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TOOT ***

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GREAT-UNCLE HOOT-TOOT.

BY

MRS. MOLESWORTH,

AUTHOR OF

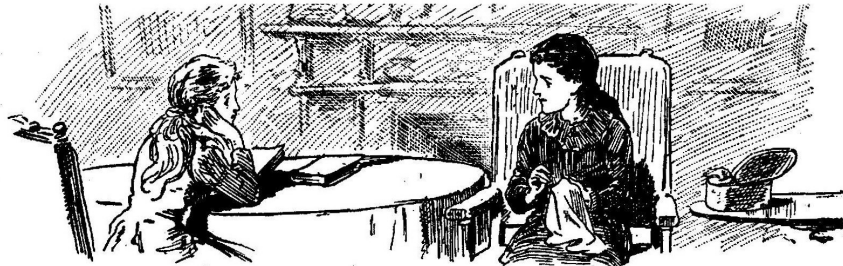
**"THE PALACE IN THE GARDEN," "CARROTS': JUST A LITTLE BOY,"
"THE CUCKOO CLOCK," ETC.**

**ILLUSTRATED BY GORDON BROWNE, E. J. WALKER, LIZZIE LAWSON,
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FRANCES AND ELSA
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GREAT-UNCLE HOOT-TOOT.

"... what we have we prize not to the worth
Whiles we enjoy it; but being lack'd and lost,
Why then we rack the value."—*Much Ado about Nothing*.

CHAPTER I.

THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE.

"What's Geoff, I'm sure," said Elsa; "I always know his ring. I do hope——" and she stopped and sighed a little.



"What?" said Frances, looking up quickly.

"Oh, nothing particular. Run down, Vic, dear, and get Geoff to go straight into the school-room. Order his tea at once. I *don't* want him to come upstairs just now. Mamma is so busy and worried with those letters."



VICKY.

Vic, a little girl of nine, with long fair hair and long black legs, and a pretty face with a bright, eager expression, needed no second bidding. She was off almost before Elsa had finished speaking.

"What a good child she is!" said Frances. "What a clever, nice boy she would have made! And if Geoff had been a girl, perhaps he would have been more easily managed."

"I don't know," said Elsa. "Perhaps if Vicky had been a boy she would have been spoiled and selfish too."

"Elsa," said Frances, "I think you are rather hard upon Geoff. He is like all boys. Everybody says they are more selfish than girls, and then they grow out of it."

"They grow out of showing it so plainly, perhaps," replied Elsa, rather bitterly. "But you contradict yourself, Frances. Just a moment ago you said what a much nicer boy Vic would have made. All boys aren't like Geoff. Of course, I don't mean that he is really a bad boy; but it just comes over me now and then that it is a *shame* he should be such a tease and worry, boy or not. When mamma is anxious, and with good reason, and we girls are doing all we can, why should Geoff be the one we have to keep away from her, and to smooth down, as it were? It's all for her sake, of course; but it makes me ashamed, all the same, to feel that we are really almost afraid of him. There now——" And she started up as the sound of a door, slammed violently in the lower regions, reached her ears.

But before she had time to cross the room, Vicky reappeared.

"It's nothing, Elsa," the child began eagerly. "Geoff's all right; he's not cross. He only slammed the door at the top of the kitchen stair because I reminded him not to leave it open."

"You might have shut it yourself, rather than risk a noise to-night," said Elsa. "What was he doing at the top of the kitchen stair?"

Vicky looked rather guilty.

"He was calling to Phoebe to boil two eggs for his tea. He says he is so hungry. I would have run up to tell you; but I thought it was better than his teasing mamma about letting him come in to dinner."

Elsa glanced at Frances.

"You see," her glance seemed to say.

"Yes, dear," she said aloud to the little sister, "anything is better than that. Run down again, Vicky, and keep him as quiet as you can."

"Would it not be better, perhaps," asked Frances, rather timidly, "for one of us to go and speak to him, and tell him quietly about mamma having had bad news?"

"He wouldn't rest then till he had heard all about it from herself," said Elsa. "Of course he'd be sorry for her, and all that, but he would only show it by teasing."

It was Frances's turn to sigh, for in spite of her determination to see everything and everybody in the best possible light, she knew that Elsa was only speaking the truth about Geoffrey.

Half an hour later the two sisters were sitting at dinner with their mother. She was anxious and tired, as they knew, but she did her utmost to seem cheerful.

"I have seen and heard nothing of Geoff," she said suddenly. "Has he many lessons to do to-night? He's all right, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," said Frances. "Vic's with him, looking out his words. He seems in very good spirits. I told him you were busy writing for the mail, and persuaded him to finish his lessons first. He'll be coming up to the drawing-room later."

"I think mamma had better go to bed almost at once," said Elsa, abruptly. "You've finished those letters, dear, haven't you?"

"Yes—all that I can write as yet. But I must go to see Mr. Norris first thing to-morrow morning. I have said to your uncle that I cannot send him particulars till next mail."

"Mamma, darling," said Frances, "do you really think it's going to be very bad?"

Mrs. Tudor smiled rather sadly.

"I'm afraid so," she said; "but the suspense is the worst. Once we really *know*, we can meet it. You three girls are all so good, and Geoff, poor fellow—he *means* to be good too."

"Yes," said Frances, eagerly, "I'm sure he does."

"But 'meaning' alone isn't much use," said Elsa. "Mamma," she went on with sudden energy, "if this does come—if we really do lose all our money, perhaps it will be the best thing for Geoff in the end."

Mrs. Tudor seemed to wince a little.

"You needn't make the very worst of it just yet, any way," said Frances, reproachfully.

"And it would in one sense be the hardest on Geoff," said the mother, "for his education would have to be stopped, just when he's getting on so well, too."

"But—" began Elsa, but she said no more. It was no use just then expressing what was in her mind—that getting on well at school, winning the good opinion of his masters, the good fellowship of his companions, did not comprise the whole nor even the most important part of the duty of a boy who was also a son and a brother—a son, too, of a widowed mother, and a brother of fatherless sisters. "I would almost rather," she said to herself, "that he got on less well at school if he were more of a comfort at home. It would be more manly, somehow."

Her mother did not notice her hesitation.

"Let us go upstairs, dears," she said. "I *am* tired, but I am not going to let myself be over-anxious. I shall try to put things aside, as it were, till I hear from Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot. I have the fullest confidence in his advice."

"I wish he would take it into his head to come home," said Frances.

"So do I," agreed her mother.

They were hardly settled in the drawing-room before Vic appeared.

"Elsa," she whispered, "Geoff sent me to ask if he may have something to eat."

"Something to eat," repeated Elsa. "He had two eggs with his tea. He can't be hungry."

"No—o—But there were anchovy toasts at dinner—Harvey told him. And he's so fond of anchovy toasts. I think you'd better say he may, Elsa, because of mamma."

"Very well," the elder sister replied. "It's not right—it's always the way. But what are we to do?"

Vicky waited not to hear her misgivings, but flew off. She was well-drilled, poor little soul.

Her brother was waiting for her, midway between the school-room and dining-room doors.

"Well?" he said, moving towards the latter.

"Yes. Elsa says you may," replied the breathless little envoy.

"Elsa! What has she to do with it? I told you to ask mamma, not Elsa," he said roughly.

He stood leaning against the jamb of the door, his hands in his pockets, with a very cross look on his handsome face. But Victoria, devoted little sister though she was, was not to be put down by any cross looks when she knew she was in the right.

"Geoff," she said sturdily, "I'll just leave off doing messages or anything for you if you are *so* selfish. How could I go teasing mamma about anchovy toasts for you when she is so worried?"

"How should I know she is busy and worried?" said Geoff. "What do you mean? What is it about?"

"I don't know. At least I only know that Elsa and Francie told me that she *was* worried, and that she had letters to write for the ship that goes to India to-morrow."

"For the Indian mail you mean, I suppose," said Geoff. "What a donkey you are for your age, Vic! Oh, if it's only that, she's writing to that old curmudgeon; *that's* nothing new. Come along, Vicky, and I'll give you a bit of my toasts."

He went into the dining-room as he spoke, and rang the bell.

"Harvey'll bring them up. I said I'd ring if I was to have them. Upon my word, Vic, it isn't every fellow of my age that would take things so quietly. Never touching a scrap without leave, when lots like me come home to late dinner every night."



HER BROTHER WAS WAITING FOR HER.

"Elsa says it's only middle-class people who let children dine late," said Vic, primly, "*I* shan't come down to dinner till I'm *out*."

Geoffrey burst out laughing.

"Rubbish!" he said. "Elsa finds reasons for everything that suits her. Here, Vicky, take your piece."

Vicky was not partial to anchovy toasts, but to-night she was so anxious

to keep Geoff in a good humour, that she would have eaten anything he chose to give her, and pretended to like it. So she accepted her share, and Geoff munched his in silence.

He was a well-made, manly looking boy, not tall for his years, which were fourteen, but in such good proportion as to give promise of growing into a strong and vigorous man. His face was intended by nature to be a very pleasing one. The features were all good; there was nobility in the broad forehead, and candour in the bright dark eyes, and—sometimes—sweetness in the mouth. But this "sometimes" had for long been becoming of less and less frequent occurrence. A querulous, half-sulky expression had invaded the whole face: its curves and lines were hardening as those of no young face should harden; the very carriage of the boy was losing its bright upright fearlessness—his shoulders were learning to bend, his head to slouch forward. One needed but to glance at him to see that Geoffrey Tudor was fast becoming that most disagreeable of social characters, a grumbler! And with grumbling unrepressed, and indulged in, come worse things, for it has its root in that true "root of all evil," selfishness.

As the last crumbs of the anchovy toasts disappeared, Geoff glanced round him.

"I say, Vic," he began, "is there any water on the sideboard? Those things are awfully salt. But I don't know that I'm exactly thirsty, either. I know what I'd like—a glass of claret, and I don't see why I shouldn't have it, either. At my age it's really too absurd that——"

"What are you talking about, Geoff?" said Elsa's voice in the doorway. "Mamma wants you to come up to the drawing-room for a little. What is it that is too absurd at your age?"

"Nothing in particular—or rather everything," said Geoff, with a slight tone of defiance. There was something in Elsa's rather too superior, too elder-sisterly way of speaking that, as he would have expressed it, "set him up." "I was saying to Vic that I'd like a glass of claret, and that I don't see why I shouldn't have it, either. Other fellows would help themselves to it. I often think I'm a great donkey for my pains."

Elsa looked at him with a strange mixture of sadness and contempt.

"What will he be saying next, I wonder?" her glance seemed to say.

But the words were not expressed.

"Come upstairs," she said. "Vicky has told you, I know, that you must be *particularly* careful not to tease mamma to-night."

Geoff returned her look with an almost fierce expression in the eyes that could be so soft and gentle.

"I wish you'd mind your own business, and leave mother and me to ourselves. It's your meddling puts everything wrong," he muttered.

But he followed his elder sister upstairs quietly enough. Down in the bottom of his heart was hidden great faith in Elsa. He would, had occasion demanded it, have given his life, fearlessly, cheerfully, for her or his mother, or the others. But the smaller sacrifices, of his likes and dislikes, of his silly boyish temper and humours—of "self," in short, he could not or would not make. Still, something in Elsa's words and manner this evening impressed him in spite of himself. He followed her into the drawing-room, fully *meaning* to be good and considerate.





CHAPTER II.

"MAYN'T I SPEAK TO YOU, MAMMA?"

That was the worst of it—the most puzzling part of it, rather, perhaps we should say—with Geoffrey. He *meant* to be good. He would not for worlds have done anything that he distinctly saw to be wrong. He worked well at his lessons, though to an accompaniment of constant grumbling—at home, that is to say; grumbling at school is not encouraged. He was rather a favourite with his companions, for he was a manly and "plucky" boy, entering heartily into the spirit of all their games and amusements, and he was thought well of by the masters for his steadiness and perseverance, though not by any means of naturally studious tastes. The wrong side of him was all reserved for home, and for his own family.

Yet, only son and fatherless though he was, he had not been "spoilt" in the ordinary sense of the word. Mrs. Tudor, though gentle, and in some ways timid, was not a weak or silly woman. She had brought up her children on certain broad rules of "must," as to which she was as firm as a rock, and these had succeeded so well with the girls that it was a complete surprise as well as the greatest of sorrows to her when she first began to see signs of trouble with her boy. And gradually her anxiety led her into the fatal mistake of spoiling Geoffrey by making him of too much consequence. It came to be recognized in the household that his moods and humours were to be a sort of family barometer, and that all efforts were to be directed towards the avoidance of storms. Not that Geoff was passionate or violent. Had he been so, things would have sooner come to a crisis. He was simply *tiresome*—tiresome to a degree that can scarcely be understood by those who have not experienced such tiresomeness for themselves. And as there is no doubt a grain of the bully somewhere in the nature of every boy—if not of every human being—what this tiresomeness might have grown into had the Fates, or something higher than the Fates, not interposed, it would be difficult to exaggerate.

The cloudy look had not left Geoff's face when he came into the drawing-room. But, alas! it was nothing new to see him "looking like that." His mother took no notice of it.

"Well, Geoff?" she said pleasantly. "How have you got on to-day, my boy?"

He muttered something indistinctly, which sounded like, "Oh, all right;" then catching sight of Elsa's reproachful face, he seemed to put some constraint on himself, and, coming forward to his mother, kissed her affectionately.

"Are you very tired to-night, mamma?" he said. "Must I not speak to you?"

Mrs. Tudor *was* very tired, and she knew by old experience what Geoff's "speaking" meant—an hour or more's unmitigated grumbling, and dragging forward of every possible grievance, to have each in turn talked over, and sympathized about, and smoothed down by her patient hand. Such talks were not without their effect on the boy; much that his mother said appealed to his good sense and good feeling, though he but seldom gave her the satisfaction of seeing this directly. But they were very wearing to

her, and it was carrying motherly unselfishness too far to undertake such discussion with Geoff, when she was already worn out with unusual anxiety.

She smiled, however, brightly enough, in reply to his questions. It cheered her to see that he could consider her even thus much.

"Of course I can speak to you, Geoff. Have you anything particular to tell me?"

"Lots of things," said the boy. He drew forward a chair in which to settle himself comfortably beside his mother, darting an indignant glance at his sisters as he did so. "Humbugging me as usual about mamma—anything to keep me away from her," he muttered. But Elsa and Frances only glanced at each other in despair.

"Well," said Mrs. Tudor, resignedly, leaning back in her chair.

"Mamma," began Geoffrey, "there must be something done about my pocket-money. I just can't do with what I've got. I've waited to speak about it till I had talked it over with some of the other fellows. They nearly all have more than I."

"Boys of your age—surely not?" interposed Mrs. Tudor.

"Well, *some* of them are not older than I," allowed Geoff. "If you'd give me more, and let me manage things for myself—football boots, and cricket-shoes, and that sort of thing. The girls"—with cutting emphasis—"are always hinting that I ask you for too many things, and I hate to be seeming to be always at you for something. If you'd give me a regular allowance, now, and let me manage for myself."



"THERE MUST BE SOMETHING DONE ABOUT MY POCKET-MONEY."

"At your age," repeated his mother, "that surely is very unusual."

"I don't see that it matters exactly about age," said Geoff, "if one's got sense."

"But have you got sense enough, Geoff?" said Frances, gently. "I'm three years older than you, and I've only just begun to have an allowance for my clothes, and I should have got into a dreadful mess if it hadn't been for Elsa helping me."

"Girls are quite different," said Geoff. "They want all sorts of rubbishing ribbons and crinolines and flounces. Boys only need regular necessary things."

"Then you haven't any wants at present, I should think, Geoff," said Elsa, in her peculiarly clear, rather aggravating tones. "You were completely rigged out when you came back from the country, three weeks ago."

Geoff glowered at her.

"Mamma," he said, "will you once for all make Elsa and Frances understand that when I'm speaking to you they needn't interfere?"

Mrs. Tudor did not directly respond to this request.

"Will you tell me, Geoff," she said, "what has put all this into your head? What things are you in want of?"

Geoff hesitated. Fancied wants, like fancied grievances, have an annoying trick of refusing to answer to the roll-call when distinctly

summoned to do so.

"There's lots of things," he began. "I *should* have a pair of proper football boots, instead of just an old common pair with ribs stuck on, you know, like I have. All the fellows have proper ones when they're fifteen or so."

"But you are not fifteen."

"Well, I might wait about the *boots* till next term. But I do really want a pair of boxing-gloves dreadfully," he went on energetically, as the idea occurred to him; "you know I began boxing this term."

"And don't they provide boxing-gloves? How have you managed hitherto?" asked his mother, in surprise.

"Oh, well, yes—there *are* gloves; but of course it's much nicer to have them of one's own. It's horrid always to seem just one of the lot that can't afford things of their own."

"And if you are *not* rich—and I dare say nearly all your schoolfellows are richer than you"—said Elsa, "is it not much better not to sham that you are?"

"Sham," repeated Geoff, roughly. "Mamma, I do think you should speak to Elsa.—If you were a boy—" he added, turning to his sister threateningly. "I don't want to sham about anything; but it's very hard to be sent to a school when you can't have everything the same as the others."

A look of pain crept over Mrs. Tudor's tired face. Had she done wrong? Was it another of her "mistakes"—of which, like all candid people, she felt she had made many in her life—to have sent Geoff to a first-class school?

"Geoff," she said wearily, "you surely do not realize what you cause me when you speak so. It was almost my principal reason for settling in London seven years ago, that I might be able to send you to one of the best schools. We could have lived more cheaply, and more comfortably, in the country; but you would have had to go to a different class of school."

"Well, I wish I had, then," said Geoff, querulously. "I perfectly hate London; I have always told you so. I shouldn't mind what I did if it was in the country. It isn't that I want to spend money, or that I've extravagant ideas; but it's too hard to be in a false position, as I am at school—not able to have things like the other fellows. You would have made *me* far happier if you had gone to live in the country and let me go to a country school. I *hate* London; and just because I want things like other fellows, I'm scolded."

Mrs. Tudor did not speak. She looked sad and terribly tired.

"Geoff," said Elsa, putting great control on herself so as to speak very gently, for she felt as if she could gladly shake him, "you must see that mamma is very tired. Do wait to talk to her till she is better able for it. And it is getting late."

"Do go, Geoff," said his mother. "I have listened to what you have said; it is not likely I shall forget it. I will talk to you afterwards."

The boy looked rather ashamed.

"I haven't meant to vex you," he said, as he stooped to kiss his mother. "I'm sorry you're so tired."

There was silence for a moment after he had left the room.

"I am afraid there is a mixture of truth in what he says," said Mrs. Tudor, at last. "It has been one of the many mistakes I have made, and now I suppose I am to be punished for it."

Elsa made a movement of impatience.

"Mamma dear!" she exclaimed, "I don't think you would speak that way if you weren't tired. There isn't any truth in what Geoff says. I don't mean that he tells stories; but it's just his incessant grumbling. He makes himself believe all sorts of nonsense. He has everything right for a boy of his age to have. I know there are boys whose parents are really rich who have less than he has."

"Yes, indeed, mamma; Elsa is right," said Frances. "Geoff is insatiable. He picks out the things boys here and there may have as an exception, and wants to have them all. He has a perfect genius for grumbling."

"Because he is always thinking of himself," said Elsa. "Mamma, don't think me disrespectful, but would it not be better to avoid saying things which make him think himself of such consequence—like telling him that we came to live in town principally for *his* sake?"

"Perhaps so," said her mother. "I am always in hopes of making him ashamed, by showing how much *has* been done for him."

"And he does feel ashamed," said Frances, eagerly. "I saw it to-night; he'd have liked to say something more if he hadn't been too proud to own that he had been inventing grievances."

"Things have been too smooth for him," said Elsa; "that's the truth of it. He needs some hardships."

"And as things are turning out he's very likely to get them," said Mrs. Tudor, with a rather wintry smile.

"Oh, mamma, forgive me! Do you know, I had forgotten all about our money troubles," Elsa exclaimed. "Why don't you tell Geoff about them, mamma? It's in a way hardly fair on him; for if he knew, it *might* make him understand how wrong and selfish he is."

"I will tell him soon, but not just yet. I do not want to distract his mind from his lessons, and I wish to be quite sure first. I think I should wait till I hear from your great-uncle."

"And that will be—how long? It is how many weeks since Mr. Norris first wrote that he was uneasy? About seven, I should say," said Elsa.

"Quite that," said her mother. "It is the waiting that is so trying. I can do nothing without Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's advice."

That last sentence had been a familiar one to Mrs. Tudor's children almost ever since they could remember. "Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot" had been a sort of autocrat and benefactor in one, to the family. His opinions, his advice had been asked on all matters of importance; his approval had been held out to them as the highest reward, his displeasure as the punishment most to be dreaded. And yet they had never seen him!

"I wish he would come home himself," said Elsa. "I think Geoff would be much the better for a visit from him," she added, with a slight touch of sharpness in her tone.

"Poor Geoff!" said her mother. "I suppose the truth is that very few women know how to manage boys."

"I don't see that," said Elsie. "On the contrary, a generous-natured boy is often more influenced by a woman's gentleness than by a man's severity. It is just that, that I don't like about Geoff. There is a want of generous, chivalrous feeling about him."

"No," said Frances. "I don't quite agree with you. I think it is there, but somehow not awakened. Mamma," she went on, "supposing our great-uncle

did come home, would he be dreadfully angry if he found out that we all called him 'Hoot-Toot'?"

"Oh no," said her mother, smiling; "he's quite used to it. Your father told me he had had the trick nearly all his life of saying 'Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!' if ever he was perplexed or disapproving."

"What a *very* funny little boy he must have been!" exclaimed both the girls together.



CHAPTER III.

AN UNLOOKED-FOR ARRIVAL.

The next few days were trying ones for all the Tudor family. The mother was waiting anxiously for further news of the money losses, with which, as her lawyers told her, she was threatened; the sisters were anxious too, though, with the bright hopefulness of their age, the troubles which distressed their mother fell much more lightly on them: *they* were anxious because they saw *her* suffering.

Vicky had some misty idea that something was wrong, but she knew very little, and had been forbidden to say anything to Geoff about the little she did know. So that of the whole household Geoff was the only one who knew nothing, and went on living in his Fool's Paradise of having all his wants supplied, yet grumbling that he had nothing! He was in a particularly tiresome mood—perhaps, in spite of themselves, it was impossible for his sisters to bear with him as patiently as usual; perhaps the sight of his mother's pale face made him dissatisfied with himself and cross because he would not honestly own that he was doing nothing to help and please her. And the weather was very disagreeable, and among Geoff's many "hates" was a very exaggerated dislike to bad weather. About this sort of thing he had grumbled much more since his return from a long visit to some friends in the country the summer before, when the weather had been splendid, and everything done to make him enjoy himself, in consequence of which he had come home with a fixed idea that the country was always bright and charming; that it was only in town that one had to face rain and cold and mud. As to fog, he had perhaps more ground for his belief.

"Did you ever see such beastly weather?" were his first words to Vicky one evening when the good little sister had rushed to the door on hearing Geoff's ring, so that his majesty should not be kept waiting an unnecessary moment. "I am perfectly drenched, and as cold as ice. Is tea ready, Vic?"

"Quite ready—at least it will be by the time you've changed your things. Do run up quick, Geoff. It's a bad thing to keep on wet clothes."

"Mamma should have thought of that before she sent me to a day-school,"

said Geoff. "I've a good mind just *not* to change my clothes, and take my chance of getting cold. It's perfect slavery—up in the morning before it's light, and not home till pitch dark, and soaked into the bargain."

"Hadn't you your mackintosh on?" asked Vicky.

"My mackintosh! It's in rags. I should have had a new one ages ago."

"Geoff! I'm sure it can't be so bad. You've not had it a year."

"A year. No one wears a mackintosh for a year. The buttons are all off, and the button-holes are burst."

"I'm sure they can be mended. Martha would have done it if you'd asked her," said Vic, resolving to see to the unhappy mackintosh herself. "I know poor mamma doesn't want to spend any extra money just now."

"There's a great deal too much spent on Elsa and Frances, and all their furbelows," said Geoff, in what he thought a very manly tone. "Here, Vicky, help me to pull off my boots, and then I must climb up to the top of the house to change my things."

Vicky knelt down obediently and tugged at the muddy boots, though it was a task she disliked as much as she could dislike anything. She was rewarded by a gruff "Thank you," and when Geoff came down again in dry clothes, to find the table neatly prepared, and his little sister ready to pour out his tea, he did condescend to say that she was a good child! But even though his toast was hot and crisp, and his egg boiled to perfection, Geoff's pleasanter mood did not last long. He had a good many lessons to do that evening, and they were lessons he disliked. Vicky sat patiently, doing her best to help him till her bedtime came, and he had barely finished when Frances brought a message that he was to come upstairs—mamma said he was not to work any longer.

"You have finished, surely, Geoff?" she said, when he entered the drawing-room.

"If I had finished, I would have come up sooner. You don't suppose I stay down there grinding away to please myself, do you?" replied the boy, rudely.

"Geoff!" exclaimed his sisters, unwisely, perhaps.

He turned upon them.

"I've not come to have you preaching at me. Mamma, will you speak to them?" he burst out. "I hate this life—nothing but fault-finding as soon as I show my face. I wish I were out of it, I do! I'd rather be the poorest ploughboy in the country than lead this miserable life in this hateful London."



VICKY . . . TUGGED AT THE MUDDY BOOTS.

He said the last words loudly, almost shouting them, indeed. To do him justice, it was not often his temper got so completely the better of him. The noise he was making had prevented him and the others from hearing the bell ring—prevented them, too, from hearing, a moment or two later, a short colloquy on the stairs between Harvey and a new-comer.

"Thank you," said the latter; "I don't want you to announce me. I'll do it myself."

Geoff had left the door open.

"Yes," he was just repeating, even more loudly than before, "I hate this life, I do. I am grinding at lessons from morning to night, and when I come

home this is the way you treat me. I——"

But a voice behind him made him start.

"Hoot-toot, young man," it said. "Hoot-toot, hoot-toot! Come, I say, this sort of thing will never do. And ladies present! Hoot——"

But the "toot" was drowned in a scream from Mrs. Tudor.

"Uncle, dear uncle, is it you? Can it be you yourself? Oh, Geoff, Geoff! he is not often such a foolish boy, uncle, believe me. Oh, how—how thankful I am you have come!"

She had risen from her seat and rushed forward to greet the stranger, but suddenly she grew strangely pale, and seemed on the point of falling. Elsa flew towards her on the one side, and the old gentleman on the other.

"Poor dear!" he exclaimed. "I have startled her, I'm afraid. Hoot-toot, hoot-toot, silly old man that I am. Where's that ill-tempered fellow off to?" he went on, glancing round. "Can't he fetch a glass of water, or make himself useful in some way?"

"I will," said Frances, darting forward. Geoffrey had disappeared, and small wonder.

"I am quite right now, thank you," said Mrs. Tudor, trying to smile, when Elsa had got her on to the sofa. "Don't be frightened, Elsa dear. Nor you, uncle; it was just the—the start. I've had a good deal to make me anxious lately, you know."

"I should think I did—those idiots of lawyers!" muttered the old man.

"And poor Geoff," she went on; "I am afraid I have not paid much attention to him lately, and he's felt it—foolishly, perhaps."

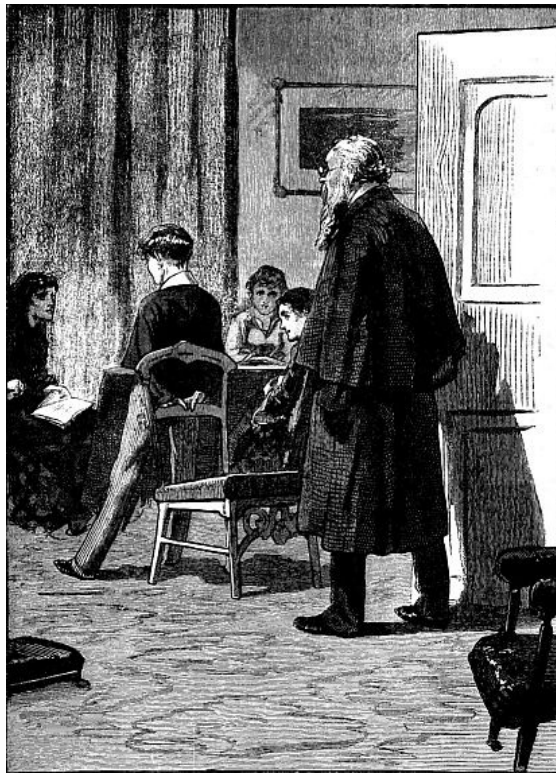
"Rubbish!" said Uncle Hoot-Toot under his breath. "Strikes me he's used to a good deal too much attention," he added as an aside to Elsa, with a quick look of inquiry in his bright keen eyes.

Elsa could hardly help smiling, but for her mother's sake she restrained herself.

"It will be all right now you have come home, dear uncle," Mrs. Tudor went on gently. "How was it? Had you started before you got my letters? Why did you not let us know?"

"I was on the point of writing to announce my departure," said the old gentleman, "when your letter came. It struck me then that I could get home nearly as quickly as a letter, and so I thought it was no use writing."

"Then you know—you know all about this bad news?" said Mrs. Tudor falteringly.



THE ARRIVAL OF GREAT-UNCLE HOOT-TOOT.

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"Yes; those fellows wrote to me. *That* was right enough; but what they meant by worrying you about it, my dear, I can't conceive. It was quite against all my orders. What did poor Frank make me your trustee for, if it wasn't to manage these things for you?"

"Then you think, you hope, there may be something left to manage, do you?" asked Mrs. Tudor, eagerly. "I have been anticipating the very worst. I did not quite like to put it in words to these poor children"—and she looked up affectionately at the two girls; "but I have really been trying to make up my mind to our being quite ruined."

"Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" said her uncle. "No such nonsense, my dear. I shall go to Norris's to-morrow morning and have it out with him. Ruined! No, no. It'll be all right, you'll see. We'll go into it all, and you have nothing to do but leave things to me. Now let us talk of pleasanter matters. What a nice, pretty little house you've got! And what nice, pretty little daughters! Good girls, too, or I'm uncommonly mistaken. They're comforts to you, Alice, my dear, eh?"

"The greatest possible comforts," answered the mother, warmly. "And so is little Vic. You haven't seen her yet."

"Little Vic? Oh, to be sure—my namesake." For Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's real name, you must know, was Mr. Victor Byrne. "To be sure; must see her to-morrow; Vic, to be sure."

"And Geoffrey," Mrs. Tudor went on less assuredly. "Geoff is doing very well at school. You will have a good report of him from his masters. He is a steady worker, and——"

"But how about the *home* report of him, eh?" said Mr. Byrne, drily. "There's two sides to most things, and I've rather a weakness for seeing both. Never mind about that just now. I never take up impressions hastily. Don't be afraid. I'll see Master Geoff for myself. Let's talk of other things. What do these young ladies busy themselves about? Are they good housekeepers, eh?"

Mrs. Tudor smiled.

"Can you make a pudding and a shirt, Elsa and Frances?" she asked. "Tell

your uncle your capabilities."

"I could manage the pudding," said Elsa. "I think the days for home-made shirts are over."

"Hoot-toot, toot-toot!" said Mr. Byrne; "new-fangled notions, eh?"

"No, indeed, Great-Uncle Hoot——" began Frances, eagerly. Then blushing furiously, she stopped short.

The old gentleman burst out laughing.

"Never mind, my dear; I'm used to it. It's what they always called me—all my nephews and nieces."

"Have you a great many nephews and nieces besides us?" asked Elsa.

Mr. Byrne laughed again.

"That depends upon myself," he said. "I make them, you see. I have had any quantity in my day, but they're scattered far and wide. And—there are a great many blanks, Alice, my dear, since I was last at home," he added, turning to Mrs. Tudor. "I don't know that any of them was ever quite such a pet of mine as this little mother of yours, my dears."

"Oh!" said Elsa, looking rather disappointed; "you are not our real uncle, then? I always thought you were."

"Well, think so still," said Mr. Byrne. "At any rate, you must treat me so, and then I shall be quite content. But I must be going. I shall see you to-morrow after I've had it out with that donkey Norris. What a stupid idiot he is, to be sure!" and for a moment Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot looked quite fierce. "And then I must see little Vic. What time shall I come to-morrow, Alice?"



MY BLACKAMoor.

"Whenever you like, uncle," she said. "Will you not come and stay here altogether?"

"No, thank you, my dear. I've got my own ways, you see. I'm a fussy old fellow. And I've got my servant—my blackamoor. He'd frighten all the neighbours. And you'd fuss yourself, thinking I wasn't comfortable. I'll come up to-morrow afternoon and stay on to dinner, if you like. And just leave the boy to me a bit. Good night, all of you; good night."

And in another moment the little old gentleman was gone.

The two girls and their mother sat staring at each other when he had disappeared.

"Isn't it like a dream? Can you believe he has really come, mamma?" said Elsa.

"Hardly," replied her mother. "But I am very thankful. If only Geoff will not vex him."

Elsa and Frances said nothing. They had their own thoughts about their brother, but they felt it best not to express them.





CHAPTER IV.

FOOLISH GEOFF.

"Is he like what you expected, Elsa?" asked Frances, when they were in their own room.

"Who? Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot? I'm sure I don't know. I don't think I ever thought about what he'd be like."

"Oh, I *had* an idea," said Frances. "Quite different, of course, from what he really is. I had fancied he'd be tall and stooping, and with a big nose and very queer eyes. I think I must have mixed him up with the old godfather in the 'Nutcracker of Nuremberg,' without knowing it."

"Well, he's not so bad as that, anyway," said Elsa. "He looks rather shrivelled and dried up; but he's so very neat and refined-looking. Did you notice what small brown hands he has, and such *very* bright eyes? Isn't it funny that he's only an adopted uncle, after all?"

"I think mamma had really forgotten he wasn't our real uncle," said Frances. "Elsa, I am very glad he has come. I think poor mamma has been far more unhappy than she let us know. She does look so ill."

"It's half of it Geoff," said Elsa, indignantly. "And now he must needs spoil Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's arrival by his tempers. Perhaps it's just as well, however. 'By the pricking of my thumbs,' I fancy Geoff has met his master."

"Elsa, you frighten me a little," said Frances. "You don't think he'll be very severe with poor Geoff?"

"I don't think he'll be more severe than is for Geoff's good," replied Elsa. "I must confess, though, I shouldn't like to face Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot if I felt I had been behaving badly. How his eyes can gleam!"

"And how he seemed to flash in upon us all of a sudden, and to disappear almost as quickly! I'm afraid there's something a little bit uncanny about him," said Frances, who was very imaginative. "But if he helps to put all the money troubles right, he will certainly be like a good fairy to us."

"Yes; and if he takes Geoff in hand," added Elsa. "But, Frances, we must go to bed. I want to make everything very nice to-morrow; I'm going to think about what to have for dinner while I go to sleep."

For Elsa was housekeeper—a very zealous and rather anxious-minded young housekeeper. Her dreams were often haunted by visions of bakers' books and fishmongers' bills; to-night curry and pilau chased each other through her brain, and Frances was aroused from her first sweet slumbers to be asked if she would remember to look first thing to-morrow morning if there was a bottle of chutney in the store-closet.

At breakfast Geoff came in, looking glum and slightly defiant. But he said nothing except "Good morning." He started, however, a little, when he saw his mother.

"Mamma," he said, "are you not well? You look so very pale."

The girls glanced up at this. It was true. They had not observed it in the



ELSA WAS HOUSEKEEPER.

excitement of discussing the new arrival, and the satisfaction of knowing it had brought relief to Mrs. Tudor's most pressing anxieties.

"Yes, mamma dear. It is true. You do look very pale. Now, you must not do anything to tire yourself all day. We will manage everything, so that Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot shall see we are not silly useless girls," said Elsa.

Geoffrey's lips opened as if he were about to speak, but he closed them again. He was still on his high horse.

"Geoff," said his mother, as he was leaving, "you will dine with us this evening. Try to get your lessons done quickly. Uncle will wish to see something of you."

He muttered an indistinct "Very well, mamma," as he shut the door.

"Humph!" he said to himself, "I suppose Elsa will want to make him think I'm properly treated. But *I* shall tell him the truth—any *man* will understand how impossible it is for me to stand it any longer. I don't mind if he did hear me shouting last night. There's a limit to endurance. But I wish mamma didn't look so pale. Of course they'll make out it's all *my* fault."

And feeling himself and his grievances of even more consequence than usual, Master Geoff stalked off.

Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot made his appearance in the afternoon rather earlier than he was expected. He found Mrs. Tudor alone in the drawing-room, and had a talk with her by themselves, and then Vicky was sent for, to make his acquaintance. The little girl came into the drawing-room looking very much on her good behaviour indeed—so much so that Elsa and Frances, who were with her, could scarcely help laughing.

"How do you do, my dear?" said her great-uncle, looking at her with his bright eyes.

"Quite well, thank you," replied the little girl.

"Hoot-toot!" said the old gentleman; "and is that all you've got to say to me?—a poor old fellow like me, who have come all the way from India to see you."

Vicky looked up doubtfully, her blue eyes wandered all over Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's queer brown face and trim little figure. A red flush spread slowly upwards from her cheeks to the roots of her fair hair, and by the peculiar droop in the corners of her mouth, Elsa, who was nearest her, saw that tears were not far off.

"What is it, Vicky dear?" she whispered. "What *will* he think of the children? Geoff in a temper, and Vicky crying for nothing!" she said to herself. "You are not frightened?" she added aloud.

"No," said Vicky, trying to recover herself. "It's only about Geoff. I want to ask—*him*—not to be angry with Geoff."

"And why should I be angry with Geoff?" said the old gentleman, his eyes twinkling. "Has he been saying so to you?"

"Oh no!" the little girl eagerly replied. "Geoff didn't say anything. It was Harvey and Martha. They said they hoped he'd find his master now *you'd* come, and that it was time he had some of his nonsense whipped out of him. You won't whip him, will you? Oh, please, please say you won't!" and she clasped her hands beseechingly. "Geoff isn't naughty *really*. He doesn't mean to be naughty."

The tears were very near now.

"Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" said Mr. Byrne. "Come, come, my little Vic; I don't like this at all. So they've been making me out an ogre. That's too bad. Me whip Geoff! Why, I think he could better whip me—a strong, sturdy fellow like that. No, no, I don't want to whip him, I assure you. But I'm glad to see Geoff's got such a good little sister, and that she's so fond of him. He's not a bad brother to you, I hope? You couldn't be so fond of him if he were."

"Oh no; Geoff's not naughty to me, scarcely *never*," said Vicky, eagerly. "I'm sure he never wants to be naughty. It's just that he's got some bad habits, of teasing and grumbling, and he can't get out of them," she went on, with a little air of wisdom that was very funny.

"Exactly," said Uncle Hoot-Toot, nodding his head. "Well, don't you think it would be a very good thing if we could help him to get out of them?"

Vicky looked up doubtfully again.

"If I think of some plan—something that may really do him good, you'll trust your poor old uncle, won't you, my little Vic?"

She gave him a long steady stare.

"Yes," she said at last. Then with a sigh, "I would like Geoff to get out of his tiresome ways."

And from this time Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot and Vicky were fast friends.

Then he asked Elsa and Frances to go out a little walk with him.

"Is your mother always as pale as I have seen her?" he said abruptly, almost as soon as they were alone.

Elsa hesitated.

"No," she said at last. "I'm afraid she is not at all well. Geoff noticed it this morning."

"Oh, indeed! Then he does notice things sometimes?" said Mr. Byrne, drily.

"He's very fond of mamma," put in Frances.

"He takes a queer way to show it, it strikes me," remarked her uncle.

"It's—it's all his temper, I'm afraid," Frances allowed reluctantly.

"It is that he's spoilt," said Elsa. "He's perhaps not spoilt in one way, but in another he is. He has never known any hardships or been forced into any self-denial. Great-uncle," she went on earnestly, "if it's true that we have lost or are going to lose nearly all our money, won't it perhaps be a good thing for Geoff?"

"Who says you're going to lose your money?"

"I don't know exactly why I feel sure it's not coming right. I know you said so to mamma—at least you tried to make her happier; but I can't understand it. If that Mr. Norris wrote so strongly, there must be something wrong."

Mr. Byrne moved and looked at her sharply.

"You don't speak that way to your mother, I hope?"

"Of course not," said Elsa; "I'm only too glad for her to feel happier about it. I was only speaking of what I thought myself."

"Well—well—as long as your mother's mind is easier it doesn't matter. I

cannot explain things fully to you at present, but you seem to be sensible girls, and girls to be trusted. I may just tell you this much—all this trouble is nothing new; I had seen it coming for years. The only thing I had not anticipated was that those fools of lawyers should have told your mother about the crash when it did come. There was no need for her to know anything about it. I'm her trustee——"

"But not legally," interrupted Elsa. "Mamma explained to us that you couldn't be held responsible, as it was only like a friend that you had helped her all these years."

"Hoot-toot, toot-toot!" he replied testily; "what difference does that make? But never mind. I will explain all about it to you both—before long. Just now the question is your mother. I think you will agree with me when I say that it is plain to me that Master Geoff should leave home?"

"I'm afraid mamma will be very much against it," said Elsa. "You see, Geoff is a good boy in big things, and mamma thinks it is owing to her having kept home influence over him. He's truthful and conscientious—he is, indeed, and you must see I'm not inclined to take his part."

"But he's selfish, and bullying, and ungrateful. Not pretty qualities, my dear, or likely to make a good foundation for a man's after-life. I'm not going to send him to a grand boarding-school, however—that I promise you, for I think it would be the ruin of him. Whatever I may do to save your mother, I don't see but that Master Geoff should face his true position."

"And we too, great-uncle," said Frances, eagerly. "Elsa and I are quite ready to work; we've thought of several plans already."

"I quite believe you, my dear," said Mr. Byrne, approvingly. "You shall tell me your plans some time soon, and I will tell you mine. No fear but that you shall have work to do."

"And——" began Elsa, but then she hesitated. "I was going to ask you not to decide anything about Geoff till you have seen more of him. If Frances and I could earn enough to keep him at school as he is, so that mamma could have the comf—— No, I'm afraid I can't honestly say that having Geoff at home would be any comfort to her—less than ever if Frances and I were away. Great-uncle, don't you think Geoff should have some idea of all this?"

"Certainly. But I cannot risk his teasing your mother. We will wait a few days. I should like to see poor Alice looking better; and I shall judge of Geoff for myself, my dears."

They were just at home again by this time. Vicky met them at the door. She was in great excitement about Mr. Byrne's Indian servant, who had come with his master's evening clothes.

"I was watching for Geoff, to tell him!" she exclaimed. "But my tea's ready; I must go." And off she ran.

"Good little girl," said Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot, nodding his head approvingly. "No grumbling from *her*, eh?"

"No, never," said Elsa, warmly. "She's having her tea alone to-day. Geoff's coming in to dinner in your honour."

"Humph!" said the old gentleman.





GEOFF'S INTERVIEW WITH GREAT-UNCLE HOOT-TOOT.

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CHAPTER V.

A CRISIS.

Mrs. Tudor and the two girls had gone upstairs to the drawing-room. Geoff glanced dubiously at Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot.

"Shall I—shall I stay with you, sir?" he asked.

Geoff was on his good behaviour.

The old gentleman glanced at him.

"Certainly, my boy, if you've nothing better to do," he said. "No lessons—eh?"

"No, sir," Geoff replied. "I've got all done, except a little I can do in the morning."

"They work you pretty hard, eh?"

"Yes, they do. There's not much fun for a fellow who's at school in London. It's pretty much the same story—grind, grind, from one week's end to another."

"Hoot-toot! That sounds melancholy," said Mr. Byrne. "No holidays, eh?"

"Oh, of course, I've some holidays," said Geoff. "But, you see, when a fellow has only got a mother and sisters——"

"*Only*," repeated the old gentleman; but Geoff detected no sarcasm in his tone.

"And mother's afraid of my skating, or boating on the river, or——"

"Doesn't she let you go in for the school games?" interrupted Mr. Byrne again.

"Oh yes; it would be too silly not to do *that*. I told her at the beginning—I mean, she understood—it wouldn't do. But there's lots of things I'd like to do, if mother wasn't afraid. I should like to ride, or at least to have a tricycle. It's about the only thing to make life bearable in this horrible place. Such weather! I do hate London!"

"Indeed!" said Mr. Byrne. "It's a pity your mother didn't consult you before settling here."

"She did it for the best, I suppose," said Geoff. "She didn't want to part with me, you see. But I'd rather have been at a boarding-school in the country; I do so detest London. And then it's not pleasant to be too poor to have things one should have at a public school."

"What may those be?" inquired the old gentleman.

"Oh, heaps of things. Pocket-money, for one thing. I was telling mother about it. I really should have more, if I'm to stay properly at school. There's Dick Colethorne, where I was staying last holidays—cousins of ours; he has six times what I have, and he's only two years older."

"And—is his mother a widow, and in somewhat restricted circumstances?" asked Mr. Byrne.

"Oh no," replied Geoff, unwarily. "His father's a very rich man; and Dick is the only child."

"All the same, begging Mr. Colethorne's pardon, if he were twenty times as rich as Cræsus, I think he's making a tremendous mistake in giving his boy a great deal of pocket-money," said Mr. Byrne.

"Well, of course, I shouldn't want as much as he has," said Geoff; "but still——"

"Geoffrey, my boy," said the old gentleman, rising as he spoke, "it strikes me you're getting on a wrong tack. But we'll have some more talk about all this. I don't want to keep your mother waiting, as I promised to talk some more to *her* this evening. So we'll go upstairs. Some day, perhaps, I'll tell you some of the experiences of *my* boyhood. I'm glad, by-the-by, to see that you don't take wine."

"No-o," said Geoff. "That's one of the things mother is rather fussy about. I'd like to talk about it with you, sir; I don't see but that at my age I might now and then take a glass of sherry—or of claret, even. It looks so foolish never to touch any. It's not that I *care* about it, you know."

"At your age?" repeated Mr. Byrne, slowly. "Well, Geoff—do you know, I don't quite agree with you. Nor do I see the fun of taking a thing you 'don't care about,' just for the sake of looking as if those who had the care of you didn't know what they were about."

They were half-way upstairs by this time. Geoff's face did not wear its pleasantest expression as they entered the drawing-room.

"He's a horrid old curmudgeon," he whispered to Vicky; "I believe Elsa's

been setting him against me."

Vicky looked at him with reproachful eyes. "Oh, Geoff," she said, "I do think he's so nice."

"You do, do you?" said he. "Well, I don't. I'll tell you what, Vicky; I've a great mind to run away. I do so hate this life. I work ever so much harder than most of the fellows, and I never get any thanks for it; and everything I want is grudged me. My umbrella's all in rags, and I'm ashamed to take it out; and if I was to ask mamma for a new one, they'd all be down on me again, you'd see."

"But you haven't had it long, Geoff," said Vic.

"I've had it nearly a year. You're getting as bad as the rest, Vicky," he said querulously.

He had forgotten that he was not alone in the room with his little sister, and had raised his tone, as he was too much in the habit of doing.

"Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" said a now well-known voice from the other side of the room; "what's all that about over there? You and Victoria can't be quarrelling, surely?"

Mrs. Tudor looked up anxiously.

"Oh no," said Vicky, eagerly; "we were only talking."

"And about what, pray?" persisted Mr. Byrne.

Vicky hesitated. She did not want to vex Geoff, but she was unused to any but straightforward replies.

"About Geoff's umbrella," she said, growing very red.

"About Geoff's umbrella?" repeated the old gentleman. "What could there be so interesting and exciting to say about Geoff's umbrella?"

"Only that I haven't got one—at least, mine's in rags; and if I say I need a new one, they'll all be down upon me for extravagance," said Geoff, as sulkily as he dared.

"My dear boy, don't talk in that dreadfully aggrieved tone," said his mother, trying to speak lightly. "You know I have never refused you anything you really require."

Geoffrey did not reply, at least not audibly. But Elsa's quick ears and some other ears besides hers—for it is a curious fact that old people, when they are not deaf, are often peculiarly the reverse—caught his muttered whisper.

"Of course. Always the way if *I* want anything."

Mr. Byrne did not stay late. He saw that Mrs. Tudor looked tired and depressed, and he did not wish to be alone with her to talk about Geoff, as she probably would have done, for he could not have spoken of the boy as she would have wished to hear.

A few days passed. Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot spent a part of each with the Tudor family, quietly making his observations. Geoff certainly did not show to advantage; and though his mother wore herself out with talking to him and trying to bring him to a more reasonable frame of mind, it was of no use. So at last she took Elsa's advice and left the discontented, tiresome boy to himself, for perhaps the first time in his life.

And every evening, when alone with Victoria, the selfish boy entertained his poor little sister with his projects of running away from a home where he was so little appreciated.

But a change came, and that in a way which Geoffrey little expected.

One evening when Mr. Byrne said "Good night," it struck him that his niece looked particularly tired.

"Make your mother go to bed at once, Elsa," he said, "I don't like her looks. If she's not better to-morrow, I must have a doctor to see her. And," he added in a lower tone still, "don't let Geoffrey go near her to-morrow morning. Has he bothered her much lately?"

"Mamma has left him alone. It was much the best thing to do," Elsa replied. "But all the same, I can see that it is making her very unhappy."

"Time something should be done; that's growing very plain," said Mr. Byrne. "Try and keep her quiet in the mean time, my dear. I have nearly made up my mind, and I'll tell you all about it to-morrow."

Elsa felt rather frightened.

"Great-uncle," she said, "I don't want to make silly excuses for Geoff, but it is true that he has never been quite so ill-natured and worrying as lately."

"Or perhaps you have never seen it so plainly," said the old gentleman. "But you needn't think I require to be softened to him, my dear; I am only thinking of his good. He's not a bad lad at bottom; there's good stuff in him. But he's ruining himself, and half killing your mother. Life's been too easy to him, as you've said yourself. He needs bringing to his senses."

Geoff slept soundly; moreover, his room was at the top of the house. He did not hear any disturbance that night—the opening and shutting of doors, the anxious whispering voices, the sound of wheels driving rapidly up to the door. He knew nothing of it all. For, alas! his tiresome, fidgety temper had caused him to be looked upon as no better than a sort of naughty child in the house—of no use or assistance, concerning whom every one's first thought in any trouble was, "We must manage to get Geoff out of the way, or to keep him quiet."

When he awoke it was still dark. But there was a light in his room—some one had come in with a candle. It was Elsa. He rubbed his eyes and looked at her with a strange unreal feeling, as if he were still dreaming. And when he saw her face, the unreal feeling did not go away. She seemed so unlike herself, in her long white dressing-gown, the light of the candle she was holding making her look so pale, and her eyes so strained and anxious—*was* it the candle, or was she really so very pale?



IT WAS ELSA.

"Elsa," he said sleepily, "what are you doing? What is the matter? Isn't it dreadfully late—or—or early for you to be up?" he went on confusedly.

"It's the morning," said Elsa, "but we haven't been in bed all night—Frances and I. At least, we had only been in bed half an hour or so, when we were called up."

"What was it?" asked Geoff, sleepily still. "Was the house on fire?"

"Oh, Geoff, don't be silly!" said Elsa; "it's—it's much worse. Mamma has been

so ill—she is still."

Geoff started up now.

"Do you want me to go for the doctor?" he said.

"The doctor has been twice already, and he's coming back at nine o'clock," she answered sadly. "He thought her a tiny bit better when he came the last time. But she's very ill—she must be kept most *exceedingly* quiet, and——"

"I'll get up now at once," said Geoff; "I won't be five minutes, Elsa. Tell mamma I'd have got up before if I'd known."

"But, Geoff," said Elsa, firmly, though reluctantly, "it's no use your hurrying up for that. You can't see her—you can't possibly see her before you go to school, anyway. The doctor says she is to be kept *perfectly* quiet, and not worried in any way."

"I wouldn't worry her, not when she's ill," said Geoff, hastily.

"You couldn't help it," said Elsa. "She—she was very worried about you last night, and she kept talking about your umbrella in a confused sort of way now and then all night. We quieted her at last by telling her we had given you one to go to school with. But if she saw you, even for an instant, she would begin again. The doctor said you were not to go into her room."

A choking feeling had come into Geoff's throat when Elsa spoke about the umbrella; a very little more and he would have burst into tears of remorse. But as she went on, pride and irritation got the better of him. He was too completely unused to think of or for any one before himself, to be able to do so all of a sudden, and it was a sort of relief to burst out at his sister in the old way.

"I think you're forgetting yourself, Elsa. Is mamma not as much to *me* as to you girls? Do you think. I haven't the sense to know how to behave when any one's ill? I tell you I just will and shall go to see her, whatever you say;" and he began dragging on his socks as if he were going to rush down to his mother's room that very moment.

Elsa grew still paler than she had been before.

"Geoff," she said, "you must listen to me. It was for that I came up to tell you. You must *not* come into mother's room. I'd do anything to prevent it, but I can't believe that you'll force me to quarrel with you this morning when—when we are all so unhappy. I don't want to make you more unhappy, but I can't help speaking plainly to you. You *have* worried mamma terribly lately, Geoff, and now you must bear the punishment. It's—it's as much as her life is worth for you to go into her room and speak to her this morning. I cannot allow it."

"*You* allow it!" burst out Geoff. "Are you the head of the house?"

"Yes," said Elsa, "when mamma is ill, I consider that I am. And what's more, Geoff, I have telegraphed to Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot. He made me promise to do so if mamma were ill. I expect him directly. It is past seven. Geoff, you had better dress and take your breakfast as usual. I will come down and tell you how mamma is the last thing before you go."

"I *will* see mamma before I go to school," he replied sharply. "I give you fair warning."

"Geoff," said Elsa, "you shall not."

And with these words she left the room.

"Humph!" said the old gentleman.





CHAPTER VI.

GEOFF "WON'T STAND IT."

Geoff hurried on with his dressing. He was wretchedly unhappy—all the more so because he was furiously angry with Elsa, and perhaps, at the bottom of his heart, with himself.

His room was, as I have said, at the top of the house. He did not hear the front-door bell ring while he was splashing in his bath; and as he rushed downstairs a quarter of an hour or so after Elsa had left him, he was considerably taken aback to be met at the foot of the first flight by the now familiar figure of Mr. Byrne.

"Geoffrey," he said quietly, "your sisters have gone to lie down and try to sleep for a little. They have been up all night, and they are likely to want all their strength. Go down to the school-room and get your breakfast. When you have finished, I will come to talk to you a little before you go to school."

Geoff glanced up. There was something in Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's face which made him feel there was no use in blustering or resisting.

"Very well," he said, putting as little expression in his voice as he could; and as Mr. Byrne turned away, the boy made his way down to the school-room.

It looked dreary and strange this morning. It was earlier than usual, and perhaps the room had been less carefully done, for Mrs. Tudor's illness had upset the whole household. The fire was only just lighted; the preparations for Geoff's breakfast were only half ready. It was a very chilly day; and as the boy sat down by the table, leaning his head on his hands, he shivered both with cold and unhappiness.

"They all hate me," he said to himself. "I've known it for a long time, but I've never been so sure of it before. It is much the best for me to go away. Mamma *has* cared for me; but they're making her leave off, and they'll set her entirely against me. She'll be far better and happier without me; and when she gets well—I dare say they have exaggerated her illness—they will have the pleasure of saying it's because I'm gone. There's only Vic who'll really care. But she won't mind so very much, either. I'll write to her now and then. I must think how best to do about going away. I hate the sea; there's no use thinking of that. I don't mind what I do, if it's in the country. I might go down to some farmhouse—one of those jolly farms where Dick and I used to get a glass of milk last summer. I wouldn't mind a bit, working on one of those farms. It would be much jollier than grinding away at school. And I am sure Dick and I did as much work as any haymakers last summer."

He had worked himself up into positively looking forward to the idea of leaving home. Vague ideas of how his mother and sisters would learn too late how little they had appreciated him; visions of magnanimously forgiving them all some day when he should have, in some mysterious way, become a landed proprietor, riding about his fields, and of inviting them all down into the country to visit him, floated before his brain. He ate his breakfast with a very good appetite; and when Mr. Byrne entered the room, he was surprised to see no look of sulkiness on the boy's face; though, on

the other hand, there were no signs of concern or distress.

"Is he really *heartless*?" thought the old man, with a pang of disappointment. "Am I mistaken in thinking the good material is there?"

"I want to talk to you, Geoff," he said. "You are early this morning. You need not start for twenty minutes or more."

"Am I to understand you intend to prevent me seeing my mother, sir?" said Geoff, in a peculiar tone.

Mr. Byrne looked at him rather sadly.

"It is not *I* preventing it," he said. "The doctor has left his orders."

"I understand," said Geoff, bitterly. "Well, it does not much matter. Mother and the others are not likely to see much more of me."

The old gentleman looked at him sharply.

"Are you thinking of running away?" he said.

"Not running away," said Geoffrey. "I'm not going to do it in any secret sort of way; but I've made up my mind to go. And now that mother has thrown me over too, I don't suppose any one will care."

"You've not been going the way to make any one care, it strikes me," said Mr. Byrne. "But I have something to say to you, Geoff. One thing which has helped to make your poor mother ill has been anxiety about money matters. I had not wished her to know of it; but it was told her by mistake. I myself have known for some time that things were going wrong. But now the worst has come——"



"I HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY TO YOU,
GEOFF."

"What is the worst?" asked Geoffrey. "Have we lost everything?"

"Yes," said Mr. Byrne, "I think that's about it."

"I think I should have been told this before," said Geoff.

"Well," said his uncle, "I'm not sure but that I agree with you. But your mother wished to save you as long as she could. And you have not borne small annoyances so well that she could hope for much comfort from you in a great trouble."

Geoff said nothing.

"I shall take care of your mother and sisters," Mr. Byrne went on.

"I am not even to be allowed to work for my mother, then?" said Geoffrey.

"At your age it will be as much as you can do to work for yourself," said the old man. "And as yet, you cannot even do that directly. You must go on with your education. I have found a school in the country where you will be well taught, and where you will not be annoyed by not being able to have all that your companions have, as you have so complained about."

"And who is to pay for my schooling?" asked the boy.

"I," replied Mr. Byrne.

"Thank you," said Geoffrey. His tone was not exactly disrespectful, but it was certainly not grateful. "I know I should thank you, but I don't want you to pay schooling or anything else for me. I shall manage for myself. It is much best for me to go away altogether. Even—even if this about our

money hadn't happened, I was already making up my mind to it."

Mr. Byrne looked at him.

"Legally speaking, your mother could stop your leaving her," he said.

"She is not likely to do so," replied the boy, "if she is so ill that she cannot even see me."

"Perhaps not," said the old gentleman. "I will send my servant to you at mid-day, to say how your mother is."

"Thank you," said Geoffrey again.

Then Mr. Byrne left the room, and Geoff went off to school.

He was in a strange state of mind. He hardly took in what he had been told of the state of his mother's money matters. He hardly indeed believed it, so possessed was he by the idea that there was a sort of plot to get rid of him.

"It isn't mother herself," he reflected. "It's all Elsa and Frances, and that horrid old Hoot-Toot. But as for going to any school *he'd* send me to—no, thank you."

He was standing about at noon with some of his companions, when the coloured servant appeared.

"Please, sir," he said, "I was to tell you that the lady is better—doctor say so;" and with a kind of salaam he waited to see what the young gentleman would reply.

"All right," said Geoff, curtly; and the man turned to go.

Geoff did not see that at the gates he stood still a moment speaking to another man, who appeared to have been waiting for him.

"That young gentleman with the dark hair. You see plain when I speak to him," he said in his rather broken English.

The other man nodded his head.

"I shall know him again, no fear. Tell your master it's all right," he said.

Geoff had to stand some chaff from his friends on the subject of the "darkey," of course. At another time he would rather have enjoyed it than otherwise; but to-day he was unable to take part in any fun.



HE STOOD STILL A MOMENT SPEAKING TO ANOTHER MAN.

"What a surly humour Tudor's in!" said one of the boys to another.

Geoff overheard it, and glared at him.

"I shan't be missed here either, it seems," he said to himself.

He did not notice that evening, when he went home, that a respectable unobtrusive-looking man, with the air of a servant out of livery, or something of that kind, followed him all the way, only turning back when he had seen the boy safe within his own door. And there, just within, faithful Vicky was awaiting him.

"I've been watching for you such a time, Geoff dear," she said. "Mamma's better. *Aren't* you glad? The doctor's been again, just about an hour ago, and he told me so as he went out."

"Have you seen her?" said Geoff, abruptly.

Vicky hesitated. She knew her answer would vex Geoff, and yet she could not say what was not true.

"I've only *just* seen her," she said. "Elsa just took me in for a moment. She has to be kept very, very quiet, Geoff. She'll have to be very quiet for a long time."

"You may as well speak plainly," said her brother. "I know what that means—I'm not to be allowed to see her for 'a very, very long time.' Oh yes, I quite understand."

He was in his heart thankful to know that his mother was better, but the relief only showed itself in additional ill-temper and indignation.

"Geoffrey dear, don't speak like that," said Vicky. "I wish I hadn't gone in to see mamma if you couldn't, but I didn't like to say so to Elsa. I know you didn't *mean* ever to vex mamma, and I'm sure you'll never do it again, when she gets better, will you? Would you like me just to run and tell Elsa and Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot how *dreadfully* you'd like to see her just for a minute? If you just peeped in, you know, and said 'Good night, mamma; I am so awfully glad you're better!' that would be better than nothing. Shall I, Geoff?"

"No," he replied gruffly. "I want to ask nothing. And I'm not sure that I *do* want dreadfully to see her. Caring can't be all on one side."

Vicky's eyes were full of tears by this time.

"Oh, Geoff!" was all she could say. "Mamma not care for you!"

Her distress softened him a little.

"Don't *you* cry about it, Vic," he said. "I do believe *you* care for me, anyway. You always will, won't you, Vicky?"

"Of course I shall," she sobbed, while some tears dropped into Geoff's teacup. They were in the school-room by this time, and Vicky was at her usual post.

"And some day," pursued Geoff, condescendingly, "perhaps we'll have a little house of our own, Vicky, in the country, you know; we'll have cocks and hens of our own, and always fresh eggs, of course, and strawberries, and——"

"Cream," suggested Vicky, her eyes gleaming with delight at the tempting prospect; "strawberries are nothing without cream."

"Of course," Geoff went on. "I was going to say cream, when you interrupted me. We'd have a cream-cow, Vicky."

"A cream-cow," Vicky repeated. "What's that?"

"Oh, I don't know exactly. But one often reads of a milk-cow, so I supposed there must be some cows that are all for cream, if some are for milk. I'll find out all about it when——" But he stopped short. "Never mind, Vicky. When I have a little farm of my own, in the country, I promise you I'll send for you to come and live with me."

"But you'll invite mamma and Elsa, and Francie too, Geoff; I wouldn't care to come without them," objected Vicky.

"Mamma; oh yes, if she likes to come. Perhaps Elsa and Frances will be married, and have houses of their own by then. I'm sure I hope so."

He had talked himself and Vicky into quite good spirits by this time. He was almost forgetting about his plan of running away. But it was soon

recalled to him. Elsa put her head in at the door.

"Vicky," she said, "you may come up to see mamma for a few minutes. Come now, quick, before Geoff comes home, or else he will begin about it again, and he just *must* not see her for some days. Mamma sees that he must not."

Geoff's face grew dark.

"Elsa," Vicky called out appealingly. But Elsa had already disappeared.

And then Geoffrey *quite* made up his mind.



CHAPTER VII.

A FORTUNATE CHANCE.

He was a sensible, practical enough boy in some ways. He thought it all well over that night, and made what preparations he could. He packed up the clothes he thought the most necessary and useful in an old carpet-bag he found in the box-room, and then he looked over his drawers and cupboards to see that all was left in order, and he put together some things to be sent to him in case he found it well to write for them.

Then he looked at his purse. He had, carefully stowed away, thirty shillings in gold, and of his regular pocket-money a two-shilling piece, a shilling, a threepenny bit, and some coppers. It was enough to take him some hours' distance out of London, where he would be quite as likely to find what he wanted, employment at some farmhouse, as farther away.

He did not sleep much that night. He was so anxious to be off early that he kept waking up every hour or two. At last, after striking a match to see what o'clock it was for perhaps the twentieth time, his watch told him it was past six. He got up and dressed, then he shouldered his bag, and made his way as quickly as he could downstairs. He could not resist lingering a moment outside his mother's door; it was slightly ajar, and there was a faint light within. Elsa's voice came to him as he stood there.

"I am *so* glad you are better this morning, dear mamma," she was saying. "I hoped you would be when I went to bed, at three o'clock. You were sleeping so peacefully. I am sure you will be quite well again soon, if we can manage to keep you quiet, and if you won't worry yourself. Everything is quite right."

Geoff's face hardened again.

"I know what all that means," he thought. "Yes, indeed, everything is so right that I, *I*, have to run away like a thief, because I am too miserable to bear it any more."

And he lingered no longer.

He made his way out of the house without difficulty. It was getting light after a fashion by this time, though it was quite half an hour earlier than he usually started for school. He felt chilly—chillier than he had ever felt before, though it was not a very cold morning. But going out breakfastless does not tend to make one feel warm, and of this sort of thing Geoff had but scant experience. His bag, too, felt very heavy; he glanced up and down the street with a vague idea that perhaps he would catch sight of some boy who, for a penny or two, would carry it for him to the omnibus; but there was no boy in sight. No one at all, indeed, except a young man, who crossed the street from the opposite side while Geoff was looking about him, and walked on slowly a little in front. He was a very respectable-looking young man, far too much so to ask him to carry the bag, yet as Geoff overtook him—for, heavy though it was, the boy felt he must walk quickly to get off as fast as possible—the young man glanced up with a good-natured smile.

"Excuse me, sir," he said civilly, "your bag's a bit heavy for you. Let me take hold of it with you, if we're going the same way."

Geoffrey looked at him doubtfully. He was too much of a Londoner to make friends hastily.

"Thank you," he said. "I can manage it. I'm only going to the corner to wait for the omnibus."

"Just precisely what I'm going to do myself," said the other. "I'm quite a stranger hereabouts. I've been staying a day or two with a friend of mine who keeps a livery stable, and I'm off for the day to Shalecray, to see another friend. Can you tell me, sir, maybe, if the omnibus that passes near here takes one to the railway station?"

"Which railway station?" said Geoff, more than half inclined to laugh at the stranger's evident countrifiedness.

"Victoria Station, to be sure. It's the one I come by. Isn't it the big station for all parts?"

"Bless you! no," said Geoff. "There are six or seven as big as it in London. What line is this place on?"

"That's more nor I can say," said the stranger, looking as if he would have scratched his head to help him out of his perplexity if he had had a hand free. But he had not, for he had caught up the bag, and was walking along beside Geoff, and under his arm he carried a very substantial alpaca umbrella. And in the interest of the conversation Geoff had scarcely noticed the way in which the stranger had, as it were, attached himself to him.

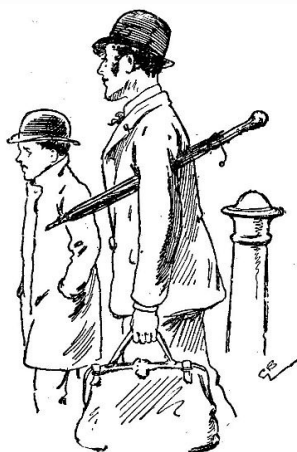
"Ah, well! never mind. I'm going to Victoria myself, and when we get there I'll look up your place and find you your train," said Geoff, patronizingly.

He had kept looking at the stranger, and as he did so, his misgivings disappeared.

"He is just a simple country lad," he said to himself. And, indeed, the young man's blue eyes, fresh complexion, and open expression would have reassured any but a *most* suspicious person.

"You're very kind, sir," he replied. "You see, London's a big place, and country folk feels half stupid-like in it."

"Yes, of course," said Geoff. "For my part, I often wonder any one that's free to do as they like cares to live in London. You're a great deal better off



WALKING ALONG BESIDE
GEOFF.

in the country."

"There's bads and goods everywhere, I take it, sir," said the young man, philosophically.

But by this time they had reached the corner where the omnibus started, and Geoff's attention was directed to hailing the right one. And an omnibus rattling over London stones is not exactly the place for conversation, so no more passed between them till they were dropped within a stone's throw of Victoria Station.

Geoff was beginning to feel very hungry, and almost faint as well as chilly.

"I say," he said to his companion, "you're not in any very desperate hurry to get off, are you? For I'm frightfully hungry. You don't mind waiting while I have some breakfast, do you? I'll look you out your train for that place as soon as I've had some."

"All right, sir," said the stranger. "If it wouldn't be making too free, I'd be pleased to join you. But I suppose you'll be going into the first-class?"

"Oh no," said Geoff. "I don't mind the second-class."

And into the second-class refreshment-room they went. They grew very friendly over hot coffee and a rasher of bacon, and then Geoff laid out threepence on a railway guide, and proceeded to hunt up Shalecray.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed. "And upon my word, that's a good joke. This place—Shalecray—is on the very line I'm going by. I wonder I never noticed it. I came up that way not long ago, from Entlefield."

"Indeed, sir; that's really curious," said the countryman. "And are you going to Entlefield to-day?"

"Well," said Geoff, "I fancy so. I've not quite made up my mind, to tell the truth. I know the country about there. I want to find some—some farmhouse."

"Oh, exactly—I understand," interrupted the young man. "You want somewhere where they'll put you up tidily for a few days—just for a breath of country air."

"Well, no; not exactly," said Geoffrey. "The fact is, I'm looking out for—for some sort of situation about a farm. I'm very fond of country life. I don't care what I do. I'm not a fine gentleman!"

The countryman looked at him with interest.

"I see," he said. "You're tired of town, I take it, sir. But what do your friends say to it, sir? At sixteen, or even seventeen, you have still to ask leave, I suppose?"

"Not always," said Geoff. "I've made no secret of it. I've no father, and—I'm pretty much my own master."

"I care for nobody, and nobody cares for me,' eh?" quoted the young man, laughing.

"Something like it, I suppose," said Geoff, laughing too, though rather forcedly. For a vision of Vicky, sobbing, perhaps, over her lonely breakfast, would come before him—of Elsa and Frances trying how to break to their mother the news that Geoff had really run away. "They'll soon get over it," he said to himself. "They've got that old curmudgeon to console them, and I don't want to live on *his* money."

"Do you think I can easily find a place of some kind?" he went on, after a pause.

The countryman this time did scratch his head, while he considered.

"How old may you be, sir? Sixteen or seventeen, maybe?" he inquired.

"I'm not so much; I'm only fourteen," said Geoff, rather reluctantly.

"Really! now, who'd 'a' thought it?" said his new friend, admiringly. "You'll be just the man for a country life when you're full-grown. Not afraid of roughing it? Fond of riding, I dare say?"

"Oh yes," said Geoff. "At least, in town of course I haven't had as much of it as I'd like." He had never ridden in his life, except the previous summer, on a peculiarly gentle old pony of Mrs. Colethorne's.

"No, in course not. Well now, sir, if you'd no objection to stopping at Shalecray with me, it strikes me my friend there, Farmer Eames, might likely enough know of something to suit you. He's a very decent fellow—a bit rough-spoken, maybe. But you're used to country ways—you'd not mind that."

"Oh, not a bit!" said Geoff. "I'm much obliged to you for thinking of it. And you say it's possible—that this Farmer Eames may perhaps have a place that I should do for?"

"Nay, sir, I can't say that. It's just a chance. I only said he'd maybe know of something."

"Well, I don't see that it will do any harm to ask him. I'll only take a ticket to Shalecray, then. I can go on farther later in the day if I don't find anything to suit me there. We'd better take the first train—a quarter to nine. We've still twenty minutes or so to wait."

"Yes, there's plenty of time—time for a pipe. You don't object, sir? But, bless me"—and he felt in his pockets one after the other—"if I haven't forgotten my 'bacca! With your leave, sir, I'll run across the street to fetch some. I saw a shop as we came in."

"Very well," said Geoff; "I'll wait here. Don't be too late."

He had no particular fancy for going to buy cheap tobacco in the company of the very rustic-looking stranger. Besides, he thought it safer to remain quiet in a dark corner of the waiting-room.

It was curious that, though the countryman came back with a well-filled tobacco-pouch, he had not left the station! He only disappeared for a minute or two into the telegraph office, and the message he there indited was as follows:—

"Got him all safe. Will report further this evening."

And ten minutes later the two were ensconced in a third-class carriage, with tickets for Shalecray.

Geoff had often travelled second, but rarely third. He did not, truth to tell, particularly like it. Yet he could not have proposed anything else to his companion, unless he had undertaken to pay the difference. And as it was, the breakfast and his own third-class ticket had made a considerable hole in his thirty shillings. He must be careful, for even with all his inexperience he knew it was *possible* he might have to pay his own way for some little time to come.

"Still, the chances are I shall find what I want very easily," he reflected. "It is evidently not difficult, by what this fellow tells me."

It did not even strike him as in any way a very remarkable coincidence that almost on the doorstep of his own home he should have lighted upon the very person he needed to give him the particular information he was in

want of. For in many ways, in spite of his boasted independence, poor Geoff was as innocent and unsuspecting as a baby.



CHAPTER VIII.

"HALF-A-CROWN A WEEK AND HIS VICTUALS."

Shalecray was a small station, where no very considerable number of trains stopped in the twenty-four hours. It was therefore a slow train by which Geoffrey Tudor and his new friend travelled; so, though the distance from London was really short, it took them fully two hours to reach their destination. And two hours on a raw drizzly November morning is quite a long enough time to spend in a third-class carriage, shivering if the windows are down, and suffering on the other hand from the odours of damp fustian and bad tobacco if they are up.

Cold as it was, it seemed pleasant in comparison when they got out at last, and were making their way down a very muddy, but really country lane. Geoff gave a sort of snort of satisfaction.

"I do love the country," he said.

His companion looked at him curiously.

"I believe you, sir," he replied. "You must like it, to find it pleasant in November," he went on, with a tone which made Geoff glance at him in surprise. Somehow in the last few words the countryman's accent seemed to have changed a little. Geoff could almost have fancied there was a cockney twang about it.

"Why, don't *you* like it?" said Geoff. "You said you were lost and miserable in town."

"Of course, sir. What else could I be? I'm country born and bred. But it's not often as a Londoner takes to it as you do, and it's not to say lively at this time, and"—he looked down with a grimace—"the lanes is uncommon muddy."

"How far is it to your friend's place?" Geoff inquired, thinking to himself that if *he* were to remark on the mud it would not be surprising, but that it was rather curious for his companion to do so.

"A matter of two mile or so," Jowett—for Ned Jowett, he had told Geoff, was his name—replied; "and now I come to think of it, perhaps it'd be as well for you to leave your bag at the station. I'll see that it's all right; and as you're not sure of stopping at Crickwood, there's no sense in carrying it there and maybe back again for nothing. I'll give it in charge to the station-master, and be back in a moment."

He had shouldered it and was hastening back to the station almost before Geoff had time to take in what he said. The boy stood looking after him vaguely. He was beginning to feel tired and a little dispirited. He did not feel as if he could oppose anything just then.

"If he's a cheat and he's gone off with my bag, I just can't help it," he

thought. "He won't gain much. Still, he looks honest."

And five minutes later the sight of the young man's cheery face as he hastened back removed all his misgivings.

"All right, sir," he called out. "It'll be quite safe; and if by chance you hit it off with Mr. Eames, the milk-cart that comes to fetch the empty cans in the afternoon can bring the bag too."

They stepped out more briskly after that. It was not such a very long walk to the farm, though certainly more than the two miles Jowett had spoken of. As they went on, the country grew decidedly pretty, or perhaps it would be more correct to say one saw that in summer and pleasant weather it must be very pretty. Geoff, however, was hardly at the age for admiring scenery much. He looked about him with interest, but little more than interest.

"Are there woods about here?" he asked suddenly. "I do like woods."

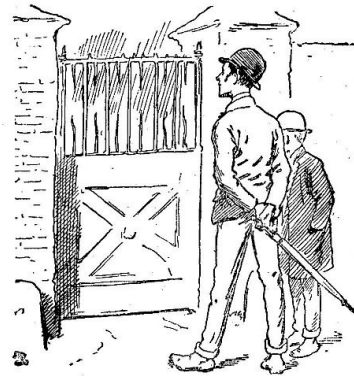
Jowett hesitated.

"I don't know this part of the country not to say so very well," he replied. "There's some fine gentlemen's seats round about, I believe. Crickwood Bolders, now, is a fine place—we'll pass by the park wall in a minute; it's the place that Eames's should by rights be the home farm to, so to say. But it's been empty for a many years. The family died down till it come to a distant cousin who was in foreign parts, and he let the farm to Eames, and the house has been shut up. They do speak of his coming back afore long."

Geoff looked out for the park of which Jowett spoke; they could not see much of it, certainly, without climbing the wall, for which he felt no energy. But a little farther on they came to gates, evidently a back entrance, and they stood still for a moment or two and looked in.

"Yes," said Geoff, gazing over the wide expanse of softly undulating ground, broken by clumps of magnificent old trees, which at one side extended into a fringe skirting the park for miles apparently, till it melted in the distance into a range of blue-topped hills—"yes, it must be a fine place indeed. That's the sort of place, now, I'd like to own, Jowett."

He spoke more cordially again, for Jowett's acquaintance with the neighbourhood had destroyed a sort of misgiving that had somehow come over him as to whether his new friend were perhaps "taking him in altogether."



THEY STOOD STILL FOR A MOMENT OR TWO.

"I believe you," said the countryman, laughing loudly, as if Geoff's remark had been a very good joke indeed. Geoff felt rather nettled.

"And why shouldn't I own such a place, pray?" he said haughtily. "Such things, when one is a *gentleman*, are all a matter of chance, as you know. If my father, or my grandfather, rather, had not been a younger son, I should have been—"

Ned Jowett turned to him rather gravely.

"I didn't mean to offend you, sir," he said. "But you must remember you're taking up a different line from that. Farmer Eames, or farmer nobody, wouldn't engage a farm hand that expected to be treated as a gentleman. It's not my fault, sir. 'Twas yourself told me what you wished."

Geoff was silent for a moment or two. It was not easy all at once to make up his mind to *not* being a gentleman any more, and yet his common sense told him that Jowett was right; it must be so. Unless, indeed, he gave it all

up and went back home again to eat humble pie, and live on Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's bounty, and go to some horrid school of his choosing, and be more "bullied" (so he expressed it to himself) than ever by his sisters, and scarcely allowed to see his mother at all. The silent enumeration of these grievances decided him. He turned round to Jowett with a smile.

"Yes," he said; "I was forgetting. You must tell Farmer Eames he'll not find any nonsense about me."

"All right, sir. But, if you'll excuse me, I'd best perhaps drop the 'sir'?"

Geoff nodded.

"And that reminds me," Jowett went on, "you've not told me your name—leastways, what name you wish me to give Eames. We're close to his place now;" and as he spoke he looked about him scrutinizingly. "Ten minutes past the back way through the park you'll come to a lane on the left. Eames's farm is the first house you come to on the right," he repeated to himself, too low for Geoff to hear. "Yes, I can't be wrong."

"You can call me Jim—Jim Jeffreys," said the boy. "He needn't be afraid of getting into any trouble if he takes me on. I've no father, and my mother won't worry about me," he added bitterly.

The entrance to the lane just then came in sight.

"This here's our way," said Jowett. "Supposing I go on a bit in front. I think it would be just as well to explain to Eames about my bringing you."

"All right," said Geoff. "I'll come on slowly. Where is the farm?"

"First house to the right; you can't miss it. But I'll come back to meet you again."

He hurried on, and Geoff followed slowly. He was hungry now as well as cold and tired—at least, he supposed he must be hungry, he felt so dull and stupid. What should he do if Farmer Eames could not take him on? he began to ask himself; he really felt as if it would be impossible for him to set off on his travels again like a tramp, begging for work all over the country. And for the first time it began faintly to dawn upon him that he had acted very foolishly.

"But it's too late now," he said to himself; "I'd die rather than go home and ask to be forgiven, and be treated by them all as if I deserved to be sent to prison. I've got enough money to keep me going for a day or two, anyway. If it was summer—haymaking-time, for instance, I suppose it would be easy enough to get work. But now—" and he shivered as he gazed over the bare, dreary, lifeless-looking fields on all sides, where it was difficult to believe that the green grass could ever spring again, or the golden grain wave in the sunshine—"I really wonder what work there can be to do in the winter. The ground's as hard as iron; and oh, my goodness, isn't it cold?"

Suddenly some little way in front he descried two figures coming towards him. The one was Jowett; the other, an older, stouter man, must be Farmer Eames. Geoff's heart began to beat faster. Would he be met by a refusal, and told to make his way back to the station? And if so, where would he go, what should he do? It had all seemed so easy when he planned it at home—he had felt so sure he would find what he wanted at once; he had somehow forgotten it would no longer be summer when he got out into the country again! For the first time in his life he realized what hundreds, nay, thousands of boys, no older than he, must go through every day—poor homeless fellows, poor and homeless through no fault of their own in many cases.

"If ever I'm a rich man," thought Geoff, "I'll think of to-day."

And his anxiety grew so great that by the time the two men had come up

to him his usually ruddy face had become almost white.

Jowett looked at him curiously.

"You look uncommon cold, Jim," he said. "This 'ere's Jim Jeffreys as I've been a-talking to you of, Mr. Eames," he said, by way of introduction to the farmer.

"Ah, indeed!" Farmer Eames replied; "seems a well-grown lad, but looks delicate. Is he always so white-like?"

"Bless you! no," said Jowett; "he's only a bit done up with—with one thing and another. We made a hearty start of it, and it's chilly this morning."

The farmer grunted a little.

"He'd need to get used to starting early of a morning if he was to be any use to me," he said half-grudgingly. But even this sounded hopeful to Geoff.

"Oh, I don't mind getting up early," he said quickly. "I'm not used to lying in bed late."

"There's early *and* early," said the farmer. "What I might take you on trial for would be to drive the milk-cart to and fro the station. There's four sendings in all—full and empty together. And the first time is for the up-train that passes Shalecray at half-past five."

Geoff shivered a little. But it would not do to seem daunted.

"I'll be punctual," he said.

"And of course, between times you'd have to make yourself useful about the dairy, and the pigs—you'd have to see to the pigs, and to make yourself useful," repeated the farmer, whose power of expressing himself was limited.

"Of course," agreed Geoff as heartily as he could, though, truth to tell, the idea of pigs had not hitherto presented itself to him.

"Well," Farmer Eames went on, turning towards Jowett, "I dunno as I mind giving him a trial, seeing as I'm just short of a boy as it happens. And for the station work, it's well to have a sharpish lad, and a civil-spoken one. You'll have to keep a civil tongue in your head, my boy—eh?"

"Certainly," said Geoff, but not without a slight touch of haughtiness. "Of course I'll be civil to every one who's civil to me."

"And who isn't civil to thee, maybe, now and then," said the farmer, with a rather curious smile. "'Twon't be all walking on roses—nay, 'twon't be all walking on roses to be odd boy in a farm. But there's many a one as'd think himself uncommon lucky to get the chance, I can tell you."

"Oh, and so I do," said Geoff, eagerly. "I do indeed. I think it's awfully good of you to try me; and you'll see I'm not afraid of work."

"And what about his character?" said the farmer, speaking again to Jowett. "Can you answer for his honesty?—that's the principal thing."

Geoff's cheeks flamed, and he was starting forward indignantly, when a word or two whispered, sternly almost, in his ear by Jowett, forced him to be quiet. "Don't be an idiot! do you want to spoil all your chances?" he said. And something in the tone again struck Geoff with surprise. He could scarcely believe it was the simple young countryman who was speaking.

"I don't think you need be uneasy on that score," he said. "You see it's all come about in a rather—uncommon sort of way."

"I should rather think so," said the farmer, shrugging his shoulders, but

smiling too.

"And," pursued Jowett, "you'll have to stretch a point or two. Of course he'll want very little in the way of wages to begin."

"Half-a-crown a week and his victuals," replied the farmer, promptly. "And he must bind himself for three months certain—I'm not going to be thrown out of a boy at the orkardest time of the year for getting 'em into sharp ways. And I can't have no asking for holidays for three months, either."

Jowett looked at Geoff.

"Very well," said Geoff.

"And you must go to church reg'lar," added the farmer. "You can manage it well enough, and Sunday school, too, if you're sharp—there's only twice to the station on Sundays."

"On Sundays, too?" repeated Geoff. Sundays at worst had been a day of no work at home.

"To be sure," said Eames, sharply. "Beasts can't do for themselves on Sundays no more than any other day. And Londoners can't drink sour milk on Sundays neither."

"No," said Geoff, meekly enough. "Of course I'm used to church," he added, "but I think I'm rather too old for the Sunday school."

"I'll leave that to the parson," said the farmer. "Well, now then, we may as well see if dinner's not ready. It's quite time, and you'll be getting hungry, Mr. Jowett," he added, with a slight hesitation.

"Why not call me Ned? You're very high in your manners to-day, Eames," said the other, with a sort of wink.

Then they both laughed and walked on, leaving Geoff to follow. Nothing was said about *his* being hungry.

"Perhaps *I* shall be expected to dine with the pigs," he thought.



CHAPTER IX.

PIGS, ETC.

Ht was not quite so bad as that, however. Farmer Eames turned in at the farmyard gate and led the two strangers into a good-sized kitchen, where the table was already set, in a homely fashion, for dinner. A stout, middle-aged woman, with a rather sharp face, turned from the fire, where she was superintending some cooking.

"Here we are again, wife," said Eames. "Glad to see dinner's ready. Take a chair, Mr. Ned. You'll have a glass of beer to begin with?" and as he poured it out, "This here's the new boy, missis—I've settled to give him a trial."

Mrs. Eames murmured something, which Geoff supposed must have been intended as a kind of welcome. She was just then lifting a large pan of potatoes off the fire, and as she turned her face to the light, Geoff noticed that it was very red—redder than a moment before. He could almost have fancied the farmer's wife was shy.

"Shall I help you?" he exclaimed, darting forward to take hold of the pan.

Eames burst out laughing.

"That's a good joke," he said. "He knows which side his bread's buttered on, does this 'ere young fellow."

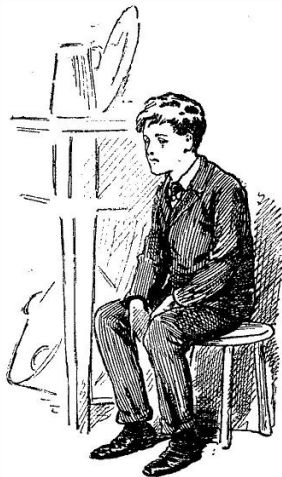
Geoff grew scarlet, and some angry rejoinder was on his lips, when Jowett, who to his great indignation was laughing too, clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come, my boy, there's naught to fly up about. Eames must have his joke."

"I see naught to laugh at," said Mrs. Eames, who had by this time shaken the potatoes into a large dish that stood ready to receive them; "the lad meant it civil enough."

"You're not to spoil him now, wife," said her husband. "It's no counter-jumpers' ways we want hereabouts. Sit thee down, Ned; and Jim, there, you can draw the bench by the door a bit nearer the dresser, and I'll give you some dinner by-and-by."

Geoff, his heart swelling, did as he was bid. He sat quietly enough, glad of the rest and the warmth, till Mr. and Mrs. Eames and their guest were all helped, and had allayed the first sharp edge of their appetites. But from time to time the farmer's wife glanced at Geoff uneasily, and once, he felt sure, he saw her nudge her husband.



HE SAT QUIETLY ENOUGH.

"She means to be kind," thought the boy.

And her kindness apparently had some effect. The farmer looked round, after a deep draught of beer, and pushed his tankard aside.

"Will you have a sup, Jim?" he said good-naturedly. "I can't promise it you every day; but for once in a way."

"No, thank you," Geoff replied. "I never take beer; moth—" but he stopped suddenly.

"As you like," said the farmer; "but though you're not thirsty, I dare say you're hungry."

He cut off a slice of the cold meat before him, and put it on a plate with some potatoes, and a bit of dripping from a dish on the table. The slice of meat was small in proportion to the helping of potatoes; but Geoff was faint with hunger. He took the plate, with the steel-pronged fork and coarse black-handled knife, and sat down again by the dresser to eat. But, hungry though he was, he could not manage it all. Half-way through, a sort of miserable choky feeling came over him: he thought of his meals at home—the nice white tablecloth, the sparkling glass and silver, the fine china—and all seemed to grow misty before his eyes for a minute or two; he almost felt as if he were going to faint, and the voices at the table sounded as if they came from the other side of the Atlantic. He

drank some water—for on his refusing beer, Mrs. Eames had handed him a little horn mug filled with water; *it* was as fresh and sweet as any he had ever tasted, and he tried at the same time to swallow down his feelings. And by the time that the farmer stood up to say grace, he felt pretty right again.

"And what are you going to be about, Eames?" said Jowett. "I'll walk round the place with you, if you like. I must take the four train up again."

"All right," the farmer replied; "Jim can take you to the station when he goes to fetch the cans. You'll see that he doesn't come to grief on the way. Do 'ee know how to drive a bit?"

"Oh yes," replied Geoff, eagerly. "I drove a good deal last summer at—in the country. And I know I was very fond of it."

"Well," said the farmer, drily, "you'll have enough of it here. But the pony's old; you mustn't drive him too fast. Now, I'll tell one of the men to show you the yard, and the pig-sties, and the missis'll show you where she keeps the swill-tub. It'll want emptying—eh, wife?"

"It do that," she replied. "But he must change his clothes afore he gets to that dirty work. Those are your best ones, ain't they?"

Geoff looked down at his suit. It was not his best, for he had left his Eton jackets and trousers behind him. The clothes he had on were a rough tweed suit he had had for the country; he had thought them very far from best. But now it struck him that they did look a great deal too good for feeding the pigs in.

"I've got an older pair of trousers in my bag," he said; "but this is my oldest jacket."

"He should have a rougher one," said Mrs. Eames. "I'll look out; maybe there's an old coat of George's as'd make down."

"All right," said Eames. "But you've no need of a coat at all to feed the pigs in. Whoever heard o' such a thing?"

Just then a voice was heard at the door.

"I'm here, master," it said, "fur the new boy."

"All right," said Eames; and, followed by Geoff, in his shirt-sleeves by this time, he led the way to the farmyard.

It was interesting, if only it had not been so cold. Matthew, the man, was not very communicative certainly, and it seemed to the new boy that he eyed him with some disfavour. Eames himself just gave a few short directions, and then went off with Jowett.

"Them's the stables," said Matthew, jerking his thumb towards a row of old buildings, "and them's the cow-houses," with a jerk the other way. "Old pony's with master's mare, as he drives hisself. I've nought to say to pony; it's your business. And I'll want a hand with cart-horses and plough-horses. Young folks has no call to be idle."

"I don't mean to be idle," said Geoff; "but if Mr. Eames doesn't find fault with me, *you've* no call to do so either."

He spoke more valiantly than he felt, perhaps, for Matthew's stolid face and small, twinkling eyes were not pleasant. He muttered something, and then went grumbling across the yard towards a wall, from behind which emanated an odour which required no explanation.

"Them's pigs," said he. Matthew had a curious trick of curtailing his phrases as his temper waxed sourer. Articles, prepositions, and auxiliary

verbs disappeared, till at last his language became a sort of spoken hieroglyphics.

Geoff looked over the pig-sty wall. Grunt, grumph, snort—out they all tumbled, one on the top of the other, making for the trough. Poor things! it was still empty. Geoff could hardly help laughing, and yet he felt rather sorry for them.

"I'll go and fetch their dinner," he said. "I don't mind pigs; but they are awfully dirty."

"Ax the missus for soap to wash 'em," said Matthew, with a grin. He hadn't yet made up his mind if the new boy was sharp or not.

"No," said Geoff, "I'll not do that till the first of April; but I'll tell you what, Matthew, I'll not keep them as dirty as they are. And I should say that the chap that's been looking after them is a very idle fellow." Matthew scowled. "Pigs don't *need* to be so dirty," Geoff went on. "I know at Cole——" But he stopped abruptly. He was certainly not going to take Matthew into his confidence. He asked to be shown the pony—poor old pony! it didn't look as if it would be over "sperrity"—and then he went back to the house to fetch the pigs' dinner.

Very hot, instead of cold, he was by the time he had carried across pail after pail of Mrs. Eames's "swill," and emptied it into the barrel which stood by the sty. It wasn't savoury work, either, and the farmer's wife made a kind of excuse for there being so much of it. "Matthew were that idle," and they'd been a hand short the last week or two. But Geoff wasn't going to give in; there was a sort of enjoyment in it when it came to the actual feeding of the pigs, and for their digestion's sake, it was well that the farmer's wife warned him that there *might* be such a thing as over-feeding, even of pigs. He would have spent the best part of the afternoon in filling the trough and watching them squabble over it.

He was tired and hot, and decidedly dirtier-looking than could have been expected, when Eames and Jowett came back from the fields.

"Time to get the pony to!" shouted the farmer. Geoff turned off to the stable. He wanted to manage the harnessing alone; but, simple as it was, he found it harder than it looked, and he would have been forced to apply to Matthew, had not Jowett strolled into the stable. He felt sorry for the boy, sorrier than he thought it well to show, when he saw his flushed face and trembling hands, and in a trice he had disentangled the mysteries of buckles and straps, and got all ready.

"Been working hard?" he said good-naturedly. "Seems a bit strange at first."

"I don't mind the work; but—it does all seem very rough," said Geoff.

There was a slight quiver in his voice, but Jowett said no more till they were jogging along on their way to the station. Geoff's spirits had got up a little again by this time. He liked to feel the reins between his fingers, even though the vehicle was only a milk-cart, and the steed a sadly broken-winded old gray pony; and he was rather proud at having managed to steer safely through the yard gate, as to which, to tell the truth, he had felt a little nervous.

"Is there anything I can do for you on my way through town?" asked Jowett. "I'll be in your part of the world to-night."

"Are you going to sleep at the livery stables?" asked Geoff.

Jowett nodded.

"I wish——" began the boy. "If I'd thought of it, I'd have written a letter for you to post in London. But there's no time now."

Jowett looked at his watch—a very good silver watch it was—"I don't know that," he said. "I can get you a piece of paper and an envelope at the station, and I'll see that your letter gets to—wherever it is, at once."

"Thank you," said Geoff. "And Jowett"—he hesitated. "You've been very good to me—would you mind one thing more? There's some one I would like to hear from sometimes, but I don't want to give my address. Could I tell them—her—it's my sister—to write to your place, and you to send it to me?"

"To be sure," said Jowett. "But I won't give my address in the country. You just say to send on the letter to the care of

'MR. ABEL SMITH,
LIVERY STABLES,
MOWBRAY PLACE MEWS,'

and I'll see it comes straight to you. You won't want to give your name maybe? Just put 'Mr. James, care of Abel Smith.'"

"Thank you," said Geoff, with a sigh of relief. "You see," he went on, half apologetically, "there's some one ill at home, and I'd like to know how—how they are."

"To be sure," said Jowett again; "it's only natural. And however bad one's been treated by one's people—and it's easy to see they must have treated you *on*common badly to make a young gent like you have to leave his home and come down to work for his living like a poor boy, though I respects you for it all the more—still own folks is own folks."

He cast a shrewd glance at Geoff, as he spoke. The boy could not help colouring. Had he been treated so "oncommon badly"? Was his determination to run away and be independent of Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's assistance a real manly resolution, or not rather a fit of ill-tempered boyish spite? Would he not have been acting with far more true independence by accepting gratefully the education which would have fitted him for an honourable career in his own rank? for Mr. Byrne, as he knew well by his mother's trust in the old gentleman, was not one to have thrown him aside had he been worthy of assistance.

"But anyway, it's done now," thought the boy, choking down the feelings which began to assert themselves.

At the station, Jowett was as good as his word. He got the paper and a pencil, and Geoff wrote a short note to Vicky, just to tell her he was "all right," and enclosing the address to which she was to write. And Jowett undertook that she should have it that same evening. Had the boy been less preoccupied he could not but have been struck by the curious inconsistencies in the young countryman, who, when he had first met him that morning, had seemed scarcely able to find his way to the station, and yet, when occasion arose, had shown himself as sharp and capable as any Londoner.

But as it was, when the train had whizzed off again, he only felt as if his last friend had deserted him. And it was a very subdued and home-sick Geoffrey who, in the chilly, misty autumn evening, drove the old pony through the muddy lanes to the farm, the empty milk-cans rattling in the cart behind him, and the tears slowly coursing down his cheeks now there was no one to see them.





CHAPTER X.

POOR GEOFF!

He drove into the yard, where Matthew's disagreeable face and voice soon greeted him. Half forgetting himself, Geoff threw the reins on to the pony's neck and jumped out of the cart, with his carpet-bag.

He was making his way into the house, feeling as if even the old bag was a kind of comfort in its way, when the farm-man called him back.

"Dost think I's to groom pony?" he said ill-naturedly. "May stand till doomsday afore I'll touch him."



MATTHEW, THE MAN.

Geoff turned back. Of course, he ought to have remembered it was his work, and if Matthew had spoken civilly he would even have thanked him for the reminder—more gratefully, I dare say, than he had often thanked Elsa or Frances for a hint of some forgotten duty. But, as it was, it took some self-control not to "fly out," and to set to work, tired as he was, to groom the pony and put him up for the night. It was all so strange and new too; at Colethorne's he had watched the stablemen at their work, and thought it looked easy and amusing, but when it came to doing it, it seemed a very different thing, especially in the dusk, chilly evening, and feeling as he did both tired and hungry. He did his best, however, and the old pony was very patient, poor beast, and Geoff's natural love of animals stood him in good stead; he could never have relieved his own depression by ill temper to any dumb creature. And at last old Dapple was made as comfortable as Geoff knew how, for Matthew took care to keep out of the way, and to offer no help or advice, and the boy turned towards the house, carpet-bag in hand.

The fire was blazing brightly in the kitchen, and in front of it sat the farmer, smoking a long clay pipe, which to Geoff smelt very nasty. He coughed, to attract Mr. Eames's attention.

"I've brought my bag from the station," he said. "Will you tell me where I'm to sleep?"

The farmer looked up sharply.

"You've brought the milk-cans back, too, I suppose? Your bag's not the principal thing. Have you seen to Dapple?"

"Yes," said Geoff, and his tone was somewhat sulky.

Eames looked at him again, and still more sharply.

"I told you at the first you were to keep a civil tongue in your head," he said. "You'll say 'sir' when you speak to me."

But just then Mrs. Eames fortunately made her appearance.

"Don't scold him—he's only a bit strange," she said. "Come with me, Jim, and I'll show you your room."

"Thank you," said the boy, gratefully.

Mrs. Eames glanced at her husband, as much as to say she was wiser than he, and then led the way out of the kitchen down a short, flagged passage, and up a short stair. Then she opened a door, and, by the candle she held, Geoff saw a very small, very bare room. There was a narrow bed in one corner, a chair, a window-shelf, on which stood a basin, and a cupboard in the wall.

Mrs. Eames looked round. "It's been well cleaned out since last boy went," she said. "Master and me'll look in now and then to see that you keep it clean. Cupboard's handy, and there's a good flock mattress." Then she gave him the light, and turned to go.

"Please," said Geoff, meekly, "might I have a piece of bread? I'm rather hungry." It was long past his usual tea-time.

"To be sure!" she replied. "You've not had your tea? I put it on the hob for you." And the good woman bustled off again.

Geoff followed her, after depositing his bag in the cupboard. She poured out the tea into a bowl, and ladled in a good spoonful of brown sugar. Then she cut a hunch off a great loaf, and put it beside the bowl on the dresser. Geoff was so hungry and thirsty, that he attacked both tea and bread, though the former was coarse in flavour, and the latter butterless. But it was not the quality of the food that brought back again that dreadful choking in his throat, and made the salt tears drop into the bowl of tea. It was the thought of tea-time at home—the neat table, and Vicky's dear, important-looking little face, as she filled his cup, and put in the exact amount of sugar he liked—that came over him suddenly with a sort of rush. He felt as if he could not bear it. He swallowed down the tea with a gulp, and rammed the bread into his pocket. Then, doing his utmost to look unconcerned, he went up to the farmer.

"Shall I go to bed now, please, sir?" he said, with a little hesitation at the last word. "I'm—I'm rather tired."

"Go to bed?" repeated Eames. "Yes, I suppose so. You must turn out early—the milk must be at the station by half-past five."

"How shall I wake?" asked Geoff, timidly.

"Wake? You'll have to learn to wake like others do. However, for the first, I'll tell Matthew to knock you up."

"Thank you. Good-night, sir."

"Good-night." And the farmer turned again to the newspaper he was reading.

"You'll find your bed well aired. I made Betsy see to that," called out Mrs. Eames.

"Thank you," said Geoff again, more heartily this time. But he overheard Eames grumbling at his wife as he left the room, telling her "he'd have none of that there coddling of the lad."

"And you'd have him laid up with rheumatics—dying of a chill? That'd be a nice finish up to it all. You know quite well—" But Geoff heard no more. And he was too worn-out and sleepy to think much of what he had heard.

He got out what he required for the night. He wondered shiveringly how it would be possible to wash with only a basin. Water he was evidently expected to fetch for himself. He tried to say his prayers, but fell asleep, the

tears running down his face, in the middle, and woke up with a sob, and at last managed somehow to tumble into bed. It was very cold, but, as Mrs. Eames had said, quite dry. The chilly feeling woke him again, and he tried once more to say his prayers, and this time with better success. He was able to add a special petition that "mother" might soon be well again, and that dear Vicky might be happy. And then he fell asleep—so soundly, so heavily, that when a drumming at the door made itself heard, he fancied he had only just begun the night. He sat up. Where was he? At first, in the darkness, he thought he was in his own bed at home, and he wondered who was knocking so roughly—wondered still more at the rude voice which was shouting out—

"Up with you there, Jim, d'ye hear? I'm not a-going to stand here all day. It's past half-past four. Jim—you lazy lout. I'll call master if you don't speak—a-locking of his door like a fine gentleman!"

Gradually Geoff remembered all—the feeling of the things about him—the coarse bed-clothes, the slightly mildewy smell of the pillow, helped to recall him to the present, even before he could see.

"I'm coming, Matthew!" he shouted back. "I'll be ready in five minutes;" and out of bed he crept, sleepy and confused, into the chilly air of the little room. He had no matches, but there was a short curtain before the window, and when he pulled it back the moonlight came faintly in—enough for him to distinguish the few objects in the room. He dared not attempt to wash, he was so afraid of being late. He managed to get out his oldest pair of trousers, and hurried on his clothes as fast as he could, feeling miserably dirty and slovenly, and thinking to himself he would never again be hard on poor people for not being clean! "I must try to wash when I come back," he said to himself. Then he hurried out, and none too soon.



KNOCKING SO ROUGHLY.

Matthew was in the yard, delighted to frighten him. "You'll have to look sharp," he said, as Geoff hurried to the stable. "Betsy's filling the cans, and rare and cross she is at having to do it. You should have been there to help her, and the missis'll be out in a minute."

The harnessing of Dapple was not easy in the faint light, and he could not find the stable lantern. But it got done at last, and Geoff led the cart round to the dairy door, where Betsy was filling the last of the cans. She was not so cross as she might have been, and Mrs. Eames had not yet appeared. They got the cans into the cart, and in a minute or two Geoff found himself jogging along the road, already becoming familiar, to the station.

It seemed to grow darker instead of lighter, for the moon had gone behind a cloud, and sunrise was still a good time off. Geoff wondered dreamily to himself why people need get up so early in the country, and then remembered that it would take two or three hours for the cans to get to London. How little he or Vicky had thought, when they drank at breakfast the nice milk which Mrs. Tudor had always taken care to have of the best, of the labour and trouble involved in getting it there in time! And though he had hurried so, he was only just at the station when the train whizzed in, and the one sleepy porter growled at him for not having "looked sharper," and banged the milk-cans about unnecessarily in his temper, so that Geoff was really afraid they would break or burst open, and all the milk come pouring out.



GEOFF AT THE STATION.

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"You'll have to be here in better time for the twelve train," he said crossly. "I'm not a-going to do this sort o' work for you nor no chap, if you can't be here in time."

Geoff did not answer—he was getting used to sharp words and tones. He nearly fell asleep in the cart as he jogged home again, and to add to his discomfort a fine, small, chill, November rain began to fall. He buttoned up his jacket, and wished he had put on his overcoat; and then he laughed rather bitterly to think how absurd he would look with this same overcoat, which had been new only a month before, driving old Dapple in the milk-cart. He was wet and chilled to the bone when he reached the farm, and even if he had energy to drive a little faster he would not have dared to do so, after the farmer's warning.

Mrs. Eames was in the kitchen when, after putting up the cart and pony, Geoff came in. There was a delicious fragrance of coffee about which made his mouth water, but he did not even venture to go near the fire. Mrs. Eames heard him, however, and looked up. She started a little at the sight of his pale, wan face.

"Bless me, boy!" she exclaimed, "but you do look bad. Whatever's the matter?"

Geoff smiled a little—he looked very nice when he smiled; it was only when he was in one of his ill-tempered moods that there was anything unlovable in his face—and his smile made Mrs. Eames still more sorry for him.

"There's nothing the matter, thank you," he said; "I'm only rather cold—and wet. I'm strange to it all, I suppose. I wanted to know what I should do next. Should I feed the pigs?"

"Have you met the master?" said the farmer's wife. "He's gone down the fields with Matthew and the others. Didn't you meet 'em?"

Geoff shook his head.

"No; I went straight to the stable when I came back from the station."

"You'd better take off your wet jacket," she said. "There—hang it before

the fire. And," she went on, "there's a cup of coffee still hot, you can have for your breakfast this morning as you're so cold—it'll warm you better nor stir-about; and there's a scrap o' master's bacon you can eat with your bread."

She poured out the coffee, steaming hot, and forked out the bacon from the frying-pan as she spoke, and set all on the corner of the dresser nearest to the fire.

"Thank you, thank you awfully," said Geoff. Oh, how good the coffee smelt! He had never enjoyed a meal so much, and yet, had it been at home, *how* he would have grumbled! Coffee in a bowl, with brown sugar—bread cut as thick as your fist, and no butter! Truly Geoff was already beginning to taste some of the sweet uses of adversity.

Breakfast over, came the pigs. The farmer had left word that the sty was to be cleaned out, and fresh straw fetched for the pigs' beds; and as Betsy was much more good-natured than Matthew in showing the new boy what was expected of him, he got on pretty well, even feeling a certain pride in the improved aspect of the pig-sty when he had finished. He would have dearly liked to try a scrubbing of the piggies themselves, if he had not been afraid of Matthew's mocking him. But besides this there was not time. At eleven the second lot of milk had to be carted to the station, and with the remembrance of the cross porter Geoff dared not be late. And in the still falling rain he set off again, though, thanks to Mrs. Eames, with a dry jacket, and, thanks to her too, with a horse-rug buckled round him, in which guise surely no one would have recognized Master Geoffrey Tudor.

After dinner the farmer set him to cleaning out the stables, which it appeared was to be a part of his regular work; then there were the pigs to feed again, and at four o'clock the milk-cans to fetch. Oh, how tired Geoff was getting of the lane to the station! And the day did not come to an end without his getting into terrible disgrace for not having rinsed out the cans with boiling water the night before, though nobody had told him to do it. For a message had come from London that the cans were dirty and the milk in danger of turning sour, and that if it happened again Farmer Eames would have to send his milk elsewhere. It was natural perhaps that he should be angry, and yet, as no one had explained about it to Geoff, it seemed rather hard for him to have to take the scolding. *Very* hard indeed it seemed to him—to proud Geoff, who had never yet taken in good part his mother's mildest reprimands. And big boy though he was, he sobbed himself to sleep this second night of his new life, for it did seem too much, that when he had been trying his very best to please, and was aching in every limb from his unwonted hard work, he should get nothing but scolding. And yet he knew that he was lucky to have fallen into such hands as Farmer Eames's, for, strict as he was, he was a fair and reasonable master.

"I suppose," thought Geoff, "I have never really known what hardships were, though I did think I had plenty to bear at home."

What would Elsa have said had she heard him?



CHAPTER XI.

"HOOT-TOOT" BEHIND THE HEDGE.

That first day at the farm was a pretty fair specimen of those that followed. The days grew into weeks and the weeks into one month, and then into two, and Geoff went on with his self-chosen hard and lonely life. The loneliness soon came to be the worst of it. He got used to the hardships so far, and after all they were not very terrible ones. He was better taken care of than he knew, and he was a strong and healthy lad. Had he felt that he was working for others, had he been cheered by loving and encouraging letters, he could have borne it all contentedly. But no letters came, no answer to his note to Vicky begging her to write; and Geoff's proud heart grew prouder and, he tried to think, harder.

"They would let me know, somehow, I suppose, if there was anything much the matter—if—mamma had not got much better yet." For even to himself he would not allow the possibility of anything worse than her not being "much better." And yet she had looked very ill that last evening. He thought of it sometimes in the middle of the night, and started up in a sort of agony of fright, feeling as if at all costs he must set off there and then to see her—to know how she was. Often he did not fall asleep again for hours, and then he would keep sobbing and crying out from time to time, "Oh, mamma, mamma!" But there was no one to hear. And with the morning all the proud, bitter feelings would come back again. "They don't care for me. They are thankful to be rid of me;" and he would picture his future life to himself, friendless and homeless, as if he never had had either friends or home. Sometimes he planned that when he grew older he would emigrate, and in a few years, after having made a great fortune, he would come home again, a millionaire, and shower down coals of fire in the shape of every sort of luxury upon the heads of his unnatural family.

But these plans did not cheer him as they would have done some months ago. His experiences had already made him more practical—he knew that fortunes were not made nowadays in the Dick Whittington way—he was learning to understand that not only are there but twenty shillings in a pound, but, which concerned him more closely, that there are but twelve pence in a shilling, and only thirty in half-a-crown! He saw with dismay the increasing holes in his boots, and bargained hard with the village cobbler to make him cheap a rough, strong pair, which he would never have dreamt of looking at in the old days; he thanked Mrs. Eames more humbly for the well-worn corduroy jacket she made down for him than he had ever thanked his mother for the nice clothes which it had *not* always been easy for her to procure for him. Yes, Geoff was certainly learning some lessons.



SOBBING AND CRYING.

Sundays were in one way the worst, for though he had less to do, he had more time for thinking. He went twice to church, where he managed to sit in a corner out of sight, so that if the tears did sometimes come into his eyes at some familiar hymn or verse, no one could see. And no more was said about the Sunday school, greatly to his relief, for he knew the clergyman would have cross-questioned him. On Sunday afternoons he used to saunter about the park and grounds of Crickwood Bolders. He liked it, and yet it made him melancholy. The house was shut up, but it was easy to see it was a dear old place—just the sort of "home" of Geoff's wildest dreams.

"If we were all living there together, now," he used to say to himself—"mamma quite well and not worried about money—Elsa and Frances

would be so happy, we'd never squabble, and Vicky——" But at the idea of *Vicky's* happiness, words failed him.

It was, it must be allowed, a come-down from such beautiful fancies, to have to hurry back to the farm to harness old Dapple and jog off to the station with the milk. For even on Sundays people can't do without eating and drinking.



GEOFF STOOD STILL IN AMAZEMENT.

One Sunday a queer thing happened. He was just turning home, and passing the lodge at the principal entrance to the Hall, as it was called, when behind the thick evergreen hedge at one side; of the little garden he heard voices. They were speaking too low for him to distinguish the words; but one voice sounded to him very like Eames's. It might be so, for the farmer and the lodge-keeper were friends. And Geoff would have walked on without thinking anything of it, had not a sudden exclamation caught his ear—"Hoot-toot, hoot-toot! I tell you——" But instantly the voice dropped. It sounded as if some one had held up a warning finger.

Geoff stood still in amazement. *Could* Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot be there? It seemed too impossible. But the boy's heart beat fast with a vague feeling of expectation and apprehension mixed together.

"If he has come here accidentally, he must not see me," he said to himself; and he hurried down the road as fast as he could, determined to hasten to the station and back before the old gentleman, if it were he, could get there. But to his surprise, on entering the farm-yard, the first person to meet him was Mr. Eames himself.

"What's the matter, my lad?" he said good humouredly. "Thou'st staring as if I were a ghost."

"I thought—I thought," stammered Geoff, "that I saw—no, heard your voice just now at the lodge."

Eames laughed.

"But I couldn't be in two places at once, could I? Well, get off with you to the station."

All was as usual of a Sunday there. No one about, no passengers by the up-train—only the milk-cans; and Geoff, as he drove slowly home again, almost persuaded himself that the familiar "Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" must have been altogether his own fancy.

But had he been at the little railway-station again an hour or two later, he would have had reason to change his opinion. A passenger did start from Shalecray by the last train for town; and when this same passenger got out at Victoria, he hailed a hansom, and was driven quickly westward. And when he arrived at his destination, and rang the bell, almost before the servant had had time to open the door, a little figure pressed eagerly forward, and a soft, clear voice exclaimed—

"Oh, dear uncle, is that you at last? I've been watching for you such a long time. Oh, do—do tell me about Geoff! Did you see him? And oh, dear uncle, is he very unhappy?"

"Come upstairs, my pet," said the old man, "and you shall hear all I can tell."

The three awaiting him in the drawing-room were nearly as eager as the child. The mother's face grew pale with anxiety, the sisters' eyes sparkled with eagerness.

"Did you find him easily, uncle? Was it where you thought?" asked Vicky.

"Yes, yes; I had no difficulty. I saw him, Vicky, but without his seeing me. He has grown, and perhaps he is a little thinner, but he is quite well. And I had an excellent account of him from the farmer. He is working steadily, and bearing manfully what, to a boy like him, cannot but be privations and hardships. But I am afraid he is very unhappy—his face had a set sad look in it that I do not like to see on one so young. I fear he never got your letters, Vicky. There must have been some mistake about the address. I didn't want to push the thing too far. You must write again, my little girl—say all you can to soften him. What I want is that it should come from *his* side. He will respect himself all his life for overcoming his pride, and asking to be forgiven, only we must try to make it easy for him, poor fellow! Now go to bed, Vicky, child, and think over what you will write to him tomorrow. I want to talk it all over with your mother. Don't be unhappy about poor old Geoff, my dear."

Obedient Vicky jumped up at once to go to bed. She tried to whisper "Good night" as she went the round of the others to kiss them, but the words would not come, and her pretty blue eyes were full of tears. Still, Vicky's thoughts and dreams were far happier that night than for a long time past.

As soon as she had closed the door after her, the old gentleman turned to the others.

"She doesn't know any more than we agreed upon?" he asked.

"No," said Elsa; "she only knows that you got his exact address from the same person who has told you about him from time to time. She has no idea that the whole thing was planned and arranged by you from the first, when you found he was set upon leaving home."

Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot nodded his head.

"That is all right. Years hence, when he has grown up into a good and sensible man, we may, or if I am no longer here, *you* may tell him all about it, my dears. But just now it would mortify him, and prevent the lesson from doing him the good we hope for. I should not at all like him to know I had employed detectives. He would be angry at having been taken in. That Jowett is a very decent fellow, and did his part well; but he has mismanaged the letters somehow. I must see him about that. What was the address Geoff gave in his note to Vicky? Are you sure she put it right?"

"Oh yes," said Frances; "I saw it both times. It was—"

TO MR. JAMES,
CARE OF MR. ADAM SMITH,
MURRAY PLACE MEWS."

"Hoot-toot!" said Mr. Byrne. He could not make it out. But we, who know in what a hurry Geoff wrote his note at the railway-station while Jowett was waiting to take it, can quite well understand why Vicky's letters had never reached him. For the address he *should* have given was—

"ABEL SMITH,
Mowbray PLACE MEWS."

"This time," Mr. Byrne went on, "I'll see that the letter is sent to him direct. Jowett must manage it. Let Vicky address as before, and I'll see that it reaches him."

"What do you think she should write?" said Mrs. Tudor, anxiously.

"What she feels. It does not much matter. But let her make him understand that his home is open to him as ever—that he is neither

forgotten nor thought of harshly. If I mistake not, from what I saw and what Eames told me, he will be so happy to find it is so, that all the better side of his character will come out. And he will say more to himself than any of us would ever wish to say to him."

"But, uncle dear," said Elsa, "if it turns out as you hope, and poor Geoff comes home again and is all you and mamma wish—and—if *all* your delightful plans are realized, won't Geoff find out everything you don't want him to know at present? Indeed, aren't you afraid he may have heard already that you are the new squire there?"

"No," said Mr. Byrne. "Eames is a very cautious fellow; and from having known me long ago, or rather from his father having known me (it was I that got my cousin to give him the farm some years ago, as I told you), I found it easy to make him understand all I wished. Crickwood Bolders has stood empty so long, that the people about don't take much interest in it. They only know vaguely that it has changed hands lately, and Eames says I am spoken of as the new Mr. Bolders, and not by my own name."

"I see," said Elsa.

"And," continued Mr. Byrne, "of course Geoff will take it for granted that it was by the coincidence of his getting taken on at my place that we found him out. It *was* a coincidence that he should have taken it into his head to go down to that part of the country, through its being on the way to Colethorne's."

"And you say that he is really working hard, and—and making the best of things?" asked Mrs. Tudor. She smiled a little as she said it. Geoff's "making the best of things" was such a *very* new idea.

"Yes," replied Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot. "Eames gives him the best of characters. He says the boy is thoroughly to be depended upon, and that his work is well done, even to cleaning the pigs; and, best of all, he is never heard to grumble."

"Fancy Geoff cleaning the pigs!" exclaimed Elsa.

"I don't know that I find *that* so difficult to fancy," said Frances. "I think Geoff has a real love for animals of all kinds, and for all country things. We would have sympathized with him about it if it hadn't been for his grumbling, which made all his likes and dislikes seem unreal. I think what I pity him the most for is the having to get up so dreadfully early these cold winter mornings. What time did you say he had to get up, uncle?"



VICKY WRITING THE LETTER.

"He has to be at the station with the milk before five every morning," said the old gentleman, grimly. "Eames says his good woman is inclined to 'coddle him a bit'—she can't forget who he really is, it appears. I was glad to hear it; I don't want the poor boy actually to suffer—and I don't want it to go on much longer. I confess I don't see that there can be much 'coddling' if he has to be up and out before five o'clock in the morning at this time of the year."

"No, indeed," said the girls. "And he must be *so* lonely."

"Yes, poor fellow!" said the old gentleman, with a sigh, "I saw that in his face. And I was *glad* to see it. It shows the lesson is not a merely surface one. You've had your wish for him to some extent, Elsa, my dear. He has at last known some hardships."

Elsa's eyes filled with tears, though Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot had had no

thought of hurting her.

"Don't say that, please," she entreated. "I think—I am sure—I only wanted him to learn how foolish he was, for his own sake more than for any one's else even."

"I know, I know," the old gentleman agreed. "But I think he has had about enough of it. See that Vicky writes that letter first thing to-morrow."



CHAPTER XII.

A LETTER AT LAST.

Christmas had come and gone. It brought Geoff's home-sick loneliness to a point that was almost unbearable. He had looked forward vaguely to the twenty-fifth of December with the sort of hope that it would bring him some message, some remembrance, if it were but a Christmas card. And for two or three days he managed to waylay the postman every morning as he passed the farm, and to inquire timidly if there were no letter—was he *sure* there was no letter for James Jeffreys? But the postman only shook his head. He had "never had no letter for that name, neither with nor without 'care of Mr. Eames,'" as Geoff went on to suggest that if the farmer's name had been omitted the letter might have been overlooked. And when not only Christmas, but New Year's Day too was past and gone, the boy lost hope.

"It is too bad," he sobbed to himself, late at night, alone in his bare little room. "I think they might think a *little* of me. They might be sorry for me, even—even if I did worry them all when I was at home. They might guess how lonely I am. It isn't the hard work. If it was for mother I was working, and if I knew they were all pleased with me, I wouldn't mind it. But I can't bear to go on like this."

Yet he could not make up his mind to write home again, for as things were it would be like begging for Mr. Byrne's charity. And every feeling of independence and manliness in Geoff rose against accepting benefits from one whose advice he had scouted and set at defiance. Still, he was sensible enough to see that he could not go on with his present life for long. "Work on a farm" had turned out very different from his vague ideas of it. He could not, for years to come, hope to earn more than the barest pittance, and he felt that if he were always to remain the companion of the sort of people he was now among, he would not care to live. And gradually another idea took shape in his mind—he would emigrate! He saw some printed papers in the village post-office, telling of government grants of land to

able-bodied young men, and giving the cost of the passage out, and various details, and he calculated that in a year, by scrupulous economy, he might earn about half the sum required, for the farmer had told him that if he continued to do well he would raise his wages at the end of the first six months.

"And then," thought Geoff, "I might write home and tell them it was all settled, and by selling all the things I have at home I might get the rest of the money. Or—I would not even mind taking it as a *loan* from Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot. That would seem different; and of course I do owe him a great deal now, in a way, for he must be doing everything for mother and the girls, and if only I were a man that would be my business."

And for a while, after coming to this resolution, he felt happier. His old dreams of making a great fortune and being the good genius of his family returned, and he felt more interest in learning all he could of farm-work, that might be useful to him in his new life. But these more hopeful feelings did not last long or steadily; the pain of the home-sickness and loneliness increased so terribly, that at times he felt as if he *could* not bear it any longer. And he would probably, strong as he was, have fallen ill, had not something happened.

It was about six weeks after the Sunday on which he had thought he had overheard Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot's voice through the hedge. It was a Sunday again. Geoff had been at church in the morning, and after dinner he was sitting in a corner of the kitchen, feeling as if he had no energy even to go for his favourite stroll in the grounds of the Hall, when a sudden exclamation from Mrs. Eames made him look up. The farmer's wife had been putting away some of the plates and dishes that had been used at dinner, and in so doing happened to pull aside a large dish leaning on one of the shelves of the high-backed dresser.



GEOFF READING VICKY'S LETTER.

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As she did so, a letter fell forward. It was addressed in a clear, good hand to

"JAMES JEFFREYS,
AT MR. EAMES'S,
CRICKWOOD FARM,
SHALECRAY."

"Bless me!" cried the good woman. "What's this a-doing here? Jem, boy, 'tis thine. When can it have come? It may have been up there a good bit."

Geoff started up and dashed forward with outstretched hand.

"Give it me! oh, give it me, please!" he said, in an eager, trembling voice. A look of disappointment crossed his face for a moment when he saw the writing; but he tore the envelope open, and then his eyes brightened up again. For it contained another letter, round which a slip was folded with the words, "I forward enclosed, as agreed.—Ned Jowett." And the second envelope was addressed to "Mr. James" in a round, childish hand, that Geoff knew well. It was Vicky's.

He darted out of the kitchen, and into his own little room. He could not have read the letter before any one. Already the tears were welling up into his eyes. And long before he had finished reading they were running down his face and dropping on to the paper. This was what Vicky said, and the date was nearly six weeks old!

"MY DARLING GEOFF,

"Why haven't you written to us? I wrote you a letter the minute I got your little note with the address, and I have written to you again since then. Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot says you are sure to get this letter. I think you can't have got the others. But still you might have written. I have been so *very* unhappy about you. Of course I was glad to hear you were getting on well, but still I have been very unhappy. Mamma got better very slowly. I don't think she would have got better if she hadn't heard that you were getting on well, though. She has been very unhappy, too, and so have Elsa and Frances, but poor Vicky most of all. We do so want you at home again. Geoff, I can't tell you how good old Uncle Hoot-Toot is. There is something about money I can't explain, but if you understood it all, you would see we should not be proud about his helping us, for he has done more for us always than we knew; even mamma didn't. Oh, Geoff, darling, do come home. We do all love you so, and mamma and Elsa were only troubled because you didn't seem happy, and you didn't believe that they loved you. I think it would be all different now if you came home again, and we do so want you. I keep your room so nice. I dust it myself every day. Mamma makes me have tea in the drawing-room now, and then I have a little pudding from their dinner, because, you see, one can't eat so much at ladies' afternoon tea. But I was too miserable at tea alone in the school-room. I have wrapped up our teapot, after Harvey had made it very bright, and I won't ever make tea out of it till you come home. Oh, Geoffy, darling, do come home!

"Your loving, unhappy little

"VICKY."

The tears came faster and faster—so fast that it was with difficulty Geoff could see to read the last few lines. He hid his face in his hands and sobbed. He was only fourteen, remember, and there was no one to see. And with these sobs and tears—good honest tears that he need not have been ashamed of—there melted away all the unkind, ungrateful feelings out of his poor sore heart. He saw himself as he had really been—selfish, unreasonable, and spoilt.

"Yes," he said to himself, "that was all I *really* had to complain of. They considered me too much—they spoilt me. But, oh, I would be so different now! Only—I can't go home and say to Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot, 'I've had enough of working for myself; you may pay for me now.' It would seem *too* mean. No, I must keep to my plan—it's too late to change. But I think I might go home to see them all, and ask them to forgive me. In three weeks I shall have been here three months, and then I may ask for a holiday. I'll write to Vicky now at once, and tell her so—I can post the letter when I go to the station. They must have thought me *so* horrid for not having written before. I wonder how it was I never got the other letters? But it doesn't matter now I've got this one. Oh, dear Vicky, I think I shall nearly go out of my mind with joy to see your little face again!"

He had provided himself, luckily, with some letter-paper and envelopes, so there was no delay on that score. And once he had begun, he found no

difficulty in writing—indeed, he could have covered pages, for he seemed to have so much to say. This was his letter:—

"Crickwood Farm, February 2.

"MY DEAREST VICKY,

I have only just got your letter, though you wrote it on the 15th of January. Mrs. Eames—that's the farmer's wife—found it behind a dish on the dresser, where it has been all the time. I never got your other letters; I can't think what became of them. I've asked the postman nearly every day if there was no letter for me. Vicky, I can't tell you all I'd like to say. I thought I'd write to mamma, but I feel as if I couldn't. Will you tell her that I just *beg* her to forgive me? Not only for leaving home without leave, like I did, but for all the way I went on and all the worry I gave her. I see it all quite plain. I've been getting to see it for a good while, and when I read your dear letter it all came out quite plain like a flash. I don't mind the hard work here, or even the messy sort of ways compared to home—I wouldn't mind anything if I thought I was doing right. But it's the loneliness. Vicky, I have thought sometimes I'd go out of my mind. Will you ask Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot to forgive me, too? I'd like to understand about all he has done for us, and I think I am much sensibler about money than I was, so perhaps he'll tell me. I can ask for a holiday in three weeks, and then I'll come home for one day. I shall have to tell you my plans, and I think mamma will think I'm right. I must work hard, and perhaps in a few years I shall earn enough to come home and have a cottage like we planned. For I've made up my mind to emigrate. I don't think I'd ever get on so well in anything as in a country life; for, though it's very hard work here, I don't mind it, and I love animals, and in the summer it won't be so bad. Please, Vicky, make everybody understand that I hope never to be a trouble and worry any more.—Your very loving

"GEOFF

"P.S.—You may write here now. I don't mind you all knowing where I am."

By the time Geoff had finished this, for him, long epistle, it was nearly dark. He had to hurry off to the station to be in time with the milk. He was well known now by the men about the railway, and by one or two of the guards, and he was glad to see one he knew this evening, as he begged him to post his letter in town, for it was too late for the Shalecray mail. The man was very good-natured, and promised to do as he asked.

"By Tuesday," thought Geoff, "I may have a letter if Vicky writes at once. And I might write again next Sunday. So that we'd hear of each other every week."

And this thought made his face look very bright and cheery as he went whistling into the kitchen, where, as usual of a Sunday evening, Eames was sitting smoking beside the fire.

"The missis has told me about your letter, Jim," said the farmer. "I'm right-down sorry about it, but I don't rightly know who to blame. It's just got slipped out o' sight."

"Thank you," Geoff replied. "I'm awfully glad to have it now."

"He's never looked so bright since he came," said Mr. Eames to his wife when Geoff had left the room. "He's about getting tired of it, I fancy; and the squire's only too ready to forgive and forget, I take it. But he's a deal o' good stuff in him, has the boy, and so I told the squire. He's a fine spirit of his own, too."

"And as civil a lad as ever I seed," added Mrs. Eames. "No nonsense and no airs. One can tell as he's a real gentleman. All the same, I'll be uncommon glad when he's with his own folk again; no one'd believe the weight it's been on my mind to see as he didn't fall ill with us. And you always a-telling me as squire said he wasn't to be coddled and cosseted. Yet you'd have been none so pleased if he'd got a chill and the rheumatics or worse, as might have been if I hadn't myself seen to his bed and his sheets and his blankets, till the weight of them on my mind's been almost more nor I could bear."

"Well, well," said the farmer, soothingly, "all's well as ends well. And you said yourself it'd never 'a' done for us to refuse the squire any mortal service he could have asked of us."



CHAPTER XIII.

THE NEW SQUIRE AND HIS FAMILY.

Tuesday brought no letter for Geoff—nor Wednesday, nor even Thursday. His spirits went down again, and he felt bitterly disappointed. Could his friend, the guard, have forgotten to post the letter, after all? he asked himself. This thought kept him up till Thursday evening, when, happening to see the same man at the station, the guard's first words were, "Got any answer to your love-letter yet, eh, Jim? I posted it straight away," and then Geoff did not know what to think.

He did not like to write again. He began to fear that Vicky had been mistaken in feeling so sure that his mother and Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot and Elsa and Frances were all ready to forgive him, and longing for his return. Perhaps they were all still too indignant with him to allow Vicky to write, and he sighed deeply at the thought.

"I will wait till I can ask for a holiday," he said to himself, "and then I will write and say I am coming, and if they won't see me I must just bear it. At least, I am sure mother will see me when the time comes for me to go to America, though it will be dreadful to have to wait till then."

When he got back to the house that evening, the farmer called to him. *He* had had a letter that morning, though Geoff had not; and had it not been getting dusk, the boy would have seen a slight twinkle in the good man's eyes as he spoke to him.

"Jim, my boy," he said, "I shall want you to do an odd job or so of work the next day or two. The new squire's coming down on Monday to look round a bit. They've been tidying up at the house; did you know?"

Geoff shook his head; he had no time for strolling about the Hall grounds except on Sundays, and on the last Sunday he had been too heavy-hearted to notice any change.

"Do you know anything of gardening?" the farmer went on. "They're very short of hands, and I've promised to help what I could. The rooms on the south side of the house are being got ready, and there's the terrace-walk round that way wants doing up sadly. With this mild weather the snowdrops and crocuses and all them spring flowers is springing up finely; there's lots

of them round that south side, and Branch can't spare a man to sort them out and rake over the beds."

"I could do that," said Geoff, his eyes sparkling. "I don't know much about gardening, but I know enough for that." It was a pleasant prospect for him; a day or two's quiet work in the beautiful old garden; he would feel almost like a gentleman again, he thought to himself. "When shall I go, sir?" he went on eagerly.

"Why, the sooner the better," said Mr. Eames. "To-morrow morning. That'll give you two good days. Branch wants it to look nice, for the squire's ladies is coming with him. The south parlour is all ready. There'll be a deal to do to the house—new furniture and all the rest of it. He—the new squire's an old friend of mine and of my father's—and a good friend he's been to me," he added in a lower voice.

"Are they going to live here?" asked Geoff. He liked the idea of working there, but he rather shrank from being seen as a gardener's boy by the new squire and "the ladies." "Though it is very silly of me," he reflected; "they wouldn't look at me; it would never strike them that I was different from any other."

"Going to live here," repeated the farmer; "yes, of course. The new squire would be off his head not to live at Crickwood Bolders, when it belongs to him. A beautiful place as it is too."

"Yes," agreed Geoff, heartily, "it would be hard to imagine a more beautiful place. The squire should be a happy man."

He thought so more and more during the next two days. There was a great charm about the old house and the quaintly laid out grounds in which it stood—especially on the south side, where Geoff's work lay. The weather, too, was delightfully mild just then; it seemed a sort of foretaste of summer, and the boy felt all his old love for the country revive and grow stronger than ever as he raked and weeded and did his best along the terrace walk.

"I wish the squire would make me his gardener," he said to himself once. "But even to be a good gardener I suppose one should learn a lot of things I know nothing about."

Good-will goes a long way, however. Geoff felt really proud of his work by Saturday evening, and on Sunday the farmer took a look at the flower-beds himself, and said he had done well.

"Those beds over yonder look rough still," he went on, pointing to some little distance.



THE FARMER TOOK A LOOK AT THE FLOWERBEDS HIMSELF.

"They don't show from the house," said Geoff, "and Branch says it's too early to do much. There will be frosts again."

"No matter," said Mr. Eames; "I'd like it all to look as tidy as can be for Monday, seeing as I'd promised to help. I'll give you another day off the home-work, Jim. Robins's boy's very pleased to do the station work."

Geoff looked up uneasily. It would be very awkward for him, very awkward indeed, if "Robins's boy" were to do so well as to replace him altogether. But there was a pleasant smile on the farmer's face, which reassured him.

"Very well, sir," he said. "I'll do as you like, of course; but I don't want any one else to do my own work for long."

"All right," said Eames. For a moment Geoff thought he was going to say something more, but if so he changed his mind, and walked quietly away.

Monday saw Geoff again at his post. It was a real early spring day, and he could not help feeling the exhilarating influence of the fresh, sweet air, though his heart was sad and heavy, for his hopes of a reply from Vicky were every day growing fainter and fainter. There was nothing to do but to wait till the time came for a holiday, and then to go up to London and try to see them.

"And if they won't see me or forgive me," thought the boy with a sigh, "I must just work on till I can emigrate."

He glanced up at the terrace as he thought this. He was working this morning at some little distance from the house, but he liked to throw a look every now and then to the beds which he had raked and tidied already; they seemed so neat, and the crocuses were coming out so nicely.

The morning was getting on; Geoff looked at his watch—he had kept it carefully, but he never looked at it now without a feeling that before very long he might have to sell it—it was nearly twelve.

"I must go home to dinner, I suppose," he thought; and he began gathering his tools together. As he did so, some slight sounds reached him from the terrace, and, glancing in that direction, he saw that one of the long windows opening on to it was ajar, and in another moment the figures of two ladies could be seen standing just in the aperture, and seemingly looking out as if uncertain what they were going to do.

"They have come," thought Geoff. "They'll be out here in another instant. I can't help it if it *is* silly; I should *hate* ladies and gentlemen to see me working here like a common boy;" and his face grew crimson with the thought.

He hurried his things together, and was looking round to see if he could not make his way out of the grounds without passing near the house, when a quick pattering sound along the gravel startled him. A little girl was running towards him, flying down the sloping path that led from the terrace she came, her feet scarcely seeming to touch the ground, her fair hair streaming behind.

"Oh!" was Geoff's first thought, "how like Vicky!"

But it was his first thought only, for almost before he had time to complete it the little girl was beside him—*upon* him, one might almost say, for her arms were round him, her sweet face, wet with tears of joy, was pressed against his, her dear voice was speaking to him, "Oh, Geoffey, Geoffey! My own Geoffey! It's I—it's your Vicky."

Geoff staggered, and almost fell. For a moment or two he felt so giddy and confused he could not speak. But the feeling soon went away, and the words came only too eagerly.

"How is it? Where have you come from? Do you know the new squire? Where is mamma? Why didn't you write?"

And, laughing and crying, Vicky tried to explain. Did she know the new squire? Could Geoff not guess? Where were they all? Mamma, Elsa, Frances, Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot—where should they be, but in the new squire's own house? Up there on the terrace—yes, they were all up there; they had sent her to fetch him. And she dragged Geoff up with her, Geoff feeling as if he were in a dream, till he felt his mother's and sisters' kisses, and heard "the new squire's" voice sounding rather choky, as he said, "Hoot-toot, hoot-toot! this will never do—never do, Geoff, my boy."

They let Vicky explain it all in her own way. How Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot had come home from India, meaning to take them all to live with him in the

old house which had come to be his. How disappointed he had been by Geoff's selfish, discontented temper, and grumbling, worrying ways, and had been casting about how best to give him a lesson which should last, when Geoff solved the puzzle for him by going off of his own accord.

"And," Vicky went on innocently, "was it not *wonderful* that you should have come to uncle's own place, and got work with Mr. Eames, whom he has known so long?" In which Geoff fully agreed; and it was not till many years later that he knew how it had really been—how Mr. Byrne had planned all for his safety and good, with the help of one of the cleverest young detectives in the London police, "Ned Jowett," the innocent countryman whom Geoff had patronized!

The boy told all he had been thinking of doing, his idea of emigrating, his wish to be "independent," and gain his own livelihood. And his mother explained to him what she herself had not thoroughly known till lately—that for many years, ever since her husband's death, they had owed far more to Great-Uncle Hoot-Toot than they had had any idea of.

"Your father was the son of his dearest friend," she said. "Mr. Byrne has no relations of his own. We were left very poor, but he never let me know it. The lawyers by mistake wrote to *me* about the loss of money, which uncle had for long known was as good as lost, so that in reality it made little difference. So you see, Geoff, what we owe him—*everything*—and you must be guided by his wishes entirely."

They were kind and good wishes. He did not want Geoff to emigrate, but he sympathized in his love for the country. For two or three years Geoff was sent to a first-rate school, where he got on well, and then to an agricultural college, where he also did so well that before he was twenty he was able to be the squire's right hand in the management of his large property, and in this way was able to feel that, without sacrificing his independence, he could practically show his gratitude. They say that some part of the estate will certainly be left to Geoff at Mr. Byrne's death; but that, it is to be hoped, will not come to pass for many years yet, for the old gentleman is still very vigorous, and the Hall would certainly not seem itself at all if one did not hear his "Hoot-toot, hoot-toot!" sounding here, there, and everywhere, as he trots busily about.



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TOOT ***

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