

## The Project Gutenberg eBook of A Girl in Spring-Time, by Mrs. George de Horne Vaizey

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Jessie Mansergh

"A Girl in Spring-Time"

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### Chapter One.

#### The Day Before the Holidays.

It was the day before the midsummer holidays, and the girls of the first form were sitting together in the upstairs school-room at Milvern House, discussing the events of the term, and the prospective pleasures of the next few weeks. Lessons had been finished in the morning, the afternoon had been given up to packing, and now they were enjoying a delightfully unsupervised hour of rest.

A tall, slim girl was standing by the table, turning out the contents of a desk, and filling the waste-paper basket with fragments of paper. The other pupils watched the movements of the small hands, and the sleek, dark head with unconscious fascination. There was something delightfully trim and dainty about Bertha Faucit. Her hair was always neat, her actions deliberate and graceful; she reminded one irresistibly of a sleek, well-nurtured pigeon pluming its wings in the sunshine, with a very happy sense of its own importance.

By the window stood another girl, who was evidently a sister, for she wore a dress of the same pattern, and held herself with a like air of dignified composure. Bertha and Lois Faucit were the daughters of a dean who lived in an old cathedral town, and their school-fellows were accustomed to account for every peculiarity on this score. "Dean's daughters, you know!" It was ridiculous to expect that the children of such a dignitary would indulge in pillow-fights, and bedroom supper, like ordinary frivolous mortals.

Bertha was talking all the while she worked, dropping out her words with the same delicate distinctness which characterised her actions.

"Picnics? Oh, dear me, yes! We have a picnic almost every week. We take the pony carriage and carry our own provisions, and make a fire of sticks. Have you ever tried to boil a kettle in the open air? It is a terrible experience. First of all the wood is so damp that it won't light, and you get all smoked and dirty; then when it does begin to burn, and you put the kettle on the top, the whole thing collapses to the ground, and you have to begin again from the beginning. You prop it up with stones, and get everything started for the second time, and then the others come back from laying the table and say, 'What! isn't the water boiling yet? Oh, you don't know how to light a fire! It is not properly laid. Let me show you!' and down comes the whole thing again. At the end of an hour the kettle boils, and the water is smoked! We always use it to wash our hands, and drink milk instead. This year I intend to use fire-lighters."

"We have a proper tea-basket for taking about with us," said one of the other girls. "The kettle hangs over a lamp which is protected from the draught, and you can have boiling water in ten minutes without any trouble. We always take it when we go on the river. I like boating picnics best of any."

"We go to the sea-side for the whole of the holidays," said Ella Bennet, a big girl with rosy cheeks and long, brown hair; "Mother thinks the bathing does us so much good. I learnt to swim last year. An old fisherman rowed out in a boat. I had a strap fastened round my waist, and he held me up with a pole while I went puffing round and round. He tried to teach me to dive as well, but I was too nervous. One day I vowed I really would try. I climbed on to the edge of the boat six times over, while he held me, and showed me how to put out my hands, and each time I began to squeal, and jumped down again at the last moment. It was band day, so there were hundreds of people sitting on the shore, and they roared with laughter. I was ashamed to come out of the van."

"I don't care about the sea-side. I like the country," said another girl. "Last year we stayed at an old farmhouse in Derbyshire. The walls are of oak, and there are secret cupboards on the stairs. There is a legend that on moonlight

nights one of the rooms is haunted by a lady in white, who comes and sits by an old spinning-wheel. One evening I dressed up in a sheet, powdered my hair, and blacked my eyebrows, then I got the landlady to suggest to the others that they should go upstairs and look for the ghost. They came up in a rush, and there I was spinning away with my head bent down as solemn as a judge. They were awfully quiet, but the boys crept nearer and nearer, and then pretended to faint, and toppled right over me. Horrid things! It turned out that the silly old woman thought they might be frightened, so she told them who it was before they came up. I was so cross!"

"But they might really have been frightened. I wouldn't go upstairs to see a ghost for a million pounds—not by myself, at least," said Nellie Grey, the youngest girl in the form. "Of course it wouldn't be so bad if you had your brothers with you. Brothers are great teases, but they never get frightened themselves, so it is a comfort to have them sometimes. My eldest brother is awfully brave. He wanted to be a sailor, but Father wouldn't let him, so at Christmas he confided in us one night that he was going to run away. He said good-bye, and divided his things among us. I got the paint-box, and Minnie the desk, and Phil the books and tool-chest. Next morning when we came down to breakfast, there he was just the same as usual. He hadn't run away at all. He said it was too cold. But we wouldn't give the things back. It's an awfully nice paint-box, with a lovely big palette in a drawer underneath. Mildred! how quiet you are! What are you going to do in the holidays?"

The speaker turned to look at a girl who was seated on the edge of the table itself, and everyone in the room followed her example with an alacrity which showed how pleasant the sight was in their eyes.

Mildred Moore had just passed her fourteenth birthday, but she was so big and strong that she looked older than her age. Her long legs nearly reached the floor, her hands were folded in her lap, and she stared through the window, lost in happy day-dreams. Mildred was the beauty of the school, and as the love of all that is sweet, and bright, and lovely is natural to girlhood, her companions placed her on a pedestal on that account, and treated her with special marks of favour. Eva Murray, who was sentimental, was accustomed to declare that Mildred was exactly like a Norse princess, and when Blanche Green, who was practical, asked what a Norse princess was like, she replied that she had never met one in real life, but had seen many in picture galleries, that they always had grey eyes and golden hair, and looked strong and kind and fearless, but also as if they could be awfully disagreeable if they liked,—which settled the question once for all, for everyone agreed that the description suited Mildred to a T.

"What am I going to do?" repeated the Norse princess cheerily. "Why, nothing at all in the way you mean. We never go away, either to the country or the sea-side, or have picnics, or parties, or any excitements of that kind. We just stay quietly at home and go on with the usual work, but I am with Mother, you know—that's my holiday! You have never seen her, you girls; I wish you had, for she is quite different to other peoples' mothers. She is only twenty years older than I am, to begin with, and she is awfully pretty. She is a tiny little thing, with dark eyes, and soft brown hair. She comes to meet me at the station in a sailor hat, and a little blue jacket, looking like a big school-girl herself. I'm so proud of her! Last time I went home I took her up in my arms and carried her across the room. She kicked like anything and said, 'You disrespectful child! How dare you! Put me down this instant!' but she wasn't really angry a bit, and we both tumbled over on to the sofa, and laughed till we cried. We do enjoy ourselves so much when we get together—Mother and I. She is lonely when I am away, poor dear, with no one to speak to but the children, so we make up for it in the holidays. I sit up to supper every night, and we have coffee, and hot buttered toast, and all sorts of good things that are bad for us, and in the daytime we bribe the elder children with pennies to amuse the younger ones, so that we may have the room to ourselves, and talk of the good times we shall have when my schooling is over, and I go home to stay!"

The girls gazed at Mildred as she spoke, with a mingling of envy and compassion. Envy,—because her intense delight in the mere prospect of being at home made them conscious of their own selfishness in regarding the holidays as a period when parents should occupy themselves in providing amusement for their families;—compassion,—because it was well known that Mrs Moore was a widow, and so poor that she could not afford to leave the country house where she lived with her half-dozen noisy youngsters. Mildred had been sent to a good boarding-school so that she might be able to teach her little brother and sisters in due time, and the other girls were specially pitiful over this prospect.

Mary Nicoll referred to the subject now with questionable taste.

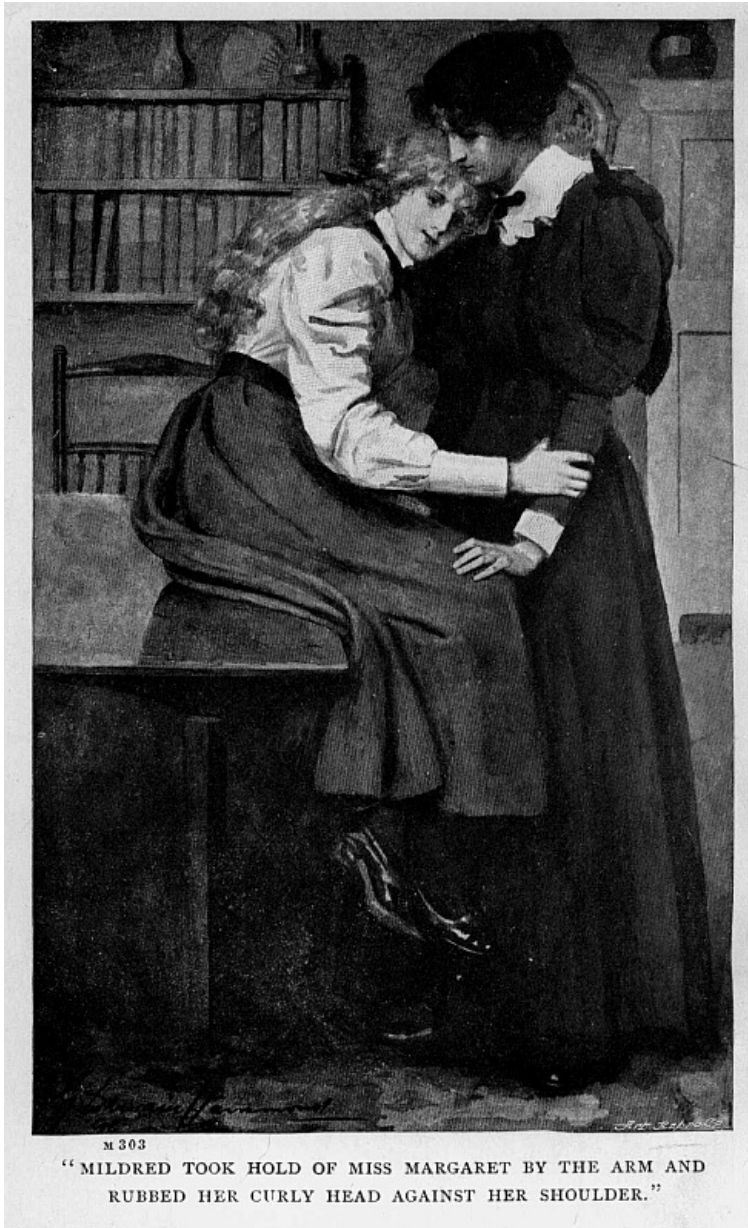
"But it won't be much fun, Mildred, if you have to teach all day long. You won't be able to go about as you like, or have any time free except in the evenings. And fancy having to go over all the wretched old lessons again, and to drill tables and dates, and latitudes and longitudes into the brains of a lot of stupid children. It will be worse than being at school."

"Our children are not stupid. They are as sharp as needles, and I don't think it will be dull at all. It will be fun to have the positions reversed, and to do none of the work and all the fault-finding. I shall bully them fearfully. Can't you imagine me—very proper and stiff, hair done up—sitting at the head of the table tapping with a lead pencil... 'Attention to the board! ... Shoulders back, young ladies, if you please! Your deportment leaves much to be desired! ... My dear, good child, how can you be so stupid! You try my patience to the uttermost!'"

Mildred accompanied these remarks with contortions of the face and body in imitation of the different teachers at Milvern House, and the bursts of laughter with which they were greeted showed how real were her powers of mimicry. She joined in the laughter herself, then suddenly breaking off, clasped her hands together, and rocked to and fro in an ecstasy of anticipation.

"This time to-morrow—oh! I shall be driving home from the station. We shall have passed the village cross, and the almshouses, and turned the corner by the farm. The children will be swarming out of the gate—the table will be laid for tea, with a bowl of roses in the middle—oh!—and strawberries—oh!—and real, true, thick, country cream. To-morrow! I can't believe it. I don't think I ever wanted to go home so badly before. The term from Christmas to midsummer seems so awfully long when you don't go away for Easter. I shan't sleep a wink to-night, I am so excited. I don't think I can lie down at all."

The girls were so absorbed in their conversation that they had not heard the door open during Mildred's last speech, and the new comer had thus an opportunity of listening undisturbed. She was a tall, slight young lady, with dark hair, and the sweetest brown eyes that were ever seen. She wore a black dress, and white collar and cuffs, and looked as if she were trying her best to appear old and dignified, and not succeeding so well as she would have wished. This was Miss Margaret, the younger of the two lady principals, familiarly known among the girls as "Mardie", because she was "such a darling" that it was impossible to address her by an ordinary, stiff, school-mistressy title. This afternoon, however, Mardie's eyes were not so serene as usual, and her face clouded over in a noticeable manner as she listened to Mildred's rhapsodies.



"Mildred, dear," she said, coming forward and laying her hand on the girl's shoulder. "I want you in my room for a few minutes. I won't keep you long. There is something—"

"You want to say to me! Oh, Mardie, I can guess. I have left my slippers in the middle of the floor, and thrown my clothes all over the room. I know—I know quite well, but it's the last day—I can't be prim and tidy on the last day. It's not in human nature!" Mildred took hold of Miss Margaret by the arm, and rubbed her curly head against her shoulder in a pretty, kitten-like manner. "To-morrow morning you will be rid of us altogether, and then—"

"But it is not about your room, Mildred. Come dear—come with me. I really want you."

"I'm ready then!" The girl slipped lightly to the ground, and turned to follow Miss Margaret from the room. "You make me quite curious, Mardie. Whatever can it be?"

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## Chapter Two.

### A Great Disappointment.

Miss Margaret's room was on the third floor, and did service both as a bedroom and as a sanctum to which its owner could retire in rare moments of leisure. The bed stood in a corner, curtained off from the rest of the room; pictures hung on the walls; little bookcases fitted into the angles; while before the window was an upholstered seat, so long and wide, and luxuriously cushioned, as to make an ideal sofa. In the girls' estimation Mardie's room was a paradise, and it seemed almost worth while having a headache, when one could be tucked up warm and cosy on that delightful

seat, shaded from the sun by the linen blind outside the window, yet catching delicious peeps at the garden beneath its shelter.

Mildred made straight for the coveted position and leant back against the cushions, her hands clasped round her knees in an attitude rather comfortable than elegant. For once, however, Miss Margaret had no reproof to offer. She had nothing to say about the awful consequences of curving the back and contracting the chest; she did not even inquire, with a lifting of the eyebrows, "My dear Mildred, is that the way in which a young lady ought to sit?" She only gazed at the girl's face and wrinkled her brows, as if puzzled how to open the conversation.

"Go on, Mardie, dear?" said her pupil, encouragingly. "What is it—have I done anything wrong? I don't know what it is, but I'm awfully sorry, and I'll never do it any more. Don't scold me on the last day! I'll promise faithfully—"

"Don't, dear! It isn't anything like that." Miss Margaret straightened herself with an expression of resolution and went boldly forward. "Mildred, are you brave? Can you bear a great disappointment?"

Mildred raised her eyes with a start of apprehension. There was a moment's silence, during which a curious change came over the girlish face. The colour faded from the cheeks, the eyes hardened, the lips set themselves in a thin, straight line.

"No," she said sharply, "I can't!" and Miss Margaret looked at her with gentle remonstrance.

"Oh, Mildred, don't take it like that! I have had to bring other girls into this room, dear, and tell them of troubles compared to which this disappointment of yours is as nothing—nothing! Poor little Effie Browning, looking forward to her parents' return from abroad, and counting the hours to their arrival—I had to show her the telegram announcing her mother's death. And Mabel, and Fanny—But your mother is well, quite well and safe. Doesn't that make you feel thankful to bear any lesser trouble?"

"No!" said Mildred again, more obstinately than before; "No!" She stared at Miss Margaret with unflinching eyes. "If Mother is well, there is only one other trouble which I could feel just now. If—if it is anything to prevent me going home, I can't bear it—it will kill me! I shall break my heart!"

"Nonsense! You are far too strong, and brave, and sensible to break your heart over a disappointment of a few weeks, however hard it may be to face. Come, Mildred, you know I rely upon you to be my helper in difficulties; you must not quarrel with me, for we shall have to keep each other company. Your little brother Robbie has taken scarlet fever, and you will not be able—"

She did not finish the sentence, for her pupil interrupted with a cry of bitter grief, and buried her face in her hands. It was one thing to imagine a thing, and another to know that it was true in solemn earnest. Mildred had spoken of the possibility of not being able to go home as of some appalling imaginary calamity, but she had never, never thought it could be true. Not go home! Stay at school all through the holidays!—the prospect was so terrible that it was impossible to realise all that it meant. Nevertheless some of the first miserable consequences were clear enough to poor Mildred's mind:—to unpack all her boxes, to put her clothes back in drawers and cupboards; to sleep by herself in the deserted dormitory; to spend the days lounging about empty school-rooms, feeling doubly lonely because of the remembrance of the friends who had been by her side but a few days before, and who had now dispersed to their own happy homes. Effie Browning had spent the holidays at school once or twice, and Mildred had pitied her so much that she had sent weekly letters and boxes of country flowers and mosses, to cheer her solitude. And now she herself was to undergo this awful experience! To-morrow morning the other girls would fasten their boxes and drive off to the station, but for her there would be no excitement of farewell, no railway journey, with the delightful sense of importance in travelling by herself all the way from the junction, no dear little mother waiting to greet her in sailor hat and blue serge suit! Her heart swelled with passionate longing, but she could not cry; the blow was too sudden, too severe. Miss Margaret's eyes were wet, however, as she looked down at the curly, golden head. She did not speak for a few minutes, then she laid her hand on the girl's arm and pressed it to attract attention.

"I am so sorry for you—so sorry, my poor girl. See, dear, here is a letter which came inclosed in one to my sister. Your mother wished us to break the news—"

Mildred seized the letter in an almost savage grasp. It was in her mother's handwriting, and ran as follows:—

My darling Mildred,

When you get this letter, Miss Chilton will have told you of the trouble at home. Poor little Robbie has been very poorly for two days, and this morning the doctor pronounces it to be scarlet fever. I could not help crying when he told me, for so many things came rushing into my head, and it all seemed so dark and difficult. I was anxious about Robbie, and couldn't think what to do with the rest of the children; and you, my darling, with your holidays just beginning! It broke my heart to think of you. I seem to have lived a month in the last few hours, but everyone has been so kind, and help has come from all directions. Mrs Bewley and Mrs Ross are to take the children to stay with them, as they have no little ones of their own, and are not afraid of infection. I will nurse Robbie, and if any of the others fall ill, they will be sent home at once, and we will make a hospital of the top floor. I suppose, even if all goes well, and Robbie is the only patient, it will be six weeks before we are out of quarantine. Oh, my dearest child, I am so grieved for your disappointment, coming upon you in the midst of your preparations; but there is no help for it, you must stay on at school, for there is no other place to which I can send you. I can't ask either Mrs Bewley or Mrs Ross to take you in addition to the other children, and even if you were here we could not see or speak to each other, and it would be dreadful to know that you were so near, and not be able to be together.

I am as disappointed as you, can be, dear, for I can't tell you how I was looking forward to having my dear, big girl back again, but this is a trouble which has come to us, and which we cannot help, and we must try

to be as brave as possible. Robbie is very hot and feverish to-day. He asked when you would be at home, and I was obliged to tell him that you could not come now. A little time afterwards I went back and found him crying, "'Cause Millie will be angry wif me!" Poor wee man! if he only gets on well we must not mind any disappointment which his illness has caused.

I shall not be allowed to send you letters, dear, but please write to me as often and as cheerfully as you can. We shall be shut off from all our friends, and letters will be eagerly welcomed. I send you a postal order for a sovereign for pocket-money during the holidays. It is all I can afford, darling, or you should have ten times as much. You know that.

I have not another minute to spare, so goodbye, dearie. I shall think of you every hour of the day. Help me by being brave!

Mother.

Mildred read the letter through, folded it away, and looked up at Miss Margaret with bright, dry eyes.

"Can I go to my own room, Miss Margaret, please?"

"You can if you like, Mildred, but the other girls will be there in a moment, getting ready for tea. Wouldn't you prefer to stay here? I will give you my writing-case, and you can write to your mother; she will be longing to hear. You shall have tea up here, a nice little tray, and Bertha shall have it with you, unless you prefer to be alone."

"I don't want to see anyone. They are all going home. It would make me feel worse than ever. They are all happy but me—"

"They will feel your disappointment almost as much as you do yourself. We are all so grieved; but I will do my best to make the holidays pleasant for you, dear."

"Don't be kind to me, Mardie, please. I can't bear it—I feel as if I hated everyone! Why need Robbie take ill just now of all times in the year? He is a tiresome little thing. It is always the same way,—there is more trouble with him than with all the five girls. Why can't Mother stay with us and send him away to be nursed? There are five of us, and only one of him. I wasn't home at Easter, though almost all the girls went. I can't live six whole months longer without seeing Mother. It makes me wild even to think of it!"

"Don't think of it, Mildred. Six months is a long way ahead; a hundred things may happen before then. Don't worry yourself about months, think only of to-day, and try to be bright, and brave, and patient."

"It would be horrid of me to be bright when Mother is in trouble. I can't be brave when everything goes wrong; I can't be patient when my heart is breaking."

"It is hard, dear, but there are harder trials than this, which we have to bear as we go through life, and you know—"

"Mardie, don't preach! Don't! I can't bear it. How can it make it easier to know that other people have worse troubles? It makes it harder, for I have to be sorry for them as well as myself. It's no use trying to reason; you had better leave me alone. If you say another word I—I—I shall—" Mildred's voice broke, she struggled in vain against the rising sobs, and burying her face in her hands, burst into a storm of bitter weeping.

Miss Margaret did not try to check her, for she knew that tears would be a relief, and that after this outburst Mildred would be calmer and more reasonable. She patted her heaving shoulders and murmured caressing words from time to time.

"Dear Mildred! poor girl! I am so sorry,—we are all so sorry for you, dear. You know that—don't you?"

Mildred cried on unrestrainedly, but by and by she nestled nearer to Mardie's side, and a few broken phrases began to mingle with her sobs.

"Oh, Mardie, I don't want—to be—so horrid! I'll try—to be good.—But you don't know—how—I feel—inside! All raging, desperate! It seems—as if—it can't be true. I was so happy. It was so—near."

"Yes, dear, yes; but, Mildred, listen to me. I know that nothing can make up for home or Mother, but I am not going away for two or three weeks, and we will have some cosy little times together—you and I. You shall sleep with me, we will have our meals in the south parlour, and we will go little expeditions on our own account, have tea in village inns, and botanise in the fields. The doctor's daughter will be at home from school, she shall come and spend the day with you as often as you like, and you must help me to pick fruit and make jam. We will get some nice books too, and read aloud in the evenings. It won't be so dreadful—will it, dear? Come, Mildred, if you cry like this I shall think you don't care for me at all."

"Oh, Mardie, I do! I love you, and I know you will be kind, but I'm—*tired* of school. I want Mother! I want Mother!" And down went the curly head once more, and Mildred burst into fresh floods of tears.

It was indeed a sad ending to a day which had dawned with such radiant promise.

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## Chapter Three.

### Friends to the Rescue.

There was consternation downstairs when the news of Mildred's disappointment was made public. The girls clustered together in groups, and talked with bated breath. The number of times that the words "fearful" and "awful" were used would have horrified Miss Chilton if she had been present, and one and all were agreed that their friend was the most pitiable creature upon earth.

Even the little sixth-form pupils were full of sympathy, for Mildred took more notice of them than any of the "big girls", and even condescended, upon occasion, to spend a holiday afternoon helping them with their games and "dressings up." Within ten minutes of hearing the news little Nina Behrends had scribbled a note on a leaf of an exercise-book, and fitted it into an envelope together with a bulky inclosure. She trotted upstairs and knocked at Miss Margaret's door, and when Mildred peered out into the passage with her tear-stained eyes, the little mite pressed the package into her hands and scuttled away as fast as her legs would carry her.

Mildred opened the envelope with a feeling of bewilderment, which was certainly not decreased when she drew forth an aged piece of india-rubber, shaggy and frayed at the ends, as with the bites of tiny teeth. She turned to the note for an explanation, which was given in the following words:

Dear Mildred,

I hope you are quite well. I send you my injy-ruber. The thick side rubs out. I hope it will comfort you that you can't go home.

So I remain,

Your little friend,

Nina.

Poor little Nina! The "injury-ruber" was one of her greatest treasures, and it had seemed to her that no other offering could so fitly express her love and pity.

The same impulse visited all the other girls in their turn. It was not enough to sympathise in words, it seemed absolutely necessary to *do* something; and before half an hour was over, every girl was rummaging through the contents of a newly-tidied desk, in search of some tribute which she might send to Mildred in her distress. Such a curious collection of presents as it was! Pencil boxes (more or less damaged); blotted blotters; "happy families" of ducks and rabbits congregated on circles of velvet; photograph frames; coloured slate-pencils;—it would be difficult to say what was not included in the list, while every gift was wrapped in a separate parcel, and offered in terms of tenderest affection.

Bertha Faucit was deputed to carry the presentations upstairs, and she found Mildred sitting upon the window-seat, gazing out into the garden with dreary, tear-stained eyes. There was nothing in the least like a Norse princess about her at this moment. She looked just what she was—a particularly lugubrious, unhappy, English school-girl. Her face lighted up with a gleam of pleasure when she saw her friend, however, for she had been alone for nearly an hour, while tea was going on downstairs, and was beginning to find the unusual silence oppressive.

"Oh, Mildred!" cried Bertha. "Oh, Bertha!" cried Mildred; then they collapsed into silence, gazing at each other with melancholy eyes.

"I can't—go home!" said Mildred at last, speaking with heaving breath and suspicious gaps between the words. "I have to stay here all the holi—days—by myself! Eight weeks—fifty-six days! I think I shall go mad—I'm sure I shall! My head feels queer already!"

"That is because you have been crying. You will be better in the morning," said Bertha, and her quiet, matter-of-fact voice sounded soothingly in her friend's ears. "See, Mildred, the girls have sent you these little presents to show how sorry they are for your disappointment. We couldn't go out to buy anything new, so you must excuse us if they are not quite fresh. I have brought my crayons,—you said the blue was a nicer colour than yours; Lois has chosen two texts for illuminating, and there are all sorts of things besides. See what a collection! Maggie Bruce has sent an exercise-book with the used leaves torn out. She said it was to be used as an album; and when we go home we are all going to ask our fathers for foreign stamps, and send them on to you. Don't you want to look at all the other things?"

Bertha had laid the parcels in a row along the floor, and Mildred now took up one after another and examined the contents, while at one moment she laughed, and at the next her eyes ran over with tears.

"How good of them all—how kind! Poor little Nina Behrends presented me with her 'injury-ruber' before tea. It is so dirty that it would spoil anything it touched, but it was sweet of the little thing to think of it. A note from Carrie. Poor old Elsie—fancy sending me this! What a nice frame; I'll put your photograph in it, Bertha. Slate-pencils! does she think I am going to do sums in the holidays? Oh, Bertha, don't think me horrid, but people seem to me to have a very queer idea of comfort! Miss Margaret sent up strawberry jam and cake for my tea, as if anything to *eat* could make up for not seeing Mother!—or pencils, or books, or stamps. I'd give all the stationery in the world if I could only wake up and find it was a dream, and that I was really going home!"

"I don't think that is quite the right way to look at it," said Bertha, seating herself elegantly on a chair, and speaking in her precise, little, grown-up manner. "We don't expect these things to 'make up'; they are not of much value in themselves, but you must think of their meaning, and that is that we all love you, and are sorry for you, and want to do everything in our power to help you."

"Yes, yes, I know; you are all angels, and I am a wretch!" cried poor Mildred dismally. "I don't deserve that you

should be so kind. I should like to be grateful and patient, but I can't! Bertha, if you were in my place, and had to stay here at school all alone, without even Lois or a single one of the girls, what would you do?"

Bertha reflected.

"I think I should cry a good deal at first," she said honestly, "and lie awake at nights, and have a headache, but I should try to be resigned. I have never had anything very hard to bear, and sometimes I have almost wished that I had. I don't mean, of course, that I want anyone belonging to me to fall ill like your brother. I should like a trouble that affected myself alone, so that I might see how well I could bear it. I love to read about people who have had terrible trials, and have been brave and heroic, and overcome them all. I have an ambition to see if I could imitate them."

"Well, I haven't," said Mildred, "not a bit; and you won't like it either, Bertha, when it comes to your turn! Besides, I don't see that there is much chance of being heroic in living alone by yourself in a ladies' school. Heroes have to fight against armies, and plagues, and terrible calamities, and I have to face only dullness and disappointment. Even if I bear them well it will be no more than is expected of me. ... There would be nothing heroic about it!"

Bertha knit her brows in thoughtful fashion.

"I am not so sure," she said. "I think it must be pretty easy to be brave when you are marching with hundreds of other people, while drums are beating and flags waving, and you remember that England expects you to do your duty, and that the whole world will talk of it to-morrow if you do well. It would be quite easy for you, Mildred; for you are never afraid, and you would get so excited that you would hardly know what you were doing. It will be much harder for you to sit still here and be cheerful; and to do the hardest thing must be heroic! I will write to you often, Mildred; all the girls will write. You will have heaps of letters."

"That will be nice. I love letters," said Mildred gratefully. She cheered up a little at the prospect, and talked to her friend for the next half-hour without relapsing into tears. Nevertheless, the remembrance of the poor, disfigured face weighed heavily on Bertha's heart, and she could talk of nothing else, as she and Lois finished their packing later on the same evening.

"I feel quite mean to be going home when poor Mildred is left here alone," she said. "And we have such a happy time. Father and Mother are so good, they give us almost everything we ask in the holidays. I wonder—" She stopped short as if struck with a brilliant idea, and stared into her sister's eyes.

"I wonder—" echoed Lois immediately, and her voice had the same ring, her face the same curious expression.

The pupils at Milvern House were often amazed at the instinctive manner in which these two sisters leapt to an understanding of each other's meaning, and the present instance it was evident that Lois needed no explanation of that mysterious "I wonder." "We are twins, you know," they were accustomed to say, when questioned about this peculiarity, and it seemed as if this fact did indeed save them from much conversational exercise.

"We will see!" said Bertha again, and Lois nodded her head and repeated, "We will see!" while her face lit up with smiles.

But Mildred did not know what pleasant schemes her friends were plotting on her behalf, and she lay, face downwards, crying heart-brokenly upon her bed.

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## Chapter Four.

### Bad News from Home.

The next morning Mildred awoke with a wail of despairing remembrance. She hid her face in the pillow and wondered how she was to live through the day, to see the different batches of girls leave the house at ten o'clock, at eleven, at one, at half a dozen different times, while she was left alone in solitary misery.

Her friends, however, were too considerate of her feelings to let her experience such a trial. Immediately after breakfast Miss Chilton announced that she was going to spend the day in a neighbouring township, and requested Mildred to get ready to accompany her. Now, Miss Chilton was a majestic person, with a Roman nose and hair braided smoothly down each side of her face; and none of the girls dared to argue concerning her decrees, as they did, on occasion, with the more popular Miss Margaret.

So Mildred marched meekly upstairs, to put on hat and jacket, without uttering a single protest. She would have liked to say, "Oh, do leave me alone! I would far rather stay at home and mope;" and Miss Chilton probably guessed as much, though she took no notice of her companion's downcast expression, and sat with the same unconscious smile upon her face all the length of the journey.

She had some shopping to do, in preparation for her own holidays, but when that was over, she and her pupil repaired to the house of a friend, where they were to lunch and spend the afternoon.

The friend had two daughters about Mildred's own age,—bright, lively girls, who carried her away to their own rooms, showed her their possessions, confided secret plans, and were altogether so kind and friendly that she forgot to be unhappy, and chatted as gaily as they did themselves. Miss Chilton had probably sounded a note of warning in the letter which announced her coming, for no one said a word to Mildred on the subject of the holidays, but when she was leaving, the mother invited her to spend another day with the girls, and the girls themselves kissed her with sympathetic effusion.

It was nearly eight o'clock when the travellers reached school again, to find the house transformed from its usual bustling aspect. The classrooms were closed, supper was laid in the cosy little south parlour, and when Mildred tried to enter the dormitory which she shared with two other girls she found that the door was locked, and Miss Margaret came smiling forward to lead the way to her own room.

"I have been as busy as a bee all afternoon. Come and see how nicely I have arranged it all," she said brightly, and Mildred, looking round, saw her own chest of drawers in one corner, her dresses hanging neatly in the wardrobe, while a narrow bed stood out at right angles from the wall.

Her heart swelled at the sight, and a hundred loving, grateful thoughts arose in her heart. She longed to thank Miss Margaret for sparing her the painful task of unpacking, and for letting her share this pretty, luxurious room, but it seemed as if an iron band were placed round her lips, and she could not pronounce the words.

"The bed spoils the look of the room!" she muttered at last, and even in her own ears her voice sounded gruff and ungracious; but Miss Margaret only smiled, and slipped one arm caressingly round her waist.

"Ah, but I sha'n't think that when I wake in the morning and see my little goldilocks lying beside me, with her curls all over the pillow like the princess in the fairy tale!" she said, and at that Mildred was obliged to laugh too, for she was like most other mortals—marvellously susceptible to a touch of flattery!

"A very grumpy princess!" she said penitently. "I am really awfully grateful, Mardie, but I can't show it. You will excuse me if I am nasty for a day or two, won't you, dear?"

Mardie raised her eyebrows and pursed up her lips in comical fashion. She was always unusually lively for a schoolmistress, but already it seemed to Mildred that she was quite a different person from the "Miss Margaret" of term time. She wore a pretty blue dress, with lace frillings on the bodice, and walked about with an airy tread, as though released from a weight of responsibility.

"Well," she said, nodding her head, and looking as mischievous as a girl herself, "I'll make allowances, of course, but I hope you won't try me too far. I am a delightful person out of school time, and mean to enjoy every day of the holidays to the full—unless you prevent me I shall be dependent upon you!"

"I prevent you,—!"

That seemed to put the matter in a new light, and Mildred was overcome at the thought of her own selfishness. Whatever she might have to suffer, she must not spoil poor Mardie's pleasure in her well-earned rest. That would be inexcusable. She determined to do her utmost to be brave for Mardie's sake.

The next day Miss Chilton departed on her travels, and a letter arrived from Mrs Ross giving a serious account of the little invalid's condition. She evidently tried to write as cheerfully as possible, but Mildred read anxiety between the lines, and was full of compunction.

She had never imagined that Robbie would be really ill, but had looked upon the fever as a childish complaint which would make him hot and red for a few days, and put everyone else to inconvenience for as many weeks. She had not only felt, but said, that it was very "tiresome" of him to have taken ill at such a time; but now the remembrance of poor wee Robbie lying in bed crying, "'Cause Millie would be angry wif him," cut her to the heart. The day seemed endlessly long and dreary, and the next morning's news was worse instead of better. Robbie's life was in danger. The doctor hoped, however, that a change might take place within the next twenty-four hours, and Mrs Ross promised to telegraph in the afternoon to allay his sister's anxiety.

Miss Margaret looked very grave, but she said little, and did not attempt to follow when Mildred fled upstairs, leaving the letter in her hands. There are times when we all prefer to be alone, and this morning Mildred could not have brought herself to speak to anyone in the world but her mother. She lay motionless on the window-seat, her head resting on the open sill, the summer breeze stirring the curls on her forehead, while the clock in the hall chimed one hour after another, and the morning crept slowly away. For the most part she felt stupefied, as if she could not realise all that the tidings meant, but every now and then her heart swelled with an intolerable ache.

It was true that Robbie had caused more trouble than his five sisters put together, but his exploits had been of an innocent, lovable nature, and when the temporary annoyance which they caused was over, she and her mother had laughed over them with tender pride. He was such a manly little fellow! Many a boy would have been spoiled if he had been brought up in a household composed exclusively of womenkind, but nothing could take the spirit out of Robbie. He had begun to domineer over his sisters while he was still in petticoats, and now that he was promoted to sailor suits, he gave himself the airs of the master of the house! Mildred recalled the day when he had been discovered standing before a mirror, making wild slashes at his curls with a pair of cutting-out scissors. The explanation given was that some boys had dared to call him "pitty girl!" and he couldn't "'tand it!" When his mother shed tears of mortification, Robbie hugged her with sympathetic effusion, but sturdily refused to say that he was "torry!"

A vision of the little shaggy head rose up before Mildred's eyes: she saw the chubby face, the defiant pose of the childish figure, and stretching out her hands, sobbed forth a broken prayer.

"Oh, God! you have so many children in Heaven—so many little boys. We have only one... Don't take Robbie!"

The morning wore away, the blazing sun of noon shone in through the open window, Mildred's head throbbed with pain, then gradually everything seemed to sink away to an immeasurable distance, and she was lost in blessed unconsciousness.



When she awoke the church bell was chiming for afternoon service, and Miss Margaret knelt by her side, holding an open telegram in her hand.

"I opened it, darling!" she said; "I thought it would be better. It is good news, Mildred—good news! Robbie is better. The doctors think he will get well now!"

Ah! that was a happy afternoon! Mardie took Mildred in her arms and kissed and petted her to her heart's content, then the door opened and in came old Ellen, the cook, carrying a tea-tray with freshly-made scones, a plate of raspberries from the garden, and a jug of thick, country cream. The kind old soul had been so full of sympathy that she had insisted upon carrying it up the three flights of stairs herself, although her breath was of the shortest, and she gasped and panted in alarming fashion. Mildred laughed and cried in one breath, and lay back against the cushions, drinking tea, and eating raspberries in great contentment of spirit.

"I was awfully hungry, though I didn't know it. I feel as if I had been ill. Oh, Mardie, isn't it a lovely feeling when the pain goes, and you can just rest and be thankful! ... It's worse to have a pain in your mind than in your body. I feel ashamed now that I made such a fuss about staying at school—it seems such a little thing in comparison, but don't say 'I told you so!' Mardie, or that will make me feel horrid again. It really *is* big, you know, only the other was so much bigger... Mardie, have you ever had a disappointment—as big a disappointment as mine?"

A quiver passed over Miss Margaret's face, and for a moment she looked very sad.

"Oh, Mildred, yes!" she cried. "Everyone has, dear, but sometimes I have been discontented enough to imagine that I have had more than my share. A disappointment, indeed! dozens,—scores,—hundreds! But of course some are harder to bear than others."

"Tell me about one now!" said Mildred, leaning back against the cushions and settling herself to listen in comfort. "Do, Mardie! I feel just in the humour to listen to a story; and I know it will be interesting if you tell it. 'The Story of a Disappointment!' Something exciting that happened to you when you were young. Now then, go along! Begin at once!"

Mardie laughed, and then pretended to look indignant.

"When I was young, indeed! What do you call me now? When you are my age you will be very indignant if anyone calls you old. Well now, let me see! I'll tell you the story of a disappointment which happened to—well—not exactly to me, but to a very great friend whom I had known all my life. He tried to get on in business in England, but it seemed as if there was no opening for him here, and at last he made up his mind to go abroad. He heard through an advertisement of an opening in a tea plantation in Assam (Assam, Mildred! You know where it is, of course), and though he hated the idea of leaving home, he thought it was the right thing to do. Well, he went. It was a long and expensive journey, and when he arrived he found that things were not at all as they had been represented. I can't enter into details, but the advertisement had been one of those cruel frauds by which young men are tempted abroad, and robbed of time and money. My friend was clever enough to see through the deception, and refused to have anything to do with the business. That was all right so far as it went, but there he was, alone in a strange land, not knowing where to turn, or what to do to earn a livelihood. It was just about this time that the planters in Ceylon were beginning to grow the cinchona-tree, from the bark of which the medicine known as quinine is made; and it happened one day that my friend overheard two gentlemen discussing the prospects of the crops and speaking very enthusiastically about it. He made inquiries in as many directions as he could, and finally decided to go south to Ceylon and prospect. He had some money of his own, and he was fortunate enough to meet a man who had been in the island for years, and who had valuable experience. They bought an estate between them, planted it with cinchona, and worked hard to cultivate it; and it is very hard, Mildred, for an Englishman to work in the open air in those tropical countries! It was a difficult crop to raise, and misfortune befell all the estates around. The roots 'cankered', the leaves turned red and dropped off, so that the trees had to be uprooted, and very little if any of the bark could be used. My friend's estate, however, flourished more and more. His partner was a clever planter, and they were not content to leave the work to the care of an overseer, but looked after it themselves, night and day. There was not a single precaution which they neglected; not an improvement which they left untried, and as I say the place flourished—people talked about it—it became well known in the island. It was all the more valuable because of the failure of the other estates, and the sum which the estate would realise, if all went well, would be a fortune—large enough to provide both partners for life.

"Imagine how they felt, Mildred! How eager they were; how delighted. They had been away from home for years by this time, and were longing to return. They had each their own castle in the air, and it seemed as if this money would build it on solid earth. For some time everything flourished, then—one morning—"

Miss Margaret paused, and drew a difficult breath; Mildred stared at her with dilated eyes.

"My friend wrote me all about it. They had finished breakfast and strolled out together, talking of what they would do when the next few weeks were over, and the money was paid down. They were to buy presents in Colombo, take passages in the first steamer, and come home laden with spoils. The partner—his name was 'Ned'—was picturing the scene which would take place at his home when he distributed the treasures which he had bought for his sisters—amethyst rings, tortoise-shell brushes, brass ornaments. He walked on ahead, gesticulating, and waving his hands in the air. Suddenly he stopped short, started violently, and stared at one of the carefully-guarded cinchona-trees.

"'What is it, Ned?' cried his partner, and at that the other turned his face. It had been all bright and sparkling a moment before. It was changed now—like the face of an old, old man. My friend looked and saw: the leaves were shrivelling—it was the beginning of the red blight!"

Miss Margaret jumped up from her seat and began to pace the room. Her voice quivered; her eyes had a suspicious brightness; while Mildred was undisguisedly tearful.

“Oh, Mardie! How awful! Oh, the poor, poor fellows! What did they do?”

“There was nothing to be done. They knew that by experience. The blight would spread and spread until the whole estate was destroyed. They could do nothing to stop it. They went back to the bungalow and sat there all day long—without speaking a word or lifting their eyes from the ground. All the years of hard, unceasing work had been for nothing—”

Mardie stopped abruptly.

“And after—afterwards?”

Mardie stood with her back to her companion, as if avoiding her glance. Her voice had a curiously tired, listless expression.

“Oh!—they dug up the ground to plant tea, and began life over again.”

“But, Mardie, dear, don’t be so sorry! It was terribly hard, but after all it is over, and it did not affect your own personal happiness!”

Mardie moved the ornaments on the dressing-table with nervous fingers.

“It is getting late,” she said. “Put on your hat, Mildred, and let us have a stroll in the garden before it is dusk.”

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## Chapter Five.

### Sunshine Again!

The next day brought reassuring news of Robbie, who had had a good night, and was distinctly better. Mildred was devoutly thankful; but now that the strain of anxiety was relieved, the loneliness of her position began to weigh upon her with all the old intensity. She grew tired of reading and writing letters, and the silence of the big, empty house weighed upon her spirits.

“Three days—and already it seemed like a month! Then what will a month feel like? and two months?” she asked herself in a tremor of alarm. “It is all very well for Mardie to say, ‘Take one day at a time, and don’t worry about the future.’ She wouldn’t find it so easy in my place! Bertha might send me a letter! I didn’t expect her to write the first day she was at home, but she might have managed it the second, under the circumstances!”

Miss Margaret was engaged with callers; the servants busy at their work. Mildred was at her wits’ end to know what to do with herself. She flattened her face against the window, and stared gloomily down the drive.

“Two more visitors coming to see Mardie. That means another half-hour at the least before I can go downstairs to have tea. An old lady, and a young one in a light dress, and a hat with pink roses. She doesn’t look a bit nice!” pronounced Mildred in critical spirit; “I shall dress much better than that when I am grown up. Her boots are awful!—old, shabby things beneath a grand dress. I would rather spend less on finery and have respectable feet. The old lady is as broad as she is long; her bonnet is crooked! Why doesn’t the girl put it straight before they go into the house? I wouldn’t allow my mother to be so untidy! She looks fearfully hot!”

Mildred stared at the old lady and her daughter until a sweep of the drive hid them from sight, and felt more lonely than ever when they had disappeared. For ten minutes or more not another soul could be seen, then the postman came briskly trotting towards the house. Mildred heard the peal of the bell, and became fired with curiosity to know whether any of the letters were for herself. Probably, almost certainly; for this was the post from the south, in which direction almost all the girls had their homes. There might be one from Bertha among the number. How aggravating to know that they were lying in the letter-box at the present moment, and to be obliged to wait until the visitors took their departure before Mardie could come out and unlock it.

“He had five or six in his hand; some of them must be for me. Suppose now, just suppose I could have whatever I liked—what should I choose? A letter from a lawyer to say I had come in for a fortune of a million pounds? That would be rather nice. What should I do with it, I wonder? Mother couldn’t come away with me just now, which would be a nuisance. I think I would travel about with Mardie, and look at all the big estates that were for sale, and buy one with a tower and a beautiful big park, with deer, and peacocks, and sun-dials on the grass. I’d go up to London to buy the furniture,—the most artistic furniture that was ever seen. The drawing-room and library should be left for Mother to arrange, but I’d finish all the rest, so that she could come the first moment it was safe. I’d have a suite of rooms for myself next to hers. A big sitting-room,—blue,—with white wood arches over the windows; dear little bookcases fitting into the corners, and electric lights hanging like lilies from the wall. Opening out of that there would be another little room where I could amuse myself as I liked, without being so awfully tidy. I’d do wood-carving there, and painting, and sewing. I might have a little cooking-stove in one corner to make toffee and caramels whenever I felt inclined, but I’m not quite decided about that. It would be rather sticky, and I could always go down to the kitchen. Then there would be my bedroom—pink,—with the sweetest little bed, with curtains draped across from one side of the top to the other side of the bottom. I saw one like that once, and it was lovely. I’d have all sorts of nice things out-of-doors, too—horses for Mother and myself to ride, and long-tailed ponies for the children. I’d like to send the little ones to boarding-schools, but I am afraid Mother wouldn’t consent to that; but they could have governesses and tutors, and a school-room right at the other end of the house. I should have nothing to do with teaching them, of course. I should be called ‘The Heiress of the Grange’, and all the village children would bob as I passed by. It would be rather nice. I would give them a treat in the grounds every year on my birthday, and they would drink my health. It seems a great deal of happiness for a million pounds. I wish I had someone to leave it to me—an old uncle in

Australia or Africa; someone I had never seen, then I could enjoy it without feeling sorry.”

The prospect of inheriting a million pounds was so engrossing that it was with quite a shock of surprise that Mildred perceived the old lady and her daughter retracing their steps down the drive. Downstairs she flew, two steps at a time, and discovered Miss Margaret emptying the letter-box of its contents.

“Oh, Mardie, I saw the postman coming, ages ago! I’ve been dying to get that key for the last half-hour!”

“Have you, really? I am sorry; but you are well repaid. Three letters for you, and only one for me. You are fortunate to-day.”

“Bertha—Carrie—Norah!” Mildred turned over the envelopes one by one, and skipped into the drawing-room with dancing tread. “Now for a treat. I love letters. I shall keep Bertha’s to the last, and see what these other young ladies have to say for themselves.”

She settled herself comfortably in an armchair, and Miss Margaret, having read her own note, watched her with an expression of expectant curiosity. The two first letters were short and obviously unexciting; the third contained several inclosures at which Mildred stared with puzzled eyes. One looked like a telegram, but the flash of fear on her face was quickly superseded by amazement, as she read the words of the message. Last of all came Bertha’s own communication, and when that had been mastered the reader’s cheeks were aglow, her eyes bright with excitement. She raised her head, and there was Mardie staring at her from the other end of the room, and smiling as though she knew all about it.

“Oh, Mardie, the most wonderful thing! It’s from Mrs Faucit; an invitation to go and stay with them for a whole month! She has written to Mother, and here is a telegram which came in reply, saying that she is delighted to allow me to accept. I am to go at once. There is a note from Mrs Faucit as well as one from Bertha. So kind! She says they are to be at home for a month before taking the girls to Switzerland for a few weeks, and that it will be a great pleasure to have me. I wish—I wish—”

She stopped short, staring at Miss Margaret with an expression of comical penitence. Even when that lady inquired, “Well, what do you wish now, you dissatisfied child?” it was several minutes before she replied.

“Nothing; only when you have made a great fuss about a thing, and it turns out in the end that you haven’t to do it after all, you feel rather—*small*. I wish now that I had been good and resigned; I should feel so much more comfortable. I suppose my going won’t make any difference to you, Mardie?”

“Only this, that I shall hurry through my work as quickly as possible, and go away now instead of waiting until my sister returns. I am delighted, Mildred! it’s just as nice as it can be. I have had a letter from Mrs Faucit, too. She asks you to go at once, but I am not sure if we can manage that.” She hesitated, looking at her pupil with uncertain eyes. “She is so pretty, bless her!” she was saying to herself, “that she always manages to look well; but she is shabby! I should think her mother would wish her to have one or two new dresses before she goes. I must speak about it. You see, Mildred,” she said aloud, “I am thinking about your clothes. You will probably be asked to a great many tennis and garden parties while you are at The Deanery, and you will have to be more particular than at school. Do you think you can go with what you have, or shall we get something new? We might call at the dressmaker’s to-morrow.”

Mildred shook her head.

“Oh, no! I must go as I am, Mardie, or stay at school. I wouldn’t ask Mother for money just now, not for the world. There will be doctors’ bills, and a dozen extra expenses to meet, and she has a hard enough time as it is. I can buy some little things—shoes, and gloves, and a sailor hat—with the money I have: nearly twenty-five shillings altogether; but it is no use thinking about a dress. I shall do very well. I have the blue crepe, and the brown, and the dyed green, and this good old serge to wear with blouses. If I see people examining my clothes, I shall shake my hair all over my back, and stare as hard as I can, so that they will be obliged to turn away... If we go into town to-morrow, I could go on Wednesday, couldn’t I?”

“Say Friday, dear; it will give us a little more time.” For, to herself, Miss Margaret was saying: “I will engage that clever little sewing-woman to come in for a couple of days and look over her dresses. She is quite right to consider her mother’s purse, but she will feel her own shortcomings when she is among the Faucit’s friends. I must do all I can to make it easier for the child. There is one comfort, she is easy to dress.”

Mildred danced away to answer her friend’s letter in overflowing spirits. She had never before paid a visit on her own account, and it seemed delightfully grown-up to be going to a strange house by herself. A Deanery, too! There was something so imposing about the sound. One Deanery was worth a dozen ordinary, commonplace houses, just as Bertha was worth a hundred other friends. Dear, darling Bertha—this was her idea, of course! It took three sheets of note-paper to contain all Mildred’s expressions of delight.

The next day was set apart for the shopping expedition, an occasion calling for anxious consideration. At Miss Margaret’s suggestion Mildred drew out a list of the articles which she wished to purchase out of her twenty-five shillings of capital. It was neatly written on a sheet of note-paper, with descriptive notes attached to the various items, and red lines ruled between, so that it presented quite a superior appearance. The list ran as follows:—

New shoes (pretty ones this time,—not thick).

Slippers (with buckles).

Gloves (light and dark).

Ribbons.

Something to do up the hat.

Sashes.

Lace things for evening.

Scent.

P.F.M.

Miss Margaret read the list, and shook with laughter.

"Are you sure there is nothing else?" she inquired. "How much more do you expect from those poor twenty-five shillings? They can never, by any possibility, be induced to buy so much. What is the mysterious P.F.M.?"

"A necessity; can't be crossed out. Oh, dear," groaned Mildred, "what a bother it is!" She tore off half a sheet of paper this time, and did not attempt any decorations. Then she went over the items one by one, sighing heavily as she did so.

"I can't do without shoes; I can't do without slippers; I can't do without gloves. I might get silk ones, of course, but they make me feel creepy-creepy all over. I daren't touch anything when I have them on. I should look like one of those wax figures in shop windows, with my arms sticking out on either side! I can't do without ribbons; I can't do—well, I suppose I *could* wear the old hat as it is, and do without scent, and a sash, and laces, or any single pretty thing to put on at night, but I don't want to! They are the most interesting things... Oh, dear, here goes!" and list number two was dashed off in disgusted haste.

Shoes.

Slippers.

Sailor Hat.

Gloves. P.F.M.

"That's short enough now! All the fripperies cut out, and the dull necessities left. I can get these, I suppose, Mardie?"

Miss Margaret believed that she could "with care", whereupon Mildred wrinkled her saucy nose, and said she should never have any respect for twenty-five shillings again, since it appeared that so very little could be obtained in exchange.

The shopping expedition was a great success, however, in spite of all drawbacks. The purchases were pretty and good of their kind, and Mildred felt an agreeable sense of virtue in having chosen useful things rather than ornamental. She had still a little plan of her own which she was anxious to execute before returning home, and took the opportunity to make a request while waiting for change in a large drapery establishment.

"I want to go to another department, Mardie. Do you mind if I leave you for a few minutes?"

"Not at all. I have some little things to get too. Suppose we arrange to meet at the door in ten minutes from now?"

Mildred dashed off in her usual impetuous fashion, but presently came to a standstill before a long, glass-covered counter, on which was displayed a fascinating assortment of silver and enamel goods. For the first few moments the assistant in charge took no further notice than a glance of kindly admiration. School-girls in short dresses, and with clouds of golden hair hanging loose round their shoulders, are not given to the purchase of valuable articles such as these; but Mildred proceeded to ask the price of one thing after another, with an air of such serious consideration as made it seem likely that she was to be the exception to the rule.

The glass case was opened, little heart-shaped trays and boxes brought forth, and such rhapsodies indulged in concerning silver-backed mirrors that the assistant felt certain of a sale. She was stretching underneath the glass to reach a mirror of another pattern, when Mildred suddenly glanced up at a clock, ejaculated "Oh, I must go! Thank you so much!" and rushed off at full speed in another direction. The ten minutes were nearly over, and Mildred had not executed the private business which she had on hand. She turned the corner where parasols hung in tempting array, passed the fancy work with resolute indifference, and making a dash for the perfumery counter came into collision with a lady who was just turning away, parcel in hand.

The lady lifted her eyes in surprise. By all that was mysterious and unexpected, it was Miss Margaret herself! Mildred blushed, Mardie laughed.

"What are you doing here, Ubiquitous Person?" she cried, but immediately turned aside in tactful fashion, and made her way to the door.

No reference to this encounter was made on either side, but later in the day a comical incident occurred. When Miss Margaret went upstairs to dress for dinner, she found a small box lying upon her dressing-table, on the paper covering of which an inscription was written in well-known, straggly writing:

*"Mardie, with heaps of love and many thanks, from Mildred."*

Inside the box was a bottle of White Rose perfume, at the sight of which Miss Margaret began to laugh with

mysterious enjoyment. When Mildred appeared a few minutes later, blushing and embarrassed, she said never a word of thanks, but led her across the room towards a table which had been specially devoted to her use. Mildred stared around, and then began to laugh in her turn, for there lay a parcel of precisely the same shape and size as that which she had addressed a few minutes earlier, and her own name was written on the cover.

“Great minds think alike!” cried Mardie. “So this is the explanation of that mysterious ‘P.F.M.’! But what are the thanks for, dear?”

“Oh, everything! You are so nice, you know, and I’ve been so nasty!” said Mildred.

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## Chapter Six.

### The Journey to the Deanery.

Friday arrived in a bustle of work and excitement. For the last two days Miss Margaret’s little sewing-woman had taken possession of the work-room, and Mildred’s well-worn dresses had been sponged and pressed, with such wholesale renewals of braid and buttons as brought back a remembrance of their lost youth. And now all was ready. Letters from home announced further improvements in Robbie’s condition; Miss Margaret was radiant in the prospect of her own holiday; there was nothing to shadow Mildred’s expectation, and it really seemed as if it had been worth while having those days of disappointment and anxiety, so delightful was the reaction.

Miss Margaret and her pupil had a great many nice things to say to each other in the few minutes before the train steamed out of the station. Mildred had said “thank you” so many times during the last few days, that there was little left to be done in that direction, but she was full of warm-hearted affection.

“I shall always remember how good you have been to me, Mardie. I think you are the nicest person in the world next to Mother. I shouldn’t mind being old if I could be like you.”

“But my dear child, I don’t consider myself old at all! When you get to my age you will have discovered that you are just beginning to be young. I wonder if,—when,—if you would—”

Mardie checked herself suddenly, and Mildred, scenting one of those secrets which are the delight of a school-girl’s existence, called out an eager: “What? What? What?”

“Oh, nothing! I only wondered if you would be very much shocked if I were betrayed into doing something very foolish and youthful one of these days.”

Mildred stared down from the altitude of the carriage window.

What could Mardie mean? There was no secret about her age. It was inscribed in every birth-day-book in the school, and thirty seemed venerable in the estimation of fourteen. It did occur to the girl at this moment that Miss Margaret looked unusually charming for an elderly lady—those sweet eyes of hers were sweeter than ever when lighted by a happy smile.

“I am sure you will never be foolish, Mardie!” she said reassuringly, and then the engine whistled, the guard waved his flag, and there was only time for a hurried embrace before the train was off.

So long as the platform remained in sight Mildred’s head was out of the window; then she sat down to find herself confronted by the mild-faced old lady into whose charge she had been committed.

She was an ideal old lady so far as appearances went. Her hair was white as snow; her chin nestled upon bows of lavender ribbon, and her face beamed with good nature; nevertheless Mildred found her fixed scrutiny a trifle discomposing, and stared out of the window by way of escape. For ten minutes on end the old lady gazed away with unblushing composure, then suddenly burst into conversation.

“Dear me, my love, you have a great deal of it! Are you not afraid that it may injure your health?”

Mildred fairly jumped with astonishment.

“Afraid? Of what? I beg your pardon—I don’t understand—”

“Your hair, my dear!—so much of it. They say, you know, that it saps the strength. A young friend of mine had hair just like yours—you remind me very much of her—and she died! Consumption, they called it. The doctors said all her strength went into her hair!”

Mildred laughed merrily.

“Oh, well! it’s quite different with me, I have plenty of strength left over for myself. I am as strong as a horse, and have hardly been ill a day in my life.”

“Dear! Dear!” ejaculated the old lady. “And with that complexion too—pink and white. Now I should have been afraid —”

She fell to shaking her head in lugubrious fashion, and watched the girl’s movements with anxious scrutiny.

“Do you think you are quite wise to sit next the window, love?” she asked presently. “You look a little flushed, and there is always a draught. Won’t you come over and sit by me? Just as you like, of course; but I assure you you can’t

be too careful. I noticed that you cleared your throat just now. Ah, that's just what a young friend of mine used to say, 'It's only a little tickling in my throat,' but it grew worse and worse, my dear, till the doctors could do nothing for her. I am always nervous about colds—"

"She has been very unfortunate in her 'young friends'!" commented Mildred to herself, but she made no reply, and the old lady waited fully two minutes before venturing another remark.

"Your—er—aunt seems a very sweet creature, my dear! You must be sorry to part from her."

"I am. Very! But she is not my aunt."

"You don't say so! Not a sister, surely? I never should have thought it—"

"She is not a sister either." (Now, what in the world can it matter to her whether we are relations or not! I suppose I had better tell her, or she will be suggesting 'mother' next). "She is one of the school-mistresses. I am just leaving school."

The old lady appeared overwhelmed by this intelligence. Her placid expression vanished, her forehead became fretted with lines, and she looked so distressed that it was all Mildred could do to keep from bursting into a fit of laughter.

"A boarding-school! Oh, my dear!" she cried. Then in a tone of breathless eagerness, "Now tell me—quite in confidence, you know, absolutely in confidence,—do they give you enough to eat? Oh, my love, I could tell you such stories—the saddest experiences—"

"Dear young friends of her own, starved to death! I know," said Mildred to herself, and she broke in hastily upon the reminiscences, to give such glowing accounts of the management of Milvern House as made the old lady open her eyes in astonishment.

"Four courses for dinner, and a second helping whenever you like. Now really, my dear, you must write down the address of that school for me. I have so many young friends. And have you any idea of the terms?"

She was certainly an inquisitive old lady, but she was very kind-hearted, and when one o'clock arrived she insisted upon Mildred sharing the contents of her well-filled luncheon-basket. Her endless questions served another purpose too, for they filled up the time, and made the journey seem shorter than it would otherwise have done. It came as quite a surprise when the train steamed into the station at B—, and Mildred had not time to lower the window before it had come to a standstill. She caught a glimpse of her friends upon the platform, however, and in another minute was out of the carriage, waving her hand to attract attention.

Bertha and Lois were accompanied by a lady who was so evidently their mother that there could be no doubt upon the subject. She had the same pale complexion and dark eyes, the same small features and dainty, well-finished appearance. As Mildred advanced along the platform to meet the three figures in their trim, tweed suits, she became suddenly conscious of flying locks, wrinkled gloves, and loose shoe-laces, and blushed for her own deficiencies. She could not hear Bertha's rapturous "There she is! Look, Mother! Do you wonder that we call her the 'Norse Princess?'" or Mrs Faucit's "Is that Mildred? She looks charming, Bertha. It is a very good description;" but the greetings which she received were so cordial as to set her completely at ease.

On the drive home Mrs Faucit leant back in her corner of the carriage, and listened to the conversation which went on between the three girls in smiling silence. She soon heard enough to prove that it was the attraction of opposites which drew the stranger and her own daughters so closely together, but though Mildred's impetuosity was a trifle startling, she was irresistibly attracted, not only by her beauty, but by the frank, open expression of the grey eyes.

"Plenty of spirit," she said to herself, "as well as honest and true-hearted! Miss Chilton was right. She will do the girls good. They are a little too quiet for their age. I am glad I asked her—"

"What did you think, Mildred, when Mother's letter arrived with the invitation?" Lois asked, and Mildred clasped her hands in ecstatic remembrance.

"Oh-h, I can't tell you! I had just been longing for a letter, and wondering what sort of one I would have if I could chose. I decided that I would hear that I had inherited a fortune, and I was just arranging how to spend it when your letter arrived. Lovely! lovely! I wanted to come off the next day, but Mardie objected. She has been so good to me, and I was a perfect horror for the first few days. I was ashamed of myself when your invitation came. Oh, what a funny old place this is! What curious houses—what narrow little streets!"

Mrs Faucit smiled.

"We are very proud of our old city, Mildred," she said. "We must show you all the sights—the walls, and the castle, and the old streets down which the mail-coaches used to pass on their way to London. Some of them are so narrow that you would hardly believe there was room for a coach. These newer streets seem to us quite wide and fashionable in comparison."

Even as she was speaking the carriage suddenly wheeled round a corner, and turned up a road leading to the Deanery gates. Mildred was not familiar with the peculiarities of old cathedral cities, and she stared in bewilderment at the sudden change of scene. One moment they had been in a busy, shop-lined thoroughfare; the next they were apparently in the depths of the country—avenues of beech-trees rising on either side; moss growing between the stones on the walls; and such an air of still solemnity all around, as can be found nowhere in the world but in the precincts of a cathedral.

The Deanery itself was in character with its surroundings. The entrance hall was large and dim; furnished in oak, with an array of old armour upon the walls. In winter time, when a large fire blazed in the grate, it looked cheerful and home-like enough, but coming in from the bright summer sunshine the effect was decidedly chilling, and Mildred's eyes grew large and awe-stricken as she glanced around. The next moment, however, Mrs Faucit threw open a door to the right, and ushered her guest into the most charming room she had ever seen.

Whatever of cheerfulness was wanting in the hall without was abundantly present here. One bay window looked out on to the lawn, and the row of old beeches in the distance; another opened into a conservatory ablaze with flowering plants, while over the mantel-piece was a third window, raising perplexing questions in the mind concerning the position of the chimney. Wherever the eye turned there was some beautiful object to hold it entranced, and Mildred was just saying to herself, "I shall have one of my drawing-rooms furnished exactly like this!" when she became aware that someone was seated in an armchair close to where she herself was standing.

"Well, Lady Sarah, we have brought back our little friend. This is Mildred. She has accomplished her journey in safety. Mildred, I must introduce you to our other guest, Lady Sarah Monckton."

"How do you do?" murmured Mildred politely. Lady Sarah put up a pair of eye-glasses mounted on a tortoise-shell stick, and stared at her critically from head to foot. Then she dropped them with a sharp click, as if what she saw was not worth the trouble of regarding, and addressed herself to Mrs Faucit in accents of commiseration.

"My dear, you look shockingly tired! Train late, as usual, I suppose! It is always the way with this wretched service. I know nothing more exhausting than hanging about a platform waiting for people who are behind their time. Bertha looks white too. You have had no tea, of course. You must be longing for it?"

"Oh! I am always ready for tea, but we had only a few minutes to wait. Sit down, Mildred dear, you must be the hungry one after your long journey. James will bring in the tray in another moment."

Mrs Faucit smiled in an encouraging manner, for she had seen a blank expression overspread the girl's face as she listened to Lady Sarah's remarks. "She speaks as if it were my fault!" Mildred was saying to herself. "How could I help it if the train was late? She never even said, 'How do you do?' I wonder who she can be?"

It was her turn to stare now, and once having begun to look at Lady Sarah, it was difficult to turn away, for such an extraordinary looking individual she had never seen before in the whole course of her life. Her face was wan and haggard, and a perfect net-work of wrinkles; but it was surmounted by a profusion of light-brown hair, curled and waved in the latest fashion; her skinny hands glittered with rings, and her dress was light in colour, and elaborately trimmed. She had a small waist, wide sleeves, and high-heeled shoes peeping out from beneath the frills of her skirt. If it had not been for her face, she might have passed for a fashionable young lady, but her face was beyond the reach of art, and looked pitifully out of keeping with its surroundings.

Country-bred Mildred could not conceal her amazement. She sat on her high-backed chair, her golden hair falling in a shower over her shoulders, her grey eyes wider than ever as she stared transfixed at this extraordinary spectacle. Even when tea was handed round, she continued to cast surreptitious glances over the brim of her cup, and to eat bread-and-butter with divided attention.

Mrs Faucit noticed her absorption, and tried to engage her in conversation, but in vain. Mildred murmured a polite little answer of half a dozen words, and turned back to stare at Lady Sarah with fascinated curiosity. It was a relief to her hostess when the girl refused a second cup of tea, and she lost no time in suggesting an adjournment upstairs.

"Bertha, I am sure Mildred will be glad to go to her own room now. Will you show the way, dear? We will not expect to see you again until dinner-time, as I know you will enjoy being alone!"

Outside in the hall Mildred stood still, and pointed through the closed door with an outstretched finger.

"What in the world is—That?"

"'That!' What? Do you mean lady Sarah? Oh, Mildred, do be careful!" chorused the twins. "She might come out. She might open the door and hear you! She is Lady Sarah Monckton. Her husband died in India. He was a sort of connection of Father's, so she comes here once or twice a year to consult him about her affairs."

"A sort of connection! What sort? Near or far? Do you know her well? Shall I hurt your feelings if I say anything disagreeable? No. I'm so glad. I'll tell you then—I—don't—like—her—at all!"

The sisters looked at each other and smiled. They had evidently expected something more scathing in the way of denunciation, and were not inclined to condemn Mildred for her opinion.

"Well, no; of course not. Nobody could! We always look upon her as a Trial!" said Bertha pensively. "She makes Mother ever so much stricter than she would be if she were left alone, and thinks it improper for a young lady to do anything that is nice. We were sorry that your visits should have come together, but it could not be helped. Perhaps she won't interfere so much when we have a visitor!"

"She has taken a dislike to me, so I expect I shall have the benefit! Didn't you see the way she glowered at me through those awful glasses? Why does she look like that? Is she a young woman with an old face, or an old one with young clothes? Why can't she be contented to be one thing at a time? Is she going to make a long visit?"

"I don't know. She has brought a maid and heaps of dresses, so I suppose she is. Mother says we must remember that she is very old, and has had a great many troubles, and try not to annoy her—"

"Your mother is a dear!" Mildred cried enthusiastically. "I will be nice to Lady Sarah to please her, but I don't believe

she is at all inclined to be nice to me. We will see.”

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## Chapter Seven.

### Lady Sarah.

Mildred had been a week at The Deanery, and if her enjoyment during that time had not been entirely unalloyed, the fault lay without question with Lady Sarah, for all the members of the family vied with each other as to who could show the young guest the most kindness. Even the Dean himself fell a victim to the “Norse Princess”, much to his wife’s amusement, for he was, as a rule, the most unnoticing of men. Mildred had written to her mother that Bertha’s father was “exactly like a Dean.” She had never met such a dignitary before, it is true, but she had an impression that he ought to look wise and studious, and Dean Faucit fulfilled these requirements to the uttermost.

He had a thin face, with grave eyes set in a net-work of lines; his shoulders were bowed with poring over the study-desk; and he was, moreover, so absent-minded that he made two separate attempts before he succeeded in grasping Mildred’s hand on the occasion of their first introduction. She had been several days in the house before he had the vaguest idea of her appearance, but one morning it chanced that he raised his eyes from the breakfast-table to complain of the sunlight which was pouring in at the window; and right opposite sat Mildred, her eyes dancing with happiness, a soft pink flush on her cheeks, and her hair shining like threads of gold. The Dean started, and drew his brows together, staring at her in curious, short-sighted fashion. He was so accustomed to the dim light of the Cathedral, and to the pale faces of his wife and children, that Mildred, with her bright colouring, seemed the embodiment of the sunshine itself. He fumbled for his glasses, scrutinised her furtively from time to time as the meal progressed, and when it was over, lingered behind to speak of her to his wife.

“That friend of Bertha’s seems to be—er—a nice little girl, dear! There is something in her face which affects me very pleasantly. I—er—I hope you are doing all you can to give her a pleasant time. Do you—er—think she would like to look at my book plates?”

Mrs Faucit laughed, and slipped her hand inside his arm.

“No, my dear old man!” she said. “I don’t think she would like it all. I think she would be profoundly bored. Leave her to the girls. They are as happy as the day is long, wandering about together.”

“Ah, well, you know best! but I should like the child to enjoy herself. It has struck me once or twice that Sarah Monckton—eh?—not quite so sympathetic to the young folks as she might be, I’m afraid. There was something at dinner the other night—I didn’t hear it all, but I had an impression—an impression—. It distressed me very much. I—er—hope she doesn’t interfere with the girls’ enjoyment.”

“Oh, no! Don’t worry yourself, dear. They are quite happy,” protested Mrs Faucit soothingly; but when her husband had returned to his study she sighed a little, as though she were not altogether so easy in her mind as she had led him to believe.

The scene at the dinner-table to which the Dean had referred was uncomfortably fresh in her own memory. It had arisen through Mildred’s horrified surprise at the sight of Lady Sarah in evening dress, and the unconscious manner in which she showed her disapproval. Mrs Faucit made up her mind that she would take an early opportunity of suggesting to her young visitor that she had better not stare at the old lady in so marked a manner, but she was too late, for before the meal was over Lady Sarah suddenly laid her knife and fork on her plate, and transfixed Mildred with an awful frown.

“Well, Miss Moore, what is it all about? Pray let me hear what is wrong, so that I may put it right at once. If I am to have my dinner, this sort of thing cannot go on any longer.”

The girl’s start of amazement was painful to behold. The sharp voice struck her like a blow, and she was absolutely ignorant as to her offence.

“I—I don’t understand! What have I done?”

“Only kept your eyes fixed upon me from the moment you sat down until now. It is most ill-bred to stare in that undisguised manner. Pray, is there anything extraordinary in my appearance that you find it so impossible to look at anyone else?”

The blood rushed into Mildred’s cheeks, but she made no reply.

“Is there anything extraordinary in my appearance, I ask you?” repeated Lady Sarah shrilly.

It was impossible to avoid answering a second time, but while the listeners were trembling at the thought of what might happen next, Mildred raised her head, and answered, with suddenly-regained composure:

“I did not know I was staring. I hope you will forgive me—I am very sorry if I have been rude.”

She spoke with a certain grave dignity, which sat well upon her, and Lady Sarah could not do otherwise than accept an apology so gracefully offered. Nevertheless the marked way in which the girl had avoided answering her question was, if possible, more galling than the original offence, and the glances which she sent across the table were the reverse of friendly.

From this time forth it seemed impossible for Mildred to do anything right in Lady Sarah’s eyes. Bertha and Lois were



allowed to go on their way undisturbed, while the sharp tongue, which had been wont to vent its spleen upon them half a dozen times a day, found occupation in criticising their friend.

She was rough, clumsy, awkward, Lady Sarah declared. She came into a room like a whirlwind; she ran up and downstairs more like a schoolboy than a young lady. As to her hair—that cloudy, golden hair which the others so much admired,—there was no end to the lectures poor Mildred received on this subject. It was disgracefully untidy—such a head of hair as no lady could possibly reconcile herself to possessing. In vain Mildred protested that the so-called untidiness was natural, and that no amount of brushing or damping could reduce those rebellious waves to order. Lady Sarah arched her eyebrows, and wished she might only have a chance of trying. She would guarantee to make it smooth enough.

Mildred bit her lip and flushed indignantly. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that she would be happy to grant the opportunity, run upstairs for her brushes, and force the old lady to prove the fallacy of her statements; but she restrained herself, and felt more than repaid for the effort when Mrs Faucit followed her out of the room a few moments later, and said:

“I was so glad to see you keep your temper just now, dear. It was trying for you, for of course we all know that what you said was perfectly true. You couldn’t possibly make your hair smooth, and it would be a pity if you could—it is far prettier as it is, but I don’t want you to think too hardly of poor Lady Sarah. You must remember that she is old and ailing, and has had a lonely life in spite of all her riches. It is difficult to be amiable when one is old and frail, but it is very easy when you are young and happy. Isn’t it, Mildred?”

“I don’t know,” said Mildred slowly. “It isn’t for me, because I am so quick-tempered. You don’t know how dreadful I feel when anyone vexes me like that. My blood all goes fizz! It seems as if I couldn’t help answering back.”

“Well, that makes it all the better when you do control yourself!” Mrs Faucit answered, laughing a little in her gentle, amused fashion; and Mildred ran upstairs, feeling delightfully virtuous.

At that moment she was prepared to declare that no amount of aggravation on the part of Lady Sarah should ever induce her to answer hastily in return.

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## Chapter Eight.

### An Exciting Prospect.

When Mildred had been staying for a fortnight at the Deanery, a letter arrived one morning which filled Bertha and Lois with delight, inasmuch as it contained an invitation to what they exultantly described as “the picnic of the year.”

The girls had already attended several tennis parties, and had organised small excursions on their own account, driving off in the pony carriage to spend an afternoon in the country in charge of the children’s governess, but this picnic was to be on a very different scale. Mrs Newland, it appeared, gave one every summer, and understood how to do things in proper style. Her guests were to assemble at the station at a certain hour, as the first stage of the journey was by rail, but a couple of coaches were to be in readiness to convey them the remainder of the way.

Their destination was a lovely little village, nestled among the hills, where a river wound in and out, and there were woods, and dells, and waterfalls, and caverns; everything in fact that the most exacting mind could desire for a well-regulated picnic.

“And such delightful people—quite grown up! You must not imagine that it is a children’s picnic,” explained Bertha anxiously. “We are always the youngest there. We would not be allowed to go at all except that the Newlands are very old friends, and that Mother chaperones us herself. Mrs Newland takes two or three of the servants with her, and they carry hampers, and clear away the things while we amuse ourselves. We sit on the rocks in the middle of the river, and come home late at night, singing part songs on the top of the coach, with mandolin and guitar accompaniments. Oh, it’s lovely! You will enjoy yourself, Mildred!”

There was no question about that, for Mildred had the faculty of enjoying every little pleasure which came in her way, and that with a whole-heartedness and forgetfulness of drawbacks which would have been shared by few girls of her age.

Bertha and Lois had a private consultation the first time they found themselves alone after the arrival of the invitation.

“I am so glad Mil is to be with us for Mrs Newland’s picnic,” said the former. “I want her to see all the people, and I want them to see her. She will chatter away and not be in the least shy, and they will be charmed with her, for she does say such funny things! Even Father has to laugh sometimes. Er—Lois! I wonder what she is going to wear.”

“So do I!” said Lois calmly. “I’ve been wondering about that ever since the invitation came, and yet I don’t see why we should, for she has nothing with her but the old school dresses, so how can there be any choice? She is certainly very shabby. It must be horrid to have no pretty clothes. I suppose they are very poor.”

“Oh, yes, I know they are! Mildred makes no secret of it. Poor dear! it is hard for her, when she is so well-connected, too,” returned the dean’s eldest daughter, in her funny, consequential, little voice. “Her grandmother was the daughter of a very well-known man—I forget who he was, but she told me one day, and I know it was someone important. She married without her parents’ consent, and they never acknowledged her afterwards. When Mildred’s mother was grown up, one of the aunts wished to adopt her as a companion, but Mrs Moore refused to go, because

she would have had to promise to have nothing more to do with her parents. The old lady was dreadfully offended, and they have never heard of her since that day."

"And a good thing, too, if she was like some old ladies we could mention!" said Lois sharply, whereat her sister first laughed, and then sighed.

"Oh, well, it's no use saying anything about that! What were we talking about before—Mildred's dress? Well, there is one comfort—she always looks sweet. I dare say she will look one of the nicest there, though Mrs Newland's friends are so smart. Don't say anything to her about our new dresses. It might make her feel uncomfortable."

There were no signs of discomfiture in Mildred's manner, however, when the new dresses arrived from town a week later on. She had been romping with the children in the garden, and came dancing in through the open window of the library to find Mrs Faucit, Lady Sarah, and the two girls grouped round the table on which lay two large cardboard boxes. The lids were thrown open, the tissue paper wrappings strewn over the floor, and Mildred, looking at the contents, gave a cry of pleasure and comprehension.

"New dresses for the picnic! Oh, how lovely! Do let me look,"—and Lady Sarah's eye-glasses went up in horrified fashion as she swung herself on to the corner of the table in her anxiety to have a good view.

The new dresses were charming, everything that the heart of girlhood could desire for the occasion; soft, creamy white, with lemon-coloured ribbons arranged in the most Frenchified style, and with big leghorn hats to match. Even Lady Sarah smiled approval, but the exclamations of the other onlookers were feeble, as compared with Mildred's ecstatic rhapsodies.

"Oh, the darlings! Oh, the beauties! Aren't they sweet? Look at the ducky little bows at the elbows, and the little crinkly ruchings at the neck! And the sashes!—oh, goodness, what yards of ribbon!—and yellow silk frills round the bottom—oh-h! And the hats—Bertha, you will look an angel! If I had a dress like that I should sit up all night—I'm sure I should! I could never bring myself to take it off. Oh-h!"

Mrs Faucit looked at the fair, flushed face with mingled approval and pity. "Poor, dear child!" she said to herself as she left the room in answer to a summons from a servant; "very few girls of her age would be so entirely free from envy. I wish I had ventured to order a dress for her at the same time; but I was afraid she might not like it. I wonder what she is going to wear?"

The same question had occurred to another person, and not being possessed of the same delicacy of mind as the dean's wife, Lady Sarah saw no reason why her curiosity should not be gratified.

"And when is your dress to arrive?" she inquired. "What have you ordered for yourself, my dear?"

"I—I ordered!" Mildred fairly gasped. The idea of "ordering" anything was so supremely ridiculous. "I haven't ordered anything!"

"Indeed! You brought your dress with you, I presume. Still I think, Miss Mildred, that you might have honoured your hostess by making the same preparation for yourself which she thinks it necessary to make for her own daughters."

"Why, dear me," cried Mildred, still too much swallowed up with amazement at the extraordinary suggestion to have room for indignation. "Why, dear me, I'd be only too delighted to order a dozen if I could; but where on earth should I get the money to pay for them? I never had a dress like that in my life. I don't suppose I ever shall have one!"

"Then what are you going to wear, if one may ask?"

Poor Mildred smoothed down the folds of the blue crepe dress. The romp in the garden had not improved its condition; it was looking sadly crumpled and out of condition, but it had been washed a dozen times, and had a delightful knack of issuing from the ordeal a softer and more becoming shade than before. With certain little accessories, already planned, she did not despair of a satisfactory result.

"Well, I thought Mrs Faucit would be so kind as to allow the laundress to get up this dress. It is the only suitable thing I have, and I was going to—"

"Suitable! That thing! Do you mean to say that you seriously intend to wear the dress you have on to a picnic given by Mrs Newland?"

Lois bit her lip and turned aside. Bertha began hastily to cover up the dainty white folds which showed the crumpled blue in such unfavourable contrast. Mildred drooped her eyelids, and answered with that smouldering calm which precedes a storm.

"I am. That is certainly my intention."

"And you mean to say you have no better dress than that in your possession?"

"This is my best dress. Yes! I have no better."

"And your mother actually allowed you to come away with such a wardrobe! Preposterous, I call it! People who cannot provide for themselves respectably have no business to accept invitations, in my opinion!"

Now it happened that this morning Lady Sarah had risen with a bad headache, one of the consequences of which had been to make her even more fault-finding towards Mildred than usual. The old discussion about her hair had been resumed after breakfast; she had been reproved for leaving the door open; for shutting the door, for speaking too

loudly; for mumbling so indistinctly that it was impossible to hear; for one imaginary offence after another, until finally she had run away in despair and taken refuge with the children in the garden. It was not only the present annoyance, therefore, it was the accumulated irritation of the morning, with which the girl had to fight at this moment, and the conflict was too hard for her strength.

As she herself would have described it, she went hot and cold all over, something went "fizz" in her brain, and the next moment she leapt down from the table and confronted Lady Sarah with flaming cheeks and eyes ablaze with anger.

"And—who—asked—*your*—opinion? What business is it of yours what I wear? I didn't come here on your invitation—I was asked by Mrs Faucit, and so long as she is satisfied you have no right to say a word. How dare you find fault with my mother before my face? How dare you question what she thinks right to do? you—you unkind, interfering, —*disagreeable old woman!*"

There was an awful silence. Lady Sarah appeared transfixed with astonishment; her jaw fell, her eyes protruded from their sockets. The twins instinctively clasped hands, and Mrs Faucit, arrested, in the act of re-entering the room, by the sound of the last few words, stood motionless in the doorway, her face eloquent of pained surprise.

Mildred glanced from one to the other. She was trembling from head to foot, her heart beat with suffocating throbs. For one moment she succeeded in maintaining her attitude of defiance; but when she met the grave scrutiny of Mrs Faucit's eyes, she burst into a storm of tears and rushed from the room. Reaction had set in, and her own irritation was as nothing to the shock which followed as she realised that—fresh from Mrs Faucit's praise and her own congratulations,—she had given way to an outburst of temper which must have horrified all who heard it.

She crouched down on a corner of her bedroom sofa and sobbed as if her heart would break. The old intolerable pangs of homesickness woke up again and dragged at her heart; the longing for her own place, her own people, above all, for the precious mother who always sympathised and understood.

Perhaps Mrs Faucit would be so disgusted that she would send her straight back to school. Well! at this moment the thought of the quiet house and of Mardie's loving kindness was by no means unwelcome. At school, at least, everyone was kind—the very servants went out of their way to give her pleasure—there was no terrible Lady Sarah to stare at her through gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and criticise and find fault from morning till night.

It was in reality less than ten minutes, but it seemed like hours to Mildred before the door opened to admit Bertha and Lois, and a fresh outburst of sobbing was the only notice which she took of their entrance.

Bertha slipped an arm round her waist. Lois sniffed in sympathy from afar.

"Never mind her, Mil!" she cried. "Don't cry. You couldn't possibly have anything prettier than the blue crepe," but at this Mildred raised her face in eager protest.

"Oh, I'm not crying about that! I don't care a rap about the dress, but—but she made me so furious. It had been going on all morning, and I c-couldn't bear it any longer. I am so ashamed. I can't bear to think of it. I don't know what I said."

The twins exchanged furtive glances.

"You called her 'an interfering, disagreeable old woman'!" whispered Bertha with bated breath, glancing half fearfully at the door as she spoke. "I—I felt as if the world were coming to an end! As if the ceiling would fall down over our heads! Oh, Mil, you should have seen her face! I never saw anyone look so astonished in my life, but the curious part of it is that I don't think she was angry. She knew she had no right to speak as she had done, and I believe she admired you for being indignant. Perhaps you will be better friends after this."

"No, we won't!" said Mildred, setting her chin stubbornly; "because I won't, if she will. I'll never forgive her. It is not Lady Sarah I care about—it is your mother. Oh, I can't forget her face, she looked so shocked! She stared at me with such horrified eyes. Is she awfully angry, do you think?"

"I haven't spoken to her. She sent us out of the room directly after you left, but she didn't seem angry, only quiet and grieved."

"Oh, oh, oh! what shall I do? I hate people to be grieved! I detest it! It's fifty thousand times worse than being angry. If people are angry you can defend yourself and take your own part, but if they are 'grieved' you can only feel a wretch, as if you had no right to live. Oh, dear, what will she think of me! It was only the other day she was saying that I kept my temper so well, and now I've disgraced myself for ever! She will never, never forgive me!"

Before the girls could say anything by way of comfort, Mrs Faucit herself entered the room and walked straight towards the couch on which Mildred was sitting. She looked pale and distressed, but the manner in which she put her arm round the girl's waist was certainly not suggestive of anger.

"I am so very sorry that this scene should have occurred, Mildred," she said; "but I have been having a talk with Lady Sarah, and she takes all the blame upon herself. She is sorry that she spoke as she did, and I think she will be more considerate of your feelings for the future. I said the other day that I knew you must often feel provoked, and how pleased I felt to know that you controlled your temper. I wish, dear," she sighed heavily, "I wish you had gone on as you began! It would have been a great relief to me; but perhaps it was too much to expect. You are young and impulsive."

"Oh, no, no! don't make excuses! I am a wretch, I know I am!" sobbed Mildred penitently. "It was hateful of me to

speaking rudely to a guest of yours—so old, too. Mother would be miserable if she knew. But it was so maddening! I bore it as long as she found fault with me, but when she began criticising Mother—saying that she didn't dress me properly, and had no right to allow me to come here,—I couldn't keep quiet any longer—I couldn't! It made me too furious. I was obliged to explode."

"I know! I know. I am sorry the girls' dresses were ever brought down—that was the beginning of it all. Mildred, dear, I hope you won't think any more of what Lady Sarah said on that subject. I noticed how pretty your dress looked when you first arrived, and we will see that it is made fresh and bright again for the picnic. It came into my mind to order a dress for you like the ones which the girls are to wear, but I was not sure if you would like it, or if it would seem as if I were dissatisfied with what your mother had provided."

Mildred threw her arms round the speaker with one of her bear-like hugs.

"All, you know! you understand!" she cried; "you are so different. It was sweet and lovely of you to think of it, but I'd rather not. If people don't care to have me in my old clothes, I'd rather stay away altogether. But I have ever so many pretty things stored away in my box—new gloves,—ribbons,—a lace collar. I can make myself quite respectable. Don't be worried, Mrs Faucit, please! I'll try to be good and not vex you again. Do please take your forehead out of crinkles."

Mrs Faucit laughed at that, and stroked the golden head with a caressing hand. She had grown very fond of her young visitor during the last few weeks, and found her coaxing ways quite irresistible.

"Dear Mildred!" she cried, "Poor Mildred! I am so sorry that your visit should be spoiled in this way, but remember what I told you the other day, dear, and try to avoid harsh judgments. It is a great concession for Lady Sarah to have acknowledged herself in the wrong in a dispute with a girl of your age; you must show how generous and forbearing you can be in return. I hope that after this you may be really good friends."

Mildred said nothing, but her lips closed with an expression which Bertha and Lois recognised. They had seen it at school on more than one memorable occasion. Mildred was the dearest girl in the world, but she did not find it easy to forgive when her animosity had been aroused.

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## Chapter Nine.

### The French Maid.

No further reference was made to the unpleasant scene in the library. Lady Sarah seemed disposed neither to offer nor to demand any sort of apology. Unnoticed by the girl, however, she constantly scrutinised her through her gold eye-glasses with a curiosity which was almost kindly. It seemed an impossibility for the old lady to refrain from interfering in the affairs of others, but for the next few days Mildred was allowed to go her own way undisturbed, while she devoted her attention to the daughters of the house.

She assured Mrs Faucit that Lois's right shoulder was higher than the left, and insisted that she should be made to lie down for two hours every afternoon; she gave it as her opinion that, as the girls were now fifteen, they should not be allowed to go about unattended by a chaperone; and last, and worst of all, she showed the Dean a prospectus of a German school, to which she advised they should be sent at once.

The twins were in despair, and many were the indignation meetings which were held in the school-room or the bedrooms overhead, while poor Mrs Faucit exhausted herself in the effort to smooth down both parties and to keep her husband in ignorance of what was passing before his very eyes. Meantime the date of the picnic drew nearer and nearer, and in connection with her own preparations Mildred met with an unexpected display of kindness on the part of no less a person than Cécile herself.

The blue dress returned from the laundress looking crisper and fresher than ever in its newly-ironed folds, and when Mildred went up to her room the same afternoon she beheld Cécile seated by the dressing-table busily engaged in sewing the lace-frills round neck and sleeves.

"Why, Cécile—you!" she exclaimed, and the Frenchwoman raised her shoulders with a shrug of protest.

"Ah, Mademoiselle, what would you have? They are so careless, these servants. Mary would iron the lace as it was, sewn in the dress, but I say, 'No, it is impossible so to do it well. You take it off,' I say, 'and I shall sew it on. Mademoiselle Mildred shall not go to the picnic with frills untidy while I am in the house.'"

"But that is very kind of you, Cécile. I'm sure I am awfully obliged," said Mildred warmly. She leant up against the corner of the dressing-table and watched the play of the nimble fingers with admiring eyes. "How quickly you do it, and how well! It would take me about a month to pleat the lace into those teeny little folds. I just run it up and draw the string, but of course it is far nicer this way. The old dress looks quite new again. It seems to enjoy being washed."

Cécile held the skirt at arm's-length, looking at it with critical eyes.

"It is a pretty colour—soft and full—just the right shade to suit Mademoiselle's complexion. When it has the sash and the lace collar it will have an air quite *chic*, but it could still be improved. If Mademoiselle will, I shall stiffen the sleeves and make them more—what you say?—fashionable! It would be much better so."

"I don't know, I'm sure. It would be very nice, but have you time, Cécile?" asked Mildred doubtfully. "You have work to do for Lady Sarah, and I should not like to interfere with that. It is very kind of you to offer, but—"

"Oh, indeed, I have hours to myself—hours! I am killed with ennui in this quiet house. It would be a charity to give me occupation. It is still quite early; if Mademoiselle would put the dress on now, for one little minute, I could then see what is required, and put in a stitch here and there."

Mildred unfastened her dress with mechanical fingers. She was bewildered by this sudden display of amiability on the part of Lady Sarah's maid, and filled with remorse for her former misjudgments. She had taken a dislike to Cécile from the moment when they had first met in the corridor and the Frenchwoman's sharp eye had scanned her from head to foot, as if taking in every detail of her attire and appraising its value. Once or twice, moreover, upon entering Bertha's room unexpectedly, she had discovered Cécile turning over the ornaments upon the dressing-table, and had not felt altogether inclined to believe the explanation that she was looking to see if there was anything she could do for mademoiselle; yet if Cécile were now so anxious to serve herself, why should she not have been equally well-disposed to Bertha?

Mildred argued out this question with herself as she stood before the glass while Cécile's clever fingers busied themselves about her dress, putting in a pin here, a pin there, achieving thereby an improvement which seemed almost miraculous in the girl's unsophisticated eyes.

While she worked Cécile kept up a string of flattering remarks.

"I must fasten the hair up for a moment to see the back. Ah, the beautiful hair! what a coiffure it will make some day! See how it goes itself into a coronet like a queen's! It is easy to fit a dress when one has the perfect model. You have the back like an arrow, Mademoiselle. Most young ladies get into the bad habits at school, and bend their shoulders like old women, but you are not so. There are many princesses who would give thousands of pounds to have a figure like yours."

"They must be very silly princesses, then," said Mildred brusquely. How was it that she could not get over her dislike to Cécile—that the touch of her thin fingers, the sight of her face in the glass brought with them a shiver of repulsion? Cécile had nothing to gain by spending time on the renewal of a school-girl's frock, and could therefore only be actuated by kindness. If it had been anyone else who had done her such a service Mildred would have been overflowing with thanks, but for some mysterious reason her heart seemed closed against Lady Sarah's maid. All the same she was annoyed at herself for such ingratitude, and made a gallant effort to carry on a friendly conversation.

"Have you been maid to many other ladies, Cécile, before coming to Lady Sarah? You have been with her only a short time, I think." Cécile sighed lugubriously.

"Three months, Mademoiselle. Oh, such long, slow months! Never before have I known the time so long. Before then I was with two beautiful young ladies in London. They went out every night—to two or three balls very often,—and always they were the most admired among the guests. Miss Adeline married an officer and went to India. She was like you, Mademoiselle—the same hair, the same eyes—you might be her sister. She would that I should go to India too. 'Oh, Cécile!' she say, 'what shall I do without you? No one shall ever suit me as you have done.' But I dare not risk the journey, the heat, the fatigue. Then Miss Edith shared the same maid with her mama, and I came to my lady here. Ah, what a difference! The house of Madame, it is like a grave—no life, no sun. With my young ladies it was all excitement from morning till night—luncheon parties, afternoon parties, evening parties, one thing after another, and no time to feel *triste*, but now all is changed. We drive in a closed carriage for amusement, and go to bed at ten o'clock, just when my ladies were dressing for their balls, and the evening should begin."

"Well, but, Cécile, I should think you would like it better," said Mildred guilelessly, "because if they did not come home until two or three in the morning it must have been terribly tiring sitting up for so long, and very bad for your health. Now you can go to bed at eleven and have nothing to disturb you until the next morning."

Cécile lifted her head from her work and darted a keen glance at the girl's face. Her eyes were small and light, and it seemed to Mildred as if at this moment there was something unpleasantly cunning in their expression, but perhaps it was only the result of the strong light which fell upon her through the open window.

"Oh, Mademoiselle, it is one thing to rest, and another to allow some one else to do the same. My lady goes to bed but not to sleep. She lies awake for hours, and she is cross sometimes, but so cross! She speaks so shrill, so loud, one would suppose a calamity should happen. It is bad for the nerves to hear such sounds in the night-time. I have been afraid for Mademoiselle lest she should be disturbed. Her windows are so near, and when the house is quiet—"

"Oh, you need not be afraid for me! I sleep like a top when I once begin. Sometimes we have had dreadful thunderstorms in the night at school, and half the girls have been sitting up shivering in their dressing-gowns, but I have known nothing about them until the morning. Besides, it is such a long way round to get to Lady Sarah's room, that I never realised before that her windows were so near."

Mildred craned her head as she spoke to look out of the window. As she had said, the entrance to Lady Sarah's room was some distance along the corridor, and round a corner, but, as it was situated in a wing of the house which stood out at right angles from the main wall, the window was but a few yards from Mildred's own.

"I never realised that I was so near!" repeated the girl dreamily, and as she busied herself with the folds of the skirt Cécile frowned and bit her lip, as though annoyed with herself for an incautious remark.

"I am glad you have not been disturbed. I feared it might be so, but if Mademoiselle should any time hear a noise in the night she will understand—she will go to sleep again quite satisfied. I am always there in my lady's dressing-room, ready to go when she calls."

"Oh, yes, I'll remember!" said Mildred easily; "but I am not in the least likely to hear. I can't understand how people can go on talking after they are in bed. When I go home for the holidays I sleep with my mother, and I have so much

to say that I try hard to keep awake, but I can't. We talk for a little time, then she says something, and I repeat it over and over to myself, trying to understand what it means. It is probably the simplest thing in the world, but it seems like Greek, and while I am still trying to puzzle it out, I fall asleep and remember nothing more till the next day."

"Oh, yes! but you are young and my lady is old. Sleep does not come to her as to you, and she is so that she cannot bear anyone to have what she has not. If she is miserable, it is her pleasure that I also should suffer."

Mildred knitted her brows and stared at the maid in disapproving fashion.

"I don't think you ought to talk like that, Cécile," she said boldly. "You are always paying Lady Sarah compliments to her face, so you ought not to abuse her behind her back. Besides, I don't think she is cross to you. She seems kinder to you than to other people. We all notice it."

"Ah, yes!" replied Cécile scornfully; "my lady can be amiable enough when it suits; but to live with all day long, to have her as mistress—ah, Mademoiselle thinks she can understand what that means! But wait a little time, wait until Mrs Faucit shall go away and my lady is left in charge, then you shall see! You will feel for me then for what I undergo!"

Mildred's eyes widened in astonishment.

"But she is not going away! What do you mean by saying such a thing? How could she go away when she has visitors in the house, and her children are home for the holidays?"

The Frenchwoman flushed and looked strangely embarrassed.

"Oh, I mean nothing—nothing! I had the impression that it was said. The servants talk among themselves, Mademoiselle. But you know best—you are of the family. It has been a mistake. See, then, Mademoiselle, I have made what I can. Do you find the dress is better?"

"It looks ever so much nicer, Cécile. I can't imagine what you have done to make such an improvement. I am awfully obliged to you for all your trouble."

"It is nothing, Mademoiselle, not worth speaking about. When the lace is on and the ribbon—big, full bows instead of the little, old ones—you shall see what a difference I make. They will say no one can tie a bow like a Frenchwoman; and even in Paris, where I learn my business, no one in the room could make one like me. I had them always to arrange, on the handsomest dresses. Mademoiselle shall see the lovely bows I shall make—"

Cécile lifted a roll of shimmering, satin ribbon from the table as she spoke, and shaking out a length of two or three yards, began to gather it up in her fingers. It was a beautiful ribbon, soft and thick, and of the richest texture, but Mildred flushed as she looked at it, and her voice sounded sharp and disapproving.

"What ribbon is that? It's not mine! You are not going to put that on my dress, Cécile!"

"But yes, Mademoiselle, I was told to do so. My lady rang the bell and asked what I did. When I said I helped with the dress of Mademoiselle Mildred, she took the ribbon from her drawer and asked if it should be useful. 'Use what you will,' she say to me. It is a beautiful ribbon, Mademoiselle, and goes well with the lace. You look not satisfied, but believe me, when you see it arranged, you will agree—"

"I wasn't thinking about that. I dare say it would look very nice, but I can't take it, Cécile," said the girl firmly. "I am glad you have not cut it up, for it will not be spoiled. I am much obliged to Lady Sarah, and you may tell her so, but I prefer to use my own things. If the old ribbon is too shabby, I can do without altogether; but it's no use putting that on, for I won't wear it."

Cécile stared in amazement, but there was no mistaking the girl's sincerity. Her eyes were bright with anger, she held her head at a defiant angle, and her lips were pressed into a thin scarlet line. Mildred was disgusted to hear that Lady Sarah had any share whatever in Cécile's services. She wished with all her heart that she had not accepted the Frenchwoman's offer. Now if the dress looked at all respectable on the day of the picnic, Lady Sarah would take the credit to herself, because she had allowed her maid to make alterations; and how dare she send contributions of her own, and give instructions as to what was to be done with them, without asking permission!

Cécile was quite awed by the young lady's air of indignation, and carried away the white ribbon without a word of protest. She evidently informed her mistress of what had occurred, for after dinner the same evening Lady Sarah detained Mildred on her way to the garden, to question her on the subject.

"So, Miss Mildred, my maid tells me that you refused to use the ribbon which I gave her for your dress. Is that true, may I ask?"

"Yes, quite true. I told Cécile to tell you that I was very much obliged for the offer, but that I preferred to wear my own things."

"You are very independent. Was the ribbon not to your fancy? Have you one of your own which you prefer?"

"Oh, no, it was beautiful; it could not have been nicer!"

"Your own is not so good?"

"Not nearly so good, Lady Sarah!"

Cécile might well have said that Mildred had the good, straight back, if she had seen her at this moment. Her cheeks were flushed, but her mouth had the stubborn look which her friends knew so well.

"You refuse, then, simply because you object to receiving anything from me?"

"I am much obliged to you, Lady Sarah, but I prefer to wear my own things."

"Oh, well, well!" sighed the other wearily; "I won't argue with you, my dear. Do as you please. I meant to do you a kindness, but, if you choose to take it in this way, there is no use saying anything about it. Don't let me keep you. Run away to your friends."

She turned towards the window as she spoke, and the sun shone full on her face. It looked tired and grey, and very, very old; and the thin hands crossed on her lap, how shrivelled they were!—they trembled all the time as though they could not keep still. Mildred walked out into the garden, a pang of compunction at her heart. Dreadful to be so old!—not to be able to see without spectacles; to hear,—unless people spoke at the pitch of their voices; to walk,—unless supported by a stick; to feel cold even on the hottest day; to feel tired the first thing in the morning;—how dreadful! Lady Sarah had looked sad too—not merely cross, as usual, but really and truly sad and lonely.

Suppose she had seriously meant to be kind—to show that she regretted her interference in the past? Mildred's face clouded over as this thought passed through her mind, but before she crossed the lawn to join her friends her lips stiffened into the old, obstinate line.

"I don't care. She had no right to send in her scraps of finery, without even asking my permission. And after saying that Mother didn't provide for me properly, too! No, I am not a bit sorry; I would do the same thing over again!"

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## Chapter Ten.

### An Unexpected Departure.

The day before the eventful picnic the family were seated round the breakfast-table, when the Dean looked up from a letter which he had just been reading, and said mildly, and as if he were making the most natural request in the world:

"Evelyn, will you get ready to go up to town by the five o'clock train this afternoon? The Archbishop has appointed our interview for three o'clock to-morrow. You had better pack for two or three nights."

Mrs Faucit gave an irrepressible start of consternation. Was ever anything so unfortunate! The interview with the Archbishop had been talked of for months past; half a dozen letters had been exchanged on the subject within the last fortnight; the question which was to be discussed was of pressing importance. She realised at once that the appointment must be kept, but her heart sank as she looked at the three young faces beside her—aghast, and speechless with horror.

"Oh! is it really to-morrow?" she cried. "Are you quite sure, dear? Look again! you so often make mistakes in the date. Does he say Wednesday the sixteenth, or Wednesday the twenty-third?"

The Dean peered at his letter once more.

"He says: *I shall be able to meet you on Wednesday next, sixteenth instant.* It is certainly to-morrow. Why, Evelyn; is there any reason why—er—?"

"It is the day of Mrs Newland's picnic. I have accepted her invitation—"

"Oh, is that all!" Her husband drew a sigh of relief. "You must write, of course, and explain your absence. She will understand, and it will be a relief to you, dear. I—er—I have some recollection of being at a picnic myself years ago. Uncomfortable occasion! Er—earwigs—meals on the grass—baskets to carry. You would have been very tired. Much more comfortable at the Métropole!"

Mrs Faucit could not restrain a smile in spite of her concern.

"Just so, Austin; but that is not the light in which the young people look at it. I was to chaperone the girls. I am thinking of them, not of myself. It will be a great disappointment."

The Dean put up his eye-glasses, and stared at the three girls in turn. His own daughters were white with suppressed emotion, but Mildred's face was tragic in its agony of suspense. She did not say a word, but she turned her great, grey eyes upon him, piteous as those of a child who sees a surgeon standing over her, knife in hand; and as he met that glance the Dean rumbled his hair in perturbation of spirit.

"Dear me! dear me! this is very distressing. Disappointed, are they? I don't want the children to be disappointed, Evelyn! Let them enjoy themselves. If they appreciate that sort of thing, let them go by all means. Why should they stay away because you are obliged to do so? Mrs Newland will look after them."

"My dear Dean!" Lady Sarah shook out her serviette, and raised her voice to an even shriller note than usual. "My dear Dean, you don't realise what you are saying. The girls are not children any longer; they were fifteen their last birthday. In another two years, or three at the outside, they will be in society. You cannot possibly allow them to go to a large affair of this sort without a chaperone. Mrs Newland will be occupied with her guests, and will have no time to look after them. If Evelyn is obliged to go away, let the girls stay at home. They can surely bear a little

disappointment. They will have bigger ones than this to bear as they go through life!"

"True, Sarah,—quite true; but that is the more reason why I wish to postpone them as long as possible. I don't want the girls to miss their pleasure, Evelyn! Can nothing be done? Can't you think of some plan, dear? you are so clever. Is there no other alternative?" And the kindly Dean looked at his wife with a face full of anxiety.

Mrs Faucit smiled back at him in the peculiarly sweet, reassuring manner which she reserved for himself and for Erroll, the youngest member of the family—a mischievous little rascal, who employed himself in getting into trouble all day long, and in rushing to throw himself upon his mother's tender mercies after each fresh exploit.

"I think we might surely hit on some plan between us!" she said brightly. "Such a number of clever people! For instance, it ought not to be altogether impossible to provide another chaperone for the girls. There are more people than my important self in the town, and Mrs Newland will be quite willing to accept a representative under the circumstances."

"If you mean me, Evelyn, I am not at all sure that I feel equal to the exertion. If they were going to drive from door to door, and have lunch in an hotel in reasonable fashion, it would be different; but with so many changes, and the whole day to be spent in the open air—"

"Oh, my dear Sarah, I never thought of such a thing for a moment! It would be too much to ask. You would be terribly fatigued." Mrs Faucit had caught the echo of three separate gasps of consternation, and she spoke with unusual emphasis. "Oh, no, indeed! I think it will answer all purposes if Miss Turner takes the girls in charge. Mrs Newland knows her, and it would be a pity to look any further when we have someone so suitable in the house. That will be a very good arrangement, won't it, girls?"

Then for the first time the girls' lips were opened, and they spoke. Up till now the tension of suspense had been so great that they seemed scarcely able to breathe.

"Oh, yes, Mother, it will be delightful!"

"Oh, yes, Mrs Faucit, splendid! Miss Turner will be nicer than anyone if you can't go yourself. But are you really obliged to go away? Why can't you stay at home when it is only for two days?"

"My dear Mil! and allow Father to go by himself!" Bertha waxed quite mischievous in the relief of the moment. "You don't know what an absent-minded creature he is! If Mother were not there to look after him, he would go to meet the Archbishop without a hat on his head, or stand gloating over an old bookstall in the street, until he forgot all about his appointment. Mother has to be very careful not to let him out of her sight. She writes down all that he wants to say on a piece of paper, and leads him up to the very door of the room. Then she says: 'Now, Austin, do you know whom you are going to see?' Father stares blankly, and says: 'Er—er—I really er—.' And then she says very slowly and distinctly: 'You—are—going—to—see—the—Archbishop! You—want—to—see—him—very—badly—indeed. Here is a list of the things you want to say!' Then she thrusts the paper into his hands, pushes him inside the door, and shuts it firmly behind him. It's quite true! I know, because I have been with them."

"Eh? eh? eh? What this! what's all this?" The Dean pushed his chair from the table, and stared at his daughter with a comical expression of amused embarrassment upon his face. "Upon my word, Sarah, I believe you are right! The children are growing up—they are growing up! I—I never heard such an accusation in my life! Absent-minded! Am I indeed, Miss Bertha? I see a great deal more than you imagine, young lady!"

His lips were twitching, his grave eyes twinkling with amusement. He was a Dean and a scholar whose fame was world-wide; who wrote books the very names of which Mildred was unable to understand, but he had shown himself so considerate of the young people's enjoyment, he looked, at the moment, so kindly and mischievous that a sudden wave of affection swelled within the girl's heart. Up she leapt, and bounding across the room to his side, threw her long arms round his neck, and kissed him rapturously upon the lips. It was an extraordinary liberty to take, but what followed was more extraordinary still, for the Dean returned the salute with the utmost alacrity, and keeping one arm round Mildred's waist, twirled off with her towards the door in something that was perilously,—perilously like a polka!

When he reached the doorway, and saw the old butler coming along the passage, he shook himself free in a moment, and shuffled off to the study, looking as sober as if he had never indulged in a game of romps in his life; but when Mildred turned back into the room the twins were clapping their hands in delight, Lady Sarah struggling in vain to restrain a smile, while Mrs Faucit was laughing softly to herself, with a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

There are two sorts of tears, however, and these of the Dean's wife were certainly not those of sorrow. Perhaps she was thinking of the days when she was a girl herself, and of a certain lanky schoolboy who spent the vacations with her brothers, and who behaved in such harum-scarum fashion that an onlooker would have been ready to prophesy anything of him, rather than that he should have developed into a sober dignitary of the church!

But a day of busy preparation lay before Mrs Faucit. She had no time to waste in day-dreams, so excusing herself to Lady Sarah, she carried the girls upstairs to her room, where she proceeded to read them a gentle lecture on their behaviour for the next few days.

"Now do, dears, try to help me while I am away! I shall be miserable if I feel that things are not going on well at home, and it all depends upon you. Make up your minds that you will not allow little things to annoy you, and set yourselves to be cheerful and forbearing. The rest will follow as a matter of course. Bertha, I leave the children to you—see that they are happy. If any accident or sudden illness should happen, telegraph at once for me. Lois, you must take my place in the house. Look after the flowers, and see that a fire is lit in the small drawing-room if the weather is at all chilly. Mildred, I have a task for you too. I wonder if you can guess what it is? I am going to leave Lady Sarah in your care! Yes, really, dear—I mean it! I ask you as a favour to look upon her as your special charge while I am away



—to see that she is comfortable and has all she wants. She is very old, Mildred, and in spite of her sharp manner, she appreciates kindness. Now remember, dear, I trust you!”

“Oh, dear!” groaned Mildred; “I wish you wouldn’t! I don’t like it a bit. I’d much sooner arrange the flowers—mayn’t I arrange the flowers, Mrs Faucit, please, and let Lois look after Lady Sarah? You said yourself I had quite a gift for arranging flowers!” Then, as Mrs Faucit only smiled and shook her head, she went off into fresh lamentations. “It’s perfectly miserable that you have to go away at all. Things do happen so nastily in this world! Just as I was going home Robbie fell ill, and now the very day before the picnic this letter arrives! It’s horrid. Cécile said you were going away, but I never believed you would!”

Mrs Faucit looked up sharply.

“Cécile said!” she repeated. “Cécile! What did she know about it, pray? The date of the interview was so uncertain that I have never spoken of it in the house. I hoped that, as it had been so often deferred, it might not come off until the end of the holidays. What did Cécile say?”

“Oh, not much!” replied Mildred easily. “Something about finding out what Lady Sarah was like when you went away and she was left in charge. I said you were not going away, and she muttered something about hearing the servants talk. I really forget what it was.”

Mrs Faucit wrinkled her brows, and looked perturbed. How could Cécile know of plans which had only been discussed between husband and wife? Could it be that the Dean, in his carelessness, had left a letter on the subject lying about, and that Cécile had been unprincipled enough to read the contents? It was the only explanation of which she could think, and it was sufficiently unpleasant to send her downstairs to interview Lady Sarah with a fresh weight on her mind.

“Will you be kind enough to take care of the keys for me, Sarah?” she asked. “There are a good many valuables in the chest in the strong-room, and I should feel more comfortable if you were in charge. James will apply to you for anything he needs, and pray do not hesitate to give him your instructions in return. By the way, Mildred has just been telling me that Cécile spoke to her some days ago of our leaving home! I can’t imagine how she can have known about it. I am afraid I have never got over my first dislike to that woman, Sarah. I don’t like her prying ways, and I don’t like her manner to you. You are not given to spoiling your servants, but it seems to me that you are allowing Cécile to get the upper hand; and if that goes on, it will be a great mistake. She does not impress me as a woman whom it is safe to indulge!”

Lady Sarah gave an impatient toss to her head.

“Oh, my dear Evelyn!” she cried; “it is easy for you to talk. You have your husband and children, and are not dependent upon a servant. I am! Cécile has it in her power to make my comfort or misery, and she is a capable woman, who understands my requirements. I have suffered so much from inefficient maids that I cannot afford to quarrel with one who really suits me!”

She evidently did not appreciate her friend’s interference, and Mrs Faucit realised that there was no more to be said on the subject.

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## Chapter Eleven.

### The Picnic at Last.

The next morning Mildred awoke to find the sun pouring into her room through the uncurtained windows. A moment of sleepy confusion, and then remembrance awoke. It was the day of the picnic—the all-important day which had been dreamt of so long, and with such ardent anticipation. She jumped out of bed and ran to the window, to see if the sky fulfilled the promise of the sunshine. Well, not quite! the blue was broken by ominous clouds, which the wind drove along at a speed too rapid to be reassuring. Mildred knew that radiant mornings had an unpleasant knack of settling down into gloomy days, but she was so anxious to think the best that she would not allow herself to dwell upon unpleasant truths. It was enough to put anyone in good spirits to dress in that delicious blaze of sunshine, and the meeting at the breakfast-table took place under the brightest auspices.

“Isn’t it a perfectly scrumptious day? Doesn’t it make you want to skip and dance?” cried Mildred enthusiastically. “I feel as if I could do anything when the sun shines like this—it’s so inspiring—it makes you feel so strong, and light, and well. I could jump over a mountain, I believe, if there was one in my way.” She gave a spring over a stool as she spoke, by way of illustrating her words, and might possibly have proceeded to further exploits had not Lady Sarah entered the room at that moment and taken her seat at the head of the table.

She walked with an unusually brisk tread, and her face looked less lined and tired than usual. The brilliant morning had evidently its effect upon her as well as on the younger members of the household, and so amiable did she appear that the girls went on with their rhapsodies undeterred by her presence. They laughed, and chattered, and joked in overflowing spirits, and when Lady Sarah found a chance to put in a question about the scene of the day’s excursion there was a race to see who could answer first, and use the greatest number of superlatives in doing so.

“A pretty place?—Oh, exquisite! The most beautiful little village that was ever seen! A river?—Yes, indeed, the prettiest river in the world, splashing over rocks, and with the sweetest little shady paths on either side! An inn?—Rather! Like an inn in a picture—oak walls, and blue china in corner cupboards. Walks?—Everywhere! In every direction?—Impossible to take a wrong turning where every step of the country was beautiful!”

After these rhapsodies had continued for several moments Lady Sarah's face began to assume an expression of curiosity, and she glanced out of the window from time to time, as if mentally considering some question.

"I am not quite sure about the day, the clouds look low. If it were more settled I really think I should like to come with you myself instead of Miss Turner."

Had a bomb-shell suddenly exploded in the room its occupants could hardly have been more bewildered than they were by the utterance of these few, quietly-spoken words, "I should like to go with you myself." The girls held their breath, and felt stupefied with horror. They had never dreamt that this would be the result of their ecstatic description; they had imagined that the subject of a chaperone was settled once for all, and it was a terrible awakening. Bertha was the first to recover her composure. She had a strong consciousness of the importance of her position as the Dean's eldest daughter, and in her mother's absence was determined not to shirk her responsibility.

"But—but, Lady Sarah, Miss Turner has been asked. Mother has written to Mrs Newland. Do you think it would do to alter the arrangement?" she asked earnestly, and Lady Sarah tossed her head in derision.

"My dear child, what nonsense you talk! I think Mrs Newland would have little hesitation in accepting me in Miss Turner's place; I would explain it to her myself."

"But we go for a walk in the afternoon, a long walk. You would be terribly tired."

"Nothing of the sort. I am not quite paralysed yet. Say no more on that score, if you please. I am able and willing, and shall be glad of the chance of seeing the place; but, of course if you prefer the governess—"

What could be said in answer to such a question as this? The usages of polite society forbidding a candid avowal of the truth, Bertha could only protest feebly in a weak, broken-spirited voice.

"Very well, then, we will consider it settled. We do not leave the house until half-past eleven, by that time I shall see what the day is going to do. It is beginning to cloud over, and I don't like the look of the sky. If it shows any disposition to rain I shall certainly not risk an attack of rheumatism by walking on damp grass, but if it keeps fine I shall be ready when the carriage comes round. Miss Turner will no doubt be very glad to stay at home."

She swept from the room, and the scene which followed can be better imagined than described. Mildred paced up and down, her cheeks aflame, her lips pressed together to keep back a torrent of angry words. Lois had hard work not to cry outright, while Bertha sat down on a chair, and clasped her hands in despair.

"I know what it means!—I know what it means! She went with us once before. She made me stay beside her all day long, and wear mufflers round my neck; and sit inside the coach coming home. She wouldn't let me have an ice at lunch, or sail on the lake—or—do anything nice! I'd just as soon give it up at once, and stay at home. It will be all spoiled! I sha'n't enjoy it a bit!"

She was very near tears herself, but for once in her life Mildred made no response. There was a strange, half-triumphant smile upon her lips, and she continued to pace up and down the room, and to take no part in her friend's lamentations.

By and by Bertha and Lois went away, with dejected mien, to attend to the various duties with which they had been charged. Bertha to the nursery, to give orders that some little friends should be invited to take tea with the children, Lois to arrange the basket of flowers which the gardener brought up to the house. About ten o'clock the sky clouded over in a threatening manner, and it seemed as if Lady Sarah's prophecy was about to be fulfilled, but when the carriage came round to the door at half-past eleven, the sun was shining again in all its splendour, and the air felt warm and fragrant.

Neither of the girls had seen anything of Mildred since parting from her in the breakfast-room, but at the last moment she came strolling leisurely across the hall, looking such a picture of youth and beauty as made them hold their breath in admiration. The blue dress looked as fresh and dainty as if it was being worn for the first time, a soft white sash was twisted round the waist, and a bunch of ox-eye daisies tucked into the folds of muslin round the neck. The golden hair fell in wavy masses down her back, and the shady hat dipped forward over her charming face. The Dean's daughters looked colourless and insignificant beside her, but they were too radiantly happy to care about their own appearance, for it was Miss Turner who came forward to seat herself beside them in the carriage, while Lady Sarah stood within the porch speaking her farewells in tones of ill-concealed irritation.

"Most rash and foolish I call it! I heard the rain distinctly, I tell you, and not satisfied with hearing, I put my head out of the window and felt several drops upon my face. Have you taken umbrellas and mackintoshes?—No? Now, my dear Lois, pray, don't make objections to everything I say. Your mother is away, and I feel the responsibility on my shoulders. Miss Turner, will you be good enough to see that umbrellas and mackintoshes are taken, and good thick cloaks in case of cold? You will be starved to death on the coach coming home."

The echo of the fretful voice followed the carriage as it drove away from the door, and as Bertha waved her hand, a shadow of compunction fell over her face.

"She is disappointed! Poor old lady; she looks lonely, standing there. She daren't come because of her rheumatism; but just look at that sky, and imagine anyone saying that it had been raining; so positive about it, too. She must have been dreaming."

"Well, for goodness sake don't begin to be miserable now, Bertha, because she is *not* coming! Two hours ago you were nearly crying because she was. You said you wouldn't enjoy yourself at all, and would just as soon stay at home. For goodness sake be cheerful, and don't grumble any more!"

Mildred's voice sounded so irritable that her friends stared at her in surprise. She looked exceedingly pretty and charming, but not quite like herself all the same. It was difficult to say wherein the difference lay, yet both Lois and Bertha recognised it at once. The air of exuberant happiness, which was one of her chief characteristics, had disappeared. She looked strained, worried, ill at ease.

All through the earlier part of the day this curious depression seemed to hang over Mildred's spirits. At every quiet opportunity she whispered an eager "Are you enjoying yourself?" into her friend's ear; "You are enjoying yourself, aren't you, Bertha?" but it was not until lunch was laid out upon the grass, and the merry scramble for knives and forks had begun, that she herself seemed able to enter into the fun with a whole heart. From that time onward she was her own merry self, and Bertha had the pleasure of seeing her prophecy fulfilled, for before the afternoon was over, Mildred, in her old blue dress and renovated hat, had become the principal personage in the party. The ladies were charmed with her because she was so pretty, and had such winsome, coaxing little ways; the gentlemen, because she was a thorough school-girl, free from every trace of young-ladyish affectation. It delighted them to see her race up the hillsides, or skip from rock to rock across the river bed, and when the time came for the return drive, there was quite a struggle for the seat by her side in the coach. The gentleman who gained it was, in Mildred's estimation, the most interesting of the number. He was very tall, and so thin that his clothes hung upon him in baggy folds. His skin was burnt to a dull brown colour, and had a curious dried-up appearance, but his blue eyes shone with a boy-like gleam. Mildred could not make up her mind whether he were old or young, but as he remarked, in the course of conversation, that he had just returned from a fifteen-years sojourn in Ceylon, and that he had left England shortly after his twenty-first birthday, she was able to calculate his age with little difficulty.

"I am interested in Ceylon. Do tell me all about it!" she said. Whereat her companion smiled, and said that was a "large order." He proceeded, however, in easy, chatty manner to give some interesting accounts of the country, and his own adventures therein. He told, for instance, of how darkness fell suddenly upon the land, and the tiny streams swelled in an hour to the magnitude of a river; how, when returning from a friend's bungalow one evening, the oil in his lantern had given out, and he had been compelled to crawl on hands and knees along the dangerous road; how, on the borders of a forest, he had seen two snakes standing erect in deadly combat, and could remember a flight of white butterflies, three miles in length and of such density that they obscured the sun as with a cloud. He told stories of his elephants, too; how they had worked for him in building the big tea-factory on which he had been engaged, dragging the heavy stones up the hillsides, and pushing them into their own particular niche, with their ponderous feet. How steadily they worked, and with what persistence, until the bell rang at four o'clock, when they instantly turned tail, ambled off to their lines, and refused to do a stroke of work until the next morning. "Fifteen years!" he sighed; "fifteen years! It is a good slice out of a man's life. When I went out, I had dreams of making my fortune in a few years and coming home to spend it in England, but the days of rapid fortune making are over, and I shall probably end my life in Ceylon. I wasn't much older than you are now, Miss Mildred, when my guardian packed me off to an office in the city, and I was obliged to sit copying letters at a desk from morning till night. Bah! how I hated it. I made up my mind to go abroad the moment I was twenty-one, and could claim my money, but when the time came, I felt pretty bad at leaving. I had a special chum, with whom I lived and worked, and played, and shared every joy and sorrow. It was a terrible wrench to part from him—and from someone else—the lady who is now my wife! You have been introduced to her, I think; there she is in the blue dress, sitting in the front of the other coach."

"With the brown hat? Yes, I know; I like her. She looks awfully sweet." Mildred nodded her head decisively, and her companion's eyes twinkled in response.

"Oh, yes! she's quite satisfactory. Bullies me a little now and then, you know—between ourselves; but one can't have everything in this wicked world. Well, you see, she came out to me in due time. But before there was any talk of that, another curious thing had happened. I was sitting in front of my bungalow one afternoon, very low and homesick, and tired to death after a long day's work. I was wondering if I should ever live to get back to the old country, or to see my friends again, when suddenly a man came round the corner of the road, and marched up the garden path. He was an Englishman—that was seen at the first glance; he was tall, and broad, and had a peculiar way of holding his shoulders. I stared at him, not knowing if I were awake or asleep, and when he was within a dozen yards, he raised his head to look at me, and it was my chum!—the very fellow I had been thinking of five minutes before, and despairing of ever seeing again!"

"Good gracious! What did you do? What did you say?"

Mr Muir smiled.

"Do? Say? I called out 'Halloa!' and he called out 'Halloa!' and we shook hands and went into the bungalow. That seems strange to you, doesn't it? If you had been in my place, and one of your school-fellows had appeared upon the scene, you would have behaved rather differently, I imagine!"

"Rather!" cried Mildred; "I can't think how you can have been so calm! If I had been there, and had seen Bertha coming, I'd have whooped like a red Indian, and rushed down, and simply smothered her with kisses. Men must be awfully cold-blooded."

"I don't know about that. There are different ways of expressing one's emotion. A grip of the hand goes a long way sometimes. Well, I was fortunate, you see, for I had my chum with me once more. He had been as lonely without me as I without him, and had made up his mind to come and join me. We bought an estate between us, and now have a factory of our own. I was grieved to see these good people drinking Chinese tea this evening. I believe some wiseacres pretend that it is good for the digestion, but what is that compared with encouraging the poor planters in Ceylon? Remember, Miss Mildred, I rely upon you to drink nothing but Indian tea for the rest of your life."

"Oh, I will!" promised Mildred readily. "I am quite interested in Ceylon now, because of you, and of another planter who was a friend of a great friend of mine. She told me a story about him only a few weeks ago. He wasn't so fortunate as you. He was quite alone, and he tried to grow quinine—cinchona, you call it, don't you? All the other

estates suffered from blight, except his, and he was promised ever so much money for it—a fortune—but just when he was so happy, thinking of coming home, the disease came on his estate too, and everything died away before his eyes. All his work was lost, he had to begin over again, and dig up the land to plant tea instead.”

“Now, I wonder who told you that story!” Mr Muir cried. “I knew a fellow who had exactly the same experience. Curiously enough, he came home in the ship with me. We only landed a week ago. Do you mind telling the name of your informant?”

“No, of course not. Why should I? It was one of my school-mistresses—Miss Margaret Chilton. She and her eldest sister keep the school to which we all go—Bertha, and Lois, and I. We were talking of disappointments one day, and she told me this story as an illustration.”

Mr Muir threw back his head, and began to laugh in a soft, amused fashion, most mystifying to the hearer.

“Talk of coincidences!” he cried. “Talk of coincidences! Why, Miss Mildred, it is the very man of whom I was speaking. Isn’t that a curious thing? I knew him intimately, and he has told me stories too—about Miss Margaret Chilton among other people. And she is your school-mistress? Tell me now, what is she like? I have heard so much about her that I am interested to hear.”

“She is a darling!”

“Er—so I was given to understand!” said Mr Muir drily. “And as to appearance? Dark or fair, tall or short, plain or good-looking?”

Mildred reflected.

“She has brown eyes,” she said slowly. “Oh, you may think that is not a good description, but it is; because when you see Mardie’s eyes, you don’t notice anything else. They are so clear, and sweet, and lovely, and they look straight at you, as if they could see through and through, but so gently and kindly that you don’t mind it a bit.”

Mildred opened her own eyes at her companion as she spoke, with a comical imitation of Miss Margaret’s expression, which made him laugh in spite of himself.

“I see! I see! Well, I shouldn’t wonder if I were to have the pleasure of meeting Miss Chilton one of these fine days. If I do, I am sure I shall recognise her by the description.”

At this point the coach drew up before the railway station, and the party separated to return to their various homes. Mr Muir whispered a word or two in his wife’s ear, and they came together to the window of the carriage in which the girls were seated, to wish them a last farewell.

“*Au revoir*, Miss Mildred!” he cried, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. “I am not going to say good-bye, for I expect to meet you again, on a still more interesting occasion.”

“I haven’t the least idea what you mean, but I hope we shall!” returned Mildred.

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## Chapter Twelve.

### A Terrible Experience.

When the girls reached home they found Lady Sarah awaiting them in the drawing-room. Her hands were lying idly on her lap, a white shawl was wrapped round her shoulders, and the sight of her tired, dispirited face brought with it a throb of compunction. It was not easy to continue the rhapsodies in which they had indulged all the way from the station in the presence of one who had, so evidently, found the day long and uninteresting. Lady Sarah, however, had many questions to ask, and received each answer with an echo of the old complaint.

“If I had only gone with you! It has been a beautiful day, I should have taken no harm. If it had not been for that unfortunate shower I should have seen it all, instead of sitting here the whole day long, wearying to death.”

“Dear Lady Sarah, haven’t you been a drive? Why didn’t you order the carriage, and go a nice long drive into the country?”

“What is the use of driving by yourself? No, thank you, Bertha, I prefer to stay at home. Cécile? no—not for worlds. I think something must be wrong with the girl’s nerves. It seems as if it were impossible for her to sit still the last few days. It fidgets me to be near a person who jumps up and down like a Jack-in-the-box. There is some supper waiting for you in the dining-room, my dears. You had better take it and let us get off to bed. The day has been long enough.”

The girls turned away obediently and hurried through their meal, not to delay the old lady any longer than could be helped. They had been successful in getting their own way, and, as is usual under the circumstances, conscience was beginning to reproach them for selfishness, and to suggest that it might have been possible to have had their own enjoyment, and to have allowed Lady Sarah to have had hers into the bargain.

When the twins went into Mildred’s bedroom to say good-night, Bertha could not refrain from putting these sentiments into words.

“Poor Lady Sarah, she does look dull! She has had a lonely day. I must say I feel rather—mean.”

"I feel mean too," said Lois; but at this Mildred interrupted with an impatient protest.

"What in the world have you to feel mean about? You have done nothing. It was not your fault. You did nothing to prevent her going."

"No, but I didn't want her to come, even when she said it would be a pleasure. I was glad when she was prevented; I thought the shower was quite a providence."

"Don't, Bertha!" cried Mildred sharply. Her face flushed to a vivid pink, she seemed to struggle with herself for a moment, then said decisively, "Look here, I am going to tell you something. You will be shocked, but it's done now, and can't be undone, so there is no use saying anything about it. There was no shower. It was a trick. I played the hose upon her window."

A gasp of horror sounded through the room as the twins uttered a simultaneous question, "You—*what?*"

"I played the hose upon her window. I'll tell you all about it. You had both been crying in the dining-room, saying that your pleasure was spoiled, and that you wouldn't enjoy yourselves a bit. Then you went out of the room and I strolled into the garden. I heard a noise at the window and saw Lady Sarah standing in her room. I didn't want her to see me, so I slipped behind a clump of trees, and the hose was lying on the ground all ready. It darted into my head in a moment that I could make her think it was raining, and I took it up and played it gently on the panes,—just like the very beginning of a shower. By and by I heard the window open and saw her stretch out her hand; then I gave a flick round the corner, so that she got quite a nice little bath. The window shut with a bang, and I went on pattering until it was all over drops. She stood in the background looking out—"

"Oh, Mildred!" echoed the Dean's daughters in horrified chorus; "Oh, Mildred! how could you, how dare you? Suppose anyone had seen you."

"Oh, I took good care of that! No one saw me at all—except Erroll."

"Erroll? Good gracious! And did you warn him not to tell?"

Mildred shook her head.

"No; Mother never allows us to tell the children anything like that. She says it makes them deceitful. He will forget all about it; children always do."

"They generally remember when you want them to forget. Oh, Mildred, I wish you hadn't done it! I don't like it a bit. It makes me feel worse than ever."

"You can't feel anything like as bad as I do," retorted Mildred miserably. "I was sorry the moment after I had done it. I went upstairs and stayed in my own room, for I thought I had done enough mischief, and had better keep out of the way. I was really disappointed to see Miss Turner in the carriage instead of Lady Sarah. I thought I shouldn't enjoy myself at all—it worried me so; but then I got interested and forgot all about it—until we came home." Her voice sank into a disconsolate whisper, "I don't know what your mother will think, when she put her into my charge, too, but there are two days more; I'm going to be awfully nice, and try if I can't make up."

"We will all try," said Bertha heartily. She saw that Mildred was even more distressed than she would admit, and was anxious to say something comforting before retiring for the night. "We have had our good time to-day, she shall have hers to-morrow. Don't worry any more, Mil dear, but try to think of something nice that we can do for her as a surprise before Mother comes back."

"It's awfully good of you not to scold me, Bertha. I know you must be disgusted with me, though you won't say so. You would never have done such a thing yourself."

"No, because I am never in a hurry. I take a long time to make up my mind about anything, good or bad. If you had waited five minutes to think about it, you would never have played that hose; but never mind, Mil, some time there will be a brave thing to do, and you will have risked your life and done it, while I am still trembling on the brink. It works both ways, you see!"

Bertha patted her friend on the arm with an air of gracious condescension, and bidding her an affectionate good-night, returned to her own room.

Left to herself, Mildred began to undress in listless, disconsolate fashion. She was tired with the day's exertions, and sorely troubled about the escapade of the morning. Lady Sarah's face haunted her. If Bertha and Lois were shocked, what, oh! what, would be their mother's feelings? "She will be grieved in earnest this time," Mildred sighed to herself. "Oh, goodness, I wonder why it is that I am always getting into trouble! I mean to be good, I have the best intentions... Mrs Faucit will look at me as she did that day when I flew into a passion. I hate to be looked at like that. Great, solemn eyes, as if her heart were broken! And it was all my fault this time... I wish I could be calm and deliberate. I'll begin to-morrow, and count twenty to myself before I say a single word."

She crept into bed and laid her head upon the pillows with a weary sigh, but sleep was long in coming, and even when the lids closed over the tired eyes, the groans which forced themselves through the closed lips, the nervous twitches of the limbs, showed that an uneasy conscience pursued her into the land of dreams.

How long she slept Mildred never knew, but it seemed as if at one moment she was lost in unconsciousness, and at the next she was awake—wide, wide awake,—with her heart beating like a sledge-hammer, and an unusual chilling of fear in her veins. Something had aroused her—what was it? The echo of the sound rang in her ears, shrill, piteous, beseeching. What could it have been? Mildred sat up in bed and looked searchingly round the room. The light was

high enough to show the furthest corner. The door was closed, the window as she had left it, the sash opened a few inches at the bottom; the tick of the little clock on the mantel-piece sounded clearly in the silence. All looked so calm, so peaceful, so safe, that Mildred drew a breath of relief and was preparing to burrow down again among the clothes, when her heart leapt at a repetition of the same mysterious sound.

There was no mistaking it this time. It was the sound of a voice raised in a wail of such bitter, helpless pleading as left the listener trembling with nervousness.

In the broad light of day, with friends seated by our sides, it is difficult to realise how keenly a sound such as this tells upon the nerves in the dark silence of the night, but Mildred was of a fearless nature, and after the first shock of surprise, her impulse was to find out the source of the alarm, not to hide her head under the bedclothes and stuff her fingers in her ears, as many another girl would have done in her place. She slipped out of bed, crept across the room to the window, and kneeling on the floor, applied her ear to the open space, listening intently.

The windows of the house were dark and lifeless, but as she waited, in straining silence, it seemed to Mildred that a faint murmur of voices reached her ear. Now a long level murmur, now a broken effort of protest, then again the smooth low voice.

Mildred turned her eye from one side to the other, calling to mind the different rooms to which the windows belonged. Below the breakfast-room, above the day nursery, to the right her own dressing-room, to the left, in the projecting wing, Lady Sarah's room and that of her maid. Mildred had never realised before how she was cut off from the rest of the household, but the conviction that the voices must come from this last-named room brought with it a throb of relief. Cécile had said that her mistress was often irritably wakeful during the night-time, and had warned her of a possible alarm like the present.

If it was only Lady Sarah scolding her maid, there was no reason why she should not go back to bed and sleep comfortably, but in spite of this conclusion she continued to kneel by the window, for the remembrance of those two cries was not easily reasoned away. She had not been able to distinguish the words, but the tone could not be accounted for by mere irritability. Mildred had had ample opportunity of studying the different tones of Lady Sarah's voice, but she had never heard this note before. Cécile had declared that her mistress treated her harshly, but Mildred, like everyone else in the house, had been inclined to think that the opposite view of the situation would be nearer the truth, for the old lady seemed in dread of the clever maid, and fearful of offending her.

The old distrust of the Frenchwoman, which had been temporarily forgotten because of her kindness in the matter of the blue dress, awoke afresh in Mildred's breast; she bent her head forward and strained her ears to overhear what was going on within that further room. It seemed as if she had been kneeling by the window for a long time, but it was in reality only a few minutes, before suddenly, sharply, the cry rang out again, to be as quickly stifled, but not before the listener had recognised the voice, and the word which it was struggling to say.

"Help! Help!"

It was Lady Sarah's voice. She was in trouble, someone was ill-treating her, so that she was fain to raise her poor, quivering voice in an appeal for help.

Mildred leapt to her feet, while the blood rushed into her cheeks and her heart began to beat furiously. She was not in the least frightened. What she felt at that moment was something almost like triumph. Lady Sarah had been committed to her charge, and she was now in danger. Here was a chance of redeeming her misdoings of the day before; an opportunity of saving her from threatened danger! Mildred slipped on dressing-gown and slippers and laid her hand on the knob of the door. Before she had time to open it, however, a faint rustling from without attracted her attention; she listened, and could discern the almost imperceptible sound of footsteps coming along the corridor from Lady Sarah's room, and towards her own. Outside her door they paused, and it seemed as if the beating of her heart must surely betray her presence. But no, they moved on again, the swish of the trailing skirts growing fainter and fainter, until it died away in the distance.

Mildred opened the door and peered cautiously into the passage. All was dark and silent, but on the wall above the staircase a faint light flickered, now here, now there, as if reflected from a candle carried in the hand of someone descending to the hall beneath. Mildred darted in pursuit along the passage, her thick padded slippers aiding her characteristic lightness of movement, so that she reached a point where she could get the desired view without making a sound that could have been heard by the most watchful ears.

It was as she thought. Someone was creeping downstairs, candle in hand, and feeble as the flame was, it was sufficient to light up the sleek head, the slight, sinuous figure of Lady Sarah's maid.

Mildred pressed her lips together with a look of comprehension, and immediately faced round to retrace her steps with even more speed than before. This time she did not stop short at her own room, but turned into the further passage from which Lady Sarah's room was entered. The key was in the lock, for Cécile had carefully fastened the old lady in the room before she herself had taken her departure, but Mildred gave a fine smile of contempt as she drew it out, and slipped it into the pocket of her dressing-gown. Another moment and she was within the room, standing by Lady Sarah's bed and gazing upon the face which lay on the pillow with startled eyes.

At the first glance it seemed altogether strange and unfamiliar. Lady Sarah's hair was brown and luxurious—these straggling locks were white as snow; Lady Sarah had well-marked brows and regular teeth, but when she lifted the handkerchief which covered the face, the brows were missing and the lips fell in around toothless gums. Mildred stood transfixed, but even as she gazed, she became aware of a faint, sickly odour, which seemed to rise from the handkerchief which she held in her hand. She raised it to her face and shuddered with disgust as the remembrance of a dentist's operating-room came swiftly to mind. That wicked Cécile! Had she been using something to make Lady Sarah unconscious? And was that the reason why she lay so still, and made no attempt to open her eyes?

Mildred dared not turn up the gas in case the light might be seen from without and excite suspicion, but she peered about the dressing-table, discovered a bottle of salts among the litter of silver ornaments, and with the aid of this and a plenteous sprinkling of water, managed to arouse the old lady to consciousness. The flattened eyelids opened, and Lady Sarah stared upwards with dreamy unrecognising eyes, for in the uncertain light the figure of the girl in her white robes and flowing golden hair seemed more like a heavenly visitant than a flesh-and-blood girl.

"Who,—who,—what are you?" she muttered, and Mildred bent nearer with a reassuring smile.

"It is I—Mildred! Mildred Moore. I heard you call and came to see what was wrong. Don't be frightened, Lady Sarah. You know me—you know Mildred! I will take care of you—No one shall do you any harm."

Lady Sarah continued to stare with those dazed, bewildered eyes, then suddenly the light of understanding flashed over her face, her fingers clasped the girl's arm, and she glanced wildly from side to side.

"Cécile? Cécile?"

"She is not here, Lady Sarah. She has gone downstairs. I saw her go, and came in here at once to look after you."

"Gone? Downstairs?" Lady Sarah pushed the girl away, and drawing herself up in the bed, began groping hurriedly beneath her pillow. "The key? It is gone—she has taken it! Oh, Mildred, the key of the safe in the strong-room. I had it here. I slept with it under my pillow. She tried to take it from me, and I wouldn't give it up.—She is a thief, Mildred, a cunning, wicked woman, and when she could not get it from me by force, she put chloroform on that handkerchief and held it over my face. She has accomplices downstairs. They will open the safe and get away before anyone knows they are here. There are valuables of my own there besides Mrs Faucit's. We shall never see them again, and I was left in charge. The wicked woman! She has been scheming for this. Oh, she is cruel, she is dangerous—she will kill you, child, if she comes back and finds you here."

Mildred laughed shortly, and threw back her hair with a scornful gesture: "Not she, indeed! She would be far more afraid of me than I should be of her. But what is to be done, Lady Sarah? We must do something quickly; there is no time to be lost. Shall I go and waken Bertha—the servants—Miss Turner?"

"A lot of nervous women! What good would they do? They would go off into hysterics, and give the alarm before you could get downstairs. And if you went down, what could you do, children and girls as you are, against old practised hands? Cécile has never planned this by herself. There are two or three men downstairs, she let out as much in her anger. If you could find James..."

Lady Sarah broke off, and stared into the girl's face with her haggard eyes. It was an intent, questioning gaze, but the girl did not shrink before it. She nodded her head gravely, as if recognising the force of the suggestion, and accepting the responsibility which it thrust upon her, for James's room was cut off from the rest of the house, and to reach it it was necessary to descend to the ground floor, and go along the whole length of the passage leading to the servants' hall.

"Yes, of course; James would be the best!"

"You know where he sleeps?"

"Yes, I know."

Lady Sarah leant her head against the pillow, trembling violently.

"You would have to go downstairs, to pass within a few yards of the strong-room door—they might see you—and if they did?—No, no! I cannot let you go. Poor child, poor child! Your safety is of more value than anything they can take. It is too great a risk."

"Dear Lady Sarah, I am not afraid. I will creep along so quietly that they will never hear me, and once down, it will not take me a minute to run along the passage. Don't try to prevent me, I must go—I must! I couldn't stay quietly here while Mrs Faucit was being robbed. See! here is the key, Cécile left it in the lock. Get up and fasten yourself in, and don't open the door until I come back. You won't be nervous?"

"Not for myself—no, no!—but for you, Mildred. No, you shall not go, I will not allow it! Your mother—"

"Mother would go herself. She is the bravest little creature in the world. I am not afraid. If they see me I will make a dash for it, and scream at the pitch of my voice. You will hear, the others will hear, the whole house will be in a tumult, and they will be glad to escape and let me alone. But I want to take them by surprise, and not let them get away. I'm going now. There is not a minute to waste. Be careful how you shut the door. Don't be frightened. If you hear no noise you will know all is well."

Mildred drew the folds of her gown round her, and stepped out into the passage. The lamps were out, but the moonlight poured in by the long windows, and saved her from all danger of stumbling. Round the corner, past the door of her own room, along to the head of the staircase she crept, so far with nothing more than consciousness of excitement and enterprise; but here the dangerous part of her mission began, and she paused for a moment to draw breath and consider how she had best proceed. The staircase descended in flights of six steps at a time, during two of which only she would be within sight from the hall beneath. One of the steps, she knew, creaked. Which was it? In which flight? Stupid not to remember when she had noticed it so many, many times! There was only one thing for it; to tread each step as lightly as possible, and to trust that the thieves might be so busily engaged that they would not notice such a gentle sound. She bent down to fasten the woollen slippers more closely, then slowly, cautiously began the descent. No step creaked beneath her feet, but when she reached the bottom of the second flight of stairs, it was

not relief but disappointment which she felt, for she realised that the dangerous point must now be passed, while she was in sight of anyone who might be standing in the hall beneath.

Suppose Cécile had stationed one of her accomplices outside the door of the strong-room, to guard against possible discovery? Suppose with the next step forward she found herself confronted by a burly rascal, ready to spring forward and silence her cries with a heavy hand pressed over her lips? Mildred set her teeth with the old obstinate expression, and stepped determinedly forward. She had known from the outset that there was a certain amount of danger in her mission; she was not to be dismayed by the first alarm. Another moment and she was within sight of the strong-room, to discover, with a thrill of relief, that the thieves were too busily engaged getting together their spoil to have time to play sentry. A faint light shone from within the half-closed door; Mildred held her breath, and could hear a murmur of voices, an occasional clicking, as of steel instruments upon a hard substance.

In the rush of indignation which the sound brought with it she trod less carefully than before, and the creak which followed filled her with dismay. Good heavens! how loudly it sounded in the stillness! She dared not move a step, but stood crouched against the wall, her gown gathered up in her hand, ready at the first sign of an alarm to rush back to the upper floor and rouse the servants by her cries; but there was no cessation of work within the strong-room, the voices still whispered together, the click, click went on as before. What had sounded so sharply in Mildred's ears had in reality been a very faint sound, scarcely perceptible at a distance of a few yards, and the noise made by their own movements prevented it from reaching the ears of the thieves.

The fact that it had not been noticed gave the girl fresh courage, so that she almost ran down the few steps that remained, her little padded feet falling noiselessly upon the carpet. She stood now in the hall itself; a sharp turn to the right would take her towards James's bedroom, but before moving forward she turned with instinctive curiosity to cast another glance at the door of the strong-room. It was half-closed,—more than half-closed; the moonlight shone on the polished handle, and on the great brass bolts above and below. If these were once slipped into position it would be an impossible task for those inside the room to make their escape, for the window was small, and protected by iron bars. If the bolts were fastened the thieves would be caught like rats in a trap!

Mildred stood like a figure carved in stone, staring fixedly at the door; her heart was beating like a sledge-hammer, the blood tingled to her finger ends. Supposing she went on and tried to awaken James! His door might be locked; he was an old man, probably a heavy sleeper; by the time he was aroused and had put on his clothes the thieves might have escaped! They were hard at work; at any moment they might come out,—*but if those bolts were slipped!*—A sudden impulse leapt into the girl's brain and refused to be shaken off. A dozen steps to the right, a leap forward, one hand on the knob, another raised to shoot the bar of brass into its place, a swift, impetuous movement, and the thing would be done, the thieves caught red-handed, and Mrs Faucit's treasures saved! "And I can do it," said Mildred to herself, "as well as James or anyone else; better perhaps, for I am small and light, and they are busy now and unsuspecting. It is the right time, perhaps the *only* time. I can do it—I *will* do it, before I get too nervous,—before I have time to think!"

She was nervous enough as it was, poor child, for the fear of failure was in her heart, and a terrible dread of those wicked men; but she had enough self-possession left to know that it must be now or never, and to allow herself no time for wavering.

Cécile and her two accomplices, rifling the safe of its treasures and packing the spoil together in convenient fashion for carrying away, were all unconscious of the white figure in the hall stealing forward step by step, the white face looking out from the veil of golden hair, the outstretched hands creeping nearer and nearer to those two strong brass knobs. A little gurgling sob of emotion swelled in Mildred's throat at that last crucial moment, her teeth gleamed between her parted lips, then with a spring like that of a wild animal she pounced upon the handle, and with strength born of excitement slammed the door against the lintel, and shot the big brass bar into position. A howl of rage sounded from within as the thieves threw themselves against the door with desperate force, but it was too late. Mildred bent downwards, secured the second fastening, and flew off to awaken James, secure in the knowledge that, rage and struggle as they might, the strong oak door shut them out from escape as surely as the barred window itself.

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## Chapter Thirteen.

### After the Robbery.

There was no sleep for the inhabitants of The Deanery during the remainder of that exciting night. The sudden banging of the strong-room door, with the babel which immediately followed from within, would in themselves have been enough to alarm the household; but Mildred was determined to leave nothing to chance.

She arrived at James's room just in time to meet that faithful servant hurrying forth with a greatcoat fastened over his night attire, and while he rushed across the garden to arouse the coachman, she turned back into the hall, and began to beat a wild tattoo upon the gong.

When Bertha came rushing downstairs a moment later, followed by a flock of terrified women-servants, she was horrified by the sight which she beheld. There stood Mildred in her white dressing-gown, her hair hung round her face in wild confusion, her eyes gleamed, her long arms swung the sticks through the air, and brought them down upon the gong with a fierceness of triumph, which had in it something uncanny to the gentle onlooker. She looked strangely unlike Mildred Moore—pretty, merry Mildred, so ready to tease and plague, to kiss and make friends, and tease again all in a moment. She was so carried away by the terrible excitement of the moment that she had no eyes for what was going on around, and seemed perfectly oblivious of the fact that her friends were standing by her side.





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“MILDRED, IN HER WHITE DRESSING-GOWN, SWUNG THE STICKS THROUGH THE AIR.”

It flashed through Bertha's mind that Mildred was going mad, and she seized hold of the swinging arms in an agony of appeal.

“Mildred, Mildred—don't! Oh, what are you doing? We are all here; I am here—Bertha! What has happened? what is the matter? Don't stare like that, you frighten me! You understand what I am saying, don't you, Mildred, dear?”

“I—I—I,” began Mildred blankly. She turned her head and looked at the strong-room door, before which James stood on guard, waiting the return of the coachman with the policemen; then at the group of women-servants huddled on the stairs; last of all in her friend's face, white and anxious, and overflowing with sympathy. “You understand me, don't you, Mil?” Bertha repeated gently, and at that Mildred's tense attitude relaxed. She put her hand to her head as one awakening from a dream, and clutching Bertha by the arms, burst into a flood of tears.

“Take me away!” she sobbed; “take me away!” and Bertha led her forward into the breakfast-room, followed by a murmur of sympathy from the onlookers.

James had found time to give a brief account of what had taken place to his fellow-servants, and they were filled with wonder and admiration.

“To come down all by herself, in the dead of night—that child! She is brave and no mistake! I always liked her—she has such pretty ways of her own,—but I never thought she would come out like this. She seemed so careless-like! Poor child, to see her beating that gong! She didn't know what she was doing. It's enough to upset anyone. To fasten that heavy door herself!”

Then the conversation took another turn, and busied itself in denouncing Cécile and her villainies.

“The deceitful, wicked creature! That's the end of her smooth tongue and her deceitful ways! Making excuses to poke about all the rooms in turn, and pretending to help when it was nothing else than curiosity and wicked scheming! I saw her with a letter of the master's in her hand one evening, and she said she had been sent to find it. So likely, when he had half a dozen servants of his own in the house! Now she will have a spell in prison for a change—not the first one either, or I'm mistaken. To think, if it hadn't been for Miss Mildred, she would have been off with the pick of the valuables in the house!”

So on and so on, while within the breakfast-room the heroine of the occasion was being soothed and petted to her

heart's content, Miss Turner and the two girls hanging round her, and vieing with each other as to who could do most for her comfort. In spite of her agitation, however, it was Mildred who was the first to think of the old lady upstairs, and her quick "Who is with Lady Sarah?" made the governess start in compunction.

"Oh, my dear, I am so glad you reminded me! I am ashamed to say I forgot all about her. One is so accustomed to depend upon Cécile."

She hurried away, sending the motherly old cook to take her place beside the girls, while the cook in her turn despatched the kitchen-maid to provide refreshment for the household. So it came to pass that at three o'clock in the morning several tea-parties were being held in The Deanery, the guests thereat presenting a motley appearance in their anomalous garments.

When the policemen arrived, Bertha and Mildred refused to go out into the hall to see the capture of the thieves; but Lois could not restrain her curiosity, and came back with a thrilling account of the two big, wicked-looking men who were Cécile's accomplices, and of Cécile herself, looking "so white, so terrified, so,—so *old*, that I was obliged to be sorry for her, though I tried to be angry! I expect she wishes now that she had gone to bed, and slept quietly, like a good Christian!" concluded Lois quaintly; and at that Mistress Cook lifted up her voice, and remarked that it would be a good thing if they were all to set about doing that without delay.

"It is nearly four o'clock," she said, "and to-morrow's work has to be done, thieves or no thieves. The mistress will get a telegram the moment the office is opened, and she will be home by the first train, or I'm mistaken. You young ladies had better get off to bed at once, or she will be more upset than ever if she finds you looking like ghosts!"

Miss Turner returned to the room at this moment, and warmly seconded the motion. She had left Mary, the pleasant-faced housemaid, in charge of Lady Sarah, who was nervous and unstrung after her fright, and she herself proposed to share Mildred's bed for the remainder of the night, the twins being left to keep each other company.

Mildred was thankful to accept the offer, for the strain upon her nerves had left her so weak that her legs trembled beneath her as she ascended the staircase. Even with Miss Turner lying beside her, sleep refused to come until the sun was high in the heavens, and the noises of the day rose from the garden beneath. Then at last, in the blissful sense of security brought about by light and sunshine, the tired lids closed, and she fell into a deep, restful slumber.

Miss Turner rose and crept softly from the room; Bertha and Lois peeped in at intervals of half an hour; Mary prepared two tempting breakfast-trays, one after the other, and carried them down untouched, for Mildred slept like the seven sleepers, and no one had the heart to shorten the well-earned rest.

Shortly before one o'clock a cab drove up to the door, and the Dean and Mrs Faucit hurried into the house. They looked anxious and perturbed, and had a great many questions to ask—not about the silver, however,—that seemed quite a secondary consideration,—but about the welfare of Mildred, Lady Sarah, and the children, and as to what had been done with that poor, unhappy Cécile. Miss Turner assured them in reply that the children were as happy and as naughty as ever; that Lady Sarah was rather nervous, but otherwise none the worse for her adventure, and that Mildred had been sound asleep since seven o'clock in the morning.



"MILDRED SEATED HERSELF ON THE END OF THE BED, WITH HER HANDS CLASPED ROUND HER KNEES."

"I must go up and see her at once—the dear child! the dear, brave child!" cried Mrs Faucit warmly; and she hurried upstairs, the Dean following, shaking his head in meaning manner, and treading on tiptoe as he entered the room, and advanced to the bedside.

Mildred lay fast asleep, her hair falling over the pillow in shining golden tangles; while one arm was thrown over the counterpane, the other tucked under her head, so that her cheek rested in the hollow of her palm.

There were dark shadows beneath her eyes; and she looked so white and spent, so unlike her usual radiant self, that Mrs Faucit's eyes overflowed with tears, and she bent involuntarily to press a kiss upon her lips.

The scream with which Mildred started up in bed made the two hearers fairly leap back in amazement. The sudden awakening was too much for the disordered nerves, and the soft touch had brought with it a hundred nightmare dreads. When she saw who was standing beside her, she calmed down in a moment, and apologised in shamefaced manner.

"Oh, Mrs Faucit, I am so sorry I startled you! I had just shut my eyes, and I thought it was—something dreadful—I don't know what exactly! How did you get back? What time is it? Is breakfast ready? Oh, I am so glad you are here! It is all right! I shut the door—they can't get out!—"

"Yes, dear, yes—I know! Don't think about it. We will have a long talk to-night when you are rested, but try to go to sleep again now. I am so vexed with myself for disturbing you!"

"I can't sleep. I've tried, but it's no good. I've been awake all night!" sighed Mildred pitifully. She believed that she was speaking the truth, but in reality she was so sleepy at the present moment that she hardly knew what she was saying. She raised pathetic eyes to the Dean's face, and inquired, with a yawn: "Wh-at did the Archbishop say about Cécile?"

"Bless me!" cried the Dean in alarm. "This is terrible—the child is wandering! She doesn't know what she is saying!" He laid his hand on Mildred's forehead, and backed out of the room, beckoning furtively to his wife as he went. Outside in the passage he ruffled his hair in helpless misery.

"Her head is burning, Evelyn! the child is in a fever! Something must be done at once. I don't like to see her suffering. Er—er—what could you give her, dear? Aconite and belladonna? What do you say to aconite and

belladonna—every half-hour?”

He looked so comical with his ruffled hair and distended eyes, that his wife could not restrain a smile.

“Oh, she will be all right, dear, after a day’s rest!” she said reassuringly. “I will keep her in bed, and not allow her to talk too much. You need not be anxious; Mildred is too healthy to be upset for more than a few hours!”

“But I should try the belladonna! I should certainly try the belladonna!” said the Dean urgently. He shuffled along the passage, but before his wife had time to re-enter the room he was back again, his face alight with inspiration.

“Evelyn, I was thinking! A gold watch and chain—the same as we gave the girls at Christmas.—How would that do, eh? We might present them to her as a small—er,—acknowledgment of—er,—gratitude! What do you think of that? Does it strike you as a good idea?”

“Capital, Austin! Much better than the belladonna!” cried Mrs Faucit.

She patted him approvingly upon the shoulder, and the Dean went off to his study rubbing his hands, and chuckling to himself, like a kindly, innocent child, which indeed he was, despite all the learning which had made him famous.

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## Chapter Fourteen.

### Friends at Last!

There was a constant coming and going at The Deanery during the whole of that day, and the very atmosphere seemed full of excitement. Mrs Faucit, however, kept Mildred a prisoner in her own room, gave her an interesting book to read, and forbade the subject of the robbery to be mentioned in her hearing, with the result that by evening she was herself once more, chatting with the girls, and only lapsing into melancholy at the remembrance of poor, unhappy Cécile.

The next morning Mildred saw Lady Sarah for the first time since the eventful moment when she had started on her search for James’s bedroom.

The old lady was sitting in her favourite corner by the drawing-room window, wrapped in shawls, and supported by pillows, for at her advanced age such an experience as she had known was not easily outlived, and as Mildred paced the garden walks with her friends, she received a message to the effect that Lady Sarah wished to see her alone for a few minutes, as she had something particular to say.

“My thanks are due, Most kind and generous maiden, unto you!” quoted Lois, from a play which had been performed at school at the beginning of the Christmas holidays, and Mildred gave a little laugh of complacency.

The quotation sounded appropriately in her ears, for she had no doubt that she was summoned to hear grateful acknowledgment for the help which she had given on the night of the attempted robbery. As she walked across the lawn towards the house, she was rehearsing the scene to herself, after a habit of her own on occasions like the present. “My dear Mildred! How can I thank you sufficiently!” Lady Sarah, she imagined, cried enthusiastically.

“Oh, pray, don’t mention it! I have done nothing at all!”

She screwed her face into the very smile of polite protest with which she would give her answer, and was proceeding to invent an emphatic disclaimer from Lady Sarah, when she came face to face with the Benjamin of the household—little, mischievous Erroll, who was strolling about the garden in search of adventure.

He wore a holland blouse, and absurd little knickerbockers about six inches long, from beneath which his bare legs emerged brown and sturdy.

A scarlet cap was perched on the back of his head, and he swung his arms as he walked with the air of a Grenadier Guard, and a very fierce and warlike one at that. Mildred pinched his ear as she passed, as a mark of affectionate remembrance, whereupon Erroll lifted his funny little face to hers, and volunteered a piece of information.

“I telled Yady Saraw about ze pump!”

“The pump!” Mildred’s heart gave a leap of apprehension. She seized the child by the arm and held him firmly until he had answered her question. “What pump? What do you mean, Erroll?”

“Wat zo pumped ze water wif, on ze window!” said Erroll pleasantly.

He evidently had no idea that Mildred would be discomposed by the intelligence, and was a good deal astonished at the hasty manner in which she shook him off and resumed her walk to the house.

Here, indeed, was a changed position. She was going to be scolded, not thanked—called to account for misdeeds, not praised for valour. Mildred pressed her lips together, and her eyes shone with a gleam of anger.

The more exciting events of the last two days had thrown the picnic into the background, so that she had almost forgotten the unfortunate incident to which Erroll had referred. It had troubled her greatly at the time, but since then she had had an opportunity of “making up”, which should surely have condoned any previous offence. “Lady Sarah need not have said anything about it; even if she were told. She might have forgiven a little thing like that, when I have perhaps saved her life,” she told herself angrily. “I believe she is glad to have something to blame me for, so

that she may avoid saying anything nice or grateful!"

Mildred felt thoroughly cross and out of sorts, as was not altogether unnatural under the circumstances. When one has been treated as a heroine for a couple of days, it comes as an unpleasant shock to find one's self suddenly dragged down from the pedestal and compelled to appear in the character of a culprit. Mildred felt it very hard indeed, and the softened feeling with which she had thought of the old lady during the last forty-eight hours vanished at once, and gave place to the old bitter enmity.

Lady Sarah had seen the girl's encounter with Erroll, so that she was at no loss to understand the sudden change in her expression, as she drew near. They looked at one another in silence for several minutes—Lady Sarah with her brows drawn together, yet on the whole more anxious than angry; Mildred erect as a dart, her head thrown back in defiant fashion.

"Is this true, may I ask, what the child tells me—that you played the hose on my bedroom window the other morning, in order to make me believe it was raining?"

Lady Sarah sat upright on her chair, her hands clasped together on her lap. The morning light gave a livid hue to the worn features, the bones in her neck seemed more prominent than ever. "But it is not my fault if she is old," was Mildred's obstinate comment. "She can't blame me for that, I suppose?"

"Yes, it's quite true."

"It is true! You heard me say that I was afraid of my rheumatism, and tried to persuade me that it was raining so that I might stay at home. You knew I was anxious to go, and you deliberately set to work to prevent me. Nice behaviour, indeed! I wonder you have the audacity to look in my face and acknowledge it!"

"I never tell lies," said the girl proudly, and Lady Sarah interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"No; you only act them, I suppose. It never struck you that it was acting a lie to go out of your way to deceive an old woman and make her stay at home on false pretences, did it?"

Mildred started.

"No, it never did. I did not think of that. If I had, I would not have done it."

"And why did you do it? To prevent my going to the picnic, of course; but why were you so anxious about that? What harm would it have done if I had been there?"

There was an unwonted strain of anxiety in the sharp voice, and the answer came but slowly.

"Oh, I don't know! We had been looking forward to the picnic for the last week. We had done nothing but talk about it. Of course we didn't want to have it all spoiled."

"As it would have been by my presence?"

"Y-es."

Mildred did not exactly relish saying so many unpalatable things, but all the same there was a kind of satisfaction in being obliged to tell this disagreeable old woman what was thought of her. Disagreeable and ungrateful, too! Had she forgotten all that had happened on the night of the picnic that she could greet her deliverer without one word of thanks?

A wave of emotion passed over Lady Sarah's face as she heard that decisive answer. Her throat worked, her face was full of wistful appeal, as she looked at the unrelenting, girlish figure, but Mildred's eyes were cast down, and she saw nothing.

"In what way were you afraid I should spoil your pleasure?"

"Oh—in every way! You would have made us stay beside you all the time and forbidden us to run about; or—or sit on the outside of the coach, or—or speak to anyone—or do anything we liked. You said that we ought to come home by an early train. You wanted us to wear cloaks when we were boiling with heat. You would have corrected us before the others, as if we were little children. Oh!" cried Mildred impulsively, as all the fears of two days earlier came suddenly to remembrance, "it would have been miserable!"

Silence. Mildred shuffled uneasily from one foot to another, rolled her handkerchief into a ball, and felt supremely uncomfortable. She had been irritated into speaking with unbecoming warmth, but the words had no sooner passed her lips than conscience began to prick. She longed for Lady Sarah to say something sharper, more unreasonable than ever, so that she might feel that she was the injured person, and get rid of this horrible feeling of guilt. But Lady Sarah did not speak. Was she too angry to find words? Was she gathering her energies for an outburst of indignation? The silence grew oppressive. Mildred longed to be allowed to rejoin her companions, and raised her eyes with impatient defiance.

Mercy! What was this that she saw? This pitiful, huddled-up figure, these trembling hands and quivering features down which the salt, difficult tears of age were trickling? They could never, never belong to the self-possessed and fashionable lady of a moment before!

Mildred gave one gasp of horror, and threw herself on her knees beside the chair.

"Oh! what have I said? what have I said? Oh, the wicked, wicked, detestable creature that I am! Lady Sarah, Lady Sarah, don't cry! Oh, please don't cry, please don't cry! You will break my heart if you go on like this!"

Her voice trembled, she clasped her arms round the old lady's waist, and swayed with her from side to side, echoing sob for sob, while ever and anon broken utterances fell painfully on her ear.

"—Cumberer of the ground! Cumberer of the ground! Alone in the world.—No one to care! Oh, dear Lord, let me be done with it—let me die!"

"No! no! no!" cried Mildred, in a paroxysm of remorse. She folded the thin figure more closely in her arms, and laid her soft, warm cheek against the quivering face. "Don't talk like that—don't! I can't bear it. I can never be happy again as long as I live if you won't forgive me, and promise to be friends! I was sorry the moment after I played that trick upon you. It spoiled my pleasure at the picnic. If you had asked me gently I would have told you how sorry I was, but I have such a dreadful temper. I fly into a passion, and then I don't know what I say. Do please forgive me, and stop crying! There—there's my handkerchief; let me dry your eyes!"

Lady Sarah trembled.

"You are very good. I don't blame you, poor child. You are an honest lassie, and I've tried your temper many a time. I was young and bright, too, once on a day, but that's all past now. I am nothing but a fretful, selfish, old woman, a burden to everybody, without chick or child to care what becomes of me."

"Don't say that. I'll love you! I'd like to love you if you will let me. You see it has all been a mistake. I thought you were cold and cross, and didn't care, but if you are only sad and lonely, why, then, I *do* love you!" cried Mildred impetuously; "for I'm sure I should be fifty thousand times nastier myself if I were in your place."

Lady Sarah smiled through her tears.

"I don't want to be 'nasty'! I don't want to spoil your happiness, poor child!" she said pathetically; "but this crabbed spirit has grown and grown, until I seem powerless to overcome it. And you must think me ungrateful, too. I wanted to thank you for your help the other night. I don't forget it, child—I shall never forget it! I was longing to see you this morning. If you had been half an hour earlier, you would have had a different reception, but that child ran in and began telling his little stories. I wish he had kept quiet. I wish I had never listened."

"I don't! I am glad that you know, now that the scolding is over," said Mildred frankly. "I am not sure that I could have screwed up courage to tell you myself, but I feel much more comfortable now that you do know. I've never done anything else like that; I truly haven't."

Lady Sarah smiled, and laid her hand caressingly on the golden head.

"I believe you, my dear. I am quite sure you have not, if you say so. You are a bright, hopeful, young creature, Mildred. My heart goes out towards you. Will you help an old woman to get the better of her fretful temper?"

Mildred lifted her face, the grey eyes large and solemn.

"If you help me, too," she said. "Let us help each other!"

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## Chapter Fifteen.

### A Happy Ending.

The Dean and Mrs Faucit duly presented Mildred with a gold watch to match those already possessed by their own daughters. It had a monogram on the back, an inscription inside the cover, and was altogether the most delightful specimen of its kind that could be imagined.

Mildred developed an absorbing curiosity to know how time was passing during the next few days, which compelled her to pull out the watch every two or three minutes, while the intervals were agreeably spent in playing with the pretty little chain to which it was attached. She wrote enthusiastic letters to her mother and Miss Margaret, describing her new possession and giving a dramatic description of the events which had led to its presentation; but the answers which she received were distinctly disappointing, for Mrs Moore could only send a verbal message, while Mardie treated her news in aggravatingly lukewarm manner.

Mildred realised with chagrin that her thrilling description had failed to arouse anything like the interest which she expected. Even the congratulations which followed were wanting in fervour, as though the presentation of a watch and chain were an everyday occurrence.

"*And now, dear, I have something interesting to tell you,*" the letter went on, when the subject of Mildred's own adventures had been dismissed in a few cursory sentences; and as she read the words, the girl tossed her head with a gesture of impatience.

"Interesting indeed! What does she call *my* news?—A robbery,—a capture,—a quarrel,—a reconciliation,—a watch and chain! She has nothing half so interesting to tell me, I am sure." Mildred changed her mind, however, before she finished reading Miss Margaret's letter.

And now, dear, I have something interesting to tell you. You remember the story about my friend, the planter in Ceylon, whose crop of cinchona died down so disastrously? I told it to you the night when you

were so distressed about not being able to go home for the holidays. You said at the time that this disappointment was different to yours, because it had not affected my own personal happiness; but you were wrong, Mildred dear, for if that crop had been a success, instead of a failure, I should have been the planter's wife long ago, and you would not have had "Mardie" at Milvern House! Years have passed since then, but now things look brighter, though there is no prospect of a second fortune, and I am going to live in Ceylon, Mildred, in the very bungalow of which we spoke together.

I am afraid you will not find me at school when you return after the holidays, for we are going to be married very soon; but Mr Lytton will be in England for six months to come, and that wonderful person, his future wife, will, I feel sure, pay many visits to Milvern House, to see the dear girls whose affection has been a comfort to her during the days of her loneliness. Are you very much surprised, Mildred? You must write and tell me what you think of my great news, and tell Bertha and Lois to write too. By the way, Mr Lytton brought a friend to call upon me the other day, a Mr Muir, who is a neighbour in Ceylon. He told me that he had met you at a picnic the other day, and intrusted me with a message which I was to give the next time I wrote: "Give Miss Mildred my love, and tell her that I am quite of her opinion." What did he mean, dear? I am curious.

Mildred gave a loud shriek of excitement when she came to that thrilling word "wife", the effect of which was to bring Bertha and Lois flying to peer over her shoulder. Together the three girls read the letter, together they gasped, and groaned, and exclaimed, together they burst into a chorus of lamentation when the end was reached.

"School without Mardie!"

"Lessons without Mardie!"

"Milvern House without Mardie! Oh, oh, oh! how shall we bear it?"

"I hate Mr Lytton!" cried Mildred vindictively, then repenting; "at least, I don't exactly mean that. It is only natural that he should want Mardie if he can get her; but I call him selfish. What are *we* to do, I should like to know?"

"Perhaps he would think we were selfish to want to keep her to ourselves," said Bertha pensively. "I am glad that Mardie is going to be happy, but I can't imagine school without her. Who will welcome the new girls, and comfort them when they are homesick? Who will take us out on half-holidays, and read aloud in the evening? Who will nurse us when we are ill?"

"Who will have her room when she is gone? I can't think how she can find it in her heart to leave that sweet little room!" cried Lois, in her turn. "But she must be anxious to go, I suppose, or she would not have promised to marry him."

"I wouldn't like to live in a country where you met snakes when you went out for afternoon strolls; but I think Indian people are nice," declared Mildred. "That Mr Muir had such a nice, sunburnt face, and such kind, twinkling eyes! If Mardie's husband is like that, I'll forgive him for taking her away. But I'll work like a slave, so as to be able to leave school as soon as possible. 'Mrs Lytton!' Gracious! We shall have to give her a present. I wish the wedding were not quite so soon, for I have only two and twopence in the world. Perhaps we could join together."

"I think it would be a good thing if the whole school joined, and gave her something really handsome—a dressing-bag, for instance."

"Oh, not a dressing-bag. She would use that on the voyage, and perhaps not again for two or three years. We ought to choose something that she would need every day. A clock would be nice," and Mildred jingled her watch-chain with an air of proud possession.

"I think a ring would be better than either," said Lois; and the discussion went on with unabated energy for the next half-hour, when it was abandoned to allow the disputants to write letters of hearty, though somewhat lugubrious, congratulation, to the bride-elect.

Mildred had no sooner finished her letter than she ran upstairs to spend half an hour with Lady Sarah in her bedroom. The compact of friendship which had been made a few days earlier had been kept all the more faithfully on the girl's part because the old lady had been suffering from the effect of shock and excitement, and had been confined to bed for several days. Mary the housemaid was deputed to act as maid in the place of the unhappy Cécile, but half a dozen times a day Mildred would go into the room to rearrange the pillows, and enliven the invalid with her bright, sunshiny presence. Lady Sarah always welcomed her with a smile, and never allowed her to depart without the earnest "Come back soon!" which sounded sweetly in the girl's ear. She was growing really fond of the old lady, and adopted little airs of authority in the sick-room which amused and fascinated the onlookers.

On the present occasion she despatched Mary downstairs to tea, and seated herself on the end of the bed, with her hair falling in showers over her shoulders, and her hands clasped round her knees. A fortnight ago Lady Sarah would have exclaimed at the inelegance of the position, but to-day her gaze rested upon the girlish figure as if the sight were pleasant in her eyes. She herself looked thin and shaken, but the kindly expression transformed her face, and the soft, white hair was much more becoming than the elaborate wig which she was in the habit of wearing. Mildred felt very strongly on this point, and did not hesitate to put her thoughts into words.

"If you are going to be *my* old lady I shall insist upon burning that ugly, brown wig!" she said this afternoon. "I love old ladies with white hair, and yours is prettier than any imitation. When you get up I am going to arrange it for you over a cushion in front, and with a pretty piece of lace falling over the back. I don't think the brown hair suits you a bit, and it looks so frizzled up and artificial. You don't mind my saying so—do you?" she concluded in an artless manner which made Lady Sarah smile in spite of herself.

"No, my dear, no! Whatever please you. It is a long time since anyone took an interest in my appearance. But it will be awkward. People will make remarks—"

"What will that matter, when they will only say that you look twice as nice? Of course everyone knew quite well that it was a wig," said Mildred, with an unconscious cruelty at which Lady Sarah winced. When the latter spoke again, however, it was to make a request which showed that she cherished no resentment.

"I have been wondering, Mildred, if you would spend the remainder of your holidays with me in Scotland. The Faucits leave for Switzerland next week, Miss Chilton will be busy preparing for the wedding of which you have just told me, and your mother's house will be closed for three weeks to come. I have taken rooms in an hotel at Pitlochry, and I should like very much to have you with me. It is a lovely spot, and there will be other young people in the house. You would not be dependent upon me for society. Do you think you could make up your mind to come?"

"I should have to ask Mother first, but if she said yes, I could—quite easily," returned Mildred. She clasped her fingers more tightly together and sat pondering over this latest extraordinary development of affairs—that Lady Sarah should invite her, of all people in the world, to pay her a visit, and that she should be willing to accept such an invitation. If anyone had prophesied as much a fortnight before, how she would have scoffed and jeered, and what sheets of explanation it would take to convince the dear little mother that Lady Sarah was not the ogress which she had been represented, and that she might be trusted to treat her guest with kindness!

"What are you thinking of, Mildred?" asked Lady Sarah, watching the changes in the girl's expression with curious eyes, and Mildred answered with her usual frankness.

"I was thinking how strange it was that we should be such good friends, when we used to dislike each other so much! You were cross to me,—I was rude to you, and we were always disagreeing! I think I annoyed you the very first night I arrived. You seemed vexed because I was late."

"I never disliked you, child. If I seemed to do so, it was because I have grown into the unfortunate habit of fault-finding. On the contrary there is something about you which has always attracted me. I don't know what it is—something in your voice, your laugh, your movements, which brings back memories of my youth. What a long, long way off it seems!—like another life,—and of all that large family of boys and girls there is not one left alive but myself! I am a lonely old woman, Mildred!"

"But there is no need that you should be! There are so many people in the world who need a friend, and you are rich—you can do kind things every day in the year! I have often thought how nice it would be to be a dear old lady with curls, and a beautiful big house, and lots of money. It is one of my castles in the air. I would be a sort of fairy godmother to poor people; help struggling young geniuses, pretty girls who had to work for their living, and old women in dingy lodgings. If I had no people of my own, I would go outside to find them, for I couldn't live alone, with no one to love me, and nothing to think of but myself! I couldn't do it!"

Mildred looked at Lady Sarah with wistful eyes, as if demanding sympathy for the very thought. She did not know that older people than herself had long been struggling for courage to impress these views of life upon her companion, and was guiltless of pointing a moral. Lady Sarah listened, however, and pondered on her words without being in the least offended. She was never offended at anything that Mildred said or did in these latter days; she seemed to have opened her heart to the girl with an unreserved affection which made Mrs Faucit very hopeful of the future.

She said as much in the letter to Mrs Moore which accompanied Lady Sarah's invitation.

I hope very much that you will allow Mildred to accept Lady Sarah's invitation, *she wrote*, for I believe the friendship which has grown up between them will be of mutual benefit. Lady Sarah has an unfortunate manner, but I have always believed in her warmth of heart, and she has fallen deeply in love with your dear, bright girl. They were not at all good friends at first, as you will doubtless have heard, but circumstances have drawn them together, and I can see that each is already beginning to exercise a beneficial influence over the character of the other. Mildred's sunshiny influence is smoothing the wrinkles from the poor old lady's face, and the knowledge that one so old and frail relies upon her for comfort, will, I am sure, overcome the temptation to hastiness which she is ever bemoaning. I don't wonder at Lady Sarah's infatuation, for we are all in love with the dear child. She has been the life of our quiet house. I hope we may see much of her in the future.

Mrs Moore received this letter, and the invitation which accompanied it, one hot afternoon as she sat in the fever room with her patient. Robbie was an invalid no longer, except in name—he was up and clothed and in his right mind; able to amuse himself by painting frescoes on the wall, and to scrub his obstinate little heels with pumice stone, after the morning and evening baths. Mrs Moore read her letters through once, twice, and yet again; then she laid them down upon the table, took her handkerchief from her pocket, and very quietly and deliberately began to cry.

She was a merry little mother as a rule, in spite of her anxieties, and had played the mountebank for Robbie's benefit with such success during the last few weeks, that he was aghast at the sudden change of mood.

He gave a roar like a wounded bull, and rushing forward, burrowed his head on her knee.

"Don't ky! don't ky!" he cried, "I'll never do it again! never do it again!" for conscience pricked concerning a dozen mischievous freaks, and he was convinced that it was his own wickedness which had brought about this outburst of distress.

His mother seized him by the arm and stared into his face with eager eyes. She was the prettiest little mother in the world, and Mildred did well to be proud of her.



"Robbie!" she cried excitedly, "am I a good mother? Have I been kind to you? Do you love me with all your heart?"

Robbie pranced about in an agony of emotion.

"Boo—hoo—hoo! Yes, I does! Boo—hoo—"

"And supposing a rich old lady came one day—very, very rich, Robbie—with houses, and gardens, and carriages, and horses, and ponies—beautiful little, long-tailed ponies, and she said, 'Come and live with me, Robbie, and be my own little boy?' What would you say? Would you go away and leave poor Mother all alone?"

"No—ow—ow! Don't wants no old ladies! Kick a nasty old pony over the wall!"

The more his mother wept, the louder Robbie roared. They clung together sobbing and crying until the sound penetrated to the lower regions, and the maid-of-all-work crept up the uncarpeted stair and listened, agape with horror.

Then suddenly Mrs Moore shook Robbie off, bounded out of the room, and called to the servant to run down the road to summon Mrs Ross to come at once—at once, and to bring pencil and paper, so that she might write down the words of a letter to be dictated from an upper window.

It was easy to see from whom Mildred had inherited her impetuosity. Poor Mrs Ross was bewildered by the torrent of words which were hurled at her head the moment she arrived. She was obliged to write four separate letters before Mrs Moore was satisfied that she had said the right thing in the right way.

The letter seemed fated to cause excitement from beginning to end. When it arrived at The Deanery, Lady Sarah put up her eye-glasses to read it, only to drop them a moment later with a cry of astonishment. She gasped, and panted, and gasped, and panted again, while the other occupants of the room stared aghast, not knowing what to make of such behaviour.

"M-M-Mildred!" she cried, and when the girl advanced to her side, she clasped her in a passionate embrace. "Mildred, Mildred, do you know who you are? My own little niece—my grand-niece,—Mary's child! I knew there was something familiar about you—I felt it! I have said so over and over again, and now Mary writes,—poor Mary! You always spoke of me as 'Lady Sarah', and she never dreamt that it was I. She has been living in the depths of the country and has never heard of my husband's honours. She was unmarried when I saw her last—"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" cried Mildred shrilly, clasping her hands together in excitement, "It was you! You were the rich aunt! Oh, how dreadfully romantic! Then you are my aunt, too. 'Aunt Sarah!' Goodness me, who would ever have dreamt of such a thing! And Mother says,—what does Mother say?"

"She seems afraid, poor thing, that I shall try to take you from her, as I wished to separate her from her parents long ago; but be satisfied, Mildred, I have learned a lesson since those days. I shall not try to take you from your mother!"

"I am glad of that, because it would be such a waste of time," said Mildred promptly. "Besides, you must come and see Mother yourself, and get to know the whole family. You can never call yourself lonely again, Lady Sarah, for you will have a niece, and five grand-nieces, and a grand-nephew. The grand-nephew is more important than all the rest put together. Oh-h!" she gazed round the room with big, bewildered eyes, "I can't believe it. My aunt! Your niece! If someone doesn't pinch me this moment, I shall believe I am asleep and dreaming. Mrs Faucit,—Bertha,—Lois,—do you believe it? Do I look at all altered? Lady Sarah's niece! I—I suppose it doesn't make any difference in my name, does it? If I have come into a title, break it to me gently, please! I can't bear much more excitement!"

"Oh, Mildred!" cried the twins in chorus. Mrs Faucit laughed merrily, and Lady Sarah looked round with an air of triumph.

"Ah, my dear, you may take after your father in appearance, but you are your grandmother over again in disposition! My sister Edyth—the brightest, merriest girl! She was my friend and companion; no one knew what I suffered when she went away and left us. Your mother is like her, Mildred—small and dark. It was the resemblance which drew me to her, but she refused to leave home, and I went off to China and we lost sight of each other. I was too proud to inquire what had become of her when I came home, but I have often thought of her. Blood is thicker than water, and I have longed for some of my own kith and kin to be near me in my old age. She is poor, you say, Mildred? Well, well!" Lady Sarah nodded her head in a mysterious fashion, which seemed to argue a hundred delightful possibilities.

So it came to pass that Mildred went to Scotland with Lady Sarah, and when Robbie was out of quarantine, returned home in company with the old lady, who was almost as much excited at the meeting with Mrs Moore as the girl was herself. Aunt and niece had many consultations together, the result of which was that Mrs Moore and her children bade farewell to their cottage home, and went to live in a pretty house situated just outside the gates of Lady Sarah's country seat. Here they were near enough to be a comfort and cheer to the old lady during her last days, and not too near to become a burden, or to allow the children to disturb her rest.

Lady Sarah took a great interest in her grand-nephew, and in every one of the five grand-nieces, and treated them all with equal generosity, but Mildred was her darling and chosen companion.

The girl spent the greater part of every day up at the big house, and though many people shook their heads, and argued ill of such a friendship, it endured unbroken to the end. By this it is not meant to imply that their lives flow on evenly, without discord or misunderstanding. Quite the contrary. Neither aunt nor niece changed their disposition in a moment; Lady Sarah's fretfulness often proved very trying to Mildred's temper, just as the old lady in her turn was overpowered by the girl's impetuous ways. Old age and youth cannot live together without such trials as these, but they had one grand point in common which never failed to bring them together—they loved each other, and love is

the sweetest of peacemakers. Lady Sarah would remember her own youth, and check the hasty words on her lip. Mildred, fretting and fuming, would suddenly bethink herself how sad it must be to be always tired and ailing, and struggle hard for patience. A glance on one side, a word on the other, and the disagreement would be over, while each peacemaking taught a new lesson, and left more strength for the future.

Mrs Moore and her children had much cause to bless the day when Lady Sarah became their friend, but when at last death took her away from their side, none of the good things which she inherited could console Mildred for the loss of the dear, cross, old lady whom she had grown to love so truly.

The End.

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