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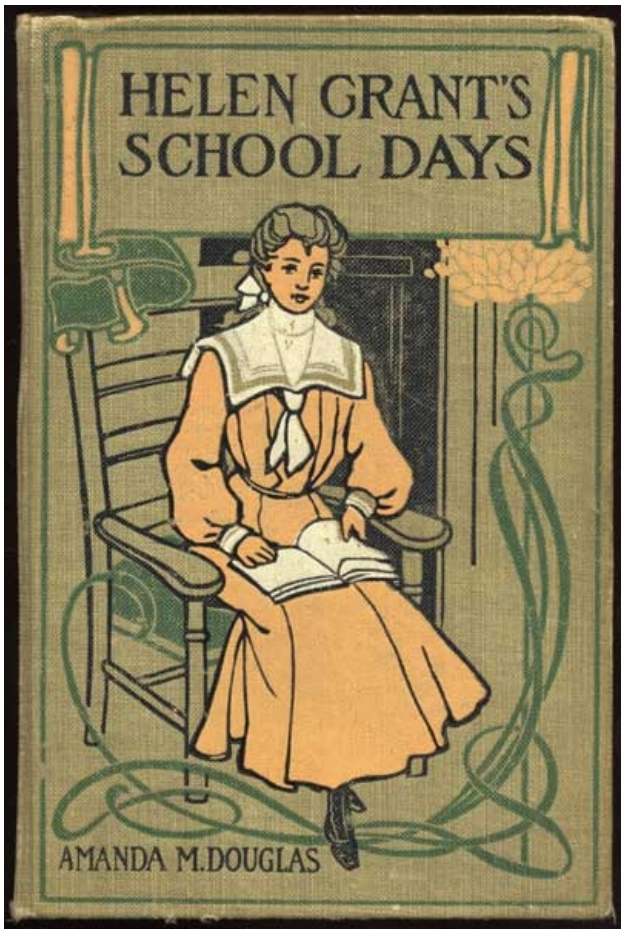

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**Helen tells her dreams to the old apple tree.
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HELEN GRANT'S SCHOOLDAYS

BY

AMANDA M. DOUGLAS

Author of "In the King's Country," "In Trust," "Larry,"
"The Kathie Stories," "Almost as Good
as a Boy," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY AMY BROOKS

BOSTON
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Helen Grant's Schooldays

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HELEN GRANT'S SCHOOLDAYS

CHAPTER I

HELEN

It had been a great day for the children at Hope Center the closing day of school, the last of the term, the last of the week. The larger boys and girls had spent the morning decorating the "big" room, which was to be the assembly-room. At the Center they were still quite primitive. There were many old or rather elderly people very much opposed to "putting on airs." Boys and girls went to school together, but they wouldn't have called it co-education. So the main room where various meetings and occasional entertainments were held, was always known by the appellation "big."

It was very prettily trimmed with the shining sprays of "bread and butter," and wild clematis, and the platform was gay with flowers. Seats were arranged on either hand for the graduating class, and the best singers in school. There was a very good attendance. Closing day was held in as [Pg 2] high esteem as Washington's Birthday, or Decoration Day. Christmas was only partly kept, the old Hope settlers being an offshoot of the Puritans, and the one little Episcopalian chapel had almost to fight for its Holy days.

The first three seats in the audience-room were full of children in Sunday attire. The girl graduates were in white, with various colored ribbons. The boys' habiliments had followed no especial rule. But they were a bright, happy-looking lot, taking a deep interest in what they were to do. The boys had an entertaining historical exercise. One began with a brief account of causes leading to the revolution. Another followed with the part Boston played, then New York, then Philadelphia, Virginia, and the surrender of Cornwallis; afterward, two or three patriotic songs, several recitations—two distinctly humorous—another song or two, and then Helen Grant's selection, which was "Hervé Riel," a poem she had cut from a paper, that somehow inspired her. Diplomas were then distributed, and the "Star Spangled Banner," sung by everybody, finished the exercises.

Helen was fourteen, well-grown and very well-looking, without being pretty enough to arouse [Pg 3] anyone's envy. "A great girl for book-learning," her uncle said, while Aunt Jane declared "She didn't see but people got along just as well without so much of it. It had never done a great deal for Ad Grant."

Helen had a bright, sunny nature—well, for that matter, she had a good many sides to her nature, and no girl of fourteen has them all definite at once. Some get toned down, some flash out here and there, and those of real worth come to have a steady shining light later on. But she never could hear Aunt Jane say "Ad Grant" in the peculiar tone she used without a sharp pang. For Addison Grant was her father, that is if he was still alive, and when Aunt Jane wanted to be particularly tormenting, she was sure he was roaming the world somewhere, and forgetting that he had a child.

Sixteen years before he had come to Hope Center and taught school. A tall, thin nondescript sort of man, a college graduate, but that didn't raise him in anyone's estimation. He was queer and always working at some kind of problems, and doing bits of translating from old Latin and Greek writers, and spent his money for books that he considered of great value. Why pretty Kitty [Pg 4] Mulford should have married him was a mystery, but why he should have taken her would have seemed a greater puzzle to intellectual people. They went to one of the larger cities, where he taught, then to another, and so on; and when Helen was seven her mother came back to the Center a hopeless invalid with consumption, and died. Mr. Grant seemed very much broken. No one knew what a trial the frivolous, childish wife had been. He *was* disappointed at not having a son. He had some peculiar ideas about a boy's education, and he didn't know what to do with a girl. So he left her with her aunt and uncle, and for four years sent them two hundred dollars a year for her keep. Then he went to Europe without so much as coming to say good-by, and no one

had ever heard of him since.

Helen's memories of her mother were not delightful enough to build an altar to remembrance. She had fretted a good deal. When she was out of temper she slapped Helen on the shoulder, and said she was "just like her father." Helen waited on her, changed her slippers, brushed her hair, and would have made a famous nurse if the end had not come. And then the life was so different. [Pg 5]

The Mulfords were in many respects happy-go-lucky people. Aunt Jane scolded a good deal, or rather talked in a very scolding tone. But the children came up without much governing. Once in a while Uncle Jason struck one of them with his old gray felt hat; Helen didn't remember ever seeing him have a new one, but he wore a black one on Sunday. There were five rollicking children, and one daughter grown, who was engaged to be married at seventeen. Helen ran and played and worked and sewed a little, which she hated, and studied and read everything she could get hold of. There were Sunday-school library books, some of them very good, too; there were books she borrowed, and some old ones up in the garret belonging to her father. She read these quite on the sly, for she knew she should hate to hear comments made about them, and Aunt Jane might burn them up.

Some years before she had a big rag doll that she was very fond of. It was her confidant, and wonderful stories, complaints, and wishes went into her deaf ears. 'Reely, the girl next to the two boys, wanted it, and ran away with it at every opportunity. One day they had a quarrel about it. [Pg 6]

"It's mine!" declared Helen. "I'll hide it away. You have no business with it."

"What's that?" demanded Aunt Jane sharply. "Helen Grant, you just give that doll to 'Reely. You're too big for such nonsense! Now, 'Reely, that doll is yours, and if Helen takes it away, I'll just settle with her in a way she'll remember one while. You great baby-calf playing with dolls!"

Helen never troubled the doll after that. There was a crooked old apple-tree in the orchard, and after she had dipped into mythology she made a friend and confidant of it, read her stories to it, studied her lessons with it even in real cold weather. It was a sort of desultory education, until the last year, when Mr. Warfield came, and then Helen really found a friend worlds better than the old apple tree, though she still told it her dreams. And sometimes when the wind soughed through its branches it seemed as if she could translate what it said.

"Of course you go to the High School next year," Mr. Warfield said a week or so before school closed. "It would be such a pity for you to stop here. You have the making of a good scholar, and there is no reason why you shouldn't be a teacher. You have one admirable quality, you go so [Pg 7] directly to the point, you are so ambitious, so in earnest, and you acquire knowledge so easily. You will make a broad-minded woman. I must say the Center people are rather narrow and self-satisfied, except the few new ones that have come in." And Mr. Warfield smiled.

Helen felt in her inner consciousness that it would be unwise to talk about the High School. And she was very busy. She was called upon to help with the ironing now. She darned all the stockings. She washed the supper dishes because Aunt Jane was tired out, and Jenny wanted to sew on her wedding outfit.

Everything had gone along very comfortably. Her white frock had a scant ruffle put on the bottom to lengthen it down, and new sleeves put in. Uncle Jason was really proud that she had to "speak a piece."

Everybody stopped to talk and discuss the exercises. The singing was pronounced first-rate. The History talk stirred up some revolutionary reminiscences among the old folks. Someone praised Helen's share in the entertainment.

"Well, I didn't just see the sense of it," declared Aunt Jane. "After all that great thing, savin' of the [Pg 8] ships, as one may say, why didn't he ask for something worth while? Just a day to go off and see some woman——"

"She was his wife."

"And, I dare say, he had chances enough to see her. You can't tell what they are driving at in these new-fangled stories. Now there's 'Pity the sorrows of a poor old man, whose trembling limbs have borne him to your door,' and 'Columbia, Columbia, to glory arise, The Queen of the world, and the child of the skies' that children used to speak when I went to school, and you could sense them."

Mrs. Mulford repeated them as if she was reeling off so much prose, and paused out of breath. She was getting rather stout now.

"I thought it rather *the*atrical," said Mrs. Keen. "I didn't understand it a bit. The Searings are going to send Louise to the High School. They have it all fixed, and she's going to board with her sister through the week. Marty Pendleton's going, too. Dear me! There wa'n't any High School in my day, and I guess girls were just as smart."

Helen was with the girls in a merry crowd. Some were going away to aunts and grandmothers, [Pg 9] and the envied one, Ella Graham, was going to the seaside, as the doctor had recommended that to her ailing mother. So they walked on, chatting, until paths began to diverge. Two roads ran through the Center, north and south, east and west. There were South Hope and North Hope, settlements that had branched out from the Center. North Hope had grown into quite a thriving

town with a railroad station and several social advantages. The High School for the towns around was situated here.

"Now," began Aunt Jane, as they neared the gate and said good-by to a few who were going farther on, "now Helen, you just run in and take off your frock and that white petticoat. They'll do for Sunday. There's peas to shell and potatoes to clean, and I have to look after the chickens, and make some biscuits. After spending 'most all the day it's time you did something."

Helen drew a long breath. She wanted to go out to the old apple tree to dream and plan. But Aunt Jane didn't consider anything real work outside of housekeeping and earning money, though Helen had been up since five in the morning, and very busy with chores before she went to help [Pg 10] adorn the schoolroom.

Sam, who had been inducted into farming two years before, was out in the field mowing with father and the man. Nathan, next in age, was most enthusiastic about the good time they had, only if there'd been a treat like a Sunday School picnic!

"Do stop!" said his mother, "I'm tired and sick of all this school stuff. Go out and bring in a good basket of wood, or you won't have any chicken potpie for supper."

Helen hung up her frock, and put on the faded gingham and a checked apron, and kept busy right along. 'Reely helped shell peas; Fan and Lou were out playing.

"It's splendid that there isn't any more school," said Fan. "We can just play and play and play."

The big girl inside was sorry enough there was no more school. Somehow Aunt Jane's voice rasped her terribly this afternoon. Two whole months of it! A shudder ran all over her.

There was a savory fragrance through the house presently. Helen tried to remember everything that went on the table, though she was repeating snatches of verses to herself. Then Jenny came [Pg 11] up the path, stood her umbrella in the corner, gave her hat a toss that landed it on a stand under the glass, that Helen had just cleared up, and dropped into a rocking chair.

"It's been hot to-day, now I tell you;" she said. "Well, did your fandango go off to suit, Helen?"

"I shouldn't call it fandango," the girl replied.

"Oh, well, what's in a name! Now I'll bet you can't tell what smart chap said that!"

"Shakspeare."

"Did he really? I suppose it's always safe to tack his name to everything;" and Jenny laughed. The word buxom could be justly applied to her. Her two long walks, and her day in the factory, did not seem to wear on her. Her color was rather high, her eyes and hair dark, her voice untrained, and everything about her commonplace.

"Go and blow the horn," said Aunt Jane to Helen.

"Did you go, mother? Was it anything worth while?" asked the daughter.

"Oh, well, so, so. Mr. Warfield seemed very proud of his pupils. Yes, the singing was good. Harry [Pg 12] Lane had the 'Surrender of Cornwallis', and it was just fine."

Father and Sam and the hired man came in. The two children straggled along, and Helen had to wash them, but presently they were all ranged about the table.

"Well, how did it go?" Uncle Jason asked, looking up as Helen finally took her place after doing Aunt Jane's bidding several times.

"Oh, it was splendid!" A thrill of delight swept over Helen as she met the good-humored eyes. "And I have a diploma."

"And did you carry the house by storm, or did you forget two lines in the most important place?" asked Sam, mischievously. "Dan Erlick is going to the High School in the fall. Are you?"

"O, I wish I could," cried Helen, eagerly, with a beseeching glance at her uncle. Occasionally he did decide matters.

"Well, I declare!" Aunt Jane threw back her head with her fork poised half way to her mouth, "And I dare say you'd like to go over to Europe, too!"

"I just should," said Helen with a good natured accent. "There are a great many things I should like to do." [Pg 13]

"Where's the money coming from to do 'em?"

"I hope to earn it. I should like to teach, and Mr. Warfield thinks I ought."

"And follow in your father's steps."

Helen's face was scarlet.

"You just won't go to any High School, I can tell you," began her aunt in an arbitrary tone. "You'd look fine walking in three mile and out again every day. Who'd keep you in shoes? Or did you think you'd take the horse and wagon? You're learning enough for the kind of life you're likely to

lead, and there are other things to do."

"And I'll tell you one of them, Nell," said Jenny with a rough comfort in her tone. "There will be three vacancies in the factory come September, and you better take one of them. Now I haven't been there but little more than two years, and take up my twelve dollars every two weeks. The work isn't hard. I almost think I'm a fool to get married quite so soon, only Joe does need a housekeeper, and will have the house all fixed up—and doesn't want to wait;" laughingly.

"Joe's a nice fellow," said her mother, "and well to do. And you didn't go to any High School, either." [Pg 14]

Mrs. Mulford took great pride in her daughter's prospects, though when Joe Northrup first began to "wait on her," she said: "I don't see how you'll ever get along with old lady Northrup, and Joe won't leave his mother."

"I aint in any hurry," returned Jenny. "Joe's a good catch and worth waiting for."

In March Mrs. Northrup began to clean house and took a bad cold, and a month later was buried. Quite a sum of ready money came to Joe, and he built on a parlor room, a new wide porch, papered and painted, and Jenny felt not a little elated at her good luck. She had been steadily at work preparing for her new home, improving evenings and odd hours, for she was an industrious girl, and she declared Mrs. Northrup's old things would be a "disgrace to the folks on the ridge." These were the poorest and most inelegant people at the Center, and had somehow herded together.

"Yes, that will be a good thing for Helen," said Aunt Jane. "She's old enough to do something to earn her way. And you'll want everything new this winter, you've grown so. And if you have had any idee of High Schools and that folderol, you may just get it out of your head at once. If you'd a fortune it would be more to the purpose, but a girl——" [Pg 15]

"It would be too far for her to walk," said Uncle Jason, warding off a reference to her father as he saw tears in Helen's eyes. "Mother, this is a tip-top potpie. You do beat the Dutch!"

"And I never went to school a day after I was twelve. I've kept a house and helped save and had six children of my own and Helen, and none of 'em have gone in rags. And there's Kate Weston, who's secretary of something over to North Hope, and who paints on chiny, and see what a house she keeps!"

"You can have lots of learning, and if it isn't of the right sort it won't do you much good," said Jenny sententiously. "There's a girl in the factory who was at boarding school two years. She's twenty and she never earns over four dollars a week, and if I didn't know more than she does—well I'd go in a convent!"

Some other topics came up, and after dinner Sam went to milk, the hired man to care for the stock, Aunt Jane took the big rocking chair and settled herself to a few winks of sleep, as was her custom, and the walk of to-day had fatigued her more than usual. Helen and 'Reely cleared the table. Jenny sat down to the sewing machine and hemmed yards of ruffling for her various purposes. Then Helen put Fan and little Tom to bed, and sat a while out on the porch, thinking, strangely sore at heart. [Pg 16]

She had not considered the subject seriously. It had been an ardent desire to go on studying. She had just reached the place where knowledge was fascinating to a girl of her temperament. Mr. Warfield had roused the best in her and she had, as it were, skipped over the years and seen herself just where she would like to be, able to travel, to make friends, to have books and the pictures she loved. She had not seen many that she cared for, until one day Mr. Warfield brought a portfolio of prints *he* admired, and she was so touched that she sat in a breathless thrill of joy with her eyes full of tears.

"Oh, I did not know there were such beautiful things in the world," she said with a sob in her breath. "And that people could really make them! How wonderful it must be to do something the whole world can enjoy." [Pg 17]

He smiled kindly. "The world is large," he replied, "and if only a little circle commends us, that must satisfy the most of us. And perhaps you know people who would rather have a bright chromo of fruit or flowers than all of these."

"Yes," she admitted with a flush.

"But in everything it is worth while to try to come up to the best within us."

This sentence lingered in her mind. But she was a very busy girl for the next two weeks, for there was a good deal to do at home. Then she was not old enough to have outgrown play. Girls really played in country places round about.

But some new thing was growing up within her. There comes a dividing line in many lives when the soul awakens and reaches up and seems suddenly to sweep past the old things, just as the bud pushes out of its sheath that then becomes a dry husk. So many desires crept up to the light. Study, languages, histories of men and women, and deeds that had changed the aspect of the world. Travel, a life of her own in which she was first, not in any selfish fashion, but to have things peculiarly her own, the things that appealed to her, not other people's ideas of what was best for you. She had had some of Jenny's frocks made over for her, and had been wearing [Pg 18]

Jenny's coat all winter. Aurelia was too small to make these changes economical, and Mrs. Mulford was one of the thrifty kind that believed in putting everything to the best use. Yet Helen longed for the time when second-hand clothes and ideas were no longer forced upon you, but you could come into some of your very own.

She thought she would go up to her own room and have a good cry. Just as she reached the door Aunt Jane said: "Yes, she's old enough now to go to work. It's a good idea."

"I'll speak to Mr. Brown and engage the place for her. After a fortnight, if she pays any sort of attention she'll get three dollars a week, for she's quick to see into things."

"Yes, if she settles her mind to them. Dear me! I hope she won't turn out trifling and inefficient like her father. She's got his eyes, only they're more wide awake. And when a girl has to do for herself, the sooner she begins the better. I'd reckoned on setting her to do something this fall, for there's 'Reely to work in the odds and ends; I always did say I wouldn't bring up a lot of shiftless girls, and I'll do my duty by her if she isn't altogether mine." [Pg 19]

Helen went round to the side entrance and slipped upstairs. Fan and 'Reely slept in the big bed. There was a jog in the room and Helen's cot was here. She threw off her clothes and crept into bed, and cried with her whole soul in revolt. What right had anyone to order another's life, to put one in hard and distasteful places! She had never thought of the factory before, indeed she had never thought much of the future. For most healthy energetic girls the present is sufficient, and to Aunt Jane it was everything. Children were to do to-day's work, there was no fear but there would be enough to fill up to-morrow when it came.

To go in the factory when Mr. Warfield had said she could make a teacher! To miss three years in the High School, three splendid satisfying years, to miss the wonderful knowledges of the wide, beautiful world when she had just come to know what a few leaves of them were like. No wonder she cried with a girl's passionate disappointment. No wonder she saw possibilities in the enchanted future and was confident of reaching them if she could be allowed. [Pg 20]

CHAPTER II

AN EXCURSION TO HOPE

Helen was up at five the next morning. They were early risers in the summer time at the Mulfords', except Fan and little Tom. Mrs. Mulford didn't want young ones about bothering, when they could be no sort of use. Mr. Mulford had quoted the advantage of good habits, and that you never could begin too soon.

"When I have need of their habits I'll see that they have 'em," she replied with a confident nod. "Plenty of sleep is good for 'em."

Helen and 'Reely had reached the period of "habits." Mrs. Mulford always called out sharply at five o'clock.

Oh, what a beautiful world it was! Over east was a chain of high hills, blue in the morning light, except where the sun struck them. They seemed part of another world. Between were bits of woodland, meadows, orchards and the creek that was laid down on the State map as a river, but [Pg 21] no one called it that. Nearer was a cluster of houses, two or three factories stretching out to South Hope and the railroad station. Oh, why were beautiful things always so far off?

She hurried on her gown and twisted up her hair in a knot. It was a faded cambric of last summer, rather short in the skirt for such a large girl, but then it was pretty well worn out. She helped with the breakfast, she laid out the dainties for Jenny's lunch, she ran to do things for Uncle Jason, the world was just full of odds and ends jumbled together. She wondered why people had to eat so much. Why hadn't they been made so one meal a day would suffice?

Jenny took her little lunch satchel and trudged on with a cheerful good-morning. Nearly a mile to walk, and then to work all day in the hot stuffy place full of unfragrant smells, and the gossip about beaus and what was going to be the fashion, and perhaps unfriendly comments or common teasing jokes. That was what they talked about when they came to see Jenny. They were no great readers, these girls. And was her lot to be cast with them? Oh, had school days really come to an [Pg 22] end? She had known their worth such a little while, only during the last year, the last three months she might say. School was a period everyone went through, but now, to her it had unfolded its magical labyrinth, and she wanted to roam there forever. Yet though she had shed bitter tears last night, she did not feel at all like crying now. An exultant life seemed throbbing within her.

"Now, Helen, you just go upstairs and sweep, and look out for the corners when you wipe up, and shake the mats out good and hard. See how quick you can get through."

Aunt Jane always said this Saturday morning. "Just as if I couldn't remember when I've done it for two years," Helen thought, but she made no reply. She worked away with her mind on a dozen other things, and her work was well done, too.

The great oven was heated on Saturday, an old-fashioned brick oven. Pies and cake and bread, and a big jar full of beans went in it to come out done to perfection. And the towels and handkerchiefs and stockings were washed on that day, it saved so much from Monday's work. Nathan and 'Reely weeded in the garden, then peeled apples for sauce, and picked raspberries to [Pg 23] can, making what Aunt Jane called a clean sweep of them. Dinner again for a hungry host.

"I'm going over to Hope this afternoon," said Uncle Jason, "I s'pose there's some butter ready to take. Now what do you want?"

"Oh, my! What I don't want would be less. Some of that green and white gingham, spools of thread, shirting muslin good and stout, and Jenny said if anyone went over there was a list of things she wanted. It's in her machine drawer."

"Oh, I never can look after so much. Come mother, go along yourself."

"On Sat'day afternoon! Jason Mulford!"

"Well you can't go on Sunday," and he laughed.

"Yes, I could go over to church on Sunday," she retorted sharply. "Thank the Lord there's one day you don't have to cook from morning to night, though like the old Israelites you have to do a double portion on Sat'day. Dear me, I sometimes wished we lived on manna."

"What is manna?" inquired 'Reely.

"Bread and honey," said her father.

"No, twan't bread and honey either. Jason, why do you say such things! It's what the children of [Pg 24] Israel had to live on forty years in the wilderness, and they got mighty tired of it too. It's my opinion, 'Reely Mulford, you'd rather have bread and cake and potpie and baked beans and berries and such."

'Reely stared with her big brown eyes.

"And—didn't they have any——"

"You're big enough to read the Bible, 'Reely. When I was twelve I had read it all through, except the chapters with the names which mother said didn't count. But we didn't have Sunday school books then, and that was all there was to read on Sunday."

Helen thought everything that happened to Aunt Jane happened before she was twelve. She had made her father some shirts, she had pieced several quilts, made bread and cake and spun on the little wheel and could do a week's washing.

"Well, about Hope?" They seldom said North Hope, or tacked Hope on to the Center.

"Oh, I couldn't go."

"Well, I can't get all those things. See here, let Helen go."

Aunt Jane looked at her. Helen knew by experience that to want a thing very much was a sure [Pg 25] way of being denied, so she merely went to the machine drawer and brought the list Jenny had written out, in which were several mispelled words.

"O Lordy!" ejaculated Uncle Jason.

"Before all these children too! No one would think you were a church member, Jason," said his wife severely.

"Well, if you want all them things you'll have to send Helen along to remember. An' I dunno's I have time."

Uncle Jason rose from the table. So did the hired man and Sam. Helen picked up the list and put it back in the drawer, brought the cloth to wash Tom's hands and began to pile up the dishes, her heart in a tumult of desire.

"Jason, what time you going?"

"'Bout two. I've got to see Warren at three. And isn't there butter to take over?"

"Yes, to Mrs. Dayton. Well—I think it is best to send Helen. Now, Helen, you wash up the dishes quick and do it well, too. Then wash yourself and dress. You know it puts Uncle Jason out to wait, he hasn't the longest temper in the world."

Helen was both quick and deft. Aunt Jane took the credit of this to her own training, but there [Pg 26] was an instinctive delicacy in the girl that made her wish she had finer and prettier dishes to wash. She did not truly despise the work so much. She really loved to read advertisements of fine china and glass, Berlin and Copenhagen wares, Wedgewood and Limoges, and hunted them up in the big school dictionary.

She was standing on the porch five minutes before two, a wholesome, happy-looking girl with two braids of light brown hair, tied together half-way down with a brown ribbon, and some wavy little ends about her forehead that would curl when they were wet. Her straw hat had a wreath of rather soiled daisies that sun and showers had not refreshed, but her blue cambric with white

bands looked fresh and nice, though it had been made from Jenny's skirt, turned the other side out. Aunt Jane had made her add her wants to the list, so she wouldn't forget a single thing. The butter was a nice roll wrapped in a cloth and shut tight in an immaculate tin pail.

With many charges they started off.

"I wish mother'd learn there wan't any sense in fussin so much, but land! I suppose people are as they grow. Mebbe they can't help it." [Pg 27]

"But if one tried? Isn't it like learning other things, or unlearning them?"

"Well—no, I guess not. You see all these habits and things are inside of one, born with him or her as you might say, while the book learning is just—well determination I s'pose. And so's farming."

That wasn't very lucid.

"But if you found some better way of farming."

"There aint many better ways. Keep your ground light and free from weeds and fertilize and get the best seed and then keep at it."

"And if you do a wrong or foolish thing, try not to repeat it."

"That's about it. But folks are mighty sot in their opinions, and hate to change. If I find a better way I take it up. Land! We couldn't farm in some things as people did a hundred year ago."

There was a splendid row of shade trees on the road to North Hope, mostly maples, but here and there an elm or a chestnut. There were farms and gardens, and old settlers who did not want any change. Then the railroad had established business lines outside the Center, while that had hardly changed in fifty years. But it kept a quaint beauty of its own. Here and there was an old [Pg 28] well sweep, then a long line of stone wall covered with Virginia creeper or clematis. And then a tall row of hollyhocks in all colors, or great sunflowers with their buds stretching out of close coverts. It was so tranquil that the tired girl lapsed into a kind of dreamy content. She used to think in later years this was a sort of turning point in her life, and yet she had no presentiment.

"Now the thing you better do, Helen," said her uncle, "is to get out here and go straight over Main Street and do your tradin'. Land sakes! I wouldn't look up those forty botherin' things for a handful of money. I'll drive round and leave the butter, and then you go to Mrs. Dayton's when you're through. I may be a little belated. Be sure now you don't forget anything."

Helen sprang out, holding her satchel with its precious contents very tightly. The stores were really quite showy, and on Saturday afternoon everybody who could, went out. She met some of her schoolmates. Ella Graham and her mother were buying pretty articles for their sea-side trip. Many were just looking. The day was not so very hot, indeed now it began to cloud over a little, [Pg 29] just enough to soften the atmosphere.

She kept studying the list. She couldn't match the edging, but she took two samples that were nearest to it, and she couldn't find the peculiar blue shade of sewing silk. She made believe now and then, that she was ordering some of the lovely lawns and cambrics, and that she didn't have to consider whether they would wash well, and how they would get made. She chose ribbons and laces to trim them with. And oh, the pretty hats, the fresh crisp flowers!

Then she made a sudden pause. Finery went out of her head. A book and picture store, and in the very front, the post of honor, a most exquisite Mother and Child—the Bodenhausen Madonna.

Mr. Warfield had two or three in his collection, and the Sistine Madonna had gone to her heart. But this child with his mother's eyes, and the tender clinging love as if he was afraid some hand might wrest him from his mother's clasp, the love unutterable in both faces filled her with a wordless admiration. It seemed as if she could stand there forever, as if all her longings were lost [Pg 30] in this rapture.

Presently she summoned courage to go in and inquire about it. A modern Madonna by a young German, a new thought of divine motherhood. It was a very fine photograph, framed, and the price was fifteen dollars.

Of course she had no more thought of buying it than of the lawns and laces. But she was very glad she had seen it. Sometime there might be a new world for her, where she could have a few of these lovely things. She must descend to gingham and shirting muslin.

Then she hurried on to Mrs. Dayton's. Uncle Jason had not come. There was a very fine old lady sitting on the porch in a silken gown with ruffles and laces, a heavy golden chain drooping about her waist, a large diamond flashing at her throat and smaller ones in her ears; while her fingers were jeweled to the last degree. But oh, how wrinkled she was, and her hair was threaded with white, while her eyes seemed almost faded out.

Helen went around to the side entrance. Mrs. Dayton was arranging the table for supper. A very pleasant, plump, amiable woman of middle-life in a white gown, almost covered with a big apron. [Pg 31]

"Why Helen Grant! Aren't you tired to death with those bundles? Sit down and get a breath. Your uncle said you would come. Take off your hat. You're just in time to have a bit of supper. Mr. Mulford said you were sent to do a lot of shopping. How did you make out?"

"Oh, very well, I think. You see I did not have to use my taste or judgment, it was all mapped out for me," smiling. "I was afraid I should be late."

"Oh, your uncle said it would be near seven when he came. And it is only quarter past six. Now take off your hat and fan yourself cool, and in five minutes I'll call the folks. They haven't all come yet. The Disbrowes get here to-night. I heard you quite distinguished yourself at school! You take learning from your father's side. The Mulford genius does not run in that channel."

Mrs. Dayton gave a pleasant smile. There was no malice in her speech. Helen colored a little under the praise.

"Pity you don't live nearer so that you could come in to the High School." [Pg 32]

"Oh, I wish I could. I love to study. And there are so many splendid things in the world that one would like to know."

"What are you going to do with yourself?"

Ah, it was not what she wanted to do. The tears suddenly softened her eyes.

"Oh, Helen, an idea has just come to me." Mrs. Dayton had been putting some last touches to the table and paused at the corner with a glass in her hand, studying the girl with comprehensive interest. "I suppose you meant to stay at home during vacation and help your Aunt? But Aurelia's getting a big girl and there are so many of you. I wonder if you wouldn't like to come over here and help me, and get paid for it? Why, I think you'd just suit. Did you see that old lady sitting on the front porch? That's Mrs. Van Dorn. She was here last summer. She had a companion then, a real nice girl about twenty, that she had sort of adopted. She has no end of money and is queer and full of whims. She wants to go to Europe in the fall and spend the winter in France. She travels all over. But the girl, Miss Gage, didn't want to go."

"Oh, dear, you don't mean"—Helen stopped and colored scarlet, and her breath came in bounds. [Pg 33]

"That you should go in her place? Oh; no, you can't indulge in such luxuries just yet. Miss Gage finally consented on condition that she could spend the summer with her folks on Long Island. There's quite a family of them, and they seem to care a good deal for each other. Mrs. Van Dorn wants someone to run up and down for her, read to her, fan her sometimes and go out driving with her. She doesn't get up until after eight, and has coffee, fruit, and rolls brought up to her room. And she's a great hand for flowers—her vases must be washed out and filled every day. Then she comes down on the porch, wants the paper read to her and likes to talk over things. After dinner she takes a nap. Then she goes for a drive. They used to take a book along last summer, she's as fond of poetry as any young girl. Mr. Warfield said you were the finest reader of poetry in the school. And what I'm driving at is that I do believe you could suit her, and I'd like someone to help me out a little when I'm rushed. Joanna's good, but one pair of hands can't do everything. I asked Mary Cross to come over and read, but she drones, and she can't bear poetry. [Pg 34] And I've been thinking who I could find. You see it isn't like a maid. Miss Gray, the nurse, comes in every morning and gives her massage and all that. She's smart enough to help herself and hates to be thought old. Now, if you could come and help both, and earn a little money? It would be three dollars a week, and no real hard work."

"Oh!" cried Helen in a fervor of delight that made her absolutely faint at heart.

Joanna opened the door. "Haven't you rung the bell?" she asked in surprise.

"I declare!" Mrs. Dayton laughed and rang it at once. Joanna brought in the soup tureen and stood it on the side table.

"We will finish the talk by and by," the mistress said.

The boarders came in. Mr. and Mrs. Pratt, Mrs. Lessing and her daughters, Mr. Conway and Mrs. Van Dorn. When the Disbrowes arrived the house would be filled.

"This is my young friend Miss Helen Grant," announced Mrs. Dayton, and she gave the girl a seat beside her. Mrs. Van Dorn was next.

Helen enjoyed it so much. The spotless cloth with its fern leaves and wild roses, the small bowl of [Pg 35] flowers at each end of the table, the shining silver, and Joanna's quiet serving. The guests talked in low, pleasant tones. At home there was always a din and a clatter and two or three children talking at once, a coarse and generally soiled table cloth, and Aunt Jane scolding one and another. And there was always a slop of some kind.

After the soup came the dinner proper; roast chicken and cold boiled ham cut in thin slices, not chunks. What a luscious pinky tint it had. And the vegetables had a dainty tempting aspect. The table service was delicately decorated porcelain, but it seemed rare china to the girl. What lovely living this was!

Helen possessed a certain kind of adaptiveness. Aunt Jane would have called it "putting on airs." She made no blunders, she answered the few questions addressed to her, in a quiet tone, for she did not have to shout to be heard over the din of children.

There was dessert and fruit, not so much more than they were used to having at home, for the Mulford's were good livers. Afterward the boarders sauntered out on the porch or the lawn seats, [Pg 36] where the gentlemen smoked.

"Now you've seen Mrs. Van Dorn, and she isn't so very formidable, is she? Sometimes she is very amiable, but I suppose few of us keep that even tenor of the way so much talked about. And there are queer people all over the world."

"Whoa, Betty, whoa! You'll get home to your supper presently," exclaimed a well-known voice, as wheels announced the approaching vehicle.

Mrs. Dayton and Helen went out. Mr. Mulford thought first he couldn't stop a minute, it was late. But the hostess explained that she had something very important to talk over, and he could have his supper while he was listening.

He demurred a little, but finally assented. Mrs. Dayton brought him a tempting plateful, and then unfolded her plan which had shaped itself definitely in this brief while. She would come over Monday afternoon, meanwhile he was to prepare the way for her.

"Well, that does beat me! Why Helen, you've struck luck! I don't see how mother can make any real objection, though she'll fuss at first. That's her way. And as you say ma'am we've a houseful at home, Helen ought to be mighty obliged to you." [Pg 37]

Helen caught Mrs. Dayton's hand and pressed it against her cheek in a mute caress.

"And now we must start off home. Oh, Helen, here's a letter for you. Come, you're too young for that sort of work," and her uncle laughed.

She lingered in the door-way opening it. Mr. Warfield had to go away before he had expected, but he begged her to take the High School examination and see how she stood. When he returned they would talk the matter over. It would be such a pity for her to stop here. He sent a list of questions for her to study out.

They hurried off home, and Betty was nothing loth. Uncle Jason said he would lay the matter before mother to-morrow. Helen better not say anything.

"And you'll be so fine riding out every day, and keeping company with big bugs that I don't see how you'll ever get back to us again. Mebbe you won't. The High School may be next step."

She squeezed Uncle Jason's arm in a sort of transport. A shadowy thought like this had crossed her brain. [Pg 38]

Aunt Jane was out on the doorstep with some of the younger children.

"Well, you *have* come at last, after keeping one on tenterhooks and supper warmed up and got cold again, and no one knowing whether you were thrown out and killed or waylaid——"

"There mother, nothing happened except that Warren fellow went off and I waited and waited for him. I was bound to get my note. And we had supper at Mrs. Dayton's. I sent Helen there to wait for me."

"Oh, Helen—we couldn't think! Did you get the things? If you'd lost my money—" and Jenny made a threatening pause.

"I didn't lose anything." Helen began to unpack her satchel on the cleanest end of the dining table. "I found everything but the lace and the blue sewing silk, and Mr. Morris is going to order them by mail. He sent some samples of lace in case he couldn't find the exact match."

"But it's got to match," returned Jenny in a positive tone. "And I did want that blue silk to finish my stitching Monday night. If you'd come home early with it I could have finished it to-night. H'm, h'm," opening the parcel and nodding. "Mrs. Dayton got her house full? And what did you see nice? Have prices gone down any, but I s'pose its hardly time! And was the style out in their best? Are they wearing ruffles on skirts or just plain? And are they real scant? Dear me! I haven't been over to North Hope in a dog's age." [Pg 39]

Helen didn't remember about skirts except that Mrs. Van Dorn's light silk had a beautiful black lace flounce. And the Madonna was still plain before her eyes.

"Well you are stupid enough," cried Jenny in disgust. "I think I'd used my eyes to a better purpose. And you didn't even bring home any fashion-papers!"

Mr. and Mrs. Mulford were still having a little bickering on the stoop. Then she came in, examined the gingham and the muslin, sent the children to bed, told Helen to take the things off the table, and said she was tired to death, and that no one ever thought about her, or cared whether they kept her up till midnight.

Helen was very glad to get away to bed, and live over the meal at Mrs. Dayton's, with its ease and refinement. How could she help building air-castles when youth is so rich in imagination, and hope is boundless! And if one unlooked-for thing happened, might not another? [Pg 40] [Pg 41]

CHAPTER III

AIR CASTLES WITH FOUNDATIONS

Aunt Jane said Helen must stay home from church Sunday morning, and help with the dinner. Joe Northrup and two cousins were coming to visit. In the afternoon all the younger portion went to Sunday School, and the little leisure Helen had afterward was devoted to reading aloud their library books. And when she came down Monday morning, Aunt Jane said in her brisk, authoritative fashion:

"Now, Helen, you fly 'round and get at the washing. See if you can't learn something useful in vacation. A big girl like you ought to know how to do 'most everything. I washed when I had to stand up on a stool to reach the washboard."

Considering that for the last two months Helen had helped with the washing before school time, and had often run every step of the way because she was late, the request did not strike her as [Pg 42] pertaining strictly to vacation. She went about her work cheerily. Uncle Jason had whispered in her ear, "Don't you worry. I guess it will all come out right."

Then the clothes were folded down, and after clearing the dinner away, Helen began to iron. Aunt Jane dropped on the old lounge and took her forty winks, then changed her gown, put on a clean white apron, which Helen knew was for company, and the thought added to her blitheness. Between three and four Mrs. Dayton drove up in the coupé with Mrs. Van Dorn, who continued her journeying around. The Mulfords' front-yard was rather pretty, with two borders of various flowers in bloom, and, as the younger children had gone over to the woods, it was quiet and serene all about. Helen glanced out of the side window, and gave thanks for the decent appearance of the place.

The conversation seemed to be not altogether dispassionate. She heard Aunt Jane raise her voice, and talk in her dogmatic manner. Oh! what if she couldn't go! She clasped her hot hands up to her face, and the iron stood there on the cloth and scorched, a thing Aunt Jane made a fuss about. [Pg 43]

Truth to tell, Mrs. Mulford had two minds pulling her in opposite directions. It would just spoil Helen to go. She would hate working in the shop afterward. She would be planning all the time to get to the High School. She knew enough for ordinary girls. She would have to work for her living, and she couldn't spend three years getting ready. There was a little feeling, also, that she didn't want Helen any nicer or finer than her own girls. They had a father who could help them along. Helen hadn't. And if education shouldn't do more for her than it had for her father!

But there was the money, and any kind of work that made actual money was a great thing in Mrs. Mulford's estimation. Nine or ten weeks. Twenty-seven or thirty dollars!

"You see, I'd counted on giving Helen a good training in housework this vacation. When girls go to school they aint good for much that way. And 'long in October she's going in the shop, and then she won't have much chance to learn. An' I d' know as it'll be a good thing for her to spend her time readin' novels an' settin' 'round dreamin' and moonin'."

"She'll read a good deal beside novels. Mrs. Van Dorn is a very intelligent woman, and keeps up [Pg 44] to the times. She has all the magazines, and the fine weekly papers, and she knows more of what is going on in the big world than most of the men. Then Helen would assist me in many things. Oh! I would see that she'd learn something useful every day," Mrs. Dayton declared, with a bright smile.

"Then she aint fixed up. She's outgrown most of her clothes, an' I'd 'lotted on having her sew some. She can run the machine, and I don't believe in girls who can't do any sewing. I'd be ashamed to bring up one so helpless. Here's my Jenny making most of her weddin' things. We don't count on having a dressmaker till the last, to put on the finishing touches."

"About the clothes," began Mrs. Dayton in a persuasive tone, "I have two or three lawn dresses that would make over nicely for Helen. And you know I did quite a bit of dressmaking through Mr. Dayton's long illness. And there's my machine. She would have some time to sew. Oh, you could depend on me not to let her waste her time."

Mrs. Dayton had certainly been a thrifty woman, if it was on higher lines than anything Mrs. [Pg 45] Jason aspired to. She had money in the bank, beside getting her house clear.

Aunt Jane's arguments seemed over-ruled in such a pleasant yet decisive manner that she began to feel out-generaled. Uncle Jason had said yesterday, "You'd better let her go. If they wanted her in the shop right away you'd send her. So what's the difference!"

"There's a great deal of difference," she answered sharply, but she couldn't quite explain it. For Helen the three dollars a week really won the day. Aunt Jane tried to stand out for the rest of the week, but Mrs. Dayton said she would come over on Wednesday, and she knew she could fix Helen up, without a bit of trouble.

"Don't let her fool away her money," said Aunt Jane. "You'd better keep it until the end of the month."

Mrs. Dayton nodded and rose. The carriage was coming slowly up the road.

Aunt Jane did not go out in the kitchen, but upstairs, and looked over Helen's wardrobe. A white frock, a cambric, blue, with white dots, and a seersucker, trimmed with bands of blue. Then, there was the striped white skirt of Jenny's she meant to make over. They could do that to- [Pg 46]

morrow. She could conjure some of it out before supper-time, and put in the shirts and collars, though at fourteen Helen ought to know how to iron them. She would forget all she had learned. It really wasn't the thing to let her go.

Helen went on ironing. 'Reely's white frock fell to her share; indeed, it seemed as if 'most everything did to-day. She was hot and tired, and, oh! if she could not go!

"I don't see why those young ones don't come back. 'Reely hasn't a bit more sense than Fan. She needs a good trouncing, and she'll get it, too. You leave off, Helen, and shell them beans; they ought to have been on half an hour ago. And lay the two slices of ham in cold water to draw out some of the salt; then the potatoes. I'll iron."

She did not ask, and Aunt Jane did not proffer her decision. Helen feared it was adverse, then she recalled the fact that Aunt Jane always told the unpleasant things at once. Ill tidings with her never lagged. So she took heart of hope again. Then there were raspberries to pick. And supper, and children scolded and threatened.

"Well?" said Uncle Jason inquiringly. [Pg 47]

"She was here, but I haven't just made up my mind. She'll be here Wednesday."

"Whew!" ejaculated Uncle Jason.

She went down the garden path to meet Jenny, who took the shortest way across lots.

"I'm goin' to sleep on it," she said, after she had told Jenny.

"But you'll let her go! Why, it would be foolish!"

"I s'pose I shall. But I'll keep her on tenter hooks to-night. Right down to the bottom I don't approve of it. She'll be planning all summer to get to that High School. Three years is too much to throw away when you're dependent on other folks."

So Helen had to go to bed unsatisfied, for Uncle Jason wouldn't be waylaid.

"I've cut you a frock out of that striped muslin of Jenny's," Aunt Jane announced, the next morning. "Sew up the seams, and put in the hem, and then I'll fix the waist."

Aunt Jane was "handy," as many country women have to be.

"You were mighty close about that business of Sat'day afternoon," Aunt Jane flung out when she could no longer contain herself. "I s'pose it don't make much difference whether you go or not?" [Pg 48]

"Oh, I should like to go." Helen's voice was unsteady. "But Mrs. Dayton told Uncle Jason to talk it over with you, and then she would come and see you, and he said—that it would be as—as—and it seemed as if I hadn't much to do with it until——"

"Well, I've decided to let you go and try. They may not like you. Rich old women are generally queer and finicky, and don't keep one mind hardly a week at a time. So it's doubtful if you stay. Then it is a good deal like being a servant, and none of the Mulfords ever lived out, as far as I've heard."

Helen colored. She had not thought of that aspect. Neither had she considered that her dream might come to an untimely end.

"And it seems a shame to waste the whole summer when there's so much to do."

"But if they had wanted me in the shop you would have let me go, wouldn't you?" Helen said in a tone that she tried hard to keep from being pert.

"That would have been different. A steady job for years, and getting higher wages all the time. I've told Jenny to engage the chance." [Pg 49]

Years in a shop, doing one thing over and over! She recalled a sentence she had heard Mr. Warfield quote several times from an English writer, "But that one man should die ignorant who had a capacity for knowledge, this I call tragedy!" She was not very clear in her own mind as to what tragedy really was, but if one had a capacity for wider knowledge, would it not be tragedy to spend years doing what one loathed? She hated the smells of the shoe shop, the common air that seemed to envelop everyone, the loud voices and boisterous laughs. And she wouldn't mind helping someone for her board, and going to the High School. Why, she did a great deal of work here, but it seemed nothing to Aunt Jane.

The frock was finished, and she washed it out, starched it, and would iron it to-morrow morning. Then there were stockings to mend, although the two younger boys went barefoot around the farm. And she worked up to the very moment the carriage turned up the bend in the road, when she ran and dressed herself while Aunt Jane packed the old valise. The children stood around.

"Oh, Mis' Dayton, can't I come some day?" cried Fanny. "How long are you going to keep Helen?" [Pg 50]

"Till she gets tired and homesick," was the reply.

A smile crossed Helen's lips and stayed there, softening her face wonderfully.

They shouted out their good-bys, and asked their mother a dozen questions, receiving about as

many slaps in return. For the remainder of the day, Mrs. Jason was undeniably cross.

"That girl'll turn out just like her father," she said to Jenny. "She hasn't a bit of gratitude."

"And I hope the old woman will be as queer as they make them," returned Jenny with a laugh.

In the few years of her life, Helen had never been visiting, to stay away over night. This was like some of the stories she had read and envied the heroine. There was a small alcove off Mrs. Dayton's room, with a curtain stretched across. For now the house was really full, except one guest chamber. There was a closet for her clothes just off the end of the short hall, that led to the back stairs, which ran down to the kitchen, a spacious orderly kitchen, good enough to live in [Pg 51] altogether, Helen thought.

She helped to take the dishes out to Joanna, and begged to wipe them for her.

"If you're not heavy handed," said Joanna, a little doubtful.

"Or butter-fingered," laughed Helen. "That's what we say at home. But these dishes are so lovely that it is like—well it's like reading verses after some heavy prose."

"I'm not much on verses," replied Joanna, watching her new help warily. She did work with a dainty kind of touch.

Mrs. Dayton came, and stood looking at them with a humorous sort of smile.

"She knows how to wipe dishes," said Joanna, nodding approvingly.

"It is a good deal to suit Joanna. No doubt she will excuse you this time from wiping pots and pans, and you may come out of doors with me."

The lawn—they called it that here at North Hope—presented a picturesque aspect. A party were playing croquet. Mrs. Disbrowe was walking her twenty-months'-old little girl up and down the path. Mrs. Van Dorn sat in a wicker rocking chair that had a hood over the top to shield her from [Pg 52] the air. Her silk gown flowed around gracefully, and her hands were a sparkle of rings.

"Oh, how sweet the air is," said Helen. "There's sweet-clover somewhere, and when the dew falls it is so delightful."

"They have it in the next-door lawn and the mower was run over it awhile ago."

Helen drew long delicious breaths. No noisy children, and the soft laughs, the gay talk was like music to her. She walked across the porch.

"Mrs. Dayton said you were fond of reading aloud," began Mrs. Van Dorn. "Your voice is nice and smooth."

"Your voice is like your father's, Helen! I had not remarked it before. Only it is a girl's voice," Mrs. Dayton commented.

"I am glad it suggests his," exclaimed Helen with a pleasurable thrill.

"Where is your father?" asked Mrs. Van Dorn.

"He is dead," said Mrs. Dayton. "Both father and mother are dead."

"I was an orphan, too," continued Mrs. Van Dorn. "And I had no near relatives. It is a sorrowful lot." [Pg 53]

"Helen has had good friends, relatives."

"That's a comfort. I heard, we all did, that you were one of the best speakers at the closing of school. It was in the paper."

"Oh, was it?" Helen's eyes glowed with gratification.

"Yes. So Mrs. Dayton suggested you might be as good as some grown-up body. That was Robert Browning's poem you recited."

"It is a splendid poem," cried Helen enthusiastically. "You can see it all; the squadron—what was left of it after the battle—and the 'brief and bitter debate,' and the order to blow up the vessels on the beach. And then Hervé Riel, just a sailor, stepping out and making his daring proposal, and going 'safe through shoal and rock!' Oh, how the captain must have stood breathless! And the English coming too late! I'm glad someone put it in stirring verse."

Helen paused with a scarlet face. She never talked this way to anyone except Mr. Warfield.

"Yes," said Mrs. Van Dorn, "I have seen the man who wrote it, talked with him and his lovely wife, who wrote verses quite as beautiful. I think you like stirring poems," in a half inquiry. [Pg 54]

"Yes, I do," she replied tremulously, and in her girlish enthusiasm she thought she could have fallen down at the feet of the man who wrote Hervé Riel. She never had thought of his being an actual living man.

"And do you know Macaulay's 'Horatius'?"

"Oh, I don't know very much—only the poems in the reading books, and a few that Mr. Warfield

had. I know most of Longfellow."

"The Center is rather behind the towns around, although it is the oldest part; settled more than a hundred years ago. But it is largely farms. The railroad passed it by some fifteen years ago, and the stations have improved rapidly. Why, we have quite a library here, and the High School for more than a half the county," explained Mrs. Dayton.

"It's not as pretty as this Hope. And the range of hills to the northeast—I suppose you call them mountains—and the river, add so much to it."

"And we have only a little creek that empties into Piqua River, and a pond in a low place, that we skate on in the winter," said Helen rather mirthfully. "I can't help wondering what the ocean is like, and the great lakes, and Niagara Falls, and the Mississippi River with all its mouths emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. And the Amazon, and the Andes." [Pg 55]

Helen put her head down suddenly, and pressed her lips on the jewelled hand.—Page 55.

"And Europe, and the Alps, and the lovely lakes, and the Balkans, and the Gulf of Arabia, and India, and the Himalayas, and Japan——"

"Oh, dear, what a grand world!" exclaimed Helen, when Mrs. Van Dorn paused. "I don't suppose anyone has ever seen it all," and her tone was freighted with regret.

"I have seen a good deal of it. I have been round the world, and lived in many foreign cities."

"Oh! oh!" Helen put her head down suddenly and pressed her lips on the jeweled hand. The unconscious and impulsive homage touched the old heart.

"And people who have done wonderful things, who have painted pictures, and made beautiful statues, and built bridges and churches and palaces," the girl assumed.

"Most of them were built before my time, hundreds of years ago. But I have been in a great many of them." [Pg 56]

"And seen the Queen!"

"If you mean Queen Victoria, yes. And other queens as well. And the Empress of the French when she had her beauty and her throne."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Helen with a long breath. And Aunt Jane had called her a queer old woman; Aunt Jane, who had never even been to New York.

It was getting too dark to play croquet. Mrs. Disbrowe had gone in some time ago with her baby in her arms, and somehow it had suggested the Madonna picture to Helen. The gentlemen smoked and talked. Then Mrs. Van Dorn rose and bade them good-night, and pressed Helen's hand.

"I think I shall like your little girl very much," she said to Mrs. Dayton, in the hall. "She's modest

and not at all dull."

Mrs. Van Dorn stepped off, as if she was still at middle life. She was wonderfully well preserved, but then, for almost forty years she had taken the best of care of herself. She wouldn't have admitted to anyone that she was past eighty. Sometimes in her travels she had a maid, often when she was abroad she had both a maid and a man. For two years she had been traveling about her own country, and seeing the changes. [Pg 57]

Yet her life had not been set in rose leaves in her youth. She had worked hard, had a lover who jilted her for a girl not half as pretty but rich. And when she was thirty-five, a rich old man married her, and gave her a lovely home; then, ten years afterward, left her a rich widow, and told her to have the best time she could. If she could only have had one little girl! She thought she would adopt one, but the child with the lovely face had some mean traits, and she provided for her elsewhere. She traveled, she met entertaining people; she liked refined society; she acquired a good deal of knowledge with her pleasure.

But to grow old! And one had to some time. At ninety perhaps. What did Ninon de l'Enclos do, and Madame Recamier? Plenty of fresh air, as much exercise as she could stand, bathing and massage, cheerfulness, keeping in touch with the world of to-day, and once-in-a-while a long, quiet rest, and early to bed as she was doing here. Ah! if one could be set back twenty years even, twenty real years, and have all that much longer to live!

The child's admiration had touched her. It was not for her diamonds and emeralds, for her Chantilly lace, nor for the fact that she had money enough to buy costly things. Helen Grant was ignorant of the value of these adornments. It was for the understanding of something finer and larger, experiences garnered up, real knowledge. How odd in a little country maiden! And this was sweeter than any of the ordinary flatteries offered her. [Pg 58]

Helen thought her little bed delightful, and she was not sure but it was all a dream. She was still more bewildered when she opened her eyes. Someone was gently stirring about. She sprang out on the floor.

"You needn't get up just yet," said Mrs. Dayton.

"Oh, I am used to it," with a bright smile. "And maybe I can help."

She did find many little things to do. It was so pleasant to be allowed to see them herself, and do them without ordering. Mrs. Dayton said "Will you do this or that," as if she *could* decline, but she was very glad to be of service.

Then the boarders sauntered in to breakfast, and that was done with. Helen dusted the parlor, she had swept the porch and the paved walk down to the street before the boarders were up. Then she helped with the dishes. [Pg 59]

"That girl knows how to work," and Joanna nodded approvingly.

"Perhaps you would like to go to market with me," suggested Mrs. Dayton. "It would be well for you to learn your way about in case I wanted to send you out of an errand."

"Oh! it would be splendid! But Mrs. Van Dorn——"

Mrs. Dayton laughed. "There comes Miss Gray, and the fussing will take a good hour. Though I think it pays, even at a dollar an hour."

Helen was silent from amazement.

"Oh, she has patients at three dollars an hour, real invalids. And she could get more in the city. Joanna knows about the breakfast. Mrs. Van Dorn is wise enough not to gorge her stomach with useless and injurious food. I never saw a person take better care of herself."

It was a very pleasant walk under maples and elms, with here and there an old-fashioned Lombardy poplar; lindens with their fringy tassels, and horse-chestnuts with their dense, spreading leaves. There was but one real market in Hope, but numerous smaller attempts. Mrs. Dayton gave her orders for the day's provision. [Pg 60]

"Now, we will go around the longest way," smilingly. "There's the High School. It calls in quite a number of winter boarders, and sometimes the large boys prove very troublesome. And here is the Free Library, though there is quite a tax to support it, and numerous contributions. There is a fine reference-room for the scholars. Education seems to be made easy now-a-days. Let us go in."

The lower floor was devoted to the library. A large room was shelved around in alcoves, reserved for some particular kind of books. History, biography, science, music, discoveries and travels, as well as novels. The reading-room was at one end, the reference department at the other. Just now it was very quiet, being rather dull times.

Up on the next floor was a fine auditorium for amusements and lectures. In the wings were small rooms used for lodge meetings and such purposes. Helen was very much interested. Oh, what a happy time! And yet she felt a little conscience-smitten, as if she wasn't doing her whole duty. [Pg 61]

The papers had come, and presently Mrs. Van Dorn took her accustomed seat. Mrs. Pratt was at the corner of the piazza doing needlework. Miss Lessing was sketching from nature. The younger girl was out hunting wild flowers.

Helen read the home news, then the foreign news. It seemed queer to know what they were doing in London, and Paris, and Rome, that hitherto had been merely places on the map to her. And then what financiers in New York were talking of, which really was an unknown language to her, but not to Mrs. Van Dorn, who for years had held the key.

Perhaps the charm in Helen was her interest in what she was doing. Sometimes she made quite a fanciful thing of her work at home, though she was not what you would call a romantic girl. And now most of the time she was reading, she put life into her tones. Mrs. Van Dorn had been here and there, and she wanted the descriptions of things to seem real to her.

"You're a very good reader," she said approvingly. "You must not let anyone cultivate you on different lines with their elocutionary ideas, or you will be spoiled. Who taught you?" [Pg 62]

"Mr. Warfield. He was principal of the school. I was in his class last year."

"He has some common sense. When you go to an opera you expect to hear ranting and sighing, and sobbing, but sensible people do not talk that way about the every-day things of life."

"I don't know what an opera is like," said Helen with a kind of bright mirthfulness at her own ignorance.

"I suppose not. Men and women singing the love, and sorrow, and woe, and trials of other men and women, long ago dead, or perhaps never alive anywhere but in the composer's brain. It is the exquisite singing that thrills you. But you wouldn't want it for steady diet."

Miss Lessing spoke of two famous singers who had been in New York during the winter. And she had heard the Wagner Trilogy, which she thought magnificent.

"Yes. I've heard it at Beyreuth." Mrs. Van Dorn nodded, as if it might be an ordinary entertainment.

"Oh, it has been my dream to go abroad some time," and Miss Lessing sighed. [Pg 63]

And there was a girl in the world who loved her own folks quite as well as a journey abroad. There was pure affection for you! Miss Lessing would jump at the offer she had made Clara Gage.

They were summoned in to luncheon. Mr. Conway was the only man of the party, not much of a talker, but the ladies loved to sit and talk over their morning's adventures, or their afternoon's intentions. Mrs. Dayton never hurried them. They all considered it the most home-y place at which they had ever boarded.

Mrs. Van Dorn went off for her nap. So did several of the others. Mrs. Dayton took Helen up-stairs. She had exhumed two of her old lawns, and thought they could modernize them into summer frocks. They were very fine and pretty, and Helen was delighted.

It was four o'clock when the coupé came, and Mrs. Van Dorn rang for Helen to come up to her room, and carry her shawl, and her dainty case with the opera glass in it for far sights, and a bottle of lavender salts. And then the driver helped them in, and away they started.

"One could almost envy that girl!" said Daisy Lessing. "I don't see why some of us couldn't be as good company." [Pg 64]

They paused at the Public Library.

"Will you go in, Helen, and ask for 'Lays of Ancient Rome,' Macaulay's," said Mrs. Van Dorn. "I hope it won't be out."

Helen came back with the book, and sparkling eyes. [Pg 65]

CHAPTER IV

PLANTING OF SMALL SEEDS

But it was not all smooth sailing for Helen, although it had begun so fair. The very next week was trying to everybody. It was warm and close and rainy, not a heartsome downpour that sweeps everything clean, and clears up with laughing skies, but drizzles and mists and general sogginess, not a breath of clear air anywhere. No one could sit on the porch, for the vines and eaves dripped, the parlor had a rather dismal aspect, and everybody seemed dispirited.

Mrs. Van Dorn was not well. She lost her appetite. It seemed as if she had a little fever. And she was dreadfully afraid of being ill. So many people had dropped down in the midst of apparent health, had paralysis or apoplexy, or developed an unsuspected heart-weakness. She would make a vigorous effort to keep from dying, she had no organic disease, but something *might* happen. Young people died, but that did not comfort her for she was not young. Helen fanned her on the [Pg 66] sofa, in the chair. The cushions and pillows grew hot, she fanned them cool. She ran out to the well, and brought in a pitcher of fresh cold water.

"It tastes queer. I do wonder if there is any drainage about that could get into it."

Then it was, "Helen, don't read so loud. Your voice goes through my head!" and when Helen lowered her tone, she said, "Don't mumble so! I can't half hear what you are saying. How stupid the papers are! There's really nothing in them!"

If Helen had not been used to fault-finding, it would have gone hard with her. As it was she was rather dazed at first at the change.

"She'll get over it," comforted Mrs. Dayton. "And if this weather ever lets up we shall all feel better."

The Disbrowe baby was ill, too, and two or three times Helen went to relieve the poor mother. Miss Gage came and stayed one night with Mrs. Van Dorn.

Friday noon the sun shone gayly out, a fresh wind blew much cooler from the west, and everybody cheered up.

"Railly," said Uncle Jason, when he came in Saturday with butter and eggs, "you're a big stranger! Mother, she feels kinder hurt an' put out, an' wishes she hadn't let you come. You do ridin' round every day an' never come near us, as if you felt yourself too grand." [Pg 67]

"Oh, Uncle Jason, it isn't that at all," cried Helen in protest. "We were out just a little while on Monday, and the mist came up. Mrs. Van Dorn took a cold, and has been poorly, and the weather has been just horrid until to-day. Then I have been helping Joanna with the jelly and canning, and Mrs. Disbrowe with her baby. I couldn't walk over, could I?" glancing up laughingly.

"Well, I s'pose you might—on a pinch——"

"Oh, no; it would have to be on my own two feet. And see what a mess the roads have been! Good going for ducks, but bad for your best shoes."

He laughed. Her tone was so merry it was good to hear. He had missed her cheerful presence. Aunt Jane would hardly have admitted how much she missed her about the work. 'Reely had so many slaps that she just wished Helen would come home again, it made mother so cross to have her away. [Pg 68]

"I s'pose, now, you couldn't go back with me, and I'll bring you over Sunday."

Helen was sorry, and yet she shrank from the proposal, and was glad she could not go. Was that ungrateful?

"Oh, I really could not, Uncle Jason. You see, Mrs. Van Dorn is just getting better, and she wants a dozen things all at once, but I'll try when we go out. Perhaps the first of the week."

"I'll have to hold on to my scalp when I get home," he said rather ruefully. "Mother told me to bring you back."

"But I'm hired to stay here, and I can't run away as I like," she answered pleasantly, but with dignity.

"That's so! That's so! Well, come soon as you can."

Mrs. Van Dorn's bell rang and she had to say good-by. Mrs. Dayton entered at that moment.

"Helen," Mrs. Van Dorn said: "I've a mind to go down on the porch and sit on the west side in the sun. I'm tired to death of this room. Get me that white lambs-wool sacque, though I hate bundling up like an old woman! I think I did take a little cold. And people who are seldom ill are always the worst invalids, I've heard. Then bring that big Persian wrap, I really do feel shaky, and that's ridiculous for me." [Pg 69]

She managed to get down stairs very well. Helen fixed the wrap about the chair and then crossed it on her knees. The white sacque was tied with rose colored ribbons, and with her fluffy, curly hair she looked like an old baby.

"Has the *Saturday Gazette* come? Let's hear the little gossip of the town. Who is going out of it, who is coming in, who played euchre at Mrs. So and So's, and who won first prize, and who has a new baby."

There were other things—a column about some wonderful exhumations in Arizona that were indications of a pre-historic people.

"Queer," she commented when Helen had finished, "but everywhere it seems as if cities were built on the ruins of old cities. And no one knows the thousands of years the world has stood. There is a theory that we come back to life every so often, that some component part of us doesn't die. Still, I do not see the use if one can't remember."

"But there is—heaven——" Helen was a little awe-struck at the unorthodox views. [Pg 70]

"Well—no one has come back from heaven. I believe there are several cases of trances where people thought they were there, and had to come back, and were very miserable over it. But it seems to me being here is the best thing we know about. I feel as if I should like to live hundreds of years, if I could be well and have my faculties."

"There's Auntie Briggs, as they call her, over to Center, who is ninety-seven, and grandmother

White was ninety-five on Christmas day."

"Tell me about them. Are they well? Do they get about?"

"Grandmother White is spry as a cricket, as people say. She sews and knits and doesn't wear glasses."

"That's something like." The incident cheered her amazingly. "And the other old lady?"

"She is quite deaf and walks about with a cane, but I think she's pretty well." Helen did not say she was cross and crabbed and a trial to her grand-daughter's family. It really was sad to live past the time when people wanted you. But couldn't you be sweet and comforting? Must old age be queer and disagreeable? [Pg 71]

"I shall try to live to a hundred," said Mrs. Van Dorn. "Let me see—I wish you'd read something bright, about people having good times. Why do writers put so much sorrow in stories? It is bad enough to have it in the world."

Helen ran up and brought down a pile of novels that Mr. Disbrowe had selected in the city. But one did not suit and another did not suit.

"We will look at the sun going down. What wonderful sunsets I have seen!"

"Tell me about them," entreated Helen.

"There was one at the Golden Gate, California. No one ever could paint anything like it." Mrs. Van Dorn looked across the sky as if she saw it again. She was an excellent hand at description. Then the men were coming in, the dinner bell rang.

"I won't bother to dress, I'll play invalid."

Helen pushed the chair in a sheltered place, and laid the shawl over the back of a hall chair. Everybody congratulated Mrs. Van Dorn, and she said with a little laugh that she thought it was the weather, and she had been playing off, that she hadn't been really ill.

"I think we all gave in to the weather," said Mrs. Lessing. "I had a touch of rheumatism. You can [Pg 72] have a fire in wet cool weather, but when it is wet hot weather, you can hardly get your breath and feel smothered."

"It's been a dreadful week for trade," remarked Mr. Disbrowe. "I haven't made my salt. Perhaps it would have been better to have tried pepper."

They all laughed at that.

"Mrs. Dayton has tried both salt and pepper and been cheerful as a lark," said Mrs. Pratt.

"And plenty of sugar," laughed Mrs. Dayton. "Though I confess I have been tried with jelly that wouldn't jell. The weather has been bad for that."

"And Miss Helen has kept rosy. She has been good to look at," subjoined Mrs. Disbrowe.

Mrs. Van Dorn smiled at the girl who flushed with the praise.

She wanted to be read to sleep that night, just as she had been the night before, and chose Tennyson.

"Well, I do hope we will have a nice week to come," Mrs. Dayton said when they were alone. "Old lady Van Dorn *has* been trying. Helen, you have kept your temper excellently. What are you [Pg 73] smiling about?"

"I guess I have been trained to keep my temper."

"Because your aunt doesn't let anyone fly out but herself? That's in the Cummings blood. And you haven't any of that. Sometimes your voice has the sound of your father's. You are more Grant than Mulford."

"You knew my father——" Helen paused and glanced up wondering whether it was much or little.

"Well—yes," slowly. "And not so very much either. You see I was beyond my school days," and Mrs. Dayton gave a retrospective smile. "Your mother went to school to him the first year he taught. I never could understand——" and she wrinkled her brow a little.

"I suppose he was very much in love with her?" Helen colored vividly as if she was peering into a secret. The love stories she had been reading were taking effect in a certain fashion. She was beginning to weave romances about people. Aunt Jane blamed her father for a good many things, and especially the marriage. But she never had a good word for him. [Pg 74]

"Oh, what nonsense for children like you to think about love! Well," rather reluctantly, "he must have been pleased with her, she was bright and pretty, but it wasn't wise for either of them, and it did surprise everybody. She was one of the butterfly kind with lots of beaus. Dan Erlick's father waited on her considerably, he was pretty gay, and people thought she liked him a good deal. Then he married a Waterbury girl, and not long after she married your father. There were others she could have had—we all thought more suitable. He was a good deal older, and cared mostly for books and study. Then he began with some queer notions, at least the Center people thought

so—that the world had stood thousands of years we knew nothing about, and that the Mosaic account wasn't—well then people hadn't heard so much about science and all that, and were a little worried lest their children should turn out infidels. And he found a place in some college at the West, but it seemed as if they made a good many changes until she came home to die. But she always appeared to think he had been kind and taken good care of her. If he hadn't the [Pg 75] Center would have heard about it."

That didn't altogether answer the question. Helen wanted some devotion on which to build a romance. Since she could not put her mother in a heroine's place, she wanted her father for a hero. But she had never seen much of him, and she had always felt a little afraid of the grave, tall, thin man who never caressed her, or indeed seemed to care about her. Had anyone really loved him? Somehow she felt his had been a rather solitary life and pitied him.

"He had a curious sort of voice," continued Mrs. Dayton. "It wasn't loud or aggressive, but—well I think persuasive is the word I mean. He had a way of making people think a good deal as he did, without really believing in him or his theories. He was a man out of place, you'll find what that means as you go on through life, a sort of round peg that couldn't get fitted to the square hole in Hope Center."

"Oh, dear! I wonder if I shall be like him?" The tone was half apprehensive, half amusing and the light in her eyes was full of curious longing. [Pg 76]

"I *do* suppose you get your desire for knowledge from him. I never heard of a Mulford who was much of a student, nor a Cummings either. Though I am not sure education does all for people. You have to possess some good sense to make right use of it. And some people with very little book learning have no end of common sense and get along successfully."

Then Mrs. Van Dorn's bell rang. Helen had been polishing the glasses with a dry towel. Joanna always went over them twice, and this was quite a relief to her.

Mrs. Dayton was putting away dishes and thinking. Helen was different from the Mulford children. She was ambitious to step up higher, to get out of the common-place round. It was not that she hated work, she did it cheerfully, looking beyond the work for something, not exactly the reward, but the thing that satisfied her. And Mrs. Dayton had found in her life that a little of what one really wanted was much more enjoyable than a good deal of what one did not want, no matter how excellent it might be.

The book to-night was talks about Rome. Mrs. Van Dorn lived over again in her reminiscences, making sundry interruptions. "It was here I met such a one," she would say. "This artist from [Pg 77] England or America was painting such a picture." And there were walks on the Pincio, lingering in churches, viewing palaces. And then—it was all real. Hadn't St. Paul written letters from Rome ever and ever so long ago? Somewhere he had "Thanked God and taken courage?" Yes. Rome *was* real. Had her father ever seen it? She would like to see it some day. And if she could ever get to where she could teach school—Mr. Warfield had earned enough to go abroad, and she remembered hearing him say he had worked all one year with a farmer for the sake of eight months' schooling.

There was a gentle sound of hard regular breathing, not to be called a snore, but a sign of sleep. Helen went on with a dream. Why couldn't she stay somewhere in North Hope and work for her board nights and mornings and go to the High School? She was learning so many things now about history and literature, and the whole world it seemed. Occasionally she looked over the list of examination studies and caught here and there a fact she had not understood a few weeks ago. Why this was as good as a school. [Pg 78]

She would not breathe her plans to a soul. If only Mrs. Dayton might, or could keep her! But early in October Mrs. Dayton shut up her house and went on a round of visits after her summer's work, and Joanna went to her sister's who had seven children, the eldest hardly fourteen. But some place might open. If boys could work their way up, why not a girl?

There was a succession of pleasant days with a bright reviving westerly wind. Driving was a delight. Sometimes they went out an hour or two after breakfast, and oh, how glorious the world looked.

For two days Helen felt she was a coward. She ought to go home, but she dreaded it somehow. Why wasn't Aunt Jane like—well, Mrs. Dayton for instance, glad that other people should have some enjoyment? Yes, she did enjoy Jenny's pleasure, but how often she threatened the others!

"Could we drive around by the Center this afternoon?" Helen asked a little hesitatingly.

"Why—I thought we would go to Chestnut Hill. I like those long faded yellow chestnut blooms that hang where there are to be no chestnuts. It is like old age hanging on to some forlorn hope." [Pg 79]

"But you do not like old age," Helen said, with a bright smile.

"Not for myself. Not for people in general. But it is pretty among the clusters of green chestnut leaves. Mrs. Dayton could make a little sermon out of that—useless old age."

"We might come round that way on our return," ventured the girl.

"Are you homesick?"

"Oh, no." A bright flush overspread Helen's face, and the light in her eyes as she turned them on Mrs. Van Dorn was so beautiful it touched her heart. "Uncle wanted to take me back on Saturday to stay over Sunday. They think——"

"Did you want to go?" with quick jealousy.

"Not very much, oh, no, I'm not homesick at all. I like it so much over here. But I ought to go now and then."

"Well—we will see."

Helen had put on her last summer's white frock. She would rather have worn the blue lawn or the pretty embroidered white muslin, made out of Mrs. Dayton's long ago skirt, but some feeling withheld her. [Pg 80]

How beautiful Chestnut Hill was to-day! It was not all chestnuts, though they were there tall and stately, but with a mingling of maple and beech and dogwood, and here and there hemlocks and cedars. A sort of wild garden of trees, but all about the edges common little shrubs and sumac stood up loyally as if the trees were not to have it all. And smaller things in bloom tangled here and there with clematis and Virginia creeper, and a riot of mid-summer bloom. They had brought along a volume of Wordsworth's shorter poems, and Helen read here and there in the pauses.

Mrs. Van Dorn was ruminating over a thought that had crossed her mind. Wouldn't this girl be glad to go off somewhere and thrust her old life behind her? How much did she care for her people? Someone could make a fine and attractive young woman out of her, yes, there was a certain noble beauty that might be cultivated and bloom satisfactorily from twenty to thirty. Ten or twelve years?

"Take the lower road round by the Center," she said to the driver.

Helen raised her eyes in acknowledgment. They passed the old farm houses, and at the gate of [Pg 81] one of them stood Grandmother White, a small wrinkled old lady in a faded gown and checked apron. She nodded to Helen. Was that worth the living to old age? Mrs. Van Dorn shrugged her shoulders. Thank Heaven she should not be like that when she came near the hundred mark.

"Now I will drive around a little while you make your call. It must not be very long, or we shall be late for dinner."

Helen sprang out with an airy lightness. The front windows were all darkened as usual. She ran up the path, around the side of the house. Aurelia was weeding among the late planted beets where dwarf peas had taken the early part of the season.

"Oh, Helen!" She sprang up with the trowel in her hand, "I'm so glad you've come. Are you going to stay all night? I miss you so much. I have such lots of work to do, and mother's cross a good deal of the time. We all miss you so. I s'pose its real nice over at Mrs. Dayton's, but I shall be so glad when you come back."

"No, I can't stay all night——"

"But the carriage went away——" [Pg 82]

"'Reely, you come in and peel the potatoes. You ought to have had that weeding done long ago. Oh, Helen," as the girl had turned around the corner that led to the kitchen. "Well I declare! I began to think you had grown so fine that the Center would never see you again!"

She looked Helen over from head to foot and gave a little sniff.

"Are you coming in?" rather tartly.

"Why—yes," forcing herself to smile.

How different from Joanna's tidy kitchen! It was clean but in confusion with the odds and ends of everything. The green paper shade was all askew, there were two chairs with the backs broken off, the kitchen table was littered, the closet door was open and betrayed a huddle of articles.

"You don't seem to be very sociable, I must say. Why didn't you come over Saturday? Your uncle felt quite hurt about it. Seems to me you're mighty taken up with those people," nodding her head northward.

"I couldn't on so short a notice. Mrs. Van Dorn had not been well. I read her to sleep nearly every night. And there are so many little things to do." [Pg 83]

"Well, if she'd employ herself about something useful she wouldn't need to be read to sleep, nor want so much waiting on."

"That is what I am hired to do," Helen returned with a good-natured intonation that she kept from being flippant.

"Well, if I had ever so much money I couldn't find it in my conscience to dawdle away time and have someone wait upon me. And how's Mrs. Dayton? All the boarders staying?"

"Yes, the house is full."

"Mrs. Dayton does have the luck of things! But she hasn't a chick nor a child, nor a husband and

a lot of boys to mend for. I was foolish to let you go over there, Helen, when I needed you so much myself. It isn't even as if you were learning anything, just fiddling round waiting on a woman who hasn't an earthly thing to do. And I'm so put about, I don't know what to take up first. 'Reely, you hurry with the potatoes or you'll get a good slap."

There was a diversion with Fan and Tommy who shook sand over the kitchen floor. Fan's face was stained with berries but she flung her arms about Helen and kissed her rapturously, while Tom dug his elbows into her lap. [Pg 84]

"Did you come in a horse and carriage?" asked Fan, wide-eyed.

"I came in the carriage."

"You know well enough what she meant, Helen. You'll get so fine there'll be hardly any living with you when you come back."

"When she came back." A tremor ran through Helen's nerves. Oh, must she come back!

"How is Jenny?" she inquired.

"Oh, Jenny's first rate, working like a beaver. There's a girl worth something, if she is mine! And the house is getting done up just splendid. Joe's crazy to be married right off, but Jenny's like me, when her mind's made up it's made up. There's a good deal of Cummings in her. Why don't you take off your hat? You're going to stay to supper?"

"No, I can't," Helen returned gently. "Mrs. Van Dorn was going to drive round a little——"

"She could have come in," snapped Aunt Jane. "We could have had the horse put out and you could both have stayed to supper. I dare say we have as good things to eat as Mrs. Dayton. She doesn't refuse our butter and eggs nor chickens when we have 'em to spare." [Pg 85]

"They all think the butter splendid, Aunt Jane. And Mrs. Disbrowe wishes they could get such eggs in the city. She is sure what they get must be a month old," said Helen, with an attempt at gayety.

"I *do* make good butter. Mrs. Dayton's folks are not the first to find it out," bridling her head. "And I'll say for Mrs. Dayton she's willing to pay a fair price. But I s'pose that old woman pays well?"

Helen wondered how the woman in the carriage would look if she heard that!

"I'd like to know the prices myself. Haven't you heard Mrs. Dayton say? I might want to keep boarders, some day."

"No," answered Helen. "But there are a good many boarders at North Hope, and some of them look as if they didn't mind about money."

"Carriage has come," announced Nathan, running in. Aurelia had finished the potatoes and put them on to cook and now stood with one arm around Helen's neck.

"Stay! stay! Can't you stay?" cried a chorus of voices in various keys. [Pg 86]

"I am not my own mistress," answered Helen, cheerfully. "And when you are paid to do a certain thing, paid for your time, it belongs to someone else."

She loosened the children's arms and rose.

"Well it is a mean little call," said her aunt, "and your uncle will be awful disappointed. But when you live with grand people I s'pose you must be grand. Do come when you can stay longer," with a sort of sarcasm in her tone.

"I'll try." Helen kept her temper bravely, left her love for Jenny and Uncle Jason. Aunt Jane had gone at making shortcake. The children followed their cousin out to the gate and showered her with good-bys, staring hard at the old lady in the carriage. [Pg 87]

CHAPTER V

A GIRL'S DREAMS

Helen's face was flushed as she stepped into the carriage, but she held her head up with dignity and smiled. The curious two sides of her, was it brain, or mind, or that perplexing inner sight? saw the wide difference between Mrs. Van Dorn and Aunt Jane. And she liked the Van Dorn side a hundred times better than the Mulford side. The delicacy, the ease, the sort of graciousness, even if it was a garment put on and sometimes slipped off very easily. Mrs. Van Dorn was never quite satisfied. She was always reaching out for something, a pleasure and entertainment. Aunt Jane was thoroughly satisfied with herself. She scolded Uncle Jason and insisted that he lacked common sense, energy, and a host of virtues, yet she often said of her neighbors' husbands: "Well, if I had that man I'd ship him off to the Guinea Coast," though she hadn't the slightest idea of its location. She often held him up to the admiration of her friends, though she always insisted [Pg 88]

she had been the making of him. And she would not admit that there was a smarter girl in Hope Center than Jenny.

The peculiar contrast flashed over Helen. What made the complacency—content?

"Did you have a pleasant call?" When Mrs. Van Dorn didn't feel cross her voice had a certain sweetness. Helen thought the word mellifluous expressed it. She was fond of pretty adjectives.

"Aunt Jane was very busy and they all set in for me to stay. The children do miss me."

"And did you want to stay?" with the same sweetness.

"No," said Helen, honestly, while the color deepened in her cheeks. "Oh, dear! I think I am getting spoiled, citified, and North Hope isn't a city either," with a half rueful little laugh, yet not raising her eyes.

"She isn't of their kind," thought Mrs. Van Dorn. "And her courage, her truthfulness, are quite unusual. She is very trusty, there is the making of something fine in her."

"You are not fond of country life, farm life," correcting herself.

"I am quite sure I shouldn't be, and yet I like the country so much, the space, the waving trees, [Pg 89] the great stretches of sky. I should stifle in a place where there were rows and rows of houses and paved streets everywhere."

"But not where there were palaces, and villas, and parks, and gardens, and beautiful equipages, and elegantly dressed women."

Helen shook her head, "I shall never have the chance to like or dislike that. Oh, yes," brightening, "I can read it in a book and imagine myself in the midst of it."

"I thought you ware planning to teach school, and save up money, and take journeys."

"Oh, I do, and all manner of extravagant things. But I am afraid they are air castles." For somehow the reality of her life had come over her again. She belonged to Hope Center, not to North Hope. And maybe she never could get over there.

Mrs. Van Dorn thought of herself at Helen's age. Where would her ambitions lead her. *She* had had no ambitions to rise in life. How gladly she would have married her first common-place lover, and accepted a life of drudgery. What queer things girls were! and how strange that when she was tired and worn out, and almost desperate, the best of fortune should come to her. It seldom [Pg 90] happened, she knew. The old life was a vague dream, she had only lived since her marriage. In a way she coveted this girl's freshness and energy. To have someone to really and truly love her—was there any such thing in life, to old age?

She had coveted Clara Gage with the same desire of possession. She had persuaded her to give up home, mother, three sisters and one brother. But she had never ceased to love them. And they had nearly outweighed a journey to Europe. Perhaps they would. Clara was about eighteen when she took her, this girl was fourteen. She would be more pliable, and she was not really in love with her people. But there would be years of training, and there was a certain strength in the girl. Sometimes they might clash, and she did not want to be disturbed at her time of life. Then too—there were certain adventitious aids to ward off the shadow of coming years. Clara knew about them, and she had grown used to her. *She* would be getting older every year.

They were a little late at dinner. How delightful and orderly and refined everything was! Helen [Pg 91] luxuriated in it. And yet it was only ordinarily nice living. Helen could see the table at home. The kitchen was large and the table at one end, and they always had meals there except when there was company, and often then the children were kept out there. The smells of the cooking did not give it the savory fragrance she read about in books. It was hot and full of flies, for the door was always on the swing.

They were around the table, everyone wanting to tell father that Helen had been to see them in a carriage, at that.

"Do hush, children!" began Aunt Jane, sharply. "You haven't any more manners than a lot of pigs, everyone squealing at once. Yes, I think we made a great mistake letting Helen go over to Mrs. Dayton's. We couldn't well refuse an old neighbor, I know. But she's that full of airs, and so high-headed that she could hardly talk. I don't see how she could make up her mind to come round to the kitchen door."

Aurelia giggled. "Wouldn't it have been funny to have her knock at the front door!" and all the children laughed.

"'Twould be a good thing to bring her back now. There's so much to do, and fruit to put up all the [Pg 92] time. And she'd get in a little decent training before she went in the shop."

"She'll soon get the nonsense knocked out of her there," said Jenny. "You needn't feel anxious about that."

"Sho, mother, that girl's good enough where she is, an' a bargain's a bargain. She was to stay till the first of September. And when you're in Rome you do as the Romans do, I've heard. It's natural, she should get polished up a little over there."

"I'm as good as Mrs. Dayton, if I don't keep city boarders," flung out Aunt Jane, resentfully. "And I've the best claim on Helen when we've taken care of her all these years."

"I d'know as she'd earned twenty-four dollars at home," said Uncle Jason.

"I s'pose not in money," admitted Aunt Jane, who down in her heart had no notion of bringing Helen home. "But I feel as if I had earned half that money doing without her."

"Twenty-four dollars. Phew! Pap, suppose you had to pay me that!" exclaimed Sam.

"You get your board and clothes," said his mother. [Pg 93]

So they were mapping out Helen's life, and she was thinking whether she could have the courage to fight it out. She could not go back to the farm. That she settled definitely.

She picked up Mrs. Van Dorn's wraps and her three letters and carried them upstairs.

"I'm going to rest a while," said the lady. "You may come up in—well, half an hour. Will you push the reclining chair over by the window?"

Helen did that and laid the fleecy wrap within reach, smiled and nodded and ran lightly downstairs. In a moment she was helping Mrs. Dayton take out the dishes to the kitchen, and then dried them for Joanna.

"Now Miss Helen, if you wanted a situation, I'd give you a good recommend," exclaimed Joanna, smilingly.

Then she went out on the stoop, for it still wanted ten minutes to the half hour.

Mrs. Van Dorn had taken up her letters rather listlessly. One from her lawyer concerning some reinvestments, one from a charity for a subscription. The thick one with the delicate superscription from Clara Gage.

It was long, and about family affairs. They had been a good deal worried over a mortgage that the [Pg 94] holder had threatened to foreclose. But her sister's lover had insisted upon taking it up, and would come home to live. Her brother had obtained a good position as bookkeeper in a mill. The youngest girl would always be an invalid from a spinal trouble; Margaret, the eldest, sang in church and gave music lessons, and thus had some time for home occupations. Mrs. Gage was quite disabled from rheumatism at times. But now Clara felt the dependent ones were in good hands, and she would not only go abroad cheerfully, but gladly. Her hesitation had been because she felt they might need her at home, or near by, where they could call upon her in illness or misfortune. "You have been very kind to wait until I could see my way clear," she wrote, "and my gratitude in time to come will be your reward."

Mrs. Van Dorn felt a little pricked in her conscience. She could have settled all this herself, and made things easy for them, but Clara had not suggested any money trouble. Mrs. Van Dorn paid her a generous salary. Down in her heart there had been a jealous feeling that her money could not buy everything, could not buy this girl from certain home obligations. [Pg 95]

But the letter pleased her very much in its frankness and its acknowledgment of favors. Yet her old heart seemed strangely desolate. How could she obtain the love she really desired? For if you did favors there was gratitude, but was that love?

Did anybody care to love an old woman? She sometimes longed to have tender arms put about her neck, and fond kisses given. But her cheeks were made up with the semblance of youth, her lips had a tint that it was not well to disturb. Oh, to go back! To be fifty only, and have almost fifty more years to live. The money would last out all that time, even.

But here was a chance with this new girl. Clara might marry. She, Mrs. Van Dorn, had been rather captious about admirers. It wasn't given to every girl to make a good marriage at five and thirty. In three years Helen would be seventeen, and with a good education, very companionable. It would be best not to lead her to hope for anything beyond the education, she might grow vain and be puffed up with expectations of great things to come. Let the great things be a surprise. [Pg 96]

There was a little tap at the door.

"Do you want me?" inquired the cheerful voice. "It is a full half hour."

"No, yes. I'll be made ready for bed if you please, little maid," and her tone was full of amusement. "Then I'll dismiss you and lie here by the window a while, as I have something to think about, until I get sleepy. Bring the jewel case."

Helen was quite fascinated with all the adornments. There were dainty partitions, velvet rooms, Helen called them, boxes in which rings were dropped, a mound to lay the bracelets, where a tiny ridge kept them from slipping, a hook for the pendants, and a case for the pins. The girl placed them in deftly, as only a person who really loved them could. To her their sparkle seemed the flame of a spirit.

Then the laces were laid in their boxes. Helen hung up the soft silk gown, the petticoats with their lace and ruffles, the night dress was donned and a pretty wrapper over it, the slippers exchanged for some soft knit ones. As for her hair—perhaps she slept in it, for that was never taken down until after the girl went away. [Pg 97]

"Now are you comfortable?"

"Yes. Helen, how did you come by so many pretty ways? I do not believe they abound in your aunt's house."

"No, they do not." Helen laughed in soft apology. "I think because everything is nice and dainty here, and everybody is——" How could she explain it.

"No, you're not quite so much of a chameleon as that. It is something from the inside, that was born with you. And you must have the opportunity of developing it. There child, good-night."

Mrs. Van Dorn felt suddenly in a glow. She would do a good deed, help this girl to her true place, cast some bread upon the waters and have it return to her presently. Three years. She hoped Helen would grow tall and keep slim, her eyes were beautiful, her complexion clear and fine if a little sun-burned. She had nice hands, too, now that she was taking care of them. She was quick to see any improvement, she had adaptiveness and a pleasant temper. She would make an attractive young woman at seventeen, and she would owe it all to her. She *must* love her benefactress. Why, this was something to live for! [Pg 98]

Helen sat on the far end of the stoop step. There were two rows of steps. This commanded the kitchen porch, as well as the dining room. Most of the boarders were up at the other end, where two hammocks were slung, but this was a favorite nook of hers when she wanted to think. Mrs. Dayton came out presently, having finished her talk with Joanna.

"Are you homesick or lonesome?" she inquired. "Was everybody glad to see you to-day."

"The children were. I think Aunt Jane was a little hurt because I didn't come and stay over Sunday."

"Do you want to go next Saturday? Though what we could do with Mrs. Van Dorn I don't know."

"I think I do not want to go," Helen made answer slowly. "Oh, Mrs. Dayton," and she stretched out her hand in entreaty, "can't you sit down here a few moments. I want to talk to someone. I want to know whether I am right, or wrong and ungrateful. And I have a half plan if—if——"

"What is it, child?" The girl's tone appealed to her strongly, and she sat down beside her. [Pg 99]

"It seems to me as if I only roused up along in the winter, and began to study in earnest. Mr. Warfield took such an interest in me. And I began to love knowledge, to learn how much there was of it in the world. He thought I ought to go to the High School and study for a teacher, and then I just knew what I should like best of all things in the world. And since I've been here I've thought it over and over——"

"And do not know how to compass it?" There was a sound in her voice that expressed the smile on her face.

"I have even planned for that. If you did not go away all the fall I should ask you to let me stay and do some work, and try to even it up next summer when the boarders come. But I've thought maybe there would be someone else who would be satisfied with what I could do nights and mornings and Saturdays for my board——"

The tone was breathless and had to stop. She was amazed that she could say all this.

"My dear child! Have you been studying all this out? Well, you certainly have a right to education when you are willing to work for it that way. And I believe it can be compassed." [Pg 100]

Helen squeezed the hand nearest her with a joyful eagerness.

"But there's another side to it. I didn't think of that until this afternoon. I fancied I could go away and study and work until I came to the place where I could earn money, like Miss Remington, and no one would have any right to interfere. Aunt Jane thinks I know quite enough, and has planned for me to go in the shop, Jenny has spoken for the chance. I should just hate it! I think I should run away. I don't know why I am different, but I am. I feel it now more than ever. Aunt Jane doesn't want me to be like my father, and she lays the blame on education. Oh, Mrs. Dayton, you do not think he ever did anything absolutely wrong, that one had need to be ashamed of?"

Helen's face was in a blaze of scarlet. How many times she had longed to ask the question.

"Why no. He had the name of being queer, and holding queer beliefs. But he was honest as the day, and temperate, and not given to brawling as the Bible has it. And he paid Aunt Jane for a [Pg 101] while. I feel sure he must be dead."

"And since then they have taken care of me. Aunt Jane thinks I ought to be very grateful, and I do want to be. I suppose they could have sent me to the poor-house."

"Oh, no, Uncle Jason wouldn't."

"I don't believe Aunt Jane would. But does that give them the right to say what I shall do or be, or put me in the shop against my will, when maybe I could earn my own way somewhere else?"

"Why no, I do not think it does. You were not even given to them. You certainly have the right to decide some things. And if friends should be willing to help you——"

"I don't want to be ungrateful. I don't want to be snobbish. But I like the nice aspects of life so much better than the common things. And I wonder now why people do not take naturally to the refinements of life. Yet the other people are very happy in their way, too. I think Aunt Jane wouldn't enjoy the manner in which you do things here. She would call it putting on airs."

"Yes, I understand. The world goes on improving, advancing, making life more kindly and [Pg 102] gracious, weeding out the roughnesses. It is just as honest and true, it calls for more self-control, it is as helpful. Of course, there are selfish people with a good deal of polish, and there are ignorant people very obstinate and disagreeable. Education does not do everything, but it helps. And if there is an easier or better, or more enjoyable manner of earning one's living, I do not see why one should not aim at it, and strive to reach it."

"Oh, thank you a thousand times." Helen's voice broke from very joy. "I kept wondering if I had the right to do what *I* liked."

"It will take some courage. But you might try it one year. And I am sure there will be friends to help such an ambitious girl. At present we will not say anything about it, but don't feel troubled. I believe it will come out right."

"Oh, how good you are!" Helen pressed the hand she held to her warm, soft cheek with a mute caress.

It seemed to her as if she might be walking on air, her heart was so light. And still there was a secret sympathy with her aunt for the disappointment. Yet, what real difference could it make to [Pg 103] Aunt Jane, whether she taught school, or worked in a shop. She should not feel better or grander, only more thoroughly satisfied with her lot in life. And before she took any journeys, she would pay Uncle Jason for these years of care since her father died. That would be her duty for taking her own way.

"We are going to take up something solid," said Mrs. Van Dorn, the next morning. "I am tired of frivolous novels. We will have a little history, and learn about places and people, and what has been done in the world, and improve our minds."

Helen looked up with a new and rather surprised interest. "There is so much in your mind already," she returned with the admiration in her voice that was so grateful to the elder woman. "Oh, I do wonder if I shall ever know so many things."

"There are years for you to study in. I did not know all these things at fourteen."

She would never have confessed how little she knew at that period.

They stopped now and then to discuss some point, but Mrs. Van Dorn was going over several other considerations. An ordinary country girl with the sweetest temper in the world would not [Pg 104] have given her more than a passing pleasure. This girl was quite out of the ordinary with her intelligence and her quick understanding. She would love all the finer arts of life. Her enthusiasm was really infectious. That was what one needed when one was going down the other side of the great divide. And she didn't really belong to anybody. Clara would never forget her mother and sisters, and if they were ill she would want to fly to them. This girl was not comfortable in her home, she would not sigh for it. And she might adore her, for there was a kind of worship in her nature. To be adored by a young girl who might have been her grandchild, the child of the daughter she had longed for and never had.

Helen glanced up hesitatingly.

"Oh, I'm not asleep," laughingly. "I was thinking. You have a fine voice, so strong and clear, and not aggressive. Don't you sing?"

"Oh, yes. When I am out in the fields I sing with the birds."

"But you have never had lessons in elocution?" [Pg 105]

"Mr. Warfield taught me that the best reading was entering into the spirit of the writer, imagining yourself in the scenes that are described, or taking part in any conversation. And he said when I recited that last day of school, I must be the Captains and Hervé Riel, just as if I was leading in the ships."

Her face was in a glow, her eyes luminous.

"How old is Mr. Warfield?"

Helen Grant's father had married one of his young pupils, Mrs. Van Dorn remembered.

"Oh, I don't know, a real young man. He has only been at the Center a year."

Mrs. Van Dorn nodded with her chin, a way she had.

"He is quite in earnest about your going to the High School?" she continued.

"He thinks I could teach, and I should like that so much."

She flushed daintily recalling the other half secret she had touched upon with Mrs. Dayton.

"The girl is capable of love and all that nonsense," thought Mrs. Van Dorn. Why should she not

[Pg 106]

come to love her?

CHAPTER VI

HOW THEY ALL PLANNED

"Helen," began Mrs. Dayton, "I was thinking if you would like to go home on Saturday and make your visit it might be a good thing. We have made no real plans about the winter as yet, but we might like to presently."

There was a half mirthful, half meaning light in her eyes.

"Oh!" Helen said. She was not longing for the visit. Her cool reception by her aunt had really hurt her.

"Time is going so fast. Why, here it is only two weeks and a half to September."

"If you think I had better," very soberly.

"Yes, I do. It would look rather underhand if you went home and said nothing when we had settled upon certain intentions."

"Yes, I understand."

Mrs. Van Dorn objected, but when she found it was a matter of duty, rather than delight, she gave in with a few little grumbles. Uncle Jason was so full of satisfaction he hugged Helen to his heart and kissed her. [Pg 107]

So she said good-by and had a pleasant drive over, heard all the small *on dits* of the farm; that two hens had stolen nests and brought off twenty-three chickens between them; and old Bose, the dog, had died suddenly, and they had a mastiff pup eight months old; that they were building a new fence on the back of the barn lot, and that there would be no end of apples this fall. He really didn't know what they would do when Jenny went away, and he wished girls didn't want to get married. But she, Helen, would come home and that would liven up things a bit.

They turned into the lane and when they were by the kitchen she sprang out. One child carried the news to another, and they huddled about her so that she could hardly walk.

"Here's Helen, mother!"

"Well, I declare! How do you do, child! You never could come in a better time! I had a good mind to tell Uncle Jason to bring you home, and I guess he just scented it. Children, don't eat Helen up, this hot night," exclaimed their mother. [Pg 108]

"She isn't cooked," said Tom.

"But she'll be stewed or steamed, and there's plenty for supper. We're going to have a houseful to-morrow. Aunt Sarah and Uncle John and the girls, and Martha's beau. She's been long enough about it, twenty-five, if she's a day, and I'd been married six years before I was as old as that. But she's going to do real well, though he's a widower with two children. And Joe as usual. Though we all went down there to supper last Sunday. Jenny's going to have things nice, I tell you! Did you bring another frock, Helen? I've been making 'Reely wear out your old clothes. And gracious me! how you have grown! You won't have a thing to wear in the fall."

"I left my bundle in the wagon," as Aunt Jane made a little halt in her talk.

"Nat, you run and get it. 'Reely, do begin settin' that table. 'Reely isn't worth a rye straw about housework. She's Mulford all over, and you've got to keep pushing the Mulfords along or they'd fall asleep in their tracks. Here she's past eleven. My, the work I did when I was eleven! Now Helen, you just put on something commoner and help round a bit and we'll have supper." [Pg 109]

Helen ran upstairs and changed her dress. She was glad of the cordial welcome. But as she looked around she wondered if she had been really content here. Did children suddenly come to some mental growth and understanding? Whom did she take after? It was queer, but when Aunt Jane said of one child "she was all Cummings, or all Mulford," it was the same heredity that they discussed at Mrs. Dayton's.

Where did she get her finer instincts from? For she had them long ago, only she was afraid to bring them out and have them laughed at. Her little white covered cot at Mrs. Dayton's looked so sweet and wholesome, everything was put in a closet, the table held a few books, a work-basket, often a bowl of flowers. This was all littered up, the candlestick decorated with piles of grease, the faded and worn bed quilt put on awry, shoes here and there, garments hung anywhere, and Fan's dolls and stuff of all kinds in the corner. Of course Jenny's room was more orderly, but it lacked something, the suggestion of refinement.

Uncle Jason and Sam had come in, and it seemed as if the kitchen was full. They scrambled round the table, pushing and crowding. [Pg 110]

"Do keep still, children!" begged their father.

"'Reely, you haven't put on a bit of salt. I think every time you forget it I ought to make you eat a spoonful," said her mother.

"I haven't any fork!" declared Nathan.

"And if we made her eat a fork, it might disagree with her, and we'd have one fork less," commented Sam.

"Can't I have a piece of bread and butter? Why can't we have some butter down here?" cried Tom.

"I'll spread it for you. Sam, will you please pass me the butter?" said Helen in a quiet tone.

"Me too, Helen," entreated Fanny, holding up her piece of bread.

"It's so nice to have you again," and 'Reely squeezed Helen's arm.

Uncle Jason helped to the meat and potatoes. There was a great clatter of passing plates, and the confusion of several voices at a time. Aunt Jane scolded, then she gave Tom a slap.

"There comes Joe and Jen," announced Sam. [Pg 111]

Jenny left work at four on Saturday and went to the house. Joe was keeping himself, and they had a cup of tea, some bread and butter, cold meat and blackberries together.

"How do, Helen. You're a big stranger. Let's sit out on the porch, Joe. I'll bring some sewing."

"That's the most industrious girl in the country," said Joe with a laugh. "I shall have to buy goods by the bale to keep her in work."

Some way they did get through with the meal, Uncle Jason and Sam first, then one by one straggling out. Helen helped put away the food and said she would wash the dishes, and Aurelia and Fan might dry them. Why couldn't Aunt Jane go out on the porch and take a rest?

"I'm tired as a dog. I've gone since half past four this morning. There was so much to do. I declare, Helen, your coming over was just a special providence. When I get hold of you again, I'll see that no one coaxes you away. I was a fool to consent to it. But you'll soon be home now."

"Yes, go out and get cooled off and rested."

Aunt Jane was really glad to. Helen kept the two girls busy until the things were put away and the [Pg 112] kitchen tidied up. The fire was out and the room getting cooler. The girls clung so to Helen, that she felt as if she would be torn in two. And sitting on the steps they wanted to know about the queer old woman, and didn't Mrs. Dayton make a pile of money? 'Reely thought when she was grown up she would keep boarders and have a servant. Did Joanna do everything?

"Oh, no. Mrs. Dayton helps, and I do a good many things when Mrs. Van Dorn does not want me."

"Is she very cross?"

"Oh, no," with a laugh of amusement.

"Not as cross as mother?" with childish frankness.

"You all annoy Aunt Jane so," returned Helen. "If you would go at once and do as she tells you, and try to remember."

"But I forget so easily," moaned Aurelia. "And I just hate to work."

"What would you like to do?"

"Play, and go out in the woods, and nutting. Oh, when will it be nut time? And then there's school."

"One can't play forever unless one wants to be a dunce." [Pg 113]

"I like dolls," interposed Fanny. "And I'm making clothes for them. Oh, have you any pretty pieces?"

"It's time you youngsters went to bed," declared their mother.

"Where's Helen going to sleep?"

"Don't you worry about Helen."

The girls came and kissed her. Then she sat in the fragrant dusk and heard a whippoor-will; and Uncle Jason and Joe Northrup comparing crops, and telling yields of certain years. Aunt Jane fell asleep in the quiet. Jenny came down to her step and asked about styles, and what was in the stores, and if prices had gone down. Joe went home presently, and Jenny said, "Now come. You're going to sleep with me. This'll be your room when I'm gone. Oh, dear! I suppose some day you'll be married, too. Don't you take a fellow unless he has a house to put you in."

Helen felt in a strange whirl, but after awhile she slept. And Sunday morning was all confusion again. Joe and Jenny and Sam went to church; the company came, and Helen helped with the

dinner, making the table look so pretty and tidy, that the dining-room was very pleasant. The four younger children were out in the kitchen, and once Aunt Jane had to go out and administer slaps all round to quell a riot. [Pg 114]

Martha and her lover were very staid and sedate. Jane, the younger sister, was rather flighty, and plied Helen with innumerable questions about North Hope. She had heard the young girls went out every day to see the stores and catch the beaus as they came home from work. And did the people in her house have dancing parties every Saturday night? She had read in some magazine that it was the fashion to do so.

The two mothers were much engrossed with the coming marriages. The young people walked down to see Jenny's house; there was a light supper, and then they said good-by to each other.

It seemed to Helen she had never been so happy in her life as when she was once more settled in her round at Mrs. Dayton's. The order and quietness, the nice adjustment that she was beginning to understand and appreciate; the bright talk that went to outside subjects and did not revolve in one small personal round, was so much more interesting. True, Mrs. Lessing and her daughter discussed clothes, and the other ladies joined in, but it was on the æsthetic and artistic side. They talked of so many other things—daily events outside of North Hope. That was not all their world. It was the larger world that so interested Helen. [Pg 115]

She and Mrs. Dayton discussed some possibilities. When Mrs. Dayton went away, Mr. Conway slept in the house, and took his meals elsewhere, but even if Helen could attend to the house it would not be possible to leave her alone in it. Then there would be clothes and various expenses. It was not as easy a matter to settle as it looked. Of course there was a sort of adoption of Helen, but Mrs. Dayton was not quite sure she wanted the responsibility. She had worked through a good deal of pressure herself, and was now where she could enjoy some of the pleasures of life as a compensation. There might be found a neighbor who would be glad of Helen's assistance—she would offer to provide her clothes.

Helen had settled herself at her reading one morning, when Mrs. Disbrowe just paused at the door with her baby in her arms, and nodded to Mrs. Van Dorn.

"Excuse me for interrupting, but there is a young man down on the porch who wishes to see Helen. He would not come in." [Pg 116]

Helen glanced up in amaze, then smiled, as she raised her eyes to Mrs. Van Dorn.

"I think it is the young man from the library. Perhaps he found the book you wanted."

"Ah—that is quite likely. Run down and see."

Helen put her marker in, and laid down her book. But when she reached the porch and the caller rose from the wicker rocker, she stretched out both her hands with a glad cry of surprise:

"Oh, Mr. Warfield!"

He glanced at her, held her off and studied her again.

"Why, you have grown or changed or something," he exclaimed in surprise. "And it has only been such a little while! You look as if you were really glad to see me," and the smile gave him such a cordial expression.

"Oh, I am. You can't think how glad. And it is so unexpected——"

Her voice was fairly alive with delight.

"I crossed ten days sooner than I had planned. A friend wanted some papers which were in my possession, and I had to come out here for them. So I reached the Center just in time for supper, and went over to your uncle's in the evening." [Pg 117]

There was an odd expression in his face—amusement and annoyance it seemed, and as if he was quite at sea. Then he said almost abruptly, "Let us sit down. There is a good deal of talking to do—or very little, as the case may turn," in a rather dry tone.

"Excuse me, while I go up and explain to Mrs. Van Dorn. Oh, I have so much to say, too. So many things have happened to me."

She was off like a flash, but he noted the grace of her movement; the air that showed she had capabilities beyond the usual untrained country girl. Would she have to be wasted on a second or third rate life?

"I suppose you have done nothing with the papers I gave you," he began, when she returned. "I have heard of your driving around, and your dissipation."

"Oh, but I have," she replied eagerly. Then she gave a bright infectious laugh. "You can't think—why it seems now as if I had been at school all summer. I have learned so many new things about the world and the people in it. I have read books and papers, and found out about the places where you have been. Mrs. Van Dorn has been—well, nearly all over the world, I believe, and she has met musicians and artists, and people who write books and poems, and has seen kings and queens——" [Pg 118]

"Then you haven't spent all the time reading novels? I was afraid you had. But your aunt—have

you any idea of keeping on at school?"

"They do not want me to," she answered gravely. "But Mrs. Dayton thinks they have no real right to decide for me, if I can do anything for myself. And why isn't it just as good and honorable for a girl to work for her education when she is hungry for the knowledges in the world, as for a boy! And if I *can* do anything, don't you think they ought to consent?"

"Well! well! well!" his exclamation points were in full evidence. He studied her brave eager face, it had in it certain strong earnest lines, certain lines of prettiness, too. All before her was an unknown country. No one could truly map out another's life, and be sure of the making, but he knew he should not mar it as the Mulfords might in their ignorance of her desires and [Pg 119] capabilities. He resolved to take a decisive hand in it.

"You don't want to go back to the Center?" He knew what her answer would be, but he desired to see the varying expressions of her face.

"No, I don't. Oh, I can't! I should be fighting with something within me all the time, and planning how to get out of it all. I want to learn. I want to teach, too. I want to see some of the great things in the world, some of the great people, and just live all through, every part of me, if you can understand."

How her face changed with every new thought.

"Really you have been making strides. Helen, you are not going to be satisfied with a holiday to see Belle Aurore. You are going to ask greater things."

"And Hervé Riel ought to have been given greater things when he had saved the ships for his country. Am I foolish to aim at the greater things?"

Her eyes were sparkling, and a brilliant color suffused her face, while the scarlet lips were quivering with emotion and resolve. [Pg 120]

"I should like you to reach them. Have you any plans?" His interest was thoroughly awakened.

"Mrs. Dayton has been so kind, a real friend. I don't mean that Aunt Jane and Uncle Jason are not real friends. They have been very good to care for me since father died. Isn't it in not understanding just what satisfies you down in your soul. Jenny is very happy working in the factory. I should just hate it. And, oh, I think it would be dreadful for her to sit and read to Mrs. Van Dorn," laughing with a gay ripple. "We have talked, but not settled upon anything definite. Mrs. Dayton thinks she might find someone who would give me my board for what I could do nights and mornings and Saturdays, and she would help me out with clothes, for I know Aunt Jane would be very angry if I went against her wishes. And Mrs. Dayton wouldn't need me. She has Joanna, you know. Then, too, she goes away in the autumn——"

"Well, I must say you have gone pretty far along in plans. I felt quite discouraged last night, though I imagine I might have talked Uncle Jason into doing something for you. But your aunt thinks three years spent in learning to teach, and not being able to earn a dollar for yourself, is [Pg 121] an awful waste of time. As if that was all there was to it!" disdainfully. "Helen, I could find it in my heart to wish you were my sister, then I could come to the rescue."

"Oh!" There was a world of exquisite delight in the tone that touched him to the very soul. "If I were! Why can't some people be in the places they would like? Some people are!" with an odd humorous laugh. "And it is the dissatisfaction that stirs you up; makes you ambitious. What is it that keeps up the dissatisfaction?" glancing at him with the smile still on her parted lips, yet full of perplexity.

"The knowledge that you are capable of doing something better, finer. If you were deficient in that, you could go to work cheerfully in the factory. You would enjoy associating with the girls."

"And then having a beau and marrying," she laughed. "Oh, I like books so much better, and knowing about the world."

"What of the examination papers. Have you found any time for them?"

"Oh, yes. There were some books in the library that helped. And such a splendid encyclopædia! I [Pg 122] wrote them out once, and then I read a great deal more, and wrote them over again. I'll give them to you, and you must consider how good a chance I have of passing. Oh, if I should fail!"

"You could go in later on. I do not think you will. I have wondered about you so many times this summer, and I have always seen you under the disadvantages of the Center, and the few helps you would have. You might have written me a letter."

"Oh, did you mean that I should?"

She asked it in sweet, eager unconsciousness, which showed that it would have been a pleasure. He had not suggested it from a wonder as to whether Aunt Jane would approve.

"I should have enjoyed an answer about your new life," he replied with interest. "I am very glad this happened to you instead of an uneventful summer on the farm and retrograding, I am afraid. And you like this"—old lady, he was about to say, but checked himself—"this Mrs. Van Dorn."

"It's something more than *like*. I cannot describe it in any word, that I know, unless it is like [Pg 123]

something I was reading a few days ago, fascination. When she talks about the places and people she has seen it seems as if I could listen forever. And then, you may think this queer," and she colored vividly, "sometimes I like Mrs. Dayton the best. I wish I didn't change about so. It is the same with books. Am I very inconstant, fickle?"

"If we couldn't change our minds, think what fossils we should soon be," and he laughed good-humoredly. "Yes, I should like to see her."

She started, then she came back a step. "I have not really talked over the plan of—of earning my way with her," and her voice fell a little. "Mrs. Dayton thought it best not to say anything until we had some certainty. She is going away soon. Her real companion comes next week."

He nodded that he understood the delicate charge. "And where is Mrs. Dayton?"

"She went to market, and to do various errands. I should like you to talk to her about it."

"Yes, I want to," he replied decisively.

Helen went upstairs and was gone quite a while. He was thinking of the bright, earnest, energetic girl, willing to work her way. He must plan it out with Mrs. Dayton. She was the one girl out of fifty who could rise above circumstances. Yet her aunt would be more than vexed, positively angry. [Pg 124]

Mrs. Van Dorn experienced a curious pang, when the girl's face brilliant with a definite emotion, flashed upon her with ardor in every line. What had moved her so? The eyes were luminous, the voice freighted with a new depth.

"Yes," she answered stiffly. "I must see this young man—he is young, isn't he? It seems to me he has been making a long call."

"Oh, we had so much to talk about, my summer here and all its pleasures, and the knowledge. Why, I told him I felt as if I had been at school all the time, I had learned so many things from you, and that you——"

She paused and flushed, wondering if the talk had been just right in the more delicate sense.

"That I was cross and queer, and full of whims——"

"Oh, I couldn't say that. It was about your journeys, and the people you had met. And he was so interested." [Pg 125]

Mrs. Van Dorn was mollified, and added a few touches to her toilet, picked up a fleecy scarf, came downstairs with her hand on Helen's shoulder, and was duly presented. The man *was* young.

But the lady was an agreeable surprise. He had been a little biased by Aunt Jane, he admitted to himself. She was like some of the fine old ladies he had met abroad, who carried their age with a serene unconsciousness.

Mrs. Dayton was coming up the path, and gave them a little nod.

"Perhaps she would like your service a while, Helen," exclaimed Mrs. Van Dorn. "I should enjoy having a little talk with your friend."

Helen rose reluctantly. She would much rather have stayed. But in five minutes she was in full flow of an interested confidence with Mrs. Dayton, and then they sat down on the north corner of the kitchen porch, and peeled peaches for the luncheon, as it was getting late.

Mr. Warfield meant to suggest several things to Mrs. Van Dorn that could tend to Helen's benefit presently. She resolved to learn what he thought of the child's capabilities for advancement. In a certain way, though, they both parried skillfully, each gained a point, yet it was not the point Mr. Warfield set out to make. [Pg 126] [Pg 127]

CHAPTER VII

SUCCESSFUL

They chatted a little after the meal was over, and Mr. Warfield asked Helen to get her papers, and let him see how she had made out with them. Mrs. Van Dorn gave him a pleasant good-by, and said she must go and take her daily nap, the best preventive of old age that she knew. Her smile was over the fact that she held the winning card, and now she had resolved to play for the girl. It was more entertaining.

Helen brought her papers, very nicely written, and Mr. Warfield admitted well prepared. There were but few corrections to be made. Then he smiled, and said in a tone he meant to be comforting, if the matter was not:

"Perhaps you know, Helen, you cannot use these. Some were last year's questions, some I guessed at, though I believe I hit two rightly. You sit down in the room, at the table, and a list is

given you, and you write out your answers from your own interior knowledge, with no helps from books or friends." [Pg 128]

Helen glanced up in dismay, her rosy cheek paled, her lip had a suspicious quiver.

"But I thought——" and she looked at the discarded papers, over which she had taken so much pains.

"My dear child, I wanted you to put in practice what you had already learned. Vacation is a trying time to the memory, unless one resolves the subject in one's mind. It would have been better for you to come up at once for the examination, but I didn't see how it was to be managed. Indeed, last night I confess I did not see how the plan could be carried through, and I am surprised at your courage and energy."

"Then the papers are of no use," she commented in a tone of disappointment.

"They have been of a good deal of use in mental training. You will find it much easier to write on kindred subjects. And I must say you have had a fortunate summer; so much better than anything I had anticipated for you. You have shown commendable courage in taking a step many girls would have shrunk from. I am sure that you will succeed, and some way we must all make it [Pg 129] possible for you to go through the High School. I feel confident that Providence will smile on our efforts."

She glanced up soberly.

"You would have gone without hesitation when school closed in the summer?"

"Oh, yes." Then she laughed. She was the wholesome sort of girl, who could laugh at herself. "That was because I knew so little. And since I have found how much knowledge of every kind there is in the world, mine seems so small. I am afraid I don't want to compare myself with the people who know less, and those who know more seem so far ahead of me," she subjoined frankly.

"That need not take away one's courage. At eight and twenty you will know a good deal more, at eight and forty if you use life rightly, you will have discarded a good deal of the youthful knowledge, and taken on maturer thoughts. Schooldays do not end with the close of a school for vacation. You observe that goes on after a little rest. And the real scholars go on. All life is a school. I did some hard studying the fortnight I was in London. I shall do some more this winter. There is always something ahead of the one who loves knowledge." [Pg 130]

He had a very encouraging smile for those who deserved it. He could frown as well, she knew, and this particular smile was used with discrimination; it was not the every-day pleasant look.

"So you will go next Tuesday. Louise Searing did not pass. She will keep you company. I must leave for New York in the train at four, and cannot be back before Wednesday. But I shall be thinking of you, and for my sake you must not fail. You see, it helps or hinders my reputation. I want all my five candidates to pass. There have never more than three gone from the Center school before."

"I will try my best," she returned. The thought that she would do something for him inspired her as well.

So they said good-by, and she went out to the kitchen. Two baskets of tempting Bartlett pears had come, and Mrs. Dayton, with a big kitchen apron on, and her sleeves rolled up, was beginning to pare them. As soon as Joanna had done the dishes she would can.

"If you wouldn't mind helping, Helen. Put that big kitchen sacque over your dress, and button the [Pg 131] sleeves around your wrists. Pear juice stains dreadfully. And then we will talk about the plans. Mr. Warfield is a delightful gentleman to meet, and he is very much interested in you."

If Helen was two or three years older, she might repeat her mother's destiny, the lady thought, and Mr. Warfield was a much more attractive man than Addison Grant.

They discussed the examination, and Mrs. Dayton endeavored to inspire her with hope, and she was confident a place could be found for Helen.

"But how to get the folks at home to consent to any such step will be the puzzle. As soon as we know about the examination I will have a talk with your uncle. I think I can persuade him to look upon the plan in the best light for you, and you can stay here all September."

"But there will be Jenny's wedding about the middle of the month, Aunt said."

"And on the tenth the High School opens."

"Oh, dear! My schooldays seem a great perplexity," and Helen gave a vague smile. "Some girls' lives run on so smoothly, but mine appears full of upsets."

"Take courage and go on. I think it will come out right. But I shall not make a single plan until [Pg 132] you have passed the examination."

Then Mrs. Van Dorn's bell rang.

Helen slipped off her sacque, washed her hands, and suddenly bent down and kissed Mrs.

Dayton's forehead. "Oh," she cried with deep tenderness, "I wish I had a mother! I wish you were my mother."

Mrs. Dayton looked after her, as she flashed through the dining room. All her motions were light and rapid, yet she never ran over chairs, or bumped up against doors or corners. It was a grace born in her, and Mrs. Dayton wondered that it had not all been wrenched out of her by the crude bustling life at the Mulfords'. And she wondered how it would seem to have a daughter growing up who would love her and care for her. Helen was overflowing with gratitude, and one of the best features of it was that it abounded in deeds rather than words. She always wanted to do something in return, she often did it without stopping to inquire, daily little things that evinced thoughtfulness. After all, her three years' board would hardly be felt, there would be the summer vacation. Only, if she should be sent away somewhere to teach afterward. But there would be [Pg 133] three pleasant years. She *could* afford to do it now, she had gone past the pinches, and was putting by a little every year.

Mrs. Van Dorn, upstairs on her couch in the comfort of a dressing sacque, was amusing herself with plans as well. She did like to enjoy outgeneraling people. And this young Mr. Warfield's confidence rather piqued her. The same thought had entered her mind that this enthusiastic girl might repeat her mother's story, and she had a fancy that it had been one of disappointment.

Years ago the daughter of a cousin, the only relative who had ever befriended her, after a prosperous married life of a dozen years' duration, was thrown on her own endeavors for a livelihood, with two little girls. She had a beautiful house in a pretty, refined town, but there was a considerable mortgage on it. Mrs. Van Dorn had come to her assistance; she was not all selfishness. With a little aid, Mrs. Aldred had established herself in a day and boarding school, had added to her house, and become the pride of the pretty town of Westchester. One act of Mrs. Aldred had gone to her old cousin's heart. She had paid the whole sum loaned, interest and principal, and sent the most heartfelt thanks. She was a prosperous and happy woman, and her [Pg 134] girls were growing up into usefulness, one was teaching, the other would be an artist. There was no hint or suggestion that she should like to be remembered in anyone's will, or would be grateful for any gift. The principle of the incident really touched Mrs. Van Dorn, who paid Mrs. Aldred a visit, and on her departure left her what she called a little gift in token of her courage and business ability, a check for a thousand dollars.

"I'm going to take the good of what I have," she announced with a rather grim smile, "so I shall have the less to leave behind when I die."

That had been five years ago. Now Mrs. Van Dorn had written to know if the school was still prosperous, and what the terms were, and if she would take the supervision of an orphan girl who was ambitious, eager, capable of many things, a girl full of bright promise, amiable in temper, who was to be trained to get her own living if that came to her, but accomplished for society, if that should be her lot.

After her talk with Mr. Warfield she had made up her mind. He should not have his way in this matter. She would try her hand, or her money with this girl. She was going abroad again for the [Pg 135] next year or two, and she would give Helen two years of education under Mrs. Aldred's supervision. Then she would decide if she wanted her, and in what capacity.

Fourteen only. Twenty would be young enough to marry. She would have six years of interest. If the girl came to love her very much——

The poor old heart had a hungering for ardent love, as well as admiration. And Helen Grant *was* grateful. To rescue her from a distasteful life like that at her uncle's, or a life of drudgery working her way through school would appeal to her, for Mrs. Van Dorn had discerned that the girl had a great hungry heart for all the accessories of finer living, though she did not know what the vague restless stirring within meant.

The carriage paused at the gate. "Help me into my waist," she said to Helen. "I've dawdled my time away finely. What have you been doing?"

"Peeling pears for canning," she replied merrily. "Mrs. Dayton picked out a dish of lovely ones for you, and put them in a cool place. They are luscious. I wonder if you would like to have one now?" [Pg 136]

"Oh, no. That will be something to think of when I come back. The wind has blown up a little cooler, and I am glad. Get my bonnet, and the blue wrap."

They went downstairs together, and were helped into the coupé. "To the Postoffice first," she said. "We will wait on ourselves this time."

Mr. Conway always brought the mail up at six, though it reached Hope at three.

"Your friend, Mr. Warfield, is going to the city? He is very earnest that you shall take the examination. How do you expect to arrange about the High School? You will have to live here at North Hope."

Helen colored vividly, and a half-humorous smile parted her lips, and made dimples in the corners.

"I shall have to earn my own living someway," she answered courageously. "Aunt Mulford will be much opposed to it, but I think Uncle will see before long that it will be best. Mrs. Dayton will be

[Pg 137]

a very good friend to me. It all turns on my passing the examinations successfully."

"And if you should not?"

"Then I must go back to the Center. But I would have another chance by the first of January. And I have quite resolved that if I do not accomplish it this year I will try next summer."

There was a charm in her courage and perseverance. Mrs. Van Dorn thought she had never looked prettier. She could not have taken so cordially to a plain girl.

They reached the Postoffice. Helen sprang out, and came back with an eager smile and three letters. Then they turned into an old shady street, and drove slowly.

One was from her lawyer in the city. The matter she had written of could be easily adjusted.

The next was in Miss Gage's fine, almost old-fashioned hand. Everything had gone on well, and she would come on Wednesday, prepared to go abroad, or anywhere at Mrs. Van Dorn's behest. A very suitable letter, but there was no suggestion of that wider living outside of her own home relations. She was an admirable companion, an excellent nurse for small ailments; she gave good value for what she received, but there was no refreshment of enthusiasm that had warmed her [Pg 138] old heart toward this girl who seemed to rouse and stir one's thoughts, and give a breath of sweetness.

The third was from Mrs. Aldred, who would be glad to do anything for her relative. She was fond of girls, especially those who were bright and capable of advancement. She would insure her a home and training for the next two years, and fit her for either position, look after her clothing, and make her as happy as possible. Hers was in reality a home school. Her circle was complete with thirty boarders, all of whom were of unexceptional character, and Mrs. Van Dorn need not be afraid to trust her *protégée* at Aldred House, nor fear that any confidence would be misplaced.

She had meant to lay the matter before Helen this very afternoon, then she suddenly changed her mind. If the examination went against her, she would be the more grateful, if in her favor, it would be a card at Mrs. Aldred's. She would let the others plan, and amuse herself with upsetting their confident arrangements.

So they talked, instead, about places. Helen never tired of listening. Her vivid imagination [Pg 139] pictured the scenes, while here she smiled a little, there her straight brows drew together in a little frown of condemnation, then the heroic appealed to her. It was so pretty to note the changes. Two years from this time would she be anxious about gowns and trinkets and frivolity of all kinds? Girls were risky creatures before their characters were really formed. Yes, it would be wise not to commit one's self too far to draw back, or substitute other plans.

"When is your old lady going away?" asked Uncle Jason, when he came in on Saturday. "Mother thinks she can't spare you more than next week. There's the house to clean, and the weddin' cake to make, and the children have to have new clothes, and goodness only knows all."

"But I was to have her a week in September," said Mrs. Dayton. "If Jenny is to be home——"

"Well, she'll be over to her house gettin' ready. We didn't make any such fuss when we were married. We got spliced and looked after things afterward. Well, Helen—how is it? I'm afraid you're 'most spoiled for living among common folks any more." [Pg 140]

Helen's face was scarlet, as she glanced into this roughened sun-burned one.

"You've come to be such a lady," he went on admiringly. "Mebbe it wasn't for the best. You really ought to be somewhere else and grow up into the kind of women there is in stories. And your hands are so soft, there isn't a freckle in your face. There's mighty little Mulford about you!"

"Oh, Uncle Jason!" She flung her soft arms about his neck, immeasurably touched by the tone of his voice. Her eyes shone with the tenderness of tears. She laid her fond lips to his rough cheek with a delicate caress.

"Whatever comes," she began, after a pause, "remember that I do sincerely love you, and that I believe you would be willing to do the best for me if it was in your power."

"Your head's level there, child," with a tremble in his voice, and he kissed her fondly, a rare thing with him.

She watched him as he went down the path and climbed into the old wagon.

"I feel mean, and underhand, and deceitful," she cried passionately, turning to Mrs. Dayton. "I like to live along just on the square, and how the thing will ever get told, and whether Aunt Jane [Pg 141] will let me stay, and whether it is all right, and why you should want things that seem out of your reach, and why someone should rise up and forbid you mounting the ladder that stands just at hand—oh dear!" and Helen burst into a flood of tears.

"You can tell it all next week. There's been nothing especially underhand. People don't usually get out on the housetops and proclaim the things they think of doing. And Mr. Warfield will be back. We shall all be ranged on your side."

"Poor Uncle Jason! And I haven't finished grating the corn for the fritters. The cold tongue looks splendid. And the cold chicken. Then we give people scalding hot fritters."

She was merry and arch again in a moment.

Sunday was soft and rainy, the sort of day one lounged about. Monday Mrs. Griggs came to wash, and as there were pears to pickle Helen helped with the ironing. Tuesday she trudged off to school with a beating heart. Louise Searing was there, one girl and two boys from the North Hope school who had been conditioned. [Pg 142]

"I don't see what you can do if you do get in, Helen Grant," said Louise. "I'm going to stay with Betty all the week"—this was her married sister. "Or has Mrs. Dayton promised to keep you? That rich old lady is going away, isn't she? How did you like living out this summer? I went up in the mountains with ma. There were some young fellows and we had lots of fun."

"Hush!" said a teacher entering. Papers and pencils were distributed, the children placed far enough apart to prevent collusion. The lady took a seat at the desk.

Helen looked over her questions. Two were from the last year's list, she saw with joy, and she jotted down the answers carefully. The two problems she solved. The analysis rather puzzled her. One of the great seaports of the country, and of Europe. The notable travelers in Africa. Hannibal's journey across the Alps, his conquests and his stay at Brutium. Just a week ago they had been reading Hannibal's wonderful story, and his fifteen years' menace of Rome. How glad she was!

A rather stern looking man came in and took his seat by the lady. As the slips were finished they were signed and passed up. By noon Helen had answered five, when they were dismissed until two o'clock. As Helen passed across the room the lady signaled to her, and handed her three of the slips. She fairly clutched them in her hand and hurried away lest Louise should speak to her. [Pg 143]

She did not dare open them. When she reached home, Mrs. Dayton was sugaring blackberries and placing the dishes on the waiter.

"Oh, Helen! You look roasted!"

"I walked so fast. Oh, will you look at these? I have not had the courage. I have done five, there are four more," she cried breathlessly.

"You poor child! Why, Helen, these are all right. It is splendid."

Helen dropped on a chair and wanted to cry from the sudden relief.

"You foolish girl, to prolong your anxiety. Here, take a fan and get some of the redness out of your face."

"I can't go in to lunch. Afterward I will go up and tell Mrs. Van Dorn. Please do not say a word about me," she entreated.

Joanna brought her a glass of iced lemonade, and she thanked her with overflowing eyes. Then she looked at the slips of paper and smiled. That was only three out of nine. What if the others should be adverse! [Pg 144]

She had a little lunch in the far end of the kitchen by the open window, and quite recovered her spirits. It seemed as if the ladies would never get done talking over the table. Their loitering never fretted Mrs. Dayton, and Joanna had her lunch in the between time.

When the coast was clear she tripped upstairs smiling and steady of nerve, now.

"And it was so fortunate that we read about Hannibal," she exclaimed, joyously. "I knew, of course, that he crossed the Alps and menaced Rome, but if we hadn't read the history I should have been at a great loss to know just what to say. And one question about the Italian poets. It seems to me I have been learning all summer from you. I was a real ignoramus, wasn't I, except in mathematics. I owe you so much!"

She squeezed the soft wrinkled hands in hers, so plump and warm. Her heartsome cheery voice penetrated deeper into the poor old soul than anything had done in a long while.

She would owe her a good deal more in time. And she wondered about taking her abroad now. They could find teachers in plenty. [Pg 145]

"Now I must go back to my four other questions. Just pray that I shall not fail anywhere."

"I have a feeling that you will succeed."

Two of the girls did not get through at four, but begged to stay, and it seemed hardly worth while to break another day, unless there were some new applicants. Helen remained. She saw her answers piled up by themselves. Then Miss Dowling beckoned her.

"You are an excellent student," she exclaimed, "and you have had a very fine teacher in Mr. Warfield. I think we must get him over here. You have missed only one question, and you go in with flying colors. I wish you were to be in my class, but I shall have to wait for you until next year. You live at the Center? You will have to come up to us."

The girl's eyes sparkled with delight at the commendation, and she expressed her gratification in a very pretty manner. Miss Dowling was exceedingly interested in her.

"I like those ambitious girls who are not puffed-up with vanity," she said to Mr. Steele. "Helen Grant. Do you know any Grants at the Center?" [Pg 146]

"No. And the Center is the dullest of all the Hopes. We must find out about this bright and shining light. I'll take these papers home and look them over, and call around about nine."

Miss Dowling nodded.

"It's just too mean for anything!" declared Louise Searing. "I'm not sure that I shall even squeeze in, I've lost so many marks. I always did think Mr. Warfield was partial to you, and it isn't fair."

"I've been studying all summer," returned Helen.

"And working at Mrs. Dayton's. For goodness sake what did you do? And I can tell you it will make a difference with the real High School girls. Some here at North Hope are very stylish. So it is true you were out carriage riding half the time?"

The tone was unpleasant, half envious.

"I went out with Mrs. Van Dorn, and read to her, and did little errands. Her real companion comes to-morrow. And about the middle of September they are going to Europe." [Pg 147]

"Oh!" Louise opened her eyes wide, rather nonplussed. Hope people did not often go to Europe. And if companions were taken, then it wasn't so bad to be a companion. Perhaps it wouldn't be wise to begin to snub Helen Grant just now. [Pg 148]

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. VAN DORN'S WINNING HAND

Helen was sitting on an ottoman and leaning her arms lightly on Mrs. Van Dorn's knees that had a soft wrap thrown over them. She fancied she felt little twinges of neuralgia in them now and then; August nights were damp.

They had been talking about the successful examination. Helen had proved the heroine of the dinner hour. Mr. Pratt admitted that he could not have answered half of the questions. Mrs. Disbrowe said she went into the High School of her town on quite as good a record. Mrs. Lessing said she did not see the need of half the tests, or of College education for women. The most satisfying destiny for a woman was a good marriage and she was quite sure men didn't care for learned women.

"You have been a very nice, cheerful, ready girl all summer, Helen. You really have been a great pleasure to me," said the lady.

"I am very glad." Helen's voice was full of emotion, and she gave the wrinkled hands a soft caress. "It has been a delightful time to me. I am so glad Mrs. Dayton thought of me when there were so many nice girls in the world. It seems to me as if I was brimming over with happiness." [Pg 149]

She could feel the thrill in the young hands. Ah, if she had found Helen just as she was now, ten years ago. But she was good for many years yet, and she would have her sweet young life, her charming womanhood.

"Would you feel very much disappointed if you didn't go to the High School?"

"Oh, I think now, it would break my heart."

"But if something better offered?"

"Oh, could there be anything better?"

"Can't you think of anything better?"

The girl was silent. In her narrow life there had not been much room for dreams of real betterment.

"Think, all around the world."

"Well," with a half laugh and a sound like a sigh not going very deep, "there would be travel all round the world. I hope some day to earn money enough to go—well I'll take London first. Then Paris, but I do not believe I shall want to stay there long, for you see I shall not have a great deal of money. And then Rome, dear delightful Rome, with all its old haunts, where its poets have lived and died. And that isn't half, is it? Is any life long enough to see it all?" [Pg 150]

Her face was in a glow of enthusiasm, her eyes deep and luminous.

The woman had not begun very early in life and she had seen a good deal of it. She had heard hundreds of people wish for things, but very few who were willing to earn them, like this girl who had so little envy in her composition.

"Suppose someone would say to you, here is a school where you can be taught all the higher

branches as well, music, drawing, painting, literature and all the pretty society ways that make one feel at home in any company. Would you go?"

"Oh, that is like a fairy dream," and she laughed with charming softness. "Why, I am afraid to look at it lest I *should* want it."

"That isn't answering my question."

She raised her face and studied the one above her. It was wrinkled and the eyes were a faded blue-gray. She did not guess the eyebrows were penciled, the lips tinted, that the hair just a little [Pg 151] sprinkled with white had come from the hair-dresser's. The curious asking expression transfixed her.

She drew a long breath. "Why, that would be wonderful to happen to a poor girl who is thinking how she can work her way along. It would be like a glimpse of heaven. I should be crazy to refuse it."

Mrs. Van Dorn took both of the warm, throbbing hands in hers. "Listen," she exclaimed. "I like you very much. When you first came, I thought only of a little maid to wait upon me, and run up and down and stay with Joanna when I wanted to be alone. I was rather curious to know whether you understood what you were about when you recited 'Hervé Riel.' You have a great deal of natural or inherited intelligence—your father was a scholar. If you were two or three years older, I should take you abroad with me and finish you on the Continent, that is, if you had not too much self-assurance that growing girls arrogate to themselves so easily. But that is not to be thought of at present—it must be some dream of the future. You need real education and you are capable of assimilating the higher part of it. I should like to send you to a school I know of where you will [Pg 152] get the best of training. And if you develop into the girl I think you will, there may be a future before you better than any of your vague dreams."

"Oh! oh!" and Helen Grant buried her face in Mrs. Van Dorn's lap and cried, overcome by a new and strange emotion. If the elder had followed her impulse she would have lifted the face and kissed it with the passionate tenderness that was smoldering in her soul, and had never been satisfied. But her experience in people had been wide and varied, she was suspicious, she could not trust easily, and here were at least two years that would go to the shaping of this girl's character. Might she not care largely for what the money would give her?

"My dear! my dear!" she began in a muffled sort of tone from contradictory emotions.

Helen raised her face of her own accord, and her eyes were like the sun shining through a shower.

"Oh, what must you think," and her voice had a broken tremulous sound, yet was very sweet. "I didn't see how anyone could cry for joy—but I am learning something new all the time. Are you in [Pg 153] very earnest? Would you take me with you if I were older and knew more? And would you like to have me trained and made into the kind of girl that suited you?"

"A girl proud and honorable and truthful, sincere and grateful——"

"Oh, I would try to be all that. It seems almost as if I had been deceitful to Uncle Jason, not to tell him about the High School, but I was not sure of passing, and not sure that I could work my way through. And sometimes I don't tell Aunt Jane things because I know she would make such a fuss, and they are not bad in themselves, and often don't come to pass. But I hate falsehoods. It makes me angry when they are told to me."

Mrs. Van Dorn smiled at the impetuosity.

"But you would give up the High School for this other plan? You would be willing to go away among strangers, and trust me for the future? I will provide everything for you, you will not have a care, only to study and do your very best, and take care of yourself. Even if you should decide to teach rather than travel about with me, you would be at liberty to choose." [Pg 154]

"I should choose you," she said frankly. "Oh, how can I thank you for anything so splendid! There are no words good enough."

She kissed the wrinkled hands fervently.

"The thanks will be your improvement. Westchester is a beautiful place, with mostly educated people. Mrs. Aldred, who is a connection, is a lady in the truest sense of the word. You will learn what the higher class girls are like—some are fine, some under a charming and well-bred exterior you will find full of petty meanness. I should hate to have you mean, grudging. I want you to keep broad, unselfish; though sometimes you will get the worst and the smallest measure in return. And you will be quite content to leave your people?"

A serious sweetness overspread Helen's countenance.

"If I had a mother who loved me, such a mother as Mrs. Dayton would make, I am afraid I would not want to leave her. Oh, I know I wouldn't," decisively. "But Aunt Jane never liked my father, and I think she didn't care much for my mother. Their desires and ideas are so different from mine, and they care very little for education, yet they are all good and kindly, and Uncle Jason is [Pg 155] really fond of me, I think. But it seems as if when one had neither father or mother to be disappointed, one might choose what one liked best, if there was nothing wrong in it."

How did the girl come by so much good sense and uprightness?

"Then you will accept my proffer?"

"Oh, I can hardly believe anything so good *can* come to me. I feel as if I were dreaming." She looked up uncertain, yet her eyes were dewy sweet, her lips quivering.

"We will make it better than a dream. But we will have to disappoint your Mr. Warfield."

That gave Mrs. Van Dorn a secret gratification. She was jealous of two people who had come into Helen Grant's life, this man and Mrs. Dayton.

"Yes; he will be sorry, I know. But then he could not be my teacher, as he was last year. And, oh, how proud he will be that I passed so splendidly."

"And I shall be glad when you attain to other heights. I really think you will not need any urging. But don't go too deep in the abstruse subjects, and don't let anyone spoil your fashion of reading, [Pg 156] for I may want you to read to me in the years to come."

"I shall be glad to do anything for you," the girl replied with deep feeling. "I wish I might spend years and years with you to repay all this generosity and kindliness. Oh, why do you go away?"

She flushed with an eagerness, a glow of excitement that gave her a frank, bewitching sweetness.

Why did she go? Mrs. Van Dorn had gone over the ground by herself. She had been tempted to settle herself for life, but did she want to help tone down the crudeness of the untrained nature, to prune the enthusiasms, to find little faults here and there? She would rather someone else would do the gardening, and she have the bloom in its first sweetness. While she was away Helen would idealize her still more, and be prepared to give her just the same girl-worship, but with more discrimination. She would think of nothing but the benefits. She would see none of the whims and queernesses that Clara Gage had grown accustomed to. She would not note her growing old every day. And then she had a longing for a change. [Pg 157]

"Well, I had planned to spend the winter in the south of France. It is supposed to be better to have an entire change every few years. I spent one winter there. I had not been quite up to the mark, and it improved me wonderfully. Then, I have made most of my arrangements."

"But you will come back?" beseechingly. "I may not stay the whole two years. You think you will feel quite satisfied to go to Aldred House? You will be among strangers, but girls soon get acquainted. Of course, I could board you here, and have you go to the High School, but it would not be as well, and it would not make the sort of girl out of you that I should like as well, for two excellent reasons," smiling a little. "What is it?" as a grave expression touched Helen's face.

"You have the right to decide. I know I should like best to go away, but perhaps it will make some trouble for you. I think my aunt——"

"I shall have a talk with Mr. Mulford when he comes in on Saturday. A man is generally master of his house. And I will see how the plan appears to Mrs. Dayton. She is a very sensible person." [Pg 158]

She had a talk with Mrs. Dayton that very evening. She would give Helen her two years' schooling, and then she would be old enough and capable of deciding what she would like to do for the future. If she should prefer to take up teaching, that kind of training would be necessary afterward. She had some fine capabilities, and it would be a pity not to make the best of them.

So Mrs. Van Dorn very clearly defined her own position in the matter, without betraying her full intentions.

"If she doesn't get spoiled," commented the listener with an odd smile. "It is a very generous proffer, and I believe Helen is capable of appreciating it to the full. It would be a hard thing for her to remain here and work her way through school, though I had a plan for easing it up somewhat. She is above the ordinary run of girls, though I didn't think of that so much when I asked her to come here. The qualities that decided me then were her cheerfulness and her readiness. I do not believe her aunt half appreciates her."

"She is of a little different kind," returned Mrs. Van Dorn. That lady possessed much cynical enlightenment as to the kinds. "There is a deal of talk about goodness in this world, and even an [Pg 159] east wind may be good for something, but it isn't pleasant. You find an immense deal of narrowness in these old country places. Saturday when Mr. Mulford comes I want to have a talk with him."

Mrs. Dayton was really glad that the first explanation was not to come from her.

Miss Gage arrived the next day at noon. She was a quiet, sensible-looking girl, who might have posed for a very attractive one, if she had known how to make the best of herself. She had a fine clear complexion, quite regular features, an abundance of soft, light brown hair, and a slim, graceful figure. But she had begun life weighting herself up with care, and made many little things a matter of conscience that were merely matters of choice. She was honest to a fault, obliging, and with that rare gift of being serviceable. At first Mrs. Van Dorn had been much pleased with her, but she was too proud to accept many favors, and her heart was centered in her own family; perhaps selfishly so.

Helen seemed released from almost every duty, and was glad to devote her time to Mrs. Dayton. [Pg 160]

"I should like to know what Mr. Warfield will think of the plan," commented the lady.

"Oh, he will hold up both hands for me to go," laughed Helen. "Everybody will, but Aunt Jane."

The boarders were all out Saturday afternoon; a party had gone picnicking to a pretty, shady nook on the Piqua River, where a little decline and a bed of rock made a dainty waterfall. So Mrs. Van Dorn and Mr. Mulford had the end of the porch to themselves.

She stated her plan in a very straightforward manner. For two years she would send Helen to school, assuming all the expense. After that the girl might take her choice as to what she would like to follow, and she would be willing to assist her in any pursuit for which she was best fitted.

Mr. Mulford gave a long whistle, and stared at Mrs. Van Dorn. There was something so amusing in his surprise that she could hardly refrain from smiling.

"Well, I swow! You must think a mighty sight of her, ma'am, to be willing to spend that money out and out, when she could get her schoolin' right here for nothin'."

"I think of her capabilities. She is ambitious, and can fill an excellent place in the world." [Pg 161]

"She's a smart girl in everything, but the book learnin' she takes from her father. Mother's missed her quick handy ways about the house, and I'm afraid she won't agree to givin' her up. And back there, ma'am, I used a word not strictly orthodox, and I'm a deacon of the church. But I was so took aback."

Mrs. Van Dorn nodded her pardon. "You see," she said quietly, "that it isn't quite as if she had been given to you. Her father might have returned and taken her. Then, when a child is fourteen she is allowed to choose her guardians. I shall stand in that capacity for the next two years. I shall arrange matters with my legal man in New York, so that, even if anything should happen to me she would have her two years at school. People lose their wits, sometimes."

"I don't believe you will lose yours. You're wonderfully well kept," he said with blunt admiration. "Well, I d'know as we could do anything if we wanted to. Mother's had other plans for her, but the child didn't fall in with them. She was mighty glad to come over here. There isn't much Mulford about her," with an abrupt sort of laugh. "We never just got along with her father, but he [Pg 162] was a good enough sort of man. We've tried to do by Helen as one of our own, and Mother would now. But I can't think it would be quite right to stand in the child's way."

"No, it would not," decisively. "She has her life to live, and you can't do that for her. She has some fine natural gifts which it would be a sin to traverse. I will have my lawyer draw up an agreement that you will not interfere during the next two years——"

"But are we not to see her?" he interrupted, quite aghast at the prospect.

"Yes; you may visit her, and she can spend her vacations at home, and write as often as she has time. I should change my opinion of her if she was glad to go away, and forget you altogether. I am sure, then, I could not trust her gratitude to me," she said decisively.

"No, ma'am, that you couldn't," he subjoined earnestly. "Helen isn't that kind, I'm sure. And we wouldn't like to have her go out of our lives altogether."

"I should not desire her to."

"But, ma'am, after she's had all this fine living and everything, I'm afraid we'll seem very [Pg 163] common. You don't think she'd better go to school here, and keep nearer her own folks?"

"Well, the other plan seems best to me. But after she has tried it a year, if she doesn't like it she shall be at liberty to come back to Hope."

"That's fair, I'm sure. Thank you, ma'am. And I don't just know what to say, only that I think it's mighty generous of you, though she's welcome to my home and all I have. I've never grudged her a penny."

"I am sure of that. Will you explain the matter to your wife? The agreement will come next week. And at the last I shall take her to New York to be fitted out with clothes. If there is any point you do not quite understand I shall be very willing to explain."

He rose in a dazed kind of fashion, and made an awkward bow, then went round to the kitchen end, where Helen had been sorting over blackberries.

"Oh, my child," he cried with a new tenderness. "I can't bear to think of your going away!"

Helen gave a long, sighing breath, then smiled. [Pg 164]

"Miss Gage is to be taken to Europe, and her folks are willing," she subjoined.

"And this place isn't so far away. You can write and come home in vacation."

Then he would consent. She felt relieved that there was to be no argument.

"What do you think Aunt Jane will say?" she inquired, clasping his arm.

"Well, she'll be mighty set against it. I'll have a hard row to hoe when I go home. There'll be weeds of last year and year before," laughing brusquely. "I wish the old lady had to tackle her."

"But I don't. Aunt Jane says a good many things at first that she doesn't mean. It's the wrong side of something full of seams and knots, but when you get it turned out it is ever so much smoother."

"You're right. You're just right. You've quick sight in a good many things, Helen, and I should hate awfully to have you spoiled, and get so grand you'd look down on us. Mother aint much for book learnin', and Jen's as smart as a steel trap, if she is ours. Oh, and there's the wedding. Why I don't see how we can do without you," and he looked really alarmed.

"Perhaps I won't have to go so soon." Somehow she was almost afraid she wouldn't go at all. It [Pg 165] was one of the happenings that seemed too good to be true, too wonderful for her.

"Well, I must get along. Mother'll wonder what kept me."

"And, oh, Uncle Jason, don't ever feel afraid that I shall forget you, and all your goodness."

Helen flung her arms around his neck and kissed his rough cheek tenderly.

"No, my girl, no. I should hope not. We'll hear soon, I suppose. And you will come over."

"Yes." Helen felt a little conscience smitten. She could go over and spend Sunday, but he did not ask it, and she did not proffer. She could imagine the time there would be, and oh, she would so much rather be out of it.

Mrs. Van Dorn said he was much more amenable to reason than she had feared. She explained about the agreement, and her plans to go the last of next week. Helen was transfixed with amazement.

Monday afternoon Mr. Warfield made his appearance. Miss Gage had gone out with Mrs. Van Dorn. Helen was very glad to have Mrs. Dayton explain the proposal, and point out its [Pg 166] advantages.

"I don't like it," he exclaimed brusquely. "And you didn't take the examination?"

"Oh, yes, I did, and it was splendid! I'll show you the papers. But why don't you like it?" apprehensively.

"If you are going to teach in a public school, the discipline and advantages of the public school education are immeasurably the best. I don't like boarding schools except for the high up people who care most for accomplishments. And I have been thinking it over, and had a plan to propose to Mrs. Dayton."

"My schooldays seem a great perplexity all around," said Helen with a dubious sort of laugh.

"I do suppose Helen could have worked her way through. I had decided to give her a home, or her other expenses if a pleasant home offered. I would much rather not have her put on the level of a domestic. We may have some very fine theories on this subject, but Helen would have many snubs to endure. And if she resolves to learn what is useful, she will learn it as well there."

"But the experience will be so different. And two years will fit her for just nothing at all. Every [Pg 167] year more real education is demanded. I am studying up for a college degree myself."

"Oh, dear!" Helen sighed lugubriously.

"Then, here, I should have had an oversight of your studies, and kept you up to the mark."

"I am resolved I won't fall below anywhere," she replied resolutely; yet there were tears in her eyes.

"But you don't know what the standard will be."

"Don't be discouraging, Mr. Warfield. Helen, go and get your papers," interposed Mrs. Dayton.

"Is that old body going to have Helen trained for a lady's maid?" Mr. Warfield asked in an imperious manner; his lips touched with a bit of scorn.

"You don't do her justice. At the end of two years Helen will be free to choose her future course. She will be only sixteen then."

"And spoiled utterly. Full of airs and graces. She is too fine a girl to be made a sort of puppet. There wasn't a girl in my class equal to her, and some had had much better advantages. I should [Pg 168] not want her to go on living with the Mulfords."

Helen returned bright and eager, proud of her success as she handed him her examination papers. But Mr. Warfield would not be reconciled to the boarding school plan, and when he saw Mrs. Van Dorn step out of the carriage in her fine attire, he felt that he hated her; that she was an officious old body. [Pg 169]

CHAPTER IX

DIFFERENT STANDPOINTS

Helen would have been figuratively torn to pieces if she had spent Sunday at the Center. Uncle Jason's first resolve was that he would wait until Sunday afternoon before announcing the conspiracy. The more he thought of the plan the greater the benefit to Helen seemed. She *was* different from the Mulfords, and she had no Cummings blood in her veins. She had changed these few weeks of her sojourn with Mrs. Dayton. Not that she had grown consequential. Indeed, she had never been more simply sweet than on this afternoon.

She would hate the shop dreadfully. And after all the three dollars a week she would earn the first year, would not more than pay for her board and clothes. Jenny had gone at it with a vim. But she hated books. The only thing that interested her was arithmetic. Uncle Jason could not put it in words, but he could feel it. [Pg 170]

The supper passed off without any squabbles. Sam and Jenny walked down to the house, the children were tired and went to bed, and Aunt Jane came out on the porch to take a turn in her rocking chair and fan herself cool. But the wind blew up, and she did not even have to fan.

"Did you ask whether Helen would come home next week? Polly Samson comes two days to make Jen's wedding gown, and she'll be married on the sixteenth. We've got along wonderfully the last fortnight, and I begin to see my way clear. Dear, how I shall miss Jen, but I'm glad she'll be so near by. And she bid 'em good-by at the shop to-day. Reely's getting to be quite a help. I don't know but it *was* better for her to have Helen away in vacation."

Uncle Jason felt this was the golden opportunity. The lovers would not be home until about ten. It took some courage. He cleared his throat, listened a moment to the crickets, and then plunged into the subject; blurting it all out before Aunt Jane could recover her breath. In fact there was such an awful silence he wondered.

Then the storm descended. He smoked his pipe and listened, though he heard the crickets with one ear, he would have said. And when he did not make an immediate answer, she said angrily: [Pg 171]

"You never consented to any such tomfoolery!"

"In the first place," he began slowly, "we couldn't keep Helen against her will. Her father didn't make us guardians. At fourteen she can choose. She isn't bound to us, and we haven't any real claim on her——"

"Except common gratitude," Aunt Jane flung out.

"We've taken care of her a few years. I dare say there'd be people in North Hope who would take a smart girl like Helen and pay her three dollars a week. Mrs. Dayton thought she might stay there and go to the High School before that other offer come along. And Warfield thinks it would be dreadful not to give her a chance at school when she could earn it for herself. She doesn't want to go in the shop——"

"As if a girl of fourteen knew what she wanted!"

"Jenny did, and you agreed with her. I was awfully took by surprise when old lady Van Dorn first snapped this onto me, but Helen and Mrs. Dayton were so much in earnest, and then drivin' home I kept thinking it over. If someone offered to take Sam and teach him store business, and he had his heart set upon going, and it was a good chance, I don't believe it would be right to oppose him. It's just the same with Helen." [Pg 172]

"And have her stick up above us and despise us! She's had pride enough, and I've tried to break her of it. I just wish I hadn't let her go at all. She'll be unthankful and full of conceit, and she never *shall* go with my consent."

Uncle Jason kept silence, which was very irritating. Aunt Jane went over the ground again, growing more dogmatic at every step. Then the young people returned.

"Goodness sakes, mother, what are you scolding about?" cried Jenny. "They can hear you half a mile away."

Then the story had to be gone over again.

"Well, I declare! I don't see that it's anything to get mad about," said Jenny sensibly. "Why, it's—it's just splendid! Pop, don't you think she ought to go? And if she likes teaching better than anything else, for goodness sake, let her teach! I'd rather go out washing. And a girl who don't like it in the shop won't get along. Helen hasn't quite the right way with her. She's on the Grant side of the fence. My! The idea! That old lady must have taken a smashin' fancy to her. And she has sights of money, folks say. Maybe she'll leave her something in the end, and she's quite old." [Pg 173]

"I'm fairly stumped!" declared Sam. "Mother, what's the reason you don't want her to go?"

"Mother's afraid she'll put on airs, and crow over us. Goodness! Let her, if she wants to. I'm going to have a good home, and a good husband," squeezing Joe's hand, "and she may crow over me as much as she likes. It won't hurt me a bit. And if you undertake to keep her home she'll be cranky, and you'll wish you hadn't."

They were all on Helen's side. Mrs. Mulford could not make any headway and went off to bed in

high dudgeon. All day Sunday she carried about an injured look, and said she had reached the time of life when her opinions were of no account, after all she had done, and where would anyone have been without her thrift and judgment? [Pg 174]

On Monday Jenny helped wash and iron, and sang about the house. She told her mother the matter wasn't worth minding. Tuesday, Polly Samson came with three new patterns of wedding gowns, and fairly alive with the wonderful news that a rich old woman boarding at Mrs. Dayton's was going to adopt Helen, and send her away to school.

The next afternoon the carriage came over with Mrs. Van Dorn, Mrs. Dayton, and Helen, and the agreement. Certainly Mrs. Van Dorn's part sounded very generous. For the next two years she would provide wholly for Helen, and keep her at school, but she would be free in the summer vacation. After that Helen must decide her course. Mr. Castles, the lawyer, vouched for Mrs. Van Dorn. The Mulfords were to visit her whenever they chose.

"I don't agree to any of this," said Mrs. Mulford, in her most severe tone. "I don't believe in girls being brought up above their station. We're just plain farmer people, and Helen's our kin, though if she was on the Cummings' side, I'd have some voice in the matter. Mr. Mulford's willing, and if it turns out bad, and she grows up proud and lazy, and ashamed of honest labor, 'taint my fault. I [Pg 175] wash my hands of it all," and she fairly wrung them out.

Helen's face was scarlet.

Mrs. Van Dorn said in a very dignified manner, "Will you sign this, Mr. Mulford? You will see the money is in Mr. Castles' hands, and must be used for that alone. You can compel me to keep my word," smiling.

"I don't doubt you at all," said Mr. Mulford. "I'd trust you without the scratch of a pen."

"But that wouldn't be business."

Jenny brought in some cake, and some very nice root beer. If the ladies chose they could have a cup of tea.

Mrs. Van Dorn thought she would.

Then they talked about Jenny's wedding. Helen was to go to New York on Saturday, and on Friday of next week was due at Aldred House.

"I'm awful sorry you can't come to the wedding," said Jenny. "We're going away for a week, then we shall have a house-warming at my house. I'm going to be married at noon, so the relatives can get home before night. And I'm sure I wish you loads of good luck. It is just wonderful. Mother'll [Pg 176] get over it, and be just as proud as anybody. Father thinks it just right, and Joe says it's like something out of a story book. He's fond of stories, and used to read them to his mother. I shan't mind his reading to me, for I'll sew and crochet."

"And I know you'll be happy, Jenny. I wish you all the good things. And I could—stay all night," hesitatingly.

"No, I wouldn't. Come over and spend Friday, then mother'll be in a better humor," laughing. "But father'll miss you dreadfully. He'd lotted on your taking my place. Well, we'll all miss you, but it's such a splendid chance. You'll let her come over on Friday?" to Mrs. Van Dorn. "Then my wedding gown will be done. It's white lansdowne. I thought I wouldn't splurge in silk or satin. Lansdowne will dye when it's soiled."

Mrs. Van Dorn promised for Friday, and they said their good-bys. Helen ran out to the kitchen porch, and kissed Uncle Jason.

"There were two votes against it," said Mrs. Van Dorn dryly. "I think I can understand your aunt, but I don't see the force of Mr. Warfield's reasoning. Your cousin seems a nice, sensible girl." [Pg 177]

How the days flew! One of the neighbors took her over Friday morning. Joe and Jenny would bring her back. And she had a really happy time. Jenny took her down to the house, and it was attractively nice and comfortable, even if Jenny had tacked up some advertising pictures in her chamber, and the dining-room. There was an old-time door-yard with its long rows of flowers. Joe was a master hand for flowers. The vegetable garden was in excellent order, and did not look ragged, as gardens were wont to do in early autumn. There had been a second crop of several things, which betokened thrift on Joe's part. Yes; Jenny would be very happy. People *were* different, and the same pursuits and pleasures could not satisfy all alike.

"I'm glad you are going to that school, Helen. You would never have liked working in the shop. It's suited me well enough, because I've been thinking of the money. I have two hundred dollars in the bank in my own name, and Joe is going to let me have the butter and egg money. But I don't know how I'll keep busy all the time, though I can help mother with the sewing. She'd [Pg 178] counted so much on you. And she thinks now——" Jenny looked at Helen, and laughed merrily, "that if Mrs. Van Dorn would put the money out at interest that she's going to spend on you the next two years, it would be ever so much better for you."

"No, it wouldn't," returned Helen decisively. "Beside, what good reason would she have for doing such a thing? She knows I am just wild for an education. There are so many splendid knowledges in the world," and the girl's face was brilliant with eagerness.

"You've changed some way, Helen. I guess you always were a little different, though." Jenny seemed studying her from head to foot. "You're taller. My, if you had on long skirts, you'd be a young lady."

"I just want to be a girl for ever so long. Mrs. Van Dorn doesn't want me grown up."

"And I went in the shop when I was only half-past fourteen," laughing. "I made mother let me wear long skirts, and when I was fifteen Joe began to come round and bring me home from cottage meeting and singing school, but his mother didn't like it a bit. She wouldn't have let him marry if she had lived, but I was willing to wait and that maddened her. Now if she'd been nice, [Pg 179] I'd a' been real glad to have her round. And I say to mother, don't you be getting cranky and snappy so as no one will want to live with you when you get old. Isn't that Mrs. Van Dorn rather queer?"

"She is so bright and intelligent, and has traveled about so much and read almost everything. Why I've learned about countries and their government, and what they do at Washington, and about Congress and our own capital, and the cities and towns that have mayors, and boroughs, and villages."

"Oh dear, all that would set me crazy!" interrupted Jenny, holding up her hand in entreaty. "I guess you *do* take after your father. Well my life suits me best. Just imagine me marrying a man like Mr. Warfield! Why I shouldn't know what to do—I'd rather work in the shop and have fun with the girls. But if all these things suit you, you ought to have them, when they are offered out and out to you."

"I am glad *you* think so;" and she gave Jenny's arm a caressing little squeeze.

"And I do hope you won't get so big feeling that you will be too grand to notice us. I'd like you to [Pg 180] come next summer in vacation and make me a nice long visit. I think I'll be able to stand book learning for a while;" with her rather boisterous laugh. "And oh, you won't forget to write to father."

"No indeed," with tender warmth. "I never loved Uncle Jason so much as this last summer, though he's always been good to me."

"And he thinks a mighty sight of you, I can tell you," returned Jenny.

Then they walked homeward. There was a great ado bidding Helen good-by. Aunt Jane gave her some severely good advice, which was quite superfluous, seeing that she would not recognize the change in the girl's life.

Uncle Jason put both arms around her and kissed her tenderly.

"Be a good, honest, truthful girl," he said in a rather broken voice, "and then all the learning in the world won't hurt you."

The next morning there were some more good-bys. Joanna's was really touching.

"There's a good deal of knowledge it's nice to have," she said, "but I think your pretty ways must [Pg 181] have come natural. And you do beat all at drying dishes."

Mrs. Dayton felt almost as if she was giving up a child. Would it have been better for her to have remained at Hope?

She was really astonished at the commotion the event created. Wasn't it a great risk to have Helen Grant go off with a strange woman? Just as if schools in Hope were not good enough!

"I never saw anything wonderful in Helen Grant," said Mrs. Graham. "Mr. Warfield pushed her ahead when he should have been taking pains with others, and I'll venture to say he helped her out with that examination. She couldn't have gone to the High School anyhow. And Jason Mulford is as stuck up as a telegraph post over her luck. We'd all laugh if it fell through in a year!"

As for Helen there were several days of living in absolute fairyland. The Hotel was a veritable palace to her, the ladies, queens and princesses. As for the stores they were beyond any description, only she thought they had been rehearsed in "Walks about Paris," but she was sometime to see the difference.

Mrs. Van Dorn displayed excellent taste in selecting Helen's wardrobe. It was simply pretty, fit [Pg 182] for a girl in the ordinary walks of life. Her measurements were left with madame, who, from time to time would send her what was suitable and necessary.

She had been such a charming companion that Mrs. Van Dorn really hated to give her up. If she were only two or three years older! Her enthusiasms were so fresh and infectious, her health was so perfect, her readiness, her pleasant temper, the pretty manner in which she took any check or counsel, appealed curiously to the worn old heart still hankering after something all its own, that should exhilarate and bring her back to some of the freshness of youth. Two years. Well, there were women who lived to ninety-six, or even a hundred. She would take good care of herself and have this enjoyment in her later years.

Miss Gage took Helen to Westchester. It was a beautiful town with old trees and old substantially-built houses. It was the county town also, and twice a year presented quite a stirring aspect. The inhabitants were refined and intelligent. Four different denominations had

churches. A lovely winding river ran on one side, full of suggestive nooks, dividing it from a neighboring State. A smaller one ran nearly through the center, crossed by several rustic bridges. Toward the east there was a rather high bluff going up, a woody sort of crest, and on this stood Aldred House, though it fronted on Elm Avenue. There were two terraces, and two short flights of steps to reach it, and a great wide veranda where a Virginia creeper and honeysuckle were burnishing their leaves in the sun. [Pg 183]

"Oh," sighed Helen with a long indrawn breath and luminous eyes, "tell Mrs. Van Dorn that I shall be perfectly happy here, I know I shall."

And Mrs. Van Dorn wondered when the message was repeated. Youth was easily caught by newness. What if Helen should be weaned away by other friends? And there were girls born students who could not be satisfied unless with some profession or business. What if she should be one of these? The jealous old heart wanted all of her, all of the Babylon she meant to build with its pleasant gardens and fascinating nooks of variety. Well, Helen had cared for her old uncle, and she, Mrs. Van Dorn would be a hundred times better to her. [Pg 184]

The reception room was cozy, with one open bookcase, some pictures, a great oriental jar full of trailing clematis and blazing sumac branches. Mrs. Aldred came in, a rather tall, sweet-faced woman with a voice that won at once, and a manner that had a welcome in it.

"I am very glad to have you come, and glad that I could oblige Mrs. Van Dorn in any way. I hope you will soon feel at home," she exclaimed.

"Oh, it is so lovely everywhere! And the journey for the last mile or two where you caught glimpses of the river, and in one place a great pile of rocks big enough to shelter some of the old Norse gods was enchanting. We have only one poor little river at home and there is but one really beautiful place in it. And I am sure I shall like to live here."

An enthusiastic girl, thought Mrs. Aldred. A fine, intelligent face also, perhaps too romantic.

Miss Gage gave her few charges and said good-by, as she was to catch a return train. It was early afternoon. Several of the scholars had arrived and were settling their rooms. Then Helen's trunk came up. Mrs. Aldred had been taking her through the long parlor on the opposite side of the [Pg 185] hall, and the dining room, where instead of one long table, several small ones were cozily arranged. Back of this, toward the bluff, was the schoolroom, and the study room, with several small ones for recitations.

"I wonder if you would like best to be alone in a room or have a companion?" questioned Mrs. Aldred. "I sometimes give girls a choice."

"I like folks," returned Helen, frankly. "That is——" pausing rather confusedly.

"If they are agreeable?"

"Yes," said Helen, smiling.

"I will give you a room where you *may* have a companion if you like. Some girls get homesick at first if they are alone."

"Oh, I shall not be homesick," she exclaimed with gay assurance.

Up the broad staircase they trooped, though there were two smaller ones convenient to many of the rooms. There was a long corridor with small rooms opening on the one side, and a cross hall leading to those in front. In the double rooms were screens arranged to insure as much privacy as one cared for. A white bed, a sort of closet with book-shelves above, a bureau and dressing [Pg 186] table, a wardrobe built in the wall, a wicker arm chair and a rocking chair, with a large hassock and a small one.

"Now," said Mrs. Aldred, "when your trunk comes you will empty it and put your clothes away, and the servant will take it to the trunk room."

It came up in a few moments. Then Mrs. Aldred left her with some kindly wishes.

Helen went to the window. It overlooked the southwest. There were tops of trees, then a depression that was the river, and over beyond fields golden in the sunshine,—that was the stubble of grain, others a dull brown with here and there a bit of green weed pushing up sturdily since the hay had been cut, young winter wheat over beyond, houses, farms, rising ground again and woodlands. Far over to the westward were the grand hills of another State. It was so much more beautiful than all the Hopes with their levels.

This wonderful thing had happened to her. Hardly a year, indeed it was at the beginning of the present year that Mr. Warfield had gone at her rather fiercely, she thought, and told her there was no use of dawdling and that she must pass for the High School. [Pg 187]

"But I can't go to the High School," she had protested. That looked impossible.

"No matter, you can pass," he had said so sternly that she wondered why people must be cross when they were so much nicer in a pleasant mood.

Then Aunt Jane began to talk of next year when she should be through school. She roused suddenly, she "took hold" as people say and found that life meant something. Perhaps it was the

growth out of childhood, the development of mind; country children were not analytical. She began to wonder about things, to ask questions that pleased Mr. Warfield and tormented Aunt Jane, and all these events, more than had come in the thirteen and a half years before, had happened in this little space of time. Eight months only.

"Oh dear, I wonder if things, incidents, come this way to all girls. I wonder if there is a time when you wake up," and she looked steadily at the sky with its drifts of gray white clouds as if it could answer.

"Well, I do suppose Jenny woke up, too. She wanted to go in the shop and earn money. Sam doesn't seem very wide awake, though he means to learn a trade. Yes, I think there must be [Pg 188] diverse gifts. Oh, it's just glorious here! I wish Mrs. Van Dorn could know."

She did know one day before she sailed and her heart thrilled with a warmth it had not known in a long while. Clara was serene, useful, patient, but she *did* lack enthusiasm.

There were steps and voices, gay laughs, some new girls had come, some old ones rushed out to welcome them. Helen turned and saw her trunks and began to devote herself to unpacking. There was a best hat in a compartment. She opened the wardrobe door and on the shelf were two hat boxes. That was settled. The small articles she laid on the rug, and lifted out the tray. Then came the gowns and skirts, the shirtwaists and all the paraphernalia. She found places for them. But here were two very precious belongings, the Madonna she had once coveted, and a tall vase of roses with a few fallen leaves so natural that one felt inclined to brush them off. There was also an extremely fine photograph of Mrs. Van Dorn. Of course the artist had done his best and turned back the hand of time; she was not over fifty that day.

Helen was much interested in "settling." There were hooks for her pictures, so she stood up on a [Pg 189] chair and hung them. There were several pretty table ornaments, her writing desk with its outfit.

Some one tapped at the partly-opened door. She found a bright rosy-cheeked girl with a fluff of golden red hair, and a laughing face.

"You are one of the new girls," exclaimed a merry voice. "I'm Roxy Mays, not half as hard as my name sounds. In full its Roxalana. I've tried several other ways of shortening it, but they are delusions and snares. I was named after a rich old great-aunt, she was my sponsor and consented to promise I should renounce everything desirable. Why is it that rich people have such ugly names and are always wanting to perpetuate them, or do you get rich on an ugly name? There ought to be some compensation. Now—have you any objection to stating yours before supper time?"

"Mine is Helen Grant."

"Oh, that is splendid and strong and easy to call. There was Helen Mar, and Helen of Troy, and several other famous Helens. Well, I like your name to begin with. Are you going to be a doctor?"

"A doctor!" Helen gave a little shudder. [Pg 190]

"Oh, that settles it. You haven't the courage for all you look so brave. Two of our last year's graduates have chosen that walk in life. One goes to New York bound to work her way through, the other to Wellesley. Seven years of study, think of it and weep!"

"But if she loves to study?"

"Depravity of taste. Spider, ask in this timid fly hovering about your gates," and as Helen stepped back with a gesture of the hand Miss Mays entered and glanced around, though she kept on talking. "Do you like getting settled, and are you not bothered about the right places?—oh," with almost a shriek—"you have that lovely Bodenhausen Madonna! I have the Sichel and I never can decide which I like best. And then Gabriel Marx, and Dangerfield! We're not hopelessly modern, for I have the Sistine. Nearly every girl has it. And oh, who is this handsome woman? A Duchess at the very least!"

"That is—a dear friend," Helen flushed. "That must have been taken when she was younger. She is quite old now."

"Elderly. There may be old men and old peasant women in pictures, but the living women are simply elderly. Well, one wouldn't mind growing old if one could look like that. Have you ever [Pg 191] been away at school before?"

"No," returned Helen.

"North, South, East or West? Brevity is the soul of wit. I sometimes set up for a wit when I can do it on a small capital."

"Rather southerly from here," laughed Helen. "A little country place called Hope Center."

"Hope Center. Helen Grant. Well that has a sound! You will do. What else are you going to put up?"

"I haven't anything else."

"That's delightful. Most girls bring so much from home, to cry over. You don't really look like the crying kind. And school girl treasures accumulate fearfully. It's nice to have a place to put the

new ones."

She had a small photograph of Mrs. Dayton in her writing desk. There had not been any keepsakes to bring.

"Won't you come and be introduced to some of the girls? They are in Daisy Bell's room."

"Wouldn't I——" she hesitated.

"Be an intruder? Oh dear no. The sooner you get over these things the better. Come!" [Pg 192]

Helen's first day at Aldred House.—Page 192.

She took Helen's hand and led her to a room two or three doors down. The screens had been pushed aside. On one bed sat two girls, two others were hanging pictures and spreading bric-a-brac on brackets and shelves. One of the girls was still in short skirts, and Helen felt secretly glad. This was Daisy Bell.

"Oh, thank goodness you're not grown up," cried Daisy, eyeing her from head to toe. "I wept, I prayed, I entreated for long skirts, and I couldn't move my mother, any more than the rock of Gibraltar."

"Well, you're not a senior. Why should you care?"

"How old are you, Miss Grant?"

"Past fourteen the last of June."

"Oh, how tall for that! I'm fifteen. But I have two older sisters, and they are always saying 'That child, Daisy,' as if I was about seven. How many sisters have you?"

"None. And no father or mother."

"You poor wretched orphan!"

"She doesn't look a bit wretched, Roxy Mays," said a girl who had been surveying her. "The juniors are all down there," nodding toward the lower end of the hall, "so you might have known she wasn't 'sweet and twenty.'" [Pg 193]

"At what age do you begin to grow sweet so as to get ready for the twenty?"

"Oh, girls, don't let's hurry into the twenty. I'd like to stay sixteen three years, and seventeen four years."

"I wish they'd made the years longer. There could have been another month or two put in vacation time."

"What is Hope Center like?" asked one of the girls. "It doesn't sound like a city."

"It's the country, farms mostly. North Hope is the real town part, and quite pretty, with stores, and churches, and a library, and a small but nice park."

"There's a lovely old park here. Everything is old. There are the oldest women you ever saw. One of them shook hands with Lafayette."

"And I've shaken hands with ever so many people and not a Lafayette or a Washington among them," declared Roxy most lugubriously.

"Now look, girls, would you hang this picture here?" [Pg 194]

"I think it's rather dark. Bring it over here."

"Yes, that's better. No one asks Miss Grant to sit down."

"'No stars were shining in the sky—
There were no stars to shine.'
No chairs were idly standing round,
In schools they never do abound,"

laughed Daisy Bell. "Miss Grant, sit on the bed. It won't break down."

"Oh, I don't mind," returned Helen.

"What I am to do with all these things!" moaned Daisy, glancing helplessly about.

"Miss Grant has begun sensibly. She did not cart a lot of truck away from home."

Helen had a mind to say humorously "There was no truck to cart," but two others began to talk at once, and she wondered how they could say such bright merry things. It seemed as if she had never seen real girls before.

Then Daisy finished up and they went down on the big back porch where chairs were plenty and hammocks were swung. Helen was introduced to another bevy of girls, some quite young ladies it seemed. They all went in to supper presently, and Helen found herself next to Daisy Bell. The six [Pg 195] girls at this table were all young. Afterwards they went out of doors again and Miss Aldred joined them, welcoming several of the new arrivals personally. She had a very sweet face without being really pretty. She came over to Helen after a few moments and said in a low tone. "You are Mrs. Van Dorn's *protégée*. I hope you will be very happy among us."

"Oh, I am sure I shall," returned Helen.

At nine there was a hymn sung and a brief prayer. Then the girls dispersed, and at ten everybody was in bed. [Pg 196]

CHAPTER X

BEGINNING ANEW

Helen went to her room, saying good-night to a group of girls. She crossed over to her window and stood there many minutes. Oh, a picture like this could never be painted. The moon had come up and the tree-tops were clusters of frosted jewels. Such little nooks of almost black shade, such translucent green where the branches were thin. And the meadows, and the far-off fields, the houses within range! Was she far away in some unknown region? Was this a book she had been reading and would she shut it up and find herself in Hope again?

There was such a sweetness and newness and beauty about it all, such a glow in her heart, speeding through every nerve at the wonderful happening. This lovely home, these pretty, merry girls, music, books, and a kind of living that filled and satisfied. Six months ago she was Helen Grant, was she really someone else now? She felt so, as if there had been some strange [Pg 197] metamorphosis.

And that delightful, enchanting week in New York. Oh, how full of pleasure and happiness the world must be if a few little spaces could contain so much! And that she could have a share in the real blessedness of it!

Was that the big clock striking the half hour? One was to stop reading or studying at that warning and prepare for bed. Dreaming too, tempting as the picture was.

Helen had always "said her prayers." A wonder as to the real virtue of this had occasionally crossed her mind. So far she had only known a religion of habit; like the other habits of life. To-night a new thought possessed her. Did she owe this simply to Mrs. Van Dorn? If all good and perfect things came from God then this that was so supremely delightful, so almost marvelous of its kind must have been put in the kindly heart by some higher power.

She was curiously awed. Uncle Jason and Aunt Jane were church members, but religion had very little power in their lives. Yet Aunt Jane brought up her children to be strictly honest, and any bald falsehood she truly believed she despised. But injustice or the refusal to see the other side of [Pg 198] the question was not connected in her mind with truthfulness. Like many other people the things she believed in and wanted, were right, not only for her, but others must be fitted to the

measure. So Helen knew very little of the higher meaning of the word.

Mrs. Van Dorn paid a general outward respect to religion when she was with a certain kind of people, but she was of a sort of heathen who make gods for themselves. Her life was to be enjoyment now, since the early part of it had been hard and comfortless. If it had not been right, a form of reward for those dreary early years it would not have come to her. She thought it bad taste to array herself against beliefs that pervaded the world so largely. All sorts of disbelief coarsened women. She had listened to one great woman speaker who afterward became an Anarchist, and who even then denounced nearly all the moral precepts and attacked modern marriage, and was really shocked. She liked to keep what she called reverence for sacred things. And it pleased her to play Providence to people now and then, and impress it delicately on the [Pg 199] recipients that they need look no farther than herself for the giver of their good.

But to-night Helen felt there was some power beyond, and she gave thanks sincerely to it. It was God who had made the world so full of beauty, it must be God who had put these noble and lovely desires in anyone's soul, so she went quite past Mrs. Van Dorn.

There were sweet and merry voices the next morning, but Helen had been up an hour or more looking over some poems in a choice selection. Someone tapped at her door, and she opened it. Miss Mays stood there smiling.

"I suppose you feel a little queer, like the traditional cat in a strange garret. Come down with us."

"To-day is a kind of lawless, irresponsible time. I dote on it. We had lots of fun last year because we came on Friday. It was Daisy Bell's first year, too. You learn to-day what the rules are, but you don't have to keep them. It's a grace day when you are not forced to get your accounts straight."

Helen turned and wished her mates goodmorning, and thought within herself that it was a very pretty thing to say, since the morning was so good. Yet she had a curious feeling within her, as if [Pg 200] she was here under some kind of false pretense. She was so utterly honest she would have enjoyed explaining her exact situation, that she was here on the bounty of a friend, and not as these other girls who came from delightful homes, and had fathers to care for them.

Mrs. Aldred summoned Helen to her room. Occasionally this was not a pleasant call to make, but this morning it had no such signification.

All new pupils underwent this examination. Where she had been trained, what she had studied, and what her aims were, if she had any.

Mrs. Van Dorn had explained pretty clearly, and she had also said, "Don't spoil a very nice, honest girl by setting her up too high."

"What I would like to do most of all?" and Helen's eyes lighted with enthusiasm. "I think it would be to teach, because then you always go on learning. There are some things that girls and women do that seem to make you stop off short, turn you into another channel entirely," and she thought of the shoe factory and how narrowly she had escaped that.

Mrs. Van Dorn had been quite as non-commital with her *protégée* then, or had no real plans for her. [Pg 201]

"Now let me hear what you have studied."

Helen went over the list and told of her High School examination and how she had passed. There was a girlish pride in it, of course, but no undue elation. Mrs. Aldred was much pleased with the absence of self-consciousness, the real delight in knowledge.

"You are very well grounded. Mrs. Van Dorn wished you to take up French; of course you will begin with Latin. And music."

"Oh!" Helen's face was radiant then. "Music! I never dreamed of that!"

"You will not enjoy the drudgery, but that has to come first. It is an excellent thing to be interested in what you are doing, to *love* it, but all studies are not equally pleasant. There are courage and perseverance needed."

"I shall try to do my very best for Mrs. Van Dorn's sake. It was so generous of her to send me here though I do think I should have managed to work my way through the High School."

What a frank, honest girl she was! How little she knew about the world! An astute person could turn her inside out and laugh at her innocence. It was a pity to spoil it, yet it would be worse to [Pg 202] leave her at the mercy of a crowd of girls.

"This will be an entirely new experience for you," Mrs. Aldred began gently. "You have had very little acquaintance with the real world, and very little need to be on your guard. As one's sphere grows wider and more people come into it, there is occasion for"—how should she put it—judgment; no, that was not quite it; at this stage of a girl's life she was not likely to have a very correct judgment; "a little caution and reserve. Girls so often exchange confidences about their lives and their friends, and do not always look at things just as they are. Afterward they regret their unreserve."

Helen had been taking in every word, only she could not get the meaning of it, except that it seemed to her confused sense akin to her thoughts of an hour ago. She really studied the face

before her, and Mrs. Aldred felt the scrutiny. How could she make the girl understand just what she meant? If Mrs. Van Dorn had been a little more explicit. If she were having the girl educated solely for herself the explanation would be easy enough.

Helen's directness solved the difficulty. There was so much ingrained honesty about her, and yet half the time lately, it seemed to her she had been on the very verge of deceitfulness. [Pg 203]

"Mrs. Aldred," she began, with some hesitation, "I was thinking, this morning, when I heard the girls talk, that my life had been so different from theirs, and whether I had the right—" her face went scarlet then—"I don't know as I can just explain it," in some confusion, "but whether I *was* on an equality with them."

She said it out bravely. Mrs. Aldred admired her courage and her honesty.

"You certainly are on an equality with them here. If Mrs. Van Dorn had asked me to take you as a return for some past favors, you would still have been put on an equality, and I should not have considered it sailing under false colors. But she pays the usual terms for you, and the favor is between yourself and her. So you can dismiss all thoughts of that from your mind. I think she desires to have you trained in society ways, which you can do by watching the best examples and following them. You will like some girls very much, and girls are largely given to think that a true friendship must begin by telling each other all the little happenings of their lives. It is a good rule [Pg 204] to consider in these matters whether you would like the girl to tell this over to someone who did not admire you so much, and who repeated it with little embellishments to the next eager listener."

"But she could not if it was a confidence," said Helen decisively.

"Girls' consciences are elastic," smiling a little. "I think they do not mean to make mischief, but I have known more than one regret caused by an incautious confidence. Girls have many things to learn before they are women, but a light and happy heart is the birthright of a girl and she need not hurry to outgrow it. Still one can study wisdom as well as other lessons, and like most of them, it is a lifelong study."

Helen was considering and wondered if she understood. She had never been counseled in this spirit. "I want you to know that you are in no sense a charity scholar, as the phrase goes, though I have had several who worked their way through school, gave for whatever they obtained, which is far from charity, I take it. I will only add, choose your friends, which implies some discrimination on your part. Did you like the girls at the table? They are all in the French class [Pg 205] and they talk French during the five school days. That is not demanded of the new scholars. Monday we will begin in regular order and I will have your classes arranged."

Then she touched a pretty bell that stood on the table and Miss Aldred answered the summons.

"Grace, will you take Miss Grant through the schoolrooms?" she asked, and Miss Aldred smiled as she gave a gesture of assent.

Helen followed her guide. This was the general assembly room, here the different recitation rooms, here the drawing classes met and there were casts and busts and figures in plaster, and several very well executed paintings and drawings embellished the walls. Then the music room, and the study room had a piano in it also.

Helen was a trifle appalled. Education had seemed a rather simple thing at Hope. She sighed as she glanced up at Miss Grace.

"Oh, where is there time to learn it all?" she asked with a sinking at the heart.

"You do not have to learn it in one day or one week," was the smiling answer. "And every day it grows easier." [Pg 206]

"But—music! I've never even touched a piano."

"Do you sing?"

"Yes, a few little songs and Sunday hymns. And sometimes out of doors I try to catch the bird notes. They are no special tunes, you know, but I always have to stop at the warble," and she laughed brightly.

Miss Grace nodded, rather amused.

"And I have never studied Latin or French."

"Everyone has to begin, though the babies in France talk French, which I believe once surprised a woman who was traveling in France."

"Oh!" Then Helen laughed gayly.

"And this is our drawing room. Once a month we have sociables, given by one of the seniors who has to arrange everything just as she would if she were in society. And the other girls are the guests."

It was a beautiful long room, with a bay window at the side which made a very pretty break in it. At both ends were double windows. The floor was matted, with rugs here and there. The furniture was simple and tasteful; two cabinets were filled with handsome china and bric-a-brac,

and there was one case of elegant books. The real reading and study books, histories, and so on, were in the reception room and the study room. [Pg 207]

Then they walked out on the porch where a bevy of girls had congregated.

"I have been introducing Miss Grant to the house," Miss Aldred said in her soft, pleasant tone, "and now you girls may tell her what we do and how we do it, and anything else that will not make her feel homesick."

Helen was sure she should never have one yearning for Hope Center.

"Oh, Miss Aldred, don't you think we might go down town this afternoon and introduce her to the town where she will have to find her social nutriment for the next ten months?"

"Social, indeed," laughed Miss Mays.

"Well, what is it? Our intellectual nutriment is here, and though we sometimes study wood and wilds you cannot exactly describe it as natural pabulum, and though we do a little shopping you can't designate it as financial forage. But we will not bother about exact definition until next week, so that we can go, Miss Aldred?" imploringly.

"I see no objection at present." [Pg 208]

The stage had come up with some scholars, and Miss Aldred went to receive them.

"I am really going to take Miss Grant in charge. First, let us have a walk about our own domain."

The front and one side were devoted to pleasure and beauty. Some lovely old trees, a willow touching the ground with its long arms, two splendid Norway spruces, a great catalpa, maples, and one fine old elm. Two hammocks were swung in the shade, there were several rustic seats about, and a table that seemed to invite one to a picnic meal. At the back the decline was a tangle of wildness until it reached the little stream. Various wood asters were beginning to bloom, golden-rod, balsams, and several fine, white blossoms. Yet, it was rather shady and they all had a delicate appearance.

"And there is a path. You can go down," exclaimed Helen, rather wistfully.

"And get yourself torn by briers. We won't go down this morning, for there are pleasanter ways, and you will have enough of it when you go out botanizing."

"It is so beautiful. And over there is another hill." Her eyes were alight with enthusiasm. [Pg 209]

"And the end of the town lies down in the valley. Now around here is the useful and a bit of orchard. The old branching apple tree gives us oceans of bloom in the spring, and we are allowed to despoil it as it seldom fruits. That's the useful—not exactly the garden of sweet herbs, but there are some in it. And here is the lovely grape arbor, if you are not afraid some fierce caterpillar or savage green worm an inch or two long may swing down upon you."

There was a long bench at one side, and the air was fragrant with ripening grapes. They seated themselves, and Miss Mays extended a cordial invitation to the merry group.

"Are we really allowed to?" asked someone, hesitatingly, a stranger to the privileges.

"In reason, yes. It would be most unkind and ill-bred to strip the vines and offer them for sale in the public market. I hope none of you have been seized with that intention. There are some more prisoners of hope," as another stage stopped.

"Why prisoners? Do they not come of their own accord," asked Helen. [Pg 210]

"Oh, Miss Grant, they generally come of their fathers' and mothers' accord the first time. Did you really sigh to come?"

"I wanted to, yes;" in an eager tone.

"Depraved taste."

Helen looked surprised. That everyone of any intelligence should not long for an education amazed her. And these bright, pretty girls who must have congenial surroundings seemed the very ones to appreciate it.

They were still jesting when the luncheon bell rang. One new table was filled and some vacant spaces in several others. It was beginning to look like quite a family. But Helen had the feeling of being a guest at a hotel, just as she had been all the week. They dispersed to their rooms, and Helen tried to read a little, but the words were mixed up with French and music. She would like the music she knew. She listened to the sound of the piano on the floor below, and her whole soul responded to the melody. Had anyone ever been so blest before? It was like a fairy story.

"Well," exclaimed Miss Mays an hour or so later, looking in at the door, "have you a mind ready for a walk, to see the town. For I doubt if otherwise you can be introduced to it before next Saturday." [Pg 211]

"Oh, yes," springing up with energy. "I begin to think strange places are—" she cast about for a word—"fascinating."

"How many strange places have you seen?" laughingly.

"Not many. A week in New York and the pretty places and wonders thereabout."

"New York is a marvel by itself. And I've never been there," sighing. "I suppose I may be classed as a Westerner. The western part of the State. I know several of those cities and Niagara Falls and the Canada side; we were there two months ago. I *did* manage to squeeze in, but the girls didn't want me a bit. Papa managed that," exultingly.

Helen had been studying Miss Mays' attire. Her gray frock and coat were just the thing, and her gray felt hat trimmed with scarlet and a bright wing. So she put it on and was ready.

"You can learn a good deal by watching other people," Mrs. Van Dorn had said. "And it is bad taste to make yourself conspicuous."

As they stepped out in the hall several others joined them. Mrs. Aldred nodded to them as they passed out. [Pg 212]

"Did you see those two girls on the veranda? They look like twins and might almost as well be. They are fifteen, birthdays only a week apart. Mothers are sisters, and the fathers cousins. Alice and Annie Otis. They both have light hair, but one has darker eyes than the other. And the blue-eyed one is a little stouter. They are to room together."

"Roxy Mays, I don't see how you find out so much about everybody," said one of the group.

"By using my eyes and ears. One of them told part of this to Miss Grace, and the mother of Annie explained the rest to Mrs. Aldred, but I don't know which Annie is. I'll guess it is the plump one with a dimple in her chin. They have never been away at school before. You can tell that by their half-frightened look."

"Did I look half frightened?" inquired Helen, mirthfully, glancing around.

"I must say you did not. And we descended upon you so unceremoniously. It might be admissible to ask what you thought of us." [Pg 213]

"That it was very kind of you to call on me. I should have felt much more strange if I had speculated all the evening and seen you first this morning."

"Now you see the benefit of rushing in where angels fear to tread. You were placed in our neighborhood, and we have been neighborly."

"I thank you very much," Helen returned gravely.

Elm Avenue ran straight down in the town, down to the river, indeed. But the beauty of Westchester was its main street that intersected this and ran parallel with the river about a quarter of a mile below the school, and was called Center Street. It had all that was of the most account in the town, the Court House, a fine building, a public hall with offices on the lower floor, two very pretty churches with their parsonages, several stores, post-office, and bank, and at both ends handsome residences with well-kept grounds. Being the county town, at autumn and spring it displayed a rather busy aspect; the rest of the time was given over to very delightful, refined social living. There had been some doubts at first as to whether a girls' boarding-school would not disturb the serene aspect, but it was not large enough, and kept very well in hand. [Pg 214]

From Center Street, streets and avenues branched out both ways. These were substantially built up with large grounds and handsome gardens on the east side, stretching out finally to farms, and on the west running down to the river, that being broken by rifts and rather dangerous places, was hardly navigable for general business, though small sloops ventured up when the river was not too low. A mile further down was a bed of clay and a brick-yard, and two or three factories with a sort of hamlet. Three miles below were large iron-works. The railroad ran along the river, and left the town to its beauty and comparative quiet.

It was, in its surroundings, much handsomer than North Hope, and the style of homes betokened both wealth and culture, a town whose ways were settled, a town of the better class who had not to consider the ordinary chances of making money. Several of the houses were shut up in the winter, while their occupants went to the city for the season. Those who remained at home entertained themselves with various amateur diversions. There was a fine musical club that gave two or three concerts through the winter; another that had a course of lectures, and the churches gave fairs and sociables. The four denominations were represented, but the Presbyterians were the largest, oldest and most influential. [Pg 215]

The small river was spanned by a number of pretty rustic bridges, and emptied into the greater one that divided it from the neighboring State, whose wooded heights and rocky bluffs were most picturesque. There were only occasional houses, though down at the brick-yard a small settlement was begun. And already the sun was throwing long shadows from the densest woods, where firs, cedars, and hemlock were almost black against the beeches and hickories, even now turning yellow at the point of the long leaves; chestnuts with the brown fringes of bloom that bore no fruit still hanging to them. Here and there a pile of rocks, gray and brown and dotted with glistening gems, it would seem, there were points that sparkled so. There a hollow that might be a dryad's cave, bunches of sumac in autumnal gorgeousness, tangles of wild growth, blackberry with its deep red leaves, cat-briar still green and glossy, and the confusion of wild woodland growth. [Pg 216]

"Oh, how beautiful it is!" Helen exclaimed involuntarily.

"Where are you viewing the universe?"

"Over beyond the river. Do you ever go there?"

"Oh, yes, we row across. The school owns a boat. It is supposed to be good exercise, but it does blister your hands. There is a bridge farther up there, now you can see it."

The church spire had hidden it from view, but it was just a plain, partly-covered structure.

"We went over for our picnic. There are swamps of rhododendrons, and mountain laurel. That is beautiful even in the winter if you are fond of such things. Never mind them to-day. There will be some rambles over there presently. Let us look nearer home. What are you, religiously?"

Helen flushed. Was she really religious at all?

"I mean what denomination claims your family? We generally follow in their footsteps."

"Presbyterian," with a hesitating sound in her voice.

"Then this will be your church. Mrs. Aldred is a member here, and Miss Grace, but curiously enough Miss Gertrude leans toward Episcopacy, and she plays some of the old masses in a way that almost sweeps you along in her current. She is to be an artist. Last winter she was in New York taking lessons, and she teaches painting, but we haven't a very artistic lot of girls I think. Mr. Danforth is the clergyman here. You will like him I guess. My people are Methodists. That is my church 'way down below, but I often go there." [Pg 217]

"Oh, let us get on to the stores," said one of the group. "Let me see—there are five of us. I'll treat to-day, that will make us five weeks going round. Only on Saturdays, mind."

They passed the bank, a very modest building with law offices on the second floor. Then the Court House, which was quite imposing, and a row of stores, larger and finer than those in Hope. An inviting ice-cream parlor with a rustic garden at the side, divided into vine-covered booths, claimed their attention, and they sauntered in, seating themselves nonchalantly. [Pg 218]

CHAPTER XI

SCHOOL IN EARNEST

On Monday the real work of school began. Besides the boarding scholars, was a day-school of the young ladies and larger girls, who were either sent away or went to Aldred House. There was an excellent school for the little ones, and a very good public school, but Westchester did not take cordially to this except for the boys.

Two of the teachers had arrived on Saturday evening. Madame Meran, the French teacher, who also gave music lessons to the younger pupils, and Miss Lane, who taught Latin and German to the few who desired it, and had dreams of college life. Mrs. Aldred made no specialty of this, but some of the pupils insisted on remaining until that time. There were two divisions in the senior class, two in the junior. Helen was glad that Daisy Bell was in the B. division. She was not as gay as Roxy Mays, but there was a quality of tenderness in her that was very attractive. [Pg 219]

She was not quite sure that she would desire to make a warm friend of Miss Mays though on Friday evening her whole heart had gone out to her. She could turn any subject into ridicule so easily, she could seize on small foibles and distort them with such a winsome grace that they were amusing at the time, but when one thought them over afterward one saw the little stings that were left behind.

It was so different from anything Helen had dreamed of. At first she thought she would have been happier going to the Hope High School and working her way through. There was a feeling that she did not truly and honestly belong in this circle of girls, many of whom had rich fathers and luxurious homes; and she wondered if some day she would come to have the careworn and unsatisfied look that Miss Lane had. Miss Lane had taught ten years, beginning when she was nineteen. So she was twenty-nine.

"And I do not believe she has ever had a lover," said Miss Mays. "She looks so."

"What kind of a look is that?" questioned someone.

"Why that discontented, hungry expression, that curious alertness, as if you were looking for something that had never come, and you were afraid never would. Girls, if I had to live until I was twenty-nine unmarried——" [Pg 220]

"Well, what then?" queried three or four voices.

"I'd find some way of finishing it out at twenty-five."

"Oh, you couldn't," cried Daisy, shocked.

"Well, there are sisterhoods in churches and they are very respectable. My great-aunt Roxalana has been married twice, both times to rich men. She's eighty-six now and looks like a fright, though it is said she was a very pretty young woman. It's safe to say that when your compeers are all dead. Oh, I do hope I will never outlive my beauty."

They all laughed at that.

Days were divided up like clock-work. You were called at six while the mornings were light. Breakfast was at seven. At eight there was a study period. Quarter before nine they assembled in the small seated room called the chapel, by courtesy, and at nine went into the schoolroom. At eleven they had ten minutes' recreation, then study until twelve; an hour for luncheon, and two hours' study and recitation again. Two afternoons a week music lessons. Dinner from five to six; [Pg 221] from seven to nine study period, unless one could get through sooner.

Helen thought this first day that she had never really studied in her life. She had a quick memory, at least, so it had always seemed, and an absolute genius for mathematics. History, as far as she had gone, was a delight. But the Latin! Was there any sense in it? Did the old Romans talk in that tongue? And what was the use of it now, when Rome itself was Italian.

"You will understand the use of it by and by," said Miss Lane. "I am afraid, so far, what you have acquired has come too easy, but a year hence you will be laughing over this when you hear some other girls moan."

If the Latin was a trial, the music was still more so. When slim fingers glided over the keys with chords of melody it penetrated her very soul, and she just drew in long breaths of delight. But hers were not slim fingers and running up and down the scale seemed as much beyond her as conversing in Latin.

"You are in too great a hurry. You go too hard, with too much force," said Madame Meran. [Pg 222]

All that she had done thus far in life had been done in a hurry, except waiting on Mrs. Van Dorn, who took everything leisurely. She tried not to run upstairs, as she found only new girls did that, and not to walk heavily on the uncarpeted floor. And she was glad enough of the experience at Mrs. Dayton's. She was not an awkward girl, and she watched the others with keen eyes. A fortnight passed before the school was full. One day Mrs. Aldred summoned her.

"You said the first day you came that you liked people," that lady began smilingly. "As yours is a double room and the other part needed, I am going to give you a choice. You can have a small room to yourself or Miss Daisy Bell will share yours, and the new scholar take hers."

"Oh, I should like that," her eyes shining with pleasure. "But if she——"

"She is quite willing. This is a first year for both of you, since she only came last Easter, and you may be able to help each other. She is already a fair musician and has had a year's tuition in Latin; in several English branches you are much in advance. Then you have a study habit, and that she lacks." [Pg 223]

"I am glad I have one good quality," and the eager face flushed with gratification.

"You have more than one," smiling. "You are too impatient about learning. Everything does not come by nature, and there may be many years to devote to it."

"I think of only two. I want to crowd in everything I can."

"Do not look so far ahead. It is better to live day by day; better to do to-day's duty."

"But I am falling behind all the time. I spent Saturday trying to catch up, instead of having a good time. And I do so want to walk in those haunts over the river, those woods and wilds, before the frost comes on."

"You were brave to give it up. They are beautiful even after frost, and there will be some time to spare. The first week, the first month, indeed, is generally the hardest. Then I'll send Miss Bell to you? I think you will make good comrades."

"Oh, I shall be delighted."

She almost ran into Daisy's arms in the hall.

"I was coming to tell you some news," exclaimed the girl eagerly, her eyes shining with pleasure.

"About——" [Pg 224]

"Oh, I know Roxy Mays ferreted that out! I do believe it is as she says, a bird in the air tells her."

"No. Mrs. Aldred spoke to me."

The sweet face lighted up instantly.

"That is all right then. I like to have the telling of something first, don't you? I think we shall get along nicely. I should not like every girl——"

"Oh, thank you;" laughingly.

"That is true of us all, isn't it, or most of us? I would not like to room with anyone who was not

neat, I'd like someone fond of study to spur me on. I'm dismal at algebra, and I can help you in the Latin. And then your room isn't crowded up with everything. I think so much makes you tired. And this is an awful heresy, but I am tired of Gibson girls, and nearly all having the same pictures and ornaments. It isn't restful. Think of Claudine Marr's room. I wonder if she ever draws a good, unimpeded breath? I'm not surprised that she has headaches."

"When I am tired I look out of the window at the most beautiful picture I have ever seen. And I think how it will change all the autumn."

"And be dreary in the winter." [Pg 225]

"I do not believe I feel about leafless trees as most people do. You see all the fine little twigs and branches, some days in a gray-purple sort of haze, some days tipped with shimmering gold, then silvered with moonlight or sparkling with frost, and I am content that the leaves drop off so that you can see how really wonderful they are. And when the wind tosses them all about, nature seems rocking them with a lullaby, you feel as if they were in some degree human."

"Oh, Helen, you ought to be a poet," Daisy exclaimed enthusiastically.

They had walked to Helen's room. Her clothes were all in the closet, her books lay on the table, only her writing-desk was on the chair. She had added nothing to the room, but she did want a case of shelves. And oddly enough she had not encroached on the other side. Daisy wondered rather at that.

"Then I may move in at once."

"Oh, yes. I shall be delighted."

"Come and help me empty my closet."

Helen did this with pleasure. They had a gay time settling things and were all in order when Miss Mays came flying along the hall.

"So you have formed a partnership, have you? I had half a mind to suggest it last night when we heard that Miss Craven was coming. I've just been introduced to her, and she's a positive fright. Lean, long, and lanky, beautiful alliteration, is it not? Helen, she would have given you the nightmare." [Pg 226]

"I am satisfied," and Helen nodded with a secret feeling of exultation as she met Daisy's eyes.

"What conspiracy are you hatching now?" glancing from one to the other.

The sound of the dinner bell was sufficient excuse for not answering. For once they had the innings.

The new scholar was at the next table to them. She was tall and looked, as Roxy said afterwards, of a very uncertain age. Her hair was a rather dull light brown, her eyes a sort of hazel with bluish lights, which made them dull, and a complexion that would never be fair, with quite a shadow under the eyes. The features were not bad, but something was needed to give them life.

After the study period the two girls went upstairs with their arms around each other.

"Let us run away to-morrow and have a walk and a splendid talk about trees," said Daisy. "I was thinking all dinner time that I needed to be introduced to them. I believe I am only acquainted with Mr. Evergreen and Mr. Horse-chestnut. It bothers me to tell an elm tree from a maple and a white-skinned beech from a white birch." [Pg 227]

"Oh, dear! I've promised to devote the afternoon to scales. I've had a little Latin hammered into me, but I am almost afraid that, extravagantly as I love music I shall make small headway in the divine art. And Madame Meran was good enough to offer me an extra lesson."

"Then we will take it some other Saturday."

"How delightful it is to be together!"

Then they kissed, girl fashion, for the first time, and uttered a tender good-night.

Two rooms away Miss Craven was crying softly and wishing she had not come here. It seemed an out of the way place, it was a small school, and Mrs. Aldred's letter had been encouraging. There was all the fortune for her alone. If it had come earlier, while some of the others were alive to share it! She, too, longed for an education so that she might be more able to enjoy it. [Pg 228]

"Have you written to Mrs. Van Dorn?" asked Mrs. Aldred on Saturday morning.

"I intend to this morning. And to my uncle."

Mrs. Aldred nodded approvingly.

Mrs. Van Dorn had said, "In a fortnight you may write me a letter. Then once a month."

So it had been a fortnight. She found a good deal to say. She liked the school very much and described her room-mate, her new studies, the little she had seen of the town. And there was an enthusiastic gratitude that satisfied the waiting and doubtful heart.

There was a good deal to say to Uncle Jason, and yet it was rather difficult not to write too

rapturously. When she had finished that she bethought herself of Mr. Warfield. He had asked her to write.

She found no trouble here. Indeed the luncheon bell rang before she had quite finished.

"You can go down to the post-office," Daisy exclaimed. "I want some stamps and some sewing cotton. Roxy borrowed mine."

She hurried her letter in the envelope. Daisy had asked permission. She sent her letters on their way with a light heart, though as she came back it was rather heavy. Such a golden day as it was. [Pg 229] And several of the pupils were going out botanizing with Miss Grace. They all liked Miss Grace very much. A girl less used to giving up would have considered it very hard. But she enjoyed every moment of this brief walk and came home with a great bunch of asters.

"If you only *were* going! I should take twice the pleasure. Helen Grant, I do believe I have fallen in love with you."

"I am very glad," returned Helen with shining eyes.

To think how she had run around the woods in Hope and never thought of the wonderful beauty God had scattered so lavishly everywhere. This delight was knowledge. Jenny never felt it as she walked in and out to the factory. And Aunt Jane called it nonsense!

Madame Meran had some needlework and sat by her counting time, fingers and thumbs. Helen was so in earnest she could not help being interested in her.

"Oh, do you suppose I ever shall learn?" she inquired with a discouraged sigh. "And I love music so."

"That is my hope about you. I have seen worse beginnings. You will never make a wonderful [Pg 230] pianist, but you have a really fine voice, and it is nice to be able to play your own accompaniments."

"And someone I care for very much desires me to learn, someone to whom I owe a debt of gratitude. So I shall do my best."

Then she went on steadily and did master two or three points.

"Now you may go in the study and practice, as I have to take Miss Craven in hand, and I can trust you."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Helen delightedly. She was just as honest as if Madame's eyes were on her. She gave the full hour although her wrist ached, and her thumb seemed to lose its agility. But she had made a slight advance, she could see that. And there were ten months to be given to study.

She went out on the back porch presently, and then almost to the edge of the flat space. One *could* go down the hill, even that was school grounds, fenced in at the sides, and up here where there was a gate, kept locked for the most part. The sun was going down behind the next hill, and across in the other State, almost as if there were two suns. What gorgeous coloring, changing, melting into new and indescribable tints and burnishing here, making scarlet shades there as if [Pg 231] the tree-tops were on fire, and the rocks molten silver. How could it take on or give out so many colors?

She had an impression someone was near and turned. It was the new scholar. There was a wistful expression in her eyes that touched Helen. No one had taken any special notice of her. Helen remembered her own warm welcome. Of course, now everyone was busy with lessons and had settled upon her friends and chums.

What could she say? To ask her if she felt at home would be a platitude, and Helen knew she did not come any nearer, as if she might be intruding. What a slim figure she had, and her frock was of fine, soft material that clung like the draperies in some of the "studies." She wore a very handsome chain and the watch edge just showed above her belt. Her hands were long and thin and she had a nervous manner of using them. She wore two beautiful rings.

Helen took a step towards her. "I wonder if you had such a battle with music as I did," she began, with girlish gayety. "It seemed as if I must have tried Madame's patience until there was nothing left for you. I am beginning to wonder how an excellent player who has an ear attuned to [Pg 232] harmony can endure such stupidity."

Miss Craven stared with a sort of uncertainty.

"I should not think you were stupid. You look so bright and vivacious."

"I am afraid I wasn't born with the art of music along with the love for it."

"I have studied a little, alone mostly, and find I have some bad habits. And I like it beyond everything."

If she only wouldn't be so stiff and distant!

"I never touched a piano until I came here. And one can't expect to be an expert in four lessons," Helen said in a half-humorous tone.

Miss Craven flushed and it was not a pretty color.

"You like it here? Were you a new scholar this year? You look very young."

"I was fourteen in the summer. Yes, I am a new scholar. But I have grown very much at home."

Then there was a pause. Helen bethought herself of the other question.

"Yes, I like it extremely. It is such a beautiful place. I've been studying the sunset and wishing I could paint a picture of it. I've come to wish so many things of late," laughing at herself. "And I like the teachers. I don't know many of the seniors, and I am in junior B." [Pg 233]

"I am taking some private lessons," hesitatingly.

Poor girl! She could not even have passed a junior B examination.

"There's such a pretty girl at your table. Her hair is the color one sometimes gets in a sunset, a bright gold, and yet it isn't the color so much as the curious waviness and stir all about it. It seems alive. And her complexion is beautiful, her eyes fairly laugh."

"That is Miss Mays. She isn't really in our class. She's an 'A' scholar. Every month someone new is elected for hostess. You are at the head of the table. You see that everything is served, that no one is—well, not exactly rude or awkward, but not up to the mark. And you keep a certain order."

"I spilled my coffee this morning. My spoon was in my cup and I just touched it with my cuff. I wish I could have gone through the floor or run away. But one has to learn all these nice things if one means to—to be anybody." [Pg 234]

"I learned some of them in the summer. I was with a friend," and Helen flushed without quite knowing why. "I was a regular country girl—on a farm."

"I was too. I begin to think I ought not have come here, but I did not want to go where there were one or two hundred girls, and I did want to learn nice ways," hesitatingly.

"Then this is the very place to come."

"Only I did not imagine they were all rich girls; that is, society people," awkwardly.

"Oh, they are not. Two of the seniors mean to teach next year, so they cannot be rich. And one girl is going to an art school and means to work her way through. Of course most of them have fathers to care for them."

"I have never had anyone to care in that way. And it is curious, but on my father's side I have not a single near relative, perhaps none at all. And my mother was an only child."

"I have neither father or mother," returned Helen. "But I have some very kind relatives on my mother's side." [Pg 235]

"It is dreadful to be all alone, and to think——"

Miss Craven paused and compressed her lips, looked indeed as if she would cry, but winked very hard. And then Helen noticed that she had lovely long lashes, much darker than her hair and that her upper eyelids were thin, almost transparent. It was queer how she was beginning to see these little points of comeliness.

"Oh, there are the girls!" she said.

They were winding round into Elm Avenue, with great bunches of wild flowers and bright leaves, and one girl with an armful of golden-rod.

"I am much obliged for the talk," and with a sudden abruptness Miss Craven disappeared.

Helen looked after her a moment. She was lonely and unhappy. She would like very much to know her story. The girls speculated upon her and decided that she was a nobody come into a fortune. Private lessons, of necessity, cost more, so she must have money. Then her clothes, though not showy, were expensive and had a true *modiste* air. There was evidently something she did not want the world to know; she had not been used to society, and she was hopelessly plain. Miss Mays made rhymes about her on the Lear nonsense pattern. You really couldn't help laughing at a great deal of bright criticism she indulged in if her comments were rather sarcastic. [Pg 236]

Helen ran down the steps out to the sidewalk, looking happy and merry.

"You poor child, you are not yet resolved into a demi-semi-quaver or any other shaky thing. But you should have been with us! I was awfully afraid of snakes, and one had to sit down and help to pick out the beggar ticks, though I long to give them the old-fashioned, appropriate country name. Why such things were allowed to grow I can't see. We discovered a new rivulet meandering down the mountain side, and a royal bed of ferns, and one of two new specimens of bloom. As for you—I observe the jabberwock has not slain you, so I suppose you conquered him!"

Helen laughed as she took Roxy's outstretched hand, which she could not very well help, and said, "I have the answer of a good conscience."

"And we have the answer of sights and sounds and a wonderful sunset."

"Yes, I saw that."

The girls were talking across each other and showing flowers. Becky, the general factotum, brought a jardiniere and put in all but the golden-rod, which was reserved for a tall Japanese vase, and they were set on each side of the hall door. Then the crowd went to fix up a little for dinner. [Pg 237]

Helen stole a furtive glance over at Miss Craven. She was simply stolid, indifferent, and went to her room while the others paced up and down the piazza in twos and threes, exchanging confidences, or someone sang a song in the long parlor. Miss Lane, down in one corner of the veranda, was telling Greek legends to half a dozen girls. It was a picture of friendly content and enjoyment.

"I wonder if Miss Craven is crying in her room?" and Helen really longed to go to her. She was so overflowing with happiness. [Pg 238]

CHAPTER XII

THE COURAGE OF CONVICTIONS

The last mail came up just after dinner. It was in the Aldred House mail-bag, and Mrs. Aldred handed out the letters. One she laid on the table. But the recipient had no idea of it and was not among the applicants.

When they were all gone she took that up. It was in a modern business hand with a good deal of strength in it, not the kind of hand usual for country farmers. The post mark was North Hope.

"Will you ask Miss Grant to come to me, Becky?"

Helen flew with eager blitheness through the hall and glanced with happy inquiring eyes.

"Was there a letter for me? I did not expect one so soon."

"Is this from your uncle?" she held it up.

"Oh, no. That is from Mr. Warfield. I could tell that hand among a hundred. Isn't it strong and quite as if he knew his own mind?" [Pg 239]

She was positively eager with delight as she reached out her hand.

"He is no relative?"

"Oh, the Principal of the school where I went. You know I told you of the interest he took in me."

"Of course you have read the school regulations in your room?"

Helen's bright face was suddenly shadowed.

"Oh, I do believe—I *did* forget all about it. I wrote to Mrs. Van Dorn and then to my uncle, and there seemed so many things I wanted to say to him, and I just hurried them down. You see he asked me to write to him——"

Helen paused embarrassed. She knew just where the little card was tacked beside the door. Various rules and regulations and hours and a notice that no correspondence would be allowed without permission, to any gentleman except father and brothers or guardians. And she had never thought of it at that moment.

"It must have been because he seemed to me like a guardian," she explained. "That does not excuse my inattention, but please believe me, Mrs. Aldred, that I didn't willfully break the rule. And you may read the letter." [Pg 240]

"You have the right of the first reading of it. Sit here, will you?"

Helen cut the end of the envelope, and was soon lost in it. Smiles passed over her face, then she drew her brows in a little crease and the lips were pressed together with a touch of annoyance. Then the smiles again.

Mrs. Van Dorn had asked that Helen Grant should not be allowed to correspond with Mr. Warfield. She did not approve of his influence over Helen. It was too purely masculine. And Helen was too young to have a man friend. It might divide her school interest, and she had selected Aldred House because she wanted Helen to have the best feminine training.

Mrs. Aldred had smiled over this when she read Mrs. Van Dorn's letter. Strange that the fear should so soon have materialized.

"Will you please read it," asked Helen in a low tone. "I think he doesn't quite like a girls' school. And he is all for study. He would push anyone right straight along, and he believes my music would be wasted time. I dare say I confessed I was not very bright at it." [Pg 241]

The letter was certainly unobjectionable, a little severe perhaps, betraying the school principal, but still showing the high esteem in which he held Helen's capabilities. Such a correspondence

would not be likely to do any student harm.

"You see, Helen," she began in a tone of sweet friendliness, "I am answerable for the girls committed to my charge. Some of the older ones have young men friends who would be very glad to keep up a correspondence, and no doubt two or three years hence the girls would feel mortified at knowing letters of theirs were in the man's possession. I have known young lads to read letters aloud to their college or club friends. It is a demoralizing and indiscreet thing, and no high-minded mother would consent to her daughter doing it without her knowledge or inspection. One rule, therefore, must apply to all such correspondences without the mother's consent. A letter like this would do a girl no harm, indeed, I think your Mr. Warfield rather severe."

"I don't quite understand how I could have done it so carelessly," Helen said in her frank, honest way. "And I am very, very sorry. But I should like to write and explain to him why it is"—she cast about for a word—"inadmissable." [Pg 242]

"Of course it is best to do that."

Helen glanced up in such a straightforward fashion. There was nothing concealed. And to make her renunciation still more earnest and the obedience more cheerful, she said:

"I don't mean that I shouldn't care for the letters, for I understand what Mr. Warfield means by every line, and sometimes it would be a pleasure to write to so good a friend, for after all I owe him the best fortune of my life. I am doing it without any demur because it is one of the rules of the school and I do honestly and truly wish to keep them."

"Thank you for your ready acquiescence," and Mrs. Aldred's smile told Helen the thoughtlessness had been condoned.

"I will bring it to you to decide upon——"

"No," the lady replied, "I can trust you to say just what is right and proper."

Helen's eyes were in a soft mist as she raised them, and picking up her letter she made a graceful obeisance as she left the room.

Yes, there was the notice. How could she have let it slip from her mind. She had a vague idea that it really couldn't apply to a man like Mr. Warfield, but it was the rule and it must be kept. It did take a certain something out of her life that she could not have described, but she felt it. He was so interested in her progress. For had he not roused her and made a scholar out of her? She might never have known what the hunger meant but for him, and accepted the husks even if under protest. How much richer and finer all her life would be. She said frankly that she was sorry, and that she had counted on the letters. [Pg 243]

He was annoyed at the foolishness as he termed it. If she were sixteen instead of fourteen it would have been different.

The days were so full and passed so rapidly to Helen. The autumn came on in all its glory and splendor. The hills, they were almost mountains, about Westchester were wonderful in their changing colors, but she thought nothing could describe those over the river until she began to read Ruskin, and that brought her nearer Mrs. Van Dorn again.

She and Daisy Bell slipped into a pleasant girl friendship. Helen was the stronger, more energetic, more ambitious. But then Daisy had only to be educated, to go home to her parents and take a place in society and marry. The girls *did* talk of the kind of husbands they would like and the wedding journeys they would take. Two of the seniors were really engaged. [Pg 244]

"And you can't tell how many have lovers," Miss Mays said one evening when several were sitting, curled up on one bed. "Of course you can't write to *him* unless you are regularly engaged and your mother consents. But if I wanted to correspond with anyone, I'd find a way."

"And disobey the rule," declared Helen.

"Oh, a chit like you doesn't know anything about such matters. All is fair in love and war. And there are times when strategy is commendable. You find it a great resource in war as you read history."

"But you wouldn't, really, Roxy! Girls are sometimes sent home in disgrace."

"I didn't say I would. I said I could find a way if I wanted to," and she laughed with a sort of light amusement. "I often think up scenes that would do for a novel; difficulties and how to get out of them."

"I don't want any more difficulties than the lessons," declared another. "I shall be glad when school days are through with. The happiest time of life is youth! Not much!" [Pg 245]

"What period do you think will be the happiest?" asked Daisy, thoughtfully.

"My happiest period will be going abroad on a wedding tour, and all the money I can spend on the other side."

"And mine will be the intervening years," declared Roxy. "Through school, lots of society, gayety, and admirers and a few flirtations before I settle down. I'd like to go abroad quite free, and leave the aching hearts behind."

"And you will make hearts ache, Roxy Mays."

Helen wondered at times how much she liked her, and others quite went down to her. She was piquant and could be very charming, then she said sharp and doubtful things, and had a way of twisting axioms around that was amusing and rather dangerous, too. She stood fairly well in her classes, but she was not an ambitious girl. How few of them considered what they were going to do with their education.

After a month or so, Helen began to have what Daisy called an insight into Latin. But, oh, dear, when she was fairly grounded there she would have to take up French. And when it came time to sit at the French table and ask for everything in a foreign tongue, how could she do it? [Pg 246]

"I shall simply starve," announced Roxy. "And after Christmas that will be my fate. I shall keep crackers and cheese under my pillow and nibble on them in the long and sleepless hours of the night."

There was a good deal of fun when she came to know girls quite well, and the arguing almost to quarreling. Some girls did and then would not speak for days. Helen and Daisy agreed very well; Helen was robustly conscientious, and Daisy gently so. They were of much assistance to each other.

Besides the boarders there were the day scholars who lived in the town, and some visiting was permitted. Helen was too busy to indulge in much outside pleasure except just for exercise. She asked permission one day to go down the hill for the sake of climbing up. "And I can say over the Latin exercises, no one will think me crazy, because no one will be there to hear."

Miss Grace laughed and gave permission, and so it became quite a favorite excursion ground. If she made blunders there was no one to laugh but herself. [Pg 247]

Cold weather came on. The crimsons turned to russet and brown, the hickories grew paler and paler until their gold had degenerated and their leaves shriveled up. There was a soft, light snow the middle of November that hung about on everything for a day or two and then winter seemed to set in. But it was so cheerful with the crowd of girls and the interested teachers that one didn't mind it.

Miss Craven was still very self-contained and reserved. She took her place in some classes, however. In music she improved rapidly, leaving Helen far behind. She spoke to Helen now and then of her own accord, but waited for the others to speak to her. Mrs. Aldred took special pains to make her feel at home.

"There's something queer about that girl," said Miss Mays one evening. "And Craven is not an attractive name, though it seems to suit her. I hope her father hasn't been a bank defaulter, nor a forger, nor a swindler! You notice that she seldom looks up at anyone. That suggests concealment." [Pg 248]

"Is that a fair judgment?"

"Well, I like a person to look you straight in the eye."

"Roxy Mays, you could stare anyone out of countenance in two minutes, no matter how straight they looked at you. And hasn't someone written a verse or two about down-dropping lids and shy eyes, and eyes that seem to listen rather than look."

"As if eyes could listen!"

"Isn't every sense assisted by every other sense? And doesn't a deaf person listen with the eyes?"

"Well—I don't like her. She doesn't take hold anywhere. You must meet people half-way. Now here is Helen frank to a fault, and looking up at you like a saucy robin. One would know she has nothing to conceal."

Helen flushed and laughed. She often recurred to Mrs. Aldred's suggested caution. She occasionally heard girls tell incidents about their families that were neither amusing nor commendable, and that others turned into ridicule. Some of these, girls would laugh at Uncle Jason, and oh, what would they say about Aunt Jane! She had simply mentioned them with the utmost respect. And that a relative of Mrs. Aldred's was educating her was sufficient. [Pg 249]

"Well, there seems to be plenty of money in the Craven exchequer. Her toilette articles are exquisite. I don't believe she had the taste to choose them, nor her clothes either."

"Oh, girls, let her alone. Isn't Miss Reid just as distant and self-contained? She never joins any of the little crowds, nor mingles in the fun."

"Well, she's of the severe order and is going to college. I'm glad I don't have to go; if I did it would be purely for fun. I'm in for all the good times I can possibly get."

How odd it was that so few girls really cared for knowledge! Of course, the fun was exhilarating, the sharpening of wits made one bright. Roxy Mays was an expert at twisting and turning and repartee, and making the worse seem the better reason. Some of it was amusing. But to magnify any trifling thing into a part of one's character, to give hard judgment on the shape of one's features or the expression of one's eyes and mouth, seemed hardly fair to Helen.

She wondered sometimes if one could grow beautiful on high and noble thoughts? One felt broader and better at heart by giving a more generous allowance. She soon found that Roxy had a bad fault, and all the girls in her set condoned it easily, while several of them grumbled about it to each other. She was always borrowing little articles and seldom returned them. "I'll take your pencil a moment," she would say. "I'll just run over this book," and you had to go after your book. It was thread and needles, buttons of various kinds, even to a shirtwaist set, and if one button or pin came up missing she was very sorry and would be sure to replace it when she went down town. Borrowing money was against the rules. There had once been a disagreeable trouble in the school about this matter, and now Mrs. Aldred kept a bank for any girl that had run ahead of her allowance, from which she was at liberty to borrow. Running up an account in the town was also forbidden. [Pg 250]

How soon Christmas came! It fell on Saturday. Some of the girls were going home, several to visit friends or relatives, and those who remained were given a holiday. Miss Lane was to go; Madame Meran on Monday; Miss Gertrude was to have the week in New York. None of the other teachers resided in the house. [Pg 251]

Thursday night there fell a real snow. The others had been beautiful attempts that had melted away in the next sunshine. Friday morning was dull and gray, without a breath of air. The roofs wore white hoods or blankets, the trees absolutely stood still, ermined to their finger ends, someone said. But at ten the somber clouds began to give way, growing thinner and thinner, and one spot rather to the south suddenly became glorified with silvery touches, then golden and azure, and the world was in a flood of sunshine. Helen thought she had never seen anything so glorious before.

"Oh, you beautiful, beautiful world!" she cried as she stood out on the porch, having said good-by to a group of girls. "It's a splendid thing just to live! But isn't it knowledge that enables one to understand and appreciate it all!"

She went through the hall. Miss Craven had just come downstairs.

"Oh, let us go out and look at the snow on our own small ravine. I am a country girl, and I think I have never really *seen* a snowstorm before," laughing. "I lived in a rather flat country." [Pg 252]

Miss Craven's face slowly lighted up and an expression went over it like a smile that had not the courage to come out, but she followed readily.

There was the smooth expanse over to the iron fence, then the tops of trees and shrubbery, set with thousands of gems of all colors, depending on the rays of the sun. The black hollow, that was the little stream they could not see from the porch, the elevation on the other side, the houses and grounds, the men shoveling paths, children snow-balling, active life already and here the extreme of silence.

"What a picture!"

"And I lived among hills and mountains," remarked Miss Craven. "I used to get so tired of the solitude. But you can be alone——" pausing abruptly, and adding: "You are not going away?"

"No. But you shiver. Are you cold? Let us go upstairs to my room and have a talk. I shall be alone until next Saturday night. Daisy Bell has gone off to have a lovely time. There was no one who wanted me enough to petition for me, though I believe I was not to go home until next summer." [Pg 253]

"Oh, you have a home?"

"Yes; and relatives. Come in," as they had reached the room. "We who remain have a holiday, and just now I do not feel in the humor for any serious thing. Let us compare our work. You are doing very well in music, Madame said. I ask about you;" and there was an expression of real interest in Helen's face that called a pleased flush to that of Miss Craven.

"Yes, but I do love it so;" and there was an intensity in her tone that aroused Helen. "If I were not so ignorant of other things I would devote my whole time to it. And if I could sing! You have such a fine voice."

"It is strong enough to lead a forlorn hope. I'd like it to be a contralto. There is so much depth and feeling and pathos in a contralto voice. Did you hear Miss Morgan sing 'Mary o' the Dee' a few evenings ago? Madame thinks she ought to settle upon music as a profession."

Helen had placed Daisy's rocking chair for her guest. There was a slant ray of sunshine coming in the window, and the room had a habitable air that some people always give. Daisy Bell possessed this in an eminent degree. [Pg 254]

"I sometimes wish I were not alone," began Miss Craven. "Only I feel that girls are not attracted to me. I suppose I am too old for girls, and I don't know enough for the young ladies. I almost made up my mind that I wouldn't stay, but Mrs. Aldred has been so kind. And perhaps it would not be better anywhere else. I am nineteen."

The girls had speculated about her age. Miss Mays said she was at least twenty-five.

"And I'm not fifteen yet," laughing brightly.

"I wish I could be fifteen, but I would not like to go back and live the four years over again. My life has been a very dreary one."

"You are so reserved. Don't you really like girls?"

"I like you. I have ever since that day you first talked to me. But you have so many friends, and I do not want to intrude. I do not know how to make friends," hesitatingly, while the tears flooded her eyes.

"Were you compelled to live alone?" Helen did not want to seem over curious. She had visions of some queer old aunt who had shut her doors to everybody. [Pg 255]

"Yes. I'd like to tell you some things I could not tell Mrs. Aldred; at least, my guardian's wife advised me not to be too frank about my life, since it probably would not interest anybody, or if it did they would pretend to admire me and care for the money's sake and what they could get out of me. Grandfather always said so. I don't know as he meant me to have it all, but he left no will, and as there was no one else it had to come to me."

"I'd like to hear about it if you did not mind. And—if you would like to be friends——"

"Oh, you don't know how dreary it is to be so much alone. Mrs. Davis thought the school such a foolish plan. But I was so ignorant. I didn't feel that I could go into society without knowing something. And I have learned a good deal by watching the girls. Many of them have such lovely manners. But if I had just one friend to talk things over with——"

There was such a longing in her tone that it seemed fairly to sweep through Helen.

"I don't know whether I should be a very judicious friend." Oh, if Mrs. Van Dorn could only set this girl straight, she thought, for that lady's wisdom had come to be nearly the whole book of the [Pg 256] world for Helen. "But if you liked to try me. I should be true, I can answer for that," and the trustiness rang in her voice.

"I've really had no one but Mrs. Davis, and I haven't been drawn to her, although she has been very kind. Yet she is so different from Mrs. Aldred, and I can't tell which is nearer right. Only I *do* enjoy it better here. It is more like the harmony in music. Then I am confused in a big city, and I really couldn't go into society."

"How did you come to live so much alone?" inquired Helen, feeling as if she was unraveling a story.

"Father died when Arthur and I were very little, and mother went home to his father's. It's a queer, curious place with great mountainous ridges on one side, and on the other, to the south, stretches of land, good for nothing much, being iron fields, a sort of dreary waste, not considered good enough in ore to be worked much. Grandfather had bought it twenty or thirty years before in a great speculating time, then it had dropped down. I suppose the misfortunes soured him. He had a small farm beside, kept a cow, and an old nag, and pigs and chickens. Mother was his [Pg 257] daughter-in-law. The house up in the mountainside was old and forlorn, but as grandfather said, 'It didn't leak and it couldn't blow over.' The little town was more than a mile away. I used to go in to school when the weather wasn't too bad. Arthur died soon after we went there. He was older than I. Grandfather had not really cared for me, he was queer and morose, and that disappointed him. Girls were of very little account except to keep house and mend old clothes. I did love school and study.

"When I was about thirteen there was a very hard winter, and mother took a cold. I suppose it was consumption. She just grew weaker and thinner, and really didn't give up until a few weeks before she died. She was a good deal troubled about me. I've seen that plainer since than I did then. And she kept saying, 'If any good ever comes to you, any money or any time, get an education. And don't marry any man until you have acquired that.'

"It was very lonely when she was gone, and I had the house to keep. Oxford village wasn't very [Pg 258] much, three or four hundred people, and mostly farms, just one little spot with a church, schoolhouse, country store and post-office. I couldn't go to school any more, grandfather always went to town with butter and eggs and the produce he could spare. I lost track of folks as one may say. Grandfather didn't believe in church-going, and I seldom had anything nice to wear. We were real hermits. You see I *was* kept pretty busy. But I used to study the old books over. There were two or three music books, and I learned to read music just for a pastime. Then I made a sort of keyboard and used to practise. I meant to have a piano if I was fifty years old.

"A year ago in August, a man who had a new way of separating iron ore, and was concerned with a railroad surveying a new route, struck Oxford, and was surprised that it had lain unimproved so long. A company was formed that pushed things, and they wanted to buy out grandfather. There was a great deal of wrangling and they were at the house nearly every day. The rails were laid and a big smelting furnace begun. In six months no one would have known the place. One stretch of land they were quite in doubt about buying when it was discovered to have a vein of very [Pg 259] valuable iron in it, hematite, and then he would not sell it, but leased it to the company for five years and he was to have a percentage on every ton of iron taken out of it. He still had the farm and we went on as usual, but it seemed as if he was more and more difficult to get along with and grew more sordid in his views. Of course there was always plenty to eat, but I did long for some of the other enjoyments. To spend half of my life in that wild spot seemed unendurable.

"One blustering March day he had been out on the ridge all the afternoon, but though he ate a hearty supper he complained of feeling cold. I made him a hot drink and put a brick steaming with herbs to his feet. The next morning he had fever and was flighty, but he wouldn't consent to

have a doctor. And when he was wild with delirium and I sent, it was too late. In five days he was dead with pneumonia. It seemed dreadful that he should die on the eve of prosperity, but I wonder if he would have done anything worth while with his wealth.

"There was no will. I was the only heir, though a cousin did come from parts unknown and was [Pg 260] easily bought off as he had no real claim. This Mr. Davis had been doing some of the business for grandfather, and was a director I believe. There had to be an administrator and a guardian appointed for me, and then I found I was a rich young woman, with a prospect of being richer still. Mrs. Davis took me in her house and was very kind to me. But I had a feeling that I wanted the education I had so hungered for and missed. She proposed a year in a convent to be trained in ladylike ways. I had a longing to know what real girls were like; I wanted to go to some nice quiet school and have that training before I went out in the world. I was afraid of society women, and I did not want to be married out of hand.

"There was a Mrs. Howard who came to stay at the summer home of Mrs. Davis. She was not so full of pleasure as some of the ladies, and once when they were all out on the golf links we had a walk and a talk, and she thought my desire to go to some small quiet school a very good one. She had a niece educated here and admired her training very much. She wrote for me and forwarded me the answer, and then I wrote, and this is the result. Mrs. Aldred is kindness itself, and agreed [Pg 261] that private lessons would be best until I could begin to compete with other girls. What I have gathered is such desultory knowledge, and I'm like a child in some things. Oh, can't you see that? And I *am* afraid of being laughed at.

"You all seem so bright, so ready with your talk, you know so much that I envy you. And if I am going to be a rich woman I want to know and to do some of the best things. I don't believe I could be satisfied with buying gowns and going to parties. There, it is a long story, and it is odd to tell it to you, only there is such a look in your eyes at times that it seemed to me you would understand and *not* laugh or hold me up to ridicule."

There was an almost breathless intensity in the face, a half fear as well, but the telling of her sad story had roused her from her ordinary apathy.

"I certainly should not ridicule you," Helen began decisively. "Why, I think it is very brave of you to want to be educated when you could lead a life of ease and pleasure. And I am beginning to suspect that a love of knowledge is *not* universal, but I like it myself. There is so much in the [Pg 262] world that I wonder women do not keep going on as some of the men do. Only then, I suppose, they wouldn't marry. And you would have to be quite rich to do it." [Pg 263]

CHAPTER XIII

A LITTLE SEED SOWN

The two girls rocked slowly back and forth, stealing side-wise glances at each other. Helen was very glad there was nothing derogatory in the story. She seemed to understand the sort of man grandfather Craven was; there were two or three of them about Hope, if they had no iron mines in prospect. They did not believe in education in modern methods, nor anything but saving up money. How did it look to grandfather Craven on the other side of the river, she wondered?

"I wish I could help you," Helen began presently. All her sympathy went out to the girl of nineteen who was very little older than herself, who had lost four or five of the choicest years out of her life. If it had been because her mother was an invalid all that time, one could see the use of it. Or if her grandfather had been poorly and needed care. [Pg 264]

"Oh, you have helped me by understanding as you do," returned Miss Craven. "And now when I catch a glance of your eye it will give me courage."

"I am sure you are right. And if some of the girls knew your story——"

"Oh, no, no!" with quick, pained apprehension, "I shouldn't want them to. I hope you——"

Juliet Craven felt she could trust this girl without a word, that it would be almost an insult to doubt her integrity. Why, she did not know. She was not sufficiently versed in human nature to explain its intricacies.

"If you mean that I could not betray a confidence, you are just right there," with a heightened color. "But Miss Grace is wise and judicious and understands girls."

"Only—I don't know as I can make it clear, but I am afraid of almost everybody. I have lived alone so much, I think I am like someone who has been blind for years and whose eyes are suddenly opened, and he cannot judge accurately of anything. I hear the girls at times mapping out characters with such a degree of certainty that I envy them. I do not seem to know how to judge anyone." [Pg 265]

"And their judgment isn't right half the time," laughed Helen. "It takes a great deal of wisdom and experience to do this, and I do not believe any young schoolgirl has enough. I haven't. I've changed my mind ever so many times about some of the girls until I almost began to think I

hadn't any mind at all."

Juliet Craven smiled at that. If this bright girl could not judge correctly—but then she was not fifteen, and she, Juliet, more than four years older.

"I am glad someone knows it all. I have only told half to Mrs. Aldred, though I suppose Mrs. Howard explained why I was so backward. Oh, do you think I shall ever catch up?" and there was a piteous anxiety in her voice.

"Why, you have done a great deal in music in this brief time."

"But I love music so. And literature enchants me. But analysis of language, and higher mathematics—I never shall master them I know. I think no one could trip me up on spelling, however. When I found a difficult word in a book I spelled it over for days," and the faint impression of a smile crossed her lips. "But the meanings puzzle me. It is hard oftentimes to think [Pg 266] of the correct word, and that makes me afraid to talk."

"I have always had a good many to talk to, and that must make a difference," and the thought of living almost alone on a mountain, out of the reach of people, crossed Helen's mind and gave her a shudder. "Oh, I don't see how you lived so alone!" she cried vehemently.

"It was dreadful after mother was gone. If I could have gone down in town once in awhile, but there was so much to do, and grandfather always said he didn't want women folks bothering round when he went anywhere. Then it was so far to church, though I did go once in a great while when I had anything to wear. But the girls I had known in school forgot me, and were married, or busy about other things. And I somehow grew used to talking to the dumb creatures and the denizens of the woods. I always kept thinking that something would happen and I'd have a chance. And I resolved that I would go to school and get an education as mother wished. But I never thought how hard it would be to begin back like a child a dozen or so years old. You see grandfather was seventy-six when mother died, and my vague plan was when he had gone, to sell [Pg 267] everything and go away. I couldn't ever have dreamed of so much money. And now I don't know what to do with it. Mrs. Davis said it would all come right when I married some nice man, who would take care of it and manage it for me, but Mrs. Howard said get some education first, and I would be better able to know what I wanted. Though I am sure I don't want to be married."

"The education will certainly be best," Helen returned with the gravity of twenty. "And I think you ought not be discouraged so soon."

"There is so much more to learn than I had any idea of. And when I look ahead——"

"Oh, don't look ahead," cried Helen laughingly. "Just live day by day, 'Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof,' and I wonder if the good will not be sufficient also! It is only about a year ago that I cared anything for education, I was just a country girl too, and suddenly roused, I didn't know how I *could* compass it when a way was opened. I can have two splendid years, and I mean to crowd them full. I don't know what will happen after that, and I am not going to worry about it. You can have all the years you are minded to take, and you will succeed, I know." [Pg 268]

The tone was buoyant, inspiriting. To Helen the prospect was enchanting. Already she had learned what a factor money was, what a blessing to have enough of it that one need not feel anxious about the future. She would settle her plans at once. Stay three years here at Aldred House, then go to college. During the four years there would be plenty of time to arrange the rest. In her case it would be teaching.

"How comforting you are!" and there was both depth and sincerity in the tone.

"Doesn't Mrs. Aldred advise you to go on?" Helen asked.

"Oh, yes. And Miss Grace has been very encouraging. But when I look at the rest of you girls and hear your bright talk, I feel so out of place."

"I have a belief that school is the help to enable us to find our right places in the world if we take it up earnestly. I meant it shall help me to find mine," confidently. "And I *do* think, yes, I am sure it will help you."

"I was so discouraged. I wrote to Mrs. Howard and she said stay by all means. Indeed, I have no place to go to. Mrs. Davis is in Florida now. Oh, I should like to travel!" and her face was roused [Pg 269] almost to enthusiasm.

"But you wouldn't want to be an ignorant traveler, either." And she thought how Mrs. Van Dorn enjoyed and understood. She would have felt still more encouraged for her compeer, had she known what Mrs. Van Dorn was at nineteen.

They talked until it was dusk, when the bell rang and arm in arm they went to the dining room. Miss Grace was placing girls together in a more sociable fashion.

"Suppose you and Miss Beck come over here," she said with a little wave of the hand to Miss Craven, and giving a nod to Miss Beck. "And Miss Grant, I think you are put down for the hostess next month. Suppose you begin now?"

Helen smiled and went to the head of the table. Miss Craven took her seat next. "Oh," she murmured, deprecatingly, "I hope it will never come my turn."

"Why, it is not much to do, only to see that everything comes right."

The girls talked of to-morrow. Miss Beck was an Episcopalian, and described how prettily the [Pg 270] little church was trimmed, how beautiful the morning service had been, and that most of it would be repeated. In the evening some anthems were to be sung and Phillips Brooks' beautiful hymn, "Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem." And on Monday at four a Christmas tree for the children. Perhaps they would like to go?

Miss Craven's eyes kindled a little and she looked at Helen, as if she might answer for her.

"We shall be very glad to," was Helen's ready reply.

The eyes thanked her timidly.

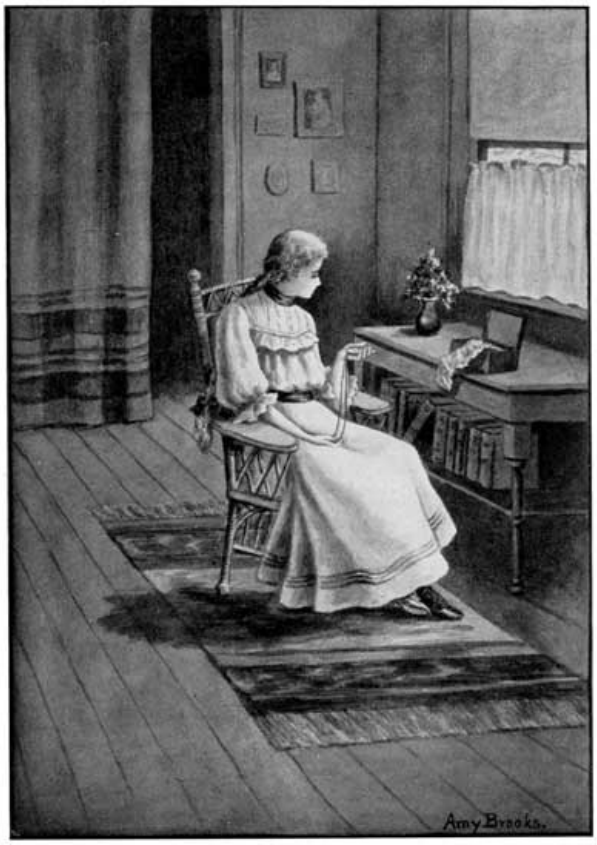
Afterward they assembled in the drawing room and sang Christmas hymns to the accompaniment of the grand piano. Two of the young ladies recited.

"I don't believe I've ever had such a nice time in my life," Juliet Craven said with her good-night. "You don't know how sincerely I thank you."

To be thanked for a little courtesy like that! Helen stood before the glass, thinking.

"I wonder," she said to the reflection, "if you could have had that much courage with the rest of the girls about? It was very easy to-day, and it is what ought to be done oftener. I wonder why [Pg 271] they all took me up so cordially, and why they should have surmised so many wrong things about her. I dare say her father and mother were ordinarily nice people, and I am glad there is nothing disgraceful about them. There are quite a good many queer old people in the world—I'm sure Roxy tells things about her old great-aunt and laughs over them, that do not sound kindly, if they are amusing. I wish old people always *were* agreeable," and she sighed. "But young people are not either," and she smiled with a revulsion of mood. "I am glad, too, that she isn't any older. Nineteen. There are not more than a half dozen girls in the school as old as that. What a pity one can't be turned back!"

Helen thought she had never enjoyed a Sunday more. Most of the girls went with Mrs. Aldred in the morning, and Mr. Danforth was certainly in a Christmas frame of mind. They had luncheon around the large table across the end of the dining room, and afterward a talk of the Jews and Romans at the time of the coming of Christ. Helen had never thought much of sacred and serious subjects, but her heart seemed to expand and glow with a fervor she had hitherto known nothing about. If education widened one's view, should not religion do something for it also? [Pg 272]



When Helen returned there was a box that had been sent across the water with some pretty laces, and a fine neck-chain and charm.—Page 272.

The evening service moved her still more deeply. And she went to sleep with the music of four lives floating through her brain:

"Yet in thy dark street shineth

The everlasting Light,
The hopes and fears of all the years,
Are met in thee to-night."

The children's Christmas tree was another pleasure. And when Helen returned there was a box that had been sent across the water with some pretty laces and a fine neck-chain and charm. It seemed to bring Paris much nearer. Her letter, too, was very enjoyable. Mrs. Van Dorn was glad to have her feel at home and study with energy. But she wanted her to go at French just as soon as she possibly could, and pay close attention to it. She, Mrs. Van Dorn, was going to start for Southern France the beginning of the year and would have a restful time after the jaunting about. Helen must write freely of herself and the friends she was making, as well as her progress in every study.

The week was a pleasant one to those who stayed at school. Miss Reid and Miss Bigelow both painted on snow scenes taken at different points. Miss Reid's had a gray sky with one streak of light down in the southwest that gave the somber picture a really beautiful effect; Miss Bigelow's was the sun shining through an opening in some trees and glistening on the frosted snow. Miss Craven kept on with her lessons, though she took several walks with Helen. Westchester put on quite a holiday attire. The Literary Society gave a reading from Dickens' "Christmas Stories," and there was a church tea and sociable, but no persuasion could induce Miss Craven to attend it, though Helen and a number of the girls accompanied Miss Aldred. [Pg 273]

Mrs. Aldred was much engrossed looking over reports, and re-arranging classes, designating the girls who were to go at the French table, and making a few changes. For it sometimes seemed as if all the real work began after Christmas.

"There will be a vacancy at your table," she said to Helen, who had been consulting her on some studies. "I wonder if you have any choice as to who fills it?"

"Who is going away?" the girls asked.

"Miss Mays. She should have gone in September, but she begged off," and Mrs. Aldred gave a little smile. [Pg 274]

"If the others would have no objection to Miss Craven——" hesitatingly.

"They would have no right to object," gravely.

"But would I have a right to make a selection for the others?" and a flush crept up to her forehead.

"Not a right," in a pleasant tone. "I offer it as a privilege."

"Then I do think Miss Craven would like it. We have been making friends," smiling and yet perplexed a little, desiring not to seem officious.

"I hoped you would choose her, for her own good. Yes, I have been noticing the sort of intimacy, the first preference she has evinced for anyone, though I think you must have kindly made the overtures."

Helen flushed brightly, but did not emphasize her claim.

"I have been much puzzled over the case. My daughter Grace and I have discussed it frequently, and in some ways I have felt very much discouraged. A friend besought me to take her, explaining that she was a simple-hearted country girl, who had had no advantages of education and was extremely anxious to be fitted for her position; that she was afraid she had fallen into the wrong hands, her guardian's wife being a rather pretentious woman of fashion. Miss Craven is a somewhat curious compound of qualities, and on several lines remarkably intelligent, but clearly she does not make the best use of that quality." [Pg 275]

Mrs. Aldred had been watching the changes in Helen's face as she talked, wondering if this girl, not yet fifteen, could comprehend. And now she paused as if expecting some comment.

"She is so afraid of nearly everything, everybody," began Helen. "And yet I think it took real courage to try school life——" and she paused, glancing up with some hesitation.

"That was the point that commended her to me. Mrs. Davis was opposed to it and suggested private teachers. Mrs. Howard thought she desired to keep the whole control and supervision of the girl, and I, too, consider it a brave resolve on her part. I was very much interested in Mrs. Howard's account, though I had in my mind the ordinary country girl whose education had been neglected. And when she came I really was puzzled to know where to place her. She could not affiliate with the girls of her age, and it would be too mortifying to be put with those so much younger. So there was nothing but for her to find her own level, to choose or be chosen by some friendly disposed girl. She will make an excellent scholar in time. She is very modest. I could wish she had not quite so much humility. One would never suppose she was an heiress already, having a much larger income than she can spend now, and the certainty of being a rich woman five years hence. But she has a great fear of being tolerated for the money's sake. There are girls who would make it a strong point. So it seems as if in this friendship matter I had to let her quite alone, though I have thought of two or three girls who might take her up if they would. I have learned, however," and she smiled a little, "that you cannot control these matters. Girls' likes and dislikes are largely impulses of the present mood, and a belief in self-knowledge, which they [Pg 276]

outgrow, fortunately. So I have been much pleased to see you two drift together. Did she tell you her story?"

"Yes—at least she went briefly over it," returned Helen. [Pg 277]

"She has not a girl's usual gift of elaboration, and that is a good quality to miss, though years and experience do mend it. It is unfortunate to begin life with the idea that you have had more trials or sorrows or struggles, or even more joys and prosperity than anyone else. Her life has been hard, but she has let it all drop behind her and wants to press on to the next best, to something a great deal better;" and an approving light shone in the elder woman's eyes. "She has a decided gift for music, for certain kinds of literature, poetry especially, though I do not think a casual observer would credit her with that. She has some concise business ideas and works hard at mathematics. Perhaps the shrewdness is one good quality she inherits from her grandfather. She is an excellent reader, and it is fortunate that school training can direct these tastes rather than the gossip and novels of fashionable life. Although I was absolutely discouraged at first, I feel now that after a year or two she will compare favorably with the average girl. Of course we are all fond of the superior girls who do credit to a school, but they are not very lavishly distributed."

"I am glad she is going to do so well," and Helen's face was bright with generous emotions. "Only, [Pg 278] she keeps looking at girls of her age, and is rather discouraged because she is so far behind."

"And friendship, contact with other girls, is what she needs. I sometimes think if girls could only understand all they might do for each other in the little things of life, the comfort they might be in some sorrowful moment, the strength in some weak moment, they would hardly hold aloof in their best qualities and give out the trifles that are merely husks. I meant this to be a different kind of talk," and a sweet look pervaded the eyes and crossed the lips, lingering there. "I wanted to thank you for your interest in her. Of all the girls I had considered as a friend to her I had not thought of you, perhaps because you were so much younger. She ought not be much over fourteen either. And I must give you one word of—shall I call it counsel or advice?" studying the eager face. "Do not allow yourself to be laughed out of what I believe will be a good work, and do not get vexed or irritated because you cannot make others see Miss Craven with your eyes. She has given you her confidence, and withheld it from the others. I wish you success in your new [Pg 279] undertaking, and I am much pleased with your industry."

"And I am very happy," returned Helen with a glowing face and luminous eyes, as she made a pretty inclination of the head.

Mrs. Aldred fell into musing when she was gone.

"If one knew just what Mrs. Van Dorn meant to do with the girl, whether to educate her for some purpose, or merely to have her fitted for an agreeable companion; but it would seem a positive sin to tie such a mind to an old woman's whims and pleasures. However, here are the two years in which one may work."

On Saturday the whole place was astir with the returning girls, and the merry chatter pervaded every corner and room. There were stories to tell of the "perfectly lovely" time one and another had had, of the gifts and gayeties, and rather wry faces over the changes.

"And I have to go to the French table, and I just know I shall starve," moaned Roxy Mays. "There's Miss Law to keep me company, but she declares she will talk straight ahead right or wrong. And is it possible that you have that wooden head next to your elbow, Helen Grant? I would have protested." [Pg 280]

"I am here to obey the rules and usages of the school," answered Helen gravely.

"Are you going to call her grandmother or great-aunt, or mother-in-law?"

"By her rightful name, Miss Craven."

"Well, I wish you joy of her. It almost compensates me for having to ask in French for every mouthful I eat, and inquire if the day is fair, if the door is locked, and if you have found the book of my friend. She will not even venture upon that. And what have you been doing the whole poky week?"

"It hasn't seemed a bit poky. I have practiced scales and fingerings, and gone into the early stages of French," answered Helen gayly.

"Aha! Well, I've just put in all the fun I could. Two very young people's parties, a grand concert, and to a euchre club that was delightful with the most charming partner with whom I established telegraphic communication. And just a lovely flirtation. What do you think? He asked if we might not correspond?"

Helen flushed, remembering her innocent attempt.

"Oh, you needn't look so indignant over it; and I am pretty sure one of my sisters is engaged. [Pg 281] Perhaps I won't need to stay at school more than next year."

"I should be glad to stay five years," cried Helen enthusiastically.

Daisy Bell was on the other side of Helen, and she looked rather askance at the newcomer, making the least cool little bow.

"I've really wanted to get back to you," she began when they had gone to their room. "They laughed at me at home, and my brother said there must always be someone for a schoolgirl to adore, and that he thought I would pass the dangerous period safely, but that it had broken out with virulence," and she laughed with light-hearted amusement.

"Did you care as much about me as all that?" and Helen glanced out of tender eyes.

"Amend your tense, or tack present and future to it. I didn't know how much until I left you behind. And you've had a horrid dull time, I know," with charming solicitude in her voice.

"No, it has been rather gay, and the days flew by so rapidly."

"Oh, they always do in vacation. Next week will be as long as any two. I am glad we won't have any change this term, and I do hope we will keep together next year. Helen, I love you, love you!" [Pg 282]

She clasped her arms about Helen's neck and kissed her rapturously, and the girl was deeply moved. Miss Mays made a patronizing half-love, you could not tell whether she was in earnest or not. But this clasp was so endearing, so full of fervor, and these kisses seemed to have the first rare sweetness in them that had come into her life. People had liked her she felt. Mrs. Dayton had been really affectionate, but this was different.

"Oh, Daisy!" she sighed from her full heart.

"You haven't positively loved any girl in school, I know. I think you are the kind of girl who doesn't love easily, but after I liked you I was awfully afraid you would go down to Roxy Mays. I ought to confess that I did last term. She is fascinating, but after a while you don't feel altogether sure of her. *You* are so strong and upright. And I don't want you to love anyone else quite as well; promise me."

"I am not likely to. No one else will want me to, I guess," rather tremulously, as another thought seemed to pierce through to her heart.

"Oh, they will, they will! You're so young, and you have something—I can't tell what it is, but you will find as you grow older people will lean on you and love you, too. I just want you to say—Daisy Bell, I love you the best of anybody I know." [Pg 283]

"I can say that easily, but I don't know a great many people," Helen returned gravely.

"And that I shall always love you the best of anybody."

"Oh, Daisy, that is a sort of sacred thing to say. How can anyone tell——"

"I don't mean lovers or husbands, and you haven't any parents or sisters. Just here in the school—you will love me the best because I love you so. That is the highest claim."

"I will love you the best," Helen said almost solemnly.

Then a strange awesome feeling thrilled through Helen, and she wondered if it was right to promise away one's freedom, even in so simple a matter as loving a schoolmate.

"Oh, you dear, dear girl! Go to sleep and dream of me." [Pg 284]

CHAPTER XIV

AND THORNS SPRANG UP

School work began in great earnest. There was no loitering now. The girls who went in the A grade would be seniors next year, and the A grade of seniors would graduate. Helen took up French with a vim. Mrs. Van Dorn spoke of it particularly in her letter, and she had the right to order what Helen should do. The girl never thought of any mental protest.

Then there were all the other classes. A conscientious girl was kept pretty busy. Helen was in the sketching class, Daisy was painting and did it well. Miss Craven began also, and evinced a decided genius for it. She was still quiet and reserved. She made no especial demands upon Helen, but the younger girl found many little ways to assure her of an interest. Just a clasp of the hand, a glance of the eye, a smile, and Miss Craven was comforted for hours. [Pg 285]

She tried to draw her into general conversation at the table, she said nice things to other girls about her and endeavored to interest them. Oh, if Miss Craven only would come out of her shell and say some of the really bright things she did when they were alone! It was hard work Helen found; a sort of weight at times affected her own spontaneity.

With all the study there was a good deal of fun, sometimes almost fighting when arguments ran high, or when one's favorite writer or poem or story was assailed. Some of the girls insisted that Miss Reid had the most genius for painting, and others were on Miss Bigelow's side. Miss Gertrude Aldred would not be trapped into a decision, though many a plot was laid for her.

Helen thought now and then of Mr. Warfield. She did so want to write to him. She could not, at least she did not say to Mrs. Dayton the many things she felt puzzled over, that even Mrs. Aldred

could not have understood, for Mrs. Aldred had never seen her home and knew so little about her past life.

And, oh, the planning that went on, the different pursuits that were discussed, the aims and hopes, yet it is true that most of them turned on marriage. Nearly every girl was confident that this would be her portion. [Pg 286]

Daisy Bell owned Helen now. She was her chum, her comrade. They could not always be together, of course, and Daisy was a great favorite with other girls. Indeed, sometimes Helen wondered why she should have chosen her so exclusively when there was a little world of adorers to pick from. She could not have understood in her broad-minded nature that occasionally Daisy longed to make her jealous by a show of fondness for someone else.

Miss Craven would not come to her room unless it was the afternoon of Miss Bell's music lessons. She was one of Mr. Griffin's pupils.

"But I am alone here and you can come to me. I am so glad to be alone. I don't see how I could stand a girl about!" declared Miss Craven. "Unless," smiling a little, which she did quite often now, to Helen, "unless it was you."

"And I am not the most charming girl in the school," Helen replied in her eager, wholehearted fashion. "If you only *would* let yourself be friendly with them."

"I'm satisfied with you and Miss Aldred. I like her very much, and most, I think, because she is beyond twenty. You see I am not young, and that makes the difference." [Pg 287]

"Miss Reid will be nineteen in June, about the time she graduates, and several of the girls are nearly eighteen or over."

"But they will have finished their education. I have only just begun mine," protestingly.

"Then there will be the more years to study," with a bright joyous emphasis. "It's like a climb up a mountain, perhaps the Alps or the Andes, when you have to come back and try over the next day, and a good many days, only it grows easier all the time."

"Do you know what I heard one of the girls call me?" and Miss Craven flushed so deep a red it was almost brown.

Helen flushed, too, but she asked nonchalantly, "What?"

"An old maid! And she said she didn't know what I wanted to come to school for. I would never know enough to teach. Do you suppose she would dare call Miss Aldred an old maid?"

"Oh, the girls do call each other that, and they don't mean anything," said Helen lightly.

"They were talking *about* me, not to me. It doesn't make me a day older, I know, but it keeps me from being friendly and at home, don't you see? My way is paid as well as theirs—it costs me more, for I have private lessons. I have as good right to the school as anybody, whether I want to teach or not." [Pg 288]

Helen looked at her in amazement. She had never seen so much spirit in her face. If she could be roused, not by anger merely, but some potent power. Happiness and love might do it.

"Oh, now I have offended you——"

"No, you have not offended me at all. You looked so spirited that I could not help admiring you. It is a very mean thing for girls to make ill-natured comments on each other. I wish they did not. I do not see why they cannot pick out the nice things instead and say them over."

Helen had made several protests about this matter. She corrected the subject of Miss Craven's age with spirit.

"You will never make me believe that," Miss Mays had exclaimed with unnecessary vigor.

"Mrs. Aldred has the register, ask her."

"Oh, Miss Craven may have said that was her age. And who knows anything about her? She keeps to herself as if there was something not quite——" ending with a disagreeable emphasis. [Pg 289]

"Girls," began another, "we all know if there was anything wrong or discreditable she would not be here. I do not call her an attractive girl, but if we do not like her we can let her alone. She lets us alone. We can't say she has forced herself in our society."

"A vote of thanks from one for speaking up for her," said Helen gayly. "And, of course, Mrs. Aldred knows."

"And Miss Grant, the baby of the school, has been taken into confidence. Pray do enlighten us. Did she come from India or the Fiji Islands, where education is sadly neglected?"

"For all information on the subject, I refer you to Mrs. Aldred."

Helen was angry, but she kept her temper. The ridiculous side of it all occurred to her, and another thought—What if Uncle Jason should come striding into the hall when half the girls were standing around? What would they say about her? How could girls be so mean and ungenerous?

This had happened some days before the talk. And now, after a moment or two of silence, Helen said to Miss Craven, "There is a verse in Proverbs, I think I heard it read in church one Sunday, 'He that would have friends must show himself friendly.'" [Pg 290]

"I don't want any friend but you."

There was a great tremble in Miss Craven's voice and she began to cry.

"And you will not let me advise you about the little things that make so much difference with girls."

How did *she* know? Helen flushed at her own assumption, and yet she *did* understand. She pitied Juliet Craven profoundly, too.

"Oh, don't cry. Can't I comfort you with some word? See here, I really love you. You are so brave, so persevering, you have had such a hard, lonely life, and I would like to make it brighter."

"Oh, Helen! Oh, Miss Grant."

"No; keep to the Helen," the younger girl interrupted.

"To have you love me! But I might have known so much care and kindness could only spring from love. Oh, I think I shall not mind the other girls now. I've been longing so for real love. Are you quite sure? It seems too good when I have been making myself content with a simple liking." [Pg 291]

She pressed Helen's hands to her hot cheeks, wet with tears. Helen kissed her on the forehead, but the elder drew her face down and returned the kiss many times.

"The dinner bell will ring in a few moments," Helen declared presently, "and we must both make ourselves fit to be seen, not of men, but between thirty and forty feminines. I wish your gowns were not quite so grave, but spring is on the way and we will take to light raiment and look like a flock of birds. Good-by for five minutes," and she flashed away.

Daisy had a blue ribbon tied in her hair and a pretty chiffon neckgear, and was really an attractive girl.

"Why didn't you stay all night with that woman of grays and browns and general dismalness, and lose your dinner! There, you have almost. If she had any beauty or charm about her I should be jealous, for you belong to me, you know."

Helen slipped into a light shirtwaist and was ready in a trice. Miss Craven did not come down. When the maid went to inquire, she said she had a headache, and wanted only a cup of tea.

There was the bit of social life, the study period, and Helen seemed so discomposed that she used up every moment of it until they were dismissed. Daisy put her arm about Helen, another girl took the other side, and three or four of them came into the room. [Pg 292]

How they stayed! Helen summoned courage presently.

"Excuse me a moment," and she flashed out of the room, tapping at Miss Craven's door.

It was open just an inch or two.

"I came to ask about your headache and say good-night," in a low tone.

"Oh, you dear, sweet friend! It did ache, but I think it was a kind of joy throbbing. I didn't want any dinner though. I just laid here and thought—happy thoughts."

The half-past nine bell pealed and everyone ran to her own room. Daisy stood in the middle of the floor upbraidingly, if one's attitude can express so much.

"I believe that girl has cast an evil eye on you," she began when Helen kept silence, busying herself with preparations. "There are evil charms as well as delightful ones, and spells that wile away love. And you have promised not to love anyone but me."

"Have I?" Helen's voice was unsteady. [Pg 293]

"Yes, you have, and you think promises ought to be kept faithfully. You must keep yours. I said I wouldn't love any other girl, and I haven't. I've seen her look at you with a strange light in her eyes, and they are horrid eyes——"

"Don't let us talk about Miss Craven, but read our verses and say our prayers," and now Helen's voice had decision enough in it.

"You are changing every day, I can see it," complained Daisy.

"Then let us pray that I may get back to the point," with grave peremptoriness.

Daisy was a little awed at this solemn way of taking it up, and acquiesced.

Helen lay and wondered at herself. Had she made Daisy such a sweeping promise? And how easy it had been to say those few words to Miss Craven. What joy it had given her. She did not love Daisy Bell any less—how many people could you love? Must one true affection shut out the others?

She *did* really love Daisy Bell. She had a rather petite figure and face; the face fair and full of soft curves changing with every emotion, and a rose tint that came and went, that seemed playing hide and seek with two seductive dimples, one in her chin, the other in her cheek. Her hair was a [Pg 294] light brown that had a tint of gold, and her eyes were a soft dark brown that could look at you with the utmost pathos or deepen with fun and fire, and her rose-red lips had a dewy, tremulous fashion of shaping themselves to any mood.

Another charm for Helen was her love of order and neatness, without being at all fussy, her wonderful blending of colors, the little touches that gave an air to the plainest surroundings. Then she was generally helpful. Helen had been indebted to her for many small aids along the difficult paths of learning that were quite unknown in Hope Center.

Daisy had made the first advances. She was more experienced in school ways, older, richer, and a favorite with the class. Helen felt honored by her preference. If she had been less lovable it might have savored of patronage and that Helen would have declined. It sometimes seemed as if she was the stronger, the leading spirit, as in some respects Daisy yielded unhesitatingly to her.

It was Helen's first girl friendship, and it possessed something of the marvel to her that Mrs. Dayton's kindliness had, since neither were in anywise compelled to take her up. But why had she [Pg 295] ever promised to love Daisy only?

And did she really *love* Juliet Craven? This night was the first time Miss Craven had ever used her Christian name. She would hardly dream of being intimate with any of the young ladies in the senior class, though several of them were very cordial and she had been asked to sing for them and with them. Helen made a funny distinction about this, it was due to her voice and not her personality. She was too wholesome to feel aggrieved about such a thing and she had very little vanity. Being brought up by Aunt Jane would have taken the vanity out of any girl.

But there did not seem so much difference between her age and Miss Craven's as the years confessed. Helen knew a great deal more about the real world. She was likely to make a good logician. Her short experience at Mrs. Dayton's had given her the key to the larger world. Those women with their different qualities were reproduced here in the school, here in Westchester, and were no doubt repeated elsewhere. But Miss Craven knew nothing and was afraid to judge, to have decided opinions, to compare one with another. Her solitary life had taken her into the [Pg 296] very heart of nature, of a certain kind of dreaming, and longing for knowledge, but that was widely different from the every day knowledge of general living. Helen had not been lonely, her mind was too active, and there had always been people about her. She wanted her knowledge to enable her to go out in the world and conquer it; girls of fourteen and older do have such dreams. Miss Craven wanted hers largely for herself alone.

Helen had pitied her, been very sympathetic, assisted her over rough places, and really advised. Was not this some of the work preached about on Sunday in the churches, helping the weaker brethren? She had hardly thought of religion up to this period of her life as having any duties in a practical sense, but Mrs. Aldred gave the school that tone, and Miss Grace was interested in the broader Christian life, not merely church-going.

So Miss Craven, curiously enough, had looked like a duty to Helen. She and Daisy did their brief reading every night, but since Christmas so many verses had pointed to the weaker brother. The stronger, wiser girls in school did not want anything of her, at least she thought she had nothing [Pg 297] to give them, since they did not ask, and the word was "everyone that asketh." Miss Craven had asked by a glance of the eye, a pressure of the hand, a quiver of the wordless lips that hesitated to frame the desire into speech. Yes, she did love her if charity and kindliness were love, and—oh, there *was* something deeper, wider, higher.

She had not settled the question when she fell asleep, rather late for her and so she did not wake until Daisy touched her. Daisy Bell had half a mind to let her oversleep and lose a mark, then she really did love her too well.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Helen ruefully. "And I wanted to finish my Latin translation this morning."

There could be no thought of anything but hurrying downstairs. Miss Craven was in her place and glanced up with a certain eagerness in her eyes. All through breakfast time Daisy made herself uncomfortable, watching.

"So you have a rival in your sweetheart's affections," Miss Mays whispered mischievously, linking her arm in that of Daisy's as they sauntered through the hall. "The glances are something wonderful, beseeching. If the eyes hadn't that dull, leady look they might prove dangerous in [Pg 298] years to come, but I doubt if young men will be drawn near enough to experience their fascination. But she gains a little every day, and you will soon lose your Helen of Troy."

"Helen of Troy is a free agent. She can make friends wherever she will," was the rather curt answer.

"But 'life is thorny and love is vain,'" quoted Roxy. "I *do* wonder at Helen Grant's taste."

There were lessons and exercises and Helen found her mind wandering, having to bring it back by sharp turns. Daisy was very distant. "Oh, how foolish girls can be!" Helen thought.

When they went in to luncheon a surprise greeted most of the girls. Helen Grant saw the vacant seat beside her. One of the girls opposite touched elbows with the other and both glanced at the

end of the room.

Helen let her eyes wander down leisurely. Next to Mrs. Aldred sat a stranger, next to her Miss Craven, more timid than ever.

The stranger was elegant and airy. Her cloth gown was of the newest shade of green, the small [Pg 299] bolero covered with iridescent embroidery, the satin bosom a few shades lighter, sown here and there with beads in colors that sparkled like gems. A very pretty, stylish-looking woman of five and thirty perhaps. She wore two magnificent diamond rings and a small star at her throat. The most critical taste could not pronounce her loud.

Helen thought rapidly. Was that Mrs. Howard? She felt rather disappointed.

Everybody went on with the luncheon and when it was through, Mrs. Aldred, the guest, and Miss Bigelow retired to the drawing room. What did it all mean? They heard presently. The lady was Mrs. Davis, the wife of Miss Craven's guardian. Just as Morris had answered the door, Miss Bigelow crossed the hall and recognized a lady she had seen a good deal of in the summer.

"Why this *is* delightful to meet a familiar face," declared the stranger. "Is this where you are at school? We have a *protégée* here, at least Mr. Davis is guardian and trustee of a young woman and no end of money, Miss Craven, do you know her?"

Morris was trying to usher the guest into the reception room. [Pg 300]

"Yes, she is here," and Miss Bigelow did the honors; begged Mrs. Davis to be seated. Morris came back with the word that Mrs. Aldred would be at liberty in a few moments.

"Do tell me what kind of a school it is? The girl's grandfather died; he was a queer old fellow, and the business was in a sort of muddle, but, as I said, there is no end of money. I wanted her to go to a convent; I was good enough to take her in and see what could be done in the way of polishing, for you see she must go in society. She didn't take kindly to the Roman Catholic aspect, but you know they never interfere with anyone's religion. I had a friend come to stay with me while I was giving a house party, a Mrs. Howard, who took a fancy to her; she had scarcely been out of the woods, though I found she had come of a very good family—Revolutionary people and a great-uncle, a judge in Maryland, and several men of note. The Baltimore relatives are among some of the best in society. If there had been no family back of her I really couldn't have undertaken her. Mrs. Howard knew of this school; I think she had a niece educated here. So she wrote, and the matter somehow settled itself. I was engaged for Lenox, and two or three house [Pg 301] parties, and Washington, Charleston, and Florida. I do seem to keep on the go most of the time. And this is really the first opportunity I have had to look after her, though I knew I could trust Mrs. Howard."

"Miss Craven is in excellent hands here. Of course I am among the Seniors and graduate in June, and am very busy, so I see but little of the Juniors."

"Why, it is quite college-like." Mrs. Davis had taken in a fresh supply of breath. Her voice was soft and well trained, though she rather swept along as she talked.

"Girls are prepared for college, or for any position in life," Miss Bigelow replied with a smile.

"That is what Mrs. Howard said. I can't understand how the grandfather could become such a queer old hermit when the family was an excellent one. It might have been the loss of his son, this girl's father. Mr. Davis thinks he was a man of education and shrewd about business. He had to go over all the papers, you know, and there were marriage certificates, his parents and his own, and various family affairs. I was glad for her sake that everything was right. A family stigma [Pg 302] always keeps cropping up."

Mrs. Aldred entered at this juncture, and Miss Bigelow left the two ladies to their conference. Mrs. Davis went over the ground again, more at length, and stated her wishes definitely. She wanted Miss Craven trained to make a good impression on society, accomplished if she could be.

"She has a great talent for music and will make a fine player. It is a pity she could not have begun her general education sooner," replied Mrs. Aldred. "It will take time to reach any standard."

"Oh, a thousand pities. But it doesn't seem really necessary for her to go into the abstruse subjects, for every year counts. It is an excellent thing that girls do not marry as young as they used to. I was married before I was quite eighteen, but I had been three years at a first-class boarding school. She will be twenty in the summer. She certainly can finish in another year?" tentatively.

"She can do a good deal, but hardly that. This year it will be principally ground-work. She has had private lessons, and she does love study, is eager to learn. Next year she will go into regular [Pg 303] classes and get accustomed to girls. She is painfully shy."

"I hope you can give her some style. After all, money *does* make amends for a great deal, and I have known some really ignorant girls to marry well, but now everyone who makes a bow to society is expected to have some training, and get the air of *nouveaux riches* rubbed off. That is detestable."

"I do not think that will be one of her faults;" and Mrs. Aldred smiled a little, wondering how long it had been since Mrs. Davis had cast comparative poverty behind her.

"French and all that she can pick up abroad. I should like her to know some Italian songs. I wish I *could* take her next year. You hardly consider it possible?"

"Oh, no. I should certainly wait. She has improved. I will send for her. And as it will soon be luncheon time may I not have the pleasure of making you a guest? You will see our school in every-day trim, and meet some of our teachers. We have also a day school for larger girls."

Mrs. Davis accepted graciously. Miss Craven was summoned, and entered with self-possession. [Pg 304]

The girl had been very happy all the morning. The consciousness that someone loved her, albeit a girl so much younger, had been like red wine to her blood, and kept her pulses throbbing, given her eyes a subtle glow. The bluish tint should never have been in such eyes, golden or the translucent green that sometimes sets hazel eyes ashine would have made a great change in her face. But they had lightened up curiously, and her cheeks rounded out, her complexion cleared up since she was no longer exposed to sun and wind, and had a more hygienic training. She had tied a pink ribbon around her neck. Helen Grant liked it so much.

Altogether, she looked improved from last summer. And she certainly had learned to smile. Her teeth were white, even, and pretty.

She was very much surprised, and could not dismiss her distrust of Mrs. Davis at once. Indeed, what reason had she for distrusting her? Mrs. Aldred led the conversation until the girl's first embarrassment was over, and then gracefully withdrew to plan for a change at the table.

Soon after luncheon Mrs. Davis took her leave, quite convinced that Mrs. Aldred would do as well for her husband's ward as anyone. She would have liked the prestige of the convent better. [Pg 305]

By dinner time most of the girls knew that Miss Juliet Craven was really an heiress, and that her guardian was the great banker and lawyer as well, and who was occasionally called upon to disentangle some very intricate points, Mr. James Elliot Davis. [Pg 306]

CHAPTER XV

BETWIXT TWO

"And you knew it all the time!" Daisy Bell cried indignantly. She sat curled up on her bed, her soft, pretty hair let down about her shoulders, her arms folded across her chest as if she would shut out any pleading tone from her heart, if indeed it was her heart whose racing pulsation could decide for her, and keep or banish a guest.

"Not all the time," corrected Helen. "She told me a little of her story, told it briefly, I mean, and left me to infer the rest; explained *why* she wanted an education, and the almost accident of her coming here. She seemed so lonely at Christmas-tide when so many of you were away in happy homes, having delightful times with plenty of love and joy and good cheer. Well, I felt rather lonely as well."

"And then I came back to you with a heart full of love, and she had crept in. Why didn't you tell me——" [Pg 307]

Daisy's voice trembled and she loosened one hand to wipe her eyes. Helen was much moved.

"There really was nothing to tell. We had made no vows, exchanged no promises, broken no rings," with a scornful little laugh. "I set her straight on two or three points, I scolded her a little, yes, I just did, and I wanted her to mix with, and be more like other girls. I don't believe you, with joyous homes and brothers and sisters, can understand the lonely life she has led."

"As *you* can," with a touch of girlish sarcasm.

"Yes, as I can. I have a kindly uncle and aunt, who have cared for me since father died, and a lot of cousins growing up into commonplace men and women. There are dozens of tender ties, but no real sympathy with my desires. Aunt thought I knew quite enough, and so I would for some lives. The longing and desire for other things, better things, helps me to understand her. But it was only a week or ten days ago—some strictures of the girls made her very unhappy——"

"She shouldn't have listened. The old adage is a good one," with a scornful laugh. [Pg 308]

"She could not help it. I think some of the girls have not treated her kindly, they have even been rude. And it was mean to try to set her age so much farther on, and to call her an old maid."

"She doesn't look young."

"She will have a guardian for almost two years longer. I suppose in law you have to give your exact age. Some of the people I love best are very far from young."

"I suppose you love a great many!" with an emphasis as bitter as her tender voice could make. She could put anger in it, but bitterness never could be part and parcel of it.

"I love a few. I am not very rich in friends. But I know I am capable of loving a good many people

for different qualities."

Helen stood up very straight. She was growing tall rapidly. There was firmness and character in every line of her face, and in her tone as well.

"I don't care for the thousandth part of anyone's love. And you said you would love me the best of anybody——"

"And so I did and do when you are not"—foolish, she was going to say, but she paused. "Oh, Daisy, can't you see it is the individuality, the qualities in a person that you love. And no two are [Pg 309] alike. You are very dear and sweet. But I dare say *you* loved girls last year when I was not here, and when I am gone you will love someone else. I don't ask you to love me best of all, for there are, no doubt, more charming girls and Miss Craven did not demand that of me. It was because she seemed so glad of a little crumb, and I knew no one loved her——"

Helen's voice had a break in it. She went on taking down her hair, putting away her necktie and handkerchief, then hung her skirt in the wardrobe. Would she ask Daisy to read with her? "Let not the sun go down upon your wrath." But she wasn't even angry, only indignant at what looked to her like injustice.

"Daisy," she began presently, "if someone told you a story, incidents out of her life that you knew were given in a burst of confidence, under the impression that you would not repeat it, should you feel duty bound to rehearse it to your friend. I did not promise, but I felt it was her business. Mrs. Aldred knew it; Miss Grace, too, I dare say, but they did not explain it to the school."

"It was nothing disgraceful. And the girls surmised—why, I think it would have been better [Pg 310] explained," and Daisy roused up a little.

"What right had any girl to surmise? It was admitted that Mrs. Aldred would not have taken in anyone with dishonorable antecedents. And if my father had been a criminal of any sort, could I have helped it? But Mrs. Aldred knew there was nothing except a neglected girlhood which she has been trying in the kindliest manner to remedy. When a girl surmised anything, she was willing to give color to what she did not know was true. It seems to me that is very near a falsehood."

Daisy had heard more sneers than Helen. Her face burned with a pained consciousness. She really felt ashamed that she should have half believed the positive untruths. Gossip and ill-nature without any foundation—how despicable it looked. How could they have been amused over it?

"I don't see why she shouldn't have been willing to let us all know she was so rich," Daisy said in a sort of extenuation for the girls.

"I think it was because she wanted to do her hardest work unnoticed, for one thing, and she doesn't seem at all proud of the money though it is honorably obtained. She is very timid because [Pg 311] she realizes her own deficiencies. I can't help feeling things would have been better with her if that Mrs. Howard had been her guardian's wife. Think, she's nineteen years old and no one has ever given her a bit of love, until——"

The great clock in the hall rolled out ten in its ponderous tones.

"Oh, good gracious!" Daisy jumped lightly from her bed. Helen put out the light and went on with her undressing. There could be no reading. She did not say a word, but knelt down presently.

It was hard to know just what was right and best. She had a feeling that she ought to go over to Daisy, since she had given the offense—it was not an offense on her part—but she could say, "I am sorry we quarreled when we meant to be such dear friends." She repeated "Our Father, who art in heaven," and then she remembered the man who prayed for wisdom, and who chose wisdom.

Two soft arms were around her neck and a tear-wet cheek was pressed against hers.

"I've been a horrid, miserable, selfish little wretch! I do wonder if you can ever love me any [Pg 312] more? But I want you too, even if you must love her some. I'm sorry——"

Helen kissed her a dozen times. "You little darling, I love you a hundred times better than before, if such a thing were possible. And I'm glad not to have any break. Run to bed, little midget, or we shall have to confess to talking out of time."

Then they said good-night again, and so the first difference was made up, but Daisy's jealous heart was not quite comforted.

There was a difference in the demeanor of most of the girls toward Miss Craven, though few would have admitted the money had anything to do with it. Miss Bigelow simply repeated Mrs. Davis's remark, that the girl would be very rich. No one could say that she was loud or presuming, or that her retiring manner was an evidence of pride. She went her way as quietly as before. She acknowledged all the little politenesses in a shy sort of way, but she was hard to get on with. She would only talk in monosyllables, except to Helen Grant.

"She has the key to unlock her tongue," Miss Mays said. "Helen is the sort of girl who will always be looking for fresh fields and pastures new. I like her immensely, but I couldn't help feeling as if [Pg 313] I was only one of the many to her."

Such little speeches with the utmost apparent good nature fell heavily on Daisy Bell's heart.

There were many things to attend to beside school-girl differences, which were always happening among pupils. Easter was late, and then every day counted to those who expected promotion as well as the graduates.

Still there were some splendid rambles over on the other side of the river, some rowing parties, delightful lessons in out-of-door botany, and, oh, the plans for summer! There would be eight graduates among the boarders, seven from the day scholars. Miss Reid was going abroad for a year at painting, Miss Downs to study music at Leipsic, Miss Bigelow to enter an art school in New York, three to go to college, one to be married. Most of the Senior B would step into the A division, and every class would be pushed up.

Helen could have gone in the higher division at Easter. She had studied not only with a will, but an eager interest in so many things that she wondered how girls could dawdle along. Still, if they [Pg 314] had no aim, if it was merely to get through these intervening years, looking forward to pleasure, society, and marriage, perhaps it *might* be sufficient. Her future was rather doubtful, even to herself. There were suggestions about the more weighty studies from Mrs. Van Dorn, as if Helen would hardly need them. But she did it because she liked them. She wanted to go to the foundation, to know on just what her structure stood, there was nothing negative about her. One day Miss Grace said:

"Miss Grant, you would make a most excellent teacher. You are so direct and so simple, you waste no time, and you evince so much interest in the branches you like. I see your influence on two pupils, Miss Bell, who is a sweet, bright girl, but not in love with study, and mother and I feel really indebted to you for your interest in Miss Craven. When she can once venture out of her shell with the consciousness that she is not so different from the others, the Rubicon will be passed. I do believe she will do it. I am counting a good deal on next year."

"I am glad if I help ever so little," returned Helen with shining eyes, as a soft color transfused her [Pg 315] fair face. "And since one and another has been very good to me, I ought to pass the kindness on to someone else."

"'Freely ye have received, freely give.' I am glad that purpose has taken root. There are so many things we can give that only cost us a little trouble, and do more good than the bestowal of money. It is one of the greatest lessons of life."

Miss Aldred smiled upon her pupil, and a warm glow sped through Helen's frame.

"Then I have my mind quite set upon teaching some day. Perhaps I take that from my father, who was a teacher. I saw so little of him, but this year I've wondered a good deal what he really was like, and if we should not have been splendid friends on these lines. I believe he was disappointed about my not being a boy, and it's funny"—with a bright merry laugh. "I've never wanted to be a boy at all. I think girls are nicer."

"The loveliest being to me is a fine, broad, sweet-minded, cultured woman, and I am very glad she is beginning to be thought of as the ideal woman. You have many years before you reach real womanhood, which comes later and is richer than it was twenty years ago. But you are taking [Pg 316] some excellent steps along the way."

"Oh, thank you for the praise," said Helen pressing her hand.

If the steps were not in Latin and French she could go bounding along, she thought. In that respect she did not inherit her father's facility nor his love for the abstruse and difficult.

"I suppose I am superficial," she said to herself ruefully. "But why shouldn't one delight in the things one loves best?"

That was one charm about Miss Craven to her. She reveled in poetry. The other girls were full of nonsense chatter in the spare half hours, but they two often slipped away under some tree and read and discussed. There was a fund of romance in each one, though temperament and surroundings had been so different, the one so afraid to express her inmost thought, the other so fearless, not even minding being laughed at.

Every day seemed more crowded with all things.

"I'm glad I don't have to think about a graduation gown, or any gown," laughed Helen. "My [Pg 317] clothes come ready-made, and all I have to do is to put them on."

"But wouldn't you like to choose sometimes?" asked one of the girls. "I shall choose my graduation gown and my wedding gown."

"Oh, no you won't. Graduation gowns have to be pretty much alike, and wedding gowns must be in the prevailing fashion. In fact, I think there is very little you *do* choose in this life. There's someone just in front always who lays down the law, and though you may think you will get your own way you find oftener it is the way of someone else."

"If I had my way I wouldn't come back to school."

"If I had my way I would come back to school ten years," exclaimed Helen.

"You are enough to tire anyone to death with your everlasting study plans. Thank heaven for

vacation, say I."

There were some plans, indeed a great deal of planning about that. Each girl had a different desire.

Helen had written her monthly letter regularly. Sometimes she had nice chatty replies from Mrs. Van Dorn; at others, Miss Gage had written. They had been spending a month at Paris, now they [Pg 318] were going to London, and then to some country houses. And early in June came a letter disposing of Helen's summer. She would return to Hope and spend the time between Mrs. Dayton and her uncle. "We do not know what may happen another year," she wrote; "and you are too young to be going about anywhere else."

Of course that was what she had expected to do, would be glad to do. She did want to see all her old friends again. Uncle Jason's letters had been rather queer and formal, Jenny had written twice all about herself and Joe.

Daisy came in bright and smiling. She, too, had a letter.

"I've been telling mamma such lots about you, and I asked her to let me invite you to spend a fortnight with me, and here it is. Just listen."

A very delightful invitation to be sure. Helen's heart beat high for a moment.

"Well—are you struck speechless?" a gay light dancing in her eyes.

"You are very good, just lovely, but I do not know as I can accept, I am to go home——"

"Only two weeks out of nine! Surely you can spare that!" [Pg 319]

Helen considered. "I will consult Mrs. Aldred before I decide," with gentle gravity.

"I really do not see what she has to do with it. Your aunt and uncle would be the ones to decide. Don't you want to do it—to see what sort of a home I have? It would be just a splendid time. Mamma is half in love with you. I am almost jealous again."

"Oh, I can't think of anything more delightful," Helen cried eagerly, and Daisy did not need to doubt the pleasure illumining her face. "But Mrs. Van Dorn has planned——"

"Oh, write to her and tell her how much you want to come," beseechingly.

"There would hardly be time."

"It would be nicer to take you home with me, but you could come afterward."

"Why yes. However, I will see what Mrs. Aldred thinks."

"Oh, go at once. I want to write back," exclaimed Daisy impatiently.

Mrs. Aldred looked up from the pile of reports on her table, and said in a pleasantly inquiring tone, "Well?" then listened, but there was a tint of perplexity in her face.

"I had a note from Mrs. Van Dorn by the last steamer also. She seems very well satisfied with [Pg 320] your progress, only she is rather exigent about the French, and I wish you would do all you can at it during vacation. But she is very explicit about the summer. I think she prefers that you should spend it in Hope."

She had been rather more than explicit, and said she did not approve of such young girls visiting about. Mr. Castles would send a trusty person for Helen and see her safely on the train for Hope.

"Do you not think I might write to her about it for a visit later on?"

"Yes, you could. But Mrs. Van Dorn is certain of her own wishes in any matter, and generally has good reasons. I do not imagine a visit like this would do you any harm, but you are young, and I *do* suppose you owe your own people some respect. I think I should accept the fiat."

Helen felt bitterly disappointed. She did not dream her girlish enthusiasm about Daisy Bell had been one of the factors in this command, as it really was, that Mrs. Van Dorn did not want any girl to gain a strong influence over Helen, but she need not have felt suspicious, as the influence was all the other way. [Pg 321]

It had come like a sudden vision, and now it was quenched in bitter regret, with the unappeased want back of it.

"I do object to indiscriminate visiting for such young girls. If Mrs. Van Dorn were here and could see just the kind of girl Miss Daisy is, it would be different, but I suppose, if she thought at all, it was about the generality of girls, who sometimes are quite lawless in their own homes. Since you have accepted her direction for the next two years, it is best to do it cheerfully," advised Mrs. Aldred.

"Yes, I *do* owe her that much," returned Helen in a convinced tone, if the disappointment had not all gone out of it.

Then Daisy and she had an unpleasant disagreement about it, and Helen felt sorrier than ever.

Juliet Craven's happening was a comforting one for her. Mrs. Davis had gone abroad with a clear

conscience. Her friend, Mrs. Howard, was to look after the ward who was neither woman or child.

Then came the rush of examinations, the excitement to know who had passed, and what the marks were, and the graduation exercises which began at three in the afternoon and were to end with a lawn party in the moonlight. [Pg 322]

Some of the pupils were secretly mortified at not attaining a higher rate, a few really did not care, and they were not sufficiently above the ordinary to make a mark anywhere. Some others were a credit to the training and culture of Aldred House, and went their way with a grateful remembrance of their teacher friend and her admirable daughter.

Helen had a part in the singing, there was some excellent playing, recitations, and essays. The house was crowded, it was one of the summer events at Westchester. There were congratulations and good wishes, and an evening of unbounded delight, as many of the young people were invited, and for this evening the youthful masculines, among them a number of law students, were welcomed.

Was it only a year ago Helen Grant had recited Hervé Riel in the old schoolhouse at Hope Center? Oh, how many things had happened since then. Why, it was like a fairy story. She could hardly believe it herself.

She recited it again out on a corner of the lawn, and before she was half through her audience had doubled, and listened with flattering attention. The young son of Mr. Danforth, just home from college, was standing near. [Pg 323]

"That's enough to inspire one," he said. "I shall take one line back with me and recall the very ring of your voice:

"Sirs, believe me, there's a way.'"

Helen flushed with pleasure. She had not given up her old hero, though there had been new candidates for her favor.

Then followed the partings the next morning. Some would be for life perhaps. Every graduate counted on coming back to Aldred House some day, but there were many chances and changes and more than one was never to see it again, only hold its happy times in remembrance.

"I am glad we are to keep together next year," exclaimed Daisy Bell. "And I *do* think I shall be a better student. The year following we shall graduate together. And all the rest of our lives I hope we shall be friends, even if we do have tiffs now and then."

Juliet Craven asked rather timidly if she might write to Helen.

"Oh, I should be disappointed if you did not. I count on it as one of my pleasures," Helen returned warmly. There were other promises, several of them not kept. And by twos and threes the group dwindled until at dinner all the remainder were invited to the table of state as guests. [Pg 324]

The next morning a thin, rather somber-looking man came with a note from Mr. Castles. Helen's eyes were swimming in tears as she said good-by to Mrs. Aldred and Miss Grace.

It was an uneventful journey until they reached New York. They stopped at Mr. Castles' office, and he questioned Helen about her past year, took her out to lunch, and then put her aboard her own train with several papers and a magazine, and wished her a pleasant journey.

And pleasant it was, though she had a seat to herself. She could not read, hardly look at the tempting array of pictures, there were so many thoughts crowding in and through her mind. She had been very happy. Schooldays were delightful. She wanted years and years of them.

Some ten miles before they reached Hope the passengers had to leave the main line. She made her change without any difficulty, and saw that her trunk was safely bestowed. Then on and on past farms and a few straggling villages, when the train began to slow up and the conductor called out—"North Hope." [Pg 325]

Half bewildered, as if it were a strange place, she felt the conductor take her arm. Then someone else grasped it, a rather tall figure with a familiar face, and a delighted voice at his side exclaimed:

"Why, Helen Grant! You have grown almost out of recollection!"

"Oh, Mrs. Dayton! Oh, Mr. Warfield!"

That was all she could say at first. Mr. Warfield looked after her trunk; Mrs. Dayton surveyed her from head to foot.

"You'll have to go in long dresses," she began in an amused tone.

"Oh, I don't want to grow up, Mrs. Dayton. I don't want to be a young lady. Girls have such a good time, and in my heart and all over me I am just a girl," she exclaimed vehemently.

"I am glad of that, too. Joanna wondered if you had forgotten how to dry glass and china, and would be clear spoiled at boarding school. You haven't changed a bit in looks, and your face isn't a day older, but you are almost as tall as I. Just now I haven't but two or three boarders, and I [Pg 326]

want all of you that I can have for the pure pleasure of the thing."

Mr. Warfield soon joined them. Here was the library in which she had taken such pleasure, the street with the stores, the window in which she had seen her Madonna, and now she knew so much about the old ones and their painters. A turn in this quiet street and here they were. She would not have been startled to see Mrs. Van Dorn on the porch. There were an old lady and an old gentleman, both silver-haired and placid, she in an almost quakerish garb, but looking very sweet.

"You are tired and dusty, I know, and want a bit of freshening up. Mr. Warfield is going to stay to dinner, and then you can have your talk. His school just closed yesterday, and he goes away to-morrow. We have almost quarreled about you; he hates girls' boarding schools and was sure you would come back a niminy, priminy Miss with high heels and trains and all that," laughing gayly.

"He doesn't know anything about Aldred House," Helen replied, amused.

"Here, you are to have a room to yourself, though I expect to-morrow Uncle Jason will whisk you off. That old couple downstairs, Mr. and Mrs. White, have Mrs. Van Dorn's room. And she's careering around Europe like any young thing! She does surprise me. Now when you are ready come down, for we are just dying to inspect you and see how much you have changed." [Pg 327]

Helen recalled the fact that a year ago she thought this the most beautiful place imaginable. There was the tall, slim rowan-tree, full of green berries that would hang out beads of red flame in the autumn, the tamarack with its sprays of delicate leaves, the big, burly, black walnut on the corner, the wild clematis and Virginia creeper, the prim flower-beds.

"There will be plenty of time to look at them through the summer," she thought, so she bathed her face, brushed her hair, shook out the pretty *plissé* shirtwaist she had in her satchel, tied a blue ribbon round her neck and looked as fresh as a just opened flower. [Pg 328]

CHAPTER XVI

HOPE THROUGH A WIDER OUTLOOK

She had on nice-fitting button boots with heels only moderately high, a dark-blue, thin summer-cloth skirt up to her ankles, with several rows of stitching through the hem, the crumply white plissé waist that fell like drapery about shoulders and arms, her hair was a mass of braids at the back with a straight parting from forehead to crown, some short curling ends about the edge of her fair brow, and the blue of her eyes was many shades deeper than the ribbon around her neck. Mrs. Van Dorn was no more anxious to have her a young lady than Mr. Warfield.

She was just a bright, intelligent, good-looking girl, who would never be girlishly pretty, but something better, perhaps a handsome woman at five-and-twenty, and always attractive from the sort of frank sweetness, the wholesomeness of the thorough girl.

Mr. Warfield felt rather vexed at being disappointed, yet down in his heart he was glad she was fulfilling the sort of ideal he had of her, the girl she might become with proper training, he had often said, even to Mrs. Dayton. He thought he should know on just what lines to develop the best and highest in her. He held a very good opinion of a man's training for certain natures, and hers was one. Then he felt a little sore at not being able to keep a sort of supervision over her by letter. [Pg 329]

But when she came and sat down by him in that unaffected manner and looked out of such frank eyes; smiled with an every-day cordiality, as if the smile was in constant use, he was a little nonplused.

"What have you been doing this whole year?" he asked with interest. "Could you pass an examination for the High School?"

"Oh, do you remember how frightened I was? But some of the questions would not cause me five minutes' thought now. I've had a magnificent time with history and literature, and a tough time with Latin. It is one of the things I have to delve at this summer. It seems to me most of my life is school life. I can't stop anywhere. Something is thrust at me all the time." [Pg 330]

"You used to love to study," complainingly.

"I love it yet. Botany is delightful, it is so full of live wonders. I do not care so much for chemistry. And physics——"

"They require close attention. And what accomplishments?" in a dissatisfied tone.

"French that I am not in love with, but Mrs. Van Dorn insists upon it, and the piano, drawing, and painting."

"A waste of time most of them," he commented severely.

"Sketching is very fascinating."

"And a camera can give you the picture twice as well."

"Some of the Seniors do beautiful work. One of them goes abroad to study and perfect herself in art. Miss Gertrude Aldred will go after next year."

"That may be very well for pastime, or waste-time," with a touch of sarcasm, "but I don't suppose any of these girls could get their living at it?"

"I don't know as they will be compelled to."

"But everybody has to be put through the same mill, I suppose?"

"Not exactly. Some studies are elective. Three of the girls go to college. Of course many of them [Pg 331] do not expect to turn their education to any account. I should like to know just what I am to do with mine," and she laughed softly.

"I thought you once looked up to teaching as a sort of glorified existence."

The touch of irony did not hurt her at all.

"I still think it one of the finest professions. Only—I should like to have a school of smart, eager children, and go on and on with them. I think it must be very hard to take up a new dull class every season."

"It is," he returned frankly. "It was one of the drawbacks, like going down to the foot of your own class."

"So I think I shall have a boarding school and keep the girls year after year."

"Well, are you deep in metaphysics or transcendentalism?" asked a cheerful voice, as Mrs. Dayton's ample figure emerged from the door-way. "You do not seem to be 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought.' That is an old-fashioned quotation and was in the copy books at school in my day, when to be thin and pale was the mark of a student. And wasn't midnight oil another? You do not show marks of either, Helen." [Pg 332]

"Oh, the lights are out and we have to be in bed at ten. We can rise as early as we like in the morning, however," laughed Helen.

"Numbers of the old ideas have been exploded. Still, we must admit they made some good scholars. The students were more in earnest, they were not so superficial."

"But it takes a long while to learn everything thoroughly. That is where teachers and professors have the advantage, they can spend their whole lives over it," exclaimed Helen. "Honestly," and a rather mischievous light flashed across her face, "I do not think the average girl is a born student. Perhaps the boy isn't either. But there seem to be so many things in a girl's life, so many sides to it"—and a thoughtful crease came in her forehead.

"You have found that out early. But the successes must be able to do several things well, and to bring knowledge into action, not have a lot of useless matter stored up in the brain waiting for the time to make it serviceable, and then it is not fresh, often not useful."

"Like the old clothes you pile up in the garret," interpolated Mrs. Dayton. "They are out of date and moth-eaten. There are many things it is not worth while to save up. I have a boarder here [Pg 333] who has saved up all her troubles since she was ten years old, and lives them over, takes them out and puts them back. She is a well-informed woman, too. There is the bell, so come in to dinner."

There were only Mr. and Mrs. White, Mrs. Carson, the woman of many troubles, and Mr. Conway, who gave Helen a warm welcome, but was amazed at the change in her.

They talked a little over the last summer's guests. "Miss Lessing was married and the younger girl engaged. The Disbrowes had gone West. And truly I wouldn't mind having Mrs. Van Dorn again. She certainly is an uncommon woman and does enjoy life on all sides. And it is curious the way she picks up knowledge everywhere. I dare say she sometimes mentions facts about her own country to consuls and ministers abroad that they have scarcely heard of," declared Mrs. Dayton.

Mr. Warfield gave a little sniff and a curl of the lip that seemed to run all over his face in disapprobation, because he could find no trenchant sentence to apply to Mrs. Van Dorn. But Helen glanced at her hostess with a lovely grateful light more eloquent than words.

When they rose she lingered. "I ought to go out and dry the dishes for Joanna," the girl said [Pg 334] laughingly.

"Indeed, you will do no such thing," was the quick reply. "And let me whisper a secret in your ear, though I don't know as it need be that. Mrs. Van Dorn wrote me a note, asking me to invite you here and keep you as much of the time as Aunt Jane would be willing to spare you. And she inclosed a check. I'd been ready enough to do it just for the pleasure."

"She is very generous," said Helen, much moved.

"And some people think her mean. She is unduly exact, but I guess the world would be better if more people paid their just debts instead of buying you a dollar gift when they owed you forty or fifty. But run out on the porch and talk to Mr. Warfield. He came purposely to see you. I'll be out

and join the fray presently," her eyes overflowing with an amused light. "If you were older I should say—there, run along."

She checked herself just in time. It was on the tip of her tongue to add—"he is half in love with you." But the girl's face was so innocently frank that it would have been both ill-bred and cruel to suggest such a thing. [Pg 335]

On the whole, it was a pleasant evening, though Helen was not a little puzzled by several things in Mr. Warfield's demeanor, and his resolutely keeping to his opinion that she would have been better off at the High School. Some way would have opened for her, he was confident.

Still, he gave her the most cordial good wishes. She had the making of a splendid girl and woman in her. He took great credit in the consciousness that he had seen this, and roused her from a commonplace existence, for now, whatever happened, she could not be commonplace; as if, indeed, the every-day lives were not often doing heroic and lovely deeds in their every-day sphere.

He was going for nine weeks to a summer college term, on the borders of a beautiful lake, where he would have refreshment of body as well as mind. So he might not see her again under a year.

"I do hope they will not have you spoiled," he said with his good-by. And as he walked down the street he muttered under his breath:

"That old woman will make a waiting maid of her in the end." He was jealous that the old woman should be able to dictate the girl's life just because she was rich. [Pg 336]

She had such a happy morning with Mrs. Dayton, talking over last summer; Joanna studied her with admiring eyes and declared that she was not changed a bit, only had grown taller, and the mysterious alteration that comes to a girl on the boundary line, for which she had no words.

Uncle Jason came in quite early and was delighted with his warm welcome, more frank than Joanna's.

"My, you're growed every way!" he said, "and you're pretty as a pink, and fine as a lady! I declare I don't know what Aunt Jane will do with you. And the children are just crazy to see you. My! My!"

He studied her from head to foot and turned her round. His eyes twinkled, he screwed up his face until it was a bed of wrinkles. His hair was faded and grayer, the fringe of beard ragged. But there was such a gladness, such an utter satisfaction that she felt doubly assured of his love.

When she had gone to pick up a few articles Mrs. Dayton made a little explanation that she felt would ease Helen's course. She would have a good deal of studying to do, and Mrs. Van Dorn had made arrangements for her to stay here part of the time, as it would be quiet, with no interruptions to break in upon her time. [Pg 337]

"Why, I thought it was vacation!" looking puzzled. "Mother's planned a lot of things. And she's mortal afraid Helen will forget all about housekeeping."

"She belongs to Mrs. Van Dorn for the two years, you know, since that lady is taking care of her. You see now that is only fair. Helen's time is planned out."

"Sho, now!" and he bit at the end of a wheat stem he found hanging to his clothes.

"Helen knows a good deal about housework and if she should ever have it to do, it will come back to her. But her heart is set upon teaching, and I think that is about as easy a way of earning money as any, if you are fitted for it."

Mr. Mulford said no more, but he felt there would be a clash between Aunt Jane and Helen.

The rosy, bright-eyed girl said good-by to her dear friend, with the promise of returning soon, and stepped into the rickety old wagon.

It seemed curious to her, but everything about looked so much smaller. The houses appeared to have shrunk, fences were dilapidated, gates hung by one hinge, the paths at the roadside were overgrown with weeds. Every street and plot of ground at Westchester was so pretty and tidy, the hills were so high and grand, and there was the beautiful river. To be sure the great Creator of all had placed it there, had raised the mountains to their height, but the residents had added the thriftiness and beauty. Oh, she could never live here! She wondered how her father had taken to it, and how Mr. Warfield endured it. [Pg 338]

Uncle Jason was a better farmer than most of his neighbors. Aunt Jane took the credit of that; perhaps she did deserve most of it. People and towns seldom remain stationary; if they do not improve they retrograde. The railroad was building up North Hope at the expense of the Center.

The house and the front fence needed painting sadly. The flower-beds looked rather ragged, the grass wanted cutting. Sam had gone in the spring to learn a mason's trade and only came home for over Sunday. So Uncle Jason was short-handed.

The children made a rush, then paused. Helen sprang down with a dignity that checked them, but she kissed them all round, and Aunt Jane, who was wiping her arms and hands on her apron. [Pg 339]

"I thought I'd get trigged up before anyone came," she exclaimed, "but there's so much to do on

Saturday. You might have opened the front door, 'Reely, but never mind," and they all trailed around through the kitchen. Off the end of the dining room was a small room that Jenny had used for sewing and odds and ends, and they went thither.

"Now take off your hat. My, didn't you bring anything but that satchel! And here's a fan—it's hot in here, and as for flies, they eat you up! 'Reely, you and Fan set the table. How you've changed, Helen, you're most grown up. But land! When I was fourteen I was grown up and did a woman's work. And you're fifteen! Well, I suppose you've had a grand good time, and forgot all the useful things you ever knew."

Aunt Jane's tone was good-humored, but it had a certain air of authority, indicating that Helen could never outgrow *her* right or proprietorship.

"No, I do not think I have forgotten much, and certainly have learned a great deal more," she replied quietly. [Pg 340]

"Well, book-learnin' isn't everything. I'd like to know how houses and farms would go on if everybody kept to books."

"There's Jenny," and Helen was delighted with the break. Jenny was sunburned but looked well, quite like a country farmer's wife, and was gayly cordial, laughed because her mother's supper was late; they always had theirs early on Saturday afternoon.

"You wait until you get a house full of children," said her mother with a touch of annoyance.

The girls sat out on the old bench that had gone a little more to splinters. Uncle Jason came in; he had not quite worked Nathan up to the point of Sam's usefulness. Aunt Jane didn't mean to lead off with any fuss for Helen, so supper was in the kitchen, but the tablecloth was clean—the other had met with a big accident at noon.

Nothing was much changed except the children were a year older and larger. Two or three of them still talked at once. Jenny sat by and had a cup of tea. Aurelia and Fanny were a little awed by Helen's fine ways, and began to eye her furtively. Jenny kept most of the talk and when the meal was through took Helen out on the front stoop. What was the school like and were there [Pg 341] many rich girls in it? And what did Mrs. Van Dorn mean to do with her when she was through with school?

Helen was relieved when she branched off on her own affairs. How much the egg and butter money had amounted to, and another scheme she had struck. She helped mother out with her sewing, but she found in the winter she had a good deal of time on her hands, so she began to sew for the neighbors. "You know I always did like running the machine," she declared. "And you'd be surprised at the money I've earned. I don't see how women can dawdle away their time so, when they've small families. I think working in a shop is a grand good training. You must be there at a certain hour, you must put in every moment if you are going to be a success, and you get brisk ways if there's anything at all to you."

Joe came over presently, and the two farmers smoked and talked. Then Jenny said she would take Helen home with her, she had such a nice spare room, and she and Aunt Jane had some words over it, but Jenny carried her point. It was lovely and quiet, and Helen was thankful. [Pg 342]

Yes, she *had* grown away from them; while she loved them just as well, she thought she loved Uncle Jason better. The life was so different. It need not be so hard and,—yes, it was coarse, really untender. Aunt Jane would have suffered anything for her children's sake, but it must be in *her* way. After all these years of married life, children, and a certain degree of hard-won prosperity, she knew better than anyone else how the world could be managed.

'Reely and Fan were fascinated with Helen, and Jenny said she had a good deal of common sense, and she supposed all the airish ways were just right at school, but they seemed queer among common folks. It was inevitable that Helen and Aunt Jane should clash, and Helen felt even at the risk of being misunderstood and wrongfully accused, she must establish her own standing. She had not come home to help with housework.

"I wish I'd never let you gone over there to wait on that old woman, and have your head filled with airs and graces that you think sets you up above your family. I knew that day I should be sorry for it. And this is all the thanks I get for what I've done for you, while you'll crawl on the [Pg 343] ground after her."

"No, I shouldn't; I do not," replied Helen with dignity. "I shall always feel thankful to you and Uncle Jason for what you have done, and, Aunt Jane, when I get to where I can earn money I want to pay you back for my keep after father died——"

Helen's face was scarlet and the hot blood was racing up and down in her pulses.

"Yes," she continued, controlling her voice by a strong effort, "I have made that one of my duties. I can't take your way of life, Aunt Jane, but I shall always feel grateful for the care."

"Helen Grant, do you suppose your uncle would take one penny from you, his own sister's child! It isn't that, it's the—the——"

"Oh, Aunt Jane, I *am* grateful. Do not let us quarrel because our paths lie in different directions. I must work in the way I am best fitted for, the way I shall like above all things——"

"Oh, yes, you'll go off with that woman, and she'll get tired of you and ship you off. You mark my words."

"Then I can take up teaching, which will be my delight. She has offered me these two years of [Pg 344] training and I mean to make the best of them, to crowd in all I can, to fit myself to earn my living in the way I like best of all. I do suppose we all have some choice."

Aunt Jane flounced out of the room. There was something burning on the stove, and she was glad of the excuse. And all she said when Helen was going over to North Hope, was:

"Well, come whenever you like. The house is always open to you."

Uncle Jason was very tender to her.

"Mother's a bit cranky," he said. "Even Jenny plagues her about it. I think she's jealous of that Mrs. Van Dorn, and she has an idea of her own about bringing up girls. But they're not all alike and some are fit for one thing, some for another. Jenny's got the right of it. It's best for everyone to do what he's best fitted for, or *she*," smiling a little. "And it stands to reason that you might take after your own father. You're not all Mulford."

It was very delightful to be back with Mrs. Dayton. One new couple had come, but they were very quiet people. And the girls about began to call on her. Ella Graham had enough of the High School.

"I just went for the name of it," she explained. "I should never teach, and what is the use of [Pg 345] wasting all that time and bothering your brains for nothing? I shall get married the first good chance I have."

Lu Searing bewailed the hard work as well and wasn't sure she would keep on. She wanted to go somewhere to boarding school, she had heard girls had such fun getting in scrapes and out of them again. Marty Pendleton was sick of it too, and was going to learn dressmaking. Dan Erlick had gone to be clerk in the drug store.

"And to think how hard Mr. Warfield worked over them all!" Helen exclaimed, indignantly. "It doesn't do him a bit of credit."

"He had four new ones this summer. Well, there does seem a good deal of work in this world without much result," said Jenny.

Helen studied her Latin with a will, and one day to make some knotty point clearer went to the reference department of the library. Miss Westerly, the librarian, had seen her the summer before and been interested in what had befallen her, and now they took up quite a friendship. The library was open only two evenings in the week, after eight o'clock, and Miss Westerly found it very pleasant to visit on Mrs. Dayton's porch and talk to a girl as bright and ambitious as [Pg 346] Helen. She was a college graduate and a thorough student, not considering her education finished.

"I should like so to go to college," Helen said. "But I don't know—I should have to earn some money first."

"I have a friend who entered college at twenty-seven. She was a clerk in a store and then an old uncle left her some money. She was born for a student, and she graduated with honors. She is thirty-five now, vice-principal in a large seminary at the West, and a very successful teacher. Then I know of a girl who spent two years at college, taught three years and then went back and finished. Some women, as well as some men, love knowledge."

"I have half a mind to say I will go, no matter what stands in the way," and Helen smiled vaguely. If one *could* see into the future.

"Perhaps your friend may send you."

Helen wondered whether she would dare propose it.

Once a week she went out to the farm. Aunt Jane had "cooled down" a little, for Uncle Jason had said, "If you can't get along, mother, I'll hire someone through the heat of the summer. Nancy [Pg 347] Bird would come in a minute. As for thinking to put Helen to housework, washing and ironing and all that, when someone else is taking care of her, I don't see as it would be just the thing, no more than to call Sam home when Mr. Bartow has given him a good lay."

"I don't see as Helen is any better than my girls, and they are going to be brought up to work. Her father didn't make out much for all his education."

Helen did have some nice visits with Jenny, who was rather more modern and broader minded than her mother. She kept her house with some system, of course, there was no one to disarrange her methods. She was blithe and cheerful and eager to get along, but she and Joe went off driving now and then, and she listened with slow-growing interest when he read aloud to her.

But altogether, Helen was not sorry when she found herself on the way back to school. She had a warmer feeling than ever for Mrs. Van Dorn and had written her two charming letters from Mrs. Dayton's porch.

What a trouble her education seemed to some of those who had no hand in it. [Pg 348]

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE DELIGHTFUL CURRENT

Helen Grant came to Aldred House again on Friday afternoon. Miss Daisy, who had been there but an hour, rushed down to welcome her.

"Oh, dear! If something had happened and you had *not* come," she cried, "I should really have been broken-hearted, and I don't see what good Samaritan could have bound up the wounds. And most things are going to be strange and new."

"New girls?" inquiringly.

"Yes, ever so many of them. There were several Mrs. Aldred could not take last year. She is closeted with two now, and you may as well come upstairs at once. I have some new pictures—we will give away the old ones. And the sweetest new willow rocker. But what do you think has happened to Roxy Mays?"

"Marriage," cried Helen laughingly.

"No, but a fortune. And her oldest sister was married to a designer or something who goes [Pg 349] abroad to illustrate Russia. The old great-aunt died suddenly, and left a good deal of money to Mr. Mays, and ten thousand dollars to Roxy. So her mother and the other sister and she sailed the last week in August. Of course Roxy is in high feather. And Miss Reid and Miss Gertrude Aldred have gone to Rome under the care of a friend of Mrs. Aldred's. Two of the girls have gone to Leipsic. Oh, dear, I wonder if *we* will ever go abroad?"

"It is a lovely dream. I do hope to compass it some time," and a longing light filled Helen's eyes.

"And there is so much to see here. We had a cousin of father's visiting us who had spent seven years in Mexico, and knew President Diaz quite well. He tells such interesting stories about the wonders there, the discoveries and the traces of people who must have lived a thousand or perhaps more years ago. Then my brother has a friend who is deep in those marvelous exhumations in Arizona. Presently we shall be a famous country, if we haven't castles and cathedrals."

Helen's trunk came up and she began to unpack. There were some new gowns. [Pg 350]

"Are you going in long skirts?" inquired Daisy.

"Not this winter. I should like to be 'only a girl' ever so long," and Helen smiled dreamily. "It seems as if I had been only a very little girl thirteen years or so, and now I want to be just a big girl. Womanhood looks so strange and mysterious to me. There are so many things to be decided then, and now you can hover about the edge, just slip into the surf of that river called the future and then draw back. You don't have to cross it. But some day you must, and shoulder its responsibilities."

"How queer and solemn that sounds. And I am a whole year older, and I ought to be ever so much ahead of you."

"You are in Latin and French. I studied up some. I met a delightful woman,—well I saw her last summer, and oddly enough she remembered me from the books I read,—that I never should have known about but for Mrs. Van Dorn. She is the librarian. And we have had such a nice time. She is a college graduate, and she has inspired me with a longing to go. But then I want everything. Travel and music and churches and ruins and histories of nations that have been swept away, and [Pg 351] to climb the pyramids, and to ask the Sphinx her mighty question——"

"*Your* mighty question as to what secret is in her ponderous brain?"

Both girls laughed heartily, merrily.

"Well, I must say, Helen Grant, your wishes comprise enough for a lifetime! And you have left out Paris, and that quaint, delightful, clean, watery Holland, and Moscow, and India."

"There is too much for one lifetime. I wonder if we *do* come back and take some of the pleasures in the life afterward? But then we don't remember what has gone before, so where is the benefit?"

"There are ever so many new girls," said Daisy presently.

"I wonder if we haven't a small share of duty towards them," remarked Helen, considering. "I thought it lovely of you girls to come and welcome me when I was a stranger."

"Roxy was splendid at that. I am not sure but there was some curiosity in it. She liked to get down to the bottom of a girl's soul and life and know all that had happened to her. And she was very amusing with her bright comments and comparisons. I was desperately in love with her at

first," and Daisy colored warmly. "Then she said little things about other girls that I didn't like. [Pg 352]
And you were so upright, so generous in your criticisms, so ready to make allowance. And after all that mistake about Miss Craven she was very unwilling to own she had been wrong. Wasn't I fearfully jealous? Didn't I act like a fiend?"

There were tears in Daisy's eyes.

Helen gave a vague smile.

"I can see now that it was somewhat due to Roxy's influence. She kept saying you were so bewitched about her, and that you were on the lookout for new sensations, that you tried on friendships and then cast them off. I think that was what *she* did. What a foolishly miserable girl I was, but I *did* love you. And I do, I shall."

Helen kissed her fondly.

"And mamma thought it was very kind in you to take up Miss Craven. She is curiously interested in her, wondering how she will develop. Papa says the Craven mines are remarkable, the new one with all that hematite is a fortune by itself. I hope she comes back."

That evening they made acquaintance with a few of the new girls. And the next day came a [Pg 353]
crowd, new and old, Miss Craven among them.

Juliet Craven had changed wonderfully under the influence of a woman who had always longed for a daughter and had three sons instead. There was a brightness about her, a kind of new interest that shone in her eyes and brought a tint to her cheeks. A little contrast would have made her quite a pretty girl, for her features were fairly good, but she was too much of a nondescript.

For the first time she had known personal interest and affection from a woman who might have been her mother, and who certainly had no ulterior object. She had outgrown some of her timidity, she stood up straighter, as if she was more conscious of her own power, and she dared to meet the eyes of the other girls, to answer their smiles. She was to go in most of the classes this year, though the girls would be much younger, but Mrs. Aldred judged that the companionship would prove beneficial.

There were several changes in the teaching corps. A Mrs. Wiley, middle-aged and experienced, who had been employed in a girls' college in the West, shared with Miss Grace the duties of the senior classes. Her daughter, Miss Esther, taught in the younger day-school classes and was a [Pg 354]
pupil in several studies. After a month matters ran along smoothly.

Not that the girls fell into the traces without any friction. Some were pert and self-sufficient, others consequential, and several not remarkable for anything, taking mental culture along objective lines, and a few ambitious, intellectual, loving study for the sake of the sweet kernel knowledge when you had cracked the rough outer shell. There were the bright and sweet, who had no aims above the average, and who would get trained into nice, wholesome girls and make good wives and mothers.

Helen enjoyed her studies immensely. The botany rambles were one of her great pleasures, and when she went at the wonders of astronomy she was enraptured.

"Such a student is worth having; she inspires the rest," Mrs. Wiley said to Mrs. Aldred. "There is a girl who should go to college."

"Yes, she ought," but in her secret soul Mrs. Aldred feared that was not Mrs. Van Dorn's design.

She was beginning to understand and love Latin, and doing very well at French. She did not [Pg 355]
display much aptitude for drawing, though she had a certain artistic taste in arrangement.

"But I really do not see any use of hammering away at music," she protested. "I never shall make a fine player."

"You will make a fine singer and you want some thorough knowledge for that," said Madame Meran.

"It was one of the branches Mrs. Van Dorn is very particular about," Mrs. Aldred added, in a tone that left no room for demur.

There was the usual fun and perhaps a little sly flirting among the newer students with the young men in the law offices. Autumn was quite a lively time, since court was in session. The girls were allowed to visit the fairs and entertainments of their respective churches, and occasionally spend Saturday afternoon with an outside acquaintance.

During the holidays Mrs. Dayton wrote that one of the High-School teachers had resigned and Mr. Warfield had gained the appointment, being much delighted with it, and would board with her. From home she heard that Jenny had a little son and they were all very joyous. Fan was going to spend the winter with her. Aurelia had been taken out of school as she didn't learn [Pg 356]
anything worth while, and Aunt Jane believed in making her girls useful.

"I don't wonder teachers get discouraged in a small country place," she thought, "when the parents care so little for education." She was glad Mr. Warfield had gone to the High School, where he could have a more congenial atmosphere.

Helen often wondered in these days what her father had been like, and how he came to drift to such a dull place as Hope Center. Twenty years before it had been a center of several things. The Church was flourishing. In the winter the large boys and girls came to school and the old-fashioned alligation, mensuration, and surveying were taught and made useful, the history of the country, parsing out of Milton's Paradise Lost, learning as much about the older English essayists and writers as was taught in the High School.

Now, the children, before they were fairly grown, went into shops or learned a trade. There had been a fine debating society in the Center, and people drove in from miles around to listen to the arguments, which were generally on stirring questions of the day, psychological fads being [Pg 357] unknown, or the highest truth in them called by some other name.

Then the railroad had really cut it off. North Hope had grown at its expense.

She thought, too, not a little about her own future. What would happen at the close of the school year. At the first of January she and Daisy Bell and a Miss Gardiner went into Senior B. In another year she would graduate.

There was something in Mrs. Van Dorn's letters that appealed to her deeply at times, an interest that gave her a curious thrill. She wrote more earnestly herself, she realized what a great thing this had been to her, lifting her out of the common groove and giving her a decided standing among Hope people. And, oh! it had afforded her such splendid experiences with cultured people, some friends who might go a long way through life with her and enrich her path with their life.

"If you were going to college, I should want to go too," Daisy Bell said one day. "Papa would be delighted, I am sure. And though you are younger, I do not know so very much more," laughingly. "You always study in such desperate earnest. We should keep step together. Oh, don't you wish [Pg 358] we could see into the future?"

Yes, she really did.

Her friendship with Juliet Craven touched another side of her nature. Miss Craven had a vein of peculiar romance. She improvised in music, she could imitate bird-songs in rare melody, she could go to depths of feeling in a few chords that stirred one's very soul. It was absolute genius.

"These are the things I used to sing to myself in the old home," she would say. "Sometimes I would put words to them."

"Why, that would be poetry. Why don't you try to write them down?" Helen inquired with newborn interest.

"There are so many things to study, to learn, to do. I am not pretty enough to attract people, but of course, I know the money would. Sometimes I wish I had only just enough for my own wants. Another year I shall come into actual possession of a large sum, and three years later, if the mines should be sold, there will be—well, I haven't any idea how much more. Mrs. Davis' plan is to take me abroad and find someone with a title to marry me. What could I do in that kind of life? [Pg 359] I want something quiet, far-reaching. I should like to make unfortunate people happy. I wonder if there are any young girls in the world as lonely and as unfortunate as I was! I shudder when I think I might have gone on with grandfather until all the best years of my life were spent. Mrs. Howard advises me to stay here and get a thorough education, and I think that is best."

Helen was very decided in her opinion that it was by far the best. How queer that money should be so unequally divided, Miss Craven having so much more than she could use, Mrs. Van Dorn having so much, and some of the girls with such rich fathers, then others just squeezing through, she really having none at all.

Mrs. Van Dorn was doing just what Miss Craven longed to do. No, not *just*. If Helen had been unpromising she realized keenly that she might have gone back to Uncle Jason, or worked her way through the High School as she best might. She knew now, most girls of sixteen do, that an attractive face and manner was an excellent capital. She sometimes gave herself a little mental hug at the thought of having just the right share of good looks, enough to please, and not enough [Pg 360] to be vain of, and not the sort of fascination Roxy Mays had possessed. There were several beautiful girls in school. Daisy Bell had many charms, a lovely, subtle, easily-flushing complexion that was like pink and pearl, beautiful even teeth, tender and loving eyes.

"My face is just like me," she comforted herself, looking in the glass. "It is strong, earnest, and capable. And I do mean to do something with life before I die. I hope God will put me in the way of it."

Toward spring there was an episode that now and then happens in a girls' school in spite of the closest supervision. Mrs. Aldred tried to train the girls to a high sense of honor, and allowed them a certain liberty, though no one girl ever went out alone. Among the new scholars was a pretty, saucy little thing, bright with her lessons and full of fun, seemingly innocent enough. But she had adroitly managed a flirtation with the brother of one of the day scholars. Letters had passed between them, and she had eluded supervision and taken several strolls with him by climbing over the fence at the back of the grounds, with the assistance of her admirer. The daring went a little too far, and one evening Miss Wiley saw the return of the culprit, who begged [Pg 361] and pleaded a little at first, and then became defiant.

"I don't care," she said angrily. "We are engaged. I knew I wouldn't be allowed to see him alone if

he called, and I had a right to his visits."

Mrs. Aldred was surprised and had a rather stormy time with the girl, who was sent home at once.

"Now that Roxy Mays will never come back," said Daisy gravely, "I will say to you that she did go as far as the letters once. It was with the clerk in Adams' drug store. He gave a note to me and said it was a prescription, and she laughed about it, saying she only did it to prove how easily a girl could write letters and get answers, but that she was not going to follow it up, and she knew I would not betray her. It was the very week before school closed, and though it wasn't just right I let it pass. She still corresponds with him, but now her mother must know it. It doesn't seem real fun to me to break rules that way. I sometimes wonder what would have happened if she had returned to school!"

Helen smiled, thinking of her innocent letter to Mr. Warfield. And now Mrs. Dayton quoted him so often she wondered if that was quite right. [Pg 362]

But she did enjoy writing to Mrs. Van Dorn. Often there was only a few lines from her, the rest finished by Miss Gage, who had a very methodical manner of going over their doings.

In April an announcement was made that surprised and troubled many of the scholars. Mrs. Aldred had decided to go to Europe, taking her daughter Grace and chaperoning several other young ladies. Gertrude, who had been studying hard in Paris, would join them, and they would spend the ensuing winter in Rome. Mrs. Wiley and her daughter would take the school, keeping it on the same lines.

"I wish you could remain another year and graduate," she said to Helen. "I shall write to Mrs. Van Dorn about it. Then you would be fitted for whatever might happen afterward."

"Oh, thank you!" Helen replied earnestly. "I have been troubled about it, and thought I ought to inquire. I should be so sorry to have my schooldays end. I have been so happy here." [Pg 363]

No one could doubt it to look at her radiant face. Mrs. Aldred was much gratified.

Yes, she should hate to part with Daisy now that they were growing so dear to each other. And she felt as if she wanted a life interest in Miss Craven, to know the sort of woman she would make and what she would do with her fortune.

It was May when the reply came, a reply that so astounded Helen, even after reading the letter over two or three times, that she was still bewildered. She took it to Mrs. Aldred.

"Yes," that lady rejoined, "you may read mine. Mrs. Van Dorn keeps her mind as fresh as a person of half her age, and she is past eighty. She has made all the arrangements."

And the arrangements were that Mrs. Aldred should bring Helen to Paris with the other young ladies. She was going there and would be ready to receive her. She was very grateful for the care bestowed upon Helen, she had been very much gratified with the girl's letters, and this must answer until she could express the rest in person.

"And you think—I can't make it seem true," faltered Helen,—"that such a thing should happen to me?" [Pg 364]

"It does not altogether surprise me," Mrs. Aldred answered in a reassuring tone. "I surmised this from the beginning. Mrs. Van Dorn took an unusual fancy to you, and knowing you these two years I must give her penetration great credit. For certain reasons, I regret you cannot go on with your education. But you will learn a great deal abroad."

"I feel as if all of life is a school, and you are learning right along to do what comes next. I have worked hard at the French, and now I see the use of it. I dare say it will be so with other things. I wish I were a better musician."

"Mrs. Van Dorn will care more for your voice. You can take excellent singing lessons abroad. Helen, I *do* congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. And whatever happens I shall always want to be considered your sincere friend. I have been very much interested in your development, and shall continue so to be."

She bent over and kissed Helen, who returned the caress with much warmth.

"You will answer your letter to go by noon to-morrow."

Helen bowed, too much moved to speak. [Pg 365]

It was still strange to her. One might dream of an event coming in the future, but to have it *here*, to put your hand on it, as one might say, dazed her. Daisy was at a music practice, though she did not think she could talk it over with anyone just now.

Miss Craven stood hesitatingly in the half open doorway, with beseeching eyes.

"If you are not too very busy—I'm in trouble about the Latin. Oh, if I could be quick to see into things!" in a passion of regret that emphasized every line of her face where last year it would have been unmoved.

"I had an awful time about it, too, so we can sympathize," smiling cheerfully. "I just wanted

something to start up my energies."

"Oh, what should I do without you? Shall I ever be able to go on alone?"

"Think what you have accomplished in the two years," was the reassuring answer.

There was a saunter around the grounds afterwards, meeting several groups of girls and flinging bright jests at each other. Then dinner, the study period, some conversation and it was bedtime. But Helen could not sleep. She smiled to herself as she wondered what Mr. Warfield would say and there was a consciousness that he would think her only half educated. Well, could one ever [Pg 366] be wholly educated at sixteen?—even at sixty, professors are learning new things. And, oh, what a stir it would make all through the Hopes!

She was up early the next morning. Daisy was asleep in her little white bed with a smile on her face. Yes, she would hate to leave her and Miss Craven, and several others. She slipped on her lovely Japanese silk morning gown, she reveled in pretty garments nowadays, though they were all befitting a girl of sixteen, and picking up her portfolio she glided softly down to the study room.

Oh, what a morning it was! The sun was throwing out long shining rays in the east and they glistened on the tree-tops, on the distant hills, on the wide slopes, leaving the nooks and haunts in suggestive darkness. Just a dainty little mist fit for dryad robes lingered about. And here at the back, down to the small stream, dogwoods and late red maples and horse-chestnuts were in bloom. Could there be a lovelier picture? Had Europe anything better? And the fragrance might have come from Araby the blest. It was all youth and freshness, and it took her back to the summer of two years ago when everything wonderful had just dawned upon her. [Pg 367]

In this mood she wrote her letter. All her life long she was glad she had not come to second thoughts, about the matter, but kept the first thoughts of joyous youth and gladness and gratefulness. The rising bell rang and she hurried along, wrote her last word at the next summons and sealed her letter.

"Where have you been?" cried Daisy at the apparition in trailing gown, as she opened her eyes.

"Writing a letter in the study." Then she hurried into skirt and waist and joined the group going downstairs, giving bright good-mornings to one and another.

"I can't think what ails you," cried Daisy in astonishment. "You look—enchanted and—frightened."

"I will tell you—the first of anybody. It is so strange I hardly believe it myself."

They were all striving their utmost, this group of girls. Examinations were so near, pictures were to be finished, little gifts made to be exchanged, remembrances of one's handiwork. An excursion across the river to add pages to their lore on wild flowers which were to be pressed and put in [Pg 368] books. A lecture on Browning that evening down at the town-hall, and Mrs. Wiley was to take a host of girls.

"If he only would read 'Hervé Riel'!" said Helen. And to think she might see the very place where the ships came in safely. It would be worth much to her.

There is always a reaction from an exalted state, and this came to Helen Grant. By degrees she remembered what she might be giving up, what she might be called upon to do. If Miss Gage was coming home, she would take her place, and be companion, have the whims, the impatience, and the restlessness to contend with. She had experienced some of it already. Past eighty—why, that was old age, decrepitude presently, loss of memory—some old people had to be told things over and over again. She had never thought of real old age in connection with Mrs. Van Dorn. And she would spend all her bright young years—there would be no further delightful school, no graduation, no college, and she *did* love study so.

Mrs. Van Dorn had given her these two splendid years, but if she asked back ten, and she was so confident of living to ninety—oh, could she grant it cheerfully? There would have to be some [Pg 369] greater grace than her own. And if God gave her this to do—if the friends of girlhood were denied her, if Mrs. Van Dorn claimed *all*, would she have to submit?

It was a hard question for sixteen who had only enjoyed two years of freedom about the things she loved best, the thing she wanted most, education.

She told Daisy Bell, who didn't know whether to rejoice or not. It was splendid, of course, but if she should be away for years and all their lovely friendship come to an end!

"For I am sure I shall never find a girl I love so thoroughly, that I depend on, that is a strong tower to me. Mamma said my letters had been her treasures this year, I was taking so much more serious and sacred views of life. And they will be dismal enough next winter."

"Then I am afraid I haven't done you much good," Helen smiled through tears.

"Yes, you have. And I will try to remember all the nice talks we have had and keep strong on them. We will appoint one hour in the day when we shall always think of each other."

"And pray that God may give us grace to remember for years if there is need," Helen returned [Pg 370] solemnly.

Miss Craven was glad for her. "It must be wonderful to have a person care that much for you," she said, "to want to keep you near her. Why, it is almost as mothers feel, I suppose. I couldn't bear the thought of you being away alone—if you *were* alone I should ask you to come and be a sister to me. I don't know how I can get along without you, but I must try and comfort myself with the thought of what you have been to me. And, oh, if you should be absent years, I will come over. Why, I should like to see the dear old lady who loves you so."

Helen felt almost convicted of ingratitude. [Pg 371]

CHAPTER XVIII

WRIT IN AN UNKNOWN TONGUE

There were girls who envied Helen Grant, who thought they would change places with her in a minute if they could. She wrote to Uncle Jason and explained that it would not be possible to come home. School closed on the 28th of June, on the 3d of July they would leave on the steamer at New York. She sent the same message to Mrs. Dayton, with the wish that she might be able to come and see her off, but she didn't suppose it would be possible. She secretly hoped Mr. Warfield might make it so.

One of the schoolgirls, a graduate, would go home at once and meet them at the steamer. The other two resided in New York. Mrs. Aldred was much engrossed with business matters and her preparations.

The second week in June, when examinations had just begun, Mr. Castles came up one evening. They were almost through dinner and Mrs. Aldred closed the door of the reception room and [Pg 372] desired that no one should disturb her. Mr. Castles said he was the bearer of melancholy news. Mrs. Van Dorn had died very suddenly in Paris. Miss Gage had cabled for full instructions. Mrs. Van Dorn's body would be brought home and buried beside her husband. Miss Gage was to have all personal belongings inventoried and packed to come with her and the body.

"Do you know a Mr. James Fenton?" he asked.

"James Fenton. He is about as near a relation as I am. He is on the father's side, I am on her mother's; about third cousins, I think."

"It appears this Mr. Fenton annoyed her some at Florence in the spring. Then he called on her at Paris and had a long talk with her in the afternoon, which Miss Gage said upset her very much. They went to a reception in the evening at the Embassy, she seeming in her usual health, but not quite placid. It was very warm and she fainted, it was supposed, but the physician who was called pronounced her dead. This Mr. Fenton insisted upon taking charge of everything, so I cabled my instructions at once. The body will be here in a fortnight." [Pg 373]

Mrs. Aldred was shocked beyond measure. It hardly seemed credible.

"Do you know anything about her affairs?"

"Not especially," replied Mrs. Aldred. "I once heard her say she would not have much to leave behind. The money was from her husband, and if she chose to live extravagantly it was no one's affairs."

"I am glad you take it philosophically," and he gave a faint smile. "When she was about sixty-five she put nearly all her money in an annuity so she would have no further care. She told me that she had no near relatives."

"That was true enough."

"So she lived very handsomely at times, at others quite plainly. She placed in my hands a sum amply sufficient for her burial, which has never been disturbed. I collected and paid over her annuity. There may be a few thousands beside. The income, you know, stopped with her death. So there will be nothing for the heirs."

"I for one shall not complain. She paid generously for her *protégé*, six months in advance. She sent for her and I was to take her over with me; calling on you in all business matters." [Pg 374]

"Yes, she notified me. It was Mrs. Van Dorn's intention to keep this young girl with her the rest of her life. Her last letter to me was as buoyant as that of any young person. She was certainly wonderful—eighty-six in March. It seemed to me as if she might have lived to be a hundred. I am afraid the talk of that man Fenton did not do her any good."

"It is a great shock. I can hardly believe it."

"What friends has this girl, if any?"

"Oh, some relatives at a small town in a neighboring State, an uncle who has cared for her. She is a bright, ambitious girl, and I *do* regret the death for her sake. I am glad there is someone she can turn to, but I think she has the courage to work her way up, with a helping hand now and then."

"And you do not know about this Mr. Fenton?"

"Nothing much. I once heard her say that after Mr. Van Dorn's death he applied to her for some money for business purposes and she refused. I think she was not favorably impressed with him."

"Well, there will not be much for anyone to have. I think this annuity was by her husband's [Pg 375] advice, and it has saved her a good deal of care. I thought it best for you to know at once and I did want to learn how the girl was situated. Do you suppose she will be bitterly disappointed?"

"She will be very much shocked and grieved."

"It would have been the same if she had adopted her. She could have made no provision for her future."

"No," thoughtfully.

"And now I must take a night train back, as I am very busy. I will keep you informed as to matters."

"We sail on the 3d of July."

"The body will be here before that."

She walked down to the street with him; then took a rustic seat and considered Helen Grant's future in so far as she could, but every moment she felt more regret that her bright hopes should be so suddenly quenched. She resolved to say nothing at present until she had evolved a plan floating through her mind.

It was true Mrs. Van Dorn had not reached the period appointed by herself. She had felt sure of [Pg 376] ninety years. There were times when she feared that nature was on the wane, but she still took excellent care of herself.

This Mr. Fenton had besieged her for some money in the spring and a liberal allowance in her will. As far as she could trace the relationship there were but two families who had any claim on her, and his was one. She had put him off with a sarcastic promise of taking her will into consideration, then her quick wit intervened.

"If I should die without a will you would share equally. I think I will let it go that way."

That was all the satisfaction he could get. She hoped never to see him again. But he had found her in Paris, and again importuned her. She had so much she could surely spare him a little now. She allowed herself the gratification then of explaining the annuity to him and that she meant to spend her income in each year. He flew into a passion and called her some harsh names, when she had left him alone with a very curt dismissal. She had been more provoked than excited. There were some special reasons why she wished to attend this reception and she went. Whether it might have been different or whether she had reached her allotted span, only God knew. [Pg 377]

The next few days Mrs. Aldred took especial pains with Helen. She must be able to enter the graduating class. Helen was delighted with the attention, and repaid it with earnest endeavor.

Mr. Castles sent word that Miss Gage had started with the body.

Helen had passed most of her examinations when Mrs. Aldred very tenderly informed her of the sad news, and how almost incredulous she had been at first.

"Of course, this changes all the plans," she said, when she had given Helen time for her first anguish. "But I have been talking with Mrs. Wiley, who is quite willing to take you for some of the younger classes, a year or two years, and in that time you can graduate. It is best that you should have a diploma. You are very young yet, and will be more capable of facing the world at eighteen. I really have no fear for you, and am confident you will succeed."

"I cannot thank you sufficiently now," Helen answered. "I am bewildered. May I be excused from dinner?" [Pg 378]

"Yes, and anything you desire to-morrow. You have my warmest sympathy, and I feel that I do not want to lose sight of you in the years to come."

It was a sad night for Helen, a sad day following; indeed, it took all the joy out of the graduation exercises for her. Mrs. Wiley made her proffer and Helen accepted it.

"So you see we shall not be separated after all," she said to both Daisy and Miss Craven, and the latter began to weave some plans for the future that she would keep to herself until the time came. Ah, if she could repay Helen's kindnesses!

Miss Gage reached New York the first day of July. Most of the girls had dispersed from the school. Helen was to go to the city with Mrs. Aldred's party.

The day before a telegram from Mrs. Dayton reached her, containing this astounding news:

"Your father has returned. You will find him staying with me."

Could it be true—after all these years?

Helen seemed to herself as one in a dream. Her sorrow for Mrs. Van Dorn had grown with every

hour and she almost abhorred herself that she should ever have hesitated a moment about devoting her whole life to her benefactress, who had only asked for a few years. But this new claim! She could not ignore it. How many times she had wished for his return! But all these years he had made no sign, expressed no desire to know whether she were living or dead. The neglect stung her cruelly. [Pg 379]

She had no time to consider this phase of affairs. She had about decided to accept Mrs. Wiley's offer. There would be home and training for another year, and she felt confident now that she could graduate. On the other hand, there would be clothes and small current expenses even with the strictest economy. She would be a young lady, and she shrank in dismay from all that implied; but now she was quite at sea. There was no one to "give the word," and pilot her through the windings.

She went to the city with Mrs. Aldred and Grace. The other voyagers were already there. The first business on hand was a visit to the lawyer's, where Miss Gage would meet them.

The story was substantially what the companion had written. Mrs. Van Dorn had gone out of life in that moment of time when she had felt confident of some years before her. She had been spared suffering and dread. [Pg 380]

"When all expenses are met there may be a thousand or two thousand dollars," explained Mr. Castles. "Mr. Fenton insists upon calling for the strictest accounting, which he has a right to do, of course, and this means the small residue will be divided between you," bowing to Mrs. Aldred, "and himself. I suppose she thought she would have so little to divide it was not worth making a will. He insists the valuable jewels shall be sold. But here is one point in which I think you will bear me out in believing the law has no right over. Mrs. Van Dorn gave me each year a sum to be spent on Miss Grant. It was her desire, and a most excellent idea, I think," smiling vaguely, "that Miss Grant should not fall into extravagant habits. There was a small amount left over when she made the new allowance. This, I take it, belongs to Miss Helen Grant, and I propose to pay it over to her at once. It is a private matter."

"I agree with you perfectly," returned Mrs. Aldred, in an approving tone; glad, indeed, that it could be so. "I wish I dared double or quadruple it, but I have no right. This will be precious to you, Miss Grant, as the gift of your benefactress. I know it was in her heart to treat you as if you were a near relative, a granddaughter, as she said in a late letter." [Pg 381]

Helen's eyes overflowed, but she could not trust her voice.

"It is a lovely remembrance," added Mrs. Aldred with much feeling. "And Helen is worthy of it."

The lawyer handed her the envelope, but she was too much moved to inspect its contents.

"Now, you and Miss Gage may take the ante-room, as I am certain that step prefigures Mr. Fenton," the lawyer announced.

Miss Gage had much to say to the young girl.

"I am so glad you wrote just that letter of gratitude," she began. "I cannot describe Mrs. Van Dorn's delight to you. She was almost childish over it and read it again and again, and though she was not sentimental about keeping letters, I found this in a box of trinkets and have brought it back to you. She was not an effusive woman, but I think she counted a great deal on having your entire love. You see I was one of a family who have always been very dear to each other, and who clung together as few families do. In the autumn I was to go home, as she had found a most excellent maid, who was also quite a practised nurse. Mrs. Van Dorn liked society and style and had many fashionable friends who *did* admire her, and then she would have a few months of simplicity, and quiet living, which she believed preserved one's health and mental faculties. No one would have supposed she was eighty-six—I did not know it until Mr. Castles told me. I do very much regret she could not have lived a few years longer; you would have had a charming time, and there would have been no relatives to interfere." [Pg 382]

Helen winced, but said nothing.

"She has purchased various articles the last year for you, boxes of trinkets marked with your name and put in my hands for safe keeping. Hardly a week before that sad day she came home one morning with the eager interest of a young person. She had bought a beautiful inlaid box with fine brass handles, and some new things, and bade me look up all the others and put them in, and said laughingly it was a treasure trove and when she was especially pleased she should bring you a gift out of it. Mr. Castles has it, and will hand it over to you. I cannot tell you how sorry I am you will not have this delightful time abroad. She was counting on your enthusiasm to inspire her, to make her over, she used to say. She had many admirable qualities. Of course, there were ways and whims and times of depression when she looked to her companion to cheer her. I think now they were the little advances of age that she resolutely refused to yield to. She was very just, she abhorred plain falsehood, though I suppose most elderly women do indulge in some make-believes," smiling a little sadly. [Pg 383]

It was evident from the sound of voices in the adjoining room that Mr. Fenton was not having an agreeable time. He insisted the heirs had been grievously wronged by this annuity business.

"As if the money was not hers to do what she chose with it," said Miss Gage. "And it seems as if the Van Dorn relatives would be the ones to object since the money came that way. I am glad she

had her own satisfactory life, and she has made others happy as well, even if there is not much left."

Mr. Fenton found that he could not take the matter in hand himself, and that he must wait for the due process of law before he could get even the small sum that would come to him. Mrs. Aldred [Pg 384] had to say good-by and go to the steamer. Helen was to write to her and she still strongly advised her going back to Aldred House. Would it be possible?

Mr. Castles brought out the pretty box of treasures and delivered it to Helen. The clerk would put her on the train and see her started on her journey; Miss Gage had to remain with the lawyer, but her good-by was very sympathetic and tender, and she, too, begged Helen to write, as she should always take a deep interest in her.

Helen settled herself for the long journey and the endeavor to disentangle the events that had so crowded upon her these few days. Whether she should go back to Aldred House did not altogether depend upon herself. True, one perplexing question was settled—she took out her envelope and examined its contents. Five fifty-dollar bills, a ten, and a five beside. Two hundred and sixty-five dollars. She could go through another year successfully, and though she would still be young, she could no doubt find a place to teach.

But what if this should be the end of school life? Her whole being rose up in revolt. She had [Pg 385] mentally protested against giving it up for pleasure, she remembered, but that would have been going on in knowledge of all kinds, climbing up and up, drinking in the juices of the fruit ripened and preserved long ago, that would never lose its flavor. And to take was not all, to give presently, to rouse some unthinking girl as she had been roused, to reach out a helping hand—yes, she had helped Juliet Craven over the thorny way, through the dense forest where learning was well-nigh smothered with parasitic growths that could be cleared away and let in sunshine. Ah, there were many lives needing it.

And now, when one unlooked-for event had cleared the way, this new one must arise.

What was her father like? she wondered. She really had no definite or trustworthy impression of him. As a little child she had stood in great awe of him, though she could not remember that he had ever been severe with her. Her mother had complained a good deal, and she always said, "Your father," as if the child was in some way answerable for the infelicities. Aunt Jane had given cruel flings sometimes, and generally scoffed at him as being impractical and a complete failure. [Pg 386]

But what hurt Helen the most was that all these years he should not have cared enough to write even to Uncle Jason. She, Helen, might have died, or misfortune might have attended Uncle Jason and the house been broken up, she cast on the charities of the world. He could not know.

How had she come by this fine sense of justice, this clear sight in so many things, this comprehension of honor and the right of every human soul? She was suddenly a puzzle to herself. Was this the outgrowth of the wild, laughing, merry child, ready for any fun or frolic or mischief, who ran races with boys, and could play ball, climb trees, jump higher fence-rails than any girl, and be proud of it? Yet, were not these things modified in the gymnasium? So she need not blush over it, or be ashamed of the riotous childhood.

And why had she protested so strenuously against going in the shoeshop? Where did these curious qualities and contradictions come from? Did she really owe her awakening to Mr. Warfield? Would she have been content in the Mulford groove but for him? Yet all these feelings and desires must have been in her brain, inherited from somewhere. [Pg 387]

What might not her father demand of her? Perhaps he was an invalid, and even now she, with aims and purposes settled on a higher plane, might be compelled to spend years of waiting in which there would be no pleasure, no satisfaction. Could she do it? Had he the right to ask it?

She was coming nearer and nearer to the momentous decision. Oh, *was* she leaving the dear, bright, fascinating schooldays behind her, the friends of girlhood, the ambitious climbing where it seemed almost as if one had winged feet, the delightful life with its discussions, its shaping of tastes, its comparison of heroes, when they almost quarreled, each being so eager and confident of her own, the lovely walks, unearthing the secrets of nature growths, the pretty, touching confidences so much to girls, the expansion everywhere; two splendid, joyous years of improvement, draining the real secrets of knowledge to help explain the mysteries of life,—was it all over?

They were coming nearer to all the Hopes. A hard little smile settled about her lips. How queer they should have called it Hope, this dead and alive place, where hope could be so easily [Pg 388] crushed? Would she abandon hope when she entered?

They steamed into the station, backed a little for some cause, then came forward again. She was on the off-side so she need not look out of the window. She waited for the small procession to pass out of the aisle, then she picked up her satchel and her precious box. Mr. Warfield stood watching, and her heart beat more freely. He took her satchel when the conductor had helped her down, and studied her face eagerly.

"I began to wonder if you were on the train. Are you tired? It is a long journey."

The friendly voice seemed to restore her.

"Not especially tired," she answered slowly.

They walked on in silence, but a question trembled about her lips.

"Were you tremendously surprised? Of course, one couldn't give particulars in a telegram."

"Why—yes, after believing him dead all these years. Is he—is he well?"

That was not what she wanted to ask.

"Yes, I think so. Mrs. Dayton said he had not changed very much. He is fifty-four and looks seventy. But, oh, the learning! He certainly has 'ransacked the ages.'" [Pg 389]

"And I suppose it will seem strange to him to have a big girl?" There was a little falter in Helen's voice, and she flushed and paled.

"Well—he almost expected you had gone through college," and Mr. Warfield gave his shoulders a shrug. "I can tell you he has no faith in modern education. And I do believe he would rather have you forty than sixteen."

"I am glad to be only sixteen," Helen returned with decision. "Life is a splendid thing and youth is its garden of growth, and I am more than satisfied to be still in the lovely garden."

She held her head up very straight, and the poise of her shoulders was fine and vigorous. She would not be made old for anybody. She would not hurry through any sweet year of her life.

"There will be some clashing," thought Mr. Warfield. "And I do believe she will win."

"When did he come?" she asked presently. "And where has he been all these years?"

"The last year in the British Museum. Before that buried in the ruins of the lost cities of the Bible, read now by cylinders and tablet plates and inscriptions on stone. Well, it *is* wonderful to know so much, to be able to reconstruct dead and gone ages. He reached here four or five days ago and surprised the Mulfords; came over here and engaged board when he heard you were on the eve of return; went up to New York and reached here last night." [Pg 390]

He looked like an old picture, but he was a gentleman every inch of him.—Page 390.

Of course, he might have written her a few words.

"And that wonderful old lady of yours is dead! Wouldn't it have been queer if you had started for Europe? Oh, here we are!" and he opened the gate.

Helen walked straight up the path, and the man pacing the porch paused at the steps. He was tall and thin, with a bend in the shoulders, and his clothes hung loosely on him. His face had a sort of shrunken look and was much wrinkled, his beard was sparse and snowy white, and his white hair was rather long with curling ends. He looked like an old picture, but he was a gentleman every inch of him.

"Oh!" Helen exclaimed with a gasp.

He took both hands, looked her over from head to foot, then touched his lips to her forehead.

"You're not a bit like your mother," and Helen detected a sense of relief in his tone. [Pg 391]

Could he remember all these years? Almost a sob came up in her throat. Yes, girl life had ended. "I am glad and thankful that I have you to recall, happy, happy schooldays," she said to herself. "No one can take that from me. Oh, Mrs. Van Dorn! I hope you know what all this has been to me, what it will be in the years to come."

They were parent and child, but they had to begin life over, a new life to her. His way was settled. Would hers have to yield?

The future seemed to hold problems no less serious than those which had confronted her in the past. But there had been some way provided for each difficulty thus far, as we have seen, and how the brave girl made good use of what her schooldays had done for her can at some time in the future be learned by reading "Helen Grant's Friends."

THE END

Transcriber's note:

In the List of Illustrations there is reference to an ilustration on page 235. It could not be found, and the information is placed here.

paragraph 1.E below.

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