamond and emerald rings. Did you see her dressing bag? It was filled up so beautifully; its bottles silver mounted; it must have cost thirty guineas, at least. And then her furs; I should like to be in her place."

"I should not envy Miss Sefton because she is rich," retorted Hatty disdainfully. "I would rather change places with her because she is so strong and so pretty. I did like looking at her so much, and so did Tom. Didn't you, Tom?"

"I say, I wish you girls would shut up or clear off," responded Tom crossly; for things felt a little [49] flat this morning. "How is a fellow to work with all this chattering going on round him?"

"Why, you haven't opened your books yet," replied Hatty, in an aggrieved voice; but Bessie hastily interposed:

"Tom is quite right to want the room to himself. Come along, girls, let us go to mother in the morning-room; we might do some of our plain sewing, and then I can tell you about Aunt Charlotte. It is so long since we have been cosy together, and our needles will fly while we talk—eh, Hatty?"

"There are those night shirts to finish," said Christine disconsolately; "they ought to have been done long ago, but Hatty was always saying her back ached when I wanted her help, and I could not get on with them by myself."

"Never mind, we will all set to work vigorously," and Bessie tripped away to find her work basket. The morning-room, as they called it, was a small room leading out of the drawing-room, with an old-fashioned bay window looking out on the garden.

There was a circular cushioned seat running round the bay, with a small table in the middle, and this was the place where the girls loved to sit and sew, while their tongues kept pace with their needles. When Hatty's back ached, or the light made her head throb with pain, she used to [50] bring her low chair and leave the recess to Bessie and Christine.

The two younger girls went to school.

As Hatty brought her work (she was very skilful with the needle, and neither of her sisters could vie with her in delicate embroidery), she slipped a cold little hand into Bessie's.

"It is so lovely to have you back, Betty, dear," she whispered. "I woke quite happy this morning to know I should see you downstairs."

"I think it is lovely to be home," returned Bessie, with a beaming smile. "I am sure that is half the pleasure of going away—the coming back again. I don't know how I should feel if I went to stay at any grand place; but it always seems to me now that home is the most delicious place in the world; it never looks shabby to me as it does to Tom; it is just homelike."

Mrs. Lambert, who was sitting apart from the girls, busy with her weekly accounts, looked up at hearing her daughter's speech.

"That is right, dear," she said gently, "that is just how I like to hear you speak; it would grieve me if my girls were to grow discontented with their home, as some young ladies do."

"Bessie is not like that, mother," interposed Hatty eagerly. [51]

"No, Hatty, we know that, do we not? What do you think father said the other day, Bessie? He said, 'I shall be glad when we get Bessie back, for the place does not seem like itself when she is away.' That was a high compliment from father."

"Indeed it was," returned Bessie; and she blushed with pleasure. "Every one likes to be missed; but I hope you didn't want me too much, mother."

"No, dear; but, like father, I am glad to get you back again." And the mother's eyes rested fondly on the girl's face. "Now you must not make me idle, for I have all these accounts to do, and some notes to write. Go on with your talking; it will not interrupt me."

It spoke well for the Lambert girls that their mother's presence never interfered with them; they talked as freely before her as other girls do in their parent's absence. From children they had never been repressed nor unnaturally subdued; their childish preferences and tastes had been known and respected; no thoughtless criticism had wounded their susceptibility; imperceptibly and gently maternal advice had guided and restrained them.

"We tell mother everything, and she likes to hear it," Ella and Katie would say to their school-fellows.

"We never have secrets from her," Ella added. "Katie did once, and mother was so hurt that she [52]
cried about it. Don't you recollect, Katie?"

"Yes, and it is horrid of you to remind me," returned Katie wrathfully, and she walked away in high dudgeon; the recollection was not a pleasant one. Katie's soft heart had been pierced by her mother's unfeigned grief and tender reproaches.

"You are the only one of all my little girls who ever hid anything from me. No, I am not angry with you, Katie, and I will kiss you as much as you like," for Katie's arms were round her neck in a moment; "but you have made mother cry, because you do not love her as she does you."

"Mother shall never cry again on my account," thought Katie; and, strange to say, the tendency to secretiveness in the child's nature seemed cured from that day. Katie ever afterward confessed her misdemeanors and the accidents that happen to the best-regulated children with a frankness that bordered on bluntness.

"I have done it, mother," she would say, "but somehow I don't feel a bit sorry. I rather liked hurting Ella's feelings; it seemed to serve her right."

"Perhaps when we have talked about it a little you will feel sorry," her mother would reply quietly; "but I have no time for talking just now."

Mrs. Lambert was always very busy; on these occasions she never found time for a heated and [53]
angry discussion. When Katie's hot cheeks had cooled a little, and her childish wrath had evaporated, she would quietly argue the point with her. It was an odd thing that Katie generally apologized of her own accord afterward—generally owned herself the offender.

"Somehow you make things look different, mother," she would say, "I can't think why they all seem topsy-turvy to me."

"When you are older I will lend you my spectacles," her mother returned, smiling. "Now run and kiss Ella, and pray don't forget next time that she is two years older; it can't possibly be a younger sister's duty to contradict her on every occasion."

It was in this way that Mrs. Lambert had influenced her children, and she had reaped a rich harvest for her painstaking, patient labors with them, in the freely bestowed love and confidence with which her grown-up daughters regarded her. Now, as she sat apart, the sound of their fresh young voices was the sweetest music to her; not for worlds would she have allowed her own inward sadness to damp their spirits, but more than once the pen rested in her hand, and her attention wandered.

Outside the wintry sun was streaming on the leafless trees and snowy lawns; some thrushes [54]
and sparrows were bathing in the pan of water that Katie had placed there that morning.

"Let us go for a long walk this afternoon," Christine was saying, "through the Coombe Woods, and round by Summerford, and down by the quarry."

"Even Bessie forgets that it will be Frank's birthday to-morrow," thought Mrs. Lambert. "My darling boy, I wonder if he remembers it there; if the angels tell him that his mother is thinking of him. That is just what one longs to know—if they remember;" and then she sighed, and pushed her papers aside, and no one saw the sadness of her face as she went out. Meanwhile Bessie was relating how she had spent the last three weeks.

"I can't think how you could endure it," observed Christine, as soon as she had finished. "Aunt Charlotte is very nice, of course; she is father's sister, and we ought to think so; but she leads such a dull life, and then Cronyhurst is such an ugly village."

"It is not dull to her, but then you see it is her life. People look on their own lives with such different eyes. Yes, it was very quiet at Cronyhurst; the roads were too bad for walking, and we had a great deal of snow; but we worked and talked, and sometimes I read aloud, and so the days [55]
were not so long after all."

"I should have come home at the end of a week," returned Christine; "three weeks at Cronyhurst in the winter is too dreadful. It was real self-sacrifice on your part, Bessie; even father said so; he declared it was too bad of Aunt Charlotte to ask you at such a season of the year."

"I don't see that. Aunt Charlotte liked having me, and I was very willing to stay with her, and we had such nice talks. I don't see that she is to be pitied at all. She has never married, and she lives alone, but she is perfectly contented with her life. She has her garden and her chickens, and her poor people. We used to go into some of the cottages when the weather allowed us to go out, and all the people seemed so pleased to see her. Aunt Charlotte is a good woman, and good

people are generally happy. I know what Tom says about old maids," continued Bessie presently, "but that is all nonsense. Aunt Charlotte says she is far better off as she is than many married people she knows. 'Married people may double their pleasures,' as folks say, 'but they treble their cares, too,' I have heard her remark; 'and there is a great deal to be said in favor of freedom. When there is no one to praise there is no one to blame, and if there is no one to love there is no one to lose, and I have always been content myself with single blessedness.' Do you [56] remember poor Uncle Joe's saying, 'The mare that goes in single harness does not get so many kicks?'"

"Yes, I know Aunt Charlotte's way of talking; but I dare say no one wanted to marry her, so she makes the best of her circumstances."

Bessie could not help laughing at Christine's bluntness.

"Well, you are right, Chrissy; but Aunt Charlotte is not the least ashamed of the fact. She told me once that no one had ever fallen in love with her, 'I could not expect them to do so,' she remarked candidly. 'As a girl I was plain featured, and so shy and awkward that your Uncle Joe used to tell me that I was the only ugly duckling that would never turn into a swan.'"

"What a shame of Uncle Joe!"

"I don't think Aunt Charlotte took it much to heart. She says her hard life and many troubles drove all nonsense thoughts out of her head. Why, grandmamma was ill eight years, you know, and Aunt Charlotte nursed her all that time. I am sure when she used to come to my bedside of a night, and tuck me up with a motherly kiss, I used to think her face looked almost beautiful, it was so full of kindness. Somehow I fancy when I am old," added Bessie pensively, "I shall not [57] care so much about my looks nor my wrinkles, if people will only think I am a comfortable, kind-hearted sort of a person."

"You will be the dearest old lady in the world," returned Hatty, dropping her work with an adoring look at her Betty. "You are cosier than other people now, so you are sure to be nicer than ever when you are old. No wonder Aunt Charlotte loved to have you."

"What a little flatterer you are, Hatty! It is a comfort that I don't grow vain. Do you know, I think Aunt Charlotte taught me a great deal. When you get over her little mannerisms and odd ways, you soon find out what a good woman she really is. She is always thinking of other people; what she can do to lighten their burdens; and little things give her so much pleasure. She says the first violet she picks in the hedgerow, or the sight of a pair of thrushes building their nest in the acacia tree, makes her feel as happy as a child; 'for in spring,' she said once, 'all the world is full of young life, and the buds are bursting into flowers, and they remind me that one day I shall be young and beautiful too.'"

"I think I should like to go and stay with Aunt Charlotte," observed Hatty, "if you think she would care to have me."

"I am sure she would, dear. Aunt Charlotte loves to take care of people. You most go in the [58] summer, Hatty; the cottage is so pretty then, and you could be out in the garden or in the lanes all day. June is the best month, for they will be making hay in the meadows, and you could sit on the porch and smell the roses, and watch Aunt Charlotte's bees filling their honey bags. It is just the place for you, Hatty—so still and quiet."

This sort of talk lasted most of the morning, until Ella and Katie returned from school, and Tom sauntered into the room, flushed with his mental labors, and ready to seek relaxation in his sisters' company.

Bessie left the room and went in search of her mother; when she returned, a quarter of an hour later, she found Tom sulky and Hatty in tears.

"It is no use trying to keep the peace," observed Christine, in a vexed tone. "Tom will tease Hatty, and then she gets cross, and there is no silencing either of them."

"Come with me, Hatty dear, and help me put my room in order. I have to finish my unpacking," said Bessie soothingly. "You have been working too long, and so has Tom. I shall leave him to you, Chrissy." And as Hatty only moaned a little in her handkerchief, Bessie took the work forcibly away, and then coaxed her out of the room.

"Why is Tom so horrid to me?" sobbed Hatty "I don't believe he loves me a bit. I was having [59] such a happy morning, and he came in and spoiled all."

"Never mind about Tom. No one cares for his teasing, except you, Hatty. I would not let him see you mind everything he chooses to say. He will only think you a baby for crying. Now, do help me arrange this drawer, for dinner will be ready in a quarter of an hour, and the floor is just strewn with clothes. If it makes your head ache to stoop, I will just hand you the things; but no one else can put them away so tidily."

The artful little bait took. Of all things Hatty loved to be of use to any one. In another moment she had dried her eyes and set to work, her miserable little face grew cheerful, and Tom's sneering speeches were forgotten.

"Why, I do believe that is Hatty laughing!" exclaimed Christine, as the dinner-bell sounded, and she passed the door with her mother. "It is splendid, the way Bessie manages Hatty. I wish some

of us could learn the art, for all this wrangling with Tom is so tiresome."

"Bessie never loses patience with her," returned her mother; "never lets her feel that she is a trouble. I think you will find that is the secret of Bessie's influence. Your father and I are often grateful to her. 'What would that poor child do without her?' as your father often says; and I do [60] believe her health would often suffer if Bessie did not turn her thoughts away from the things that were fretting her." [61]

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CHAPTER V.

THE OATLANDS POST-MARK.

One day, about three months after her adventure in the Sheen Valley, Bessie was climbing up the steep road that led to the Lamberts' house. It was a lovely spring afternoon, and Bessie was enjoying the fresh breeze that was blowing up from the bay. Cliffe was steeped in sunshine, the air was permeated with the fragrance of lilac blended with the faint odors of the pink and white May blossoms. The flower-sellers' baskets in the town were full of dark-red wallflowers and lovely hyacinths. The birds were singing nursery lullabies over their nests in the Coombe Woods, and even the sleek donkeys, dragging up some invalids from the Parade in their trim little chairs, seemed to toil more willingly in the sweet spring sunshine.

"How happy the world looks to-day!" said Bessie to herself; and perhaps this pleasant thought was reflected in her face, for more than one passer-by glanced at her half enviously. Bessie did not notice them; her soft gray eyes were fixed on the blue sky above her, or on the glimpses of [62] water between the houses. Just before she turned into the avenue that led to the house, she stopped to admire the view. She was at the summit of the hill now; below her lay the town; where she stood she could look over the housetops to the shining water of the bay, with its rocky island in the middle. Bessie always called it the bay, but in reality it resembled a lake, it was so landlocked, so closed in by the opposite shore, except in one part; but the smooth expanse of water, shining in the sunlight, lacked the freedom and wild freshness of the open sea, though Bessie would look intently to a distant part, where nothing, as she knew, came between her and the Atlantic. "If we only went far enough, we should reach America; that gives one the idea of freedom and vastness," she thought.

Bessie held the idea that Cliffe-on-Sea was one of the prettiest places in England, and it was certainly not devoid of picturesqueness.

The houses were mostly built of stone, hewn out of the quarry, and were perched up in surprisingly unexpected places—some of them built against the rock, their windows commanding extensive views of the surrounding country. The quarry was near the Lamberts' house, and the Coombe Woods stretched above it for miles. Bessie's favorite walk was the long road that skirted [63] the woods. On one side were the hanging woods, and on the other the bay. Through the trees one could see the gleam of water, and on summer evenings the Lambert girls would often sit on the rocks with their work and books, preferring the peaceful stillness to the Parade crowded with strangers listening to the band. When their mother or Tom was with them, they would often linger until the stars came out or the moon rose. How glorious the water looked then, bathed in silvery radiance, like an enchanted lake! How dark and sombre the woods! What strange shadows used to lurk among the trees! Hatty would creep to Bessie's side, as they walked, especially if Tom indulged in one of his ghost stories.

"What is the use of repeating all that rubbish, Tom?" Bessie would say, in her sturdy fashion. "Do you think any one would hear us if we sung one of our glees? That will be better than talking about headless bogies to scare Hatty. I like singing by moonlight."

Well, they were just healthy, happy young people, who knew how to make the most of small pleasures. "Every one could have air and sunshine and good spirits," Bessie used to say, "if they ailed nothing and kept their consciences in good order. Laughing cost nothing, and talking was the cheapest amusement she knew."

"That depends," replied her father oracularly, on overhearing this remark. "Words are dear [64] enough sometimes. You are a wise woman, Bessie, but you have plenty to learn yet. We all have to buy experience ourselves. I don't want you to get your wisdom second-hand; second-hand articles don't last; so laugh away, child, as long as you can."

"I love spring," thought Bessie, as she walked on. "I always did like bright things best. I wonder why I feel so hopeful to-day, just as though I expected something pleasant to happen. Nothing ever does happen, as Chriss says. Just a letter from Tom, telling us his news, or an invitation to tea with a neighbor, or perhaps a drive out into the country with father. Well, they are not big

things, but they are pleasant, for all that. I do like a long talk with father, when he has no troublesome case on his mind, and can give me all his attention. I think there is no treat like it; but I mean Hatty to have the next turn. She has been good lately; but she looks pale and dwindled. I am not half comfortable about her." And here Bessie broke off her cogitations, for at that moment Katie rushed out of the house and began dancing up and down, waving a letter over her head.

"What a time you have been!" cried the child excitedly. "I have been watching for you for half an hour. Here is a letter for your own self, and it is not from Aunt Charlotte nor Uncle Charles, [65] nor any old fogy at all."

"Give it to me, please," returned Bessie. "I suppose it is from Tom, though why you should make such a fuss about it, as though no one ever got a letter, passes my comprehension. No, it is from Miss Sefton; I recognize her handwriting;" which was true, as Bessie had received a note from Edna a few days after she had left them, conveying her own and her mother's thanks for the kind hospitality she had received.

"Of course it is from Miss Sefton; there's the Oatlands post-mark. Ella and I were trying to guess what was in it; we thought that perhaps, as Mrs. Sefton is so rich, she might have sent you a present for being so kind to her daughter; that was Ella's idea. Do open it quickly, Bessie; what is the use of looking at the envelope?"

"I am afraid I can't satisfy your curiosity just yet, Kitty. Hatty is waiting for the silks I have been matching, and mother will want to know how old Mrs. Wright is. Duty before pleasure," finished Bessie, with good-humored peremptoriness, as she marched off in the direction of the morning-room.

"Bessie is getting dreadfully old-maidish," observed Katie, in a sulky voice. "She never used to be so proper. I suppose she thinks it is none of my business."

When Bessie had got through her list of commissions she sat down to enjoy her letter quietly, [66] but before she had read many lines her color rose, and a half-stifled exclamation of surprise came from her lips; but, in spite of Hatty's curious questions, she read steadily to the end, and then laid the letter on her mother's lap.

"Oh, mother, do let me hear it," implored Hatty, with the persistence of a spoiled child. "I am sure there is something splendid about Bessie, and I do hate mysteries."

"So do I, Hatty; we think alike there. Shall I read it aloud, my dear?" and as Bessie nodded, Mrs. Lambert read the letter in her quiet, silvery voice:

> "My Dear Miss Lambert," it began; "I told you that I should not allow you to forget me, so, you see, I am keeping my promise like a reliable young woman. Mamma says I have made a bad commencement to my letter—that self-praise is no recommendation. I think I remember that profoundly wise saying in copy-book days; but I hold a more worldly view of the subject. I think people are taken at their own value; so, on principle, I never undervalue myself; and the gist of all this is that I do not intend to be forgotten by a certain young lady who enacted the part of Good Samaritan in the Sheen Valley.
>
> "Now, as I must candidly confess to a sincere wish for a better acquaintance with this same young lady, I am writing in my own and mamma's name to beg you to favor us with your company at The Grange for a few weeks. [67]
>
> "You must not think this is a very unconventional proceeding on our part, as our parents were old friends. Mamma is writing to Dr. Lambert by the same post, and she means to say all sorts of pretty things to induce him to intrust you to our care.
>
> "I wish I had the power of persuasion. Mamma has such a knack of saying nice things, but indeed you must come. The Grange is such a dear old house, and we know such pleasant people, and I want you to see our Kentish lanes, and indeed mamma and I will make you so comfortable. I don't mention Richard, because he is nobody, and he never interferes with our friends.
>
> "Now I am taking it for granted that you will not refuse me, so I will proceed to tell you our arrangements. Mamma and I have been in town the last five weeks, and we are both of us tired to death of Vanity Fair, so we mean to go back to Oatlands next week. You may come to us as soon after that as you like; fix your own day and your train, and I will be at the station to meet you.
>
> "I remain, yours most sincerely,
> "Edna Sefton."

"Oh, Bessie, how delightful! But I don't like to spare you again so soon."

"Now, Hatty, don't be selfish. You must not grudge Bessie the first real treat she has ever had offered to her. We have none of us had such a chance before. Fancy staying at a place like The Grange, and seeing lots of nice people."

"I wish you could go in my place, Chrissy, dear. I am not quite sure how I should like staying

with strange people; we have got into homely ways, never going anywhere except to Aunt Charlotte's or Uncle Charles', and I don't know how I should get on with rich people like the Sefton's; besides, father and mother may not wish me to accept the invitation," glancing at her mother's thoughtful face. [68]

"We must see what your father says about it," returned Mrs. Lambert, rousing herself with difficulty from her abstraction. "I would not talk about it any more, girls, until we know his wishes. It will only disappoint Bessie if she makes up her mind that she would like to accept the invitation, and father thinks it wiser to refuse. Let us put it out of our heads until he comes home, and he and I will have a talk about it."

"Yes, that will be best," returned Bessie, putting the letter in the envelope. "Father will not be home until late, but that does not matter; to-morrow will do quite well." And, to her sister's surprise and disappointment, she refused to say any more on the subject.

"Mother is quite right," she observed, as Hatty fussed and grumbled at her silence. "If we talk about it, I shall just long to go, and shall be vexed and disappointed if father wishes me to refuse."

"But you might coax him to change his mind. Father never likes disappointing us when we set our hearts on anything," urged Hatty.

"No, indeed; I never like arguing things with father. He is not one to make up his mind in a hurry, like some people; he thinks over a thing thoroughly, and then he gives his opinion. If he does not wish me to go, he will have a good reason for saying so. I never found either father or mother wrong yet, and I am not going to find fault with them now. Don't let us talk any more about it, Hatty. I want to think of something else." But, in spite of this wise resolution, Bessie did think a good deal about the letter, and in her heart she hoped that her father would allow her to accept Miss Sefton's tempting invitation. [69]

Dr. Lambert did not return home that night until long after his girls had retired to rest, and to Bessie's surprise he said nothing to her at breakfast; but just as she was leaving the room to give out the stores, as usual, he called her back. "Oh, by the by, Bessie," he observed, "I have to drive out as far as Castleton this afternoon. I will take you with me if you care to go."

"I always care to go with you, father dear," replied Bessie, and then she hesitated, as she remembered Hatty's pale cheeks; "but I think you ought to take Hatty instead; it would do her so much good, and she does so love a drive."

"No, I think you shall be my companion this afternoon; I will take Hatty to-morrow," replied the doctor, as he took up his paper again.

"Good child, she always thinks of poor Hatty," he said to himself, and his eyes glistened. "They are all good girls, but not one of them is so unselfish as my little Betty; she takes after her mother in that. Dora never thinks of herself." [70]

Bessie went about her household tasks with a light heart, for she had the prospect of a pleasant afternoon before her. The drive to Castleton would be lovely, and she would hear what her father had to say about the letter. So she was ready and waiting by the time the pretty little victoria came around to the door, and as Dr. Lambert stood on the porch, he thought the happy, sunshiny face looked very attractive under the new gray hat.

"You look very smart, Bessie," he said, smiling. "Have I seen that very becoming hat before?"

"Only last Sunday," returned Bessie brightly; "but I always put on my best things when I drive with you, that your daughter may do you credit;" for Bessie in her heart thought her father the handsomest man in Cliffe; and indeed many people admired the doctor's clever, refined face, and quiet, genial manners.

The sturdy little roan trotted briskly down the lower road, as it was called, and Bessie leaned back and looked dreamily at the golden ripples that lay on the water, while the branches overhead threw flickering shadows on the road before them, until her father's voice roused her. [71]

"You and I are to have some talk together, I believe. Would you like to see Mrs. Sefton's letter, Bessie? Your mother showed me the one you received from her daughter." And as Bessie eagerly assented, he handed it to her.

"It is a very nice letter," she observed, as soon as she had finished it; "it could not be more kindly expressed."

"No; Mrs. Sefton is a ladylike woman, and she knows exactly what to say. It is a grand thing to have tact." And then he paused for a moment, and continued in an amused voice, "The world is a very small place after all. I have lived long enough in it not to be surprised at running against all sorts of odd people in all sorts of odd places, but I must own I was a little taken aback when you brought Miss Sefton into my house that night."

"You knew Mrs. Sefton when you were a young man, father?"

"I suppose I knew her fairly well, for I was engaged to her for six months." And as Bessie started, "Well, you will think that an odd speech for a father to make to his daughter, but, you see, I know our Bessie is a reliable little woman, who can keep her tongue silent. I have my [72]

reasons for telling you this. You have always been your mother's companion, as well as my right hand, and I would not let you go to The Grange in ignorance of the character of its inhabitants."

"Oh, father, do you really mean me to go?"

"We will come to that presently; let me finish what I was saying. I was fool enough to engage myself to a beautiful girl, knowing her to be unsuitable in every way for a poor man's wife, and I dare say I should have persisted in my blindness to the bitter end, if I had not been jilted by the young lady."

"My dear father!"

"My dear little Betty, please don't speak in that pitying tone; it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I dare say I had a bad time of it; young men are such fools; but I soon met your mother, and she healed all wounds; but if Eleanor Sartoris treated me badly, she met with her punishment. The man she married was a worthless sort of a fellow; he is dead, so I need not mind saying so now. He was handsome enough and had all the accomplishments that please women, but he could not speak the truth. I never knew a man who could lie so freely, and in other respects he was equally faulty, but Eleanor was infatuated, and she would marry him against the advice of her friends, and the first thing she found out was that he had deceived her on one point. She knew that he had married when almost a boy, and his wife had been long dead, but he kept [73] from her that he had a son living. His excuse was that he had heard her say that nothing would induce her to undertake the duties of a stepmother, and that he feared a refusal on account of Richard. In this he had overreached himself; she never forgave the deception, and she barely tolerated the poor boy. I am afraid, from what I heard, that their short married life was not a happy one. Eleanor had a proud, jealous temper, but she was truthful by nature, and nothing was so odious in her eyes as falsehood and deceit. I can feel sorry for her, for no woman could respect a character like Sefton's, but I have always blamed her for her hardness to her stepson. His father doted on him, and Richard was the chief subject of their dissension on his death bed. He begged his wife to be kinder to the boy, but I do not know if this appeal softened her. The property belongs, of course, to her stepson, and in a sense she and her daughter are dependent on him, but it is not a united household. I know very little about the young man, except that he is industrious and fond of out-of-door pursuits, and farms his own estate; but I hear he is a little clownish in appearance. Now we are stopping, because I have a patient to see here, but I shall not be ten minutes, and we will resume our conversation presently." [74]

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CHAPTER VI.

LITTLE MISS MUCH-AFRAID.

Bessie had plenty of food for meditation while Dr. Lambert paid his visit to his patient, and he found her apparently absorbed in a brown study when he returned to the carriage.

"Father dear," she said, rousing herself, as he placed himself beside her, "I have been thinking over all you have told me, and I cannot help wondering why you wish me to visit Mrs. Sefton, when she treated you so badly."

Dr. Lambert was silent for a minute; the question was not an easy one to answer. His wife had said the very same thing to him the previous evening:

"I wonder that you care to let Bessie visit at The Grange, when Eleanor Sartoris treated you so badly." And then she added, "I think she is very much to blame, too, for her behavior to her stepson. Margaret Tillotson tells me that he is an honest, good-hearted fellow, though not very clever, but that want of appreciation has made him shy and awkward." [75]

But he had been able to satisfy his wife without much difficulty. All their married life there had never been a shadow of a doubt between them; her calm, reasonable judgment had wholly approved her husband's conduct on all occasions; whatever he did or said had been right in her eyes, and she had brought up her daughters to think the same.

"Well, do you know, Bessie," he said playfully, "I have more reasons than one for wishing you to go to The Grange? I have taken a fancy to Miss Sefton, and I want her mother to be acquainted with my daughter; and I think it will be good for you to extend your knowledge of the world. You girls are tied too much to your mother's apron-strings, and you must learn to do without her sometimes."

This was all very well, but though Bessie smilingly accepted this explanation of her father's motives in permitting her to go to Oatlands, she was clever enough to know that more lay behind.

Dr. Lambert had long ago forgiven the injury that had been done to him. His nature was a generous one; good had come out of evil, and he was tolerant enough to feel a kindly interest in Mrs. Sefton as an old friend. It is true she had created her own troubles, but in spite of that he could be sorry for her. Like a foolish woman she had built her life's hopes upon a shifting, sandy [76] foundation; she had looked on the outward appearance, and a fair exterior had blinded her to the hollowness beneath. The result was bitterness and disappointment.

"I should like her to see our Bessie," he had said to his wife. "Bessie is just like a sunbeam; she will do her good, and even if things are different from what she sees at home, it will do her no harm to know how other people live. Our girls are good girls, but I do not want them to live like nuns behind a grating; let them go out into the world a little, and enlarge their minds. If it were Christine, I might hesitate before such an experiment, but I have perfect confidence in Bessie."

And his wife's answer to this had been:

"I am quite sure you are right, Herbert, and I am perfectly willing to let Bessie visit your old friend." And so the matter ended. The doctor got his way as usual, simply by wishing for it.

The drive was a long one, but it seemed short to Bessie, and she was quite sorry when it was over.

"Thank you, father dear, it has been such a treat," she said, with a loving little squeeze of his arm; and then she ran in to find her mother.

Mrs. Lambert looked up inquiringly as Bessie took off her hat and gloves. [77]

"Well, my dear, have father and you settled it?"

"Yes, indeed, mother; and I am really to go. Father seems to like the idea. He has evidently fallen in love with Miss Sefton. I am afraid I am a great deal too much excited about it at present, but Hatty will soon damp me."

"Poor child! she never likes you to go away. She does not mean to be selfish, and I know she struggles hard to control her feelings, but she will have a good cry when she hears you are going to Oatlands."

"We must not let her mope, mother. If I thought it were good for Hatty I would stay at home, to prevent her feeling so miserable, but it would be false kindness to give in to her; she would hate herself for her selfishness, and she would not be a bit happy if she knew she had prevented my visit. I would rather see her fret before I go, and bear it as well as I can, and then I know she will cheer up soon and be looking forward to my return."

"You are quite right, Bessie, and neither your father nor I would allow you to sacrifice yourself for Hatty. Too much indulgence on your part would only feed the poor child's nervous fancies. I know she feels her parting with you for a week or two as a serious trial, and I dare say it is a trial to her, but she must take it as one, and not selfishly spoil your pleasure. Now we will forget Hatty [78] for a few minutes; there is something else troubling me. How are you to be fitted out for your visit, when I dare not ask your father for any more money?"

"Well, I have thought about that, too," returned Bessie briskly. "I was reviewing my wardrobe all the time father was at Castleton House. He was quite half an hour away, so I had plenty of time. I was a little worried at first, thinking how I should manage, but somehow I made it all straight. Listen to me, mother, dear," as Mrs. Lambert sighed and shook her head. "Miss Sefton has been here, so she knows we are not rich people, and she will not expect to see many smart dresses. I don't want to pretend to be what I am not. We cannot afford to dress grandly, nor to have many new frocks, but I am sure we are just as happy without them."

"Yes; but you never have stayed with rich people before, Bessie," returned her mother sadly. "You do not know how shabby your old things will look beside other people's silks and satins. Father does not think about these things, and I do not like to remind him; but you ought to have a new jacket, though we did say the old one would do this year."

"Now, mother, will you be quiet, please, and listen to me? for I am brimful of ideas, and I won't have you worry. The jacket must do, for I do not mean to ask father for a new one. I have my gray [79] dress and hat, and father thinks they are very becoming; and there is my Indian muslin Uncle Charles gave me for best occasions, and if you will let me buy a few yards of white nun's-cloth Chrissy and I will contrive a pretty dinner-dress. I like white best, because one can wear different flowers, and so make a change. Perhaps I must have a pair of new gloves, and some shoes; but those won't cost much."

"You are easily satisfied, darling," replied Mrs. Lambert fondly. "Yes, you shall have the nun's-cloth, and I will give you some of my lace to trim it. And there are the pearls that I wore on my wedding-day. Your father is so fond of them, but I always told him they were put aside for you. Wait a moment; they are in my escritoire, and you may as well have them now." And Mrs. Lambert unlocked the door, and opening a little box, placed the necklace in Bessie's hand. It consisted of three rows of tiny pearls, and was very simple and pretty.

"Oh, mother, how lovely!" exclaimed the girl. "Is it really for me? That is just what I wanted; my gold chain is so thin that I hardly ever dare to wear it. It has been broken twice. But this is far prettier." And Bessie clasped the little necklace around her neck, and then went off proudly to

[80]

show her treasure to Christine and Hatty, while Mrs. Lambert shed a few tears at the thought how little she had to give her girls. The next moment she dashed them away indignantly.

"I ought to be ashamed of myself," she thought. "What would Herbert say if he found me crying in this childish way? What do our girls want with ornaments and pretty dresses? They have youth and good looks and manners. My Bessie is a perfect gentlewoman, in spite of her shabby frocks. No one could help being pleased with her gentle, modest ways. I expect it is my pride. I did not want Mrs. Sefton to think we are not rich. But I am wrong; my girls are rich. They are rich in having such a father, and in their own happy natures." And then Mrs. Lambert thought of those other ornaments that she desired for them—the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit; the priceless jewels of innocence and purity, which are the fairest adornments of a young girl.

"These will not be lacking," she said to herself. "My Bessie's unobtrusive goodness will soon make itself felt."

Bessie had made up her mind not to trouble about her scanty wardrobe, and she was quite happy planning the nun's-cloth dress with Christine.

But though Dr. Lambert said nothing, he thought a great deal, and the result of his cogitations was, a five-pound note was slipped into Bessie's hand the next evening. [81]

"Go and buy yourself some finery with that," he observed quietly.

Bessie could hardly sleep that night, she was so busy spending the money in anticipation; and the very next day she was the delighted purchaser of a new spring jacket and had laid out the remainder of the five-pound note in a useful black and white tweed for daily use, and a pretty lilac cotton, and she had even eked out a pair of gloves.

Three dresses to be made; no wonder they were busy; even Mrs. Lambert was pressed into the service to sew over seams and make buttonholes.

Hatty never complained her back ached when she worked for Bessie; her thin little hands executed marvelous feats of fine workmanship; all the finer parts were intrusted to Hatty.

"I feel almost as though I were going to be married," observed Bessie, as she surveyed the fresh, dainty dresses. "I never had more than one new gown at a time. Now they are finished, and you are tired, Hatty, and you must go and lie down, like a good child."

"I am not tired, not a bit," returned Hatty touchily; "and I am going out with Ella."

Bessie held her peace. Hatty's temper had been very trying for the last three days; she had [82] slaved for Bessie to the detriment of her health, but had worn an injured manner all the time.

She would not join in the conversation, nor understand a joking remark. When Christine laughed at her in a good-humored way, Hatty pursed up her lips, and drew herself up in a huffy manner, and would not condescend to speak a word. She even rejected Bessie's caresses and little attempts at petting. "Don't, Bessie. I must go on with my work; I wish you would leave me alone," she would say pettishly.

Bessie did leave her alone, but it made her heart ache to see the lines under Hatty's eyes, that showed she had cried herself to sleep. She knew it was unhappiness and not temper that was the cause of her irritability.

"She is ashamed of letting me know that she cannot bear me to go away," she thought. "She is trying to get the better of her selfishness, but it conquers her. I will leave her alone for a little, and then I will have it all out. I could not go away and leave her like that." For Bessie's warm, affectionate nature could not endure the thought of Hatty's pain.

"I have so much, and she has so little," she said to herself, and her pity blunted all Hatty's sharp, sarcastic little speeches and took the sting out of them. "Poor little thing! she does not [83] mean half she says," she remarked, as a sort of apology to Christine, when Hatty had marched off with Ella.

"I don't know how you put up with her as you do," observed Christine, whose patience had been sorely exercised that morning by Hatty's tempers. "She is treating you as badly as possible. I would rather have been without her help, if I had been you; we might have had Miss Markham in for two days; that would have shamed Hatty nicely."

"I don't want to shame her, Chrissy, dear; poor little Hatty! when she has been working so beautifully, too. She is worrying herself about my going away, and that makes her cross."

"As though no one else would miss you," returned Christine stormily, for she was not quite devoid of jealousy. "But there, it is no use my talking; you will all treat Hatty as though she were a baby, and so she behaves like a spoiled child. I should like to give her a bit of my mind." And Christine tossed her pretty head and swept off the last dress, while Bessie cleared the table.

Bessie's visit was fixed for the following Tuesday, so on Sunday evening she made up her mind that the time was come for speaking to Hatty. As it happened, they were keeping house together, for the rest of the family, the servants included, had gone to church. Hatty had just settled [84] herself in a corner of the couch, with a book in her hand, expecting that Bessie would follow her example (for the Lambert girls were all fond of reading), when a hand was suddenly interposed between her eyes and the page.

“This is our last quiet evening, Hatty, and I am going to talk instead of read, so you may as well shut up that big book.”

“It takes two to talk,” observed Hatty, rather crossly, “and I am not in the mood for conversation, so you had better let me go on with ‘Bishop Selwyn’s Life.’”

“You are not in the mood for reading either,” persisted Bessie, and there was a gleam of fun in her eyes. “When you pucker up your forehead like that, I know your thoughts are not on your book. Let us have a comfortable talk instead. You have not been like yourself the last week, not a bit like my Hatty; so tell me all about it, dear, and see if I cannot make you feel better.”

“No, Bessie, don’t try; it is not any use, unless I jump into somebody else’s body and mind. I can’t make myself different. I am just Hatty, a tiresome, disagreeable, selfish little thing.”

“What a lot of adjectives! I wonder they don’t smother you. You are not big enough to carry so many. I think I could word that sentence better. I should just say, ‘Hatty is a poor, weak little body to whom mole-hills are mountains, and the grasshopper a burden.’ Does not that sound nicer?” [85]

“Yes, if it were true,” returned Hatty sorrowfully, and then her ill-humor vanished. “No, don’t pet me, Bessie; I don’t deserve it,” as Bessie stroked her hand in a petting sort of a way. “I have been cross and ill-tempered all the week, just unbearable, as Christine said; but oh, Bessie, it seemed as though I could not help it. I was so miserable every night to think you were going away, that I could not sleep for ever so long, and then my head ached, and I felt as though I were strung on wires when I came down the next morning, and every time people laughed and said pleasant things I felt just mad, and the only relief was to show every one how disagreeable I could be.”

Hatty’s description of her overwrought feelings was so droll that Bessie with some difficulty refrained from laughing outright, but she knew how very real all this was to Hatty, so she exercised self-control, and said, quite gravely:

“And so you wanted to make us all miserable, too. That was hardly kind, was it, when we were all so sorry for you? I do think you have a great deal to bear, Hatty. I don’t mean because you are so weak in health; that could be easily borne; but it must be so sad always to look on the dark side of things. Of course, in some sense, we all project our own shadows; but you are not content with your own proper shadow, you go poking and peering about for imaginary ones, and so you are dark all round.” [86]

“But your going away to Oatlands is not imaginary,” returned Hatty piteously.

“No, you foolish child. But I hope you do not grudge me a pleasant visit. That would be a great piece of substantial selfishness on your part, of which, I trust, my Hatty would not be capable. Supposing I gave in to this ridiculous fancy and said, ‘Hattie hates me to go away, so I will just stop at home, and Miss Sefton shall be disappointed.’ I wonder how you would like that?”

“That would not please me, either. I am not so selfish as that. Oh, Bessie, do tell me how I am to conquer this nervous dread of losing you. It is not selfishness, for I do love to have treats; but when you go away I don’t seem to take any pleasure in anything; it is all so flat and disagreeable. Sometimes I lie awake and cry when I think what I should do if you were to die. I know how silly and morbid it is, but how am I to help it?” And here Hatty broke down, and hid her face on Bessie’s shoulder. [87]

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CHAPTER VII.

IN THE KENTISH LANES.

Bessie did not make any answer for a minute or two, but her eyes were a little dim as she heard Hatty sob.

“I must not break the bruised reed,” she said to herself. “Hatty’s world is a very little one; she is not strong enough to come out of herself, and take wider views; when she loves people, she loves them somehow in herself; she can’t understand the freedom of an affection that can be happy in the absence of its object. I am not like Hatty; but then our natures are different, and I must not judge her. What can I say that will help her?”

“Can’t you find anything to say to me, Bessie dear?”

“Plenty; but you must wait for it to come. I was just thinking for you—putting myself in your place, and trying to feel as you do.”

“Well!”

“I was getting very low down when you spoke; it was quite creepy among the shadows. ‘So this [88]
is how Hatty feels,’ I said to myself, and did not like it at all.”

“You would not like to be me, Bessie.”

“What an ungrammatical sentence! Poor little me! I should think not; I could not breathe freely in such a confined atmosphere. Why don’t you give it up and let yourself alone? I would not be only a bundle of fears and feelings if I were you.”

“Oh, it is easy to talk, but it is not quite so easy to be good.”

“I am not asking you to be good. We can’t make ourselves good, Hatty; that lies in different hands. But why don’t you look on your unhappy nature as your appointed cross, and just bear with yourself as much as you expect others to bear with you? Why not exercise the same patience as you expect to be shown to you?”

“I hardly understand you, Bessie. I ought to hate myself for my ill-temper and selfishness, ought I not?”

“It seems to me that there are two sorts of hatred, and only one of them is right. We all have two natures. Even an apostle could say, ‘Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?’ Even St. Paul felt the two natures warring within him. How can you and I, then, expect to be exempt from this conflict?”

“Don’t put yourself in the same category with me, Bessie. You have crushed your lower nature, [89]
if you ever had it.”

“Oh, hush!” replied her sister, quite shocked at this. “You can’t know what you are talking about.” And here her voice trembled a little, for no one was more conscious of her faults and shortcomings. Bessie could remember the time when the conflict had been very hard; when her standard of duty had been lower than that she held now; when she had been as careless and indifferent as many girls of her age, until Divine guidance had led her feet into better paths; and knowing this, in her humility she could be tolerant of others.

“You do not know what you are saying, Hatty, or you would not hurt me by such a speech; it is only your love for me that blinds you. What I want to tell you is this—that you must not be so impatient; you waste all your strength in saying hard things about yourself, instead of fighting your faults. Why don’t you say to yourself, ‘I am a poor, weak little creature, but my Creator knows that too, and he bears with me. I cannot rid myself of my tiresome nature; it sticks to me like a Nessus shirt‘—you know the old mythological story, Hatty—‘but it is my cross, a horrid spiky one, so I will carry it as patiently as I can. If it is not always light, I will grope my way through the shadows; but my one prayer and my one effort shall be to prevent other people [90]
suffering through me?’”

“Oh, Bessie, that is beautiful!”

“You will find nothing else will help you to fight your bogies; do try it, darling. Be merciful to your poor little self; ‘respect the possible angel in you,’ as Mr. Robertson said. You will get rid of all your faults and fancies one day, as your namesake did in the river. You won’t always be poor little Hatty, whose back aches, and who is so cross; there is no pain nor crossness in the lovely land where all things are new.”

“Oh, if we were only there now, Bessie, you and I, safe and happy!”

“I would rather wait till my time comes. I am young and strong enough to find life beautiful. Don’t be cowardly, Hatty; you want to drop behind in the march, before many a gray-haired old veteran. That is because you are weak and tired, and you fear the long journey; but you forget,” and here Bessie dropped her voice reverently, “that we don’t journey alone, any more than the children of Israel did in the wilderness. We also have our pillar of cloud to lead us by day, and our pillar of fire by night to give us light. Mother always said what a type of the Christian pilgrimage the story of the Israelites is; she made us go through it all with her, and I remember all she told [91]
me. Hark! I think I hear footsteps outside the window; the servants are coming in from church.”

“Wait a minute, Bessie, before you let them in. You have done me so much good; you always do. I will try not to mope and vex mother and Christine while you are away.” And Hatty threw her arms penitently round her sister’s neck.

Bessie returned her kisses warmly, and left the room with a light heart. Her Sunday evening had not been wasted if she had given the cup of cold water in the form of tender sympathy to one of Christ’s suffering little ones.

Bessie felt her words were not thrown away when she saw Hatty’s brave efforts to be cheerful the next day, and how she refrained from sharp speeches to Christine; she did not even give way when Bessie bade her good-bye.

“You will remember our Sunday talk, Hatty, dear.”

“I do remember it,” with a quivering lip, “and I am trying to march, Bessie.”

“All right, darling, and I shall soon be back, and we can keep step again. I will write you long

letters, and bring you back some ferns and primrose roots," and then Bessie waved her hand to them all, and jumped in the brougham, for her father was going to take her to the station.

[92] It must be confessed that Bessie felt a trifle dull when the train moved off, and she left her father standing on the platform. With the exception of short visits to her relatives, that were looked on in the light of duties, she had never left home before. But this feeling soon wore off, and a pleasant sense of exhilaration, not unmixed with excitement followed, as the wide tracts of country opened before her delighted eyes, green meadows and hedgerows steeped in the pure sunlight. Bessie was to be met at the station by some friend of the Seftons, as the country-bred girl knew little about London, and though a short cab drive would deposit her at Charing Cross, it would be far pleasanter for her to have an escort. Mrs. Sefton had suggested Mrs. Sinclair, and Dr. Lambert had been much relieved by her thoughtfulness.

As the train drew up to the platform Bessie jumped out, and stood eagerly looking about her for the lady whom she expected to see, and she was much surprised when a gentlemanly looking man approached her, and lifting his hat, said, with a pleasant smile:

"I believe I am addressing Miss Lambert."

"Yes, certainly; that is my name," returned Bessie, in rather an embarrassed manner.

"Ah, that is all right, and I have made no mistake. Miss Lambert, my mother is so seriously indisposed that she was unable to meet you herself, but you must allow me to offer my services instead. Now I will look after your luggage, and then I will find you a cab. Will you come with me, [93] please? The luggage is at the other end."

"I am so sorry to trouble you," returned Bessie. "I have only one box—a black one, with 'E. L.' on the cover." And then she stood aside quietly, while Mr. Sinclair procured a porter and identified the box; and presently she found herself in a cab, with her escort seated opposite to her, questioning her politely about her journey, and pointing out different objects of interest on their way.

Bessie's brief embarrassment had soon worn off; and she chatted to her new companion in her usual cheerful manner. She liked Mr. Sinclair's appearance—he looked clever, and his manners were quiet and well bred. He did not seem young; Edna had told her that he was thirty but he looked quite five years older.

"I wonder how you recognized me so quickly?" Bessie observed presently.

"It was not very difficult to identify you," he returned quietly. "I saw a young lady who seemed rather strange to her surroundings, and who was evidently, by her attitude, expecting some one. I could tell at once you were not a Londoner."

"I am afraid I must have looked very countrified," returned Bessie, in an amused tone.

[94] "Pardon me, I meant no such invidious comparison. People from the country have an air of greater freshness about them, that is all. You live at Cliffe, do you not? I was never there, but it is rather an interesting place, is it not?"

"I think it a dear place," returned Bessie enthusiastically; "but then it is my home, so I am not unprejudiced. It is very unlike other places. The streets are so steep, and some of the houses are built in such high, out-of-the-way nooks, you look up and see steps winding up the hill, and there is a big house perched up among the trees, and then another. You wonder how people care to climb up so many steps; but then, there is the view. I went over one of the houses one day, and from every window there was a perfect panorama. You could see miles away. Think what the sunsets must be from those windows!"

"You live lower down the hill, then?" with an air of polite interest.

"Yes, in such a quiet, secluded corner; but we are near the quarry woods, and there are such lovely walks. And then the bay; it is not the real open sea you know, but it is so pretty; and we sit on the rocks sometimes to watch the sunset. Oh, I should not like to live anywhere else!"

"Not in London, for example?"

"Oh, no, not for worlds! It is very amusing to watch the people, but one seems to have no room to breathe freely."

[95] "We are pretty crowded, certainly," returned Mr. Sinclair; "but some of us would not care to live anywhere else, and I confess I am one of those people. The country is all very well for a month or two, but to a Londoner it is a sort of stagnation. Men like myself prefer to be at the heart of things—to live close to the centre of activity. London is the nucleus of England; not only the seat of government, but the focus of intellect, of art, of culture, of all that makes life worth living; and please do not put me down as a cockney, Miss Lambert, if I confess that I love these crowded streets. I am a lawyer, you know, and human nature is my study."

"I quite understand you," returned Bessie, with the bright intelligence that was natural to her. She was beginning to think Edna a fortunate girl. "There must be more in her than I thought, or this clever man would not have chosen her," she said to herself; for Bessie, in her girlish innocence, knew little of the law of opposites, or how an intellectual or scientific man will sometimes select for his life companion a woman of only ordinary intelligence, who will,

nevertheless, adorn her husband's home by her simple domestic virtues. A wife does not need to be a moral whetstone to sharpen her husband's wits by the fireside, neither would it enhance his happiness to find her filling reams of foolscap paper with choice specimens of prose and poetry; [96] intelligent sympathy with his work is all he demands, and a loving, restful companion, who will soothe his hours of depression, who is never too weary or self-absorbed to listen to the story of his successes or failures.

"I shall be down at The Grange in a week or two—that is, if my mother be better; and then I hope we shall renew our acquaintance," were Mr. Sinclair's parting words as he took leave of Bessie; and Bessie sincerely echoed this wish.

"He is the sort of a man father would like," she thought, as the train moved slowly out of the station.

This was paying a great compliment to Mr. Sinclair, for Dr. Lambert was rather severe on the young men of the day. "I don't know what has come to them," he would remark irritably; "young men nowadays call their father 'governor,' and speak to him as though he were their equal in age. There is no respect shown to elders. A brainless young puppy will contradict a man twice his age, and there is not even the same courtesy shown to the weaker sex either. I have heard young men and young women—young ladies, I suppose I ought to say—who address each other in a 'hail-fellow-well-met' sort of manner, but what can you expect," in a disgusted tone, "when the girls talk slang, and ape their young brothers? I think the 'sweet madame' of our great- [97] grandmothers' times preferable to these slipshod manners. I would rather see our girls live and die in single blessedness than marry one of those fellows."

"Father, we don't want to marry any one, unless he is as nice as you," replied Christine, on overhearing this tirade, and Bessie had indorsed this speech.

It was rather late in the afternoon when Bessie reached her destination, and she was feeling somewhat weary and dusty as she stood on the platform beside her box. The little station was empty, but as Bessie was waiting to question the porter, a man-servant came up to her and touched his hat.

"Miss Sefton is outside with the pony-carriage," he said civilly. "I will look after the luggage, ma'am—there is a cart waiting for it."

"Oh, thank you!" returned Bessie, and she went quickly through the little waiting-room. A young man in knickerbockers, with a couple of large sporting dogs, was talking to the station-master, and looked after her as she passed; but Bessie did not notice him particularly; her eyes were fixed on the road, and on a pony-carriage drawn up under the trees. Miss Sefton waved her whip when she saw Bessie, and drove quickly up to the door. She looked prettier than ever in her dark-blue cambric and large shady hat.

"How do you do, Miss Lambert? I am delighted to see you again. How punctual you are. Jump [98] in. Ford will look after your luggage. This is a very different meeting, is it not, from our last? No snow about, but a very hot sun for June. Where is your sunshade? You will want it. Yes, that is right; put it up—my hat shades me. Now then, Ford, are you ready? Go on, Jack. What are you about, Jill? Are not my ponies pretty, Miss Lambert? Richard gave them to me last birthday, but I am afraid I plagued him a good deal beforehand to provoke such unusual generosity. There is nothing like teasing when you want a thing."

Bessie smiled, but remained silent; she was tired, and not quite inclined for repartee. They had turned into a long, lovely lane, so narrow that no vehicle could have passed them, and the thick hedgerows were full of pink and white briar roses and other wild flowers; on either side lay hop fields. Bessie uttered a delighted exclamation.

"Yes, I told you you would admire our Kentish lanes. They are pretty now, but in the winter they are not quite so pleasant. Well, did Mrs. Sinclair meet you, as she promised?"

"No, her son came instead; he said his mother was seriously indisposed, and unable to keep her engagement."

"Neville met you. How extremely odd! How on earth did you discover each other? Were you [99] very much embarrassed, Miss Lambert?"

"No; it was a little strange at first, but Mr. Sinclair was very kind and pleasant, and soon put me at my ease."

"Oh, Neville always gets on with ladies; there is certainly no fault to find with him in that respect. His civility is natural to him; he is just as polite to an old woman with a market basket and a few apples tied up in a blue spotted handkerchief as he is to a lady whose dress has been made by Worth."

"I call that true politeness," returned Bessie warmly.

"There is not much of the precious commodity to be found in our days; the young men one meets in society are not cut after that pattern. And so Mrs. Sinclair is ailing again?"

"'Seriously indisposed,' was Mr. Sinclair's expression; and he looked rather grave, I thought."

"My dear creature, Neville always looks grave, as though he were engaged in a criminal

investigation. He is a barrister, you see, and he troubles himself if his mother's finger aches. The dear old lady is always ailing, more or less, but there is never much the matter—a creaking door; you know the sort; only Neville always makes the worst of it. Now, look here, Miss Lambert, that is what we call the village—just those few cottages and the inn; there is not even a church; we [100] have to walk over to Melton, a mile and a half away. Isn't that pond pretty, with the ducks on it? and there is a flock of geese. Now we have only to turn down this road and there is The Grange." And as Miss Sefton pointed with her whip, Bessie saw the outlines of a large red house between the trees.

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CHAPTER VIII. [101]

AT THE GRANGE.

As Miss Sefton spoke the lane widened before them, and the hedgerows gave place to a short avenue of elms, the sunlight filtering through the thick interlaced branches, and throwing quivering shadows on the white road below; a low white gate opened into a meadow where some cattle were grazing, and on the right hand side was a large, straggling red house, with picturesque stables half smothered in ivy. The hall door stood open and a fine Scotch deerhound lay basking in the afternoon sun; he roused himself lazily as the pony carriage stopped before the door, and as Bessie alighted he came up to her wagging his tail slowly, and put his long, slender nose into her hand.

"What a beautiful creature!" exclaimed Bessie, who was exceedingly fond of all dumb animals. "Look how friendly he is, as though he were welcoming me to The Grange."

Miss Sefton, who was patting the sleek sides of Jack and Jill, looked round carelessly. [102]

"Mac is a good old dog, but he is not always so amiable to strangers; he has his likes and dislikes, as we humans have, only I must tell Richard that he has taken to you—he is his property. Now let us go and find mamma." And Edna locked her arm in Bessie's, and, followed closely by the deerhound, led her into the house.

There was no servant in attendance; a strange hush and stillness seemed to pervade the place. Bessie almost felt oppressed by it. The hall was large and dark, with a smooth, slippery floor, and was panelled in dark oak; oak settles and large carved antique cabinets were ranged round the walls. The great fireplace was filled with green boughs, and a tiger skin, with a huge grinning head and eyes, lay before it. The quiet little country girl had never seen such a hall in her life.

"Take care; our oak floors are slippery to people who are unused to them," observed Edna. "Mamma is in the drawing-room, I suppose." And she opened the door and ushered her companion into a handsome room, with three windows opening on to a lawn. A lady, who was sitting on a couch reading, rose as she perceived the two girls, and crossed the room with a slow, stately step.

"Mamma, I have brought Miss Lambert."

"I am very glad to see her, Edna. My dear," taking Bessie's hand, and kissing her cheek, "you [103] are very welcome for your father's sake."

"Thank you," returned Bessie, with unusual shyness, for Mrs. Sefton's stateliness rather awed her. Both her words and her manner were kind; nevertheless, Bessie found it difficult to respond; even when Mrs. Sefton had established her in the corner of the couch, and was questioning her with polite interest about her journey, she found herself answering in almost monosyllabic replies, as though she were tongue-tied.

"I cannot tell what came over me," she wrote the next day to her mother; "I never felt so bashful and stupid in my life; and yet Mrs. Sefton was most kind and considerate, only her graciousness seemed to crush me. She is very handsome, far handsomer than her daughter, slightly stout, but such a grand looking figure; Miss Sefton and I look like pygmies beside her; but there is one thing that strikes me about her—a sort of hardness when she is not speaking. I never saw a mouth closed so tightly; and then there is no rest in her face. I could not help thinking about father's story as I looked at her; it is not the face of a happy woman. I can imagine that disappointment in her husband has hardened her. I admire her very much; she fascinates and yet repels me, but I do not think I could love her very much. Miss Sefton does, but then her mother dotes on her." [104]

Bessie was devoutly wishing herself at home during that first quarter of an hour, but after a few minutes Mrs. Sefton's questions ceased, and she touched a silver-mounted gong beside her, and almost as though by magic the door was thrown noiselessly back, and the butler entered with

the tea-tray, followed by a footman in smart livery. Bessie wondered what her mother would have thought of the delicate Worcester china that was placed on a low table beside Mrs. Sefton, while a second table was quickly covered with bread and butter and dainty-looking cakes. Edna had thrown off her hat, and had coaxed Bessie to do the same; then she proceeded to wait on her guest. A little table was placed at Bessie's elbow, and all manner of sweet cakes forced on her. The very tea had a different flavor from her mother's tea; it was scented, fragrant, and mellow with rich country cream. Bessie sipped her tea, and crumbled her rich cake, and felt as though she were in a dream. Outside the smooth-shaven lawn stretched before the windows, there was a tennis-net up, and some balls and rackets were lying on the grass. Some comfortable wicker chairs were placed under a large elm at the bottom of the lawn.

"Do you play tennis?" asked Edna abruptly, as she noticed Bessie's eyes were wandering to the garden.

"A little; I am fond of the game, but I have not played a great deal; it takes time, and there is so much to do." [105]

"Edna plays beautifully," observed Mrs. Sefton. "It is a fine exercise for young people, if they are moderate and do not over-exert themselves. We have some neighbors, the Athertons, who come in nearly every day to practice with Edna."

"Does not your brother play with you sometimes?" asked Bessie.

"Richard? Oh, no?" And Edna's lip curled a little disdainfully. "He is far too busy to waste his time on me—he prefers playing cricket with the village lads at Melton. Bye the bye, mamma, I left Richard at the station; he said he had business with Malcolmson, and would not be home much before dinner."

"Indeed, I am sorry to hear it," returned Mrs. Sefton coldly. "Of course it was no use my warning him against any dealings with Malcolmson; Richard will go his own way; but I confess that this infatuation for Malcolmson vexes me much;" and a slight frown crossed Mrs. Sefton's white forehead.

"Was the young man with two splendid dogs that I passed in the waiting-room your brother?" asked Bessie, in some surprise.

"Yes, that was Richard," returned Edna; and she added, a little maliciously, "I can see you are a little surprised. I suppose you took him for a young farmer or gamekeeper. Richard is terribly clownish in appearance." [106]

Bessie thought this speech was in very bad taste, but she replied quietly:

"I cannot say I noticed your brother, but one of the dogs attracted my attention, he had such a fine head; I should think Landseer would have enjoyed painting him."

"Oh, that must have been Gelert; every one admires him; I know Neville coveted him. Now we have finished tea, and I dare say you will be glad to get rid of the dust of your journey, so I will undertake to show you your room. Mamma was going to put you into the big spare room, but I insisted that you would prefer a smaller one. Was I right, Miss Lambert?"

"Perfectly right, thank you," returned Bessie, as she rose with alacrity.

Mrs. Sefton's eyes followed her curiously as she crossed the room.

"A healthy, fresh-colored country girl," she said to herself; "quite a little rustic; but she seems a nice, harmless little thing; though why Edna took such a fancy to her rather puzzles me. I thought she would take after her father, but I can see no likeness. What a handsome fellow he was—poor Herbert!—and so gentlemanly." And here Mrs. Sefton sighed; for to her it was always a perilous thing to recall the past. No woman had ever been so foolish as she; she had cast away gold for dross. [107]

While her hostess was indulging in these heavy reflections, Bessie was uttering little staccato exclamations of delight at the sight of the room allotted her.

"What a lovely view!" she had observed, running to the window, for not only was the pretty shady garden to be seen, but some meadows, and a glimpse of a fir wood in the distance; and it all looked so cool and still, and the only objects of moving life were some white lambs feeding by their mothers, and a pretty brown foal with its dam.

"Do you think you will like your room?" asked Edna demurely; but there was a gleam of fun in her eyes as she put the question, for she had a vivid remembrance of Bessie's room at home; the strips of faded carpet, the little iron bedstead, and painted drawers; and yet it had been a haven of rest to her that night, and she had slept very sweetly on the little hard bed.

"It is far too grand for me," returned Bessie candidly. "I shall feel like a fine lady for the first time in my life." And she looked round her with admiring scrutiny, noting every detail—the wax candles and hot-house flowers on the toilet-table, the handsome wardrobe and cheval-glass, the writing-table with its dainty appendages, and the cosy-looking couch; even the brass bedstead, with its blue cretonne hangings, and frilled pillow-cases, demanded some fresh comment. [108]

"I think it is a lovely room, and far too good for me," finished Bessie.

“All our rooms are very comfortable,” was the careless response; “but one is too used to this sort of thing to notice it. Now shall I send Brandon to help you? She is our maid, and understands hair-dressing perfectly. She will help you unpack and arrange your things.”

“Oh, no, thank you!” returned Bessie, in such an alarmed voice that Miss Sefton laughed; and then she continued, in rather a shamefaced manner: “You see I am not like you, Miss Sefton. I have not been used to luxuries and being waited on; we are plain people, and wait on ourselves.”

“Just as you like,” was the indifferent answer. “Brandon is the comfort of my life, though she is such a cross old thing. Now, Bessie—I am going to call you Bessie, and I beg you to lay aside the stiff Miss Sefton—you must tell me if I can lend you anything, or help you in any way. And you are not to trouble about making yourself smart, for we have no one coming to dinner to-day, and I shall only put on an old dress. We are in the country now, and I don’t mean to waste my fine [109] London gowns on Richard, who calls every material dimity, and never knows whether one is dressed in velvet or sackcloth.”

Bessie smiled, and then asked if she might use any of the flowers on her toilet-table.

“My dear child, just look behind you,” was the amused answer; and Bessie saw a breast-knot of lovely crimson roses on the writing-table. “Those are for your use to-night, but if you will let me know every morning what color you want for the evening, I will tell Brandon.”

As Bessie was unpacking, she heard a faint scratching at her door, and on opening it found, to her great surprise, Mac, the deerhound, sitting on his haunches, with a very pleading look in his beautiful brown eyes.

“You may come in if you like, old fellow,” she said, wondering at his sudden friendship for a stranger; and, sure enough, the hound walked in and stretched himself under the writing-table, with his nose between his paws, quietly observant of every movement.

When Bessie had finished her unpacking, she proceeded to brush out her bright, brown hair, and arrange it in her usual simple fashion. Then she put on the dress of cream-colored nun’s veiling, which was cut square and trimmed with her mother’s lace; and when she had clasped the pearls round her neck, and had pinned on her roses, she felt she had never been so well dressed [110] in her life; and, indeed, the girl’s freshness and sweet expression made her very pleasant to look upon.

Bessie was sitting at the window thinking of Hatty when Edna entered, looking like a young princess to her dazzled eyes. The old gown proved to be a delicate blue silk, and was trimmed in a costly fashion, and she wore at her throat a locket with a diamond star. As she came sweeping into the room, with her long train and fair coronet of hair, she looked so graceful and so handsome that Bessie uttered an admiring exclamation.

“Oh, don’t look at me!” observed Edna rather pettishly. “I have told Brandon I really must discard this gown; it is getting too bad even for quiet evenings.”

“I think it lovely,” returned Bessie, much surprised at this remark. “I thought it was quite new.”

“Oh, no; it is nearly a year old, quite a patriarch in gowns; and, besides, I am getting so tired of blue. Mamma likes me best in white, and I agree with her; but you look very nice, Bessie, more like a crimson-tipped Daisy than ever. You remind me so of a daisy—a humble little modest, bright-eyed thing.”

“Thank you, Miss Sefton,” returned Bessie, blushing at such an unexpected compliment. “I think I must tell Hatty that.”

“Hatty! Oh, you mean the little pale-faced sister with the clever eyes. Now, what did I say to [111] you? That I preferred Edna to Miss Sefton. Oh, there goes the second gong, and Richard has only just come in. Mamma will be so vexed at his unpunctuality. Why, I declare if Mac has not taken up his quarters under your table. I suppose he approves of Miss Daisy as much as I do.”

Edna chatted after this fashion as she tripped down the oak staircase, while Bessie followed her more slowly. They found Mrs. Sefton in a somewhat ruffled mood. She looked handsomer than ever in her gray silk dress; her hands were blazing with diamond rings, her dark hair was still unmixed with gray, and hardly needed the lace cap that covered it.

“Richard has only just come in, mamma; need we wait for him?”

“It is our duty to wait for the master of the house, Edna, however much we are inconvenienced by the delay.” And Mrs. Sefton fanned herself with a dissatisfied expression. “Your brother never thinks of our comfort, as long as he is engrossed with his own occupations. I must apologize to you, Miss Lambert, for our unpunctuality. I am sure, after such a journey, you must need your dinner.”

“I am not at all hungry, thank you,” replied Bessie, whose appetite was not stimulated by her hostess’ aggrieved remarks. She sat literally on thorns during the next five minutes, while Mrs. [112] Sefton fanned herself, and Edna walked up and down the room, humming snatches of songs, and then breaking off into a sarcastic observation on the length of Richard’s toilet.

“I shall expect great results,” she was just saying, as the door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered young man advanced rather awkwardly into the room.

“I am afraid I am late again, mother,” he began apologetically; but Mrs. Sefton apparently took no notice of this remark, except by a slight shrug of her shoulders.

“We have been waiting half an hour,” broke in Edna, with a pout. “You get worse and worse, Richard. Now, will you take in my friend, Miss Lambert? and mamma and I will follow.”

Bessie rose at once, as Mr. Sefton offered his arm, but beyond a stiff bow he took no further notice of her. His face wore a moody expression as they seated themselves at the table. His reception had evidently damped him.

Bessie glanced at him. Richard Sefton was certainly not handsome; his features were rather heavily molded; he had a reddish mustache that hid his mouth, and closely cropped hair of the same color. His evening dress set rather awkwardly on him, and he had looked far better in his [113] tweed coat and knickerbockers. Bessie was obliged to confess that Edna had been right in her description; there was something clownish about his appearance, and yet he looked a gentleman.

“Have you nothing to tell us, Richard?” asked Mrs. Sefton sharply, when the silence had lasted long enough.

“Nothing that will interest you,” he replied, rather gloomily; and Bessie noticed that his voice was not unpleasant. “I have been with Malcolmson all the afternoon.” And he looked steadily at Mrs. Sefton as he spoke.

A slight flush crossed her face, but she evidently did not trust herself to answer.

“I know our opinions differ about him,” he continued, as though forcing himself to speak; “but for my part I think him a clear-headed, reliable fellow. He has done my business well, and has relieved me of a great deal of responsibility.”

“I hope you will not have cause to repent your rashness, Richard,” was the severe answer; but Edna, who was watching her mother’s countenance with some anxiety, interfered in an airy fashion:

“Oh, pray don’t begin to talk business, Richard, or you will make mamma’s head ache. You know she can’t bear to hear Malcolmson’s name mentioned. All this is not very amusing for Miss [114] Lambert. Can’t you find something interesting to suit a young lady?”

But if Edna hoped to pose as a peacemaker, she failed signally, for a sullen look came to her brother’s face, and, with the exception of a slight attention to his guest’s wants, and a few remarks about her journey and the weather, Richard made no further attempt to be agreeable.

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CHAPTER IX. [115]

RICHARD SEFTON.

“Richard is a perfect bear!” exclaimed Edna angrily, as she threw herself into one of the wicker seats on the lawn. It was a lovely evening; the sun was just setting, and she had invited Bessie to take a stroll round the garden.

“The dews are very heavy,” remonstrated her friend. “I think we had better keep to the gravel paths.” And then Edna had got up from her seat, grumbling as she did so, and had again reiterated her opinion that Richard was a bear.

“I think something must have put him out,” returned Bessie, who was always prompt in defence of the absent. “He did not look quite happy.”

“That was because mamma was so vexed about his unpunctuality, and about Malcolmson. Richard hates to vex her, and when she looks at him like that he always becomes gloomy and morose. I have known him silent for days, when they have fallen out about something. I am taking you behind the scenes, Bessie, but all our friends know that mamma and Richard do not agree. [116] You see, mamma is very clever, and she likes managing, and Richard has a will of his own; he is very tenacious of his own opinions, and when he has got an idea into his head he can be as stubborn as a mule.”

“Don’t you think a man has a right to his own opinion, Edna?”

Edna pursed up her lips.

“A man like Neville, perhaps, who is clever and knows the world; but Richard is a perfect child in some things. He ought to be reasonable, and allow mamma to have her way. Now, she dislikes Malcolmson—she does not believe in him; and Richard, as you hear, swears by him.”

“Who is Mr. Malcolmson, if I may venture to ask?”

“Oh, he is an ugly, scrubby little Scotchman whom Richard means to take as a sort of bailiff, or overseer, or something; I don’t understand what.”

“Your brother farms himself, does he not?”

“Yes, he has a large farm; and then there is the brewery, a few miles off, and he wants Malcolmson for that. Mamma is disgusted, because she wanted Richard to take a *protégé* of her own—such an interesting young fellow, and so poor, with a widowed mother and two or three young sisters; and my lord won’t look at him.”

“Perhaps he has his reasons for declining him.” [117]

“No, it is just his obstinacy; he will not allow mamma to interfere in his business. He thinks she ought to keep to her own department, and leave him to manage his own concerns; but mamma can’t see it; she has been used to rule, and she is always offended when he refuses to take her advice.”

“What a pity!” observed Bessie. “I think people in one house ought to be of one mind.”

“My dear Daisy, your golden rule won’t hold at The Grange. No one thinks alike in this house; mamma and I dote on each other, but we do not always agree; she makes me cry my eyes out sometimes. And as for Neville, as I told you, we have not an idea in common. I think perfect agreement must be rather monotonous and deadening. I am sure if Neville were to say to me, ‘My dear Edna, you are always right, and I agree with you in everything,’ I should be ready to box his ears. It is much more amusing to quarrel half a dozen times a day, and make it up again. Oh, I do dearly love to provoke Neville; he looks so deliciously bored and grave.”

Bessie was at a loss how to answer this extraordinary statement, but Edna gave her no time to collect her ideas.

“Quarrelling with Richard is poor fun,” she went on; “he hasn’t the wit to retaliate, but just sits glum as you saw him to-night. I mean to tell Master Richard, though, that his manners were [118] worse than usual, for he actually did not open his lips to his guest, although she was a stranger.”

“Indeed you are wrong,” returned Bessie eagerly. “You are doing your brother an injustice; he spoke to me several times, and made remarks about the weather and my journey. I was just describing Cliffe to him when your mother gave us the signal to rise.”

“What a brilliant conversation!” observed Edna sarcastically. “Well, I will prove to you that Richard is in his sulks, for he won’t enter the drawing-room again to-night; and if he did,” she added, laughing, “mamma would not speak to him, so it is just as well for him to absent himself. Now let us go in, and I will sing to you. When people are not here mamma always reads, and I sing to her.”

Edna sung charmingly, and Bessie much enjoyed listening to her; and when she was tired Mrs. Sefton beckoned Bessie to her couch, and talked to her for a long time about her family.

“All this interests me; I like to hear your simple descriptions, my child,” she said, when Edna interrupted them by reminding her mother of the lateness of the hour. “Now you must go to bed.” And she dismissed her with another kiss and a kindly good-night. [119]

As the two girls went out into the hall they found Richard Sefton hanging up his cap on the peg. He wore a light overcoat over his evening dress, and had evidently spent his evening out.

“Good-night, Richard,” observed Edna, with a careless nod, as she passed him; but Bessie held out her hand with a smile.

“Good-night, Mr. Sefton. What a beautiful evening it has been!”

“Yes, and so warm,” he returned cheerfully, as though the girl’s smile had loosened his tongue; “it is glorious haymaking weather. I expect we shall have a fine crop in the lower meadow.”

“Are you haymaking?” exclaimed Bessie, with almost childish delight. “Oh, I hope your sister will take me into the hayfield.”

“I will promise anything, if only you and Richard will not turn over the haycocks now,” retorted Edna, with sleepy impatience. “Do come, Bessie.” And Bessie followed her obediently.

Richard Sefton looked after her as her white dress disappeared up the dark staircase.

“She seems a different sort from most of Edna’s friends,” he muttered, as he lighted his pipe and retired to the nondescript apartment that was called his study. “There does not seem much nonsense about her. What do you think about it, Mac?” as the hound laid his head on his knee. “I [120] imagine, as a rule, women have a precious lot of it.” And he whistled a bar from the “Miller of the Dee.”

“I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me.”

“What a long evening it has been!” thought Bessie, as she leaned out of the window to enjoy the sweet June air, and to admire the lawn silvered by the moonlight.

“It seems two days at least since I left Cliffe. Oh, I hope Hatty is asleep, and not fretting!”

“I wonder if I shall be happy here,” she went on. “It is all very nice—the house and the country beautiful, and Edna as delightful as possible; but there is something wanting—family union. It is so sad to hear Edna talking about her brother. He is a perfect stranger to me, and yet I took his part at once. How could the poor fellow talk and enjoy himself while Mrs. Sefton was sitting opposite to him looking like an offended tragedy queen? He had not the heart to talk; besides, he knew that in engaging that man he was going against her wishes, and so he could not feel comfortable. Edna was wrong in calling him a bear. He was not at his ease, certainly; but he anticipated all my wants, and spoke to me very nicely. But there, I must not mix myself up in family disagreements. I shall have to be civil and kind to every one; but it makes one thankful for [121] one’s peaceful home, and the dear mother and father,” and the tears came into Bessie’s eyes as she thought of her shielded and happy life, and the love of her sisters and Tom.

“God bless them all, and make me worthy of them!” thought the girl, with a sudden rush of tenderness for the dear ones at home.

Bessie was an early riser. Dr. Lambert had always inculcated this useful and healthy habit in his children. He would inveigh bitterly against the self-indulgence of the young people of the present day, and against the modern misuse of time. “Look at the pallid, sickly complexions of some of the girls you see,” he would say. “Do they look fit to be the future mothers of Englishmen? Poor, feeble creatures, with no backbone to mention, leading unhealthy, frivolous existences. If my girls are not handsome, they shall at least be healthy; they shall learn self-control and self-guidance. Early hours will promote good appetites; plenty of exercise, fresh air and good digestion will sweeten their tempers and enliven their spirits; a clear conscience and a well-regulated mind will bring them happiness in whatever circumstances they are placed. I am not anxious for my girls to marry. I don’t mean to play minor providence in their lives, as some fathers do; but I would fit them for either position, for the dignity of marriage or for the unselfish duties of the single woman.”

Dr. Lambert loved to moralize to his womankind; he had a way of standing before the fire and [122] haranguing his family—anything would serve as a text for his discourse. Some of his daughters certainly thrived on his homely prescriptions, but Hatty was the thorn in her father’s side, the object of his secret anxiety and most tender care—the sickly one of his domestic flock. Hatty would never do him credit, he would say sadly; no medical skill could put color into Hatty’s pale cheeks, nor cure the aches and pains and nervous fancies that harassed her youth. As Dr. Lambert watched the languid step, or dissatisfied voice, he would sigh, as though some thought oppressed him; but with all his gentleness—and he was very gentle with Hatty—he never yielded, nor suffered any one else to yield, to her wayward caprices.

“My dear,” he would say, when Bessie pleaded for some little extra indulgence for Hatty, “you must not think me hard if I say distinctly ‘No’ to your request. You may trust me; I know Hatty better than you do. Very little would make her a confirmed invalid. It is not in our power, not in the power of any man living,” continued the doctor, with emotion, “to give that poor child health; but we may help her a great deal by teaching her self-control. Half her misery proceeds from her own nervous fancies. If we can help her to overcome them, we shall do more for Hatty than if we [123] petted and waited on her.” But Bessie had always found this wise prescription of the doctor’s a very difficult one.

Bessie always called the hour before breakfast her “golden hour,” and by her father’s advice she devoted it to some useful reading or study. In a busy house like the Lamberts’, where every one put his or her shoulder to the wheel, it was not easy to secure opportunity for quiet reading or self-improvement. There was always work to be done; long walks to be taken; the constant interruption of the two school-girls; Ella’s practicing to overlook; Katie’s French verbs to hear; besides household tasks of all kinds. In the evenings the girls played and sung to please their father, who delighted in music; sometimes, but not often, their mother read aloud to them while they worked. It was against the family rules for one to retire into a corner with a book. In such a case the unfortunate student was hunted out, teased, pursued with questions, pelted with home witticisms, until she was glad to close her book and take up her needlework, for the Lamberts were brisk talkers, and their tongues were never silent until they were asleep, and then they talked in their dreams.

When Bessie rose early, as usual, the morning after her arrival at The Grange, she sat down by the open window, and wrote a long letter to her mother and a little note to Hatty. It was an [124] exquisite morning; the thrushes and blackbirds, the merle and the mavis of the old English poets, were singing as though their little throats would burst with the melody, and a pair of finches in the acacia were doing their best to swell the concert; the garden looked so sunny and quiet, and such a sweet breath of newly made hay came in at the open window that Bessie at last laid down her pen. The household was stirring, but the family would not be down for half an hour, so the maid had informed her when she brought Bessie the morning cup of tea. Bessie had looked rather longingly at the pretty teapot, but her father had been so strong in his denunciations against slow poison, as he called it, imbibed on waking, that she would not yield to the temptation of tasting it, and begged for a glass of milk instead. This the maid promised to bring every morning, and as Bessie ate the bread and butter and sipped the sweet country milk, yellow with cream, she thought how much good it would do Hatty. Then she put on her hat and went softly downstairs, and finding a side door open, went out into the garden.

She thought she and the thrushes and blackbirds had it to themselves, but she was mistaken,

for in turning into a shrubbery walk, skirting the meadow, she was surprised to see Richard Sefton sitting on a low bench, with Mac's head between his knees, evidently in a brown study. [125] Bessie was sorry to disturb him, but it was too late to draw back, for Mac had already seen her, and had roused his master by his uneasy efforts to get free, and Mr. Sefton rose, with the awkward abruptness that seemed natural to him, and lifted his cap.

"Good morning, Miss Lambert. You are an early riser. My mother and Edna are hardly awake yet."

"Oh, I am always up long before this," returned Bessie, smiling at his evident astonishment, as she stooped to caress Mac, who was fawning on her.

"Mac seems to know you," he observed, noticing the dog's friendly greeting.

"It is very strange, but he seems to have taken a fancy to me," replied Bessie, and she narrated to Mac's master how the hound had pleaded for admission to her room, and had lain under her table watching her unpack.

"That is very odd," observed Richard. "Mac has never bestowed a similar mark of attention on any one but a certain homely old lady that my mother had here for a time, as a sort of charity; she had been a governess, and was very poor. Well, Mac was devoted to the old lady, and she certainly was an estimable sort of woman, but he will have nothing to say to any of Edna's fine friends, and generally keeps out of the way when they come."

"An animal's likes and dislikes are very singular," remarked Bessie, looking thoughtfully into [126] Mac's brown eyes. "I believe Mac knows that I am a lover of dogs."

"Are you indeed, Miss Lambert? Would you like to see mine?" returned Richard quickly; and his face lighted up as he spoke. He looked younger and better than he did the previous night. His powerful, muscular figure, more conspicuous for strength than grace, showed to advantage in his tweed shooting-coat and knickerbockers, his ordinary morning costume. The look of sullen discomfort had gone, and his face looked less heavy. Bessie thought he hardly seemed his age—nine-and-twenty—and, in spite of his natural awkwardness, he had a boyish frankness of manner that pleased her.

Bessie was a shrewd little person in her way, and she already surmised that Richard Sefton was not at ease in his stepmother's presence. She found out afterward that this was the case; that in spite of his strength and manhood, he was morbidly sensitive of her opinion, and was never so conscious of his defects as when he was presiding at his own table, or playing the part of host in her drawing-room, under her critical eye. And yet Richard Sefton loved his stepmother; he had an affectionate nature, but in his heart he knew he had no cause to be grateful to her. She had made him, the lonely, motherless boy, the scapegoat of his father's deceit and wrongdoing. He had [127] been allowed to live at The Grange on sufferance, barely tolerated by the proud girl who had been ignorant of his existence. If he had been an engaging child, with winning ways, she would soon have become interested in him, but even then Richard had been plain and awkward, with a shy, reserved nature, and a hidden strength of affection that no one, not even his father, guessed. Mrs. Sefton had first disliked, and then neglected him, until her husband died, and the power had come into Richard's hands. Since then she had altered her behavior; her interests lay in conciliating her stepson. She began by recognizing him outwardly as master, and secretly trying to dominate and guide him. But she soon found her mistake. Richard was accessible to kindness, and Mrs. Sefton could have easily ruled him by love, but he was firm against a cold, aggressive policy. Secretly he shrunk from his stepmother's sarcastic speeches and severe looks; his heart was wounded by persistent coldness and misunderstanding, but he had sufficient manliness to prove himself master, and Mrs. Sefton could not forgive this independence. Richard took her hard speeches silently, but he brooded over them in a morbid manner that resembled sullenness. Yet he would have forgiven them generously in return for one kind look or word. His stepmother had fascinated and subjugated him in his boyhood, and even in his manhood it gave him a pang to [128] differ from her; but the truth that was in him, the real inward manhood, strengthened him for the daily conflicts of wills.

Poor Richard Sefton! But after all he was less to be pitied than the woman who found it so difficult to forgive a past wrong, and who could wreak her displeasure on the innocent.

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CHAPTER X. [129]

BESSIE IS INTRODUCED TO BILL SYKES.

"WOULD you care to see my dogs, Miss Lambert?" asked Richard, and Bessie only hesitated for a

moment.

“Very much. That is, if it will not trouble you.”

“Not in the least; they are only just outside in the stable yard. Leo, our big mastiff, who gained the prize last year, is over at the farm. He is a splendid fellow, but a trifle fierce to strangers. He pulled a man down once, a tramp who was lurking about the place. Leo had got loose somehow, and he was at his throat in a moment. The poor fellow has the scar now; but I made it up to him, poor wretch.”

“I should not care to go near Leo’s kennel,” returned Bessie, with a shudder.

“Oh, it would be all right if I were with you. I should just put my hand on your arm and say, ‘A friend, Leo,’ and he would be as gentle as Mac, here. Leo is my faithful servant and guardian at the farm. I always take him out for a walk on Sunday afternoons. Leo knows Sunday as well as I [130] do. Now, we must be quick, or the gong will sound. There is no need to go through the house; this door leads to the kitchen garden, and we can reach the stables that way.” And talking in this easy, friendly fashion, Richard quickly conducted Bessie down the trim gravel walks, under the apple and plum trees, and then unlocking a green door in the wall, Bessie found herself in the stable yard, where the groom was rubbing down a fine brown mare. The mare neighed as soon as she heard her master’s voice, and Richard went up to her and petted her glossy sides.

“That is brown Bess,” he observed. “She is a skittish young thing, and plays her pranks with every one but me; but you and I understand each other, eh, old lady?” And the mare rubbed her nose against him in a confiding manner. Bessie looked on with an earnest air of interest.

“Do you ride?” asked Richard presently.

Bessie shook her head.

“I have never been on horseback in my life; but I can imagine what a pleasure riding must be.”

“What a pity!” he returned briefly. “There is nothing like it.” And so saying, he unlatched a gate and ushered his guest into a small paved yard, and then, opening a door, he uttered a prolonged whistle, and yelps, and a number of dogs, small and large, rushed out upon him. [131]

“Hi, there, Gelert! down, Juno; down, down, good dogs all.” And Richard threatened them with his dogwhip.

“Is this Gelert?” asked Bessie, pointing to a fine black retriever.

“Yes; and that is Brand,” patting the head of a handsome pointer. “That brown setter is Juno; she is the mother of those three puppies—fine little fellows, aren’t they? Look at this curly haired one; two of them are promised to friends; they are a capital breed. Do you care for terriers, Miss Lambert? because Spot is considered a perfect beauty. Look at his coat; it is like satin.”

“And that knowing little fellow, what is his name?” and Bessie pointed to a very small black and tan terrier, who sat up and begged at once.

“Oh, that is Tim; he ought by rights to be a house-dog, but he has taken a fancy to Spot, and insists on sharing his straw bed at night; they both have the run of the house by day—at least, as far as the hall and smoking-room are concerned. My mother hates dogs, and will not tolerate one in the drawing-room.”

“Surely, that is not one of your dogs,” exclaimed Bessie, looking with some disfavor on an ugly white mongrel, with a black patch over one eye; her attention was attracted by the creature’s [132] ugliness. Evidently he knew he was no beauty, for, after uttering a short yelp or two in the attempt to join in the chorus of sonorous barks, he had crept humbly behind Richard, and sat on his haunches, looking up at him with a pathetically meek expression.

“Oh, you mean Bill Sykes; yes, he is a pensioner of mine. Come along, Bill, and say good morning to your master.”

It was impossible to describe the change that came over the dog as Richard spoke to him in this kindly fashion; his whole body quivered with pleasure as he sprung up and licked Richard’s hands.

“What do you think, Miss Lambert? I found Bill one day tearing through Melton with a tin kettle tied to his tail, hunted by a pack of rascally school-boys; one of the little wretches had thrown a stone at him, and poor Bill was bleeding. I managed to stop him, somehow, and to free the poor beast from his implement of torture, and left him licking his wound by the roadside, while I caught two of the boys and thrashed them soundly. I reserved thrashing the others until a convenient season, but they all caught it. I read them a pretty lesson on cruelty to animals. Bill followed me home, and I have never parted with him since. The other dogs disdained his company at first, but now they tolerate him, and, on the whole, I think he leads a pleasant life. He [133] knows he is of humble extraction, and so he keeps in the background, but he is a clever dog; he can walk across the yard on his hind legs—the gardener’s boy taught him the trick. Now, then, Bill, walk like a gentleman.” And Bill obediently rose on his hind legs and stalked across the yard with an air of dignity, followed by a fat, rollicking puppy, barking with all his might.

Bill had just received his meed of praise when the gong sounded, and they had to hurry in to breakfast. They found Edna in a bewitching white morning dress.

“I hope I am not late,” observed Bessie, apologetically. “Mr. Sefton took me to see the dogs. I did so enjoy looking at them; they are such beautiful creatures.”

“Yes, especially Bill Sykes,” returned Edna sarcastically. “Well, there is no accounting for tastes,” with a critical look at Bessie’s neat blue cotton. “I never venture in the yard myself, unless I have an old ulster on. I could not put on my dress again if all those scratchy paws had been over it. Richard does not train them properly; they all spring up and nearly knock me down in their clumsy gambols.”

“They are like their master, eh, Edna?” returned Richard good-humoredly. “Mother, shall I give you some ham? What time do you mean to bring Miss Lambert to the lower meadow, Edna? We [134] shall be carrying this evening.”

“Oh, you need not expect us at all,” returned Edna, to Bessie’s disappointment. “I quite forgot the Atherton’s are coming this afternoon, to practice for to-morrow.”

“I thought Miss Lambert wanted to see us make hay,” observed Richard, looking at Bessie as he spoke; but she replied hastily:

“Not if your sister has other plans, Mr. Sefton, thank you all the same; I would rather do as she wishes.”

“Yes, and you are fond of lawn tennis, are you not? We have a garden party to-morrow, and you ought to practice, you see. I want you to know the Athertons; they are such nice girls, Florence especially; plenty of go in them, and no nonsense.”

“Yes, Florence is a sweet girl,” assented her mother. “Mrs. Atherton is a sad invalid, and they are such devoted daughters. Edna, it is your day for writing to Neville, is it not? I want to send a message to Mrs. Sinclair; don’t you think it would be a pretty attention if you were to write to her as well? She seems very poorly again.”

“I am not inclined to pay pretty attentions to any one this morning,” returned Edna, with a little laugh. “Bessie, can you amuse yourself while I do my duty to my *fiancé*? There are plenty of [135] books in the morning-room, and a deliciously shady seat under that big tree.”

“Oh, that will be delightful,” replied Bessie, to whom a book was a powerful attraction. She was some time making her selection from the well-filled bookcase, but at last fixed on some poems by Jean Ingelow, and “The Village on the Cliff,” by Miss Thackeray. Bessie had read few novels in her life; Dr. Lambert disliked circulating libraries for young people, and the only novels in the house were Sir Walter Scott’s and Miss Austin’s, while the girls’ private book shelves boasted most of Miss Yonge’s, and two or three of Miss Mulock’s works. Bessie had read “Elizabeth,” by Miss Thackeray, at her Aunt Charlotte’s house, and the charming style, the pure diction, the picturesque descriptions, and the beauty and pathos of the story made her long to read another by the same author. As Bessie retraced her steps through the hall Mac raised himself up slowly, and followed her out, and in another moment Spot and Tim flew through a side door and joined her.

Bessie never passed a pleasanter morning; her tale enthralled her, but she laid down her book occasionally to notice her dumb companions. A white Persian kitten had joined the group; she was evidently accustomed to the dogs, for she let Tim roll her over in his rough play, and only boxed his ears in return, now and then. When he got too excited, she scrambled up a may-tree, [136] and sat licking herself in placid triumph, while the terriers barked below. Bessie was almost sorry when the quiet was invaded by Edna. Edna, who never opened a book, by her own confession, unless it were an exciting novel, looked a little disdainfully at the book Bessie had chosen.

“Oh, that old thing!” she said contemptuously; “that is not much of a story; it is about a Breton peasant, is it not? Reine, I think she was called. Oh, it was amusing enough, but I prefer something more thrilling.”

“I think it lovely,” returned Bessie. “It is all so sweet and sunshiny; one can smell the flowers in that studio, and the two Catherines, one so happy and charming, and the other so pathetic. All the people are so nice and good, they seem alive somehow. In other books there are wicked people, and that troubles me.”

“You would not like the sort of books I read;” returned Edna, shrugging her shoulders. “There was a murder in the last; I could hardly sleep after it—some one thrown out of a train. Oh, it was deliciously horrible! I have not sent it back to Mudie; you can read it if you like.”

“No, thank you,” returned Bessie quietly; “it would not suit me at all. Father is very particular [137] about what we read, and mother, too; he will not let us touch what he calls ‘the sensational literature of the day’—oh, you may laugh,” as Edna looked amused; “but I think father is right. He says it makes him quite unhappy to see books of this description in the hands of mere children. He is a doctor, you know, and he declares that a great deal of harm is done by overstimulating the imagination by highly wrought fiction. ‘A meal of horrors can nourish no one,’ he would say.”

Edna chose to dispute this point, and a long and lively argument ensued between the girls until the luncheon bell silenced them.

Richard did not appear at this meal; he was taking his bread and cheese under the hedge with the haymakers, Edna explained, or in other words, he had desired his luncheon to be sent to him.

“He does not favor us much with his company, as you will soon see for yourself, Miss Lambert. My stepson is not a society man,” observed Mrs. Sefton.

“So much the better,” was on Bessie’s lips, but she prudently refrained from speaking the words. She was beginning to wonder, however, if Mrs. Sefton or Edna could mention his name without adding something disparaging. Edna especially was forever indulging in some light sarcasm at her brother’s expense. [138]

They sat in the cool drawing-room a little while after luncheon, until the Athertons arrived with their rackets; and then they all went down to the tennis lawn.

The Atherton’s were nice-looking girls, and Bessie was rather taken with them, but she was somewhat surprised when they opened their lips. She was walking across the grass with Florence, the tallest and prettiest of the sisters, and, indeed, she was rather a sweet-looking girl.

“Is it not a lovely day?” observed Bessie.

“Awfully jolly,” replied Miss Florence, in a sharp, clipping voice; and the next minute Bessie heard her call one of her sisters a duffer for missing the ball.

“What would mother say?” thought Bessie. She was not much used to the typical girl of the period; after all, she was an old-fashioned little person.

The Athertons were really nice girls, although they talked slang like their brothers, and conformed to all the foolish fashions of the day, disguising their honest, womanly hearts under blunt, flippant manners.

“What a pity,” said Bessie to herself, when she came to know them better. They were good-natured, clever girls, very fond of each other, and devoted to their mother and brothers. Reggie’s examination—exam., Florence called it—for Sandhurst; Harold’s new coach, and Bertie’s score at cricket, were the theme of their conversation. “I am afraid Harold won’t pass,” observed Sabina [139] sadly. “His last coach was such a muff, but the man he has got now seems a good old sort. Harold can get on with him comfortably.”

“Well, what do you think of the girls?” asked Edna, when she and Bessie were left alone at the close of the afternoon.

“I think they are very nice, Florence especially, but it is such a pity that they talk slang; it seems to spoil them, somehow.”

“I agree with you that it is bad style, but, you see, they have learned it from their brothers.”

Bad style, that was all. Bessie’s gentle-looking mouth closed firmly with the expression it always wore when politeness forbade her to air her true opinions, but in her own heart she was saying:

“Bad style. That is how worldly minded people talk. That is how they palliate these sins against good taste and propriety. I like these girls; they are genuine, somehow; but I suppose our bringing up has made us old-fashioned, for I seemed to shrink inwardly every time they opened their lips. Surely it must be wrong to lose all feminine refinement in one’s language. There were no young men here, happily, to hear them; but if there had been, they would have expressed themselves in the same manner. That is what I cannot understand, now girls can lay aside their [140] dignity and borrow masculine fashions. What a little lady Christine would have seemed beside them! Chrissy has such pretty manners.”

The dinner hour passed more pleasantly than on the previous evening. Richard talked more, and seemed tolerably at his ease. He followed them into the drawing-room afterward, and asked his sister to sing, but, to Bessie’s vexation, Edna declined under the pretext of fatigue, and could not be induced to open the piano. Bessie felt provoked by her wilfulness, and she was so sorry to see the cloud on Richard’s face, for he was passionately fond of music, as he had informed Bessie at dinner-time, that she ventured to remonstrate with Edna.

“Do sing a little, just to please your brother; he looks so disappointed, and you know you are not a bit tired.” But Edna shook her head, and her pretty face looked a little hard.

“I do not wish to please him; it is just because he has asked me that I will not sing a note this evening. I intend to punish Richard for his rudeness to me. I begged him to stay home for our garden party to-morrow; but no, he will not give up his stupid cricket. He says he is captain, and must be with his boys; but that is all nonsense; he does it to spite me.”

“Oh, very well,” returned Bessie good-humoredly, for she would not quarrel with Edna for her [141] perversity. “If you mean to be so obdurate, I will sing myself.” And Bessie actually walked across the room and addressed Richard, who was moodily turning over his sister’s music.

“Edna does not feel inclined to sing to-night, but if you can put up with my deficiencies, I will try what I can do. My music is rather old-fashioned, but I know one or two pretty ballads, if you care to hear them.”

“Thanks; I should like it very much,” was all Richard said, as he opened the piano; but his face cleared like magic. It was not the song he wanted, but that some one should care to please him. All his life long this had been his longing; and the cold indifference with which his expressed wishes had always been met by his mother and Edna had chilled his affectionate nature. Bessie

had a pretty voice, though it showed want of training, but she could sing a simple ballad with much sweetness and feeling, and Richard, who had a fine ear for music, avowed himself much pleased.

"You ought to have some good lessons," he said frankly. "Your voice has great capabilities, but it has not been properly trained. I hope you do not think my criticism rude."

"No, indeed; I am too much aware of my own faults. I have only had a few lessons. Miss James [142] was not much of a teacher, but I cannot help singing somehow. Now, have I tired you, or do you want another song?"

"I want more than one," returned Richard, growing bold. Bessie's readiness to please, her good-humored reception of his criticism, charmed him. She was so amiable, so willing to be friendly; she was so different from the other girls who came to The Grange. Richard had no patience with them; their airs and graces, their evident desire for masculine admiration disgusted and repelled him. They seemed always seeking for him to pay them little compliments and attentions, and in his heart he despised them.

"Thank you, my dear," observed Mrs. Sefton graciously, when Bessie had finished. "She sings very nicely, does she not, Edna?"

"Charmingly," replied Edna; but her smile was hardly as pleased as usual, and she bade Bessie a somewhat cold good-night when they parted an hour later.

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CHAPTER XI. [143]

EDNA HAS A GRIEVANCE.

Bessie did not concern herself much about her friend's coldness. She had tried to atone to Richard for his sister's unkindness, and she had succeeded in giving one person pleasure.

"I dare say her conscience tells her that she has been naughty, and that makes her cross with me," thought Bessie, who was too healthy minded to harbor unnecessary scruples.

Hatty would have made herself wretched under the circumstances; would have accused herself of boldness, and love of display, and a want of consideration for Edna; for Hatty, who was a self-tormentor by nature, could spin a whole web of worries out of a single thread; but Bessie never troubled herself with morbid after-thoughts. "Edna will be all right with me to-morrow," she said to herself; and she was right in her prognostication.

Edna came downstairs the next morning radiant with good humor, and was even civil to Richard. It was a brilliant day; her friends had all accepted her invitation, and she was looking [144] forward to a most enjoyable afternoon.

It was impossible for Bessie to resist the influence of her friend's gayety and flow of spirits. Edna's example was infectious, and Bessie was soon laughing heartily at her nonsensical speeches. There was no quiet for reading that morning. She had to practice tennis with Edna, and help her arrange the flowers; and finally she was carried off to be made smart.

"I wish you had a white dress, too," observed Edna regretfully; for in her heart she thought Bessie's favorite gray gown very dowdy and Quakerish. "But we must try to enliven you with a few flowers. You are going to wear a gray hat. Wait a moment." And Edna darted out of the room, and returned a moment afterward with a dainty cream lace fichu. "Look, this lace is lovely! Mamma gave it to me, but I never wear it now, and it will just suit you. Now let me fasten in a few of those creamy roses. Well, you do look nice after all, Daisy dear."

"Yes; but not half so nice as you," replied Bessie, looking with honest admiration at the pretty young creature. Edna's soft white dress just suited her fair hair and delicate complexion, and she looked so slim and graceful, as she stood before the glass fastening a rosebud at her throat, that Bessie said, involuntarily, "How nice it must be to be so pretty!" but there was no trace of envy in [145] her tone.

Edna blushed a little over the compliment.

"Do I look pretty? Thank you, Bessie. Isn't it a pity Neville cannot see me?" and she laughed mischievously over her vain speech. "Now, come along, there's a dear, or the people will arrive before we are ready for them. There, I declare I hear Florence's voice!" And the two girls ran down and joined Mrs. Sefton in the drawing-room.

Well, it was a very pleasant garden party, and Bessie thoroughly enjoyed herself, though it was

the grandest affair she had ever seen—so many people driving up in their carriages, and such smart footmen lingering in the hall, and a bevy of officers who were quartered in the neighborhood. But Bessie was not left out in the cold. Florence Atherton took her under her wing, and introduced some nice people to her. She even took part in one game when there was a vacancy, and her partner, a young lieutenant, was very good-natured, and only laughed when she missed the ball.

“We have won, after all, you see,” he observed, when the match was over.

“Yes, thanks to you,” replied Bessie honestly.

“Not at all. You played very well. Now shall we go and get an ice? I wonder what’s become of Sefton? I don’t see him anywhere.”

“Oh, he is playing cricket at Melton. He is captain of the village club, I believe. I don’t think he [146]
cares for tennis.”

“I suppose not,” was the dry rejoinder; but the young man slightly elevated his eyebrows in a meaning manner. Bessie heard other remarks on Richard’s absence before the end of the afternoon. A young lady to whom she had been recently introduced addressed the same question to her.

“Mr. Sefton is not putting in an appearance this afternoon, Miss Lambert.”

“No, I believe not; he is otherwise engaged.”

“It is very odd,” replied Miss Green significantly; “but Mr. Sefton always is engaged when his sister gives one of her parties. I am told he hates society, and that sort of thing. Isn’t it a pity that he should be so different from Edna? She is a darling, and so charming, but her brother—” and here Miss Green shrugged her shoulders, and her keen black eyes seemed to demand Bessie’s opinion; but Bessie made no rejoinder. She was not much prepossessed with Miss Green, and left her as soon as politeness allowed her, to sit with an old lady who was very chatty and amusing, and who called her “my dear” at every word.

It was no use trying to speak to Edna; she was always surrounded by a group of young people. [147]
Once or twice the thought crossed Bessie’s mind, how Mr. Sinclair would like to see her laughing and talking so long with that handsome Captain Grant. She was not exactly flirting—Bessie would not do her that injustice—but she allowed him to pay her a great deal of attention. It struck her that Mrs.Sefton was uneasy, for she called her to her side once.

“My dear Miss Lambert, I cannot attract Edna’s attention, and I want to speak to her particularly; she is somewhere in the shrubberies with that tall man with the dark mustache—Captain Grant. I spoke to her as she passed just now, but neither of them heard me.”

“Shall I go and fetch her, Mrs. Sefton?”

“I shall be very glad if you will do so, my dear.” And Bessie at once started in pursuit. She overtook them by the summer-house. Edna looked rather bored as she received her mother’s message, though she at once obeyed it; but Captain Grant kept his place at her side.

Mrs.Sefton received him rather coldly.

“Edna,” she said, addressing her daughter, “I want to speak to you about the Mackenzie’s; they are sitting quite alone, and no one is talking to them; and that tall brother of their’s has not played a single game.”

“That is his own fault. I offered him Marian Atherton for a partner ages ago, but he plays badly; as for the girls, they keep aloof from everybody. I introduced Mr. Sayers and Major Sparkes to [148]
them, but they have evidently frightened them away. Mamma, are we engaged for Thursday? because Captain Grant wants us to go and see the officers play polo.”

“That is the day I am going up to town, Edna.”

“But you can put it off,” she interposed eagerly. “It will be such fun. Mrs. Grant is to give us tea, and it will be such a treat for Bessie.”

“My mother is counting upon the pleasure of seeing you all, Mrs. Sefton. She has been unable to call, but she is hoping to make your acquaintance in this way.”

“She is very kind, Captain Grant,” returned Mrs. Sefton stiffly; “but unfortunately, as my daughter knows, I have a very important engagement for that day.”

“I am extremely sorry to hear it; still, if the young ladies care to drive over, my mother will chaperone them,” persisted Captain Grant; “or perhaps their brother.”

“Oh, of course! I forgot Richard,” exclaimed Edna, disregarding her mother’s evident objections.

Mrs. Sefton looked annoyed, but she said civilly:

“I will see what Richard thinks; but you must not take anything for granted, Edna, until I have spoken to him.”

"Oh, I will tease him into taking us," returned Edna gayly. "I do love polo, and I am sure Bessie will be delighted. Now we must start another game, Captain Grant." And before her mother could [149] interpose Edna had crossed the lawn with him.

"Shall you be very disappointed if you do not see polo, Miss Lambert?" asked Mrs. Sefton presently.

"No, indeed. But I am afraid Edna will be; she seems to have set her heart on going."

"Richard will not take her," returned Mrs. Sefton; "he has a strong objection to Captain Grant; and I must own I think he is right. He is very handsome, but he has not a straightforward look. I have no wish to see him intimate here. He is forward and pushing, and does not take a rebuff. But Edna does not agree with me," with a quick, impatient sigh.

Captain Grant's unfortunate invitation entirely marred the harmony of the evening. Directly the guests had left, the family sat down to a cold collation, instead of a regular dinner. Richard had only just come in and taken his place, declaring that he was as hungry as a hunter, when Edna informed him of their plans for Thursday.

"Mamma has to go up to town, so she cannot possibly go with us, and the carriage will have to fetch her from the station, so you must drive us over to Staplehurst in your dog-cart, Ritchie. I dare say Bessie will think that fun."

Richard glanced uneasily at his stepmother before he answered, as though he wished for her [150] opinion, and she gave him a significant look.

"I am very sorry, Edna, but I am afraid it is impossible. I have to go over to Fordham on business, and I cannot possibly be back until six."

"On some stupid farming business, I suppose," returned Edna, and it was evident her temper could ill brook the contradiction. Her color rose, and there was an ominous sparkle in her eye; but Richard answered composedly:

"Yes; I have to meet Medway and Stephenson. I am sorry to disappoint you and Miss Lambert but Thursday is never a free day with me."

"No, indeed, nor any other day of the week when I want you to do anything," returned Edna, with rising excitement. "Now don't make any more excuses, Richard. Do you think I am a child to believe in your Medways and Stephensons? I saw you look at mamma before you answered, and you think she does not wish me to go."

"My darling, why need you excite yourself so?" exclaimed Mrs. Sefton.

"It is you that excite me, mamma, you and Richard. You have got some foolish notion in your heads about Captain Grant, just because the poor man is civil to me. You treat me, both of you, as though I were a baby—as though I could not be trusted to take care of myself. It is very unjust," [151] continued Edna, "and I will not bear it from Richard."

"I confess I don't see the gist of your remarks," returned her brother, who was now growing angry in his turn; "and I don't think all this can be very amusing to Miss Lambert. If my mother has an objection to your keeping up an acquaintance with Captain Grant, it is your duty to give the thing up. In my opinion she is right; he is not the sort of friend for you, Edna, and his mother is disliked by all the officers' wives. I should think Sinclair would have a right to object to your frequent visits to Staplehurst."

But Edna was in no mood to listen to reason.

"Neville knows better than to state his objections to me," she returned haughtily; "and it is quite unnecessary to drag his name into the present conversation. I will only trouble you to answer me one question: Do you absolutely refuse to do me this favor, to drive Miss Lambert and me over to Staplehurst on Thursday?"

"I must refuse," returned Richard firmly. "It is quite true that my engagement can be put off, but it is so evident that my mother objects to the whole thing, that I will not be a party to your disobeying her wishes."

Edna rose from the table and made him a profound courtesy. "Thank you for your moral lecture, Richard; but it is quite thrown away. I am not going to be controlled like a child. If you [152] will not take us, Bessie and I will go alone. I quite mean it, mamma." And Edna marched angrily out of the room.

"Oh, dear," observed Mrs. Sefton fretfully; "I have not seen her so put out for months; it must have been your manner, Richard. You were so hard on the poor child. Now she will go and make herself ill with crying."

"Did I misunderstand you?" asked Richard, astonished at this. "Did you wish me to take them, after all?"

"Of course not; what an absurd question! I would not have Edna go for worlds. Neville only said the other day how much he disliked the Grants, and how he hoped Edna kept them at a distance. I think he has heard something to Captain Grant's disadvantage; but you know how wilful she is; you might have carried your point with a little tact and *finesse*, but you are always so clumsy with

Edna."

"You did not help me much," returned Richard rather bitterly. "You left me to bear the brunt of Edna's temper, as usual. Why did you not tell her yourself your reasons for disliking her to go? But, no; I am to be the scapegoat, as usual, and Edna will not speak to me for a week." And so saying he pushed his chair away and walked to the window. [153]

Mrs. Sefton did not answer her stepson. Most likely her conscience told her that his reproach was a just one. She only glanced at Bessie's grieved face and downcast eyes, and proposed to retire.

The drawing-room was empty when they entered it, and as Bessie noticed Mrs. Sefton's wistful look round the room, she said timidly:

"May I go and talk to Edna?"

"No, my dear; far better not," was the reply. "Edna has a hot temper; she takes after her poor father in that. We must give her time to cool. I will go to her myself presently. She was very wrong to answer Richard in that way, but he has so little tact."

Bessie did not trust herself to reply. She took her book to the window, that her hostess might not find it incumbent on her to talk, and in a short time Mrs. Sefton left the room. Richard entered it a moment later.

"Are you alone?" he asked, in some surprise. "I suppose my mother has gone up to Edna?"

"Yes; she is uneasy about her. Shall I play to you a little, Mr. Sefton? It is getting too dark to read." Bessie made this overture as a sort of amends to Richard, and the friendly little act seemed to soothe him.

"You are very kind. I should like it of all things," he returned gratefully. So Bessie sat down and played her simple tunes and sung her little songs until the young man's perturbed spirits were calmed and quieted by the pure tones of the girlish voice; and presently when she paused for a minute, he said: [154]

"It is awfully good of you to take all this trouble for me."

"Oh, no, it is not," replied Bessie, smiling. "I like singing; besides, you are feeling dull this evening; your talk with your sister has upset you."

"No one ever noticed before if I were dull or not," he replied, with a sigh; "but I am afraid that sounds ungracious. I think we owe you an apology, Miss Lambert, for airing our family disagreements in your presence. I am more sorry than I can say that you should have been subjected to this unpleasantness."

"Oh, never mind me," returned Bessie cheerfully. "I am only sorry for all of you. I dare say Edna did not mean half she said; people say all sorts of things when they are angry. I am afraid she is bitterly disappointed. I have heard her say before how fond she is of watching polo; but I dare say she will soon forget all about it."

"I cannot flatter myself with that belief. Edna does not so easily forget when her whims are crossed. I dare say she will send me to Coventry all the week; but I can't help that. Nothing would induce me to drive her over to Staplehurst, and she will hardly carry out her threat of going without me."

"Of course not," and Bessie fairly laughed.

"No, it was an idle threat; but all the same it is very vexatious." But Bessie would not let him dwell on the grievance. She began telling him about Tom, and a funny scrape he had got into last term; and this led to a conversation about her home, and here Bessie grew eloquent; and she was in the midst of a description of Cliffe and its environs when Mrs. Sefton reappeared, looking fagged and weary, and informed them that Edna had a headache and had retired to bed. [155]

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CHAPTER XII. [156]

THE FIRST SUNDAY AT THE GRANGE.

THE unfortunate dispute between Edna and her brother had taken place on Saturday evening, and as Bessie went up to her room that night she made up her mind that the first Sunday at Oatlands would be a failure, as far as enjoyment was concerned.

“I never can be happy myself unless I see others happy round me,” thought Bessie, rather mournfully; “and Edna has taken this disappointment so badly that I am afraid she will make us all suffer for it.” But in this opinion she was wrong. Her acquaintance with Edna had been brief, and she had no suspicion of the intense pride that blended with Edna’s wilfulness, nor of the tenacity, strange in such a bright young creature, that could quietly maintain its purpose under a careless, light-hearted exterior.

Edna had evidently been ashamed of her outburst of temper on the previous evening, for she came down on Sunday morning looking a little pale and subdued, and very gentle in her manner to her mother and Bessie. She seemed to ignore Richard; beyond a cold good morning she did not [157] vouchsafe him a word or a look; and as all his overtures toward reconciliation were passed over in chilling silence, he soon left her to herself.

They all went to church together, and as they walked through the lanes Edna seemed to recover her buoyancy. She laughed and chatted with her mother, and made sprightly speeches in her usual way; and no one could have judged from her manner that there was a spot of bitterness under the smooth surface—an angry consciousness that Richard had dared to cross her will.

Ah, well! there are many beside Edna who enter God’s house with their darling sin hugged close to their bosom, fondled and cherished. Truly we may say we are miserable sinners, and that there is no health in us, for the black plague spot is often hidden under the white vesture, undetected by human insight, but clearly legible to the “Eye that seeth not as man seeth.”

Once Bessie looked up from her hymn-book as Edna’s clear, high notes reached her ear. Edna seemed singing with all her heart:

“Oh, Paradise! Oh, Paradise!
Who does not crave for rest?”

Her brown eyes were soft with feeling, there was a sweet, almost angelic look upon her face; a [158] passing emotion possessed her. Alas, that such moods should be transitory! And yet it has ever been so in the world’s history. Unsanctified human nature is always fickle, and the “Hosanna” of yesterday become the “Crucify Him” of to-day.

After their early luncheon, Edna asked Bessie if she would go with her to see the Athertons.

“Mamma indulges in a nap on Sunday afternoons,” she explained, “and as I am not fond of my own company, I run in and have a chat with the girls.”

“If you would excuse me,” returned Bessie, looking rather uncomfortable, “I would so much rather stay at home. You see, I have been accustomed to spend Sunday very quietly. We have never paid visits as some people do. Church and Sunday-school and a little sacred music and reading, and the day soon passes. If you do not mind, I would rather sit in the garden, or take a stroll through those lovely lanes, than go to the Athertons’.”

Edna looked exceedingly amused at this speech, and at Bessie’s hot cheeks.

“My dear Daisy, don’t look so perturbed. This is Liberty Hall, and our guests always do exactly as they please. I would not interfere with your little prudish ways for the world. I do not require your company in the least. You may retire to your own room and read the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ [159] with the blinds down, if you please, and mamma and I will not say a word. There’s Blair’s ‘Sermons’ in the attic, and Hervey’s ‘Meditations Among the Tombs.’ They are a bit dusty, perhaps, but you won’t object to that, for they are full of wholesome and cheerful reading.”

“Thank you,” returned Bessie, undisturbed by this light banter. “But I brought a book from home, in which I am much interested—‘Bishop Hannington’s Life’—and as you are so good as to spare me, I mean to explore some of those shady lanes; they are so nice and quiet.”

Edna was about to make another mischievous rejoinder, but as she looked at Bessie she refrained. Bessie’s contented, gentle expression, the quiet dignity that seemed to invest her girlishness, closed Edna’s mouth.

“She is a good little thing, and I won’t tease her,” she thought. And she refrained with much magnanimity from one of her droll speeches when Maud Atherton asked where Miss Lambert was.

“She preferred taking a walk,” returned Edna; which was the truth, but not the whole truth, for, as she said to herself, “those girls shall not have the chance of laughing at my dear little Bessie.” And she cleverly changed the conversation to a safer topic; for she was quite a diplomatist in her small way. [160]

“Edna is really very good-natured,” thought Bessie gratefully, as she sauntered happily through the leafy lanes.

How delicious the air felt! It was June, and yet there was still the crispness of the spring. She felt as though she and the birds had this beautiful world to themselves, and the twitterings and rustlings in the thicket were the only sounds that broke the Sabbath stillness.

Bessie had just turned into a sunny bit of road when an abject-looking white dog with a black patch over his eye suddenly wriggled himself through a half-closed gate.

“Why, I do believe that is Bill Sykes,” thought Bessie, as the creature stood looking at her. “Bill,

what are you doing so far from home?" Bill wagged his tail feebly in a deprecating manner. "Why don't you walk like a gentleman?" continued Bessie, and, to her great amusement, the dog rose solemnly on his hind legs and commenced stalking down the lane. Bessie burst into a laugh that was echoed by another voice.

"Well done, old Bill." And, looking up, Bessie saw Richard Sefton leaning on the gate, with his dogs round him. "Don't move, Miss Lambert," he continued hastily; "stand where you are till I join you." And as Bessie looked rather surprised at this peremptory speech, he walked quickly to [161] her side and put his hand on her shoulder. "A friend, Leo. Excuse my unceremoniousness, Miss Lambert, but Leo needs an introduction;" and at his words a huge mastiff, who had been eyeing Bessie in a dubious manner, walked quietly up to her.

"Will it be safe for me to pat him?" asked Bessie, as she looked at the big tawny head and heavy jowl of the magnificent beast; but the brown sunken eyes had a friendly expression in them.

"Oh, yes, Leo will be as quiet as a lamb; and what is more, he will never forget you. You may go within the reach of his chain any day, and he will behave to you like a gentleman. Leo is an aristocrat, and never forgets *noblesse oblige*."

"He is a splendid animal," returned Bessie; and then she noticed the other dogs. They were all there: Gelert and Brand, and Juno and her puppies, and Spot and Tim.

"We have been for a long walk," observed Richard, as they turned their faces homeward. "The dogs have been wild with spirits, and I had some difficulty with them at first. You see, they make the most of their weekly holiday."

"What do you do on a wet Sunday?" asked Bessie curiously.

"Well, I smoke a pipe with them in the stable, and so give them the pleasure of my company. I [162] do hate disappointing dumb animals, Miss Lambert—they have their feelings as well as we have, and I think we ought to behave handsomely to them. I remember when I was quite a little fellow my mother taught me that."

"Your mother!" in some surprise, for somehow Mrs. Sefton never gave Bessie the impression that her relations with Richard were of the motherly sort.

"Oh, I mean my then mother," he returned hastily, as though answering her unspoken thought. "I was very young when she died, but I have never forgotten her. She was not a lady by birth, you know; only a farmer's or yeoman's daughter, but there is not a lady living who is prettier or sweeter than she was."

"I am glad you feel like that to your mother," replied Bessie, in a sympathetic voice that seemed to ask for further confidence.

Richard Sefton had never spoken of his mother to any one before. What could have drawn the beloved name from his lips? Was it this girl's soothing presence, or the stillness of the hour and the quiet beauty of the scene round him? Richard was impressionable by nature, and possibly each of these things influenced him. It was a new pleasure to speak to a kindly listener of the memories that lay hidden in his faithful heart.

"Yes, and yet I was a mere child when I lost her," he went on, and there was a moved look on [163] his face; "but I remember her as plainly as I see you now. She was so young and pretty—every one said so. I remember once, when I was lying in my little cot one night, too hot and feverish to sleep, that she came up to me in her white gown—it was made of some shining stuff, silk or satin —and she had a sparkling cross on her neck. I remember how it flashed in my eyes as she stooped to kiss me, and how she carried me to the window to look at the stars. 'Are they not bright, Ritchie?' she said; 'and beyond there is the great beautiful heaven, where my little boy will go some day;' and then she stood rocking me in her arms. I heard her say plainly, 'Oh, that I and my little child were there now!' And as she spoke something wet fell on my face. I have heard since that she was not happy—not as happy as she ought to have been, poor mother!"

"And is that all you can remember?" asked Bessie gently.

"Oh, no; I have many vague recollections of making daisy chains with my mother on the lawn; of a great yellow cowslip ball flung to me in the orchard; of a Sunday afternoon, when some pictures of Samuel, and David and Goliath, were shown me; and many other little incidents. Children do remember, whatever grown-up people say."

"I think it would be terrible to lose one's mother, especially when one is a child," observed [164] Bessie, in a feeling voice.

"I have found it so, I assure you," replied Richard gravely. "My stepmother was young, and did not understand children—boys especially. I seemed somewhat in the way to every one but my father. A lonely childhood is a sad thing; no success nor happiness in after life seems to make up for it."

"I understand what you mean; father always says children claim happiness as a right."

"It is most certainly their prerogative; but I fear I am boring you with my reminiscences."

"Not at all; you are giving me a great pleasure, Mr. Sefton. I do like knowing about people—their real selves, I mean, not their outside; it is so much more interesting than any book. I think,

as a rule, people shut themselves up too much, and so they exclude light and sympathy."

"One longs for sympathy sometimes," said Richard; but he turned away his face as he spoke.

"Yes; every one needs it, and most of us get it," replied Bessie, feeling very sorry for the young man in her heart. He was too manly and too generous to complain openly of his stepmother's treatment, but Bessie understood it all as well as though he had spoken. [165]

"In a large family there is no complaint to be made on this score. When I have a grievance there is always mother or Hatty, or Christine and father. We take all our big things to father. Oh, at home, no one is left out in the cold."

"I think your home must be a happy one, Miss Lambert—but here we are at The Grange. I must bid you good-bye for the present, for I have an errand in the village."

But Richard did not explain that his errand was to sit with a crippled lad, whose life of suffering debarred him from all pleasure. If there were one person in the world whom Bob Rollton adored it was "the young squire."

"He is a real gentleman, he is," Bob would say; "and not one of your make-believe gentry. It is all along of him and Spot and the little 'un, Tim, that I don't hate Sundays; but he comes reg'lar, does the squire; and he brings some rare good books with him; and Tim curls himself up on my blanket, and Spot sits on the window-sill, making believe to listen, and we have a good old time."

Other people beside Bob could have cited instances of the young squire's thoughtfulness and active benevolence; but Richard Sefton was one who did good by stealth, and almost as though he were ashamed of it, and neither his stepmother nor Edna guessed how much he was beloved in the village.

Mrs. Sefton was one of those people who never believed in virtue, unless it had the special hall-mark that conventionality stamps upon it, and Richard's simple charities, his small self-denials, would have appeared despicable in her eyes. She herself gave largely to the poor at Christmas; blankets and clothing by the bale found their way to the East End. The vicar of Melton called her "The benevolent Mrs. Sefton," but she and Edna never entered a cottage, never sat beside a sick bed, nor smoothed a dying pillow. Edna would have been horrified at such a suggestion. What had her bright youth to do with disease, dirt and misery? "Don't tell me about it," was her usual cry, when any one volunteered to relate some piteous story. That such things should be allowed in a world governed by a merciful Providence was incredible, terrible, but that she should be brought into contact with it was an offence to her ladylike judgment. [166]

Many a girl has thought like Edna Sefton, and yet a royal princess could enter a squalid cottage, and take the starving babe to her bosom; and from that day to this Princess Alice has been a type of loving womanhood.

Edna had not returned from the Athertons when Bessie entered the house, so she went alone to the evening service. As the service was at half-past six, an informal meal was served at a quarter past eight, to allow the servants to attend church. Bessie was rather surprised at this mark of thoughtfulness, but she found out afterward that Richard had induced his stepmother, with some difficulty, to give up the ceremonious late dinner. She urged as an objection that neither she nor Edna ever attended the evening service; but he overruled this, and carried his point. [167]

Just before service commenced, Bessie was surprised to see him enter the church. She had no idea that he would come, but he told her afterward that it was his usual practice.

Just as they were starting for the homeward walk they were joined by a cousin of the Athertons. Bessie had seen her the previous day. She was a fair, interesting-looking girl, dressed in deep mourning. Her name was Grace Donnerton. Richard seemed to know her well. He had evidently waited for her to overtake them, and they all walked on happily together.

Bessie was much taken with her. She was the daughter of a clergyman, who had a large parish in Leeds, and she interested Bessie very much in her account of her own and her sister's work. They had lately lost their mother, and it was surprising to hear of the way in which these young creatures helped their father in his good work.

"When any one is ill, we generally help in nursing them," Grace had said, quite simply. "There are so many of us that we can easily be spared, and we are so fond of our poor people. We have all attended ambulance lectures, and Lizzie, that is my eldest sister, is now training for a year at a hospital. She is very strong, and so fond of nursing, and she hopes to be very useful when she comes home. There are five of us, and we take turns in being papa's housekeeper. Emma, who is very clever, manages the mother's meeting, and the rest of us do district work." [168]

Bessie was so interested by all this that she was sorry when the walk drew to a close. After they had said good-bye to Miss Donnerton, Bessie said "What a nice girl! I am sure I should like to know more of her."

"Yes; I knew she would be your sort; that is why I waited for her," replied Richard, as he opened the gate.

Bessie wondered over this speech as she ran up to her room. "My sort! what could he have meant by that?" she said to herself. "I only wish I were like Miss Donnerton, for I am sure she is sweet and good. Well, it has been a lovely day. I have not wished myself at home once. Now I

must devote myself to Edna."

Edna looked a little tired and bored, and Bessie did not find it easy to interest her. She [169] appeared to be quite indifferent to Miss Donnerton's merits.

"Oh, Grace! so you like her, do you? Well, I must confess she is too good for me. I never found her say anything interesting yet, but then I did not talk to her about poor people," and Edna sneered slightly in a ladylike way. "I think all the girls were relieved when she went to church, for we could not get her to talk about anything."

Yes, Edna was decidedly impracticable that evening. She would not be induced to play or sing; she was not in the humor for sacred music; no, she did not want to read; and everything was slow and stupid.

Bessie coaxed her into the garden at last, and the soft evening air refreshed her in spite of herself.

"Don't you ever feel *ennuyée* and horrid?" she asked, in a sort of apologetic manner, presently.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so; at least, I don't quite know what you mean," returned Bessie; but she was not thinking of the question. The stars were glittering overhead, and Richard Sefton's words recurred to her. How clearly she could see it all! The little lonely boy in his cot, the young mother coming up to soothe him. She could picture her so plainly in the white shining gown and the sparkling cross, with the tears falling on the child's face. "Oh, that I and my little child were [170] there now!" Oh, how sad it all sounded; and she had gone, and not taken the boy with her. "Poor Mr. Sefton!" thought Bessie, as she recalled the sad, quiet tones and the moved look on Richard's face.

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CHAPTER XIII. [171]

WHITEFOOT IN REQUISITION.

Three days after this Bessie wrote the following letter—it was commenced on Wednesday, and finished on Thursday morning:

"My Dear Little Hattie: It is your turn for a regular long letter, as I have already written to mother and Christine. I don't write to father because he is so busy, and letters bother him; but you must tell him all the news. You cannot think how Edna laughs at my correspondence; she always says it is such waste of time; but you and I know better than that. It is just the one thing that I can do for you all, now that I am away, and I am not so selfish that I grudge an hour in the day. I know how disappointed one face looks when there is no letter from Bessie in the morning, and so I lay down my book and scribble away as I am doing now.

"I am having a lovely time. I do not think I have ever played so much in my life before. It is such a new thing, and yet it is rather nice, too, to hear Edna say in the morning, 'Now, what shall we do to-day?' as though one's whole duty were to amuse one's self. Father always says, 'Whatever you do, do it thoroughly,' and I am carrying out his maxim to the letter, for I do nothing but enjoy myself, and I do it thoroughly. On Monday I [172] finished my letter to Crissy before breakfast, and afterward, as Edna was busy, I spent a long morning reading 'The Village on the Cliff.' I have finished it now, and think it lovely. I do enjoy these mornings in the garden; but I must not read too many stories, only Edna says I shall like 'Old Kensington,' and I must indulge myself with that. I assure you we make quite a picture. Mac lies at my feet, and Spot generally curls himself up on my lap. Tim prefers lying on the lawn and keeping an eye upon the kitten. She is such a droll little creature, and her antics quite distract me.

"Well, I had this delicious morning to myself, and in the afternoon we played tennis at the Athertons'. There were no visitors, but we girls played by ourselves, and I had a long talk with Grace Donnerton. I liked her better than ever; but just as she was talking to me about her sister's hospital, Maud Atherton disturbed us by telling us tea was ready.

"The next morning Edna drove me over to Kimberley—such a lovely drive; and the ponies were so frisky and went so well. We called at a beautiful old house, called Kimberley Hall—I never saw such a place—and had luncheon there. Mrs. Blondell, our hostess, is such a dear old lady, with pretty white curls, and such a sweet old face. Her husband is such a handsome old man; but he is quite deaf, and no one seems to make him hear anything except his wife, and she goes up and speaks to him in a low, distinct voice,

and tells him things, and he brightens up at once. He is such a courtly old man, and pays little old-fashioned compliments. He took Edna's hand and said, 'We do not often see a pretty young face, my dear, but it is a very pleasant sight. I remember your mother when she was a girl, and a fine, handsome creature she was. I think her daughter does her credit, eh, Dolly?' And Dolly—that is the dear old lady's name—put her pretty old hand on [173] his arm, and said, 'She does indeed, Rupert, and she has got a look of our Maisie about her;' and then they looked at each other in such a way.

"Edna explained it to me as we drove home. She said they had one child, a beautiful girl, who lived until she was seventeen, and then died of some wasting disease. She had been dead fifteen years, but the old couple had never got over her loss. 'I am there often,' Edna went on, 'but I have never once been without hearing Maisie's name mentioned; they are always talking about her. One day Mrs. Blondell took me upstairs and showed me all her things. There were her little gowns, most of them white, folded in the big wardrobe. 'She was to have worn this at her first ball,' said the poor woman, pulling down a lace dress; it looked quite fresh somehow, only the satin slip was a trifle discolored. There were the shoes, and the silk stockings, and a case of pearls, and the long gloves. 'She would have looked lovely in it,' she went on, smoothing out the folds with her tremulous fingers. 'Rupert says she would have made hearts ache. Thank you my dear, you are very kind,' for I could not help hugging the dear old thing. It made me cry, too, to hear her. 'I go there very often because they like to see me; they will have it I am like Maisie, but I am not half so pretty.' And Edna laughed, though her eyes were moist, and touched up Jill rather smartly.

"We had some people to dinner that evening, so Edna made me put on my Indian muslin, which she said looked very nice. She wore a soft white silk herself, which suited her admirably. She has some beautiful dresses which she showed me; she says her mother thinks nothing too good for her, and showers presents on her. She gets tired of her dresses before they are half worn out. I was half afraid she was going to offer me one, for she looked at me rather wistfully, but I made a pretext to leave the room. I enjoyed myself very much that evening. The curate took me in to dinner, and I found him very [174] clever and amusing, and he talked so much that, though I was very hungry, I could hardly get enough to eat; but Edna, who declared that she had had no dinner either, brought me up a great plate of cake when we went to bed. Edna sang beautifully that evening, and the curate—his name is Horton—sung too, and Florence Atherton brought her violin. I had never heard a lady play the violin before, but Edna tells me I am old-fashioned, and that it is all the rage at present, and certainly Miss Atherton played extremely well.

"Good-bye for the present, dear Hatty; I will add more to-morrow. This is a sort of journal, you know, not a letter, and I shall write a little bit each day.

"'Do be nice and lengthy,' you said, and I am sure I am carrying out your wish."

"Thursday morning.

"Well, here I am again sitting at my writing-table, pen in hand, and 'the top of the morning to ye, darlint,' as Biddy used to say; but my Hatty will be still asleep, I know, as she is not one of the strong ones, poor little Hatty! Such a wonderful thing happened to me yesterday—I actually had a riding-lesson. Do tell father that, for he knows how I used to envy Tom when Colonel Miles gave him a mount. It happened in this way. Edna was talking at breakfast time about her ride in the Row, and Mr. Sefton said suddenly, 'How would you like to learn to ride, Miss Lambert?' and not thinking he meant anything by the question, I said, 'I should like it of all things. I do long for a good gallop.'

'Oh, you must not gallop before you trot,' he returned, quite seriously; 'Edna, if you still have your old habit by you, I don't see why I should not give Miss Lambert a lesson. Old Whitefoot is doing nothing for her living.' [175]

"Well—would you believe it?—he was quite in earnest, and Edna, who is very good-natured, seemed to think it a good bit of fun, for she jumped up from the table and told her brother to bring Whitefoot round in half an hour; and then she made me go upstairs with her and put on a beautiful blue habit, which seemed to me quite new; but she said she had a much better one made for her last season. It fitted me tolerably, and only required a little alteration to be perfect—and I assure you I hardly knew myself in it, I looked so nice; but a dark habit is always so becoming. Edna looks like a picture in hers.

"Well, when we went downstairs, there was Whitefoot—such a pretty brown mare—with Mr. Sefton standing beside her, and Brown Bess was being brought round from the stable. I was just a little nervous at first, but Mr. Sefton was very kind and patient; he taught me how to gather up my reins, and how to hold myself; and he would not mount for some time, but walked beside me for a little distance, telling me things, and when he saw I felt less strange he jumped on Brown Bess, and we had a canter together.

"My dear Hatty, it was just delicious! I never felt happier in my life. But Mr. Sefton would not let me ride long; he said I should be very stiff at first, and that we should have a longer ride to-morrow, when Edna would be with us; and of course I had to submit.

"I was far too lazy to play tennis that afternoon, so Edna made me get into the hammock, and I had a nice, quiet time with my book, while she and the Athertons had their usual games, and bye and bye Grace Donnerton came and sat by me, and we had another nice talk.

"The next morning Edna said she would ride with us, so Mr. Sefton ordered the horses directly after breakfast, and we had a glorious ride for more than two hours. I found trotting rather difficult at first, but Mr. Sefton would not let Edna laugh at my awkwardness, and he encouraged me by telling me that I should soon ride well, and after [176] that I did not mind a bit. Edna really rides perfectly; it was a pleasure to watch her. Once she left us and had a tearing gallop by herself over the common. The other horses got excited and wanted to gallop too, but Mr. Sefton held Whitefoot's reins, and managed to quiet them both with some difficulty. I thought Edna looked lovely as she rode back to us; she had such a beautiful color, and her eyes looked so bright I don't wonder people admire her so.

"Edna was going to an archery meeting that afternoon with the Athertons, but as there was no room for me in their wagonette, I stayed at home quietly with Mrs. Sefton, and managed to make myself useful, for several people called, and I had to make tea and help entertain them; but I got a quiet hour in my favorite garden seat. Edna brought Florence and Maud Atherton back to dinner, and we had a very merry evening, playing all sorts of games. Mr. Sefton came into the drawing-room for a little while, but he did not stay long. I think the girls quizzed him, and made him uncomfortable. It is such a pity that he is not more at his ease in society; people think he is stupid and cannot talk, but he is really very intelligent, and knows a great deal about a good many subjects. There is to be no ride to-morrow. Mrs. Sefton is going up to town on business, and Edna is to accompany her to the station, for, although Mr. Sefton suggested that I should go out with him for an hour, I could see that they did not second it.

"Now, darling, I have told you everything, and I think you will own that I am having a good time. I hope all this pleasure is not spoiling me, but I think of you all as much as ever, and especially of my Hatty. Are you very dull without me, dear? And how do you sleep? Write and tell me everything—how mother looks, and what Tom said in his last [177] letter, and if father is busy. And if any of you want me very badly, you must say so, and I will come home at once, though I do want some more rides, and Edna has promised to drive me over to Kimberley again. But there is the gong, and I must run down to breakfast. Good-bye, my dearest Hatty.

"Your loving
"Bessie."

Bessie had written out of the fullness of her girlish content. She wanted to share her pleasure with Hatty. Happiness did not make her selfish, nor did new scenes and varied experiences shut out home memories, for Bessie was not one of those feeble natures who are carried out of themselves by every change of circumstances, neither had she the chameleon-like character that develops new tendencies under new influences; at The Grange she was just the same simple, kindly Bessie Lambert as she had been at Cliffe.

After all, she was not disappointed of her ride. Jennings, the groom, had a commission to do at Leigh, and Richard proposed to his stepmother that Bessie should ride over there too. Jennings was an old servant, and very trusty and reliable, and she might be safely put in his charge. To this Mrs. Sefton made no objection, and Bessie had a delightful morning, and made good progress under Jennings' respectful hints. Bessie had just taken off her habit, and was preparing for luncheon, when Edna entered the room. [178]

"What dress are you going to wear this afternoon, Bessie?" she asked rather abruptly, and her manner was a little off-hand. "I shall be in white, of course, and I shall wear my gray dust cloak for the roads, but——"

"What dress!" returned Bessie, rather puzzled at the question; she was hot and tired from her long ride, and had been looking forward to an afternoon of delicious idleness. "Is any one coming? I mean, are we going anywhere?"

"Why, of course," replied Edna impatiently, and she did not seem in the best of tempers; "it is Thursday, is it not? and we are engaged for the polo match. You must make haste and finish dressing, for we must start directly after luncheon."

"Do you mean that Mr. Sefton is going to drive us over to Staplehurst, after all?" asked Bessie, feeling very much astonished at Richard's change of plan; he had not even spoken on the subject at breakfast-time, but he must have arranged it afterward.

"Richard!" rather contemptuously. "Richard is by this time lunching at the Fordham Inn, with half a dozen stupid farmers. Have you forgotten that he flatly refused to drive us at all? Oh, I have not forgotten his lecture, I assure you, though it does not seem to have made much impression on you. Well, why are you looking at me with such big eyes, Bessie, as though you found it difficult to understand me?"

"Because I don't understand you Edna," replied Bessie frankly. "You know both your mother [179]

and brother objected to Captain Grant's invitation; you cannot surely intend to go in opposition to their wishes."

"Their wishes! I suppose you mean Richard's wish, for mamma never opened her lips on the subject; she just listened to Richard's tirade."

"But she did not contradict him; and surely you must have seen from her face that she agreed with every word." Bessie did not dare to add that Mrs. Sefton had expressed her strong disapproval of Captain Grant to her. "She was looking at you so anxiously all the time."

"Oh, that is only mamma's fussiness. Of course I know she does not want me to go. I don't mean to pretend that I am not aware of that, but mamma knows that I generally have my own way in this sort of thing, and she did not actually forbid it."

"Oh, Edna! what can that matter when you know her real wishes?"

"My dear, don't preach; your words will not influence me in the least. I told Richard, before mamma, that I should go, and I mean to carry out my word. You are a free agent, Bessie; I cannot oblige you to go with me, but as the Athertons are all engaged, I could not get one of them in your place."

"But if I say I cannot go, what will you do then?" asked Bessie anxiously. [180]

"In that case I should go alone," returned Edna coldly; "but I should think you were unkind to desert me."

"I should have to bear that," replied Bessie rather sadly; "it is not what you would think of me, but what I ought to do. Oh, Edna, you are placing me in a very difficult position. I do not know how to act, and the whole thing distresses me so. Do give it up for my sake, and just to please me; do Edna, dear."

"I cannot give it up," was Edna's answer; "but I will not argue any more about it. Make up your mind quickly, Bessie, for there is no time to lose." And so saying, she left the room, and a moment afterward Bessie heard her ringing for her maid.

Bessie had never felt more distressed; she was so tired and so perplexed how to act, that she could almost have cried from worry. "If I go with her, will not Mrs. Sefton and Mr. Richard have a right to be offended with me?" she thought. "They will not know that I have tried to turn Edna from her purpose; they do not know me well enough to be sure of my motives. Edna told him that I wanted to see polo played; they may believe that I was willing to go. I cannot bear to put myself in this position; and yet, will it be right to let her go alone? Will they not blame me for that, too? [181] Oh, how I wish I could speak to Mr. Sefton; but he is away. What shall I do? I must decide. It seems such a little thing to pray about, and yet little things bring big consequences. No, I can't moralize; I am too worried. Why can I not see the right thing to do at once?"

Bessie sat and reflected a moment, and then a sudden impulse came to her, and she opened her blotting-case, and wrote a few hurried lines.

"Dear Mrs. Sefton," she wrote, "I am so troubled, I hardly know what to do. Edna has just told me that she intends to drive over to Staplehurst after luncheon to see polo played, and has asked me to accompany her. I cannot induce her to give it up. Please do not think that I have not tried. I know how much you and Mr. Sefton were against it; but I do not think you would wish me to stay behind. She ought not to go alone. I feel you will be less anxious if I go with her." Bessie dashed off these few lines, and then dressed herself hurriedly; but before she had half finished the gong sounded.

As she ran downstairs she met Dixon, the butler, coming out of the dining-room, and putting the note in his hand, begged that he would give it to his mistress directly she returned.

"Certainly, ma'am," replied Dixon civilly; and it struck Bessie that he looked at her in an approving manner. He was an old servant, too, and most likely was accustomed to his young [182] mistress' vagaries. "We expect my mistress home at six, and I will take care she gets the note," he continued, as he opened the door for her.

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CHAPTER XIV. [183]

BESSIE SNUBS A HERO.

"So you are going, after all?" was the only remark made by Edna, as she caught sight of Bessie's gray gown. "Well, be quick; I have nearly finished my luncheon. I thought you were

never coming, and there was no time to lose."

"I will not keep you waiting," returned Bessie, whose healthy young appetite failed her for once. "I am not hungry."

"Nonsense?" said Edna, with restored good-humor. "You will find this mayonnaise excellent. You have had a long ride, and the drive to Staplehurst will take nearly an hour. We shall have a lovely afternoon for our expedition."

Edna was chatting in her old lively fashion. She really looked exquisitely pretty this afternoon, and she seemed to take a delight in her own naughtiness. Her eyes sparkled mischievously every time she looked at Bessie's grave face. She was as frisky as a young colt who had just taken his bit between his teeth and had bolted. Her spirits seemed to rise during her long drive, and she [184] talked and laughed without intermission.

Bessie tried to respond and to make herself agreeable, but her efforts failed signally. She looked forward to the afternoon as a long martyrdom to be endured; the thought of Mrs. Sefton's and Richard's reproachful faces came between her and all enjoyment. Edna took no notice of her unusual gravity; she had gained her end, and obliged Bessie to bear her unwilling company, and so she was satisfied. It was almost a relief to Bessie when the drive was over, and they found themselves at Staplehurst.

Polo was to be played in a large park-like meadow belonging to Staplehurst Hall. As they drove in at the gate, two or three of the officers who were to play were walking about in their bright silk jerseys, while their ponies followed them, led by their grooms. One came up at once, and greeted the young ladies.

"I was on the lookout for you, Miss Sefton," he observed, with a smile that he evidently intended to be winning, but which Bessie thought was extremely disagreeable. "I knew you would not disappoint me, even if Sefton proved obdurate."

"Richard had some stupid farming engagement," returned Edna, "so I brought Miss Lambert instead. Is your mother on the ground, Captain Grant?"

"Yes; let me take you to her," he replied, with alacrity; but it was some time before Jack and Jill [185] made their way to the central point where the ladies were sitting. Several of the officers joined Captain Grant, and there was quite a triumphal procession through the field. Edna sat like a little queen guiding her ponies, and distributing smiles and gay speeches. Admiration and pleasure were as the breath of life to her; she was at once peremptory and gracious; she looked down at her escort with a sort of benign amusement. When Captain Grant handed her out of the low chaise, she made her way through the ladies with the air of a princess.

A tall, high-colored woman, with dark hair, and dressed in rather bad taste, held out her hand and welcomed her warmly.

"My dear, I am so glad to see you; Jem told me you were sure to come. Is this Miss Lambert? Put those chairs closer, Jem. And so your mother could not come. Never mind; I am used to chaperoning young ladies, though I never had girls of my own."

Edna answered civilly, but Bessie soon perceived that Mrs. Grant's conversation was not exactly to her taste. She spoke in a loud voice, and as most of her remarks were about her boy Jem, as she called him, his extraordinary cleverness and good luck at polo, and his merits as a son and officer, it was extremely desirable that they should not be overheard, but Mrs. Grant [186] seemed quite indifferent to the amused looks of the ladies round her, and her broad, good-natured face beamed with smiles as Jem made a fine stroke and won the goal.

"He rides better than any of the men," she exclaimed proudly. "I'll back my boy against any of them. Oh, look, Miss Sefton, Singleton has hit the ball away—no, Jem is galloping after him, he means to carry it. Yes—no—yes! they are through! Bravo, Jem, bravo!" and Mrs. Grant clapped her hands excitedly.

In spite of her uneasiness, it was impossible for Bessie not to become first interested and then absorbed in the game, and for a little while she forgot all about The Grange. She had never seen polo played before, and she was carried away by the excitement of that fascinating but perilous game; the mad rush of the horses across the grass, the quick strokes of the players, the magnificent riding, and the ease and grace with which the officers guided their ponies and leaned over their saddles to strike the ball; the breathless moment when young Singleton rode alone with all the others pursuing him wildly; no wonder Bessie felt enthralled by the novelty of the sight. She uttered a little scream once when the horses and riders all crushed together in a sort of confused melee. [187]

"Is any one hurt?" she exclaimed in much distress; but Edna and Mrs. Grant only laughed.

"You must come with me and have some tea," observed Mrs. Grant, when the match was over. "My lodgings are just by."

Edna hesitated for a moment, and Bessie touched her arm.

"It is already five," she whispered. "Do you see those dark clouds? We shall have a thunder-shower soon; I think it would be better to start for home."

“And be caught in the rain,” replied Edna, with a shrug. “And we have no umbrellas nor waterproofs. No, Bessie; we must take refuge at Mrs. Grant’s until the shower is over. Come along; don’t make a fuss. I do not want to go any more than you do, but it is no use getting wet through; we cannot help it if we are late for dinner.” And so saying, Edna again joined the talkative Mrs. Grant.

Bessie said no more, but all her uneasiness returned as she followed Edna. Mrs. Grant had temporary lodgings in the High Street, over a linen-draper’s shop. She ushered her young guests into a large untidy looking room with three windows overlooking the street. One or two of the other ladies joined them, and one officer after another soon found their way up the steep little staircase, for Mrs. Grant was noted for her hospitality. She called Edna to help her at the tea-table, and Bessie seated herself by one of the windows. No one took much notice of her; her [188]
good-natured partner at tennis, Leonard Singleton, was not among Mrs. Grant’s guests.

Captain Grant brought her some tea, and offered her cake and fruit, but he soon left her to devote himself exclusively to Miss Sefton. Bessie felt very dull, and out in the cold, and yet she had no wish to join the gay group round the tea-table. The room felt close and oppressive; the first heavy drops were pattering on the window; two or three children were running down the street with a yellow dog barking at their heels.

“You will get wet; shall I close the window?” observed a voice behind her, and Bessie started and looked round at the tall, solemn-looking young officer who had been introduced to her two hours previously as “Captain Broughton, not of ours, Miss Lambert.”

“Oh, no, I prefer it open, it is so warm,” replied Bessie hastily.

“Oh, ah, yes! Are you fond of polo?”

“I never saw it played until this afternoon; it is very exciting, but I am sure it must be dangerous.”

“Nothing to speak of; an accident now and then—man half killed last Thursday, though.”

“Oh, dear, how dreadful!”

The solemn-faced officer relaxed into a smile.

“Well, he might have been killed outright in battle, don’t you know; accidents will happen now [189]
and then; it is just luck, you see, and Owen always is such an unlucky beggar.”

Bessie refuted this with some vivacity. She explained that though it might be a man’s duty to die for his country, it was quite another thing to imperil a valuable life on a mere game; but she could make no impression on the solemn-faced captain.

“But it is an uncommonly good game, don’t you know,” he persisted; and Bessie gave up the point, for Captain Broughton’s mind seemed as wooden as his face.

“It was no good talking to such a man,” she observed to Edna, as they drove home; “he said ‘Don’t you know’ at the end of every sentence, and seemed so stupid.”

“Are you talking about Captain Broughton?” asked Edna calmly. “My dear Daisy, it is not always wise to judge by appearances. Captain Broughton is not specially amusing in conversation, but he is a brave fellow. Do you know, he wears the Victoria Cross for his gallantry in saving a wounded soldier; only a private too. Yes; though he was wounded himself, he carried him off the field. He was a village lad—one of his own tenants—who had followed him out to India, and when another ball struck him he just staggered on.”

“Oh, dear,” groaned Bessie; “this is a punishment to me for judging too quickly. To think I had [190]
the opportunity for the first time in my life of talking to a hero, and that I called him stupid! This is a case of entertaining angels unawares. But if one could only know they were angels.”

Edna only laughed at this; but Bessie found food for uncomfortable reflection all the way home. The rain had ceased at last, but not before Edna had grown secretly conscious of the lateness of the hour. It was nearly seven before the weather allowed them to start, and for the last half hour she had stood at the window quite oblivious of Captain Grant’s entreaties that she would make herself comfortable, and evidently deaf to his unmeaning compliments for she answered absently, and with a manner that showed that she was ill at ease.

The moment the rain ceased, she asked him peremptorily to order her pony-chaise round.

“Mamma will be getting anxious at this long delay,” she said, so gravely that Captain Grant dare not disobey her.

“You will come over next Saturday and see our match with the Hussars,” he pleaded, as she gathered up the reins.

“Perhaps; but I will not promise,” she returned, with a nod and a smile. “Oh, dear; how tiresome these last two hours have been. You have not enjoyed yourself a bit. Bessie. I am so [191]
sorry!”

“Oh, never mind.” returned Bessie wearily, and then they had both been silent. Neither was in the mood to enjoy the delicious freshness of the evening; that clear shining after the rain that is

so indescribable, the wet, gleaming hedges, the little sparkling pools, the vivid green of the meadows; for Edna was feeling the reaction after her excitement; and Bessie, tired out with conflicting feelings was thinking regretfully of her unsatisfactory conversation with Captain Broughton.

"It serves me right, after all," she thought penitently. "Father always says that we ought to take trouble to please even the most commonplace, uninteresting person, not to let ourselves be bored by anyone, however uncongenial they may be, and of course he is right. I was just fidgeting about the weather, and how we were to get home, and so I did not try to be entertaining." And here Bessie made a mental resolution to be more charitable in her estimate of people.

She had no idea that Captain Broughton had said to himself as he left her, "Nice little girl, no nonsense about her; not a bad sort, after the women one sees; can talk to a man without looking for a compliment; like her better than Miss Sefton."

Just as the drive was drawing to a close, Bessie roused up from her unwonted depression. They [192] had turned out of the narrow lane, and a wide sweep of country lay before them, bathed in the soft tints of the setting sun. A mass of golden and crimson clouds made the western heavens glorious, the meadows were transfigured in the yellow radiance, every hedgerow and bush seemed touched by an unearthly finger, a sense of distance, of mystery, of tranquil rest seemed to pervade the world.

"Oh, Edna, how beautiful! If only one were an artist to try and paint that."

"Yes; it is a fine evening," remarked Edna carelessly.

"Thank goodness, there is The Grange at last. Yes, there is Richard, evidently on the lookout for us. So I suppose they have finished dinner."

"Did you think we were lost?" she asked with a little air of defiance, as her brother came forward and patted the ponies.

"No," he said gravely; "I told my mother the rain must have detained you. It is a pity you went, Edna. Sinclair has been here two hours. He came down in the same train with mother."

"Neville here!" And Edna's look changed, and she became rather pale. "What has brought him, Richard?"

Richard shrugged his shoulders, and replied that he had not the least idea. He supposed it was [193] a whim. It was evident that Edna was not too well pleased at the news. A little hardness came into her face, and she walked into the house without taking any notice of Bessie.

As Bessie stood hesitating for a moment in the hall, Richard followed her. He had not even looked at her, and poor Bessie felt sure that his manner expressed disapproval.

"Will you not go into the drawing-room, Miss Lambert?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Sinclair is there, is he not? I would rather go upstairs and take off my things. I am very tired." And here Bessie faltered a little.

But to her surprise Richard looked at her very kindly.

"Of course you are tired. You had that long ride; but Edna would not think of that. Take off your things quickly and come down to the dining-room. Dixon will have something ready for you. There is some coffee going into the drawing-room. You will like some?"

"Oh, yes, please," returned Bessie, touched by this thoughtfulness for her comfort. After all, he could not be angry with her. Perhaps she would have time to explain, to ask his opinion, to talk out her perplexity. How comfortable that would be! Bessie would not stay to change her dress, [194] she only smoothed her hair, and ran down.

Richard was waiting for her, and Dixon had just brought in the coffee. When he had gone out of the room she said eagerly:

"Oh, Mr. Sefton, I am so glad to be able to ask you a question. You were not vexed with me for going to Staplehurst with your sister?"

"Vexed!" returned Richard, in a tone that set her mind at rest in a moment. "You acted exactly as I expected you to act. When mother showed me your note I only said, 'I never doubted for a moment what Miss Lambert would do; she would go, of course.'"

"Yes; I only hesitated for a moment; but, oh! what a miserable afternoon it has been!" And as she touched on the various incidents, including her *tête-à-tête* with Captain Broughton, Richard listened with much sympathy.

"I never dreamed for a moment that Edna would go after all, but it was just a piece of childish bravado. The foolish girl does not think of consequences. It is a most unfortunate thing that Sinclair should turn up at this moment; he is a little stiff on these subjects, and I am afraid that he is terribly annoyed."

"Did Mrs. Sefton tell him all about it?"

"My mother? No; she would have given worlds to hide it from him. Edna told him herself that [195]

she was going in her last letter. Oh, you don't know Edna," as Bessie looked extremely surprised at this; "her chief virtue is truthfulness. She will defy you to your face, and trample on all your prejudices, but she will never hide anything."

"And she actually told Mr. Sinclair?"

"Yes she did it to tease him, I believe, because his last letter did not please her. Sinclair has to put up with a good deal, I can tell you, but he wrote back in a great hurry, begging her not to carry out her plan. Sinclair told us both this evening that he could not have written a stronger letter. He told her that he had good reasons for wishing her to see as little as possible of Captain Grant. And when he came down just to give her a pleasant surprise, as he had a leisure evening, it was quite a shock to him to find his entreaties had been disregarded, and that she had actually gone after all. He is excessively hurt, and no wonder, to find Edna has so little respect for his wishes."

"It was a grievous mistake," returned Bessie sorrowfully. "I don't believe Edna enjoyed herself one bit."

"No; it was just a freak of temper, and she chose to be self-willed about it. I hope she will show herself penitent to Sinclair; she can turn him around her little finger if she likes; but sometimes she prefers to quarrel with him. I really think Edna enjoys a regular flare up," finished Richard, laughing. "She says a good quarrel clears the air like a thunder-storm; but I confess that I don't agree with her." [196]

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CHAPTER XV. [197]

"SHE WILL NOT COME."

Bessie did not enter the drawing-room that evening; she felt that her presence would be decidedly *de trop* under the circumstances. She made the pretext of fatigue the reason for retiring to her room early, and Richard accepted the excuse as though he believed in it.

"Well, I dare say you will be more comfortable," he agreed. "My mother will be sure to come up and wish you good-night. Confess now, Miss Lambert, are you not wishing yourself at home this evening?"

"No; of course not," replied Bessie briskly. "Have you not promised me another ride to-morrow?" But all the same, as she went upstairs, she thought a talk with her mother and Hatty would have been very soothing. She was sitting by her window, thinking over things in general, when there was a tap at her door, and Mrs. Sefton entered.

"Richard told me you were tired and had gone up to bed," she said, more kindly than usual. "I am so sorry, my dear, that you have had such an uncomfortable afternoon. Edna has been very naughty—very naughty indeed; but Richard and I feel very grateful to you for accompanying her." [198]

"I thought it was the right thing to do, Mrs. Sefton."

"Yes, of course; there was nothing else to be done; but it was a foolish freak on Edna's part." Mrs. Sefton spoke in a worried voice, and her face looked tired and harassed. Bessie said as much, and she replied:

"Oh, yes; I am worried enough. I have had a fatiguing day in town, and then when Neville and I entered the house, expecting a welcome, there was Richard's moody face and your note to greet us. And now, to make things worse, Edna chooses to be offended at Neville's coming down in this way, and declares he meant to be a spy on her. She won't say a civil word to him, and yet it is for him to be displeased; but I think he would waive all that if she would only own that she has acted ungenerously to him. I must say Neville is behaving beautifully. He speaks as gently as possible; but Edna is in one of her tempers, and she will not listen to reason."

"I am sorry," replied Bessie, looking so full of sympathy that Mrs. Sefton relaxed from her usual cold dignity.

"Oh, my dear," she said, and now there were tears in her eyes, "I am afraid it is all my fault. I have indulged Edna too much, and given her her own way in everything; and now she tyrannizes over us all. If I had only acted differently." And here the poor woman sighed. [199]

Bessie echoed the sigh, but she could think of nothing to say that could comfort Mrs. Sefton; she was evidently reaping the effects of her own injudicious weakness. She had not taught her child to practice self-discipline and self-control. Her waywardness had been fostered by indulgence, and her temper had become more faulty. "What man is there of you, whom if his son

ask bread, will he give him a stone?" asked the Divine Teacher; and yet there are many parents who offer these stony gifts to their children, loading them with false kindness and indulgence, leaving evil weeds unchecked, and teaching them everything but the one thing needful.

"Oh, how different from mother!" thought Bessie, when she was left alone, and recalled the time when her young will had been over strong, and there had been difficult points in her character, and yet, how sensibly and how tenderly her mother had dealt with them.

She had never been blind to one of her children's faults, and up to a certain age it had been her habit on the eve of their birthdays, to talk quietly to them, pointing out their failings and [200] defective habits, and giving her opinion on the year's improvement. "On a birthday one ought to begin afresh," she would say, "and make a new start." How well Bessie could remember these talks, and the gentle words of praise that generally closed them. She was almost sorry when she was too grown up for them, and quiet self-examinations took the place of those fond maternal admonitions.

When Bessie joined the family at breakfast she found Mr. Sinclair helping Edna with the urn. He accosted Bessie with much friendliness, and seemed pleased to see her again. She had been prepossessed with him at their first meeting, and she thought his manner still pleasanter on this second occasion, and she was struck afresh with his air of quiet refinement. He took part in the conversation with much animation, and talked more to Richard than to any one else.

Edna did not appear to have recovered herself; she took very little notice of anybody, and received her *fiancé's* attention rather ungraciously. Bessie thought she looked as though she had not slept well; her eyes had a heavy look in them, as though her head ached. Bessie had her ride directly afterward, and as Richard assisted her to mount, Mr. Sinclair stood on the steps and watched them.

"What are you and Edna going to do with yourselves?" asked Richard presently. [201]

Mr. Sinclair smiled.

"I shall do whatever Edna likes; perhaps she will drive me somewhere; she looks as though the fresh air would do her good. I shall have to go back to town this evening, so I must make the most of my day in the country."

The house was so still when they returned that Bessie thought they had started for the drive, when she ran upstairs to take off her habit. She seated herself presently by one of the drawing-room windows with her work, wondering what everyone was doing.

Her work interested her, and she was quietly enjoying herself when she heard quick footsteps in the hall outside, and a moment afterward a door slammed.

"They have come back, I suppose," thought Bessie; and she worked on, until the drawing-room door opened and Mr. Sinclair came in alone. He seemed surprised to see Bessie, but the next minute he had crossed the room hastily.

"Miss Lambert, will you do me a favor? I cannot find Mrs. Sefton, and I have no one else to ask."

"Certainly," returned Bessie, and she rose at once.

Mr. Sinclair looked pale and troubled, and his manner was extremely nervous.

"Then will you be so good as to beg Edna to come down to me for a moment; she has misunderstood—that is, I wish to speak to her—there is a slight misconception. Edna has gone to her own room."

"I will go at once," exclaimed Bessie, feeling convinced by his manner that something was very [202] wrong. Edna must have quarrelled with him again. She ran upstairs and knocked on Edna's door, but received no answer; it was not locked, however, and after a moment's hesitation she entered.

Edna had evidently not heard her; she was standing by the window in her walking-dress. As Bessie spoke to attract her attention, she turned round and frowned angrily; something in her face made Bessie breathless with apprehension.

"What do you want?" she asked harshly.

"Mr. Sinclair sent me," pleaded Bessie; "he is very anxious to speak to you; he begs that you will come downstairs. He thinks that there is some mistake."

"No, there is no mistake," replied Edna slowly; "you may tell him so for me."

"Why not tell him yourself, Edna?"

"Because I have had enough of Mr. Sinclair's company this morning. Because nothing would induce me to speak to him again. I thought I had locked my door to prevent intrusion; but I suppose I forgot. Please give him my message that there is no mistake—oh, none at all."

Bessie hesitated, but another look at Edna's face showed her that any entreaty at this moment would be in vain, so she went out of the room without another word. [203]

Mr. Sinclair was standing just where she had left him; he looked at her anxiously. Bessie shook

her head.

“She will not come,” she said sorrowfully.

“Will not? Did she give no reason—send no message?”

“Only that there was no mistake; she repeated that more than once. Perhaps she will change her mind in a little while.”

But Mr. Sinclair did not seem to hear her.

“No mistake! Then she meant it—she meant it!” he muttered, and his face became quite changed. He had walked to the window, but he came back again.

“Thank you, Miss Lambert. I am very much obliged to you,” he said, as though feeling he had been deficient in politeness; but before she could reply he had left the room.

The gong sounded for luncheon directly afterward, but Bessie found the dining-room empty, so she sat down to her work again, and bye and bye Dixon brought her a message that his mistress was waiting. Mrs. Sefton was in the room alone; she motioned Bessie to a seat, and began to carve the chicken before her. No one else made their appearance; but Mrs. Sefton did not apologize for their absence. She scarcely eat anything herself, and made no attempt to sustain the conversation. She looked preoccupied and troubled, and as soon as the meal was over she begged Bessie to amuse herself, as she had some important business to settle, and left the room. [204]

Bessie passed a solitary afternoon; but though her book was interesting her attention often wandered. She was sure something was seriously wrong, and she felt vaguely unhappy on Edna’s account. She could not forget Mr. Sinclair’s face when she had brought him that message. It was as though he had received a blow that he scarcely knew how to bear.

Dixon brought her some tea, and told her that his mistress and Miss Edna were having theirs in the dressing-room. Later on, as she went indoors to prepare for dinner, she encountered Richard; he had just driven up to the door in his dog-cart, and Brand and Gelert were with him.

“Where is Mr. Sinclair?” she ventured to ask, as he smiled at seeing her.

“He has gone,” he replied. “I have just driven him to the station. Do you know where my mother is to be found?”

“I have not seen her since luncheon,” answered Bessie. “I think she is with Edna.”

“Very likely. I will go and see.” And Richard sprung up the staircase three steps at a time. Bessie thought he looked tired and worried, too; and to add to the general oppression, a storm seemed gathering, for the air felt unusually still and sultry.

Edna did not join them at dinner, and the meal was hardly more festive than the luncheon had been. Mrs. Sefton hardly opened her lips, and Richard only made a few general remarks. [205]

Bessie expected that her evening would be as solitary as her afternoon, but, rather to her surprise, Mrs. Sefton beckoned her to sit down beside her.

“My dear,” she said, “you are feeling very uncomfortable, I can see, and you do not like to ask questions; you think something is the matter, and you are right. Edna is making us all very unhappy. She has quarrelled with Neville, and has broken off her engagement with him, and nothing that Richard or I can say to her will induce her to listen to reason.”

“Oh, Mrs. Sefton, how dreadful!”

“Yes, is it not heart-breaking? Poor Neville! and he is so devoted to her. They were to have been married next spring, but now Edna declares that nothing would induce her to marry him. She will have it that he is jealous and monopolizing, and that he distrusts her. Over and over again she told us both that she would be the slave of no man’s caprice. Of course it is all her temper; she is just mad with him because he is always in the right, and she knows how ungenerously she has acted; but bye and bye she will repent, and break her heart, for she is certainly fond of him, and then it will be too late.”

“And she has really sent him away?” [206]

“Yes; she told him to go, that she never wanted to see him again; and he has gone, poor fellow! Richard drove him to the station. He says he never saw a man so terribly cut up, but he told Richard, just at the last, that perhaps it might prove the best for them in the end, that they were not suited to each other, and never had been, but that Edna had never shown him her temper quite so plainly before.”

“Oh, Mrs. Sefton, how terrible it all seems! Can nothing be done?”

“Nothing,” in a voice of despair. “Richard and I have talked to her for hours, but it is no use. She declares that it is a good thing she and Neville at last understand each other, that she will never repent her decision, and yet all the time she looks utterly wretched. But she will not own it; it is just her pride and her temper,” finished the unhappy mother, “and I must stand by and see her sacrifice her own happiness, and say nothing.”

“May I go up to her, Mrs. Sefton? Do you think she would care to see me?”

“I think she will see you now, and it is not good for her to be alone; but you will find her very hard and impracticable.”

“I shall not mind that, if she will only let me be with her a little; but I cannot bear to think of her shut up with only miserable thoughts to keep her company;” and here Bessie’s eyes filled with tears, for she was very sympathetic and soft-hearted. [207]

“Then go to her, my dear, and I hope you may do her some good.” And Bessie went at once.

Just outside the door she met Richard; he was on his way to the drawing-room.

“I am going up to Edna,” she said, as he looked at her inquiringly. “Oh, Mr. Sefton, I am so sorry for her! She is making herself and every one else miserable.”

“I am more sorry for Sinclair,” he returned, and his face looked very stern as he spoke. “She has treated him abominably. Wait a moment, Miss Lambert,” as she seemed about to leave him; “there is no hurry, is there? and I have not spoken to you to-day. Do you think you are wise to mix yourself up in this? My mother is thinking more of Edna than of you, but you will do no good, and only make yourself miserable. Leave Edna alone to-night, and come and play to me instead.”

“Mr. Sefton, I never thought you could be so selfish.”

He laughed outright as Bessie said this very seriously.

“Never trust any man; we are all of us selfish. But to tell you the truth, I was not thinking of my own enjoyment at that minute. I wanted to save you an hour’s unpleasantness, but I see you prefer to make yourself miserable.” [208]

“I think I do in the present instance,” returned Bessie quietly.

“Very well, have your own way; but if you take my advice, you will not waste your pity upon Edna. She is flinging away her happiness with her eyes open, just to gratify her temper. You see I can speak plainly, Miss Lambert, and call things by their right names. Just out of pride and self-will, she is bidding good-bye to one of the best fellows living, and all the time she knows that he is a good fellow. She won’t find another Neville Sinclair, I tell her.”

“No; and it is just because she is doing it herself that I am sorry for her,” replied Bessie. “Please don’t keep me, Mr. Sefton; you do not understand—how can you? If he had died, if anything else had separated them, it would be so much easier to bear, but to do it herself, and then to be so sorry for it afterward—oh, how miserable that must be!” and Bessie’s voice became a little unsteady as she hastily bade him good night.

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CHAPTER XVI. [209]

A NOTE FROM HATTY.

Bessie knew that she would find Edna in her mother’s dressing room—a large, comfortable room, much used by both mother and daughter when they were tired or indisposed. Mrs. Sefton generally used it as a morning-room, and it was fitted up somewhat luxuriously.

Bessie found Edna lying on a couch in her white tea-gown, with a novel in her hand. The pink shade of the lamp threw a rosy glow over everything, and at first sight Bessie thought she looked much as usual; her first words, too, were said in her ordinary tone.

“So you have found your way up at last,” she exclaimed, throwing down her book with an air of disgust and weariness; “my head ached this afternoon, and so mamma thought I had better stay here quietly.”

“Is your head better now?”

“Yes, thanks; only this book is so stupid. I think novels are stupid nowadays; the heroes are so gaudy, and the heroines have not a spark of spirit. You may talk to me instead, if you like. What have you been doing with yourself all day?”

Bessie was dumb with amazement. Was this pride or was Edna acting a part, and pretending not to care? She could break her lover’s heart one minute and talk of novels the next. Bessie’s simplicity was at fault; she could make nothing of this. [210]

“Why are you looking at me in that way?” asked Edna fretfully, on receiving no answer; and as she raised herself on the cushions, Bessie could see her face more plainly. It looked very pale, and her eyes were painfully bright, and then she gave a hard little laugh that had no mirth in it.

“So mamma or Richard has been talking to you! What a transparent little creature you are, Bessie! You are dreadfully shocked, are you not, that I have sent Neville about his business?”

“Oh, Edna, please don’t talk about it in that way.”

“If I talk about it at all it must be in my own way. If Neville thought I could not live without him, he finds himself mistaken now. I am not the sort of girl who could put up with tyranny; other people may submit to be ordered about and treated like a child, but I am not one of them.”

“Edna, surely you consider that you owe a duty to the man you have promised to marry.”

“I owe him none—I will never owe him any duty.” And here Edna’s manner became excited. “It is mamma I ought to obey, and I will not always yield to her; but I have never given Neville the [211] right to lecture and control me; no man shall—no man!” angrily.

“Edna, how can you bear to part with Mr. Sinclair, when he is so good and loves you so much?”

“I can bear it very well. I can do without him,” she replied obstinately; “at least I have regained my liberty, and become my own mistress.”

“Will that console you for making him miserable? Oh, Edna, if you had only seen his face when I gave him your message, I am sure you must have relented. He has gone away unhappy, and you let him go.”

“Yes, I let him go. How dare he come down here to spy on my movements? Captain Grant, indeed! But it is all of a piece; his jealously is unbearable. I will no longer put up with it. Why do you talk about it, Bessie? You do not know Mr. Neville—Mr. Sinclair, I mean. He is a stranger to you; he has given me plenty to bear during our engagement. He has a difficult nature,it does not suit mine; I must be treated wholly or not at all.”

“Will you not let your mother explain this to him and send for him to come back?” But Edna drew herself up so haughtily that Bessie did not proceed.

“I will never call him back, if I wanted him ever so; but I am not likely to want him, he has made me too miserable. No one shall speak to him; it is my affair, and no one has any right to meddle. Mamma takes his part, and Richard, too. Every one is against me, but they cannot [212] influence me,” finished Edna proudly.

“Mrs. Sefton was right; I can do no good,” thought Bessie sorrowfully; “it seems as though some demon of pride has taken possession of the girl. Mr. Sinclair is nothing to her to-night; she is only conscious of her own proud, injured feelings.” And Bessie showed her wisdom by ceasing to argue the point; she let Edna talk on without checking her, until she had exhausted herself, and then she rose and bade her good night.

Edna seemed taken aback.

“You are going to leave me, Bessie?”

“Yes, it is very late; and your mother will be coming up directly. I can do you no good; no one could to-night. I shall go and pray for you instead.”

“You will pray for me! May I ask why?”

“I will not even tell you that to-night; it would be no use, the evil spirits will not let you listen, Edna; they have stopped your ears too; to-night you are in their power, you have placed yourself at their mercy; no one can help you except One, and you will not even ask Him.”

“You are very incomprehensible, Bessie.”

“Yes, I dare say I seem so, but perhaps one day you may understand better. You want us not to think you unhappy, and you are utterly miserable. I never could pretend things, even when I was [213] a child. I must say everything out. I think you are unhappy now, and that you will be more unhappy to-morrow; and when you begin to realize your unhappiness, you will begin to look for a remedy. Good-night, dear Edna. Don’t be angry at my plain speaking, for I really want to do you good.”

Edna made no answer, and yielded her cheek coldly to Bessie’s kiss. If something wet touched her face she took no apparent notice, but Bessie could not restrain her tears as she left the room.

“Oh, why, why were people so mad and wicked? How could any one calling herself by the sacred name of Christian suffer herself to be overmastered by these bitter and angry passions? It is just temper; Mrs. Sefton is right,” thought Bessie; and her mind was so oppressed by the thought of Edna’s wretchedness that it was long before she could compose herself to sleep.

But she rose at her usual early hour, and wrote out of the fullness of her heart to her mother, not mentioning any facts, but relieving her overwrought feelings by loving words that were very sweet to her mother.

“I think it is good to go away sometimes from one’s belongings,” wrote Bessie; “absence makes one realize one’s blessings more. I don’t think I ever felt more thankful that I had such a mother than last night, when Edna was talking in a way that troubled me.”

When Bessie went downstairs after finishing her letter, she was much surprised to see Edna in [214]

her usual place pouring out the coffee. She looked a little pale and heavy-eyed; but no one could have detected from her manner that there was anything much amiss. A slight restlessness, however, an eagerness for occupation and amusement, and a shade of impatience when any one opposed her, spoke of inward irritability. Now and then, too, there was a sharpness in her voice that betrayed nervous tension; but none dared to express sympathy by look or word. Once when she announced her intention of joining Bessie and Richard in their ride, and her mother asked her if she were not too tired, she turned on her almost fiercely.

"I tired, mamma! What an absurd idea; as though riding ever tired me! I am not an old woman yet. Bessie," turning to her, "the Athertons are coming this afternoon, and I have written to the Powers to join them. We must have a good practice, because we have to go to the Badderleys' to-morrow, and Major Sullivan will be my partner; he is our best player, and we have Captain Grant and Mrs. Matchett against us."

It was so in everything. Edna seemed bent all that day on tiring herself out. She rode at a pace that morning that left the others far behind, but Richard took no notice; he continued his conversation with Bessie, and left Edna to her own devices. [215]

In the afternoon she played tennis in the same reckless fashion; once Bessie saw her turn very pale, and put her hand to her side, but the next minute she was playing again.

"What spirits Edna is in!" Florence said once. "Really I do not know what we shall all do next spring when she gets married, for she is the life and soul of everything;" for none of the girls had noticed that the diamond ring was missing on Edna's finger; some brilliant emerald and ruby rings had replaced it.

Edna continued in this unsatisfactory state for weeks and not once did she open her lips, even to her mother, on the subject of her broken engagement. Every morning she made her plans for the day. It seemed to Bessie as though air and movement were absolutely necessary to her. When the morning ride was over she would arrange to drive her mother or Bessie to some given place, and the intervening hours were always spent in tennis or archery. When the evening came she would often lie on the drawing-room couch in a state of exhaustion, until she compelled herself to some exertion.

"Oh, how stupid every one is!" she would say, jumping up in a quick, restless manner. "Ritchie, why don't you think of something amusing to do? Bessie, I hate those dreamy old ballads; do come and play some game. Mamma," she exclaimed, one evening, "we must have a regular picnic [216] for Bessie; she has never been at a large one in her life. We will go to Ardley, and Florence shall take her violin, and Dr. Merton his cornet, and we will have a dance on the turf; it will be delightful."

Well, to please her, they talked of the picnic, and Richard good-naturedly promised to hire a wagonette for the occasion, but she had forgotten all about it the next day, and there was to be an archery meeting in the long meadow instead.

"Bessie, she is killing herself," exclaimed Mrs. Sefton, for in those days she found Bessie a great comfort. "Do you see how thin she is getting? And she eats next to nothing; she is losing her strength, and all that exercise is too much for her. The weather is too hot for those morning rides. I must speak to Richard."

"She does not really enjoy them," replied Bessie; "but I think she feels better when she is in the air, and then it is something to do. Mrs. Sefton, I want to speak to you about something else. I have been here nearly a month, and it is time for me to go home."

"You are not thinking of leaving us," interrupted Mrs. Sefton, in genuine alarm. "I cannot spare you, Bessie; I must write to your father. What would Edna do without you? My dear, I cannot let you go."

"Hatty is not well," observed Bessie anxiously. "She always flags in the warm weather. I don't believe Cliffe really suits her; but father never likes to send her away. Christine wrote to me [217] yesterday, and she said Hatty had had one of her old fainting fits, and had been very weak ever since. I cannot be happy in leaving her any longer, though they say nothing about my coming home."

"But she has your mother and Christine. You are not really wanted," urged Mrs. Sefton rather selfishly, for she was thinking of her own and Edna's loss, and not of Bessie's anxiety.

"Hatty always wants me," returned Bessie firmly. "I think I am more to her than any one else, except mother. I have written to father this morning to ask what I had better do. I told him that I had had a long holiday, and that I was ready to come home at once if Hatty wanted me."

"Oh, very well, if you have made your plans," returned Mrs. Sefton, in rather a chilling manner; but Bessie would not let her proceed.

"Dear Mrs. Sefton," she said, much distressed at her obvious displeasure, "you must not think that I leave you willingly. I have been so happy here; it has been such a real holiday that I am afraid I am not a bit anxious to go home, but if father thinks it is my duty——"

"Your father is a sensible man. I don't believe he will recall you, anyhow. I will write to him myself, and tell him how anxious we are to keep you. That will do no harm, eh, Bessie?" [218]

“No,” hesitated the girl; “I dare say he will only think you are all too kind to me.” She did not like to offend her hostess by begging her not to write. Her father knew her well enough; he would not misunderstand her. He knew her love for Hatty would never let pleasure stand in the way if she required her. “All the enjoyments in the world would not keep me from Hatty if she really needed me, and father knows that; we are both quite safe with him.”

Bessie was perfectly comfortable in her own mind; she was sure of her own motives, and she had implicit faith in her father; but she would not have been quite so easy if she had known that Mrs. Sefton intended to send a little note to Hatty as well. It was only a kindly worded note, full of sympathy for Hatty’s little ailments, such as any friendly stranger might write; but the closing sentence was terribly damaging to Bessie’s plans.

> “Please do not let your father recall Bessie unless it be absolutely necessary. We are all so fond of her, and my poor girl, who is in sad trouble just now, is dependent on her for companionship. Bessie is so happy, too, that it would be cruel to take her away. She is becoming a first-rate horsewoman under my son’s tuition, and is very much liked by all our friends; indeed, every one makes much of her. If you can spare her a little longer, I shall be truly grateful, my dear Miss Lambert, for my poor child’s sake.” [219]

And then followed a few kindly expressions of goodwill and sympathy.

Bessie was rather surprised to receive a letter from Christine the following morning, with a little penciled note from Hatty inside.

“Father was too busy to write,” Christine said. “He had a very anxious case on hand, but he hoped Hatty was rather better that day, and he thought they could do without Bessie a little longer, as her friends seemed to need her so much. He was sorry to hear Miss Sefton had broken off her engagement; it was a very serious thing for any young lady to do, and he hoped none of his girls would act so dishonorably to any man.”

Hatty’s note was short and much underlined.

> “Darling Bessie: You are not to come home on my account. Chrissy is very nice, and does everything for me, and I won’t have your pleasure spoiled, and Miss Sefton’s too, poor thing, just because I was stupid enough to faint. It is only the hot weather—oh, it is so hot and glaring here! Chrissy and I cannot imagine how you can ride and play tennis in such heat; but perhaps it is cooler in the country. Now, remember, I mean what I say, and that I don’t want you one bit. At least that is a fib in one way, because I always want my Betty; but I am quite happy to think you are enjoying yourself, and cheering up that poor girl—she must be very miserable. Write to me soon again. I do love your letters. I always keep them under my pillow and read them in the morning. Good-bye, darling; you are my own Betty, you know. [220]
>
> “Your loving little
> “Hatty.”

“I suppose I must stop a week or ten days longer,” thought Bessie, laying down her letters with rather a dissatisfied feeling. “I wish father could have written, himself, but I dare say he will in a day or two. I will try not to fidget. I will wait a little, and then write to mother and tell her how I feel about things. When she understands how difficult it is for me to get away without giving offense, she will be sure to help me, and six weeks are enough to satisfy Mrs. Sefton.”

Bessie spoke of her letters at luncheon-time. Edna heard her with languid attention, but Mrs. Sefton was triumphant.

“I knew they could spare you, Bessie,” she said, with a look of amusement that made Bessie feel a little small.

Richard glanced at her without speaking, and then busied himself in his carving. But that evening, as Bessie was pausing in the hall to look out at the dark clouds that were scurrying across the sky, she found Richard at her elbow.

“There is going to be a storm,” he said quietly. “I have been expecting it all day. Edna is always nervous; she hates the thunder. What was that my mother was saying at luncheon, Miss Lambert? Surely you do not intend leaving us?” [221]

“Not just yet—not for another week,” returned Bessie, much surprised by the gravity of his manner. “They will want me at home after that.”

“They will not want you as much as some of us do here,” he returned, with much feeling. “Miss Lambert, do not go unless you are obliged. My sister needs you, and so—” He broke off abruptly, colored, and finally wished her good-night.

“I wonder why he did not finish his sentence?” thought Bessie innocently, as she went up to her room.

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CHAPTER XVII.

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“TROUBLE MAY COME TO ME ONE DAY.”

Bessie had hardly fallen asleep before the storm broke. A peal of thunder crashing over the house woke her; the next minute a flash of lightning seemed to fill her room with white light.

“What a terrific clap! It must have woke Edna,” she thought; and just as she was summoning up resolution to cross the dark passage in search of her, there was a hasty tap at the door, and Edna entered, fully dressed, and with a candle in her hand.

“Edna! what does this mean? You have not been to bed at all?” exclaimed Bessie, regarding her friend with dismay. Edna’s pale, disordered looks excited her alarm.

“No,” she returned, in a tone of forced composure, as she put down the candle with a shaking hand; “I was too nervous to sleep. I knew the storm was coming, and I sat up and waited for it; but I could not stop by myself any longer. Did I wake you, Bessie?”

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“The thunder woke me, and I thought of you. I am not a bit frightened; but one cannot sleep in such a noise. Hark at the rain; a perfect deluge! Come and lie down beside me, Edna, dear. You look quite wan and exhausted.

“I have been thinking myself stupid, but I am still too restless to lie down. I feel as though I never want to sleep again, and yet I am so tired. Ah, you don’t know the feeling! One seems on wires, and all sorts of horrid, troublesome thoughts keep surging through one’s brain, and there seems no rest, no peace anywhere.” And she shivered, and hid her face on the pillow as another peal broke over the house.

Bessie did not speak for a minute, and then she said very tenderly:

“Edna, dear, I know all about it. I am quite sure that you are miserable; I have known it all the time. Pride does not help you a bit now; in your heart you are sorrowful and repentant. You would give all you have in the world to bring him back again.”

But Edna silenced her. “Don’t, Bessie, you are torturing me. I cannot bear sympathy; it seems to madden me somehow. I want people to think I don’t care—that it is all nothing to me.”

“Ah, but you do care, Edna.”

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“Yes, I know I do,” in a despairing voice. “I will own, if you like, that I am very miserable, but you must not take advantage of me. I am weak to-night, and I seem to have no strength to brave it out. Don’t be hard upon me, Bessie; you have never been in trouble yourself. You cannot put yourself in my place.”

A great pity rose in Bessie’s heart as she listened to Edna’s sad voice. “No,” she said gently, “I have never known real trouble, thank God, except when Frank died. Mine has been a very happy life; but trouble may come to me one day.”

“Yes, but not through your own fault,” replied Edna, in the same dreary hopeless voice. “There is no trouble so hard to bear as that. To think that I might have been so happy, and that my own temper has spoiled it all. Let me tell you all about it, Bessie; it will be a relief, even though you cannot help me, for to-night the misery is more than I can bear.” And here she hid her face in her hands, and gave vent to a few choking sobs.

Bessie only answered by a quiet caress or two, and after a few moments Edna recovered herself.

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“I was unreasonably angry with Neville that day, but I never guessed that my passion would overmaster me to that extent. Oh, Bessie! why, why was I never taught to control my temper? Why was my mother so cruelly kind to me? If I had been brought up differently—but no, I will only reproach myself. If Neville had been more masterful—if he had shown more spirit; but there again I am ungenerous, for nothing could exceed his gentleness; but it only exasperated me. I was bent on quarrelling with him, and I fully succeeded; and I worked myself up to such a pitch that I almost hated the sight of him. I wanted to be free—I would be free; and I told him so. I was still in the same mind when you brought me that message, but, all the same, something seemed to whisper to me that I should live to repent that day’s work; but I would not listen to this inward prompting—I would be firm. Bessie, I verily believe some evil spirit dominated me—I felt so cold, so inexorable, so determined on my own undoing. For one moment I quailed, and that was when I saw Neville drive away from the house. I saw his face, and it looked so pale and sad. Something within me said, ‘Call him back, and he will come even now;’ but I was too proud to give the sign. I

wanted to do it, but my demon would not suffer me, and in a moment he was gone. Oh, Bessie, how I suffered that night and the night after! But my pride was strong. I would not let people see how unhappy I was. But I want him back now. There is no one in the world like Neville—so gentle, and brave, and good; but I have lost him, and I deserve to lose him, for I was never worthy of his love." And here Edna broke into bitter weeping, and for a little while there was no comforting her. [226]

"Oh, how selfish I am!" she exclaimed at last, starting up. "I have only made you miserable; and, after all, no one can do me any good. Don't look at me so reproachfully, Bessie; you are very dear and good to me, but you cannot put yourself in my place."

"You are wrong," returned Bessie quickly. "Though I have never been through your experiences, I can still sympathize with you. If I were in your position, Edna, I would not speak as you are doing now, as though there were no hope for you, as though everything were only black and miserable. The Lord Jesus is always able and willing to help all who penitently and trustfully look to Him for pardon. There are no depths of human suffering deep enough to hide us from His tender sympathy and forgiving love."

"Oh, but I am not religious, Bessie. I am not good, like you."

"Please don't talk so, Edna; it only pains me to hear you. Let me tell you how I think I should try to feel in your place. I would try to bear my trouble bravely, knowing that it had come through my own fault. If we do wrong, we must surely take our punishment. Oh, I know it is easy to talk, but all the same this is how I would strive to carry my burden."

"Ah, but such a burden would crush any girl."

"You must not let it crush you, Edna. You must not let it lead you to despair. However heavy the burden, and however much we deserve the suffering which our follies and mistakes and sins [227] bring, there is one all-sufficient way of deliverance. Jesus, by His death on the cross, has made it possible for us to be freely forgiven; and if we come to Him in faith and prayer, the Holy Spirit will lead us into the full experience of salvation and peace. Your will is very strong; why do you not will this one thing—to become worthy of the love of a true man like Mr. Sinclair? I do not say that things will be the same between you; I know too little about the world to guess how a man acts under such circumstances; but if you care for him really—if indeed he stands so high in your estimation as a good man whom you have misunderstood and wronged, then, even if you lead your lives apart, you may still try to live nobly that he may think of you with respect. You may still let the influence of this trial guide you to a higher and better life. Would not this make things more bearable?"

Bessie's words, spoken with intense earnestness, seemed to stir Edna's mind, rousing it from its bitter apathy of hopeless remorse and grief; a faint light came into her eyes.

"Do you think I could grow better—that Neville would ever hear of me? Oh, I should like to try. I do so hate myself, Bessie. I seem to grow more selfish and horrid every year. I thought Neville would help me to be good, but without him——" And here the tears came again. [228]

"Without him it will be doubly hard. Yes, I know that, Edna dear; but you must lean on a stronger arm than his—an arm that will never fail you. Cast all your burden upon the loving sympathy and tender heart of the Lord Jesus, and He will lead and comfort you. Now you are utterly exhausted, and the storm is quite lulled; do go back to your room; you will be able to sleep, and it is nearly three o'clock."

"And I have kept you awake all this time," remorsefully. "Well, I will go; the pain is a little easier to bear now. I will think over your words; they seem to have a sort of comfort in them. Yes, I deserve to be unhappy for making Neville so wretched. Good-bye, dear Bessie; you are a real friend to me, for you tell me nothing but the truth."

Bessie kissed her affectionately, and then Edna left the room; but Bessie found it difficult to resume her interrupted dreams; the splash of the raindrops against her windows had a depressing sound, the darkness was dense and oppressive, a vague sadness seemed to brood over everything, and it was long before she could quiet herself enough to sleep. Strangely enough, her last waking thoughts were of Hatty, not of Edna, and she was dreaming about her when the maid came to wake her in the morning.

Edna did not come down to breakfast; the storm had disturbed her, Mrs. Sefton said. "I think it [229] must have kept you awake, too," she observed, with a glance at Bessie's tired face.

Bessie smiled and said a word or two about the wild night, but she did not speak of Edna's visit to her room. Afterward she went up to prepare for her ride, but during the next hour Richard noticed she was not in her usual spirits, and questioned her kindly as to the cause of her depression. Bessie made some trifling excuse; she had slept badly, and her head ached; but in reality she could find no reason for her vague discomfort.

The morning was fresh and lovely, and bore no signs of last night's storm. Whitefoot was in frisky spirits, but she found herself looking at everything with melancholy eyes, as though she were looking her last at the pleasant prospect. In vain she strove to shake off the uncanny feeling, and to answer Richard's remarks in her usual sprightly fashion. The very effort to speak brought the tears to her eyes, and she had the vexed feeling that Richard saw them and thought something was amiss, for he told her very kindly to be sure and rest herself that afternoon.

Edna was in the front garden when they returned; she was standing at the gate evidently watching for them. Bessie thought she looked very pale. As Richard lifted her down Edna opened the gate.

"You have had a longer ride than usual, have you not, Richard? Bessie looks very tired. Will you take off your habit, or will you go into the drawing-room? Your brother has just arrived, Bessie." [230]

"My brother? Do you mean Tom? Oh, what does he want with me? Hatty must be worse." And here Bessie's numb, unaccountable feelings quickened into life. "Oh, Edna, speak—what is it?" And then Bessie grew pale with apprehension.

"Hatty is not very well," replied Edna gently; "but Mr. Tom will tell you himself."

"Yes, go to him," whispered Richard; "your brother will be your best informant; don't wait to ask Edna."

And Bessie needed no further bidding. Oh, she knew now what that vague presentiment meant! That was her last ride—her last everything, she told herself, as she hurried into the house. Of course, Hatty was ill, very ill—dying perhaps—she always knew she would die. Tom's boyish face looked unusually grave as he caught sight of Bessie. She walked up to him and grasped his arm.

"What is it, Tom?" she said almost clinging to him.

Poor Tom was hardly equal to the occasion. He was young, and hated scenes, and Mrs. Sefton was looking at them both, and he felt uncommonly choky himself; but Edna, who had followed Bessie, said promptly: [231]

"Don't be afraid of telling Bessie, Mr. Lambert; she knows that Hatty is not so well. You have come to fetch her—have you not?—because Hatty had another bad fainting fit, and your father thinks her very ill."

"That is about it," blurted out Tom. "Can you get ready and come back with me, Bessie? Hatty asked for you last night for the first time, and then father said I had better come and fetch you; so I took the last train to London, and slept at Uncle George's, and came on this morning."

"And Hatty is very ill?" asked Bessie, with a sort of desperate calmness that appeared very ominous to Tom, for he answered nervously:

"Well, she is pretty bad. Father says it is a sudden failure. It is her heart; and he says he always expected it. He never did think well of Hatty, only he would not tell us so—what was the use? he said. But now these fainting attacks have made him anxious, for he says one can never tell what may happen; and then he said you must be fetched at once."

"I suppose we can start by the next train, Tom?"

"Yes, by the 3:15; there is none before that. We must catch the 6:05 from Paddington, so you will have time to look about you."

"Let me help you," exclaimed Edna eagerly. "Mamma, will you send Brandon to us?" And she followed Bessie.

Richard came into the room that moment, and took possession of Tom, carrying him off to the garden and stable-yard, and trying to make the time pass in a less irksome manner. Richard could show his sympathy for Bessie in no other way than this, and he felt sorry for Tom, who was feeling awkward among so many strangers, and was trying to repress his feelings, after the fashion of young men. [232]

"I am afraid your sister is very much cut up about this," observed Richard presently.

"Oh, yes, she will take it uncommonly badly; she and Hatty are such chums."

"Yes, but I trust that your sister is not dangerously ill?"

"Well, she does not seem so to me," replied Tom vaguely. "She is weak, of course; any one would be weak after such an attack; but she looks and talks much as usual, only she is too tired to get up."

"And it is her heart, you say?"

"Well, my father says so. You see, she has always been weakly, but there never seemed much amiss to us; and now my father says that he never expects her to make an old woman, and that there is something wrong with her heart, and he is afraid that she may go off in one of these attacks, and that is why he wants Bessie to come home at once."

"Yes, I see; it looks very serious. Oh, there is the luncheon-bell. I have ordered the carriage round directly afterward, so you will be in plenty of time." [233]

When the two young men returned to the house they found Bessie in the dining-room. She took her old place by Richard, and made some pretense of eating. Once, when Richard spoke to her, begging her to remember the long journey before her, she looked up at him with a faint smile; that smile, so gentle and childlike, haunted Richard during the remainder of the day.

Bessie was battling bravely with her feelings all luncheon, and during the short interval that

elapsed before the carriage was brought round she managed to say a few words to Mrs. Sefton, thanking her for all her kindness, and just before she left the house she found an opportunity to speak to Edna.

"Edna," she whispered, holding her friend's hand, "you will not forget our talk. I shall be thinking of you even when I am with Hatty." And then for the moment she could say no more.

"Will you come, Miss Lambert?" urged Richard gently. He had followed the girls, and had overheard this little speech; but Bessie did not heed him.

"Will you try to be brave, Edna?" But her voice was almost inaudible.

"Go with Richard, Bessie, darling; he is waiting for you." And then Bessie got into the carriage.

She looked back and waved her hand as they drove away, but this time there was no smile on [234] her face. Edna was standing on the porch, and the afternoon sun was shining on her face and hair and white dress, and her large wistful eyes were full of sadness. Bessie's lip quivered, her heart ached. How beautiful it all was! The world seemed glorified in sunshine; every one they met seemed happy, and yet Edna was wretched, and Hatty ill—perhaps dying; and a great black cloud seemed to overshadow everything, a sense of terror and confusion, of utter chaos. "In the midst of life we are in death." Why did those words come to Bessie? Just before the train moved Richard broke the silence.

"You will let us hear how things are, Miss Lambert?"

"Oh, yes, I will write to Edna."

"And you will take care of yourself?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Things maybe better than you expect; one can never tell." He stopped and looked earnestly in her face, and she could see that he was very much moved. "I wish you could be spared all this, but I know you will do your best for everybody. I will not tell you now how we shall all miss you; the house will seem very empty when I go back."

"You have been very good to me, Mr. Sefton; thank you for everything."

"No one can help being good to you," he replied gravely. "Good-bye, God bless you!" The train [235] moved on, and he lifted his hat and stood aside.

"Oh, how kind every one is!" thought Bessie, as she leaned back wearily and closed her eyes. Was it all a dream, or was her beautiful holiday really over? Alas! the dull, aching consciousness told her too truly that it was sorrowful reality.

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CHAPTER XVIII. [236]

"FAREWELL, NIGHT!"

The journey seemed endless to Bessie, but she restrained her painful restlessness for Tom's sake. Tom was very kind after his own fashion; he got her some tea at Paddington, and was very attentive to her comfort, and every now and then he gave utterance to a few remarks, bidding her keep up her heart like a brave little woman.

"'While there is life there is hope,' you know, Bessie," he said. "I think my father takes too dark a view of the case; but then, you see, Hatty is his own child. I don't believe she is as bad as all that; depend upon it, she will take a good turn yet."

"Don't let us talk about it, Tom," pleaded Bessie, with a sick, wretched feeling that Tom's boyish testimony was not very reliable. How she wished he would be silent; but in a few minutes he was back again on the same subject, with another homely axiom for Bessie's comfort.

But the longest day must have an end, and at last they reached Cliffe. No one met them at the [237] station, but Tom assured her that he never expected to be met; he put Bessie into a fly, and again there was need for patience, as the horse toiled slowly up the steep road. It was long past nine when they reached the house, and by that time Bessie's overwrought feelings bordered on nervous irritability.

The door opened as the fly stopped, and by the hall lamp she saw her mother's face, looking paler and sadder, but her voice was as quiet and gentle as ever.

"Is that you, Bessie? My dear child, how tired you must be!"

“Oh, mother, mother!” and now Bessie literally fell on her mother’s neck and wept.

Mrs. Lambert seemed to understand all about it; she made her sit down on the couch, and took off her hat, and smoothed her hair with caressing fingers.

“You have had a long day, and have been keeping up as well as you could; don’t be afraid of giving way a little, now you are with your own mother,” she said tenderly.

“Oh, mother, you are such a comfort; but I must not trouble you like this, and I am keeping you from Hatty.”

“Hattie is asleep,” replied her mother quietly. “Christine is with her; you must come into the dining-room with me, and have something to eat and drink before you go upstairs;” but Bessie detained her “Wait a moment, mother, darling; Tom is there, and I want to speak to you alone. [238] What does father really think of Hatty?”

“He thinks her very ill,” was the sorrowful answer; “it seems a sudden failure. She was much as usual until the warm weather came, and then one evening she complained of palpitation and faintness, and the next day she seemed very weak, and so it has gone on. Your father says he was always afraid there was latent mischief, but I think he hardly expected it would be like this. There was a consultation this morning, but they say there is no rallying power, and another attack may carry her off.”

“Oh, mother, if I had only stayed at home!”

“Don’t say that, Bessie; you must not even think of it; no care on your part could have prevented this. Hatty seemed as well as usual for a week or two after you left, and none of us suspected anything. You are very good not to reproach us for not sending for you before, but Hatty prevented us; she would not have your pleasure spoiled, and it was only last night that your father looked so grave, and said Tom had better fetch you.”

“But is there no hope—no hope at all, mother?”

“I dare not ask the question,” and here Mrs. Lambert’s eyes filled with tears. “Your father looks so harassed. Dr. Morton said she might go on like this for a long time, getting weaker and [239] weaker, or it might be sudden. Dear little Hatty is so good and patient, and gives us no trouble. Now you must not talk any more, and you must be a good child and take your supper; we all need to keep up our strength. I will leave Tom to take care of you while I go up to Hatty.”

Bessie did as she was told, and Ella and Katie waited on her, and then she went up to her own room, and stayed there until Christine came to fetch her.

“Hattie is awake now, Bessie, and she is asking for you, and mother has gone downstairs to speak to father.”

“Thank you, Chrissy dear. I will go to her at once;” and Bessie went hurriedly across the passage.

Hattie lay on her little bed with her eyes closed. As she opened them a sudden sweet smile came over her face, and she held out her arms to Bessie. “My own Betty, is it really you?”

“Yes, it is really I,” returned Bessie, trying to speak brightly; but now her heart sunk as she looked at her sister. There was no need to tell her Hatty was very ill; the life was flickering in the feeble body, the mysterious wasting disease had made rapid strides, even in these few days. “Oh, Hatty darling, to find you like this! Why—why did you not let them send for me? You wanted me; I am sure you wanted me.”

“Why, of course I wanted you,” returned Hatty, in a weak, happy voice, “and that is just why I would not let them send. You know how unhappy I have always been because of my horrid [240] selfishness, and I did want to be good for once, and I said to myself when Mrs. Sefton’s letter came, ‘Bessie shall not know how poorly I feel, nor what strange suffocating feelings I have sometimes. I won’t try to get my own way this time; she shall be happy a little longer.’”

“Oh, Hatty! as though I cared for any happiness without you!”

“You must not say that, Bessie dear,” replied Hatty, stroking her sister’s hand; “and yet it seems nice to hear you say so. Do you recollect what I used to say—that it would take very little to kill me, because I was so weak? Well, I think it is coming true.”

“Don’t talk so, Hatty; I can’t bear it. I feel as if I want to lie there in your stead.”

But Hatty shook her head.

“No, darling, no; that would not do at all. You are so strong and full of life, and people could not spare you. It does not matter for a weakly little creature like myself. I have never been strong enough to enjoy anything. I have just been ‘Little Miss Much-Afraid,’ full of troublesome fears and fancies; but they seem gone somehow.”

“I am so glad, my Hatty; but ought you to talk?”

“Yes, when I feel like this. Oh, I am so comfortable, and it is so nice to have you with me again. [241] What talks we will have! Yes, I don’t feel like dying yet. Oh, there’s mother, and she is going to send you away.”

“Yes, for to-night, love. Bessie is tired, and it is not good for you to talk so much. Bessie shall be head nurse to-morrow, if she likes, but father says she is to go to bed now.”

“Very well, mother,” replied Hatty meekly. “Bid me good-night, Bessie. I don’t mean to be selfish ever again.” And as Bessie kissed her without speaking and moved away, she said to herself, “It was Bessie that always helped me to be good; but bye and bye I shall be quite good. Oh, how nice that will be!”

Bessie’s life was changed, indeed, from this day. No more thoughtless, merry hours, no more rides and drives and pleasant musical evenings. Her days were passed in a sick-room, and from hour to hour she seemed only to live on Hatty’s looks and words. Bessie had for many years been her mother’s right hand, and now she shared her watch beside the sick-bed. Her bright, healthy color began to fade from fatigue and anxiety, and it needed her father’s stringent orders to induce her to take needful rest and exercise. For the first time in her life Bessie found it difficult to submit, and she had to fight more than one battle with herself before she yielded. More than once her mother remonstrated with her tenderly but firmly. [242]

“Bessie dear,” she said once, “this may be a long illness, and it is your duty to husband your strength most carefully. You are looking pale from confinement to the house and want of exercise. You know your father insists that Christine should relieve you for two hours in the afternoon.”

“Yes, mother; and of course father is thinking of me; but what does it matter if I look a little pale? I cannot bear to lose an hour of Hatty’s company when—when—” but Bessie could not finish her sentence.

“My dear, the feeling is natural; but don’t you think Chrissy likes to have her to herself sometimes? We all love Hatty; you must remember that.”

“Oh, mother, how selfish I am, after all! I see what you mean. I want to monopolize Hatty, and I grudge her to every one else—even to you and Chrissy. I never knew I could be so horrid; but I see even trouble has its temptations.”

“Indeed it has, Bessie; but I will not have you say such hard things about yourself. You are our dear child, and our greatest comfort, and I do not know what your father and I would do without you. Don’t fret any more, darling; go out with Katie, and get a little turn in the woods, and come back fresh for the evening work.”

Mrs. Lambert’s words were not thrown away. Bessie’s sweet, reasonable nature was easily guided; her passionate love for Hatty had blinded her to her own selfishness, but now her eyes [243] were open. The mother’s heart was often touched by the cheerful alacrity with which Bessie would yield her place to Christine. Even Hatty’s plaintive, “Oh, must you go, Bessie?” seemed to make no impression; but how long those two hours seemed!

Bessie did not forget her friends in her trouble; she sent frequent notes to Edna, and heard often from her in return. Now and then a kind message came from Richard, and every week a hamper filled with farm produce and fruit and flowers were sent from The Grange. Hatty used to revel in those flowers; she liked to arrange them herself, and would sit pillowed up on her bed or couch, and fill the vases with slow, tremulous fingers.

“Doesn’t the room look lovely?” she would say, in a tone of intense satisfaction. When her weakness permitted she loved to talk to Bessie about her friends at The Grange, and was never weary of listening to Bessie’s descriptions.

“What a nice man Mr. Richard must be, Betty!” she would say. “I should like to see him.” And she often harped on this theme, and questioned Bessie closely on this subject; but often their talk went deeper than this.

One evening, about five weeks after Bessie’s return, she was alone with Hatty; she had been reading to her, and now Hatty asked her to put down the book.

“Yes, it is very nice, but I feel inclined to talk. Come and lie on the bed, Bessie, and let us have [244] one of our old cosy talks. Put your head down on the pillow beside me. Yes, that is how I mean; isn’t that comfortable? I always did like you to put your arm round me. How strong and firm your hand feels! Look at the difference.” And Hatty laid her wasted, transparent fingers on Bessie’s pink palm.

“Poor little Hatty?”

“No, I am not poor a bit now. You must not call me that. I don’t think I have ever been so happy in my life. Every one is so kind to me—even Tom—he never finds fault with me now.”

“We are all so sorry for you.”

“Yes, but you must not be too sorry. Somehow I am glad of this illness, because it makes you all think better of me. You will not remember now how cross, and jealous, and selfish I used to be. You will only say, ‘Poor little thing, she always wanted to be good, even when she was most naughty and troublesome.’”

“Don’t, Hatty; I can’t bear to hear you!”

“Yes, let me say it, please; it seems to do me good. How often you have helped me over my

difficulties. ‘If I could only tell Bessie,’ that was what I used to say. I am glad you went away and gave me something to bear. I used to be glad every night when I prayed; it was something to do for you, and something to bear for His sake.” And Hatty dropped her voice reverently, for she was speaking of the Lord Jesus. [245]

“Yes, darling, I see what you mean.”

“I am glad that it has not been too easy, and that I have really tried for once not to be selfish. I don’t want to get well, Bessie. I should have all the old, miserable feelings over again. I have been ‘Little Miss Much-Afraid’ all my life, and the fears have been a part of me. Do you recollect what Bunyan said about Much-Afraid? ‘She went through the river singing;’ that was because she had left all her fears and troubles on the bank.”

“And you are not afraid to die, Hatty?”

“No, not really afraid. Sometimes in the night, when I lie awake with that strange oppression, I think how strange it will be without you all, and to have only the angels to talk to me. But I suppose I shall get used to it. I always say that psalm over to myself, and then the queer feeling leaves me. Don’t you know? ‘He shall give His angels charge over thee. They shall bear thee up in their hands.’ That verse gives one such a restful feeling; just as though one were a little child again.”

“Dear Hatty, you will be in that city where ‘the inhabitants shall not say, I am sick, and they that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.’ You will be where Jesus is.

‘Peace, perfect peace with loved ones far away! [246]
In Jesus’ keeping we are safe—and they.’

It does me good to hear you; but you must not talk any more, your voice is so weak. Let me repeat one of your favorite hymns, and then perhaps you will get drowsy.” And then Hatty consented to be silent.

After all, the end came very suddenly, just when it was least expected. Hatty had seemed better that day; there was a strange flicker of life and energy; she had talked much to her mother and Bessie, and had sent a loving, playful message to Tom, who was away from home.

It had been her father’s custom to take the early part of the night-watch, and then to summon one of the others to relieve him. He had persisted in this, in spite of long, laborious days. Hatty was very dear to her father’s heart, and he loved those quiet hours beside her. Bessie had retired to bed early, as it was her turn to be roused, but long before the usual hour her mother was beside her.

“Come, my child, come; do not wait to dress, Hatty is going home fast.”

One startled, non-comprehending look, and then the truth rushed on Bessie, and she threw on her dressing-gown and hurried to the sick-room.

“Going home fast!” nay, she had gone; the last sigh was breathed as Bessie crossed the threshold “Thank God, she has not suffered!” murmured her father. Bessie heard him as she flung herself down beside Hatty. [247]

There had been no pain, no struggle; a sudden change, a few short sighs, and Hatty had crossed the river. How peaceful and happy she looked in her last sleep—the sweet, deep sleep that knows no awaking! An innocent smile seemed to linger on her face. Never more would Hatty mourn over her faults and shortcomings; never more would morbid fears torment and harass her weary mind; never more would she plead for forgiveness, nor falter underneath her life’s burden, for, as Maguire says, “To those doubting ones earth was a night season of gloom and darkness, and in the borderland they saw the dawn of day; and when the summons comes they are glad to bid farewell to the night that is past, and to welcome with joy and singing the eternal day, whose rising shall know no sunset.”

Many and many a time during that mourning week did Bessie, spent and weary with weeping, recall those words that her darling had uttered, “I don’t want to get well, Bessie; I should have all the old miserable feelings over again.” And even in her desolation Bessie would not have called her back.

> “My Hatty has gone,” she wrote to Edna, in those first days of her loss. “I shall never see her sweet face again until we meet in Paradise. I shall never hear her loving voice; [248]
> but for her own sake I cannot wish her back. Her life was not a happy one; no one could make it happy, it was shadowed by physical depression. She had much to bear, and it was not always easy to understand her; it was difficult for her to give expression to the nameless fears, and the strange, morbid feelings that made life so difficult. She loved us all so much, but even her love made her wretched, for a careless word or a thoughtless speech rankled in her mind for days, and it was not easy to extract the sting; she was too sensitive, too highly organized for daily life; she made herself miserable about trifles. I know she could not help it, poor darling, and father says so too. Oh, how I miss her. But God only knows that, and I dare say He will comfort me in His own good time. Mother is ill; she is never strong, and the nursing and grief have broken her down, so we must all think of her. Pray for us all, dear Edna, for these are sorrowful days. I do not forget you,

but I seem to look at you through the mist of years; still, I am always your loving friend,

"Bessie."

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CHAPTER XIX.

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"I MUST NOT THINK OF MYSELF."

Bessie's words to Edna had been strangely prophetical—"Trouble may come to me one day;" it had come already, in its most crushing form. The bond of sisterhood is very strong; it has peculiar and precious privileges, apart from other relationships; a sort of twinship of sympathy unites many sisters who have grown up together. Their thoughts and interests are seldom apart. All their little pleasures, their minor griefs, youthful hopes, disappointments, are shared with each other. They move together through the opening years of their life. Sometimes old age finds them still together, tottering hand in hand to the grave. Of all her sisters, Bessie could least spare Hatty, and her death left a void in the girl's life that was very difficult to fill. From the first, Bessie had accepted the responsibility of Hatty. Hatty's peculiar temperament, her bad health and unequal spirits, had set her apart from the other members of the family, who were all strong and cheerful and full of life.

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Bessie had realized this and had made Hatty her special charge and duty; but now there was a gap in her daily life, a sense of emptiness and desolation. There was no need now to hurry through her morning's task that she might sit with Hatty. When she went out, there was no Hatty to watch for her return and listen to all her descriptions of what she had seen. At night, when Bessie went upstairs, she would creep softly into a certain empty room, which was dearer to her than any other room. Hatty's little gowns, her few girlish possessions, were all locked away in the wardrobe; but her Bible and Prayer-book, and her shabby little writing-case, lay on the table. Bessie would pull up the blinds, and kneel down by the low bed; she liked to say her prayers in that room. Sometimes as she prayed the sense of her sister's presence would come over her strongly; she could almost feel the touch of the thin little hands that had so often toiled in her service. Hatty's large wistful eyes seemed to look lovingly out of the darkness. "Oh! my Hatty, are you near me?" she would sob; but there was no answer out of the silence.

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Who has not tasted the bitterness of these moments, when the craving for the loved presence seems insupportable, hardly to be borne? How our poor human hearts rebel against the unnatural separation, until the thrilling words make themselves heard: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living." Oh, yes, of the living! Cease, then, to mourn, poor soul, as one without hope. Somewhere, not here, but in the larger room of a purified existence, your beloved one lives, breathes, nay, thinks of thee. Be comforted; one day we shall meet them, and the friendship of time will become the love of eternity.

Bessie strove hard not to be selfish in her grief. Her mother's strength, never very great, had broken down utterly for a time. Bessie knew that this failure of power added to her father's anxiety, and in the most touching manner she tried to console them both. When she looked back at these sad days, Bessie owned that she had been marvellously helped and supported. With the day's burden had come daily strength to bear it.

"I must not think of myself; I must think of father and mother," she would say, as she awoke in the morning with that blank sense of loss. "There is nothing to do for Hatty now, but there are others who need me." And this thought helped her through the day.

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In that busy household there was no time to sit alone and brood. A quiet walk now and then, and that half hour in Hatty's room, was all Bessie could conscientiously spare. If she stayed away for an hour, Christine complained of dullness, and her mother looked sadder on her return. Ella and Katie, too, made constant demands on her time and patience. Christine was very unlike Bessie in temperament. She was a pretty, bright girl, warm-hearted and high-spirited, but she did not possess Bessie's contented nature. Christine often found her quiet life irksome. She was inquisitive, restless, eager to see the world. She had insatiable curiosity; a love of change, her small girlish ambitions. She wanted to plume her wings a little—to try them in flights hither and thither. The gay world seemed to her ignorance a land flowing with milk and honey. She had yet to spell the meaning of the words illusion and vanity. Bessie was fond of Christine. She loved all her sisters dearly, but there was less sympathy between them than there had been between herself and Hatty.

Hatty, in spite of her morbid humors and difficult tendencies, had a refined and cultured mind; her chief source of fretfulness was that she loved the best, and failed to reach it. The very loftiness of her standard produced despondency akin to despair.

Hatty's faith was pure, but feeble. She hated everything false and mean. She despised the conventionalities of life, while Bessie laughed at them. She and Bessie had their ideals, their simple secrets, their crude girlish notions, that were nevertheless very true and sweet.

Bessie could make allowances for Hatty's sharp speeches as she watched her daily struggles [253] with her faulty temper. She could rejoice in Hatty's victories all the more that she had borne so patiently with her failures, and there was no abiding sting in her grief now, no remorseful feelings for duties undone and opportunities wasted; but with Christine things were different.

One Sunday afternoon when Bessie was stealing away for a quiet half hour in Hatty's room, she was surprised to find Christine following her.

"May I come in too, Bessie?" she said very humbly, and her eyes were full of tears; "I do so want a little comfort, and I can't talk to mother. I am making myself miserable about Hatty."

"About our dear Hatty! Oh, Chrissy, what can you mean?" asked Bessie reproachfully. "We can talk here, and perhaps our poor darling may be listening to us. I do love this room; it seems to breathe of Hatty somehow. There, I will open the window. How sweet the air is? and look, how red the leaves are, though it is only the end of September!" And then she added, softly: "Hatty has been six weeks in her new home."

"Oh, how I envy you, Bessie!" sighed Christine, "you can talk and think happily about our dear little Hatty, but with me it is all so different. If I had only been good to her, if she had not made [254] me so impatient But I cannot help remembering how horrid I used to be." And here one tear after another rolled down Christine's pretty, troubled face.

Bessie's soft heart grew very pitiful. "Dear Chrissy," she said gently, "there is no need to fret over that now. Hatty was always fond of you, and you of her; she told me that night, when I came home, how kind you had been to her. There was no one but you to do things, and you were such a comfort to her."

"How could I help being kind to her, when she was so ill, and there was the fear of losing her? Somehow, I never thought there was much amiss with Hatty. I could not get it out of my mind that she always made the most of every little ailment, and that it was wrong of you and mother to give in to her. I never thought it would come to this." And Christine sobbed afresh.

"Yes, I know what you mean; but, indeed, Chrissy, dear, you need not distress yourself so. Hatty forgave everything long ago; she was never one to bear malice—no, her nature was too sweet for that."

"But I might have made her happier," persisted Christine. "I need not have minded her worrying so over every little trifle, but I was always losing patience, and getting vexed with her. I used to wonder at your bearing with her as you did, and I thought it a mistake to give way to all [255] her humors. I never imagined that she was cross because she was suffering, but father says all her gloomy fancies and tiresome little ways came from her bad health."

"I might have made her happier!" That speech went to Bessie's heart. "Listen to me, darling," she said eagerly; "think rather of how, by your waywardness, you have wounded the loving heart of Jesus, and sinned against Him. Let the sense of Hatty's loss send you to him in penitence for pardon. Nothing can now undo the past; but you can set yourself in the grace and strength which Jesus gives to do all in your power to make the lives of those around you happier. I do not want to make you more miserable, but what you have just said reminds me so of a passage I copied only the other day out of one of Tom's books; it was written by a man who failed in his own life, but was very gentle and very tolerant of other people. 'Oh, let us not wait,' he says, 'to be just, or pitiful, or demonstrative toward those we love, until they or we are struck down by illness, or threatened with death. Life is short, and we have never too much time for gladdening the hearts of those who are travelling the dark journey with us. Oh, be swift to love, make haste to be kind!' And then in another place he says, and that is so true, too, 'Never to tire, never to grow cold; to [256] be patient, sympathetic, tender; to look for the budding flower and the opening heart, to hope always like God; to love always—this is duty.'"

Christine made a despairing gesture. "It is a duty in which I have utterly failed," she said bitterly.

"You think you might have been kinder to Hatty; that is just what Tom said of himself the other day. I am afraid many people have these sort of reproachful thoughts when they lose one they love. Everything seems different," she continued, in a musing tone; "we see with other eyes. Death seems to throw such a strange, searching light over one's life; big things are dwarfed, and little things come into pre-eminence; our looks and words and actions pass in review before us—we see where we have failed, and our successes do not comfort us."

"But you, at least, are free from these thoughts, Bessie?"

"Not entirely. There were times when I found Hatty trying, when she depressed me, and made me impatient. Indeed, Chrissy dear, we must remember that we are human, and not angels. None of us are free from blame; we have all failed in our turn. You have never been morbid before; try to forget the little everyday frictions, for which Hatty was to blame as well as you, and only remember how good you were to her in her illness—what a comfort to me as well as to her. [257] 'Chrissy has been such a darling,' Hatty said to me one day."

After all, Christine was quite willing to be comforted, and presently she dried her eyes.

“You must let me talk to you sometimes, Bessie,” she said; “it will do me good, because you have such a nice clear way of putting things, and you never mind trouble. I know I can’t take Hatty’s place, but if you will let me do things for you sometimes, and feel that I am a help, for we are sisters as much as you and Hatty were, and I want to get nearer to you somehow.”

“And so you shall, dear,” replied Bessie, touched by this humility. “You must not think that I do not love you because Hatty was so much to me. There is nothing I would not do for you, Chrissy—oh, you may be sure of that;” and Bessie kissed her affectionately.

This conversation made Christine happier, for she was a good-hearted girl, and her repentance was very real, and it strengthened Bessie in her resolve to do her best for them all. Sorrow is a great test of character; it makes the selfish more selfish, and hardens the proud, but Bessie grew softer under its influence. After all, Edna was right in saying that it was harder to suffer through one’s own fault. An affliction that comes straight from God’s hand (though, in one sense, all [258] trouble is permitted by His providence) wounds, and yet heals at the same time, and Bessie was to learn this by degrees; and, after all, her cross was wreathed with the soft flowers of hope.

One morning early in October Bessie had a most unexpected pleasure. She had just returned from a long walk, and was on her way to the morning-room in search of her mother, when Christine opened the drawing-room door and beckoned to her with a very excited face.

“Do come in, Betty,” she said, in a loud whisper that must have been distinctly audible inside the room. “What a time you have been! and there is a friend of yours waiting for you.”

Bessie quickened her steps, feeling somewhat mystified by Christine’s manner, and the next moment she was face to face with Edna. Bessie turned very pale and could hardly speak at first for surprise and emotion; but Edna took her in her arms and kissed her.

“My dear Bessie,” she said softly; and then she laughed a little nervously, and it was not the old musical laugh at all—“are you very surprised to see me? Oh, it was a bright idea of mine. I have been visiting those same friends (I had returned from them that day, you know, when we were snowed up together). Well, when I saw Sheen Valley, all of a sudden the thought popped into my [259] head that I would stop at Cliffe, and take a later train; so I telegraphed to mamma, who is in London, and now I have a whole hour to spend with you. Is not that nice?”

“Very nice indeed. I am so glad to see you, Edna; but you are looking delicate; you have lost your color.”

“What nonsense!” with a touch of her old impatience. “You are as bad as mamma; she is always finding fault with me. People who live in glass houses should not throw stones at their neighbors. You do not look like yourself either, Bessie.”

“Oh, that is different,” and Bessie’s lips trembled a little; “I have gone through so much since we parted. I try to take it properly, and every one helps me, but I think I miss my Hatty more every day.”

“You want a change,” returned Edna kindly, for she was much touched by the alteration in her friend’s looks.

Bessie had lost her pretty fresh color, and looked pale and subdued in her black dress; her gray eyes had a sad look in them, even her voice had lost its old cheery tones, and her very movements were quieter; the bright elasticity that had been her charm was missing now, and yet Edna thought she had never looked so sweet.

“My poor little Daisy,” she continued, “you have a crushed look. You want country air to revive [260] you. Will you come to us? Mamma will be delighted; you are such a favorite of hers; and as for myself, I want you more than I can say.”

“Not yet; I could not leave mother yet,” returned Bessie; but a faint color stole into her face. No, she could not leave her post, and yet it would have been nice to see The Grange again, and Richard’s friendly face; he had been so kind to her; and there was Whitefoot, and the dear dogs, and the lanes would be full of hips and haws. “No, not yet; but I should like to come again one day.”

“Well, well, I will not tease you; bye and bye I will make another appeal, but if your mother be not well——” She paused, and then something of the old mischief came into her eyes. “You see I am improving, Bessie; I am not always trying to get my own way; my goodness makes mamma quite uneasy. I think she has got it into her head that I shall die young; all good young people die—in books. No, it was wrong of me to joke,” as a pained look crossed Bessie’s face. “Seriously, I am trying to follow your advice; but, oh! it is such hard work.”

“Dear Edna, do you think I do not see the difference in you?”

“Am I different?” she asked eagerly, and a wistful look came into her lovely eyes. “Richard said the other day how much nicer I was; we are quite friends, Ritchie and I, now, and I won’t let [261] mamma be so hard on him. He was very kind to me when—when—Neville went away; he tells me about him sometimes, for once or twice he has seen him in London; but just fancy, Bessie, he never even asked after me. ‘Are your people well?’ That is all he said; but of course he will never forgive me; men are like that.”

“He may not think that you want to be forgiven,” returned Bessie.

Edna’s color rose.

“He will never know it,” she said proudly; but the next moment her tone changed. “Oh, Bessie, what shall I do? Sometimes I am so miserable that I hardly know how I am to go on living. I never thought I should miss Neville like this, but I do—I do.”

“Do not think me unkind if I say that I rejoice to hear it; it proves how deep and real your affection was.”

“It was the only real part of me,” was the reply. “Now it is too late, I have discovered it for myself. I never would let myself think seriously of my engagement. I liked Neville, and I meant to marry him one day, and that was all I thought about it; but now I see that the real feeling was there all the time, only choked up with rubbish, and I am quite sure that I could never care for any one else in the same way—never—never.”

“Poor Edna! it is very hard, and I am so sorry for you.” [262]

But as Bessie spoke Christine came back into the room with a small tray of refreshments, and her mother followed, so she and Edna were obliged to break off the conversation.

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CHAPTER XX. [263]

“BESSIE’S SECOND FLITTING.”

JUST before Edna left them Dr. Lambert came into the room. He seemed very pleased to see her, and at once offered to drive her to the station. Bessie was a little disappointed at this, for she had hoped to walk down with her friend; it would have given them time to finish their conversation; but Edna certainly looked tired, so she refrained from a dissenting word.

Edna bade her good-bye very affectionately, and begged her to write to her frequently, and just before they reached the station she said a word or two to Dr. Lambert; would he spare Bessie to them bye and bye—not now, but a little later—for Oatlands was pleasant even in the winter?

“Yes, bye and bye,” he returned hastily; “but her mother cannot spare the girl now; she is not well; her strength has flagged since Hatty’s death, and Bessie is mother’s crutch; but later on you shall have her; and indeed she looks pale, and in need of change, and I shall be thankful to let her go.” And when he reached the home he told them all of Edna’s invitation to Bessie, and how he had answered her. [264]

Mrs. Lambert looked wistfully at her daughter.

“You would like to go, Bessie; it would do you good, and indeed I am growing stronger every day. I would spare you willingly.”

“No, mother, I am not going to leave you just now. Why, you have not been down yet to breakfast. When you are quite well and strong I will think of it.” And Bessie looked tenderly at her mother’s thin, faded face.

Perhaps it was not quite so thin as it was, not so pinched and anxious, but there was plenty of room for improvement; and though Mrs. Lambert sighed, she could not conscientiously own that she was well. But when she was alone with her husband, she spoke to him about Bessie’s looks.

“She is not like the same girl,” she said sadly. “She feels darling Hatty’s loss more than the others. What does it matter about me, Herbert? A mother must think of her children before herself.”

“Perhaps so,” he replied rather dryly, “but it is my duty to think first of you, my dear Dora. We both love our children, and would willingly do our best for them. I am not blind to Bessie’s looks; but she is really strong, and her health will not suffer.”

“No; but the change will do her good,” she pleaded.

“I do not doubt it, and I wish you were strong enough to spare her; but Bessie is young enough to wait a little. It is we who are growing old, my dear, and who need to be comforted quickly; the young have their life before them.” [265]

But though the doctor expressed himself after this stoical fashion, he was very tender in his manner to Bessie, and though he would not have avowed it to his wife, he watched the girl narrowly, and often took her for drives, or contrived errands for her at the other end of the town.

Nay, more, he became extravagant, and brought home books for her and Christine, bidding them improve their minds, and Bessie found herself the possessor of several nice books, not wholly instructive—for “Lorna Doone,” and Miss Austen’s “Emma,” and “A Sister’s Story,” by Mrs. Craven, were among them.

Bessie had other little surprises that pleased her greatly; every week or two a hamper came from Oatlands—new-laid eggs and cream, a chicken or two, and often a brace of partridges or a pheasant. Bessie, who was housekeeper, used to rejoice over the contents of these hampers; she knew the game would tempt her mother’s sickly appetite. Many of Dr. Lambert’s patients remembered that he had an invalid wife, and fruit and flowers and all sorts of delicacies found their way to the doctor’s house, for the Lamberts were much respected in Cliffe, and even the poor people would step up with a couple of new-laid eggs from a speckled hen, or a pot of [266] blackberry-jam, or a bottle of elderberry wine for Mrs. Lambert.

“The world is very full of nice people,” observed Bessie one day, when, near Christmas, she looked at the larder shelves fairly laden with good things. One kind friend had sent them a barrel of oysters. Aunt Charlotte’s contribution had been a stock of apples that would last them half through the winter.

The hamper from Oatlands had been unusually rich, for a turkey, and a great fat goose dangled from the ceiling, and Edna had added a rich cake and a packet of bonbons and chocolate for Ella and Katie. But the letter that accompanied it had made Bessie somewhat anxious. Edna had a cold, a severe cold, for she could not shake it off, and her mother had decided to take her to Brighton for a month or two. The doctor had recommended Hastings or Bournemouth as being warmer, but Edna had a fancy for Brighton, so her mother had taken a suite of rooms in the Glenyan Mansions—a big drawing-room overlooking King’s Road and the sea, and a small dining-room leading out of it.

> “And we have four bedrooms,” wrote Edna, “for Richard proposes to run down for a night or two now and then, and mamma suggests an invitation to you. Do you think you could come, Bessie—that your mother could spare you? We are going on the third of [267] January, and want you to join us a few days afterward. Do try, there’s a dear! My cold has made me so weak and miserable, and the cough will not let me sleep properly at night, so of course my life is not very pleasant. It will be such a comfort to have you, for I never can talk to mamma; she frets herself into a fuss over everything, and that makes me, oh, so impatient, I should like to jump into the sea! But you are such a patient, reasonable little creature, Daisy dear, and I am so fond of you. Bye the bye, Richard has sent you a message. He was very particular in repeating it more than once. Let me see; oh, this is it: ‘Do you not think that you owe some duty to your friends, especially when they need you?’ That he was sure you could do me good, and that he hoped you would make every effort to come, if only for my sake. Was that not kind and brotherly of him? But then Richard is very much improved, too.”

Bessie hardly knew what she was to say in reply. Her mother was better, certainly; but she could not propose to leave her. She was much surprised when her father asked her that evening if no letter had accompanied the hamper, and on her replying in the affirmative, he coolly asked to see it.

“Well,” he said interrogatively, as he handed back the letter, “what answer do you propose to give, Bessie?”

“I do not know; at least, I have not thought about it,” she answered.

Her father looked at her steadily.

“You have never been to Brighton?”

“Never, father.” [268]

“So much the better; it will be all new to you. Sit down and write to Miss Edna at once, and tell her that you will be glad to spend a week or two with her and her mother. Let me see, what time did she say? The first week in January, that will fit in well. I am going up to town on the seventh, and we can travel together. That will do famously, will it not, mother?”

“Do you think you can spare me, mother?” asked Bessie anxiously.

And Mrs. Lambert answered without hesitation: “I certainly can and will spare you, Bessie, and I am very grateful to Mrs. Sefton for her invitation. My dear,” as the girl still hesitated, “your father and I have long wished you to have a little holiday, so your mind may be quite at rest.” And after this Bessie was satisfied.

But it was with very different feelings that Bessie left her home in the mild-tempered sunshine of that January day, to those when, seven months ago, she paid her first visit to The Grange. Things had been well with her then; no trouble since her brother’s death had checkered her bright, sunshiny existence. She had gone in holiday mood to seek fresh interests and new enjoyments; but now how utterly changed were her feelings! She could no longer look out upon the world through the rose-colored spectacles that youth generally wears. For the second time in her life she had been brought face to face with death, and the great reality had sobered her. A [269]

deep sense of responsibility, of the inner meaning of life, seemed to cast a weight of gravity over her. A bond of sympathy seemed to unite her with all those who were in sorrow; so many were unhappy, so many had lost their nearest and dearest. Oh, how she longed to comfort them all!

Bessie was not one to speak of her feelings; the best of her life was out of sight. Only once she said to Christine, as they were walking home from church in the starlight:

“People are very proud when their relatives achieve any worldly honor or attain to any rank, yet no one seems to feel an added dignity when any dear one has finished his or her earthly conflict most gloriously, and has won a heavenly crown. Why is it, Chrissy? Somehow it seems such an honor to me to feel I have a sister as well as a brother in heaven; it makes one more careful not to do anything unworthy of them.”

Bessie’s gray eyes had a softer look in them than they had of old; her voice had grown more gentle. Mrs. Sefton, who was at the station, hardly recognized the girl as she came quickly toward her; the black dress and crape bonnet made her look older, but when she smiled it was the same Bessie.

“My dear, are you very tired?” she asked, looking at her kindly. “It is such a cold evening that I dare not let Edna come with me, for her cough is still troublesome. I had some difficulty with her, [270] but at last I got my way. Edna is not nearly so self-willed as she used to be.” But here Mrs. Sefton sighed.

“Do you think Edna is really better?” asked Bessie, when the carriage door was closed, and they drove away from the station.

“I do not know,” returned Mrs. Sefton, in a troubled voice. “Dr. Milton assures me that there is nothing radically wrong with her health, only want of tone and a severe cold; but I cannot feel comfortable about her. She is losing appetite and flesh, and her spirits are so variable. She is not happy, Bessie, and she cannot always hide her feelings from her mother. Richard says that we can do nothing; but how are we to go on like this?”

Bessie hardly knew what to answer; she was full of sympathy for the anxious mother; she knew Edna was her one thought in life, and that no happiness was possible to her if her child suffered. They were in the King’s Road now, and the brightly lighted shop-windows almost dazzled Bessie. On the opposite side she could see a dark line that was evidently the sea; a dull, heavy surging of waves broke on her ear; now and then the splash of the white surf was clearly visible.

“Edna is young,” she said vaguely; but, after all, there was scant consolation in this truism, for the young suffer very keenly; a sense of impatience, of injustice, aggravates their pain. The old [271] accept their sorrows more meekly; their reason comes to their aid. “Man is born to trouble,” they say, and the philosophy enables them to endure at least with some show of dignity.

“Yes, she is young; perhaps she may be consoled,” replied Mrs. Sefton, with another sigh; and then the carriage stopped. “Our rooms are on the first floor,” observed Mrs. Sefton, as they stood in the large, brilliantly lighted hall, and she conducted Bessie up the staircase and down a narrow corridor, and then into a long, well-furnished drawing-room, where they found Edna.

She was sitting on a low chair, looking at the fire, but she sprang up and welcomed Bessie warmly.

“My dear little Daisy, how delighted I am to see you!” she said, with something of her old animation. “Mamma, is it not delicious to have her again? Sit down there; you look tired and cold, and I mean to wait on you. Mamma, the tea is all ready, and I am going to pour it out. Take off your warm jacket, Bessie; oh, and your bonnet too; and then you will look more like yourself.”

Bessie did as she was bidden, but her eyes followed Edna’s graceful figure. How delicate she looked—far, far too pretty! She was almost dazzling to-night. The ruby velveteen set off her fair [272] hair and white skin; her face was flushed, and her eyes were too bright; and as she moved about Bessie heard her cough once or twice—a hard, dry cough. But there seemed nothing wrong with Edna’s spirits to-night. She was evidently overjoyed to have her friend with her again; she talked and laughed after her old fashion.

“You will be sure to like this place, Bessie,” she said. “The shops are delightful, and it is so amusing to see the people; and the sea is magnificent. I have my ponies here, so we can have plenty of drives; and there are some people that we know at the Bedford. We don’t intend to mope, mamma and I; we are going to the grand bazaar at the Pavilion, and there are some first-rate concerts. But you shall be as quiet as you like,” with a sudden change of tone, as Bessie looked grave; “your only duty will be to talk to me. Now I will show you your room, and you shall unpack and get ready for dinner.”

Bessie was not sorry to be left alone in her comfortable room. When she had finished her unpacking, she put on her best cashmere dress, with its soft white frilling, and fastened a few white flowers at her throat. Then she sat down before the fire, and had a quiet quarter of an hour before Edna came in search of her and carried her off.

All the evening Edna was as merry as possible. She played several of her favorite pieces, and [273] even sung a little; only as the evening drew to its close she began to have a white, exhausted look; but she followed Bessie into her room, and sat down on the rug, with the evident intention of having a talk.

“Edna, you must not stay; you look far too tired,” remonstrated Bessie; “and we shall have plenty of time for talk to-morrow.”

“But I like fireside talks best,” replied Edna willfully; “and I am not inclined to sleep yet. I do hate the night!” with sudden petulance. “It is so stupid to lie awake and watch the fire go out, and count sheep jumping through a gap in the hedge; anything to cheat one’s self into oblivion. Do you sleep well, Bessie?”

“Yes, always; trouble never keeps me awake. I always think of Hatty when I lie down, and wonder what she is doing, and what the angels are teaching her, but I fall asleep in the middle of a thought, and it is morning before I wake.”

“Oh, you have a good conscience,” replied Edna bitterly; “you have no remorseful thoughts to goad you into wakefulness. If one could only have one’s life over again, Bessie? I want you to help me while you are here, to think what I had better do. I cannot go on like this. Is there anything that I can do? Any work? If it were not for mamma, I would go to some hospital and learn nursing; it is too dreadful living like this just to amuse one’s self, and try to forget. I must do [274] something, something for the good of myself, if not for my fellow-creatures.”

Bessie listened to her with some surprise. Edna’s manner was excited; she looked feverish; her voice had a hard ring in it.

“Tell me what I must do,” she said, fixing her large eyes on Bessie.

“Dear, you must get well first,” replied Bessie tenderly. “You are far from strong; your mother is right, Edna.”

Edna shook her head impatiently.

“It is nothing—a cold; what does it signify? How can one feel well with all these worrying thoughts? It is work that I want, Bessie—work that will take me out of myself and make me forget.”

“Are you sure that God wishes you to forget?” asked Bessie softly. “Oh, my dear,” stroking her hand, “you can never say again that I do not know what trouble is, that I cannot feel for you; but I have learned that we must not run away from our trouble; girls so often talk like that,” she went on, “about going into a hospital, but they do not know what they want. Nursing is too sacred a work to be done from such a motive. What good would such a work, undertaken in a selfish, self-seeking spirit, do them? Edna, when God wounds He heals, but it must be in His own time, and in [275] the proper place; and even troubles caused by our own recklessness must come under this head.”

“But, Bessie——”

“Wait a minute, dear; I seem to see it so clearly. You have work, only you are throwing it aside and asking for more. ‘Thou earnest not to thy place by accident; it is the very place God meant for thee.’ Don’t you remember those lines? Surely, surely, an only daughter’s place must be with her mother; to make her happy must be no light duty. You are her one thought from morning to night; it breaks her heart to see you unhappy. Edna, if your mother died, and you had not tried to make her happy!”

“Do you mean—oh, I see what you mean, but I am too selfish to find it out for myself. I am only thinking of my own good, not of her at all. I have never been good to her; she gives all, and I just take it.”

“Make her your work,” whispered Bessie, “and bye and bye comfort will come to you, as it would not in any hospital, in any self-chosen duty; for where God puts us, He must find us, or we shall have to give an account of why we have erred and strayed,” finished Bessie reverently.

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CHAPTER XXI. [276]

ON THE PARADE.

Bessie had spoken out of the simplicity of her honest heart; but there is a great power in earnestness, and her words were not to fall to the ground. In spite of Edna’s faults, many and glaring as they were, she was very susceptible to good influences; her affection for Neville Sinclair proved this, as well as her friendship with Bessie; underneath the leaven of selfishness and self-will engendered by a false education there was a large margin of generosity and truth; if she were quick to sin, she was also quick to repent.

Edna did not again allude to the subject of her unhappiness; there were no more fireside

confidences with Bessie, but for two or three days she was very quiet and thoughtful, and there were no excited moods of merriment to jar on Bessie. She was gentle and affectionate in her manner to her mother, and this unusual docility seemed to add to Mrs. Sefton's uneasiness.

Bessie did not feel comfortable in her mind about Edna; the old spring and elasticity seemed gone forever; there was manifest effort in everything she did through the day, and yet she never [277] rested willingly. She laid out plans for every hour, she made appointments with her friends; every day there was driving, shopping, tea-drinking, often a concert or recitation to finish off the evening; but now and then, in the midst of a lively conversation, there would be the look of utter exhaustion on her face, and when her friends had left she would throw herself on the couch as though all strength had gone. On these occasions, when she was spent and weary, it was not always easy to control her irritability. Mrs. Sefton was not a judicious woman, and, in spite of her devotion to her daughter, she often showed a want of tact and a lack of wisdom that galled Edna's jaded spirits. She was always urging Edna to seek new distractions, or appealing to her sense of vanity.

"Mamma thinks a new dress or ornament can make any girl happy," she said one day, with a curl of her lip; "but she is mistaken; I don't care about them now."

One afternoon Mrs. Sefton had been lunching with a friend, and when she returned she brought Edna a present; it was a pin brooch set with brilliants, a most costly toy, and Edna had admired it in an idle moment; but as she opened the little case there was no pleased expression on her face. [278]

"Oh, mamma, why have you bought this?" she asked, in a dissatisfied voice.

"You admired it so much, my darling, and so I thought I would please myself by giving you this surprise."

"It is very pretty," holding it out for Bessie's inspection; "but I have more ornaments than I know how to use now. I am sorry you bought it, mamma; it must have cost so much money."

"Do you think I begrudge you anything?" replied Mrs. Sefton, who was much chagrined by this reception of her gift.

Edna looked up at this moment, and saw the disappointed look on her mother's face. Her better feelings were touched, and she threw her arms round her neck.

"Mother dear, why will you load me so with things?" she remonstrated. "You give me everything, and I do nothing for you in return; please don't give me anything more for a long time. I am horribly discontented, nothing seems to give me pleasure; even this beautiful pin is wasted on me."

"Don't talk so, Edna," returned her mother, with the tears in her eyes; "if you knew how it troubled me to hear you. There is nothing that I would not do to make you happy, but if you talk in that way you take all the spirit out of me."

"Then I won't talk so any more," replied Edna, repentantly; and she fastened the brilliant pin in [279] some lace she wore, and begged them both to admire it; and she was very affectionate to her mother all that evening, and seemed bent on making her smile.

Mrs. Sefton looked almost happy that night; she thought Edna looked better and more like herself, and she had not coughed once, and no one knew that as the girl took off her trinket that night she suddenly hid her face in her hands and wept.

"It is all no use, mother," she sobbed; "no money can buy me content nor make me good and happy; if I were only like Bessie—Bessie is worthy of him, but I never was—I never was!"

When Bessie had been with her friends more than a week she began to wonder that there was no news of Richard, and one day she asked Edna if he were all alone at The Grange.

"Yes, I believe so," was the careless answer; "but Richard is a regular old bachelor, and he will not be dull."

"But he comes to see you sometimes?"

"He has not been yet, but that is mamma's fault, and not Ritchie's; he wrote on Wednesday to say he was coming from Saturday to Monday, but mamma said she wanted the room for Miss Shelton, and after all, she did not come; so it was a pity Richard should be disappointed; and now [280] Miss Shelton may come next week, and there is no room for him again. Mamma has just written to say that she cannot possibly have him until Saturday week."

Bessie felt a pang of disappointment; she was going home on the Thursday, and would just miss him. What a pity! He had been so kind and friendly to her during her visit at The Grange, and she would have liked to have seen him. She wondered vaguely if he would be disappointed too when he heard that she had gone. It was thoughtless of Mrs. Sefton to invite Miss Shelton, but most likely she had done it on purpose to keep her stepson away. Edna had told her rather sorrowfully the other day that her mother did not understand Richard any better.

"He is never at his ease with her, and so he never appears to advantage in her presence," she said. "Poor Ritchie! I am afraid he has a dull life at The Grange!"

Bessie was afraid so too, but she dared not say so; she could only appeal to Edna's generosity, and beg her to consider that she owed a duty to her brother. But she could not say much on this point. A girl cannot well enter the lists on a young man's behalf; however sensible and free from nonsense she may be, she is bound by a sense of conventionality; and though in her heart Bessie was very sorry for Richard, very much interested in his behalf, she felt her pity must be kept to herself. [281]

Bessie was not ashamed to own her disappointment, and she was human enough to bear a grudge against the offending Miss Shelton, who proved to be an old governess of Edna's, and a most worthy woman.

In consequence of Edna's temporary indisposition, which made her languid in the morning, the family breakfast was unusually late, and was rarely ready before ten. It was Bessie's habit, therefore, to go out, after an early cup of cocoa, for an hour's solitary walk; she enjoyed this more than any other part of the day. The Parade was almost deserted at the time, and she met few people. She loved to stroll down to the beach and watch the waves rolling on the shore; the cold, fresh air invigorated her, and her old color returned. Her mother would have been at rest about her if she could have seen the girl's strong, elastic step, or noticed how the sea breezes had brought back her fresh color. Bessie would return from these morning walks with refreshed spirits and vigorous, youthful appetite that Edna good-naturedly quizzed.

"You would be hungry, too, if you had swallowed those delicious sea breezes," Bessie would answer, nothing daunted by these remarks, and she persevered in these early strolls.

The morning after their little conversation about Richard, Bessie went out as usual. There had been rain during the night, and the seats on the Parade were soaking, but the sun was shining now, and the little pools in the road were sparkling in the warm sunlight, and the sea looked clear and blue. [282]

"What a delicious morning," thought Bessie, as she walked on briskly. "There is rather a strong wind, though. Oh, that gentleman has lost his hat!" The gentleman in question had been leaning on the railings, looking down on some boys playing on the shingle; but as his hat took to itself wings, and rolled playfully down the Parade, after the manner of hats, he followed it in quick pursuit. Happily, it rolled almost to Bessie's feet, and she captured it.

"Thank you so much," observed the young man, gratefully; but as Bessie held it to him with a smile, they mutually started, and a simultaneous exclamation rose to their lips.

"Mr. Sinclair!"

"Miss Lambert!" and then rather awkwardly they shook hands. "Who would have thought of seeing you here?" went on Mr. Sinclair, rather nervously, as he brushed the wet from his hat. "But of course one meets every one at Brighton, so I ought not to be surprised. I only came down last night, and I have already exchanged greetings with half a dozen acquaintances. Have you been here long?"

"About ten days. I am staying with the Sefton's at Glenyan Mansions. Mrs. Sefton and Edna are both here." [283]

"Edna here?" and then he bit his lip, and a dark flush crossed his face. "I hope Miss Sefton is quite well," he continued coldly.

"Indeed she is not," returned Bessie bluntly. But this sudden encounter had taken her by surprise, and she hardly knew what she was saying. "She is very far from well. Oh, quite ill, I should say; though she will have it that there is nothing the matter. But she is so changed that she is hardly like the same girl. Oh, no; she is perfectly different; not like Edna at all, and——"

"What has been the matter with her?" he asked abruptly; but he turned his face away as he put the question. They were both standing by the railings, and now he crossed his arms upon them, leaning heavily against them, so that Bessie could not see his face. There was no one in sight, except the boys playing beneath them, and an old man hobbling on crutches. "What has been the matter with her?" he repeated, as Bessie hesitated.

"She caught cold, and could not shake it off, and so her mother got frightened about her, and brought her here. But it does not seem to do her much good. It is her spirits, I think, for she has lost all her fun, and she is not at all like the old Edna, and it grieves me to see her," stammered Bessie, confused at having said so much, and yet not willing to be silent. "What can I say? What ought I to do for them both?" she thought, in much distress. [284]

"There has never been anything wrong with her spirits before," replied Mr. Sinclair, in rather an incredulous tone. But Bessie had caught sight of his face; it was quite pale now, and he was pulling his mustache nervously, and she was not a bit deceived by his voice. "Do you mean that she is not happy? I hope—that is—I trust nothing has occurred to trouble her."

"Nothing fresh. Oh, Mr. Sinclair!" and here Bessie burst out, regardless of conventionality, of probable consequences, of everything but her honest heart. "Why do you not understand what it is that ails Edna? If you do not know, no one can—no one—no one;" and then, frightened at her own audacity, Bessie colored up to her forehead and walked on; but Mr. Sinclair was by her side the next moment.

“Don’t go, Miss Lambert. Please do not leave me yet. Tell me plainly what it is you mean. You are Edna’s friend, and I know you will be true to her. You have a good heart. I see in your eyes that you are sorry for me; do not be afraid to speak out. Why am I to know what is the matter with Edna?”

“That is a strange question for you to ask; surely you know Edna well enough to be aware how [285] deeply she can repent of her faults!”

“Do you mean—speak plainly, I beseech you; do you—can you mean that Edna repents of her cruel treatment of me?”

“Repents! Of course she has repented. Mr. Sinclair, you were very wrong to leave her. Why did you take her at her word? It was all temper; her pride was piqued because she believed herself distrusted. I know Edna so well; in spite of her faults, she is true and generous. When she loves, she loves once and forever; if she sent you away, she has been sorry for it ever since. What must you think of me for telling you this? I am so ignorant of the world, most likely I have acted foolishly, but it seems to me that truth is everything.”

“I think that you have acted nobly, Miss Lambert; you have made me your debtor for life, if this be true;” and then he stopped and passed his hand across his forehead, as though the sudden relief had bewildered him. “Oh, thank God!” she heard him say, as though to himself.

“It is true.”

“I will believe it; I can trust you; my good angel brought me out this morning. The last seven months have not been the happiest time in my existence. I had my own trouble to bear, and then [286] my mother fell ill. I thought I should have lost her, but I was spared that; still, her life hangs on a thread. I am afraid from your deep mourning that you have been in trouble, too, Miss Lambert.”

“I have lost a dear sister.”

“That is sad; but you have other sisters left to comfort you.”

“Yes; three.”

“I had no one but my mother and Edna; I should have been lonely indeed. But now I must not keep you standing any longer; the wind is cold, and you are beginning to look tired.”

“Yes, and breakfast will be ready; I must not be late.”

“Is Sefton with you?” he asked suddenly.

“No; he is at Oatlands; he is not coming until Saturday week.”

“I am sorry to hear it; he would have helped me in a great difficulty. Sefton has always been my friend. Miss Lambert, I confess I don’t clearly see my way. I can hardly present myself at Glenyan Mansions, and yet how am I to see Edna? If we could only meet, as it were, accidentally, it would be better for both of us.”

“I see what you mean,” returned Bessie, whose ready sympathy made her quick to detect his meaning “Edna is very proud; you think it would be wiser to leave her in ignorance of this [287] interview. Yes, you are right; there must be some other way;” and then, after a moment’s consideration, she added, “There is a fancy bazaar at the Pavilion this afternoon; some friends of the Sefton’s are stall-holders, and we are all going; every one will be there; why should you not go too?”

“Thank you,” was all he said; but his face brightened perceptibly, and then in an eager tone: “What time will you go?”

“Mrs. Sefton said she should order the carriage at half-past three, so I suppose we shall be there about a quarter to four. The Crawfords’ stall is at the end of the room, and Minnie and Eleanor Crawford are to be dressed in sacques and hoops, with powdered hair, in the fashion of George III.’s time. Edna is very anxious to see their stall in its first glory, before there is a rush of buyers.”

“You have made me your friend for life,” he said lightly. “I must not go any farther, for I see the windows of Glenyan Mansions;” and then he shook hands with her, and quietly retraced his steps to his hotel.

“I wonder if mother would be shocked,” thought Bessie. “I think I should have been shocked myself under any other circumstances; but when I thought of poor Edna, and saw him looking so pale and grave, I felt I must help them both. Was it very forward of me? Have I betrayed Edna’s [288] confidence? But, no; I found it all out for myself; surely, no one could blame me for speaking the truth. If Mr. Richard were here, I would ask him. Truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, after all. One cannot be wrong if only one be absolutely true.”

Bessie found it very difficult to preserve her ordinary demeanor that morning. The consciousness that she had a secret oppressed her, but neither Mrs. Sefton nor Edna seemed to notice any difference in her manner. Edna looked languid and depressed, and seemed to have lost all interest in the bazaar. She alarmed Bessie in the course of the morning by saying that, after all, she did not care to mix with such a crowd.

“Oh, Edna, I shall be so disappointed if we do not go!” exclaimed Bessie.

“My dear, I was not talking about you,” replied Edna wearily. “Mamma will go, of course, and you can accompany her; but I am sick of bazaars, and the noise and chatter will make my head ache. You may take my purse, Bessie, and buy something of Minnie and Eleanor;” and Edna threw down her work and began looking over the batch of novels that her mother had sent in from the circulating library, leaving Bessie to digest her dismay and disappointment as well as she could.

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CHAPTER XXII.

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BESSIE BUYS A JAPANESE FAN.

Edna continued in this unsatisfactory mood until luncheon. Nothing pleased her. The novels were stupid. She was tired of love tales—why could not people find something else to write about? She was sick of such namby-pamby sentimentality; and then they were so untrue to life. Stories in real life did not always end happily, or there would not be so many old maids in the world.

“Single women, Edna; I like that term ever so much better.”

“No; old maids,” persisted Edna, obstinately; “cross, cranky old maids.”

“Old maids, as you call them (and you are very rude to a lot of good, nice women, Edna), are not necessarily cross and cranky; the unmarried women I know are all busy, cheerful creatures, full of life and energy, and very useful in their generation. Father says he always enjoys a talk with an unmarried lady; so many of them keep their freshness and youth, even though they have wrinkles on their faces. I know some of them get soured and narrow, but perhaps they have had much to try them.”

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“Bessie, I do believe you will be an old maid yourself, some day.”

“Your prophecy does not frighten me in the least If I am to be an old maid, I mean to be a very happy one. You know, Edna, how often I have talked to you of my dear Mr. Robertson. Well, he said something on this subject in one of his sermons that pleased me very much. I remember dear Hatty liked it too. I cannot recollect the exact words, but it was to this effect—that much of our happiness depends on the way we look on life; that if we regard it as a complete and finished existence, then no doubt those who fail in their aims are disappointed and discontented. In this the unmarried and childless woman, and the widow who has lost her treasure, will be agreed; but if we regard our present existence as only a prelude to a better—as an education, a training for a high and happier sphere—then the disappointed may take heart, for they have only come to the beginning of their life, and may surely wait with some degree of patience until a future life expands their happiness. Grown-up people do not want their sugar-plums all at once, as children do—don’t you see it, Edna?”

“Oh, yes, I know what you good people mean.” But she spoke with a degree of pettishness. “But I have not climbed as high as you, and I shall be a shriveled, cantankerous old maid.”

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“You will be nothing of the kind,” replied Bessie, kissing her. “But luncheon is ready, and here comes your mother; pray, don’t say anything to her about not going to the Pavilion, or she will be so disappointed; she never enjoys anything without you.” And to her great relief Edna acquiesced.

Mrs. Sefton talked a great deal about the bazaar during luncheon. The Tozers and Lady Hampton were going, and she had heard that Minnie Crawford’s costume was perfect, and suited her admirably.

“I suppose I had better go and get ready,” observed Edna, pushing back her chair, “or mamma will never survive the disappointment. The carriage will be here at half-past three.” And she marched out of the room with rather a bored expression on her face.

“Nothing pleases her,” complained Mrs. Sefton; “she seems tired of everything. I believe she is only going to the bazaar because she thinks it will give me pleasure; and the crowd and hot room will make her ill. Run after her, Bessie, and beg her not to go. You and I will do very well together, and we can choose something pretty for her off the Crawford’s stall. I would rather she did not go, I would indeed.”

“It will do her good,” pleaded Bessie; “the room will not be crowded just at first, and it will be such a pretty sight. She would be dull if we left her at home and the drive will refresh her.”

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“Do you think so?” returned Mrs. Sefton doubtfully. “But I am beginning to lose heart; nothing we can do seems to please her. I believe she is getting tired of Brighton; last night she said she wished we were at home; but Oatlands is far too quiet for her. I think I shall take rooms in town for the season, and afterward we will go abroad. The Crawford’s are going to the Engadine, and they are lively young people, and their society will be good for Edna. Perhaps,” looking at Bessie wistfully, “your mother might be induced to spare you, and we could take you with us. You have never seen Switzerland, Bessie?”

“No, none of us have ever been abroad. Oh, it would be too delightful!” but as Bessie went off smiling to get ready for the drive, she told herself that any Swiss journey would be very dubious. “That is one of the things one has to long for all one’s life,” thought Bessie, “one of the denied good things that are to come presently.”

Edna came down to the carriage looking quite bright and pretty; she was no longer in a misanthropic mood, the mere exertion of dressing to please her mother had done her a world of good. It was a brilliant afternoon and already groups of well-dressed people were moving in the [293] direction of the Pavilion. “There are the Tozers, mamma!” she exclaimed beginning to look interested; “and there is Lady Hampton in that victoria; she has her old bonnet on; what a dear old dowdy she is! I tell you what, Bessie, I mean to dress well, even when I am a cranky old maid; there is a great support in clothes—and—no, it can’t be——”

“Well, finish your sentence,” observed Bessie. “Have you seen a ghost, Edna?” laughing rather nervously, for Edna had changed color in a singular manner.

“No, only a likeness; but of course I was mistaken;” but, all the same, Bessie knew that Edna had really seen Mr. Sinclair, however much she might doubt the evidence of her eyes. She had caught a glimpse of him, too—he was on his way to the Pavilion with the other people.

Edna did not recover herself in a hurry; she looked white and shaken; the likeness must have been a strong one, and brought back the past too vividly. Bessie glanced at her anxiously. Certainly, Edna’s looks verified her words. Mr. Sinclair would read the truth for himself. They had arrived at the Pavilion now, and Mrs. Sefton and Edna were already exchanging greetings with their friends.

“Does it not look like a picture of Vanity Fair?” she whispered, when they at last made their way into the bazaar. [294]

Well, it was a curious sight, certainly; a young man with powdered hair, in a blue velvet coat, offered them programmes of the entertainment; a little Moorish girl, with a necklace of gold coins, showed them her flower-basket, and a stately Queen Elizabeth smiled at Edna across the counter. A harlequin and a cavalier mounted guard over the post-office, and a gypsy presided over a fish pond. Mary Stuart and a Greek lady were in charge of the refreshment stall. It was a relief when the band struck up one of Strauss’ waltzes, and drowned the din of voices; but as the sad, sweet strains of “Verliebt und Verloren” floated through the room, a pained expression crossed Edna’s face.

A moment later Bessie felt her arm grasped, and Edna whispered excitedly:

“Look, Bessie; is it my fancy—that gentleman standing by the flower-stall—is it——”

“Yes, it is Mr. Sinclair,” returned Bessie calmly. “Oh, he sees us now; he is coming to speak to us. Dear Edna, please don’t look so pale over it; you surely do not mind seeing him.”

But Edna was beyond answering; there was not an atom of color in her face as Mr. Sinclair came up to them and lifted his hat.

It was very odd that just at that minute Bessie was seized with an uncontrollable longing to become the possessor of a Japanese fan. It was excessively dear and excessively ugly, and the [295] young person in the Catherine de Medicis ruff who was in charge of that part of the stall was otherwise engaged; nevertheless, Bessie would not give up her point. Mrs. Sefton was on the other side of the room, talking to Lady Hampton; and though it was clearly Bessie’s duty to remain with Edna, she was perfectly blind to the fact; she did not even wait to greet Mr. Sinclair, but turned her back on him in the rudest manner, and kept her eyes on the gaudy specimen of Japanese art.

It was ten minutes before the coveted article was in her possession, and even then the stall seemed to fascinate her, and she was just making up her mind that a certain little blue vase would please Christine when Mrs. Sefton touched her arm.

“My dear child, why have you hidden yourself? and what has become of Edna?”

“Edna?” looking round; but there was clearly no vestige of her, or of Mr. Sinclair either. It was easy to escape detection in that crowd. “She was here just now. Mr. Sinclair was with her, and ——”

“Neville here!” in intense surprise.

“Yes; and Edna seemed rather upset at seeing him, and so I left them.”

“You have taken my breath away,” exclaimed Mrs. Sefton. “Oh, Bessie, do you think—— Come and let me sit down somewhere; my sight-seeing is over What did he say to her? How did they [296]

meet? Did he speak first?”

“Don’t ask me; I know nothing,” replied Bessie, with an odd little laugh. “She pointed him out to me, and asked if it were her fancy; and then he saw us, and Edna looked very white, and he held out his hand and said something; and then there was that Japanese fan, and of course, I heard nothing more.”

“You left them. That was right; you were very sensible, my dear.”

“Let me tell you everything,” said Bessie, feeling burdened by her secret. “I have seen Mr. Sinclair before; I met him on the Parade, and it was I who told him to come here.” And she related the purport of her conversation with him.

Mrs Sefton seemed much moved. “It will come right;” she said, in an agitated voice. “My poor child will be happy again. Bessie, I cannot tell you how grateful I am to you. I love Neville like a son. It is the wish of my heart to see Edna his wife. He has brilliant prospects. He is a rising man, and immensely clever; and Edna will never care for any one else.”

Bessie forgave this worldly speech on account of the motherly tone in which it was said.

“He must have taken her away; they are certainly not in this room,” she said bye and bye. “Perhaps they are in the gardens; they will be quieter there.”

“Never mind, we will not look for them. You must amuse yourself, Bessie, until they come of [297] their own accord. Suppose we buy something at the Crawfords’ stall. I want you to choose something pretty for each of your sisters. Throw that hideous fan away! It is not worth sixpence. Where did you pick up such an ugly thing?”

“It was the first handy article,” replied Bessie. “Throw it away! No indeed! I shall keep it forever as a memento of this day.”

But Mrs. Sefton, in high good-humor, vowed that she should have a prettier remembrance of the day than that. A few minutes afterward she put a lovely little work-case in Bessie’s hands. It was fitted up very tastefully, and was really a most useful present; and then she proceeded to select work-bags and pretty knick-knacks for the Lambert girls.

Bessie remonstrated in vain. Mrs. Sefton had come there to spend money, and she lavished one article after another on Bessie.

“This soft white shawl will just suit your mother,” she said. “And, oh! here is a pocketbook for Dr. Lambert. Your father will find that useful. Does your brother smoke? No? Well, we will buy that letter-case for him; and now I think we have finished.”

But it was quite half an hour afterward before the truants returned. [298]

“Here they come!” exclaimed Bessie, as Mrs. Sefton began to get restless.

“Oh, mamma, dear, I hope we have not kept you,” said Edna penitently; but she blushed very prettily as she spoke, and there was no mistaking the happy look in her eyes.

“You must blame me, Mrs. Sefton,” interrupted Mr. Sinclair, who also looked radiant. “There was such a crowd that I took Edna into the gardens, and we have been sitting quietly under the trees. I hope we have not really inconvenienced you and Miss Lambert.”

“Not a bit,” replied Mrs. Sefton cheerfully. “But we may as well go home now, as Bessie and I have made all our purchases. Will you see if the carriage be there, Neville?”

“Neville is coming back with us, mamma,” observed Edna, in her old bright manner; and then Mrs. Sefton looked at her meaningly. Just then the band struck up with a military march, and Bessie lost Edna’s low answer. There was nothing particular said during the drive home. Mr. Sinclair observed he must go to his hotel to dress, and Edna questioned Bessie about her purchases.

When they reached Glenyan Mansions, Edna shut herself up with her mother, and Bessie went off to her own room and inspected her treasures, and then she dressed herself and sat down to read. Bye and bye there was a knock at the door, and Edna came in; she looked perfectly lovely [299] with that soft look of happiness on her face.

“May I come in, Bessie? Mamma is talking to Neville in the drawing-room, and I can spare you a few minutes. Neville has told me everything. He says it is you who smoothed the way for our meeting and reconciliation. Bessie, darling, how am I to thank you?” and Edna wrapped her arms round her and kissed her fondly.

“It is all right, then?”

“It was all right the moment I saw him; he just looked at me, and said, ‘I wonder if you are glad or sorry to see me, Edna?’ and I managed to gasp out the word ‘Glad!’ And then he took my hand and asked me to come out of the crowd, and let him talk to me quietly. It seemed to me we understood each other at once.”

“Dear Edna, I congratulate you from my heart.”

“Yes, and it is all owing to you; we shall neither of us forget that. Bessie, you don’t half know

how good Neville is, how gentle and generous he has been. He would not let me humble myself, or ask for his forgiveness. But, oh, he has been so unhappy! His mother has been nearly dying, poor fellow, and I never knew it; and even now her health is in a critical state. It is so sad for him, for he dotes on her, and they are everything to each other. He says if it had happened, and he had not had me to comfort him, it would almost have broken his heart." [300]

"But he will have you now."

"Yes, and it must be my one thought to make up to him for these wretched seven months. Do you know, Bessie, he seems more distressed about me than about himself. He says I am quite altered, so thin and pale. He said it so gravely that I asked him if I had grown too plain for his taste; but there—I don't mean to repeat his answer."

"He will soon find out that you are as vain as ever."

"I actually told him so, for he was so depressed at my changed appearance that I had to make one or two mischievous speeches just to rouse him, and that did him good; he punished me, though, by pointing out some of his gray hairs; but he has really grown handsomer, Bessie. Mamma said so, too, though Neville was never really handsome. Poor mamma! she is so happy, she has been crying for joy."

The dinner-bell rang at that moment, and they were obliged to break off their talk. Mr. Sinclair had evidently found Edna's absence irksome, for he met her with a reproach at her delay; but she answered him so sweetly that he was mollified in a moment.

It was the happiest evening Bessie had had since Hatty's death; it was such a relief to see Edna's face bright with smiles, and to hear the satisfied tones of her voice, and to meet the quiet look of content on Mr. Sinclair's face. He was not a demonstrative man, and a stranger would hardly have thought his manner lover-like, but it was evident that he and Edna understood each other perfectly. After dinner he asked her to sing for him, and she went to the piano at once. [301]

"This is your favorite song, Neville," she said, looking at him quietly, and a flush of pleasure crossed his face. If he had ever doubted the reality of her affection for him, he could not have doubted it to-night, when every moment her gentleness and soft, appealing manner seemed to plead for forgetfulness of the past, and to hold out a safer promise for the future.

"I must come and see your mother," Bessie heard her say later on. "Mamma thinks of taking rooms for the season, and then I shall see her often; shall you like that, Neville?"

"There is only one thing I should like better," he replied, and there was a smile on his face as he got up and wished them good-night; and then he said something in a low voice to Edna.

"Very well," she answered, with a bend of her graceful head, and she rose from her seat and walked to the door.

Mrs. Sefton looked after them with an indulgent smile.

"He wants a word with her alone; Edna won't refuse him anything to-night. How happy they are, Bessie! Dear Neville is so satisfied; he told me that he was struck with the improvement in Edna; he thinks her so much more womanly and so gentle, but he is troubled about her delicacy; but she will get better now all this worry is at an end." And Bessie acquiesced in this. [302]

When Edna came back, a little while afterward, she went straight to her mother and knelt down by her chair.

"Mother dear," she said, tenderly, "Neville has forgiven me, and you must forgive me, too."

"I forgive you my darling!" in a startled tone.

"Yes, for being such a bad daughter; but I will be good; indeed, I will be good now;" and, worn out with the emotions of the day, Edna laid her head on her mother's lap and burst into tears.

Bessie, touched to the heart by this little display of feeling, went softly out of the room, and left the mother and child together.

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CHAPTER XXIII. [303]

MRS. SEFTON HAS ANOTHER VISITOR.

It was impossible for Neville Sinclair to tear himself away from Brighton for another twenty-four hours, so he telegraphed to his mother and made arrangements to take another day's

holiday. He settled this before he slept that night, and presented himself at Glenyan Mansions long before the late breakfast was over. He and Bessie exchanged an amused glance as they shook hands, which was instantly detected by Edna, and she at once insisted on an explanation.

Mr. Sinclair laughed mischievously.

“The fact is,” he said, “Miss Lambert and I have met before this morning;” which was the truth, for Bessie had encountered him coming out of his hotel, and they had spent a pleasant hour together talking about many things; and this conversation had raised Mr. Sinclair very much in Bessie’s estimation, and her interest was warmly reciprocated.

“You have never had a friend I liked so well as I do Miss Lambert,” he said, as he and Edna were walking together. “She is a genuine girl—absolutely true, and without any pretense or nonsense.” [304]

“Daisy is a dear little thing, and I am as fond of her as possible. I am so glad you like her, Neville,” and Edna looked very pleased.

Mr. Sinclair left on the following morning, and in the afternoon Miss Shelton arrived. She was a pleasant-looking woman, with a tranquil face and silvery-gray hair, and Bessie was prepossessed in her favor at once. She was evidently warmly attached to her old pupil, and the news of her reconciliation with her lover filled her with unbounded satisfaction, and her congratulations were very hearty.

“I have lived a great many years in the world,” she said, “but I have never seen two better young men than Mr. Sinclair and Mr. Richard.”

They were sitting round the fire in the twilight as Miss Shelton made this little speech; they had come in from their drive half an hour ago; the tea things had just been taken away, and Edna was sitting on the rug at Miss Shelton’s feet.

“They are both admirable,” she murmured; and this encomium on the absent Richard gratified Bessie.

“I don’t think they are to be compared,” observed Mrs. Sefton, rather superciliously. “My dear Miriam, Neville is infinitely superior. Richard has not got Neville’s brains.”

“Cleverness is not everything,” replied Miss Shelton. “I respect Mr. Sinclair, and have the highest opinion of his abilities; but Mr. Richard has always been a favorite of mine. Very few people guess how much he has in him; but I found it out myself a long time ago.” [305]

“You and Ritchie were always good friends, dear Miss Shelton. Hush! I hear some one in the corridor; it cannot be Neville come back;” and Edna sprung up from her low seat with a heightened color; but as the door opened her voice fell. “No, it is only Ritchie,” in a disappointed tone.

“Whom were you expecting, Edna?” asked her brother, advancing toward the fireside circle. “Your tone does not sound very promising for me. Mother, you see I have taken you by surprise. Miss Shelton, I am delighted to see you again. How do you do, Miss Lambert?” with a swift glance in her direction.

Bessie greeted him quietly, and went back to her corner; the surprise was a very pleasant one for her. Richard looked well, and more animated than usual.

“I thought we arranged that you were not to come until to-morrow week, Richard,” observed Mrs. Sefton, in her usual cold manner: and it was evident that she was not pleased at her stepson’s arrival. “I told you particularly Miss Shelton was coming this week.”

“Oh, yes, I knew Miss Shelton would be here; but Saturday week would not have suited me at all. I don’t mean to put you out, mother. I have taken a room at the Grand Hotel. I can have my meals there, too, if you like.” [306]

“Nonsense, Ritchie!” returned Edna, good-humoredly; “our dining-room is not so small as that. You may have your breakfast at your hotel, and then spend the rest of the day with us. Miss Shelton will be delighted to have you; she was singing your praises just now.”

“I saw Neville in town this afternoon,” observed Richard, with a significant glance at his sister. “‘All’s well that ends well,’ eh, Edna? So the comedy of errors is played out.”

“Come into the other room and I will tell you all about it,” replied Edna, taking hold of his arm in a friendly fashion. “Mamma, I suppose there is enough dinner for Richard, but I don’t mean to let him go away.”

“Neither do I mean to go,” added Richard, with a laugh, as he allowed himself to be led out of the room.

“How well he looks! older and nicer, I think,” observed Miss Shelton, as the young people left the room.

“Do you think so?” replied Mrs. Sefton, indifferently. “Richard is always terribly boorish in appearance; and as to his manners, nothing will polish them. But what can you expect, when he affects the company of farmers? Neville is worth a hundred of him,” she continued, as she rose, [307]

with a discontented expression, to give some further orders.

Miss Shelton shook her head in a disapproving fashion.

“What a mistake,” she said quietly, “always to undervalue that poor boy! I am glad to see Edna is improved in that respect. He is a great favorite of mine, Miss Lambert. I found out he had a kind heart when I was in trouble once. As Edna says, we are great friends.”

“He is very nice,” agreed Bessie, and then she went to her room to prepare for dinner. Yes, she was very glad he had come, though the sight of his familiar face had brought back the memory of that last sad day at The Grange. They had not met for seven months; how much had happened since then!

But when the evening was over, she was obliged to confess that it had somehow disappointed her. Richard had said very little to her. Miss Shelton had engrossed his conversation; he hardly looked in Bessie’s direction.

When dinner was over, and Edna went to the piano, he placed himself beside her; but he did not ask Bessie to sing. She sat at her work, and tried to think that she was enjoying herself, but [308] she felt left out in the cold; she missed the old friendliness in Richard’s manner; she wondered why he did not ask about her home. Could a few months have cooled his friendship? When she bade him good-night he hardly looked at her; he shook hands far more cordially with Miss Shelton.

Bessie felt chilled and depressed, for she was a faithful little soul, and was true to all her likes and dislikes; fickleness to her friends was not in her nature; if she liked a person she liked him or her always.

“It is very strange, very disappointing. I think I would rather he had not come,” she thought; “but perhaps he will be nicer to-morrow;” and with this vague hope she fell asleep.

The next morning she was out at her usual time, and, as before, the crisp morning air seemed to dispel all uneasy thoughts; she felt brighter, more sanguine and cheerful than she had last night. Nature holds a store of comfort for those who love and seek her—she has all sorts of balmy messages to give them; a thousand mellow influences steal upon the jaded consciousness; hope is written legibly in the blue sky, the clear air, the sunshine; every flower, every leaf is a token of love; the birds sing, and, in spite of ourselves, our hearts grow lighter. [309]

“It must have been my fancy,” thought Bessie; “I hope I am not growing self-conscious;” and then she gave a little start of surprise, for surely she knew that brown tweed coat, and there was Richard coming to meet her; and it was with his old pleasant smile that he greeted her.

“What a lovely morning, Miss Lambert! I knew you would be out.” He had expected her then. “Miss Shelton is an early riser, too, but she never walks before breakfast. I wanted to find you alone, and to tell you that I was at Cliffe the day before yesterday.”

“At Cliffe?” And Bessie raised her clear eyes to his with such intense surprise that Richard laughed a little nervously.

“I had some business there,“ he began awkwardly, “and I wanted to see your father. I saw them all,” hesitating, “except your brother—he has gone back to Oxford; they were very well, and sent their love.”

“And you saw mother?”

“Yes; what a nice woman she is! I like her so much, and your father too; they were very kind—kinder than I expected. You are a little like your mother—at least, I saw a sort of likeness. I never felt more at home anywhere.”

“I am so glad;” and Bessie did look glad. He was quite like himself this morning; she had got her friend back again. “Did father send me no other message?” she asked presently. [310]

“No, I believe not; at least, I have no recollection of a message. Miss Lambert,” and here Richard’s manner was decidedly nervous, “don’t you wonder what my business was at Cliffe?”

“Why, no,” she said, so frankly and innocently that in spite of his nervousness Richard could not restrain a smile. “I suppose there was something you wanted.”

“Yes, indeed,” he replied promptly, for this remark helped him; “and I wanted it so much that I was obliged to apply to your father.”

“Could father help you?” much astonished at this.

“He helped me a great deal. I should not be speaking to you now but for him. Miss Lambert—Bessie—can’t you guess? It is so hard for me to bring it out. Can’t you guess what it was I wanted from your father? I have never wanted anything so much in my life.”

Richard’s manner grew so earnest and imploring, that an idea of his meaning flashed across her with a suddenness that made her giddy; but she only said very gravely:

“I cannot understand unless you speak out.”

“May I speak out, then—may I tell you plainly what I want? It is yourself, Bessie;” and, in spite [311]

of his nervousness, Richard spoke a few forcible words, very eloquent from their intense earnestness. “I have cared for you all this time, but I would not obtrude myself on your trouble; I thought it better to wait.”

“It was very kind, very thoughtful of you,” replied Bessie, in a low voice. And then she added, shyly: “This is all new to me. I never expected this, Mr. Sefton.”

“I was afraid not, from your manner; but, Bessie, for my sake you will think of it now. We have been friends, and now you have grown necessary to my happiness. I have been very lonely all these years; I shall be lonelier than ever if you cannot bring yourself to love me.” His voice was so sad that the tears came to Bessie’s eyes. She longed to comfort him; but how was she to be sure of her own mind?

“Will you give me a little time, a few hours to think of it?” she said at last. “It will not be right to answer you now. Do my mother and father know about this?”

“Yes,” he returned eagerly, for her words filled him with hope; she had not repulsed him, and her manner, though confused, was as gentle as ever. “They quite approved. You see, I knew you so well that I would not have ventured to speak to you without their sanction.”

“You were right,” she said softly; and then she looked at him in a beseeching way that made [312] Richard say:

“You would like me to leave you alone for a little, would you not?”

“If you please—that is, if you do not mind.”

“I will go, then. But, Bessie, you will be here to-morrow morning?”

“Yes.”

“I will be content with that promise, then,” and Richard lifted his hat and moved away, and Bessie went home.

Breakfast was ready when she arrived, and she took her place at once, and made an effort to talk as usual. Once Edna made a remark about Richard.

“I have promised to drive him over the downs,” she said. “Bessie, Miss Shelton wants to do some shopping; do you mind taking charge of her for the morning?”

“Certainly not,” replied Bessie, who would have given worlds to be quiet; but she could not refuse Edna. She was afraid, however, that Miss Shelton found her a stupid companion; every now and then her attention wandered; she was conscious that a grave decision, one that would affect her whole life, was hanging in the balance; she had promised Richard to think about it, but no such thought seemed possible. [313]

“I am tiring you out, my dear,” observed Miss Shelton at last, “and it must be nearly luncheon time. I dare say Edna has returned from her drive.”

Yes, Edna was standing in the window when they entered, but Richard was not with her.

“Ritchie said he would lunch at his hotel,” she observed; “and he is going over to Lewes this afternoon, and may be late for dinner; and in that case he will have a chop somewhere, as he does not want us to wait for him.”

“He will come in afterward, I suppose,” replied Miss Shelton; but Bessie said to herself that he would do no such thing. How thoughtful he was for her comfort! He was staying away purposely, that his presence might not confuse her; and Bessie felt grateful to him for the delicacy that shielded and spared her.

The afternoon was not much better than the morning. Edna carried off Miss Shelton to the Aquarium, and left Bessie to drive with her mother; and as Mrs. Sefton was very talkative and in excellent spirits, Bessie had to maintain her share of the conversation. They found visitors on their return, and Bessie had to pour out the tea, and help entertain them, as Edna was tired from her exertions.

As she had predicted, Richard never made his appearance at all, although Miss Shelton and Edna both expected him, and indulged in wondering comments on his prolonged absence. Bessie [314] found her position unbearable at last, and she made an excuse to retire early to her room. She gave a sigh of relief when she closed the door.

“At last I can think,” she said to herself, as she drew her chair to the fire.

How was she to answer Richard to-morrow? But even as she asked herself the question she knew she had her answer ready. True, he had taken her by surprise; she had never suspected that this was his meaning. Bessie’s unconsciousness, her humble estimate of herself, had blinded her to the truth. She hardly knew herself how much he was to her until his words had broken the spell; but now there was no room for doubt. She respected him; he had claimed her sympathy long ago, and now he had won her love.

“Oh, if only my Hatty knew!” were her last thoughts that night, after she had finished her thanksgiving for the new blessing that had come into her life; and though she was still tremulous and confused with happiness, she quieted herself with a few childlike prayers, and soon slept

soundly.

Bessie felt a little nervous as she left the house the next morning, but she tried not to think of herself. Richard was waiting for her on the Parade. One glance at him banished her nervousness; [315] he looked pale and anxious, as though he had not slept, but he made an effort to smile as he held out his hand.

“Is there any hope for me, Bessie?”

“Yes,” she said simply, as she left her hand in his; and Richard needed no further answer.

It was a bright, peaceful hour that followed, as they walked side by side, looking at the shining sea and speaking of the dim future that lay before them.

“I was afraid you were too good for me, Bessie,” Richard said, bye and bye, when he had exhausted his gratitude a little. “Sometimes I used to lose hope. ‘She will never care for such a rough fellow,’ I often said to myself.”

“You must not speak against yourself now,” returned Bessie shyly.

“No, dear, for you have promised to take me just as I am, and that would make any fellow think more of himself. Bessie, you must not mind if my mother is not quite pleased at first; she is an ambitious woman, and her notions are very different from mine.” Bessie did not answer for a moment, and her silence seemed to alarm Richard.

“She is only my stepmother; I am my own master, Bessie.”

“Yes, I know,” in a low voice. “I was thinking about that last night. I am afraid she will not like [316] it, and it troubles me a little. We are not rich, and——”

“What does that matter?” with a touch of impatience. “I thought you were free from that sort of nonsense, Bessie.”

“It does not matter to us,” replied Bessie, with a slight emphasis on the “us” that was exquisite to Richard’s ear. “I am only speaking of Mrs. Sefton; but she is not your own mother, and she has never made you happy, and she has no right to prevent you pleasing yourself.”

“That is spoken like a sensible girl. I must thank you for that speech. Your father said much the same thing to me. ‘You are your own master,’ he remarked, ‘and your stepmother has no right to control your choice; but, knowing her as I do, she will not be pleased.’”

“You will tell her as soon as possible, will you not—and Edna, too?”

“I will tell them this morning. You must leave everything to me. You shall be subjected to no unpleasantness that I can prevent. And, Bessie, I am going to take you down to Cliffe. I have made my mind up to that.”

“Very well,” she said, with a smile. And it was a new thing for Richard to assert himself and meet with no contradiction; and as he looked at the girl beside him, and met her clear, candid [317] glance, his heart swelled within him for very gratitude.

“It is getting late; we must go home now,” observed Bessie, wondering a little at his sudden silence.

“Yes, we will go home,” he replied, rousing himself. “I was just thinking, dear, what life will mean to me when I have you beside me.”

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CHAPTER XXIV. [318]

IN THE COOMBE WOODS.

Breakfast was a more difficult affair than it had been on the preceding morning, and Edna, who was very quick-witted, soon saw there was something amiss with Bessie; but she was a kind-hearted girl, and she threw herself with such animation into the conversation that Bessie’s silence was unnoticed.

When the meal was finished Bessie withdrew to her room, and Edna would have followed her, but just then Richard came in, and begged her in a low voice to get rid of Miss Shelton for half an hour, as he wanted to speak to her and her mother; and then in a moment Edna guessed the truth.

Bessie remained a long time alone. She had finished her letter to her mother, and had just

taken up her work, before Edna came in search of her.

Edna looked excited, and there were tears in her eyes as she kissed Bessie.

"You naughty little thing!" she said, trying to laugh. "Who ever would have thought of you and [319]
Ritchie falling in love with each other? I don't think I have ever been more surprised in my life."

"I was surprised, too," replied Bessie naïvely. "Dear Edna, are you very much shocked?"

"Not at all. On the whole, I am very much pleased at the idea of having you as a sister. I fell in love with you myself, Bessie. I told Ritchie that, so I ought not to be so surprised that he has followed my example. I am not quite sure that he is good enough for you. I suppose you think he is," doubtfully.

"Yes, indeed. It is I who am not good enough for him," replied Bessie, blushing, and looking so pretty that Edna hugged her again.

"You are very kind to me, Edna, but I am afraid your mother will not be pleased about this;" and then Edna's face grew somewhat grave.

"No, Bessie, she is not; and she is very hard upon poor Richard, as usual, and I had to take his part. Mamma is very proud, and that is why she approved so much of Neville, because he belongs to county people and is his uncle's heir. Neville will be terribly rich one day."

"And I am poor!" in a troubled voice.

"Yes, but Richard has plenty of money, and, as I tell mamma, I cannot see what that matters. You are a lady, Bessie; your mother is a perfect gentlewoman; and as for Dr. Lambert, mamma knows what he is—she cannot say a word against him. She says she is very fond of you [320]
personally, but all the same she does not want Richard to marry you. You see," hesitating a little, "mamma will have to leave The Grange when Ritchie marries, and she does not like the idea of that; but, as Richard justly said, his father hoped he would marry early, and he had a right, like any other man, to take a wife when he wishes. Of course, mamma has not a grain of right on her side, but she chooses to be angry with Richard because he has been down to Cliffe and settled everything without reference to her; she says it is the way he always treats her."

"I think I will go to your mother, Edna. Is—is your brother with her?"

"Yes, I believe so; but they are not talking now. Ritchie sent me to you. Must you go, Bessie, dear? mamma will not be a bit nice to you."

"I cannot help that; but I am as much to blame as your brother is, and I shall not leave him to bear the brunt of it all." And though Bessie looked a little pale as she said this, she carried out her resolve much to Mrs. Sefton's astonishment.

Richard met her at once, and took her hand.

"I have told my mother, Bessie," he said, in a clear, high voice that was a little defiant.

"Yes, I know now, when everything is arranged," returned Mrs. Sefton, in an injured tone. [321]

"Dear Mrs. Sefton," said Bessie gently, "nothing was settled until this morning. Mr. Sefton took me by surprise yesterday, and I was hardly prepared. Indeed, I had no answer to give him until this morning, so not an hour has been lost."

"My mother knows all that," interrupted Richard, "but I cannot convince her no offence is intended. Mother, I think you might give Bessie a kinder reception; she has promised to marry me, and I think my future wife should be treated with consideration and respect."

"No, no; how can you talk so?" interrupted Bessie, for the young man spoke in a fiery manner. "Mrs. Sefton, please don't listen to him. You shall treat me as you will; but I shall always remember how good you have been to me. Of course you are not pleased with a poor girl like me; but you will be kind to me all the same—will you not? and I will try to follow all your wishes. It is not your son's fault either," very shyly, but trying to speak out bravely, "for he could not help caring for me, I suppose. Do, do try to forgive us both, and be kind to him." And here Bessie faltered and broke down.

Nothing could have been better than Bessie's little impetuous speech. Mrs. Sefton was a proud, ambitious woman, but she was not wholly without feelings, and she had always been fond of Bessie. The girl's sweetness and humility, her absence of all assumption, the childlike way in [322]
which she threw herself upon her womanly kindness, touched Mrs. Sefton's cold heart, and she kissed the wet, flushed cheek.

"Don't cry, Bessie. I suppose as things are settled we must just make the best of them. Richard put me out, and I said more than I meant. I was not pleased. I think I ought to have been consulted at least, not left so wholly in the dark."

"I am very sorry, mother, but you have never invited my confidence," replied Richard; but his lips quivered as he spoke.

"Yes; but you will be kinder to him now," and Bessie looked imploringly at her; "indeed, he has always loved you, but you have repelled him so. Richard," very softly, "will you not tell your mother that you mean to be good to her?"

Mrs. Sefton looked up, and her eyes met her stepson's. "It was not my fault, mother," he said, with suppressed emotion.

Bessie thought that he was speaking of their engagement, but Richard's words conveyed a different meaning to his stepmother's ears. He was going back to the past. Again he saw himself a shy, nervous boy, standing before the proud, handsome girl who had just become his father's wife. "He can never be anything to me," he heard her say; and her low, bitter tones lingered long [323] in his ears. "If I had known of his existence it might have been different; but now—" and she turned away with a gesture of dislike.

"Ritchie, my boy, you must ask this lady to forgive us both," his father had observed, rather sadly.

How well Richard remembered that little scene! the discomfited expression of his father's face; his own puzzled, childish feelings. All these years he had suffered the consequences of his father's rash act. "He can never be anything to me," she had said, and her words had come true.

"Mother, it was not my fault," he said, looking into her eyes.

And for the first time she quailed before that sad, reproachful gaze; it seemed to compel her to acknowledge the truth. "No, Richard; it was your father's; it was he who estranged us," she returned slowly. "I was not the woman to forgive deceit. I wish—I wish things could have been different."

"They shall be different," he replied gently, "if you will have it so, mother; it is not too late yet;" and though she did not answer, and there was no response to that burst of generous feeling, there was something in her face that gave Richard hope; neither did she repulse him when he stooped over her and kissed her.

"Try to make the best of me," he said; and Mrs. Sefton sighed, and left her hand in his.

Richard took Bessie out with him after that. He was agitated and dispirited by the interview [324] with his stepmother, and needed all the comfort Bessie could give him.

"It is very hard to bear," were his first words, when he found himself alone with her.

"Yes, it is very hard," she replied gently; "but you behaved so well it made me so proud to hear you;" and Richard felt a glow of satisfaction at her words.

"You were beside me, helping me all the time," he said simply. "Bessie, if you only knew what it is to me to be sure of your sympathy. My little blessing, I think you were born to be a peacemaker. It was you who softened my mother's heart; before you came in she was so hard, and said such bitter things, and then I lost my temper, and——"

"Do not go back to that," she said quietly. "Your mother was taken by surprise. She said herself that she spoke hastily. Let us give her time. She cannot alter her nature all at once. You have been very patient a long time, Richard; be patient still for my sake."

"There is nothing I would not do for your sake," he replied; and Bessie was pleased to see him smile.

After all, it was not difficult to comfort him; the cloud soon passed away from his face, and in a little while they were talking as happily together as though no unkind words had been said.

They had a quiet, peaceful Sunday together, and then Richard went back to Oatlands, on the [325] understanding that he was to return on Wednesday night and take Bessie down to Cliffe the next day.

Bessie was not sorry to be left alone for two days to realize her own happiness; but, all the same, she was glad to welcome him back again on Wednesday, though she was secretly amused when Richard declared those two days of absence had been intolerably long; still she liked to hear him say it.

It was a happy evening to Bessie when she saw Richard for the first time in her own dear home, making one of the family circle, and looking as though he had been there for years. How kindly they had all greeted him! She saw by her mother's expression how pleased and excited she was. She took the young man under her motherly wing at once, and petted and made much of him; and it was easy to see how proud her father was of his son-in-law elect. Bessie thought she had never seen Richard to such advantage before. There was no awkwardness in his manner; he was alert, cheerful, and at his ease, ready to talk to Christine or to the younger girls, and full of delicate little attentions to his *fiancée*.

"A fine, manly fellow!" observed Dr. Lambert, as he wished his daughter good-night. "You have won a prize, my girl; I am perfectly satisfied with my future son-in-law," and Bessie blushed and [326] smiled over her father's encomium.

But the most comfortable moment was when she had her mother to herself, for Mrs. Lambert had stolen upstairs after Bessie.

"Oh, mother, this is what I wanted," she said, drawing her mother down into the low chair beside the fire, and kneeling on the rug beside her. "How good of you to come up to me! I was so longing for a talk."

“I think your father wanted Mr. Sefton to himself, so I left them together.”

“You must call him Richard,” corrected Bessie; “he wants you to do so. It was so nice to see him with you to-night; he will never want a mother now. You like him, do you not?” rather shyly.

“Yes, indeed; we all like him; there is something so genuine about him. My darling, I have not felt so happy since our poor Hatty’s death.”

“I think she would have been pleased about this, mother; it is the one drop of bitterness in my cup of happiness that her congratulations are missing. You were all so dear and kind to me, and to Richard, too; but I missed my Hatty;” and Bessie leaned against her mother’s shoulder, and shed a few quiet tears.

“I think I must tell you something,” returned her mother soothingly. “Dear little Hatty used to talk in the strangest way sometimes. One night when she had been very ill, and I was sitting [327] beside her, she told me that she had had such a funny dream about you—that you and Mr. Sefton were going to be married, and that she had seen you dressed in white, and looking so happy, and then she said very wistfully, ‘Supposing my dream should come true, mother, and our Bessie really married him, how nice that would be!’ and she would speak of it more than once, until I was obliged to remind her that I never cared to talk of such subjects, and that I did not like my girls to talk of them, either. ‘But, all the same, mother, Bessie will not be an old maid,’ she persisted, with such a funny little smile, and then she left off to please me.”

“How strange!” replied Bessie thoughtfully. “I must tell Richard that; he was so kind about Hatty. Mother, is it not nice to be able to tell some one all one’s thoughts, and be sure of their interest? That is how I begin to feel about Richard. He is always so kind and patient, and ready to hear everything, and he never laughs nor turn things into fun, as Tom does; and he is so clever; he knows things of which I am quite ignorant;” and Bessie rambled on in an innocent, girlish way of her lover’s perfections, while her mother listened with a smile, remembering her own young days.

“She is very simple,” she said to her husband that night; “she thinks only of him; she does not seem to remember that he is rich, and that one day she will be mistress of The Grange. That is so [328] like our Bessie; she always goes to the heart of things.”

“I am very much pleased with him,” replied Dr. Lambert; “he is just as unsophisticated in his way as Bessie is in hers. You would have liked to have heard him, Dora. He seems to think there is no one like her. ‘She is worth a dozen of me,’ he said; and he meant it, too.”

Richard spent several days at Cliffe, and they were golden days to him and Bessie. On the last evening they went out together, for in the Lamberts’ crowded household there was little quiet for the lovers, and Richard had pleaded for one more walk. “I shall not see you for six whole weeks,” he said disconsolately; and, as usual, Bessie yielded to his wishes.

They climbed up by the quarry into the Coombe Woods, and walked through the long, green alleys that seemed to stretch into space. The Coombe Woods were a favorite trysting-place for young couples, and many a village lad and lass carried on their rustic courtship there. The trees were leafless now, but the February sky was soft and blue, and the birds were twittering of the coming spring.

“And Edna is to be married in June,” observed Bessie, breaking the silence. “I am glad Mrs. Sefton has given her consent.”

“I suppose they gave her no option,” replied Richard. “I knew when Sinclair went down on [329] Saturday that he would settle something. Edna would not be likely to refuse him anything just now. You will have to be her bridesmaid, Bessie, so I am sure of some rides with you in June.”

“Dear old Whitefoot! I shall be glad to mount him again.”

“I shall get you a better horse before next winter. Whitefoot is growing old. Bessie, I ought not to be dissatisfied when you have been so good to me; but do you not think it would be possible to induce your father to change his mind?”

Bessie did not pretend to misunderstand his meaning; she only said gently:

“No, Richard; and I do not think it would be right to ask him;” and then she added, “You know dear Hatty will only have been dead a year.”

“Yes, I see what you mean,” he replied slowly, “and I must not be selfish; but next October is a long time to wait, Bessie.”

“It will not seem so,” she answered brightly, “and we must not hurry your mother; there will be Edna’s marriage in June, and my visit to The Grange, and every now and then you will come here.”

“Yes, and there will be my mother to settle in her new house—you see what Edna says in her letter, that they have decided not to separate; that means that my mother will take a house at [330] Kensington. Well, I dare say that will be for the best; but when my mother goes The Grange will want its mistress.”

“It will not want her long,” she said very gently, “and Richard, dear, you have promised not to be impatient. Mother is not ready to part with me yet. I shall not like to think of you being lonely

in that big house; but it will not be for long."

"And, after all, I shall not be lonely," he returned, for he was not to be outdone in unselfishness. "I shall be getting the house ready for you, and the new mare. Oh, and there will be a hundred things to do, and in the evenings I shall talk to Mac about his new mistress, and he will look up in my face with his wise, deep-set eyes, as though he understood every word, and was as glad as I was that October would soon come."

"Poor old Mac!" she exclaimed; and there was a soft color in her face as she interrupted him. "You must give him a pat from me, and to all the dear dogs—Leo, and Gelert, and Brand, and Bill Sykes—we must not forget Bill Sykes—and Tim, and Spot; and tell them—" And then she stopped and looked at him with a smile.

"What shall I tell them?" he asked coaxingly; "that you will be glad too, when October comes?"

"If you like," she answered quietly, "you may tell them that; but, Richard, when I think of the future, it is all like a dream. I cannot imagine that the dear old Grange is to be my home." [331]

"You will find it very real," he replied. "Think what walks we shall have on Sunday afternoons, with Bill Sykes and his companions; and when you go into the drawing-room to make tea, Tim and Spot will not be left outside."

"Wait a moment, Richard look at that sunset;" and Bessie pointed to the western heavens, which were bathed in a glow of golden light. They had reached the end of the wood; a wide stretch of country lay before them. How still and quiet it was! even the birds' twitterings had ceased. Bessie's eyes grew soft and wistful; the sunset glories had reminded her of Hatty in her far-off home.

Down below them lay the bay, like a sea of glass mingled with fire. "Thank God, all is well with my Hatty!" she thought; and then she turned to Richard with a gentle smile, and they went slowly back through the wood again, talking quietly of the days that were to be.

THE END.

Transcriber's Note:

Changes to the original publication have been made as follows:

The Oatland Post-mark *changed to* The Oatlands Post-mark

"I am sure I don't know" returned *changed to* "I am sure I don't know," returned

in ice in Artic *changed to* in ice in Arctic

I dont think Aunt *changed to* I don't think Aunt

proudly to show her treassure *changed to* proudly to show her treasure

manners My Bessie is *changed to* manners. My Bessie is

embarrased manner *changed to* embarrassed manner

live anywhere else?" *changed to* live anywhere else!"

inintellect, of art *changed to* intellect, of art

then her mother dotes on her. *changed to* then her mother dotes on her."

"You may come in if you like, old fellow. *changed to* "You may come in if you like, old fellow."

Hatty! Oh, you mean the little *changed to* "Hatty! Oh, you mean the little

but for my part I think him *changed to* "but for my part I think him

but I I can imagine what a *changed to* but I can imagine what a

muff, but the man be has *changed to* muff, but the man he has

he returned hastiiy *changed to* he returned hastily

step-mother was young, and did not *changed to* stepmother was young, and did not

I go there very often because *changed to* 'I go there very often because

and the heorines have *changed to* and the heroines have

observed Bessie anxiously *changed to* observed Bessie anxiously.

What a terriffic clap! *changed to* What a terrific clap!

effort to come, if only for my sake.' *changed to* effort to come, if only for my sake.

is quite well," he continueed coldly *changed to* is quite well," he continued coldly

You father will find that *changed to* Your father will find that

“I had some business there, he began awkwardly *changed to* “I had some business there,” he began awkwardly

“Yes, indeed, he replied promptly *changed to* “Yes, indeed,” he replied promptly

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK OUR BESSIE ***

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