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Salome



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SALOME

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SALOME.

[9]

CHAPTER I.

THE HOME AND THE CHILDREN.



MAPLESTONE COURT was a pretty, spacious, and comfortable English home. The house was built of old red brick, which took a deep, rich colour in the rays of the western sun as it shone upon the wide porch and the many windows. Before the house there was a wide expanse of emerald turf, skirted by stately trees; and this lawn was not cut up into flower-beds, but rolled and shaven close, so that the dark shadows of the trees lay upon it in unbroken masses morning and evening.

To the right of the house the ground sloped gently down to what was called by courtesy a river, though it was but a little rippling stream, which had taken many curves and windings, and just below Maplestone had made for itself a deep basin, called by the same courtesy a lake.

Lake or pond, mere or tarn, this was a delightful refuge in sultry noon-tide. Here the water-lilies

rocked themselves to sleep; here the plummy ferns hung over the crystal depths; and here the children of Maplestone Court brought their small craft of every shape and size to sail across from one side to the other of the lake, often to make shipwreck amongst the reeds and lilies, sometimes to sink in the clear water!

A rude wooden bridge crossed the stream just above the lake; and several seats, made of twisted boughs and ornamented with the large cones of the firs which shut in Maplestone at the back, were to be found here and there on the banks.

On one of these seats, on a hot August day, Salome was half-sitting, half-lying, looking dreamily down upon the water. Her wide straw hat was lying at her feet, a book with the leaves much crumpled was in the crown. One little foot hung down from the bench; the other was curled up under her in a fashion known and abhorred by all governesses and those who think the figure of a girl of fifteen is of greater importance than careless ease of position like Salome's at this moment.

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The rounded cheek, which was pillowed by the little hand as Salome's head rested against the rough arm of the seat, was not rosy. It was pale, and all the colour about her was concentrated in the mass of tawny hair which was hanging over her shoulders, and varied in its hue from every shade of reddish brown to streaks of lighter gold colour.

It was wonderful hair, people said; and that was, perhaps, all that any one ever did see at all out of the common in Salome.

Quiet and thoughtful, liking retirement better than society, she often escaped out of the school-room to this favourite place, and dreamed her day-dreams to her heart's content.

Salome was the elder of two sisters, and she had one brother older than herself and three younger. Sorrow or change had as yet never come near Maplestone. The days went on in that serene happiness of which we are none of us conscious till it is over. When we hear the rustle of the angels' wings, then we know they are leaving us for ever, and when with us we had not discerned their presence.

Salome roused herself at last, picked up her hat and book, and uncurling herself from her position, stood up and listened. "Carriage wheels in the drive," she said to herself. "I suppose it is nearly luncheon time. I hope no stupid people are coming; that's all. I hate—"

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Salome's meditations were broken off here; for a boy of thirteen or fourteen came clattering over the wooden bridge and took a flying leap down into the hollow, and exclaimed, "The bell will ring directly. Make haste, Sal; you are all in a tangle as usual. And won't Miss Barnes be angry? There is the book she has been hunting all over the place for; and the cover is in rags and tatters, and no mistake!"

Salome looked ruefully at the book, a French story by Madame Pressensé which has delighted many children in its day and generation.

"'L'Institutrice' does not belong to Miss Barnes," Salome said; "it is Ada's. Why should she be in such a fuss? and Ada won't mind."

"Well, come on," Reginald said; "and don't put out every one by being late."

"Who is come?" Salome asked, as the brother and sister walked towards the house together. "Who came in the carriage just now?"

"It was only father. Mr. Stone brought him back from Fairchester in his brougham."

"Father!" Salome exclaimed. "How very odd! And why did Mr. Stone drive him home?"

The sound of the bell stopped any reply from Reginald; and Salome, being obliged to go up to her room to give her hair a superficial combing, and her hands a hasty dip in water, entered the dining-room just as the whole party were assembled.

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Mrs. Wilton always lunched with the children at one o'clock, but to-day her place at the head of the table was taken by Miss Barnes.

"Where is mother?" was Salome's instant inquiry.

"You are very late, as usual, Salome," was Miss Barnes's rejoinder; it could not be called a reply.

"I asked where mother was. Do you know, Ada?"

Ada, a pretty, fair girl of fifteen, fresh as a rose, trim as a daisy, without an imperfection of any kind in her looks or in her dress, said, "Father wanted her, I believe;" while Salome, half satisfied, turned to her eldest brother Raymond.

"Is anything the matter, Ray?"

"I am sure I don't know," he answered carelessly. "There's something the matter with this soup—it's beastly."

"Raymond!" Ada exclaimed reprovingly, "pray, don't be so rude," as Raymond pushed away his plate, and, pulling another towards him, attacked some cutlets with tomatoes.

"The cooking is fifty times better at old Birch's," the young Etonian growled. "I can't think how mother can put up with that lazy Mrs. Porson." [14]

"I say," said Reginald, "don't grumble at your bread and butter because it is not just to your mind."

"Shut up, will you," said Raymond, "and don't be cheeky."

And now the two little boys of eight and nine began to chime in with eager inquiries as to whether Raymond would help them with their tableaux, which were to be got up for their double birthday on the 1st of August. For Carl and Hans were both born on the same day of the month, Hans always affirming that he came to keep Carl's first birthday.

"Tableaux at this time of year; what folly! I shall be gone off in Strangway's yacht by then, you little duffer."

"I'll help you," Reginald said. "We'll have the tableaux Black Prince, Joan of Arc, and Mother Hubbard, if mother will lend us the finery, and Sal will advise us what to do."

"Oh, mother says we may have the tableaux. She says Shakespeare acted out of doors. We want to have them in the house by the lake, as a surprise, and bring in the lake," exclaimed Carl. "If Thursday is a day like to-day, it will be jolly. And, Ada, you said you'd write the invitations, didn't you?—the Holmes, and the De Brettes, and the Carruthers, Ada." [15]

Ada, thus appealed to, smiled, and said, "We'll see."

"I have got some pink paper," Carl vociferated. "Nurse gave it to me. She bought it at her nephew's shop in Fairchester. It is just fit for invitations."

"Oh no; that would be fearfully vulgar!" said Ada. "Pink paper!"

Poor Carl was extinguished, and began to eat his rice-pudding in large mouthfuls.

All this time Miss Barnes had not spoken, and Salome watched her face anxiously. Yet she dared not question her, though she felt convinced Miss Barnes knew more than any of them about their mother's non-appearance and their father's unusual return from Fairchester in Mr. Stone's carriage. Mr. Stone was the doctor; and though Salome tried to persuade herself Mr. Stone's carriage had probably been at her father's office, and perhaps having a patient to see out in their direction, Mr. Wilton had accepted the offer of a drive homewards, and that Mr. Stone being a doctor had nothing to do with it, she was but half satisfied with her own self-deception.

The dining-room at Maplestone Court was like all the other rooms—a room suggestive of *home* and comfort. The three large windows, to-day thrown wide open, looked out on the lawn, and beyond to quiet meadows and copses skirted in the far distance by a range of hills, seen through the haze of the summer day blue and indistinct. Within, there were some fine pictures; and the wide dining-table was decorated with flowers—for of flowers there were plenty at Maplestone. If banished from the front of the house, they had their revenge in the dear old-fashioned kitchen-garden—a garden where beds for cutting were filled with every coloured geranium and verbena and calceolaria; a garden which seemed an enclosure of sweets and perfumes, where the wall-fruit hung in peerless beauty, and a large green-house, of the type of past days, was the shelter of a vine so luxuriant in its growth and so marvellous in its produce, that Maplestone grapes continually carried off the prize at the flower and fruit shows of the neighbourhood. [16]

The children gathered round that pretty table—which, in spite of Raymond's dissatisfaction, was always well supplied with all that could please the taste—were singularly ignorant of whence all their good things came. They had all been born at Maplestone. They took it and all its comforts as a matter of course. Till Raymond went to Eton they had none of them concerned themselves much about what others had or had not. Raymond, the eldest son, had been the most indulged, the least contradicted, and had an enormous idea of his own importance. [17]

He was very handsome, but by no means clever. He had no higher aim than to lounge through life with as little trouble to himself as possible; and now, at seventeen, when asked if he meant to turn his mind to any profession, he would say, "Oh, I may scrape through the militia, and get a commission; but I don't bother about it."

A naturally selfish disposition, he was altogether unconscious of it. He had spent a great deal of money at Eton; he had wasted a great deal of time. He cared nothing about Latin and Greek, still less about Euclid. If his clothes were well made, and he could get all Lord Clement Henshaw got, and the Marquis of Stonyshire's nephew, he was content. But as to a thought of his responsibility as his father's eldest son, or any idea beyond the present moment, he had nothing of the kind. Of late he had grown arrogant and self-asserting at home; and the holidays, when Reginald came rushing in with joyous gladness from Rugby, were by no means unmixed pleasures to the other children, by reason of Raymond's return from Eton. Reginald was Salome's especial friend. Ada, in her pretty completeness, stood somewhat alone. She was so "provokingly perfect," Reginald said. No one ever caught Ada out; and it was so dull. [18]

The little boys were under Miss Barnes's care; but Carl was to go to a preparatory school at Christmas. The very idea of such a separation set "Hans's water-works flowing," Reginald said; so the great event was only generally understood, and not talked about.

Just as Miss Barnes had risen from the table, saying, "Your grace, Hans," and just as little Hans

had lifted his voice in childish treble, with the accustomed form used by all his predecessors in the Wilton family, the door opened, and Mrs. Wilton came in.

Salome went to her impetuously. "Have you had no luncheon, mother? Let me ring for some hot soup."

Mrs. Wilton took the chair Miss Barnes vacated, and saying in a low voice to her, "Take the children away," she declined anything but a glass of wine and a biscuit, and scarcely seemed to notice the children's eager—

"We may have the tableaux, mother, mayn't we? and Ada may write the notes for our birthday party?"

"Yes, darlings, yes. Run away now."

The two little boys scampered off, and Ada, stooping over her mother, kissed her, and said,—

[19]

"You look so tired, mother!"

Raymond and Reginald were still lingering at the bottom of the table, when Raymond said,—

"I suppose I can take out Captain this afternoon? I want to ride over to St. John's."

"Your father—" Mrs. Wilton got no further; and Salome said,—

"Father does not like Captain to be ridden carelessly, Raymond. You had better take old Bess."

"*Thank you!*" was Raymond's retort; "I did not ask for your opinion, Miss Sal."

Then Raymond left the room, and Reginald, seeing his mother did not wish to be troubled with questions, followed him.

Ada with another kiss, as she leaned over the back of her mother's chair, also went away, and Salome and her mother were left to themselves.

Salome knew something was wrong—very wrong, but her lips refused to form the words she longed to utter. Mrs. Wilton, finding they were alone together, covered her face with her hand, and then in a broken whisper said,—

"Your father is in great trouble, Salome."

"Is he ill?" the girl asked quietly.

"Ill, and most miserable. He thinks he is ruined."

"I don't understand, mother. How is he ruined?"

"The great Norwegian firm with which he traded has failed; and as if that were not enough, rumours are floating to-day that the Central Bank is likely to stop payment to-morrow."

[20]

Salome's bewildered expression struck her mother as pathetic. "She is only a child," she was saying to herself; "she does not take it in."

Presently Salome said with a deep-drawn breath, "Has father all his money in the bank, then?"

"All his private fortune; and then, if he has to stop trading as a timber merchant, the loss will be—simply ruin, Salome."

"This house is ours, isn't it?" the girl asked.

"My dear child, ours no longer if it has to be sold to meet the debts—the liabilities, as they are called. But do not say a word to any one to-day. There is just this chance, the rumours about the Central Bank may be false. Your father's partners incline to the hope that it may prove so; but I have no hope, no hope. Oh, your father's face of misery is more than I can bear! At his age, to have everything taken from him!"

"Not everything, mother; he has got *you*."

"What am I? A poor weak woman, never strong, never fitted for much exertion. What will become of the children?"

"I will do my best, mother," Salome said. "I will do all I can."

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"*You*, Salome! My dear," said her mother sadly, "what could you do?"

"Take care of the boys; teach the little ones; save the expense of a governess; help you to do without so many servants," Salome said promptly.

"Ah, Salome, we shall want no servants, for we shall have no home. Maplestone must be sold, and all the dear old pictures;—but I must not go over this part of it. Mr. Stone happened to meet your father in Fairchester, and thought him looking so ill that he brought him home. He told me he was very anxious about him, and I was by no means to allow him to go back to Fairchester to-day. I heard him order the dog-cart round at three o'clock, and he ought not to go; yet how can I stop him?"

"May I go and see father?" Salome asked. "I will be very quiet, and not worry him."

"I hardly know. He said none of the children were to be told to-day—that I was to keep the trouble from you; that is why I dared not come in to luncheon. And the De Brettes and Fergusons dine here to-night. They ought to be put off; but he won't hear of it. Miss Barnes saw Mr. Stone leading your father across the hall. I was obliged to tell her about it; but she said she would keep it from the children."

"I am not a child now, mother," Salome said; "I am nearly sixteen. Somehow," and her voice faltered—"somehow I don't feel as if I should ever be a child any more if—If you come upstairs and lie down in your sitting-room, I will go and see father, and try to persuade him not to go to Fairchester. Now, mother." [22]

For the first time in her life Salome felt that she must think for others as well as for herself. It was a sudden awakening. Long years after, she recalled that last dreamy noon-tide by the little lake, and all her visions and illusions: the fairy web of youthful weaving, which some of us remember, was so delicious and so sweet. Now, when she had drawn down the venetian blinds and left her mother to rest, if rest were possible, she paused before she could summon courage to turn to the library and see the father she so dearly loved in his sore trouble.

CHAPTER II.

[23]

SORROW AND SIGHING.



O Salome's great relief, she remembered there were no school-room lessons that afternoon. Miss Barnes had to take Ada into Fairchester in the pony-carriage for a music lesson. Carl and Hans were full of their birthday party, and had possessed themselves of a heap of decayed finery, which they were sorting in their spacious old nursery. Raymond had taken Captain, and Salome saw him trotting quickly down the drive, from the staircase window when she passed on her way to the library. She saw Reginald, too, lingering about on the lawn, and at last stretch himself full length under a spreading cedar, with his cap tilted over his eyes, and Puck, a little white dog, lying near him. She wished she could only tell Reginald. It was better Ada should not know; but Reginald was so different. Reginald lying there so unconscious of coming trouble; Raymond riding off on the very horse which had been forbidden; the little pony-carriage wheeling away to Fairchester, Ada [24] whipping up the fat gray pony, and turning out on the road with a grand flourish; Carl and Hans singing over their wreaths of faded flowers, worn by their mother in young, happy days; nurse's voice in occasional remonstrance; and the loud singing of a canary,—all these sounds and sights told of life at Maplestone going on as it had done for so long, and only she—Salome—knew that all things were on the very brink of change. There, as she stood thus thinking, some words came to her soul in that strange, mysterious way which all of us, young and old, must have recognized sometimes as coming from some One higher and holier than ourselves—"With God is no variableness, neither shadow of turning;" and then, as if in answer to all her day-dreams, there came the memory of other words, left as a beacon pointing heavenward to all young hearts,—

"Be good, dear maid, and let who will be clever;
Do noble deeds, nor dream them all day long;
And so make life, death, and that vast for ever
One grand sweet song."

"I want to do what is right," she sighed. "I want to help them,—father, and all of them,—but oh, I must pray God to help me and make me patient!" Then, with a quiet, slow step she went to the library door and tapped gently. There was no answer. Then Salome opened the door and went in. [25]

Her father was sitting in his arm-chair, with his back turned towards her. Salome went up to him and touched his arm.

"Papa."

Mr. Wilton turned his face towards her at last, and said, almost roughly,—

"What do you want, Salome?"

"Mother has told me all, and I am come to tell you how I love you, and I will try to help you, if I can."

"My dear—my dear child," Mr. Wilton said, "no one can help me now; I am ruined! But your mother promised not to tell you. You might as well have had another night of peace,—just as well. I told her to keep it from the children."

"But, dear father, I am not like a child now. I am the eldest girl, and I ought to know what troubles you. Mother could not keep it from me; she was obliged to tell some one. I want to ask you to be so very kind as not to go into Fairchester again to-day, but stay quiet."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Wilton impatiently; "I must go. Why should I leave the sinking ship like this? I am very well. It is all Stone's humbug, frightening your poor mother out of her wits. Here, give me another glass of wine, and then ring for Curtis to come round with the dog-cart." [26]

Mr. Wilton suddenly rose from his chair, and before Salome could prevent it he had emptied the decanter into a tumbler, and was raising it to his lips when he dropped it with a crash upon the ground, his hand fell powerless at his side, and he sank back in the chair speechless and unconscious of any outward thing.

Instantly Salome's first thought was of her mother—to save her from the sudden shock which had blanched her own lips with terror, and for a moment left her as helpless as her poor father.

Then, instead of ringing the bell frantically, or calling out aloud, as so many girls would have done, she ran with the speed of lightning to the nursery and called her faithful friend there.

"Come to papa! quick, Stevens, quick!" Then as nurse threw down her work and obeyed her she flew to the garden, where Reginald, all unconscious of the impending sorrow, was lying under the cedar tree.

"Reginald, Reginald, get up! father is much worse. Send to Fairchester for Mr. Stone, or any doctor; *pray* make haste."

"Father! what is the matter with him?"

"Oh, I don't know! His face is an awful gray colour, and his mouth—O Reginald, don't ask me, only go and get some help; but don't let mother be frightened." [27]

Reginald did as she told him without farther question; and Salome returned to the library.

The servants were gathered there now—the old butler, Greenwood; Stevens, the nurse, who had seen Mr. Wilton bring home his bride; others of the large household standing near in awe-struck silence. They made way for the little figure that appeared at the door, and let Salome pass to Stevens, who was supporting her master's head, while Greenwood was loosing his collar.

"You can do no good, my dear Miss Salome; no good."

"What do you mean, Stevens? I have sent Reginald for Mr. Stone—" Here she stopped, for Greenwood broke out into convulsive crying.

"The dear master is struck for death, and no mortal power can help him now!"

That evening about seven o'clock, Salome, sitting by her mother's side in the hushed and darkened room where the master of Maplestone lay breathing heavily, quite unconscious of any outward thing, heard the sound of horses' feet. She rose quickly and went to the hall door. [28]

"It is Raymond. I had better tell him," she said.

On her way she met Ada, her pretty face washed with tears, like a rose in a heavy shower, who said,—

"Raymond has come back on one of Mr. St. John's horses, Salome. He has broken Captain's knees; just think of that!"

"Does he know?" Salome asked.

"I daresay they have told him in the stables. Is there any change in father?"

Salome shook her head. "Will you go and sit with mother while I find Raymond? Reginald is gone with the messages to the De Brettes and Fergusons."

"Oh, I am afraid to see father," Ada said, shuddering. "I dare not go. I wonder if Uncle Loftus will come; Miss Barnes says he is sure to start when he gets the telegram. Here comes Raymond."

Raymond came in with a would-be careless air, trying to whistle. Salome went up to him.

"Raymond, do you know what has happened?"

"My father is ill, you mean. What is the matter with him? I shall be spared a row about Captain. I have been and done for Captain, and for myself pretty nearly. What do you both look so scared for?"

"Come into the drawing-room and I will tell you, Raymond. O Raymond!" Salome said, "father is dying! Mr. Stone has telegraphed for Dr. Scott, but he has no hope." [29]

Raymond's lip quivered, and the real boy-nature asserted itself. "I wish I had not taken Captain," he said. "Where's mother?"

"In the library. He was seized with this fit while I was with him there. He could not bear the dreadful blow which has fallen on him."

"Blow! What do you mean?"

"I forgot," Salome said simply. "Father has lost all his money, and we shall have nothing."

"What nonsense! We shall have this house, and—"

"Oh no, Raymond! The house and everything in it will have to be sold. But oh! what is that—what is that to—losing father?" and Salome covered her face with her hands and wept bitterly.

"I say, Salome, don't take on like this," said Raymond in a strangely husky and unnatural voice. "There is some mistake, depend upon it. Things can't be as bad as that. Why, what am *I* to do, if I can't go back to Eton?"

Ah, there was the sting to the undisciplined, selfish nature,—*"What am I to do?"*

Salome turned away and went back to keep her sorrowful vigil by her mother's side.

The next week was like a terrible dream to Salome. The dreaded news of the stoppage of the Central Bank came, as had been expected; but Mr. Wilton died unknowing that his worst fears had been realized, and that all was lost. He was laid to rest in the pretty churchyard of Maplestone just one week after the blow had fallen, and his widow and children were left desolate. [30]

Uncle Loftus had arrived, as Miss Barnes had expected. He had not remained all through the sad week,—while the sunshine reigned without, and darkness and dreariness within Maplestone Court,—but he returned for the funeral; and the same evening he sat in consultation with Mr. Calvert, the lawyer, and Mr. De Brette, with the partners of the great timber concern which had collapsed in the general and widespread pressure of the time. Mr. Wilton's case was rendered far worse by the loss of a large private income derived from shares in the Central Bank. There was literally nothing left to his children but his heavy liabilities and his wife's small settlement.

"Under three hundred a year," Dr. Loftus Wilton said; "and with all their previous habits and way of life, this will be little enough. My sister-in-law is not a strong woman, and has had her own way, poor thing—I mean she has been blessed with a very indulgent husband."

"I suppose the eldest boy can earn his living," Mr. De Brette said; "he is over seventeen." [31]

"He ought to do so. We must get him into an office. Perhaps, when the concern is wound up, Mr. Ferguson may find him a berth when a fresh start is made."

"A fresh start!" exclaimed Mr. Ferguson; "that will never be, as far as I am concerned. I should think a clerkship in a bank would be better."

"I think you ought to see Raymond," Dr. Loftus Wilton said; "he is his father's representative, and everything should be laid before him. Then there is the eldest girl, close on sixteen; a little creature, but full of nerve and sense. Shall we call them?"

The gentlemen seemed doubtful; and Mr. De Brette said,—

"Poor things! I think we had better leave it to you to tell them what must happen. The house will realize a good deal," he added, looking round; "fine pictures, and everything in good order. The cellar, too, must be valuable—poor Wilton's wine was always of the choicest."

"Yes, poor fellow. My brother lived up to the mark, perhaps a little too much so; but who was to foresee such a calamity as this?"

After a little more discussion the party broke up,—the lawyer gathering together the papers and Mr. Wilton's will with a half sigh, as he said,—

"This is so much waste paper now. It is a melancholy story, and there are hundreds like it. Nothing but losses all round." [32]

Dr. Loftus Wilton strolled out into the grounds when he was left alone. He would put off talking to the children till the next day, he thought, and there was no immediate necessity to do so. He was sorry for them; but he had a large family, and a hard fight to provide for them out of a professional income as a doctor in a fashionable watering-place, where much was required in the way of appearance, and people were valued very much by what they wore, and very little by what they were. The summer was always a flat time at Roxburgh, and hence Dr. Loftus Wilton could better afford the time away from his practice. "There are good schools at Roxburgh for the small boys, and the two girls could get advantages," he thought; "but then Anna will not trouble herself about poor Arthur's family. In fact, she would not care to have them there. Still, I must do my duty. She and Emily never did hit it off. Anna thought she patronized her; and now it would be the other way, poor things." And then Dr. Wilton lighted another cigar and paced up and down the garden, till at last he found himself on the wooden bridge, and in the stillness of the summer evening heard voices. He went on, and came upon the lake, on the bank of which three black figures were sitting—Salome and her two elder brothers. The opportunity was too good to be lost, and knocking the ashes off his cigar end, Dr. Wilton descended, saying,— [33]

"The very people I wanted to see.—Here, Reginald, my boy, stop—Raymond, I mean."

But Raymond, at the sight of his uncle, had suddenly left his seat, and, with his hands in his pockets, had disappeared in the tangled shrubbery which led away from the lake on the other side.

Reginald, however, stopped when his uncle called, and Salome, rising, said,—

"Did you want us, Uncle Loftus?" The pale, tear-stained face and little slight figure, in its black, sombre dress, touched Dr. Wilton.

"Yes, my dear; I came to talk with you and your eldest brother, as—well, as reasonable people. Sit down, Salome," and he drew her towards him on the bench.



"“Sit down, Salome,” and Dr. Wilson drew her toward him on the bench.”

"You know, my dear," he began, "you know you will have to leave Maplestone at once,—the sooner for all of you the better, I think,—for the place is in the possession of your poor father's creditors. Now, my dear, listen to me."

"I am listening, Uncle Loftus," Salome said.

"I cannot do much for you, for I have a large family and many expenses; but I have been thinking Roxburgh would be a good place for you all to live in. The small boys could go to school, and—" [34]

"I mean to teach Carl and Hans, Uncle Loftus. There are Raymond and Reginald. Reginald is not fourteen."

"Oh, well, Reginald must have a year or two more, I suppose. But Raymond is well over sixteen; he must work for his living."

"And there is Ada, Uncle Loftus,—she must go on with her lessons."

"My dear, I am afraid *must* is a word we shall have to leave alone now. It is what you can afford out of your poor mother's income, not what you *must* have. Now I want you to ask her what she thinks of my plan. If she approves it, I will look for a small furnished lodging, somewhere in Roxburgh, and I will speak to your Aunt Anna—only you must get your mother's mind about it first. I shall see her to-morrow before I leave, and you can prepare her for my proposition. You must take heart, my dear. Things may brighten."

"Nothing can bring father back," said Salome passionately. "I could bear anything if only I had him. To have worked so hard for us, and then to die ruined and broken-hearted!"

Dr. Wilton had nothing to say except, "My dear, don't fret—pray don't. From what I have observed as a medical man, I think your poor father's life would not have been a long one at the best. He had a slight attack, you know, two years ago, when I advised him to go abroad for a few weeks for entire rest. And this fearful blow was too much for him—brought on the last attack of paralysis, which proved fatal. Your brothers ought not to have gone off in that way." [35]

"I am here, Uncle Loftus," Reginald said. "I have heard every word; I am ready to do anything to help my mother," he continued, drawing himself upright from the long grass where he had been lying full length.

"That's a brave little man," Dr. Wilton said. "I wish your brother may show the same good feeling." And then he relighted his cigar, and went over the bridge again.

"How unfeeling he is!" were Reginald's first words. "Oh, dear Sal, *don't!*" for Salome was sobbing bitterly. "Don't, Sal; and, for any sake, don't let us go to Roxburgh to be patronized by that set of heartless people. Let's stick together, and go and live near a big school, where I can go as a day boy. Not at Rugby though; I shouldn't like that. The fellows in Crawford's house might look down

on me as a day boy. It is hard to have to leave Rugby; but I don't mean to give up because I have to do my work somewhere else. One's work doesn't alter—that's one comfort; and I'll do my best. And I have got *you*, Sal; that's more than most fellows can say, for sisters like you don't grow like blackberries in the hedge."

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"O Reg! I am sure I have not been of much use to you, only I think I understand you. And, Reg"—this was said very earnestly—"you must tell me always when I am untidy, and wake me up when I am in a dream, and remind me to put my books away, and not leave everything in a higgledy-piggledy fashion."

"Oh, bother it! clever girls like you, who are always thinking and making up stories and verses, often are all of a heap."

"But that does not make it right, Reg; and I am not a bit clever, really. Think of Ada—how beautifully she works and plays and draws! and I don't do one of those things. Sometimes I think I might make a very little money by writing a story. You know I have written heaps, and torn them up, but now I shall keep the next and read it to you. I have got it all straight in my head, not a hitch anywhere. Reg, isn't it strange I can make all things in my stories go so pit-pat and right, and yet I never can keep my goods straight? Why—would you believe it?—I've already lost one of my new black kid gloves with four buttons. I can't find it *anywhere*. It just shows what I shall have to do to *make* myself orderly."

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"Ah!" said Reginald, "I see; if I were you, Sal, I would have some of my hair cut off."

"I have turned it up," Salome said; "I thought I had better try to do it myself to-day."

"Yes; but there is a great pin sticking out, and a long tail hanging down, and"—Reginald hesitated—"it makes you *look* as if you weren't quite trim. Trim isn't prim, you know, Sal."

"No; that's right, Reginald. Tell me just what you think, won't you, and I will tell you. I suppose," she went on, "such a sorrow as ours makes us think more of God. We are forced to think of Him; but, O Reg! I have been thinking of Him before this trouble—His love and care for every tiny creature, and giving us so many beautiful things. I feel as if no loss of money could take *them* away—the sky, the sunshine, the flowers—all signs of God's love. And then even *this* comes from Him; and I know He is love, and so I try to bear it."

"You are awfully good, Salome," Reginald said in a husky voice. "You know that talk we had at Easter. I have done what you said ever since, you know. Not that I always or ever get much good from it; but I always read the verses you said you would, and try to say a real prayer in chapel. The dear old chapel," Reginald said; "fancy if I never see it again!"

The brother and sister sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Salome said, "I must go to mother now, and tell her what Uncle Loftus wishes, and try to find Raymond. Poor Ray! it is worse for him than for any of us somehow. Ray was made to be rich."

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"He'll have to get a lot of nonsense knocked out of him, I expect," Reginald said, as he and Salome parted—Reginald turning off to the stables to see poor Captain, who had been brought back comparatively worthless. And Salome, going to her mother's room, met Raymond on the stairs. To her surprise he said,—

"Come here, Sal; I want to speak with you."

They went into the library together, now so full of memories to Salome that she could hardly restrain her tears; but she was always saying to herself, "I must keep up for mother's sake, and not be weak and useless."

"I say, Salome, don't you be taken in by Uncle Loftus; he is going to ride over us, and I won't stand it. I shall not go to Roxburgh, and so I shall tell him. I must try and get into—well, into the militia, and—"

"Raymond, you cannot do it. There is only just enough money to keep mother and all of us. You don't seem to take it in, Ray. Dear Ray! I am dreadfully sorry for you, for you will feel it most; but you would do anything for mother, and if you went into a bank or an office you might soon get rich and—"

[39]

"Rich! whoever heard such nonsense? I shall go and see Mr. Calvert the first thing to-morrow, and tell him how Uncle Loftus tries to put us down."

Salome was really astonished at her brother's unreasonableness and absolute childishness; and Ada coming in to say mother wanted Salome directly, she left her with Raymond, despairing of making any impression upon him.

CHAPTER III.

[40]

EDINBURGH CRESCENT.



R. WILTON was too busy all the day after his return to Roxburgh to think much about



his nieces and nephews at Maplestone. The incessant calls on a medical man in the full swing of practice in a place like Roxburgh are urgent and cannot be put aside. He came in to dinner at half-past seven, and the scene of his home comfort and his elder children seated round him brought back to him forcibly the condition of his brother's widow and his family.

When the servant had left the room, Dr. Wilton said,—

"I have advised these poor things to come here for the winter anyhow, Anna. Can you look for lodgings for them to-morrow? I think there may be some to be had cheap down by St. Luke's Church."

"Come here, Loftus! You surely are not going to bring Emily and the children here, the most expensive place to decide upon."

[41]

"Well, I don't know what else to advise. You see we might show them some attention, and help them on a little. The boys could go to the college, and the girls get advantages which will fit them for teaching. Poor things! it makes my heart ache when I think of them, I can tell you."

"Papa!" exclaimed Louise Wilton, "I am sure we don't want them here. I never could get on with Salome and Ada. I am sure I hated being at Maplestone that summer; and Aunt Emily was so grand and stuck-up."

"Nonsense, Louise!" said her father sharply. "Grand and stuck-up indeed! Poor thing! she will only just be able to pull through with all those children. Hans and Carl are quite little things."

"Well, I must say," said Mrs. Loftus Wilton, "I do think it is a mistake to bring them all here; and I don't believe for an instant you will get lodgings for them at a low price."

"I am not going to try," said Dr. Wilton. "I leave that to you; and to-morrow morning you had better take the carriage and drive about till you find some at thirty shillings or two pounds a week. Four bed-rooms and two sitting-rooms will do."

Mrs. Wilton leaned back in her chair and said, "I shall send Betha; she is a far better judge than I am of lodgings. But I feel sure you will be disappointed. It will be utterly impossible to get lodgings in Roxburgh for two pounds a week to accommodate a family like poor Emily's."

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"I should have thought," said Dr. Wilton, "you might have troubled yourself to help these poor people. It is not unlikely that you may find yourself in the same position one day; and then I don't know how you will manage. My poor brother had far less reason than I have to look forward to leaving his wife and children unprovided for."

With these words Dr. Wilton left the dining-room; and Louise said,—

"What shall we do with all the Maplestone people, mother? it will be so awkward to have them in lodgings here. Just the last place for people to come to who are poor."

"Your father seems to be of a different opinion, my dear Louise, and we must abide by his decision."

"Really," exclaimed Kate, the second sister, "Roxburgh does not belong to us. I suppose our cousins may come here if they like."

"You have not practised to-day, Kate," Mrs. Wilton said sharply. "Go into the school-room at once."

Dr. Wilton had a large family, of whom Louise and Kate were the eldest girls. Then came three boys, who were at the college; and then three more little girls. A daily governess had educated Louise and Kate, who at seventeen and eighteen were supposed to have finished with the school-room except for music and a little German. The trio of little girls—Edith, Maude, and Hilda—were under Miss Browne, as their sisters had been. And in the nursery there was a little delicate, fragile boy of four years old, who was the especial care of the kind aunt of Mrs. Wilton, who lived in her house as a poor relation, and performed an unlimited number of services small and great for the whole family. Her presence in the doctor's household obviated the necessity of an experienced nurse, an experienced cook, or an experienced housemaid. A staff of young girls under Aunt Betha's management got through the onerous duties of the doctor's household, and thus Mrs. Wilton practised economy by her help.

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Like many people who love a showy outside of things and sacrifice much to attain their object, Mrs. Wilton was very mean in small matters. An extra quarter a pound of butter used in the house, or a shilling expended on little Guy over and above the sum she thought right for his beef tea and other nourishment, caused her real concern. She would fly off to Aunt Betha to inquire into the matter, and would inveigh upon her want of management with some asperity. But she did not grudge anything in her drawing-room which kept it up with the fashion of the day, and encouraged her eldest girl to dress, as she did herself, with excellent taste and prettiness.

[44]

Mrs. Wilton went up to the nursery after dinner, where Aunt Betha was sitting by little Guy. He had been very feverish and ailing all day, and his father had paid him several visits. Aunt Betha raised her head as Mrs. Wilton rustled in.

"He has just gone off to sleep," she whispered.

His tall graceful mother went up to the little bed where Guy lay.

"Loftus does not think there is much amiss," she said. "Poor little man!" Then she sat down by the fire and said, "I want you, auntie, to go out lodging-hunting to-morrow for me. It is for Emily Wilton and her children. They are almost penniless, and it is necessary that they should leave Maplestone at once, for the creditors are in possession of the place. Shall I wake him?" Mrs. Wilton asked, as Aunt Betha turned her head towards Guy's bed.

"No, I think not; he is really sound now. But, oh, I am so sorry for those poor children; I am indeed."

"It is a pitiable case, and I don't see myself the wisdom of bringing them to Roxburgh. However, as Loftus wishes it to be done, I must look for the lodgings, or get you to look for them. I think down by St. Luke's Church is the most likely locality, or behind Connaught Crescent. They want four bed-rooms and two sitting-rooms for two pounds a week." [45]

"I fear we shall not succeed at that price; but I will go directly after breakfast to-morrow,—if Susan can be trusted here. Guy must be kept quiet till after his luncheon, and the children are so apt to rush in."

"*Poor* little man!" the mother repeated. "He has but small enjoyment in his life; but we shall see him a strong man yet. Oh, those boys!" And Mrs. Wilton hastily left the nursery as sounds of boisterous mirth ascended from the boys' study, a small room on the ground floor where they got through their evening preparations. Three vociferous young voices were raised at their highest pitch, while Edith's shrill treble was heard.

Down went Mrs. Wilton, and at the sound of her footstep there was a lull.

"Edith, have I not forbidden you to interrupt your brothers at their work? Go up to bed immediately."

"Mamma," sobbed Edith,—*"mamma, it is all Ralph's fault. He says—he says that Uncle Arthur's children are all paupers, and that if papa—if—"*

"She is such a baby," Ralph exclaimed; "she says pauper is a bad word." [46]

"Yes," laughed Cyril, "the silly baby. I believe she thinks *pauper* is swearing."

"No, she does not," said Digby, the eldest of the three brothers. "No, poor little thing. It is a shame to tease her as you have done. Come on upstairs, Edith. I will take you," and Digby took his little sister by the hand and was leading her away when his mother interposed.

"Don't encourage her in naughtiness, Digby. She is very disobedient to come here at all.—Now, Edith."

Poor Edith obeyed at once, sobbing out, "I only said I was glad we were not so poor as our cousins; and they all laughed at me—at least Ralph and Cyril did—and said if papa died—"

"That will do, Edith. You are *not* to go down to disturb your brothers again. The next time I find you in this room of an evening, I shall punish you severely. Run away to bed. Aunt Betha ought to have called you by this time; and what can Sarah be thinking of?"

Then Mrs. Wilton kissed her little girl, and returned to the drawing-room, where Louise was reading by the bright gaslight.

"You have four burners lighted, Louise. It is quite unnecessary," and Mrs. Wilton's height made it easy for her to turn down two of the burners in the glass chandelier. [47]

"What a noise the boys have been making downstairs!" Louise said. "I am sure I hope we shall not have them here all the holidays. Are we not going to Torquay or Ilfracombe?"

"Decidedly not *en masse*," Mrs. Wilton said. "Lodgings by the sea are so fearfully expensive."

"Well," said Louise, "I think it is very dull staying in Roxburgh all the summer, and the boys are so tiresome. If we had only a proper tennis-court; playing in the square is so disagreeable."

"You are very discontented, Louise," said her mother. "Pray, do not grumble any more."

Mrs. Wilton sat down to write a letter, and no more was said till Kate came in with Digby. They were great friends, and Digby was the generally acknowledged good-temper of the family. I am afraid it was too much the motto of each of the doctor's children, "Every one for himself." There could not be said to be one really unselfish person of that household. But Digby and Kate had more thought for others than the rest of the brothers and sisters, and were naturally better tempered and contented.

"Are you going to look for lodgings for Aunt Emily, mother?" Digby asked.

Mrs. Wilton looked up from her writing as if the idea were a new one to her. [48]

"No, my dear, I shall not have time to do so. I am engaged to take Louise and Kate to a tennis-party at Cawfield to-morrow."

"Digby, I wish you would not sit on that sofa. Look what you have done to the cover."

Digby changed his seat from the sofa to a straw chair, one of those half-circular ones with cushions which creak at every movement.

"O Digby, do pray be quiet," said Louise irritably. "It does fidget me to hear that noise."

"You will be an old maid to a certainty, Louise," said her brother, "if you are so cantankerous,—another Aunt Betha, only not half as good.—Come on, Kate; let us have a game of backgammon."

"Not in here!" exclaimed Louise. "I hate the rattling of the dice. Pray go into the back drawing-room."

"Yes, let us go there," said Kate, "in peace."

"Peace! There is none in this house," said Digby as he followed Kate, who jumped up on a chair to light the gas, and came down with a thud on the floor, when she had achieved her object, which shook the glass-drops of both chandeliers ominously.

"I say, Kate, what a clumsy elephant you are. You'll bring down the chandelier and a torrent of abuse from a certain person at the same time."

"Where are Ralph and Cyril?" Kate asked.

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"Downstairs. We have all been 'preparing a lesson,' doing a holiday task. Such humbug, as if fellows of our age ought not to dine late."

"Well, the Barrington boys always have school-room tea."

"They are younger. Ned isn't fifteen, and I am sixteen."

"No, not quite; not till next week," Kate said. "You are younger than Raymond. Are you not sorry for them at Maplestone?"

"Awfully," said Digby; "and I think every one so unfeeling. You girls ought to be in mourning."

"Mamma said it would be too expensive," said Kate; "but then she never expected they would all come here and see us. I believe she is going to get up something if they do come; but they may not get lodgings. Isn't it odd, Digby, to think of our visit to Maplestone a year and a half ago, when we felt them so much better off than we were, and envied the house and the gardens, and the ponies and the carriages? And Raymond talked so much of his swell Eton friends; and Reginald was at Rugby; and you grumbled because you could not go to school, but had to be a day boy at the college here."

"Yes, I remember," said Digby. "And how pretty Ada looked when she went to church on Sunday. And that quiet one, they say, is clever, with the queer name."

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"Salome! ah, yes," said Kate. "She was odd—so dreamy, and unlike other girls. Dear me, it is very sad for them all. I wish they were not coming here all the same, for I know they will be disappointed; and Roxburgh is not a place to be poor in. I am sick of all the talking about who this person is, and where they come from, and what they wear; and that 'residents' can't know 'lodgers' for fear of getting mixed up with what is not quite the thing. I do hate it," said Kate vehemently; "and yet what is one to do?"

"Play backgammon now," said Digby; "and go to bed and forget it. With slow holidays like these, one had better lie there half the day."

"*Pray* don't be late to-morrow, Digby; it does make such a fuss. Now then—sixes as a start. What luck for me!"

So the cousins in Edinburgh Terrace talked of the cousins at Maplestone. So small a part of the lives of others do griefs and sorrows make. That evening, while Digby and Kate were so lightly discussing the coming of Ada and Raymond, of Aunt Emily and Reginald, Salome was standing in the fading light by her father's grave in the quiet churchyard of Maplestone, with some freshly-gathered flowers in her hand, and crying as if her heart would break!

CHAPTER IV.

[51]

LOOKING FOR LODGINGS.



AUNT BETHA was not the person to do anything by halves. She had promised to set forth early the next day to "hunt for lodgings," and she did not shrink from her task. She was up earlier than usual, that everything might be in order and her daily routine gone through in good time. First there was Guy to be washed and dressed; and his breakfast, with his two little sisters, Maude and Hilda,—Edith breakfasting in the dining-room with her elders. Then came the visit to the kitchen, and Mrs. Wilton's orders and counter-orders to convey to the young servant who cooked under Aunt Betha's supervision. There were the daily accounts to balance, and the daily arrangements to make; and last, not least, the daily burden of others to be borne. How nobly and uncomplainingly Aunt Betha bore this burden I have no words to tell you. She had gone through deep trials in her young days,

and had been the useful sister to Mrs. Wilton's mother. Then when that sister died, and dying [52] said, "You will have a home with Anna; don't give her up, she will want help," Aunt Betha transferred her faithful service from the mother to the daughter. She was too poor to live without earning her own living, and she chose to do this by the position in Dr. Wilton's house in which we find her.

Dear Aunt Betha! She was plain, and short, and very old-fashioned in her dress. "I hear too much about dress in this house," she would say, "to care much about my own." And black silk for Sundays, and a black merino or alpaca for week-days, made short and full, was her unvarying costume. Aunt Betha was scrupulously neat and clean, and her caps, tied with mauve ribbon under her chin, were always fresh and bright. So were the large collar and cuffs which finished her "afternoon dress;" though when she was busy about the house in the morning she dispensed with the cuffs, and wore a large apron and holland sleeves over her gown.

Mrs. Wilton had that dislike to trouble which can hardly be called indolence; for she was active in her habits, and could go through a good deal of fatigue without complaining. She would walk with Louise to a house at some distance, if the carriage was not available, rather than miss an afternoon party. She would give herself any amount of trouble about one of her husband's [53] patients who she thought belonged to a good family. She would plan and contrive for Louise and Kate's dress and amusement; and her own appearance was singularly youthful and her dress faultless; and all this was not effected without much pain and trouble. But all the daily routine of household duties which did not bring any especial honour with them she disliked. Drudgery could be as well done by Aunt Betha as by her. Why should she be a drudge? "Aunt Betha was made to be useful, and she enjoys it. Dear old woman! We give her a comfortable home, and she is happy. Nothing could fit in better."

"I am not to exceed two pounds a week, Anna?" Aunt Betha asked, as she put her head into the dining-room, where Mrs. Wilton and Louise were lingering over breakfast and complaining that Digby was so late.

"Oh, about the lodgings!" exclaimed Mrs. Wilton. "Are you going now, dear?" (Mrs. Wilton often called Aunt Betha "dear.") "I will go up to Guy, then."

"Susan is with him. He is better this morning. Good-bye,—I have no time to lose."

"Very well. Take a cab if you are very tired. Certainly not more than two pounds a week for the lodgings; but less will be better." [54]

Aunt Betha closed the door, and was soon on her way, her quick, light footsteps growing faint and fainter as she went along the smooth pavement of Edinburgh Crescent. She had a message at the green-grocer's and an order at the butcher's to leave as she passed the shops which supplied the wants of Roxburgh; and then she turned away from what might be called the West End of Roxburgh to the neighbourhood of St. Luke's Church. Here there was a substratum of small villas and long, narrow streets, which were a long way from the crescents and terraces of the gay town to which so many people resorted for health and pleasure. The college at Roxburgh stood a little apart from crescents and small streets, and a large number of well-built houses clustered around it, where the families of boys who attended the college mostly lived. In days gone by there had been a mineral spa at Roxburgh, which had proved the starting-point of the large fashionable watering-place of these later times. But "the spa" had declined in popularity, and the old pump-room was in a forlorn state of decay and desolation. It had given Roxburgh its fame; and now, being out of repute, was cast aside and renounced.

The part of the town towards which Aunt Betha directed her efforts lay below the deserted spa, and was nearer the large, smoky town of Harstone, which was scarcely two miles from Roxburgh, where a busy life of trade and commerce went on in the valley, apart from the life of pleasure on the hill above. A cloud of smoke lay in the valley above Harstone, and the river fogs crept up on this side of Roxburgh, laden with the smut and breath of the chimneys, in late autumn and winter; but on this bright August morning, the towers and spires of the Harstone churches looked picturesque in the soft, gray mist which lay over them and the tall masts of the ships in the docks. [55]

Aunt Betha did not, however, turn her eyes to the valley. She was too much intent on scanning the rows of small houses with "Apartments," "Furnished Apartments," printed on boards in the windows.

"Number 3 Lavender Place. That is a nice bow window, and white curtains. I'll try there." Aunt Betha rang the bell, and did not fail to notice "that you might see your face in the brass knob of the handle." A very neat woman came to the door, and in answer to her inquiries said—

"Yes, I have apartments to let,—a drawing-room and four bed-rooms."

Aunt Betha felt quite delighted at what seemed likely to be the speedy end of her labours. Everything was so neat. Drawing-room back and front. Could anything be better? Then came the question of terms. [56]

"Two guineas a week."

"Would you, Mrs.—" Aunt Betha paused.

"Parsons—my name is Parsons," said the landlady.

"Could you, Mrs. Parsons, say less if the rooms were taken for some time?"

"Perhaps I might, ma'am. I *might* say two pounds."

"Very well. I don't think I shall do better. I will close at once, and send you word as to the day the family will arrive."

"Pray, ma'am," inquired Mrs. Parsons, "how many are there in the family?"

"A widow lady, and, let me see, a servant,—poor thing, she must keep one servant; she has been used to more than you can count on your fingers,—and six children."

"I never take children, ma'am, *never*," said Mrs. Parsons.

"Oh dear, that is unfortunate; but these are not young children. The little boys are twins, and are —"

"*Boys!* that quite decides me, ma'am. I don't like other folk's servants about my place; but I *might* have got over that, had the children been girls. But boys—"

[57]

"Then I must wish you good-morning," said Aunt Betha. "Can you tell me of any house where children would not be objected to? *I* live in a house full of children myself, and I find them, as a rule, a deal pleasanter than grown-up people. But of course you must please yourself."

"I look at my furniture, ma'am, and my peace and comfort. I look to the ruin of carpets and chairs, and—"

But Aunt Betha stayed to hear no more, and trotted off on her arduous errand.

In and out of houses went poor Aunt Betha, with alternate hopes and fears. Some were dirty and slovenly; the landladies of these called the children "little dears," and said "they doted on children." Some rooms were too dear; some too small; and as the sharp-sounding clock of St. Luke's struck twelve, Aunt Betha felt tired out and ready to give up. She was standing hopelessly at the corner of Lavender Place, when a pleasant-looking woman, crossing the road, exclaimed with a smile, "Why, if that's not Miss Cox! Dear me, Miss Cox, how are you, ma'am?"

"I am pretty well, Ruth, thank you; but I am tired out. I am looking for lodgings for poor Mr. Arthur Wilton's family, and I can't find any."

"Mr. Arthur Wilton! Poor gentleman. I saw his death in the paper, and thought it must be the doctor's brother. He has left a long family, hasn't he?"

[58]

"Yes; that is, shorter than my niece's; but six are enough to provide for when there is nothing left but debts and difficulties."

Ruth was an old married servant of Dr. Wilton's, one of the innumerable young cooks who had been under Miss Cox, and had basely deserted her as soon as she could *cook*—send up a dinner fit to be eaten—to dress the dinner of the baker's boy who had served 6 Edinburgh Crescent with bread.

"Dear me! I thought Mr. Wilton was a very rich gentleman. I have heard the young ladies talk of the fine country place. How was it?"

"He had misfortunes and losses, Ruth; and his family are coming here to live in furnished lodgings. But I can meet with none. Can you help me?"

Ruth looked right and left, as if she expected to see some one coming up or down the road with the news of lodgings in their hands, and was silent. At last a light seemed to break over her rosy face. "If they don't mind being next to our shop, I believe I do know the very place. Will you come and see? The house belongs to my mother-in-law, and she has got it nicely furnished. It is not far; will you come, Miss Cox?"

[59]

"Is it quite near, Ruth? for I must be back for the children's dinner, and I am so tired."

"You can take a tram from the Three Stars, and that will get you home in no time. It is not far, Miss Cox."

"Well, I will come, Ruth; but I don't feel sure about engaging the lodgings. Your mother-in-law won't mind my looking at them?"

"Oh no, ma'am, not a bit. She was an old servant, you know, of some real gentry at Whitelands, and the old lady died last fall twelvemonth, and left mother—I always calls her mother—a nice little sum and some real valuable furniture."

"Oh! then she won't take children," said Miss Cox despairingly. "She won't take boys?"

"That she will, if you like the apartments; there won't be no difficulties," said Ruth in a reassuring voice. "You see, my Frank's father died when he was an infant, and mother went back to her old place, where she lived till two years ago, when the mistress died. Then she took this little business for Frank, and the house next. It is quite a private house, and was built by a gentleman. She thought she should be near us and help us on a bit, and so she has. And she put the furniture in it, and has added a bit here and there; and she let it all last winter to the curate and his mother; and here we are, Miss Cox. Look straight before you."

[60]

Miss Cox looked straight before her as she was told, and there, at the end of the road, stood a neat white house with a pretty good-sized baker's shop on the lower floor, and two windows above. There was a wing with a bake-house, and then a tall elm tree, left of its brethren which had once stood there in a stately group, either by accident or by design, and given their name to the locality—Elm Fields.

"There's my Frank at the door," Ruth said, nodding; "he wonders what I am come back for."

"I remember him," said Miss Cox; "he used to take an hour to deliver the bread. Ah, Ruth, you should not have married such a boy."

"Shouldn't I? Then, Miss Cox, you and I don't agree there. If I am a bit older, Frank is the best husband that ever lived.—This way, ma'am."

Ruth opened a wooden gate and went up a narrow path to the door of a small house, built of old-fashioned brick, with a porch at the side, and a trellis covered with clematis.

"Quite like country, isn't it, ma'am?—Mother," Ruth called. And then from the back of the house Mrs. Pryor emerged, a thin, pale, respectable-looking woman, but with a sad expression on her face. "Here's a lady, mother, come to look at your apartments, for a family—Dr. Wilton's brother, you know, mother, where I lived when I first saw Frank."

[61]

"Ah! indeed; will you please to look round, ma'am? It is a tidy place; I do all I can to keep it neat and clean; and there's some good furniture in it, left me by my dear blessed mistress." And Mrs. Pryor raised her apron to her eyes, and spoke in a low voice, like one on the brink of tears.

"Well then, mother, when ladies come to be in their eighty-sevens, one can't wish or expect them to live. It is only natural; we can't all live to be a hundred."

"I don't like such flighty talk, Ruth," said Mrs. Pryor reprovingly. "It hurts me.—This way, ma'am."

Aunt Betha followed Mrs. Pryor into a sitting-room on the ground floor, square and very neat,—the table in the middle of the room, a large mahogany chiffonier, with a glass of wax flowers on it, and two old china cups. Miss Cox went to the square window and looked out. The ground sloped away from the strip of garden, and the hamlet of Elm Fields, consisting of the cottages and small houses where Frank now delivered his own bread, was seen from it. There was nothing offensive to the eye, and beyond was a line of hills. Harstone lay to the right. Another room of the same proportions, and four bed-rooms, all very neat, and in one, the pride of Mrs. Pryor's heart, a large four-post bed with carved posts and heavy curtains, the very chief of the dear mistress's gifts and legacies.

[62]

Aunt Betha felt it would do—that it must do; and there was a little room for the servant which Mrs. Pryor would throw in, and all for the prescribed two pounds a week.

"I will tell Dr. Wilton about it, and you shall hear this evening, or to-morrow morning at latest, and you will do your best to make them comfortable. They have had great sorrows. One thing I forgot to consider,—how far are we from the college?"

"Not a quarter of an hour by the Whitelands road," said Ruth eagerly. "I can walk it in that time; and young gentlemen, why they would do it in five minutes."

"How many young gentlemen are there?" Mrs. Pryor asked feebly, when they were in the passage.

"Two that will go to the college," said Ruth quickly. Then, with a glance at Miss Cox, she said in a lower voice, "I will make it right. Now, ma'am, you will catch the tram at the Three Stars if you make haste."

Poor Aunt Betha trudged off to the Three Stars, and stumbled into the tram just as it was starting.

She reached Edinburgh Crescent almost at the same moment as Dr. Wilton, who was returning from his first round.

[63]

"I have found a house which I think will answer for the poor people from Maplestone," she said. "I did not absolutely engage the rooms till I had consulted you and Anna."

Dr. Wilton gave a rapid glance to the white slate in the hall, and then said, "Come in here a minute, auntie," opening the door of his consulting-room. "Where are the lodgings?"

"In the neighbourhood you mentioned—by St. Luke's Church—in that new part by Whitelands called the Elm Fields. They are kept by a respectable woman, the mother of an old servant of ours—Ruth—and there is room for them all. Four bed-rooms, two sitting-rooms, and a little room for the servant."

"I'll take a look at the place this afternoon. I expect it is the very thing; and I have to see a patient in that direction. If I am satisfied, I will engage them from this day week. Guy is better to-day."

"Yes; he slept better," said Aunt Betha.

She was very tired, for she carried the weight of sixty-five years about with her on her errands of love and kindness. "I must go now and carve for Anna," she said. "It is past one o'clock."

Dr. Wilton always took his hasty luncheon in the consulting-room,—a glass of milk and a few biscuits. He did not encounter that long array of young faces in the dining-room in the middle of his hard day's work. Aunt Betha departed with her news, which was received with some satisfaction by Mrs. Wilton. At least, Elm Fields did not lie much in the way of Edinburgh Crescent. There was safety in distance. And Aunt Betha wisely forbore to make any reference to the baker's shop. [64]

That afternoon a telegram was handed in at Maplestone, which Salome opened for her mother with trembling fingers:—

"Dr. Wilton, Roxburgh, to Mrs. Wilton, Maplestone Court, near Fairchester.

"I have taken comfortable lodgings here for you from the twenty-third. I will write by post."

CHAPTER V.

[65]

A JOURNEY.



HAT last week at Maplestone was like a hurried dream to all the children, who had known no other home. Their neighbours and friends were very kind and full of sympathy, and Mrs. Wilton and the little boys were invited to spend the last two days with the De Brettes, who lived near, and it was arranged that they should stay there with Ada; and that Salome, and Stevens, and the two elder boys should precede them to Roxburgh. Miss Barnes had said she would come with them for a day or two to help them to arrange the rooms, and prepare everything for Mrs. Wilton; but she was called away to the sick-bed of her own mother, and Stevens and Salome went with Raymond and Reginald alone. The beautiful summer seemed over, and it was in a chill drizzling rain that Salome looked her last at Maplestone. She did not cry as the fly, laden with boxes, rumbled slowly down the drive. Stevens sobbed aloud, and Raymond and Reginald kept their heads well out of each window; but [66] Salome sat pale and tearless. The coachman's wife at the lodge stood with her children round her at the large gate, and curtsayed; but she hid her face in her apron, and cried bitterly. The gardener had preceded them with the cart to the station, and the boxes were all labelled before the party in the fly arrived.



"The coachman's wife hid her face in her apron, and cried bitterly."

"Shall I take the tickets?" Raymond asked.

"Yes; let Master Raymond take them," exclaimed Stevens.

Salome had the purse intrusted to her by her mother to pay expenses.

"It is better you should begin your responsibilities," her mother had said sadly; "and Stevens will

have so much to attend to."

Salome opened the purse and gave Raymond a sovereign.

"Another," he said, waiting.

"That is enough. Four tickets, third class."

"Third class. *I* am not going to travel third class, I assure you."

"We must, Raymond; we *must*," said Salome. "Raymond!"

But Raymond was gone, and Salome stood laden with small parcels, while poor Stevens was counting over the boxes. [67]

The gardener had a beautiful basket of flowers ready, and had filled a hamper with the best fruit and vegetables from the Maplestone gardens.

"I have put up a melon, Miss Wilton, and a lot of grapes. Mind how the hamper is unpacked. You'll still have some more flowers soon, for I shall be coming up to Roxburgh."

"Perhaps we had better not, thank you, Thomas. They are not ours now, you know—nothing is ours;" and, as often happens, the sound of her own voice as she gave utterance to the sad truth was too much for her. She put her little hand into Thomas's, and said in a broken voice, "Here comes the train! Good-bye, Thomas; good-bye."

At this moment Reginald, who had been doing his utmost to help poor Stevens, came up.

"Now, dear Salome, make haste. Here's an empty carriage."

"Third class? Here you are. How many seats?" said a porter.

"*This* way, do you hear?" Raymond called. "This way. Stevens is to go there, and you must come with me. I've got the tickets."

"Hallo, Wilton!" said a pleasant voice, "where are you off to?"

"I am going to Roxburgh with my sister," said Raymond. "My sister—Mr. Henry St. Clair," said Raymond grandly. "Get in, Salome, or you will be left behind." [68]

Raymond's friend took some parcels out of Salome's hand, and courteously helped her into the carriage, putting the umbrellas and cloaks up in the rack behind the seat, and settling the little parcels for her.

As the guard came to shut the door with the usual words, "Any more going on?" Raymond said, "Where's Reginald?" and, putting his head out, he called, "Hallo, Reginald; you'll be left behind."

"I am going with Stevens, third class," was the answer.

Raymond's brow grew dark, and he muttered something between his teeth. "What an idiot! I've got his ticket."

Salome, who had great difficulty in repressing the tears which the good-bye to Thomas had brought in a shower, said bravely, "We ought all to have gone with Stevens, Raymond."

Raymond turned away, hoping his friend would not hear, and then the two boys began to talk about Eton matters, and Salome was left to her own sad meditations. She could not help, however, hearing some of the conversation, and her surprise was unbounded when she heard Raymond say his return to Eton was uncertain, for since the "governor's" death their plans were all unsettled. They might go abroad for the winter; at present they had taken a house near Roxburgh! [69]

Oh, how could Raymond talk like that? and what would become of him? Ashamed to go third class! ashamed to say they were poor! Oh, if only Reginald had been the eldest brother, what a difference it would have made.

Raymond got out at the junction, where they had to wait for the up-train, to smoke a cigar. His friend did not accompany him, and he and Salome were left together. With ready tact he saw that she would prefer silence to conversation, and he only asked her if she would like the window quite closed, as it was so damp, picked up a flower which had fallen from Thomas's basket, and then unfolded a newspaper.

The next minute a young man looked in at the window and said, "I thought I saw you at Fairchester. How are you, old fellow?"

"All right. Where are you bound for?"

"I am going down into Cornwall till term begins. I say, there's Wilton! As much side on as ever, I suppose. Bragging as usual, eh?"

Henry St. Clair tried to make it evident by a sign that remarks about Raymond were to be stopped.

"Never was such a fellow for brag. I have been staying near Fairchester, and I heard the other day that the whole family were left without a farthing and heaps of debts. Is it true?" [70]

"I don't know," said Henry St. Clair. "Have you seen Barnard lately?"

"No. What makes you ask? I say, St. Clair, what's up?"

"The *up*-train. Now we are off. Here comes Wilton."

Raymond came sauntering up, and knocking the ashes from his cigar, threw it away.

"You extravagant fellow!" St. Clair exclaimed.

"Well, I can't smoke here, can I?"

"You ought not to smoke at all, according to Eton rules," exclaimed the other boy, as he ran away to take his place in another part of the train.

"Where did Harrington come from?"

"He has been staying near Fairchester, he says," St. Clair replied carelessly, and then he began to read his paper.

"Near Fairchester!" thought Raymond; "then he will have heard all about us. Whom can he have been staying with, I wonder? How stupid Salome is sitting there like a dummy when she might talk, as she can talk sometimes, and be agreeable. One can't go about the world airing one's pauperism; it's such nonsense." [71]

The rest of the journey passed without much conversation. The Wiltons were to get out at a small station where there was a junction of two miles to Roxburgh. Henry St. Clair was going on to Harstone. He helped Salome, and even said to Raymond, "Here, take your sister's bag and umbrella, Wilton."

Reginald and Stevens were behind at the van watching the piles of boxes turned out, and Stevens was nervously counting them.

Henry St. Clair bid Salome a pleasant good-bye, and she felt his kind attentions in contrast to Raymond's indifference.

"What a nice little thing that sister of Wilton's is!" Henry St. Clair thought, as the train moved off and he caught sight of Salome's slight figure standing by Stevens and the luggage which was to be carried across to another platform for the Roxburgh train. "A nice little thing! And what a selfish brute Wilton is; such a cad, too, with his big talk—while she is so different. I wonder whether it is true what Harrington has heard. I will ask Barnard. He comes from those parts, and is sure to know. I'll ask him."

The drizzling rain had turned into a regular down-pour, when at last Stevens and her boxes were safely stowed away in the omnibus, and Salome and her brothers filled a cab, with small parcels, baskets, and rugs at the Roxburgh station. [72]

"Where shall I drive, sir?" asked the cabman as he prepared to mount to his seat.

"What's the name of the house?" said Raymond. "Salome, where are we to drive?"

"I—I—don't quite know," said poor Salome. "How stupid of me!—Reginald, can you remember?"

"It's by a church, and the name is Friar, or Pryor, or—"

"There's a lot of churches," said the cabman; "and this ain't exactly the weather to stand here while you put on your considering cap, with the water pouring off one's hat enough to blind one."

"It's St. Luke's Church. Yes, I am sure it's close to St. Luke's," Salome exclaimed. "But Stevens will know—our nurse, who is in the omnibus."

"You want a nurse, you do," said the cabman, "to guide you? Come now, I can't wait here all night."

And now a shout was heard from the omnibus.

"The old lady wants to speak to you," said the conductor. And Salome, looking out at the cab window, saw Stevens frantically making signals and trying to make her voice reach the cab.

"Oh, Stevens knows, Stevens knows the address," and before more could be said, Reginald had jumped out and was soon climbing the steps of the omnibus to hear what Stevens said. He was back in a minute drenched with rain, and saying,— [73]

"Close to St. Luke's Church—Elm Fields—Elm Cottage—Mrs. Pryor."

"All right," said the cabman. "I know—Pryor the baker; I pass down by there from Whitelands often enough." Then he climbed to his seat, the rain still falling in one continuous rush, and they were off.

"How idiotic of you, Salome, not to know the address," said Raymond; "and I do wish you would keep your hair tight. Look here!" And he gave one of the thick plaits a somewhat rough pull as it lay like a line of light upon Salome's black jacket. "I saw St. Clair looking at it. You didn't take in who he was."

"Some Eton swell, I suppose," said Reginald.

"I thought he was very nice and kind," said Salome.

"Nice and kind! He is Lord Felthorpe's son, and in the same house as I am at Eton. Old Birch always manages to get the right sort of fellows! How could you be such an ass, Reginald, as to travel third class when I had taken a first class ticket for you?"

"We ought all to have travelled third class," said Reginald stoutly. "Mother said second; but there is no second on the Midland Railway, so I went third."

[74]

"Well, just as you please," said Raymond. "I say, what a neighbourhood this is! not a good house to be seen," and he wiped the window of the cab with his coat-sleeve.

Salome looked out from her window also.

"I don't remember this part of Roxburgh. It cannot be near Uncle Loftus's house, I think."

"Oh no," said Reginald; "that is the swell part—Edinburgh Crescent and Maniston Square and the Quadrant. This is more like a part of Harstone. Hallo!"

The cab had stopped at last.

"What are we stopping for?" exclaimed Salome.

"I expect this is the place," said Reginald, "for there is a baker's shop, and Pryor over it."

"Nonsense," said Raymond. But the cabman got down and tapped at the blurred glass, signing to Raymond to let it down, and saying, "Now then, sir, look sharp!"

"This can't be the place,—it's impossible,—it's a mistake."

But now a cheerful voice was heard, and, with a large cotton umbrella held over her, Ruth appeared.

"It's all right! This way, sir, round by the gate. I am sorry you have such a day, that I am; it makes everything look so dismal. Frank will come and help with the luggage."

[75]

Salome followed Ruth to the trellised porch, where the clematis was hanging limp and damp, with drops from every tendril. Just within the porch stood Mrs. Pryor. Smiles were not in her way at all. She looked as sad and melancholy as the day, and when the creaking omnibus was heard coming up the road and stopping at the gate, she held up her hands.

"All those boxes! it's ridic'lous to think of getting 'em in."

"Nonsense, mother; Frank will manage that in no time. There's lots of room, and a family must have things to use."

"You walk in, miss," said Ruth to Salome; "tea is all set in the parlour. We thought you would like to have one room kept for meals and one for company."

"Company! what company! Who would ever come near them in that obscure quarter of Roxburgh," Salome thought. And now Raymond made it worse by coming in to declare he should not allow his mother to stay in a hole like this, and that he should go out and look for lodgings the very next day. Whoever took them must be mad, and he should not put up with it. Even Reginald's good temper was tried to the utmost, and he and Raymond began a fierce wrangle about the cab and omnibus fare; while Stevens, wet and tired and miserable, sat down on one of her big boxes, and seemed as if all exertion were over for her.

[76]

"I am wore out," she said. "I have not slept for three nights. I am wore out."

Of course, Mrs. Pryor was too much affronted at Raymond's remarks on her house—the house, with all the highly-polished furniture, which was at once her pride and joy—to volunteer any consolation; but quietly addressing Salome, she said,—

"You have not seen the bed-rooms yet; will you walk up, Miss Wilton?"

Salome followed, saying, as she passed Raymond and Reginald,—

"Please do not say any more. I daresay we shall be very comfortable.—And do come up with me, Stevens, and see the rooms."

The gentle, sweet voice softened Mrs. Pryor somewhat. Stevens was pleased to see the bed-rooms neatly furnished, and that not a speck of dust was to be seen; from these upper windows, too, there would be, on clear days, a nice open view; and altogether her spirits rose, and she said "with a few things put here and there she thought she might soon get a bed-room fit for her mistress."

"I am glad mother did not come with us," said Salome. "It will be all settled before Monday. If only Raymond would make the best of it."

LOSSES AND GAINS.



NE really sunny, good-tempered person has a wonderful effect in a household. Ruth Pryor was the sunny element in the two days of rain outside, and discomforts of unpacking inside the house, which followed the arrival of the first instalment of the party from Maplestone. She smoothed down difficulties; she laughed at her mother-in-law's melancholy forebodings that "the party was too grand for her," and that she, who had lived for so many years with a lady of title—her dear, departed mistress—was not going to put up with "airs" from a young man like Mr. Raymond.

"It takes a time to get used to everything," Ruth said; "they'll settle down right enough, and so Mrs. Stevens thinks. She says her mistress, poor thing, is too broken down to grumble; and I am sure Miss Wilton is a little angel."

"*Very* untidy, very careless—dropping things here and there; and she has spilled some ink on the tablecloth." [78]

"A mere speck," said Ruth; "you'd need to put on your spectacles to see it; and a green and black cloth does not show spots."

"Not to *your* eyes, Ruth; you are far too easy. It's a good thing you have no family."

"There now, mother, don't say that," said Ruth, a shadow coming over her round, rosy face. "You know how I fretted when I lost my baby; and Frank, he fretted enough."

"Well, well, you may have a baby yet, only you would find you'd have to be more particular as to bits and pieces strewed everywhere," and Mrs. Pryor stooped to pick up some leaves which Salome had dropped as she filled the two stiff white vases with the Maplestone flowers.

Mrs. Wilton and the boys were expected that evening. Raymond and Reginald were to meet them at the station; and Salome had been following Stevens about the house, giving finishing touches here and there, and trying to hope her mother would be pleased. The "parlour," now called the drawing-room, was wonderfully improved by pushing the table back against the wall, and covering it with books and a little flower-basket from the old home. Then there was a "nest" of small tables, which Salome and Stevens separated, and covered two of them with some bits of scarlet cloth, round which some lace was run by Stevens. On these tables some photographs were set in little frames, and two brackets were nailed up with a book-shelf. Salome looked round with some satisfaction as the sun struggled through the clouds and seemed to smile on her efforts. Reginald enjoyed all the wrenching of nails from boxes and running out on messages; and altogether things assumed a brighter aspect. [79]

Raymond had been out the greater part of the two days, and only came in to meals. He was moody and disagreeable: selfish and discontented in the days of prosperity, he naturally made no effort to sweeten the days of adversity.

"Have you got any money, Salome?" he asked his sister, as she sat down in the dining-room with ink and pens before her and a large blotting-case, which had once been a music portfolio, and was now filled with a great variety of scribbled paper, the beginnings of many stories which had been read to her little brothers by the nursery fire at Maplestone, and were considered, by them at least, the "jolliest tales that were ever told—much jollier than printed books."

Out of this chaotic heap Salome thought of forming a story for children, of which visions floated before her, bound in olive green, and embossed with gold, and illustrated with pictures, and advertised in the papers! Only Reginald was to be in the secret. And then the joy of giving her mother the money she should get for her book. The little heap of gold was already rising from ten to twenty, nay, to thirty sovereigns, when Raymond's question broke in on her dream,— [80]

"I say, Salome, have you got any money?"



“‘I say, Salome, have you got any money?’”

"Money! No, Raymond, only a few shillings; but mother will have some this afternoon."

"Well, you see, I spent nearly a pound of my own for the tickets, and the omnibus, and cab, and porters."

"Not for the omnibus and cab. I gave Reginald seven shillings for them. And as to the tickets, you ought not to have taken first class tickets. One was a waste, because Reginald did not use it."

"A lucky thing I had the sense to take first class tickets. Fancy St. Clair finding *me* in a third class carriage—and *you*, worse still! If Reginald was such a fool, I can't help it, it was not my concern; but I have a right to look after you, and I know my father would never have allowed you or Ada to travel third class with a lot of half-tipsy navvies, for all I could tell."

Raymond said this with a grandly magnanimous air, as if he were to be commended for brotherly attention.

[81]

Salome bit the end of her pen-holder, and could scarcely repress a smile, but she only said,—

"What do you want money for, Raymond?"

"What do I want it for? That's my business. I am not going into Roxburgh without a penny in my pocket. It's not likely."

"Well," Salome said, "I hope you will not tease mother for money. I hope you will spare her as much as you can. I believe I have some money of my own,—ten or twelve shillings,—and I can let you have it, or some of it." Salome put her hand in her pocket to get out her purse. Alas! no purse was there. "I must have left it upstairs," she said.

And Raymond exclaimed,—

"A nice hand you'll make of keeping money for the family."

"Stevens," Salome said, rushing up to Stevens, "have you seen my purse?"

"No; you've never lost it?"

"I can't have lost it.—Reginald,—I say, Reginald, have you seen my purse? I thought it was in my pocket."

Reginald called out from his mother's bed-room, where he was fastening up a bracket for her little clock,—

"What do you say you've lost?"

"Oh, my purse, Reginald! what *shall* I do?" and Salome wildly turned out a drawer in the room which she was to share with Ada, and left it in dire confusion.

[82]

"Dear me, Miss Salome, pray don't make work like that," said Stevens. "I do wish you would learn

to take care of your own things at least. You never was fit to look after money."

Salome was in despair, when Reginald came out of his mother's room holding the lost purse on high.

"O Reginald, where did you find it? You might have told me before. It was a shame. Where *did* you find it?"

"Under the table in the dining-room last evening," and he tossed the purse to her, saying, "It's not very heavy. But you *should* be careful, Salome; you are awfully careless."

"Don't be rude, Reginald; it's not for you to take me to task. Mind your own business, please."

"Hallo! there's a carriage. It's Uncle Loftus; yes, that it is," exclaimed Reginald. "He has not hurried himself to look after us, I must say."

Salome felt a nervous fear of her uncle, and stood irresolute at the top of the narrow stairs.

"Come down with me, Reginald," she said; "do come."

"Oh no, you'll get on better alone," Reginald said; "and Raymond is downstairs."

[83]

"The doctor, Miss Wilton," said Mrs. Pryor, in a tone which seemed to imply that some one was very ill. "The doctor," she repeated, looking up from the narrow hall at Salome.

Salome went down slowly, and her heart beat so loud she could almost hear it. Her Uncle Loftus brought back the memory of her father so vividly. He resembled him, as brothers do often resemble each other—a family likeness, which starts out always more forcibly when one of that family is gone.

"Well, my dear child," Dr. Wilton said, advancing to Salome when at last she opened the door, "how are you getting on? You are quite comfortable here, I hope. It really looks very nice and home-like. It was the best we could do for you. I heard from your mother yesterday, and she says she is coming this afternoon with the children and—and—" (Dr. Wilton could not fit the sister with a name) "your sister. I will try to meet your mother, and bring her up in the carriage. I have to be at the hospital in Harstone at four o'clock, and I think I can just manage to get to the Elm Fields Station at five. The boys must meet the train too, and they and the children and the luggage can come up in the omnibus."

"Thank you, Uncle Loftus," Salome said gently. "I am very glad mamma should drive up in the carriage."

[84]

"What a quiet, demure little thing she is," thought Dr. Wilton. "Where are your brothers?" he asked.

"I thought Raymond was here," Salome said, rising as if to call him.

"No; do not call him now. I wanted to tell you that I have, I hope, succeeded in getting him into a merchant's office in Harstone. It really is a most difficult thing to provide for boys in these days, as I shall find. All professions need so much outlay to begin with—articles for the law, and so on. But Mr. Warde, out of respect to your poor father's memory, says he will take your brother on, at a nominal salary of twenty pounds, just to keep him in clothes; and considering the calamity at Fairchester, I think it is better the boy should start clear here. Reginald must have another year at school, I suppose, and I will speak to Dr. Stracey about it. The term does not begin till the middle of September. The little boys you and Ada can manage between you, I daresay."

"Oh yes," Salome said; "I can do their lessons at present."

"That's right. You know your poor father's affairs are in such a fearful mess that it is impossible to tell yet how things stand. The liquidation of the Central Bank will go on for years. A heavy overdraft there is the ugliest part of the matter."

[85]

"An overdraft!" poor Salome exclaimed; "I don't understand!"

"No, my dear, you can't understand, I daresay. But, as I told you, your poor mother's income is secure, and on that you must all make up your minds to live till better times. It is just three hundred a year."

Three hundred a year conveyed a very hazy idea to Salome.

"How much had we a year at Maplestone, Uncle Loftus?"

"How much?—my dear, your father was living at the rate of four or five thousand a year!"

"Four *thousand!*" This at least was a help to a clear understanding. Four thousand did stand out in sharp contrast to three hundred. Salome was speechless.

"Your Aunt Anna will be calling on your mother to-morrow, and she will settle about your coming to see your cousins. You must be about Kate's age—seventeen."

"I am not quite sixteen," Salome said. "Ada is just fifteen, and Raymond seventeen. Reginald is nearly fourteen."

"Only a year between each of you, then!"

"The little ones are much younger. Carl is nine, and Hans eight. They were born on the same day of the month." [86]

Family records of births and ages were not in Dr. Wilton's line. He looked at his watch, and said,
—

"Well, I must be off. I will speak to your mother about the situation for Raymond, and other matters, as we drive up from the station. Good-bye, my dear." And Dr. Wilton was gone, leaving Salome standing in the middle of the room. She would have liked to kiss him, to cry a little, and be comforted. But there was something in her uncle's professional manner, kind though it was, which threw her back. He would do his duty, she felt; he would not give up his brother's children; but he would do it as shortly as possible, and waste neither time nor words over it.

He had smiled, and looked kind; he had spoken pleasantly and cheerfully; he had even put his arm round her when she first went into the room, and there was real feeling in the words, "Well, my dear child," as he kissed her forehead; but for all that, Salome felt like a sensitive plant, touched by the gentlest hand, which draws in, and cannot unfold in response.

"If only father were here!" the girl exclaimed, covering her face with her hands. "Oh, that he were here! Oh, that we had all thought more of him when we had him! And what a life he must have had the last year; never telling us, and yet in such trouble!" Vain regrets for our dead; vain longings to be what we can never be again! Let us all take care, as the daily life rolls swiftly on, that we lay up happy memories, or at least pleasant memories, when that daily life has become *the past*,—the past which, when it was the present, was, alas! so often sown with the seeds of unkindness, harshness of word and judgment, ill-temper, selfish disregard for the feelings of others, which yield such a bitter harvest when those we love are hidden from our sight, and we can never more lighten a burden, or help to make the way easy by smiles and good-temper, by tenderness and forbearance, by the love which covereth a multitude of faults. [87]

Salome was roused by Raymond's entrance.

"Why did you not come and see Uncle Loftus?"

"He did not ask for me."

"Yes, he asked where you were; but he told me not to call you."

"I did not want to see him. I hate his patronizing ways. Have you found your purse?"

"Yes, Reg had picked it up; but you are not going out before dinner, are you, Ray?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Raymond, stretching and yawning. "I should have thought we had better have dined at seven, when mamma comes." [88]

"I—I don't think Mrs. Pryor would like a late dinner."

"Well, I can get a little luncheon somewhere in Roxburgh. It is so fine, and it is so slow being cooped up here."

"You have to go with Reg to the Elm Fields Station to meet mamma—don't forget that—at five o'clock."

"All right." But Raymond lingered. "The money, Sal; I'll pay you back." Salome opened the purse and took out two half-crowns. "Thanks!" said Raymond; "it *is* a come down to want a paltry five shillings."

"O Raymond!" Salome said passionately,—"*O Ray*, do try to make the best of things to mother! It will make her so dreadfully sad if you grumble. Dear Raymond, I will do all I can, only please do try to make the best of everything."

"You are a kind little thing," said Raymond; "but I wish we were all at the bottom of the Red Sea. There is nothing left to live for or care about; no pleasure, and no fun; nothing but to be looked down upon!"

"I believe Uncle Loftus has heard of something for you, and perhaps you will make money and be a rich merchant." Raymond whistled and shrugged his shoulders, and strolled off, lighting a cigar in the porch. [89]

Then Salome went to find Reginald, and make her peace with him.

"Reg, let us go out. It is so fine; and I am so sorry I was so careless about the purse. It was very good of you to pick it up, Reg; I was horridly cross to you."

"Never mind, Sal. Yes, let's go out and look about the place till dinner."

"I don't see that we want any dinner to-day, Reg. We can have the cutlets at tea, when the others come; and Stevens won't mind—she can have eggs and bacon. And we'll find a shop and have some buns and ginger-beer. I'll get ready at once, and tell Stevens to tell Mrs. Pryor. It will be fun, and save expense, you know."

Poor child! she was soon ready; and Reginald and she set off in better spirits than they had known since their troubles had fallen on them.

When Salome was outside the gate, and had nodded to Ruth, who was behind the counter of the shop, she discovered she had got both left-hand gloves. "But it will spoil all if I tell Reg, and go back, and keep him waiting while I hunt for the right-hand glove. He will say I am incorrigible." So by a little skilful manœuvring Salome persuaded her right hand to accommodate itself to circumstances, and tripped almost gaily by her brother's side.

CHAPTER VII.

[90]

COUSINS.



HE walk had an exhilarating effect on both brother and sister. There is a charm in novelty to us all, and it is a charm which is more especially felt by the young. The present moment bears with it its own importance, and neither future nor past has the power with children that it has with grown-up people. Reginald and Salome soon left behind them the lines of small villas and long narrow streets intersecting each other which stretched out from the district called Elm Fields, connecting it with Roxburgh in one direction, and sloping down towards Harstone in the other.

Beyond all these signs of increasing population was a wide expanse of common or down, skirted, it is true, by houses which year by year are multiplied, but yet comprising an acre or two of broken ground with dips and hollows, and, again, wide spaces of soft turf, freshened by the breezes which come straight from the mouth of the river on which Harstone stands, some ten miles away.

[91]

"This is nice," Salome said. "I feel as if I could run and jump here. And look at that line of blue mountains, Reg! Is it not lovely? Oh, we can come here very often! I think I remember driving across these downs when I came with dear father to stay at Uncle Loftus's three or four years ago. We are nearer the downs than the fashionable part of the place, I believe."

"Yes," said Reginald; "I call this jolly. And there's the college over there; we will go home that way, and find out a short cut back to Elm Fields. I say, Sal, there is no one near, or no one who can watch us; let's have a race to the big thorn bush right in front, and on to the stumpy tree to the left."

Salome gave a quick glance round, and then said, "Off!" Away she went, fleet of foot, her plaits of hair falling over her shoulders, refusing to be kept in place by the hair-pins, which were indeed not strong enough to bear up that mass of tawny locks on ordinary occasions, certainly not now when Salome was flying in the teeth of a brisk wind over the open downs.

"Well done," said Reginald, breathless with his exertions, "you were not two yards behind me; but, I say, Sal, your hair!"

[92]

"Oh, what shall I do? and no pins! I must go back and look for them."

"Here's one caught in your jacket; but it would be like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay to look for the others on the down. No one will know you; let it all go."

"I will go to a hairdresser and have it cut off. It's no use being bothered like this. Now, let us walk quietly; I wish to consult you about my story. Shall I make the children orphans, living with a cross aunt? or shall they have a father and mother? And would you put in that tale about the monkey which Hans is so fond of? That is a really true tale, you know. It happened to Stevens's little niece."

"Well, I think stories about monkeys pulling watches to pieces and breaking tea-cups are rather stale. So are all stories, if you come to that—the same things told hundreds of times, just the names of the children changed."

Salome was silent, feeling rather disappointed at this douche of cold water over her schemes of authorship.

"But, Reg, if stories are to be like life, they *must* be the same things told over and over again, just as things do go on happening over and over again. For instance, all that is happening to us now has happened to thousands and thousands of other families,—may be happening at this very moment. The thing is," said Salome thoughtfully, "it is the *way* of telling a story which makes the difference. We see things differently, and then we put the old thing in a new light. That is why there is everything fresh every day, and nothing can be really stale, as you call it. All this beautiful view never can look quite the same, for there is certain to be a variety in the lights and shadows."

[93]

"Oh, well, I daresay; but then I am not sentimental or romantic, though I think you are awfully clever, and would beat Ada, or any of us, any day. I wonder how I shall get on at the college? It will be very different to Rugby. I must work hard and make the best of the year, for I am only to have a year more at school. Did not Uncle Loftus say so?"

"Yes; but perhaps it may turn out differently. You are sure to get on, whatever happens. It is about Raymond I am so afraid. I cannot imagine him in an office in Harstone.—How that girl is

staring at me, Reginald, and the boy too. Is it at my hair?"

"Come along," said Reginald; "don't look at them."

He turned towards the low wall which skirts the side of the down where the high rocks, through which the river runs, rise to a considerable height on the Roxburgh side. Reginald leaned with folded arms against the wall, and Salome, uncomfortably conscious that her hair was floating over her back in most dire confusion, stood by him, never turning her head again. At last Salome heard a voice close to her say,— [94]

"Yes, I am sure it is, Digby. Let me ask her."

"Nonsense. You can't be sure."

There was a moment's silence, and then Kate Wilton seized on her chance. Salome's pocket-handkerchief, as she turned at a sign from Reginald to walk away, fell from the pocket at the side of her dress.

"I think this is yours," said Kate, "your pocket-handkerchief; and I think you are my cousin. We—we came to see you at Maplestone two years ago."

The brightest colour rose to Salome's face, and she said, "Yes, I am Salome Wilton. Reginald!"—for Reginald had walked on, resolutely determined not to believe they had any kinship with the boy and girl who had stared at them—"Reginald," Salome said, overtaking him, "do stop;" adding in a lower voice, "It's so uncivil."

Reginald, thus appealed to, was obliged to turn his head, and in the very gruffest voice said, [95] "How do you do?" to Digby, who advanced towards him.

"I am so glad we met you," Kate said. "I have been watching you for ever so long. Something made me sure you were our cousin. I was not so sure about your brother. I daresay he has very much grown in two years, but you are so little altered, and"—Kate paused and laughed—"I knew your hair; it is such wonderful hair. Don't you remember how you used to let it down at Maplestone, and make me guess which was your face and which was the back of your head? It was not so long then."

Salome felt more and more uncomfortable about her hair, and said, "I am quite ashamed of my untidiness; but I have lost all my pins, and my hair is such a dreadful bother."

"It is beautiful," said Kate. "I am sure I should not call it a bother. I wish you could give me some; but we have all scraggy rats' tails. We should like to walk with you, if we may," Kate continued. "Which way are you going?"

"Oh, no way in particular. Reginald and I came out for a walk. We have had such dreadful weather since we have been here."

"Yes; and Digby and I, like you and your brother, were tired of staying at home. It is so dull for the boys when they have bad weather in the holidays. I hope it is going to clear up now." [96]

Salome hoped so too, and then there was silence. But Kate soon broke it with some trivial remark, and the girls made more rapid advances towards friendship than the boys. Kate was pleasant and good-tempered, and was easy to get on with. But Salome listened in vain for much conversation between the boys. All the talk came from Digby, and she felt vexed with her brother for his ungraciousness. But boys are generally more reticent than girls, and have not so many small subjects to discuss with each other on first acquaintance, till they get upon school life and games.

"I hope you will come home with us," Kate said, after a pause, during which she had been calculating the time of her mother and Louise's departure to luncheon at a friend's house in the neighbourhood. A glance at the clock of a church they passed reassured her. "They were certain to have started," she thought. "Aunt Betha would not mind if I took home half-a-dozen people to luncheon."

"You are going out of your way, Salome," said Reginald. "We ought to turn up this way to Elm Fields."

"I want them to come home to luncheon, Digby. Do make them." [97]

"Oh yes, pray, come," said Digby, "unless you have anything better to do."

"Oh no," said Salome simply. "Reginald and I were going to get some buns at a shop. We did not intend to go back till—"

A warning, not to say angry, glance from Reginald stopped Salome, and she added,—

"Perhaps we had better not come, thanks. Mamma and Ada and the children are coming this afternoon, and Reginald has to be at the station at five o'clock to meet them."

"Well, as it's not one o'clock yet," said Digby, "there's time, I should think, for both." He changed companions as he spoke, and, leaving Kate to Reginald, walked briskly on with Salome towards Edinburgh Crescent.

The bell was ringing for the "children's dinner" as the four cousins were admitted by the "boy in

buttons" who answered the doctor's bell, and had in truth time for little else than swinging back that door on the hinges and receiving patients' notes, telegrams, and messages.

"You are late, Miss Kate," was Bean's greeting. By reason of his name poor Bean had a variety of sobriquets in the family. Of these "Stalky Jack" and "Vegetable" were amongst the most conspicuous.

"Is mamma gone?" Kate asked anxiously.

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"Yes, miss, just turned the corner as you came up. Lady Monroe don't lunch till one-thirty: *we* lunch at one sharp."

Another ring, before the door had well closed, took Bean to it again, and Kate, saying, "It is all right, Salome, come upstairs," led the way to the room she shared with Louise, while Digby took Reginald into the dining-room.

An evening dress of blue and white lay on one of the little beds, and Kate dexterously covered it with a white shawl; for Salome's deep crape reminded her that neither she nor Louise was really wearing the proper mourning for her uncle.

"Just take the daisies out of your hats," her mother had said, "and wear your black cashmeres. It is really impossible to provide mourning for a family like this; and besides, so few people here will know much about it—so many are away; and by the time Roxburgh is full again, the six weeks' mourning for an uncle will be over. Still, as you two elder girls are seen with me, you must not be in colours; it is a fortunate thing I had just had that black silk made up."

The memory of her mother's words passed swiftly through Kate's mind, and she hoped Salome would not notice the blue dress. She need not have been afraid. Salome was fully occupied with plaiting up her hair and possessing herself of two or three stray hair-pins she saw on the dressing-table.

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The room was not particularly tidy or attractive; very different to the bright sunny room at Maplestone, with its wreath of ivy round the windows and its decorations within, in which Ada delighted. The back of Edinburgh Crescent looked out on strips of dark gardens, shut in by red brick walls; and beyond, the backs of another row of houses.

"Louise and I are obliged to share a room," Kate said. "Though this house looks large, we fill it from top to bottom—we are such an enormous family. That's poor little Guy," she said, as a wailing, fretful cry was heard. "The nursery is next our room. Guy is our baby: he is very delicate, and I don't think papa has much hope that he will live. Now we must come down to luncheon. I hope you don't mind barley soup and treacle pudding. We are certain not to have anything better to-day, because mamma and Louise are out." She said this laughing as she ran down before Salome.

The long table with its row of young faces bewildered Salome. She felt shy and uncomfortable, and Aunt Betha, rising from her place at the head of the table, advanced kindly toward her.

"Come and sit next me, my dear. There are so many cousins; don't attempt to speak to them all. Will you have some hashed mutton or cold beef?—Go on with your dinners, Edith and Maude"—for the little girls had stopped short in eating to gaze curiously at their cousin. "Do you take beer, my dear? Only water! that is right. We are all better for taking water.—Now, Digby, send down the potatoes.—We wait on ourselves at luncheon. I hope you find your lodgings comfortable. Mrs. Pryor is a very superior person, rather gloomy, but Ruth laughs enough for a dozen. A giddy girl she was when she lived here.—You remember Ruth, Kate?"

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"No, I don't," said Kate; "we have a tide of girls passing through the house. They are all alike."

Aunt Betha's kindly chatter was a great help to Salome, and she began to feel less oppressed by the presence of her cousins. Such an army of boys and girls it seemed to her! and the home picture so widely different to that which she had known at Maplestone. "Children's dinner," with neither father nor mother present, at Dr. Wilton's was of the plainest, and Mrs. Wilton expended her ornamental taste on her drawing-room, where she had many afternoon teas and "at homes." Dinner parties or even luncheon parties were rare, and the dining-room was therefore generally bare and commonplace in its arrangements. A dusty fern, which looked unhappy and gas-stricken, drooped rather than lived in a china pot in the middle of the table; but beyond this there were no signs of flower or of leaf.

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Yet it was *home*, and Salome felt by force of contrast homeless and sad. The boys were going to see a cricket match, and Digby wanted Reginald to come with them.

"I shall not have time, thank you. We ought to be going back now, Salome."

But Kate overruled this, and Reginald was obliged to consent, and went off with his cousins till four o'clock, when he was to return to pick up his sister and take her to Elm Fields before going to the station.

"We will have a cozy talk in the school-room, and I will get Aunt Betha to let us have some tea. The children are all going out, and mamma and Louise will not be back yet, so we shall have peace." Kate said this as, with her arm in Salome's, she led the way to the school-room,—a very bare, untidy room in the wing built out at the back of the house, and over Dr. Wilton's consulting-room. Two battered leather chairs, which had seen years of service, were on either side of the

fireplace; and there was a long bookcase, taking up the wall on one side, where school books for every age and degree were arranged in brown paper covers. A writing-desk standing on the table, with a cover over it, and an inkstand with pen and pencil, all belonging to Miss Scott, the daily governess, was the only really tidy spot in the whole room. The walls were covered with maps and pictures cut from the *Illustrated News*—two or three of these in frames—conspicuous amongst them the familiar child in the big sun bonnet tying up her stocking on the way to school, and another sitting on a snowy slope, apparently in a most uncomfortable position, but smiling nevertheless serenely on the world generally. [102]

"This is our school-room, and I am glad I have nearly done with it. That cracked piano is enough to drive one wild. It is good enough for the 'little ones' to drum on. Do you care for music?"

"Yes, I care for it, but I don't play much. Ada plays beautifully."

"Ada is very pretty, isn't she? I remember one of you was very pretty."

"Yes, Ada is thought lovely. She is not in the least like me."

"Well, I hope we shall be good friends. I am sorry you are out in that poky part of Roxburgh; but Digby and I shall come very often, and you must come here whenever you can."

"It is so odd," Kate went on, "that only a year ago we used to call you our grand relations, who were too stuck-up to care for us—" [103]

"Oh! please, don't talk so," said Salome, with a sudden earnestness of appeal. "Pray don't talk so. I can't bear it."

"I did not mean to hurt you, I am sure," said Kate eagerly. "Don't cry, Salome." For Salome had covered her face with her hands to hide her tears. "How stupid of me! Do forgive me," said Kate, really distressed. "But I am always doing things of this kind—saying the wrong thing, or the right thing at the wrong time."

Salome made a great effort to recover herself, and soon was amused at Kate's lively description of the ways and doings at Edinburgh Crescent. Kate could describe things well, and delighted in having a listener, especially one like Salome, who was sure not to break in with—"You told me that before;" or, "I have heard that story a hundred times."

But though Salome was amused, she was secretly surprised at Kate's free discussion of the faults and failings of her brothers and sisters. Salome would never have dreamed of talking of Raymond's selfishness and arrogance to outside people, nor of Ada's serene contentment with herself, which was passive rather than active, but was trying enough at times. Salome's loyalty in this respect is worth considering; for the inner circle of home ought to be sacred, and the veil should not be lifted to curious eyes to make public faults, and troubles which too often arise from those faults and darken with cold shadows the sky of home. [104]

The boys did not return by four o'clock, and Salome, afraid that she should not be at Elm Fields in time to receive her mother, set out to walk there alone. Just as she was leaving the house, her aunt and Louise arrived in a carriage, and were saying good-bye to two ladies, who had evidently driven them back from the luncheon party.

As the little black figure glided past, Kate, who was standing in the hall, called out—

"Mamma! that is Salome. Mamma!—"

Mrs. Wilton took no notice of the exclamation; and Louise said, "Pray, do go back, Kate."

But Lady Monroe had turned her head, and was looking earnestly after Salome's retreating figure.

"Is not that Salome Wilton, Eva," she asked of her daughter,— "poor Mr. Arthur Wilton's child? I should so much like to speak with her. I was at Maplestone last year.—Stop by that young lady," she said to the footman, as he closed the carriage-door—"the young lady in black."

"How very odd!" exclaimed Louise, as the carriage drove off. "Lady Monroe never said she knew the Maplestone people. Why, Salome is getting into the carriage. How absurd! Mamma, I do believe they will drive her home—next door to the baker's shop. Just fancy!" [105]

"Do not stand on the pavement making such loud remarks, Louise," said Mrs. Wilton.

"I am glad," exclaimed Kate, "that Lady Monroe is so kind. And how could you and mamma cut Salome like that?"

"How should I know who she was?" said Louise sharply. "I did not go to Maplestone with you."

"Well, mamma *must* have known her anyhow," said Kate. "She is the nicest girl I have seen for a long time. I shall make a friend of her, I can tell you."

ARRIVALS.



"SHALL be so glad to drive you home, my dear," Lady Monroe said, as Salome seated herself in the carriage. "I have the pleasure of knowing your mother; and Eva and I spent a very pleasant day at Maplestone last year, when I renewed an old acquaintance. How long have you been in Roxburgh? I wish Dr. Wilton had told me you were here."

"We only came the other day," Salome said; "indeed, mother and the children are not here yet. We expect them at five o'clock, and that is why I am so anxious to get back. We have lodgings at Elm Fields."

"You must direct us when we get nearer the place. Have you been spending the day at your uncle's?"

"Reginald and I met Kate and Digby on the down, and we went back to dinner. I have not seen Aunt Anna yet. Uncle Loftus came to see me."

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Then fearing she might have left a wrong impression she added—

"Uncle Loftus is very kind to us."

"He is kind to everybody," said Eva Monroe earnestly. "He is the best doctor in the world—except for sending me to Cannes for the winter."

"He has done that for the best, Eva;" and Lady Monroe sighed. "It only shows how conscientious he is."

Salome was becoming nervous about the right turn to Elm Cottage; and her wrong glove began to worry her as she looked at Eva Monroe's slender fingers in their neatly-shaped four-button black kid gloves.

"It is up there, I think," Salome said. "Yes; I know it is." Then, as the crimson rushed into her face, she said, "Elm Cottage is at the end of this road, next to a baker's shop."

"It is a pleasant, airy situation," Lady Monroe said. "You must tell your mother I shall call upon her very soon; and perhaps she will let me take her for a drive."

"Oh! it is near St. Luke's Church, mamma—Mr. Atherton's church. Why, it is the very house the Athertons lodged in till the vicarage was ready."

"So it is. You will find the Athertons pleasant neighbours," Lady Monroe said. "They will be nice friends for you, I hope; and the church is a very nice one. I daresay Mr. Atherton will be glad of your help in the Sunday school."

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The carriage drew up as she was speaking, and the footman looked down from his seat doubtfully.

"Yes; this is right," said Lady Monroe. "Good-bye, my dear. I am so glad I met you."

"A sweet, gentle girl," Lady Monroe said, as Salome, having expressed her thanks, disappeared behind the little wooden gate. "It is very sad for them all. What a change from that lovely place, Maplestone Court, where I saw poor Emily Wilton last year!"

"Yes," said Eva; "to lose their father and money and position."

"Not position, Eva. A gentlewoman can never really lose position in the eyes of right-thinking people. I feel a great interest in the Wiltons; for their mother is, I should think, but little fitted to struggle with adversity; she was never strong."

"I wish we were not going to Cannes, mother, and then we could often go and see them. Oh! I do *not* want to go away; my cough is quite well. It is so hard to go. Think how tired we were of the life there last year." And a cloud of discontent came over the fair face of the delicately nurtured girl, who had all that loving care could suggest to brighten her life and soften the privations which delicate health brings with it to the young.

[109]

It must strike us all, old and young, when we look round upon the lives of others, that there is a crook in every lot, and that God will have us all learn the lesson of "patience,"—patience which can make the crooked places straight and the rough places smooth.

Salome found Stevens had set out tea on a little table in the dining-room. The tea-pot had a cosy cover over it; and a plate of thin bread and butter, cut from one of Ruth's fancy loaves, looked inviting.

"This is the mistress's time for afternoon tea," Stevens said. "She could not sit down to a table at this time, just off a journey too. I have got some buns for the children. Now, Miss Salome, do go and get yourself tidy, to look home-like. Where are the young gentlemen? Master Reginald went out with you."

"I expect they are both gone down to the station. Reg and I have been to dinner at Uncle Loftus's. Oh! here is the carriage. Here are mother and Ada!"

Salome went swiftly out to meet her mother and sister, and tried to greet them with a smile. "Mother," she exclaimed; "I am so glad you have come."

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Mrs. Wilton made an effort to respond to Salome cheerfully; but Ada did not even try to smile.

"Now, then," said Dr. Wilton, "I must not stay. Reginald is walking up with the little boys and my Digby. The luggage will follow in the omnibus."

"Won't you have a cup of tea, Uncle Loftus?" said Salome. "We have it all ready."

"No, thanks, my dear, I cannot stay. I have a consultation at half-past five. Really you have made the best of this room; it looks quite pretty; and it is quiet here. I hope you will be comfortable."

While he was speaking, Mrs. Pryor appeared, with a courtesy so profound that Dr. Wilton had to hurry away to hide a smile.

"I hope I see you well, ma'am," said Mrs. Pryor; "and I hope, I am sure, you will mention anything I can do for you, and I will try in my poor way to do it. It's a world of trouble, ma'am, and you have had your share, as I have had mine; and I know how hard it must be for you, ma'am, in the evening of your days, to have a change like this—from riches to—"

"Here are the little ones," exclaimed Salome, as the sound of the children's voices was heard in the porch.

Hans and Carl were in the highest spirits. They had chattered all the way from the station, and were ready to be pleased with everything. [111]

They brought with them a relic of the old home, in the person of a little white fluffy dog, named Puck, which came bustling in at their heels, flying up at every one in expectation of a welcome, and regardless of Salome's—

"Mother, what will Mrs. Pryor say to a dog? I thought Puck was to be given to the De Brettes."

"The children begged so hard to bring him," Mrs. Wilton said. "Puck is a dog no one can object to."

Salome looked doubtful, and said—

"I am sure Mrs. Pryor won't let him get on the chairs," as Puck seated himself on one of them. "Get down, Puck."

"I thought it was a mistake to bring Puck," Ada said; "but the children would have their own way."

"He is a very well-behaved dog in general," said Stevens, anxious to make peace and avoid discussion with Mrs. Pryor; "and if he forgets his manners, we must teach him, that is all."

"Where is the nursery?" Carl asked, "and the school-room? Are we to have tea there?"

"You shall all have tea together this evening," Stevens said; "but I will show you your room, my dears. Come upstairs."

"Where is Raymond?" Mrs. Wilton asked. [112]

"Raymond!" exclaimed Salome. "He said he would go to the station. Did you not see him?"

"No," Reginald said. "Digby Wilton and I walked down together from the cricket match. Digby is not so bad after all."

"I think him very nice, and I like Kate. I had quite an adventure, mamma. Lady Monroe, who says she knew you years and years ago, brought me from Edinburgh Crescent in her carriage, and was so kind. Do you remember her, mother? She came to Maplestone last year."

Poor Mrs. Wilton, who had been trying to keep back her tears, found the very mention of her old home too much at this moment. A sob was the only answer; and Ada said—

"Mamma had better go and take off her things and rest a little. Show us the way, Salome." Reginald followed, and tried not to be disappointed that his mother did not notice the bookshelves and several little contrivances in her room. And Salome wished Ada would not say, "How dreadfully small the house is; and how this huge ugly bed fills up the room,"—the four-post bed which was Mrs. Pryor's glory.

She had come up behind the party, and hearing her most valued possession thus slighted, took her revenge forthwith. [113]

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; I don't wish to intrude; but I do not take *dawgs*. No dawgs or cats are allowed in *my* house. I don't take *children* as a rule—never; but a dawg I cannot put up with. It would wear my spirits out. I hope," looking round, "you are *satisfied*, ma'am!"

"Oh, it is all very clean and neat, thank you," Mrs. Wilton faltered out; "it will do very nicely, and—and I will see about Puck: if he is troublesome, he must be sent away."

Alas! the very spirit of mischief, whose name he bore, seemed to have suddenly possessed Puck. A great bustling and low growling was heard on the staircase, and Hans and Carl laughing and saying, "At it, Puck—good Puck." In another moment Puck appeared shaking something soft frantically, and tearing wildly about with it in his mouth, letting off the spirits which had been pent up on his journey from Fairchester.

"What has he got? Take it from him, children.—What is it, Salome?"

"It's a bird, I think.—Puck, put it down," said Reginald sternly, seizing Puck by his fluffy tail, and administering several hard slaps.



“It's a bird, I think.—Puck, put it down!”

When at last Puck dropped his prey, Mrs. Pryor exclaimed, "My feather brush—my dear, dear mistress's feather brush! I've seen her dust her own chayny with it *times*. I wouldn't have taken a pound for it. Oh dear! oh dear!" [114]

"It is not much injured, I hope," said Mrs. Wilton. "Only two feathers have been loosened."

"A nasty, mischievous little thing," said Mrs. Pryor in an injured tone, making a thrust at Puck with the short handle of the feather brush.

It was not in dog nature to take this patiently, and Puck stood at bay, barking furiously, and growling as an interlude between every fresh outburst.

Mrs. Pryor put her hands to her ears, and saying something about calling her son to protect her, she toddled away. After a storm comes a calm. Puck stood apologetically on his hind legs when his enemy was gone; and Carl, seizing him in his arms, carried him off to the little room he was to occupy with Hans, saying, "That horrid old woman should not touch him."

Like the sun shining through a cloud was the appearance of Ruth's good-natured face.

"I will manage it all," she said to Stevens. "If mother makes a great fuss, why, I'll take the little creature to live with us. I am not so particular or fidgety. Don't take any notice of what mother may say; she means well."

Alas! how many people "mean well," and how much better it would be if they made their meaning clear. Their good intentions are often like a riddle, hard to find out. If the intention is good, it is a pity that it is not better fulfilled. People who say they mean well are, I am afraid, often very disagreeable, and do not make the lives of others easier by their "good meaning." [115]

The evening passed. Tea was over. The "little ones" were in bed. Stevens was sitting at supper with Mrs. Pryor when Raymond rang the bell.

"Where have you been, Raymond?" Salome said, going out to meet her brother. "Why did you not go to the station to meet mamma?"

"Why didn't I go?—there were plenty without me," he said crossly. "I have been with Barington; I met him in Roxburgh, and I was thankful to get out of this hole."

"Raymond, don't say that to mamma," Salome entreated.

"Well, my dear boy," Mrs. Wilton said, rising wearily from her chair as Raymond went into the room, "I was getting quite anxious about you;" and then she kissed him affectionately.

"I met an old friend—Barington," Raymond said; "and I knew Reginald would meet you.—Hallo,

Ada, how are you? Barington wanted to come to-morrow to see you. He admires your photograph so much; but I could not let him see us here, so I put him off."

[116]

Ada looked up with a placid smile from her work—for Ada was never idle for a moment—and said, "Who is Barington?"

"Oh, an awfully nice fellow!—I say, mother, you won't stay here, will you? No decent people will call upon you. I can easily find you some nice lodgings Barington told me of."

"My dear boy, we must stay here for the present. It is quiet and better than living in a street. Will you have any tea, Raymond?" she asked.

"No, thanks; I have dined with Barington at the Queen's. He paid the score."

Raymond had a soft, caressing way with his mother, and she now sat with her hand in his, looking at him with loving interest.

"I can't bear you to live in a place like this," he began again, "you dear mother. I am sure there are heaps of good lodgings in the better part of Roxburgh, only our kind relatives did not wish to have us too near them."

"Nonsense, Raymond," Salome broke in.

"Well, never mind about that, dear. Uncle Loftus has, he thinks, heard of something for you in Harstone. You are to go and see Mr. Warde with him to-morrow at ten o'clock punctually."

[117]

"Uncle Loftus won't like to be kept waiting, so you must be up in good time to be at Edinburgh Crescent by ten o'clock, Digby says."

"Shut up, Reginald," said his brother; "I do not want your interference."

"What is to be done about old Birch, mother?" he asked turning again to Mrs. Wilton; "he ought to have a term's notice. I thought I could go back till Christmas."

"Oh no, Raymond; I am afraid that is impossible. My dear boy, it is such pain to me—to—to—"

Mrs. Wilton was in tears again, and Salome murmured, "How can you be so selfish, Raymond?" while Reginald, unable to control his indignation, went out of the room, shutting the door with a sharp bang.

"Oh, well, mother, I'll go to this Mr. Warde's, of course, and I daresay they will give me a good salary, and then I will get you some other lodgings the very first thing; see if I don't. I am not going to allow you to be shelved off here; and Ada! I daresay these Edinburgh Crescent people are jealous of her. There is not one of them half as good-looking."

"Oh, why did Ada smile and look pleased? Why did Raymond always get undeserved praise?" Salome thought. For Mrs. Wilton said, "It is very good and dear of you to think about us, Ray; I only hope you will be happy. My children's happiness is now the only thing I have to live for."

[118]

Salome bit her lip, as she listened to her brother for the next ten minutes, standing now with his back to the chimney-piece surveying the room, and interspersing his remarks on it, which were anything but complimentary, with stories of "Barington," and a fellow who had dined with them at "The Queen's."

"Shall we have prayers, mother?" Salome said at last. "You must be very tired, and—"

"Prayers! oh, not to-night, Sal; besides, who is to read them?" said Raymond.

Salome faltered a little as she said, "We can read a Psalm for the Evening in turn, and perhaps mother will say a prayer."

"Yes," Mrs. Wilton said; "you are quite right, dear. Call Reg and Stevens, and bring me my large prayer-book, for my eyes are so weak. I am in the evening of life, as Mrs. Pryor told me," she added with a sad smile; "and the last month has added ten years to my age."

"Why, mother, you look so young," said Ada. "I do dislike Mrs. Pryor talking in that whiny-piny voice; and how disagreeable she was about Puck."

Salome, who had gone to fetch the books, now returned with Stevens and Reginald, whom she had coaxed to come back. Then she found the places in the books, and the young voices read together the Psalm for the Seventh Evening. It seemed to bring its message of peace to the young, untried heart of the eldest daughter of those fatherless children.

[119]

"Fret not thyself because of the ungodly.... Put thou thy trust in the Lord, and be doing good: dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed. *Delight* thou in the Lord: and he shall give thee thy heart's desire."

"I will try to delight myself—that means, be cheerful and patient," Salome thought. "I must take care not to be too hard on Raymond, as if I thought myself better than he. But I feel as if it would be a *fight* now, and as if I should never be able to forget the troubles quite. I must set myself to be patient and cure my own faults, and be as happy as I can, that mother may see we are all trying to help her, and that we *like* to help her. How far, far worse it is for her than for any of us."

Thoughts like these were in Salome's heart as she lay down to sleep that night, and there was a

shining as it were from the "delight in the Lord" upon her young, sweet face, as her mother, weary, yet sleepless, took her candle and went to look at her children as of old in the spacious nurseries of Maplestone. The little boys lay in the profoundest slumber, and the mother's heart yearned over them with unspeakable tenderness. But as she left them and gently opened the door of the girls' room, and stood by the bed where the sisters slept, she felt as if the story of the last few weeks had left its trace on Salome's face. The expression was changed, and though bright and sweet, it was the face of the woman rather than of the child. Salome had entered the school where God takes the text and preaches patience. [120]

CHAPTER IX. [121]

"SETTLING DOWN."



T is wonderful how the wave of a great storm carries us unresisting on its crest. We are, as it were, washed ashore; stunned and bewildered for a time, but soon to find the necessity of struggling onward—to do our best. Stripped of all we have held dear,—however desolate, however bare, life must be faced and the burden must be borne.

Children like the Wiltons have youth and the freshness of spring-time to help them on; while women of Mrs. Wilton's age—in the autumn of her days—naturally clinging for support to others, are more likely to collapse, like the ivy when the prop on which it depended is removed.

A man so widely respected as Mr. Wilton had been was not without friends, and several of them came forward with valuable and substantial help. Ready money to meet the current expenses which were absolutely necessary was kindly offered; and Mr. De Brette wrote to Mrs. Wilton, after the sale at Maplestone, to say he had bought in one or two pictures, and some other little things, which she was to accept as a small token of gratitude for services rendered to him by Mr. Wilton in past years. The arrival of these things in the van from the railway caused great excitement amongst the children, while the sight of them seemed to open afresh the flood-gates of poor Mrs. Wilton's grief. They were chosen with that sympathetic feeling of what she would care for most, which doubled the value of the gifts. Her own and her husband's portrait, painted by a good artist at the time of her marriage; a beautiful copy of the San Sisto Madonna; her own devonport; a certain chair which she had always used; and the table and chair from Mr. Wilton's library; and a good many little odds and ends of familiar things. And a box containing enough plate for everyday use was brought by Mr. De Brette himself, and placed in Mrs. Wilton's hands. [122]

The settling in of all these things was an interest and delight to the children, and Mrs. Wilton was glad for their sakes that it was so.

Mrs. Pryor could not be brought to admire anything. She was incredulous as to the identity of the fair, graceful, smiling girl in the picture with the pale, careworn widow lady who sat beneath it. As to the poor gentleman, he might have been good-looking, but he was not fit to hold a candle to the doctor. But she had been used to such beautiful pictures at her dear departed lady's house—nothing could look *much* after them. Her bitterest shafts were hurled against the devonport, to make room for which an old mahogany what-not had to be removed: "A clumsy thing, and yet all gim-cracky, with a lot of little drawers—no use to anybody. She hoped she was not expected to dust all them things, for she just honestly said she wasn't going to do it." [123]

But at last all was settled down, and except for the standing grievance of Puck, peace was proclaimed. Puck had made a pretence of living at the shop, but this stratagem did not avail for long. He was continually rushing to and fro, and was oftener at Elm Cottage than at the baker's shop; but Mrs. Pryor thought more highly of him than at first, for he waged war against a large cat that Mrs. Pryor had convicted of killing a canary, and still occasionally dared to haunt the back premises to look for another victim! Puck's growls succeeded so well, that Mr. Tom contented himself with sitting on the low red-brick wall, with his back raised to a level with his head, and his tail swelled to the size of the boa Mrs. Pryor wore round her throat in winter. [124]

Her son Frank, who left most of the conversation necessary to his wife, was heard to say, at the end of the first week of the Wiltons taking up their abode at Elm Cottage: "We live and learn. If any one had told me my mother would take children as lodgers, and those children with a little dog at their heels, I shouldn't have believed them. We shall see her with a monkey from the 'Zoo' next."

Lady Monroe was not slow to fulfil her promise of calling on her old friend, bringing Eva with her; and it so happened that Mrs. Loftus Wilton, Louise, and Kate arrived on the same day. The little square drawing-room was filled; and Hans and Carl, rushing up to the room where Salome sat with her old music portfolio and her manuscript, shouted out,— "Two carriages full of people are come to see mother. Go down, Salome."

"Ada is there," Salome said, telling the children not to talk so loud; and then she looked ruefully at her inked forefinger, and wished she had mended the crape on the skirt of her dress before she put it on that day.

"Miss Wilton—Miss Salome—my dear, do make haste; your mamma will be so pressed and worried. There's Mrs. Doctor Wilton, with a train of black silk long enough to reach from here to

the gate almost. Do make haste, Miss Salome, my dear. If there isn't another knock! Dear me, I can't abide answering the door; it has never been my business." And Stevens bustled down, exhorting the children not to peep through the banisters, and signing to Salome to follow her, she disappeared to answer the door to Mr. and Mrs. Atherton. But happily Mrs. Atherton had seen the two carriages at the gate, and was just giving the cards to Stevens, saying she would come again, when Salome appeared. [125]

"We hear your mother has visitors," said Mrs. Atherton, in one of those voices which ring with the clear sweetness of truth,—the voice which is so different from the "put on" or company voice, or the voice which regulates itself to the supposed requirements of the moment. "We will come again very soon. I hope your mother is pretty well?"

"Yes, thank you," said Salome. "Won't you come in?"

"No; we are near neighbours at the vicarage," Mr. Atherton said. "We were your predecessors here," he said with a smile; "so we know the rooms will not hold large levees. I want to know your brothers. I saw two elder ones at church with you on Sunday. If they care for cricket, we have a game going on every Saturday in the field above the church."

"Reginald is at the college now; but I will tell him, thank you." [126]

And then, as Mr. and Mrs. Atherton said good-bye, Lady Monroe and her daughter came into the little passage with Ada.

"We shall only tire your mamma if we stay now," she said; "but I have made her promise to drive with me to-morrow if it is fine, and either you or your sister must come also."

Salome and Ada, after a few more words, went together to the little sitting-room, where their mother sat, flushed and ill at ease, with their Aunt Anna, Louise, and Kate.

Kate sprang up when Salome came in and kissed her affectionately; while her mother said, "How do you do?—is this Salome?" and then, with a very light salute on her cheek, went on in the same even current of talk which the entrance of the girls had checked, not stopped.

"I want to see your little brothers," Kate said to Salome; "may I come with you and find them? Louise can talk with Ada; they are certain to get on."

Salome glanced at her mother, who looked so worn-out and tired and sad, and wondered at her Aunt Anna's conversation, which all concerned herself and her friends, and her own interests and amusements. But it seemed hopeless to help her, and she left the room with Kate. [127]

Hans and Carl were painting pictures in the dining-room, and Kate had soon finished with them.

"Why, they are twins, aren't they? Have you got to teach them? What a bore for you! Now show me your room. It is not so bad, really; and I like the look of your sitting-room—it has a home-like air. What a smoke! Where does that come from?" she said, looking from the window of Salome's room.

"That is the bake-house," Salome said. "Mr. Pryor is our landlady's son; and the garden is separated from ours by that wall."

"I smell the bread," Kate exclaimed; "it's rather nice. And what is this?" she said, pausing on the heap of foolscap paper lying on the chest of drawers. "Essays—papers? 'Chapter I.' Why, I believe it is a story. Have you actually written a story? You look like an authoress. Digby says he never saw a cleverer face than yours, and he quite admires you. Read me a bit of the story; tell me the names of the people."

Poor Salome was suffering all this time the pangs which sensitive natures like hers can only understand. To have her secret hopes and fears thus ruthlessly dragged to light—to see her sheets, which, alas for her wonted carelessness, ought to have been hidden in one of those deep drawers, fingered by strange hands, was misery to her. She tried to take them from her cousin's grasp; but she held them fast, and began to read:— [128]

"Under the shadow of a spreading cedar-tree, two little—"

Salome was now really angry; her eyes flashed, and she said, "Give me the manuscript directly, Kate. It is excessively rude; I hate it; I—"

"Oh, I am only in fun. I don't see anything so wonderful in writing a story. Hundreds of people write now-a-days. I hope you will get fifty pounds for 'Under the shadow of the cedars.' Dear me, I did not think you could 'flare up' like that."

"I hope you won't tell any one about what you have seen," said poor Salome in a trembling voice. "I hope—"

"Not I. I forget everything directly. 'In at one ear, out at another,' Digby says. But I want to be great friends with you, so do not let us quarrel about that stupid old story."

It was a relief to Salome to hear Stevens's voice calling her, and announcing that "Mrs. Loftus" was going, and Miss Wilton was to come down directly.

It seemed delightful to be left alone; and Mrs. Wilton lay back in her chair, and in the gathering twilight Salome saw she was quietly crying. She stole up to her, and, sitting down on a low stool, [129]

said, "You were glad to see Lady Monroe, mother. She is *so* kind."

"Yes, very kind; and I must make an effort to drive with her to-morrow, as she has asked me; but —"

"Oh yes, dear mother, you *must* go. Aunt Anna was rather too much for you. It was a pity that they all came at once, as you have seen no one for so long."

"Yes; and it brought the past back. But I will try to be patient."

"You are patient, mother dear," Salome said.

Ada now drew near the fire, and began: "I like Louise very much. She wants me to go to Edinburgh Crescent to-morrow to play tennis in the square. May I, mother? I can walk as far as the turn to the college with Reginald."

"I think we ought to begin with the children's lessons," Salome said, "and settle down. They are getting very unruly, just because they miss Miss Barnes's hand."

"It is no use beginning in the middle of a week," Ada said; "and I suppose I may have some lessons too—music lessons I do want."

"We shall see our way in time, darling," Mrs. Wilton said; "and I must try to manage about a piano. But I think Salome is right about the children; they ought to begin regular lessons. Mrs. Pryor complains of their running so much up and down stairs. She says it wears out the carpet." [130]

"Mrs. Pryor is a most disagreeable woman," said Ada. "I certainly do agree with Raymond that we ought to remove."

"Nonsense, Ada. Think of all the trouble over again, and all our things just settled in and unpacked."

She was interrupted by Reginald rushing in from the college. He was full of life and spirit; and had found Rugby boys were thought something of, as the head-master himself and several of the assistant-masters were Rugbians. He had taken an excellent place; and, altogether, the world seemed to smile on Reginald.

Raymond followed his brother in about ten minutes, and threw himself into a chair and yawned.

"Are you very tired, dear?" asked his mother.

"I should think I was. The air of that hole in Harstone is enough to choke a fellow. I don't believe you have any idea of the stuffy air; and such dirty clerks at the desks—a set of cads!"

"One isn't a cad anyhow," said Reginald. "His brother is in my form. His name is Percival."

"Oh, I know; his coat out at elbows, and his hair like a mop. I should say he was the greatest cad of the lot." [131]

"That I know he isn't," said Reginald hotly. "He may be shabby—for his people are poor, and there are heaps of children—but I am certain Ralph Percival's brother isn't a cad."

"You needn't put yourself out about it," Raymond said. "Not one of the clerks is anything to me. I don't speak to them."

"I daresay as you get higher in the office you will find the class better. Mr. Warde's nephew and his two sons are in it. Uncle Loftus told me so."

"Any letters for me by the second post?" asked Raymond.

"No, dear. Whom did you expect to hear from?"

"Oh!—a friend—St. Clair. He may not have posted the letter in time." Another yawn, and then Raymond stretched his legs out before the fire, first giving it a vigorous stir with the tongs, which came more handy than the poker, and drew a newspaper out of his pocket.

"We have had a number of visitors to-day," Ada said. "Lady Monroe, for one, with her daughter. Such a pretty, nice girl!"

"Who is Lady Monroe? and how did she find you out?"

Ada explained; and Raymond seemed interested. [132]

"I hope you will keep up with them," he said; "and mind mother drives with Lady Monroe to-morrow."

"They are going to the south of France for the winter very soon; that is the worst of it," Ada said. "Lady Monroe went to school with mamma, and seems so fond of her."

"What a bore that they are going away! They might be useful, and ask a fellow to dinner. Who came besides?"

"Aunt Anna and the two elder girls. I like Louise very much; and Aunt Anna is really very handsome, and she does look so young."

"She patronized no end, didn't she? I am glad I was not here."

"She was very pleasant, and said she hoped to see us often."

"That 'often' means 'never,' when no day is fixed."

"I am to go to tennis to-morrow."

"Well, did anybody else come?"

"Yes; Mr. and Mrs. Atherton, the vicar of St. Luke's."

"Oh, they are certain to be slow. We didn't want them."

Salome had escaped by this time, and was in her room re-arranging her papers. Why had she been so cross to Kate? why should she be offended with her? "I will work at it whenever I get the chance," she thought. "A little at a time is better than nothing;" and taking the sheet that lay upper-most to a large box in the window, pressed the spring of a little leather ink-stand, and kneeling to catch the western light, was soon engrossed in her tale. She forgot cold, and vexation, and Raymond's conceit and selfishness, and wrote on with a smooth-nibbed "J" pen for a quarter of an hour.

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Then Carl bounced in.

"Ruth Pryor has sent us in some lovely hot cakes for tea; isn't that kind?"

"Go away, dear," Salome said.

"What are you doing, Salome? Do come and read to us the life-boat story. *Do*."

Salome sighed, gathered up her sheets, put them in the drawer, and went to her little brothers.

CHAPTER X.

[134]

A PROPOSED FLIGHT FROM THE NEST.



LADY MONROE was right when she said the Athertons would prove true friends; and it soon became one of Salome's greatest pleasures to get a quiet talk with Mrs. Atherton. She possessed the power, rare but beautiful, of influencing others by *herself*, not by her words. She had remarkably quick insight into character; and she had not known the Wiltons long before she had, as it were, mastered the situation, and could enter into the difficulties and trials of each one. She saw that Salome had the hardest task of all, and she felt for her, with her dreamy, imaginative temperament, forced, as it were, to take up with the practical side of daily life, and set herself to help her.

Lady Monroe had postponed the departure to Cannes longer than Dr. Wilton thought right, till the sudden change from a prolonged St. Luke's summer to an early and sunless spell of winter brought on Eva's little short cough, and made her hasten the arrangements for leaving England.

[135]

Eva was a spoiled child—or, rather, would have been spoiled, had so sweet and gentle a nature been capable of "spoiling," in the common acceptation of the word. Her mother clung to her with the intense love which springs from the thought that all love and care for our heart's dearest ones may not be needed long. Eva had taken a sudden and real liking for Ada Wilton. Her beauty and serenity had a charm for her. She liked to hear her play and watch her white hands on the piano. She liked to talk with her and to hear her voice. And so it had come to pass that Ada was continually sent for to Lady Monroe's house; and when the time for leaving Roxburgh was definitely arranged, Eva said that nothing would please her so much or help to pass the winter cheerfully as to have Ada with her.

Lady Monroe herself had her misgivings. "Ada is so young, and ought to be going on with education and lessons," she said.

"But she can *have* lessons, mamma; and think how she will learn to speak French. And there are drawing-masters and music-masters at Cannes. Oh, *do* let us take her; she is so fond of me, mamma, and she is so lovely and so ladylike."

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The feverish glow on Eva's face and the excited light in her eyes made her mother hesitate before she refused.

"I will consult Dr. Wilton," she said, "and her mother. I hardly know if it would be right to take her away from her mother; and yet it might be a relief in some ways. Still it would be an additional anxiety for me; and you might get tired of her, Eva."

"Tired of her, mamma! Oh no. Think of the many dull, lonely hours I have to spend, while other girls are playing tennis, and going to picnics, and dancing, and enjoying themselves. I know I have you, darling mother," Eva said tenderly; "but if I had a young companion, you would feel more free to leave me."

"We will see about it, Eva. I must not do anything rashly."

But Lady Monroe lost no time in consulting Dr. Wilton, who gave the plan unqualified

approbation; and then it only remained to get Mrs. Wilton's leave.

Her note with the proposition came one afternoon when the day had been a troubled one—the children naughty, and Salome unable to manage them; Ada still less so; Stevens put out by the inveterate smoking of the chimney in the little boys' room, where she kept a fire and sat at her needle-work, and made the room look like the ghost of her old nursery. Then Mrs. Wilton had been vainly trying to look over accounts. Her head and eyes ached. The weekly bills when multiplied by fifty-two would amount to far more than her small income. Raymond had asked for a sovereign, and how could she refuse him? Reginald had begged for his football jersey and cap, for which the old Rugby colours were inadmissible. Rain poured without, and a cold wind penetrated through every crack and cranny of the house. In fact, the aspect of life was dark and gloomy; and Mrs. Wilton, fairly exhausted, was just losing herself in a day-dream by the fire when Ada tripped in with Lady Monroe's note. [137]

"I expect I know what it is about, mamma; something very, very delightful for *me*."

"I can't see to read it till the lamp is brought in," Mrs. Wilton said.

"Let me get the lamp, mamma—or ring for it—or poke up a blaze," said Ada.

It was quite unusual for Ada to exert herself like this; and so Salome thought, who was reading to Hans and Carl in a low tone by the window, where the daylight was stronger than by the fire.

Mrs. Wilton yielded to Ada's impatience, and opened the envelope, holding it towards the bright blaze Ada had brought to life, and reading by it the large, clear handwriting. [138]

"You know what is in this note, Ada?" Mrs. Wilton said when she had finished it, and turned back to the first sheet again to assure herself of the contents.

"I can guess, mother," Ada said, drawing nearer. "Do let me go."

"Go where?" asked Salome, leaving her post by the window and coming towards the fire,—"go where, Ada?"

Mrs. Wilton gave Lady Monroe's note into Salome's hand. She bent down, shading her forehead from the heat by her hand, and read:—

"DEAR MRS. WILTON,—I am writing to ask you a great favour. Will you lend your dear Ada to me for the winter? Eva has so set her heart on the plan, and has such a real affection for your Ada, that I hope you will consent. I need not say that she will be to me for the time as my own child, and that I am of course answerable for every expense; and I will see that she has advantages in the way of music lessons and any others that may be available at Cannes. My Eva's life will be brightened, and she will feel the privations of her delicate health less with a young companion whom she loves. Do not refuse me this request. I may add that Dr. Wilton encourages me to make it. Our friendship is not a new thing; and when I look at Ada, I see again the Emily Bruce of old times.—With kindest love, I am ever affectionately yours,

[139]

"KATHARINE MONROE."

"Do you wish to go, Ada?" Salome asked.

"Wish? Oh, I shall like it so much! I think it is delightful!"

"To *you*, no doubt," said Salome; "but it will put a great deal more on me. The children's lessons, and walking with them, and—But if mother likes it, there is nothing to be said."

"Well, it will be a great advantage to Ada," Mrs. Wilton sighed out; "and Lady Monroe will be a substantial friend. If your uncle approves it, I do not see how I can refuse."

Ada sprang up. She was but a child, and the idea of a journey to the south of France was full of untold delight. Then to escape from the tiresome lessons, the dull way of life, the bother about money, the fidgets about keeping two fires burning, looked most attractive.

"Thank you, darling mother," she exclaimed with unusual enthusiasm, throwing her arms round her mother. "I shall come back ever so much brighter, and able to do heaps more things." [140]

"It is very easy to settle things in that way," said Salome. "You are exactly like Raymond—*intensely* selfish."

"Don't be jealous, Salome," Ada exclaimed. "You knew the Monroes first, and if Eva had taken a fancy to you, you would have been only too pleased; but you see Eva happens to like *me* best."

"Oh, my dear children, do not let there be any uncomfortable feeling. Though we are poor, let us be loving."

Salome's heart was full, and rising hastily, she dropped Lady Monroe's letter, and left the room. Poor child, it did seem to her, as to many another, that effort for others was in vain; that those who keep self and selfish interests well to the front are, after all, those who succeed best, not only in getting what they wish, and escaping disagreeables and worries, but in winning affection and admiration from every one.

"I have done my very best ever since dear father died. I *have* tried to do everything, and yet Ada

is the most cared for. I believe mother does really love her best. Father—father—*he* cared for me, and now he is gone."

"Why, Sal, what is the matter?" It was Reginald's voice, as he came into the dining-room, where, in an arm-chair, by the dying embers of the fire, which was not allowed to burn up, Salome was sobbing out her trouble. "Why, old Sal, what is it?" [141]

"Ada is going off to Cannes with Lady Monroe, and never thinks about me. I shall have twice as much to do—the children always on my hand; and I shall never be able to finish my story. I have not minded leaving mother with Ada; but now—and she *is* so selfish, Reginald."

"So is half the world, it seems to me, Sal. Cheer up. *I* am glad, for one, *you* are not going to the south of France. I tell you that. I cannot get on without you, nor any one else either; so that is very certain. Come, Sal, don't be down-hearted. It will make one less here, and Ada is not cut out for our present life. You and I do very well; and I know I have got the best of it at school, and have no time to sit and mope."

"I don't mope," said poor Salome, half-offended. "To-day, I have—" Tears were just beginning to fall again, when Reginald caught sight of a book on the floor.

"Is not this Mrs. Atherton's paper you promised to send back this morning, Salome? I say, she said she must have it to post to a friend. Shall I run over with it to the vicarage?"

"Oh dear, how careless I am," Salome sighed. "I should like to go with it myself, Reginald. It is not quite dark, not nearly dark out of doors. Will you come for me in half an hour? I do feel as if the run, and seeing Mrs. Atherton, would do me good." [142]

"All right," said Reginald good-naturedly; "only, be quick, for I want tea over early this evening. I have no end of work to get through."

Salome raced upstairs, and snatching up her jacket and hat, and thrusting her hands into a muff, with the newspaper crushed up mercilessly, she was out of the house in no time, and was very soon at the vicarage.

If she could only find Mrs. Atherton at home, she thought, and alone. She stood in awe of Mr. Atherton, the grave, dignified man, who looked as much older for his years as his mother looked younger, and by reason of this had led to much confusion in the parish when he and Mrs. Atherton first came to St. Luke's.

Yes, Susan thought Mrs. Atherton was at home. Would Miss Wilton walk in?

Salome was shown into the drawing-room, which was empty; and Susan, after throwing a log on the fire, and remarking that "it was quite wintry weather," left her.

That bright, cheerful room, full of the signs of the life of those who inhabited it, always gave Salome a sense of home. Books on all sides; a little picture on an easel in one corner; needle-work; a carefully-arranged writing-table in one recess by the fire, a work-table in the other. Nothing fine or grand, no aspirations after "high art," though a few old china plates were hung against the wall, and the large square of crimson carpet was surrounded by polished dark boards. A room used and loved already, though the vicarage was a new house, and there was not the charm of association with the past to make it dear. [143]

Salome had waited for a few minutes, lost in a day-dream by the fire, and forgetting her vexation and trouble, when the door opened and Mr. Atherton came in.

"I have brought back this newspaper Mrs. Atherton lent me," she began hurriedly, "to read a review. I hope it is not too late for the post."

"My mother is gone to see a child who is ill; but sit down, and let me have the benefit of a talk in her place." Mr. Atherton saw the look of disappointment in Salome's face, and added, "If you can wait, my mother will be home before long."

Salome stood irresolute, and then, fearing to be ungracious, she said,—

"I can come again to-morrow, thank you. I daresay you are busy now."

"No; I was only reading for half an hour's recreation. I may as well take it by talking with you, unless you really would rather go away." [144]

In spite of her shyness, a bright smile flashed over Salome's face.

"I could not say so," she said, "as you ask me to stay, without—"

"Being uncivil," he said laughing. "Now I think we have had enough of preliminaries. I was thinking of you just before you came. I have a little class at the Sunday school ready for you, if you would like to take it, and one for your sister also."

"My sister is going away for the winter with Lady Monroe," Salome said. "I wanted to tell Mrs. Atherton about it. It is not quite decided; that is to say, mother had not written the answer to the note when I came away; but I feel sure she will go, and as I shall be left alone with mother and the children and the boys, I don't think I shall be able to leave them on Sunday afternoons."

"Then I would not urge you; our first duties lie at home."

"I shall have to teach the children altogether now. Ada helped with arithmetic and music. I am so stupid at both, especially arithmetic."

Mr. Atherton saw that Salome was troubled, and yet he did not press her for confidence, but quietly said,—

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"Well, we are not all born to be mathematicians or musicians. God gives us all different powers. It is wholesome, however, to grind a little at what we dislike sometimes. The old story of the two roads, you know."

"I don't know," said Salome, her eyes glistening with interest; "unless you mean the narrow and the broad road," she added simply.

"Yes; I was thinking of Lord Bacon's rendering of the same idea. If two roads seem to lie before the Christian—one smooth and pleasant, the other rough and thorny—let him choose the rough one, and in spite of pricks and wounds he will gather flowers there, and fruit too, if he perseveres. Those may not be the precise words, but it is the meaning."

"I don't think I have *two* roads before me to choose from," Salome said. "When I look back on our dear, happy home at Maplestone, and compare that time with this, it *does* seem hard enough."

"Do not look back, my dear child, nor onward too much; just take the day, and live it, as far as you can, in the fear of God, taking everything—joy and sorrow—from Him."

"Oh, it's not so much the big things," said Salome. "Even the greatest trouble of all—dear father's death—is not so hard in the way I mean; though I would give—oh, I would give anything to get him back and to see him happy. Still, I can think he is at rest, and that God took him from what would have broken his heart. But I mean little worries—crossness, ill-temper, fidgets about money, and, above all, feeling that I am getting so disagreeable—worse every day."

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"You do not think you are alone in these feelings, do you? My dear child, it is a very common experience. Take these little pricking thorns, and the wounds they make, yes, and the poison they sometimes leave behind, to the loving hand of the Great Healer. Would you not think it strange if people only sent to your uncle, Dr. Loftus Wilton, for great and dangerous ailments? His patients go to him with the small ones also, and often by skill the small ones are prevented from growing into large ones. Be patient, and watchful, and hopeful, and cheerful, and leave the rest to God. There is a deep meaning in those words we were using last Sunday: 'Cheerfully accomplish those things that thou wouldest have done.'"

Salome felt in much better spirits when she left the vicarage than when she entered. She raced down the garden to the gate, where Reginald was waiting for her, and then she saw Mrs. Atherton tripping lightly up the road with a basket in her hand.

It would have been dark by this time, except for the light of a bright young moon which was hanging like a silver bow over the church spire; Jupiter, a little in advance of the moon, in a clear blue sky.

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"I am sorry I missed you, my dear," Mrs. Atherton said. "Come to-morrow, if you can, about four o'clock. I have been to see a dear little boy who is suffering great pain from a burn. I have dressed it for him, and he is better."

"I brought back the paper you lent me," Salome said.

"It is too late for the north post to-day; but never mind. Good-bye," and Mrs. Atherton's alert steps were soon out of hearing as she walked quickly up the garden to the house.

"Reginald, let us go round by the upper road and down at the back of Elm Cottage; it is so fine and bright, and I feel in a better temper."

"Make haste then," said Reginald; "for Digby said something about coming to tea. He had to go home first."

The brother and sister walked fast; and Reginald told Salome a long and rather involved history of a football match, and said he hoped soon to work up into the first fifteen. The road at the back of Elm Cottage took a sudden dip down towards an excavation from which stone for building had been taken some years before; but the particular vein had been exhausted, and the quarry was deserted, and made a circular outlet from the road of some thirty feet, overhung with brambles and ivy. As Reginald and Salome passed this quarry they heard voices. Something familiar in the tone of one speaker made Salome slacken her pace.

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"Reginald, I am sure that was Raymond speaking. Look back. Who is it?"

Reginald turned, and distinctly saw two figures at the entrance of the quarry—two men or boys.

"I don't think it is Raymond."

"I am certain it is," Salome said. "Whom can he be talking with?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Reginald. "I daresay it is not he."

"I wish I knew how Raymond is really getting on," said Salome. "The worst of it is, one never feels quite sure that he is telling the truth."

Reginald was silent.

"Does Percival's brother ever say anything to you about Raymond?"

"No; at least, not much."

"Reg, if you *do* know anything about Raymond, tell me. It's not like telling tales. I think I ought to know, for there seems no one to look after him, and, though I hate to say so, he does deceive mother."

But Reginald was not to be drawn into the discussion further. Digby Wilton arrived at Elm Cottage at the same moment as Reginald and Salome, and he was always a cheerful and welcome visitor. The two families seemed to leave any intimacy that existed between them to the two pairs of brothers and sisters. [149]

Louise's affection for Ada was short-lived, and a certain jealousy possessed her when she saw that Eva Monroe had taken an affection for her. Louise would have liked very much to be the elected companion of Eva to Cannes, and was lost in astonishment that a child of fifteen should be preferred before her, when the plan was announced.

"It is done as an act of charity, my dear Louise," her mother said. "Be thankful that your education and social position and advantages have been secured by me without the help of strangers. Poor Emily! it must be hard for her to receive so much from her friends. My proud spirit could never be brought to do so. And she is not an economical woman. I notice she has had the crape on her dress renewed already. And I hear from Aunt Betha that they deal with the tradesmen about Elm Fields and Whitelands Road. It would be far cheaper if they sent down into Harstone, and really Stevens might do this. It seems extravagant for poor people in lodgings to keep a maid." [150]

"I don't believe Stevens would leave Aunt Emily if she begged and prayed her to go," said Kate with indiscreet heat. "Really I do think it hard to talk of Aunt Emily like that, mamma."

"My dear Kate," said Mrs. Wilton, "will you ask Aunt Betha to come and speak with me? I must send a note to the Quadrant this evening."

These were Mrs. Wilton's favourite tactics. She seldom argued a point with her children, and she was right in the principle. If the differences of opinion were likely to be very decided, she would ignore them by turning quietly to another subject.

CHAPTER XI.

[151]

ADA'S DEPARTURE.



HE household at Elm Cottage were engrossed for the next ten days with preparations for Ada's departure. Mrs. Pryor's eyes filled with tears whenever it was mentioned.

"Going off to foreign parts, where my dear departed lady went years ago, to find a grave for her husband; no good ever comes from going to these outlandish places. However a widow lady can trust her child to go off like this passes my comprehension."

"These are old-fashioned notions in these days, mother," Ruth would interpose. "These foreign places are just English all over. I know a young person who went as maid to—to—not Cannes, but it's all the same; the name begins with a saint."

"Ah! I daresay," sighed Mrs. Pryor; "some Papist's place."

"Well, this young person told me," said Ruth, taking no notice of the interruption, "that at their hotel it was just like an English country house; everything goes like clock-work. In your lady's days, I daresay, sixty years ago, it might have been changed." [152]

"Yes, it *was* different. And times are changed," said Mrs. Pryor. "The young set themselves up, and think it fine to scoff at their elders. If this pretty child—for she is *but* a child—is laid in the burying-ground out there, hundreds of miles from her widowed mother, don't come to me to be *surprised*—that's all."

Ruth nodded at Stevens to say no more. But Stevens's own heart was heavy; and many were the sighs which were breathed over Ada's box, which stood ready, strapped and addressed, in the dull haze of the November morning.

Ada herself had kept up bravely till now; but as the wheels of the fly were heard which was to take her to the station, to meet Lady Monroe and Eva and their maid, her sobs broke forth.

"Oh, I wish I were not going!" she said. "O mother, mother!"

"Don't upset mamma, Ada," Salome whispered. "Dear Ada, please don't."

But Ada threw herself into her mother's arms, and could only sob out, "Oh, I wish I were not going!"

Mrs. Wilton strove to be calm; and Stevens wisely hastened box, and neat little bundle of rugs, and ulster, and umbrella into the fly. Hans and Carl, who, with Stevens, were to see Ada off, stood bewildered to see their generally calm, self-possessed sister crying so bitterly. [153]

"I thought she wanted to go to France," Carl said, puckering up his mouth.

"Yes; I thought Stevens said Ada was crazy to go," echoed Hans.

"She will be all right when she is once off, my dears," said Ruth. "You run and get in. There's good little boys; get into the fly. Look! I declare there is Puck, knowing as well as possible that Miss Ada is going."

At last Ada was gone, clinging to the last to her mother and to Salome, and saying, "Give Raymond and Reg my love; don't forget."

Ada was not the first to find that the longed-for pleasure is not all that imagination pictured; and well might Ruth say, as she turned back into her little shop,—

"There, I didn't think she had so much heart, that I didn't."

"Everybody's heart ain't always in their mouths, Ruth," was Frank's rejoinder. "Still waters run deep, my dear."

"Then you are one of the deepest I ever saw, Frank; you never waste a word. I do believe if I hadn't helped you, you never would have come to the point with me." [154]

"That's an old story now, my dear," said Frank, rubbing his floury face with his hand. "Don't be offended, my dear," he continued. "I don't say it wasn't a good story, for *me* anyhow, that I *did* come to the point."

After Ada's departure Salome made a great effort to settle down into a fixed routine. She wrote out a list of the lessons with her little brothers, and with Reginald's help got over the formidable arithmetic better than might have been expected. Irsome as this routine was to a girl of her dreamy and imaginative temperament, she bravely struggled to take each day as it came, and do the best with it. Stevens, who did all the needle-work and small washing of the family, could not always walk with her children, but she clung to this habit of a past life; and soon after the one o'clock dinner in the short winter days Hans and Carl would set off on a shopping expedition with Stevens, or for a walk over the downs. And while Mrs. Wilton rested quietly for an hour, Salome would sit down to her story, and forget the present in the society of the imaginary children of whom she wrote. Unconsciously she reproduced the dear old home of her happy childhood,—the stately trees, the emerald turf, the little lake with the rustic bridge. Her children were the idealized children of her own experience, and the circumstances in which she placed them and the adventures which befell them were, like the "monkey stories," for the most part reproductions of incidents which lay treasured in the storehouse of her memory. Thanks to Miss Barnes's admirable teaching, Salome was guiltless of slips of grammar, and wrote a fair hand. This "thinking on paper" has a peculiar fascination in it for the young; and no one could have grudged Salome these hours she spent over her manuscript, full of hope and even belief that by her hand the weight of care might be lifted from her mother. [155]

Christmas drew on, and Reginald was full of his examinations—so full, that he sat up late at night with his papers, and had but little time to give to the consideration of Salome's tale.

It was one evening when Mrs. Wilton was occupied in answering a long letter from Ada, filled with glowing descriptions of Cannes and the happy life she was leading there, that Salome went into the dining-room where Reginald was at work. The finished manuscript was in her hand, and she said, "Reg, where do you advise me to send my story? I have finished it, every word."

Reginald was absorbed in his Euclid, and held up his hand, as if to beg her to stop. [156]

"Are you very busy?" she said. "Then I won't trouble you."

Still there was the thought in her heart, "How nice it would be if somebody cared." But she waited patiently, and at last Reginald pushed the books away, and giving a prolonged yawn, said,—

"It is awfully cold here with no fire. What do you want, Sal?"

"Reg, do come and work in the drawing-room. The children are gone to bed, and mother and I are as quiet as mice."

"Raymond is not there, of course."

"No," said Salome, "and I can't think what he does every evening. He goes off directly after tea, and he is so late every night now. Reg, do you know where he goes?"

"I don't *know*," said Reginald, "but I don't think things are all square with him. But, you see, Raymond and I have never had much to do with each other, going to different schools, and he has always looked down on me."

"I hope he has not bad friends," Salome said; "but I am certain he was with some one he did not care for you and me to see that evening when I had been up to the vicarage, the day it was fixed for Ada to go to Cannes."

"Yes; I remember. However, I don't see that we can do any good. We must just go on and leave it." [157]

"I am sorry mother gave him a latch-key. I know she lies awake till she hears him come upstairs; and though I am glad to do anything for her, still I think it is a pity she let him have our room when Ada went away. When he slept in yours it was a check. I can't think where he gets money from," Salome went on. "That is a new ulster he has, and a new cigar-case, and I don't believe he has had any salary yet at Mr. Warde's. Reg," said Salome in a low voice, "*do* you think he is getting into debt?"

"You see, Sal," said Reginald, "I don't like to say anything I am not sure about, so don't ask me, though of course a fellow like Percival is to be trusted. Still, I don't think either you or I can do anything, so it is better to hold our tongues. Is that your story?" touching the roll of manuscript.

"Yes," said Salome sadly. "I thought you wouldn't mind just looking at my letter. I shall send it to Bardsley and Carrow. They have such a long list of stories for the young. Look, this is what I have said. Will it do, Reg?"

"How should I know, Sal? You can write a letter fifty times better than I can. It is a pity you cannot consult somebody else."

"I don't know who, unless it is Mrs. Atherton." [158]

"Mr. Atherton," suggested Reg; "he is awfully clever."

"Yes; and I should feel so stupid and shy, I know. I think I will just try by myself; and if it is returned, I may pluck up courage to ask Mr. Atherton then."

"Yes; that will be the best way. And mind you put in the same number of stamps in the envelope that you put on the parcel, or you will never see the story again."

"Then you think it is safe to be rejected, Reg? Well," said Salome with a sigh, "never mind. I am going to begin another at once, so perhaps at last I shall succeed."

Reginald drew his chair to the table again, and opened a book, as if to show he had no more to say on the subject; and Salome returned to her mother, having first deposited her precious manuscript and the letter addressed to Messrs. Bardsley and Carrow in the drawer, where she had kept them since the day when Kate had so roughly handled the sheets.

"Are you going to write to Ada, Salome?" Mrs. Wilton asked.

"Not to-night, I think, mother."

"Hers is a delightful letter—dear child! I am sure I am thankful she is so happy; and Lady Monroe's little enclosure is so pleasant." [159]

"I did not see that," Salome said. "Give it to me, mother;" and Salome read:—

"Your dear child is all, and more than all, I wished for a companion to my Eva. They are so happy together, and lessons are not forgotten. Ada is making rapid advances with her music. There are some very nice people in the hotel, and we have pleasant little drives, and picnics, and excursions in the sunshine and amongst the flowers."

Salome made no comment as she returned the letter to her mother, and the next minute Dr. Wilton's little short rap was heard, followed by Mrs. Pryor's footstep in the passage, eager to have the honour of admitting the doctor. "The only visitor she troubles herself about," Stevens always said.

"Uncle Loftus!" Salome exclaimed. "How late! It is past nine o'clock!"

"He must have been on a late round," Mrs. Wilton said. And then Mrs. Pryor, with her usual solemnity, announced,—

"Dr. Wilton."

"Well, my dear Salome? And how are you, Emily? You look warm and comfortable here. It *is* a wretched night. Where are the boys?"

"Reginald is working hard at the exams, and the little ones are in bed. Raymond is out. He is so closely confined in the office all day that I cannot keep him here all the evening. The change in our circumstances falls more heavily on him than on any of them. Life at Eton and life here are indeed two different things." [160]

Dr. Wilton gave an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, and looking at Salome, whose face was turned up to his with its wistful expression, he said,—

"I saw Mr. Warde to-day, and I am sorry to say that he did not give at all a good account of Raymond. He is very unpunctual in his attendance at the office, and very careless and idle when he is there. The senior clerk complains of him continually; and not only of this, but he gives himself such airs that he is most unpopular with the men in the same office."

Dr. Wilton had found great difficulty in beginning what he had to say, but when once in for it he went straight through. He saw with pity and compassion his sister-in-law's face grow whiter and

whiter as he went on, and he saw Salome quietly move and, going behind her mother's chair, put her hand caressingly on her shoulder, bending down, and pressing her cheek against her mother's in silent sympathy.

"My dear Emily," Dr. Wilton said kindly, "I am extremely sorry to have to say this. The boy is young, and has been—well, a good deal indulged. Let us hope he will see the folly of throwing away his chance of earning his living. His head is stuffed full of nonsense, and even my own boys complain of his brag." [161]

Mrs. Wilton rallied now. That the clerks in the office should complain of her son filled her with pain: but that his cousins (as she thought), plain, uninteresting, heavy boys, should dare to disparage her handsome, bright son, to whose faults she was blind, filled her with anger as well as pain.

"I do not think any of my children have seen much of yours in their own home, Loftus," she replied; "and if *this* is the way the one who is so constantly here has repaid our kindness, I shall take care he is not with us so much in future."

"O mother, Digby would never be unkind," Salome said warmly. "He would never speak evil of any one. Reg says—"

"I know Reginald is your favourite brother, Salome. Perhaps you might have done more for poor Raymond, if—"

Mrs. Wilton's voice faltered. The best mothers have what may be called "colour-blindness" as to their children's faults and failings. But there are some who will suffer any amount of personal trouble and anxiety that the children inflict, rather than that their faults should be canvassed by others. The discussion of them by ordinary people is resented; how much more when relations bring them roughly to light! It is not too much to say that Mrs. Wilton could have better borne a complaint of her boy coming direct from Mr. Warde to herself than to have that complaint brought by his uncle. Worse still that Raymond's cousins should be quoted. [162]

I cannot say that I think Mrs. Wilton had any reason to think kindly of her husband's family. Although Dr. Wilton had been kind and attentive, his wife had taken no trouble to brighten the life of her relatives at Elm Cottage. This arose chiefly from her habit of never troubling herself about outside matters. She "never puts herself out of the way for any one. It is not *in* Anna to do it," Aunt Betha would say sometimes when even the maternal instinct was not strong enough to keep Mrs. Wilton from an "afternoon" or a dinner party when little Guy was in one of his worst fits of pain.

"I can do no good. It only hurts me to see him suffer, dear little man," she would say. "Auntie nurses him so much better than I can."

Thus it is not likely that a woman who could be thus unconcerned about her own children would be greatly interested in her husband's nieces and nephews. Hans and Carl had been twice to Edinburgh Crescent to tea, and had walked with Miss Scott, and Edith, and Maude. Salome had spent one day with Kate and Louise. But this was about all the hospitality which had been extended to them. Ada had been more sought after, because she was so pretty; every one asked who she was and admired her. But Ada was gone, and jealousy at Eva's preference for her was now the prominent feeling with both Louise and her mother. [163]

"Well," Dr. Wilton said, "I think the boy ought to be seriously remonstrated with. If he leaves Warde's office, I don't know what on earth is to be done with him. If you can send him up to Edinburgh Crescent to-morrow evening to dinner, I'll make an opportunity of speaking to him. I am sorry to be the bearer of unpleasant news; but as I recommended Warde to take him, even go out of his way to help him,—for they don't, as a rule, take young men with any salary,—I can but feel some responsibility about it.—Can you say anything to your brother, Salome?" Dr. Wilton said in a gentle voice,—a voice which always recalled her father. "You are the best of sisters and daughters," he added, putting his arm kindly round Salome's slight figure.

"I will try, Uncle Loftus," was the answer in a low voice.

Then Dr. Wilton went away, saying,—

"Good-bye; we must hope for better things. Remember, tell Raymond seven o'clock to-morrow evening." [164]

"The first time he has ever asked Raymond to dinner," said Mrs. Wilton. "O Salome, it is very hard to be treated in this way!"

"I think I am sure Uncle Loftus means to help us; he is very kind. And, dear mother, Raymond must be told he cannot go on like this. He ought not to stay out so late every night; and—" Salome stopped. Mrs. Wilton broke completely down, and cried bitterly.

"Don't speak sharply to him, Salome," she sobbed. "I will try what I can do. He does love me. I shall wait up for him to-night, and you can go to bed. Let us have prayers now."

To the surprise of his mother and Salome, though scarcely more than half-past nine, Raymond's key was heard in the door, and he came in, throwing his ulster on a chair and his hat on it.

"Is it raining, Raymond?" his mother asked.

"No," was the short answer; and then there was silence till Stevens came in with the Bible, and Reginald, with a rough, shaggy head of hair, and ink on his fingers, followed her into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

[165]

CONFIDENCES.



ALOME did not know what passed between Raymond and her mother, but when she came up to her room, she heard her speaking cheerfully to Stevens, who always came to attend on her mistress, as in old days. Salome had slept in a small iron bedstead in a corner of her mother's room since Ada had left home, in order that Raymond might have the one she had shared with her sister to himself. Salome, however, still kept her property in her old room, and her manuscript and heaps of books and scribbles were in the drawer there, so that she often went into it.

The next morning Salome got up early, with the intention of posting her roll and the letter at the nearest Elm Fields post-office before breakfast. It seemed that Raymond had changed his habits, for Salome met him ready dressed in the passage, as she softly left her mother's room.

"Where are you off to, Salome?" he asked.

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"I was going to post a letter. O Ray, I am so glad you are up early; and I will get the coffee made directly.—Be quiet, children," she said, as two little figures came dancing down the passage in their nightgowns. "Run back and be quiet, or you will wake mamma."

Stevens was busy in the dining-room, where the fire was burning cheerfully, and the light of the December morning struggling to gain ascendancy over the Harstone fogs.

"Wonders never cease!" exclaimed Stevens. "Master Raymond will be in time at the office for once!" Stevens spoke with the freedom of an old servant, and to Salome's surprise her brother did not resent it. He was quiet and subdued, but evidently absorbed in his own thoughts.

"You are never going out in the cold and fog, Miss Salome? What are you going for?" Stevens asked.

Salome was all this time hoping the manuscript and letter, stuffed in the pocket of her black ulster, would escape notice.

"I like to warm my feet before breakfast, Stevens. Do go and call Reginald. He will be late for school. He was so tired last night with his work."

Stevens was gone at last, and brother and sister were left together. Salome's heart beat fast. She did so much wish to say the right thing, and to avoid irritating her brother. She was apparently intent on watching the boiling of the little "Hecla" which made the coffee, but in reality she was thinking how she should begin what she longed to say. She was spared the effort. Raymond suddenly said,—

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"I am in a great bother, Salome. I wish you would help me. I—"

"How can I help you, Ray? Oh, I am so sorry for you and for mother! I do trust Mr. Warde will let you stay at the office."

"Mr. Warde! the arrogant cad—it is not about him I am bothered. Sneak! to complain of me to my uncle. Why did he not say it to me? It is only that fellow Browne, the head clerk, has a spite at me!" This was an old story. In days gone by, Raymond's bad school reports had always been "the result of spite." "But, Salome," he went on, "you know I did not like to be for ever begging of poor mother, so hard up as I know she is, so I borrowed some money of a fellow, who said I need not think of paying him for ever so long; and now he is turned rusty, and we have had a blow-up, and he says if I don't pay him to-day, he shall come here to my mother, or to my uncle, for he will have the money by hook or by crook."

"O Raymond!" Salome exclaimed; "how much is it?"

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"A mere trifle; only my term's allowance at Eton—five and twenty pounds. Do you think, Salome, you could get it for me in any way? You never wear that gold thing with emeralds mother gave you that belonged to grandmamma. Could you let me have it to raise money on it?"

"I don't know. I don't think it would be right. The necklet is in mother's dressing-case. I never have kept it myself. Of course, it is mine, as grannie left it to me, or it would have been sold. Still I don't think it would be right. O Raymond, I wish I could ask some one about it."

"If you do that you will ruin me. If I can get the money quietly, I will promise not to borrow again."

"Did you use it for—for that ulster and pin, and—" Salome was alarmed at her own boldness; and Raymond answered,—

"No; I did not."

"And you are in debt for those things also?"

"Yes; but that does not matter—tradesmen will wait. It's this fellow Percival."

"Oh, is it Percival, the brother of Reg's friend? Digby knows him; he is very good and nice. I thought you despised him."

"I said he wore a coat out of elbows in the office; but he is a gentleman for all that, I find." [169]

"I should think so," said Salome indignantly; "as if a coat made any difference. But I can't imagine how it was he had money to lend you."

"He is a miser, you see," said Raymond. "He is saving up, and grinding and pinching, that the brother at the college may get to Oxford. They say he will get a scholarship; but that would not keep him, and so this fellow is saving up. I'll tell you how it was I borrowed the money. I told him a cram, and said it was to keep my mother and all of you."

"O Raymond! how could you be so mean and deceitful?"

Raymond took his sister's plain speaking very quietly, because he looked upon her as his only hope. "Percival found out that I had spent the money in billiards, and—well you know, in 'The Queen's,' with Barington while he was here; and—"

"I think it is dreadful," Salome interrupted. "I could not have believed it of you."

"Well, look here, Sal, will you save me from a frightful row with Uncle Loftus by seeing Percival, and trying to make him wait for his money? I expect he would believe you; and I really don't want to—vex my poor mother. It was bad enough last night about old Warde; and I promised to do better at the office, and that I would go to Edinburgh Crescent to-night just to please her, for I detest it. If there is a row with Percival, it will make her ill." [170]

"You should have thought of that before," was on Salome's lips, but she refrained from saying so.

"Reg will be here directly; may I tell him?"

"No; on no account. I will tell Percival to come up here this afternoon, just at dusk, and you must manage to meet him."

"O Raymond, I don't think that will do; you don't consider what people might say if they saw me."

"It is nearly dark at four; that is not late. That old quarry place then."

"Where I saw you with some one some time ago?"

"Yes; that's it. I will be close at hand. Do pray let me tell Percival."

Salome had only time to say "Yes," when Reginald came down. It was so new to her to hear the grand, magnificent Raymond pleading for a favour at her hands. It was a cowardly proceeding on his part; but such boys as Raymond Wilton are cowards. It would have been better for him if he had not so often been helped out of school scrapes by too indulgent parents. His was one of those natures which need discipline and firmness as well as love. He had not been taught that in self-denial there is nobleness which brings peace after the pain. To choose the thorny path of which Mr. Atherton had spoken to his sister, had never even occurred to him. He had always looked for the smoothness and pleasantness of life as his by right as well as choice, and thus of all the family who had suffered these sharp reverses he was the least able to meet them. [171]

As Reginald came into the room Raymond left it; and Stevens and the children next appeared—Stevens with a tray for her mistress's breakfast, and two bowls of oatmeal porridge for Hans and Carl.

"I am just going to walk a little way with Raymond," she said; "I shall not be five minutes."

Salome was off like lightning, and soon overtook her brother.

"Raymond, may—may I tell Reginald? may he come with me this afternoon?"

"No," said Raymond; "what made you race like that? Tell no one, and I am certain Percival will listen to you. In the quarry at four o'clock, or soon after."

Salome fell back breathless behind her brother, and turned up the road to the post-office. She dropped the precious manuscript into the box and the letter addressed to Messrs. Bardsley and Carrow, and then ran home.

"Good morning, miss," said Ruth, who was washing the step of the shop, while Puck sat by watching the operation. "It is a fine winter's morning, isn't it? just enough frost to make it pleasant. Puck is looking his best, isn't he? the beauty! I washed him last evening." [172]

"It is very kind of you," said Salome; "he is beginning to like you, Ruth, as well as he does us."

"Oh no; he isn't one to forsake old friends," said Ruth. "See now—" for Puck had darted towards Reginald with delight expressed in a series of twists and twirls and low sounds of affection, as he ran hither and thither round Reginald.

Salome ran to her brother. "I have posted my story, Reg." How she longed to say more; how perplexed was her loyal heart as to what was right and best to do.

She seemed suddenly drawn into a secret meeting with a stranger, and with what shame she would have to beg him to wait for the debt her brother had so dishonestly contracted. Salome watched Reginald's figure as he ran with amazing speed down the road, and then turned slowly and sadly into the house.

Mrs. Wilton came down about eleven o'clock looking much brighter and better. When the little boys had put away their books and slates, and had gone out with their hoops, she said: "I feel so much happier about dear Raymond, Salome. He was so affectionate to me last evening, and has promised to do better. I have written a line to your Uncle Loftus, to ask him to deal gently with him, and to remember how greatly indulged he was in your dear father's lifetime. He has been little prepared for such a life as the one he is now leading. But we must be patient with him, poor dear fellow. I always think I am not half patient enough."

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"O mother, you are only too kind to Raymond, and, indeed, to us all. You spoil us all."

"Not you, Salome," her mother said tenderly; "I fear you have too much on your young shoulders. If I were a strong woman, like your Aunt Anna for instance, I could do more to help you; but I am so useless. No one can feel that more than I do."

"You are of great use, mother dear," Salome said, "and ornamental too. You always remind me of somebody in a story as you sit by your work-table. Quite as pretty a picture as that one of you when you were a girl, whatever Mrs. Pryor may say. When shall we know about our affairs, mother?" Salome asked after a pause.

"I cannot tell; there is so much to settle. I believe the furniture realized a great deal, and the wines, and—"

"Don't let us talk of it, mother. I was only thinking of those jewels of grannie's—the set of emeralds that she left me."

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"They are all secure, my dear; they are my personal property, which is mine under settlement. But I often think I shall sell some of them. Indeed, I shall have to do so, I expect."

"It would not be wrong, would it, mother? I mean nothing that is yours ought to go to the creditors?"

"No, certainly not, my dear. It is sad to think you should have to talk of such things at your age. Only a few months ago, and I was consulting Miss Barnes about your going to Paris to finish, and now here is your education stopped."

"Oh no, mamma," said Salome cheerfully; "I learn a great deal by teaching Hans and Carl. I am beginning Latin with Reginald, and you know I read German and French for my own pleasure. I daresay I am finishing my education just as well as if I had gone to Paris."

Salome's words had more truth in them than she knew. She was indeed under training in the school where the Lord gives His children many lessons, learned, perhaps, more easily in youth than in after years.

Many times in the course of that day Salome tried to recall all Mr. Atherton had said in his sermon on the Sunday before. He had been speaking of those who sought themselves and their own pleasure, and had quoted the well-known words of Thomas à Kempis:—"My son, if thou seekest thyself, thou shalt find thyself, but to thy own punishment." The thing eagerly coveted and sought after, nay, even prayed for, is granted; but it comes after all in the guise of a foe rather than of a friend.

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"I am not seeking myself," Salome thought. "I am trying to serve Raymond, and to save mother from pain; but, oh! I wish I could have had Reginald with me when I go up the road. He knows already something, I am certain, from the Percival who is at the college; but I could not break my word to Raymond, I must go through with it now."

Happily for Salome, Kate and one of her little sisters came to see them soon after dinner on this bright winter day, and Salome and Hans and Carl walked towards Roxburgh with them. Kate was as good-tempered and kind as ever, and infected Salome with her bright spirits.

Reginald was sure to stand marvellously well in the examination, Digby said so. Ralph and Cyril were going to sing at the school concert. It was such a pity Salome could not be there. Everybody always went, and it was such fun. Kate wanted Salome to go round by the college ground, where a football match was on; but as the sun set and the winter's fog gathered, Salome knew her hour was drawing near, towards which she was looking with nervous dread.

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The boys ran into the house, and clattered upstairs as soon as they reached home. Salome lingered in the porch a moment irresolute; then started off past the shop, where the gas was already lighted, up the road towards the quarry. The hedges were higher as she advanced, and, indeed, the road was cut out of the rock.

It was dusk, almost dark, and Salome felt lonely and frightened. She had not long to wait in suspense. A tall figure advanced towards her from the overhanging rocks of the old quarry.



"A tall figure advanced towards her."

"Miss Wilton?" asked a voice, so pleasant and gentleman-like in its tones that Salome was reassured. "I was coming to call on Mrs. Wilton. I am Philip Percival. At your brother's entreaty, and not wishing to press too hardly on him, I consented to see you first, as he tells me his mother is in such delicate health that excitement might hurt her. Is that true?"

"Yes, quite true," Salome said; but she was shivering with nervousness, and her voice trembled.

"We had better walk up or down the road," Philip Percival said; "you will take cold. It is a most unpleasant business, Miss Wilton; but I honestly think the only hope of saving your brother is to deal openly with you. He has deceived me so grossly, and you cannot wonder that I am indignant. He represented to me that his mother and sisters were in great difficulty, and that if I lent him the money for a month he could repay it with interest. It was foolish of me to be taken in. I was completely taken in. He has a winning, plausible manner; and he is treated so roughly by some of the clerks who resent the airs he gives himself, that I tried the more to befriend him. I have had a nice reward!"

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"I am so sorry," Salome said. "I want to beg you to wait a little while, and perhaps I shall be able to pay you. Mother has no money, I know, just now; and it is not only on that account I do not like to ask her, but because it will grieve her so much to hear of Raymond's deceit. She loves him so dearly, and it would be such a shock to her. Do you think you *could* wait?"

Philip Percival looked down on the little slight figure in its sombre dress with very different feelings to what he had expected. "My eldest sister will make it all right, if you will see her," had conveyed to his mind the idea of a woman of mature years—not of a young girl, who ought to have been sheltered by Raymond's care, not exposed by him to this painful revelation.

"Could you wait?" Salome repeated; and as she spoke two people coming down the road passed her and Philip Percival.

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"Salome, is that you?" It was Mrs. Atherton's voice. "Good-night;" and then, as Salome scarcely responded to the greeting, Mr. and Mrs. Atherton passed on.

"Whom could Salome Wilton be talking to so earnestly?" Mrs. Atherton said as they walked away. "It was not one of her brothers."

"No; I think not. You had better speak to her about it. It is far too late for her to be walking here alone with a young man."

"It is very strange. I cannot understand it," Mrs. Atherton said. "Yes; I will speak to her tomorrow. She is such a quiet child, every day I know her and watch her I love her better. I cannot understand it," Mrs. Atherton repeated.

"Yes; I will wait till Christmas for your sake," Philip said. "I see how painful your position is, and I feel indignant with your brother for placing you in it. He ought never to have sent me here. But lest you should think I love money for its own sake, I want to tell you that we are very poor. My father is paralyzed, and my mother gives lessons in music. I have been working hard to save

enough money to help my brother to live on his scholarship at Oxford, if, as we hope, he takes one. Also, I am able, by strict economy, to get a few things which brighten my mother's life a little. I don't say this to make you think it is wonderful or praiseworthy. I hope you will not misunderstand me."

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"No indeed," Salome said earnestly, looking up at the face she could but dimly see,— "no indeed. I think you are brave and good; and, please, do not give up poor Raymond. Perhaps he may get wiser and more used to this great change in his life."

"Let us hope so, for your sake as well as his own. And now, shall I see you home?"

"Oh no, no; it is quite near—at the end of the road. Good-bye, and thank you very, very much."

Philip Percival stood watching the retreating figure as it went swiftly down the road and was soon lost to sight in the gathering darkness.

"His sister, his eldest sister," he said—"a mere child; but what a world of resolution in her face!"

It would not have been Salome had she not dropped something in her flight. Philip saw something white on the road, and picking it up, found it was Salome's pocket-handkerchief. He was irresolute for a moment whether to follow her with it or keep it. He decided on keeping it; and putting it into his coat pocket, walked quickly away in the opposite direction to Elm Cottage.

CHAPTER XIII.

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HARD TIMES.



RAYMOND WILTON came back from dining with his uncle in a very amiable mood; and when he could get a word with Salome, and found that he was relieved from the immediate pressure of debt, he seemed as unconcerned as if he had never been in debt at all. He did not ask many questions about the interview with Philip Percival, catching at the most important part as Salome said,—

"Yes; he promised to wait till Christmas. That is not long, Raymond."

"Oh, well, something will turn up by then, and Uncle Loftus says it is possible there may be a little money coming in. The creditors are going to accept seven shillings in the pound; and if it were not for that hateful bank and its cheating, we should do. Anyhow, I am easy for the present, thanks to you, Sal; I shall not forget it, I can tell you."

"Raymond," Salome said in a low voice, "I wish you would go to church on Sunday mornings, and try to think more of what God wishes us to do."

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"All right, Salome; but you know I am not fond of preaching."

"Dear Ray," said Salome earnestly, "I am sure I am not fit to preach to you or any one, only I do feel sure that if we ask God to keep us safe, He hears us, and will not forsake us, if we are *really* sorry, and determined to try to please Him."

"These are old-fashioned notions, Sal," said Raymond carelessly; "but you are a good little thing, and I daresay it would be better for me if I were more like you."

That was all Salome could get out of Raymond; and, chilled and disappointed, she felt, as many of us have felt, that it was no use trying to help people like Raymond, still less to expect anything from them.

But for the present there was a calm. Raymond went off in good time to Harstone. He spent the evening at home; and his mother was quite cheered about him, saying several times to Salome, "I thought, for my sake, Raymond would turn over a new leaf."

Meantime Reginald worked hard at his papers, and was steadfast in his work, fighting his way in the form, step by step, always a hard matter at a new school for the first term.

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Salome saw him going on diligently and steadily, and longed for a word of praise for him. But it often happens that there is more joy in the mother's heart over signs of amendment in one child who has given her trouble and anxiety than in the persistent well-doing of those who never cause her uneasiness. This is nothing new. Was it not so in the days when divine lips told the story of the lost piece of silver and of the wandering sheep? Will it not be so to the end of time?

Salome lived for the next few days in constant excitement about the postman. Every time his knock was heard her heart would give an answering thump, and she would go out into the passage to take the letters. But Messrs. Bardsley and Carrow made no sign. A week passed; and one afternoon, when she went out to meet the postman, and eagerly took the letters from his hand, she came suddenly on Mrs. Atherton.

The rosy flush and the excitement of her manner were not lost on Mrs. Atherton, nor that she hastily thrust one letter into her pocket, and answered Mrs. Atherton's question as to whether she would like to see the *Review* she had brought in a confused manner, not even asking her to

come in, and standing with Ada's foreign letter in her hand, twisting it nervously in her fingers. [183]

"Shall I come in and see Mrs. Wilton?" Mrs. Atherton asked.

"Oh yes; please come in," was the reply; "but mamma is not downstairs to-day, so we have no fire in the drawing-room. I sit in the dining-room when mother is not well. She has a bad cold and head-ache. Please come in, Mrs. Atherton."

Salome preceded Mrs. Atherton into the dining-room, which Hans and Carl had combined to make very untidy by cutting up newspapers for the tail of a kite bigger than themselves, which Frank Pryor had in leisure moments made for them, with the assurance that "he" would carry a tail that would reach pretty near as far as Harstone Abbey Church. All these untidy scraps were on the floor, and one end of the table was even in a worse condition. Papers, books, pens, and ink were in a state of confusion impossible to describe. By the papers, and engulfed by them as they surged on every side, was a little work-basket, stuffed so full that the lid refused to think of closing, and out of which peeped a curious medley of articles too numerous and varied to mention.

"I am sorry to bring you in here," Salome began. "The children have nowhere else to play. They are gone now to help Ruth to make some tea-cakes. Please sit down." [184]

Mrs. Atherton subsided into a chair, and then laughing, said,—

"I am sitting on some property, I think," and rising, she drew from under her a box of tools, from which Hans had been using the hammer.

"How dreadfully careless and naughty of the children!" Salome exclaimed. "I am so sorry. I do wish I were neat and tidy like Ada, who never left anything in the wrong place in her life."

"It is never too late to mend," said Mrs. Atherton with a smile. "I have not seen you for a week, except in church. I have been so busy; and every week and every day we get nearer to Christmas, the pressure grows greater. I wanted to ask you if you would come over to the vicarage and help me with some work."

"I work so badly," Salome said, "but I will do all I can."

"It is very easy, humble sort of work," Mrs. Atherton said,— "sewing strings on skirts, and buttons on aprons and pinafores, for Christmas presents in the parish, you know. Will you come in to-morrow afternoon for an hour or two?"

Salome promised; and then conversation seemed to flag, as it always does when something is on the mind of one of those who are trying to keep it up without alluding to that "something." [185]

At last Mrs. Atherton rose to go away, when, taking Salome's hand in hers, she held it for a moment, and said,—

"My dear child, I have not seen you since we met you on the Whitelands Road. It was very late for you to be out alone, and with a stranger."

Salome's colour rushed to her face, and was of course misunderstood.

"You are so young, my dear," Mrs. Atherton said; "and I daresay, living in the country, you have often been out late in your own grounds and village. But here it is different. And you were talking and walking with a gentleman. Was he an old friend?"

"No," said Salome, "oh no; I had never seen him before. Oh, please do not ask me any more questions."

The look of distress on Salome's face touched Mrs. Atherton.

"My dear child," she said tenderly, "if you were my own daughter, I should say what I now say. Do not think that I interfere unduly, but let me earnestly advise you not to place yourself in the same position again. Will you promise?"

Salome was silent. How could she promise, when once more she must meet Philip Percival and tell him if she had succeeded in getting the money or not? Perhaps she might write to him, but somehow she felt it would be better to see him. [186]

Mrs. Atherton waited, as if for an answer; and as none came, she dropped Salome's hand, and turned away.

"Do kiss me again," Salome said. "And do trust me. I thought, and I still think, I was doing right that evening."

"Well, my dear child," said Mrs. Atherton, kissing her affectionately, "I hope it will prove so. Give my love to your mother. I will come in again very soon."

Salome ran upstairs with Ada's letter, and hastily putting it on the table by her mother's side, went down again to read her own letter. It was from Bardsley and Carrow. Her hands trembled with excitement as she tore open the envelope and read:—

"DEAR MADAM,—We return the manuscript of 'Under the Cedars,' with thanks for allowing us to peruse it. We regret that it is not suited for publication in our series of

stories for the young.—We remain your obedient servants,

"J. A. BARDSLEY AND CARROW."

"Everything is a disappointment! Everything fails!" exclaimed Salome. "It is no use trying to do anything. Mrs. Atherton suspects me of I don't know what; and I was only trying to save mother from pain. But Raymond may go his own way now. I can do nothing for him. Why should my life be so different to other girls? Ada is happy at Cannes, having all she can wish for. Then there are the girls at Edinburgh Crescent going out to-night to a fancy-dress dance, and to-morrow to some other party, and next week to the school concert; and here am I, trying to be of use, and yet I cannot even succeed in that, and everything is so wretched and miserable. I saw Mrs. Atherton looking round on this untidy room. The children are really the greatest bother;" and Salome snatched up the tail of the kite, newspapers and all, with no gentle hand; and by so doing, the string, which was twisted in one of the corners of her old writing-folio, brought the whole down—cloth, work-basket, and all. [187]

"What a horrid fire! and *what* a mess! Really this isn't very inviting," said Reginald, as he came in from football, and, covered with mud and scratches, threw himself into the chair Mrs. Atherton had occupied.

"Where's mother?" he asked. "Is her cold worse? I say, Salome, I was chosen to play in the second fifteen instead of a fellow who is ill. I have had a glorious run for once. Sal, what's the matter?" [188]

Salome was fairly crying now.

"It is all so miserable and uncomfortable, Reg; and look here."

She handed him the letter as she spoke.

"What a jolly hand!" Reginald exclaimed. "Who is it from?"

"It's about my story. Of course it is returned."

"Oh, well, try somebody else. There's heaps of other publishers; or, if that doesn't do, write another tale."

"It's very easy to talk like that, Reg. You don't seem to care."

"Yes; I do care very much. Where's the manuscript?"

Then it flashed across Salome for the first time that the manuscript had not arrived with the letter.

"Why, the manuscript is not come after all. Perhaps it is lost. I daresay it is lost. It does not matter."

The entrance of Stevens settled this matter. "The postman came back with this parcel, Miss Salome. He forgot to deliver it. What is it?"

"Oh, it is mine. It is all right. Give it to me, Stevens."

"What a state the room is in! Well, for your own comfort's sake, I think you might keep it tidier, Miss Salome. You would be ever so much more comfortable.—O Master Reg, what boots! Well, I don't know how the mud is to be got off. You must remember there's no one but me to do everything, except the old lady, who is not one to put herself out of the way to help anybody—not she." [189]

"Well, I'll clean my own boots, if that's all," said Reginald. "I don't care what I do. I'll clean the knives too, and learn to make you a gown, if it will please you, Stevie." And Reginald sprang up, took Stevens round the waist, made her pirouette round the table with him, and then, having left dabs of clay and mud off his boots all over Mrs. Pryor's red druggot, vanished.

Stevens straightened her cap, and pulled down her white apron, and said breathlessly,—

"What a boy it is! But I would sooner, fifty times over, have a bright happy nature like his, than one that can only mope and look miserable."

"I *am* miserable," said poor Salome, "so I can't help looking miserable."

"Well, there's many that are worse off than you, my dear. Ruth Pryor has been telling me of a family of little children left without father or mother. The Pryors supply them with bread; and this morning, when Frank went with the loaves, he found the eldest child, scarce twelve years old, with the little ones all crying round her, and her mother only buried a month ago; and now the father was taken in a fit, and went off before the doctor could get to him." [190]

It was the reverse of the picture to that over which Salome had been brooding,—her cousins' gaieties; Ada's happiness amongst flowers, and music, and sunshine; the lives of her old neighbours at Maplestone—the De Brettes, and the Fergusons, and many others—riding, dancing, and enjoying themselves. Stevens's words were of use. The old message seemed to be whispered to her soul: "Let patience have her perfect work." "Trust in the Lord, and be doing good ... verily thou shalt be fed."

It is not the perfect work of patience when trials are fretted at, and, as it were, *resented*; not the

perfect work of patience when we tell ourselves we have borne a great deal, and are wonderfully brave, and that no one half appreciates us or all we do and endure. Ah no! The stuff of which the hidden saints of God are made is different to this. Theirs is the patience of Christ's faithful ones who can smile under the smart, and be tender and gentle to others even while the sword is piercing their own souls.

The child of whom I write was very young, and no wonder that she failed at times. The burden laid on her was heavy; and I cannot be surprised that Mrs. Atherton's misapprehension was hard to bear, and that the honest and pure desire to save her mother and her brother should be the cause of her kind friend thinking less highly of her than before made it doubly bitter. Then the story, on which she had built so many hopes, copied so carefully, kept free from blot or stain,—it was hard to see it again, the familiar words looking up at her as she scanned them with tear-dimmed eyes; the headings to the chapters, the little bits of verse or hymn, so carefully chosen. All in vain all her trouble, all her pains. And if no one took her story, and paid her for it, how should she be able to satisfy Philip Percival at Christmas? [191]

The tangle of her life looked more bewildering than ever, and the child-heart within her was sick and sore with disappointment—a form of trial which the young find harder to meet than the old, because they have not the experience of past disappointments to guide them, and do not know how the sting is often taken away, as we live to say and to feel, "It was far better as it was, though I could not see it at the time."

Mrs. Wilton's cold proved a severe one, and she had to keep her bed for several days, and Salome did not find time to go over to the vicarage. Mrs. Wilton needed a great deal of attention, and Dr. Wilton came every day to see her. [192]

The holidays began. It was getting near Christmas, and there was an ever-increasing dread in Salome's mind about the money. It seemed strange to her that Raymond did not appear to concern himself about it. He was in excellent spirits, and altogether more agreeable than before the revelation about his debts. They hung like a fetter round his sister. And there was no news of "Under the Cedars," which had gone forth again to try its fate—this time with far different feelings, and with very little hope of success, instead of a great deal.

"Something must be said to Mr. Percival, Raymond, about the money. He said he would wait till Christmas, but not longer. Shall I write to him?"

"Oh no; don't remind him of it. I see him every day, and he can ask me if he chooses."

But Salome was not to be satisfied. "As I promised to do something about it by Christmas, I must tell him how it is."

"How what is?"

"Why, Raymond, I thought, I hoped I might get something for some work I did, and then I could have paid Mr. Percival half perhaps."

"Work! what sort of work?" [193]

"Oh, you must not ask. I will tell you some day perhaps."

"Don't bother yourself, Sal. Percival can wait. He is all right now with me, and I think he is a good fellow after all. I want awfully to get to St. Clair's for Christmas. He has asked me, which is awfully kind of him. You remember he was the fellow who travelled with us on that wretched journey."

"Yes, I remember; but I don't think you can go, Raymond. It is such a long journey for two days."

"I shall ask for an extra day. Old Warde is very civil to me now. It is better to keep up with friends worth having, like St. Clair. Mother thinks so."

Salome was silent. She thought it wiser to say nothing.

There was a bright service in St. Luke's Church every Wednesday evening; and on the Wednesday before Christmas, as Salome was coming out of the church, scarcely two hundred yards from Elm Cottage, she heard a voice near her say,—

"Miss Wilton."

She started, and turning quickly, said,—

"I wanted to see you, Mr. Percival. I cannot do what I promised, and I—I hardly like to ask it, but *could* you wait till Easter?"

"Yes," was the reply. "I can and will wait. I came here on purpose to say so." [194]

"How kind of you! Mr. Percival, is—do you think my brother is getting on better at the office?"

"I hope so," was the answer.

"He is there in better time of a morning, isn't he?" asked Salome anxiously.

Again the answer came guardedly,—

"I think so."

"Mother has been so ill lately, and quite confined to her room. Raymond has been much more attentive to her lately."

"I am very glad to hear it. I hope you will be at rest about the money. Good-night."

Then he was gone. And Salome ran quickly across the road to the gate of Elm Cottage, saying to herself, "Surely Taylor and Darte will take my story, they are so long in replying, and that is a good sign. Bardsley and Carrow were only a week. Oh, perhaps by Easter it will be all right, and I shall be able to repay Mr. Percival. How kind he is! I do like him."

CHAPTER XIV.

[195]

DAFFODILS.



THE Christmas season, so different to any the Wiltons had ever passed, came and went. Raymond managed to attain his wish, as he generally did; and instead of returning punctually to the office after the two days above and beyond the bank holiday which Mr. Warde kindly and considerately granted him, he sent an excuse to him, and a telegram to his mother, which alarmed her very much, to say he had a severe cold, and was not allowed to travel.

It ought to be a warning to all those who are tempted to make false excuses or deceive, that when once it is done, every one's faith is weakened in their assertions. It takes years of truthfulness and sincerity to restore the confidence which one falsehood has shaken.

Reginald must be excused, therefore, if he said, as he read the telegram,—

"Humbug!"

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Salome gave him a quick glance, for she saw her mother's distressed and anxious face.

"I do hope he is not very ill. What do you think, Salome?"

"I hope not, mother. He only says, 'A severe cold;' and you see he sends the telegram himself."

"Would you advise me to send a telegram for a paid answer?"

"Certainly not, mother," said Reginald. "Don't disturb yourself; he is all right."

Mrs. Wilton was silenced; but when Reginald left the room she said to Salome, "I cannot understand how it is that Reginald is so unfeeling about Ray. It is not like the love of brothers."

All this anxiety at Elm Cottage might have been spared had it been possible to show Mrs. Wilton the comfortable dining-room at Rose Court, the St. Clairs' home, Raymond talking and laughing with one of Henry St. Clair's sisters at a pleasant dinner-party, and quite forgetting the sore throat and little cough which had seemed to Mrs. St. Clair in her kindness a sufficient reason for Raymond to prolong his visit. Sympathy for the boy's altered position had made her doubly kind to him, though she secretly wished he would talk less of himself, his old Eton days and friends, and would have liked it better if he had been quieter and less self-asserting.

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"It was a kindness to invite him, poor boy," she said to her husband. "They had a very pretty nice place, with every comfort, and Henry paid them a visit during the Easter holidays. Think what a change it is! I am glad to be kind to him; though he is not exactly the friend I would choose for Henry."

"A conceited, shallow-pated young fellow," was the reply. "Handsome enough, no doubt; but I, for one, shall not be sorry to see him start for Harstone."

Poor Raymond! How little did he think that this was the impression left upon his host at Rose Court. He went home with a fresh edition of discontent at his lot, and relapsed a good deal into his former habits.

So the winter passed, and the days lengthened, and the bright spring-time drew on.

One radiant March morning Salome set out early to spend a day at Edinburgh Crescent. A holiday was proclaimed for the children, and an expedition with Ruth Pryor to see a menagerie which was stationed in a large field not far off. Mrs. Wilton had been unusually well of late, and was quite happy to be left for the day, to write letters, and perhaps walk over to the vicarage at three o'clock to see Mrs. Atherton. Salome's step was light and elastic as she walked away towards Edinburgh Crescent. She had the spring of youth in her, which responded to the spring of nature; and something delightful had happened which was to mark that day with a red letter, as she thought, to her. "Under the Cedars," after three unsuccessful journeys, and three new title-pages, had been accepted, and she had in her pocket a letter offering to publish the story and give her ten guineas for it. If the proposal was agreeable to her, the cheque would be sent at once. Only those who have earned money that is needed for some express purpose can understand the joy in Salome's heart. It was only ten guineas. Fifteen more would be required to meet what was wanted. But another story was rapidly approaching its conclusion, and very soon she might earn the rest.

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These few months had been times of steady progress with Salome. She had set herself earnestly to learn the lesson of her life; and no one, old or young will, if they seek God's help, do this in vain. Just as one who sweeps a room from this cause makes it and the action fine, so did Salome, by striving against her desultory, untidy habits and her dreamy indolence, when what she had to do was uncongenial, and, above all, when her effort to struggle against discontented repining for what was denied her of luxury and pleasantness in everyday life, make the way "finer" and brighter for others and for herself. Child as she was, her influence was felt. Stevens acknowledged it, and her brothers could not fail to be affected by it. All unconsciously to herself she was fulfilling the command of One who lays no burden on us too heavy to bear, who tells us to let our light *so* shine that our Father in heaven may be glorified. [199]

I think Salome's little light was shining, and I also think that had it not been for the surrounding gloom of sorrow and loss which, as it were, encompassed her, it would not have been so bright nor so steady in its radiance.

How she longed to tell Reginald the good news about "Under the Cedars." How she wished the letter had come by the first instead of the second delivery. It would be nice to meet Reginald, and hear him say, "How jolly it is!" "I shall be obliged to let him know, when I have the money, what I am going to do with it. But that time is not come yet. I must take the days one by one. And oh, what a lovely day this is! Such a sky; and how those horse-chestnut buds are shining in the sun. I remember one day last spring how I was riding with father, and he told me to look at the big chestnut tree by the lodge, how the buds were glistening." [200]

The wakened memory of her father sent a thrill of pain through the young heart, and a hungry longing for him, which is so well expressed by the poetess of love and natural affection in her own especial strain without a rival:—

"But what awakest thou in the heart, O Spring—
The human heart with all its dreams and sighs,
Thou that bring'st back so many a buried thing,
Restorer of forgotten harmonies?
Sweet sounds and scents break forth where'er
thou art;
What wakest thou in the heart?"

"Too much, ah! there too much,
We know not well wherefore it should be so;
But roused by thee,
What strange, fond yearnings from the soul's
deep cell,
Gush for the faces we no more may see;
How are we haunted in thy wind's low tone
By voices that are gone!"

"Looks of familiar love, which never more,
Never on earth our aching eyes shall greet,
Sweet words of welcome to the household door,
And vanished smiles, and sounds of parted
feet.
Spring, 'midst the wakening of thy flowers and
bees
Why—why awakest thou these?"

It seemed so long to her since the last spring, as if she had left behind her childhood and its dreams and happiness and come into the cares of womanhood. But youth was strong within her for all that; and when her cousins, the trio of dear little sisters, came rushing out to meet her as Bean threw open the door, and Kate danced downstairs to give her a prolonged hug, Salome felt ready for anything her cousins might propose. [201]

"The boys are going to be so condescending as to walk with us," Kate said. "We are all going to Stoke Canon to get daffodils. I thought you would like that, as you have an eye for beauty, as Aunt Betha says. Digby is to bring Reginald home to luncheon, and we are to start at two o'clock. But come upstairs now. I have got a new hat, and I want your advice about it."

"May we come and get daffodils, Katie?" pleaded Edith's little voice.

"Certainly not; run away, children."

"Let Edith come, Katie, Edith and Maude," Salome said.

"Oh no, they will only be a bother; besides, we are going too far for them."

"You must come to tea with Hans and Carl next Saturday," Salome said, "if Aunt Anna will allow you."

"Oh, that will be nice!" exclaimed the children. "Now, do come and see Guy and Aunt Betha."

Poor little Guy lay extended on his sofa, while Aunt Betha was busy with some new table-linen, which she was marking in the old-fashioned way with red marking thread.

Guy's pale face beamed with delight as Salome came into the room. Poor suffering little one! he had not much variety in his life, and Salome's visits were always hailed by him as a great event. She told him a story sometimes, every detail of which he would drink in with hungry eagerness. Salome was a favourite with Aunt Betha as well as with little Guy, and she turned to her with a bright smile of welcome on her pleasant old face, taking off her spectacles and rubbing her eyes. [202]

"I am getting past this fine marking," she said, "though I don't think that dinner napkin is amiss," holding it up for admiration.

"I wonder you take the trouble, auntie," Katie said. "Every one writes on linen now-a-days. Mamma says it is quite old-fashioned. Do give it up."

"No, my dear," said Aunt Betha half sadly. "I am an old-fashioned person, and I could never bear to see beautiful linen inked all over with blotted scrawls. No new fashion would make me believe that this is not the best plan. That mark will last long after I am in my grave. I am not ashamed of my handiwork, I can tell you."

Salome had taken up the table-napkin and was admiring the three well-shaped letters L. E. W. and the neat figures beneath, the number and the year, when Guy's little voice was raised in appeal. [203]

"Cousin 'Lome,"—his nearest approach to Salome's name—"do come and talk to Guy; tell about when you were a little girl, at your big house—tell about the bridge."

"A little girl!" thought Aunt Betha, as she saw Salome's slight, almost child-like figure bending over Guy. "She is but a child now, so young and delicate-looking, and not one to breast many of the storms of this troublesome world."

The boys came in to dinner in good time; and about two o'clock the happy party of four cousins set off for the Stoke Canon Woods.

Digby and Reginald were now fast friends; and Kate held to her first affection for Salome. Salome enjoyed Kate for a time, her sharp speeches and rippling fun were amusing at intervals; but she often thought that she would not care always to live with Kate, or skim over the surface of everything as she did.

The daffodils were in their full glory in a field and orchard beyond Stoke Canon Woods. Many poets of every age have sung their praises; but who can really convey any idea of their loveliness as they bend their beautiful heads to the crisp breeze as it passes over them, and catch the sunlight on their pale golden cups?

"Oh, take them gently!" Salome exclaimed, as the boys rushed upon them, eager to fill the girls' baskets for them. "Take them gently; don't break one off too short," she said, bending down and gathering the flowers with a tender hand. "Look at the fringe on this one; and oh, Kate, just see how deep it is, and how perfect the leaves are." [204]

"Oh yes; but I like primroses better when they are gathered, and bluebells. The Stoke Woods are filled with bluebells in May."

"Hallo!" exclaimed Digby, "there's Percival and his elder brother. When he was at the college they used to be called—"

"You shouldn't tell school nicknames; it is not fair," Reginald exclaimed. "Come down here, Percival," he shouted, for the field and orchard lay a little below the level of the road. "Come down and speak to us, Percival."

Percival obeyed, and his brother remained standing on the bank above.

Salome gave him one quick glance, and all the bright colour left her face. He saw and understood, and, following his younger brother, came down and said,—

"Introduce me to your friends, Robert."

"Oh, I forgot you did not know them, Phil. Miss Wilton and Miss Salome Wilton."

Philip Percival bowed with a pleasant smile, and stooped to gather some of the flowers almost as gently as Salome herself. [205]

"I must take some to my father," he said. "They will please him; he has a craving for bright colours, and daffodils more than any flower seem to fill the house with light."

"Yes," Salome said; "I do love them so much; they are like bits of spring sunshine."

Then, as the party all walked on together, Philip talked of many things; and Kate seemed to amuse him as much as she did Salome, for he often laughed merrily at her sharp sallies.

The Percivals returned with the Wiltons, and they had what Aunt Betha always liked to prepare for them—a school-room tea: a glass dish of jam, a pile of hot cakes and—a departure from the usual order—of Dorset butter. Fresh white butter was a luxury not known every day in Mrs. Wilton's school-room or nursery.

"This is jolly," said Kate, "if only there are chairs enough to hold us all.—No, don't sit on that, Mr. Percival; it has long been shaky on one leg.—Run, Edith, and get some more chairs. And you

three little ones may all come, only you must not make yourselves 'jammy,' or what will Aunt Betha say?"

"I think I shall go and have my tea with Guy, if you don't mind very much," Salome said. "Poor little boy, he must wish he could come here." [206]

"Nonsense, Salome! Pray don't be so silly," Kate said. "Let Edith take him some hot cake, and he will be content."

But Salome went off, little Edith following her; and Guy's delighted welcome was a sufficient reward.

"Oh, Cousin 'Lome, if only you could live with me! Do tell me another story."

Aunt Betha took the opportunity of Salome's presence to slip downstairs to watch some operations in the kitchen, and Salome and Guy were left together. She fed him with little bits of cake, and repeated to him some verses which fascinated the sick child, and he made her say them over and over again;—the story of the two little birds told by Mrs. Fowler in her beautiful book called "Our Children's Story,"—a story in its sweet musical rhythm which has touched many hearts besides little Guy Wilton's.

Salome wished she could have one word with Philip Percival—one word to say that the ten pounds would be so soon in her possession. But the opportunity was not forthcoming. Salome tripped gaily home with Reginald in the soft spring twilight, her basket of daffodils in her hand, and a feeling of joy in her heart, which beamed in her sweet face as she went into the drawing-room at Elm Cottage. [207]

"Look, mother! look, Hans and Carl—"

But the joy faded out of her face and changed to anxious foreboding as Mrs. Wilton said, brokenly,—

"I am so glad you are come. Send the children away; don't let Reginald come. I want to speak to you alone."

CHAPTER XV.

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LOST!



"END the children away!" The words recalled that first day of sorrow—eight months before.

"Salome, I have lost the necklet set with emeralds, which really belongs to you. When we first settled in here, I looked over all my personal jewels, and everything was right. This afternoon, when I came in from the vicarage, I opened my large dressing-case to look for a ring I thought I would sell, and the necklet was gone! Salome, do you, *can* you imagine the Pryors are dishonest?" Salome looked bewildered for a moment, and then the terrible suspicion, which was almost a certainty, flashed upon her. "Salome, do you think the Pryors can have been dishonest? Do you think we are living in a den of thieves? There is no one but Stevens and the Pryors who ever go about the house. It must lie between them."



“Salome, I have lost the necklet set with emeralds.”

"Mother!" exclaimed Salome, "Stevens! How can you say so?"

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"What *am* I to say or think, Salome? The necklet is old-fashioned, but it is very valuable. They are fine emeralds, and, I daresay, worth sixty or seventy pounds. I was very foolish to keep it here; I ought to have sent it to your Uncle Loftus to put in his plate-chest, or to the bank. Salome, have you nothing to advise or to say? Shall I question Stevens?"

Salome was taking the daffodils one by one from the basket, and did not speak for a moment.

"No, mother; do not question anybody yet; let us wait. It is so dreadful to suspect innocent people. Are you quite sure the necklet was in that large dressing-case? Have you looked through the little one?"

"Yes, over and over again. I know I am not mistaken. I was thinking of a ring which belonged to an uncle of mine which I do not value; and I thought if I sold it I might get a few pounds for the boys. Reginald would like to go to Westmoreland this Easter, and it is so hard to have no spare money. Raymond, too, wants five pounds,—so much, though I fear he is very extravagant."

Salome started as her mother was speaking, for Raymond came in. It was Thursday, the day for the early closing of the offices in Harstone, and Mrs. Wilton said,—

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"This has been a lovely afternoon. Where have you been?"

"I came in here about three o'clock and found everybody out, so I went off again. I thought you might have liked a drive, mother, and I could have hired a little trap for a trifle. Where had you flown to?"

"Only to the vicarage. How kind of you to think of me. Look at Salome's daffodils! But I have had a most unpleasant loss, Raymond,—do not mention it to the little ones or to Reginald. I have missed something of value out of my large jewel-box—that old gold necklet set with emeralds."

"I thought that was Salome's," Raymond said, taking up the newspaper, and sitting down with it on the sofa, soon appeared to be absorbed in it.

Salome went on quietly arranging her daffodils, and then as quietly left the room. She went upstairs to her mother's room, and then, after much thought and prayer, determined to speak at once to Raymond. For how could she doubt that he had taken the necklet? A shudder of pity and deep pain at this deed of her brother's thrilled through her. But it seemed all clear. The necklet was hers, and he had talked to her about it; and she had said, when he asked if it could be sold, "I do not know if it would be right." Then there arose before her the past six months, and the pains she had taken to cover her brother's sin. Had she been right to do this? Would it not have been better to have gone direct to her Uncle Loftus and confided in him?

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Poor Salome! The same doubts and fears have at times beset us all; and the question is a hard one to answer. Desire to shield those we love from exposure may not be the truest kindness to them, and yet loving hearts shrink from inflicting pain, especially when, as in Salome's case, the

frank avowal of Raymond's sin must bring sorrow on his mother, already so heavily tried and burdened with grief and trouble.

But Salome was now determined to be brave, as far as Raymond himself was concerned; and that night, when her mother and Reginald had both gone to their rooms, she tapped gently at Raymond's door, and said,—

"Please let me in. I want to speak to you."

The door was opened at once, and Raymond, looking straight at his sister, said,—

"Well, what is the matter?"

"Raymond," Salome said, closing the door behind her and clasping her little hands tightly together, "I am come to speak to you about my necklet set with emeralds."

"You had better have up Pryor, and—"

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He faltered, for Salome's clear, steadfast eyes were fixed on his face as if she could read his thoughts.

"Raymond, I believe you have taken my necklet out of mother's large dressing-case! Why did you do so by stealth and like a thief?"

"Come now, Salome—no insults. How dare you speak like that?"

"Raymond," the brave girl went on, "I am certain you took the necklet; and you must tell mother to-morrow morning, and not allow innocent people to be accused. What have you done with the money? Have you paid Mr. Percival? Raymond, I mean to be answered, and I shall wait here till you speak."

"You may wait all night, then; and"—putting on a great Inverness cape over his coat and seating himself coolly in a chair—"you will find it very cold here in this horrid little room."

"I shall go to Uncle Loftus early to-morrow morning and tell him everything from first to last. I have been wrong to conceal it all this time, and I mean now to tell Uncle Loftus everything. If father were alive, *he* would be told; and Uncle Loftus is our guardian, and has been very kind to you."

"Kind! nonsense," Raymond said. "I don't see his kindness."

"Well, Raymond, I shall tell him everything to-morrow—about your debts, and all the trouble you have caused, and—"

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"That I stole your necklet, and made a fortune by it. Just like you, to jump at conclusions."

This was grateful, after all that she had done for him. But natures like Raymond's are almost incapable of gratitude.

"Where is my necklet? tell me that, Raymond."

"Well, if you must know, I did take it to Moore's in St. Michael's Green to-day to have it valued. I found mother's keys on her dressing-table, and took a look into the box. You know I asked you about the necklet, and so don't put on that surprised face."

"I shall go to Moore's to-morrow and bring back the necklet," said Salome decidedly; "and I shall tell mother about it. It is only fair and right. Suspicion has fallen on the Pryors, and I must do it. I know I am right," she said confidently. "I shall get up very early to-morrow and go down into Harstone."

"What stuff! I will bring the thing back. Moore won't give it up to you; besides, the shops are not open till past eight. Don't be foolish, Salome."

"Raymond," she said, "please listen to me, and make a full confession of everything to mother and Uncle Loftus. Make a new beginning. O Raymond! think of our father—think of bringing dishonour on his name! Dear Raymond," she said, breaking down into tears, "I am so miserable about you; you might be such a comfort to mother and to me, and—"

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Raymond was touched at last. He put his arm round his sister and said,—

"Don't cry, Salome. You see a fellow has heaps of things to do with his money that you know nothing of, and—still I will try to get out of Harstone. I shall never do any good in that hateful office. Come, don't cry. I will go down with you to-morrow and get that wretched necklet. I wish I had never heard of it."

She saw she could do no more that night, and left him, to creep into her mother's room, stifling her sobs, after exacting from Raymond a promise to be ready to go down to Harstone with her at half-past seven the next morning.

"I think Raymond's room is very cold," she said, as she lay down on her little bed by her mother, who was sleeping quietly; "I am shivering so. I hope I shall not wake mother."

The shivering was followed by heat and restlessness, and then Salome heard the clock of St. Luke's Church strike twelve, then one—two—three. She could not sleep. About five o'clock the

wind began to rise and moan, then splashes of rain came against the window, and the March morning broke in storm and flood. Salome got up noiselessly as soon as it was light, and with eyes heavy from sleeplessness, and a heart heavier with shame and anxiety, dressed, and went softly down the passage to Raymond's room. She was anxious to avoid all observation, and to her great relief Raymond appeared, in answer to her tap at his door, in his ulster. [215]

"It's an awful morning, Salome; you had better let me go alone."

"Oh no, no," she said eagerly.

"Well, it is so early; and look how it is pouring cats and dogs! We had better give up such a wild-geese chase. I'll bring back the thing all right. Can't you trust me?"

"No; I can't, I can't," said Salome. "Besides, mother will begin to examine the Pryors and Stevens, and that will only make it worse for every one. Make haste, Raymond. I hear Stevens. *Do come!*"

In another moment they were out in the wild, stormy morning. Could it be the same world, Salome felt ready to ask herself—the smiling, sunny world of yesterday, when she had set out so happily to Edinburgh Crescent? Then her head ached dreadfully, and her back too, and her cheeks were hot. It was almost a relief to feel the cold drops of rain which came against them every time a great blast came and hurled her umbrella on one side. [216]

"The trams will be running when we come back," Raymond said. "Had not you better go back, Sal? It is making such a fuss; and you will get cold."

Salome only said, "I must come with you," and struggled on.

It was past eight when they reached Mr. Moore's shop. The shutters were taken down, and the shop was being dusted and swept.

Mr. Moore was an old-fashioned tradesman, but of good repute; and though his shop was small, he dealt only in the very best jewellery and plate. A young man with light hair was behind the counter, and looked with surprise at these early customers as Raymond advanced to the counter, all dripping as he was, with the little shivering figure by his side.

"I left a case here yesterday. I want to take it away again. Where is Mr. Moore?"

"Mr. Moore is not come into town yet," said the young man. "He will not be here till ten o'clock."

"You can let me have the necklet, I suppose? Old gold filigree, set in emeralds. I left it here to be valued."

The young man went to a book, and ran his finger down the last page—"Mr. Stephens—necklet, set with emeralds.—Yes; here it is." [217]

"That is not right," said Salome. "That can't be yours."

"Be quiet," said Raymond, in an angry whisper.—"Yes; that is it. I will take it, if you please."

There was still a little hesitation in the man's manner. "Mr. Stephens—is that right?" There was a scarcely perceptible glance at Salome as he spoke.

He produced the case, and opening it, said, "They are very fine emeralds. The value would be from sixty to eighty pounds."

Raymond took the case up, closed the spring, and, saying "Good morning," was leaving the shop; but the shopman followed him.

"I think it would be more satisfactory, sir, if you signed your name in this book, and address."

Raymond was perplexed for a moment, but only for a moment.

"The necklet is this young lady's property," he said.—"Sign your name, Salome."

The girl took the pen into her trembling fingers and wrote:—"Salome Mary Wilton, Elm Cottage, Elm Fields, near Harstone."

"A relation of Dr. Wilton's, I presume?"

"Yes," said Salome. "Dr. Wilton is my uncle."

The man's manner became instantly very respectful.

"It is a very wet morning, Miss Wilton. Shall I call a cab?" [218]

"Oh no, no, thank you," Salome said, hurrying away. But Raymond was frightened at her pale face; it haunted him for many and many a day.

"Yes; we must take a cab. You can't possibly walk back."

"The tram," Salome said,—"the tram; it will be cheaper."

She was very wet, and shivering perceptibly.

At last the corner was reached from whence the tram started. Raymond was thankful to put his sister into the tram; and if ever he repented what he had done, it was at that moment.

"O Raymond, Raymond! how could you say your name was Stephens?"

Raymond felt ashamed of himself as those pure, truthful eyes met his.

"My name is Stephen, isn't it, Salome? Don't make me out worse than I am. I am awfully sorry, and I shall go and see Uncle Loftus for your sake. O Sal, I hope you have not got cold, you look so horridly white."

Poor Salome struggled to keep calm; and was received by Stevens at the door with exclamations of angry surprise,—

"Going out in a storm like this, getting your death of cold! I have no sort of patience with you, that I haven't."

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"Oh! don't, don't scold me, Stevens. It is all right now;" and running upstairs, she went into her mother's room, laid the case on the table, and said, "There is the necklet; it was not stolen—it was not. Put it back in the box; and, dear mother, will you please say no more till—"

The sentence was unfinished, and poor Salome fell forward on the bed where her mother was lying—fainting, for the first time in her life. Her mother rang the bell, and Stevens came hurrying in, raised her head, and took off her wet cloak, and her hat, which loosened all the thick masses of hair falling over her like a cloud.

"What is it? What can be the matter?" said Mrs. Wilton. "O Stevens, send for Dr. Wilton. Call Reg."

"She is faint with galloping off before breakfast, I don't know what for, I am sure. She is a slave to other people, and that is the truth. It was to please Master Raymond she went out in all the rain and storm, you may depend."

Salome soon recovered consciousness, and looking up at her mother's anxious face, which was bending over her, she said,—

"I think it will all come right now, mother; I do indeed. Put the necklet away, and Ray will tell you all about it. I wish—I wish I did not feel so giddy," she said, as she tried to rise.

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"Don't try to get up, my darling—my dear child," her mother said. "O Salome! what should I do without you? Stevens is gone for a cup of hot coffee, and you must lie still."

"Put the necklet back into the dressing-case, mother," Salome repeated. "No one but you and I need ever know. Is it not odd I tremble so? I suppose I must lie quiet to-day."

They undressed her and put her to bed; and there, at twelve o'clock, her uncle found her—with her temperature very high, her head aching, and every sign of coming illness, of what nature Dr. Wilton could not then determine.

CHAPTER XVI.

[221]

THE CONSEQUENCE.



ALOME'S illness proved to be rheumatic fever. She was in great pain, and often delirious—wandering in thought to her old home and her childhood, and talking incessantly of the emerald necklet and money and debts, and the troubles which had by her brother's selfishness shadowed her young life, and weighed her down prematurely with the sorrows of older people.

Her mother understood but little of these feverish wanderings. But there was one in that house in whose ear his sister's voice rang with a pain which he never felt before.

Reginald was miserable and lonely. The little ones—whom in a bad day of restlessness and fever Dr. Wilton had hurried off in his carriage to Aunt Betha, who begged to be allowed to have them, saying she would be answerable they were in nobody's way—were continually asking when Salome would be well. Mrs. Wilton sat hour after hour in the sick room, almost paralyzed with the fear of losing this precious child. Stevens, dear faithful Stevens would go away to hide her grief when the moans of pain were more grievous, or when Salome would talk as if she were in the old nursery at Maplestone, and address Ada or her father as if present. All these tender and loving hearts were wrung with sorrow and distress; but Raymond's pain was far greater than any of these. Mrs. Atherton and her son were unable to reach him with a word of comfort. He went sullenly off to the office, and returned with a look of utter misery on his face every afternoon, only to hear the same report—"She is no better."

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One Sunday morning he was up and dressed in time, and Reginald walked with him to church. The two brothers had been so much separated since early childhood that there was little sympathy between them. But this grief about Salome seemed to draw them together.

"How is your sister? How is the young lady?" Ruth asked, as they passed her door.

"No better, thank you," Reginald replied.

"What's the use of asking?" Frank Pryor said. "Mother says she is taken for death, and you know it."

"I don't know it," said Ruth impatiently. "I don't give up hope. It is not my way. I leave that despairing about everybody and everything to your mother and you. There, Frank, I don't mean to be cross, but I feel as if I should break my heart if that child died;" and Ruth burst into tears. Puck sprang to her, whining and crying, and showing by every possible sign that he sympathized with the general sorrow for Salome. [223]

The two brothers walked on to church, and when their sister's name was read in the list of those for whom their prayers were desired, it was not lost on them that Mr. Atherton added, "who is dangerously ill." The name, with the significant words, came as a sort of spoken declaration of the fear in both boys' hearts, and a deep sob from Raymond was heard by a man kneeling behind him, and understood. That man was Philip Percival. He waited at the door of the church after service, and gave the hand of both brothers a fervent pressure.

To his surprise Raymond said, "I want to speak with you, Percival. Will you come in?"

The two young men were going into the desolate sitting-room, where the daffodils, gathered ten days before, were hanging their pretty heads, all shrivelled and forlorn.

"The flower fadeth," thought Philip Percival, as he recalled the bright afternoon and the sunshine glowing on the daffodils and on the plaits of hair gathered round the small shapely head, as it bent over the treasures in the basket. [224]

Reginald was following his brother and Philip Percival, when Raymond turned quickly towards him.

"Wait a few minutes, Reg, if you don't mind. I want to speak to Percival alone."

Reginald obeyed without a word, and sitting down on a stool in the passage, buried his face in his hands, trying to shut out the sound of the ringing voice above, as it called, "Yes, father; I am coming. Oh! look at the chestnut tree, all in flower, not buds, as I thought."

Then the door above was closed, and Stevens came down, in her hand a large paper parcel. She was crying bitterly.

"I have just cut it all off," she said. "Did you ever see such hair? Oh! the pretty darling. I can remember it when she was three years old—how the people would turn round to look at it when she walked down the village. O Master Reg, my dear, my heart will break if we lose her! And we *shall* lose her, I believe."

Reginald did not speak. After one look at the great mass of golden brown hair, he turned almost impatiently away, and went upstairs to his own room. [225]

I cannot write what passed between Philip Percival and Raymond; but when Stevens came to call him to dinner, he seemed not to hear her. Philip Percival was standing by the empty fire-place, and, rousing himself, went up to Raymond, saying,—

"Good-bye; I am going now."

"Wait and see Reginald. You must wait and dine with us."

"You can tell Reginald alone; it will be less painful."

"No," Raymond said; "I would rather you were present."

Reginald, whom Stevens had summoned, now came down, and Raymond said,—

"Reginald, I have borrowed money from Percival I had no means of repaying. I was so cowardly as to let her—Salome—bear the whole burden of it. She met him and asked him to spare me exposure; and he did, for her sake. It might have been better if he had come down on me then. But it is no use looking back. I am going to see Uncle Loftus and tell him the whole truth, and perhaps he will help me out of the difficulty. But, Reginald, the worst part is yet to come. I caused Salome's illness by dragging her down into Harstone to get a necklet of hers on which I was trying to raise money. If she dies, it will lie at my door. Forgive me, Reginald." [226]

Reginald turned away. He felt as if he could not look at his brother. But Philip Percival said,—

"Your sister would be the first to say 'Forgive him.' You know it. Shake hands with your brother, and let us, you and I, do our best to help him to keep his good resolutions."

Reginald came back and held out his hand. Neither he nor Raymond could speak, but the brothers were friends at last.

A roll lying on the table now attracted Reginald. It was addressed to "Miss Wilton, Elm Cottage, Elm Fields, Harstone."

"What is that?" Raymond asked.

Reginald looked for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"I think I know. Yes—oh! poor Salome! it is her story."

"Her story?"

"I forgot no one knew but me. I don't understand this, though. It has come back, after all, and I thought she said it was accepted. But this is her writing."

Reginald unrolled the parcel, and the little kernel, so familiar to authors, of the proof-sheets enclosed in the husk of the manuscript fell out.

Philip Percival picked them up. "Take care of them," he said; "it is all right. These are the first proofs, sent for correction with the manuscript. Take care of them; and you ought to write to the publisher and tell him they are received, and will be corrected." [227]

"Corrected!" exclaimed Reginald. "I do not know how to correct them. What do you mean?"

"I have had some little experience in this way," said Philip Percival; "and if you will trust me, I will go over them and do my best till—till your sister is well enough to do it herself."

"Thank you," said Reginald. "I don't think Salome would mind your having them; indeed, I don't see what else is to be done."

Philip rolled up the manuscript and sheets, and, putting them in his pocket, said "Good-bye," and was gone.

"He is the best fellow that ever lived," Reginald said; "and he is awfully fond of her. Oh! how long is this to go on?" he exclaimed, as the sound of Salome's voice reached them from the room above, in the rapid, unnatural tones so full of painful foreboding to the ears of those who have to listen to them hour after hour, with no respite but the occasional lull of heavy, unrefreshing slumber.

Dr. Wilton was surprised that same Sunday afternoon to see Raymond ushered into his consulting-room.

"Is there any change since the morning? I am coming in at seven o'clock. What is it?" [228]

"No; Salome is just the same. I am come, Uncle Loftus, to tell you how ashamed I am of myself. I daresay you will cut me for ever, but I am so miserable that I hope you won't be hard on me."

He did indeed look miserable; it was difficult to recognize him for the self-sufficient, handsome young man whom Dr. Wilton had often felt too provoked with to speak patiently to him.

The whole sad story was told. It was a step in the right direction; it was a hopeful sign; and Dr. Wilton felt it to be so.

"I don't think I shall ever get straight in Harstone, Uncle Loftus. If I could go away and begin fresh."

"Your debts must be paid. I must consult the other guardians and trustees. Perhaps there may be some arrangement. But, Raymond my boy, change of place won't effect a cure in itself. Only yesterday Warde told me he did not wish to keep you in the office; he did not care to treat you harshly, for your father's sake, but he says you simply do nothing, and it is a bad example to the other clerks. It is very sad, Raymond; you ought to have been a comfort to your poor mother and sister."

Raymond faltered out, "I will do anything you think best now, Uncle Loftus. Do you think Salome will get well?" [229]

"I cannot say, my boy. Such cases do sometimes pull through; but the poor child is very ill—dangerously ill. I am going to take Mr. Masters to see her this evening. Still we must keep up heart and hope. Come and see your brothers and your Aunt Anna and your cousins."

"No, thanks, not now," Raymond said; "I must go back."

As Raymond was going towards Elm Fields he met one of those idle young men whose society had been so unwholesome for him.

"Come and have a pipe and a glass of brandy and soda. You look awfully down in the mouth, Wilton."

But Raymond passed on, saying, "Not to-day, thanks."

"Oh, I say, are you in a great scrape? Don't be sulky, old fellow. Come along."

"No," Raymond said more decidedly; "my sister is very ill, and I am going home."

"Sister—which sister? the pretty one at Cannes?"

"No; my eldest sister. This is my way," he said, glad to escape from what was, now at least, most uncongenial company.

When he reached Elm Cottage, Stevens met him.

"She is herself now, and she keeps asking for you." [230]

"I can't see her; it will kill me."

"Don't talk like that, Master Raymond. Go to the dear lamb at once; she is asking for you every minute."

Ah, what a sore pain is remorse! Raymond Wilton will never forget the sight of his sister as she lay before him, her hair—that beautiful, luxuriant hair—all gone, her large, pathetic, wistful eyes turned to him as he came in.

"Raymond, dear Raymond," she whispered, "I wanted to tell you how I love you."



"'Raymond,' whispered Salome, 'I wanted to tell you how much I love you.'"

He expected to hear something very different to this,—entreaty to be good; to begin life afresh; to give up all his selfish indulgence. But no; Salome had not strength for this; she could repeat only,—

"Dear Raymond, I love you; and the Lord Jesus loves you, and is quite ready to forgive all. Please ask him. Kiss me, Raymond, and let me see you kiss mother."

He obeyed; and then, as he held his poor mother in a close embrace, Salome whispered,—

"I am happy now. Good-bye, Raymond; I can't talk any more."

Who shall say what this love of the stricken child did for the wayward, sinning brother? It seemed to him the very reflection of the highest and greatest love of the all-loving One who loved *all* unto death.

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Raymond slowly left the room, walked as if in a dream to the silent, deserted sitting-room, and with sobs and tears prayed for forgiveness to Him who is ever pitiful and full of mercy—who welcomes back the wanderer with the fulness of forgiveness, seeing him even while yet a great way off, and *coming out to meet him*. I think He went forth to meet the poor sinful boy in the quiet of the spring evening; and He will lead him, blind as he is, by a way that he knows not.

Patient continuance in well-doing: how sure is the reward. If it tarry, wait for it. If the hope is deferred, and the heart sick, yet shall the faithful and patient ones know at last that the granted desire is as the tree of life.

CHAPTER XVII.

[232]

A DREAM.



UMMER was in its first fresh beauty, and lilacs and hawthorns were filling the air with their fragrance. Laburnums waved their golden tassels in the soft breeze, and the blue skies of early June were like those which Lady Monroe said they had left behind them in the Riviera. She had returned with Eva and Ada; and Mrs. Wilton had the pleasure of

hearing from her that the plan had fully answered. Ada had been everything that Eva wanted as a companion, and Lady Monroe begged to keep her for the present till Salome was quite well again.

Dear little Salome! She had struggled through fever and pain, and was lying on this lovely afternoon by the open window of the little sitting-room at Elm Cottage,—a pale, faint, shadow-like Salome indeed, but with returning light in her beautiful eyes and a tinge of colour on her cheeks. Her legs were as yet all but useless; the cruel rheumatism had attacked them with terrible force; but it was easy for Stevens and Ruth to carry that little light figure downstairs, and every day now she came into the sitting-room, which was filled with flowers brought continually from Lady Monroe's conservatory by Eva and Ada. [233]

On this particular June afternoon Salome was alone. Her mother had gone for a drive with Lady Monroe and Eva, while Ada was spending the day with Louise and Kate Wilton. Hans and Carl were now sent to a school for little boys in the neighbourhood, and were on this afternoon gone to watch the cricket at the college ground, where Reginald was distinguishing himself and proving himself worthy of his Rugby training. Salome was very happy; a sweet, peaceful calm seemed to surround her. Everything was so lovely; that little piece of sky above the laburnum at the gate, how beautiful she thought it was; and how kind of Ruth Pryor to bring in such a dainty little afternoon tea. Even Mrs. Pryor tried to look a little more cheerful to suit the summer radiance, and did not shake her head and sigh as she came in to see if the sun was shining on the carpet; but when Salome said, "I love the sunshine, Mrs. Pryor," she forbore to shut it out, and only laid down a sheet of the *Daily News* on the particular place on the floor where the sun lay.

Mrs. Pryor had just completed this arrangement when a knock at the door made her toddle off to open it. In another minute she returned. [234]

"Here is a gentleman wishes to see you, Miss Wilton."

"Mr. Atherton? oh! ask him to come in."

"No, Miss Wilton, it's not Mr. Atherton. He has been here often enough, I should have shown him in; but this is the gentleman who, regular as clock-work, all the time you were so bad, came at half-past eight every morning, and walked down to Harstone with Mr. Raymond, and always the last thing at night would come to the shop and hear how you was."

Salome in vain tried to stop Mrs. Pryor's long speech. Mrs. Pryor was, when once unwound, like an alarum, obliged to run off.

"It must be Mr. Percival. Yes; ask him to come in, Mrs. Pryor, please."

Salome had another moment's suspense, and then Philip Percival came in, quietly and to all appearance unconcerned, though his heart was beating so that he could almost hear it, and his emotion at the sight of that sweet pale face and large wistful eyes turned up to him was hard to conceal.

"I am so glad to see you downstairs, Miss Wilton," he began; "so very glad."

"I daresay you hardly know me," she said with a smile. "I have cut all my hair, and Mrs. Pryor says I look like a starved robin. But I am getting well now, and Uncle Loftus says I shall be able to walk soon, though my legs are still very stiff." [235]

"I have brought you a book," Philip Percival said. "I thought I should like to give it to you myself." And he unfastened a neat parcel, and displayed a pretty book in a red and gilt cover.

"Thank you," Salome said. "What is the title? 'Under the Cedars, by S. M. W.' My book! Oh, I don't understand. How has it been done?"

"When you were ill—very ill—last March, I happened to be here when the first sheets came from the publishers. Your brothers could not correct them, and as I have had a little experience with printers, I asked leave to possess myself of them. I told Mr. Darte you were ill, and unable to attend to them yourself, and that I was to act for you. I hope you do not mind," he said half anxiously.

"Mind! Oh, I am so grateful to you. It *is* a pretty book outside!" she exclaimed with almost childish delight.

"It is prettier inside than outside," Philip Percival said. "I feel as if all the children were my particular friends; and as to the cedars, I have sat under them, and know the two ring-doves that come and sing their song to little Pamela."

"Oh, you can't think how glad I am you like my book; and—has Mr. Darte sent the money? because you know it is *yours*, and I hope when I get well to write another story better than this, and you shall have the rest of the money then if you *can* wait." [236]

Philip Percival felt a choking sensation in his throat, and he could not speak. And Salome, her face flushing rosy red, went on,—

"I know it is a great deal to ask, and you have been so good and kind to Raymond. He says, if ever he is worth anything it will be your doing."

"*Yours* rather, I should say," Philip murmured.

"I feel as if I could never, never repay you for all you have done," Salome went on; "but you know I am grateful. We are all of us so grateful to you. Raymond is quite different since he had you for a friend, and he will do well now, I think."

"I had something to say about Raymond. I am not tiring you, am I?" he asked anxiously, for the bright colour had left her face and she laid her head back on the cushions.

"No, oh no; only pleasure is somehow as hard to bear as pain, in a different way. I have so longed for the day when I could show mother and the boys my book, and here it is. Only Reginald knew about it, and since I have been better I have asked him if he had heard anything of the publisher, and he has always said it was all right, he thought, and the book would come out one day. He did not tell me *you* had done all this for me." [237]

"Reginald can keep a secret," Philip said, "or he is not the boy I take him for. Now, if you can listen without being too tired, I want to tell you something about Raymond and me. Mr. Warde wishes to send me out to a West India station in Barbadoes, to look after the business there and superintend some change in the sugar-planting. He offers me a very good salary, and I am to have a clerk, of course. Raymond thinks he should like to go with me in that capacity, and I believe Dr. Wilton quite approves the plan. Will Mrs. Wilton, and will you, approve also?"

"I think it will be the very best thing for Raymond. I do not know what poor mother will say about it, she is so fond of Raymond. Still, she would bring herself in time to it. When would you go?"

"The first week in July,—this day month."

"Shall I tell mother about it when she comes in, or will you tell her?"

"I think I shall ask you to tell Mrs. Wilton," he said, rising to leave her. "Good-bye."

"You will come and see me again very soon, won't you?"

"If you wish it."

"I do wish it very much," she said. "And then there is the money. Mr. Darté will send it to me now, I suppose, if I write to him. Will you come for it some day?" [238]

"No," he said, "I shall never come for that. If you wish to please me, you will not mention that subject again; it hurts me and pains me. Let us never speak of it again." He spoke vehemently, almost roughly, and taking one of the little white thin hands in his, he said, "Give me one of the books, and write my name in it; and do not forget me."

The next minute he was gone, and Salome was left in a maze of delight, surprise, and happiness, through which there seemed to run a golden thread, bright and shining, as she repeated softly to herself, "So good, so noble, so brave! And I think he cares for me, and I think—"

What Salome thought I shall not write here, but leave her to her book and her dream, while the sun, nearing the west, comes in at the open window and touches the little short curls which cluster over her head till they shine like the aureola round the foreheads of Fra Angelico's maidens in the old pictures of a bygone time.

CHAPTER XVIII.

[239]

THE LAST.



HE surprise and delight which the sight of "Under the Cedars" caused in Elm Cottage I cannot describe. However many thousands of books are written year by year, however many thousands are launched on the stream to win popular favour, there is always a special charm and interest in the first book written by one we love. It raises the person for the time to an important place in the family; and though the poor little book may soon be engulfed in this stream of which I speak, and lost to sight, or beaten down by the lash of reviewers, or, worse still, left to die the natural death of utter indifference, the author's position amongst her own immediate friends is not altered by it.

"Under the Cedars" was fresh and bright, full of imagination and that subtle power which touches the commonplace with interest. It had many faults—faults of youthful exuberance of fancy—faults of construction; but it deserved the praise of the local newspapers, which said it was perfectly simple and pure in its style, and the descriptions of child-life and nature alike true and unaffected. Then "Under the Cedars" had the advantage of being well revised and corrected by an able hand. It was well printed and well illustrated, and Hans and Carl danced about with excited delight as they recognized their own portraits in two knickerbockered boys of their own age. [240]

Ada laughed at this. "All little boys look alike," she said. "You don't suppose the man who did the pictures knew anything about you or Salome."

But Ada was none the less delighted to take back a copy to Eva Monroe on the day when twelve presentation copies arrived from London. And Dr. Wilton was pleased to show one to his wife.

"That child has done something to be proud of though she is so unpretending."

All the cousins admired and applauded, and Digby was triumphant.

"Did I not always tell you that Salome was awfully clever? Not one of us could ever come up to her."

Even Aunt Anna was pleased when a lady, of whom she thought a great deal, said, "I have bought [241] a charming story for children, called 'Under the Cedars.' Have you seen it?"

It was something to take it from her writing-table and to say, "It is written by a niece of mine, a very clever girl of seventeen. So young, and so full of talent."

Thus did dear little Salome win praise, and in her simple heart this was all as nothing to the joy of feeling that she had helped to lift the burden of care from those she loved.

Raymond sailed with Philip Percival, and was full of spirit and pleasure at the change. It was grief to his mother to lose him, but when she saw how happy he was in the prospect, she was comforted.

Raymond was improved and daily improving, but naturally selfish people do not suddenly become unselfish, and the whole complexion of a life is not changed with one sudden impulse. But he had really awakened to some sense of responsibility, and the continually good influence of Philip Percival kept up the impression of the past which might have otherwise died out.

When the parting was over, and the letters from Barbadoes came regularly, Mrs. Wilton began to feel the relief of knowing that Raymond was out of temptation and happy in the change of scene and people. [242]

A bright prospect opened out to Philip Percival. He settled the affairs on the sugar-plantation with great skill, and returned in the spring with an account of what he had done so satisfactory to the partners in the large concern, that he had a permanent appointment with a large salary, and Raymond was to remain with him for another year.

"Then I shall come back," Philip said to Salome, "and ask you a question."

They were walking together from Roxburgh one beautiful May evening. Salome had been to spend the day with his mother, his last day in England, at his special request.

"The question has been on my lips many times," he said, "since the night—so long ago now—when I picked up this, which a careless person dropped in the road." He took out of his pocket a large case which held his letters, and drew from it a handkerchief. "Look," he said, "whose property is this?"

"My handkerchief! I remember I dropped it that afternoon, and how Stevens scolded me and said I should lose my head next."

"Well," Philip said, "I lost my heart then, and kept the handkerchief as a compensation. Do you understand?" [243]

"Yes," she said.

"And if I asked the question now, could you answer it, Salome?"

"I think I could," she replied.

"I have loved you ever since that evening when you looked up at me, your face so dimly seen in the twilight," he went on; "the little brave sister coming out to meet a stranger to save her brother from disgrace and her mother pain. Every month, nay, every day I have lived since then, I have loved you more. Can you love me, and, when I come back next time, be my wife?"

"Yes," was the simple answer. Then, as if to strengthen it, she repeated, "Oh yes; let us go home and tell mother."

How happy they were as they walked to Elm Cottage together, and how bright and joyous were all the inhabitants of the little home that evening. The next morning, Puck, after an extra washing, had a piece of red ribbon tied round his neck, which was a long established custom on birthdays, and Salome said, as she tied it on between smiles and tears, for she had just parted with Philip for a whole year,—

"Ah, Puck, this is a grand day, not a birthday, but such a happy day to me; and, Puck, my new story is to be called 'Under the Quarry!'" [244]

"A very poor prospect for Salome," Aunt Anna said; "still, it is something that the Percivals are a good old family."

"A greater comfort still," rejoined Dr. Wilton, "is that Percival is one of the best and noblest of men. May our daughters be equally fortunate."

So we leave Salome standing on the threshold of her great happiness. Patience has had her perfect work in the days of her girlhood. Will she need it no more in the womanhood which is dawning upon her with the soft, sweet radiance of a faithful heart on which she may rest?

Yes; Patience, that fair and beautiful angel, with its calm, sedate presence, will be needed for

Salome as for us all through every stage of the journey. When the gates of love open for us, and we enter into what seems an Eden, we know that there are thorns amongst the flowers, rough places to tread, sharp angles to meet. Salome will take Patience with her, nor leave her gentle guidance till she comes to the Paradise of God. For *there* are no crosses to bear and no imperfect work to mourn, no sin to be hid in secret places, no sorrow, nor any more pain. The former things have passed away, and Patience, having had her perfect work, is exchanged for the rest of those who have fought the good fight, and bear the palms of victory in their hands through Him who has redeemed us to God by His death, and given to His faithful ones the life everlasting. [245]

"Safe home! safe home in port!
Rent cordage, shattered deck,
Torn sails, provisions short,
And only not a wreck:
But oh! the joy upon the shore
To tell our voyage-perils o'er!"

"The prize! the prize secure!
The athlete nearly fell;
Bore all he could endure,
And bore not always well:
But he may smile at troubles gone
Who sets the victor's garland on."

THE END.

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Transcriber's Notes:

Spelling and punctuation errors were corrected.

Retained: devonport, ascendancy, fire-place and fireplace, ink-stand and inkstand, practice (for medical) and practise (for repeatedly do).

Locations of illustrations have been moved to the action in text that they illustrate. Most of these moves were slight changes, but the illustration on p. 66 originally displayed as a frontispiece before the title page illustration.

On caption in illustration list, original "Dr. Wilson" changed to "Dr. Wilton."

P. 22, "any more if-- If you come upstairs"; space after em dash deleted.

P. 42, "'I should have thought,' said Dr. Wilton", original read Mr. Wilton.

P. 100, "Edith and Maude", original read "Maud."

P. 139, "walking with them, and-- But if mother"; space after em dash deleted.

P. 191, quotes were added around "It was far better ... time."

P. 245, Poem at the end, "Safe home!", inconsistent indentation is faithful to the original as printed.

The ten pages of ads at the end of the text each displayed "T. Nelson and Sons, London, Edinburgh, and New York." at the bottom of the page. These have been reduced to one occurrence, at the bottom of the last ad page.

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