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Title: A Terrible Tomboy

Author: Angela Brazil
Illustrator: N. Tenison

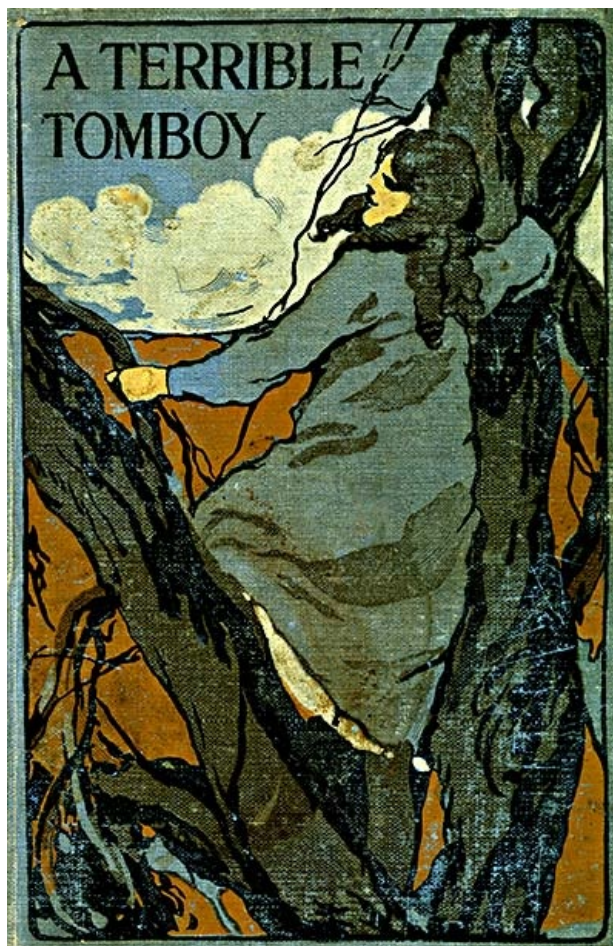
Release date: January 20, 2012 [EBook #38619]
Most recently updated: January 8, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Suzanne Shell and the Online Distributed
Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net>

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A TERRIBLE TOMBOY



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A TERRIBLE TOMBOY

BY
ANGELA BRAZIL

AUTHOR OF "FAIRY PLAYS FOR CHILDREN"

NEW EDITION

ILLUSTRATED IN COLOUR BY N. TENISON

LONDON
HENRY FROWDE
HODDER AND STOUGHTON
1915

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A TERRIBLE TOMBOY

[1]

CHAPTER I

PEGGY AT HOME

'Good sooth! I know not be she wench or swain;
Her face proclaims her one, her deeds the
other!'

'PEGGY! Peggy! where are you? Peggy! Aunt Helen wants you! Oh, Peggy, do be quick! Wherever are you hiding?'

Getting no response to her calls, the speaker, a pretty fair-haired girl of fifteen, flung her brown holland cooking-apron over her head, and ran out across the farmyard into the lightly-falling rain. She peeped into the cart-shed, where the hens were scratching about among the loose straw. Certainly Peggy was not there. She searched in the kitchen garden, but there was nothing to be seen except the daffodils nodding their innocent heads under the gooseberry-bushes. Round through the orchard she sped, bringing down a shower of cherry-blossom as she brushed against the low-growing trees, and greatly disturbing a robin, who was feeding a young

family in a hole in the ivy, but without any sign of the truant. Here and there Lilian ran, hunting in all Peggy's favourite haunts—now peeping into a hollow yew-tree, now peering at the top of a ladder, now rummaging in the tool-shed, then back through the sand-quarry into the stack-yard, where there was a very good chance that the young lady might be hidden away in some snug little hole among the hay; but though Lilian got a tolerable amount of hay-seed into her hair, her efforts were fruitless, and she was just turning away, hot and out of breath, to give up the useless search, when the sound of a low, chuckling laugh attracted her to the barn.

The door was slightly ajar, and she peeped in.

On the floor among the straw sat a little boy of between eight and nine years old, gazing with rapturous delight into the rafters of the roof. Following the direction of his eyes, Lilian glanced up, and beheld a sight which made her gasp with horror. The barn was a very large one, and was spanned by a great cross-beam, which ran across the whole length from one end to another. Mounted on this, fully fifteen feet above the ground, a small girl was slowly walking along, her gray eyes bright with excitement, her brown curls flying in wild disorder, and her arms stretched out on either side to balance herself as she went on her perilous journey.

Lilian gazed at her spellbound; she did not dare to speak or move, lest by some mischance the frail little figure should lose its nerve and come crashing down on to the stone floor below.

The child herself, however, did not seem to be troubled with the slightest fear, for she walked on as steadily as if the beam had been a plain turnpike road, giving a shout of triumph as she reached the cross-bar, and slid down the ladder on to the ground.

'Hurrah! hurrah!' cried Bobby, clapping his hands in an ecstasy of admiration.

Peggy turned round with a radiant face.

'It's perfectly easy!' she exclaimed; 'I could do it over again. Now, Bobby, you come up and try!'

But here Lilian's pent-up excitement and wrath burst forth.

'For shame, Peggy!' she cried. 'If you want to break your own neck, you shan't break Bobby's, at any rate! Don't you know what a horribly dangerous thing you have been doing? And the idea of your walking along there with your boot-lace dangling down in that way! You are really getting too old for these silly tricks; one can't look after you like a baby. Aunt Helen *would* be angry if she heard of this!'

Peggy sat down on the bottom rung of the ladder. The triumph had faded from her face, and left something not nearly so pleasant to look at behind.

'All right,' she said defiantly; 'go along and tell Aunt Helen if you like! I don't care!'

'Peggy, how horrid you are! Do I ever tell? Didn't I wash and iron your pinafore yesterday, when you fell into the pig-trough, and nobody even suspected? I call you right-down mean to go saying things like that!' And Lilian's pretty face flushed quite pink with righteous indignation.

Peggy had the grace to look rather ashamed of herself.

'No, Lil, you're a dear; you don't tell tales,' she said; 'and I haven't forgotten about the pinafore.'

'Promise me, then, that you won't go playing such mad pranks again, and leading Bobby into them, too?'

'All right—anything for a quiet life.'

'But promise, properly.'

'There! On my honour, I will never walk along that beam again, or let Bobby do it either. Will that suit you?'

Lilian heaved a sigh of relief, for whatever might be Peggy's sins and misdeeds, her word, once given, was not lightly broken.

'I've been looking for you everywhere,' she said. 'Aunt Helen sent me to fetch you in at once, and I've been such a long time in finding you. I'm afraid she'll be ever so cross.'

'What does she want me for?'

'To darn your stockings. Oh, Peggy, how could you go and hide all those pairs away under the dressing-table? It was really silly, for you might have known Aunt Helen would be sure to hunt them out; and now she's fearfully angry about it, and says you'll have to sit and mend away till they're all finished; and she won't let me help you, either.'

Peggy sighed philosophically.

'I suppose I shall have to come,' she said, getting up and shaking the straw out of her hair. 'Never mind; I'd really rather mend them all in one big heap than in a lot of little horrid pottering times; it spoils one's Saturdays so!'

'Aunt Helen said if I found Bobby he was to come in too, and learn his Latin,' continued Lilian, looking round. But that youth had prudently disappeared at the first hint of Saturday duties, and

was nowhere to be seen.

Peggy chuckled.

'I'm afraid you won't find him,' she remarked; 'and it's no use looking. He's got the most lovely hiding-place in the world that he goes to when he doesn't want to be told to come in. I only found it out by accident myself, and I promised wild horses shouldn't wrench the secret from me. Come along; we may as well go and get the scolding over.'

And the young lady tossed back her tangled locks, shook her fist at the anticipated pile of darning; then, putting on an air of chastened and becoming meekness, as being most likely to soothe Aunt Helen's wrath, she marched sturdily into the house. [5]

It was a beautiful old home into which Peggy entered, half castle, half farmhouse, with an air of having seen better days about it. The quaint timbered house, with its carved gables and red-tiled roof, was built in at one end into a kind of square tower or keep, with tiny turret windows and winding staircase, getting just a little ruinous in places, but held firmly together by masses of ivy, which clung round it like a green mantle. Beyond the tower lay the remains of an abbey, more ancient than the keep. Most of it had been carried away to build the large barns and stables, but the foundations could still be plainly traced, with here and there part of a wall thickly covered with ivy, the ruins of a shattered column, a delicate little piece of window tracery, or a few steps of corkscrew staircase. There were rows and heaps of mossy stones covered with nettles and elder-bushes, with patches of green grass in between, where the cows grazed and the pigeons flew about, cooing gently. In the ivy the jackdaws were always busy, and the children had many a perilous climb trying to reach the coveted nests. The earliest primroses grew here, and beds of sweet violets under the ruined walls, and there were so many turns and corners and sheltered nooks that it made the grandest play-place in the world for anyone who loved a game at hide-and-seek.

On the other side of the house stretched the garden—such a sweet, old-fashioned garden, where roses, lilies, and gillyflowers were all mixed up with the currants and gooseberries and cabbages. It was somewhat neglected, it is true, but perhaps it looked none the less picturesque for that, and certainly no one would be disposed to quarrel with the beautiful ripe strawberries and the sweet little yellow gooseberries with the hairy skins, or the big red plums that hung upon the old brick walls. [6]

Inside the house was large and roomy, with rambling passages and odd little windows in unexpected corners. There was a large oak staircase, with wide, shallow steps, leading to a panelled gallery, where hung swords, and rusty armour, and moth-eaten tapestry, and many an ancient relic of the past; while in the best bedroom was a great carved four-post bed, hung with faded yellow curtains, where Queen Elizabeth herself was said to have slept in much state for two nights on her journey from Shrewsbury to Wrexham.

The big drawing-room had been shut up for many years; the Queen-Anne chairs and china-cabinets were swathed in wrappers, and the ornaments put away in boxes; but sometimes the children would steal in and open the shutters to look at the portraits which hung upon the oak-panelled walls—stately gentlemen with wigs and lace frills, whose eyes seemed to follow you about the room; haughty dames with powdered hair and patches; stiff little girls in hoops and mittens, and pretty young ladies attired as shepherdesses or classic goddesses, with cupids and nymphs in the background.

The little blue drawing-room, which was always used instead, was a far more cheery apartment, with its sunny French window and fresh muslin curtains, and the blue chintz covers on the chairs. But of all the rooms I think the quaintest was the kitchen. It was by far the oldest part of the house; the great beams of the roof, roughly hewn out with an axe and black with age, had been a portion of the ancient castle, and so had the mullioned windows, with their deep, old-fashioned seats and diamond panes, filled with green, uneven glass. It looked a cheerful place, with its polished-oak dressers and shining brasses, and on a winter's evening, when the shutters were closed and the settle drawn close to the fire, it seemed the cosiest spot in the world; and Peggy and Bobby would often escape from the sober atmosphere of the dining-room to pull their little stools into the ingle nook, and listen to Nancy's wonderful tales of ghosts and goblins, which seemed twice as thrilling when the wind was howling like a banshee in the chimney, and rattling the doors till they could fancy that spirit fingers were tapping on the panels, and only waiting a chance to catch them in the dark passages, and sent such cold shivers running down their backs that they grew almost too frightened to go to bed. [7]

Below the house the meadow sloped down to a river, where a stone bridge led to the village, with its pretty thatched cottages and Norman church, whose square tower stood up like a beacon for the surrounding country; and away in the distance, tier upon tier, rose the Welsh mountains, fading from green to purple or from purple to misty mauve, till the last were lost in the hazy blue of the sky.

Gorswen Abbey, as Peggy's home was called, had been an important place in its time, and an air of sleepy grandeur seemed still to hang about the old walls, as if sometime it might rouse itself from its lethargy and take its part in the world again.

No one could remember when Vaughans had not lived at the Abbey. There were tombs in memory of them in a side transept of the church—stalwart Crusaders, lying with legs crossed and meek hands folded in prayer; stout Elizabethan squires and their dames, with ruffs round their

necks, and rows of prim little kneeling children beneath them; full-faced Jacobean worthies in curled wigs, with sculptured cherubs weeping over extinguished torches; and there was a high old pew with a carved canopy over it, and an escutcheon bearing a coat of arms with a dragon on it, which, when Peggy was very little, she had always associated with the dragon in the Book of Revelation, and had an uneasy feeling that its eye was upon her all service time, and if she did not behave properly it might come down in great wrath and devour her.

There had been Vaughans who fought in the Wars of the Roses, Vaughans who threw in their lot with King Charles and helped to beat Cromwell at Atherton Moor, Vaughans who had joined the Young Pretender's force, and had lost their heads as their reward. There was no end to the stories which the children could sometimes cajole out of old David, the farm-help, who had all the family history at his finger-ends.

But they had been a happy-go-lucky, spendthrift race, loving to ride to hounds and to entertain liberally better than to look after their affairs. Little by little the fine property had been wasted away, till, when Peggy's father succeeded to the estate, he found it to consist of scarcely more than the old house with the surrounding farm and woodlands, together with such a multitude of debts, mortgages, and other encumbrances, that it was truly a barren heritage. Robert Vaughan, however, was a man of strong will and much determination. Some of the grit of the old Crusaders was left in his blood, and instead of taking his solicitor's advice, and selling the place for what it would fetch, he resolved to farm the land himself, and by using every care and economy to free the property, and raise it to its former level in the county. He worked in his own fields, ploughing, harvesting, and reaping, toiling harder than any of his labourers, and living in as plain a manner as possible.

To those friends who thought he lost caste thereby he had always the same argument—that he saw no reason why the cultivation of fields should counteract the habits of refinement and good breeding to which he had been reared; that in the colonies educated gentlemen set to work to labour with their hands, and are thought none the worse of: so why not in England, where land is good and markets are plentiful, especially when it involved the keeping of a fine old property which had been in the family for so many hundreds of years?

Fortune, however, had been against him. Several bad seasons and a spell of disease among the cattle had made all the difference between profit and loss, and at the time this story begins Robert Vaughan realized that any unusual run of ill luck might bring matters to a crisis, and render vain the struggle of so many years. The children, however, knew little of the shadow which haunted their home, for they lived as yet in that happy thoughtless paradise which is the inheritance of true childhood, where a new rabbit in the hutch or an extra treat on a holiday is of far more importance than any grown-up affair.

Their mother had faded so early from their young lives that she was scarcely more than a tender memory, and her place had been taken by dear, pretty Aunt Helen, father's younger sister, who did her best to train them up in the way they should go. Aunt Helen fondly imagined herself to be a great disciplinarian, but her own lively youth was still such a recent remembrance that her eyes were wont to twinkle and the corners of her mouth to twitch in the middle of her severest scoldings, and the children always had a feeling that so long as they did not do anything rude or wrong, or run into any very imminent danger, their escapades were secretly condoned by their aunt, who admired pluck and spirit, however much she might feel it incumbent upon her to lecture them.

Gentle Lilian gave little trouble, and Bobby, Aunt Helen often declared, would be easy enough to manage alone; but where Peggy led he was always sure to follow, and the end was generally mischief of some sort or other.

The worst of it was poor Peggy really did not mean to be naughty; she was so eager, so active, so full of overflowing and impetuous life, with such restless daring and abounding energy, that in the excitement of the moment her wild spirits were apt to carry her away, simply because she never stopped to think of consequences. She had always a hundred projects on hand, each one of which she was ready to pursue with unflagging zeal and that absorbing interest which is the secret of true enjoyment.

'Let her alone,' the Rector, who rejoiced in Peggy, was wont to say. 'Don't prune her too hard, for it is sometimes the side-shoots that bear the best flowers, after all. She is like a young growing plant—a little too much leaf at present, but I see a grand promise of blossom, and she'll turn out a fine woman in the end.'

Happily both her father and Aunt Helen shared his views, and, knowing Peggy's generous, affectionate nature, were able to lead her more by love than severity (for with human hearts it is often like the fable of the sun and the wind: they will respond to a kindly touch, while harshness will only make them sullen and obstinate), and they further held the opinion that it is better for a child to have many interests and much energy, even though these qualities prove a little troublesome, than to grow up clipped to the prim pattern of those who may have outlived their enthusiasms.

Such natures as Peggy's taste life to the full; for them it is never a stale or worthless draught. Each moment is so keenly lived that time flies by on eager wings, and though there may be stormy troubles sometimes, as a rule the spirit dwells, like the swallows, in an upper region of joy, which is scarcely dreamt of by those who cannot soar so high.

CHAPTER II

[12]

BIRDS'-NESTING

'The busy birds with nice selection cull
Soft thistle-down, gray moss, and scattered
wool;
Far from each prying eye the nest prepare,
Formed of warm moss and lined with softer
hair.'

PEGGY and Bobby sat at the top of a high apple-tree in a cunning little seat just where one bough crossed another, and, bending up, formed a kind of armchair with a back to it. Below them the pink apple-blossom spread like a rosy cloud against the bluest of skies, and a blackbird in a neighbouring bush was trilling his loudest.

Easter had fallen late, so that the children's spring holidays were not yet over when the first early delightful days of May brought a foretaste of the coming summer. Peggy and Bobby were out the whole day long, following their father about the farm, riding on the slow plough-horses, helping to drive the sheep, or bringing home the cows from the pasture, sowing seeds in their little gardens, and generally revelling in the delicious freedom.

Sometimes Lilian would join them, but more often she was busy indoors, helping her aunt and Nancy, the maid, and learning the mysteries of housekeeping and dairy-minding; for she was growing quite a nice little companion to Aunt Helen, and becoming so useful that Nancy declared they should scarcely know what to do without her when the term began again.

[13]

'What shall we do this afternoon?' said Bobby, leaning back among the branches in a way that would have brought Aunt Helen's heart to her mouth if she had not long ago come to the conclusion that small boys have nine lives, like a cat.

'I don't know,' replied Peggy, idly picking off bits of twig, and throwing them at the old gander, which had strayed underneath.

'Then let's go birds'-nesting. You can't think how dreadfully I want to find a cuckoo's egg. Arthur Hill has one at school, and he's so proud of it, he wouldn't change it though a boy offered him five sticks of mint-rock and a pea-shooter. I'm sure we ought to get one about here: I've heard such lots of cuckoos lately. We'll look in every nest we find.'

'All right, we'll go down the meadows by the river into the hazel-wood.'

'No, no! Up the hill, over the gorse common, and down the yew-tree lane.'

'You won't find any nests up there!'

'Yes, I shall!'

'I tell you you won't!'

'And I tell you I shall!'

'You were only eight last January, and I shall be twelve in November, so I ought to know best!' said Peggy crushingly.

'I don't care if you're a hundred!' replied Bobby with scorn. 'Joe was up there last night, and he found twelve nests, and, what's more, he told me just where they all are.'

'Then, why couldn't you say so at first? Are you sure you can find them?'

'Certain; and one of them's a long-tailed tit's, with ever so many eggs in it. Do you want to go down by the river now?'

[14]

'No,' replied Peggy, giving in graciously. 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and if Joe really found the nests up there, it's worth while going to see.'

Bobby climbed down in triumph, for Peggy so generally took the lead that it was sweet for once to get his own way. He was rather a gentle little boy, ready as a rule to follow at Peggy's bidding, and to make a lively second to any scheme she might have in hand. Aunt Helen sometimes thought the two must have got changed, and that Peggy should have been the boy and Bobby the girl; for though the latter was not without courage, it was certainly Peggy who had the most of that enterprising spirit which is generally thought a characteristic of the masculine mind.

Though she would not have minded being a genuine boy, Peggy had the greatest objection to be called a tomboy—a term of reproach that had been hurled at her head from her earliest infancy by indiscriminating friends.

'If they meant anything nice by it, I shouldn't care,' she complained. 'But they don't, for a tomboy is a horrid, rough sort of creature who isn't fit to be either a boy or a girl. It's too bad that

I can't even do useful things without people howling at me. Mrs. Davenport looked perfectly shocked when I harnessed the pony, though I told her Joe was milking, and there was no one else to come and do it; and when old Mr. Cooper saw me help Father to drive cows down the pasture, he popped out with "Miss Tomboy" at once, though he did say afterwards I was the right sort of girl. People didn't call Joan of Arc and Grace Darling tomboys, though they did other things besides stay at home and darn stockings. Why can't I climb trees and jump fences, and enjoy myself like boys do, and yet be a thorough girl all the same?

[15]

To do Peggy justice, I think she was right, for though she delighted in outdoor life, she was in no sense a rough or ill-mannered child, and loved pretty things and dainty ways as well as quieter Lilian; but it was a case of a dog with a bad name, for however indignantly she might remonstrate, people had got into the habit of dubbing her 'tomboy,' and at that valuation she seemed likely to remain.

The walk which Bobby had proposed this afternoon was somewhat of a scramble, for the country rose behind the Abbey into undulating hills, which were fairly steep, though not so high as the Welsh mountains, and were covered for the most part with gorse and rough grass, where the sheep and young bullocks were turned out to graze. It was rather a stiff pull up to the common, but the Vaughans were as accustomed to climbing as mountain goats, and would have thought it far more wearisome to walk the length of a London street.

Half-way up was a spot very dear to the children's hearts. At a turn of the road a great slab of Welsh slatestone lay at a sloping angle, shelving down for a distance of about twenty feet, and with its surface so flat and even, and so smooth and polished by the weather, that it made a natural sliding-board, down which it was delightful to toboggan at full speed. It seemed expressly formed for the enjoyment of small boys and girls, for as it lay across a corner, you had only to walk up the road to get to the top, then settling yourself firmly with feet straight in front, you let go, and slid like a bolt from an arrow down—down—till you found your feet on the road again, and could climb up once more and repeat the performance.

[16]

Of course, it was not very nice for the backs of boots and knickerbockers, and frocks and pinafores were apt to get sadly torn if they caught on a projecting angle; but what child ever thought of clothes when a twenty-foot slide might be enjoyed? Certainly not Peggy or Bobby, whose well-worn garments were generally made of the stoutest and most serviceable materials.

They spent quite half an hour at this enthralling pastime, till a very persistent cuckoo in a little copse over the hedge recalled them to the principal object of their ramble.

'Come along!' shouted Peggy. 'We're wasting time!'

'Let's take the short cut,' cried Bobby, hopping nimbly over the fence into the meadow, where the kingcups were lying, such a bright mass of gold in the sunshine that you might have thought the stars had fallen from the sky and were shining in the fields instead. Little rabbits scuttled away before them into the hedgerows, and a cock pheasant, disturbed in his afternoon nap, flew with a great whir into the coppice close by. Two fields brought them out on to the common, where the gorse was a blaze of colour and the bees were busy buzzing among the sweet-smelling blossom.

'Joe said there was a yellowhammer's nest just there, close by the elder-bush,' said Bobby.

'All right,' said Peggy; 'you take one side of the tree, and I'll take the other.'

A few minutes' search resulted in a delighted 'S'sh!' from Bobby, for on a little ledge of rock under an overhanging tussock of grass was the cosiest, cunningest nest in the world, and the yellowhammer herself sat on it, looking at them with her bright little eyes, half undecided whether to stay or to fly away in alarm.

[17]

Peggy crept up as quietly as a mouse. Though the children were very anxious to find nests, it was not in any spirit of ruthless robbery. Mr. Vaughan was a keen naturalist, and had taught them to watch the birds in their haunts, but disturb them as little as possible, taking an occasional egg for their collection, but only when there were so many in the nest that it would not be missed.

'Isn't she stunning?' whispered Bobby. 'And how tight she sits!'

But a human voice was too much for the yellowhammer, and she flew like a dart into the gorse-bushes.

'Five eggs,' said Peggy, 'but not one of them a cuckoo's. You don't want one, do you, Bobby?'

'No, I've got three at home. I had five, but I swopped two of them with Frank Wilson for a redstart's.'

'Come along, then; she'll soon fly back when we're gone; I believe she is watching us out of the elder-tree. Where did Joe say the long-tailed tits had built?'

'Right in the middle of a gorse-bush, just on the top of the mound where the goat was tethered last year. He calls them bottle-tits, but it's just the same thing, Father says. Whew! isn't the grass scratchy on your legs!'

'Horrid! My boots are full of prickles. I shall have to take them off soon. It's so deep here, it's

scratching my very nose. Oh, look, Bobby! There goes one of the tits! I saw just where she flew from. Oh, here it is! See, isn't it just the prettiest little nest that ever was?'

The tit's nest would certainly have gained the prize if all the birds had been asked to take part in a building competition. It was made of the softest moss and lichens, fashioned together in the shape of a bottle with the neck downwards; for the tit must have some place in which to bestow her long tail, and she builds her home to suit her person.

[18]

Peggy thrust a cautious finger through the tiny opening in the side.

'It's full of eggs!' she exclaimed; 'I should think there must be seven or eight. I'll take two, one for you and one for me. They're the smallest you ever saw, and so warm. I hope they'll blow easily.'

Bobby had brought a box full of sheep's wool in his pocket, to hold anything they might find, so Peggy laid the eggs in with great pride, for bottle-tits were rare in that neighbourhood, and they had long wished to find such a treasure. Joe had certainly not misled them, and Bobby's memory, though defective as regarded Latin declensions and historical facts, was unerring where it was a case of locating birds'-nests.

He found three thrushes' nests low down in the elder-bushes, all filled with gaping yellow mouths, the pretty little chaffinch's up in the ivy-tree, with only two speckly eggs as yet, and Jenny Wren's household, hidden away in a bank, full of so many children that she surely resembled the old woman who lived in a shoe, and it was a marvel how she could remember which little chirping atom she had fed last. The robin had built early and her brood had flown and left the empty nest; but two blackbirds were sitting in the hawthorn-hedge, and flew away with cries of indignation and distress.

The cuckoos were still calling loudly in the distance.

'Tiresome things!' said Bobby; 'if they would only build nests like other birds, one might have a chance of finding them.'

"In April the cuckoo comes,
In May she'll stay,
In June she changes her tune,
In July she prepares to fly,
Come August, go she must,"

[19]

quoted Peggy.

'But you haven't said it all,' put in Bobby.

"And if the cuckoo stays till September,
It's as much as the oldest man can
remember."

'I wish the rhymes would tell us where she lays her eggs,' said Peggy.

She was poking about in the mossy bank as she spoke, when a hedge-sparrow flew out from the low bushes above almost straight into her face. It did not take Peggy long to find the neat little nest of twisted twigs and grass woven into the fork of a branch. There were four lovely blue eggs inside, and a slightly larger one of a greenish-gray colour. Peggy flushed all over with excitement.

'Bobby, Bobby!' she screamed, 'come here, quick! I do believe I have found a cuckoo's egg!'

There seemed little doubt about it, for the egg really looked quite different to the others; so the treasured find was safely put away in the small box, to be shown to Joe, who was wise in such lore, though he only knew the birds by their country names, and had never heard of such a science as ornithology. Quite elated with their success, the children hunted down the lane, searching in every bush and hedgerow, but they found nothing but a few last year's nests, full of acorns and dead leaves.

They came out by Betsy Owen's cottage—a little low, whitewashed, tumble-down building, standing in the midst of a neglected garden, with a very forlorn and deserted air about it.

'Joe says no doubt there'd be lots of nests in the ivy there,' confided Bobby, peeping through the hedge. 'But he wouldn't go in and see, not if you gave him five pounds for it.'

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'Why not?' demanded Peggy.

'Because old Betsy's a witch, and you never know what she might do if you made her angry. John Parker and Evan Williams took some sticks from her hedge last autumn, and she came out in a rage, and crossed her fingers at them, and in six weeks John broke his leg, and Evan had sore eyes all the winter. And once Joe and another boy were coming home very late at night past the cottage, and they saw a bright light, and just as they reached the gate it went out, and they heard a most fearful shriek, and they were so frightened they ran all the way home.'

'What nonsense!' said Peggy. 'I expect the old woman was blowing out her candle to go to bed, and a screech-owl flew over their heads. Joe would have run away from his own shadow. But if you're afraid, stay outside in the lane, for I'm going in to see if there's a nest in that ivy; it looks

such a likely place. I don't believe anyone's in the cottage, either, for the door's shut.'

But Bobby much resented such a slur on his manly courage, and insisted upon being the one to climb the ivy-covered chimney. He crept quietly round to the back of the cottage, and swung himself up by the thick stems, feeling in every little hole where he could lay his hand. The large old chimney was so wide at the top that he found he could peep right down it, as if he were looking into a well, and could see a good piece of the hearth underneath, with a small fire of sticks burning under a large, three-legged iron pot, and the old woman sitting close by on a low stool, smoking a short clay pipe.

Betsy Owen was a withered, cross-grained old dame, who by dint of the knowledge of the uses of some simple herbs and a good deal of cunning, had contrived to establish a reputation something between a witch and a quack doctor. People came to her from remote farms to have warts charmed away or the toothache cured; she dressed burns and wounds, and concocted lotions for sore eyes and bad legs. Her one room was hung all round with plants in various stages of drying, and she was always ready to prescribe a remedy for an ailing cow or a sick child, generally at much profit to herself, whatever might be the benefit to the sufferer. She was bending over her iron pot now, stirring the concoction with a long-handled spoon. Bobby could see her quite plainly in the fire light, and could catch the curious aromatic smell which rose up from the smouldering wood. I do not know what prompted him—probably the love of mischief which dwells in all small boys—but he picked up a loose piece of mortar which was lying on the roof, and dropped it suddenly down the chimney. It fell plump into the iron pot with a loud, hissing sound.

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Out rushed Betsy from the cottage, scolding furiously. Down dropped Bobby from the chimney, and was through a hole in the hedge and away down the lane as fast as his sturdy legs could carry him. Peggy had been waiting in the garden, and, before she could realize what had happened, she found herself seized and shaken violently by the angry old woman.

'I'll larn yer to come into other folk's places and drop stones down decent body's chimleys!' shrieked Betsy. 'Be off with yer, yer ill-mannered young good-for-naught; and if ever I catch yer here again, yer'll get such a hidin' yer won't forget it for a month!'

Peggy was so amazed by the suddenness of the attack that for the moment she offered no resistance; but, finding a storm of blows descending on her head like hail, she managed to squirm out of Betsy's ungentle grasp, and fled after Bobby down the lane, followed by a shower of epithets from the gate, where the old woman stood shaking her fist until long after the children were out of sight.

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When they judged themselves to be at a safe distance the pair sat down on a fence to get their breath, and talk over their adventure.

'We're in for it now,' laughed Peggy. 'She was so fearfully angry I'm sure Joe would say she'd bewitched us!'

'Yes, he'll be in a great state of mind when we tell him. He'll quite expect us to break our arms or legs or necks or something before long!'

'You'll do that without her if you try to swing head downwards on one leg like that,' said Peggy; for Bobby was executing some marvellous gymnastics on the top rail of the fence.

He came down feet foremost, however, and they sauntered off along the road to the old water-mill, where the miller's man was slinging a sack of flour on to a patient donkey who stood, with drooping ears, eyeing the burden which he must carry up far into the mountains, while his mistress, a little black-eyed Welshwoman, poured forth a torrent of gossip in high-pitched tones.

The wheel was standing idle, and the children went down the slippery steps to the pool below. It was cool and dark there, for the trees grew low over the stream, and the water, escaping from the race above, poured down by the side of the wheel in a foaming cataract. A dipper was hopping about from stone to stone in the centre of the stream, pruning her sleek feathers, and calling her lively 'chit, chit' to her mate. Peggy grasped Bobby by the arm.

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'Keep still,' she whispered. 'Let us watch her. Perhaps she may have a nest somewhere close by.'

All unconscious of her audience, the little bird jerked her short tail, dived rapidly into the water, and, emerging at the other side of the pool, flew suddenly into the green, moss-grown wall which overhung the mill-wheel.

'That's her nest,' cried Bobby. 'Oh, don't you see it? It looks just like a great lump of moss; you can hardly tell it from the wall, only I see a little round hole at the bottom. What a shame it's in such a horrid place! We can never get it up there.'

'Yes, we can,' replied Peggy stoutly. 'I'm going up.'

'But how?'

'Up the mill-wheel, of course, stupid! No, you're not coming too. You climbed the chimney, and it's my turn. Just hold my hat, and I'll manage all right, you'll see!'

It was a slippery climb, for the wheel was green with slime, and it needed a long step to get

from one blade to the other; but Peggy was utterly fearless, and she had soon pulled herself to the top. Balanced there, she could easily reach to the nest, which was only a few feet away from her. Out flew the dipper in a panic, and in went Peggy's fingers.

'Three eggs, Bobby—lovely white eggs! Look! I think I shall take this one, at any rate.'

She held out her hand to show her prize, but at that instant the mill-wheel began to turn, and she was whirled from the dizzy summit down—down—into the dark pool below.

Bobby's agonized shrieks brought out the miller's man, who, dashing into the stream, caught the child just as she rose to the surface, and before she had drifted into the swifter current further on. It was a very forlorn and draggled Peggy which he laid upon the bank, but she was game to the last.

'I haven't broken the egg,' she gasped out, with the water streaming from her hair.

'Better thank the Lord you're not drowned, miss,' said the miller's man, looking ruefully at his own wet garments. 'Let me take you into the house, and Mrs. Griffiths'll get you some dry clothes to your back; you'll catch your death of cold sitting there.'

Peggy essayed to get up and walk, but she was such a very water-logged vessel that to hasten matters her rescuer picked her up in his arms, and bore her off like a sack of flour.

Stout old Mrs. Griffiths was sitting knitting in the chimney-corner, but she jumped up in a hurry when John carried in his dripping burden.

'Sakes alive!' she screamed, 'what is it? Is she dead? Lay her out on the parlour sofa. Sarah Grace, run for the parish nurse and the Rector—quick!'

But Peggy's voluble tongue assuring her that she was very much alive, and only in need of drying, she soon hustled that young lady upstairs, and out of her wet clothes. Ten minutes later Peggy sat on the settle by the kitchen fire, an odd little figure, attired in Sarah Grace's Sunday jacket over Mrs. Griffiths' best red flannel petticoat, and a steaming glass of hot elder wine in her hand.

'Just to keep you from catching cold, miss; and Master Bobby must have one too, bless his heart! He's as white as my apron, and small wonder, after seeing his sister half drowned!'

CHAPTER III

THE BLACK PUPPY

'His eyes so brown, his winning ways,
His faithful heart, command our
praise.'

AFTER the adventure at the mill-wheel, Aunt Helen, judging wisely that 'Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do,' sent the children into the fields with Lilian to gather cowslips to make cowslip beer. It was pleasant work wandering among the green meadows picking the sweet-smelling flowers, while the larks sang their loudest overhead, and the little brook babbled by on its path to the river—more especially pleasant when they remembered that by this time next week school would have begun again, with its attendant woes of Latin grammar and French composition.

'I'm sure we must have enough now,' said Lilian, turning out her sixteenth basket of blossoms into the ever-increasing pile in the bakehouse. 'I'm almost tired of gathering them; I shall see nothing but cowslips when I shut my eyes in bed to-night.'

'It will take a fearfully long time to pick them all,' remarked Peggy, starting bravely to work on her task of pulling the yellow pips away from the green calyces. 'It seems almost a shame to put them into a barrel, they look so pretty.'

'You won't say so when you come to taste it,' said unromantic Bobby, who was fond of cool, fizzy drinks in summer.

'Be that you, miss?' said a voice from the region of the door; and the good-natured, freckled face and sandy hair of Joe, the farm-boy, made its appearance, followed by the rest of his lanky person, as he entered slowly, bearing something mysteriously concealed under his coat.

'Whatever have you got there, Joe?' cried three voices at once.

'Well,' replied Joe, with an important air, 'it do be a present for Miss Peggy, it be. She were that disappointed about the guinea-pig as Mrs. Davenport promised to give her, and forgot all about,

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that I says to myself, "I must make it up to her some ways, if I gets the chance." So I walks over to my granny's at Marlow last night, and I begs a black pup off her, and here it is.'

Joe drew aside his jacket, and disclosed to the children's delighted eyes the sweetest little round fuzzy ball of black fluff, just like a tiny woolly bear, with tan chest and paws, and a wagging morsel of a tail like a black tassel. It had the brightest of brown eyes, the pinkest of tongues, and the shrillest of barks, and it was altogether such a dear, enchanting, soft, curly morsel of puppyhood that Peggy took it to her arms and her heart at the same moment.

'Oh, thank you, Joe!' she exclaimed, almost too pleased to speak.

'Granny has five of 'em, miss,' said Joe; 'but I picked out the best. It'll make a grand dog, it will, when it's growed, and master was sayin' only the other day as he could do with another collie to train in old Rover's place.'

'Let me have him a moment!' begged Bobby, hugging the wriggling burden, which Peggy unwillingly relinquished. [27]

'What shall you call the darling?' inquired Lilian, kissing the funny black nose that was smelling at her buttons.

'I think Rollo would be a jolly name, and of course we can all have a piece of him all the same, though he's mine,' announced Peggy magnanimously, for the Vaughans always shared their good things with one another.

They had a perfect menagerie of pets at the Abbey. First there were the rabbits, five white ones and two black, which lived in a little hutch behind the stackyard. They did not do very much except nibble at bran and lettuce-leaves, it is true, but they were pretty, soft creatures, with long, silky ears, and it was fun sometimes to let them out for a scamper on the granary floor. Then there was Prickles, a bright little hedgehog, which Peggy had rescued from some village boys who were using the poor little fellow as a football. She had brought him home, and fed him on bread and milk, and he soon got to know her, and would come when she called him, and allow her to scratch the end of his funny pink nose. Prickles generally slept most of the day in a snug box lined with hay, but in the evenings he woke up, and Peggy would carry him into the kitchen, where he devoured black-beetles, much to his own delight and Nancy's satisfaction.

Jack, the magpie, had fallen from his nest in the fir-tree when still an ugly little half-fledged creature with a wide, gaping mouth. The children had made a nest of grass for him inside a basket, and fed him on worms and scraps of raw meat until he was old enough to fly, when he would follow them everywhere about the farmyard and outbuildings, calling 'Jack, Jack!' which, with the mewling of a cat, the gobble of the old turkey-cock, and a close imitation of David's winter cough, made up the extent of his accomplishments. [28]

Nancy kept him sternly out of the kitchen, for he was terribly mischievous, and seemed to take a positive delight in playing practical jokes. He had purloined David's scarf from the saddle-room, and dropped it into the horse-trough, had filled Bobby's hat with pebbles, and devoured the queen-cakes which Lilian had placed on the kitchen window-sill to cool; he had snatched Joe's breast-pin—a glittering imitation diamond—from his Sunday tie, under the very nose of that injured youth, and had stolen so many small articles that if anything were missing the children would have a grand search for Master Jack's hiding-place, and would generally turn out the lost treasure from among an odd collection of trifles—scraps of bright-coloured rags, bits of broken glass, hairpins, pen-nibs, pencil-ends, together with pieces of bread and half-picked bones which the thief had concealed in some cunning corner inside a manger or under the roof of the loft.

Then there was Pixie, the pony, who would come whinnying up from the further side of a field to poke her soft nose into the children's pockets for pieces of bread or lumps of sugar; there were numerous cats who lived in the barns and stables, and Tabbykins, the stately gray Persian, who usually sat sunning herself on the pigsty wall, keeping a strict eye on naughty Jack, who was wont to harry her if he got the chance.

Bobby had a pretty set of bantams, whose small eggs afforded him much delight and some slight profit, for Aunt Helen bought them from him at threepence a dozen—a transaction which he always recorded in chalk upon the hen-house door, the pennies being carefully put by towards the purchase of a pair of fantail pigeons, which was at present the summit of his ambition. [29]

This spring, too, there was a pet lamb called Daisy. David had found it bleating beside its dead mother one bitter morning early in March, and had carried the poor orphan into the kitchen, where Nancy had reared it on a feeding-bottle like a baby. It returned her care by an affection which was quite embarrassing to the worthy girl, for however attractive a pet lamb may be, it becomes distinctly in the way when it insists upon following you into the dining-room with the dinner, or presses its attentions on you when you are engaged in cleaning the grate or scrubbing the floors.

It was not only outside that the children had treasures. Aunt Helen was very long-suffering with respect to hobbies, for she rightly thought that the more a child's life is filled with interests, the more chance it has of growing up an intelligent and broad-minded individual, and of escaping from that lethargy of boredom which swallows up the lives of many young people who ought to know better how to amuse themselves in God's beautiful world. 'I don't know what to do,' was an unknown expression among the young Vaughans, who had always so many projects on hand that

the difficulty lay in finding time to carry them all out.

The Rose Parlour, as it was called, from the tangle of pink roses which framed the windows in summer-time, was especially given up to the children's use. It was a bright, cheerful room, with a view over the river to the sunset and the Welsh mountains, and had a French window which opened into the garden. Here was the old piano on which they practised, here the ink-pots and rulers for their home-lessons, with their paint-boxes, crayons, and drawing-books.

A cupboard in the corner was devoted to a kind of museum, where they kept their collection of birds' eggs, a few butterflies, moths, and beetles, Lilian's pressed wild-flowers, a box full of shells and fossils which they had brought home from their one never-to-be-forgotten visit to the seaside, a curious plaited basket filled with bone rings, shell bracelets, and other curiosities, sent by a sailor cousin from the South Sea Islands, and an odd assortment of stones, old coins, foreign stamps, crests and postmarks, which represented landmarks in the history of past fads.

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Lilian's canary hung in the sunniest window, Peggy's silkworms lay in a box on the sideboard, and Bobby's white mice reposed in much comfort in a cage on the chimney-piece.

The walls were adorned with school drawings and prize maps, fastened up with tacks; a bookcase of much-read volumes filled the space between the fireplace and the window; and in the corner might be found a miscellaneous collection of cricket-bats, fishing-rods, tennis-racquets, bows and arrows, croquet-mallets, sticks, balls and ninepins, and other articles very dear to the children's hearts, but which Nancy generally classed impartially under the head of 'lumber.'

The black puppy proved a delightful addition to the already long list of pets. Lilian hunted up a piece of blue ribbon to tie round his fluffy neck; but he objected to decorations, and soon clawed it off, and chewed it into a soft, slimy pulp. He ran after the children with little short, sharp barks, worrying at their heels till Aunt Helen declared there would soon not be a whole stocking left in the establishment; he had a fray at once with Jack, but was much worsted by that worthy, returning to Peggy for protection with his scrap of a tail between his legs; he tore Bobby's cricket-ball to pieces, licked the polish off Father's boots, devoured Aunt Helen's goloshes, and nestled cosily down to sleep on the top of Nancy's best Sunday hat, which that luckless damsel had imprudently left in an open band-box on the kitchen settle.

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On the first night of his arrival he howled so piteously on being left alone that Peggy insisted on taking him to bed with her.

'He'll be no trouble, the darling!' she said. 'He'll just cuddle down on the rug at the foot of my bed, and go to sleep like an angel; I know he will!'

She and Lilian made him a very snug little nest with the help of an old pillow, and he settled himself with a sigh of much content.

'He's *far* better than a baby,' declared Peggy, 'for he doesn't want hushing and rocking, and he won't cry in the night.'

But his fond mistress had given her favourite his good character a little too soon. About midnight the bright moonlight streaming in through the window woke Master Rollo, who, having had a refreshing nap, was now very wide awake, and ready for anything. He heaved himself out of his wrappings, and with a delighted yelp fell upon Peggy's curls, worrying them with little gasps of joy, till she had to dive beneath the bedclothes to escape her too sportive pet.

After that there was no more rest for Peggy or Lilian; Rollo was on the war-path, and determined to make the most of his opportunities. It was in vain that Lilian held him in her arms, and tried to soothe him to sleep; he grunted and whined, and wriggled down on to the floor, where, with a shrill bark, he unearthed a cardboard box full of old gloves, which had been stored away under the bed. The chewing and tearing up of these afforded him much sport, as did also the bare feet of his mistress, when she attempted to interfere. Peggy was at her wits' end, but she finally seized the tempestuous ball of fluff, and dropped him to the bottom of the empty clothes-basket.

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'He can't do any harm in there, at any rate,' she said hopefully.

He could make such a noise, however, that he effectually banished slumber; he twisted and turned, he bit at the wickerwork, and scratched with his claws, and after ten minutes of much commotion managed to tip over the basket and crawl out in triumph, to renew his attacks upon the shoes and other property of the despairing girls.

'It's no use,' groaned Lilian at last, getting out of bed and catching the small sinner; 'we shall just have to take it in turns to nurse him till morning; he's as lively as a cricket, and if we leave him raging about on the floor like that we shan't have a thing in the room left unchewed!'

Never had a night seemed so long; the only one who thoroughly enjoyed himself was the puppy, who, delighted to receive so much attention, pursued his diversions until the sun was well in at the window, when at length he snuggled into Peggy's pillow, and composed himself to sleep, leaving his weary guardians only time for a brief rest before Nancy's unwelcome tap was heard at the door.

After this experience Peggy was not so enthusiastic about having Rollo for a bedfellow, and he slept in the stables, with the cats to bear him company.

He was an amusing little fellow, and soon learned to sit up and beg for biscuits, and Peggy promised herself to teach him many more accomplishments in course of time. As he grew older his pranks assumed rather a more serious form.

'Just look what that precious dog of yours has done, Peggy!' cried Mr. Vaughan one day, bursting indignantly into the Rose Parlour with a dead kitten in his hand. [33]

There was a howl of consternation and woe from the children, for the poor gray kit had been rather a favourite, and an instant search was made for the murderer. But Rollo had fled from the stern hand of justice, and though they sought him far and near, it was of no avail, and by bedtime he was still missing.

'No doubt he's hiding somewhere about in the barns,' said Lilian. 'He must be fearfully hungry; but it serves him right, the wretch!'

The children had long ago gone to bed, and Mr. Vaughan was on the point of following their example when he noticed a curious and most unusual lump underneath his counterpane.

'What on earth has that stupid Nancy given me a hot bottle for on such a warm evening?' he exclaimed; and flinging down the clothes he disclosed to view, not the expected earthenware bottle, but the shrinking and apologetic form of Master Rollo, who, if ever a dog could be said to own a conscience, surely showed he knew he had offended, and repented heartily of his sins.

Mr. Vaughan laughed so much that he had not the heart to thrash the little rogue, but next morning he devised a punishment for him which Peggy declared was far worse. The body of the dead kitten was securely tied round his neck with a piece of rope, and, like the albatross in the ballad of the 'Ancient Mariner,' it proved such a weight of shame that the guilty dog did not dare to show his face to his friends, but slunk away to hide his dishonoured head in dark corners of the barn or stackyard.

Mr. Vaughan was inflexible, and would not allow Rollo to be relieved from his burden until the following evening. [34]

'We must teach him a lesson he is not likely to forget,' he said. 'I cannot have him touching any of the animals on the farm, or we shall have him killing the sheep when he is older.'

So Rollo bore his punishment as best he could, and was fed behind the pigsty by the sympathetic Peggy, who, while mourning for the departed Ruffles, forgave her erring pet from the bottom of her heart when she saw the depths of his unutterable woe.

CHAPTER IV

 [35]

A STORMY DAY

'Alack-a-day, what tears we
mingle!
For trouble ne'er, I wot, came
single.'

THOUGH Gorswen was the most quiet little country spot you could find, it lay only four miles away from Warford, a rising inland watering-place, which boasted not only a Mayor and Corporation, but a pump-room and concert-hall, and had a large and fleeting population of visitors, and, to judge by its growing suburbs, an ever-increasing number of residents.

Lilian and Peggy attended the Warford High School, and Bobby the Grammar School. It was not quite what Father would have wished for them, for he had been a Rugby boy himself, but it was the best he could afford; and certainly the education was excellent, though the pupils were decidedly mixed. Still, as Aunt Helen said, 'You have no need to copy the manners of the children you meet. You have been taught at home to behave like gentlepeople, so please to remember you are Vaughans, and keep up the credit of the family.'

Every morning at eight o'clock the little governess-car and Pixie, the steady black pony, stood ready at the side gate, and the trio jogged off to school with their lesson-books and their luncheons in their satchels. David could not be spared to go with them, but all the children had been taught to drive, and even Bobby had a firm hand on the reins, and knew the rules of the road as well as many a more experienced coachman; and I think, too, that Pixie had a sense of her responsibilities, and could be trusted not to get the wheel locked with a passing waggon, or to race too furiously down a steep hill, whatever feats her drivers might urge her to perform. The pony and trap were put up for the day at a quiet little inn midway between the two schools, and were always waiting for the children by a quarter past four, when, like the traditional donkey, they joyfully turned their noses towards home again. [36]

On one special Monday morning in May Peggy got out of bed in that peculiar frame of mind which Father charitably called 'highly strung,' and Nancy broadly defined as 'having black dog on your back.' To begin with, it was wet. Not that Peggy minded rain in the least, but if it were fine Mr. Vaughan had intended to go over to a great cattle fair which was to be held that day at Shrewsbury, and had promised to bring her home a guinea-pig. 'And now he won't go,' she thought dismally, 'and I shan't have the chance of another until Warford Agricultural Show in the autumn.'

Peggy hated Monday mornings. After the delightful freedom of Saturday and Sunday at home it was always doubly hard to return to school, and the time until next Friday afternoon seemed an endless prospect. All the nastiest lessons, Peggy thought, came on Mondays—grammar and arithmetic, dates and French verbs, and all those horrid fussy things which take a great deal of learning without being specially interesting in themselves.

On this particular morning the children were late for school, for Pixie had cast a shoe upon the road, and Lilian had been obliged to drive so slowly that the church clock was chiming a quarter past nine as Peggy opened her classroom door. [37]

It is rather an ordeal to walk late into a schoolroom full of thirty girls, and the slightly nervous feeling had the unfortunate effect of making Peggy march in with a don't-care look on her face, and shut the door with a bang.

Miss Crossland glared at her through her eyeglasses.

'If you are so careless as to be late, Margaret Vaughan,' she remarked, 'the least you can do is to come in quietly without disturbing the class.'

Rather crestfallen, Peggy threaded her way to her place, and took out her arithmetic books.

'Which sum are you doing?' she whispered to her desk-mate, Emily Thompson; but Emily judiciously pretended not to hear, for she did not wish to waste valuable time in giving Peggy information. She was rather a pretty girl. Her light flaxen hair and pale, fair complexion gave her a smooth, shining appearance, and somehow Peggy always thought her manners were smooth and shining too, for she had a way of wriggling out of any little difficulty and unpleasantness, so that the blame rested upon other people, and was always ready to take a mean advantage, or play some of those little underhand tricks which schoolgirls know only too well.

Peggy's frank, downright nature held Emily in much contempt, and, as she made no effort to conceal her opinion, the dislike was mutual, and a kind of undeclared war existed between the two. It was unfortunate for Peggy that the third form classroom was furnished with double desks, for as Miss Crossland would permit no changing of places, she was obliged to sit by her enemy for the rest of the term, to their equal discomfort and annoyance. [38]

The lesson dragged on wearily for awhile, till they were disturbed by a tap at the door, and a small girl from one of the lower classes entered, full of importance at her errand.

'If you please, Miss Crossland,' she piped, 'Miss Martin would like to speak to you for a moment in the library.'

Miss Crossland looked annoyed; she disliked being interrupted in her classes, but the head-mistress's request could not be disobeyed.

'Very well, Gertrude,' she replied coldly; then, turning to her class: 'Girls, I must leave you for a few minutes. I trust you to continue your arithmetic in silence during my absence. Not a word must be spoken while I am out of the room.'

For so long indeed as her footsteps echoed in the passage her pupils obeyed her order, but the moment she might reasonably be believed to be out of earshot a low murmur began among the little heads bent so discreetly over the arithmetic books. No one attempted to do any work; sweets and apples appeared mysteriously from within desks, and surreptitious bites were offered to appreciative neighbours. One daring spirit even mounted the platform, and waved the pointer in supposed imitation of Miss Crossland's majestic style.

'What made you so late, Peggy?' asked Nora Pemberton in the intervals of ecstatic delight over a white mouse, hidden away in a desk-mate's lunchbox.

'Couldn't help it,' replied Peggy, with her mouth full of chocolate. 'Pixie lost a shoe, and we thought she would go lame, so we almost crawled along; and when we got her in, we had to tell them to be sure and have her shod by four o'clock, and of course it all takes time.' [39]

'I wish I drove to school every day,' said Sissie Wilson, a delicate looking girl who lived in the heart of the town.

'You wouldn't like it when it was wet,' said Peggy. 'And if it's frosty one's hands get just numb holding the reins, though it's jolly enough in summer. We have to start ever so early, too, to be here by nine.'

'Well, I only wish I had the chance,' grumbled the envious Sissie; but she was interrupted by a warning 'Hush! Miss Crossland!'

In a moment thirty hair-ribbons were bent over thirty desks, and thirty demure young ladies were adding up figures with the utmost care and attention.

Miss Crossland looked at them suspiciously; perhaps ten years of teaching had caused her to mistrust such amazing diligence.

'Has any girl spoken during my absence?' she inquired sharply.

No one replied. Peggy's face flushed, and her conscience gave her a sharp twinge. A Vaughan must never have anything to do with the least little bit of an untruth, so she stood bravely up in her place.

'I spoke, Miss Crossland,' she admitted.

'And I too,' said Nora Pemberton.

Nobody else followed Peggy's example. Sissie Wilson bit the end of her pencil in abstruse calculation, Emily Thompson was deep in the pages of her arithmetic, while most of the girls were adding up columns as if for dear life.

Miss Crossland looked grave.

'Very well, Margaret and Nora,' she said, 'I must give you each a bad-conduct mark, and shall expect you both to stay after four o'clock this afternoon.'

The tears rose to Peggy's eyes at the injustice.

'What a mean set they are!' she said to herself. 'I'm sure Miss Crossland might have known they had been talking too; but she is always down upon me.'

She opened her desk, and searched for a fresh pencil to hide her tell-tale face, and somehow (she really did not mean it, but perhaps her tears blinded her) the desk-lid slid from her fingers, and fell down with an awful crash, which rang through the whole room.

'Take another bad-conduct mark, Margaret Vaughan,' said the calm voice of Miss Crossland. 'You must learn not to show temper when you are reprov'd.'

Poor Peggy groaned. Every bad-conduct mark meant six sums to be worked out when school was over. She and Lilian had been very anxious to get home early that afternoon, for they had meant to sow seeds in the garden; and Father was always angry if they kept Bobby waiting, for he did not like him to be loitering about the inn-yard listening to the talk of the stable-boys.

But Miss Crossland was writing a problem upon the blackboard in compound proportion. 'If a hen and a half lay an egg and a half in a day and a half, how many eggs can four hens lay in six days?'

'What a stupid sum!' thought Peggy. 'How could there be a hen and a half? I don't know the least how to state it. Is the answer to come out in hens or eggs or days?'

She put down a few random figures, then her thoughts wandered off to the brown speckled hen at home, and she wondered if the little chicks would hatch out to-day, and whether Nancy would remember to go and see, and put the dear fluffy yellow things in a basket before the kitchen fire.

'Your answer, Margaret?' said Miss Crossland. But Peggy's mind was so far away in the Abbey barn that she did not at once hear her.

Perhaps Emily Thompson really wished to recall Peggy's wandering thoughts, or perhaps there was just a spice of malice in the action—at any rate, she dug the point of her lead-pencil so sharply into poor Peggy's hand that her astonished victim sat up with a yell.

'*Margaret!*' exclaimed the outraged mistress.

'I couldn't help it!' cried Peggy, grown desperate: 'Emily hurt me so!'

'I'm very sorry, Miss Crossland,' said Emily sweetly. 'I didn't mean to hurt Margaret, only to make her see you were speaking to her.'

'Which would not have been necessary if she had been attending properly,' replied the mistress. 'And I must say I think little of any girl who cannot endure a moment's pain in silence. Read out your answer, Emily, and I will then correct the home-work.'

Peggy heaved a sigh of relief at that. She knew the sums which she had worked at home on Saturday were correct, for Lilian had gone over them carefully afterwards, so she opened her book and took up her pencil ready to put a triumphant 'R' to each of them.

'Miss Martin has borrowed my Blackie's Arithmetic,' said Miss Crossland, 'so I have not the answers here. But read out your results, Bertha Muir, and I shall be able to judge from the general average whether they are correct or not.'

'Three hundred and nineteen pounds six and sevenpence,' read out Bertha.

'Hands up girls who have got that answer,' said Miss Crossland.

At least twenty out of the thirty hands went up like lightning into the air.

'Right!' ventured the teacher.

Peggy gazed at her sum in amazement. She differed from the answer by several figures. Could

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both she and Lilian have made a mistake? It seemed impossible, for Lilian was so splendid at arithmetic. But Bertha was reading out the next sum, and the next. To each answer she gave a crowd of uplifted hands agreed with her, and poor Peggy found, to her chagrin, that in every case her figures were not the same. It could not be that all the ten sums she had taken so much pains over were wrong. If so, it meant a very bad mark for arithmetic.

'Oh, Miss Crossland,' she burst out, 'it's not fair! I *know* my answers were right. If you would only work them out on the board, you'd soon see.'

'Margaret Vaughan,' said Miss Crossland sternly, 'I am the best judge in this matter, and if I have any more trouble with you this morning I shall send you straight to Miss Martin. I do not allow any girl to speak to me in that tone.'

Though inwardly raging, Peggy was forced to put on an outward appearance of submission and good behaviour, and the lessons droned on somehow until the morning was over. Most of the girls fled, as usual the moment the class was dismissed; but Peggy stayed behind in the schoolroom to tidy her desk and talk to Nora Pemberton, who just at present was her particular friend among her schoolmates.

'I can't think how it was my sums were all wrong,' she lamented, as she put away the ill-fated home-lesson book. 'Did you get yours right, Nora?'

'No, wrong, every one; and I had worked them so carefully.'

'Just let me look at your answers. Why, they are exactly like mine! I know they are right. How is it all the other girls got the same as Bertha?'

'Oh, I can tell you that,' said Nora, 'They all copied her sums, for I saw them doing it just before school began. You know it was the Military Bazaar at the Assembly Rooms on Saturday, and I suppose most of the girls were there, and had no time to do their home-work, so they just scribbled down Bertha's figures before the bell rang.'

'How unfair! How shamefully mean!' cried Peggy, with flaming cheeks. 'Miss Crossland ought to work out those sums.'

'She won't, though. You made her so angry about it this morning, and when once she says a thing she sticks to it.'

'She's always hard on me somehow,' sighed Peggy. 'She's been perfectly horrible to-day. Why, Nora, what's the matter?'

For Nora had also had a tidy fit, and had been turning out her desk, and she now drew forth a book with such a very blank and rueful face that Peggy might well exclaim.

'It's the Literature Notes,' said Nora in an awe-struck voice—'that book Miss Martin lent us to copy from, and that vanished so mysteriously a month ago. Don't you remember what a fearful fuss she made about it, and we were all told to search in our desks? I thought I had looked quite to the bottom of mine, but there it was, under a pile of old exercise-books. Whatever shall I do? She will be so dreadfully angry with me.'

'Why, of course, you'll have to take it back,' said Peggy. 'But,' her love of mischief getting the upper hand, 'I don't see why we shouldn't have a little fun with it first. You won't find Miss Martin in the library now, and it would do quite as well at four o'clock, so suppose you put it inside Mary Hill's desk, just to give her a fright. She's such a goose, she'll give a perfect howl of horror when she finds it, and then we'll pretend to think she must have had it there all the time, and get her into *such* a state of mind before we tell her.'

Nora laughed, for practical jokes were at a high tide of popularity in the class, and many were the tricks which the girls played on one another.

'I owe Mary something,' she said, 'for she tied my hair-ribbon to the back of the desk on Friday, and when I tried to get up I was held fast by my pigtail.'

'It will be a good way to pay her back, then,' said Peggy. 'See, I'll put it just on the top in front, where she'll find it first thing; but don't tell a soul till this afternoon, or you'll spoil all the fun.'

The two conspirators ran downstairs laughing, and were soon romping in the playground. After dinner one of the elder girls suggested rounders, and the game grew so enthralling that time flew by until the bell, ringing for afternoon school, sent the players, hot and rosy with their exertions, hurrying up the great staircase to their classrooms. As Peggy passed the door of Miss Martin's study she happened to notice Mary Hill come out of it, with a particularly red and uncomfortable look upon her face.

'What has she been doing there?' thought Peggy; but there was neither time to inquire Mary's errand nor to carry out her anticipated joke with the note-book, for the girls were taking their places, and Miss Crossland came in a moment afterwards.

She mounted the platform and rang the bell for order, but, instead of calling their names as usual, she announced:

'Girls, Miss Martin desires that you should all be present in the lecture-hall, where she wishes to address the whole school. File out in order, beginning with the top desk on the right.'

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Full of astonishment, the girls marched down to the large lecture-hall, where all the classes were assembling, marshalled by their teachers. It was evidently a matter of some importance, for it was seldom indeed that lessons were interrupted in this manner. The girls kept whispering to each other under their breath:

'Whatever can it all be about? Have you heard anything? Why does she want us all here?'

But their surmises were soon put an end to by the appearance of Miss Martin herself, stately and commanding as usual, and with a grieved look on her face. She mounted the platform, and with a little sigh turned to her expectant audience.

'Girls,' she began, with an air almost of tragedy, 'a very distressing incident has happened to-day—a circumstance which in all the records of this school has never occurred before. You see this book in my hand,' and she held up (oh, luckless Peggy!) the missing note-book. 'This book of manuscript notes, which I had compiled myself from various sources, and valued greatly, I lent to be copied by the third form. It was lost, and though I caused every search to be made, I could find no trace of it. Girls, I regret to say that to-day this book has been brought back to school, and *has been placed in another girl's desk*—in the desk, I repeat, of an innocent girl, who had nothing to do with its loss.'

Miss Martin paused, and a wave of horror passed over the school. As for Peggy, her blood ran cold. It had never struck her before that the act of placing the book in Mary's desk could be open to such a construction. She had meant it all for a joke, and thought Mary would have been the first to join in the fun, and then Nora would, of course, have taken it back. She saw now that, while they had still been romping at rounders, Mary must have gone up to the schoolroom, and finding the missing notes in her desk, had carried them at once to the library. [46]

'Oh, why did we not come up sooner?' groaned Peggy. 'Who would ever have thought of Miss Martin taking it like this?'

'I feel,' continued the head-mistress sadly, 'that we have one girl among us of so dishonourable a nature that she seeks to hide her fault by throwing the blame on to the shoulders of another. Who that girl may be I cannot tell, but her own conscience must surely convict her.'

She paused again, and her glance passed slowly round the room. Peggy's face grew burning hot.

'I am determined,' Miss Martin went on, 'to probe this matter to the bottom, and I now call upon any girl who may have any knowledge on the subject to rise up and tell what she knows.'

Peggy tried to look at Nora, but Nora was several rows behind her. For one moment she hesitated, and in that moment she was lost. Emily Thompson had risen in her place.

'Well, Emily,' said Miss Martin gravely, 'do you know anything about this unhappy affair?'

'I do, Miss Martin,' replied Emily in a low voice.

'Tell me at once, then,' commanded the head-mistress.

'I would much rather not, please,' said Emily, casting down her eyes. 'I don't like getting another girl into trouble.' [47]

'Emily Thompson, this is not the time to shield a companion, and I order you to say at once what you know.'

'Well,' said Emily, twisting her slim hands nervously, 'if I must tell, I went back to the schoolroom before dinner for my pencil-box, and,' with a sidelong look at Peggy, 'I noticed Margaret Vaughan putting a book inside Mary Hill's desk.'

The bolt had fallen. Miss Martin turned to Peggy, who, with white and quivering lips, sat as still as if she had been frozen on to the form.

'Is this false or true, Margaret Vaughan?' she asked, in a voice that was scarcely more than a whisper.

There were nearly four hundred girls in the room, but you could have heard a pin drop in the silence. Lilian had risen half up in her place, and was looking at Peggy with eager, expectant face. As for Peggy, she felt as if the end of the world had come. She could not in truth deny the fact, though of the intention she was absolutely guiltless. She had never in her life told a lie, and she summoned all the Vaughan spirit to her aid.

'It's true,' she faltered, trying to speak bravely, but wishing all the time that she could sink through the floor.

Miss Martin gazed at her for a moment as if dumbfounded.

'That will do,' she said at last. 'I will inquire into this privately. Miss Pope, will you kindly take Margaret Vaughan into the kindergarten classroom, where she will wait until I come to her? Each form may now leave the room in turn. We have wasted too much time already.'

Peggy's head was in a whirl. She had a confused idea that Lilian was trying to come to her across a row of benches, and was being held back by a teacher; but otherwise she scarcely knew what was happening, except that she seemed to be the centre for all the eight hundred eyes in [48]

the room, till Miss Pope took her by the shoulder and marched her away like a warder escorting a very small convict to gaol. The kindergarten babies did not return to school in the afternoon, so their little classroom was empty. Left alone, the poor child flung herself on to one of the low seats and burst into a passion of tears.

That it should come to this—that she, Peggy Vaughan, who, whatever might be her faults, had always held such an unstained reputation for honour and truthfulness, should be deemed capable of such a mean and discreditable action seemed too hard to be borne. She felt as if she could never explain the matter properly, and that the brand of this horrible affair would remain on her for the rest of her life, bringing disgrace upon the whole family for her sake. She worked herself up nearly to the point of heartbreak when she thought of what Father and Aunt Helen would think about it, and it seemed to her as though the very Crusaders and the lady and gentleman in the Elizabethan ruffs would look at her from their tombs in the church next Sunday with grave disapproval in their eyes.

'It's all my own fault, too,' she thought, 'for Nora wanted to take that wretched book back at once, and she would have done so if it hadn't been for me. I don't think Miss Martin will ever believe me now, when I tell her how it was, and all the girls will think me a mean sneak for evermore.' And her tears flowed down faster and faster as she pictured herself a sort of social outcast in the school, shunned and avoided by everyone. 'I wonder how long they're going to leave me here?' she thought dismally, as the afternoon wore away and the clock chimed half-past three. 'Miss Martin said she was coming after me at once. Oh, if *only* I could get home, I'd ask Father not to send me to school again. Perhaps Aunt Helen would teach me lessons at home if I begged hard. I can never bear to face anybody here after all this.'

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It really seemed too bad to leave the poor little culprit so long in suspense, for to a child's mind the agony of waiting is often far worse than the dreaded punishment, and childhood's sorrows are so overwhelming and hopeless that they almost eclipse those of later years.

Peggy's head was aching, her eyes were red and swollen with crying, and dark despair was settling down upon her, when the door suddenly opened, and Lilian burst in and caught her in a regular bear's hug, while Nora followed like a perfect whirlwind only a yard behind.

'There, darling! don't cry any more. I *knew* you couldn't do such a mean thing,' said Lilian between her kisses. 'I've been just longing to come and comfort you, but they wouldn't let me. I rushed off at once to tell Miss Martin I was sure it was all a horrible mistake, but she was engaged with a tiresome caller who had just been shown into the library, and I've been dodging about the corridor all this time waiting to see her.'

'And so have I,' cried Nora. 'I have been simply dancing with impatience on the doormat. I know I ought to have told at once, but I was so dreadfully taken aback at it all turning out like that, and you being accused, that I could only stand and stare like an idiot while Miss Pope marched you out of the room. Miss Martin's been ever so nice about it, though. She talked a lot about my being careless and our wanting to play tricks on Mary, but she said she was "glad to be able to think as highly of Margaret Vaughan as she had always done," and we were to go at once and set you free. She actually kissed us both before we went, didn't she, Lilian? Do say you forgive me, Peggy, for I feel as if I had got you into all this trouble.'

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'Of course I do,' said Peggy warmly, feeling ready to forgive even Emily Thompson in her relief.

'The girls all know about it,' said Nora. 'They're waiting outside in the playground. They think Emily Thompson was a sneak to go telling tales like that, without asking you first if you had really done it, and they're so sorry for you that they say they'll give you a "hooray" when you come out.'

But, though all is well that ends well, Peggy was still so tear-stained and upset that she did not feel equal to facing her school-fellows, however sympathetic they might be, so she escaped with Lilian through the side-door into the street, feeling she would never be really happy or at ease again till she was back in that haven of home where she was always appreciated and understood, and pouring out her troubles to Aunt Helen in the sanctuary of the Rose Parlour.

CHAPTER V

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CONCERNING LILIAN

'Her life had many a hope and
aim,
Duties enough, and little
cares.'

THIS story is so much about Peggy and her satellite Bobby that we have rather neglected Lilian, and she deserves a chapter all to herself; for she was one of the sweetest, gentlest, most

unselfish of girls, who filled a quiet niche in the little world of her home which would have been sadly empty without her.

If anyone had asked Lilian what was her favourite study she would promptly have replied: 'Music.' She practised away patiently at the old piano, much to the delight of her German teacher, who was wont to hold her up as his pattern pupil.

'Mees Vaughan, she take pains, ver' great,' he would say to Miss Martin. 'As for ze ozer yong ladies, zey have no more musique in zem zan an old hurdy-gurdy. All zat vill please zem is a tune to make dance, but for ze vorks of ze best composers zey have no heart at all.'

Lilian's secret ambition was to go to Germany to study at the Leipzig Conservatoire, which Herr Frankenburg always described as the very home and abode of the spirit of music, and made her sadly envious with accounts of the wonderful concerts and operas which might be enjoyed in that favoured city, where the very street vendors would not be tolerated if they cried their wares out of tune. [52]

Lilian's experience of concerts was confined to an occasional afternoon performance in the Warford Assembly Rooms, or the military band in the Spa gardens; but she bravely hid her longings for better things, for she knew that a musical education would be an utter impossibility in the family circumstances, and that Father had strained a point already to allow her to learn from Herr Frankenburg, who was the most expensive teacher in the school.

She had a sweet, true voice, though not of any great volume, and would sing away with much delight when she got the Rose Parlour all to herself, often composing little things of her own, which were really quite pretty, though she was generally too modest to own to them.

One Saturday towards the end of May six of Lilian's most particular school-friends had been invited to spend the afternoon, and there were great preparations at the Abbey. Rollo had been newly washed and combed, the rabbits' hutch had been scrubbed, the arbour swept out, the museum tidied, and Nancy had baked a supply of cakes and tarts calculated to provide for the healthiest appetites.

'Here they are!' cried Bobby, who, perched on the archway that surmounted the gate, could command a view of the distant prospect, and report progress, like Sister Anne in the story of Bluebeard.

'All of them?' asked Lilian, hurriedly tying a pink ribbon round the neck of the pet lamb, whose toilet had been forgotten among the many arrangements.

'Yes; I can see six bicycles coming along the road. One girl's got red hair, so I'm sure it's Evelyn Proctor, and the two in the blue hats will be Susie and Mary. Oh, it is really, for they're turning up from the village over the bridge, and waving their hands.' [53]

And Bobby climbed down quickly from his point of vantage, so as not to miss the interesting arrival.

They were a very jolly set of schoolgirls whom Aunt Helen came out on to the front steps to welcome. Kathleen O'Riley was a bright Irish girl, with the prettiest suspicion of a brogue imaginable, and that winning manner which seems specially to belong to the children of the Emerald Isle. Susie and Mary Hirst were the daughters of a rising Warford physician, and were pleasant and amusing, though they had not the racy humour of Dorothy Gower. Evelyn Proctor was full of high spirits, while shy Lucy Thorburn was perhaps Lilian's favourite among them all.

'It must be stunning to have a bicycle,' said Bobby, regarding with envious eye the row of bright machines neatly stacked against the wall, and spinning the pedals with a not too gentle hand.

'Yes, it is pretty good fun,' said Susie Hirst, good-naturedly giving him a ride round the carriage sweep. 'But, you see, you have Pixie instead, and I think a pony's really nicer.'

'She can't go so fast,' complained Bobby, determined not to be consoled.

'Perhaps not, but you couldn't bike to school in the pouring rain or snow. It's no joke to get a side-slip, I can tell you.'

'Come along, girls,' cried Lilian; 'I have such heaps to show you.'

It was the first visit that some of the guests had paid to Gorswen, so they were delighted to make a tour of inspection round the garden, farmyard, and ruins. They duly admired the pet lamb, laughed at Jack, stroked the rabbits, declared Rollo to be a black-and-tan angel, and screamed with horror at Toby, a harmless grass snake, which was the very latest addition to the menagerie. [54]

Tea was a lively meal, for Father was full of jokes and funny stories, and Aunt Helen enjoyed schoolgirls' society almost as much as the children themselves, while Nancy's delicacies melted away like snow in summer.

'Let us come to the Rose Parlour,' said Lilian, when cups were emptied for the last time, and 'No, thank you's' began to be responded to invitations to more cake and pastry.

Peggy followed, feeling very grand and grown-up among so many elder girls, and shut the door

sternly in Bobby's face.

'We don't want little boys in here,' she said crushingly.

'I don't care,' shouted the indignant youth through the keyhole. 'I don't want to play with a lot of stupid girls—so there! I shall go and talk to Joe.'

The museum proved a great fund of interest, for nearly every article had a history, and the guests wandered round the room examining the maps and various specimens of art which adorned the walls. Dorothy was trying the piano, for she played well, though her touch had not half the firmness of Lilian's.

'What's this?' asked Mary, hunting through a pile of old music inside the ottoman, and fishing out a manuscript page in Lilian's neat hand.

'Oh, don't!' cried Lilian, blushing hotly. 'Let me have that, Mary, please. I didn't know I had left it there.'

'What is it?' exclaimed all the girls, whose curiosity was naturally aroused. 'Peggy, you tell!'

'If you dare, Peg!' said Lilian.

But for once Peggy turned tell-tale, and disclosed the secret.

'It's a coon song she's made up herself,' she declared stoutly.

'Oh, do sing it!' cried Susie. 'I couldn't write a note of music if I tried for a year.'

'Yes, yes, you must!' echoed the others.

Thus urged, the unwilling composer was hauled to the piano and pressed on to the music-stool, where, with many protestations and much bashfulness, she sang the following song:

SHOO! PICCANINNIES.

[Listen to the music—midi\(1.76KB\)](#)
[Listen to the music—wav \(2.66MB\)](#)

1. 'Way down in Georgia where de sugar am grow,
All de piccaninnies want to suck de canes, you know!
An' dey're hidin' round an' peepin', like de 'possum all de
day,
Till Uncle Sambo bring his stick an' chase 'em all away!

Chorus.

Shoo, shoo! piccaninnies mustn't come near!
Don't want no little piccaninnies 'way down here!
Ole mammy callin' you, de melon-beds among—
Shoo! little piccaninnies, 'way! go 'long!

2. When de kitchen-fire am blazin', an' Aunt Dinah stews an'
bakes,
All de piccaninnies gather just to smell her pies an' cakes;
An' dey cluster round de window like de bees upon a comb,
Till Auntie Dinah she get mad, an' turn an' drive 'em home!
Shoo, shoo! piccaninnies, etc.
3. When massa go a-drivin' in de carry-all and pair,
Little piccaninnies run behind to shout Hurrah! and stare;
Den de overseer he come up, and use his big, long lash,
And say de road was neber meant to harbour nigger trash!
Shoo, shoo! piccaninnies, etc.

'It's lovely!' cried the admiring girls. 'Did you make up the words too?'

'Of course she did,' said Peggy, who was proud of her sister's talents. 'She has made lots of others, too. Lil, do let me find "Dinah's Baby" and "Stealin' Melons 'neath de Moon"!'

'No, no,' said Lilian; 'I've shown off quite enough for one day. It's somebody else's turn now. Come along, Dorothy!'

But Dorothy declared she had played everything she knew, with the exception of scales or five-finger exercises, and none of the others could remember anything without their notes, so the piano was closed and the music put away.

'There's your little brother outside, tapping on the glass,' said Susie. 'What a cherub he looks, with his pink cheeks and little tight brown curls!'

'Sure, I'll let him in, the darlint!' said Kathleen O'Riley, running to open the French window and admit the smiling Bobby, who entered with an expression of such angelic innocence that Peggy's suspicions were instantly aroused.

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'I thought you might like some chocolates,' he said winningly, handing a noble box to Mary Hirst with an air of much generosity.

'Dear little fellow! How sweet of him!' murmured the girls as they collected round with pleased anticipation.

Mary opened the box, but dropped it with a howl of dismay, for in place of the tempting sweetmeats she had expected lay a writhing mass of fat green caterpillars, newly picked from the gooseberry-bushes, a subtle revenge on Bobby's part for his expulsion from the sanctum.

'You wretch!' cried Lilian, endeavouring to catch and chastise the rejoicing offender, who was off through the window and over the wall long before the girls had finished screaming and shaking their skirts.

'He's a broth of a boy!' laughed Kathleen, who rather enjoyed the joke. 'Get out the fire-shovel, Peggy mavourneen, and we'll be after sweeping them up from the carpet. They're too soft and juicy to be treading under foot.'

'What shall we do now?' asked Susie, sinking back luxuriously into the basket-chair, when the contents of the chocolate-box had been successfully removed.

'Suppose we play at nonsense verses,' said Lilian, tearing a few pages from an exercise-book, and hunting out a supply of pencils. 'You all know the famous one about the lady of Riga:

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"There was a young lady of Riga,
Who smiled as she rode on the tiger;
They came home from their ride
With the lady inside,
And the smile on the face of the tiger."

Well, the game is this. We each write down the name of a person we all know on a slip of paper; they are folded up and shuffled, and everybody draws one, and you must write a nonsense rhyme about the person whose name you find upon your particular slip. Then we elect a president and read them out.'

'It sounds dreadfully difficult,' sighed Lucy. 'I'm not at all clever at poetry.'

'Oh, never mind, *do* try;' said Peggy, dealing out the pencils. 'It's ever such fun when once you begin.'

The names were written out, the papers shuffled and drawn, and for ten minutes or more the girls sat knitting their brows and biting their pencils in all the agonies of composition. When everyone had finished the slips were folded up and placed in a basket, and Lilian, who had been chosen to read the effusions, shut her eyes and drew one out at a venture. The name was 'Mademoiselle,' and the lines ran as follows:

'There once was a French mademoiselle
Who thought she knew English quite
well.
When she meant "I am happy,"
She said "I am snappy,"
Which made us all laugh, I can tell.'

The girls tittered, for Mademoiselle's mistakes in English were a by-word all over the school.

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'I wonder who wrote that!' said Susie, with an innocent air.

'Don't give yourself away, my dear,' answered Evelyn. 'We can all guess now.'

The next paper was headed 'Mary Hirst.'

'There was a wild schoolgirl named Hirst,
Who of all the bad pupils was worst,
Till she started to cram
For the Cambridge exam.,
And, to everyone's surprise, came out
first.'

'I hope that's a true prophecy,' laughed Mary, who was studying hard for the Senior Local.

'This writing is not very clear,' said Lilian, unfolding another slip and reading: 'Peggy.'

'There was a young lady named Peg,
Who was terribly strong in the leg:
With the boys in a race
She could set her own pace;
But pray do not name it, I beg.'

'That's your own, Lilian,' said the astute Kathleen, 'for you said the writing was hard to make out, and yet you read it straight off, quite glibly.'

'You may guess as you like, but I shan't tell,' replied the president sternly.

The fourth paper was described 'Herr Früh'l.'

'There was an old German named Früh'l,
Who a respirator wore as a rule.
When the weather was bad,
Oh, his temper was sad,
Till we wished he were muzzled in
school.'

This proved a favourite, for poor Herr Früh'l, the German master, was famous for his bronchitis and his bad temper, and the general opinion ascribed the authorship to Dorothy, though she would not acknowledge her laurels. [60]

'The next,' said Lilian, 'is on Kathleen.'

'There once lived a maid named
Kathleen,
Who never a boat-race had seen;
When they brought her a bow
Of bright red, she said "No,
My national colour is green!"'

The lines referred to a joke which was never forgotten against Kathleen. When she first came to Warford High School, fresh from her native Erin, she had been taken with the rest of her class to witness a grand boat-race between the Grammar School and a rival college from Oswestry. Many of the girls had brothers in the contest, and the Warford favours were freely distributed on the bank. A little boy had come up to Kathleen and politely begged her to accept the scarlet bow of the Grammar School, and sport it as a token of goodwill towards the heroes of the town.

'Is it a red riband, then, ye'll be after askin' me to wear?' inquired the indignant young Irishwoman. 'It's the shade of the tyrant, bad cess to it! and don't suit me complexion neither. Sure it's nothing but green favours ye'll see on Kathleen O'Riley.'

'Miss James' was the subject of the sixth poem.

'A teacher there was called Miss
James,
The most domineering of dames:
When she passed by their places,
All the girls made bad faces;
But she never found out, all the
same!'

'Same doesn't quite rhyme with James,' remarked Evelyn.

'Well, I told you I was no good at poetry,' began poor Lucy, then stopped in much embarrassment at having betrayed herself. [61]

'I think it's very nice,' said Lilian hurriedly; 'I like it one of the best. Don't you want to hear this one about "Dorothy Gower"?'

'A maiden named Dorothy Gower
Could never eat anything sour;
To plain biscuits or bread
A "No, thank you," she said,
But candy or cakes she'd devour.'

'It's a slander!' cried Dorothy. 'A vile slander! And if I discover the authorship, I'll bring an action for libel. Go on, Lilian dear, and give us the last.'

The final effort was on the theme of 'Joe.'

'There was a young fellow named Joe:
Who gave him that name I don't
know,
But I do know that he
Gave a puppy to me,
And that's why I take to him so!'

'That's Peggy's!' cried the girls in chorus. 'It couldn't belong to anyone else. Well done, Peggy! You will have to show that to Joe; he'll be quite flattered.'

They sat laughing over the rhymes and chattering as only schoolgirls know how until Aunt Helen came in to announce that a light repast of cake and lemonade awaited them in the dining-room, and to gently hint that, if Warford were to be reached before darkness had fallen, it was getting time for the six bicycles to be set in motion. So there was a grand collecting of hats and gloves, and pumping of tyres, and many 'good-byes' and 'thank you's,' and the merry party at last

started off on their homeward way, ringing their bells as a parting salute, and declaring they would not soon forget their afternoon at the Abbey.

CHAPTER VI

[62]

SUNDAY

'A poor man served by thee shall make thee
rich;
A sick man helped by thee shall make thee
strong;
Thou shalt be served thyself by every sense
Of service which thou renderest.'

It was Sunday afternoon, and the children sat in the Rose Parlour, with the windows wide open to let in all the sweet summer scents from the garden.

Patient Lilian was struggling to teach Bobby a Scripture lesson, for his form-master had decreed that the names of the books of the Old Testament must be repeated without a slip immediately after prayers on the ensuing Monday morning. Poor Bobby had neither a retentive memory nor a great disposition to learn. He fidgeted, and kicked the leg of the table, and said it was 'a jolly shame for old Peters to give a fellow Sunday prep.' He hopelessly confused Ezra and Esther, floundered at Ecclesiastes, and the minor prophets filled him with despair.

'Oh, Bobby, *do* try again,' entreated Lilian. 'Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk.'

'It's no use, Lil,' said the despondent Bobby. 'I may as well make up my mind to take a caning and spare myself the trouble.'

'Lilian dear, are you busy?' said Aunt Helen, putting her head round the door. 'I thought you might have taken this jar of beef-tea to old Ephraim. I hear he is not so well again, and he was not in church this morning.'

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'Oh, Auntie, let me take it!' cried Peggy, glad of any excuse to interrupt the study of her Collect and Catechism.

'Be careful not to spill it, then, and be sure to bring back the basket. And while you are there, I have no doubt he would be pleased if you read to him for a little. He is getting so blind now, poor old man! and it is dull for him, living all alone,' said Aunt Helen, who liked to teach the children to help their neighbours.

Old Ephraim was a quaint and original character. He had come to Gorswen from the North country, and had been shepherd for forty years at the Abbey. He was past work now, and lived in one of the village almshouses, subsisting partly on the parish dole and partly on private charity; for though Mr. Vaughan might practise rigid economy in his own private expenses, he had never a grudging hand towards the poor.

The little low whitewashed cottage was a humble enough place, but it looked cheerful this Sunday afternoon, with the sunlight streaming in through the tiny window, and a few early white roses shedding their sweet perfume in the small garden in front.

Peggy found the old man seated in his elbow-chair by the fireside, his head enveloped in a huge flat oat-cake, tied on with a red cotton pocket-handkerchief, so that he resembled some new species of mushroom.

'Why, Ephraim!' she cried, stopping short in amazement; 'whatever is the matter? And what have you got on your head?'

'Headache, Miss Peggy,' replied Ephraim, shaking his gray locks solemnly. 'There ain't nothink like a hot oat-cake for a bad head; it do cure it wonderful, to be sure.'

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'Well, it seems a queer thing to put on, anyhow,' remarked Peggy, wondering privately whether the old man would consume his remedy afterwards for tea. 'How is the rheumatism?'

'Better, Miss Peggy—gradely better since I've kept a potato in my pocket. Ah, it's a fine thing for the rheumatics, is a potato. But,' with a sly wink, 'it must be stolen, or it beant no use at all!'

'Did you *steal* it, then, Ephraim?' cried Peggy with thrilling interest.

'That's as may be,' replied the old man, willing to change the subject now it was growing personal. 'Is your pa keepin' well these days?'

'The Catechism says it's wrong to steal,' observed the righteous Peggy, keeping sternly to the

point, and anxious to improve the occasion. 'Haven't you got a Bible, Ephraim?'

'Ay, ay,' returned the culprit evasively, 'there be one somewheres.'

'Don't you know where it is?' said Peggy severely.

'Oh ay! Hannah Jones was in a' Saturday, sidin' th' top o' th' cupboard, and I see'd her wi' it in her hand. Oh, I reads the Bible, I does. It's all about wars—them Israelites foightin' wi' the other heathen.'

'It's about something else, too,' replied Peggy: 'miracles and parables and epistles, and—oh! lots of things. Wouldn't you like me to read some to you?'

'Nay now, Miss Peggy,' said Ephraim, much alarmed lest she should expect him to stir his rheumatic old bones in a search on the cupboard-top. 'I reckon sometimes 'tis better to think on things nor to read 'em. I've time to do a deal o' thinkin', settin' here.'

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'Perhaps I might read you something else, then?' volunteered Peggy, determined to be a ministering angel, despite the evident unwillingness of her protégé.

'Yea,' said the old man, considerably relieved; 'there be a drawer full o' books i' the dresser. Take your choice, miss—take your choice.'

Peggy turned out the drawer by the simple process of emptying it on the table, and disclosed a very miscellaneous collection of literature—socialist pamphlets, agnostic newspapers, and radical tracts were mixed up with teetotal treatises, missionary leaflets, and the parish magazine. Sheets of ballads, which Ephraim had bought as a boy, lay side by side with a tattered copy or two of Zadkiel's prophetic almanac, some advertisements of patent medicines, a recipe for sheep-dip, and a Wesleyan hymn-book. Peggy gazed eagerly at an ancient chap-book, which set forth the stories of Dick Turpin and Jack Sheppard, interspersed with rude woodcuts of the gallows and whipping-post; but she heroically put it aside, as being unsuitable for the day.

Finally, she settled upon a little worn volume bound in calf, with the title, 'A Sigh of Sorrow for the Sinners of Zion, breathed by an Earthly Vessel known among Men by the Name of Samuel Fish.'

'I'm sure Aunt Helen would think this all right to read to him,' she said to herself, as she drew a chair to the other side of the fire.

It was not very easy reading, for the print had faded till it was almost the colour of the yellow leaves, and the 's's' were all long, so that Peggy found herself continually reading 'fins' instead of 'sins'; but she did her best, conscientiously, and the old man nodded in his chair, sitting up briskly, however, when he felt her reproachful eyes upon him.

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Peggy stopped, quite hot and weary, at the end of the first chapter.

'Do you like it, Ephraim?' she inquired anxiously.

'Ay, Miss Peggy, it be foine, it be, surely,' said the old man.

'What does it all mean?' said the child. 'It is so hard to read, I can scarcely understand it.'

'Why, as to that, miss,' answered Ephraim, 'it seems to me as long as it's pious words, there beant no call to understand 'em, let alone I'm that deaf to-day, it seems naught but a buzzin' like when you read.'

Peggy closed the book hurriedly.

'I think I had better be going now,' she announced. 'I hope your headache will be well soon. Can't I put the kettle on for you?'

'Ay, miss, if you be so bountiful. My rheumatics be cruel bad when I stir me.'

Peggy filled the kettle from the pump in the back garden, and hung it on its hook over the fire. She found the old man's cup and saucer, and set out his tea on the little round table by his side, and finally took her departure, feeling she had at least attended to his temporal wants, and might leave the rest to older and wiser heads than hers.

'I'll call and see Mrs. Davis; there'll be plenty of time before tea,' she said to herself, as she came back up the village street, swinging her empty basket.

Mrs. Davis was a dear old Welshwoman, and a particular friend of Peggy's. She was one of Nature's gentlewomen, for her kind heart prompted those little gracious, courteous acts which in a higher class we call good breeding. She made quite a picture in her short linsey-woolsey petticoat, with the check apron, her plaid shawl crossed over her cotton bodice, and the frilled white cap framing the kind old face, with its apple cheeks and soft white hair. She was sitting among her bees this Sunday afternoon, beating with an iron spoon upon an old tin kettle.

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'They be swarming, indeed, Miss Peggy,' she said. 'And here I've had to sit the whole of the day, beating this old tin—and Sunday, too! But we can't expect the poor creatures to understand that, can we?'

'I suppose not,' said Peggy, settling herself on a low wooden seat, at a safe distance from the

agitated hives, and letting her glance wander round the little garden, where the tall yellow lilies reared their stately heads over a mass of sweet cottage flowers, pinks and forget-me-nots, poppies and double daisies, sweet-williams—loved of the bees—pansies, lupins, and snapdragons; over the cottage, where the white roses climbed up the thatch to the very chimneys, and where through the open doorway could be seen the neat kitchen, with its red-brick floor, the settle placed by the fireside, the tall grandfather's clock ticking away in the corner, and the oak dresser, with its rows of blue willow-pattern plates; and back again at last to where Mrs. Davis sat with her grandchild by her knee, a small round-eyed boy, whose thumb was stuck perpetually, like a stopper, in his mouth, and who stood watching the bees with stolid indifference.

'Won't he get stung?' asked Peggy, who thought he looked far too near to the swarming hives for safety.

'No, dearie. I think they know me and Willie now, though they'd attack a stranger as soon as not.'

'I was dreadfully stung once,' confided Peggy. 'I lifted off the little box on the top of one of the Rectory hives, just to see how the bees were getting on, and they all came rushing out and settled on me. Mr. Howell seized me, and put my head under the pump, and Father was ever so cross, for he said I shouldn't have meddled with them.'

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'The bees don't like to be interfered with,' said Mrs. Davis. 'You should never touch them in the daytime. Always take the honey at night.'

'Joe says you must tell them if there's a death in the house, and tie a piece of crape on the hive, or they'll all fly away.'

'Well, I don't quite hold with all folks say about them, but they are strange creatures, with queer ways of their own. They seem quiet just now, so I think I might leave them for a few minutes. I have a pot of honey I should like to send to your aunt, miss, if you would kindly take it to her. I'll go inside and fetch it. No, Willie, my pretty, you can't come. Granny's going up the ladder into the loft.'

'I'll take care of him. Come with me, Willie dear—come and see the pretty flowers.'

And Peggy seized the stolid infant by his disengaged hand.

Willie did not look enthusiastic about the attractions of the flowers, but he allowed himself to be led away, staring at his new guardian with round eyes of solemn distrust, and solacing himself with his thumb.

'We'll build a little house,' said Peggy, anxious to prevent the suspicious twitching of her charge's mouth from developing into a roar, and taking up some bricks and loose stones which lay under the wall. 'See, we'll make a kitchen and parlour, and put down leaves for a carpet. Here's a little round stone for a table, and the pansy-flowers will do for dollies. They've such funny little faces. We'll make them skirts out of laurel leaves, and put them to bed in the corner.'

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Peggy's well-meant efforts at entertainment were suddenly interrupted by a loud sniff from the other side of the wall, and, looking up, she saw the round, reproachful face of Polly Smith, a girl of about her own age, who sometimes came up to the Abbey to help Nancy at busy times.

'Why, it's you, miss, I do declare!' exclaimed Polly. 'And making play-houses in Mrs. Davis's garden on Sunday, too! I *am* surprised! *I've* been to Sunday-school!'

Peggy felt rather caught, but she carried it off as well as she could.

'I was only amusing Willie,' she said. 'He was going to cry because Granny Davis went indoors and left him.'

'Ay, she's been sittin' swarmin' her bees all day. I see her when I was goin' to chapel, and I see her again when I come back, and when I goes to Sunday-school she were still there. My dada says he don't hold with folks as can't keep the Sabbath holy.'

And Polly turned up her small nose in a distinctly aggravating manner.

'How did you get on at Sunday-school?' asked Peggy, who did not like insinuations against the moral worth of her dear Mrs. Davis.

'Splendid, miss. I always does. Teacher gave me a prize for sayin' hymns—such a nice book. Wouldn't you like to look at it?'

'Are you sure it's a Sunday book?' inquired Peggy, who could not forbear her revenge.

'Oh yes, for I looked at the end chapter, and she dies beautiful, and they plant snowdrops on her grave; and her big brother, what's so unkind to her, gets drowned through goin' boatin' on Sunday,' replied Polly, regarding Peggy as if she thought her courses might lead her to a similar watery fate.

'Here's Granny!' cried Willie, abandoning his thumb to seek the protection of the friendly linsey-woolsey petticoat.

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'Ay, so it be. *My* granny sits in the parlour on Sunday afternoons, with her blinds drawn down, and reads her Bible. She's a godly old woman, she is!'

And Polly took her departure with a conscious sniff, as if deploring the depravity of her neighbours.

Peggy was very much upset.

'Is it really wrong to look after the bees and amuse babies on Sunday?' she asked Father afterwards.

'No, dear, certainly not. The Pharisees came to our Lord with just such a question, and you know He answered them that it was right to do well on the Sabbath. God did not mean it to be a day of misery, but a specially joyful and happy day, in which we were to think a good deal about Him. Sometimes we can show our love for Him quite as well by helping others as by reading our Bibles or going to church, though we should not neglect that either. As for shutting ourselves up on Sundays, and thinking it is wrong to look at the beautiful things around us, that is mere ignorance, for Nature is like a wonderful book, written by God's hand, and the birds and the bees and the flowers are all pages out of it for those who have eyes to read them rightly.'

Peggy thought of this as she sat among the ruins watching the sunset that night. The sky, flaming in bands of crimson, violet and orange, looked like the very gate of heaven, a golden city which you had only to cross the hills to reach—surely another page in that book of which Father had spoken.

'It's like one of the pictures in the Interpreter's house in the "Pilgrim's Progress,"' she said to herself; 'or Christian and Hopeful on the Delectable Mountains, when they looked through the glass, and thought they saw "something like the gate, and also some of the glory of the place."' [71]

She stayed a long, long time among the crumbling old walls, watching the gold fade gradually out of the sky. It was very still and peaceful in there, and she liked to sit and think how the Abbey must have looked in those strange, bygone days when the little steps had led to a dormitory, and the broken pillars had held up the roof of a church, whose tinkling bell had rung out at sunset, calling to prayer those old monks who slept so quietly in their forgotten graves.

An owl began to hoot in the woods beyond the river, a great stag-beetle came droning by, and the bats flew over her head with their shrill little cry, flitting here and there like night swallows.

Peggy got up and brushed the dew from her dress, and walked slowly back to the house in the gathering twilight. In the Rose Parlour Aunt Helen sat turning out her little writing-desk, and wiping suspicious drops from her eyes.

'Don't keep old letters, child,' she said, as Peggy crept up to her with silent sympathy. 'It opens so many wounds to re-read the tender words of those who are estranged or gone away from us, and all the hopes and expectations that have come to nothing.'

'Don't read them, Auntie. Let's tear them up and burn them, if they make you cry.'

'No, no; I can't bear to part with them, after all! We'll lock them up in the desk again. But, Peggy, take my advice, and if you quarrel with anyone, go and fight it out at once, and get it over, and don't let misunderstandings make the breach so wide that nothing can ever mend it again.'

CHAPTER VII

 [72]

MAUD MIDDLETON'S PARTY

'Methinks, good friend, to-day I scarce do know
thee,
The fashion of thy manner hath so changed.'

'Oh, Aunt Helen!' cried Peggy, bursting into the dining-room one afternoon, where her aunt was busy adding up accounts, 'can't we all go to Maud Middleton's party?'

'And who is Maud Middleton, I should like to know?' inquired Aunt Helen, pausing in the midst of her butcher's bill. 'I have not heard you mention her before. Is she one of your schoolfellows?'

'Oh no, she's the *dearest* girl! They have a French governess, but they go to the dancing-class on Fridays, and Maud and I always dance together, and I simply *love* her!' said Peggy, who was apt to take up friendships with enthusiasm.

'But, my dear child, you have not yet told me who she is. I cannot have you making friends with any shopkeeper's daughter from Warford.'

'Oh, they're not at all like that!' declared Peggy. 'Maud's just lovely, with long yellow curls right down to her waist, and Muriel's almost grown up, though she's only as old as Lilian. She wears combs in her hair, and has the sweetest blue dress, trimmed with pearl trimmings!'

'That is no patent of good breeding, I am afraid,' said Aunt Helen, smiling. 'Lilian, can't you tell me something more about this latest idol of Peggy's?'

'They really seem very nice girls, Auntie,' said Lilian. 'I think you would like them. They have taken Redlands—that pretty house just beyond the toll-bridge on the other side of Warford. Major Middleton has been appointed Adjutant to the volunteers. They lived in India for a long time, and then in London before they came here. Muriel plays the violin, and they know ever so many musical people, and go to the concerts every week at the Assembly Rooms. It is Maud's birthday on the thirteenth, and they have invited us all three. Mrs. Middleton was at the dancing-class today, and spoke to us herself. She said she "hoped so much that our Aunt would allow us to accept." We should like to go immensely,' added Lilian with a wistful sigh, as she remembered Muriel's accounts of the grand piano, and the Stradivarius violin which was her latest acquisition.

'Go and ask Father, then,' said Aunt Helen. 'And if he says "Yes," I suppose it will be all right.'

'Oh, thank you!' cried Peggy, who knew that Father would not be likely to resist the combined coaxings of the trio. 'We must write to Maud to-night. She'll be as pleased as we are!'

And she executed a little war-dance of delight out in the hall. Such a thing as a party was a great event in the children's calendar. They had few invitations, for there was little visiting now at the Abbey; the anomaly of a country gentleman who ploughed his own fields was felt to be too much for the neighbouring squires, and one by one the 'county' had ceased to call. Truly adversity is a great winnow of friendships. It is but the staunchest who will stick to us through our troubles, while those who love us for what we have, instead of what we are, fall away like chaff at the first breath of ill-fortune.

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Poor Lilian's anticipations, however, were doomed to sad disappointment, for when the much-talked-of day arrived, it brought her such a bad headache that she readily agreed with Aunt Helen's decree that she was better at home. She took it very patiently, poor child! and came downstairs to see the others start off in the little pony-trap, Bobby resplendent in a clean white sailor suit, and Peggy in a pale-blue sprigged muslin dress, which Aunt Helen had toiled hard to finish in time. To be sure, it was only made out of the last summer's frock which Lilian had outgrown, but it looked as good as new, and the colour suited her.

'How nice you look!' said Lilian, gazing with admiration at the gray eyes and pretty brown curls under the little white hat, and thinking that Peggy grew more and more like the Romney portrait which hung on the drawing-room wall.

'Mind you behave yourselves!' said Aunt Helen. 'And don't forget to thank Mrs. Middleton when you say good-bye.'

'Bless 'em!' said Nancy. 'There won't be any other folk's children there that can beat 'em, to my mind!'

Father was waving a good-bye from the stackyard. Joe held the gate open with a grin of broadest appreciation, and even old David peeped out of the stable door to witness the departure. So they started off in great style, and in the very highest of spirits. It was a perfect day for a party—warm enough to make it pleasant to be out of doors, yet not too hot for comfort, and a blue sky without a hint of rain clouds. Pixie was fresh, and kept up a fine pace, scarcely slacking for the hills, so they soon got over the ground. They were within a mile of Warford, and were going along at a quick trot, when, without any warning, a carriage and pair came suddenly dashing up behind from a side road, and passed them, giving such scant room that if Peggy had not been a clever little driver, and turned Pixie smartly into the hedge, an accident could scarcely have been avoided. Two little girls, the only occupants of the carriage, turned round to stare, but neither the grand cockaded coachman nor the tall footman on the box even looked back to see how the children had fared.

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'How rude!' cried Peggy in great indignation. 'I should like to call them back, and teach them good manners. They nearly grazed our wheel. I don't think they were more than half an inch off!'

'I wish they had,' declared Bobby, 'and then they would have spoilt their own varnish. It would just have served them right!'

'I wonder who they are?' said Peggy. 'I never remember seeing that carriage before; but they seem to think the road belongs to them, anyhow. If David had been with us I don't believe they would have done it; but most people are so nice when they see children driving alone. Never mind, we're nearly in Warford now.'

It was exactly three o'clock when the children drove up the drive at Redlands. A number of guests were already assembled on the lawn, both grown-ups and children, a very smart company indeed, holding up such gay parasols that they looked like a flock of bright butterflies.

Maud came forward as Peggy drew up with a little prim company manner.

'How d'you do, Peggy? How d'you do, Bobby?' she said. 'Lilian not come? Oh, *so* sorry! You've not brought your groom? George, just run into the house, will you, and ring for Withers to take this trap to the stables. Now, won't you come and speak to mother?'

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Mrs. Middleton was standing chatting with a number of elegantly-dressed ladies, and for a moment she gazed at the children with blank unrecognition.

'Margaret Vaughan, Mother,' prompted Maud.

'Of course—of course!' said Mrs. Middleton. 'I hope you have brought your sisters, my dear. We were charmed with them at the dancing-class. And your brother? Oh yes; the sweet little boy who looks exactly like a Christmas-card!'

Inwardly hugely indignant at such a description of his manly charms, Bobby came forward politely to shake hands, and was marched off afterwards by good-natured George Middleton to make up a cricket eleven.

'Perhaps you will find somebody here you know, dear,' said Mrs. Middleton to Peggy, as Maud turned away to welcome new guests. 'There are several of your little friends from the dancing-class here this afternoon.'

Peggy walked slowly towards the group of children upon the lawn. There were a few girls whom she knew, but they only nodded, and did not come forward to speak to her. A sudden wave of shyness came over her, and she stood apart, feeling somehow very much out of it, and longing for the support of Lilian's presence.

There were two little girls in charming lace frocks and white Tuscan hats, with ostrich plumes, standing close by, whom Peggy recognised at once as the occupants of the carriage which had nearly upset them on the road. The recognition seemed to be mutual, for the elder child nudged the younger, and Peggy could see that they were looking her up and down, and evidently taking in all the details of her costume. The Vaughans had not been brought up to think much about clothes, but Peggy felt suddenly, with a little pang, that the muslin frock, which they had all thought so pretty when she started off, looked hopelessly homemade and unfashionable compared with the elaborate toilets of most of the other guests.

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Somehow Maud, too, seemed quite a different person this afternoon to what she had done before. She had put on a languid, affected manner, and sailed about, shaking back her long curls, and trying to be very grown-up and stylish, and she did not take any more notice of Peggy, nor come up to introduce her to other people, and make her feel happy and at home. There were a great many elder people present, but they all stood laughing and talking together, and nobody seemed to think of amusing the children, except Mademoiselle, the French governess, who was endeavouring to make the young people talk to each other, instead of standing about shyly on the grass.

'Would you like a game of croquet, Margaret?' said Muriel, noticing at last that Peggy stood unfriended and alone. 'Some of the others are going to play. Do you know Phyllis and Marjorie Norton?' indicating the owners of the lace frocks. 'Perhaps you will excuse my coming; I have so many people to see to. Mademoiselle will act as umpire.'

Marjorie gave Peggy a limp hand, but Phyllis only stared. Mademoiselle was dealing out the mallets and arranging the sides with much energy, estimating the players with a keen eye to their possible capacities.

Peggy knew it was unreasonable of her to feel so bitterly disappointed. It was all so different, somehow, to what she had expected. Accustomed to little quiet schoolgirl parties, she had not thought there would be such a large and fashionable assembly of guests, and had hoped that she would have her dear Maud to herself for a short time, at any rate, and be shown the doves, and the white pony, and the Indian cabinet, and the other treasures which her friend had so often described to her during the dancing-class. She tried to banish the rather chilled feeling.

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'Of course, I can't expect Maud to attend only to me,' she thought. 'There are such heaps of people here to-day. I wish they would let me play with the boys. I should have liked it far better.'

But the croquet had already begun, so Peggy threw her whole energy into the game. She excelled in all outdoor sports, having a keen eye and a true stroke, and was soon absorbed in making her hoops and helping on her partners, two quiet little girls considerably younger than herself, who seemed never to have played before, to judge by their absolute lack of skill. Peggy was standing waiting for her turn, while the others clustered round a rather difficult stroke of Marjorie Norton's, when she saw Phyllis, whose ball had been left distinctly wired, hurriedly push it with her foot into a better position. Peggy had been accustomed from her babyhood to 'play fair,' so she opened her eyes wide to see such deliberate cheating. Phyllis, who had thought herself unobserved, happened at that moment to look up, and met Peggy's glance, which was certainly not a flattering one. She flushed scarlet, and kicked the ball back to its former place.

'I only moved it by accident,' she said haughtily. 'You have no need to glare at me like that!'

Peggy dropped her eyes and strolled away. It was a little incident, and she had not spoken a word, yet she had an unpleasant feeling that the mere fact of having noticed the act had made her an enemy.

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'Ver' good!' Mademoiselle was saying. 'A splendide stroke! You shall take two hoops, and send ze black ball away. Tiens! You have missed! It is zen ze turn of Mees Marguerite.'

Peggy's next piece of play was so brilliant that it decided the game, and, to the great delight of her little partners, they all pegged out, amid the cold applause of their opponents and the ecstatic admiration of Mademoiselle.

All the guests were now summoned to tea, which was set out on little tables under the trees, and showed a tempting display of cakes and strawberries and cream, while attentive servants bustled about with cups and plates. Much against her inclinations, Peggy found herself sitting side by side with Phyllis Norton. Bobby was a long way off, among a jolly set of boys, whose shouts of laughter Peggy listened to with wistful ears, and her small partners had been borne away by an elder sister. Phyllis sat for some time stealing glances at Peggy from under her lashes.

'I believe we passed you this afternoon, coming here,' she remarked at last. 'Weren't you driving that queer little pony-cart?'

'Yes; your coachman nearly ran over us. I don't think he's a very good driver,' replied Peggy.

'Oh, Wilkins always takes the middle of the road, and makes everyone else get out of the way,' said Phyllis calmly. 'Do you live at this side of Warford? I don't remember seeing you before.'

'We live at Gorswen Abbey,' answered Peggy.

'Oh, I know; that old farmhouse by the river. We've often passed it on our way to Wyngates. Why, you're quite in the country! Do you go to school, or have you a governess?'

'I go to Warford High School. We drive in every day.'

'To the *High School!*' said Phyllis, with uplifted eyebrows. 'Well, I suppose it's all right for farmer's daughters. Marjorie and I go to a London boarding school.'

Peggy was furious. If she could only have thought of a suitable retort, she would have said something stinging; but usually our smartest remarks occur to us when the occasion has long passed by, and perhaps it is all the better, for we are saved from bitter words, which, once spoken, are not easily forgotten by the hearers, however keenly we may regret them ourselves. As it was, she could only walk away with what dignity she could summon; for tea was over, the boys were rushing back to cricket, and the girls collecting in little groups to arrange tennis sets.

'Come and look round the garden, Peggy,' said Maud, at last taking some notice of her friend. 'We've scarcely seen anything of you all the afternoon!'

Peggy forebore to remark that it was not her fault, and, cheering up a little, she joined the select circle whom Maud was conducting through the greenhouses and conservatories. The Middletons had a fine collection of orchids and rare plants, which were much admired by the young visitors, though simple Peggy could not help thinking they were not half so pretty as the roses and lilies in the old garden at home, and certainly the grand Scotch gardener was not nearly so nice as David or Joe, for he seemed quite to resent their presence and followed them about grimly, for fear they should disturb anything, or pluck any of the fruit or flowers.

'We're going to London next week,' drawled Maud, in her most grown-up manner. 'We've taken a house in Mayfair. Mother always likes to go up for a while during the season. We've so many friends, don't you know. I expect we shall have a lovely time. We drive in the Park every day, and father has promised to take us to "Lohengrin." Have you seen it, Linda?'

Linda had not seen it, but she had been to other operas, and was only too pleased to air her knowledge, so the conversation turned upon plays and actors, and Peggy, who had never been inside a theatre in her life, could only stand and listen. She felt so shy and stupid, and so apart from the other girls, that she began to wish heartily that she had never come, and long for the hour when it would be time to go home, and even to wonder how she could ever have thought she liked Maud so much—'though she was quite different to this at the dancing-lessons,' she reflected.

A welcome diversion came outside, however, in the shape of a beautiful white Persian kitten, who submitted to pettings with gracious condescension, arching her back and purring loudly.

'I'll fetch Carlo,' said Maud, who was genuinely fond of her pets, and liked to show them to an appreciative audience.

And she returned in a moment, leading a fine St. Bernard by the collar.

But Carlo's mistress had not calculated upon his love of sport, for no sooner did the naughty dog see the white kitten than he simply went for it, and puss only saved her life by springing up a yew-tree close by. The poor little creature was so terrified that she leaped from bough to bough, till suddenly losing her foothold, she fell with a crash, and hung suspended by her neck in the fork of a branch.

'Oh, look at her! She'll be hanged! Whatever shall I do?' shrieked Maud, wringing her hands helplessly in an agony of alarm.

'Call the gardener, or somebody,' suggested Linda.

But an animal in trouble was a sight which flung Peggy's shyness to the winds, and she sprang like a knight-errant to the rescue. She was up the yew-tree in two leaps and a bound, and by crawling along an overhanging bough, clinging to a branch, and making a long arm, she managed to seize puss by the scruff of her neck, and release her from her dangerous position.

'Oh, thank you!' said Maud, as Peggy came down from the tree, with grazed hands and rumpled

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frock. 'You're really too good! Withers might have fetched her with a ladder. Look how you've torn your dress!'

'Never mind my dress. She'd have been dead if I'd waited another moment,' remarked Peggy dryly, feeling rather snubbed; for several of the girls were smiling, as if they thought she had been a little too enthusiastic.

'Well done!' cried a voice from the background, and a tall, brown-bearded man, who had been a silent spectator of the whole scene, came forward to join the group.

'Mr. Neville!' exclaimed Maud. 'Where did you spring from?'

'Only arrived ten minutes ago, just in time to witness a most gallant act. Please introduce me to the heroine, who, I think, is a true friend in need. What, Miss Peggy Vaughan? Any relation to the Vaughans of Gorswen Abbey? Then, my dear, I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, for I knew your father long ago, and your grandfather too.'



"MAKING A LONG ARM, SHE MANAGED TO SEIZE PUSS BY THE SCRUFF OF HER NECK."

Peggy liked her new friend at once; his twinkling blue eyes, his bronzed face, his jovial voice, and rather unconventional dress, seemed to mark him as distinct and different to other people. His arrival seemed to alter the whole atmosphere. Maud's supercilious manner slipped away from her like magic, and she became once more the pleasant Maud of the dancing-class, and her friends, feeling the change, soon left off trying to be poor little imitations of grown-up people, and began at last to enjoy themselves; for true enjoyment does not consist in showing off, but in being our simple, natural selves, if people would only believe it.

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'Now then, what are you all doing?' cried Mr. Neville. 'The boys playing cricket by themselves, and the girls mooning about, keeping their frocks nice? Scandalous! Come along, all of you, and we'll get up some mixed sports. I stopped in the town, and filled my pockets with prizes, when I heard you were having a party. I am sure a young lady who can climb a tree looks capable of doing a high jump!'

After that the rest of the afternoon simply flew. Mr. Neville was a capital organizer, and had such a delightful way with children that they all made friends with him in five minutes. He impounded the grown-ups in the sports, and his jolly, hearty good spirits seemed so infectious that almost before they realized what they were doing, elegant ladies were holding up skipping-ropes, and smart young gentlemen flung off their coats, and forgot their high collars in the enthusiasm of the contests. Even Phyllis Norton was shrieking in a potato-race, and only laughed

when she fell and soiled her immaculate lace frock.

As for Peggy, she was quite in her element. Long jumps, high jumps, handicaps, sack-races, three-legged races—she was ready to compete in all, and, to her delight, won several prizes, while Bobby, too, gained his share of laurels.

The unfashionable muslin dress, with its long rent, was forgotten, and several people asked who that charming little girl was, with the sweet gray eyes and the pretty hair, who could run so splendidly.

'Vaughan? I remember a Vaughan up at Brazenose in my first year at Oxford. A fine-looking fellow he was, too!' said a heavily-moustached officer, regarding Peggy with a critical eye.

'Her father, no doubt. They're a very old family—quite one of the county, in fact,' said Mrs. Middleton, gushing over her small guest, now she found she was a success.

Maud hugged Peggy when she said good-bye in quite her old affectionate manner, and Muriel remembered to send her love to Lilian, and say she was sorry for her absence, a fact she had scarcely seemed to notice before.

As for Mr. Neville, Peggy confided to Aunt Helen, when she got home, that she liked him the best of any gentleman she had ever seen, next to Father.

'He's been out in India for ten years, Auntie—that's where he knew the Middletons—but he says he lived in England once, and used to come to Gorswen when grandfather was alive. Do you remember him?'

'I think I do,' replied Aunt Helen shortly, with a flush on the cheek that was still so smooth and pretty.

'Then don't you think,' persisted Peggy, 'that he is *quite* the nicest man you've ever met?'

'Go to bed, children,' said Aunt Helen. 'Here's Bobby so sleepy he can scarcely keep his eyes open. You shall tell me all about the party to-morrow.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOLIDAYS

'A little work, a little play,
To keep us going—and so, good-
day!'

'No more Latin, no more Greek, no more cane to make me squeak!' sang Bobby on the fifteenth of July, springing out of the pony-trap before Pixie had stopped, and taking a flying leap over the pump-trough in the exuberance of his spirits.

'School is over, hooray!' shouted Peggy, banging down her books on the mounting-block, and waltzing into the kitchen, where Aunt Helen and Nancy were busy making jam. 'Don't you hear, Auntie? We've broken up for eight weeks! Isn't it glorious?'

'I hear fast enough; but I'm afraid it will be a doubtful pleasure for Nancy and me if you are all going mad like this. My dear child, don't you think you might choose a less juicy seat than a tray full of raspberries?'

Peggy jumped up in a hurry.

'I really didn't see them,' she said. 'I'll go and help Lilian unharness Pixie. Joe's away in the turnip-field. No home-lessons to-night, hip-hip-hooray!' and she took herself off like a whirlwind.

The holidays were indeed a delightful respite after the weary round of examinations which generally makes life a burden at the end of the summer term, and the children set to work to enjoy them thoroughly. Bobby had taken to entomology, and panted over the hot pastures, chasing butterflies with unflagging zeal. At dusk he would enlist Peggy's services, and the pair went treacling for moths. A careful mixture of gin and syrup was smeared upon the trees, which were afterwards visited with a lantern, when the unfortunate insects could easily be taken in the midst of their revels, falling sad victims to the sin of intemperance.

Caterpillars, too, were caught and kept in boxes, till the Rose Parlour became so full of interesting specimens that Aunt Helen, for once, rebelled, and ordered this new branch of the menagerie to be removed to the loft.

'I found one of your beasties inside my hat, and another in my teacup,' she complained. 'So you had better keep them where it does not much matter if they escape.'

Lilian devoted herself to art, and sallied forth with her paint-box, pencils, and sketch-block, in quite a professional manner, looking for subjects. To be sure, the perspective of her cottages was apt to be rather peculiar at times, and the Welsh mountains turned out a more vivid shade of purple, and the fields a far more brilliant green than Nature ever painted them; but it was all good practice, and the admiring Peggy thought that no Royal Academician could have produced such charming masterpieces. There was a little work, too, to make the playtime all the sweeter—fruit to be picked, peas and beans to shell, the garden to weed, and great piles of bread and cheese to be cut and carried out into the fields for the harvesters' 'drinkings.' But, as Bobby said, it was all play-work, and much nicer than lessons, anyhow.

Peggy lay one afternoon at full length on the grass under the lime-tree, deep in the pages of 'Treasure Island.' It was rather a grown-up book, perhaps, for a little girl, but it was all about pirates, and sailors, and hairbreadth escapes, of so wildly exciting a nature, that she read on till she almost wept with disappointment to think she was not a boy to go to sea and meet with such thrilling adventures.

From the Rose Parlour came the strains of the piano, where Lilian was wailing a melancholy little ditty with keen enjoyment. It is mostly when we are very young that we take the greatest delight in the sad songs; those who have felt the real bitterness of sorrow are glad to bury it deeply away, and do not wish it wakened, as sailors' wives love a place best where they cannot hear the sound of the sea.

Lilian had always taken rather a delight in what Nancy called 'the melancholics.' When quite a tiny child she had much preferred the tragedy of Red Riding Hood to the brighter fate of the princesses who lived happily ever afterwards, and, with the tears streaming down her fat little cheeks, would quaver out 'Tell it again!'

Her first efforts in poetry had been in a distinctly pensive strain. When only about nine years old she had composed—

'THE DYING CHILD'S LAST WORDS.

'Remember me when I am gone,
And me thou canst not see;
When I lie sleeping in my grave,
Dear friends, remember me.

'You'll keep my little garden neat,
My clothes you'll fold away;
My playthings in a drawer you'll
put
With which I last did play.'

There ought to have been more verses, but at this point Father had unfortunately got hold of the paper, and persisted in treating the poem in such a comic light that the indignant authoress had never found the heart to finish it, though the fragment was considered very talented by Aunt Helen, and carefully put away in an old work-box, with the first specimens of Peggy's handwriting and one of Bobby's little baby-curls.

Peggy came to the end of her book at last, and life seemed so stale and flat anywhere out of the South Seas that she wandered down the garden for a little diversion. Lilian's fresh young voice proclaiming that her heart 'was breaking, breaking,' came wafted along the terrace, mingled with the sound of the reaping-machine, and the indignant gobble of the old turkey, which Bobby was chasing round the pasture.

'Let him alone, you naughty boy! Whatever mischief will you be in next?' cried Aunt Helen, flying to the rescue of the patriarch of her poultry-yard, and enforcing her remarks by sounding raps on the culprit's curly brown pate. Bobby was the apple of her eye, but she considered wholesome chastisement to be necessary to his moral welfare.

'Oh, Auntie, I've finished my book, and we've nothing much to do this afternoon; don't you think we might take our tea out into the woods?' said Peggy, swinging herself over the garden wall into the pasture.

'You can if you like; only you must get the baskets ready yourselves, and not worry Nancy. You may as well buy a loaf while you are out, too,' said Aunt Helen, rummaging a shilling out of her pocket. 'We're baking again to-day, but the harvesters take so much bread for the "drinkings." Get some tea-cakes, too, if they have any.'

'All right,' cried Peggy, rushing off with enthusiasm to rouse Lilian from the piano and forage in the pantry for a supply of jam and butter.

Half an hour later an interesting procession started off from the kitchen door: Lilian first, with the basket of cups and provisions, Peggy with the milk-can, and Bobby armed with the kettle, while Rollo seemed to be everywhere at once, and as pleased as anybody.

'I've got the matches,' said Peggy, 'and a newspaper. You're sure you put in the spoons, Lilian? We forgot them last time.'

The place where the children were going was a delightful spot for a picnic. A rapid stream ran

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through the woods, dashing down over great boulders, making little cascades and waterfalls as it went, with here and there a deep, clear pool, where the trout lay snugly under the stones; the rocks under the overhanging trees were carpeted with the softest and greenest of moss, and tall ferns grew right down to the water's edge, mingling with trailing ivy and creeping moneywort. A grassy glade under a tall beech seemed intended by Nature for a summer-house, for there was a large flat stone in the middle, which served for a table, and a circle of little stones round, just high enough for seats, so that you might imagine Queen Mab and her fairies dined here on moonlight nights, with the squirrels for guests and the bats and owls for waiters.

The children put down their baskets, and ran about gathering dry sticks to build their fire. There were plenty of dead branches strewn about in the wood, so they soon had a goodly pile of fuel. Bobby filled the kettle at the stream, and planted it firmly on Lilian's elaborate erection of sticks. Peggy struck a match and set the paper alight; up went the smoke, and in a few moments the bonfire was blazing grandly. But unfortunately the picnic party had quite forgotten that burning wood does not make a very substantial foundation, for the whole pile suddenly collapsed, and over went the kettle, spilling all the water, and putting out the fire with a hiss.

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'What a nuisance!' exclaimed Lilian. 'We must find something to hang the kettle on, like the gipsies do.'

'Suppose we make a kind of fireplace between two big stones, and then we can put a thick branch across,' suggested Peggy. 'It will be easier to lift the kettle off, too. I don't know how we should have seized it from the middle of that blaze.'

The second attempt proved a much greater success, and in a short time the water was boiling bravely, while a very attractive feast was spread out upon the mossy table.

Lilian had filled the teapot, and the company was just about to sit down and fall to with much relish, when the party was suddenly augmented by an unexpected guest. Down the little path from the glen above solemnly marched a very small girl indeed, so round and fat and chubby that she looked nearly as broad as she was long. She was a pretty child, with soft, dark eyes and pink cheeks, so plump and full that the little nose seemed almost to be lost between them. A pair of stout brown legs showed under the smocked holland pinafore, her white sun-hat hung upon her back, and she clasped a dilapidated doll in her arms.

She strolled up to the astonished children with the dignity of a duchess.

'I saw you lighting the fire,' she announced calmly, 'so I took Isabella, and I've come to tea.'

'We're very glad to see you, I'm sure,' said Lilian. 'Is Isabella your dolly?'

'No; she's my child. I don't call her a dolly: it hurts her feelings, so please don't say it again!'

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'I'm ever so sorry,' apologised Lilian, trying to repress Bobby's giggles. 'Whose little girl are you?'

'I'm Father's girl. Father's painting pictures up there in the wood. I paint pictures, too, sometimes, when Isabella don't want me,' confided the juvenile artist; and to judge from the smears of paint upon her pinafore, she had evidently been pursuing that art with more vigour than discretion.

'Won't you come and sit on my lap?' said Peggy coaxingly, for she loved small children.

The chubby infant looked the slight figure up and down, as if appraising the offered accommodation.

'She hasn't got a lap to sit upon,' she remarked scornfully, settling her stout legs on the grass.

'You haven't told us your name yet,' said Lilian, trying to draw out the interesting visitor.

'My name's Matilda Christabel Wilkins, but they call me Matty for short.'

'Are you sure they don't call you Fatty?' inquired Bobby.

'No; only rude people. Nice people call me Miss Wilkins. I don't like boys. I was four last week, so I'm quite a big girl now. Will the doggie hurt me? I think I will have some of that cake!'

'Hadn't you better begin with bread-and-butter?' said Lilian. 'No, dear, the doggie won't hurt you; it's only his play. Come here, Rollo! I'm afraid I haven't a spare cup; but perhaps you won't mind having some milk in a saucer. Are you staying about here?'

'Yes, at the farmhouse. I help Mary to milk the cows. Mary sings to them. I can sing, too. Would you like to hear me sing now?'

'If it won't trouble you too much,' began Lilian.

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'No. I like it!' and Miss Wilkins crossed her short legs, turned up the brown eyes, and broke forth into such a very extraordinary burst of melody that the children were nearly in fits. It had neither time nor tune, but the notes quavered about on the scale like a distant representation of the bagpipes. From the words they supposed it must be meant for a hymn, and it wound on through six or seven verses, till Bobby grew quite hysterical.

'Thank you,' said Lilian, stifling her mirth, when the youthful Madame Patti had at length

drawn to a close. 'Where did you learn that?'

'I learn it on Sundays, out of a book. Shall I sing it for you over again?' evidently thirsting for an encore.

'Hadn't you better have some tea first?' suggested Peggy hastily. 'See, I've put strawberry jam on your bread-and-butter.'

The attractions of preserve seemed to outweigh the charms of music, for Miss Wilkins ate stolidly for five minutes without volunteering any further remarks.

'You've got freckles on your nose,' she announced at length to Lilian. 'And *she's* torn her dress!' with an eye on Peggy. 'What a lot that boy eats! Nurse says it's very rude to fill your mouth so full!' pointing a severe finger at Bobby, which so convulsed him that he nearly choked.

'Perhaps you would like some cake now,' said Lilian, politely passing the basket to the stranger.

'Thank you. I'll take two pieces, because Isabella would like one. I think I had better be going home now. Good-bye. I'll call again another day;' and the young lady crammed one piece of cake into a diminutive pocket, and, munching the other, strolled away up the glen, with the luckless Isabella head downwards under her arm. [93]

'I hope she'll be all right; she's such a dot to wander about alone!' said Lilian anxiously, peering through the trees, and much relieved at seeing a tall figure in a brown velvet jacket catch up Miss Wilkins and bear her off upon his shoulder. 'I suppose they're staying at Brown's farm. I know they sometimes let rooms during the summer.'

'She's a queer young customer, at any rate. I feel quite ill with laughing,' said Bobby, swallowing down his fifth cup of tea and flinging his crumbs for the robins.

'Let's clear up, then. Suppose, instead of going straight down by the village, we walk up through the woods to Pengarth, and buy the bread there. We can leave our things here, under the tree, till we come back,' said Peggy, hastily swilling the teacups in the stream and packing them up in the basket.

The others readily agreed, and they set off for a glorious scramble up the steep hillside. The path was so narrow that in places they could scarcely push through the thick, overhanging bushes and the trailing brambles, where the blackberries were already turning red, and showing a fine promise for the autumn. The trees were covered with nuts, which Bobby cracked with persistent hope, and perpetual disappointment when he found them all yet empty of kernels.

They crossed the stream by a bridge roughly made of two pine-trees flung from bank to bank, with a rope for a hand-rail, a somewhat dizzy foothold for anyone who minded the rushing water beneath, but infinitely to be preferred to stones and mortar in the children's opinion.

Up the steep bank they trudged, through fields of bracken higher than Bobby's head, getting out at last upon a white road that wound along the top of a cliff, with a stream roaring below, till round a sudden turn they came upon Pengarth, a prim little village, nestling in a hollow, and consisting of a short street and a big chapel and school-house. [94]

There was a small general shop in Pengarth, where groceries and boots, apples and red-herrings, seemed all mixed up with yards of print and ribbon, penny ink-bottles, milk-cans, sun-bonnets, gingerbread, pear-drops, and bull's-eyes, presided over by a funny old woman in a black wig and horn spectacles, who seemed to find much enjoyment in gossiping with her customers; for the children had to wait quite a long time, while the chief points of last Sunday's sermon in chapel and the new dress of the minister's wife were freely discussed. At length the stout farmers' wives picked up their baskets and took their departure, and old Mrs. Ellis was able to give her undivided attention to Lilian's modest little voice, which had been striving to make itself heard, in a vain request for bread and tea-cakes for the last ten minutes.

'I say, Lil, couldn't we go straight down the wood here, and cross the stream by the picnic place instead of the pine bridge? It would save nearly a mile,' suggested Bobby, as they turned to go home.

'I suppose we could get over the stepping-stones?' replied Lilian rather doubtfully. 'I don't think there's a proper path through the wood, but we could find our way somehow, and it is certainly much shorter.'

So they plunged down through the thick tangle of trees which clothed the side of the cliff. It was so steep that in places they were obliged to sit down and slide, clutching at the trees as they passed, to save themselves from falling, and bringing down such showers of small loose stones and shale that it seemed as if the whole hillside were sliding too, and Lilian was very relieved when they all got safely to the bottom. Now that they were really close to the water the stepping-stones looked much farther apart than they had imagined, and very slippery and slimy, too, with a swift current flowing between. [95]

They all stopped and looked at it for a moment, each secretly wishing that somebody else would offer to go first, but nobody liking to make the plunge; even Rollo stood whimpering and whining on the bank, as if he did not half like the adventure.

'Here goes!' cried gallant Bobby at last, leading the way as though he were charging at the

enemy, and with four jumps and a long leap he managed to get over dry-shod, with Rollo at his heels, barking loud and furiously.

Not to be outdone in pluck, Peggy essayed to follow with equal style, but her foot slipped on a particularly green and moss-grown boulder, and in a moment she had plunged, tea-cakes and all, into an impromptu bath. Luckily, it was not deep, and she soon scrambled out, and fished up the paper-bag as well; but she was a very wet and draggled object, and as for the tea-cakes, they were a moist wreck!

'Oh, I know I shall go in, too!' wailed Lilian from the other side. 'I'd better try and save the bread, at any rate,' and she flung the loaf with all the strength she could muster across the stream. It fell well on the opposite bank, and Peggy made a desperate effort to catch it, but it eluded her grasp, and rolling down the bank with a series of aggravating bounds, descended with a splash to seek a watery grave.

'There! It's gone! And it's in such a deep hole, too. We can't possibly get it out. We shall have to leave it for the fishes,' said Peggy, poking vainly into the depths with a long stick. 'Lil, you'll never get over if you stand shivering on the brink like that. Do come along!'

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But Lilian popped down on the grass, and pulled off her shoes and stockings as the most speedy way of solving the difficulty, and hustled Miss Peggy home with all possible haste, to be dried; for the water was very cold, and her teeth were chattering in her head, while her dripping garments left such a moist track as she went that Bobby unfeelingly compared her to a watering-cart.

'What am I to do with such terrible children?' said poor Aunt Helen, as the trio recounted their adventures round the supper-table. 'I can scarcely let you out of my sight without you tear your clothes to ribbons or come home half drowned.'

'They're chips of the old block, Helen!' laughed Father. 'We Vaughans have a natural love of adventure: it's in the blood, and bound to come out somehow, so best let it have its fling while they are young, and they'll sober down when they come to years of discretion. Eh, bairns? Don't you agree with me?'

And three hearty young pairs of lungs carried the resolution with a unanimous 'Rather!'

CHAPTER IX

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A MOUNTAIN WALK

'The mountains that infold
In their wide sweep the coloured landscape
round,
Seem groups of giant kings, in purple and
gold,
That guard the enchanted ground.'

'FATHER, where are you going?' cried Peggy one morning, sliding down the banisters in her hurry to see why her father was pulling out his great fishing-basket from the cupboard under the stairs.

'Up to Llyn y Gaer, little woman, to look after the sheep. I shall stay all night at the cottage, so you won't see me home again till to-morrow evening.'

'Oh, Father!' cried Peggy, flinging her arms round his neck in her most beguiling manner, '*couldn't* you take Bobby and me with you this time? We have never been once yet, and you can't think how much we want to go.'

'Why, my dear child, I don't know whether you could manage it. Remember, it is an eight-mile walk, and all uphill, and such a rough place when you get there. I am afraid I should have you both crying for Aunt Helen when bedtime came!'

'Indeed we shouldn't; we're not babies!' insisted Peggy, greatly indignant at such a suggestion. 'We can walk quite as well as grown-up people, and carry our own baskets. Oh, Daddy, dear, do, *do* please take us just this once!'

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'The hut's hardly fit for a girl,' said Mr. Vaughan doubtfully, beginning to relent to Peggy's coaxings.

'Well, you've called me a tomboy often enough, so let me be a boy for to-day. Oh, Auntie, do be a darling, and persuade Father to say yes!'

Aunt Helen paused on her way from the pantry to the dining-room, with a dish of ham in one hand and a pound of butter in the other.

'I really think they might go,' she said, 'if you don't walk too fast for them, Robert. The weather has been so hot that it must be quite dry up there, so I hardly think they would catch cold in the cottage. But they must promise to behave properly, and not to get into any mischief. I can't spare Lilian to-day, or she might have gone to look after them.'

'Oh, thank you! Of course we'll promise!' cried Peggy, clapping her hands, and flying off in the seventh heaven of joy to inform Bobby of the delightful prospect, nearly upsetting Nancy and the breakfast-tray in her mad career, and causing that worthy girl to wish devoutly that schools had no holidays.

Mr. Vaughan owned some land high up on the mountains, across the border, in Wales. He had a little rough shepherd's hut there, just sufficient to form a shelter at night-time, and every now and then he would make an expedition to look after his sheep, or the tiny shaggy ponies which were turned out loose to wander almost wild upon the moors.

To go with Father upon one of these mountain excursions had been the dream of Peggy and Bobby's lives, so it was with very gay faces that, their fishing-baskets full of provisions slung over their shoulders, and old Rover trotting soberly behind, they started off on their eight-mile tramp up the hillside. [99]

It was such a lovely summer morning, one of those brilliant, glorious days when the world looks as if it had been newly created, and came to us with a whiff of Paradise about it. Down in the village the cottage gardens were ablaze with flowers, and even old Ephraim had forgotten his rheumatism, and crawled out to bask in the hot sunshine on the low wall, and called out a friendly 'Good-mornin'!' as the children went by. Past the forge, whence the cheery chink, chink of the blacksmith's hammer came mingled with the refrain of a stirring melody from a good bass voice; under the spreading yew-trees of the churchyard, and out through the lych-gate to the old mill, where the great wheel was turning slowly round, its dripping blades gleaming bright in the sunshine; up the steep path through the little hazel-wood, scrambling over the ladder-like stile into the narrow lane that ran ever uphill towards the mountains, which loomed before them, rugged in outline, and shaded in a mist of purple blue. The hedgerows had given place to stone walls now, loosely built without any mortar, and with green ferns and pennywort growing in the crevices, and forget-me-nots in the ditch below. On and up, on and up, with the great blue hills always rising higher before them, till at length even the stone walls vanished, and they were on the bare moorland, with only a slight foot-track for a road.

Quite out of breath with scrambling after Father's long strides, the children begged for mercy, and sat down to rest for a few minutes and eat their lunch by the side of a little quick-running stream.

'It is a good place for a halt,' said Father, 'for it is the boundary between England and Wales. When we are over the border we shall all be Taffies instead of John Bulls.' [100]

The air was sweet and cool up there, delightfully refreshing after the hot climb uphill. Below them the country lay stretched out like a map, the fields looking no larger than the squares of a chess-board, and the village a pretty child's toy by the side of the river which wound, a mere silver thread, along the valley. Far in the distance, among the trees, the outline of the Abbey rose gray against the background of soft beeches; a little dark cloud, the only one in the whole expanse of clear blue sky, hung over it like a warning of distant danger, and Father sighed as he looked, for to him it appeared as if the shadow of ruin were already creeping near, and stretching a threatening hand over the old home.

But Peggy and Bobby were at the very high-tide of happiness. Children live so entirely in the present, that so long as the existing day brings joy, they literally take no thought for the morrow, and catching their infectious spirits, Mr. Vaughan shook off his forebodings, and joined in the delight of the moment as if he were a boy once more. He hunted in the brook for sedges, captured a Red Admiral to grace Bobby's collection, filled his pockets with sweet gale and asphodel for Lilian's dried vases, and made himself such a delightful companion that the children agreed that Father on a holiday was out and out the best playmate they knew.

'Come, we must be getting on!' he said at last, when the last piece of bread-and-butter had vanished, and the remains had been scattered for the fishes. 'Do you see that little farm nestling in the hollow, with the fir-trees behind it? That is our last link with civilization. We shall find no more human habitations until we reach our hut by the lake, so we must make the most of our opportunity, and buy some milk as we pass. They will lend us a can, and we can leave it as we return to-morrow.' [101]

The farm proved, on a nearer acquaintance, to be a little one-storey dwelling built of rough stones, with a roof so covered with a mass of green polypody fern as to completely hide the slate underneath. There was no garden, only a low wall on which the milk-cans and most of the family crockery seemed to be taking an airing; but a patch of potatoes and a scanty half-acre of oats lay beyond the little homestead, roughly railed off to keep out the marauding sheep.

Peggy, who always liked to be first and foremost, ran on before the others to ask for the milk, and was greeted by a furious barking from a collie-dog who guarded the doorstep, while a small, shock-headed girl peeped shyly from behind the shelter of his rough back. At the sight of a stranger she fled with a howl, for visitors were almost unknown on these heights, and the child was as wild as a young rabbit. Her cry of alarm brought out a woman, who kicked the dog yelping into the house, and looked at Peggy with as much curiosity as if she were the inhabitant of

another world.

'Please can you let us have some milk?' asked Peggy politely.

'Dim Saesneg,' replied the woman, shaking her head, which, being interpreted, means, 'I can't speak English.'

For once Peggy was at a loss, but Father soon came to the rescue, for he had picked up a little Welsh in his expeditions on the mountains, and readily made the woman understand, in her native tongue, what they required.

The little black cow with the long horns looked strange to eyes accustomed to the large red and white cows at the Abbey, but her milk seemed sweet and good, and the woman sang a song in Welsh while she milked it, to a strange, haunting kind of melody that, like most of the Celtic music, had a touch of sadness and pathos about it. [102]

'Ask her if she ever comes down to Gorswen, and how they get food up here,' whispered Peggy to Father, anxious to be initiated into the mysteries of life among the moors.

'We don't go down more than once a fortnight or so for flour and groceries,' was the translated reply. 'Then we bring it up on the donkey's back. Oh yes, we walk ourselves all the way. What do we live on mostly? Bread and bacon, oatmeal and potatoes, and a few eggs. It's a healthy life, but terribly cold in winter. No, I've never been inside Gorswen Church. We go to a little chapel up here. A preacher walks over from Llanelly when they can spare one. Lonely? Not a bit! When you have the cows and the pigs and the hens and the children to see to you've no time to feel lonely!'

She looked pleased, however, to have had an opportunity for a chat, and gave them a very hearty good-bye as they took the milk-can and set off again on their long tramp. When the little farm was out of sight, they seemed indeed to have left the world behind them, and to be all alone among the hills. Oh, the boundless delight of those rolling miles of heather, which looked like a crimson sea spreading onward towards the horizon, and the delicious smell of the sweet-gale as they trod it underfoot! Great flocks of plovers flew before them, screaming their 'pee-wit, pee-wit!' and here and there they roused a snipe or a woodcock, while wild little ponies scampered off like the wind, indignant at having their solitude disturbed. [103]

The path ran for fully a mile over a bog, and the children had to follow very closely in Father's footsteps to keep a safe track over the soft, spongy surface, for Joe had told them dark tales of pedlars, travelling from Llanrhos to Gorswen, who had sunk into those treacherous brown pools and been heard of no more.

At last, coming over a little rise, they saw in the distance the gleaming outline of a lake, looking like a patch of silver amongst the heather.

'Look!' cried Mr. Vaughan. 'That is Llyn y Gaer. We shall be there in half an hour.'

This was good news to Peggy and Bobby, who were beginning to think that the fishing-baskets were very heavy on their backs, and that it was the longest eight miles they had ever imagined, so they hurried after Father, who made haste now, to make up for the many halts upon the road, for the afternoon was wearing on, and there was much to be done before night. Close beside the lake, on a flat piece of grass sheltered under a high cliff, stood the shepherd's hut, a small one-roomed shanty of rough stones piled up without either mortar or plaster, and roofed with a few tree-trunks covered with turf and heather. The tiny window was hardly a foot square, and had no glass in it, and a beautiful root of parsley fern grew luxuriantly on the sill, while all the crevices of the walls seemed full of lichens, bound together by the crimson stems of the creeping pellitory.

Father unlocked the weather-beaten door, and the children rushed in with much excitement. They saw a low room with a raftered roof, rough whitewashed walls, and an earthen floor. The whole of one side was occupied by a great fireplace, with a chimney so wide that, looking up, you could see the sky above. Grate there was none, and the fire must burn on the hearth-stone, but a good stack of dry peat and heather stood in the ingle nook, evidently left ready for use. A table, a chair, and two boxes were all the furniture, while a few cups, plates, and knives, together with a frying-pan, a kettle, and a pair of bellows, made up the rest of the modest establishment. [104]

'Isn't it fun?' said Peggy, putting down her heavy basket with a sigh of relief.

'I should just think so!' replied Bobby, roaming round to explore, and wondering whether it would be possible to climb up the wide chimney and peep out through the top.

'To work! To work!' cried Father. 'We have no time to be idle if you want any tea! Bobby, take the kettle, and fill it from the stream outside; and Peggy, you can get some of those peats, and help me to light the fire.'

Father had a newspaper and a box of matches in his pocket, so, with the help of the dry heather, they soon had a glowing red blaze, and swung the kettle on a hook, fastened to the end of a long chain, which hung, in true Welsh fashion, from a great beam fixed across the chimney.

'Now, while the water boils,' said Mr. Vaughan, 'we must go and pull heather for our beds, before the dew begins to fall upon it. Come along, my two subalterns, this is camp life, and you must learn to bivouac like true soldiers.'

""The heath this night must be my

bed,
The bracken's curtain for my head,"

sang Peggy, who had been studying the 'Lady of the Lake' at school, and quoted it on all occasions. 'But we ought not to have a hut at all. We should just wrap ourselves in our plaids, and lie under the "silent stars."' [105]

'I prefer a roof over my head myself,' said Father dryly. 'But if you are so anxious to taste the romantic you may sleep in the cold outside. I'm afraid I haven't a plaidie to offer you.'

'I'm sure a heather bed will be stunning!' declared Bobby. 'I don't think I shall ever want sheets and nightshirts, and horrid things of that sort, again. I'd like to be a hunter when I grow up, and always live in tents, and caves, and jolly places, like the boys in books.'

'It's just like the Swiss Family Robinson, only ever so much nicer,' said Peggy. 'I wish we lived up here, and then we shouldn't need to go to school, and darn stockings, and do all kinds of things we hate!'

They pulled great armfuls of the delicious purple heather, and laid them on the floor close to the fire, for Father said it was chilly at nights after the sun had gone down, and they would need all the warmth they could get. The kettle was boiling noisily by this time, so the children hastened to set out the cups and plates. There was no table-cloth, but that did not matter in the least, and the absence of teaspoons was regarded as rather an advantage than otherwise. It was so quaint to sit right inside the chimney corner, and smell the delicious blue peat smoke that was curling its way to the turf roof overhead, and to look out through the open doorway at the silver lake, sending gentle ripples over the little sandy beach, and always the purple waste of heather beyond, with the mountains rising up, tier after tier, into the dim distance.

There never were such appetites. Peggy poured out, with a grand air, as if she were officiating at some Court ceremony. Aunt Helen's hard-boiled eggs and bread-and-butter disappeared like magic, and the little teapot was filled again and again, till there was no more water left in the kettle. [106]

'Bobby, you simply must stop!' said Father. 'Please to remember our supplies have to last us for breakfast and lunch to-morrow. If we eat up everything so fast, we shall be obliged to go hungry before we get home again. Now I am going out to look after the sheep, and I shall leave you to clear away and wash up. If I bring you camping out up here, you must be my orderlies, and do the work. I generally put the cups into the pool outside.'

'All right,' said Peggy and Bobby, rattling the tea-things into the big fishing-basket with a haste calculated to break anything but the stout blue enamel ware which Aunt Helen had thoughtfully provided, and racing outside to the little stream which flowed past the cottage into the lake.

The bank shelved in one place, so as to form a shallow basin, and here the children tilted in their load, sitting down on the heather for a few minutes to wait until the running water had washed them clean.

'Take care they are not washed away into the lake!' shouted Father after them. 'And keep up the fire while I am gone. I shall be in before dark.'

And he went off for a weary tramp over the hills, with old Rover following closely at his heels.

'I wish we could have brought Rollo,' said Bobby. 'I don't believe he would have driven the sheep all the wrong way, in spite of what Father says. David had to tie him up in the stable, so that he shouldn't follow us.'

'I know he'll miss us dreadfully, poor darling!' said Peggy. 'I hope Lilian won't forget to give him his biscuit to-night. I asked Nancy to remember Prickles, and Joe promised to feed the rabbits; and if Jack doesn't get his supper he'll scold so dreadfully outside the kitchen door that someone is sure to hear him. Oh, Bobby! I saw a fish in the pool just then. I have two pins in my jacket, and a long piece of string in my pocket. Don't you think we could make hooks and lines, and catch some to surprise Father when he comes back? There are lots of worms in the bank.' [107]

The tea-things were hastily collected from the stream, and the amateur anglers set to work with much enthusiasm but no success, for the fish absolutely declined to bite, in spite of the tempting bait, and lay sulkily under the stones at the bottom of the pool. It was growing quite dark before Father returned, and I think, though neither of them would have confessed it, the children were both rather relieved to hear his cheery whistle outside the door, for it was just a little eerie sitting by the peat fire in that lonely cottage, without a sound to break the vast silence, and the knowledge that the nearest human habitation lay fully three miles away; and Bobby had already asked Peggy if she believed in ghosts, and whether it was true what Joe had told him that the lights you sometimes see at night hovering over a bog are the souls of children who have never been baptized; and though Peggy had professed to laugh at the supernatural, she did not feel quite so brave as she pretended, and found little cold shivers stealing down her back when the wind rose suddenly, and began to wail round the cottage like a hungry creature waiting to be let in.

'I don't know what you young folks are,' said Mr. Vaughan, 'but I'm dog-tired, and we had better go to bed, for I want to be up with the sun to-morrow.'

The children were disposed to agree with him, so, simply pulling off their boots, they lay down in their clothes on the piles of fragrant heather, while Father threw thick bundles of it over them to serve instead of blankets. Heather makes one of the most delicious beds in the world. It is so soft, and yet so springy, and the purple blossom smells so sweet, that one could scarcely wish to lie easier.

Father and Bobby were asleep in two minutes, but Peggy lay awake for a long time, watching the shadows of the peat fire flicker upon the rough beams of the roof, till at length fire and heather merged into a dreamland kingdom, where she was walking with Rollo upon the clouds, and fishing teacups out of a flowing sea below.

CHAPTER X

ON THE MOORS

'No sound by night but the winds which
blow,
No sound by day but the water's flow,
And the wild bird's screaming note.'

IN spite of the best resolutions for early rising, nobody woke with the sun after all, and that luminary had plenty of time to creep round and peep in through the little window before Father sprang up from his bed of heather, and exclaiming that they were late, set the children to blow the peats into life again while he took his morning bath in the lake.

Later on Peggy and Bobby followed his example. After sleeping all night in their clothes the cool plunge in the clear water was delightfully refreshing, and they sat about like mermaids on the rocks, basking in the sunshine, and watching a ring-ousel teaching her three big babies to fly, till Father called out that if they did not hurry up and come in at once he should eat all the breakfast before they arrived.

It was real fun frying rashers of bacon over the fire, especially when Peggy nearly upset the pan in her excitement, and Bobby absentmindedly sat upon the teapot, which he had put to keep warm among the peats. I am afraid poor Father had rather a distracting meal, but he cheerfully ate the smoky toast which the children provided, and did not even grumble when Peggy, by mistake, put six lumps of sugar into his tea.

'Rover and I must be off to work again this morning,' he said, taking a shepherd's crook that lay in a corner of the room, and calling the old dog from the fireside. 'You youngsters had better play about near the cottage. Don't go wandering all round the lake, or you'll get so tired you won't be able to walk home this afternoon.'

Left alone, the children began to busy themselves with what the Americans call 'chores.' First of all the breakfast things had to be cleared away, and carried down to the stream, but, to Peggy's dismay, the greasy bacon plates utterly refused to wash clean, however long they were left to soak in the pool, and came up in the same smeary condition in which she had put them in.

'Whatever shall we do with them? We can't leave them dirty like this,' she exclaimed, feeling as anxious for the credit of the establishment as any full-grown housekeeper.

'Tilt them up in a row against the cottage wall, and pour a kettleful of boiling water over them,' said practical Bobby, who generally had some suggestion to offer.

I do not know what Nancy would have thought of such a method of washing up, but it answered splendidly all the same, for the greasy water drained away into the grass, and the fresh breeze dried the plates without any need of a towel, and Peggy even managed to clean out the frying-pan with the help of some fern-leaves and a wisp of grass, an achievement of which she felt quite proud.

'We can't make our beds,' she said, 'because there's nothing to make; but we'll pile the heather up with the rest of the peat in the chimney corner, and it will do to light the fire with next time. I mean to ask Father to bring us, now, whenever he comes up.'

They managed to construct a broom from some of the longest pieces of heather, and swept the crumbs neatly out at the front-door; they hung up the frying-pan, the kettle, and the bellows in their accustomed places, and stacked the cups and plates in the old box which served as a cupboard.

'Doesn't it look nice?' said Peggy, gazing round with much satisfaction on their handiwork. 'If only we could stay up here a good long time we'd bring lots of things from home, and paint pictures for the walls, and put them in cork frames, and I really believe, if I tried, I could make up

one of those hearthrugs out of little scraps of cloth all pinched up and sewn on, like Nancy made last winter for her sister's wedding present.'

'Oh, bother the cottage!' said Bobby, who, boy-like, soon tired of domestic duties. 'Let's go out and look for whinberries; there ought to be heaps of them round there by the lake.'

Peggy was more than willing, and relinquishing her schemes of household improvement to hunt up the milk-can as a handy receptacle, followed him out into the sunshine, to search among the heather for the little low-growing, red-leaved shrubs with their crop of small purple berries.

But the blackbirds and the ring-ousels had been before them, so it took a long time to fill the can, especially as a good deal of the fruit found its way into the children's mouths, leaving them with such purple lips and stained fingers that they resembled the babes in the wood.

'I say, Peggy,' cried Bobby suddenly, stooping down to examine more closely the grassy bank where he was sitting, 'there's a whole swarm of bees keeps coming in and out of this hole.'

[112]

Peggy came hurrying up in great excitement, tripping as usual over her dangling bootlace.

'It's a wild bees' nest; I expect the bank is full of honey. Oh, wouldn't it be fun to dig it out! I'm sure we could do it first-rate!'

'But won't they all go for us when we start laying into their hive?'

'We must smoke them out first, like the people do in the village when they only have those straw hives. We'll bring some dry heather and light a fire, so that the smoke will send them to sleep, and then we can get the honey as easy as anything. I remember just how Mrs. Davis does.'

Peggy spoke as if she knew all about it, though really she had never seen any honey taken in her life, but she was a young lady who had much confidence in her own powers, and Bobby was so accustomed to follow her lead that he offered no further objections. They went back to the cottage for the matches and a supply of dry heather, which they arranged in a circle round the nest.

'You stand ready with the matches,' commanded Peggy, 'and when I say "Now!" strike a light. Then, as the smoke goes up, I shall poke a stick into the hole, and you'll see they'll all fly out and tumble down asleep.'

Obedient Bobby stood at attention, match in hand.

'Now!' cried Peggy breathlessly.

Up went the smoke, the heather catching fire at once, in went the stick, and out came the bees in an angry swarm; but something had gone wrong in the calculations, for instead of falling stupefied on to the grass, they flew unharmed through the smoke, and fell upon their tormentors with a buzz of indignation.

[113]

Away fled the children, racing over the moor as if the furies were at their heels. They were both capital runners, having had plenty of practice at cricket and rounders, but I do not think they ever ran so fast in their lives as when they were chased by the bees.

They had just reached the side of a little incline when Peggy's bootlace, which she had neglected to fasten all the morning, tripped her up, and over she went, rolling into a prickly gorse-bush, while Bobby, who was so close behind that he could not stop himself, fell over her, and collapsed into a boggy hollow, where he lay panting for breath until Peggy picked herself up and hauled him out.

'Oh, you *are* in a mess!' she cried, trying to wipe the mud off his coat with her pocket-handkerchief, and getting almost as grimy as he was in the process.

'I'm half stunged up!' moaned poor Bobby. 'I've a great place on my cheek, and just look at my hands!' stretching out the wounded members for sympathy.

'They've stung me all round the back of my neck,' said Peggy. 'I expect it'll hurt ever so when it begins to swell. We'd best go and bathe the places in the lake.'

The water relieved the smart considerably, and Peggy, happily remembering she had a parcel of biscuits in her pockets, pulled them out and suggested some lunch, for Bobby was looking doleful and injured, and inclined to cast aspersions upon her knowledge of bee-keeping.

There were three apiece, all thick arrow-root ones, and I grieve to say this ill-behaved pair had a competition as to which could finish them the quickest. Dry biscuits are choky things, and it is not very easy to eat three off on end, in record time, without drinking.

'I've won!' declared Bobby in triumph, hurriedly swallowing the last morsel, and scooping up a delicious draught of water to wash it down.

[114]

'Yes; but you simply bolted your last. You want Miss Wilkins here to teach you manners. What a dear little fat dot she was! I wish we could come across her again.'

'She's gone home. I saw her the day before yesterday in a carriage, with a lady and gentleman and a lot of boxes, and Mrs. Price at the post-office said she had heard Sir Somebody Wilkins was a very great artist in London, and had pictures in the Royal Something-or-other,' explained Bobby

lucidly.

'Was it the Royal Academy?'

'I believe it was; but I thought an academy meant a school.'

'So it does sometimes, but I know the Academy is a place where people go to see pictures, because Maud Middleton told me she had her portrait there last year. Talking of Maud, we have never seen anything of Mr. Neville since that party. I wish he would come over to Gorswen.'

'So do I; he was a stunning chap! He could bowl better than the captain of our eleven. Why don't Father and Aunt Helen write and ask him?'

'I don't know. I asked Aunt Helen, but she was so funny and queer over it, and wouldn't talk about him at all. I can't imagine why. Oh, Bobby, look what I've found! A clump of real white heather! Isn't that lucky? The first I've ever seen. I shall take it home for Aunt Helen; she'll be so pleased.'

'Joe says it means a wedding if you give it to anybody, and if you find it in three places you'll be married three times. No, I don't want to hunt for any, thank you! It's girls' stuff! I aren't going to bother with marrying when I grow up; I mean to be a pirate, and live in a ship with a black flag, and a lot of jolly fellows with pistols and cutlasses, and we'll overhaul every merchantman we see, and string the sailors up from the yard-arm!' and the future buccaneer swung his legs over the rock, and put on a cut-throat expression, strangely at variance with his cherubic cast of countenance.

[115]

'Pooh! You're a silly little boy!' said Peggy scornfully, forgetting that only last week she had regarded the adventures in 'Treasure Island' as the beau-ideal of earthly bliss. 'There are no such things as pirates now, so you couldn't be one, and I believe you'd be scared of the pistols, too, if they were loaded!'

Much offended at these remarks, Bobby stalked away in such aggrieved majesty that, as the best means to restore peace, Peggy suggested that they should walk on to a larger stream, which emptied itself into the lake about half a mile lower down. Luckily Bobby's ill-humours were of a short-lived nature, and after a few minutes of cutting silence, he volunteered the rather ambiguous remark that there were 'lots of things a fellow could do when he grew up, anyhow,' and was his smiling self again.

The new stream proved highly attractive. It was one of those noisy, rushing mountain torrents, brown with flowing over the peat, and full of great moss-grown boulders, with smooth round stones between. There were foaming cataracts here and there among the rocks, just like Niagara on a small scale, and there were dear little quiet pools at the edges, where the still water was overhung by ferns and rushes, that sheltered caddice-worms, and boat-flies, and whirligig water-beetles, and all sorts of other delights for the collection.

The children promptly pulled off their shoes and stockings and paddled in the brown water like a couple of ducks. Peggy tied her boots together by the laces, and putting her stockings inside, slung them over her back in true fisher-boy fashion, while she sat dabbling her feet in a waterfall, and watching Bobby's frantic efforts to catch a dragon-fly.

[116]

'Oh, Peg, come quick! I believe I have him under my hat!' shouted the enthusiastic collector, lying flat among the reeds on a grassy bank.

Peggy jumped up in a hurry, and splashed her way to the rescue, but the smooth round stones were slippery, and seemed to slide away from under her feet. She gave a desperate clutch at a willow-stump on the bank to save herself from falling, and somehow or other, in the struggle, her bootlace broke, and away went the boots, sailing gaily down the stream, over the waterfall and into the depths of the lake, before their astonished owner had even realized their loss. Naturally, to secure the dragon-fly and pin him on Bobby's hat was the first consideration, and by the time the missing boots were thought of, they had utterly disappeared, and though the children searched for fully half an hour down the stream and on the bank of the lake, they were not to be found.

'I'm afraid it's no use,' said Peggy at last. 'They must have gone down into a hole, or been washed right into the middle of the lake. Someone will fish them out a few hundred years hence, and put them into a museum as great treasures. Well, it can't be helped. I suppose I shall have to walk home without them,' pretending to look as if she did not care, though really the prospect of a scolding from Father, and further explanations with Aunt Helen on her return, made her somewhat uneasy.

With spirits slightly damped she wended her way back to the cottage, trying to think it did not hurt to walk on the scrubby heather-stems, and privately wondering whether Scotch children's toes were made of different material to her own.

[117]

Mr. Vaughan came home at one o'clock, having counted the sheep to his satisfaction, and found none missing.

'I'm as hungry as a hunter,' he announced. 'We must eat up everything that's left; it won't do to carry anything back in our baskets. Is the kettle boiling? Come, Peggy, child, put on your shoes and stockings; you look like the picture of an Irish peasant-girl.'

Peggy had certainly expected a lecture when she made the painful confession that her foot-gear was at the bottom of the lake, but, to her great relief, Father took it all as a joke, and laughed so heartily that he quite forgot to scold her.

'But you can't walk eight miles home over a rough road with bare feet!' he exclaimed, the practical side of the question suddenly striking him, 'and I certainly don't feel equal to carrying you. We must manage to make you a pair of sandals of some kind. I suppose I shall have to sacrifice my shooting-gaiters;' and he divested himself of his leather leggings with rueful reluctance. 'Now, put your foot down upon that, and I will draw a line round it; then, if I cut it out with my penknife it will make quite a good sole—enough to save you from the stones, at any rate.'

Peggy sat on the box while Father tied on the improvised sandals with her pocket-handkerchief and Bobby's. They were certainly ingenious, though hardly elegant, and it did not comfort her much to be told that she would be taken for a wounded soldier limping back from the wars; indeed, Father made such fun of her that she grew quite indignant, and began to think she would really rather have been scolded a little than so very much laughed at. [118]

Peggy never forgot that walk home. The sandals were anything but comfortable, and her feet hurt dreadfully on the stones, while every gorse-bush she passed seemed to be stretching out spiky fingers to scratch her bare legs; she was tired after her morning's adventures on the moors, and the eight miles seemed to lengthen out to an interminable vista, in spite of the way being downhill; sundry bumps and bruises, which she had never noticed at the time, began to ache now, and the bee-stings on her neck smarted, until she hardly knew how to bear the pain.

Poor Bobby was in scarcely better plight, and, to add to their misery, a rain-cloud, blowing over from the west, broke on the mountain-top, and drenched them almost to the skin. Mr. Vaughan was in such haste to get home before post-time that he hurried them on, quite forgetting how much shorter their legs were than his own, and he refused to listen to any excuses for sitting down and resting, which, considering their wet condition, was perhaps just as well.

A more draggled and disreputable-looking pair of children it would have been impossible to find. Bobby's sailor-suit was all stained with mud, where he had fallen into the bog, and smears of the same material seemed to have distributed themselves over his chubby face. There were several rents in his stockings, while the brim and crown of his straw hat had parted company, showing his crop of brown curls through the gap between. As for Peggy, a young gipsy tramp would have looked more respectable, for the brown holland dress, which had started out stiff and clean yesterday morning, was smeared with whinberry juice, black smudges from the kettle, and green stains from the mossy stones in the stream, and clung around her bare legs in damp, clammy folds, while the drenching rain had reduced the poppies in her hat to a scarlet pulp, which dripped down in crimson tears upon her cheek. The sun, shining out brilliantly as they reached civilization once more, seemed to make the forlorn plight of the wayfarers look worse than ever. If there had been any possible way home, except through the village, I think Peggy would have begged Father to take it, and she wished that, like Lady Godiva, she could have shut the people up in their cottages until she had passed by. [119]

'I know they'll all stand and stare at my bare legs and queer sandals,' she groaned. 'Those horrid, rude Watkin boys are sure to see me, and call names next time, when Father's not there, and Mrs. Price will come fussing out of the post-office to ask if there has been an accident; she always wants to poke her nose into everything!'

The Watkin boys, however, were away, engaged in a raid for early apples in the orchards of long-suffering neighbours, while Mrs. Price was taking tea in her back-parlour, and indulging in such spicy gossip with her particular friend Miss Jones that the children passed by unnoticed, and Peggy began to congratulate herself that they were almost out of danger.

But alas! things rarely happen as we expect in this world. They had crossed the bridge, and were turning away up the lane to the Abbey, when the sound of wheels was heard behind them, and, in the smart carriage which rolled by, whom should Peggy recognise but the supercilious faces and elegant costumes of Phyllis and Marjorie Norton. Her cup of humiliation was filled to the brim. [120]

'And they knew me at once, I'm sure,' she lamented to Lilian afterwards, 'for they both looked at each other, and Phyllis laughed in that horrid, sneering way she has. I know she'll tell the Middletons, and they'll think it so queer. I don't much mind Marjorie, but of all people in this world I simply *detest* Phyllis Norton!'

CHAPTER XI

A NEW FRIEND

'Good-morrow to the day so
fair,
Good-morrow, sir, to you.'

ONE hot afternoon, when the holidays were about three weeks old, found Peggy wandering disconsolately round the farmyard alone. Lilian was away, spending a few days in Shrewsbury with a distant cousin; Father had gone to Warford, and had taken Bobby with him; even Rollo had disappeared on some mysterious errand not entirely disconnected with bones, so the young lady was left for once to her own devices.

Aunt Helen had broadly hinted that an hour's practice of much-neglected pieces upon the piano in the Rose Parlour would be a profitable means of employing the time, and the fear lest this threat should become an actual command caused Peggy to shun the neighbourhood of the house with elaborate care, and betake herself, with a selection of pets, to the barn.

But the rabbits were stupid and sleepy this afternoon. Even Jack, the magpie, seemed to feel the heat, and refused to amuse his young mistress, while Prickles snored on in his box of hay, oblivious to all coaxings and blandishments.

'Bother the creatures!' said Peggy at last, giving it up in despair. 'If they want to go to sleep, I suppose they must! I wonder if it would be worth while going down to the harvest field? I'm afraid David wouldn't let me drive the reaper. No, I know what I'll do.'

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And she jumped up, full of a new idea which had suddenly flashed into her mind.

Down the pasture she pelted, her red hat looking like a new species of poppy among the grass, and, taking a flying leap over the fence, made her way along the dusty road to a place where a large willow overhung the path.

The tree was old, so old and decayed that the upper side of the trunk had worn away altogether, leaving nothing but a hollow, crumbling shell, as rotten and dry as matchwood. Into this cavity Miss Peggy proceeded to creep, where, concealed by the new branches which had grown from the old stump, she found she could lie at full length, quite hidden from sight, while through a hole in the bark she could obtain an excellent view of every one who passed in the road below. The first to come by was Mr. Griffiths, the stout old miller, mounted on his equally fat horse, the two jogging comfortably along, almost asleep in the sunshine. Peggy allowed him to get well beneath her, then, taking a pebble from her pocket, she let it fall plump in the middle of his white hat. The miller sat up with a jump, and reined in the old horse, staring into the tree with such blank amazement on his rubicund countenance that Peggy had to stuff her fingers into her mouth to stifle her mirth.

'Shoo! Hi!' cried Mr. Griffiths, clapping his hands.

But, like Brer Rabbit, Peggy 'lay low and said nuffin', and the old man rode slowly on, turning round in his saddle for a last lingering look as he went.

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Encouraged by this success, Peggy's next venture was on a pedlar, who came down the road with a pack on his back and a thick stick in his hand. I am afraid this time her stone was bigger, for it bounced with such effect on his shoulder, that he turned round with a flow of language far from elegant, shaking his fist at the tree with so much fury that Peggy was in terror lest he should climb up to find the author of the assault; but he evidently thought the day too hot for such exercises, and with a final abusive epithet walked away muttering curses on all the children in creation.

'It's not safe to use stones,' thought Peggy. 'They know someone must be up here to drop them. I'll try little pieces of wood instead, and then they'll think it's a bird or a squirrel.'

After that, she had excellent sport, for the women were beginning to return from Warford Market with their empty baskets, and she was able to cause wonder and mystification in many a rustic breast, without the slightest chance of discovery.

She was growing almost tired of the fun, when she heard a cheery whistle, and a boy of about fourteen came sauntering slowly down the road. He was rather a nice-looking boy, with merry brown eyes, a freckled nose, and frizzy chestnut hair, which stood up like a mop all over his head, and he had a particularly jolly, breezy air about him.

Peggy had acquired such practice at her interesting occupation by this time that she was able to drop her piece of wood neatly down the back of his neck exactly at the moment he passed below.

'Hello!' cried the boy, turning round, and flinging a stone into the tree. 'A squirrel, I'll be bound! I guess it's no use you hiding 'way up there, old fellow! I'll unearth you before you're much older!' And he commenced such an onslaught of stones that, to avoid the descending shower, Peggy tried to creep deeper into the hollow cavity where she was lying.

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But the poor, rotten old tree could stand the strain no longer, and, with an awful crash, down came the overhanging bough, bringing Peggy to the ground with a good deal more speed than elegance.

'I say! What the dickens! Great Scott! Are you hurt?' exclaimed the boy, regarding with much astonishment the crumpled heap of sailor frock, brown curls, and splinters of willow-wood that

had suddenly descended at his feet.

Peggy got up, feeling tenderly at her shins, which had suffered most in the fall.

'I don't think I'm quite killed,' she replied slowly. 'But I've no doubt there'll be heaps of bruises to-morrow.'

'So you were the squirrel! It was rather a cute dodge, and well done. I guess you're something of a tomboy, young lady, aren't you?' said the boy, grinning appreciatively.

'No, I'm not,' said Peggy, indignant at the old reproach; 'I'm only fond of a little fun. I know who *you* are. You're the boy who's staying with Miss Forster at the Willows. I saw you in church on Sunday;' and she nodded convincingly.

'Why, I believe I saw you, too! You dropped your collection money, and made a rabbit out of your pocket-handkerchief,' chuckling at the remembrance.

'Aren't you Miss Forster's nephew? What's your name? Why have you never been to Gorswen before? Where is your home?' asked Peggy, wondering at his slight American accent.

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The boy whistled.

'Whew! what a catechism! My name's Archie, if you want to know, and my godfathers and godmother gave it to me at my baptism. Yes, Miss Forster is my aunt, and I haven't been to Gorswen before, because I was raised in Colorado, and that's a little too far for chance visits; but I'm going to locate here now most of the time, I guess. Is there anything else you would like to ask?'

And the brown eyes looked at her quizzically.

'Yes, I should,' admitted Peggy frankly. 'I want to know what you're doing in the corner of Miss Forster's garden. I can hear you sawing and hammering there every morning.'

'I wonder you don't come to see!'

'Well, I would if anyone *invited* me!'

The boy laughed.

'All right!' he said good-naturedly. 'Come along now, and I'll show you, if you like. If we cut over the hedge here we can drop straight down into the garden without going round by the road. I guess a girl who can climb a tree to play squirrel won't shy at a fence. Eh, Miss Tomboy?'

Peggy replied by lightly vaulting over the obstacle, and following her new friend with much promptitude, giving him a condensed history of herself and family as she ran to keep up with his long strides.

'Here we are!' cried the boy, jumping over the little stream that bounded the Willows garden, and watching Peggy's heroic leap after with an eye of secret approval. 'There, now, if you want to see what I have been doing, you can!'

He put his hands in his pockets, and whistled carelessly, but it was evident, all the same, that he was pleased to show off his handiwork, even to a little girl. Peggy gave a gasp of astonishment and delight, for by the side of the stream was fixed the prettiest little miniature water-wheel, which was turning round as merrily as the miller's own.

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'Oh, how lovely!' she cried. 'You don't mean to say you made that yourself?'

For the efforts of Joe and Bobby at carpentry were generally of a very rough description.

'Of course I did. Do you reckon I'd get the village joiner to fix it? Precious much good he'd be at a job like this, the clumsy old idiot! But the wheel's nothing. Come over here, and you'll see what it turns!'

'A grindstone! How splendid! Why, it's going round ever so fast when you put on that catch!'

'I can grind your pen-knife for you, if you like,' suggested Archie magnanimously. 'I'd admire to do it.'

'Haven't got one,' said Peggy sadly. 'I lost mine out of my pocket the other day, when I fell into the stream.'

'Ah! girls have such stupid pockets, they never can keep anything in them. Never mind, perhaps this will be more in your line;' and lifting up a lid, he showed a tiny churn, calculated to fill the feminine soul with rapture.

'You could put some cream in that, and make enough butter for your tea,' he said, when Peggy had exhausted her list of admiring adjectives. 'I'll let you do it some time, if you want. But if you like the churn, what do you think of this, now?' And, stooping forward, he moved a switch, and the strains of a little musical-box were heard playing 'The Last Rose of Summer' with wonderfully correct time and tune.

'You'll never persuade me you made that, too!' cried Peggy, turning upon him with wide-open eyes.

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'Indeed I did!' laughed Archie. 'Oh, it's not so difficult, after all. See, I'll show it to you. It's only made with pins set round in a circle on a piece of board, with a nail on a pivot in the centre to revolve round and strike them. The hard part of it was to set the pins just right. You see, the shortness or longness of them makes the difference in the notes, and the distance between gives the time. It took me a jolly long while to puzzle it all out, I can tell you!'

'I think you're a genius!' declared Peggy, who was absolutely steeped in admiration.

'Why, no!' said the boy. 'But I reckon to go in for engineering some time, so it's all practice, you see. When I can get some more tools and things I want to set up a hydraulic pump to water the garden. I believe I could put electric light all over the house, if aunt would only let me try.'

'I'm afraid you might blow us all up, my dear boy!' exclaimed the pleasant voice of Miss Forster, who had joined them unobserved. 'So you have been making Peggy's acquaintance? She had better stay to tea, now she is here. I will send a message up to the Abbey to say we are keeping her.'

Peggy beamed with delight, for she wanted to see more of Archie's wonderful work, and also the cakes and jam at the Willows had a reputation for excellence quite unsurpassed in the neighbourhood.

Miss Forster was a little elderly lady, with a neat, bird-like appearance, and a brisk, cheerful manner, who seemed to match the prim, square house with its green door and brass knocker, and white sun-blinds over the windows. Everything about the place was kept in the most exquisite order—never a weed on the paths nor a daisy on the lawns—while indoors the old-fashioned rooms were the very perfection of neatness, and the polish on the Chippendale furniture was a thing to wonder at. [128]

When Miss Forster had adopted her brother's youngest boy from Colorado, her neighbours held up their hands in amazement, and suggested that one of her London nieces would have proved a far more satisfactory companion. But Miss Forster herself thought otherwise.

'My nieces are dear girls,' she said, 'but they take all I say for gospel, and have not an original idea among them. I want some fresh young life in the place, to keep me from quite stagnating. Archie brings a breath of the new world with him, and outside interests which I hope may prevent me from falling into the narrow rut that is so often the fate of elderly spinsters in retired villages. It is quite possible that he may upset the house in some slight degree, but on the whole it is good for me to have my little ways interfered with. One is apt to get into the habit of thinking that the set of a curtain, or a speck of dust on the mirror, are of more importance than the affairs of the universe.'

Since his arrival, Archie had certainly done his best to preserve his aunt from any danger of stagnation, for his fertile brain kept her in a perpetual tremor as to what the 'dear boy' would do next.

'We work everything by machinery out in America, you know, aunt,' he explained. 'And it feels just terribly behind the times to come home and find you jogging on in the same hum-drum way this old country has done since the conquest. I guess if you could come out to Colorado, you'd get an eye-opener!'

Miss Forster opened her eyes wide enough, as it was, to see a neat telephone, made of two empty cocoa-tins and a piece of waxed string, fixed up between the house and the stables, while a small windmill on the scullery roof turned the coffee-grinder in the kitchen, to the huge amazement and delight of the cook. She had gasped a little at the incubator, made of an old biscuit-tin, and placed on the greenhouse pipes. [129]

'Would not a good sitting hen be really better, my dear boy?' she suggested mildly. 'I don't see what you are going to do with the young chicks when you hatch them out.'

'Oh, I'll have fixed up a foster-mother before the three weeks are up,' said Archie. 'I'm lining a shallow box with plaster of Paris, and sticking it full of feathers while it's wet. Then, if I keep it on the hot pipes, it will feel for all the world like an old hen, and I don't believe there'll be a chick that'll find out the difference!'

There seemed to be no end to Master Archie's wonderful inventions. The boy had a great talent for mechanics, and was very painstaking in carrying out all the minute details of his work. Most of his schemes were really of use in the household, though occasionally some of them were not attended with quite the success they deserved. He had hung the great dinner-bell in the cherry-tree, and fastened a string from it to his bed-post, so that he might scare the birds from the fruit in the early morning; but unfortunately he had flung out his arms in his sleep and set the bell ringing soon after midnight, bringing the neighbours hurrying up to the Willows, thinking it was an alarm of fire. He had manufactured a marvellous hat-grip, warranted to defy the windiest of weather, and presented it to the housemaid; but when the poor girl tried to take off her Sunday hat, she found it so tightly fixed to her hair that it took the combined efforts of the other servants, aided by the liberal use of a pair of scissors, to remove the construction from her head. He had fixed a fire-escape to the landing window, and nearly killed the trusting parlour-maid by letting her down in a blanket 'just for practice,' while the cook was soaked through in a sudden application of the hose-pipe to quench imaginary flames in the region of the back-kitchen. [130]

But I think the crowning achievement was an automatic currying-brush, which was to be wound

up and fixed on to the horse's back, and was to do the work 'in just half the time old Fleming takes pottering over it.'

'Don't ee, now, Master Archie—don't ee, now!' remonstrated the poor old coachman, with dismay in his soul. 'Horses is kittle cattle, and it aren't right to play no tricks with 'em!'

'Don't you be alarmed, Fleming. I guess Captain will like it just first-rate. He'll find it sort of soothing, and it'll put such a gloss on him you'll be able to see your face in his coat. If it works all right, I'll rig up an arrangement to milk the cows next.'

And the confident inventor wound up his little machine, and started it on Captain's fat back. But the old horse would have nothing to say to such a newfangled contrivance, and, with a snort of alarm, had nearly kicked through the side of his stall, sending the currying-brush flying in one direction and Master Archie head over heels in another.

'I reckon he's rather too old to catch on to it,' said the boy, determined not to own himself beaten, as he picked up the ruins of his clock-work. 'It would be best to start on a colt, and put it in as part of the training. Never mind, I can use the wheels to make an alarum, and fix it up in the harness-room, to go off at any time you like, Fleming!'

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But Fleming showed such a rooted distrust for anything that was intended to 'go off,' and, indeed, such absolute abhorrence of any further mechanical contrivance in the vicinity of the stables, that Archie had transferred his attentions to the garden, where he was full of a scheme for utilizing the water power of the little stream to irrigate the soil, after the fashion of the Nile in Egypt, in a series of canals between the beds, and had already made the hose-pipe work with capital effect by means of a siphon and an old barrel.

This was a form of amusement which appealed far more to Miss Forster's mind, for her flowers suffered much from drought in summer time, and she was a keen competitor at the local horticultural shows, exhibiting some of the largest carnations and the roundest dahlias in the neighbourhood. So she watched with delight the growth of the hydraulic pump, groaning a little over the dirty boots and muddied clothes that ensued, but assuring her friends that the 'dear boy' was a perfect genius, and would make his mark in the world, and relating the story of his achievements with most unbounded pride and satisfaction.

CHAPTER XII

[132]

IN THE RECTORY GARDEN

'A good man's life is like a fairest
flower:
It casts a fragrant breath on all
around.'

THOUGH Miss Forster's pet flower-beds were a subject for modest congratulation to their owner, they were not to be compared to those at the Rectory, which were indeed a feast of scent and colour. The Rector was worthily proud of his garden. It represented a considerable amount of skill and artistic taste on the part of himself and his handy-man, for the rare plants and exquisite groupings of contrasting blossoms would have done credit to a more imposing establishment, and he had as choice a collection of shrubs as could be grown anywhere in the county.

It was almost sunset when Peggy, having seen the last of Archie's contrivances, and bidden good-bye to kind Miss Forster, passed by the Rectory hedge, and hearing the brisk sound of the mowing-machine, pushed open the little gate and went in, knowing she was always sure of a welcome.

Peggy loved to get Mr. Howell sometimes quite to herself. Perhaps it was because he was one of those rare characters in whose presence we can feel certain of perfect sympathy, or perhaps it grew from a more subtle and silent bond, felt keenly by the child, though never spoken of, for Peggy could remember a time when the Rector's hair was raven black, and there had been a little Raymond Howell playing about on the smooth lawns of the old garden. Folks had said that the Rector, like many a man who marries late in life, had made an idol of his motherless boy, and they had said, again, that the father's heart was broken and the print of death was on his face as he stood by his child's open grave. But they judged wrong, for he had wrestled with his sorrow, like Jacob with the angel of old, and came forth from the struggle with hair indeed as white as snow, but a face so full of the glory of his conquest that those who looked felt as if he, too, had died, and they saw his immortality.

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'Ah, he's a changed man!' said Ellen, the nurse, to Susan, the cook, as they talked in whispers over the night-nursery fire when the children were in bed. 'If he was a saint before, it's an angel he is now, and nothing less. They say he takes no thought for himself at all. His heart's been left

in the grave with the poor boy, it's true, but, mark my words, if there's a soul in trouble in all the parish it's no kinder friend they'll find than Mr. Howell.'

Little five-year-old Peggy, lying wide awake, straining her ears to overhear the whispered conversation, sat up in bed with burning cheeks.

'Oh, nurse!' she cried. '*Poor* Mr. Howell! Have they lost his heart in the churchyard, and can't anybody find it for him?'

'Go to sleep at once, you naughty girl, or I'll call your aunt,' said Ellen, putting out the candle to avoid further complications, for she knew she ought not to have been talking within hearing of her charges, and hoped Peggy would forget the matter by morning.

But the child lay awake for a long time, puzzling her small brain. She was not quite sure what a heart was, but she thought the Rector would miss it, and that he was in some sort of trouble she realized well enough. [134]

'Can people live without hearts?' she asked Lilian next day.

'Of course not,' replied Lilian, with the superior wisdom of nine years old, and dismissed the idea with scorn.

But Peggy did not consider the question ended by any means. Like most children, with the instinctive dread of being laughed at, she never thought of confiding her difficulty to an older person, but solving the problem according to her own quaint ideas, she dodged the vigilance of Ellen, and trotted off alone to the churchyard. The lych-gate was locked, but she toiled over the steep steps that spanned the wall, and wading through the long grass under the yew-trees, found the spot, all covered with flowers, which Lilian had pointed out on Sunday, where 'Mary, the wife of the Reverend Philip Howell,' slept, 'in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life,' and where the stonemason had been already busy with the newly-added line: 'Also Raymond, only son of the above.'

Who can tell all that goes on in the mind of a little child, or what it understands of death? In a vague way Peggy knew that her playfellow had 'gone to heaven, where mother is,' but she did not think of that as any cause for sorrow, nor did she connect him for an instant with the place where she stood, but, with her nurse's words still troubling her, she knelt down and searched among the white flowers that hid the bare earth beneath.

A step on the gravel walk startled her to her feet, but it was only the Rector, coming slowly down the path from the church-door.

'Don't go away, little Margaret,' he said quietly. 'God's acre is free to all. We have both precious seed sown here that we hope to find blooming some day in Paradise.' [135]

'Oh, Mr. Howell,' burst out Peggy, her gray eyes brimming over with tears, 'is it really true that your heart is lost here? Don't you think, if we were both to look, we might find it again?'

The Rector stroked the brown curls with a tender hand.

'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. No, child, it's not here, but up in the light beyond;' and he pointed where the sun, breaking through the clouds, burst out in a flood of golden glory. 'We make our plans for this world,' he said softly, speaking as much to himself as to Peggy, 'and say we will do this or that, but sometimes God takes it out of our hands and arranges it for us; but His ways are better than our ways, and His thoughts than our thoughts, and, after all, death is but the gate to life immortal.'

Since then a great friendship had existed between these two, made all the stronger, perhaps, by the fifty years that divided them, for old folk have often more tolerance and sympathy for childhood than have those whose eyes are still blinded by the bustle of life, and, whatever Peggy might be to others, with Mr. Howell she was always at her highest and best.

'As welcome as the flowers in May, dear child,' said the Rector this evening. 'I was just longing for an excuse to leave the lawn-mower, and now I feel bound to give up work and entertain you. Come and look at my carnations.' And taking a basket as a receptacle for any weeds that might offend his eye, he led the way, Peggy trotting after him with her little tongue wagging freely in a lively account of her latest adventures, and the marvels which her new friend Archie was constructing in Miss Forster's garden. [136]

'Yes, he's a clever lad,' said Mr. Howell, 'and likely to do well and be a comfort to her, I hope. It's a grand thing when a boy can fill his life with a hobby; it leaves him no time to get into mischief.'

'I think flowers are your hobby, next to the parish,' said Peggy, as she watched the Rector tying up his carnations, touching each blossom as carefully as if it were a child, with a tender pride in its loveliness.

'Flowers are such dear friends, you see, Peggy; they rarely disappoint or deceive you. Treat them well, and they repay you a thousandfold; and the best of it is they give so much pleasure to others as well as to ourselves. By-the-by, how are Miss Forster's carnations getting on?'

'Beautifully! She has a lovely apricot-coloured one she hopes may take a prize, but I don't like it as well as your yellow. She says the show will be bigger than ever this year; so many of the

village people have sent in entries.'

'I'm glad of that. Gardening is the best hobby a working man can take up. He won't want to think of the public-house when he's digging in his patch of ground and watching the plants he's raised himself. I always agree with good old Francis Bacon that "God Almighty first planted a garden, and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures." I have given away a great many roots in the village this spring, in the hope that the flowers would find their way to the show in due course. People are generally so pleased with them.'

'I took a nice carnation plant down to old Mrs. Johnson at the smithy,' said Peggy, 'but she didn't seem at all pleased. She said I might have known she wanted a Bizarre, and not a Picotee, and I was bringing "coals to Newcastle."' [137]

'But you left it for her, all the same?'

'Oh yes; I believe she liked it really, for it was quite a new kind; but she loves to grumble; she's a terribly cross old woman.'

'Poor old soul! She's let her heart wither up instead of ripening! We must all do one or the other, Peggy, child, as we grow older. It is only the sunshine of God's presence that can mellow us thoroughly, and if people wilfully turn away from that they are bound to become shrivelled and sour. Worldly prosperity is like a strong electric light—it may bring out flowers, but it will never ripen character; so don't forget that, or ever exchange it for the true sunlight. Now come and help me to choose out which flowers to specially train for the show, and we shall just have time to stake them before dark.'

The Rector never made the mistake of continually talking down to a child's level. He spoke with Peggy exactly as he would have done with a grown-up friend, and if she could not always follow his train of thought, I think the mere effort to do so was good for her, and the older she grew, the more truly she understood and appreciated him.

It is not only when we try to amuse them that the children love us best (who has not sometimes seen the look of almost contempt in the eyes of a little one for the good-natured elder who plays the fool for his benefit?), and often the companion most cared for and sought after by a child is he who unconsciously raises the standard of the eager, growing soul.

For reasons of his own the Rector kept Peggy late that evening, and they made a little tour of the garden, selecting what they called their prize plants, putting indiarubber bands round carnation-buds to keep them from bursting, and tying up the most promising stocks and asters with a scrupulous care, working until the light had almost failed and the sky stood out yellow against the outline of the cypress-trees. It grew so dim and still in the twilight that Peggy cried out in alarm as a tall figure seemed to rise from the shadows under the dark yew-hedge, and came towards them; but peering through the gathering dusk, she recognised the face of her old friend Mr. Neville. [138]

'John!' exclaimed the Rector, 'I thought you had been at the Abbey all this time!'

'I haven't found the courage yet,' returned the other huskily, picking a prize dahlia to pieces with a recklessness that seemed wanton in Peggy's eyes.

'Oh, Mr. Neville, is it really you? However did you get here?' she cried.

'Mayn't I know the Rector, too, Peggy? He happens to be a very old friend of mine, and I have come to see him.'

'You said you knew Father and Aunt Helen, too, but you have never been to see us,' said Peggy reproachfully. 'I'm afraid there's only Aunt Helen in to-night, but I know she'd love you to come.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Mr. Neville rather bitterly. 'I don't know whether I should be welcome, Peggy dear. Aunt Helen and I quarrelled once, long ago, and I doubt if she could forgive me.'

'Oh, she would—I know she would!' exclaimed Peggy. 'She always forgives us, however naughty we are; and she told me once—the night she was crying over the old letters in her writing-desk—that if you quarrelled with anyone it was better to make it up at once, and not let it go on for ever. Do, please, try!' [139]

'Go, my boy,' said the Rector. 'Tell her the simple truth, and don't spoil two lives for the sake of an old tale that is best forgotten.'

Peggy waited wide awake in bed for hours that night to catch Father's step in the passage and call him in for a good-night kiss.

'Oh, Daddy!' she cried, as she clasped him round the neck, 'is Aunt Helen really and truly going to marry Mr. Neville?'

'Really and truly, at last, dear; and I could not wish to see her in better hands.'

'But whatever *shall* we do without her?'

'We must manage as best we can, Peggy, and try and not spoil her happiness by any selfish regrets. I have had terrible trouble to persuade her to leave us all, for she was ready to sacrifice herself bravely a second time, but that I would not allow. Aunt Helen has thought for us, and worked for us, all these years, and now we must learn to look after ourselves. You are getting big girls, and Lilian must be my little housekeeper, and a mother to the rest of you. Aunt Helen has taught you how to behave, so don't you think, little woman, it is time to begin to settle down, and do your best to grow up what she and I would like you to be?'

'I'll try,' said Peggy, kissing him. 'We don't want to lose Aunt Helen, but oh!'—as she nestled down among the bed-clothes—'what a delightful uncle Mr. Neville will make!'

CHAPTER XIII

[140]

THE SMUGGLERS' CAVE

'Dark and dank, where the toad doth creep,
And the dusk-loving bat haunts the shadows
deep.'

GREAT was the excitement in the family at the news of Aunt Helen's engagement, and equal were the lamentations when it became known that, instead of settling down near them as a pleasant and desirable uncle, Mr. Neville intended to carry his bride back with him to India as soon as matters could possibly be arranged, for he held a high position under Government in an outlying province, and could only be spared on short leave. Poor Aunt Helen was torn in two between the lover of her youth and the children of her adoption; but I really believe, when she saw Bobby's tears, that if Father had not put his foot down firmly, she would have thrown up everything, and clung to her bairns.

As it was, the house seemed entirely upset. Miss Jones, the village dressmaker, was installed in the Rose Parlour, and appeared to be stitching morning, noon, and night; the postman's bag was quite heavy with patterns and catalogues of Indian outfits; while distant relations and old acquaintances, who had neglected the Abbey for years, kept Nancy in a state of perpetual agitation by turning up suddenly to pay congratulatory calls.

'If they'd only send a letter to say they'd be coming,' she complained, 'one would have a chance to be ready for 'em. But old Mrs. Osborne arrived o' Monday, with me in the midst of my washing, and never a bit of cake in the house; and there was Squire Henley and his lady o' churning day, and I had to leave the butter half made to bring in tea; and ten to one there'll be someone more o' Friday, when I'm cleaning my kitchens. What with visitors all days of the week, and Miss Jones with her snippings and mess in the parlour, I, for one, shall be glad when the wedding is over, though how the house is to go on without Miss Vaughan goodness only knows.'

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Peggy and Bobby liked the fun of the preparations, though they crept out of the way of the visitors as much as possible, for to be shown up in the drawing-room involved an amount of dressing and tidying which did not fit in at all with their ideas of holiday enjoyment, and they much preferred a picnic tea in the orchard, with Rollo and the rabbits for company, to the more select charms of the best china and the stately patronage of the neighbouring dowagers.

Lilian was busy trying to grow up suddenly and be ready to take Aunt Helen's place, for she was old enough now to realize how much responsibility would rest with her when she must manage the reins of the household alone, and she was determined that Father should feel as little discomfort as possible from the change.

So the younger ones were left more than ever to their own devices, to amuse themselves as they liked, and to get into mischief or not, according to the whim of the moment. I am afraid, if there was any mischief in the case, the blame generally rested with Peggy, for it was her enterprising mind which planned out the schemes of enjoyment.

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It was certainly Peggy who suggested sitting on the top of the haystack, and making it sway backwards and forwards like a swing, a delightful sensation while it lasted, but which ended suddenly in the collapse of the whole top of the stack, much to Father's wrath, for it took David a couple of hours to repair the damage, and certainly did not sweeten the old man's already crusty temper. It was also Peggy's most inopportune idea to ride the brown cow round the pasture on the very afternoon that Mrs. Davenport was paying a stiff call in the drawing-room. She gave Bobby a leg up on to Brindle's broad back, and had just succeeded in scrambling inelegantly behind him, when the astonished quadruped paused in her task of cropping the succulent grass and buttercups, and realizing that something unusual was oppressing her, fled in mad career over the meadow, with the delighted children clinging desperately to her horns.

'Hoop-la! Yoicks! Tally-ho! I believe she'll take the fence!' shouted Peggy in anything but a quiet and young-lady-like tone of voice.

'Gee up! Let her go! Hooray!' yelled Bobby, striking such a whack on Brindle's heaving side that she settled the matter by suddenly lying down to roll, and depositing her encumbrances in the miry ditch.

The children jumped up in fits of laughter, but they sobered down considerably at the sight of the shocked faces of Aunt Helen and Mrs. Davenport, who were walking towards them over the pasture.

Mrs. Davenport was a tall, majestic, long-nosed lady, the wife of a clergyman in a neighbouring village. She ruled both the parish and her meek little husband with a rod of iron, and her mission in life seemed to be to find out that everybody else was wrong, and to try to set them right again. She had five darlings of her own, in whom she could see no fault, and whom she invariably held up as models of good behaviour to all the children of her acquaintance.

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Peggy and Bobby loathed the little Davenports, who were mild, pale, neat-looking little girls, so alike that each one seemed merely a copy of the next, a size smaller, and who always wore gloves, even in the garden, and never dreamed of tearing their pinafores, or using slang, and went on prim little walks with their governess, instead of scrambling over the fields; and, I grieve to say, that on the few occasions when they met, they had taken such a positive pleasure in leading their inoffensive companions into places which resulted in soiled dresses and dirty boots, that Mrs. Davenport discouraged the acquaintance as much as possible, never feeling easy even for the life and limbs of her progeny when they were in the society of 'those terrible young Vaughans,' and revenging herself by scathing remarks upon manners and deportment, which were extremely trying to the feelings of Aunt Helen, who naturally thought *her* children superior in every way to 'those mealy-faced little Davenports, who look as if they had not the strength or spirits to enjoy themselves, even if they were allowed to try.'

Mrs. Davenport came up now, picking her way daintily over the pasture, in her best dress, and expressing her disapproval in her usual emphatic tones.

'I hope you are not hurt,' she said, eyeing Peggy severely, and distinctly hesitating before she accepted the grimy hand which that young lady offered in the agitation of the moment. 'Such an accident might have proved *most* serious. I have known a child develop a spinal complaint from a far less fall, and I should have thought you were old enough, Margaret, to restrain your brother from such foolish feats, instead of encouraging him. Dear me, you must be nearly twelve, I believe—the same age as my Bertha, and she is already beginning to help me with the parish accounts and spends all her spare time knitting for the Deep Sea Missions. I am thankful to say none of my girls are tomboys! If you will take my advice, Miss Vaughan, you will urge your brother to see at once about getting a good, strict governess to take charge of these children when you leave. A little wholesome discipline is just what they require. Indeed, I know of a lady who would exactly suit him; not too young, but still *most* energetic. Lived seven years with my cousin, the Hon. Mrs. Lyttleton at Bratherton Hall, and just leaving, having prepared the youngest boy for school. And I can assure you *their* manners are everything that could be desired, and she is able to impart a style and a finish which, living so wholly in the country, is most important. A truly admirable housekeeper. Your dear Lilian is, of course, young and inexperienced—and—'

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But here Mrs. Davenport's remarks, which had been wafted along in gusts, died away in the distance as she departed down the pasture to inspect the hen-coops, and hint broadly for the gift of a couple of young pullets, 'for yours are such an excellent breed, dear Miss Vaughan, and such capital winter layers. I shall only be too delighted to add them to my stock, since you are so kind as to offer them, though really I am afraid you will think I never come to the Abbey without taking something away with me.'

Which was exactly what Aunt Helen did think, though she was too polite to say so, for Mrs. Davenport was well known to have an extreme partiality for presents, perhaps considering them as only her due in exchange for so much good advice.

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The children looked at one another with rather long faces.

'I had no idea she was there,' said Bobby in an awe-struck whisper, 'or we would have run away to the orchard. You don't think Father would really be likely to get us that governess, do you?'—the horrible possibility of the lady, still energetic, though no longer young, and evidently capable of so much in the way of discipline, quite casting a gloom over his youthful spirits.

'No, no,' said Peggy hurriedly; 'he can't afford it. That's one comfort in not being well off, at any rate. And you know he said Lilian was to do the housekeeping. Oh, I don't think he would like that kind of a governess any better than we should ourselves—' privately hoping that Father's notions of self-sacrifice would not make him see fit to inflict so great a penance on himself and his family.

But the very idea that such a course had evidently been suggested made the children uneasy, and kept them for several days at a pitch of sedate behaviour calculated to calm down Aunt Helen's possible fears for their future welfare, and to render unnecessary the criticism of the most faithful and interfering of friends.

Perhaps it was the natural reaction arising from this very unwonted state of affairs, or merely

the desire to keep as much as possible out of the way of afternoon callers, that put it into Peggy's head one close, sultry afternoon that they should go and explore a cave which lay on the river at no great distance from the Abbey meadows.

That such a cave existed the children knew well, for Joe had once been inside, and had told them wonderful stories of smugglers in bygone days, and of kegs of brandy, and bales of silk and lace, and boxes of tea and tobacco, which were still supposed to be hidden in its depths, only waiting for some enterprising spirit to discover their hiding-place and bring them to light again. [146]

'And I don't see why *we* shouldn't find them as well as anybody else,' said Peggy with enthusiasm. 'Just think of yards and yards of silk as stiff as paper, and old French lace, all yellow with age! We shouldn't care about the brandy, but Father and David would like the tobacco, and Mrs. Davis and old Ephraim should have some of the tea. And we might find money, too. Smugglers always had bags of money—spade guineas, you know, and Spanish doubloons, and all those kinds of things you read about in books.'

Having a very shrewd suspicion that Father and Aunt Helen might not approve of such an escapade, Peggy took care not to mention her plans, and the children started off, feeling like a pair of conspirators, with the stable-lantern, a few extra pieces of candle, and a box of matches.

At the bottom of the meadows which bounded the Abbey land the river took a sharp turn past a few bold cliffs which rose almost sheer out of the water, and by scrambling along the rocks at the base it was possible to get round this headland and reach the low entrance of the cave, which was raised only a few feet above the level of the river.

The mouth was overgrown with hazel-bushes and brambles and long, trailing twines of ivy, and it seemed to the children as if no foot but theirs had disturbed it for a long time. Peggy looked at Bobby, and Bobby looked at Peggy, and I think each felt just a little inclined to hang back, though neither would have confessed it for worlds; then, with the solemn air of a Guy Fawkes, Peggy lighted the lantern, and boldly plunged into the darkness, with Bobby following particularly closely at her elbow. At first the entrance was rather narrow and low, but it soon broadened out until the roof was ten feet or more above their heads. The sides of the rocky walls bulged out into irregular shelves, covered in parts with moss, and moist and clammy with slowly-dripping water. [147]

'Those will be the smugglers' cupboards that Joe spoke about,' said Peggy, flashing the lantern into every nook and cranny, but with no success, for there was never a sign of a box of tea or a keg of brandy to be seen.

The air was close and damp, and their footsteps raised strange echoes as they went, and loud voices seemed so out of place that, with one accord, the children spoke in whispers.

'O-o-gh! something soft flapped in my face then!' exclaimed Bobby.

Peggy held up the lantern over her head, and a number of bats, disturbed by the light, dropped from the roof where they had been suspended and whirled round the cave, 'cheeping' angrily for some moments, and opening their tiny jaws at the children in quite a threatening manner, till Bobby clapped his hands, and they flew off to find their way into some deeper retreat.

'Come along,' said Peggy; 'let's go higher up. There's nothing to be found here.'

Clinging together, the two walked with some caution, and it was well they did so, for the floor of the cave was suddenly interrupted by a chasm, which seemed to have rent the earth in two, and was so deep that they could not see to the bottom. It was spanned by a plank, green with slime and rotten with age, placed there perhaps by the smugglers as a means of retreating to a more secure hiding-place. [148]

Peggy flashed the light over the dark abyss to the still more gloomy depths beyond, but even her foolhardiness did not prompt her to try so perilous a bridge.

'We'll get Joe to come some time with a new plank, and help us across, and then perhaps we may find something,' she said rather hurriedly, in case Bobby might expect her to continue the explorations.

But that hero suggesting that it must be after teatime, she cordially agreed with him, and they began to retrace their steps to the entrance, feeling just a little disappointed, for somehow they had imagined a smugglers' cave would be a jolly, dry sort of a place, with at least a few remains of its former tenants strewn about—a pistol or two, perhaps, or a coil of rope, or a rusty dagger, just sufficient to give an air of romance to the adventure, even if the missing treasure were not forthcoming.

The air seemed to have grown more close and sultry while the children were within the cave, and, just as they reached the mouth, a low, grumbling sound, which they had heard for some time, but not taken much notice of, broke into a crash of thunder that seemed to make the ground shake beneath them, while at the same instant a brilliant streak of lightning flashed zigzag across the sky, lighting up the gloom behind them to its furthest recess.

The storm had broken. Peal after peal of thunder rent the air, echoing in the cavern till Peggy and Bobby clung to one another in terror, while the rain came down in a perfect deluge, with such tropical fury that it seemed as if the very sky were descending. Crouched down on the floor by the entrance, the children waited for the storm to pass by, wondering at the vivid pink flashes [149]

and the size of the hailstones which beat in through the hazel-bushes. A little runnel of water, flowing uncomfortably near, brought Peggy to her feet with a sudden cry.

'Bobby! Bobby! the river is rising, and the rocks are covered. We cannot get round the point to the meadow again!'

It was but too true, for the sudden violence of the storm had swollen the mountain-streams that fed the river, and the once-placid waters were flowing past in a brown, turbulent flood, which seemed to sweep everything along in its course. The stones over which they had scrambled were completely covered, while waves were dashing against the face of the cliff. Here and there a dead sheep or pig drifted by, or a portion of a haystack; a hurdle floating like a raft bore on it a few disconsolate fowls, clucking dismally; while an occasional wash-tub or upturned table showed that the river must have already flooded some of the low-lying cottages higher up on its course.

The children looked at each other with blanched faces.

'We must stay where we are for the present,' said Peggy, trying to speak bravely, 'and perhaps the water will fall soon, and we shall be able to get home.'

But the water did not fall. Each moment it seemed to flow with even swifter current, and to be rising with terrible sureness nearer and nearer the mouth of the cave. It was already growing dusk, and distant rumblings among the hills showed that the storm was still raging over the Welsh border, and sending down its torrents of rain to swell the already overflowing river.

Hungry, and chilly from the damp moisture that oozed down the walls, the poor children sat quietly huddled together watching the cold gray surface of the water, which seemed like some cruel monster ever creeping nearer and nearer to infold them in its treacherous grasp.

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'Perhaps Father will guess where we've gone, and come for us with a boat,' suggested Bobby. 'I wish he would be quick. It's so cold and horrid here, and I want my supper.'

'Perhaps he will,' replied Peggy, as hopefully as she could, though in her heart of hearts she knew that the cave was about the last place anyone would dream of searching for them.

There was a long silence; then, 'It's getting dark now,' said Bobby, 'and the water is beginning to wet my feet.'

'We must go back into the cave,' said Peggy. 'We shall be quite dry there, for the ground shelves up. See, I'm going to light the lantern again. What a good thing we brought several pieces of candle!'

The mere effort of having something to do cheered them up a little. They hunted about to find as dry a spot as possible, and put the lantern up upon one of the shelves of rock, so that it should cast as much light as it could around the cave. Then they sat down to wait again, for what seemed to them an eternity of time.

The mouth of the cavern loomed like a great eye, growing gradually fainter and fainter as the daylight faded and the darkness grew outside. The river flowed by with a dull, roaring sound, and the little channel had risen from the entrance, and began to lap gently on the floor. The moisture dripped from the walls in loud-sounding drops, and the bats had awakened again, and flew to and fro towards the lantern with a soft whirl of wings. When the last faint patch of light faded from the opening Bobby's bravery gave way, and the poor little fellow's tears chased each other down his cheeks as he crouched in a miserable heap on the damp ground.

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'I want to go home!' he wailed. 'Why doesn't Father come to fetch us? Don't you think they know where we are?'

Peggy flung her arms round him in an agony of self-reproach.

'Oh, Bobby darling! it's all my fault, for I made you come, and wouldn't let you tell where we were going, though you said we ought to ask leave first! Put your head on my shoulder, and try to go to sleep. Perhaps Father may find us after all, or the river will have gone down by morning, and we shall be able to scramble round by the rocks.'

'I must say my prayers first. Aunt Helen always comes into my room and hears them last thing before I get into bed.'

'Say them with me to-night,' said Peggy, with a lump in her throat, as she knelt by his side, thinking that perhaps Aunt Helen, too, was praying at that moment that her dear ones might be safe.

The old, familiar words seemed to have new meaning in them, said in the midst of the darkness and the danger, and the children felt that, though their earthly Father might be seeking far and wide for them in vain, they were known and cared for by 'our Father which art in heaven,' to whom the darkness is the same as daylight, and in whose sight not even a sparrow falls to the ground unnoticed.

Bobby fell asleep at last, with his head on Peggy's knee, the sound of his regular breathing mingling strangely with the lap of the water which crept nearer and ever nearer to them up the cave. Many thoughts came to Peggy that night, as she sat watching the light of the lantern flicker upon the rough walls. Father's reproachful face seemed to rise up out of the darkness, asking 'Where is Bobby? What have you done with my little boy?' Good resolutions made, and alas! too

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often forgotten, crowded in now upon her remembrance, and as she listened to the roar of the river, she thought how strange it would seem that they two, so full of life, might in a few hours be floating very still and silent upon that flowing stream, with the world only a memory behind them. But Peggy had been too much with the Rector to have any fear of death. He, she knew, viewed this life as merely the stepping-stone to a fuller and richer life beyond, and the body as but the worthless husk of the soul, so with a dreamy feeling that somehow Mr. Howell had set the gate of the next world ajar, and allowed some of the glory to steal out and comfort her, the child closed her tired eyes, and slept as quietly as if she had been safe in her bed at home, and the storm and the rushing water nothing but a vision of the night.

She woke with the sound of little lapping waves, to find that the water had risen higher, and now formed a deep pool on the floor of the cave, reaching almost to their feet. The candle had burnt low in the lantern, and even as she looked it gave a last flicker, and guttered out, leaving her in utter darkness. With trembling fingers, Peggy felt in her pocket for the remaining piece of candle and the box of matches. She tried to strike a light, but the match was damp, and fizzled away without igniting. A second and a third met with the same fate, and Peggy was in a panic of despair, until she remembered that Father had once told her to rub damp matches through her hair before striking them. This method proved a success, and she was able to relight the lantern, laying Bobby gently down on the floor, hoping he might not wake.

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But the movement disturbed him, and he sprang to his feet, calling: 'Father, is that you? We're here, in the cave!'

'It's not Father yet, dear; only me lighting the lantern again.'

'I was dreaming that it was morning,' said Bobby, rubbing his eyes, 'and that Father had come to fetch us away in a boat.'

'I think it will be morning soon,' said Peggy. 'We seem to have slept for a long time. Bobby, dear, the water is rising so fast that I don't think we shall be able to stay here much longer, but I have a plan which I think we might perhaps carry out. Joe told me that people say the cave was really only the entrance to a secret passage which runs to the Abbey, and in the old days the smugglers used to carry their goods up there, and hide them away amongst the ruins. We must try and cross by that plank, and see if there is really any possible opening, except by the river.'

Anything seemed better than sitting still in the darkness watching the growing water, so the children went up the cave again to where the chasm lay yawning across their path.

'We mustn't try to walk over it,' said Peggy, as she doubtfully examined the slippery, shaky plank. 'I shall crawl over first with the lantern, and then I'll hold the light for you, and you must follow in the same way.'

It felt a very insecure bridge to poor Peggy, as she crept over on her hands and knees, trying not to look down into the dark gulf below, so frail and insecure that she shuddered for Bobby, who seemed so unnerved that she scarcely dared allow him to make the trial.

'Wait a moment!' she cried. 'Don't start just yet!'

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And hurriedly taking off her pinafore, she tore it into strips, and knotting them together in a kind of rope, threw one end of it across to him.

'Now tie that firmly to your arm before you set off, and then, if you fall, I think I might be able to drag you up again.'

But luckily Peggy's childish strength was not put to the test, for Bobby accomplished the crossing in safety, and scrambled over the rocks which rose at the other side. Holding up the lantern, the children found they were in what seemed to be the entrance of a rough kind of passage. That it was not altogether of natural origin was evident from the traces of built-up stones, while here and there the walls showed the marks of the pick. The air was stale and damp and difficult to breathe, and the candle burnt so badly that several times Peggy feared it was going out altogether. They went stumbling along over the irregular floor, wondering whether their way was taking them to safety, or only into the bowels of the earth.

On and on the passage led them, sometimes through places so narrow they could scarcely scramble through, or so low that, small as they were, they were obliged to stoop; now up hill, now down, round many a sharp curve, till it ended suddenly in a small cavern about ten feet square.

Peggy lifted up the lantern high over her head, and looked anxiously round. Apparently they were in nothing but a blind alley, for there seemed no possible way out, except the path by which they had come. The poor children stared at each other with hopeless horror.

'We shall have to go back, and chance the river going down when it's light,' faltered Peggy.



"BOBBY ACCOMPLISHED THE CROSSING IN SAFETY."

'Oh, no, no! We can't go back over that hateful plank again and sit watching the water come up! I would rather be drowned here than there! Oh, Father, Father! do come and find us!' And Bobby sat down upon the ground with such a wail of despair that Peggy at last lost her self-control and found herself joining in his sobs.

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But she stopped suddenly, and laying a restraining hand on his shoulder, put up her finger for silence, for it seemed to her that from the region somewhere over their heads she had heard a distant shout.

'Call again, Bobby, like you did before!' And both together the children joined their voices in a wild shriek of 'Father!'

This time there was an unmistakable shout of reply, and after what seemed to them a long interval of calling they could hear Father's voice from above quite plainly saying, 'Where are you?'

'In a cave down below!' cried Peggy, trying to make her voice carry in the hollow atmosphere.

Now that help was near she was her brisk, capable self again, and, seizing the lantern, searched round every foot of the cavern till she discovered what seemed to be the beginning of a little staircase, long since blocked by earth and stones.

'Here, Father! Dig for us here!' she called, and taking up a stone, began to tap like she had heard of imprisoned miners doing in the coal-pits.

There was silence for a few minutes, and then the children began to hear the welcome sound of a pickaxe, and Father's voice every now and then, shouting a word of encouragement to them. At length there was a rumbling noise in the roof above, some loose stones and earth fell, and Father called loudly:

'Stand back! Keep out of the way!'

Peggy clutched Bobby, and retreated into the passage, while a shower of stones and soil came pouring down into the cave, till a great rent was made in the roof, and Father dropped through the hole like Santa Claus down the chimney, only no saint was ever so welcome, even at Christmas-time.

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It did not take very long for the children to be hauled up by Joe at the top, and they found themselves standing among the Abbey ruins in the early gray of the dawn, with Aunt Helen rushing to catch them in her arms, and Lilian hugging them and sobbing over them by turns, while Nancy, her face all blotched and swollen with crying, kept hovering round to put in a kiss whenever the others gave her a chance, and even old David cleared his throat hard, and 'blessed

the Lord they were safe.'

Very little was said until the children had been warmed and fed and comforted by the dining-room fire, and then Mr. Vaughan would only allow the briefest account of their adventures before they were put to bed to sleep off the effects of their night of exposure. Nancy prophesied quinsy and pleurisy and rheumatic fever, but the Vaughans were a hardy race, and not even a cold resulted, in spite of her gloomy prognostications.

Peggy's quiet talk with Father next day was so entirely between themselves that I shall not repeat it; but it is often incidents, and not years, which help us to grow up, and somehow afterwards she always found herself dating events from that night in the cave, and all the part 'when I was little' came before, and the older and more sensible part seemed to follow afterwards.

CHAPTER XIV

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LILIAN'S HOUSEKEEPING

'Thou wert working late, thou busy, busy bee!
After the fall of the cistus flower,
When the primrose-tree blossom was ready to
burst,
I heard thee last, as I saw thee first;
In the silence of the evening hour
I heard thee, thou busy, busy bee.'

AUNT Helen was married in September, with the Rector to read the service, and Father to give her away, and Lilian and Peggy for bridesmaids, while the Sunday-school children strewed the path from the church-door with flowers, and Bobby flung rice and old shoes after the carriage, and all the village people came to watch, and say how sweet and pretty she looked, and to wish health and happiness to 'Mrs. John Neville.'

Things felt very flat when the excitement was all over and the last of the guests had left the Abbey, and the children found themselves wishing that life could be a perpetual round of bouquets and favours and wedding-cake, not forgetting presents to the bridesmaids, for Lilian and Peggy were the proud possessors of charming gold lockets set with turquoises, with portraits of Aunt Helen inside them, 'the gifts of the bridegroom,' as the local paper described them, while a silver watch and chain consoled Bobby for not taking a more prominent part in the ceremony, and made him declare that his new uncle was 'a brick, and no mistake.'

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After so much dissipation, it was quite hard to settle down to plain prose again; but school had already re-opened, and the children had stolen an extra week of holidays to join in the festivities, so it was high time they were setting to work once more. It seemed strange to start off every morning without Lilian, who only went into Warford once a week now for music-lessons, and Mr. Vaughan had occasional qualms as to the safety of allowing such youthful Jehus to drive about the country unattended; but the little yellow pony-trap was so well known on the road that it would have been rather difficult for anything to happen to the children. People knew the time of their passing, and looked out for them daily; kindly women would come to cottage doorways to nod and smile; the inn-keeper at the Halfway Arms set his clock by their arrival; they had struck up quite a friendship with the postman, two milkmen, and the driver of a fish-cart, while the old man who broke stones by the roadside always nodded and gave them 'Good-morning,' and fired a facetious remark or two after them, which the children imagined he must relieve the monotony of his work by composing during the intervals of their coming and going.

Left alone, Lilian tried to settle down in dead earnest to battle with her task of housekeeping. It was a heavy burden for such young shoulders, for in a farmhouse there is always a great deal of extra work to be done. Pigs, poultry, and young animals had to be fed, and the eggs gathered in daily; the dairy claimed constant attention, for the pans must be scalded and the pails polished bright, and though Joe did the milking and churning, it was Lilian's business to superintend the making up of the butter, and to weigh each pound with her own hands and print it with the Abbey stamp.

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Nancy, too, proved somewhat of a trial, for though a hard-working and most kind-hearted girl, she had not been gifted by Providence with either brains or a memory, and was capable of making the most astonishing mistakes, which she invariably justified by declaring she was sure she had done it so 'in Miss Vaughan's time.'

'But, Nancy,' said poor, bewildered Lilian, 'I'm sure Aunt Helen never told you to rub up the silver with paraffin and brickdust. You're scratching it horribly. There's a packet of proper pink powder stuff to do it with somewhere.'

'There's naught like oil and brickdust for putting a polish on metals,' observed Nancy, complacently scouring away at Bobby's christening mug. 'It beats all they rubbish that the pedlars brings round in boxes, and tries hard to persuade you to buy, so it do for sure!'

'I have no doubt about it's being very good for fenders and fire-irons, and things of that sort, but not for the best teapot. Don't you think it would be better, Nancy, if I were to clean the silver on Friday mornings, and you could get on with your kitchen?'

'As you wish, Miss Lilian,' said Nancy, relinquishing the polishing-leather with no great sorrow. 'Miss Vaughan, she always did it her own self, too. Was you going to do anything with that stock that has been in the larder since Monday?'

'Oh, Nancy, I had forgotten all about it!' cried Lilian, much conscience-stricken at the reminder. 'And I had intended to make it into soup. Do go and fetch it, and see if it is still good.'

But the stock, alas! had accumulated a skim of green mould on the surface, and generally betrayed such symptoms of distress that it was fit for nothing but the pig-trough; and when Lilian, warned by its awful example, visited her neglected shelves, she found so many forgotten scraps put away into odd corners that she straightway formed the excellent resolution of reviewing the larder daily after breakfast, having an uneasy sensation that it was one of the golden rules which Aunt Helen had particularly impressed upon her, but which, like many others, had slidden into the background of her remembrance. [160]

It was certainly one thing to housekeep with Aunt Helen at her elbow to advise, and quite another to puzzle it out with only her memory and the cookery-book for assistance. The quantities required for a family of five persons was a subject which took her some time to master.

'There's the butcher's boy at the back-door, miss,' observed Nancy one morning, a few days after the wedding, putting her head into the Rose Parlour, and interrupting the 'Bridal March' from 'Lohengrin' which Lilian was trying over on the piano. 'He's left his cart at the bottom of the drive, but he'll fetch up anything you want.'

The butcher only came round weekly at Gorswen, so Lilian abandoned her music and sallied forth to give her first order.

'We're quite tired of great sirloins of beef and legs of mutton,' she announced. 'Haven't you anything else this morning?'

'Nice bit of pork, mum,' suggested the man—'fillet of veal.'

'I'm sure the veal would be a change; we haven't had any for a long time.'

'Very good, mum. How much may we send you?'

'About a pound and a half, I should think,' said Lilian, knitting her brows and trying in vain to remember the extent of Aunt Helen's weekly order. 'Or suppose we say two pounds. I expect that would be right.' [161]

The meat arrived in due course, looking such a very small amount when Nancy placed it on the kitchen-table that Lilian exclaimed in horror:

'Why, Nancy, that will never last us for a week! It looks hardly enough for one dinner!'

Nancy shook her head doubtfully, but did not offer any assistance in the dilemma.

'Perhaps if we boiled it, it might swell out a little, and be enough for twice, at any rate. I think you had better get a pan and put it on at once. I believe things have to boil for a long time before they're tender.'

Nancy obeyed without question.

'I suppose you can keep your eye on it, Miss Lilian?' she observed. 'I shall be busy upstairs in the bedrooms this morning.'

And she departed with broom and dustpan, leaving her young mistress in charge of the kitchen.

Lilian really did mean to look after that meat. She got it boiling briskly, and filled up the pan several times with water; then, giving it a final replenishing, she ran off to practise a few scales and exercises.

She was quite sure she had not been absent more than ten minutes, but when she returned to the kitchen she was greeted by a strong smell of burning, and rushing to her pan, found that every drop of water had boiled out, and the veal was frizzling at the bottom into a hard black mass. To take it off was her first act, and to call Nancy to the rescue her second.

'Well, it do be a pity, Miss Lilian,' said that sympathizing damsel. 'But there, don't take on so! We can cut off that black part at the bottom, and put the rest down with some vegetables. Happen it'll turn out all right after all. There'll be just time afore dinner,' chopping away as she spoke in a vigorous onslaught on the carrots and onions. [162]

It was Saturday, so the children were at home, but even their healthy appetites were not equal to the very untempting dish which was set before them, for the unfortunate veal had boiled away to ribbons, and all the goodness had gone into the lost gravy, while the pulpy remains tasted so

hopelessly burnt as to be perfectly uneatable.

'The vegetables are quite nice, at any rate,' began Father cheerfully; then seeing Lilian's swimming eyes: 'Never mind, little woman; experience is always dearly bought, and a vegetarian dinner won't hurt us for once in a way. We must make out with home produce until the butcher comes again. There's a young cockerel that will do for Sunday, and perhaps I can shoot you a rabbit; and we can always fall back upon eggs and bacon, at any rate, if there is nothing else to be had. Cheer up! I don't expect to find a full-fledged housekeeper in five minutes!'

After this Lilian determined to provide more generously, and astonished the grocer by ordering three pounds of cayenne pepper, and a like quantity of mace (embarrassing possessions which lingered in the spice-cupboard for years before they were eventually finished), and generally running the household on so liberal a scale that Father had to interfere and preach economy. Such very Spartan fare was the result of his lecture that he wisely fixed her a weekly allowance, and left her to manage as best she could upon it, and this plan answered far better, for she had a natural aptitude for arithmetic, and soon learned to make the various items fall into their proper places, balancing her little account-book in quite a professional manner. [163]

About this time, too, Lilian took to poring over the 'Ladies' Column' in the newspaper, and trying the various recipes which were given therein. Some of them were very successful, and—especially the cakes—were much appreciated by the children, though others did not turn out quite what she had expected, in which case it is only charitable to suppose the oven was at fault.

'There's a splendid one here, Nancy,' she announced one day, 'under the heading of "What to do with your Cold Mutton." You mince it all up with herbs, and make it into a kind of pasty, and it sounds most delicious. It says, "First take a couple of onions." By-the-by, did Joe bring in any onions this morning? Those in the basket are all finished.'

'No, Miss; Joe, he's never been near to-day, though there's master's shooting-boots waiting for him to clean.'

'Oh, then do run down, Nancy, please, and ask him to dig up a few, while I put the meat through the mincing-machine. You'll very likely find him in the orchard or the stackyard.'

Nancy soon returned flushed and out of breath, with a full apron.

'I couldn't find Joe nowheres,' she panted. 'But he'd put these down in the harness-room, so I just took them. Shall I chop them up for you now?'

'Please do. But oh, Nancy, stop! Let me look! These are not onions; they're the gladiolus bulbs that David has just taken up from the garden! What a mercy you did not put them into the pasty! We might all have been poisoned!' [164]

'Lor!' said Nancy, much abashed, 'I made so sure they was onions I never thought to look at 'em. But if it's only a couple you're needing, miss, there are two or three left in the larder that would do. Was it anything else you'll be wanting?'

'It says, "Take a little dried thyme, sage and sweet marjoram,"' read Lilian, with her finger on the recipe, "'together with a few pieces of lemon-peel." I wonder what it calls "a little." I haven't the slightest idea, but I suppose we must put plenty in to make it a nice flavour, or it won't taste of anything.'

So, putting a very liberal interpretation on the words, she cut up a goodly supply of those herbs, and mixed them in with the meat.

The pasty came out of the oven baked to a turn, and smelling delicious, and Lilian felt quite a thrill of satisfaction as it was placed on the table, and Father began to cut it. But the 'Ladies' Column' should have been a little more explicit as to the quantity of flavouring, for, when it came to a matter of eating, the herbs so entirely predominated that the mutton was utterly lost, and, as she had unfortunately cut up the stalks as well as the leaves, the mixture bore a horrible resemblance to chopped hay. It was distinctly galling, but, still, she learned by her mistakes; for practice gives the best training, and there is no such invaluable teacher as hard experience.

Well-meaning friends were kind in their offers of help and advice, but, as Lilian said:

'You can't run down in the middle of mixing a pudding to ask Miss Forster how much sugar to put into it, or send for the Rector's housekeeper to tell you when the custard is thick enough. Mrs. Davenport told me to write her a post-card if I got into a fix, and she would come over and set me straight; but I don't think I should quite like that, and I'm sure Nancy wouldn't.' [165]

Father did not encourage her to seek outside help, thinking it better that the Abbey should manage its own affairs, even at the cost of a little inconvenience, and kindly shut his eyes to many small deficiencies, knowing that time was the best remedy, and that old heads do not naturally grow on young shoulders.

At first the cares of her new position were a terrible burden on the poor child's mind, for she was, if anything, too conscientious, and almost morbidly anxious to do right and fill the place which Aunt Helen had left so empty. She would wake at four o'clock in the morning, and not dare to close her eyes again, for fear Nancy should oversleep herself, and the children be late for school. She would visit the dairy ten times a day to see that the thunder had not turned the milk, nor the cat crept in through the window. She counted and recounted the linen and the silver, and

sat worrying over her account-books at night till Father threatened to burn them.

I think her greatest trial, however, was on the few occasions when Mr. Vaughan was obliged to stay away for the night, and leave her responsible for the safe keeping of the whole establishment. She would go round with Nancy and a candle, carefully locking all the doors and securing the shutters, peering fearfully into cupboards and starting at her own shadow on the wall; and, having finally retreated to her bedroom, would barricade the door with a tin box, and place the poker handy on a chair by her bedside. But in spite of these precautions, the nights were misery all the same. Sleep refused to come, and she lay awake hour after hour, imagining every sound to be a burglar breaking into the premises, and wondering how Peggy could slumber so peacefully in the other little white bed. It is amazing, when the house is perfectly quiet, how many creaks and peculiar noises make themselves heard which we never think of noticing in the daytime. The wind blowing the ivy about would sound like a hand tapping upon the pane, the cattle trampling in the fields suggested footsteps under the window, and a mouse behind the wainscot would raise her to such a pitch of panic that she would often be obliged to get up and light the candle to reassure herself, and when she at last fell asleep it was generally with her fingers stuffed in her ears, and her head buried under the bedclothes, an uncomfortable proceeding, resulting in such white cheeks and heavy eyes that Father, with some difficulty finding out the cause of the trouble, never left in future without arranging for old David to sleep in the house during his absence.

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I think, during those early struggles, her correspondence with Aunt Helen was her greatest help and comfort, for to that dearest of friends she could unburden all her worries and perplexities, and be sure of sympathy.

'It is so hard to do exactly right,' wrote Lilian—'to be generous without being extravagant, and economical without being stingy. Father says we must be careful, and spend as little as we can, but things to eat seem to cost such a terrible amount all the same. I wish we could live on porridge and potatoes, like the Irish do! Life would be far simpler.

'About going on with my education. You ask if I am keeping up my French and German, but there really seems no time. The two hours' practising for Herr Frankenburg is as much as I can possibly get in. I am busy with Nancy all morning, the music takes the best part of the afternoon, then the children come home, and after tea I must see that they learn their lessons and go to bed, and Father likes someone to talk to in the evenings. It is so dull for him if I am buried in a German exercise when he wants to tell me about the farm. I try to attack a few "improving" books when I can manage it, and I have begun to read Carlyle's "French Revolution" to Father in the evenings, but I am sorry to say it generally sends him to sleep. He is so tired with the threshing just now, poor darling! and, as he said one night: "You see, my dear, I have so many troubles of my own at present that the trials of the French peasantry of a hundred years ago seem an affair of quite minor importance."

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Aunt Helen's letter back was just like a little piece of her dear self.

'I can sympathize thoroughly with all your worries,' it ran, 'for I, too, was left motherless at sixteen, to manage as best I could. Of course, keep up our family standard of cleanliness and order as much as you possibly can, but you will find it a mistake to be too particular and exacting. Rather, let the children run in sometimes with dirty boots than check their confidence by continual fault-finding. I am sorry that the education must needs be somewhat neglected, but after all the other is more important. There are plenty of "blue" Girton girls in the world who do not seem to me to be of much use to anyone except themselves, while as the "little mother" of your home you are filling a place that is the sphere of every true woman. And because you have no time for reading is not any reason why your thinking powers need rust away. There is so much wisdom to be learnt from even the little ordinary incidents of life if one knows how to appreciate them. People say one is apt to grow narrow with living in the country, but I have generally found the people who do so are those who have no interests outside the round of society pleasures or social gossip, and to my mind they would be narrow anywhere. When you know a little about botany and natural history, all the common things on the farm have something to teach you. The quaint sayings of the villagers are often as full of humour as those Scotch books over which people rave so much, and many of their stories are such interesting survivals of ancient folklore that I have often longed to collect them in writing. While surely, to a thoughtful mind, the constant sight of so much loveliness around tends to have a more ennobling effect than an environment of bricks and mortar and smoky chimneys, whatever the Londoners may say.

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'Do your household duties thoroughly, but don't let them absorb you entirely, for Father does not want you to be a mere domestic drudge, with no ideas beyond the potato-pan and the pepper-pot. When I was a young girl I often tilted up a volume of Tennyson and read snatches while I compounded a pudding, and found it had a wonderfully inspiring effect, and did not spoil the cooking either, for my "Tennyson" puddings generally turned out a great success.

'You will find the housekeeping comes easier as you grow older, and in the meantime remember you are not only educating yourself, but bringing up the younger ones, who look to you now instead of to me for example, and who will be far more influenced by what you do and what you are than by any amount of good advice you may bestow upon them. It is hard to write all this from a distance of so many thousand miles, when I am longing to sit over the fire in the Rose Parlour, and have a good chat with you, like we used to do sometimes when the children had gone to bed.

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'I am afraid there seems very little festivity or party-going for you, dear child, and I should have been glad to hear you had been asked out rather more; but, after all, much society often means much rivalry and heartburning. I have tried both, and find there is more real pleasure to be had from the intellectual than from the social side of life, for while the latter is apt to fail us just when we most require it, the former is "warranted to wear well and improve with keeping," and, so far from being affected by the changes and chances of this world, sticks by us when health and wealth and even friends can fall away.'

CHAPTER XV

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THE BEGINNING OF A SHADOW

'Looking, I saw
Where sorrow, like a shadow grim, did
rise
Betwixt me and the sun.'

AUTUMN had come, mellow and gorgeous. The trees were turning to russet and amber and gold, and the swallows had long since flown away. The plums hung ripe and yellow upon the kitchen garden wall, and the apples were piled in rosy heaps in the orchard, ready for the cider-making.

The hop-gathering was over, and the hoppers—a motley crew—had returned to the slums of Stafford and Birmingham, the men not sorry to cease hard work, but the poor, draggled women and the little children with a wistful good-bye to the green fields, and all, I think, with a half sigh of regret for the Rector, who had toiled unceasingly among them during their brief stay, hoping, if by ever so little, to raise the hopeless lives and the sodden minds to a knowledge of higher things.

A band of gipsies was the next event. They arrived late one evening, nobody knew from where, and encamped on a patch of ground by the roadside, not very far from the Abbey (much too near, Father said, for the safety of his hen-roosts), coming like a tribe of wandering Israelites, with most of their worldly possessions on their backs. They were real gipsies, too, not the fair-haired hybrid pretenders who go about in neat caravans with muslin curtains to the windows, and wicker baskets slung on the top, but a dark-eyed, Spanish-looking crew, who put up a tent with a pole and a ragged blanket, and stewed their supper in a black caldron hung from three sticks set in the ground.

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The children came across them suddenly, just as the sun was setting, and the picturesque scene stirred Peggy's sense of romance—perhaps also her budding artistic taste—to the core. The whole family was gathered together on the grass round the wood fire, the smoke of which rose up faintly blue against the russet of the beech-woods behind—handsome, fierce-eyed men, lying slouching idly on the ground smoking short black pipes; slatternly women with gay handkerchiefs tied round their black hair, bustling about with something savoury inside tin cans; ragged brown-skinned little children, gnawing at bones with savage haste; while a few disreputable dogs waited eagerly for the scraps that were thrown to them from time to time. A small cart, laden with brooms and coarse crockery, was tilted up by the hedge, while a couple of worn-out old donkeys, with clogs tied to their legs, cropped the grass close by, with dejection in their drooping ears.

'I'm sure they're talking Romany,' said Peggy, squeezing Bobby's arm hard in her excitement, and drawing him behind a bush, so as to watch the scene unobserved. 'What a queer life! Just think of getting up every morning, and not knowing where you were going to be by night, and sleeping under that dirty tent! I wonder what they have in that caldron? It smells nice, at any rate, though rather too oniony.'

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'Pheasants, I should think, and rabbits that they have poached,' whispered Bobby. 'The keepers will have a lively time to-night. I wonder where they prigged the onions.'

Low as the children had spoken, the sharp ears of the gipsies had heard them, and a withered, witch-like old crone came hurrying up from the group near the fire, with an eager glitter in her eye.

'Tell your fortune, my little master? Tell your fortune, my pretty young lady? Cross the poor gipsy's hand with a silver sixpence, that the planets may work.'

'We haven't any money,' said Peggy hurriedly, a little scared when it came to meeting the tribe at such close quarters.

'Ah, but no doubt the little lady's father is at home at the big house yonder, and she can get a silver piece from him, and come back to the poor old gipsy.'

'He's gone to Warford this evening,' began innocent Bobby. 'There isn't anybody at home at all.'

But the more wary Peggy, seeing the folly of such revelations, gave him a nudge, and the emphatic hint: 'Shut up!'

'The pretty thing at the young lady's neck would do as well,' continued the woman in a wheedling voice, eyeing Peggy's brooch, 'or the little gentleman's silver chain. Oh, I won't keep them, missy; only hold them in my hand for a minute to influence the stars! You trust the poor gipsy, and she'll tell you what the future has in store for you.'

But Peggy and Bobby were not so simple as to be taken in by such palpable guile, and they walked on, with the old crone following persistently in their wake, at first clamouring for some trifle and then hurling curses at their heads. As she passed the encampment she said something in Romany, and one of the men sprang to his feet with a shrill whistle. The terrified children took to their heels, and I don't really know what might have happened, only fortunately the familiar figure of old Barlow, the village cobbler, appeared stumping down the road in the distance. He was not generally a very attractive person, being snuffy in appearance and crusty in temper, but to-night no fairy prince could have been more appreciated, and they flew to him, each seizing one of his horny hands with an enthusiasm which much surprised him. They were ever afterwards fully persuaded that but for his timely arrival they would have been robbed and murdered, and their bodies hidden away from their sorrowing relatives, like Eugene Aram's victim, or the little princes in the Tower, and they felt quite an affection for Barlow in consequence, so much so that Bobby determined to wear out his boots as fast as possible, that he might put some business in the old man's way.

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Though Mr. Vaughan did not take quite such a serious view of the episode, he thought the gipsies were certainly undesirable additions to the countryside, and sent a hint to the local police, with the result that, when Peggy and Bobby screwed up their courage, and dared each other to go and have another peep at the encampment, they found the tent struck and the wanderers flown, with nothing to mark their passing visit but a few dirty pieces of paper and the ashes of the wood fire, though loud complaints from neighbouring farmers as to missing ducks and geese, and traces of snares found by the keepers in the preserves, showed that they had not gone away empty-handed.

The gipsies were soon forgotten in the excitement of cider-making, for the ripe piles of apples had been gathered into the big barn, and the children liked to watch the great press as its stone roller slowly crushed the fruit into pulp, and let the juice escape into the trough below. It always seemed a pity, Peggy thought, to make the nice apples into such horrid stuff as cider, and she was glad David stored so many away in the loft for winter use, and in the meantime she and Bobby consumed such quantities that Father declared they would both be breaking out into leaves and blossom in the springtime.

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The blackberries were ripe, too, and there were many expeditions in search of them, mostly in their own fields, for the hedgerows abounded in the purple fruit, and Lilian's housekeeping soul was at present bent on jams and cordials.

One Saturday afternoon Peggy had had a long scramble through copse and bracken, over fences and along stubble fields, and had filled her big basket almost full, somewhat to the detriment of her costume and fingers, and she was now working her way home along the edge of the pasture, picking as she went. She had climbed up the bank to reach a particularly luscious looking cluster from the long, trailing brambles overhead, when voices below attracted her attention, and, peeping through the hedge, she saw two horsemen riding slowly along in the bridle-path beneath. The first was a lean, spare man, with gray side-whiskers and a slight stoop, whose rather sporting attire accorded ill with his sharp, keen face; while the second, the one on the better horse, was stout and ruddy of countenance, a man who looked as though he would be more at home in a bar-parlour than in a drawing-room, and who held himself with a complacent air, as one who is satisfied both with the world in general and himself in particular.

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'That is the house,' said the first, reining in his horse just below where Peggy was standing, and pointing with his riding-whip at the Abbey. 'It's a fine old property, and has grand capabilities about it, too.'

'H'm, it would want a good deal of repairing,' remarked the other, tugging at his sandy moustache. 'I should pull down that tower and the older part, and throw out a billiard-room and a conservatory. I suppose the stables would all want rebuilding, and no doubt that wood could be cleared, and turned into pleasure-grounds. It would cost a sight of cash to do it all shipshape—not that that's much odds to me if a thing takes my fancy. This grass-land would be grand for a racer or two; I've my eye on the Melton sweepstakes yet. When did you say it falls due?'

'Next July,' returned the thin man, lowering his voice. 'Of course, they will try every end up to meet it, but unless they can raise it privately, which doesn't seem likely, there isn't a soul who would lend more than two-thirds of the amount on the security, so the thing is as good as done.'

Eavesdropping was certainly not one of Peggy's besetting sins, but she could not help overhearing all that was said, and as the pair rode on down the path towards the gate, she picked up her basket and walked in the same direction on her own side of the hedge, so as to get a good look at them if possible. At the gate they paused, for it was shut, and he of the gray whiskers, after fumbling at the latch with his whip, was evidently preparing with much reluctance to dismount, when, spying Peggy, he called to her, and asked her to open it.

Peggy felt half inclined to refuse, and turn away, for she did not like his tone, but her kindly

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country instinct prevailed, and she swung it open wide. He rode through without even a 'Thank you!' but his companion fumbled in his waistcoat pocket, and, scarcely stopping to look at her, flung her a penny as he passed. All the proud Vaughan blood rushed into Peggy's face. In a fury of wrath she seized the offending coin and flung it after its donor, but, like many of our keenest shafts, it fell harmless, for she missed her aim, and the horsemen rode on, sublimely unconscious of the storm they had left behind them.

'That they should dare!' said Peggy hotly to herself, flushing all over with indignation. 'I suppose they took me for a village child. I'm afraid I do look rather untidy with blackberrying, but all the same they might have seen the difference. I wish I had never gone near the gate, and let them open it for themselves. David,' she said to the old man, who was coming across the field with a sack of potatoes, 'who are those people riding along the pasture? I can't call them gentlemen.'

'Who be they two, Miss Peggy?' said David, laboriously putting down the sack and shading his eyes with his hand. 'Wheer did you say they be?'

'In the pasture. Oh, look quick, or they'll be gone!' cried Peggy, impatient at his slow ways.

'Oh, I know they! Yes, I do for sure. I see'd 'em round t'other side o' the field five minutes agone. The thin un in front be Mester Reade, the lawyer fra' Warford, and a tight-fisted rascal he be, too, from all they say. It's Heaven help them as Lawyer Reade gets his teeth into! And the big, stout man be Mester Norton, the distiller, him as has those works t'other side o' Warford, and runs half the drink-shops in the town, to say naught o' the country publics he owns, too. The teetotalers calls him "Old Blazes," partly to favour his red face and partly 'at he keeps the whisky traffic going so briskly. He's worth a power o' money, he be, but it all comes out o' poor folks' pockets, what ought to be put to a better use.'

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So that was the father of Phyllis and Marjorie Norton, that vulgar man with the loud voice and the coarse red face, and those pretty frocks and handsome carriages were all paid for out of the ruin of poor people's homes; for the lower parts of Warford had a bad character, and the clergy waged ceaseless war against the terrible curse of drink.

'What are they doing in our fields?' inquired Peggy, suddenly recalling the conversation she had inadvertently overheard, the remembrance of which had been lost in the heat of her wrath.

'Why, there be a right-o'-way across the pasture, and through the hazel-wood, though it's not a many as ever uses it. Wheer they could be a'-goin' to passes me, for it don't lead to nowheer, except on to the high-road agin, and it's not in sense that they should ride out o' their way, just to come round by the Abbey.'

Peggy thought privately that must have been exactly their reason, but she said nothing to David on the subject, reserving further inquiries for Lilian, to whom she ran home to give a full description of her encounter.

'Whatever could he mean, Lilian? He talked almost as if the Abbey were his, and said he should pull down the tower, and do ever so many other things. Do you think he can be mad?'

To her surprise, Lilian took the matter only too seriously.

'Oh, Peggy dear!' she said, putting down the pile of stockings she was darning, 'I don't know whether I ought to tell you or not, but you seem so much older now than you used, and I think I can trust you not to talk about it to anybody. Poor Father is most dreadfully worried just at present, for, you see, this Mr. Norton has a mortgage on the estate.'

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'What's that?' inquired Peggy.

'I'm afraid I can't explain business things very clearly, but a lot of money was lent on the understanding that if it was not paid back, the Abbey should go instead of it.'

'Did Father have the money?'

'Oh no. I believe our great-grandfather had some, and then grandfather and Uncle Charlie, who died, had the rest. It has been going on for years and years, and Father has kept trying to pay it off, but he never could manage it. Of course, it was not Mr. Norton who lent it at first, but through this Mr. Reade, the lawyer, he has what is called "bought up the mortgages," and now he claims all the money back, and I'm afraid, from what you heard to-day, he will take the Abbey if he does not get it.'

Peggy was aghast. That it was possible for the Vaughans and the Abbey to be ever dissevered had never before entered into her calculations, and the prospect was so terrible that she thrust it from her with scorn.

'It can't be!' she cried. 'They couldn't turn us out of the Abbey, when we've always lived here! Father will get the money somehow! Perhaps Mr. Neville or the Rector would lend it to him.'

Lilian shook her head sadly.

'They haven't got it to lend; they are neither of them really well off, you know, and it is such a large sum. But I keep hoping all the time that we may find some way out of the trouble. I don't know whether to tell Father or not what you heard to-day. I'm afraid it will only worry him.'

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'I think perhaps he ought to know,' said Peggy briefly, as she turned and went out to hide a suspicious choking sensation in her throat. Then, going into the ruins, she climbed up on to the old wall, from which the best view of the house and its surroundings could be obtained, and gazed with new eyes at the panorama of her home; and as her glance travelled slowly from orchard to stackyard, from meadow to garden, back to the ivy-clad tower and the red gabled roof, 'I think,' she said slowly, 'that if we had to leave the Abbey, it would break my heart!'

CHAPTER XVI

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ARCHIE

'God wants the boys—the merry boys,
The noisy boys, the funny boys,
The jolly boys, with all their joys—
God wants the boys.'

You must not suppose that all this time Peggy's acquaintance with Archie Forster had been allowed to languish. That young gentleman had introduced himself to the rest of the family, and had made himself very much at home indeed at the Abbey. He kindly gave Father the benefit of his experience of farming in Colorado (greatly to the latter's edification); he amused Lilian with his funny stories, and was a source of open-mouthed wonder to Nancy, who thought his achievements only second to a conjurer she had once seen at Gorswen fair. Bobby naturally regarded him with an admiration which bordered on worship, and trotted about at his heels like an affectionate poodle, while Peggy found herself living from Saturday to Saturday to continue the delightful series of projects which her enterprising friend lost no time in starting, and wondering sometimes how they had managed to exist before they knew him.

By good rights Master Archie ought to have been away at school, but a too active brain in a fast-growing body had brought about such a delicacy that the doctor forbade any severer study than a few hours' daily reading with the curate, and recommended as much fresh air and exercise as possible. Miss Forster was not sorry to find so plausible an excuse for keeping her pet nephew at the Willows, and the young man himself had no objections, being fuller than ever of ingenious schemes, only he had transferred the seat of his operations to the Abbey, as offering a wider scope in the way of material, and having the further advantage of a number of appreciative assistants. The only person who was not won over by Archie's friendly ways and frank American manners was Joe, who gloomily prophesied broken necks and kindred evils as the result of the children's association with 'the young master from furrin parts'; but I fear there was a good deal of jealousy in this, for poor Joe had been a hero to the children in his modest way, and it was hard to find himself suddenly supplanted in their affections, especially by a rival with whom it was quite impossible to compete.

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Incited by an account of the tree-dwellings in one of Miss Forster's books of travel, Archie determined to emulate them, and construct such an elevated establishment for themselves. The trees in his aunt's garden were mostly ornamental shrubs, many of them clipped into quaint shapes, and could not be thought of for the purpose, but a tall elm growing on the borders of the Abbey stackyard seemed designed by Nature for his requirements. He was a neat workman, and all his contrivances were perfectly steady and durable, for, as he said:

'When you're out West, you have to be your own chore-boy. Dad put an axe into my hand, and taught me to chop kindling before I was out of petticoats, and when we went up the Rockies shooting grizzlies we built log-cabins, and I can tell you there was no carpenter to fetch there nearer than a hundred miles, so I guess I ought to know how to handle a saw and fix up a bit of lumber.'

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He first set to work to make a spiral staircase up the tree, which wound round and round the trunk like the little turret stairs in the tower. Every step was carefully nailed on and properly supported, and the erection grew daily until he had reached four large boughs which branched out twenty feet above the level of the ground. Here he arranged a kind of platform, fixing pieces of wood across in the fashion of a raft, and making a firm railing all round the edge. In the midst of this platform a small hut gradually grew up, the walls of stout hazel-stakes wattled across with branches and willow-withs, while the roof was neatly thatched with reeds. The whole erection was so steady and well made that, though Father, as chief inspector, stamped vigorously about, he could not make it shake, and was able to pass it as perfectly safe, and give his congratulations to the young architect, while even Joe grudgingly admitted that 'Master Forster hadn't made half a bad job of it neither.'

If grown-up people found it satisfactory, you can imagine the delight of the children at this wonderful bird's-nest. Their first thought each day on coming home from school was to rush off to see how 'Sky Cottage,' as they had christened it, had progressed in their absence, and their grief

was loud if anything hindered Archie from the prosecution of his labours on Saturdays, while they quite envied Lilian being able to run out any time she liked and take a peep at the operations.



"HE FIRST SET TO WORK TO MAKE A SPIRAL STAIRCASE UP THE TREE."

Naturally Sky Cottage, like Rome, was not built in a day, and though Archie worked at it pretty constantly, it was November before the roof was on and he considered the building complete. The question of decorations was much discussed, for while Father suggested hanging the walls with sacking, and Lilian voted for garlanding them with wild flowers, both ideas were rejected, the one as too prosaic and the other as not sufficiently durable, and it was not until Peggy conceived the brilliant thought of lining their dwelling with moss that a satisfactory solution was arrived at.

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So off went the little party to the woods, with a couple of sacks and a coil of rope, to tear up the vivid green sheets which covered the rocks like carpets of velvet.

'All the thickest and best is on the other side of the stream, beyond where we had our picnic in the summer,' said Peggy, leading the way with the proud air of a pioneer. 'If only we can manage to cross, for the water is rather full to-day,' she added, with a lively remembrance of her former dipping.

They found an unexpected help, however, for a recent storm had blown down a large oak, which now stretched itself very conveniently over the stream like a bridge, and by the aid of its branches it was quite easy to hop across and climb up the bank at the other side. The woods were thick here and damp, and the moss was of such superior quality that it fully justified the extra labour involved in fetching it. They pulled it up in pieces a yard or more square, and crammed it into the sacks, tying the mouths with rope, so as to be able to drag them along, for the moss was full of moisture, and the bags were dreadfully heavy. They were rather at a loss how to convey their spoils over the bridge. Bobby suggested floating them down the stream, but, as Lilian pointed out, they would promptly sink to the bottom; so in the end Archie hoisted a sack upon his back, and, with Lilian to steady it behind, managed to stagger across in safety, coming back for the other when the first had been successfully landed.

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It was hard work bumping the sacks over the rough, uneven ground, but they got them home at last, safely conveyed to Sky Cottage, and emptied out on to the platform. They were all busily engaged within the hut, nailing sheets of moss over the wattled walls, when a curious squeaking noise began to attract Peggy's attention.

'What's that?' she inquired, pausing with the hammer suspended in her hand.

'A bird, most likely,' replied Lilian, with her mouth full of nails.

'No, it isn't,' said Peggy, going out to investigate. 'It seems to come from the moss at my feet. Archie, do come and look! Whatever can it be?'

The noise grew louder and louder, so that it resembled the squealing of a kitten, and all four began to turn over the moss with eager fingers, till, with a cry, Archie drew out a small round ball of dried grass, about the size of Bobby's fist, from which issued such crescendo squeaks that there could be no mistake as to the locality of the sound. The little ball was so beautifully made and so neatly rounded that there was not the slightest aperture to be seen, and Archie turned it over and over in his hand in some perplexity.

'What can it be?' cried Peggy.

'Do open it!' piped Bobby.

'Oh, *do* be careful! Suppose it's a viper!' shrieked Lilian.

'You goose! Vipers don't squeal, at any rate,' said Archie, whose friendship had reached a degree of intimacy that was distinctly brotherly; and gingerly pulling asunder the neatly-woven grass, he disclosed to view a plump yellow dormouse, whom they had evidently disturbed in his winter quarters. [185]

The little fellow lay flat on his back in the midst of his snug little nest. He had not taken the trouble to open his eyes, but his paws were crossed, and his pink mouth was open, giving vent to loud disapproval of the bumpings to which he had been rudely subjected unawares.

'My! ain't he cunning?' said Archie, stroking the soft fur with his finger, while the others crowded round to look. 'And so clean, too; he looks as if you had just loaned him new from a store, and he's as fat as butter. He's been feeding up for this, I reckon. What shall I do with him?'

'Oh! can't we keep him for a pet?' implored Peggy, with an eye on the ever-increasing menagerie. 'We could get nuts and acorns and things for him, and I've no doubt he would eat corn, too.'

'I guess he'll want to sleep now right away till spring, like our grizzlies do in the fall.'

'Let's wrap him up again,' said Lilian. 'I'm sure he'll catch cold, poor dear! and we'll put him in a snug corner of the orchard, where we can look at him now and then, and in the spring perhaps he'll wake up.'

As this seemed the most humane suggestion, Master Dormouse was tucked up in bed once more, and, still protesting, was carried to a sunny bank under an apple-tree, and stowed away under a protecting clump of leaves, where his plaintive voice gradually subsided, and he settled down for five months of oblivion, to ignore the winter frosts and storms until the April sunshine should tempt him out of his lair.

The moss lining to Sky Cottage was a great success, Archie arranged willow withs in a neat pattern over it, to keep it from falling down, and everyone agreed that it looked charming. Furnishing was the next consideration, and the attics and lumber-room at the Abbey were ransacked for any treasures they might afford. A few broken chairs, and a rickety gate-legged table were soon mended by Archie's clever fingers. Lilian hunted out an old piece of carpet and a tablecloth, and the place looked so comfortable that the children, fired by Archie's accounts of the log-cabins in the Rocky Mountains, longed to put in a cooking-stove and emigrate there altogether. They decided to have quite a garden on the platform next spring, and to grow seeds in pots, and persuade nasturtiums and canary-creepers to climb up the walls, and they made a beginning by hauling up a box of soil, and planting some ivy, which they hoped in time would cover the whole roof. [186]

Peggy and Bobby would have been quite content to go on adding a nail here or a shelf there, and further making improvements, but Archie, now that the chief work was over, found his interest cooling, and having got hold of a book on 'Balloons and Air-Ships,' proposed no less daring a scheme than that he should construct a flying machine, and start it from the platform. Father, however, getting to hear of the project, forbade it so emphatically that the disgusted aeronaut was obliged to give way, and consoled himself by constructing a fire-balloon out of gay strips of pink and green tissue-paper, which, ignited by methylated spirits, was to be set off with great effect on Peggy's birthday.

As some slight amends for his disappointment, Lilian proposed that they should have a grand housewarming at Sky Cottage on Saturday afternoon, and invite Father to tea in the sanctum. The rest giving a hearty and vigorous approval, she set to work to bake cakes in honour of the occasion, preserving such a halo of mystery round her cookery that the others were consumed with curiosity, and felt ready for any surprises. [187]

There were a great many preparations to be made when the eventful afternoon arrived. The hut had to be swept and dusted, late flowers to be gleaned from the garden to decorate the tea-table, cups and saucers packed up and conveyed in baskets, together with the little tin kettle and the methylated spirit lamp, as they could scarcely light a fire on the platform like they did for picnic teas in the woods. Archie hung up a Japanese lantern in the doorway, and fixed a Union-Jack on one side, and the star-spangled banner of the United States on the other, and Peggy found

enough Michaelmas daisies and white asters to put a wreath all round the railing of the veranda, which rather suggested harvest decorations, but looked very festive all the same.

They had brought a clean tablecloth from the kitchen drawer, and set the table quite artistically, with a jam-pot full of flowers in the centre, and little plates full of cakes grouped round it. Lilian put out a very tempting looking selection of rock-buns and ginger-nuts, and Archie produced a tin of real Scotch shortbread and some macaroons, a contribution from his aunt; so with bread-and-butter, and a pot of the newly-made blackberry jam, there was quite a noble display. But Lilian had kept her surprise in the background, and it was only when all was ready that she opened a basket, and proudly drew out her masterpiece, a substantial-looking cake, with a cut-paper frill, and white icing on the top, on which in pink sugary letters were inscribed the words: 'Success to Sky Cottage!' Certainly some of the capitals were a little staggery, and the 'y' had strayed into the pink border round the edge, but it was felt to be a triumph of culinary art all the same, and gave quite a grace to the table. [188]

At the last minute Father had been obliged to send his regrets and apologies, for the veterinary surgeon had arrived to doctor a sick horse, and he could not possibly leave the stables, so the tea-party must perforce begin without him, for the days were growing short now, and there was no time to spare.

It was a merry, not to say boisterous, party, for Archie was in one of his funniest moods, and told 'tall' Yankee stories till the children nearly rolled off their seats with laughter, and Lilian went on pouring into her overflowing cup till the tray was swimming with tea. The cake looked such a work of art that, as Mrs. Squeers remarked of her Yorkshire pie, it seemed 'quite a pity to cut into it'; but, seizing the knife, Peggy boldly severed the 's' and the 'u,' and with Aunt Helen's wedding festivities fresh in their memories, the company drank the health of Sky Cottage in tea, clinking their cups together over the table in imitation of old Squire Henley.

They were in the very midst of one of Archie's most comical adventures, when a shout was heard underneath the tree, and going out on to the veranda, they beheld Nancy struggling timorously up the staircase, her evident anxiety to make some communication overcoming her natural abhorrence of such an airy structure.

'Oh, Miss Lilian,' she panted, 'if there isn't Mrs. Davenport just arrived in her pony-shay, and she's put it up in the yard, and says she's sure you'll give her a cup of tea! So I left her sittin' in the drawing-room lookin' at the photo-albums, and rushed off to tell you she's here!' [189]

'*What* a nuisance!' groaned Lilian, who was not generally inhospitably disposed. 'Run back, Nancy, quick, and be getting some tea ready, and I'll follow you! I must bring these cakes; they're the only ones we have!'

She bundled the remains of the feast into her basket, and had just descended the stairs, escorted by the sympathizing Peggy and Bobby, when round the corner of the large haystack suddenly loomed the tall figure and black alpaca skirts of Mrs. Davenport, who, finding herself left longer in the drawing-room than she appreciated, had sallied forth in search of her hostess. She stopped short now, quite thunderstruck at the vision before her.

'What do I see?' she exclaimed. 'What mad folly is this? Really, Lilian, I am astonished that you countenance such wild proceedings! Peggy I knew was a sad tomboy, but I thought you, at least, were the sensible member of the family, and would try to train the younger ones into more civilized habits. I had heard from Miss Forster that that very indulged and unmanageable nephew of hers had been making some sort of place in a tree at the Abbey, but I never imagined so much as this. Sheer waste of good time, I call it; and a boy who can expend so much energy as to raise such a construction must be only shamming ill-health, and would be far better packed off to school. I shall tell his aunt so the next time I see her, and I don't care who hears me!' she added, catching sight of a grinning face on the veranda, for Archie had stolen out to see the fun, and overflowed in such gurgles of delight at this sally that Lilian trembled for the result. [190]

'You had better come down, Archibald,' said Mrs. Davenport in her most majestic voice. But Master Archie evidently thought discretion the better part of valour, for he dived through the doorway like a rabbit into a burrow, his overwrought feelings so far overcoming him that he exploded into a tremendous cock-crow as he sought the friendly shelter of Sky Cottage.

An embarrassing silence followed, broken at last by Lilian, who asked Mrs. Davenport if she would not like to return to the house. Peggy and Bobby tried, as Archie expressed it, to 'do a slope,' but in vain, for, saying she had not seen them for a long time, and should like to talk to them, their unwelcome visitor took the dismayed pair into custody like a female policeman, and whirled them sternly along before her.

It really was too bad that Mrs. Davenport, instead of coming upon a Wednesday or Thursday, when all would have been neatness and order, and Nancy in her best black dress and muslin apron, should have chosen this particular Saturday afternoon, when there was no fire in the drawing-room, a pile of mending on the dining-room table, and all the family in somewhat dishevelled array.

'But she always does manage to catch us, somehow,' lamented Lilian afterwards. 'She calls it "taking us just as we are," but then we *aren't* generally in a muddle like this, so it doesn't seem quite fair. She ought to come sometimes when we are tidy, to see both sides.'

Once established in an armchair by the dining-room fire, Mrs. Davenport took off her gloves, untied her veil, and enjoyed herself thoroughly. She catechized Lilian freely about her housekeeping arrangements, hoped Nancy did her duty, and did not neglect to sweep out corners, told Bobby that his irrepressible curls looked girlish, and his hair ought to be cropped close every week, plied Peggy with embarrassing questions on the subject of fine needlework and stocking-darning, and drank four cups of tea in the meantime, with the air of one conferring a favour thereby.

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'I hear you see a good deal of Miss Forster's nephew,' she remarked, her eye wandering round the room, and taking in the pile of untidy music scattered about on the window-seat and Father's dirty shooting-boots under the sofa.

'I suppose we do,' said Lilian meekly, wondering privately where Archie was, and if he would go home without saying good-bye.

'Not a very suitable companion for any of you, I consider. Young people in America are brought up to have far too good an opinion of themselves, and this lad is no exception. I was not at all pleased with his manner when I met him at the Willows,' frowning slightly at the remembrance; for Archie's cool and elaborately courteous treatment of her criticisms on that occasion had completely baffled her.

But luckily the growing dusk reminded Mrs. Davenport that country lanes were unpleasant to drive along in the dark, so drawing on her gloves she routed her groom, a small, depressed-looking boy, out of the harness-room, where he was retailing his grievances to the awe-stricken Joe, and tucked her black skirts safely into her pony-carriage, assuring the children that it should not be long before she looked them up again, as she had promised their aunt to keep an eye on them after they were left alone. Half-way down the drive she met Mr. Vaughan, and stopped to give him some good advice as to the general upbringing of his family, even suggesting that Peggy—for a yearly consideration—should be transplanted to Pendlefield Rectory, to share the studies and maternal care of the five little Davenports, a proposal which he declined with a haste that was perhaps more emphatic than polite.

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With a sigh of relief Lilian had adjourned with Peggy to the kitchen to help Nancy to wash up, when the back-door was softly pushed ajar.

'Is she gone?' said a cautious voice, and a fluffy red head appeared in the opening, only followed by the rest of Archie's body on the full assurance of the entire retreat of the enemy. 'I thought I should have died with laughing,' announced that youth, sitting down easily among the crockery on the table. 'My stars! Isn't she a terror? I shall have to keep clear of the Willows every afternoon next week, for I know she'll make a point of calling and telling poor Aunt Mary her candid opinion of me. What a mercy we live at Gorswen instead of Pendlefield! Think of exchanging the Rector for *her* and little crushed Mr. Davenport! If she came to live any nearer than four miles away, I declare I would pack my boxes and beg to be sent off to school!'

CHAPTER XVII

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DAME ELEANOR'S GHOST

'What see you there
That hath so cowarded and chased your
blood
Out of appearance?'

THE weather, which had been beautifully fine and mild for the time of year during October and the first half of November, kept up for Peggy's birthday on the twenty-first. By good luck that important occasion fell on a Saturday, so there was no tiresome school to interfere with the festivities. As the Vaughan family was more rich in goodwill than in coin of the realm, the presents were mostly of a kind which I am afraid either Maud Middleton or Phyllis and Marjorie Norton would have scorned, but to Peggy they gave the utmost satisfaction. There was the much-longed-for guinea-pig from Father, which had been smuggled up in a hamper, and kept with elaborate care in a remote portion of the barn (a secret which Bobby found the utmost difficulty in preserving); a nightdress case worked by Lilian's neat fingers; a cork frame from Bobby, made under Archie's supervision; a round pink-and-white wool mat, which Nancy had crocheted at odd times during the evenings; and a little mug from Joe, with a Welshwoman in a tall hat on one side, and 'A present from Llandrindod' on the other, bought on a visit to the famous wells which he had paid in company with the church choir. Archie came up during the morning bearing a pretty writing-case, an offering from himself and Miss Forster, while a parcel had arrived from India, containing the loveliest carved sandal-wood box, inlaid with mother-of-pearl, to show that Aunt Helen had not forgotten her little niece.

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As the birthday was not so very long after the fifth of November, they had decided to keep any Guy Fawkes celebrations until then, and had been busy for some days collecting sticks for a bonfire. The party consisted solely of themselves and Archie, for Father's suggestion of the five Miss Davenports was received with howls of indignation; and Lilian and Nancy's combined efforts had produced a cake with twelve tiny coloured wax candles stuck into icing-sugar on the top, one for every year of Peggy's life, and which had to be blown out in turns by the assembled company for good luck.

The bonfire was held in the stubble field beyond the stackyard, and roared up like a fiery furnace, making quite a red glow in the sky, while its red ashes roasted potatoes and chestnuts to a turn. Archie had even contrived to manufacture a few fireworks, having shut himself up in a room over the stables at the Willows, a combination of peculiar odours and a singed eyebrow alone testifying to his occupation. To be sure, the catherine-wheel stuck, and utterly refused to turn, in spite of all pokings and proddings, and the rockets only fizzled off near the ground, instead of shooting up as they ought to have done; but the squibs and crackers were quite effective, and a train of gunpowder, laid down to represent a fiery serpent, blazed away in fine style. The fire-balloon, however, was the success of the evening, for it shot straight up, and floated across the sky like a beautiful meteor, its pink and green sides giving a charming effect, till at length it dwindled away and became a mere speck in the distance, leaving the children more full of admiration than ever for Archie's talents. [195]

After the birthday the weather broke and a foretaste of winter arrived, with cold winds and gray, murky skies and occasional falls of snow. Archie caught a severe chill hunting for microscopical specimens in the pond, and was in bed for some weeks, nursed by his doting aunt, consoling himself for his enforced idleness by planning such improvements at both the Willows and the Abbey as were calculated to make their owners' hair stand on end.

As the long evenings closed in, Joe, ever timorous with regard to the supernatural, became the prey of superstitious fears. He saw shrouds in the candle and corpse-lights in the churchyard. Rollo's howling filled him with forebodings, and a screech-owl flying over the orchard sent him into a panic. He heard ghostly footfalls among the ruins and mysterious taps on the stable-window when he was suppering the horses, which, in spite of Lilian's reassurances, he persisted in regarding as a warning, though for which of his numerous relatives it was intended kept him in a state of perpetual doubt and uneasiness. The worst of it was that he infected Nancy with his alarms to such an extent that she could scarcely be persuaded to put her nose out at the back-door after dusk (except on her evening out, when her sweetheart came to fetch her), which was distinctly inconvenient if a pail of water were wanted during the evening, or she happened to have left the coal-box standing in the yard. The Abbey boasted the reputation of maintaining what Peggy called 'a real, live, genuine ghost,' though none of the family had ever caught a glimpse of it, it seeming to prefer to manifest itself to Joe and to chance visitors from the village who came up to the house on dark evenings. The washerwoman's little girl had heard footsteps behind her on the drive and a distinct clanking as of chains, while old Betty Carson swore on her Bible oath that she had seen something white moving about among the ruins, which groaned as in the expression of the keenest mental anguish; and when Mr. Vaughan suggested it might prove nothing worse than a young bullock with indigestion, she had dismissed the idea as almost profane. [196]

Beyond the fact that a lady in white was supposed to haunt both the ruins and the oak-wood, weeping and wringing her hands in orthodox ghostly fashion, the children had not been able to learn much of the story, for there were so many and divergent accounts of it, all told with uncertainty as to names and dates, and in that very oracular—not to say muddled—style sometimes indulged in by rustic historians. But one wet afternoon, finding David alone in the harness-room, where the old man had lighted a fire to make some wonderful decoction of foxgloves wherewith to doctor a cow with a strained leg, they seated themselves on a sack of potatoes in front of the cheerful blaze, and with the aid of a little judicious flattery and coaxing managed to cajole him into a true and circumstantial account of the family ghost.

Although he was somewhat crusty to begin with, old David, like all who have the gift of narrative, enjoyed telling a story, and he soon warmed to his work.

'It were my father as told me,' he began, 'and he had it from his father, and his'n afore him, for it be a powerful long time ago, it be. Ay, time do pass by quick, for sure!' [197]

'When did it happen?' asked Peggy, hastily, hoping to nip in the bud one of the old fellow's rambling divergences from the point.

'In the reign of King Henry the Sixth, so they say. Ay, it were Henry, for it were the same name, I mind me, as the old Squire.'

'Reigned 1422 to 1461, married Margaret of Anjou,' put in Bobby, who liked to air his knowledge.

'I don't know who he married; it weren't nothing to do with marryin'. It were fightin' first in those days, though I suppose they married, too, like other folk, when they found time.'

'Who were fighting?' inquired Bobby.

'Why, it was the Wars of the Roses, of course,' answered Peggy crushingly.

'Nay, it weren't no wars of roses, I can tell you. It was real bloody battles they fought then, with swords and pikes and spears and the like; for there was two Kings, both with a notion of reignin', and when Kings falls out, it's their subjects has to do the fightin' for them, I takes it.'

'Henry VI. and Edward IV.,' put in Peggy. 'Please go on, David.'

'There was Vaughans at the Abbey then, just as there is Vaughans at the Abbey now,' continued the old man, staring meditatively into his foxglove brew, as though he could see a mental picture in the pot. 'And him as had it then was Sir Richard Vaughan, the one as lies under the cracked old monument in the corner at church.'

'With the dragon and the crooked arrows on it,' nodded the children.

'Well, this Sir Richard Vaughan, he favoured King Henry of Lancaster, and went out to fight for him with forty gentlemen and yeomen at his back, to say naught of lesser folk. They met Duke Edward of York, him as afterwards became King, at Mortimer's Cross, which ain't so far from here, neither, for I went once myself when I were a lad with my aunt's cousin, who drove a good horse and gig. Let me see: how many years will it be agone?' [198]

'Oh, David, never mind! *Do* go on with the story! What happened at the battle?'

'He were killed, for sure, were Sir Richard, and his head took by they Yorkists, and kicked about like a football afore they nailed it up over Hereford gate. You'd ne'er find his skull if you looked inside the old monument—naught but the rest of his bones.'

'How awful! Then is it *his* ghost?'

'Oh no, Bobby! It is the White *Lady*, you know!'

David took advantage of these interruptions to lift his pot from the fire and examine its contents, but finding them not yet to his liking, put it on again, and continued:

'It weren't enough for they Yorkists to get Sir Richard's head; they wanted his lands along of it, and they marched across country (a set of blood-thirsty ruffians they was) and laid siege to the Abbey. Dame Eleanor, a widow new-made, as you might say, couldn't hold it above two days, for the pick of the men had all gone with her husband, and the best part of *they* lay stretched out stiff at Mortimer's Cross. So she lets them in at last, sore agin her will, and gives up the keys to Lord Grey of Wigmore. You'd a' thought that would a' satisfied them, but they wanted more.'

'What did they want?' said Peggy, for David seemed disposed to rest from his labours and attend to his cookery.

'Sir Richard had left a son behind him, a young lad of nine or ten or thereabouts, and he were the heir. It were him as Lord Grey wanted—told a fine tale as how he'd take him up to London, and get him put as page to the great Earl of Warwick, which were as good as makin' his fortune.' [199]

'Did he go?'

'Nay, his mother were no fool, neither, and she knowed full well she'd ne'er see him again, no more than you'd see a duck if you gave it in charge of the fox. She'd sent him away safe out of the Abbey by that passage to the cave, most like, where you very near lost your lives last summer, and she weren't going to let on where he were, not to no one.'

'Did she tell? Did he get off safe? What happened?'

'Let me tell my tale in my own way,' said David testily. 'They was brutes in those days, and had no respect for God or man, let alone woman. So they clapped a thumbscrew on Dame Eleanor, to sharpen her wits.'

'Oh, poor thing! She didn't tell, did she?' cried the children, who could not forbear comments.

'Tell! Not she, though her thumb was crushed to a jelly. And when they see'd it weren't no manner of use, they let her go. But that Lord Grey of Wigmore was a disciple of Old Nick himself, and what does he do but catch hold of Dame Eleanor's daughter, which weren't more' an a little maid like Miss Peggy there, and put the screw on her thumb, thinkin' it would loosen her mother's tongue to hear her shriek. There's things that women can bear up to a certain pass, but touch their young uns, and they'll let you know. At the first cry as was raised by that child Dame Eleanor went clean off her head, and, breakin' away from them as held her, she seized up a dagger and stabbed herself through the breast, with a awful shout of laughter, shuttin' her lips for ever from them as would wrest the secret from her.' [200]

'And what became of the poor little boy and girl?'

'Lord Grey felt a bit 'shamed, like, when he see'd what were done, and he sent the girl home to his wife, who brought her up kind. And the boy had been took away by that time to them as was his friends. He grew up to manhood and learned to fight, like everyone else in they times, and then King Henry came to his own again, and he got back the Abbey.'

'But King Henry didn't stay long on the throne, did he? I thought the history-book said that "King Edward landed at Ravenspur and fought the Battle of Barnet." We learnt it in our dates last Monday.'

'I know naught of books. It's what my father told me, and his father afore him. There have been

a many Kings since then, I reckon, but the Vaughans have held the Abbey in spite of 'em.'

'But, David, you haven't told us about the ghost yet, and that's the most important part of all.'

'The ghost! Oh, that be Dame Eleanor, for sure. They say she walks round the ruins of the Abbey and across to the oak-wood. Whiles she goes away, and no one sees her for long enough, and whiles she comes back; and they do say,' said David, lowering his voice, 'that if there's a death in the family, or any evil hangin' over the Vaughans, that she be there shriekin' and wringin' her hands to give warnin' of what be to come.'

The children were beginning to feel quite delightfully creepy, and would have liked a further continuation of the spirit portion of the story; but David's decoction being now ready, his thoughts were with his invalid in the cow-house, and nothing could bring them back to Dame Eleanor's wraith. So, in spite of all entreaties for more, he departed, bearing his steaming can with him, and declaring that one good cow was worth all the ghosts and ghostesses in the kingdom, 'for you might do some good to *she*, but as to *they*, they was naught but hearsay, after all.'

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After this, Peggy and Bobby were determined to try and obtain a sight of their ancestress, and with much screwing up of their courage stole out one evening, and crept fearfully round the ruins, clutching each other's hands very tightly, and jumping at every sound. There was a fitful moon, and it was just light enough to see the outlines of the old walls and the pieces of broken stair and column, with very dark places between, where the shadows fell. It was an ideal spot for a ghost. It really seemed as if these old relics of bygone days *must* be haunted, so strong were the cords which bound them to the past. A cloud had come over the moon, and as they groped their way round the corner of what had been the refectory, Peggy caught Bobby's arm.

'Listen!' she said in a thrilling whisper.

The children clung together tighter than ever and held their breath, for there certainly was the most extraordinary noise to be heard—a kind of mixture between groaning and sighing, with a rattling sound as of dragging chains. It seemed coming in their direction, too, and they shrank into a niche in the wall, with their hair almost standing on end. Something gleamed white in the faint moonlight, and a terrific sound suddenly boomed in their ears. Frightened almost out of their wits, the children shrieked and ran, but stopped before they had gone twenty yards, for the noise had developed into a very decided 'Hee-haw!' and the moon, bursting through the clouds, revealed the long nose and twirling ears of the tinker's broken-winded old donkey, who, dragging a clog on his leg, was giving vent to his feelings in his own peculiar fashion, his master having turned him into the ruins for a stolen feed during the night, no doubt with the intention of fetching him in the morning before anyone was up and about. It was such bathos after the overwrought state of their feelings that they sat down and laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, treasuring the joke to tell to Archie when he should be well enough to receive visitors, and holding it up as a model to relieve Nancy's fears.

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But seeing how easy it was to imagine a ghost out of really every-day materials, the children plotted mischief next Saturday, and determined to give Joe a fright. About half a mile from the house lay the oak-wood, which was also the supposed scene of Dame Eleanor's walk. Through this wood ran a road, which was the shortest way to Middlehead, a little market-town in the opposite direction to Warford. Knowing that Joe had gone for a holiday, with some other lads from the village, to a fair which was being held that day at Middlehead, they decided to construct a ghost and fix it up in the wood, to alarm him and his companions as they returned. They kept their secret to themselves, and retired to the barn to fashion a figure of Dame Eleanor according to their own notions of what a phantom should be. Taking a large turnip, they scooped out the inside till there was nothing left but a hollow shell, cutting holes in it for eyes, nose, and mouth, and fixing a candle inside, so that when the light shone through it should resemble a horrible, grinning face. At dusk they stole away with the rest of their materials to the oak-wood, and set to work. The spot chosen was a grassy corner, where a gate across the road formed an angle with the wall which bounded the wood upon one side. It was a specially dark and shady place, for the tall trees shut out the sky, and even in the daytime it looked gloomy and still. They first planted a stout broomstick in the ground, and fixed the turnip head firmly upon the top of it; two branches of trees tied on like cross-bars made a pair of shoulders and arms, and when covered with a sheet stolen from the linen-cupboard, it appeared as if the white figure were stretching out its imploring hands in a vain appeal for mercy. When Peggy lighted the candle inside the effect was so terrific that the conspirators felt quite eerie themselves, and with a last look to see that all was steady, and the candle not likely to fall over, they left Dame Eleanor in her corner, and fled home over the fields with a rather guilty feeling, wondering what would happen.

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To do Peggy justice, I do not think she would have tried to play such a trick on poor Joe if she had imagined he were returning alone; but knowing he would have the company of several of his friends to support him, she thought he might rather enjoy the joke than otherwise.

The dusk soon fell, and Peggy sat by the fire in the Rose Parlour reading 'Ivanhoe' in much warmth and content. Lilian was playing snatches of her favourite Chopin, but somehow the music did not go well to-night, for the musician's heart was not in her fingers.

'What's the matter, Lilian?' asked Peggy, tearing herself away from Friar Tuck and the Black Knight to realize that her sister had got up for the fifth time from the piano to peep out through the window into the dark beyond.

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'I wish Father would come home, that's all. I always feel so uneasy when he goes to Middlewood'—pacing restlessly round the room, and looking again at the clock.

'Why?'

'Because he drives home through the oak-wood, and it's really so dangerous. There's no fence on the side next to the river, and Prince is so frisky, if he were to shy there by the wall nothing could save them from going straight down the bank. I've often begged Father to have it railed in, but he only laughs at me. Why, Peggy, where are you going?'

For without a word of explanation Peggy had flung down her book and fled from the room. Hatless, and in her thin house-shoes, she rushed out of the house, and tore over the fields as fast as her shaking legs could carry her. In her plan to give Joe a fright, she had never thought of Father, who returned by the same road; and now that horrible white object was stationed just in the very danger-spot where a plunging horse might mean a matter of almost certain death, for the wall of the five-acre field abutted the road on one side, and on the other there was only a narrow patch of grass between the steep bank which shelved down sheer into the river, while the closed gate stopped any chance of a dash forward. Peggy's heart was beating like a sledge-hammer as she flew through the wood. Already she heard a distant rumbling of wheels, and putting on a last desperate spurt, she reached the gate. She could never afterwards tell exactly what happened at that moment, except that the gig-lamps flashed suddenly in her eyes, 'Whoa, my lad!' shouted Father's voice, and Prince's rearing, kicking form loomed large before her as he backed persistently towards the bank. It took Peggy just one instant to open the gate, and catching up her ghost to hurl the whole wretched thing over the wall, and in another she had seized the horse by the rein, and, soothing him with her well-known voice, dragged him forward with all the strength of her wiry little arms. She was barely in time, for already one wheel was over the edge, but, the object of his fear being removed, Prince allowed himself to be cajoled into the road again, where he stood, panting and trembling in every limb.

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'Why, my little Peggy!' cried Father, leaning down to see where the lamp-light flashed on the face of his rescuer.

But the strain was too much for Peggy, and she plumped down on the dead leaves by the roadside in such a tempest of tears that Father had to climb out of the gig and pick her up to comfort her; but as he could not get a word of sense, he popped her in the vacant place by his side and drove on, while she clung to his arm, still shaking with sobs, till they reached the Abbey, where he helped her down, such a miserable little tear-stained picture of woe, gulping out the confession of her escapade, that he had not the heart to scold her, though he had a word of warning to say afterwards upon the danger of such heedless practical jokes.

Dame Eleanor's remains were fished out of the corner of the five-acre field on Monday morning by Joe himself, who kicked her turnip head as ruthlessly as the Yorkists had used her husband's at Mortimer's Cross, and brought back the broomstick to the stable and the sheet to Nancy's wash-tub. In all the valour of daylight he assured the children that 'it wouldn't have scared *he*, not it. He'd made a many o' they turnip lanterns in his time, and knowed 'em too well to be took in so easy.'

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But his faith in the genuine phantom remained unshaken all the same, and I do not think he would have ventured alone into the ruins after dark for the amount of his weekly wages, and money meant a good deal to poor hard-working Joe.

CHAPTER XVIII

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PLAY-ACTING

'Therefore, they thought it good you hear a
play,
And frame your mind to mirth and merriment,
Which bars a thousand harms, and lengthens
life.'

THE winter set in cold and frosty, and as Christmas drew near the snow came down in real earnest, covering the fields with its white carpet, and turning Sky Cottage into a very good imitation of a Swiss chalet. It was chilly work getting up in the dark mornings by candle-light, and driving off to school when the sun had scarcely risen; the four miles of road seemed much longer than they had done in the summertime, and in spite of woollen gloves, the hand which held the reins was apt to be stiff and numb with the cold long before Warford was reached.

'I wish I were a cat!' said Peggy one morning, quite roused to envy by the contemplation of Tabbyskin's toilet, 'to have no trouble with washing or dressing; only just to jump out of bed,

hump up your back and stretch yourself, drink your saucer of milk, and then lick yourself comfortably on the hearthrug in front of the dining-room fire.'

'I think the dormouse has the best of it,' said Lilian, 'for he sleeps straight on, and never seems to feel the frost at all. It would be a glorious plan to retire to bed for the winter. I'm sure Nature intended me for a hibernating animal, for I hate the cold. It makes my fingers so stiff I can't practise nicely one little bit.'

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'You'd say so if you were at school now,' grumbled Peggy. 'There is a new housekeeper, and she manages so badly that sometimes they are only just lighting the fires when we are going into the class-rooms. The studio felt like an ice-house yesterday, and nobody was able to draw properly. Some of the girls have the most dreadful chilblains on their fingers. I'm sure one goes through a great deal to get one's education!'

'Never mind, the holidays begin on Wednesday, and then you shall have a lovely time. If only this frost keeps up, we ought to get some skating, and that's warm work, at any rate!'

But as regards skating, the children were doomed to disappointment, for, with the usual perversity of the English climate, the weather changed, and Christmas Eve brought a mild wind and drizzling rain. They trudged through the half-melted snow to the church to help with the decorations, for it was fun twisting holly and evergreens, and making garlands of ivy to fasten round the pillars. Archie, who naturally was to the fore on such an occasion, managed to climb up and hang wreaths round the heads of the cherubs at the top of the Jacobean monument, which gave their weeping faces quite a festive appearance for once. Each of the Crusaders was accorded a cross of yew, and the Elizabethan lady and gentleman had a special decoration all to themselves. Lilian transformed the pulpit into a perfect bower, weaving in holly and laurels till the Rector hoped she would leave room for him inside it; and Peggy and Bobby helped—or hindered—the schoolmistress as she adorned the font with a wonderful arrangement of cotton-wool and frosted leaves.

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Luckily Christmas Day was fine (for a wet Christmas is enough to damp the stoutest spirits), but after that the weather indulged in such a variety of changes, alternately freezing and thawing from day to day, that there was no time for a safe crust of ice to form even on the smallest and shallowest of ponds. At the first fall of deep snow Archie had mounted both himself and the children on Canadian snow-shoes, for as soon as his illness had allowed, he had persuaded his aunt to bring his tool-chest into his bedroom, and had beguiled his convalescence with a little carpentry.

At first they had all floundered hopelessly about, and it had taken some practice even to slide a few steps; but long before they had reached the stage of skimming over the frozen surface at the rate of eight or ten miles an hour, which had been their fond ambition, the snow had melted into moist and dirty slush, which was particularly trying, as they had just decided to make a sledge out of an old packing-case, and drag Lilian round the pasture.

As outdoor exercise was rather out of the question, amusement must perforce be found indoors, and amateur theatricals became the order of the day. Archie was full of enthusiasm over what Nancy called 'play-acting,' and had soon initiated his friends into all the mysteries of drop-scenes, side-shifts, make-ups, cues, and footlights. Both tragedy and comedy raged in the Rose Parlour, the company feeling themselves equal to anything, from a representation of Hamlet to the famous scene between Sir Peter and Lady Teasle. Like all their hobbies, they rode it hard, or, as Archie elegantly expressed it, 'rolled up their sleeves and went into it bald-headed.' I am afraid the house-keeping languished while Lilian painted scenery on large sheets of blue grocery paper. Nancy had to dry her washing as best she could, for all the clothes-horses in the establishment were needed for side-wings, and the dining-room tablecloth, being green, was generally missing, having to do duty for such occasions as 'a grove,' 'a glade in the forest,' or the garden scene in 'Much Ado about Nothing.'

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From such constant rehearsals the actors found themselves adopting a very stilted kind of conversation. They addressed each other as 'Ho, knave!' or 'Prithee, kind wench!' and would answer the simplest question by 'Yea, certes!' or 'An't please thee, my lord.' Bobby took to carrying about an old horse-pistol which he had found in the lumber-room, and saying 'Oddsbodkins' on all occasions, and Peggy put on such a general air of melodrama that it seemed scarcely possible for her to speak in plain prose; Archie was impresario, stage-manager, scene-shifter, dresser, maker-up, and principal actor all combined, while Lilian waxed so enthusiastic that she even sacrificed the feathers out of her last summer's best hat to adorn the slouched head-gear considered necessary for a due representation of Romeo.

One thing only the players felt to be missing in their entertainments, and that was the very important feature of an audience; for what is the use of learning up parts, and constructing scenery, if there is nobody to come and watch you act? Peggy sounded Father on the subject of a children's party, but he did not rise at all to the occasion.

'We can't afford it, Peggy,' he said briefly; then, noticing her look of disappointment: 'That's where the shoe pinches, my dear child. The plain necessities of life we are bound to have, but the state of my purse tells me not to indulge in any luxuries, and I am afraid we must consider party-giving under that head.'

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Kind Miss Forster would probably have turned her house upside down for Archie's gratification, but she herself was on the sick-list this Christmas-time, so any gaieties at the Willows were

equally out of the question. Getting a hint of the dilemma, the Rector came to the rescue, and invited the performers to give an exhibition of their skill and talent on the occasion of the Sunday-school tea-party, which was to take place early in the New Year. This gave quite a fresh aspect to affairs, and great were the discussions as to what piece should be chosen, everybody unfortunately wanting something different, and generally utterly inappropriate, or impossible to act.

Lilian, always fond of tragedy, had set her heart on the last scene in 'Romeo and Juliet.'

'I should be Juliet, you know, stretched out on the bier, and Archie would have to be Romeo, and come in, and think I was dead, and stab himself, and then of course I should wake up and stab myself, too; and Peggy and Bobby could be the Montagues and Capulets, getting reconciled over our dead bodies.'

Archie, however, having leanings towards comedy, was not at all willing to play the rôle of the despairing lover.

'We could never manage to fix up an Italian vault,' he objected, 'and I don't see how Peggy and Bobby could represent a whole crowd of Montagues and Capulets, however much noise they made. Why not do a scene from "The Rivals"? You'd be grand as Lydia Languish, and Peggy would just enjoy Mrs. Malaprop's mistakes. I, of course, should be Captain Absolute.'

'Then who would be Sir Anthony?'

'Why, Bobby would have to be Sir Anthony.'

'He *couldn't!* Bobby your father! It would look perfectly ridiculous, and people would only laugh! No, that won't do anyhow, and we shall have to think of something else.'

Bobby was vague as to any particular play, only bargaining he might be allowed to bring in his pistol, and do as much fighting as possible, and that his part should not require too much learning.

Peggy had ambitions towards the trial scene in the 'Merchant of Venice,' with herself as Portia, having a scarlet dressing-gown which she thought would answer beautifully for the doctor's robes, and designing Archie for the part of Shylock, while Lilian was to don male attire, and represent the unfortunate merchant.

'Then who is to take Bassanio and Gratiano and Salanio, and Salarino and the Duke, to say nothing of Nerissa? Bobby can't very well act six parts at once.'

'Can't we leave them out?'

'Leave them out! Might as well act "Hamlet" with the part of Hamlet omitted!' said Archie with much scorn, and the problem seemed no nearer being solved than ever.

But here the Rector again stepped in, and limited the performance to half an hour's duration, begging them to choose something appropriate for a Sunday-school audience, and if possible with a moral, and further reminding them that a platform consisting of tables hastily pushed together after the tea was concluded would scarcely give facilities for either footlights, drop-scenes, or side-shifts, a curtain being the utmost he could undertake to manage in that direction.

With wings very much clipped, the soaring actors had to throw aside Shakespeare and Sheridan, and apply themselves to books of recitations and dialogues for village schools. It was difficult to find anything of the right length with exactly the right number of parts, but at last Archie declared he had hit upon one which would do beautifully.

'Just four characters. You and I could be John and Mary, Lilian; and Peggy and Bobby would of course be the children.'

'Why of course? I'm too old for a child!' said Peggy indignantly.

'No, you're not. You're small for your age, and you won't look so very much taller than Bobby, if you wear your shortest frock. It's a jolly piece, and should go first-rate, so we'd better decide on this right away, and let the Rector know.'

Peggy flushed up to her eyes, and turned her back to hide her rising tears. After all her aspirations it was a bitter humiliation to be put down for the very minor part of 'a child,' especially by Archie. She had been learning elocution at school this term, and knew she could both recite and act well. Moreover, she loved to shine, and to be first and foremost, and had looked forward to this occasion as likely to prove one of much triumph. Very few of us are heroes when it really comes to the point, and I grieve to say that she looked so glum, and was generally so grumpy and discontented over the arrangement, that unselfish Lilian, divining the cause, instantly proposed to give up her own part to Peggy, and train a little village girl for the second 'child' instead. But this Peggy would not allow, and rushed away to the barn to weep off her ill-humour amongst the hay, returning in a much better frame of mind, with several valuable suggestions for Lilian's make-up; for she was a generous child at heart, though she could not give up her own way without a struggle.

The small piece chosen did not require much either in the way of rehearsing, scenery, or costumes, which was just as well, for the time was short, and the day of the tea-party seemed to arrive almost directly. By four o'clock the school was full of impatient children, dressed in their

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best, the girls with their heads such marvels of frizzing and curling that you could well imagine their hair had been screwed up in plaits and papers for several days previously, while the boys were shiny with soap and hair-oil. Lilian and Peggy were soon hard at work pouring out tea as if for dear life, while Archie and Bobby distributed buns and ham-sandwiches with lightning speed, which seemed to vanish with equal quickness, for many of the boys had dispensed with dinner in order to enjoy their tea the more.

'The big boy in the corner drank twelve cups!' declared Peggy, 'and little Willie Jones had eight, or even nine, for I lost count; and the boy from Monkend Farm ate at least fourteen buns. I believe he pocketed a few, though I never could catch him!'

Peggy was in her element; she was able to manage, or, as Archie called it, 'boss around,' to her heart's content. She kept a severe eye on the small children, patted them firmly on the back when they choked, and refused to allow them to grab at the cake, regulating their tea according to her own notions of what was good for them, and turning stolen lumps of sugar out of their pockets with the cleverness of a detective.

Tea was over at last, and the crumbly remains having been cleared away, the tables were pushed to one side of the great schoolroom to form the platform, while the benches were arranged in rows to accommodate the audience, which at present was indulging in an amount of noise only to be equalled by the Tower of Babel. Peggy, hard at work behind the scenes, put her eye to a hole in the curtain, and surveyed the prospect below, where children big and little were engaged in jumping over the forms, chasing each other round the stove, and generally acting more like monkeys at the Zoo than civilized human beings, while the Rector strove in vain to collect them at the empty end of the room to play games, and the curate, a shy young man fresh from Oxford, looked as if he would have preferred to wrestle with a consignment of heathens from the Cannibal Islands.

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'Come along, Bobby,' said Peggy; 'we ought to go and help. Archie and Lilian can arrange the scenery quite well. The Rector is getting pulled to pieces, and poor Mr. Wentworth has lost his glasses.'

Mrs. Davenport would have approved of Peggy for once, for even the pattern Bertha could not have displayed more energy in a parish emergency. She promptly organized a game of 'Oranges and Lemons,' herself leading the long tail of infants who passed under the Rector's and Mr. Wentworth's upraised hands; she set the boys to swing honey-pots, and the girls to play 'Drop the Handkerchief'; she boldly interposed her small person between the fists of two fighting hobbledehoys, and seized a little boy by the boot who had ventured to climb up the stove-pipe; she welcomed some of the parents who had begun to arrive for the entertainment, and found them comfortable places on the benches, even nursing one of the babies while its mother went to the rescue of an older child, who was being forcibly held down and sat upon by several of its companions; and by the time the bell was rung, and the audience requested to take their places, she was almost as hot and pulled about as the Rector himself, but with a feeling of conscious virtue that made up for everything.

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The first part of the entertainment was to be chiefly musical, so the proceedings began with a waltz by Lilian, who was always the Rector's mainstay in making up a programme, and had helped at most of his Sunday-school concerts since she was ten years old. A violin solo followed from the village tailor, who was much applauded, most of the hearers being persuaded that not even the band in the Warford Public Gardens could surpass 'Bill Evans and his fiddle.' Little Jimmy Carson recited 'The Charge of the Light Brigade' in a high, thin, piping voice, standing on tiptoe in his eagerness to give due effect to the famous lines, flinging out his arms wildly to indicate where

'Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them
Volleyed and thundered,'

and getting so mixed up with his aspirates that he concluded with:

'Honour the charge they made,
Honour the Light Brigade,
Noble six 'undred.'

A selection of small boys and girls sang school glees and Christmas carols, a trifle flat occasionally, but perhaps that was the fault of the piano, which needed tuning. The two Miss Prices from the Post-Office warbled a mild little duet, which gave unbounded satisfaction to their fond mamma, if to nobody else; the blacksmith's assistant roared out a sea song in a voice like a tempest; and a young man on a visit to the miller gave a comic song, which quite took the company by storm.

A five minutes' interval followed before the act, which was regarded as the chief event of the evening. There was a good deal of giggling and whispered conversation behind the scenes as the actors hastily concluded their preparations, but at length, in response to the enthusiastic clapping and stamping of the audience, the curtain was drawn aside by two Sunday-school teachers, and the play began. Peggy, standing behind one of the clothes-horses which served for a side-wing, could see the two hundred eager faces turned towards the platform, and experienced that peculiar sensation known as 'stage fright.' Instead of longing now for a

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prominent part, she heaved a sigh of relief to think that Lilian must begin instead, and trembled for the moment when she would be obliged to face those watching eyes.

The piece chosen turned upon a discussion between a man and his wife as to the relative difficulties of their work, resulting in the husband undertaking to do the morning's duties during the absence of the housewife. Lilian, in a print dress, apron, and sun-bonnet, made a charming little village mother, and trotted off with her basket, leaving many injunctions for 'John' to follow. Archie, as the husband, in corduroy trousers, his shirt-sleeves rolled up, and a short clay pipe in his mouth, was a capital British workman, and his struggles in the performance of his domestic duties were the subject of much mirth. When he broke the china, and stirred up the washing with the poker, the audience cheered, and it shouted with delight when he upset the kettle and burnt the bread black in the oven. Peggy and Bobby as 'the children,' with crumpled pinafores and smudged faces, were an equal success, for in watching Archie Peggy had forgotten her sudden shyness, and she now threw herself thoroughly into her part, howling most realistically when her nose was scrubbed in the wash-tub, or her hair combed with a fork; while Bobby stole jam and resisted medicine with lifelike zeal. Lilian's face, when as 'Mary' she returned to find her cottage a scene of confusion, was considered excellent, and the moral of the story was enough to satisfy even the Rector. The audience 'hoorayed' and thumped with their thick boots on the floor, and shouted 'encore'; but as it was not possible to break the china, spill the medicine, and upset the kettle twice over without a considerable amount of preparation, they had to be content with the graceful bows which the artistes bestowed upon them.

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'Say them "Little Orphaned Annie" instead of an encore,' whispered Lilian to Peggy, as the stamping still went on, and nobody seemed inclined to go.

'Shall I?' said Peggy, flushing; for it was her best piece at the elocution class, and she had been complimented on it by her teacher.

'Yes, go on quick!' said Lilian, pushing her forward, and catching the Rector's eye.

Peggy was in good form that night, and I really think her recitation was considered the star of the evening. Her gruesome voice as she recounted what the goblins did to naughty boys made several small sinners in the back benches shake in their shoes—many innocent infants felt they should never dare to go to bed in the dark again; and the wild shriek with which she ended her announcement that 'the goblins are about' quite brought down the house, and the children shouted and yelled and cheered as the Rector strove to get order once more, and wind up the proceedings with the National Anthem. So Peggy had her triumph after all, even if it were only a small one.

CHAPTER XIX

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PEGGY AT WAR

'By this good light, a lass of matchless
mettle!'

THE Christmas holidays being over, and Archie in the rudest of health, Miss Forster had no more excuse for keeping that young gentleman at home, and after much packing and preparation, he departed to school, amid the fond regrets of his aunt and the lamentations of his friends at the Abbey, to whom he promised to write as often as time and the regulations of his house would allow him.

After he had left, things seemed to jog on for some time in the same way. Peggy was studying hard this term, for she was a clever girl, and liked to take a high place in her class, so most of the evenings were occupied with home-lessons, and it was only on Saturday that she had any leisure for the many projects which Archie had begged her to continue in his absence. Time steals on very quickly when we are fully occupied, and winter seemed to slide into spring, and daffodils to replace the snowdrops in the garden before they had realized the welcome change, and Easter drew near once more, with all its delights of violets, young lambs, and early blossom.

It seemed a long while now to the children since Aunt Helen had gone away, and Lilian had become so accustomed to the housekeeping that it was not nearly so much of a care. She had taken up her neglected French books again, and struggled manfully through 'Paul et Virginie' with the aid of a dictionary; for Peggy was getting on so fast now that Lilian felt she would soon be left behind unless she made some effort to keep up what she had learnt. The evening readings, too, were continued, for Mr. Howell had suggested 'The Vicar of Wakefield' as being less solid for a tired mind than 'The French Revolution,' lending her his own charmingly illustrated copy; and Father had forgotten the farm and all his other worries in a hearty laugh over Moses and the spectacles, or Mrs. Primrose's efforts at gentility, declaring that the philosophy of the light-hearted Vicar exactly suited his own circumstances, and christening Lilian and Peggy 'Olivia' and

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'Sophia' on the spot. Finding that a success, Lilian followed it up by 'Pride and Prejudice,' and the 'Pickwick Papers'; for she was glad to discover anything that would wipe away the lines from Father's forehead, if only for an hour, and distract his thoughts from those terrible deeds and account-books which were wont to litter the dining-room table at nights. Peggy, too, had begged to sit up a little later to listen, and I think she learned almost as much from the readings as from her lessons; for our English classics are an education in themselves, and those who love them young rarely care to read much trash afterwards.

As the days grew longer and lighter, the garden also claimed attention, and the children were busy digging, raking, and planting, for this year there were to be special classes in the flower-show for exhibitors under fifteen, and both Peggy and Bobby had secret hopes of a prize. Then there was Sky Cottage to be tidied and spring-cleaned, for Archie must not come home at Easter to find it looking neglected, and there were various little improvements which they wished to make in it to surprise him on his return. [221]

It was well that they were all so full of resources for their own amusement, for otherwise than school they saw almost nothing of the outside world. The temporary attraction of Aunt Helen's engagement being over, the neighbours had lapsed again into their customary neglect of the Abbey, and visitors or invitations were as rare as if they had been living in the wilds of Africa. It seemed rather hard that sweet, pretty Lilian should be so entirely overlooked, and I think that somebody—not to say Mrs. Davenport—might have seen that she had some share in the merry-makings which went on in many of the country houses round about; but nobody remembered, and the shy girl herself was quite content to remain at home, busying herself, like Dame Durden, with her household cares. Somehow her old school friends seemed to have drifted away from her. They were full of their own interests, and, on the few occasions when she happened to meet them, had talked so much of new teachers, new pupils, and class topics of which she knew nothing, that she had felt a little 'out of it,' and had an uneasy sensation that, if she spoke of the quiet little episodes of her daily round they would vote her housekeeping experiences as decidedly 'slow.' Miss Forster, one of their kindest friends, had been unwell and confined to her room nearly all the springtime, and the children had felt her a loss; for besides the bond with Archie, she loved young people, and had always a word of help or sympathy for their schemes.

'I wonder what it feels like to be ill,' said Peggy one day, coming back from the Willows, where she had been sent to inquire, after one of Miss Forster's worst attacks. 'We're such a healthy set, we haven't any of us been a day in bed since we had measles five years ago. I should think it would be quite fun to send for the doctor, and be fussed over.' [222]

'I suppose you *feel* horrid,' replied Lilian. 'But all the same, I've sometimes thought it must be rather nice to be an interesting invalid. I wouldn't have minded being Margaret, for instance, in the "Daisy Chain," to lie on a sofa, and just look beautiful, and set a good example to all your family, and keep on telling somebody you couldn't marry him, while he stalked about the room with an air of profound melancholy, and said he couldn't take to anybody else.'

'I've always thought I should like to be a foundling,' said Peggy. 'It is so delightfully mysterious to be picked up from a wreck on the sea-shore, or saved from a railway accident, and nobody to know who you are, or anything about you. They always keep your beautiful baby-clothes, and the gold locket round your neck with the portrait inside, and then, when you're just grown up, you turn out to be the only daughter of a duke, who has been mourning for you ever since you were lost. Orphans, too, don't have half a bad time in books, though they generally live with rich uncles, and have to wear the old dresses and stop at home, while their cousins go to parties. They only look sweeter than ever in the shabby clothes, and something nice always happens while the others are out—like Mabel, you know, in "Sweet Seventeen." I think it must be most romantic to be so beautiful and so despaired.'

'Will you try living with the Davenports for a while?' laughed Lilian. 'You'd have plenty of chance there of being sat upon, at any rate.' [223]

But Peggy declined with thanks, declaring the case did not apply at all, for neither was Mrs. Davenport a rich relation nor was she herself in the friendless condition necessary for the full requirements of fiction, so she was afraid the round of amusements and social triumphs generally enjoyed by the heroine would not fall to her share.

'I wish we did go out just every now and then, though,' said Peggy, who occasionally had ambitions after gaiety. 'I haven't been anywhere except to Miss Forster's or the Rectory since I was at the Middletons last year. The girls were all talking about parties at school, after the Christmas holidays, and I hadn't been to a single one, or the pantomime either, and we never get to any of the concerts at the Spa Gardens. The Harpers have asked me to their dance next Wednesday, but Father won't let me go. I wish he would, just for once. It seems so hard never to do anything like other girls, doesn't it?'

'It is so difficult, darling, to get you home. You would catch cold if you came out of hot rooms and drove home at night in the open trap, and it is dreadfully expensive to hire a cab from Warford. Besides, you would want new shoes and gloves, and silk stockings, even if your bridesmaid's dress would be smart enough. If only I had had that money Aunt Helen sent me on my birthday, you should have gone, but I spent it every penny on Bobby's cricket flannels, and I don't like to ask Father for more. You see, we are trying to be so very careful just now. You and Bobby are not learning dancing this term, and I have even given up my music-lessons'—with a wistful sigh, for that had been a sore wrench to poor Lilian.

'So you have, Lily mine, and never growled at all over it! I'm a horrid little wretch, and I wouldn't have taken Aunt Helen's present, even if you had had it left. I don't really care about parties and things. We have ever so much fun out here at the Abbey that the girls who live in Warford never dream of, and it wouldn't be fair to expect both. Easter will soon be here, and Archie will come home, and then we shall all have glorious times again!' And Peggy's momentary discontent vanished like snow in sunshine at the enthralling prospect of several new projects which her ingenious friend intended carrying out, and of the picnics, woodland scrambles, and other delights which the holidays would bring in their train.

But there was yet a month of the term to run, and the little pony-trap must make many more journeys to and from Warford before either Pixie or the children could take a rest, and lessons and school affairs were still matters of the first importance.

Accustomed to a daily account of the doings of both himself and his class-mates, Peggy began to realize about this time that all was not well with Bobby. Instead of being full of his usual fun on the homeward journey, he had scarcely anything to tell her. He had been late for several days at the inn-yard, and had arrived looking so flurried and peculiar that, although he had laughed it off and made some excuse, she was certain that things were not as they should be. The pair had never had any secrets before, so Peggy waited at first for Bobby to tell her, but as the confidence did not seem to be forthcoming, she one day boldly taxed him with it.

'Well,' said Bobby, plucking at the corners of his dog-eared Latin grammar, 'if you really want to know, it's Jones minor. I didn't mean to breathe a word, because I hate to be a sneak, and peach, and all that; but after all, telling you isn't like telling any of the fellows, is it?' anxious for his code of schoolboy honour.

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'Of course it's not. What about Jones minor?'

'He bullies me so. He lies in wait for me every afternoon, and I have to dodge ever so to get out of his way. I came round by five back streets to-day, and climbed over a garden wall.'

'How big a boy is he?'

'Oh, he's a fellow of thirteen, I should think, for he's in the fourth form. If he were anywhere near my own size I'd fight him, if I had to do it every day till I licked him. I thrashed Moore last week for punching little Barton's head.'

'What does this Jones do to you?'

'Pulls my ears, and bumps my head against the wall. He twists my arm round, too, and hammers at it, and he keeps a buckle-strap in his pocket specially for me, so he says. He's just generally a beast, that's what he is!'

'I don't quite know what we can do,' said Peggy. 'If only Archie were at home he'd soon thrash him into a jelly, and enjoy it. I suppose there's no one else at school who would champion you?'

'No, there isn't. Never mind, Pegotty, don't you worry. I'm growing all the time, and perhaps one day I'll be big enough to go for him, and after all, a fellow ought to be able to stand a bit of bullying without going whining home to his sister about it.'

'Is there much of this sort of thing going on at the Grammar School?' asked Peggy.

'A fair amount. Not among the best end of the boys, but some of the fellows are awful cads. They took Holmes major one day, and held him upside down with his head in the lavatory basin till he nearly choked, and they tied two others up as sparring-cocks to-day, and made them fight all dinner-time. They're awfully rough on us little boys, too, at games. We have to fag till we nearly drop sometimes. That great hulking Taylor half kills young Ford now and then. I'm thankful he doesn't look my way. It's only Jones minor who attends to me, and he's quite bad enough.'

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'I only just wish I could catch him at it,' said Peggy reflectively; and there for the present the matter ended.

But a few days after this the pony-trap waited in vain, and Peggy, who had walked leisurely three times from the inn-door to the end of the street, grew tired of loitering about, and sallied forth to look for the truant. It would be useless to try the highways, she knew, so accordingly her search must be in the by-ways, and she made a little tour of investigation round all the back streets between the inn and the Grammar School, but without success, and she was just thinking she must have missed him, and had better return to the inn-yard, when a fortunate chance prompted her to turn up a retired avenue which lay between the two main roads. It was a quiet spot, with long gardens leading to old-fashioned houses on the one side, and the tall palings of a cricket-field on the other—just the spot where nobody would be likely to come along and make a disturbance, and so evidently Jones minor seemed to think, for he held Bobby pinned against the wall with one hand, while with the other he amused himself by tweaking his ears, pulling his hair, and any other tortures which his ingenious mind could suggest at the moment.

At the sight of this edifying spectacle Peggy flew on to the scene like Diana on the war-path.



"IF YOU BREAK YOUR WORD, I'LL LET ALL WARFORD KNOW THAT YOU'VE BEEN KNOCKED DOWN AND THRASHED BY A GIRL."

'Here,' she cried indignantly, 'you Jones! Just stop that, will you?'

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'Mind your own business, you—whoever you are!' cried the boy rudely. 'I'll do what I like!'

Bobby tried to dodge away, but the bully caught him by the arm, and, partly to show off, commenced such an excruciating twist that the tears started to his victim's eyes, though he did not utter a sound. It was too much for Peggy. She looked carefully round to see that no one was near, flung down her books with a bang on the pavement, and—simply went for Jones minor.

The assault was so utterly unexpected that he rolled over like a ninepin. Peggy might be small for her age, but she was strong and muscular, and she had the spirit of a Cœur de Lion and the courage of a Joan of Arc. Her method of boxing was certainly not scientific, but she set to work to punish Jones minor according to her own ideas of warfare. With two well-directed blows she nearly closed his eyes before he had time even to see his assailant. She punched his head, tweaked his ears, and hammered into the soft portions of his body until he roared for mercy, for, like all bullies, he was a coward at heart, and had a vague impression that some very superior force must suddenly have descended upon him.

'Have you had enough?' said Peggy at last, with her foot on her foe's chest, and her fist at his swollen nose.

'Yes, thanky!' faltered the snivelling Jones.

'Then swear on your honour, if you have any, that you'll never lay a finger on my brother again. If you'll promise that faithfully, we'll neither of us tell, but if you break your word, I'll let all Warford know that you've been knocked down and thrashed by a girl!'

'Hooray! hooray!' cried two voices, and two tall boys in Grammar School caps came clambering over the palings from the cricket-field, whence they had been the delighted but unseen witnesses of the encounter.

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'By Jove! you're a girl worth knowing!' said the taller boy. 'The way you rolled him flat was the funniest sight I've seen for many a year! Get up, Jones, you sneaking, drivelling cur!'—kicking the prostrate form of that fallen hero. 'And if ever I catch you at any of your tricks with Vaughan again I'll settle you myself, I promise you, though I don't know whether I could have done it any better than this, after all!' glancing with an eye of admiration at the victorious Peggy, who, with split gloves, scarlet cheeks, and wild-flying curls, stood panting after the contest.

'Golly! if you were *my* sister, I'd be proud of you!' he continued, while the other boy picked up her hat from the roadway, and collected her scattered school-books. 'I like a girl with pluck, and you've got enough for ten of 'em. I say, Vaughan, I'll try you to fag for me, if you like. You're a

good runner, I hear, and no butter-fingers. You can begin to-morrow.'

'And *he* is the Captain of the school eleven!' said Bobby afterwards, who would have felt it scarcely so great an honour to be noticed by the Prince of Wales. 'There isn't a boy in my class who isn't yearning to be Farrar's fag. They'll be just wild with envy! Peggy, you're about the biggest trump on the face of the earth, and I'll never forget this day if I live to be a hundred!'

Jones minor found he also had good reason to remember the occasion, for as Farrar and Henderson felt no obligation to observe secrecy, his life at Warford Grammar School was for some time a burden to him. Constant references as to his fondness for female society, offers to see him home to protect him on the way, tender inquiries as to the state of his eyes and the condition of his ears, filled him with confusion, while large portraits of Jones in the clutches of an imaginary Amazon, executed with schoolboy talent and vigour, adorned the walls of the playground and the palings of the cricket-field. [229]

Peggy's onslaught really seemed to have done some good in the school, for the attention of the older and better boys being called to the subject of bullying, a stand was made, and public opinion ran high against it, so that for a time, at any rate, the little boys had peace, and Bobby was able to return daily by the ordinary high-road, instead of seeking the shelter of side-paths and back alleys.

Bobby's letter to Archie on the subject of the encounter, though hardly a model of orthography, was as stirring as the ballad of Chevy Chase.

'She lade the villin flat on the erth, and I just wish you cud have seen her punch his hed,' he wrote. 'She nocked him about like a pottatotee. Peggy is awful strong wen her blud is up, and she sez she wuld do it agen to save my Life. Jones minor stopt at home two days arfter. He cudunt stand the jeers of the other boys, and they still give it him badly. Farrar is jolly good to me now. I like fagging for him better than enything. Peggy won't tork about wot she has done at all. She sez she is rather ashamed of it now, and that you wuld think her a bigger tomboy than ever; but all the boys at skule call her a brick, and so do I, and if she comes to see the bote race at Easter they mean to chear her.'

Archie wrote back at once to congratulate the heroine, and Peggy treasured the letter for days, until the new pet lamb accidentally chewed it up. It ran thus: [230]

'MY DEAR PEGGY,

'I think it was just elegant of you, and I won't call you t..b.y any more if you don't like it. Instead I will christen you Ta-ka-pun-ka, which in the language of the Chincowawas means "Girl-afraid-of-nothing," for you are as good as one of our Indian braves. I only wish you had taken his scalp, but I suppose you hadn't time. When I come back at Easter I will teach you to box, and then you will be ready for anybody, only please don't tackle me. I shall have to be careful how I quarrel with you now. If I am home in time for the boat-race I shall come and cheer, too. I am longing to get back to Gorswen. Bobby never said if the water-wheel was all right. I hope no one has touched it while I have been away. Why don't you write and tell me about it, and about Sky Cottage, too? I shall have heaps of school news for you when I come home, and I have thought of several fresh things we can make; but I shan't tell you what they are till I see you, so curb your curiosity until the holidays.

'Hoping Prickles, and the rabbits, and all the other pets are well,

'Your affectionate friend,
'ARCHIE FORSTER.'

CHAPTER XX

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GORSWEN FAIR

'Come, let us go while we are in our
prime,
And take the harmless folly of the
time.'

EASTER was here at last, and down at the Willows Archie had come home like the breath of spring, Miss Forster declaring that he did her more good than all her medicine bottles, and that his lively ways would make her almost her usual self again, while at the Abbey he had a royal welcome. It was funny to see how the young American citizen was merging into the British public schoolboy, for Archie was losing his Western accent, which only cropped out now and then when he was excited, and cricket and football were beginning to replace Indians and grizzlies in his

conversation; but he was totally unspoilt by his new life, and as jolly and hearty as ever.

The weather seemed to have conspired in his favour, for the biting March winds and cutting hail-storms gave way to genial sunshine and April showers. The hedgerows had burst into tender green, and the banks were spangled with stitchwort and celandine stars. There had been quite a spell of sickness in Gorswen at the end of the winter, for many of the picturesque cottages were dark, unwholesome places inside, and lay low on the damp fields by the river; but the invalids crept out now into the sunlight, and the mild breezes blew roses into wan cheeks and brightness into dull eyes, bringing back health, that most priceless of gifts, to the village—to all, indeed, but the Rector, who had been sick-nurse, doctor's assistant, family friend and chaplain combined during the epidemic, and now that the strain was over broke down so utterly that the physician insisted upon a complete rest and change of air, ordering him off immediately to the high meadows of the Alps. He went unwillingly.

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'I would rather worry on, Peggy,' he said, 'till I can take that last long holiday of all. It is better to wear out than rust out, any day. Still, our bodies were not given us to abuse, so you see I am obeying orders, like a good soldier.'

The village seemed strangely empty without Mr. Howell. Everyone had become so accustomed to claim his help and sympathy upon every occasion as a matter of course that it was only when he was gone they realized how much they valued him, for many of our blessings are hardly appreciated until we have lost them. The curate did his best, but as the old dames remarked: 'He be a nice gentleman, and means well, for sure; but what can a young lad like that have to say to we?'

So they dusted their best chairs for him, and agreed with all his remarks about the weather or the Prayer Book, but kept their doubts and difficulties for the tried old friend who had stood the test of years.

Most of the people had made haste to get well for Easter, for to the good folk of Gorswen that festival meant but one event—the great fair of the borders, which had been held in the village every Easter Tuesday within the memory of even that wonderful person, the oldest inhabitant. It was a kind of central pivot for the year to turn on, and 'five years come fair-day,' or 'the last fair-day but one agone,' was the general method of calculating time amongst the villagers. Everybody put on something new for the fair, and to have appeared on that occasion in a last year's hat would have been an offence against public taste, or a confession of abject poverty scarcely removed above pauperism. Cousins to the ninth and tenth degree turned up for the fair, distant relations from remote districts or former inhabitants who had left the neighbourhood and 'got on' in other places availed themselves of cheap excursions, and visited their early home, partly for the holiday, and partly for the sake of meeting everyone else.

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The wave of excitement which spread over the village as Easter drew near could scarcely fail to send its ripples up to the Abbey. Nancy's evenings for some time past had been absorbed in the construction of a bright heliotrope gown with gilt buttons, and she had walked into Warford on her day out, and spent a month's wages upon a hat, which was such a marvellous erection of flowers and feathers combined with lace, chiffon, and ribbons, that it was calculated to leave her rivals, like the Queen of Sheba, with no more spirit in them.

'Which fair-day only comes onst a year, so folks may as well do their best,' she observed, as she tried it on before the kitchen mirror. 'And I had heard as that Sally Pearson has got a hat all the way from Shrewsbury. A squint-eyed baggage she be, too, who'd ne'er look aught, whatever she might clap on her head. Tell me truly now, Miss Peggy dear, does it suit me or not?'

Knowing that Nancy was capable of starting immediately for Warford to change the article in question for one yet more costly, Peggy hastened to answer in the affirmative, and Bobby likewise assuring her that it would 'take the cake, and no mistake,' it was carefully folded up again in its sheets of white tissue-paper, and put by until the great day should arrive.

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Nor was Nancy the only one who indulged in a little innocent vanity, for Joe, too, had been so fastidious in his choice of a red-and-blue spotted necktie and a walking-stick with an ivory handle that the children began to suspect the blacksmith's rosy-cheeked daughter must be at the bottom of it; and even David had taken a long-tailed coat and a beaver hat out of the retirement of some mysterious handboxes and had been quite snappy and particular with Mrs. David on the subject of the proper starching and ironing of his Sunday shirt.

As early as Monday morning, caravans began to arrive from all parts of the country, and encamp on the piece of green common opposite the mill. Tired-looking men in dirty shirt-sleeves were soon busy setting up swings and merry-go-rounds, theatres and shooting-galleries, while the arrival of a travelling menagerie was the occasion for the collecting of a whole crowd of small yokels, who studied the outside of the waggons with breathless delight.

'Hey, Billee! do 'ee hear the lion roar?'

'Lion! That be a jackass brayin', thee fule!'

'Jackass theeself! Don't I know a moke from a wild beast? I tell 'ee 'tis within the tent!'

'Here be the fat woman arrivin', and it do take four horses to drag her, for sure!'

'And the wild man from Borneo. Ay, if he be like his picture outside, I'll ne'er venture in reach

of him!'

'Thee's not got the penny, may be!'

'Hain't I? Say that agin, and I'll let 'ee know!'

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'Way back there, ye young rascals! there's the giant and the dwarf a-comin'!'

And the youngsters scattered, to leave the green free, and to feast their imaginations upon the gaudy representations of the various attractions which adorned the sides of the yellow caravans that crept slowly up the dusty road from Warford. This, however, was only to be the pleasure part of the fair. Early on Tuesday morning the real business of the day started, for then the shepherds began to bring down their flocks of sheep from the surrounding mountains, the cattle-drovers came with their sleek cows and long-horned young bullocks, and whole herds of rough little Welsh ponies were driven with much noise and shouting from the high moorlands over the border.

Quiet, sleepy Gorswen seemed completely transformed. The village street from end to end was an impassable block of charging bullocks, kicking ponies, barking collies, and bawling drovers, which overflowed past the Rectory and up to the Willows on the one hand, and nearly as far as the Abbey gates on the other. Having tried in vain to edge a way through the press, Peggy and Bobby tacked round by the fields, and scrambling over a garden wall, found a temporary refuge in the churchyard, which stood some height above the level of the road, and where, from the vantage-ground of a convenient tombstone, they found they had an excellent view of the fair below. The noise was deafening. Animals were lowing, bellowing, bleating, whinnying, or squeaking in every note of the octave; cocks crew, ducks quacked, dogs barked, and men talked and shouted in Welsh and English till a chance comer might have imagined himself in pandemonium. A cartful of little pigs drawn up beneath the wall rent the air with their cries, and not the least funny incident was to watch a stout farmer's wife, despairing of driving her bargain through the crowd, wrap her squealing purchase in her mantle, and carry him off in her arms, like 'Alice' with the Duchess's baby. Most of the cows had been sold first thing, and were being driven away with much forcible language on the part of their drovers, and it was now the turn of the cart-horses, beautiful glossy creatures with tails tied up with straw and manes plaited with ribbons as if for May-day. By good luck their paces were tried just under the churchyard, so the children got all the fun of the bargaining.

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'There's Jimmy Fowler selling his Black Bess,' cried Peggy, nearly falling over the wall in her excitement. 'See that tall Welshman feeling her knees and looking at her teeth. *Aren't* they quarrelling over the price? Oh, he's taken her, for they've both clapped their hands over it! What a lot of sovereigns he's counting into Jimmy's hand! Now he's leading her away. I hope she's got a good home; she's such a gentle old thing!'

'Here come the ponies!' shouted Bobby, as a wild stampede round the inn-corner proclaimed the advent of one of the principal features of the fair.

It was a good thing that the children were in a place of safety, for anyone down in the roadway below stood a very fair chance of being trampled to death by the frightened, plunging herd which surged up the street, scattering the spectators like leaves before a storm. Utterly wild and unbroken, the little rough-coated things showed their disapproval of this their first taste of civilization by every means in their power, rearing, bucking, and kicking to the best of their ability. Bargaining in that throng was no easy matter, but their owners would dash in, seize a pony by the mane and tail, and by sheer force drag it away from its companions, the very small size of the animals rendering practicable what would have been impossible with a larger breed. Dealers had come from all parts of England and Wales, for Gorswen Fair was noted for its ponies, and a good deal of money changed hands that day. It made Peggy quite sad to think that the little creatures were mostly bought for the mines, and that, once broken and trained, they would never see daylight again, but spend their lives drawing trucks up and down the low galleries underground, having said good-bye to their native moorlands for ever.

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Across the road, in the broad square by the inn, the sheep were huddled in pens, each flock watched by its own clever collie, who seemed to think it a cardinal virtue to get up a free fight with every other dog in the fair. Barking, biting, and snarling, the combatants had continually to be seized by the tails, forcibly separated, and kicked yelping back to their duties, where they stood with bristling ears, growling at each other through the hurdles, and showing their teeth like a pack of wolves. But the buying and selling were over at last, and the live-stock having been conveyed away, Gorswen turned its attention to the side of pleasure. Small booths sprang up like magic under the church wall, and cheap-jacks and travelling hucksters began to proclaim their wares. The thrifty village housewives were doing a thriving business in tea and ginger-pop, for a cattle fair is thirsty work, and the inn was filled to overflowing. All the little gardens were set out with chairs and tables, and the rattle of cups and the flying of corks made a brisk accompaniment to the buzz of conversation. The crowd which surged along the main street was a laughing, merry-making crowd, indulging in a flow of broad chaff and humour, and bandying jokes with friends and strangers alike.

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The children had returned after dinner to their point of vantage on the churchyard wall, and found as much amusement in the sight below as in the livelier scenes of the morning.

'There's Joe!' cried Bobby with deep interest, as that worthy passed sheepishly by, a posy of wall-flowers in his buttonhole and the blacksmith's daughter hanging on his arm. 'He's got a tall

collar and a pair of tan shoes on. *Isn't* he a swell!

Nancy's hat was a conspicuous object among the smart throng, for Lilian, after one peep at the fair, had charitably kept house herself, and allowed her hand-maiden to take a holiday, and the damsel seemed to have collected so many admirers that the luckless Sally was entirely eclipsed. Old David was there, quite smiling for once, with Mrs. David in a new bonnet, and quite a swarm of small grandchildren around him.

'He's actually buying them humbugs!' said Peggy. 'And he carried the little one in the blue dress all down the street. I never saw David look so pleasant in my life before. I think holidays agree with him!'

Peggy was right there, for a little pleasure is good for most people, and there were many bright faces and hearty greetings and handshakings among the pushing crowd.

'Hello! so this is where you're hiding!' cried a voice from the roadway below; and Archie seized an overhanging branch of the big yew-tree, and swung himself up into the churchyard. 'I have been looking for you everywhere. Couldn't find you this morning for the jam. I've seen some cute sights in my life, but this fair do beat 'em all! It's like Barnum's and Mexican Joe flung together, with a cake-walk afterwards!' [239]

'It's bigger than ever this year, and prices are well up,' remarked Bobby, with the air of a budding farmer. 'We sold our brown cow for a pound more than we thought we should, and the ponies went off ever so high. Did you watch them race round this corner? Didn't the people run?'

'You should see us break in big horses wild out West. That would make you stare, if you like. This is mere child's play to it. Where's Lilian?'

'Keeping house. Mrs. Davenport's there. She drove over to the fair with her gardener, and she's bought two cows and four little pigs. They've turned them all into the loose-box at the Abbey, and they're waiting till the roads are quieter to take them home. She'll be there for some time yet. No, we thought we wouldn't go back to tea just at present; we're not hungry.'

Divining the cause of this very unwonted lack of appetite on the part of his friends, Archie proposed an adjournment to one of the numerous stalls below.

'Come along with me,' he said, 'and have some cakes and ginger-pop. We'll do the shows afterwards, and have a real high old time. I'll stand treat.'

Nothing loth to have a share in the afternoon's fun, the children dropped from the wall, and each accommodated with one of Archie's arms, they went the round of the fair in true village fashion. They feasted upon ginger-nuts at one stall and lemonade at another, and filled their pockets with mint rock and caramels. Archie was determined to enter every one of the gaudy shows which were drawn up in a line along the green, and dealt out his pennies in princely fashion. [240]

'Here you are, sir, the fat woman! A most improvin' exhibition!'

'The wild man from Borneo! Safe in an iron cage, and can't hurt yer!'

'This way for the giant and dwarf! Come in, and open yer minds!'

'Circassian beauty! Only a penny!'

'All right, keep your hair on, old chaps!' cried Archie, nearly pulled to pieces among the rival showmen. 'We calculate to work right down the row in due course, and we'll take you all in turn. Let us start fair and square with number one!'

Number one proved to be the 'Wild Man from Borneo,' a half-human looking creature with hairy arms ('Just monkey-skin stitched on to him,' Archie assured the children), who sat jabbering in a corner of his cage, making occasional ape-like grabs at the clothing of the passers-by. He was such a palpable fraud that they soon left him, to gaze on the genuine charms of the fat woman, who sat stolid and smiling on a sofa, displaying a stout ankle to the best advantage. Peggy was rather fascinated, but Archie made such very rude inquiries as to whether she were aspiring to attain an equal bulk that she indignantly dragged him away to view the living skeleton, a fearful, hollow-cheeked object, whose bones could almost be counted. After that came the giant and dwarf, the former a weedy specimen of unwholesome overgrowth, while the latter looked as if he had been reared upon gin to keep him small. Then there was the Circassian Beauty, with the strong suggestion of Whitechapel about her, the bearded lady, the man with the expansive skin, the six-legged calf, and the two-headed duck, to say nothing of the man who ate fire and swallowed swords as if they constituted his usual diet. [241]

Archie insisted upon trying both the swing-boats and the merry-go-round, and supported the drooping Peggy (who found the motion tend to sea-sickness) with a firm arm, otherwise I fear she would have slipped off her prancing steed altogether. They spent quite a long time in the shooting-gallery, and won a cocoa-nut, which Bobby proudly carried round the fair, and they had their photographs taken in a group, but some air-bubbles having unfortunately got on to the plate, their countenances came out speckled as though they were suffering from a virulent attack of small-pox; but Peggy kept it, all the same, as a memento of the occasion. Archie peeped into the cinematograph, but judging it not very suitable for his little companions, marched them on to hear the gramophone instead, which was winding out a rather indistinguishable song.

'I can't hear a single one of the words,' said Peggy, rather disappointed. 'Something makes such a buzzing all the time.'

'Yes, that's the machinery. I guess they've not got it set up quite square. I'd soon fix it for them, if they'd let me. I took ours all to pieces once at home'—and Archie glanced quite wistfully at the instrument, almost ready to offer his services gratis, till a suggestive pull from Peggy in the direction of the door caused him to remember that his friends might prefer the superior attractions of the menagerie.

Neither Peggy nor Bobby had ever seen a wild-beast show before, for those visits to the Zoo, which are the joy of little Londoners, do not fall to the share of country children, and Archie had quite a lively time keeping them out of harm's way, for Peggy declared the leopard looked so exactly like Tabbyskins at home that she must positively try to stroke it, and was under the rope and up to the bars before Archie could seize her by her skirts and drag her back, while Bobby's curiosity on the subject of jackals and hyenas nearly led to the ejection of the whole party from the tent. The small rodents and the mongoose delighted Peggy, and they would have stopped for ever watching the monkeys, and feeding them on nuts and biscuits, but Archie had other plans. [242]

'There's a circus down by the river, with Japanese acrobats, and performing dogs, and a pig that stands on its head. I know you'd just admire to see them; and it can't be late yet, so come right along!'

Such an inducement sent even the attractions of the baby 'possum to the winds, and feeling that Archie was indeed a friend worth having, they trotted ecstatically under his wing to the great, flapping tent, where the flaming posters set forth the attractions of 'The Brothers Amalfi,' 'Jingo, the Performing Pig,' and the 'Marvellous Flying Girl.' Being well provided with pocket-money, and liking to do things in style, Archie took reserved seats, and they sat in great state on a front bench covered with faded scarlet cloth, and felt proudly that the man with the drum kept his eye upon them, and the clown turned in their direction when he let off his best jokes.

It was all a whirl of delight to Peggy and Bobby, from the accomplished dogs who danced skirt-dances to the little pig who dragged the clown in a mail-cart and turned somersaults with amazing dexterity. The flying lady fluttered across the tent so naturally that you quite forgot you could see the wire that supported her airy form; the Japanese acrobats climbed ropes, hung head downwards from poles, and suspended themselves in a combination of marvellous attitudes, finally tying their agile bodies together in a knot; a Hindoo conjuror performed marvels in the way of canaries from under pocket-handkerchiefs, umbrellas out of top-hats, even producing yards and yards of coloured ribbons out of his own open mouth, much to Bobby's mystification; while the horses pounded round the ring with quite commendable spirit, and a lady rider in gauze and spangles jumped through hoops on to their backs with reckless daring. [243]

'Oh, Archie, take me home!' cried Peggy at last, for a diet of ginger-nuts, mint-rock, and lemonade is not exactly sustaining, and the hobby-horses and swings, combined with the hot, stifling atmosphere of the tent, made her suddenly feel as if the world were turning round her.

'All right, old girl; you do look queer, certainly. Cling on to me, and we'll fight our way out somehow. Come along, Bobby. Now then, make room there, can't you? The lady's ill!' And pushing, edging, and struggling through the crowd, Archie half carried her down the tent, and tugged her through the doorway into the fresh air outside.

They nearly fell into Father's arms.

'Why, you naughty children! wherever have you been?' he exclaimed. 'I have been hunting for you for hours. Lilian is almost distracted, thinking you had been kidnapped in the fair; and Miss Forster has sent up twice from the Willows. Don't you know it is nearly nine o'clock?'

'They've been all right with me, sir,' said Archie. 'I've been taking them round the shows, and time went so fast, I forgot to look at my watch. But if aunt's in a stew, I'd better cut off home as fast as I can, and ease her mind. Here, Peggy, take the rest of the mint-rock, Bobby has the gingerbread!' [244]

But the remains of the revel, crammed generously into her arms, seemed the last straw to poor Peggy, and Father took home such a very limp and dejected young lady that he might well remark it was a good thing fair-day only came once a year, an opinion in which a great many people in Gorswen might feel disposed to agree with him.

CHAPTER XXI

ROLLO'S GRAVE

'Under the wide and starry sky

Dig the grave, and let him lie.
Glad did he live, and gladly
die,
And he laid him down with a
will.'

ROLLO, now grown into a fine dog of a year old, remained Peggy's favourite among all her numerous pets. Though she had not again tried him for a bedfellow, he was still the companion of her walks, and the most winsome playmate on wet days, and Peggy firmly believed that he understood every word she said to him. He was growing clever with the sheep, too, and Father hoped to be able to train him into a really valuable collie, even hinting that he might in time gain a prize at the annual sheep-dog contests which were held for the district of Gorswen and the Welsh border. Peggy liked to see Rollo working with the sheep, the tips of his ears twitching and his faithful brown eyes bright with intelligence, as he cleverly sorted the lambs which Father had pointed out from the rest of the flock, and drove them neatly into the enclosure, coming up whimpering with pride for the praise which he knew awaited his efforts.

One lovely April morning Peggy started off alone, on the ostensible errand of going to pay half a crown which was owing to old Williams, the mole-catcher, but the more real one of gathering primroses and hunting about for birds' nests. It was seldom that she was separated from Bobby, who was as constant as her shadow, but to-day he had preferred to stay and work in his garden, having many designs for its improvement, while the holidays were waning only too fast. Peggy had whistled for Rollo, but he was not to be found, and it was only when she was more than half-way down the pasture that he came racing after her as hard as he could tear, nearly knocking her down in the exuberance of his joy.

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Instead of walking along the high-road, Peggy determined to take the path through the fields which skirted the preserves belonging to Lord Hazelford's estate, for the finest primroses grew at the edge of the wood, and the earliest bluebells, and many a snug little nest might be found hidden away in those quiet hedgerows. It was a glorious morning, with the larks singing overhead and the thrushes trilling in the bushes, and that delicious smell of the earth which we often notice in early spring, and which makes the blood run through our veins like rising sap. The trees were clothed with the pale, tender green of April, and a cuckoo, the first of the year, flew out of the copse, and, cuckooing loudly, sped over to where the larch-trees were bursting out into a crowd of tassels. Peggy had no pocket in her dress, but she turned the half-crown in her hand for good luck, and hoped it might answer the same purpose. Rollo was almost as happy as his mistress. He poked his nose into all the rabbit-burrows, he chased the birds, and dug holes for rats, and generally behaved as if he were a puppy again, instead of a sedate, grown-up dog, snapping at the flies, and standing over Peggy wagging his tail in approval, while she gathered violets and wood-anemones.

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The path which Peggy was following ran along a lane with the wood on one side and a tall hedge on the other. It was a lonely spot, for there was not even a farmhouse in sight, and as it was only a by-road it was very seldom frequented, even by the country people. As she swung the gate open, and passed from the field into the lane, she saw a sight which for a moment made her hang back doubtfully, for a tramp lay stretched out full length asleep in the sunshine, his tattered clothes and broken boots a strange contrast to the bed of white daisies and celandine upon which he lay. Peggy was not generally afraid of poor people, but even in sleep this man had an evil, hang-dog look about his face, which might have warned many an older person to give him a wide berth. She stood for a little while with the gate in her hand, hesitating whether to go forward or not, then, thinking she could probably pass him quietly without waking him, she walked on, treading on tip-toe. But he could not have been so fast asleep as she supposed, for he sprang up as she neared him, and casting a swift glance round to see whether she were accompanied or alone, held out his hand, and begged for money.

'I have none to give you,' said Peggy, trying to pass him by; but he stood over the path before her with a blustering air.

'No money! What's that in your hand?' he said roughly.

Peggy put her hand under her dress, and tried to beat a retreat to the gate.

'Now then!' cried the man, with a horrible oath, 'none of your slinking off! You give me what you have there, or I'll break every bone in your body, and worse! Here! Hand it over, quick!'

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He came a step nearer, but at that moment there was a rush and a rustle, and Rollo bounded like an arrow through the gate, and flew at his throat. The two rolled over together, and Peggy clung trembling to the gatepost as she watched the confused heap at her feet, Rollo scratching, snarling, and biting like a wild beast, and the tramp kicking, fighting, and swearing in a way which made her blood go cold to hear. She was too terrified to run away, and could only stand there, a breathless witness of the scuffle. Now the dog had the mastery, and now the man, as each panted and fought for his life; but at length something bright gleamed in the sunlight, there was a cry of agony, and Rollo lay in a pool of blood upon the grass. The tramp raised himself slowly up, and looked at Peggy. Peggy shrieked, such a shriek of ghastly terror that it might have been heard a mile away, and mercifully it was heard, for there was an answering call from the wood, followed by a rustle of branches and dead leaves, and the keeper and his son burst through the thick undergrowth, and came scrambling over the fence, almost before the echo of her cry had died away. The tramp took to his heels, and was off down the lane with sturdy Harry Adams

racing after him, in less time than it takes to tell it.

'After him, Hal!' yelled his father. 'Don't let the villain escape! Send a shot through his leg if he's gaining on you! Has the brute hurt you, Miss Vaughan?'—looking Peggy tenderly over to see that no damage was done.

Peggy shook her head, for speech seemed almost impossible at that moment, and she broke away from the keeper's eager inquiries to kneel down by Rollo's side, trying vainly to staunch the crimson stream that was draining his life away. But Rollo was beyond the reach of help now. The poor beast made a feeble effort to raise himself up to greet his loved little mistress; he whined, licked her hand, and with one last affectionate glance from his rapidly-glazing eyes, rolled over on his side—quite dead.

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'He was a faithful friend, Peggy, for he laid down his life for you,' said Father later on in the day, when poor Rollo's body had been carried home to the stable, and the tramp safely lodged by Mr. Adams and Harry in Warford Gaol, to await his trial for attempted highway robbery and assault.

Peggy had cried till her cheeks were purple and swollen and her eyes were only two aching slits. She took her troubles hardly, and just at present it seemed to her as if life could never be quite the same again. Bobby, almost equally afflicted, had the added trial of trying to conceal his grief, for he regarded tears as unmanly, and the result was a peculiar shortness and roughness of manner, with frequent rushings away to the barn when his feelings overcame him. Joe, whose sympathy could not have been more genuine if Peggy had lost a parent, hovered about all day, trying to console the bereaved pair, with small success, till towards evening a sudden flash of genius inspired him to suggest a funeral, perhaps his village experience teaching him that the bustle and preparation necessary for such a ceremony was the best safety-valve to work off sorrow.

'We might bury him among the ruins, Miss Peggy. There's a fine place round by the old abbot's house, where the ground is soft, and we could dig easy; and I've a cousin in the slate-quarries at Bethogwen as has promised many a time to cut me a little tombstone as a present, if ever I was wantin' one, so I'll ask him to bring it next time he comes, and put Rollo's name on it, and the day, and as how he died defendin' you; and we'll fix it up nice, and plant flowers round, just as if it was the churchyard.'

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Peggy sat up, and wiped her eyes with the corner of her damp pocket-handkerchief.

'He ought to be in the real churchyard,' she said chokily. 'If ever a dog deserved the Victoria Cross and a military funeral, it's Rollo!'

'Do you think he'll go to heaven?' asked Bobby, with a suspicious gulp.

'Of course he will! I wonder you can ask such a question! Heaven wouldn't be heaven unless we found Rollo there! We'll wrap his body in the Union Jack, and pick all our best flowers to strew round him; and you might fire off your old pistol over his grave, if Father will let you have any gunpowder—a parting salute, you know, like they do for officers,' said Peggy, cheering up a little at the thought of arranging the obsequies.

Just at sunset the melancholy procession started off from the stable towards the ruins. Joe and Bobby were bearers, and carried between them the packing-case lid, draped with all the available flags that could be found, which bore what had once been poor Rollo. Peggy followed as chief mourner, her arms full of wreaths and flowers, and a piece of black crape, purloined from the scrap-bag, pinned conspicuously upon her hat. The place chosen was among the most perfect part of the old Abbey, not so much filled up with stones and rubbish as the great refectory or the remains of the choir. Tradition pointed it out as the abbot's house, and that name had clung to it through all the hundreds of years since the busy monks had lived and worked there.

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'Suppose you dig just here, Joe,' cried Peggy, selecting a spot where a blackthorn was bursting forth into a sheet of white blossom and the primroses were yellowest and best.

Joe moistened the palms of his hands in the orthodox fashion, and seizing the spade began to shovel away at the loose, light soil. He had dug about three feet deep when his spade struck against a smooth, flat stone, which, instead of coming out easily amongst the rubbish, seemed to extend for some way underneath the surface.

'It looks like a paving-stone, for all the world,' he said, sweeping the soil away from it with his hand. 'I'll dig out the earth all around it, and see what it do be.'

It took Joe a considerable time to clear the stone, though Bobby went to his aid with a trowel; but he got it free at last, and Peggy stooped down curiously to examine it.

'There are marks on it, like letters and queer figures, but they're all filled up with soil,' she said. 'It seems to me it's a kind of lid, and if you dig round the edge a little more, Joe, we might

lift it up. It's rather like the cover of one of those old stone coffins in the churchyard, only smaller. I wonder if there is anything inside?'

Joe set to work again with a will, clearing out the earth well from under the side of the stone; then, putting his fingers beneath it, he gave a mighty jerk of his strong arms, and up it came, nearly upsetting him with the force of the recoil. Three eager faces peered anxiously down into what certainly looked like the inside of a small stone coffin, but instead of containing mouldering bones, it held a good-sized chest of oak, bound with iron, rather rusted and crumbling, but still holding quite firmly together.

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'Lift it out, Joe!' cried Peggy, in such excitement that Rollo was almost forgotten for the moment. 'Whatever can be inside it?'

'It bean't no light weight, Miss Peggy, whatever it be' groaned Joe, for it was as much as he could manage to heave the heavy chest from its resting-place on to the grass above.

'There may be money and all sorts of treasures in it,' suggested Bobby. 'Perhaps the smugglers left it behind.'

'Nay, this be older nor smugglers,' said Joe, with a glance at the solid workmanship and the quaint carving on the old lid, 'unless they made use of an old thing for their own purposes. Let be, Master Bobby, I can't do nothing with you hangin' over me like this!'

He had been fumbling with the ancient rusty lock while he spoke, and it now broke away from the rotten woodwork. He flung back the heavy lid, and revealed—neither gold nor jewels, nothing but a pile of musty-looking old parchments and books. The children looked at each other in blank disappointment.

'There might be something underneath,' said Peggy, beginning to rummage the chest to the very bottom; but her hopes were soon dashed, for a further search did not bring anything more to light.

'How disgusting! Who cares for old books?' exclaimed Bobby, whose heart had been set on stolen jewels, smuggled valuables, or daggers and firearms at the least.

'They're very funny ones, at any rate,' said Peggy, picking up one of the despised tomes. 'Just look at the backs. They're so thick and heavy. They seem to be made of metal of some kind, with little bits of coloured glass stuck into them; but they're terribly tarnished and dirty. I can't read the writing inside at all, and there are the queerest little pictures all round the edges of the pages.'

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'What be I to do with the box?' asked Joe, gazing at their find in some perplexity. 'And be I to dig another hole for the burial, miss, or not?'

Her thoughts recalled to the melancholy occasion, Peggy flung down the book, and her grief broke forth anew.

'We'll bury him in the old stone coffin,' she declared. 'We'll line it with leaves and primroses, and then lay him in, and just drop on the lid again. I'm glad he should have a real coffin, after all, and the Abbey's almost as good as the churchyard, for Father says lots of the old monks must have been buried here, if we could only find their graves.'

Even Ophelia could not have chosen a more flowery resting-place, for the children covered poor Rollo with violets, primroses, and white sloe-blossom. Joe carefully replaced the lid, and shovelled on the soil again, heaping it up, and smoothing it with the flat of his spade, in imitation of the village sexton.

Father had refused to allow gunpowder, so the pistol was useless, but Peggy placed a wreath of white jonquils picked from her own garden upon the grave, and dropped so many tears over it that I do not think any dog could have been more truly mourned and regretted.

'You won't forget about the tombstone, will you, Joe?' she said, finding the prospect of a monument to her pet decidedly consoling. 'I mean to make up a nice epitaph for him, in poetry if I can manage it—something about his being such a beauty, and then dying doing his duty, because that would rhyme.'

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'Miss Peggy,' declared Joe solemnly, 'you shall have that there little tombstone, if I has to go without one myself. You write the words out plain on a piece of paper, and I'll walk over to Bethogwen the very next time I gets a holiday. You'll see my cousin will do it beautiful, havin' worked a year in a stonemason's yard, and being fond of a dog, too. He might even try his hand at a weepin' angel or a broken flower at the top, but I can't promise that, not knowin' whether he's kept his tools.'

The box containing the old manuscript was carried into the loft by Joe, and examined by Father at his leisure.

'I don't know much about this sort of thing, Peggy,' he said, 'but I should imagine they would be mostly old records and deeds of the Abbey. It is marvellous how well they are preserved, but the oak and the stone combined must have kept out the air, and parchment does not decay like paper. Valuable? Not from a money point of view, I am afraid; but no doubt they would prove very interesting to some antiquarian who could read them. We will keep them here until the Rector

comes home again. I expect he will be delighted to look over them some day, and will tell us what they are all about.'

Mr. Vaughan had intended to write an account of the find to the local newspaper, but in the hurry and worry of his affairs he forgot. The Rector was still away, and as nobody else took any interest in such matters, the mysterious old chest stayed neglected among the corn-sacks. Only Peggy sometimes stole up the stone staircase, and taking one of the strange books from its hiding-place, would pore over the quaint pictures which bordered the pages. They fascinated her with their crude drawing and colours still vivid and bright—saints with halos round their heads, kneeling rapt in prayer, with folded hands, in the midst of green fields and flowers, while the Virgin, clothed in blue and gold, appeared with a whole company of angels from the skies above; patient martyrs, with wan faces upturned to heaven, while their persecutors flung stones, or heaped on the burning brands; the blessed passing into the joys of Paradise, with the wicked writhing in the tormenting flames below; and round all a curious illuminated bordering, where strange faces peered out of twisting foliage, and figures of birds and animals were intertwined with patterns of flowers or the tail of a capital letter. What patient fingers, she wondered, had toiled over these in days gone by, working with paint-pots and palette of gold to put the glory of paradise on his pages? Had the world altered much in all these years? And how little did the old artist think that his work would be found and marvelled at when he and his order were alike forgotten, and the very Abbey where he had lived and laboured had long since crumbled away!

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So the old chest remained in the loft, as hidden there as when it had been buried in the earth, and Peggy came and went, never dreaming in the time that followed that these ancient, musty relics could in any way be bound up with the fate and fortunes of the Vaughans.

CHAPTER XXII

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DEEPENING TROUBLE

'The web of our life is a mingled yarn,
Good and ill together.'

As the year advanced, Mr. Vaughan found that his troubles by no means decreased. Mr. Norton, urged on by his solicitor, was a hard creditor, and would allow neither time nor mercy. He had taken a fancy to the place, it seemed, and hearing that some of the neighbouring properties would probably soon be on sale, wished to settle down at Gorswen and let it form the nucleus of a large new estate. Unless the whole of the mortgages could be paid up by the end of July, the property must fall into his hands, and the black cloud which had hung for so long over the Abbey seemed on the verge of breaking.

Mr. Vaughan had tried by every means in his power to meet his difficulties, but all the channels he had counted upon had failed him, and as he sat over his account-books late into the night blank ruin stared him in the face. So impossible did it seem in any way to raise so large a sum of money that he began quietly to make arrangements to realize what he could on the stock and furniture, to enable him to make a fresh start in a fresh place. It would be too trying, he decided, to settle down anywhere in the neighbourhood of his old home, and it would be better for both himself and his children to seek their fortune in a new country, where his practical knowledge of farming should stand him in good stead. He had thought at first of Kansas or Nebraska, but having a friend in Australia, who might help him considerably in the choice of land, he determined to give the preference to the colonies, and to try his luck under the Southern Cross. It would be impossible to take much more than their personal belongings with them, so everything else would have to be sold on previously. Already an auctioneer had been sent for to the Abbey to inspect the furniture, and give some idea of what it might be likely to realize. It made Lilian's blood boil to see him appraising the old oak, examining the curtains and carpets, and taking notes of the pictures and books.

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'There's grand stuff here for a sale,' he said to her enthusiastically, rubbing his hands as if he expected her to share in his joy. 'We shall have dealers from all over the kingdom. It's not often one gets the chance of genuine antiques which have been known to be in one family for such a length of time. I shouldn't wonder, now, if that Chippendale suite were to run into three figures; it's a very scarce pattern, and much sought after. There's some china, too, that will attract many of the buyers, and should go for a fair price, and that Romney portrait ought to be quite a catch. I think you will find that in our experienced hands the very utmost will be made of everything. Of course, we shall advertise the sale in good time, and have catalogues printed and distributed in every likely quarter.'

'It seems quite bad enough to have to sell the things at all,' said Lilian afterwards. 'But to hear him talk of putting all our dear old treasures down in a catalogue made me feel absolutely ill. I can't bear to have the Romney picture go, either, because it's just like Peggy; it might have been

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painted from her"—the vision of the family portraits and the armour of her ancestors being turned over and valued by oily gentlemen of the Hebrew persuasion adding a double sting to the trial.

Bobby was still too young to fully understand everything that was taking place, but to the two girls it was a time of bitter trouble and humiliation. To Peggy, the mere fact that it should be Phyllis Norton who would take her place at the Abbey seemed as hard as anything to bear, and she knew her old home would pass to a family who would care nothing for its ancient traditions and associations. Mr. Norton had spoken freely of his plans in the neighbourhood, and it was well known that he intended to almost rebuild the house, pulling down the ruins and all the more early portion, and turning the whole into a handsome modern residence. Of romance and respect for the past he possessed not a whit, and valued the estate for its shooting and horse-rearing capabilities alone.

'All the things which we care for most will be done away with,' grieved Peggy—'the dear old tower pulled down, the ruins destroyed, the garden uprooted, and the woods cleared away. I should not have minded so much if we could have given up the place to someone who would have kept it just as it is. It seems so hard we should be turned out when we love it so. I feel as if, when we leave the Abbey, there will be nothing left!'

'We shall still have each other, Peggy,' said Father. 'And while our little circle is unbroken, I think we shall be able to make a home again somewhere. It is hard to be torn up by the roots, but you must not let it spoil your young lives, at any rate. I hope my children may get on as well in the new country as they would have done in this, though an old fellow like I am may find it difficult to settle down again.'

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'You're not old, Father,' said Lilian, stroking the hair which had shown tell-tale streaks of gray lately among the brown.

'I feel old, my dear, after all I have gone through. It is worry, not years, which ages people. But there's life in the old dog yet, and we'll make a brave push for it in Australia.'

'I wish Aunt Helen were here,' said Peggy. 'She would have been *such* a comfort in all this trouble!'

'No, no!' cried Father hastily. 'Thank God she's out of it, at any rate! I feel it one of my blessings to know she was safely settled before this came upon us. Aunt Helen has had too much trouble in her life, without taking any more upon her shoulders. She'll be grieved enough about it as it is, even out there in India with her husband to console her.'

In spite of all possible care, the secret of the state of affairs at the Abbey soon leaked out in the neighbourhood, causing the utmost consternation and regret, for the Vaughans were universally liked and respected, while for Mr. Norton nobody could find a good word. The matter was much discussed at the Bluebell Inn, where old Ephraim, having served the family for forty years, was considered an authority on the subject, and graciously allowed himself to be treated by the assembled company while he gave voice to his opinions.

'It's not as I holds by pride of birth,' he argued, 'and me a Radical fifty year and more. When I were a lad, there were a talk o' choppin' up th' land, an' givin' share and share alike to all, but they never done it. It come up sure enough at election times, as regular as free trade or the income-tax. "Three acres o' land and a cow," was what was promised th' poor man if he'd give his vote to th' Liberal candidate; but it weren't nothing but talk, and came to naught.'

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'They be mostly windbags, they candidates,' observed Tom Slater, the village blacksmith, settling himself more easily in a corner of the bench by the fireside, and holding up a stalwart finger for the pot-boy.

'Ay, as empty as a glass wi' naught in it!' replied Ephraim, shaking his head, and gazing reflectively at his empty tumbler.

Taking the hint, Tom ordered gin-and-water hot for two, and gently turned the conversation back to the Vaughans.

'If there's to be property,' said the old man, 'let them have it, sez I, as is used to it, and knows what's due to other folk. There's Mester Vaughan would always do a good turn to a poor body if it lay in his way, but this here Mester Norton's as tight-fisted a screw as ever looked at a penny twice afore he parted with it.'

'Ay, he be that, and scant honest,' cried the stout miller, with a lively remembrance of sundry hard transactions with grain for the distilleries, in which, to his chagrin, he had had distinctly the worst side of the bargain. 'It be the same with all they that make haste to get rich,' he added piously. 'But they'll take their place with Dives when other folk has gone to Abraham's bosom.'

'You hain't done badly yourself, Mester Griffiths,' suggested Tom Slater, 'if it come to a matter o' that. Folks say you've a tidy sum laid by in Warford Bank.'

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'Earned by the sweat o' my brow, Tom,' said the miller, puffing away at his long churchwarden pipe. 'The work o' my hands has been blessed and prospered. Ay, the Lord's been very good to me, and I've done Him credit, too!'

For Ebenezer Griffiths was deacon of Salem Chapel, and accustomed to regard himself as the main bulwark and pillar of the religious and moral welfare of the village.

'I've not any grudge against them as has money,' observed old Ephraim oracularly, 'but when it's used to turn them as hasn't out of their own, it's time them Socialists had a innings and stepped in. There was Mester Vaughan givin' interest fair on them mortgages, and I've heard as th' lawyer hissself said as he were safe as th' bank to pay regular, and what call had Mester Norton to buy 'em up, and ask for th' principal back, when it weren't in reason as he could raise it?'

'A case of Naboth's vineyard,' sighed the miller. 'He coveted the land, and is using foul means to get it.'

But Ephraim's knowledge of Scripture being limited, the allusion was lost upon him.

'Let th' Government take it up, sez I,' he declared, waxing excited, and thumping his fist on the table. 'It 'ud be a sight better nor passing land bills for Ireland, where no one's satisfied i' th' end, do what un may. Let Mester Vaughan go up to Lunnon, and put it fair afore th' House o' Commons, like th' deputations as th' newspapers tell on, and they'd listen to un, and see un to his rights.'

Tom Slater shook his head. He had little opinion of Parliament, having supported the wrong candidate at the last election, and pinned his faith to purely local measures.

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'We might boycott Norton, may be,' he observed thoughtfully, 'and mek the place too hot to hold him.'

'Ay, Tom, that be a good notion, surely,' put in little Sam Andrews, the joiner. 'Send him a letter with a coffin drawn out at the top, or a skull and cross-bones, to say as how that's what's waitin' for un, if he comes to Gorswen.'

'Ye'll be gettin' into trouble, Samuel,' said the miller. 'Norton would put the police on your track, and clap you in Warford Gaol for threatening his life.'

'But it wouldn't be me alone if we made a round robin o' it,' said Sam hastily, who had by no means anticipated carrying out the scheme on his own responsibility. 'Or I'd send un wi'out puttin' a name to un—a unanimous letter they calls un, I believe.'

'Anomalous?' suggested Tom Slater.

'Anonymous be the word,' said the miller. 'But it's agin the law, Sam—agin the law. Nay, it's a case where the wicked do prosper. I be main sorry for Mester Vaughan, I be, but the ways o' Providence be dark and past findin' out.'

If there was sympathy for Mr. Vaughan's trouble among the patrons of the Bluebell Inn, nearer home it waxed both keen and practical.

'Take me with you, sir,' begged poor Joe, dissolving into tears at the thought of parting with the family to whom he was so much attached. 'I'd serve you faithful, and never ask a penny of wages, but just my keep till you got settled and started. I've got eight pound ten laid by in the savings-bank, which would go towards my passage-money, and my granny would lend me the rest. I'd be glad to try my luck over the seas, and maybe it 'ud seem more homelike to Master Bobby and the young ladies to find a face they knew about 'em in a place where all was strangers.'

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Warm-hearted Nancy was in a perpetual tempest of regret, and assured Lilian that if she had not faithfully promised to marry Tom Higgins she would have packed her box and insisted upon joining the party.

'But he have took the farm, Miss Lilian, and bespoke three cows, and a pig, and twelve hens, and he be such a fule he'd no more know what to do with 'em than a babe, so I must have him, if it's for naught but the sake of the poor beasts'—which certainly seemed a most convincing reason.

Perhaps to David the anticipated change meant as much as to anyone, for he was growing too old to seek a new master, and dreaded the inevitable time when he would be shelved from work, and placed on the parish list, to the self-respecting poor always the bitterest sting of old age. The day of possible emigration for him had long gone by, and his must be the harder part of remaining to watch the Abbey pass into the hands of 'a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph,' and who could not be counted upon for either kindness or charity in his dealings with the poor around him.

As it was such an open secret, Peggy did not feel she was betraying any confidence by discussing their affairs with Archie when he came over for his brief half-term holiday, and in the seclusion of the stack-yard she poured out her troubles into his sympathetic ear.

'Oh, I say, look here, you know,' cried the boy, ruffling up his chestnut locks with both hands, which was a way he had when upset, 'if you go out to Australia, I shall come too! I could persuade aunt to go in a jiffey—the doctor said she'd be a million times better in a drier climate—and we'd take the farm next to yours. Now my poor old dad's gone, and my mother's married again, and the boys all trading off on their own account, I don't want to go back to Colorado; but I like colonial life, and farming would be a lot jollier than school, any way, for the fellows in my house are awful Johnnies, they can talk of nothing but games, and laugh at one for a crank if one tries to make things.'

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'It would be nice if you went too,' said Peggy, quite brightening at the prospect, for not the least part of her trouble had been the thought of leaving her friends.

'Then we'll go. Cheer up, Pegsie; you'll see it won't be so bad as you imagine. Australia's a fine place to get on in, and there'll be queer trees and flowers, and kangaroos, and natives, and all sorts of new things to see. Of course, I know it's an awful wrench leaving the Abbey; but, after all, there are other places in the world to locate in. There's no end of jolly fun going on on board ship, I can tell you, and you'll have a real good time on the voyage out, and at the ports, especially with me to show you around; and when we get fixed up on our new ranches I guess you'll allow that things are pretty first-rate!'

'It would never be the Abbey, though, however jolly it was. I had meant to live here all my life, and be buried in the transept when I die. I have a feeling as if the Crusaders and the Elizabethan lady and gentleman on the monuments would miss us when we go away,' said Peggy, relapsing into pensiveness once more.

But Archie had been brought up in a democratic country, and had little sympathy for the ties of race. [265]

'Oh, bother the ancient Crusaders, and the other folks under the tombstones! If they could get up again and chop off old Norton's head, and fight anyone who laid a finger on the Abbey, they'd be of some use to you. I believe there are a pile of old Forsters lying under elaborate tombs somewhere in Northumberland, but what have they ever done for me? It's no use being sentimental about old times. I'll undertake there was precious little sentiment about them in those days. Didn't they come sailing over from Denmark and Normandy, and all sorts of places, to settle down in England, which was a new country then, just as we're thinking of going out to Australia? Five hundred years hence we shall be quite ancient history ourselves, and folks can romance over our tombstones if they feel inclined. And after all, why should one's ancestors do everything for one? I guess I'd rather make my mark in the world for myself,'—for the boy had all the enthusiasm of a pioneer about him, added to a sturdy spirit of independence.

This was quite a new gospel to Peggy, and though she could not altogether reconcile it with her clinging love for the home of so many generations of Vaughans, it did her good in that it gave her a fresh aspect of life, for it is always wise to look at things from another person's point of view, as well as your own, and she had a great respect for Archie's opinions.

In the meantime things went on at the Abbey just as though the family were not, metaphorically speaking, sitting on the edge of a volcano. Daily duties must be done, however sore your heart may be, and the work of a farm can never be stopped for your private troubles. So Lilian reared fluffy chickens and yellow ducklings which would probably never grace her poultry-yard, and Father cultivated the fields, though he might not be there to gather in the harvest. It seemed hard to Peggy to think that the trees would bud and the flowers blossom, and the crops grow, when they were not there to watch it all, for most of us have a kind of feeling that we are the important centre around which Nature turns, instead of only mere spectators of her varying moods, and sometimes it felt so impossible that such an utter upheaval in their lives could really come to pass that she would have to shake herself to believe that it was not all a bad dream; but as she noticed the quiet preparations that went on, and the added worry on Father's face, she realized that it was only too true, and that every day was bringing them nearer to that terrible twenty-fifth of July when the mortgages would fall due. [266]

There is always a silver lining, however, to every cloud, and I think this trouble, hard as it was to bear, made one of the stepping-stones in Peggy's character. At first she had been inclined to grumble and repine, and say that life was using them hardly, but something which the Rector (always the family confidant) wrote to her in one of his frequent letters made her stop and think.

'If you are really anxious to be a help and comfort, Peggy, here is your grand opportunity. Now that the sky is so overcast at home, suppose you put your own part of the trouble quite on one side, and let your bright ways make the family sunshine. One cheerful person in a sad house can work wonders, and by being specially gentle and loving just now you can make Father remember that his children are more to him than his old home, and that, after all, love is the best thing in this life, and worth more than houses, or lands, or any goods which the world may offer us. A really bright, sunny disposition is as much a talent as any other of God's good gifts, so be thankful, child, you possess it, and make the best use you can of it in the Master's service.' [267]

Peggy put the letter by among the treasures in her work-box. She did not speak about it, or show it to anyone, but after that not a further grumble escaped her, and she managed to find such a bright side to the question, and talked so often and so hopefully of the future, that Father said she was as good as a tonic, and began to find his little daughter such a comfort to him, and so different to the old thoughtless Peggy of former days, that I scarcely know how he would have got through that trying time without her.

THE ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY

'Who comes to the ruin, the ivy-clad ruin,
With old shaking arches, all moss-
overgrown?'

MAY drew to a close with a burst of warm weather, and the Whitsuntide holidays promised to prove all that the heart of the cheap tripper might desire, though beyond a chance cyclist or two that article was as unknown as the dodo in quiet Gorswen, where fortunately the charms of the scenery had not yet been spoilt by picnic parties leaving greasy sandwich papers and ginger-beer bottles in the woods, and demanding noisy entertainment in the village, nor the youth of the neighbourhood corrupted into hanging round the public-house doors to listen to the mirth and songs of the excursionists within, or offer faded bunches of flowers in exchange for halfpence. Gorswen, having taken its annual holiday at Easter, made no account of Whit-week, and went on with its work as usual, for the agricultural labourer does not claim so much in the way of pleasure as his brethren of the loom or the forge, and is content with an occasional fair or village feast to break the monotony of his daily life.

Whit Monday was a holiday at school, however, and Peggy and Bobby, having the day at home, took a sudden fit of industry, and started to weed the shrubbery with the noble intention of having it raked over and tidied by teatime, being put somewhat on their mettle by Father's remarks on the subject of sustained labour, and his laughing incredulity when they assured him he would find it all neatly finished when he returned from Warford that evening. It was a warm day, and gardening is particularly back-breaking work, but they toiled grimly away, neither liking to be the first to give in, and soon began to make considerable headway among the weeds.

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'Hello!' cried Bobby suddenly, pausing in his task of uprooting a giant dock. 'Who on earth is all this crew coming up the drive? I say, Peggy, do come and look!'

Peggy was not sorry to find an excuse to fling down her hoe and basket, and she came scrambling up the bank just in time to witness the strange procession that was slowly straggling from the great gate towards the front-door. There were gentlemen, young, old and middle-aged, some in tourist tweeds, some in boating flannels, and some in sober black, most of them with books or road-maps in their hands, while a sprinkling of ladies, both grave and frivolous, in light summer costumes and with gay parasols, completed the party. That they were on an errand of pleasure was evident, for there was a tolerable amount of laughing and talking, while all appeared to be taking stock of the house and surroundings with considerable interest.

'Whatever can they want?' said Peggy, who certainly had never seen the Abbey invaded by such an alarming number of callers before. 'They look as if they were going to take the place by storm!'

After a short parley at the door, the visitors were conducted by Nancy to the side-gate, where they all filed into the ruins, from whence a lively hum of conversation could plainly be heard.

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'I vote we go and see what they're after,' said Bobby, his curiosity getting the better of him; and, abandoning the weeds, the children ran round by the kitchen garden into the house.

'Did ye ever see the like?' said Nancy, as they catechized that giggling maiden for information. 'They calls themselves "The Welsh Borders Society of Antiquaries," so they sez. It's got the name on this little paper as they've left, and they comes to the door wantin' master's permission to look at the ruins. I sez he ain't in, but I asks Miss Lilian, and she tells 'em "Yes," and there they all is, pokin' about amongst the nettles, and grubbin' up stones, and stickin' bits of mortar in their pockets, and dodgin' about with yard measures, for all the world like a set of lunatics. What they can find to look at passes me, for there's nought there but the walls and stones. And it seems they've come all the way from Warford in waggonettes. Just think of that, now! Only to look at a few old ruins, when they might 'a' spent Whit Monday in the Spa Gardens, with the Grenadier Band, and the variety company down from Lunnon, too!'

'But the ruins are tremendously interesting, Nancy; I don't wonder people want to come and look at them. Just think how old they are!'

'Well, the gentry has queer tastes, I will allow. There's you and Master Bobby, now, always a-collecting of stones and insects and like rubbish to litter up the Rose Parlour, and I suppose some grown folk is as foolish as children over such things. However, it's live and let live, and if they care to take their pleasure that way, let 'em, although it wouldn't be my taste if I was a lady born.'

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'Come along, Bobby,' said Peggy, 'we'll go into the ruins, and see what these people are doing. Miss Crossland has often talked about the Antiquarian Society in the history lessons at school, and I always wanted to see one of the meetings.'

'Ay, do,' said Nancy, 'and if you can make head or tail of their talk, it's more than I can. One of 'em asked me if there was any sepulchral slabs, and it turned out she only meant tombstones after all. She could 'a' got plenty o' they in Warford Cemetery, without coming this distance, I reckon.'

Feeling rather shy, and not liking to intrude their presence upon strangers, the children followed the party into the ruins, and creeping under the protecting shelter of some bushes, found they could take quite a good view of the proceeding unobserved. The antiquarians did not seem to be discussing anything very learned just at present, for they had drawn out flasks, and packets of sandwiches, and were engaged in picnicking upon the stones in a truly modern fashion, while occasional bursts of laughter were wafted along the air.

'It looks jolly fun. I wish they'd ask us to join them!' whispered Bobby.

'I don't see Miss Crossland there,' returned Peggy. 'But perhaps she's away for Whitsuntide. They certainly seem to be having a good time.'

To enjoy an *al fresco* meal, however, was evidently not the main business of the society, for the members soon disposed of their refreshments, and began to collect in little groups round a learned-looking gentleman, who, with a bundle of papers in his hand, seemed clearing his throat in preparation for giving an address. The children could hear most of what he said, and a very interesting account of the Abbey it proved to be, with a description of the size and extent of the old buildings, and the life led by the ancient monks, which quite delighted Peggy, who revelled in Scott's novels and historical stories, and which made the past days rise up so clearly before her that she could almost fancy the bell ringing for vespers, and hear the rustle of the gray robes of the friars as they passed silently up the chancel to their stalls in the choir. The members seemed to take copious notes in pocket-books, and asked occasional questions, one literary-looking lady, in spectacles and a large black hat with nodding feathers, being particularly insistent, and volunteering so much information that she threatened to usurp the place of the lecturer, and had to be gently suppressed, while an old gentleman distributed pamphlets broadcast, declaring he had had them specially printed for the occasion. The speeches were over at length, and a last farewell round of the ruins having been made, the society finally took its departure, with the intention of viewing the church, and an injunction for all the members to assemble for tea at the Bluebell Arms at half-past four precisely.

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As the last pink parasol and straw hat disappeared through the little gate, Peggy and Bobby emerged from their retirement, somewhat stiff and cramped, and were just about to give vent to a wild war-whoop as some slight relief to their pent-up feelings when they noticed that after all they were not alone. Two antiquarians had remained behind, so evidently fascinated with their surroundings that they lingered about, measuring the walls with a yard-tape, and putting down the items in well-worn pocket-books. One of them was a singular-looking old gentleman, small and thin, with a clean-shaven face and a scholarly stoop. Seemingly he thought considerably more of his books than of such details as his toilet, for there was a very large expanse of gray sock visible above his dusty shoes, and his limp shirt-front looked guiltless of starch. In spite of the heat of the day, he wore two overcoats, one above the other, and the pockets of both were filled to overflowing with pamphlets and papers. He kept a fragment of pencil continually in the corner of his mouth, like a cigar, and Peggy noticed that when he accidentally mislaid his pocket-book he jotted down notes upon his cuffs, as if it were quite an ordinary occurrence to use them in lieu of paper. The other old gentleman was stout and jovial-looking, with a full gray beard and whiskers, and an amazingly juvenile suit of tweeds. It was evident that his pitch of enthusiasm, or perhaps physical endurance, was not equal to that of his companion, for he panted with heat as he held the other end of the yard measure, and gave vent to occasional grunts of disapprobation as he toiled painfully to the tops of mounds to get bird's-eye views of the outlined cells, or take snap-shots of the remains of the windows and columns.

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'Interesting, most interesting! Abounding at every yard with testimony of the past, and in some ways unique, and a valuable contribution to our list of early English abbeys. With your photographs, Sedgwick, we shall have ample material for our projected treatise, which I trust should be ready for the September issue of the *Archæologist*'—and the little old gentleman sat down on a broken column, and pulled a sheaf of papers out of one of his many pockets.

'Warm work, though, Doctor,' replied the other, wiping his steaming brow. 'I believe I would sell my birthright for a tumbler of water. I wonder if they would give us some up at the house. There does not seem to be a spring or anything about here.'

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'You will be having tea soon,' said he of the two overcoats unsympathetically, 'and I am most anxious to compare your notes and measurements with my own. This is such a favourable opportunity that I think we had better seize the occasion while we are on the spot to make fresh observations in case of any discrepancies in our descriptions.'

The stout man seemed to comply unwillingly, and the friends were soon immersed in calculations, quite unaware of the two pairs of watchful eyes close by which had taken in the whole situation.

'I'm sorry for that fat man,' whispered Bobby. 'He looks as if he were ready to melt. The way he pounded up and down those mounds made me hot to watch him.'

'Poor old fellow! You'd think the other would be hot, too, in two overcoats! I declare I shall go in and fetch them some milk!' cried Peggy, starting up impulsively. 'You can stay, if you like, and tell them I'm bringing it.'

But bashful Bobby distinctly objected to accost strangers, and preferred to follow her in the direction of the house, offering to act scout while she did the foraging. Not being quite certain how her efforts at hospitality might be received at headquarters, Peggy watched Nancy

successfully out of the way, and dashing into the dairy, emerged presently with a jug of milk and two glasses perilously balanced on a tray, which she nearly upset in her efforts to elude the returning deity of the kitchen.

'You can go first, Bobby,' she suggested, as she struggled with her burden through the side-gate, 'and say "Good-afternoon," and "Would they like some milk?" and then I can offer them the tray.'

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'Well, I like that, when it was your idea altogether! No, thank you, I don't care to be in it!—and meanly deserting at the last moment, Bobby fled into the sanctuary of the garden, leaving Peggy to carry her refreshments to the ruins alone.

I think if it had not been for the fact that she knew Bobby was peeping at her from over the wall, Peggy would have turned tail too, but as it was, she felt bound to carry out her project, and under the fire of his laughing eyes she walked sturdily towards the strangers. She had thought of at least three pretty speeches to make for the occasion, but when it came to the point she could not remember any of them, and could only hold out the tray, blushing very much, and saying nothing at all. The old gentlemen looked so surprised at the sudden apparition before them that the numerous books and papers fell to the ground in wild confusion.

'Hebe, surely!' said the stout gentleman, with a little bow. 'Is this nectar which you are offering us, fair nymph? Doctor, this is indeed a godsend! Allow me to pour you out a glass of this beverage. Ah! nectar indeed!'—as he set down his empty tumbler. 'I feel refreshed and invigorated. May I ask if it is the sprite of the ruins to whom we are indebted for this bounty?'

Rather taken aback by his bantering tone, Peggy was at a loss what to answer, but the other old gentleman, noticing her confusion, came to the rescue.

'Many thanks, my dear, for your kindness,' he said, with stately, old-fashioned courtesy. 'We have much enjoyed the examination of your most interesting ruins, and if your Father had been at home to-day, I should have given myself the pleasure of thanking him in person. I shall make a point, however, of sending him a copy of my report in the *Archæologist*, where I trust he will find many items of information respecting the origin and history of the Abbey with which perchance he may be unacquainted. By-the-by, may I ask if any curiosities have ever been found while ploughing in these fields?'

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'Not when they were ploughing,' said Peggy, finding her voice at last. 'But when we were digging last Easter here in the ruins we found a funny old box.'

'*What!*' cried the old gentleman, bouncing up in his excitement like an indiarubber ball. 'You actually found something *here*, in the Abbey, when digging? Sedgwick, do you hear that?'

The stout man smiled appreciatively.

'Perhaps our fair nymph will kindly describe the nature of the discovery,' he suggested.

'There was a big old stone box first,' began Peggy.

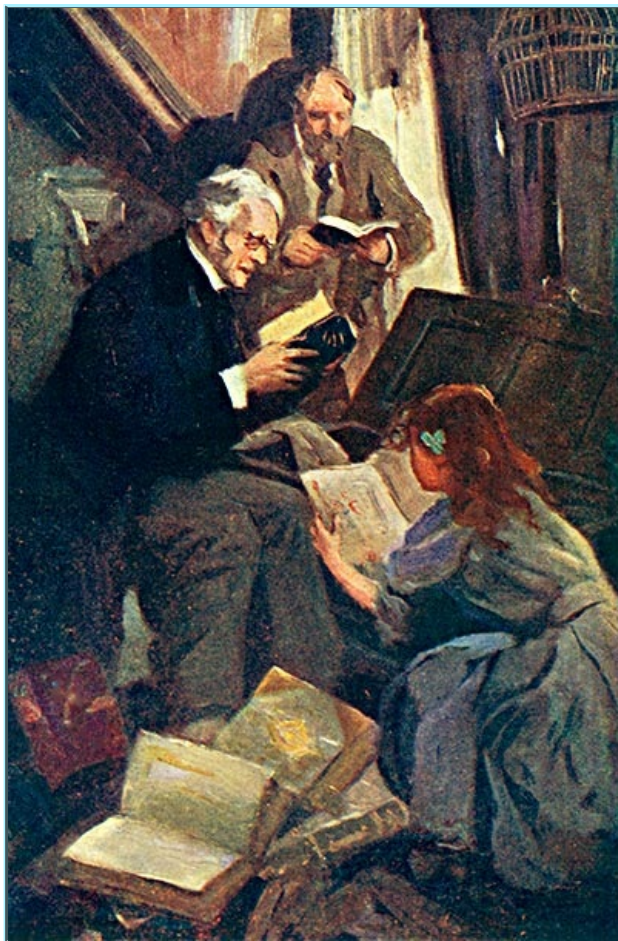
'A stone coffin!' gasped the old gentleman.

'But there weren't any bones inside,' continued Peggy, rather enjoying herself now that she had once broken the ice. 'It was something much queerer than that—a wooden box full of old books, with writing you can't read, and strange little pictures all round the pages.'

'And what have you done with them? Where are they? Can you show them to me?' cried the enthusiastic antiquarian, almost dancing with eagerness.

'They're in the loft. I'll take you if you'd like to look at them.'

'Come along, Sedgwick; I believe we may be on the verge of a valuable discovery!'—and stuffing his papers into his capacious pockets, the old gentleman started off with impatient strides, bearing his stout friend in his wake like a little tug towing a steamer.



"SEDGWICK, THIS IS AN EXTRAORDINARY DAY!"

Peggy often laughed afterwards when she remembered how she escorted the pair up the rickety steps into the granary, and prevented them from falling through the trap-door into the stable below, and guided them between the sacks of grain in the dark loft, where, flinging open the wooden shutter, she let in a stream of sunlight, and disclosed to view the ancient chest.

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'A curious piece of workmanship, Sedgwick! Saxon undoubtedly, I should say.'

'I agree with you, Doctor. Shall I lift the lid?'

'By all means. Ah! what have we here?'—and the little man squatted down on a sack of oats, and lifted out one of the books with the reverent touch of the true collector.

'Unique! unique!' he cried, rubbing his hands with delight. 'Sedgwick, this is indeed a find! If I do not mistake, this is a genuine portion of the Saxon chronicle, and will make a sensation in the antiquarian world.'

'There is something here which looks like a copy of the Gospels,' replied the other, who had been turning over the contents of the chest with much interest. 'And there seem to be some exquisite breviaries and "Hours of the Virgin." Just see this illuminated border. It reminds me of the "Book of Kells."'

'The same period, doubtless. Sedgwick, this is an extraordinary day! Such a discovery only comes once in a lifetime!'

'Some of the bindings are queer, too,' put in Peggy, hunting out one of her favourites. 'Look at this. It seems as if it were made of lead, with little pieces of coloured glass stuck in it.'

'Lead! Coloured glass!' chuckled the old gentleman. 'My dear child, let me tell you this is antique silver, set with jewels. Wait till you see it cleaned!'

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'Jewels in the back of an old book!' gasped Peggy, astonished in her turn. 'How did they get there? Is it really true?'

'Certainly. Many of the books in old times had covers of enormous value. The ancient Abbey no doubt was a rich one, and much of their wealth would be devoted to their library.'

'Then if these are really precious stones,' said Peggy, 'I suppose they will be worth something. Father said he was afraid the old books were of no value except to people who were fond of such things. We were waiting till our Rector came home to look at them.'

'They are of the utmost value, my dear, not only for the jewelled covers, but for the rare contents and illuminations, which are of a type most scarce and precious. I have not had time to go through the whole contents of the chest, but I should say if these books were put up at

Christie's they would realize many thousands of pounds. With your Father's permission, I should like to send down an expert from the Bodleian to examine them.'

'There will be keen bidding with the British Museum if they are put up for sale,' remarked the stout gentleman.

'It would be a most exciting occasion. I should make a point of being present in person, and use all my influence to secure them for Oxford. There would probably be representatives bidding from all the principal libraries and museums in the kingdom, not to mention the United States and the Continent.'

'But, please, do the books really belong to Father?' asked Peggy, who did not quite understand this conversation.

'Certainly, if your Father is the legal owner of the property. No one else can lay the slightest claim to them, and I congratulate him on the value of his prize.'

'Then—would it be—would it be possible for Father to get the money for them—soon?' faltered Peggy, blushing scarlet at putting such a question.

'Without doubt it would. If he should wish to realize them at once, the sale could be pushed on in a few weeks, only time should be allowed for the Americans to hear of them, as they always run prices up. If agreeable to your Father, I will call to-morrow morning and discuss the subject with him, and in the meantime I can only beg that all possible care will be taken of these priceless treasures. The chest seems secure from any ravages of rats or mice. Still, I should advise its being carried into the house without further delay. You agree with me, Sedgwick?'

'Certainly; it is wiser to run no risks. By-the-by—looking at his watch—'may I remind you, Doctor, that our waggonettes are due to start at five o'clock, and it is already half-past. I fear the members of our party will be awaiting us with some impatience at the Bluebell Arms.'

'Dear me,' said the old gentleman, 'I fear I am sadly forgetful! In the society of such enthralling interests I have no conception of the flight of time. To-morrow morning, then, my dear, if your Father will be at liberty, I shall give myself the pleasure of calling upon him;' and regretfully closing the lid, he tore himself away from the old chest, like a reluctant lover from his mistress, and took his departure, leaving Peggy, nearly wild with excitement, to rush tumultuously into the house with her wonderful piece of news.

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CHAPTER XXIV

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CONCLUSION

'We live in deeds, not years; in thoughts, not
breaths;
In feelings, not in figures on a dial.
We should count time by heart-throbs. He most
lives
Who thinks most, feels the noblest, acts the best.'

IT was all perfectly true, that was the best part of it. The little old gentleman turned out to be a very learned don from Oxford, with a terrific list of letters at the end of his name, and in the course of a few days a representative arrived from the Bodleian Library with a request to be allowed to inspect the books (which by this time had been removed to a corner of the big drawing-room), and after a considerable amount of talking and writing it was arranged that they should be sent to London at once to be sold by auction. As the old gentleman had prophesied, the sale made quite a sensation among lovers of antiquities, and realized a sum sufficient to put Mr. Vaughan at once out of his difficulties.

'It does not make me a rich man, children,' he said. 'But it is enough to wipe off our debts, and keep the old roof together over our heads. We shall still have to work hard and live carefully, but now that there will not be the continual drain of the interest on the mortgages going out, I shall be able to put more into the land, and carry out the improvements I have been longing to make for years, and in time the estate will pick up, so that I hope when I go to take my place among the old Crusaders in the transept I shall hand it on to the next generation of Vaughans in better condition than I found it.'

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To say that the children were delighted at this new turn of fortune's wheel is a very poor way of expressing their rapture. Every corner of the Abbey had to be revisited to feel again the joy of possession; all the animals must be petted as a kind of apology for having even thought of parting with them; and Peggy felt as though she would like to tell the birds and the flowers that they were not going away after all, and give them a chance of joining in the general rejoicings. Soft-

hearted Joe wept at the good news, but it was for joy this time; and so many people sent kind messages of congratulation, and expressed such pleasure at hearing they were to remain at the Abbey, that the Vaughans were quite surprised to find how popular they were in the neighbourhood.

The only person who seemed not altogether satisfied was Archie, who had dwelt so much on a colonial future that he was quite disappointed at having to give up the idea.

'I had almost persuaded Aunt to go,' he declared. 'And it would have been ripping fun out there on our ranches. No, I ain't going unless you do! I guess I'll stay in England now, and take to engineering; but it seems half a pity, for we should all have got on tip-top in the new world.'

As Mr. Vaughan had said, the change in his fortunes did not make him a rich man, and though all anxiety was now removed, and even a few extra comforts might be added, matters went on pretty much in the old way at the Abbey. Peggy grew up without many of the luxuries which fall to the lot of richer girls, but she was none the worse for that, and I think, when she saw how bored and uninterested Maud Middleton was in the midst of her round of London society and foreign travel, she felt that it is sometimes better to have the capacity for enjoyment than to have the means without the happy talent of being able to appreciate your good things.

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Life was always so well worth living to Peggy, whether at work or play. Her friendships were so keen and her affections so warm, that I think she found the world a very pleasant place to be in, and made it better and pleasanter for other people too (which is, after all, the grand secret of happiness), and the energy and enterprising spirits which had caused the tomboy pranks of her childhood were qualities which, turned to good use, proved of the utmost service to her in after-years.

Do I make too much of a little girl who, after all, was no heroine, but who tried her honest best, like many another, to fear God, tell the truth, and love her neighbour as herself? If so, my love for her bright ways and warm heart must be my excuse, for I have told Peggy's story just as it happened.

Many years have passed away since the children played round the old apple-trees in the orchard, or scrambled among the ivy in the ruins, but Gorswen is little changed. The picturesque old black-and-white houses still stand in the village street, unspoilt by time or tourists; Mrs. Price presides at the Post Office, rubicund and smiling; and old Ephraim totters down from his cottage to the Bluebell Arms, a living testimony to the healthfulness of the district. The flowers are as beautiful as ever in the Rectory garden, but the Rector is not there to tend them. He has gone where little Raymond went before, on that longest of holidays from which there is no return to the lesson-books of this life. He is deeply missed in the village, but he has a worthy successor in Mr. Wentworth, who now holds the living in his stead, for years of companionship with one who dwelt so continually at the gate of heaven have changed the nervous young curate into a strong and earnest character. He is much liked in Gorswen, and he has Lilian to help him. Perhaps the fact of their mutual shyness first drew them together, but they have much in common besides an enthusiasm for parish work. She makes an excellent helpmeet, and an ideal clergyman's wife. She has no children of her own, but in mothering the fragile little Indian cousins who are sent home to gain rosy cheeks and sturdy limbs from the fresh English breezes her warm heart finds its outlet, and she is able to pay back to Aunt Helen some of the love and care which she owes her from long ago.

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Bobby is a fine, tall young fellow, fresh from an agricultural college, where he has learnt so much in the way of scientific farming that he intends to make the fields yield the very highest pitch of production. But already the Abbey has prospered to such an extent that little by little the Vaughans are buying back some of the land which their ancestors had squandered, and in time the estate may once more be of some importance in the county.

And Peggy? I think the Rector's prophecy is justified, and she has grown in every sense into the fine woman which he hoped and expected. She still loves the Abbey dearly, but I do not fancy she will spend all her life there, after all, for Archie, who now owns a prosperous sheep-farm in Australia, is still as anxious as ever for her to try colonial life, and I think that the next time he comes home on a visit to Gorswen he will be able to persuade her.

[284]

Peggy does not feel the least little bit older than when she climbed the water-wheel, or thrashed Jones minor behind the paling of the cricket-field—if growing old means losing your ideals, and your keen enthusiasm, and your hopefulness, and a certain appreciation of other people's worth which is our birthright when we are young. She is still capable of climbing a tree or scrambling over a hedge when no one is looking, and pursues her hobbies with all her former vigour and energy. She is sometimes almost ashamed of feeling, as she says, so ridiculously young, but after all one's age should not always be measured by one's years, and wherever she may go, or whatever she may do, Peggy will keep that most priceless of possessions, the heart of a little child, without which, equally in this world or the next, it is impossible to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven.

THE END

Richard Clay & Sons, Limited, London and Bungay.

Transcriber's Note:

Variations in spelling and hyphenation have been retained as they appear in the original publication. Changes have been made as follows:

Page 19

In April the cuckoo comes, *changed to*
["In](#) April the cuckoo comes,

Page 143

and went prim little walks *changed to*
and went [on](#) prim little walks

Page 164

such invaluable etacher as *changed to*
such invaluable [teacher](#) as

Page 172

were not so simply *changed to*
were not so [simple](#)

Page 197

the old fellow's, rambling divergences
the old [fellow's](#) rambling divergences

Page 240

Safe in a iron cage *changed to*
Safe in [an](#) iron cage

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A TERRIBLE TOMBOY ***

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