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ANXIOUS AUDREY

By

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AUTHOR OF "A WAIF AND A WELCOME", "TROUBLESOME URSULA,"

"ZACH AND DEBBY," "IN CORNWALL'S WONDERLAND," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY HELEN JACOBS.

Transcriber's note:Helen Jacobs was the sister of author W.W. Jacobs.

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WHEN, THOUGH, IT CAME TO CARRYING UP THE CHEST OF DRAWERS, THEN ALL HAD TO GIVE A HAND.

CHAPTER LINKS

CHAPTER I.

"Lady-bird, lady-bird, fly away home,
The field-mouse has gone to her nest;
The daisies have shut up their sleepy red eyes,
And the birds and the bees are at rest."

Mr. Carlyle, standing outside the nursery door, stayed a moment until the sweet low voice had reached the end of the verse, then, turning the handle very gently, entered the room on tiptoe.

Faith looked up with a smile, but with a warning finger held out, while in a lower and more crooning voice she began the next verse:

"Lady-bird, lady-bird, fly away home,
The glow-worm is lighting her lamp——"

"Oh, dear!" as two round blue eyes looked up at her, full of sleepy wickedness, "She is as wide awake when I began! Baby, you are not a nice little girl and I shan't be able to go on loving you if you don't go to sleep soon."

The blue eyes, wandering from Faith's reproving face, fell on her father, and with a croon of delight a pair of plump dimpled arms was held out pleadingly. "Dad! Dad!" cooed the baby voice coaxingly, and the arms were not held out in vain.

Faith handed over her heavy, lovable burden with a mingled sigh of relief and hopelessness. "This is all wrong, you know, father," with a weary little laugh, "a well brought up baby should be sound asleep by this time—but how is one to make her sleep if she absolutely refuses to?"

Mr. Carlyle looked down at his little daughter snuggling so happily in his arms. "I don't know, dear," he said helplessly. "I suppose we aren't very good nurses. Perhaps we are not stern enough. I am sorry I came in just then, she might have gone off if I hadn't, but I wanted to speak to you particularly; there is a great deal I want to discuss. How is your mother? I haven't been in to see her. I saw that her room was dark, so I thought she was probably asleep."

"I expect she is. She seemed very sleepy when I gave her her cornflour at seven. I haven't been able to go to her since, baby has been so restless."

"Isn't she well?"

"Oh, yes, she is well, but while I was down making the cornflour I had to leave her with Tom and Debby, and they got playing, of course, and excited her so much she can't go to sleep."

"Couldn't Mary have made the cornflour or have looked after baby for the time?"

"No, she was ironing, and she doesn't know yet just how mother likes it."

"Oh! but can't you come down, dear, until this minx is slumbering?"

Faith looked at the grate where a few cinders only lay grey and lifeless at the bottom; then she looked at her father with a mischievous twinkle in her pretty brown eyes. "I can't unless we take baby too," she said. "Of course it is very wrong and a real nurse would faint at such behaviour, but, shall we, daddy? It is cold up here, and lonely—and, oh! I am so hungry and quite hoarse with singing lullabies."

"Poor child! Come downstairs and we will not think about what real nurses would say. This little person is really so sleepy she will hardly realise what has happened."

Faith's eyes sparkled. "We mustn't let Tom and Debby know, or they will be down too. If we go very softly perhaps they won't hear, they were nearly asleep when I looked in at them just now. I hope baby won't give a yell on the stairs."

"I will try to prevent her. Now then, come along."

Baby Joan, as though she understood all about it, and what was expected of her, smiled up at them knowingly, but she did not make a sound, not even when they paused at her mother's bedroom door and looked in.

The firelight shining on the invalid's face showed that she was sleeping peacefully, so they tiptoed away again and reached the hall without having disturbed anyone. In the dining-room the lamp was lighted, but so badly that it smelt horribly; the fire was out and the room was cold and cheerless.

"Oh dear," sighed Faith, "no coal here, either," and dashed away to the kitchen in search of some. "Mary doesn't seem able to remember that fires go out if there is nothing to put on them," she laughed, as she struggled back panting under the weight of a scuttle of coal and an armful of logs. "But we shall be all right soon," she added as she knelt before the grate and began building up a fire. "I do love wood and a pair of bellows, don't you, daddy!" blowing away hard at hot embers. But Mr. Carlyle did not answer her. Instead he asked with rather an anxious note in his voice, "Does Mary find she has too much to do?"

Faith sat back on her heels and eyed the kindling sticks with a well pleased air. "No-o, I don't think so, daddy. There might be too much—if she did it," with a little laugh, "but she says she likes being where there are no other servants, and plenty of life. In her last place there were three or four servants and only an old lady to look after, and Mary says the quietness was awful. Nothing ever happened but the quarrels of the servants amongst themselves."

"I suppose they were so occupied with their quarrels that Mary had not time to learn how to do things—nicely?" Mr. Carlyle's eyes glanced sadly about the untidy room and then at the ill-laid supper table.

Faith looked up at him in mild surprise; it had never occurred to her that there was anything lacking in the care of the house. Her glance followed his and rested on the supper table too.

"Oh, daddy, I believe you have had nothing since dinner. You must be frightfully hungry, I know you must, and the dinner was so badly cooked— oh, poor daddy! Why didn't you come home to tea?"

"I had barely finished my round of calls in time to keep an appointment Dr. Gray had made with me. He wanted," he added more slowly, his face growing grave and troubled, "to talk to me about your mother."

Faith looked up quickly at him, her large eyes full of anxiety, her heart throbbing

heavily. Then there was more trouble in store, more anxiety! She had felt it for days in her inmost heart, but had not had the courage to put her fears into words. "Is mother—worse?" her voice faltered and broke.

Mr. Carlyle, gazing, absorbed and troubled, into the fire, did not see her blanched cheeks and the dread that filled her eyes. He had no suspicion of the awful fear which had haunted her every waking moment, and even her dreams, or he would not have kept her in suspense while his thoughts ran on to plans for the future.

"No, dear," he said at last, "no dear, she is not worse, but the doctor says it will be a long time before she is well again—well enough to walk about and take up her old life. For a year, poor dear, she must lie on a sofa, and live the life of an invalid. If she does, he says, she will become her old strong self again in a year or two, but if she——"

"Oh, but she will, of course she will, that will be easy enough." In the intensity of her relief, Faith spoke so gaily that her father looked up at her in surprise, her tone and words sounded almost heartless.

"Easy! It will be a long and trying ordeal for her. Faith—just think of it, a whole year in one room! You don't realise."

"Oh yes I do, daddy, but we will manage beautifully. I will look after the house and the children, and—and see that mother isn't worried at all, and she can read and write, and—and oh, father, father, I am so glad—I don't know what to do!" and without any warning Faith broke down and began to sob.

"Glad!" For a moment Mr. Carlyle looked at his little daughter as though he feared she must be mad instead of glad. She spoke as though his news had come as a relief. Relief from what? Then quite suddenly the truth broke upon him.

"Oh, you poor little woman! What have you been thinking? What have you been fearing, Faith dear—tell me. Did you think——?"

Faith nodded. "Yes—yes—I thought," but she could not put her dread into words.

"You feared we might be going to lose her altogether. Oh, you poor child. My poor little girl. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I couldn't, daddy."

Mr. Carlyle drew her to him. "No wonder my news came to you as a relief," he said softly, "instead of as the shock I feared. Why, Faith, how you are trembling. You look ready to faint too. Look here, I believe you are tired and famished. Come and have some supper. What have we got? Something tempting?"

With either arm encircling a daughter, the vicar turned to survey the supper table, but at sight of it his face fell a little. Neither the food, nor the way in which it was placed before them would have tempted any but the most healthy, even ravenous appetite. Mary, the only maid they could afford to keep, was more willing than able. The china and silver had certainly been washed, but they were smeared and unpolished, the cloth was wrinkled and all askew, the food was dumped down anyhow.

Fortunately for her own comfort, but unfortunately for the good of the house, Faith was not troubled by appearances. Her eyes did not notice details, the details which mean so much, for her home had always been in more or less of a muddle. There were so many of them, Audrey, Faith, Tom, Deborah and baby Joan. Five of them ransacking and romping all over the house, until granny had come and taken Audrey away to live with her.

They had always been in a muddle, but they had always been happy, and they loved their home so dearly that, whatever it was like, it was right in their eyes—excepting, perhaps, in Audrey's. And even if their clothes were shabby—well, shabby clothes were much less of a worry than smart ones; and if their food was plain, and not very daintily served, there was always enough, and there was plenty of fun and laughter as sauce for it.

Mr. Carlyle, who had grown up in a well-ordered home where everything was as neat and well-cared-for as things could be, did realise that there was much that was lacking in his own home; but whatever he may have suffered from the disorder, he never complained. His mother had had means, three good servants, and only one child to make the home untidy; whereas his young wife, who had been brought up in an Orphan School, had never known real home life until her marriage, had only small means, several young babies, and only one ignorant servant to help her.

Audrey and Faith, as they grew out of babyhood, helped to dust the rooms, run errands, and look after the younger children, but they had only the vaguest notions as to how homes should be kept, or meals served, or the hundred and one other little things which make all the difference between a well-kept house and an ill-kept one, and they were quite content with things as they were.

At least Faith was. Audrey often had misgivings that all was not as it should be, and yearned for something more orderly, dainty, and neat; for prettier clothes and prettier manners. And then Granny Carlyle had come on a visit, and had offered to take one of her many grandchildren to live with her—for a time, at any rate. And, to the joy of Audrey, and the relief of the others, she was chosen and they were not; and, with all her few possessions packed in her mother's old portmanteau, she had gone off to enjoy all the things that she considered best worth having—a large comfortable home in a town, new clothes, school, tempting food, daintily cooked meals, and peace and quiet in which she could read and write undisturbed. For though Audrey resembled her father's mother in many ways, she had also inherited her mother's taste for writing and reading. That was four years ago, when Audrey was eleven and Faith ten, and Deborah and Tom five and four respectively. Baby Joan, aged eighteen months, Audrey had not yet seen.

Thoughts of his eldest daughter were uppermost in Mr. Carlyle's mind as he glanced from the unappetising remains of a joint lying on a dish on which it had already appeared twice, to the scrap of dry cheese and the unpolished knife lying beside it.

"I—I am afraid that is all there is, father. Won't it do?" Faith looked at him with troubled eyes. "Shall I tell Mary to cook you some eggs?"

"No, no. What is here will do very well for me, but you—wouldn't you prefer eggs—or ——"

"Oh no, thank you, I am so hungry I can eat anything," said Faith cheerfully. "Father, Joan is asleep, can't we tuck her up snugly on the sofa while we are having our supper? She would be certain to wake up if I took her upstairs to her cot."

"Of course she would. If you will make her a nice little nest on the sofa I will pop her into it so gently she will not know she has been moved. There now, wasn't that clever!"

Faith again held up a warning finger, but Joan only stretched her limbs a little in her new nest, and forthwith dropped asleep again.

With a smile of triumph at each other the two nurses turned away to the supper-table, and Mr. Carlyle said grace, and with her deep relief at the news about her mother still glowing in her heart, Faith joined in with a deeper sense of real gratitude than she had known before.

"Daddy," she said presently, "you said you wanted to talk to me. Was it about mother?"

"Yes, dear, and—and other things too. I have been thinking matters over since I left the doctor, and I have come to the conclusion that I must send and have Audrey home."

"Audrey home! Oh, how jolly!" Faith's eyes lighted with pleasure. "That will be lovely. But," with sudden misgiving, "why must she come home, daddy?"

"Well, for one thing, your mother will need companionship—more than you can give her with the children taking up so much of your time. And, for another, it will be a relief to your mother to know that Audrey is here looking after things. We don't want a stranger, and, indeed, I can't afford to have anyone extra in just now. We have had so much illness and such heavy expenses. After four years with your grandmother, Audrey should be quite capable. She always had a sensible head on her shoulders and for certain granny has given her a good training."

"Ye-es," said Faith musingly, "I—I wonder how she will like coming away. I believe she will not like it at all." But Faith kept that last thought to herself.

CHAPTER II.

Old Mrs. Carlyle, or 'Granny Carlyle' it would be politer, perhaps, to call her, lived at Farbridge, which was a whole sixty miles from the little village where her only son was vicar.

Granny Carlyle had been born in Farbridge, married, and spent all her life there, and hoped, so she often declared, to remain there to the end of her days. And there seemed no reason why she should not attain her wish.

Farbridge was a large country-town, with wide streets, good shops, and a park. To Audrey Carlyle, when first she went there, it appeared a splendid place; she felt sure none of

the big cities of the world could outdo it, even if they equalled it. The park, with its close-cut grass, its trees and flower-beds, asphalt paths, and green-painted seats, was to her one of the beauty spots of England.

"Oh, it does look lovely," she sighed happily, as she gazed at it. "After the untidy old moor at home, it looks beautiful, granny."

"It is certainly different," agreed granny, with a twinkle in her eyes. Nevertheless she was well pleased. "I am bound to say I am no lover of the depths of the country. When I walk I like to walk in comfort, and to feel that there is no risk of my twisting my ankle in a rabbit-hole, or by tumbling over a tussock." She was glad that Audrey shared her taste, but she was not quite sure that the taste was a good one.

Granny Carlyle's house, 'Parkview,' solid, double-fronted, handsome, stood on the opposite side of the roadway, facing the park. As Audrey sat at meals in the dining-room, she looked across at the prim patches of green grass, intersected by black paths, the whole outlined by gay, trim flower-beds. Two of the patches of green had large trees in the middle, with wooden seats encircling their trunks; on several of the other patches were green seats with backs to them; the backs were all towards 'Parkview,' so that those who rested on them might be able to enjoy the view, for, though the railway-station stood on the opposite side of the road which ran along the lower side of the park, the tree-clad hills rose high beyond that again, and showed over the low roof of the little station, and if the hills happened to be covered with mist, why, there was the park itself to look at.

On that March morning when, just as Audrey and her granny sat down to breakfast, Mr. Carlyle's letter came, the park was quite gay with people, even though it was early, for, after a long spell of wet weather, the sun was shining quite warmly, and everyone was glad to be out of doors again.

Audrey thought it all looked more beautiful than ever that morning. If she could have done just as she liked, she would have gone out there herself, taking a book with her to read. But she knew that her grandmother would not allow that, so she did not let herself dwell on it.

"Isn't it lovely!" she remarked again enthusiastically. She had said exactly the same thing three times already without receiving any reply, but this time she noticed it, and, withdrawing her eyes from the fascinating scene without, looked instead at her granny for an explanation. Apparently there was no reason why Mrs. Carlyle should not have answered. She was only turning over the lumps of sugar in the sugar-basin, trying to find a small one, yet Audrey felt certain that there was something unusual in the air, that something out of the common had happened, and something not very pleasant either. Granny looked grave and troubled, and at the same time annoyed. However, there was nothing for Audrey to do but to go on with her breakfast, for she knew that her grandmother did not like to be questioned, and, after all, it might only be that the laundress had torn a sheet, or that the boot-boy had been rude to the cook. Granny was always greatly upset if people did not do their duty.

It was not until they had nearly finished breakfast that Audrey knew what was really the matter.

"I have had a letter this morning from your father, Audrey."

"Oh," said Audrey, absently, "have you, granny?" She was not deeply interested, and at that moment one of her schoolfellows went by with a new hat on, a light blue one, with a white 'bottle-brush' bobbing about on it, and she found that much more absorbing. "How is mother?" she asked, when the 'bottle-brush' had bobbed out of sight.

"Don't be staring out of window, child, while I am talking to you. I want your undivided attention."

Audrey coloured, and looked not too well pleased, but she only said, "I did not know you wanted me."

"Well, I do. I have some important news for you."

"Yes, granny," with increased interest, for this sounded very thrilling.

"Your father wants you at home."

Mrs. Carlyle, having brooded over the news for more than an hour, did not realise how startling it might be to her grand-daughter to have it blurted out in this abrupt fashion. Audrey's colour faded, leaving her quite white. "Is mother worse?" she gasped. "Granny, please tell me quickly."

Mrs. Carlyle realised the mistake she had made, and roused herself. "Oh, no, dear. Your mother is better—a little, I mean, and she is stronger, but her doctor says she must lead an invalid's life, lie down, and not walk about, or exert herself, for a whole year, and your father

says they need you at home. They need your help, and your mother will be glad of your companionship."

The relief from her first dreadful fear was so great that Audrey's spirits rose high. Change is always exciting too, and to feel that one is needed is very pleasant; it makes one feel grown-up and important.

"When am I to go, granny? Soon, I suppose? Am I to keep house?" Audrey's face was very bright as she turned it to her grandmother. "Oh! but I shall have to leave school, shan't I, granny?" Her face fell at that thought, and her granny said to herself, with a little pang of pain, "She is more sorry to leave school than she is to leave me."

"Of course you will have to leave your school," she said tartly. "You could hardly come sixty miles in the morning, and home again at night. You might as well live here for all the company you would be to your mother. Think before you speak, Audrey; it would save you from saying many foolish things."

"Then shan't I go to school?"

"I don't know what arrangements your father will make; he doesn't go into every detail in this letter. Perhaps he will get a governess for you all; perhaps you will have to teach the younger ones."

"Oh!" Audrey did not care for that prospect. She was not fond of children, they made a house untidy and noisy, and required so much attention. All the same, though, it was very nice to be going home as mistress of the house, and companion to her mother. Perhaps her mother would help her with her story-writing. It would be grand if she could write stories and sell them, and earn enough money to buy her own clothes. Granny Carlyle did not approve of her writing, or reading either. Indeed, there was scarcely a book in the house.

Audrey recovered her spirits as she remembered the books and papers at home; they seemed to overflow and spread all over the house.

"I shall have my own bookcase, and keep my own books in it, away from the children," she thought to herself. "I hope I have a bedroom to myself. Oh, I must!" But the little doubt she could not get rid of sobered her again. She thought of her pretty bedroom upstairs, how lovely the comfort and peace of it had seemed to her after the bare ugly room at home, which she had shared with Faith.

"Granny, do you think I shall have a room to myself at home?" she asked anxiously. "I shall hate sharing one with Faith!"

"I daresay Faith will not relish sharing one with you," remarked granny, severely, "if she has to."

"But she is so untidy, and after having had such a nice one all to myself, I shall miss it dreadfully."

"I wonder if you will miss me," exclaimed Granny sharply, and for the first time Audrey thought of her grandmother, and her feelings.

"Why, of course I shall, granny, and everything here. I expect I shall often wish I was back again." But it was not until the last day came, and she sat at breakfast for the last time in the handsome, comfortable dining-room, that she fully realised the pain of parting.

She was looking across to the sun-bathed park, at the children already at play there, and the 'grownups' sitting on the seats gazing at the view, or reading their papers, when the thought came to her that to-morrow, and the next day, and all the days that followed, they would be there, but she would not see them. She would be miles away from that dear peaceful spot, with only a rough country road to look out on, and the desolate-looking moor in the distance. And with the same the shrill whistle of a departing train cut the air, and the melancholy of it, and of the day, and of all that was to happen, poured over Audrey, until the pain seemed almost more than she could bear.

"Oh, granny, I don't want to go away," she cried. "I don't want to go. I can't bear leaving you, and—and everything. I want to stay with you always."

Oddly enough, at the sight of Audrey's sorrow, some of the sadness which had weighed on her granny's heart for days was lifted from it, and, though it was their last day, she felt happier. "Then the child does care, she does feel leaving me, she has some deep affections! I knew she had," thought the lonely old grandmother with a sense of triumph over the doubts which had troubled her. She put out her hand and patted Audrey's. "I am so—" she almost, in her relief, said "I am so glad!" "I would like you to stay, dear, but I feel it is your duty to go, and mine to spare you."

"May I come back, granny, when the year is up?" pleaded Audrey, keeping back her tears by remembering that her eyes would be red for her journey. "It would be lovely to

think that this day twelve-months I shall be seeing it all again."

"If your father and mother can spare you, and you still wish to come, I shall be very glad to have you, and your room will be waiting for you."

That was comforting, but the thought of leaving that pretty, beloved room for a whole year set the tears flowing again. "Oh, I mustn't cry, I mustn't," she said to herself fiercely. "Everybody at the station will see, and everyone in the train, too." But, as her eyes wandered from one to another of the familiar things, the pretty cups and saucers, the silver coffeepot, the funny old tall cosy that granny used, and all the rest of them, the sense of loss and parting again became too much for her, and this time the tears flowed without thought of appearances.

"I think I love things more than people," she said to herself, as she stood in her bedroom putting on her hat and coat; and she stooped and kissed the two old foreign shells on the mantelpiece with a sudden feeling of sympathy. They must have travelled so far from their home, and would never, never go back. She leaned out of the window for the last time, and took a long look at the well-filled garden, and at the flat country beyond, and the river shining in the sunlight.

The sight of the river and the hills brought her some comfort. They had been there so long, and would be there unchanged whenever she came back. "And I am coming! I am coming! I *will* come!" she cried passionately.

A knock sounded at her door. "Mistress wants to know if you are ready, miss," said Phipps, granny's maid, who had been with her for five-and-twenty years. "The sandwiches and milk are ready for you in the dining-room, Miss Audrey. The train leaves in half an hour."

"I will be down in a minute," said Audrey, in a choked voice. She hoped desperately that Phipps would go away and leave her alone to say her last good-bye to her room. But Phipps showed no such intention.

"I'll fasten up the bag, and bring it down, miss," and she laid hands on the straps and began to secure them in a manner which gave Audrey no hope. "I'm sorry to be doing up luggage for you to go away altogether, Miss Audrey. We shall all miss you," she said kindly. "The house will seem dreadfully dull and empty. I think you had better come down and have something to eat, or the mistress will be worrying. She likes to be at the station in good time."

Audrey hurried out of her room for the last time, without a backward glance, for her heart was too full to talk.

Once out in the sunshine, though, and walking across the park with her grandmother, some of her unhappiness lightened. It was all so familiar, so exactly as it always was, so calm and unchanged, it seemed impossible that she could be going away from it all for more than a very little while. There were several things, too, that could not fail to cheer her. In her rug-strap were two new umbrellas, one for herself and one for Faith. Her own had a white handle, and Faith's a green one. In her trunk was a new coat for Faith, and a present for each and all from granny, while in the new dark-blue hand-bag that she carried was a dark-blue purse, and in the purse were a half-crown for Faith, and a new shilling each for Debby and Tom.

"To do what they like with," said granny, as she popped in the coins, "but granny hopes that they will like to put them in their money-boxes."

On the platform, when they got there, they found Audrey's neat green trunk and portmanteau, with the rug-strap lying on top, and a porter mounting guard over them. Audrey was very proud of her luggage when she travelled, it looked so neat and nice, all green alike, and all with her initials, 'A. M. C.', in white. Granny had bought it all for her when they went for their first annual visit to Torquay. Her old boxes, which she had taken with her from home, had been sent to a Jumble Sale.

They were, after all, so early for the train that the last few moments were rather painfully long and trying for them both. Granny bespoke a corner seat, and ordered a foot-Warmer, and they had walked the whole length of the platform until granny, at last, was weary, and still the train had not come. At last Mrs. Carlyle, in her anxiety to fill up the time, even went to the bookstall and bought some magazines for Audrey to take with her. She did not approve of magazines as a rule. Audrey did, though, and was overjoyed at having them; but while she was trying to get a peep at the contents there came the sound of a shrill whistle, then a rattle and a roar, and the train thundered down on the little station, and drew up.

After that it was all soon ended. A good-bye, a kiss, a promise to write, and a "be sure and let me know how your mother goes on. I shall count on you to send me bulletins frequently, your father is so busy. Good-bye, dear, good-bye—keep away from the door," and the engine, puffing a little louder, and a little louder, moved on its way again. Neither Mrs.

Carlyle nor Audrey were sorry when the strain was over. It had to be; the pain lay in that; a few minutes more or less of each other's company was but little pleasure when the life they had enjoyed together was ended.

For a while after the engine steamed out, and the last glimpse of the station was gone from Audrey's sight, she felt utterly miserable, and the tears would have their way. She loved her grandmother very much, and she loved living with her, and, for the moment, at any rate, she was not charmed with the thought of life at home, the noisy children, the plain food, the shabby clothes, and even shabbier house. Tears trickled down her cheeks, and one actually dropped on the new blue bag. "Oh, dear!" exclaimed Audrey, vexedly, "I expect there will always be a mark!"

The engine began to slow down before stopping at the next station.

"Oh, dear," cried Audrey again, "I expect I look an object!" She jumped up and tried to see herself in the strip of looking-glass conveniently placed along the back of the opposite seat. "What a bother it is that one can't cry without getting to look so——" She subsided on to her seat hastily, leaving her thought unfinished, and pulled her hat down over her eyes, turned her back on the platform end of her carriage and gazed fixedly out of the opposite window, for a whole party of people had caught sight of her nice empty carriage, and were making for it.

"There are heaps of room here, mother, and such a nice carriage too!" said a boy's voice eagerly.

Audrey could not help looking round, but she pretended it was to pick up one of her magazines, and, being still afraid that her eyes and nose were red, she continued to pretend to be absorbed in the contents. She was so vexed with the newcomers for invading her carriage that she would not have looked at them—so she told herself—even if her eyes had not been red; but, if she refused to look, she could not refuse to hear, and she soon knew that there were two girls of the party, as well as the boy and his mother; and that their voices were pretty and refined. They were all so happy and jolly, too, that, in spite of her vexation, Audrey could not help growing interested and amused, and, finally, even rather glad of their company. It had certainly been rather melancholy, travelling with nothing but one's sad thoughts for company.

She felt, too, rather than saw, that they in their turn were interested in her, and were inclined to be friendly, and once again she experienced a thrill of satisfaction that she was so well dressed, and that all her belongings were so good and so dainty.

Before very long she grew tired of her self-imposed task of reading. It seemed so silly to be continually holding open the pages and casting her eyes over and over them without taking in a word. It gave one a crick in the neck too, keeping it bent so long, and, after all, the people in the carriage were so much more interesting than the people in the stories. If she could hold her head out of the window a little while and blow away the last signs of weeping, she would be able, she thought, to look about her. She threw aside her magazine, took off her hat, and, lowering her window, thrust her head out. The sun turned her red hair to a golden radiance about her; the wind, catching the heavy locks, blew them out like fluttering red-gold pennons. All the Carlyles had red hair of varying shades and natures. Audrey's was long and heavy, with a pretty wave in it. Faith's was shorter, darker, and curly. Tom's curled tightly over his head, a fiery mat of curls. Deborah's, finest and silkiest of all, hung in soft auburn waves to her waist. Baby Joan's fluffy curls were the colour of newly-spun silk.

Audrey was not thinking of her hair, but of her tear-disfigured face, until, in half turning round from the window, she caught sight of herself in the strip of mirror, and of two large smuts ornamenting her brow and her nose! After that she thought of them, and of how ridiculous she must look, and she glanced quickly with shamed eyes at her companions.

They were looking at her, but there was not the ghost of a laugh on either of their faces; indeed, on one there was gentle concern.

"That cinder is so close to your eye; may I flick it off for you?" asked the taller of the two girls, springing to her feet. "If you had tried to do it yourself you might have sent it into your eye," she explained, when she had done, "and then sometimes they take hours to get out again."

"Thank you very much," said Audrey, gratefully, then suddenly grew so shy that she subsided into her corner without another word. She made a big effort, though, to recover; it seemed so ungracious, so rude, to receive a kindness in so *gauche* a fashion. She took up some of her magazines. "Would you—would you like to look at these?" she asked, holding them out towards the elder girl, and at the same time colouring with embarrassment and with pleasure.

"Oh, thank you!" the three spoke with one voice. "We would love to, but— have you done with them all for the time?" asked Irene, the elder girl. "Wouldn't you like one for yourself?

Daphne and I could look at one together."

Audrey shook her head. "No, thank you. I have looked through them, and I have a book here if I want to read."

"Perhaps you would take some lunch with us instead?" suggested the mother, looking up from her paper with a smile. "Keith, before you begin to devour *The Boys' Own*, lift up the lunch-basket for me, and I will unpack it. We don't stop again for some time, so we can feel sure of not being disturbed."

Audrey was really not hungry, but more for the pleasure of joining the happy party than because she wanted anything, she accepted the kind offer, and was always afterwards thankful that she did, for it was the jolliest, pleasantest meal she had ever had in her life. Almost before it was begun all stiffness and shyness had vanished, and if Audrey had ever resented her travelling companions coming, she had quite forgotten it.

"I shall be sorry when the journey is over," she said with a sigh, as she lay back weary with laughter. "I never had such a jolly one!"

"Have you far to go?"

"Not so very, very much farther," she said, half ruefully. "I am going to Moor End, but I have to get out at Kingfield, and change."

"Oh, how funny! We get out at Kingfield too, but we are going on to Abbot's Field. That is the same line as yours, isn't it?"

"Yes, Abbot's Field is a station further on."

"What an extraordinary thing! Was ever anything so strange!" Daphne, the younger girl, was overcome with excitement at the coincidence. "I wonder if we shall see you sometimes! We might each walk half-way and meet. Wouldn't it be fun! Are you going to stay long?"

"Oh, yes, for a year, most likely. It is my home."

"Oh!" They all looked puzzled. Most people lived at home always; they did not come on a twelve-months' visit, or speak in quite that tone about their home-coming. But Audrey offered no explanations, and they were too polite to ask for any.

"Oh," said Daphne again. "Well, I don't suppose we shall be at Abbot's Field as long as that. We are going to stay with grandpapa, Mr. Vivian. He lives at 'The Orchard.' Do you know him?"

Audrey shook her head. "I—I don't remember the people round about Moor End—at least, not very well. I have been living with my granny for four years!"

All the laughter and joy had died out of her heart, and from her face. She was visibly embarrassed. She thought of her home, the shabbiness and untidiness of it as it used to be, and she did not expect it to be much better now, even though Faith was four years older, and she felt a shamed shrinking from letting these strangers see it. She had spoken the truth when she said she did not know Mr. Vivian, but she did remember that 'The Orchard' was a large place, and the house one of the finest in the neighbourhood.

She hoped, she hoped, oh, so fervently, that they would never come over to Moor End to look her up; that they would not ask her her name, or where she lived. If they knew her father was the vicar, they would be coming over to hear him preach, and then she would not be able to avoid introducing them, and then they would see and know all!

A shade of embarrassment hung over the rest of the journey. Audrey was uncomfortable. She was ashamed and nervous, and troubled at her own lack of frankness. She was also, fortunately, ashamed of being ashamed, but she had yet to learn how to rise above herself; to know what are the things she should feel shame for.

It was almost a relief to her when at last the train drew up at Kingfield, and they all had to change carriages; for no one could help feeling that little shade of embarrassment. And she was even more glad when the porter, who looked after her luggage for her, put her into a carriage apart from the Vivians, for now she felt she could escape the necessity of introducing to them whoever might be at the station to meet her at Moor End. Indeed, it was just possible that they might not see if anyone met her.

Yet, when the feeling of relief entered her heart, all other joy went out of it, for she did love her father, she did love them all, and it hurt her to feel ashamed. She liked her new friends too, so much, and wanted them to like her. Tears rose in her eyes as the truth came home to her that she was being false to those who loved her, and to those who had been so kind to her—and all for what?

She did not answer the question, but stood up and stared out of the window, that those within the carriage might not see her face. And so Mr. Carlyle, Deborah and Tom saw her as

the train drew up, and her father's heart rejoiced at her—as he thought—anxiety to catch the first glimpse of them after their long separation.

"Has it been a very long and dreary journey, dear?" he asked, as he put his arm round her shoulders and kissed her. "Did you have company, or have you had to come all the way alone?"

"I had very nice company, part of the way," she answered, and blushed hotly, as, glancing out under the brim of her hat, she caught sight of Keith Vivian and Irene hanging out of their window looking at her. "Perhaps I had better get a porter and see about my luggage," she added hastily. It was very tiresome that they should have to wait on the platform until the train went out, before they were allowed to cross the line by the footway. But it always was so on the down platform of the little Moor End station.

To Tom and Debby one of their greatest treats was to stand and see the engine puff in and puff out on its way again. Audrey grew quite cross with the eager and shabby little pair who would stand so prominently forward, and stare so hard. With a hoot and a puff and a snort the engine moved slowly on, and the Vivians' carriage drew nearer. Daphne was at the window now, as well as Irene and Keith, their hands waving wildly in farewell greeting.

"Good-bye! Good-bye!" they called out, as cheerfully as though they had not noticed the cloud which had fallen on the end of their happy journey. "Perhaps we shall see you——" the rattle drowned the end of their greeting, and saved Audrey the necessity of replying.

"Oh! oh! Audrey, you pushed right in front of me. I couldn't see a thing, and your elbow bumped me in the eye!"

Audrey stepped back quickly; she blushed and looked embarrassed. She had not meant to bump her little sister in the eye, but she had meant to get in front of her and hide from view her shabby frock and patched boots. She had done it deliberately.

"I am very sorry, Debby, if I hurt you," she said stiffly, "but you do make a fuss about a trifle!"

"Debby doesn't," contradicted Tom, fierce in his favourite sister's defence, "Debby has more pluck than—than——"

"Tom, boy, come here," interposed Mr. Carlyle quietly. "You and Debby can carry this rug-strap between you, can't you?"

"Were those your travelling-companions?" he asked interestedly turning to Audrey as the little pair, their indignation forgotten, trotted homewards proudly with their burden.

"Yes," answered Audrey briefly. She said no more, she felt she could not, but she knew that the shadow which had fallen on her own pleasure, had fallen also on others.

CHAPTER III.

Between Moor End vicarage and the road stretched a long narrow strip of garden, at least, a strip of ill-kept grass and some shabby bushes. A wall divided the garden from the road, a wall so low that garden, house, and all, were exposed to the view of every passer-by. The strip of grass was the children's play place, for the garden behind the house was divided up into beds of carrots, cabbages, turnips, potatoes and all manner of other things, so that there was no room left for a good game.

Not only was there no room, but old Job Toms, who came once or twice a week to 'do' the vegetable garden, threatened such dire punishment to anyone who made a footmark on one of his beloved beds, that the children were almost afraid to step inside the gate.

However, the front garden made up for it, there were no beds there—at least none to worry about. There had been two down by the gate at one time, but there was nothing in them now, and the children were allowed to do just as they liked there. They had the added joy too of seeing everyone who passed along the road and everyone who came to the house.

Deborah and Tom had been playing there when their father called them to know if they would like to go with him to the station; and their toys were lying about just as they had left them when they flew away to wash their hands and brush their hair.

Audrey glancing over the wall, eager for a first sight of her home after all the long time

she had been absent from it, saw an old pair of kitchen bellows, numberless scraps of paper, a broken battledore, a shabby straw hat, and three grubby, battered dolls perched up against an old tub, which had once contained flowers, but had long since ceased to do so.

The sight would have jarred on most, but to eyes accustomed to the primness of Granny Carlyle's house it was ugly and unsightly in the extreme. To Audrey, tired, irritable, already depressed, the sight was as jarring as it possibly could be. "Was this really home? Was this the sort of thing she would have to endure for twelve long, weary months?" A great gloom weighed upon her. She walked in without a word, her heart full to bursting.

The look of the house was not more cheering than the garden. In three of the four bedroom windows facing her, the low blinds sagged in the middle and fell away from the sides. In the fourth window alone were the curtains clean and neat, this was the room which was being got ready for Audrey. Over the top of the low blind Faith's head suddenly appeared, and Faith's face beamed out a welcome.

"There is your sister," said Mr. Carlyle, more cheerfully than he had spoken since they left the station. "I expect she is putting finishing touches to your room. Come down," he called up to the open window, but Faith was already coming over the stairs with a rush.

"You have come!" she cried excitedly, hopping over two pairs of shoes and a rattle which strewed the hall floor, "the train must have been very punctual. I was hurrying to clear another shelf in my cupboard for Audrey."

Audrey's heart sank even lower. Then she was expected to share a room with Faith. "Couldn't I—need I disturb—couldn't I have another room," she stammered. "It—it seems too bad to turn you out."

"Oh, you aren't turning me out," laughed Faith. "We have the old nursery for our room, it is so nice and large; there is heaps of room too for Joan's cot to stand beside my bed. I have cleared two shelves in the wardrobe by tipping everything out on to my bed. I must find somewhere to put it all before I go to bed, or I shall have to sleep on the floor—but we shall both settle down in time. Come and see mother, Audrey, she is longing to see you."

"How is she," asked Audrey, as they mounted the stairs together. "Is she really very ill?"

"No—not what you would call very ill. She was last year, and she will never be really well again unless she rests for a whole year."

"It's an awfully long time, isn't it?" said Audrey dejectedly. "When does it count from? From when she was so ill, or—or from when father wrote for me to come home?" She was already calculating in how many weeks time she would be able to get away, and back to Farbridge and granny.

Faith looked at her sister, her soft brown eyes full of mild surprise.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't suppose Dr. Gray can tell to a few weeks, or even months. A lot depends on how quiet she keeps. He said that perhaps by next spring or summer she would be quite well again, and able to go about."

"Oh!" Audrey's face fell, but before she could say anything more, Faith opened a door and in another moment Audrey was in her mother's arms.

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I am so glad to see you. I hardly realised what a great big daughter I possessed. How you have grown, Audrey, and how nice you look, darling. You are going to be tall, like your father, and you have his features." Audrey's face brightened, fond as she was of her mother, it was her father she wished to resemble. Faith had her mother's short tip-tilted nose and big brown eyes, and Audrey had many times envied her the latter, but if she herself had her father's straight nose and aristocratic features, she felt she would not grudge Faith her pretty eyes. Faith was short too—as her mother was—a soft, sweet dumpling of a girl. Audrey admired tall people.

She glanced about her mother's room interestedly and with a happier face. Here, at any rate, all was comfortable and orderly. The litter that lay about was the litter of books and papers, which was what Audrey liked. Perhaps things would not, after all, be as bad as at first they seemed.

"I expect, dear, you would like to take off your hat and coat and have some tea. You must be tired and hungry." Mrs. Carlyle loosened her arm from round her daughter, but reluctantly. "Well," she said, looking after her as she left the room with Faith; "you have your father's features, but you have my mane, I see. Shocking, isn't it, to have six red-headed people in one house!"

"Six red-headed tempers too," laughed Faith, "no five—you haven't a temper, mummy. Come along, Audrey." She hurried along the narrow corridor and opened a door at the other end, "There—that is our room— won't it be jolly? I am sorry it is so untidy now, but it will be lovely when we have settled in, won't it?"

Audrey glanced about her, speechless, "How—how small and—and old-fashioned the room looks," she said at last. "At granny's they are so high, and they look so light and bright. Where am I to put all my things? You see I have rather a lot of clothes."

"Have you?" said Faith wistfully, "well it's lucky that I haven't. I will give you another drawer in my chest of drawers. Now I must run down to baby. Mary is cooking, and there is only Debby to look after her. Will you come down when you are ready? It will soon be tea-time, and I want you to see baby. Oh, Audrey, she is such a darling. You'll be sure to love her. Doesn't it seem odd that you have never seen her—your very own sister!"

"Yes," said Audrey, but without eagerness. "I wish though that she had been a boy. We were too many girls before."

Faith went downstairs with a shadow on her bright spirits. Why was it that nothing seemed quite right? Perhaps she had expected too much. Somehow she had a feeling that Audrey was not pleased with anything, nor comfortable. She could give her another drawer or two and more room in the cupboard, but she could not change the long, low rooms to high, light ones, nor her baby sister into a brother.

"And I don't want to!" she cried as she met the young person in question crawling along the hall to meet her.

"Fay! Fay! Fay!" cried Joan joyfully, and chuckled with delight at sight of her.

Faith caught her up in her arms and hugged her. "Oh, Joan, you darling— but what about your clean pinny that I had put on on purpose to make you look nice when your new big sister saw you for the first time?"

But Joan only caught Faith's curls in her two plump little hands, and drew her face down until she could rub her own soft baby face against it.

A few minutes later Audrey came out of her room, she had made herself as tidy as she could without hot water to wash with, or a brush or comb. Her own were not unpacked, and Faith's were nowhere to be seen. As she descended the stairs a strong smell of cooking poured up to meet her. "Sausages," she thought to herself, "what a funny time of day to have them." She was so hungry though, she could forgive the appearance of such a dish at such an hour.

In the dining-room Tom and Debby were trundling a small tin train across the table from side to side, trying to avoid collisions with forks and spoons and cups and saucers, et cetera, by moving such things away. Faith was playing on the hearthrug with Joan. "Look, Audrey," she cried as her eldest sister entered, "this is baby! isn't she a darling!"

Audrey looked down at the sweet little upturned face, at the big, velvety, violet eyes fixed so earnestly on herself. "Oh, you are a darling," she cried impulsively. "Will you come to me, Joan dear?" But Joan was shy at first and shrank back against Faith, though her eyes still scanned Audrey's face with interest. A moment later there was a crash against the door followed by a rattle of plates and dishes, diverting everyone's attention. Audrey swung round with a cry of alarm. She was not accustomed yet to the ways of the household.

"It is only Mary bringing in the dishes and things," remarked Faith placidly, "she always bumps the door with her tray." Audrey wondered what granny would say if any one so treated the doors at 'Parkview.' She wondered too, when she saw her, what granny would think of Mary; round-faced, untidy, good-tempered Mary, with her crumpled apron, torn dress and untidy head. Audrey did not know then how patient, willing and hard-working Mary was. She only saw an untidy head with hair and cap falling over one ear, a red face and smutty hands, and wondered how her father, who followed her into the room could look at her and not send her away to make herself neat, or give her notice on the spot.

Granny would not allow her to come into the room looking so untidy, and oh! what would Phipps think of her?

She did not know then that poor Mary did more hard work in one day than prim Phipps did in four; did it willingly too, and for far less reward.

"Tea's ready, miss," Mary announced loudly. "Master Tom, you'll have to pick up your toys now; and look at the litter you've made the table in! Miss Faith, shall I hold baby while you have your tea? I'll rompsy with her a bit, and that'll tire her out and make her sleepy."

"Oh, thank you, Mary, she will love that." Faith handed her precious burthen over to the grimy, willing hands without a vestige of the shudder which ran up and down Audrey's spine at the sight of them.

"Oh! oh! sausages for tea! sausages for tea!" Debby and Tom pausing in their entrancing game realised for the first time the unusual luxury spread before them. "Sausages *and* jam too! That's 'cause Audrey has come. Faith, may we have some too? Are we always going to have sausages for tea now? Oh, I am glad Audrey's come home. Don't you love sausages,

Audrey?"

Debby looked up at her sister with eager, happy eyes.

"Yes—rather—I mean yes, I do." Audrey was glancing about her for a table-napkin. Mr. Carlyle saw and understood.

"Faith, dear. Audrey would like a table-napkin. Can you get her one?"

"Never mind," said Audrey, "it really doesn't matter." But Faith had already flown. When she came back again it was with a troubled face and a very ragged piece of damask in her hand.

"I know we have some better ones somewhere," she said, "but I can't think where they have got to. I can't find anything but this."

"Oh, don't bother," pleaded Audrey, embarrassed by the trouble she was causing.

Mr. Carlyle sighed softly, but not so that Faith could hear. "I think we shall have to put you in charge of the linen-cupboard," he said, smiling down at his elder daughter, and Audrey's face brightened. She loved granny's nice neat linen cupboard, with its neat piles of towels and pillow-cases, sheets and tablecloths all in such beautiful order.

She picked up her knife and fork to begin her meal, trying not to see that the knife had not been cleaned, but when she felt the handle of her fork sticky in her clasp her patience gave out, she could not eat with dirty messy things, and she would not. With a face like a thunder-cloud she laid down both again, "I don't think I will have any, thank you," she said huskily. "I—I——" She was so thoroughly put out she could scarcely speak, for she really was very hungry and she really wanted her tea.

Her father, with a very concerned face, laid down his own knife and fork and looked at her anxiously. "Perhaps it was not a very wise choice to have made for you after a journey," he said, "would you rather have some cold meat, dear?"

"No, thank you, it is very nice, but—but——"

"You would rather have some bread and butter."

She would not at all prefer bread and butter, at that moment she felt she hated it, she was so hungry and longed for the savoury sausage and potato. It was not the food she objected to but what she had to eat it with. After the fuss, though, about the table-napkin she had not the courage to speak out. So she sat and ate bread and jam sulkily, and almost choked over her tea and refused to smile at anyone or at anything that was said.

In her heart she wondered how she could ever endure the hopeless muddle, the dirt and untidiness, for fifty-two long weeks. "Three hundred and sixty-five days of it!" she thought angrily, "and I haven't lived through one yet! Oh, I must write to granny and beg her to let me come back to her again. They must manage without me here, I simply cannot bear it."

Again a shadow fell on the happiness of all. Mr. Carlyle, looking at his eldest daughter's downcast face, wondered if he had done right by her; not so much in having her home now, as in ever letting her go away. Was she going to be the comfort to her mother, and the help to the younger ones that he had hoped she would, after her four years of training; or had the years simply taught her to be selfish, and to love luxury?

Faith, too, felt unusually depressed. She was accustomed to feeling tired in body, but to-night she felt tired in spirit also. Debby and Tom, instead of rejoicing that they had a big sister to make home happier, felt as though they had a stranger amongst them, who disapproved of everything.

In her heart of hearts Audrey knew it too. She felt that she was being disagreeable, that so far she had given no one cause to be glad that she had come home; and, once her first anger had subsided, the feeling added greatly to her sadness. She longed to be able to get away by herself for a while; but in that busy house she knew there was but little chance of solitude.

"I must have a room to myself, I must! I must!" she thought desperately, "if it is only an attic. Somewhere where I can put my books and desk." Suddenly she remembered that the house had attics, some of which were not used—at least, two were unused when she lived at home. Her heart gave a great leap of excitement. If one were still empty, could not she have it? She felt she could put up with everything else, if she might but have one place of her very own.

She longed to ask about it at once, and set her mind at rest, but second thoughts showed her that it would be too selfish, too ungracious to be inquiring about a room for herself on the very first evening of her home-coming, especially after the nursery—an extra large room —had been given up to them that they might be happy and comfortable.

She would wait a day or two, she decided, and then make the suggestion to Faith. Faith would agree, she was sure, if she thought it would give pleasure. She was always so easy-going and good-tempered; so ready to fall in with any plan for making others happy.

Audrey's spirits brightened, and the brightness showed in her face. Her father, watching her anxiously, saw that the cloud had lifted, and thought that perhaps after all it might only have come from over-tiredness, and a very natural sorrow at leaving her grandmother and her home of four years.

"I have taken your boxes upstairs," he said, laying his hand caressingly on her shoulder, "you will be able to unpack after tea if you like."

Audrey looked up at him with the brightest look he had yet seen on her face.

"Oh, thank you, father, so much, I will go up and unpack at once, if I may, there are presents in my big box for everyone."

CHAPTER IV.

Audrey had already unpacked a book for her father, a soft down cushion for her mother, and a pretty pinafore for Baby Joan.

"This is for—oh no, this is a pair of shoes for Debby—oh Debby, Debby, how dare you!" Audrey's face and voice and manner changed in a flash from sweet graciousness to hot anger. "Just look at the mess you have made, and your heel is on the brim of my best hat. Oh, how clumsy you are!"

Deborah was sitting right in the middle of Audrey's bed, and Tom on Faith's. Faith herself sat on the floor, gazing entranced at her sister's pretty belongings. In one hand she held a smart new patent leather shoe, in the other a pretty bedroom slipper. "What is Debby doing?" she asked absently. "Oh, Audrey, you have three—no, four pairs of house shoes! How——"

But Audrey was not in the mood to listen to a recital of her own blessings. "Deborah couldn't sit on a chair, or the floor, but must actually clamber on to my bed, with her boots on too! Just look at the mess she has made my white quilt in! It—it looks as though it had been slept on by—by a muddy dog."

Faith, roused by the wrath in her sister's voice, put aside the shoes, and looked up. "Debby," she said reprovingly, "you shouldn't. You know Audrey wants the bed to put her things on. Why couldn't you sit on the floor beside me?"

"I couldn't see all the things when I was down so low," explained Deborah, in an aggrieved voice.

"I have a good mind not to give you your presents at all," stormed Audrey. "I am sure granny wouldn't wish me to, if she knew how naughty you were."

"I don't want your old presents, you can keep them yourself," retorted Debby hotly, scrambling off the bed hurriedly, and dragging off a collection of gloves and laces with her. Her face was red and angry too, but tears were very near the surface.

Faith held out her arm, "Come and sit beside me, dear, and we will put on your new shoes, to see if they fit."

"I don't care if they fit or not, I don't want them! I wouldn't wear them if they did. Audrey had better keep them for herself—disagreeable old thing," and Debby, mortified and indignant, marched out of the room, banging the door behind her.

Faith's face grew troubled. The child had been so happy a moment before. "She did not know," she murmured apologetically. "She didn't know she was doing wrong, they always sit on my bed. Tom, you had better come off, my quilt is a clean one too."

In the silence that followed, Audrey grew uncomfortable. They had all been so excited and happy a moment before, and now the room was full of gloom. No one took any further interest in her box and what it contained. She knew that she had been only right and Debby very naughty, that children with dusty boots should not sit in the middle of clean white quilts; but perhaps she could have spoken more gently. The children did not know they were doing wrong.

Tom swung himself off the bed, and marched towards the door. Audrey looked at his stormy face nervously. "This is for you," she said, holding a tempting-looking parcel towards him.

For a moment he hesitated, evidently unwilling to accept it from her, but his better instincts prevailed. "Thank you," he said, but coldly, and laying it down without looking at it, he turned to Faith. "I am going to look for Debby," he said, and went out of the room.

"What dreadful tempers!" Audrey, mortified by Tom's snub, grew angry again. "They ought to be sent away to school, to a very strict school. They would be taught, then, how to behave themselves!"

"They aren't really bad," pleaded Faith wistfully. "I think they were hurt, you see Debby didn't know she was naughty, and—and they hardly know you yet. They would not mind so much if they did."

"Well, I think their tempers are dreadful, and their manners too." In her annoyance Audrey could not help speaking out the hard thoughts that were in her heart.

"All red-haired people have hot tempers, they say," quoted Faith quietly, "I know I have."

"Oh, well, I am glad I haven't."

"You! oh!" Faith glanced up at her sister with a comical little smile, but she said no more.

"This is yours," said Audrey glumly, dragging a large parcel from her box. "It is a blue coat like mine. Granny thought you might want one."

"Want one! I should think I did!" Faith sprang to her feet in a tumult of excitement. "Oh, Audrey, I haven't had a new coat for three years, and mine is so shabby and so small for me. How kind of granny to send me such a beautiful present. I wish she was here now. I do so want to thank her!"

Audrey stared at her sister, wide-eyed with astonishment. Not had a new coat for three years! Why, that was nearly as long as she herself had been away, and she had had one every winter and summer. Poor Faith! no wonder she looked so shabby. It was not entirely from her own carelessness then.

But Faith, blissfully unconscious of the thoughts passing through her sister's mind, had torn off the wrapper from the parcel, and was already slipping her arm into her new treasure. "Doesn't it look nice," she cried, pirouetting before the glass. "I must go and show it to mother and father, and the children," and she danced away to her mother's room, and even to the kitchen to show Mary.

Audrey remained where she was, gazing thoughtfully down into her trunk. She suddenly felt ashamed that she should possess so much, while Faith, who worked so hard, possessed so little. She thought of all the dresses lying in her box at that moment, the soft grey cashmere, the dark blue serge, the green tweed, the new blue muslin, and the cotton ones, white, blue, and green.

"I wish my dresses would fit Faith. I would give her one—unless she has enough already —and I don't suppose she has." She was still standing in the same spot, and still thinking, when Faith danced into the room again.

"Oh, Audrey, they all think it beautiful, and daddy says he hopes I will be able to have a new hat this summer." Then catching sight of her sister's grave face. "How are you getting on? Can you find room for all your things? You can have all my pegs but one—one will be enough for me."

"Haven't you many frocks?" asked Audrey. She spoke a little gruffly, but it was from shyness, and the thought of what she was about to do.

"I have this one," said Faith cheerfully, "this is my best—and an old one I wear in the mornings. I was to have had a new one, but the roof had to be mended, and it cost an awful lot. I wish this skirt was blue instead of brown, it would look so nice with my new blue coat, wouldn't it?"

"I have a blue skirt that you can have. I have two, a blue serge and a blue cloth. You shall have the blue cloth, it is rather short for me, so it ought to do nicely for you."

Faith could hardly believe her ears. "Oh, Audrey!" she gasped, "do you really mean it; but why should you give up your things? You may want them, and I don't mind being shabbier than you are. I don't really. You see the eldest is always the best-dressed."

"But I mind," cried Audrey. "I can't go about nicely dressed, and you in—in rags almost."

She did not mean to speak ungraciously, she did not mean exactly what her words

conveyed, she was embarrassed by Faith's overwhelming gratitude, and her exaggerated idea of her—Audrey's—generosity. Something made her feel mean and petty. "You can wear your own blouses with it, so there will be no trouble about the fit."

"I shall be able to have a new blouse soon," said Faith blithely. "I am saving up to get some muslin. Miss Babbs has got some new in. Oh, it is so pretty, and only sixpence a yard. It will only take three yards, and when I have got it, Miss Babbs says she will cut it out for me, and help me make it. Isn't it kind of her! I have a shilling towards it."

"Oh!" Audrey made a dart at the bed where her bag, and a host of other things, lay in the utmost confusion. "I had quite forgotten," she said, diving in the bag for her purse, "granny sent half-a-crown to you, and a shilling each to Debby and Tom."

Faith's eyes grew rounder than ever. "I never knew such a lovely day as this. Why, it is like a very nice birthday!" she cried, overwhelmed with happiness. "Oh, Audrey, I can get my muslin now, and—and perhaps I can make my blouse by Sunday! Will you come to Miss Babbs' with me to-morrow to choose it?"

Miss Babbs' shop was of the useful kind so often met with in villages. The kind of shop where you seem able to buy everything that is needed, and many that are pretty, such as the blouse muslin on which Faith had set her heart. She was so afraid that it would be gone before she could get some of it, that she rushed off as soon as breakfast was over, carrying the greater part of her family with her.

"I would have liked that white one with the blue spots," she said, eyeing that particular roll wistfully, "but it would always be needing washing."

"Why don't you have this," suggested Audrey, pointing to a dark blue with a spot on it of the same colour, "with little white cuffs and a collar; it would look awfully well with your blue coat and skirt."

"Oh, so it would," cried Faith eagerly, "please give me three yards of that, Miss Babbs. What good taste you have, Audrey! Other people always choose prettier things for me than I should choose for myself."

Deborah pulled at her sleeve anxiously. "Fay—Fay, I want to get something for mother," she whispered in a tone that could be heard all over the shop, "and I want to get something for daddy, and Joan, and Mary."

"Oh!" said Faith, and forgot all about her own purchases. "You must get something for yourself too, darling."

"I don't want anything—look Fay! wouldn't Mary like a pair of those?" Her eyes were riveted on a boxful of cotton gloves, bright yellow, black, and white, marked fourpence three-farthings.

"She'd love a pair," said Faith with conviction. "She would like a yellow pair to wear with her new brown frock." She wished it was as easy to find something for all the others.

"Joan would like a ball, and mother—oh, why not get mother some oranges. She is so fond of fruit."

Debby was gazing enraptured at a shelf of china with a view on each piece. "Oh, Fay, I would like to give daddy a cup and saucer, may I?"

"Of course, darling, if you have money enough; he would like it ever so much." But the cups and saucers cost eightpence, and Debby's means would not run to that.

Tom came to her rescue, "I know, we will get it for daddy between us, that'll be fourpence each, you shall give him the cup if you like, Deb."

"No, I shan't," said Debby decisively, "we'll give half a cup and half a saucer each. Let me see, fourpence and fourpence three-farthings is nearly ninepence, a penny for Joan's ball, that only leaves twopence-farthing for mummy. Do you think she will feel hurt?" turning a grave face to Faith.

"Hurt! of course not!"

"I know," shouted Tom, "I'll save on Mary. I'll get her two sticks of peppermint rock, she loves it—then I'll be able to get a mug for mother, then if you give her oranges, and father doesn't have anything but his cup and saucer, that'll be about fair."

"I know what we'll do," said Debby, after long and deep thinking. "We'll put our things together, shall we, Tom? and not say which is from which."

Coming out of the shop nearly an hour later, with their arms full of parcels, they ran almost into the arms of a tall grey-haired gentleman. Debby gave a shout of delight. "Dr. Gray, oh, Dr. Gray," she cried excitedly, "I've spent a whole shilling, but look what a lot of

things I've got." In her efforts to try and hug them and him too, she dropped some of them.

"I see you have bought a ball for someone," he laughed, rescuing it from the gutter. "Is that for me?"

"For you!" Debby chuckled hilariously at first, then her face grew suddenly serious. She had not bought anything for this lifelong friend, and she felt mean. "Would you like one," she asked anxiously, "'cause you shall have it, if you would!"

"Bless the child!" cried the doctor, picking her up unceremoniously and kissing her. "I haven't time for play. You give it to the lucky person you bought it for."

"That's Joan."

"Very well. When I want a game and have time, I will come up and play with Joan. What else have you got there?"

"Oranges for mother—oranges and a ball aren't easy to carry together, and I've got gloves for Mary, and a cup for daddy—at least, *we* have, me and Tom."

"My eye! you have been making Miss Babbs' fortune this morning! Where is the cup? In the crown of your hat?"

"No, forchinately Faith is carrying that, or it would have been broken."

"That is fortunate indeed." At the mention of Faith, the doctor turned to the elder sisters. "Ah, Miss Audrey," he cried, clasping her hand warmly, "it is nice to see you home again! I began to think you had deserted us for good. But you have come back at last to look after them all! Well they needed an elder sister's help; it was time you came."

Audrey smiled and blushed prettily. "I want to be useful," she said, and genuinely meant it. "When I have been here a little while I shall know better what I can do."

She mistook the doctor's meaning. She did not realise that he meant that her mother needed companionship and care; and Faith some help with the heavy burden which weighed down her young shoulders. She thought he referred to the house and the garden, and the muddle which reigned in both. And she walked home with her head held high. People should soon see that she, at any rate, knew how things should be done.

"Debby," she said sharply, as they passed through the garden on their way home. "When you have taken in your parcels do come out and pick up that old hat, and those dreadful old dolls, and carry them all up to your own room. They make the garden look dreadfully untidy."

Debby stood still in the path, her oranges dropping one by one, unheeded, through the bottom of the bag. Those dreadful old dolls! She could scarcely believe her ears. Her precious babies, her Dorothy, and Gladys and Dinah Isabella, called 'dreadful old dolls.' The colour mounted in her cheeks, and the tears in her eyes.

"They are not old!" she cried indignantly, "and they are not—not dreadful—they are lovely, they are darlings, and they have *got* to stay out of doors, they have been ill."

"Rubbish!" snapped Audrey irritably. "You don't care in the least how untidy you make the place look. I wonder you aren't ashamed for anyone to come here." She did not see, nor would she have cared if she had seen, the quivering of Debby's lips, the hurt feeling in her eyes.

Faith was torn two ways; full of pity for her little sister she yet felt she must uphold the authority of the eldest one. "Debby dear," she said, "your old hat, at any rate, oughtn't to be lying here, and just think how horrid it will be if slugs and snails get into it. It is time your dolls came in and had a bath, isn't it? They have been out all night. Tom, pick up that paper, will you, dear? You know daddy dislikes to see paper lying about."

"I forgot," said Tom, "we were playing shops when daddy called out and asked if we would like to go to the station."

"But that was yesterday," said Audrey coldly, "I saw it lying there when I came, it looked dreadful, it caught my eye at once. There has been plenty of time to pick it up since, and you should have done it."

The look of sullen rebellion came again to Tom's face. "Daddy didn't tell me to, or Faith. I suppose Audrey thinks she can boss us as much as she likes," he whispered angrily to Debby, "'cause she is the eldest. I wish she had stayed at granny's for ever and ever."

Faith walked on at her sister's side, looking grave and troubled. From time to time she glanced with anxious eyes at Audrey's face. She could see that she was annoyed, and irritated.

"I—I expect we seem rather untidy to you, after granny's," she remarked at last. She spoke apologetically, yet she was longing for a word of understanding sympathy. "With mother's illness, and—and little children, and no nurse to look after them, it has been so difficult to keep it all nice."

But Audrey only gave a snort of contempt. She had no sympathy to offer. "Nice!" she said sarcastically; "from the look of the place I shouldn't have thought anyone had tried. It is more like a pigsty than anything else. And the children haven't any manners at all," she added, quite losing sight of her own, and longing only to hurt someone.

CHAPTER V.

Audrey had been at home two weeks, but, she wrote to her granny, "it seems like two months, and such long ones. Mother seems to be going on very well, but nothing else does. Everything else seems all wrong. The house is so shabby and untidy, and no one seems to try to keep it neat. I am *always* telling them about it, and then they turn round and say I am nagging. Oh, granny, I shall be so glad when next year comes, and I can come back to you. I miss you dreadfully."

What she really missed was her comfort, and the little luxuries her grandmother had surrounded her with as a matter of course. "I am going to try to have a room to myself, I simply can't bear things as they are. With love, your affectionate grandchild, Audrey."

Having sealed and directed her letter, Audrey rose, crept softly out of the bedroom, and up the steep stairs to the attics. She really was going to see about getting one for herself. If the empty one was at all suitable she was going straight to her mother to ask if she might have it. If it was not suitable! She did not let her mind dwell on such a possibility, it would be too dreadful to bear—after all the hopes she had built up.

She had shared the room with Faith and Joan for a fortnight, and she simply could not stand it any longer. The children seemed to forget that it was not their nursery still, and spent half their time there. She had never been able to put out her writing-case and work-basket, or her books and ornaments, for there was no room. Nor would she have done so if there had been, for the children would have been always handling them, and spoiling them all.

And now, even while she was writing, Debby had upset the water-jug all over the floor, and Joan had danced all over the beds; and really it was more than Audrey could endure any longer.

"I can't be expected to," she said to herself, as she mounted the attic stairs, "anything would be better than that muddle."

The attic on the extreme left was a box-room, she knew, and the one in the middle was the servant's room, so she opened the third door. The box-room faced the east; the servant's room looked out over the front garden and the road; the third one—Audrey's—looked out to the west, and down over the village and the church, to where the hill wound up and up to the heather-clad moor.

As she opened the door the room felt close and musty, but a flood of sunshine poured in through the closed window, to welcome her. "Oh, how jolly! I must have this! I must! I must! I could make a splendid room of it."

She went over and threw up the window wide, then faced about and examined the place more closely. "There is heaps of room, and I am sure I could make it ever so nice. The bed could stand there, and the chest of drawers facing the window, and—oh, I could have a real writing table by the window. I could do real work if I had this all nice and quiet to myself, with my things about—and this view to look out at! I shall go and ask mother this very minute!" and with cheeks pink with excitement she tore down the bare stairs and along the corridor as though she was afraid she would lose her chance if she waited a moment.

But at her mother's door she found her father standing, talking to Dr. Gray. The doctor looked round at her with a little frown on his brow, and put up his finger for silence. "Your mother is trying to sleep," he said rather sharply. "She had a bad night. Will you try and keep the house as quiet as possible, Miss Audrey, please?"

Audrey's face clouded. She was disappointed at not being able to put her request to her mother, and she was annoyed at being reproved. Audrey never could endure reproof.

"I will try," she answered glumly; "but it is almost impossible to get quiet here. The children are so noisy, and they never do what they are told."

Mr. Carlyle sighed. Dr. Gray's eyebrows lifted a little. "They are very imitative," he said. "If you explain to them how necessary it is, for their mother's sake, and set them the example, I will answer for it that they will be good."

But Audrey only tossed her head, and retired to her bedroom.

Presently, after what seemed a long time, Faith came up, carrying Joan, asleep in her arms. She looked tired and hot. "She has dropped off at last," she panted, "I am going to put her in her cot. I think it is the warm weather that makes her so restless. She hasn't slept for hours."

Audrey did not reply. She sat on the chair beside her bed, and watched her sister lay the sleeping child carefully on her pillow, without disturbing her; then draw the blanket carefully over her.

That done to her satisfaction, Faith flung herself on her own bed with a sigh of content. "Oh!" she sighed, "how lovely it is to lie down. I am so tired, and my head aches so—and my feet."

The warm days had come in suddenly; though it was only April they seemed to have stepped from winter right into summer, and everyone felt it.

Audrey looked at her sister with disapproving eyes. "A nice sight your bed will be, when you get off it, and look at mine. Joan did that. With that great slop on the floor, too, the room isn't fit to look at."

"I should think this heat would soon dry up anything," said Faith placidly, "no floor could stay wet long, even if one wanted it to." She turned over, and stretched her aching limbs contentedly. "If my bed is untidy, I must tidy it again—that is all. I am so dead tired I must lie down somewhere. Where have you been? In with mother?"

"No. I was here part of the time, trying to write to granny, and—and then I went up to the attics. Faith, I do want to have that west attic for my very own. It would make a jolly bedroom. I am going to ask mother if I may. I should think she would let me when she knows how much I want it."

"Do you?" Faith opened her tired eyes, and looked at her sister wistfully. "You don't care for being here with me?"

Audrey looked somewhat embarrassed. "It—it isn't that—but I do want a room to myself, where—where the children won't be always bursting in and banging the place about. You see, I have been accustomed to having my own room, and my things about, all the time I was with granny. It—it seems senseless, too, doesn't it? for three of us to sleep in one room, and leave that one up there standing empty."

"But Joan only sleeps here because mother mustn't be disturbed at night."

"I know, but she makes three sleeping here. Do you think mother and father would mind my having the attic?"

"Oh, no—not if you want it so much. It makes more work for the servant to have another room to clean, and one so high up too."

"Oh, I will keep it clean, and—and all that sort of thing. I wonder when mother will be awake? I want to go and ask her."

"I don't know. Not for a long while yet, I hope, for Dr. Gray gave her a sleeping draught. But you need not bother mother about it, ask father, it will be just the same. He is in his study."

Audrey was on her feet in a moment. "Shall I? Do you think he will understand as well as mother would? You see, I really need a quiet place where I can work in peace. Do you think father would let me have the attic?"

"Oh, yes, father will let you have it." Faith turned her head on her pillow with a weary sigh. "Audrey, will you draw down the blind? My head is simply splitting."

"All right. I will go down to father this very minute, then I must see about getting it cleaned out, and—oh, I wonder if I could possibly get it ready to sleep there to-night!"

"To-night!" In spite of her pain, Faith opened her eyes wide with surprise. "But there is no furniture there, no—no anything. What a hurry you are in, Audrey." She felt a little hurt, and the hurt sounded in her voice; but Audrey did not hear, she was already on her way to the study.

Faith got off the bed, drew down the blind herself, then clambered on to her bed again; but there was no pleasure in the rest now. She was conscious all the time that she was crushing the pillows and the quilt and spoiling the look of everything. "I wish I had a rug and a cushion, that I could lie on the floor. It seems wrong to be lying here." However, as she was there, she thought she might as well stay, and presently she dozed, until Audrey's return woke her.

"Father says I may have the attic," she announced bluntly, but she was not as exuberant about it as Faith had expected her to be. Without saying anything more, she went to a drawer and took out a large apron.

"Are you going to begin at once?" asked Faith, sitting erect in her excitement.

"I may as well. What is the use of waiting?"

"I was only thinking of the heat—and the noise. We shall have to be so awfully careful not to disturb mother. What did daddy say, Audrey?"

"Oh," he said: "'Yes, certainly,'" a pause.

"Was that all?"

"No, he—he seemed to think I was going to take Debby with me—as you had Joan; but I might as well stay here as do that! Better, in fact. If Debby thought the attic was as much hers as mine, I should have no peace in my life. I should never be able to keep her out."

Faith got slowly off the bed. "I don't suppose Debby would care to go, either," she said quietly. "I will have her in here with me. There will be plenty of room, and I shall be able to keep an eye on her."

"Yes—that's a capital idea," Audrey's face brightened. "She will love being here with you and Joan. Now I am going down to get a brush and some dusters. I shall first of all sweep out the attic. I am going to have it as nice and clean and pretty as ever I can get it."

"I will come and help you," said Faith with as much energy as she could muster. She was very hot and tired still, and her head ached as badly as ever.

When Mary heard what Audrey wanted the brushes for, she came too, to lend a hand. She even washed the floor, to take up any loose dust, and "make it sweet," as she said. "It dries as fast as I wash it," she added, "it is that hot up here to-day, and such a breeze blows in." Good-tempered Mary also cleaned the window, and put up a pair of holland curtains—the best that could be found.

"They will do for the time," said Audrey, somewhat scornfully. "I shall make myself a pretty pair as soon as I can, and embroider roses on them. I think I will write to granny, and ask her to send me the materials. Granny has some sweet ones. She cuts out great sprays of flowers from cretonne, and appliqué's them on to Bolton sheeting. You have no idea how sweet they look."

"I wish we had some for the drawing-room," sighed Faith, "the curtains there are too shabby for words."

Debby and Joan had drifted up by this time, and were allowed to help, and Joan sat on the floor contentedly playing with the hammer. When she had put up the curtains, Mary helped Faith to unscrew the bed and carry it up, and screw it together again, the mattress she carried in her strong arms as easily as though it were Joan; while Tom and Deborah staggered up with the pillows, sheets, and blankets.

When, though, it came to carrying up the chest of drawers, they all had to give a hand. It was so clumsy, and slipped through their hands so persistently that more than once they all sat down suddenly on the stairs with the chest on top of them. By that time they had all begun to giggle, and that made matters worse, for it took away all the strength they had. Audrey's new room was growing quite ship-shape, but every other duty in the house was at a standstill, everything else was forgotten, and time was lost count of.

"Audrey! Faith! Mary! Where are you all? Do you know that it is half-past one?"

Mr. Carlyle's voice broke in on their laughter so peremptorily and unexpectedly, that Audrey and Faith above, and Mary below, lost their hold of the clumsy bit of furniture, and let it slip backwards.

"Is dinner nearly—I say, girls, do be careful. If that thing were to fall on Mary it might injure her seriously—and what should we do without her?" With a strong grasp he seized and raised their cumbersome load, while Mary, red, embarrassed, laughing, dishevelled, struggled out from underneath. She was not really hurt, but she was dismayed at the thought of the time, and the work which lay neglected.

"Half-past one!" she gasped, "and I've got all the dinner to get." Faith had already flown

downstairs.

"And I have to be at the Cemetery at half-past two," said Mr. Carlyle gravely, but not unkindly. Mary was only seventeen, and, after all, young things did enjoy anything out of the routine, he knew. But such a lack of all sense of responsibility was serious, especially in a house where there was an invalid, and young children.

"And what about your mistress's lunch?" he asked, when they had succeeded in getting the chest of drawers safely into the attic. Mary, overcome with remorse, flew down to the kitchen without a word.

Mr. Carlyle turned to Audrey. "Had you forgotten your mother?" he asked in a voice full of reproach.

Audrey coloured with shame. "I—I—yes, I had, father. I didn't know it was so late—the time flew so.

"It does, when we are occupied with anything that pleases us. But it was your duty to know how the time was going. You reminded me to-day that you were the eldest, and that, therefore, certain privileges were due to you. You must remember, dear, that with certain privileges, certain responsibilities are yours too."

"I am very sorry, father. When I—when I am settled in—I will try to see to things better."

"That's right. I hope the having a room of your very own will not prove a temptation to you to shirk your duty; that your privileges will not block your view of your duties. Come down now, and help Mary, in return for all the help she has given you."

"Yes, father. I will as soon as I have washed my hands."

It took her so long though to find soap and nailbrush, and a towel, and a brush and comb, that when, at last, she did get down to the kitchen she found Faith just leaving it with a cup of hot beef tea on a tray, and a plate of stewed fruit and custard. Joan sat on the floor, this time happy with the bellows, while Mary chopped cold potatoes as fast as she could in the frying-pan over the gas ring.

"If I can only get something ready for the master to have, I don't mind," she gasped, pausing for a moment. "There is plenty of cold beef, that is one comfort, and some stewed fruit; but I did mean to have had a hot dinner, and have kept the cold meat for supper."

"Never mind, that will be all right. It is lucky we had it." Audrey's ideas as to what was suitable for dinner, and what should only be had for suppers, had undergone a sharp and swift change. She resented a little Mary's tone of proprietorship, but she decided that it would be wiser to await another opportunity to tell Mary that it was for her, Audrey, to arrange what they should have for this meal and that.

She took up a magazine which was lying on the table. "There doesn't seem to be anything for me to do," she said, contentedly dropping into a chair. She was very glad, for she was very tired. "Oh, dear! how my legs ache. I feel as though I don't want to do a thing more to-day."

Mary looked at Audrey once or twice with disapproval, as she sat lazily turning over the pages. She hardly liked to say what was in her mind, for she was a little in awe of her master's eldest daughter, who seemed to know so much better than anyone else how things should be done, and to have been accustomed to everything so much grander than they were at the Vicarage.

Loyalty to Faith, though, gave her courage. Faith, so good-tempered and willing, at the beck and call of everyone. If Audrey was tired, so were they all—and with working for her, too—and Faith was feeling quite sick with the pain in her head.

"There is the cloth to lay, miss," she said, reluctantly. "I haven't been able to do that yet. Miss Faith said she would, but she is feeling so bad——"

"Oh, isn't the cloth laid!" in a disappointed voice, "then I suppose," reluctantly, "I had better do it. Where do you keep it, Mary, and where shall I find the glasses, and the table napkins, and the silver?"

Mary stopped and showed her, running back between whiles to attend to the potatoes. Audrey laid the cloth, and turned to the plate-basket. "I suppose I ought to polish each fork and spoon as I lay it," she thought, ruefully, "it all looks smeary; but, I can't bother. I am too tired to-day. The things shouldn't be put away smeary," she added crossly, "it is only leaving the work for someone else to do."

When she had finished laying the silver, she went out to the kitchen again and collected the glasses. Every one had the smeary look that glasses have if they have been wiped with a damp, and not too clean, cloth.

At the sight of them she exclaimed with impatience: "Oh, bother the things!" she cried irritably, "I can't stay to wipe them all, I am tired out." She was putting them on the table when her father came into the room. "That is right, dear, I am glad you are showing Mary how things should be done. She is very young, and has had no proper training. Example is everything with Mary, she is very imitative; but poor little Faith has had too much on her hands to be able to attend to the daintinesses of life."

Audrey coloured, but not, as her father thought, with pleasure.

"Example!" That was what Dr. Gray had said. How tiresome it was of people to keep on about example, and how difficult it made life! It was so much more difficult to do things oneself, than to tell people how they should be done.

In a gust of impatient anger she caught up the glasses again. "I wish I could teach Mary to wash tumblers properly," she said crossly, "and silver. There is not one thing fit to use ——"

"Well, can't you? If you showed her the way once or twice I am sure she would learn. She is very anxious to improve herself."

The hot words on Audrey's lips died away, but not the anger in her heart, as she dashed out to the kitchen again. "I want some hot water," she demanded peremptorily, "every tumbler needs washing, Mary," she said sharply, "there isn't one fit to use."

Mary's face fell. "There isn't any hot water, miss, the fire has gone clean out."

"Then it's the only thing that is clean," said Audrey rudely.

Mary's eyes flashed. "Serves me right for not tending to my own work, and leaving others to tend to theirs," she retorted. She was tired, hot, and thoroughly put out by the upset of the morning, and while she was doing all she knew to make up for her fault, out came Audrey nagging at her. "Another time I'll know better than start moving furniture and washing floors late in the morning, when I ought to be getting my dinner forward."

"That didn't prevent your washing the glasses properly last night, did it?" snapped Audrey. "If you did things properly once, they wouldn't need doing a second time."

Mary lost her temper entirely. "It is easy for them to talk as don't do anything," she muttered sullenly; "it's them that work that knows——"

Fortunately Faith came into the kitchen at that moment, bringing word that someone had knocked twice at the front door, and Mary departed hurriedly. But though her coming checked any further hot words, it could not drive away the recollection of what Mary had said. "It's easy for them to talk as don't do anything." Was that what Mary thought of her? Did others think the same? Was that the character she had earned? The words rang in her ears, the mortification bit deep. It was hateful to be so spoken to by a little ignorant country servant; but the sharpest sting lay in the knowledge that Mary was right. No one knew, and Audrey would not have liked anyone to know how she loathed doing the things that she blamed others for not doing.

"What is the matter?" asked Faith, "can't you find something you want?"

"The glasses aren't clean, and there is no hot water to wash them with. I suppose it is my fault for taking Mary away to help with my room. I didn't think—I didn't know——"

"Oh, that's all right," said Faith cheerfully, "wash them in cold water. Here, give them to me, and I will do it."

But Audrey's eyes had been opened, and for the time, at any rate, she saw some things very clearly. "No," she said promptly, "if you can wash them in cold water, I can. You sit down and rest, and talk to me. You must be dead tired," and Faith obeyed, wondering.

That night Audrey, in a state of great delight, slept in her new room. It was very warm certainly, so close up under the roof, but it was as clean and neat as a new pin—all the untidiness was left behind in Faith's room. Audrey never gave a thought to the muddle and discomfort there. When she closed her door behind her for the night her heart was full of nothing but pleasure and pride in her new possession. She went to the open window, and looked out on the moonlit world below, on the pretty cottages, the old church nestling at the foot of the hill, at the wide, white road, winding up and up in the misty distance until she could not see where it ended. For the first time the beauty of the spot where her home stood, and the love of it, entered her heart.

"If only—if only," she thought, "if we were not so poor, and could have pretty things; if only it was more beautiful, more dainty, I could love it very much."

But, as yet, she had not the eyes to see, nor the heart to feel that her home possessed beauties beyond all others—the most precious beauties of all—love, sympathy, cheerfulness

under poverty, patience with each other's faults, and, above all others, a great unselfishness.

Nor was it yet brought home to her that those smaller beauties that it lacked, the daintiness, neatness, the order that she so yearned for, it rested with her to supply.

CHAPTER VI.

Perhaps, after all, Audrey's move to the attic was a good one. She herself was certainly happier, and the others were happier too, for to feel that someone is always discontented and miserable, is very depressing, and to know that someone is finding fault with everything one does, is apt to make one irritable and faultfinding too.

In her new room Audrey found a great interest. She did all she could to make it pretty—it was the only part of the house that she did try to make pretty. On her writing-table she had always a vase of fresh flowers, and another on her dressing-table, and a jar of tall ferns in the grate. All that was easy enough to manage, but she found it rather a trial to have to make her own bed every day, and keep her room swept and dusted.

Living with her granny, where everything was done for her, and the housework went on with the regularity of machinery, and without any share in it, or interest in it, on Audrey's part, she had grown up with a knowledge only of how things should look when done, but without the faintest idea of how to do them, or of the trouble it cost to make things nice, and keep them so. It had never occurred to her that to keep furniture brightly polished, and brass and silver too, windows gleaming, and window curtains spotless, meant constant care on somebody's part, and hard work too. She was beginning, though, to learn the value now of many things that she had taken for granted before.

"If one did all that needs doing about a house," she said, excusingly to herself, "one would have no time for anything else, and I do want to write. If I could sell my stories I could help father tremendously, and that is far more important than dusting and cooking, and looking after the children. Faith can do that, she has no taste for writing. When lessons begin I shall have less time than ever for it, so I really must do all I can now." And fired with enthusiasm and importance, she shut herself up more and more in her attic, and Faith was left to look after her mother, and the children, and the house, pretty much as she was before; and if the muddle did not grow greater, it certainly did not grow less under Audrey's rule.

"If you want to keep this house tidy you must always be tidying it," she grumbled, and to be always tidying it was certainly the last thing she wished or intended. So, as long as her own attic was neat and fragrant, she closed her eyes to the rest and was, apparently, content to let things go on as she found them.

"Audrey, will you sit with mother this evening while I go to church?" Faith opened her sister's door nervously, and the face which appeared round it was decidedly apologetic. She was always afraid that she might be interrupting Audrey at a critical point in the story she was writing, and she generally was too.

This May Sunday was an exception though. Audrey did not write stories on Sundays, she only thought about them. Occasionally she wrote a letter to her granny, or to a school friend. She was thinking of a story now, when Faith disturbed her, a very sentimental one, as she sat by her bedroom window and gazed at the road winding up to the moor. 'He'—the lover—was striding along it with set jaws and haggard eyes, while 'she'—the heroine—sat at just such a window as Audrey's own, and gazed after him through tear-filled eyes. And Audrey was just trying to decide whether 'she' should wave a relenting handkerchief and call him back, or watch him depart for ever and die of a broken heart, when Faith popped her head in.

"Very well," she said, and sighed.

"And will you get her a glass of milk at seven? She must not have it later or she will have indigestion all night——"

"Oh, I know all about that, of course." Faith so often forgot that she, Audrey, was the eldest,—and mistress of the house for the time.

"And will you read to her——"

"Oh there is no need to do that, mother and I can always find plenty to talk about, we have so many tastes alike——"

"She likes to have the Evening Service read to her, and the hymns and the lessons. The numbers of the hymns are on a slip of paper on the mantelpiece. I will go now and see that Tom and Debby are getting ready."

"All right." It never occurred to Audrey to go and see to them for Faith, while she got herself ready.

"Oh, and Audrey, Joan is in bed, but will you go in and look at her after I have gone to see that she is covered up? she throws off——"

"Oh yes, of course, I'll attend to everything. Don't worry so."

"Thank you. I will see to the supper when I come back. Mary is out to-night."

"Oh, is she! What a bother. Never mind, I'll look after things and sit with mother. I want to talk to her about a story I am going to write."

"Oh, Audrey, how lovely!" Faith gazed at her sister with eyes full of wistful admiration. "I wish I could hear about it too."

"Oh, you wouldn't understand." Nevertheless, Audrey was very well pleased with her sister's appreciation.

"But I could listen, and try to. Will you have done before I come home?"

"Oh yes, of course."

Tom began to shout from down below and Faith started off at a run. "He can't find his hat and I promised to help him look for it," she added hastily.

"Faith," Audrey called after her, "don't say anything to anybody else about my story," she added in a lower tone as she leaned over the stairs. "Don't tell father, or the children, or—or Mary. I don't want anyone to know anything about it until I have sold some—at least, only mother and you."

Faith nodded back brightly, immensely pleased at being trusted with the mighty secret. She was very proud of Audrey and thought her cleverness quite remarkable.

Mrs. Carlyle was proud of her daughter too, and pleased that, at any rate, one of her children inherited her talent for writing. At least her taste—she hoped that in time it would prove a talent. And for nearly an hour she patiently listened and advised.

"You must not be too sure of yourself yet, dear," she said at last, a somewhat weary note in her voice. "You must be content to read and practise for a long time yet——"

"But mother, I am sure I could write a story as good as one I read a few days ago—there was simply nothing in it."

"But Audrey, you surely would not be content to write a story only as good as a very poor one! Your aim should be to write one better than a very good one."

"To begin with, mother! I couldn't do that to begin with—and oh, I do want to see one in print!"

Mrs. Carlyle sighed. She was very tired. "I thought you wanted my advice, dear," she said gently. "Now, will you read me the Psalms, please. My books have been waiting such a long time for you to begin. They will be home from church before we have read the lessons, I am afraid. Oh, I am afraid I must trouble you to get me my glass of milk now, before we begin. I shall not be able to take it if I leave it any later. I wonder if Joan is all right? I have not heard her call, have you?"

Audrey jumped up hurriedly and ran into the next room.

Baby Joan was asleep, but with the bed-clothes kicked back and all her little body exposed to the night breeze from the open window.

"Oh dear," sighed Audrey impatiently, "I think children do things on purpose to annoy one." She was cross because she was really alarmed. Joan was very cold, she must have been lying uncovered for nearly an hour. "She really deserved a whipping." Audrey covered the little body up warmly and hurried back to her mother's room with her tale of woe. She had quite forgotten the glass of milk.

Mrs. Carlyle did not grow irritable as she listened, though she had every reason to be, but she was greatly worried. "I should have reminded you to go in and see that she was all right," she said, full of self-reproach. "Isn't it dreadful to think that if Faith goes out we can none of us be trusted to take care of anything properly!" She did not again remind Audrey of the glass of milk.

Audrey did not relish the reproach. She was always a little sore about Faith's pre-eminence in the house. "You see it isn't my work," she said shortly, "if it had been I expect I should not have forgotten. It is frightfully hard to remember other people's little odds and ends of work when they happen to be out."

"Did not Faith ask you to look after baby while she was away?"

"Yes—but——"

"Then it was your work, Audrey."

"Oh, well, I am very sorry. I quite forgot, but I expect Joan will be all right. Now I will read to you, mother. Which hymn would you like?"

Mrs. Carlyle's mind at that moment was not in tune for any reading. She was troubled about her baby girl, and almost more troubled about her big girl. Her heart was heavy, her head ached, she felt tired too, and faint.

Audrey also was out of humour with herself and everything. She was disappointed in her mother's advice about her writing. She was angry with herself for failing in her duty, she was nervous about Joan, and over and above all she was disappointed in her Sunday. It did not seem like a Sunday—the happy beautiful day that comes bringing sunshine to the heart and sweetness and peace to the home, giving to all strength and courage to take up the burden of daily work again, and go singing on one's way.

Audrey had been late for prayers in the morning, and Debby had annoyed her on her way to church by appearing with a hole in her stocking; while at dinnertime she had been so annoyed by the sight of finger-marks on her tumbler, that she had neither given thanks for her food nor returned them.

The afternoon which she had longed to give up to reading she had had to devote to the Sunday School. She did not like children, and she detested teaching, "but, of course, if you very much dislike a thing you are bound to have it thrust on you, and if you love a thing very much, well, that is quite enough to prevent your being able to have it." She cried bitterly in the solitude of her own room. She went to the school and she took her class, but neither pupils nor teacher benefited by the lessons. To the children she was cold and unsympathetic. She took no interest in them or their doings; and they in their turn did not like her. And, more than that, they judged other teachers by her.

"If that's what Sunday School teachers is like, you don't catch me coming again," declared Millie Pope, who had been coaxed by a friend into coming for the first time. "If being good makes you as sharp and sour as she is—well, I don't want to be good."

Audrey had not heard the remarks that were made, but she felt that she had been a failure, and her heart was heavy. She was vexed and sorry, and annoyed with herself and everything, for she knew that she had not done her best, that she had failed in her duty. And she knew as well as though they had told her that the children had not liked her.

Oh, it had been a failure, that May Sunday. The birds had sung their blithest, the hedges were white with hawthorn, the air sweet with the scent of flowers, the sun had shone all day —and yet it had been a grey Sunday, begun badly, continued badly, ending badly—because the right spirit was lacking.

"Would you like me to read to you now, mother?" she asked again, but doubtfully. Something told her that the time was past, that the sweet calm pleasure was not to be caught now. And before Mrs. Carlyle could answer her, footsteps sounded in the garden, and Faith, followed by Debby and Tom, came rushing up the stairs.

"Oh, we have had such a lovely time," but Faith catching sight of her mother's wan face, stopped abruptly. "Aren't you feeling so well, mummy? —are you faint? Have you had anything since we have been gone?"

Audrey sprang up with a cry of dismay and flew from the room. "It is too late now, dear," said the invalid feebly, but Audrey did not hear her.

"It is too late now," called Faith, rushing after her. "I will make her some Benger——" Their footsteps and voices died away.

"Oh, what a pity!" sighed Deborah, "we've got such a lot to tell, and we wanted you to be well enough to listen, mother."

"We've had quite an advencher," cried Tom, his eyes wide with excitement, "and father asked them to supper——"

"But you mustn't tell," interrupted Debby reprovingly, "not till Faith comes. It wouldn't be fair—and Audrey too, 'cause it's Audrey that knows them."

Mrs. Carlyle beckoned Debby to her side. "Run down, darling, and tell Faith not to make

me any Benger, it takes so long, and I don't want her to stay now. I will have some jelly instead, and a slice of bread. Tell her to come quickly, and Audrey too. I am longing to hear about your 'advencher.'"

Mrs. Carlyle kissed her little daughter very tenderly. She loved to have them come to her with all their little joys and woes. It was one of the chief pleasures of her slowly returning health.

In a very short time Debby came racing back again, a plate in her hand with a slice of bread on it. "It's all right," she cried triumphantly, "it hasn't fell'd, I put my thumb on it so's it shouldn't!"

Mrs. Carlyle smiled to herself. "I hope it was a nice clean thumb," she said gently. "Another time, dear, it will be better to walk more slowly, for you should never put your finger on another person's food."

"Oh!" Debby looked disappointed. "But it was such a safe way, mummy, it never fell'd once. Audrey and Faith were so slow. Faith was dusting a tray and Audrey was turning out all the drawers looking for a tray-cloth to put on it, and—and I couldn't wait. I wanted you to hear all about who we've seen—oh, here they are at last!"

They had evidently been successful in finding a cloth of some kind, for Audrey came in carrying a neatly laid tray, with a plate of jelly on it, a spoon, and a table-napkin; while Faith walked behind, her face beaming with triumph.

"Doesn't that look tempting, mother?"

"Indeed it does! and what a luxury to have the table-napkin remembered. Is that Audrey's doing?"

"Yes—and oh, Audrey, I've been longing all this time to tell you. What *do* you think—we've met some friends of yours. There were strangers in church—I didn't know them, but father and Debby and Tom did—at least they recognised them, and after service was over they were standing about in the churchyard as if they were looking for someone—and it was you! And who do you think they were?"

Audrey groaned. "What do you mean?" she asked irritably. "Who was me? and who was looking for what? and how should I know who anyone was if you don't explain? Can't you tell all about it so that anyone can understand you?"

Faith put a restraint upon herself and began again. "I mean it was you that the strangers were looking for. They are called Vivian—they are the grandchildren of Mr. Vivian at Abbot's Field. You know, mummy," turning to her mother. "They said they travelled with Audrey the day she came home. Why didn't you tell us, Audrey?"

"Perhaps Audrey did not know who they were," suggested Mrs. Carlyle gently, seeing that Audrey looked confused and remained silent.

Audrey grew red and uncomfortable, but made no reply.

"They said they saw daddy and me and Tom on the platform," burst in Debby, breaking an awkward pause. "They didn't know he was the vicar, but they came over to try and see you at church, and then they saw daddy, and then they looked round and saw me and Tom, and Faith—of course they didn't know Faith, but they guessed she was another of us because of her red hair. And they waited until we came out of church to speak to us—they wanted to inquire for Audrey."

"And oh, they are so nice, mother dear," chimed in Faith excitedly. "You will love them. They are coming here to see you."

"I am so glad, dear, it will be nice for you to have companions. Did you not know who they were, Audrey, and where they were going to stay?"

Audrey nodded. She was looking embarrassed, troubled and vexed. "Yes, mother, at least, they said they were going to stay with a Mr. Vivian, but—but I did not know him—and I—I didn't know them——"

"Did you like them, dear?"

"Yes, but I only saw them for a little while, of course. We did not travel all the way together. They weren't with me when daddy met me." She spoke quickly, hurrying out a jumble of excuses.

"They are so jolly and friendly one could not help liking them," cried Faith enthusiastically.

"Daddy asked them to come back with us to supper," chimed in Tom, "and they did wish they could, but they had to walk the three miles home and their mother would be anxious

about them if they were late."

"Their mother! Was their mother with them, Audrey, when you travelled together?"

"Yes."

"Oh, what must she think of us," cried poor Mrs. Carlyle, really distressed. "Such near neighbours, and to have taken no notice of them all these weeks. We knew her husband quite well before he married——"

"But they are coming to see us, mummy," cried Debby consolingly. "They are coming one day very soon. They said so."

Audrey nearly groaned. She thought of the ragged garden, the shabby house; the ill-cooked, untidily served meals—and she felt she could have cried. "Why couldn't they have stayed at home? Why must they come tearing over to Moor End? and oh, what must they think of her for never having mentioned them to her people, after their kindness and friendliness too, in inviting her over to see them! Oh dear, how wrong everything in this world did go!"

"Are you not pleased, Audrey? Don't you want to see them again?" Mrs. Carlyle inquired anxiously.

"Oh, yes—oh, yes, mother, I should like to see them if—if we had a nice place to ask them to, but they must be rich, they probably have everything, and 'The Orchard' is such a big house.——"

"You—you were not ashamed of us—of your home, were you, Audrey?" The words and the tone went to Audrey's heart like a knife twisted in a wound. She would have given all she possessed to be able to say 'no' with all her heart and soul. But she could not. Nor could she tell a lie. So she stood there, silent and ashamed, and grieved to her heart by the knowledge of the pain she was inflicting.

No one spoke to break the horrible silence which fell on the room. With all their pleasure gone, Faith and the little ones crept quietly away, and, after a moment, Audrey, not knowing what else to do, turned and followed them. She longed for some word, some sign from her mother, but none came. It was too soon to ask for her forgiveness yet. It was too much to ask, for it would be only asking for comfort for herself, it would not lessen the pain she had given to others. Nothing could do that, nothing, at least, but time, and never-ceasing effort on her part.

With a heart as heavy as lead, she crept slowly down the stairs. In the hall Faith met her, Faith with eyes sparkling with an anger Audrey had never seen in them before.

"Oh, how could you!" she cried, her voice trembling with indignation, "how could you be so cruel! And why are you ashamed of us, because we are poor? because we are shabby? and untidy? If it is because we are untidy, why don't you show us how to do better, why don't you help? If it is because we are poor, and everything is shabby—it isn't our fault. We would have everything fresh and beautiful if we could. I don't mind, for myself, what you say or think—but oh, Audrey, how could you hurt mother so; how could you; how could you?"

The anger died suddenly out of Faith's eyes, washed away by tears.

"I am so awfully, awfully sorry," said Audrey, the pain in her heart sounding in her voice.

"But you—you didn't mean it!" Faith asked, but in more gentle tone. "You didn't mean it?"

"I—I did," stammered Audrey, with quivering lip, "but—I don't now. I myself am the only thing I am ashamed of now," and bursting into tears she flew upstairs again and shut herself in her attic.

CHAPTER VII.

Almost before her eyes were open the next morning, Audrey felt as though some big black weight lay upon her, as though something very dreadful had happened. And then gradually sleep cleared from her brain, and recollection came back.

She had been petty, mean, and everyone knew it, everyone must despise her. She had hurt her own mother, she had hurt them all. She had shown them that she was ashamed of

them—and why? Not because they had done anything wrong, or despicable, but because they were poor and were obliged to live in a shabby house, shabbily furnished!

"Oh, I can never live it down," she thought miserably. "I can never make them forget, and think well of me again!" She buried her face in her pillow and groaned aloud. She wished wildly for all sort of impossible things to happen, that she could put miles and miles, and oceans and continents between herself and everybody—or that she could wipe out all recollection of her foolishness from everyone's mind, or never, never have to meet the Vivians again.

There is no way, though, of blotting out in a moment our wrongdoing, our foolishness, our mistakes. They cannot be wiped off, as a sum off a slate, nor the results, nor the memory of them. There is nothing to be done but to face the consequences bravely, to live them down hour by hour; so, profiting by the lesson thus learnt, that in time those about us will find it hard to believe that we ever were so foolish, or wicked. Through genuine repentance and sorrow only can we expiate our faults, and Audrey had sense enough to know this.

"I have just got to live through it," she sighed miserably, "but oh, I wish I hadn't hurt mother so."

As she was passing her mother's bedroom door on her way downstairs, a sudden impulse made her knock.

"Come in," said the sweet kind voice; but as she turned the handle Audrey's courage nearly failed her. "Oh, it's nothing," she began, and was turning away when fortunately the thought came to her—how glad she would be after, if she were brave now, and did what she came in to do. "It will be a beginning," she told herself feverishly, "I shall be much happier after," and allowing herself no more time for thought, she marched bravely in and up to the bed.

"Mother," she said, and the tears rushed to her eyes again. "I want you to try to forget—please, *please*. It was all a mistake. I was all—all wrong. I am so sorry."

"My dear, I know, I understand." Her mother threw her arms round her, and drew her gently down beside her. "I know how these things happen, if we are not always loyal in thought and in deed. I have failed often, Audrey dear, so I understand. But we will both forget, darling." And then Audrey broke down entirely. "Mother, I can never forget, I can never forgive myself, but I will try never to be so mean again, never. I am going to begin to-day to do better. I really mean to."

"We all will, we will begin by trying to understand each other, shall we? Try to be more patient, and to see how things seem to others. Don't you think a good motto for us all would be 'others first.'"

"I don't think Faith needs that motto, mother," said Audrey wistfully, which was a great admission for her, and the first step on the new road she meant to tread.

"Oh yes, she does, dear. We all do, some more, some less."

"Well, I am one who needs it very much more," and Audrey smiled ruefully as she raised herself. "Now I am going down to see what I can do to help. I will begin by laying her breakfast-tray as nicely and temptingly as ever I can," she thought, as she hurried away. She felt so lighthearted she wanted to do something for everyone, to make all feel as happy as she did herself. But alas, alas! when she got downstairs her happiness received a check. Joan was ill.

In the kitchen Audrey found Faith seated by the kitchen fire with Joan upon her lap. Joan drowsy and feverish, and fretful. Faith anxious and pale.

"I believe she is ill," said Faith, looking up at her with eyes full of alarm, "she has been so restless all night. I wonder what can be the matter. I have been so careful about her food, and I don't see how she can have got a cold."

Joan turned uneasily, and began to whimper, Mary came over and looked anxiously at the flushed baby face. "She's feverish, Miss Faith, she's got a cold somehow. She is so hot, and it seems to hurt her to move."

With a swift shock of fear Audrey remembered what had happened the previous evening—the little thinly-clad body lying outside the bed-clothes, exposed to the draught from the open window. She coloured guiltily, but for a moment she hesitated to speak. It was so dreadful to have to heap more blame upon herself—to have to make everyone think more hardly of her, just when she had begun to try to make them think better. But once again she conquered herself, and so took another step, and a long one, along the new but stony road she had set out to tread.

Faith looked grave as she listened. She adored her baby sister, and she found it hard not to blame Audrey. "I ought not to have gone away," she began irritably, but stopped, as it

struck her what a self-righteous and conceited thing it was that she was saying. "I had better put her back to bed again, I expect," she concluded, more gently.

"I suppose so," agreed Audrey doubtfully. She did not in the least know what to do in a case of illness. Mary came to the rescue. Mary had lots of brothers and sisters at home, and had had a good deal of experience.

"I shouldn't, miss," she said, "in this summer weather it is so hard to keep them covered up, and restless as Miss Joan is, she wouldn't have the bedclothes over her more'n a minute at a time. I'd give her a nice deep hot bath here by the fire, and then wrap her up in a big shawl, and keep her by the fire. It'll be hot for anybody that's holding her, but I believe it'll drive the chill out of her quicker than anything."

"I'll do anything to get her well again," said Faith eagerly. So a bath was made ready—all the water that was needed for breakfast was used for it, but that was a trifling matter, and Mary's advice was followed to the letter.

"Now I'll get her some hot milk," said Mary, as she arranged the last wrap around the little patient, and put the cookery book under Faith's feet for a footstool.

"Oh!" gasped Faith, "don't make up too big a fire, Mary, or I shall really explode!"

Audrey, ashamed and sorry, moved about unobtrusively trying to do what she could; but it was mortifying to her to find how little she could do. At last it occurred to her to go upstairs and see if Tom and Debby wanted any help in the fastening of strings and buttons, and the brushing of hair.

"Oh dear," she sighed, "you have only one button left on your frock, Debby, and the string of your apron is broken. Can't you put on another?"

"They've all only got one string, you will find a safety pin somewhere, I have it pinned gen'rally."

"Oh! well, I will mend them for you when I've got time."

"Faith said she would when she'd got time, but when she'd got time she hadn't got any tape, and when we remembered to buy some tape we couldn't find a bodkin. Where does one buy bodkins, Audrey?"

"I don't know, but I have two in my work-box. I will put in the tapes for you. Now run down while I turn out the beds. Oh no, come here," as the pair went dashing away, "come and fold up your nightgowns, you should never leave them lying on the floor like that. Who do you think is going to fold them for you? I believe you never think of the trouble you give."

Tom and Debby went back patiently, and picking up their offending garments, struggled with them valiantly. But, however careful they were, it seemed as though one sleeve would hang out, or the folds would go crooked, simply for the purpose of aggravating two impatient little people.

"I wish we didn't have sleeves," sighed Deborah.

"Let's cut them off," cried Tom, and in a spirit of mischief, picked up a pair of scissors and pretended to cut the sleeve.

He was only pretending, but Audrey misunderstood, and, with a sharp slap on the hands, sent the scissors skimming across the floor.

The unexpectedness of the blow, the pain, and the indignity, roused Tom to real anger, and for a few moments there was an ugly scene. Debby cried, Tom raged, and Audrey scolded. "You can fold the old thing yourself," cried Tom, flinging out of the room. Audrey dragged him back.

"I shall not, you shall do it yourself if you have to stay here all day. I shall speak to father about your behaviour, and I do think you might have tried to behave decently and not have made such a noise when Joan is ill, and we want her to sleep. You think of no one but yourselves—you two."

"Joan ill! You might have told us before. How were we to know? and—and you were making more noise than anybody, and—and it was all your fault in the beginning," cried Tom. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself Audrey, you are the eldest, and—and you knew Joan was ill."

Debby was less angry, and more concerned. "Where is Joan?" she asked anxiously. "Is she in bed?"

"She is in the kitchen by the fire, so don't go there making a noise too. You had better play in the garden, and do be as quiet as you can."

"I am going to see mother first," retorted Debby, "we always do when we are dressed. Mummy likes us to. And we don't make a noise if we *know* we mustn't. If you had only told us Joan was ill——"

But Audrey was already half-way down the stairs, on her way to the kitchen. "Children are such worries," she sighed. "Now I will get mother's breakfast."

In the kitchen she found Faith sitting patiently by the fire, she was scarlet with the heat, and very weary, but there was a look of relief in her eyes. "She is sleeping so comfortably," she whispered. "That shows that she is in less pain, doesn't it?"

"I should think so. You look awfully hot."

"Hot! I am roasting, I feel quite faint every now and then, but I don't mind anything if it is doing Joan good."

"Can't you put her down? Make her up a bed on a chair or something, can't you?"

"No. She rouses at once if I try to put her out of my arms. I would rather hold her. It doesn't matter about being hot. I shall cool down again some day."

Audrey picked up a tray. "I am going to get mother's breakfast," she announced. "I want to make it look nice. Mary, can you wipe this tray for me, it has something sticky on it."

Mary put down her saucepan of milk and went away with the tray in her hand. "I s'pose it must have touched something," she said cheerfully.

"Yes, evidently—and you couldn't have washed it properly. It has made my hands sticky too." It really was aggravating, for she had only just washed them. "Where can I find a clean tray-cloth, Mary?"

"In the drawer of the press, miss."

Audrey's face wore an expression of deep disdain as she turned over the collection of things in the untidy drawer. "I can't see anything fit to use," she said irritably. "Where are the clean ones kept, Mary?"

"We have only two, miss, one is in the wash, the other you've got in your hand. It is a bit crumpled, I am afraid."

"If we've got so few, it's a pity not to take more care of those we have," grumbled Audrey, "this really is not fit to use, but I suppose I must." When she began to collect the china, the cup, as usual, had a smear on it, and the plate was not clean. "I had better wash it all, I suppose, as usual!" she thought impatiently, and banged open the tea-towel drawer with such force that Joan started out of her sleep.

"I'd have got the tray ready, if you'd left it, Miss Audrey," said Mary shortly.

"I wanted to make it look nice and tempting."

Poor Faith grew to look harassed and miserable. Whatever happened, she did not want a collision between Audrey and Mary. Mary was rough, and not thorough, but she was good-tempered, hard-working, and ready to turn her hand to anything.

Mr. Carlyle came into the kitchen. "Is breakfast nearly ready?" he asked, "it is nine o'clock, and I have a full day before me—why, Baby! what is the matter?" He stood looking down at his two flushed daughters, while Faith explained. "But I think she is better," she concluded eagerly, "look, daddy, she is smiling at you! If we are careful all day, I daresay she will be well to-morrow."

"And do you intend to sit by that fire all day with her! Why, you will be a cinder."

Faith laughed, "I am rather hot, but it has done her good, I am sure—at least the hot bath and the heat has. Mary thought of it, wasn't it clever of her?"

"I will take her presently, Miss Faith, while you have your breakfast," said Mary, much gratified by the little compliment.

Mr. Carlyle went over to where Audrey stood arranging a few flowers on her mother's tray. "How dainty!" he said approvingly, "your mother will appreciate that, dear. She loves pretty, dainty things about her. I am going over to Abbot's Field to-day," he added, "and I thought I would call on Mrs. Vivian, and the old gentleman. Will you come with me, to represent your mother? I think it would be rather pleasant, don't you?"

Audrey coloured with embarrassment. To her the prospect did not seem at all pleasant. "I—I am afraid I can't, father. I have a lot to do at home."

Her mind was full of plans for tidying house and garden, and making everything more

presentable. It was a big undertaking, she knew, but she was full of zeal.

Her father looked disappointed. "Oh well, then, I must go alone. I thought you would like to meet the young people again—and I think they still expect you—they were so anxious to see you. But never mind, I will tell them that you are busy, but are hoping to see them over here one day very soon. I had better fix a day; will Thursday do?"

"Thursday! so soon!" The suggestion filled her with dismay, but she kept her dismay to herself. "Yes, father, I think so," she said feebly, and lifting up the tray went slowly with it to her mother's room. Debby was sitting on the bed, chattering quite happily, all the temper forgotten.

"Oh, how pretty," she cried, as she caught sight of the breakfast tray.

"Oh, how tempting," said Mrs. Carlyle, smiling her appreciation, "the sight of it gives me quite an appetite."

"Do you always do trays like that?" asked Tom, "or is it a birthday?"

"Yes, always. No, it is not a birthday. It is the right way, that's all."

"When I am ill in bed, will you bring up my breakfast to me on a tray with a white cloth, and a flower, and a dear little dainty teapot of my own?" asked Debby eagerly.

"Yes," laughed Audrey, "but don't try to be ill on purpose."

"I think I will wait until the new governess comes," said Debby gravely. She could not endure the thought of lessons, and of being shut up for ever so many hours a day.

As soon as breakfast was over Audrey stepped out at the front door, and surveyed the garden. "It is the first thing they will see," she thought despondingly, as, with the expected guests in her mind, she looked from the ragged grass to the unswept path, and thence to the untrimmed bushes. "I wish I could get Job Toms to cut the grass. I must ask father to order him to."

Faith on her way back to the kitchen and Joan, saw Audrey in the garden and joined her. "I wish we had flower beds on either side of the path," said Audrey, "they would look so pretty, but I suppose the children would always walk on them."

"They wouldn't if they were told not to," declared Faith, always ready to champion the little imps. "What a jolly idea, Audrey. If Joan wasn't ill I'd come out this minute and begin to make them. It wouldn't take very long."

"Oh yes, it would, to make them properly. We ought to have a real gardener to do it, and then we should want dozens of bedding plants, we should have to have something to start with. But all that would cost very nearly a sovereign, I expect."

"I hadn't thought of having bedding plants," said Faith, disappointedly. "Of course we couldn't spend money on plants. I was thinking of roots, and seeds, and cuttings. The people in the village would gladly give us a lot. Mrs. Pope offered me young sunflower seedlings only a week or two ago, and Miss Babbs is always offering me phloxes, and wallflowers, and things. We could soon fill up the beds, I am sure, and with things that would come up year after year by themselves. Let's each make a bed for ourselves, shall we, Audrey, and each do our own in our own way. It would make the garden look ever so much nicer."

"I couldn't, and if I can't, you can't, at least you oughtn't to. It would look too silly to have a bed on only one side. The garden would look like a pig with one ear."

"It would be a very pretty pig," laughed Faith, "at least its one ear would."

"Anyhow, we couldn't get it done by Thursday, and what I wanted was to try and get the place looking nicer by the time the Vivians come. Now I am going in to see if I can do anything to the drawing-room."

"Oh!" Faith's face grew grave. "Do you think we need use the drawing-room? Won't the dining-room do? You see we have taken some of the nicest things from there for mother's room—to make that as nice as possible. The curtains, and the carpet."

"Whatever are we going to do!" cried Audrey in genuine dismay. "It really is too dreadful. Father oughtn't to ask people here if we haven't a room fit to ask them into. You see we *must* use the drawing-room."

"What for?"

"Why, for tea, of course, for one thing."

"Oh!" cried Faith, "don't let's have a dotted-around-the-room tea! The children make such a mess with their crumbs, they can't help it, and they are sure to upset their cups, and

drop their plates—and we shall be in one big worry all the time. They hate those teas, and so do I! Let's have a nice comfortable one in the dining-room, and sit up to table."

"And spend all the rest of the time there too, I suppose?" sarcastically.

Faith looked pained. "Well, I don't suppose they would mind very much if we did, as long as we were all jolly and happy. They seemed so kind and friendly, and not a bit stuck up."

"Oh," cried Audrey impatiently, "you seem to think anything will do, as long as you are happy and jolly. You don't realise what other people are accustomed to, and expect."

"I think I am glad I don't," said Faith gravely, "it only seems to worry one."

"I do wish you would keep your blind straight in your bedroom," retorted Audrey irritably, "no house could possibly look nice with the blinds all anyhow, as ours are."

"Um, yes, they do look bad, we ought to have sticks for them, tape is always getting loose. Audrey," eagerly, "suppose we take our tea up on the moor, and have a kind of picnic, when the Vivians come. Wouldn't that be rather jolly?"

Audrey's face brightened. "Yes, that might be a good plan. They would not be in the house much then."

"Mother would want to see them."

"Would she? Oh, well, she could. I'd like them to know mother—and her room is quite presentable. We shall have to get some nice cakes. I wonder if we have any baskets that will do to carry the things in? And oh! I do hope that Mary will wash the cups and saucers properly that day. She is so horribly careless, one can't trust her the least little bit. I always have to look at my cup before I drink, to see if it is clean."

Faith looked at her with troubled eyes. "The best plan would be to wash them all yourself that day," she suggested, "then you would be sure they would be all right, and have quite a load off your mind. You can easily offer to wash the dishes and things for Mary, because she will have extra work to do, and then you can put aside those that we shall want in the afternoon. I will go and look out the baskets by and by. Do remind me if I forget. Oh, I must hurry in now, poor Mary is sitting by the fire all this time holding Joan, she will be roasted alive."

Audrey made no reply to her sister's suggestion. She liked things to be dainty, and clean, but she did not like the task of making them so; and to expect her to wash the dishes herself was really rather too much!

The head of a house did not expect to have to do the work herself. Her part was to tell others what to do, and see that they did it. At least that was her opinion.

CHAPTER VIII.

The next two or three days simply raced by, in what, to Audrey, seemed a hopeless struggle against all odds. It certainly was a struggle, but not quite a hopeless one, for by the time Thursday dawned bright and beautiful, a day to cheer even the most uncheerful, many small changes had been wrought in the Vicarage and in the garden. And Audrey had brought them about. Not by herself, certainly, but by the simple process of worrying others until they did what she wanted done.

It is only fair, though, to admit that hers had been the ruling spirit. If it had not been for her, none of the improvements would have been made.

Mary had cleaned all the windows, Faith had, somehow, managed to get rods, and had straightened all the blinds. By offering a ha'penny to the one who swept and raked the garden paths most thoroughly, the garden path was swept and raked until the weeds and the soiled gravel had been turned over and buried out of sight, and with no worse damage than a bump on Tom's forehead, where the handle of the rake had struck him, and some tears on Debby's part because she had lost the prize.

Job Toms too had even been coaxed into bringing a scythe and cutting the grass.

"It would look quite nice if Faith had not made that silly bed all along that side," Audrey admitted.

This was Faith's reward for getting up early, and slaving through the whole of a long hot day to remove the worn turf from a narrow strip of the lawn, the whole length of the path, and dig over the moist brown earth beneath. "I would do the other side too," she said, generously, when she displayed her handiwork, "only I really believe my eyes would drop out if I stooped any more. You see I'd only the trowel to do it with."

"I suppose that is why you have made such a mess, and the bed is all crooked. You should have left it for a gardener to do," said Audrey, ungraciously. "Of course, the turf should have been chopped down, and the whole thing done properly. It would have been better not to have touched it, if you couldn't do it properly."

"Don't you like it?" asked Faith, disappointedly.

"Well, it spoils the look of the place, doesn't it? And just when I had got it made almost fit to look at, for once. I daresay it might be quite pretty if the bed was full of flowers," she added, in a less caustic tone, "as I suppose it will be some day. As it is—well, you must admit it looks a hopeless botch, doesn't it?"

Faith did not reply. There was no need to, and she felt that she could not. Instead, she walked away and down to the village, where she had many friends, and a little later returned with a collection of roots and cuttings and seedlings, which would have taken another person hours to plant properly, but which Faith got into the ground somehow in less than one. She had been too dead beat to get water and put round their roots, and it never occurred to Audrey to do so for her; so the poor things hung wilting and dejected-looking in the early morning sunshine, and only added to the unsightliness of Faith's new border.

On Thursday morning early, Tom, strolling round the garden to walk off a little of his excitement, noticed the poor drooping, dying things, and was filled with pity. Tiptoeing back to the house again for a can of water, he gave them all a drink. Deborah, coming out a few minutes later, found him standing, can in hand, rather wet about the feet and legs, gazing thoughtfully at Faith's new garden.

"I've got an idea," he whispered mysteriously, "such a jolly one! Have you any money?"

"I've got a penny. Daddy gave it to me yesterday."

"I've got two ha'pennies, the one Audrey gave me, and one I had before. Let's go down to Miss Babbs' and buy two penny packets of flower seeds, and sow them, and not say anything about it. Then when they come up everybody'll be surprised." Debby was enchanted. She loved s'prises, and this was such a pretty one. She loved, too, to back Tom up in anything he suggested.

Miss Babbs was only just taking down her shutters when her early customers arrived, so Tom was able to help her. At least, he thought he helped, and Miss Babbs would not have undeceived him for the world—even though she could have done the work herself in half the time, and with less than half the trouble.

But an even harder task than taking down the shutters, was that of deciding which of all that glorious collection of penny packets should be theirs. Such poppies! such lupins! nasturtiums of such glorious colours were pictured on each.

"I want them all!" replied Debby. "Wouldn't the garden look lovely, and wouldn't Faith be excited!"

"Why, you'd have a flower show all on your own, Miss Debby," laughed Miss Babbs, "and all for five shillings. I don't call it dear, do you?"

"Five shillings!" gasped Debby, "could I have all those for five shillings? I've got ten in the bank——"

"Best keep it there," advised Miss Babbs, sagely. She was rather alarmed by the spirit she had roused. "You never know what may 'appen."

Tom pulled Debby's apron. "Don't be silly," he said in her ear, "the flowers would all be gone by Christmas, and you know we are saving for a——" he ended his sentence by a regular fusilade of mysterious nods and winks.

"Donkey!" ejaculated Debby, innocently completing his sentence for him. "So we are. I had forgotten. I'll take one packet, please, Miss Babbs; and I'd like lupins, please, they are *so* beautiful."

"And I'll have mignonette, please, 'cause mother loves it, and Faith too. Won't they be glad when it comes up! Do you think mother will be able to smell it from her room?"

"More than likely," said Miss Babbs, encouragingly. "It's wonderful strong when it's a good sort like this."

In the box where all the packets of seeds lay shuffled together, some stray seeds rolled

about loose, as though looking for nice soft earth in which to bury themselves.

"Now these seeds must have come from somewhere," cried Miss Babbs, when she caught sight of them, "and somebody or other'll be 'cusing me of giving short weight, and a pretty fine thing that'll be! I never knew nothing so aggravating as what seeds is, they'll worm their way out of anything. Here Master Tom," as she chased and captured some, "take 'em home and plant 'em. Miss Debby, you 'old out your 'and too. I don't know what they are, but they're sure to be something. Those two are sunflowers, and that's a 'sturtium. I do know those, and there's a few sweet peas."

"Oh!" gasped Debby, her face beaming. "Oh, Miss Babbs, how very kind you are!" and she held up her beaming little face to kiss the prim but tenderhearted woman who had been her lifelong friend. "Faith has made a new flower bed," she explained, "she has made it all by herself, but she hasn't very much in it yet. So we wanted to put some seeds in it without her knowing anything about it, so's she would have a s'prise. Now she'll have lots of s'prises. She'll think it's the piskies, won't she?"

"Two-legged piskies, I guess," laughed Miss Babbs, knowingly, and the children were too polite to remind her that piskies never had more. "When your peas come up, Miss Deborah, you come along to me, and I will give you some fine little sticks for them."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Debby, and in the excitement they both ran off still clutching their pennies, and had to go back again with them.

They had spent so much time over their purchases, that they had only just got their seeds planted by the time the breakfast bell rang. Their great fear was that Faith might have seen them, and would ask them what they had been doing; but Faith had been so busy dressing Joan, and helping Mary in the kitchen, she had had no time to look out of the window.

Audrey, though, came full upon them as they came in with their hands earthy, and their pinafores wet, and Audrey was irritable because she was so nervous and anxious.

"I do think you children might have kept yourselves decently clean until breakfast time," she snapped, crossly. "But I am sure you must try to see how much trouble you can give. Whatever have you been doing? Something you oughtn't to, of course." She stood glowering darkly down at them, and the two bright little faces lost their brightness.

"We've been—'tending to Faith's new flower-bed," said Tom, sturdily, "the plants would have died if we hadn't watered them."

"Faith's flower-bed? It isn't Faith's any more than it is mine, or—or——"

The two looked at each other in consternation. If they had known that, they would not have spent their precious pennies in buying seeds for it. Tom's annoyance found vent in words. "If it was yours, why didn't you give it some water, then?" he demanded.

Audrey made no reply. "If you don't behave yourselves, you won't be allowed to go to the picnic this afternoon," she said sternly, as she walked away to the dining-room, leaving two mortified, angry little hearts behind her.

"I don't want to go to her old picnic," stormed Tom in his bedroom, as he scrubbed his earthy hands.

"Oh, yes, you do—it isn't Audrey's picnic," urged Debby anxiously, "it is all of ours. It is daddy's really, and—and I shall have to go, Tom, and I can't go without you, there wouldn't be anybody to talk to. Say you'll come, Tom, do. There's going to be a cake with cherries and nuts on it, and one with jam—and Faith would be so mis'rubble if you didn't come."

"All right," Tom assented, with a lordly air, "I'll come, just to show Audrey the picnic isn't hers, nor the moon neither. Don't worry."

The Vivians were to arrive soon after lunch, and not return until the seven o'clock train in the evening.

"I suppose I had better go and meet them," said Audrey, at dinner-time, "as they were my friends first."

"And as I have met them twice since then, I think I will go too," said Mr. Carlyle, laughingly. "I have to be at one of the cottages near the station this afternoon, so I will manage to be at the station by time their train comes in."

"Then I shall have time to make Joan tidy, and change my frock before they get here," said Faith quietly, as she helped the now quite recovered Joan to spoon up her pudding. Tom and Debby did not speak, but they exchanged glances which would have told a tale to anyone who had intercepted them; and as soon as they were allowed to leave the table, they strolled in a casual way to the back door, and through the yard. Then suddenly they started

as though they had been stung, and raced away as fast as their legs would go.

"I wish I hadn't forgotten to take off my overall," panted Debby, as they reached the station.

A little country station does not afford many good hiding places. In common with most of its kind, Moor End had only the ticket office, station master's office, and one bare little general waiting-room, the door of which always stood invitingly open. For a second the pair stood pondering deeply, then marched up boldly, and knocking in an airy fashion at the station master's door, opened it hurriedly and marched in.

"We have come to have a little talk with you, Mr. Tripp," said Debby, with her most insinuating smile. "It is such a long time since we saw you. Tom, unfasten my overall at the back, please, and I will carry it over my arm. It is very hot to-day," she added, by way of explanation to her host.

"It is, missie, and you look hot too, Have you been running?"

"Ye-es—we did run a—a little."

"Ah! and not long had your dinner, I'll be bound. Running on one's dinner is always hot work, and apt to cause a good bit of pain sometimes."

"We didn't run on it—we ran after it," said Debby, crushingly.

"Well, anyway, miss, you didn't have to run *for* it," and the old man chuckled at his own joke. Tom and Debby, though, refused to smile, they felt that they were being laughed at, and they resented it.

"We ran," explained Tom, formally, "because we—we wanted to get here before the next train comes in. You—you are so busy when there's a train in, that there is no chance of talking to you."

"Ay, ay, sir," agreed Mr. Tripp, with a twinkle in his eye, "sometimes I have one passenger getting out here, sometimes I have as many as four! Market days there's a reg'lar crowd coming and going."

"Well, you'll have three, at least, by the next train," said Tom, knowingly.

"O—ho! and you have come to meet them, I suppose. A sort of a pleasant little surprise for them. I thought you'd come to have a little chat with me!"

"So we have—both. Father's coming too, and our eldest sister."

"I see, but you came on ahead. You didn't wait for them." A knock at the door broke in on the conversation. Tom and Debby grew very red, and looked slightly nervous.

"Tripp, can I speak to you a minute?" Round the door came the vicar's head.

"Oh—h! I beg your pardon, you are engaged. Hullo! Why, you young scapegraces, what are you doing here, taking up Mr. Tripp's time, and—and filling up his office!"

The two scarlet faces lost their nervous look, and became wreathed in smiles. When daddy spoke like that, all was well.

"The train is signalled, sir," said the station master, and led the way out to the platform. At that same moment Audrey came sailing down the road, hurrying as fast as she could, with dignity. She was looking as dainty and fresh as a flower in her clean white frock. She wore a pretty sun hat, trimmed with blue ribbon, and the scarf hung around her neck exactly matched it. Her long hair was tied at the nape of her neck with a black bow.

"Oh, doesn't Audrey look pretty!" Debby's enthusiastic admiration died away in a sigh as she looked down over her untidy self, and, for the first time in her life, she felt ashamed of her appearance.

"I—I wished I'd stayed to wash my hands," she whispered nervously to Tom, "and had put on my hat, it would have covered up my hair—I never brushed it."

"Oh, you are all right," responded Tom, consolingly "just button up your shoes."

"I can't, the buttons are off. Oh! and you haven't got on any tie! Oh, Tom, what will they think?"

"Well—I couldn't find it. I looked and looked. Here's the engine. Oh, Deb, doesn't she look fine?"

"Splendid," said Deborah, but only half-heartedly. She was so sorry Tom had not a tie on, and that she had not made herself look as nice as Audrey did. And when there stepped out of

the train two trim figures in spotless blue cotton frocks, and a boy in an equally spotless grey flannel suit, Debby could not face them, but turned and raced off the platform and up the street as fast as her legs could take her. Too fast, indeed, for her slippers, for they dropped off very soon, and she hadn't time to stop and pick them up. It was easier to run along in stockinged feet, than in shoes that slopped off at the heels with every step she took. It was rather painful work, though, and Debby was glad when she reached the shelter of home.

"Oh, Faith!" she cried, almost falling into the room. "They have come, and they are so—so tidy, and pretty! They have on blue frocks, and big hats with cornflowers on them; and, oh, please do try and make me look tidy and pretty too!"

Faith was standing before the glass, tying up her hair. She had been taking unusual pains with her appearance to-day, and she was rather late— which was not unusual. Joan, looking a perfect darling in her little long white frock, was sitting on the bed, playing with reels of cotton.

"Where are your shoes?" asked Faith, looking in dismay at Debby's much-darned stockings.

"I lost them—down the village. They fell off when I was running. Somebody will bring them back all right," she added, consolingly, "they've got my name inside."

It was Irene Vivian who brought them back. "Your brother said they were yours," she smiled, as she handed the shabby brown shoes to the blushing Debby.

"I am so sorry," said Debby, apologetically. "Tom should have carried them. You see, I'd lost the buttons, and they dropped off when I was running. I—I couldn't stay to go back, I was in—in rather a hurry."

She took the shoes, and was putting them on as they were. "I'm going to wear them to-day, 'cause they're comfortabler than my best ones, and the heather and brambles and things would scratch up my best ones," she added, confidentially. "I am going up on the moor to tea—we are all going. All except Joan." Has Audrey told you?

"I am glad of that, only I'd like Joan to go too. But you can't walk comfortably without any buttons on your shoes. If you could find me two, and a needle and cotton, and a thimble, I would sew them on for you. Oh, here is a work-basket. I will take what I want from here. Shall I?"

"Oh, oh!" gasped Debby, "that is Audrey's. I don't think we had better touch that—she is dreadfully particular. She gen'rally keeps it up in her room; but she brought her best things down here to-day, 'cause you were coming."

"How kind of her," said Irene. She felt somewhat embarrassed by these confidences. "And I am sure then she would not mind my using her work-basket. I won't hurt it the least little bit in the world."

She looked round for Audrey, to ask her permission, but she could not see her, and helped herself to a thimble, and needle and cotton. It never entered her head that there could be any reason why she should not do so. Mr. Carlyle had gone off to collect the baskets, Audrey had run upstairs to see if her mother was ready and able to see the guests for a little while before the start. Faith was showing Joan to Daphne. The two boys, very anxious in their first shyness to have something to do, had followed Mr. Carlyle.

When Audrey came down, Irene was putting the finishing stitches to the second shoe. Audrey looked shocked and displeased. "Oh, Debby, how dare you!" she cried, scarcely knowing, in her indignation, what she was saying.

"You should say 'how dare you' to me," laughed Irene, as she returned the thimble and needle to their places. "I asked if I might sew on Debby's buttons, and I used your basket. I hope you don't mind. I haven't done any harm, I think."

Audrey did mind, but she could hardly say so. "I never did know such children," she cried, trying to conceal her vexation. Debby's shoes were decidedly shabby, yet she could not have displayed them more thoroughly. It almost seemed as though she took a pride in their shabbiness. "They never seem able to keep a button on for two days together. I really think they pull them off on purpose."

"Oh, Audrey! I don't, you know I don't. I told you days ago that one was off, and the other one was loose—and then the loose one came off too."

Irene strolled over and looked out of the window. "What a jolly garden," she said, anxious to put an end to the discussion. "I wish we had a large plain piece of grass like that. At grandfather's the turf is all cut up with flower-beds, and one can hardly step for ornamental flower pots—and things. We three never seem able to do anything without damaging something."

Audrey's face cleared a little. "Well, we haven't too many flower beds," she laughed. "In fact, one can hardly call ours a garden. The children play there, and, of course, that spoils it. But, of course, they must have somewhere to play." She had put on her best company manner and grandmotherly speech. "Will you come up now to see mother? Then I think we ought to start. No, Debby, you must stay down, we don't want you." Debby's face fell, but Irene looked back with a smile, which made up for the hurt.

It was a great satisfaction to Audrey that her mother, and her mother's room, were both so dainty and pretty, as she ushered Irene and Daphne in. It was the first satisfaction she had felt that day, so far.

"I have been longing to see you," said Mrs. Carlyle, warmly, kissing them both, "ever since I heard you were so near. I used to know your father when he was a boy, and I am so glad that his children and mine should have met. I hope you will become real friends, dear."

"I hope so," said Irene, her face alight with pleasure. "Did you really know father? I am so glad. Abbot's Field seems so like home, for he told us so much about it, and he loved it so."

"Mrs. Carlyle," broke in Daphne, "did you guess who we were when Audrey told you who she had travelled home with? We told her where we lived; but we didn't know then who she was."

Audrey blushed painfully, and waited in dread of her mother's reply.

"I—no, dear, not then. I was rather ill when Audrey came home. I did not realise."

"I—I think we had better start now." Audrey got up from her chair, and went to the door hurriedly. She was so nervous she felt she could not bear any more. "The nicest part of the afternoon will be gone if we don't go."

Daphne sprang to her feet, but Irene rose more reluctantly. "Will you be alone while we are away?" she asked, lingering by Mrs. Carlyle's sofa. "It seems so selfish to go away and leave you. I wish I could be with you—or you with us."

Mrs. Carlyle looked up at her with shining eyes. "I would love a picnic on the moor above all things," she said. "Another summer, perhaps, if you are here, we will all go. I shall look forward to that, Irene, as eagerly as if I were a child. Perhaps Joan will be able to go too—the big baby and the little one!"

"Oh, I hope so," said Irene, her beautiful eyes glowing, "and I hope we shall be here. We want mother to take a house somewhere near, we love this part better than any—Coming, Audrey, coming!" She stooped and kissed the invalid affectionately. "Is there anything I can do for you before I go? Is the window as you like it? Do you want a book or anything handed to you?" While she spoke she was spreading the rug smooth over the invalid's feet.

"Yes, dear, please if you will pass me that book and lower the blind a little, I shall be able to read myself to sleep."

"Irene! Irene! are you coming?" a voice called up the stairs again.

"Run, dear, I must not keep you any longer. I am so comfortable now, with everything put right."

"Good-bye then for the time," said Irene, smiling back brightly as she stood at the door.

"Good-bye, little nurse. Try to enjoy yourself, dear; and thank you for all you have done for me."

But, though she was so comfortable and 'had everything she wanted,' Mrs. Carlyle did not fall asleep for a long while after the girls had left her, but lay gazing thoughtfully before her, and more than once tears shone in her eyes and fell on to her pillow.

"They are such darlings, too," she murmured at last, rousing herself with a little shake, as though trying to shake off her thoughts. "They are such dear children, it is wicked to wish them other than they are, yet sympathy is very sweet; and—and understanding makes life very, very pleasant."

CHAPTER IX.

"Debby! Tom! Are you ready? It is time to start." Dead silence.

"Audrey, ask Mary if she knows where they are, will you, please?"

Audrey walked away reluctantly. The whole party had collected just where they could look right into the kitchen directly the door was open; and one of the last things Audrey wanted, under the circumstances, was to open the door, for she knew, only too well, the state the kitchen was in. Instead of being neat and spotless, a place of gleaming copper and silvery shining steel, of snowy wood and polished china, such as she would have loved to display, it was all a hopeless muddle and confusion, a regular 'Troy Town' of a kitchen.

Perhaps she hoped she could make Mary hear without actually opening the door; but it was a forlorn hope. Mary was generally afflicted with deep deafness if one particularly wanted her hearing to be acute. She was now. Audrey called again and again in vain.

"Open the door," suggested Mr. Carlyle, "she is probably rattling pans and dishes and can't hear anything beyond."

"Put your head in and shout," suggested Faith, and Daphne and Keith laughed.

Audrey had to do it. She knew that if she did not Faith would—and when Faith opened a door—well, all there was to see one saw. In a gust of anger she turned the handle and opened the door as little as she could. Oh how she longed for one of the exquisitely neat Dutch kitchens so often seen in pictures.

"Mary!" she called in impatiently, "wherever are you? Do you know what has become of the children?"

Mary heard at last, and hurrying forward to reply, spread the door as hospitably wide as it would go, and stood outlined against a background of dirty pots and pans, a table piled with unwashed dishes, and a litter of torn paper everywhere. She had been so busy packing the baskets for tea that her own work had got more behind than usual.

"I saw them going out of the garden carrying a basket each," she said slowly, eyeing the while with the keenest interest the visitors whom she now saw for the first time. "I thought you had sent them on ahead, perhaps, Miss Audrey."

Mr. Carlyle counted again the baskets on the table. "There are four here. Isn't that the lot?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." Mary looked puzzled. "Then I don't know what they were carrying. I didn't pay much heed, but I'm sure they were carrying some, and heavy ones too."

"Some nonsense or other that they have thought of, I suppose," sighed Audrey wearily, and hurried away. Mary would not close that door as long as they stood there, so the only thing to do was to take the guests away.

"I expect they have gone on to try and find a specially nice spot to have tea in," suggested Faith. "They are always busy about something and they love to give us surprises. Don't you think we had better follow them?"

Mr. Carlyle laughed. "As likely as not they have taken up a load of their toys to help to make a pleasant afternoon for us. Now, can you young people carry two of these baskets between you, if I carry the other two?"

"I can take both," cried Keith eagerly, "it is easier to carry two than one." But the girls would listen to no such argument.

"Oh no, no," laughed Faith, "we have some strong sticks on purpose to sling them on, then two of us will carry a basket between us. I have been longing to try it, it seems such an easy way."

But Keith, though longing to help, was not inclined for a *tête-à-tête* with one of his own sisters, and was shy of facing one with one of these strangers. "I know," he cried, with sudden inspiration, "I'll walk in the middle with the end of a stick in either hand and you four can take it in turns to carry the other ends." No one having anything to say against this plan they proceeded, Faith grasping one stick and Irene the other, while the baskets swung between in a fashion that would have turned the milk to butter had there been any in them to turn. Behind the trio walked Audrey and Daphne, dainty and decorous enough to give an air to any party.

Upon the moor, meanwhile, Debby and Tom sat triumphant but exhausted.

"Won't they be s'prised!" panted Debby. "Won't it be fun. Oh, Tom, I must take them out, they are crying so." The first only of her remarks applied to her family. She untied the lid of her basket and, lifting the cover, peeped in. "Oh, Tom," her voice growing shrill with alarm, "Snowdrop is stepping on Nigger's head, and—oh! Rudolph looks as though he is quite dead!" Her voice had risen to a cry of horror.

"Haul them out then," cried Tom brusquely. "What are you waiting for!" He was nearly as alarmed as Debby, but not for worlds would he have shown it. "I expect he is only asleep or shamming."

With shaking hands Debby, awed into silence for the moment, lifted out first a tiny black kitten, then a white one, and last of all a black and white one, and laid them on the short warm grass beside her. Nigger and Snowdrop began to sprawl about at once, revelling in their freedom. The black and white Rudolph opened a pair of watery blue eyes, gazed sleepily about him, and fell asleep again with every sign of satisfaction.

"He's all right," cried Tom, relieved, yet annoyed at having been for a moment alarmed. "He's a greedy little pig; he can't keep awake because he eats so much. Now, look out, I am going to let out Nibbler."

"Oh!" gasped Debby, still busy with her pets, "won't they love it! Wait a sec., Tom, till I'm looking. Snowdrop you shall all go back into the basket this minute if you don't stop yelling! You are only doing it to annoy. Now I am ready. Don't lift him; just open the cover and let him hop out by himself. We'll see what he does. Oh-h-h, he won't eat my kittens, will he?"

"Nibbler isn't a cannibal, he's a rabbit," declared Nibbler's owner indignantly. "Now, look out!" He opened the lid slowly, and Nibbler sniffed the air rapturously.

"Oh, doesn't he love it! Look at his dear little nose wriggling with joy. Oh Tom! do look at him waggling his ears!" Debby's voice grew shrill again with excitement. Nibbler hopped out of the basket and her joy became intense.

For a moment, as though bewildered by the space, the sunshine, and the breeze, the great rabbit sat and stared about him; then suddenly old instincts came crowding back upon his rabbit brain, He saw furze and bracken, and rabbits' burrows all about him, he felt the turf under his feet, and life calling to him—and he followed the call!

When, a little later, the rest of the party arrived, they found three forlorn kittens tumbling helplessly over each other, and squealing loudly with fright, while in the distance two little blue-clad figures dashed desperately from one clump of bracken to another, and with tears running down their faces, shouting frantically "Nibbler, Nibbler, oh darling, do come here, you will be killed if you stay out here all night; Nibbler, Nibbler!"

It did not take the family long to grasp what had happened. "They will break their hearts if they lose him," cried Faith, almost as distracted as the children. "We shall never get them to go home and leave him behind. They will stay all night searching for him."

"I will go and help them," said Keith at once. "What colour is he?"

"White and tan, nothing uncommon, but we all love him."

Audrey felt very cross. "One can always count on those children to spoil every plan we make," she muttered to herself vexedly; "they deserve to be whipped and sent home to bed, tiresome little torments!"

All of the party but herself had hurried away to join in the search, and she was left standing alone by the baskets.

"Well, there is no need for me to go fagging round too, and someone ought to stay by the things, or they might be stolen. One never knows if there are tramps about."

She seated herself comfortably on the grass with her back against a basket and waited. It never occurred to her to unpack the baskets and begin to arrange the tea-table, nor to take up the frightened kittens and try to stop their cries. She just sat there revelling in the sunshine and the breeze, and the scent of the furze-blossom. It was so beautiful that she almost forgot everything unpleasant or worrying. In the distance she caught sight of a man on horseback galloping across the moor, and began to weave a story of bearers of secret tidings, plots and enemies, in which the distant horseman was the hero and she the heroine, and she had just reached, in her own mind, a village wedding and little girls strewing in the path of a noble one-armed hero and a bride, white as a lily save for her crown of burnished hair, when Irene returned, and with a little sigh of weariness dropped on the ground beside her.

"We can't find him," she sighed, "and those poor babies are breaking their hearts. What can we do?" Irene was really distressed, but Audrey, with her eyes fixed on the horseman, and her thoughts on the story she might write, had none left for sympathy with two children and a lost rabbit.

"Oh, he is quite old," she cried involuntarily. The rider was near enough now for her to see that his hair was grey and—oh, horror, that he had a beard!

Irene looked up in surprise. "Who?" she inquired, "Nibbler?" Then her eyes followed Audrey's, and with a cry of delight and surprise she sprang to her feet. "Why, it's

grandfather!" and ran forward to meet him.

Audrey was glad that she did so—she was glad to be alone for one moment, in which to recover herself. Oh how thankful she was that no one could read her thoughts, how thankful that no one knew what she had been thinking. She saw the rider dismount and greet Irene, she saw Irene tuck her arm contentedly through his arm and lead him forward; and she had scarcely recovered from her confusion when Irene brought him up to her saying, "This is my grandfather, Audrey."

"Grandfather, you have heard us talk of Audrey, the girl we travelled down with the day we came to you. Mr. Carlyle and all the rest are looking for the children's rabbit. The poor dears brought him out to share the picnic and he has hopped off on his own account. Now you must stay here and talk to Audrey while I go and look for him just over there. I think we haven't looked in that clump of ferns yet."

Mr. Vivian slipped the rein from off his arm and left his horse free to crop the grass. "He will be safe," he said reassuringly, "he will not go far from me. Peter is more dependable than the rabbit Irene was speaking of."

Peter moved away a few paces, and his master seated himself on the grass near Audrey and the baskets and the kittens. "What sort of a rabbit is it?" he asked, "and which way did he go?"

"I don't know which way he went," said Audrey, "he was gone when we reached here. The children were very naughty, they started off by themselves, unknown to anyone, with a basket of kittens and a rabbit. There are the kittens. They have been making that dreadful noise ever since we came."

"Poor little creatures! they are frightened, they want to be taken up and held."

"They would spoil my clean frock," said Audrey hesitating.

Mr. Vivian picked up the three little squealing things and held them in his own arms. Their cries soon changed to a contented note. "They can't hurt my old coat," he remarked with a smile, "not that I'd mind much if they did, poor little beggars."

Audrey felt vexed and ashamed and could think of no reply to make. For a moment silence fell, broken only by the singing of the birds all around them.

Close to them and to Peter was a large clump of bracken on which Mr. Vivian's eyes rested lazily. Suddenly he deposited his three little charges on the ground again, "What was the colour of your rabbit?" he asked in a lowered tone.

"White and light brown," said Audrey, "quite a common kind. It wasn't a valuable one, but the children——"

"If you get up very gently and go round to that side of the clump of ferns," Mr. Vivian broke in hastily, "I think we shall get the gentleman. I feel pretty sure he is in there. I saw something big move when Peter stepped close. Now then, stoop down on that side and grab him if he runs out, and I will be on the look out for him here."

There was no need though for Audrey to grab, for the poor frightened creature only stared up bewildered when Mr. Vivian opened the ferns above its head, and with one sure grasp lifted it up and into his arm.

"Now," he said, as pleased almost as Debby and Tom themselves could be, "I'll pop my gentleman into his basket while I hurry on to tell the news, and relieve those poor little aching hearts."

Surprise at his presence, or awe of his rugged face and grey hairs were entirely swallowed up in the joy his news brought them. To the three Carlyle children he was a complete stranger, but they took him to their hearts then and there.

"We will give you the very, very nicest tea we can possibly give you," cried Faith enthusiastically, when each in turn and all together had poured out their thanks. "I hope you are longing for some, for we want to give you something that you want very much."

"I did not know I was," laughed the old gentleman, "but now you have mentioned it I find it is *the* one thing I want."

Tom and Debby ran on ahead to rejoice over their newly-recovered darling, the rest trooped back more slowly. Audrey seeing them coming got up and began to bustle around. She felt a little ashamed of herself, and very anxious to wipe out the not very pleasing impression she felt sure she had made on their visitor. She got out the table cloth and spread it on the ground.

"First of all," suggested Faith, "we had better build up the fire and put the kettle on. It takes rather long sometimes."

"I'll get some sticks," volunteered Keith. "Come along, Tom, we'll provide the wood; that shall be our job."

"I want to go too," cried Debby, "but the kittens are asleep, and I can't possibly disturb them, can I?"

"Run along," said Mr. Vivian kindly, "I will mind your kittens for you, they know me, and we will be as happy as kings together."

"I wish," Audrey remarked, "that we had some methylated spirits and a stove. It is ever so much quicker and not nearly so messy."

"But it isn't as much fun," consoled Irene, "and the tea tastes so nice when the water is boiled over sticks and furze. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know. I don't see that it can make any difference. But I think it is a dreadful bother trying to get enough for everyone. The fire always goes out or the——"

"Audrey," called out Faith, "where is the kettle? Daphne and I will go to the cottage to get it filled."

"I haven't the kettle," said Audrey. "I haven't seen it. Isn't it in the basket over by you? Don't say you have come without it?"

"I am afraid we have," said Faith reluctantly, after looking in vain in all directions. "What can we do? Do you think the woman at the cottage would lend us one?"

"If she did she would be sure to say we had damaged it. If it sprang a leak at the end of six months she would be sure to think it was our fault." Poor Audrey felt and looked thoroughly vexed. Everything so far that day had gone wrong, and she had wanted it to be so different. What she could not see was that nothing had gone wrong seriously, and a little good temper and a sense of humour could not only have carried her through triumphantly, but have turned most of the predicaments to fun.

Keith came up with a bundle of sticks in his arms and heard the tale of woe. "Oh, that's nothing," he said with a promptness that was most consoling. "I will ask grandfather to lend me Peter and we'll trot back and get a kettle in a flash."

But Mr. Vivian preferred to go himself. "And I'll take young Tom with me," he said. "He can run in and explain to the maid and get the kettle in half the time Keith or I could. We should have to explain who we were and by what right we came and demanded the family tea-kettle."

Audrey demurred, blushing at the mere idea, and she blushed again when, Peter and his two riders returning, she saw Mr. Vivian waving the old kettle triumphantly.

"Oh," she cried impatiently, "I did think Mary would have had the sense to wrap it up!"

"I wouldn't let her. I told her not to do anything more than tie a piece of paper round its smutty sides. Now, while we are mounted, don't you think it would be a good plan for us to ride over to the cottage and get the kettle filled? I like to be useful," as all protested against his taking this trouble. "You see, I feel that if I do something for it I shall be able to ask boldly for a second cup of tea." And the old gentleman rode away laughing, as full of enjoyment as any of them.

Now at last things promised to go right. In a very short time the kettle, filled with water, was hanging over a blazing fire of sticks and furze, and Mr. Vivian had ridden away to borrow a pitcherful of water in case the kettle required to be filled again, as it almost certainly would. A new site was chosen for the tea-table and the cloth was spread. Daphne brought sprigs of heather and grasses and green ferns to decorate the table with. Keith, with Tom helping him, worked like a Trojan at stoking the fire, and Audrey was glad that someone else undertook that smutty, eye-smarting business, or her hands and her dress would have been as grubby as theirs probably, before she had done.

Irene was taking cups and saucers, plates and dishes from Faith as she unpacked them, and arranging them on the table.

"But you are the guests," said Audrey presently, "you mustn't bother about helping. Faith and I ought to do all that."

"Oh, but I love to. Do you mind?" Irene looked round, a swift delicate colour mounting to her cheeks.

"Mind!" Audrey knew as well as possible that she could never have arranged such a dainty, alluring-looking tea table, as was every minute growing in attractiveness before her eyes. She knew how it should look when done, but Irene knew how to do it. Audrey did think though that she would like to be of some use. She was feeling rather snubbed and very much out of things.

Irene saw it and drew back a little. "I am afraid—I did not mean to—to be bossy," she added, colouring again more warmly. "I only wanted to help," and she pushed towards Audrey the box of cakes she had been unpacking. "I suppose it comes from being the eldest. Everyone seems to expect the eldest to do things, and—and so I have got into the way of doing them as a matter of course. I am awfully sorry, Audrey, it was a great cheek of me."

But Audrey scarcely heard what she was saying, for she was thinking that no one went to her to have things done for them. No one seemed to expect anything of her.

"I suppose they think I am not able—but, at any rate, I can take cakes out of a box and arrange them on a plate." And while trying her hardest to make the dishes look as attractive as possible she grew less unhappy and more in tune with everything.

"Oh, how pretty," said Faith, coming to her with the teapot in one hand and a packet of tea in the other. "Audrey, will you measure out the tea. I don't know a bit how much to put in for such a lot of us."

Here was something expected of her, at any rate. She should have felt elated at being again appealed to, but she only looked vaguely from Faith to Irene and back again. "Neither do I," she confessed at last.

Irene counted heads on her fingers. "Nine," she reckoned, "two real kiddies, two ex-kiddies,"—fixing her eyes on Keith and Daphne. Daphne threw a tuft of heather at her, "one—two—three——"

"Flappers," interrupted Keith derisively.

"Grown-ups," finished Irene, ignoring him, "and two real grown-ups who like their tea strong. I should think half-a-dozen teaspoonsful would do. If we haven't tea enough to go round, Keith and Daphne shall drink hot water; it will be so good for their complexion."

"What gratitude! after we have slaved so over the fire and boiling the kettle and all," cried Keith indignantly.

"What is the 'all'? Don't say that you have boiled anything more than the water."

But the discussion was put an end to by the kettle, which boiled over at that moment, and the tea was made as Irene had decreed.

Then at last the whole party gathered round the table; the kittens, revived by milk, played happily together on the grass. Nibbler sulked in his basket and took sly bites at a handful of dandelion leaves when he thought that no one was noticing him; but everyone else was happy, hungry, and content. The fresh air gave them all such appetites that everything they had to eat and drink seemed to be doubly good; the same beautiful air and the sunshine sent their spirits soaring, and set everyone in the mood to laugh and joke. All stiffness and shyness had so completely vanished that the visitors already seemed like old friends rather than new ones; and Audrey was just thinking how very happy life might be, even at home in Moor End, when, in a pause in the chatter, a sharp pitiful cry floated across the stillness to them.

Debby was on her feet in a moment. "It is one of the kittens," she cried anxiously. "Oh, what has happened? I am sure one is hurt."

Everyone's eyes searched the ground around them. Snowdrop was seen at once, and Nigger was close by. Suddenly Keith started to run, Debby tore after him, the same fear possessing them both. A little way off Peter stood cropping the grass, a few paces behind him Rudolph lay on the turf bleeding and very still—his inquisitiveness had led him too far at last. In inspecting Peter's hoofs he had got under one and so ended his curiosity for ever.

TEA ON THE MOORS.

Keith reached him first, and by the time poor, panting, white-faced Debby drew near he had covered the little lifeless body with his handkerchief. "He is dead," he said gently, going to meet her and lead her away. "Poor little chap—he must have been killed at once. Come away, Debby dear, don't look at him." And he stood with his arm around her shaking shoulders while her first anguished sobs broke from her.

"Don't cry so, Debby," he urged her; consoling her more by his tone than his words, "be brave, old girl. He—he—poor little chap—he—won't suffer any more. He—won't have to be given away now." Keith found it very hard to find anything comforting to say. In fact, he would have been glad to have been somewhere quite alone, that he might have shed a few tears unobserved, himself. "Anyhow, he enjoyed his life—as long—as it lasted. You made him awfully happy."

"But he had only had six weeks and two days," sobbed Debby, "and I loved him best of all, he was so ugly, and people laughed at him. Oh, why couldn't he have stayed where I put him! Oh, Rudolph, you dear naughty darling, I loved you so."

Keith clasped her closer, "Never mind, old girl; don't cry, Debby." Debby's face was bowed on his other arm. Suddenly she stretched out a groping arm. "Handkerchief please, I —I lost mine."

"I—I am awfully sorry, but mine is spread over Rudolph."

"Never mind, don't take it away from him." Debby's tears flew fast again. "But I wish I knew where mine was, it's—it's rather awkward."

At that moment, though, the rest of the family came up, and Audrey, who, true to a habit taught her by her grandmother, always carried two, provided the little mourner with the much-needed handkerchief.

But though she provided for her wants Audrey was thoroughly vexed and upset with the little mourner. It seemed to her that the two children really did go out of their way to spoil everyone's enjoyment.

Her eye fell on Tom standing close beside her. "It all comes of your naughtiness in the first place," she said irritably, "if you hadn't brought all these animals up here we might all have had some pleasure, and Rudolph would have been alive and happy. Now you and Debby have the satisfaction of knowing that by your behaviour you have spoilt the day for everyone, and killed a poor little helpless kitten."

Audrey was not observant or she would have noticed her little brother's white face and quivering lips. If she had been sympathetic she would have understood that the sorrow which filled his heart was doubled, trebled, by the knowledge that his act—innocent little joke though it was, was at the bottom of the tragedy—but Audrey understood neither. She was annoyed and she wanted to hurt.

Mr. Carlyle, who, if he had not heard all, had seen more than Audrey was capable of seeing, went over and put his arm around his little son's shoulders protectingly. He knew what the boy was enduring—that he was learning in that hour a lesson which would remain with him all his life.

"If we could all of us foresee the consequences of what we do," he said, "we should be saved from doing many a wrong and foolish thing. If we could look ahead and see the effect of what we say, we would often bite our tongues rather than utter the words trembling on them. When I was a little boy, my mother taught me some verses which I hardly understood at the time, but they have often come back to my mind since, whenever I have felt inclined to blame other people. I will tell them to you, that you may remember too.

"'Happy are they, and only they,
Who from His precepts never stray.
Who know what's right, nor only so,
But always practice what they know.'

"But always practise what they know," Mr. Carlyle reflected thoughtfully. "I wonder which of us do that?"

Audrey coloured deeply, and found no words to say. Thoughts came crowding on her mind, remembrance of many things left undone, of many complainings of others, of duties neglected, of selfishness—known to no one but herself—and her heart grew shamed and very humble. How many times since she had come home had she not preached what she did not practise?

"But," went on Mr. Carlyle sadly, "I love better the words of a more kindly singer, one who shows us not only the mountain-top, but helps us up the steep, rough path to it:

"'If you would help to make the wrong things right,
Begin at home, there lies a life-time's toil.
Weed your own garden fair for all men's sight,
Before you plan to till another's soil.'

"Shall we try to do that, my Audrey, you, and little Tom, and I? I think we should be happier:

"'If you are sighing for a lofty work,
If great ambitions dominate your mind,
Just watch yourself, and see you do not shirk
The common little ways of being kind.'"

With his other arm around her the trio strolled away across the moor. "We all need kindness so much, and forbearance. In this world we cannot get on without them. Shall we start fresh from to-day, Audrey?"

Audrey looked at her father through tear-filled eyes, her lips were quivering. "Oh father, father, I want to—but I don't know how."

"There is only one way, dear. By constant striving against our failing, and by constant prayer. We cannot succeed by ourselves, we should only meet with certain failure. But if we place our hand in God's hand we know that though we may stumble and totter many times, we cannot fail entirely."

A few minutes later she was kneeling beside Debby, where she still lay sobbing heartbrokenly.

"Debby dear, I have picked some heath and some dear little ferns. If Keith will help me, we will make such a pretty grave for poor little Rudolph, up here on the moor. Would you like that?"

For a moment Debby looked at her in speechless surprise. "Could it be cross Audrey speaking so gently?" Then her arms were flung out and around her eldest sister's neck, "Oh, Audrey," she cried, "oh Audrey, I am so glad you care too. Though he wasn't—*very* pretty, he was such a darling, and I do, I want everyone to feel sorry that he is dead—but I thought you didn't."

And Audrey returned the embrace. "I do Debby dear, I do. I can't tell you how dreadfully sorry I am."

When, an hour later, the whole party turned their faces homeward, one of Debby's hands was clasped in Audrey's, the other in Keith's. Audrey carried the sleeping Snowdrop and Keith the sleeping Nigger; while up on the now desolate looking moorland, little Rudolph lay sleeping in the soft brown earth beneath a clump of waving bracken. So short a life his had been, so tragic and swift an end, but the hand-clasp of the sisters showed that his little life had not been lived in vain.

CHAPTER X.

A few days later Mr. Carlyle was upon the moor again, but this time everything was very different. There was no happy party, no picnic, no sunshine nor soft breeze.

Instead, there lay about him one unbroken stretch of desolation, above him a sky almost frightening in its aspect, with its banked-up masses of black and copper clouds, over which the lightning ran like streams of liquid fire.

He had been to visit a parishioner in a cottage at the farthest corner of his parish, and while there the storm, which had been threatening all day, had broken with a violence such as he had never known before. For nearly two hours he had remained a prisoner in the little lonely house, which had seemed merely a fragile toy, to be their only shelter from the floods of rain, the deafening thunder, the flaming, darting lightning. Again and again it had seemed as though the roof and walls must crack and fall about them, or the rain come through and wash them from their shelter.

But those who had built the sturdy little house had built well, if roughly, and the stone walls stood as though they were one solid block of stone, the rain beat on the roof, but streamed off it, not a drop came through. The little deep-set windows stared at the flashing lightning as though with a patient unconcern, until at last the storm seemed to grow tired of its sport, and swept away to find other victims.

In spite of the fact that the ground was like a sponge, that the little cart-track, which was the only approach to the house, was filled up with water, and that rain still fell, Mr. Carlyle made his way to the highest point of the moor to look about him. It was not often he could see so fine a sight, such a storm-swept sky, such curious lights and shadows.

Before the gusty wind the black clouds were rolling heavily away to the west, where Abbot's Field lay. Mr. Carlyle's face grew anxious as he looked at the dense mass of fiery blackness, and the heavy mist, which seemed to envelop the place as with something evil. Every now and again the black clouds appeared to open and show something of the glory and radiance behind them, a radiance which human eye would not look upon. Then close on the flashes came the crackling and booming thunder again, only more distant now.

"I hope the Vivians are not nervous," he murmured. "I am afraid King's Abbot is having it even more severely than Moor End."

Moor End stood at the edge of the extreme end of King's Moor. Abbot's Field, the larger village, lay two or three miles further along the edge, while behind both the great moor rolled away and away to the south, desolate, barren, until it reached the sea and the little villages scattered along the coast.

Mr. Carlyle turned and looked at the rolling stretches of grey-green land all round him. Besides himself, and that one tiny dwelling, there was not a sign of human life to be seen. Overhead the storm still threatened and grumbled; below, the man and the house stood

powerless, but undaunted. Far away to the south the sun shone out brightly through a rift in the clouds. "Always God's promise somewhere. God's sign to us that He cares."

Suddenly, out of the inky murkiness to the west a horse came galloping swiftly. In such a scene of desolate solitude, the sight of any living creature came as a surprise, and held one's gaze. Mr. Carlyle watched the creature fascinatedly. "Frightened, I suppose, poor beast," he muttered sympathetically. "Whomever it belongs to should have taken it in; they must have seen the storm coming. Oh!" his words broke off suddenly, for, as the horse drew near, he could see that it had on a bridle and a saddle—a lady's saddle too!

"It must have thrown its rider," he cried anxiously, and pondered helplessly what he could do. How was he to catch the frightened creature without frightening it more, and where, in all that expanse, was he to begin to look for the fallen rider? Then suddenly it came to him that there was something familiar about the horse.

"Peter!" he called, "Peter! Peter! Peter!" He tried to imitate the note and voice Peter's master had used on the day of the picnic. "Peter, good boy, come here." The horse's ears twitched. He had heard him, and his pace slackened. He was really a friendly, tame creature, but a specially violent clap of thunder, followed by a flash of lightning which had shot across his eyes, had, for the moment, given him such a shock that he had lost his usually sober senses, and flown panic-stricken from the neighbourhood of such horrors. He was not accustomed either to a side-saddle, nor to so gentle a hand upon his mouth.

Already, though, his fears were vanishing, and he was longing for the sound of a human voice and the grip of a hand on his bridle.

"Peter! Peter!" Mr. Carlyle called again. Peter turned swiftly in answer to the call, caught his hoof in the dangling bridle, and fell heavily on the soft, wet turf.

This gave the Vicar his chance. Peter was soon on his feet again, but his bridle was gripped firmly enough now.

"Peter, you ought to be ashamed of yourself." Peter was. He stood beside his captor shamed, shaken, genuinely distressed. "I wish you could show me where you dropped your rider, Peter." Peter only flapped his ears, and threw up his head.

Mr. Carlyle got on his back, in order to get a wider view. "I suppose he has come from his home; perhaps I had better go in that direction."

Peter seemed to agree with this decision, and, with apparently recovered spirits, walked on willingly. The Vicar's spirits, though, did not recover so lightly. His eyes swept the moor anxiously, but in vain, and his fears increased, for a rider who had been not much hurt would surely appear soon, coming in search of her horse. If she did not appear it might forebode the very worst of disasters. For more than half an hour they searched, but vainly, then suddenly, far ahead of him, almost out of the ground it seemed, a small white fluttering something appeared, and he quickened Peter's pace to a gallop.

It was Irene who had been Peter's rider, Irene who, recovering from the shock and blow of the fall, had struggled up, and waved her handkerchief in the desperate hope of attracting someone.

She was scratched, bruised and bleeding, and wet to the skin; but her concern was all for Peter, and her one feeling was joy at seeing him alive and sound. "Oh, I am so glad!" she cried in a rapture of relief. "Oh, I am so glad—I could never have gone home and faced grandfather if anything had happened to Peter." Then suddenly she broke down and burst into tears. "Oh, I am so thankful," she sobbed. "I have been nearly crazy with fear!"

"But, my poor child, what about yourself? Peter is all right, but you are hurt—your face is bleeding, you—you——" He could not tell her what a pitiable little object she was. One of her eyes was swelled, and fast discolouring; on her forehead a great lump stood out, scratches decorated her cheek, from which the blood still oozed.

"I—fell on my face," she explained brokenly, "near a bramble bush. I think I have hurt my arm too." Against the increasing pallor the scratches stood out horribly. She was on the point of collapsing again, when Mr. Carlyle picked her up without a word, and seated her on Peter's back. "Try to keep up," he said encouragingly; "hold on to the pummels; I will manage Peter. And try not to think about the accident; give all your attention to holding on; we will go to that cottage over there, and get you some water. They have a pony-cart there, too, I will borrow it and drive you to the Vicarage as quickly as I can. You certainly can't walk, and you can't go all the way to Abbot's Field until you are better. But we will take care of you, Irene. Don't cry any more, my child. You will feel better soon, and you have very much to be thankful for."

"I know, I know!" gasped Irene. "I don't know how to be thankful enough; we might have been killed on the spot. Oh, that lightning! It was *awful*, perfectly awful. There seemed to be fire all round us, nothing but fire!" She buried her face in her hands, as though to shut out the sight. "It looked as though some awful fiery furnace had opened before us, it was like the

place of torment——"

"But God's protecting love was about you. His arm was shielding you."

"I know," said Irene softly, "and that was my only hope. I remember saying, 'From lightning and tempest, and from sudden death, good Lord, deliver us,' and then I think I must have fainted, for I knew nothing more until I felt the rain on my face, and the thunder crashing overhead, and my first thought was——" she broke off in sudden shy confusion, and a faint flush rose to her cheeks.

"May not I know, Irene, what your first thought was, when you woke and found yourself still in this world? was it that God had spared you yet, that you might do more work for Him?"

"That was it!" she cried eagerly; "that was my thought—'God has not taken me—He must have something for me to do, and—and——'"

"You mean that, God helping you, you would do it?"

Irene looked away; again the colour rushed into her pallid cheeks.

"Yes," she whispered softly, but could say no more.

"By His help, and in His Name." Mr. Carlyle's hand shook a little as he clasped hers. "Thanks be to Him," he added, with deep feeling. "Irene, my child, never forget this afternoon, nor the vow you have taken."

"I will try never to," said Irene humbly, and then the cottage was reached, and the Vicar lifted her down, and led her into shelter.

After that, matters were soon arranged. One of the big boys at the cottage was to take Peter home, and deliver him over safely, and he was to take a note of explanation and reassurance, and a request for clothes for Irene, which he would bring by train, and then take home the pony and cart which the Vicar was borrowing to transport the poor little patient to the Vicarage.

Irene did not demur at anything. She could only smile the gratitude she felt; after her last outburst she had become exhausted. When lifted into the cart she half sat, half lay in the bottom of it, rolled in blankets, seemingly only half conscious of what was happening.

When the little cart at last drew up at the Vicarage, Audrey was standing at the door looking out. The rain had ceased by that time, and the air was laden with a sweet freshness which told that the storm had passed. When she saw the cart draw up, she thought only that her father had had a lift homewards—as they had hoped he would. Then she saw that he was holding the reins, and was apparently alone in the cart, and at the same moment he caught sight of her and beckoned to her vigorously.

"I have Irene Vivian here," he said. "She has met with an accident. Hold the pony's head, dear, while I lift her out, and carry her into the house. We must get a room ready, and get her to bed as soon as possible, with hot blankets and bottles. You will know what to do, Audrey."

Audrey did not. She did not know in the least what to do. She should have felt flattered by her father's confidence in her, but she only felt ashamed.

And the spare room, where Irene must go! It was she knew, in a state of neglect and confusion. In her anxiety to speak to Faith and Mary, Audrey almost let the pony go, and ran into the house.

Fortunately, though, when Irene was safely deposited on the ground, stiff and bruised though she was, she could, she declared, walk through the garden to the house. "I am not so faint now; I feel better already. Oh, Audrey, I am so sorry to come and give you so much trouble. I am sure I shall be able to get home when—when I have rested. I am nearly all right."

But when she, with the same, reeled and almost fell, Mr. Carlyle picked her up bodily, and carried her quickly into the house. "You are not to talk any more," he commanded peremptorily, "but you are to remember that you are no bother to us whatever, that we are only too pleased to have you, and the more you give us to do, the better we shall be pleased." Then, catching sight of her troubled face as he laid her on the sofa in the dining-room, "Some day we may want your help, and I should not hesitate to ask you for it, Irene, because I should know that it would be a joy to you to give it. Will you believe the same of us, my child?"

Irene looked up at him gratefully. "Oh, yes, yes," she cried, but her glance travelled swiftly from him to Audrey, wanting her assurance too.

"Of course we are very glad to have you," Audrey answered, meeting the eager eyes; but

her voice lacked that ring of genuineness which means more than any other; the ring which sounded so clearly in her father's. She knew it, and was sorry; but she could not help it. There was that to be said for Audrey—she was honest. She could not feign a pleasure she did not feel; and she had yet to learn to feel the pleasure which comes with trying to make others happy.

"You couldn't help it," she added lamely; "don't worry about it, Irene," but that seemed only to make matters worse. Irene's face showed that, and her own heart told her so.

Oh, how she longed to be one of the happy-go-lucky, don't-care people, like Faith, who felt nothing but gladness at welcoming people, and were quite unconcerned as to what they were welcoming them to! It was really her care for her visitor's comfort which lay at the bottom of her seemingly cold welcome, her over-anxiety that everything should be as nice as she was accustomed to.

"No, I couldn't help it. But—I think I ought to go home presently. I can manage to, I can really, and mother would be so glad."

Tears came into her eyes. She was feeling so shaken and faint, and in such pain all over, she seemed to lose grip on herself. A sudden longing to be petted and made much of, swept over her. Fortunately at that moment Faith came rushing in.

"What has happened?" she cried anxiously. "I have only just heard that there has been an accident.—Oh, Irene! you poor darling, you do look bad. Here, lean back, and let me arrange the cushions more comfortably. Oh, your poor face, how it must hurt you. Wouldn't it be more comfortable if I bathed it with warm water?"

"We have got to get the spare room ready as quickly as possible," said Audrey, briskly, rousing herself to action. "She is wet through, she must go to bed as soon as she can."

"Here? Irene is going to stay here? Oh, how lovely! I am awfully sorry for you, Irene, but, oh, I am so glad." Faith's face was one beam of welcome. No thought of their unpreparedness troubled her.

"Well, Irene won't be glad, unless we hurry and get a room fit for her to go into," Audrey retorted sharply. "She must be cold and miserable."

"Oh, we will soon get the room straight; she can go into mine if she likes."

"She must have peace and quiet," said Audrey dryly, "and she ought to have a hot bath at once. Granny always made me have one if I got wet; it takes the pain and stiffness out of one's bones."

Faith lifted up one of the poor scratched hands, and looked at it. "We sometimes have mustard in our baths," she said mischievously, "when we have colds, but I don't think we will give Irene mustard in hers now!"

Irene chuckled faintly, though she could not help shuddering. Faith's welcome had raised her spirits considerably. "A hot bath *without* mustard would be lovely, if it isn't inconvenient. My clothes are soaked through, and I am growing so chilly——"

"Inconvenient!" cried Faith, scornfully, "as though it could be! You ought to be in it by this time, though. Come along at once, or a nice cold you will have, and while you are bathing we will get the bed made, and all the hot-water bottles and hot bricks and things we can find, to put in it!"

"Thank you, but don't cook me," groaned Irene. "When I have had my bath I shall be so hot, I shall be able to warm the bottles instead of the bottles warming me."

Audrey hurried away to begin the preparations, though she had very little idea of what to do. She wanted to be alone, and busy, to try and work off her vexation. Why could not she have welcomed poor bruised, hurt Irene, as Faith had done! She had followed her mood of the moment, thinking only of herself, and she had made an impression, left a feeling, that she would never now be able to wipe away. Oh, it was unendurable to feel so mean, so unlovable, when—when she really did not mean to be either, when she wanted to be so different! At the door of the spare bedroom she turned, and walked swiftly down the stairs again to the dining-room.

"Irene," she said, her voice trembling a little with shyness at her first effort, "I think my nightdresses would fit you best. Would you like a nun's veiling one, or a cotton? I will get one aired by the time you are ready for it."

Faith looked at her sister admiringly, almost enviously. She would have found it very difficult to have provided Irene with the necessary garment, for she had but three to her name, and all were more or less buttonless and torn. If the younger Carlyles had nightgowns enough to go round, they thought themselves fortunate; to have different ones for summer and winter was a luxury they never dreamed of. "Oh—and, Audrey," Faith cried eagerly, "do

lend Irene your pretty dressing-gown too."

"I was going to," responded Audrey stiffly—Faith never gave one a chance to be gracious—"if you had given me——" She drew herself up sharply, with a genuine effort to master her vexation.

"I will run up and see about getting the bath ready," said Faith. "It won't take more than ten minutes. Irene, use my room if you will, until your own is ready. Audrey, you will help her to take off her wet boots and stockings, won't you? I'll call Mary to come and make the bed."

Within an hour Irene lay in the bed, rolled up in a blanket, with a hot-water bottle at her back, and a hot brick at her feet, for, after all, there was only one bottle in the house that did not leak, and that was Audrey's. She was very hot, but she felt revived and cheerful.

Faith came into the room with a cup of steaming tea, and some bread-and-butter on a tray. She had profited by Audrey's example sufficiently to remember to put a tray-cloth over it, and to try to make it look dainty. Irene turned a hot but grateful face towards her. "How good you all are to me!" she said.

Audrey was standing by the fire, looking from the creeping flames to the dust upon the mantelpiece. She wished Mary had dusted the room a little. It did not occur to her that Mary could not possibly have found the time; that she had been flying round ever since Irene's arrival making the bed, lighting the fire, pushing furniture into place, putting up curtains, and filling the hot-water bottle; that since then she had spread Irene's clothes to dry, and had made her tea.

"This room is dreadfully dusty," she said at last, feeling that she must apologise for it. "I am very, very sorry, Irene."

"Oh, don't worry about me," said Irene cheerfully. "You leave it until I get up again. I will dust all the house for you then, out of sheer gratitude."

Audrey did not reply, but with heightened colour she walked away, and returned a few minutes later with a duster in her hand. She had always thought she hated dusting, but after all there was, she decided, as she nearly completed her task, some pleasure in it. It was nice to see things grow clean and bright under her hand, and it was such a relief to have the work done, instead of waiting and waiting for someone else to do it, waiting vainly, too, as a rule! And when, a little later, Mrs. Vivian was shown into the room, Audrey felt an even greater pleasure in knowing that all was neat and spotless for her to see.

The relief and the satisfaction brought a glow to her face, and warmth to her manner, such as she seldom showed. For almost the first time in her life she escaped the irritation of seeing them left undone by others, and knew the pleasure of doing things for oneself. As she softly left the room she felt happier than she had all day. Irene, in her nest of blankets, looked up at her mother with eyes full of remorse, mingled with pleasure.

"Poor child! are you in great pain?" Mrs. Vivian leaned down over her daughter and kissed her. She was so agitated she could scarcely speak. Irene drew her left arm out from the blankets, and threw it round her mother's neck.

"Oh, mother, mother, I deserve it all! I deserve ever so much more. I—I ought to be whipped and kept on bread-and-water."

A ghost of a smile flickered over Mrs. Vivian's white face. "We will forgive you this time, but oh, Irene, when I saw Peter being led in riderless I—I——"

Irene drew her mother down to her again. "Mother darling, it shall be a lesson to me. I will never, never go against your wishes again. When I woke up—I think I must have fainted—and knew where I was, and all that had happened, and when I realised that God had spared my life instead of punishing me—oh, mother, I promised Him that I would dedicate the rest of it to Him, and to you."

With a low cry of deep joy Mrs. Vivian clasped her little daughter in her arms, her emotion too great for words. And so they remained, heart to heart, cheek to cheek, talking in soft, low tones, talk too sacred and precious for other ears to hear, until at last they were brought back to everyday things by a gentle knock at the door.

"May we come in?" asked Audrey, opening it a little way. "We have brought you some tea, Mrs. Vivian. We thought you might be tired."

"Oh, how kind!" Mrs. Vivian looked up at her gratefully. "I feel as though I should enjoy a cup of tea, as I never have in my life before." With her relief at finding Irene's injuries so comparatively slight and with her heart full of the deep, almost sacred joy their talk had brought to her, the paleness had vanished from her cheeks, and the happiness in her heart glowed in her pretty, kind eyes.

"Audrey dear, do you think it would be possible for your mother to see me for a little while? I want so much to thank her for all the kindness you are all showing to my bad girl. And as it seems that she will have to stay here for a day or so, I want to ask her to make an exchange, and spare me one of you in Irene's place."

"Oh!" Audrey's heart leaped with pleasure. A visit to 'The Orchard' would be lovely—to have servants, horses and carriages, gardens, and all the comforts and luxuries she loved so much; what joy! And she had nice clothes, too, and everything suitable for such a visit. But Mrs. Vivian, little dreaming of the thoughts rushing through Audrey's head, brought her castles tumbling to the ground.

"I know I must not ask for you, for you have not long been home, and you cannot be spared, but I thought, perhaps, Faith would come, or the little ones—it might be a change for them, and would make a little less work for you here."

She looked at Audrey inquiringly. For a second there was silence, then "I am afraid Faith could not be spared—either," Audrey answered in a tone Mrs. Vivian could not understand, it seemed to hold both shame and triumph. "She—she is really more useful than I am—much more," she added emphatically, as though to press home the stab she was dealing herself.

A wave of hot colour poured into her cheeks, then ebbed away, but the glow in her heart remained, for she had once more conquered herself.

CHAPTER XI.

Never in their lives before had Debby and Tom been thrown into such a state of such rapturous joy and excitement as when they heard of the invitation which had been accepted for them, and never, never had they been called upon to face so bitter a disappointment as that which befell them before the week was out, when news came to the Vicarage that the visit must be postponed indefinitely, for measles had broken out at 'The Orchard.' One maid was down with it, and Daphne was, they feared, sickening. And if Daphne developed it, Keith was almost certain to follow suit.

"It is almost too dreadful to be borne!" cried Debby tragically, meaning the disappointment, not the measles. "Don't you think it is only a bad dream, and we'll wake up presently?"

Tom shook his head gloomily. "I'm awake right enough," he said, "so are you."

"I wish I wasn't; I'd never been asked away before, in all my life, and there would have been the train, and the donkey cart when we got there, and a s-s-swing in the orchard. Oh, Faith, isn't it dreadful, that such things can happen, and all because of measles—as if measles are anything to make a fuss about."

"Some people make such a fuss about a little thing," scoffed Tom, "I wouldn't have minded going and catching them. I've got to have them some time, I s'pose, so I might as well have had them there as at home— better, too!"

"I doubt if Mrs. Vivian would have thought so," said Faith. "Cheer up, both of you, and try not to mind. Perhaps Mrs. Vivian will ask you again some day, and you see you can't go, neither can Irene, so we shall have her here for a long time yet—and won't that be jolly!"

When Audrey had first heard the news she had breathed a sigh of relief and sympathy. Relief, when she thought of the scanty, shabby little outfits which were all they had to take with them. Sympathy with their disappointment. She knew what it was to feel the latter.

Irene was frankly dismayed. To land oneself suddenly on new friends for a day or two was bad enough, but to be told that you must not return home for some weeks—indeed, for no one knew how long—was most embarrassing.

"I am so sorry," she said apologetically to Mrs. Carlyle, "I expect mother will arrange for me to go somewhere as soon as possible, I—I hope it won't be very inconvenient my staying here until I hear."

Mrs. Carlyle smiled at her affectionately. "Inconvenient! Irene, dear, how could it be. We should simply rejoice to have you as long as you can stay—that is, of course, if you would like to. The Vicar wrote to your mother at once to know if we might keep you during the time, and we are waiting to hear."

"Like to! Oh, Mrs. Carlyle, how good you are to me! I would like it better than anything," she cried enthusiastically, bending down to give the invalid a warm kiss. Then, turning swiftly, she caught up Baby Joan and danced with her round the room. "Oh, isn't it perfectly lovely, Joan darling. I am going to stay with you, Joany Carlyle, for weeks, instead of going to strangers. If you were only half as pleased as I am you would clap your hands and sing."

"She would if she understood," laughed Mrs. Carlyle. "I would too, if I could."

Irene stood still suddenly in the middle of her pirouetting. "Would you? Would you, really?" she exclaimed; her cheeks were flushed and her eyes shone. "Are you really sure I shall not be a bother?"

"Indeed, indeed, I love to have you here, darling." There was no mistaking the meaning in Mrs. Carlyle's voice. "It is like letting sunshine into the house. We all love having you—and it is so good for the girls. They have no real companions here."

When, a few minutes later, Irene went downstairs and into the garden, her face was grave, but her eyes still glowed. "Sunshine!" Mrs. Carlyle had called her. She was like sunshine in the house. What a glorious thing to have said of one—and she had done nothing to deserve it either. Well, here was her chance. She had not been in the Vicarage those few days without learning that there was a lot to be done, and few to do it. Here was her opportunity!

Faith was in the garden looking at the flower bed. "I can't understand it," she said, in a puzzled voice, as Irene drew dear, "there seem to be seedlings, or something, coming up all over it. They look like real flowers, don't they? Or do you think they are weeds? If they are, they ought to be pulled up, but I don't like to until I know."

"Oh no, let them stay. I am sure they aren't weeds, Faith. Look at those, they are sweet peas, I am certain they are, and this is young mignonette."

Faith's face was as puzzled as her voice. "It is a most extraordinary thing about this bed," she said soberly, "I made it, and then Audrey didn't like it because we hadn't any nice bedding plants for it, so I put in a few things that I had given me, phloxes and sunflowers, and wallflowers, and—oh, I forget quite what, but I forgot all about watering them, and I thought they were dead, but they aren't. They pulled through somehow; I never planted any seeds, though, I am quite sure. Yet the bed is getting to look quite full! I think the fairies must have come at night, and sown them!"

"Or the brownies," suggested Irene. "We won't watch for them, then perhaps they will plant some more. They stop working if they are watched!" she laughed.

"Well, it's brownies, or something, and I want to thank them," said Faith gratefully, if ungrammatically. "I want to dreadfully. What are you smiling at, Irene?"

"Was I smiling? Oh Fay, I can't help it, I am so happy. Your father and mother have asked my mother to let me stay here with you until the measles have gone. Isn't it lovely of them!"

"Have they? Have they really?" Faith's face was a picture of glad surprise. "Oh, Irene, how lovely! how jolly! They hadn't said a word to us. I expect they knew how disappointed we should be, if your mother said 'no.' But she mustn't say 'no '! She *must* let you stay. It will be perfectly lovely having you here." And she threw her arms round Irene's waist and hugged her. "Oh, I am so glad," she sighed, "I don't know what to do!"

"Keith and Daphne will be wild with envy," said Irene, returning the hug. "Poor dears, they will have a dull time, I am afraid."

"We will write them letters, to cheer them up, shall we? and send them all sorts of things—for fun."

Audrey came out and joined them, "Mother has told me," she said. "Oh, Irene, I am so delighted." Her pleasure shone in her face, and her speaking eyes. Irene already knew the worst there was to know of the shabbiness of the home, and Audrey's heart was at rest. "I think, though, you ought to come in now, and lie down, you know you are not really well yet."

"You must give me something to do then, sewing, or darning, or something. I simply could not lie still doing nothing. I am too excited. Haven't you some stockings that need mending? We always have a basketful at home."

"I took the basket up to mother a day or two ago," said Audrey. "We didn't get them done, somehow, so mother said she would try what she could do. But don't bother about work, Irene. Lie down and read, I am going up to my room to work for a little while."

"And I must put Joan in her cot for her morning nap," said Faith, taking that little person from Irene's arms.

Audrey strolled away to her beloved attic, Faith to her bedroom, and Irene was left alone to go to her bedroom, or the dining-room, as she pleased. For a few seconds she lay on the sofa in the dining-room, thinking; then suddenly she got up, and went softly up the stairs to Mrs. Carlyle's room.

"Come in," said the gentle voice, in answer to her knock. "Oh, Irene, is that you. Are you come up to sit with me? How nice?" The invalid's face brightened perceptibly.

"I came for the stocking basket," said Irene. "I am ordered to keep still, but I simply can't while I am so excited. I feel I want to be doing something to work it off me. Would you mind if I sat here with you for a little while, Mrs. Carlyle, and did some darning?"

"It would be the greatest pleasure to me, dear. I was longing for someone to talk to. I tried to mend some of the stockings myself, but I only managed to do one pair for Debby to put on. My eyes ached so. One seems to twist them if one tries to do fine work when lying down."

"Of course one does. Mrs. Carlyle," eagerly, "will you let the stocking basket be my charge while I am here? I love to have a big pile of work to do, and make my way through it. Would it bother you if I worked up here sometimes?"

"Not in the least, dear child. There is nothing I should enjoy more. I often long for company, but ours is a busy household. With only one servant, it takes the girls all their time to keep the house in order."

Irene stooped low over the stocking-basket, lest her face should reveal anything.

"Of course it is too much for them," Mrs. Carlyle went on anxiously, "and we shall have to have in extra help when the holidays are over, and their new governess comes. They can't possibly do their lessons and the housework as well. Next year I hope to be about again, and able to take some of the load off their shoulders, but," with a little sigh, "next year is a long way off."

"I wish I could help," said Irene. "I love housework, and keeping things nice. I am longing for the time when we shall have a house again. Mrs. Carlyle, have you any dark blue darning wool that I can mend Tom's stockings with?"

"No, dear, I have not, I have taken up that pair ever so many times and put them down again because I had no wool to mend them with."

Irene thrust her hand in, "Um!" Someone had not been so particular, she thought, as her eye fell on a brown darn on the heel, and a black one at the back of the leg.

"Irene, don't you think you could drop the formal name, and call me 'Aunt Kitty'? I wish you would, dear. I have no nieces or nephews of my own, and I have always longed to be 'aunt' to someone."

"Why, of course I will, I should love to, Aunt Kitty—don't you have a glass of milk about this time? Shall I ask for it for you?"

"Thank you—I think they must have forgotten it." She did not add that five days out of every seven the glass of milk was forgotten either entirely, or until it was so close on dinner-time that she could not take it.

"I won't bother Mary to bring it, I will go and get it, if you don't mind my going into the kitchen?"

Mrs. Carlyle was of the same happy, easy-going nature as Faith, and minded nothing of that sort. Even if she had known the state of muddle the kitchen was in, she would not have been troubled by Irene's going into it.

But though the muddle was there, as usual, and worse than usual, Irene did not see it. The shock she received when she opened the kitchen door, drove everything else from her thoughts, and it was not until some time later that she had eyes for the kitchen itself.

In the middle of the floor sat Mary, propped against the table leg, while on either side of her knelt Audrey and Faith, trying to staunch the blood which flowed freely from Mary's hand. Mary's face was as white as chalk, her eyes nearly popping out of her head with alarm. Audrey and Faith looked almost as frightened.

When Irene appeared on the scene they turned their faces to her in evident relief. "Oh, Irene, Mary has cut her poor hand fearfully, and—and it will not stop bleeding, and we don't know what to do, we have been here ever so long, and it isn't stopping a bit. Do you think we ought to send for Doctor Gray?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Irene reassuringly, "not if it is an ordinary cut. Let me see it, may I?"

"Oh, no, you mustn't look at it. You will faint!"

"I don't faint from that kind of thing, I am used to it. We are always damaging ourselves, and I doctor them all. Anyhow, I know that Mary ought not to hold her hand down like that,"—gently raising it to check the flow—"it will bleed for hours if she does. Have you any soft rag?"

"Plenty, I should think," Audrey replied sarcastically, "but I don't know where to find any." Irene, looking at her closely for the first time, saw that she was white to the lips, and trembling.

"Look here," she said quickly, "I came down for a glass of milk for your mother, and some biscuits, will you take them up to her? She will be waiting, and wondering what has become of me. Then you stay with her and talk to her. Don't tell her what has happened—simply say that I am busy. Don't come down again, Audrey, you will be fainting if you stay here, and we can manage by ourselves. Don't cry, Mary, it will be all right. I am sure it will."

"I—I believe I've taken a bit of my finger right off," sobbed Mary. "I am sure I have, p'raps it's gone. Do look, miss."

"Oh no, it isn't gone. Don't scream so, Mary, you will frighten Mrs. Carlyle and make her very ill. Now just be as plucky as ever you can while I dress it. Faith, where can I find some rag?"

"Oh, I don't know," groaned Faith. "Irene, do you think a piece of her finger has really come off?"

"No!" Irene, who had been examining the wound, spoke almost impatiently. "The cut is a deep one, but it will be all right in a few days. Do try and find some rag or bandage, Faith. I want to bind it up as tightly as possible to stop the bleeding. If you haven't any I will get one of my handkerchiefs."

Faith, much relieved in her mind, ran off hurriedly. Mary's sobs became quieter, but as she grew less frightened about herself, she grew more worried about her work.

"Whatever shall I do!" she wailed, "there's the dinner to get, and I've got to make cake to-day! Oh, what can I do! We'll have to have in a woman, and see what that costs!"

Poor Mary's innocent words brought Irene's wandering thoughts to a standstill. Mary's concern for her master's purse touched her, and filled her with a deep respect for the simple, loyal, country girl.

"Oh, but we need not do that, Mary," she said kindly, "you will be able to use your other hand quite well, and this one too, for some things. Of course, you can't make cake, but I can. I often made it at home; and I can cook the dinner too, if you will tell me what you want."

"Oh! but Miss Irene, I couldn't let you!" Mary was so taken aback she forgot all about the cut hand, and let Irene bathe it without once wincing. "Oh, miss! I—I couldn't. The master wouldn't like it, and— and——"

"The master need not know anything about it, at least, not until it is done, then I will ask him if he approves of his new cook. I expect he will say he prefers his old one! Now Mary—you are not to say anything about it. I love cooking, and I want to practise, and I think it will be the greatest fun."

Faith came dashing in with an old pillow-case in her hand. "You will have to use some of this, I am afraid. I know there is a heap of real rag somewhere, but I can't stay to look any further. Joan has pulled over the water-jug and drenched herself to the skin. I must fly!"

Irene looked at Mary, and Mary looked at the pillowcase. "Seems a pity to tear that up," she said anxiously, "it wants a bit of mending, but it is one of the best. If you will wait a minute, miss, I think I know where I can put my hand on a piece," and Mary scrambled to her feet, forgetful of her faintness.

"Law me! 'tisn't nothing to have made such a fuss about, after all," she remarked shamefacedly, as Irene bathed the cut in clean cold water, "I thought for certain the top of my finger was lying round on the floor somewhere, and the thought of it made me feel that ill."

"Well, don't think about it any more," laughed Irene, as she deftly tore up strips of linen, "it is too horrid. Tell me now if I am binding your finger too tightly. There! Isn't that neat! I daresay a doctor or a nurse would laugh at it, but if it answers the purpose, that is all that really matters, isn't it? Now I am going to make you a sling."

"But I can't use it if it is in a sling, miss."

"No, that is just why I am going to give you one. I want you to keep your hand up, at any rate for an hour or two, to prevent its beginning to bleed again. There, I am sure that looks

like a First-Aid professional sling. Now, when I have washed, I want you to tell me what you were going to cook for dinner to-day."

"There's a round of beef to roast, miss, and fruit to stew, and a milk pudding to make."

"That is easy enough, I feel I would like something more difficult. I daresay, though, I shall find it enough, by the time I have done! Do you have a suet pudding with the beef?"

"No-o, miss, we—we haven't had one lately. I believe they used to, but— well, I don't seem able to make them proper, so I never tries now."

"Well, I daresay everyone would like one—the children will, for certain. I'll show you how I have made them at home, then you will be able to do it another time. My mother taught me."

"Nobody never taught me," said Mary, apologetically, "I just had to pick things up as I could."

"Don't they teach you at school?"

"Oh no, miss. I learnt a lot about hygiene, and how to draw an apple, but I was never no good with a pencil—and what good would it do me if I could draw apples? Mother said, 'better fit they taught me how to peel one properly.'"

Irene laughed. "Well, it does seem that it would have done you more good to have learnt how to grow them, or how to cook them! Now, to begin! First of all I am going to wash the breakfast things, or we shall have no room to move."

Mary looked really shocked. "Oh no, miss! You mustn't. Just think about your 'ands."

"I am thinking about my hands," said Irene cheerfully. "Did you ever hear about the Thanksgiving of the Hands, Mary?"

Mary, looking puzzled, shook her head.

"Well, if you feel very, very glad and grateful for something, you can show your gratitude and your gladness through your hands."

"Oh, music!" said Mary, with sudden inspiration.

"No, it is something that everyone's hands can do. It is just making them do some little service as a thanksgiving. I am very, very glad, Mary, that your accident is no worse than it is, and I am very, very grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle and all of them, and to you too, Mary, for being so kind to me, but most of all I am grateful to God for sparing my life that day, and for sending Mr. Carlyle to me that day, and giving me such kind friends when I needed them so badly, and I feel I can never give thanks enough—except through my hands. So, the more I have to do the better I am pleased. Do you understand, Mary?"

"Yes, miss," said Mary huskily, and to Irene's surprise there were tears in her eyes. "I—I've often felt like that, miss, but I—never could say it, and I—I never met anyone else who did. But what about me, miss? I am sure I ought to be grateful for having you come to help me like this, yet I don't seem to be doing anything."

"But you will—you are always doing something, Mary. Now you can tell me where the things are kept—the soap and the dish-pan, and the dishcloth."

"And I can put the things away in their places," said Mary, somewhat comforted.

Audrey, after being banished from the kitchen, sat with her mother for a little while, but her thoughts were so pre-occupied, and she sat so long gazing abstractedly out of window, evidently hearing nothing that was said, that presently Mrs. Carlyle gave up trying to talk to her, and gradually fell asleep. Recalled to herself by the sound of the deep, regular breathing, Audrey rose, and tiptoeing softly from the room made her way swiftly to her beloved attic.

Faith, after a busy half-hour spent in mopping up water from the floor, and changing Joan's wet clothes, popped that young person into her cot to take her long-delayed nap, and laid her own weary body on her own little bed beside her.

"I *must* rest for just a few minutes," she sighed, "and then I will go down and see how Mary's hand is getting on." She picked up from the table beside the bed, the alluring book she was in the middle of.

It certainly was a very jolly story, perfectly fascinating, but somehow she could not get on with it. She read a few lines, and then the next thing she knew, she was finishing it off in her own brain. She tried again and the same thing happened, then at last when she was trying to read the end of the paragraph she had begun so many times, her eyelids dropped before she could even find it, the book slipped from her hand and fell forward on her face,

and she had not the strength to hold it up again.

The clang of the dinner-bell was the next thing she was conscious of, and then the savoury smell of cooking. Then she opened her eyes and saw Joan sitting up in her cot, playing with the book she herself had dropped.

Faith sprang off her bed, lifted Joan out of hers, and, untidy as she was, hurried down the stairs. Suddenly the remembrance of Mary's injured hand and the scene in the kitchen came back to her. "I suppose it is all right, as she has got the dinner ready. Oh, Irene!"

Irene came running up the stairs, looking flushed and hurried, but very well pleased. She had a big apron on over her cotton frock, and as she came along she was turning down her sleeves.

"I've got to wash my hands and tidy my hair, and I mustn't keep you waiting," she said as she whisked past. "I won't be more than a moment."

Audrey, descending from her attic, joined the little group. Her head was full of what she had been writing, and it took her a second or two to realise things.

"Oh, Irene, I hope you haven't been dull. I never meant to leave you alone so long, but I was working, and—and forgot. How hot you look. What have you been doing?"

"I am rather. I have been cooking. Oh, I have had a lovely time. Do run down and look at my pudding—but I must fly, or everything will be cold!" and Irene whisked away and into her bedroom.

Audrey and Faith did not rush down at once to look at Irene's pudding. They looked at each other instead, and in the eyes of each dawned a look of shame and remorse.

"I quite forgot," gasped Faith. "I never remembered," gasped Audrey, "was Mary—couldn't Mary?"

But Faith had flown, leaving Joan to toddle after her. In the hall she met Mary hurrying to the dining-room with a big dish. Her hand was bound up, but was out of the sling, and she looked quite gay and cheerful. "Oh, Mary!" she said, following her into the room, "I never thought about your not being able to manage, I *am* so sorry. It is not much use to be sorry now, though, is it?"

"No," said Mary, laughing, "it isn't, Miss Faith—but it's all right, Miss Irene helped me. Oh, she is a clever young lady, Miss Faith, and so nice, she—she will wash dishes, and make cake, and sweep the kitchen, or—or anything, and be a lady all the time!"

"Cook! Can Miss Irene cook?"

"I should think she can, miss. It's a long time since we had a dinner so nice, or—or my kitchen either," added Mary honestly, as she hurried out to it again. "You come and look, Miss Faith. She's washed away all the dishes and has made the place look like a little palace."

"Washed the dishes!" Audrey groaned in bitterness of spirit, as she and Faith followed Mary out. In spite of dinner having just been cooked there, Audrey saw at a glance that this was the kitchen of her dreams—the neat, clean kitchen she had longed for, but had never attempted to create.

Mary looked at them both, her face glowing. Irene's interest and encouragement had quite inspired her; and her practical help had shown her the way. Every one of her few chance words, too, had gone home.

"'I can't bear to see a kitchen littered with dirty dishes, can you, Mary?' she said to me. I hadn't thought about it before, but when it was put to me like that I felt all of a sudden that I couldn't bear to see it either. 'And the longer they are left the nastier they are, aren't they?' she said, and that's true too, Miss Faith. 'The kettle is boiling, and we can have some nice hot soapy water. We will see how soon we can get everything cleared away,' she says, and up she turns her sleeves, and— well, she washed all those things as well as I could myself, and better. Look at the shine on them, Miss Faith."

"I am looking," said Faith; but it was something else that she saw the shining of. The shining of a brave spirit, and a warm heart—of an example that she never forgot.

"Miss Irene wouldn't let me do more than put the things back in their places, 'cause of my hand."

Without another word Audrey turned and walked away. The shame in her heart burned in her cheeks, and in her eyes. "And I—I talk, and do nothing. I tell other people what they ought to do—Irene helps them do it." And through her mind passed the thought; "What kind of dinner would they all have had, if they had to rely on her? What would the kitchen have been like at that moment, if it had been left to her?"

Debby came rushing out of the dining-room tempestuously. "Have you made yourself ready for dinner?" asked Audrey, laying a detaining hand on her.

"Yes, yes, ever so long ago. We are waiting for you. There is the nicest pudding for dinner that we have had for ever so long, but daddy says we mustn't begin it till you all come. Oh, *do* make haste."

Irene came flying down the stairs. "I am so sorry to be so long," she cried apologetically, "the string of my apron got into a knot, and I really began to think I should have to wear it at dinner."

"I am late, and have no excuse," thought Audrey dejectedly. "I never have one."

"I shall be glad to see anyone, no matter what they are wearing," said Mr. Carlyle, coming to the door. "Who is that talking of kitchen aprons?"

Irene looked at him with merry eyes laughing above her flushed cheeks. "Please, sir, it's the new cook," she said, dropping him a curtsey.

CHAPTER XII.

"Ugh! how horrid they feel! I think that is the very worst part of dish-washing, don't you, Irene?"

Audrey sat in a kitchen chair with her hands held out stiffly before her. She had just washed all the beautiful things, and Irene had wiped them. Now, after wiping out the dish-pan, and spreading the dish-cloth to dry, she had sat down while she dried her hands on the runner. She was tired, and her feet ached; the weather was hot, and she had been busy ever since she had got up.

For more than a fortnight now, she and Irene had inaugurated a new state of affairs at the Vicarage, and, to her surprise, she found that she was growing to enjoy the work. She certainly enjoyed the results, and felt proud of them. And, oh, how proud and happy she was when her father remarked on the improvement.

There were disagreeables too; there was no denying the fact. And one of them was the uncomfortable roughness of her hands.

"Rub them with salt," advised Irene, briskly, as she hung the shining jugs and cups on their hooks on the dressers. "Then rub some cold cream or glycerine into them."

"But I don't keep a chemist's shop," laughed Audrey. "I have only a little glycerine."

"Well, that is splendid if it suits you. Rub some into your hands while they are wet, and then rinse it off again. When I have my own little house I shall have a shelf put up close to where I wash my dishes, and vases, and things——"

"Close by the tap, and the sink, and the draining-board," interrupted Audrey, eyeing their own.

"Yes, close by, and I shall keep on it a bottle of glycerine, a cake of pumice soap, some lemon and glycerine mixed, and—oh, one or two other things that I shall think of presently. And every time I wash my hands I shall rub in a little glycerine—then my skin will keep quite nice. Of course, I shall have a whole array of gloves to put on when I do dirty work. I shall have silver-cleaning gloves, black-leading gloves, dusting gloves, and gardening gloves."

"How will you get them? Buy them?"

"Oh, no. I shall use my own old ones, and I shall beg some of grandfather. One can easily get old gloves. I have begun to collect some already."

"I can't, they are almost as hard to get as new ones. You see, we wear ours, just every-day wear, until they are past being good for anything. And father never wears any, except woolly ones in very cold weather, and they are too thick and clumsy for housework."

"Um, yes. I will send you some of grandfather's. He uses a lot, he rides so much. When I have my house——"

Audrey laughed. "That wonderful house of yours! How perfect it will be!"

"It will be a perfect dear; but I don't want it to be perfect in any other way—not at first, I mean. I want to make it so. Well, as I was saying when you rudely interrupted me by scoffing —when I have a house of my own, you shall come to stay with me, and you shall have breakfast in bed every morning; and you shall not touch a duster, or wash a dish, or make a bed. Oh, Audrey! it is going to be such a dear little gem of a place, with large sunny windows opening on to the garden, and a balcony outside each bedroom."

"How lovely!" sighed Audrey. "I wish you had it now. I'd love to be sitting in one of your balconies, looking down at your flowers. Of course, you would have crowds of flowers?"

"Oh, crowds—and apple-blossom, and honeysuckle, and pear and cherry trees."

"I would sit there and read, and write and write. Oh, Irene, I think I should go crazy with delight."

"No, you would not," laughed Irene. "When I saw you getting so I would come and put a wet dishcloth in your hands, and bang a wash-bowl behind you. That would bring you down to sober earth again."

Audrey groaned, and laughed. "I wonder when, or if ever, you will have your little paradise," she questioned wistfully.

"Oh, I shall have it, but not for rather a long time yet. At least, I am afraid it will be a long time. You see, I have to work for it first, and I don't leave off lessons for another year yet. Then I am going to study Domestic Science, and then I shall begin to earn money. You see, I have got to earn enough to buy my cottage, before I can have it."

Audrey groaned again. "Why, you will be ninety, and I shall be eighty-nine—far too old to sit on a balcony—it will be too risky. And if you are still energetic enough to bang your wash-bowl, I shall be too deaf to hear it."

"Indeed, I shall not be ninety. I am going to try hard to be a lecturer, and I shall get quite a lot of money, and grandfather says he will sell me the cottage—he has got *the very one* I want—for a hundred pounds, as soon as I am twenty-one. Won't it be lovely, Audrey?"

"Lovely!" sighed Audrey. "Oh, Irene, how splendid to have something like that to work for."

"It is. Why don't you do the same? It makes life seem so splendid, so interesting and beautiful. You try it too, Audrey."

"Oh, but I couldn't," said Audrey, wistfully, "there is so much to do here——"

"But at the end of the twelve months, when you go back to your grandmother?"

"Granny would not hear of it. She can't bear the idea of girls—women— working like that, lecturing, I mean. She doesn't mind their being governesses, if they have to, but they must not be anything else." Audrey paused for a moment. "I am not going back to granny, though," she added softly.

"What?" Irene really gasped with astonishment. "I thought—oh, Audrey, won't you be very unhappy? You loved it so. I thought you were counting the days."

"So I was, but I am not now. I am going to stay here. Mother needs me more—and there is so much to do. And I know it will be better for mother not to have hard work to do, even when she is quite well again; and if Faith and I take care of the house and the children, mother will be able to go on with her writing. She loves it, and it is such a help."

Irene stood leaning against the kitchen table, gazing thoughtfully before her. "I think it is fine of you, Audrey," she said earnestly. "You are right; but it is fine of you."

Audrey coloured hotly with pleasure, but: "No it is not," was all she said, "it is only what you would do."

"But I love the work, you don't. I do not want to do any other—you long to, I know."

Audrey groaned. "Oh, Irene, I simply ache with longing to write. I have stories and stories in my brain, and I feel sometimes as though my head will burst if I don't write them down. I would sit up all night, or get up very, very early in the morning to write them, but I am always so sleepy, I can't keep my eyes open. I tried once or twice, but I found I was only putting down nonsense."

"There is one thing," said Irene comfortingly, "you are very young—there is plenty of time. Perhaps when Mrs. Carlyle is better, and you have done with schooling, you will be able to have more time."

"But it is now—now, that I want it," cried Audrey, springing to her feet. "Oh, I must tell you, Irene. Do you remember those magazines granny bought me, and I lent to you in the

train that day?" Irene nodded. "Well, in one—*The Girl's World*—there was a prize of three guineas offered for the best original Christmas play for children to act." Audrey hesitated a moment, and coloured again beneath Irene's now eager eyes.

"Yes, yes," said Irene.

"Well,"—Audrey in her nervousness was twisting the kitchen 'runner' into cables, and binding her arms up with it—"I began to write one for it. I—I longed to so—I had to. I wanted to write the play, and I wanted to earn the money. Oh, I wanted it ever so badly—to help father."

"Well?" Irene gasped breathlessly, "are you doing it?"

"I began it—but I have had to drop it. I wrote the first scene—I had just finished it that day Mary cut her finger, and you cooked the dinner. But I have scarcely touched it since. One wants a good long time at it; five minutes now and then are no good. But there has been so much else to do, and now I feel—I feel quite guilty if I try to get more."

"Poor Audrey!" Irene murmured sympathetically. "I am sure you oughtn't to feel guilty. If one feels as strongly about any kind of work as you do, I think it shows that one is meant to do it. Don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Audrey, with a little puzzled, weary sigh. She rose to her feet, hung up the 'runner,' and drew towards her a big basket of peas that Job Toms had brought in from the garden. "I think this is what I am meant to do, and, after all, it is—well, I daresay it helps just as much as the prize-money would, even if I were lucky enough to get it."

Irene did not answer, but began shelling peas too. She worked in an abstracted manner though, and was evidently lost in thought.

"Audrey," she said at last, "I am sure you ought to compete for that prize, and I can't see why you can't have a nice long quiet afternoon every day of the week."

"I do then! On Fridays I have to prepare my Sunday School lesson——"

"Well, every other day then."

"I take the children out while Faith sits with mother, or I sit with mother."

"Well, I will take the children out, or play with them indoors. I would love to; and you can have a clear two or three hours every afternoon. Do take them, Audrey, for your writing. When I have gone home it may not be so easy. Oh, Audrey, how grand it sounds. And some day, when it is finished, we will all act it—wouldn't that be perfectly splendid?"

Audrey's face was alight with excitement; her grey eyes glowed.

"But," she objected, "but——" She hesitated again. "It will probably be no good—a poor, silly thing——"

"You can't possibly tell until you have written it," said Irene, silencing her nervous doubts. "There—there are nine peas in a pod for you, for luck."

"There is no luck in that sort of thing."

"There is for the person who buys them; nine nice fat round peas, instead of three and a dwarf!"

Mary came in with her bucket and kneeler. "Those steps do pay for a bit of extra doing," she remarked, complacently. "Since I've been able to give more time to them, they've improved ever so. You've no idea, Miss Irene."

"Oh, yes I have," laughed Irene. "We have more than an idea, haven't we, Audrey? The steps catch our eye every time we pass, they have improved so. Why, there are Faith and the children back from their walk. Oh, my, how we have been gossiping."

Faith and the children came strolling in at the back door.

"We came through the kitchen garden," said Faith, "and I have been talking to Jobey Toms, and what *do* you think? He has actually remembered at last that there is another garden, and 'it ain't no credit to nobody.' I told him that everyone had noticed that for a long time past, and hurt his feelings dreadfully. At least, he said I had. Anyhow, he is going to keep the grass cut and the bushes trimmed, and he is actually going to make a flower bed on the other side of the path."

"Whatever is the meaning of it?" gasped Audrey, looking almost alarmed.

Faith laughed. "I think someone has been twitting him about the way he keeps it, or rather, doesn't keep it. He began to me about it directly he saw me. 'I can't put up with that

there front garden no longer,' he said, 'a one-eyed thing. I am going to make it look more fitty by the time the missus is able to come out and see it, or—or I dunno what she'll think of me for 'lowing it to go on looking such a sight. I'm going to cut a bed t'other side of the path, Miss Faith, and make a 'erbashus border.' I nearly tumbled down in the path, I had such a shock."

"I did not know Jobey knew what a herbaceous border is," said Audrey.

Faith chuckled. "He doesn't. He thinks it is another name for a herb-bed. He has got hold of the idea from someone, poor old man. He told me he had been talking to John Parkins, 'what's come 'ome from Sir Samuel Smithers's place, where he's 'ead gardener, and John 'e don't seem able to talk of nothin' but his 'erbashus borders, just as if we 'adn't never 'eard of 'em before. Why, I 'ad a 'erb-bed before ever 'e was born, and for 'im to be telling me what mould to use! I never! I soon let 'im see I wasn't goin' to be taught by no youngsters, even if they did grow their 'erbs by the 'alf mile.'" Faith imitated the old man's speech and indignation to the life. "'I'Alf a mile of 'erbashus border, 'e said 'e'd laid out—and expected me to believe 'im, I s'pose! I says to un, says I: 'I s'pose your Sir Samuel's a bit of a market gardener,' says I. He pretended to laugh, but I could see 'e didn't like it, and I stopped his bragging, anyway. These fellows, they go away for a bit, and they come back talking that big there's no 'olding with 'em. But, any'ow, we can do with a bit more 'erb, and we're goin' to 'ave it, Miss Faith, and when he comes 'ome next time I warrant I'll show 'im a bed of parsley as'll take the consate out of 'un!'"

Audrey's laughter changed to a cry of dismay. "What *can* we do? We don't want a herb-bed from the front door to the gate. It is useful, perhaps, but it is not pretty, and as sure as fate, Jobey would plant chibbles and spring onions too. He calls them ''erbs,' and loves the taste of them himself above all others."

"We can't explain to him that herbaceous borders and herb-beds are not the same," said Faith. "For one thing, he would not believe that we knew anything about it; but if he did believe it, he would be so mortified he would never get over it."

"Perhaps," suggested Irene, "we could lead him on from lamb-mint to lemon-thyme, and from lemon-thyme to rosemary and lavender—tell him rosemary is good for the hair."

"Job cares nothing about hair," said Audrey hopelessly, "it is so long since he had any he has forgotten what it is like not to be bald. I think it is too bad that after neglecting the garden all these years he should go and do a thing like that. I have always longed for a bed full of bright flowers; so has mother."

Debby and Tom exchanged glances. "Don't you worry, Audrey. Let Jobey make his bed, perhaps the Brownies will come along at night, and fill it with seeds."

"He would only pull them up, as soon as they showed above ground."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't, he'd think they were young herbs—until it was too late. Then we'd get father to let them stay." Debby was quite hopeful.

"No," burst in Tom eagerly, "I know what we'll do. We'll tell him to leave them 'cause mother likes them. He'd do anything for mother."

Audrey went to the cupboard, and took down a tumbler. "I am going to take up mother's glass of milk now," she said. There was a new note in her voice, a new light in her eye. Irene's encouragement had filled her heart and brain again with the joy of creating something with her own hand and pen; with the hope of helping others in the way in which help was so greatly needed—and by her own work too. But what added most of all to her new pleasure in her work—though she was not yet old enough to realise it—was the zest of contrast, and the happy, satisfying feeling that the time and the opportunity were her own, and not being taken at the expense of others.

"Audrey, I will take up the milk to mother. You look tired already."

"I am rather," sighed Audrey, "and I haven't half done yet. Irene and I are going to make cakes."

Faith seized the tray with the tumbler on it, and, anxious to help, dashed upstairs with it. By the time she reached her mother's room a considerable quantity of the milk was spilled over the nice clean tray-cloth.

"Oh, bother!" she cried impatiently, as, in opening the door, she upset a lot more, "it is such nonsense having tray-cloths and all those faddy things. If I had brought it in my hand, without any tray at all, it wouldn't have mattered."

"Would it not? What do you think I drink milk for, Faith?"

"Why for nourishment, of course. To make you strong."

"Well then, does it not matter if you deprive me of a third of my nourishment, of my strength?"

"Oh, mother!" Faith looked shocked, "of course it does."

"And, apart from that, if you had brought it in your hand, and spilled it, you would have ruined the stair carpets, and you know how very, very hard it would be to get new ones."

"Oh! I hadn't thought of that. I suppose that is why one uses trays. The cloth doesn't matter—that will wash—but I am very sorry I wasted the milk, mother."

"But, darling, the cloth does matter. Everything matters in some way. Someone will have to wash, and starch, and iron it—all extra work—and someone will have to pay for the soap, and the starch, and the fire for heating the water, and the irons. Don't you see, dear, what big consequences our tiniest actions often have?"

Faith sighed. "I wonder if I shall ever learn to be careful," she said, hopelessly.

"Not until you really want to, dear."

"I do want to, mummy. I do! I do!"

"You think you do. Well, to realise that you are not so, is a step forward," and with a soft laugh Mrs. Carlyle put her arm around her little daughter, and drew her to her. "Dear, each of us has a hill to climb, and there has to be a first step; but if we do not quickly take another step forward, we are very apt to slip to the bottom again. If we want to reach the top we *must* keep on going."

"Mother, I shall bring you your glass of milk every day, and I shall try to bring it more nicely each time. Then, perhaps, I shall remember to take the next step. Now I must run away to look for Joan."

Once again Mrs. Carlyle drew her closer. "My good little Faith," she said softly, "Joan's little second mother. What would she or I have done, darling, without you to take care of us?" And her eyes were misty with tears as she lay back on her cushions.

Faith's eyes were dim, too, as she went softly on her way. "But second mothers have to be always setting good examples, just as real mothers have," she thought. And, by way of beginning, she set about making her bedroom as neat as a new pin.

CHAPTER XIII.

The last day for sending in the 'Plays' was July 31st. That was now but a fortnight off, and Audrey, in a state of feverish nervousness, had completed her last clean copy. She had worked hard each afternoon, and conscientiously, only to be filled at the last with despair and despondence. She had read, re-read, written and re-written it, until she knew every word by heart, and all seemed stale, dull, and trivial.

Irene, coming up to her room one afternoon, had found her with flushed cheeks and swelled eyelids, and despair plainly visible in every line of her face and form.

"It is no good," she groaned. "I shall not send it. I couldn't send anything so dull and foolish. They will only laugh."

"That is what you want them to do, isn't it?" asked Irene, cheerfully.

"Not the kind of laughter I mean. Oh, Irene, it is miserably bad."

Irene shook her head. "I simply don't believe it. You have been through it so often, you can't judge. Will you let me read it? I will tell you quite honestly how it strikes me."

Audrey coloured, but she looked grateful. "If you would care to, but I am ashamed for anyone to see it. And, oh, I *am* so disappointed, and, oh," throwing herself wearily on her bed, "oh, so tired of it. The mere sight of it almost makes me ill."

"Poor old girl, you are tired and over-anxious. Is this it?" pointing to a little heap of MS. on Audrey's writing-table in the window.

"Yes."

"May I read the old one, too? The first copy you finished, I mean, before you began to alter it."

Audrey opened her desk and took out another heap of paper, tumbled, scribbled over, and evidently much used.

"Now I am going to shut myself up in my room, and," with a laugh and a nod at the despairing author, "I want no-one to come near me until I show myself again."

"Very well," said Audrey, "but I shall not come near you then. I shall be much too nervous."

"Then I will come to you and stalk you down. Look here, Audrey, don't shut yourself up here all the afternoon. You have no writing to do now. Take my advice, and go for a good long walk, and try not to think about the play, or—or anything connected with it. Keep your heart up, old girl. I am sure it is good, even if it won't be the best."

Audrey sighed heavily. She had long since given up hoping that it might be the best, or even second best, or third. To be 'Commended' was an honour she had ceased to hope for. She had written and re-written, and altered and corrected, until all the freshness and originality were gone, and the whole was becoming stiff and stilted, and she was incapable of seeing whether she was improving or spoiling it.

It was with a distinct sense of relief that she gave in to Irene's suggestion, and handed it over to her for her opinion.

And, as soon as Irene was gone, she took her second piece of advice and went out for a walk. By going quietly down the back-stairs to the back-door she escaped from the house unnoticed; then by going through the vegetable garden she got into a little lane which skirted the village, one end of it leading to the moor, the other to the high road to Abbot's Field. Her one idea was to escape meeting anyone. She felt in no mood for talk. She could not force herself to play with the children, or to chatter to the old village people, who would all be at their doors just now, anxious to see someone with whom to gossip. She meant to go up to the moor, where she could be sure of solitude. The air and the peace up there always did her good. The sight of a figure coming towards her made her turn the other way, though. She felt she could not meet anyone, and be pleasant and sociable. She was sorry, for she loved the moor better than any place. However, this other way there was the shade of the trees and the hedges, she consoled herself. And she walked on, well content through the silence and solitude of the hot summer afternoon.

Well content, at last, until suddenly she saw a well-remembered horse and rider coming along the road towards her.

Audrey was vexed. She wanted only to walk and think, and walk and think. But, though she would have found it difficult to realise, it was best for her that the break should come. She had already walked two miles, and, oblivious of everything but her thoughts, and of every thought but one— her play—was as full of nerves, and hopes and fears, as though she had stayed at home.

Mr. Vivian's sturdy common-sense was as good for her as a tonic. At sight of her he reined up Peter and dismounted. "Miss Audrey," he cried, "it is the greatest treat in the world to see you. I have scarcely seen a friend to speak to for weeks. And I was tired to death of my own company. No, I will not shake hands, and we will keep the width of Peter between us, though I am really safer than nine persons out of ten, for I have lived in such an atmosphere of disinfectants I must be saturated through and through. I honestly believe I could not catch a measle, or any other disease, if I wanted to."

"I am not afraid," said Audrey, stroking Peter's soft nose. "How are you all? Are you all out of quarantine?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" Audrey's face fell, and her tone was not one of congratulation.

"You don't seem quite as pleased as we are, Miss Audrey."

Audrey laughed and blushed. "I am—I am, really," she said, looking up at him with an apologetic smile. "But I am afraid I was selfish. I was thinking of Irene. You will want her home now, of course, and—well, I do not like to think of her going. I—we shall miss her horribly."

Mr. Vivian had slipped the reins over his shoulder, and was searching his pockets. "I have a letter here for your mother and father. I was on my way to deliver it. We don't want to part you, but of course we want Irene. We have missed her sadly."

"It has been lovely having her," said Audrey softly. In her overwrought state, she felt inclined to cry at the mere thought of losing her. Indeed, she felt so stupid, so miserable, so

tongue-tied, she could not stand there any longer lest the sharp-eyed old gentleman should see the tears in her eyes. What a weak, silly baby she was!

She turned away abruptly as though to resume her walk. "Oh, you are not going yet.—I forgot, of course you were walking away from home. I just wondered——"

She had intended to, for she was tired, and it would be tea-time before she got home, if she did not hurry. But her longing was to go in any direction but his.

"I—I am soon," she said lamely, forcing down her feelings and her tears. "Did you want me to do anything?"

"I just wondered if you would take this note to your parents for me. I have to go to the mill first, and be at the station by five o'clock, and I am afraid I shall hardly do it."

"Of course I will. I beg your pardon. I did not understand."

The old gentleman's kind eyes looked at her very keenly as he handed her the letter. "You don't look very well, Miss Audrey; I hope you aren't going in for measles too! Or have you been working too hard, taking care of Irene? You look tired."

Audrey smiled back at the face so full of sympathy and kindly concern. "I don't think I am really tired," she said, speaking as brightly as she could, "and I am quite sure I am not going in for measles, and I certainly haven't been doing too much for Irene. I have walked rather far, that is all, and it is dreadfully hot, isn't it? I think I will go home now, after all. It must be nearly tea-time."

Tea was laid and waiting for her by the time she reached home. But before she noticed that, her eyes had sought Irene's face, as though she expected to read her verdict there.

Irene's face was beaming. "Splendid," she whispered, reassuringly. Audrey felt as though a great load had been lifted off her heart. "I will just run up and take off my hat and shoes," she said, more gaily than she had spoken for a long time. Irene followed her to her room. "I couldn't wait," she panted, as she reached the top stair. "Oh, Audrey, I do like it; it is lovely. I am sure it—will be one of the best." She wound up with sudden caution, remembering that it would be cruel to raise her hopes too high. "But do send the first one—the untidy one. Copy that one out just as it is; it is ever so much the better of the two. You have tried to improve and improve it until you have improved most of the fun out of it. Now I must fly down to tea. I am so excited, I hardly know what I am doing."

But her excitement was nothing compared with Audrey's. She, in her joy, forgot everything—Mr. Vivian, the letter, the news he had brought, and never remembered either again until some time later, when Mr. Carlyle came in.

"I met your grandfather at the station, Irene," he said at once. "He told me——"

Audrey leaped out of her chair. "Oh, I had *quite* forgotten," she cried remorsefully. "I am so sorry. I had a letter——" and she darted away and up the stairs, leaving them all startled and wondering. "I don't seem able to think of anybody or anything but that play," she thought. "I shall be glad when I have seen the last of it."

When she went down again she fancied Irene looked at her reproachfully. "How was grandfather looking?" she was asking Mr. Carlyle, "and the others—did he say how they were?"

Audrey felt more and more ashamed. Irene had been so good to her, and this was her return.

"Yes, he said they were all perfectly well now, and they are all going to Ilfracombe for a long change, as soon as they can arrange matters."

Irene clapped her hands ecstatically. "Keith and Daphne will love that, and mother too. Ilfracombe suits her so well. Will they want me to go with them?"

Mr. Carlyle smiled ruefully. "I am afraid so. Where is the letter, Audrey. Have you taken it to your mother?"

"Yes, father, and she wants you."

Mr. Carlyle rose, picked up Baby Joan, and went upstairs with her in his arms, leaving Audrey to tell her tale, and make her apologies to Irene.

Faith came in presently from the garden, where, rather late in the day, she had been tying up the sweet peas and sunflowers Debby and Tom had planted. "Oh, dear, I don't like weather quite as hot as this; it makes one so dreadfully tired," she sighed wearily, as she stretched herself full-length upon the shabby sofa. "Has anyone seen Joan? I ought to be giving her her supper."

Irene looked at her attentively. "Let me give her her supper, and put her to bed to-night, Fay. I would love to. Do let me. She will be quite good with me now."

Faith stirred lazily and half rose. "Oh no—we shall leave everything to you soon, Irene. I can do it quite well. I am not so very tired, really; only hot and limp."

She was very pale, though, and Irene noticed for the first time how white her lips were, and how dark the marks under her eyes. She got up, and, going over to the sofa, pressed Faith back on to the cushions again. "Do let me, Faith," she pleaded, "please. You see, I shall not be able to many times more." And Faith, anxious to give what pleasure she could, let her have her way.

Irene, satisfied, folded her work, and departed. Faith sank down contentedly, and fell into a doze. Audrey sat for a while, wondering what she should do next. "I think I will go up and work at that manuscript, as long as the daylight lasts," she decided; "the sooner it is done the better," and crept softly out of the room, so as not to disturb Faith. But halfway up the stairs she met Irene dashing down like a wild thing.

"Oh, Audrey," she cried, "come quickly! Where is Faith? and, oh, I want Debby and Tom too. Such news! Oh, do call them. Mr. Carlyle wants you all." But the end of her sentence came in broken gasps as she tripped over the mat and disappeared into the dining-room.

A moment later three flying figures dashed up breathlessly, with Faith panting on more slowly in the rear. "What has happened?" she gasped. "What is it all about?"

"I don't know," cried Audrey, "but it can't be anything bad." And they hurried after the others into their mother's room.

Mrs. Carlyle was sitting up on her couch looking happy and excited. Mr. Carlyle looked pleased too, but a little grave.

"Irene, dear, you tell them, will you?" said Mrs. Carlyle, eagerly. And Irene told, and what she told seemed to them all too wonderful to be true. Mrs. Vivian had taken a furnished house at Ilfracombe for two months, a house much larger than she needed for her own brood, and she begged Mrs. Carlyle to let her have her brood too for three or four weeks, "to fill the house up comfortably."

It was so wonderful, so unlooked-for, such an undreamed-of event in their lives, that for a second an awed silence filled the room. Then came a long-drawn "O-o-oh-h-h!" of sheer amaze and delight; and the spell was broken.

"Is it really, truly true!" gasped Debby, "or is it only a 'let's pretend'?"

"It is a really—truly true, Debby darling," cried Irene, seizing her in her arms and lifting her high enough to kiss her.

"Wants *all* of us?" gasped Audrey, incredulously. "What, *all five*!"

"' All—if you can spare them,'" read Mr. Carlyle, turning to the precious letter once more.

"But you can't spare them," said Faith, suddenly sitting down on a chair at her mother's side. Then, with a little gulp, and a little laugh, "You can't spare me, mummy, you know you can't. We will send off Audrey to be nursemaid to the babies, and—and you and I will have a nice quiet time at home alone!" Her lip quivered just for a moment, but her big brown eyes, full of a strained look of excitement, glanced from one to the other with half-laughing defiance, as though daring them to say her nay.

Audrey's spirits dropped from fever-heat to several degrees below zero. For one moment the prospect had been so beautiful, so ideal. A change, a holiday, a journey, the sea, servants, comforts—no more dishwashing or cooking. Oh, it was unbearably enticing. But almost with the same she realised that none of these were for her. Faith was to go, if no one else went. A glance at Faith's face made that quite plain. Yes, Faith must go; and she, Audrey, must stay at home. And so she told her when, after all the rest of the household was asleep, she crept down in her dressing-gown to Faith's room. Fearing to knock, she had entered the room with no more warning than a gentle rattle of the handle. But her warning was lost on Faith who, hot night though it was, was lying with her head buried under the bed-clothes, to deaden the sound of her sobs.

"Faith! What is the matter? tell me. Oh, what is it? do tell me!"

At the touch of Audrey's hand, Faith had thrust her head up suddenly.

"Oh, I was afraid it was father! I mean, I was afraid he had heard me."

"What is the matter?" asked Audrey, her voice full of anxiety. "Oh, Faith, do tell me. Perhaps I can help."

"It—it isn't about not going to Ilfracombe," declared Faith stoutly. "Audrey, I don't want to go, I would rather not. You must go. I really want to stay at home."

"Why?"

"Because I do."

"That is no reason. You need a change and a holiday more than any of us, and you know you would love it. You must go."

"I can't."

"But why?"

"I am too tired. I don't want the fag of it all."

"But you will be less tired if you do go. The change will do you heaps of good, and it will not be a fag. I will pack for you."

Finding herself thus cornered, Faith's usually sweet temper gave way. "I haven't anything to pack," she snapped impatiently, "nor anything to pack in. I can't go. I can't possibly go. I haven't any clothes. Don't worry me so, Audrey."

Audrey showed no resentment. "Oh," she said, thoughtfully. "Oh, I see. Well, we won't bother about that now. But, Faith, I do want you to go. I came down on purpose to ask you to. I want you to go as—as a favour to me. I will tell you why. I want to stay at home, I—I mean I can't go away just now, for I want to finish some writing very, very particularly," and she breathed in Faith's ear the precious secret about her 'play.'

Her ruse answered perfectly.

"*You* have *written* a play!" Faith sat erect in her bed, all her tiredness, all her depression gone. "A real play! Oh, Audrey, do you mean it? How clever you are! Of course I'll go and take the children, to leave you here in peace to finish it. I don't care how shabby my clothes are!"

Audrey winced. She would have liked—or, rather, it would have been pleasant—if Faith—and all—could just have realised her self-sacrifice— how much it cost her to stand aside, and give up so great a pleasure.

"Oh, I could——" she began, but, to her lasting joy, recovered herself in a moment, and never finished her sentence.

"Audrey, will you let me read it, some day?" Faith's eyes were full of appeal.

Audrey coloured. "Some day, perhaps," she said shyly. "Now I must go to bed."

"Thank you," said Faith simply. "Oh, Audrey, I *am* so happy!" She turned her pale face to the window, her eyes to the stars in the blue-black sky. "I am so happy that I feel I must get out and say my prayers again. A few minutes ago everything seemed black and dreary, but now——"

"I will say mine too," said Audrey gently, "before I go." And the two sisters knelt down side by side in the darkness, and said their prayers again together, 'because they were so happy,' with the happiness which comes of giving up something for one another.

The next morning Audrey got up early, and, going to the box-room, dragged out from their coverings her pretty green box and portmanteau. Then she went back to her room, and from her cupboards and drawers she collected a pair of house-shoes and a pair of boots, gloves, stockings, a soft grey cashmere dress that she had a little grown out of, and a Leghorn hat, which, she knew, had long filled Faith's heart with envy. All these she popped into the trunk.

"There is something towards going away," she said, as she dragged the boxes into Faith's bedroom; "the dress is as good as new, but I have grown so, and—and I will lend you my writing-case, and a nice hairbrush." And before Faith had recovered herself sufficiently to speak, Audrey had darted away again and locked herself in her own room.

The sacrifice had cost her more than anyone would ever know. The thought of the lost holiday, and such a holiday, was hard to bear, and a great longing for the sea was tugging at her heart-strings until the pain of it was almost unendurable.

CHAPTER XIV.

Audrey finished her clean copy of her play and posted it on the very day the family departed for Ilfracombe. But she did not tell Faith so. Faith must still believe that Audrey wanted nothing so much as a peaceful time at home for her work.

"And now I shall have to wait three whole weeks before I hear anything," she thought dolefully, as she hurried home from the post office and into the house by way of the back door, before any of the others were down.

She was rather surprised and disappointed that she felt none of the thrills and delight she had expected to feel when she at last sent off her first piece of work to try its fortune. Indeed, she felt nothing but a painful consciousness of its faults, which was very depressing.

And still more depressing was it to feel that she would not have Irene there to talk things over with, and get encouragement from. Those three long weeks of waiting she would have to live through alone, without anyone to confide her anxieties to, or to give her fresh hope.

Under the circumstances it was not easy, all things considered, to keep up a smiling face, and live up to the joyful excitement of the five travellers. And as she left the station with her father, after the train with its fluttering array of hands and handkerchiefs had glided away out of sight round the sunny curve, she had hard work to keep the tears out of her eyes, and the bitterness out of her heart.

Mr. Carlyle had to go and pay some calls in the village, so Audrey walked home alone; and very, very much alone she felt, after the lively companionship of the last month. The garden, when she reached it, wore a new air of desolation, and when she caught sight of one of Debby's dolls lying forgotten on the grass, she picked it up and hugged it sympathetically, out of pity for its loneliness. The silence in the house and out was just as oppressive. Audrey, still holding Debby's old doll, hurried through the silent hall and up the stairs to her room, and dropping on the seat by the window, she leaned her head over the ledge. Now, at last, she might give way to her feelings and sob out some of the pent-up misery in her heart.

"But—mother—she will be expecting me." The thought came to her more swiftly than the tears forced their way through her lids. It was nearly lunch time too, and there was no one but herself to get it.

"Oh, dear," sighed Audrey, "there is not even time to be miserable!" But that thought made her laugh, and she ran downstairs to Mary.

Mary had evidently shed a few tears, but she was already cheering herself up with plans for the homecoming.

"At first it seemed that melancholy and quiet, Miss Audrey, I felt I'd never be able to bear it, speshully when I remembered that Miss Irene wouldn't be coming back any more. It's like losing one of ourselves, isn't it, miss? And when I think of that dear baby gone so far,"—the tears welled up in Mary's eyes—"and there'll be no rompseying with her to-night before she goes to bed—well, I can't 'elp it. I may be silly, but I can't 'elp it, though there, she's happy enough, I daresay, with her little bucket and spade and all, and she won't miss us 'alf as much as we'll miss 'er!"

"Yes, baby will love it, Mary, they all will. We have got to cheer ourselves up by thinking of how happy they all are. And they will come back looking so well and strong. We shall get more accustomed to the quietness in a day or two, and the time will soon pass."

"Oh my, yes, miss! The time won't 'ang when once I begin to get my 'and in. It won't be long enough for all I'm going to do by time they come back. I am going to have their rooms as nice as nice can be; and I'm going to paint Master Tom's barrow, and I'm going to make a rabbit 'utch for Miss Debby and mend her dolls' pram——"

"But Mary, what about your holiday. You must have that while the house is so empty. I must speak to mother about it."

"Oh, I don't want any holiday, Miss Audrey." Mary's voice was quite decisive. "I mean, I don't want to go away. I haven't got any money to waste, and holidays do cost more'n they are worth. Leastways, mine do, for I'm so home-sick all the time, I'm only longing for them to be over. It seems waste, doesn't it, miss?"

"It does," agreed Audrey gravely, "but I suppose you have the joy of coming back, and you appreciate home all the more for having been away."

"Well, miss, it seems rather a lot to pay, for only just that. And a lot to bear too, when you are 'appy enough already. What I do want to go to is our own treat, when it comes, and I'd like to go to the sea for a day."

"Well, I am sure you can, Mary. I will speak to mother and father about it."

Audrey was busily collecting the things for her mother's lunch-tray. She had to make her an omelette, and she felt nervous about it, for hitherto Irene had helped her, and Mary was not capable of doing so.

As soon as it was ready she hurried upstairs with the tray. She had not seen her mother yet since they had all departed, and she had suddenly begun to wonder how she was bearing it.

"Of course I ought to have run in at once to see her," she thought remorsefully, "but I did feel miserable."

Mrs. Carlyle was lying propped up on her cushions with Debby's kittens beside her. "Well, darling," she said, looking up with a glad smile of welcome, "how did they all go off, I am longing to know. I have been picturing their enjoyment of everything they see and do on the journey, and their joy when they first catch sight of the sea."

"Oh dear," sighed Audrey, "everyone is thinking of their happiness. I can only think how miserable it is without them; and I should have thought you would have felt it even more than I do, mother."

"Perhaps it is that I have had more experience, dear, I seem to live again my own first visit to the sea; and time does not seem so long to one when one is older either, and it passes only too soon. I feel too full of gratitude to feel miserable, I had been thinking for such a long time about a change of air for them, and worrying myself because it seemed absolutely out of the question. Then quite suddenly the way was opened and all was made possible without my help or interference. One could sing thanksgiving all day long one has so many blessings to be thankful for."

"I shouldn't have thought you felt that, mother, shut up here week after week as you are; with nothing to look out at but the garden and the road." Audrey strolled over to the window, "and such a garden too!" she added sarcastically.

Mrs. Carlyle glanced out at it and sighed. "I often wish,"—she said, but did not finish her sentence.

"What do you often wish, mother?"

"I often long for the time when I shall be able to go out there again and help to keep it nice. If I ever am permitted to," she added in a lower tone.

"Well, at any rate I can," cried Audrey, with an effort to recover her spirits. Here was something more waiting for her to do. It was hard that her mother, having a garden to look on, should have only this neglected place with but one spot of brightness in it—the bed that Faith had made and Debby and Tom had sown with seeds.

Job Toms' herbaceous border was but a melancholy spectacle as yet. He had sown parsley and put in roots of mint and sage; and then, in Job's own way, had left the things to look after themselves, to grow or not to grow as they could or would.

Here was a task to set herself. She would get that bed, and Faith's too, as pretty as she could. Faith would be so delighted when she came home and saw it, and they would be able to vie with each other in keeping them nice, for mother's sake. If Jobey objected, well, he must go on objecting, and they would try and make him understand, without hurting his feelings, that a herbaceous border and a herb bed were not one and the same things.

Audrey's spirits went up with a bound.

"Are you awfully tired with what is called 'Gay'?
Weary, discouraged, and sick,
I'll tell you the loveliest game in the world—
Do something for somebody quick!
Do something for somebody quick!"

She sang blithely and felt in her heart that there was nothing like it for lifting a load off one's spirits.

"Mother dear," she said, when her mother had eaten her omelette, and laid aside her knife and fork, "I have been talking to Mary about her holiday. I thought she ought to have it

while the house is so empty, but she does not want to go. She only wants one day for the Sunday School treat and one to spend by the sea."

"Yes, dear, of course she can. She must, she so thoroughly deserves it. And Audrey, I have another plan that I want to talk to you about. Don't you think it would be nice to ask granny to come and stay with us while the house is quiet?"

"Granny!" For a moment Audrey's heart leaped with pleasure, then it sank. Even with all the improvements they had wrought in the house, and the meals, and the way they were served, everything seemed very different from what granny was accustomed to at home. What would she do without her comforts! Audrey's mental eye ran over the carpets, the bed and table linen; even the best was as shabby as that which granny, at home, condemned and put aside.

"Are you ashamed for her to see our poverty?" asked Mrs. Carlyle in her patient, gentle voice, and Audrey coloured at finding her thoughts thus read.

"Darling, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Granny knows what our means are, and she must realise what heavy expenses we have to meet, so she should not expect us to be anything but shabby. She would understand that with five children things need replacing more often, and that there is less to replace them with."

"Oh, I know, mother, I know. But granny had only one little boy, and a very well behaved one, and I think she couldn't realise how five of us knock the things about."

"But don't you think she would be so glad to see her one little boy, that she would overlook that?"

Audrey still looked doubtful.

"Think of it in this way, dear. Suppose we missed this opportunity, and suppose dear granny died before we invited her here. Do you think we should ever cease to feel remorseful? And don't you think she would rather be asked to come, and made to feel that we wanted her, than remain unasked because our home is shabby? Try by all means in one's power to have things as neat and nice and comfortable as possible, but don't let us put outward show before kind feeling."

Audrey listened eagerly. She had learnt one great lesson—not to trust entirely to her own opinion and she was very, very anxious to learn what was right, and to do it.

Mrs. Carlyle looked at her smiling. "Don't you think it is often a help to ask oneself, 'what would I like others to do to me? What would I myself prefer?'" But Audrey coloured painfully, as the thought of her own return home came back to her. How entirely she had lost sight of the love and the welcome in her care about external appearances. She was silent so long that her mother looked at her anxiously more than once.

"I think you are very tired, aren't you, dear?"

"Oh no, mother."

"Perhaps you need a holiday. Would you like to go back with granny to Farbridge for a week or two?"

"Oh no, mother, no I don't want any holiday. I don't want anything to do but stay here. Oh, mother." Her secret hovered on the tip of her tongue, her longing to confide in her mother almost overcame all her other feelings, but she checked herself. "Oh mother," she added lamely, "I want to do so much but—but——"

A voice came calling up the stairs, "Audrey, Audrey, are you coming to give me my dinner, or am I to dine alone?" Mr. Carlyle put his head in round the door. "Don't you think the remnant of the crew should cling together?" Then kissing his wife and lifting away her tray, he drew Audrey's hand through his arm and made for the door.

"Audrey will tell you of the plans we have been hatching," Mrs. Carlyle called after them. "Come up here when you have finished your dinner and tell me what you think about them."

"Mother thought that now would be a good time to ask granny here to stay," said Audrey.

"Did she!" Mr. Carlyle looked up with almost boyish pleasure on his face. Audrey was surprised. She had not dreamed that he would care so much.

"That really looks as though your mother felt a little stronger. Don't you think so?" he added, and looked at her with such eager questioning eyes, she had not the heart to say that mother never thought of herself when she was planning happiness for others. She really was better though, and stronger. She herself said so, and the doctor said so. She could do several little things now that she could not have done a few months ago.

"I am sorry granny will not see the children," her father was saying when her thoughts came back to him again. "She has never seen Joan yet. But your mother and she will have a more quiet time for talks together than they have ever had, and I am glad of that. We must try and make her as comfortable as we can, Audrey."

"Yes, daddy, we will," she said, but not very hopefully.

The meal ended, she got up from the table and strolled over to the window. As her eyes fell on the herb bed once more she remembered all her plans for making it a pleasant sight for her mother to look out on. She thought of her other plans too. Of all the writing she had meant to do while the work in the house was slacker, and here were all her plans upset, and a fresh load laid upon her shoulders.

Across her thoughts came Irene's voice, and a fragment of their merry talks. "I know I shall never paint a big picture, nor write any great books, nor be a pioneer of any kind; but I know I can help to make a few people happier, and it is grand to feel that there is something one *can* do. Something that is of use. I always feel as though people were my little children, and I've got to mother them."

With her eyes fixed on the herb bed, Audrey first felt the responsibility of controlling her own words and temper. "I know I can help to make a few people happier." It rested with her to make or mar the pleasure of her grandmother's visit. By letting her feelings have their own way she could spoil everyone's pleasure. By putting her own feelings aside, and thinking only of others, she could, to a large extent, make their pleasure.

"How odd things are," she sighed aloud. "No one is of very great importance, yet everyone matters to someone——"

"To lots of someones as a rule," said her father, rising and joining her at the window. "And that is one of the most serious and most blessed facts of life. I think that almost the saddest thing human beings can feel is that no one is the better or the happier for their existence."

"But can we help it, father? If I had no relations, nor anyone belonging to me——"

"You would still have all the world to 'mother,' Audrey. There is always someone, close at hand too, needing help and sympathy. Always bear that in mind, my child wherever you may be. Now I am going up to talk to your mother. I think we had better ask granny to come next week."

"Next week!" thought Audrey. "At any rate then I shall have no time to worry about my play or anything else before granny comes, whatever I may do after."

"Oh Mary," she sighed as she took a turn at the ironing while she told her the news, and Mary washed the dinner things, "I am dreadfully nervous. I wish we had a cook and a parlourmaid, and I wish we were able to buy all the best things that can be got. Granny does so like to have nice food and nice everything. She has always been accustomed to it."

But Mary, never having seen her master's mother, much less lived with her, was not so filled with fears as was Audrey herself.

"Well, miss, we'll do our best—and we can't do more. And after all, people don't come to stay with you for what you can give them, but because they want to see you."

And with that thought Audrey tried to allay her nervous fears, and face the coming visit with only happy anticipations.

Old Mrs. Carlyle tried to face the coming visit with happy anticipations only; but, with a lively recollection of her last visit to her son's home still impressed on her mind, she could not help it if her feelings this time were a little mixed. Her longing though to see her son and his wife, and her favourite grand-daughter, overcame every other; and the warmly affectionate terms in which they invited her, sent a glow to her lonely old heart.

"There is something better than comfort," she thought to herself, "and some things that means cannot buy. I wish Audrey had her dear father's affectionate nature," she added wistfully, for she had never forgotten the lack of feeling Audrey had shown when the summons came which was to break up their happy life together.

Granny Carlyle came, and though her visit was but a short one, she learnt many things while it lasted. One was that her son's home was more comfortable but more shabby than she had thought. Another was that poverty and the need to work had developed in Audrey a stronger character and a sweeter nature than comfort and plenty could ever have done. The grandmother noticed the change in her almost as soon as she alighted at Moor End station.

Audrey had not only grown in inches, but, though older-looking, she was yet younger. She was less self-conscious, but more self-reliant; less concerned for herself, and more for others. When they reached the Vicarage, and the luggage had been deposited in the hall,

Audrey picked out the special cap-basket and ran up at once with it to her granny's room.

"I knew you would want this, the first thing," she said cheerfully, "and Mary has put hot water ready for you; the can is under the bath towel. And tea will be ready when you are, granny. It will be in mother's room, we thought you would like it there."

And as Mrs. Carlyle came out of her bedroom to go to her daughter-in-law's room she met Audrey flying up the stairs with a rack of dry toast on a tray. "I remembered that you used to eat toast always for tea, granny, so I thought you might still. Oh, granny, it is so nice to see you in your pretty caps again, it seems so—so natural."

It also seemed to her, though, that granny had grown to look much older in the last three months, and thinner, or was it only that she had been away from her, and amongst younger people.

With a sudden sense of sadness, Audrey thrust her arm affectionately through her grandmother's arm. "Mother is longing so to see you," she said, with a sort of longing on her to make her granny feel that they all loved her. Her mother's words came back to her hauntingly, "Don't you think granny would rather be asked to come to us, and be made to feel that we want her, than remain unasked, because our home is shabby?"

Then Mr. Carlyle appeared, and taking granny by the other arm, they all entered the invalid's room together.

When she had started for her visit Mrs. Carlyle had wondered how she would get through a whole week without the comforts and the peace she was accustomed to. At the end of ten days she sighed that she could not stay longer. "If I hadn't invited a friend to pay me a visit," she said, "I should be very tempted to stay the fortnight. I have enjoyed myself so much, dear Kitty, and feel better for the change." And both Audrey and her mother felt very very happy, for they were both of them aware that granny had not enjoyed her former visit. She had not hesitated to say so.

During the ten days granny, too, had done her share in making happiness. "Gracious me, child," she cried, when she saw the carpetless floor in the drawing-room, "I did not know that it was as bad as this. I have so much furniture at home I can scarcely move for it, and two carpets sewn up with camphor, to keep the moths and mice away, I will send them both as soon as I get back, and—a few other things that may be useful."

She hesitated for a moment, then, with her old severe manner, "I don't want to be prying, Audrey, as you know, but how are you off for china—odd plates for the kitchen, and cups and saucers and things."

"Not very well, granny. We aren't well off in any kind of china. If the children had been at home we should not have had enough of anything to go round," she added, with a rueful little laugh. And though granny looked shocked for a moment, and felt so, she was obliged to laugh too.

"Oh!" she said. "Well, I will pop in some useful odds and ends, so that when I come again on purpose to see the children, we shall have a plate each, and not have to share a cup."

But, though they little thought it then, poor Granny Carlyle was never to come again. And none of those she loved best could feel thankful enough that they had had that pleasant time which had brought them all closer together than they had ever been before, and had left not only one happy lifelong memory, but many.

CHAPTER XV.

"I think I would like to go for a walk, daddy, if you are going home, and will see that mother is all right."

"Yes, I will take care of mother. Are you very tired, dear? I am afraid you must be, you have worked very hard looking after us all so well."

Audrey smiled up at her father, but it was rather a wistful smile. "No, I am not exactly tired, but I feel as if I wanted a walk."

"I expect you do, you have been shut up in the house so much. Well, I will hurry home now; and you will be back in time for tea?"

Audrey nodded, and, with a sigh of contentment, turned up the winding road which would presently lead her out on the moor.

Granny Carlyle's visit was over, and it was as she and her father were turning away from the station after seeing her off, that there had come to her suddenly a great desire to be alone, to be out on the great, wide, open, silent moor, where she could think and think without fear of interruption.

At home there was so little time for thought, and she had so many things to think about. Only yesterday granny had said: "Well, Audrey, and are you coming back to me when the year is up?" And Audrey, shocked at the thrill of dismay the mere suggestion sent through her, had tried to tell her as gently and kindly as possible, that she could not be spared from home, at any rate, until Joan was some years older.

"Even when mother gets about again, she will not be fit for hard work," she explained hurriedly, "and, of course, there is a lot of hard work. Father says we can't possibly keep another servant, for there will soon be the governess to pay, as well as Mary and Job Toms."

"I know, child, I know," granny answered, almost sadly. "I scarcely expected to be able to have you." And Audrey, feeling a little uncomfortable lest she should have even suspected her changed feelings, had again been struck by her aged and fragile look, the weariness in her eyes, and in her voice, and had been troubled by it.

It had troubled her, too, ever since, but she did not know what she could do. Indeed, she knew that she could not do anything, and that was saddest of all.

Up on the moor she threw herself down on a bed of heather, and with only the bees, and the larks, and the little westerly breeze for company, tried to think the matter out. And soon the breeze blew some of her worries away, and the sun and the birds' songs between them so raised her spirits that she found courage to face things more hopefully and trustfully. "I can't alter things," she sighed, "I can only do the best I know, or what seems best."

Presently remembrance of her play came back to her. For the last week or two she had been so busy, and her mind so occupied with other things, she had really not had time to worry about it, and now: "There are only three days more to wait!" she cried. "Only three days more. I wonder how I shall first know? Will they write? or shall I see it in the papers? or —or what? And how shall I bear it—if—if, whichever way it is?"

But, in spite of herself, her mind wandered on, picturing what she would do with her money. Should she send away for one of those pretty, cool, cotton rest-gowns for her mother, that she longed so for. They were often advertised, it would be quite easy to get one. She would still have a good deal left for other things. Or should she give the money to her father for a new great coat? His old one was fearfully shabby. It would take the whole of her money, but it would be lovely when winter came, to know that he was not cold. Oh! but she did want to get some new curtains, or sheets, and—and Faith was dreadfully in need of a rain coat, and: "Oh, dear!" she cried, rousing out of her day-dream, "and, after all, I shall probably not even have a five-shilling consolation prize! How silly I am to let myself think of it. It is enough to prevent its coming."

She got on to her feet, and shook herself, to shake the dried grass and heather from her skirt and her long hair—to shake off her foolishness too. Well, five shillings would be useful. It would buy mother some fruit, and wool for socks for father. "I wish though I could forget all about it. I wish something would happen to drive it out of my head again." And already something was happening—was on its way to her.

A letter had come for her while she was out, a letter from Irene.

"I can see that it is from Ilfracombe," said her mother as she handed it to her. "Open it quickly, dear, I have been longing for you to come home and tell me what it says about them all."

But Audrey's eyes were already devouring the pages. "Oh!" she gasped, "oh, how lovely! How perfectly lovely!"

If there is one thing more aggravating than another, it is to hear someone exclaiming over a letter, without giving a clue as to the cause of the excitement.

"Audrey! Audrey, darling, don't tease me any more."

Audrey looked up, ashamed of her selfishness. Her mother's cheeks were flushed with excitement. "Oh, mummy, I am so sorry," she cried, repentantly.

"Never mind, dear. I could see that the news, whatever it was, was pleasant."

"Oh, mother, it is lovely, perfectly—perfectly glorious. What do you think? They are actually coming here to live—no, not in this house," laughing, "but in Moor End. Irene says that her grandfather has bought the Mill House for them, and they hope to have it done up

and ready for them to move into before winter sets in. Won't it be lovely? Oh, mother, aren't you glad?"

Mrs. Carlyle was more than glad. She was thankful. Her mind was relieved of a care which had increased as the days sped on. Now her girls would have companionship, and with friends whose influence and example would be all for good. Tom, too, would have a companion. And, perhaps, who knows, they could share their lessons too. Mrs. Carlyle's thoughts flew on; but her thoughts were all for her children. She had not yet considered what it would mean to herself,—the companionship, the kind friends at hand in case of need.

"You are very, very glad about it, aren't you, dear?" she asked, her heart and her eyes full of sympathy with her child's gladness.

"Glad! Oh, mother. I was never so happy in my life. It seems now as though everything is just perfect!"

"And granny? Have you given up wanting to go back to her, dear?"

A shadow fell on Audrey's happiness. "Granny was speaking about it," she said hurriedly, "only yesterday, and I told her I could not come. I thought I was—I felt I ought to stay here, even after you are well again, for there is a lot to do, and—and, mother—you don't think I must go back, do you?"

Her voice was full of anxiety. She had little dreamed at one time that she would ever be overjoyed at being told she could not do so; but now. Her eyes sought her mother's face anxiously. She longed to hear her say reassuringly that there was not the slightest need, that she could not be spared.

But for a moment Mrs. Carlyle did not answer at all, and when she did she spoke slowly and hesitatingly. "I hardly know, dear, what to say. As she is at present, there is no actual need, and I am glad, for I don't know what we should do without you here. But, well, I feel I could not grudge her one—when I have so many, and she is so lonely. You could be such a comfort to her, Audrey."

Audrey's face grew white and hard. "Of course," she thought bitterly, "it was only for her to feel happy for life to seem jollier and more full of happy prospects than ever before, and she must be dragged away from it all."

If she had been asked what, above all else, she would have chosen, she would have asked for just this: that Irene should come to live close by; and she was really coming. Better still, they were all of them coming, and life, for one brief moment, had seemed full of sunshine. "So, of course, a black and heavy cloud must come up, and shut the sunshine out, and darken all her happiness," she told herself dramatically.

"Audrey, dear. Don't look so unhappy, so—so disappointed. We will not anticipate. No one knows what the future may bring. It is seldom exactly what we hope, or dread; and if we just go on trustfully day by day, taking all the happiness God sends us, and ready bravely to face the clouds. We know that He will make the sunshine show through. He wants His children to be happy, not miserable."

"I—don't know," said Audrey, doubtingly. "It seems that if ever I want a thing very much it is taken away, or I am not allowed——"

"Audrey, darling, do not say such things. Do not let yourself ever think it. Do you honestly believe that the great God above demeans Himself and His Majesty and Might to annoy one of His children? That He plans to torment you? My dear, dear child, don't get into that bitter, wicked way of talking. It is so wrong—so insulting to your Heavenly Father. It is so ruining to your own character, and your happiness. The mistake that we make, Audrey, is that we want to choose our own way, and follow it—not His. That we think we can see better than He what is for the best, and what our future should be.

"Now, let no imaginary cloud in the future overshadow the sunshine of to-day. Enjoy the happiness that is sent to you, and, if the call to duty elsewhere comes, obey it as all good soldiers of Christ should."

Audrey was on her knees by her mother's side, her face buried in her lap. "Oh, mother, mother!" she cried remorsefully, "I am not a good soldier—I am a coward. I never want to obey—unless—it pleases me to."

"You did not want to come here when the summons came, did you, dear?"

Audrey shook her head. "No, mummy," she admitted reluctantly. "When I came I counted the days until I could go back again."

"But you are happy here? You are glad now?"

"Oh, yes, yes," cried poor Audrey.

"You would not be happy, though, if you stayed on here, refusing to go to granny. You would be in the place you want to be, you would be near your friends, and be doing the things you want to do; but you would not be happy. You would enjoy nothing."

"Is one only happy if one does one's duty?" queried Audrey faintly.

"Yes, little soldier. That is why you have been so happy here since——"

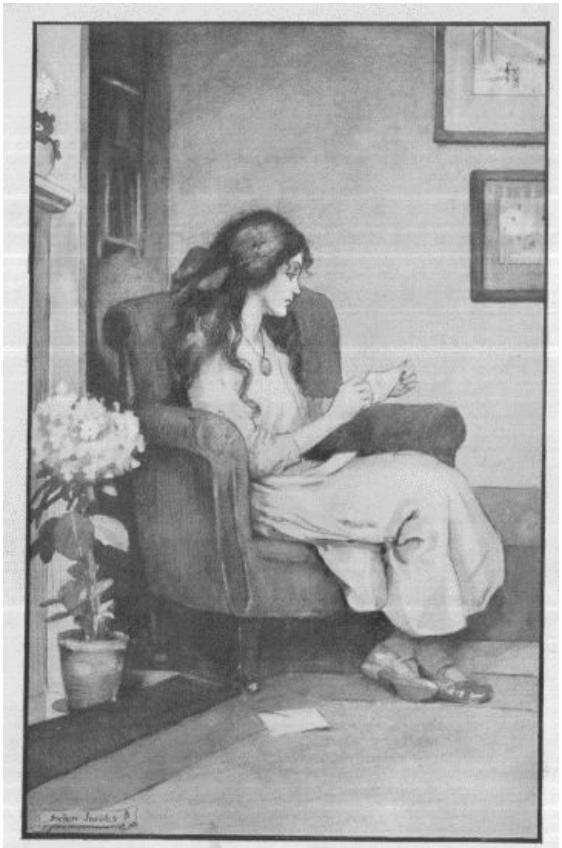
"Since Irene showed me what my duty was," said Audrey softly. She rose to her feet, kissed her mother fondly, and for a moment stood by her side silent, and very still.

"I—I will try," she said at last, "I will try, but—but——" Her voice broke.

Mrs. Carlyle put her arm about her, and held her very close. "That will do, darling. That is all God asks of any of us—just to try and shoulder bravely the duties He lays on us."

It was just three days later that Audrey heard the news so longed for, yet so dreaded. By the early post that morning there came several letters, and one of them for her.

When she opened it, and unfolded the sheet of paper it held, a cheque dropped out and into her lap. A cheque for three guineas!



FOR A MOMENT AUDREY HELD IT, STARING AT IT INCREDULOUSLY.

For a moment Audrey held it, staring at it incredulously. Then she had won a prize! The first prize, too! Her play had not been utter rubbish, but the best! The best!!

The blood rushed over her face and neck, dyeing both scarlet; her hands trembled, her heart beat suffocatingly. She turned to the letter, but for a moment she could see nothing. Then gradually her sight cleared, and she read: "The Editor of *The Girl's World* has much pleasure in informing Miss Audrey Carlyle that her play has been adjudged the best of all those sent in; and encloses a cheque for three guineas. The Editor would be glad to have a copy of Miss Carlyle's latest photograph, to print in our next number."

Audrey read no more. With her face glowing with happiness, her red mane flying behind her, she rushed up the stairs to her mother's room. At last she could tell her secret.

Sure of her mother's interest and sympathy she burst into the room with only the faintest apology of a tap at the door. Her father was there too, standing by the bed with a letter in his hand.

"Oh, mother! What do you think!" Audrey's voice broke off suddenly, for her mother's eyes when she looked at her were full of tears.

"Oh, what has happened? Father—mother—what has happened? Not—an accident?"

Her thoughts flew at once to her brothers and sisters. "Not——!" She could not finish the awful question. She turned so white and faint that her father stepped across the room, and taking her in his arms, guided her to a chair by the open window. "No, no, dear, not, thank God, as bad as that. A letter has come from Dr. Norman to say that yesterday granny fainted, and was unconscious a long time. She recovered, but—he wants me to come as soon as possible, he is afraid—her condition may be serious."

"I am never to be allowed any great happiness," said Audrey in her heart. "If something good comes my way, something bad comes with it." Even through her anxiety the thought would come, adding bitterness to her trouble. The letter and cheque she held slipped from her fingers to the floor. She would not even tell her news, she thought bitterly. Perhaps if she showed that she did not care, Fate would find no pleasure in being so cruel to her.

"Do you want me to go too?" she asked. She knew that her voice was hard and unsympathetic, but she felt, at that moment, as though she could not help it.

"No, not now, dear." The gentleness of her mother's voice brought a lump to Audrey's throat. "Your father will go first, and see how things are. They may need a trained nurse, or —well, we don't know; but, oh, Audrey, Audrey, the bitter part is that we haven't the money to take him there. We dare not draw any more from the Bank until some has been paid in, and that cannot be for a few days yet. What can we do? There is no one we can appeal to, no one we can confide in. If Mr. Vivian were only here——"

But Audrey, instead of answering, was groping on the floor. Tears were in her eyes, shame and remorse again filled her heart. After all, God was giving her a greater opportunity, a more perfect way, of using her money, than any she had dreamed of.

"Father," she said shyly, "I have just had this," holding out the two slips of paper. "I came up to tell you and mother, but—but——" The varying emotions of the morning, the joyful surprise, the excitement, the shock which had turned her faint, the drop from the height of her happiness to the depths of bitterness and sorrow, proved too much for Audrey, and, dropping on her knees beside her mother's bed, she burst into tears.

She felt her mother's gentle hand on her head, she felt her father raise her in his arms. She heard her father, as he kissed her forehead, murmur, "My blessed child, my God-send." She heard her mother say, with a catch in her voice, "My Audrey, what should we do without you!"

But all Audrey could do was to sob brokenly. "No, no, no, I don't deserve it, don't, please don't. You don't know——"

"I do know," whispered her father kindly, as he held her. "You felt aggrieved, hurt; you came up in the full flush of your happiness, and found us filled with selfish sorrow, wrapped in our own cares. You thought all your pleasure in your success was spoilt. I thought only of my trouble. Really, God was giving us both our opportunity. Doubling your happiness, and teaching me a lesson in Faith."

"And me," said Mrs. Carlyle softly, "that under us are always His supporting arms."

That afternoon Mr. Carlyle left for Farbridge, but Audrey's summons did not come for a while yet.

Granny Carlyle rallied considerably, and they all began to hope that she might be spared to them yet. But it was only a temporary rally; and Faith and the little ones had been home but a few days when a telegram came from Farbridge, asking that Audrey might come at once, and, instead of starting for Ilfracombe for a week or two's stay before the Vivians left there too, Audrey went on a very, very different visit, one that none knew the end of, for old Mrs. Carlyle was in that state that she might live for years, or for only a few weeks or days.

Never, in all her life after, did Audrey forget that journey on that hot August day. The sun poured in at the window on her, the smuts came in in showers, the compartment felt like an oven, and the hot air was heavy with the mingled odours of blistering paint, coal smoke, and tar. At every station at which they stopped the engine panted like an exhausted thing. The sight of beds of scarlet geraniums glowing in the sun ever after brought back to Audrey the sights, sounds, and sensations of that hot summer afternoon.

But at last the journey was over, and Audrey, feeling almost as though she was walking in a dream, crossed the well-remembered park—where the only change was that the grass was now burnt brown, and summer flowers took the place of the tulips and daffodils she had left behind her—and entered once more the orderly, roomy house which was so little changed that she might have gone out from it only the day before, except that now the moving spirit was gone, and the silence was not restful, as of old, but oppressive.

Phipps met her, with tears in her eyes. "Perhaps you would like to go to your room first, Miss Audrey. Are you very hot and tired, miss?"

"I think I am," said Audrey wearily, "but that is nothing. How is granny now, Phipps?"

But Phipps only shook her head, and the tears brimmed over. "I can't say she is any better, Miss Audrey, and—and I won't say she is worse, I can't bring myself to," and Phipps began to sob aloud.

"Poor Phipps!" said Audrey in a choky voice. "Is she as bad as that!" She knew what it all meant for Phipps. If Granny Carlyle died, her home of forty years was gone from her. For the first time in her life Audrey realised what we all come to realise as we grow older—that the sorrowfulness of death is not with those who go, but with those who are left behind.

"I shall lose everything," sobbed Phipps, "everything I care for. My dear mistress, my home—everything, and I shall never be happy in another."

"Oh, poor Phipps!" cried Audrey, genuinely troubled. What could one do or say to comfort such sorrow! But her sympathy comforted Phipps a little, and she cheered up somewhat.

"If you will come down when you are ready, miss, I will have tea waiting for you," she said as she left the room, "and after tea the mistress would like to see you."

But, tired and exhausted though she was, Audrey could only make a pretence of taking the meal. To be sitting alone in that big room, which she had hitherto never known without her granny, and feeling that in all probability she would never, never see her there again, was sufficient in itself to destroy any appetite she had. Her thoughts, too, were full of the coming interview. What could she say and do? Would granny be much changed? These and a dozen other questions hammered at her brain as she poured herself out a cup of tea. How she had once longed to be allowed to pour tea from that silver tea-pot, and pick up the sugar with those dainty little tongs, which granny would never allow her to touch. What a proud day it would be, so she used to think, when she might! But now—now that the day had come, she found no pride or pleasure in it, only a sort of shrinking. It seemed to her to be taking advantage of granny's helplessness—that she had no right. She was haunted by the sight of granny's fragile, delicate hand clasping that handle, and delicately turning over the lumps of sugar to find one of a suitable size.

"Would she be much changed?" Her thoughts flew again to the coming interview, which she so dreaded.

Yet, after all, though sad, it was very quiet and simple. Granny lay flat in her bed, looking much as usual, save that the face surrounded by the night-cap frill was thinner, and gentler, perhaps, and more kind.

"Come round to the other side, dear," she said softly, as Audrey approached her, and only then did Audrey realise that granny's right arm and side were helpless.

She was very white as she stooped down to kiss her grandmother, and her lips trembled.

"It is all right, dear; don't you grieve about me," granny whispered. She was so weak she could not speak very well. "I am quite ready— anxious—to go. I am very glad you came to me, Audrey; you have made me very happy."

Audrey knelt down by the bed, holding her granny's hand in both hers. "I—oh, granny, I wish I had never left you!" She pressed the fragile hand against her cheek caressingly. "I—I didn't want to go. I shall have home and the others always, and you only for a little while." Her sobs choked her.

"Dear, you do not know—no one knows—how long you may have each other, and it was your duty to go. Your mother was ill, and needed you; I was well, and had many to take care of me. I did not want to let you go, but I was glad afterwards, when I saw you again, I knew it had been best for you. Keep to the path you have set your feet on so bravely, dear."

Granny's voice died away. She was too tired to talk any more. "To-morrow," she gasped; "send nurse—now."

So Audrey, with another lingering kiss, crept softly away, to spend the long lonely evening among the shadows in the great drawing-room, where everything seemed to speak to her of her granny. Here was her work-table, with her work neatly folded, as she had left it. Here was her book with a folded piece of paper in it for a marker. She could not bear it any longer. In her own room the pain might be less cruel.

Audrey sobbed herself to sleep that night, but before that she had made one more resolution, with her prayers. In all the days to come, God helping her, she would 'Leave no tender word unsaid.' She would strive hard that these bitter memories, this reproach, should never again be hers.

"Out of sight and out of reach they go.
These dear familiar friends who loved us so,
And sitting in the shadows they have left,
Alone with loneliness, and sore bereft,
We think, with vain regret, of some kind word
That once we might have said, and they have heard."

Audrey did not know those lines then, but they expressed the thoughts which haunted her in those days, even in her dreams.

Early the next morning, after her breakfast, Phipps came to ask her to go to her granny's room as soon as convenient.

"I will go now. How is she, Phipps? Do you think she is any better, just a shade better?"

But Phipps only shook her head, and hurried out of the room with her head bowed. Poor Audrey! Phipps had dashed all the hopes which had risen afresh with the morning, and sent her to the sick-room unnerved and full of fears.

But face to face with her granny, so calm and placid and content, fears seemed wicked, out of place.

"Audrey, dear, before I have my sleep I want to say something to you in case, later, I may not be able to. When I am gone there are certain things which I wish you children to have. The lawyer knows—it is all written down—but I wanted to tell you myself. I want to ask you—and to ask the others through you—when you wear them to wear them not as ornaments only, but as reminders; will you, dear Audrey? As reminders to—to give your sympathy and love, while it can help, not only at the hour of parting. That is where I have failed. I see it now, and ask God's pardon." For a moment there was silence in the quiet room; a tear fell from the dying eyes. Audrey's were falling fast.

Presently the weak voice began again. "To you, Audrey, I have given my pearl brooch, and the ring your grandfather gave me as my engagement-ring. You will value it, will you not, dear? I wish you not to wear the ring until you are eighteen. I was just eighteen when he gave it to me. To Faith I am giving my ruby cross and brooch—Faith with her warm heart glowing with kindness towards the world, always reminds me of rubies. Tom is to have his grandfather's watch and chain, and Debby is to have mine. To Baby I have given my string of pearls." Her voice had grown more and more feeble, and now for a moment died away. But very soon she spoke again. It was as though she felt she had not much time, and could not waste a moment of it. "To you, dear, I leave my work-table, too; you loved it so when you were very little. Do you remember?"

Audrey smiled as the memory came back to her of the joy with which she had turned it out, and dusted and rearranged it daily. But her smile changed to tears. "Granny, granny, you must get well, and use it again yourself. There is your work in it now, waiting to be finished."

A little flicker of pain passed over granny's face. "I shall never finish it now," she whispered. "Whenever the end comes, one leaves many things undone. Some do not matter so very much. It is the thought of the things that do matter—neglected—those we might have helped, that stab one to the heart."

With a deep sigh she turned her face on her pillow. Audrey, kneeling beside her, holding her hand, presently laid it gently down, thinking that she had gone to sleep, and, stepping softly to a chair by the window, sat down to wait for her to wake and speak again.

Over in the park the children were playing gaily; the elder folk were already seated on the seats with books or newspaper, or sewing. How familiar it all was, how dear! Minute after minute passed, while Audrey, with her eyes fixed on the distant hills, turned over and over in her mind those last words her grandmother had spoken. How they rang in her ears, as warning bells! By and by the nurse came in.

"Granny is having such a lovely sleep," said Audrey happily. But the nurse, already at the bedside, did not return her smile. Her eyes were on the face on the pillow, her hand on the frail hand lying where Audrey had laid it down.

"She is," she said at last, very softly—"She was. She has had such a beautiful wakening, dear. She has passed through the Valley of Shadows, and is safe on the other side."

CHAPTER XVI.

A year had passed since Granny Carlyle went to her rest and Audrey returned to the Vicarage to take up her duties there again.

Another summer has come and gone, for it is September now, but a September so warm and sunny and beautiful that, if it were not for the changing tints on the trees, one might well imagine it was still June.

In the Vicarage garden the 'herb bed' had developed into a handsome herbaceous border, varied by patches here and there of feathery parsley, a bush of sage, a clump of lemon-thyme, and mint. Job Toms had retired again to his kitchen-garden, for "he didn't hold with messing up flowers and herbs together, and nothing wasn't going to make him believe but what planting poppies next to parsley was bad for the parsley. Poppies was p'ison, so he'd been always led to believe, and he didn't believe in p'isonous things being planted 'mongst what folks was asked to eat."

So Audrey and Faith and the children had taken the beds in their charge, and in aiming at showing Job what a beautiful, if not useful, thing a herbaceous border could be, they had laboured hard, and were now reaping their reward.

Occasionally, as a great favour, the old man could be coaxed into cutting the grass—as to-day, for instance, which was a great day in the family history, for it was Mrs. Carlyle's birthday; and not only that, but she was to go to the Mill House to tea. Her first real 'outing' for two long years at least.

To her husband and children, and even to Mary and Job, to have 'mother' about amongst them again was a cause for such rejoicing that they hardly knew how to express it.

Early in the morning Debby and Tom were up and knocking at Miss Babbs's shop door before Miss Babbs was fully dressed or had raked the ashes out of her kitchen stove.

"Why, Master Tom," she cried, somewhat ruffled by the importunate hammering on her new paint. "Shops ain't supposed to be open till the shutters is down."

"I will take them down for you," offered Tom, blandly.

"I don't want them took down yet, thank you, sir. Why I haven't had time even to light my kitchen fire yet——"

"I'll light your kitchen fire, Babbs dear," said Debby, quite undisturbed by Miss Babbs's wrath. "I'll have it burning like anything by the time you've got your hair on."

Miss Babbs backed away into the dark shop. "I don't want any help, thank you, Miss Deborah," she said, stiffly. "If you'll come again in an hour's time, when the shop is open, I'll be ready to serve you."

"Babby dear, don't be cross," pleaded Deborah. "It's mother's birthday, and we want some flags to decorate the garden, 'cause she's coming out to-day for the first time."

Debby's tone was pathetic in the extreme. Her expression and her words went straight to Miss Babbs's heart, and brought the tears to her eyes. "Oh, my dear children, you don't say so! Oh, I *am* glad! Whoever'd have thought it. Come right in—not that I believe I've a flag left, unless 'tis Coronation ones. Come in and shut the door, Master Tom. We don't want all Moor End dropping in, before I'm dressed for the day, and my place tidy. No, never mind the shutters, Master Tom, we'll leave them up for a bit. I'll carry the box into the parlour for you, and you can turn it out for yourselves, while I light my fire, or I shall be I don't know where all day."

Tom and Debby, expressing their thanks as they went, groped their way delightedly past barrels of potatoes, soap-boxes, and goods of many kinds. The sacks looked quite alarming in the dimness, the barrels as though they might have held all manner of mysterious dangers. The air was heavy with the mingled smell of onions, bacon, scented soap, leather, and groceries.

"Oh, I *must* keep a shop when I grow up," whispered Debby. "Miss Babbs, when you retire will you sell your business to me? I've got three pounds in the bank already, and I'll save every penny,"—but her plans came to an end in a hamper, into which she plunged head first.

"Babbs isn't going to retire," grunted Tom, as he dragged his sister out. "Don't talk

rubbish, Deb."

Miss Babbs staggered out into the light parlour with a large wooden box, and dumped it down on the table before her customers. "There's bandana handkerchiefs on top," she panted, "but there may be a flag or so under."

"The quickest way will be to turn the box upside down, and begin at the bottom," suggested Tom, as soon as Miss Babbs had retired to her kitchen— and suited the action to the word.

"Here's one!" cried Debby eagerly, and unfolded a flag with 'God Save our King and Queen' on it, and portraits of their Majesties.

"And here's one of 'God Bless our Sunday School,'" cried Tom. "Oh, look, there are three of them. If we nail them upside down they will look all right. They'll be flags, anyhow."

"It's an insult to hang a flag upside down," corrected Debby, severely.

"All right, I don't mind. Here's a Union Jack, that's jolly, though they are rather a worry to hang. I never can remember which way they should go. Not that anyone in Moor End would know if they were right way up or not."

"Then they ought to be ashamed of themselves," retorted Debby, "and it's time they were taught." She had lately been reading an article on the subject and her opinions were very strong with regard to the ignorance shown by so many. "One Coronation, one Union Jack," she counted, "three Sunday School—that's five altogether. We ought to have one more to make the money up to sixpence. I'll have a red and white handkerchief, it will come in afterwards for Jobey for Christmas."

When, by and by, Mrs. Carlyle passed downstairs to go out through the garden to the carriage Mr. Vivian had sent to drive her to the Mill House, she found the banisters festooned with rings of coloured paper, and the garden ablaze with paper roses and flags. From every tree fluttered a flag, more or less inappropriate, and on every bush and plant, poppy and rose, sage and phlox, laurel and sweet briar, blossomed roses of a size and colour to make a florist's heart rejoice—had they been real. Suspended across the gateway hung an old white sheet, with 'Many happy returns,' in red letters, sewn on crookedly.

Smiles and tears fought for mastery in her heart. "It is all meant for you, mummy," explained Debby, eagerly. "You must pretend what is on the Coronation flag is 'God save our Mother,' and on the Sunday School ones 'God bless our Mother.' Can you pretend like that, mummy? I can."

"Yes, darling, for it is no pretence. He has saved me, and blessed me," she said softly.

The carriage was to drive slowly through the village that the heroine of the day might see it all again, and note all the changes which had taken place during her long seclusion. Joan was to go with her to share the novelty of a drive. But the other four and their father formed a guard of honour, and marched beside them, or behind. Mary was to share in the outing too. As soon as she had tidied herself and put things straight, she was to hand the care of the house over to Job Toms, and go to the Mill House as early as she could, which was only a few minutes later than her mistress.

The slow drive turned into a veritable triumphal progress. Everyone rejoiced to see the Vicar's wife amongst them again, every heart in the village shared in the joy of the Vicar and his family. Miss Babbs was out at her shop door, waving her best lace handkerchief. The old sexton's wife ran into the road in order to present a bunch of the best flowers in her garden. All stood out at their doors with welcoming smiles and glad greetings.

By the time they reached the Mill House, Mrs. Carlyle was almost borne down with the weight of love and tenderness which had been poured out upon her—but, oh! so happy, so glad, so grateful.

At the Mill House, where all were out awaiting her. Mrs. Vivian soon carried her off to her own little room. "You are to rest here quite alone," she said firmly. "I shall not allow anyone to see you for half an hour—unless, perhaps, it is your husband or Audrey."

Mrs. Carlyle looked up at her with grateful eyes, and a brave smile on her pale, happy face. "You understand," she said gently. "I would like to be quite alone just for a little. Oh, I feel so—unworthy, and so—so rich beyond my deserts. I must ask for help to—to try to merit some of all I have."

Downstairs in the long low dining-room, the table was prepared for tea. Daphne had decorated room and table with autumn leaves, and ferns, and flowers. In the centre stood a handsome birthday cake of Irene's making and decorating, and surrounding it was dish after dish of tartlets, and cakes, and other things such as made the children gaze at the clock anxiously, fully assured that it had stopped.

"It *must* be five o'clock, or six," sighed Tom. "I am sure it is three or four hours since dinner-time."

"I didn't eat any dinner," announced Daphne, "when I saw what Irene had made, I thought I would wait. You see, it was a boiled mutton dinner, and I can't bear boiled mutton."

"Some of the things you saw are for supper," laughed Irene, "so I am afraid you have a long time to wait yet."

Daphne's face fell. "Four hours more! Never mind, I don't want the time to hurry past—though it will."

Faith, the same happy, bright-faced Faith, strolled up to the window, one hand tucked affectionately through old Mr. Vivian's arm, the other leading Joan. In the sunshine her hair glowed like a halo round her head; on the bosom of her white dress glowed her ruby cross. Her frock was only of the cheapest soft muslin, but it was sound and neat, her shoes had all their buttons on, her stockings were guiltless of darns of another colour. In her pretty brown eyes love beamed on all, and happiness.

"Who would like a donkey ride?" called out Mr. Vivian. "Tom, Daphne, are you coming? Debby, where's my little Debby?"

Debby was never far from Tom, nor from Mr. Vivian when she could be with him.

"Audrey, are you coming too?"

"I don't know," said Audrey, smiling. "I want to go with you, and I want to be here in case mother needs me."

"And I want you," said Irene, in the midst of bustling round. "I want you very particularly."

"The truth is," said Mr. Vivian, his kind old eyes resting on her very tenderly, "we all need you. We can't get on without you. Never mind, wait for your mother, child. She needs you most of all." And with a wave of the hand they left.

Audrey went outside and rested on a seat in the sunshine. On the roof Keith's pigeons sat cooing amiably; the mingled sweetness of 'cherry-pie' and mignonette filled the warm air. Daphne's cat Snowdrop, once Debby's kitten, lay stretched out comfortably on the warm, red-tiled path.

How beautiful it all was, how peaceful. Audrey sitting lost in almost a rapture of enjoyment, did not hear soft footsteps approaching, until Irene dropped on to the seat beside her.

"Audrey," she said eagerly, "I do want a few minutes alone with you. There is something—very special—I want to talk to you about."

Audrey looked round interestedly. "Well?" she said. "You know Christmas is not so very far off."

Audrey laughed lightly. "Christmas! Just imagine being able to think of Christmas—winter—on a day like this!"

"I am not thinking of winter, only of Christmas—and our party."

"A Christmas party? Oh, Irene!"

"Yes. I must tell you quickly, or someone may come. Mother suggested it only this morning—that we have a party, and—and act your play!"

Irene looked at her triumphantly, her pretty eyes bright with excitement.

"My play? Oh!" Audrey blushed scarlet. She seemed quite overcome.

"Irene, Irene," called her mother from within the house, and Irene sprang to her feet. "Think about it," she said, lightly touching Audrey's hot cheek with her finger, "think of the fun of the rehearsals, and all the rest."

"Think about it!" There was little need to tell Audrey to do that. She thought and thought, and at first she felt she could never face it all; then, by degrees, the idea grew less distasteful, more pleasant, then at last she laughed.

"A penny for your thoughts, Audrey," a sweet soft voice broke the silence, and brought Audrey back from a happy future to the blissful present. Looking up she saw her mother leaning on Irene's arm.

"I couldn't sell them," she said, laughing and springing to her feet, "they were too, too lovely, but not nearly as lovely, mother, as seeing you here and walking about."

Mrs. Carlyle sank on to the seat with a happy sigh. "I can hardly believe I am myself," she said, smiling. "I am almost afraid I shall wake up and find it is all a dream—as I have done so often."

"Oh, this is no dream," laughed Irene, "it is all very real. Look at those bad sparrows, fighting over a piece of bread. Listen to the pigeons calling for their tea, and look at my bed of verbenas, all raised from seeds by my very own hand. It is only Audrey who dreams. Audrey, will you give us your thoughts, as they are not to be bought?"

"Yes," said Audrey, her grey eyes shining bright with happiness. "I am thinking that in all the world there is nothing so beautiful as home, no happiness so great as——"

"As that which comes from helping others," said Mrs. Carlyle softly, and drawing her dearly loved daughter to her. "Oh, my dear, how blessed I am in my children, and in their friends;—my children too," she added softly, as she drew Irene to her, and kissed first one and then the other.

Mrs. Vivian came to the door and looked out, smiling at them.

"Will you come now? Tea is ready," she called cheerfully. And, with one supporting her on either side, Mrs. Carlyle went in to the house to cut her birthday cake.

THE END.

[Transcriber's note:

Chapter III

'and the mudde which reigned in both'

corrected to:

'and the muddle which reigned in both'

Chapter IX

'innocent little oke'

corected to:

'innocent little joke']

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