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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE DAUGHTERS OF A GENIUS ***

Mrs George de Horne Vaizey

"The Daughters of a Genius"

Chapter One.

Unknown Cousins.

"What is your letter, my dear? You seem annoyed. *No bad news, I hope,*" said the master of Chedworth Manor, looking across the table to where his wife sat behind the urn, frowning over the sheet which she held in her hand. She was a handsome, well-preserved woman, with aquiline features, thin lips, and eyes of a pale, indefinite blue. She looked up as he spoke, then threw down the letter with a sigh of impatience.

"Oh, bad news, of course! When did we ever return from a holiday without finding something of the sort awaiting us? It's from Stephen Charrington. He says he would have written before, but heard that we were abroad, and did not know where to direct. Edgar is dead. He died a fortnight ago, and the funeral was on Friday week. I never knew a man who married improvidently and had a huge family who did *not* die before he reached middle age. It seems a judgment on them; and here is another instance. Forty-nine his last birthday! He ought to have lived for another twenty years at least."

Mrs Loftus spoke with an air of injury which seemed to imply that the deceased gentleman had died out of pure perversity, and her husband knitted his brows in disapproving fashion. Even after twenty-five years of married life his wife's heartless selfishness could give him a twinge of shocked surprise when, as now, it was obtrusively displayed. He himself made no claims to philanthropy, but one expected some natural feeling from a woman; and with all his faults, Edgar Charrington had had close claim on her sympathy.

"He was your brother, my dear," he said dryly. "I suppose the poor fellow would not have died if he could have helped it. We have not seen anything of him for a long time, but he used to be a most attractive fellow. I thought he would have made his mark. Never met a man with so many gifts—painting, music, writing; he used to take them up in turn, and do equally well in each."

"But excel in nothing! That was the undoing of Edgar; he had not the application to keep to one thing at a time, but must always be flying off to something new. That disastrous marriage was like a millstone round his neck, and practically doomed him to failure. Oh, I know what you are going to say. There was nothing against Elma; and you admired her, of course, because she was pretty and helpless; but I shall always maintain that it was practically suicide for Edgar, with his Bohemian nature, to marry a penniless girl, with no influence to help him on in the world. How they have managed to live at all I can't imagine. He never confided in me, and I made a point of not inquiring. To tell the truth, I lived in dread of his wanting to borrow money, and one has enough to do with one's own claims. I think he was offended because we never invited the children, for I have scarcely heard from him for the last five years. Really, it was too great an experiment I can't imagine what they must be like, brought up in that little village, with next to no education. Social savages, I should say."

"How many children were there? I've forgotten how they come after the first two. Stephen and Philippa visited us once long ago, and I remember thinking her an uncommonly handsome child, with a spirit of her own, which will probably stand her in good stead now. The boy was not so interesting. How many are there besides these two?"

"Oh, I don't know. Dozens! There was always a baby, I remember," returned Mrs Loftus impatiently. "Goodness knows what is to become of them now that they are left orphans, with practically no means of support. Stephen seems quite bewildered with the responsibility. He says he is anxious to see us, as his father's nearest relations, and to consult with us as to the future. I think we had better decline all responsibility. It is a thankless task to interfere with other people's business, and young folks are so opinionated. I shall write a letter of sympathy, and say that, as I know so little of their circumstances and surroundings, I do not feel myself competent to advise."

"Just as you please, my dear; but you must speak for yourself alone. I shall certainly have a chat with the poor young fellow. It is the least we can do, and I am only sorry I was not back in time to attend the funeral. I am afraid we behaved shabbily to poor Edgar while he was alive, and I should have liked to pay him some respect in death. This is Monday. I must attend to one or two affairs here, but I'll run down to Leabourne towards the end of the week, and put up at the inn. Tell Stephen I'll write later on and say when he may expect me."

Mr Loftus pushed his chair back from the table, and tossed his serviette on a chair. He looked decidedly ruffled in temper, and injured and sorry for himself into the bargain. If there was one thing he disliked more than another, it was to have anything approaching a dissension with the members of his household. "Peace at all price" had been the motto of a character kindly enough, yet lacking the necessary strength to make a stand for the right, and already he was beginning to doubt his own wisdom, and to reflect sorrowfully how much less trouble it would have involved to have taken Gertrude's advice. Half-way down the table he stopped short, with a sudden softening of the face, and laid his hands caressingly on the shoulders of a pale, languid-looking girl who had been a passive listener to the late conversation.

"You had better write too, and sympathise with your poor cousins, Avice. You wouldn't like it, would you, if *you* were to lose your poor old father?"

The girl smiled at him affectionately enough, but made no response until the door had closed, when she turned to her mother with an expression of real anxiety upon her face.

"Shall I have to wear mourning, mother! Will it be necessary?"

"Cer-tainly not! I should not dream of such a thing. It is quite out of fashion nowadays for any but the nearest relations, and it would be a sin to put aside all those lovely French frocks until they were out-of-date. It would be different if we lived in the same place; but you are not in the least likely to come in contact with your cousins. I can't think what has made your father take up this attitude all of a sudden; but if he insists upon going to Leabourne I shall certainly go too. He is so carried away by the impulse of the moment that there is no knowing to what mad plan he might commit himself. The best thing your cousins can do will be to stay quietly where they are and take in paying guests to make ends meet. Quite good people do that nowadays; and with so many girls they would not need much extra service in the house. From what Stephen says, I fear they have some notion of coming up to town, but that I shall strongly denounce. Most rash and improvident for them, and uncomfortable for us. They would, no doubt, expect us to take them up and introduce them to our friends, and would be offended when they discovered that we had no intention of doing anything of the kind. Much better stay where they are and work among their old friends."

"I should like to see Philippa again. It's an age since she was here, but I remember her quite well. She was so lively and amusing! And there is another girl just my age, with a pretty, uncommon name. Faith, is it? No; Hope. Uncle Edgar sent me a little sketch of her on my birthday years ago, and it was so pretty! I'd rather like to know my cousins, mother, if they were presentable. It's so lonely being an only child."

Mrs Loftus looked at her daughter, and something like a quiver passed across the hardness of her face. Avice was her darling, her idol, the only creature on earth whom she really loved; and every now and again a spasm of alarm gripped her heart as she noted the languid speech and movement, the fragile form, and pallid complexion which distinguished the girl from her companions. Everything within the power of love and money had been done to make her strong and happy, yet she continued listless and ailing, seeming to regard the very amusements provided for her as so many penalties to be endured with resignation. Something must be wrong—and very wrong—to make a girl of twenty-one assume so unnatural an attitude. The mother checked a sigh half-way, and said caressingly:

"There is no reason for you to be dull, dearest. I am always ready to invite any one you may fancy. Surely, with all your friends, you need not be alone. What about Truda Bennett! If you like liveliness you could hardly improve upon her; and The Knoll is a nice house for you to visit in return. Shall I write and ask her to come next week!"

"No, thank you, dear, I'd rather not Truda is very nice, but she tires me out. She dislikes being quiet, and cares only for rushing about all day long. She doesn't amuse *me*; I have to amuse *her*. The nice thing about relations would be that one would not have to be on ceremony with them all the time. Couldn't I go down with you to Leabourne next week, mother, and see what the girls were like, and if I should care to invite one of them here."

"You could, of course; but I strongly advise you to do nothing of the sort. Your uncle Edgar has been dead only a fortnight, remember, and though I don't think he was an especially devoted father, the children will naturally be upset and distressed. It would be very dull for you with the girls weeping, and your father and Stephen discussing money matters, and ten to one a dreary, uncomfortable inn. Better stay at home, and let me bring back a report. In any case you won't care to invite one of them here until the first few months are over and she is able to go about and make herself agreeable. It would be depressing to have her about in her first deep black."

"Oh dear, yes! I couldn't stand that. I'd rather be alone than have any one in low spirits," agreed Avice fervently, the idea that she herself might possibly help to cheer and console never dawning on her self-engrossed brain. "You say that the girls must be savages, mother, but I should think they can hardly help being interesting. Aunt Elma was a beauty, and Uncle Edgar was a genius—and some of them, at least, must have inherited his gifts. Why do you say he was not a devoted father? From my vague recollection he seemed very proud of the children."

"Oh yes, he was proud enough; but they worried him when they were young, and as they grew older I think he felt that they criticised him and realised how he had wasted his opportunities. He was devoted to Elma, for she worshipped him meekly all her life, and was convinced that no such genius had ever existed. Your father is right. I never knew a more brilliant young man than Edgar was at twenty-one; but what is there to show for it now? A few songs, two or three novels and volumes of poetry, and a number of pictures and sketches which he was ashamed even to sign! He was always growing discouraged, turning from one thing to another, and lowering his standard to meet the taste of the market. His songs became more and more clap-trap and commonplace, his stories more sensational, his pictures of the cheaply-pretty order which sell at provincial exhibitions. I believe at the bottom of his heart he realised his downfall, and when Elma died, and he had not her adoring admiration to keep up his faith in himself, he fretted himself ill. The last time I saw him he was a wreck—mentally and physically—and I fancy those girls must have had a trying time of it before the end."

Chapter Two.

Stephen's confession.

Stephen Charrington had expressed a wish to consult with his aunt and uncle less from any preconceived intention than from a feeling of helplessness which took possession of him as he penned the news of his father's death. It had seemed to him at the moment that the advice of any one older and wiser than himself would be of value in deciding plans for the future, but no sooner was the letter irrevocably on its way than he began to tremble at the prospect of telling Philippa of what he had done. Philippa had been left co-trustee with himself, and she was not a young woman who would meekly be put on one side. What she thought, she said; what she willed, she accomplished; and anything like interference was to her as the brandishing of a red rag in the face of a bull. Stephen resolved to wait for a favourable opportunity before breaking the news of the intended visit, and to introduce it casually in the midst of a general conversation, when there would be less chance of a "scene." On Tuesday he decided to speak on Wednesday; on Wednesday there seemed abundant reason why he should postpone the disclosure until Thursday; on Thursday his uncle's note arrived announcing his arrival on the following day, and there could be no longer delay. Stephen betook himself to the morning-room, where his sisters sat in conclave, and hid himself behind a newspaper, awaiting his opportunity.

Despite the gloominess of the autumn day and the mournful nature of the work on hand, the scene was far from being doleful. To begin with, the background was pretty—a long, low apartment, half studio, half workroom, its walls washed a rich crimson hue, and covered with unmounted sketches, plaster casts on brackets, and a hundred quaint, artistic odds and ends. Against this background the four sisters made an interesting group as they busied themselves with the sewing on hand. There was no money forthcoming to pay dressmaking bills, and little enough to buy material, so it was necessary to use up what was in the house—to turn and twist and remake, and cover over, and patch together—an occupation which involved no little ingenuity in addition to the mere manual labour.

Philippa stood by the table, the big cutting-out scissors in her hands; a handsome girl with clearly cut aquiline features, and dark hair which rippled back in a soft, smoke-like mass, and was coiled gracefully together on the nape of her neck. Her shoulders were broad and square, and had a trick of broadening still further in dignified, self-assertive fashion when their owner was annoyed or wished to exercise her authority. Madge always declared that she looked at Philippa's shoulders when she wished to see how the wind blew; but then Madge was so daring and inconsequent in her remarks that no one paid much attention to what *she* said! Behold her now, running seams on the old-fashioned treadle machine, with bent back and long, pointed chin poked forward over the needle. As often as not a jerk of the hands or an erratic movement of the feet would be followed by a jar, a knot, a breaking of the thread; and when this occurred Madge would clench both fists together and mouth dumb anathemas, the while she rolled tragic eyes to the ceiling. If there was one thing on earth which she detested more than another, it was plain sewing; but this morning she had gallantly volunteered to do the machining, and machine she would, no matter what tortures it might cost her! She was a little scrap of a thin, starved-looking creature, with a long, narrow face, plain features, and just the prettiest, happiest, most lovable pair of hazel eyes you can possibly imagine. Even to-day they looked happy, for there was a certain transparency and twinkling light in the iris which seemed independent of varying moods. Madge was eighteen, and was going to be an artist and have pictures hung on the line in the Academy or know the reason why, and in her opinion her time would have been much more profitably employed daubing in the attic than doing dull, useful work downstairs; but, as has been said, there are occasions when personal inclinations have to be laid in the dust.

Theo sat by herself, unpicking a coloured lining from a black grenadine dress, with an expression of tragic despair. It was not that she sorrowed for her father more deeply than her sisters, but it was Theo's nature to revel in emotion and deliberately to work herself up to the height of rejoicing or down to the depths of despair. She was a tall, graceful girl, with a face which was decidedly interesting if not regularly pretty, and her broad forehead and deep-set eyes seemed to portray a greater brain-power than that possessed by the rest of the family. Theo had written stories for her own amusement since the age of ten, and was even now engaged upon a full-fledged novel with which she hoped to burst upon an astonished world. It seemed a horrible, ghoul-like proceeding to examine her own feelings in order to be able to depict what Veronica, her heroine, should feel in the hour of her desolation; and she was disgusted with herself because, despite all resolutions, she had been mentally taking notes during the whole of the past week. Now, as she sat unpicking the pretty pink lining and casting it ruthlessly on one side, her busy brain was weaving a simile by which it appeared that all the brightness of life was left behind and nothing remained but blackness and desolation.

By Philippa's side—adviser, assistant, and architect-in-chief—stood golden-haired Hope, sweet as her name, and all unselfish anxiety for the good of others. Her white forehead was wrinkled with the strain of trying to induce two yards of silk to do duty for three, and she stood at attention, staring down at the pattern spread over the black folds, and rubbing her chin in solemn calculation as she discussed the knotty point.

"If I were to make the yoke of something else, and let the silk come from the arm-holes only, do you think we could manage it then? There is some of that old black velvet that could be used for the yoke, and it could be made to look very nice. I am afraid we couldn't match this silk even if we tried."

"Don't want to try," said Philippa shortly. "Spent quite enough as it is. Well, we shall either have to do it that way or make the sleeves of another material to match the skirt.—Theo, it's for you. Which would you rather have?"

"Don't care at all. Make it as you please; I take no interest in the matter," replied Theo, turning her head elaborately in an opposite direction and speaking in a tone of implied rebuke, which brought a flash into Philippa's eyes.

"Then you *ought* to take an interest! How are we to get on if no one will say what she wants? We want to do our best for you, and it's not much trouble just to say what you like, and help us to decide."

Theo looked round at that, and lo! her eyes were full of tears.

"I think it's hateful to think of clothes at all," she cried passionately. "What does it matter *how* they are made? Make me a sack if you like; it will make no difference to me."

"Yes, dear, it will; you are mistaken there. We shall have to wear these things for a long time, and the day will come when it would worry you very much to wear what you did not like. I know you feel no interest just now, but it would be really unselfish to rouse yourself enough to consider the question and help us with our work," said Hope, the peacemaker, speaking just in time to stop Philippa's sharp retort and so avert the threatened storm. Theo, the emotional, was always ready to be swayed by a soft word; besides, she adored Hope, and was especially sensitive to her wishes. So the black skirt was dropped to the floor, and she came forward obediently to discuss the important question of sleeves *versus* yokes. It was wonderful how particular she became when once her attention was aroused, and what precise instructions she had to give concerning shape and size. Madge dropped her chin until it looked longer than ever, and exchanged a sly glance with Philippa; for if the two middle girls paired together, the eldest and youngest had a wonderful sympathy of feeling, and rarely failed to understand an unspoken message.

"Very well, then; *that's* settled," said Theo, in conclusion. "And when it is done you needn't trouble to make anything more for me, for if there is any chance of going to London before winter I would rather wait and get what I want when we can shop in comfort. Did you see Mr Matthews to-day, Stephen, and tell him that this house might be to let at Michaelmas?"

Poor Stephen! He quaked behind his newspaper, knowing that his hour had come. "No-o, not to-day," he said feebly; and then Madge must needs fall upon him in her turn, and cry:

"Oh Steve, how foolish! We told you he was looking at the Masons' house last week, and if you put off seeing him he may take it before he knows there is a chance of getting this one. You really must go to-morrow. If we let him slip, goodness knows when we may find another tenant."

Stephen put down the newspaper and braced himself for the fray. After all, he was the eldest of the family, the man and master, and it was cowardice to shrink from what a girl might say! "I can't see him to-morrow, for I shall be otherwise engaged. I have had a letter from Uncle Loftus to say that he and Aunt Gertrude are coming down to-morrow to talk over arrangements with us and give us their advice as to the future. When I wrote to them last week I said I should be grateful if they would help us in this way, and it is good of them to come so far on our account. Uncle writes most kindly. He seems really interested. I think we have misjudged him in the past. At any rate, his wife was father's nearest relative, and it seemed right that they should be consulted."

Silence. The three girls looked fearfully at Philippa, and Philippa studied *her* pattern with an air of elaborate carelessness, making dainty snicks at the silk with the cutting-out scissors.

"And for how long, may I ask, have you invited them to stay? It may be necessary to make a few preparations, and as the house is hardly in a state to receive visitors, we had better begin at once."

"They are not coming here; they are to put up at the inn. Now, Phil, come! don't take it like that. Honestly, I never intended to do anything behind your back. I was so worried and puzzled when I wrote that I said on the impulse of the moment that I wished they would give us their help. I did not tell you about it, for, to tell the truth, I never expected that they would come. Surely you feel, as I do, that we are ignorant and inexperienced, and would be the better for advice from people who know the world. You are a sensible girl; I am sure you agree."

"I don't think it is a question of understanding the world so much as understanding *us* and our circumstances," said Philippa, standing up suddenly and facing him with kindling eyes. She seemed about to add something sharp and stinging, but controlled herself with a visible effort, and said quietly, "You should not have done this without consulting me, Steve. If we have to work together there must be confidence between us. But let that pass. I don't want to make unnecessary difficulties. We have enough as it is, goodness knows! I should welcome any advice that came from a reliable source, but the Loftus connection have shown so plainly of late years that they wished to have nothing to do with us, that I can't say their opinion will have any weight with me. They are selfish, worldly creatures, who only think of their own convenience."

"Even so, my dear, they may be useful to us. Worldly wisdom is an ingredient which has been conspicuous by its absence in our family up till now. It is time we made a reform," said Steve, with a tinge of bitterness in his voice; for it is a heavy burden for a young fellow of twenty-five to find himself saddled with the responsibility of an impecunious young family, and it was difficult to subdue a feeling of resentment as he remembered the careless *régime* of the past. "When it comes to the final decision you and I must give the casting votes, but it would be an ease to my mind, at least, if a man of the world like Uncle Loftus approved of what we were going to do. Come now, Phil! it would be to you too. If the worst came to the worst, and our venture proved a failure, it would be a comfort to you to feel that you had not acted alone."

"I don't think anything could comfort me then," said Philippa sadly. She leant against the table and snapped unconsciously at the air with the scissors. "If it will be any satisfaction to you, Steve, I am glad that they are coming; but, honestly, they won't alter my decision. I have thought and thought until my brain feels like a jelly, but there seems no way out of the tangle but the one we propose. If Uncle Loftus tries to dissuade me, I shall be obliged to tell him that in this matter I consider my own judgment better than his. How can he decide what is best for us? What does he know of our characters and possibilities? We are not like other families. We may be less amiable and worthy in many respects, but we *are* cleverer. It isn't conceited to say so, for it's true. We have inherited father's gifts, and ought to be able to do something with our lives. Other girls might be content to stodge along and never see anything of the world, and teach the doctor's children, and marry the curates, and be as poor as Job all their lives, but—"

"But that's not me nor you!" quoted Madge vigorously, stopping the machine with the usual jar and snap, and tossing her determined chin with an air of defiance. "I won't stodge for any one. If fifty aunts and a hundred uncles came and sat in rows round the room, and besought me to be a good little girl and stay where I was, I'd snap my fingers in their faces and tell them that I had to live my own life, and I'd take jolly good care that I lived it in my own way."

"Madge!"

"Sorry! Didn't mean to interfere. Thought you might like to know my sentiments—that's all. Keep me out of the room when the Loftuses are here if you don't wish them to hear home-truths. I don't mince my words when I'm roused, as some of you know to your cost I'll shake hands with them when they come, and say good-bye when they go, and they will say to each other as they drive away, 'Plain, heavy-looking girl that youngest! They will never be able to do anything with her.' Ha, ha!" and Madge laughed in a mocking, derisive fashion, which brought an answering

flicker of amusement to the anxious faces of her companions. It was evident that she fully expected an hour to come when her relatives would be stupefied to discover the genius of the age in the "plain, heavy-looking girl" whom they had despised, and it said volumes for her attainments that the prospect seemed within range of possibility to more than one of her audience.

Theo, however, had an objection to make. "I think you are very foolish if you do anything of the kind," she said severely. "We ought to make the best of ourselves, not the worst, if we want them to agree to our plan. They know that we are poor and have lived in the country all our lives, and I suppose they imagine that we are great, awkward, clownish creatures who know nothing about society or how things should be done. I vote we surprise them. Let's all put on our nicest things, and make the house look its very, very best, and prepare a *chic* little luncheon, and give them coffee afterwards; and let them see that we don't require any patronage, and are quite able to take care of ourselves. I'm sure that's the best plan; isn't it, Phil?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Go your own ways. You want to appear better than you are; Madge wants to appear worse. I'm going to be myself—horribly myself! I don't feel that I can pretend one bit. It's all very well for you; you are only standing on the ramparts. I have to go down and fight the battle," cried poor Philippa dismally, and Hope's arm stole round her waist with a close, encouraging pressure.

Hope was so sorry for every one in turn that she had no time to be sorry for herself. "It will soon be over," she whispered fondly. "Cheer up, Phil! By this time to-morrow they will have come and gone."

Chapter Three.

A Family Conclave.

Mr and Mrs Loftus arrived by the morning train, and drove up to The Cottage in the ancient village fly. Uncle Edward wore a black band round his hat; Aunt Gertrude an elaborately trimmed black gown, which had obviously *not* been bought for mourning. They stared curiously at the house as they approached, and from behind the blind in the front bedroom four pairs of eyes stared even more curiously at them.

"Thin lips and a sharp nose! Face like a hatchet. No love lost between *us*, my dear!" cried Madge shrewdly. "Nice old fellow, Uncle Edward! Looks as if he would be kind if he had the chance."

"Isn't she smart? She has taken the flowers out of an ordinary bonnet to make us think she is in mourning. I could swear there were once pink roses where that jet is now," said Theo of the sharp eyes, the while she glanced complacently at her own careful toilet. "I am glad I dressed up the drawing-room. Don't hurry down, Phil. Let them have time to look round and realise that we don't live in a hovel."

"I suppose I ought to fly to meet them at the door, but I don't feel in the least inclined. Now Steve is going out. He looks so nervous! I'm sure he wishes that he had not written. Do you think Aunt Gertrude looks more determined than I do? I expect we shall have an awful battle. You must come down with me, girls, and be introduced before we begin. I wish my heart wouldn't thud; I don't want to give myself away by looking nervous."

Then came a quick review before the glass, a creeping downstairs, and the entrance of four girls, one after the other, to greet the unknown relatives as they stood in the middle of the low, sunny-windowed drawing-room. Mrs Loftus put up her *pince-nez* and stared at each in turn—Philippa, stately and dignified; pretty, soft-eyed Hope; Theo, with her air of distinction and clever, interesting face; Madge of the long, sagacious chin and quick, light movements—and even as she looked she realised that these were no nonentities, but young women who would insist upon having a definite vote in the matter of their own destiny. They sat down and talked company talk, the little handmaid appeared and offered light refreshments to the travellers, Uncle Loftus made complimentary remarks, and everything was quite proper and orthodox, just like a scene in a book, until presently Stephen began to fidget and glance at the clock, and Philippa looked at her uncle and said, "Shall we have our talk now? The girls will leave us alone for an hour, and Stephen will tell you exactly what our position is, and what we are thinking of doing."

"Perhaps it would be as well. I am feeling so tired after the journey that I should like to go to bed early this evening, and have ordered dinner at the inn at seven o'clock. I hope that is convenient to you. I didn't know what your arrangements might be, or whether it would be convenient to have us here."

"Whichever you prefer. We hoped you would spend the evening with us, but I can quite understand that you must be tired," said Philippa, resolutely avoiding meeting Theo's eye lest she should be obliged to smile at the thought of the wasted culinary efforts over which that poor victim had been groaning the whole of the morning. Then the door closed, the two men automatically moved their chairs nearer the table, and Stephen nervously began his story:

"You know, of course, that my father was in bad health for some years before he died. His work was of the kind which was peculiarly dependent on health, for he had the artistic temperament and could do nothing to order. He was in chronic low spirits, and had not the energy to compose. In former years he made a very fair income; though, of course, it was always uncertain, and he could never tell from month to month what would come in. Sometimes he made a hit, and one or two of his songs bring in a fair royalty still. He was able to save a little, now and again, but the last two years he was constantly having to draw on his capital, until we find that there is practically none left. There is, however, an insurance which is intact. It seems that on his marriage my mother's people insisted on this as a provision for her in the event of his death; and as the premiums were paid up some years ago, it has not lapsed. It amounts to two thousand pounds, and is left to Philippa and myself in trust for the family, with full discretion to use it as seems best to us for our mutual benefit and advancement in life. There are six of us altogether. My brother Barnard is still at school, but we have given notice for him to leave at the end of the term, as he is sixteen, and must begin to work for himself. Two thousand pounds is not a large provision for six people."

Mrs Loftus drew in her lips and stared fixedly at a corner of the ceiling; her husband drummed upon the table and looked unaffectedly distressed.

"So bad as that! Tut, tut! Sorry to hear it—sorry indeed. And this house? You have made it very pretty—charming little bijou residence. Is the house your own?"

"No. We have it at a very low rental in consideration of the improvements which father made from time to time, but it is not our own. We think we should have no difficulty in letting it; for, as you say, it is pretty in its way. In fact, we know of a possible tenant already, and I think it quite likely that he may take the lease from us at Michaelmas if we decide to move."

There was a rustle of silken skirts as Mrs Loftus sat upright in her chair and gave a short preliminary cough before entering into the conversation.

"But if you get it cheaply, why should you move at all? I think it would be a fatal mistake. Living must be very cheap in this out-of-the-world place; and you have a garden, I see, which must keep you supplied with vegetables. If you kept fowls you might sell the eggs, and make a little extra money in that way. Quite a number of people go in for poultry-farming in these days. There is nothing *infra dig*, about it. I was saying to your uncle as we came down that it was quite likely that you could get paying guests if you went to work in the right way. Many people prefer living in the country in summer-time, and you could quote reasonable terms. Then there must surely be some teaching to be found in the neighbourhood, which would employ the girls who were not needed at home. Really I think, with a hundred a year assured, besides what you earn—you are in a solicitor's office, I believe, Stephen—you might get along very comfortably."

Philippa's eyes flashed, but her lips twitched at the same time, for it was too absurd to hear a stranger settling the destinies of a family in this swift, casual fashion. She dared not meet Stephen's eye; and even Mr Loftus seemed conscious of something wrong, for he said testily:

"Not so quick, my dear; not so quick, if you please! We have not heard what plans Stephen and Philippa have made for themselves.—I should like to hear your own ideas; for, of course, you have thought over the matter from all points of view. Let us hear what are your plans."

The brother and sister looked at one another, and there was a dead silence. Stephen was afraid to speak. Philippa was anxious not to monopolise the rôle of leader. She waited a full moment, but when she began there was no hesitation in her voice.

"We intend to go up to London to seek our fortunes. I agree with Aunt Gertrude that if we stayed here we should be able to earn enough money to provide bread-and-butter, and for the time being it would be the easier course. But we don't want to think of the present only; we want to provide for the future. I believe—and Stephen agrees with me—that if we settle here now it will practically mean vegetating for the rest of our lives. He will remain in the same sleepy office, where if he worked for twenty years he could never gain more than a few hundreds a year. Barney would come home and go into the bank. There is no other place to put him, and he is too lively and high-spirited a boy to trust by himself in a big town. Then there are the girls. They are all clever, and father was very particular about their training. He realised that he himself had made a mistake in trying too many things at once, so he made them each choose one hobby and stick to that alone. Hope is musical. She plays charmingly, can read music as easily as a book, and has already had one song published. She ought to study harmony under a clever master, and hear plenty of really good music. Father said that that was what she wanted most of all—to hear good music. She has gone through the drudgery; what she needs now is confidence and style; but it is impossible to give it to her here. Theo wishes to write. She is always scribbling, and father thought she would do well some day. There are one or two editors in London who knew him, and who would take an interest in her for his sake. She has a narrow life here, with very few friends. It would be the best training for her to have more varied experience. Madge is an artist. It is her ambition in life to go to a studio and work hard. She is very original, and has already quite a distinctive style of her own. Father was very proud of her, and used to say she was the cleverest of the family. Now that he is gone there is no one within miles who can help her with her work. It seems to me a very sad thing to turn these girls into governesses and household drudges when they have real gifts to cultivate."

"Quite so—quite so. I can understand your feelings; but you mustn't be angry with me, my dear, if I say that you must allow some discount for sisterly partiality. You think your sisters geniuses, but whether the public will agree with you is a very different question." Uncle Loftus was beginning to feel vaguely uncomfortable, and to scent a coming request for a loan of money, to be repaid at that indefinite period when the aforesaid geniuses should be recognised by the world. He was a good-natured man, and was quite ready to help these pretty, attractive nieces by an occasional present of a dress or a five-pound note; but his recollection of school bills paid for his own daughter made him shrink from the prospect of finishing the education of three ambitious and aspiring young "women." "Music and pictures are at a discount in these hard times, and half the artists, by their own account, are starving. A poor fellow brought me a couple of water-colours only last month. Wanted fifteen pounds for them, but was thankful to take five. Very good pictures, too! I don't pretend to understand these things, but they look very well in my smoke-room. As for story-writing, there are half-a-dozen stars who make a fortune in literature, but the vast majority of authors have a hard fight to earn a living. Many of them fail altogether and throw it up in despair, like that poor poet fellow—Chatterton, wasn't it? I never can remember names. Women aren't made to fight their way, especially country girls, as you are, who have no idea of life in a great world like London. Depend upon it, my dear, you would be far happier and safer where you are."

"For the present—yes. I said so myself. If we go to town we shall have a hard fight for the first few years; but we have faith to believe that we should succeed in the end, and we would rather fight our battles while we are young. If *you* were beginning life, Uncle Loftus, would you be content to settle down to lifelong obscurity and poverty, or would you feel that, come what might, you must go down into the arena and win a crown for yourself?"

Philippa threw back her head and looked at him with challenging eyes. So young, so brave, so ignorant, poor child, of the real meaning of the fight which lay before her, what wonder that the man's heart softened, and that he laid his hand on hers with a quick movement of sympathy. Mrs Loftus spied the movement with her cold blue eyes, and hastened to turn on the tap of cold common-sense.

"Perhaps you will kindly tell us in plain words exactly what it is that you intend to do. Your ideas sound very charming and romantic, but I do not understand how they are to be carried out. Education is a costly business, and it is your duty to save rather than to spend. How can you reconcile the need of earning money with the programme which you have drawn out?"

"I don't try," said Philippa boldly. "I know it is impossible. You will think our scheme very daring, Aunt Gertrude, but in plain words it is this: to take a flat in town in as central a position as we can afford, and to invest our capital in apprenticing Barney to a firm where he would have a chance of getting on, and in giving the girls the lessons and opportunities which they require. We know

quite well that we could not possibly do this on our tiny income, but we believe that it is the wisest way of using our capital, and that the time will come when we shall be thankful that we had the courage to do it. Th—that's all; that's our scheme," faltered Philippa, feeling that she had launched a bombshell, indeed, as her uncle fell back in his chair overcome with amazement, and her aunt raised protesting eyes to the ceiling as though calling Heaven to witness that she was no party to this mad folly.

"And—er—Stephen would, of course, give up his situation! He would—er—hope to find more lucrative employment in London?" she inquired, with a thinly veiled satire which roused the head of the family to dignified response.

"I have every reason to do so. In that respect at least we should not be reckoning in the dark, Aunt Gertrude. The solicitor's office here is but a small branch of an important one in the City, and my chief has been anxious for some time that I should remove to the head-office. He realised that there could be no promotion for me here, and has been a most kind friend—anxious to help us in every way. So far I have refused to move, for I like a country life, and—"

"He doesn't like it a bit. He longs to go to town, but he stayed with us because he knew we couldn't do without him," cried Philippa, with a loving glance, at which Stephen flushed and darkly scowled an order to be silent. Mr Loftus thought the byplay very pretty and creditable to both the actors, but his business instinct had been shocked, and he felt it his duty to protest.

"Spend your capital! Break into your capital! My dear girl, that is against all laws of prudence and business. I really—as you have asked my advice—I really could not sanction such a step as that. Your income, taking everything together, will not amount to over three hundred a year, I suppose? No! I thought not. Well then, remember that you would have to pay a high London rent, to feed and clothe six people, exclusive of a servant, to pay coals and gas, and constant travelling to and fro, and a hundred extra expenses, before you begin to think of lessons and concert-going and payment of premiums. It would cost you at least twice as much, and I doubt if you could do it on that. Consider what you are doing. It is a risk which I could never sanction—a big risk, a serious risk."

"I believe in risks," cried Philippa gallantly. "There is a tide in the affairs of men'—Risk—deliberate, thoughtful risk—is only another name for courage and enterprise and faith. What would become of the world if no one was willing to take a risk? What battle would be won if soldiers did not risk everything—health, limbs, life itself—to overcome the enemy! We know it is a risk; we have faced it with our eyes open; but we feel it is the right thing to do. It is our chance; we ought to take it. We are not acting thoughtlessly or lightly; we mean to work hard, and to ask God to help us and give us strength not to be discouraged—"

"We are not going to squander our capital, uncle," said Stephen; "we are going to *invest* it. Surely if you can equip six people with the means of getting on in the world, it is a better return for money than a wretched three and a half per cent. We mean to practise every possible economy in food and dress and amusements, and to be extravagant in one way only: the girls shall have no second-rate masters; Barney shall have a good start. They realise the responsibility which we are taking upon ourselves, and are prepared to work hard and shorten the period of probation as much as possible."





‘Do you ever think, my dears, of what would happen if your scheme were to fail?’

D. O.

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“Yes, yes—of course! Young things are always eager for change, and are ready to promise anything in advance. But suppose they *don't* make their way? Suppose your scheme is a failure? The money is left to you and to Philippa to spend as you think wise for the good of the family, so that legally there would be no claim upon you for what was gone. But you might find yourself in a most unpleasant position, all the same. If you spend it all within the next few years, Barnard may think himself ill-used when he grows up and feels the need of a few hundred pounds. The girls may want a trifle to buy a trousseau, or help in other ways, and may blame you for influencing them when they were too young to know their own minds. Do you ever think, my dears, of what would happen if your scheme were to fail?”

Did she ever think! Poor Philippa! How many scores—nay, hundreds—of times had the nightmare seized her in its grip! How often had she lain awake shuddering with dread, seeing the workhouse loom large in the foreground, and the reproachful faces of brothers and sisters turned mutely upon her! She shivered even now, and clasped her hands beneath the tablecloth; but she showed a brave face to the enemy, and refused to be cast down in his presence.

“It is no use beginning a fight with the expectation of being beaten, uncle. I should have no courage left if I did that. I have enough faith in my brothers and sisters to believe that they will not reproach us, whatever happens; and at the worst we could come back and try your plan in the country. We are strong and capable, and could always earn enough to live on, even if we had to separate and go out as cooks and housemaids. I am not in the least afraid of starving. We shall manage to keep ourselves without either asking or expecting help from outsiders.”

“Come, come, my dear! there is such a thing as being too independent. What is the use of relations if they can't help each other at a pinch? If you are really determined to try this scheme we must help you all we can. You must come to see us when we are in town, and we may be able to give you useful introductions. Avice will be pleased to make your acquaintance, and so shall we all.—We must do what we can for Edgar's children, mustn't we, mamma?”

“I cannot promise anything which would be an encouragement to what appears to me a piece of preposterous folly,” said Mrs Loftus coldly. “It is flying in the face of Providence to leave a comfortable home and deliberately court danger in this fashion. With your inexperience you will be ruined before a year is over, and who is to pay your debts I don't know. You can't expect any help from us if you act in defiance of our wishes. If you had already made up your minds, as appears to be the case, I must say it was very inconsiderate to inflict this long journey upon your uncle and myself for the mere farce of asking our opinion.—We had better get back to the hotel now, Edward. I am tired, and shall be glad of a rest.”

Mr Loftus rose obediently and followed his wife's lead to the door, but on his way he managed to whisper a few conciliatory words into Philippa's burning ear.

“Take no notice, my dear—no notice! Your aunt is hasty, but she will come round. I will see you again this evening when she has gone to bed, and to-morrow we will both come up again before we leave. Can't approve, you know—can't approve; but you are a brave girl. You mean well. Wish you good luck!”

Philippa's eyes swept over him with an expression of magnanimous superiority.

“Poor little down-trodden, trembling worm!” she was saying to herself. “Afraid to assert yourself and be your natural self for fear of what a woman might say! Oh, if I were a man! Oh, if I were your husband, my dear! I'd keep you in order; I'd tell you straight out what I thought of you.” Then aloud: “Good-afternoon, Aunt Gertrude! Mind the door-step. So awkward! *Hope* you will not be too tired. *Good-bye!*”

The door closed, and brother and sister drew back and gazed at one another with bright, excited eyes. “Well?” queried one. “Well,” answered the other. Then came the rush of feet on the floor, and down hurried the girls, one after the other, questioning, staring, agape with curiosity.

“Well—well—well—what did they say? Were they furious? Were they amiable? Did you stick to your point? Are they coming again? What is decided? Tell us quickly! Tell us at once!”

“It is quite decided,” said Stephen gravely. “We are going to London.” He put his arm round his sister's waist, and looked down at her with admiration. “Phil, you were glorious! You convinced me, at least, if you failed with the others. My last lingering doubt has disappeared. I'll begin preparations this very day.”

“Here endeth the first volume!” chanted Madge shrilly. “Now for excitement; now for romance; now for the third volume, with its honour and glory!”

But Philippa shivered and was silent. The moment of reaction had come, and in her heart she said: “But the second volume lies between, and in the second volume are all the trials and difficulties. Oh, it may be a long, long fight before we get to the happy ending!”

Chapter Four.

The Removal.

Two months later the plunge was taken. The Charrington family said good-bye to their picturesque country home, and established themselves in the top flat of a massive red building in the picturesque district of the Tottenham Court Road. With one exception the rooms were small; there was no passage to speak of; the coal-cellar was in pleasing proximity to the drawing-room door; the view consisted of a forest of chimney-stacks, and the air was thick with smuts. When Philippa made her first survey of the premises she felt that she was indeed coming down in the world; but when she heard the rent demanded she changed her mind with a shock of surprise. It was preposterous—incredible! The price of a palace rather than of a sooty tenement midway between earth and sky! For that price in the country one could have a tennis-lawn, and a stable, and a pretty flower and vegetable garden, to say nothing of a roomy and comfortable house. Off went Miss Charrington with her head in the air, but two long days of search brought her to the sad conviction that she would have to change her attitude with regard to London prices, and that the agent had been right in speaking of the flat as unusually cheap. She did not dare to take it, however, without a family consultation; so she secured the option for a couple of days, and went home with the story of her wanderings. The girls howled in unison at the mention of the rent, but, like their sister, were obliged to come round to the conclusion that the money must be paid.

"It is really and truly the best thing I could find in a central position," said Philippa sadly. "The question is—ought we to give up the idea of living in town, and take a little house in the suburbs? If we went out in an unfashionable direction we could get one for half the cost. I asked the agent, and he said there were any number to be had. They run them up in a few months—rows and rows of them—quite nice, compact little houses, with all modern conveniences—"

"I know! Thank you," interrupted Theo haughtily. "I've seen them from the train—hundreds of them—exactly alike, with sunflowers in the front garden, and the washing in the back, and such nice, sociable neighbours over the palings!"

"It's all very well, Theo, but can we afford to be snobbish? We shall have to pocket our pride, and save every penny-piece that is possible. If the house would be cheaper—"

"I'm not so sure that it would. It is different for a man and his wife. But you must remember that we should have four, perhaps five railway contracts to add to the rent. Our great object is to be near our work, and we might almost as well stay where we are as bury ourselves in an out-of-the-way suburb. If we go to the flat, Madge will be almost next door to the Slade School, the boys can come home for lunch, and Hope and I will be near libraries and concerts, and have some chance of picking up odd pieces of work. Suppose I go in for journalism? How am I to be in the hum of things when I live a dozen miles away, and have probably a bad service of trains?"

"Suppose I get accompanying to do at concerts? I intend to call on some of the lady professionals who sing father's songs and ask them to give me a chance. I shall have to get used to going about by myself at night, but it would be nice to be in a central position, and not have *too* far to go," said Hope wistfully; and her eldest sister, looking at her golden locks and sweet pink-and-white face, came to a sudden determination.

"We will take the flat. It's no use doing things by halves. We must hope to save the money in travelling expenses and lunches. I will write to the agent and settle it to-night."

So the flat was taken, and the question of furniture was the next to come upon the tapis. For the larger articles there could be no accommodation; they must be sold for what they would bring; but even without them there was an incredible number of possessions with which it seemed impossible to part. Curtains were faded, carpets so darned and mended as to be incapable of removal, but Edgar Charrington had been picking up artistic treasures all his life, and the rooms were crowded with quaint, old-world furniture. There was a Chinese cabinet, shaped like a pagoda, with coloured Chinese figures standing in the niches. It would take up more room than could be spared, but who could bear to part with it, remembering the fascination of those figures to the infant mind, the later joy of turning over the contents of the daintily fitting drawers, and sniffing the sweet, musty odour? There was an oak-framed picture of a church, with a real clock fitted into the steeple. A place for that must be found somewhere, or life would be robbed of one of its oldest associations. There was a black silhouette picture of Great-great-aunt Martha riding on a pillion; and another of Grandfather and Grandmother Charrington, with a family of six little Charringtons, clad in *décolleté* dresses, spencers, and pantaloons. What Goth or Vandal could find it in his heart to part with them? There was a collection of old china, of pewter, of old beaten silver; and such stacks of pictures, framed and unframed, as were quite alarming to count.

"What shall we do with them? Shall we pack half away in chests and ask the vicar to store them in his loft? He would be only too glad to keep them for us. It seems absurd to take such a collection. The place will look like a museum," cried Philippa, in despair; but the idea seemed to commend itself rather than otherwise to her ambitious young sisters.

"Just what it ought to look, as a temple of the Muses. No use pretending to be artistic against a commonplace background. Let us make our rooms as striking, and unusual, and 'ancestorial' as we can. I hate a house that looks as if it had been furnished yesterday. When people come to call, they will: have a pretty good idea of what we are by looking round our rooms."

"But who is to come, you dear little snob? We know nobody. I'm afraid the arrival of the Charrington family won't make much stir in the great Metropolis. I can tell you I felt a lone, lorn creature, walking about those crowded streets, and thinking that not a single soul knew me or cared whether I lived or died. As for Aunt Loftus, she may come once, perhaps, to pay a formal call, but we sha'n't be troubled with her after that; and I should be sorry to count upon uncle's promised introductions. We shall be left severely to ourselves."

"I am going up to London to know and be known, and I am not going to be left alone for anybody," cried Madge, tossing her head with a consequential air. "Seclusion may suit some people, but not this child. I'm going to make friends, and have a real good time. I think I shall start a *salon*, like that Madame de Thingummy in Paris, and make our house the resort of all the learned and celebrated people of the day. I've read about her in magazines, and it sounds quite easy. You don't need to be pretty, nor rich, nor to live in a big house; all you have to do is to announce that you are at home on certain evenings, and give cups of coffee, and be very vivacious, and talk, and make people laugh. *You* can give the coffee, and I'll talk! There's never any difficulty in that; the trouble is to be quiet. Wait until you see Cabinet Ministers, and Presidents of the Academy, and celebrated authors all driving up to our door, and toiling up hundreds of steps on purpose to enjoy the fascinations of my society!"

"Very well; I'll wait. It will be good exercise for my patience. For my own part, I have resigned myself to single blessedness, staying at home cooking dinners and darning stockings while you are out making your fortunes. I shall be too busy to be lonely; and if you earn money, I shall save it. We can't *all* be fascinating society leaders," said Philippa cruelly. She was so devoted to Madge, so tempted to applaud all that she said and did, that as a pure matter of conscience she felt bound to snub her now and then, just to show her impartiality! It had very little effect, however, for Miss Madge was too sharp not to see through the pretence, and refused to be in the least impressed by her strictures.

What a comfort the girl was in the weeks which followed, when the burden of responsibility seemed to weigh ever more and more heavily on the shoulders of the two young heads of the family! Hope was always ready with sympathy, Theo with dramatic invectives against the cruelty of fate, but Madge met difficulties with a laugh and a jest, and the sound thereof was as sunshine in the house. In some respects fortune favoured the adventurers at the start, for Stephen's firm made no difficulty about his removal, while Mr Matthews snapped at the offer of the house, and even promised to buy the fixtures "at a valuation." But here the disappointments began. Philippa instantly made a valuation on her own account, and added generously to the total in consideration of those manifold odds and ends which accumulate in households of thirty years' standing, but which are hardly worth the cost of cartage to pastures new: oddments of glass and china, of tin and iron and earthenware; mouldy volumes which no one will read; chairs minus a leg, rusty fire-irons, and damaged ornaments.

"With a little glue and patching you might make good things of them yet. Five pounds at the least! No; say seven pounds. Seven pounds added to forty-five—over fifty pounds in all! That ought to pay for the removal and leave something over for carpets and blinds. Thank goodness, I can mark *that* expense off the list!" sighed Philippa.

But alas for the frailty of human hopes! The valuer's estimate came to exactly a third of the sum expected, while one and all the dealers refused to bid for the valuable collection of antiquities, so that in the end a cart had to be hired to convey the whole to the village schoolroom, to be sold at a coming rummage sale!

Scarcely had poor Philippa recovered from this blow than the estimate from the furniture remover arrived to cast her down once more. She screamed aloud when her eye lighted on the horrible total. But what could one do? The things must be moved, and the firm in question had been recommended for its economy. It was appalling to think of the inroads into capital which would be made before the real life in town could begin; and Philippa needed all her courage when the hour came to say good-bye to the old home, and go forth to prepare the flat for its inmates. Madge was to accompany her, as a matter of course. It had been so certain that she would be chosen as helper that the matter was not even discussed. Hope and Theo took refuge at the vicarage, Steve with a bachelor friend; Barney was to remain at school until the half-term; and Madge decreed that no one was to approach the flat until all preparations were finished, and the artistic Steve of the whole ready to burst upon the enraptured sight. Philippa thought of the chimney-pots, and the soot, and the narrow passages, and the weary flight of stairs, coldly clean, with bottles of fire-extinguisher ranged on the wall at each landing, to remind the dwellers on the top story of the peril in which they lived! She thought of the narrow, begrimed windows, of the cheap fireplaces, and the saffron paper in the sitting-room, and felt it her painful duty to undeceive the young enthusiast lest the blow might fall too heavily upon her. But Madge refused to be cast down, and went through the ordeal of the first inspection with an undaunted smile.

"My hat!" she exclaimed as she peered out of the first window and beheld the roof-scape in all the beauty of a drizzling autumn rain; and though the expression was neither lady-like nor elegant, nor in the least degree appropriate, it yet had a quaint, whimsical sound which made Philippa laugh and draw a breath of relief.

"Yes! I told you so. I didn't exaggerate, you see. Cheerful and comprehensive, isn't it? This is the dining-room. Not much room to spare when you have the table in the middle. I don't know if we can get it in at all."

"If we can't we'll dine at small tables like a restaurant—far more *chic*. Not a bad little den when it is dressed up. Jolly cosy in winter. When summer comes I shall live up on the leads and make a roof-garden. Is there any way out?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. Come and look at the bedrooms. We can have first choice, I suppose, as I'm the eldest; but if you don't mind, I'd like the girls to be at the front. You could hardly imagine that the one at the side could be smaller and more dreary, but it is; and Theo would be so wretched! Do you think we could possibly get our things in here?"

Madge stood prospecting the small square box with a ruminating gaze. "Bed there—dressing-table there—wash-stand there—chest of—No; can't be done. We shall have to do without a dressing-table, and use the top of the bureau. We can manage all right that way; but you will always have to get up first, and make way for me while I have my last little snooze. It will be good practice for our tempers, for we really daren't quarrel in such very close quarters. Let's look at the sitting-room for a change. You said that was a decent size."

"Oh yes—quite; and a pretty shape, too. Don't you like the shape! Don't you think that rounded window is sweet in the corner? It would make a dear, quiet little nook if it were curtained off; wouldn't it dear?" cried the eldest sister, anxious to divert the artist's eyes from the saffron paper, with the aggressive roses and the gilded leaves, which was in such disastrously good condition that the company could not really be expected to replace it.

"Yes; I'll sit in there when I'm engaged, and let the cord go free. A very good room, with plenty of possibilities. Nothing square and stiff about it. That corner would do charmingly for the cabinet; and we will fit in shelves for the china in that funny little niche. We must keep the middle of the floor as clear as possible, for I shall want space for my receptions. *Philippa Charrington!* Do you mean to look me in the face and say that you are responsible for this paper?"

"No, no—of course not. The last tenant left it. I begged hard for another, but it was no use. Make the best of it just now, there's a dear, and perhaps in a year or so we may get another."

"We are going to have another before the week is out," declared Madge; and when her sister protested, "Look here," she said sturdily, "let us come to a clear understanding. We made up our minds to make this move and to face the cost, and we are not going to spoil the house for the sake of a few pounds. Before we have done with putting things in order we shall have a dozen unexpected expenses. Things won't fit and will have to be altered; we shall have to buy little fixings, and have workmen in and out. If you are going to groan over every sixpence we shall have a dismal old time. Make up your mind to pay and be cheerful, since you've got to pay whether you like it or not. About this wall-paper! I suppose there are some families who could live in peace and happiness staring at yellow cabbages, but we are not one of them. We inherit artistic fastidiousness, and should hate them worse every day of our lives. When we can't afford to go out for amusements, isn't it our duty to make home as attractive as possible? When we shall spend a round hundred over the removal, is it worth while to spoil our best room for the sake of an extra sovereign?"

"You can't possibly—"

"Yes, I can. I can buy a self-coloured paper for next to nothing—a pretty soft blue, I think, to make a good background for the pictures—and hang it myself, to save the expense of the workman."

"You can't possibly—"

"Nonsense! I did my own room at home, and there's no matching about a plain paper. I could not face Theo with that atrocity on the walls. And besides, think of my *salon!*"

"Oh, well! have it your own way," Philippa cried, with affected disgust.

It was impossible not to feel more interest in the room now that it could be imagined in its pretty new dress, and the discussion of how it should be arranged and decorated occupied an hour out of a dreary wait. The sisters had slept the night before at a boarding-house, and had hurried to the flat directly after breakfast, so as to be ready to receive the furniture at ten o'clock as agreed. At eleven o'clock there was no sign of the vans; but no one expects furniture-vans to be punctual within an hour or two, and until noon the girls managed to possess themselves in patience, and to find amusement in wandering from room to room. But when one o'clock drew near the matter became serious. They had brought a tea-basket with them, but there were no chairs on which to sit, no table to hold the cups and saucers. They were growing tired, and were longing to get to work while daylight lasted, and to have a bed to sleep on before night fell. It was two o'clock before the first van arrived, and seven before the men departed, leaving the two young mistresses to thread their way between stacks of furniture, unopened crates, and boxes of luggage. There was no room for a servant to sleep in the flat, and the charwoman who was engaged to help could not come until the following day, so it was hopeless to try to do more than get one bedroom in tolerable order. By Hope's forethought the necessary blankets and linen had been packed in one box and plainly labelled, so preparations were soon made, and by eight o'clock the tired workers were already longing for bed. Downstairs in the basement was a public dining-room where dinner could be obtained for a shilling a head; but they were too dishevelled and footsore to feel inclined to appear in public, so they refreshed themselves instead with more tea, more cakes, more dried-up sandwiches. Philippa leant back in her chair and sighed heavily as she looked first at her roughened hands, then at the hopeless disorder by which she was surrounded.

"I used to dream," she said slowly—"I used to dream of coming up to London. Father seemed so often on the eve of doing something great, and I used to imagine what it would be like if the book really turned out as he expected, or the picture made his name famous. He would have brought us to town, and we should have been rich, and every one would have wanted to know us—"

"I know! So have I. 'Beautiful Miss Charringtons—the rage of the London season.' That's the kind of thing, isn't it? I'm not beautiful, of course, but I'm vivacious—that's my point. I can *espiègle* fifty times better than Hope, though she is such a darling. You are very handsome, Phil, when you look pleasant; and Theo has the air of a princess in disguise. We are an interesting family. It seems hard lines that the world should not know us. We do seem slightly—just a little—what you might call *cornered* up here."

"We do indeed. Oh, it is different—so different from what I expected!" faltered poor, tired Philippa, with a sob; and then of a sudden her fears and dreads caught her in a grip from which there was no escape. She looked round the strange, unlovely room, through the bare window at the great city, lurid and threatening in the light of many lamps, and trembled at the thought of what she had done. She had been as a mother to these children, and she had brought them away from their peaceful home to face a thousand trials, a thousand difficulties; Stephen, constitutionally despondent, to be burdened with fresh responsibilities; the girls, ardent and credulous, to be ready prey for unscrupulous acquaintances; Barney, pining for mischief, to a swift and certain ruin! Her face blanched; she held out her hands to her sister with a gesture of terrified appeal.

"Madge, Madge, I'm frightened! Suppose it is all a mistake! Suppose we fail, and all the money goes, and we are left penniless and alone in this great wilderness! I have read of it so often: people come up hoping to make their fortunes, and the time passes, and they move into smaller and smaller rooms—and no work comes—and they fall ill. It is my doing! I persuaded Stephen. Oh Madge, if it's all a mistake, you will believe I did it for the best, won't you? I was not thinking of myself. It would have been easier for me to stay where we were. You will not blame me if the money goes and there is none left? Promise that you will never blame me."

But Madge lay back in her chair and folded her arms out of reach of the trembling hands.

"I will, though!" she replied bluntly. "I'll make an awful row; and quite right, too, for it *will* be your fault. If you lose heart the very first night, and fall to crying and groaning, how do you expect to get on? If *you* get low in your mind, Steve will be indigo, and Hope and Theo will have no spirit left in them. As for me, I'm not *going* to fail, nor fall ill, nor starve, nor throw myself over London Bridge, nor anything else interesting or melodramatic! I've always longed to come up to town, and now that I am here I am going to enjoy myself in the best way I can. It is ripping to work hard when you feel you are getting on, and a little taste of success now and then will be a wonderful fillip. There must be some compensations for being poor, and I mean to find them out, and see if I can't get as much fun for sixpence as Avice Loftus does for a sovereign."

"I—I believe you will," said Philippa, with a feeble laugh. "You mustn't think me a coward, Madge; I could be brave for myself; but it is the awful feeling of responsibility that weighs upon me. All this day I have been saying to myself, 'Now we are here. What is the next step? What ought we to do next?'"

"Go to bed, I should say. You look as if you needed it," came the curt rejoinder; and at that Philippa was obliged to laugh outright.

"Oh, Mr Dick, Mr Dick! your common-sense is invaluable. Come along, then; let us go. We shall need all the rest we can get to prepare us for our hard work to-morrow."

Chapter Five.

First Impressions.

A week after the girls had taken possession of the flat Stephen joined them, and spent his evenings carpentering, hanging up pictures, and laying carpets, as a pleasant relaxation after a day's work in the City. He had been unpleasantly surprised to discover that, though the firm for which he worked was of long standing and first-class position, its offices were by no means so large or so comfortable as those which he had left behind in the little country town. The room in which he worked was so dark that the gas seemed to be burning all day long; the windows looked out on a narrow side-street; there was a continual roar of traffic, a rumbling from the trains underground. His head ached, and he found it impossible to concentrate his thoughts. But when the long day came to an end, there was a certain exhilaration in walking home through the crowded streets, in looking at historic scenes, and feeling that one was an inmate of the greatest city, of the capital of the world!

Every evening, too, the flat looked more home-like, as suitable resting-places were discovered for the old furniture, and the familiar pictures smiled a welcome from the walls. Madge's paper-hanging had been a success of which she was justly proud, and the little dining-room looked both pretty and cosy when the curtains were drawn and the lamps lighted. The girls were tired but cheerful, and had always amusing little anecdotes to relate as gleanings from the day's work; the workmen, the charwoman, the porter at the door downstairs, were all so different from the country-folk to whom they had been accustomed; and imitation of the Cockney accent proved an unending source of delight. Madge cultivated special sentences with a view to impressing her sisters on their arrival, and when they drove up to the door, insisted upon "p'ying the keb" with a vehemence which left them speechless with consternation.

Hope and Theo were conveyed upstairs flight after flight—for the lift had not yet been introduced into these unfashionable mansions—and when at last they could go no farther, lo! there was an open door, a blaze of light sending forth a welcome, and the new home all ready to receive them, even to the very tea on the table, and hot water in the basins in the bedrooms. It was delightful to meet again, to have the first meal in the new home, to feel that the step so long contemplated was an accomplished fact; and if a certain amount of disillusion had to be endured, the new-comers had enough good feeling to notice only what they could admire. Dark though it was, it was scarcely seven o'clock when the evening meal was finished; and in the state of pent-up excitement in which the travellers found themselves, it seemed impossible to stay quietly indoors.

"Couldn't we *do* something?" asked Hope wistfully. "I feel like a caged lion shut up here, knowing that London lies outside. We need not go to bed for three hours at least. Oh Steve! the top of an omnibus—a drive along the streets, with all the lights—past Saint Paul's and the Abbey, and along the Embankment. Could we do it? Oh, do you think we might do it?"

The eager voice and pleading eyes raised a general laugh of amusement, and even the prudent Stephen could find no objection to so innocent a request.

"Well, really, I think we might rise to that. Put on warm coats, and we will lock the door behind us and sally forth. An omnibus to Saint Paul's, and another to Victoria Station, and back the best way we can. I don't know the ropes yet, but we shall easily find out. It will do Phil and Madge good, too, for they have hardly stirred out of the flat this last fortnight."

No sooner said than done. It was astonishing how quickly hats and jackets were donned, and in a quarter of an hour's time the four girls were fearfully clambering up the narrow steps leading to the top of a "City" bus, and taking their seats on the foremost benches. Hope took an outside place, but begged to change seats before she had driven a hundred yards; at every turn and crossing her heart died within her, and she seemed to look death in the face. She hung on to Philippa's arm and groaned incessantly, but when asked if she would like to return home, "Oh no, no! I love it," she cried, and groaned again, more fearfully than before.

The other occupants of the benches stared with curious gaze at the five young people, whose animation was in such marked contrast to their own phlegmatic calm; and Theo studied them in her turn, making up little romances concerning them, as her nature was. "That fat dark man is married to the little woman in blue. She was left an orphan, and he was a friend of her father's. He offered to marry her, and she was lonely and sad, and didn't care very much what she did. He is very kind to her; he is carrying all the parcels; but her heart isn't satisfied. She stares before her all the time, and never speaks... The girl with the pearl beads serves in a shop. She is going home to a suburb, and her 'young man' will meet her at the station. They are going to have a little shop together, and she is thinking how she will manage it. How she does turn and twist! Her hair is like a great turban round her head. She would be pretty if she would not spoil herself so... That poor, sad-looking young fellow has just had notice to leave his situation. He is thinking how he can tell his wife. He will put his arms round her, and they will cry together. She will kiss him and say, 'For better, for worse, dear; for richer, for poorer.' Her voice will be like music. He will look at her, and his face will shine. Oh dear! I am crying myself. How stupid! I'll write an article—'On a City 'Bus'—a character sketch, short and strong and dramatic. Where shall I send it?"

She went off into a reverie, turning over in her mind the names of different papers and magazines, planning, wondering, weaving dreams, while the omnibus made its way down Holborn towards the Viaduct. Madge and Steve were chattering gaily together. Hope sat with clasped hands, gazing eagerly ahead for the first glimpse of the majestic dome. Tired Philippa blinked at the rows of lamps, the flaring advertisements, and gaily lighted saloons, and wished that the drive would last for hours, so that she might sit still and feel the refreshing night-air play upon her brow. She groaned when the stoppage came and Madge pulled her impatiently by the arm; and had nothing but yawns to mingle with her sisters' ecstasies as they stood at the corner of the Churchyard, and gazed and gazed until it seemed that they would never tear themselves away. Hope was hearing in imagination the swell of the great organ, the reed-like sweetness of the voices of the white-robed choristers. Madge was already painting a picture of the great edifice by night, the twinkling lights beneath, the vast outline losing itself mysteriously in the clouds.

Theo was trembling, and biting her lips to keep back the tears. To her it was not a building at all; it was a sign—a symbol! The wide steps were not empty—she saw on them the blaze of great national pageants; the wide nave was filled with happy faces, with black-robed women who wept and wrung their hands; in her ears was the tramp of armed men. She shivered and drew her cloak closely round her. When the next omnibus for Victoria came along she took a surreptitious opportunity of flicking the drops from her eyelashes. Some day she would write about this too! Oh, what wealth of subjects, what capital, what inspiration in this wonderful, throbbing world! And then Stephen tapped her on the shoulder and cried a well-known name:



Well, it was a wonderful drive !

"Fleet Street, Theo! Allow me to introduce you. Your special beat, my dear."

"My publishers! Where are my publishers!" cried Theo loudly, as though she expected to see the heads of the great firms ranged in a body to greet her.

The other occupants of the benches overheard her words, and gazed upon her with becoming awe. This was evidently a distinguished author! Note her well—consider her features, so that she may be recognised by the portraits in the shop windows! Philippa smiled whimsically at the thought that already Theo had made an impression. What further triumphs or humiliations had this Fleet Street in store for her?

Well, it was a wonderful drive! If Saint Paul's had been impressive, what about that glorious pile of buildings at Westminster, and the first glimpse of the river by night! It was like a dream—a wonderful dream—in which the imagined glories of the world passed in review before the eyes.

That night the girls were in the clouds, lifted far above mercenary anxieties; but they came back to earth again next morning when their boxes had been unpacked and stored away, and they were confronted with the all-important question of the next move. When lunch was over silence fell suddenly upon the little room, and four pairs of eyes met in solemn conclave.

"I—er—I shall go round to the Slade School and make inquiries," said Madge quickly. "We are settled down now, and must lose no more time. I shall ask what is the very first day I can join."

"I shall write to Mr Hammond, the editor of the *Casket*. His firm publish books as well as the magazine, and he took most of father's things. I shall ask him if he can see me for ten minutes, as I am thinking of devoting myself to literature as a profession, and should be grateful for his advice."

"I—er—I am going to pay a call at Hampstead," said Hope, trying to look confident and self-possessed, but flushing a tell-tale pink all over her delicate face. "You remember the name of Miss Minnie Caldecott, who sings some of father's songs? I found one of her cards, and she is at home every Tuesday afternoon. I thought if I went early I might see her before any one else arrived. I have been working at that new song ever since you left, Phil, and it *is* pretty! It's the best thing I have written, and if she took a fancy to it, and promised to sing it at concerts, it would be so much easier to find a publisher. If I can summon courage I shall ask her to let me accompany her as well. If I could sell a few songs, and make a little money by playing accompaniments, it would help to pay for my lessons."

Poor Hope! She looked at once so frightened, so eager, and so pretty that her sisters broke into a simultaneous murmur of sympathy.

"I'll go with you," said Philippa quickly. "You must have some one to support you, poor dear! And how—oh, how are we going to find our way?"

"Ask the porter downstairs. We shall have to go about alone, so the sooner we puzzle it out the better. Yes, do come, Phil! If you don't, I shall probably run away as soon as I've rung the bell. Will she be very formidable, do you think?"

Philippa did not know, could not conjecture. Professional singers existed for her only on the programmes of concerts. She had never heard one more celebrated than Miss James, the singing-mistress from Coventry. Sometimes, she believed, they were paid fabulous prices for singing; but Minnie Caldecott did not seem to come in the first rank. Perhaps she, like themselves, was struggling to make her name.

The girls found their way to Hampstead with wonderfully little trouble; but it was more difficult to find Mayfield Road, and they wandered about for half-an-hour before discovering its whereabouts. It was not an attractive situation; neither was the house a palatial residence; and though Miss Caldecott was "at home" as usual, the costume of the servant-maid left much to be desired. She led the way down a narrow entrance-hall, and showed the visitors into a room at the back of the house, saying that Miss Caldecott would be with them in a few minutes' time.

It was barely half-past three, yet two lamps were already burning under elaborate pink shades, and there was a profusion of flowers on the mantelpiece and on the small tables with which the floor was crowded. The piano stood open, with a litter of torn sheets on the top, and there were photographs—photographs everywhere—of extraordinary-looking people, who all seemed to write their names underneath with fat quill-pens and many dashes. The lady with the little ring in the middle of her forehead was "Mabs;" the one swinging in a hammock was "Bella;" "Fanny" smirked from a bower of palms, and wore ropes and ropes of pearls round her neck. There was a framed photograph on the wall with a signature like the rest. From across the room Hope recognised a familiar name, and was about to rise to study it close at hand, when swish-swish came the rustle of silken skirts, the door opened, and Miss Caldecott herself made her appearance.

Chapter Six.

Hope's First Venture.

Miss Caldecott was tall and stout, had wavy hair and arched eyebrows, and wore a slightly *decolleté* gown of blue silk, a trifle soiled if you looked at it in a critical spirit, but wonderfully elaborate and becoming. The broad, beaming face was young, and but for its undue size would have been strikingly pretty. She looked at the sisters, showing her straight, white teeth in the most friendly of smiles, and squeezed Hope's hand until she winced with the pain.

"How do you do, dear?" she said. "How d'o, dear?" to Philippa. "Wretched day, isn't it? So good of you to come! Sit down and rest. I always flop on the sofa the moment I come in. So tiring dragging about, isn't it? But you are thin. Wait until you get fat like me."

Her shoulders shook; her eyes danced; the dimples dipped in her round, pink cheeks. Philippa and Hope were obliged to laugh in sympathy, but it was very embarrassing; she evidently mistook them for old friends. Hope cleared her throat and began the rehearsed explanation.

"I am Hope Charrington, and this is my sister. You knew my father—by name at least. You used to sing some of his songs."

Miss Caldecott looked blank; then she began to laugh. It appeared that she was always laughing.

"Then I didn't know you after all! Heaps of people come to see me, and I've the silliest memory—always forget what I ought to remember. Doesn't make much difference, does it? I know you *now*. Sung your father's songs, did I? Charrington! Charrington! Don't remember. What were they called, do you know?"

Hope's heart sank. She had expected the name to act as an open-sesame, and it was not even recognised.

"One was 'A Song of Summer,'" she said slowly, "and another 'Into the Night.'"

"La-la-la-La! Ta-ta-ta-Ta! Refrain went like that, didn't it? I remember. Pretty change in the second verse. High G sustained in the last bar. I used to bless him when I came to that note. And he is dead, you say? What a pity. So clever, too! Do you compose? You have a musical face."

Here was a lead, indeed! Hope flushed with eagerness, and her voice broke with a little nervous tremor. Miss Caldecott was so friendly, so open, so far removed from being formidable that it was impossible to believe that she could refuse her request.

"Oh yes, I do. That's what I came to speak to you about to-day. We have come up to London to try to find work, for we are very poor. As you had liked father's songs, I was going to ask if you would be so very, very kind as to try one of mine. I have it with me now. Messrs Holding and Co. published one for me before, and if you liked this, and would promise to sing it, they would be so much more willing to accept it. It is very bold of me to ask. I am horribly nervous, but you are so kind."

Miss Caldecott laughed and shook her head.

"Not in business matters, dear," she said. "I have to keep my wits about me in business. If you knew the shoals of things I have sent to me! But I hate to say no. Got the song with you, do you say? Strum it over, like a dear, and let me hear how it goes. Sing it too, if you can. I've got a horrid cold."

Hope rose eagerly. She had been prepared for this, and was less nervous in playing than in speaking. The piano was delightful; she was tingling to make the most of her opportunity, and played the introductory bars with a dainty finish which brought Miss Caldecott's eyes upon her with an appreciative flash. She listened in silence to the first verse, nodding her head to and fro, then turned to Philippa with another beaming smile.

"Nice little pipe, hasn't she? Sweet and simple like herself. I say! it wouldn't go far in the Albert Hall, would it? Let me try a verse." She put down her hands on either side, lifted herself from her low chair, and went over to the piano. "What are the words? Oh, I can see. Fire away, then, and I'll see what I can make of it."

"Pack clouds away, and welcome day—
With night we'll banish sorrow.

"Funny words, dear! Where did you get hold of them? It's not bad, you know—not half bad—what I call graceful. Let's try again, and go on to the next verse."

This time she drew herself up and sang with careful attention. The full, rich tones of her voice flooded the room, and Hope thrilled with delight at the sound of her own creation. Never—no, never—had she imagined that it could be so charming; and the last verse was the prettiest of all. Surely if Miss Caldecott liked the beginning, she would be enraptured with the end!

But, alas! at the conclusion of the second verse Miss Caldecott crossed the room and threw herself on the sofa, with a resounding yawn.

"Thanks awfully, dear. How clever of you! It really is sweet. Doesn't quite suit my voice, though, does it? And I don't like those accidentals. They are tricky, and I'm such a careless creature. Where did you pick up the words? I don't know the author, but you can tell him from me that he can't write songs. Not at all catchy words. He'll have to do better than that. Don't sit perched up there any more, dear; you look so uncomfortable. There'll be some other people coming presently, and we'll have tea. I bought some lovely cakes from Buzzard's. Always make a bit of a splash on my at-home afternoons, you know, for it's the only entertaining I do. I'm in digs here, and very bad they are, too. But what can one do? They don't send for me at the Albert Hall, dear. It's a shame, for I could do ever so much better than some of those old, worn-out things who only trade on a name. My voice is fresh, and a jolly good one, too, though I say it myself. Where are *you* living, dear? In this neighbourhood?"

Philippa replied. Hope was too disappointed, too cast down, to be able to speak. Miss Caldecott had seemed so pleased; the song had sounded so charming from her lips. At one minute acceptance had seemed certain; at the next the subject was waved aside, and apparently dismissed from consideration. She pressed her lips together and stared at the mantelpiece, with its bank of chrysanthemums in cream-jars, its photographs of becurled beauties. Philippa was talking about the flat, and removal expenses generally, and Miss Caldecott was lavishing floods of sympathy upon her, and abuse upon those who had disappointed or thwarted her plans.

"Wretched, good-for-nothing things, the pack of them! But you are so near Maple's. Why don't you go to Maple and let him do the whole thing? Expense! Bills! Oh, bother bills! You can let them run, you know. I do! If I want a thing I get it, and think about the bill afterwards. Do you like this tea-gown? I bought it at the autumn sales. Such a bargain! I have to spend a fortune in clothes. What would you advise me to get for this winter, for really swell affairs, you know? I go to a good many private receptions. I got some patterns this morning. I look so huge in white! What would you think of yellow—eh? Blue is so ordinary."

"Really, I—really, I don't know." Philippa thought it was better to laugh outright than in a covert manner, so she laughed as she spoke, and Miss Caldecott joined in the strain with the greatest good-humour.

"I'm sure you have good taste, dear; you look so stylish. I never wear black myself; it makes me doleful. I do get doleful sometimes, though you wouldn't think it. I live all alone, and sometimes business gets so slack. I get plenty of suburban work, but I don't come to the front somehow. Can't think why. My voice is far better than that Marah Bryce's, whom they all rave about nowadays. Have you heard her lately?"

Philippa felt relieved to be able to reply in the negative, and Miss Caldecott enlarged at great length on the personal deformities, mental blemishes, and vocal limitations of her rival, even condescending to imitate her rendering of a favourite song.

"High-flown rubbish, I call it! Something like that song of yours," she said blandly, turning to Hope. "You might offer it to her. Far more her style than mine. Don't you say I sent you, though."

"Thank you," said Hope softly. "I think I should hardly like to venture. I don't know her at all, so it's quite different. You knew our name at least, and I thought—I hoped—"

Despite herself, Hope's voice broke with a little quiver of disappointment, for she had counted so much on this woman's help; and if she refused, what could be expected from a stranger on whom she had no possible claim for sympathy? Her face looked so drawn and pale that Miss Caldecott's good-nature could not look at it unmoved.

"What's the matter, dear? Disappointed! Hateful of me, isn't it? But I couldn't sing that song even to please you. I'll tell you what we will do, though; you shall write another especially for me. Mezzo-soprano, you know; I don't mind a G now and then, but don't let me have them too often. And be sure to give me a catchy refrain—something the people want to move their feet to at the end of the second verse—see? Then the words must be domestic. I want a song badly, to sing down Clapham way and places like that, for charities and subscription concerts. Let me see—something about children, I think. Nothing fetches them like children! First verses, major, 'Happily homeward the children go;' and about their little troubles, you know, and their little fears, little smiles, and little tears. There! that's rhyme. I believe I could write it myself. Then comes the refrain—a little swing to it, a little lilt—the same words for the first two verses. Oh, you know the kind of thing! Something to make the mothers cry, and the papas rush off to buy the song next morning. Nothing draws so well as children. And you might change to the minor key at the third verse, and point a moral: we are all children, life's a journey, and we shall grow tired, too, and fall asleep at the end of our day. There! Never say I didn't give you an idea. You write that for me, and we'll make a fortune out of it."

"Thank you. Oh, how kind you are! I see it exactly. I'll try my very best. It is so very, very good of you to give me the chance!"

Miss Caldecott yawned wearily. "So close, isn't it?" she said. "I hate this muggy weather. Some people say it's good for the complexion, but I don't believe it. I use that new American powder. Have you tried it? There's the bell! I expect it is the Elliots. They said they were coming."

"Then perhaps we ought to—We have stayed a long time already," said Philippa, rising. "Thank you so very much for seeing us at all."

"Oh, won't you wait for tea? Good-bye, dear," cried Miss Caldecott all in one breath, and without waiting for a reply to her question; and the sisters went out into the narrow passage, to squeeze their way past three tall, smartly dressed girls who were engaged in arranging their veils and pulling out their fringes before the little strip of mirror in the hat-stand. They walked down the street in silence, turned the corner, and exchanged bright, amused glances.

"Our first introduction into professional circles! How very, very funny she was! How many times did she call us 'dear,' I wonder? Not very formidable, was she?"

"But, oh, what a lovely voice! So rich and full! I suppose it is because she has not had a thorough musical education that she hasn't come to the front, and because she isn't quite—quite—But it is a shame to criticise," cried loyal Hope. "How kind she was! How perfectly sweet of her to ask me to write that song! Phil, Phil, don't you think I am fortunate! Don't you think it's a good beginning? I have an idea for the song already, and she is almost sure to take it; it is as good as a commission."

Philippa looked at the shining eyes, and could not endure to breathe discouragement; but in her heart of hearts she reflected that she should be sorry indeed to place any reliance upon the promises of Miss Minnie Caldecott.

Chapter Seven.

A Private Reading.

Theo was pressed into the service to write the words of the song for Miss Caldecott, and composed a graceful little ditty which was sufficiently touching even to the spinster mind, and might safely be trusted to melt the hearts of parents "in the front rows." The task kept her happy and occupied while waiting for the answer to her letter, and Mr Hammond was both prompt and kind in his reply.

"I shall be happy to give what help I can to your father's daughter," he wrote. "He always appeared to me to have a very special gift, and I regretted that he did not cultivate it to the full. I hope that you have inherited his powers, but at the same time I feel it my duty to beg you to earnestly consider the matter before deciding on your life's work. Many young people seem to imagine that they can 'take up literature' as they would typewriting or clerical work, which is a vast mistake, and it would be cruel to encourage you unless you possess the inherent qualifications. Would it not be better for the aiding of my judgment if, before coming to see me, you forwarded some *short MS* for my perusal? The time at my disposal is limited, but I will contrive to read anything you send before, say, Monday next, when I shall be pleased to see you at any time that may be convenient between eleven and one."

The letter was read aloud at the breakfast-table, and the audience commented on it with the candour which distinguishes family conclaves.

"Very sensible! Short and to the point. How can he tell what sort of rubbish you write!" said Steve.

"Hope you notice the dash under the 'short'! No chance for your novel, my dear. He doesn't see himself sitting down to read hundreds of pages of your appalling fist. Grows more like lattice-work every day!" Philippa cried severely.

"I can just imagine what he is like! A proper little person, with a shiny bald head. Fancy writing love-scenes for his inspection! My hat!" and Madge lengthened her chin in an expressive grimace.

"The worst of it is, I don't know what to send. I have nothing short that's good enough. It ought to be striking, arresting, original. I—I want an idea," cried poor Theo, staring frantically at the coffee-cups, and wrinkling her brow until she looked ten years older on the spot. "It's finding a subject that is the hardest part. I love the writing when I'm once well started. I can't possibly send anything before next week."

"Don't try. Take your time, and do your very best. Send a letter to say you will forward a MS in the course of the next few weeks. It's important that you should send your best work, and you can't write happily with a feeling of hurry. It must be a story, of course, not an article."

"Mind you have a nice hero: six feet high—broad shoulders—big moustache—"

"No, no; clean shaven—clean shaven, with a firm, determined chin; big feet and hands, quick-tempered, but too sweet for anything to the girl he loves."

"Make her slim and willowy, with grey eyes; rather wistful-looking, not exactly pretty, but with 'a way with her' that simply mows 'em down!'"

"Give her some spirit, mind!" cried Madge once more. "I hate your mawkish heroines—sort of creature you would call 'The Maiden.' Don't call her 'The Maiden,' Theo, if you wish me to buy a copy; and whatever you do, I pray and beseech you, don't write in the present tense: 'I am leaning against a stile; the roses are falling in heavy clusters by my side; the rays of the sun are pouring

on my uncovered head and turning to gold the wayward curls which refuse to lie straight despite all my efforts.' Don't you know the kind of thing! I feel inclined to throw a book in the fire when it begins like that. Don't let your heroine have 'wayward curls,' Theo. Don't let her have 'little tendrils wandering over her brow.' Don't say in every chapter that 'she had never looked more lovely;' and for goodness' sake don't let the husband and wife behave like idiots, and quarrel all the time, though they are really expiring of love!"

"Well, really! Any more instructions? It's a pity you don't write the whole thing while you are about it," said Theo testily as she pushed her chair from the table.

The family had grown to dread the times when Theo was settling on a plot for a new story. She was so restless; she wandered about in such an aimless manner; she looked so thoroughly worried and unhappy. Sometimes the girls would try to help her with suggestions, and then she would listen with a forbearing smile, and say, "Oh, thank you! Yes, it's *very* good. I should think a capital story might be made out of it, but somehow it doesn't appeal to me."

At other times, when they were never thinking of helping, and were engaged in what seemed the most ordinary conversation, Theo would suddenly clap her hands and cry, "Oh, that will do! Good! *Now* I've got it!" and rush excitedly from the room, leaving her sisters to discuss what in the world they had said that could possibly suggest a romance. Verily, an author in the household was a difficult person with whom to deal!

For the next few days Theo sat alone in her room making futile efforts at a beginning, going out for long walks along the crowded streets, or sitting shivering on the seats in the Park. In deference to her condition, Hope kept away from the piano while she was at home; but no sooner was the door closed behind her than she flew to try the effect of the new song, and to alter and re-alter the more troublesome bars. She must practise, too, for with the hope of public work before her it would never do to lose execution and flexibility of finger. Already she was making arrangements for lessons in harmony, and her time seemed filling up.

In the energy which distinguishes all beginnings, Hope practised scales and exercises for a good three hours one Saturday afternoon, and towards the end of the time was much exercised to account for the meaning of a thumping noise that seemed to rise from the ground beneath her feet. She stopped playing; the noise stopped also. She began again; the noise was repeated. Philippa, summoned to decide whether or no they were the proud possessors of a unique sort of echo, immediately arrived at a more prosaic explanation.

"It's some one knocking from underneath. It must be the Hermit, that bachelor creature who lives just below. He wants you to stop."

"What cheek!" cried Hope. She was, as a rule, discreet and punctilious in her language, but there are points upon which the meekest among us are keenly sensitive, and when it came to interference with her practising, propriety flew to the winds. "What *hateful* cheek! What right has he to interfere! Has he hired the whole building? Does he think we are going to consult *him* about what we do? What next, indeed? I'll try chromatics now, and see how he will like them. Cheek! Abominable cheek?"

She went to work more vigorously than ever, and Philippa thought it prudent to refrain from interference, but contented herself with hurrying preparations for tea; and for the time being there was no more knocking. Presumably the chromatics had reduced the listener to a condition of helpless despair.

On the third evening Theo made her appearance wearing her best fichu, and with a face wreathed in smiles. "I've got it!" she announced; and there was no need to ask to what she referred. The tension was over for the time being, and the young author worked up her subject with the usual enjoyment. When the story was finished the girls begged for a private reading; a request against which, as a rule, the author steadily set her face, so that, as usual, the first response was a refusal.

"I can't. It is too cold-blooded. The members of one's own family are too painfully critical. I'd rather face a dozen editors than you three girls."

"Very unkind of you, then; that's all I have to say," said Philippa severely. "You know how interested we are; and if we *are* critical, surely it's better to discuss faults with us than to let them go uncorrected. This is a special story, and in consideration of our anxiety—"

"Oh, well!" said Theo unwillingly, "I'll read it if you like. Get your sewing, and don't stare at me all the time. It's quite short. You won't like it, I expect. Let me sit near the lamp."

She was evidently nervous, and her voice was decidedly shaky for the first few pages; but after that she forgot herself, and read with expression and power. If one of the girls moved, she looked up with a frown; and when Madge groaned and clasped her hands over her heart at a particularly touching part of the love-story, she stopped short and fixed her with a basilisk glare. It was a story of a truly modern type, which, so to speak, began at the end and worked slowly but surely back to the beginning. It was by no means certain, too, what the heroine did, or why she did it; and if one had been sceptically minded, one would have doubted whether the author knew herself. Hope was puzzled, Madge engrossed and curious; Philippa was frankly bored. Her own nature was straightforward and outspoken, and she had no patience with what seemed to be wilful obtuseness. Her attention waned as a Martha-like anxiety seized her in its grip; her eyes wandered to the clock, and her brow grew furrowed. Alas for the trials of the author in the household! At the very moment when Theo was preparing to deliver the crucial sentence on which hung the whole construction of the plot—in that thrilling moment wherein she paused and drew breath, the better to deliver it with due emphasis and dramatic effect—an anxious voice claimed precedence and cried loudly:

"*Hope!* It's after five. *Did* you remember to order the fish?"

It was too much for flesh and blood to endure. Up bounced Theo; down dashed the MS on the table; bang went the door after her departing figure as she fled to her bedroom for refuge, while the two younger sisters stared across the room with eyes large with reproach.

"Phil, how could you? How cruel! At the most exciting point! How *could* you do it?"

"I'm sorry," said Philippa; and she really looked it. "I didn't mean to vex her; but Steve will be home in less than an hour, and there is only cold meat. I was so anxious about the fish. Was there much more to read? You might finish it, and then we can tell her what we think of it. I don't like it; do you?"

"It's clever," said Madge decidedly. "It's atrociously clever. I'm dying to know how it ends."

But when the MS was finished Madge's curiosity remained unsatisfied, for what happened to the heroine was as uncertain as everything else in her career.

Theo did not make her appearance again until dinner was on the table, when she came into the room with her head in the air and her lip curled in disdain. "I have to live with these poor, grovelling worms, but at least I need not associate with them!" So said her expression as plainly as words could speak. She had, however, reckoned without her sense of humour, which, fortunately for her readers, was particularly acute; and no sooner was the cover removed from the belated fish than her lips began to twitch and her eyes to twinkle. Her cheeks grew red, her shoulders heaved, and finally out came a great burst of laughter; and there she sat, rocking to and fro in her chair, gasping out short, strangled sentences, with her hands gripped convulsively over her heart.

"Oh-h! Oh! Have you ordered the fish? The *fish!* Oh, a prophet—is not a prophet—*Fish!* Oh!"

"Might make a joke somehow about fish and Jonah, mightn't you?" said Madge, laughing, scarcely less heartily, in the relief of seeing Theo's descent from her high horse. "I can't quite see how it is to be done, but it has possibilities. I finished reading your story, my dear, and I feel inclined to shake you. Why couldn't you make a happy ending while you were about it?"

"Too commonplace!" said the author scornfully. "You didn't expect me to make them 'live happily ever after,' did you? I haven't quite descended to that, I hope. Well, what do you think of it?"

"I don't like it nearly so well as some of your others. I was sorry that I interrupted you, dear; but I am afraid it was because I didn't like it," confessed Philippa honestly. "I loved that pretty little story about the poor governess and the rich lover who came home from Australia. Do send that to Mr Hammond; it is really very much nicer."

"Nicer!" repeated Theo. "Pretty!" Her voice rang with an incredulous disdain. "I want something strong and powerful. Hope, what do *you* think? Don't you like it either?"

Hope wrinkled her brows, and looked puzzled and distressed.

"I can't decide. It's so queer! Does it really mean that she marries him in the end, or that she refuses him because she loves him? I keep thinking and thinking, and it is so confusing."

"It is the most maddening story I ever read," chimed in Madge decisively, "for it tells you nothing that you want to know, and it makes you want to know so much that you can hardly live for suspense. You ought to hate that exasperating girl, and yet you feel that life is not worth living without her. I will say for you, my dear, that you have achieved the most worrying, unsatisfactory muddle I can possibly imagine. I believe I shall dream of it to-night."

"Hurrah!" cried Theo—"hurrah!" and she tossed her bread in the air, and caught it again with a wave of triumph. "I *am* pleased! I won't alter a single word, but will send it off to-night. If Hope keeps worrying about it while she is awake, and Madge dreams of it while she is asleep, I don't want any higher praise. Never mind if the impression is painful; it *is* an impression, and that's the great object of story-telling. Thank you both. I'm so relieved."

"Humph!" muttered Philippa shortly, and added something under her breath about "executions making a painful impression, if you come to that;" which the others judiciously affected not to hear. Phil had her own grievance by this time, for it is not pleasant to have one's criticisms overlooked as beneath consideration, and to be calmly ignored by artistic striplings as a good, commonplace creature who cannot be expected to rise to the intellectual level of her companions. Like all housekeepers, Philippa experienced moments of weariness and revolt against the everlasting "trivial round"—moments of longing for a more interesting life-work—and at such times the attitude of her younger sisters made her lot doubly hard. She struggled against the temptation to say something sharp and cutting, and Stephen, watching her face from the other end of the table, divined the hidden thoughts. He was not a brilliant nor, to outsiders, a particularly interesting young fellow, but just one of those kindly, single-hearted men who are born to make some woman's life safe and happy; and as, so far, Philippa was his lady-love, he could not rest while that shadow was on her brow. Before they went to bed he made an excuse to call her into the dining-room, and to lead the conversation in such a direction as would invite her to give him her confidence.

"It is a little hard, isn't it?" she said wistfully. "You saw how Theo ignored my criticism, and the others never even seemed to notice. I work for them all day long, keeping the house comfortable and mending their things, to set them free for their own work, and I am only despised for it. It makes me mad, Steve; and, worse still, it makes me sad."

"Poor old girl!" said Stephen softly. He leant his elbows on the mantelpiece and ruffled his hair nervously. If Philippa had been his wife he would have taken her in his arms and spoken all that was in his heart, but a man feels an embarrassment in "letting himself go" before a sister not known in the nearer and dearer relationship. He wanted to say that the woman who makes a home has achieved a greater and nobler work than the one who produces a mere book or picture, and that in his eyes at least she is first and best. But he had a horror of appearing sentimental, and

what he really said was: "Horribly bad form! Upsetting young cubs! They will get a little of the starch knocked out of them when they find what a poor place they take among the rest."

"Oh, I don't want that! I want them to succeed," cried Philippa quickly; and then she began to laugh and to look herself once more. "We are like a nice, prosaic old father and mother, Steve, whose children are so alarmingly clever that we are half-afraid of them. I am glad you are ordinary like myself. You wouldn't be half such a strength to me if you were a genius too."

"Poor old girl!" said Stephen again, and let his hand drop on her shoulder with a helpful grip. He did not say that she could trust him to stand by her always, and to uphold her in every difficulty, but she understood the unspoken promise, and went to bed soothed and comforted.

Theo's MS was posted to Mr Hammond, and in due course an answer was received containing no reference to the story, but simply naming an hour for the proposed interview. The young author tried to read signs of increased deference and respect for her attainments between the lines, but even her optimism failed in the attempt. She grew nervous as the time approached, and looked decidedly pale as she partook of a strengthening cup of cocoa before dressing for the important expedition.

"What are you going to wear?" Madge inquired, and the author curled her lip in disdain.

"My dear, how ridiculous! As if it mattered! Do you suppose for one moment that it will make any difference to Mr Hammond whether I look charming or a perfect fright! Are you so innocent as to believe that he would accept a story that he didn't like from the greatest beauty on earth?"

"Humph!" said Madge reflectively. "The heart of man is desperately wicked! Not *that* story, perhaps, but he would be much more willing to look at another. Take my advice and put on your toque. A girl never loses anything by making herself attractive when dealing with a man. I have never met any editors, but I have reason to suppose that they are not different from the rest of mankind."

"Nineteen, and country-bred! Where did your worldly wisdom come from, my dear?" cried Theo, holding up her hands in astonishment. But she wore her toque all the same, and took off her veil three times over because one little curl refused to lie exactly in the right place. She desired, above all things, to arouse Mr Hammond's interest and sympathy.

The first visit to a publisher's office! It was a nervous occasion, and Theo walked once, twice, thrice past the dreaded door before summoning courage to enter. A board on the wall informed her that she must mount to the third story, so she raised her skirts, ascended a narrow and not too clean staircase, and stood outside a door labelled "Office," wondering what to do next. Neither knocker nor bell was to be seen; what, then, was she to do? If she tapped on the pane and waited for the door to be opened, she would appear humble and amateurish; if she entered unannounced, it would seem bold and presumptuous. She determined to err rather on the side of overrating her own importance, hoping thereby to prove the truth of the old adage; so, turning the handle with a firm hand, she walked into the office, and found herself confronted by—a small and shabby boy, perched on a high stool!

All this fuss about a child! Theo's indignation lent an added haughtiness to her manner as she demanded to see the editor of the *Casket*, and Jack-in-office stared at her curiously, up and down, down and up, before he replied. His expression seemed to imply that he had seen her like before, and that he more than suspected a MS tied with blue ribbon was hidden skilfully beneath her coat.

"Have you an appointment?" he asked severely; and though Theo affected a smile of superiority, she felt an inward conviction that without that same appointment she would have been compelled to make her way to Mr Hammond's presence over the dead body of his vassal. As it was, he carried away her card, and came back almost immediately to escort her to the editor's room, where he pointed to a chair, and remarked encouragingly that Mr Hammond would be disengaged in a few minutes' time.

Theo threw a glance at her reflection in a dusty mirror, and seated herself with much the same tremulous sinking of heart as that with which she was accustomed to settle herself in the dentist's chair. On the desk before her lay a litter of papers and proofs; her eye fell absently on the slip nearest to herself, and lightened into eager interest. Here was a treat indeed, for what she saw was the next month's instalment of a powerful serial as to the termination of which the sisters had frequently and hotly debated. A sentence here, a sentence there, gave the needed clues, and she smiled with mischievous delight at the advantage she had gained. That evening she would lead the conversation to the Count and his lady, and would give graphic prophecies of the next stage in their adventures. Even the conversations she would foretell, so that when the new number arrived her character of wizard would be fully established. The interesting prospect dispelled her nervousness, and she was smiling to herself in bright, natural fashion when the door opened and Mr Hammond appeared.

The editor was short and dark, middle-aged, and carelessly dressed; an undignified little figure, on whom the literary aspirant looked with instant lightening of heart. "I'm not afraid of *him*," she told herself; but the thought was no sooner formed than revoked; for Mr Hammond spoke, and at the first sound of his voice he became aloof, formidable—a personage! He greeted the girl kindly enough, but Theo felt strangely humbled as she faced him, and realised with painful clearness that she was a girl, a tyro, and that this man was accustomed to associate with the masterminds of his day. Her complacency about the "worrying" story fell from her like a cloak, and she awaited his verdict with sickening suspense.

"It is kind of you to see me; I know you are very busy. I sent you a MS, as you asked for one. I suppose you—received it?"

"Yes." Mr Hammond's face gave no clue as to his opinion of the masterpiece in question. "I am pleased to see you, and to give you any help in my power. As I said in my note, I had a great admiration for your father. And so you have determined to settle in town and enter the great arena?"

"Yes. We are very poor, and must work for ourselves. I have been writing for my own amusement ever since I was a child, and if it were possible to make a livelihood in that way I should like it better than anything else. I would rather live on half the money and do the work I love."

She looked appealingly at the impassive face, but no approval of her prospective renunciation was forthcoming. Mr Hammond merely bent his head in grave assent and remarked:

"Literature is a good crutch, but a very inefficient staff. If you have no private means, and are seeking for a profession which is to be your entire support, you would be wiser to go in for millinery. Brain-work is uncertain, trying, and badly paid. Even at the best an author's spell of popularity is short-lived in these degenerate days. A new writer comes along with a fresh trick, and the old friend is promptly forgotten and despised. For the sake of L.S.D. he is compelled to write twice as much as he ought to do, and so dooms himself even more completely. In millinery, I should suppose, experience adds to capacity, and the demand for bonnets is a happy certainty."

This time it was the editor who smiled and Theo who was unresponsive. She was deeply offended, and hope had sunk to the lowest ebb. Surely if Mr Hammond had found any merit in her story he would not have humiliated her by such a suggestion. She lowered her eyes, and trifled nervously with her furs.

"Then you think—after reading my story—you think I have no chance?"

"No; I don't say that. That depends entirely upon—"

"Yes?"

Mr Hammond looked at her with a kindly pity. "*Upon how much heart-breaking you can stand!*" he said solemnly. "The apprenticeship which you will have to serve is weeks, months—it may be even years—of steady, persistent, unsuccessful work; weary disappointment after weary disappointment; nothing to show for your labour but a drawer full of dog-eared papers which nobody will accept. Realise what it means, and ask yourself if you have strength to bear it; if you have sufficient courage and self-confidence to work on undaunted, and find fresh inspiration in the midst of defeat."

He looked at her gravely, and Theo lifted her head and returned the look with flashing eyes.

"If I had the prospect of success in the end—yes! a hundred times, yes! I am not a child. I don't expect to make a name in a day. You can judge better than I. Is there a chance for me if I work hard? Have I a gift which is worth cultivating? You promised to tell me the truth, and I ask it of you now."

Then for the first time Mr Hammond gave a hint of encouragement. He smiled whimsically, as at an amusing recollection, and studied the girl's face with a new interest.

"Oh yes; you have the faculty. It is there; there is no doubt it is there. I read your story, and with all its faults it escapes the two unpardonable crimes—it is neither dull nor commonplace. I don't pretend to say that you will be a great writer, but when you have learned your trade you will probably be able to place your stories with little difficulty. Study style; study the best masters; don't think any time wasted that is given to cultivating pure, forcible English. Study the people around you, and write of what you *know*, not of what you imagine. It is difficult to describe an emotion which one has never felt, or a life in which one has no part. Study the magazines also, and note what style is adopted by each, the length of story taken, and so on. These things are but the technicalities of the profession, but the mastery of them will save you needless disappointments. When a MS is returned for the sixth time, put it away for a month, then read it over in a critical spirit, and try to discover wherein the fault lies. A little altering and rewriting may make it a marketable article."

"Y-es," said Theo faintly. That "sixth time" fell sadly on her ear, for it was one thing to assert that she did not expect to win in a day, and quite another to hear repeated failure predicted in that cool, unemotional fashion. She wondered if Mr Hammond would refer to her story in any more definite fashion, and seeing that he began to play with the papers on his desk, as if to intimate that the "five minutes" were drawing to a close, she summoned courage to put a direct question.

"And the MS that I sent you, Mr Hammond—was it pretty good? Do you think it suitable for—er—for—"

Her courage failed as he looked up in grave inquiry, and she dared not say "the *Casket*," as she had intended; but Mr Hammond finished her sentence, as if he had not divined the unspoken word.

"Publication! There would be no harm in trying. I have read many less interesting stories, though it bears the mark of inexperience. Try some of the smaller papers, like the *Companion*; and, if necessary, cut it down to their length. I have it here in this drawer, I think. Yes—thank you. Pleased to have seen you."

Theo rose to her feet a-smart with mortification. To be recommended to the *Companion*, and advised to cut down her masterpiece for the approval of its twopenny-halfpenny editor, was humiliation indeed for the would-be contributor to the *Casket*. She followed Mr Hammond to the door, and held out her hand in silence, her only desire being to end the painful interview at once. But the smitten look on the young face, the sudden collapse of the former audacious complacency, were too marked to pass unnoticed. The editor looked at her, and recalled his own youth, when a kind word was as a magic wand, and a harsh one shut the door so hopelessly against a cherished dream. He gave her hand an encouraging pressure.

"You have the stuff in you; you have the stuff! Work hard, and when you have served your apprenticeship come back to me, and I'll help you all I can. Send me one MS in three months—one,

remember. If you send more I sha'n't read them. When one is accepted you will have reached the first rung of the ladder. No, don't thank me! I will accept nothing from you, nor from any one else, that does not deserve a place on its own merits. Good-morning."

His eyes fell on the roll of paper in her hand, and he pointed to it with an outstretched finger.

"Don't—er—don't overdo it," he said meaningly. "Don't try to be too clever."

Then the door shut, and Theo groped her way down the stairs. Her cheeks were crimson; she beat the banisters savagely with the paper roll. Jack-in-office looked out of his open door and grinned to himself in amused understanding. He had seen "them" look like that before.

Chapter Eight.

Visitors Arrive.

Theo's pride made her represent the interview with Mr Hammond in its most favourable light to her sisters. He was satisfied that she had the makings of a successful author, was anxious to consider MSS from time to time, and had suggested a likely home for the present story. The future, in fact, was assured, but a period of probation must necessarily elapse while she served what he called her "apprenticeship." The girls appeared duly impressed, and Theo felt with satisfaction that this verdict from a high authority would go far towards procuring for her that respect and admiration which it is so difficult to obtain from the members of one's own family.

"He advises me to read a great deal, to study the styles of the best masters, and to write only what I know. I think that is rather a mistake. If one possesses the literary instinct, it must surely be possible to project one's self, as it were, into the place of another, and so create an environment. How can one be expected to experience personally the whole gamut of human emotions?"

"Cast your ruminating eye upon me, my love," said Madge suavely, pointing with a thin forefinger to herself. Behind Theo's back she had been occupied in rolling her eyes and waving her hands in dramatic illustration of the other's high-flown phrases, so that Hope had rushed to the window to stare at the chimney-pots, while Philippa had dropped her needle on the floor and grovelled on all-fours in order to redeem it. The two returned to their seats with expressions of preternatural gravity, while Madge continued to declaim her offers of help.

"Study my character! It is full of rich and unexpected qualities. When you get to an *impasse*, ask my advice, and I'll tell you how I should behave in the circumstances. Though young in years I am old in wisdom, and you would go far before you discovered a better preceptor."

Theo laughed with good-natured disdain. "Old in experience, indeed! Poor little country mouse, what do you know of life? You have never even been in love."

"Oh, haven't I, though! Shows how little you know," cried Madge darkly. "I have never been out of it since I was eight years old. The first one was Tommy Egerton. Do you remember those Egertons who took The Chase for a year? Tommy was the little boy who wore a fawn coat with a sealskin collar, and dear little brown gaiters. I doted on him! And one day his mother brought him to call, and I had on a soiled pinafore. Oh, my feelings! I consider that my character has been warped for life by the humiliation I endured that afternoon. Then there was that freckled boy who used to send me valentines:—

"The rose is red, the violet blue,
And sugar's sweet, and so are you.

"Dear, dear, how bashful I felt the first time I met him after that special valentine arrived! Then there was the curate who spoke through his 'dose.' That was the love that was born of pity! Every one abused him, so there arose in my heart that almost maternal tenderness and compassion which is inseparable from the love of every good woman. Ahem!" Madge glanced up with dancing eyes, then grew grave again and added slowly, "And now there's that student at the Slade School. I asked him some questions the other day, and he was *so* kind! He has a lovely chin. I expect we shall be great friends. Look at Philippa growing pale with anxiety."

"It's all very well," cried Philippa irritably. "I like young men myself, and wish we knew many more than we do, but we *must* be careful. I hope you girls will not make any friends until you have had time to judge whether they are the sort of people we ought to know. I don't want to preach. I hate preaching. It is very hard to be in the position when it falls to me to say all the disagreeable things, but, situated as we are, we can hardly be too particular. We want to make friends who will be a help to us, not a hindrance, and whose influence can never be hurtful to Barney when he is with us."

The mention of Barney brought a smile to each face, followed by sighs of anxiety, for it was impossible not to realise that the reckless, high-spirited boy would be a care as well as a pleasure. Stephen was already looking out for a suitable opening in the City, and, with Philippa's consent, had written to Mr Loftus to ask his assistance in the search. As an influential shareholder in many large concerns it was likely that he would be able to find a situation, and his kindness of heart made it seem probable that he would put himself to some trouble on the boy's behalf. So far no letter had been received in reply; but one afternoon about five o'clock the electric bell sounded through the little flat, and Hope ran to open the door to save trouble to the one small servant who was wrestling with preparations for the evening meal. She thought it might possibly be the postman with a letter from Miss Caldecott to say how delighted she was with the new song; but instead she found herself confronted by two life-size fashion-plates and, hidden away behind flowing skirts and ruffling chiffons, one small and dejected lord of creation!

The Loftus trio! Aunt Loftus come to pay her first call, on the very occasion when Mary had set fire to the pretty lampshade, so that the smell of burning pervaded the air, and a naked "chimney" took the place of rosy frills; when Philippa had felt too tired to change her morning-blouse, and naughty Madge had taken advantage of an idle hour to wash her hair, and was even now stretched before the fire in all the glory of a dressing-gown too old to be spoiled! Hope was speechless with consternation, but with the drawing-room distant about two yards from the front-door escape was hopeless, and she was obliged to introduce the visitors with what composure she might.

To the credit of their breeding, be it said, Philippa and Madge rose nobly to the occasion, and welcomed the unwelcome guests without either apology or confusion. Madge smiled sweetly through her wisps of hair, and discussed the weather in orthodox fashion, before sailing out of the room to clothe herself in more suitable attire. Hope was proud of her sisters, and unselfishly annoyed that she should appear to better advantage than they; for she had dressed early after her return from a wet and tiring walk. She met her cousin's curious gaze, and sat down beside her with a friendly smile.

"You are Avice. I have so often wondered about you?"

"You are Hope. I have a picture of you as a little girl. It is so pretty! You haven't changed a bit."

"Oh, oh, you shouldn't! But how nice of you, all the same! I love compliments," confessed pretty Hope, blushing in bewitching fashion between gratification and embarrassment. She looked at Avice in her turn, and decided that she was not at all pretty. But, oh, what clothes! What a dream of a hat! What distracting ruffles and laces peeping from between the sables! What twinkling lights of diamond brooches! She paused for a moment to do obeisance before a vision of herself clad in similar garments, then continued, with a smile, "I am so glad to meet you! It feels lonely to be absolutely without friends in this great London, and so far we know no one at all."

"You are the musical one, aren't you?" Avice asked curiously. "You are all geniuses, father says, and determined to make a name in the world. Have you begun work? What have you done so far?"

Hope smiled with pardonable satisfaction.

"Well, really, I think we have made a good start. Theo has interviewed one of the most influential editors in Fleet Street, and has been asked to send MSS to his paper. Madge has sent in her two show-pictures to the Slade School, and is to begin regular work there at the half-term. Meantime she is studying the different exhibitions and collections, and, as she says, picking up 'quite valuable hints' from old masters. She is so amusing! She comes home every evening with absurd accounts of her adventures. Most people would find it rather dull spending a whole day at the National Gallery, for instance, but Madge has the faculty of finding amusement wherever she goes, and, even apart from the pictures, has a dozen little histories and romances to recount."

"Y-es," assented Avice flatly. She herself had little sense of humour, and was by no means prepossessed by the plain, elf-like figure of her youngest cousin Hope, on the contrary, was graceful and charming, and had been already mentally adopted as the friend of the future. "What are *you* doing?" she asked, with an interest which could not fail to be flattering, and Hope moved her chair a trifle closer with an impulse of girlish confidence.

"Oh, I am getting on so well! I have had my first lesson in harmony, and my master is so kind and encouraging. He seems to think that I know a great deal already, and his work is so interesting. In the mornings I study and practise, and in the afternoons I try to hear as much music as I can. I go to cheap seats at concerts and recitals, or to service at the Abbey or Saint Paul's. And fancy! I have had a commission to write a song for a professional—a real professional—a lady who sings at concerts all over the country. You may know her name—Miss Minnie Caldecott."

Yes, Avice knew it quite well, and was duly impressed by the news. She passed it on to her mother, who was sitting silently criticising the details of the room, while her husband talked to the older girls. She also appeared impressed, and expressed a desire to hear Hope perform one of her own compositions. Accordingly the piano was opened, and the girl sang, not one song, but two, so that her relations might appreciate the variety of her style: first the graceful and would-be classical setting to the words which Miss Minnie had despised, and then the more taking, if less high-class, "domestic" ditty. Mrs Loftus had little of the maternal instinct in her composition, but even her hard face softened as Hope's fresh voice sang the sweet, simple words. Uncle Loftus cried "Bravo! bravo!" and Avice opened wide surprised eyes. Mrs Loftus put up her eyeglasses and examined the singer in critical fashion. So young; so pretty; so exceptionally gifted! Really, the girl would be a useful addition to an evening's entertainment or a house-party in the country. She made a mental note that Hope was the "presentable" member of the family, then rose to take her departure, murmuring society nothings as she shook hands with Philippa, and checking Avice's farewell words with a warning frown.

"Oh yes, we must arrange to meet again. I will look over our list. Don't make any plans to-day, dear; you are so overdone with engagements."

She rustled to the door, followed by her obedient spouse, who was allowed no time to speak, but instead delivered himself of a succession of mysterious nods and smiles, which left the girls in a state of amused mystification. The explanation was, however, speedily forthcoming, for ten minutes had not elapsed after the departure of the three when a second bell sounded, and there stood Mr Loftus, erect and self-confident, a man on his own account, with no overwhelming feminine element to keep him in the background.

"Back again like a bad penny!" he cried jocosely. "Just a word to say to you, my dears—a word in your ears. Put the ladies into the carriage, and went on 'to my club.' He, he! Useful things, clubs! About that boy, now. Don't approve of your spending capital—never approved of that, you know—but pleased to help you all the same. Edgar's children. Yes! Ought to give you a lift. Fifteen—eh? Young to leave school, but can't be helped, I suppose. Was speaking to Spence the other day—most influential man—thinks he might take him in there. Eh? Insurance office—huge place—hundreds of clerks. Spence is manager. Always taking in new fellows. What do you think of that—eh?"

"Please sit down, uncle," said Philippa, greatly puzzled by the short, jerky sentences; and, so far as she could judge of the proposal, thinking about as badly of it as it was possible to do. "It is very kind of you to remember Barney, and we are most anxious to find him an opening, but I don't know that insurance—and such a number of clerks, too! Would not a boy be likely to be lost among them, and drudge on year after year without promotion?"

"In an ordinary way, yes; but this would be different. I'm on the Board, you see—on the Board—chairman last year. Spence a personal friend. Could help him on if he stuck to his work. Don't know the boy, but if Spence took a fancy to him, there isn't a man in town who has more in his power. Peculiar man, Spence! Difficult temper—autocratic; but if he takes a fancy, there's nothing he won't do. Barney, now—what kind of a boy is Barney?"

"All kinds," replied Philippa, smiling. She felt perfectly satisfied that Mr Spence *would* take a fancy to Barney, but whether that young gentleman would "stick" to his work was another and a very different question.

"He is a very handsome boy, Uncle Loftus, and full of fun and mischief. He is clever, but I'm afraid not too industrious. We hope that he will settle down and realise that he has his way to make; but he is young, as you say. Mr Spence might not have patience with him."

"Oh, Spence would have nothing to do with him at first. He would have to obey the head of his department. Send Stephen to me to talk it over. Men understand business; girls, you know—pretty girls like you—think only of bonnets. That's it, Hope, isn't it? Quite right, too. Get a becoming one, my dear, and come and see me in it when it is bought. Now I must be off. Glad to have seen you all Pretty little nest at the top of the tree! Hope it may be prophetic. Hard on my legs, though. Stiff in the knees. Not so young as I was, my dears—not so young as I was."

He went todding out of the door, smiling and chucking to himself, and as he descended the staircase the echo of disjointed phrases reached the girls' ears: "Top of the tree! Ha, ha! Not so young as I was. Prophetic—eh! Hope it is prophetic."

"Poor little mannikin!" said Philippa pitifully. "I feel like a mother to him. He daren't even be kind in his wife's presence, he is so kept down. How I do detest to see women snub their husbands and fathers! When I marry I intend to look up to my husband and think him the finest man in the world. I'd rather be ruled by some one stronger and wiser than myself than have it all my own way. *My* husband is going to be master of his own house, or I'll know the reason why."

She was leaning over the banisters as she spoke, listening to the departing footsteps of the "mannikin" as he trotted along the stone entrance-hall; but as she finished speaking she drew back with a gasp of dismay, for a cadaverous countenance was raised to hers from the landing immediately beneath, and the tenant who had objected to Hope's practising stood for a moment buttoning his coat, then slowly took his way downstairs. With one bound, as it seemed, the girls were back in their own sitting-room, confronting each other with horrified, scarlet faces.

"The Hermit!"

"The author creature who writes all day and sits up all night. Do you suppose he *heard*?"

"Heard! My dear, he has ears; how could he help it? If you *will* air your ideas as to your future husband on the landing of public buildings, what can you expect? Never mind. Perhaps it's just as well that you should understand each other from the first."

"Don't be vulgar, Madge. That kind of joke is in the worst possible taste."

"Pologise! My vulgar nature, I suppose. *Didn't* he stare? He looks shockingly ill. I should say his nerves were overstrained, and he wouldn't be too pleasant a companion. I hope he won't call."

"People never call in London, child, unless they have some sort of introduction or a mutual friend. Besides, the porter told me that the Hermit is quite a celebrity. Why should he call upon us? He writes articles for the reviews, and long, learned books which no one can understand. I will never try to, for one. I hope I may never, never see his face again!" cried Philippa, in a sudden outburst of passion, for it was really most trying to discover a strange man playing the part of audience on the one occasion on which she had "let herself go."

Stephen called upon Mr Loftus as suggested, was taken to interview the eccentric Mr Spence, and eventually decided to accept the offered opening for Barney. It was not exactly the position which he would have chosen, but beggars cannot be choosers, and his uncle's influence, backed by a personal introduction to the manager, seemed to hold out a reasonable chance of promotion. At the worst, the experience would give the boy some knowledge of office life, and prevent his running wild over London, getting into fresh mischief with every hour, as his custom was.

The half-term arrived, and with it Mr Barnard himself. The lad drove up in a hansom, and smiled patronisingly upon the sisters assembled to welcome him in the bare entrance-hall. He was nearly as tall as Philippa herself, and very like her in appearance, though his sparkling face lacked as yet her characteristic strength and earnestness of expression. So far, indeed, life had appeared one huge joke to Barney, and his radiant spirits had suffered no eclipse. He allowed himself to be kissed and hugged by one sister after another, and was then escorted up the stone staircase with all the honours of a returned hero, the while his bright eyes roved from side to side in search of adventure. He tested the banister, calculated its length from top to bottom, and offered to race Madge down with a handicap of half a minute. He pointed to the bottles of fire-extinguishers ranged on each landing, and cried genially, "We'll start an alarm of fire one night, and watch the Johnnies rush out and smash 'em!" Then seeing the words, "*Do not knock unless absolutely necessary,*" printed on a card nailed to the "Hermit's" door, he lingered behind to give such a resounding rat-tat-tat to the knocker as woke the echoes to life. The girls scuttled upstairs like so many frightened mice; but what was the good of that? They could not hide the noise of their footsteps, and once in the precincts of their own flat they one and all fell upon Barney, covering him with reproaches. How could he? How dared he? It was rude, ungentlemanly, unfair to his sisters. He must never—no, never—do such a thing again!

"Well, scarcely ever!" cried the beaming culprit. "So this is the rabbit-warren, is it! What a rummy little show! When will the feed be ready? I'm dying of hunger. Hope you've slain a jolly big calf while you were about it."

When the "calf" appeared, and the reunited family seated themselves round the dining-room table, Barney wished to bet some one "a tanner" that without leaving his chair he could ring the bell, poke the fire, pull up the blind, and put a plate on the sideboard; and proceeding to give practical illustration of his words, overbalanced himself, grazed his head against a corner of the bookcase, and made an ugly stain upon the wall-paper with the contents of his overturned plate.

"Really, Barney—really! That's not at all amusing. I don't feel in the *least* inclined to laugh," protested Philippa severely; but she belied the truth of her words by smiling lovingly on the culprit throughout the meal. It was easy to see who was going to be master of *that* flat!

Chapter Nine.

An Anonymous Letter.

Barney's infectious spirits were a godsend to his sisters, who, truth to tell, were beginning to experience a reaction from their first elation, and to realise how many weary rungs of the ladder had to be ascended before success was gained. Theo felt that she was condescending sadly when she sent off her MS to the editor of a threepenny magazine; but that gentleman evidently differed from her opinion, for he sent it back again with admirable promptitude, with only a printed rejection by way of criticism. Hope received no answer from Miss Minnie Caldecott, and Madge found herself ranked with other new-comers in the antique room at the Slade School, and treated with patronising disdain by the older pupils. These latter worked "in the life," and had merry little lunches together in the corridors, while she ate sandwiches in the dreary cloak-room in the basement, and sadly reflected that she was not the genius she had imagined. Her talent lay in caricature and bright original design, and pray how was she to have a chance of exhibiting these gifts in a copy of the *Venus de Milo*? The probabilities of earning money seemed to retreat into the dim distance, and poor Philippa realised as much, and sighed more and more heavily over the weekly bills.

It was a relief to all to listen to Barney's merry voice, and to sun themselves in his radiant presence. The account of his luncheon in town was a daily amusement; for he had strongly objected to coming home in the middle of the day, and had finally been allowed the lordly sum of eight-pence by the head of the exchequer.

"It is twice as much as your return fare in the Tube, so I calculate that would be about the cost of your lunch here. If you go to the right places, Steve says, you can get quite a comfortable meal for eight-pence—a plate of warm, nourishing soup, or a cup of chocolate and sandwiches."

So spoke Philippa in her wisdom, but Barney was too much of a schoolboy to condescend to warm and nourishing diet while sweetmeats were within his reach. On a chill and rainy day he would make a selection of three custard-tarts and a bottle of lemonade, or a cold mince-pie, a slice of plum-cake, and a glass of milk; after which exploit he would return home in the best of health and spirits, to eat at one meal as much as his four sisters put together.

As to his business experiences, Barney was curiously reticent, but he pronounced the office "not bad sport," talked of the heads of departments by their Christian names, alluded to the manager as "Old Waxworks," and was so uncomplaining about the long confinement that Philippa cherished the fondest hopes of his success. The boy had settled down far better than she had expected, and if he were a trifle uproarious at home, it was not to be wondered at. Before his arrival Hope had played favourite classics for the amusement of her sisters during the evening, but Master Barney had little patience with such a tame performance. He preferred to hear popular street ditties, coached Hope in the airs in a loud, cracked treble, and insisted on a chorus, as often as not throwing in a step-dance by way of improvement. From time to time one of his sisters would offer a mild protest: "Don't, Barney—don't!" "Barney, be quiet!" Whereupon Barney would give a louder stamp than before, or, by way of reply, elegantly wave a foot over the head of the protester.

On one of these convivial occasions there sounded once again that eloquent echo from below; but the performer was happily unconscious, and his sisters, rolling meaning eyes, exerted every device to divert his attention in another direction. Well they knew that if Mr Barney once grasped the nature of the message his energy would increase tenfold, and he would dance until he dropped, if only to prove his free and independent spirit!

Then one evening came the formal opening of the war.

At an unorthodox hour of the night the letter-box clanked, and an undirected note fell into the box. Philippa read it, and grew pale with anger; Madge read it, and grew flaming red; Hope cried, "Oh! oh!" and Theo tossed her head like a tragedy queen. The note was short and to the point; it bore neither address nor signature:

"If the occupants of flat Number 10 would have the consideration to remember the existence of their neighbours, it would add greatly to the comfort of the other dwellers in the mansions. Such establishments could not continue to exist if rowdiness and horseplay were permitted without protest. It is sincerely to be hoped that the matter may be remedied before appeal be necessary to those in authority."

"Anonymous, too! As if we did not know perfectly well who wrote it!" Philippa cried, with curling lip. "Cranky, sallow-faced wretch! He ought to live in a den, and not among ordinary flesh-and-blood mortals. *I'll* write an answer! *I'll* settle him!"

"He banged on the ceiling one day when I was practising," chimed in Hope, with smouldering resentment. "It isn't as if I were a schoolgirl and couldn't play."

"Thinks we make too much noise, does he?" murmured Barney thoughtfully. "Sweet innocent! He doesn't know he is born. Wait a bit until I have really given my mind to the subject."

"No, no; none of that now, Barney! If we live in a flat we are bound to keep within bounds," interrupted Stephen anxiously. He reviewed the past fortnight, and was bound to acknowledge that the writer of the note had some just ground for complaint. "I am afraid we have been rather noisy since you arrived.—But perhaps you can explain in your reply, Phil, that there have been—er—special circumstances—er—not likely to occur again. Smooth him down. Great mistake to quarrel with one's neighbours."

Philippa looked her brother over, her head erect, her shoulders squared in the defiant manner he had learned to know. She made no reply in words, but he understood full well what was meant by that look. If he were prepared to give in meekly, she was not; if he would not fight for the rights of the family, she would do it for him; and it would not be to-day nor to-morrow either that she would write an apology in response to so audacious a complaint.

All that evening Philippa sat with pursed-up lips, composing and revising an answer which should be at once haughty, sarcastic, and to the point; and no sooner was Stephen safely out of the way next morning than it was written, submitted to Theo for professional revision, and safely deposited in the "Hermit's" letter-box:

"Miss Charrington is in receipt of an anonymous letter, the source of which, however, she is at no loss to decide. She agrees with the writer that forbearance and consideration are necessary where several tenants live beneath the same roof, but she would impress upon his notice that such consideration should be mutual and not one-sided. It is unreasonable to expect a large and still young family—"("Still young! he won't like that—it implies that he is so old himself!")—"to live in a condition of absolute inaction; and repeated and varied complaints—"("That means the rapping on the ceiling")—"are at least as disagreeable to its members as their musical efforts appear to be to their neighbour."

"That ought to settle him for some time to come," cried the girls complacently; and when by chance they met the "Hermit" on the stairs they stared at him beneath haughtily contracted brows, and held their skirts well to the side, lest by chance they should brush against him as they passed.

November was half-way through when a second letter arrived to introduce a little excitement into the daily routine. It bore the postmark of a small Norfolk township, on the borders of which Mr Loftus had his shooting-box. It was addressed to Hope, and was of an import which brought a flush of excitement to her cheeks. Her "Ohs!" and "Ahs!" of surprise were aggravatingly uninteresting, and in the end Madge took forcible possession of the sheet, and glancing over it rapidly, read out the sentences in slow, sententious accents:

"My dear Hope,—As the address will show, we are staying in Norfolk, and I write to ask if you would pay us a visit from Monday next to Tuesday the 30th. We expect to have several big shoots during the week, and as you are distinctly the most presentable of the family, and your musical abilities can be usefully employed in providing free amusement for my guests, I think you will be quite a valuable addition to our house-party. You will find the 11:15 a convenient train, and we will send to the station to meet you, if we have no better use for the carriages."

"*Madge!*" cried Hope, aghast.

"What an extraordinary letter!" gasped Philippa, too much stunned by surprise to protest. "Give it to me. Let me see."

Madge handed it over, with a shrug of the shoulders and a slow, whimsical smile.

"Oh, well," she admitted, "that's not a literal rendering. I read between the lines and found the true meaning. Aunt Loftus is all politeness, of course. 'You don't look strong—would be better for a change. Can leave London more easily than your sisters. Be sure to bring plenty of music.' But my reading is the right one, all the same. Bah! Sickening! If you want to be mean, *be* mean, and don't try to wrap it up in the form of philanthropy. I might be as ill as I liked, but I should never be asked. Your face is your fortune, Hope. Make the most of it before you grow old and ugly."

"I won't go. I shall write and refuse," said Hope quickly; for she had noticed a shadow fall across Theo's face, and divined the reason of its presence. Theo would not grudge her a pleasure, but from a professional point of view, could not help wishing that the invitation had fallen to her own share. Life at a shooting-box would be a new experience, a useful background for future stories; and the guests would supply the young author with the opportunity of valuable character-study. Unfortunately Theo's talent was not of value to a hostess, and she was conscious that her chance of an invitation to her uncle's shooting-box was not much greater than that of Madge herself. For a moment she was silent, battling against a host of conflicting emotions; then she said bravely:

"You must go, Hope; it is your duty. You may meet people who will take an interest in you and be able to help you on, and we can't afford to lose opportunities. You can take your own compositions, and sing them whenever you have a chance; it will be quite an advertisement in a small way."

"It seems mean to pay a visit with an idea of making something out of it," said Hope, with a sigh. "That is the worst of being poor. The money question seems eternally hovering in the background, whatever one may do. I shall enjoy seeing Avice, of course; and if I can really help Aunt Loftus, it will be comforting to feel that the advantage is mutual. I wonder—What about clothes?"

"That is just what I have been thinking. We can't afford anything new just now, for the bills are too heavy," replied Philippa sadly. "We can only bestow our united treasures upon you, dear, and make you as smart as possible. You shall have mother's old lace for your evening-frock; but be careful of it, for if you damage it you need never face me again! It is going to trim my wedding-dress one of these days."

"When the lordly male arrives before whom she is to grovel in the dust! You shall have my feather boa, too. It will hide the shabby front of your jacket;" and Theo sighed, for the feather boa was the pride of her wardrobe, and represented months of saving and self-denial. It was none of your thin, lanky wisps, but a really handsome boa, with a bloom on the feathers like that on a hot-house grape. Theo was fastidious, and would rather do without a thing altogether than accept a poor imitation. She thought of her reduced appearance without the beloved fluffiness, and heaved another sigh.

"Nothing to offer you, my dear. My wardrobe is of so limited a character that if I gave anything away I should have to stay in bed until it was returned," cried Madge cheerfully in her turn. "Accept my blessing, and my earnest hope that the head of a great musical publishing house may be among the guests, and will recognise in you the coming genius of the day."

"So likely, isn't it? That sort of thing happens only in novels. The house will probably be full of sporting men, who don't know one composer from another, but who find it enlivening to listen to a 'tune' in the evening. Oh, if Minnie Caldecott would only write! I look out for that letter every morning, but it never comes. Do you think I might send a little note to jog her memory?"

"Certainly I do. I should think she was the sort of woman who needed a good deal of jogging. Say that you are anxious to know whether she wishes to secure the song, as, if not, you will offer it elsewhere. There is nothing like appearing confident and unperturbed. I am sorry you are going away, Hope, for I wanted you to sit for me as fair Rosamond in the picture I have to show to get permission to draw in the life-room. I'll have to send in an old one, I suppose. Look over these for me, and tell me which you like best."

Hope turned over the sketches in the portfolio, smiling with sisterly pleasure as she recognised one old favourite after another. It seemed incredible to her partiality that Madge should not have immediately ranked as a genius among the students of the school, for surely there was something peculiarly original in the treatment of these figures!

She held out a sheet towards her sisters, and cried eagerly, "There! That is my choice. What do you think of that?"

"Good—suggestive—full of atmosphere!" pronounced Theo in her most professional manner; while Philippa put her head on one side, and in all innocence of heart launched a bombshell into their midst.

"Wouldn't it make a good poster? Doesn't it look exactly like some of the posters you see upon the hoardings?"

It was seldom indeed that a speech of Philippa's could wound her faithful friend and admirer, but this time the arrow went home, and Madge's thin cheek flushed with displeasure. She gathered together the scattered sketches in silence, keeping her head rigorously turned aside, while Hope made strenuous efforts to redeem the situation.

"Well, really, so it does! They say poster-painting is quite an art nowadays. I hear it pays so well that many artists would be thankful to take it up, if it were not that it requires a special talent. Personally I hope it will be cultivated. It would be so delightful to see the old eyesores replaced by really artistic pictures."

In vain! Madge remained silent, red, and angry. Poster-painting may be admirable in its way, but when a student dreams of becoming a female Leighton or Alma Tadema, the alternative is not welcomed with enthusiasm. Philippa reflected sadly that another unfortunate remark was scored against her; but Madge was of too happy a disposition to harbour a grudge, and in half-an-hour's time the grievance was dismissed from her mind, and she was once more her own sunny self.

When Barney returned home that evening he joined in the general chorus of lament at Hope's departure, though his sorrow flowed from a somewhat different source from that of his sisters.

"What a fag!" he cried. "Now that old Hermit Johnny will think that we are quiet because he complained. I wish to goodness I had taken up the flute; I would tootle all the evening for his amusement." He sat for a while gazing at the ceiling in deep reflection, then slapped his knee ecstatically. "There's a fellow in the office who belongs to the London Scottish and has a bigpipe. I say, wouldn't it make the Hermit sit up if I borrowed it and practised reels! McGregor wouldn't lend it, though. He is a stingy beast who will never do a fellow a good turn. I have a score against him! Well, cheer up, Hope; I'll do my best to fill your place while you're away. I'll find some way of keeping our friend alive, or I'm mistaken."

"Barney dear—Barney!" murmured Philippa softly.

Barney smiled at her with indulgent tenderness. "Keep your hair on, old lady!" he said encouragingly; and Philippa could only gasp and pant beneath his bear-like hug, and declare that never—no, never—had she met such an unmanageable, disrespectful, vulgar boy!

Chapter Ten.

The Shanty.

A week later Hope travelled down to Norfolk with the united fineries of the family in her box, a mind stored with good advice from the stock of worldly wisdom of her sisters, and a heart filled with mingled expectation and foreboding. It was the first time in her life that she had paid a visit on her own account, and she realised, with a shock of surprise, what a child she remained in spite of her three-and-twenty years, and how unlimited was her inexperience! Now that she was really on her way and it was too late to turn back, she sat aghast at her temerity in daring to face a houseful of strangers, and trembled at the ordeal of appearing before them. She would arrive at the station at half-past four; after that would follow a drive of, say, half-an-hour. If she arrived at the house at five o'clock, would tea be over, or only in progress? Would the men have returned from their day's sport? Would many guests be present to whom she must be introduced, and who would all want to know if she were tired, if the train had been punctual, if she had had a comfortable journey? Would there be any girls in the party besides herself? And if so, would they be very superior and fashionable! Would Avice be friendly and affectionate, or too much taken up with her duties to waste time on insignificant Hope Charrington! All these and a thousand other questions occupied Hope's busy brain till she reached the end of her journey.

Insignificant Hope Charrington looked, if the truth were told, anything but insignificant as she took her place in the high dogcart that was waiting at the station. As she drove through the little country town, more than one admiring glance was cast upon the pretty young lady whose golden hair and pink-and-white complexion showed to such advantage against the severe black of her carriage. Tired shop assistants gazed at her through the shop windows, and sighed with envy as they looked. It must be so nice to be a lady and have nothing to do but enjoy one's self, and look pretty, and never know an anxious thought all one's days? That lovely young lady, for instance, was going to stay at The Shanty, where there was already a houseful of guests: handsome men ready to fall in love at a moment's notice; girls over whom the new-comer would reign as queen! Her luggage was no doubt following in the cart: box upon box of fineries; different dresses for every day in the week; jewel-cases full of glittering gems!

So much for imagination, while in reality poor Hope was clenching her hands to keep from trembling, hoping with all her might that the one black silk evening-dress would not be a mass of creases when unpacked; wondering if it were possible that where she was going she would meet a friend who might be able to help her to earn some money—a little money to put towards those terrible household expenses.

Ten minutes' drive and they had left the town behind them; another ten minutes and the lodge gates of The Shanty came in sight; three minutes more and Hope was stepping inside an entrance-hall lined with fine old tapestries, and stretching the whole length of the house. The sound of voices came to her ear, but she could not locate them until she had walked half-way down the hall. Then a deep recess came in view on the right-hand side—a recess as big as an ordinary room—wherein a dozen people sat round a blazing fire, drinking tea with leisurely enjoyment. At sight of the new-comer there was a general pause in the conversation. Mrs Loftus rustled forward to greet her; Avice smiled and extended a languid hand; and Uncle Loftus murmured jocosely, "Hope on, Hope ever! So here you are, my dear—eh! Glad to see you. Have a cup of tea!"

"Sit here, Hope. Let me introduce you," said her aunt; and Hope listened confusedly to a long list of names, bowed automatically from time to time, then thankfully subsided into a seat in a corner. There were two ladies present besides her aunt and cousin—one elderly and prosaic matron, and one young and sparkling brunette, who was busily occupied flirting with three men at the same time, and seemed capable of adding indefinitely to their number. For the rest, there were men in shooting-coats and leather gaiters—old men, middle-aged men, young men, all bronzed and healthy, and remarkably well satisfied with themselves and their day's sport.

Hope studied them shyly as she nibbled at her scone. The buzz of conversation had begun again by this time, and as her presence was apparently forgotten, she was at leisure to pursue her investigations. The stout, grey man was the husband of the prosaic lady. The merry little man with the round bald head and the short legs was evidently an intimate of the family, for he threw fresh logs on the fire, and even dared to chaff Mrs Loftus herself. The fair youth with the eyelass was only pretending to be captivated by Miss Brunette; the older man with the fair hair was seriously smitten; the tall, distinguished-looking personage with the haughty eyelids and drooping moustache had the air of being bored by everything and every one. Hope looked at him critically, with a view to describing him to Theo. "He would make a splendid hero. Dark features, sharply cut; two horizontal lines in his forehead; lazy eyes that give a flash now and then, and show that he could be active enough if he chose; a square chin; and such great, wide shoulders. He looks quite different from the other men; and yet I don't know why he should."

She looked him critically up and down, and her eyes, travelling upwards again, found his studying her in return. It might have been an embarrassing discovery, but before it had time to become so the man who was different from other men had strolled across the hall, taken possession of the seat by her side, and was inquiring if she felt tired after her journey, in a tone which seemed to imply that he took not the faintest possible interest in her reply.

"A little tired," said Hope prosaically, conscious that if Madge had been in her place she would have been ready with a vivacious retort which would have broken the ice of formality. She felt quite unable to frame such a retort. Instead she said simply, "I am not particularly fond of railway travelling, and I dislike changes. I never feel that I can settle down comfortably when there is a change before me. Even if it is two hours ahead, I cannot determine to undo a rug and make myself comfortable."

"No?" said Mr Merrilies; and once again his voice sounded so flat and uninterested that she wished she had not been so explicit in setting forth her feelings. She allowed herself to be helped to a second cup of tea, then relapsed into silence, waiting patiently for a fresh lead. The other men were discussing the day's sport, and presently her companion must needs report on "the bag" in his turn.

"We have been over the Tansy Woods to-day, seven of us, and the bag was two hundred and fifteen pheasants, a brace of partridges, thirty hares, and ninety-five rabbits. Pretty fair, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Hope simply. "I know nothing about shooting. Neither my father nor brother was a sportsman, so I cannot judge what is bad or good. It seems a tremendous number."

She looked so pretty and so winsome as she glanced at him with her childlike eyes that his face relaxed from its set lines, and he smiled in involuntary friendliness.

"A few years ago it would have been a record day, a day to put in the papers, but now it is nothing at all extraordinary. In shooting, as in everything else, the standard has risen, and we are less easily satisfied. It is an age of great expectations; don't you think so?"

"I don't know," said Hope again; but her brow clouded, and presently she asked in an anxious little voice, "Do you really think the standard has risen in everything! Would it be more difficult to do well in—er—in any profession, for instance, than it was a dozen years ago! Would you have to be much cleverer?"

"Oh dear, yes! certainly you would. It is a different thing altogether. A dozen years ago people were easily pleased, and ready to make allowances, but nothing short of perfection satisfies us nowadays. The days of the amateur are past; even professionals need constant study to maintain their high standard."

"Y-es," assented Hope faintly. She thought of her poor little songs, of Theo's "worrying" story, and Madge's poster-like pictures, and felt a sinking of heart that took away her appetite for scones and plum-cake. She and her sisters had thought themselves geniuses at dear little Leabourne, but three months' experience of London had brought a bitter disillusionment. She stared at the ground, and Mr Merrilies in his turn stared at her charming profile, and sighed to think that the prettiest girls were generally the most stupid. He was unfeignedly relieved when Avice came forward to take her cousin upstairs to dress for dinner.

The room which had been set apart for Hope was one of the smallest and least handsomely furnished in the house, as became the abode of a poor relation; but it looked attractive enough, all the same, with a bright little fire burning in the grate and the curtains drawn cosily over the windows. Hope's box had already been unpacked, and as there could be no question of "What will you wear for dinner?" there lay the black silk on the bed, solid and sober. Avice glanced at it carelessly.

"Oh yes, that will do very well. We shall be quite alone," she said, with a nod; then leant against the mantelpiece and smiled at her cousin with languid friendliness. She gave the impression of wishing to be really kind, but of lacking the energy to put her intention into effect; as a matter of fact, the girl was too anaemic to feel keen interest in anything or anybody. "Sure you have all you want? If you require anything just ring, and it will be brought to you at once. You needn't be downstairs for an hour and a half. There are some books over there if you would like to read."

"Couldn't you stay and talk to me?" asked Hope shyly; but Avice thought not—thought she had better lie down—thought there would be plenty of time to talk another day, and glided listlessly away, leaving the new-comer chilled and disappointed.

A little reading; a home letter written with a "detailly" description of journey, arrival, and first impressions; a careful if simple toilet, made short work of the hour and a half's waiting, and Hope stopped shyly out of her room to find her way along the corridor. Half-way down a door creaked, a pair of dark eyes peered cautiously forth, followed by the whole of a curly dark head, and Miss Brunette's voice accosted her with the ease and geniality of an old acquaintance.

"There you are! I have been looking out for you for an age! Do come and lace up my dress, there's a kind creature! I have rung the bell three times over, but I suppose it is broken, as nobody has appeared. I didn't bring a maid with me this time; did you?"

"I? A maid! I never possessed such a thing in my life," cried Hope, laughing; at which Miss Brunette stared, looked her critically up and down, and affected to frown.

"Really? But then it doesn't matter to you. You are one of those exasperating people who can't help looking nice, whatever they do. I *did* bless you when you walked in this afternoon! If there is one thing that makes me wild, it is to have a better-looking girl than myself staying in a house. I have had it all my own way here so far, for Avice is too lazy to count, but now I shall have to play second fiddle. Men are so silly about pretty faces. Do you think I am pretty? Honestly? Yes, most people do; but, to tell you a dead secret, it is all a mistake. I am really barely good-looking, but I give an impression of prettiness by my vivacity and strict attention to business."

Hope laughed, and the two girls chattered gaily together over the belated toilet. When it was finished Truda Bennett slid her hand through Hope's arm in friendly confidence.

"You are a dear," she said. "I like you. When you came in I thought you were bound to be slow and proper. I always mistrust fair girls with blue eyes. Nine times out of ten they are deadly uninteresting; but I can see you are an exception. I will try not to be jealous of you, if you will promise not to flirt with Ralph Merrilies. I'm especially interested in him; so play fair, won't you? You may have all the others."

"How wholesale of you! Are you sure you mean it? From what I have seen, I should imagine you would hardly be satisfied with one."

In dealing with such a very outspoken young lady, it seemed best to reply in the same strain, but Hope marvelled inwardly at the eccentricities of human nature. Imagine—just imagine—being "interested" in somebody, and confiding the fact to a stranger the very first time one spoke to her! It would be difficult enough to speak of it even to Theo, her lifelong friend and companion; but to a stranger—it was incredible! She studied the girl's dark face with curious eyes as they walked downstairs, while the men gathered round the fireplace below, watched them as they approached, and admired the pretty picture. They made a charming contrast—the sparkling brunette in her amber draperies, and the tall figure in the black dress, with the sweet pink-and-white face.



It was greeted with applause, so spontaneous and genuine that it could not fail to be inspiring.

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Directly after dinner Mrs Loftus sent Hope to the piano, and the girl sat down unaffectedly, and played several pieces in succession, to the complete satisfaction of the company, who apparently found it much more agreeable to discourse to music than without it. Mr Merrilies, indeed, did stroll across the room, to stand by her side and say "Thank you" at the conclusion, as if he meant what he said; but from a general point of view the performance was a failure, and Mrs Loftus felt disappointed. Hope had been invited with the especial intent of providing amusement for her guests, and if she failed to do so there was really no reason for her presence.

"Sing something to us, Hope," said Mrs Loftus imperiously. "Sing some of your own songs.—Miss Charrington has composed some charming little things," she explained to the company at large, who murmured politely in response.

"Compose? How wonderful of you! How do you manage to do it?" queried Truda eagerly, while the fair youth pulled his moustache and looked at Hope as if she were a wild animal escaped from the Zoo, and Uncle Loftus began humming what he fondly supposed to be the air of "The Song of Sleep" to his companion on the sofa.

Plainly, the best thing to do was to begin at once before the situation grew more embarrassing, so Hope broke into the accompaniment of song number one, a simple but taking little production which had been published two years before. It was greeted with applause, so spontaneous and genuine that it could not fail to be inspiring. Hope forgot to be nervous, and sang "Pack Clouds Away" in her best style, sweetly, smoothly, and with that distinctness of enunciation which is so rare a charm. More applause followed, more exclamations of appreciation, more queries as to how she did it, and then Uncle Loftus must needs begin humming again, and put in a request for "The sleepy one, you know—the one you wrote to order. That is the gem of the collection, in my opinion. We should like to hear the sleepy one, my dear."

Now, as it happened, Hope was by no means anxious to grant this request, for the idea which Miss Caldecott had so slightly suggested had appealed very strongly to her sensitive nature, and she had put into it her best work, with the hope that when listening to it its hearers might feel something of the same thrill, the same earnestness, which she had experienced in its composition. She had never been able to go through it unmoved, and it seemed almost sacrilege to sing it in this room full of noisy strangers, who would miss its point, and at best pronounce it "sweetly pretty." She tried to protest, to declare that she had already monopolised the piano too long, but it was of no avail. The more she hung back, the more eager became her audience. "The sooner begun, the sooner it's done," she said to herself, with a sigh of resignation, and began to sing forthwith.

Theo had clothed the idea in simple and touching words, and Hope had seconded her with something akin to inspiration; the last few lines, with their subtle change of key, containing an effect at once charming and pathetic. "So to us all comes the end of the day," sang Hope softly—so softly that the crackle of the firewood sounded loudly in the ears of the listeners:

"So to us all comes the end of the day,
When our playmates are lost, and our toys cast away;
Tired children of earth, when the shadows fall deep,
The Father in Heaven will grant to us - sleep!"

The pause before the last word gave to it an added emphasis, and Hope let her hands fall on her lap with a sigh of pent-up emotion. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears; but there were no signs of emotion in the audience.

"How sweetly pretty!" cried Truda in the very accents which the singer had heard in imagination.

"I say! Quite touching, isn't it?" said the youth with the fair moustache.

There was a babel of "Thanks—thanks awfully!" and Aunt Loftus said graciously, "You must be tired, my dear. Come and sit down. We must really give you a rest."

For five minutes afterwards Hope was the centre of an admiring throng, and tasted the bitter-sweet of an applause which failed to appreciate the true merit of her work. It was pleasant enough, so far as it went, but it left a disappointed ache behind, and she was not sorry when Truda asserted her rights, and by means of a trick with a lead pencil, a piece of paper, and a hand-glass succeeded once more in gathering the company round herself.

Hope remained on the outside of the circle, a little tired after her exertions, and thankful for a moment's breathing-space. As she stood she became conscious of a steady gaze levelled upon her from the other end of the room. Mr Merrilies had not taken up a position with the other men, but was leaning against the mantelpiece, studying her face with a grave, intent questioning. For a moment each looked deep into the other's eyes; the rest of the figures in the room seemed to fade away, and these two saw each other as they really were, shorn of all the pretence and artificiality of society.

"It is true," he said to himself: "her mind is as lovely as her face. She could not have composed that song—she could not have sung it as she did—if she were not everything that is sweet and good. *Hope!* I wonder—I wonder if—at last—"

He raised his arm from the mantelpiece and walked forward to join the group by the table, while Hope shrank still farther into the shadow. Her cheeks flushed, her heart beat with an unaccustomed quickening. "I believe," she said to herself—"I believe he understood!"

Chapter Eleven.

New Friendships.

Three days passed, and Hope thoroughly enjoyed the novel experience of life in a crowded and constantly changing household. Certain of the guests were fixtures, among whom were numbered Truda Bennett, Mr Merrilies, and the fair and facetious Reggie Blake; but for the rest, every day saw fresh arrivals, fresh departures, all involving a certain amount of extra work to the busy servants. Hope could not help realising the truth of Madge's shrewd surmise that she had been asked to make herself of use, for her aunt did not fail to claim her services a dozen times a day. She arranged the flowers, decorated the dinner-table, answered business letters, made up and unpacked parcels, and, in short, discharged all the little duties which ordinarily fall upon the daughter of the house.

The work kept her more or less separate from the rest of the party, and there were occasions when she listened longingly to the bursts of laughter which sounded from the hall or from the billiard-room when on a wet day the resourceful Truda organised a billiard tournament for the entertainment of the men. But for the most part she was delighted to be of use, to watch her aunt's hard manner gradually soften into something closely approaching affection, and to receive from time to time one of her cousin's rare caresses. Avicé never offered to take any part in the work, but the listless eyes noted more than was imagined; and looking back over the day's history, Hope often realised that it was to a quiet word or suggestion from Avicé's lips that she owed what little pleasure came her way.

With Mr Merrilies she had few opportunities of conversation, for he was out shooting all day long; and in the evening Truda claimed him for her own, and allowed him no chance of leaving her side. She had dozens of what she called "parlour tricks," and every evening produced some new device to attract attention. Now it was a ring slung on a piece of string, which must be separated without undoing the knot; now a feat of balancing; now some marvellous thought-reading, carefully prearranged with a confederate. She was a young person whom it was impossible to ignore, who systematically made herself the centre of attraction, laughing, talking at the pitch of her voice, and gesticulating with her little ringed hands. Hope felt a curious fascination in watching Mr Merrilies' expression as he passively played the part of assistant, and asked herself curiously if he returned Truda's feeling of "especial interest". Impossible to say. His inscrutable face was no index to his feelings, but if he showed no special pleasure in being thus singled out, he at least made no effort to escape it. In spite of the warning which she had received, Hope could not help feeling more interest in this man than in any other member of the party; and she realised, with a little thrill of satisfaction, that the interest was mutual. If she took advantage of an unobserved moment to study him, he lost no opportunity of watching her in return, and the knowledge that his dark eyes were fixed on her as she talked, and sang, and moved about the room filled her with a new and delightful self-consciousness.

Now, Hope was a warm-hearted girl, and, as was only natural, had given many a thought to the lover of the future; but it never occurred to her that there was any danger in the interest which she felt in Ralph Merrilies, or in her intense consciousness of his presence. She deluded herself into the belief that she was less cordially disposed to him than to any other member of the party, for she had been warned that another girl considered him her individual property, and was by no means willing to share his attentions. So it came to pass that she kept quietly in the background, and had little or nothing to say to Truda's cavalier.

On the third evening of Hope's stay at The Shanty the sportsmen came home unusually tired, and for once Truda's after-dinner tricks failed to entertain. The men had no inclination to exert their minds or their muscles either, and turning to Hope, begged her for "a tune."

"The worst of Miss Charrington," sighed Reggie Blake regretfully, "is that she is so painfully classical and superior. She never condescends to play a piece whose composer hasn't seven syllables in his name and a sneeze in the middle. They are very clever and all that sort of thing, don't you know, but I always wonder when the tune is going to begin. Squeak, squeak! in the treble; bang, bang! in the bass; a rolling like heavy machinery, and all sorts of jerks and breaks when you are least expecting them: that is what you call a 'Gigue.' A bit of a scale repeated over and over again like the tune the old cow died of: that is a 'Fugue.' I've a musical sister at home, so I know. Now, I don't pretend to be classical; I like a good, rousing air—something that makes you want to stamp your feet and beat time with your head. Look at Miss Charrington laughing at me! I suppose as a matter of fact you don't *know* any airs, Miss Charrington?"

"I have a schoolboy brother," answered Hope demurely. She wheeled round on the music-stool and looked at him with dancing eyes; and when Hope looked mischievous, it was something very well worth seeing in those days of young womanhood. "I blush to say," she said slowly—though as a matter of fact she did not blush at all, but looked particularly beaming and complacent—"I blush to say that there is not a single tune at present performed upon the barrel-organs with which I am not intimately acquainted. I shall be happy to accompany you, and to coach you in the words, whenever you feel inclined to perform."

“Hurrah! Good business! Will you really!” cried Reggie, jumping to his feet and hurrying across to the piano, abeam with delight. “Can you manage ‘Mrs ‘Enry ‘Awkins’? That is my stock song, and I sing it wherever I go.—Mrs Loftus, you are dying to hear me sing ‘Mrs ‘Enry ‘Awkins’? I know you are.—Let’s tune up at once, Miss Charrington; and a chorus, mind—a rousing old chorus!”

Every one was laughing, and looking of a sudden bright and animated; no one was sleepy any longer. There was a secondary accompaniment of chuckles as Reggie screwed up his thin, ugly face into the most comical of grimaces and half-sang, half-recited the celebrated coster love-song. Hope’s spirited playing made him sing his best, and her clear voice started the chorus with such spirit that presently every one was taking part, tentatively at first, then with quickly growing ardour, until at last the volume of sound became overpowering. Uncle Loftus bellowed himself hoarse in his corner, and even his wife’s lips moved in sympathetic echo. At the conclusion of the song there was an outburst of applause and laughter which made the performer beside himself with delight.

“To think,” he cried, “that we have wasted our time over Wagner and Grieg, and all those foreign Johnnies, when we might have had music like this! I’ll sing every night; and we must work up some more choruses. Mrs Loftus, have you any Gilbert and Sullivan operas in the house? Couldn’t we have a try at them?”

Why not, indeed? No sooner said than done. Out came the operas from the music cabinet, and as half-a-dozen voices urged the claims of half-a-dozen favourites, there was plainly nothing to be done but take each in turn. The chorus was by way of being a scratch combination—one treble; one alto, who had to accompany as well as sing, and also to put in all the high notes, because the treble declared that she could not possibly “go” above F; two tenors, by no means as correct as they might have been; and an army of heavy, dragging bass—but what was lacking in ability was made up by fervour.

Mr Merrilies did not sing, but he volunteered to turn over the pages, and seating himself by Hope’s side, watched her face for the signal which was to guide his inexperience. At first this signal was a quick glance at his face, but as time went on this was replaced by a nod of the head or an upward jerk of the hand—for there was something in the expression of those watchful eyes which was embarrassing to meet at close quarters. They talked quietly together between the choruses, while the different parts were wrangling loudly, each laying the blame upon the other, and calling attention to his own superior performance: and it was not in girl nature to be ignorant of the fact that Ralph seemed far less concerned about the music than her own comfort. The lamp was moved because it dazzled her eyes; the book was raised to a more convenient angle; a door was closed to avoid a draught; and all in a quiet, unobtrusive manner that made the attention doubly acceptable. Members of large families are not accustomed to have their wishes gratified almost before they are realised, and are all the more ready to appreciate such consideration from a stranger.

Hope played, and sang, and instructed—gave leads, banged insistently upon notes which the singers rendered flat instead of sharp, and even finished a tenor solo which had hopelessly come to grief—until hand and voice and head alike ached with fatigue; but still the insatiable chorus clamoured for more, remembering another and another favourite which it would be a sin to leave untried.

“You are tired,” said a low voice in her ear. “You shall not play any longer;” and before she had time to protest, Ralph Merrilies had risen from his seat and closed the book with a determined hand. “It is nearly eleven o’clock. Do you realise how long you have kept Miss Charrington? She has surely earned a rest. Do come and sit down, Miss Charrington; your back must need support.”

“Better come upstairs with me, Hope. I am just going,” said Avice, rising from the sofa and slipping her hand through her cousin’s arm. The singers, contrite at their own lack of consideration, busied themselves putting away the music, and gathered into little groups round the piano, so that Mr Merrilies and the two girls were alone in their corner, and their conversation was not overheard. “I am afraid we have been very selfish,” he said, looking at Hope’s tired face; “but the music has been such a pleasure that we have gone on and on without noticing the time, and Miss Charrington was too good-natured to remind us that she was growing tired.”

“Hope never thinks of herself,” said Avice quietly; and the colour flamed into Hope’s white cheeks and her blue eyes brightened with pleasure at this unexpected tribute. Avice—Avice the languid, the undemonstrative—to praise her aloud, and in company! She was too much taken aback to protest in the conventional way, but she noticed that Mr Merrilies looked even more pleased than herself. He smiled at Avice with a new interest in his eyes, and said quickly:

“In that case it is our duty to look after her. I should suggest fresh air in the first place. How is it that she never joins us at our out-of-door luncheons?”

“She stays at home to help mother; but she shall come to-morrow. I will bring her,” replied Avice in a voice that for once was not languid, but quite brisk and decided. Wonders would never cease! Could it be that friendship for a girl of her own age was about to rouse the listless Avice to an active interest in the life which was going on around her!

Chapter Twelve.

A Shooting Luncheon.

It was with the exultation of a child on a holiday that Hope prepared to start for the picnic lunch the next day. Hitherto she had watched the departure of the other ladies with a spasm of not unnatural envy, but now she was going herself. The day was bright and mild, and it was so pleasant to drive in the open behind Pipeclay, the little white pony which was Avice’s special favourite. Truda had driven on ahead with the luncheon-baskets, accompanied by a young married lady who was the latest addition to the house-party, so the two cousins were alone, and could talk together without fear of interruption. Hope was all brightness and animation, for she was experiencing at that moment a mysterious lightness of heart which made her see everything through rose-coloured spectacles. She admired everything—the grey stretches of the landscape, the outline of the trees against the skies, the tumble-down cottages by the roadside—while Avice listened to her animated talk with a wistful smile on her face.

“You enjoy everything, Hope. How do you manage it? I wish I knew your secret, for to me it all seems so stale and uninteresting. I do not believe there is anything in the world which would make me so bright and happy as you seem this morning.”

“Nothing?”

“No—nothing. I enjoy some things more than others, of course; but, honestly, for me the happiest moment of the day is when I lie down in bed and feel that for eight hours at least I need do nothing but rest.”

“Poor darling!” cried Hope sympathetically—“poor darling! That is a matter of health, of course. But, Avice, don’t you think that perhaps if you—”

“Yes; if I what?”

Hope knitted her brows and looked distressed and nervous.

“Oh, I don’t want to preach, but perhaps if you had something to do—if you did not think quite so much of—I mean to say that if one is feeling weak and listless, and has nothing to do, one goes on feeling worse and worse. But if one gets interested—”

“Yes, I know what you mean; but how is one to get interested? That is the question. I am not clever like you, and have no hobbies to occupy my mind, and I get so bored with myself. Mother won’t let me help her. She thinks I am too delicate; and, apart from that, she is quick and I am slow, and it would fidget her to see me droning through what she could do in half the time. It is all very well to say, ‘Have an interest.’ Everything that seems new and exciting to you here is stale to me. I am sick to death of living in public as we do, entertaining one set of visitors after another, who all say the same things and amuse themselves in the same way. I am not strong enough to go out ‘slumming’ or visiting hospitals, as some girls do. Where would *you* find your interest if you were in my place, Hope?”

“I’d find it somewhere,” said Hope sturdily. “You have plenty of money and plenty of time, and there must be a hundred ways of putting them to account. I—I think I would try to help girls who are alone in the world and struggling to make their living. We are all together, and have enough money to keep us from actual want, but I can imagine how *awful* it must be for girls who are all alone, with no one to help them if they fall ill; whose lives are one long, colourless struggle, with never a ray of brightness or pleasure from Monday morning until Saturday night. Could you not think of some way of helping them? What could you do? I know; I have it! There is that sweet little lodge with no one living in it but old George and his wife, and she was lamenting to me only yesterday that her daughters were married, and there were no young folks left in the house. Why should you not furnish two rooms upstairs, and invite poor shop assistants and girl-clerks to come down for their holidays, two at a time, so that they would be companions for each other? It would be so easy to manage, for you need not think of expense; and Mrs Moss would wait upon them, while you provided their amusements. You could go round with Pipeclay and take them out for drives; you could lend them books and papers, and have them up to the house to tea. They would confide their joys and troubles to you, and tell you about their ‘friends,’ and write letters to you when they went home. When they married, you could help to provide the trousseaux. And when the first little girls were born they would be called after you, and you would knit their socks. They would be brought up to love you because you had been kind to their mothers, and it would be the dream of their lives to be asked down to see all the places of which they had heard so much. In a dozen homes all over the country people would be blessing you, and looking upon you as the good fairy who had brought them health and happiness. Oh Avice, you lucky girl! What would I give to have such a chance? I would begin to-morrow—to-day—this very afternoon!”

“Well,” said Avice reflectively—“well!” It was not in her nature to be enthusiastic like her cousin, but she smiled as if the idea found favour in her sight, and her dull eyes brightened. “It *does* sound nice. I suppose I could do it if I liked. Mother wouldn’t mind, and Mrs Moss would be delighted. She is one of those women who are never so happy as when they are nursing some one; and she would coddle the girls from morning till night, and give them beaten-up eggs and black-currant jelly for their throats, and her celebrated cough mixture made out of nine ‘ingredients’! I really will think about it, Hope. I believe it would be interesting. Would you help me to furnish the rooms and make them pretty and artistic?”

“Rather! I adore buying things—when some one else has to pay. We would have one room blue, and one pink, with white paint and dear little white beds, and bookcases full of nice books, and comfy wicker chairs by the window, where the girls could sit and read, and rest their poor, tired backs. And I would be your town agent, and look out for likely subjects. If I were in a shop and saw a poor, anaemic-looking girl, I could find out her circumstances from the manager or head of the department; and if she had no one to look after her, and was living in the shop, or in poky little lodgings, I could send on her name to you, and you would invite her to come here for the holidays. Oh, you are going to do it, my dear! You’ll *have* to do it! I’ll give you no peace till you do.”

“I’ll think about it. I can’t decide things in a moment; but I would like to work with you, Hope, and it doesn’t sound too formidable. I really think I could arrange a pleasant holiday for the girls.”

“I really think you might,” agreed Hope, laughing; and then suddenly came a halloo of welcome, and over the fence appeared one head after another as the shooting party rose to receive the new-comers.

Truda and Mrs Inglis had arrived some ten minutes earlier, and luncheon was laid on a cloth under the shelter of the hedge, mackintosh sheets being spread upon the ground, on which the guests could sit without fear of rheumatic consequences. A few yards away the beaters were already refreshing themselves with Irish stew and copious draughts of beer, while from the hampers had come forth all manner of tempting viands, to which the sportsmen did ample justice, the while they protested at such dainties.

“Mrs Loftus spoils us altogether. I don’t approve of luxuries at a shooting lunch. We are getting too soft as a nation; that is what is the matter with us. It would be a lot better if we went back to simpler ways.—Cut me a chunk more of that galantine, that’s a good fellow. A *chunk*, I said; cut it thicker, can’t you?” and Reggie Blake bent forward to superintend the carver’s movements with an anxiety of expression which evoked a hearty laugh from his companions.

Mrs Nash, the new-comer, was offering “a handsome wife and ten thousand a year,” in the shape of the lost roll upon a plate, to an old bachelor of sixty, who appeared much delighted at the prospect. Truda was playing tunes on the rim of her tumbler; Avice had actually a tinge of colour in her cheeks; and Hope sat perched on a cushion, looking down on them all like a queen on her throne. Before the meal had begun she had found herself seated uncomfortably between two of the least interesting of the sportsmen; but she had hardly time to realise her disappointment before—presto! the scene was changed. Mr Merrilies had strolled towards the pony-cart, and returned with an armful of cushions, which he placed on the ground close to where he himself had been sitting.

“There!” he said; “those are for you, Miss Charrington. You have evidently not mastered the art of lurching comfortably on the ground, and we shall have to break you in by degrees. Let me take your plate.”

Thus in the most open and natural fashion the change was effected which was fraught with so much satisfaction to the two people most concerned. It was so much pleasanter than the old position, though innocent Hope—the view was more extended, more beautiful, more sunny and cheerful; and to judge from his unusual animation, Ralph Merrilies was of the same mind as herself. There was no chance of private conversation; but there are occasions when the most commonplace phrases become interesting and the very passing of the mustard is a thrilling incident!

When lunch was over the ladies agreed to walk a little way with the men, leaving the carts to pick them up at another point. Once again Hope found herself carried off by Ralph Merrilies, and guided by such a circuitous path that the other members of the party were soon ahead and safely out of hearing. For a time they talked of matters connected with the day’s sport, but gradually the conversation took a more personal tone, and Hope found Mr Merrilies confiding details of his life to her attentive ears. It appeared that his parents were dead, and that he owned an estate in Hampshire, where he lived in much luxury, and greater boredom, during such portions of the year as he was not visiting or risking his life abroad in search of adventure; that he was, in short, one of those wealthy, idle men of whom she had often read, but whom she had never met. As for him, he was charmed by her naive interest and curiosity concerning himself and his doings. She asked for a description of the house, of his housekeeper-aunt’s appearance, character, and attainments; she wondered how he employed himself all day, suggested improvements in his grounds, and was much concerned to hear of a fire among the stacks at the home farm. Then he adroitly led the conversation to herself, beginning with a reference to the subject in which she appeared most deeply interested.

“I suppose you amuse yourself with music. As you sing and play and compose, you have plenty of variety to keep you going. The worst of possessing so many talents is, that they are so much appreciated by other people that they want to work you to death for their amusement. Last night, for instance! It was too bad to keep you at the piano all evening, and treat you as though you were a professional accompanist.”

“I wish I was,” sighed Hope wistfully; and when her companion looked at her with a start of surprise, “That is what I want to be,” she added simply. “I have to earn my living in some way, and neither my voice nor my playing is good enough for public performances; but I *can* accompany. I should be thankful if any one *would* hire me for the purpose.”

Ralph Merrilies looked at her in silent astonishment. He had taken for granted that, as the niece of the wealthy Mr Loftus, Hope Charrington occupied the same position in society. Man-like, he had noticed none of the signs of poverty in her attire which were plain as print to feminine eyes. What if her attire was always of the simplest description? She invariably looked better than any other girl in the room. If one solitary dress did duty every evening, a new arrangement of laces transformed it in his eyes; and if she wore no jewels, the round white throat and arms looked all the better for their lack of adornment. It gave him a shock of surprise to hear her speak of making her own livelihood.

“Do you really mean that?” he asked gravely; and in reply Hope gave him a short biographical sketch, which explained the present position of the family. “So you see I am responsible for a share of our expenses,” she said in conclusion, “and it is not so easy to earn as I expected. I thought I should have little difficulty in getting songs published, but I find it is very difficult indeed; and even if I sold one or two in the year, they would bring in very little, so I must find something that is more certain. I should make a good accompanist, for I can read at sight and transpose as I go, and know when to humour a singer and when to pull him up. But the difficulty is to find an opening. I do hope that I may not be reduced to giving lessons! That would be a real trial of patience, and the prospect is so hopelessly limited.”

“Oh, you must not give lessons! That would never do,” said Ralph, drawing his brows together in a disapproving frown. That she should need to work at all was an idea still disagreeably new. “You speak of becoming an accompanist. What does that mean exactly! Is there an opening for accompaniment playing, apart from taking a more prominent place in a programme?”

“Oh yes. Professionals often insist upon having their own accompanists, for it is so easy for a stranger to spoil their effects. Even among amateurs they are occasionally required. Suppose a lady gets up a concert for charity, or gives a musical ‘At Home,’ or has private theatricals, it is an immense help to have some one who can play for all the performers alike, improvise a few bars if things go wrong, and fill up awkward gaps by appropriate ‘selections.’ That is the work which would suit me best, if I could make a start and become fairly well-known.”

“I see. Yes, as you explain it, there certainly is an opening in that direction; but forgive me for saying that the position seems too subordinate for your talent. Why should you not sing yourself? You would be better paid, and it seems to me that you are very well fitted to do so.”

Hope shook her head with pathetic candour.

“No. My voice is not strong enough. I am a fair amateur, but most people can find friends to sing for them quite as well as I could do; and if they hire professionals at all, they want something better—a beautiful voice like Minnie Caldecott’s, for instance. As you said yourself the day I arrived, it is a fastidious age, and mediocrity cannot hope for success.”

“Did I say that? What a singularly unhappy remark! You must forgive it, please, because of course I had no idea what was in your mind. I don’t think, however, that you ought to use the word ‘mediocre.’ It is more a question of appropriateness. Your voice may not be suited for big entertainments—and, to speak quite frankly, I can hardly imagine your facing such an ordeal—but surely there are quieter ways of setting to work. What about children, now—children’s parties? My little nieces have a party every year, and it is a serious business to find a change from the everlasting conjurer and magic-lantern. Could you not find some songs which they would like to hear?”

He looked at her inquiringly, and Hope stood still in the middle of the lane and stared at him with kindling eyes. “*Children!*” she whispered beneath her breath—“*children!*”

It was the prettiest thing in the world to see the different emotions chase each other over the sweet face: surprise first, and puzzled questioning; then the gradual dawning of an idea, the flush of radiant triumph.

“Children’s parties! Oh, what an idea! What a brilliant, brilliant ideal Mr Merrilies, how can I ever thank you? I don’t know why I did not think of it myself, for it is the very thing I should love above all others; and I believe I could make it a success.”

She turned and began to walk rapidly forward, waving her hands and unfolding her programme with characteristic Charrington enthusiasm.

“I know what I will do—I know exactly. I will tell them a story, and sing descriptive little songs at intervals. Theo shall write the words and share in the profits; and the songs shall be set to well-known airs, for children love what they know, and would enjoy joining in the choruses. Oh, it will be charming!—a new fairy tale introducing all the dear old characters—the Giant who lives alone in his Castle, and eats up every one who comes in his way, ‘Fe-fo-fum!’ that shall be his song—‘Fe-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!’ Can’t you hear the deep chords in the bass? Then there must be the Prince, of course, and the most beautiful Princess that ever was seen—”

“With golden hair and dark-blue eyes,” put in the listener, with a look in his eyes that passed unnoticed by his excited companion.

“Yes, yes; and—and a wicked fairy who was not asked to the christening, and a good fairy who undid all her spells. Theo will bring them all in. I will write to her this very night, for there is not a minute to be lost. I shall have no difficulty in setting the songs to music, and should not feel a scrap nervous singing to children. Deal little souls! What fun it will be watching their faces and hearing them join in the choruses! Oh, what a charming ideal! Do you really think any one would allow me to try?”

“I will give you your first engagement now, at this moment! My sister will be only too eager to secure you; and she will tell her friends of the new idea. I shall say that your fee is rather high, but that at all costs you must be engaged if she wishes the party to be a success. You must charge a good deal, you know, or people won’t think half so much of you.”

Hope looked at him with shy delight.

“Must I? I should like that. Mr Merrilies, I am so grateful to you that I don’t know what to say. You have made me feel so happy. If I get on at all, it will be all your doing.”

“It will be nothing of the kind. I simply mentioned the word children, and you pounced upon it and evolved the whole scheme. There is no gratitude due to me,” declared Ralph Merrilies sturdily.

At that moment voices broke upon the ear, and turning a corner, they saw the three remaining ladies of the party walking back to meet them. Avice came forward to ask Mr Merrilies some question about the carriage, while Truda turned to Hope and studied her face with gloomy eyes.

“You look very jubilant. What is the matter with you to-day?”

“I’ve got an idea!”

“Goodness! Is that all? I’ve got hundreds.” She fell a few steps behind the others, and added resentfully, “You have managed to keep him pretty well to yourself, at any rate. He hasn’t spoken a word to me all day. I don’t call that keeping your promise.”

Chapter Thirteen.

Prickings of Conscience.

Truda was very silent all the way home; in plain words, she sulked, and refused to give more than monosyllabic replies to Hope’s gentle overtures. When the house was reached she pleaded headache—that convenient cloak for every feminine ill, from a headache to had temper—and retired to her room for the remainder of the afternoon. Hope went into the empty library and wrote a long letter home, telling all about her new plans, asking Theo’s co-operation, and sending a list of certain points to which she wished special attention to be given. She wrote with interest, it is true, but with none of the elation which she had known an hour earlier; for at the back of her mind lay a consciousness that something disagreeable lay before her—a painful situation to be faced so soon as leisure should be hers. When later on she sat before her bedroom fire, in the interval before dressing for dinner, she stared into the heart of the glowing coals and thrashed out the subject—quietly, sweetly, fairly, as her nature was.

Truda was annoyed, and considered that she had been unfairly treated, in that another had monopolised something to which she possessed a prior claim. After that first very candid statement she had naturally relied on the loyalty of the girl in whom she had confided, and although no actual promise had been given, that girl had also considered herself bound in honour. Had she kept faith? For the most part Hope could honestly answer in the affirmative, but looking back over the last few days, she acknowledged that she had been sufficiently "off guard" to allow herself to be monopolised without protest, and so had engrossed the lion's share of Ralph Merrilies' attention. *Without protest!* The blood rushed over Hope's face at the misleading sound of the words. There had been no thought of protest—no wish for it—nothing but purest delight and satisfaction in being thus monopolised. So far from feeling any dismay, her heart had given a leap of triumph each time he had come to her side. What did this mean? Did it—could it possibly be falling in love? Was she beginning to care more for Ralph Merrilies than for any man whom she had known? She mentally placed the image of one masculine friend after the other beside this acquaintance of a week's standing, and lo! they were as nothing—their weal or woe touched her not at all, compared with the lightest interest of this comparative stranger. *Beginning* to care! She cared already—cared with all her heart—cared more than she had even known it was possible to care. Realising this, Hope grew frightened, and clasped trembling hands in her lap. What madness was it, what will-o'-the-wisp, for which she had bartered her peace? She, Hope Charrington, poor, insignificant, friendless, and he the owner of a fine estate, handsome, distinguished, influential, with the *entr e* into any society which he desired to affect, the world a playground over which to roam at will! With such a choice before him, such a stage on which to play his life, how was it possible that he could cast a thought in her direction? What attention he had paid her had been but that which a man would naturally show towards any girl who happened to be to him—for the time at least—the most interesting member of a house-party. Hope did not delude herself that Ralph had any penchant for the lively Truda, but since the two moved in the same circle, and had many opportunities of meeting, it was possible that in time to come he might return the girl's fancy; in any case she could not be the one to stand between them.

"I'll go home," decided Hope drearily. "My time is up on Tuesday, and though I know Avice will beg me to stay longer, this children's entertainment will be a good excuse for getting back to town. I'll keep out of his way as much as possible until I go, and forget all about him when I step into the train. Ten days! Only ten days! It must be easy enough to forget a little time like that. It would be cowardly to let ten days interfere with one's life."

She was very quiet that evening, very subdued all next day, and so much engrossed in helping her aunt that she was hardly seen by the rest of the guests until evening came round. That she had been missed was evident, but while the other men loudly regretted her absence, and plied her with tiresome questions as to its cause, Ralph was silent, watching her face with an anxious glance, and attending to her comfort with even more than his usual quietly unobtrusive care. Hope felt that he had divined a secret trouble, and she was sure of it the next morning after breakfast, when Mrs Loftus having sent her into the library to write some notes, he suddenly remembered his own correspondence and followed her into the room. Hope would have settled down to work at once, but she could not be so ungracious as to refuse to help in his search for some mislaid articles, and in the middle of commonplaces another question was put, suddenly, briefly, but with an earnestness of manner which showed what was his real purpose in following her to the library.

"You are not yourself; something is troubling you. Have you had bad news?"

Hope fell back a pace and looked at him with startled eyes. Before his earnest scrutiny ordinary denials became impossible; she could answer nothing but the truth.

"Not bad news—no; but something troubles me a little. Please take no notice; it will pass away."

"Is it nothing in which I can help?"

A faint smile flitted across Hope's charming face, and she shook her golden head. "You are very kind, but—"

"If I can help at any time, in any way, will you give me the opportunity? Will you believe that nothing could possibly give me so much pleasure?"

He stepped towards her as he spoke; but even as he did so there came from without the sound of Truda's voice, loud and insistent, approaching nearer and nearer to the room. With a shiver of dismay, Hope realised that in another moment the door might be thrown open and a *t te- t te* discovered, which, however innocent in reality, would certainly have a romantic appearance in the eyes of a beholder. She broke into a forced laugh and turned aside to seat herself at the desk.

"Oh, thank you! You *have* helped me already by your charming suggestion about the children's entertainment. I have written to my sister, and hope to find the story ready when I get home."

Even to her own ears the reply sounded curt and ungracious, an obvious turning aside from the point at issue, and Ralph showed that he felt the same by saying no more, and leaving the room as soon as he had written a short note. It was painful to be obliged to appear ungracious, but painful things have to be done occasionally, and Hope longed for the day to arrive that would put an end to her suffering. Avice pleaded hard for an extension of her stay, and could only be pacified by the promise of a longer visit in spring, when the lodge rooms were to be furnished and the new scheme inaugurated by which she was to play the part of fairy godmother to less fortunate girls than herself. That was one good thing that seemed likely to arise from this visit, and it was some compensation to Hope to receive her cousin's affectionate embrace at parting, and to hear her say, "Goodbye, sweet Hope. Don't forget me among all your duties. We shall be in town again in a fortnight, and I sha'n't be content unless you come at least once a week to see me. You have done me lots of good. I'll try—I really will try—to think more of other people."

That sent Hope away with a thankful heart, and with courage to go through the farewells downstairs. Her new friends seemed sorry to say good-bye, but it was not a sorrow that would imperil their peace of mind. Truda had received a longed-for invitation to a country-house in the neighbourhood, and was in the highest of spirits, and Mr Merrilies was not present. Hope wondered if she were not to see him to say good-bye, but when she stepped out of the carriage on to the platform of the little station, a tall figure appeared within the threshold of the waiting-room, and Ralph Merrilies himself stepped forward to meet her.

"I thought I would walk home this way and see you off. Are you alone! Will you come in here beside the fire or walk up and down?"

Hope glanced at the clock, found she had still five minutes to wait, and decided that it would be less embarrassing to move about than to remain within the confines of that little room.

"I shall have to sit still for the next three hours, so I think I will walk about, please, if you don't mind. I hope you will have good sport this afternoon, and to-morrow at Benckley. Did Miss Bennett tell you she had received her invitation for next week? She is quite excited about it, for so many of Aunt Emma's guests seem to be going on there. You are one of the number, aren't you?"

"I think not I left it indefinite, and I rather fancy I shall write to say that I must go home. I thought of leaving The Shanty to-morrow or Saturday." He was silent for a moment, his eyes on the ground; then he said suddenly, "You will give me your address? I must have it for my sister, who will want to write to you about the date of her party."

"Yes, of course. Thank you so much for remembering. I have not a card in my purse, but our number is ten—Number 10 Whately Mansions."

"And may I—will you allow me to come to see you sometimes? I am often in town, and it would give me so much pleasure!"

He did not look at her as he spoke, and Hope was thankful that he did not see her flush of dismay. She had never anticipated such a request, and was terrified by a suggestion that would make all her good resolutions of no effect. During every hour of the last three days she had congratulated herself that her time of probation was short, and that with her return home would come back peace and contentment. What prospect of recovery could there be, what chance of work well done, if the expectation of Ralph's coming was ever before her as the one great possibility of the day? And what would Truda say? The thought that she might perhaps be endangering Truda's happiness nerved her to boldness of speech.

"You are very kind, but we are business women, and our sitting-rooms are our work-rooms also. I fear we must deny ourselves the pleasure of visitors yet awhile."

She cast a hurried glance at the clock to see how many of the five minutes still remained. Only one! The porter was carrying her box to the farther end of the station, a group of rustics were strolling out of the ticket-office, and Mr Merrilies was saying quietly:

"Art is long. You find, as do all her disciples, that she demands undivided allegiance. I shall look forward to hearing the result of your labours. Here is your train. You would like the small bag in the carriage, wouldn't you?"

There was a note in his voice which gave Hope actual pain to hear, and the remembrance of his set white face was not a pleasant one for her to carry away on her journey.

Chapter Fourteen.

Home Again.

The little flat looked bright and cheery when the traveller reached home. A new lampshade had replaced the one which Mary had burned, sixpence-worth of flowers were displayed to the utmost advantage against a background of dried fern, and the three sisters were beaming with joy at the return of their peacemaker. They asked questions steadily for an hour on end, and even then were far from being satisfied; for, though Hope smiled and declared that she had had "a lovely time," they were vaguely conscious of the difference which she herself felt only too surely. Hitherto home had meant the centre of interest, and its walls had practically bounded the world; now her heart was a wanderer, and at every pause in the conversation roved away to that distant spot where it had found fresh anchorage. Fortunately for the keeping of her secret, the girls were enthusiastic on the subject of the children's entertainment, and encouragingly sanguine of success. Theo had finished writing the story, and read it aloud after dinner to an appreciative audience, who unanimously decided that she must give her attention to children's stories forthwith, since nothing more poetically graceful, and at the same time interesting and exciting, could be wished to while away the children's hour. Hope was humming over the refrain of a chorus, and trying to decide which of two well-known airs would be more suitable, when Madge drew a sheet of paper from a portfolio and held it towards her with conscious pride.

"My share in the Amalgamated Sisters' Enterprise, Limited! I never like to be out of a good thing, so, though I was not asked, I determined to have a finger in the pie. You will want some sort of advertisement to take round to entertainment agencies, and to distribute among friends. There you are!"

There Hope was indeed, for Madge was never more happy than when she could give full play to her fancy. For years past she had amused herself by designing artistic programmes for the small bazaars and concerts that had taken place at her country home, so that she had experience as well as interest to help her on this occasion. Hope grew quite pink with pleasure and embarrassment as she looked down the sheet and tried to realise that she herself was the performer of whom it spoke.

"*Tell me a story!*" ran the heading, in quaint, uneven lettering; while immediately underneath came a sketch of two children, a boy and a girl, with hands outstretched as though they were offering the petition. Madge had copied the figures from an old sketch, altering only the dress to suit the occasion; and a dainty little pair they made, most eloquent in their dumb entreaty. Beneath came more lettering, setting forth that Miss Hope Charrington, the children's entertainer, was prepared to give her charming recitals at Christmas parties, bazaars, or charity gatherings for the sum of two guineas an hour. A waving, ribbon-like border edged the sheet, held up at the corners by four characters dear to the childish heart—the Prince, the Princess, the Fairy, and the Giant.

"Madge, you darling! How perfectly lo-ovely!" gasped Hope, in delight. "So clever, so dainty, so—so beautifully professional! But oh, *dare* I? 'Charming recital'! Suppose it is a terrible failure. 'Children's entertainer'! I have never entertained any one in my life. Suppose I were to break down."

"Practice makes perfect. Of course, you will have to try your hand. The vicar of Saint Giles's called on us yesterday, and asked if we would help in the parish. I asked—just as a feeler—if he would like a treat for the school children, and he snatched at the idea. You are to let him know what you can do; and if you run the blockade of his street-arabs you need fear no longer. *They* won't pretend to be amused if they are not, that is certain."

"It will be pleasant for me if they hoot in the middle! But I'll put my feelings in my pocket and do my very best. I must do *something* with my life, and I am determined that nervousness sha'n't stand in my way;" and Hope sighed once more—the short, stabbing little sigh that had come so often since her return.

When the sisters retired to bed that evening Theo chatted pleasantly about ordinary matters until the gas was put out; then she stretched out an arm, and asked in a tenderer tone than was often heard from her lips:

"What is it, deary! What is the trouble? Can you tell me?"

"Oh Theo, how did you know?" cried poor Hope guiltily. "I thought I had hidden it so well."

And then out it came—the poor little love-story, that was hardly a love-story at all, but only a "might have been;" the happiness of those few days, the awakening, the bitter wrench of parting. The soft voice trembled as it came to the end of the story, and a little sob was swallowed with the last words: "He was hurt! I could see he was hurt. There was a sort of strained look on his face as he stood looking after the train. Oh Theo, do you think I did right? Do you think I have made a mistake?"

Theo's arm pressed tenderly against the heaving shoulder. "I think," she said quietly—"I think you did what seemed to you best at the time, and what was very hard to do; and that, having done it, you must not regret. When you have chosen the narrow way, dear, you must not look back."

"No," said Hope faintly; "but still—I can't—help—regretting. It is cowardly, Theo, but he was so—I liked him so very much. Do you think it is all over—that I shall never see him again?"

"He can see you at his sister's next month if he wishes to. Try to put him out of your mind until then. Work hard, and let off steam to me when you feel particularly blue. This new plan is going to be a success; I feel convinced of it."

Theo was too prudent to give more definite comfort, but when by herself she laughed scornfully at the idea that a solitary refusal could discourage a true lover. If this Mr Merrilies had been simply attracted by a pretty face, and was likely to forget the fancy as quickly as it was formed, why, then, the less Hope thought of him the better. But the artless narrative had given Theo a different impression of his feelings. Dear, modest Hope had no idea of her own winsome charm, but her sister felt it impossible that a man of taste could live in the same house, learn the unselfish sweetness of her disposition, share in her light-hearted gaiety, and watch the different emotions flit over her face as she sang, and still call his heart his own. "If he is a thousand times all she thinks him, he is not good enough for Hope," she told herself proudly. "But oh, what a comfort it would be if she married happily, and had no need to fight for her bread! She is too sensitive to bear the 'heart-breaking' that is my apprenticeship."

The slow tears rose in Theo's eyes and trickled on to the pillow. The "worrying story" had been returned for the third time. It was looking quite dog-eared and shabby!

Chapter Fifteen.

Enter the Hermit.

The next morning Hope and Theo seated themselves at the piano, and tried over the songs which were to be included in the musical recital. The words had been written to fit certain tunes, but on singing them over little hitches and awkwardnesses were discovered, which made it necessary to reconstruct certain lines or introduce a new word for an old. As Philippa sat darned stockings in the dining-room, she smiled to herself at the sound of the disconnected snatches of song and the monotonous repetition of airs which were in such strange contrast to the classical music in which Hope delighted. All the same, the refrains were very catching; and when the "Giant's Song" was practised in its turn, Philippa found herself instinctively swelling the chorus, and emphasising the last words of the lines in merry, schoolgirl fashion:

"Whether he be alive, or whether he be *dead*,
I'll have his *bones* to make my *bread*!"

At lunch-time author and composer made their appearance, rather blue as to complexion and red as to fingertips—for the luxury of a fire in the drawing-room could not be indulged in before three o'clock at the earliest—but jubilantly pleased with themselves, and with the improvements which they had accomplished.

The next thing on the programme was to have a number of circulars lithographed for distribution, and for these Hope proposed to arrange that very afternoon, Madge accompanying her, the better to give instructions. "I can pay for them out of uncle's present," she explained smilingly. "He drove down to the lodge with me, and slipped a note in my bag in his usual fussy, disconnected fashion. 'Something to pay your fare, my dear—just to pay your fare! Serious thing to live upon capital! Mustn't allow you to be out of pocket by visiting us.' I thought it would be a couple of sovereigns just to cover expenses, and forgot to open the envelope until just now when I was getting ready for lunch and wanted something out of the bag. Then I came across it, and what do you think I found? A ten-pound note! Wasn't it sweet of the little mannikin?"

"Very decent. Fancy your forgetting about it! I should have torn it open the moment his back was turned," cried Madge in amazement, while Hope sighed at the remembrance of how her thoughts had been occupied. It was a relief to be up and doing, and she started on the important expedition directly after lunch. Theo turned out also in search of adventure, while the busy housekeeper toiled away at her basket of mending, building castles in the air about that happy time when her fledglings would be full-grown geniuses, and poverty and anxiety known no more.

Three o'clock struck, and almost at the same moment came the sound of the electric bell to startle Philippa in the midst of her dreams. In response to the summons the little maid went to the door, and a man's voice was heard inquiring if Miss Charrington was at home. Philippa gasped in dismay, and offered up a mental prayer that Mary would remember to show the visitor into the drawing-room. But Mary had no intention of doing anything of the kind. Of experience she had none, but her sense of fitness told her that when a gentleman wished to see the missus he should be shown into her presence as speedily as possible. She opened the door of the dining-room for about the space of six inches, peered round the corner, announced, "Here's a gentleman," and promptly retired to her lair, leaving the stranger standing on the mat. Philippa groaned in spirit over her own negligence, vowed that not another day should elapse before Mary was instructed in the art of introducing visitors, and walked forward to discover the identity of the stranger.

Alas! the first glance brought a prevision of trouble; she saw before her the stooping form, the thin, cadaverous face of the "Hermit," occupant of Number 9. He bowed, she bowed, invited him into the room by a wave of the hand, and stood before him in questioning silence. Seen close at hand, the Hermit was younger and less austere than he had appeared from a distance; his features, though emaciated, were delicately moulded, and the eyes that looked out of the hollow caverns were bright and alert with life. It was the face of a man whose body was the slave of his brain—a man who forgot his meals in the interest of work; who turned day into night, and persistently ignored physical ills—a striking contrast to the girl beside him, with her glowing cheeks and tall, well-developed figure.

"You wished to see me?" asked Philippa, to end the silence. The Hermit coughed nervously, and turning his hat to and fro, nicked the dust from the brim.

"I—er—yes. I came to the conclusion that a personal interview was necessary. I have tried—er—other means of protest, but, as you are aware, without success. The case in point is—er—briefly this, that I cannot any longer submit to the annoyance which I have suffered since you have taken possession of this flat, and by which my work is seriously interrupted. The ordinary noise of a household I must of course, endure, but that is a different thing from wilful, intentional disturbance."

"Wilful! Intentional!" Philippa's cheeks grew rosy red, and she squared her shoulders in her old determined fashion. All the danger-signals were flying, and if any members of the family had been present they would have given little indeed for the chances of the stranger in the battle which loomed ahead. "I think you can hardly mean to insult me by insinuating that we have deliberately tried to annoy a neighbour, however wanting in courtesy we may have found him. I presume the immediate reason of this complaint was the music this morning; but I may remind you that for the last ten days the piano has not been opened, as my sister was from home. Does it not strike you as somewhat unreasonable to complain if a neighbour plays the piano once in a fortnight?"

"I was not aware that the interval had been so long; but even so, there ought to be moderation in all things. People who live in these establishments ought to remember that, however gratifying to their own tastes it may be to sing comic songs for hours at a stretch"—the thin lips curved into a barely concealed sneer—"it may be a most painful penance for their neighbours."

"Even so, I am afraid it was necessary in this case. My sisters were not practising for their own amusement; strange to say, they also were at work. It is not necessary to go into details, but I can assure you that what they were doing was as important to them as your studies are to yourself. You misjudged them altogether if you supposed they were performing for your edification."

"I am sorry if I have made a mistake; though, of course, this was only one occasion out of many. As a matter of fact I did not intend to speak of music primarily, but of the other noises, which are more difficult to explain: a constant tapping outside my study window, for instance, which has a most trying effect on the nerves, and has made connected thought impossible every evening during the last week; and an extraordinary jarring sound which wakes me out of sleep before it is light, so that not only is my day's work marred, but my nights are disturbed into the bargain."

Philippa rested her hands on the table and stared at him with distended eyes. Was the man mad? Was he one of those morbid creatures who develop hallucinations in their lonely hours, and who, having once become possessed of an idea, proceed to nurse and coddle it into a full-grown mania? She tried to keep calm and cool, but her voice vibrated with indignation.

"And do you seriously mean to tell me that you believe *us* to be responsible! Do you blame *us* because something has gone wrong with your window-frame, or because the noises in the street disturb you in the morning? They disturb me too. I can rarely sleep after five o'clock, but I have certainly never dreamt of blaming you for the fact. You cannot possibly mean that you think—"

"I do more than think: I am as sure as it is possible to be. It is no ordinary street noise which wakens me, but something much nearer, and more jarring. It appears to be immediately outside my window, and it happens once each morning—and only once—sometimes at five, sometimes later, sometimes earlier still. With regard to the tapping, it has never happened before; and so far as I am aware, nothing is wrong with my window. I believe, as I said before, that both these noises are the result of intention, not accident."

Philippa looked at him steadily with her bright, dark eyes. "And suppose," she said quietly—"suppose I tell you in return that you are entirely mistaken, and that we have nothing to do with either one or the other. What then? Will you refuse to believe me?"



The two stared at one another in silence, like combatants measuring strength for a fight.

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The two stared at one another in silence, like combatants measuring strength for a fight. It was the man whose eyes were the first to fall, the man who first showed signs of relenting.

"Of course, if you give me your word, Miss Charrington, I am bound to take it."

"Then I give you my word, Mr Neil, that we are absolutely innocent of annoying you in the way you describe."

The Hermit bowed, laid his hat on the table, and fumbled nervously with his coat.

"I can only say that the matter is most mysterious and annoying. Perhaps, however, you will be willing to promise that in other respects you will be more considerate for the future, so that I may be able to work with less disturbance from the noise overhead?"

"I am afraid I cannot see my way to giving any such promise, for I fail to see how we *can* be quieter without interfering with our own duties. I have three sisters, and music is the profession by which one of them hopes to make a living. If she gave up practising it would seriously injure her prospects. The others are busy all day long, and naturally wish for a little relaxation at night. Although you give us no credit for consideration, I may tell you that we are constantly calling our young brother to order in case he should disturb you, but I should not feel it right to make home dull and cheerless by forbidding any noise whatever."

"It does not occur to you that under those circumstances you are hardly the right tenants for a flat, but ought to be in a house of your own?"

"It occurs to me that we are the best judges of our own actions," returned Philippa icily, fighting down the wild longing that arose, even as she spoke, for a place of their own—a nest, however small, where they might dwell in peace and freedom. "You are not the only tenant, Mr Neil, who has to endure disagreeables from his neighbours; we also might find ground for complaint, if we wished to be disagreeable. My sisters sleep above your study, and they say you keep poking the fire until two in the morning and waking them up with a start. Then, too, you have a hanging lamp or chandelier which you push up, and which makes a most unpleasant noise; and in the autumn evenings you smoked strong cigars on your balcony until we were poisoned with the smell. Oh, there are a thousand things which I could mention," cried Philippa—though in truth she would have been puzzled to add one more complaint to her list—"but I would not stoop to it! It is too miserably petty and degrading to be everlastingly picking quarrels. I am sick of it."

"Not more heartily than I am. I have lived in these buildings for nearly ten years and have only once before made a complaint—which, I may remark, was met in a very different spirit." The Hermit was evidently growing ruffled in his turn, and could not resist a parting shot before he left the room. "As I said before, I should be sorry to have to complain at headquarters, but I do not intend to have my comfort ruined by new-comers who have no claim on the establishment. If it becomes impossible for us both to live under one roof, I have little doubt who would be asked to remain."

He was gone. The door closed behind him, and Philippa sank into a chair with a sudden feeling of collapse. "Oh! oh!" she cried, and her hands went up to her head, and her breath grew short and strangled. All her pride and independence were swept aside by the remembrance of those last pregnant words: "Impossible for us both—little doubt in whose favour!" Suppose—oh, suppose, the Hermit complained to the committee, and she were served with a notice to quit! Suppose, with one set of bills barely settled, she were called upon to incur a second! With characteristic Charrington impetuosity she beheld ruin stalk towards her, and the faces of brothers and sisters filled with a pale reproach. Her head dropped forward on to the table; the tears rolled down her cheeks. She was just about to indulge in the luxury of a good cry, when suddenly there was a sound in the room, an exclamation of distress, and there stood the Hermit, picking up the hat which still lay on the table, and murmuring disconnected sentences of explanation.

"I forgot my hat. The door was still open; I forgot to shut it. I turned back—*Crying!* I hope that I—that nothing that I have said—I should be most distressed—"

Philippa stared at him helplessly. Her impulse was to deny the suggestion with scorn, but how was that possible with the tears rolling down her cheeks? She tried to control herself, to steady her voice sufficiently to reply, but the floodgates were open and could not be restrained. An agony of dread seized her lest she should humiliate herself still further, and, pointing to the door with childlike helplessness, she sobbed out a pitiful "Please, go—please, go!" and buried her face in her hands.

The Hermit crept back to his room, but he could not work. Between himself and his books rose the vision of a girl's face, tremulous and tearful. The dark eyes looked into his with pathetic reproach. He called himself a brute and a coward for having dared to distress her.

Chapter Sixteen.

The Culprit Discovered.

Acting on the rule of all good housewives, Philippa breathed no word of the unpleasant incident of the afternoon until dinner was over, and the workers had been fed and rested after their day's labours. Stephen, it is true, noted the pucker on her brow, and questioned her dumbly across the table; but she frowned a warning, and eagerly questioned the girls as to the success of their expedition. The circulars, it appeared, were promised in a week's time; and pending their arrival Hope had called on the vicar on the way home, and arranged to give her first performance to the members of his infant class on the following Monday. She had confided to him her anxiety to rehearse her entertainment, and he had laughingly promised to find her occupation for as many nights as she liked to give, either in his own parish or in those neighbouring ones which were even more in need of help.

"So you will gain experience and do good at the same time—a most agreeable arrangement," said Philippa, smiling. "The next thing is to buy yourself a really smart frock with the remainder of Uncle Loftus's cheque, so that you may be ready for the social engagements when they come. You have nothing suitable, and in this case it is a duty to be provided with the prettiest and most becoming gown you can find."

"That's the sort of duty I should like. I could be a martyr to it if I had the chance," cried Madge, with a sigh. "No mortal being knows how it harrows my artistic soul to wear ugly clothes. I sometimes feel inclined to kneel down and, do obeisance before the dresses in the Bond Street shops. And they look so lovely just now! I've had a horrible temptation sometimes to ask for things to be sent on approval, just for the pleasure of trying them on and seeing how I look in them."

"Do you think it is an honourable thing to send for things that you have no earthly intention of buying?" asked Philippa the literal, with a solemn air, which delighted her mischievous sister.

"No, I don't; I think it's a mean trick. But I'm so dull! I want to do something reckless for a change. You needn't alarm yourself, Philippa; if I wrote asking for a selection of Court dresses to be sent on approval to an address off the Tottenham Court Road, they wouldn't pay much attention to the order, I'm afraid."

Theo thought not, indeed; while Hope looked pained and penitent, and said, "I seem to have all the changes—all the good things. I suppose I ought to dress for the part. But remember the 'Amalgamated Sisters'! Whatever I gain must be divided in equal shares."

"If you want excitement, it is a pity you weren't at home this afternoon, Madge," said Philippa. Dinner was over by this time, and she felt free to unburden her mind and receive the longed-for sympathy. "I had an adventure all to myself, and found it more exciting than I liked. The Hermit called, and Mary announced him in her own original fashion—that is to say, left him standing on the mat. He came to lodge some more complaints, and we had a row royal. I think he is mad, for he made the most extraordinary statements. But he is worse than mad; he is dangerous, and means to complain and get us turned out if he can. There is not the slightest ground for his complaints, but he is an old tenant and we are new, and it is only natural that his word should be taken before ours."

"Don't worry yourself about that old girl," said Stephen kindly. "I have not the slightest fear of being turned out Neighbours in flats are constantly having these little frictions, and the authorities must turn a deaf ear to complaints if they wish to succeed or to have any peace in life. I'll go down some night and talk to the old fellow, and see if I can bring him to reason. We have been so quiet, too, since Hope went away. What on earth did he find to grumble about?"

"Oh, my dear, the wildest fancies! He didn't like Hope practising the children's songs this morning, and was blighting superior about her taste; but the worst grievance is that there is a tapping at his study window which gets on his nerves, and that something wakes him up every morning before it is light. It sounds too ridiculous to be true, but he actually supposed that we were responsible."

"What utter folly!" began Stephen angrily; but the next moment he stopped short, and with one accord four pairs of eyes followed his towards the corner of the room where Barney sat—shaking, red-faced, apoplectic. "*Barney!*" cried the head of the house in a terrible voice. "What is the meaning of this? Do you mean to say that this is *your* doing? Have you had any hand in this business? Speak up this moment."

"I should think I had!" cried Barney. "Both hands in it! Didn't I vow when Hope went away that I would find some plan of keeping the old fellow occupied? I flatter myself that I hit on something original this time, and secured a fine effect with next to no trouble. The tapping was made by a little lead weight hung on the end of a string fastened outside the girls' window. It swung about in the air, just at the top of his panes, and when there was a breeze, tapped away like a machine. I fastened it up one day, and left it to do its work. It's there still, if you choose to look. The waking-up business was more difficult. I found out, by watching the lights at night, that he slept beneath my room, and I borrowed an alarm from a fellow in the office. I told him why I wanted it, and he nearly died with laughing. I set it for different hours, and lowered it down by a cord so that it lay against the pane. I left my window open, and when it went off it woke me too, and I hopped out of bed and pulled it up before he opened his window. It was too dark for him to see anything, but I could hear him muttering to himself in a tearing rage. It came off splendidly, but I'm not sorry to give up that part of the business, for it was jolly cold getting out of bed and standing by that open window. It isn't good enough in this weather;" and Barney doubled himself up in another burst of laughter at the success of his plot.

For once nobody joined in the chorus; the girls were dumb and horrified, while Stephen was filled with righteous indignation.

"Stop laughing this moment, sir," he cried sternly. "You have done mischief enough; don't make it worse by triumphing over it. If you have not enough consideration for your sisters to teach you how to behave, I must find some other way of keeping you in order. I won't have the peace of the house ruined and Philippa worried to death."

"Leave him to me, please, Steve," said Philippa quietly. She walked forward until she stood immediately before Barney, and the smile faded from the boy's lips as he saw her face. She was not flushed as he had often seen her under the stress of passing irritation, but white—deadly white—with a look in her eyes before which his own fell to the ground.

"You have made me tell a lie," she said slowly. "Do you hear? I gave Mr Neil my word that we had had no part in these annoyances. He did not want to believe me, but I made him; I gave him my word. I will not wait a minute before going to him and apologising for saying what was not true. Get up! Come downstairs with me. You shall tell him the whole story as you have told it to us, and ask his pardon like a gentleman. Are you coming?"

Barney scowled and looked at her darkly; he opened his lips to say that he would do nothing of the kind, but Philippa looked at him again, and the words died away. She walked to the door, and he marched after her; she held it open, and he passed through. They stood together before the Hermit's door, and Philippa pressed her fingers on the bell.

Chapter Seventeen.

Rehearsals.

Half-an-hour passed by, fraught with the deepest suspense and anxiety to the waiting party in Number 10; then Philippa's step was heard running up the stairs, and in she came, white no longer, but smiling, rosy, abeam with complacency.

"Where is Barney?" cried four voices eagerly; and she seated herself before the fire, crossed her hands on her lap, and regarded her audience with the prospective satisfaction of one who knows that she is about to make a sensation.

"Barney," she said slowly, "is enjoying himself so much that he refused to come away! He is invited to stay for the evening. He is at present employed in helping Mr Neil to catalogue specimens for his microscope."

"Wh-at!" gasped Stephen incredulously, while Theo caught hold of her sister by the shoulders and gave her an impatient shake. "Phil, be sensible! Tell it properly. Begin at the moment when you knocked at the door, and go right through to the end. Now then, begin!"

"We-ll," drawled Philippa comfortably, "I rang, and a boy came to the door—I don't think there is a woman on the premises. Mr Neil heard our voices, and came out to see what was wanted. He took us into his room, which is all books and litter, and a great big microscope on a stand by the window. Don't ask me what I said, for I don't know. I only remember his face looking so startled and sorry. He is really very nice-looking, you know; and he wears a velvet coat Barney behaved well. He said, 'I'm sorry, sir, if I have annoyed you. It was only a joke.' And Mr Neil said, 'All right, my boy, that is settled. We won't say anything more about it. Are you interested in microscopes?' After that we went over to the stand, and he explained what he was doing, and showed us the workings. It was very exciting. Barney was in raptures, and I was quite horrified to find how long we had stayed. He was as nice and kind as he could be, and I believe it is the beginning of peace. Oh, my dears, such dust! I longed for a brush and shovel. No wonder he looks ill, living alone in that dreary place, with only a boy to attend to him. I believe he is starved."

"He is a real good sort. anyway, to behave so well to that boy. I'll call on him some night, and perhaps we can return his kindness by asking him here occasionally. I am glad peace is settled, but I am not done with Mr Barney yet. He must promise me to give up these foolish tricks," said Stephen severely. He himself had never played a trick in his life, and could not imagine wherein the fun lay.

When Barney came upstairs an hour later he was taken into the dining-room and lectured in solemn, elder-brotherly fashion; and being in the highest of spirits, obediently promised all that was desired.

"I sha'n't want to rag him any more, because, you see, we shall be pals," he explained. "He wants me to go down whenever I feel inclined, and that will be pretty often; because, though the girls are bricks, a man does like another man to talk to sometimes. He's terrifically clever! You should see all the things he has made himself—little mechanical businesses that you can't buy. He is going to let me watch him when he is at work. I fancy he felt a bit bad when Phil ate humble-pie, and wants to make up by being extra amiable and friendly."

It was just as well that the Hermit had been conciliated, for in the days which followed Hope was constantly practising her songs and reciting her story to an imaginary audience in the drawing-room. Mary, sweeping the tiny hall, would open her eyes in amazement as a voice cried dramatically: "Fairly Godmother! Fairly Godmother! can you not help me now? I'm so lonely up here in this deserted tower. Is the spell not broken yet, dear Godmother?" And the fairy answered: "Patience, Princess Chrystal! Wait but a few hours longer. To-morrow morn, as the sun creeps round the corner of the poplar tree, look out of your casement window, and you will see"—Mary was all agape to know what the Princess Chrystal would see, but Philippa came bustling out of the dining-room and, half-laughing, half-frowning, sent her about her work. Later on a message-boy who was waiting for an answer to a note grew quite pale with agitation as an unseen giant hissed out, "To your knees, rash youth! Before another hour is past you shall be chained in the lowest dungeon beneath the castle moat!" It was really quite alarming, and the message-boy informed his companions who were waiting for him in the road below that there was a lunatic upstairs, who was raging and carrying on "something krool."

The first performance was a nervous occasion, and Hope realised the full difficulty of the task which she had undertaken when she stood upon the platform of the mission-room vainly trying to gain a hearing from a crowd of noisy, excited children. Appeal was useless, but at length the happy idea struck her to begin with a song; so down she sat at the piano, struck up a lively air, and gave the first verse with such spirit and go that at the word "Chorus!" there was quite a creditable attempt at the refrain. After that it was comparatively easy to keep the attention which she had gained, although she had rarely before experienced such tiring work. For a first attempt the performance was a distinct success—ay, more than a success—for it proved the existence of many weak spots, demanded more prominence for dramatic incidents, and proved that, given time and experience, she need not fear the most critical juvenile audience.

Twice more did Hope give a performance of the fairy play before the long-delayed circulars were ready, and she started forth on the difficult work of distribution, with Madge as companion, guide, and administrator of much-needed courage. Any girl who has tried to earn her own living will have discovered how different becomes the demeanour of those in authority when the supposed customer turns out to be herself in need of help. It is a painful revelation, and the moral which it teaches us is, to be gracious to other poor suppliants if it ever comes to our turn to be in authority. Madge had made a list of those entertainment bureaux where tickets can be obtained for theatres and concerts, and arrangements made for drawing-room entertainments; but when the first of these establishments was reached Hope made three successive bolts post the door before she could be induced to enter. Her embarrassment was greatly increased by the fact that several other people were in the shop, ready to listen and to stare with curious eyes as she mumbled her request. The assistant ran his eye carelessly over the leaflet—Madge's masterpiece, printed regardless of expense on thick rough paper with torn edges—did not think there was any demand for that sort of thing; was afraid it was not in their line. No, did not object to keeping the advertisement; would put it on the stand if there was room; and before the girls had turned aside, had flicked it carelessly into a drawer.

Hope was trembling, crimson of cheek, and inclined to turn tail and make a short cut for home; but Madge's chin was in the air, and her face set in determined lines.

"Snob!" she cried scornfully; "working himself, and despising others because they try to do the same. Dear Hope, don't look so doleful. You surely won't let yourself be discouraged by a worm like that."

"Oh, it is so hateful!" murmured poor Hope tremulously. "Suppose they *all* treat us in the same way. You know very well, Madge, that that circular will never see the light."

"Oh, won't it, though? It shall be up on that board before a week is over," returned Madge obstinately; and when breathlessly questioned how and why, she answered imperturbably, "Haven't the slightest idea, but I'll find out a way. Cheer up now, and for goodness' sake don't look as if you were ashamed of yourself. I'd send you home and go the round myself if we could exchange faces for the occasion, but if you will only perk up you can do far better than I. Look smiling and self-possessed, and as if you were rather conferring than asking a favour."

It was admirable advice, but, alas! Hope was not the girl to carry it into effect. Her cheeks would flush; her voice *would* shake; she looked so unmistakably the amateur that, in spite of her charming appearance, she met with but scant success wherever she went. No one actually refused her circular, but the manner of its acceptance was so lukewarm and careless that it would have depressed the stoutest heart. Even Madge looked downcast when home was reached, but she was smiling again by dinner-time; and what was more, Philippa and Theo were smiling too, with a mischievous enjoyment which seemed strangely unsympathetic to the crushed adventurer.

For several days no explanation was forthcoming; then came an afternoon when housekeeper and author arrayed themselves in all the splendour they possessed and sallied forth on a mysterious errand. Hope wondered, questioned, and was amiably snubbed for her pains; but at five o'clock back came two flushed, triumphant conspirators, only too eager to tell the tale of their adventures.

"We have been working for you, my dear," cried Phil, nodding cheery encouragements at the dear, pretty sister who had grown to look so pathetically pale and wistful of late; "but the idea came from Madge, so you have to thank her most of all. Well, we sallied forth, and went the round of the shops where you had left your circulars. Theo took one direction, I took another, and we met at the Stores. The first shop I went into was empty, and I had quite a long talk with the man. I wanted to know what entertainment he could provide for a juvenile party. He suggested a magic-lantern—cinematograph—Punch and Judy—conjurer. I looked profoundly bored, and drawled out, 'So terribly commonplace! Have you nothing *new*?' He declared there was nothing else, and I was feeling very baffled and angry, when suddenly he remembered your circular, and began searching for it in a drawer. I regarded it with judicial calm, thought the terms rather high, but on the whole was much taken with the idea. The difficulty, of course, was to withdraw without settling anything definitely; but some other people came in, and I murmured polite nothings about 'thinking it over,' and beat a retreat. At the next place my pumping failed, for the wretch had forgotten all about you, or had thrown your circular into the fire. You must send him another with a polite reminder of his promise to find you engagements, 'subject, of course, to the usual commission.' Number three had actually pinned you up on the board, beside the Performing Brothers and the Negro Troupe. He ought to have been an author, for he had a beautiful imagination! When I inquired about you he waxed quite enthusiastic about your abilities and popularity. I regarded him more in joy than in anger, and hoped he embroidered as eloquently to all his customers."

"Oh! oh!" cried Hope, aghast. She was torn in twain between elation and pangs of conscience. "How sweet of you, Phil! But—do you think it is quite right?"

"Why not? Does not every unknown author implore his friends to ask for his books at their libraries and express untold surprise because they are unknown? Why should not we advertise you in

your turn?"

"You must be boomed, my dear, or you may wait for ever for an engagement. I was even more bold than Phil," confessed Theo, "for I purposely hung about until other people went into the shop, and then spoke in such a loud voice that they were obliged to hear what I said. They seemed quite interested, and I left one lady reading the circular and asking questions about you. In another shop I said in an anxious voice, 'I *hope* she will be able to come to me when I want her. Will it be necessary to engage her a *long* time ahead?' The man looked as solemn as an owl, and said, 'Well, madam, it would be wise. There is sure to be a rush in the Christmas holidays.' What do you think of that? Won't it be exciting when the letters come in?"

There was no doubt about that, but unfortunately no letters arrived; and the weeks passed by, and the Christmas holidays began, and not a mother in the whole Metropolis expressed the slightest desire to engage the services of the "children's charming entertainer." Hope's wistful look each time that the postman's knock came to the door moved her sisters to fresh efforts on her behalf, and an ingeniously worded inquiry was despatched for publication in the pages of a popular fashion magazine:

"Can any lady recommend a new form of entertainment for a children's party? No lanterns, conjurers, or marionettes. Early answer much appreciated."

An early answer was, in fact, in readiness from the hour when the inquiry was posted, wherein Theo was prepared to certify that, having heard Miss Hope Charrington's entertainment (at the mission-room of Saint Paul's Church!), she was able most enthusiastically to recommend it to all mothers and guardians. Alas! the all-important inquiry was one of many more "unavoidably delayed through want of space," and how to reply to an advertisement which had never appeared was a problem which baffled even Madge's ingenuity.

"I shall go to see Minnie Caldecott this afternoon," announced Hope one Tuesday morning when the post had produced nothing more inspiring than a couple of circulars and a coal-bill. "I can't sit here any longer doing nothing, and it is evidently no use writing to her. I have not even heard if the song arrived. Would any one like to come with me and get a peep into professional life?—Theo?"

"Yes," said the author quickly. "It will be 'copy,' and I want it badly. I have quite a stock of heroes and heroines on hand—fascinating creatures, every one—but I can't think what to do with them! Perhaps one might be a public singer. I've given her a lovely voice already. I'll come, Hope, and make a study of the lady while you discuss business."

A few hours later, therefore, behold the two sisters seated in the warm, flower-scented little room, where the portraits of becurled ladies still smirked from the walls, and the presiding goddess dispensed tea, and kept up a stream of cheerful, inconsequent babble. She appeared overjoyed to see her visitors, kissed them effusively, addressed Hope affectionately as "Miss What's-your-name," and declared that she remembered her quite well. "You brought me a song with ridiculous words; and you have all come up to town to make your fortunes. It isn't too easy, is it? I'm supposed to be one of the lucky ones, but it is the solemn truth, my dears, that there are only a few pounds between myself and the workhouse. It is a hand-to-mouth business, and what with cabs and gloves, there is precious little to be made out of these suburban engagements. I shall have to get married one of these days. There is one man now—that is his portrait on the mantelpiece—the one with the big nose! He has been worrying me for years, and I tell him the first time I get a really bad cold on my chest I'll marry him then and there. I could never stand the expense of an illness. Look at that girl laughing! It is your sister, isn't it, dear? What is her name! Theo! I say, how toney! Are you clever too, Theo? What is your line?"

"I—write!" replied Theo, shrinking in anticipation of the question which is fraught with so much humiliation to the would-be author. Of course, Miss Caldecott would instantly want to know what she had written and where it could be found, and then how agonising to be obliged to explain that; with the exception of a few stories in a village paper, not a word of her writing had yet appeared in print! Hope came to the rescue with a reply which was at once tactful and diplomatic, since it turned the conversation into the desired channel.

"I have been keeping her busy lately. She has been writing children's stories for an entertainment which I am hoping to give. I brought one of the advertisements to show you, as I thought you might be interested."

The undisguised yawn with which Miss Caldecott greeted this announcement was the reverse of encouraging; but she read the circular with increasing interest, pronounced the idea to be "rattling good," and wanted to know who was responsible for the design. "I'll have a programme got up like that some day," she declared; but she yawned again when the girls expatiated on the skill of their artist-sister, and interrupted with another question:

"Have you written any more songs lately?"

Hope looked at her gravely, and found it impossible to keep a tinge of reproach out of her voice as she replied, "Why, of course! You know I have. I have been waiting for weeks to hear what you thought of the one I wrote especially for you."

"Gracious!" ejaculated Miss Caldecott; "I never got it. I remember now that you *did* write to me about it, but I get so many letters that I forget half what's in them. I've never seen it, anyway. Perhaps it is in that cupboard with the newspapers. That is my boggy-hole, and if I haven't time to open things I stick them in there, and forget all about them. You can look if you like, dear; I'm too lazy."

There was an air of dignified displeasure in the manner in which Hope crossed the room to avail herself of this permission; but Miss Caldecott drank her tea in blissful unconsciousness, and when the MS was discovered, wrapped in an unopened covering, exclaimed cheerily:

"Think of that now! It would have lain there till doomsday if you hadn't looked. Do you want me to hear it? Strum it over, then, my dear; but I give you notice that I'm full up for this season."

"But—but it was a commission! You *asked* me to write it," cried Hope, stung into retort by the keenness of her disappointment. "Don't you remember saying you wanted a domestic song about children, to make the mothers cry? You suggested the words yourself, and we carried out your idea."

"I suggested it, did I? How clever of me! I suppose I saw you were disappointed, dear, and wanted to let you down easily. I hate being disagreeable, but I never thought you would take it seriously. Here! let me see it. I can tell in a moment if it is any good."

She rose, and standing by the piano, glanced over the pages once or twice, then motioned to Hope to play the accompaniment. The next moment the rich, melodious tones filled the room, and Theo held her breath in rapturous enjoyment. What a glorious organ of a voice—how sweet, how full, how true! What a melting tenderness of expression! What skill in seizing on effective phrases and bringing them delicately into prominence! If her eyes had been shut, what a lovely, spirituelle vision she would have pictured as the owner of this wonderful voice! But, alas! there stood Minnie Caldecott, flushed, fat, and touselled, enveloped in the blue silk tea-gown, which was beginning to show decided signs of age—as far removed from spirituality as it was possible for a human creature to be. She sang the song to its last note, and nodded her head approvingly at its conclusion.

"It is not at all bad, dear. Quite a fetching little song! I could make them howl over that, couldn't I? And it is different from anything I have on hand. I might find room for it sometimes, if we could agree about other things. What was your idea as to terms?"

"Oh, thank you! You are too kind. I did not think of charging you at all. It would be an advertisement for me if you sang it, and that would be sufficient payment."

Hope was fully convinced that she was acting in a generous manner, and Theo agreed with this conclusion, so that it came as a shock to both when Miss Caldecott burst into a peal of laughter, and cried loudly, "Bless your innocent heart! I meant, what are you going to pay *me*? Didn't you know that we were always paid for taking up a song? That is why we sing such rubbish half the time. I'm a business woman, and can't afford to work for nothing. I'd like to oblige you, dear, and it's a useful little song in its way—I believe I could do something with it—but I must have my commission."

"Then I am afraid it is no use discussing the subject any longer. I cannot afford to pay anything," said Hope quietly. She had turned very white, but her manner was calm and collected, and she rolled up the song with an air of finality which showed that she meant what she said. "Perhaps another day, when we are better off—"

"Charmed to see you, dear, at any time. But you'll never get on in the world if you don't pay out a bit at first; or if you *do*, it will be a mighty slow process. You think I'm a wretch, no doubt, but I dare say if the truth were known I'm as hard up as you are yourself; and I have no rich friends to help me. You *have*, and you ought to make them useful. Now, I'll tell you what I *will* do for you! You mention my name when you hear of any one giving a reception, and every time you get me an engagement I'll sing your song, and you shall play the accompaniment. That would help us both, and I'll do as much for you if I hear of any children's parties coming off."

Hope's thanks were very sweetly expressed, but disappointment was still the predominating feeling, and when the sisters found themselves in the street they exchanged a rueful glance under the light of a lamp.

"It seems as if no one wanted us," sighed Hope sadly. "Whatever we try to do, there are a thousand people who do it a thousand times better. I wonder if we shall *ever* succeed."

"As Mr Hammond said, it depends upon how much heart-breaking we can stand. We never shall if we lose heart before six months are over," said Theo sturdily. "Cheer up, old girl; those letters will be arriving soon, and then you will be too busy to be depressed."

Hope sighed and was silent. The ache at her heart made disappointment harder to bear, and Miss Caldecott's offer of help seemed at present of little value. Aunt Loftus might, indeed, be willing to engage the services of a professional, but there was no one else of whom such a favour could be asked, and the reflection brought an added sense of friendlessness to the tired girl as she walked home through the crowded streets.

It is always the darkest hour before the dawn. So says the proverb, and in this instance it was fully justified, for no sooner had the girls passed the Hermit's door than Philippa and Mudge flew to meet them, each waving a letter in her hand and keeping up a loud, excited chatter.

"For you, Hope! At last! Here they come!"

"A coat of arms. Such lovely paper! Beautiful writing."

"Mine is from one of the agencies. Application from a client, no doubt. Be quick—be quick! We are dying to read them."

"Why didn't you open them, then? It is your business as well as mine."

Hope opened the letter first, and shuddered dramatically at the intelligence that a certain Mrs Annesley would be glad to engage her services for the evening of December the 27th; then came the turn of the second letter, and her sisters saw the pale cheeks deepen into rose as she read its contents.

"It is from a Mrs Welsby, in Belgrave Square, a sister of the Mr Merrilies who was at The Shanty. He has told her about me, and she wants me for the 29th. I—I think I shall take a berth on an Atlantic liner and emigrate. I daren't face it. I shall make an idiot of myself; I know I shall."

"All right. If you don't go—*I shall!*" cried Madge. "I can sing too—in a fashion—and that money would be remarkably useful to us just now. Choose between yourself and me; that is the position."

There was no sympathy forthcoming for Hope's nervousness; on the contrary, she was made to feel that it was her duty to overcome any such feeling, and to do her best for the sake of the family. Happy girl! her chance had come, while others were still waiting their turn; it was they who were in need of pity, not one to whom a longed-for opportunity had been given. Hope listened, assented, and let no further word of dread pass her lips. In truth, after the first shock was over, she forgot everything but one absorbing question—would Ralph be at Mrs Welsby's party? Would she be able to speak to him? Would his face lighten at the sight of her, as it had done during that happy fortnight at The Shanty? At one moment she longed passionately to meet him; at the next she almost wished him absent, since it would be doubly difficult to be natural and unconstrained beneath his scrutiny.

Chapter Eighteen.

Meeting and Parting.

And so the weeks went by, and the eventful evening came round at last. Hope attired herself in the white dress in which she looked charming enough to enrapture any audience, seated herself in a cab, and drove away through the crowded streets, a poor little trembling Columbus going forth to discover new worlds! At Belgrave Square an awning was erected over the doorway, a babel of noise filled the air, and the big rooms were crowded with dainty little forms dancing about on long white legs, and groups of boys in Eton jackets standing by themselves and looking bored and superior. Mrs Welsby rustled forward to meet Hope with a glance and a smile, which made the girl's heart leap with painful remembrance, and seemed unfeignedly rejoiced at her arrival.

"Oh, Miss Charrington, so charmed to see you! We have been playing games for an hour, and I am quite exhausted. What exacting little wretches they are! I will take them into the drawing-room and get them seated; and will you begin at once, please? I have really come to the end of my resources."

She was so smiling and friendly that Hope's shyness disappeared on the spot, and she helped to marshal the children to their seats, and took her stand on the little platform by the piano as the last few rows of chairs were being filled. A hasty glance around had discovered no sign of Mr Merrilies; but his absence, bitter disappointment though it was, brought an increase of self-confidence for the task ahead. Experience in the mission-rooms had shown that not a moment must be lost in engaging wandering attention, so no sooner had the last little white frock taken her seat than she clapped her hands to call for silence, and looking smilingly around, began her story:

"Once upon a very long time ago there lived a king and queen, who had the most beautiful little princess daughter that was ever seen. Her true name was Marie Theresa Louisa Alberta Maud Victoria Patricia Josephine, but as it was a very busy country, where the people were always going to war and having discussions among themselves, no one had time to call her by so many names, except on Sundays and bank holidays and Christmas Day. On ordinary working days she was called Princess Chrystal, because her eyes were so clear and sparkling and her laugh like a chime of bells. She had seven fairy godmothers, and they all came to her christening, and brought her the most wonderful presents you can imagine. I am going to sing you a song which tells all about the godmothers and their presents, and I want you to listen very carefully to the first verse, and to join in the chorus when I hold up my hand."

She stepped down from the platform to seat herself at the piano, and even the superior gentlemen in Eton jackets were obliged to join in with the rest when they discovered that the words were set to the well-known rollicking tune of "Seven Little Nigger Boys." Though the story began in the orthodox fashion, its development was decidedly original, and the numerous songs and choruses prevented attention from wandering. When it came to the turn of the Giant with his "Fe-fo-fum," the boys in the back rows stamped with their feet to emphasise the words, and it was the prettiest thing in the world to see Hope shaking with laughter even as she sang, and nodding encouragement with her golden head.

"Pretty dear!" said the hostess to some one who stood well back in the shadow of the doorway. "How *blasé* you men are! The idea of describing her to me in that callous manner! I could sit and look at her all night."

"Very pleasant for you; but, if I might make a suggestion, this must be tiring work for her. When Princess Chrystal is safely married I'll take her downstairs and administer refreshment. As I suggested this entertainment, I am anxious to hear how it is catching on, and I haven't seen her since she left The Shanty."

Mrs Welsby looked up keenly, but the dark face beside her was as inscrutable as ever. It was not like Ralph to trouble himself about a girl, still less to volunteer excuses for his actions, and she watched curiously to see the meeting between the pair at the conclusion of the story-telling.

"You!" cried Hope, in astonishment, as she made her way past the applauding children and came out into the refreshing coolness of the hall. She stood still, looking at him with wide, startled eyes. "I never saw you. I thought you were not here."

"I kept out of sight on purpose, in case it might make you nervous to see some one whom you knew. Now, will you come downstairs and let me get you some refreshment after your arduous labours! I am sure you must need it."

Hope looked round with uncertain glance. "I—I think I do, but will it be right? Do you think I *ought*?"

"Right! Ought! Miss Charrington, what do you mean? Take my arm now, at any rate, and explain when you are comfortably seated. A matter of conscience cannot be discussed in this deafening noise. There is a grandfather's chair in the corner of the dining-room, which I can confidently recommend."

It was like a revival of old times to be waited upon with such care and consideration, and being ordered not to speak a word until she had been fed and rested. Hope sipped her wine and ate sandwiches in a dream of happiness. Mr Merrilies had not forgotten her question, however, and presently she found herself called upon for an explanation.

"I'm so new to this business that I don't quite know 'my place,'" she said, smiling at him in mischievous fashion. "Last Tuesday I had my first social engagement. I arrived at the hour appointed, and found that the children were dancing, and that a conjurer was engaged as well as myself. We waited our turn together, the conjurer and I, in a dreary little room, with a dreary little gas fire that sent all its warmth up the chimney. We waited nearly an hour and no one came near us, and it was very cold. We talked and talked, and he showed me tricks to keep up my spirits, for he saw how nervous I was."

Reggie Blake would have said, "Happy conjurer!" but Ralph Merrilies was not given to compliments. He knitted his brows and inquired brusquely:

"What sort of a fellow was he? A decent sort?"

"At first I thought he was detestable. He was not, to put it mildly, *quite* a gentleman, and he was very familiar. I was stiff and haughty for a few minutes, and then I began to reflect that, after all, we were in the same position, trying to earn our living, and that if I snubbed him I should be as great a snob as the woman who had cared so little for our comfort. I was quite nice after that, and he really was a dear little vulgar thing. He had an invalid wife at home—and he spoke so tenderly of her—and two little conjurer boys who knew his tricks almost as well as he did himself, and a delicate daughter, for whom I have plans in the future. We exchanged addresses, and he volunteered to find me engagements, and thought we might do a very good 'j'int business."

Hope laughed at the remembrance, but Ralph frowned more fiercely than before, and bending forward with his chin supported on his hands, stared fixedly at her face.

"I hate to hear of your having such experiences—of your having to work at all. I wish I had never suggested it. Do you mean to say you *enjoy* it yourself?"

"I enjoy it very much when I am well started, and see all the dear little faces looking at me; but I hate it beforehand, and am, oh, so frightened and nervous! And I love getting the money. I paid a coal-bill yesterday with my very own earnings, and I never enjoyed anything more in all my life!"

He pressed his lips together and was silent, and when he spoke again it was to start an entirely new subject.

"How are you going home to-night?"

"In a four-wheeler. I shall get the man to whistle for one presently."

"Alone?"

"Of course. I am a working woman, Mr Merrilies; I have to take care of myself."

"Well, there is no need to-night, at any rate. I shall go with you and see you safely home. If you won't let me come inside, I shall sit on the box. It is for you to decide."

The pale, disconcerted glance which the girl turned on him in reply would have depressed a more confident lover than himself; for the suggestion had awakened Hope to the danger of her position, and filled her tender conscience with dread lest she had already been disloyal to her vow. How much she would have enjoyed the prolonged *tête-à-tête* can be well imagined, but there were half-a-dozen reasons which made it unadvisable. Mrs Welsby would naturally prefer her brother to remain until the end of the evening; it would be discourteous to accept his escort and still refuse an invitation to the flat; yet such an invitation once granted might mean unlimited suffering in the future! Hope was still hesitating over a reply, when a reprieve came in the shape of a summons from her hostess, who beckoned to her brother from the doorway, and cried pleadingly, "Ralph, can you possibly go upstairs? The conjurer wants to begin, and the children are scrambling over the chairs in the most hopeless fashion. Do go to the rescue, like a good fellow."

The "good fellow's" expression was the reverse of amiable as he prepared to obey. A low "I'll see you later, then; that is settled," reached Hope's ears; then Mrs Welsby rustled forward and took possession of the vacant seat.

In the five minutes' conversation which followed Mrs Welsby was all that was gracious and charming, but Hope had an uncomfortable conviction that she was not altogether pleased with the *tête-à-tête* which she had interrupted, and that she herself was being very closely scrutinised. And then came an unexpected blow. After the usual compliments, and a promise to recommend the entertainment to her friends, Mrs Welsby said blandly:

"And now we must not detain you any longer. You look tired, and must be longing to rest. I am going to ask you to do me a favour—to take charge of a little girl who is crying to go home, and who will not be sent for for another hour. It would not be much out of your way, and you would be in time to stop the carriage from coming. I will send for your cloak, and John shall whistle for a four-wheeler."

Poor Hope—poor, miserable, deluded Hope! A minute before she had been so wise, so prudent, so satisfied that she preferred to decline Ralph's offer; but now that escape was made easy, a wave of bitter disappointment, of wild, incredulous rebellion, took the place of the former calm. She searched desperately for an excuse, an evasion, but short of confessing the previous engagement, there was nothing to be said. Theo would have been equal to the occasion; Madge would even have enjoyed it; but Hope found herself murmuring polite acquiescence, and five minutes later was driving away from the door, as miserable a young woman as could be found in the length and breadth of London. The little girl was still crying weakly; the big girl hugged her and cried in sympathy. "He will think I did it on purpose," she sobbed to herself. "He will never want to speak to me again."

Ten minutes later Ralph Merrilies asked his sister the whereabouts of Miss Charrington, for whom he had been searching in vain. "She has gone home," was the calm reply: "drove off in a cab directly after you went upstairs."

The glance which accompanied the reply was keenly observant; for, though Mrs Welsby was less worldly-minded than most women of her class, it did not coincide with her plans that her brother should fall in love with a girl who was working for her living. She wondered if he would show signs of disappointment; but Ralph had his feelings well under control, and gave no visible signs of the blow which her words had inflicted.

"The second time!" he said sternly to himself. "The second rebuff. That ought to be enough for any fellow. Poor little girl, her life is hard enough as it is. I'm a brute if I worry her any longer."

Chapter Nineteen.

Shadows Ahead.

A year after the Charringtons had taken possession of their flat, the girls sat in conclave and reviewed the situation. Philippa "submitted" her accounts with the usual unpleasant results; for those who had nothing to do with the management were horrified at their amount, groaned over the total sum, and wondered "how it had gone," until the goaded housekeeper was fain to turn the tables and inquire into the doings of her critics. That brought them quickly enough to their knees, for in truth the report was far from rose-coloured.

"I have made a decided improvement," said Theo dryly. "My manuscripts are now refused with a written acknowledgment instead of a printed slip. In two cases I have even been asked to submit further efforts. I worked for nearly a month on one story for Mr Hammond, and he said it was 'crude.' I wrote another in one afternoon, and he said it was 'charming, but not suitable for his magazine.' I have sent it to three other editors since then, and the unanimity of opinion is most impressive. I gathered together all my rejected addresses and offered them to a publisher. He said that volumes of short stories had been overdone, and that—except in a few exceptional cases—they were not publishing any more. I was determined to earn money *somehow*, so I turned to children's stories and paragraphs for penny papers. I get a sovereign each for the stories, and five shillings a page for the paragraphs. I wrote an article on 'Advice to Young Authors,' and it was accepted on its first journey. I also perpetrated a penny novelette, with detailed descriptions of the heroine's frocks, and an earl for hero. The editor accepted it, and corrected my English according to his lights. I *cringed* over the printed copy, and blushed to my ears. Altogether I have amassed seventeen pounds—minus, of course, my expenses and the fortune expended on stamps!"

"I wish I had done as well," said Hope sadly. She was as pretty as ever, but her face was thinner and the mischievous dimples came more rarely into sight. "I had eight 'social engagements' during the Christmas holidays, for four of which I have to thank my friend the conjurer. Then my market was practically closed for another year. Minnie Caldecott sang my song at Aunt Loftus's reception, and again at the Welsby's, and the publisher printed it 'as sung by Miss Minnie Caldecott,' just as I wished. They would not pay anything down, but promised a royalty if the sales exceeded five hundred. Last time I inquired they had sold forty-eight copies. Oh dear! I got some transposing and copying to do, which paid rather better than promised matches. I swallowed mountains of pride and prejudice and advertised myself as an instructor of youth—the one thing I had always vowed I would not do—and I have one pupil with warts on her fingers, who snores all the while she is torturing the 'Village Blacksmith.' I—I always thought I was amiable before, but I have felt—*murderous* to that child! I have earned nineteen pounds, Philippa, spent five on my dress, three on my cloak, over two on cabs and gloves; grand total for a year's effort—ten pounds sterling!"

"I've not made a cent, but I've done my best, and saints can do no more," cried Madge breezily. "I designed Christmas-cards and composed sensible verses to be printed on them; not the—"

"May all your life be bright and gay,
As cloudless as a summer day!"

"Kind of business, but reasonable good wishes which had some chance of being fulfilled. The first firm kept them for months, and could not be induced to return them until I had written four times, and the second said that it was too late in the season to consider new designs. I have sent headings and initial letters to magazines, and have had heaps of compliments, but nothing more substantial. I have likewise had heaps of snubs at the Slade, but I bob up again like a cork after each fresh dousing, and am more determined than ever to get on and make a name. The mistake we have made is in being too proud to begin at the beginning. Hope is the most humble-minded of the family; but she expected to become well-known in one season, and to sell her song by the hundreds. Theo wanted to write for the *Casket*, and I hoped to be exhibiting before now. We must crawl down, and be content to drudge before we soar. My serious studies leave much to be desired, but I can caricature with the best. The other day I amused myself in the lunch hour by drawing the pupils in the life, and one of the girls' carried off the sketch and stuck it on her easel. Just then in came Pepper, as we call him—he is so horribly stinging and bitter in his criticisms—and walked straight up to look at it. Oh, my heart! He was quite silent, but I saw his shoulders shaking, and when he turned round his face was red. 'Whose work is this?' he asked; and I suppose guilt was written large on my expressive features, for he came up to me and said, 'I shall have to inflict a punishment for this, Miss Charrington. I cannot have my pupils ridiculed and their work interrupted in this manner. The punishment is—that you draw a caricature of me on the other side of the sheet!'"

"He put the paper on my easel, and all the girls giggled and peered round to witness my collapse. But I wasn't going to be floored by a little thing like that. He stuck his hands in his pockets and stood opposite me, and I set to work to draw him then and there. He was easy to caricature, for he has a curious, sheep-dog kind of face, with two deep lines running down from the nose, humped-up shoulders, and a mop of hair. It really was like him, and what I call a *polite* caricature, so that his feelings shouldn't be hurt. He tried to look solemn when I gave it to him, but his lips twitched, and he walked straight out of the room and took it with him. Next day, when he was abusing my drawing as usual, he said, 'You had better caricature your subjects at once. You will make far more out of them in that way than in any other.' That was quite a compliment coming from Pepper, and I've taken it to heart. After much cogitation I have evolved an idea which, with Theo's co-operation, I am going to put into action forthwith. I sha'n't tell you what it is until I see how I succeed, but I don't mind confessing that it is hardly high-class. We might call it the lowest rung of the ladder."

"Be careful, deary. Don't do anything that you would be sorry for afterwards. Promise me to be careful," pleaded the anxious housekeeper; and Madge promised gaily, and carried Theo away into another room to talk over the new idea without further delay.

Hope sat still, gazing into the fire with wistful eyes; and Philippa, watching her anxiously, wondered, as she had often done of late, if it were only the strain of money-making which had brought such sadness into the sweet face. Hope had told her nothing of Ralph Merrilies; and indeed there was little to tell, for, with the exception of two occasions when she had met him at her uncle's house and exchanged a few commonplace sentences, he had practically dropped out of her life since the evening when he had offered his escort and had been treated with such apparent rudeness in response. Hope had given over telling herself that a fortnight's acquaintance could not possibly influence a lifetime, for the impression was too strong to be reasoned away. The picture of the strong, dark face was imprinted on her brain; in every moment of leisure her thoughts drifted back to Ralph as the needle to the pole. The longing to see him again was sometimes so strong as to be an actual physical pain. Now, as she sat staring into the fire, she was reviewing her life, telling herself that love was a thing forbidden, and pondering on what remained, until, Philippa's fixed gaze attracting her attention, she looked up with a flickering smile.

"I was thinking, Phil. Our talk has made me think. I have worked so hard this last year, and the result is so poor—so unsatisfactory!" She rose, and coming close to Philippa's side, took hold of her hand and cried, with sudden passion, "Phil, I can't do it—I can't go on! I could *give* my life, I could work for nothing, gladly and cheerfully, if it were for some noble end, but I can't sell it for a mess of pottage! I can't go on smiling and acting and trampling on my feelings, and associating with Minnie Caldecott and her friends for the sake of what I can make out of them. And I can't earn enough to help you. I am only a burden. I want to give it up, Phil, and devote my life to doing good. I want to enter a home for deaconesses, and be trained for work among the poor. There is no question of money there, for you get barely enough to live in the plainest way, but I should be doing some good in the world—"

"Sit down, Hope," said Philippa quietly. She waited in silence until the trembling hand lay quietly on her own, and then began her reply. "I know a girl who went to pay a visit at a country-house. It was, on the face of it, merely a pleasure visit, but while there she managed to rouse a very selfish girl to the consciousness that there were other needs in the world besides her own. Later on she gave real hard work to the carrying out of a scheme which she had suggested, and which has put fresh life into many tired workers this summer. I know a girl who has three quick-tempered, sharp-tongued sisters, and who keeps peace among them by her sweet influence. I know a girl who can make home cheerful by the exercise of her talent, and so keep a young brother happy and occupied many times when he would otherwise be roaming about in search of amusement. He is only a boy, but he thinks himself a man, and he is so easily—so easily influenced for good or bad! If that girl left her home, and her sisters' lives were made more difficult, and that poor boy went astray, would she be 'doing good?' Would she be doing the duty that lay at her hand?"

"Oh Phil!" gasped Hope, dismayed; but now Philippa in her turn was roused, and squared her shoulders in her old determined fashion.

"I can't think what has come to girls nowadays that they must take for granted that good work must needs be without their own four walls. Charity begins at home, and I call it treachery to forsake your relations when they need your help. If you go away, and anything happens to Barney—"

"Phil, don't! I can't bear it. Of course I will stay if you need me; and it comforts me more than anything else to feel that I *can* help. You are not—not *anxious* about Barney, are you, dear?"

"Yes, I am. I hate to put it into words, but perhaps it is better that we should consult together. The boy is changed; sometimes there is a look upon his face which I can't bear to see—a worried, miserable, *shamed* look, as if there were something he was trying to hide. He keeps asking for money, too, and at last I summoned up courage and refused to give any more. I thought he would have been angry, but he only stared at me fixedly and said, 'You'd better, Philippa! You will be sorry if you refuse.' Perhaps it was cowardly of me, but I was frightened and gave him what he asked; but I spoke very plainly to him, all the same. I said, 'Remember, Barney, that every unnecessary shilling you spend means extra anxiety and worry to me, and extra self-denial to the girls. We expect you to help, not to hinder. If you really love us you cannot have the heart to be extravagant just now.' He looked miserable, but he did not offer to return the money. I have given him no more since then, but he must get it *somewhere*, for he spends far more than Steve. He had half-a-dozen new ties in his drawer, and is always going to the theatre, and buying little things for his room. I don't like to speak to Steve, for the truth is, he doesn't understand Barney, and does more harm than good by his interference. But, Hope, you and I must work together. We must save our boy before it is too late. We must not allow him to get into bad ways."

"Poor Barney!" sighed Hope sadly. "It must be a hard life for him down in that dreary office. We have wondered that he stuck to his work so well. We won't scold him, Phil. Boys won't stand being scolded by their sisters. We will just make home as bright as we can, and make a point of consulting him and asking his help, so that he may feel like a man, poor darling—a man who has women depending on him, and must keep straight for their sake. We'll appeal to the best in him by showing our trust."

Philippa looked at her with shining eyes.

"Oh Hope, and you wanted to leave us! Bless you, dear, you *are* a help! I was feeling so cross and bitter, inclined to snap off the poor boy's head, though my heart was breaking for him all the time; but yours is the right way. You are right and I am wrong. We will begin to-night and see what we can do."

When Barney returned from town an hour or two later Hope looked at him with opened eyes, and felt a pang of remorse for the selfishness which had blinded her to the change in the boy's face. The once smooth forehead showed a faint network of lines; his glance had lost its candour, his radiant self-confidence was replaced by nervous uncertainty. He sat down quietly, casting a quick, almost furtive glance at Philippa's face; but when she smiled gaily in response, when she pressed dainties upon him and called him "old boy" in her old loving tones, his relief and pleasure found vent in one of his old bursts of merriment. He laughed and sang, danced up and down the room, and chattered incessantly, and as if he had never known a care in his life.

"I had a rowing from old Waxworks to-day. I expect I shall get sacked soon," he announced complacently. "The head of our department is such a muff! He can't see a joke, and spends half his time telling tales of me to the boss. Now, Waxworks, with all his faults, has quite a decent sense of humour. I tried him pretty high one day, and he really behaved uncommonly well. I was at the telephone when he came out of his private room and said, 'Oh Charrington, just telephone home for me that I am bringing two of the directors to dinner to-night.' I said, 'Yes, sir,' and rang up at once. Of course, I expected him to go back to his room, so after I had given the message, 'Two directors coming to dinner to-night,' I dropped the tube and added a little warning on my own behalf for the benefit of the clerks: '*Don't—have—hash!*' They were all so jolly sober about it that I looked round to see what was up, and there was every man Jack of them scribbling for his life, while old Waxworks stood at his door looking on. I tell you I felt pretty sick; but he just glared at me for a moment, and then went into his room and shut the door. My private opinion is that he wanted to laugh. One of the fellows told me that he quite snubbed Young—that's our head—when he complained of my vaulting over the desks—waved his hand, and said, with his grandest roll, 'Your manager has been young himself!' I expect Young had it in for me worse than ever after that, and to-day he had his chance. He was out of the room, and it was beastly dull, so I proposed getting up a statue gallery, and posed the fellows standing up on their stools. We had the Three Graces, with their arms entwined, and their legs sticking up in the air. Ulysses meeting What's-her-name—Penelope, wasn't it?—and hugging her round the waist, and all sorts of heathen Johnnies wrestling and fighting. Then the other fellows got scared and went back to their desks, and I was doing 'Ajax defying the lightning' in fine style, when Young came sneaking in and found me at it. He told the boss, and the boss sent for me, and jawed for a quarter of an hour. 'Willing to make excuses for youthful spirits, but must enforce discipline. Repeated complaints. Friend of your uncle. Very sorry. Give you another chance.' You know the kind of thing."

"Bar-ney!" cried the four sisters in chorus. But Barney only laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"What's the odds? I'm sick of the whole show, anyway. If he thinks I am going to spend my life making out policies he is jolly well mistaken. It's bad enough as it is; I should go cracked if I couldn't have a little fun."

The lines came back to his forehead as he spoke, and Philippa regarded him in pained self-reproach. This bright, adventurous spirit was never intended by nature to be chained to an office desk. No wonder that he chafed at confinement, and occasionally broke the bounds. If circumstances would have allowed it, he would have made a resourceful midy, a soldier who would have done good work for his country; but circumstances had not allowed it, and here once more was the round peg in the square hole, here once more the inevitable failure and disappointment. Surely there is no greater wrong that can be done to a young man, no surer way of driving him into temptation, than to set him a lifelong task which he despises and abhors. Philippa determined to consult the Hermit, who was by this time a regular Sunday-night visitor at the flat, and whose understanding of the boy's nature made him a more valuable adviser than the staid elder brother. Perhaps Mr Neil might be able to suggest a way out of the difficulty.

For the next few days Theo and Madge took their walks abroad together, and when at home remained shut up in the drawing-room together, whence came peals of mysterious laughter. Sheets of cardboard were smuggled to and fro, and finally taken out of the house and never brought back. In their place, however, appeared two bright half-sovereigns, displayed with huge pride on Madge's overstretched palm.

"First fruits!" she cried. "The foundations of a mighty fortune! I have set up in the advertising business, my dears, and am very well satisfied with my beginning. Oh, I am going to explain; just give me time and you shall hear all about it. You may remember, Phil, that you once advised me to try poster-painting, and that I was mortally offended at the suggestion. I remembered it, though, and when Pepper advised me to go in for caricature, it seemed as if the two things might be worked together. I was afraid it was no use trying anything big as a start, so I have been parading unfashionable thoroughfares this last week, looking out for shops which advertise their wares in the window, studying the said wares, and composing something really striking and original to attract the passers-by. There was one pastry-cook's where they had a printed cord in the window which pleased me very much—'Mutton pies—as good as mother makes 'em!' The inventor of that advertisement would, I was sure, be able to appreciate my efforts; so I drew a picture of a dinner-table, with a fat, motherly old dear cutting up pies at one end, while the different crowned heads of Europe sat round the table, elbowing each other for the first chance. You should have seen the delight of the proprietor when I exhibited it. He called his wife, and she came out of the little parlour, and shrieked with laughter. They wanted to know what I charged for it, and I said boldly, 'Ten shillings; and in a couple of years it will be ten pounds. I am just starting in this business, so I am charging a nominal price.' They whispered together, and asked if I couldn't make it seven-and-six; but I was firm, and they were glad enough to secure it at the price. That was number one. Number two was a failure, though I thought the sketch was the best of all. The man was hard up, I think, and couldn't afford the money. The third was a sweet-shop, for which I illustrated a rhyme of Theo's, with figures of the 'Shock-headed Peter' type. There was a nice old body in charge, who was not by any means an easy prey. She did not believe that the picture would bring her any fresh custom, but I persuaded her to try it for a couple of days, and saw it safely pasted on the window before we left. When we went back she confessed that there had been crowds of children about the window when the schools came out, and 'supposed she had better keep it now.' That's the second half-sovereign. And you needn't look nervous, Phil, for I assure you I never met with greater politeness; the assistants in the fashionable entertainment bureaux might learn a lesson from my mutton-pie gentleman. Besides, it has shown me that I *can* do it, and I'll be more ambitious next time. I'll show you the sketch that the tobacconist refused, to give you an idea of the style of thing."

She ran into her bedroom, and brought back a narrow sheet of paper on which was depicted a race-course, dotted over with the strangest, most comical of figures. The headpieces of old Toby pipes peered forth from the necks of rotund tobacco-jars, which were crowned with cocked hats, as represented by well-filled pouches. Short-stemmed pipes did service for arms, long-stemmed pipes for the wide-spread legs, and it was really astonishing how life-like and animated the figures appeared. With one exception, however, the combatants were in a very sad case, tumbling, fainting, falling to the ground, standing still with bowl-like hands pressed to their hearts, while the winner pressed nearer and nearer to the goal, and on that winner's corpulent figure was inscribed the eloquent and touching legend, "Banks's tobacco leads the way!"

"The name, of course, can be altered to suit the exigencies of the situation," said Madge dryly; and at that Barney burst into a roar of delighted laughter.

"Good old Madge! Well done, you! That's a rattling good picture, and you will sell it yet! I tell you what; there's a little shop that I patronise sometimes on my way home, where I really think they might have it. They sell newspapers and tobacco and so-called stationery, and the man is an enterprising sort of fellow, who would take up a new idea. I'll write down the address, and you might call in some day."

"Good old Barney! Good for you!" replied Madge in return. It was a simple enough suggestion, frankly made and as frankly accepted; neither brother nor sister suspected to what weighty consequences it was to give rise.

Chapter Twenty.

The Discovery.

Over a week elapsed before Madge was able to carry out Barney's suggestion and offer the race-course advertisement to the tobacconist who had been mentioned as a likely purchaser. As a preliminary measure she thought it wise to prospect the shop itself to see if it boasted any speciality which could be introduced into the sketch, and also to study the neighbourhood in search of further customers. When the first sketch had been touched up, and two more executed, she sallied forth to try her fate once more. She was less fortunate this time than on her first expedition, inasmuch as she met with two decided refusals. The tobacconist came last on the list, and Madge's thin face shone with the light of battle as she stepped across his threshold; for hers was one of the fortunate natures which holds the more firmly to its purpose when face to face with difficulty. To return home without one single sheaf to flourish was not to be thought of for a moment; by cajolery, tact, or insistence, this last chance must be turned into a success, and a bright half-sovereign transferred from the till to her purse.

It was already late in the afternoon, the gas was lit, and the master of the shop was sitting behind his counter reading an evening newspaper. He looked up in astonishment as Madge entered, for his clientele was almost exclusively masculine, and there was something about this quiet, black-robed girl which made him rise hastily and put on his best manners, as he inquired with what he could have the pleasure of serving her. She was a lady—not a pretty lady, yet there was something very taking about the way in which she smiled and said frankly:

"Well, do you know, I want *you* to be my customer to-day! I have heard that you are enterprising and fond of taking up new ideas, and I have drawn a picture advertisement which I thought you might like to buy to paste in your window."

The man looked dubious and disappointed. "I hardly think"—he began uncertainly; but Madge was already unrolling her paper, and what living tobacconist could have withstood the picture that was then revealed! This one, at least, was profoundly impressed; but when the money question was approached he showed a shocking ignorance of the value of artistic efforts. "If you 'ad said 'arf-a-crown, now,' he said sadly; and then Madge thought it was time to cease cajolery and show a firm front. She spoke to him seriously on the subject of an artist's education—of its duration, its cost, its difficulties; she hinted at a reputation which would be seriously injured by the receipt of silver coins, and gave him to understand that the day was near at hand when the sketch might be resold at a fabulous profit. The bargaining was continued for a considerable time, but Madge was sharp enough to see where she could afford to be firm, and would not concede a point.

In the end the tobacconist sighed and succumbed, but not without making a stipulation on his own side. There were one or two trifling additions which he wished made to the advertisement, and these Madge offered to do then and there if he could accommodate her with a table. There was no room in the tiny shop, but he looked towards the half-open door which led into the room behind, and whistled a summons, in response to which a thin, sad-faced woman made her appearance.

"Mother, will you give this young lady a seat in the parlour? She's got a drawing here that you will like to see, and there are one or two little things she is going to put in to make it better still."

"Come in, miss," said the woman curiously; and Madge walked into a little oven of a room, which was, however, clean and tidy, and not without a certain homely charm. The pictures on the walls were almost without exception prints of racing horses, and while the tobacconist's wife examined her sketch, Madge studied these prints with interest, and could not resist remarking on their number.

"You must be very fond of horses."

"My husband is!" The woman spoke shortly, and in a tone which made Madge regret her thoughtlessness. The thin face grew lined and troubled; her voice sank to a whisper. "I hate 'em!" she whispered. "I hate the sight of 'em. They have been the ruin of us. We used to be in quite a big way. We've come down and down. I don't know what will happen next."



'Jolly bad tips!' cried another voice, at the sound of which Madge's

Madge murmured sympathetically and bent her head over her work. All unwillingly she had touched upon the family skeleton, and it was difficult to know how to offer consolation when the offender himself was within hearing distance. She worked steadily at her sketch, while the woman sat down to her sewing, and for several moments the silence was unbroken. Then came the tinkle of the little bell, and two customers entered the shop. Madge heard a request for tobacco and a sporting paper, but she was in the middle of some fine printing and did not lift her head from her sheet. The proprietor was evidently weighing out the tobacco while his customers studied the paper. Suddenly one of them spoke in a reproachful voice:

"You were wrong about Friday's race, Mr Edwards. Brownie was not in it! You have not been fortunate in your tips lately."

"Jolly bad tips!" cried another voice, at the sound of which Madge's pencil slipped from her hand and rolled across the table. She bent forward to rescue it, casting at the same time a lightning glance through the half-opened door. The two customers were still standing before the counter, the younger of the two speaking in hot, excited tones: "I wish I had never taken your advice. It's been a bad business for me. I've lost five pounds this last fortnight."

"I wish I had got off with five pounds, sir," sighed the tobacconist; and his wife echoed the sigh with hopeless resignation. Then the bell jingled once more, the customers left the shop, and five minutes later Madge pushed back her chair and prepared to follow their example.

"Bless me, miss, you *are* white!" cried the woman anxiously. "Have you turned faint? Sit down, my dear, and I'll make you a cup of tea."

"Thank you, you are very kind, but I shall be all right when I get into the air. The room—the room is rather warm."

Madge gave a nickering smile, pulled herself together, and went through the concluding interview with the shopman with creditable composure; but once outside in the street, and lost in the deadliest of all solitudes—a London crowd—her agitation could no longer be restrained.

Oh Barney! beloved Benjamin of the family—radiant, clear-eyed child—honest, fearless boy—have you come to this? Betting, Barney! Losing five pounds in a fortnight—throwing it away with both hands—while at home Philippa sat sewing—sewing from morning to night—mending, turning, contriving, to save a penny—while Steve became old before his time, and Hope grew pale and thin with anxiety. A rush of colour flooded Madge's cheeks, and the indignant blood tingled in her veins. Then came a sudden terrifying thought before which she paled again. *Where had Barney got this money?* It was impossible that he could have saved it out of his pittance of a salary; the home exchequer could not furnish it; then how had he come by it? Madge walked along the busy streets pondering on this question, and on another equally important—her own course of action. If she could save her sisters from this painful discovery, if she could bring Barney to a sense of his wrong-doing, and pay off his debts by her own work, Madge felt that she would not have lived in vain. It did not matter how hard she had to work; she would sit up half the night gladly—gladly; and her experience had been so encouraging as to justify her in more ambitious flights. She would set to work at once on a design for a nursery frieze which had been in contemplation for some time past, offer it to a West End firm, and boldly ask a good price. If only Barney would be frank, and confess the whole truth! She reviewed his conduct for the last few weeks, and realised that, with the exception of one outburst of spirits, the boy had been preoccupied, silent, inclined to be irritable. She studied his face throughout the evening which followed, and was startled at what it told, even as Hope had been before her.

It was not until the house was quiet, and Barney had retired to his room, that Madge found her opportunity. Then she knocked softly at the door, was told to come in, and entered, to find Barney hastily covering up a bundle of papers. The action, the glimpse at the papers which showed them so surely to be tradesmen's bills, fired Madge with fresh indignation. She looked fixedly at the boy, and he returned her gaze with surprised inquiry.

"Well! What do you want?"

"I want a little conversation with you apart from the rest. I was in that tobacconist's shop this afternoon when you came in, Barney—that is to say, I was in the room behind the shop putting a few last touches to my sketch."

"Well!"

"The door was open, and I heard what you said."

Barney sat down on a chair, stretched out his legs, stuck his hands in his pockets, and looked at her with an air of insolent calm. The worried, downcast air which he had worn on her entrance disappeared as if by magic; his face was hard, stubborn, and defiant.

"Well—and what if you did?"

"What if I did? You can ask me that, when by your own confession you are betting and gambling, and leading a double life—when you are throwing away money which is needed for daily bread!"

"I never threw away any of your money, did I? You mind your own business, Madge, and leave me to mind mine."

"It is my business to look after you and keep you out of mischief. Where did you get that five pounds? It is bad enough that you should have lost it, but did you get it honestly, in the first place?"

"You'd better be careful what you say. You are not talking to a thief, remember!"

"How am I to know that?" cried Madge wildly. "If a man begins to bet, one can never tell to what he may sink next. And how could a boy like you have such a sum to spare? Where did you get it, Barney? Wherever you got it, it must be paid back at once."

There was no reply. Barney folded his arms, and set his lips in sullen determination. The question was repeated, to be ignored once more, when the tide of the girl's indignation could no longer be restrained.

"Coward! Despicable! To see your sisters slaving for a pittance, and to be content to be a shame and a burden! If you cannot work, at least you might try to be a man, and not disgrace our name."

Bitter words—bitter words! What need to repeat them? The girl had worked herself into a frenzy of anger, and hardly realised what she was saying, and the boy sat still and listened—the boy of seventeen, who all his life had been the spoiled darling of the household. Ten minutes before the stress of accumulated troubles was upon him, and he had been wrestling with an agony of repentance. A kiss from Philippa, a soft word from Hope, would have brought him to his knees in a flood of penitent tears; but the lash of Madge's words hardened his heart within him. He made no attempt to stop the torrent of reproach, but when at last she came to a pause he rose slowly, and standing at his full height, looked down upon her.

"If you have quite finished, will you kindly leave my room?" He pointed to the door as he spoke, and there was a look on his face which Madge had never seen before. Barney the boy was dead: Barney the man confronted her with haggard face, and spoke in a tone of authority which she dared not disobey. She turned towards the door, murmuring disjointed words of warning:

"If you will not tell, I must. Philippa—she will have to know."

"There is no necessity to disturb Philippa to-night. In the morning, no doubt, she will hear that—and other things!"

There was an ominous sound in those last three words which chilled Madge with a sense of trouble to come, but the door was closed against her even as they were spoken, and she crept back to bed shivering and dismayed. Perhaps if she had been gentler, more conciliating—if she had fought with the weapons of love instead of anger—she would not have been so signally defeated. Like many another quick-tempered sister, Madge's anger ended in self-reproach, and when too late she would have given the world to withdraw her bitter, pitiless words.

Chapter Twenty One.

Dark Days.

The next morning, when the four sisters were seated at breakfast, Steve entered and stationed himself before the fire to read a long, business-looking letter. His exclamations of dismay as he read roused the girls' attention, but Steve did not reply—to their eager questioning. With set face he handed them the letter, and one by one they read the unwelcome intelligence, and swelled the chorus of sighs. Barney was dismissed from his situation! The manager wrote a courteous explanatory letter to the effect that an inexcusable escapade—the last of a long series—made it necessary for the lad's connection with the office to cease. He regretted this conclusion, not only from the fact that his old friend Mr Loftus would have cause for disappointment, but also, he might add, for the sake of the boy himself, who had many good points and was a favourite among his companions. If he might be pardoned for making a suggestion, an office desk was hardly the right position for a youth of so much spirit. Given more congenial work, he would no doubt do better. It was a kindly letter, and one which made its import as palatable as possible. Philippa sighed, and said, "Just what I have been thinking! It was too hard on the boy to expect him to settle to that humdrum life. Perhaps this is the best thing that could have happened."

But Steve was not disposed to take such a lenient view of the matter.

"If Barney had told us honestly that he could not stand it, we would have done our best to find another opening, but to be dismissed like this—to be turned away at an hour's notice—it is disgraceful! Uncle Loftus will have every right to be angry. 'An inexcusable escapade'! What can that refer to, I wonder?"

Theo covered her lips with her hands, for even at that moment she could not restrain a smile at the recollection.

"I think I know. Barney told me the night before last. One of the clerks bought an alarm and left it on his desk while he went out to lunch. He had previously announced that he was going to meet his fiancée in town, and take her to a concert after dinner. Barney got hold of the alarm and set it for nine o'clock. He knew the poor creatures would be sitting in cheap seats, and that there would be no cloak-room for their things. The man would put the clock in his hat under the seat, and at the appointed time, *Cr-r-r-r-r*, off it would go! He would not be able to stop it. I asked Barney last night what had happened, but he would not tell me much. I suppose he was in low spirits about his dismissal. The alarm had gone off in the midst of a classical concerto, and the people around had been so cross that the clerk had to rush out with it as fast as he could go. He was very angry, and went straight to the manager to complain."

"Oh! oh! how naughty!" cried Philippa. Hope was laughing softly to herself, but Phil looked at Steve's stern face and dared not show any amusement. "Where *is* Barney!" she asked. "Perhaps he does not like to come in until we have read our letters. Call him, Theo dear, will you! His breakfast will be cold."

Theo stepped across the narrow passage and tapped at the door of Barney's room, waited a moment, opened it gently, then came running back, all scared and breathless.

"He is not there! The bed has not been slept in. Oh Phil, what does it mean?"

But she knew what it meant; they all knew. There was no need for explanation. Together they crushed into the little room and looked around with haggard eyes. Theo had a dreary sense of having been through it all before; and indeed it was an old, old story, even to the torn-up papers on the hearth and the letter of farewell on the dressing-table. It was addressed to Philippa, and she read it aloud, with short, gasping breaths:

"I have lost my situation, and have got into debt, and lost money betting on races, and the best thing I can do is to take myself off and not trouble you any longer.—I can't stay here to be a shame and a burden.—(Oh Barney!)—If you and Steve will pay off my bills, you can look upon the money as my share in what was left. I will never trouble you for any more."

Here came a great dash as if the writer had intended to end the letter, but at the bottom of the sheet were a few words scribbled in uncertain letters: "Good-bye, Phil. I'll try to keep straight for your sake."

Philippa looked up; Steve was written on her face, but her first words were of thanksgiving. "Thank God! He is alive and well; he will do himself no harm. My poor boy! We must find him and bring him home again."

"Betting!" echoed Steve. "Debts! I can't understand it. We kept him supplied with pocket-money; he had a comfortable home; what more did he want? I don't wonder he was ashamed to face us, but it is a cowardly thing to run away from the consequences of his wrong-doing and bring fresh anxiety upon us. I wouldn't have believed it of Barney."

"It is my fault! Blame me; I drove him to it," said Madge desperately.

Her sisters stared at her in amazement, while she told the history of the last afternoon and evening, omitting nothing, extenuating nothing, repeating her bitter words with unflinching honesty. Only her face betrayed the inward agony of remorse, but that was eloquent enough, and when she had finished not one of her hearers had the heart to utter a reproach. Philippa looked appealingly at Steve, as if asking what could be done next; but for once the set face refused her comfort in her need. Stephen could be trusted to do what was right, but his search would lack the inspiration which would come from a thorough understanding of the boy's character.

"And I'm only a woman; I haven't the knowledge that a man would have," sighed poor Phil to herself; then she stretched out her hands and cried sharply, "I want to see the Hermit. Barney liked him so much! They used to talk together; he will know best what was in the boy's mind, and be able to help us."

"I'll bring him up," said Steve, and turned straightway to the door. He, too, was eager for a man's advice—a calm, masculine judgment—to temper the discussion with these distracted girls. Relief was apparent in his manner when he followed the Hermit into the dining-room five minutes later, and summoned his sisters to meet him.

"Barney has gone!" said Philippa simply as she put her hand into the one outstretched to meet it. Then as she met the grave tenderness of the gaze that was turned upon her, for the first time she broke down and sobbed out a wild appeal: "Oh, find him for me—find him for me! He has run away, and it is all my fault. I brought him to this terrible city, and shut him up in an office all day long; and Barney is such a restless creature; he can't endure confinement. If he got into trouble here, when we were all near him, what will income of him now when he is alone? Oh, find him for me! Bring him back—"

"I will, Miss Philippa, if it is humanly possible," replied the Hermit gravely. And then Madge's story was retold, and the question raised again as to how Barney had come into possession of so much money.

"I can account for some of it at least," Mr Neil said. "I saw that the boy was troubled, and found out that he was in need of money. Eventually he asked me for the loan of five pounds. I said, 'My boy, you must not begin borrowing at your age. It is a bad habit, and I won't encourage you in it. But I had made up my mind to give you a cheque for a Christmas present; and you shall have it in advance, if that would be a help to you.' He said it would, and I gave him the five pounds for which he had asked."

"It was not right of you. No! you should not have done it. It was leading the boy into temptation." Philippa spoke in tones of strong reproach; but though Mr Neil's face was troubled, it was in nowise repentant.

"I have been a boy in an office myself, Miss Philippa," he said gently, "for two years—two long, miserable years—and I know—forgive me for saying so—that there is an even greater temptation in being too short of money. When a lad gets his first taste of independence it goes hard with him if he cannot indulge in the little luxuries which his companions enjoy; and the shops seem irresistible. I hoped that by means of my gift Barney might be able to pay off his debts and start afresh."

"You have been very generous and very forgiving, Mr Neil," said Steve; "and we are much indebted to you. But what can we do this morning? I must get to the office as soon as I can, for there are already two men away. It won't do for me to lose my berth into the bargain."

Steve spoke with a tinge of bitterness, for in truth he found himself in a painful position—the position of the elder brother in the parable. He had never got into debt, nor betted, nor failed in a single instance in his duty to his sisters, and it was a little hard to realise, as he did this morning, that to each one of the four—Phil included—the curly-headed prodigal was dearer than himself. He looked at the Hermit, and asked anxiously, "Can you come with me?"

"It is what I was about to propose. I am my own master, and can give all my time to the search. We had better go to the office first, and try to discover who was the companion of the tobacconist's shop; then if we get a clue I will follow it up."

"Right," said Steve, and went into the little hall, to find Hope already brushing the coat which she had taken down from its peg. She helped him to put it on, turned down the collar at the back, and let her hand rest against his neck as she murmured a few low words: "Dear old Steve! What should we do without you?" It was always Hope's way to divine a wound and lay a healing hand upon it.

The two men went straight to the insurance office, and interviewed the manager in his room. "Waxworks," as Barney had irreverently dubbed him, was unaffectedly grieved to hear of the boy's flight, and repentant of his own share in the catastrophe. "I liked the lad," he said. "One could not help liking him. If I had consulted my own wishes only I should have lectured him and let him stay on, but in a big place like this it is necessary to keep a firm hand. I had overlooked several breaches of discipline, and it could not go on. He must be found, of course; and then, if you take my advice, you will let him live an out-of-door life. Send him abroad. He is just the type that is wanted in the colonies. Now I'll send for Young, and you can question him as you please."

Mr Young, however, had no light to throw upon the subject; neither had Barney's special companions among the clerks, who were interviewed in their turn. The lad had left the office alone, so that the identity of his companion still remained a mystery, which the tobacconist alone could solve. The two therefore made their way to the little shop, where Madge's sketch was displayed in all its glory in the window, but neither brother nor friend had the heart to laugh at it to-day. The tinkling bell announced their entrance to the proprietor, and they lost no time in telling him the object of their visit. Two young gentlemen had been in the habit of visiting his shop and asking his advice on racing matters, their last call happening the night before, somewhere about five o'clock. The younger of the two was tall, dark, and handsome; for private reasons his friends were anxious to interview his companion. Who was he, and where employed?

Did the man know or did he not? He professed utter ignorance, but there was a slyness on his face which did not escape the notice of his questioners. A number of gentlemen came to his shop; sometimes they did happen to talk of a race if it was near at hand; but he never inquired a customer's name. Gentlemen wouldn't like it. Couldn't say for certain that he remembered the two just mentioned.

"The man lies. We will waste no more time on him," said the Hermit sternly as he turned away from the door. "Go back to your office, Charrington, and leave me to see the police and put an advertisement in the papers. That is all that we can do at the moment, though I shall not rest until I have tracked that unknown friend. He will probably be able to tell us more than any one else. I'll think out a plan of action for the next few days. This is my business as well as yours; for the boy has been like a young brother to me this last year."

Looking back on the days which followed Barney's disappearance, the Charringtons were often puzzled to understand how they endured the strain and suspense, and marvelled at their own composure. Day after day the Hermit continued his search, and came home weary and disappointed; day by day Philippa listened to his report with a steady face, and abated not one of her usual efforts for the comfort of the household, while the three younger sisters set their teeth and went on doggedly with their work.

"If we were actresses or public singers we should have to keep our appointments, and smile and look cheerful; if we were clerks or teachers we should have to turn out as usual, and be patient and forbearing; if we were shop assistants we should have to stand on our feet all day long, and be polite, however much we were aggravated. We are poor things if we call ourselves working women and then indulge our feelings like any fine lady," Theo had said sternly to two drooping figures who sat by the fire gazing at idle fingers, and she had no need to speak a second time. In the temporary eclipse of Madge's bright spirits, Theo had taken upon herself to be the cheery, inspiring member of the family, which rôle shook her out of the old self-engrossed groove, and suited her well. Now, as she went into her room and sat down at her desk, her heart swelled with a sense of joy and gratitude for the talent which had been entrusted to her care. She took up her manuscript and set to work with none of the difficulty and hesitation which often hampered her progress: the thoughts crowded into her brain; the right word came of itself and did not need to be sought; the difficult point was overcome, and she laughed with delight at the wittiness of her own dialogue. Here, then, was a discovery, that even sorrow had its compensation, since it brought with it fresh

understanding, earnestness, and delicacy of touch. When she went in to lunch, the light on her face made her sisters look and wonder.

"No need to ask how you have fared to-day, Theo," Hope said. "I don't know who your characters are at the moment, but they have been good children this morning."

"Couldn't be better," said the author brightly. "So charmingly alive, and saying such witty things! It is a curious delusion, but when I do my best work I always feel as if some one else suggested it. I was sad enough in my own heart to-day, but as I wrote a little sprite seemed to whisper in my ear. The good things *came*! I didn't create them. I suppose the really great writers often feel like that I am quite sure that when they read over their books they are astounded at their own cleverness."

"It must be a very—a very agreeable sensation. I have never been the least little bit surprised at mine. I tried to work, too, but I didn't get on well. You two girls make me ashamed of myself, but I think sometimes that I was never meant to be a public character," sighed Hope, wrinkling her forehead in her pretty, wistful fashion. "I don't seem to have the faculty of earning money."

"Because nature intended some one else to make it for you, darling! You are one of the dear, frightened, humble little creatures who need a big strong man to stand between them and the world. I do hope you will marry, Hope! Do, please, the first chance you get. You'd be ever so much happier, and it would be so agreeable for us. Marry a rich man who lives in the country, and send us hampers every week!" cried unsuspecting Madge. It seemed natural enough to the others that Hope should blush at the suggestion; only Theo understood the meaning of that blush, and the train of thought which suggested the reply.

"I think I shall go to see Avice this afternoon. I promised Steve that I would call before the end of the week if we had no news. He doesn't want uncle to hear about Barney in town; he might be annoyed that we had not told him ourselves."

When Hope saw her aunt's face, however, she knew at a glance that she was too late with her news, and sat meekly listening to the tirade which followed, thankful that she was the listener instead of Philippa. Her gentleness was her best weapon, however; for, having said her say, Mrs Loftus began to soften and to regret having spoken so strongly. Argument or contradiction would have incensed her still further; but how could one go on scolding a pretty, timid creature who merely sat still and looked miserable? She paused, frowned, and finally asked the amount of the debts which Barney had left behind. "Everything, I mean—the whole sum for which you are liable."

"I think, perhaps—I'm afraid nearly t-twenty pounds!"

The gasp with which Hope replied was for the magnitude of the sum mentioned; the echoing gasp from the other side of the fireplace was for an exactly opposite reason.

"Only twenty pounds!" cried Avice; "the price of a gown! The poor boy ran away for that! Hope dear, I will pay it myself; I will give it to you this afternoon before you go. You sha'n't be worried about it any more."

"It is paid already, dear. Steve saw to that at once. You are very kind, but Barney would not like it, and we have a good deal of money still left. Philippa drew it out of the bank."

"You will be in the workhouse soon," Mrs Loftus prophesied cheerfully. "I never heard anything more mad than to spend your capital as you are doing. Just think of the inroads you must have made into it this year!"

"I'd rather not, Aunt Loftus, if you don't mind. It is always the first step which costs, but we have made a start, and hope to do wonders next year. At the worst I shall avoid the workhouse by throwing myself on Avice's mercy.—You would have me down at the lodge, wouldn't you, dear?"

The glance exchanged between the two cousins was full of confidence and affection, and Avice's voice had a new ring of animation as she replied:

"I should like to have you always. Oh Hope! I *do* enjoy shopping now, and seeing the girls who were with us in summer. Mother is quite scandalised because we talk so much, but being with them does me more good than I can say. And the conjurer's daughter is going to be married—to a magic-lantern man! I thought of having them down for their honeymoon."

"Avice is far more interested in that engagement than she is in Truda Bennett's; and she is to be one of Truda's bridesmaids, too," said Mrs Loftus in a puzzled tone as she pushed back her chair and rose from her place before the tea-table. Hope rose too, with an impulse of escape, and bent down to pick up muff and gloves. Her heart had given a great leap of fear, and was beating in heavy throbs, but she said savagely to herself, "You *sha'n't* blush! You sha'n't look startled!" and turned an unmoved face to her aunt.

"Miss Bennett engaged! I didn't, know."

"You can't have used your eyes, then, when you were with us last year. They flirted shockingly! It ought to have been announced long ago. By the way, Hope, we go down to The Shanty next week. You had better come with us for a little visit. I meant to write and ask you, and you look pale—as if you needed a change. We shall be almost the same party as before."

"Dear aunty, I can't. It is good of you to think of it, but I couldn't leave home just now. I should be so anxious and troubled that I should be of no use to you."

"You must come later, then. It will be all the same to us, but the others will be disappointed. Truda asks after you continually, and Ralph Merrilies said he looked forward to some more delightful music. I wish you could come, Hope."

"He wanted to meet me, then," said Hope drearily to herself as she took her way home. "It's just as I always thought: he cared for me only as a friend, and was kind to me because I was poor and friendless. He must have grown fond of Truda, after all. She is so bright and amusing! I suppose she showed him tricks and made him laugh; and he is so serious himself that he needs some one cheerful. I hope he will be very, very happy." Her eyes smarted suddenly, and a sob swelled in her throat. "But oh, I wish I had never met him! I wish I was not so wretched! Truda had so many other things, and I could have made him happy. It is hateful of me, but I believe I should make a nicer wife. I should have been so good to him! Oh Ralph! Ralph!"

Alas, poor Hope! She pulled down her thick veil, and cried quietly behind its shelter as she wended her way home through the busy streets.

Chapter Twenty Two.

An Unexpected Clue.

Ten days passed by and brought no news of Barney. Steve devoted every spare moment to the search, the Hermit was unremitting in his efforts, but with the best will in the world they proved but poor detectives. The tobacconist remained stubbornly uncommunicative, and as Madge would not have recognised Barney's companion if she had seen him, it was little use watching the shop. The insurance clerks were interviewed again and again, but Barney had been prudent in one respect at least—he had not breathed a word of his betting transactions in the office. He had vaguely mentioned "a friend of mine"—"a fellow I know," but had given no names, and the consensus of opinion was that he must have picked up acquaintances in the luncheon hour, when, boy-like, he was fond of wandering about from place to place. The Hermit lunched diligently in all the principal restaurants in the neighbourhood of the office, and made a point of entering into conversation with his companions, but he failed to meet any one who remembered Barney.

"I am at a standstill. I don't know what to do next. I am afraid there is very little of the Sherlock Holmes about me, Miss Philippa," he said dejectedly on the tenth afternoon, as he detailed the history of the day's search. It had become a custom for him to come upstairs to tell his story and to be refreshed with tea and scones, and the girls welcomed his advent as a break in the long, anxious day. So far he had brought no good news, but while he was devoting so much time to their service, they felt bound to cheer him for his disappointments, and the effort was good for themselves also.

"Never mind; if you were Sherlock Holmes you wouldn't be yourself, and you are a much pleasanter neighbour as you are," replied Philippa as she lifted the little copper kettle from its stand and poured the water into the teapot. She kept her face turned aside so that he might not see the disappointment written upon it, and reminded herself for the hundredth time that she could afford to be patient. Had not Barney promised to keep straight for her sake? Perhaps, after all, this separation from home might teach him its value as no amount of petting and spoiling would have done, and on his return he would show a gentler, more disciplined spirit. Philippa would never allow herself to believe that this absence was more than temporary. She handed the plate of home-made scones to the Hermit, smiling the while with some of her old mischievous brightness.

"Hungry?"

"I had steak to-day. I find, on the whole, that steak suits me best," replied the Hermit, screwing up his eyes in judicial fashion. "It's so tough that it takes a long time to despatch. Then, again, it takes ten minutes to prepare. I calculate that I can while away a good half-hour on a plate of steak, to say nothing of after-courses. In this way I get several changes of companions, and I manage to work round the conversation until I can bring in Barney's name, and inquire if they happen to have met him. I am getting quite skilled in the exigencies of small-talk."

"Poor thing, and you hate it so! It is noble of you to persevere as you do, for I am sure there is nothing you dislike more."

"No, no; don't say that. It is good for me. I have studied books too much, and men too little, in my life—to my own great loss. Before you took me in hand a year ago I was a veritable hermit, and the old habits cling about me still. I feel terribly rusty among all those bright, alert young fellows, and they treat me as if I belonged to a different species. Do you—do you notice anything pedantic in my manner?"

All four girls were in the room, but it was to Philippa that he addressed the question; he had a way of looking at her when he spoke, of which the girl herself was gratefully conscious. Theo and Madge—even Hope herself—had a way of treating her with affectionate patronage as a dear, kind, preoccupied Martha who could not be expected to understand their higher flights. She had suffered beneath this treatment, and was delighted that these fledglings should now see in what estimation she was held by a scholar of repute.

"You are the *kindest* man I ever met. There is no one else among our friends who would jeopardise his digestion by eating tough steak day after day in the hope of doing us a service," she cried, deftly evading a direct answer, which, if honest, must needs have been in the affirmative. Theo's hand advanced cautiously and gave a meaning pressure to Madge's elbow. Madge stared into space, with wooden stolidity of feature. Hope looked wistfully from Philippa to the hermit, from the Hermit back to Philippa once more.

Then suddenly came the sound of the electric bell, followed by a silence of expectation. It might portend a letter or a telegram. It might be even Barney himself!

Mary opened the door, and some one entered the tiny passage to an accompaniment of gasps and groans and rustlings of silken skirts; the air became laden with scent, and a second after Minnie Caldecott staggered into the room and sank down on the nearest chair.

"Where is your lift? You horrible girls, what do you mean by not having a lift? I'm *dead!*" she announced tragically, fanning herself with the ends of a chiffon boa, and puffing and blowing in quite an alarming fashion, until, suddenly catching sight of the Hermit at the other end of the room, she sat up straight in her chair and recovered her breath with remarkable celerity.

The Charrington girls had never before seen the fair Minnie in the presence of a member of the opposite sex, and the scene which followed filled them with delighted amusement. The lady elaborately prepared herself for the fray, set her hat at a more becoming angle, pulled out the little curls under the veil, and while ostensibly addressing herself to her friends, sent fascinating glances across the room with her big blue eyes. The man hunched his shoulders, screwed up his brows, and looked helplessly miserable and ill at ease. He would have given the world to escape, but the buxom figure barred the way, and he lacked the courage to pass by. There was nothing for it but to sit still until she chose to depart.

"Well, I'm thankful I have found you at home after that climb. You must think twice before you go out, when you live in a bird's nest like this. I nearly turned back, but I wanted particularly to see you about some business." She caught Hope's eager glance, and shook her head in reply. "Nothing for you, dear. No more songs just now. I say! you *are* white. What's the matter? Have you been ill?"

"Not ill exactly. We have had an anxious time lately."

Hope could not bring herself to speak of Barney to Minnie Caldecott, and her cheeks grew pink even as she spoke, for she knew that she was using the boy's disappearance as a cloak behind which to hide the real trouble which was sapping her strength. Miss Caldecott nodded her head, however, as though she understood all about the matter, and said cheerfully:

"Still trying to make your fortune! Better give it up, my dear, and follow my example: I'm going to be married." She threw a deprecatory glance at the Hermit, as though condoling with him on his own late arrival on the scene. "Told you I should come to that before long! Fact is, the public is getting tired of me and running after newer singers, and I must do something to improve my position, so the day is fixed for the third week in January; and on the fifteenth of December Minnie Caldecott gives a grand farewell concert, when all her friends in the profession will give their services for her benefit."

"How kind of them!" said Hope. "I hope you will be very happy. But are you really going to retire so soon? Your voice is so fresh still—you are so young—"

The bride-elect laughed her large, hearty laugh. "How old should you think I was!" she inquired; and this time she addressed the Hermit in such a marked manner that he could not choose but reply. He looked annoyed, however, and the pedantic manner was at its height as he said shortly, "I am afraid I must confess that I have not thought about the subject at all."

"Think now!" said Minnie, staring at him with her wide blue eyes. She was like a big baby, Madge reflected—a huge wax doll—just as smooth and pink-and-white and chubby—just as vacant and soulless in expression. "Out with it! Don't be afraid," she cried; and the Hermit, thus goaded, ventured a leap in the dark:

"I should say somewhere about thirty."

Miss Caldecott turned a horrified face towards her friends.

"Well, *he* doesn't know how to pay compliments.—Thirty, indeed! I'm only twenty-nine, and in the profession we always knock off at least five years. No, I am not going to retire. I know a trick worth two of that. A few months later there will be another concert—first appearance since her marriage—and a year or two after that a second farewell; but I want to make a big splash with this first one, and it occurred to me the other day that you might help me." Her eyes wandered round the room until they rested on Madge's thin face. "You are the one I want. You designed that swell leaflet for your sister's entertainment. Don't you think it would be a good chance for you to do one for me now?"

Madge looked at her quizzically. The Charringtons had learned by this time that, in spite of her beaming good-nature, Miss Caldecott was a keen business woman, and that in dealing with her it was necessary to look well after one's own interests.

"I am not certain that I can undertake any fresh orders just now; I am so busy with my advertisements," Madge replied grandiloquently, glancing at the table in the window on which lay the roll of the nursery frieze, now approaching completion.

As she had expected, Miss Caldecott insisted upon seeing it, and went into raptures over a spirited rendering of "Hi Diddle, Diddle." The cat was evidently of Cheshire origin, to judge from its bland and benign expression; the cow was in the act of drawing itself together for the fateful leap, while the moon rolled apprehensive eyes towards it, and the little dog clasped its fore-legs over its heart in an ecstasy of amusement. In the distance a gentlemanly-looking dish was dragging a swooning spoon in its wake. It was very funny, very clever, very original; for Madge, like Theo, had been working at high pressure, and had been inspired to do her best in the hope of paying off a part at least of Barney's debts, and thereby giving a sop to her troubled conscience.

"I am not quite sure who shall have it, Mason's or Fearing's," she said languidly, mentioning the two largest West End furnishers, in reply to Miss Caldecott's inquiry as to the destination of the design. "It depends, of course, upon which makes the highest offer."

She turned her head cautiously to grimace at her sisters, and beheld the Hermit wreathed in smiles, nodding encouragement, waving his hand as if imploring her to keep it up. His delight, contrasted with the baffled expression on Minnie's chubby face, proved almost too much, for Madge's composure, but she busied herself with covering up the sketches, and presently returned to her seat, and smiled with bland patronage upon her visitor.

"And now—er—about this concert!"

"Herman is going to sing, and Marie Ross, and—" Miss Caldecott reeled off the names of half-a-dozen well-known artistes, checking them on her fingers with an air of triumph. "They are all *giving* their services. My dear, it would be the finest advertisement you could have. Make up something original and striking in the way of a programme, and they will all be eating out their hearts with jealousy. You don't know what we are in the profession, but I do. And you may take it from me that every one of them will determine on the spot that she will have something even better when it comes to her turn. You will have your name printed in the corner. I will crack you up as the coming artist, and they will all be running after you, and giving you more commissions than you can take—"

"On the same terms?" queried Madge blandly. "Because if so, I hardly see where the artist comes in. There must be reciprocity in these things, Miss Caldecott. I cannot work for nothing. Now, for instance, if you were going to sing Hope's song—"

Miss Caldecott looked shocked at the suggestion.

"My dear girl, it's impossible. I'm booming three songs for publishers just now, and get half-a-guinea apiece every time I sing them. That is what Hope should do: get some firm to push her things, and pay for having them sung. She will never make a name until she does."

"Just so; but as she is young and unknown, they don't feel inclined to help her. It would help matters considerably if you would give 'The Song of Sleep' at your concert. You might possibly lose ten-and-sixpence, but, on the other hand, my charge for an illustrated programme is five guineas! You would have the best of the bargain."

In the silence which followed the Hermit's chuckle of delight was distinctly audible. Minnie looked at him sharply, nodded her head as if in sympathy with his enjoyment, and cried laughingly:

"*She'll get on!* No fear for her! Knows how to look after herself, and her sister too. Very well, then, it shall be an encore; but you must do your best for me, mind—something very fetching. If you could give a hint of a wedding it would be a good idea. I don't want the audience to think I am retiring through old age. Thirty, indeed!" and she threw an indignant glance at the Hermit, the while Madge laughed, and suggested:

"Wedding-bells, and a wreath of orange-blossoms as a bordering?"

"Yes, yes! Just the thing! Bring the sketch to show me, and we can consult about it together, for I really can't manage these stairs again. I'm so pleased it's all settled!"

She rose as she spoke, and prepared to take her leave, but as she did so her eye fell on the row of photographs on the chimneypiece, and she walked forward to examine them in her usual free-and-easy fashion.

"Family pictures! There is Hope—not half pretty enough, though. That was your father, I suppose. So clever, wasn't he! By the way, how is that young brother of yours getting on?"

If a thunderbolt had fallen through the roof, the occupants of the room could hardly have been more startled than by this simple question. This was Miss Caldecott's first visit to the flat; Barney's name had never been mentioned in her presence; how, then, did she come to know of his existence? The shadow which had been pushed aside for a few minutes now returned more heavily than ever, and the pale, tense faces of the four girls started the innocent questioner.

"What is the matter? What have I said? Nothing to worry you, have I?"

"We are in trouble about our brother, Miss Caldecott. He has—disappeared," said Philippa, resting both hands on the back of a chair to hide their trembling. "Do you mind telling us how you came to know him?"

"But I don't know him; only heard his name casually from a friend. Handsome boy, isn't he?—musical—sings comic songs and dances break-downs—up to all sorts of fun?"

"Yes, yes!" cried the sisters in concert, and the Hermit drew near, forgetting his embarrassment in his anxiety to hear what might be told. The five pairs of eyes were fixed hungrily on the silly, pretty face, and even as they looked they saw it change, soften into sympathy, and grow sweet and earnest and womanly.

"And he has run away, has he? And you are sitting at home waiting for him, and breaking your hearts. Poor little girls! Wouldn't it be lovely if I helped you to find him, after all? Now, I'll tell you all I know. I had some friends in the other night, and one of the men was turning over my songs and found 'The Song of Sleep.' We laughed about it a good deal, for I told him it was half my own composition. He noticed the name—Hope Charrington—and said he knew a young fellow of that name; who was one of the most amusing boys he had ever met, and could sing a rattling comic song. He is musical, this man I am speaking of, and is fond of having little singsongs at his rooms. I asked one or two questions, found out that it must be your brother, and told Jim I would warn you that he was not a fit companion for a lad. Oh, I was only in fun; there's no real harm in Jim, but he is in rather a fast, betting set, and I have a young brother of my own. I know how I should feel about it I determined to give you a hint next time we met, and I *did* remember, didn't I? I am so glad I didn't forget!"

The look of elation which accompanied the last words brought a smile to Hope's face. She had reason to know Miss Caldecott's powers of forgetting, and it argued a wonderful amount of interest that she should have, remembered Barney in the midst of the exciting preparations for her benefit concert. She slipped her hand through the plump arm and pressed it gently, while Philippa asked half-a-dozen breathless questions.

"How long ago was that? Have you heard nothing since? Where had he met Barney? Is he in an insurance office?"

"Insurance? No, that is not it. He has quite a good berth somewhere—shipping office, I think. Their ships go out to the Cape."

She drew her breath sharply as she finished her sentence, and, to judge by the startled look which went round, the same thought had flashed through every mind. Shipping! Ships that went out to the Cape! What better means by which to frustrate the most diligent search? Barney had always had a craving for the sea, and if this unknown "Jim" had influence in his office, and felt himself even indirectly responsible for the trouble in which the boy found himself, what more likely than that he would help him to a fresh start?

"I shouldn't wonder one bit if that is the explanation," cried Minnie triumphantly. "Two to one he has gone off in one of their boats; and a very good thing if he has. Nothing knocks the nonsense out of a boy like a good long voyage. He'll be so thankful to get back that he will settle down to anything you like to mention. Got into trouble, I suppose, before he went? Nothing serious, I hope."

She had shown herself so kind and sympathetic that Philippa could not refuse to reply, and Minnie listened to the story of Barney's debts with indulgent sympathy.

"And so he ran away from them. Just what I have longed to do myself a dozen times over. Now, you will want to see Jim, and hear what he has to say. I shall be passing near his lodgings on my way home, and if Mr—er—Neil, isn't it?—likes to come with me, we might interview him together. He gets home by half-past five, as a rule."

She looked coquettishly at the Hermit, who was immediately seized with a paroxysm of embarrassment, twitched nervous fingers, and looked as supremely miserable as if his last hour had come. With the energy of despair he managed to blurt out a few words to the effect that—"Stephen—Mr Charrington—home presently—like to be present. After dinner, perhaps—could go together if Miss Caldecott kindly—left address."

"Well, *he* doesn't know how to flirt!" Minnie exclaimed, blighting five minutes later as she and Hope stood in the little hall for a few parting words. "Can't understand a man like that. No patience with him either. No relation of yours, I hope, dear?"

"None whatever; but, oh Minnie, you should not want to flirt when you are engaged! I do hope you are not going to be married just because you are tired and discouraged and need a rest. I do trust you are not making a mistake," cried Hope earnestly. "Are you quite sure you care for him, and can be happy?"

Miss Caldecott laughed lightly. "My dear," she said, "if I look thirty in my best new veil, it is more than time I was married. And I am so tired of paying my own bills! Jack is very well off, and I intend to make his money fly. It will be a new experience to spend money that some one else has earned." She paused, looked for a moment into Hope's wistful face, and added impulsively, "If you will promise faithfully never to tell Jack if you should meet him, I'll let you into a secret. I'm frightfully happy! I've been in love with him for years. It was difficult to make up my mind when I had been my own mistress for so long, but now that I *have* given in, I wouldn't go back for the world. It is nice to be loved and taken care of—far nicer than being independent. You will find that out for yourself some day soon."

"Dear Minnie, I am so glad! I do congratulate you with all my heart; and 'Jack' too. You will make such a nice, cheerful, good-tempered wife!" cried Hope bravely; whereat Miss Minnie indulged in an elephantine byplay of bashfulness, and ran rustling down the staircase.

"An appalling woman!" the Hermit was reiterating in the drawing-room; but none of the sisters would agree with this denunciation.

"She doesn't wear her heart on her sleeve; neither do we," maintained Hope. "She is ever so much nicer when you know her well."

"She shows great perspicuity in her judgment. Did you hear her say that I was sure to get on?" cried Madge; and Theo smiled as at a pleasant recollection.

"Did you notice how her face softened when we spoke of our trouble? Her lips drooped, and her eyes grew so soft and liquid. My next heroine shall have eyes like that."

"And if she helps us to find Barney," sighed Philippa softly, "I shall bless the name of Minnie Caldecott as long as I live."

Chapter Twenty Three.

Rejoicings.

It can be imagined with what eagerness Steve was greeted on his return from the City that evening, how he was hurried through his dinner, and despatched forthwith, in company with the Hermit, to interview "Jim," otherwise Mr James Matthews. The time of waiting seemed unbearably long, but when the two men returned it was at once evident that they were the bearers of good news. The companion of the newspaper shop had been found at last, while Barney himself was now on his way to the Cape, working for his passage in the capacity of steward!

Briefly, the tale which Mr Matthews had to tell was as follows. He had made the boy's acquaintance in a luncheon-bar, had been attracted by his breezy, high spirits, and taken some pains to arrange further meetings. The two had attended theatres and concerts together, and finally Barney had visited his new friend in his rooms, and become the confidant of certain betting transactions in which he was in the habit of indulging. The boy had begun to bet on his own account, had been unlucky, and had called at the shipping office one day, declaring himself in trouble at home, and anxious to get out of the country for a time at least Mr Matthews told him that his only chance was to ship as a steward, and Barney, being not only willing but eager, was sent to wait his turn at Southampton, and had been fortunate in finding an opening three days after his arrival. "Jim," as Miss Caldecott had called him, appeared to be a good-natured, easy-going individual with little sense of responsibility. When sternly questioned by Steve as to whether he considered it right to encourage a boy of seventeen to bet, he smilingly declared that "every one did it—even the little office-boys put their coppers on the races;" and refused altogether to acknowledge that he should have consulted Barney's friends before sending him abroad.

"But you were the very people he wanted to avoid. There is no need to worry yourself, my good sir. He has signed for the round voyage, and you will see him back in a couple of months, all the better for having to rough it a bit and finding out what hard work means."

This was his opinion, and, on the whole. Barney's brother and sisters were inclined to agree. After the suspense of the past weeks it was a blessed relief to hear definite news, and, with a good ship and a good captain, there was little fear of the boy's safety. There was just a chance that letters written at once might arrive at Capetown before the vessel sailed on her homeward voyage, and Philippa was already rehearsing loving messages, when Madge cried eagerly:

"Can't we *do* something to celebrate the occasion? Not to-night, I mean, but to-morrow. We have been in the depths for so long that we need a little festivity. I'm *tired* of being miserable!"

She felt a passing wonder as to the moaning of Hope's quick frown, but Theo chimed in with an eager assent, and even the grave Steve stretched himself, as if throwing off a burden, and looked pleased at the suggestion.

"I believe we should all be the better for a change. There has been too much work and too little play lately to be good for any of us. The question is, what can we do that is cheap and exciting!"

Madge's grimace was the reverse of approving.

"The greatest change we could have would be to be expensive and lazy. It is not my idea of pleasure to stand shivering in a queue for a couple of hours, and hunt for omnibuses after a performance. I want to see how the other people live—the people who toil not, neither wear their last year's clothes! I should like to dine at the Carlton, and sit in the hall after dinner watching the coming and going—the pretty girls in their fashion-plate cloaks, and the old ladies in sables and diamonds, going out to theatres and evening receptions—and watch the flirtations, and listen to Theo making up stories. It would be so good for us both; we should get lots of ideas."

"I'm afraid"—began Steve the prudent, but the Hermit did not give him time to finish.

"I will engage a table at the Carlton to-morrow morning," he cried. "You shall all come and dine with me. It is a capital idea. I'm very much obliged to Miss Madge for suggesting it."

Polite murmurs of dissent greeted this speech. Steve cried, "No, no, my dear fellow; we couldn't think of it." Philippa blushed, and declared, "You mustn't, Mr Neil; you really mustn't." But the Hermit was firm and would brook no refusal.

"It is impossible for me to entertain at home, and it is quite time that you dined with me for a change. I have been your guest for about fifty Sunday-night suppers."

"Cold roast beef and beetroot in winter; cold lamb and mint-sauce in summer! There is an appalling lack of variety in the menus of an English household," said Madge, with an expressive grimace. "When I am married I shall make a point of serving my loved one with constant surprises."

"You will find it more difficult than painting pictures. What is one to do in winter, when poultry is so dear and none of the nice spring things have come in?" queried the dear, literal Martha,

looking straight at the Hermit as she spoke, as if asking him to vindicate her housekeeping abilities; the which he proceeded to do with a zeal untempered by knowledge, while Hope studied his face with anxious eyes, and Madge sat silent, a monument of long-chinned solemnity.

No further objections were made to the Hermit's invitation—which, in truth, was too tempting to be refused—and the next morning was spent in hunting up old fineries, turning ribbons, washing laces, and sewing them on again in as near an imitation of the latest Parisian fashion as could be obtained with insufficient quantities and 'prentice fingers.

"To think that it is eighteen months since I wore an evening-dress!" sighed Madge tragically. "Do you remember how I talked of holding a *salon* for all the greatest intellects in London! It is rather a come-down to reflect that the Hermit is the only youngish man who has crossed this threshold since we came. And he is no good to me either, for!"—She looked round the room to make sure that Philippa was not present. "I'll tell you a secret, Theo. He is—not falling—he could not do anything so precipitate—but *crawling* in love with Phil; but he will never find it out unless somebody tells him!"

"I'll tell you another stale item. Phil is crawling in love with him too; but wild horses wouldn't make her confess it. If he ever winds himself up to proposing, she will refuse him for the sake of the family and never say a word about it, but only snap off our heads, and grow so cross and cantankerous that there will be no living with her."

This from Theo. The other ungrateful sister shrugged her shoulders and exclaimed, "What a nuisance it is when people *will* make martyrs of themselves! Now, it would really be very nice if Phil lived on the next landing, and could run in and out half-a-dozen times a day; and though the Hermit is not my passion, he is a worthy old thing, and would make a devoted husband. It strikes me, my dear, that you and I will have to take this matter in hand. It is no use asking Hope. She has grown so proper lately that I am quite afraid of her."

"Oh no, we won't ask Hope!" said Theo quickly. "But really it would be rather fun to see what we could do—as good as a story in real life. The first step is to make them aware of their own feelings. But how is it to be done?"

"We might try jealousy. How would it be if I flirted with him violently under her very eyes?"

"He would be horribly bored, without understanding in the least what you were trying to do, and Phil would forbid him the house in case you were blighted in your youthful affections."

"Should we take him aside, then, and drop a casual hint of the curate who proposed to her in Lebourne?"

"My dear, he would take fright on the moment and consider it his duty to stand aside in favour of a better man. He is so absurdly quixotic that he would positively enjoy immolating himself."

"What about pity, then? Snub Phil violently in his presence, and confide to her in secret that his cough sounds consumptive! That would make them sorry for each other, you see, and rouse a desire to help. They would sympathise, and grow sentimental, and—"

"It might do," said Theo thoughtfully. "Really, Madge, you ought to write instead of me; you are far more inventive. My only idea is propinquity. Impress upon Phil that the Hermit is her best counsellor in all matters concerning Barney, and advise her to talk things over quietly with him when Steve is not present. The Hermit has about as much worldly wisdom as a babe in arms, and consequently would be immensely flattered by being asked to impart it. He will repeat all her suggestions with an air of wisdom, and Phil will dote upon him for helping her to her own way."

"Propinquity does it! We will be as innocent as cherubs, and have smashing headaches when he comes to call. Also, it might be well to take a more active share in the housekeeping department, in order to show Phil that she is not so indispensable as she imagines. We must be cruel to be kind."

Theo's shoulders shook with laughter, and just at that moment in marched Philippa herself, looking round with an air of surprise.

"What is the matter with you two this morning! You are giggling like a couple of schoolgirls."

"We are so excited at the prospect of this evening! What have *you* been so busy about in your room? Writing to Barney?"

"N-not just lately," faltered Phil, and blushed in guilty fashion. As a matter of fact she had been trying experiments in hairdressing, and studying her profile to see which arrangement gave the best effect to—er—to any one who happened to be seated by her side! "How ore you getting on with your work?" she asked, eager to change the subject, when Madge held up the venerable chiffon bodice on which she had been sewing "applications" of lace, and regarded it with critical approval.

"Subdued elegance is to be the keynote of my costume. I shall wear no jewels! I don't think it is in good taste for a young girl to wear valuable diamonds. What do you think of the arrangement of lace? Exact copy of one of Lady Godiva's dinner-dresses as drawn in last week's *Queen*. Wouldn't it be thrilling if I were mistaken for her and written about in the papers? The only drop of bitterness in my cup is the want of an evening-cloak. It does give one away so horribly to go in a golf-cape!"

"No one will know you, dear. No one will look at you."

"Do you mean that for comfort, may I ask? I *want* to be looked at. 'Tis sad to think no eye will watch for us, and grow brighter when we come,'" quoted Madge in sentimental accents, which made Philippa giggle in her turn. Then for some mysterious reason she blushed again, and strolled over towards the window.

"Hot, dear?" queried Madge blandly. "Room rather warm, perhaps—too big fire."

"So extravagant, too, on a mild day like this! I really must speak to Mary about using so much coal," said Theo, with a frown. She went on with her sewing, apparently unconscious of the wide-eyed amazement with which Philippa regarded her. The skies were going to fall indeed when Miss Theo troubled herself about an item of domestic economy!

There was something rather pathetic about the glee with which the four sisters made their toilets a few hours later. The night's entertainment, which would have seemed so tame and ordinary to most girls of their age, appeared a very frenzy of excitement after their year of hard work and privation. They laughed and chattered like so many magpies, ran about from room to room in lace petticoats and pretty low bodices, and sat in turns before the dining-room fire, while Hope—happy possessor of natural curls!—heated irons and waved and crimped with such artistic skill that, as Madge gleefully declared, the three heads were "transformations" indeed—far more like toupées than natural growth.

Philippa wore her mother's lace, which gave a regal air to the old black silk dress; Hope was lovely, as usual, in her professional white; Madge's "subdued elegance" proved exceedingly becoming; but Theo was distinctly the most imposing figure of the four. She possessed the Frenchwoman's talent for putting on her clothes and adding those little touches which go so far towards making an effective whole, and her sisters exclaimed with surprised admiration as she came rustling into the drawing-room, a chaplet of violets crowning the graceful head, and a couple of black feathers fastened jauntily at the side of the low corsage by a paste buckle, which looked exactly like a family heirloom, and not in the least as if it had been unpicked from the side of a felt hat but ten minutes before. Thrown over her shoulders, too, was quite a vision in the way of evening-cloaks, manufactured out of a summer cape, a lace collar, and the beloved feather boa tacked on as an edging. The cape was unlined, and far too thin a covering for a winter evening; but, girl-like, Theo declared that she was "broiled," and insisted that suffocation would be the result of wearing the nice, warm, ugly shawl which Philippa pressed upon her.

The Hermit came upstairs in his dress-clothes, bearing in his hands four immaculate white camellias, which had seemed to his old-fashioned notions appropriate offerings to present to his girl guests. It was sweet of him to have thought of flowers at all, but—camellias! Theo thanked her stars for the violets which she was already wearing, and dashed from the room to warn Madge, who promptly stole the chrysanthemums from the dinner-table and pinned them in a conspicuous position. Hope, of course, was too gentle to refuse what had been meant so kindly; while as for Philippa, to judge by her ejaculations of delight, it would appear that nothing under the sun could have given her so much pleasure.

They drove away from the door in a couple of four-wheelers, two happy, smiling girls on either back seat, faced by a hungry, dress-coated man. The dinner was everything that fancy had painted it: all sorts of delightful things to eat, disguised under French names, and looking so pretty that it seemed a sin to disturb the dishes. Music, lights, interesting people all around, at whom it was a pleasure to look, and who looked back in their turn, as if equally pleased by what they saw. Steve grew quite frisky in his enjoyment, and Philippa and the Hermit became delightfully and unconsciously absorbed in their own conversation. The little party lingered over dessert, loath to leave so interesting a position, but the settees in the hall were presently discovered to afford an even better vantage-ground for observing their neighbours.

Steve came over and demanded a place beside his three younger sisters. "Neil is submitting the synopsis of his next book to Phil. You seem much jollier over here," he said innocently, and the girls watched Philippa's absorbed face in an ecstasy of admiration.

"*Doesn't* she do it well? Who would think, to look at her, that the very title is beyond her comprehension?"

They turned aside to hide their smiles, and became once more absorbed in their old occupation. Fascinating groups of people appeared at every moment, and it was no use deciding that you would have your next new dress made exactly like this one, and making surreptitious sketches on the back of the menu card, for it was no sooner lost to sight than another appeared fifty times more distracting.

"I do feel a worm among them all!" grumbled Madge; but when Steve considerably offered to take her home, she said, "Thank you, dear; I'm enjoying it dreadfully. I wouldn't go for *worlds*.—Hope, there is a girl over there to the right who is staring at you with all her eyes. Pretend to look after this man and you'll see her. There—by the lady in blue."

Hope looked, exclaimed in surprise, and the next moment she and the strange girl had risen and walked forward to meet each other in the middle of the hall.

"Miss Bennett, is it really you?"

"Hope Charrington! The idea of meeting you here! I've so often wanted to see you again! Sit down here and talk to me for a minute. Are those your sisters? They are not like you—not so pretty; but the one with the violets looks very smart. You are thin, but you are one of those horrid creatures who always look nice. What do you think of me? Do I look worn? Brides always look wrecks; and I vowed I wouldn't, but I'm tired to death already. I've come up to buy my clothes. It's to be in February. You heard, of course?"

"Avice told me. I must congratulate you now. I suppose you are very happy?"

"He is!" laughed Truda meaningly. "Quite daft about me! You met him, of course, down at The Shanty, and he liked you awfully much. We have often talked of you, and arranged to have you down when we have a party to entertain."

Hope smiled with stiff lips. He had liked her "awfully much," had he? So much that he had wished to have her as a visitor when Truda was his wife! Oh, what a fool, fool, fool she had been to imagine for a moment that he had really cared!

"You will live in the country, I suppose?" she remarked; and again Truda laughed and wagged her head.

"He thinks we will, and I am very meek and submissive *note*, but I'll have a town-house before a year is over; you see if I don't! What is the use of all my lovely clothes in a poky little bit of a village? Would you like to see my dresses? I'll take you with me to the dressmaker's some day if you like."

"Thank you, but I am afraid I could not spare the time. It is very kind of you to ask me."

"Oh, not a bit! It would have amused me and been a day off for mamma. Still writing songs and giving story-telling entertainments, are you? Oh, I heard all about it. I was bothered to death to find engagements for you." Truda lay back in her chair and looked curiously into the fair, troubled face. "Seen anything of Ralph Merrilies lately?"

Hope's embarrassment was swallowed up in surprise at so casual a reference to a future husband. "No," she said emphatically—"not for nearly six months. I never meet him except at my aunt's house, and I go there very seldom. He does not call on us in our flat."

"I wonder why not. He was awfully smitten with you; and wasn't. I furious about it? He had been quite attentive to me before you came, and then he had eyes for no one else. I believe I was quite jealous of you, dear."

"You had no reason to be. You feel that now, don't you?" said Hope gently, and Truda gave a complacent little laugh.

"Oh, I don't mind now. He may care as much as he likes. Reggie is a good little soul; I'm quite satisfied with him."

"Reggie!"

"Reggie, of course—Charles Reginald Blake. Who else should it be? Hope Charrington, you *don't* mean to tell me that you imagined—"

"Of course I did! It's your own fault. You told me—don't you remember?—you told me yourself that you liked him, and warned me—"

For once Truda had the grace to blush and look discomfited.

"Oh well, of course, there was always *some one*. I was rather smitten, but I could not go on caring for a man who had the bad taste to prefer another girl. And Reggie has been so faithful! He used to send me chocolates when I was at school in Brighton."

"He is a dear little man—so amiable and cheery. There will be quite a competition between you as to who shall play off a trick first. I hope you will ask me down some day. You *will* be a merry couple," cried Hope, with such a heart-whole laugh as had not been heard from her for many a long day.

Miss Bennett regarded her curiously.

"How pleased you seem! Oh yes, I'll ask you. But perhaps you may be"—her eyes twinkled—"previously engaged."

Chapter Twenty Four.

All's Well that Ends Well.

One dark December morning Theo found a letter lying on her plate on the breakfast-table; not the long, white envelope addressed in her own writing, which her soul abhorred, but a business-looking epistle, stamped on which was the magic name of *The Casket Magazine*. She gulped, tore open the envelope, and read the golden news: "I have read with much interest your original little story, and have pleasure in accepting it for the magazine." "Your original little story—have pleasure in accepting it." Theo gulped again, and laughed with the tears in her eyes. Oh, how often she had dreamt of this moment! How she had longed for it, and sickened with dread lest it should never come! She turned a radiant face upon her sisters, and waved her letter in the air.

"Hurrah! At last! From Mr Hammond! He has accepted my story, and calls it very original. A story in the *Casket!* Girls, do you realise it? Do you realise how you are honoured by sitting at the same table with *me!*" She laughed again, in tremulous fashion, and Madge bowed elaborately, coffee-cup in hand.

"Your health, my dear! I look towards you! You have done it this time. To be a contributor to the *Casket* is like being hung on the line in the Academy. Sha'n't I brag about you at the Slade?"

"It is simply splendid, dear. I do hope they will put your name to it. It will be so disappointing if they don't," said Philippa the tactless. She was overflowing with sympathy with Theo in her success, and yet, poor dear! she must needs call attention to the one existing drawback; for the *Casket* was as conservative as it was high-class—scorned to invite popularity by illustrations or artistic cover, and more often than not left a blank opposite the titles of stories and articles. It was at such moments as these that Theo felt that she could endure with resignation Philippa's speedy marriage and departure from the home circle. Only five minutes since she had heard the wonderful news, and already a little cloud came floating across the brightness of the sky; for it was little use appearing in the best magazine of the day if no one knew of it but yourself, and an admiring public remained in ignorance of your name.

"How *horrid* of you to suggest such a thing! You might let me enjoy myself when I can," she cried irritably. "You are a perfect wet blanket, Philippa—always sitting on us, and depreciating what we do. It is too bad—spoiling my pleasure when I have waited so long."

"I! I spoil your pleasure—I depreciate you!" Philippa was fairly gasping with surprise and wounded feeling. "When I slave for you all day long! When I take everything off your hands, so that you may give your time to your work! When it is through me you are here at all! You cruel, ungrateful girl, how can you have the heart to speak to me in such a way?"

"I'm sure I don't want you to slave for me. I am quite capable of doing my own mending, if you refer to that. I should *like* to take more share in the housekeeping, but you are so jealous if any one interferes."

"Jealous! Oh, oh! Jealous!" repeated Philippa dramatically. Her eyes were beginning to grow tearful. Theo's dark brows met in an ominous frown; there were all the signs of a row royal, when Hope came flying to the rescue.

"Girls, girls, *be quiet!*" she cried, banging her fist on the table in imperative fashion. "You shall *not* quarrel when we ought to be so happy! This is the best success we have had, and it would be disgraceful to spoil it by quarrelling like babies. You are both to blame, so no apologies are needed, but for goodness' sake smile and look pleasant."

"I'm sure I am only too willing. I want to smile if I am allowed," said Theo gloomily.

"I'm sure I don't want to quarrel. Perhaps I had better go away and leave you to yourselves, since I am such a wet blanket," sniffed Philippa into her pocket-handkerchief. Madge gave Hope a warning kick under the table, and began to chatter as unconcernedly as if nothing had occurred.

"You can always write 'Contributor to the *Casket, etc.*' beneath your name on the back of your MSS, Theo. No need to mention that the *et cetera* means the *Penny Penman!* And if you intimate to all whom it may concern that you write anonymously for the *Casket*, you may get credit for half-a-dozen stories instead of one. I wonder what they will pay you for it, and how soon it will appear. Won't the Hermit be impressed? He says it is the only magazine worth reading. Do knock at the door and tell him, Phil, as you go out for your shopping."

Wily Madge wished to offer a sop to each of the combatants, and had the satisfaction of seeing Philippa smile faintly, and the complacent expression return to Theo's face.

"I knew it was a splendid story when I sent it off," said the author modestly. "Ten pounds at least, I should think, as it is such a first-class magazine. It took me less than four days, with all the correction and rewriting. Ten pounds a week; how much is that a year? If I earned five hundred a year it would make a difference in our exchequer, wouldn't it, Phil?"

The olive branch was held out with a smile, and as Philippa checked herself on the verge of remarking that it would be difficult to sell a story a week, peace was restored once more. The housekeeper went about her duties, and the author experienced that alternate elation and depression which follows artistic success. She had created something of real merit and power; that was a thrilling reflection, but quickly following came the dreary certainty that virtue had gone out of her, and she would never be able to do so well again. She hastened to her desk, hoping to disprove the dread by writing something better still; but, alas! her heroine sulked persistently, refused to be cajoled into conversation, and after being dragged through half-a-dozen pages, was promptly condemned to the flames. It appeared that even when one had begun to ascend the ladder there was imminent danger of falling off!

Years later, when Theo had made a name for herself as an author of power and originality, she used to look back on that morning and smile at her own ignorance in having supposed for a moment that the battle was won. It was only begun, and it was a battle which had to be waged to the end. There could be no sitting down and congratulating one's self on victory; no relaxation of care and study, for each fresh success brought its onus of responsibility, and made it more imperative for her to maintain her best. There were times when she thought wearily of Mr Hammond's suggestion of "the bonnet-shop," and realised that millinery would have been easier end more remunerative, but there was never an hour when she regretted her choice of a career. It seemed to her that no other work could be so absorbing—such a constant refuge from self.

Fortune had evidently made up her mind to smile upon the Charrington sisters this Christmas-tide, for Minnie Caldecott approved enthusiastically of the design for her concert programme, and

the nursery frieze found a purchaser the first time it was exhibited. Madge had summoned courage to show the latter to "Pepper" on its completion, when he found a dozen faults, and made huge pencil-markings to illustrate his meaning, the while the artist writhed in agony; but finally he turned up trumps in the most delightful manner by giving her an introduction to the firm with whom she finally transacted her bargain. Judging from the experiences of the past few months, she had a future before her in this particular branch of her art, and might in time make a comfortable income; but it was not in the least the work she had coveted. She burned to create great subjects on great canvases—to paint with strong, lurid brush—and lo! it appeared that it was her mission to design pretty leaflets and comic pictures for the nursery. It was a blow, but Madge had the good sense to realise that it is better to excel in humble work than to struggle painfully after the unattainable.

As for Hope, she sang and danced about the house with a sudden return to her old light spirits, which puzzled two sisters, and furnished valuable copy to a third. The short interview with Truda Bennett had made everything rose-coloured again, though in truth it was a trifle exasperating to remember Mrs Loftus's invitation. Oh, to think that even now she might have been at The Shanty, with no secret promise to hinder her enjoyment of Ralph's society; that they might have been walking together along the country lanes; sitting side by side in the evenings!

"That tonic has given you quite a colour. I shall try it myself," said Philippa, looking up from her stocking-basket to admire the sweet pink-and-white face at the opposite side of the table. "Mr Neil was saying the other day that so few town girls have any colour. I have lost mine with sitting so much in the house, but I might try what a bottle would do. It only costs a shilling at that wholesale chemist's. I do look such a faded old creature beside you, Hope; and, after all, I am only two years older!"

Hope laughed—a delightfully scornful, reassuring laugh.

"Faded old creature, indeed! when we were only remarking this week that you were looking handsomer than ever. And happier, too. That's because Barney will be home so soon; isn't it, dear?"

"Of course. What else should it be?" said Philippa; and, to do her justice, she spoke in all sincerity.

Theo's suggestion that she should consult the Hermit as to Barney's future had been accepted with an unmoved face, and put into immediate execution; and as a result of the conference a letter was even now on its way to Mr Neil's younger brother in Canada, asking if it would be possible to receive the boy as a pupil on his large farm and ranch, and train him for future work on his own account. Philippa shed bitter tears at the thought of parting from her boy, but the Hermit insisted that it was the right thing to do, though he was much perturbed at the sight of her distress.

"I seem fated to make you cry," he said miserably. "Do you remember that first time! I shall never forget your face, all streaming with tears, and with such a miserable, helpless expression!"

"I must have looked very—ugly," said Philippa, with a sob. She reflected that by the same course of reasoning she must look ugly now, and dried her eyes with remarkable promptness, while the Hermit sat in admiration of her fortitude.

If Barney was to be at home for a short time only, his sisters were determined to make that time as happy as possible, so that his recollections should carry with them no sting of reproach. In conclave together they agreed that the dear boy would be embarrassed and depressed, and that all means must be taken to convince him of their full and free forgiveness, and to put him at his ease once more.

"I shall go to meet him," Philippa said. "It will be less trying for him than having to see us all at once. And I am going to put up new curtains in his room—he hated those old moreen atrocities—and make it look bright and cheerful, as if it had been kept ready for him all the time. I'm going to be so busy this week, I don't know how I shall get through all I want to do in the way of preparation."

Alas for Philippa! her work during the next few days was to lie in bed and burn and shiver with an attack of the prevalent influenza. Hope acted nurse, and Theo said blandly, "Don't worry, dear; I will look after the house. I know exactly what to do"—a statement which the invalid received with undisguised incredulity.

"Shell make an awful mess of it," she sighed; but Theo had no intention of failing. She was a clever, capable girl, who could do most things well if she chose to give them her attention; and, as we know, she had a special reason for displaying her housekeeping powers. She put aside her writing for the time being, studied the cookery-book and the shop windows in the morning, and in the afternoon enveloped herself in a huge white apron and put into practice what she had learned. All old housekeepers are apt to get into a rut and supply the same dishes over and over again, and Philippa was no exception to the rule, so it happened that the very novelty of Theo's menus commanded success, and the invalid was constantly assured that she need not hurry out of bed, since all was going on swimmingly without her. If she shed tears at the intelligence, it was put down to the depression which was a part of the illness, and she was urged to take a cup of Theo's beef-tea—"Such excellent beef-tea!"—or to take some of Theo's jelly—"Wonderfully good jelly!"—by way of restorative.

There could be no going to meet Barney now. The most she could do was to crawl out of bed an hour before he was expected and look on feebly at the final preparations. She searched for a dozen deficiencies—hoping, if the truth were told, to see tangible proofs of her absence—but all was orderly, dainty, and appropriate: the best china on the table, flowers in the vases, the fatted chickens roasting in the oven, and Barney's favourite pudding all ready to be served, with its whipped cream ornamented in professional style with candied cherries and angelica.

"You must sit still in that easy-chair, poor darling! I'll carve," said Theo kindly; but Philippa felt much more inclined to snap than to be grateful for her consideration. She hated to be out of her usual place on this evening of all others, and to be obliged to play the part of spectator while Theo issued orders for the prodigal's reception.

"Madge, you must chatter as hard as you can. You are always bragging about your powers of conversation; now let us see what you can do. There must be no awkward pauses. It doesn't matter what you say, but say *something*—Hope, you had better run to the door and meet him first—no one could be afraid of *you*—and sit next to Steve at table, and stamp on his toes if he makes improving remarks. There will be plenty of time for that later on. We mustn't spoil the first evening. We won't let Barney linger over the greetings, but hurry him off to his own room to prepare for dinner. It shall be served the moment he comes back. It is so much less formidable to talk when one is eating!"

She had thought of everything—all the little niceties of consideration which Phil herself had planned but had not yet put into words. She could think of no objection which would have been reasonable to advance, but made a feeble plea to be allowed to be first at the door, when Theo cried loudly, "My dear, with that face! You would frighten the poor boy into running away again!" and there was plainly no more to be said.

At six o'clock Barney's train was due at Waterloo. It was calculated that he would reach home before the half-hour, and soon after the quarter Theo set the front-door ajar, and the four sisters sat trembling with excitement, straining their ears for the first footstep. Steve and the Hermit were to bring the boy home from the station, and Philippa thought pitifully of his embarrassment as he sat opposite the two solemn faces. This home-coming must be an awful ordeal, despite the letters of encouragement and forgiveness which had been sent to Madeira, and again to Southampton, and for her own part she dreaded to see the bright face clouded and ashamed.





A big, bronzed fellow threw open the door, and seizing each sister in turn, swung her off her feet in the ardour of his greeting.

D. G.

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The moments passed and no one spoke; it was half-past six—twenty-five minutes to seven—and still Barney did not come. The invalid shivered and drew her shawl more closely round her; Theo poked the fire and swept the grate clear of ashes; Hope was in the act of leaving the room to peer over the banisters, when a sound from below startled all four sisters into instant attention. It was a sound with which they were all familiar; perhaps the last sound in the world which they expected to hear at that moment—a burst of merry, boyish laughter.

"Bar-ney!" gasped Phil in an incredulous whisper. The other girls stood like so many statues, frozen into the position in which the sound had reached them. The leaping footsteps drew nearer and nearer, a voice called out, "Avast, there, my hearties!" and a big, bronzed fellow threw open the door, and seizing each sister in turn, swung her off her feet in the ardour of his greeting. Madge's embrace was every whit as loving as that given to her sisters; for Barney had forgotten that he had left her in anger, forgotten her bitter words, as, alas! he seemed to have forgotten his own folly and wrong-doing.

There was no need for Theo's elaborate precautions; the truant was as absolutely, transparently at his ease as if he had been out for half-an-hour's stroll, instead of a voyage across the world. It was his sisters who sat silent and embarrassed through the meal which followed, while he ate three helpings of chicken and pudding, and discoursed in picturesque fashion on a life on the ocean wave. Steve, always anxious to improve an occasion, had many questions to ask concerning the distant lands which had been visited; but though Barney could converse fluently enough on the iniquities of the sailors or the idiosyncrasies of the passengers on whom he had waited, he was but a poor hand at useful information. What he approved was "ripping," what he disliked was "tommy rot," but these descriptions were hardly satisfactory from a geographic or climatic point of view.

By nine o'clock Philippa was wan and spent, and went off to bed, trying in vain to reason away the ache at her heart. It was all so different—so very different from what she had expected! She did not want to see her boy broken in spirit, but this unabashed assurance frightened her, as indicating a deeper carelessness and lack of moral fibre than she had suspected. It seemed incredible that Barney should show no sign of regret for the anxiety which he had caused; yet, on the other hand, what was the sense of writing that by-gones were by-gones, and all offences forgiven and forgotten, and then of lamenting because she was taken at her word! Philippa tossed restlessly on her pillow, and being weak and tired, cried steadily from the time she lay down until some one came into the room with her next dose of medicine, and turned up the gas over the mantelpiece.

"Don't, Hope," she cried weakly; but it was not Hope, but Barney himself, who raised her head on his arm and held the glass to her lips.

"Now then, old lady! I'm no end of a good nurse nowadays, so I thought I had better come and look after you myself. There was an old Johnny coming home from the Cape, in one of the deck-cabins." He stopped suddenly, and Philippa knew that he had noticed her tear-stained eyes. "He was very bad, and I had to dose him every hour," he concluded lamely, then bent over her with curious gaze. "What have you been crying about? About *me*?"

"I'm—not well. It has upset me seeing you again, and thinking of all that has happened."

"Was it that that made you ill to start with—my going off, I mean!"

It was a curious change of feeling to have taken place in a couple of hours, but Philippa actually found herself wishing that she could answer in the affirmative, and casting about in her mind for some honest reply which would yet lay some burden of responsibility upon those careless shoulders.

"I have been laid up only a week, but I think I was run down by all the strain and suspense. We had a terrible fortnight—"

Barney frowned and drew his hand away from the coverlet.

"So had I. I was beastly sick. It is all right, though, Phil. I've brought home enough money to pay you back. I got some rattling good tips. That old Johnny I told you of—"

"Oh Barney, Barney, it was not the money! I never thought of the money," cried Phil, with such a wail of despair as brought the boy's eyes upon her with startled questioning. The two faces confronted each other, so like, yet so unlike, and the boy flushed darkly through his tan.

"Well, you needn't have worried about—*that* either. I told you I would remember. I gave my promise, and I—kept it, Phil. There were lots of things I wanted to do. It was awfully dull not being able to go about with the other fellows, but I kept my word. And I wanted to spend the money, too. There was the 'cutest little monkey you ever saw, trained to do all sorts of tricks. It was jolly hard lines not being able to bring it home as a present to you girls, but I thought under the circumstances it might be bad form."

"Oh Barney, Barney!" cried Philippa, laughing uncontrollably even as the tears rolled down her cheeks. It was such balm in Gilead to know that the promise had been kept; it was so ridiculously, inimitably like Barney that he should mix up monkeys with the story of his repentance. "I'm so very, very thankful for everything," she whispered; "for the things you didn't do, and—the monkey that didn't come. Kiss me, Barney. I shall get well quickly now that you are back."

Barney did as he was asked, not once, but many times over, and kept his big fingers clasped closely round hers while he asked anxiously:

"You won't want to send me back to an office, will you, Phil? The Hermit has been telling me about his brother in Canada. That's the sort of thing I should like if it could be arranged. It will be beastly leaving home again. I never knew it was such a thundering nice place until I left this time. But it is my only chance; I should never do any good in the City. You will let me go, won't you, Phil?"

"Yes, Barney," said Philippa sadly. "It is the hardest thing you could ask me, but if it is for your good I must not think of myself. You shall go, dear, as soon as an opening is found; and we will give you as complete an outfit as can be bought, but after that we can do no more. You will have to stand by yourself and fight your own battles. There will be no home open if you run away from your work, and no stupid old sister to spoil you and give you a fresh start."

The smile with which Barney regarded her was at once charming and pathetic—so full of warm-hearted affection, so radiantly complacent and assured.

"Canada is not far off; it would be as good as being in England, for it is under the old flag, and the people are so jolly loyal and brave. I could come back every two or three years, and when I get a home of my own you will have to come out and visit me. Don't you worry, old girl; I'll get on like a house on fire, and I promise you to keep out of mischief. There will be no chance of getting into it, for one thing, away out in the wilds."

"Oh Barney, Barney, don't be so sure! There will be difficulties and temptations wherever you go, and you must be prepared to meet them. Don't be content to promise *me*, dear. Promise yourself—the strong, good man you were meant to be. Promise God, Barney, and ask Him to help you to stand fast."

It was not Philippa's habit to preach, and the fact gave additional weight to her solemn words. Barney looked awed and impressed, and thoroughly uncomfortable into the bargain. "All right, Phil, I'll remember," he said softly; but the next moment he discovered that she looked tired, and hurried away. Philippa heard him go into his own room, and presently the sound of his voice reached her ears, raised in happy strains:

"Jack's the boy, when girls are sad,
To kiss their tears away."

He had been serious for five minutes on end, and the strain was evidently too much for his constitution; but Philippa lay awake far into the night, talking to God about her boy, asking His help where she had failed. It was the truest of all comforts to feel that the far-off country was still near to Him.

Fortunately for all concerned, the letter from the Hermit's brother proved in every respect satisfactory, for the Loftus family washed their hands of Barney, going out of their way to refuse help before it was asked. The 'mannikin' would, no doubt, have acted differently had he been permitted, but his wife told him sternly that he could not allow *all* his friends to be victimised by that dreadful boy, when he said, "Yes, my dear—yes! No, my dear—no!" and collapsed, as his custom was. The Charringtons were hardly disappointed, for they had learned long ago that—except where Hope was concerned—it was useless to expect sympathy from Aunt Loftus. Avice's affection for Hope made her a welcome guest, and she was frequently asked to fill a vacant place at a dinner-table, or presented with a ticket for an afternoon concert which she would not otherwise have been able to afford. It was at such a concert that Hope's next meeting with Ralph Merrills took place, and through all her embarrassment she noticed the glance exchanged between him and Avice as he seated himself in the vacant stall by her side. There was no surprise in her cousin's languid eyes, but something very, very like triumph at the completion of a well-laid scheme. Could it be possible that the seat had been designedly reserved?

As we all know, well-bred people never dream of whispering or talking at classical concerts, and Hope's devotion to her programme was so continual and absorbing that her next-door neighbour could study her profile at his ease, and wonder if there was another girl in the world who had such long eyelashes and such a sweet, winsome mouth. The interval seemed a long time in coming, but it came at last, and then Avice gave Ralph another eloquent glance and carried off her mother to speak to some friends at the other side of the hall. The occupants of stalls to right and left were also moving about and chattering together, and to the two who were left seated there was a sense of solitude in the midst of a crowd.

"Wasn't it beautiful?" asked Hope, still studying her programme.

"Very!" replied Ralph; but they were not referring to the same subject. He rested his arm on the back of the seat and said softly:

"Never mind that programme just now. Talk to me. I haven't seen you for months. Mrs Loftus told me that you refused her invitation to The Shanty. I had been hoping to meet you there."

"And I was sorry not to go, but we were in trouble at the time, and I felt I ought to stay at home. Did you have a good time?"

"Fairly so. It suffered from contrast. It was amusing to meet Miss Bennett in her new rôle."

"I met her a few weeks ago at the Carlton."

"So she told me." There was a meaning expression in his voice which made the blood rush into Hope's face. He bent nearer to her, his eyes fixed earnestly on hers. "What made you think that? What made you imagine for a moment that she could be engaged to met."

"I can't tell you," replied Hope, truthfully enough. She stared down at the programme, and became intently occupied in plaiting its cover between her fingers. "I knew it was some one whom I had met at The Shanty, and I took for granted that it was you."

"You can't truthfully tell me that you thought I was in love with her last year?"

"N-no."

"Did it ever strike you that I was in love with some one else?" The elbow moved its position and encroached on the corner of her own chair. "Hope, I want you to answer a question. Did you refuse to let me call upon you in town because you knew I loved you, and thought it was impossible to care for me in return?"

The grey eyes were lifted at that with an air of startled disclaimer.

"Oh no, no! Quite the contrary!" cried Hope eagerly.

The next moment confusion seized her as she recognised the inference, but the words were spoken beyond recall, and Ralph's glowing face showed that he was not likely to forget them.

"You darling! Hope, do you mean it? Have we been misunderstanding each other all this time?" He stretched his hand towards her, then hurriedly drew it back as an old lady put up her *pince-nez* to regard him from afar. "Hang these people! What a nuisance they are! I'll tell you a secret, Hope. I fell in love with you that very first evening while you were singing your little song, and I've been uncommonly miserable ever since. Well?"

"Well—what?"

“One expects some response to a statement like that!”

Hope gave a soft, contented laugh.

“I—liked you too, and I have been *wretched!* What made you come here to-day?”

“Truda told me about your interview, and volunteered the intelligence that you seemed relieved to discover that I was not the happy man. She spoke to Avice too, I imagine, for I was asked to join you this afternoon in a very marked manner.”

So Truda had repented her jealous exactions, and had tried to undo the mischief which they had wrought. That was generous of her, but Hope blushed with a discomfited air as she said:

“I thought I pretended so beautifully! I thought no one could guess. There is something else I want to explain. That evening last winter when you wanted to see me home—it was not my fault that I disappeared before you came back. Mrs Welsby asked me to take charge of a little girl, and sent me off in a cab.”

“Humph!” exclaimed Mrs Welsby’s brother dryly. “What a comfort it would be if people attended to their own business in this world! And were you sorry, Hope? Were you disappointed?”

“I cried,” said Hope simply; and once again Ralph Merrilies looked round at the other occupants of the stalls and breathed a wish that they were at any other part of the world than just that inhabited by Hope and himself.

At the conclusion of the interval Avice came back to her seat, and looking shyly around, found the answer to her question in two flushed, radiant faces.

“I’m so glad, Hope!” she whispered, pressing her cousin’s hand beneath the shelter of that useful programme. “It is just what I wanted. I helped you a little, didn’t I? I asked him on purpose.”

“I shall love you for it all my life,” said Hope shyly.

“So shall I,” said Ralph; “but—why didn’t you do it sooner?”

Two hours later Hope ascended the stairs leading to the little flat, having dismissed an unwilling lover who had been anxious to introduce himself to his future sisters-in-law and fix the date of his wedding without a moment’s delay. She tried hard to control her features as she entered the dining-room, and to look less ridiculously happy, but it was of no avail. The girls gaped at her in astonishment as she stood blushing and smiling before them, and Madge cried severely:

“What is the matter! You look mightily pleased with yourself, my dear. What mischief have *you* been up to this afternoon?”

“Please,” said Hope humbly, “I’ve been getting engaged!” and the scene which followed approached delirium in its excitement.

“And to think that I did not even know his name!” Philippa exclaimed when a hundred questions had been asked and answered, and Hope had been kissed and hugged to her heart’s content. “You *were* quiet about it! How did you manage to get along without some one to comfort you all these long months?”

“Theo knew,” said Hope; and at that a little frown showed itself on Philippa’s forehead. It was a blow to her vanity to find that another had been chosen before herself, and though she made no comment, she was filled with a yearning for a closer sympathy and appreciation than she received in the home circle.

“Sometimes I feel as if I had come to the end of my work,” she said wistfully to the Hermit when he came upstairs during the evening to congratulate the bride-elect. “When Barney goes abroad and Hope marries we shall be a very small family, and Theo is growing so clever at housekeeping. When I was ill they got on quite well without me. It seems as if the time had come when I was no longer needed. It makes me feel quite sad!”

“You must not feel that. Er—er—*fresh* duties may arise,” stammered the Hermit in consolation.

Madge looked at them across the room, and dropped her sagacious chin.

“At this rate,” she said to herself—“at this precipitate rate—they will be finding out what they want in the course of the next three or four years!”

The End.

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