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Title: The Turn of the Tide: The Story of How Margaret Solved Her Problem

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Illustrator: Frank T. Merrill

Release date: June 12, 2011 [EBook #36401]

Language: English

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE TURN OF THE TIDE: THE STORY OF HOW MARGARET SOLVED HER PROBLEM ***

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"MRS. KENDALL PLACED IN HER HANDS A GREAT RED ROSE."

The Turn of the Tide

The Story of How Margaret Solved Her Problem

By ELEANOR H. PORTER

AUTHOR OF
"Pollyanna: The Glad Book,"
Trade Mark Trade Mark
"Cross Currents," "The Story of Marco," Etc.

With Four Illustrations
By FRANK T. MERRILL

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

Published by Arrangements with THE PAGE COMPANY

To my husband
whose cordial interest in my work
is always a
source of inspiration

ILLUSTRATIONS

The Turn of the Tide

CHAPTER I

Margaret had been home two hours—two hours of breathless questions, answers, tears, and laughter—two hours of delighted wandering about the house and grounds.

In the nursery she had seen the little woolly dog that lay on the floor just as she had left it five years before; and out on the veranda steps she had seen the great stone lions that had never quite faded from her memory. And always at her side had walked the sweet-faced lady of her dreams, only now the lady was very real, with eyes that smiled on one so lovingly, and lips and hands that kissed and caressed one so tenderly.

"And this is home—my home?" Margaret asked in unbelieving wonder.

"Yes, dear," answered Mrs. Kendall.

"And you are my mother, and I am Margaret Kendall, your little girl?"

"Yes."

"And the little dog on the floor—that was mine, and—and it's been there ever since?"

"Yes, ever since you left it there long ago. I—I could not bear to have any one move it, or touch it."

"And I was lost then—right then?"

"No, dear. We traveled about for almost a year. You were five when I lost you." Mrs. Kendall's voice shook. Unconsciously she drew Margaret into a closer embrace. Even now she was scarcely sure that it was Margaret—this little maid who had stepped so suddenly out of the great silence that had closed about her four long years before.

Margaret laughed softly, and nestled in the encircling arms.

"I like it—this," she confided shyly. "You see, I—I hain't had it before. Even the dream-lady didn't do—this."

"The dream-lady?"

Margaret hesitated. Her grave eyes were on her mother's face.

"I suppose she was—you," she said then slowly. "I saw her nights, mostly; but she never stayed, and when I tried to catch her, she—she was just air—and wasn't there at all. And I did want her so bad!"

"Of course you did, sweetheart," choked Mrs. Kendall, tremulously. "And didn't she ever stay? When was it you saw her—first?"

Margaret frowned.

"I—don't—seem—to know," she answered. She was thinking of what Dr. Spencer had told her, and of what she herself remembered of those four years of her life. "You see first I was lost, and Bobby McGinnis found me. Anyhow, Dr. Spencer says he did, but I don't seem to remember. Things was all mixed up. There didn't seem to be anybody that wanted me, but there wouldn't anybody let me go. And they made me sew all the time on things that was big and homely, and then another man took me and made me paste up bags. Say, did you ever paste bags?"

"No, dear." Mrs. Kendall shivered.

"Well, you don't want to," volunteered Margaret; and to her thin little face came the look that her mother had already seen on it once or twice that afternoon—the look of a child who knows what it means to fight for life itself in the slums of a great city. "They ain't a mite nice—bags ain't; and the paste sticks horrid, and smells."

"Margaret, dearest!—how could you bear it?" shuddered Mrs. Kendall, her eyes brimming with tears.

Margaret saw the tears, and understood—this tender, new-found mother of hers was grieved; she must be comforted. To the best of her ability, therefore, Margaret promptly proceeded to administer that comfort.

“Pooh! ‘twa’n’t nothin’,” she asserted stoutly; “besides, I runned away, and then I had a tiptop place—a whole corner of Mis’ Whalen’s kitchen, and jest me and Patty and the twins to stay in it. We divvied up everythin’, and some days we had heaps to eat—truly we did—heaps! And I went to Mont-Lawn two times, and of course there I had everythin’, even beds with sheets, you know; and ——”

“Margaret, Margaret, don’t, dear!” interrupted her mother. “I can’t bear even to think of it.”

Margaret’s eyes grew puzzled.

“But that was bang-up—all of it,” she protested earnestly. “Why, I didn’t paste bags nor sew buttons, and nobody didn’t strike me for not doin’ ’em, neither; and Mis’ Whalen was good and showed me how to make flowers—for pay, too! And——” 13

“Yes, dear, I know,” interposed Mrs. Kendall again; “but suppose we don’t think any more of all that, sweetheart. You are home now, darling, right here with mother. Come, we will go out into the garden.” To Mrs. Kendall it seemed at the moment that only God’s blessed out-of-doors was wide enough and beautiful enough to clear from her eyes the pictures Margaret’s words had painted.

Out in the garden Margaret drew a long breath.

“Oh!” she cooed softly, caressing with her cheek a great red rose. “I knew flowers smelled good, but I didn’t find it out for sure till I went to Mont-Lawn that first time. You see the kind we made was cloth and stiff, and they didn’t smell good a mite—oh, you’ve picked it!” she broke off, half-rapturously, half-regretfully, as Mrs. Kendall placed in her hands the great red rose.

“Yes, pick all you like, dear,” smiled Mrs. Kendall, reaching for another flower. 14

“But they’ll die,” stammered Margaret, “and then the others won’t see them.”

“The—‘others’? What others, dear?”

“Why, the other folks that live here, you know, and walk out here, too.”

Mrs. Kendall laughed merrily.

“But there aren’t any others, dear. The flowers are all ours. No one else lives here.”

Margaret stopped short in the garden path and faced her mother.

“What, not any one? in all that big house?”

“Why, no, dear, of course not. There is no one except old Mr. and Mrs. Barrett who keep the house and grounds in order. We have it all to ourselves.”

Margaret was silent. She turned and walked slowly along the path at her mother’s side. On her face was a puzzled questioning. To her eyes was gradually coming a frightened doubt.

Alone?—just they two, with the little old man and the little old woman in the kitchen who did not take up any room at all? Why, back in the Alley there were Patty, the twins, and all the Whalens—and they had only one room! It was like that, too, everywhere, all through the Alley—so many, many people, so little room for them. Yet here—here was this great house all windows and doors and soft carpets and pretty pictures, and only two, three, four people to enjoy it all. Why had not her mother asked—— 15

Even to herself Margaret could not say the words. She shut her lips tight and threw a hurried look into the face of the woman at her side. This dear dream-lady, this beautiful new mother—as if there could be any question of her goodness and kindness! Very likely, anyway, there were not any poor——

Margaret’s eyes cleared suddenly. She turned a radiant face on her mother.

“Oh, I know,” she cried in triumph. “There ain’t any poor folks here, and so you couldn’t do it!”

Mrs. Kendall looked puzzled.

“‘Poor folks’? ‘Couldn’t do it’?” she questioned.

“Yes; poor folks like Patty and the Whalens, and so you couldn’t ask ’em to live with you.”

Mrs. Kendall sat down abruptly. Near her was a garden settee. She felt particularly glad of its support just then. 16

“And of course you didn’t know about the Whalens and Patty,” went on Margaret, eagerly, “and so you couldn’t ask them, neither. But you do now, and they’d just love to come, I know!”

“Love to—to come?” stammered Mrs. Kendall, gazing blankly into the glowing young face before her.

“Of course they would!” nodded Margaret, dancing up and down and clapping her hands. “Wouldn’t you if you didn’t have nothin’ but a room right down under the sidewalk, and there was such a heap of folks in it? Why, here there’s everythin’—*everythin’* for ’em, and oh, I’m so glad, ’cause they *was* good to me—so good! First Mis’ Whalen took in Patty and the twins when the rent man dumped ’em out on the sidewalk, and she gave ’em a whole corner of her kitchen. And

then when I runned away from the bag-pasting, Patty and the twins took me in. And now I can pay 'em back for it all—I can pay 'em back. I'm so glad!"

Mrs. Kendall fell back limply against the garden seat. Twice she opened her lips—and closed them again. Her face flushed, then paled, and her hands grew cold in her lap.

This dancing little maid with the sunlit hair and the astounding proposition to adopt into their home two whole families from the slums of New York, was Margaret, her own little Margaret, lost so long ago, and now so miraculously restored to her. As if she could refuse any request, however wild, from Margaret! But this—!

"But, sweetheart, perhaps they—they wouldn't want to go away forever and leave their home," she remonstrated at last, feebly.

The child frowned, her finger to her lips.

"Well, anyhow, we can ask them," she declared, after a minute, her face clearing.

"Suppose we—we make it a visit, first," suggested Mrs. Kendall, feverishly. "By and by, after I've had you all to myself for a little while, you shall ask them to—to visit you."

"O bully!" agreed Margaret in swift delight. "That will be nicest; won't it? Then they can see how they like it—but there! they'll like it all right. They couldn't help it."

"And how—how many are there?" questioned Mrs. Kendall, moistening her dry lips, and feeling profoundly thankful for even this respite from the proposed wholesale adoption.

"Why, let's see." Margaret held up her fingers and checked off her prospective guests. "There's Patty, she's the oldest, and Arabella and Clarabella—they're the twins an' they're my age, you know—that's the Murphys. And then there's all the Whalens: Tom, Peter, Mary, Jamie, and—oh, I dunno, six or eight, maybe, with Mis' Whalen and her husband. But, after all, it don't make so very much diff'rence just how many there are; does it?" she added, with a happy little skip and jump, "'cause there's heaps of room here for any 'mount of 'em. And I never can remember just how many there are without forgettin' some of 'em. You—you don't mind if I don't name 'em all—now?" And she gazed earnestly into her mother's face.

"No, dear, no," assured Mrs. Kendall, hurriedly. "You—you have named quite enough. And now we'll go down to the brook. We haven't seen half of Five Oaks yet." And once more she tried to make the joyous present drive from her daughter's thoughts the grievous past.

CHAPTER II

It was not long before all Houghtonsville knew the story, and there was not a man, woman, or child in the town that did not take the liveliest interest in the little maid at Five Oaks who had passed through so amazing an experience. To be lost at five years of age in a great city, to be snatched from wealth, happiness, and a loving mother's arms, only to be thrust instantly into poverty, misery, and loneliness; and then to be, after four long years, suddenly returned—no wonder Houghtonsville held its breath and questioned if it all indeed were true.

Bit by bit the little girl's history was related in every house in town; and many a woman—and some men—wept over the tale of how the little fingers had sewed on buttons in the attic sweat shop, and pasted bags in the ill-smelling cellar. The story of the coöperative housekeeping establishment in one corner of the basement kitchen, where she, together with Patty and the twins, "divvied up" the day's "haul,"—that, too, came in for its share of exclamatory adjectives, as did the account of how she was finally discovered through her finding her own name over the little cot-bed at Mont-Lawn—the little bed that Mrs. Kendall had endowed in the name of her lost daughter, in the children's vacation home for the poor little waifs from the city.

"An' ter think of her findin' her own baby jest by givin' some other woman's baby a bit of joy!" cried Mrs. Merton of the old red farmhouse, when the story was told to her. "But, there! ain't that what she's always doin' for folks—somethin' ter make 'em happy? Didn't she bring my own child, Sadie, an' the boy, Bobby, back from the city, and ain't Sadie gettin' well an' strong on the farm here? And it's a comfort ter me, too, when I remember 'twas Bobby who first found the little Margaret cryin' in the streets there in New York, an' took her home ter my Sadie. 'Twa'n't much Sadie could do for the poor little lamb, but she did what she could till old Sullivan got his claws on her and kept her shut up out o' sight. But there! what's past is past, and there ain't no use frettin' over it. She's home now, in her own mother's arms, and I'm thinkin' it's the whole town that's rejoicin'!"

And the whole town did rejoice—and many and various were the ways the townspeople took to show it. The Houghtonsville brass band marched in full uniform to Five Oaks one evening and gave a serenade with red fire and rockets, much to Mrs. Kendall's embarrassment and Margaret's delight. The Ladies' Aid Society gave a tea with Mrs. Kendall and Margaret as a kind of pivot around which the entire affair revolved—this time to the embarrassment of both Mrs. Kendall and her daughter. The minister of the Methodist church appointed a day of prayer and thanksgiving in commemoration of the homecoming of the wanderer; and the town poet published in the *Houghtonsville Banner* a forty-eight-line poem on "The Lost and Found."

Nor was this all. To Mrs. Kendall it seemed that almost every man, woman, and child in the place came to her door with inquiries and congratulations, together with all sorts of offerings, from flowers and frosted cakes to tidies and worked bedspreads. She was not ungrateful, certainly, but she was overwhelmed.

Not only the cakes and the tidies, however, gave Mrs. Kendall food for thought during those first few days after Margaret's return. From the very nature of the case it was, of necessity, a period of adjustment; and to Mrs. Kendall's consternation there was every indication of friction, if not disaster.

For four years now her young daughter had been away from her tender care and influence; and for only one of those four years—the last—had she come under the influence of any sort of refinement or culture, and then under only such as a city missionary and an overworked schoolteacher could afford, supplemented by the two trips to Mont-Lawn. To be sure, behind it all had been Margaret's careful training for the first five years of her life, and it was because of this training that she had so quickly yielded to what good influences she had known in the last year. The Alley, however, was not Five Oaks; and the standards of one did not measure to those of the other. It was not easy for "Mag of the Alley" to become at once Margaret Kendall, the dainty little daughter of a well-bred, fastidious mother.

To the doctor—the doctor who had gone to New York and brought Margaret home, and who knew her as she was—Mrs. Kendall went for advice.

"What shall I do?" she asked anxiously. "A hundred times a day the dear child's speech, movements, and actions are not what I like them to be. And yet—if I correct each one, 'twill be a continual 'don't' all day. Why, doctor, the child will—hate me!"

"As if any one could do that!" smiled the doctor; and at the look in his eyes Mrs. Kendall dropped her own—the happiness that had come to her with this man's love was very new; she had scarcely yet looked it squarely in the face.

"The child is so good and loving," she went on a little hurriedly, "that it makes it all the harder—but I must do something. Only this morning she told the minister that she thought Houghtonsville was a 'bully place,' and that the people were 'tiptop.' Her table manners—poor child! I ran away from the table and cried like a baby the first time I saw her eat; and yet—perhaps the very next thing she does will be so dainty and sweet that I could declare the other was all a dream. Doctor, what shall I do?"

"I know, I know," nodded the man. "I have seen it myself. But, dear, she'll learn—she'll learn wonderfully fast. You'll see. It's in her—the gentleness and the refinement. She'll have to be corrected, some, of course; it's out of the question that she shouldn't be. But she'll come out straight. Her heart is all right."

Mrs. Kendall laughed softly.

"Her heart, doctor!" she exclaimed. "Just there lies the greatest problem of all. The one creed of her life is to 'divvy up,' and how I'm going to teach her ordinary ideas of living without shattering all her faith in me I don't know. Why, Harry,"—Mrs. Kendall's voice was tragic—"she gazes at me with round eyes of horror because I have two coats and two hats, and two loaves of bread, and haven't yet 'divvied up' with some one who has none. So far her horror is tempered by the fact that she is sure I didn't know before that there were any people who did not have all these things. Now that she has told me of them, she confidently looks to me to do my obvious duty at once."

The doctor laughed.

"As if you weren't always doing things for people," he said fondly. Then he grew suddenly grave. "The dear child! I'm afraid that along with her education and civilization her altruism *will* get a few hard knocks. But—she'll get over that, too. You'll see. At heart she's so gentle and—why, what"—he broke off with an unspoken question, his eyes widely opened at the change that had come to her face.

"Oh, nothing," returned Mrs. Kendall, almost despairingly, "only if you'd seen Joe Bagley yesterday morning I'm afraid you'd have changed your opinion of her gentleness. She—she fought him!" Mrs. Kendall stumbled over the words, and flushed a painful red as she spoke them.

"Fought him—Joe Bagley!" gasped the doctor. "Why, he's almost twice her size."

"Yes, I know, but that didn't seem to occur to Margaret," returned Mrs. Kendall. "She saw only the kitten he was tormenting, and—well, she rescued the kitten, and then administered what she deemed to be fit punishment there and then. When I arrived on the scene they were the center of an admiring crowd of children,"—Mrs. Kendall shivered visibly—"and Margaret was just delivering herself of a final blow that sent the great bully off blubbering."

"Good for her!"—it was an involuntary tribute, straight from the heart.

"Harry!" gasped Mrs. Kendall. "'Good'—a delicate girl!"

"No, no, of course not," murmured the doctor, hastily, though his eyes still glowed. "It won't do, of course; but you must remember her life, her struggle for very existence all those years. She *had* to train her fists to fight her way."

"I—I suppose so," admitted Mrs. Kendall, faintly; but she shivered again, as if with a sudden chill.

CHAPTER III

Scarcely had Houghtonsville recovered from its first shock of glad surprise at Margaret's safe return, when it was shaken again to its very center by the news of Mrs. Kendall's engagement to Dr. Spencer.

The old Kendall estate had been for more than a generation the "show place" of the town. Even during the years immediately following the loss of little Margaret, when the great stone lions on each side of the steps had kept guard over closed doors and shuttered windows, even then the place was pointed out to strangers for its beauty, as well as for the tragedy that had so recently made it a living tomb to its mistress. Sometimes, though not often, a glimpse might be caught of a slender, black-robed woman, and always there could be seen the one unshuttered window on the second floor. Every one knew the story of that window, and of the sunlit room beyond where lay the little woolly dog just as the baby hands had dropped it there years before; and every one knew that the black-robed woman, widow of Frank Kendall and mother of the lost little girl, was grieving her heart out in the great lonely house.

Not until the last two years of Margaret's absence had there come a change, and then it was so gradual that the townspeople scarcely noticed it. Little by little, however, the air of gloom left the house. One by one the blinds were thrown open to the sunlight, and more and more frequently Mrs. Kendall was seen walking in the garden, or even upon the street. Not until the news of the engagement had come, however, did Houghtonsville people realize the doctor's part in all this. Then they understood. It was he who had administered to her diseased body, and still more diseased mind; he who had roused her from her apathy of despair; and he who had taught her that the world was full of other griefs even as bitter as her own.

Not twenty-four hours after the news of the engagement became public property, old Nathan—town gossip, and driver-in-chief to a generation of physicians, Dr. Spencer included—observed triumphantly:

"And I ain't a mite surprised, neither. It's a good thing, too. They're jest suited ter each other. Ain't they been traipsin' all over town tergether, an' ridin' whar 'twas too fur ter foot it?... Ter be sure, they allers went ter some one's that was sick, an' allers took jellies an' things ter eat an' read, but I had eyes, an' I ain't a fool. She done good, though—heaps of it; an' 'tain't no wonder the doctor fell head over heels in love with her.... An' thar was the little gal, too. Didn't he go twice ter New York a-huntin' fur her, an' wa'n't it through him that they finally got her? 'Course 'twas. 'Twas him that told Mis' Kendall 'bout that 'ere Mont-Lawn whar they sends them poor little city kids ter get a breath o' fresh air; an' 'twas him that sent on the twenty-one dollars for her, so's she could name a bed fur little Margaret; an' 'twas him that at last went ter New York an' fetched her home. Gorry, 'twas allers him. Thar wa'n't no way out of it, I say. They jest had ter get engaged!"

It was not long before the most of Houghtonsville—in sentiment, if not in words—came to old Nathan's opinion: this prospective marriage was an ideal arrangement, after all, and not in the least surprising. There remained now only the pleasant task of making the wedding a joyful affair befitting the traditions of the town and of the honored name of Kendall.

In all Houghtonsville, perhaps, there was only one heart that did not beat in sympathy, and that one, strangely enough, belonged to Mrs. Kendall's own daughter, Margaret.

"You mean you are goin' to marry him, and that he'll be your husband for—for keeps?" Margaret demanded with some agitation, when her mother told her of the engagement.

Mrs. Kendall smiled. The red mounted to her cheek.

"Yes, dear," she said.

"And he'll live here—with us?" Margaret's voice was growing in horror.

"Why, yes, dear," murmured Mrs. Kendall; then, quizzically: "Why, sweetheart, what's the matter? Don't you like Dr. Spencer? It was only last week that you were begging me to ask some one here to live with us."

Margaret frowned anxiously.

"But, mother, dear, that was poor folks," she explained, her eyes troubled. "Dr. Spencer ain't that kind, you know. You—you said he'd be a husband."

"Yes?"

"And—and husbands—mother!" broke off the little girl, her voice sharp with anguished love and terror. "He sha'n't come here to beat you and bang you 'round—he just sha'n't!"

"Beat me!" gasped Mrs. Kendall. "Margaret, what in the world are you thinking of to say such a thing as that?"

Margaret was almost crying now. The old hunted look had come back to her eyes, and her face looked suddenly pinched and old. She came close to her mother's side and caught the soft folds of her mother's dress in cold, shaking fingers.

"But they do do it—all of 'em," she warned frenziedly. "Tim Sullivan, an' Mr. Whalen, an' Patty's father—they was all husbands, every one of 'em; and there wasn't one of 'em but what beat their wives and banged 'em 'round. You don't know. You hain't seen 'em, maybe; but they do do it,

mother—they do do it!”

For a moment Mrs. Kendall stared speechlessly into the young-old face before her; then she caught the little girl in her arms.

“You poor little dear!” she choked. “You poor forlorn little bunch of misguided pessimism! Come, let me tell you how really good and kind and gentle the doctor is. Beat me, indeed! Oh, Margaret, Margaret!”

CHAPTER IV

In spite of Mrs. Kendall’s earnest efforts Margaret was not easily convinced that marriage might be desirable, and that all husbands were not patterned after Tim Sullivan and Mike Whalen. Nor was this coming marriage the only thing that troubled Margaret. Life at the Alley was still too vividly before her eyes to allow her to understand any scheme of living that did not recognize the supremacy of the sharpest tongue and the heaviest fist; and this period of adjustment to the new order of things was not without its trials for herself as well as for her mother.

The beauty, love, and watchful care that surrounded her filled her with ecstatic rapture; but the niceties of speech and manner daily demanded of her, terrified and dismayed her. Why “bully” and “bang-up” should be frowned upon when, after all, they but expressed her pleasure in something provided for her happiness, she could not understand; and why the handling of the absurdly large number of knives, forks, and spoons about her plate at dinner should be a matter of so great moment, she could not see. As for the big white square of folded cloth that her mother thought so necessary at every meal—its dainty purity filled Margaret with dismay lest she soil or wrinkle it; and for her part she would have much preferred to let it quite alone.

There were the callers, too—beautiful ladies in trailing gowns who insisted upon seeing her, though why, Margaret could not understand; for they invariably cried and said, “Poor little lamb!” when they did see her, in spite of her efforts to convince them that she was perfectly happy. And there were the children—they, too, were disconcerting. They came, sometimes alone, and sometimes with their parents, but always they stared and seemed afraid of her. There were others, to be sure, who were not afraid of her. But they never “called.” They “slipped in” through the back gate at the foot of the garden, and they were really very nice. They were Nat and Tom and Roxy Trotter, and they lived in a little house down by the river. They never wore shoes nor stockings, and their clothes were not at all like those of the other children. Margaret suspected that the Trotters were poor, and she took pains that her mother should see Nat and Tom and Roxy. Her mother, however, did not appear to know them, which did not seem so very strange to Margaret, after all; for of course her mother had not known there were any poor people so near, otherwise she would have shared her home with them long ago. At first, it was Margaret’s plan to rectify this little mistake immediately; but the more she thought of it, the more thoroughly was she convinced that the first chance belonged by right to Patty’s family and the Whalens in New York, inasmuch as they had been so good to her. She determined, therefore, to wait awhile before suggesting the removal of the Trotter family from their tiny, inconvenient house to the more spacious and desirable Five Oaks.

Delightful as were the Trotters, however, even they did not quite come up to Bobby McGinnis for real comradeship. Bobby lived with his mother and grandmother in the little red farmhouse farther up the hill. It was he who had found Margaret crying in the streets on that first dreadful day long ago when she was lost in New York. For a week she had lived in his attic home, then she had become frightened at his father’s drunken rage, one day, and had fled to the streets, never to return. All this Margaret knew, though she had but a faint recollection of it. It made a bond of sympathy between them, nevertheless, and caused them to become fast friends at once.

It was to Bobby that she went for advice when the standards of Houghtonsville and the Alley clashed; and it was to Bobby that she went for sympathy when grievous mismanagement of the knives and forks or of the folded square of cloth brought disaster to herself and tears to her mother’s eyes. She earnestly desired to—as she expressed it to Bobby—“come up to the scratch and walk straight”; and it was to Bobby that she looked for aid and counsel.

“You see, you can tell just what ’tis ails me,” she argued earnestly, as the two sat in their favorite perch in the apple tree. “You don’t know Patty and the Whalens, ‘course, but you do know folks just like ’em; and mother—don’t you see?—she knows only the kind that lives here, and she—she don’t understand. But you know both kinds, and you can tell where ’tis that I ain’t like ’em here. And I want to be like ’em, Bobby, I do, truly. They’re just bang-up—I mean, *beautiful* folks,” she corrected hastily. “And mother’s so good to me! She’s just——”

Margaret stopped suddenly. A new thought seemed to have come to her.

“Bobby,” she cried with sharp abruptness, “did you ever know any husbands that was—good?”

“‘Husbands’? ‘Good’? What do ye mean?”

“Did you ever know any that was good, I mean that didn’t beat their wives and bang ’em ‘round? Did you, Bobby?”

Bobby laughed. He lifted his chin quizzically, and gazed down from the lofty superiority of his

fourteen years.

“Sure, an’ ain’t ye beginnin’ sort o’ early ter worry about husbands?” he teased. “But, mebbe you’ve already—er—picked him out! eh?”

Margaret did not seem to hear. She was looking straight through a little open space in the boughs of the apple tree to the blue sky far beyond.

“Bobby,” she began in a voice scarcely above a whisper, “if that man should be bad to my mother I think I’d—kill him.”

Bobby roused himself. He suddenly remembered Joe Bagley and the kitten. 38

“What man?” he asked.

“Dr. Spencer.”

“Dr. Spencer!” gasped Bobby. “Why, Dr. Spencer wouldn’t hurt a fly. He’s just bully!”

Margaret stirred restlessly. She turned a grave face on her companion.

“Bobby,” she reproved gently, “I don’t think I’d oughter hear them words if I ain’t ‘lowed to use ’em myself.”

Bobby uptilted his chin.

“I’ve heard your ma say ‘ain’t’ wa’n’t proper,” he observed virtuously. “I shouldn’t have mentioned it, only—well, seein’ as how you’re gettin’ so awful particular——!” For the more telling effect he left the sentence unfinished.

Again Margaret did not seem to hear. Again her eyes had sought the patch of blue showing through the green leaves.

“Dr. Spencer may be nice now, but he ain’t a husband yet,” she said, thoughtfully. “There was Tim Sullivan and Patty’s father and Mike Whalen,” she enumerated aloud. “And they was all—— Bobby, was your father a good husband?” she demanded with a sudden turn that brought her eyes squarely round to his. 39

The boy was silent.

“Bobby, was he?”

Slowly the boy’s eyes fell.

“Well, of course, sometimes dad would”—he began; but Margaret interrupted him.

“I knew it—I just knew it—I just knew there wasn’t any,” she moaned; “but I can’t make mother see it—I just can’t!”

This was but the first of many talks between Margaret and Bobby upon the same subject, and always Margaret was seeking for a possible averting of the catastrophe. To convince her mother of the awfulness of the fate awaiting her, and so to persuade her to abandon the idea of marriage, was out of the question, Margaret soon found. It was then, perhaps, that the idea of speaking to the doctor himself first came to her.

“If I could only get him to promise things!” she said to Bobby. “If I could only get him to promise!”

“Promise?”

“Yes; to be good and kind, you know,” nodded Margaret, “and not like a husband.”

Bobby laughed; then he frowned and was silent. Suddenly his face changed. 40

“I say, you might make him sign a contract,” he hazarded.

“Contract?”

“Sure! One of them things that makes folks toe the mark whether they wants to or not. I’ll draw it up for you—that’s what they call it,” he explained airily; and as Margaret bubbled over with delight and thanks he added: “Not at all. ’Tain’t nothin’. Glad ter do it, I’m sure!”

For a month now Bobby had swept the floor and dusted the books in the law office of Burt & Burt, to say nothing of running errands and tending door. In days gone by, the law, as represented by the policeman on the corner, was something to be avoided; but to-day, as represented by a frock coat, a tall hat, and a vocabulary bristling with big words, it was something that was most alluring—so alluring, in fact, that Bobby had determined to adopt it as his own. He himself would be a lawyer—tall hat, frock coat, big words and all. Hence his readiness to undertake this little matter of drawing up a contract for Margaret, his first client.

It was some days, nevertheless, before the work was ready for the doctor’s signature. The young lawyer, unfortunately, could not give all of his time to his own affairs; there were still the trivial duties of his office to perform. He found, too, that the big words which fell so glibly from the lips of the great Burt & Burt were anything but easily managed when he tried to put them upon paper himself. Bobby was ambitious and persistent, however, and where knowledge failed, imagination stepped boldly to the front. In the end it was with no little pride that he displayed the result of his labor to his client, then, with her gleeful words of approval still ringing in his ears, he slipped it into its envelope, sealed, stamped, and posted it. Thus it happened that the next day a very much amazed physician received this in his mail: 41

"To whom it may concern:

"Whereas, I, the Undersigned, being in my sane Mind do intend to commit Matremony, I, the said Undersigned do hereby solumly declare and agree, to wit, not to Beat my aforesaid Wife. Not to Bang her round. Not to Falsely, Wickedly and Maliciously treat her. Not once. Moreover, I, the said Undersigned do solumly Swear all this to Margaret Kendall, the dorter and Lawfull Protectur of the said Wife, to wit, Mrs. Kendall. And whereas, if I, the aforesaid Undersigned do break and violate this my solum Oath concerning the said Wife, I do hereby Swear that she, to wit, Margaret Kendall, may bestow upon me such Punishmunt as seems eminuntly proper to her at such time as she sees fit. Whereas and whereunto I have this day set my Hand and Seal."

Here followed a space for the signature, and a somewhat thumbed, irregular daub of red sealing-wax.

CHAPTER V

It was a particularly warm July evening, but a faint breeze from the west stirred the leaves of the Crimson Rambler that climbed over the front veranda at Five Oaks, and brought the first relief from the scorching heat. The great stone lions loomed out of the shadows and caught the moonlight full on their shaggy heads. To the doctor, sitting alone on the veranda steps, they seemed almost alive, and he smiled at the thought that came to him.

"So you think you, too, are guarding her," he chuckled quietly. "Pray, and are you also her 'Lawfull Protectur'?"

A light step sounded on the floor behind him, and he sprang to his feet.

"She's asleep," said Mrs. Kendall softly. "She dropped asleep almost as soon as she touched the pillow. Dear child!"

"Yes, children are apt—— Amy, dearest!" broke off the doctor, sharply, "you are crying!"

"No, no, it is nothing," assured Mrs. Kendall, as the doctor led her to a chair. "It is always this way, only to-night it was a—a little more heart-breaking than usual."

"'Always this way'! 'Heart-breaking'! Why, Amy!"

Mrs. Kendall smiled, then raised her hand to brush away a tear.

"You don't understand," she murmured. "It's the bedtime prayer—Margaret's;" then, at the doctor's amazed frown, she added: "The dear child goes over her whole day, bit by bit, and asks forgiveness for countless misdemeanors, and it nearly breaks my heart, for it shows how many times I have said 'don't' to the poor little thing since morning. And as if that were not piteous enough, she must needs ask the dear Father to tell her how to handle her fork, and how to sit, walk, and talk so's to please mother. Harry, what *shall* I do?"

"But you are doing," returned the doctor. "You are loving her, and you are surrounding her with everything good and beautiful."

"But I want to do right myself—just right."

"And you are doing just right, dear."

"But the results—they are so irregular and uneven," sighed the mother, despairingly. "One minute she is the gentle, loving little girl I held in my arms five years ago; and the next she is—well, she isn't Margaret at all."

"No," smiled the doctor. "She isn't Margaret at all. She is Mag of the Alley, dependent on her wits and her fists for life itself. Don't worry, sweetheart. It will all come right in time; it can't help it!—but it will take the time."

"She tries so hard—the little precious!—and she does love me."

A curious smile curved the doctor's lips.

"She does," he said dryly.

"Why, Harry, what——" Mrs. Kendall's eyes were questioning.

The doctor hesitated. Then very slowly he drew from his pocket a large, somewhat legal-looking document.

"I hardly know whether to share this with you or not," he began; "still, it *is* too good to keep to myself, and it concerns you intimately; moreover, you may be able to assist me with some advice in the matter, or at least with some possible explanation." And he held out the paper.

Mrs. Kendall turned in her chair so that the light from the open hall-door would fall upon the round, cramped handwriting.

"'To whom it may concern,'" she read aloud. "'Whereas, I, the Undersigned, being in my sane Mind do intend to commit Matremony.' Why, Harry, what in the world is this?" she demanded.

“Go on,—read,” returned the doctor, with a nonchalant wave of his hand; and Mrs. Kendall dropped her eyes again to the paper.

“Harry, what in the world does this mean?” she gasped a minute later as she finished reading, half laughing, half crying, and wholly amazed.

“But that is exactly what I was going to ask you,” parried the doctor.

“You don’t mean that Margaret wrote—but she couldn’t; besides, it isn’t her writing.”

“No, Margaret didn’t write it. For that part I think I detect the earmarks of young McGinnis. At all events, it came from him.”

“Bobby?”

“Yes.”

“But who——” Mrs. Kendall stopped abruptly. A dawning comprehension came into her eyes. “You mean—Harry, she *was* at the bottom of it! I remember now. It was only a week or two ago that she used those same words to me. She insisted that you would beat me and—and bang me ’round. Oh, Margaret, Margaret, my poor little girl!” 46

The doctor smiled; then he shook his head gravely.

“Poor child! She hasn’t seen much of conjugal felicity; has she?” he murmured; then, softly: “It is left for us, sweetheart, to teach her—that.”

The color deepened in Mrs. Kendall’s cheeks. Her eyes softened, then danced merrily.

“But you haven’t signed—this, sir, yet!” she challenged laughingly, as she held out the paper.

He caught both paper and hands in a warm clasp.

“But I will,” he declared. “Wait and see!”

Not twenty hours later Bobby McGinnis halted at the great gate of the driveway at Five Oaks and gave a peculiar whistle. Almost instantly Margaret flew across the lawn to meet him.

“Oh, it’s jest a little matter of business,” greeted Bobby, with careless ease. “I’ve got that ’ere document here all signed. I reckoned the doctor wouldn’t lose no time makin’ sure ter do his part.” 47

“Bobby, not the contract—so soon!” exulted Margaret.

“Sure! Why not? I told him ter please sign to once an’ return. An’ he did, ‘course. I reckoned he meant business in this little matter, an’ he reckoned I did, too. There wa’n’t nothin’ for him ter do but sign, ’course.”

Margaret drew her brows together in a thoughtful frown.

“But he might have—refused,” she suggested.

Bobby gave her a scornful glance.

“Refused—an’ lost the chance of marryin’ at all? Not much!” he asserted with emphasis.

“Well, anyhow, I’m glad he didn’t,” sighed Margaret, as she clutched the precious paper close to her heart. “I should ‘a’ hated to have refused outright to let him marry her when mother—Bobby, mother actually seems to *want* to have him!”

CHAPTER VI 48

Margaret had been at home four weeks when the invitation for Patty, Arabella, Clarabella, and three of the Whalens to visit her, finally left her mother’s hands. There had not been a day of all those four weeks that Margaret had not talked of the coming visit. At first, to be sure, she had not called it a visit; she had referred to it as the time when “Patty and the Whalens come here to live.” Gradually, however, her mother had persuaded her to let them “try it and see how they liked it”; and to this compromise Margaret finally gave a somewhat reluctant consent.

Mrs. Kendall herself was distinctly uneasy over the whole affair; and on one pretext and another had put off sending for the proposed guests until Margaret’s importunities left her no choice in the matter. Not but that she was grateful to the two families that had been so good to Margaret in her hour of need, but she would have preferred to show that gratitude in some way not quite so intimate as taking them into her house and home for an indefinite period. Margaret, however, was still intent on “divvying up,” and Mrs. Kendall could not look into her daughter’s clear blue eyes, and explain why Patty, Arabella, Clarabella, and the Whalens might not be the most desirable guests in the world. 49

It had been Margaret’s intention to invite all of the Whalen family. She had hesitated a little, it is true, over Mike Whalen, the father.

“You see he drinks, and when he ain’t asleep he’s cross, mostly,” she explained to her mother; “but we can’t leave just him behind, so we’ll have to ask him, ‘course. Besides, if he’s goin’ to live

here, why, he might as well come right now at the first."

"No, certainly we couldn't leave Mr. Whalen behind alone," Mrs. Kendall had returned with dry lips. "So suppose we don't take any of the Whalens this time—just devote ourselves to Patty and the twins."

To this, however, Margaret refused to give her consent. What, not take any of the Whalens—the Whalens who had been so good as to give them one whole corner of their kitchen, rent free? 50
Certainly not! She agreed, however, after considerable discussion, to take only Tom, Mary, and Peter of the Whalen family, leaving the rest of the children and Mrs. Whalen to keep old Mike Whalen company.

"For, after all," as she said to her mother, "if Tom and Mary and Peter like it here, the rest will. They always like what Tom does—he makes 'em."

Mrs. Kendall never thought of that speech afterward without a shudder. She even dreamed once of this all-powerful Tom—he stood over her with clinched fists and flashing eyes, demanding that she "divvy up" to the last cent. Clearly as she understood that this was only a dream, yet the vision haunted her; and it was not without some apprehension that she went with Margaret to the station to meet her guests, on the day appointed.

A letter from Margaret had gone to Patty, and one from Mrs. Kendall to Miss Murdock, the city missionary who had been so good to Margaret. Houghtonsville was on a main line to New York, and but a few hours' ride from the city. Mrs. Kendall had given full instructions as to trains, and had sent the money for the six tickets. She had also asked Miss Murdock to place the children in 51
care of the conductor, saying that she would meet them herself at the Houghtonsville station.

Promptly in return had come Miss Murdock's letter telling of the children's delighted acceptance of the invitation; and almost immediately had followed Patty's elaborately flourished scrawl:

"Much obliged for de invite an wes Acomin. Tanks.

"Clarabella, Arabella, an
"Patty at yer service."

Mrs. Kendall thought of this letter and of Tom as she stood waiting for the long train from New York to come to a standstill; then she looked down at the sweet-faced daintily-gowned little maid at her side, and shuddered—it is one thing to carry beef-tea and wheel-chairs to our unfortunate fellow men, and quite another to invite those same fellow men to a seat at our own table or by our own fireside.

Margaret and her mother had not long to wait. Tom Whalen, in spite of the conductor's restraining hand, was on the platform before the wheels had ceased to turn. Behind him tumbled Peter, Mary, and Clarabella, while Patty, carefully guiding Arabella's twisted feet, brought up the 52
rear. There was an instant's pause; then Tom spied Margaret, and with a triumphant "Come on—here she is!" to those behind, he dashed down the platform.

"My, but ain't you slick!" he cried admiringly, stopping short before Margaret, who had unconsciously shrunk close to her mother's side. "Hi, thar, Patty," he called, hailing the gleeful children behind him, "what would the Alley say if they could see her now?"

There was a moment's pause. Eagerly as the children had followed Tom's lead, they stood abashed now before the tall, beautiful woman and the pretty little girl they had once known as "Mag of the Alley." Almost instantly Margaret saw and understood; and with all the strength of her hospitable little soul she strove to put her guests at their ease. With a glad little cry she gave one after another a bear-like hug; then she stood back with a flourish and prepared for the introductions. Unconsciously her words and manner aped those of her mother in sundry other introductions that had figured in her own experience during the last four weeks; and before Mrs. Kendall knew what was happening she found herself being ceremoniously presented to Tom 53
Whalen, late of the Alley, New York.

"Tom, this is my dear mother that I lost long ago," said Margaret. "Mother, dear, can't you shake hands with Tom?"

Tom advanced. His face was a fiery red, and the freckles shone luridly through the glow.

"Proud ter know ye, ma'am," he stammered, clutching frantically at the daintily-gloved, outstretched hand.

Margaret sighed with relief. Tom did know how to behave, after all. She had feared he would not.

"And this is Mary Whalen, and Peter," she went on, as Mrs. Kendall clasped in turn two limp hands belonging to a white-faced girl and a frightened boy. "And here's Patty and the twins, Clarabella and Arabella; and now you know 'em all," finished Margaret, beaming joyously upon her mother who was leaning with tender eyes over the little lame Arabella.

"My dear, how thin your poor little cheeks are," Mrs. Kendall was saying.

"Yes, she is kind o' peaked," volunteered Patty. "Miss Murdock says as how her food don't 'similate. Ye see she ain't over strong, anyhow, on account o' dem," pointing to the little twisted 54
feet and legs. "Mebbe Maggie told ye, ma'am, how Arabella wa'n't finished up right, an' how her legs didn't go straight like ours," added Patty, giving her usual explanation of her sister's misfortune.

"Yes," choked Mrs. Kendall, hurriedly. "She told me that the little girl was lame. Now, my dears, we—we'll go home." Mrs. Kendall hesitated and looked about her. "You—you haven't any bags or

—or anything?" she asked them.

"Gee!" cried Tom, turning sharply toward the track where had stood a moment before the train that brought them. "An' if 'tain't gone so soon!"

"Gone—the bag?" chorused five shrill voices.

"Sure!" nodded Tom. Then, with a resigned air, he thrust both hands into his trousers pockets. "Gone she is, bag and baggage."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," murmured Mrs. Kendall.

"Pooh! 'tain't a mite o' matter," assured Patty, quickly. "Ye see, dar wa'n't nothin' in it, anyhow, only a extry ribb'n fur Arabella's hair." Then, at Mrs. Kendall's blank look of amazement, she explained: "We only took it 'cause Katy Sovrensky said folks allers took 'em when they went trav'lin'. So we fished dis out o' de ash barrel an' fixed it up wid strings an' tacks. We didn't have nothin' ter put in it, 'course. All our clo's is on us."

"We didn't need nothin' else, anyhow," piped up Arabella, "for all our things is span clean. We went ter bed 'most all day yisterday so's Patty could wash 'em."

"Yes, yes, of course, certainly," agreed Mrs. Kendall, faintly, as she turned and led the way to the big four-seated carryall waiting for them. "Then we'll go home right away."

To Tom, Peter, Mary, Patty, Arabella, and Clarabella, it was all so wonderful that they fairly pinched themselves to make sure they were awake. The drive through the elm-bordered streets with everywhere flowers, vine-covered houses, and velvety lawns—it was all quite unbelievable.

"It's more like Mont-Lawn than anythin' I ever see," murmured Arabella. "Seems 'most as though 'twas heaven." And Mrs. Kendall, who heard the words, reproached herself because for four long weeks she had stood jealous guard over this "heaven" and refused to "divvy up" its enjoyment. The next moment she shuddered and unconsciously drew Margaret close to her side. Patty had said:

"Gee whiz, Mag, ain't you lucky? Wis't I was a lost an' founded!"

The house with its great stone lions was hailed with an awed "oh-h!" of delight, as were the wide lawns and brilliant flower-beds. Inside the house the children blinked in amazement at the lace-hung windows, and gold-framed pictures; and Clarabella, balancing herself on her toes, looked fearfully at the woven pinks and roses at her feet and demanded: "Don't walkin' on 'em hurt 'em?

"Seems so 'twould," she added, her eyes distrustfully bent on Margaret who had laughed, and by way of proving the carpet's durability, was dancing up and down upon it.

The matter of choosing beds in the wide, airy chambers was a momentous one. In the boys' room, to be sure, it was a simple matter, for there were only two beds, and Tom settled the question at once by unceremoniously throwing Peter on to one of them, and pommeling him with the pillow until he howled for mercy.

The girls had two rooms opening out of each other, and in each room were two dainty white beds. Here the matter of choosing was only settled amicably at last by a rigid system of "counting out" by "Eeny, meany, miny, mo"; and even this was not accomplished without much shouting and laughter, and not a few angry words.

Margaret was distressed. For a time she was silent; then she threw herself into the discussion with all the ardor of one who would bring peace at any cost; and it was by her suggestion that the "Eeny, meany, miny, mo," finally won the day. In her own room that night, as she went to bed, she apologized to her mother.

"I'm sorry they was so rude, mother. I had forgot they was quite so noisy," she confessed anxiously. "But I'll tell 'em to-morrow to be more quiet. Maybe they didn't know that little ladies and little gentlemen don't act like that."

CHAPTER VII

Five oaks awoke to a new existence on the first morning after the arrival of its guests from New York—an existence of wild shouts, gleeful laughter, scampering feet and confusion. In the kitchen and the garden old Mr. and Mrs. Barrett no longer held full sway. For some time there had been a cook, a waitress, a laundress, and an experienced gardener as well. In the barn, too, there was now a stalwart fellow who was coachman and chauffeur by turns, according to whether the old family carriage or the new four-cylinder touring car was wanted.

Tom, Peter, Mary, Patty, and the twins had not been at Five Oaks twenty-four hours before they were fitted to new clothing throughout. Mrs. Kendall had not slept until she had interviewed the town clothier as to ways and means of immediately providing two boys and four girls with shoes, stockings, hats, coats, trousers, dresses, and undergarments.

"'Course 'tain't 'zactly necessary," Patty had said, upon being presented with her share of the new garments, "but it's awful nice, 'cause now we don't have ter go ter bed when ours is washed —an' they be awful nice! Just bang-up!"

No wonder Five Oaks awoke to a new existence! The wide-spreading lawns knew now what it was to be pressed by a dozen little scampering feet at once: and the great stone lions knew what it was to have two yelling boys mount their carven backs, and try to dig sharp little heels into their stone sides. Within the house, the attic, sacred for years to cobwebs and musty memories, knew what it was to yield its treasured bonnets, shawls, and quilted skirts to a swarm of noisy children who demanded them for charades.

Tom, Peter, Mary, Patty, Arabella, and Clarabella had been at Five Oaks two weeks when one day Bobby McGinnis found Margaret crying all alone in the old summerhouse down in the garden.

"Gorry, what's up?" he questioned; adding cheerily: "'Soldiers' daughters don't cry'!"—it was a quotation from Margaret's own childhood's creed, and one which in the old days seldom failed to dry her tears. Even now it was not without its effect, for her head came up with a jerk. 60

"I—I know it," she sobbed; "and I ain't—I mean, I *are* not going to. There, you see," she broke off miserably, falling back into her old despondent attitude. "'Ain't' should be 'are not' always, and I never can remember."

"Pooh! Is that all?" laughed Bobby. "'Twould take more'n a 'are not' ter make me cry."

"But that ain't all," wailed Margaret, and she did not notice that at one of her words Bobby chuckled and parted his lips only to close them again with a snap. "There's heaps more of 'em; 'bully' and 'bang-up' and 'gee' and 'drownded' and 'g' on the ends of things, and—well, almost everything I say, seems so."

"Well, what of it? You'll get over it. You're a-learnin' all the time; ain't ye?"

"'Are not you,' Bobby," sighed Margaret.

"Well, 'are not you,' then," snapped Bobby.

Margaret shook her head. A look that was almost terror came to her eyes. She leaned forward and clutched the boy's arm. 61

"Bobby, that's just it," she whispered, looking fearfully over her shoulder to make sure that no one heard. "That's just it—I'm not a-learnin'!"

"Why not?"

"Because of them—Tom, and Patty, and the rest"

Bobby looked dazed, and Margaret plunged headlong into her explanation.

"It's them. They do 'em—all of 'em. Don't you see? They say 'ain't' and 'gee' and 'bully' all the time, and I see now how bad 'tis, and I want to stop. But I can't stop, Bobby. I just can't. I try to, but it just comes before I know it. I tried to stop them sayin' 'em, first," went on Margaret, feverishly, "just as I tried to make 'em act ladylike with their feet and their knives and forks; but it didn't do a mite o' good. First they laughed at me, then they got mad. You know how 'twas, Bobby. You saw 'em."

Bobby whistled.

"Yes, I know," he said soberly. "But when they go away——"

"That's just it," cut in Margaret, tragically. "I wa'n't goin' to have them go away. I was goin' to keep 'em always; and now I—Bobby, I *want* them to go!" she paused and let the full enormity of her confession sink into her hearer's comprehension. Then she repeated: "I want them to go!" 62

"Well, what of it?" retorted Bobby, with airy unconcern.

"What of it!" wept Margaret. "Why, Bobby, don't you see? I was goin' to divvy up, and I ought to divvy up, too. I've got trees and grass and flowers and beds with sheets on 'em and enough to eat, and they hain't got anything—not anything. And now I don't want to divvy up, I don't want to divvy up, because I don't want them—here!"

Margaret covered her face with her hands and rocked herself to and fro. Bobby was silent. His hands were in his pocket, and his eyes were on an ant struggling with a burden almost as large as itself.

"Don't you see, Bobby, it's wicked that I am—awful wicked," resumed Margaret, after a minute. "I want to be nice and gentle like mother wants me to be. I don't want to be Mag of the Alley. I—I hate Mag of the Alley. But if Tom and Patty and the rest stays I shall be just like them, Bobby, I know I shall; and—and so I don't want 'em to stay." 63

Bobby stirred uneasily, changing his position.

"Well, you—you hain't asked 'em to, yet; have ye?" he questioned.

"No. Mother 'spressly stip'lated that I shouldn't say anything about their stayin' always till their visit was over and they saw how they liked things."

"Shucks!" rejoined Bobby, his face clearing. "Then what ye cryin' 'bout? You ain't bound by no contract. You don't have ter divvy up."

"But I ought to divvy up."

"Pooh! 'Course ye hadn't," scoffed Bobby. "Hain't folks got a right ter have their own things?"

Margaret frowned doubtfully.

“I don’t know,” she began with some hesitation. “If I’ve got nice things and more of ’em than Patty has, why shouldn’t she have some of mine? ’Tain’t fair, somehow. Somebody ain’t playin’ straight. I—I’m goin’ to ask mother.” And she turned slowly away and began to walk toward the house.

Not once, but many times during the next few days, did Margaret talk with her mother on this 64
subject that so troubled her. The result of these conferences Bobby learned not five days later when Margaret ran down to meet him at the great driveway gate. Back on the veranda Patty and the others were playing “housekeeping,” and Margaret spoke low so that they might not hear.

“I *am* goin’ to divvy up,” she announced in triumph, “but not here.”

“Huh?” frowned Bobby.

“I *am* goin’ to divvy up—give ’em some of my things, you know,” explained Margaret; “then when they go back, mother’s goin’ with ’em and find a better place for ’em to live in.”

“Oh, then they are *goin’* back—eh?”

Margaret flushed a little and threw a questioning look into Bobby’s face. There seemed to be a laugh in Bobby’s voice, though there was none on his lips.

“Yes,” she nodded hurriedly. “You see, mother thinks it’s best. She says that they hadn’t ought to be here now—with me; that it’s my form’tive period, and that everything about me ought to be just right so as to form me right. See?”

“Yes, I see,” said Bobby, so crossly that Margaret opened her eyes in wonder. 65

“Why, Bobby, you don’t care ’cause they’re goin’ away; do you?”

“Don’t I?” he growled. “Humph! I s’pose ’twill be me next that’ll be sent flyin’.”

“You? Why, you live here!”

“Well, I say ‘ain’t’ an’ ‘bully’; don’t I?” he retorted aggressively.

Margaret stepped back. Her face changed.

“Why—so—you—do!” she breathed. “And I never once thought of it.”

Bobby said nothing. He was standing on one foot, digging the toe of the other into the graveled driveway. For a time Margaret regarded him with troubled eyes; then she sighed:

“Well, anyhow, you don’t live here all the time, right in the house, same’s Patty and the rest would if they stayed. I—I don’t want to give *you* up, Bobby.”

Bobby flushed red under the tan. His eyes sparkled with pleasure—but his chin went up, and his hands executed the careless flourish that a boy of fourteen is apt to use when he wishes to hide the fact that his heart is touched.

“FOR A TIME MARGARET REGARDED HIM WITH TROUBLED EYES.”

“Don’t trouble yerself,” he shrugged airily. “It don’t make a mite o’ diff’rence ter me, ye know. There’s plenty I *can* be with.“ And he turned and hurried up the road with long strides, sending back over his shoulder a particularly joyous whistle—a whistle that broke and wheezed into silence, however, the minute that the woods at the turn of the road were reached.

“I don’t care,” he blustered, glaring at the chipmunk that eyed him from the top rail of the fence. “Bully—gee—ain’t—hain’t—bang-up! There!” Then, having demonstrated his right to whatever vocabulary he chose to employ, he went home to the little red farmhouse on the hill and spent an hour hunting for a certain book of his mother’s in the attic. When he had found it he spent another hour poring over its contents. The book was old and yellow and dog-eared, and bore on the faded pasteboard cover the words: “A work on English Grammar and Composition.”

CHAPTER VIII

Tom, Peter, Mary, Patty, and the twins stayed at Five Oaks until the first of September, then, plump, brown, and happy they returned to New York. With them went several articles of use and beauty which had hitherto belonged to Five Oaks. Mrs. Kendall, greatly relieved at Margaret’s somewhat surprising willingness to let the visitors go, had finally consented to Margaret’s proposition that the children be allowed to select something they specially liked to take back with them. In giving this consent, Mrs. Kendall had made only such reservation as would insure that certain valuable (and not easily duplicated) treasures of her own should remain undisturbed.

She smiled afterward at her fears. Tom selected an old bugle from the attic, and Peter a scabbard that had lost its sword. Mary chose a string of blue beads that Margaret sometimes wore, and Clarabella a pink sash that she found in a trunk. Patty, before telling her choice, asked timidly what would happen if it was “too big ter be tooked in yer hands.” Upon being assured that it would be sent, if it could not be carried, she unhesitatingly chose the biggest easy-chair the house afforded, with the announcement that it was “a Christmas present fur Mis’ Whalen.”

For a moment Mrs. Kendall had felt tempted to remonstrate, and to ask Patty if she realized just how a green satin-damask Turkish chair would look in Mrs. Whalen’s basement kitchen; but after one glance at Patty’s radiant face, she had changed her mind, and had merely said:

“Very well, dear. It shall be sent the day you go.”

Arabella only, of all the six, delayed her choice until the final minute. Even on that last morning she was hesitating between a marble statuette and a harmonica. In the end she took neither, for she had spied a huge chocolate-frosted cake that the cook had just made; and it was that cake which finally went to the station carefully packed in a pasteboard box and triumphantly borne in Arabella’s arms.

Mrs. Kendall herself went to New York with the children, taking Margaret with her. In the Grand Central Station she shuddered a little as she passed a certain seat. Involuntarily she reached for her daughter’s hand. 69

“And was it here that I stayed and stayed that day long ago when you got hurt and didn’t come?” asked Margaret.

“Yes, dear—right here.”

“Seems ’most as if I remembered,” murmured the little girl, her eyes fixed on one of the great doors across the room. “I stayed and stayed, and you never came at all. And by and by I went out there to look for you, and I walked and walked and walked. And I was so tired and hungry!”

“Yes, yes, dear, I know,” faltered Mrs. Kendall, tightening her clasp on the small fingers. “But we won’t think of all that now, dear. It is past and gone. Come, we’re going to take Patty and the others home, you know, then to-morrow we are going to see if we can’t find a new home for them.”

“Divvy up!” cried Margaret, brightening. “We’re goin’ to divvy up!”

“Yes, dear.”

“Oh!” breathed Margaret, ecstatically. “I like to divvy up!” And the mother smiled content, for the last trace of gloomy brooding had fled from her daughter’s face, and left it glowing with the joy of a care-free child. 70

Not two hours later a certain alley in the great city was thrown into wild confusion. Out of every window leaned disheveled heads, and in every doorway stood a peering, questioning throng. Down by the Whalens’ basement door, the crowd was almost impassable; and every inch of space in the windows opposite was filled with gesticulating men, women, and children.

Mag of the Alley had come back. And, as if that were not excitement enough for once, with her had come Tom, Mary, Peter, Patty, and the twins, to say nothing of the beautiful lady with the golden hair, and the white wings on her hat.

“An’ she’s all dressed up fit ter kill—Maggie is,” Katy Goldburg was calling excitedly over her shoulder. Katy, and Tony Valerio had the advantage over the others, for they were down on their knees before the Whalens’ window on a level with the sidewalk. The room inside was almost in darkness, to be sure, for the crowd outside had obscured what little daylight there was left, and there was only the sputtering kerosene lamp on the table for illumination. Even this, however, sufficed to show Katy and Tony wonders that unloosed their tongues and set them to giving copious reports. 71

“She’s got a white dress on, an’ a hat with posies, an’ shoes an’ stockings,” enumerated Katy.

“An’ de lady’s got di’monds on her—I seen ’em sparkle,” shouted Tony. “An’ de Whalen kids is all fixed up, too,” he added. “An’, say, dey’ve bringed home stuff an’ is showin’ ’em. Gee! look at that sw-word!”

“An’ thar’s cake,” gurgled Katy. “Tony, they’re eatin’ choc’late cake. Say, I *am* a-goin’ in!”

There was a sudden commotion about the Whalens’ door. An undersized little body was worming its way through the crowd, and thrusting sharp little elbows to the right and to the left. The next minute, Margaret Kendall, standing near the Whalens’ table, felt an imperative tug at her sleeve.

“Hullo! Say, Mag, give us a bite; will ye?”

“Katy! Why, it’s Katy Goldburg,” cried Margaret in joyous recognition. “Mother, here’s Katy.” 72

The first touch of Margaret’s hand on Katy’s shoulder swept like an electric shock through the waiting throng around the door. It was the signal for a general onslaught. In a moment the Whalen kitchen swarmed with boys, girls, and women, all shouting, all talking at once, and all struggling to reach the beautiful, blue-eyed, golden-haired little girl they had known as “Mag of the Alley.”

Step by step Margaret fell back until she was quite against the wall. Her eyes grew wide and terror-filled, yet she made a brave attempt to smile and to respond politely to the noisy greetings. Across the room Mrs. Kendall struggled to reach her daughter’s side, but the onrushing tide of humanity flung her back and left her helpless and alone.

It was then that Mrs. Whalen’s powerful fist and strident voice came to the rescue. In three minutes the room was cleared, and Margaret was sobbing in her mother’s arms.

“You see, mother, you see how ’tis,” she cried hysterically, as soon as she could speak. “There’s such lots and lots of them, and they’re all so poor. Did you see how ragged and bad their clothes were, and how they grabbed for the cake? We’ve got to divvy up, mother, we’ve got to divvy up!” 73

“Yes, dear, I know; and we will,” soothed Mrs. Kendall, hurriedly. “We’ll begin right away to-morrow, darling. But now we’ll go back to the hotel and go to bed. My little girl is tired and needs

rest.”

CHAPTER IX

Dr. Spencer met Mrs. Kendall and her daughter at the Houghtonsville station on the night they returned from New York. His lips were smiling, and his eyes were joyous as befitted a lover who is to behold for the first time in nine long days his dear one’s face. The eager words of welcome died on his lips, however, at sight of the weariness and misery in the two dear faces before him.

“Why, Amy, dearest,” he began anxiously: but her upraised hand silenced him.

“To-night—not now,” she murmured, with a quick glance at Margaret. Then aloud to her daughter she said: “See, dear, here’s Dr. Spencer, and he’s brought the ponies to carry us home. What a delightful drive we will have!”

“Oh, has he?” For an instant Margaret’s face glowed with animation; then the light died out as suddenly as it had come. “But, mother, I—I think I’d rather walk,” she said. “You know Patty and the rest can’t ride.”

The doctor frowned, and gave a sudden exclamation under his breath. Mrs. Kendall paled a little and turned to her daughter.

“Yes, I know,” she said gently. “But you are very tired, and mother thinks it best you should ride. After all, dearie, you know it won’t make Patty and the rest ride, even if you do walk. Don’t you see?”

“Yes, I—I suppose so,” admitted Margaret; but she sighed as she climbed into the carriage, and all the way home her eyes were troubled.

Not until after Margaret had gone to bed that night did Mrs. Kendall answer the questions that had trembled all the evening on the doctor’s lips; then she told him the story of those nine days in New York, beginning with Margaret’s visit to the Alley, and her overwhelming “reception” in the Whalens’ basement home.

“I’m afraid the whole thing has been a mistake,” she said despondently, when she had finished. “Instead of making Margaret happy, it has made her miserable.”

“But I don’t see,” protested the doctor. “As near as I can make out you did just what she wanted; you—er—‘divvied up.’”

Mrs. Kendall sighed.

“Why, of course, to a certain extent: but even Margaret, child though she is, saw the hopelessness of the task when once we set about it. There were so many, so pitifully many. Her few weeks of luxurious living here at home have opened her eyes to the difference between her life and theirs, and I thought the child would cry herself sick over it all.”

“But you helped them—some of them?”

Again Mrs. Kendall sighed.

“Yes, oh, yes, we helped them. I think if Margaret could have had her way we should have marched through the streets to the tune of ‘See the conquering hero comes,’ distributing new dresses and frosted cakes with unstinted hands; but I finally convinced her that such assistance was perhaps not the wisest way of going about what we wanted to do. At last I had to keep her away from the Alley altogether, it affected her so. I got her interested in looking up a new home for the Whalens, and so filled her mind with that.”

“Oh, then the Whalens have a new home? Well, I’m sure Margaret must have liked that.”

Mrs. Kendall smiled wearily.

“*Margaret* did,” she said; and at the emphasis the doctor raised his eyebrows.

“But, surely the Whalens——”

“Did not,” supplied Mrs. Kendall.

“Did not!” cried the doctor.

“Well, ’twas this way,” laughed Mrs. Kendall. “It was my idea to find a nice little place outside the city where perhaps Mr. Whalen could raise vegetables, and Mrs. Whalen do some sort of work that paid better than flower-making. Perhaps Margaret’s insistence upon ‘grass and trees’ influenced me. At any rate, I found the place, and in high feather told the Whalens of the good fortune in store for them. What was my surprise to be met with blank silence, save only one wild whoop of glee from the children.

“‘An’ sure then, an’ it’s in the country; is it?’ Mrs. Whalen asked finally.

“‘Yes,’ I said. ‘With a yard, some flower beds, and a big garden for vegetables.’ I was just warming to my subject once more when Mr. Whalen demanded, ‘Is it fur from the Alley?’

“Well, to make a long story short, they at last kindly consented to view the place; but, after one

glance, they would have none of it.”

“But—why?” queried the doctor.

“Various reasons. ’Twas lonesome; too far from the Alley; they didn’t care to raise vegetables, any way, and Mr. Whalen considered it quite too much work to ‘kape up a place like that.’ According to my private opinion, however, the man had an eye out for a saloon, and he didn’t see it; consequently—the result!

“Well, we came back to town and the basement kitchen. Margaret was inconsolable when she heard the decision. The Whalen children, too, were disappointed; but Mr. Whalen and his wife were deaf to their entreaties. In the end I persuaded them to move to rooms that at least had the sun and air—though they were still in the Alley—and there I left them with a well-stocked larder and wardrobe, and with the rent paid six months in advance. I shall keep my eye on them, of course, for Margaret’s sake, and I hope to do something really worth while for the children. Patty and the twins are still with them at present.”

“But wasn’t Margaret satisfied with that?” asked the doctor.

“Yes, so far as it went: but there were still the others. Harry, that child has the whole Alley on her heart. I’m at my wits’ end to know what to do. You heard her this afternoon—she didn’t want to ride home because Patty must walk in New York. She looks askance at the frosting on her cake, and questions her right to wear anything but rags. Harry, what can I do?”

The man was silent.

“I don’t know, dear,” he said slowly, at last. “We must think—and think hard. Hers is not a common case. There is no precedent to determine our course. Small girls of five that have been reared in luxury are not often thrust into the streets and sweat shops of a great city and there forced to spend four years of their life—thank God! That those four years should have had a tremendous influence is certain. She can’t be the same girl she would have been had she spent those years at her mother’s knee. One thing is sure, however, seems to me. In her present nervous condition, if there is such a thing as getting her mind off those four years of her life and everything connected with it, it should be done.”

The doctor paused, and at that instant a step sounded on the graveled driveway. A moment later a boy’s face flashed into the light that streamed through the open door.

“Why, Bobby, is that you?” cried Mrs. Kendall.

“Yes, ma’am, it’s me, please. Did Mag—I mean Margaret come home, please?”

“Yes, she came to-night.”

Bobby hesitated. He stood first on one foot, then on the other. At last, very slowly he dragged his right hand from behind his back.

“I been makin’ it for her,” he said, presenting a small, but very elaborate basket composed of peach-stones. “Mebbe if she ain’t—er—*are* not awake, you’ll give it to her in the mornin’. Er—thank ye. Much obliged. Good-evenin’, ma’am.” And he turned and fled down the walk.

For a time there was silence on the veranda. Mrs. Kendall was turning the basket over and over in her hands. Suddenly she raised her head.

“You are right, Harry,” she sighed. “Her mind must be taken off those four years of her life, and off everything connected with it; everything and—everybody.”

“Yes,” echoed the doctor; “everything and—everybody. Er—let me see his basket, please.”

Four days later Mrs. Kendall and her daughter Margaret left Houghtonsville for a month’s stay in the White Mountains. From the rear window of a certain law office in town a boy of fourteen disconsolately watched the long train that was rapidly bearing them out of sight.

“An’ I hain’t seen her but once since I give her the basket,” he was muttering; “an’ then I couldn’t speak to her—her mother whisked her off so quick. Plague take that basket—wish’t I’d never see it! An’ I worked so hard over it, ’cause she said she liked ’em made out o’ peach-stones! She said she did.”

CHAPTER X

It was the day before Christmas. For eight weeks Margaret had been at Elmhurst, Miss Dole’s school in the Berkshires. School—Miss Dole’s school—had been something of a surprise to Margaret; and Margaret had been decidedly a surprise to the school. Margaret was not used to young misses who fared sumptuously every day, and who yet complained because a favorite ice cream or a pet kind of cake was not always forthcoming; and Miss Dole’s pupils were not used to a little girl who questioned their right to be well-fed and well-clothed, and who supplemented this questioning with distressing stories of other little girls who had little to wear and less to eat day after day, and week after week.

Margaret had not gone to Elmhurst without a struggle on the part of her mother. To Mrs. Kendall

it seemed cruel to be separated so soon from the little daughter who had but just been restored to her hungry arms after four long years of almost hopeless waiting. On the other hand, there were Margaret's own interests to be thought of. School, certainly, was a necessity, unless there should be a governess at home; and of this last Mrs. Kendall did not approve. She particularly wished Margaret to have the companionship of happy, well-bred girls of her own age. The Houghtonsville public school was hardly the place, in Mrs. Kendall's opinion, for a little maid with Margaret's somewhat peculiar ideas as to matters and things. There was Bobby, too—Bobby, the constant reminder in word and deed of the city streets and misery that Mrs. Kendall particularly wished forgotten. Yes, there certainly was Bobby to be thought of—and to be avoided. It was because of all this, therefore, that Margaret had been sent to Elmhurst. She had gone there straight from the great hotel in the mountains, where she and her mother had been spending a few weeks; so she had not seen Houghtonsville since September. It was the Christmas vacation now, and she was going back—back to the house with the stone lions and the big play room where had lain for so long the little woolly dog of her babyhood.

It was not of the stone lions, nor the play room that Margaret was thinking, however; it was of something much more important and more—delightful, the girls said. At all events, it was wonderfully exciting, and promised all sorts of charming possibilities in the way of music, pretty clothes, and good things to eat—again according to the girls.

It was a wedding.

Margaret's idea of marriage had undergone a decided change in the last few weeks. The envious delight of the girls over the fact that she was to be so intimately connected with a wedding, together with their absorbing interest in every detail, had been far more convincing than all of Mrs. Kendall's anxious teachings: marriage might not be such a calamity, after all.

It had come as somewhat of a shock to Margaret—this envious delight of her companions. She had looked upon her mother's marriage as something to be deplored; something to be tolerated, to be sure, since for some unaccountable reason her mother wanted it; but, still nevertheless an evil. There was the contract, to be sure, and the doctor had signed it without a murmur; but Margaret doubted the efficacy of even that at times—it would take something more than a contract, certainly, if the doctor should prove to be anything like Mike Whalen for a husband.

The doctor would not be like Mike Whalen, however—so the girls said. They had never seen any husbands that were like him, for that matter. They knew nothing whatever about husbands that shook and beat their wives and banged them around. All this they declared unhesitatingly, and with no little indignation in response to Margaret's somewhat doubting questions. There were the story-books, too. The girls all had them, and each book was full of fair ladies and brave knights, and of beautiful princesses who married the king—and who wanted to marry him, too, and who would have felt very badly if they could not have married him!

In the face of so overwhelming an array of evidence, Margaret almost lost her fears—marriage might be very desirable, after all. And so it was a very happy little girl that left Elmhurst on the day before Christmas and, in care of one of the teachers, journeyed toward Houghtonsville, where were waiting the play room, the great stone lions, and the wonderful wedding, to say nothing of the dear loving mother herself.

It was not quite the same Margaret that had left Houghtonsville a few months before. Even those short weeks had not been without their influence.

Margaret, in accordance with Mrs. Kendall's urgent request, had been the special charge of every teacher at Elmhurst; and every teacher knew the story of the little girl's life, as well as just what they all had now to battle against. Everything that was good and beautiful was kept constantly before her eyes, and so far as was possible, everything that was the reverse of all this was kept from her sight, and from being discussed in her presence. She learned of wonderful countries across the sea, and of the people who lived in them. She studied about high mountains and great rivers, and she was shown pictures of kings and queens and palaces. Systematically and persistently she was led along a way that did not know the Alley, and that did not recognize that there was in the world any human creature who was poor, or sick, or hungry.

It is little wonder, then, that she came to question less and less the luxury all about her; that she wore the pretty dresses and dainty shoes, and ate the food provided, with a resignation that was strangely like content; and that she talked less and less of Patty, the twins, and the Alley.

CHAPTER XI

Christmas was a wonderful day at Five Oaks, certainly to Margaret. First there was the joy of skipping, bare-toed, across the room to where the long black stockings hung from the mantel. In the gray dawn of the early morning its bulging knobbiness looked delightfully mysterious; and never were presents half so entrancing as those drawn from its black depths by Margaret's small eager fingers.

Later in the morning came the sleigh-ride behind the doctor's span of bays, and then there was the delicious dinner followed by the games and the frolics and the quiet hour with mother. Still later the house began to fill with guests and then came the wedding, with Mrs. Kendall all in soft

gray and looking radiantly happy on the doctor's arm.

It was a simple ceremony and soon over, and then came the long line of beaming friends and neighbors to wish the bride and groom joy and God-speed. Margaret, standing a little apart by the dining-room door, felt a sudden pull at her sleeve. She turned quickly and looked straight into Bobby McGinnis's eyes. 89

"Bobby, why, Bobby!" she welcomed joyously; but Bobby put his finger to his lips.

"Sh-h!" he cautioned; then, peremptorily, "Come." And he led the way through the deserted dining-room to a little room off the sidehall where the gloom made his presence almost indiscernible. "There!" he sighed in relief. "I fetched ye, didn't I?"

Margaret frowned.

"But, Bobby," she remonstrated, "why—what are you doing out here, all in the dark?"

"Seein' you."

"Seeing me! But I was in there, where 'twas all light and pretty, and you could see me lots better there!"

"Yes, but I wa'n't there," retorted Bobby, grimly; then he added: "'Twa'n't my party, ye see, an' I wa'n't invited. But I wanted ter see ye—an' I did, too."

Margaret was silent.

"Mebbe ye want ter go back now yerself," observed Bobby, gloomily, after a time. "'Tain't so pretty here, I'll own." 90

Margaret did want to go back, and she almost said so, but something in the boy's voice silenced the words on her lips.

"Oh, I'll stay, 'course," she murmured, shifting about uneasily on her little white-slippered feet.

Bobby roused himself.

"Here, take a chair," he proposed, pushing toward her a low stool; "an' I'll set here on the winder sill. Nice night; ain't it?"

"Yes, 'tis." Margaret sat down, carefully spreading her skirts.

There was a long silence. Through the half-open door came a shaft of light and the sound of distant voices. Bobby was biting his finger nails, and Margaret was wondering just how she could get back to the drawing-room without hurting the feelings of her unbidden guest. At last the boy spoke.

"Mebbe when we're grown up we'll get married, too," he blurted out, saying the one thing he had intended not to say. He bit his tongue angrily, but the next minute he almost fell off the window sill in his amazement—the little girl had sprung to her feet and clapped her hands. 91

"Bobby, could we?" she cried.

"Sure!" rejoined Bobby with easy nonchalance. "Why not?"

"And there'd be flowers and music and lots of people to see us?"

"Heaps!" promised Bobby.

"Oh-h!" sighed Margaret ecstatically. "And then we'll go traveling 'way over to London and Paris and Egypt and see the Alps."

"Huh?" The voice of the prospective young bridegroom sounded a little uncertain.

"We'll go traveling to see things, you know," reiterated Margaret. "There's such a lot of things I want to see."

"Oh, yes, we'll go travelin'," assured Bobby, promptly, wondering all the while if he could remember just where his mother's geography was. He should have need of it after he got home that night. London, Paris, Egypt, and the Alps—it might be well to look up the way to get there, at all events.

"I think maybe now I'll go back," said Margaret, with sudden stiffness. "They might be looking for me. Good-bye."

"Oh, I say, Maggie," called Bobby, eagerly, "when folks is engaged they——" But only the swish of white skirts answered him, and there was nothing for him to do but disconsolately to let himself out the side door before any one came and found him. 92

"And I'm going to get married, too," said Margaret to her mother half an hour later.

"You're going to get married!"

"Yes; to Bobby, you know."

The newly-made bride sat down suddenly, and threw a quick look at her husband.

"To Bobby!" she exclaimed. "Why, when—where—Bobby wasn't here."

"No," smiled Margaret. "He said he wasn't invited, but he came. We fixed it all up a little while ago. We're going to London and Paris and Egypt and see the Alps."

CHAPTER XII

The great dining-room at Hilcrest, the old Spencer homestead, was perhaps the pleasantest room in the house. The house itself crowned the highest hill that overlooked the town, and its dining-room windows and the veranda without, commanded a view of the river for miles, just where the valley was the greenest and the most beautiful. On the other side of the veranda which ran around three sides of the house, one might see the town with its myriad roofs and tall chimneys; but although these same tall chimneys represented the wealth that made possible the great Spencer estate, yet it was the side of the veranda overlooking the green valley that was the most popular with the family. It was said, to be sure, that old Jacob Spencer, who built the house, and who laid the foundations for the Spencer millions, had preferred the side that overlooked the town; and that he spent long hours gloating over the visible results of his thrift and enterprise. But old Jacob was dead now, and his son's sons reigned instead; and his son's sons, no matter how much they might value the whiz and whir and smoke of the town, preferred, when at rest, to gaze upon green hills and far-reaching meadows. This was, indeed, typical of the Spencer code—the farther away they could get from the oil that made the machinery of life run easily and noiselessly, the better pleased they were.

The dining-room looked particularly pleasant this July evening. A gentle breeze stirred the curtains at the open windows, and the setting sun peeped through the vines outside and glistened on the old family plate. Three generations of Spencers looked down from the walls on the two men and the woman sitting at the great mahogany table. The two men and the woman, however, were not looking at the sunlight, the vines, or the swaying curtains; they were looking at each other, and their eyes were troubled and questioning.

"You say she is coming next week?" asked the younger man, glancing at the letter in the other's hand.

"Yes. Tuesday afternoon."

"But, Frank, this is so—sudden," remonstrated the young fellow, laughing a little as he uttered the trite phrase. "How does it happen that I've heard so little of this young lady who is to be so unceremoniously dropped into our midst next Tuesday?"

Frank Spencer made an impatient gesture that showed how great was his perturbation.

"Come, come, Ned, don't be foolish," he protested. "You know very well that your brother's stepdaughter has been my ward for a dozen years."

"Yes, but that is all I know," rejoined the young man, quietly. "I have never seen her, and scarcely ever heard of her, and yet you expect me to take as a matter of course this strange young woman who is none of our kith nor kin, and yet who is to be one of us from henceforth forevermore!"

"The boy is right," interposed the low voice of the woman across the table. "Ned doesn't know anything about her. He was a mere child himself when it all happened, and he's been away from home most of the time since. For that matter, we don't know much about her ourselves."

"We certainly don't," sighed Frank Spencer; then he raised his head and squared his shoulders. "See here, good people, this will never do in the world," he asserted with sudden authority. "I have offered the hospitality of this house to a homeless, orphan girl, and she has accepted it. There is nothing for us to do now but to try to make her happy. After all, we needn't worry—it may turn out that she will make us happy."

"But what is she? How does she look?" catechized Ned.

His brother shook his head.

"I don't know," he replied simply.

"You don't know! But, surely you have seen her!"

"Yes, oh, yes, I have seen her, once or twice, but Margaret Kendall is not a girl whom to see is to know; besides, the circumstances were such that—well, I might as well tell the story from the beginning, particularly as you know so little of it yourself."

Frank paused, and looked at the letter in his hand. After a minute he laid it gently down. When he spoke his voice was not quite steady.

"Our brother Harry was a physician, as you know, Ned. You were twelve years old when he married a widow by the name of Kendall who lived in Houghtonsville where he had been practising. As it chanced, none of us went to the wedding. You were taken suddenly ill, and neither Della nor myself would leave you, and father was in Bermuda that winter for his health. Mrs. Kendall had a daughter, Margaret, about ten years old, who was at school somewhere in the Berkshires. It was to that school that I went when the terrible news came that Harry and his new wife had lost their lives in that awful railroad accident. That was the first time that I saw Margaret.

"The poor child was, of course, heartbroken and inconsolable; but her grief took a peculiar turn. The mere sight of me drove her almost into hysterics. She would have nothing whatever to do with me, or with any of her stepfather's people. She reasoned that if her mother had not married, there would have been no wedding journey; and if there had been no wedding journey there would have been no accident, and that her mother would then have been alive, and well.

“Arguments, pleadings, and entreaties were in vain. She would not listen to me, or even see me. She held her hands before her face and screamed if I so much as came into the room. She was nothing but a child, of course, and not even a normal one at that, for she had had a very strange life. At five she was lost in New York City, and for four years she lived on the streets and in the sweat shops, enduring almost unbelievable poverty and hardships.” 98

“By Jove!” exclaimed Ned under his breath.

“It was only seven or eight months before the wedding that she was found,” went on Frank, “and of course the influence of the wild life she had led was still with her more or less, and made her not easily subject to control. There was nothing for me to do but to leave the poor little thing where she was, particularly as there seemed to be no other place for her. She would not come with me, and she had no people of her own to whom she could turn for love and sympathy.

“As you know, poor Harry was conscious for some hours after the accident, long enough to make his will and dictate the letter to me, leaving Margaret to my care—boy though I was. I was only twenty, you see; but, really, there was no one else to whom he could leave her. That was something over thirteen years ago. Margaret must be about twenty-three now.” 99

“And you’ve not seen her since?” There was keen reproach in Ned’s voice.

Frank smiled.

“Yes, I’ve seen her twice,” he replied. “And of course I’ve written to her many times, and have always kept in touch with those she was with. She stayed at the Berkshire school five years; then—with some fear and trembling, I own—I went to see her. I found a grave-eyed little miss who answered my questions with studied politeness, and who agreed without comment to the proposition that I place her in a school where she might remain until she was ready for college—should she elect to go to college.”

“But her vacations—did she never come then?” questioned Ned.

“No. At first I did not ask her, of course. It was out of the question, as she was feeling. Some one of her teachers always looked out for her. They all pitied her, and naturally did everything they could for her, as did her mates at school. Later, when I did dare to ask her to come here, she always refused. She wrote me stiff little notes in which she informed me that she was to spend the holidays with some Blanche or Dorothy or Mabel of her acquaintance. 100

“She was nineteen when I saw her again. I found now a charming, graceful girl, with peculiarly haunting blue eyes, and heavy coils of bronze-gold hair that kinked and curled about her little pink ears in a most distracting fashion. Even now, though, she would not come to my home. She was going abroad with friends. The party included an irreproachable chaperon, so of course I had nothing to say; while as for money—she had all of her mother’s not inconsiderable fortune besides everything that had been her stepfather’s; so of course there was no question on that score.

“In the fall she entered college, and there she has been ever since, spending her vacations as usual with friends, generally traveling. When she came of age she specially requested me to make no change in her affairs, but to regard herself as my ward for the present, just as she had been. So I still call myself her guardian. This June was her graduation. I had forgotten the fact until I received the little engraved invitation a week or two ago. I thought of running down for it, but I couldn’t get away very well, and—well, I didn’t go, that’s all. But I did write and ask her to make this house her home, and here is her reply. She thanks me, and will come next Tuesday. There! now you have it. You know all that I do.” And Frank Spencer leaned back in his chair with a long sigh. 101

“But I don’t know yet what she’s like,” objected Ned.

“Neither do I.”

“Oh, but you’ve seen her.”

“Yes; and how? Do you suppose that those two or three meetings were very illuminating? No. I’ve been told this, however,” he added. “It seems that immediately after her return to her mother’s home she had the most absurd quixotic notions about sharing all she had with every ragamuffin in New York. She even carried her distress over their condition to such an extent that her mother really feared for her reason. All her teachers, therefore, were instructed to keep from her all further knowledge of poverty and trouble; and particularly to instil into her mind the fact that there was really in the world a great deal of pleasure and happiness.” 102

Over across the table Mrs. Merideth shivered a little.

“Dear me!” she sighed. “I do hope the child is well over those notions. I shouldn’t want her to mix up here with the mill people. I never did quite like those settlement women, anyway, and only think what might happen with one in one’s own family!”

“I don’t think I should worry, sister sweet,” laughed Frank. “I haven’t seen much of the young lady, but I think I have seen enough for that. I fancy the teachers succeeded in their mission. As near as I can judge, Miss Margaret Kendall does not resemble your dreaded ‘settlement worker’ in the least. However, we’ll wait and see.”

CHAPTER XIII

There was something of the precision of clockwork in matters and things at Hilcrest. A large corps of well-trained servants in charge of an excellent housekeeper left Mrs. Merideth free to go, and come, and entertain as she liked. For fifteen years now she had been mistress of Hilcrest, ever since her mother had died, in fact. Widowed herself at twenty-two after a year of married life, and the only daughter in a family of four children, she had been like a second mother to her two younger brothers. Harry, the eldest brother, had early left the home roof to study medicine. Frank, barely twenty when his brother Harry lost his life, had even then pleased his father by electing the mills as his life-work. And now, five years after that father's death, Ned was sharing his brother Frank's care and responsibility in keeping the great wheels turning and the great chimneys smoking in the town below.

Della Merideth was essentially a woman who liked—and who usually obtained—the strawberries and cream of life. Always accustomed to luxury, she demanded as a matter of course rich clothing and dainty food. That there were people in the world whose clothing was coarse and whose food was scanty, she well knew; and knowing this she was careful that her donations to the Home Missionary Society and the Woman's Guild were prompt and liberal. Beyond this her duty did not extend, she was sure. As for any personal interest in the recipients of her alms, she had none whatever; and would, indeed, have deemed it both unnecessary and unladylike that she should have had such interest. Her eyes were always on the hills and meadows on the west side of the house, and even her way to and from Hilcrest was carefully planned so that she might avoid so far as was possible, the narrow, ill-smelling streets of the town on the other side of the hill.

Frank Spencer was a hard-headed, far-seeing man of business—inside the office of Spencer & Spencer; outside, he was a delightful gentleman—a little grave, perhaps, for his thirty-three years, but none the less a favorite, particularly with anxious mothers having marriageable, but rather light-headed, daughters on their hands. His eyes were brown, his nose was straight and long, and his mouth firm and clean-cut. His whole appearance was that of a man sure of himself—and of others. To Frank Spencer the vast interests of Spencer & Spencer, as represented by the huge mills that lined the river bank, were merely one big machine; and the hundreds of men, women, and children that dragged their weary way in and out the great doors were but so many cogs in the wheels. That the cogs had hearts that ached and heads that throbbed did not occur to him. He was interested only in the smooth and silent running of the wheels themselves.

Ned was the baby of the house. In spite of his length of limb and breadth of shoulder he was still looked upon by his brother and sister as little more than a boy. School, college, and a year of travel had trained his brain, toughened his muscles, and browned his skin, and left him full of enthusiasm for his chosen work, which just now meant helping to push Spencer & Spencer to the top notch of power and prosperity.

For five years the two brothers and the widowed sister in the great house that crowned Prospect Hill, had been by themselves save for the servants and the occasional guests—and the Spencers were a clannish family, so people said. However that might have been, there certainly was not one of the three that was not conscious of a vague fear and a well-defined regret, whenever there came the thought of this strange young woman who was so soon to enter their lives.

To be a Spencer was to be hospitable, however, and the preparations for the expected guest were prompt and generous. By Tuesday the entire house, even to its inmates, was ready with a cordial welcome for the orphan girl.

In his big touring car Frank Spencer went to the station to meet his ward. With him was Mrs. Merideth, and her eyes, fully as anxiously as his, swept the crowd of passengers alighting from the long train. Almost simultaneously they saw the tall young woman in gray; and Mrs. Merideth sighed with relief as Frank gave a quick exclamation and hurried forward.

"At least she looks like a lady," Mrs. Merideth murmured, as she followed her brother.

"You are Margaret Kendall, I am sure," Frank was saying; and Mrs. Merideth saw the light leap to the girl's eyes as she gave him her hand.

"And you are Mr. Spencer, my guardian—'Uncle Frank.' Am I still to call you 'Uncle Frank'?" Mrs. Merideth heard a clear voice say. The next moment she found herself looking into what she instantly thought were the most wonderful eyes she had ever seen.

"And I am Mrs. Merideth, my dear—'Aunt Della,' I hope," she said gently, before her brother could speak.

"Thank you; and it will be 'Aunt Della,' I'm sure," smiled the girl; and again Mrs. Merideth marveled at the curious charm of the eyes that met her own.

CHAPTER XIV

The big touring car skirted the edge of the town, avoiding as usual the narrower streets, and turning as soon as possible into a wide, elm-bordered avenue.

“We have to climb to reach Hilcrest,” called Frank over his shoulder, as the car began a steep ascent.

“Then you must have a view as a reward,” rejoined Margaret.

“We do,” declared Mrs. Merideth,—“but not here,” she laughed, as the car plunged into the depths of a miniature forest.

It was a silent drive, in the main. The man in front had the car to guide. The two women in the tonneau dropped an occasional word, but for the most part their eyes were fixed on bird or flower, or on the shifting gleams of sunlight through the trees. The very fact that there was no constraint in this silence argued well for the place the orphan girl had already found in the hearts of her two companions.

Not until the top of the hill was reached, and the car swung around the broad curve of the driveway, did the full beauty of the panorama before her burst on Margaret’s eyes. She gave a low cry of delight.

“Oh, how beautiful—how wonderfully, wonderfully beautiful!” she exclaimed.

Her eyes were on the silver sheen of the river trailing along the green velvet of the valley far below—she had turned her back on the red-roofed town with its smoking chimneys.

The sun was just setting when a little later she walked across the lawn to where a rustic seat marked the abrupt descent of the hill. Far below the river turned sharply. On the left it flowed through a cañon of many-windowed walls, and under a pall of smoke. On the right it washed the shores of flowering meadows, and mirrored the sunset sky in its depths.

So absorbed was Margaret in the beauty of the scene that she did not notice the figure of a man coming up the winding path at her left. Even Ned Spencer himself did not see the girl until he was almost upon her. Then he stopped short, his lips breaking into a noiseless “Well, by Jove!”

A twig snapped under his foot at his next step, and the girl turned.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said absorbedly. “I couldn’t wait. I came right out to see it,” she finished, her eyes once more on the valley below. The brothers, at first glance, looked wonderfully alike, and Margaret had unhesitatingly taken Ned to be Frank.

Ned did not speak. He, too, like his sister an hour before, had fallen under the spell of a pair of wondrous blue eyes.

“It seems to me,” said the girl, slowly, “that nothing in the world would ever trouble me if I had that to look at.”

“It seems so to me, too,” agreed Ned—but he was not looking at the view.

The girl turned sharply. She gave a little cry of dismay. The embarrassed red flew to her cheeks.

“Oh, you—you are not Uncle Frank at all!” she stammered.

A sudden light of comprehension broke over Ned’s face. And so this was Margaret. How stupid of him not to have known at once!

He laughed lightly and made a low bow.

“I have not that honor,” he confessed. “But you—you must be Miss Kendall.”

“And you?”

“I?” Ned smiled quizzically. “I? Oh, I am—your *Uncle* Ned!” he announced; and his voice and his emphasis told her that he fully appreciated his privilege in being twenty-five—and uncle to a niece of twenty-three.

CHAPTER XV

By the end of the month the family at Hilcrest wondered how they had ever lived before they saw the world and everything in it through the blue eyes of Margaret Kendall—the world and everything in it seemed so much more beautiful now!

Never were the long mornings in the garden or on the veranda so delightful to Mrs. Merideth as now with a bright, sympathetic girl to laugh, chat, or keep silent as the whim of the moment dictated; and never were the summer evenings so charming to Frank as now when one might lie back in one’s chair or hammock and listen to a dreamy nocturne or a rippling waltz-song, and realize that the musician was no bird of passage, but that she was one’s own beloved ward and was even now at home. As for Ned—never were the golf links in so fine a shape, nor the tennis court and croquet ground so alluring; and never had he known before how many really delightful trips there were within a day’s run for his motor-car.

And yet——

“Della, do you think Margaret is happy?” asked Frank one day, as he and his sister and Ned were watching the sunset from the west veranda. Margaret had gone into the house, pleading a

headache as an excuse for leaving them.

Della was silent. It was Ned who answered, indignantly.

“Why, Frank, of course she’s happy!”

“I’m not so—sure,” hesitated Frank. Then Mrs. Merideth spoke.

“She’s happy, yes; but she’s—restless.”

Frank leaned forward.

“That’s it exactly,” he declared with conviction. “She’s restless—and what’s the matter? That’s what I want to know.”

“Nonsense! it’s just high spirits,” cut in Ned, with an impatient gesture. “Margaret’s perfectly happy. Doesn’t she laugh and sing and motor and play tennis all day?”

“Yes,” retorted his brother, “she does; but behind it all there’s a curious something that I can’t get at. It is as if she were—were trying to get away from something—something within herself.”

Mrs. Merideth nodded her head. 114

“I know,” she said. “I’ve seen it, too.”

“Ah, you have!” Frank turned to his sister with a troubled frown. “Well, what is it?”

“I don’t know.” Mrs. Merideth paused, her eyes on the distant sky-line. “I have thought—once or twice,” she resumed slowly, “that Margaret might be—in love.”

“In love!” cried two voices in shocked amazement.

Had Mrs. Merideth been observant she might have seen the sudden paling of a smooth-shaven face, and the quick clinching of a strong white hand that rested on the arm of a chair near her; but she was not observant—in this case, at least—and she went on quietly.

“Yes; but on the whole I’m inclined to doubt that now.”

“Oh, you are,” laughed Ned, a little nervously. His brother did not speak.

“Yes,” repeated Mrs. Merideth; “but I haven’t decided yet what it is.”

“Well, I for one don’t believe it’s anything,” declared Ned, stubbornly. “To me she seems happy, and I believe she is.”

Frank shook his head. 115

“No,” he said. “By her own confession she has been flitting from one place to another all over the world; and, though perhaps she does not realize it herself, I believe her coming here was merely another effort on her part to get away from this something—this something that while within herself, perhaps, is none the less pursuing her, and making her restless and unhappy.”

“But what can it be?” argued Ned. “She’s not so different from other girls—only nicer. She likes good times and pretty clothes, and is always ready for any fun that’s going. I’m sure it isn’t anything about those socialistic notions that Della used to worry about,” he added laughingly. “She’s got well over those—if she ever had them, indeed. I don’t believe she’s looked toward the mills since she’s been here—much less wanted to know anything about the people that work in them!”

“No, it isn’t that,” agreed Frank.

“Perhaps it isn’t anything,” broke in Della, with sudden cheeriness. “Maybe it is a little dull here for her after all her gay friends and interesting travels. Perhaps she is a little homesick, but is trying to make us think everything is all right, and she overdoes it. Anyway, we’ll ask some nice 116
people up for a week or two. I fancy we all need livening up. We’re getting morbid. Come, whom shall we have?”

CHAPTER XVI 117

It had been a particularly delightful day with the Hilcrest house-party. They had gone early in the morning to Silver Lake for a picnic. A sail on the lake, a delicious luncheon, and a climb up “Hilltop” had filled every hour with enjoyment until five o’clock when they had started for home.

Two of the guests had brought their own motor-cars to Hilcrest, and it was in one of these that Miss Kendall was making the homeward trip.

“And you call this a ‘runabout,’ Mr. Brandon?” she laughed gaily, as the huge car darted forward. “I should as soon think of having an elephant for an errand boy.”

Brandon laughed.

“But just wait until you see the elephant get over the ground,” he retorted. “And, after all, the car isn’t so big when you compare it with Harlow’s or Frank’s. It only seats two, you know, but its 118
engine is quite as powerful as either of theirs. I want you to see what it can do,” he finished, as

he began gradually to increase their speed.

For some time neither spoke. The road ran straight ahead in a narrowing band of white that lost itself in a thicket of green far in the distance. Yet almost immediately—it seemed to Margaret—the green was at their right and their left, and the road had unwound another white length of ribbon that flung itself across the valley and up the opposite hill to the sky-line.

Houses, trees, barns, and bushes rushed by like specters, and the soft August air swept by her cheeks like a November gale. Not until the opposite hill was reached, however, did Brandon slacken speed.

“You see,” he exulted, “we can just annihilate space with this!”

“You certainly can,” laughed Margaret, a little hysterically. “And you may count yourself lucky if you don’t annihilate anything else.”

Brandon brought the car almost to a stop.

“I was a brute. I frightened you,” he cried with quick contrition. 119

The girl shook her head. A strange light came to her eyes.

“No; I liked it,” she answered. “I liked it—too well. Do you know? I never dare to run a car by myself—very much. I learned how, and had a little runabout of my own at college, and I run one now sometimes. But it came over me one day—the power there was under my fingers. Almost involuntarily I began to let it out. I went faster and faster—and yet I did not go half fast enough. Something seemed to be pushing me on, urging me to even greater and greater speed. I wanted to get away, away——! Then I came to myself. I was miles from where I should have been, and in a locality I knew nothing about. I had no little difficulty in getting back to where I belonged, besides having a fine or two to pay, I believe. I was frightened and ashamed, for everywhere I heard of stories of terrified men, women, children, and animals, and of how I had narrowly escaped having death itself to answer for as a result of my mad race through the country. And yet—even now—to-day, I felt that wild exhilaration of motion. I did not want to stop. I wanted to go on and on——” She paused suddenly, and fell back in her seat. “You see,” she laughed with a 120
complete change of manner, “I am not to be trusted as a chauffeur.”

“I see,” nodded Brandon, a little soberly; then, with a whimsical smile: “Perhaps I should want the brakes shifted to my side of the car—if I rode with you!... But, after all, when you come right down to the solid comfort of motoring, you can take it best by jogging along like this at a good sensible rate of speed that will let you see something of the country you are passing through. Look at those clouds. We shall have a gorgeous sunset to-night.”

It was almost an hour later that Brandon stopped his car where two roads crossed, and looked behind him.

“By George, where are those people?” he queried.

“But we started first, and we came rapidly for a time,” reminded the girl.

“I know, but we’ve been simply creeping for the last mile or two,” returned the man. “I slowed up purposely to fall in behind the rest. I’m not so sure I know the way from here—but perhaps you do.” And he turned his eyes questioningly to hers. 121

“Not I,” she laughed. “But I thought you did.”

“So did I,” he grumbled. “I’ve been over this road enough in times past. Oh, I can get back to Hilcrest all right,” he added reassuringly. “It’s only that I don’t remember which is the best way. One road takes us through the town and is not so pleasant. I wanted to avoid that if possible.”

“Never mind; let’s go on,” proposed the girl. “It’s getting late, and we might miss them even if we waited. They may have taken another road farther back. If they thought you knew the way they wouldn’t feel in duty bound to keep track of us, and they may have already reached home. I don’t mind a bit which road we take.”

“All right,” acquiesced Brandon. “Just as you say. I think this is the one. Anyhow, we’ll try it.” And he turned his car to the left.

The sun had dipped behind the hills, and the quick chill of an August evening was in the air. Margaret shivered and reached for her coat. The road wound in and out through a scrubby growth of trees, then turned sharply and skirted the base of a steep hill. Beyond the next turn it dropped in a gentle descent and ran between wide open fields. A house appeared, then another 122
and another. A man and a woman walked along the edge of the road and stopped while the automobile passed. The houses grew more frequent, and children and small dogs scurried across the road to a point of safety.

“By George, I believe we’ve got the wrong road now,” muttered Brandon with a frown. “Shall we go back?”

“No, no,” demurred the girl. “What does it matter? It’s only another way around, and perhaps no longer than the other.”

The road turned and dropped again. The hill was steeper now. The air grew heavy and fanned Margaret’s cheek with a warm breath as if from an oven. Unconsciously she loosened the coat at her throat.

“Why, how warm it is!” she exclaimed.

“Yes. I fancy there’s no doubt now where we are,” frowned Brandon. “I thought as much,” he finished as the car swung around a curve.

Straight ahead the road ran between lines of squat brown houses with men, women, and children swarming on the door-steps or hanging on the fences. Beyond rose tier upon tier of red and brown roofs flanked on the left by the towering chimneys of the mills. Still farther beyond and a little to the right, just where the sky was reddest, rose the terraced slopes of Prospect Hill crowned by the towers and turrets of Hilcrest.

“We can at least see where we want to be,” laughed Brandon. “Fine old place—shows up great against that sky; doesn’t it?”

The girl at his side did not answer. Her eyes had widened a little, and her cheeks had lost their bright color. She was not looking at the pile of brick and stone on top of Prospect Hill, but at the ragged little urchins and pallid women that fell back from the roadway before the car. The boys yelled derisively, and a baby cried. Margaret shrank back in her seat, and Brandon, turning quickly, saw the look on her face. His own jaw set into determined lines.

“We’ll be out of this soon, Miss Kendall,” he assured her. “You mustn’t mind them. As if it wasn’t bad enough to come here anyway but that I must needs come now just when the day-shift is getting home!”

“The day-shift?”

“Yes; the hands who work days, you know.”

“But don’t they all work—days?”

Brandon laughed.

“Hardly!”

“You mean, they work *nights*?”

“Yes.” He threw a quizzical smile into her startled eyes. “By the way,” he observed, “you’d better not ask Frank in that tone of voice if they work nights. That night-shift is a special pet of his. He says it’s one great secret of the mills’ prosperity—having two shifts. Not that his are the only mills that run nights, of course—there are plenty more.”

Margaret’s lips parted, but before she could speak there came a hoarse shout and a quick cry of terror. The next instant the car under Brandon’s skilful hands swerved sharply and just avoided a collision with a boy on a bicycle.

“Narrow shave, that,” muttered Brandon. “He wasn’t even looking where he was going.”

Margaret shuddered. She turned her gaze to the right and to the left. Everywhere were wan faces and sunken eyes. With a little cry she clutched Brandon’s arm.

“Can’t we go faster—faster,” she moaned. “I want to get away—away!”

For answer came the sharp “honk-honk” of the horn, and the car bounded forward. With a shout the crowd fell back, and with another “honk-honk” Brandon took the first turn to the right.

“I think we’re out of the worst of it,” he cried in Margaret’s ear. “If we keep to the right, we’ll go through only the edge of the town.” Even as he spoke, the way cleared more and more before them, and the houses grew farther apart.

The town was almost behind them, and their speed had considerably lessened, when Margaret gave a scream of horror. Almost instantly Brandon brought the car to a stop and leaped to the ground. Close by one of the big-rimmed wheels lay a huddled little heap of soiled and ragged pink calico; but before Brandon could reach it, the heap stirred, and lifted itself. From beneath a tangled thatch of brown curls looked out two big brown eyes.

“I reckon mebbe I felled down,” said a cheery voice that yet sounded a little dazed. “I reckon I did.”

“Good heavens, baby, I reckon you did!” breathed the man in glad relief. “And you may thank your lucky stars ’twas no worse.”

“T’ank lucky stars. What are lucky stars?” demanded the small girl, interestedly.

“Eh? Oh, lucky stars—why, they’re—what are lucky stars, Miss Kendall?”

Margaret did not answer. She did not seem to hear. With eyes that carried a fascinated terror in their blue depths, she was looking at the dirty little feet and the ragged dress of the child before her.

“T’ank lucky stars,” murmured the little girl again, putting out a cautious finger and just touching the fat rubber tire of the wheel that had almost crushed out her life.

Brandon shuddered involuntarily and drew the child away.

“What’s your name, little girl?” he asked gently.

“Maggie.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m ‘most five goin’ on six an’ I’ll be twelve ter-morrer.”

Brandon smiled.

"And where do you live?" he continued.

A thin little claw of a finger pointed to an unpainted, shabby-looking cottage across the street. At that moment a shrill voice called: "Maggie, Maggie, what ye doin'? Come here, child." And a tall, gaunt woman appeared in the doorway.

Maggie turned slowly; but scarcely had the little bare feet taken one step when the girl in the automobile stirred as if waking from sleep.

"Here—quick—little girl, take this," she cried, tearing open the little jeweled purse at her belt, and thrusting all its contents into the small, grimy hands.

Maggie stared in wonder. Then her whole face lighted up.

"Lucky stars!" she cried gleefully, her eyes on the shining coins. "T'ank lucky stars!" And she turned and ran with all her small might toward the house.

"Quick—come—let us go," begged Margaret, "before the mother sees—the money!" And Brandon, smiling indulgently at the generosity that was so fearful of receiving thanks, lost no time in putting a long stretch of roadway between themselves and the tall, gaunt woman behind them.

CHAPTER XVII

"Stars—t'ank lucky stars," Maggie was still shouting gleefully when she reached her mother's side.

Mrs. Durgin bent keen eyes on her young daughter's face.

"Maggie, what was they sayin' to ye?" she began, pulling the little girl into the house. Suddenly her jaw dropped. She stooped and clutched the child's hands. "Why, Maggie, it's money—stacks of it!" she exclaimed, prying open the small fingers.

"Stars—lucky stars!" cooed Maggie. Maggie liked new words and phrases, and she always said them over and over until they were new no longer.

Mrs. Durgin shook her daughter gently, yet determinedly. Her small black eyes looked almost large, so wide were they with amazement.

"Maggie, Maggie, tell me—what did they say to ye?" she demanded again. "Why did they give ye all this money?"

Maggie was silent. Her brow was drawn into a thoughtful frown.

"But, Maggie, think—there must 'a' been somethin'. What did ye do?"

"There wa'n't," insisted the child. "I jest felled down an' got up, an' they said it."

"Said what?"

"'T'ank lucky stars.'"

A sudden thought sent a quick flash of fear to Mrs. Durgin's eyes.

"Maggie, they didn't hurt ye," she cried, dropping on her knees and running swift, anxious fingers over the thin little arms and legs and body. "They didn't hurt ye!"

Maggie shook her head. At that moment a shadow darkened the doorway, and the kneeling woman glanced up hastily.

"Oh, it's you, Mis' Magoon," she said to the small, tired-looking woman in the doorway.

"Yes, it's me," sighed the woman, dragging herself across the room to a chair. "What time did Nellie leave here?"

"Why, I dunno—mebbe four o'clock. Why?"

The woman's face contracted with a sharp spasm of pain.

"She wa'n't within half a mile of the mill when I met her, yet she was pantin' an' all out o' breath then. She'll be late, 'course, an' you know what that means."

"Yes, I know," sighed Mrs. Durgin, sympathetically. "She—she hadn't orter gone."

Across the room Mrs. Magoon's head came up with a jerk.

"Don't ye s'pose I know that? The child's sick, an' I know it. But what diff'rence does that make? She works, don't she?"

For a moment Mrs. Durgin did not speak. Gradually her eyes drifted back to Maggie and the little pile of coins on the table.

"Mis' Magoon, see," she cried eagerly, "what the lady give Maggie. They was in one o' them 'nauty-mobiles,' as Maggie calls 'em, an' Maggie felled down in the road. She wa'n't hurt a mite—

not even scratched, but they give her all this money."

The woman on the other side of the room sniffed disdainfully.

"Well, what of it? They'd oughter give it to her," she asserted.

"But they wa'n't ter blame, an' they didn't hurt her none—not a mite," argued the other. 131

"No thanks ter them, I'll warrant," snapped Mrs. Magoon. "For my part, I wouldn't tech their old money." Then, crossly, but with undeniable interest, she asked: "How much was it?"

Mrs. Durgin laughed.

"Never you mind," she retorted, as she gathered up the coins from the table; "but thar's enough so's I'm goin' ter get them cough-drops fur Nellie, anyhow. So!" And she turned her back and pretended not to hear the faint remonstrances from the woman over by the window. Later, when she had bought the medicine and had placed it in Mrs. Magoon's hands, the remonstrances were repeated in a higher key, and were accompanied again with an angry snarl against the world in general and automobiles in particular.

"But why do ye hate 'em so?" demanded Mrs. Durgin, "—them autymobiles? They hain't one of 'em teched ye, as I knows of."

There was no answer.

"I don't believe ye knows yerself," declared the questioner then; and at the taunt the other raised her head.

"Mebbe I don't," she flamed, "an' 'tain't them I hate, anyway—it's the folks in 'em. It's rich folks. 132
I've allers hated 'em anywheres, but 'twa'n't never so bad as now since them things came. They look so—so comfortable—the folks a-leanin' back on their cushions; an' so—so *free*, as if there wa'n't nothin' that could bother 'em. 'Course I knew before that there was rich folks, an' that they had fine clo's an' good things ter eat, an' shows an' parties, an' spent money; but I didn't *see* 'em, an' now I do. I *see* 'em, I tell ye, an' it makes me realize how I ain't comfortable like they be, nor Nellie ain't neither!"

"But they ain't all bad—rich folks," argued the thin, black-eyed woman, earnestly. "Some of 'em is good."

The other shook her head.

"I hain't had the pleasure o' meetin' that kind," she rejoined grimly.

"Well, I have," retorted Maggie's mother with some spirit. "Look at that lady ter-night what give Maggie all that money."

There was no answer, and after a moment Mrs. Durgin went on. Her voice was lower now, and not quite clear.

"Thar was another one, too, an' she was jest like a angel out o' heaven. It was years ago—much 133
as twelve or fourteen, when I lived in New York. She was the mother of the nicest an' prettiest little girl I ever see—the one I named my Maggie for. An' she asked us ter her home an' we stayed weeks, an' rode in her carriages, an' ate ter her table, an' lived right with her jest as she did. An' when we come back ter New York she come with us an' took us out of the cellar an' found a beautiful place fur us, all sun an' winders, an' she paid up the rent fur us 'way ahead whole months. An' thar was all the Whalens an' me an' the twins."

"Well," prompted Mrs. Magoon, as the speaker paused. "What next? You ain't in New York, an' she ain't a-doin' it now, is she? Where is she?"

Mrs. Durgin turned her head away.

"I don't know," she said.

The other sniffed.

"I thought as much. It don't last—it never does."

"But it would 'a' lasted with her," cut in Mrs. Durgin, sharply. "She wa'n't the kind what gives up. She's sick or dead, or somethin'—I know she is. But thar's others what has lasted. That Mont- 134
Lawn I was tellin' ye of, whar I learned them songs we sings, an' whar I learned 'most ev'rythin' good thar is in me—*that's* done by rich folks, an' that's lasted! They pays three dollars an' it lets some poor little boy or girl go thar an' stay ten whole days jest eatin' an' sleepin' an' playin'. An' if I was in New York now my Maggie herself'd be a-goin' one o' these days—you'd see! I tell ye, rich folks ain't bad—all of 'em, an' they do do things 'sides loll back in them autymobiles!"

Mrs. Magoon stared, then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Mebbe," she admitted grudgingly. "Say—er—Mis' Durgin, how much was that money Maggie got—eh?"

CHAPTER XVIII 135

Margaret Kendall did not sleep well the night after the picnic at Silver Lake. She was restless, and she tossed from side to side finding nowhere a position that brought ease of mind and body. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but her active brain painted the dark with a panorama of the day's happenings, and whether her eyes were open or closed, she was forced to see it. There were the lake, the mountain, and the dainty luncheon spread on the grass; and there were the faces of the merry friends who had accompanied her. There were the shifting scenes of the homeward ride, too, with the towers of Hilcrest showing dark and clear-cut against a blood-red sky. But everywhere, from the lake, the mountain, and even from Hilcrest itself, looked out strange wan faces with hollow cheeks and mournful eyes; and everywhere fluttered the ragged skirts of a child's pink calico dress.

It was two o'clock when Margaret arose, thrust her feet into a pair of bed-slippers and her arms 136
into the sleeves of a long, loose dressing-gown. There was no moon, but a starlit sky could be seen through the open windows, and Margaret easily found her way across the room to the door that led to the balcony.

Margaret's room, like the dining-room below, looked toward the west and the far-reaching meadows; but from the turn of the balcony where it curved to the left, one might see the town, and it was toward this curve that Margaret walked now. Once there she stopped and stood motionless, her slender hands on the balcony rail.

The night was wonderfully clear. The wide dome of the sky twinkled with a myriad of stars, and seemed to laugh at the town below with its puny little lights blinking up out of the dark where the streets crossed and recrossed. Over by the river where the mills pointed big black fingers at the sky, however, the lights did not blink. They blazed in tier upon tier and line upon line of windows, and they glowed with a never-ending glare that sent a shudder to the watching girl on the balcony.

"And they're working now—*now*!" she almost sobbed; then she turned with a little cry and ran 137
down the balcony toward her room where was waiting the cool soft bed with the lavender-scented sheets.

In spite of the restless night she had spent, Margaret arose early the next morning. The house was very quiet when she came down-stairs, and only the subdued rustle of the parlor maid's skirts broke the silence of the great hall which was also the living-room at Hilcrest.

"Good-morning, Betty."

"Good-morning, Miss," courtesied the girl.

Miss Kendall had almost reached the outer hall door when she turned abruptly.

"Betty, you—you don't know a little child named—er—'Maggie'; do you?" she asked.

"Ma'am?" Betty almost dropped the vase she was dusting.

"'Maggie,'—a little girl named 'Maggie.' She's one of the—the mill people's children, I think."

Betty drew herself erect.

"No, Miss, I don't," she said crisply.

"No, of course not," murmured Miss Kendall, unconsciously acknowledging the reproach in 138
Betty's voice. Then she turned and went out the wide hall door.

Twice she walked from end to end of the long veranda, but not once did she look toward the mills; and when she sat down a little later, her chair was so placed that it did not command a view of the red and brown roofs of the town.

Miss Kendall was restless that day. She rode and drove and sang and played, and won at golf and tennis; but behind it all was a feverish gayety that came sometimes perilously near to recklessness. Frank Spencer and his sister watched her with troubled eyes, and even Ned gave an anxious frown once or twice. Just before dinner Brandon came upon her alone in the music room where she was racing her fingers through the runs and trills of an impromptu at an almost impossible speed.

"If you take me motoring with you to-night, Miss Kendall," he said whimsically, when the music had ceased with a crashing chord, "if you take me to-night, I shall make sure that the brakes *are* on my side of the car!"

The girl laughed, then grew suddenly grave.

"You would need to," she acceded; "but—I shall not take you or any one else motoring to-night." 139

In the early evening after dinner Margaret sought her guardian. He was at his desk in his own special den out of the library, and the door was open.

"May I come in?" she asked.

Spencer sprang to his feet.

"By all means," he cried as he placed a chair. "You don't often honor me—like this."

"But this is where you do business, when at home; isn't it?" she inquired. "And I—I have come to do business."

The man laughed.

“So it’s business—just plain sordid business—to which I am indebted for this,” he bemoaned playfully. “Well, and what is it? Income too small for expenses?” He chuckled a little, and he could afford to. Margaret had made no mistake in asking him still to have the handling of her property. The results had been eminently satisfactory both to his pride and her pocketbook.

“No, no, it’s not that; it’s the mills.”

“The mills!” 140

“Yes. Is it quite—quite necessary to work—nights?”

For a moment the man stared wordlessly; then he fell back in his chair.

“Why, Margaret, what in the world——” he stopped from sheer inability to proceed. He had suddenly remembered the stories he had heard of the early life of this girl before him, and of her childhood’s horror at the difference between the lot of the rich and the poor.

“Last night we—we came through the town,” explained Margaret, a little feverishly; “and Mr. Brandon happened to mention that they worked—nights.”

The man at the desk roused himself.

“Yes, I see,” he said kindly. “You were surprised, of course. But don’t worry, my child, or let it fret you a moment. It’s nothing new. They are used to it. They have done it for years.”

“But at night—all night—it doesn’t seem right. And it must be so—hard. *Must* they do it?”

“Why, of course. Other mills run nights; why shouldn’t ours? They expect it, Margaret. Besides, 141
they are paid for it. Come, come, dear girl, just look at it sensibly. Why, it’s the night work that helps to swell your dividends.”

Margaret winced.

“I—I think I’d prefer them smaller,” she faltered. She hesitated, then spoke again. “There’s another thing, too, I wanted to ask you about. There was a little girl, Maggie. She lives in one of those shabby, unpainted houses at the foot of the hill. I want to do something for her. Will you see that this reaches her mother, please?” And she held out a fat roll of closely folded bills. “Now don’t—please don’t!” she cried, as she saw the man’s remonstrative gesture. “Please don’t say you can’t, and that indiscriminate giving encourages pauperism. I used to hear that so often at school whenever I wanted to give something, and I—I hated it. If you could have seen that poor little girl yesterday!—you will see that she gets it; won’t you?”

“But, Margaret,” began the man helplessly, “I don’t know the child—there are so many——” he stopped, and Margaret picked up the dropped thread.

“But you can find out,” she urged. “You must find out. Her name’s Maggie. You can inquire— 142
some one will know.”

“But, don’t you see——” the man’s face cleared suddenly. “I’ll give it to Della,” he broke off in quick relief. “She runs the charity part, and she’ll know just what to do with it. Meanwhile, let me thank you——”

“No, no,” interrupted Margaret, rising to go. “It is you I have to thank for doing it for me,” she finished as she hurried from the room.

“By George!” muttered the man, as he looked at the denominations of the bills in his fingers. “I’m not so sure but we may have our hands full, after all—certainly, if she keeps on as she’s begun!”

CHAPTER XIX 143

It was after eight o’clock. The morning, for so early in September, was raw and cold. A tall young fellow, with alert gray eyes and a square chin hurried around the corner of one of the great mills, and almost knocked down a small girl who was coming toward him with head bent to the wind.

“Heigh-ho!” he cried, then stopped short. The child had fallen back and was leaning against the side of the building in a paroxysm of coughing. She was thin and pale, and looked as if she might be eleven years old. “Well, well!” he exclaimed as soon as the child caught her breath. “I reckon there’s room for both of us in the world, after all.” Then, kindly: “Where were you going?”

“Home, sir.”

He threw a keen look into her face.

“Are you one of the mill girls?”

“Yes, sir.” 144

“Night shift?”

She nodded.

“But it’s late—it’s after eight o’clock. Why didn’t you go home with the rest?”

The child hesitated. Her eyes swerved from his gaze. She looked as if she wanted to run away.

“Come, come,” he urged kindly. “Answer me. I won’t hurt you. I may help you. Let us go around here where the wind doesn’t blow so.” And he led the way to the sheltered side of the building. “Now tell us all about it. Why didn’t you go home with the rest?”

“I did start to, sir, but I was so tired, an’—an’ I coughed so, I stopped to rest. It was nice an’ cool out here, an’ I was so hot in there.” She jerked her thumb toward the mill.

“Yes, yes, I know,” he said hastily; and his lips set into stern lines as he thought of the hundreds of other little girls that found the raw morning “nice and cool” after the hot, moist air of the mills.

“But don’t you see,” he protested earnestly, “that that’s the very time you mustn’t stop and rest? You take cold, and that’s what makes you cough. You shouldn’t be——” he stopped abruptly. 145
“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Nellie Magoon.”

“How old are you?”

The thin little face before him grew suddenly drawn and old, and the eyes met his with a look that was half-shrewd, half-terrified, and wholly defiant.

“I’m thirteen, sir.”

“How old were you when you began to work here?”

“Twelve, sir.” The answer was prompt and sure. The child had evidently been well trained.

“Where do you live?”

“Over on the Prospect Hill road.”

“But that’s a long way from here.”

“Yes, sir. I does get tired.”

“And you’ve walked it a good many times, too; haven’t you?” said the man, quietly. “Let’s see, how long is it that you’ve worked at the mills?”

“Two years, sir.”

A single word came sharply from between the man’s close-shut teeth, and Nellie wondered why the kind young man with the pleasant eyes should suddenly look so very cross and stern. At that 146
moment, too, she remembered something—she had seen this man many times about the mills. Why was he questioning her? Perhaps he was not going to let her work any more, and if he did not let her work, what would her mother say and do?

“Please, sir, I must go, quick,” she cried suddenly, starting forward. “I’m all well now, an’ I ain’t tired a mite. I’ll be back ter-night. Jest remember I’m thirteen, an’ I likes ter work in the mills—I likes ter, sir,” she shouted back at him.

“Humph!” muttered the man, as he watched the frail little figure disappear down the street. “I thought as much!” Then he turned and strode into the mill. “Oh, Mr. Spencer, I’d like to speak to you, please, sir,” he called, hurrying forward, as he caught sight of the younger member of the firm of Spencer & Spencer.

Fifteen minutes later Ned Spencer entered his brother’s office, and dropped into the nearest chair.

“Well,” he began wearily, “McGinnis is on the war-path again.”

Frank smiled. 147

“So? What’s up now?”

“Oh, same old thing—children working under age. By his own story the girl herself swears she’s thirteen, but he says she isn’t.”

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

“Perhaps he knows better than the girl’s parents,” he observed dryly. “He’d better look her up on our registers, or he might ask to see her certificate.”

Ned laughed. He made an impatient gesture.

“Good heavens, Frank,” he snapped; “as if ’twas our fault that they lie so about the kids’ ages! They’d put a babe in arms at the frames if they could. But McGinnis—by the way, where did you get that fellow? and how long have you had him? I can’t remember when he wasn’t here. He acts as if he owned the whole concern, and had a personal interest in every bobbin in it.”

“That’s exactly it,” laughed Frank. “He *has* a personal interest, and that’s why I keep him, and put up with some of his meddling that’s not quite so pleasant. He’s as honest as the daylight, and as faithful as the sun.”

“Where did you get him? He must have been here ages.” 148

“Ages? Well, for twelve—maybe thirteen years, to be exact. He was a mere boy, fourteen or fifteen, when he came. He said he was from Houghtonsville, and that he had known Dr. Harry Spencer. He asked for work—any kind, and brought good references. We used him about the office for awhile, then gradually worked him into the mills. He was bright and capable, and untiring in his efforts to please, so we pushed him ahead rapidly. He went to night school at once,

and has taken one or two of those correspondence courses until he's acquired really a good education.

"He's practically indispensable to me now—anyhow, I found out that he was when he was laid up for a month last winter. He stands between me and the hands like a strong tower, and takes any amount of responsibility off my shoulders. You'll see for yourself when you've been here longer. The hands like him, and will do anything for him. That's why I put up with some of his notions. They're getting pretty frequent of late, however, and he's becoming a little too meddlesome. I may have to call him down a peg."

"You'd think so, I fancy, if you had heard him run on about this mill-girl half an hour ago," laughed Ned. "He said he should speak to you." 149

"Very good. Then I can speak to him," retorted the other, grimly.

CHAPTER XX 150

Early in the second week of September the houseful of guests at Hilcrest went away, leaving the family once more alone.

"It seems good; doesn't it—just by ourselves," said Margaret that first morning at breakfast. As she spoke three pairs of eyes flashed a message of exultant thankfulness to each other, and three heads nodded an "I told you so!" when Margaret's gaze was turned away. Later, Mrs. Merideth put the sentiment into words, as she followed her brothers to the door.

"You see, I was right," she declared. "Margaret only needed livening up. She's all right now, and will be contented here with us."

"Sure!" agreed Ned, as he stepped out on to the veranda. Frank paused a moment.

"Has she ever been to you again, Della, with money, or—or anything?" he asked in a low voice.

"No, never," replied Mrs. Merideth. "She asked once if I'd found the child, Maggie, to give the money to, and I evaded a direct reply. I told her I had put the money into the hands of the Guild, and that they were in constant touch with all cases of need. I got her interested in talking of something else, and she did not say anything more about it." 151

"Good! It's the best way. You know her history, and how morbid she got when she was a child. It won't do to run any chances of that happening again; and I fear 'twouldn't take much to bring it back. She was not a little excited when she brought the money in to me that night. We must watch out sharp," he finished as he passed through the door, and hurried down the steps after his brother.

Back in the dining-room Margaret had wandered listlessly to the window. It had been some weeks since she had seen a long day before her with no plans to check off the time into hours and half-hours of expected happenings. She told herself that it was a relief and that she liked it—but her fingers tapped idly upon the window, and her eyes gazed absent-mindedly at a cloud sailing across a deep blue sky. 152

After a time she turned to the door near by and stepped out upon the veranda. She could hear voices from around the corner, and aimlessly she wandered toward them. But before she had reached the turn the voices had ceased; and a minute later she saw Frank and Ned step into the waiting automobile and whir rapidly down the driveway.

Mrs. Merideth had disappeared into the house, and Margaret found herself alone. Slowly she walked toward the railing and looked at the town far below. The roofs showed red and brown and gray in the sunlight, and were packed close together save at the outer edges, where they thinned into a straggling fringe of small cottages and dilapidated shanties.

Margaret shivered with repulsion. How dreadful it must be to live like that—no air, no sun, no view of the sky and of the cool green valley! And there were so many of them—those poor creatures down there, with their wasted forms and sunken eyes! She shuddered again as she thought of how they had thronged the road on the day of the picnic at Silver Lake—and then she turned and walked with resolute steps to the farther side of the veranda where only the valley and the hills met her eyes. 153

It had been like this with Margaret every day since that memorable ride home with Mr. Brandon. Always her steps, her eyes, and her thoughts had turned toward the town; and always, with uncompromising determination, they had been turned about again by sheer force of will until they looked toward the valley with its impersonal green and silver. Until now there had been gay companions and absorbing pastimes to make this turning easy and effectual; now there was only the long unbroken day of idleness in prospect, and the turning was neither so easy nor so effectual. The huddled roofs and dilapidated shanties of the town looked up at her even from the green of the valley; and the wasted forms and hollow eyes of the mill workers blurred the sheen of the river.

"I'll go down there," she cried aloud with sudden impulsiveness. "I'll go back through the way we came up; then perhaps I'll be cured." And she hurried away to order the runabout to be brought

to the door for her use.

To Margaret it was all very clear. She needed but a sane, daylight ride through those streets down there to drive away forever the morbid fancies that had haunted her so long. She told herself that it was the hour, the atmosphere, the half-light, that had painted the picture of horror for her. Under the clear light of the sun those swarming multitudes would be merely men, women, and children, not haunting ghosts of misery. There was the child, Maggie, too. Perhaps she might be found, and it would be delightful, indeed, to see for herself the comforting results of the spending of that roll of money she had put into her guardian's hands some time before.

Of all this Margaret thought, and it was therefore with not unpleasant anticipations that she stepped into the runabout a little later, and waved a good-bye to Mrs. Merideth, with a cheery: "I'm off for a little spin, Aunt Della. I'll be back before luncheon."

Margaret was very sure that she knew the way, and some distance below the house she made the turn that would lead to what was known as the town road. The air was fresh and sweet, and the sun flickered through the trees in dancing little flecks of light that set the girl's pulses to throbbing in sympathy, and caused her to send the car bounding forward as if it, too, had red blood in its veins. Far down the hill the woods thinned rapidly, and a house or two appeared. Margaret went more slowly now. Somewhere was the home of little Maggie, and she did not want to miss it.

Houses and more houses appeared, and the trees were left behind. There was now only the glaring sunlight showing up in all their barrenness the shabby little cottages with their dooryards strewn with tin cans and bits of paper, and swarming with half-clothed, crying babies.

From somewhere came running a saucy-faced, barefooted urchin, then another and another, until the road seemed lined with them.

"Hi, thar, look at de buz-wagon wid de gal in it!" shrieked a gleeful voice, and instantly the cry was taken up and echoed from across the street with shrill catcalls and derisive laughter.

Margaret was frightened. She tooted her horn furiously, and tried to forge ahead; but the children, reading aright the terror in her eyes, swarmed about her until she was forced to bring the car almost to a stop lest she run over the small squirming bodies.

With shrieks of delight the children instantly saw their advantage, and lost no time in making the most of it. They leaped upon the low step and clung to the sides and front of the car like leeches. Two larger boys climbed to the back and hung there with swinging feet, their jeering lips close to Miss Kendall's shrinking ears. A third boy, still more venturesome, had almost reached the vacant seat at Miss Kendall's side, when above the din of hoots and laughter, sounded an angry voice and a sharp command.

CHAPTER XXI

It had been young McGinnis's intention to look up the home and the parents of the little mill-girl, Nellie Magoon, at once, and see if something could not be done to keep—for a time, at least—that frail bit of humanity out of the mills. Some days had elapsed, however, since he had talked with the child, and not until now had he found the time to carry out his plan. He was hurrying with frowning brow along the lower end of Prospect Hill road when suddenly his ears were assailed by the unmistakable evidence that somewhere a mob of small boys had found an object upon which to vent their wildest mischief. The next moment a turn of the road revealed the almost motionless runabout with its living freight of shrieking urchins, and its one white-faced, terrified girl.

With a low-breathed "Margaret!" McGinnis sprang forward.

"A MOB OF SMALL BOYS HAD FOUND AN OBJECT UPON
WHICH TO VENT THEIR WILDEST MISCHIEF."

It was all done so quickly that even the girl herself could not have told how it happened. Almost unconsciously she slipped over into the vacant seat and gave her place to the fearless, square-jawed man who seemingly had risen from the ground. An apparently impossible number of long arms shot out to the right and to the left, and the squirming urchins dropped to the ground, sprawling on all fours, and howling with surprise and chagrin. Then came a warning cry and a sharp "honk-honk-honk" from the horn. The next moment the car bounded forward on a roadway that opened clear and straight before it.

Not until he had left the town quite behind him did McGinnis bring the car to a halt in the shade of a great tree by the roadside. Then he turned an anxious face to the girl at his side.

"You're not hurt, I hope, Miss Kendall," he began. "I didn't like to stop before to ask. I hope you didn't mind being thrust so unceremoniously out of your place and run away with," he finished, a faint twinkle coming into his gray eyes.

Margaret flushed. Before she spoke she put both hands to her head and straightened her hat.

"No, I—I'm not hurt," she said faintly; "but I *was* frightened. You—you were very good to run away with me," she added, the red deepening in her cheeks. "I'm sure I don't know what I should have done if you hadn't."

The man's face darkened.

"The little rascals!" he cried. "They deserve a sound thrashing—every one of them."

"But I'd done nothing—I'd not spoken to them," she protested. "I don't see why they should have molested me."

"Pure mischief, to begin with, probably," returned the man; "then they saw that you were frightened, and that set them wild with delight. All is—I'm glad I was there," he concluded, with grim finality.

Margaret turned quickly.

"And so am I," she said, "and yet I don't even know whom to thank, though you evidently know me. You seemed to come from the ground, and you handled the car as if it were your own."

With a sudden exclamation the man stepped to the ground; then he turned and faced her, hat in hand.

“And I’m acting now as if it were my own, too,” he said, almost bitterly. “I beg your pardon, Miss Kendall. I have run it many times for Mr. Spencer; that explains my familiarity with it.” 160

“And you are——” she paused expectantly.

The man hesitated. It was almost on his tongue’s end to say, “One of the mill-hands”; then something in the bright face, the pleasant smile, the half-outstretched hand, sent a strange light to his eyes.

“I am—Miss Kendall, I have half a mind to tell you who I am.”

She threw a quick look into his face and drew back a little; but she said graciously:

“Of course you will tell me who you are.”

There was a moment’s silence, then slowly he asked:

“Do you remember—Bobby McGinnis?”

“Bobby? Bobby McGinnis?” The blue eyes half closed and seemed to be looking far into the past. Suddenly they opened wide and flashed a glad recognition into his face. “And are you Bobby McGinnis?”

“Yes.”

“Why, of course I remember Bobby McGinnis,” she cried, with outstretched hand. “It was you that found me when I was a wee bit of a girl and lost in New York, though *that* I don’t remember. But we used to play together there in Houghtonsville, and it was you that got me the contract 161 ——” She stopped abruptly and turned her face away. The man saw her lips and chin tremble. “I can’t speak of it—even now,” she said brokenly, after a moment. Then, gently: “Tell me of yourself. How came you here?”

“I came here at once from Houghtonsville.” McGinnis’s voice, too, was not quite steady. She nodded, and he went on without explaining the “at once”—he had thought she would understand. “I went to work in the mills, and—I have been here ever since. That is all,” he said simply.

“But how happened it that you came—here?”

A dull red flushed the man’s cheeks. His eyes swerved from her level gaze, then came back suddenly with the old boyish twinkle in their depths.

“I came,” he began slowly, “well, to look after your affairs.”

“*My* affairs!”

“Yes. I was fifteen. I deemed somehow that I was the one remaining friend who had your best interests at heart. I *couldn’t* look after you, naturally—in a girls’ school—so I did the next best thing. I looked after your inheritance.”

“Dear old Bobby!” murmured the girl. And the man who heard knew, in spite of a conscious throb 162 of joy, that it was the fifteen-year-old lad that Margaret Kendall saw before her, not the man-grown standing at her side.

“I suppose I thought,” he resumed after a moment, “that if I were not here some one might pick up the mills and run off with them.”

“And now?” She was back in the present, and her eyes were merry.

“And now? Well, now I come nearer realizing my limitations, perhaps,” he laughed. “At any rate, I learned long ago that your interests were in excellent hands, and that my presence could do very little good, even if they had not been in such fine shape.... But I am keeping you,” he broke off suddenly, backing away from the car. “Are you—can you—you do not need me any longer to run the machine? You’ll not go back through the town, of course.”

“No, I shall not go back through the town,” shuddered the girl. “And I can drive very well by myself now, I am sure,” she declared. And he did not know that for a moment she had been tempted to give quite the opposite answer. “I shall go on to the next turn, and then around home 163 by the other way.... But I shall see you soon again?—you will come to see me?” she finished, as she held out her hand.

McGinnis shook his head.

“Miss Kendall, in the kindness of her heart, forgets,” he reminded her quietly. “Bobby McGinnis is not on Hilcrest’s calling list.”

“But Bobby McGinnis is my friend,” retorted Miss Kendall with a bright smile, “and Hilcrest always welcomes my friends.”

Still standing under the shadow of the great tree, McGinnis watched the runabout until a turn of the road hid it from sight.

“I thought ‘twould be easier after I’d met her once, face to face, and spoken to her,” he was murmuring softly; “but it’s going to be harder, I’m afraid—harder than when I just caught a glimpse of her once in a while and knew that she was here.”

CHAPTER XXII

Margaret's morning ride through the town did not have quite the effect she had hoped it would. By daylight the place looked even worse than by the softening twilight. But she was haunted now, not so much by the wan faces of the workers as by the jeering countenances of a mob of mischievous boys. To be sure, the unexpected meeting with Bobby McGinnis had in a measure blurred the vision, but it was still there; and at night she awoke sometimes with those horrid shouts in her ears. Of one thing it had cured her, however: she no longer wished to see for herself the shabby cottages and the people in them. She gave money, promptly and liberally—so liberally, in fact, that Mrs. Merideth quite caught her breath at the size of the bills that the young woman stuffed into her hands.

"But, my dear, so much!" she had remonstrated.

"No, no—take it, do!" Margaret had pleaded. "Give it to that society to do as they like with it. And when it's gone there'll be more."

Mrs. Merideth had taken the money then without more ado. The one thing she wished particularly to avoid in the matter was controversy—for controversy meant interest.

There had been one other result of that morning's experience—a result which to Frank Spencer was perhaps quite as startling as had been the roll of bills to his sister.

"I met your Mr. Robert McGinnis when I was out this morning," Margaret had said that night at dinner. "What sort of man is he?"

Before Frank could reply Ned had answered for him.

"He's a little tin god on wheels, Margaret, that can do no wrong. That's what he is."

"Ned!" remonstrated Mrs. Merideth in a horror that was not all playful. Then to Margaret: "He is a very faithful fellow and an efficient workman, my dear, who is a great help to Frank. But how and where did *you* see him?"

Margaret laughed.

"I'll tell you," she promised in response to Mrs. Merideth's question; "but I haven't heard yet from the head of the house."

"I can add little to what has been said," declared Frank with a smile. "He is all that they pictured him. He is the king-pin, the keystone—anything you please. But, why?"

"Nothing, only I know him. He is an old friend."

"You know him!—a *friend*!" The three voices were one in shocked amazement.

"Yes, long ago in Houghtonsville," smiled Margaret. "He knew me still longer ago than that, but that part I remember only as it has been told to me. He was the little boy who found me crying in the streets of New York, and took me home to his mother."

There was a stunned silence around the table. It was the first time the Spencers had ever heard Margaret speak voluntarily of her childhood, and it frightened them. It seemed to bring into the perfumed air of the dining-room the visible presence of poverty and misery. They feared, too, for Margaret: this was the one thing that must be guarded against—the possible return to the morbid fancies of her youth. And this man—

"Why, how strange!" murmured Mrs. Merideth, breaking the pause. "But then, after all, he'll not annoy you, I fancy."

"Of course not," cut in Ned. "McGinnis is no fool, and he knows his place."

"Most assuredly," declared Frank, with a sudden tightening of his lips. "You'll not see him again, I fancy. If he annoys you, let me know."

"Oh, but 'twon't be an annoyance," smiled Margaret. "I *asked* him to come and see me."

"You—asked—him—to come!" To the Spencers it was as if she had taken one of the big black wheels from the mills and suggested its desirability for the drawing-room. "You asked him to come!"

Was there a slight lifting of the delicately moulded chin opposite?—the least possible dilation of the sensitive nostrils? Perhaps. Yet Margaret's voice when she answered, was clear and sweet.

"Yes. I told him that Hilcrest would always welcome my friends, I was sure. And—wasn't I right?"

"Of course—certainly," three almost inaudible voices had murmured. And that had been the end of it, except that the two brothers and the sister had talked it over in low distressed voices after Margaret had gone up-stairs to bed.

Two weeks had passed now, however, since that memorable night, and the veranda of Hilcrest had not yet echoed to the sound of young McGinnis's feet. The Spencers breathed a little more freely in consequence. It might be possible, after all, thought they, that *McGinnis* had some sense!—and the emphasis was eloquent.

CHAPTER XXIII

Miss Kendall was sitting alone before the great fireplace in the hall at Hilcrest when Betty, the parlor maid, found her. Betty's nose, always inclined to an upward tilt, was even more disdainful than usual this morning. In fact, Betty's whole self from cap to dainty shoes radiated strong disapproval.

"There's a young person—a very impertinent young person at the side door, Miss, who insists upon seeing you," she said severely.

"Me? Seeing me? Who is it, Betty?"

"I don't know, Miss. She looks like a mill girl." Even Betty's voice seemed to shrink from the "mill" as if it feared contamination.

"A mill girl? Then it must be Mrs. Merideth or Mr. Spencer that she wants to see."

"She said you, Miss. She said she wanted to see——" Betty stopped, looking a little frightened.

"Yes, go on, Betty."

"That—that she wanted to see Miss *Maggie* Kendall," blurted out the horrified Betty. "'Mag of the Alley.'"

Miss Kendall sprang to her feet.

"Bring the girl here, Betty," she directed quickly. "I will see her at once."

Just what and whom she expected to see, Margaret could not have told. For the first surprised instant it seemed that some dimly remembered Patty or Clarabella or Arabella from the past must be waiting out there at the door; the next moment she knew that this was impossible, for time, even in the Alley, could not have stood still, and Patty and the twins must be women-grown now.

Out at the side door the "impertinent young person" received Betty's order to "come in" with an airy toss of her head, and a jeering "There, what'd I tell ye?" but once in the subdued luxury of soft rugs and silken hangings, and face to face with a beauteous vision in a trailing pale blue gown, she became at once only a very much frightened little girl about eleven years old.

At a sign from Miss Kendall, Betty withdrew and left the two alone.

"What is your name, little girl?" asked Miss Kendall gently.

The child swallowed and choked a little.

"Nellie Magoon, ma'am, if you please, thank you," she stammered.

"Where do you live?"

"Down on the Prospect Hill road."

"Who sent you to me?"

"Mis' Durgin."

Miss Kendall frowned and paused a moment. As yet there had not been a name that she recognized, nor could she find in the child's face the slightest resemblance to any one she had ever seen before.

"But I don't understand," she protested. "Who is this Mrs. Durgin? What did she tell you to say to me?"

"She said, 'Tell her Patty is in trouble an' wants ter see Mag of the Alley,'" murmured the child, as if reciting a lesson.

"'Patty'? 'Patty'? Not Patty Murphy!" cried Miss Kendall, starting forward and grasping the child's arm.

Nellie drew back, half frightened.

"Yes, ma'am. No, ma'am. I don't know, ma'am," she stammered.

"But how came she to send for me? Who told her I was here?"

"The boss."

"The—boss!"

"Yes. Mr. McGinnis, ye know. He said as how you was here."

"Bobby!" cried Miss Kendall, releasing the child's arm and falling back a step. "Why, of course, it's Patty—it must be Patty! I'll go to her at once. Wait here while I dress." And she hurried across the hall and up the broad stairway.

Back by the door Nellie watched the disappearing blue draperies with wistful eyes that bore also a trace of resentment. "Go and dress" indeed! As if there could be anything more altogether to be desired than that beautiful trailing blue gown! She was even more dissatisfied ten minutes later when Miss Kendall came back in the trim brown suit and walking-hat—it would have been so much more delightful to usher into Mrs. Durgin's presence that sumptuous robe of blue! She forgot her disappointment, however, a little later, in the excitement of rolling along at Miss Kendall's side in the Hilcrest carriage, with the imposing-looking coachman in the Spencer livery

towering above her on the seat in front.

It had been Miss Kendall's first thought to order the runabout, but a sudden remembrance of her morning's experience a few weeks before caused her to think that the stalwart John and the horses might be better; so John, somewhat to his consternation, it must be confessed, had been summoned to take his orders from Nellie as to roads and turns. He now sat, stern and dignified, in the driver's seat, showing by the very lines of his stiffly-held body his entire disapproval of the whole affair.

Nor were John and Betty the only ones at Hilcrest who were conscious of keen disapproval that morning. The mistress herself, from an upper window, watched with dismayed eyes the departure of the carriage.

"I've found Patty, the little girl who was so good to me in New York," Margaret had explained breathlessly, flying into the room three minutes before. "She's in trouble and has sent for me. I'm taking John and the horses, so I'll be all right. Don't worry!" And with that she was gone, leaving behind her a woman too dazed to reply by so much as a word. 174

Hilcrest was not out of sight before Margaret turned to the child at her side.

"You said she was in trouble—my friend, Patty. What is it?" she questioned.

"It's little Maggie. She's sick."

"Maggie? Not *the* Maggie, the little brown-eyed girl in the pink calico dress, who fell down almost in front of our auto!"

Nellie turned abruptly, her thin little face alight.

"Gee! Was that you? Did you give her the money? Say, now, ain't that queer!"

"Then it is Maggie, and she's Patty's little girl," cried Margaret. "And to think I was so near and didn't know! But tell me about her. What is the matter?"

CHAPTER XXIV 175

Down in the shabby little cottage on the Hill road Mrs. Durgin walked the floor, vibrating between the window and the low bed in the corner. By the stove sat Mrs. Magoon, mending a pair of trousers—and talking. To those who knew Mrs. Magoon, it was never necessary to add that last—if Mrs. Magoon was there, so also was the talking.

"It don't do no good ter watch the pot—'twon't b'ile no quicker," she was saying now, her eyes on the woman who was anxiously scanning the road from the window.

"Yes, I know," murmured Mrs. Durgin, resolutely turning her back on the window and going over to the bed. Sixty seconds later, however, she was again in her old position at the window, craning her neck to look far up the road.

"How's Maggie doin' now?" asked Mrs. Magoon.

"She's asleep."

"Well, she better be awake," retorted Mrs. Magoon, "so's ter keep her ma out o' mischief. Come, 176
come, Mis' Durgin, why don't ye settle down an' do somethin'? Jest call it she ain't a-comin', then 'twill be all the more happyfyin' surprise if she does."

"But she is a-comin'."

"How do ye know she is?"

"'Cause she's Maggie Kendall, an' she was Mag of the Alley: an' Mag of the Alley don't go back on her friends."

"But she's rich now."

"I know she is, an' you don't think rich folks is any good; but I do, an' thar's the diff'rence. Mr. McGinnis has seen her, an' he says she's jest as nice as ever."

"Mebbe she is nice ter folks o' her sort, but even Mr. McGinnis don't know that you've sent fur her ter come 'way off down here."

"I know it, but—Mis' Magoon, she's come!" broke off Mrs. Durgin; and something in her face and voice made the woman by the stove drop her work and run to the window.

Drawn up before the broken-hinged, half-open gate, were the Spencers' famous span of 177
thoroughbreds, prancing, arching their handsome necks, and apparently giving the mighty personage on the driver's seat all that he wanted to do to hold them. Behind, in the luxurious carriage, sat a ragged little girl, and what to Patty Durgin was a wonderful vision in golden brown.

Mrs. Durgin was thoroughly frightened. She, *she* had summoned this glorious creature to come to her, because, indeed, her little girl, Maggie, was sick! And where, in the vision before her, was there a trace of Mag of the Alley? Just what she had expected to see, Mrs. Durgin did not know—

but certainly not this; and she fairly shook in her shoes as the visible evidence of her audacity, in the shape of the vision in golden brown, walked up the little path from the gate.

It was Mrs. Magoon who had to go to the door.

The young woman on the door-step started eagerly forward, but fell back with a murmured, “Oh, but you can’t be—Patty!”

Over by the window the tall, black-eyed woman stirred then, as if by sheer force of will.

“No, no, it’s me that’s Patty,” she began hurriedly. “An’ I hadn’t oughter sent fur ye; but”—her words were silenced by a pair of brown-clad arms that were flung around her neck. 178

“Patty—it is Patty!” cried an eager voice, and Mrs. Durgin found herself looking into the well-remembered blue eyes of the old-time Mag of the Alley.

Later, when Mrs. Magoon had taken herself and her amazed ejaculations, together with her round-eyed daughter, home—which was, after all, merely the other side of the shabby little house—Patty and Margaret sat down to talk. In the bed in the corner little Maggie still slept, and they lowered their voices that they might not wake her.

“Now, tell me everything,” commanded Margaret. “I want to know everything that’s happened.”

Patty shook her head.

“Thar ain’t much, an’ what thar is ain’t interestin’,” she said. “We jest lived, an’ we’re livin’ now. Nothin’ much happens.”

“But you married.”

Patty flushed. Her eyes fell.

“Yes.”

“And your husband—he’s—living?” 179

“Yes.”

Margaret hesitated. This was plainly an unpleasant subject, yet if she were to give any help that *was* help—

Patty saw the hesitation, and divined its cause.

“You—you better leave Sam out,” she said miserably. “He has ter be left out o’ most things. Sam—drinks.”

“Oh, but we aren’t going to leave Sam out,” retorted Margaret, brightly; and at the cheery tone Patty raised her head.

“He didn’t used ter be left out, once—when I married him eight years ago,” she declared. “We worked in the mill—both of us, an’ done well.”

“Here?”

Patty turned her eyes away. All the animation fled from her face and left it gray and pinched.

“No. We hain’t been here but two years. We jest kind of drifted here from the last place. We don’t never stay long—in one place.”

“And the twins—where are they?”

A spasm of pain tightened Patty’s lips.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You—don’t—know!” 180

“No. They lived with us at first, an’ worked some in the mill. Arabella couldn’t much; you know she was lame. After Sam got—worse, he didn’t like ter have ’em ‘round, an’ ‘course they found it out. One night he—struck Arabella, an’ ’course that settled things. Clarabella wouldn’t let her stay thar another minute, an’—an’ I wouldn’t neither. Jest think—an’ her lame, an’ we always treatin’ her so gentle! I give ’em what little money I had, an’ they left ‘fore mornin’. I couldn’t go. My little Maggie wa’n’t but three days old.”

“But you heard from them—you knew where they went?”

“Yes, once or twice. They started fur New York, an’ got thar all right. We was down in Jersey then, an’ ‘twa’n’t fur. They found the Whalens an’ went back ter them. After that I didn’t hear. You know the twins wa’n’t much fur writin’, an’—well, we left whar we was, anyhow. I’ve wrote twice, but thar hain’t nothin’ come of it.... But I hadn’t oughter run on so,” she broke off suddenly. “You was so good ter come. Mis’ Magoon said you—you wouldn’t want to.” 181

“Want to? Of course I wanted to!”

“I know; but it had been so long, an’ we hadn’t never heard from you since you got the Whalens their new—that is——” she stopped, a painful red dyeing her cheeks.

“Yes, I know,” said Margaret, gently. “You thought we had forgotten you, and no wonder. But you know now? Bobby told you that——” her voice broke, and she did not finish her sentence.

Patty nodded, her eyes averted. She could not speak.

“Those years—afterward, were never very clear to me,” went on Margaret, unsteadily. “It was all so terrible—so lonely. I know I begged to go back—to the Alley; and I talked of you and the others constantly. But they kept everything from me. They never spoke of those years in New York, and they surrounded me with all sorts of beautiful, interesting things, and did everything in the world to make me happy. In time they succeeded—in a way. But I think I never quite forgot. There was always something—somewhere—behind things; yet after a while it seemed like a dream, or like a life that some one else had lived.” 182

Margaret had almost forgotten Patty’s presence. Her eyes were on the broken-hinged gate out the window, and her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible. It was a cry from little Maggie that roused her, and together with Patty she sprang toward the bed.

“My—lucky—stars!” murmured the child, a little later, in dim recollection as she gazed into the visitor’s face.

“You precious baby! And it shall be ‘lucky stars’—you’ll see!” cried Margaret.

CHAPTER XXV 183

It was, indeed, “lucky stars,” as little Maggie soon found out. Others found it out, too; but to some of these it was not “lucky” stars.

At the dinner table on that first night after the visit to Patty’s house, Margaret threw the family into no little consternation by abruptly asking:

“How do you go to work to get men and things to put houses into livable shape?... I don’t suppose I did word it in a very businesslike manner,” she added laughingly, in response to Frank Spencer’s amazed ejaculation.

“But what—perhaps I don’t quite understand,” he murmured.

“No, of course you don’t,” replied Margaret; “and no wonder. I’ll explain. You see I’ve found another of my friends. It’s the little girl, Patty, with whom I lived three years in New York. She’s down in one of the mill cottages, and it leaks and is in bad shape generally. I want to fix it up.” 184

There was a dazed silence; then Frank Spencer recovered his wits and his voice.

“By all means,” he rejoined hastily. “It shall be attended to at once. Just give me your directions and I will send the men around there right away.”

“Thank you; then I’ll meet them there and tell them just what I want done.”

Frank Spencer moistened his lips, which had grown unaccountably dry.

“But, my dear Margaret,” he remonstrated, “surely it isn’t necessary that you yourself should be subjected to such annoyance. I can attend to all that is necessary.”

“Oh, but I don’t mind a bit,” returned Margaret, brightly. “I *want* to do it. It’s for Patty, you know.” And Frank Spencer could only fall back in his chair with an uneasy glance at his sister.

Before the week was out there seemed to be a good many things that were “for Patty, you know.” There was the skilled physician summoned to prescribe for Maggie; and there was the strong, capable woman hired to care for her, and to give the worn-out mother a much needed rest. There were the large baskets of fruit and vegetables, and the boxes of beautiful flowers. In fact there seemed to be almost nothing throughout the whole week that was not “for Patty, you know.” 185

Even Margaret’s time—that, too, was given to Patty. The golf links and the tennis court were deserted. Neither Ned nor the beautiful October weather could tempt Margaret to a single game. The music room, too, was silent, and the piano was closed.

Down in the little house on the Prospect Hill road, however, a radiant young woman was superintending the work that was fast putting the cottage into a shape that was very much “livable.” Meanwhile this same radiant young woman was getting acquainted with her namesake.

“Lucky Stars,” as the child insisted upon calling her, and Maggie were firm friends. Good food and proper care were fast bringing the little girl back to health; and there was nothing she so loved to do as to “play” with the beautiful young lady who had never yet failed to bring toy or game or flower for her delight.

“And how old are you now?” Margaret would laughingly ask each day, just to hear the prompt response: 186

“I’m ‘most five goin’ on six an’ I’ll be twelve ter-morrow.”

Margaret always chuckled over this retort and never tired of hearing it, until one day Patty sharply interfered.

“Don’t—please don’t! I can’t bear it when you don’t half know what it means.”

“When I don’t know what it means! Why, Patty!” exclaimed Margaret.

“Yes. It’s Sam. He learned it to her.”

“Well?” Margaret’s eyes were still puzzled.

“He likes it. He *wants* her ter be twelve, ye know,” explained Patty with an effort. Then, as she saw her meaning was still not clear, she added miserably:

“She can work then—in the mills.”

“In the mills—at twelve years old!”

“That’s the age, ye know, when they can git their papers—that is, if it’s summer—vacation time: an’ they looks out that ’tis summer, most generally, when they does gits ’em. After that it don’t count; they jest works, lots of ’em, summer or winter, school or no school.”

“The age! Do you mean that they let mere children, twelve years old, work in those mills?” 187

For a moment Patty stared silently. Then she shook her head.

“I reckon mebbe ye don’t know much about it,” she said wearily. “They don’t wait till they’s twelve. They jest says they’s twelve. Nellie Magoon’s eleven, an’ Bess is ten, an’ Susie McDermot ain’t but nine—but they’s all twelve on the mill books. Sam’s jest a-learnin’ Maggie ter say she’s twelve even now, an’ the minute she’s big enough ter work she will be twelve. It makes me jest sick; an’ that’s why I can’t bear ter hear her say it.”

Margaret shuddered. Her face lost a little of its radiant glow, and her hand trembled as she raised it to her head.

“You are right—I did not know,” she said faintly. “There must be something that can be done. There *must* be. I will see.”

And she did see. That night she once more followed her guardian into the little den off the library.

“It’s business again,” she began, smiling faintly; “and it’s the mills. May I speak to you a moment?”

“Of course you may,” cried the man, trying to make his voice so cordial that there should be 188
visible in his manner no trace of his real dismay at her request. “What is it?”

Margaret did not answer at once. Her head drooped forward a little. She had seated herself near the desk, and her left hand and arm rested along the edge of its smooth flat top. The man’s gaze drifted from her face to the arm, the slender wrist and the tapering fingers so clearly outlined in all their fairness against the dark mahogany, and so plainly all unfitted for strife or struggle. With a sudden movement he leaned forward and covered the slim fingers with his own warm-clasping hand.

“Margaret, dear child, don’t!” he begged. “It breaks my heart to see you like this. You are carrying the whole world on those two frail shoulders of yours.”

“No, no, it’s not the whole world at all,” protested the girl. “It’s only a wee small part of it—and such a defenseless little part, too. It’s the children down at the mills.”

Unconsciously the man straightened himself. His clasp on the outstretched hand loosened until Margaret, as if in answer to the stern determination of his face, drew her hand away and raised 189
her head until her eyes met his unfalteringly.

“It is useless, of course, to pretend not to understand,” he began stiffly. “I suppose that that altogether too officious young McGinnis has been asking your help for some of his pet schemes.”

“On the contrary, Mr. McGinnis has not spoken to me of the mill workers,” corrected Margaret, quietly, but with a curious little thrill that resolved itself into a silent exultation that there was then at least one at the mills on whose aid she might count. “I have not seen him, indeed, since that first morning I met him,” she finished coldly. Though Margaret would not own it to herself, the fact that she had not seen the young man, Robert McGinnis, had surprised and disappointed her not a little—Margaret Kendall was not used to having her presence and her gracious invitations ignored.

“Oh, then you haven’t seen him,” murmured her guardian; and there was a curious intonation of relief in his voice. “Who, then, has been talking to you?”

“No one—in the way you mean. Patty inadvertently mentioned it to-day, and I questioned her. I 190
was shocked and distressed. Those little children—just think of it—twelve years old, and working in the mills!”

The man made a troubled gesture.

“But, my dear Margaret, I did not put them there. Their parents did it.”

“But you could refuse to take them.”

“Why should I?” he shrugged. “They would merely go into some other man’s mill.”

“But you don’t know the worst of it,” moaned the girl. “They’ve lied to you. They aren’t even twelve, some of them. They’re babies of nine and ten!”

She paused expectantly, but he did not speak. He only turned his head so that she could not see his eyes.

“You did not know it, of course,” she went on feverishly. “But you do now. And surely now, *now* you can do something.”

Still he was silent. Then he turned sharply.

"Margaret, I beg of you to believe me when I say that you do not understand the matter at all. Those people are poor. They need the money. You would deprive some of the families of two-thirds of their means of support if you took away what the children earn. Help them, pity them, be as charitable as you like. That is well and good; but, Margaret, don't, for heaven's sake, let your heart run away with your head when it comes to the business part of it!"

"Business!—with babies nine years old!"

The man sprang to his feet and walked twice the length of the room; then he turned about and faced the scornful eyes of the girl by the desk.

"Margaret, don't look at me as if you thought I was a fiend incarnate. I regret this sort of thing as much as you do. Indeed I do. But my hands are tied. I am simply a part of a great machine—a gigantic system, and I must run my mills as other men do. Surely you must see that. Just think it over, and give me the credit at least for knowing a little more of the business than you do, when I and my father before me, have been here as many years as you have days. Come, please don't let us talk of this thing any more to-night. You are tired and overwrought, and I don't think you realize yourself what you are asking."

"Very well, I will go," sighed Margaret, rising wearily to her feet. "But I can't forget it. There must be some way out of it. There must be some way out of it—somehow—some time."

CHAPTER XXVI

There came a day when there seemed to be nothing left to do for Patty. Maggie was well, and at play again in the tiny yard. The yard itself was no longer strewn with tin cans and bits of paper, nor did the gate hang half-hinged in slovenly decrepitude. The house rejoiced in new paper, paint, and window-glass, and the roof showed a spotted surface that would defy the heaviest shower. Within, before a cheery fire, Patty sewed industriously on garments which Miss Kendall no wise needed, but for which Miss Kendall would pay much money.

Patty did not work in the mills now; Margaret had refused to let her go back, saying that she wanted lots of sewing done, and Patty could do that instead. Patty's own wardrobe, as well as that of the child, Maggie, was supplied for a year ahead; and the pantry and the storeroom of the little house fairly groaned with good things to eat. Even Sam, true to Margaret's promise, was not "left out," as was shown by his appearance. Sam, stirred by the girl's cheery encouragement and tactful confidence, held up his head sometimes now with a trace of his old manliness, and had even been known to keep sober for two whole days at a time.

There did, indeed, seem nothing left to do for Patty, and Margaret found herself with the old idleness on her hands.

At Hilcrest Mrs. Merideth and her brothers were doing everything in their power to make Margaret happy. They were frightened and dismayed at the girl's "infatuation for that mill woman," as they termed Margaret's interest in Patty; and they had ever before them the haunting vision of the girl's childhood morbidness, which they so feared to see return.

To the Spencers, happiness for Margaret meant pleasure, excitement, and—as Ned expressed it—"something doing." At the first hint, then, of leisure on the part of Margaret, these three vied with each other to fill that leisure to the brim.

Two or three guests were invited—just enough to break the monotony of the familiar faces, though not enough to spoil the intimacy and render outside interests easy. It was December, and too late for picnics, but it was yet early in the month, and driving and motoring were still possible, and even enjoyable. The goal now was not a lake or a mountain, to be sure; but might be a not too distant city with a matinée or a luncheon to give zest to the trip.

Ned, in particular, was indefatigable in his efforts to please; and Margaret could scarcely move that she did not find him at her elbow with some suggestion for her gratification ranging all the way from a dinner-party to a footstool.

Margaret was not quite at ease about Ned. There was an exclusiveness in his devotions, and a tenderness in his ministrations that made her a little restless in his presence, particularly if she found herself alone with him. Ned was her good friend—her comrade. She was very sure that she did not wish him to be anything else; and if he should try to be—there would be an end to the comradeship, at all events, if not to the friendship.

By way of defense against these possibilities she adopted a playful air of whimsicality and fell to calling him the name by which he had introduced himself on that first day when she had seen him at the head of the hillside path—"Uncle Ned." She did not do this many times, however, for one day he turned upon her a white face working with emotion.

"I am not your uncle," he burst out; and Margaret scarcely knew whether to laugh or to cry, he threw so much tragedy into the simple words.

"No?" she managed to return lightly. "Oh, but you said you were, you know; and when a man says

——”

“But I say otherwise now,” he cut in, leaning toward her until his breath stirred the hair at her temples. “Margaret,” he murmured tremulously, “it’s not ‘uncle,’—but there’s something else—a name that——”

“Oh, but I couldn’t learn another,” interrupted Margaret, with nervous precipitation, as she rose hurriedly to her feet, “so soon as this, you know! Why, you’ve just cast me off as a niece, and it takes time for me to realize the full force of that blow,” she finished gayly, as she hurried away.

In her own room she drew a deep breath of relief; but all day, and for many days afterward, she was haunted by the hurt look in Ned’s eyes as she had turned away. It reminded her of the expression she had seen once in the pictured eyes of a dog that had been painted by a great 197
artist. She remembered, too, the title of the picture: “Wounded in the house of his friends,” and it distressed her not a little; and yet—Ned was her comrade and her very good friend, and that was what he must be.

Not only this, however, caused Margaret restless days and troubled nights: there were those children down in the mills—those little children, nine, ten, twelve years old. It was too cold now to stay long on the veranda; but there was many a day, and there were some nights, when Margaret looked out of the east windows of Hilcrest and gazed with fascinated, yet shrinking eyes at the mills.

She was growing morbid—she owned that to herself. She knew nothing at all of the mills, and she had never seen a child at work in them; yet she pictured great black wheels relentlessly crushing out young lives, and she recoiled from the touch of her trailing silks—they seemed alive with shrunken little forms and wasted fingers. Day after day she turned over in her mind the most visionary projects for stopping those wheels, or for removing those children beyond their reach. 198
Even though her eyes might be on the merry throngs of a gay city street—her thoughts were still back in the mill town with the children; and even though her body might be flying from home at the rate of thirty or forty miles an hour in Frank’s big six-cylinder Speeder, her real self was back at Hilcrest with the mills always in sight.

Once again she appealed to her guardian, but five minutes’ talk showed her the uselessness of anything she could say—it was true, she did not *know* anything about it.

It was that very fact, perhaps, which first sent her thoughts in a new direction. If, as was true, she did not know anything about it, how better could she remedy the situation than by finding out something about it? And almost instantly came the memory of her guardian’s words: “I suppose that that altogether too officious young McGinnis has been asking your help for some of his schemes.”

Bobby knew. Bobby had schemes. Bobby was the one to help her. By all means, she would send for Bobby!

That night, in a cramped little room in one of the mill boarding-houses, a square-jawed, gray-eyed 199
young man received a note that sent the blood in a tide of red to his face, and made his hands shake until the paper in his long, sinewy fingers fluttered like an aspen leaf in a breeze. Yet the note was very simple. It read:

“Will you come, please, to see me to-morrow night? I want to ask some questions about the children at the mills.”

And it was signed, “Margaret Kendall.”

CHAPTER XXVII 200

With a relief which she did not attempt to hide from herself, Margaret saw the male members of the family at Hilcrest leave early the next morning on a trip from which they could not return until the next day; and with a reluctance which she could not hide from either herself or Mrs. Merideth, she said that afternoon:

“Mr. McGinnis is coming to see me this evening, Aunt Della. I sent for him. You know I am interested in the children at the mills, and I wanted to ask him some questions.”

Mrs. Merideth was dumb with dismay. For some days Margaret’s apparent inactivity had lulled her into a feeling of security. And now, with her brothers away, the blow which they had so dreaded for weeks had fallen—McGinnis was coming. Summoning all her strength, Mrs. Merideth finally managed to murmur a faint remonstrance that Margaret should trouble herself over a 201
matter that could not be helped; then with an earnest request that Margaret should not commit herself to any foolish promises, she fled to her own room, fearful lest, in her perturbation, she should say something which she would afterward regret.

When Miss Kendall came down-stairs at eight o’clock that night she found waiting for her in the drawing-room—into which McGinnis had been shown by her express orders—a young man whose dress, attitude, and expression radiated impersonality and business, in spite of his sumptuous surroundings.

In directing that the young man should be shown into the drawing-room instead of into the more informal library or living-room, Margaret had vaguely intended to convey to him the impression that he was a highly-prized friend, and as such was entitled to all honor; but she had scarcely looked into the cold gray eyes, or touched the half-reluctantly extended fingers before she knew that all such efforts had been without avail. The young man had not come to pay a visit: he was an employee who had obeyed the command of one in authority.

McGinnis stood just inside the door, hat in hand. His face was white, and his jaw stern-set. His manner was quiet, and his voice when he spoke was steady. There was nothing about him to tell the girl—who was vainly trying to thaw the stiff frigidity of his reserve—that he had spent all day and half the night in lashing himself into just this manner that so displeased her.

“You sent for me?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” smiled the girl. “And doesn’t your conscience prick you, sir, because I *had* to send for you, when you should have come long ago of your own accord to see me?” she demanded playfully, motioning him to a seat. Then, before he could reply, she went on hurriedly: “I wanted to see you very much. By something that Mr. Spencer said the other evening I suspected that you were interested in the children who work in the mills—particularly interested. And—you are?”

“Yes, much interested.”

“And you know them—lots of them? You know their parents, and how they live?”

“Yes, I know them well—too well.” He added the last softly, almost involuntarily.

The girl heard, and threw a quick look of sympathy into his eyes.

“Good! You are just the one I want, then,” she cried. “And you will help me; won’t you?”

McGinnis hesitated. An eager light had leaped to his eyes. For a moment he dared not speak lest his voice break through the lines of stern control he had set for it.

“I shall be glad to give you any help I can,” he said at last, steadily; “but Mr. Spencer, of course, knows——” he paused, leaving his sentence unfinished.

“But that is exactly it,” interposed Margaret, earnestly. “Mr. Spencer does not know—at least, he does not know personally about the mill people, I mean. He told me long ago that you stood between him and them, and had for a long time. It is you who must tell me.”

“Very well, I will do my best. Just what—do you want to know?”

“Everything. And I want not only to be told, but to see for myself. I want you to take me through the mills, and afterward I want to visit some of the houses where the children live.”

“Miss Kendall!” The distressed consternation in the man’s voice was unmistakable.

“Is it so bad as that?” questioned the girl. “You don’t want me to see all these things? All the more reason why I should, then! If conditions are bad, help is needed; but before help can be effectual, or even given at all, the conditions must be understood. That is what I mean to do—understand the conditions. How many children are there employed in the mills, please?”

McGinnis hesitated.

“Well, there are some—hundreds,” he acknowledged. “Of course many of them are twelve and fourteen and fifteen, and that is bad enough; but there are others younger. You see the age limit of this state is lower than some. Many parents bring their children here to live, so that they can put them into the mills.”

Margaret shuddered.

“Then it is true, as Patty said. There are children there nine and ten years old!”

“Yes, even younger than that, I fear. Only last week I turned away a man who brought a puny little thing with a request for work. He swore she was twelve. I’d hate to tell you how old—or rather, how young, she really looked. I sent him home with a few remarks which I hope he will remember. She was only one, however, out of many. I am not always able to do what I would like to do in such cases—I am not the only man at the mills. You must realize that.”

“Yes, I realize it, and I understand why you can’t always do what you wish. But just suppose you tell me now some of the things you would like to do—if you could.” And she smiled encouragement straight into his eyes until in spite of his stern resolve he forgot himself and his surroundings, and began to talk.

Robert McGinnis was no silver-tongued orator, but he knew his subject, and his heart was in it. For long months he had been battling alone against the evils that had little by little filled his soul with horror. Accustomed heretofore only to rebuffs and angry denunciations of his “officious meddling,” he now suddenly found a tenderly sympathetic ear eagerly awaiting his story, and a pair of luminous blue eyes already glistening with unshed tears.

No wonder McGinnis talked, and talked well. He seemed to be speaking to the Maggie of long ago—the little girl who stood ready and anxious to “divvy up” with all the world. Then suddenly his eyes fell on the rich folds of the girl’s dress, and on the velvety pile of the rug beneath her feet.

“I have said too much,” he broke off sharply, springing to his feet. “I forgot myself.”

“On the contrary you have not said half enough,” declared the girl, rising too; “and I mean to go

over the mills at once, if you'll be so good as to take me. I'll let you know when. And come to see me again, please—without being sent for," she suggested merrily, adding with a pretty touch of earnestness: "We are a committee of two; and to do good work the committee must meet!"

McGinnis never knew exactly how he got home that night. The earth was beneath him, but he did not seem to touch it. The sky was above him—he was nearer that. But, in spite of this nearness, the stars seemed dim—he was thinking of the light in a pair of glorious blue eyes.

McGinnis told himself that it was because of his mill people—this elation that possessed him. He was grateful that they had found a friend. He did not ask himself later whether it was also because of his mill people that he sat up until far into the morning, with his eyes dreamily fixed on the note in his hand signed, "Margaret Kendall."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Frank Spencer found the mental atmosphere of Hilcrest in confusion when he returned from his two days' trip. Margaret had repeated to Mrs. Merideth the substance of what McGinnis had told her, drawing a vivid picture of the little children wearing out their lives in plain sight of the windows of Hilcrest. Mrs. Merideth had been shocked and dismayed, though she hardly knew which she deplored the more—that such conditions existed, or that Margaret should know of them. At Margaret's avowed determination to go over the mills, and into the operatives' houses, she lifted her hands in horrified protest, and begged her to report the matter to the Woman's Guild, and leave the whole thing in charge of the committee.

"But don't you see that they can't reach the seat of the trouble?" Margaret had objected. "Why, even that money which I intended for little Maggie went into a general fund, and never reached its specified destination." And Mrs. Merideth could only sigh and murmur:

"But, my dear, it's so unnecessary and so dreadful for you to mix yourself up personally with such people!"

When her brother came home, Mrs. Merideth went to him. Frank was a man: surely Frank could do something! But Frank merely grew white and stern, and went off into his own den, shutting himself up away from everybody. The next morning, after a fifteen minute talk with Margaret, he sought his sister. His face was drawn into deep lines, and his eyes looked as if he had not slept.

"Say no more to Margaret," he entreated. "It is useless. She is her own mistress, of course, in spite of her insistence that I am still her guardian; and she must be allowed to do as she likes in this matter. Make her home here happy, and do not trouble her. We must not make her quite—hate us!" His voice broke over the last two words, and he was gone before Mrs. Merideth could make any reply.

Some twenty-four hours later, young McGinnis at the mills was summoned to the telephone.

"If you are not too busy," called a voice that sent a quick throb of joy to the young man's pulse, "the other half of the committee would like to begin work. May she come down to the mills this afternoon at three o'clock?"

"By all means!" cried McGinnis. "Come." He tried to say more, but while he was searching for just the right words, the voice murmured, "Thank you"; and then came the click of the receiver against the hook at the other end of the line.

The clock had not struck three that afternoon when Margaret was ushered into the inner office of Spencer & Spencer. Only Frank was there, for which Margaret was thankful. She avoided Ned these days when she could. There was still that haunting reproach in his eyes whenever they met hers.

Frank was expecting her, and only a peculiar tightening of his lips betrayed his disquietude as he turned to his desk and pressed the button that would summon McGinnis to the office.

"Miss Kendall would like to go over one of the mills," he said quietly, as the young man entered, in response to his ring. "Perhaps you will be her escort."

Margaret gave her guardian a grateful look as she left the office. She thought she knew just how much the calm acceptance of the situation had cost him, and she appreciated his unflinching determination to give her actions the sanction of his apparent consent. It was for this that she gave him the grateful glance—but he did not see it. His head was turned away.

"And what shall I show you?" asked McGinnis, as the office door closed behind them.

"Everything you can," returned Margaret; "everything! But particularly the children."

From the first deafening click-clack of the rattling machines she drew back in consternation.

"They don't work there—the children!" she cried.

For answer he pointed to a little girl not far away. She was standing on a stool, that she might reach her work. Her face was thin and drawn looking, with deep shadows under her eyes, and little hollows where the roses should have been in her cheeks. Her hair was braided and wound tightly about her small head, though at the temples and behind her ears it kinked into rebellious

curls that showed what it would like to do if it had a chance. Her ragged little skirts were bound round and round with a stout cord so that the hungry jaws of the machine might not snap at any flying fold or tatter. She did not look up as Margaret paused beside her. She dared not. Her eyes were glued to the whizzing, whirring, clattering thing before her, watching for broken threads or loose ends, the neglect of which might bring down upon her head a snarling reprimand from “de boss” of her department.

Margaret learned many things during the next two hours. Conversation was not easy in the clattering din, but some few things her guide explained, and a word or two spoke volumes sometimes.

She saw what it meant to be a “doffer,” a “reeler,” a “silk-twister.” She saw what it might mean if the tiny hand that thrust the empty bobbin over the buzzing spindle-point should slip or lose its skill. She saw a little maid of twelve who earned two whole dollars a week, and she saw a smaller girl of ten who, McGinnis said, was with her sister the only support of an invalid mother at home. She saw more, much more, until her mind refused to grasp details and the whole scene became 213
one blurred vision of horror.

Later, after a brief rest—she had insisted upon staying—she saw the “day-shift” swarm out into the chill December night, and the “night-shift” come shivering in to take their places; and she grew faint and sick when she saw among them the scores of puny little forms with tired-looking faces and dragging feet.

“And they’re only beginning!” she moaned, as McGinnis hurried her away. “And they’ve got to work all night—all night!”

CHAPTER XXIX 214

Margaret did not sleep well in her lavender-scented sheets that night. Always she heard the roar and the click-clack of the mills, and everywhere she saw the weary little workers with their closely-bound skirts, and their strained, anxious faces.

She came down to breakfast with dark circles under her eyes, and she ate almost nothing, to the great, though silent, distress of the family.

The Spencers were alone now. There would be no more guests for a week, then would come a merry half-dozen for the Christmas holidays. New Year’s was the signal for a general breaking up. The family seldom stayed at Hilcrest long after that, though the house was not quite closed, being always in readiness for the brothers when either one or both came down for a week’s business.

It was always more or less of a debatable question—just where the family should go. There was the town house in New York, frequently opened for a month or two of gaiety; and there were the 215
allurements of some Southern resort, or of a trip abroad, to be considered. Sometimes it was merely a succession of visits that occupied the first few weeks after New Year’s, particularly for Mrs. Merideth and Ned; and sometimes it was only a quiet rest under some sunny sky entirely away from Society with a capital S. The time was drawing near now for the annual change, and the family were discussing the various possibilities when Margaret came into the breakfast-room. They appealed to her at once, and asked her opinion and advice—but without avail. There seemed to be not one plan that interested her to the point of possessing either merits or demerits.

“I am going down to Patty’s,” she said, a little hurriedly, to Mrs. Merideth, when breakfast was over. “I got some names and addresses of the mill children yesterday from Mr. McGinnis; and I shall ask Patty to go with me to see them. I want to talk with the parents.”

“But, my dear, you don’t know what you are doing,” protested Mrs. Merideth. “They are so rough —those people. Miss Alby, our visiting home missionary, told me only last week how dreadful 216
they were—so rude and intemperate and—and ill-odored. She has been among them. She knows.”

“Yes; but don’t you see?—those are the very people that need help, then,” returned Margaret, wearily. “They don’t know what they are doing to their little children, and I must tell them. I *must* tell them. I shall have Patty with me. Don’t worry.” And Mrs. Merideth could only sigh and sigh again, and hurry away up-stairs to devise an altogether more delightful plan for the winter months than any that had yet been proposed—a plan so overwhelmingly delightful that Margaret could not help being interested. Of one thing, however, Mrs. Merideth was certain—if there was a place distant enough to silence the roar of the mills in Margaret’s ears, that place should be chosen if it were Egypt itself.

Patty Durgin hesitated visibly when Margaret told her what she wanted to do, until Margaret exclaimed in surprise, and with a little reproach in her voice:

“Why, Patty, don’t you want to help me?”

“Yes, yes; you don’t understand,” protested Patty. “It ain’t that. I want ter do it all. If you have 217
money for ’em, let me give it to ’em.”

Margaret was silent. Her eyes were still hurt, still rebellious.

“I—I don’t want you ter see them,” stammered Patty, then. “I don’t want you ter feel so—so bad.”

Margaret’s face cleared.

“Oh, but I’m feeling bad now,” she asserted cheerily; “and after I see them I’ll feel better. I want to talk to them; don’t you see? They don’t realize what they are doing to their children to let them work so, and I am going to tell them.”

Patty sighed.

“Ye don’t understand,” she began, then stopped, her eyes on the determined young face opposite. “All right, I’ll go,” she finished, but she shivered a little as she spoke.

And they did go, not only on that day, but on the next and the next. Margaret almost forgot the mills, so filled was her vision with drunken men, untidy women, wretched babies, and cheerless homes.

Sometimes her presence and her questions were resented, and always they were looked upon with distrust. Her money, if she gave that, was welcome, usually; but her remonstrances and her 218
warnings fell upon deaf, if not angry, ears. And then Margaret perceived why Patty had said she did not understand—there was no such thing as making a successful appeal to the parents. She might have spared herself the effort.

Sometimes she did not understand the words of the dark-browed men and the slovenly women—there were many nationalities among the operatives—but always she understood their black looks and their almost threatening gestures. Occasionally, to be sure, she found a sick woman or a discouraged man who welcomed her warmly, and who listened to her and agreed with what she had to say; but with them there was always the excuse of poverty—though their Sue and Bess and Teddy might not earn but twenty, thirty, forty cents a day; yet that twenty, thirty, and forty cents would buy meat and bread, and meant all the difference between a full and an empty stomach, perhaps, for every member of the family, at times.

Margaret did what she could. She spent her time and her money without stint, and went from 219
house to house untiringly. She summoned young McGinnis to her aid, and arranged for a monster Christmas tree to be placed in the largest hall in town; and she herself ordered the books, toys, candies, and games for it, besides the candles and tinsel stars to make it a vision of delight to the weary little eyes all unaccustomed to such glory. And yet, to Margaret it seemed that nothing that she did counted in the least against the much there was to be done. It was as if a child with a teaspoon and a bowl of sand were set to filling up a big chasm: her spoonful of sand had not even struck bottom in that pit of horror!

CHAPTER XXX 220

The house-party at Hilcrest was not an entire success that Christmas. Even the guests felt a subtle something in the air that was not conducive to ease; while Mrs. Merideth and her brothers were plainly fighting a losing contest against a restlessness that sent a haunting fear to their eyes.

Margaret, though scrupulously careful to show every attention to the guests that courtesy demanded, was strangely quiet, and not at all like the merry, high-spirited girl that most of them knew. Brandon, who was again at the house, sought her out one day, and said low in her ear:

“If it were June and not December, and if we were out in the auto instead of here by the fire, I’m wondering; would I need to—watch out for those brakes?”

The girl winced.

“No, no,” she cried; “never! I think I should simply crawl for fear that under the wheels somewhere would be a child, a dog, a chicken, or even a helpless worm—something that moved 221
and that I might hurt. There is already so much—suffering!”

Brandon laughed uneasily and drew back, a puzzled frown on his face. He had not meant that she should take his jest so seriously.

It was on the day after New Year’s, when all the guests had gone, that Margaret once more said to her guardian that she wished to speak to him, and on business. Frank Spencer told himself that he was used to this sort of thing now, and that he was resigned to the inevitable; but his eyes were troubled, and his lips were close-shut as he motioned the girl to precede him into the den.

“I thought I ought to tell you,” she began, plunging into her subject with an abruptness that betrayed her nervousness, “I thought I ought to tell you at once that I—I cannot go with you when you all go away next week.”

“You cannot go with us!”

“No. I must stay here.”

“Here! Why, Margaret, child, that is impossible!—here in this great house with only the servants?” 222

“No, no, you don’t understand; not here at Hilcrest. I shall be down in the town—with Patty.”

“Margaret!” The man was too dismayed to say more.

“I know, it seems strange to you, of course” rejoined the girl, hastily; “but you will see—you will understand when I explain. I have thought of it in all its bearings, and it is the only way. I could not go with you and sing and laugh and dance, and all the while remember that my people back here were suffering.”

“Your people! Dear child, they are not your people nor my people; they are their own people. They come and go as they like. If not in my mills, they work in some other man’s mills. You are not responsible for their welfare. Besides, you have already done more for their comfort and happiness than any human being could expect of you!”

“I know, but you do not understand. It is in a peculiar way that they are my people—not because they are here, but because they are poor and unhappy.” Margaret hesitated, and then went on, her eyes turned away from her guardian’s face. “I don’t know as I can make you understand—as I 223
do. There are people, lots of them, who are generous and kind to the poor. But they are on one side of the line, and the poor are on the other. They merely pass things over the line—they never go themselves. And that is all right. They could not cross the line if they wanted to, perhaps. They would not know how. All their lives they have been surrounded with tender care and luxury; they do not know what it means to be hungry and cold and homeless. They do not know what it means to fight the world alone with only empty hands.”

Margaret paused, her eyes still averted; then suddenly she turned and faced the man sitting in silent dismay at the desk.

“Don’t you see?” she cried. “I *have* crossed the line. I crossed it long ago when I was a little girl. I do know what it means to be hungry and cold and homeless. I do know what it means to fight the world with only two small empty hands. In doing for these people I am doing for my own. They are my people.”

For a moment there was silence in the little room. To the man at the desk the bottom seemed 224
suddenly to have dropped out of his world. For some time it had been growing on him—the knowledge of how much the presence of this fair-haired, winsome girl meant to him. It came to him now with the staggering force of a blow in the face—and she was going away. To Frank Spencer the days suddenly stretched ahead in empty uselessness—there seemed to be nothing left worth while.

“But, my dear Margaret,” he said at last, unsteadily, “we tried—we all tried to make you forget those terrible days. You were so keenly sensitive—they weighed too heavily on your heart. You—you were morbid, my dear.”

“I know,” she said. “I understand better now. Every one tried to interest me, to amuse me, to make me forget. I was kept from everything unpleasant, and from everybody that suffered. It comes to me very vividly now, how careful every one was that I should know of only happiness.”

“We wanted you to forget.”

“But I never did forget—quite. Even when years and years had passed, and I could go everywhere and see all the beautiful things and places I had read about, and when I was with my friends, 225
there was always something, somewhere, behind things. Those four years in New York were vague and elusive, as time passed. They seemed like a dream, or like a life that some one else had lived. But I know now; they were not a dream, and they were not a life that some one else lived. They were my life. I lived them myself. Don’t you see—now?” Margaret’s eyes were luminous with feeling. Her lips trembled; but her face glowed with a strange exaltation of happiness.

“But what—do you mean—to do?” faltered the man.

Margaret flushed and leaned forward eagerly.

“I am going to do all that I can, and I hope it will be a great deal. I am going down there to live.”

“To live—not to live, child!”

“Yes. Oh, I *know* now,” she went on hurriedly. “I have been among them. Some are wicked and some are thoughtless, but all of them need teaching. I am going to live there among them, to show them the better way.”

The man at the desk left his chair abruptly. He walked over to the window and looked out. The moon shone clear and bright in the sky. Down in the valley the countless gleaming windows and 226
the tall black chimneys showed where the mill-workers still toiled—those mill-workers whom the man had come almost to hate: it was because of them that Margaret was going! He turned slowly and walked back to the girl.

“Margaret,” he began in a voice that shook a little, “I had not thought to speak of this—at least, not now. Perhaps it would be better if I never spoke of it; but I am almost forced to say it now. I can’t let you go like this, and not—know. I must make one effort to keep you.... If you knew that there was some one here who loved you—who loved you with the whole strength of his being, and if you knew that to him your going meant everything that was loneliness and grief, would you—could you—stay?”

Margaret started. She would not look into the eyes that were so earnestly seeking hers. It was of Ned, of course, that he was speaking. Of that she was sure. In some way he had discovered Ned’s

feeling for her, had perhaps even been asked to plead his cause with her.

“Did you ever think,” began Spencer again, softly, “did you ever think that if you did stay, you might find even here some one to whom you could show—the better way? That even here you might do all these things you long to do, and with some one close by your side to help you?” 227

Margaret thought of Ned, of his impulsiveness, his light-heartedness, his utter want of sympathy with everything she had been doing the last few weeks; and involuntarily she shuddered. Spencer saw the sensitive quiver and drew back, touched to the quick. Margaret struggled to her feet.

“No, no,” she cried, still refusing to meet his eyes. “I—I cannot stay. I am sorry, believe me, to give you pain; but I—I cannot stay!” And she hurried from the room.

The man dropped back in his chair, his face white.

“She does not love me, and no wonder,” he sighed bitterly; and he went over word by word what had been said, though even then he did not find syllable or gesture that told him the truth—that she supposed him merely to be playing John Alden to his brother’s Miles Standish.

CHAPTER XXXI 228

The household at Hilcrest did not break up as early as usual that year. A few days were consumed in horrified remonstrances and tearful pleadings on the part of Mrs. Merideth and Ned when Margaret’s plans became known. Then several more days were needed for necessary arrangements when the stoical calm of despair had brought something like peace to the family.

“It is not so dreadful at all,” Margaret had assured them. “I have taken a large house not far from the mills, and I am having it papered and painted and put into very comfortable shape. Patty and her family will live with me, and we are going to open classes in simple little things that will help toward better living.”

“But that is regular settlement work,” sighed Mrs. Merideth.

“Is it?” smiled Margaret, a little wearily. “Well, perhaps it is. Anyway, I hope that just the presence of one clean, beautiful home among them will do some good. I mean to try it, at all events.” 229

“But are you going to do nothing but that all the time—just teach those dreadful creatures, and—and live there?”

“Certainly not,” declared Margaret, with a bright smile. “I’ve planned a trip to New York.”

“To New York?” Mrs. Merideth sat up suddenly, her face alight. “Oh, that will be fine—lovely! Why didn’t you tell us? Poor dear, you’ll need a rest all right, I’m thinking, and we’ll keep you just as long as we can, too.” With lightning rapidity Mrs. Merideth had changed their plans—in her mind. They would go to New York, not Egypt. Egypt had seemed desirable, but if Margaret was going to New York, that altered the case.

“Oh, but I thought you weren’t going to New York,” laughed Margaret. “Besides—I’m going with Patty.”

“With Patty!” If it had not been tragical it would have been comical—Mrs. Merideth’s shocked recoil at the girl’s words.

“Yes. After we get everything nicely to running—we shall have teachers to help us, you know—Patty and I are going to New York to see if we can’t find her sisters, Arabella and Clarabella.” 230

“What absurd names!” Mrs. Merideth spoke sharply. In reality she had no interest whether they were, or were not absurd; but they chanced at the moment to be a convenient scapegoat for her anger and discomfiture.

“Patty doesn’t think them absurd,” laughed Margaret. “She would tell you that she named them herself out of a ‘piece of a book’ she found in the ash barrel long ago when they were children. You should hear Patty say it really to appreciate it. She used to preface it by some such remark as: ‘Names ain’t like measles an’ relations, ye know. Ye don’t have ter have ’em if ye don’t want ’em—you can change ’em.’”

“Ugh!” shuddered Mrs. Merideth. “Margaret, how can you—laugh!”

“Why, it’s funny, I think,” laughed Margaret again, as she turned away.

Even the most urgent entreaties on the part of Margaret failed to start the Spencers on their trip, and not until she finally threatened to make the first move herself and go down to the town, did they consent to go. 231

“But that absurd house of yours isn’t ready yet,” protested Mrs. Merideth.

“I know, but I shall stay with Patty until it is,” returned Margaret. “I would rather wait until you go, as you seem so worried about the ‘break,’ as you insist upon calling it; but if you won’t, why I must, that is all. I must be there to superintend matters.”

“Then I suppose I shall have to go,” moaned Mrs. Merideth, “for I simply will not have you leave

us here and go down there to live; and I shall tell everybody, *everybody*," she added firmly, "that it is merely for this winter, and that we allowed you to do it only on that one condition."

Margaret smiled, but she made no comment—it was enough to fight present battles without trying to win future ones.

On the day the rest of the family left Hilcrest, Margaret moved to Patty's little house on the Hill road. Her tiny room up under the eaves looked woefully small and inconvenient to eyes that were accustomed to luxurious Hilcrest; and the supper—which to Patty was sumptuous in the extravagance she had allowed herself in her visitor's honor—did not tempt her appetite in the least. She told herself, however, that all this was well and good; and she ate the supper and laid herself down upon the hard bed with an exaltation that rendered her oblivious to taste and feeling.

In due time the Mill House, as Margaret called her new home, was ready for occupancy, and the family moved in. Naming the place had given Margaret no little food for thought.

"I want something simple and plain," she had said to Patty; "something that the people will like, and feel an interest in. But I don't want any 'Refuges' or 'Havens' or 'Rests' or 'Homes' about it. It is a home, but not the kind that begins with a capital letter. It is just one of the mill houses."

"Well, why don't ye call it the 'Mill House,' then, an' done with it?" demanded Patty.

"Patty, you're a genius! I will," cried Margaret. And the "Mill House" it was from that day.

Margaret's task was not an easy one. Both she and her house were looked upon with suspicion, and she had some trouble in finding the two or three teachers of just the right sort to help her. Even when she had found these teachers and opened her classes in sewing, cooking, and the care of children, only a few enrolled themselves as pupils.

"Never mind," said Margaret, "we shall grow. You'll see!"

The mill people, however, were not the only ones that learned something during the next few months. Margaret herself learned much. She learned that while there were men who purposely idled their time away and drank up their children's hard-earned wages, there were others who tramped the streets in vain in search of work.

"I hain't got nothin' ter do yit, Miss," one such said to Margaret, in answer to her sympathetic inquiries. "But thar ain't a boss but what said if I'd got kids I might send them along. They was short o' kids. I been tryin' ter keep Rosy an' Katy ter school. I was cal'latin' ter make somethin' of 'em more'n their dad an' their mammy is: but I reckon as how I'll have ter set 'em ter work."

"Oh, but you mustn't," remonstrated Margaret. "That would spoil everything. Don't you see that you mustn't? They must go to school—get an education."

The man gazed at her with dull eyes.

"They got ter eat—first," he said.

"Yes, yes, I know," interposed Margaret, eagerly. "I understand all that, and I'll help about that part. I'll give you money until you get something to do."

A sudden flash came into the man's eyes. His shoulders straightened.

"Thank ye, Miss. We be n't charity folks." And he turned away.

A week later Margaret learned that Rosy and Katy were out of school. When she looked them up she found them at work in the mills.

This matter of the school question was a great puzzle to Margaret. Very early in her efforts she had sought out the public school-teachers, and asked their help and advice. She was appalled at the number of children who appeared scarcely to understand that there was such a thing as school. This state of affairs she could not seem to remedy, however, in spite of her earnest efforts. The parents, in many cases, were indifferent, and the children more so. Some of the children in the mills, indeed, were there solely—according to the parents' version—because they could not "get on" in school. Conscious that there must be a school law, Margaret went vigorously to work to find and enforce it. Then, and not until then, did she realize the seriousness of even this one phase of the problem she had undertaken to solve.

There were other phases, too. It was not always poverty, Margaret found, that was responsible for setting the children to work. Sometimes it was ambition. There were men who could not even speak the language of their adopted country intelligibly, yet who had ever before them the one end and aim—money. To this end and aim were sacrificed all the life and strength of whatever was theirs. The minute such a man's boys and girls were big enough and tall enough to be "sworn in" he got the papers and set them to work; and never after that, as long as they could move one dragging little foot after the other, did they cease to pour into the hungry treasury of his hand the pitiful dimes and pennies that represented all they knew of childhood.

CHAPTER XXXII

The winter passed and the spring came. The Mill House, even to the most skeptical observer, showed signs of being a success. Even already a visible influence had radiated from its shining windows and orderly yard; and the neighboring houses, with their obvious attempt at “slickin’ up,” reminded one of a small boy who has been told to wash his face, for company was coming. The classes boasted a larger attendance, and the stomachs and the babies of many a family in the town were feeling the beneficial results of the lessons.

To Margaret, however, the whole thing seemed hopelessly small: there was so much to do, so little done! She was still the little girl with the teaspoon and the bowl of sand; and the chasm yawned as wide as ever. To tell the truth, Margaret was tired, discouraged, and homesick. For months her strength, time, nerves, and sympathies had been taxed to the utmost; and now that there had come a breathing space, when the intricate machinery of her scheme could run for a 237
moment without her hand at the throttle, she was left weak and nerveless. She was, in fact, perilously near a breakdown.

Added to all this, she was lonely. More than she would own to herself she missed her friends, her home life at Hilcrest, and the tender care and sympathetic interest that had been lavished upon her for so many years. Here she was the head, the strong tower of defense, the one to whom everybody came with troubles, perplexities, and griefs. There was no human being to whom she could turn for comfort. They all looked to her. Even Bobby McGinnis, when she saw him at all—which was seldom—treated her with a frigid deference that was inexpressibly annoying to her.

From the Spencers she heard irregularly. Earlier in the winter the letters had been more frequent: nervously anxious epistles of some length from Mrs. Merideth; stilted notes, half protesting, half pleading, from Ned; and short, but wonderfully sympathetic communications from Frank. Later Frank had fallen very ill with a fever of some sort, and Mrs. Merideth and Ned 238
had written only hurried little bulletins from the sick-room. Then had come the good news that Frank was out of danger, though still far too weak to undertake the long journey home. Their letters showed unmistakably their impatience at the delay, and questioned her as to her health and welfare, but could set no date for their return. Frank, in particular, was disturbed, they said. He had not planned to leave either herself or the mills so long, it being his intention when he went away merely to take a short trip with his sister and brother, and then hurry back to America alone. As for Frank himself—he had not written her since his illness.

Margaret was thinking of all this, and was feeling specially forlorn as she sat alone in the little sitting-room at the Mill House one evening in early April. She held a book before her, but she was not reading; and she looked up at once when Patty entered the room.

“I’m sorry ter trouble ye,” began Patty, hesitatingly, “but Bobby McGinnis is here an’ wanted me ter ask ye——”

Margaret raised an imperious hand.

“That’s all right, Patty,” she said so sharply that Patty opened wide her eyes; “but suppose you 239
just ask Bobby McGinnis to come here to me and ask his question direct. I will see him now.” And Patty, wondering vaguely what had come to her gentle-eyed, gentle-voiced mistress—as she insisted upon calling Margaret—fled precipitately.

Two minutes later Bobby McGinnis himself stood tall and straight just inside the door.

“You sent for me?” he asked.

Margaret sprang to her feet. All the pent loneliness of the past weeks and months burst forth in a stinging whip of retort.

“Yes, I sent for you.” She paused, but the man did not speak, and in a moment she went on hurriedly, feverishly. “I always send for you—if I see you at all, and yet you know how hard I’m trying to help these people, and that you are the only one here that can help me.”

She paused again, and again the man was silent.

“Don’t you know what I’m trying to do?” she asked.

“Yes.” The lips closed firmly over the single word.

“Didn’t I ask you to help me? Didn’t I appoint us a committee of two to do the work?” Her voice 240
shook, and her chin trembled like that of a grieved child.

“Yes.” Again that strained, almost harsh monosyllable.

Margaret made an impatient gesture.

“Bobby McGinnis, why don’t you help me?” she demanded, tearfully. “Why do you stand aloof and send to me? Why don’t you come to me frankly and freely, and tell me the best way to deal with these people?”

There was no answer. The man had half turned his face so that only his profile showed clean-cut and square-chinned against the close-shut door.

“Don’t you know that I am alone here—that I have no friends but you and Patty?” she went on tremulously. “Do you think it kind of you to let me struggle along alone like this? Sometimes it seems almost as if you were afraid——”

“I am afraid,” cut in a voice shaken with emotion.

“Bobby!” breathed Margaret in surprised dismay, falling back before the fire in the eyes that

suddenly turned and flashed straight into hers. “Why, Bobby!”

If the man heard, he did not heed. The bonds of his self-control had snapped, and the torrent of words came with a force that told how great had been the pressure. He had stepped forward as she fell back, and his eyes still blazed into hers.

“I *am* afraid—I’m afraid of myself,” he cried. “I don’t dare to trust myself within sight of your dear eyes, or within touch of your dear hands—though all the while I’m hungry for both. Perhaps I do let you send for me, instead of coming of my own free will; but I’m never without the thought of you, and the hope of catching somewhere a glimpse of even your dress. Perhaps I do stand aloof; but many’s the night I’ve walked the street outside, watching the light at your window, and many’s the night I’ve not gone home until dawn lest some harm come to the woman I loved so—good God! what am I saying!” he broke off hoarsely, dropping his face into his hands, and sinking into the chair behind him.

Over by the table Margaret stood silent, motionless, her eyes on the bowed figure of the man before her. Gradually her confused senses were coming into something like order. Slowly her dazed thoughts were taking shape.

It was her own fault. She had brought this thing upon herself. She should have seen—have understood. And now she had caused all this sorrow to this dear friend of her childhood—the little boy who had befriended her when she was alone and hungry and lost.... But, after all, why should he not love her? And why should she not—love him? He was good and true and noble, and for years he had loved her—she remembered now their childish compact, and she bitterly reproached herself for not thinking of it before—it might have saved her this.... Still, did she want to save herself this? Was it not, after all, the very best thing that could have happened? Where, and how could she do more good in the world than right here with this strong, loving heart to help her?... She loved him, too—she was sure she did—though she had never realized it before. Doubtless that was half the cause of her present restlessness and unhappiness—she had loved him all the time, and did not know it! Surely there was no one in the world who could so wisely help her in her dear work. Of course she loved him!

Very softly Margaret crossed the room and touched the man’s shoulder.

“Bobby, I did not understand—I did not know,” she said gently. “You won’t have to stay away—any more.”

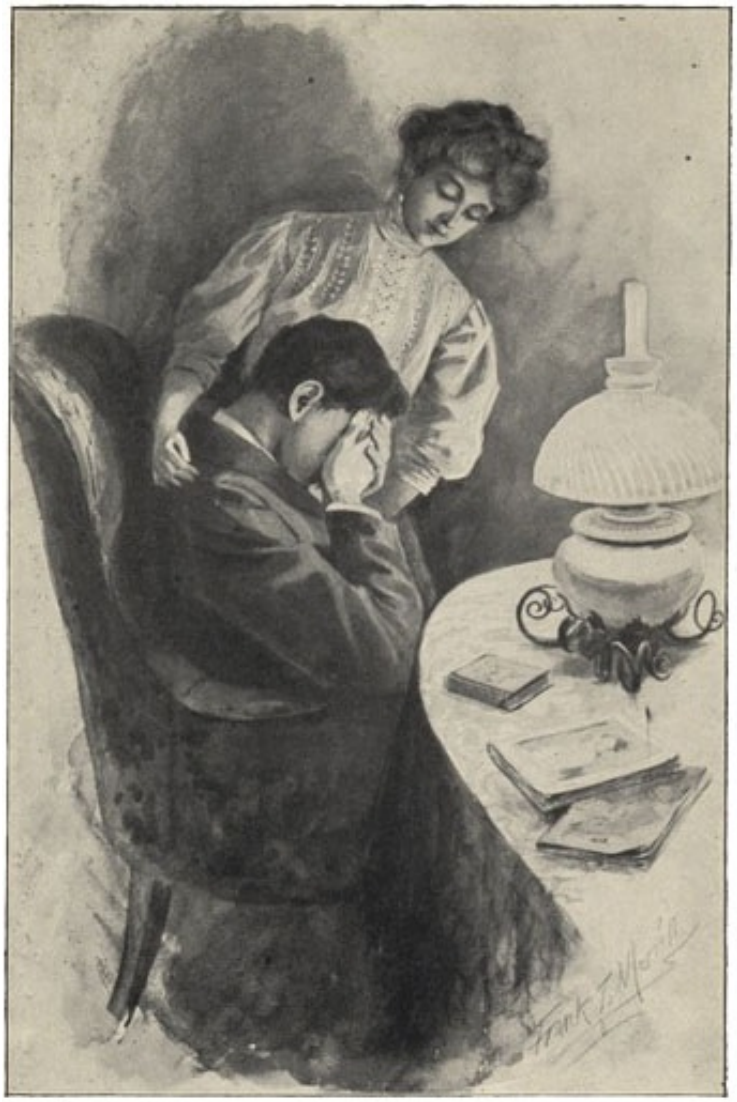
“Won’t have to—stay—away!” The man was on his feet, incredulous wonder in his eyes.

“No. We—we will do it together—this work.”

“But you don’t mean—you can’t mean——” McGinnis paused, his breath suspended.

“But I do,” she answered, the quick red flying to her cheeks. Then, half laughing, half crying, she faltered: “And—and I shouldn’t think you’d make—*me* ask—*you*!”

“Margaret!” choked the man, as he fell on his knees and caught the girl’s two hands to his lips.



“MARGARET CROSSED THE ROOM AND TOUCHED THE MAN’S SHOULDER.”

CHAPTER XXXIII

Ned Spencer returned alone to Hilcrest about the middle of April. In spite of their able corps of managers, the Spencers did not often leave the mills for so long a time without the occasional presence of one or the other of the firm, though Ned frequently declared that the mills were like a clock that winds itself, so admirably adjusted was the intricate machinery of their management.

It was not without some little embarrassment and effort that Ned sought out the Mill House, immediately upon his return, and called on Margaret.

“I left Della and Frank to come more slowly,” he said, after the greetings were over. “Frank, poor chap, isn’t half strong yet, but he was impatient that some one should be here. For that matter, I found things in such fine shape that I told them I was going away again. We made more money when I wasn’t ‘round than when I was!”

Margaret smiled, but very faintly. She understood only too well that behind all this lay the reasons why her urgent requests and pleas regarding some of the children, had been so ignored in the office of Spencer & Spencer during the last few months. She almost said as much to Ned, but she changed her mind and questioned him about Frank’s health and their trip, instead.

The call was not an unqualified success—at least it was not a success so far as Margaret was concerned. The young man was plainly displeased with the cane-seated chair in which he sat, and with his hostess’s simple toilet. The reproachful look had gone from his eyes, it was true, but in its place was one of annoyed disapproval that was scarcely less unpleasant to encounter. There were long pauses in the conversation, which neither participant seemed able to fill. Once Margaret tried to tell her visitor of her work, but he was so clearly unsympathetic that she cut it short and introduced another subject. Of McGinnis she did not speak; time enough for that when Frank Spencer should return and the engagement would have to be known. She did tell him, however, of her plans to go to New York later in search of the twins.

“I shall take Patty with me,” she explained, “and we shall make it a sort of vacation. We both

need the change and the—well, it won't be exactly a rest, perhaps."

"No, I fear not," Ned returned grimly. "I do hope, Margaret, that when Della gets home you'll take a real rest and change at Hilcrest. Surely by that time you'll be ready to cut loose from all this sort of thing!"

Margaret laughed merrily, though her eyes were wistful.

"We'll wait and see how rested New York makes me," she said.

"But, Margaret, you surely are going to come to Hilcrest then," appealed Ned, "whether you need rest or not!"

"We'll see, Ned, we'll see," was all she would say, but this time her voice had lost its merriment.

Ned, though he did not know it, and though Margaret was loth to acknowledge it even to herself, had touched upon a tender point. She did long for Hilcrest, its rest, its quiet, and the tender care 247
that its people had always given her. She longed for even one day in which she would have no problems to solve, no misery to try to alleviate—one day in which she might be the old care-free Margaret. She reproached herself bitterly for all this, however, and accused herself of being false to her work and her dear people; but in the next breath she would deny the accusation and say that it was only because she was worn out and "dead tired."

"When the people do get home," she said to Bobby McGinnis one day, "when the people do get home, we'll take a rest, you and I. We'll go up to Hilcrest and just play for a day or two. It will do us good."

"To Hilcrest?—I?" cried the man.

"Certainly; why not?" returned Margaret quickly, a little disturbed at the surprise in her lover's voice. "Surely you don't think that the man I'm expecting to marry can stay away from Hilcrest; do you?"

"N-no, of course not," murmured McGinnis; but his eyes were troubled, and Margaret noticed that he did not speak again for some time.

It was this, perhaps, that set her own thoughts into a new channel. When, after all, had she 248
thought of them before together—Bobby and Hilcrest? It had always been Bobby and—the work.

CHAPTER XXXIV 249

It was on a particularly beautiful morning in June that Margaret and Patty started for New York—so beautiful that Margaret declared it to be a good omen.

"We'll find them—you'll see!" she cried.

Little Maggie had been left at the Mill House with the teachers, and for the first time for years Patty found herself care-free, and at liberty to enjoy herself to the full.

"I hain't had sech a grand time since I was a little girl an' went ter Mont-Lawn," she exulted, as the train bore them swiftly toward their destination. "Even when Sam an' me was married we didn't stop fur no play-day. We jest worked. An' say, did ye see how grand Sam was doin' now?" she broke off jubilantly. "He wa'n't drunk once last week! Thar couldn't no one made him do it only you. Seems how I never could thank ye fur all you've done," she added wistfully. 250

"But you do thank me, Patty, every day of your life," contended Margaret, brightly. "You thank me by just helping me as you do at the Mill House."

"Pooh! As if that was anything compared ter what you does fur me," scoffed Patty. "'Sides, don't I git pay—money, fur bein' matron?"

In New York Margaret went immediately to a quiet, but conveniently located hotel, where the rooms she had engaged were waiting for them. To Patty even this unpretentious hostelry was palatial, as were the service and the dinner in the great dining-room that evening.

"I don't wonder folks likes ter be rich," she observed after a silent survey of the merry, well-dressed throng about her. "I s'pose mebbe Mis' Magoon'd say this was worse than them autymobiles she hates ter see so; an' it don't look quite—fair; does it? I wonder now, do ye s'pose any one of 'em ever thought of—divvyin' up?"

A dreamy, far-away look came into the blue eyes opposite.

"Perhaps! who knows?" murmured Margaret. "Still, *they* haven't ever—crossed the line, perhaps, so they don't—*know*." 251

"Huh?"

Margaret smiled.

"Nothing, Patty. I only meant that they hadn't lived in Mrs. Whalen's kitchen and kept all their wealth in a tin cup."

"No, they hain't," said Patty, her eyes on the sparkle of a diamond on the plump white finger of a

woman near by.

Margaret and Patty lost no time the next morning in beginning their search for the twins. There was very little, after all, that Patty knew of her sisters since she had last seen them; but that little was treasured and analyzed and carefully weighed. The twins were at the Whalens' when last heard from. The Whalens, therefore, must be the first ones to be looked up; and to the Whalens—as represented by the address in Clarabella's last letter—the searchers proposed immediately to go.

"An' ter think that you was bein' looked fur jest like this once," remarked Patty, as they turned the corner of a narrow, dingy street.

"Poor dear mother! how she must have suffered," murmured Margaret, her eyes shrinking from the squalor and misery all about them. "I think perhaps never until now did I realize it—quite," she added softly, her eyes moist with tears. 252

"Ye see the Whalens ain't whar they was when you left 'em in that nice place you got fur 'em," began Patty, after a moment, consulting the paper in her hand. "They couldn't keep that, 'course; but Clarabella wrote they wa'n't more'n one or two blocks from the Alley."

"The Alley! Oh, how I should love to see the Alley!" cried Margaret. "And we will, Patty; we'll go there surely before we return home. But first we'll find the Whalens and the twins."

The Whalens and the twins, however, did not prove to be so easily found. They certainly were not at the address given in Clarabella's letter. The place was occupied by strangers—people who had never heard the name of Whalen. It took two days of time and innumerable questions to find anybody in the neighborhood, in fact, who had heard the name of Whalen; but at last patience and diligence were rewarded, and early on the third morning Margaret and Patty started out to follow up a clew given them by a woman who had known the Whalens and who remembered them well. 253

Even this, however, promising as it was, did not lead to immediate success, and it was not until the afternoon of the fifth day that Margaret and Patty toiled up four flights of stairs and found a little bent old woman sitting in a green satin-damask chair that neither Margaret nor Patty could fail to recognize.

"Do I remember 'Maggie'? 'Mag of the Alley'?" quavered the old woman excitedly in response to Margaret's questions. "Sure, an' of course I do! She was the tirror of the hull place till she was that turned about that she got ter be a blissed angel straight from Hiven. As if I could iver forgit th' swate face of Mag of the Alley!"

"Oh, but you have," laughed Margaret, "for I myself am she."

"Go 'way wid ye, an' ye ain't that now!" cried the old woman, peering over and through her glasses, and finally snatching them off altogether.

"But I am. And this is Mrs. Durgin, who used to be Patty Murphy. Don't you remember Patty Murphy?"

Mrs. Whalen fell back in her chair.

"Saints of Hiven, an' is it the both of yez, all growed up ter be sich foine young ladies as ye be? Who'd 'a' thought it!" 254

"It is, and we've come to you for help," rejoined Margaret. "Do you remember Patty Murphy's sisters, the twins? We are trying to find them, and we thought perhaps you could tell us where they are."

Mrs. Whalen shook her head.

"I knows 'em, but I don't know whar they be now."

"But you did know," interposed Patty. "You must 'a' known four—five years ago, for my little Maggie was jest born when the twins come ter New York an' found ye. They wrote how they was livin' with ye."

The old woman nodded her head.

"I know," she said, "I know. We was livin' over by the Alley. But they didn't stay. My old man he died an' we broke up. Sure, an' I'm nothin' but a wanderer on the face of the airth iver since, an' I'm grown old before my time, I am."

"But, Mrs. Whalen, just think—just remember," urged Margaret. "Where did they go? Surely you can tell that." 255

Again Mrs. Whalen shook her head.

"Mike died, an' Tom an' Mary, they got married, an' Jamie, sure an' he got his leg broke an' they tuk him ter the horspital—bad cess to 'em! An' 'twas all that upsettin' that I didn't know nothin' what did happen. I seen 'em—then I didn't seen 'em; an' that's all thar was to it. An' it's the truth I'm a-tellin' yez."

It was with heavy hearts that Margaret and Patty left the little attic room half an hour later. They had no clew now upon which to work, and the accomplishment of their purpose seemed almost impossible.

In the little attic room behind them, however, they left nothing but rejoicing. Margaret's gifts had

been liberal, and her promises for the future even more than that. The little bent old woman could look straight ahead now to days when there would be no bare cupboards and empty coal scuttles to fill her soul with apprehension, and her body with discomfort.

Back to the hotel went Margaret and Patty for a much-needed night's rest, hoping that daylight and the morning sun would urge them to new efforts, and give them fresh courage, in spite of the unpromising outlook. Nor were their hopes unfulfilled. The morning sun did bring fresh courage; and, determined to make a fresh start, they turned their steps to the Alley.

The Alley never forgot that visit, nor the days that immediately followed it. There were men and women who remembered Mag of the Alley and Patty Murphy; but there were more who did not. There were none, however, that did not know who they were before the week was out, and that had not heard the story of Margaret's own childhood's experience in that same Alley years before.

As for the Alley—it did not know itself. It had heard, to be sure, of Christmas. It had even experienced it, in a way, with tickets for a Salvation Army tree or dinner. But all this occurred in the winter when it was cold and snowy; and it was spring now. It was not Christmas, of course; and yet—

The entire Alley from one end to the other was flooded with good things to eat, and with innumerable things to wear. There was not a child that did not boast a new toy, nor a sick room that did not display fruit and flowers. Even the cats and the dogs stopped their fighting, and lay full-stomached and content in the sun. No wonder the Alley rubbed its eyes and failed to recognize its own face!

The Alley received, but did not give. Nowhere was there a trace of the twins; and after a two weeks' search, and a fruitless following of clews that were no clews at all, even Margaret was forced sorrowfully to acknowledge defeat.

On the evening before the day they had set to go home, Patty timidly said:

"I hadn't oughter ask it, after all you've done; but do ye s'pose—could we mebbe jest—jest go ter Mont-Lawn fur a minute, jest ter look at it?"

"Mont-Lawn?"

"Yes. We was so happy thar, once," went on Patty, earnestly. "You an' me an' the twins. I hain't never forgot it, nor what they learnt me thar. All the good thar was in me till you come was from them. I thought mebbe if I could jest see it once 'twould make it easier 'bout the other—that we can't find the twins ye know."

"See it? Of course we'll see it," cried Margaret. "I should love to go there myself. You know I owe it—everything, too."

It was not for home, therefore, that Margaret and Patty left New York the next morning, but for Mont-Lawn. The trip to Tarrytown and across the Hudson was soon over, as was the short drive in the fresh morning air. Almost before the two travelers realized where they were, the beautiful buildings and grounds of Mont-Lawn appeared before their eyes.

Margaret had only to tell that they, too, had once been happy little guests in the years gone by, to make their welcome a doubly cordial one; and it was not long before they were wandering about the place with eyes and ears alert for familiar sights and sounds.

In the big pavilion where their own hungry little stomachs had been filled, were now numerous other little stomachs experiencing the same delight; and in the long dormitories where their own tired little bodies had rested were the same long rows of little white beds waiting for other weary little limbs and heads. Margaret's eyes grew moist here as she thought of that dear mother who years before had placed over just such a little bed the pictured face of her lost little girl, and of how that same little girl had seen it and had thus found the dear mother arms waiting for her.

It was just as Margaret and Patty turned to leave the grounds that they saw a young woman not twenty feet away, leading two small children. Patty gave a sudden cry. The next moment she bounded forward and caught the young woman by the shoulders.

"Clarabella, Clarabella—I jest know you're Clarabella Murphy!"

It was a joyous half-hour then, indeed—a half-hour of tears, laughter, questions, and ejaculations. At the end of it Margaret and Patty hurried away with a bit of paper on which was the address of a certain city missionary.

All the way back to New York they talked it over—the story of the twins' life during all those years; of how after months of hardship, they had found the good city missionary, and of how she had helped them, and they had helped her, until now Clarabella had gone to Mont-Lawn as one of the caretakers for the summer, and Arabella had remained behind at the missionary's home to help what she could in the missionary's daily work.

"And we'll go now and see Arabella!" cried Patty, as they stepped from the train at New York. "An' ain't it jest wonderful—wonderful ter think that we are a-goin' ter see Arabella!"

CHAPTER XXXV

When Margaret and Patty went home three days later they were accompanied by a beautiful girl, whose dark eyes carried a peculiar appeal in their velvety depths. Some of the passengers in the car that day wondered at such an expression on the face of one so young and so lovely, but when the girl rose and moved down the aisle, they wondered no longer. She was lame, and in every movement her slender form seemed to shrink from curious eyes.

Margaret had found her little friend far from strong. Arabella had been taxing her strength to the utmost, assisting the missionary through the day, and attending night school in the evening. She had worked and studied hard, and the strain was telling on her already frail constitution. All this Margaret saw at once and declared that Arabella must come home with them to the Mill House.

“But I couldn’t,” the girl had objected. “I couldn’t be a burden to you and Patty.” 262

“Oh, but you won’t be,” Margaret had returned promptly. “You’re going to be a help to Patty and me. The Mill House needs you. The work is increasing, and we haven’t teachers enough.”

“Oh, then I’ll come,” the girl had sighed contentedly—nor did she know that before night Margaret had found and engaged still another teacher, lest Arabella, when she joined the Mill House family, should find too much to do.

Almost the first piece of news that Margaret heard upon her return was that the family were back at Hilcrest, and that Mrs. Merideth had already driven down to the Mill House three times in hopes to get tidings of Margaret’s coming. When Mrs. Merideth drove down the fourth time Margaret herself was there, and went back with her to Hilcrest.

“My dear child, how dreadfully you look!” Mrs. Merideth had exclaimed. “You are worn out, and no wonder. You must come straight home with me and rest.” And because Mrs. Merideth had been tactful enough to say “rest” and not “stay,” Margaret had gone, willingly and thankfully. She was tired, and she did need a rest: but she was not a little concerned to find how really 263 hungry she was for the cool quiet of the west veranda, and how eagerly she listened to the low, sweet voices of her friends in pleasant chat—it had been so long since she had heard low sweet voices in pleasant chat!

The thin cheeks and hollow eyes of Frank Spencer shocked her greatly. She had not supposed a few short months could so change a strong man into the mere shadow of his former self. There was a look, too, in his eyes that stirred her curiously; and, true to her usual sympathetic response to trouble wherever she found it, she set herself now to the task of driving that look away. To this end, in spite of her own weariness, she played and sang and devoted herself untiringly to the amusement of the man who was not yet strong enough to go down to the mills.

It had been planned that immediately upon Frank Spencer’s return, McGinnis should go to him with the story of his love for Margaret. This plan was abandoned, however, when Margaret saw how weak and ill her guardian was.

“We must wait until he is better,” she said to Bobby when he called, as had been arranged, on the 264 second evening after her arrival. “He may not be quite pleased—at first, you know,” she went on frankly; “and I don’t want to cause him sorrow just now.”

“Then ’twill be better if I don’t come up—again—just yet,” stammered Bobby, miserably, his longing eyes on her face.

“Yes. I’ll let you know when he’s well enough to see you,” returned Margaret; and she smiled brightly. Nor did it occur to her that for a young woman who has but recently become engaged, she was accepting with extraordinary equanimity the fact that she should not see her lover again for some days. It did occur to Bobby, however, and his eyes were troubled. They were still troubled as he sat up far into the night, thinking, in the shabby little room he called home.

One by one the days passed. At Hilcrest Margaret was fast regaining her old buoyant health, and was beginning to talk of taking up her “work” again, much to the distress of the family. Frank Spencer, too, was better, though in spite of Margaret’s earnest efforts the curiously somber look was not gone from his eyes. It even seemed deeper and more noticeable than ever sometimes, 265 Margaret thought.

Never before had Margaret known quite so well the man who had so carefully guarded her since childhood. She suddenly began to appreciate what he had done for her all those years. She realized, too, with almost the shock of a surprise, how young he had been when the charge was intrusted to him, and what it must have meant to a youth of twenty to have a strange, hysterical little girl ten years old thrust upon him so unceremoniously. She realized it all the more fully now that the pleasant intercourse of the last two weeks had seemed to strip from him the ten years’ difference in their ages. They were good friends, comrades. Day after day they had read, and sung and walked together; and she knew that he had exerted every effort to make her happy.

More keenly than ever now she regretted that she must bring sorrow to him in acknowledging her engagement to Bobby. She knew very well that he would not approve of the marriage. Had he not already pleaded with her to stay there at Hilcrest as Ned’s wife? And had he not always disapproved of her having much to say to McGinnis? It was hard, indeed, in the face of all this, to 266 tell him. But it must be done. In two days now he was going back to the mills. There was really no excuse for any further delay. She must send for Bobby.

There was a thunder-storm on the night Bobby McGinnis came to Hilcrest. The young man arrived just before the storm broke, and was ushered at once by Margaret herself to the little den where Frank Spencer sat alone. Mrs. Merideth had gone to bed with a headache, and Ned was

out of town, so Margaret had the house to herself. For a time she wandered aimlessly about the living-room and the great drawing-room; then she sat down in a shadowy corner which commanded a view of the library and of the door of the den. She shivered at every clap of thunder, and sent a furtive glance toward that close-shut door, wondering if the storm outside were typical of the one which even then might be breaking over Bobby's head.

It was very late when McGinnis came out of the den and closed the door behind him—so late that he could stop for only a few words with the girl who hurried across the room to meet him. His face was gray-white, and his whole appearance showed the strain he had been under for the last two hours.

"Mr. Spencer was very kind," he said huskily in response to the question in Margaret's eyes. "At first, of course, he—but never mind that part.... He has been very kind; but I—I can't tell you now—all that he said to me. Perhaps—some other time." McGinnis was plainly very much moved. His words came brokenly and with long pauses.

For some time after her lover had gone Margaret waited for Frank Spencer to come out and speak to her. But the door of the den remained fast shut, and she finally went up-stairs without seeing him.

The next few days at Hilcrest were hard for all concerned. Before Margaret had come down stairs on the morning following McGinnis's call, Frank Spencer had told his sister of the engagement; and after the first shock of the news was over, he had said constrainedly, and with averted eyes:

"There is just one thing for us to do, Della—or rather, for us not to do. We must not drive Margaret away from us. She has full right to marry the man she loves, of course, and if—if we are too censorious, it will result only in our losing her altogether. It isn't what we want to do, but what we must do. We must accept him—or lose her. I—I'm afraid I forgot myself at first, last night," went on Frank, hurriedly, "and said some pretty harsh things. I didn't realize *what* I was saying until I saw the look on his face. McGinnis is a straightforward, manly young fellow—we must not forget that, Della."

"But think of his po-position," moaned Mrs. Merideth.

Frank winced.

"I know," he said. "But we must do our best to remedy that. I shall advance him and increase his pay at once, of course, and eventually he will become one of the firm, if Margaret—marries him."

Mrs. Merideth burst into tears.

"How can you take it so calmly, Frank," she sobbed. "You don't seem to care at all!"

Frank Spencer's lips parted, then closed again. Perhaps it was just as well, after all, that she should not know just how much he did—care.

"It may not be myself I'm thinking of," he said at last, quietly. "I want Margaret—happy." And he turned away.

Margaret was not happy, however, as the days passed. In spite of everybody's effort to act as if everything was as usual, nobody succeeded in doing it; and at last Margaret announced her determination to go back to the Mill House. She agreed, however, to call it a "visit," for Mrs. Merideth had cried tragically:

"But, Margaret, dear, if we are going to lose you altogether by and by, surely you will give us all your time now that you can!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

Bobby McGinnis wondered sometimes that summer why he was not happier. Viewed from the standpoint of an outsider, he surely had enough to make any man happy. He was young, strong, and in a position of trust and profit. He was, moreover, engaged to the girl he loved, and that girl was everything that was good and beautiful, and he saw her almost every day. All this Bobby knew—and still he wondered.

He saw a good deal of Margaret these days. Their engagement had come to be an accepted fact, and the first flurry of surprise and comment had passed. The Mill House, with Patty in charge, was steadily progressing. Margaret had taken up her work again with fresh zest, but, true to her promise to Mrs. Merideth, she spent many a day, and sometimes two or three days at Hilcrest. All this, however, did not interfere with Bobby's seeing her—for he, too, went to Hilcrest in accordance with Margaret's express wishes.

"But, Bobby," Margaret had said in response to his troubled remonstrances, "are you not going to be my husband? Of course you are! Then you must come to meet my friends." And Bobby went.

Bobby McGinnis found himself in a new position then. He was Mr. Robert McGinnis, the accepted suitor of Miss Margaret Kendall, and as such, he was introduced to Margaret's friends.

It was just here, perhaps, that misery began for Bobby. He was not more at ease in his new, well-

fitting evening clothes than he would have been in the garb of Sing Sing; nor did he feel less conspicuous among the gay throng about Margaret's chair than he would if he had indeed worn the prison stripes.

As Bobby saw it, he *was* in prison, beyond the four walls of which lay a world he had never seen—a world of beautiful music and fine pictures; a world of great books and famous men; a world of travel, ease, and pleasure. He could but dimly guess the meaning of half of what was said; and the conversation might as well have been conducted in a foreign language so far as there being any possibility of his participating in it. Big, tall, and silent, he stood as if apart. And because he was apart—he watched.

He began to understand then, why he was unhappy—yet he was not watching himself, he was watching Margaret. She knew this world—this world that was outside his prison walls; and she was at home in it. There was a light in her eye that he had never brought there, though he had seen it sometimes when she had been particularly interested in her work at the Mill House. As he watched her now, he caught the quick play of color on her cheeks, and heard the ring of enthusiasm in her voice. One subject after another was introduced, and for each she had question, comment, or jest. Not once did she appeal to him. But why should she, he asked himself bitterly. They—those others near her, knew this world. He did not know it.

Sometimes the mills were spoken of, and she was questioned about her work. Then, indeed, she turned to him—but he was not the only one to whom she turned: she turned quite as frequently to the man who was seldom far away from the sound of her voice when she was at Hilcrest—Frank Spencer.

McGinnis had a new object for his brooding eyes then; and it was not long before he saw that it was to this same Frank Spencer that Margaret turned when subjects other than the mills were under discussion. There seemed to be times, indeed, when she apparently heard only his voice, and recognized only his presence, so intimate was the sympathy between them. McGinnis saw something else, too—he saw the look in Frank Spencer's eyes; and after that he did not question again the cause of his own misery.

Sometimes McGinnis would forget all this, or would call it the silly fears of a jealous man who sees nothing but adoration in every eye turned upon his love. Such times were always when Margaret was back at the Mill House, and when it seemed as if she, too, were inside his prison walls with him, leaving that hated, unknown world shut forever out. Then would come Hilcrest—and the reaction.

"She does not love me," he would moan night after night as he tossed in sleepless misery. "She does not love me, but she does not know it—yet. She is everything that is good and beautiful and kind; but I never, never can make her happy. I might have known—I might have known!"

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Spencers remained at Hilcrest nearly all summer with only a short trip or two on the part of Mrs. Merideth and Ned. The place was particularly cool and delightful in summer, and this season it was more so than usual. House-parties had always been popular at Hilcrest, and never more so than now. So popular, indeed, were they that Margaret suspected them to be sometimes merely an excuse to gain her own presence at Hilcrest.

There were no guests, however, on the Monday night that the mills caught fire. Even Margaret was down at the Mill House. Mrs. Merideth, always a light sleeper, was roused by the first shrill blast of the whistle. From her bed she could see the lurid glow of the sky, and with a cry of terror she ran to the window. The next moment she threw a bath-robe over her shoulders and ran to Frank Spencer's room across the hall.

"Frank, it's the mills—they're all afire!" she called frenziedly. "Oh, Frank, it's awful!"

From behind the closed door came a sudden stir and the sound of bare feet striking the floor; then Frank's voice.

"I'll be out at once. And, Della, see if Ned's awake, and if you can call up Peters, please. We shall want a motor car."

Mrs. Merideth wrung her hands.

"Frank—Frank—I can't have you go—I can't have you go!" she moaned hysterically; yet all the while she was hurrying to the telephone that would give the alarm and order the car that would take him.

In five minutes the house was astir from end to end. Lights flashed here and there, and terrified voices and hurried footsteps echoed through the great halls. Down in the town the whistles were still shrieking their frenzied summons, and up in the sky the lurid glow of the flames was deepening and spreading. Then came a hurried word from McGinnis over the telephone.

The fire had caught in one of the buildings that had been closed for repairs, which accounted for the great headway it had gained before it was discovered. There was a strong east wind, and the fire was rapidly spreading, and had already attacked the next building on the west. The

operatives were in a panic. There was danger of great loss of life, and all help possible was needed.

Mrs. Merideth, who heard, could only wring her hands and moan again: “I can’t have them go—I can’t have them go!” Yet five minutes later she sent them off, both Frank and Ned, with a fervid “God keep you” ringing in their ears.

Down in the Mill House all was commotion. Margaret was everywhere, alert, capable, and untiring.

“We can do the most good by staying right here and keeping the house open,” she said. “We are so near that they may want to bring some of the children here, if there should be any that are hurt or overcome. At all events, we’ll have everything ready, and we’ll have hot coffee for the men.”

Almost immediately they came—those limp, unconscious little forms borne in strong, tender arms. Some of the children had only fainted; others had been crushed and bruised in the mad rush for safety. Before an hour had passed the Mill House looked like a hospital, and every available helper was pressed into service as a nurse. 278

Toward morning a small boy, breathless and white-faced, rushed into the main hall.

“They’re in there—they’re in there—they hain’t come out yet—an’ the roof has caved in!” he panted. “They’ll be burned up—they’ll be burned up!”

Margaret sprang forward.

“But I thought they were all out,” she cried. “We heard that every one was out. Who’s in there? What do you mean?”

The boy gasped for breath.

“The boss, Bobby McGinnis an’ Mr. Spencer—Mr. Frank Spencer. They went——”

With a sharp cry Margaret turned and ran through the open door to the street, nor did she slacken her pace until she had reached the surging crowds at the mills.

From a score of trembling lips she learned the story, told in sobbing, broken scraps of words.

Frank and Ned Spencer, together with McGinnis, had worked side by side with the firemen in clearing the mills of the frightened men, women, and children. It was not until after word came that all were out that Frank Spencer and McGinnis were reported to be still in the burning building. Five minutes later there came a terrific crash, and a roar of flames as a portion of the walls and the roof caved in. Since then neither one of the two men had been seen. 279

There was more—much more: tales of brave rescues, and stories of children restored to frantically outstretched arms; but Margaret did not hear. With terror-glazed eyes and numbed senses she shrank back from the crowd, clasping and unclasping her hands in helpless misery. There Ned found her.

“Margaret, you! and here? No, no, you must not. You can do no good. Let me take you home, do, dear,” he implored.

Margaret shook her head.

“Ned, he can’t be dead—not dead!” she moaned.

Ned’s face grew white. For an instant he was almost angry with the girl who had so plainly shown that to her there was but one man that had gone down into the shadow of death. Then his eyes softened. After all, it was natural, perhaps, that she should think of her lover, and of him only, in this first agonized moment. 280

“Margaret, dear, come home,” he pleaded.

“Ned, he isn’t dead—not dead,” moaned the girl again. “Why don’t you tell me he isn’t dead?”

Ned shuddered. His eyes turned toward the blackened, blazing pile before him—as if a man could be there, and live! Margaret followed his gaze and understood.

“But he—he may not have gone in again, Ned. He may not have gone in again,” she cried feverishly. “He—he is out here somewhere. We will find him. Come! Come—we must find him!” And she tugged at his arm.

Ned caught at the straw.

“No, no, not you—you could do nothing here; but I’ll go,” he said. “And I’ll promise to bring you the very first word that I can. Come, now you’ll go home, surely!”

Margaret gazed about her. Everywhere were men, confusion, smoke and water. The fire was clearly under control, and the flames were fast hissing into silence. Over in the east the sun was rising. A new day had begun, a day of—— She suddenly remembered the sufferers back at the Mill House. She turned about sharply. 281

“Yes, I’ll go,” she choked. “I’ll go back to the Mill House. I *can* do something there, and I can’t do anything here. But, Ned, you will bring me word—soon; won’t you?—soon!” And before Ned could attempt to follow her, she had turned and was lost in the crowd.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

Tuesday was a day that was not soon forgotten at the mills. Scarcely waiting for the smoking timbers to cool, swarms of workmen attacked the ruins and attempted to clear their way to the point where Spencer and McGinnis had last been seen. Fortunately, that portion of the building had only been touched by the fire, and it was evident that the floors and roof had been carried down with the fall of those nearest to it. For this reason there was the more hope of finding the bodies unharmed by fire—perhaps, even, of finding a spark of life in one or both of them. This last hope, however, was sorrowfully abandoned when hour after hour passed with no sign of the missing men.

All night they worked by the aid of numerous electric lights hastily placed to illuminate the scene; and when Wednesday morning came, a new shift of workers took up the task that had come to be now merely a search for the dead. So convinced was every one of this that the men gazed with blanched faces into each other's eyes when there came a distinct rapping on a projecting timber near them. In the dazed silence that followed a faint cry came from beneath their feet.

With a shout and a ringing cheer the men fell to work—it was no ghost, but a living human voice that had called! They labored more cautiously now, lest their very zeal for rescue should bring defeat in the shape of falling brick or timber.

Ned Spencer, who had not left the mills all night, heard the cheer and hurried forward. It was he who, when the men paused again, called:

"Frank, are you there?"

"Yes, Ned." The voice was faint, but distinctly audible.

"And McGinnis?"

There was a moment's hesitation. The listeners held their breath—perhaps, after all, they had been dreaming and there was no voice! Then it came again.

"Yes. He's lying beside me, but he's unconscious—or dead." The last word was almost inaudible, so faint was it; but the tightening of Ned's lips showed that he had heard it, none the less. In a moment he stooped again.

"Keep up your courage, old fellow! We'll have you out of that soon." Then he stepped aside and gave the signal for the men to fall to work again.

Rapidly, eagerly, but oh, so cautiously, they worked. At the next pause the voice was nearer, so near that they could drop through a small hole a rubber tube four feet long, lowering it until Spencer could put his mouth to it. Through this tube he was given a stimulant, and a cup of strong coffee.

They learned then a little more of what had happened. The two men were on the fourth floor when the crash came. They had been swept down and had been caught between the timbers in such a way that as they lay where they had been flung, a roof three feet above their heads supported the crushing weight above. Spencer could remember nothing after the first crash, until he regained consciousness long afterward, and heard the workmen far above him. It was then that he had tapped his signal on the projecting timber. He had tapped three times before he had been heard. At first it was dark, he said, and he could not see, but he knew that McGinnis was near him. McGinnis had spoken once, then had apparently dropped into unconsciousness. At all events he had said nothing since. Still, Spencer did not think he was dead.

Once more the rescuers fell to work, and it was then that Ned Spencer hurried away to send a message of hope and comfort to Mrs. Merideth, who had long since left the great house on the hill and had come down to the Mill House to be with Margaret. To Margaret Ned wrote the one word "Come," and as he expected, he had not long to wait.

"You have found him!" cried the girl, hurrying toward him. "Ned, he isn't dead!"

Ned smiled and put out a steadying hand.

"We hope not—and we think not. But he is unconscious, Margaret. Don't get your hopes too high. I had to send for you—I thought you ought to know—what we know."

"But where is he? Have you seen him?"

Ned shook his head.

"No; but Frank says——"

"*Frank!* But you said Frank was unconscious!"

"No, no—they aren't both unconscious—it is only McGinnis. It is Frank who told us the story. He—why, Margaret!" But Margaret was gone; and as Ned watched her flying form disappear toward the Mill House, he wondered if, after all, the last hours of horror had turned her brain. In no other way could he account for her words, and for this most extraordinary flight just at the critical moment when she might learn the best—and the worst—of what had come to her lover. To Ned it seemed that the girl must be mad. He could not know that in Margaret's little room at the Mill House some minutes later, a girl went down on her knees and sobbed:

"To think that 'twasn't Bobby at all that I was thinking of—'twasn't Bobby at all! 'Twas never

Bobby that had my first thought. 'Twas always——" Even to herself Margaret would not say the name, and only her sobs finished the sentence.

CHAPTER XXXIX

Robert McGinnis was not dead when he was tenderly lifted from his box-like prison, but he was still unconscious. In spite of their marvelous escape from death, both he and his employer were suffering from breaks and bruises that would call for the best of care and nursing for weeks to come; and it seemed best for all concerned that this care and nursing should be given at the Mill House. A removal to Hilcrest in their present condition would not be wise, the physicians said, and the little town hospital was already overflowing with patients. There was really no place but the Mill House, and to the Mill House they were carried.

At the Mill House everything possible was done for their comfort. Two large airy rooms were given up to their use, and the entire household was devoted to their service. The children that had been brought there the night of the fire were gone, and there was no one with whom the two injured men must share the care and attention that were lavished upon them. Trained nurses were promptly sent for, and installed in their positions. Aside from these soft-stepping, whitecapped women, Margaret and the little lame Arabella were the most frequently seen in the sickrooms.

"We're the ornamental part," Margaret would say brightly. "We do the reading and the singing and the amusing."

Arabella was a born nurse, so both the patients said. There was something peculiarly soothing in the soft touch of her hands and in the low tones of her voice. She was happy in it, too. Her eyes almost lost their wistful look sometimes, so absorbed would she be in her self-appointed task.

As for Margaret—Margaret was a born nurse, too, and both the patients said that; though one of the patients, it is true, complained sometimes that she did not give him half a chance to know it. Margaret certainly did not divide her time evenly. Any one could see that. No one, however—not even Frank Spencer himself—could really question the propriety of her devoting herself more exclusively to young McGinnis, the man she had promised to marry.

Margaret was particularly bright and cheerful these days; but to a close observer there was something a little forced about it. No one seemed to notice it, however, except McGinnis. He watched her sometimes with somber eyes; but even he said nothing—until the day before he was to leave the Mill House. Then he spoke.

"Margaret," he began gently, "there is something I want to say to you. I am going to be quite frank with you, and I want you to be so with me. Will you?"

"Why, of—of course," faltered Margaret, nervously, her eyes carefully avoiding his steady gaze. Then, hopefully: "But, Bobby, really I don't think you should talk to-day; not—not about anything that—that needs that tone of voice. Let's—let's read something!"

Bobby shook his head decidedly.

"No. I'm quite strong enough to talk to-day. In fact, I've wanted to say this for some time, but I've waited until to-day so I could say it. Margaret, you—you don't love me any longer."

"Oh—Bobby! Why, *Bobby*!" There was dismayed distress in Margaret's voice. When one has for some weeks been trying to lash one's self into a certain state of mind and heart for the express sake of some other one, it is distressing to have that other one so abruptly and so positively show that one's labor has been worse than useless.

"You do not, Margaret—you know that you do not."

"Why, Bobby, what—what makes you say such a dreadful thing," cried the girl, reaching blindly out for some support that would not fail. "As if—I didn't know my own mind!"

Bobby was silent. When he spoke again his voice shook a little.

"I will tell you what makes me say it. For some time I've suspected it—that you did not love me; but after the fire I—I knew it."

"You knew it!"

"Yes. When a girl loves a man, and that man has come back almost from the dead, she goes to him first—if she loves him. When Frank Spencer and I were brought into the hall down-stairs that Wednesday morning, the jar or something brought back my senses for a moment, just long enough for me to hear your cry of 'Frank,' and to see you hurry to his side."

Margaret caught her breath sharply. Her face grew white.

"But, Bobby, you—you were unconscious, I supposed," she stammered faintly. "I didn't think you could answer me if—if I did go to you."

"But you did not—come—to—see." The words were spoken gently, tenderly, sorrowfully.

Margaret gave a low cry and covered her face with her hands. A look that was almost relief came

to the man's face.

"There," he sighed. "Now you admit it. We can talk sensibly and reasonably. Margaret, why have you tried to keep it up all these weeks, when it was just killing you?"

"I wanted to make—you—happy," came miserably from behind the hands.

"And did you think I could be made happy that way—by your wretchedness?"

There was no answer.

"I've seen it coming for a long time," he went on gently, "and I did not blame you. I could never have made you happy, and I knew it almost from the first. I wasn't happy, either—because I couldn't make you so. Perhaps now I—I shall be happier; who knows?" he asked, with a wan little smile.

Margaret sobbed. It was so like Bobby—to belittle his own grief, just to make it easier for her! 292

"You see, it was for only the work that you cared for me," resumed the man after a minute. "You loved that, and you thought you loved me. But it was only the work all the time, dear. I understand that now. You see I watched you—and I watched him."

"Him!" Margaret's hands were down, and she was looking at Bobby with startled eyes.

"Yes. I used to think he loved you even then, but after the fire, and I heard your cry of 'Frank'——"

Margaret sprang to her feet.

"Bobby, Bobby, you don't know what you are saying," she cried agitatedly. "Mr. Spencer does not love me, and he never loved me. Why, Bobby, he couldn't! He even pleaded with me to marry another man."

"He pleaded with you!" Bobby's eyes were puzzled.

"Yes. Now, Bobby, surely you understand that he doesn't love me. Surely you must see!"

Bobby threw a quick look into the flushed, quivering face; then hastily turned his eyes away. 293

"Yes, I see," he said almost savagely. And he did see—more than he wanted to. But he did not understand: how a man *could* have the love of Margaret Kendall and not want it, was beyond the wildest flights of his fancy.

CHAPTER XL 294

Frank Spencer had already left the Mill House and gone to Hilcrest when McGinnis was well enough to go back to his place in the mills. The mills, in spite of the loss of the two buildings (which were being rapidly rebuilt) were running full time, and needed him greatly, particularly as the senior member of the firm had not entirely regained his old health and strength.

For some time after McGinnis went away, Margaret remained at the Mill House; but she was restless and unhappy in the position in which she found herself. McGinnis taught an evening class at the Mill House, and she knew that it could not be easy for him to see her so frequently now that the engagement was broken. Margaret blamed herself bitterly, not for the broken engagement, but for the fact that there had ever been any engagement at all. She told herself that she ought to have known that the feeling she had for Bobby was not love—and she asked herself scornfully what she thought of a young woman who could give that love all unsought to a 295
man who was so very indifferent as to beg her favor for another! Those long hours of misery when the mills burned had opened Margaret's eyes; and now that her eyes were opened, she was frightened and ashamed.

It seemed to Margaret, as she thought of it, that there was no way for her to turn but to leave both the Mill House and Hilcrest for a time. Bobby would be happier with her away, and the Mill House did not need her—Clarabella had come from New York, and had materially strengthened the teaching force. As for Hilcrest—she certainly would not stay at Hilcrest anyway—now. Later, when she had come to her senses, perhaps—but not now.

It did not take much persuasion on the part of Margaret to convince Mrs. Merideth that a winter abroad would be delightful—just they two together. The news of Margaret's broken engagement had been received at Hilcrest with a joyous relief that was nevertheless carefully subdued in the presence of Margaret herself; but Mrs. Merideth could not conceal her joy that she was to take 296
Margaret away from the "whole unfortunate affair," as she expressed it to her brothers. Frank Spencer, however, was not so pleased at the proposed absence. He could see no reason for Margaret's going, and one evening when they were alone together in the library he spoke of it.

"But, Margaret, I don't see why you must go," he protested.

For a moment the girl was silent; then she turned swiftly and faced him.

"Frank, Bobby McGinnis was my good friend. From the time when I was a tiny little girl he has been that. He is good and true and noble, but I have brought him nothing but sorrow. He will be

happier now if I am quite out of his sight at present. I am going away."

Frank Spencer stirred uneasily.

"But you will be away—from him—if you are here," he suggested.

"Oh, but if I'm here I shall be there," contested Margaret with a haste that refused to consider logic; then, as she saw the whimsical smile come into the man's eyes, she added brokenly: "Besides, I want to get away—quite away from my work." 297

Spencer grew sober instantly. The whimsical look in his eyes gave place to one of tender sympathy.

"You poor child, of course you do, and no wonder! You are worn out with the strain, Margaret."

She raised a protesting hand.

"No, no, you do not understand. I—I have made a failure of it."

"A failure of it!"

"Yes. I want to get away—to look at it from a distance, and see if I can't find out what is the trouble with it, just as—as artists do, you know, when they paint a picture." There was a feverishness in Margaret's manner and a tremulousness in her voice that came perilously near to tears.

"But, my dear Margaret," argued the man, "there's nothing the matter with it. It's no failure at all. You've done wonders down there at the Mill House."

Margaret shook her head slowly.

"It's so little—so very little compared to what ought to be done," she sighed. "The Mill House is good and does good, I acknowledge; but it's so puny after all. It's like a tiny little oasis in a huge 298 desert of poverty and distress."

"But what—what more could you do?" ventured the man.

Margaret rose, and moved restlessly around the room.

"I don't know," she said at last. "That's what I mean to find out." She stopped suddenly, facing him. "Don't you see? I touch only the surface. The great cause behind things I never reach. Sometimes it seems as if it were like that old picture—where was it? in Pilgrim's Progress?—of the fire. On one side is the man trying to put it out; on the other, is the evil one pouring on oil. My two hands are the two men. With one I feed a hungry child, or nurse a sick woman; with the other I make more children hungry and more women sick."

"Margaret, are you mad? What can you mean?"

"Merely this. It is very simple, after all. With one hand I relieve the children's suffering; with the other I take dividends from the very mills that make the children suffer. A long time ago I wanted to 'divvy up' with Patty, and Bobby and the rest. I have even thought lately that I would still like 299 to 'divvy up'; and—well, you can see the way I am 'divvying up' now with my people down there at the mills!" And her voice rang with self-scorn.

The man frowned. He, too, got to his feet and walked nervously up and down the room. When he came back the girl had sat down again. Her elbows were on the table, and her linked fingers were shielding her eyes. Involuntarily the man reached his hand toward the bowed head. But he drew it back before it had touched a thread of the bronze-gold hair.

"I do see, Margaret," he began gently, "and you are right. It is at the mills themselves that the first start must be made—the first beginning of the 'divvying up.' Perhaps, if there were some one to show us"—he paused, then went on unsteadily: "I suppose it's useless to say again what I said that day months ago: that if you stayed here, and showed him—the man who loves you—the better way——"

Margaret started. She gave a nervous little laugh and picked up a bit of paper from the floor. 300

"Of course it is useless," she retorted in what she hoped was a merry voice. "And he doesn't even love me now, besides."

"He doesn't love you!" Frank Spencer's eyes and voice were amazed.

"Of course not! He never did, for that matter. 'Twas only the fancy of a moment. Why, Frank, Ned never cared for me—that way!"

"*Ned!*" The tone and the one word were enough. For one moment Margaret gazed into the man's face with startled eyes; then she turned and covered her own telltale face with her hands—and because it was a telltale face, Spencer took a long stride toward her.

"Margaret! And did you think it was Ned I was pleading for, when all the while it was I who was hungering for you with a love that sent me across the seas to rid myself of it? Did you, Margaret?"

There was no answer.

"Margaret, look at me—let me see your eyes!" There was a note of triumphant joy in his voice now.

Still no answer.

“Margaret, it did not go—that love. It stayed with me day after day, and month after month, and it only grew stronger and deeper until there was nothing left me in all this world but you—just you. And now—Margaret, my Margaret,” he said softly and very tenderly. “You *are* my Margaret!” And his arms closed about her.

CHAPTER XLI

In spite of protests and pleadings Margaret spent the winter abroad.

“As if I’d stay here and flaunt my happiness in poor Bobby’s face!” she said indignantly to her lover. Neither would she consent to a formal engagement. Even Mrs. Merideth and Ned were not to know.

“It is to be just as it was before,” she had declared decidedly, “only—well, you may write to me,” she had conceded. “I refuse to stay here and—and be just happy—*yet*! I’ve been unkind and thoughtless, and have brought sorrow to my dear good friend. I’m going away. I deserve it—and Bobby deserves it, too!” And in spite of Frank Spencer’s efforts to make her see matters in a different light, she still adhered to her purpose.

All through the long winter Frank contented himself with writing voluminous letters, and telling her of the plans he was making to “divvy up” at the mills, as he always called it.

“I shall make mistakes, of course, dear,” he wrote. “It is a big problem—altogether more so than perhaps you realize. Of course the mills must still be a business—not a philanthropy; otherwise we should defeat our own ends. But I shall have your clear head and warm heart to aid me, and little by little we shall win success.

“Already I have introduced two or three small changes to prepare the way for the larger ones later on. Even Ned is getting interested, and seems to approve of my work, somewhat to my surprise, I will own. I’m thinking, however, that I’m not the only one in the house, sweetheart, to whom you and your unselfishness have shown the ‘better way.’”

Month by month the winter passed, and spring came, bringing Mrs. Merideth, but no Margaret.

“She has stopped to visit friends in New York,” explained Mrs. Merideth, in reply to her brother’s anxious questions. “She may go on west with them. She said she would write you.”

Margaret did “go on west,” and it was while she was still in the west that she received a letter from Patty, a portion of which ran thus:

“Mebbe youd like to know about Bobby McGinnis. Bobby is goin to get married. She seemed to comfort him lots after you went. Shes that pretty and sympathizing in her ways you know. I think he was kind of surprised hisself, but the first thing he knew he was in love with her. I think he felt kind of bad at first on account of you. But I told him that was all nonsense, and that I knew youd want him to do it. I think his feelins for you was more worship than love, anyhow. He didn’t never seem happy even when he was engaged to you. But hes happy now, and Arabella thinks hes jest perfect. Oh, I told you twas Arabella didn’t I? Well, tis. And say its her thats been learnin me to spell. Ain’t it jest grand?”

Not very many days later Frank Spencer at Hilcrest received a small card on which had been written:

“Mrs. Patty Durgin announces the engagement of her sister, Arabella Murphy, to Mr. Robert McGinnis.”

Beneath, in very fine letters was: “I’m coming home the eighteenth. Please tell Della; and—you may tell her anything else that you like. MARGARET.”

For a moment the man stared at the card with puzzled eyes; then he suddenly understood.

“Della,” he cried joyously, a minute later, “Della, she’s coming the eighteenth!”

“Who’s coming the eighteenth?”

Frank hesitated. A light that was half serious, half whimsical, and wholly tender, came into his eyes.

“My wife,” he said.

“Your *wife*!”

“Oh, you know her as Margaret Kendall,” retorted Frank with an airiness that was intended to hide the shake in his voice. “But she will be my wife before she leaves here again.”

“Frank!” cried Mrs. Merideth, joyfully, “you don’t mean——” But Frank was gone. Over his shoulder, however, he had tossed a smile and a reassuring nod.

Mrs. Merideth sank back with a sigh of content.

“It’s exactly what I always hoped would happen,” she said.

THE END

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