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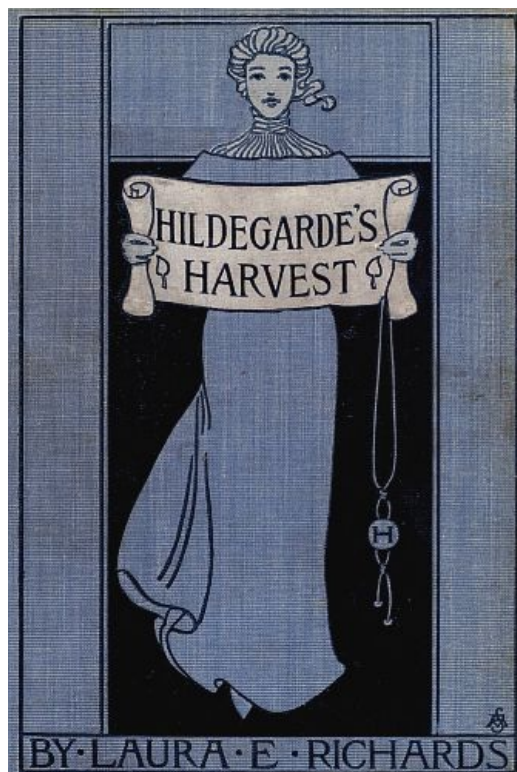
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**"HILDEGARDE DANCED THE VIRGINIA REEL WITH
THE COLONEL."**

HILDEGARDE'S HARVEST

BY

LAURA E. RICHARDS

AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN JANUARY," "HILDEGARDE'S NEIGHBOURS,"
"QUEEN HILDEGARDE," ETC.

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CHAPTER I.

THE MORNING MAIL.

HILDEGARDE was walking home from the village, whither she had gone to get the mail. She usually rode the three miles on her bicycle, but she had met a tack on the road the day before, and must now wait a day or two till the injured tire could be mended.

Save for missing the sensation of flying, which she found one of the most delightful things in the world, she was hardly sorry to have the walk. One could not see so much from the wheel, unless one rode slowly; and Hildegard could not ride slowly,—the joy of flying was too great. It was good to look at everything as she went along, to recognise the knots on the trees, and stop for a friendly word with any young sapling that looked as if it needed encouragement. Also, the leaves had fallen, and what could be pleasanter than to walk through them, stirring them up, and hearing the crisp, clean crackle of them under her feet? Also,—and this was the most potent reason, after all,—she could read her letters as she walked, and she had good letters to-day. [10]

The first that she opened was addressed in a round, childish hand to "Mis' Hilda," the "Grahame" being added in a different hand. The letter itself was written in pencil, and read as follows:

"MY DEER,

"I hop you are well. I am well. Aunt Wealthy is well. Martha is well. Dokta jonSon is well; these are all the peple that is well. Germya has the roomatiks so bad he sase he thinks he is gon this time for sure. I don't think he is gon, he has had them wers before. Aunt Wealthy gave me a bantim cock and hens, his nam is Goliath of Gath, and there nams is Buty and Topknot. The children has gon away from Joyus Gard; they were all well and they went home to scool. I miss them; I go to scool, but I don't lik it, but I am gone to have tee with Mista Peny pakr tonite, Aunt Wealthy sade I mite. He has made a new hous and it is nise. [11]

"So goodbi from
"BENNY."

Hildegard laughed a good deal over this letter, and then wiped away a tear or two that certainly had no business in her happy eyes.

"Dear little Benny!" she said. "Dear little boy! But when is the precious lamb going to learn to spell? This is really dreadful! I suppose 'Germya' is Jeremiah, though it looks more like some new kind of porridge. And Mr. Pennypacker with a new house! This is astonishing! I must see what Cousin Wealthy says about it."

The next letter, bearing the same postmark, of Bywood, and written in a delicate and tremulous hand, was from Miss Bond herself. It told Hildegard in detail the news that Benny had outlined; described the happy departure of the children, who had spent their convalescence at the pleasant summer home, all rosy-cheeked, and shouting over the joy they had had. Then she went on to dilate on the wonderful qualities of her adopted son Benny, who, it appeared, was making progress in every branch of education. [12]

"I may be prejudiced, my dear," the good old lady wrote, "but I am bound to say that Martha agrees with me in thinking him a *most remarkable* child."

Miss Bond further told of the event of the neighbourhood, the building of Mr. Galusha Pennypacker's new house. The neighbourhood of so many little children, his friendship with Benny, "but more than all, his *remembrance of you*, my dear Hildegard," had, it appeared, wrought a marvellous change in the old hermit. The kindly neighbours had met him half-way in his advances, and were full of good-will and helpfulness; and when, by good fortune, his miserable old shanty had burned down one summer night, the whole neighbourhood had turned out and built him a snug cottage which would keep him comfortable for the rest of his days.

"Mr. Pennypacker came here yesterday to invite Benny to drink tea with him (I employ the current expression, my dear, though of course the child drinks nothing but milk at his tender age; I have always considered tea a beverage for the aged, or those who are not robust), and in the course of conversation, he begged me *most earnestly* to convey to you the assurance that, in his opinion, the comfort which surrounds his later days is owing entirely to you. His actual expression, though not refined, was forcible, and Martha thinks you would like to hear it: [13]

"'I was a-livin' a hog's life, an' I should ha' died a hog's death if it hadn't been for that gal.'"

"I trust your dear mother will not think it coarse to have repeated these words. There is something in the very mention of swine that is repugnant to ears polite, but Martha was of the opinion that you would prefer to have the message in his own words. And I am bound to say that Galusha Pennypacker, though undoubtedly an *eccentric*, is a thoroughly well-intentioned person."

"Dear Cousin Wealthy!" said Hildegarde, as she folded the delicate sheet and put it back into its pearl-gray envelope with the silver seal. "It must have cost her an effort to repeat Mr. Pennypacker's words. Poor old man! I am glad he is comfortable. I must send him a little box at Christmas,—some little things to trim up his new house and prettify it. Oh! and now, Bell, now for your letter! I have kept it for the last, my dear, as if it were raisins or chocolate, only it is better than either."

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BELL'S LETTER

The fat square envelope that she now opened contained several sheets of paper, closely covered, every page filled from top to bottom with a small, firm handwriting, but no line of crossing. The Merryweathers were not allowed to cross their letters, under penalty of being condemned to write entirely on postal cards. Let us peep over Hildegarde's shoulder, and see what Bell has to say.

"DEAREST HILDEGARDE:

"It is two full weeks since I have written, and I am ashamed; but it is simply because they *have* been full weeks,—very full! There is so much to tell you, I hardly know where to begin. A week ago to-night our play came off,—'The Mouse Trap.' It went beautifully,—not a hitch anywhere, though we had only had five rehearsals. I was Willis, as I told you. I wore my ulster without the cape, and really looked quite masculine, I think. I had a curly, dark-brown wig (my hair tucked down my neck,—it didn't show at all!) and the prettiest little moustache! Marion Wilson was Amy, and she screamed most delightfully. In fact, they all screamed in such a natural and heartfelt way, that some of the ladies in the audience seemed to feel quite uncomfortable, and I am sure I saw Madame Mirabelle tuck her skirts close around her feet, and put her feet up on the

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bench in front of her. Well, we all did our best, though Clarice Hammond was the best; she is a born actress! and the audience was very cordial, and we were called before the curtain five times; and altogether it was a great success. I enclose a flower from a bouquet that was thrown at me. It was a beauty, and it struck me right on the head. I thought it was for Clarice, and was going to hand it to her, but somebody in the audience cried out, 'Why don't you speak for yourself, Willis?' and everybody laughed, and they said it was really for me, so I kept it, and was pleased and proud. I have pressed two or three flowers in my blue-print book, with the pictures of the play. I am going to send you some as soon as I can print some more. The girls snatched all the first batch, so that I have not a single one left.

"Let me see! What comes next? Oh, next you must hear about my surprise party. I was in my room one evening, grinding hard at my Greek (do you think your mother would object to 'grinding?' It is such old, respectable college slang, mamma allows it once in a while), when I heard whispering and giggling in the hall outside. I don't mind telling you, my dear, that my heart sank, for I had a good lot of Pindar to do, and there is no sense in shirking one's lessons. But I went to the door with as good a grace as I could, and there was our dear Gerty, and Clara Lyndon, and three or four other girls from Miss Russell's school. They said they had double permission, from Miss Russell at that end, and Mrs. Tower at this, to come and give me a surprise party; and here they were, and they were coming in whether I liked it or not. Of course I did like it after the first minute, for they were all so dear and jolly. They had borrowed chairs as they came along through the hall, and one had her pocket full of spoons, and another had a basket,—oh, but I am getting on too fast. Well, Gerty and I sat on the bed, and the others on the chairs, and we chattered away, and I heard all the school news. Then presently Mabel Norton opened a basket, and took out—oh, Hilda! the most beautiful, *beautiful* rose-bush, simply covered with blossoms. It was for me, with a card from Miss Russell and the whole school; and when I asked what it all meant, why, it seems that this was the anniversary of the day last year when I pulled a little girl out of the river, down near the mill-dam. It was the simplest thing in the world to do, for any one who was strong and knew how to tread water; but these dear people had remembered the date, and had done this lovely thing to—well, Hilda, I didn't cry that evening, but somehow I want to now, when I come to tell you about it. You will understand! It is so lovely to have such dear, kind friends, that I cannot help it. Well, then out of another basket came a most wonderful cream tart, with my initials on it in caramel, and a whole lot, dozens and dozens, of the little sponge-cakes that I am so fond of. They cannot make them anywhere in the world, I think, except at Miss Russell's, and dear good Miss Cary, the housekeeper, remembered that I was fond of them. Oh, and a huge box of marshmallows; and we all knew what *that* meant. Marshmallows are the—what shall I say?—the unofficial

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emblem of Miss Russell's school; and soon two or three were toasting over the gas on hat-pins, and I was cutting the tart, and Gerty was handing round the sponge-cakes, and we were all as happy as possible. I ran and asked the girls along the hall to come in, and as many of them did come as could get in the door, and the rest sat in a semicircle on the floor in the hall, and we sang everything we could think of. All of a sudden we heard a knocking at the window. I ran and looked out, and there was something hanging and bobbing against the glass. I opened the window, and drew in a basket, full of all kinds of things, oranges and bananas and candy, with a card, 'Compliments of the Third Floor!' So of course I was running up to thank them, and say how sorry we were that there was not room for them, when I almost ran plump into Mrs. Tower, who was coming along the entry, very stately and superb. She had heard all about it, and she came to say that, if we liked, we might dance for half an hour in the parlour. You can imagine—no, you cannot, for you never were at college!—the wild rush down those stairs. We called the third floor (they are mostly freshmen), and they came careering down like a herd of ponies; and the first floor came out of their studies when they heard the music, and we had the wildest, merriest, most enchanting dance for just half an hour. Then it was hurry-scurry off, for Miss Russell's girls were on the very edge of their time allowance, and had to run most of the way home (it is only a very little way, and one of the maids had come with them, and waited for them). And we all thanked Mrs. Tower as prettily as we knew how, and she said pleasant things, and then some of the girls helped me to take back the chairs and straighten things up generally. So the great frolic was over, and most delightful it was; but, my dear, I had to get up at five o'clock to finish my Greek next morning, and the ground floor was not much better off with its philosophy. And now there are no more gaieties, for the examinations are 'on,' and we must buckle to our work in good earnest. I don't expect to have much trouble, as I have kept up pretty well; but there is enough for any one to do, no matter how well up she is. So this is the last letter you will have, my dear, before the happy day that brings us all out to the beloved Pumpkin House. Oh, what a glorious time we shall have, all together once more! Roger is still out West, but hopes to get back for the last part of the holidays, at least; and Phil's and Jerry's vacation begins two days before Gerty's and mine. Altogether, the prospect is enchanting, and one of the very best parts of it is the seeing you again, dear Hilda. Only three weeks more! Gerty paints a star on her screen for every day that is gone. Funny little Gerty! Give my love to your mother, please, and believe me always, dear Hilda,

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[18]

"Your affectionate
"ISABEL MERRYWEATHER."

Hildegarde gave a half-sigh, as she finished this letter, and walked on in silence, thinking many things. Bell's life seemed very free and full and joyous; it suited her exactly, the strong, sensible, merry girl; and oh, how much she was learning! This letter said little about studies, but Hildegarde knew from former ones how much faithful work was going on, and how firm a foundation of scholarship and thoroughness her friend was laying.

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"Whereas I," she said aloud, "am as ignorant as a hedge-sparrow."

As she spoke, a sparrow hopped upon a twig close by her, and cocked his bright eye at her expressively.

"I beg your pardon!" said Hildegarde, humbly. "No doubt you are right, and I am a hundred times more ignorant. I could not even imagine how to build a nest; but neither can you crack a nut—ask Mr. Emerson!—or play the piano."

The sparrow chirped defiance, flirted his tail saucily, and was gone.

"And all girls cannot be students!" said Hildegarde, stopping to address a young maple that looked strong-minded. "Everybody cannot go to college; there must be some who are to be just girls,—plain girls,—and stay at home. As for a girl going to college when there is only herself to—help make a home—why,—she might as well be Nero, and done with it."

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She nodded at the maple-tree, as if she had settled it entirely, and walked on more quickly; the cloud—it was a slight one, but still a cloud—vanished from her brow, leaving it clear and sunny.

"The place one is in," she said, "is the place to be happy in. Of course I do miss them all; of—course—I do! but if ever any girl ought to be thankful on her knees all day long for blessings and happinesses, Hildegarde Grahame, why, you know who she is, and that she does not spell her name Tompkins."

CHAPTER II.

[21]

THE CHRISTMAS DRAWER.

CHRISTMAS was coming. Christmas was only three weeks off. Oh, how the time was flying! "How

shall I ever get ready?" cried Hildegarde, quickening her pace as she spoke, as if the holiday season were chasing her along the road.

"One is always busy, of course; but it does seem as if I were going to be about five times as busy as I ever was before. Naturally! there are so many more people that I want to make presents for. Last Christmas, there was Mammina, and Col. Ferrers and Hugh, and the box to send to Jack,—dear Jack!—and Auntie, and Mrs. Lankton and the children, and,—well, of course, Cousin Wealthy and Benny, and all the dear people at Bywood,—why, there were a good many, after all, weren't there? But now I have all my Merryweathers in addition, you see. Of course I needn't give anything to the boys,—or to any of them, for that matter,—but I do want to, so very much; if only there were a little more time! I will go up this minute, if Mammina does not want me, and look over my drawer. I really haven't looked at it—thoroughly, that is—for three days! Hilda Grahame, what a goose you are!"

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By this time she had arrived at Braeside, the pretty house where she and her mother passed their happy, quiet life. Running lightly up the steps, and into the house, the girl peeped into the sitting-room and parlour, and finding both empty, went on up the stairs. She paused to listen at her mother's door; there was no sound from within, and Hildegarde hoped that her mother was sleeping off the headache, which had made the morning heavy for her. Kissing her hand to the door, she went on to her own room, which always greeted her as a friend, no matter how many times a day she entered it. She looked round at books and pictures with a little sigh of contentment, and sank down for a moment in the low rocking-chair. "Just to breathe, you know!" she said. "One must breathe to live." Involuntarily her hand moved towards the low table close by, on which lay a tempting pile of books. Just one chapter of "The Fortunes of Nigel," while she was getting her breath?

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"No," she said, replying to herself with severity, "nothing of the kind. You can rest just as well while you are looking over the drawer. I am surprised,—or rather, I wish I were surprised at you, Hilda Grahame. You are a hard case!"

Exchanging a glance of mutual sympathy and understanding with Sir Walter Scott, who looked down on her benignly from the wall, Hildegarde now drew her chair up beside a tall chest of drawers, and proceeded to open the lowest drawer, which was as deep and wide as the whole of some modern bureaus. It was half filled with small objects, which she now took out one by one, looking them over carefully before laying them back. First came a small table-cover of heavy buff linen, beautifully embroidered with nasturtiums in the brilliant natural colors. It was really a thing of beauty, and the girl looked at it first with natural pride, then went over it carefully, examining the workmanship of each bud and blossom.

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"It will pass muster!" she said, finally. "It is well done, if I do say it; the Beloved Perfecter will be satisfied, I think."

This was for her mother, of course; and she laid it back, rolled smoothly round a pasteboard tube, and covered with white tissue paper, before she went on to another article. Next came a shawl, like an elaborate collection of snowflakes that had flitted together, yet kept their exquisite shapes of star and wheel and triangle. Cousin Wealthy would be pleased with this! Hildegarde felt the same pleasant assurance of success. "There ought to be a bit of pearl-coloured satin ribbon somewhere! Oh, here it is! A bit of ribbon gives a finish that nothing else can. There! now that is ready, and that makes two. Now, Benny, my blessed lamb, where are you?"

She drew out a truly splendid scrap-book, bound in heavy cardboard, and marked "Benny's Book," with many flourishes and curlicues. Within were pictures of every imaginable kind, the coloured ones on white, the black and white on scarlet cardboard. Under every picture was a legend in Hildegarde's hand, in prose or verse. For example, under a fine portrait of an imposing black cat was written:

[25]

"Is this Benny's pillow-cat?
No! it is not half so fat!
No! it is not half so fair,
So it mews in sad despair,
Feeling that it has not any
Chance for to belong to Benny."

Hildegarde had spent many loving hours over this book; her verses were not remarkable, but Benny would like them none the less for that, she thought, and she laid the book back with a contented mind. Then there was a noble apron for Martha, with more pockets than any one else in the world could use; and a pincushion for Mrs. Brett, and a carved tobacco-stopper for Jeremiah. Beside the tobacco-stopper lay a pipe, also carved neatly, and Hildegarde took this up with a sigh. "I don't like to part with it!" she said. "Papa brought it from Berne, all those years ago, and I am so used to it; but after all, I am *not* likely to smoke a pipe, even if I have succumbed to the bicycle, and I do want to send some little thing to dear Mr. Hartley. Dear old soul! how I should like to see him and Marm Lucy! We really must make a pilgrimage to Hartley's Glen next summer, if it is a possible thing. Marm Lucy will like this little blue jug, I know. We have the same taste in blue jugs, and she will not care a bit about its only costing fifteen cents. Ah! if everything one wanted to buy cost fifteen cents, one would not be so distracted; but I *do* want to get 'Robin Hood' for Hugh, and where am I to get the three dollars, I ask you?"

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She addressed William the Silent; the hero drew her attention, in his quiet way, to his own

sober dress and simple ruff, and seemed to think that Hugh would be just as well off without the record of a ruffling knave who wore Lincoln green, and was not particular how he came by it.

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"Ah! but that is all you know, dear sir!" said Hildegarde. "We all have our limitations, and if you had only known Robin, you would see how right I am."

And then Hildegarde fell a-dreaming, and imagined a tea-party that she might give, to which should come William of Orange and Robin Hood, Alan Breck Stuart and Jim Hawkins.

"And who else? let me see! Hugh, of course, and Jack, if he were here, and the boys and—and Captain Roger; only I am afraid he would think it nonsense. But Bell would love it, and I would invite Dundee, just to show her how wrong she is about him. And—oh, none of the King Arthur knights, because they had no sense of humour, and Alan would be at their throats in five minutes; but—why, I have left out David Balfour himself,—Roger would love David, anyhow,—and Robin might bring Little John and Will Scarlet and Allan-a-Dale. We would have tea out on the veranda, of course, and Auntie would make one of her wonderful chicken pies, and I would ask Robin whether it was not just as good as a venison pasty. Alan would have his hand at his sword, ready to leap up if it was denied; but jolly Robin would make me a courtly bow, and say with his own merry smile—Come in! oh! what is it?"

[28]

Rudely awakened from her pleasant dream by a knock at the door, Hildegarde looked up, half expecting to see one of her heroes standing cap in hand before her. Instead, there stood, ducking and sidling,—the Widow Lankton.

"How do you do, Mrs. Lankton?" said Hildegarde, with an effort. It was a sudden change, indeed, from Robin Hood and Alan Breck, to this forlorn little body, with her dingy black dress and crumpled bonnet; but Hildegarde tried to "look pleasant," and waited patiently for the outpouring that she knew she must expect.

"*Good-mornin'*, dear!" said the widow, ducking a little further to one side, so that she looked like an apologetic crab in mourning for his claws. "I hope your health is good, Miss Grahame. There! you look pretty well, I must say!"

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"I hope you are not sorry, Mrs. Lankton," smiling; for the tone was that of heartfelt sorrow.

"No, dear! why, no, certainly not! I'm pleased enough to have you look young and bloomin' while you can. Looks ain't allers what we'd oughter go by, but we must take 'em and be thankful for so much, as I allers say. Yes, dear. Your blessed mother's lyin' down, Mis' Auntie told me. *She* seems slim now, don't she? If I was in your place, I should be dretful anxious about her, alone in the world as you'd be if she was took. The Lord's ways is—"

"Did you want to see me about anything special, Mrs. Lankton?" said Hildegarde, interrupting. She felt that she was not called upon to bear this kind of thing.

The widow sniffed sadly and shook her head.

"Yes, dear! You're quick and light, ain't you, as young folks be! Like to brisk up and have done with a thing. Well, I come to see if I could borry a crape bunnit, to go to a funeral; there, Miss Grahame, I hope you won't think me forth-puttin', but I felt that anything your blessed ma had worn would be a privilege, I'm sure, and so regardin' it, I come."

[30]

"Oh!" said Hildegarde, with a little shudder. "We—we have no crape, Mrs. Lankton. My father—that is, my mother never wore it."

"Didn't!" said Mrs. Lankton. "Well, now, folks has their views. I was one that never liked to spare where feelin's was concerned. Ah! I've wore crape enough in my time to bury me under, you might say. When my poor husband died, I got a veil measured three yards, countin' the hem; good crape it was, too. There! I took and showed it to him the day before he was took. He'd been failin' up quite a spell, and I was never one to hide their end from them that was comin' to it. 'There, Peleg!' says I. 'I want you should know that I sha'n't slight nothin' when you're gone,' I says. 'I'll keep you as long as I can,' I says, 'and I'll have everything right and fittin' as far as my means goes,' I says. He was real gratified. I was glad to please him, goin' so soon as he was."

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"He turned up his toes less than twenty-four hours after I said them words; died off real nice. His moniment is handsome, if I do say it. I have it scrubbed every spring, come house-cleanin' time, and it looks as good as new. Yes, dear! I've got a great deal to be thankful for, if I have suffered more than most."

Hildegarde set her teeth. Inwardly she was saying, "You dreadful old ghoul! When will you stop your grisly recollections, and go away?" But all she said aloud was, "Well, Mrs. Lankton, I am sorry that we cannot help you. Perhaps one of the neighbours,—but I ought to ask,—I trust it is no near relative that is dead?"

"No, dear!" replied the widow, with unction. "No relation, only by marriage. My sister's husband married this man's sister for his third wife; old man Topliffe it is, keeps the grocery over t' the Corners."

"Why, I did not know he was dead!" said Hildegarde.

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"Not yet he ain't, dear!" said Mrs. Lankton. "But he's doomed to die, and the doctors don't give him more than a few hours. I'm one that likes to be beforehand in such matters,—there's them

that looks to me to do what's right and proper,—and I shouldn't want to be found without a bunnit provided. Well, dear, I must be goin'. Ah! 'twill seem nat'ral to be goin' to a funeral again, Miss Grahame. I ain't b'en to one for as much as five months. I've seen the time when three funerals a week was no uncommon thing round these parts, and most all of 'em kin to me by blood or marriage. Yes, no one knows what I've b'en through. You're gettin' fleshy, ain't you, dear? I hope the Lord'll spare you *and* your ma,—she's like a mother to me, I allers say,—through *my* time. It ain't likely to be long, with these spells that ketches me. *Good-by*, dear!"

With a tender smile, and another sidelong duck, the widow took herself off; and Hildegarde drew a long breath, and felt like opening all the windows, to let the sunshine come in more freely. The door of her room being still open, she became aware of sounds from below; sounds as of [33] clashing metal, and rattling crockery.

What could Auntie be about? she would wake Mamma at this rate.

Running down-stairs, Hildegarde went into the kitchen, and was confronted by the sight of Auntie, perched on top of a tall step-ladder, with the upper part of her portly person buried in the depths of a cupboard.

"Auntie, what *are* you about?" she cried. "Do you know what a noise you are making? Mamma is asleep, and I don't want her to wake till tea-time, for her head has ached all day."

Auntie did not seem to hear at first, but continued to rattle tins in an alarming way; till Hildegarde, in despair, grasped the step-ladder, and shook it with some force. Then the good woman drew her head out of the depths, and looked down in astonishment.

"Why, for goodness sake, honey, is dat you?" she said. "I t'ought 'twas dat old image cacklin' at me still. She gone, is she? well, dat's mercy enough for one day!" [34]

She sat down on the top of the ladder and panted; and Hildegarde burst out laughing.

"Auntie, did you go up there to get rid of Mrs. Lankton?"

"For shore I did, chile! I'd ha' riz through de roof if I could, but dis was as fur as I could git. She was in hyar an hour, 'most, 'fore she went up-stairs,—and I told her not go near you, but she snoke up, and I dassn't holler, fear ob waking yer ma,—and my head is loose on my shoulders now, listenin' to her clack. So when I hear her comin' down again, I jest put up de ladder here, and I didn't hear no word she said. Did she hab de imp'dence to ask you lend her a crape bunnit?"

"Yes; that is what she came for. We had none, of course."

Auntie snorted. "None ob her business whedder you had none or a hunderd!" she said. "I tole her if she ask you dat, I'd pull her own bunnit off'n her next time she come; and I will so!"

"Oh, no, you won't, Auntie!" said Hildegarde.

"Well, now, you'll see. Miss Hildy chile! I had 'nuff ob dat woman. Ole barn-cat, comin' snoopin' round here to see what she can git out'n you and yer ma, 'cause she sees yer like two chillen. What yer want for supper, honey, waffles, or corn-pone?" [35]

"Waffles," said Hildegarde, with decision. "But—Auntie, what have you there? No, not the pitcher; those little tin things that you just laid down. I want to see them, please."

"I been rummagin' dis shelf," said Auntie. "I put a lot ob odd concerns up here,—foun' em in de place when we come,—and dey ain't no good, and I want de room. Dose? Dem's little moulds, I reckon. Well, now, I don't seem as if I noticed dem before. Kin' o' pretty, ain't dey, honey?"

She handed down a set of tin moulds, of fairy size and quaint, pretty shapes. Tulips, lilies, crocuses,—"Why, it is a tin flower-bed!" cried Hildegarde. "Why did you never show me these before, Auntie?"

But Auntie was not conscious of having noticed them before. She had cleaned them,—of course,—but her mind must have been on her cooking, and she did not remember them. [36]

"And what could one do with them?" Hildegarde went on. "Oh, see! here is a scrap of parchment fastened to the ring of one of them. 'The moulds for the almond cakes. The receipt is in the manuscript book with yellow covers.' Why, how interesting this is! Almond cakes! It sounds delightful! Do you remember where I put that queer old book, Auntie? You thought the receipts so extravagant that I have not used it at all. Oh! here it is, in your table-drawer. I might have been sure that you would know exactly where it was. Now let us see. This may be a special providence, Auntie."

"I don't unnerstand what you talkin' 'bout, chile," said Auntie, good-naturedly. "I made you almond cake last week, and I guess dat was good 'nuff, 'thout lookin' in de grandmother books. But you can see,—mebbe you find somethin' different."

Hildegarde was already deep in the old manuscript book. Its leaves were yellow with age, the ink faded, but the receipts were perfectly legible, many of the later ones being in Miss Barbara Aytoun's fine, crabbed, yet plain hand. [37]

"'Bubble and Squeak!' Auntie, I wish you would give us Bubble and Squeak for dinner some day. You are to make it of cold beef, and then at the end of the receipt she tells you that pork is

much better.—'China Chilo! Mince a pint basin of undressed neck of mutton'—How *is* one to mince a basin, do you suppose? I should have to drop it from the roof of the house, and then it would not be fine enough.—'Serve it fried of a beautiful colour'—no! that's not it!—'Pigs' feet. Wash your feet thoroughly, and boil, or rather stew them gently'—Miss Barbara, I am surprised at you!—'Ramakins'—those might be good. 'Excellent Negus'—ah! here we are! 'Almond cakes!' H'm! 'Beat a pound of almonds fine'—and a pleasant thing it is to do—'with rose water—half a pound of sifted sugar—beat with a spoon'—ah, this is the part I was looking for, Auntie! 'Bake them in the flower-moulds, watching carefully; when a beautiful light gold colour, take them out, and fill when cold with cream into which is beat shredded peaches or apricots.' O—oh! doesn't that sound good, Auntie?"

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"Good 'nuff," Auntie assented, nodding her turbaned head. "Good deal of bodder to make, 'pears to me, Miss Hildy. I'm gittin' old for de fancy cakes, 'pears like."

"Oh, you dear soul! I don't want you to make them," cried Hildegarde. "I want to make them myself. Now, Auntie, I am going to be very confidential."

Auntie's dark face glowed with pleasure. She loved a little confidence.

"You see," Hildegarde went on, "I want some money. Not that I don't have enough for everything; but I want to earn a little myself, so that I can make all the Christmas presents I want, without feeling that I am taking it out of the family purse. You understand, I am sure, Auntie!" and Auntie, who had held Hildegarde in her arms when she was a baby, nodded her head, and understood very well.

[39]

"So I thought that possibly I might make something to send to the Woman's Exchange in New York. I saw in a magazine the other day that the ladies who give a great many lunches are always wishing to find new little prettinesses for their tables. I saw something of that myself, when I was there this fall." But Hildegarde checked herself, feeling that she was getting rather beyond Auntie's depth.

"And I had been wondering what I could make, this very afternoon, and thinking of one thing and another; and when I saw these pretty little moulds, it seemed the very thing I had been looking for. What do you think, Auntie?"

"T'ink? I t'ink dem Noo York ladies better be t'ankful to git anything you make for 'em, Miss Hildy; dat's my 'pinion! And I'll help ye make de cake, and fuss round a little wid de creams, too, if you let me."

But Hildegarde declared she would not let her have any hand whatever in the making of the almond cakes, and ran off, hearing her mother's voice calling her from up-stairs.

"My dear suz!" said the black woman, gazing after her. "T'ink ob my little baby missy growed into dat capable young lady, wat make anything she touch her finger to. Ain't her match in Noo York, tell yer; no, nor Virginny, nudder!"

[40]

CHAPTER III.

[41]

AUNT EMILY.

"AND you really think I would better stay several days, Mammina? I don't like to leave you alone. Some one might come and carry you off! How should I feel if I came back next week, and found you gone?" Hildegarde looked down at her mother, as she sat in her low chair by the fire; she spoke playfully, but with an undertone of wistfulness. Mrs. Grahame had grown rather shadowy in the last year; she looked small and pale beside Hildegarde's slender but robust figure; and the girl's eyes dwelt on her with a certain anxiety. But nothing could be brighter or more cheerful than Mrs. Grahame's smile, nor could a voice ring more merrily than hers did as she responded to Hildegarde's tone, rather than her words.

"There *have* been rumours of a griffin lurking in the neighbourhood. He is said to have a particular fancy for old—there, there, Hilda! don't kill me!—well, for middle-aged ladies, and his preference is for the small and bony. I feel that I am in imminent peril; but still, under all the circumstances, I prefer to abide my fate; and I think you would decidedly better spend two or three days at least with your Aunt Emily. She has never invited you before, and her note sounds pretty forlorn, poor old lady! Besides, if you really want to do something at the Exchange, you could hardly manage it in one day. So you shall pack the small trunk, and take an evening gown, and make a little combination trip, missionary work and money-making."

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"And what will you do?" asked Hildegarde, still a little wistfully.

"Clean your room!" replied her mother, promptly.

"Mamma! as if I would let you do that while I was away!"

"Kindly indicate how you would prevent it while you were away, my dear! But indeed, I don't mean a revolutionary, spring cleaning; I just want to have the curtains washed, and the paint

[43]

touched up a little; I saw several places where it was getting shabby. Indeed, Hilda, I think the trip to New York is rather a special providence, do you know?"

"Humph!" said Hildegarde, looking suspiciously at her parent. "And while I *am* gone, it might be a good plan to take up the matting, and re-cover some of the chairs, and have the sofa done over, you think?"

"Exactly!" said Mrs. Grahame, falling innocently into the trap. Whereupon she was pounced on, shaken gently, embraced severely, and forbidden positively to attempt anything of the kind. Finally a compromise was effected, allowing the washing of the curtains, but leaving the details of painting, etc., till Hildegarde's return; and the rest of the evening was spent in the ever-pleasant and congenial task of making out a list.

"You cannot be expected to make visits, of course, dear, in so short a stay; but there are one or two people you ought to see if possible," said Mrs. Grahame. [44]

Hildegarde looked up apprehensively from her jottings of towels, gloves, and ribbons to be bought. Her mother's ideas of family duty were largely developed.

"Aunt Emily will expect you to call on Cousin Amelia, and no doubt the girls will come to see you. Your Aunt Anna is in Washington."

"For what we are about to escape—" murmured the daughter.

"Hildegarde, I wonder at you!"

"Yes, dear mamma! what else were you going to say?"

Mrs. Grahame tried to look severe for a moment, did not succeed, and put the subject by.

"Then there is old Madam Burlington; she would take it as a kindness if you went to see her; you need not stay more than a quarter of an hour. A Cranford call is all that is necessary, but do try to find an hour to go and sit with poor Cousin Harriet Wither; it cheers her so to see some young life. Poor Harriet! she is a sad wreck! You will probably dine at your Cousin Robert Grahame's, and if Aunt Emily wishes you to call on any of the Delansings—" [45]

"Were you expecting me to stay away over Christmas?" inquired Hildegarde, calmly.

"Why, darling, surely not! what do you mean?"

"Only that you seem to have started on a month's programme, my love, that's all. Don't look so, angel! I will go to see all of them; I will spend a month with each in turn; only don't look troubled!"

By and by everything was settled as well as might be. Mother and daughter went to sleep with peaceful hearts, and the next day Hildegarde departed for New York, determined to make as short a visit as she could in propriety to Aunt Emily Delansing.

Of her reception by that lady she herself shall tell:

"BLESSEDEST MOTHER:

"As usual, you were quite right, and I am glad I came. Hobson was at the station, and brought me up here in a hansom, and Aunt Emily was in the drawing-room to receive me. She is very kind, and seems glad to have me here. I have not done much yet, naturally, as I have not been here two hours yet. I could not let the six o'clock mail go without sending you a line, just to say that I am safe and well. Very well indeed, dearest, and no more homesick than is natural, and loving you more than you can possibly imagine. But oh, the streets are so noisy, and there are no birds, and—no, I will not! I will be good. Good-bye, dearest and best! Always your very ownest,

"HILDA."

Hilda sealed and addressed her letter, and then rang the bell. A grave footman in plum-coloured livery appeared, received the letter as if it were an official document of terrible import, and departed. Then, when the door was closed and she was alone again, Hildegarde leaned back in her chair and gave herself up to reverie. Her eyes wandered over the room in which she was sitting,—a typical city room, large and lofty, with everything proper in the way of furnishing. "Everything proper, and nothing interesting!" said Hildegarde, aloud. The oak furniture was like all other oak furniture; the draperies were irreproachable, but without character; the pictures were costly, and that was all. [47]

Rather wearily Hildegarde rose and began the somewhat elaborate toilet which was necessary to please the taste of the aunt with whom she had come to stay. Mrs. Delansing was her father's aunt. Since Mr. Grahame's death, his widow and child had seen little of her. She considered their conduct, in moving to the country, reprehensible in the extreme, and signified to Mrs. Grahame that she could never regard her as a sane woman again. Mrs. Grahame had borne this affliction as bravely as she might, and possibly, in the quietly happy years that followed the move, she and her daughter did not give much thought to Aunt Emily or her wrath. She was well, and did not need them, and they were able to get on very tolerably by themselves. Now, however, things had happened. Mrs. Delansing was much out of health; her own daughters were settled in distant

homes, and could not leave their own families to be with her; she felt her friends dropping away year by year, and loneliness coming upon her. For the first time in years, Emily Delansing felt the need of some new face, some new voice, to keep her from her own thoughts. Accordingly she had written to Mrs. Grahame a note which meant to be stately, and was really piteous, holding out the olive-branch, and intimating that she should be glad to have a visit from Hildegarde, unless her mother thought it necessary to keep the girl buried for her whole life.

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In replying, Mrs. Grahame did not think it necessary to reply to the last remark, nor to remind Mrs. Delansing that Hildegarde had spent a month in New York the winter before, with an aunt on the Bond side, who was not in the Delansing set. She said simply that Hildegarde would be very glad to spend a few days in Gramercy Park, and that she might be expected on the day set. And, accordingly, here Hildegarde was. She had fully agreed with her mother that it was her duty to come, if Aunt Emily really needed her; but she confessed to private doubts as to the reality of the need. "And you do want me, Mrs. Grahame, deny it if you dare!" she said.

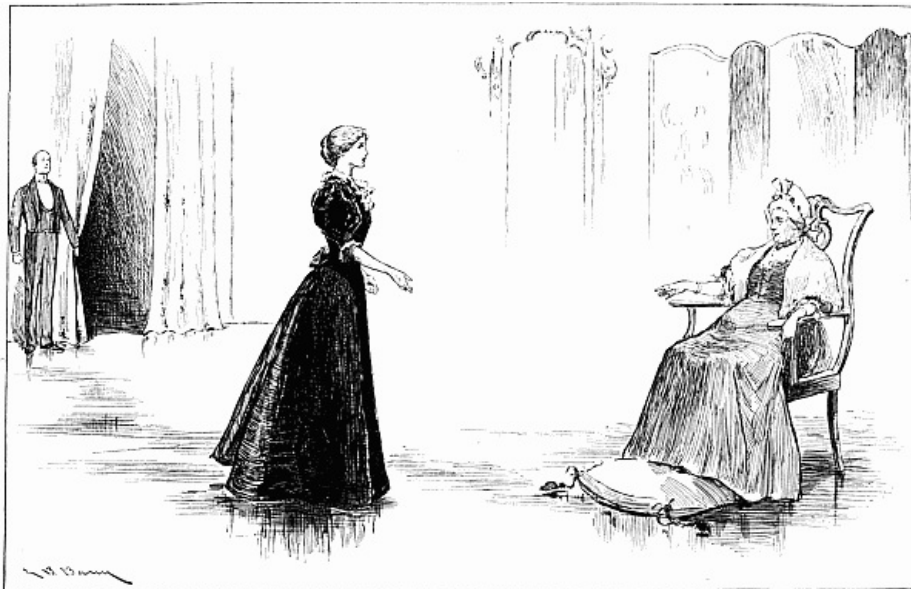
"Heigh ho!" said Hildegarde again, looking about her for something to talk to, as was her way. "Well, so I packed my trunk, and I came away, and here I am." She addressed a small china sailor, who was sitting on a pink barrel that contained matches.

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"And if you think I like it so far, my friend, why, you have less intelligence than your looks would indicate. What dress would you put on, if you were I? I think your pink-striped shirt would be extremely becoming to me, but I don't want to be grasping. You advise the brown velveteen? I approve of your taste!"

Hildegarde nodded to the sailor, feeling that she had made a friend; and proceeded to array herself in the brown velveteen gown. It was a pretty gown, made half-low, with full elbow-sleeves, and heavy old lace in the neck. When Hildegarde had clasped the gold beads round her slender neck, she felt that she was well dressed, and sat down with a quiet conscience to read "Montcalm and Wolfe" till dinner-time. Presently came a soft knock at the door, and the announcement that dinner was served; and Hildegarde laid aside her book and went down to the drawing-room.

[50]



"MRS. DELANSING SCRUTINISED HER AS SHE CAME THROUGH THE LONG ROOM."

Mrs. Delansing, seated in her straight, high-backed armchair, was on the watch for her grandniece, and scrutinised her as she came through the long room. Then she nodded, and, rising, laid her hand on the arm that Hildegarde offered her.

"Who taught you to enter a room?" she asked, abruptly. "You have been taught, I perceive."

"My mother," said Hildegarde, quietly.

"Humph!" said Mrs. Delansing. "In my time, one of the most important accomplishments was to enter a room properly. Nowadays I see young women skip, and shuffle, and amble into the drawing-room; I do not often see one enter it properly. You will, perhaps, tell your mother that I have mentioned this; she may be gratified."

Hildegarde bowed in silence, and as they came into the dining-room, took the place to which her aunt motioned her, at the foot of the table. It was a long table, and Hildegarde could only see the bows of Mrs. Delansing's cap over the stately epergne that rose between them; but she was conscious of the old lady's sharp black eyes watching her through the ferns and roses. This awoke a rebellious spirit in our young friend, and she found herself wondering what would be the effect of her putting her knife in her mouth, or drinking out of the finger-bowl. The dinner seemed interminable. It is not easy to talk to some one whom you cannot see; but Hildegarde replied as well as she could to the occasional searching questions that were darted at her like spear-points through the ferns, preserved her composure, and was not too unhappy to enjoy the good food set before her.

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It was a relief to go back to the drawing-room, which seemed a shade less formal than the one

they left; also, she found a comfortable chair, and received permission to take out her embroidery.

"Where did you get that lace?" asked Mrs. Delansing, suddenly, after a silence during which Hildegarde had thought her asleep, till, on looking up, she met the steady gaze of the black eyes, still fixed on her. [52]

"It is extremely valuable lace; are you aware of it?" The tone was reproachful, but Hildegarde preserved a quiet mind.

"Yes, I know it is valuable!" she said. "Old Mr. Aytoun left all his personal property to Mamma, you know, Aunt Emily; there was a great deal of lace, some of it very fine indeed; this is a small piece that went with some broad flounces. Beautiful flounces they are!"

Mrs. Delansing's eyes lightened, and her fingers moved nervously. Lace was one of her few passions, and she could not see it, or even hear of it, unmoved.

"And what does your mother propose to do with all this lace?" she asked. "She cannot wear it herself, in the wilderness that she chooses to live in."

"Oh, she keeps it!" said Hildegarde. "It is delightful to have good lace, don't you think so? even if you don't wear it. And when either of us wants a bit to put on a gown,—like this, for example,—why, there it is, all ready." [53]

"It seems wanton; it seems almost criminal," said Mrs. Delansing, with energy, "to keep valuable lace shut up in a mouldering country-house. I—it distresses me to think of it. I shall feel it a point of duty to write to your mother."

Hildegarde wondered what her aunt would feel it her duty to say. It was hardly her mother's fault that the lace had been left to her; it seemed even doubtful whether she should be expected to mould her life upon the lines of lace; but this seemed an unsafe point to suggest.

"That is very beautiful lace on your dress, Aunt Emily!" said this wily young woman.

Mrs. Delansing's brow smoothed, and she looked down with a shade of complacency. "Yes, this is good," she said. "This is very good. Your grandfather,—I should say your great-uncle, bought this lace for me in Brussels. It is peculiarly fine, you may perceive. The young woman who made it lost her eyesight in consequence."

"Oh, how dreadful!" cried Hildegarde. "How could you—" "How could you bear to wear it?" was what she was going to say, but she checked herself, and the old lady went on, placidly. [54]

"Your great-uncle paid something more than the price asked on that account. He thought something more was due; he was a man of great benevolence. This is point lace."

"Yes," said Hildegarde, "Point d'Alençon; I never saw a more delicate piece."

"Ah! you know point lace!" said Mrs. Delansing. Her voice took on a new tone, and she looked at the girl with more friendly eyes. "I did not know that any young women of the new generation understood point. These matters seem to be thought of little consequence nowadays. I have myself spent months in the study of a special point, and felt myself well repaid."

She put some searching questions, relative to the qualities of Spanish, Venice, and Rose point, and nodded her head at each modest but intelligent answer. Hildegarde blessed her mother and Cousin Wealthy, who had expounded to her the mysteries of lace. At the end of the catechism, the old lady sighed and shook her head. [55]

"It is an exceptional thing," she said, "to find any knowledge of laces in the younger generations. I instructed my own daughters most carefully in this branch of a gentlewoman's education, but they have not thought proper to extend the instruction to their own children. I—a shocking thing happened to me last year!" She paused, and Hildegarde looked up in sympathy.

"What was it, Aunt Emily?" she asked.

Mrs. Delansing was still silent, lost in distressful reverie. At length, "It is painful to dwell upon," she said, "and yet these things are a warning, and it is, perhaps, a duty to communicate them. You have met my granddaughters, your cousins, Violette and Blanche?"

"Oh, yes!" said Hildegarde, smiling a little, and colouring a little too. These cousins were rather apt to attempt the city-cousin rôle, and to treat her as a country cousin and poor relation. She did not think they had had the best of it at their last meeting. "Yes, I know them," she said, simply.

"They are girls of lively disposition," Mrs. Delansing continued. "Their mother—your Cousin Amelia—has been something of an invalid,—I make allowance for all this, and yet there are things —" She broke off; then, after a moment, went on again. "Violette made me a visit last winter, here, in this house. She was engaged in what she called fancy work, for a bazaar (most objectionable things to my mind), that was to be held in the neighbourhood. One day she came to Hobson—I was unwell at the time—and said,—Hobson remembers her very words: [56]

"'Oh, Hobson, see what a lovely thing I have made out of a bit of old rubbishy lace that was in this bureau drawer.'

"Hobson looked, and turned pale to her soul, as she expressed it in her homely way. She recognised the pattern of the lace.

"'I cut out the flowers,' said the unhappy girl, 'and applied them'—she *said* 'appliquéd' them, a term which I cannot reproduce—'applied them to this crimson satin ribbon; it will make a lovely picture-frame; so unique!'

"She had—she had taken a piece of my old Mechlin, which Hobson had just done up and had laid in the drawer till I should feel strong enough to examine and approve its appearance,—she had taken this and cut it to pieces, cut out the flowers, to sew them— There are things that have to be lived through, my dear. It was weeks before Hobson felt able to tell me what had occurred. I was in danger of a relapse for several weeks, though she did it as delicately as possible,—good Hobson. I did not trust myself to speak to Violette in person; I sent for her mother, and told her of the occurrence. She—she—laughed!" [57]

There was silence for some minutes. Hildegard wanted to show the sympathy that she truly felt, for she liked lace, and the idea of its stupid destruction filled her with indignation. She ventured to lay her hand timidly on the old lady's arm, but Mrs. Delansing took no notice of the caress; she sat bolt upright, gazing out of the window with stony eyes. Presently she said:

"You may ring for Hobson, if you please. I feel somewhat shaken, and will have my malted milk in my own room. Another evening, I may ask your patience in a game of backgammon,—you have been taught to play backgammon? Yes; but not to-night. You will find books in the library, and the piano does not disturb me. Good-night, my niece." [58]

She shook hands with Hildegard, and departed on Hobson's arm, looking old and feeble, though holding herself studiously erect. Hildegard went to her room, feeling half sad, half amused, and wholly homesick. She greeted the china sailor with effusion, as if he were a friend of years. "Oh, you dear fellow!" she said. "You are young, aren't you? and happy, aren't you? Well, mind you stay so, do you hear?" She nodded vehemently at him, and took up her book, to read till bedtime.

CHAPTER IV.

 [59]

GREETINGS.

THERE WAS no family breakfast at the house in Gramercy Park. A smiling chambermaid brought up a tray to Hildegard's room, with all manner of pleasant things under suggestive little covers. Hilda ate and was thankful, and then, finding that her aunt would not be visible before noon, she put on her hat and went for a walk. The streets were chilly, in the November morning, but the air was fresh and good, and Hildegard breathed it in joyously.

This was just a walk, she said to herself. She had many visits to make, of course, and more or less shopping to do, but there was time enough for all that. Now she would walk, and get her bearings, and consider that one might live well in a city. The brick sidewalks seemed at once strange and familiar; she had known the brown-stone streets all her life. Once they had seemed her own, the only place worth walking in; now they were a poor apology, indeed, for shady lanes and broad sunny roads along which the feet trod or the wheel spun, winged by "the joy of mere living." She passed the house where her childhood had been spent, and paused to look up at the tall windows, in loving thought of the dear father who had made that early home so bright and full of cheer. Dear Father! There was his smoking-room window, where he used to sit and read aloud to her, so many happy hours. How he would dislike those heavy brocade curtains; he used to thunder, almost as loud as Colonel Ferrers, about curtains that kept out the blessed sunshine. How—the house was a corner one, and at this moment, as Hildegard stood gazing up at the windows, a gentleman turned the corner, and ran plump into her. [60]

"Upon my soul," said the gentleman, with great violence, "it is a most extraordinary thing that a human being should turn himself into a post for the express purpose of—I beg your pardon, madam. I was not conscious that I was addressing a lady! Can I serve you in any way? Command me, I beg of you!" [61]

The moment Hildegard caught the sound of the gentleman's voice, she turned her head away, so that he could not see her face; and now she spoke over her shoulder.

"A place in thy memory, dearest—sir, is all that I ask at thy hands. It is hard to be forgotten so soon, so utterly!"

"What! what! what! what!" said the Colonel. "Who! who! why—why the mischief will you not turn your head round, young woman? There is only one young woman in the world who would address me in this manner, and she is a hundred miles away. Now, in the name of all that is elfish, Hildegard Grahame, what are you doing here?"

Hildegard turned round, her eyes full of happy laughter, and took her friend's arm.

"And in the name of all that is occult, and necromantic, and Rosicrucian, Colonel Ferrers, what are *you* doing here?" she asked. "I thought you were in Washington." [62]

"I was, till last night!" the Colonel replied. "We have seen all the sights, the boy and I, and now we have come to see the sights here on our way home. Well! well! and the first sight I see is the best one for sair een that I know. What a pity I left the boy at the hotel! He was still asleep. We arrived late last night. I went to wake him, and I give you my word, I could as soon have thought of waking an angel from a dream of paradise; the little fellow smiled, you understand, Hildegarde, and—and moved his little arms, and—I came away, sir,—my dear, I should say,—and left him to sleep as long as he would. Where are you going now, my child? have you had breakfast? if not,—"

"Oh, yes, I have had breakfast, dear sir!" said Hildegarde. "And you were thinking, if I had had it, how pleasant for me to go in and surprise that blessed lamb in his crib; now, weren't you?"

"The point, as usual!" cried the Colonel. "Country neighbours learn to know each others' thoughts, they say, but I never believed it, till I had neighbours. Well, shall we go? Now, upon my soul, this is the most surprising and delightful thing that has happened to me for forty years. But you have not told me where you are staying, Hilda, nor why you are here, nor in fact anything; have simply wormed information out of the confiding friend, and remained silent yourself!" and the Colonel looked injured, and twirled his moustaches with mock ferocity. [63]

"I like that!" said Hildegarde. "That really pleases me! Kindly indicate, dear sir, the moment at which I could have got in a word edgewise, since you began your highly interesting remarks! I have been simply panting with eagerness to tell you that I left home yesterday, and arrived in New York at five o'clock in the afternoon; that I am staying with my great-aunt in Gramercy Park; that I am wofully homesick, and that the sound of your voice was the most ecstatic sound I have heard for half a century." [64]

"Ha!" said the Colonel. "Humph! mockery, I perceive! of the aged, too! Very well, Miss Grahame, your punishment will be decided hereafter. Meanwhile, here we are at my hotel, and we will go straight up and wake the boy,—if he seems to be ready to wake, my dear. I am sure you will agree with me that it would be a pity to rouse him from a sound sleep. 'Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,' you remember, Hildegarde!"

"Yes, dear Colonel Ferrers!" said Hildegarde. "But I don't believe Hugh's sleeve is very deeply ravelled, do you? and indeed, it is high time for him to be awake."

They turned in at a great white marble portal, and the elevator soon brought them to the Colonel's door. He opened it softly with a latch-key, and led the way into the apartment; then paused, and beckoned Hilda to come in quietly.

"Listen!" he whispered. "Hugh is awake!"

They listened, and heard a clear, sweet voice discoursing calmly:

"I have three pillows to my head, though I am not ill. I wish that other boy was here, that was in bed, and made songs about himself, and said it was the Land of Counterpane. He was the Giant great and still, that sits upon the pillow-hill, and I am that kind of giant too. Now I play he is here, and he sits up against that pillow, and I sit up against this. And I say, 'How can you say all the things that come in your mind? I can have the things in my mind, too, but they will not have rhyme-tails to them. How do you make the rhyme-tails?' [65]

"And then he says,—I call him Louis, for that is the prettiest part of his name,—Louis says, 'It has to be a part of you. I think of things in short lines, and after every line I look for the rhyme-tail, and I see it hanging somewhere. But perhaps your Colonel can help you about that,' Louis says.

"But I say, 'No! my Colonel cannot help me about that. My Colonel is good, and I love him with love that grows like a tree, but he cannot make rhymes. Now, if my Beloved were here, she might be able to help me; but she is far away, and the high walls shut her out from me. The walls are very high here, Louis, and my Colonel has gone away now, and I don't know how soon he will come back; so don't you leave me, Louis, for I am alone in a sandy waste, and there are no quails. But manna would be nasty, I think.'" [66]

At this point the listeners could bear no more. Hilda ran into the room, and had Hugh in her arms, and was laughing and crying and cooing over him all at once. The Colonel followed, very red in the face, blowing his nose and clearing his throat portentously.

"Why, darling," Hilda was saying between the kisses, "darling Boy, did you want me? and did you think your Colonel would leave you for more than a few little minutes? Of course he would not! And where do you suppose I came from, Boy, when I heard you say you wanted me? Do you think I came down the chimney?"

Hugh gravely inspected her spotless attire; the blue serge showed no wrinkle, no speck of dust.

"I should say *not* the chimney!" he announced, "But from some strange where you must have come, Beloved, if it was a place where you heard me talking when I was not there. Was it the up-stairs of the Land of Counterpane?" he added, his eyes lighting up with their whimsical look. "Was it the Counterpane Garret? Then it must have been over the top of the bed that you came from, and you seemed to come in at the door. Did Louis tell you to come?" [67]

"Louis?" said the Colonel. "What does the boy mean? Stuff and nonsense! I met your Beloved in the street, ran into her, and thought she was a post; and then I brought her along, and here she is; and what do you think about breakfast, Young Sir?"

Young Sir thought very well of breakfast, but he could not think of eating it without his two friends looking on; so Hildegard waited in the parlour, chatting merrily with the Colonel till Young Sir's toilet was completed, and then breakfast was brought, and Hugh ate, and the others watched him; and Hildegard found that she was quite hungry enough to eat Black Hamburg grapes, even if it was only two hours since breakfast, and altogether they were very merry. [68]

"And what shall we do now?" asked the Colonel, when the pleasant meal was over. "The Metropolitan, eh? The boy must see pictures, Hilda, hey? 'The eye that ne'er on beauty dwells,' h'm! ha! folderol! I forget the rest, but the principle remains the same. Never seen any pictures except those at home, and the few in Washington. Chiefly rubbish there, I observe. What do you say, Miss Braeside? Will you give Roseholme the honour of your company as far as the Metropolitan?"

"Why not?" thought Hildegard. "Hobson said positively that Aunt Emily would not see me before lunch, and there is no one else that I need go to see quite so very immediately."

"Yes, I will go with pleasure!" she said. So off they started, the cheerfullest three in New York that morning. Busy men, hurrying down-town to their business, turned to look back at them, and felt the load of care lightened a little just by the knowledge that there were three people who had no care, and were going to enjoy themselves somewhere. Hugh walked in the middle, holding a hand of each friend, chattering away, and looking up from one to the other with clear, joyful looks that made the whole street brighter. The Colonel was in high feather; flourishing his stick, he strode along, pointing out the various objects of interest on the way. He paused before a mercer's window, filled with shimmering silks and satins. [69]

"Now here," he said, "is frippery of a superior description; frippery enough to delight the hearts of a dozen women."

"Possibly of two dozen, dear sir," put in Hildegard; "consider the number of yards in all those shining folds."

"Hum! ha! precisely!" said the Colonel. "Now, Hildegard, you have some taste in dress, I believe; you appear to me to be a well-dressed young woman. Now, I say, what seems to you the handsomest gown in all this folderol, hey? the handsomest, mind you?"

"Said the Kangaroo to the Duck, this requires a little reflection!" Hildegard quoted. [70]

"Perhaps, on the whole, that splendid purple velvet; don't you think so, Colonel Ferrers?"

"Hum!" said the Colonel. "Ha! possibly; but—ha! hum! that—I may be wrong, Hildegard—but that seems to me hardly suited to a young person, hey? More a gown for a dowager, it strikes me? I may be wrong, of course."

"Not in the least wrong, dear sir," said Hilda, laughing. "But you said nothing about a young person. You said 'the handsomest.'"

"Precisely," said the Colonel again. "And after all, a gown is a temporary thing, Hugh. Now, a bit of jewelry—but now, Hildegard, I put it to you, if you were going to choose a gown for Elizabeth Beadle, for example; suppose Hugh and I were going to take a present home to Elizabeth Beadle; there's no better woman of her station in the mortal universe, sir, I don't care who the second may be. What do you think suitable, hey?"

"Oh, Guardian!" and "Oh, Colonel Ferrers!" cried Hugh and Hildegard, in a breath. "How delightful!" [71]

"I think Hugh ought to choose," said Hildegard, with some self-denial; and she added to herself:

"If only he will not choose the blue and red plaid; though there is nothing she would like so well, to be sure!"

Hugh surveyed the shining prospect with radiant eyes.

"I think you are the very kindest person in all the world!" he said. "I think—my mind is full of thoughts, but now I will make my choice."

He was silent, and the three stood absorbed, heedless of the constantly increasing crowd that surged and elbowed past them.

"My great-aunt is fond of bright colours," said the child, at last. Hildegard shivered.

"She would like best the red and blue plaid. *But*, people must not always have the things they like best. You remember the green apples, Guardian, and how they weren't half as good as the medicine was horrid."

"Most astonishing boy in the habitable universe!" murmured the Colonel, under his breath. "Don't undertake to say what kind of boys there may be in Mars, you understand, but so far as this planet goes,—hey? Ha! well, have you made your choice, Young Sir?" [72]

Hugh pointed out a gray silk, with a pretty purple figure. "That is the very best thing for my great-aunt," he said.

"That will fill her with delirious rapture, and it will not put out the eyes of anybody. We shall all be happy with that silk."

So in they went to the shop, and Hugh bought the silk, and the Colonel paid for it, and then they all went off to the Metropolitan, and spent the rest of the morning in great joy.

CHAPTER V.

[73]

AT THE EXCHANGE.

"AND how have you spent the morning, my dear?" asked Mrs. Delansing.

They were sitting at the luncheon-table. Hildegarde could just see the tip of her aunt's cap above the old-fashioned epergne which occupied the centre of the table; but her tone sounded cheerful, and Hildegarde hastened to tell of her delightful morning. She had enjoyed herself so heartily that she made the recital with joyful eagerness, forgetting for the moment that she was not speaking to her mother, who always enjoyed her good times rather more than she did herself; but a sudden exclamation from Mrs. Delansing brought her to a sudden realisation of her position.

"What!" exclaimed the old lady, and at her tone the very ferns seemed to stiffen. "What are you telling me, Hildegarde? You have been spending the morning with—with a gentleman, and that gentleman—"

[74]

"Colonel Ferrers!" said Hildegarde, hastily, fearing that she had not been understood. "Surely you know Colonel Ferrers, Aunt Emily."

"I *do* know Thomas Ferrers!" replied Mrs. Delansing, with awful severity; "but I do *not* know why—I must add that I am at a loss to imagine *how*—my niece should have been careering about the streets of New York with Thomas Ferrers or any other young man."

Hildegarde was speechless for a moment; indeed, Mrs. Delansing only paused to draw breath, and then went on.

"That your mother holds many dangerous and levelling opinions I am aware; but that she could in any degree countenance anything so—so monstrous as this, I refuse to believe. I shall consider it my duty to write to her immediately, and inform her of what you have done."

Hildegarde was holding fast to the arms of her chair, and saying over and over to herself, "Never speak suddenly or sharply to an old person!" It was one of her mother's maxims, and she had never needed it before; but now it served to keep her still, though the indignant outcry had nearly forced itself from her lips. She remained silent until she was sure of her voice; then said quietly, "Aunt Emily, there is some mistake! Colonel Ferrers is over sixty years old; he was a dear friend of my father's, and—and I have already written to my mother."

[75]

Mrs. Delansing was silent; Hildegarde saw through the screen of leaves a movement, as if she put her hand to her brow. "Sixty years old!" she repeated. "Wild Tom Ferrers,—sixty years old! What does it mean? Then—then how old am I?"

There was a painful silence. Hildegarde longed for her mother; longed for the right word to say; the wrong word would be worse than none, yet this stillness was not to be endured. Her voice sounded strange to herself as she said, crumbling her bread nervously:

"He is looking very well indeed. He has been in Washington with little Hugh, his ward; he had been suffering a great deal with rheumatism, but the warm weather there drove it quite away, he says."

[76]

There was no reply.

"Colonel Ferrers is the kindest neighbour that any one could possibly have!" the girl went on. "I don't know what we should have done without him, mamma and I; he has really been one of the great features in our life there. You know he is a connection of dear papa's,—on the Lancaster side,—as well as a lifelong friend."

"I was not aware of it!" said Mrs. Delansing. She had recovered her composure, and her tone, though cold, was no longer like iced thunderbolts.

"I withdraw my criticism of your conduct,—in a measure. But I cannot refrain from saying that I think your time would have been better employed in your room, than in gadding about the street. I was distinctly surprised when Hobson told me that you had gone out. Hobson was surprised herself. She has always lived in the most careful families."

[77]

Hildegarde "saw scarlet." "Aunt Emily," she said, "blame me if you will; but I cannot suffer any reflection on my mother. I do not consider that it would be possible for any one to be more careful of every sensible propriety than my mother is; though she does not mould her conduct on

the opinions of servants!" she added. She should not have said this, and was aware of it instantly; but the provocation had been great.

"You admit that your mother is human?" said the old lady, grimly. "She has faults, I presume, in common with the rest of humankind?"

"She may have!" said Hildegarde. "I have never observed them."

Silence again. Hildegarde tried to eat her chicken, but every morsel seemed to choke her; her heart beat painfully, and she saw through a mist of angry tears. Oh, why had she come here? What would she not give to be at home again!

Presently Mrs. Delansing spoke again, and her tone was perceptibly gentler. [78]

"My dear, you must not think that I mean to be unkind, nor did I mean—consciously—to reflect upon your mother, for whom your affection is commendable, though perhaps strongly expressed."

"I am sorry!" said Hildegarde, impulsively. "I ought not to have spoken so. I beg your pardon, Aunt Emily!"

Mrs. Delansing bowed. "You are freely pardoned! I was about to say, when this little interruption occurred, that I had hoped you could be content for a few days under my roof, without seeking pleasure elsewhere; but age is poor company for youth."

"But you could not see me this morning, Aunt Emily! You said last night that you never saw anybody before lunch. And what should I do in my room? It is a charming room, but you surely did not expect me to stay in it all the morning, doing nothing?"

"I should have thought you might find plenty of occupation!" said Mrs. Delansing. "In my time it was thought not too much for a young lady to devote the greater part of the day to the care of her person; this, of course, included fine needlework and other feminine occupations." [79]

"I did not bring any work with me," said Hildegarde. "You see, I must go back to-morrow, Aunt Emily, and there are so many errands that I have to do. This afternoon I must go out again; and is there anything I can do for you? I shall be going by Arnold's, if you want anything there."

"I thank you; Hobson makes my purchases for me!" said Mrs. Delansing, stiffly. "She would better accompany you to Arnold's; there is apt to be a crowd in these large shops, which I consider unsuited for gentlewomen. I will tell Hobson to accompany you."

But Hildegarde protested against this, saying, with truth, that she must pay a visit first. The idea of going about with Hobson at her heels was intolerable for the girl who had spent the first sixteen years of her life in New York.

She finally carried her point, and also obtained permission to read to her aunt for an hour before going out. It was a particularly dull weekly that was chosen, but she read as well as she knew how, and had the pleasure of seeing Mrs. Delansing's stern face relax into something like cheerfulness as she went through two chapters of the vapid, semi-religious story. At length the cold, gray eyes closed; the stately head nodded forward; Aunt Emily was asleep. Hildegarde read on for some time, till she was sure that the slumber was deep and settled. Then she sat for a moment looking at the old lady, and contrasting her face and form, rigid even in sleep, with those of dear Cousin Wealthy Bond, who always looked like the softest and most kissable elderly rose in her afternoon nap. "Poor soul," she said, softly, as she slipped out of the room to find Hobson. "So lonely, and so unloved and unloving! I can't bear to hear Blanche and Violette speak of her,—I can hardly keep my hands off them,—and yet—why exactly should they be fond of her? She is not fond of them, or of anybody, I fear, unless it be Hobson." [80]

The visit was paid, and Hildegarde took her way towards the Woman's Exchange, with a beating heart. It beat happily, for she had enjoyed the half-hour's talk with the kind cousin, an elderly woman, who seldom moved from her sofa, but whose life was full of interest, and who was the friend and confidante of all the young people in the neighbourhood. She had heard with pleasure of the proposed plan, and had given Hildegarde a note to the manager of the Exchange, whom she knew well; had tasted a crumb of one of the cakes, and predicted a ready sale for them. Moreover, and this was the best of all, she had talked so wisely and kindly, and with such a note of the dear mother in her voice, that Hildegarde's homesickness had all floated away, and she had decided that it was not, after all, such a hardship to spend three days in New York as she had thought it an hour ago. [81]

As I said, she took her way towards the Exchange, carrying her neat paper box carefully. As she went, she amused herself by building castles, *à la* Perrette. How many things she would buy with the money, if she sold the cakes; and she should surely sell them. No one could resist who once tasted them, and she had made several tiny ones for samples; just a mouthful of "goody" in each. [82]

Fine linen, several yards of it, and gold thread, and "Underwoods" in green morocco,—that was really *almost* a necessity, for Mamma's birthday; and some pink chiffon to freshen up her silk waist, and—and—here she was almost run over, and was shouted at and seized by a policeman, and piloted gently to a place of safety, with an admonition to be more careful.

Much ashamed, Hildegarde stood still to look about her, and found herself at the very door of the Exchange. She went in. The room was filled with customers. "I ought to have come in the morning," she said to herself, and the quick blush mounted to her cheeks, as she made her way to the counter at the back of the shop, where a sweet-faced woman was trying to answer four questions at once.

"No, the Nuns have not come in yet. Yes, they are generally here before this. No, I cannot tell the reason of the delay. Yes, it happened once before, when the maker was ill. I do not know why more people do not make them. Yes, just the one person, so far as I know. Marguerites? Yes, madam,—in one moment. The orange biscuits will come in at two o'clock. No, we have never had them earlier than that. Perhaps you are thinking of the lemon cheese-cakes. These are the lemon cheese-cakes."

[83]

She paused for breath, and looked anxiously round. It was plain that she was expecting assistance, and equally plain that it was late in coming. Hildegarde stepped quietly round behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" she whispered.

The lady gave her a grateful glance. "I should be so thankful," she murmured. "All these ladies must be served instantly. The prices are all marked."

The lady who had demanded the "Nuns" had also paused for breath, being stout as well as clamorous; but she now returned to the attack. Hildegarde met her with a calm front, and eyes which tried not to smile.

[84]

"Can you—oh! this is a different person. Perhaps *you* can tell me why the Nuns are not here. It really seems an extraordinary thing that they should not be here at the usual time."

"The messenger may have lost a train, or something of that sort," suggested Hildegarde, soothingly.

"Oh, but that would be no excuse! No excuse at all! When one is in the habit of supplying things to people of consequence, one must not lose trains. Now, are you *perfectly sure* that they have not come? You know what they are, do you? Little round cakes, with a raisin in the middle, and flavoured with something special. I don't remember what the flavour is, but it is something special, of that I am sure. Have you looked—have you looked everywhere? What is in that box at your elbow? They might have been brought in and laid down without your noticing it. Oblige me by looking in that box at your elbow."

[85]

A sudden thought flashed into Hildegarde's mind; she began to unfasten the box, which was her own, whispering at the same time into the ear of her companion in distress.

"Oh! Oh, yes, certainly!" said the latter, also in a whisper. "Anything, I am sure, that will give satisfaction! If you can only—"

"Stop her noise," was evidently what the patient saleswoman longed to say; but she checked the words, and only gave Hildegarde an eloquent glance, as she turned to meet a wild onset in demand of macaroons.

Perhaps Hildegarde's fingers trembled a little as she untied the narrow blue ribbon that bound up her hopes; perhaps she was purposely slow, collecting her thoughts and words. The stout lady fumed and fidgeted. "You should never allow things to be tied in a hard knot! It should be one of the first rules in a place like this, that boxes should be fastened with india-rubber bands. Surely you know the usefulness of india-rubber bands? I hope those Nuns are fresh. If you did not see them come in, or speak to the person who brought them, how can you be sure of their being fresh? Stale cakes are out of the question, you know; nobody could think of enduring stale cakes; and Nuns, in particular, must be eaten the same day they—"

[86]

"These are not Nuns, madam," said Hildegarde, as she opened the box. "Perhaps you would like to see—"

"*Not Nuns!* Then why did you tell me they were Nuns? What are they, I should like to know? H'm! ha! very pretty! What do you call these?"

"Novices!" said Hildegarde, with a flash of inspiration.

"Aha! Novices, eh? Yes, yes! a good name, if they are—are they something new? I have never seen them here before."

"Entirely new!" Hildegarde assured her. "This is the first box that has ever been brought in."

"Eh? the first? Then how do you know they are good? How can you conscientiously recommend them? I always expect conscientious treatment here, you know."

[87]

"Will you try one?"

Hildegarde handed her the box; and she was soon crunching and nodding and smiling, all at the same moment.

"De-licious! I assure you, delicious! something entirely new—Novices! Why, they are exactly what I want for my party to-night. Much better than Nuns,—Nuns have really become quite

tiresome. What is the price of the Novices?"

Hildegarde hesitated, and glanced at the saleswoman. The latter leaned swiftly forward, looked, tasted a crumb,—

"Five cents apiece!" she said, quietly. Five! Hildegarde had thought of three, and had built all her castles on that basis.

But the stout lady was crying to heaven against the price. "Impossible! absurd! Why, Nuns were only two cents apiece, Marguerites only three! The price was ridiculous, exorbitant. She could not think of paying—"

Here a small lady, richly but quietly dressed, came up, and looked at the box. "Pretty!" she said. "Graceful and ingenious! Five cents apiece, you say? Give me a dozen and a half, please! I should like to have them sent to me once a week for the season; they are just the things to please my daughter's lunch-club." [88]

She nodded kindly to Hildegarde, and passed on. The stout lady gazed after her reverentially.

"Mrs. Cameron Pine!" she murmured. "She will make them the fashion instantly. I—I will take the rest!" she cried, wildly. "Put them up, and send them to me,—Mrs. Newcomb Rich, Madison Avenue. Send me two dozen every week,—wait! send them the *day before* you send Mrs. Pine's, do you hear? the day before! Don't forget! It is most important!" and puffing and nodding, she, too, went on.

There was a little lull now, during which the saleswoman turned to thank Hildegarde so heartily that our heroine would have felt well repaid even if she had not sold all her cakes.

"I cannot imagine where Miss Berden is; she is always so punctual. This is our busiest day, and one of our busiest hours, and some of the ladies, as you saw, rather hard to please. I really don't know what I should have done if you had not helped me; it was very kind and thoughtful of you." She gazed earnestly at Hildegarde, and added, "You have a good mother, I know, who has taught you to think and help." [89]

Hildegarde nodded and smiled, but said nothing, for the tears came springing to her eyes.

"And you sold all the pretty cakes!" added the saleswoman. "I knew they would make a hit the moment I saw them. That was partly why I put a good price on them; but it was also because I knew there must be a good deal of nice and careful work in making them. I wonder—you have been so good, I am ashamed to ask you anything more, but there is no one here now; would you be willing to hold the fort while I run to the corner and post a letter?"

Hildegarde assented cheerfully, and Miss Adams (for by this name she now introduced herself) put on her hat and went out. Hildegarde remained mistress of the situation, and occupied herself in tidying up the marble counter, brushing away the crumbs, and rearranging some biscuits that had fallen from their dainty pyramid. [90]

Now voices were heard at the door, and a gay group entered. A splendid carriage stood without, and these rustling, high-plumed ladies had evidently just dismounted from it. There were four of them, and they were joined in another moment by two or three more. Apparently, all had been at some concert, for they were talking all at once, and Hildegarde heard the words, "Exquisite!" "Technique!" "Andante!" etc., repeated over and over. She became interested, and forgot for the moment her position, when something curious recalled it to her. She recognised, in one of the younger ladies, her cousin Blanche Van Dene, one of Mrs. Delansing's granddaughters; and almost at the same instant, she became aware that Blanche had recognised her, and that she was anxious to avoid any open recognition. Her eyes had met Hildegarde's for one second; the next, she had turned her back squarely, and was chattering volubly in the ear of her neighbour.

A wave of anger surged over Hildegarde, leaving the very tips of her ears pink as it receded; but the wave of amusement followed it quickly, and the second wave bore a little spray of malice. Should she call to her, and say, "Dearest Blanche, how is your dear mother?" Or she might put on a twang—Hildegarde had an excellent twang at her disposal, and say, "Hello, Blanche! Haow's yer haalth, and haow's the folks to home?" Oh! it would be fun! And surely the girl deserved it! Such bad form, to say nothing of bad feeling! But here Hildegarde seemed to hear a certain familiar voice saying, "My dear, a debt of rudeness is one that should never be paid!" So she held her tongue, and contented herself with looking hard at Blanche's back, which showed consciousness and discomfort in every line. [91]

So intent was Hildegarde on her cousin's back, that she did not notice that one of the other ladies had turned round, and was gazing at her in perplexity; next moment a shout rang out, in a clear, joyous voice that made every one start.

"Hilda Grahame, in the name of all that is wonderful! My dear, what sky have you dropped from?" [92]

Hildegarde started, and saw a splendid vision advancing towards her with outstretched hand. A girl somewhat older than herself, with the walk and figure of a goddess and the dress of a queen; a face of almost faultless beauty, and large clear eyes through which looked a soul like a child's; she was one of the famous beauties of the day, famous alike for her loveliness, her great fortune, and the pride of her ancient name.

"My dear," she repeated, taking both Hildegarde's hands in hers, "what sky have you dropped from, and what are you doing here?"

"Dear Imperia!" said Hildegarde, calling her by the old familiar school name that came naturally to her lips. "How delightful to see you! I am selling cakes; will you have some? There were some that I made myself, but they are all sold. Here are various others, doubtless inferior, but still good."

"Of course I will have some!" cried Imperia. "Why, this is perfectly delightful! Do you really come here? regularly, I mean, and have all the cakes you want? I never heard of such fun. Give me three dozen of everything, and we'll have a carouse. Here, girls!" she turned and called to the others, who were looking curiously at the two; "come here, and tell me who this is! Shade of Madame Haut-ton, hover over us, and bless this reunion!"

"Hildegarde Grahame! Hilda! Queen Hildegarde!" cried several voices; and Hildegarde was instantly surrounded by the crowd of butterflies, all caressing and questioning, laughing and talking at once. One or two looked puzzled, other one or two sad, as they saw their gay schoolmate of former days standing behind the counter, quiet and self-possessed, and apparently entirely at home. But visible distress was on one countenance, and Hildegarde, charitable, refrained from looking at her cousin, when Imperia exclaimed, "Why, here is Blanche Van Dene! She is your cousin, isn't she? Blanche, here is Hilda, who used to be so good to you at school, and help you with your spelling. Dear me, Hilda, *do* you remember how Blanche used to spell?"

Hildegarde shook hands with her cousin composedly, and only her dancing eyes showed any consciousness of the situation. Blanche muttered some greeting, and then recollected an engagement and hurried off. The lady Imperia looked after her with good-natured contempt.

"Same little animal, my dear! I beg your pardon, Hilda, but really, you know, we remember her in her pinafores, and she was a snob then. But now tell us all about it, like a good girl! You are not in trouble, dear old thing?"

At this moment the door opened and Miss Adams came hurrying in, breathless and apologetic. There had been a block in the street—she was on the wrong side and could not get back—would Hildegarde *please* excuse her for being so long?

"Oh, but I have had a delightful time, Miss Adams!" cried Hildegarde. "And I have sold three dozen of everything—was that a real offer, Imperia?"

Imperia vowed that it was; and Hildegarde and Miss Adams together tied up the parcels, while all chatted together like old friends. The situation was explained, and so many dozens of "Novices" were ordered for every week that Hildegarde declared her intention of taking back with her to Braeside a *chef* and three kitchen-maids to help her in the manufacture. Finally, she was whirled away in her friend's purple chariot for a drive in the park, and had the pleasure of passing her cousin Blanche on the way, looking sad and sorry.



"HILDEGARDE GRAHAME, IN THE NAME OF ALL THAT'S WONDERFUL!"

CHAPTER VI.

MORE GREETINGS.

"AND YOU won't think better of it? Hilda, I am in despair! Think of it, my dear! Calvé, and both the De Reszkes—there will never be such a performance again, perhaps, in our lifetimes! And all the good time we should have between the acts—and our box will be simply *full* of people all the evening—oh, you must come, Hilda Grahame!"

People said of Helena Desmond that if she had a fault, it was that of speaking too loud. She was so full of the joy of living, so powerful and vigorous in all her emotions, pleasurable or painful, that her clear, resonant voice was apt to be heard like the sound of a trumpet, dominating other and feebler organs. Mrs. Delansing, sitting erect behind her tea equipage, heard it, and shivered slightly; but Hildegarde's reply was spoken so low that she could not catch a syllable. Then came: "No, no, I shouldn't! Don't tell me! I should do nothing of the sort! We are to take our opportunities as they come,—time enough for sacrifices when Lent comes. You know I don't mean that, Hilda; and you know you are a dear, dear,—" here followed the sound of good hearty kisses, and Mrs. Delansing shivered again; then the door closed with a solid slam, and all was silent.

Hildegarde came into the room, her hands full of roses.

"Aunt Emily," she said, "Helena Desmond sent you these! She would have come in, but she was late already for a reception. Aren't they lovely?"

Mrs. Delansing bent her head over the flowers; they were among the few things she enjoyed.

"Beautiful!" she said. "It was very kindly done of Miss Desmond. I should have been glad to see her. Was—was that she at the door, speaking so loud?"

"Yes," said Hildegarde. "She was speaking rather loud, perhaps; but her voice is so musical, I don't think one minds it in her, somehow. She is a glorious creature!" [98]

Mrs. Delansing seemed absent and disturbed. "She—it is not always possible to avoid overhearing portions of conversations, when carried on in a high key—I gathered that some invitation had been extended to you, Hildegarde—for this evening."

"Yes!" said Hildegarde, rather reluctantly. "She wanted me to go to the opera with her, but I didn't think I would better."

"Why not?" demanded her aunt, severely. "Miss Desmond is not accustomed to have her invitations refused,—and you are bound to take advantage of such opportunities as may present themselves to you, living in the extraordinary way that your mother thinks suitable for you."

"Oh, well!" said Hildegarde, "Helena understood perfectly, and I thought it best not to go."

She was arranging the flowers as she spoke, and did not see the curious change that seemed to come over Mrs. Delansing's face. It was as if the stony repose of her features were broken,—some shifting light seemed to pass over her, changing into shadow, but a shadow softened into something approaching tenderness. [99]

"Hildegarde, it is not on my account that you are making this sacrifice? I cannot permit—"

Hildegarde looked up; then laid down her roses, and crossed the room to lay her hand on her aunt's shoulder.

"Of course it is, Aunt Emily!" she said, impulsively. "I came here to see you, not to go to the opera. I have been out already more than I should to-day, but—but things happened, somehow. And this is the last evening we shall have together, and you know we are to play the grand final rubber; and—and I *wanted* to stay."

The old lady began to tremble in her chair; a mist came over her keen black eyes.

"My grandchildren would have gone!" she cried. "Blanche and Violette would have gone, and not have thought it necessary even to tell me. I have done everything for them, and nothing—Blanche has been here this afternoon!" she added, in a different voice, struggling for her usual composure. "She said—but it is of no consequence what she said." [100]

"No, it really isn't, Aunt Emily!" said Hildegarde, venturing to stroke the silken shoulder affectionately. "Suppose we don't mind about Blanche now; she is very young for her age, don't you think? I can finish that story before I go to dress for dinner."

But Mrs. Delansing had something else to say.

"Thomas Ferrers came to see me, also!" she said. "Did you ask him to do so?"

"Oh—no!" said Hildegarde. "I—I only told him that you did not go out very much, and—and he said at once that he should come to see you before he left town."

"He is grown an old man!" said Mrs. Delansing. "Wild Tom Ferrers! We had a great deal of talk; much of it about you. I am bound to say that he gave me a different impression of your life. You—you must all be very happy there together!"

The tone was piteous in its wistfulness, and Hildegarde responded heartily. "You must come and see for yourself some day, Aunt Emily! We *are* happy, as happy as the day is long!" [101]

The evening passed quickly and pleasantly. Mrs. Delansing unbent more than Hildegarde could have supposed possible, and even smiled as she told, over the backgammon board, some anecdotes of Colonel Ferrers's wild youth. One could not imagine her laughing under any circumstances, but her smile, when she was amused, was fine and delicate, and made a wonderful difference in her face.

When bedtime came, she held Hildegarde's hands in hers for several minutes, looking at her with a searching gaze.

"You have not found it too dull?" she said. "Hobson says she heard you singing in your room to-day! You do not find this a dreary cage, where no young life could be happy?"

Hildegarde had found it so the first day, but now all was changed, and she could answer heartily, "No, indeed, Aunt Emily! I have had a very pleasant visit, and I am—oh, *so* glad I came! I don't believe I should ever have known you if I had not been here in the house; and I am very, very glad to know you, Aunt Emily. May I come again?" She bent, and kissed the old lady's cheek, and was delighted to have her kiss warmly returned. [102]

"Come whenever you will, my child!" Mrs. Delansing said. "Come as often as you can; I shall be better for every time I see you."

So it was arranged that later in the winter Hildegarde was to come to Gramercy Park for a good visit, and hear the German opera; and when the aunt and niece finally said good-bye at the bedroom door, Hildegarde felt that she had made a new friend; while the lonely old woman went to bed with a warmer heart than she had felt in her bosom for years.

"Why, mum," said Hobson, "I declare to goodness, you look ten years younger since that young lady come here!"

"I *am* ten years younger, Hobson!" said Mrs. Delansing, gravely. "I will have the nightcap with the Valenciennes frill, if you please." [103]

Hildegarde sent her little trunk off by the expressman, and after bidding good-bye to Hobson, who begged her most earnestly to come again soon, started off for her final shopping-bout. She had some idea of lunching at Purcell's, and taking an afternoon train for home. There were still several things to be attended to, and she might—it was not very far from Blank & Blank's—she might be able to run round and see if Rose Flower were at home. It was doubtful, for she had been away most of the fall, but there was always a chance of her having returned. The dear Rose! How good it would be to see her, and Doctor Flower, and, perhaps, Bubble!

It was eleven o'clock before she reached Blank & Blank's, and the vast shop was filled with a surging crowd of women, young and old, smart and dowdy, rich and poor. Here and there a lone man was seen, standing bewildered, with a sample in his hand of something that he was to match; here and there, too, stood the floor-walkers, in calm and conscious dignity, the heroes of the shopping-world; but these were only occasional flecks on the frothing tide of womanhood. Hildegarde, after several vain attempts, succeeded in reaching the counter she sought. Before it stood a row of women, elbow to elbow, each bent on her own quest; behind it were the shop-women, endeavouring to satisfy all demands at one and the same moment. [104]

Endeavouring, most of them, that is; but even the shop-woman, tried as she is in the furnace, is not always pure gold. The young woman who stood near Hildegarde may have been too tired, or may have been ill; she certainly was rude. Hildegarde had taken her stand directly behind a plainly dressed, elderly woman, shrewdly judging that she would be likely to make some definite purchase and then depart, instead of fingering half the goods on the counter, as many of the customers were doing. The elderly woman was evidently in haste. She held up the black cashmere that she had been examining, and said, civilly, "Will you please tell me the price of this?" The question was repeated several times; the shop-woman, after one glance at the quiet, unstylish figure, turned her shoulder, and began to press some goods volubly on a departing shopper. [105]

"Please!" said the quiet woman again. "I am in haste, and want to buy some of this. Will you please tell me the price?"

"You'll have to wait your turn, lady!" was the reply; and voice and tone were equally ill-bred. "I can't wait on everybody at once."

"I have been waiting fifteen minutes," was the reply; "and my turn has come over and over again."

That was enough for Hildegarde. She reached over the woman's shoulder, and rapped sharply on the counter. "Will you tell the lady the price of this cashmere, or shall I call Mr. Jones?"

The shop-woman looked up hastily, caught sight of two blazing eyes, and a face like white lightning, and quailed.

"I—I'm sure I was doing my best!" she muttered. "It's sixty cents a yard."

"If this is your best, you have no place here!" said the flashing person before her. "How many yards would you like, madam? You shall—oh! oh, my dear! Oh, Nurse Lucy, it is not really you?" [106]

"Oh, my blessed lamb!" cried Nurse Lucy, "Am I awake or dreaming, I says to myself the minute I heard your darling voice!"

And the stately maiden in blue serge, and the gray-haired woman in black alpaca, fell on each other's neck, and fairly cried for joy, while the roar of the shopping actually ceased—for one moment. Then it rose again,—what did it matter to anybody, when a bargain sale was on, who met or who parted? And the two friends, holding each other fast by the hand, got into a quiet corner apart, in a haven dedicated to Marseilles quilts, which nobody was buying, and sat down on two stools, and gazed their fill.

"I wonder what is the meaning of it all!" cried Hildegarde. "One after another, I keep meeting all the people I care most about; first one friend, and then another,—and now you, you dear, blessed Nurse Lucy. Oh! what *are* you doing here? and where is Mr. Hartley? and—and—have you seen Rose and Bubble? I was wondering whether I could find them. And—oh, do tell me all about everything, *please!*" [107]

She paused, breathless, and Nurse Lucy took up the tale, drying her joyful tears the while.

"My pretty! to think of it being you! and me thinking of you miles away, and wishing I could

run down and see you and your blessed mother, as you've asked me a many times so kind. And Jacob,—why, he's right outside, dear, waiting for me. He can't abear a crowd of people, you know, and New York almost smothers him anyway, poor soul. We came up for the day, dear, to see Pinkrosia, and Bubble, and the Doctor. We had a note from Doctor Flower—ah! what a good man he is!—and he wouldn't take no for an answer, but we must come up and see them in their own home; and so here we are,—came up on the early train this morning, as Jacob had business in the city. And now!—and my dear looking so well and so beautiful, and the living spirit of her mother—"

"Oh, hush, Nurse Lucy! you must not flatter me!" cried Hildegarde. "See! there is your parcel all done up! I will take it for you; and I don't think that young woman will neglect a customer again for one while." [108]

Arm in arm, they passed through the crowd. As they reached the street, Mrs. Hartley pressed Hildegarde's arm. "Hush, dear! stop a minute! there's Jacob; waiting so patient, poor soul! To think how surprised he will be! What shall we say to him?"

"I know!" said Hildegarde. "Let me tell him, Nurse Lucy!"

A tall, stalwart man was standing with his back to them; his legs were rather wide apart, his shoulders squared, and he seemed to have planted himself against the throng of people that hurried and jostled by him. Discontent was visible in every line of his figure, and Hildegarde knew just how his mouth was puckered, though she could not see it.

Hildegarde stepped up softly behind him, and spoke in his ear.

"And what do you expect to get for winter wheat, Mr. Hartley?"

The farmer turned round as if he had been shot. "What in—now take me away! take me away home, before I lose any senses this place has left me. This ain't Huldy Grahame, no way of the world!" [109]

Convinced that it was that young person herself, he seized her two hands, and drew her forcibly along, as he made his way through the crowd. "Lucy found ye?" he said. "I bet Lucy found ye. Nothin' like women! I've been thinkin' about ye all this blessed day, and looked at every gal that went by, and they was about ten thousand of 'em, and not one I'd look at twice. Come along, Lucy! I've done all the shoppin' I want! Let's get home to Doctor Flower's, and have a sight at this gal, before I wake up and find she's a dream!"

As the good man spoke, he hurried Hildegarde along at a surprising rate, Nurse Lucy following as best she might. Hildegarde was fairly bewildered by all these sudden meetings. She began to feel as if every street corner must reveal some new vision; she looked for Bubble,—for the Merryweathers; it seemed to her, too, almost dreamlike in its strangeness. Yet after all, there is nothing wonderful in meeting all sorts and conditions of men in the course of two days in New York. [110]

A short walk brought them to a quiet, pleasant street, where the usual brown stone houses had rather a special look of care and neatness. There were many flowers in the windows; the curtains were more often muslin than lace, but they were fresh and white, and one felt that it was a pleasant neighbourhood, a neighbourhood of homes.

"You have been here before, dear?" asked Mrs. Hartley.

"No," replied Hildegarde. "I have been meaning all the fall to come, ever since they came back from Europe and took this house, but one thing and another has prevented. As I told you, I meant to try to see them to-day, in any case. But Rose does not know I am in town; it will be another surprise. Dear Rose!"

"Well, I do suppose Pinkrosia'll be glad to see you!" said Jacob Hartley. "But if she sets up to be as glad as Marm Lucy and I be, she'll have to hear something, that's all. Huldy Grahame's my gal this time, and no mistake!" [111]

Hildegarde wondered what the Colonel would say to this; wondered also if there were any one else—but the thought dismissed itself unfinished.

Here they were now, in a pretty, homelike parlour, hung with rose-colour,—ah! Doctor Fowler always had the prettiest ideas!—waiting for their hostess. A light step on the stairs! As it came down, quickly and steadily, Hildegarde saw many pictures, all in a moment. First, a girl in a wheeled chair, pale and sweet-faced, saying quietly that she could not walk,—that she had not walked since she was three years old,—pointing out the beauty and convenience of her precious chair, in which she was a prisoner. Then, herself, Hildegarde Grahame, walking up and down the anteroom of the hospital, waiting in an agony of suspense for news; then her mother's face, and Doctor Flower behind her, both smiling, and the blessed words, "It is all right!"

The tears sprang to her eyes. Then came the vision of their two selves, herself and her friend, in their happy, happy holiday summer at Cousin Wealthy Bond's; the gradual recovery, the roses coming in the pale cheeks, the step, growing ever firmer, more elastic. Then—but there was time for no more. Here she was at the door, Rose Flower, no longer a cripple, no longer even an invalid, but the happy wife of one of the best men in the world. [112]

Rose's cry of surprise was very different from the clarion shout with which Helena Desmond

had greeted her friend. It was soft and low,—a note like that of a bird coming home to its nest. "Hilda! my Hilda! oh, happy, happy day!"

The two girls (for Rose was a girl still, if she was a married woman!) held each other close for a little, without a word; the words did not come, nor was there need of them; each knew the other's heart was full of love that had had steady life and growth for five years. "My dear!" they said; and then again, "My dear!" and that was all.

But a few minutes later, when all four were seated in a circle, the girls hand in hand, the old people looking from one to the other with eyes of delight, the words came fast enough. [113]

Rose had to tell of her summer abroad, of all the new worlds that had opened before the country-bred girl,—worlds of which she had dreamed all her life, which she had never thought to see with her bodily eyes. Then Hildegard must tell of her summer, all the wonders of the camp, the new friends, grown so dear in so short a time; of Hugh and the Colonel, and all the delights of Braeside and Roseholme; and then both girls must hear all about affairs at Hartley's Glen, from the greatest to the least.

"Oh, Nurse Lucy, is the old yellow hen still alive—Mrs. Whittaker, I mean? Surely you know the hen we always called Mrs. Whittaker. She used to tell us her name whenever she laid an egg. And the cats! How are the dear cats? Do you think Camaralzaman remembers me, Nurse Lucy? And do you try to say his whole name once in a while, so that he will not forget it? And how are all the people in the village? How is Miss Bean? Does she still trim hats?— Oh, Rose, do you remember the funny hats? There was a green satin one, the first time I went there—my dear! she wanted me to buy it! But she was so good, and kind, and nice! Everybody in the village is nice!" [114]

"Hilda, do you remember when Bubble sprained his ankle, and the letter he wrote you? Oh, such a funny letter, wasn't it?"

"Remember it? I have it in one of my most precious portfolios! But, oh, Nurse Lucy, you haven't told us a word about the cows. Dear cows! How are they all?"

And so on, and so on, happy, foolish talk, with laughter breaking through it at every moment, as one recollection brought up another. And in the midst of it all, who is this tall youth who comes silently into the hall, and stands silent in the doorway, gazing at all the merry talkers? No one sees him; he stands and looks from one to the other, with shining eyes. A slight, trim figure, well-dressed, alert, quickness and energy in every line of it; a face not handsome, certainly, but so full of life and intelligence and good-will that whoever looks at it once is sure to look again. There he stands, silent, absorbed; and so standing, he, too, sees visions. A garden, and a boy at work in it; a freckled, towsled boy, fighting weeds with a hoe, but keeping one eye on a tattered spelling-book that lies beside him. Ten weeds to a word, that was the rule; big weeds, of course,—he did not count chickweed. What was the word,—ah! yes! *anticipate!* That was it! And then he looked up, and saw the face looking through the hedge,—the beautiful face, with the proud, pretty mouth, and the bright eyes. It had hardly changed, save that the mouth was now gentle, instead of proud. And then she came forward, and talked to him,—to him, in his old shirt and trousers, and asked about his lessons, and offered to teach him. Ah, yes! that was the beginning of it all, the new life, the new world, the new joy! [115]

There was a suspicion of moisture in the youth's bright blue eyes, but they twinkled nevertheless; and when he spoke, it was in the old, homely speech that he loved, and in the very words that he had spoken that day, all these happy years ago. [116]

"I swan!" said Zerubbabel Chirk. "I reelly do! I swan to man!"

CHAPTER VII.

 [117]

MERRY WEATHER SIGNS.

BUT the best of all, perhaps, was telling about it afterward. Sitting by the fire that evening, in the pleasant sitting-room, Hildegard told her mother all about the Great Frisk, as she called it; and it would have been hard to say whether narrator or listener were the more interested.

"But, child," said Mrs. Grahame, "how was it possible for you to do so much, and see so many people in three days, or, rather, two days and a half? I cannot comprehend it!"

"Nor can I!" laughed Hildegard. "But—it just happened, you know! Why, dear, it seemed to *rain* friends! Wherever I turned I ran into some one I loved. Oh, I feel so rich,—rich in every way! The money in my pocket is the least part of it all, and yet I am glad enough of that, too. Only *think* of my getting such a price! And eight or ten dozen to send every week! It is like a fairy story, isn't it, darling? And then to meet Helena,—dear Helena! Oh, she was so delightful! And just to see her was enough to fill one with beauty for the whole day. She wears her hair brushed back now,—you remember how it waves,—wonderful hair! And she was in dark blue velvet, trimmed with chinchilla, and—and altogether, my love, if the Queen of Sheba had seen her, her spirit would have died within her twice over. And just the same dear, whole-souled creature as ever! She never can change. She promises to come out here before she goes to Washington." [118]

"That will be delightful!" said Mrs. Grahame. "I shall be very glad to see Helena again; I have always hoped that when she came back you would see something of her again. She was the one of your schoolmates that my heart always warmed to. How came Mrs. Desmond to be willing to leave Paris? When she went away, she said it was for life."

[119]

"Oh, Helena would come!" said Hildegarde. "She told me about it; they must have had a scene. She said to her mother, 'Mamma, I am an American! I have never committed any crime, and I refuse to be exiled from my native country any longer. If you will come with me, it will be much the pleasantest thing; if not, I go alone.' Well, it was not the thing to say, of course, but—"

"I am not sure about that!" said Mrs. Grahame, flushing slightly. "I am inclined to think Helena was perfectly justified. When a woman has not sense enough to guide her daughter, she must submit to be guided. The idea of keeping that girl over there five years, frittering about the continent; preposterous! My sympathy is entirely with Helena."

Mrs. Grahame sat very erect, and her eyes were very bright; then, catching Hildegarde's eyes, full of laughter, she relaxed her muscles, and began to laugh too.

"I am sorry, dear," she said. "I never could like Mrs. Desmond."

"I should think not!" said Hildegarde, promptly. "I should be under the painful necessity of disowning you if you did. But you love Mrs. Honiton, Mamma!"

[120]

"Ah, Mrs. Honiton! how could two sisters be so different? It is Margaret Honiton who should be Helena's mother,—they are wonderfully alike."

"Yes. Helena feels that. She is lovely with her mother,—firm, but devoted,—but Aunt Margaret is the one of the world to her. It is a *terrible* thing for a girl to have an incompetent mother!"

"Yes, darling, it is indeed," said Mrs. Grahame, meekly. "I feel it so in your case. No, don't kill me, Hildegarde! my time is not yet come. Tell me more about Rose and her husband. She is very happy, you say?"

"Happy as the day is long. I told you I did not see Doctor Flower,—the only one I missed, really; he was in Philadelphia. But their house is as pretty as pretty; it is evident that he furnished it,—you know what taste he has; and everywhere roses, roses! carved and painted and embroidered,—it is really the Rose-bower, as he calls it. Her own little sitting-room, up-stairs—oh, such a little rosy-posy nest! rosewood desk,—and everything soft covered with rose-flowered chintz—curtains, too,—and the most de-lightful sofa I ever did see! And her little work-table, and—oh, well, Mamma, I think, after all, that made me happier than anything,—unless it was the sight of Nurse Lucy's face when she recognised me! But, remembering all that Rose suffered, and all the cramped, anxious days and years, and then seeing her, a rose in full bloom, in her own pretty house, with such signs of loving care all about her,—it was good, good!"

[121]

"Yes, indeed!" said Mrs. Grahame, heartily. "I am sure that was a real treat, darling. And Bubble—you say he is grown such a fine lad!"

"Bubble is enchanting! not handsome—well, but you need not laugh, Mamma, for he is *very* good looking, and certainly has an air of distinction. He holds his head so well; and he walks well, and, altogether—oh, I am proud of Bubble. And Rose says that Doctor Flower is sure the boy has a career before him; he never had so apt a pupil. And he speaks such beautiful English, Rose says."

[122]

"Rose says!" repeated Mrs. Grahame. "I thought you had a good little talk with the boy himself."

"Oh, so I had, but he *would* not talk anything but the broadest Yankee. He insisted that he was precisely the same freckled boy that he was when I first saw him; and he carried on in the most absurd way. He was almost like Gerald; dear Gerald! I didn't see any of the Merryweathers, Mamma; so there was something lacking, after all."

"It would be a weary world if there were not," said her mother. "But speaking of the Merryweathers—have you noticed, Hilda dear, whether the night is clear?"

"Whether the night is clear, Mamma? No, I did not look. What do you mean, darling? Shall I go to the door—"

"No; not to the door," said Mrs. Grahame. "Go to the window, child; the west window, that looks across the hedge. Tell me if the stars are out."

[123]

Wondering greatly at this sudden solicitude about the weather, Hildegarde crossed the room and drew the curtain.

"Clear as a bell," she said. "Stars all out, and wind,—oh, oh, Mamma! Why, there are lights in the windows of Pumpkin House! Mamma, they have come!"

She turned upon her mother with eyes alight with happy inquiry.

"They have come," Mrs. Grahame repeated. "Some of them, that is. Oh, things can happen here as well as in New York, mademoiselle! They came yesterday,—Mrs. Merryweather and Kitty and —"

"And you never told me!" cried Hildegarde. "And you have let me talk on and on for three,—four hours,—oh, Mrs. Grahame!"

"You never asked me," replied that lady, demurely. "You had a great deal to tell, and I wanted very much to hear it; perhaps, too, I did not want to have your mind distracted until I had had my turn. Mrs. Merryweather is looking very well."

"Oh, the dear!" cried Hildegarde. "Oh, Mammina, do you think I might go over? Do you think it is too late? It is only half-past eight. *Don't* you think I might run over now?" [124]

"Hark!" said Mrs. Grahame, raising her hand. "What is that?"

Hildegarde, in full tide of excitement, checked herself, and listened. Under the window some unseen hand swept the strings of a guitar, lightly, yet firmly; and next moment a voice broke out, singing the old air of "Gentle Zitella."

"Under thy window,
Maiden, I sing,
Though the night's chilly
For this kind of thing.
Weather is merry,
Hearts too are light;
Speak to thy Jerry,
Hilda the Bright!"

Hildegarde threw up the sash.

"Come in, Gerald!" she cried. "Oh, you dear boy, I *am* so glad to see you—hear you, rather! come in, quick!"

She shut the window hastily.

"Did you feel the air, Mamma? I thought if I opened it just for a second,—the room seemed pretty warm. Sure you are not cold, love?" [125]

Mrs. Grahame was quite positive; but Hildegarde must feel her hands to make assurance doubly sure; must tuck a shawl round her mother's shoulders, and throw an encouraging glance towards the fire, before she turned to the door, which now opened to admit Mr. Gerald Merryweather.

"You dear boy!" she repeated, going to meet him with outstretched hand. "To think that you have been here two days without my seeing you. Gerald, how you have grown!"

"Great weeds do grow apace," said the tall lad, looking down on her. "I forestall the remark, you observe. It is the one with which I am commonly greeted by my affectionate family. But it's awfully good to see you, Hilda. I say, how well you're looking!"

"You, too," said Hilda. "And they are all well? and all here, or coming? Oh, sit down and tell me all about everything, do!"

"I have already told her, Gerald," said Mrs. Grahame; "but I don't think she paid much attention; you may as well tell her over again." [126]

"Well, I was so excited, you see!" cried the girl. "I have been having the most wonderful time in town; and then to come out here and find you,—my cup is rather brimming over, that's all. Now tell, Jerry."

"We came," said Gerald, curling up his long legs on the hearth-rug; "we have seen—several things; we expect to conquer—shortly—the dust, and to get the house to rights. Our holidays—Ferguson's and mine—began on Saturday, so the Mater thought we'd better come right down and get things ready for the others. Then she reflected that she could not trust us; so she decided to come herself; then she further reflected that she could not possibly leave the kids alone with the Pater, so she brought them along. Behold us! Bell and Toots arrive next week, and the Codger at some time known to himself. He is in Arizona, or somewhere this side of it,—sent for to inspect a mine, and see whether it is a good place for planting cabbages." [127]

"Gerald!" said Hildegarde.

"Honoured miss!" replied the boy. "I may not be quite accurate in the details, but there is a mine, I do assure you."

"And what kind of winter have you all had? You have been in Boston all the time,—that is, your mother and father?"

"In Boston, yes. The winter has been such as might have been expected, far from the sun which etcetera. Barring the fact that we have all existed in a state of acute anguish at being separated from you, we have all been exceedingly well, thank you."

"And how do you and Phil like college? Is it as much fun as you thought it would be? Do you like your rooms? Are you doing all right in your Greek?"

"Hilda," put in Mrs. Grahame, "do let the boy draw breath, and allow yourself to do so. Two such panting young creatures I have seldom seen. And Gerald is not going away on the night

train."

"I suppose not!" said Hildegard. "But, oh, it does seem so long since I have heard anything about him and Phil. Bell, you see, writes the most enchanting letters, but they are mostly about college and music,—her college, I mean; and she tucks in a little postscript to say that all are well at home, and that is all the news I get."

[128]

"Which accounts for your pallid and emaciated appearance!" said Gerald.

"Thy cheek, my love, of late a living rose,
Which could the bulbul cheat with its rich hue,
Looks pale—"

"I don't remember any more. I learned that in the Finden book, when I was six years old."

"Why, Gerald, did you have the Finden books, too? How delightful! Dear, ridiculous books! We have them now. I still think the 'Diamond' lady the most beautiful creature that ever lived,—and simpered. But you are not telling me a word about college!"

"I have had so much opportunity, you observe!" said Gerald, appealing to Mrs. Grahame. "My natural diffidence has been allowed such free play by the silent and unconvivial attitude of your daughter—"

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Mrs. Grahame shook her head, and declared that there was a pair of them, and she would have nothing to say on either side.

Finally, however, boy and girl settled down into an amicable and more or less coherent exchange of information. It appeared that the boys were doing well in college, enjoying the new life to the full, and keeping well in their classes.

"Of course we started in with about three times as much sail as we could carry. I had five courses, and Ferguson seven. But some of them were half ones, and after the first term we began to see where we were a bit,—and to perceive that Roger and Pater were right. We couldn't see it at first, of course, being such as we are."

"And such as boys have been since the beginning of colleges!" said Mrs. Grahame.

"Dear madam, how well you know! Well, Greek has been pretty stiff, but still we peg away, and like it no end. Then we both have Chem. 2,—that's great sport! I blew myself up—"

"Gerald!"

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"Fact, I assure you! Pounding something in a mortar—nice little glass mortar, you know,—pounding away, having fine sport; suddenly I pounded a little too hard,—old Comprehensive told us we must not pound hard,—and away went the mortar, and away went I. My eyebrows are only just growing out; and you never noticed!" And the boy looked deeply injured.

"My dear boy! What a narrow escape! Oh, your mother must have had a fright!"

"Rather!" said Gerald. "Roger, you know, had that bad time ten years ago, and she thought I had done something of that sort, and would have to live on dark room and excruciating tortures for months. But I got my eyes shut all right, you see; so it only burned my hyacinthine locks a bit, and took off my eyebrows, and spoiled a good suit of clothes. But I learned something, and now I pound the way old Comp tells me to."

"What is the professor's name?" inquired Hildegard.

"Comprehensive? Oh, well, his real name is Worcester, you know. Of course no one could stand that, and he is so short that it would never do to call him 'Unabridged,' so I suggested 'Comprehensive,' which is the size you have in school, you know; and the fellows took to it, and now he is called that altogether, or 'Comp' for short."

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"I see! By the way, what are you and Phil called? Anything except your own names, I suppose!"

"Pretty much!" Gerald admitted. "Phil is called the 'Holy Poker'—don't know why, I'm sure!—and 'Thumbling,'—he has grown about nine feet, Phil has; really, he is a whole head taller than I am!"

"Dear me!" said Hildegard, innocently. "I had no idea your head was so big as *that*, Gerald! of course I knew it was *rather*—"

"Mrs. Grahame!" cried Gerald, in a tone of anguish. "Will you speak to her, please? She is trampling all over my delicate sensibilities, and talking slang besides!"

"Hildegard," said Mrs. Grahame, "I am surprised at you!"

"Yes, dear madam!" said Hildegard, meekly. "You didn't hear the things *he* said. Go on with the names, Gerald!"

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"They call him 'Bottle-washer,' too, and 'Cappadocia.' I think that is rather the favourite name for Ferguson."

"*Why* 'Cappadocia?'" asked Hildegard.

"Oh, well, there isn't really much reason,—but then, it doesn't take much. They call me 'Capsicum,' you see, and we are twins, and 'Cappadocia' begins,—surely I need explain no further even to a person of limited intelligence?"

"Go on, Master Impudence! Do they call you 'Cayenne,' too?"

"Yes, indeed! And 'Bricks,' and 'Mortar,' and 'Flag,'—short for 'Conflagration,'—and everything of that sort. I don't care; I don't mind any of these; but when they call me 'Hamlet,' I knock them down."

"Dear Jerry! Why do they call you 'Hamlet?'"

"Oh! just some idiot started it,—you can't tell how these things start. One comfort is,—I called him the 'Grave-digger,' and it will stick to him through college, for he looks it to the life. And the joke of it,—I don't know whether it's safe to tell you the joke of it, Hilda."

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"Try and see!"

"Well, the real joke of it is that his father is an undertaker, and I never knew it."

"But I haven't finished about the courses!" he added, hastily, seeing Hilda look serious. "I am taking French, and Ferguson German. We have delightful conversations every evening, I speaking my language, and he his. You shall have a specimen when you see us togeth—Hullo! What's that?"

Mrs. Grahame uttered a slight cry, and rose hastily to her feet.

"I—I don't know," she said. "I thought—I surely did see a face looking in at the window. Hark!"

They listened, and heard a rustling in the great linden-tree outside. Then something gleamed white at the window,—a face, beyond all doubt.

"Ferguson!" said Gerald. "If I don't give it to him for startling you, Mrs. Grahame; he shall be flayed, I assure you! Set your mind at rest on that point! Flayed an inch at a time!"

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"May I come in?" asked Phil's voice, as he swayed back and forth on the linden branch.

"Begging for a dole of crumbs,
Little Robin Redbreast comes!"

"Quick!" said Hildegard, as she threw up the window once more. "When will you boys learn to move and act like reasonable mortals? How are you, Phil? I am delighted to see you!"

Phil wriggled his length swiftly into the room, and closed the sash with a single quick movement. Then, after shaking hands warmly with his two friends, he fixed a withering glance on his brother.

"How about that box?" he asked.

"Now may Julius Cæsar promote you to a captaincy in the Skidmore Guards!" replied Gerald, with great sweetness. "I clean forgot the box, sweet chuck! And I just threatening to flay you! Didst open it with thine own fairy paws, beloved?"

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"I didst, beloved! And I intend to do the same by thy head, at a convenient season. He promised to be back in ten minutes," Phil added, turning to Mrs. Grahame, "to open a box for the Mater. I was putting up bookcases the while. It's frightful, the way books multiply in our family. I've put them up all along all the up-stairs passages now, and it gives us a little breathing-space, but not enough."

"That is a good idea!" said Mrs. Grahame. "We must remember that, Hilda; though, indeed, there is still plenty of space in these rooms."

"I wish there were in ours," said Phil. "The disadvantage of the passage bookcase is, that the whole family stops and reads as it goes along, and we seldom get anywhere. Which reminds me! I'm afraid I must go back, Mrs. Grahame, and take this wretched object with me. It is nearly ten o'clock, and my Obadiah should have been tucked up in his little nest some time ago."

"Your Obadiah will inquire into the condition of *your* little nest before he sleeps!" said Gerald, threateningly.

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"But remember that the Mater said the next time we scrapped a bedstead to pieces, we must sleep in the pieces. Come along, Child of Doom!"

And with many hearty greetings, and promises to meet the next day, the friends separated, the boys saying good-night, and clattering off down the stairs like a regiment of horse.

CHAPTER VIII.

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CHRISTMASING.

THE next day seemed to be largely spent in running to and fro between the two houses. Kitty and Willy were at Braeside before breakfast, eager to embrace their dear Mrs. Grahame and Hilda, and full of wonderful tales of school and play. Then, as soon as Hildegarde had finished breakfast, she must go back with them to greet Mrs. Merryweather, and tell her how delighted she was at their coming, and hear a more detailed account of the girls' movements. Mrs. Merryweather was sitting at her desk, with a pile of papers before her, and books heaped as high as her head on every side.

"My dear," she said, after greeting Hildegarde most affectionately, "I am just looking for the girls' letter. It came this morning, and I put it somewhere,—in quite a safe place, as I knew the boys would want to see it, and then I meant to send it on to your father,—I mean to their father, of course. Here it—oh, no! that is an old one! Now, this is really unfortunate, for I was to send something to Gertrude, and I cannot remember what it was. Dear me! I am really too—would you mind saying over a few things, Hildegarde, that she would be likely to want? Perhaps it will come back to me; and I can keep on looking all the while, not to lose time."

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Much amused, Hildegarde began to suggest,—"Boots, hat, muff, handkerchiefs, gloves,"—but at each article named Mrs. Merryweather shook her head, and sighed as she sorted papers.

"No, dear, no! Thank you just as much; but it was none of those. This only shows, dear Hildegarde, the dreadful misfortune of being unmethodical. I have no manner of doubt that I have wasted at least ten good years of life in looking for things. My sister-in-law, now, could find a needle in a top bureau drawer at midnight, without a moment's hesitation. It is a gift! I trust you cultivate—now, you see, I may spend half the morning hunting for this letter, when I might—what amuses you, my dear?"

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For Hildegarde's eyes were dancing, and her whole face eloquent of fun.

"Dear Mrs. Merryweather,—I know you will excuse me,—but is not that the letter, pinned to your dress? It looks like Gertrude's handwriting."

Mrs. Merryweather looked down, and gave a sigh of relief.

"My child, your coming in was providential, nothing less. Of course, I remember now, I pinned it there for fear I should do—what I thought I had done. Well, well! and it is a Roman sash that the child wants,—I am sure I should never have thought of that. Ah, dear! I do miss my girls, Hildegarde. You see, they inherit from their father a sense of order,—in a measure,—and they help me a great deal. Are my glasses on my forehead, dear? Whereas Gerald and Phil are rather like me, I am afraid. I wonder if Gerald has found his waistcoat yet? He is wearing—ah, there he is now! Gerald, you are really an object for a circus, my son."

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Gerald looked down thoughtfully at himself. He was attired in white corduroy knickerbockers, an ancient swallow-tail coat so large that it hung in folds upon him, and a red velvet waistcoat reaching to his knee.

"I hesitated about coming in," he said. "Hildegarde is so susceptible, I fear the impression I shall make upon her tender heart. The lily is painted, the fine gold is gilded. Hilda, confess that I am the dream of your existence."

"What does it mean?" asked Hildegarde, laughing.

"Trunks not come yet; not mine, at least. Upset a bath-tub over my only suit this morning,—lo, the result! Wouldst not that I were ever habited thus, mirific Mammy? Consider the beauty of your offspring."

He seated himself on his mother's desk, drawing the folds of the dress-coat about him, and beamed upon her.

"If you would send him away, dear Mrs. Merryweather," said Hildegarde, "I should be so glad to help you a little with the papers and books. I have a whole hour to spare,—do let me help!"

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"CONSIDER THE BEAUTY OF YOUR OFFSPRING."

"My dear, I should be only too thankful," said Mrs. Merryweather. "Jerry, go away, and find something to do! You might unpack the blankets, like a dear."

But Gerald declared that a wet blanket was the only one with which he had any concern after this cruel treatment, and retired weeping bitterly, wiping his eyes with a long coat-tail.

Hildegarde devoted the morning to helping her friends, and when she went home at noon the rooms wore a very different aspect. The books were all off the chairs and on the tables, or in the bookcases.

"Not that it makes any permanent difference," said Mrs. Merryweather, plaintively. "They *will* put books on the chairs, Hildegarde. It is against the rules,—but it is their nature. I made a rhyme about it once:

"The book is on the chair,
And the hat is on the stair,
And the boots are anywhere,
Children mine!"

Hildegarde especially enjoyed helping to arrange the girls' room, tacking up the curtains, and putting fresh flowers (from the Roseholme greenhouse) in the vases. To-morrow she would see those dear girls, and then who so happy as she! [142]

And to-morrow came, and with it Bell and Gertrude, escorted by their father. All the Merryweathers were now here, except Roger. The question was on Hildegarde's lips several times, "When will he come?" but somehow she waited a little each time, and the moment passed, till she heard Mr. Merryweather say:

"A letter from Roger, Miranda! He will be here next week,—day uncertain, but surely in time for Christmas."

A chorus of joy arose, in which Hildegarde joined heartily.

"Think!" said Bell. "We have not seen Roger since the summer; hardly since we have seen you, Hildegarde. Oh, my dear, how long it seems since camp! and yet when you look at it the other way, it might be yesterday. Heigh, ho! whose turn is it to get supper to-night? and who is going to get the fish for the chowder?"

"Dear, happy days!" said Hildegarde. "I have not lost a minute of one of them, Bell. If I should wake up to-morrow morning and find myself at camp, I should not be in the least surprised, but should just 'put the kettle on and stand by to go about.'" [143]

"Dear old camp motto!" said Bell. "It makes a pretty good one anywhere, Hilda, do you know? If they give me the class oration,—the girls are talking about it,—I might take that for my text."

"Are you talking camp and graduation," put in Gertrude, who came into the room at this moment, "when Christmas is almost here? Oh, think of it, and we have not planned what we are going to do, or—or anything!"

"Speak for yourself, Gertrude," laughed Hildegarde. "I have three bureau drawers full of things ready, and I ought to be tying up a box this minute, to go out West."

"Missionary box?" asked Bell.

"No,—at least, not in the regular way. But there are some distant cousins out in Colorado,—they have a hard time to get along, and there are a great many of them,—and Mamma and I always send them a box at Christmas. A kind of grab-bag box, with clothes and whatever we can think of." [144]

"My dear," cried Bell, sitting up with shining eyes, "don't you want some contributions? Let me tell you,—this is the position! We also have such cousins,—fourteen in number,—in Minnesota. And there was an auction at school, and I got all kinds of odd picknickles and bucknickles, thinking they would do for the box,—and I returned to find that Mother had sent it off three days ago, filled to overflowing. You see, the boys are just behind ours in age and size, so there are always lots of jackets (never any trousers, of course), and she thought they would be needed for the cold weather,—and I forgot to tell her about my purchases. What do you say, Hilda? Oh, come up into my room, and see some of the things! They are rather nice, some of them, and others just funny. Come on!"

Away went the three girls, up to Bell's sunny room, where the trunks stood open, with trays of hats on the bed, and a general effect of "just-arrived-and-haven't-had-time-to-get-settled" pervading all. Bell cleared a chair for Hildegarde, and bidding Gertrude "perch where she could," began to pull things out of the big, brown trunk, talking as she went. [145]

"You see, girls, the way of it was this. There is always an auction at the end of the year, and generally things stay over for that; but this time there had been a fire in the town, and a good many poor families were left destitute. Mrs. Tower suggested that, perhaps, we might make up a little purse, or take charge of one family for the winter. We agreed to do the latter, and made up a committee to order coal and wood, and another to make clothes for the children,—seven children, poor little things! and the father so badly hurt in saving the youngest baby that he will not be able to work for several weeks. Well, I was on the committee to order the things; but when I came to collect the money, some of the girls, who wanted most to help, were very hard up, myself included. So near the end of the term, you see, and we had been buying Christmas things and all. So I said, 'Suppose we have an auction!' for there were some girls—not many, but I suppose there are a few everywhere—who didn't care a bit about the poor family, and yet we knew they had money, and we were bound to get some of it. I had the sale in my room. It was great fun. I hung out a red flag, and posted flaming notices in all the halls and corridors; and we had a great crowd. Me! oh, no, I was not auctioneer! I could not possibly talk fast enough. Caroline Hazen did it splendidly. Her mother was Irish, and she can drop into the most delicious brogue you ever heard, and she was so funny, we were in fits of laughter all the time. We made twenty dollars,—think of it!—all in a little over an hour. And some of these things I bought with what little money I had, and the rest were just left over, and as the girls would not take them back, I brought them along for the box. See! here is a pair of knitted shoes,—really perfectly new. Anna Waring said that she had a dear aunt who sent her a pair every Christmas and every [146]

birthday, and she has ten pair now, and never hopes to catch up. Three pair were sold beside these; got them for ten cents, and see how pretty they are!"

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"Why, charming!" cried Hildegarde. "Bell, why don't you wear these yourself?"

"I! Perish the thought! I never wear *any* shoes in my room, Hilda; bare feet are part of my creed."

"But—but you have no carpet here, dear," said Hildegarde, with a little shiver. "And it must be very cold—"

"Delightfully cold!" cried Bell. "I know few things pleasanter than the touch of a good cold floor to the bare feet on a winter morning."

"She is volcanic, Hilda!" put in Gertrude. "She sleeps under a sheet all winter, and never looks at a blanket; it is true!"

Bell nodded gaily in answer to Hildegarde's horrified look. "No use, dear! I am hardened in mind as well as in body, and cannot change my ways. Look here! Perhaps one of the boys might like this?"

She held up a string of chenille monkeys, and danced them up and down.

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"Of course he would," said Hildegarde. "And what—what *is* that, Bell Merryweather?"

Bell looked rather ruefully at the object she now drew from the trunk.

"Nobody else would buy it," she said. "The girl who brought it down is new and shy, and—well, somehow, you felt that she wanted to help, and had nothing else to bring. I was so sorry for her, —I gave my last quarter for it."

It was a long strip of coarse twine lace, with a yellow ribbon quilted in and out its entire length. One of those objects that sometimes appear at fancy fairs, for which no possible use can be imagined.

"It *is* queer," said Bell. "I suppose it must have been meant for something; I didn't like to ask her what."

"Oh, but, my dear, it is a lovely ribbon!" said Hildegarde. "Why not take the ribbon out, and make bows and things? I am sure you must want ribbon for some of your Christmasings."

Bell confessed that she might, and the ribbon was carefully laid aside, freed from its snarl of twine.

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"Here," said Bell, diving into the trunk again, "is a highly interesting article, *mesdames!* a pheasant, you see, carved,—Swiss, I suppose,—with all his feathers spread out. Now, I think I did pretty well to bring that home without breaking. Is there a boy in your box, Hilda? I meant this for a boy."

"There is, indeed, and I know he will be enchanted with such a pretty thing. Oh, and the marbles! Now, Bell, will you tell me what college girls do with marbles?"

"I will," said Bell, laughing. "She—Martha Sinclair—is very near-sighted, poor thing. She thought these were moth-balls. She brought a lot of them from home, and put them up with her furs this spring, and was horrified to find them—the furs—all moth-eaten this fall. Poor Martha! That, Hildegarde, is the sad tale of the marbles. They are very good ones! I should not dare to let Willy see them,—here, put them in your pocket! Here are assorted pen-handles,—went in one lot, —forty cents for the dozen of them. Some of them are rather nice, I think."

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"This is a beauty!" cried Gertrude. "This Scotch plaid one. May I have this, Bell?"

"Certainly, dear! Hilda shall have the pearl one,—there! This is the prettiest, Hilda—"

"But why am I to have all the prettiest?" inquired Hildegarde. "You are very reckless, Bell."

"No, my love, I am not," said Bell. "Pen-handles are, generally speaking, a drug in this family. For several Christmases Willy—dear child!—could not think of anything else to give us, so we had pen-handles all round—how many years, Gertrude?"

"Three, I think," said Gertrude. "Then some one laughed, and hurt his dear little feelings, and he never gave us any more. I miss the Christmas pen-handle myself, for I always get mine nibbled pretty short in the course of the fall term. It is the only way I can possibly write a composition."

"And is your next composition to be on the 'Scottish Chiefs?'" asked Hildegarde. "Or do you hope to cure yourself by the taste of varnish and red paint?"

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"Puppies!" cried Bell, emerging once more from the depths of the trunk. "Five china puppies in a row. And thereby hangs a tale."

"I don't see a sign of a tail," said Gertrude, inspecting the five little terriers, all sitting up very straight, with their paws exactly on a line.

"Spell it the other way, miss; and don't forget your Shakespeare," said her sister.

"This reminds me of the very most foolish charade I ever heard. We were playing one evening

in Martha Sinclair's room; and Janet Armour took this row of puppies from the mantelpiece and set it on the floor, and told us to look at it. Then she kicked it over with her foot, and told us it was a word of three syllables, all three and the whole word given at once. See if you can guess, Hildegarde? You give it up? Well, it is too silly to guess. 'Kick-a-row,' do you see? Cicero, Gertrude, my lamb. I explain on account of your tender years."

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"She must be a silly girl," said Gertrude. "We wouldn't put up with such a poor charade as that here, would we, Hilda?"

"There are different kinds of brains," said Bell, laughing. "Janet Armour leads the whole college in mathematics, and is head of the basket-ball team. So you see, dear, talents vary. Well, Hildegarde, I am afraid there is nothing else that would do; unless you would like this cologne-bottle doll? She is a superior doll."

"Very," said Hildegarde. "And you know Kitty would be enchanted with her. No, Bell, I shall take nothing else, and I am ever so much obliged for all these nice things. Now you must come over with me and help me fasten up the box. You, too, dear Gertrude."

The three raced across the lawn and through the hedge, and were soon in Hildegarde's room. Bell looked round her with a sigh, half admiration, half regret.

"Hilda, there is no room but this!" she said. "How do you make it so—so—well, your own portrait in a way? If I were to be shown into this room in the furthest corner of the Soudan I should say, 'And is Hildegarde in, or shall I wait for her?'"

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Hildegarde laughed, and looked about her, her eyes resting lovingly on this or the other treasure of picture or book.

"Dear room!" she said. "I am glad you like it, for I love it very much. And if it looks like me—"

"You must be pretty good-looking!" cried Gertrude. "Is that what you were going to say, Hilda?"

"No, you absurd child, it was not. But—well, girls, of course it is different when people have two or three places, in town and country, and move about as you do, to and from school and college, and all that. But this, you see, is my home, my only home and abiding-place; and so my own things grow to be very real to me, and very much a part of my life. I suppose that is it. I know—you will understand what I mean, Bell—whenever I go out of this room, it seems as if one part of me stayed here, and was ready to greet me when I came back. But that is enough about me," she added, lightly. "Here is the box! Now we shall see how nicely all Bell's prettinesses will fit into the corners!"

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"This is Mamma's present for Cousin Ursula. A nice, fat down puff, for her feet in winter; it is very cold there, and she is not strong, poor dear. And I trimmed this hat for Mary, the daughter. Rather pretty, do you think?"

"Rather pretty!" cried both girls. "Hilda, it is a perfect beauty! Oh, how did you learn to do these things? Will you trim all our hats for us, for the rest of our lives?"

"I should be delighted," said Hildegarde, laughing. "I learned all I know from my mother. She *is* clever, if you will. I cannot compare with her in skill. Yet I was once offered a position as assistant to a milliner. These things underneath are things we have worn, but they are all good."

"This has never been worn!" exclaimed Bell, lifting a pretty gray silk blouse, trimmed with knots of cherry-coloured ribbon. "This is just out of the box, Hildegarde. Oh, what a pretty, dainty thing!"

Hildegarde laughed. "I am proud of that!" she said. "I made that out of an old underskirt of Mamma's. Yes, I did!" as the girls exclaimed with one accord. "It was good silk to begin with, you see. I washed it, and pressed it, and made it up on the other side; and it really does look very nice, I think. The ribbon is some that Mamma had had put away ever since the last time they wore cherry colour,—twenty-five years, she says. Lovely ribbon! Well, and I knew that Mary, the daughter, is just my age, so I had to 'run for luck,' and make it to fit me. I do hope she will like it!"

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"Like it!" exclaimed Bell. "If she does not like it, she deserves to wear brown gingham all her life. It is as pretty a blouse as I ever saw."

"What is the matter with brown gingham?" asked Hildegarde. "One of my pet dresses, a year or two, was a brown gingham."

"Oh, but not like *our* brown gingham!" said Bell. "You see—well, it is treasonable, I know, Gerty, but Hildegarde is almost like ourselves. You see, our blessed Mammy (this was long ago, when Toots was a baby, and the boys still in kilts) got tired of all our clothes, and felt as if she could not bear to think about them for a while. So she got a whole piece of brown check gingham,—forty mortal yards,—and had it all made up into clothes for us. Oh, dear! Shall I ever forget those clothes? It was a small check, rather coarse, stout gingham, because she thought that would wear better than the Scotch. It did! I had four frocks of it, and the boys each had three kilt suits, and even the baby wore brown slips. You cannot remember it, Toots?"

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Gertrude shook her head.

"I remember the effect on the family mind," she said, laughing.

"Yes," said Bell. "I don't know whether you have ever noticed, Hildegarde, that none of us ever wear brown? Well, we never do! Pater will never see it. He did not realise for some time what had been done. But one day,—oh, you ought to hear the Mammy tell about this! I can't begin to make it as funny as she does. One day he came home, and the twinnies were playing in the front yard. He stood and looked at them for a while.

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"Are you making mud pies, boys?"

"No, Papa!"

"Then why have you on these clothes?"

"The boys didn't know much about their clothes; he looked at them a little more, and then he came into the house. There was I, in my brown gingham, playing with my doll.

"Great Cæsar!" says Papa. 'Here's another! Been making mud pies, Pussy?'

"No, Papa! I am playing with my dolly.'

"Do you get dirty, playing with your dolly?"

"Why, no, Papa!"

"Then why do you wear such things as this?"

"I was just going to tell him that 'this' was the dress I was wearing every day and all day, when dear Mammy came out of the sitting-room with the baby. And, Hilda, the baby wore a brown gingham slip, and Mammy had on a long, brown gingham apron.

"Napoleon Bonaparte!" said Papa. 'Here's two more of 'em.' Then he sat down on the stairs, and looked from one to the other. Then he went to the door and called the boys; and he took us all into the sitting-room, and stood us in a row, and sat and looked at us.

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"Miranda," he said, 'What have you been doing here?'

"Doing, my dear Miles?" said Mamma. 'What should I have been doing? Dressing baby after her afternoon nap, to be sure.'

"Dressing her!" says Pater. '*Dressing* her!' Then he broke off, Mammy says, and put his hand to his forehead, as if he were in a kind of dream.

"Miranda," he said, 'I have been greatly occupied for the last few weeks, and have not fully realised what was going on. I have been dimly aware that, when I came home, the whole world seemed to turn brown and dingy. At first I thought it was the weather; then I thought it was the condition of business; at last I began to think that my sight must be failing, and cataracts forming, or something of the kind, so that I could see nothing without a brownish tinge over it. Now, I—I realise what the matter is; and I ask what—*what* is this stuff in which my family is masquerading?'

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"Masquerading, Miles? I don't understand you. This is brown gingham, a most excellent material, inexpensive, durable, and neat. I bought forty yards of it, so that the children might all be dressed alike, and without all this fuss and expense of different materials. You know you said we must economise this summer, and I—"

"Yes," said Pater. 'Yes, I understand now. Miranda, you are a good woman, but you have your limitations.'

"He would not say another word, but went off into the garden to smoke. We forgot all about what he said, all but Mammy, and she thought he would get used to the brown gingham in time, and, anyhow, she had meant to do the best, dear darling.

"Hildegarde, the next morning, when we all came to dress, our clothes were gone."

"Gone!" repeated Hildegarde.

"Gone,—vanished; frock and kilt, slip and apron. Not an atom of brown gingham was to be found in the house. And the rest of the piece, which Mammy had meant to make into a gown for herself, was gone, too. Mammy looked everywhere, but in a few minutes she understood how it was. She didn't say a word, but just put on our old dresses, such as were left of them. They were pretty well outworn and outgrown, but we were glad to get into them. We hardly knew how we had hated the brown gingham ourselves, till we got out of it. Well, that day there came from one of the big shops a box of clothes; an enormous box, big as a packing-case. Oh! dresses and dresses, frocks and pinafores and kilts, everything you can imagine, and all in the brightest colours,—pink and blue, yellow and green,—a perfect flower-garden. White ones, too, three or four apiece; and the prettiest slips for Baby, and a lovely flowered silk for Mammy. You can imagine how I danced with joy; the boys were delighted, too, and as for old Nursey, she beamed all over like an Irish sun. When Papa came home that afternoon, we were all dressed up, the boys in little white sailor suits, I in a ruffled pink frock, and Mammy and Baby most lovely in white and flowers. He looked us all over again. 'Ha!' he said, 'once more I have a family, and not a shoal of mud-fish. Thank you, my dear.' And none of us has ever worn brown since that day, Hildegarde."

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"Poor, *dear* Mrs. Merryweather!" cried Hildegarde, laughing. "I think it was pretty cruel, all the same. And—did you ever find the brown gingham?"

"Oh, that *was* naughty!" cried Gertrude. "He buried it all in the back garden. That was truly naughty of Papa. Mammy found them there a week after, when she was setting out the asters. They were all neatly laid in a box, and buried quite deep down. But Mammy took them up, and sent them to the Orphans' Home. Dear Mammy!"

CHAPTER IX.

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AN EVENING HOUR.

"AND what shall we play this evening?" asked Mrs. Merryweather.

Hildegarde and her mother had been taking tea at Pumpkin House. Hugh was there, too, and now Colonel Ferrers had come in, so the cheerful party was nearly complete.

"If we only had Roger and Papa!" sighed Bell. "Nothing seems just right without the whole clan together."

"We shall have them soon," said her mother. "Meanwhile let us be merry, and honour their name. It is too soon after tea for charades, I suppose. Why not try the Alphabet Stories?"

"Alphabet Stories?" repeated Hildegarde. "Is that a new game? I don't seem to remember it."

"Brand-new!" cried Gerald. "Mater invented it one evening, to keep us quiet when Pater had a headache. Jolly good game, too. Tell Hildegarde one or two of yours, Mater, to show how it's played."

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"Let me see! Can I remember any? Oh, yes, here is one! Listen, Hilda, and you will catch the idea at once. This is called 'The Actions of Alcibiades:' Alcibiades, brilliant, careless, dashing, engaging fop, guarded Hellas in jeopardy, king-like led many nobles on. Pouncing quite rashly, stole (though unduly, violently wailing) Xerxes's young zebra.

"That is the story. You see, it must have twenty-six words, no more, no less; each word beginning with a successive letter of the alphabet."

"Oh! delightful! enchanting!" cried Hildegarde. "Mamma, this is the very game for you and me. We have been longing for a new one, ever since we played 'Encyclopædics' to death. Tell us another, please, Mrs. Merryweather!"

"Let me see! Oh, but they are not all mine! Bell made some of the best ones. I will give you another, though. This is 'A Spanish Serenade.' Andalusian bowers, castanets, dances, enraptured Figaro. Gallant hidalgo, infuriately jealous, kittenish lady, made nocturnal orisons. 'Peri! Queen! Star!' Then, under veiled windows, Ximena yielded. Zounds!"

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"That is extremely connotative!" said Mrs. Grahame. "This really is an excellent game. Colonel Ferrers, shall we enter the list?"

"Not I, my dear madam. Curly my brain up into bow-knots, I assure you. Clever people, word-plays,—that sort of thing always floors me completely. Delightful, you understand! I enjoy it immensely, if I may be allowed to play the listener. Let us hear some more, hey? 'Alcibiades'—hum, ha! How did that go? Quite a ring to it, hey?"

"I have one," said Bell; "but it is a good deal like Mammy's Spanish one. Still, perhaps it will pass. It is called 'An Elopement.' Arbitrary barber, charming daughter, engaging foreigner, graceful, handsome, insinuating. Jealously kept lady. Midnight nuptials; opposing parent. Questing, raged savage tonsor,—'Ungrateful! Vamosed with Xenophon Young? Zooks!'"

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"Oh, but that is a beauty!" cried Hildegarde. "Where do you get your X's and Z's? I cannot think of one."

"There aren't many," said Bell. "And I rather fear we have used them all up. Try, though, Hilda, if you can make one. I am sure you can."

"Give me a few minutes. I am at work,—but, oh, I must have pencil and paper. How do you keep them in order in your head?"

"*Habeo! Habeo!*" cried Gerald, who had had his head buried in a sofa-pillow for the past few minutes. "Through all the flash of words I have maintained the integrity of mine intellect." (This was lofty!) "Hear, now, 'A Tale of Troy.' Agamemnon brutally called Diomed 'Elephant!' Fight! Great Hector, insolently jocular, kicked Lacedæmonian Menelaus's nose. 'O Phœbus! Quit!' roared Stentor. Turning, Ulysses valiantly waded Xanthus. 'Yield, zealots!'"

A general acclamation greeted Gerald's story as the best yet. But Bell looked up with shining eyes.

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"Strike, but hear me!" she cried. "Shall Smith yield to Harvard? Perish the thought! Hear,

gentles all, the tale of 'The Light of Persia.' Antiochus, braggart chief, devastated Ecbatana; finding golden hoards, invested Jericho. Median nobles, overcome, plead quarter! Rescuing, springs through underbrush, victorious, wielding Xerxes's yataghan,—Zoroaster."

"Hurrah!" cried both boys. "Good for you, Smith College! That is a buster!"

"Boys!" said Mrs. Merryweather.

"Yes, Mater! We did not mean that. We meant 'that is an exploder!'"

"You are very impertinent boys!" said their mother. "Shall I send them away, Mrs. Grahame?"

"Oh, please don't!" said that lady, laughing. "I am sure we have not had all the stories yet. Phil, you have not given us one."

"Mine won't come right," said Phil, rather ruefully. "I shall have to cheat on my X. Have I leave?"

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"Well,—for once, perhaps," said his mother. "It must not be a precedent, however. Let us hear!"

And Phil gave what he called "A Mewl of Music." "A bandit—cheerful dog!—enjoyed fiddling. 'Go home!' insolently jawing ki-yied local musician. 'Nay! Oh, peace, queasy rustic! Take unappreciated violin. We execrate your zither!'"

"Yes!" said Mrs. Merryweather. "That is imperfect, but the first part is good. Next?"

"I think," said Hildegarde, rather timidly, "I *think* I have one ready. I hope it is correct,—shall I try it? It is 'The Sea.' Amid briny, cavernous depths, entrancing fishes gambol, hilarious, iridescent jewels. Kittenish, laughing mermaids nod; or perhaps, quietly resting, softly twine, under vanished wave-worn xebecs, yellow zoophytes."

"My dear Hildegarde, that is the best of all!" said Mrs. Merryweather, warmly. "That is a little poem, a little picture. We shall have nothing prettier than that to-night, and as we must not overdo a good thing, suppose we stop the stories for this time, and try something else. Where is our music, girls?"

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Bell glanced at Hildegarde, and then at Colonel Ferrers. She had heard something of the passages between Jack Ferrers and his uncle, and knew that classical music was not the thing to make the Colonel enjoy himself. But Hildegarde nodded brightly in return.

"Let us sing!" she said. "Let us all have a good sing, as we used at camp. Where is the old song-book?"

Bell, comprehending, fetched an ancient volume, rubbed and thumbed into a comfortable mellowness.

"Here it is!" she said. "Come, boys, now for a chorus! Sing it as we used to sing it, sixteen campers strong, etc."

The whole family clustered round the piano, Kitty and Will and Hugh close beside Bell, Hildegarde and Gertrude looking over their shoulders, while Phil and Gerald did what the latter called the giraffe act in the background. And then they sang! One song after another, each choosing in turn, the chorus rolling out nobly, in such splendid songs as "October," "A-hunting we will go," and "John Peel." Then Hildegarde must sing "Annie Laurie" for the Colonel, and she sang it in a way that brought tears to the eyes of the ladies, and made the Colonel himself cough a good deal, and go to the window to study the weather.

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"Ah, Colonel Ferrers," said Hildegarde, when the sweet notes had died away, and it was time for the silence to be broken, "where is the lad who should play that for us, better than any human voice could sing it? When shall we have our Jack home again?"

The Colonel hummed and hawed, and said it was absurd to suppose that any fiddle, however inoffensive,—and he acknowledged that his nephew's fiddle gave as little offence as any he had ever heard,—still it was absurd to think for an instant that it could be compared with the sound of the human voice.

"Give me a young woman's voice, my dear madam," he said, turning to Mrs. Grahame; "give me that organ, singing a song with melody and feeling in it,—none of your discordant Dutch cobwebs, none of your Italian squalling, or your French caterwauling, but a *song*,—a thing which is necessarily in the English language,—and I ask nothing more,—except that the singer be young and good-looking."

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"Are you so very reasonable, I wonder, as you think, my dear Colonel?" said Mrs. Grahame, laughing. "Surely we cannot expect that every person who sings shall be beautiful."

"Then she has no business to sing, madam," said the Colonel. "My opinion,—worth nothing, I am aware, from a musical point of view. Now, when I was in Washington last week,—stayed at a friend's house,—delightful people,—very good to the Boy here. Weren't they, Young Sir?"

"They were fountains in the valley!" said Hugh. "They were ducks,—but they quacked, instead of singing."

"Precisely! Exactly! The child has described it, my dear madam. There were two young ladies in the family,—charming girls,—when they kept their mouths shut. The moment they opened them to sing,—a pair of grinning idols. I do not exaggerate, Mrs. Merryweather,—grinning idols, madam!"

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"Really!" said Mrs. Merryweather. "How distressing!"

"Distressing? My dear lady, it was excruciating! They opened their mouths—"

"But, *dear* Colonel Ferrers!" cried Hildegarde. "They *had* to open their mouths, surely! You would not have had them sing with closed lips?"

"I am aware that they had to open their mouths, my child, to some extent. They were not, I conceive, forced to assume the aspect of the dentist's chair. They opened their mouths, I say,—red gulfs, in which every molar could be counted,—and they shut their eyes. They hunched their shoulders, and they wriggled their bodies. Briefly, such an exhibition that I wondered their mother did not shut them in the coal-cellar, or anywhere else where they might escape being seen. Frightful, I assure you! frightful!"

Hildegarde and Bell exchanged glances; the Colonel was on his high horse, and riding it hard.

"And what did they sing?" asked Bell.

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"They *squalled*, my dear young lady,—I refuse to call such performance singing,—some Italian macaroni kind of stuff. Macaroni and soap-suds,—that was what it made me think of. When I was a young lad, they made a song about the Italian opera,—new, it was then, and people didn't take to it at first,—how did that go, now? Hum, ha! I ought to be able to remember that."

"Was it 'Meess Nancy,' perhaps, Colonel?" asked Mrs. Merryweather. "I think I can recall that for you."

"My dear lady, the very thing! 'Meess Nancy said unto me'—if you would be so obliging, Mrs. Merryweather."

And Mrs. Merryweather sang, to the funniest little languishing tune:

"Meess Nancy said unto me one day,
'Vill you play on my leetle guitar?'
Meess Nancy said unto me one day,
'Vill you play on my leetle guitar?'
Vich goes "tinky-tink-ting!"
Vich goes "tanky-tank-tang!"
Vich goes "ting,"
Vich goes "tang,"
Vich goes "ta!"

"Exactly!" said the Colonel. "Precisely! tanky-tank-tang! that is the essence of half the drawing-room music one hears; and the other half is apt to be the kind of cacophonous folderol that my nephew Jack tortures the inoffensive air with. By the way, Hildegarde,—hum, ha! nothing of the sort!"

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"I beg your pardon, Colonel Ferrers!" said Hildegarde, somewhat perplexed, as was no wonder.

"Nothing of the slightest consequence," said the Colonel, looking slightly confused. "My absent way, you know. Oblige us with another song, will you, my dear? 'Mary of Argyle,' if you have no special preference for anything else. My mother was fond of 'Mary of Argyle'; used to sing it when I was a lad,—hum, ha! several years ago."

"In one moment, Colonel Ferrers. I just wanted to ask you, since you spoke of Jack,—have you any idea when we shall see the dear fellow? Is there any chance of his getting home in time for Christmas?"

But here the Colonel became quite testy. He vowed that his nephew Jack was the most irresponsible human being that ever lived, with the exception of his father. "My brother Raymond—Jack's father, you are aware, Mrs. Grahame—never knows, it is my belief, whether it is time to get up or to go to bed. As to eating his meals—it is a marvel that the man is alive to-day. Never sits down at a Christian table when he is alone. Housekeeper has to follow him round with plates of victuals, and put them under his nose wherever he happens to stand still. Never sits down, my brother Raymond. Like Shelley the poet in that respect—"

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"Did Shelley never sit down?" asked Bell, innocently. "I never heard—"

"I—hum, ha!—alluded to the other peculiarity," said the Colonel. "Shelley would stand—or sit—for hours, I have been told, with his dinner under his nose, entirely unconscious of it. I have never believed the story that he wrote a sonnet with a stalk of asparagus one day, taking it for a pen. Was surprised, you understand, at finding nothing on the paper. Ha!"

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"Colonel Ferrers," said Hildegarde, gravely, "it is my belief that you made up that story this very instant."

"Quite possible, my dear," said the Colonel, cheerfully. "Absence of mind, you know—"

"Or presence!" said the girl, significantly. "I wonder why we are not to hear about our Jack."

"Possibly, my love, because I do not intend to tell you," said the Colonel, with his most beaming smile. "Did you say you would be so very obliging as to sing 'Mary of Argyle' for me?"

And Hildegarde sang.

CHAPTER X.

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DIE EDLE MUSICA.

BELL MERRYWEATHER was sitting alone in the parlour at Braeside. She was waiting for Hildegarde to finish some piece of work up-stairs before going for a twilight walk. So waiting, she naturally drifted to the piano, and, opening it, began to play.

Bell might love her Greek and her botany, might delight, too, in rowing and riding, and in all the outdoor life that kept her strong, young body in such perfect condition; but, after all, these things filled the second and third place only in her life; her music was first, once and always. All through school and college she had kept it up steadily, seeking always the best instruction, loving always the best music; till now, at eighteen, she was at once mistress and faithful servant of her beloved art. Hildegarde played with taste and feeling, but she never cared to touch the piano when she might listen to Bell instead; there was all the difference in the world, and she knew it far better than modest Bell herself. So when Hildegarde now, up-stairs, heard the firm, light touch on the keys below, she nodded to herself, well pleased, and went on with her work. "Such a treat for Mammina!" she said. "And I do want to finish this, and the dear girl will not know whether she plays five minutes or an hour."



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Hildegarde was right. Bell played on and on, one lovely thing after another; and forgot her friend up-stairs, and her walk, and everything else in the world, save herself and *die edle Musica*.

Now, it happened about this time,—or it may have been half an hour after,—that some one else stood and listened to the music that filled the early December twilight with warmth and beauty and sweetness. A young man had come running lightly up the steps of the veranda, with a tread that spoke familiarity, and eagerness, too; had hastened towards the door, but paused there, at the sound of the piano. A young man, not more than twenty at the most, very tall, with a loose-jointed spring to his gait, that might have been awkwardness a year or two ago, but sat not ungracefully on him now. He had curly brown hair, and bright blue eyes, set rather far apart under a broad, white forehead; not a handsome face, but one so honest and so kindly that people liked to look at it, and felt more cheerful for doing so.

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The blue eyes wore a look of surprise just now; surprise which rapidly deepened into amazement.

"Oh, I say!" he murmured. "That can't be,—and yet it must, of course. How on earth has she learned to play like this?" He listened again. The notes of Schumann's "*Faschingsschwank*" sounded full and clear. The bright scene of the Vienna carnival rose as in a magic vision; the flower-hung balconies, the gardens and fountains, the bands of dancers, like long garlands, swinging hand in hand through the white streets. The young man saw it all, almost as clearly as his bodily eyes had seen it a year before. And the playing! so sure and clear and brilliant, so full of fire and tenderness—

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"But she cannot have learned all this in two years!" said Jack Ferrers. "It's incredible! She must have worked at nothing else; and she has never said a word— Ah! but, my dear girl, you must have the violin for that!"

The player had struck the opening chords of the great Mendelssohn Concerto for piano and violin.

The youth lifted something that he had laid down on the veranda seat,—an oblong black box; lifted it as tenderly as a mother lifts her sleeping child. Then he stepped quietly into the twilight hall.

So it came to pass that Bell, who was very near the gate of heaven already, heard suddenly, as

it seemed to her, the music of angels; a tone mingling with her own, pure, thrilling, ecstatic; lifting her on wings of lofty harmony, up, up,—far from earth and its uncertain voices, nearer and ever nearer to where love and light and music were blended in one calm blessedness. It never occurred to her to stop; hardly even to wonder what it meant, or who was doing her this service of heavenly comradeship. She played on and on, as she had never played before; only dreading the end, when the spirit would leave her, and she must sink to earth again, alone.

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When the end did come, there was silence in the room. It was nearly dark. Any form that she should see on turning round would needs be vague and shadowy, yet she dreaded to turn; and she found herself saying aloud, unconsciously:

"Oh! I thought I was in heaven!"

"I *knew* I was!" said Jack Ferrers. "Oh, Hilda, how have you done it? How was it possible for you to do it? My dear—"

He was stepping forward eagerly; but two voices cried out suddenly, one in terror, it seemed, the other,—was it joy or pain? The girl at the piano turned round; even in the dark, Jack knew instantly that it was not his cousin. He looked helplessly towards the door, and there stood another shadowy figure; what did it all mean? But now, after that pause of an instant, this second figure came forward with outstretched arms.

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"My dear, dearest old Jack! I have been listening; I could not speak at first. Oh, welcome, dear old fellow! Welcome home a hundred thousand times!"

Ah! now Jack knew where he was. This was the welcome he had thought of, dreamed of, all the way home across the ocean. This was the surprise that he had planned, and carried out so perfectly. This was Hilda herself, in flesh and blood; his best friend, better than any sister could be. These were her kind, tender eyes, this was her sweet, cordial voice, in which you felt the heart beating true and steady,—all was just as he had pictured it in many a lonely hour during the past two years. Only,—only, who was it he had gone to heaven with just now? A stranger!

Before his bewildered mind could grasp anything more, Hildegarde had put out her hand, and caught the silent shape that was flitting past her through the doorway.

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"No!" she cried. "You shall not go! It is absurd for you two to pretend to be strangers, after you have been playing together like that; absurd, and you both know it. Bell, of course you know this is my cousin Jack, whom I have so wanted you to meet. Jack, I have written you of my friend Isabel Merryweather. Oh, oh, my dears! It was so beautiful! So beautiful! And I am so happy,—I really think I am going to cry!"

"Oh, don't!" cried Bell and Jack together; and the sheer terror in their voices made Hildegarde laugh instead.

"And you thought it was I!" she cried, still a little hysterical. "Jack, how could you? I thought better of you!"

"I—I didn't see how it could be," said honest Jack. "I didn't see how you could possibly have done it in two years, or,—or in a lifetime, for that matter; but how could I suppose,—how could I know—"

"You couldn't, of course. Oh, and to think of all the delight you are going to give us, the two of you! Jack, your playing is—I can't tell you what it is. My dear, I am afraid to light the lamp. Shall I see a totally different Jack from the old one? You have learned such an infinity, haven't you?"

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"I should be a most hopeless muff if I hadn't learned something!" said her cousin. "But you needn't be afraid to light the lamp, Hilda. You will see the ostrich, or the giraffe, or the kangaroo, whichever you prefer. But first I must thank Miss Merryweather for playing so delightfully. You have played with the violin before, of course? I felt that instantly."

There was no reply; for Bell, feeling simply, desperately, that she must get away, must relieve the two cousins of her presence, since it could not by any possibility be welcome, had seen her moment, and slipped quietly out while Hildegarde was busy with the lamp.

The light sprang up, and both looked eagerly round.

"Why, she is gone!" cried Jack. "I say! And I never thanked her. What an idiot she must think me!"

"She thought nothing of the sort," said Hildegarde. "She is the most modest, unselfish creature in the world, and she thought we would rather be without her. I know her!"

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"Well, I suppose she was right," yet Hildegarde fancied a shade of regret in his hearty tone; "anyhow, she is a brick, isn't she?"

"How would you define a brick?" asked Hildegarde, demurely.

"A musician," said Jack, emphatically; "and a—a good fel—Oh, well, you know what I mean, Hilda! And isn't it pretty hard, now, when a fellow has been away two years, that he should come back and have the girl of his heart begin to tease him within five minutes? Oh, I say, Hilda, how well you're looking! You have grown prettier; I didn't suppose you could grow prettier. Would you mind shaking hands again?"

Hildegarde held out her hand gladly, and laughed and blushed when her cousin raised it to his lips in the graceful European fashion.

"You have learned something besides violin-playing, Jack," she said. "If any one had proposed your kissing hands two years ago, what would you have done?" [185]

"Taken to the woods," replied Jack, promptly. "But—well, they all do it there, of course; and I saw the *gnadige Frau*—Frau J.—expected it when I went to dine there, so—so I learned. But all the time, Hilda, I thought I was only learning so that I could kiss your mother's hand,—and yours!"

"Dear lad!" said Hilda. "Mamma will be pleased; she always wishes people would be 'more graceful in their greetings.' Can't you hear her say it? But why do we stand here, when she is waiting for us in her room? She has rheumatism to-day, so I would not let her come down, poor darling; and here I am keeping you all to myself, like the highwayman I am."

"Yes, I always thought you were cut out for a highwayman," said Jack. "Come along, then! I have a thousand things to tell you both."

Hand in hand, like happy children, the two ran up-stairs. Mrs. Grahame was waiting with open arms. Indeed, she had been the first to hear the notes of the violin; and her cry—"Hilda! Jack is come! our boy is come!"—had brought Hildegarde flying from the recesses of the linen-closet. Her eyes were full of happy tears; and when Jack bent to kiss her hand, she folded him warmly in her arms, and pressed more than one kiss on his broad forehead. [186]

"My boy!" she said. "My boy has come back to me! Hilda, it is your brother; do you understand? It is as if my little son, who went away so long ago, had been sent back to me."

"Yes, Mother," said Hildegarde, softly. "I know; we both know, Jack and I. Dear Mother, blessed one! let the tears come a little; it will do you good."

They were silent for a little. The two young people pressed close to the elder woman, who felt the years surge up around her like a flood; but there was no bitterness in the waters, only sweet and sacred depths of love and memory. The boy and girl, filled with a passionate longing to cheer and comfort her whom they loved so dearly, felt perhaps more pain than she did, for they were too young to have seen the smile on the face of sorrow. [187]

But now Mrs. Grahame was smiling again.

"Dears!" she said. "Dear children! They are such happy tears, you must not mind them. And now they are all gone, and that is enough about me, and too much. Jack, sit down on that stool; draw it close, so that I can see you in the firelight. So! And you are there, Hilda?"

"On the other stool!" said Hildegarde. "Here we are, love, close beside you."

"That is good! And now, Odysseus, let us hear! Mr. Ferrers has the floor."

"He certainly has a good deal of it!" said Jack, looking rather ruefully at his long legs, which did extend a prodigious distance along the hearth-rug.

"What do you think of my having grown two whole inches since I went away? I call it a shame! Uncle Tom measured me with his stick before I had been in the house five minutes; six feet four! It is disgraceful, you know!" [188]

"Dear Colonel Ferrers!" cried Hildegarde. "Isn't he coming soon, to tell us how happy he is? Why, Jack, do you know, he was so funny about you last night! I asked when you were coming, and he quite growled, the dear, and called you irresponsible, and wouldn't tell us a thing."

"Of course he wouldn't! Spoil my surprise, that I had planned so carefully? It is well he did not! But he told me about it, too,—about last night, I mean. He said you would persist in asking questions, and looking straight at him as you asked them, so that his only refuge was in gruffness. Yes, Hilda, he is coming over after tea,—I may stay to tea, mayn't I? He—I thought they wouldn't mind being alone for a bit,—Oh, wait! I haven't come to that yet. Where shall I begin? Come back to Leipsic with me, will you?"

Both ladies signified their willingness to take the voyage at once.

"I have spread the magic carpet!" cried Jack. "Be seated, if you please! Whisk! Presto! Behold us in Leipsic. *Mesdames*, let me have the honour of presenting you to Herr J,—the greatest living violinist. Herr Professor, these are the people I love best in the world, except two. Well, you see it is very simple, after all. The Maestro was going on a tour in Russia; was invited to play before the Czar, and all kinds of things. He will be gone all winter; so he said, why should I not come home and see my father and uncle, and talk over plans with them? He—the Maestro—wants me to work for the Royal Medal. It's only given out once in three years, and it's a pretty big thing, but he thinks I would better try for it. I—did I write you about the scholarship I got? No? Well, I think I did, but it must have been in my last letter, and Uncle Tom thinks my last letters did not get posted, or something. Well, yes; I got a pretty good scholarship, enough to pay my expenses both ways, and leave me a hundred dollars besides." [189]

"Oh, Jack! how splendid!" cried Hildegarde, in delight. "That is pretty glorious, I do think. Wasn't Colonel Ferrers enchanted? Oh! and when can you see your father? Is he still in Virginia? Of course you want to fly to him." [190]

"Not in the least!" replied Jack. "I am coming to that presently. I think that hundred dollars rather went to my head. The first thing I did when I got it was to cable to my father that I was coming on the *Urania*. Then I shut myself up in my room and played a bit, and then I turned somersaults till my head was like—like an apple dumpling; and then I went shopping."

"Shopping, Jack? I can hardly fancy you shopping."

"Well, I did! I got a pipe for my father,—oh, a beauty!—meerschaum, of course, carved with a head of Schumann, the most perfect likeness! Hilda, when the smoke comes out of it, you expect to hear it sing the 'Davidsbündler,' one after another. Of course anybody except Schumann would have been ridiculous, but it seems to suit him. Then for Uncle Tom—a pipe is horror to him, of course—I got a walking-stick, ebony, with no end of a Turk's head on it. He hates the Turks so, you know. I knew he would enjoy squeezing it, and rapping it up against things, and he does like it, I think. And then—" the boy began to fumble in his pockets, blushing with eagerness—"Mrs. Grahame, I—I saw this in a shop, and—it made me think of you. Will you put it somewhere, please, where you will see it now and then, and—and think of me?"

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The tiny parcel he held out was wrapped in folds of soft, foreign-looking paper. Mrs. Grahame, opening it, found an exquisite little copy of the Nuremburg Madonna, the sweetest and tenderest figure of motherhood and gracious womanliness.

"My dear boy!" she said, much moved. "What a beautiful, beautiful thing! Is it really mine? How can I thank you enough?"

"So glad you like it! Is it right, Hilda?"

"Quite right," said Hilda; and they nodded and smiled at each other, while the mother bent over her treasure, absorbed in its beauty.

"And you, Hilda!" said Jack, searching his pockets again. "Do you suppose I have anything for you? Do you really suppose I had time to stop and think about you?"

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The boy was in such a glow of happiness, the joy so rippled and shone from him, that Hildegard could not take her eyes from his face.

"Dear fellow!" she said. "As if I needed anything but just the sight of you, and the sound of your—fiddle! And yet,—oh, Jack! Jack! How could you? How could you *let* yourself do it?"

Jack had put something into her hands, and was now leaning back in perfect content, watching her face in turn, and delighted with every light that danced over it. The something was a bracelet; a little, shining garland of stars, each star a cluster of "aquamarine" stones, clear as crystal, with the faintest, most delicate shade of green, hardly seen in the full light. Not a jewel of great value, but as pretty a thing as ever a girl saw.

"Jack!" sighed Hilda again. "How could you? There never was anything so beautiful in the world; that is confessed."

"And the clasp is the moon, you see!" Jack explained, eagerly. "I thought it looked like the Moonlight Sonata, Hilda, and you used to like me to play it, you know; and so I thought—you do like it? Now I am quite happy! Fate has nothing better for me than this. Except one thing!" he added, turning with boyish shyness from Hilda's warm, almost reproachful thanks,—she was hardly reconciled to his spending his hard-earned money on trinkets for her, yet she was genuinely delighted with the exquisite gift, as any right-minded girl would have been.

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"There is one thing more!" said Jack. "And I think I am going to have that now. Hark! Is not that a step on the veranda? May he—may they come up here, dear Mrs. Grahame?"

Mrs. Grahame hesitated a moment, glancing at her dainty tea-gown, and then around at the perfection of the pleasant sitting-room.

"Certainly!" she said, heartily. "If you do not think Colonel Ferrers will mind,—such an old friend, and he knows I am not well to-day."

Jack and Hilda flew down-stairs as fast as they had flown up; indeed, Hilda was nearly overthrown by her cousin's impetuous rush.

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"I haven't told you yet!" he cried. "Hilda, you guess, don't you? You know what the best of all is to be? He is here! He—here he is!"

He threw open the door. Colonel Ferrers's stalwart form loomed against the pale evening sky, and behind it was a tall, slender figure, stooping somewhat, with a shrinking air like a shy boy.

"Hilda, it is my father!" cried Jack, now at the top of his heaven, and "Hilda, my dear, my brother Raymond!" cried the Colonel, not a whit less pleased. Hilda found her hand taken between two slender, white hands, that trembled a little, as they drew her towards the light.

"My boy's best friend!" said Mr. Ferrers; and Hilda thought that the gentle blue eyes were even kinder than those fierce gray ones of the Colonel's, now twinkling with tears, which he brushed away with furious impatience.

"My boy's kind sister and helper! God bless you, my dear! I owe you a great debt, which only love can repay. And now take me to your mother. I have not seen her for many a long year."

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Hildegarde hardly knew how they all got up-stairs, she was so flurried, so joyfully shaken and melted and confused. But it was only a moment before the tall man was bending over her mother's chair, taking her hands in turn, and gazing at her wistfully, tenderly.

"Mildred Bond!" said Raymond Ferrers. "Am I fifty years old, or fifteen, Mildred? Where are the years gone, my child? You are utterly unchanged."

But this was more than the Colonel could bear.

"Raymond, you are as great an ass as ever!" he cried, bringing down his hand with formidable violence on the slender, stooping shoulder. "Jack, what did I tell you? I said he was a mixture of angel and idiot. Look at him! Hear him! and contradict me if you dare." And then, as his brother turned and laid an arm round his shoulder, the Colonel fairly broke down, and was heard to mutter behind his handkerchief that the world consisted principally of a parcel of fools, and that he was the biggest of them.

CHAPTER XI.

[196]

THE BOYS.

"MAMMINA!"

"Yes, Hilda!"

"Are you quite sure you will not mind my asking?"

"I am not at all sure! Suppose you try it, and find out."

"Well,—I don't believe you will really mind. But—was not Mr. Raymond Ferrers—very fond of you, dear?"

Mrs. Grahame coloured like a girl.

"Yes, dear, he was. He was—I am afraid—very fond of me, Hilda. It was years and years ago, of course; he was only a lad. But,—well, it happened that we had never met since, you see; I think we were both a little overcome, for I, too, was very fond of him, Hilda, though not in the way he wished. Poor Raymond!"

"You—you couldn't care for him, dear?"

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"My child! I had seen your father; how could I think of any one else? But Raymond did not know that; and—and it was hard for him. I trust I did not appear foolish, Hilda?"

She spoke anxiously, and Hilda laughed outright.

"Darling, you appeared like an angel, and were perfectly calm. I never should have guessed it from you; but—he, it was all over him, at the first glance."

"Poor Raymond!" said Mrs. Grahame again, meditatively. "And yet he was very happy in his marriage, I have always heard. His wife was a lovely person, and sincerely attached to him. But—I suppose the seeing me brought back his boyhood, and some of the old feeling,—we are singular creatures, Hilda. Perhaps you think I might have told you of this before, Hilda. You see, I never thought of it as anything belonging to me, dear."

"Of course," said Hilda. "I know! And I should not have asked if—if he had not made it so *very* obvious. But, oh, how charming,—how lovely he is! And how beautiful to see him with Jack, and the dear Colonel with both of them! My mother, do you know that we have the very most delightful friends in the habitable universe?"

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"It really does seem so," said her mother. "And what a Christmas we shall have, with so many of them around us! Let me see! Mr. Merryweather came to-day. Now the whole Smiling Signal Service, as absurd Gerald calls it, is here,—except the good Roger."

Except, indeed! Hildegarde's heart gave a great bound, and she felt the colour rushing to cheek and forehead.

"We shall be very glad to see Roger?" said Mrs. Grahame. "Very glad, daughter dear?"

"Very glad indeed, dearest mother!" said Hilda. She met her mother's loving glance bravely, with her own bright smile; here, the blushing did not matter, for the two hearts, mother's and daughter's, beat in such true time together that words were hardly needed to carry the swift thought from mind to mind.

There was a moment's pause; then Mrs. Grahame went on.

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"And are they not planning all kinds of merrymaking for Christmas week? Dear me! Why, it is this very coming week, Hilda! Where has the month gone?"

"Oh, it is to be a great time!" said Hildegarde. "The flower party, and lots of people coming

down from town for it; and a toboggan-party,—if the snow will only come! and the tree at Roseholme, and I don't know what else. Do you know, I almost thought the Colonel and Mr. Merryweather would quarrel about the tree; both wanted it so much. And then they both gave up at the same minute, and each insisted that the other should have it, till I thought they would quarrel over that. But it all ended most happily. Hugh, of course! He came up quietly, and held out two straws; and they drew, and neither said another word. Oh, Mother, Hugh is so happy with Jack! I met them just now; his little face was shining like a star. Jack was chattering German to him, and he did not understand a word, but that made no difference at all. And dear old Jack! I believe he would have liked to kiss every stone in the garden wall—there! he is calling me now! I promised to go for a walk when my work was done. Are you sure you don't want anything, darling? absolutely sure? Then good-bye for an hour!"

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Hildegarde ran down, and found Jack pacing the veranda with yard-long strides.

"Do you remember," he said, abruptly, "the first time I came here, Hilda?"

"Of course I do!" said Hilda.

"How I fell over a chair, and then knocked down a hanging-basket? Hilda, I do believe I should have made away with myself that night, if there had been any weapons about. I was simply *full* of rage and misery; I hated everybody, myself included; and it did seem to me as if you might let me alone, and not insist upon making me talk. I *couldn't* talk, you know."

"No, dear, you certainly could not; but you had to learn. And you are not sorry now, Jack?"

"Sorry! well, rather not! Fancy, if I had stayed the hateful noodle that I was that night! Fact is, I was brimful of my own self; that was the trouble with me. Ah—who are all these people Uncle Tom has been telling me about, next door, in the yellow house? I didn't bargain for strangers, Hilda!" And my lord looked slightly injured.

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"No, dear!" said Hildegarde. "Of course we ought to have thought of that, and have prevented their coming here. We don't own the house, it is true, but we might have turned the hose on them, or put rat-poison about, or kept them off in some way."

"Oh, there you go!" cried Jack. "I say! I haven't been teased for two years. I forget what it's like. But seriously, are they really nice? Do you care for them? I—I really *am* jealous, Hilda; you needn't laugh. I thought I was going to have you all to myself, and now here are a lot of people,—with unreasonable names, it seems to me,—and Uncle Tom says they are your most intimate friends, and that he loves them all like brothers."

"That was one of them you met last night," said Hildegarde, demurely.

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"Oh, I say! I was going to ask you,—was it, though? of course; I didn't notice her name much, but I remember now. Well, Hilda, she is a musician, and of course I'm glad you have had such a friend as that. I liked her face, too,—"

"You couldn't see her face!"

"Oh, I saw enough. I saw her eyes just for a minute, and I know what she's like, anyhow; didn't I play the Mendelssohn Concerto with her? So that's all right, and I mean to get her to play with me a lot, if she will. I like to play with the piano, only you so seldom find any one—any pianist—who understands the violin; they are generally thinking about their own playing. But—well, what was I saying? It is so jolly to be talking one's own language again, and talking to you. I just want to go on and on, whether I say anything or not."

"So I infer!" said Hildegarde.

"Oh, I say!" cried Jack again. "But—well, to go back to these people,—there are a lot of them, aren't there? A lot of fellows, or something?"

"There are!" said Hildegarde, gravely "Here are two of them coming now, Jack. These are the twins, Phil and Gerald; they are particularly nice fellows, and I want you to meet them."

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"Look here, Hilda! I can't, you know. I'm going to cut across the field here. I didn't expect to see anybody this first morning. You won't mind if I—"

"I shall mind very much indeed!" said Hildegarde, with decision. "Jack, you must not be absurd! You are behaving like a child."

"Oh, good-morning, Phil! Good-morning, Gerald! I am so glad to see you! This is my cousin, John Ferrers, who came last night, and is staying at Roseholme. Jack, these are my neighbours, Philip and Gerald Merryweather."

The three bowed with mutual distrust.

"Glad to see you!" said Phil, in a tone which contradicted his words.

"Fine morning!" said Gerald. "You had a pretty rough passage, I ho—I'm afraid!"

"Thanks!" said Jack, with a detestable little drawl, which Hildegarde had never heard before. "I had an excellent passage."

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The three drew back and looked at each other, so exactly like strange dogs that the tails only

were wanting, it seemed to Hildegarde. She had difficulty in keeping her countenance. "What a comfort," she thought, "if I could only shake them all, and tell them to behave themselves!" But outwardly she was calm and smiling, looking from one scowling face to the other as if all were wreathed in smiles.

"And whither are you bound, boys?" she asked. "And what frolic is there on hand for to-day? If the snow would only come! I do want some tobogganing."

"There is good skating on Jimmy's Pond!" said Gerald. "We were just coming to see if you would go this afternoon, Hilda."

At the familiar name, Jack Ferrers glared so ferociously that Hildegarde almost expected to hear him bark, and to see him spring at the other lad's throat. Gerald perceived the impression, and hastened in pure malice to deepen it.

"I have been counting on a skate with you, Hilda; you remember the last we had together? I never shall forget it!"

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Now Hildegarde had never skated with Gerald in her life, and she had no idea of putting up with this kind of thing.

"I shall be delighted to come!" she said, with a little ring of steel in her voice that all three lads knew very well; "if you can find a pair of skates for my cousin. I know you have a whole closet full of them. You would like very much to come, Jack? Very well, then, that is settled! We will be ready at three o'clock. Good-morning, boys! Bell and Gertrude will come, too, of course!"

And with a quick, decided nod she walked on, Jack following after, after a defiant bow which was returned with interest.

The cousins walked on in silence for a few steps; then—

"I don't think you really misunderstood what I said, Hildegarde!" said Jack, coldly. "I did *not* say that I should like to go skating. I said I should be unable to go. Of course it is of no consequence."

"Of none in the world!" said Hildegarde, turning upon him with gleaming eyes. "The absurd behaviour of three ridiculous boys,—Jack! How could you? I was so mortified,—so ashamed of you all! All! But you are my own; I am responsible for your behaviour. I never—" but here she caught a glimpse of Jack's face, and suddenly burst into a fit of laughter.

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"Oh, it was so funny! Jack, none of you will ever know how funny it was. I am very angry, but I—cannot—help laughing."

"I am glad you are amused!" said Jack Ferrers, stiffly. "It was worth while to come home for that."

"Jack! I—I won't laugh any more—if I can help it! Oh, dear! If you had only seen—"

But Hildegarde saw that her cousin was really hurt. Instantly she controlled her laughter, and laid her hand quietly on his arm.

"Dear lad," she said, "you are not really angry, any more than I was. Dear Jack, think about it a little!"

They walked on in silence. Jack was still smarting under a sense of injury; yet the steady, friendly hand on his arm seemed to smooth down his ruffled feelings, whether he would or no.

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"You know how it is," he said, presently, speaking in a more natural voice. "I have been thinking so long about the home-coming! I thought it was going to be—just the same. I thought I should have you all to myself; and now—"

"Jack, dear," said Hildegarde, quietly, "are you thinking of falling in love with me, by any chance?"

Jack looked down at her with startled eyes.

"Why—no! I wasn't, Hilda; but I will, if you want me to. I—what makes you say that? I thought we were brother and sister."

"I thought so, too," said Hildegarde, smiling. "But if my brother is going to show his teeth and growl at all the other dogs—I mean boys—he meets, I don't think I shall find it comfortable. There was a dog in a manger once; perhaps you have heard of him."

Jack winced, but owned he had.

"And—and even if you were not my brother," Hildegarde went on, "the idea of being jealous of the twins is so funny that—well, when you know them, Jack, you will laugh as much as I did. They are not that *kind* of boy, at all. No boys were ever less so."

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"That red-haired fellow," said Jack, still distrustful; "what was he saying about skating with you before? I thought he *sounded* decidedly spoony, Hilda. I won't be disagreeable any more, but I say this seriously."

"Gerald! naughty, naughty Gerald! that was so like him! He is quick as a flash, Jack, and he

said that just to torment you. I have never skated with him in my life; I never knew them till this last summer. Oh, he is such a funny boy! Come on, and I will tell you some of his pranks as we go along!"

Gerald and Philip Merryweather walked home in moody silence. They came upon a loose stone, and kicked it along before them with savage and purposeful kicks. Neither mentioned the fact of the stone's representing any particular person, but when either made a specially successful kick, he looked at the other for sympathy, and found it in a grim nod and chuckle. Only once did they break silence.

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"Poor Codger!" said Gerald.

"H'm!" growled Philip, assenting.

"Know when he's coming?"

"No! Don't suppose it will make any difference, though."

"S'pose not!"

"H'm!"

"H'm!"

Reaching the house, they sat down on the steps and pitched gravel stones in gloomy rivalry. So sitting, it chanced that Bell came upon them; Bell, with a face more than commonly bright (though she was always one of the most cheerful of mortals), with her hands full of ground pine, fresh from a walk in the woods, humming a fragment of the Mendelssohn Concerto.

"What's the matter with my boys?" she demanded, promptly.

"Nothing!" responded the twins, with alacrity. And they lowered like toppling thunderclouds.

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"Then tell me all about it!" said Sister Bell, sitting down on the step, and taking a hand of each.

"What happened to my twinnies? Did some one throw away their tadpoles, or did the dog eat their molasses candy?"

This allusion to early misfortunes could generally bring a smile, but this time it failed, and Bell looked from one to the other in genuine concern.

"Phil! Jerry! What is it?" she asked again. "Oh, there has been no bad news, boys? Roger!—"

Gerald groaned.

"Roger!" he said. "That's just it, Bell! No, nothing of the kind you mean. He's well, poor dear old Codger. Better than he will be, when he hears what is going on."

"What *is* going on? Come, boys, I really must know."

"We met Hilda just now," said Gerald. "Her cousin's come; kind of fiddler-chap from Germany. I'm afraid it's all up with the Codger, Bell."

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"Indeed!" said Bell, quietly. "And what makes you think that, Jerry?"

"Oh, we met them just now! He—he's about nine feet tall, to begin with."

"That *is* a beginning! Where does he expect to end? But I have seen Mr. Ferrers, Jerry. I saw him last night."

"You did? Why didn't you tell a fellow?"

"Oh, I—I—hardly know!" said downright Bell, unused to even the whitest fib. She really could not, perhaps, have put into words the feeling that had kept her silent about the scene of the night before.

"But that is no matter!" she went on. "What else is the matter with him, besides height? He can't help that, you know."

"I don't suppose he can. But he can help making up to Hilda, Bell, and he'd better!" savagely. "Only it's too late now, I suppose!" despondently. "Why on earth the fellow couldn't stay and fiddle over there, where he's wanted,—don't admire their taste, by the way!—instead of coming over here to spoil everything, is more than *I* know!"

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"Horrid shame!" murmured Phil, taking careful aim with a pebble at an innocent cat that was crossing the lawn.

Bell struck his hand up.

"I won't have the cats teased, Phil! And as for all this nonsense—"

"It isn't nonsense!" cried both boys, earnestly.

"I tell you we met them just now," Gerald went on, "and when he saw us, he looked black as thunder, and had hardly manners to speak to us. Perfectly odious; wasn't he, Ferguson?"

"Absolutely!" echoed Phil.

"And you were very cordial to him, of course?" said Bell. "You let him see that you were glad to meet him, and that as Hilda's warm friends you were anxious to welcome her cousin cordially, and to show him all the courtesy you could?"

The twins looked at each other. Bell had an extraordinary way of putting things sometimes.

"We didn't do anything of the sort!" said Phil, with an attempt at bluster.

"Because if you did not," his sister went on, "I am afraid you must have seemed very rude, my children. Rude and silly!" [213]

"I wouldn't call names, Tintinnabula!" said Gerald, turning red.

"Sorry to be obliged to," retorted his sister, in perfect good humour. "But if you looked at Mr. Ferrers as you are looking now, there really can be no doubt about the matter. Now listen, boys! I know—Hilda has told me—a great deal about this Mr. Jack Ferrers. Hilda loves him dearly, as dearly as if he were her own brother, and in exactly the same way. You need not shake your heads and try to look wise, my dears, because you are *not* wise! You are two very foolish boys, who are trying to run your heads against a stone wall when there is no wall there. That is the state of the case about Mr. Ferrers. I know Hildegarde pretty well, and I am sure of what I am saying. You need have no fear of him. As for Roger,—well, I don't think you need have any fear for Roger either."

"Has he—has she—do you think they are—" [214]

"Hush!" cried Bell, putting a hand over the mouth of each. "I don't think anything! At least—well, that isn't true, of course; but it does no good to talk about these things, dear boys. I do not think Hilda and Roger are—are engaged." Bell dropped her voice to a whisper. "But I feel quite sure they will be some day, when the time comes. I think they understand each other very well. Roger will be here soon; suppose you leave it all to him, Phil and Jerry, and don't worry about it. But there is one thing you can do, and it should be done soon."

"What?" cried both boys, eagerly.

"Put on your good clothes, and your good manners, and go to call at Roseholme."

"We'll be shot if we will!" cried the twins.

"Be just as nice as you know how to be to Mr. Jack Ferrers. He—he is a remarkable person, I have reason to think. You see," she spoke rather hastily, "Hilda has told me so much about him. And I—well, I heard him play last night, and he is a very wonderful performer, boys. You never, in your little lives, heard anything like his playing. He is too much in love with his art to think of any such nonsense as has been troubling your silly heads; you will understand that, the moment you hear him." [215]

Gerald made a feeble protest to the effect that he hated fiddling, but there was little hope in his tone. And he was promptly reminded of his having spent his last fifty cents the winter before on a ticket for Sarasate's concert, and saying that it was the best investment he ever made.

The boys knew that their cause was lost; and when Bell added, as a clincher, "Ask Mammy, and see what she says," they retired from the unequal contest.

"Oh, we know what Mammy will say! Don't hit us when we are down, Bell. We'll go, and make asses of ourselves as well as we know how."

"Oh, not that, dears, I entreat!" cried Bell; and then ran swiftly into the house, laughing.

The twins resumed their occupation of pitching gravel stones, but a change had come over their spirits. Phil was actually whistling, and Gerald hummed a bass with perfect cheerfulness. The cat came back across the lawn, and they threw stones before her nose and behind her tail, avoiding contact with her person (for she was a beloved cat, in hours of joy), and contenting themselves with seeing her skip hither and thither in uninjured surprise. [216]

"Philly!"

"Yes, Jerry!"

"Us feels a lot better, don't us, Philly?"

"H'm!" said Phil, and the sound was now one of content and peace.

"She's not a bad sort, the Tintinnabula!" Gerald went on, meditatively. "She doesn't harry a fellow, as some fellows' sisters do. She pokes you up and smooths you down at the same time, somehow. That's the way a girl ought to be—my opinion. Come along, Ferguson, and let's do something to celebrate!"

"All right!" said Phil. "What shall we do?"

"Oh, any old thing! Come along!"

And they went and wrestled in the conservatory, and broke three flower-pots, and had a delightful morning.

CHAPTER XII.

[217]

JIMMY'S POND.

So it came to pass that, as Jack Ferrers was strolling about the garden with Hugh after dinner, talking about old times, and pausing at every other step to greet some favourite shrub or stick or stone,—it came to pass that he heard steps at the gate, and, turning, saw the Messrs. Merryweather, holding themselves very straight, and looking very sheepish. They had compromised with Bell on skating dress, instead of the detested "good clothes," and Gerald carried several pairs of skates in his hand. They fumbled with the latch a moment, during which Jack felt extremely young, and was conscious of redness creeping up to his ears. But then, they were quite as red, he reflected; and, after all, as Hilda said, he was two years older than these boys, and if they really were all she made them out to be—why—

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So it was a very different-looking Jack who advanced to meet the embarrassed boys at the gate. It was perhaps the first time in his young life that Gerald had been embarrassed, and he found the sensation unpleasant.

Before any of them could speak, however, a joyous whoop was heard from another quarter. Hugh had been investigating an old nest, and had just caught sight of the friends from Pumpkin House. He came running now, his face alight with welcome.

"Oh, Jerry! How do you do? How *do* you do, Phil? I am very well, thank you! Do you know my Jack? Because he has come home; and he is almost the dearest person in the world. And he has grown up his own beanstalk, he says, and that is what makes him so tall. And he has brought me the most beautiful soldiers that ever were, and we are going to have battles, even the prancings, the prancings of their mighty ones! Hurrah!"

"Hurrah it is!" said Jack. "How d'ye do?" And he held out his hand cordially enough. "Awfully good of you to bring the skates! Come in, won't you, and see my father and my uncle?"

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"Didn't know whether you liked Acmes or Clubs," said Gerald, "so I brought both. Clubs are the best, we all think."

"So do I! These are just right, I think. Awfully good of you, I'm sure! You ought to see the things they wear in Germany; like the old ones Uncle Tom has hanging up in that trophy in the hall."

Chatting cheerfully, they moved on towards the house, taking note of one another as they went. Jack found the tones of the boys' voices very clear and good, free from any nasal quality; Phil and Gerald decided that there must be a good deal of muscle in those long, lean arms, and that it would not be so easy to "lick" the stranger as they had thought on first seeing him.

On Phil's remarking that his sisters and the "kids" had gone across the fields to the pond, there to await the rest of the party, Jack said he would be ready in three minutes, and ushered them into the library, where the two reunited brothers were peacefully smoking together. The Colonel received the boys most cordially, and, while Jack hurried away to put on jersey and knickerbockers, presented them to "My brother Raymond. Jack's father, young gentlemen! I trust you and my nephew Jack will be friends. The young should be friendly,—eh, Raymond? My brother Raymond, boys, is a man of genius. He is probably studying the lines of a fiddle at this moment,—an imaginary fiddle, you understand,—and I doubt if he is aware of your presence, or of one word I have been saying."

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"Not quite so bad as that, Tom!" said Mr. Ferrers, holding out his hand to the boys, with the peculiarly sweet smile that won all hearts to him at the first glance, "not quite so bad as that. I am delighted to see you, young gentlemen. I have already heard a good deal about your cheerful circle here. I am, it is true, somewhat absent-minded,—"

"Absent-minded! Jupiter Capitolinus! When it comes to a man putting sugar and cream on his mutton-chop at breakfast,—"

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"How do you know that I do not prefer it so, Tom? We have many curious customs in Virginia, you know. It wasn't bad, really!"

"Not bad!" snorted the Colonel. "Five-year-old mutton, hung a fortnight, and broiled by Elizabeth Beadle; and this man treats it as a pudding, and then says it was not bad! Elizabeth Beadle wept when Giuseppe told her about it; shed tears, sir! Said there was no pleasure in feeding you."

"Poor Elizabeth!" said Raymond Ferrers, laughing. "Dear, good soul! I must go and ask her to make me some molasses cookies with scalloped edges. Will that pacify her, Tom? Where is the boy?"

"Raymond, do not try me further than I can bear!" said his brother, with marked ferocity. "Ask for the boy every five minutes, my dear brother! a shorter interval than that is beyond my powers of endurance, which have their limits. The boy, sir, if you persist in applying that epithet to a young giraffe who has already scraped more paint off my lintels than I can supply in six months,—well, I will make it three, if you specially desire it,—is putting on his togs, to go skating with these young fellows. And what is more, Raymond, I know two old fellows who are going to be asses enough to put on *their* togs and go skating with the youngsters. Come along, sir! Jimmy's Pond, Ray! Come along!"

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ON JIMMY'S POND.

A pleasant sight was Jimmy's Pond an hour later, when all the party had assembled. Hildegarde came in regal state, escorted by Colonel Ferrers and his brother, one walking on either side, while the three tall lads strode along before, now thoroughly at ease with each other, and Hugh capered and curveted in the rear. The child had a horse's tail fastened to his belt behind, and was Pegasus on Helicon, oblivious of all things earthly.

They found Bell and Gertrude awaiting them, their cheeks already glowing from a preliminary tour of the pond. In the distance Willy and Kitty could be seen tugging each other valiantly along, falling and scrambling down and up. Bell was looking her best, in her trim suit of brown velveteen, with the pretty little mink cap. Hildegarde thought her more like a snow-apple than ever, and hoped Jack saw how pretty and sweet she was. Air-castles are pleasant building, and our Hildegarde had one well under way already; a castle whose walls should rise to the sound of music, and in which two happy people should play, play, play, all day and every day.

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Hildegarde herself, in dark blue corduroy trimmed with chinchilla, was very good to look at, and more than one pair of eyes followed her as she swept along in graceful curves, holding Hugh's hands in hers.

"A very lovely young creature, Tom!" said Raymond Ferrers, as he stood a while, after fastening his skates.

"Not so beautiful as her mother. I find Mildred more beautiful than ever, Tom."

"You were always near-sighted, Raymond, you will allow me to observe!" cried the Colonel, ruffling instantly. "I admire Mrs. Grahame beyond any woman—of her age—that lives. She is a noble woman, sir! an admirable creature! But to say that she compares in looks with a blooming creature like that,—a princess, by Jove! A young Diana, the very sight of whom makes a man young again. By the way, Raymond," he added, after a pause, in an altered voice. "I don't know, my dear fellow, whether you have noticed any—a—resemblance, any look of—eh?"

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"Yes, indeed, my dear Tom; I noticed it instantly. Sweet Hester! This might be her younger sister. Yes! yes! *Tempo passato*, eh, brother? We are old fellows, but we once were young."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried the Colonel, throwing off his mood with sudden violence. "Speak for yourself, sir! If a man chooses to spend his days hunched over a table, making fiddles, I don't say how things may turn out with him; but for myself,—here, Young Sir! bring me a hockey-stick, will you?"

Hugh, prancing by in full career, paused, and surveyed his guardian with dreamy eyes.

"Hi-hi-hi!" he replied, with a creditable attempt at a whinny.

The Colonel stiffened to "attention."

"What did I understand you to remark, sir?" he inquired. "I experience a difficulty in following your interesting observation."

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"Hi-hi-hi!" repeated the boy. "I am Pegasus; I do not understand your language. I will find Bellerophon, and send him to you."

He retired a few paces, and gravely removed his tail, then came back, beaming with cheerfulness, every inch a boy.

"What was it you wanted, Guardian?" he cried. "I was a horse then, you see, so I really couldn't; please excuse me!"

"I wanted a hockey-stick, sir!" said the Colonel, with some severity. "And it is my opinion that two-legged horses would better keep their wits about them."

"A game of hockey, Raymond," here he turned to his brother, "will warm your blood, and bring back your wits. 'Polo,' they call it nowadays; parcel of fools! It's my belief that nine-tenths of the

human race to-day don't know what they are talking about. Don't understand their own language, sir! Polo, indeed! Ha! here are the sticks. Now we shall see about this 'old fellow' business!"

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Indeed, it was a marvellous thing to see the agility of the Colonel in his favourite sport. He swept here and there, he made the most astonishing hits, he hooked the ball from under the very noses of the amazed and delighted boys. Raymond Ferrers, too, after watching the sport for a few minutes, yielded to the spirit of the hour, and was soon cutting away with the best of them.

A pleasant sight was Jimmy's Pond, indeed! The pond itself was a thing of beauty, a disk of crystal dropped down in a hollow of dark woods; dropped into the middle of this again, a tiny islet, with a group of slender firs, lovely to behold. And dotted here and there on the shining gray-silver of the ice, these happy players, young and old, darted hither and thither, filled with the joy of the hour and the pleasure of each other's presence.

It might have been interesting, could one have stood invisible on the bank, to hear the fragments of talk, as the different groups swept by in the chase. They seemed to drop naturally into couples, without any special prearrangement. First came the two brothers, intent on the ball, bent on keeping it ahead of them, and unconscious of anything else.

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"Now, sir!" the Colonel would cry. "Let me see you beat that! Hi! There she—no! she doesn't! Ha! ha! Beat you that time, sir!"

"Poor old Raymound,
Fell into a hay-mound!"

"Do you remember that, sir? Only rhyme I ever made in my life; proud as a peacock I was of it, sir! And what was the scurrilous verse you made about me?"

"Tommy, Tommy Tantrum,
Crowing like a bantrum!"

said his brother, laughing.

"I always call them 'bantrums,' always shall. Aha! Where are you now, boy? Off she goes!"

Next came Gertrude and Phil, swinging easily along together.

"So glad he is really nice, because he looks so, and it would be so horrid if he were horrid, wouldn't it, Phil? And Bell says he plays—oh, wonderfully, you know."

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"Playing isn't everything in the world, Toots! But he does seem to be a good fellow enough. Told us a lot, coming over here, about the way he lived over in Germany. I say! I'd like to go there! Two or three duels every day; great sport, it must be!"

Now it was Willy and Kitty, skating away sturdily, with short, energetic strokes, and holding each other up bravely.

"So he asked me if I would swap with him for another hard one, and I said yes, if it was hard enough; for this Mexican one, you see, was very hard indeed. He said it was.

"So I said all right, hand it over. Well, it was just the end of recess, and he handed it over, all scrumpled up, in a kind of hurry, and I crammed it into my pocket without looking. And when I came to look at it after school, it was a mean old three-cent 'Norji.' So I knocked him down, and it just happened that one of his old teeth was loose, and it came out. I was glad of it, and so were all the fellows, for he meant to cheat, you see; that's why I had the black marks."

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Now come Jack and Bell, she a little out of breath, being unused to skating with a giraffe; he all unconscious, discoursing high themes.

"Yes, a good many people play it short, with a kind of choppiness. I hate to hear a violin chop. But J— gives it with a long, smooth crescendo that seems to carry you straight out of the room, you know, out into the open air, and up among tree-tops. Do you ever feel that way? You seem to feel the air blowing all about you, and—hear all the voices that are shut up in the trees and flowers, and can't get out generally. You know what I mean, I am sure!"

"Yes," says Bell, softly. "But they are all answering to the violin, don't you think? They would not speak to the piano in that way."

"Depends upon who plays it," says gallant Jack. And Hildegarde, close behind, hears, and stumbles a little, and catches Gerald's hand, laughing.

"Take them both!" says Gerald. "Take, incidentally, my heart with them; unless its size and its lacerated condition would make the burden unwelcome, Hilda?"

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"I doubt if I should notice," says Hildegarde. "Yes, I will take both hands, Jerry; let us try the outer edge, now. There! that is a delightful swing! You do skate very well, my child."

"Ah! you should see Roger skate!" cried loyal Gerald; and is rewarded by seeing a very pretty blush deepen in his companion's bright cheek.

"Good old Codger! I wish he were here, skating with you, Hilda!"

"Thank you!" says Hilda. "I am sorry to incommode you, Gerald. I can skate perfectly well

alone, thank you. There! Don't be absurd, Jerry! You'll get out of step if you don't take care. Do you think we could do a figure of eight together? Let's try!"

Last of all, alone, yet in a world peopled with fantastic joys, came little Hugh. He had his tail on again, and he was skating with a high-stepping gait, rather more suggestive of trotting than was compatible with safety. He murmured to himself as he went, and his talk was far from hockey or any delights of skating.

"Yonder, dear Bellerophon! look yonder, far down below this fleecy cloud that I am just going to plunge into! Now wait till I get through it, and you will see. The cloud is all full of monsters, whales, and crocodiles, and—hairy mammoths; and we have to plunge through them, and they claw after us and try to catch us. But I switch my tail, dear Bellerophon" (here he switched the tail vigorously), "and that frightens them, so that they crawl back into their holes, the ugly things. But down on the earth there, do you see three little spires of smoke, right by the mouth of that black hole? That is the Chimæra, Bellerophon! We have come all the way, and now we are going to have the most terrible fight that any one ever had,—Samson or Hercules or any one else. Aha! now is the time, you see, for me to say 'Aha' among the trumpets; that is why I made you bring your trumpet along. My neck is clothed with thunder, and I am pawing in the valley. See me paw!" [231]

Alas, for the winged steed! Pawing in the valley is a dangerous pastime on smooth ice, and unsustained by hind legs. Pegasus, his head high in air, looking forward to battle and glory, paid little attention to things at his feet. His skate caught in a crack, and, checked in full speed, he came heavily to the ground, and lay motionless. [232]

Hildegarde and Gerald heard the crash, and were at his side in a moment, raising him. The little fellow was stunned, and there was an ugly cut on his forehead.

"Hugh, dear!" cried Hildegarde. "Is it very bad, little boy? You are all right now; Jerry and I are here, and you will be feeling better in a moment."

She took the child's head in her lap, and stanchd the blood with her handkerchief, rubbing his temples gently, while Gerald chafed his hands. Presently Hugh opened his eyes. At first his look was vacant, but soon the light came back into the blue eyes, and he tried to smile.

"I pawed too hard!" he whispered. "Beloved, it wasn't the right valley to paw in."

Hildegarde and Gerald exchanged glances.

"He's a little out!" murmured Gerald. "We'd better get him home as quick as we can. Phil and I will carry him." [233]

By this time the others, looking back, had seen that something was wrong, and came hurrying back. Colonel Ferrers turned very white when he saw Hugh lying motionless, his head pillowed on Hildegarde's lap, and the red stain on his temple.

"My little boy!" he gasped. "Jack, where are you? The child! The child is hurt!" Jack was already bending over Hugh; indeed, the anxious group pressed so close that Hildegarde motioned them to back.

"I don't think he is much hurt," she said, looking up at the Colonel, and speaking as cheerfully as she could. "He spoke to me just now, Colonel Ferrers. He was stunned by the fall. I don't think the cut amounts to anything, really."

"No," said Jack, who had been examining the cut, "this isn't anything, Uncle Tom. It's the shock that is the trouble, and he'll be over that in a minute. You're better already, aren't you, old chap?" [234]

Hugh opened his eyes again, but slowly, as if it were an effort.

"How do you do?" he said, politely. "Yes, I am better, thank you, but not quite well yet. You did not seem to understand what I said, so I thought I would wait till I could speak better."

Seeing Jack look bewildered, Gerald whispered, "He was talking nonsense. He takes you for me now; it was to me he was talking."

"I was not talking nonsense!" said Hugh, clearly. "I said I had been pawing in the valley, and that this was not the right valley to paw in. It wasn't! My Beloved will understand what I mean, if she uses her mind."

"He was a horse!" cried the Colonel. "Astonishing thing, that nobody can understand that child, when he is speaking perfectly rationally. He was a horse, I tell you! Whinnied at me, sir, when I asked him to get me a hockey-stick. Try it again, Boy! Let's hear you once more, eh?"

Hugh smiled, but could not do more than shake his head.

"Thank you for explaining, Guardian!" he said. "I was Pegasus, you see, and Bellerophon and I were just going to plunge down through the clouds and kill the Chimæra; but I forgot where I was for a minute, and began to paw in the valley, and say 'Aha!' and, of course, the cloud broke through, and down we went. I hope dear Bellerophon isn't hurt." [235]

"Bellerophon is all right!" said Jack. "Right as a trivet. He says he thinks you'd better go home, old man; he thinks it will be better Chimæra-hunting to-morrow, anyhow."

"Yes! yes!" cried the Colonel, making a brave effort to enter into the child's idea.

"Go back to the stable, Boy,—I mean Dobbin, or whatever your name is, and—and have some hay!"

But Hugh's brow contracted.

"Pegasus didn't eat hay!" he murmured, still leaning against Hildegarde's shoulder.

"No, dear," said the girl. "The Colonel did not mean hay; he meant asphodels and amaranth and moly."

"That sounds better," said Hugh.

"I say," whispered Gerald, who was beginning to recover from his alarm, "you know, I suppose, that asphodel is a kind of pigweed?" [236]

"Hush! Yes! There is no need of the child's knowing it yet. How shall we get him home, Jack?"

"But I will walk home!" cried Hugh, hearing the last words. "I will perhaps trot home, only slowly."

He tried to rise, but sank back again.

"It appears as if there were wheels in my head," he murmured. "They go round too fast."

"Of course they do," said Jack, in the most matter-of-fact way. "I'm going to harness myself into them, and take you home that way. Put him up on my back, will you, Merryweather? So! there we are!"

Delighted to find himself in the once familiar position, Hugh looked up to smile at the anxious Colonel, who stood wiping his brow, and wishing for once that he were twenty and a giraffe.

"I'm all right now, Guardian!" he said. "All right, Beloved! My Jack is an ostrich again, and I am not Pegasus any more just now. I am only Hugh. Good-bye! Good hunting!" [237]

"Only Hugh!" repeated Colonel Ferrers, gazing after the two, as they went across the field, Jack walking steadily, with long, even steps, very different from his usual hop-skip-and-jump method of progression.

"Only Hugh! Only the greater part of the world—eh? what are you saying, Hilda, my dear?"

"Only that we will go home together, dear Colonel Ferrers!" said Hildegarde, who had already taken off her skates. "We will go back together, and the others can follow whenever they are ready. We shall find him comfortable already, with Mrs. Beadle tucking him up in bed, and talking about chicken broth and wine jelly, neither of which he will need in the least. Come, dear sir!"

"I will come!" said the Colonel. "You are a good child, Hilda! I—I am rather shaken, I believe. I will come with pleasure, my love! Be good enough to take my arm!"

CHAPTER XIII.

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MERRY CHRISTMAS.

HILDEGARDE awoke in the dark, with the sound of bells in the air. Her first thought was that of all women in similar case—fire! She sat up in bed and listened; but these were no fire-bells that rang so joyously, breaking through the hush of the winter morning with glad rejoicing. "Glory to the newly born!" she said, softly, and was silent for a little. Presently she waved her hand in a comprehensive greeting to the friends on walls and shelves, whom she could not yet see.

"Merry Christmas!" she cried. "Merry Christmas, Sir Walter! Merry Christmas, Viscount, and you too, Saint William! What a pity I cannot say it in Dutch!"

She hummed a carol to herself, as she recalled the night before, Christmas Eve, which she had spent with the Merryweathers. They had gone together to the carol service at the little church, which they had all helped to make beautiful with spruce and fir and hemlock. After that they sang hymns and carols at home, in full chorus, with such hearty good-will and earnest feeling as it was a joy to remember; and then came the hanging of the stockings. An only child for so long, Hildegarde had never seen before the bewildering, enchanting bustle of Christmas Eve in a large family; the hanging of the stockings, six in a row, the whole length of the great fireplace in the nursery; the delightful mysteries, the parcels which no one saw, the whisperings which no one heard save those to whom they were addressed, the tiptoeing hither and thither, the rustle of tissue-paper,—ah! it was all very pleasant! The kind friends had begged her to stay with them, and share the morning fun, which they declared to be the best of all; but that Hildegarde could not do. [239]

"Mamma and I have only each other!" she said. "You would not really have me leave her alone, dear people!" and the Merryweathers were obliged to confess that they would not, upon any [240]

account. So they had parted, with many plans and promises for the next day,—the great, the blessed day of the year. And now it was here! and oh, was it—could it really be snowing?

Hildegarde listened, and heard a sound as of fairy hands beating softly on the window-panes. It was growing lighter every moment, but the light came through a soft, white dimness. Hildegarde ran to the window; the ground was white, the dark branches of the evergreens were bending under a weight of snow, and it was snowing still, not furiously, but in a quiet, determined way, that meant business. Oh, joy! At last, the longed-for winter had come! This ungrateful girl had already received many favours from the Frost King; she had skated, she had had icicles to eat, she had broken through the ice, and got a good wetting,—still she was not content, but longed for snow; and now she had her heart's desire.

"And we'll all go tobogganing,
Bog, bog, bogganing!"

she sang, as she dressed herself, stopping now and then to dance about the room a little when she felt cold; for the morning was evidently sharp, and the cold had got into the house in good earnest. [241]

Running down-stairs, she found the breakfast-room warm and bright with a crackling, leaping fire on the hearth. Mrs. Grahame was already down, and her long, silent embrace was the first and best Christmas greeting. Then it was "Merry Christmas!" and again "Merry Christmas!" as Auntie came into the room, bringing the fragrant coffee, and the tray piled high with good things.

"Oh, and the mail has come!" cried Hildegarde, fairly dancing round the table to her place. "See, my love! Letters from everybody, heaps upon heaps! Oh, what joy!"

There were greetings from all the distant friends, it seemed; from all the good people at Bywood, from Rose and Doctor Flower, from the dear old couple at Hartley's Glen.

"Oh, how good every one is!" cried Hildegarde. "And here is a parcel—Mamma, what can this be? It looks like Aunt Emily's hand." [242]

"It seems a desperate measure to propose," said Mrs. Grahame, "but I *have* heard of parcels being opened in such a case. I should not wish to influence you—"

"Oh, my dear!" cried the girl, who had been acting on the suggestion, and undoing the box tied carefully with floss silk. "My Respected Parent, will you look at this?"

It was the prettiest watch, surely, that ever was seen, set with blue enamel and pearls; and with it came a stately little note, assuring "my grandniece" that this was a slight return indeed for the pleasure that she had given to her affectionate E. D.

"Poor dear Aunt Emily!" cried Hildegarde. "She has so little pleasure, I suppose every little attention counts for a good deal. Oh, aren't you glad we sent her the Mechlin tabs? She and Hobson will have good times over them, I am sure. Well, Auntie, what now?"

Auntie brought in a huge box. "Dis ain't for you, Miss Hildy, chile, dis for you' Ma. You can' 'spec' to have everyt'ing, young lady!" [243]

"Flowers, Mamma! Oh, the lovely things! Do let me see—From Mr. Raymond Ferrers! The dear thing! Why, we shall be a perfect bower, for I know the Colonel is going to send you a box. Dear me! What a delightful time we are having, aren't we, love?"

"If you don't eat your breakfast, Hilda, I shall have all these things taken away, and kept till dinner."

"Oh, I will eat, I will indeed! See me! Observe me sacrificing myself to rolls and orange marmalade! But do you see that it is snowing, my own? And do you know what that means? Tobogganing this afternoon, if there is any faith in Merryweathers."

Hildegarde was so excited it was really difficult for her to eat anything like enough to satisfy the demands of Auntie.

"You ain't goin' to no chu'ch on no empty stomick!" that potentate announced; and she actually stood over Hildegarde till a fair portion of her good things was disposed of. Then, when church-time came, she must see personally that both her "Missies" were properly wrapped, and properly toasted before going out. [244]

"You ain't no right to go out at all, Mis' Grahame, and you knows it well as I do; but dere ain't no holdin' you some times, and dis is one of 'em, I know. Nothin' for old woman to do, 'cept just see dat you's fixed up right. You' bonnet ain't straight, mum; I should go crazy if you started out like ob dat."

The chore-man had already been at work with shovel and broom, so that there was a path cleared through the snow to the road; the snow was already quite deep, and Hildegarde and her mother were glad of their high snow-boots, as they picked their way along. Hildegarde stopped every other moment to take a handful of snow from some hanging branch, sometimes to eat it, oftener to toss it in the air for pure joy. It was beautiful snow, soft and dry, the crystals showing with exquisite distinctness.

"I feel about ten years old, darling!" the girl announced, as she frisked hither and thither.

"So I perceive!" said Mrs. Grahame, who was walking soberly along, even deigning to protect her bonnet with a prosaic umbrella.

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"I feel rather doubtful about taking you, Hildegarde. Suppose you should turn round and smile at the little boy behind you, as you did the first time I took you to church!"

But by the time they reached the old stone church, Hildegarde was grave enough. This was the best of all, she said to herself, as she took her place in the choir, and heard Bell's firm touch on the keys of the organ behind her.

The Pastoral Symphony! Hildegarde gave a long sigh of pure happiness, and leaned back in her seat. She might have known Bell would play it! She knew that her friend was to take the organist's place during the Christmas vacation; but she did not know that somehow, in all the hurry and happy bustle of yesterday, two young musicians had contrived, by hook or by crook, to get an hour's practice together in the church, as a Christmas surprise for her very own self, and when, above the deep, throbbing tones of the organ, rose the exquisite voice of the violin, Hildegarde felt her cup very full indeed, and hardly tried to check the thankful tears that sprang to her eyes. The church was full of the warm fragrance of balsam fir; the long garlands of green clothed the old gray walls with a lovely grace; she saw her mother's face in the pew near by; the music soared heavenward and her soul mounted with it. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will to men!" When it came her turn to sing, she felt heaven near, indeed, and the peace of blessedness descending on her.

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By noon it had stopped snowing; by three o'clock the sky was clear and the world lay white and glittering, a new thing under a sky of crystal.

"Just like the biggest plummy cake that ever was baked!" cried Willy Merryweather as he capered about before his toboggan. The clan was gathering for the first tobogganing of the season. Here was Mr. Merryweather, tall and stalwart, in a fur cap big enough for the Czar of all the Russias; Here were all the children, big and little, in "muffs and furs and fluffs," all rosy and happy and beaming; here was Hildegarde, in moccasins, and the prettiest scarlet blanket-suit; finally, here was Jack Ferrers, striding across the fields at a tremendous rate when he saw that the others were waiting for him.

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"Oh, Jack! couldn't Hugh come?" cried Hildegarde, as her cousin came up. "He looked pretty pale this morning, I thought, dear little fellow! Is he feeling badly to-day?"

Hugh had not been like himself since the fall on the ice. He had a good deal of headache, and seemed heavy and drowsy, not at all his own bright self. Hildegarde spoke anxiously, and Jack answered her look as well as her question.

"Not much the matter, I hope, but Uncle Tom thought he'd better keep quiet this afternoon, so as to be all fit for the tree this evening. His head does ache, Hilda, but he says it isn't bad, and he sent you all kinds of messages, and said you were to have twice as good a time, for his sake, as you would have had if he had been on hand. Poor little chap! I promised him I would give you a famous time; so come on, Hilda, and don't let me see those grave looks any more."

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"You are darkening the sky, Hilda," cried Gerald, "and we can't have our Christmas sunshine spoiled! Look at the Pater! Isn't he immense? Like a Russian Boyar, or a Wallachian Hospodar, or something of that kind."

"We might all find some good, snowy title!" said Bell. "You shall be a Starosta, Jerry, and Phil a Voevoda, and Mr. Ferrers a Magyar."

"Oh, there are plenty more titles!" said Jack. "We must have a Sotnik, and a Hetman, and a—"

"Who is coming tobogganing?" cried Mr. Merryweather. "Is this a *conversazione*, or an expedition?"

They all started off, talking and laughing, for the nearest hill. They chose the well-known slope that swept round the foot of Braeside, beyond the stone wall that separated it from Roseholme. Climbing the slope, Hildegarde remembered the first time she had climbed it, and how she climbed a tree, too, and was caught by Colonel Ferrers in the act, and taken for a marauding boy. How long ago it all seemed; and how strange to think of their ever having been strangers to their dear Colonel, or to any of the good friends who had grown so near and so dear.

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At the top, they paused to draw breath, for the ascent was steep; then Mr. Merryweather, as commander-in-chief, marshalled his forces, and arranged them in line of march.

"Let me see! Hilda, will you come with me? and Gertrude? So! Now, Phil, you shall take Bell and Kitty; and you and Mr. Ferrers, Gerald, take the little one. There! How will that do?"

All declared themselves satisfied, and proceeded to take their places on the toboggans. The girls tucked up their skirts carefully, the boys pressed their caps down firmly over their ears.

"All ready?" asked the Chief. "Now then! one, two, three—off!"

Down swept the toboggans; down, down, down! Hildegarde was clutching Mr. Merryweather's leather belt, and she felt as if it were the only thing that kept her from flying off entirely. The swift motion took her breath away; the light snow, puffing in her face, rising up in clouds on every side, half blinded her. On and on, gliding now over the long meadow at the foot of the hill,

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still with the flight of an arrow; till at last, with a skilful turn, they were brought up alongside the stone wall that bounded the field, and landed in a good soft drift.

Up they all jumped, rosy and snow-powdered, shouting with glee.

"Oh! wasn't it glorious!" cried Hildegard. "We kept the lead, didn't we, Mr. Merryweather? And I kept the top of my head on, which is more than could have been expected. I really never felt anything so delightful in my life. Where are Jack and Gerald?"

"There they come! They went round the other way, down the steep side."

"The steep side! Oh, me! Is there a steeper side? Why, they must have turned somersaults all the way down. Oh! oh, my poor dears!"

The boys came round the curve in fine style, shooting straight as a dart, both leaning back, and evidently enjoying themselves to the full. Suddenly, as if propelled by some invisible engine, they shot into the air, the toboggan followed, and for a moment there was an extraordinary vision of legs and arms, caps and splinters, all whirling together. Then they plunged into an enormous drift, and disappeared.

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The girls cried out in terror, but Mr. Merryweather and Phil shouted with laughter, and ran to the spot.

"Gone to ground!" they cried. "Dig 'em out, Phil!" cried the Chief. "Here's a foot; give a good pull, now!"

Phil gave a vigorous pull, and was rewarded by a kick which sent him sprawling on his back in the snow. Then, laughing and spluttering, the boys emerged from the drift, rubbing the snow from their eyes, and shaking it from their clothing.

"I say!" cried Jack. "What do you keep in this field, sir? Was it a torpedo, or an electric eel?"

"It's your uncle's field, young man!" replied Mr. Merryweather. "I suspect it was nothing more than a rock, however. I thought the hill was all smooth grass."

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"You might try it, sir!" said Gerald. "If there is a sound bone in my body, write me down Hollander. How are you, Ferrers? Anything broken?"

"No, indeed! Lost a button, and—where is my other mitten? Oh! thank you, Hilda! Did we make a pretty picture, flying through the air?"

"Lovely!" said Hilda. "If I had only had my camera! But I was really frightened. I am hardly sure now that you are not killed, you did go so very hard!"

"The toboggan *is* killed!" said Gerald, ruefully. "Kindling-wood, poor old thing! Just look at it!" He dragged to light some forlorn remnants, which certainly did not look as if they could be of service again save in some humble capacity.

"Too bad!" said his father. "Fortune of war, my boy! But there is plenty of room for you and Ferrers on the two others. We must see about this stone, and get it out of the way."

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Search revealed a big, jagged stone, so fitted into the slope of the hill that the snow had lain smoothly over it; but it had caught the toboggan in mid-flight. It was soon torn from its bed, rolled down the hill, and deposited on the other side of the wall. Then they all climbed the hill again, trying as they went to sing the Tobogganing Song; failing for lack of breath, panting, singing again, and all the while struggling upward, laughing and chattering and pelting each other with the soft snow.

"When the field lies clear in the moon, boy,
And the wood hangs dark on the hill,
When the long white way shows never a sleigh,
And the sound of the bells is still,

"Then hurry, hurry, hurry!
And bring the toboggans along!
A last 'Never fear!' to Mother-my-dear,
Then off with a shout and a song.

"A-tilt on the billowy slope, boy,
Like a boat that bends to the sea,
With the heart a-tilt in your breast, boy,
And your chin well down on your knee,

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"Then over, over, over,
As the boat skims over the main,
A plunge and a swoop, a gasp and a whoop,
And away o'er the glittering plain!

"The boat, and the bird, and the breeze, boy,
Which the poet is apt to sing,
Are old and slow and clumsy, I know,

By us that have never a wing.

"Still onward, onward, onward,
Till the brook joins the meadow below,
And then with a shout, see us tumbling out,
To plunge in the feathery snow.

"Back now by the side of the hedge, boy,
Where the roses in summer grow,
Where the snow lies deep o'er their winter sleep,
Up, up the big hill we go.

"And stumbling, tumbling, stumbling,
Hurrah! 'tis the top we gain!
Draw breath for a minute before you begin it—
Now over, and over again!"

"How are you, noble Hetman?" said Hildegarde, finding herself near Gerald, as they gained the top of the hill. "Aren't you all full of snow, my poors, and very cold and wet?"

"Oh, days of me boyhood, I'm dreamin' of ye now!" quoted Gerald. "I never thought that my mother's words would come true in my person: [255]

"Woffsky-poffsky, Woffsky-poffsky,
Once he was a Cossack hetman;
But he fell into the Dnieper,
And became a Cossack wetman.'

"And to speak sooth, sweet chuck, there may be a matter of half a bushel of snow—if you measure it by bushels,—it's a matter of fancy—down my manly back at this moment."

"Oh, Gerald! But do go home, my dear, and change your things! You will get your death of cold, if you go about in this state."

"I'll move into the adjoining territory at once!" said Gerald. "But calm yourself, angelic being! Consider that in this manner I avoid all danger of sunstroke! Every man his own refrigerator; patent applied for; no Irish need apply."

"What is the use of talking to people like this!" cried Hildegarde. "Jack, are you as wet as that? Because if you are,—"

"As wet as what?" said Jack. "I am not, anyhow, if you are going to look at me in that way. Just wet enough to cool me off delightfully; very sultry to-day, don't you think so?" [256]

"Mr. Merryweather," cried Hildegarde. "Will you use your authority, please, and try to get some sense out of these boys? They are both wet through to the skin, and they will not—"

"Wet, are they?" said the Chief, cheerily. "Best thing in the world for 'em, my dear! Quicken the circulation, and keep the pores open. Now then, boys and girls, we must pack closer this time. Sit close, Kitty! Hilda, hold tight, my dear! All ready? Now, one, two, three, and off we go!"

And off they went.

CHAPTER XIV.

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BELLEROPHON.

"ALL ready, boys?" asked the Colonel.

"All ready!" responded the boys, namely, Raymond Ferrers, aged sixty, Jack Ferrers, aged twenty, and Hugh Allen, aged nine. Barring more or less difference in height, and a trifle of gray hair in one case, they all appeared of much the same age; nor had the Colonel, evidently, a day the advantage of them. On the contrary, he was the youngest of the four, as he walked round and round the Christmas Tree, poking among the branches, readjusting a string of pop-corn here, or a glittering ornament there. It was their own tree, every twig, every needle of it their own. Not Hildegarde herself, nor her mother, nor any Merryweather, had had a word to say, or knew a single detail about it. They were invited,—they were coming; that was their part; all the rest had belonged to the four boys. Had they not gone in town together, and gone to Schwartz's, and bought out the greater part of the shop? And had they not spent the greater part of the day (save dinner-time, and church-time, and the hour that Jack had taken for tobogganing) in decorating their plaything, and tying on the presents? Surely, such a tree had never been seen! It glittered from top to toe with icicles; it shone with globes of gold and silver; it was powdered with diamond snow, and hung with golden nuts; silver cobwebs draped it, hanging in long festoons from every bough, while round and round, in graceful festoons, went the long garlands of snowy pop-corn. Now nothing was left to do, save to light the candles; and still the Colonel walked and looked, puffing with pleasure, and still Brother Raymond followed at his heels, and Jack followed [258]

Raymond, and Hugh kept close behind Jack. And Elizabeth Beadle, surveying this scene from the depth of the hall, was so moved by it that she retired to the kitchen and wept for a quarter of an hour, for pure joy.

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"Sure you have the pail of water handy, Jack?"

"Yes, sir, quite sure! Stepped into it just now."

"Then you had it footy, not handy!" murmured Hugh. His guardian turned, and looked anxiously at the boy.

"Hum, ha!" he said. "Talk a little nonsense, eh, Young Sir? That's right! Feel quite well this evening, hey?"

Hugh certainly did not look well. His rosy color was gone, and there were dark circles under his blue eyes; but he answered so brightly, and was so full of joy and delightful anticipation, that Colonel Ferrers smiled even as he sighed, and turned to his brother.

"Pretty sight, Raymond?" he said, for perhaps the twentieth time. "Pretty custom, eh? Give you my word, sir, I haven't enjoyed anything so much for years."

"If you go on at this rate, Tom," rejoined his brother, "you will be in short jackets again in a year or two. After all, what is there in the world so good as youth, my dear fellow? Let us hold it fast, say I, as long as we can!"

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"Yes!" growled the Colonel. "But you wouldn't have said that before you came here, Raymond Ferrers; and I shouldn't have said it before Hildegarde Grahame came here,—"

"And her mother!" put in Raymond.

"And her mother, of course!" cried the Colonel, testily. "She never thought of coming here without her mother, did she? Don't be a quibbler, my good fellow! If there is one thing I find it difficult to have Christian patience with, it is a quibbler. I tell you, sir, that before those people came here my life was a stagnant fish-pond, sir; with no fish in it, either, and—and it shows what a young woman can do, sir, when she is willing just to *be* a young woman, and to minister cheerfulness and joy and—and affection to the people around her. Three years ago I had not a friend in the world,—or thought I had not, which amounts to the same thing,—except a round-shouldered fiddle-maker in another State, whom I never expected to see again. I was morose, sir! I was unfit for human companionship! And now—" the Colonel stopped to wipe his eye-glasses, and blew his nose portentously—"now I have a son in my own house,—two sons just now, for if you pretend that Jack is more your son than mine, I scoff at you, sir, and I deride you!—and a daughter close by, who will come to me if my little finger aches. And to that daughter, sir,—under Providence," and the Colonel bowed his head and dropped his voice,—"*to Hildegarde Grahame, I owe all this, and more. So I say,—*"

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"Here they come!" cried Hugh, who had been watching from the window. "Here they all come, Guardian! My Beloved and her mother, and after them all the others. Oh! but Captain Roger is not with them!"

The four hosts hurried out into the hall to meet their guests, and many and warm were the greetings. Hildegarde in white, Bell in pink, and Gertrude in blue, looked like a posy of fresh flowers, and Kitty like the little rosebud she was. Mrs. Merryweather and Mrs. Grahame were already taking off their wraps, and Miles Merryweather and Phil brought up the rear, with Willy.

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"Where's the Professor?" cried the hospitable Colonel, rubbing his hands. "Where is Professor Roger? I was definitely promised that he would be here."

Where was Roger? Hildegarde's heart echoed the question; and though she greeted the Colonel with her own bright smile, it was rather an effort to be as gay as usual; for the disappointment had been severe. Roger had telegraphed that he would be with them that afternoon without fail; and now all the trains had come and gone, and no Roger had come. All the Merryweathers were crying out, and saying that some tiresome man of science must have captured him, and carried him off. Hildegarde was only a little more silent than usual; she slipped quietly into the drawing-room, and took her seat by Mr. Raymond Ferrers, whose smile always seemed like a kind of sublimated music,—music that soothed while it cheered. But when she saw her little Hugh, with his pale face, and the suffering look in his dear blue eyes, she reproached herself for a selfish, unloving girl, and went and sat with her arm round the child, looking affectionately and anxiously at him, and listening to his story of the joy of the blessed day.

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"And Gerald?" now cried the Colonel. "Am I to be robbed of half my guests, I ask you? Mrs. Merryweather, my dear madam, this is positively unfriendly, I must inform you. A Christmas Tree without Gerald Merryweather,—the idea is incongruous! I can say nothing more."

"Oh, Colonel Ferrers, that is my fault!" cried Hildegarde. "Gerald will be here in a moment; he ought to be here now, indeed. I very carelessly forgot something,—a little parcel that I wanted to bring,—and Gerald was so kind as to go back for it."

"Quite right, my child!" said the Colonel. "Of course you sent him! Preposterous if you had done anything else." He bustled off, and Hildegarde turned to look out of the window; for truth to tell, the parcel that she had left behind contained a little gift for the Colonel himself (it was a copy of "Underwoods." Hildegarde would have given copies of "Underwoods" to all her friends, if

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she could have afforded it), and she wanted to catch the first glimpse of Gerald. How long he was in coming! They were lighting the candles, Hugh whispered her; Jack and Mr. Raymond Ferrers and Mr. Merryweather were to light them as soon as the party was assembled. Gerald was wanted to take the second tenor in the carol. Why had she been so careless? Ah! there he was at last!

Hildegarde ran out to the porch, to receive the precious parcel.

"Oh," she cried, "how long you have been, child! I thought you would never come!"

"So did I," said a voice that certainly did not belong to Gerald, "but that is no reason why you should be out here with nothing on your head, and the thermometer at zero."

Hildegarde felt her two hands grasped, and herself drawn firmly back into the house.

"They do not take proper care of you!" said Roger. "And are you glad to see me, Hilda?"

Everything seemed misty to Hildegarde after that. She heard the welcomes and rejoicings; heard Gerald's voice of panting apology,—"*Couldn't keep up with the Codger, you know! Couldn't, 'pon my word, he was in such a hurry!*"—and received the Colonel's book in time to tie it on the tree. She took her part in the carol, too, and wondered that her voice should be so strong, and not tremble, as the rest of her seemed to be trembling. Yes, and she saw the glorious Tree, in all its splendour, and helped untie the presents, and sat with her lap full of pretty things, sharing the wild delight of Will and Kitty, and the quieter raptures of Hugh.

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Yes, the lion was truly splendid; she had never heard such a roar, or seen such a mane. She should really be afraid to come to Pumpkin House, if she would be in danger of meeting him on the stairs. And Hugh's fleet was a joy, and,—yes, certainly they would go sailing together; and they'd go to the Dee, and the Jellybolee, over the land and over the sea—

And all the time, the girl felt that she was in a dream, in which the only real thing was the tall, broad-shouldered figure that moved so lightly and cheerfully among the rest; was the deep, sweet voice that was talking, explaining, parrying, the attack of the Colonel and all his own family?

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"Well, but it is true, my dear Miranda. I could not have helped it; really I could not. No, I dined with no other friends. I dined on a cold sausage, at a railway restaurant. I have travelled day and night to get here, and I do not mean to be abused for my efforts. There was a railway accident,—"

"An accident! Oh, Roger! are you hurt? Where are you hurt? How did it happen? Tell us all about it? Whose fault was it? Was any one killed?"

Thus the Merryweathers in chorus, with Colonel Ferrers thundering a bass. Roger Merryweather looked from one to the other; his eyes twinkled, but he was silent.

"Well, sir?" cried his brother Miles, in a fine baritone solo.

"Well, sir!" retorted Roger. "I thought you were all doing it so beautifully, it was a pity to interrupt. No,—no one was hurt. A freight train broke down, and blocked all the trains on the road. The delay was apparently endless; there seemed no particular reason why we should ever go on. Finally, I ran ahead, and found the engineer of the night express, the first train in the block, fighting mad, and vowing that he would plough his way through the freight train, if they didn't get it out of the road in five minutes. A lot of us took hold in good earnest, and in ten minutes the track was free. Then the express driver found that his fireman was hurt,—I forgot him! He was really the only one,—and he was madder than ever, and said he could not go on without a fireman. So I said I was his fireman, and his long-lost uncle besides; and I jumped on, and off we went. It was an exhilarating ride. We were an hour late, and we made up half of it; but that did not let me make my connections. Finally, here am I; the question is, are you glad to see me, or shall I go back?"

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Well, there seemed little doubt that they were glad to see him. It seemed to Hildegarde, still sitting in her corner, with Hugh's hand in hers, as if the other children would fairly devour him; and the elders were not much better. Miles must hear all about the mines, and piled question upon question till his brother cried for mercy. Will and Kitty hung about his neck, Bell and Gertrude could hardly take their eyes off him. Only Gerald, after the first moment, came and sat by Hildegarde, and asked if he should not take Hugh, and if she did not want to go and join the others.

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"No!" cried Hildegarde. "Go yourself, Jerry, and hear all about it. I—I shall hear it all another time."

"I met him, you see!" said Gerald, guiltily. "I heard it all as—as we came from the other house. We came along together, and then he—he got ahead of me somehow, and came in first."

Hildegarde heard him, but only half understood what he said. Now, however, there came a change in the boy's voice, and he rose hastily.

"I—I think I will go, Hilda, if you really don't mind,—if you will excuse me. I think Phil wants me for something—"

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He vanished, and Hildegarde turned to find Roger at her elbow.

"I have a little gift for you," he was saying. "I—I won't give it to you to-night, I think, but bring

it to-morrow, if I may. It is something I made myself, and I am rather proud of it. May I come to-morrow morning? Oh, it is good to be at home again! Good to see what one has been dreaming about for all these—"

"Supper! supper!" cried the Colonel, rubbing his hands. "Come, young folks! the tree is stripped, and now for an honest, old-fashioned supper. None of your kickshaws and folderols! No flummery, that leaves a man tired and hungry when he leaves the table. Food, my dear madam, is one of the blessings—what was it this Boy said about food the other day, Raymond? Hugh, you understand, Mrs. Grahame; more and more astonishing that child grows, as he grows older. He was disappointed the other day,—Hildegarde could not come as he expected, or something happened,—hum, ha! And he was distressed; a good deal distressed. Then he ate his supper,—ate it like a man, and I told him so, sir, and congratulated him on keeping his appetite. He looks up at me, and says he, 'Food stops sorrow!' His very expression, give you my word! Food stops sorrow! Ha, ha! so it does, my dear madam, so it does! This way, if you please! Hildegarde, my child, you will bring the Boy? He is—hum, ha!—not quite up to concert pitch to-night. Nothing much the matter,—growing boys, eh, Mrs. Grahame? Come on, all hands!"

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Well, the supper was great, and the games were glorious. Hildegarde did her very best to appear just as usual, and, indeed, no one who had seen her flying down the long drawing-room in the Virginia reel (the Colonel had engaged her for it a month before) would have thought her anything but the gayest of the gay; but, happy though she was, the world still seemed misty, the rooms confused, the talk mere babble; and she was glad, for once, when the frolic was over, and the greetings said, and she was at home once more, in her own quiet room.

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There was a cosy little fire burning on the hearth, and late though it was, Hildegarde was in no mood for going to bed. She sat down by the window and looked out. The snow lay clear and white in the moonlight; here and there the dark evergreens rose like steadfast guardians; all was peaceful and lovely. Lovely! How brown and handsome he looked! And had he really been glad to see her? She thought so; yes, surely he was glad, only somebody interrupted him every time he came near her. Of course, selfish creature that she was! They were his own dear people, he was theirs; he belonged to them. They had not seen him for months, and how preposterous of her to expect to have any of his time the very first evening. Besides, he said particularly that he was coming in the morning. Would the day be fair? But men did not mind weather, certainly not the Merryweather men. And—and her mother would be so glad to have a good talk with him.

Were they all asleep now, the good, merry neighbours? They made a good deal of noise sometimes, but they all meant so well, and were so hearty and genuine. Gerald was the most like Roger, after all; she had never noticed before how much alike they were. Dear Jerry! He had always been her favourite, though Phil was as nice as he could be, and, of course, she was very, very fond of Bell, and all of them. How perfectly clear and still it was! Silver and pearl and diamond,—oh, what beauty!

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"Deep on the convent roof the snows
Are sparkling to the moon."

She wondered if her white dress was really the one she should have worn, or whether—whether any one would have thought the pink one prettier. No; he always liked white; she remembered his saying so. There was a light in the corner room of Pumpkin House; ah, yes! it was Roger's room. Such a funny room, all full of minerals and dried specimens, and with lengths of copper wire hanging all about the walls. Jerry said that Roger had put them there against the time he should be crossed in love, so that he could hang himself whenever he felt like it. What was it he had brought for her? A specimen, probably. No! for he had made it himself. What was he doing now, she wondered. Oh, it was so good, so good, to know that he was near, and that she should see him in the morning!

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"But now," said Hildegarde, shaking her shoulders, and pulling herself together, "you are going to bed, miss! Let me have no more of this ridiculous moon-gazing, do you hear? Have you any sense? Take one look at the white glory of it, and then off with you!"

Wrapping a shawl round her (for she was still in her white evening dress, though it was an hour and more since she came back from Roseholme), she opened the window for an instant,—softly, for fear of rousing her mother, and leaned out, to take one deep draught of the magical beauty of the night. As she gazed, held as with a charm,—what was that, that seemed to move by the corner of the hedge? What was it, white against the snow, that was stealing along by the garden wall, silent as a dream? Was she, indeed, dreaming? Hildegarde's heart stood still for a moment. A little figure came forward now across the lawn,—it stood out clear against the dark firs. Good heavens! It was little Hugh! Barefoot, in his white nightgown, his head held high, his eyes gazing straight forward, the child came on, with swift, certain steps. One more glance told Hildegarde the truth; he was walking in his sleep.

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In a flash she had stolen down the stairs, only stopping to snatch a warm cloak from the hall as she went. The bar and chain delayed her, for she dared not strike a match,—her mother's light sleep was too precious,—still, it seemed only an instant before she was on the lawn, gazing wildly about her. The child was gone! An instant she stood undecided; was it possible that the whole had been a vision, a hallucination, brought on by excitement and fatigue? No! For here were the little footprints in the snow.

Oh, the little, tender feet, stung by the bitter cold! How was

it possible that the touch of the snow had not waked him? But here was her clue; in another moment, surely, she should have him in her arms. Breathless and panting, Hildegarde ran round the corner of the house, following those little white tracks—and stopped. The footsteps broke off short. Looking up, bewildered, she uttered a low cry of terror. Hugh was climbing up the wall. This part of the house was low, a kind of shed or outhouse, seldom used. It was easy climbing enough, a window-sill here, a cornice there, and a spout that ran the whole way up to the shingled roof. Hildegarde had climbed it herself, in pursuit of a runaway kitten; if the child would only stop at the shed roof she could easily follow him. But above rose the steep-pitched upper roof! What should she do if he went on? What should she do? She dared not call, for now the little figure, steadily climbing upward, stood on the shed roof; hesitated a moment, turned half towards her,—then turned back, and set his foot on the short ladder that led to the upper roof. Instantly Hildegarde's knee was on the first low window-sill. She was reaching up, on the point of raising herself to her feet, when she started violently, and nearly lost her balance. A hand was laid on her shoulder; a steady, restraining hand.



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"A LITTLE FIGURE . . . STOOD OUT CLEAR AGAINST THE DARK FIRS."

"What upon earth does this mean?" asked Roger Merryweather.

His voice was stern, or Hildegarde fancied it so; she answered like a child:

"I am going after Hugh!"

"Going after—" began Roger, stupefied. Then following her upward gesture, he broke off short.

"Go into the house, my child!" he said, quickly, in his own kind tone. "Go at once; you must not stay out another moment in this thin dress. I will bring him to you in the house. It will be only a minute now, and he will be quite safe."

With that he was up like a cat, clinging here, springing there, never pausing, never seeming to take his eyes from the little white figure, which had now reached the summit of the steep-pitched roof. Hildegarde gave one glance at the child, and saw him standing with outstretched arms on the ridge-pole itself. His voice came down, clear and calm.

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"I am ready, dear Bellerophon! We will fly together now, down, down,—"

The girl covered her face, and prayed. It was a breath of time, it was eternity, before Roger's voice came down to her, strong and cheerful.

"We will go down together, Hughie. I was up here, too, and I will take you down, because you will be more comfortable that way. Put your arms round my neck, so! Hold on tight—that's right! Now, down we go!"

Hildegarde stood still in the snow, her hands still clutching the window-sill. She seemed incapable of speech or motion; could only listen to the quiet, steady voice, as it soothed the now awake and frightened child.

"Why, I suppose you went up to get a ball, or something that had been thrown up there. Eh? No? Something about Bellerophon? Where is he? Well, he may be in the house, laddie. We'll go in and see, anyhow. Your Beloved is there, you know, and she will be—*Hildegarde!*"

"Yes, Roger!" said Hildegarde, faintly.

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"I told you to go into the house!"

"Yes, Roger; I am going!" And then Hildegarde sank down in a little white heap at Roger's feet, and knew nothing more.

CHAPTER XV.

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AT LAST.

HILDEGARDE was sitting by Hugh's bedside. He had been laid in her bed that night; how long ago was it? She hardly knew,—and was still too ill to be moved. A concussion of the brain, the doctor said, the result of his fall on the ice. There was danger of brain fever, but it might be averted. Absolute quiet for a few days, and the trouble might pass off without any serious developments. Meantime, a shaded room, plenty of ice, no noise, and as little change of faces around him as might be,—they would hope for the best.

Hildegarde had hardly left his side, save when Auntie came in to watch through the night, or her mother took her place for the short time that her strength allowed. Mrs. Grahame was far

from strong, and was not allowed to take charge of the nursing, as she would so gladly have done. Colonel Ferrers hung about the house all day, like a man distracted; and it took all Mrs. Grahame's tact, and all his brother's and Jack's watchful devotion, to keep him out of the sick child's room. He seemed to have aged ten years in these few short days. His ruddy colour was gone; his eyes had lost their fiery spark; his military stride had given place to an anxious shuffle.

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"We shall have you ill, sir!" Elizabeth Beadle remonstrated, with many tears.

"You ain't like Mr. Raymond, sir; you cannot go without your food. It's hard enough as I can't go to my baby, my own dear niece's child, to nurse him myself, as go I would if I was let, though Miss Hilda may be a better nurse, as you say; but blood is thicker than water, Colonel Ferrers, and if I have to have you sick, too, it will be more than I can bear, sir; yes, it will!" Thus Mrs. Beadle, with her apron at her eyes. The Colonel, roused for a moment from his anxious musing, turned upon her with something like his natural fury.

"*You* go to the child, Elizabeth Beadle? You, who cannot keep from crying for ten minutes together? If you would stop poisoning my food with salt water, ma'am, you might have less complaint to make of my not eating. You have no more sense, ma'am,—no more sense than—than some other people have. Don't look at me in that manner, I desire you! God bless you, my dear old soul; go along, will you, or I shall be crying, too."

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Rumours of these things, and others like them, came to Hildegarde, as she sat hour after hour by the sick child's side, shifting his pillow now and then when it grew hot, laying the cool wet cloths on his forehead, giving him food, drink, medicine, at the appointed times. The whole world seemed narrowed down to this one room; everything outside was unreal, all save the scene in white and black that she saw whenever she closed her eyes,—the moonlight on the snow, the black firs, the child in his white dress, fronting death with his sleeping smile, and by her side the friend who was to save him. How long ago was it? Had she been sitting here three days, or three weeks?

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Little Hugh lay still, with his eyes shut. He seemed unconscious for the most part. Only now and then came a motion of the head, a low moan that was hardly more than a whisper; then the blue-veined lids would lift heavily for an instant, and the sweet eyes look out, but with no light in them; and after a moment the lids would fall again wearily, and the heavy sleep close round him again like a curtain. How long would it last?

More snow had fallen. She heard the sound of bells, and the soft swish of sleigh-runners passing swiftly by. The voices of her neighbours came to her, now and then, but never calling loud and joyous, as they were wont to do. Every sound was subdued; every one moved softly and spoke low, with the sick child constantly in their thoughts.

Guests came to Pumpkin House; long-invited guests, who could not well be put off. Hildegarde knew this, and knew that her friends loved her and the child no less because they were now forced to play the hosts, and to make pleasure for the holiday visitors. Was this the evening of the Flower Party? Her dress was hanging ready in the closet. Such a pretty dress! She was to be a wild rose, and the graceful pink petals curved over the skirt, and curled upward to form the bodice.

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What a pity that some one could not wear it! She might send it over, in case some one of the guests had no costume ready. Bell was to be an apple-blossom; Gertrude, a lily. The twins would be splendid as Larkspur and Scarlet Runner. And would Roger—would he go in fancy dress? She could not imagine him doing anything of the kind, somehow. She thought of him in boating dress, or in his camp jersey and knickerbockers—or, as she saw him last, in evening dress, climbing over the snowy roofs—she shuddered, and laid her hand on Hugh's arm, to make sure that he was there. The child was safe, at any rate. He was not going to die. Hildegarde kept this thought resolutely away from her, and was only conscious of it as a dim horror, lurking in a corner of her brain. He would be better soon, perhaps in a day or two. It might even be that she would see Roger before he went back to the West,—for he would be going soon, no doubt. He would be sorry, she thought, to go without seeing her. But she had his gift; he had sent it to her the day after Christmas. She put her hand to her throat, to make sure it was there—the brooch that he had made himself for her, digging the gold, refining, hammering, fashioning it, all with his own hands. She would never wear any other brooch! Dear old Jack, too. He was missing her from his vacation, she knew. Her mother said that he and Bell were practising together every day, and that all the Merryweathers were delighted with him. He and the twins were becoming fast friends. But they all missed her. They all said that there was no luck about any of the houses, with Hildegarde awa'. The tears came to the girl's eyes. Everybody was so good to her, so kind, so loving!

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Hugh moved uneasily, and she bent over him; his lips moved. "Play!" said the child.

"Dear!" said Hildegarde, softly. "My laddie! Do you want something?"

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Hugh did not open his eyes, but a smile, or the shadow of a smile, hovered about his lips for an instant.

"Play—Jack—play!" he whispered.

"Yes, dear! He shall come. We will send for him; rest now, my boy, quietly!"

But now, seeing her mother at the door, Hildegarde stole softly to her, and told of the

whispered words. "Will you ask the doctor? He might—it might—do him good, if he is thinking about it? You will see what is best, dear!"

Mrs. Grahame nodded, and went away. An hour passed, as all the others passed. Then Hildegard heard steps on the veranda; the door opened and closed quietly; the next moment the voice of the violin came stealing through the house. Ah! what was it? Were angels singing the child to sleep? Schubert's Cradle Song; there is no sweeter melody on earth, and many times had Jack played little Hugh to sleep with it, in the days before he went abroad. Hildegard watched the child intently. At the first note of the music he stirred, and opened and closed his hands, which lay listless on the counterpane. Then, as the song flowed on, so low, so tender, it seemed the voice of a spirit, or of some wandering wind, caught and trained to melody; the brows which had been knitted, as if in an effort to think, relaxed, a smile came to the sweet lips and settled there happily. [286]

"Schlafe, schlafe, süsser, holder Knabe!
Leise wiegt dich deiner Mutter Hand."

"Sing!" whispered Hugh; and Hildegard sang, her heart beating high with joy and hope; for this was the first time she had been sure of his knowing her. She bent over him, hoping for a glance of recognition; but he did not open his eyes. His face seemed to clear and lighten every moment; it was as if a cloud were passing, and the day shining out fair and lovely; but he turned his head drowsily, and whispered, "Sleepy!"

Now Jack was playing the Chopin *berceuse*, and all the world seemed lulling to sleep; the sound floated in waves through the darkened room, whispering in corners, rippling round the drowsy child, bearing him on, away, through the gates of pearl, till now he was asleep, in no heavy lethargy this time, but lying easily, breathing deeply, his whole little form at rest, at peace. And seeing this, the weary girl beside him laid her head on the child's pillow, and borne on those waves of dreamy sound, she, too, passed through the white gates, and slept. [287]

They slept so all through that night. Mrs. Grahame and Auntie, coming to relieve Hildegard, could not bear to wake her. The doctor put his head in at the door, gazed for a moment, and then nodded, and tiptoed off down-stairs and home to bed, wiping his eyes as he went. The Colonel and Jack, making their last call for the night, heard the joyful report, and departed treading on air. And still they slept. The black woman nodded in her chair in the corner; she had put Mrs. Grahame to bed, and returned to watch the night with her charge, all the more precious now that her "own chile" was sleeping beside him. Now and then a coal fell, and tinkled in the fireplace; the night-light burned steadily, but the fire flared, and drooped, and leaped up again, filling the quiet room with flitting lights and shadows. Were they spirits, bending over those two fair heads on the pillow, side by side? The angels might be glad to come a good way to see such a sight as that, Auntie said to herself. And she nodded, and dreamed of the Golden City, and woke again to see always the same quiet room, to hear always the same sweet breathing of peace and rest and returning health. [288]

It was morning when Hildegard awoke; dim, early morning, with the stars still shining, but with a faint, pearly radiance growing momentarily stronger in the east. She wondered at first what was the matter, and why she was sitting up in bed, rather stiff, with soft things wrapped round her. Before she moved her eyes fell on the little face beside her, and she remembered all, and gave thanks to God for his mercy before she stirred. Raising herself softly, she saw Auntie sitting in her great chair, bolt upright, but sound asleep.

"Poor dear!" thought the girl. "She need not have come at all. We did not need anything, Hugh and I. We have had a good, good rest." [289]

Beyond changing her position, and stretching her limbs, cramped by staying so long in one posture, she did not move, but sat with folded hands, full of such happy thoughts that the morning seemed to come on wings of gold.

The sun was up before Auntie woke, and her frightened exclamation, "Fo' gracious goodness! ef I ain't be'n 'sleep myself!" though hardly spoken above a whisper, echoed sharply through the silent room.

Hugh opened his eyes, and his glance fell directly on Hildegard. He smiled, and stretched out his arms.

"Beloved," he said, "I am very glad to see you; but what are you doing in my room?"

Hildegard made no answer. She bent over and took the child in her arms; raised him a little, with his head resting on her shoulder, so that he could see beyond her. His eyes travelled round the room, growing rounder and larger every moment, as in the broadening light one object after another shone out, familiar, and yet strange. [290]

"Beloved," he said, "I beg your pardon! But what am *I* doing in *your* room? Will you make me understand, please?"

"You have been asleep, darling!" said Hildegard. "You were not very well, and—and you happened to be here at the time, and so—we put you to bed here, you see."

"I don't see very well!" said Hugh, in quite his own manner. "But probably I shall in a little while. How long have I been asleep?"

"Oh, quite a long time. But aren't you hungry now, little boy? See, here is Auntie, and she is going to bring you up some breakfast, the very best breakfast you can think of. What do you say to chicken broth?"

Hugh nodded and smiled at Auntie, who stood devouring him with her eyes.

"Thank you!" he said. "I think I shall be hungry,—when my think comes back a little more. My think—my mind—has been asleep, I am pretty sure!" he added, looking up at Hildegarde with his quiet, penetrating gaze.

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"If I had only just gone to sleep with my eyes, Beloved, I should remember about it; and I don't—remember—much of anything."

"Oh, never mind about it now, Hughie! When you feel stronger we will talk it all over. See! I want to bathe your face and smooth your hair before breakfast comes. Now you shall be my baby, and I will curl your golden locks for you. Shall I put something good in the water? There! Isn't that nice and fresh? And now you shall put on my dressing-jacket; my beautiful new dressing-jacket, that Bell made for me. Here it is, all fluttering with pink ribbons. Wasn't it dear of Bell to make it?"

"Bell!" said Hugh, meditatively; he seemed to be searching for something in his mind.

"Bell—Bellerophon!"

"Never mind about Bellerophon now, dear," said Hildegarde, trying to hide her anxiety, and to speak lightly. "We will have Bellerophon by and by; we don't want him here."

But Hugh was not to be turned aside; his brain was now fully awake, and at work, but his look was so calm and clear, his voice so natural and peaceful, that Hildegarde felt relieved in spite of herself.

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"I have to consider a little, Beloved," he said, cheerfully, "just to straighten out my think, which appears to be somewhat mixed. What—was—I—doing—on a roof?"

Hildegarde held her peace. The child must take his own way, she felt; she did not dare to cross him.

"I went up—on a roof!" Hugh went on. "I *think* it was a roof, Beloved?"

Hildegarde nodded.

"And there—I was Pegasus, you remember; I have been Pegasus a great deal lately, but I shall not be him for a good while now, because I have had enough,—I was Pegasus, and I wanted Bellerophon. The Christmas Tree frightened him away, so I came—somewhere—perhaps here? and I thought it was a mountain. I thought it was Helicon, and if I climbed up to the top, Bellerophon would come to me, and we would fly down and kill the Chimæra, don't you see?"

"I see, dear, of course! And then—?"

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"Then I called out to Bellerophon that I was ready, and we would fly. But—but just as we were going to fly, some strong person took hold of me, and I looked, and I was on a roof, with Captain Roger holding me. Where is Captain Roger, Beloved? And where was the roof?"

"The roof was here, dear child! You were walking in your sleep, Hugh. You climbed up to the upper roof, and—and Captain Roger saw you, and went after you, and brought you down. That is how you came to be in my room, Hugh. Now you understand it all, darling, and you will not worry any more about it."

Hugh looked relieved.

"Now I shall not worry any more about it!" he repeated, with satisfaction. "It *was* puzzling me dreadfully, Beloved, and I could not get straight till I saw how it was, but now I see. My head has been queer ever since I fell down on the ice; I think Bellerophon got bumped into it, don't you? But now he is bumped out again, and he may go and kill the Chimæra himself, for I sha'n't stir a step."

His laughter rang out fresh and joyous; and at the sound Mrs. Grahame came running in, at first in great anxiety, fearing delirium; but when she saw the two happy faces, beaming with smiles, and heard Hugh addressing her in his own quaint fashion, and hoping that she had slept very well indeed, she could not keep back the tears of joy. Seeing these tears, Hildegarde must needs weep a little, too; but they were such tears as did no one any harm, and Hugh said at once, "This is a sun-shower! And now we shall have a rainbow, and after that some breakfast."

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When the breakfast came, you may be sure it was served on the very best tray the house afforded,—the gold-lacquered one, with the bronze dragon curling about it; and the broth was in the blue Sèvres bowl, with golden pheasants strutting round it.

"Dem's de nearest to chick'ns I could find!" said Auntie, and Hildegarde forbore to point out to her that she, Hildegarde, had never been allowed to so much as dust this precious piece of china, much less to eat out of it. And the toast was like thin strips of edible gold, so that both Hugh and Hildegarde declared King Midas could not have had such a bad time of it after all, if he had a cook anything like Auntie. It was hard to tell who most enjoyed the broth and toast, Hugh who

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ate it, Auntie who made it, or Hildegarde who held the spoon, and broke off the crisp bits. It was a happy little feast, and the doctor was a joyful man when he looked in on it an hour or so later. He said that all would go well now.

"Slowly! slowly! No hurry! Keep him here a while yet, and don't let him see too many people; no excitable folks, who will weep over him,"—Hilda and her mother exchanged a guilty glance,—"keep him in bed for a day or two, till he gets his balance entirely. Good-bye! God bless you!"

The good man trotted off briskly, and they heard him greeting some one on the veranda below.

"Doing finely! finely! All right now; a little quiet, a little care,—going in? Yes! Oh, yes! See you all right! Told them to keep noisy folks away. Good-morning!"

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Mrs. Grahame went out, and spoke in a low voice with some one now in the hall. Some one was speaking in return, very low; yet not so low but that Hildegarde's heart began to throb, and the colour to mount high over cheek and brow; not so low but that Hugh, who had the fine ear of some woodland creature, sat up in bed, and clapped his hands.

"It is Captain Roger, Beloved! It is himself; do you hear his voice? And he must come up, please, this moment of time, to see me, and to let me tell him what is in my heart for him."

Hildegarde hesitated; there was a tumult within her that made her feel uncertain what was best to do or say; but in this moment Mrs. Grahame had brought Roger up-stairs, and now he was here, on the threshold. He was in the room; he was holding her hand, and looking at her with his bright, kind gaze.

Neither of them spoke; it was Hugh who broke the silence. Roger had sat down by him, after that first silent greeting, and kissed his forehead, and took both the child's hands in his.

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"I heard you, Captain Roger; I heard the first tone of your voice, and you sounded like an angel."

"Did I, Hugh? I don't think I look like an angel, do you? Did you ever see a picture of one with a moustache?"

"Perhaps not; but it says that they don't always look like themselves, you know. Many times they looked just like common men in the Bible. And you were an angel when you came to me on the roof the other night."

Roger glanced quickly at Hildegarde; the girl nodded.

"He knows," she said. "I could not keep it from him, the moment he was himself again. He pieced it all out, with hardly any help from me."

Roger looked grave, but his anxious look rested on Hildegarde, not on Hugh.

"Did you take cold?" he asked.

"I? No, certainly not! Why should I take cold?"

"In your thin evening dress!" said Roger, reproachfully. "With slippers on your feet,—there you stood in the snow, and would not go in when I told you. I have thought of nothing but pneumonia and consumption ever since. But—you look pretty well, I think!"

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Hildegarde laughed in spite of herself.

"I—I thought you believed in being wet!" she said.

"For myself—of course! We are all polar bears, more or less; but it is different with you."

"Very different!" said Hildegarde. "I had snow-boots on, Captain Roger, all the time! Your anxiety has been thrown away, you see."

"So!" said Roger, with a look of intense relief. "I never thought of that! I—I didn't think—"

"You didn't think I had sense enough!" cried Hildegarde. "No more I had! They just happened to be on my feet, because I hadn't taken them off. I had been sitting and looking out of the window, ever since the Christmas Tree."

"So had I!" said Roger. "That was how we both happened to see. The moral is—"

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He did not say what the moral was, but sat pulling his moustache, and looking at Hildegarde. Hildegarde felt herself blushing again; she tried to speak of some trivial thing, but the words died on her lips; the silence deepened every moment, and it seemed as if she and Roger were drowning in it, going deeper and deeper down, down,—

Hugh looked cheerfully from one to the other; he saw that they were embarrassed for some reason, and came to the rescue with his usual calm philanthropy.

"Have you forgotten what you wanted to say? When I am going to say anything, and then forget what I wanted to say, I say, 'I love you!'"

Roger broke into a short laugh.

"Thank you, Hugh!" he said. "There is not much need of my saying it, but—shall I, Hilda?"

Hildegarde could not speak. She looked up, and meeting her eyes, Roger held out his hand across the little bed,—the strong, faithful hand that had helped her now so many times,—and she laid hers in it, and felt its earnest clasp, and knew that there was no more any parting between Roger and her.

THE END.

Transcriber's Notes:

Obvious punctuation errors repaired.

The remaining corrections made are indicated by dotted lines under the corrections. Scroll the mouse over the word and the original text will appear.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HILDEGARDE'S HARVEST ***

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