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### **THE CARROLL GIRLS.**

By

**MABEL QUILLER-COUCH.**

1906

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## CHAPTER I.

Up and down, to and fro, backwards and for wards over the sunny garden the butterflies, white, sulphur, and brown, flitted and fluttered, lightly poising on currant-bush or flower, loving life as they basked in the sunshine; and Penelope lay and watched them. What did it matter to them that the garden was neglected, the grass rank and uncut, the currant-bushes barren from neglect, the lilacs old and blossomless? It mattered no more to them than it did to Penelope, lying so lazy and happy in the coarse grass.

Penelope had never known the garden other than it was now, except, perhaps, at very far-distant intervals when a visitor was expected— usually Aunt Julia, when a shilling or so had to be found to pay a gardener to come and 'tidy up.' She herself was always better pleased when he did not come, for almost invariably he charged too much, or Lydia said he did, and would tell him of it, not too politely, and tell her mistress that she was encouraging robbery; and Mrs. Carroll—who would far rather pay too much and hear no more about it than be bothered—would be worried, and Lydia would be cross; and to Penelope it seemed a pity to be made so uncomfortable for the sake of sixpence or a shilling. She could not bear jars and discords. These, though, were troubles that occurred but seldom to ruffle the surface of her usually happy life. As a rule, like the butterflies, she saw only the sunshine, and the green things growing, and nothing of the sordidness and neglect of everything about her. If she did, if things jarred or fretted her, she just walked away, far out into the country and the woods where everything was peaceful, and nothing seemed to matter; and out there she would very soon recover again and become her old happy self.

There were three other Carroll children—Esther, the eldest, Angela, and Poppy, the baby of them all. Penelope was the second, aged nearly twelve.

"Four girls! isn't it dreadful?" Esther sometimes sighed. "But there, I suppose it is better than some of us being boys, for now we *can* hand our clothes down from one to the other, and if we couldn't I am afraid the younger ones would often have to go without."

In the thirteen short years of her life poor Esther had grown to know all the shifts and economies and discomforts of poverty only too well. She had seen, so to speak, the rise and fall of her family, and at last had become almost the only prop which kept it from falling altogether. She could remember when the house was always full of company and life and laughter, when her mother always wore pretty frocks and beautiful jewels, and drove everywhere in their own carriage. She could remember gay dinner-parties, when she used to

creep out of bed and sit on the stairs to listen to the singing in the drawing-room.

The scent of certain flowers still brought back the memory of those days, when she and Penelope used to go down in their prettiest frocks to dessert, and were given dainty sweets and fruits, and were made much of.

Then there came a dark time when, although she was so young, she felt vaguely that there was trouble overshadowing them, and saw it, too, reflected in her father's face; and the darkest day of all was when Grandpa Carroll came, and with scarcely a word or a glance for the children, went at once to the library with her father, and departed again that same night, leaving gloom and misery behind him. All the rest of the day, she remembered, her father remained shut up in the library, and her mother locked herself, weeping, in her bedroom; and Esther and Penelope went to bed that night without any good-night kiss from either; and worse than that, Esther heard nurse and Jane, the housemaid, talking in low, mysterious tones, and knew that they were talking of her parents' and their affairs; and, as any child would, bitterly resented it.

"Why don't you go downstairs, Jane?" she said at last, when she could endure it no longer; "you know mother doesn't allow gossiping in the nursery."

But she had only a shaking from nurse, and a rude answer from Jane, which made her anger burn hotter than ever. She lay awake a long time that night, trying to make sense of what they had been saying, but it was not until years later that she really understood.

The next day Jane had had a month's notice given her, not because she gossiped in the nursery, or was rude to Esther—Esther never told tales about the servants—but because Mr. Carroll said briefly that they must manage with fewer servants and cut down all expenses. For that same reason the children's pony was taken away and sold a few days later, and from that time it seemed to Esther it had been nothing but cutting down and giving up and doing with less and less. It was only a few months after the pony was sold that Poppy was born, and soon after that they left their old home and went to live in a little house where they had no library and no nursery, and no stables or horses, and the children had to play in the dining-room; and Esther's chief recollection of this time was her constant struggle to prevent Penelope and Angela and the new baby from crying or making too much noise, for she knew by the frown on her father's face that he was worried and bothered by it, and she could not bear to see him looking gloomy, or to hear the children scolded.

Having no nursery they had no nurse—no real nurse; they had a 'cook-general' and a 'nurse-housemaid' as the advertisements put it, and, in common with most persons who profess to be able to 'turn their hands to anything,' they could do few things, and nothing well. So it fell to Esther and her mother to take care of the babies, and as Mrs. Carroll had not yet learnt to take care of herself even, a very heavy burden rested on little serious-faced Esther.

It was better when the summer came, though, for then the family made another move. True it was to a yet smaller house, and more things had to be given up; but the smaller house was in a little village called Framley, and the little village had woods lying behind it, and here was nursery large enough for any number of children to laugh in or cry to their hearts' content, without disturbing any one; and Esther's heart was relieved of one big worry, and the children soon learnt to laugh a again, and play, and make as much noise as their hearts desired.

Summer, though, cannot last for ever, and woods do not make an ideal nursery in winter. The perplexed frown was beginning to pucker Esther's brow again when once more they were called on to relinquish something. The nurse-housemaid had to be sent away, and they had to learn how to manage with one servant; and it was just about that time that she heard her father say one day, "It will really be easier for you, dear, when I am gone," at which her mother burst into tears and wailed something Esther could not quite understand, about being left to bear all the worries alone. "It is much worse for those who are left than for those who go," she cried.

"But you will have the children," Mr. Carroll said sadly.

"Yes, four of them to feed and bring up on two hundred a year, and only one servant to help me. I don't know how any one can expect me to do it. I've not had a new gown myself for nearly a year."

"It shall not be for long, dear, if I can help it," her husband had said, very patiently. "As soon as possible I will send for you and the children. But it is no use to take you all out until I have a home of some sort ready for you; it would be greater misery than this."

But Mrs. Carroll had only wept more and more, until the children began to weep too, though they did not know for what.

Soon after that there had been a great deal of upset and excitement in the house: big boxes stood about on the landing, and the children were told that daddy was packing—he was going away to Canada, where they were all to join him soon. For a few days this news

filled them with a pleasant excitement, and for months after their father had gone Esther and Penelope talked and talked of what they would do when they got to Canada, and Penelope dragged out an old trunk and began to pack a curious assortment of things that she thought peculiarly suitable for that country. But as time went on she found she needed the things, and by degrees the thought of Canada became dim, and of no immediate interest to them. They were excited at first when their father's letters came because they thought each one would bring the longed-for summons; then they grew almost to dread them, for their mother always broke out into tears and wailings on reading them, finally locking herself in her room for the rest of the day, and the children were left to themselves to try to throw off the load of oppression and wretchedness which weighed on them even while they played. The memory of the wretchedness of those days remained with them to the end of their lives.

Two, three, four years passed by, and gradually they forgot Canada, and Mrs. Carroll ceased to weep on receipt of a letter from her husband; but whether it was that she grew more used to her trouble, or that the news was better, the children did not know, though Esther often longed to.

So things were on that sunny May day when Penelope lay dreaming and watching the butterflies in the neglected garden, and Esther made a milk pudding in the kitchen, and the two younger children played about the house, while nearer and nearer came the postman bearing the letter that was to alter all their lives for them.

Esther had just finished making her pudding, and Poppy had that moment succeeded in inveigling Angela into the cupboard under the stairs and turning the key on her, when footsteps came up the path, a letter dropped in through the letter-box, and a postman's rattle sounded to the furthest corner of the little house.

The post was the principal excitement of the day to the little Carrolls, and there was usually a race to the door to try to be first to seize the letters. This time Poppy had a clear start, for Esther was in the kitchen, and Angela was safely under lock and key.

"A letter from daddy," she shouted, recognising the stamp; and in she flew with it to her mother.

Mrs. Carroll, roused from her reading, laid aside her novel and bottle of smelling-salts to take the letter. Having secured and handed over the prize, Poppy danced off again. She was far more interested, at that moment, in her prisoner, whose kicks on the door and screams of rage had brought Esther to her rescue.

Esther, having released one sister, strolled wearily out into the garden to seek another and a little rest. She was very tired and very depressed; but the garden did not look inviting when she got there.

"How can you like this untidy old place?" she cried, as she made her way through the long rank grass.

"Oh, Esther, come gently, do! Look, oh do look at that lovely dragon-fly! Did you ever see such a beauty? Don't disturb him. Oh, do be careful!"

But Esther looked with only half-interest at the gorgeous insect; then, turning away a little impatiently, "I don't know how you can be out here so much and not try to make it a little tidier," she said vexedly. "I only wish I had a machine, or shears or something, and more time, and I would do something to it."

Esther was by nature a very neat and dainty little person, with none of Penelope's dreamy indifference to her surroundings. The untidy garden with its air of neglect would have been irritating to her if it had belonged to some one else, but being their own, and feeling responsible for it, it vexed her so she could hardly endure to stay in it. If the others could have had their way, they would have had all their meals out there, but not so Esther; the sight of the poor neglected spot would have quite destroyed her appetite, though no one loved having meals out-of-doors better than she did. She often took the children to tea in the woods, but *that* was different; the woods were always lovely, and just what they should be.

Esther's earlier years had given her a brief experience of how things should be done, and how they should look, and she had never forgotten; Penelope, on the other hand, had forgotten, or never noticed Angela and Poppy, fired by Esther's example, had spasmodic passions for improving the house or garden, during which every one suffered more or less, and they themselves were exhausted long before the huge tasks they had undertaken were half completed.

So here and there the garden showed cleared and scarred patches where the children had 'worked,' which meant that they had begun to 'tidy' by pulling up everything that grew, after which they would scrape the bed over with a rake and replace in a prim row as many of the plants as they could get in, and a day or two later the eye would be caught by a square of brown earth, broken by a row of sorry-looking dead or dying plants standing conspicuous and solitary against the wild, untrained vegetation round about, while a later search would

perhaps reveal, under the tangled litter in the path, one of the best dinner-knives, covered with rust, and other lost treasures, such as a trowel, scissors, and occasionally a silver fork.

To Esther these attempts were merely depressing and irritating; they seemed only to emphasise their helplessness, and the uselessness of trying to make things better.

"Nothing is right here, somehow," she complained to Penelope now, "neither the house, nor the garden, nor ourselves. Look at us!" throwing out her hands dramatically. "We aren't educated, or dressed properly, or—or anything. Look at that," stretching out her foot, and eyeing disdainfully the clumsy shoe which disfigured it. "We aren't fit to go anywhere, and we can't ask any one here because the house is never fit to be seen, or the meals, or—"

"Never mind," said Penelope placidly. She was used to Esther's outbursts, but, though quite unable to sympathise, she was ready with attempts at comfort. "You don't want to know any one but ourselves, do you? I don't."

"No-o," admitted Esther. "But we ought to. It—well, it is always supposed to be right. We shall grow up like savages, Aunt Julia says, and not be fit to talk to any one or go anywhere, and we shan't have any friends; and every one *ought* to make nice friends; it looks so bad if one has none—"

"Miss Esther! Miss Esther!" called a sharp voice from the kitchen door. "You must all come in at once. Your ma wants you immejutly—all of you."

Esther rose, a little anxious pucker gathering on her brow as she remembered the Canadian letter.

"Come along, Pen," she said impatiently. "I wonder what it is. Bad news from father, I expect."

"P'r'aps it's good news," said Penelope hopefully, rising with a sigh of regret at having to leave her nest and the sunshine and the butterflies. Somehow, though, she did not really expect any such thing. "P'r'aps we are to go, at last. Oh," with sudden excitement, "wouldn't it be perfectly lovely! Oh, Essie, wouldn't it be splendid! Do let's run in and see if that is what it is mother wants us for."

## CHAPTER II.

"Children, *do* make haste! How long you do take coming when I send for you! And I've had such news I am really quite bewildered, and haven't a moment to spare. All my plans are changed in a minute, and I can hardly realise all I have to do. I have heard from your father. He wants me to come out to him, and I am going, at once; of course, I *must* go. I couldn't refuse to, and—you must all go to live with your Aunt Julia. I know you don't like her—and it is very naughty and ungrateful of you— but I can't do anything else, and you must make up your minds to behave."

Mrs. Carroll paused at last from want of breath, and the children gasped in sympathy.

They had barely entered the dining-room when this cataract of speech was turned on them by their mother, with every appearance of excitement and gratification. All her usual melancholy apathy was thrown aside; her face was alight with pleasure, her eyes bright with excitement. Mrs. Carroll loved to be the bearer of startling news, to spring a surprise on people— just as she loved to have a pleasant one sprung on herself. She adored excitement, and under its influence saw nothing but the one thing that appealed to her at the moment.

Now, after hastily scanning her husband's letter, she grasped the one fact that he thought she might come out to him very soon. What the change might mean to others, never occurred to her; that it might be for the worse, never entered her head. She saw simply a chance of a change, an escape from the monotony and sordidness of her present life. She would have a new outfit, and travel, and meet new people, and escape from that dreadful little cheap house and dull village, not to speak of other tiresome things which had been thrusting themselves on her attention for a long time, but had been put aside and aside for consideration 'some day.'

The children stood just within the door, startled and bewildered—too bewildered for the moment to move or speak. "Going away!" they gasped at last, "and—and *we* are to be left *behind!* Oh, mother, you can't mean it!"

They loved their careless, easy-going mother very dearly, and, in spite of her neglect of them were, as a rule, very happy. She was the one person in the world, too, that they knew well and were accustomed to; and to be thus suddenly bereft of her and left entirely to strangers, or worse, was a prospect too appalling almost to be credited. In spite of her neglect they loved her; in fact it was only as they grew older that they realised that she did neglect them, or was not to them all she might have been. Esther was beginning to realise it; but Esther, in spite of her odd, sharp temper and reserved manner, had a great love for her mother; she loved her so much that she wanted her to be different, to be more what the ideal mother was—such a one as she had read of in books.

"Oh, mother, you aren't really going away, and going to leave us!" cried Angela again. "Mother, you can't! We can't be left!" At the thought of it Poppy began to cry.

"Yes, your father wants me to come, and I must go as soon as I can make arrangements. Of course I can't take you all with me, so I am going to ask your Aunt Julia to let you go and live with her."

What Esther had been on the point of saying, was never said—her mother's apparent indifference to their separation hurt her too deeply. "Oh, then, Aunt Julia does not know it yet?" she remarked shrewdly.

"No, your father has left all the arrangements to me to make, and I am to come as soon as I like; so, as I see no use in delaying, I shall try to get away as soon as I possibly can."

Mrs. Carroll's brain could work very quickly under certain circumstances. Now, though only a few moments had elapsed since the momentous letter had arrived, she had formed plans innumerable, to be carried out at once in spite of all obstacles. She would give Lydia a month's notice this very day, and the landlord notice that she was going to leave the house, and her sister Julia that she was about to send the four children to take up their abode with her at once—she would feel so much freer when they were settled, and she was alone.

"But perhaps Aunt Julia will not have us," said Penelope, joyfully clutching at the hope. They none of them loved their Aunt Julia. Not to be going to Canada was bad enough, but to have to go and live with Aunt Julia, for no one knew how long, was too dreadful to contemplate.

"Oh, mother, *don't* send us to her, *do* take us with you, mother dear," pleaded Angela tearfully. "Doesn't father say we are to come? I am sure he wants us too."

"Don't bother me now, child," said Mrs. Carroll, not crossly, but with a distracted air, pushing aside Angela's clinging, eager arms. "I've got more than enough to think of as it is. Of course you can't go now."

"Why, mother? Can't we afford it?" asked straightforward Penelope.

"Oh, do be quiet. Don't bother any more," cried Esther bitterly. "Don't you see that mother doesn't want us, and Aunt Julia won't want us— nobody wants us." And in a tumult of pain and anger she flung herself out of the room to hide the tears that made her eyes smart and tingle.

"I really think your Aunt Julia would refuse to have Esther if she knew how bad her temper has become," said Mrs. Carroll with a sigh. "She seems quite to have forgotten the respect due to her mother, and to think I may be spoken to in any way she chooses. I am sure no other mother would endure such behaviour from their children as I have to."

"Esther didn't mean to be rude, mother," pleaded Penelope. "I expect she is upset 'cause daddy didn't send for us too. He *said* he would, you know, and we always thought we should go too when you went. It is an *awful* disappointment," sadly.

"Mother," pleaded Angela wistfully, "it isn't true what Esther said, is it? You *do* want us, don't you?"

"I certainly do not want children with me who don't know how to behave," said Mrs. Carroll in a quick, reproving tone, never dreaming of the love and longing in the child's heart. A few words of explanation, of love, and sorrow for the parting, of hope of a speedy reuniting would have relieved all their young hearts of a load, would have banished that chilling feeling of being unloved, unwanted, would have filled them with hope and patience, and have bound their young hearts to their absent parents for ever. Instead of which they felt rebuffed and unloved, they were turned in on themselves, until such time as some other love should warm their chilled hearts and expand their natures, and a stranger, maybe, should mean more to them than a parent.

Of all the little brood Angela was the most affectionate, the most clinging little home-

bird. She loved her mother passionately, and her home too, in spite of its unattractiveness, for the flaws she saw in persons or things only made her love with a deeper, more sympathetic desire to help. It was always to the most unlovable and unattractive that Angela's heart went out. If people or animals had no one else to care for them, she felt they might be glad of her.

She turned away from her mother with a little sigh. She did not blame her for her want of feeling, she only winced as at a new revelation of her own unlovableness.

Poppy, who all this while had been standing mute and considering, was at that moment struck by an inspiring idea.

"But, mother," she said gravely, "if we don't know how to behave properly Aunt Julia won't want us either, and then what shall we do! You will *have* to take us with you," with rising hope in her voice, "and I am *sure* daddy would be glad, and I *do* want to go in the big ship and see daddy," with a deep sigh. "Oh, I *do*," pathetically, "want to see daddy, so badly."

"Don't talk nonsense, child. You can't remember your father. Why should you want to see him?"

"I do. I want to see what he is like. Esther remembers him, and she wants to see him too. *Do* take us with you, mother. We'll be—oh, ever so good. I *don't* like Aunt Julia; she is *always* cross, and I don't like cross people."

Poppy had no fear or awe of any one. Every one but Aunt Julia had loved her always, and done their best to make her happy, even cross Lydia, and she in return rewarded them by a placid, sweet acceptance of their efforts, and allowing them to love her.

"Mother," burst out Penelope eagerly, "couldn't we all go to boarding-school while you are away? It would be jolly, and ever so much nicer than living with Aunt Julia. I know we shall always be getting into scrapes if we go to her, and no one *could* please her, Lydia said so."

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Carroll warmly, "Lydia is a very rude girl to speak so of a lady, and my sister, and if I were remaining here I should not allow you all to go into the kitchen so much. It will be very good for you to try to please your aunt. Children don't know what is best for them, and—and they should learn to consider others before themselves."

A grown-up observer might have smiled satirically at Mrs. Carroll's theories, so easily preached, so neglected in practice.

"Now run away. I have so much to think of, my poor head is quite bewildered. I think I must have a cup of tea at once—will you tell Esther or Lydia to make it for me—or I shall have a dreadful headache, and I *must* think out what outfit I shall require, or it will never be ready in time, and I must try to let the house, or we shall have to pay another quarter's rent, and there is the furniture to get rid of and—oh dear, oh dear, my poor head feels quite bewildered already; however *shall* I manage it all, and by myself too! It is really too much to face alone—now, children, don't make a noise or you will drive me distracted."

Without another word the three walked away in search of Esther, and to talk over the dreadful and bewildering change the last hour had wrought in their outlook; but Esther, sitting white-faced and angry-eyed on her bed, could not be brought to discuss anything. She was bitterly disappointed not to be going to Canada, furiously angry at having to go to Aunt Julia, who treated them all invariably as though they were naughty or going to be naughty, cruelly hurt that her mother showed so little feeling at being parted from them all, and, curiously, full of pain at the thought of parting from that mother.

Poor Esther could not see, of course, that this same parting was really for her good; that there, under the strain and discord of her home she was allowing herself to become irritable and captious, despondent and sharp-tongued. She knew she always felt cross and injured and sore, but she never set herself to face the reason and combat it.

Two days later a reply came from Miss Julia Foster, and a frown sat heavily on Mrs. Carroll's brow. Aunt Julia firmly refused to take over at a moment's notice the burden her sister was so calmly laying on her shoulders.

"People who have children must expect to give up something for them," she wrote. "You really must not expect to throw off your responsibilities in this way. It is your duty to stay with them if you cannot take them with you. I observe you say nothing as to the provision you are prepared to make for their board and clothing and education. I presume you don't expect me to take over the responsibility of providing all that too."

Miss Foster wrote as she talked, very candidly.

Mrs. Carroll's face flushed with anger and annoyance.

"Julia never would do anything to oblige any one," she said sharply. "She has always

been the same. I only wonder I thought of asking her."

It never occurred to her to think what it would mean to a person unaccustomed to children to have four suddenly introduced into a quiet home hitherto occupied only by one very prim and particular lady and two equally prim servants, who did not know what real work was.

Miss Foster's first thought had been: "Neither of the maids would stay," and she could not contemplate the terrors of changing. Her second thought, "Who is to provide for the children?" She felt quite certain that that important point had never entered into their mother's calculations, and she felt distinctly annoyed with her sister for the abrupt and casual way in which she threw such a great responsibility on others' shoulders, and in her letter she made her feelings plain.

For a few moments Mrs. Carroll sat considering. One by one all her relations and friends were passed in review before her mind's eye. "There seems," she said at last in a musing tone, "no one but Cousin Charlotte. I wonder—"

There was not much doubt as to what Mrs. Carroll was wondering. Her face lightened, determination shone in her eye.

"Cousin Charlotte," or Miss Charlotte Ashe, was a cousin of Mrs. Carroll's mother. In her earlier years she had kept a girls' school in London, but when she found herself growing old she sold it, and retired to a little house in her native village in Devonshire. Schoolmistresses do not, as a rule, grow rich, and Miss Ashe was the last person to save money for herself while there was any one else wanting it; she managed, however, to save enough to keep herself, and Anna, her former cook, in their little house in comfort, and put a trifle by for an emergency.

It was to this quiet, modest little home that Mrs. Carroll's thoughts now flew, without the slightest feeling of compunction at invading it, as she meant it to be invaded. Her letter to Miss Ashe was a masterpiece of pathetic pleading. Miss Charlotte read it with tears of pity for the poor mother, reduced from affluence and luxury to poverty and the position of an emigrant's wife torn from her children by stress of circumstance. Then she read it again to Anna, and Anna's eyes filled too; but it was for the children that Anna wept. Both kind hearts agreed, though, that they could not refuse to give the homeless ones a home; and a letter was despatched at once, full of warm hospitality and affection, and almost before it was posted a perfect fury of cleaning, planning, rearranging burst over Moor Cottage, in preparation for the four new inhabitants.

"Children," cried Mrs. Carroll delightedly, when the letter arrived, "your dear Cousin Charlotte is quite anxious to have you in her charming little home in Devonshire. I know you will be happy there, she is so sweet and kind. I was always very fond of her, and so will you be, I know; and you must do all you can to help her, and not be too troublesome. She says she can have you at any time, so I think you really had better go as soon as I can get you ready. I shall be able to see to things better, and pay a few farewell visits, when I am quite free. It will be a great relief to know you are comfortably settled."

Esther listened in silence. She was terribly sensitive. She was interested, but troubled. Did Cousin Charlotte really want them, she wondered, "or had mother forced them on her?"

Penelope knew no qualms; she simply danced with delight at the thought of going to Devonshire, and to live on a moor. "I always wanted to go there," she cried. "I know I shall love it."

Angela wept quietly at the thought of leaving Framley, and her mother, and the house and the woods. Poppy stood gazing eagerly from one to the other, prepared to do whatever her sisters did, but puzzled to know which to copy.

"Cousin Charlotte will want a big house," she remarked gravely, "if she has all of us to live with her. I wonder if she is glad we are coming—or sorry," she added as an afterthought.

"What about our clothes and food, and everything," asked Esther presently, nervously summoning up courage to put the great question that had troubled her most ever since the move was first mooted. She knew from bitter experience that the very last person to trouble about such details was her mother.

"Really, Esther, you are very inquisitive and interfering," said Mrs. Carroll, deeply annoyed because the question was one of the most embarrassing that could have been put to her. "Who do you consider is the right person to attend to such matters, myself or yourself?"

Esther sighed, but made no answer. She had no doubt as to who was the right person, her doubt was as to the right person's doing it. The matter, though, was too important for her to be easily daunted. She felt she *must* know, or she could not go.

"And—and what about our education?" she asked. She meant so well, but she spoke in that sullen, aggressive tone that always put her in the wrong and made her mother angry. It



was purely the result of nervousness. She did so hate to have to be disagreeable and say these things, making herself seem so forward and important, when she really felt just the reverse. There was no one else though to do it, so she had to. "Is there a school there? We all ought to go to school now, even Poppy. I am thirteen, and—and I don't know as much as the village children, and I—I'm ashamed to go anywhere or meet any one. Every one sees how stupid and ignorant we are." A great sob clutched her throat and choked the rest of her words, tears of mortification and bitterness filled her eyes. She was painfully conscious of her own ignorance, and had an exaggerated idea of the contempt others must feel for her. "And some day the others would come to feel the same," she told herself resentfully, "if nothing was done for them. It was cruel. No one seemed to care for them, or how they grew up."

And then again, she would hate herself for her bad temper, and the nasty things she said. She knew she was making herself unlovable, and she did so long for love.

Mrs. Carroll looked somewhat taken aback at this new question. "Oh," she stammered, "I suppose I must arrange something. I must talk to your father about it when I get out to him. In the meantime I daresay Cousin Charlotte will be able to help you a little with a few lessons. She has been a schoolmistress all her life; she had a splendid school— such nice girls, too. She must miss them so. She will probably be quite glad to do a little teaching."

"I wonder what she will think of us," said Esther, "if she has been accustomed to well-brought-up girls."

"Well," cried Mrs. Carroll, turning on her sharply, "surely if you are so anxious to learn, you might have been studying by yourself all this time. I am sure there are books enough in the house, and you knew there was no money to spare for education."

"Yes, there are books," said Esther quietly. "Father's books that he brought from Oxford, but I can't understand them. It is books for quite little children that I want," her face flushing hotly.

"Well, I daresay Cousin Charlotte will have loads of old school-books, and—and well, at any rate, Esther," reproachfully, "you know how to read and write, and you might have been teaching Angela and Poppy to do so, you really might have done that."

"I have," said Esther.

"Oh, well, that is something. When one can read there is no excuse for ignorance in a place where there are books. There are lots of people who have set to work and taught themselves when they have been too poor to go to school, and have done—oh, marvels!" responded Mrs. Carroll, relieving herself of any feeling of self-reproach. Because a few rare geniuses had done so, by facing difficulties and self-sacrifices such as she could not even imagine, she felt there was nothing to prevent every ordinary child from pursuing the same course.

Esther said no more; a sense of hopelessness and helplessness seized her— a feeling common to most who had to do with Mrs. Carroll, but Esther, as yet, did not know that. She walked away out of the room and the house— she felt she must get away somewhere by herself.

She hurried on quickly till she came to the woods. There, at any rate, there was peace and rest, and no bickerings. "But oh," she thought, as she flung herself down on the soft, springy pine-needles which lay so thickly everywhere, "what shall I do when I haven't the woods to come to?" and she put out her hand and patted tenderly the rough trunk of the nearest pine-tree.

Half an hour later she rose as bewildered and vexed as ever. Her thoughts had led her nowhere; instead of finding some way to surmount her troubles, she had just brooded and brooded, and nursed her grievances until they were larger than ever. She could not go home yet, she felt too depressed and miserable, so she wandered on and on.

In one little hollow in the woods was a spot they called their 'house,' where they spent long days playing all sorts of lovely games, and very often, when their mother or Lydia wanted to have a free day, they had their dinner and tea there too. Making for this place now, Esther came upon Penelope perched in the forked trunk of an old tree, a book in her hand. She was so absorbed she gave quite a start when Esther called to her, "What are you doing, Pen?"

Penelope had a deep pucker in her forehead and a very grave face. "I am trying to educate myself," she said soberly. "I thought if I could learn even only a little before I went to Cousin Charlotte's it would not seem *so* bad. But I don't seem able to get on *very* well. I can't quite make out what it is all about, and the words are very long. I thought I'd try though. I only wish I'd thought of it sooner."

Esther felt a twinge of shame. She had thought of it, but she had done nothing, and her inmost conscience told her she might have spent her time more profitably than she had. "If

we were not going away, Pen," she said enthusiastically, "we would have lessons here every day. P'r'aps if we kept on at it we might get to understand better, and we might get some nice books in time. But," hopelessly, "it is too late now."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Penelope encouragingly. "It can never be *too* late to learn things, and p'r'aps we can make up for lost time. At any rate, let's try."

"Very well, we'll begin now. Shall we start together? What book are you reading?"

"It is called *The Invasion of the Crimea*" said Penelope slowly. "I think it will be very interesting—further on."

"I wonder what the Crimea was," mused Esther.

"If we read very carefully perhaps we shall find out. There seems to be a lot about soldiers and battles."

"I wonder," said Esther, after a moment's thought, "if it will be any good our reading all this. Don't you think we ought to learn something that people talk about every day?"

Penelope looked a little disappointed. "I don't know," she said slowly. "I don't know how to—or what books to get, and—and p'r'aps some people do talk about the Crimea. Cousin Charlotte may, and then won't she be surprised if we know all about it!"

"Is it long?" asked Esther, still dubiously. Esther wanted to find the royal road to knowledge, which is easy and short and smooth—so they say, but no one knows, for no one has found it yet.

"Eight more volumes," said Penelope, almost apologetically. She was beginning to feel her zest for self-education considerably damped. "But," brightening up a little, "we can go on with this, at any rate, until we find out what we *ought* to learn. It can't do any harm. It looks like history, and I am sure we ought to know history."

"Yes," agreed Esther. So they began taking it in turns to read; but the words were long, and the names difficult to pronounce, and Esther's mind was in such a state of turmoil she could not fix it on anything, and line after line, as Penelope read, fell on deaf ears. "I think I shall go home now," she said at last. "Penelope, do you think we shall have some new clothes before we go away? We ought, we are dreadfully shabby."

Penelope looked up with doubt in her face. "I don't know. I don't expect so; you see it would cost such a lot to get things for the four of us, and there will be the tickets too, and it must be a very long journey."

Esther sighed. "Well, we are disgracefully shabby. I don't know what we are going to do. Cousin Charlotte will think we are a tramp's children."

The next day, when the study hour came, Esther took a large basket of stockings out into the woods with her to darn. "I must try and mend these again," she said. "We don't seem to be going to have any new ones," and while Penelope with some trouble made her way through a chapter of the *Invasion of the Crimea*, and the younger ones collected fir-cones to take home for the kitchen fire, Esther sorted out and darned a motley collection of stockings of various sizes and every variety of shade of washed-out black and brown. She darned them quickly and thoroughly; but the great excrescences of blue, brown, grey, or black darning-wool would have brought terror to the heart of any one who suffered from tender feet. "There," she said, laying aside the last pair with a sigh, "at any rate we shall be sound if we are shabby. I wish, though, the darns didn't show quite so much," gazing regretfully at a large light-blue patch in the middle of one of Poppy's black stockings.

After that the *Crimea* was abandoned, and they all fell to talking of the strange new life which was drawing so close to them now, and by degrees, and in spite of their first dread, was so exciting, so full of interest, and all manner of possibilities.

### CHAPTER III.

And now at last the parting was over, and the new life fairly begun. Esther, Penelope, Angela, and Poppy sat alone in a third-class carriage, looking out with blurred and smarting eyes at the fields and hedges rushing past them, at telegraph wires bowing and rising, at people and cattle and houses, and wondered if it could all be real or if they were only dreaming.

They had been very sad for the last few days, for the parting had been a painful wrench. In spite of all its drawbacks, the little house at Framley was their home, and they shed many bitter tears when they bade good-bye to it, and the woods and the walks, and all their well-known play-places. They wept, too, at leaving their mother, and even Lydia, cross, careless Lydia, for, after all, their mother and Lydia were the only two beings they knew well, and to be obliged to leave them and go entirely to utter strangers, in a quite unknown place, was very alarming.

"No one knows what it may be like at Dorsham," said Esther tragically, "and we—and we are not like children accustomed to going about. We don't know what are the right things to do—you know what I mean, we don't know how to behave, at least I don't. I hate having to meet any one in the street, for I never know what to say or do; and if I don't speak I know I am rude, and they think all sorts of things about me, and then I am miserable, and—and it'll be like that all the time at Cousin Charlotte's."

The other children looked awed until Penelope brightened up a little. "Never mind," she said hopefully, "we will go on just as we do now. After all, we can't be so very very dreadful, for mother *is* a lady, and knows, and we aren't wild savages; and Cousin Charlotte must tell us if we don't do things right, and we must remember for another time. Don't you think that will be all right, Esther?"

"I wish I could remember all the things Aunt Julia used to tell us," sighed Angela regretfully. "If we could we should know exactly what to do; but she was always telling me things and I've got them all mixed up."

"Will Tousein Charlotte whip us if we don't do right?" asked Poppy, in an awe-stricken voice.

"No one knows," said Esther, still in the same tragic, woebegone manner. "She may. I believe schoolmistresses are *very* strict. We shall know when we get there." Poppy's face grew longer and longer. "Mother says she is a *dear* old lady, but—but mother forgets, and she never had to live with her, as we've got to."

So their hearts were heavy with mingled dread and shyness, as well as sadness and a sense of desertion, as they took their seats in the train which was to convey them to Dorsham. In the luggage van were two small trunks containing their four scanty wardrobes, and all their toys and other treasures. In her hand Esther carried a large old purse of her mother's, containing their four tickets, and a sovereign which her mother had at the last moment given her to provide them all with stamps and notepaper and pocket-money for the next twelve months.

To children who had been in the habit of doing without pocket-money at all it seemed as though unbounded wealth were theirs, and they could never know want again.

Penelope carried a basket of provisions, which Lydia, with unusual care, had insisted on their taking. Penelope consented because she did not like to refuse Lydia's last request, but neither it nor its contents held the slightest interest for them until quite a long stretch of their journey had been covered. They were too unhappy to feel hungry. They would never care for food again, or for any one or anything but Framley and their mother and Lydia; and while they were in this frame of mind two or three hours and many miles passed by.

But the lapse of time brought some relief and a lightening of their depression. They became able to take a growing interest in their surroundings, and a sensation of hunger began to assert itself; so did a savoury odour from Lydia's basket, an odour so delicious that, in spite of themselves, they became interested.

"I wonder what Lydia put in here," said Penelope, looking down at the despised basket for the first time. "Something smells rather nice." They had left home before nine, and the meal they ate before starting was hardly worthy the name, and as it was now past twelve they began to feel very empty and rather faint, and the savoury whiffs which floated out from the basket grew more and more appealing.

Poppy slipped from her seat at last and pressed her small nose close to the cover. "I believe it's patties, and gooseberries, and—and—"

Lydia had her faults as to temper, but there was no denying she could cook when she chose to, and her meat patties were the joy of the children's hearts on the rare occasions when she could find time to make them.

Without more delay the basket was unpacked, and Poppy's sense of smell was amply justified. Four meat patties, some hard-boiled eggs and slices of bread and butter, cakes,

biscuits, milk, gooseberries, and apples, made a lunch fit for four queens. And the children fairly squealed with delight as they unrolled packet after packet.

"We will have a table," cried Esther, springing up and spreading a newspaper on the seat for a tablecloth, "and lay everything out on it. I only hope no one else will want to come into this carriage."

It was not very easy to keep on their feet with the train swaying and jerking them as it did, but it made it all the more amusing, and when all was spread it looked so nice it made them feel very grand and grown-up. It was a wonderful new experience, and their spirits rose quite high under it.

"I wish we could go on and on like this always," said Esther. "Wouldn't it be jolly! There would be no one to worry us, and no strangers to face."

Penelope looked up quickly, her eyes alight with a sudden idea. "Oh, Esther, let's do it! Let's go on and not get out at Dorsham," she cried wickedly.

"But could we go on much further?" asked practical Angela. "Isn't there any end to the railway?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it just goes on and on all round England, and in and out until it comes to where it started from, and then goes on again," said Penelope, her mind busy over the problem.

"But the poor engine-drivers must get down sometimes and go to bed, mustn't they?" asked Poppy. "They don't sleep on the engine, do they?"

"I wish I knew," said Penelope. "It would be so lovely just to go on and on and not know where we were, or anything, and—"

"But what should we do for food?" asked Esther quietly. "The meat patties are gone already," throwing the last crumbs out of window, "and we couldn't get any more, and—and—" At that moment the train drew up at a station, and a ticket-collector, flinging open the door, came in and demanded to see their tickets. Trembling with nervousness, certain that he must have heard what they had been saying, Esther fumblingly undid her purse and produced them. The man looked at the tickets closely, clipped bits out of them, and handed them back again, giving at the same time a keen, curious look at the four young travellers.

It was not until the train had steamed on again, and he was left behind on the platform, that either one of them recovered from the shock sufficiently to speak.

"He must have heard us," breathed Angela, with wide frightened eyes. "He *must* have, and—oh! he must have seen all that," pointing to the remains of the feast spread out on the seat.

"I expect he is used to it," said Penelope consolingly. "Most people do eat when they are travelling, I expect. But it is no use for us to try to travel on beyond Dorsham, that is certain. They would find us out by looking at our tickets, and—and p'r'aps we should be sent to jail!"

Agreeing, reluctantly, that their plan for a life of perpetual travel must be abandoned, they settled down again to face the more monotonous future that had been arranged for them. Tired at last of talking, they tried to read, but no book could enthral them for long, while there was so much to see and take note of, as they rushed through the beautiful country all bathed in June sunshine, or stopped at the big bustling stations, and the funny little country ones. Oddly enough, though they stopped so often no one got into their carriage, which was very nice, they thought. By and by, though, they began to grow very weary, the carriage was very hot, and they grew tired of their own company. It might have been better for them, perhaps, had they had some fellow-passengers.

"Only three o'clock!" sighed Penelope, catching sight of a clock at the station they were drawn up in. "We have two and a half more hours yet. Oh dear, what a long day it is! I believe I shall be almost glad to get there, though I do dread it so."

"I wonder if Cousin Charlotte is nervous, too," remarked Angela, who had been very quiet for some time.

Poppy woke up from an uncomfortable nap, looking and feeling very cross. "Oh, I am so thirsty," she cried. "Esther, mayn't I have an apple?"

Esther roused herself from her study of the landscape. "Of course you may, dear—let us all have another meal now, and call it tea. You see, if we get there at half-past five we are sure to have something to eat soon after, so it will be better to eat up what we have here soon, unless we mean to waste it."

There was complete agreement of opinion on this point, so Esther tidied their tablecloth and rearranged the remaining food as well as she could, and they set to work to demolish

everything with keen appetites—a task they accomplished without any great effort; and it is only to be hoped that Lydia heard of the appreciation the contents of her basket met with.

Try, though, as they would to spin out the meal, it was not yet four when the last crumb and drop had vanished; and, finding nothing else to do, they nestled down in their four corners again with the quiet melancholy of a dying day settling down on them once more. Though it was June, the land outside seemed already to take on a look of evening, the wind had changed, and little dark clouds had come up and hidden the sun. The children were reminded of the woods at home, and the curious air of gloom they wore, as though there were a storm outside, even when the sun was shining brightly.

Poppy crept from her corner and nestled up close to Esther.

"Essie, let's tell stories that will make us feel happy," she said, wistfully, with just the faintest quiver of her baby lip. "Something that will make me not think about mummy and Lydia and home."

"Pen, you tell us one, will you?" said Esther, lifting her little sister on to her lap, and holding her very close. "You can tell stories better than I can."

Angela in her corner kept her back turned to them, looking out of window very persistently, and winking very hard. But when the story was fairly begun she too crept up and nestled close to Esther, with her face well hidden behind Poppy's back and Esther's encircling arm.

The request roused Penelope from her own depression. She loved to tell stories. Usually she made up her own, for she had read but few to repeat; and the children always preferred hers, for, somehow, she seemed to know exactly what they liked. Now it seemed as though she understood perfectly just what would cheer them, and what to avoid, and they listened in perfect silence, drinking in comfort.

"Don't stop, don't stop!" pleaded Poppy, when the obvious end had been reached. But at that moment the train drew up, and Esther's eyes, wandering idly over the little station to see what place they had reached, read 'Dorsham' on the signboard, and sprang to her feet with such energy as to send Angela and Poppy tottering across the carriage.

"We are come," she gasped. "Oh girls, we are come! What shall we do?"

"Dorsham, Do-orsham," shouted a porter outside, in confirmation of her words, and the carriage immediately became a scene of wild confusion and excitement.

"I wonder if there is any one here to meet us," said Esther, as she tidied Poppy's dark hair and put on her hat. "Perhaps some of us had better get out and see, or they'll think we have not come."

They were all almost breathless with nervous excitement, and Esther was just popping her head out of the window to try to open the carriage door when a little lady came hurrying along the platform, her cheeks very pink, her eyes bright with anxiety. When she saw Esther she stopped, her face brightening with an expectant smile. When her eye fell on the three other little faces gazing out through the side windows with eager curiosity, her face brightened still more.

"Oh," she gasped, "are you—I think you must be the little Carrolls from Framley, my young cousins. I am Miss Charlotte Ashe, Cousin Charlotte— and I've come to meet you—are you Esther? I think you must be."

Esther's face had brightened too, with relief. This gentle little lady was so unlike the formidable stranger she had been dreading so, she felt quite at ease at once.

In another moment they were all on the platform being introduced.

"This is Penelope, and this is Poppy, the youngest of us, and this is Angela, the third," she said with the air of a proprietor, "and I am the eldest."

"I am delighted to see you all, my dears," said Miss Ashe warmly, kissing each in turn. She felt a little nervous under the fire of four pairs of enquiring eyes; there was nothing rude, though, in their stare; it was simply full of a wistful, half-incredulous pleasure. They could scarcely believe their eyes and ears that things were turning out so much less dreadful than they expected.

Then followed a moment of bustle, while the station-master and the one porter went in search of the luggage, and the children were led up to identify the various things as they should be lifted out. When they were told that the two shabby trunks were all there were to identify, disappointment was only too plainly written on the men's faces.

Seeing how little it was, the porter readily promised "to wheel it along by and by," and Miss Ashe turned away with a sigh of relief.

"Now then, chicks," she said cheerily, "we will start for home. You won't mind a walk, I hope, dears. My house is only fifteen minutes from the station. Are you *very* tired?" looking anxiously from one to the other, but most anxiously at Poppy.

"Oh no," they assured her politely. "We would like to walk, Cousin Charlotte," added Esther; "after sitting still so long it will be very nice," and her sisters supported her eagerly.

The engine, with a good deal of puffing and snorting, glided on its way again. The children stood to watch it, but they saw it depart without any of the regret they had expected to feel, and then the little party turned out of the station, on the last stage of their pilgrimage to their new home.

They were accustomed to the country, of course, so that their first view of Dorsham did not affect them as it would have affected a town child, but even they exclaimed with delight at the weird, wild beauty which opened out before them. The station appeared to have sprung up in the heart of a little forest of firs, as being the most sheltered spot it could alight upon in that open country, and it was not until they had walked a little way along the white road which skirted the woods, and came to the other road which led at right angles to Dorsham, that the real beauty of the place they had come to burst upon them.

Then, "Oh!" they gasped. "Oh! oh! Cousin Charlotte, how perfectly lovely! We did not think it would be a bit like this."

Angela alone did not speak; she gazed, and shivered as she gazed. She was too awed by the rugged wildness to be able to find any words—awed and rather frightened. In the beautiful evening light of the summer's day there lay before them an immense stretch of wild and rugged moorland, sloping down on either side till it met a winding silver streak at the bottom of the valley, and rolling upwards, away and away, rising and dipping, with every here and there rough boulders and tors, single or in groups, standing upon its brown bosom like rocks out of a brown sea, until in the distance high rock-crowned hills bounded and closed it in.

Then would the eye travel from the wilder beauty back to rest on the gleaming, gliding river in its rocky bed, and the group of little houses which stood about so irregularly as to give the impression that they had been dropped down promiscuously and allowed to remain as they fell; while close about each house were large gardens snatched from the wealth of wildness outside and enclosed within sturdy walls, as though to protect them from the encroaching brown sea outside.

"Oh, Cousin Charlotte," gasped Angela, "aren't you afraid to live here? It looks so—so wild and—and sad?"

Cousin Charlotte smiled. "Oh no," she cried, "it is not as lonely as it looks. There is quite a village just on beyond, but you cannot see it from here." Then noticing the look on Angela's face, "You will not be afraid, will you, children?" she asked anxiously.

"Oh no," said Esther, replying for them all. "I am sure we shall like it, Cousin Charlotte. I don't think it is as lonely as a wood really, because here you can look all about you, and can see if any one is coming. Angela is tired, I expect, and I think every place looks rather sad when night is coming on. I think she will like it soon, when she is more used to it."

"The village looks more lonely than it is really," said Cousin Charlotte. "From here it seems as though we are quite unprotected, but when we are at home that feeling will be gone. It seems then as though the moor is protecting us. There are other villages just beyond us in each direction, too, so we are not quite deserted."

"Oh, I love it, I love it!" gasped Penelope, who had been silent from the intensity of her emotion all this time. It was almost as though the sight was too much for her. She felt bewildered, overcome, full of awe and love, and a feeling she could not describe. She stood still in the wide white road, and gazed and gazed with her heart in her eyes. The others walked briskly on, Angela keeping close to Esther, her hand thrust through Esther's arm, Poppy holding Miss Ashe by one hand and Esther by the other. The road wound down in almost a straight line, until they could hear the murmuring of the river, like a welcoming voice, as it hurried along over the stones. The nearer they drew to the house and the river, the less did the moor and the hills seem to dominate them, and the feeling of home grew on them.

Just before they reached the house Penelope overtook them.

"Oh," she cried enthusiastically, "it is so lovely. I—I am sorry I have lived all my life away from it. I might have had nearly twelve more years here."

Miss Ashe laughed, well pleased. "I am so glad, children, that you think you will like it. Anna and I thought it might be dull for you. Well, here we are at last, and very glad you must be, I am sure, after your long, tiring day. This is Moor Cottage, dears, and I hope you will all be very, very happy here as long as I am allowed to keep you. It shall not," she added gravely, pausing as she stood in the porch with her hand on the latch, "be my fault if you are

not."

"I am *sure* we shall be happy, Cousin Charlotte," said Esther earnestly, longing to throw her arms about the dear little lady, and kiss her, but feeling too shy. "I know we shall."

Angela did not only long, but she acted. "And I hope we shall make you happy, too," she cried, and throwing her arms about Miss Ashe's neck kissed her lovingly.

Cousin Charlotte's eyes were dim as she opened the door wide. "Welcome home," she cried. Then in a louder, brisker voice, "Anna, Anna," she called, "where are you? Here are our young ladies come, and neither of you out to meet and welcome them! I am ashamed."

A wild scratching was heard at the back of the little stone-paved hall, then a door was flung wide, revealing for a moment a pretty, cosy kitchen with firelight gleaming on a dresser laden with dainty china; but only for a moment, for the doorway was almost immediately blocked by a figure which blotted out every other view—the big, broad figure of Anna, white-capped, white-aproned, red-faced and smiling.

"Well I never!" she kept exclaiming, "and to think of me never hearing you coming. Well I never!" but all further talk was put a stop to by a yelp of joy, and the wild rush from somewhere of a creature that, for the moment, Poppy was quite sure was a bear. The creature flung himself on Miss Ashe so impetuously as to very nearly topple her over.

"Guard, Guard," she protested, recovering her footing with a laugh, "behave yourself, sir." But the great dog would not be quiet until she had given him her hand to kiss and her purse to hold; with that in his mouth he contented himself with wriggling joyfully at her feet, making little muffled sounds of welcome.

"Now come and speak to your visitors," she said, "and shake hands like a gentleman." But he had to return her purse to her own safe keeping before he could be induced to do anything more, after which he went round and solemnly shook hands with each of the girls, smiling very wide with pleasure at the pats and caresses he got, until, on coming to Poppy, she flung her baby arms about his great rough neck, crying, "Oh, you darling, you darling," and kissed his soft brown cheek, upon which he looked up at her adoringly, and seated himself beside her. Then Anna came forward and seemed quite pleased when they all shook hands with her; and Guard, seeing every one else so hearty, began to dash round and round again as he looked ecstatically from one to the other, making little low cries of pleasure.

## CHAPTER IV.

"Now then, Anna," said Miss Ashe at last, "we really must show these poor children their rooms, and let them wash and refresh themselves before tea; they must be longing to, and I am sure they are famished—aren't you, children?"

They remembered their 'tea' at three o'clock, and blushed; but that really did seem hours ago now, and they honestly were very hungry again. Perhaps the moor air had something to answer for already.

"Well, come along," said Miss Ashe, while, murmuring something about hot water, she bustled off to the kitchen. "No, Guard, you must wait down here," said his mistress, as he rose to follow them; and with his feet on the bottom stair he stood still, gazing after them longingly, but without attempting to follow.

At the right of the hall was an archway, and going up a step and through this, the children found themselves in another little hall, with doors on two sides of it, and a staircase at the back, all completely cut off from the view from the front door. The stairs were so wide and shallow they tripped as they followed Miss Ashe up them. At the top they found themselves in a little gallery which ran all round with several doors opening into it.

"Now, my chicks," said Miss Charlotte, throwing open the first door they came to, "you must settle amongst yourselves which two shall share a room, and which room you will have."

The children, greatly excited, poured after her into what they all thought the sweetest, loveliest bedroom they had ever seen in their lives—which it certainly was. The walls were covered with a pretty creamy paper festooned all over with bunches of pink-tipped daisies tied together with blue ribbons; two little white beds, with snowy curtains and quilts, stood with a table between them. But most fascinating of all was the long, low, lattice-window with its white dimity curtains, and frill across the top. They flew to it to look out, and there before them lay the river winding in and out on its crooked course, and beyond it the moor stretching away, as far as the eye could see, to where, in the distance, it melted into the sky. The beauty of it so fascinated them that it was not until later they noticed all the remaining charms of the room—the little white bookcase full of books, the chairs on either side of the windows, the two white chests of drawers, one for each of them, and provided with a key, too, and the charming blue carpet on the floor.

"I hope we don't do any harm," said Esther nervously. To her, accustomed to the shabby bare rooms at home, ill-kept and untidy, it looked almost too dainty and pretty to use.

"I am quite sure you will not," said Miss Ashe, who appeared to have no fears. "Now this is the sunniest side of the house, and I think, perhaps, the Poppy ought to have the sun."

Poppy laughed. The idea pleased her, and, as though to claim possession, threw her hat on to one of the chairs.

"Now, come along, or tea will be ready before we are." Out they trooped excitedly, each delighted in her own particular way. "That is my room," said Miss Ashe, touching the next door, which was closed. "My window looks towards the station, along the road we came just now." She did not say she had given up the pretty room they had just quitted, in order that they might have the sunshine.

At the back of the square gallery she threw open another door. "This is your other room," she said; and Penelope, who was standing by her, gave one long, low cry of pleasure, and was across the room in a moment.

"Oh!" she gasped, "oh my!" She could not find words to express the feelings which rushed over her as her eyes fell on the view without—the pretty garden full of flowers, enclosed within a stone wall, and beyond that the old brown moor stretching far and wide in every direction, until it broke like a brown sea about the foot of the distant hills. Here and there were lesser tors and piles of rock, and little footpaths through the heather, and pools which gleamed with a cold light in the light of the evening sky. It was wild, weird, fascinating.

"I think you, at any rate, should have this room," said Miss Ashe, smiling, well pleased at Penelope's delight. The rest of the children were looking interestedly about them. "As this has a colder aspect I thought it should be made to look warmer," Miss Ashe explained; and indeed the warm red carpet, and the dark-red roses nestling against deep-green leaves on the walls, gave it a very cosy, comfortable look.

Esther felt soothed and calmed already. The air of comfort and neatness, the good taste that met them on all sides, gave her such a sense of pleasure and ease as she had never known before. This was just how things should look, how she had always wanted them to look, and had never been able to get them to, or make the others understand.

"How do you think you will manage?" said Miss Ashe, turning to Esther. "Don't you think you and the baby here had better be together in the other room, so that you may be able to help her a little? I have only the one servant yet, so we must manage to do as best we can for the time. I think these two," laying a hand on Angela and Penelope, "had better stay here;" a plan they all heartily agreed with. Then, after providing them with brushes and combs until they could unpack their own, Miss Ashe went away, and left them to prepare themselves for tea.

And here, perhaps, it would be as well to give you some idea of what the four little Carrolls were like at this time, for one's first question generally, on hearing any one spoken of, is, "Is she pretty?" or, "What is she like?" and quite naturally, too, for people only seem real to us when we are able to picture them in our own minds as they really are.

Well, Esther Carroll at this time was a tall, thin girl, with a grave face and fine expressive grey eyes. She was not pretty, but she would have been what is generally described as 'nice-looking' if her face had not been almost always spoilt by her worried, cross expression. She was a tall, graceful girl, with a good carriage, well-shaped hands and feet, a good complexion, and an abundance of long light-brown hair. She took great pains that her hair should look well-kept and glossy, and it hung long, straight, and gleaming, to below her waist.

Penelope was shorter and broader, altogether a more portly little person, with a clever face, dreamy, questioning grey eyes, and a nose which was decidedly a snub—a fact there was no getting over, though Penelope often tried. Her hair, which was short and curly, was not so golden as Esther's; it had deeper, redder tints in it.



Angela was more like Esther in appearance than either of the others. She was a lanky, overgrown little person at nine years of age, but her long, shapely feet and hands gave promise of a graceful woman by and by. She had long, fair hair like Esther's too, but Angela's had a beautiful wave in it. Her eyes, blue and soft, and appealing as her warm affectionate nature, looked out of a beautiful child-like face, full of gentleness and love.

Then came the Poppy, the pet and plaything and ruler of them all, a little round, dark-haired, brown-eyed contrast to the others, who demanded love and got it, giving it in return when she chose, and that was not always to those who asked most loudly for it. Fearless, outspoken, and quick, Poppy had none of Penelope's dreaminess, or Esther's anxiousness, or Angela's timidity. She was eminently a practical little person, with deep thoughts and plans of her own, and a will to carry them through.

They had had a rough, uncared-for upbringing, which had made Esther perhaps a little masterful and grown-up in her ways and ideas, and Penelope, somewhat careless, had not checked Angela's nervousness or Poppy's independence, but they were all honest and truthful, and full of good instincts; and as they stood looking out of the windows of their new home at the new strange world beyond, each in her own way was determining to make the best of her new life, and be good.

But they dared not linger at the windows.

"Tea may be ready even now, and Cousin Charlotte is perhaps a very particular and punctual person," said Esther, and taking Poppy by the hand they started to go down. But at the top of the stairs they found Penelope and Angela debating and looking about them nervously.

"Ought we to go down, or ought we to wait till we are called?" asked Angela, turning to Esther, with relief at leaving it to some one else to decide. "Would it be rude to seem in a hurry, or to keep Miss Charlotte waiting?"

Esther could throw no light on the dreadful problem, there were so many things to think of. If they went down they would not know where to go, and if they stayed in their rooms Cousin Charlotte might wait and wait for them, thinking they were not ready.

"Anyhow, we can't stand here," whispered Penelope. "It will look as though we are listening and prying. Let's go back to our rooms—and yet— oh dear, Cousin Charlotte may be down there now, at this very moment, getting angry with us and thinking how long we take getting ready, and we don't really."

Esther's temper suddenly gave way. "I do wish one knew what to do, always," she said crossly. "But mother never taught us things like this— yet we are expected to know—"

"P'r'aps it doesn't really matter," whispered Angela, who could not bear to hear her mother spoken harshly of.

"Oh yes, it does," snapped Esther. "It makes all the difference."

"P'r'aps they'll ring a bell when tea is ready," chimed in Poppy, with sudden inspiration, "then we will know." And sure enough at that moment a bell did ring down below, and settled the difficulty. In their relief Penelope and Angela started off with a rush.

"Oh, girls, don't hurry so," cried Esther nervously. "It looks so bad, as though we had been waiting."

So the impetuous ones slackened their pace, and four very demure little maidens entered the dining-room a moment later in a manner as decorous and restrained as the most polite could wish.

And what a charming scene it was that met their eyes—one that all the four appreciated to the full: a long, low room with a French window standing wide open to the garden just a step or two below. On the evening breeze wafted in the scent of mignonette and flowers, and the low sleepy clucking of the hens, about to go to roost. Near the window stood the table, with a silver kettle boiling merrily on its stand, and fruit and flowers and pretty china in abundance, all looking as dainty and tempting as heart could desire. There was an abundance too of more substantial fare, eggs and fish, and jam and cream, a tart, and a big home-made loaf; and the scent of the flowers and the tea all mingled together in a most appetising whole.

To the children it all seemed wonderful, exquisite; and for the first time they realised how hungry they were. Penelope's eyes wandered through the window to the flower-beds outside.

"Oh, what a lovely garden!" she cried, struck at once by the beauty of its well-kept air, and the cared-for look of everything. Then she grew silent as her thoughts flew back with tender pity to the old beloved untidy Framley garden, and she felt a twinge of remorse that she had not tried to do something with it—it might perhaps have been made to look like this.

Then, at a word from Miss Ashe, they turned away from the window to the tea-table.

While the children were taking their places she made the tea.

"Now," she said, as she drew the cosy over the teapot, "which of you will say grace?"

The four looked from one to the other dismayed. Esther and Penelope's cheeks flamed hotly, Angela looked puzzled. Poppy alone spoke.

"What is 'grace'?" she asked innocently.

Miss Ashe grasped the situation in a moment, and, though her heart sank a little in dismay at their ignorance, she showed no sign. "It is a little prayer we say before a meal, to ask God's blessing on what He has given us, and we say one again at the end to thank Him for it."

"We never say anything at home," said Poppy, with childlike candour. "What do you say, Cousin Charlotte?"

"Put your hands together, dear, and bow your head, and you shall hear. It is very simple; you will be able to say it too in a day or so. Now," bowing her head reverently, "For what we are about to receive, O Lord make us truly thankful. Amen." Then Miss Ashe raised her head, and the children followed suit.

"I've read in some of my books of people who said grace," said Angela, "but I didn't know that people really did it."

Cousin Charlotte's face was very grave. "A great many do, and a great many more do not, but every one should. Don't you yourselves feel that you want to, dears? You say 'Thank you!' to any one who gives you even the least little trifle. You have just said 'Thank you!' to me for the cup of tea I handed you; then surely much more should you say it to the good God who gives you everything. Don't you see, darling?"

"Yes, I see," said Penelope soberly. "I wish I had thought of it before. How ungrateful we must seem to God! I wonder He goes on being good to people if they never seem grateful."

"God is so tender, and loving, and forgiving. He does not punish us because we are ungrateful, and forget Him; but, though what is done in ignorance is excusable, when we know and yet forget Him we are committing a sinful and ungrateful act."

Poppy sat drinking in eagerly all that was said. "I'll try to remember, Cousin Charlotte," she said seriously. And Cousin Charlotte smiled, and blinked her eyes rather hard for a moment and laid one hand on Poppy's tiny hand resting on the table by her. Then the meal began in earnest. And oh what a meal it was! The children were wildly hungry, and the new fare was so tempting compared with what they had been accustomed to at home. Then, when it was over, and that was not very quickly, and grace had been said, they all strolled out through the open window and down the steps to the sweet-scented garden, where they wandered about until it was time to go in and unpack their boxes, and put Poppy to bed.

It was great fun unpacking and laying away their things in the places meant for them, though there was so little to lay away it looked quite lost in the deep drawers and cupboards. Esther felt horribly ashamed as she wondered what Miss Ashe and Anna would think when they came and saw them. At the same time it was great fun running from room to room to look for missing articles. One of Poppy's shoes was in one box, and the other in the one Penelope was unpacking in her room. Then no nightgowns could be found until, after a long search, they were discovered at the very bottom of one of the boxes underneath the toys they had insisted on bringing.

"I don't think the boots ought to have been put in last," said Esther gravely. "Your old boots were right on top of my best hat, and the crown has been doubled right in. Look, Pen."

Penelope looked at it with serious consideration.

"What a pity! I believe," she added, after vainly trying again and again to make the crown stay up, "I believe you will have to pretend this is how it ought to be."

The Carroll children had had so little in the way of hats and clothes, and so seldom a pretty thing, they thought very little about dress, so the catastrophe did not affect them as it would have vainer children; and, in any case, their minds were too full now of other things to have much time to spare for trouble.

That night as soon as they were in bed they fell asleep, and slept like tops; their long day had tired them out, and the moor air made them sleepy, so sleepy that when morning came they slept on and on, in spite of the sun shining outside, and the birds calling, and the voices of the men and boys shouting 'Good mornin'!' 'Bootiful day,' to each other as they went on their way to their work.

When Esther did awaken at last it was to find Anna knocking at her door, and calling,

"Time to get up, young ladies; it is half-past seven, and breakfast will be ready at half-past eight. Are you awake, missie?"

"Come in," called Esther in a very sleepy tone, stretching herself luxuriously in her comfortable bed. They had rarely known the luxury of being called—never, certainly, of having hot water brought them.

Anna opened the door, and her big person filled the aperture. When she caught sight of Poppy's dark head so still and quiet on the pillow, she came further in. "Well, I never!" she breathed softly, as she gently placed down the can of hot water, "how sound she do sleep, the pretty dear; it do seem a shame to wake her. P'r'aps she'd better 'bide on for a bit, and rest herself."

"Oh no," said Esther, rousing herself. "Poppy is all right, she is a dreadful sleepy-head. Poppy!" she called, raising herself on one elbow, "Poppy! Wake up! It will soon be breakfast time, and Cousin Charlotte will be awfully angry if you are late."

"Ah, now, it do seem crool to frighten her like that," said Anna, half smiling, half troubled.

Poppy stirred herself, opened her dark eyes, and then, recognising her new surroundings, sat bolt upright in bed, looking about her with deep interest, but no sign of alarm or fear.

"I couldn't think where I was, just at first," she exclaimed in a sleepy voice. "It's Tousin Charlotte's. Is it time to get up? Oh how lovely! Now we've got all day to go and look at where we are."

She was out of bed at once, dancing about on her little white toes, her short curls all tumbled about her pretty flushed face.

"Now I'm going on to call your sisters," said Anna. "The bath water is all ready, missie; you've only got to turn the tap to get it just to your liking. You know where the bathroom is, don't you?"

"Bags I bath first!" shouted Poppy, who, all the while Anna had been speaking had been edging nearer and nearer the door; and with a triumphant laugh she had flown along the corridor and shut herself in before any one could stop her. Esther felt distinctly aggravated. She had considered herself obliged by politeness to remain in bed and give Anna her undivided attention while she was talking, and now Poppy, troubled by no such scruples, had taken this mean advantage. She would really have to be kept in better order, and taught to behave. Anna went away to call the others.

"Well, she hasn't got any towels, or sponge, or anything," said Esther, looking about the room. "Serve her right, she deserves—oh dear! I forgot the water would be hot; she's sure to scald herself, Or do something mad with the taps or the water. I *must* go and see to her."

At home the bathroom had had no bolt or lock on the door, and she would have gained admission at once by simply storming it. But here, as yet, she felt constrained to do things in a more gentle manner. So she crept softly along the corridor and tapped at the door lightly. "Poppy," she pleaded in an anxious whisper, "Poppy, do open the door, and let me get the bath ready for you. I am sure you will scald yourself, or swamp the house. *Do* let me in, dear; just think how angry Cousin Charlotte would be if any accident were to happen."

But no answer came to her pleading. "Poppy," more seriously, "do you hear me! Let me in at once, as I tell you." But the only response was a mighty rush of water and a great splashing, and Esther retreated, defeated, to nurse her wrath and await Miss Poppy's return.

"I do hope the children won't behave like savages," she muttered angrily, "and so disgrace us all." And a few moments later she had cause to echo this wish, for with a good deal of rattle and noise the bathroom door was flung open, and Poppy, having discovered nothing to dry herself with, flew dripping back to her bedroom, leaving a trail of wet footmarks all along the speckless carpets.

It really was enough to make Esther very cross, and it did, and Miss Poppy was rubbed dry with more vigour than she at all appreciated, a vigour which was not lessened by a rush from the other bedroom and the capture of the bathroom by Penelope. Esther felt very injured. As eldest she considered she had the first right. On her way back again, Penelope, unconscious of the state of feeling in the blue bedroom, unceremoniously opened their door and popped her head in. "How are you?" she asked, her face all beaming with smiles.

"I don't know how I am, but I know how I shall be," said Esther tartly. "I shall be late, and it won't be my fault."

To Penelope this seemed a matter too trifling to think of. "Isn't everything jolly?" she breathed loudly, remembering suddenly that Miss Charlotte was in the next room. "I

couldn't think where I was when I woke up, it was so funny—"

"Go and dress," said Esther, "or you—oh, it really is too bad!" she exclaimed abruptly as a soft swish along the corridor and the click of a latch told her that she had been again forestalled, and Angela was now in possession of the bathroom. "I ought to go first, because I am the eldest, and Poppy last because she is the youngest."

Poppy chuckled, "*I was first and you'll be last, to-day,*" she said aggravatingly.

"I didn't know it mattered, as long as we all got washed," said Penelope, and finding the atmosphere uncongenial, began edging away.

"It matters very much," said Esther with dignity. "I have to dress Poppy, and tidy the room. If I am dressed first I can—" but Penelope had melted away, and Poppy was kneeling by her bed, saying her prayers. Esther could have cried with annoyance.

She was ready in time after all, but barely. She was just fastening her frock when the bell rang, and her waistband she put on as she went down the stairs. A frown still rested on her face and she felt very cross. She had not said her prayers, and she had not been able to put her room tidy as she meant to, and she felt that her first morning, that she had thought would have been so lovely, was quite spoilt.

## CHAPTER V.

Poppy's boldness vanished when it came to going downstairs, and, though she had been ready so long, she waited for Esther after all. So did the others; they all felt rather shy at meeting Miss Charlotte again.

In the breakfast-room they found their cousin sitting at the table with some books before her. She looked up and smiled brightly when they entered, and beckoning to them, drew each in turn to her for a morning kiss. A quite unusual beginning to their day.

"Now, darlings," she said, "will you find seats for yourselves for prayers?"

The request startled them. They had never before heard of such a proceeding; but Esther, quickly recovering herself, tried to appear as though she were used to everything, though, with Poppy looking at her with such interested, astonished eyes, it was difficult.

"I've said mine," whispered Poppy, in rather an injured tone. Esther looked at her warningly. "Yes, I know, but Cousin Charlotte hasn't, and—and this is different. Lots of people do this. Sit there, and don't talk."

Poppy obeyed. Anything that her sisters approved was right, in her judgment. Penelope seated herself by the window, Angela on a little chair by the empty hearth, a grave, devout look on her pretty face. Then Anna came in, and Miss Ashe opened the Bible and read. She read only a few verses, but they were such as would appeal to the hearts of children. Then she closed the book and knelt down; at a sign from Esther they all knelt too, and Miss Ashe asked God's blessing on this new day and their new life, and thanked Him for His care and love, after which she began to repeat the Lord's Prayer.

"Oh, I know that," exclaimed Poppy delightedly. She repeated the prayer sentence by sentence; Anna did the same, and Esther and the others joined in; and to Esther, at least, as the sacred words were spoken, the whole world seemed to alter. The worry and irritability, the dread of she knew not what, all slipped away from her; and life seemed brighter and happier, and full of good things.

"What a lovely way to begin a day," she thought. "I hope we always have prayers. She got up and helped Poppy to her feet, and, after a moment or two, they all drew up to the table. Poppy looked about her with frank interested eyes.

"Oh, *what* a lovely breakfast!" she sighed, apparently overwhelmed by the loveliness, and every one was obliged to laugh. It was what they were all thinking, but the elder ones did not like to put their thoughts into words. Yet it was a simple enough meal; but the clean white cloth and shining silver, the flowers and fruit, and the dainty neatness of everything

made it seem perfectly beautiful to little people accustomed to Lydia's untidy, careless ways, to soiled and ragged cloths, badly washed silver and dirty knives, and food put down anyhow, and often not enough of it. This was what Esther had always instinctively yearned for; to the others it came as a surprise.

"I've been thinking, children," said Cousin Charlotte—who had indeed been lying awake half the night, realising for the first time all she had undertaken, and trying to grasp all her duties. "I have been thinking you had better perhaps have a few days' holiday to begin with, so as to get accustomed to your new surroundings, and then by and by we must begin to think about lessons. I am expecting to hear from your mother or father as to their views on the subject of your education. I expect they are anxious that you two elder ones should go to a good school at once. And that is one of my greatest difficulties, and the greatest drawback to your coming here, for there is no good school within reach, and I am puzzled to know what to do. It is so important that you should have every advantage now."

Esther's heart sank, for Cousin Charlotte's sake as much as anything. She knew as well as possible that Cousin Charlotte would have to settle this matter for herself, and bear the responsibility entirely. She knew, too, that the importance of it appealed as little to her mother as it did greatly to her cousin. Mrs. Carroll was one of those happy-go-lucky persons, so difficult to deal with, who think that 'sufficient for the day is the evil thereof,' and 'the future will take care of itself,' so what is the use of worrying—something is sure to turn up, and everything will turn out right, somehow.

It never occurred to her that her four children's future depended almost entirely on the education given them now; or to ponder what, poor and ill-educated, their future would be.

"Oh, something will be sure to happen," she would have answered. "What is the use of planning, no one knows what the future may bring." Miss Ashe's idea, on the other hand, was that with a good education any child had, at any rate, one strong weapon with which to fight her way.

At Dorsham the post did not come in until ten o'clock, so that there was no correspondence to discuss over the breakfast-table. Not that the children expected any letters; they had never received one in their lives.

Breakfast over, Miss Ashe was a little at a loss to know what to do with her charges; her life had suddenly become so changed and complicated, that the little lady had difficulty in grappling with it all at once. "I think you may like to go out and look about you," she said at last. "You can come to no harm, I am sure, if you keep away from the river. You may play in the garden, or wander on the moor a little way. But if you go beyond the garden, take Guard with you; he will be a companion and protector. Don't go very far, dears; I want you all to come back at eleven for some milk and biscuits."

The children were enchanted. This was a happy life indeed! As quickly as ever they could they got on hats and boots and started. They had never a doubt as to where they would go. The garden was very nice, but the moor! —a heaven-sent playground, miles of freedom, and all to themselves. The thought of having to return at eleven was the only thing that marred their perfect joy; they felt they wanted to have the whole long day before them to cover all the ground and make all the discoveries they wanted to. Guard, a proud and delighted protector, rushed about as excitedly as any of them. The new interest that had come into his life promised to be all that he could desire.

"I do want to get to the very top of that mountain," said Penelope, gazing earnestly at what was really a very modest hill, and apparently at no great distance from them.

"Well, let's," said Esther encouragingly, "it can't be very far away," and off they started. But the grey tor seemed to possess the power of gliding backwards, and the more the children walked, the further it seemed to recede; until at last, when, on scaling what they thought was the last height, they saw still a long stretch of moorland before them, with more deceptive dips and rises, they gave in and postponed their climb for another day. Moor air has a way of increasing the appetite at an alarming rate.

"I am afraid it must be past eleven," said Esther as they gave up the quest, and sat down to rest before turning homewards. "I wish I had put on my watch; but I was afraid of losing it."

Esther had a silver watch of her very own, one she had earned for herself. She had won it as a prize in a competition offered by a magazine the children took in. Her success had come as a surprise to them all, but most of all to herself, and the proudest moment of her life had been that when a carefully sealed-up jeweller's box had come directed to 'Miss E. J. Carroll,' and she had lifted out her prize under the admiring eyes of Lydia and the children, and the astonished gaze of her mother.

Mrs. Carroll was doubly astonished, firstly because she had not considered Esther capable, secondly because she had not grasped the fact that Esther was really seriously competing; but when she saw this proof of her labours, she made her a present of a pretty

silver chain, with two little silver tassels at the end, and Esther's cup of joy overflowed.

From that moment she would have bodices to her frocks that buttoned up in front, that she might pass the little silver bar through the buttonhole; and she set herself to make watch-pockets in all her skirts, which she managed by cutting slits in them just below the waistband, and sewing to the slits on the inside little pockets like small bag purses. Lydia showed her how to do it; and if the work was somewhat rough, and not quite finished, the pocket answered very well, and we cannot all reach perfection at once.

But at this moment the precious watch stood on the mantelpiece in the blue bedroom, on the watch-stand which was another of Esther's treasures. Lydia had given it to her on one of her birthdays; it was made of white wood, and had a little view on it of Blackpool, where Lydia had been spending her holidays. In her shabby, ugly bedroom at home Esther had not used her precious stand, it was all too dusty and ill-cared for; but here, where everything was so nice, it was to be given a prominent position.

When the children got home at last, tired and very hungry, they found four mugs of milk awaiting them, and a tin of biscuits; they found also that the postman had been with letters. There were none for them; but they never expected any, and postmen and posts held little interest for them as a rule. To-day, though, it had brought them something.

"I have heard from your mother, dears," said Cousin Charlotte, "and she sends you her love, and hopes you have arrived safely."

"Oh, we ought to let her know," cried Penelope, with sudden remorse that they had none of them thought of doing so before.

"It is all right," said Miss Charlotte consolingly. "I sent her a telegram last evening, after you came. She knew before Poppy went to bed. Ephraim took it to Gorley for me. Oh, you don't know Ephraim yet, do you? He is our handyman. He attends to the garden, and the poultry, and does all kinds of useful things. But, of course, you want to hear about your mother, more than about Ephraim. Well, dears, I cannot tell you much, for I have broken my glasses and cannot read very well. I was waiting for Esther to come home and be my eyes for me for once. I did make out, though, that she is very busy, and leaves Framley to-morrow. No, dear," to Esther, "I won't ask you to read it now. We will wait till you have had your lunch. I expect you are all hungry, and there is no great hurry."

Their milk and biscuits disposed of, Penelope and the two younger ones sauntered away to the garden. Esther waited. Miss Charlotte took Mrs. Carroll's letter from a little pile, and handed it to her. Esther, who was burning with impatience to know if her mother wrote of those things that were troubling her, began to read at once:

"DEAREST COUSIN CHARLOTTE,

"It is *more* than good of you to have my four poor children and give them a *home*. They will be as *happy* as possible with you, I *know*. I expect by this time they have reached you. To come to the *business* part of our plan, which I know *you dislike* as much as *I* do, I am *very* thankful you can keep them, clothe and educate them, for the hundred and fifty pounds a year. Their clothes need cost but *very little*; after all, it does not much matter what *children* wear in a country place."

"I have my friends here," Miss Charlotte was thinking, "and I cannot let my little cousins run about dressed like little tramps."

"While as for their *education*, we need only think of Esther and Penelope *yet*, and theirs must be of the *simplest*; it matters so much *less* for *girls* than for *boys*."

"Oh dear, oh dear," thought Miss Charlotte, "what a mistaken notion!"

"Ronald *hopes* to send more when the children are a little older. Oh, this *dreadful* want of money! I have been nearly *distracted* to know what to do. *Do* you mind, dear Cousin Charlotte, if I do not send you the cheque for this quarter till later on, but keep it for my own needs, which are *so* urgent? I *have* to get *so* much for my outfit, and so *many* things besides, I find I have not nearly enough money for it all. I *hope* you do not mind. I am up to *my eyes* in work, turning out the house and packing; and to-morrow I go to stay with friends in the North. I think the change will *brace* me up for the journey; *I sadly need* it.

"My love to the chicks and to yourself.

"Your affectionate cousin," "MAUDE CARROLL."

For a moment Esther could not lift her eyes from the sheet, they were too full of bitter tears of mortification. "Oh, why does mother always act like this," she was crying to herself, "and make people think unkind things of her? It is cruel of her, too, to leave us like this with a stranger, and not a penny to pay for it all."

Esther's heart burnt hot with shame as well as anger, for she knew instinctively that

Miss Charlotte Ashe would never see one penny of that money. She knew, oh, she knew only too well! She had had six years' experience of debt and trouble and shame, of money being diverted from its destined use and frittered away and wasted, of tradesmen and servants continually asking for their money, their threatenings, and all the shifts and contrivances that had to be resorted to to get a little to satisfy them for the moment.

The cheque her father had intended for their needs would, she knew, be frittered away on useless, foolish things; and never, never would her mother be able to get together so large a sum again, for she would never tell her husband of the debt; she would not have the courage; it would mean 'a scene,' and she hated to be scolded. If Miss Charlotte worried and made continual demands, a sovereign or a few shillings might be sent to her now and again; but if she were too proud or too kind to ask, she would never have a penny of it. Esther knew, oh, how well she knew and understood it all; and how it hurt and humiliated and maddened her, as she realised their position! Helpless, penniless, homeless, four of them, and dependent on this gentle little lady, who was neither rich nor young, and could have no great love for them. They had no claim on her whatever. Esther could scarcely summon courage sufficient to look up; her shame and trouble burnt in her eyes and wrung her young heart. It was a bitter, bitter moment, how bitter Miss Charlotte had no conception, for she did not know all. But never, throughout the whole of her life, did Esther lose the memory of that scene, and the shame and misery which swamped her.

But, though she did not realise Esther's trouble, Miss Charlotte was greatly troubled too, for she had but a limited income, and to make it provide for six where it had only been expected to suffice for two was a matter that required some consideration, and when the extra four were but scantily supplied with clothes, and had to be provided with education too, the matter became very serious indeed.

But Miss Charlotte was not one to worry unduly. In the first place she had been accustomed all her life to facing difficulties, and in the second, she had too much faith to worry about things.

"The dear Lord has His own plans for us," she would say, "and He will guide us through if we only have faith and hope." She said it to herself now, as she tried to put troublesome thoughts into the background.

But poor Esther had as yet none of Miss Charlotte's faith. Troubles to the young appear so much more appalling than they do in later life, for they have no experience to look back upon and learn from.

Cousin Charlotte began to perceive, though, that Esther was very troubled too, seriously troubled. With quick intuition she divined something of what she was feeling, and her whole heart flew out in sympathy to the child.

"It will be all right, dear," she said, smiling cheerfully. "We shall do. Don't let the matter trouble you. We grown-ups will see to it all. Don't upset yourself, Esther dearest."

The kindness of her words and tone broke down Esther's last powers of restraint. "But—I can't help it—you didn't want us, you couldn't have, and—and here we are—so many, filling up your house, and—and costing so much, and—and—oh, Cousin Charlotte, I am so sorry. We must go away, go back, we can't stay here—" Esther's voice and manner grew almost hysterical.

"Oh, but, dear, you must stay, *please*," pleaded Cousin Charlotte gently. "You would not go away and leave me lonely again, would you, and upset all my plans and my pleasure, would you? Don't you know that it is a very great pleasure to me to have you? It is," seeing Esther's look of incredulity, "I assure you. I love girls of all ages, and I have missed them terribly here. Never let such a thought trouble you again. After all, dear, I could not expect to have the money in advance. I might, you know," smiling, "take it and spend it on myself, and pack you all up and set you adrift if I had it beforehand. Every one has to earn their money before they get it. It is about your education and Penelope's that I am troubled most. Your mother does not mention it. I wanted to send you to a good school, but if I did it would cost the whole of the money your father is able to spare for you all, and I think I am hardly justified in running him into so much expense. I would gladly put out the money—"

"Oh no, please, you mustn't," cried Esther eagerly. "Please don't, Cousin Charlotte, you mustn't think of it." Again Cousin Charlotte was perplexed by her very real distress. "I will teach myself and the others if I can only have some books, but it mustn't cost you anything."

Miss Ashe would not allow a glimmer of a smile to show in her face or eyes. "Well, dear," she said gravely, "we will think about it and have another talk. We cannot settle such a big question in a moment, can we? At any rate, if you cannot manage the teaching you can help me in other ways."

"How?" asked Esther eagerly, her whole face brightening. "Oh, I do so want to help."

But at that moment Anna came in to say Miss Ashe was wanted, and the conversation had to end.

"Run out and amuse yourself now, dear, and keep an eye on the others," said Miss Charlotte, laying a gentle hand on Esther's shoulder with a little caressing touch. "I am afraid I am leaving the care of them very much to you, but we shall settle down in time. I hoped to have got another maid; but well, Anna has lived so long alone now it is a little difficult to find any one she would live with happily. I want a girl, too, who would not require high wages. Now run along, dear. I hear Poppy calling to you," and with the same Miss Charlotte bustled away, and Esther was left alone.

## CHAPTER VI.

"Girls," said Esther solemnly, as she hurried down the garden to where they were sitting, "I've got a lot to talk about. Let's go somewhere where we can be quiet."

There was a door in one wall of the garden, which led out directly on to the moor. Penelope had already discovered this, and at once led her sisters through it. At no great distance up the slope was a large group of rocks, which afforded them seats and shelter; it had other advantages, too, for from it they could look along the winding road, or down on the river and the cottages. Here the four of them ensconced themselves, with Guard beside them, and the three looked eagerly at their eldest sister.

"What is it?" asked Penelope.

"It isn't bad news from mother, is it?" gasped Angela, with a frightened face.

Esther sat looking very grave and absorbed, yet eager. "There is so much to say I hardly know where to begin," she said at last, and the excitement of the others increased.

"Begin anywhere," urged Poppy, who was not noted for her patience, and the others echoed her suggestion.

Methodical Esther, though, began at the beginning, and at great length told her story. The others listened with interest, but only Angela sympathised with Esther entirely. Penelope and Poppy were impressed, but they did not feel her peculiar horror of the situation as Angela did, nor her sensitive pride and shame. They grew more alert, though, when she, having finished her story of the letter, said gravely, "Girls, we've all got to do something, and I'll tell you what we've got to do."

"What?" they demanded in one breath.

"Well, we've got to save Cousin Charlotte all we can, and not cost a penny more than we can help."

"Must I only eat a very little teeny tiny bit?" asked Poppy gravely.

Esther laughed.

"Oh no, dear, you must eat as much as you want, or Cousin Charlotte will be angry. But we must manage so that she won't have to have another servant, and if we all help Anna and do a lot of the work, I don't think she need. We managed with only Lydia at home. But what I want most of all is to try and earn some money so as to be able to give it to Cousin Charlotte for what we cost her. But I can't think of *any* way, can you? Do let's try and think of something," she ended anxiously. "I am sure I would if I only knew how. I wish we weren't all so small."

"I saw a littler girl than me selling bootlaces once," said Poppy eagerly. "I could do that."

They all laughed, and the laugh inspirited them; the four faces grew bright and eager, the four brains went to work busily, and the maddest, wildest schemes chased each other through those little heads.

At dinner Miss Ashe was struck by the air of gravity which hung over them. She feared they must be tired or homesick, or suffering from the change of air, and grew quite troubled. They disclaimed all three when questioned, and spoke quite cheerfully when spoken to, and apparently were quite well; it seemed to be more an abstraction that enveloped them than



depression.

Poppy at last gave a clue to their feelings. "We are finding," she said, looking at Miss Charlotte, as though she felt some explanation were necessary; but catching Esther's warning glance she said no more.

"We must not let Cousin Charlotte know," Esther had said. "She is so kind she would not like us to worry, so we won't say anything about it to her if we can help."

"We'll s'prise her," Poppy had cried gleefully; so, catching Esther's eye, she remembered, and grew silent again, leaving Cousin Charlotte more puzzled than ever.

"I wonder," said Miss Charlotte, as they rose from the table, "I wonder if you children would mind going to Mrs. Bennett's for me for some rice. Anna tells me she has run out of it. You haven't seen our shops yet, have you?"

"Shops! Oh no, we didn't know there were any." And off they ran delightedly and put on their hats at once. Esther took her purse with her too. She wanted to change the sovereign; she was so dreadfully afraid of losing it, and several silver and copper coins seemed safer than one small gold one.

Mrs. Bennett's shop was not difficult to find. Just beyond Miss Ashe's house, round a bend in the road, they found themselves in what was called 'the street.' There were at least a dozen cottages close together; a little further on were two or three more, and up the hill were scattered others, at greater distances apart. The children were perfectly delighted. Here was life and interest in plenty, and Moor Cottage was not so lonely as they had imagined.

The shops were in two of the first group of cottages they came to, and here was more delight—a perfect feast. Such fascinating windows they had, so full of all sorts of interesting things, and all at such reasonable prices too, or so it seemed to the children.

Mrs. Bennett's held groceries and drapery, and boots and writing-paper, kettles and saucepans, little china images and 'surprise' packets. Mrs. Vercoe's held ironmongery and drapery, and dolls and groceries, sweets and toys of various sorts, bread, cakes and books. Mrs. Bennett sold china too, and glass, some homely medicines, and hoops and thimbles and skipping-ropes. Mrs. Vercoe included cheese and bacon, rope and twine, and baskets.

Of the two they were most drawn to Mrs. Vercoe's. Her stock appealed to them more. But as they had been told to go to Mrs. Bennett, thither they went; and Mrs. Bennett, who kept the post office too, sold Esther some stamps and changed her sovereign for her, and while they gazed fascinated about her shop, she gazed at them with frank curiosity. But nothing she could say could draw them into conversation. For some reason, they could not have said what, they did not like her. It may have been that she 'talked fine,' as her neighbours said, and minced her words in a somewhat affected way, or that she seemed very inquisitive, or that her rather cold manner unconsciously offended them. The children could not have explained why it was, but fascinating though the shop was, they hurried away from it and crossed the road to Mrs. Vercoe's.

Mrs. Vercoe's window was certainly more enticing to them than Mrs. Bennett's. A prolonged and critical gaze showed them not only all the things already mentioned, but dear little rough red pitchers which would hold just half a pint, and a larger size which would hold a pint; packets of flower-seeds with gay pictures on the outside, and only a penny each; the pitchers were only a penny and twopence; there were the dearest little watering-cans too, and fancy handkerchiefs with a nursery rhyme round the border, and funny little books, with roughly done pictures in the brightest of colours, and money-boxes, some like little houses, others representing miniature letter-boxes.

Angela longed and longed for a pitcher. Poppy wanted a penny watering-can, painted bright red inside, and green out. Penelope wanted a book and some sweets, and Esther a money-box, that she might begin to save at once.

"Do let's go inside," whispered Penelope. "There may be lots of other things inside."

"But wouldn't it look rude to come out of one shop and go right into another?" asked Esther, who was really as interested as Penelope.

"Can't we walk on a little way, and then on our way back go in as though we had just seen something we wanted?" suggested Angela, who was an adept at trying to spare people's feelings. "P'r'aps Mrs. Bennett won't be in her shop by that time."

They all agreed to this, and sauntered on with a simulated air of unconcern. They walked on past all the cottages, keeping to the wide granite road which led with many windings up and up a hill beyond the village. How far they went they had no idea, but by and by they heard a clock strike in the distance.

"I do believe we have come to a town, or something," said Penelope excitedly. "There

isn't a church or a big clock in Dorsham, only a chapel. Let's go on and see."

But Esther checked her enthusiasm. "We had better not stay away too long, or Cousin Charlotte may be frightened, and we want to stop at Mrs. Vercoe's before we go home. Let's go there now, shall we?"

The suggestion was seconded with alacrity. But if they thought that their little manoeuvrings were going to blind Mrs. Bennett, or spare her feelings, they made a mistake. They had yet to learn that no single thing happened in Dorsham 'street,' no single person went up it or down, without the fact being known sooner or later—generally on the instant—to every dweller therein; and for four strangers, newly come to live in the place, to expect to escape notice was absurd.

The only result of their plan was to attract more attention to themselves; but of this they were happily unconscious, and once inside the little, low, dim, crowded place, their joy seemed unbounded. If Mrs. Bennett had repelled them, plump, jolly-looking Mrs. Vercoe, with her round rosy face and kindly, smiling eyes, attracted them at once.

"Well, my dears," she said warmly, "and what can I do for you to-day?"

There was a delicious smell of hot cake pervading the place, and Mrs. Vercoe herself had come out streaked with flour, and carrying a big black 'sheath' full of new currant cakes and buns.

"I—I hardly know," said Esther. "There are such lots of nice things here," she added politely. "Do you mind if we look about for a few minutes first?"

"Look about to your heart's content, my dear," she said genially. "Well, little missie," to Poppy, "'tis nice to see so many young ladies about Dorsham; 'tis what we ain't over-blessed with. I'm afraid you'll find it dull without any little companions; 'tis very quiet here, not that I'm complaining," she added hastily, afraid of seeming disloyal to her native place. "And what do 'ee think of our village?" she asked, seeing Penelope's eyes fixed interestedly on her. "Fine and lonely I reckon it looks to strangers, but 'tis airy," with a little laugh, "and bootiful air too. Makes 'ee hungry, I expect, missie, don't it? Could 'ee eat a new bun now?"

Penelope was about to decline, thinking it would be correct to do so, but her finer natural instinct told her that it might be politer to accept, and in response to Mrs. Vercoe's bidding she helped herself. The old dame delightedly invited them all to do the same. Angela and Poppy accepted; Esther held back with shy reluctance.

"Oh no, thank you," she said. "We are so many."

"Well, they'm only farden buns," said Mrs. Vercoe, with a little chuckle; "but p'r'aps you'd rather have one of these," and she held out to Esther an apple. Esther felt more embarrassed than ever. Mrs. Vercoe seemed to think she had declined the bun because she wanted something better.

"Oh no, thank you," she said, with a great effort. "I like the buns very much, but I am not hungry. We had dinner just before we came out."

Mrs. Vercoe laid the apple down without saying any more; but Esther thought she looked rather hurt, and felt that it would have been more tactful to have taken it. To break the awkward pause which followed, she plunged into business.

"Please how much each are those little pitchers?" she asked hastily.

"Tuppence, missie," said Mrs. Vercoe, as pleasantly as ever, to Esther's great relief. "And the littler ones are a penny."

"May I have one of the tiny ones?" whispered Angela eagerly.

"It was for you I wanted it," said Esther, who would have liked one for herself, too. "Aren't they dears!"

"I must look 'ee out a perfect one," said Mrs. Vercoe, tapping up one after another and rapping them with her knuckles. "They'm terrible things for getting chipped. There, I think those are all right."

Angela, in a high state of delight, chose the one she thought the prettiest. Poppy, meanwhile, was tugging at Esther's skirt. She had been very quiet for some time, absorbed in a boxful of the packets of flower-seeds, with gay pictures outside.

"Esther, may I have a packet of seeds? and one of those dear dinkey little watering-cans? May I, Essie? Do say 'yes,' please do."

Poppy was not only fascinated, but she was possessed by a sudden, brilliant idea which the packets of seeds had suggested. She could not rest until Esther had consented, and she could not keep from dancing with excitement as she bent over the box, trying to make a

selection.

"Bless her pretty face," cried Mrs. Vercoe, much amused. The old lady was as delighted with her customers as though they were spending pounds instead of pennies. Penelope, meanwhile, was perched on a corner of a sugar-box, absorbed in one of the funny little books which were lying in a pile on the counter, and was quite oblivious of all that was going on around her.

Esther paid for Poppy's purchases. "And will you take for the book, too, please," she said, as she held out a shilling. "The book my sister is reading." She blushed as she spoke, for she was shocked at Penelope's behaviour.

But Mrs. Vercoe would not hear of it. "Why no, my dear; 'tisn't likely she'd be wanting to buy it now she mostly knows what's in it. You'd rather have another, wouldn't you, missie? and it don't make no manner of diff'rence to me."

Penelope looked up with a start, and blushed too, but an end to the discussion was put by Poppy, who came up very excitedly with a packet of parsley seed in her hand. It was not one of those with a picture on the outside, but a larger, plainer packet.

"Please, how much is this?" she asked eagerly.

"Ah, you wouldn't like that, dearie, that isn't pretty. It's parsley. Very good parsley it is, but it don't have no pretty flowers."

"I know," said Poppy, nodding her head vigorously. "How much does it cost?"

"A penny."

"Well, I'll take it, please, instead of the other," and she held out her hand for the packet as though she was afraid of having it wrested from her.

Mrs. Vercoe held it while her eyes searched Esther's face. It seemed to her such an extraordinary choice for a tiny child to make. She was reluctant to let her have it. "Hadn't she better have the one she chose first?" she asked anxiously. But Esther was accustomed to her sister's vagaries.

"No, thank you. I expect she would rather have this. Perhaps she thinks she gets more."

Poppy smiled, and pursed her lips, and hugged her secret to herself delightedly.

Then, having paid for Penelope's book, and bought some sweets for them all, Esther led her little troop out of the shop and home.

Miss Ashe was out when the children returned, so they strolled into the garden to amuse themselves as best they could. But the garden was too neat and well-tended to allow of much in the way of games, so very soon they wandered further, and escaped on to the moor, Penelope with her new book, Esther with another book and the sweets, Angela carrying her beloved pitcher. Guard followed them devotedly.

Poppy, though, decided to remain behind. She did not say so; nor did they, so busy were they with their plans, at first notice her absence.

Miss Ashe's garden was a large one. In Dorsham land was of little value, and one could have almost as much as one chose, if one took the trouble to enclose it. The Moor Cottage garden was large enough to allow of its being divided up into several small ones, the dividing being done chiefly to provide shelter from the storms which so often swept over the moor, though the strong stout walls provided excellent space for fruit-trees.

Poppy, when she saw she was alone, walked quickly from one part of the garden to another, looking about her eagerly, her watering-can in her hand, her packet of seeds in her pocket. No one else was about. Anna was in the kitchen, she heard her voice there, singing hymns; Ephraim, whom she was most afraid of meeting, was away, apparently. Probably he had gone to Gorley with Miss Charlotte's broken glasses. Having made quite sure that she had the place to herself, Poppy carefully deposited her can on the ground, and ran to a corner where she had seen some tools stacked. There were a spade, a large fork, a rake, and a little fork. Poppy seized the spade, but after she had struggled with it a few yards and tumbled down twice, she exchanged it for the little fork.

Close by where she had dropped her can was a neat square bed of nice earth, all beautifully sifted and raked over. This pleased her critical eye immensely. With the fork she made several little holes not far from the edge, then she got out her packet of seeds and opened it.

"What *lots!*" she cried delightedly, and proceeded to place carefully one seed in each hole. But the seeds she planted seemed not to lessen the number in the packet in the least. "I must make another row," she murmured, and carefully covering in the first holes, she stepped on the bed and made some more.

When she had made a third row and filled them in she sighed a little. Before she had finished she had had to commandeer the whole of the bed, and was weary and confused. There seemed to be nothing but footprints all over it, and where the seed was, or how to make the earth look nice and smooth again so that no one should guess her secret, she was puzzled to know. She could have cried with weariness, but she bravely kept back her tears with the thought of the splendid thing she had done, and the delight and surprise there would be when her secret came to light. While she was standing looking in some dismay at the trampled bed, she remembered the rake standing in the corner.

It was heavy, so heavy she could hardly carry it, and far too clumsy for her to wield properly, but she worked bravely, and tried to forget her aches; she had not a very critical eye either, and soon the bed, to her eyes, looked quite neat and tidy. Then came the crowning moment. At the water-tap, which stood over a butt sunk in the ground by one of the paths, she filled her new water-can, and proceeded to give her seeds a good watering.

This was joy indeed, pure joy. The can poured splendidly, Poppy was delighted. She had to run many times to the tap to get water enough for the whole bed, and by the time it was done to her satisfaction her pinafore was well soaked, and she herself was almost too weary to stand. Her task was perfected, but when she looked down over herself, at her mud-clogged shoes, her dripping clothes, her begrimed hands, and realised what she would have to go through in the way of questioning and scolding, her spirits sank altogether. Cousin Charlotte or Anna she dared not face. Her only resource was to try to find Esther, or the others. They would scold too, but she knew them and their scoldings; they were not very bad, and were soon over. With the aid of the fork she managed to lift the latch of the garden door, and stepped out on the great wide waste; but in all the length and breadth of it, as far as her eyes could see, she caught no glimpse of the others. They were nowhere in sight, and the moor looked big, and lonely, and frightening.

Poppy felt very forlorn, and miserable, and homesick, standing there in that great waste; and under the weight of her troubles her lip began to quiver, though she did her best to steady it. She dared not go indoors, and she was too weary to go in search of the others, so she crept up the slope to the nearest rocks large enough to hide her, determined to sit there and wait until she saw the others coming home, when she would call to them. She slipped off her pinafore, spread it on the ground to dry, and with much care and trouble cleaned first her hands and then her boots on the short coarse grass, after which, utterly weary, she lay down herself and knew no more.

## CHAPTER VII.

Esther, Penelope, and Angela reached home at just about what they thought must be tea-time. They came in the way they had gone out, through the garden door. In the garden path they saw Poppy's new watering-can lying. They expected to see Poppy too, but she did not appear, and the garden seemed quite empty. She must have gone indoors, they concluded, and Esther began to feel very compunctious for having left her alone so long. With this feeling on her she hurried in to find her little sister, but the house seemed quiet and empty too. They ran up to their own rooms. No one was there. They came down and looked in the sitting-rooms, Esther with a sudden fear that Poppy might be at some mischief; but both rooms were quite empty. They next ran out and tapped at the kitchen door.

"Come in," said Anna cheerfully. She liked to have the children about her.

"Is Poppy here?" asked Esther.

"Miss Poppy! No, miss. I haven't seen her since she went out with you."

"She hasn't been with us. We have been on the moor ever since, and she must have stayed in the garden, but I can't see her there now. We saw her little can in the path, that was all, and I can't find her in the house anywhere. I thought perhaps she was here with you."

Anna looked anxious. "Have you been all over the house, miss?"

"I have been in our rooms and the dining-room and drawing-room, and we have all called

her, but we can't find her."

"I'd look again, miss, if I was you; look in the missus's room, and mine too, if you like. I'd come with you, but I can't leave my bread for a few minutes."

"Oh, we will find her," said Esther cheerfully, and they ran off again.

She was back in a short while, though, and not quite so cheerful. Just as she reached the kitchen Ephraim came in at the other door.

"Who hev been meddlin' with my new turnip-bed?" he demanded. He did not see Esther.

"What's the matter with your turnip-bed?" asked Anna shortly. She was just lifting her loaves out of the oven, and it was a critical moment; besides, Anna was always 'short' with Ephraim; she had a theory that it was good for him.

"Why, it's in such a mess as you never saw in your life; anybody'd think there'd been a month's rain emptied over it, and all the hens in Dorsham scratching it over, and me only sowed the seeds this morning and left it as tidy as ever you see a bed, only so long ago as dinner-time."

Anna, looking up, caught sight of Esther. "Have 'ee found her, missie?" she asked, taking no further notice of Ephraim.

"No," said Esther anxiously, "she isn't in the house, I'm sure."

Anna always grew cross when she was frightened. "Here," she cried, turning sharply on Ephraim, "never mind your old turnip-bed. You just take and look for Miss Poppy; she's the youngest of our young ladies, a little bit of a thing, and she's lost, so you'd best go and look for her this very minute. Look in the garden first of all. Time enough to worry about an old garden bed when the children's all safe."

Esther, in spite of her growing trouble, could not help laughing, their speech sounded so odd and funny, and Ephraim's face was such a picture of offended dignity.

Penelope meanwhile, without saying a word to any one, had gone down to the garden again, and out on to the moor. She had a feeling that Poppy might be out there somewhere. Very likely she had gone in search of them and missed them.

Esther, not knowing this, followed Ephraim. "She couldn't come to any harm, even if she opened the door and got out, could she?" she asked eagerly.

Ephraim shook his head with ponderous gravity. "I wouldn't go for to say so much as that," he said soberly, "there's wild beastes about in plenty on these here moors."

"Wild beasts!" Esther almost screamed with horror at the thought. She pictured her poor little Poppy flying shrieking before a cruel wolf, frightened nearly to death, calling for help, for her sisters—and no one near to save her. Beyond that she dared not let her imagination go. She felt sick and almost fainting. "Do you mean wolves and bears, and— and—"

"Well, no," said Ephraim slowly, as he searched a bed of young carrots as though he thought Poppy might by chance have got under the feathery leaves. "I won't say there are any of them there kinds exactly, but wild cattle, and 'osses, and sheep; there's plenty 'nough of they about, and they'm 'most so bad."

Esther's heart was relieved. "'Osses and cattle' seemed so very mild after what she had pictured.

"I think we'd better go and look on the moor," she said impatiently, as Ephraim showed every sign of making a prolonged search amongst the sea-kale pots, taking the cover off each one in turn. Almost reluctantly he followed her. In the path there still stood Poppy's little watering-can. Esther's eyes filled with tears as she caught sight of it. Ephraim saw it too, and picked it up.

"Perhaps we'd better take this here along as a clue," he said, looking very wise.

Esther could not see what possible use it could be, or how it could help them, but she consented in order to hurry him along; so off they went, Ephraim carrying the tiny can. But hardly had they stepped through the doorway than they saw that their search was ended. Poppy, led by Penelope, was coming down the hill towards them.

"There she is! oh, there she is!" cried Esther, and flew up to meet them, Ephraim following.

On getting outside, Penelope had, by good fortune, at first followed almost exactly in Poppy's footsteps. By stopping to search every bush and boulder she had got somewhat out of her way, but, as she was stooping to look under a large clump of broom and gorse not so very far from where her little sister lay asleep, something white fluttering about had caught

her eye. It was Poppy's pinafore, dried now by the breeze. A moment later she caught sight of Poppy's shoes standing alone, without any wearer in them. The sight of her little sister's clothes lying about the moor in this fashion turned Penelope perfectly sick and cold with a horrible, indescribable fear. With feet weighted with terror, and quivering limbs, she hurried to the spot, and dropped on her knees half senseless by her sister's body. A moment later all her terrors fled, replaced by a wonderful ecstasy of thankfulness and joy. Poppy stirred, turned in her sleep, and showed a dirty but rosy face to her frightened sister. In her relief Penelope, with a shout of happiness, flung her arms about her and hugged her.

Suddenly awakened, Poppy sat up and looked about her in a dazed way; then her eyes fell on her muddy pinafore and boots, and a hot blush spread over her baby face.

"I didn't mean to make my pinny dirty," she said anxiously, "but I *couldn't* help it; there was such a *lot* of seed, and I *had* to water it, and the silly water would run out over the can, though I was *ever* and *ever* so careful."

"But how did you come to be lying here, darling?" said Pen, drawing her little sister closer into her arms. In her relief she was quite unable to scold her for the fright she had given them. "We left you in the garden. You shouldn't have come out here alone. We thought you were lost, and we were awfully frightened!"

Poppy sat up very erect. She suddenly felt herself very important and interesting. "I wanted to find you and Essie. I was 'fraid to see Cousin Charlotte with my dirty pinny on; and I came out here and you weren't anywhere, and then I was *so* tired I lay down. Oh, it took me such a long time, but Mrs. Vercoe said it was *beautiful* parsley. Do you think it is beginning to grow yet, Pen?"

"I don't know," said Pen absently; "we must make haste back, now, to let them know you are safe. You see, if you go getting lost, Cousin Charlotte won't let us come out on the moor alone. Come along," raising her sister, after putting on her shoes for her.

For a moment Poppy looked troubled, but quickly cheered up. "I don't fink Cousin Charlotte will be cross when she knows," she said confidently.

"Knows what?" asked Penelope curiously.

"My secret," said Poppy solemnly. "I'll tell you if you'll promise not to tell any one else." But at that moment all confidences were stopped by the appearance of Esther and Ephraim.

Poppy accepted Esther's rapturous greeting calmly. She, of course, did not realise yet the state of alarm they had all been in on her account; her whole attention was absorbed by the sight of a strange man in possession of her precious watering-can. It was too much for her to pass unnoticed.

"That's my tan, please, I fink," she said politely but firmly, and Ephraim felt his wisdom in bringing this means of identification had been fully justified.

Happy and triumphant the whole party returned to the house, to be received by Anna with open arms and a face beaming with joy. What did it matter if Poppy's apron was covered with mud, and her frock and boots and hands the same? Instead of being treated as a culprit, she was made a heroine of, and appreciated the difference.

When Anna had finished crooning over her, and the story of the discovery had been repeated more than once, she was taken upstairs by Esther, and washed and changed, so that by the time Miss Ashe returned, instead of the bedraggled, dirty little maiden of an hour before, she saw only a perfectly neat and spotless one, and had no suspicion of all that had taken place during her absence.

Ephraim came into the hall to speak to his mistress just as Poppy came down the stairs.

"Well, Ephraim, how far did you get with your morning's work? Did you get the turnip-seed planted?"

"Well, yes, ma'am, I did," said Ephraim slowly. "I made a nice bed for it right there under the lew wall there in the far corner. But—well, whatever has come to it since, it passes me to know; when I went away that there bed was so smooth and tidy as my hand; when I comes back to it—well, ma'am, you honestly might have knocked me flat with a feather, that there newly made bed was—well, 'twas more like a mud-heap than anything you ever saw in your life, ma'am, and trampled—well, out of all shape and semblance. I neer see'd the likes of it in my life. So soon as it's dried I'll have to go and do it all again, and have a second sowing, but it'll be a day or so before it's fit to touch; 't isn't no use to trust to that first crop—it's my belief it's all ruined."

Poppy drew up suddenly on her way to the dining-room. Her face had grown very red, her hands were working nervously. "You—oh, you mustn't disturb it, please," she gasped. "I—I've planted some thing, and it mustn't be disturbed, it's *very good* seed, and I watered it to make it grow quickly—it—did look rather muddy, but—but it'll soon dry."

Ephraim stared in dumb bewilderment. Miss Ashe looked from him to the child and back again, scarcely taking in the situation. She looked again at Ephraim, but getting no help from him, she turned to Poppy.

"What do you mean, darling? Have you been sowing seeds?"

"Yes," said Poppy, but with marked hesitation. "You shall know soon, but it's a secret now, and I mustn't tell, only I was afraid he,"—nodding at Ephraim—"would dig them all up again."

"But, Poppy dear, you shouldn't have done it without asking permission; you see you might do considerable damage by taking a piece of ground like that, not knowing whether there is anything in it or not. As it is, you see, you have spoilt all my turnips. If we hadn't found it out in good time, we should have been left without any for the whole season. Don't you see, dear, how important it is?"

The importance of it was so apparent, and what she had done appeared so overwhelmingly naughty, it seemed to Poppy as though all joy and happiness had gone out of her life for ever. It was dreadful, intolerable. In trying to help Cousin Charlotte as Esther had wished, she had done harm instead of good. Her beautiful secret was over, and instead of being a help she had been a naughty, foolish little girl, whom these strange new people would wish they had never seen, while every one else would laugh when they heard the story. She felt herself covered with shame and disgrace; she was humiliated and miserable; her little lip quivered piteously, her eyes filled, and she was too tired and hurt to fight against her woe.

Miss Charlotte's kind eyes saw the humiliation in the pretty, tired little face, and held out her hand. "Never mind, dear; as it happens there is no harm done; Ephraim shall choose another spot for the turnips, and you shall have that piece of ground for your own garden. It would never do to destroy a second lot of seeds by digging the bed all over again. Good evening, Ephraim, I'll see you to-morrow."

So, thanks to Cousin Charlotte, Poppy was saved the disgrace of having cried before Ephraim; her tears did not fall; she winked them away, and her lip grew steadier. The thought restored her spirits, but her great pleasure in her scheme was dashed.

"And I sowed the parsley on purpose for Cousin Charlotte, only 'twas to be a secret," she confided to Esther as she was being put to bed that night, "to help her, like you said. She could have some to use, and I was going to sell most of it and give the money to her."

Esther did not smile; indeed her eyes were misty as she took her little sister on her lap and kissed her on the top of her head. "It will be all right, dear," she said, "and—and you are the first of us to begin to do something useful; it was splendid of you to think of it. I wish I knew what I could do," she added wistfully, her cheek resting on Poppy's curls.

"I'll try and fink of something for you," said Poppy gravely. "P'r'aps by the morning I'll have finked of something *very* nice—then won't you be glad?"

But she fell asleep before she had come to any satisfactory conclusion, and Esther, downstairs, in spite of her busy brain and sober face, was equally unsuccessful. She was still thinking when she got up to say 'good-night' and kiss Miss Charlotte. But Miss Charlotte did not bid her good-night at once; instead, she asked her to wait a few moments.

"I wanted to have a little talk, dear, now we are alone," she said, with her pretty smile.

Penelope and Angela had already gone to bed.

Esther sat down again, wondering what was coming.

"I have been thinking," said Miss Charlotte, laying down her pen and coming to sit by Esther, "I have been thinking over our plans, dear, and I have come to the conclusion that I might superintend your studies myself, for a time at any rate."

Esther looked up quickly, her pleasure showing in her eyes. "Oh, that *would* be nice, Cousin Charlotte," she cried. "I do want to learn so much, but—but you have such a lot to do already, and we are *very* backward, and I am so—so stupid."

"I don't think you are that, dear," said Miss Charlotte gently, and her words, quiet though they were, brought deep pleasure to Esther.

"I think we might manage it," she went on cheerfully. "Of course I have many calls on my time, and I shall not be able to give you all the attention I should like to; but we can but do our best, and this seems the best plan I can think of. I cannot very well manage to have a governess to you, and there is no school nearer than Gorley, and that is not only four miles away, but a school I do not approve of. So, at any rate, we will try this plan for the present."

Esther got up and stood by Miss Charlotte, her colour coming and going, her fingers

playing nervously with her pinafore. "I—I think you are too good to us, Cousin Charlotte," she said huskily, speechless almost with nervousness, but determined to say something of what was in her heart. "I—I don't know how to thank you, but I *do* want to, and—and—"

Cousin Charlotte's arm was round her, drawing her to her. "We can never be *too* good to one another, dear; and what are we here for but to help each other over hard places, to try to make each other's lives easier? I am only thankful to have this opportunity of doing good. I was growing narrow and selfish all by myself. I think you were sent to rouse me."

"Oh, Cousin Charlotte, I want to help too," cried Esther wistfully. "I do want to be useful, but I don't know how. Will you tell me? Nothing ever seems to happen to me; I never get a chance of helping people."

"Opportunities, small or great, occur every day, dear," said Miss Charlotte; "it is the little opportunity we must look out for, the small things that we must do. Big ones come sometimes, but little ones every day; if you look for them you will find them. We will help each other, dear. Now we will say good-night. You are tired with your long day in the open air. We will not begin lessons until Monday, there will be so much else to do and arrange. Good-night, my love," and with a warm kiss they parted.

Esther went up to her room with a great glow of happiness at her heart. For the first time in her life she had met some one who understood her; at least, some one who could draw out the good side of her, and not the bad. Esther did not understand what it was, but she felt a difference, and she undressed and said her prayers with Cousin Charlotte's words still ringing in her ears: "We can never be *too* good to one another, dear; and what are we here for but to help each other over hard places?"

She prayed very especially that she might be shown how to do her share in helping others. Like Poppy, she lay down, determined to think and think, hoping that perhaps by morning she would have thought of some way of helping Cousin Charlotte; and, more successful than Poppy, before even she fell asleep an idea had come. Quite suddenly there came back to her Miss Ashe's remark, that 'it was not convenient then to have a governess.' "It must be on account of the expense," thought Esther, with sudden inspiration. "She talked of getting another servant; but I am sure, if she can't afford a governess she can't afford a servant; and I do believe we could do without one, if I helped quite a lot, as I did at home. And I can. I did all right there. I will ask her to let me try. Oh!"—enthusiastically, as the idea took a firmer hold on her—"I *hope* she will. She *must*—and I am sure Anna would be glad."

Too excited and pleased to sleep, Esther slipped from her bed, crept to the window, and looked out. A bright moon lighted up the moor opposite and the river below, until she could see the old brown boulders quite plainly; birds called to each other across the distance, and far away a cow lowed monotonously for its calf. Esther stood and gazed and listened with uplifted heart, yearning for something, she knew not what, something higher and better to be and do.

"Oh, I am so glad we came here!" she murmured, "so glad! I am sure it will be easy to be good here, and I do so want to be good! I wish I hadn't been so horrid to mother sometimes, and—and now I can't ever be anything else, to her." And there came back to her mind her mother's words, "I am sure your Aunt Julia would not have Esther if she knew how bad her temper had become," and her eyes filled with tears at the recollection.

"I will try," she whispered. "I will try that no one else shall ever say that of me—and I will write to mother, and tell her I am sorry." And it was a very grave and serious Esther who fell asleep at last.

## CHAPTER VIII.

When Esther awoke the next morning, she wondered for a moment why she felt so happy and light-hearted. Then memory returned. She recollected the talk of last night, Cousin Charlotte's kiss, and the plan for Monday. She would begin to learn at last! But even greater was her joy at the other thought—her own plan to help Miss Charlotte. She could hardly lie still when she thought of all she meant to do. She would dust, and tidy and sweep, and sew, and polish the furniture, and she even pictured herself making bread and cleaning windows.



She longed to be dressed, and beginning already. She sat up in bed and looked across at Poppy. She wanted to tell her and the others all the news, but Poppy was sleeping in the most aggravatingly persistent way.

Too impatient to wait for her to wake, she slipped out of bed and crept along the corridor, past Miss Charlotte's room, to Penelope's.

Angela was asleep, but Penelope lay awake reading.

"What is that you are reading?" asked Esther, eyeing the red-covered book with a sort of feeling that it was familiar to her.

"Oh, it's only *The Invasion of the Crimea*," said Penelope, withdrawing her eyes almost reluctantly from the page.

"I didn't know you were going on with it," said Esther, a touch of resentment in her voice. She did not like to feel that Penelope was more persevering than she herself, and had outstripped her. She was conscious in her inmost heart that she had not been sorry when the readings were broken off; the history did not interest her. At the same time it mortified her a little that it did interest Penelope.

"It's awfully exciting," said Penelope. "Of course I have to skip some, I can't understand it, but here and there it's lovely."

Esther's first fresh joyful feeling was a little dashed, but as it came back to her mind what it was that she wanted to say, she recovered herself. "In a few days I shall be learning properly," she thought, and then Penelope would not outstrip her.

"Listen to me," she said eagerly, as she perched herself on the foot of Penelope's bed. Angela stirred, and catching sight of Esther, was wide awake in a moment.

"What is it?" she demanded. "Has anything happened?"

"Listen," said Esther again, "both of you. I want to tell you about our schooling. Cousin Charlotte stopped me last night as I was going to bed, to have a talk; it was about our lessons. We are to begin on Monday."

"Where are we going?" asked Penelope. "There isn't any school here, is there?"

"No, Cousin Charlotte is going to teach us herself. Isn't it good of her?"

"I am sure I shall never learn. She will be shocked at me," said Angela nervously. "She doesn't know how backward I am. Fancy me, nine years old, and not able to read yet. I shall be ashamed to look, and there she will be all day long. I would rather go somewhere where I could get away when lessons are over."

"Don't be silly," said Esther. But Angela had only expressed something of her own feeling.

Penelope was sitting up in bed now, her eyes alight. "How jolly," she said, half absently. Then in low, eager tones, "I wonder if she will let us learn just what we want to? I don't want to learn grammar and sums. I want to know about people, and wars, and battles, and revolutions, and I want to learn French and music and to sing. When I grow up I should like to be able to sing and play *very* well. I would rather do that than anything. I wonder if Cousin Charlotte would let me learn?"

Esther looked up in mild disapproval of Pen's enthusiasm. It worried her when her sisters showed any unusual traits, or expressed desires that differed from her own. Penelope very often worried her in that way. Poppy too, at times. She felt a twinge of jealousy always that the idea had not first come to her, and of resentment that they should have tastes apart from her.

"I don't suppose Cousin Charlotte would if she could," she said coldly. "Of course you must learn grammar, and history, and geography, and all those things first. Every one has to learn them."

Penelope looked disappointed, but she was not one to worry. "Perhaps before long I shall be able to do both," she said cheerfully. "I wish Cousin Charlotte had an organ. I do want to be able to play the organ."

Esther grew impatient; these things seemed so trifling and useless compared with what she had in her mind. "I think you ought to try and think how you can help Cousin Charlotte instead of giving her more to do."

"That's just it," persisted Penelope. "If I only knew how to play well, I could be an organist, and teach people, too, and earn quite a lot of money."

"Not for years and years," said Esther, in a very crushing manner. "And we ought to

begin to help at once. I'll tell you what I am going to do—I thought of it last night when I was in bed; it is not nonsense, but something very sensible. I am going to ask Cousin Charlotte to let me help Anna; I can do a lot if I have some big aprons like Anna's, and big white sleeves to go over my frocks. I know Cousin Charlotte and Anna don't want to have a strange servant in; she would cost a lot, and Anna wouldn't like her in the kitchen—and I could save all that."

"And I could help too," cried Angela excitedly. She was a born housewife, and all her tastes lay in that direction. "I can dust, and clean silver, and all sorts of things—"

"I am going to do all that," said Esther loftily, resenting at once any encroachment on her domain. "You can keep Poppy out of mischief, and play with her. I can do the hard work, if you will only be good and keep out of harm."

Angela's face and spirits fell. She did so love to do real work, it was so much more interesting than play; and keeping out of harm was not a bit interesting—it was very dull and stupid, in fact. But Angela was used to disappointments; besides which experience had already taught her that if she waited patiently she could often find little things to do, little ways of helping, that others forgot, or did not care about, so she said no more, but waited. "When I am older, perhaps I'll be able to do the things I like," she very often said to herself, by way of encouragement.

Esther crept back to her room and to her bed, and lay there impatiently, waiting to be called. The minutes seemed endless, and Anna so slow in coming!

And when at last she was dressed and downstairs she had scarcely patience to endure prayers and breakfast, she was so longing to broach her great idea to Cousin Charlotte. But Cousin Charlotte seemed to be wanted by everybody. First Ephraim kept her ever so long talking over the day's work; then Anna came in with a question to be answered; then Cousin Charlotte began to talk to the others about the lessons which were to begin on Monday, and Penelope was telling her all about her longing to learn to play and sing, and Cousin Charlotte seemed so interested, she talked on and on for quite a long time about it; and all the while Esther was growing more and more vexed, until, when Cousin Charlotte at last sprang up, exclaiming, "My dear children, do you know how long we have been talking? I must hurry away this minute, or I shall be behindhand all day!" the limit of poor Esther's patience was passed.

Angela looked up eagerly. "Can't I do something to help you, Cousin Charlotte?" she asked eagerly; "I should love to."

Cousin Charlotte paused and looked down at the pretty, eager face thoughtfully. "I wonder if you could pick some strawberries for us. Would you like to?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Angela delightedly. "I should like to do anything to help." She did not mean to trespass on Esther's plan. This, she thought, was quite different work from what Esther was going to do. But her promptness added to Esther's vexation.

"Well, there are a great many ripe ones, and I want some for ourselves and some to give away; and Anna has no time this morning to pick them, and— well, my back is not young enough to enjoy such work."

"I will do it," said Angela, very pleased and proud.

"May I help, Cousin Charlotte?" pleaded Poppy. "I'd love to."

"Yes," said Cousin Charlotte, smiling. "Can you whistle? Strawberry-pickers must whistle all the time they are at work; you know that, don't you?"

Poppy looked up very gravely. "I can't whistle," she said regretfully, "but I can sing. Will that do, Cousin Charlotte?"

Miss Charlotte laughed and kissed her. "Yes, my pet, anything that will prevent too many strawberries finding their way down Red Lane."

The others laughed merrily. Poppy began to understand.

"Put on your shady hats, and I will get you some baskets." And off they ran in a high state of delight.

Esther waited. Though she had been full of excitement and pleasure about approaching Miss Charlotte, she had felt very nervous, too, and this long delay only increased her nervousness.

Anna came in to clear the table; Penelope strolled away, no one knew where. Esther stood by the window looking out and drumming impatiently on it with her fingers. Anna looked at her once or twice as though she would like to say something. No one cares to see a window covered with finger-marks. But she did not say anything; she was in a hurry, and

presently retired to her kitchen, and Esther was left alone.

"I thought last night it would be quite easy to be good here," she said to herself, "but it doesn't seem so now." She stood and gazed out at the river disconsolately. It seemed to her that the others, who were not nearly as anxious to help as she was, were taking all her opportunities, and she was left, to seem idle and unkind—and really she meant so differently.

Poor Esther! Once more, while full of big aims, she was overlooking the little chances.

"Well," she said at last in a very proud tone, "if no one wants me I will go for a walk by myself. I shan't be in any one's way then!" She knew quite well she was in no one's way, but she was very aggrieved and full of self-pity.

She was just crossing the hall to put on her hat, when Miss Charlotte entered it. Then was her chance, and she knew it; but the old sullen temper had the upper hand, and forbade her to speak. By this time she had let herself feel as hurt as though Miss Charlotte had known what was in her mind and purposely ignored her.

She passed on, put on her hat, and went out. She would not go to the garden because she did not want to see the others happily at their work; so, when Miss Charlotte turned in to the kitchen, she slipped out at the front door and walked away quickly up the road towards the station. She would not go past the cottages, she wanted to avoid every one; for that reason she avoided that part of the moor behind the house, where Penelope would probably be, if she were not in the house or garden. A little way up the road, on the right-hand side, a bridge crossed the river. Esther went over it and found herself on the moor beyond, but she turned away from it lest she should be seen, and clambered down to the river's edge, where boughs and bushes shut her off from view. It was lonely there, and she wandered on and on, through sun and shadow, under low-hanging branches, by tiny beaches of clean river-sand, and all the way she went the river ran beside her singing a low, cheery song as it rippled over its uneven bed.

It could not be long before such loveliness must have a soothing effect on any troubled spirit. By degrees Esther's mood changed, her sense of wrong grew less, and presently she began to wish she had acted differently. If she only had, she might now have been busy and happy too. She began to feel ashamed of herself. How foolish she had been. She would go back again and see if she could not be more sensible, and she rose from her seat and turned her face homewards.

The house seemed deserted when at last she reached it. She went into the hall, looked in the dining-room and drawing-room, saw no one, and strolled out to the garden.

"Where can they all be?" she wondered, "and what can they be doing?"

From the kitchen came a great clatter of crockery. Anna was washing dishes, and by the noise one could gather that Anna's temper was not of the smoothest.

As Esther stepped out she saw Miss Charlotte coming towards her from the group of outbuildings, carrying a basket of eggs. She was looking grave and worried, and for a moment Esther felt she could not speak to her then; she must wait until she found her again in such a mood as last night's. But a second glance told her that Miss Charlotte looked tired, and without giving herself time to think, Esther stepped up to her.

"Cousin Charlotte," she said, "I have nothing to do; let me help you—may I?"

Cousin Charlotte's face brightened. "Oh, could you, dear? I am so busy I don't know what to do first. I wonder if you could wash those eggs for me, and write the date on them?"

Esther assented joyfully, and Miss Ashe led her to the pantry and showed her where to find a cloth and a pencil and a place to store the eggs.

"While you are doing that, I can make out my list to send to Gorley; that will be capital!"

"Cousin Charlotte," said Esther, in a voice that trembled a little with nervousness, "I—I wanted to speak to you. I—I—you said you were trying to get another servant." Miss Charlotte sighed. "I know you don't want to, and—and don't you think we could manage without one, if I—if I helped Anna?" Her voice was trembling, uncertain, but there was no mistaking the earnestness of her purpose. "I used to help a lot at home, and I should like to here. I can sweep, and dust, and make beds, and clean silver, and cook some things, and—oh, I can do lots of little useful things. I could keep our bedrooms dusted, and the drawing-room— and it would all help, wouldn't it?"

Miss Ashe, who had paused in what she was doing, listened attentively. "My dear," she said, as gravely as Esther herself, "it is very good and thoughtful of you to think of such a thing, and you can certainly be most useful in many ways, but I hardly know what to think about trying to do without an extra servant. I cannot let you work too hard; you will have your studies, you know, and we are rather a large family now. I cannot let you become a

little slave with no time for enjoyment; at the same time, I must admit I really do not know how Anna and another maid would get on. Anna does not like the idea, and to prove that one is not necessary, she slaves and slaves to do everything herself, gets over-tired and worried, and—and—well, she is very difficult; her only fault is her temper, but that *is* rather trying. I know she means well, and I keep on telling myself so. She gets so hurt and offended if I try to help her; she seems quite to resent it; and it requires a great deal of tact, more than I possess, I am afraid," concluded Miss Ashe with another deep sigh.

"Perhaps she wouldn't mind so much if I helped her," said Esther shrewdly; "you see, it is we who have made so much extra work. Do let me try, Cousin Charlotte, if it is only for a time."

Esther's face was very eager, her voice very pleading; Cousin Charlotte could not resist the appeal, and gave in with another sigh, but of relief this time. Esther, in her joy and excitement, marked every egg twice with the wrong date, but what did it matter when she had gained her point?

For a few minutes Miss Ashe went on making her list, but in an absent-minded fashion. "I wonder," she said at last, rather nervously, "how it would be best to broach the subject to Anna?"

Esther looked up somewhat puzzled; she would have gone straight out to Anna and told her she was going to undertake this, that, and the other thing, and give all the help she could, but Miss Ashe had other views, born of experience.

"My dear," she said, smiling rather shamefacedly, as though aware of her weakness, "it all depends on how we manage it, whether all goes smoothly, or there is constant friction. I think the best way will be not to speak to Anna about it as though we had planned it, but just begin gradually, doing what you can. I think it is always wiser not to begin violently with changes and reforms. No one likes to have new plans made and thrust on them, or their work taken from them, even though they grumble at having to do it. We should not like it ourselves, should we, dear?"

Esther's memory flashed back to the morning, and her objection to Angela's desire to share in the new scheme; she understood something of what Miss Charlotte meant.

"I think, dear, if you just go about quietly, with your eyes open, ready to give a little help when you see an opportunity, that would be the best way; then by degrees you will build a little niche for yourself, and get your own duties; and Anna, instead of resenting your help, will grow to trust you, and count on you, and be grateful."

"Yes, Cousin Charlotte," agreed Esther, but in a not very enthusiastic voice. She saw the wisdom of the plan, but it was rather a descent from the beautiful scheme by which she was to have been the help and comfort of them all, and she felt she might as well say 'good-bye' at once to the big aprons and white sleeves which had formed such a delightful feature of her plans.

"Things never turn out just as we want them to," she sighed, "and they might so easily if people's tempers were not so tiresome." But at that point she paused suddenly, and had the grace to blush warmly, though no one was there to see her.

## CHAPTER IX.

"Oh dear!" sighed Esther, dropping wearily into the chair by her bedroom window. "I *am* so tired!"

Anna looked up in surprise from her task of bed-making.

"Tired, Miss Esther!" she exclaimed. "Whatever with? You oughtn't to be tired at this time of day."

"I am though," said Esther, sighing again; "tired of doing nothing, I suppose. You see, I used to have lots to do at home, and I miss it."

"Did you, missie? Well, I'm thinking if I had a chance to sit still I'd be only too glad, and not grumble, I know." And Anna thumped a pillow vigorously.

"I don't think you would," said Esther. "You would soon get tired. But perhaps you don't like doing housework. I do; I love it."

"Do you really, miss?" said Anna, as though such a taste were past her comprehension. "Well, you'll have enough to do next week, when your lessons begin."

"Yes," assented Esther, "but they won't take long; and it's dusting and tidying, and all that sort of thing that I like. I wish I had a little house of my very own. I would do all the work in it myself. I'd love to blacklead a grate, and clean windows, and scrub tables and things—oh, Anna, do let me help you, or I shall grow homesick and miserable. Do let me do some dusting for you; I'd love to—will you?"

Anna was quite touched by Esther's piteous appeal; also she herself detested dusting and 'finicking work,' as she called it.

"Would you really like to, dearie? Then you shall. I know it's miserable not to know what to do with yourself; I used to feel like it when I was a child. I was never so happy as when I'd got real work to do; 'twas better to me than play. You shall dust your own room presently, if you like."

"Shall I? Oh, that will be nice." Esther was on her feet in a moment, all her melancholy gone. "Where shall I find a duster, Anna?"

"Don't be in too much of a 'urry, Miss Esther. I reckon you wouldn't feel so pleased if you'd got to do it," added Anna, laughing. "I'll give you the duster and brush in a minute. You lend me a hand with this, if you will," turning the mattress on Poppy's bed, "and I'll be ready in half the time; it's ever so much quicker done if there's two at it; you see, when one's alone, one wastes so much time running round and round the bed."

"Of course," said Esther. "I wish I'd helped you sooner. I wonder how long I should be learning to make a bed. Is it very difficult?"

"Not a bit," said Anna, "once you've got into the way of it. First you spreads the blanket like so, and tucks it in—you must always begin at the bottom."

"First the foot and then the head, That's the way to make a bed."

"My old grandmother taught me them lines when I wasn't more'n eleven, and I've never forgot 'em. Next you spreads the sheet just so, and you must be careful not to leave any creases in it. Then you beat up the bolster and pillow, and lay them like that," suiting the action to the words. "Then comes the top sheet, and the blankets. You must tuck each one in at the bottom first, and then at the sides, and leave the top end loose, so that when you've got the blankets spread, you turn the sheet neatly down over the blankets; and then you see it's all tidy under the quilt, ready for when you come to turn down the bed at night."

Esther followed her instructions closely to the end. "Shall I come and help you with the others?" she asked, as Anna moved off to Penelope's room; and Anna quite graciously consented.

"I shall be glad enough to have the dusting done," she said, as they finished off the other two little beds. "I've got to make jam to-day, and that means that I can't leave the kitchen a minute when once I've put it on," and Esther could have danced with joy. She was managing wonderfully, she told herself, and felt very proud.

From the French window below they heard Miss Charlotte's voice. "Penelope!" she called. "Penelope, dear!"

Penelope came running up the garden at once.

"Do you think you could walk as much as two miles without getting over-tired?"

"Oh yes," said Penelope, without a moment's hesitation. "I often walked five or six miles at home. Do you want me to go somewhere, Cousin Charlotte?"

"Well, dear, I very much want some one to go to Four Winds for me. I promised some strawberries to a friend of mine, Miss Row, who lives just outside Four Winds. She is giving a garden-party to-day, and I know she is relying on my sending her some fruit. I thought Ephraim would have been able to go, but he started for Gorley before I could speak to him."

"I should love to go," said Penelope. "I will start at once. Which way is it, Cousin Charlotte?"

"You go past the houses here, and keep on the main road, right up the hill, until you come to the top; just before you reach the top you will come to a church."

"Oh, I know," cried Penelope. "I went there yesterday, and when I came to the church it was open, and some one was playing the organ, and I went in and sat in one of the pews for ever so long to listen."

"Oh, is that where you were?" said Miss Charlotte. "I wondered what had become of you. Well, when you go so far another time, dear, take Guard with you. We rarely, if ever, get a tramp, or any other undesirable person about these parts, we are too remote, and too poor to be worth coming so far to find, but all the same I do not like you to go about quite alone. Take him with you now, dear. When you reach the church you must go on a little further, until you come to the village; then you cross the square straight, keep down the next hill a little way, and you will soon come to a large white gate with 'Cold Harbour' painted on it. That is my friend's house. Go in, and ask for Miss Row, and if you can see her, give her the basket and this note. If you can't see her you must leave them; but I hope you will, for I should like you to rest a little before you take the walk back."

Penelope took the basket, and was starting straight away with it.

"I think, dear, you had better wash your hands and brush your hair before you go," said Cousin Charlotte. "Miss Row is very good and kind, but she is a very particular lady, and I want you to make a good impression on her; besides, one lady never calls on another with soiled hands."

"Oh, of course!" Penelope blushed and ran upstairs, and some few minutes elapsed before she walked out and through the village, her basket of strawberries on her arm, and Guard at her heels.

It was a glorious day, with rather a stiff breeze blowing, and clouds and sunshine chasing each other along the road. If it had not been for the clouds, and the intervals when the shadows had overtaken the sun, the walk would have been a hot one; but Penelope did not notice that, her mind was absorbed by other things, for suddenly it seemed to her that it was rather an alarming thing to be going alone to face a strange, and very particular, lady, and she felt a great shyness coming over her. She tried to forget it by racing the cloud, as it chased the sunshine, and the sunshine as it overtook the cloud, and so, at last, she came to the church. She paused a moment to listen, but the organ was silent to-day, so on she went again, but more soberly, and soon found herself in the village square, with little low-roofed houses on either side and a pump in the middle of the square, and two or three happy ducks paddling about in the damp earth by the trough. Guard, as though he knew it of old, went up to the pump for a drink. The ducks fled, tumbling over each other in their hurry, scrambling and quacking indignantly at the great creature who had so disturbed their pleasure; but Guard, quite unconcerned, drank, and went calmly on his way again until he led Penelope straight to the white gate with 'Cold Harbour' painted on it.

A short drive led from the gate to the house, and Penelope felt horribly shy and conscious as she made her way up it. It seemed to her that somebody might be watching her from every window, and there were so many windows it was quite embarrassing.

But, apparently, no one had witnessed her approach, for she stood quite a long time at the door, not able to reach the knocker or find the bell. She rapped with her knuckles; but they grew sore and produced no result, for the sound did not reach beyond the door-mat, or so it seemed to her, and the vast, still hall within appeared to swallow up everything. Guard lay down at last on the gravel and went to sleep, and Penelope longed to sit beside him. She was tired, and her arm aching a good deal from carrying the basket.

But at last, just as she was beginning to get anxious and a little vexed, a servant crossed the hall on her way to one of the rooms, and saw her.

"Good morning," said Penelope. "I have been trying to ring the bell, but I don't know where you keep it."

The servant, an elderly woman, who looked like the cook, smiled. "There's a brave many can't do that," she said. "There," showing Penelope a little knob like a button, "there 'tis; 'tis one of them new-fangled electric things. I can't abide 'em myself; they may be very fine and nice for towns, but in the country, where we don't have to count every inch of room, give me the good old sort. 'Tis such a silly noise these makes, too, like a child's toy, yet it never sounds but what I jumps nearly out of my skin."

Penelope wished one would sound then, that she might see so wonderful a sight. But she only smiled.

"I wanted to see Miss Row, please. I've come from Miss Ashe."

"Please to walk inside, miss," said cook, very amiably; and Penelope followed her through the dim hall to a large room where a lady was sitting at a table littered with vases, cans of water, and quantities of cut flowers. She was rather a severe-looking lady, and glanced up so sharply when cook opened the door and showed the visitor in, that Penelope was, for the moment, quite frightened. But it was not Penelope's way to remain frightened for long, and she soon recovered herself, as did Miss Row when she saw that the intruder

was not a very formidable person.

"I have brought you these from Cousin Charlotte," said Penelope, advancing to the table with her wide, frank smile; "and I was to give them to you myself if you were at home."

Miss Row took the basket and the letter, but she was paying more attention to their bearer than to either.

"I suppose you are one of Miss Ashe's young cousins?" said Miss Row abruptly.

"Yes, I am Penelope, the second eldest."

"Well, sit down for a little while, and rest before you walk back again."

Penelope, not being directed to any particular seat, and seeing by the window a little low, upright chair, evidently made for small people like herself, went over and seated herself on it with much satisfaction.

But Miss Row, glancing up presently from her letter, felt no satisfaction at all; in fact she gave quite a scream when she saw her. "Oh, child," she cried. "Get off that chair this moment, quick! quick! It isn't meant to be sat on; it is far too old and valuable. Oh dear! you might have broken it right down, or—oh dear, oh dear, to think that out of all in the room you should have chosen that one!"

Penelope sprang to her feet at once. At first she felt terribly alarmed, then very angry; it made one feel so small to be screamed at in that way.

"I—I didn't know—how could I?" she said crossly. "Is it a broken chair?" What she longed to say was, "Why do you keep it there if it is so unsafe?" but she felt that would be rude. "I am very sorry," she added, forcing herself to be polite. "Is it a very old chair?"

"Yes, very old. It was made for my great-great-grandmother, when she was a little girl, and I value it exceedingly. Unfortunately the last two or three years worms have got into the wood, and have eaten it so it is quite crumbling away."

"But can't you do anything for it?" asked Penelope, her vexation swallowed up in pity for the chair. She was thinking that if she had valued it so much she would have taken better care of it.

But Miss Row had returned to her letter again. When she had done she rose and rang the bell. "You can take some milk and cake before you go, can't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I think so, thank you," said Penelope modestly. "But I left Guard outside. Will he stay, do you think?"

"Oh yes, he is used to waiting here."

Cook came in presently with a tray, on which was a large jug of milk, some glasses, and a plate of cakes of various kinds. Penelope thought they looked beautiful, so beautiful that she longed to take some back to the others. She knew exactly how thoroughly they would enjoy them; but, of course, no sign of what she was thinking escaped her.

She was wondering which of all them she might take for herself, when Miss Row took up the plate. "I think you will find that very nice," pointing to a piece of uninteresting-looking shortbread, "or that," pointing to a slice of ginger-cake. "They would be less likely than the others to disagree with you."

Penelope longed to say that nothing disagreed with her, but she did not like to, and helped herself with the best grace she could to the shortbread.

Miss Row continued arranging her flowers, sipping a glass of milk meanwhile, and eating one after another of the fascinating little sugared cakes Penelope was eyeing so wistfully, while she nibbled at her thick piece of shortbread, unable to get a real bite. There really was no satisfaction about that shortbread. It was so hard as to be unbiteable, and so crumbly it scattered all over the floor; while with one hand occupied holding the glass of milk, and the other the cake, she could not pick up the crumbs, or break the piece. When she saw the crumbs filling her lap and pouring off on to the carpet, poor Penelope wished she had declined to have anything, and sat in misery wondering what she could do.

Presently Miss Row looked around at her, and her sharp eyes fell immediately on the litter on her usually speckless carpet. "Oh dear," she said with the little click of her tongue which expressed annoyance more effectually than any words could. Then, perhaps catching sight of the child's mortified face, she tried to pass it off.

"I expect your Cousin Charlotte has a trial with the four of you," she said, in what she meant to be a joking manner; but her words, and the little laugh that accompanied them, were worse to Penelope than anything.

"I—we—try not to be more troublesome than we can help," she said shortly, without a trace of a smile on her face. "Cousin Charlotte doesn't seem to mind—and we try to help as much as we can." Then, after a moment's silence, "I—I wish I hadn't taken it. It was so crumbly I *couldn't* eat it without its falling all about; and the chair is so high my feet don't touch, so they all ran off my lap." She meant the crumbs, though it sounded as if she was speaking of her feet.

Perhaps something told Miss Row that she had not been very kind, for her tone changed. "I ought to have thought of it, dear," she said. It was the first time she had ever been known to call any one 'dear'.

"I think I had better go now, please Miss Row," said Penelope very gravely. She still felt mortified and unhappy.

"I wonder if you would mind waiting just a little longer, then I could have your company as far as the church. I must go and have my practice, or I shall not be ready for Sunday."

Penelope looked up with sudden interest, all her mortification and resentment forgotten. "Oh, was it you who was playing there on Tuesday?"

Miss Row nodded. "Probably, I don't know of any one else who plays that organ. Why? What do you know about it?"

"I walked up there the day after we came, and I heard the organ, and I went in and listened for ever so long. I hope you don't mind. The door was open, and I thought any one might go in."

"Mind? Oh dear no! I am only thankful some one besides myself takes any interest in it. Are you fond of music?"

"I love it! I love to hear it! I can't play yet, but I want to learn, and I *think*," gravely, "I'd rather play the organ than anything. I do want to learn to play so well that I can earn money by it."

"Oh, you mercenary little person," laughed Miss Row. "What can you want with money?"

Penelope did not know what 'mercenary' meant. She understood the second question, but she did not know whether she was at liberty to answer it or not. Miss Row seemed, though, to be waiting for a reply, so she felt obliged to.

"We all want to help Cousin Charlotte and father," she added, with great earnestness. "You see we are so many, and it costs such a lot to keep us all, so Esther says, and I don't know *how* to help, but I am trying to think of a way."

Miss Row looked at her little companion very thoughtfully, with a somewhat puzzled expression. She herself had never known what it was to want money. She was a wealthy woman, and she did a certain amount of good with her wealth, subscribing to many charities, but it never occurred to her that there might be anxiety and need amongst people of her own class, still less among those she knew. Penelope's words opened a new vista before her, and set her wondering if there were not many things she had missed for want of eyes and understanding.

"If you could play the organ," she said at last slowly, "it would be years before you could earn your living by it. You could not do much until you were seventeen or eighteen."

"No," said Penelope sadly. "That is the worst of it, and by that time perhaps daddy will be able to have us out to Canada; but it would always be useful, for I daresay there are organs in Canada, and I don't suppose daddy will ever be very rich again, and—and if I only knew how to play I could help if I was wanted to."

"It is always a great pleasure and solace too, even if one only plays for one's own pleasure," said Miss Row softly.

She led the way into the hall, unhung a hat and put it on, and preceded Penelope to the door. Guard, hearing their footsteps, rose from his sleep in the sun, and expressed his delight.

On their way through the garden Miss Row gathered quite a large nosegay of lovely roses and carnations and mignonette, and as she wandered from bush to bush, Penelope followed her in a state of perfect delight. She was passionately fond of flowers.

At last they made their way into the road and up the hill. Miss Row was rather silent. Penelope talked and Miss Row listened, but she did not say much until they came to the gate of the church and stopped.

"Tell Miss Ashe I will come and see her tomorrow. Give her my love and thanks for the fruit, and for introducing one of her cousins to me—you, I mean," touching Penelope's cheek lightly with her finger. "And these are for you," placing in Penelope's hands the lovely



flowers she had been carrying all this time.

Penelope gasped with delight. "For Cousin Charlotte! oh, how lovely, I thought they were for the church."

"They are for neither. They are for you yourself," said Miss Row, with just the faintest tinge of colour in her cheeks. For one second Penelope looked incredulous; then in a kind of rapture she held her bouquet closer. "Oh, thank you very, very, *very* much," she said earnestly. "I never had anything so lovely in my life before," and she put up her face with the prettiest grace imaginable to kiss her new friend.

"I am glad you are pleased," said Miss Row smilingly. "Now, good-bye. Perhaps I may see you on Sunday."

"On Sunday?" said Penelope puzzled.

"If you come to church."

"Oh, do we come up here to this dear little church? I am so glad, I didn't know. I hope we shall all come. Good-bye, and thank you, and,"—hesitating a little and colouring warmly—"I am *so* sorry about the crumbs;" and waving her hand to her new friend as she disappeared within the church, she ran off in a state of high glee.

Mrs. Vercoe was standing at her door as Penelope passed. "Good-morning, missie," she said. "I reckon you'm fond of walking. I was the same when I was young. Oh my! what bootiful flowers!"

Penelope stayed to display her treasures. "You must have one of them, Mrs. Vercoe," she said, selecting one of the handsomest roses from her bouquet.

Mrs. Vercoe was vastly pleased. "'Tisn't often one has a flower like that now," she exclaimed delightedly. "It'll brighten up my bit of a place wonderful. Thank you kindly, missie "; and she disappeared into her house to place her treasure in water.

Penelope was hurrying on, when, glancing round to look for Guard, her eye fell on Mrs. Bennett standing at her shop door. Mrs. Bennett said "good-morning," and Penelope returned the greeting; but she had gone a step or two before it occurred to her that she had not been very gracious or kind to the post-mistress. Mrs. Bennett must have seen her stop and give a flower to Mrs. Vercoe. She paused, then slipped back to Mrs. Bennett's door. "Would you like one of my pretty flowers?" she asked.

"Oh no, thank you, miss. Don't you pull your bookay to pieces for me," she answered civilly, but with just the slightest toss of her head. She was really a little hurt and jealous, for she had seen that Penelope's offer to Mrs. Vercoe was quite spontaneous. Penelope, conscious of the feeling that had been in her own heart, was ashamed and sorry. "Do please let me give you one," she said earnestly. "I want to. I have such a lot it would be greedy to keep them all."

Mrs. Bennett backed into her shop. "Won't you come inside, missie?" she said, much more graciously. "Your little hands are almost too small; you'm in danger of dropping some of them."

Penelope followed her in gladly enough. She could not bear to think she had hurt any one's feelings, even any one she did not particularly like. Mrs. Bennett led the way into her parlour, where Penelope had never been before. It held all the treasures she was most proud of, and the window was full of geraniums, fuchsias, and hanging baskets of 'Mothers of Thousands,' blocking out most of the light. While Penelope was selecting a flower Mrs. Bennett stepped to the window.

"Are you fond of flowers, miss?"

"Oh, *very*," said Penelope, "I *love* them. I wish I could grow some. I think I shall ask Cousin Charlotte to let me have a little bit of garden of my own. Do you think I should ever get anything to grow?"

She talked on rapidly, partly because she was really interested and partly in the hope of ministering balm to Mrs. Bennett's wounded feelings.

"Oh yes, missie, of course you could, and if you'd like a split or two of geranium I'd be glad to give 'ee some off of any of mine, or you could have 'em in pots in your own windy. Have 'ee got a windy-ledge to your room?"

"Yes," said Penelope eagerly.

"Then you could grow mignonette and lots of things there. Look at mine. I've got flowers 'most all the year round."

Penelope stepped over to look closer at the beautiful pelargoniums, the great white

geraniums, and graceful fuchsias, all blooming as happily in their narrow space as though it had been a handsome conservatory.

"Oh, and what is that?"

Two halves of a cocoanut shell hung from the top of the window with a curious little creeping plant growing in them, and sending long, hanging tendrils down over the sides.

"I was going to ask you if you would accept one of these, missie, by way of a beginning. We calls 'em 'Mothers of Thousands' here, and a very good name for 'em. I tilled both those last year from my old plant there, and look how they've growed a'ready."

Penelope was overjoyed. To have a plant of her very own, and growing in a cocoanut shell, too, gave her the greatest delight. She thanked Mrs. Bennett profusely, took her new present almost reverently, and hardly knew how she got home, her hands were so full of treasures and her mind of excitement.

## CHAPTER X.

The next day, according to promise, Miss Row came to call on Miss Ashe. The children were all out and very busy when she came, and did not know anything about the call until Cousin Charlotte came to the garden to them after.

Esther was shelling peas, Penelope was filling flower-pots in which to plant some mignonette seeds she had bought at Mrs. Vercoe's that morning. Angela and Poppy were playing shops. They had the long stool Anna used for her washing-trays on washing-days. This was their counter, and on it they had arranged their stock of goods—a little pile of unripe strawberries, another of currants, a heap of pebbles to represent nuts, gravel for sugar, and earth for tea. One of their greatest treasures was a little tin scoop which Anna had presented to them, and which they took it in turns to use. They both stood behind the stool, with a pile of newspaper cut into all kinds of shapes and sizes in front of them, and were apparently kept as busy as could be by the constant stream of invisible customers which flowed into their shop.

When Miss Charlotte came out she found them as busy as possible. "Penelope," she called, "I want to speak to you, dear. I have something to tell you—something that I think will please you very much, dear."

Penelope looked up from her seed-sowing with a face full of pleased surprise.

"I have had a visitor, Miss Row, and she has offered to give you lessons on the organ if you would like to learn. She tells me she thinks you would. It is very kind of Miss Row, and a great opportunity for you."

"I'd *love* to, I told her so." Penelope stopped abruptly, her face crimsoning. "Oh, I hope she did not think I was asking!"

"No, dear, she certainly did not think that," said Miss Charlotte reassuringly. "I know my friend well enough to know that she would never have made the offer if she had."

"But where can I learn?" asked Penelope. "I shouldn't be allowed to use the organ in the church, should I?"

"I think so; but Miss Row will settle all that. You see, her father used to be the vicar at Four Winds, and she has been the organist ever since she was sixteen—"

"Sixteen!" cried Penelope. "Can I be an organist when I am sixteen?"

"As I was saying," said Cousin Charlotte, in a slight tone of reproof, "she has been the organist there since she was sixteen, and all for love, so no one would be so ungrateful as to object to her using it."

"Oh, how beautiful, how beautiful, and just the very thing I wanted." Penelope fairly danced with delight. "Isn't it strange," she said, "how one gets just the very things one has

been longing for?"

Esther did not make any remark. The old demon jealousy surged up in her heart and forbade her saying anything that was nice or kind.

"Why was it that Penelope always attracted all the notice, and made friends, and got the very things she longed for?" she asked herself angrily. She wished she had said she would like to learn to play the organ, and had made friends with Miss Row; then perhaps she would have had lovely flowers given her, and be thought a lot of. Having finished her task she picked up her things and walked away into the house. Penelope looked after her, a little hurt at her seeming want of interest. Angela and Poppy had dropped their play and were bubbling over with joyful sympathy.

"Angela dear," said Miss Charlotte, "will you go to the henhouse for me, and see if there are any eggs there?"

Angela was delighted. She was always longing to be employed, and she loved anything to do with the fowls or the garden.

Miss Ashe's fowl-houses were models of what fowl-houses should be, airy, snug, and beautifully clean; and her fowls were something to be proud of. Angela ran off at once, found three eggs, and took them into the house. Miss Ashe was busy in the pantry tying down jam.

"I wonder if you could mark them for me," she said. "My fingers are very sticky."

Angela took the pencil and did her best. The figures were clumsy, but they were her neatest. They were something like this—22/6.

She looked up at her cousin with shamed eyes and rosy cheeks as she held out the eggs.

"That will do," said Miss Charlotte kindly. "You will soon be able to make tiny figures." Then, as Esther had done once before, Angela put the eggs in their box; but Esther had forgotten all about her first task in her anxiety to get others.

"Cousin Charlotte, if I learn to write better, may I always collect the eggs and mark them? I'd love to. I love the chicken and fowls, and I'd try to do it properly." She was very eager and very shy about making her request.

"I shall be very glad indeed of your help," said Cousin Charlotte. "Anna seems too busy and Ephraim forgets; he thinks eggs and hens too unimportant for his notice. I, though, think them very important indeed; they make quite a nice little addition to one's income, I find."

"Do they?" said Angela, full of interest. "When I grow up I shall keep fowls too, I think."

"You will have to learn all about them first," said Cousin Charlotte, "but that you can begin to do at once. You have them here always under your eyes, and you must keep your eyes open and take in all you can."

Angela felt, as Penelope had done, that all her dearest wishes were being granted at once. "Is there something else I can do for you, Cousin Charlotte?" she asked.

"Yes, dear, if you will. I want to send those fresh eggs up to Miss Bazeley. She has a lady lodging there who is ill, and Miss Bazeley's hens seem to have all stopped laying just as she most wants fresh eggs."

"I'd like to go. I'll go now," said Angela, running off to get her hat.

"You can take Poppy with you, dear. It is not far, and you can't make a mistake. Miss Bazeley's house is the very last in the village; it stands at the side of the hill on the way to Four Winds."

"I think I know; it has a honeysuckle arch over the gate, hasn't it?"

"Yes, sharp eyes. Now run along."

Esther was up in her room, trying to work herself into a better state of mind. She knew she was jealous of Penelope's good fortune, and she was vexed with herself for being so. When people recognise their weaknesses, and see the wrong of them, they are on a fair way to recovery—if they choose.

Esther did really want to get the better of the nasty moods and tempers that she, better than any one, knew she suffered from, and presently she came down in quite an altered frame of mind, though a little embarrassed to know how to express herself.

Penelope was in the garden alone, busy over her flower-pots once more. Esther went up to her wondering what she could say, but Penelope looked up with so grave a face Esther found her speech at once.

"Aren't you glad?" she asked in surprise.

"Oh yes," cried Penelope enthusiastically.

"So am I," said Esther, and with the same felt her burden of jealousy fall from her. "It will be fine; it was the very thing you wanted. But you don't look glad."

"I am," said Penelope emphatically; "but I was thinking how kind every one is, and I do want to do something for them—and I don't know how. There don't seem to be any ways for children to help grown-ups."

Esther stood very still and quiet for a moment. Then, after a little shy hesitation, she said, "Cousin Charlotte says we can always help each other, only we must not be always looking out for big things to do. If we do the little things, we shall do big things, too, in time."

"Oh," said Penelope. "I suppose I shall get to know what little things to do. What I would like would be to give Miss Row a beautiful organ, and Mrs. Bennett a greenhouse, and Cousin Charlotte—oh, a lot of money and things, and—and—"

"I don't suppose Mrs. Bennett would know what to do with a greenhouse if she had it," said Esther wisely.

"Don't you?" said Penelope disappointedly, and was silent for some time, pondering the matter. "Well," with a sigh of resignation, "I'll give her one of my pots of mignonette when it grows—that will be something—just to show I care, and perhaps—"

But what Penelope intended to say further was lost for ever, for at that moment there was a rush through the house and garden, a chorus of cries and exclamations, and Angela and Poppy and Guard burst on them like a small hurricane.

"Oh, do look!" cried Angela, her face flushed, her eyes dancing with joy— "do look what Miss Bazeley has given me! Oh, it is such a darling! And the poor mite has no mother, or brothers or sisters. And *do* you think Cousin Charlotte will let me keep it? It is a very good one, Miss Bazeley says. What sort did she call it, Poppy? I said it over and over so as to remember, and have forgotten it after all."

"It was somefin like the name of a sweety," said Poppy, racking her brain so hard she brought a frown to her brow. "Was it somefin drop, or rock, or—"

"I know it was something like Edinburgh Rock."

"Plymouth Rock, perhaps," said Miss Ashe's voice, close behind them. In their excitement they had not heard her coming, and they all sprang around with a start. "What is it, dear?" looking at the little basket Angela was holding so carefully.

As if in reply, a tiny, very forlorn 'che-ep' came from the inside.

"It is a dear little motherless chick, Cousin Charlotte," cried Angela eagerly. "A tiny baby one, and it's an orphan. A fox killed its poor mother, and the other hens won't be kind to it; they are very cruel to it, Miss Bazeley says, and she asked me if I would like to have it. May I, Cousin Charlotte? Do you mind? I will take care of it, and then some day, when it lays eggs, you shall have all the eggs."

"Well, we will see about that when the time comes," said Cousin Charlotte. "Yes, dear, you may certainly keep it. I foresee I shall have a rival poultry-yard in my own garden."

Angela and Poppy ran off in a state of the highest glee; but when they got to the yard, and all the hens ran towards them in expectation, they were afraid to trust their treasure alone among the crowd.

"You will have to try to get one of the hens to mother it," said Miss Charlotte, who had followed them, "or it will die of cold and loneliness."

This presented some difficulty. As soon as the little chick was put down it would run to the nearest hen as if it thought it had found its mother, but the hens would have nothing to say to it; first one and then another pecked it savagely, until the poor little thing was nearly scared to death.

At last Miss Charlotte threw down some oatmeal before a coop where a solemn old hen sat with half a dozen chicks playing about her. As soon as they saw the food, the greedy little creatures poured out, while the mother rose and clucked noisily with annoyance at not being able to follow. Angela put the orphan chick down amongst the others; for a second it cheeped pitifully; then it, too, began to eat. As soon as the last grain had gone some more was thrown into the coop for the old hen. All the chicks poured back helter-skelter into the coop, the orphan amongst them, and the hen took it into her family circle without demur, and the baby Plymouth Rock's life was saved.

After that, to say that Angela was as fussy as a hen with one chick was to speak but very mildly of her condition. She looked on it as the foundation of her fortunes, and, surely, she thought, no one had ever owned such a beautiful chick before.

The next day Penelope went to the church at twelve o'clock to have her first lesson. She went off jubilantly; she returned a little less so. Miss Row was unaccustomed to children, or to teaching, and she had never been considered a patient woman.

"I believe it is going to be dreadfully hard," Penelope confided to the others, as they gathered round her. They had all gone to meet her, and hear her experiences. They had always been so much together that what happened to one was of the keenest interest to all.

"I don't believe I shall ever learn, there are such lots of things to remember, and Miss Row doesn't like to explain a thing more than once, and you've *got* to remember."

Esther began to feel thankful that she had not expressed a desire to know how to play the organ. She much preferred to do housework and not be scolded. Penelope's next words then came as a shock.

"Oh, and what *do* you think! Miss Row wants us to sing in the choir! She says we *must*. She can get scarcely any one to sing, and she says it will be good for us, and we shall be very glad by and by—"

"Oh, I couldn't!" cried Angela, overcome with nervousness. "I haven't got any voice, and I don't know how to; and I couldn't sing with all the people looking at me."

"It will be dreadful," said Penelope drearily. "But Miss Row says we shall be glad later on —"

"People always say that when they want one to do anything one simply hates doing. But she can't make us, can she? I shall ask Miss Charlotte to say we can't. I am sure she will when she knows how much we don't want to. I wish you had never said anything, Penelope, about the organ, and learning to play, and all that. Miss Row would never have thought of it if you hadn't," grumbled Esther; and Penelope, feeling the truth of it, looked more dejected than ever. After her first encounter with Miss Row as a teacher, the prospect before her looked anything but enticing, and she was haunted by a feeling that she had not declined the honour as firmly as she might have done, for the sake of the others.

They all turned and walked homewards very gloomily. The only cheerful member of the party was Poppy. "I wouldn't mind singing in church," she said, "if nobody wouldn't look at me. I can sing 'Once in Royal David's City' all through."

"It doesn't seem so bad if you haven't *got* to," said Angela miserably. "But when you have, it is awful. I—I almost wish I'd never come to Dorsham, and yet—I loved it so till this happened."

During dinner Miss Charlotte looked at the four from time to time, first with faint surprise, then with anxiety. They were so quiet, so gloomy, so changed. When she had spoken two or three times and received polite, but the briefest of answers, she began to feel she must get to the bottom of the mystery.

"Well, Penelope, did you enjoy your organ lesson, dear?" she asked briskly.

Penelope looked up with the ghost of her old comical smile gleaming in her eyes. "Well, I—I didn't exactly *enjoy* it," she said, trying to be polite and truthful at the same time. "It is rather hard at first, but— but I wouldn't mind that if—if—"

"If what, dear?" asked Miss Charlotte gently. "Is it anything I can help in?"

"No-o, I am afraid not, thank you. It's the singing—Miss Row wants us all to sing in the choir!"

The great and terrible news was out, the shadow that hung over them was explained, and eight eyes gazed at Miss Charlotte, expecting to read in her face something of the shock and dismay they had felt, instead of which she sat looking quite unmoved and rather amused. "Well, dears, I don't see anything very dreadful in that. Do you?"

"But we can't," cried Esther. "We can't sing, except just a little bit to ourselves." "But you can learn. I don't suppose Miss Row, or any one else, would expect you to sing perfectly at first. She would teach you. You said you wanted to learn all you could, didn't you, dear?"

"Ye-es," said Esther slowly, feeling she was having the worst of the argument, but unmoved in her dread and dislike of joining the choir. "But I never thought of this; this is different."

"Yes; but, dear, you will find very few things happen just as you would have them to. We may miss the best chances of our lives if we insist on that. You told me you wanted to save money and expense—now here is your opportunity. You will gain a knowledge of music and

singing such as you could not gain in any other way, for even if we had the means, there is no one here to teach you. I dare say you feel a little shy and nervous, but don't be foolishly so, dears. All your lives you will be thankful you had this chance."

Esther had no word to say. She felt she was in the wrong again, and that is never a pleasant feeling.

"But I could never sing before so many people, Cousin Charlotte," said Angela. "I wouldn't mind so much if it was only just ourselves, but I am sure I couldn't sing before strangers."

"Then, dear, it will be good for you in another way. You must learn to get over your self-consciousness. You must not imagine the eyes of every one are on you. You must try to forget all about yourself. Remember that every one there has a lot else to think about, and that you are only one little person amongst a number." Cousin Charlotte laid her hand on Angela's to take away any seeming severity from her words.

"I know Miss Row is always trying to make up a choir, and she has such difficulty. You would be doing her a real kindness if you help her; and I know you would like to do that," with a smile at Esther.

Esther sighed. "Yes," she said hesitatingly. "But—but can't one ever do things just in the way one likes, Cousin Charlotte? There are lots of kind things I should love to do."

"We may choose, generally, whether we will do a thing or not, or whether we will do it in our way, or the way that is mapped out for us. But usually if we choose our own, it is ourselves we please, and not the person we are doing it for. But this we can always do, dearie—if we have to do a thing we do not like, we can teach ourselves to like to do it."

"It sounds like a riddle," said Penelope.

"It very often is," said Miss Charlotte. "But am sure you will all grow to love your singing and your choir when the first shyness is over, and then you will be glad you gave in, and did not choose your own way. And of one thing you may be quite sure: if, as you think, you have no voices, Miss Row will soon tell you so, and you will not be bothered any more about having to sing."

But, after all, somehow it did not seem to them that that was what they wanted.

## CHAPTER XI.

To the girls' relief they were not expected to appear at the very next choir practice. Miss Charlotte had a talk with her friend, which tempered her enthusiasm with common sense, with the result that the children had their voices tried and two or three lessons given them before they were expected to appear in public, with the result that poor Poppy, the only one who really longed to be in the choir, was the only one denied that honour. All their voices were pronounced quite good. But Poppy was too young; it would strain her voice, she was told, and to her chagrin she had to sit in an ordinary pew with Miss Ashe while the others sat in what Poppy called the 'dear little' choir stalls in the chancel.

But, to show her defiance of this objectionable, and, as she thought, unnecessary care for her voice, she sang always at the top of it. It happened often that she did not know the right words, but she always managed to pick up the tune quickly, and with just one sentence to repeat over and over again, she got along to her own satisfaction, at any rate convinced in her own mind that it would not be very long before they would be glad to *ask* her to come into the choir.

So the days flew by and the summer slipped away; autumn had gone and winter, almost, before they realised it, so full were their days with their lessons and their singing, their housework and gardening, walks on the moor, and games and play. By degrees, as Miss Charlotte had foretold, each had made a little niche for herself. Esther had obtained almost complete charge of the drawing-room—no one else dusted it or arranged a flower in it. Penelope sometimes tried to find room in it for one of her pet plants, but unless permission

was asked, and Esther chose the place where it might stand, the treasure was certain to be found 'in the way.'

She dusted their own bedrooms, too, and helped to make the beds, and did lots of other little duties; and at Christmas, to her great delight, Miss Charlotte had given her the much-longed-for sleeves and aprons.

Angela had become, meantime, almost sole mistress of the hens and the eggs. She had begun by just collecting the eggs, and washing and marking them, and she did her work so well that no one else ever thought of troubling about them; and before very long, to her enormous pride, she was given the task of packing them for market. And oh! the joy of it! the pleasure she took in laying the rich brown and creamy-white eggs in cosy nests in the sweet-smelling hay; her pride in their appearance! The only flaw in her happiness was the fact that she could not carry the basket and dispose of the contents herself to the customers. She pictured herself turning back the snow-white cloth from the top of the basket, and counting out her beloved treasures one by one.

After that she began to feed the fowls, and keep account of the corn that was used, and the number of eggs that were laid. Anna consulted her quite gravely about the house scraps.

Perhaps, though, the very happiest day of all her life, at any rate the proudest, was that on which Fluffikins laid her first egg. Angela, when she saw it and the little hen strutting up and down before the nest in which it lay, stood in a kind of speechless ecstasy, much as a young author when his first work has been accepted, or an artist before his first completed picture. Then she held out her arms to the proud Fluffikins, who mounted to her shoulder, clucking happily; and, rubbing their cheeks against one another, they gazed ecstatically at the precious egg.

"Oh, Fluff, I *am* so sorry to take it from you," she cried, "but I *must* show it to Cousin Charlotte. Fluff, you darling, do go on and lay lots more. I want one every day, then you shall sit on some, and hatch out some dear little baby chicks of your very own; and you shall live with me till you are an old, old bird, Fluffikins darling, and no one shall dare to—to—" she hesitated to name the dreadful word 'kill,'—"shall interfere with you. You are what they call the 'founder' of my fortune, you precious bird."

She did not take the egg in to show to Miss Charlotte after all. She thought of another plan. She took it in and showed it to Anna, and to the girls, who gazed at it and marvelled at its beauty, but Miss Charlotte was not to see it until it appeared on her plate at tea, with an inscription on it to say whose it was.

It hurt Angela very much to deprive poor Fluffikins of her treasure, but, while she was not looking, she slipped another new, warm egg in the nest in its place, and hoped the dear bird would not see through the fraud; and Miss Charlotte did deserve the honour, after all her goodness to Fluff and her mistress; in fact they were pledged to it.

Cousin Charlotte could not suppress a slight start of surprise when she saw the black-speckled thing in the egg-cup on her plate; but she was as pleased as the girls could wish when she read, 'My and Fluff's first egg for you,' and assured them, as she ate it under their united gaze, that she had never in her life tasted a better one.

Poppy had constituted herself every one's hand-maiden and handy-maiden. If she were allowed to have a duster and dust-brush and help Esther, her cup of joy was full, but she was just as pleased to run to the post, or to the shops, or to help Ephraim gather windfalls in the orchard, dig potatoes, or assist Anna in any way she was allowed to. And now that her parsley bed was really in full growth, in spite of its troubled beginning, she was very full of happy importance. To be asked if she could spare a pennyworth of parsley filled her with pleasure for days.

"I never saw anything like it," she would say seriously, shaking her little purse the while. "It only cost me a penny, and I've made fourpence by it already. I wonder every one doesn't grow parsley."

"If they did, dear, there would be no one to sell to," Cousin Charlotte explained.

Of them all Penelope did least to help. She had her flowers—quite a collection of them now. "But she doesn't do anything with them," complained Esther one day.

"They make the house pretty," urged Angela, always ready to defend her room-mate, "and they make our room so sweet and pretty."

"But she should try to sell them," argued Esther, "or—or do something. She seems to have forgotten all about helping Cousin Charlotte."

"She doesn't get much time," pleaded Angela, "by the time her lessons are done, and her organ lesson, and the practice, and her reading—she always reads for an hour a day, sometimes more. And—and there isn't any one here to sell flowers to—"

At that moment Penelope herself dashed in on them, her eyes dancing, her face glowing. "Oh, girls, what *do* you think?" she cried, as she flung her music-case on to one chair, her hat on another, and herself on a third.

"What?" asked Esther, as she picked up the music-case and straightened the cushion it had knocked over.

"Oh, *do* tell, do tell quick," urged Angela.

"Well!" sitting up and clasping her hands tight in an ecstasy of pleasure, "you know Miss Row has friends staying with her."

"Yes; but I don't see much in that to be excited about," said Esther.

"Well, one of them is called Mr. Somerset, and he is a musician, and he— he heard me sing. Miss Row made me sing on purpose. I was awfully frightened, but I got through all right, and—and what *do* you think he said?"

Esther felt the old demon jealousy clutching at her heart at once. "I don't know, I'm sure," she said coldly. "Do tell if you are going to, Penelope. I am too busy to wait."

"Oh, what?" gasped Angela, with eager, questioning eyes.

"He said,"—in an impressive, almost awed voice—"he said I had the promise of a very fine voice, and—and no expense ought to be spared in training it!" Penelope repeated the words slowly, like one in a dream.

"Oh, Pen!" Angela gasped, almost speechless with delight, "did he really?"

Pen nodded.

"What nonsense!" said Esther, in a strained voice, quite unlike her usual tones.

Angela turned on her reproachfully. "Essie, aren't you glad?"

"Of course I am," snapped Esther shortly; "but it is so silly to put such things into people's heads when there *is* no money. I suppose he thinks we all ought to give up everything for this, and—and never thinks that the rest of us might like to—to have lessons —"

Esther really did not mean a tenth of the hard things she was saying, and she hated herself for saying them, but that wretched temper of hers got the upper hand of her again. She knew she was being mean and unkind, and it added to her vexation; but she had not the strength of will to get the better of it. In her calmer moments she longed to be one of those who could rise above such mean jealousies, and be unselfish and brave and strong, but when the trial came she succumbed.

Penelope was too lost in happy dreams, though, to heed or be hurt by Esther's remarks.

"Of course I can't have it trained, but all the same I *am* glad I have a nice voice," she said in a happy, dreamy voice. "Fancy me, *me*, with a beautiful voice! Isn't it strange? Doesn't it seem as though it can't be true? Oh, I *am* so happy!"

"I always loved to hear you sing, dear," said Angela, seating herself on the ground at Penelope's feet and hugging her sister's knees. "And, Pen, just imagine if you could have lessons, and could sing at concerts, and everybody wanted to hear you, and you made lots and lots of money—wouldn't it be *lovely*! Esther, come and sit down and talk about what we would do if Pen were famous and made a heap of money." Angela never doubted that what good fortune came to one would be shared by all. "Come and sit here, Esther."

"It will be Penelope's money," said Esther coldly. "It would be for her to say what she would do with it, not for us. I am busy; I can't stay talking nonsense," and away she walked out of the room, leaving Penelope and Angela with their spirits considerably lowered.

"I don't know why it is," sighed Penelope, roused at last from her happy oblivion, "but whenever I bring home what I think is good news it always seems to upset Esther. I thought she was just dying for us all to be able to do something to help father and Cousin Charlotte, and this seemed such a lovely thing! Of course there is all the expense first, but *if* I have a really good voice, later on I should be able to keep you all, and give you all you want. I think she might have seemed a little bit glad."

"Perhaps she is worried," said Angela, "because she wants you to have lessons, and there isn't any money for them, and—and I think she is tired."

"I wish she would not do so much and get so tired," said Penelope wistfully. "We scarcely ever see her now; she hardly ever has any time to play, and—and it is disappointing when she acts like that." Penelope's voice quavered a little, in spite of herself, and she rose and looked out of window that Angela might not see her misty eyes.



"Never mind, dear," coaxed comforting Angela, "don't you fret. Essie is as glad as either of us, *really*, and by and by she will be all right. Let us go out on the moor, and talk over what we will do when you are rich, shall we?"

"Yes," said Penelope, with a little sigh, and a shake to shake off her gloom. "Dear old moor, I feel I want to lie down on it and hug it when big, nice things happen, and tell it all about them. Come along, Angel."

Esther, from upstairs, saw them go out together, Angela's arm about Pen's waist, Penelope's arm about Angela's shoulders. With angry eyes and aching heart she watched them go through the garden, and guessed whither they were bound; and a sense of loneliness, of being shut out, stole over her.

Cousin Charlotte had gone to Gorley and taken Poppy with her, so she was quite alone. With a hasty movement she flung on her hat, and dashed downstairs and out of the front door. "If they went out, she could go out too," she told herself angrily, and could find her own company sufficient. If they went one way she would go another, the moor was large enough, and—and at any rate the tors and the gorse and the birds liked her as much as they liked Penelope. She would not there be put aside for her younger sister.

By that time she had worked herself up into such a state of resentfulness of imagined injuries and fancied wrongs, she felt she could hardly endure her unhappy lot. She walked along the road in a perfect turmoil of mind, and, fearing she might meet some one, turned down towards the bridge and the river; but the weather had been rainy lately, and the river was swollen, and the bank all wet and slippery.

She had never been further than the bridge and the river-bank before, and as she clambered up from the muddy, slippery river-path, and pushed through the sheltering brushwood which lined it, she found herself, a tiny speck, apparently the only living creature, in a huge great stretch of moorland which was all new ground to her. There were a few big rocks here and there, but no big hills, as on the other side, with their friendly sheltering look; and the great stretch of bare land, stretching away and away, looked the picture of desolation.

The spirit of it seemed in tune with Esther's own sense of loneliness; but it touched her heart with the softening touch of sadness. She sank down on a big boulder beside her, and, stretching out her arms on its rough, lichen-covered breast, buried her face in them and burst into sobs.

"Why is it? why is it? Why should every one like the others and no one like me? Why should Penelope have everything and me nothing, and why can't I feel nice about it? Why do I care, or why can't I pretend I don't mind?" At that moment Esther really did believe that no one in all the world cared in the least for her. "Penelope is pretty and clever, and—and taking, and—and now she has a beautiful voice, and I have nothing. I am not pretty or clever or nice, and I shall never be anything, or do anything, and—and no one wants me. She will be able to go about and travel, and be rich and have everything she wants, and be able to help the others, and—and I am no better than a drudge!"

A little field-mouse, creeping out of its hole, heard the sobs and flew away again, nearly scared out of its wits. A goldfinch came and perched on a furze-bush near, looked wonderingly at the odd-shaped thing that made such funny noises, and then flew away to a thistle and began to search for any stray seeds that might have been overlooked. Little spiders ran over the boulder and put out delicate feelers to try to discover what curious pinky-white things those were that lay on the old stone; then, after a first venture, finding them harmless, ran over and over Esther's hand in a perfect fuss and fury of excitement.

Esther, feeling the slight tickling of the little creatures' feet, raised her head to look, and kept it raised to watch their busy movements. Her storm of tears had relieved her heart, and done her good. She felt less injured, and in a better frame of mind. She did not dare to move until the last spider had finished his investigations, for fear of alarming him; but when he had scurried away home, evidently eager to tell of his adventures, she raised herself and looked about her.

Her face and eyes were hot and swelled and aching. She could not meet any one while looking such a sight as she was. She would walk on until the fresh breeze should have cooled down her burning features. She turned away from Dorsham in the same direction as the river ran. It was all a strange country to her, and she would explore it. No one would miss her at home. The anger and jealousy were gone, but she still felt sad and lonely, and full of pity for herself.

She walked on and on and on, still too absorbed in herself to pay any heed to the voice of the birds or the river or the myriad little creatures moving about her. She was thinking how much she would like to frighten them all at home, and make them anxious about her; she felt she would like to walk on and on until twilight and darkness fell, and she and the moor were left to their loneliness together. It was all very foolish; but as long as there are boys and girls, or men and women, these moods will come to them, to be fought down and overcome;

and we must remember that to the sufferer they do not seem foolish at the time.

How far she did walk she had no idea at the time; it seemed to her it was miles and miles;—in reality it was only about a mile and a half,—and the sun was going down, and she was beginning to admit doubts to her mind as to whether she should turn back or not, when suddenly, in a hollow in the moor before her, she saw, though at first she could hardly believe her eyes, a real little house with real smoke coming out of the chimney on the thatched roof.

If it had not been for the smoke, whirled and beaten about by the breeze, she would have thought the house was not really a human habitation, but a bit of the moor itself risen up, so brown and rough and weather-beaten it looked under its old lichen-grown thatch. But the smoke was real smoke, and Esther, stepping nearer, saw one window lit by the leaping, cheery glow of a fire.

Fascinated and surprised, she drew nearer and nearer. Before the cottage was a little garden surrounded by a sturdy railing and a thick-set, close-clipped holly-hedge, within the shelter of which whole beds of crocuses and daisies and polyanthuses bloomed gaily. The crocuses were all asleep now, their little petals fast closed, and the daisies too, but the polyanthuses looked bravely with their beautiful eyes at the fast darkening sky. Over the cottage walls, as well as on the thatch, lichen and house-leeks grew, as though to prove it was but a boulder, one of the many scattered thereabouts in all directions, and not a house at all.

## CHAPTER XII.

Ester stood staring fascinated, quite unconscious of the fact that a pair of bright but dim eyes were peering out at her wonderingly; and she started, quite guiltily, when presently the cottage door opened, and a lady came along the garden path towards her.

Esther began to move away, feeling ashamed that she should have stared so rudely; but the lady hearing her, spoke.

"Don't go away, please," she said in a pretty soft voice with a foreign accent. "I saw you, and I wondered if you had lost your way. It is not often we see strangers here, we are so far away from other houses."

"No-o, thank you," stammered Esther shyly. "I—I don't think I have lost my way. I was out for a walk, and had never been this way before. I have come from Dorsham."

"Dorrsham, oh!" the lady rolled her r's, and poke in the prettiest way imaginable. "It is rather a long walk home for a young lady when the light is beginning to fail. Have you no one with you?"

"No," said Esther, suddenly realising her disobedience in not having brought Guard. "I am not afraid; at least—I—I shall be home before it is dark."

"I do not feel so sure of that."

Neither did Esther as she looked about her, and saw how quickly twilight had fallen since the sun had gone.

"I hardly like to let you go, my child, by yourself only, over the moor. You could so easily miss your way, and get into the river, or fall over a boulder and injure yourself. Will you come into my house and rest; and after you have had some tea—"

"Oh, thank you, no," cried Esther, overcome with shyness at the thought of giving so much trouble. "I am sure I shall get back all right."

"Will you not do it to oblige me?" And the lady, who was very pretty and graceful and charming, spoke so coaxingly, so prettily, Esther could not refuse her.

"I—I—but it would make me later," she began.

"Ah, but I was going to say, Anne is going to Dorsham presently, and he shall conduct you safely home."

"Who?" breathed Esther, puzzled beyond politeness.

"Anne. He—well, he is not exactly my servant—he is my friend and factotum; he and his wife live in the cottage at the back," explained the little lady. "His wife is ill, unfortunately, and he is going to get some mustard for poultices for us to apply, and he will see you home."

"Oh, thank you," stammered Esther, interested but uneasy. She was beginning to feel uncomfortable about Cousin Charlotte, and the anxiety she might be causing her; but she really did shrink from the long walk home in the gathering darkness, and, too, she did not know how to refuse the kind stranger's request. So she stepped in at the open gate, and put her hand in the one outstretched to welcome her.

"My name is Esther Carroll," she said, feeling some introduction was necessary, "and I and my sisters live with Miss Ashe at Moor Cottage."

"Oh," said the lady vaguely. Evidently she did not know Miss Ashe or the cottage. "I have not the pleasure of knowing Miss Ashe. I never go to Dorsham. I seldom go beyond my garden; in fact—I cannot walk much," and Esther noticed for the first time that she was lame. "My name is Mademoiselle Leperier. I am not one of your countrywomen, though I might claim to be, having lived in England most of my life. Now I think," with a bright smile, "we know each other. Come inside, do. Anne had just brought in the tea-tray when he caught sight of you, and drew my attention. We thought perhaps you had lost your way. Come in, we will have tea at once, and you shall start very soon for home, or your cousin will be anxious."

Esther, following her kind hostess, thought she had never in all her life seen anything so pretty as the little firelit room into which she now stepped, with its pure white walls, its green dresser hung with priceless old blue china, the high white mantelpiece, loaded, too, with china, the high-waisted lattice window, with its prim little creamy silk curtains.

By the fire stood two comfortable easy-chairs, and a little square table, on which was spread a white cloth and dainty tea-things, bread-and-butter, and tempting little cakes. To Esther it all seemed perfect, as perfect a picture as Mademoiselle Leperier herself in her soft grey gown, with her white hair, bright eyes, and pale face.

In a very short time they were seated on either side of the table, drinking fragrant creamy tea and chatting as friendly as though they had often met before. Anne, who had brought another cup and saucer, had been told his errand, and with quiet politeness expressed his eagerness to oblige. Esther looked at him with interest. Somehow she had expected to see quite a young man, but Anne was old—older than his mistress. That he was a foreigner, too, there could be no doubt; his speech, his appearance, his every action bespoke the fact.

"Is—is Mr. Anne French too?" asked Esther, and then blushed, fearing she had been rude.

But Mademoiselle nodded brightly. "Yes. Call him 'Anne,' please, dear. His name is Anne Roth. His parents came to England with mine, when they had to fly from France, and he and his have been with me and mine ever since. Ah! but he is a dear, faithful soul is Anne, and so is Laura, his English wife. They would not leave me, even when I came to this far-away spot. At first it made them sad, I think, but now they have come to like it."

"Were you exiles?" asked Esther, with eager interest. "Oh, how interesting!"

Mademoiselle Leperier's heart warmed towards her sympathetic visitor with the eager face, and soon they were deep in talk, so deep that they were surprised when Anne knocked at the door to say he had come to know if the young m'amzelle was ready to be conducted home.

Under the spell of her hostess's kind face and voice Esther had told some of her story too—told more, really, than she could have believed possible considering that she had not spoken of the events of that afternoon, nor to what led to her appearance at Edless, as the spot was called where Mademoiselle lived.

"May I come to see you again?" she asked impulsively, as she put up her face to kiss the gentle, fragile-looking French lady.

"Will you, dear? I shall be so pleased if your cousin will permit you. It is a little desolate here, and *triste* at times, for I cannot read or write much, or use my needle; my eyes are not strong."

"Those bright, shining eyes not strong!" thought Esther with surprise. "Could I read to you sometimes, or write for you, or sew?" she asked eagerly. "I am sure Cousin Charlotte would be pleased for me to, and—and I should *love* to. May I?"

"If *la cousine* does not object, dear child, I should be grateful indeed; but, remember, she does not know me, or anything of me, and you must not be angry if she does not permit you. It would be but natural."

"Oh, I am sure she will," said Esther confidently, and out she stepped into the darkness with Anne.

To the end of her life Esther will never forget that walk across the moor under the cold blue of the darkening sky—the long, mysterious-looking Stretches of darkness with here and there a big rock standing up grim and gaunt in the silence, the vastness in which they seemed but specks, the shrill, sweet voices of the birds calling to each other, and the busy, persistent voice of the river, added to the weirdness and loneliness of the experience. The only lifelike sounds were their own footsteps, and it was only here and there, when they got on to rough ground and off the turf, that these could be heard.

Esther grew oppressed by the awe and silence. She longed for her companion to speak. She would have said something herself, only she did not know what to begin about, and it needed courage to break, with her small voice, that vast silence.

At last though, a rabbit, or some other wild animal that loves the night-time and the silence, darted right across their path, making her start and scream. The shock past, she laughed a little with shame of her own weakness. The scream and the laugh broke the spell.

"It was very silly of me, but it came so suddenly," she explained apologetically.

"It did, m'amzelle. I expect you are not used to such places at night?"

"No, not at night. We love the moor, though, by day, and know it well, and I am not really afraid of the wild things."

"No, m'amzelle," politely. Silence followed again. Esther grew desperate.

"I—I hope your wife will soon be better," she said sympathetically.

"Thank you, m'amzelle. I hope so, too."

"Is she very ill?"

"Well, not—not dangerous, but she troubles. Our M'amzelle Lucille is not strong, she suffers so, and when Laura—my wife—is ill, M'amzelle does too much, she is so good."

"Can't you have some one in to help you?" asked practical Esther.

"No, m'amzelle, we are so far away. But we do not want any one really. I can do all. I know how to nurse," with evident pride, "but M'amzelle likes to help us, and—and she is not strong, she suffers so."

"Does she?" asked Esther sympathetically. "I am so sorry. I noticed she was lame. Does she suffer pain from her lameness?"

"Yes, m'amzelle. She had a fall some years ago. You know, I daresay, that M'amzelle Lucille was at one time a famous singer. No? She has not told you? Then perhaps I should not have, but I thought that when she told you her name you would know."

"I can keep a secret," said Esther. "I will never mention it if I may not. Why did M'amzelle stop singing and come here?"

"Ah, she stopped singing long, long before she came here. She never sang after the great trouble came to her life, when the great English gentleman she was so soon to marry was killed."

Esther gave a little cry of horror. "Oh, how dreadful, but—but how—was it an accident?"

Anne's tongue was loosened now, he needed no questioning; he had so few opportunities to talk, he could not resist this one, and he wanted every one's sympathy for his beloved mistress. "Yes, it was an accident, a fearful, a cruel accident, and it happened less than a week before the wedding day. They were together at a station waiting for a train, when some one ran against him with so great force he reeled, he lost his balance, he fell forward, right off the platform—the train was just coming in!" Anne's voice died away in an awful impressive silence. "M'amzelle Lucille sprang to catch him—"

"Oh!" gasped Esther, in horror.

"They saved *her*," he added significantly; "but she was injured, she was lame always from that day, and her eyes were injured. She may be blind, some day—if she lives. He was killed before her eyes."

"Oh, poor M'amzelle Leperier," groaned Esther, her heart aching with the tragedy of the

terrible story. "I wonder it did not kill her."

"It nearly did," said Anne significantly.

"And her singing?"

"She never sang again, m'amzelle. She says her voice broke with the shock—but it was her heart that broke. She loved him so; it was too cruel, too terrible."

"Did you come here to live then?"

"No, m'amzelle, not for a long time. We travelled from place to place. M'amzelle Lucille said she would go alone, but my wife and I would not leave her, she was so lonely, so *triste*, she had no one but us. Wherever we went people stared at her and annoyed her so. Very often they recognised her, she was so well known; or they saw she was beautiful, and they knew her story, or found it out, and they had no delicacy, no feeling. We always had to leave. Last year we came here. M'amzelle does not suffer here, except from loneliness, and I think she never will, but it is too lonely for her. I hope you will come to see her, m'amzelle. She likes you, I can see."

Esther was delighted. Here, at last, was some one who really needed her. In her heart she determined to devote all her spare time to M'amzelle Lucille. The walk home was over much sooner than she wished. She could have gone on listening to Anne for miles further, but the bridge was crossed, the lights began to show in the cottage windows, and soon they were at the gate of Moor Cottage.

Here Esther's new joy began to moderate. It was quite dark now. Anne told her it was nearly six o'clock. What would Cousin Charlotte be thinking? Now she had time to spare a thought for her, Esther felt sorry and ashamed.

The sounds of their footsteps or voices must have reached the anxious ears within, for even while she was saying 'good-night' to her companion the cottage door was opened wide, letting a flood of light pour along the pathway. "Esther, dear, is that you?" asked Cousin Charlotte's gentle voice reproachfully, and Esther flew to her and flung her arms about her.

"Oh, Cousin Charlotte, I *am* so sorry," she cried repentantly. "I can't tell you *how* sorry. I didn't mean to be so late, really—at least, at first I did—but—but—I shouldn't have—"

"Never mind now, dear. Come in and warm yourself, and you can tell me all about it later. You have frightened me dreadfully, Esther; but just now I am too relieved to scold, only—only don't do it again, it is more than I can endure bravely," and Cousin Charlotte leaned down and kissed her.

Esther saw then that she was white and trembling, that tears glistened in her eyes, and understood for the first time how much Cousin Charlotte cared.

"Oh, Cousin Charlotte, Cousin Charlotte," she cried remorsefully, "if only I were like you. I wish I could be good. I do want to be, I do really."

"Try to be good, but not like me, dear," said Cousin Charlotte huskily, "or you will be a very weak and foolish old woman. Now," with another kiss, "run upstairs and take off your hat and shoes, and come and tell us all your adventures. We have all been dreadfully anxious."

Esther went upstairs feeling far more remorseful than if Miss Charlotte had scolded her well. When she had taken off her hat and shoes, and made herself tidy, she felt really shy of going down to face them all. But while she was hesitating, the door opened and Poppy flew into the room and straight to Esther's arms.

"Oh, Essie, I couldn't wait, and Cousin Charlotte said I might come up for you. Are you all right? You are not hurt or—"

"You have been crying," broke in Esther. "Oh, Poppy, I made you!"

"I couldn't help just a teeny tiny little cry, but it was only a tear or two when I thought the wild beasts had got you and were eating you right up. Come down now."

In the dining-room it was all so cosy and pleasant that Esther soon forgot her embarrassment, and, seated in the midst of the circle round the fire, was soon telling her story to a rapt audience.

"I should love to see the little cottage, and have tea in that dear little room," said Angela, after Esther had described her sudden discovery of the little brown house and the flower-filled garden.

"Mademoiselle Leperier!" cried Miss Ashe quite excitedly. "Why, child, I remember her quite well; at least her name and fame, and the tragedy of her lover's death. I have often wondered what had become of the poor lady."

"Have you?" cried Esther, delighted. "Cousin Charlotte, I wish you would get to know her. I am sure she is very lonely."

"Perhaps she prefers loneliness, dear. I should be only too pleased to show friendly neighbourliness to the poor lady if she would like it, but sometimes it is greater kindness not to intrude. You can go there, dear, if you and she wish it, and perhaps the friendliness will increase by degrees."

"Is she very ill? Does she have a great lot of pain?" asked Poppy anxiously. "I wonder if she knows she may be blind some day. Why doesn't she have a doctor?" Poppy had no doubt in her mind that a doctor could cure every ill human beings can suffer.

"She has seen nearly every famous doctor there is," said Esther, "so Anne said. But, Poppy, if you ever see Mademoiselle, you must never let her know that we know about it, and *never* speak about her to *any one*. Do you hear? You won't, will you, dear? She might not like it."

Poppy promised. "*Oh, no*," she cried emphatically, "tourse not "; and Poppy's promises were always kept. "Esther, hasn't she got any eyes, and is she very sad, and—and—"

"Not at all. She was anxious about Laura, and she looked thin and delicate, but you would never know she was suffering; and her eyes are as bright and pretty as any I have ever seen." Then Penelope, who had been all this time thinking things over, began to put her questions. All her curiosity was about Mademoiselle's singing, but Esther could tell her little on that point. "Perhaps she will tell me more when I know her better," she said hopefully, and went to bed in high spirits at the thought of the new friend she had made, and of another visit to the dear little cottage soon.

### CHAPTER XIII.

"Angela, has Fluffy laid an egg to-day?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Will you sell it to me? I've got the money for it." Poppy opened her hand to display the penny she had been tightly grasping.

"What do you want to buy an egg for?" asked Angela, with sudden caution. "I don't think you had better eat any more without asking Cousin Charlotte first. You had a big breakfast."

"I don't want to eat it," cried Poppy, in a tone of wounded dignity. "I want it to—to give to some one."

"Some poor person?"

"Well, yes, I think she is poor. I know she is not well, and eggs are good for people who are not well."

"Yes, very. Well, there's the egg. Isn't it a beauty? *I* call it perfectly lovely." Angela looked at it lovingly. To her there never were or would be such eggs as her Fluffikins laid. "Now do be careful. How are you going to carry it?"

Poppy ran off, and in a moment was back again with a little covered basket lined with hay. Evidently it had been prepared beforehand for this purpose. The egg was laid in and carefully covered over, and the lid shut down and secured.

"Are you going with it now?" asked Angela.

"In a minute. I have to get something else too."

The girls were always very considerate to each other over their little mysteries and secrets, so Angela, without further inquiry, went away to her hens, and Poppy hurried off to the end of the garden, where she gathered a bunch of beautiful green parsley, and wrapped it round with a piece of paper which she tied with a little piece of pink ribbon she had saved

on some previous occasion.

Miss Charlotte and Anna were in the kitchen arranging the meals for the day. Esther was busy in the bedroom, Angela was in the hen-house, and Penelope already at the church, practising, for although it was Easter, and holiday time, she continued her organ-practice daily. So no one saw Poppy as she and Guard started off together. She was bound on a secret expedition to Mademoiselle Leperier, carrying with her all she could compass as suitable offerings to an invalid—a new-laid egg and a bunch of her own fresh parsley. She had not mentioned her plan to Miss Charlotte—not because she was afraid of being stopped, but because she wanted to give of her very own, and not make demands on Cousin Charlotte. She knew if she did speak of it that Miss Ashe would be thinking of all sorts of things to send, and Poppy did not want that. She wanted it to be entirely her own little scheme, in gratitude to the poor lady for her kindness to Esther.

She did not know in the least how long the walk would be, but she was prepared for it to take her a very great while. Essie had said it was a long way there but a short way back, and it had not occurred to either of them to wonder how this could be possible. Thinking, though, of the expedition before her as something very great, she hurried along without once pausing to look at the river or play on the bridge or pay heed to any of the hundreds of attractions which lie on a walk on a beautiful spring day. Guard made little dashes and excursions in all directions, but was never absent for more than a moment or two from his little mistress's side.

Now and again Poppy sat down on a big boulder to rest, standing her basket on the ground beside her, and she and Guard would gaze eagerly about them at the wide-spreading sunny moorland; and probably both of them thought of the games they might be having there if matters so serious were not engaging their attention, but no thought of doing so crossed their minds now.

The result of all this haste was that, long before she expected it, Poppy found herself face to face with the little brown cottage, and felt there must be some mistake. This could not be the place, she thought; it must be another. Perhaps, oh dreadful doubt! she had come the wrong way. She was a very wise little person, though, and to make sure, before she went further, she determined to go in and inquire.

Rather timidly, but full of interest, she walked along the paved garden path, and tapped at the door with her knuckles, not being able to reach the knocker. It was a feeble knock, but soon called forth an answer. A man opened it, an elderly man—Anne himself, in fact.

"Please does Mademoiselle Le-le-, the French lady, live here?" she asked, finding some difficulty in pronouncing the long French name.

"Yes, m'amzelle. M'amzelle Leperier lives here."

Poppy was a little non-plussed. She had not thought out any plan or reason to give for her visit, nor how she was to reach the presence of Esther's new friend, but her usual ready frankness stood her in good stead. "I have come to ask how she is, and how—how Anne's wife is. My sister Esther was here last night. Made—Miss, the French lady, asked her to tea, and—and sent her home with a Mr. Anne." The man smiled.

"Ah! I know. The young lady I conducted to her home last night— Miss Esthaire. Come inside, m'amzelle. I know M'amzelle Leperier will wish to see you."

A sudden shyness rushed over Poppy. "Oh, I—I don't think I had better come in, thank you. I didn't mean to do that. I have to go all the way home, and it will take me rather a long time. I—I only brought a fresh egg that Angela's hen laid this morning, and some parsley out of my own garden for—for Miss Leperier, and perhaps if she didn't like it she might give it to your wife. I am sorry I had nothing nicer."

"There couldn't be anything nicer, m'amzelle," said Anne Roth with ready tact. "It will come in for an omelette for the mistress's lunch, and the parsley too, it will be most useful. How fine it is. We have none here. It is always a difficulty to get any."

"Oh, I am so glad I brought it!" cried Poppy, flushing with delight. "If ever you want any, *do* come and have some of mine. I have a whole bedful, and all from a penny packet of seed that I sowed myself. I should be delighted to give you some at any time."

She refrained from mentioning the fact that it was her only source of income. She had thrust the basket and the parsley into the man's hand, and was edging away.

"But M'amzelle will be annoyed with me if I let you go all the way back without any rest," he pleaded. "Please to enter, m'amzelle."

At that moment Mademoiselle Leperier herself appeared. Anne turned to her with relief.

"Here, M'amzelle, is the sister of the young lady who was here last night. She has come with kind inquiries for M'amzelle and my wife."

Mademoiselle Leperier stepped to the door, and taking the blushing Poppy's hands in both her own, stooped and kissed her. "Oh, you dear child, how sweet of you," she cried with warm delight. "Come in, you must come in. Is that beautiful dog at the gate yours? I saw him there and felt I must go out and speak to him, and then I heard your voice and Anne's. Do call him in, I want to know him too. You must both come."

There was no shyness or hesitation about Guard; he hurried in almost before he was invited to, and he and his little mistress found themselves in the room Esther had described so vividly the night before, only now it was lit by sunshine instead of fire and lamp. Poppy did not like to look about her, she knew it was not polite to do so, but her eye fell on the dresser with its lovely china, and the blue bowl of primroses and moss and ivy leaves on the little black table, and thought it all more perfect even than she had imagined.

Guard, as though feeling he was too large for the small room, went over and sat close against the wall by the window, shedding around him genial smiles in return for all the attentions lavished on him. Anne was despatched for milk and biscuits; and while he was gone Mademoiselle inquired for Esther, and how she got home, politely hoping they had not been very anxious.

"Yes, we were; we were very anxious, thank you," said Poppy, half absently. She was looking at her hostess, and thinking of the story she had heard of her. It seemed so wonderful that after going through such terrible tragedies she could laugh and talk and be interested in little every-day matters. But she was, especially when Poppy, at last recovering her tongue, told her all about themselves, and their father and mother in Canada, and how they four came to Cousin Charlotte's because no one else could have them, and how frightened they were until they saw her, but were never frightened after, she was so kind; and how they all wanted to help her, and how they tried all sorts of ways.

Mademoiselle was very interested in the parsley-bed, and Angela's hen, and Esther helping in the house, and Penelope's desire to be able to play the organ and sing; and Poppy chattered on, delighted to find so interested a listener.

"I think it quite cheered her and did her good," she confided to Angela later. "She said it did, and she asked me to come again; and I am to keep threepennyworth of parsley for her every week. Isn't it lovely! A whole shilling a month! Oh, I wish I had a whole garden to sow parsley in. Do you think it will go on growing for ever, Angela?"

Angela did not know, but she was hopeful. Ephraim, however, thought that at the rate she was picking it her crop would not last another month, and strongly advised the clearing of a part of the bed and tilling more seeds.

But when Poppy went to Esther to tell her about her expedition, she met with a disappointment. Esther did not seem at all pleased at the attentions she had shown the invalids. She seemed, in fact, quite annoyed.

"I was going myself," she said coldly, "by and by; but I sha'n't now, of course. I don't suppose Mademoiselle Leperier wants the whole Carroll family continually going to her house. It was not right for you, either, to go all that way alone; it was not safe."

"I had Guard with me," said the crestfallen Poppy. "I didn't know you wouldn't like it, Essie. I thought you—you would be glad." Her lip would quiver a little as she spoke. "I—I only wanted to be kind to the poor lady because she was kind to you, and I—didn't mean to go inside, but she made me. Aren't you really going again, Esther? She expects you, she said so."

"I can't go if all the rest of you keep going. Besides, Mademoiselle won't want me."

"Oh yes, she will," cried Poppy, almost in tears. "She *does* want you; and—and I won't go any more if you don't like me to. You can take the parsley for me. I wish now I hadn't promised to bring it; but they can't get any one to come, and—and—" and then a tear really forced its way out and fell; but at the sight of it Esther's better nature conquered her temper, and she took her little sister in her arms with real remorse.

"No, darling, you shall go, and we will go together; but not always," she added presently. "I should like to go alone sometimes, Poppy, to have a quiet talk with Mademoiselle."

#### CHAPTER XIV.



To-morrow was Poppy's birthday, and all day long there had been mysterious whisperings and signs and nods, hasty dashes in and out of the house, invasions of Mrs. Vercoe's and Mrs. Bennett's shops, and great mysteriousness on the part of Ephraim, who had to make a special journey to Gorley.

And all the time Poppy, with a little thrill of excitement at her heart, went about pretending to see and hear nothing, and half wishing her senses were not so acute.

Miss Charlotte was very vexed with herself. She had made an engagement for the very afternoon of the great day, and could not get out of it.

"I am *so* vexed I did not remember, dears," she said; "but it was so long ago I was asked, and I had to accept or refuse then and there, and I really did not realise what the date actually was. I should have liked, above all things, to have been home with you on that day."

The children were very sorry too; but seeing Cousin Charlotte so vexed they made light of their own disappointment.

Anna was vexed too. To her the birthday tea was the great feature of the birthday, and she had, days before, with a great deal of trouble to keep it a secret from the children, made and baked a beautiful birthday cake, which now lay hidden away in a white cloth in a tin box in the copper in the wash-kitchen.

On this day, the day before the great day itself, when she had for the first time realised that the children would be alone on the important occasion, her mind had grown very seriously troubled, so troubled that she could think of nothing else, until suddenly a beautiful idea came into her head, so beautiful an idea that Anna fairly gasped. Later on, when she had really sorted out her plans, she went upstairs to a big box in her bedroom which held untold stores of treasures, and searched until she drew from the depths a box of little sheets of fancy note-paper and envelopes. This was hid in the copper too, along with the cake; but only until the children had all gone to bed and the house was quiet.

As soon as ever she was sure there would be no more rushes into the kitchen that night, Anna got out the wooden box with 'Hudson's Soap Powder' stuck all over it, in which she kept her writing materials; and then, withdrawing the box of fancy note-paper from its hiding-place, she sat down, and taking out sheet by sheet, spread them all on the table before her.

"It do seem a pity to use it after keeping it all these years," she said regretfully, as she examined each one. They were all different. "But there, there couldn't be a better time. They'm just what I want." So hardening her heart against any further regrets, she proceeded to make her choice.

"I think Miss Poppy ought to have the roses. They'm considered the best of all the flowers, and 'tis her day. Then Miss Esther shall have—let me see. They'm all so pretty I don't hardly know which to choose for which— oh, Miss Angela shall have the daisies, somehow they remind me of her, and vi'lets seems like Miss Esther's flower, and I'll give the sunflowers to Miss Penelope."

That settled, and four envelopes picked out and inscribed each with one of the children's names, Anna squared her elbows and began the real work of the evening. First she took some old scraps of paper, and wrote note after note on them before she succeeded in pleasing herself. At last she accomplished what she wanted, and feeling satisfied, copied it out, word for word, on the four sheets of note-paper. She hesitated as to whether she should not put her writing on the plain side, and so avoid marring the fair beauty of the flowered side, but she thought better of it, and hardened her heart; and after one had been done she did not mind so very much.

It was almost late when at last she went to bed, her task had taken her so long, and the clock actually struck ten as she crept into Esther's room and left two of her little notes on the dressing-table, after depositing the other two in Penelope's and Angela's room.

Poppy, being the heroine of the day, was naturally the first to wake the next morning. At the remembrance of what the occasion was, she sat straight up in bed with excitement, and nearly shouted; then she saw that Esther was asleep still. It seemed very hard that every one else should be asleep, and quite lost to the greatness of the occasion, while she was awake and alert, all ready to receive congratulations.

As her eyes grew accustomed to the dimness she could make out a square, fascinating-looking parcel on the table by Esther's bed, after which it became almost intolerably hard to lie still and wait for the others to wake. The little heroine's excitement began to give way to quite a hurt feeling. It seemed as though no one could care, or they would never sleep on like this. She actually began to feel aggrieved; but she sprang out of bed to try to drive away

the feeling by looking out to see what the morning and the weather were like. She might, if she had liked, have pulled back the curtains in a way that would have waked Esther at once; but she drew them as gently as though her one anxiety was not to disturb her sister, and opening the window, looked out.

Oh, how lovely it was! Poppy, child as she was, gasped at the sight before her. Road and river, houses and moor, lay bathed in the clear glow of the beautiful pure morning sunshine. Every leaf and twig sparkled with dew; even the little window-panes in the cottages glittered and looked beautiful. On the moor opposite great cloud-like masses of mist rolled away quickly before the advancing sun, leaving the old brown moor behind it, flashing from thousands of tiny leaves and blades. The river gleamed and scintillated as it danced along, singing as it went.

"Everything seems to know what day it is," said Poppy gleefully. "Oh, you dear river, you dear sun, you dear, dear moor and houses, *how* I love you all!"

She softly closed the window and turned away to get back to bed. As she turned her eye fell on two little envelopes, one pink, the other lilac-coloured.

"What *can* they be?" she cried, as she read the inscriptions on them.

'Miss Esther.'

'Miss Popy.'

Taking up the one addressed to her, and carefully opening it, she took out the pretty sheet with the spray of rosebuds scattered over the page. Across the rosebuds, sprawled in big letters,—

"Anna rekuests the pleasure of Miss Popy's compny to tea in the kitchun at five o'clock.

"Yours respectfly

"Anna."

The rustling of the paper had aroused Esther at last. First she opened one eye, then the other, and would have shut both again, only they happened to fall on the white parcel beside her.

"Why, it has come! The day has come! It is Poppy's birthday!" she thought. She sprang up in a moment, wide awake. "Many happy returns of the day," she cried. "Oh, Poppy, have you been out of bed long? Come into my bed and get warm. Here is something for you. Why, what have you got there?" Poppy was dancing about the room in a high state of glee, waving a letter in her hand.

"Oh, thank you, darling," she cried, seizing the parcel and hugging Esther at the same time. "And here's something for you. Won't it be fun! Isn't Anna a dear! I *do* love her. I fink I love *every* body."

"Get into bed," commanded careful Esther, and Poppy hopped into her sister's bed before she even stayed to open her first birthday present.

Esther's gift was a book, which she had bought for her little sister the last time she was at Gorley. Poppy was delighted. New books, or even old ones, came to her so seldom. She loved them with such a love as only the unspoiled child can know. While she was still crooning over it, looking at the pictures, examining the covers, patting it and loving it as though it were a living, feeling thing, the other two came flying in, all excitement. Each held in one hand a letter, in the other a small parcel.

"Many happy returns of the day. Oh, you darling!" as they caught sight of Poppy's dark head and beaming face in Esther's bed. "Just look at our letters,—oh, you have got some too? Isn't it lovely of Anna? I think she is a perfect dear." Both talked at once, and as fast as their tongues could wag. "Here's a present for you," said Penelope, laying her parcel very carefully in Poppy's lap, and kissing her on the top of her curly poll.

"Jump in too, at the bottom," said Esther; and soon all four were tightly packed into the little bed.

Poppy's fingers shook as she fumbled with the string. It was a curious-shaped parcel, and Penelope kept enjoining her to be very careful, and not to turn it over. When at last she did undo the wrappings, and the box inside, and found a tiny red flower-pot with a baby cactus in it, her joy knew no bounds.

"I am afraid you won't care for mine very much," said Angela meekly. "It is something for your room." But Poppy was equally delighted with the little blue pincushion, with her name, 'Poppy,' outlined in bright new pins. "It is stuffed with tiny, soft, beautiful feathers from our own hens," explained Angela. "I've been saving them, and Anna baked them for me."

They all agreed that it was a perfectly lovely birthday morning, one of the nicest they had ever known, and when the presents had been examined and discussed, Anna's pretty writing-paper came in for a long examination.

"I like mine best," said Esther, and all agreed they each preferred their own.

"Mine ought to have had poppies on it," said their little namesake; "but I do like roses best."

"Anna gave you the roses because the rose is the queen of flowers, and you are the queen of the day, I expect."

Then Anna came in to call them, and at the sight of the four figures in the bed immediately collapsed on to a seat by the door, and laughed and laughed until they laughed too from the infection of it.

"We'd best stop ourselves," she said presently, rising, and trying to make her face very grave. "Laugh before breakfast, cry before night, they do say; and we don't want no tears this day, do we?"

"Oh no," they all agreed, and tried very hard to draw long serious faces at once; but it was difficult on a birthday, and holiday, with the sun shining, and the birds singing, and tea in the kitchen in prospect.

When Poppy presently danced singing down to breakfast, she found by her plate another present—a pretty scarlet housewife from Cousin Charlotte, containing a little pair of scissors, a silver thimble, a case of needles, a stiletto, a bodkin, and two of the tiniest reels of silk she had ever seen. When the case was closed it looked like a dear little red hand-bag.

There was a letter, too, from Canada from father, for the mail happened to come in that very day. Such a nice letter it was—so full of love for his little daughter, and longing to see her, and all of them. "Sometimes I feel I cannot bear this exile from my little ones any longer," he wrote. "If I do run away from here and return, will you help to make a home for your old father and mother? or will you want to remain with Cousin Charlotte always? Give her my love and grateful thanks for all her kindness to my chicks."

Angela cried a little over this letter. "I don't believe father is a bit happy out there," she said. "I do wish he would come home and live here, and mother too. It would be so jolly, and I'm sure they would love it."

A little cloud of sadness rested on them for a while, but for Poppy's sake they put away all sad thoughts, and began to make all kinds of nice plans for the day, and before very long they were all as merry as grigs. Cousin Charlotte was really very pleased when she heard of Anna's invitation.

"I wish you were coming too," cried Esther, "then it would be all quite perfect,—oh, and there's Ephraim. I do think Anna ought to invite him too—don't you, Cousin Charlotte?"

"You had better ask her," said Miss Ashe with a smile. But Anna did not smile when they put the question to her. "Me ask Ephraim!" she cried indignantly. "Me ask him! No, my dears, 'tain't likely as I shall ask him to tea in my kitchen, so he needn't expect it," and she bustled away, sniffing and snorting in a perfect fury of disgust apparently. Why she should show such scorn and contempt of poor Ephraim no one could ever understand; but some very wise, sharp-eyed people had been known to say that she over-acted her contempt for all men, and Ephraim in particular, and that really—well, they even went so far as to say she had so warm a spot in her heart for him, she was always afraid some one would find it out.

But, if it was so, she acted so well that neither Ephraim nor the children ever suspected it was acting.

Having made their suggestion, and not met with the success they had expected, they turned their thoughts next to the spending of their morning. With one consent they agreed it was to be spent on the moor.

"I will wear my watch," said Esther, "and we will see how far we can get; but we will come back to 'the castle' for lunch, won't we?"

All agreed joyfully; and Miss Charlotte's permission having been obtained, Anna packed them two noble baskets of provisions, and gave them a can of milk. Poppy was loth to go away and leave her new treasures, and debated long whether she would not carry her book or her cactus with her—one would be so nice to read on the way, and the sunshine would be so good for the plant; but on the others pointing out to her that she would not be away so very long, she finally agreed to leave both in Anna's care.

"Don't you think," said Penelope, when at last, after many wanderings this way and that, they reached the castle, and she had dropped her basket and thrown herself on the ground beside it—"don't you think we might leave the baskets and can here? It will be ever so much

nicer not to have to carry them all the way, and I should think they would be quite safe if we hide them very carefully."

All agreed at once that it was a splendid idea, and quite safe, for they scarcely ever saw any one on the moor but themselves; and the baskets were heavy, and the milk was apt to slop, and it would be much nicer to go on with free hands.

"We will try a new way to-day, shall we?" cried Penelope; and they bore away to the right instead of keeping straight on up the slope, wandering hither and thither, it is true, but still bearing in the same direction, until presently they came out by the station.

A train was just coming in, and they stopped to watch it—a great delight to them always, for the coming and going of the trains was one of the greatest excitements of their lives. They never expected to see any one they knew; but the sight of the people in it, even if they did not get out, afforded them interest and food for talk, wondering where they were going, and whether they wanted to go or not, and making up all sorts of tales about them and the people they were going to. An engine is always fascinating, too.

To-day, though, was quite an unusual day. First Anne Roth got out, and then Miss Row and her guest Mr. Somerset. Anne left the platform first, and was walking briskly away when he caught sight of the children, and came up to them smiling and bowing.

"How is Mademoiselle?" asked Esther, who never forgot her inquiries.

"Not very well, m'amzelle," Anne answered sadly. "I think she is suffering, and her spirits are low. If m'amzelle could find time to come and cheer her, she would be glad, I know, and it would do her much good." He glanced at the others; but they had learned that Esther disliked any encroachment on what she considered her rights.

"Oh, yes, I will come," she answered gladly. "I will come to-morrow. I cannot to-day, for it is my little sister's birthday, and we have had an invitation to tea; but I will come to-morrow, and I will bring a book. Perhaps Mademoiselle would like to be read to."

"I am sure she would," agreed Anne. "Thank you, m'amzelle. *Bon jour*"; and with a bow which included them all, Anne hurried on.

As he went Miss Row was rapidly approaching the spot where the children stood. She looked with curious, suspicious eyes after Anne, and then at the children.

"Who is your friend?" she asked with frank curiosity..

"That is Anne Roth, Mademoiselle Leperier's man," said Esther, not without a touch of importance in tone and manner. "Mademoiselle Leperier is a friend of mine," she added. She still felt a little sore that Miss Row had passed her over for Penelope, and she was not sorry to let her know she had friends who could appreciate her.

Mr. Somerset had been teasing Poppy in the meantime, and laughing with the others.

"What a pretty name," said Miss Row, who was very curious and wanted to find out more; but she already knew enough of Esther to understand that she must not let her curiosity be apparent.

"Yes, it is," agreed Esther, by her little vanity falling easily into the trap laid for her; "and she is so pretty, too, and she had such a lovely voice once. She was a very famous singer years ago, but she never sings now—"

Then remembering, she stopped suddenly in her chatter, colouring hotly with anger with herself, and embarrassment, as she glanced round and saw all eyes fixed on her. It seemed to her that every one was listening to her indiscreet, foolish talk. Mr. Somerset had ceased playing with Poppy, and was listening with particular interest.

"Mademoiselle Leperier," he cried, drawing nearer. "You don't mean to say she is in the neighbourhood! You never told me," turning to Miss Row, "what a celebrity you had in your midst. I should so much like to meet her—quite an interesting personality. I have always wanted to know her. Don't you know her story?" And in a few brief, cold words he gave the outline of the bitter tragedy of the singer's life.

Esther chafed and boiled with anger against them, and resentment and rage with herself. She realised to the full now what she had done. She had destroyed Mademoiselle Leperier's peace and seclusion. She had laid her open to curiosity and unwelcome visitors, and—and she might even have driven her from that neighbourhood, and Mademoiselle would know it was her fault, and blame her, and never like her again.

Oh! it was bitter to think that she had done it, she who loved Mademoiselle so, and knew and understood her, who meant to have been such a comfort to her. Poor Esther was heartbroken as she realised it all. Something must be done, she determined. She must do something to undo some of the mischief. She could not let things go on like this; it was too

dreadful.

They turned to her full of inquiries. Where did Mademoiselle Leperier live? What did she look like? Who lived with her? etc. etc. Esther set her lips tight. They should get no more out of her. In the first place she could decline to tell them where Mademoiselle lived. If they determined to find out, she must find some means of preventing their going.

When Miss Row had asked three or four questions and got no answer, she began to grow annoyed. "What is the matter with you, child? Why don't you speak when you are spoken to? Don't you know how rude it is?"

"Yes, I do know," said Esther, in a very trembling voice, "and I am very sorry, but I am not going to tell any one anything more about Mademoiselle. I—I ought not to have said anything. I promised her I wouldn't. I am *very* sorry I did—"

"Dear me! dear me! how important we are!" cried Miss Row, whose temper was far from being one of the best. "Let me inform you that we all knew of Mademoiselle Leperier before you were born, and Mr. Somerset knew her personally—"

Mr. Somerset stepped forward, colouring a little. "I—I am afraid I can hardly claim that much," he said hastily. "She was so great and so sought after, and—and so exclusive, it was difficult to get to know her— unless,"—with a smirk—"one were a celebrity too."

Miss Row looked at him as crossly as she had at Esther. She hated to find herself mistaken at all.

"But I thought," he went on hastily, "I would very much like to see this celebrity of a past generation, the heroine of such a romance, in her—ah—in her retirement. Perhaps she would not be so exclusive now. A chat with her would be most interesting—such valuable 'copy.' I really must try to accomplish it. Shall we call, dear Miss Row? I am sure you and she would be mutually pleased."

Esther's feelings became too much for her. She did not know what 'copy' meant; but she felt certain that this kind of person was the very last Mademoiselle would wish to see.

"Oh, please don't," she cried anxiously. "Please, you mustn't go there. Mademoiselle herself told me she did not want any visitors, and Anne told me she came here on purpose that she might be quite quiet, because she can't see them. Please don't go. If people call she will go away— I'm sure she will. Anne says she had to move from ever so many places because people would not let her be quiet. *Please* don't let her know that I said she lived here. I did not mean to—"

"Dear me! I suppose you have the exclusive right to the lady's society— that, knowing Miss Esther Carroll, she does not require any other friends!" Miss Row's sneering, sarcastic words brought the colour to Esther's cheeks and the tears to her eyes.

"I didn't—mean—that," she stammered confusedly, bitterly hurt. "You know I didn't," then turned away hastily that they might not see how weak she was.

All this time the others had stood by listening, growing more and more indignant with Miss Row, and more and more sorry for Esther. At first they were afraid to say anything for fear they might make matters worse, but Miss Row's last speech was more than they could bear. Angela ran to Esther with blazing cheeks and flashing eyes. "Never mind, dear," she cried, putting her arms about her. "You were very brave to speak up so."

Penelope stepped nearer to Miss Row. Her cheeks were white, her eyes very bright and indignant.

"It is not fair to speak to Esther like that, Miss Row," she said reproachfully. "It was by accident she came to know Mademoiselle Leperier, and Mademoiselle *asked* her to go again, or she wouldn't have gone, for Esther knew she did not want to have strange visitors—she told her so. She said she didn't want any one to know she was living here, for she was not strong enough to have visitors, or to go anywhere. Esther ought not to have said anything about her, and she was frightened when she had; but when she had, she had to tell you— about—about not going there."

Miss Row was not in the frame of mind to be reasonable. She felt she was in the wrong, and that made her the more cross. "Well, Penelope," she said icily, "I did not expect to be spoken to like this by you, after all I have done for you, too. I did expect civility and some gratitude in return, I must confess; but I find I have been grossly mistaken in you."

Penelope started, and her face flushed crimson.

"I suppose," went on Miss Row, turning to Mr. Somerset, "I was foolish to expect it from children brought up as they were." Then turning to Penelope again—"Esther's unfortunate temper one has grown accustomed to; but you—"

Penelope hung her head for a moment, overcome with mortification; then suddenly raising it she looked fearlessly, but wistfully, into Miss Row's angry eyes. "I wish you would understand," she said earnestly. "We neither of us mean to be rude or—or ungrateful." She stammered a little over the last word. "It was only Mademoiselle we were thinking of—and—and then you were unfair to Esther, and—and I couldn't bear that."

"And I can't bear rudeness," said Miss Row, beginning to move away. Her face was very red, and her eyes ugly. "Don't come to me again this week for a lesson," she said, turning round to face Penelope once more. "I—I don't want to see you for a while. When I do I will send for you."; and Miss Row walked away very quickly, chattering volubly all the way to her companion, while Penelope stood, stunned and wounded, scarcely able to believe her own ears.

For a few seconds she remained looking after the retreating pair, then turned, walked silently for a little distance, and suddenly dropped on the old brown turf in a passion of sobs.

For a moment Poppy gazed, too entirely astonished to know what to do. She could not remember when she had last seen Penelope weep; it happened so rarely. Flinging herself on the turf beside her, she threw her arms lovingly about her. "Don't cry, darling. Oh, Pen, don't cry," she pleaded. "It doesn't matter what that horrid old Miss Row says, and we all love you. Don't cry, dear." She was too young to comprehend what was hurting Penelope most—the words that rankled, and stung; the charge of ingratitude; the taunt; the throwing up to her of favours she had received—things no lady should ever permit herself to do.

Under the lash of it all Penelope sobbed on uncontrollably. When she did weep, she did weep—a perfect storm of tears that shook and exhausted her. Poppy grew frightened at the violence of her grief. There seemed to be something more here than she could understand. "Oh, where is Essie? Essie must come," she cried, raising herself on her knees and looking about for her sisters; but Esther and Angela were at some distance, walking slowly but steadily away, apparently absorbed in talk.

Poppy sighed a big sigh which sounded almost like a sob. "My poor little birthday," she murmured wistfully, "that I fought was going to be so lovely!"

The words and the tone touched Penelope. Her sobs grew less, broke forth again, then stopped, and she struggled up into a sitting position. "Oh, you poor little Poppet," she cried. "It *is* hard on you. I *am* so sorry, dear. It is too bad that your birthday should be spoilt like this. I wish—I wish we had kept to the moor, and not come anywhere near human beings." Tears welled up into her eyes again, but she only threw up her head and tilted her nose a little higher, as though to make them run back.

"Never mind, darling. We will try to forget all about it, and enjoy ourselves."; but a sob shook her even as she spoke.

"And it began so beautifully," Poppy was murmuring. "Anna said 'Laugh before breakfast, cry before night,' and it's come true. I'll never laugh before breakfast again."

Penelope listening to her, suddenly made up her mind. It *should* be a beautiful day, after all. They would put away all unpleasant thoughts for Poppy's sake. It rested with her to be cheerful herself, and to comfort and cheer up the others. She put her arms about her baby sister and drew her closer. "Poppy dear, don't tell Esther about—Miss Row being so—nasty, and about my crying. It will only trouble her more, and I want her to forget, and we will all try to be very jolly to-day, won't we?"

Poppy nodded her head vigorously; but there was a doubtful expression on her pretty face. "She will see you've been crying," she said gravely.

"No. We will sit here facing the breeze, and that will soon make my face and eyes look all right, and—we will laugh and talk as if nothing had happened. We are going to have a really jolly day, aren't we?"

Poppy nodded again; but a second later she shook her head gravely. "I sha'n't ever forget what Anna said about laughing before breakfast," she said very seriously. "It comes true."

Side by side on the springy turf the two little figures sat, leaning against each other lovingly, waiting for the sweet breeze to take away all traces of sorrow; telling secrets the while of what they would do by and by, when they were grown-up, and trying bravely to forget their own troubles for the benefit of others.

## CHAPTER XV.

At last, finding the others did not come back to them, Poppy and Penelope got up and prepared to follow them. "I suppose they don't mean to go any farther in this direction," said Penelope. "Are my eyes all right, Poppy?"

Poppy assured her, truthfully, that no one would know she had shed a tear, and Esther and Angela, seated on a boulder waiting for them, saw no trace on either face, and suspected nothing of the storm that had come and gone since they parted.

"I am frantically hungry, aren't you?" called Penelope gaily, as they drew near.

They were all ravenous.

"Let's go back and have lunch at once," suggested Esther. "Did you get away from that horrid old thing pretty soon?"

They all understood who the 'horrid old thing' was without explanation, and none of them felt inclined to quarrel with the description.

"Oh yes, pretty soon," said Penelope, in an off-hand way, as she stooped to pick some sweet wild thyme.

"I shall never like her any more," said Angela emphatically. "She was so horrid to Esther."

"I wouldn't be taught by her for something," said Esther. "I don't envy you, Pen."

Pen felt a big sinking at her heart at the thought of her music lessons, and Miss Row's last words to her; but she made a brave effort to be cheerful. "She—she *can* be very nice," she said lamely.

"It's all very well for you to talk," said Angela, whose usually gentle spirit was greatly roused. "She didn't speak to you as she did to Esther."

Penelope gave Poppy a warning glance. "Well, she *can* be nice," she repeated, for want of something else to say. "Now come along, girls; do let's get back to 'the Castle' and have some lunch, and we'll forget all about Miss Row being so nasty. It is the Poppy's birthday, and we've *got* to think only of nice things. Now let's join hands and run down this slope."

With Poppy tightly grasped by her two eldest sisters, they flew over the ground as fast as their legs could go. Poppy, her feet scarcely touching the ground, shrieked with the greatest delight. Guard, who had been distractedly hovering between the two couples while their party was divided, barked and danced, and raced away and back again, as pleased as any of them.

They were quite exhausted before they reached 'the Castle,' and Poppy and Angela had to be allowed to sit down to recover their breath.

"I will go on and begin to get out the baskets," said Esther, "and unpack them by the time you come. You won't stay here very long, will you?"

Penelope was lying on her back gazing up at the blue sky and the swarms of tiny insects which hovered and darted between her and it. She was too comfortable to move, even to help get the lunch, so Esther and Guard went alone.

'The Castle,' the children's favourite play-place, was a group of huge boulders, like closely set rough pillars, so arranged by nature as to enclose a considerable space, like a tiny room, while outside was a kind of natural staircase leading to what they sometimes called 'upstairs,' and sometimes 'the roof,' which was formed of a large flat boulder, forming a natural roof, and keeping the interior dry and cosy save for the breezes which blew through the various openings, large and small, between the pillars.

It was in this centre, close to a pillar, and well out of sight, that the children had hidden their things; and here Esther came now, and pushing her arm through a narrow opening, groped about for the familiar baskets, and groped in vain.

"I thought we put them here," she said to herself, "but I must have come to the wrong opening." She went to another, and groped again in vain.

"Well," she said perplexed, and beginning to feel troubled, "I am certain it was in one of those. We didn't go round to the other side, I am sure we didn't. I'll go inside and look."

She went to what they called their secret entrance, and creeping in, stood up in the 'room' and looked about her. Not a basket was to be seen. The place was bare.

She scrambled out again more quickly than she had moved for a very long time. "Penelope," she shouted, "girls, quick—come—we've been—"

Then the thought suddenly came to her that perhaps the thieves were in hiding somewhere near, and were chuckling over her dismay, and she drew herself up abruptly. If a trick had been played them the perpetrators should not gloat over their discomfiture.

Guard was still sniffing eagerly about the spot when Esther walked with dignity back to the others, and, still with that fear of watching eyes on her, sat calmly down by them before she spoke; but when she did speak her tragic, mysterious voice and manner filled them all with awe and dismay.

"Girls, keep very quiet and listen to me. What *do* you think has happened! There are thieves about. They have stolen our baskets and the can—everything. There isn't a crumb left. Isn't it awful! Don't shriek or make a fuss. They may be watching us, and we won't let them see that we know, or—or care, will we?"

To the two younger ones it was an impossibility to suppress all signs. To them thieves meant robbers, bandits, a horde of savage creatures who might spring from anywhere, who, having consumed their provisions, might next run away with themselves. There were other troubles, too.

"And I am *so* hungry," cried Poppy. "I am starving. It isn't a bit like a birthday. I wish I hadn't had one."

Esther sat down by her and put her arms protectingly round her. Penelope looked fierce.

"We cannot put up with it," she cried indignantly. "It's such impertinence to take our things, such wickedness, such thievery. The children will be starved. What can we do? Where can we look? Who do you think can have done it? Come and search for them, shall we? Guard ought to be able to catch them. Perhaps some one has done it just to play us a trick."

"But suppose they are looking on and laughing," said Esther, who had a perfect horror of being made to look foolish. "And do you think it is safe? They must be horrid people, and might do anything if we found them out."

"I expect they have run away by now, if they stole the things," said wise Penelope, who could be very practical when she did come out of her dreamy state, "and they would laugh more if the baskets were only just hidden for a joke, and we went hungry because we wouldn't look for them."

Esther saw the sense of all that; but Angela repeated anxiously, "Do you think it is safe?"

"Yes, safe enough with Guard to protect us," said Penelope, rather impatiently. She was dreadfully hungry, and very disappointed and rather cross. They all got up and looked about them. Guard was at a little distance from them, sniffing excitedly about a big clump of furze and blackberry bushes.

"I believe they are there," cried Penelope.

"What, the thieves!" cried Angela, turning pale.

"Don't be silly, Angela," Penelope retorted crossly. "Can't you see you are frightening Poppy? I meant the baskets. If you are afraid, stay here, and I will go alone."

Angela looked 'squashed.' "Oh no," she stammered, "I—I will go too."

"We will all go," said Esther promptly. "Come along, children, don't let's be silly."

They went along hand in hand, trying hard to look unconcerned and brave, and succeeding fairly well. Guard, seeing them coming, ran back to them excitedly, then tore back to the bushes again, while they followed as fast as they could, peered in where he was thrusting his nose, and there, right in the middle of the furze brake, they saw the two baskets and the can, quite empty.

They were so hungry, so shocked, so disappointed, and so mortified by the trick that had been played them, they had hard work to keep back their tears. Angela and Poppy quite failed to. "I never knew such a horrid old birthday," sobbed Poppy; "and the patties looked so lovely, and the cake, and now we've got to wait till we go home."

Esther stood with the baskets in her hands, gazing at them with a troubled face. "I am glad we have these to take home with us," she said thoughtfully. "Girls, do you think we had better go straight back and tell what has happened, or—or shall we say nothing and let Cousin Charlotte and Anna think we have eaten it all up. Anna would be so awfully



disappointed to think all the meat patties and the sandwiches she had made, and all the other things, had been eaten by thieves, and—and very likely we shouldn't be allowed to come out like this any more, and that would be dreadful."

The consternation on all faces when Esther began was almost ludicrous, and, indeed, it was no light matter to contemplate hours of hunger in that hungry air; but the thought of Cousin Charlotte's and Anna's disappointment, wrath, and alarm made them think of another side of the question.

"Will it be very long?" asked Poppy, in a piteous little voice. Esther took out her watch. "Four and a half hours to tea-time, I am afraid," she said reluctantly. She could not bear to doom her sisters to such a spell of waiting, it seemed really too dreadful; and so they all thought as they groaned aloud.

"Can I go home and pretend to Anna we want more lunch, we are so hungry to-day?" suggested Penelope.

"I am sure she would think we were ill, and make us all come home at once," said Esther, laughing, "and perhaps make us go to bed. She gave us such a lot we couldn't possibly be hungry if we ate it all."

"I have a penny," said Angela. "Shall we go and buy four tea-cakes at Mrs. Vercoe's? That will be one each, and better than nothing." Better than nothing indeed! One of Mrs. Vercoe's tea-cakes seemed then the most desirable thing in the world—except two.

They were all starting off when Angela exclaimed again, "Oh, and I've thought of something else. If I could creep into the garden without being seen, and get to the fowls' house, I believe I should find an egg in Fluffikin's nest."

"One raw egg between four wouldn't be much good," said Penelope hopelessly. "It isn't worth going for."

"But I didn't mean that, I didn't mean to eat it. I meant to take it to Mrs. Vercoe's, and sell it. I dare say she would give me a penny for it, and that would buy four more tea-cakes."

The suggestion was pronounced a noble one, and hailed with joy, and in another moment they were all running in the direction of home as fast as they could go.

"I feel like a thief myself," said Angela, as she crept out of the garden again, and rejoined them, a beautiful great egg in her hand.

"I wish I knew who stole our food," said Esther, "I should feel much happier. I don't like to tell, yet I don't think it is right to say nothing about it."

It was a knotty problem, and lasted them all the time they were skirting the end of the garden and crossing the moor, until they came out close to Mrs. Vercoe's shop.

What had not occurred to any of them was that there might be any one else in the shop, and least of all that it should be any one they knew. And this was exactly what did happen.

The four of them walking quickly in at the door, as into a haven of refuge reached at last, found themselves face to face with Cousin Charlotte.

It was so unexpected that for a moment they wavered, and nearly turned and fled. Colouring hotly, and looking the picture of confusion, they could think of nothing to do or say. But Cousin Charlotte, guessing nothing, only smiled and looked amused. Their dismay escaped her. "Well, chicks," she said, "are you managing to enjoy your holiday?"

"Yes—thank you," they stammered, with as much enthusiasm as they could muster.

"That's right. Don't overtire yourselves, but have a nice day. Now I must hurry home to my meal. I expect you have had yours by this time. Ah, I see," glancing at the empty baskets, "every crumb cleared. This is wonderful air for giving one an appetite," she remarked, turning to Mrs. Vercoe, and Mrs. Vercoe agreed; but the children felt that neither of them understood that fact as they did. It was almost torture to hear Cousin Charlotte say she was going home to her meal. Their longing to join her was almost more than they could bear. They were thankful, though, that she did not ask them how they had enjoyed their lunch, and what Anna's patties were like, or anything of that sort.

"Well, good-bye, dears, for the time. You won't be late, will you? It would be wise to have a nice rest before tea-time. Don't eat a lot of sweets now, will you? After your big lunch you should reserve yourselves for Anna's big tea. She will expect you to do justice to it." Then turning to Mrs. Vercoe again to explain, "It is this young lady's birthday, and Anna has invited them to tea with her, as I, unfortunately, have to be out."

"My!" exclaimed Mrs. Vercoe, looking at them with amused interest, "that *will* be nice. Good-day, miss," as Cousin Charlotte hurried away.

On the counter stood a large tray of buns and tea-cakes—'splits' as they call them in those parts. They were new, and the smell was perfectly delicious. Mrs. Vercoe, saying, "I wishes you many returns of the day, missie," was about to take one up and present it to Poppy, when she stayed her hand. "If you've just had your dinner you'd rather have a bit of sweetie, I reckon."

"Oh no," gasped poor Poppy, in her desperation almost clutching at the tempting food. "I—I—thank you very much," she stammered. "I love plain buns. There's miffing I like so much." But when she had it she hesitated to begin to eat it; it seemed so selfish and greedy right there under those three pairs of hungry eyes. She longed to divide it, but did not like to. Esther, seeing her perplexity, came to her rescue. "Eat it, dear," she said softly, and Poppy never in her life was more glad to obey.

Angela stepped forward, colouring a little. "Please, I want four farthing tea-cakes," she said, as calmly as she could speak. She was painfully conscious of Mrs. Vercoe's look of surprise. "And—and please," she went on, growing painfully embarrassed, for it was not easy now it had come to the point, "do you want an egg, Mrs. Vercoe?"

Mrs. Vercoe looked even more surprised, but she only said civilly that she "could do with a dozen."

"I've only one at present," said Angela. "It is one my own hen laid, but you can have some more to-morrow morning."

"Very well, my dear," said amiable Mrs. Vercoe, "that will do. I'll put the one here until I get the rest. Shall I give you the money, missie, or would Miss Ashe prefer to have it in goods?"

"Oh please," said poor Angela, "this one is my own, and I should like— some more tea-cakes for it."

"Tea-cakes!" said Mrs. Vercoe in a bewildered voice. "Why, yes, my dear, of course; but—you'll excuse my asking, but—there isn't nothing the matter, is there?" she inquired confidentially, peering at them over her big glasses.

Then Esther stepped forward. "Yes, Mrs. Vercoe, there is. It's—it's nothing wrong that we've done, but you must promise not to say a word about it to anybody, please. It wouldn't have mattered *quite* so much, but now we have pretended to Cousin Charlotte that we enjoyed our lunch it would be dreadful. You will never say a word to any one, will you, Mrs. Vercoe?"

Mrs. Vercoe promised solemnly, whereupon the four tongues were unloosed, and the whole tale of the calamity and their hunger and disappointment was poured out. Mrs. Vercoe listened with the keenest interest, every now and then raising her two fat hands in amazement, then resting them again on her plump sides.

"Oh, my dears! oh, my dears!" she kept gasping. "What owdacious wickedness there do be in this world, to be sure. To think of it! Well, I never did! And if they ain't caught and punished it'll be no more nor less than a crying shame."

By the time they had finished she was leading them all into her little parlour, bent on making tea for them and preparing them a good meal; but Esther would not hear of it.

"Thank you very much," she said warmly, "but if we may have a few tea-cakes it will be quite enough. We only want something to prevent our feeling so hungry and faint and horrid till tea-time."

Mrs. Vercoe insisted, though, on their all having some milk to drink with their splits, on which she spread butter liberally, and an apple or so each to take away and munch on the moor. It was too soon to go home yet, they felt, yet their love for wandering had been somewhat dashed by the unpleasant experience of the morning. Somehow the moor did not seem the same while they felt that it held thieves too.

Guard, who had been given some biscuits and stale cake, looked up at them inquiringly, as much as to say, "Aren't we going home now?" Visions of his comfortable bed rose before him, and he felt very inclined for a noon-day nap. But the children told him he was not to go home yet, and he agreed, with his usual amiability, to follow where they led.

"I think we will go down by the river," said Esther. "It will be a change, and will seem different. It won't remind us so much of thieves."

So on they went, past Moor Cottage, where they saw through the curtains Cousin Charlotte at her solitary meal, and waved gaily to her; over the bridge and down on the fascinating river-bank where all sorts of treasures lurked, and the roots of the trees, rising out of the soft earth, formed steps and seats and balustrades and all sorts of things.

"I think we won't go so very far," said Esther, looking at her watch. "It is two o'clock

now, and I think we might go home at half-past three. Let's sit down here, shall we?"

"Shall we just go a teeny tiny way further?" pleaded Angela. "There is a beautiful place a little way further on, a dear little cosy, cubby corner where we should be shut in, and as comfy as possible. Shall we, Esther?"

Esther nodded, and on they went again. Guard, as though he knew what they had been saying, ran on in front, making for the very spot.

"He *couldn't* have understood what I said could he?" asked Angela eagerly, "but he has gone into the very place."

"And seems inclined to stay there," said Penelope. She whistled once or twice, but the usually obedient Guard did not appear.

"I wonder what he is doing?" said Angela, growing anxious at once, as she always did. "I will run on and see," and, no one stopping her, she went.

## CHAPTER XVI.

The others, scarcely noticing that she had gone, went on their way very slowly, watching the river as it swirled past, rushing by some places, at others apparently not moving. They were absorbed in sailing twigs down the stream when a flying white-faced figure dashed into their midst, chattering confusedly and almost weeping.

"Oh, what shall we do, what shall we do!" gasped Angela. "Guard found them. They are in there, dead or asleep. I don't know which. He is sniffing at their pockets. There are three of them, and he won't let them go, and it is Cousin Charlotte's cloth. I recognised it hanging out of his pocket, the one Anna wrapped the patties in—"

"*What are you talking about?*" demanded Esther, grasping Angela by the arm. "Don't be so frightened. What has happened?"

Angela tried to be calmer and more coherent. "There are three boys asleep in the very place where we were going. Guard found them. He was sniffing at their pockets when I got there, and he *wouldn't* come away, and—I believe they are the thieves that stole our lunch. One had a bit of white sticking out of his pocket, and Guard sniffed at it and pulled it out, and I am certain it is Cousin Charlotte's doyley! Oh, Esther, what shall we do? Shall we go away, or—or shall we—"

"Go away!" cried Esther, scornful and indignant. "No, indeed, except to fetch a policeman. I am going to tax them with it, and hear what they have to say. What boys are they, do you know?"

"I believe I have seen them at 'Four Winds,' but I don't know their names—but, Esther, do you think it is safe to accuse them—"

"Safe!" cried Esther scornfully. "What is there to be afraid of? If there was anything I shouldn't care. I am not going to let them get off scot-free, nasty, wicked thieves. They have spoilt our day, too, and all our fun. Let's be quick and catch them before they manage to escape."

The four turned and hurried to the spot. As they drew near they heard now and again a low growl from Guard, then voices half-whimpering, half-bullying. "Get away, get away you ugly great thing. You leave me alone."

Esther's and Penelope's eyes lightened at the scent of battle.

"Oh, don't let them hurt poor Guard!" pleaded Poppy piteously.

"No, dear, they won't hurt him. They are horribly afraid of him, really, I expect. Perhaps you had better stay here. Would you rather?"

But Poppy clung close, begging not to be left. If there was to be battle she was not going

to let her sisters face it alone.

There was not much battle left, though, in the three young scamps Guard was keeping prisoners. The sight of the big, angry-looking dog, and the knowledge that they were trapped with proofs of their guilt on them, had quenched all their spirit. Torpid after their big meal, they had fallen asleep in their hiding-place, feeling perfectly secure from detection. They had been awakened by something touching them, breathing into their faces, diving into their pockets where the remains of their feast lay hidden, and had awakened with a start to find a huge, eager, angry animal standing over them. They would have yelled but for the fear of drawing still more attention to themselves and their whereabouts.

When they heard footsteps approaching their terror increased a hundredfold, but when the owners of them turned the corner, and they found they were nothing worse than four little girls—the eldest no bigger than themselves—their relief was great, and their courage began to return. They assumed at once a superior 'don't-care' air, as though they thought it all a great joke. In their own minds they felt they could easily defy such antagonists and get the better of them; but their attitude only made Esther and Penelope more indignant with them.

"Now," said Esther severely, "you are caught. You are three thieves, and we have caught you, and it only remains for us to decide what we shall do with you. Guard, come here."

Guard obediently came to her side, but he only helped so completely to block the entrance that the boys recognised at once that they were no better off than they were before.

"You go away and leave us alone," cried the tallest of the young scamps, a boy of about fourteen. "We've got as much right here as you, and you've no right to stop us if we want to go. I'll tell the p'lice as 'ow you set your great savage dog on us. Yes, I will, see if I don't!"

Esther laughed scornfully. "I should like to see you," she said contemptuously. "You wouldn't *dare*!"

"Wouldn't I! wouldn't I dare! You just wait and see then," he went on in a bullying tone.

Penelope could keep quiet no longer. "That's easily proved," she said loftily. "I will go and get one. Constable Magor will be in the village about this time, it won't take me long to get him," and she turned away.

The boys' faces were a picture. Fear, confusion, astonishment took the place of their bragging. They still kept up a semblance of defiance, but it was very lukewarm. "No, you won't. You know you don't mean it. You needn't try to kid us. We know better."

Penelope without another word walked away. When first she spoke she had hardly intended really to get a policeman, but their taunts roused her spirit and determined her. The boys listened to her departing footsteps, and the look that came into their faces was not pretty. For a moment they looked only foolish, then their expression changed to one of bullying anger.

"Let's knock 'em down and run for it," urged one. "They don't know who we are. Tip them there things out of your pocket, Bill, so's they won't have no clue."

Esther's eyes darkened and deepened, her lips grew a little more compressed, but otherwise her expression did not change from its look of scornful disgust. Poppy clung closer. "Oh, Essie, don't let them hurt us," she whispered nervously.

Esther drew her closer and stood in front of her. "They won't hurt us, darling," she said, with calm defiance.

Angela, who all this while had been standing white to the lips and shaking uncontrollably, now suddenly pulled herself together. "If either of you dare to touch my little sister," she called out, "I'll—I'll—"

"Dear me," mimicked one boy rudely. "Will you really? What very fine people we are. Ain't we brave too! Come on, Bill," and they came towards the girls with a rush. But they had reckoned without a very important antagonist. Guard, sitting quiet, obedient, apparently unconcerned, had watched every movement. At their first step forward he was on his feet, when they made their rush he sprang towards them, knocking the first boy off his feet, and the others sprawling over him, and across the wriggling, bellowing, gasping heap he planted his big, rough body determinedly, growling fierce low growls every time they attempted to move, and even had his mistresses called to him then it is doubtful if he would have moved, so enraged was he.

But Esther did not call him. Her anger had flamed as hot as his at this attack of the bullies on Angela and little Poppy, and she felt no pity. "They shall stay there," she determined, "for the time, at any rate. We will see what will happen next."

The next thing that happened was a very meek voice coming from the prostrate trio. "Please, miss, if you'll call your dog off, we won't touch you, we won't really, honour bright!"

"Honour bright," scoffed Esther. "You have none. You don't know what honour is! I didn't know before that boys ever were such cowards."

"Please, miss, if you'll call him off and not let him hurt us, we'll promise—"

"I don't want your promises," cried Esther. "You are thieves and cowards, and I wouldn't take your word. Besides, *we* are not afraid of your touching us. Why did you steal our things?"

"Well—we found them," grumbled one of the boys. "Findings is keepings, and how was we to know they was yours?"

"You knew they were not yours, and you had no right to touch them."

"You shouldn't leave things about if you don't want them took. As like as not your dog would have had 'em if we hadn't."

"*He is honest*," said Esther scathingly, "and we are accustomed to honest people. The things were put in a safe spot, out of sight."

"Not so very safe," taunted Bill. "We found 'em easy enough." But his energy only called forth an alarming growl from Guard.

"We will find a safe spot for you, at any rate," said Esther meaningly, and the boys became thoughtful for a moment.

"Please, miss, your dog's 'urting. He's treading on my chest, and he's 'eavy," whined Bill, but Esther paid no heed. Silence reigned, broken only by the voice of the river, and the singing of the happy birds. Guard stood at his post, the three girls kept the entrance, the boys waited in increasing alarm, wondering what was going to happen. They were beginning to feel genuinely frightened.

Esther was thinking deeply. The truth was she did not know what step to take next. She did not really want to give them in charge, she did not want the affair to reach Cousin Charlotte's ears, and she did not know how to dispose of her prisoners with dignity.

At last the silence was broken by a pitiful wailing voice. "Please, miss, if you'll let us go, we'll promise never to do no such thing no more. Please, miss, we ain't thieves really; we done it for fun more'n anything, and—and now I—I wish I hadn't never seen the old things," and then the hero broke down and began to sob and call "Mawther, mawther, I want my mawther!"

Angela's anger evaporated. "I dare say he isn't really a bad boy," she whispered to Esther. "Let's forgive him, Essie."

Esther was making up her mind. "Look here, you boys," she called out at last, "if you apologise to us and say you are sorry, and will never do such a thing again, we will let you off this time. But you must tell me your names and where you live." She did not in the least know what good an apology would be, nor did the boys know what it was, but they promised readily.

"Guard, come here," commanded Esther.

Guard moved away reluctantly. He had not forgotten the sudden attack on his little mistresses. The boys sat up.

"His name is John Thomas, and his is Bill Baker, and mine's Silas Hawken," said the eldest of the three, "and we lives to Four Winds."

"Um!" said Esther sternly. "We know Four Winds and a lot of people there, so we shall hear if you don't behave yourselves, and if you don't we will tell the police about this. Now go."

With intense relief and quickening steps the boys were hurrying by them, Guard, still suspicious, following at their heels, when suddenly it was his turn to be bowled over by the enemy. With a roar of terror the three boys recoiled one on the other, and all three on top of Guard, for at the entrance stood Penelope and Constable Magor.

Angela and Poppy looked almost as frightened as the boys. They did not want them to be really taken to jail, and it seemed now as though matters were being taken out of their hands. They felt sure the culprits would be led away handcuffed. Poppy, with this in her mind, forgot everything.

"Oh, please," she cried, running to the constable, "please we have promised to forgive them. Don't take them to jail, please. They said they were sorry, and they won't ever be

naughtily again, and we let them go. Didn't we, Esther? Please don't hurt them."

Constable Magor looked at Esther, and Esther explained. The boys, looking the picture of miserable fear and shame, stood huddled together as far as possible from every one. The constable, with a knowing shake of the head to Esther, said, "All right, miss. I knows how to deal with they there young rogues." Going over to them he pushed them apart, and made them stand at equal distances from one another.

"Now you turn out your pockets, every one of them," he commanded sternly. "Right there afore me, you turn 'em out, and turn 'em out thorough, or I'll be doing it for you. Do you hear?"

They heard plainly enough, and with shaking hands turned out a collection of marbles, crumbs, sticky sweets, twine, broken patties and sandwiches, and sundry other odds and ends. One had the little doyley Angela had first recognised, another reluctantly produced a silver folding fruit-knife with 'C. Ashe' engraved on the handle. When the girls saw this they looked at each other. "Cousin Charlotte and Anna would have missed that," they whispered, "and then we should have had to tell."

The constable looked grave, too, when he saw the knife and the doyley. "This is serious," he said sternly, "and if it wasn't that the young ladies perticler asked me not to, I'd clap the handcuffs on the lot of you for it, and as like as not you'd get a week in jail, and have your jackets warmed with that there cat-o'-nine-tails you may have heard tell on. Don't you think, miss," turning to Esther with a very grave face, "as 'ow I'd better, after all?"

"Oh no—don't let him!" pleaded Poppy frantically.

Esther pretended to think deeply for a moment, debating the question; then, with great importance and dignity, "No, I think we will let them go this time, thank you," she said, "though when I gave them my promise I didn't know they were going away with stolen things in their pockets. I gave them my promise, and I'll keep it, but,"—very severely—"it is more than they deserve."

"That it is," said Constable Magor emphatically; "and if they don't look after their ways they'll taste that 'cat' yet. Do you hear, you young scamps? Let this be a lesson to you, and thank your stars you've got such kind-hearted young ladies to deal with, or I wouldn't say what would have happened to you by now! Now go. Right about face, quick march, and don't you let me have no more complaints of you, or I'll know how to act. You won't have a second such chance. Do you hear? Now go!"

They did not need a second bidding, but dashed out of the place as though they feared if they lingered their chance would be gone, and soon even their stumbling, scrambling footsteps could no longer be heard.

Then the policeman took his leave too, and the four were left looking at each other. The scene had tried their nerves and their courage more than they realised; they felt suddenly very tired and very depressed. Poppy began to sob from sheer weariness. The others felt as though they would like to follow suit, but pride forbade them. The moor and the river and the day seemed suddenly to have grown chilly and gloomy and sad.

"I think we will go home," said Esther. "Shall we?"

They all agreed, with something like relief in their voices. Poppy's sobs ceased. "It doesn't seem a bit like a burfday, does it, Essie? Oh, I am *so* tired."

Esther bent down and kissed her and picked her up in her arms. She herself was tired, and Poppy was a heavy load for fourteen-year-old Esther; but she loved her baby sister so dearly she could not bear to see her sad and weary. "Put your arms round my neck and hold tight, and we will soon get home, and you shall rest a little; and then we will have tea, and all the rest of the day shall be one of the beautifullest you ever had. We will play games, 'Hot and Cold,' 'Pepper, Salt, and Mustard,' and all the ones you like best, and we will have a lovely time, won't we?"

Poppy nodded the weary little head resting on her sister's shoulder. "Yes," she agreed gladly, comforted greatly by Esther's tone. Esther herself did not feel at all inclined for games or jollity, or anything of the sort, but the mere pretending helped her. Penelope and Angela strolled on ahead, linked arm in arm. Guard trotted along slowly between the two couples, as though determined to be prepared for any more attacks, and so they reached home again at last, and thankfully they made their way to their comfortable bedrooms to prepare for the next event of that exciting day.

"I do hope," said Esther, as she slowly mounted the stairs, "that we don't have another angry word with any one all the rest of the day. It seems to have been nothing but quarrelling, so far."

"Laugh before breakfast, cry before night," murmured Poppy in a very weary voice; but when Esther had given her a nice warm bath, and tucked her away in her little bed for a

rest, her spirits had recovered. "She didn't say 'keep on crying,' did she, Essie? So perhaps I have cried enough, and it's all over. Oh my! what lovely things Anna must be cooking," sniffing in the savoury odours which were finding their way from the kitchen. "I wonder what they are. *I* am going to have some of *everything*, because it's my birthday," and then the little heroine of the day dropped off into a dreamless sleep, while Esther turned over their scanty stock of clothing to try to find something worthy of the occasion.

When Poppy awoke the scent of hot jams and spicy cakes, and all sorts of other good things, was stronger than ever, reminding her, the moment she opened her eyes, what day it was, and what was before her. She jumped up in bed with a start. "Oh, I haven't slept too long, have I? Esther, is it very late? Do help me to dress quick!"

"It is all right," said Esther, in a calm, reassuring tone. "I am ready, and now I can attend to you. It is only four o'clock. There is plenty of time. I wouldn't have let you sleep too long, dear."

"But supposing you had slept too, and we had all slept!" Poppy's eyes grew very large and round at the mere thought of so dreadful a possibility.

"Oh my!" said Esther calmly, as she put the last finishing touches to her hair, "wouldn't it have been dreadful! Don't let's think about it."

Esther had put on her best frock and an old muslin fichu about her shoulders. The fichu was one her mother had thrown away long ago, and Esther had rescued. It was old, but it looked quite pretty and picturesque over her plain red frock. Poppy was better off than the others. She owned a little soft, white silk frock, which still looked festive and partyfied, in spite of frequent washings and not too careful ironings. Her pretty dark hair Esther tied with her own best rose-pink hair-ribbon. "Now if I had only got a sash for you, dear, your frock would look lovely."

"Never mind," said Poppy cheerfully. "I will wear my locket." From her jewel-case, as she called it, she took carefully a thread-like gold chain and a tiny old-fashioned gold locket; it had an anchor on one side and held two photographs. Poppy did not know whose photographs they were, and no one had ever been able to tell her, but she would not have had them removed for any consideration whatever. The other contents of her jewel-case were a large green malachite brooch in the shape of a Maltese cross, a tiny silver pig, and a broken gold safety-pin; but no child ever possessed treasures more greatly prized.

Before the toilette was complete Penelope and Angela came in, looking very neat and nice, and then an anxious consultation was held as to whether they ought to go down or wait until the bell rang. They compromised by going half-way and sitting on the stairs. The last few minutes did seem very long, for they were ravenous again by that time; but so prompt was Anna that before the clock began to strike the hour she came to the kitchen door, and had just begun to make a terrific clanging with the bell when they ran through from the inner hall.

"Well! 'tis a compliment, sure enough," she said, with a beaming smile, "when folks comes and waits outside for the doors to open. Come along in then, my dears. 'Tis all ready."

Anna was in her best frock with her Band of Hope scarf on, and looked flushed and pleased, and no wonder, for the kitchen looked beautiful. It was decorated with no fewer than twenty nosegays of flowers, arranged on the dressers and mantelpiece and every available space in jugs and pots and vases of every description; while on the table were bread and butter, 'splits' spread with jam and cream, seed-cakes, currant-cakes, an apple tart covered with cream, on a plate, and *the* birthday cake. Oh! how good it all smelt and looked.

Anna took her seat at the head of the table before the tea-tray, with the heroine of the day on her right hand and Esther on her left.

"I hope you've all got good appetites," she said, as she handed them their cups.

"Oh yes," they said meekly, but thought, as they looked at each other, it was as well Anna did not know how good, and why.

"You look tired, I think," she went on. "You've been out too long, perhaps; but your tea will refreshen you."

Esther thought if Anna only knew all they had been through since she saw them last she would not wonder at their looking tired. She did long to pour out all their adventures to her. She would have been so interested and sympathetic, and it would have been such a relief to have talked it all over with some one older than themselves, and thus have thrown off the fear of a chance word or hint escaping one or the other of them. Once or twice the tale almost got beyond the tip of her tongue; but she thought of the curtailed freedom which might follow, so held her peace.

The others were, for a time, completely absorbed by the meal. Never greater compliment

was paid to any feast. Very soon there was not a dish on the table but what showed gaps. The 'splits' vanished in no time; the apple tart looked quite shabby. Anna was kept quite busy helping them to one thing after another. At first she fairly beamed with delight; but by and by she began to look a little perplexed.

"I suppose it *is* a long time since you had your lunches," she said reflectively, "and the air do give one a appetite. P'r'aps you hadn't better have any more tart, Miss Poppy, dear. Hadn't you better try a bit of plain bread and butter?" She did not like to say much, but she really began to grow quite troubled at the size of their appetites.

Before they had finished their tea Ephraim came to the door. He had tidied for the evening, but had come back with a message for Miss Charlotte.

"Oh, *do* ask him in," pleaded Poppy earnestly. "Anna, do. It would seem so unkind to let him see us having such a *lovely* tea and not offer him any."

"I shouldn't think he'd want any," said Anna, with seeming reluctance; but she called out to him, "Come inside, Ephraim, and close that door. You'm keeping the young ladies in a draught. Miss Poppy wants to know if you can stay and have some of her birthday tea. You'm welcome to if you can."

Ephraim seemed able, and even glad, to stay. "I wanted to see Miss Poppy," he said. "I've got something for her, as that there furrin chap down to Edless was bringing along. I met un at the gate and told un I'd take it in for him as I was coming in," and he laid a neat white parcel on the table beside the astonished little maid.

"For me!" she cried, looking all round the table, wide-eyed with excitement. "Are you *sure* it's for me, Ephraim?" she asked, as she began to undo the pretty ribbons which tied the parcel—rose-colour ribbons like that in her hair. The excitement of all very nearly equalled hers, and when she lifted out of the soft white paper a beautiful silk-fringed sash of the same shade, they all shrieked with joy.

"The very, very, very thing I was wanting for you just now!" cried Esther. "Oh, how lovely! It is from Mademoiselle. How kind and beautiful of her."

Poppy handed the sash round for inspection, while she read the little note enclosed.

"It is not poppy-colour, but will my dear little market-woman accept it from a grateful customer with much love and every good wish for many happy returns of the day?"

Their excitement was so great they could not eat another mouthful, somewhat to Anna's relief, for she had really grown quite anxious lest they should make themselves ill.

Ephraim's appetite almost rivalled theirs, but at last even he had done, the table was cleared, and space made for games to begin. It was then that Ephraim came out in a new and unexpected light, for if any one had told Anna or the children that he could be a leading spirit in games and jokes, and riddles and such-like, they would have refused to believe it; but he proved it beyond all doubt or denial, for the next hour or two flew by with shrieks of laughter and endless fun, and Ephraim was the leader of it all.

"Anna," said Poppy, as she was being put to bed that night, "don't you like Ephraim now better than you did?"

Anna refused to own to any such weakness, but she blushed a little as she denied it.

"P'r'aps," said Angela, in a half-absent way as she brushed out her hair in Poppy's room, "p'r'aps Anna likes him so much already she can't like him better if she tries"; and Anna blushed as though Angela's chance shot had reached home.

## CHAPTER XVII.

To Penelope the weeks that followed the great day were very sorrowful ones. Miss Row apparently could not forgive her. Day after day she waited, hoping for a message bidding her come to renew her lessons; but no message came, and Penelope grew sick with



disappointment and grief that she should have given such offence to her good friend. She went to Cousin Charlotte about it—she had told her at once the story of how they had given offence—but Cousin Charlotte only shook her head.

"I think you cannot do anything, dear, but go and apologise if you feel you spoke rudely; but—well, to tell you the truth, Penelope, Miss Row has a most unfortunate temper. She was born with it, and she was never taught to check it, and now it is too late. I tell you this as a warning, child."

Penelope did go to Cold Harbour to apologise. She thought she would feel happier if she did; but there she only met with another blow. Miss Row had gone away, and no one knew when she would come back. Returning more dejected than ever, she looked in at the church on her way home. If she could have practised a little it would have comforted her, but the organ was locked. Miss Row had probably left the key with some one, but Penelope felt she could not ask for it, as Miss Row had not said anything to her about it; so everything seemed at a standstill and full of gloom.

Esther, meantime, was spending what were perhaps the happiest weeks she had ever known. She went to Mademoiselle Leperier three times a week to sit with her and read to her and do little things she needed done, and in return Mademoiselle gave her lessons and talked to her in French, so that very soon Esther began to feel she was becoming quite proficient in the language. So the visits were a double and a treble joy to her. She loved to be with Mademoiselle in the dear little brown house where all was so quiet and peaceful, and nothing rubbed her the wrong way; or to stroll about the moor together. She loved to learn, and, perhaps best of all, she loved to be of use and feel she was some help. Such pleasant walks they had, and such long talks as they strolled slowly about, or sat in the sunny sweet garden, looking over the great empty space where nature dwelt alone, or in the cosy little parlour, fragrant always with the scent of flowers and the pot-pourri with which the old blue bowls and teapots were filled. One of Esther's self-appointed duties was to keep the vases always fresh and sweet.

The days were very full and happy now for Esther. She had quite a number of duties at Moor Cottage, duties that were now left entirely to her, and for which she was held responsible. She worked hard at her studies with Cousin Charlotte, and she was still to some extent 'little mother' to Poppy, so her mind and her time were very much occupied. This perhaps made her a little blind to Penelope's distress, yet poor Penelope's distress was very complete and apparent, for Miss Row had been away for months, and never once in all that time had she sent a word to her little pupil. The truth was she was so absorbed, as was her habit, in the people and things she was amongst that she quite forgot all else.

It was Angela who felt most distressed by Penelope's trouble, and most sympathetic; and Angela it was who, on one of her rare visits to Edless, told the tale to Mademoiselle Leperier.

"Poor child, poor child," sighed Mademoiselle sympathetically, and asked many questions until she drew from Angela all details, even to what Mr. Somerset had said about her voice. "Ah!" she said. "It ought not to be neglected, it ought not to be neglected. It will soon be too late."

She said no more then; but when Angela and Esther were leaving she sent a message to Penelope. "Tell her to come to me to-morrow. We may be able perhaps to do something that will fill up the waiting time."

Angela returned home in a high state of joy, which was scarcely damped by Esther's silence during the first part of their walk, or her vexed remark, "I do think you should know better than pour out all the family troubles to Mademoiselle. I wonder you didn't ask her to teach—" but she stopped before she finished what she had been going to say. "You three never go there but what you make me wish you hadn't."

"But I haven't done anything, Esther. Mademoiselle asked how Pen was, and when I told her she was very unhappy about something she asked me why, and what it was, and I had to tell her; and then she just asked me all about it, and I—I told her. I couldn't help it—could I? I couldn't say I wouldn't."

"Penelope isn't very unhappy, nothing to make such a fuss about," grumbled Esther. "When I am unhappy no one takes any notice of me. I don't see anything wrong with her."

"Oh, don't you? I do. She is always so quiet, not like she used to be. She frets so about having vexed Miss Row, and not going on with her music."

"If Miss Row had acted so to me I should have too much pride to grieve. Why doesn't Penelope ask Mr. Jeffry to lend her the key of the organ? He would in a moment."

"She won't because she feels Miss Row did not mean her to have it."

"That is nonsense," retorted Esther. "She can't want it so very much if she won't take the trouble to speak to Mr. Jeffry. After all, it is not Miss Row's organ."

"Pen does want it *very* much," said Angela gently.

"I never did like Miss Row," Esther went on, still in her most disagreeable mood. "I could see she had a horrid temper. If Pen lets herself be taken up and made a lot of she must expect what she gets."

"But Miss Row didn't make more of Penelope than Mademoiselle has of you," urged Angela, always ready to defend her adored Penelope, "and you would feel it if Mademoiselle acted so to you."

"Oh, Mademoiselle is quite different from Miss Row," said Esther loftily. She did not admit even to herself that much of the charming difference lay in the fact that she had singled out her, Esther, from her sisters.

She underwent some change of opinion, though, when, a few days later, Penelope came dancing down the road from Edless beside herself, almost, with happiness. "Oh, Cousin Charlotte!" she cried as she rushed into the house. "Oh, Cousin Charlotte! oh, girls! Mademoiselle has been talking to me. She *is* so kind! What *do* you think? She actually says she will give me lessons in singing if Cousin Charlotte will permit her. She says she would *like* to. Isn't it lovely! splendid! beautiful! Cousin Charlotte, you will, won't you? I *do* want to learn, and this is such a splendid chance. Isn't it wonderful how the very things one wants most come to one! I never dreamed of such a lovely thing as this."

Esther got up and walked away without speaking a word. Cousin Charlotte, who had seen her face, looked after her sadly, and sighed a little as she watched her go. Then she turned to Penelope. "Yes, dear, certainly. It is a wonderful opportunity for you here in this out-of-the-way spot, and I could not deny it to you. I am most grateful to Mademoiselle for her thoughtful kindness. I must call on her," Miss Charlotte added a moment later, "whether she likes it or not. I must thank her for her goodness to all my chicks."

"Oh, she *will* be glad," cried Penelope, flinging her arms about Miss Ashe's neck, and kissing the soft old cheek. "She will love you, Cousin Charlotte, I know she will. She can't help it. Now I am going out to think about it all. Oh, I *am* so happy. Thank you ever so much, Cousin Charlotte," and she kissed her impetuously again.

"You are easily made happy, my Penelope," said the little lady with a sigh, as she put her arm around Penelope's shoulders and gave her a little squeeze; and she sighed again as she thought of her Esther, and the expression on her face. "I had that same sort of temper once," she said to herself, "so I ought to understand her, and help her through; but oh, I pray she may be spared the sorrow I had to bear, and the bitterness of such regrets."

But whatever Esther felt she said nothing. She never once spoke to Penelope, then or later, of her singing lessons, or mentioned the subject to any one, and when Penelope returned from her lessons, full of talk of what had been seen and done and said, Esther might have been dumb and deaf for all the share she took in the conversation. But she carefully avoided Edless on those days; in fact she rarely went to the cottage at all from the time Mademoiselle made her kind offer to Penelope.

No one knew it, though, for she went off as usual three times a week in the direction of Edless; but usually she turned aside when she got out of sight, and wandered on the moor hour after hour, lonely and most unhappy, breaking her heart for neglecting her beloved Mademoiselle, yet such a victim to her temper that she could not conquer it. Often and often she threw herself on the turf in a passion of tears, angry, wretched, ashamed. More than once, in a better mood, she determined not to be so weak and contemptible, but to be nobler and braver, and truer to her aims. She hoped Mademoiselle did not notice anything and understand. But how could Mademoiselle help noticing? She saw and grieved; and in part she understood, but she said nothing. She knew that time alone could set things right. Esther must learn by experience. But how that lesson was to come, or how bitter was to be the experience, she little dreamed until the dreadful day I am going to tell you of.

To begin with it seemed like any other day. Penelope had to go to Edless, for it was one of her singing-lesson days, and Esther, jealous, angry, wretched, had watched her start, envying her and full of wrath. She herself had not been to Edless for a fortnight, and she had lately felt shy about going again after such a long neglect. She wondered what Mademoiselle was thinking of her. She was hurt that no message was sent by Penelope, yet relieved that Mademoiselle was keeping her secret; she often dreaded what Cousin Charlotte would think of her if she should discover her deceit, for she had often and often gone out pretending she was bound for Edless, and had even said, in answer to her inquiries for Mademoiselle, that she was 'about the same,' or something to that effect, though she really had no knowledge at all, and the deception made her conduct trebly bad. She was angry that all this misery should have come and spoilt her happy life, jealous that Penelope should be able to go off with such an honest, light heart and smiling face; and blamed every one but herself.

Before Penelope was more than out of sight, on this particular tragic day, Cousin Charlotte came into Esther's bedroom, looking alarmed and bothered.

"Esther dear," she said, "I wish you would go to Edless to-day and home again with Penelope, and take Guard with you. If you are quick you can overtake her. She has gone quite alone, and I am anxious. Ephraim told Anna that a lot of the cattle have wandered to this part of the moor, and are in a very wild state. I shall be afraid for you children to go on the moor at all if they stay in this neighbourhood. I wish Anna had spoken about it before Penelope started; I would have sent Ephraim with her or not have let her go. Do you mind going, dear?"

"Oh no," said Esther, but very coldly.

"You will be quite safe with Guard, even if they do come near. He will drive the creatures off," said Cousin Charlotte, thinking Esther was nervous. "Penelope ought to have taken him. I should not have been anxious about her if she had."

But Esther had none of that sort of fear. "Oh, I am not afraid," she said more heartily, and went away to put on her hat. But when she was actually on her way to Edless she felt she could not go there; she could not obey Miss Charlotte and hurry after Penelope until she overtook her, and then escort her to the very door. In those days she could rarely bring herself to talk to Penelope at all, so far had her feelings got the mastery over her, and so deeply did her grievance rankle; and the farther she went the less able did she feel to do so now.

"If I keep her in sight it will be all right," she said, with sudden inspiration; and so they went all the way, the unconscious Penelope walking on in front, Esther behind dodging and hiding and loitering so that Penelope might not see her, until at last she knew the cottage was almost reached, and stopped altogether.

She had had to lead Guard all the way, for he, catching sight of another of his mistresses before him, was full of eagerness to tear on and greet her; but Penelope, still quite ignorant of what was behind her, reached the cottage safely, knocked, and was admitted. Esther, from her hiding-place behind a rock, saw the door opened by Laura, Anne's smiling wife, and closed again, and resentment against her sister grew hotter than ever.

"She gets everything," she muttered, "and if I have a friend or a chance she takes them away; but she doesn't share hers with me." She had told herself all this so often she really believed it by this time. Poor Esther! poor unhappy Esther! Guard sat by her watching her with wistful, wondering eyes. He felt that something was wrong, poor old doggie.

She seated herself behind the rock to await Penelope's return. It would be no use to conceal her presence any longer, for Cousin Charlotte would certainly speak of it; so she must join Penelope on the way home, and make some sort of explanation. That, though, would be nothing compared with the mortification of having to go into the cottage with her.

Esther in her nook, cut off from every view but the moor in the direction from which she had just come, sat and dreamed troubled dreams, and brooded over her grievances, but never once gave a thought to the danger she had been sent to protect Penelope from. And all the time that danger was drawing nearer and nearer.

In the distance, just over the horizon behind her, on her left, there appeared a shaggy brown form, followed closely by another and another and another until a whole herd was descending the slope towards her, sniffing the air and the strange ground, cropping the turf a little here and there, or gazing about them with curiosity. Closer and closer they came, the soft turf deadening the noise of their coming.

"It must be nearly time for her to come out," said Esther at last, taking out her watch. Guard, at the sound of her voice, rose on his long legs and, stretching himself, wandered away a little. The foremost of the shaggy brown creatures looked up sharply, looked again, suspiciously, at this other occupant of this strange land who had so unexpectedly appeared, and his eyes wore a new glint as he stood and watched with increasing fear or suspicion, or both. Then he took a pace nearer, and another, followed by the others, all staring now at Guard, tossing their heads ominously, and pawing the ground as they sniffed the air.

And just at that unfortunate moment Penelope came around the bend, dancing along light-heartedly, singing to herself the exercise she had just been learning. Guard, looking about him eagerly, recognised her at once, and with a yelp of joy dashed towards her.

Esther was not alarmed at his outcry. She guessed the cause of it, and rising with feigned indifference went out from her shelter to meet her sister. With cold, hard eyes and unsmiling face she looked towards Penelope, framing the while her explanation of her presence there—only to see that explanation had come too late.

The cattle, roused to anger by Guard's sudden bark and spring, were coming down on him in a body, their pace growing faster, their anger increasing with every step. In charging him they must inevitably charge Penelope too. There was no escape for her, unless Guard ran away from her, drawing the enemy off; but that, of course, he was not likely to do, he was too pleased at seeing her again.

Esther saw and realised all at a glance, and the horror of it struck her dumb. Once, twice, three times she tried to call. If she could only get Guard away the cattle would follow him; but no voice came. She grew desperate, mad with fear for her sister. Oh, if she could but get them to come towards her and leave Pen. She tried to whistle, but her lips trembled too much. She tried to shriek and failed, and when at last she succeeded, the weak, strained voice could hardly be recognised as hers. But Guard heard it. "Guard, Guard, come here!" she called, running a little to draw him after her. The obedient old dog turned, saw the enemy, and, all his fury aroused by the danger, charged them like a hurricane.

But what was one amongst so many! They overwhelmed him, were on him, closed around him, and around Penelope too.

Esther saw it—saw her sister fall, saw the big beasts trampling over her, and Guard in their midst barking, snarling, flying at their noses, dodging away from their horns, and punishing them so severely that in spite of their numbers the poor brutes gave up the game at last, worsted, and tore away over the moor in the direction whence they had come, as though they had a pack behind them.

When Anne Roth came panting up a moment later, having seen the cattle disappearing and been filled with alarm lest Penelope should have been frightened by them, he found the two sisters unconscious on the ground, with their poor protector lying bleeding and exhausted between them, and whining piteously as he licked his bleeding wounds.

Here was a sight for one man in a lonely spot! For a moment Anne was bewildered; then, picking up Penelope, who he saw was the most injured, he carried her with all the speed he could back to his own house. But he was full of a double dread, for to the most casual eye it was plain that the child was seriously injured, and the sight of her, bruised, bleeding, and unconscious could not but be a shock to his mistress.

But Mademoiselle bore the shock well. "Let me attend to her while you and Laura go to poor Miss Esther and the dear dog," she said promptly; and Penelope was taken up to her own room, where she undressed her and got her to bed, and bathed her cuts, while they went out and brought in the other two.

Esther was in a swoon, but quite uninjured, so they laid her on the couch in the little sitting-room and administered restoratives, while Guard was taken to the kitchen to have his wounds bathed and dressed, and Anne hurried off for a doctor and Miss Ashe, for Penelope's injuries were far too serious for home dressing. She was bleeding so profusely from the cuts on her head that there was real cause for alarm; her arm was broken, and her collar-bone, too, they feared, while her poor body was bruised and crushed all over.

When Esther came back to consciousness twilight had fallen. She looked about her for a moment in the dimness, bewildered and incredulous. That she was in the dear familiar room she loved so well, she felt sure, yet how came she there? and what had happened? She lay still for a moment, wondering; then, her head growing confused, she raised herself a little and looked again. This time she recognised a figure seated by the window, but so quiet and drooping she scarcely seemed alive.

For a second or so Esther gazed in sheer bewilderment, then raising herself still more, she whispered, half-alarmed, half-questioning, "Mademoiselle, is that you?"

Mademoiselle rose at once. "Are you better, darling?" she said, bending over and laying a soft hand on her head. Esther noticed that she spoke in a strange, hushed voice.

"Are you ill, Mademoiselle?" she asked anxiously.

"No, darling. I am well, but—" she paused, as though listening, and then for the first time Esther noticed the sounds of strange voices and many footsteps overhead, and with the same, memory returned.

"Penelope!" she cried frantically. "Oh, Penelope! where is she? Is she—is she—oh,"—burying her face in her hands as memory returned to her—"I thought she was killed—I saw her—under their hoofs. I saw them trampling on her—is she—killed?" in a hushed, gasping voice.

Mademoiselle laid a soothing hand on her. "No, dear, she is alive and safe. She is badly injured, but she will recover, please God. The doctor is with her now, and Miss Ashe, so I came down to see my poor Esther. My child, we have much to be thankful for that things are not worse. It might have been—"

"Oh, Mademoiselle, Mademoiselle," cried Esther, "I can never tell you how bad I have been—" but she found herself clasped in a warm embrace that told of pity and love and sympathy unbounded. Mademoiselle asked no questions, but the whole story had to be told. Esther knew she would know no rest until she had unburdened her heart and humbled herself, and was possessed by a feeling that if she did not do it then she might never again be able to. And Mademoiselle, with complete understanding, let her talk.

"I saw her fall. I heard her scream. She tried to get up, but was knocked down again. She called 'Esther, Esther,' but I couldn't help her—and I thought she was being killed. Oh, Mademoiselle, I shall never be able to forget it—never, never, never!" and Esther clung to her, shaken with terror and the shock of all she had gone through.

"Darling, you must try not to dwell upon it. You must try to be strong and brave, and get well, for Penelope will need you, and Angela and Poppy will need you—and Guard—"

"Oh! Guard?" gasped Esther, afraid to ask the question which filled her mind.

"Do you think you can bear to see him? He will be so much happier if he may be with you."

"Then he is—all right?" breathlessly.

"No, darling, not all right. He has come out of the battle alive, which is more than one could have dared to hope; but he is badly injured. You will not be shocked by the sight of bandages, will you? Guard looks a poor old battered warrior at present, but we hope he will soon recover."

A battered warrior indeed did he look as he came creeping, limping in, his head bound up in bandages, one leg in a splint, and bandages about his body and chest where big gashes had been stitched and strapped up. His pain was so great he could scarcely drag himself in, but he crept forward, wagging his tail bravely; and when Esther laughed a little weak, almost tearful laugh, at the sight of his long nose coming out of his 'nightcap,' as she called it, he smiled and wagged his tail again, and tried to raise himself to kiss her.

The other victim Esther did not see until the next day, for Penelope was too ill to bear anything more that night, and when Esther went into the sickroom the next day she could hardly recognise her bonnie, smiling sister in the pale, bandaged face on the pillow, so drawn with pain, so dark about the eyes, so wan and changed in even that short time.

She was too weak and exhausted even then to speak much, but the old smile flickered for a moment in her tired eyes, and the sound arm was stretched out to creep around Esther's neck.

"I am all—all right," she whispered. "I shall be well—soon. It isn't— so very—bad, now."

"Pen," Esther whispered back in an agony, "oh, Pen, you don't know all, but—I'll never, never—"

Penelope put up her lips to be kissed. "Never—mind," she whispered faintly. "Nothing shall—ever—come between us—again, shall it, dear?"

"Never," said Esther decisively, "if I can help it." And she honestly tried to keep her word.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

It often happens that a big shock which pulls us up with a sharp jerk on the road we are travelling will show us the danger of the way before us, and teach us to walk warily all our days. So it was with Esther. The shock and horror, and the awful fear she endured that afternoon, showed her, as nothing else could, the way she was going. I do not for a moment mean to say that she conquered her unfortunate temper all at once, and became perfectly good and gentle and free from all jealousy from that moment. That would have been impossible to any one, certainly to a child of such strong feelings, so reserved and sensitive, so full of failings as Esther. But she did try, and if she failed she did her best to conquer next time, and only those who have tried too know how hard that is.

Others helped her a little without her knowledge. Penelope tried to restrain herself in a half unconscious habit she had got into of putting herself before her shy elder sister.

Mademoiselle was careful, too, to show her how much she valued her, and to try not to wound her sensitive, loving heart; so was Cousin Charlotte. And Esther, on her part, taught

herself the lesson that one person can love two without loving either the less.

So when Penelope was at last able to creep about again, and Guard seemed as hale and hearty as ever, a new era of peace and happiness dawned for Moor Cottage, and never could there have been a happier, busier, more united little household than that was.

The summer went by like a golden flash, so it seemed to the children, so full was every day of work and play, picnics, lessons, walks, gardening, and a dozen other occupations. No matter what the weather, or how busy she was, Esther never failed to go to Mademoiselle Leperier's three times a week, and twice a week Penelope went for her singing lesson. Penelope was having French lessons of Mademoiselle too, and she and Esther studied together.

Miss Row came back from her journeyings, and, entirely oblivious apparently of all that had passed, sent for Penelope to recommence her organ lessons, and was quite annoyed that she had not kept up her practising. But at this Miss Ashe's gentle spirit rose, and she talked to Miss Row so frankly and seriously that that eccentric lady became very repentant, and to make up for her unkindness promised Penelope the post of organist, at a salary of twenty-five pounds a year, as soon as ever she was capable of filling it.

To Penelope this was success indeed, and as soon as her arm was strong enough to bear it she practised with an assiduity which promised that the time was not so very far distant when she would be fitted to take over her appointment.

Angela, before that summer was over, acquired three more chicks and a fowls' house of her own, and already saw visions of herself presiding over a farm—which should adjoin Moor Cottage—well stocked with fowls and ducks, geese and turkeys, cows and pigs, horses and dogs.

"And I shall write out to daddy and mother to come home," she would say triumphantly. For Angela never grew reconciled to the thought of her parents' exile. "It must be so sad and lonely and uncomfortable out there," she would say. "Mother might find it dull here, but she would have lots of books to read, and that would make her happy."

"I should live wiv you, shouldn't I, Angela?" Poppy inquired eagerly.

"Oh yes, we should all live together."

"But what about Cousin Charlotte? I am sure she would be *very* unhappy wivout us; so would Anna." Poppy found matters very difficult of arrangement, owing to her incapacity to live in two places at the same time. "I shouldn't like to leave Cousin Charlotte and Anna and Guard and Ephraim."

"I should stay with Cousin Charlotte," said Esther one day, when the matter was under discussion. "You see, there would be so many of you, you wouldn't want me, but Cousin Charlotte would, and we should be next door, so it would be almost the same."

But all these premature plans were thrown that autumn into confusion by a letter from Canada. Instead of waiting to be sent for by his prosperous daughters Mr. Carroll wrote to say he had made up his mind to come.

"Your cousin cannot reconcile herself to the life here," he wrote, "and says she can never be happy here; and as I am not doing well enough to warrant me in staying on in spite of her objections, I am thinking of selling out and coming home with her very soon. For the time, to give me an opportunity to look about me, I can think of no better plan than to come near you, my dear cousin, if a small house can be found for us. I cannot describe to you my longing to see my children again, nor with what pleasure I am filled at the prospect of coming home, even though I have to write myself down a failure here."

Then he went on to thank her in most grateful and feeling terms for her goodness to his children, terms which drew tears from the gentle little lady's eyes and set her to wondering what she could do really to help this almost unknown cousin and his children.

When she told the children the news their excitement was great; but when, a week later, came another letter, asking, if there was a cottage at Dorsham or close by to be found, that it should be taken for them, if it would possibly do, their excitement grew intense.

"Oh, if only I had my farm!" cried Angela, and she went out and looked at the ground, as though expecting the foundations might have already begun to show.

But no cottage was to be found next door or in Dorsham. There were not very many all told, and those there were were always full, so that if one family wanted to change they had to wait until another was in the same mind, and then just walk in to each other's houses. But up at Four Winds there was a square, sturdy cottage built expressly, one would think, to defy those winds that blew over the village. It was the only one, but all the four girls agreed that it would be just the very thing. It had a sitting-room and kitchen and scullery and three bedrooms, tiny rooms all of them, but to the children it was one of the most fascinating little

places ever built; and when stocked with the simple furniture Miss Charlotte had had instructions to purchase it really did look a dear, cosy little house.

And such it seemed to the weary travellers when they arrived, the father tired, disappointed with his last attempt, and bowed under a burden of care, but so glad to see his children again that nothing else seemed to matter. Such it seemed, too, to the mother, so disgusted with the roughness and want of comforts in the life she had been leading lately that everything seemed luxurious and replete with comfort.

Cousin Charlotte and the girls had certainly done their best to make the place look homelike, and Anna had helped to clean it from top to bottom, to lay carpets, hang curtains, and polish everything that could be polished, so that it really was in a perfect state of order and cleanliness.

It was in the spring that the travellers finally reached Four Winds, just when the brooks were beginning to run with a cheerful note, and the scent of wet moss and primroses to fill the air.

As they drove from the station on the memorable day of their arrival Mr. Carroll drew in the sweet fresh breeze as though it were the breath of life to him, and almost shouted with pleasure at the sight of the catkins on the nut-bushes, and the 'goslings' on the willows, and the yellowhammers and thrushes hopping in the hedges.

They got down for a moment at Moor Cottage to see the children's home, and be introduced to Anna and Guard.

"You noble old fellow, you saved my girls' lives," said Mr. Carroll, patting the dear old dog's rough head; and Guard wagged his tail and looked as pleased as though he quite understood.

Then Mrs. Carroll and Miss Ashe mounted the quaint old carriage again, and drove slowly on with the luggage, while Mr. Carroll and his girls, and, of course, Guard, walked on behind. The elder girls were a little shy and constrained just at first, perhaps, and Angela was silent with happiness. If she talked much she should weep, she felt; but she showed her father her hens and hen-house before they started on again. "And in time I shall have a whole farm, father," she said seriously, "and then I want you to come to live with me on it, and we will have all kinds of animals."

"A capital idea," said Mr. Carroll gravely, without a trace of a smile as he looked at the very modest beginning so much was to spring from.

But, if the others were silent Poppy, when once her tongue was loosened, made up for it, and she trotted along by her father's side, holding his hand, and chattering to him as freely as though he had never been away.

The greatest joy of all though was when they reached the new cottage, and displayed their arrangements there—the sitting-room, with its easy-chairs, and table spread with dainty white cloth, shining tea-things, and some of Anna's nicest cakes. A fire was burning in the grate, making it warm and cheerful for the strangers. Upstairs the simply furnished bedrooms looked equally attractive and spotlessly clean, and then last of all came the cheerful, cosy little kitchen, looking a perfect picture, with its bright tin and copper and china reflecting the firelight on all sides; and where, oh crowning delight, sat the neatest of neat little maid-servants, her rosy cheeks growing rosier and rosier as her new master and mistress and all the young ladies trooped in. She rose and curtsied when she saw Mr. and Mrs. Carroll, for she was a well-trained country child, not yet contaminated by the modern 'Board-school manners.' So she curtsied civilly, and stood while her master and mistress were present; and when Mr. Carroll asked her her name, she answered, "Grace, if you please, sir," and blushed again; and when he said, "Well, Grace, so you have come to help us. I hope we shall all be very happy and comfortable together," she curtsied and said, "Yes, thank you, sir. I'll try my best."

The bedrooms, all but Mr. and Mrs. Carroll's, were very tiny. One was so small it would only hold one little bed.

"But where is the fourth chick to roost?" asked their father anxiously. "You don't expect one to sit up while the other sleeps, I hope?" laughing.

But Cousin Charlotte, to whom he spoke, did not laugh back. "I—I wondered," she said, looking up at him very wistfully, as though she knew she was asking a great deal—"I wondered, Ronald, if you would spare me one, at—at least until I have got used to losing them all. I know it is a good deal to ask you, but—I shall be so very lonely—" poor Cousin Charlotte's voice quavered—"and as your house is so small I wondered if you would let me still keep my Esther?"

Esther started, and a sense of disappointment made her heart sink. Remembering her mother's dislike of housekeeping, and her incapacity, Esther had all this time been picturing herself as housekeeper and real mistress of this dear little home, presiding over the kitchen

and the neat little maid and generally distinguishing herself as cook and housewife. She had known, of course, that there was only room for three of them there, but she had, somehow, thought of Angela as being the one to remain with Cousin Charlotte, because, perhaps, of her fowls, and her position as mistress of the poultry yards.

For the first few moments, therefore, when she heard Cousin Charlotte's request, she felt a deep pang of disappointment. "But mother will need me here," she was just about to say, when there rushed over her the memory of all Cousin Charlotte had done for them, her goodness and patience, her generosity and unselfishness, and now her loneliness,—and all her feelings changed.

"She is my right hand," Cousin Charlotte went on pathetically. "I do not know what I should do without her now!"

Then how glad Esther was that she had not spoken, and oh! the joy and pride that filled her heart, the deep, deep happiness of knowing that she had been of real use and comfort, that some one really needed her. With only a little effort she put aside all her feeling about the new home, and determined, if her parents consented, to go blithely with Cousin Charlotte, and never, never, never let her know of that moment's unwillingness.

Consent was given, of course. How could they refuse to spare one to her who had taken them all and made her home theirs when they had no other, and had loved and cared for them, and guided them so well and faithfully without hope of reward?

Mr. Carroll was only too happy to be able to do something in return.

"I think it will be good for Penelope, too, to have a few housekeeping duties," said Cousin Charlotte, smiling as she laid her gentle hand on Pen's shoulder. "It will help to balance the dreamy side of her—at any rate until Angela grows older; while Angela—well, Angela is a born housekeeper and farmer combined, and I prophesy that within a year or so she will be keeping the house and all of you in such order and comfort as to be a pattern to the country round."

Angela's face grew radiant. "I'd love to," she said joyously; "but I wish—the only thing I wish is that we could all live together. I don't want to leave you, Cousin Charlotte, yet I want to be with—you understand, don't you?"

Yes, Cousin Charlotte understood. They all felt the same; but when the three had left their old home for the new one it was only, as one might say, to live in two houses instead of one, for never a day passed but what they were down at Miss Charlotte's, and so the change was not such a wrench as all had feared. Miss Charlotte insisted on continuing to teach them all—at any rate, she said, until they were obliged to go away to school.

Mademoiselle Leperier, who actually went to call on Mrs. Carroll, declared her health and spirits were so much improved by the new interest the children had provided her with that she begged to be allowed to give them all lessons in French, and singing, too.

"I foresee that I shall have no housekeeper after all," said Mrs. Carroll with a sigh, "but I suppose I shall manage somehow, and the children are being educated, which is something. One must think of them first, I suppose."

Esther felt a pang of doubt when she heard the words. Ought she not, after all, to give up her happy home with Cousin Charlotte, where by this time she had completely settled down, and come up to take care of her mother? She would see but little of Mademoiselle if she did, she saw that plainly, and there would be very little time for study, but there was her father to think of, and his comfort.

But when she laid her doubts before her father and Cousin Charlotte, they bade her put them out of her head. She tried to, though she doubted their advice; and it was only years later, when she was a well-educated, cultured woman, full of interests and good aims, that she understood the wisdom of Cousin Charlotte's plan in taking her away, at least until her education was complete, from where she would have become little but a household drudge, worked beyond her strength, her talents, her greatest interests undeveloped, her temper irritated and ruined as it was when first she came to Dorsham; and she felt deeply grateful for the understanding and loving care which had surrounded her at so critical a time.

## CHAPTER XIX.



Five years have gone by since Mr. and Mrs. Carroll returned from Canada to the little house on the moor which they have never left, or desired to leave, since.

Mr. Carroll's health suffered severely from the long strain and the rigour of his life abroad, and he was never again fit for hard work. But grandpapa Carroll, recognising the brave fight he had made, forgave him the misfortunes he had met with earlier and altered his will, so that when he died, not long after Mr. Carroll's return, the little family, though still obliged to be economical, and not above being glad of the girls' little earnings, were placed beyond all want.

Esther still lived with Cousin Charlotte, the prop and mainstay of the house, for Anna had married Ephraim and moved into the cottage next door to Mrs. Bennett's. Angela, pulling her bow at a venture on that birthday night, so long ago now, had hit the truth when she said that Anna could not think better of Ephraim after that evening because she thought so well of him already. A truth Ephraim found out for himself in time, though it took him two years longer to do so.

Finding it was no use waiting to speak until he found her in a gentle mood he spoke out then and there, and no one could decide whether Anna was most astonished at being asked or Ephraim at being accepted. However, when once the need for concealment of her true feelings was over Anna's manner to Ephraim changed so markedly that Ephraim often stopped to wonder if the woman he had married could possibly be the one who had led him such a life before. Love can work miracles, Ephraim found, and came to the conclusion that whether she was the same or not he was quite content.

It was a great blow to Miss Charlotte to lose her Anna, but more than one nice little maiden was only too anxious to come to 'a place' where the last servant had stayed twenty years; and Esther, and the fortunate maid chosen to fill Anna's shoes, combined to prevent Miss Charlotte feeling her loss too deeply.

Esther's hands had grown very full as time had gone on, and the fuller they grew the happier she was. Slowly and almost imperceptibly Miss Charlotte gave up more and more of her work, and took life easily, feeling she could leave all to her Esther, and know that all was well.

Angela's hens were moved to Four Winds, and Esther took over the responsibility of the poultry yard as well as the house and the kitchen and the new maid. But in the midst of all her duties she contrived to give a good deal of her time to her dearly loved Mademoiselle, for Mademoiselle was failing, and those who loved her best knew that not for very much longer would they have the joy of her presence.

Penelope was away in London, studying with all her heart and strength, for in the sweet pure air of the moor her voice had developed beyond everyone's expectation, and Mademoiselle Leperier never rested until she had been sent to study under a distinguished master. The question as to ways and means had been a very serious one, but while it was being anxiously discussed, and almost abandoned in despair, Miss Row came forward, and with unwonted delicacy asked to be allowed to play the part of fairy godmother to her favourite.

"I shall only be laying out a little to buy myself a big return some day," she pleaded. "If you will let me have a share in Penelope's success the kindness will be all on your part."

So Penelope went away from their midst to stirring scenes of life and work, weeping at leaving her beloved moor, and vowing to return as soon and as often as might be,—a vow she never forgot.

Angela's dream in time was realised too. Her dream poultry farm became a real one, and the most successful in the country. Very slowly at first she added penny to penny, then shilling to shilling, then pound to pound, until at last, instead of building more hens' houses, she bought a cow. It was an experiment, and one those about doubted the success of; but Angela never doubted, and presently another cow was added to her stock, and soon after that they all moved to a small farm, where Poppy had to become the little housewife, for Angela's time was quite taken up with her dairy.

Poppy's market-gardening scheme never got beyond the bed of parsley. With that one success she decided to be satisfied. "It was a most wonderful pennyworth," she often remarked, "for it brought me quite a lot of money, and Mademoiselle as a friend, and nothing could have been better than that."

"Nothing," said Esther softly. "Life is very wonderful, Poppy dear, isn't it?"

"Very," answered Poppy sagely, with a serious shake of her curly head.

One last scene before we bid them all good-bye!

It is Easter time once more. In the orchards and woods the daffodils are bowing their golden heads, as though awed by the beauty of the pear-blossom spreading between them and the glorious blue sky. The hedges are starred with primroses, daisies, and king-cups, the air is sweet with the scent of flowers and the fresh earth. Everything seems brimming over with sunshine and happiness and joy of living. Easter is in the heart of all things animate and inanimate.

Up in 'the Castle' the four girls are gathered as of old, but with one big gap in their circle. Guard, dear old Guard, will never accompany them more in their wanderings. He sleeps his last long sleep in the breast of the moor he loved so well. Yet he is with them in spirit and thought, for he lies buried close beside 'the Castle,' and they feel he is near them whenever they go there.

Easter is in their hearts, too, for Penelope is home for her holidays and Angela has just returned from a much-dreaded duty visit to Aunt Julia, and their joy at being together again is intense.

Penelope lies in her old attitude, flat on the moor, one cheek pressed close to its breast, her eyes gazing in a perfect rapture of delight over the length and breadth of it.

"I *almost* think," she says softly, "it is worth going away to have the joy of coming home again; to step out of that dear little station, and then to turn the corner and see—this," waving her hand in a wide sweep. "Oh, girls, shall you ever forget the first time we came, and how we dreaded it, and how shy we were, and frightened—"

"Until we saw Cousin Charlotte," chimed in Esther. "I never felt frightened after that."

"And do you remember," burst in Angela, "our dear little rooms, and how lovely it all looked when we came that night, and dear old Guard,"—her voice wavered and dropped—"came out to meet us, and Anna?"

"And I was so troubled about our clothes because we were so shabby, and— but it never seemed to matter much. Cousin Charlotte made everything come right. Isn't it wonderful, all that has happened just through mother's writing to Cousin Charlotte, and Cousin Charlotte being able to take us!"

"Wonderful," said Penelope softly; and back to her mind as through a vague dream came a vision of a child lying amidst the long coarse grass of an untidy garden, with butterflies, yellow and white and brown, flitting about over her head, while through her mind as she watched them passed visions and dreams of the future, and vague wonderings as to what it would bring.

"And this is what it has brought," she thought to herself. "I shall not be afraid to take the next step now. God has been so good to us."

## **THE END.**

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CARROLL GIRLS \*\*\*

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