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Title: The House That Grew

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Illustrator: Alice B. Woodward

Release date: April 28, 2012 [EBook #39554]

Language: English

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THE

HOUSE

THAT

GREW

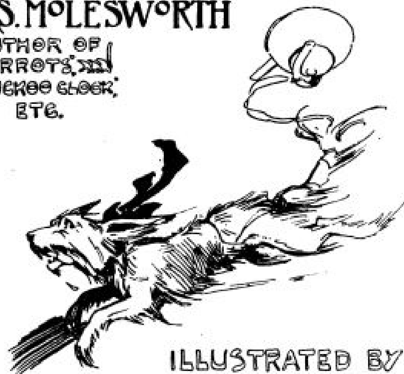
MRS

MOLESWORTH

THE HOUSE THAT GREW

ROLF CAREFULLY DEPOSITED THE LITTLE CREATURE.—p. 175.

THE HOUSE THAT GREW



LONDON
MACMILLAN AND CO LIMITED
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN COMPANY
1900
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[Pg 1]

CHAPTER I

'IT'S DREADFUL, ISN'T IT?'

Mamma sat quite quietly in her favourite corner, on the sofa in the drawing-room, all the time papa was speaking. I think, or I thought afterwards, that she was crying a little, though that isn't her way at all. Dods didn't think so, for I asked him, when we were by ourselves. She did not speak any way, except just to whisper to me when I ran up to kiss her before we went out, 'We will have a good talk about it all afterwards, darling. Run out now with Geordie.'

I was very glad to get out of the room, I was so dreadfully afraid of beginning to cry myself. I didn't know which I was the sorriest for—papa or mamma—mamma, I think, though I don't know, [Pg 2] either! Papa tried to be so cheerful about it; it was almost worse than if he had spoken very sadly. It reminded me of Dods when he was a very little boy and broke his arm, and when they let me peep into the room just after the doctor had set it, he smiled and whistled to make out it didn't hurt much, though he was as white as white. Poor old Doddie! And poor papa!

'It'll be worse for us and for mamma than for papa, won't it, Dods?' I said, as soon as we were outside and quite out of hearing. 'They always say that it's the worst for those that are left behind—the going-away ones have the change and bustle, you see.'

'How can I tell?' said Dods; 'you ask such stupid things, Ida. It's about as bad as it can be for everybody, and I don't see that it makes it any better to go on counting which it's the worst for.'

He gave himself a sort of wriggle, and began switching the hedge with the little cane he was carrying; by that and the gruff tone of his voice, I could tell he was feeling very bad, so I didn't mind his being rather cross, and we walked on for a minute or two without speaking.

Then suddenly Dods—I call him Dods, but his real name is George, and mamma calls him Geordie [Pg 3] —stopped short.

'Where are you going, Ida?' he said. 'I hear those children hallooing over there in the little planting. They'll be down upon us in another moment, tiresome things, if we don't get out of the way, and I certainly don't want them just now.'

I didn't either, though I'm very fond of them. But they're *so* much younger, only seven and eight then, and Dods and I were thirteen and fourteen. And we have always gone in pairs. Dods and I, and Denzil and Esmé. Besides, of course, the poor little things were not to be told just yet of the strange troubles and sorrows that had come, or were coming, to us.

So I agreed with Dods that we had better get out of the way.

'Esmé is so quick,' I said; 'she'd very likely see there was something the matter, and papa did so warn us not to let them know.'

'Humph,' said Dods. 'I don't think we need worry about *them*. Denzil is as dense as a hedgehog, and as comfortable as a fat dormouse. *He'd* never worry as long as he has plenty to eat and a jolly warm bed to sleep in. And Esmé's just a——'

'A what?' I said, rather vexed, for Esmé *is* a sweet. She's not fat or lazy, and I don't think Denzil is [Pg 4]

—not extra, for such a little boy.

'She's just a sort of a butterfly,' said Geordie. '*She'd* never mind anything for long. She'd just settle down for half a moment and then fly up again as merry as a sandboy.'

I could not help bursting out laughing. It was partly, I daresay, that I felt as if I must either laugh or cry. But Dods did mix up his—'similes,' I think, is the right word—so funnily! Hedgehogs and dormice and butterflies and sandboys, all in a breath.

'I don't see what there is to laugh at,' said Geordie, very grumpily again, though he had been getting a little brighter.

'No more do I, I'm sure,' I replied, sadly enough, and then, I think, Dods felt sorry.

'Where shall we go?' he said gently.

'Wherever you like—to the hut, I think. It is always nice there, and we can lock ourselves in if we hear the children coming,' I answered.

The hut, as we called it, was our very most favourite place. It was much more than you would fancy from the name, as you will hear before long. But we did not wait to go on talking, till we got there. The children's voices did not come any nearer, but died away in the distance, so we walked on quietly, without hurrying. [Pg 5]

'Ida,' said Geordie after a bit, 'it's dreadful, isn't it?'

'Yes,' I agreed; 'I think it is.'

The 'it' was the news poor papa had been telling us. We were not quite like most other children, I think, in some ways. I think we—that is, Dods and I—were rather more thoughtful, though that sounds like praising ourselves, which I am sure I don't mean. But papa and mamma had always had us a good deal with them and treated us almost like companions, and up to now, though he was getting on for thirteen, Dods had never been away at school, only going to Kirke, the little town near us, for some lessons with the vicar, and doing some with me and our governess, who came over from Kirke every day. So papa had told us what had to be told, almost as if we were grown-up people.

We did not understand it quite exactly, for it had to do with business things, which generally mean 'money' things, it seems to me, and which, even now, though I am sixteen past, I don't perfectly understand. And I daresay I shall not explain it all as well as a quite grown-up person would. But I don't think that will matter. This story is just a real account of something rather out of the common, and I am writing it partly as a kind of practice, for I do hope I shall be able to write stories in books some day, and partly because I think it is interesting even if it never gets into a book, and I should like Denzil and Esmé to read it all over, for fear of their forgetting about it. [Pg 6]

I must first tell what the news was that we had just heard. Poor papa had lost a lot of money!

We were not very rich, but we had had quite enough, and our home was—and *is*, I am thankful to say—the sweetest, nicest home in the world. Our grandfathers and great-grandfathers back to papa's great-great ones have always lived here and seen to everything themselves, which makes a home nicer than anything else. But a good deal of *papa's* money came from property a long, long way off—somewhere in the West Indies. It had been left to *his* father by his godmother, and ever since I was quite little I remember hearing papa say what a good thing it was to have some money besides what came from our own property at home. For, as everybody knows, land in England—especially, I think, in our part of it—does not give half as much as it used to, from rents and those sorts of things. [Pg 7]

And we got into the way—I mean by 'we,' papa and mamma, and grandpapa, no doubt, in his time—of thinking of the West Indian money as something quite safe and certain, that could not ever 'go down' like other things.

But there came a day, not very long before the one I am writing about, which brought sudden and very bad news. Things had gone wrong, dreadfully wrong out at that place—Saint Silvio's—and it was quite possible that *all* our money from there would stop for good. The horrid part of it was, that it all came from somebody's wrongdoing—not from earthquakes or hurricanes or outside troubles of that kind—but from real dishonesty on the part of the agents papa had trusted. There was nothing for it but for poor papa himself to go out there, for a year at least, perhaps for two years, to find out everything and see what could be done.

There was a *possibility*, papa said, of things coming right, or partly right again, once he was there and able to go into it all himself. But to do this it was necessary that he should start as soon as could be managed; and with the great doubt of our *ever* being at all well off again, it was also necessary that mamma and we four should be very, very careful about expenses at home, and just spend as little as we could. [Pg 8]

A piece of good fortune had happened in the middle of all this; at least *papa* called it good fortune, though I am afraid George and I did not feel as if it was good at all! Papa had had an offer from some people to take our house—our own dear Eastercove—for a year, or perhaps more. We had often been asked to let it, for it is so beautifully placed—close to the sea, and yet with lovely woods and grounds all round it, which is very uncommon at the sea-side. Our pine woods are almost famous, and there are nooks and dells and glens and cliffs that I could not describe if I tried ever so hard, so deliciously pretty and picturesque are they.

But till now we had never dreamt of letting it. Indeed, we used to feel quite angry, which was

rather silly, I daresay, if ever we heard of any offer being made for it. And now the offer that had come was a very good one; it was not only more money than had ever been proposed before, but it came from very nice sort of people, whom the agent knew were quite to be trusted in every way. [Pg 9]

'They will take good care of the house and of all our things,' said papa, 'and keep on any of the servants who like to stay.'

'Shall we not have *any* servants then?' Dods had asked. 'Do you mean that mamma—mamma and Ida and the little ones—I don't mind for myself, I'm a boy; I'll go to sea as a common sailor if it would be any good—but do you mean, that we shall be like *really* poor people?' And here there came a choke in his voice that made me feel as if I could *scarcely* keep from crying. For I knew what he was thinking of—the idea of mamma, our pretty mamma, with her merry laugh and nice dresses, and soft, white hands, having to work and even scrub perhaps, and to give up all the things and ways she was used to—it was too dreadful!

Papa looked sorry and went on again quietly—

'No, no, my boy,' he said; 'don't exaggerate it. Of course mamma and you all must have every comfort possible. One servant, anyway—Hoskins is sure to stay, and a younger one as well, I *hope*. And there must be no thought of your going to sea, George, or going anywhere, till I come back again. I look to you to take care of them all—that is why I am explaining more to you and Ida than many people would to such young ones. But I know you are both very sensible for your age. You see, we are sure of the new rent, thanks to this Mr. Trevor's offer—and even *that* would prevent us from being in a desperate position. And, of course, the usual money will go on coming in from the property, though the most of it must go in keeping things in order, in case——' but here papa broke off. [Pg 10]

'I know what you were going to say, papa,' said poor Dods, growing scarlet; he was certainly very quick-witted,—"in case we have to sell Eastercove!" Oh, papa! anything but that! I'll work—I'll do *anything* to make money, so long as we don't have to do that. Our old, old home!'

He could not say any more, and turned away his head.

'It has not come to that yet, my boy,' said papa, after a moment or two's silence. 'Let us keep up heart in the meantime, and hope for the best.'

Then he went on to tell us some of the plans he and mamma had already begun to make—about our going to live in some little house at Kirke, where we should not feel so strange as farther away, though there were objections to this too,—anything at all *nice* in the shape of even a tiny house there would be dear, as the neighbourhood was much sought after by visitors in winter as well as in summer. For it was considered so very healthy for delicate people; the air was always clear and dry, and the scent of the pine woods so strengthening. Papa, however, was doing his best; he and mamma were going there that very afternoon, 'To spy the land,' papa said, trying to speak cheerily. [Pg 11]

So now I come back to where I began my explanation as to what the 'it' was, that Geordie and I agreed was so dreadful.

WE WERE WALKING ON SLOWLY.

We were walking on slowly to the hut, and just as I had replied, 'I think it is,' we came in sight of it, and something—I don't know what—made us both stop and look at this favourite spot of ours. It was so pretty to-day—perhaps that was it. A sudden clearing brought us out of the wood, through which we had been following a well-worn, narrow path, and the bright, soft light of the early afternoon—of an April afternoon—was falling on the quaint little place. It was more like two or three huts than one, and indeed it really did consist of three or four rooms, which we children had been allowed to consider our own quarters, and to decorate and improve according to our fancy and taste. To begin with, it had been a bathing-house, of two rooms, partly of stone, partly of wood, standing on a little plateau, just at the edge of the pine trees, and well above the sea, so that even in stormy weather the water could not possibly reach it; besides which, I must say that stormy weather in the shape of high tides or great waves never did show itself in this cove. Often and often we had sat there, listening to the boom and crash at the foot of the cliffs, round at the other side, as snug and peaceful as if we had been miles inland. [Pg 12]

And the sands that sloped down from our hut were just perfection, both as to prettiness and niceness for bathing. They shone to-day like gold and silver mixed in the sunshine; and the hut itself, though queerly shaped, looked pretty too. We had managed, in spite of the sandy soil, to get some hardy creepers to grow over it on the inland side, and we had sunk some old tubs filled with good soil in front of the porch—for there was a porch—in which flourished some nice, bushy evergreens, and there was even a

tiny terrace with long flower-boxes, where, for six months of the year at least, geraniums and fuchsias, and for part of the time, nice, big, white and yellow and straw-coloured daisies seemed quite at home. It was a *lovely* place for children to have of their own; and the year before, papa had added two other rooms to it, for our photographing—*iron* rooms, these were, and not at all ugly, though that would not have mattered much, as they were at the back, beside the little kitchen, where we were allowed to cook our luncheons and teas when we were spending a whole day on the shore. [Pg 13]

'Dods!' I exclaimed, as we stood there in silence, admiring our mansion, 'we must see about the flowers for the long boxes. It's getting quite time, for Bush has settled all about the bedding-out plants—he told me so yesterday—so he'll be able to tell us what he has to spare.'

I spoke in utter forgetfulness—but it only lasted a moment—only, that is to say, till I caught the expression of Geordie's mournful blue eyes—he *can* make them look so mournful when he likes—fixed upon me in silent reproach.

'Ida,' he said at last, 'what are you thinking of? *What's the use?*'

'Oh, Dods! oh, dear, dear Doddie!' I cried—I don't think I quite knew what I was saying,—'forgive me. Oh, how silly and unfeeling I seem! *Oh*, Doddie!' [Pg 14]

And then—I am not now ashamed to tell it, for I really had been keeping it in at the cost of a good deal of forcing myself—I just left off trying to be brave or self-controlled or anything, and burst out crying—regular loud crying. I am afraid I almost howled.

George looked at me once more, then for a minute or so he turned away. I am not sure if he was crying, anyway he wasn't *howling*. But in an instant or two, while I was rubbing at my eyes with my handkerchief, and feeling rather, or very ashamed, I felt something come round my neck, crushing it up so tightly that I was almost choked, and then Doddie's voice in my ear, very gruff, very gruff indeed of course, saying—

'Poor Ida, poor old Ida! I know it's quite as bad or worse for you. For a *man* can always go out into the world and fight his way, and have some fun however hard he works.'

'That wouldn't make it any better for *me*, Dods,' I said—we both forgot, I think, that he was a good way off being a man just yet,—'you're my only comfort. I don't mean that mamma isn't one, of course; but it's our business now to cheer her up. Papa said so ever so many times. I don't really know, though, how I *could* have cheered her up, or even tried to, if you had been away at school already!' [Pg 15]

Poor George's face darkened at this. It was rather an unlucky speech. He had thought of things already that had never come into my head. One was that it seemed unlikely enough now that papa would ever be able to send him to school at all—I mean, of course, to the big public school, for which his name had been down for ever so long, and on which, like all English boys, his heart was set. For he knew how expensive all public schools are.

'Don't talk of school, Ida,' he said huskily. 'Luckily it's a good year off still,' for it had never been intended that he should go till he was fourteen; 'and,' with a deep sigh, 'we must keep on hoping, I suppose.'

'Yes, and working,' I added. 'Whatever happens, Dods, you must work well, and I'll do my best to help you. Mightn't you perhaps gain a scholarship, or whatever you call them, that would make school cost less?'

This remark was as lucky as the other had been unfortunate. Dods brightened up at once.

'By Jove,' he said, 'what a good idea! I never thought of it. I'll tell you what, Ida; I'll ask Mr. Lloyd about it the very first time I see him—that'll be the day after to-morrow, as to-morrow's Sunday.' [Pg 16]

Mr. Lloyd was the vicar of Kirke.

I felt quite proud of having thought of something to cheer Geordie up, and my tears stopped, and by the time we had got to the hut, we were both in much better spirits.

'It is to be hoped,' I said, 'that papa and mamma *will* find some kind of a house at Kirke, however poky. For you would be very sorry not to go on with Mr. Lloyd—wouldn't you, Dods?'

'Of course I should,' he replied heartily. 'He's very kind and very strict. And if I mean to work harder than ever before, as I do now, since you put that jolly idea into my head, it's a good thing he *is* strict.'

When we got to the hut and unlocked the door, we found a good deal to do. For on Saturdays we generally—we *meant* to do it regularly, but I am afraid we sometimes forgot—had a sort of cleaning and tidying up. Photographing is very nice and interesting of course, and so is cooking, but they are rather messy! And when you've been doing one or the other nearly all day, it's rather disgusting to have to begin washing up greasy dishes, and chemicalised rags and glasses, and pots and pans, and all the rest of it. I don't mean that we ever cleaned up the photographing things with the kitchen things; we weren't so silly, as, of course, we should not only have spoilt our instruments, but run a good risk of poisoning ourselves too. But the whole lot needed cleaning, and I don't know which were the tiresomest. [Pg 17]

And the last day we had spent at the hut, we had only half-tidied up, we had got *so* tired. So there were all the things about, as if they'd been having a dance in the night, like Hans Andersen's toys, and had forgotten to put themselves to bed after it.

Dods and I looked at each other rather grimly.

'It's got to be done,' I said. 'It's a shame to see the place so bright and sunny outside and so *dreadfully* messy indoors.'

'Yes,' said Dods, 'it is. So fire away, Ida. After all——' but he didn't finish his sentence and didn't need to. I knew what he meant—that quite possibly it was the very last time we'd need to have a good cleaning up in the dear old hut.

CHAPTER II

'MUFFINS, FOR ONE THING, I HOPE'

The first thing we had to do was really to 'fire away.' That is to say, to light a fire, for of course nothing in the way of washing up or cleaning can be done without hot water, and you cannot get hot water without fire of some kind. But that part of our work we did not dislike at all. We had grown quite clever at making fires and getting them to burn up quickly in the little stove, and we had always, or nearly always, a nice store of beautifully dry wood that we picked up ourselves. And though the hut was so near the sea, it was wonderfully dry. We could leave things there for weeks, without their becoming musty or mouldy.

And as the fire crackled up brightly, and after a bit we got the kettle on and it began to sing, our spirits began to rise again a little, to keep it company.

'After all,' I said, 'there really is a good strong *likelihood* that things won't turn out so badly. Papa is very clever, and once he is out there himself, he will find out everything, and perhaps get them put straight once for all. It wouldn't so much matter our having less money than we have had till now, if all the muddle and cheating was cleared up.'

'No, it wouldn't,' Geordie agreed, 'and of course it's best to be hopeful. So long as there's no talk of our selling Eastercove, Ida, I don't feel as if I minded anything.'

'And the great thing is to cheer up poor mamma while papa's away,' I said, 'and not to seem dull or miserable at having to live differently and go without things we've always been used to have. I don't think I shall mind that part of it so *very* much, Dods—shall you?'

Dods sighed.

'I don't know; I hope not for myself—of course what matters to *me* is the perhaps not going to a big school. But you have cheered me up about that, Ida. I shall hate you and mamma not having a carriage and nice servants and all that, though we must go on hoping it will only be for a bit.'

'And I *do* hope we can stay on near here,' I said, 'so that at least we can feel that home is close-to. I would rather have ever so little a house at Kirke than a much better one farther off—except that, well, I must say I shouldn't like it to be one of those dreadfully stuffy-looking little ones in rows in a street!'

'I'm afraid that's just what it is likely to be,' said Dods. 'It will be pretty horrid; there's no use trying to pretend it won't be. But, Ida, we're not working at all. We must get on, for papa and mamma will like to find us at home when they come in.'

'Especially as to-morrow's Sunday,' I added; 'and very likely, if it's as fine as to-day, we may all come down here to tea in the afternoon,' for that was a favourite habit of ours. We children used to consider that we were the hosts on these occasions, and papa and mamma our visitors.

So we set to work with a will, without grumbling at the rather big collection of things there were to wash up, and the amount of sweeping and brushing to do. To begin with, we knew we had ourselves to thank for it, as we had left things in a very untidy way the last day we had spent at the hut. Then too, even though only an hour or so had passed since we had heard the bad news, I think we had suddenly grown older. I have never felt thoroughly a child again since that morning. For the first time it seemed to come really home to me that life has a serious side to it, and I think—indeed I know—that George felt the same. I don't mean that we were made sad or unhappy, for I don't count that we had ever been very thoughtless children, but we both began to feel that there were certain things we could do, and should do, that no one else could do as well.

I think it must be what people call the sense of 'responsibility,' and in some ways it is rather a nice feeling. It makes one feel stronger and braver, and yet more humble too, though that sounds contradictory, for there comes with it a great anxiety to prove worthy of the trust placed in one to do one's best.

And just now it was very specially a case of being trusted. Papa said he would go away happier, or at least less unhappy, for knowing that he left two 'big' children to take care of mamma, and though I cannot quite explain how, the feeling left by his words had begun to influence us already. We even were extra anxious to do our tidying very well and quickly, as we knew it would please mamma to see we were keeping the promises we had made when she first persuaded papa to let us have the hut for our own, and got it all made nice for us.

And by four o'clock or so it did look very nice—I never saw it neater, and we felt we might rest for a few minutes.

We had put everything ready for Sunday afternoon's tea-party—everything that could be ready, I mean. The cups and saucers and fat brown tea-pot were arranged on the round table of the room

we counted our parlour; it was in front of the kitchen, looking towards the sea, and here we did the unmessy part of the photographing, and kept any little ornaments or pictures we had. Of the other two rooms one was the 'chemical room,' as we called it, and in a cupboard out of it we hung up our bathing-clothes, and the *fourth* room, which had originally been the front bathing-house, so to say, or dressing-room, was now a bedroom, all except the bed. That does sound very 'Irish,' does it not? But what I mean is that it was furnished simply as a bedroom usually is—only that there was no bed.

We had often begged to be allowed to spend a night in the hut, for there was an old sofa that Geordie could have slept on quite comfortably in the parlour, or even in the kitchen, and we had saved pocket-money enough to buy a camp bedstead, for which mamma had two or three mattresses and pillows and things like that among the spare ones up in the long garret. But so far we had never got leave to carry our picnicking quite so far. Papa would not have minded, for of all things he wanted us to be 'plucky,' and did not even object to my being something of a tomboy; but mamma said she would certainly not sleep all night if she knew we were alone in the hut, and perhaps frightened, or ill, or something wrong with us.

So *that* plan had been put a stop to.

'I wonder what Hoskins will give us in the shape of cakes for to-morrow,' I said. 'There is enough tea and sugar for two or three more afternoons'—'more than we shall want,' I added to myself with an inside sigh.

Hoskins was a sort of half-nurse, half-housekeeper person. She had not been with us *very* long, only since Esmé was born—but she really was very good and dear, and I know she cared for us in a particular way, for her father had been gardener for ages, though ages ago now, as she herself was pretty old, at Eastercove. And she wasn't cross, like so many old servants both in books and real life—rather the other way—too "spoiling" of us. She had only one fault. She was a little deaf.

'Muffins, for one thing, I hope,' said Dods. 'They don't leave off making them till May, and it isn't May yet.'

There was a baker in the village—I think I have forgotten to say that there was a very tiny village called Eastercove, close to our gates—who was famed for his muffins.

'Humph,' I said. 'I don't very much care about them. They are such a bother with toasting and buttering. I think bread and butter—thin and rolled—is quite as good, and some nice cakes and a big one of that kind of gingerbread that you hardly taste the ginger in, and that's like toffee at the top.'

I was beginning to feel hungry, for we had not eaten much luncheon, which was our early dinner, and I think that made me talk rather greedily.

'You are a regular epicure about cakes,' said Dods.

I did not like his calling me that, and I felt my face get red, and I was just going to answer him crossly when I remembered about our great trouble, and thought immediately to myself how silly it would be to squabble about tiny things in a babyish way now. So I answered quietly—

'Well, you see, it is only polite to think of what other people like, if you invite them to tea, and I know papa likes that kind of gingerbread. He ate such a big piece one day that mamma called him a greedy boy.'

Geordie did not say anything, but I always know when he is sorry for teasing me, and I could see that he was just now.

Then we locked up and set off home again. As we came out of the pine woods and in sight of the drive we saw the pony carriage, and we ran on, so as to be at the front door when papa and mamma got there.

They smiled at us very kindly, and papa said in what he meant to be a cheery voice—

'Well, young people, what have you been about? Run in, Ida, and hurry up tea. Mamma is tired.'

Yes, poor mamma did look dreadfully tired, and through the outside cheeriness of papa's words and manner I could see that he was feeling very sad and dull.

 I hurried in, and we were soon all at tea in the pretty drawing-room. George and I did not always have tea downstairs, but to-day somehow there seemed no question of our not doing so. I waited till mamma had had some tea and was looking a little less white and done up, and then I said half-frightenedly—

'Did you see any nice little house at Kirke?' though in my heart I felt sure they hadn't, or they would not have come back, looking so disappointed.

Mamma shook her head.

'I am afraid, dearie,' she began, but papa interrupted her—

'No,' he said decidedly, 'we saw nothing the least possible to call "nice," except one or two places far and away too dear. And of course we knew already that there are plenty of nice houses to be got, if expense had not to be considered so closely. There is no good beating about the bush with George and Ida,' he went on, turning to mamma. 'Now that we have so thoroughly taken them into our confidence it is best to tell them everything. And the truth is,' he continued, leaning back in his chair with a rather rueful smile, 'I am really feeling almost in despair. I am afraid we shall have to give up the idea of staying at Kirke.'

'Yet there are so many advantages about it,' said mamma quickly. 'And there is, after all, that tiny house in the Western Road.' [Pg 27]

'Horrid poky little hole,' said papa. 'I cannot bear to think of you in it. I would almost rather you went about in a caravan like the gypsies we passed on the road.'

'Yes,' I agreed, '*I* wouldn't mind that at all—not in summer, at least.'

'Ah, but unluckily, my dear child, "it is not always May,"' he replied, though I was pleased to see he held out his cup for some more tea (I have found out that things do seem much worse when one is tired or hungry!) and that his voice sounded more like itself.

'And it isn't always winter either,' said mamma cheerfully. 'Let us be as happy as we can while we are together, and enjoy this nice spring weather. I *am* glad, if sad things had to happen, that they did not come to us in November or December. Perhaps Mr. Lloyd will find some nicer house for us.'

'Does he know about—about our having to leave Eastercove?' I asked.

Mamma nodded.

'Yes,' she replied. 'We stopped there on our way back, and papa went in and told him.'

I felt glad of that. It would prepare him for Dods's anxiety about a scholarship. [Pg 28]

'By the bye,' mamma continued, 'how fast they are getting on with the new parish room! I was looking at it while I was waiting for you, Jack' (that's papa), 'and it seems really finished. Are they not beginning to take away the iron room already?'

'Lloyd says it is to be sold here, or returned to the makers for what they will give, next week,' papa replied. 'It has served its purpose very well indeed these two or three years. If——'

'If what?' said mamma.

Poor papa shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, it's no good thinking of it now,' he answered. 'I was only going to say—forgetting—that if Geordie and Ida liked I might buy it and add it on to the hut. It would make into two capital little bedrooms for very little cost, and Lloyd happened to say to-day that the makers would rather sell it for less where it stands than have the expense of taking it back to London. They keep improving these things; it is probably considered old-fashioned already.'

Geordie and I looked at each other. How lovely it would have been! Just what we had always longed for—to be allowed really to *live* at the hut now and then. And with two more rooms we could have had Hoskins with us, and then mamma wouldn't have been nervous about it. But as papa said, there was no use in thinking about it *now*. [Pg 29]

'Will the people who are coming to live here have the hut too?' I asked.

Papa did not seem to pay much attention to what I said. He was thinking deeply, and almost started as I turned to him with the question.

'I do not know,' he replied. 'It has not been alluded to.'

'I hope not,' said mamma. 'If we stay at Kirke, as I still trust we may, it would be nice to come up there to spend an afternoon now and then. It is so far from the house that we would not seem like intruders. Though, of course, once they see how nice it is, they may want to have it as a bathing-box.'

'That's not very likely,' said papa. 'They seem elderly people, and the son is a great sufferer from rheumatism. That is why they have taken such a fancy to this place—the scent of pine woods and the air about them are considered so good for illnesses of that kind. And sea-air suits him too, and they think it a wonderful chance to have all this as well as a dry climate and fairly mild winters. Yes—we who live here *are* uncommonly lucky.' [Pg 30]

He strolled to the window as he spoke and stood looking out without speaking. Then he turned again.

'I'll remember about the hut,' he said. 'I don't fancy these good people would be likely to be fussy or ill-natured or to think you intruding. Their letters are so well-bred and considerate.'

We felt glad to hear that.

'Mamma,' I said, 'we have made the hut so nice and tidy for to-morrow—Sunday, you know. You and papa will come and have tea there, won't you? It will be the first time this year' (and 'the last perhaps' seemed whispered into my mind, though I did not utter the words), for the spring-coming had been uncertain and we had all had colds.

Mamma looked at papa.

'Yes,' he said; 'certainly we will. And the little ones too, Ida?'

'Of course,' I said, and then I went off to talk about cakes—and muffins if possible, to please Dods—to Hoskins, the result of the interview proving very satisfactory.

When I came back to the drawing-room the little ones were there—Denzil, solemn as usual; Esmé hopping and skipping about and chattering thirteen to the dozen, as usual, too! She is three or four years older now, and beginning to 'sober down,' as they say, so I hope if she ever reads this, which certainly will not be for three or four or more years from now, she will have gone on sobering down, enough to understand what a 'flibbertigibbet' (that is a word of Hoskins's which I [Pg 31]

think very expressive) she was, and not to be hurt at my description of her. For I do love her dearly, and I always have loved her dearly, and I should be sorry for her ever to lose her good spirits, though it is already a comfort that she *sometimes* sits still now, and listens to what is said to her.

All the same, that part of our lives which I am writing this story about, would have been much duller and harder but for our butterfly's funny, merry ways.

This afternoon she was especially laughing and mischievous, and it made me feel a little cross. I was tired, I daresay, with all the work we had been doing, *and* the sadness that had come upon us so suddenly, and I did want to be quiet and talk sensibly. It was a little papa's fault too, I must say. He is sometimes rather like a boy still, though he has four big children. He hates being unhappy! I don't think he would mind my saying so of him, and he got mischievous and teased Esmé, to make her say funny things, as she often does. [Pg 32]

And I suppose I looked rather too grave, for, after a little, mamma whispered to me—

'Ida, dear, don't look so dreadfully unhappy; you almost make me wish we had not told you anything till we were obliged to do so.'

'I don't look worse than Geordie,' I replied, in a whisper too, 'or—or,' as I happened just then to catch sight of my younger brother's face, 'than Denzil.'

At this mamma did burst out laughing—a real merry laugh, which, in spite of my crossness, I was pleased to hear.

'My dear!' she exclaimed, 'who has ever seen Denzil anything but solemn! And as he knows nothing, it has certainly not to do with what *we* are all thinking about. He was the solemnest *baby* even that ever was seen, though many babies are solemn. I used to feel quite ashamed of my frivolity when Denny was only a couple of months old. And—no, poor old Geordie is trying to cheer up, so you must too.'

Yes, it was true. Geordie was laughing and playing with Esmé and papa, though I know his heart was quite as heavy as mine. Geordie is very particularly good in some ways. So I resolved to choke down, or at least to hide, my sadness—and still more the sort of crossness I had been feeling. It was not exactly real ill-tempered crossness, but the kind of hating being unhappy and thinking that other people are unhappy too, which comes with troubles when one isn't used to them especially, and isn't patient and unselfish, though one wants to be. [Pg 33]

However, I managed to look more amiable after mamma's little warning—still more, I think, after her hearty laugh. Her laughing always seems to drive away crossness and gloominess; it is so pretty and bright, and so real.

And I was helped too by another thing, though as yet it had scarcely taken shape in my mind, or even in my fancy. But it was there all the same, fluttering about somewhere, as if waiting for me to catch hold of it and make something of it. Just yet I did not give myself time to think it out. All I felt was a sort of presentiment that somewhere or somehow there was a way out of our troubles, or rather out of one part of them, and that I was going to find it before long. And I am quite sure that sometimes the thinking a thing out is more than half done by our brains before we know it—much in the same way that we—Dods and I—are quite sure that putting a lesson-book under your pillow at night helps you to know what you have to learn out of it by the next morning. Lots of children believe this, though none of us can explain it, and we don't like to speak of it for fear of being laughed at. But I don't mind writing about it, as I shall not hear if people do laugh at it or not. [Pg 34]

Anyway it *did* happen to me this time, that *something* worked the cobweb ideas that were beginning to float about in my brain into a real touchable or speakable plan, before the 'awake' side of it—of my brain, I mean—knew that anything of the kind was there.

I will try to tell quite exactly how this came about. But first I must say that I don't think George was feeling so *very* bad after all, for the last thing he said to me that evening as we went up to bed was, 'I do hope Hoskins has managed to get some muffins for to-morrow.'

CHAPTER III

[Pg 35]

'IT'S A WONDERFUL IDEA, IDA'

I remember that I fell asleep very quickly that night. Of course, like most children when they are well, I generally did. But that night it would not have been very surprising if I had kept awake and even got into a tossing-about, fidgety state, just from thinking about the strange, sudden trouble and change that were coming into our lives.

On the contrary, I seemed to drop straight down into unconsciousness almost as soon as my head touched the pillow, and I must have slept several hours straight off without even dreaming, or at least dreaming anything that I could remember. For when I awoke the dawn was creeping in, and though I felt too lazy and comfortable to get up to look out, I knew that sunrise could not be far off. It was that time of early morning when one almost fancies that sun and moon stop a moment or two to say a word to each other on their way, though of course I know enough astronomy now to understand that those fancies *are* only fancies. And yet there is a kind of truth in them, for the [Pg 36]

sun and moon, and the stars too, *have* to do with all of us people living on this earth; indeed, we owe everything to the sun; and so it is not altogether fancy to think of him, great big kind thing that he is, as a wonderful friend, and of the little gentle moon as taking his place, as it were, when he is at work on the other side. And the curious, mingled sort of light in the room, faint and dreamy, though clear too, made me think to myself, 'The sun is saying, "How do you do?" and the moon, "Good-bye."'

But I soon shut my drowsy eyes again, though not to fall asleep again at once. On the contrary, I grew awaker and awaker, as I began to feel that my mind or memory or brain—I don't know which to call it—had something to tell me.

What was it?

I seemed almost to be listening. And gradually it came to me—the knowledge of the idea that had been working itself out during my sleep from the thoughts that had been there jumbled up together the day before. And when I got clear hold of what it was, I nearly called out, I felt so struck and startled at first, just as if some one had said it to me, though with astonishing quickness it spread itself out before me as a really possible and even sensible plan, with nothing dreamy or fanciful about it. [Pg 37]

It was this.

'Why should not we all—mamma, that is to say, and we four children—why should we not live altogether at the hut during the year, or more perhaps, that papa would have to be away?'

It may seem to those who read this story—if ever there are readers of it—a wild idea that had thus come to me. But 'the proof of the pudding is in the eating,' as Hoskins is fond of saying. So please wait a little before you judge.

And no sooner had the idea got into words than all the bits of it began to place themselves in order like the pieces of a dissected puzzle-map, or, still better, like the many-coloured skeins of silk in the pretty fairy story where the touch of the wand made them all arrange themselves. Still more—no sooner had the first vague thoughts settled down than others came to join them, each finding its own corner in the building that I began to see was not a castle in the air but a good solid piece of work.

[Pg 38] It would be so healthy and airy, and yet not damp; nor, with proper care, need it be very cold, even in winter. It would be near enough to Kirke for Geordie to go on with his lessons with Mr. Lloyd, and for us to feel we had old friends close at hand, who would understand all about us, and very likely be kinder than ever. It would be near enough to home—dear Eastercove—indeed, it would be Eastercove—for us to take lots of furniture and things from the house to furnish as much more as was needed and to make it comfortable and even pretty, without emptying Eastercove house at all. There was, as I have said, such a lot of stored-away extra furniture and old carpets and curtains and blankets and all sorts of things up in the great attic, and Hoskins kept them all so nice and tidy, and without moths or mildew or horrible things like that, that it was quite a pleasure to go up there sometimes. It was like a very neat shop for second-hand things, which is more than can be said for most box-rooms or lumber-rooms, I fancy.

And the moving these things would be no expense, and there would be no travelling expenses for any of us, and—the last idea that came into my head was the best of all. The old parish room! The iron room that Mr. Lloyd had told papa about the afternoon before! They wanted to get rid of it and would sell it for almost nothing. Even if 'almost nothing' meant—I could not guess how much or how little—a few pounds, perhaps—it would be far, far less than the rent of a house, however small, and it would make into two or even three little rooms, easily. Perhaps it would be enough just to divide it by screens or curtains, perhaps——

Oh, the 'perhapses' that came crowding into my head when I had thought of the old parish room! I could scarcely lie still another minute—I felt in such a desperate hurry to tell Geordie of the wonderful thought that had come to me. But it was still far from getting-up time; I knew it would be very selfish and unkind to wake up poor old Dods in what would seem to him the middle of the night, for he was a very sound sleeper, and had hard enough work to get his eyes properly open by seven o'clock.

No—there was nothing for it but to lie still and be as patient as I could. It would be interesting to watch the light growing stronger and changing; it was already doing so in a curious way, as the cold, thin moonshine gave place to the sun, even then warmer somehow in its tone than the fullest moon-rays ever are. [Pg 39] [Pg 40]

'Yes,' I thought, 'they have met and passed each other by now, I should think. I wonder—if——'

Strange to say, I cannot finish the sentence, for I don't know *what* I was going to wonder! In spite of all my eagerness and excitement I knew nothing more, till—the usual summons, in Hoskins's voice—

'Miss Ida, my dear, it's the quarter-past. You were sleeping soundly—I could scarcely find it in my heart to awake you. But it's Sunday morning, and you know it doesn't do to be late—and a beautiful spring morning too as ever was seen.'

I could scarcely believe my ears.

'Oh, Hoskins!' I exclaimed, 'I *am* sleepy. I was awake a good bit quite early, and I had no idea I had gone off again. I was *so* awake, thinking.'

The talking thoroughly roused me, and almost at once all

the 'thinking' came back to me, so that by the time I was dressed, even though Sunday morning dressing needed a little more care and attention than every day's, I had got it all clear and compact and ready, as it were, for Geordie's cool inspection.

To my great satisfaction he had had a good fit that morning of getting up promptly and being down the first after me, instead of, as often happened, the last after everybody.

NO—THERE WAS NOTHING FOR IT BUT TO LIE STILL.

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'Geordie,' I exclaimed, when I caught sight of him standing at the dining-room window, staring out—or perhaps I should say' gazing,' for staring is an ugly word, and the garden that morning was looking so particularly pretty—'Geordie, I am just bursting to talk to you. Is it any use beginning before papa and mamma come down, do you think?'

Geordie looked at the clock on the mantelpiece.

'Yes,' he said; 'we have five minutes, or ten perhaps. Is it anything particular?'

'Of course it is,' I replied, 'or I wouldn't say I was bursting to tell it you. And I think and hope it is something that will please you very much. You are to listen well and not interrupt me and say "nonsense," before you have taken it into your mind and thought it over.'

I saw he already was looking interested, and I was glad of it. His face had been so sad when he first turned at the sound of my voice, and I well knew why. I can almost always understand Geordie and very often guess what he is thinking of. He has such dear blue eyes, but they are the kind that can look very melancholy sometimes. I do hope he will have a happy life when he grows up—I am pretty sure he will deserve it. Even now that he has been a good long while at school—big public school, I mean—he is just the same to me as ever. When he comes home for the holidays it seems as if he had never been away.

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'I won't interrupt you—or say "nonsense," if I can help it,' he answered, with a little fun in his voice and smile coming in his eyes.

Then I told him. I need not repeat all I said, as I have written a lot of it already. But it must have been rather hard for Geordie not to interrupt me. It all bubbled out so fast—all the splendid ideas and good reasons and perhapses—one on the top of the other, so that if he hadn't been pretty well accustomed to my ways he could scarcely have understood. It was quite interesting and exciting, as I went on, to watch the expression in his face—his cheeks grew pink, then crimson, and his eyes brighter and brighter. I soon saw I was not going to be snubbed.

But real want of breath, and then the sound of mamma's skirts coming across the hall with a pretty soft rustle—I don't think any one else's skirts move so nicely; they seem to match her, not like that noisy flustering that is like saying, 'Here I am; I expect to be attended to'—made me stop at last. There was only time for George to whisper—

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'It's a wonderful idea, Ida. I'll think a lot and then we'll talk about it, by ourselves, first, of course.'

'We mustn't think about it in church,' I replied in the same tone; 'we must *try*, I suppose, Dods, not to think of it in church—part of the time, at least. I don't see that it would matter so much during the first lesson, and *perhaps* one of the psalms, if they are very long ones.'

'No—o, perhaps not,' he said, and then we both ran forward to kiss mamma.

She looked at us, and I saw her face brighten when she saw that ours were not very sad or dull. I think she had been afraid that in his wish to help *her*, papa had put too much of the burden on us two, considering how young we were then.

'My darlings!' she said, in a rather low voice, 'my own brave boy and girl,' and I am almost sure the tears came into her eyes. But the smiles came too.

'What a lovely day it is going to be!' she went on, as she glanced out of the window. 'I am so glad. We must put cares aside as much as we can and try to be happy and hopeful.'

[Pg 44]

'Yes, dear mamma,' I answered cheerfully, and with all the delightful exciting ideas in my head, it was quite easy to be bright, as you can understand, 'yes, we *are* going to have a nice day. Geordie and I'—I glanced at him; he had not exactly said so, but I knew he would not mind,—'Geordie and I want to go down to the hut very soon after luncheon, if you say we may, to get it all ready for you and papa and the little ones, to come to tea.'

'All right,' said mamma, though I saw a tiny shadow cross her face as I spoke, and I knew she was thinking to herself that very likely it would be our last Sunday afternoon tea-party for a very long time, perhaps for ever, as far as the hut was concerned! But these solemn kinds of 'perhapses' are always in our lives, and if we were always thinking of them, it would be more than our minds

and hearts could bear. We should not *forget* them, but I am sure we are not meant to be gloomy about them. Still, at the best, even if my grand plan was carried out, there was plenty to be sad about, I knew. Poor papa's going so far away, first and worst of all, and worst of course for mamma, for though we loved him dearly, she must love him, I suppose, still more.

He came into the room just as these thoughts were flying about my brain. I thought he looked more tired and troubled than mamma—men are not so patient and not always so good at hiding their feelings as *some* women. At least *I* think so! [Pg 45]

We two, however, were really feeling cheerful, and I think our brightness made it easier for mamma to be, at least, less sad than she would otherwise have been. And I said to myself—

'Papa will cheer up too *if* he likes our idea, and I really can't see why he should not like it.'

So breakfast got on pretty well on the whole, and as soon as it was over, Dods and I went off for a talk. How we did talk! But first of all—that was so like Dods—he pulled out his watch and looked what o'clock it was.

'It's just half-past nine, Ida,' he said, 'and we must be quite ready by half-past ten. So let's talk till ten, no longer; it always takes you twenty minutes or half an hour to get dressed for church, and you know it vexes papa to be kept waiting. And to-day it's really very important not to vex him at all, if anything is to come of our plan.'

'Very well,' I said; 'I promise to go in at ten.'

Then we went to one of our favourite garden seats and set to work at our idea. It grew and grew; we kept thinking of new bits to it, each saying something which made the other think of something else, till by ten o'clock we began to feel as if it were all quite settled—'cut and dry.' [Pg 46]

The very last thing I called out to Geordie as we ran in was about a certain old breakfast set of china we had espied in one of our visits to the garret.

'Yes,' I was saying, 'those willow pattern cups and things would do beautifully. It wouldn't matter their being odd, for then mamma wouldn't mind if some got broken. And very likely, Doddie, things *will* get broken, more than——'

'What are you talking about, my dear child?' said mamma's voice, and, looking round, I saw that she was just coming out of the drawing-room on her way upstairs to get ready for church. 'You don't mean to say that your tea-things at the hut are all broken?'

'Oh no, no, mamma dear,' I replied in a great hurry, and feeling myself grow red, though I don't think she noticed it; 'they are all right—none broken, and only one saucer chipped. But—I was only saying—we *might* need more some time.'

'Ah, well!' said mamma, with a little sigh, 'not at present, at any rate.'

And oh how I wished I could tell her of the plan at once! But of course it was best to wait a little. [Pg 47]

I shall never forget that morning at church, and how *awfully* difficult it was to give my attention. I found myself counting up the things we should need to make the hut comfortable, even while my voice was saying the responses quite correctly, and any one noticing me would very likely have thought I was being quite good and listening rightly. Dods, whom I glanced at now and then, was looking very grave but not unhappy. I felt sure he was being much better than I—I mean about listening to what he heard and thinking of the words he said—though afterwards he told me that he too had found it difficult.

'What was most bothering me,' he said, 'was about the new rooms—the old parish room, I mean. What do you think, Ida—should it be made into a dining-room and drawing-room, or——'

'Oh no,' I interrupted, 'certainly not. The two front ones looking to the sea must decidedly be the sitting-rooms—the one to the left of the porch, in front of the kitchen, must be the dining-room, and the big dressing-room, the one we have always meant to be a real bedroom, must be the drawing-room. It is quite a nice, large room, and behind it, the 'messy' room must be *yours*, Dods, which leaves the parish room to be divided for mamma and Esmé and me. Denzil can be with you—there's plenty of room.' [Pg 48]

'But,' said Geordie, 'you're forgetting the servants?'

My face fell at this—I should have said that this conversation was on our way down to the hut that afternoon. We could not talk much before then, as we drove back from church with the others, but we set off as soon as we could after we had had dinner.

'Yes,' I said, 'I was forgetting them altogether, and what's more, Geordie, I haven't the least idea who they are to be, or how many we should have.'

'We must let mamma settle that of course,' he replied. 'Hoskins will be one, anyway. Still—it's a pity we can't propose some place for them, Ida. It makes the whole plan seem rather unfinished and—childish.'

'Like the man who built a house for himself and when it was all finished found he had forgotten a staircase!' I said, half laughing, but feeling rather mortified all the same.

George did not at once reply. He was thinking. We were close to the hut by this time, and he did not say anything till we had unlocked the door and put down our packages and looked round us. [Pg 49]

Everything was just exactly as we had left it the evening before, but somehow everything seemed different!

The truth was, I suppose, that we were looking at it all through different spectacles—yesterday it was only a kind of summer-house or play-room—to-day it was a possible *home*. In some ways I felt as if I had never liked it as much; in others I began to be almost frightened at the ideas I was so full of! But as often happened with us, George's cool, common sense put me right.

'Yes,' he said, after he had strolled into the other rooms and stared at them well as if he had never seen them before,—'yes, I don't see why it shouldn't do. And, about the servants, Ida. Of course papa and mamma must *settle* everything; but if they do take it up seriously and papa buys the iron room, I rather think it's a good deal larger than we have been counting it. I believe it would divide into three quite well. There might be a partitioned-off little room for me, and a large curtain might do to separate mamma from you and Esmé?'

'Yes,' I said, my spirits rising again, 'and that would leave the back room for Hoskins and whomever else we have—*I* should like Margery—wouldn't you, Dods? She is such a good-natured, sturdy little thing. And——' [Pg 50]

'We'd better not try to settle too much,' said sensible Geordie. 'And you must talk quietly, Ida, so as to show we have really thought of it not in a—oh, a babyish way, you know.'

I felt a little ruffled at this.

'You'd better tell them all about it yourself, then,' I said; '*I* don't want any of the honour and glory of it, and if there is any fear of their thinking us silly babies, why, then, we had better give up the whole idea.'

'Nonsense, Ida,' said Geordie. 'It was you who first thought of it, and I think you deserve a lot of credit for it. And I expect you'll get it too. I only want papa and mamma—papa especially—to hear of it at first in the best sort of way.'

'Yes—yes, I know!' I exclaimed, 'and you are a sensible old Dods as you always are. And see what I have got to please you,' and I held up three lovely, fat muffins.

We got the kitchen fire lighted and the tea-table spread in the parlour—I felt inclined to begin calling it 'the dining-room' now—and everything nice and ready before they all came. The first announcement of them was Esmé, who flew in as usual, followed very deliberately by Denzil. She gave me a hug when she saw the table. [Pg 51]

'Oh, what a lovely tea!' she said, 'and how delicious the hut looks. Oh, *don't* you wish, Ida, we could live here always?'

I glanced at Dods—we could not help smiling at each other—it seemed a sort of good omen, her saying that, but we did not say anything. Then came papa and mamma—they had walked down slowly through the wood, and as they came to the little 'plateau' where stood the hut, I saw them stop and look at it. I *wondered* if the same idea was in their minds at all. I did not exactly want it to be, for I was rather pleased at being the first finder of it.

CHAPTER IV

[Pg 52]

'GEORDIE STOOD UP AND WAVED HIS CAP'

No—papa and mamma had not been thinking of anything of that kind—afterwards mamma told me they had only been saying to each other how sweet and pretty it all looked and—though perhaps they did not say so aloud—feeling no doubt how sad it was that we should so soon have to leave it.

But they came in quite brightly, and mamma answered gaily to Esmé's exclamations about the 'lovely tea-party.'

'Yes,' she said, 'it does look nice. And muffins too'—as Geordie glanced up with a very red face from the fire where he was toasting one; 'don't scorch yourself *too* much, in our service, my dear boy.'

'It's a good bit for myself as well,' said Geordie in his rather gruff way. He always spoke like that if he thought he was being praised—above all, the least *over*-praised. 'I like muffins better than any kind of cake or things.' [Pg 53]

He certainly knew how to toast and butter them to perfection. I remember how very good they were that day. Indeed, the tea-party was a great success altogether. After it was over we carried all the cups and saucers and plates into the kitchen, to be ready for Margery to wash up, for mamma had left word at home that she was to come down to the hut to do so, which we were very glad of.

'I wanted to be together as much as possible to-day,' said mamma in her kind way. And just as we had cleared away everything in the parlour we saw Margery coming, and to my great delight Esmé asked if she and Denzil might 'help her' in the kitchen, for Dods and I had been wondering how we could get rid of the little ones without seeming unkind.

So off they ran, and then for a few minutes we four—'big ones,' I was going to say, only that does seem putting Geordie and myself too much on a line with papa and mamma, doesn't it?—sat silent. I was feeling rather nervous, not afraid of papa and mamma, but afraid of them thinking it

was all a perfectly impossible plan.

But at last, after looking at me several times and even giving me two or three little kicks, Geordie plunged in, as was his way— [Pg 54]

'Ida has something to say to you,' he began. 'It's only fair for her to say it, for it's all her own idea, though we have talked about it a good deal.'

Papa looked at me very kindly.

'What is it, my little girl?' he said. 'I am sure you know how pleased I—and your mother—will be to do anything we can to—to brighten all these troubles.'

He seemed to know by instinct that what I had to say must have to do with what he had told us the day before. Yes—only the day before! I could scarcely believe it—it seemed years ago.

I felt my face growing red; mamma was looking at me too, and though her eyes were very kind, I grew more and more nervous, and of course I blurted it out quite differently from what I had meant to.

'It isn't only for us ourselves,' I began, 'though we should like it ever so much—awfully much better than anything else. But I feel as if it would be nicer for everybody—for mamma too, and for papa, when you are far away, you know,' and here I turned specially to him, 'not to have to think of us in a strange place and among strange people. And—and—there are lots of little bits of it that seem to fit in so well.' [Pg 55]

'But, my dear child, I must interrupt you,' said papa smiling, 'before you go on to the "bits," do tell us what the whole is?'

I had really forgotten that I had not done so—my own mind was so full of it, you see.

'Oh,' I said, feeling very much ashamed of myself, especially as I knew Geordie's blue eyes were fixed on me reproachfully. 'I'm very sorry for being so stupid. It's just this, papa—we've been thinking, at least I thought of it first, and Dods has joined in the planning, that—why shouldn't we all, mamma and us four, come to *live* here, really to live here altogether, while you are away?'

Papa gazed at me as if he did not understand, and no doubt just at first he did not.

'Live *here*,' he repeated, 'but that is just——'

'Yes,' I interrupted,—'here, in the hut. I don't mean of course go on living at home, at Eastercove, though it would be Eastercove too. That's the beauty of it; you would be able to feel that we *were* at home, and close to all our friends.'

But still papa repeated, in a dazed sort of way, I would say 'stupid,' only it would seem rude— [Pg 56]

'Live *here*.'

(I do think men are far slower at taking up new ideas than women.)

'Live *here*,' he said again, till I really wished it would not be disrespectful to give him a little shake, and even Dods, who is far patienter and less im——what should I say?—impetuous or impulseful, I must ask mamma which is best, began to look rather provoked. But mamma put it all right.

'Yes, Jack,' she said, the colour rushing into her face and her eyes sparkling,—'yes, *here* in the hut, is what the child means, and, really, I think it is an inspiration.' Mamma *is* quick, and she has such a beautifully ready imagination. 'I don't see why we shouldn't. It is perfectly healthy; dry and airy and quite warm except perhaps in the middle of winter, and we surely could find ways and means of making a *dry* house warm. Ida, darling, I believe you have hit upon a way out of our greatest difficulty. *Do* say you think so too, Jack!'

Light was gradually penetrating into papa's mind.

'Here in the hut! Yes, I wish it were possible,' he said, 'and I agree with you both so far. It *is* dry and healthy, and might be made warm, but—it is so small! Ah!' and he started to his feet, his whole face changing, 'talking of inspirations, I'm not sure but that *I* have got one too—the———' [Pg 57]

Here to our amazement, mamma's and mine I mean, in *his* turn up jumped Dods, and, respectful or not, interrupted papa in the most barefaced way—

'Stop, stop!' he cried, 'let me say it, Dad, do, before you do. I want to have a bit of it. Is your inspiration the old parish room? The iron room they want to get rid of? *Is* it?—do say.'

They were both so excited it was quite funny to see them, Geordie especially, for he is much calmer than papa naturally. Papa turned to him smiling—

'You have guessed it, my boy. Yes, we might buy the room and turn it into two or three at least. It could not cost much—our own men could do it, I believe. It has doorways and windows and fireplaces too, I think, all ready, and I believe we can have it for an old song——'

'I hope I shan't be the one chosen to sing it!' exclaimed Dods, at which we all laughed, though it was not particularly witty. But we were just in the sort of humour to laugh at the least little piece of fun.

'I wish—upon my word, I wish I could see about it this very afternoon,' went on papa, who was now racing ahead of us all in his eagerness. [Pg 58]

'But you can't, dear; it's Sunday, you know,' said mamma, patting his arm; 'and we have plenty to think about. There is no fear of Mr. Lloyd's selling it before to-morrow morning. Let us hear some

more of your plan, Ida, dear.'

I was only too ready to tell it—I was bursting to do so, and so was Geordie. We set to work and talked—how we did talk!—papa and mamma putting in a word now and then, though they were so kind, understanding our wish to be considered the 'discoverers,' as it were, of the new home, that they really let us talk ourselves out. Then we four made a sort of progress through the rooms, papa measuring here and there with the little folding-up foot-rule he always carried in his pocket, and mamma planning where she would put such and such a piece of furniture which could be quite well spared from the almost too full rooms up at the house, not to speak of the stores—treasures they were fast becoming in our eyes now—crowded away in the big garret.

'We must go up there first thing to-morrow morning,' said mamma, 'and have a good look round. I don't believe I know half the things we have—no one does, except Hoskins.' [Pg 59]

'You will have to take her into your confidence at once, I expect,' said papa.

'Yes, I was just thinking so,' mamma replied; 'but I shall wait till you have inquired about the iron room. She knows our troubles already,' she went on, turning to Geordie and me; 'she has known about them for some days, and she says whatever we do, or wherever we go, she will not leave us.'

'Oh, I *am* so glad!' exclaimed Geordie and I in a breath. 'We thought she would be like that,' I went on; 'and I should hope she'd like the hut far, far better than going away to some horrid little poky house among strangers. And, mamma, don't you think Margery would be the best for the other servant.'

'Are we to have two?' said mamma laughing. 'Your plans are getting quite grand, Ida!'

'Of course you must have two,' said papa, 'and one of the men to look after things outside. I have an idea about that; Geordie and I will talk about it together,' and he nodded to Geordie, who looked very pleased at being consulted in this way, as if he were quite big.

'When will you ask about the parish room?' he said to papa. 'May I go with you when you do? Perhaps I could help about the measuring.' [Pg 60]

For they had already settled as to where it should be placed—at one side of the hut, but a little to the back, so that it should not spoil the rather pretty look we were gradually managing to give to the front, by training creepers over the porch, and filling two or three large square tubs with bushy, hardy plants which would stand the winter, and placing them at each side of the long low windows.

'Certainly,' said papa. 'We can drive down to Kirke immediately after breakfast to-morrow morning. And if it is all right about the room, I will see the man whom, I think, Mr. Lloyd employed to put it up. He will understand the best way of partitioning it off, and our own men can work under his directions.'

So it was in the best of spirits—considering, that is to say, the real sorrow of parting with dear papa, and the real anxiety that *must* hang over us for many months to come, at least—that we set off home again, Esmé chattering about how she had wiped all the tea-cups and saucers, and how Margery had said that she could not possibly have 'got through' without her.

'That is not a very elegant expression, my little girl,' said papa. 'Don't you think you could say it some other way.' [Pg 61]

Esmé looked rather puzzled.

'You says,' she replied, and at that papa laughed—I think he felt it was out of the frying-pan into the fire,—'you says to mamma or to Ida when we're playing croquet, "Now see if you can't get through that hoop."'

'But cups and saucers isn't croquet hoops,' said Denzil solemnly, at which we all laughed. A very small joke will go a long way when people are all happy together, and each one trying to do his best to please or amuse the others.

When I awoke on Monday morning it was with much more quietly hopeful feelings than on that sad Saturday I could have believed possible. I seemed to myself to have grown years older in the two days, which was partly nice and partly, just a very little, 'frightening.' I was proud of my idea being thought so well of, and I was very anxious to think it out more and more, so as really to help mamma and to prove that it *was* a good one. So, though it was still very early, I lay quite quietly and did not mind the having a good while to wait till it was time to get up, so busied was my brain in going into all the details which I was able to think about. [Pg 62]

'Two little beds for Esmé and me,' I began. 'Let me see which are the smallest, to take up the least room? This one is rather too big, and besides, the people who have taken the house will most likely need it left. I wonder what they will do with this room. I daresay they will use it for visitors. It is so pretty—my own dear room!' For since my last birthday I had had a room to myself, all freshly done up with light chintz curtains and covers and white furniture. But I resolutely put the thought of my regret out of my mind, and went on thinking about the hut. Esmé's cot would be big enough for her for a good while, and there was at least one old small bedstead up in the garret, and then Dods and I had saved enough money to buy one, as I said.

'We must spend it on *something* for the hut,' I reflected. 'Perhaps we had better ask mamma what would be the most useful.'

Then my mind went on again about the other rooms and what would be needed for them, and I

had just arrived at the chests of drawers when I must have fallen asleep, for when I was awakened by Margery and the announcement, 'Seven o'clock, Miss Ida,' I found myself dreaming that I was hanging up curtains in front of the fireplace instead of the window, and wondering how we could prevent their flying up the chimney! [Pg 63]

After breakfast papa and Geordie set off almost immediately for Kirke, to catch Mr. Lloyd before his week's work began again, papa said. And as soon as mamma had finished her regular housekeeping business for the day, she and I went up to the garret together, to spy the land, or rather the stores. I forget if I said that we happened to be in the middle of our Easter holidays just then, which was most lucky, was it not?

Mamma and I really enjoyed ourselves up in the garret. It was all so neat, and not fusty or dusty or musty, and we came upon treasures—as often is the case if you explore a lumber-room—whose very existence even mamma had forgotten.

'I really think, Ida,' mamma began, pushing her hair out of her eyes in a pretty way she has; her hair is lovely, so curly and fuzzy, like Esmé's, though mine is dreadfully smooth! and theirs never *looks* messy, however untidy it really may get,—'I really think we could find enough furniture here to do for all the rooms, after a fashion. And we can certainly take a few things away from downstairs without spoiling the look of the house. Two beds at least—and one or two small tables. I must have a writing-table for myself—and several of the wicker chairs in the verandah might be spared. Yes—I really don't think the furnishing will be much difficulty or expense.' [Pg 64]

'And Doddie and I have saved sixteen and sixpence, you know, mamma,' I said. 'We meant to buy a camp bedstead for the hut, you know, whenever you would let us furnish the room that is going to be our drawing-room now. So we can still get one for Dods if you like, or anything else needed.'

'Yes, darling,' said mamma. 'That will be very nice. We can wait a little till we see what is most required.'

She spoke quite as seriously as I had done, though I know *now* that sixteen and sixpence is really not nearly as much money as I then thought it. But that is what has always been so dear about mamma; she never 'snubs' us. And many people, even really very kind people, do hurt children's feelings dreadfully sometimes without in the least meaning it. It is one of the things I mean to try always to remember when I am quite grown-up myself, and it would be very wrong and ungrateful of any of *us* ever to forget it, for our father and mother have shown us such a good example about it. [Pg 65]

Then mamma went off to write some letters and I to the schoolroom to practise, which had to be done, holidays or no holidays!

'I wonder if we shall have a piano at the hut,' I thought. 'I shan't very much mind if we don't,' for at that time I did not care much for music, not, at least, for my own performances. Since then I have come to 'appreciate' it a little better, though I am not at all clever about it, and I am afraid papa and mamma are rather disappointed at this. But Esmé is learning the violin and plays already so well that I hope she will make up for me.

I kept running to the window—the schoolroom overlooks the drive—every time I heard the sound of wheels, to see if it was papa and Geordie coming back, which was very silly, as of course they would have a good deal to do, measuring and seeing the carpenter and arranging it all. But I felt as if I could not settle to anything till I knew about the iron room, as it did seem as if the whole plan depended a good deal on our getting it. And when at last I did catch sight of the dogcart coming swiftly along the avenue, my heart began to beat so fast that I had to stop once or twice to take breath on my way to the hall-door. [Pg 66]

Mamma was there before me, as anxious as I, I do believe, though she was too sensible to show it.

But before they got to the house, we knew it was all right. Geordie stood up in the cart and waved his cap for us to understand.

'Oh, I am so glad!' I cried, and mamma smiled.

How strangely things change their—oh, dear, I can't find just the right word; yes, I have it now 'aspects'—in life sometimes. This was Monday; on Saturday only had we heard *the* sad news, and here we were, quite in good, almost high spirits again, about a little bettering of what, if we had foreseen it a week ago, we should certainly have thought a cloud with no silver lining!

Papa and Dods jumped down in a moment, and threw the reins to the groom.

'Is it——' I began.

'All right,' papa interrupted. 'Lloyd is delighted. Very kind and sympathising, of course, with us, but so interested in our—I should say,' with a smile to me, 'Ida's scheme. He thinks it a first-rate idea, at any rate till the autumn.' [Pg 67]

'And he is coming up himself this afternoon,' said Geordie, 'with the drawings and measures of the room, that he got when he bought it.'

'Very good of him,' said mamma.

'And Jervis, the carpenter, is coming too,' George went on; 'and we must all go down to the hut together. Mr. Lloyd said *particularly* Ida.'

I felt myself grow red with pleasure.

'Yes,' said papa; 'we must all go and give our opinions. I am very glad to have secured the room. They were already beginning to take it down. It is a very good size really, larger than you would think; and there are two doorways, I am glad to find, and a little porch. I have two or three ideas in my head as to how to join it on and so forth, but I can go into them better on the spot.'

'Ida and I have been busy too,' said mamma. 'Really, Jack, you would scarcely believe the amount of extra furniture we have. There will be very little to buy—only, I do believe, one camp bedstead for Geordie, and perhaps a servant's one; and a few bright, warm-looking rugs.'

'*We* might buy those, mamma,' I interrupted eagerly. 'I have told mamma about our sixteen and sixpence, Doddie,' I went on, turning to George. 'I knew you wouldn't mind.' [Pg 68]

Geordie nodded.

'Sixteen and sixpence,' repeated papa. 'How have you managed to get together all that?'

'It's *hut* money,' I replied. 'I mean it's on purpose to spend on the hut. We have other savings, too, for Christmas and birthdays—this is all for the hut.'

'And it shall be spent on the hut,' said papa, 'on something lasting—to do honour to you both.'

Wasn't that nice of him?

CHAPTER V

[Pg 69]

'WHAT *CAN* SHE MEAN?'

I remember that Monday afternoon so well. It was very interesting. Mr. Lloyd was very kind and clever about things, and the carpenter, though a rather slow, very silent man, understood his business and was quite ready to do all that was wanted. Papa was as eager as a boy, and Geordie full of ideas too. So between us we got it beautifully planned.

It was far nicer than I had dared to hope. They fixed to run a tiny passage between the side of the hut where the room was to be placed, so that the two doorways into it could both be used,—one to enter into Geordie's room, so that he could run in and out without having to go through mamma's or ours, and the other leading into mamma's, from which we could pass to ours. And the partitions made them really as good as three proper rooms, each with a nice window. There [Pg 70] could be no fireplace in ours, but as it was the middle one, and therefore sure to be the warmest, that would not matter, as there were two, one at each end in the iron room. If it was very cold, mamma said Esmé and I might undress in hers, and *dress* in his, Geordie added, as he meant always to be up very early and light his own fire to work by, which rather amused us all, as he was *not* famed for early rising. Indeed, I never knew such a sleepy head as he was—poor old Dods!

We felt satisfied, as we walked home, that we had done a good day's work.

'Though it *couldn't* have been managed without the iron room,' Geordie and I agreed.

And a day or two later we felt still more settled and pleased when mamma told us that Hoskins and Margery were coming with us. Hoskins was just a little melancholy about it all, not a bit for herself, I do believe, but because she thought it would be 'such a change, so different' for mamma and us.

She cheered up however when we reminded her how much nicer it would be than a poky little house in a back street at Kirke, or, worse still, away in some other place altogether, among strangers. And when she said something about the cold, in case we stayed at the hut through the [Pg 71] winter, Geordie said we could afford plenty of fires as we should have no rent to pay, and that *he* was going to be 'stoker' for the whole family.

'You won't need to look after any fire but your own, Master George,' said she, 'and not that, unless it amuses you. Margery is not a lazy girl—I would not own her for my niece if she was. And besides that, there will be Barnes to help to carry in the coal.'

Barnes was one of the under-gardeners. He lived with his father and mother at the Lodge, but he had never had anything to do with the house, so I was surprised at what Hoskins said.

'Oh yes,' George explained, looking very business-like and nodding in a way he had, 'that is one of the things papa and I have settled about. We are rigging up a room for Barnes, much nearer than the Lodge—the old woodman's hut within a stone's throw of *our* hut, Ida, so that a whistle would bring him in a moment. He will still live at the Lodge for eating, you see, but he will come round first thing and last thing. He's as proud as a peacock; he thinks he's going to be a kind of Robinson Crusoe; it will be quite a nice little room; there is even a fireplace in it. He says he [Pg 72] won't need coals; there's such lots of brushwood about.'

'*I* have been thinking of that,' I said eagerly. 'It would seem much more in keeping to burn brushwood than commonplace coals——'

'Except in my kitchen, if you please, Miss Ida,' put in Hoskins.

'And better still than brushwood,' I went on, taking no notice of Hoskins's 'kitchen,'—I would much rather have had a gypsy fire with a pot hanging on three iron rods, the way gypsies do, or are supposed to do,—'better than brushwood, fir cones. They do smell so delicious when they are

burning. We might make a great heap of them before next winter. It would give the children something to do when they are playing in the wood.'

ORDERING DENZIL ABOUT AS USUAL.

They—the two little ones—were of course in tremendous spirits about the whole thing,—such spirits that they could not even look sad for very long when at last—about three weeks after the days I have just been describing—the sorrowful morning arrived on which dear papa had to leave us. Esmé cried loudly, as was her way; Denzil, more silently and solemnly, as was his; but an hour or two afterwards we heard the little butterfly laughing outside in the garden and ordering Denzil about as usual. [Pg 73]

'Never mind,' said mamma, glancing up from the lists of all sorts of things she was already busy at and reading what was in my mind, 'rather let us be glad that the child does not realise it. She is very young; it does not mean that she is heartless,' and mamma herself choked down her tears and turned again to her writing-table.

I too had done my best not to cry, though it was *very* difficult. I think George and I 'realised' it all—the long, lonely voyage for papa; the risks at sea which are always there; the dangers for his health, for the climate was a bad one, and it was not the safest season by any means. All these, and then the possibility of great disappointment when he got there—of finding that, after all, the discovery of things going wrong had come too late to put them right, and of all that would follow this—the leaving our dear, dear home, not for a few months, or even a year, but for *always*.

It would not do even to think of it. And I had promised papa to be brave and cheerful.

[Pg 74] By this time I must explain that the Hut—from now I must write it with a capital, as mamma did in her letters: 'The Hut, Eastercove' looked quite grand, we thought—was ready for us to move into. Our tenants were expected at the house in a week or ten days, and we were now to leave it as soon as we could.

A great part of the arranging, carting down furniture, and so on had been done, but it had been thought better to put off our actually taking up our quarters in our quaint new home till after papa had gone. *He* said it would have worried him rather if we had left sooner, but I know the truth was, that he thought the having to be very busy, in a bustle in fact, at once on his going, would be the best for us all—mamma especially.

And a bustle it was, though things had been hurried on wonderfully fast. The fixing up of the iron room was quite complete and the partitions were already in their places, the furniture roughly in the rooms too. But as everybody who has ever moved from one house to another knows, there were still *heaps* to be done, and seen to by ourselves, which no work-people could do properly. And besides the arranging at the Hut of course, there was a great deal for mamma to settle at the house, so as to leave everything nice for the people who were coming.

That afternoon, I remember, the afternoon of the day papa left, we were at the Hut till dark, working as hard as we could, even the little ones helping, by running messages and fetching and carrying. And by the time we went home we were very tired and beginning to find it very difficult to look on the bright side of things. [Pg 75]

'I don't believe it will ever be really comfortable for mamma,' said Geordie in the growly tone he used when he was anxious or unhappy. 'It's just a horrid business altogether. I don't believe papa will be able to get things right, out at that old hole of a place, and even if he doesn't get ill, as he very likely will, he'll only come home to leave it for good—I mean we'll have to sell Eastercove. I'm almost sorry we did not go away now at once and get it over.'

I glanced before us. Mamma was some little way in front—I could just see her dimly, for it was dusk, with Denzil and Esmé, one on each side; Esmé walking along soberly for once, and I caught snatches of mamma's voice coming back to us, for there was a light, though rather chilly evening breeze, blowing our way. I could hear that she was talking brightly to the children; no doubt it was not easy for her to do so.

'Listen, Geordie,' I said, nodding forwards, so to say, towards mamma. [Pg 76]

And he understood, though he did not say anything just at once.

'It is a good thing,' I went on, after a moment's silence, 'that the wind is not the other way. I would not like her to hear you talking like that, within a few hours of papa's going.'

It was not often—very, very seldom indeed—that I felt it my place to blame good old Dods; and honestly, I don't think I did it or meant it in any 'superior' way. I am sure I did not, for the words had scarcely passed my lips before they seemed to me to have been unkind. Geordie was tired; he had been working very hard the last few days, and even a strong boy may feel out of heart when he is tired.

'I don't know what *I* should do, not to speak of mamma,' I went on, 'if you got gloomy about things. We all depend on you so,' and for a moment or two I really felt as if I must begin to cry!

Then something crept round my neck, and I knew it was all right again. The something was Geordie's arm, and it gave me a little hug, not the most comfortable thing in the world when you are out walking, and it tilts up your hat, but of course I did not mind.

'Yes, Ida,' he said, 'it's very babyish and cowardly of me, and I'm very sorry. I won't be like that again, I promise you.'

Then I gave him a sort of a hug in return, and we hurried on a little, not to leave mamma with the children dragging on at each side of her, as they are apt to do when they are tired. We none of us spoke much the rest of the way home, but Geordie said one or two little things about how comfortable the Hut was getting to look and so on, which *I* understood, and which prevented poor mamma's suspecting that he was at all in low spirits.

When people really *try* to do right, I think outside things often come to help them. That very evening we were cheered and amused by a letter which had arrived by the second post while we were all out—a quite unexpected letter.

It was from a cousin of ours, a girl, though a grown-up one, whom we were very fond of. She was *almost* like a big sister, and her name was Theresa. She was generally called 'Taisy' for short. I have not spoken of her before; but, indeed, when I come to think of it I have not spoken of any of our relations, I have been so entirely taken up with the Hut. We had however none *very* near. Taisy was almost the nearest. She lived with her grandmother, who was papa's aunt, so Taisy was really only second cousin to us children.

She was now about seventeen, and she was an orphan. Many people like her would have been spoilt, for old Aunt Emmeline adored her and gave her nearly everything she could possibly want. But Taisy wasn't a bit spoilt.

She often came to stay with us, and one of the smaller parts of our big trouble was that we could not look forward to having her *this* year, at any rate. Papa had written to Lady Emmeline to tell her of what had happened; she was one of the few whom he felt he must write to about it, and it was partly because of Taisy's not coming—I mean our not being able to have her—that he did so.

And he had had a very kind letter back from his aunt. She wished she could help him, but though she was comfortably off, her money was what they call 'tied up,' somehow, and Taisy would have none of *hers* till she was twenty-one. Besides, papa was not the sort of man to take or expect help, while he was strong and active and could work for us himself, and it was the kind of trouble in which a little help would really have been no use—a large fortune was at stake.

Taisy had not written; she had only sent loving messages to us all, and something about that 'by hook or by crook' she must see us before the summer was over.

But the letter to mamma which was waiting for us roused our curiosity, and kept us quite bright and interested all that evening, in wondering what she *could* mean.

'Ever since I heard from grandmamma of your worries, dear auntie,' she wrote,—I must explain that Taisy always called papa and mamma uncle and aunt, though they were really only cousins,- 'I have been thinking and thinking about how I could still manage to pay you a visit. I really cannot face the idea of all the long summer without seeing you.'

'It *is* very dull for her at Longfields,' said mamma, interrupting herself in the reading aloud the letter to us. 'Aunt Emmeline never has cared much to have visitors, though she is a wonderfully strong and active old lady. And now that Taisy is giving up regular lessons, it will be still duller. But it can't be helped, I suppose. Yet I do wonder what the child has in her head,' and she went on reading.

> 'And, once I was with you, I am *sure* I would not be any trouble, if only you had room for me. You don't know what a help I should be! So—don't be surprised if you see a balloon coming down towards the Hut one day, and me getting out of it. I have not got my plan quite ready yet, and I am not going to say anything to Granny about it till it is all cut and dried and ready to be stacked!—though, as she always lets me do whatever I want, I am not much afraid of her making any difficulties. Her old friend, Miss Merry, will be coming over from Ireland as usual, I suppose, and I am sure I should only be in the way, especially as I have no governess now. My best love to you all, and I do hope dear Uncle Jack will have a nice voyage and come back feeling quite happy again.—Your loving
>
> TAISY.'

'What *can* she mean?' said Geordie, looking up with a puzzled face.

'Of course about a balloon is quite a joke, isn't it?' I said, though I spoke rather doubtfully, not knowing much about balloons!

'Of course,' said Geordie, in a superior tone. 'Besides, there is no difficulty about her getting to us. The railway and the roads are not blocked up because of our troubles. The thing is, that there is nowhere to put her if she did come.'

'No,' I agreed, running over the rooms at the Hut in my mind; 'we are quite closely enough packed as it is. There isn't any possible corner for another bed even.'

'Unless,' said Geordie slowly,—'unless you would let me really camp out, mamma? I could rig up a

little tent, or—I wouldn't much mind sleeping in Barnes's hut?'

'No, no,' mamma replied decidedly. 'I could not allow anything of the kind. Our living at the Hut is only possible because it is *not* to be like rough camping out, but as healthy and "civilised" as if we were in a house. So put that out of your head, my dear boy. I could not risk your catching cold, or anything of that sort. Remember, I feel responsible to your father in *my* way for you all, just as you two big ones feel so for me,' she added with one of her own dear smiles.

'And then, Dods,' I said, 'it wouldn't be safe—I know *I* wouldn't feel safe—without having you actually in the house, even though Barnes's hut is so near.' [Pg 82]

I think Geordie liked my saying that. But I really meant it.

So we went on wondering and puzzling as to what Taisy meant. It was quite an amusement to us that first evening of papa's being away. And it was worth wondering about, for Taisy was a very clever girl—what is called 'practical.'

'If she could come and be with us, I'm sure she would be a great help,' I thought. 'She is so full of nice ideas and funny ones too, and she never has headaches or neuralgia or horrid things like that. And yet she is *so* kind—I remember that time I sprained my ankle. She was so good.'

The next few days were so busy, however, that all thought even of Taisy and her balloon went out of our heads. I only remember packings and unpackings and arranging and rearrangings, all in a jumble together, ending, nevertheless, in a great deal of satisfaction. The afternoon we went to the Hut 'for good,' it really looked nice enough for us to feel it, for the time, more 'home' than the big house, which, on the surface, seemed rather upset still, though in reality it was nearly ready for the tenants, having gone through a magnificent spring cleaning. But our own little belongings [Pg 83] were absent, and such of the rooms as were quite in order, to our eyes looked bare and unfamiliar, so that we were not sorry to be actually settled at the Hut.

The evenings were still a little chilly, which I, for one, did not regret, as it gave an excuse for nice bright fires in the sitting-rooms and mamma's bedroom. And the children had already picked up a good lot of fir cones, so that the pleasant scent of the trees seemed to be inside as well as out of doors.

'It *is* cosy, isn't it, mamma?' I said, as we stood for a minute or two in what was now the little drawing-room; 'and oh, *aren't* you glad not to be starting on a railway journey to some strange place, or even driving to that little house at Kirke which you told me about as the best we could have got?'

'Yes, indeed, darling,' mamma replied. 'And I am *so* glad to be able to date my first letter to papa from the Hut. I must make time to write to him to-morrow morning; it will just catch the mail.'

'And to-night,' I went on, 'you must rest. There isn't really very much more to do, is there? Not at least anything that we need hurry about.'

'No,' said mamma, looking round. But she spoke rather doubtfully, and I felt that she was longing [Pg 84] to get everything into perfectly 'apple-pie order,' though what that means I have never been able to understand, for as far as we know them nowadays, apple-pies are rather untidy-looking! 'There is very little now for me to see to at—home—at the house,' she went on. 'I am not going there at all for a day or two, and then just to give a look round and pay the wages owing till the Trevors come.'

The Trevors were our tenants—a mother and an invalid son, and a not-very-young daughter—and several of our servants were staying on with them, which we were very glad of.

'And I want,' mamma began again, 'to get things started here regularly. Your lessons, and the little ones' too, and—and—everything. Our own clothes will take some time to arrange, and I must not expect Hoskins to be everywhere at once.

'I will do *lots*, mamma,' I said. 'You don't know what I can do when I regularly set-to, and I promise you I won't open a story-book till the boxes are unpacked and arranged,' though I gave a little silent sigh as I said this. There seemed such heaps to unpack, for you see we had had to bring all our winter things with us too, and I was sensible enough to know that there must now [Pg 85] be a lot of planning how to make frocks and coats and things last, that hitherto we should have given away without a second thought to those whom they might be of use to. And in my secret heart I was trembling a little at the idea that perhaps one of the things I should have to 'set-to' at would be sewing—above all, mending!

'For of course, as mamma says,' I reflected, 'we can't expect Hoskins to do *everything*! And I knew it was a case of just spending the very least we could—without risking health or necessary comforts—till papa came home again, or at least till he got *some* idea of what the future was likely to be.

But for the moment it was worse than foolish to go on looking forward, when the *present* was pretty clearly to be seen. And just then Esmé came dancing in to tell us that tea was ready in the dining-room.

'Quite ready and getting cold. So come quick,' she said.

CHAPTER VI

[Pg 86]

'YOU DO UNDERSTAND SO WELL, MAMMA'

I shall never forget the first morning's awaking in the Hut. Well, as I knew it, it seemed as if I had not till then ever been there before. I do not mean so much the actual waking; that of course is always a little confusing, even if only in a different *room* from the one you are used to, and I was particularly accustomed to my own room at Eastercove, as we were not people who went away very much. We loved home too well for that.

No, though I rubbed my eyes and stared about me and wondered why the window had changed its place, I soon remembered where I was, especially when I caught sight of Esmé's little bed beside mine, and of Esmé's pink cheeks and bright hair as she lay fast asleep still, looking like a comfortable doll.

I was thinking rather of the feelings I had when I was dressed—I dressed very quickly, despising any warm water in my bath for once, and moved about very quietly, so as not to waken Esmé and thereby vex Hoskins the very first morning—and made my way out to the porch and stood there gazing about me. [Pg 87]

It was not so very early after all—half-past seven by mamma's little clock in the drawing-room, and I heard the servants working busily in the kitchen and dining-room, though there was no sound from poor old Geordie's corner, in spite of his overnight intentions of being up by six!

But outside it seemed very, very early. It was so absolutely *alone*—so strangely far from any sight or sound of common human life, except for just one little thing—a tiny white sail, far, far away on the horizon—a mere speck it seemed. And below where I stood,—I think I have said that the hut was on a sort of 'plateau,—' though at some little distance, came the sound of the waves, lapping in softly, for it was a calm day, and now and then the flash of a gull as it flew past, or the faint, peculiar cry of some other sea-bird or coast-bird nearer inland. For the spot was so quiet and seemingly isolated that rather wild, shy birds were not afraid of visiting it, even when there was no stormy weather or signs of such out at sea. [Pg 88]

And behind me were our dear pine woods, and the feeling of the squirrels and the home birds all busy and happy in the coming of the spring, though any sounds from there were very vague and soft.

At first I did not know what it all reminded me of. Something out of my own experiences I knew, but I had to think for a minute or two before it came back to my mind. And then I remembered that it was a story in a French book that mamma had read to us, partly in French, which Geordie and I knew fairly well, and partly translating as she read. It was called *Les Ailes de Courage*, by some great French author, who wrote it, I think, for his or her grandchildren, and it is almost the most interesting and strangest story I ever heard—about a boy who lived quite, quite alone in a cave by the seashore, and got to know all the wild creatures and their habits in the most wonderful way, so that they came to trust him as if he was one of themselves. I cannot give any right idea of the story; I doubt if any one could, but I wish you—if 'you' ever come to exist—would all read it.

Just as I was standing there, pleased to have remembered the association in my mind, I felt a hand slipped gently round my neck. It was not one of Geordie's 'hugs,' and I looked up in surprise. It was mamma. [Pg 89]

'How quietly you came,' I said; 'and oh, mamma, *doesn't* it remind you of *Les Ailes de Courage*?'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I know exactly what you mean.'

And then we stood perfectly still and silent for a moment or two, taking it all in, more and more, till a *very* tiny sigh from mamma reminded me of something else—that dear papa was on that same great sea that we were gazing at—perhaps standing on the deck of the steamer and thinking of us—but *so* far away already!

'It is chilly,' said mamma, 'and we must not begin our life here by catching cold. We had better go in, dear. I think it is going to be a lovely day, but in the meantime I hope Hoskins has given us a fire in the dining-room.'

Yes—a nice bright little fire was crackling away merrily, a handful or two of the children's cones on the top. And the room looked quite cosy and tidy, as Margery had finished dusting and so on, in here, and was now busy at the other side.

'I will go and see how Esmé is getting on,' said mamma. 'She had had her bath before I came out, but there may be difficulties with her hair. And you might hurry up the boys, Ida, for I have promised Hoskins to be very punctual, and breakfast will be ready by eight.' [Pg 90]

It was a good thing I did go to hurry up the boys—they were both fast asleep! Geordie looked dreadfully ashamed when I at last managed to get him really awake, and Denzil almost began to cry. He had planned with Esmé, he said, to have a run down to the sands before breakfast, and Hoskins knew and had promised them a slice of bread and butter and a drink of milk.

'Did she not wake you then?' I asked. 'She woke Esmé at seven, but I was already up.'

Geordie could not remember if he had been awakened or not. Denzil thought Margery had come in and said something about 'seven o'clock,' but it was all mixed up with a wonderful dream that he wanted me to stay to listen to, about a balloon (he had heard us talking about Taisy's balloon) with long cords hanging from it, like those in the grandfather's clock in the hall 'at home,' for you to climb up and down by, as if they were rope-ladders.

'You must have gone to sleep again and dreamt it through the word "o'clock" getting into your brain,' I said, whereupon I felt as if I had got out of the frying-pan into the fire, for instead of telling the rest of his dream, Denzil now wanted to know exactly what I meant, and what his brain was 'like,' and how a word could get into it—was it a box in his head, and his ears the doors, etc., etc.—Denzil had a dreadfully 'inquiring mind,' in those days—till I really had to cut him short and fly. [Pg 91]

'You will neither of you be ready for breakfast, as it is,' I said; 'and if you are not quick you will have none at all, or at least quite cold.'

I nearly ran against the coffee, which Hoskins was just carrying in, as I got to the dining-room door, which would not have been a happy beginning. But I pulled up just in time, and took in good part Hoskins's reminder that it wouldn't do to rush about as if we were in the wide passages at home. Then she went on to tell me what it all made her think of, she was so glad to have remembered.

'It is just like a *ship*, Miss Ida. I have never been at sea, but I spent a day or two once on board one of the big steamers at Southampton that a cousin of my mother's is stewardess of. Yes, it's that that's been running in my head.'

'It can't have been a *very* big one, then,' I said, rather pertly, I am afraid. But Hoskins did not see the joke. [Pg 92]

'Oh, but it was, Miss Ida,' she went on, after she had placed the coffee-pot in safety. 'The big rooms, saloons, as they call them, were really beautiful, but the passages quite narrow, and the kitchens and pantries so small, you'd wonder they do do any washing-up in them, let alone cooking. Not an inch of space lost, you may say. And as to how they manage in rough weather when everything's atop of the other, it's just wonderful, not that I've any wish to see for myself; the sea's all very well to be beside of, but as for going *on* it,' and Hoskins shook her head, but said no more. For mamma just then came into the room, and the kind-hearted woman did not want to remind her who *was* on the sea at the present moment.

We three—mamma and Esmé and I—had made some way with our breakfast before the two lazy ones joined us, Geordie rather shy and ashamed; Denzil eager to explain the whole story of his dream, and to tease poor mamma about his brain and how it was made and what it was like, till I did wish I had not mentioned its existence to him.

I don't remember anything very particularly interesting in the course of the first few days at the Hut, or rather perhaps, *everything* was so interesting that no one thing stands out very much in my memory or in my diary. I kept a diary in those days, as I daresay you who read this have suspected, otherwise I could not have been so exact about details, though it needs no diary to remind myself of the *feeling* of it all, of the curious charm of the half gypsy life. Not that it really was nearly as 'gypsy' as we would have liked it to be, or as we *thought* we would have liked it to be! It was really so comfortable, and we were all so pleased with our own efforts to make it so, and their success, that by the end of a week or ten days we began to long for some adventures. [Pg 93]

'A storm,' said Geordie one day,—'a storm at sea. How would that do? Not a very bad one of course, and———'

'No,' I said decidedly, frowning at him to remind him about papa's being on the sea,—'no, that wouldn't do at all. Besides, there never are storms at this time of year. It's past the bad time. No, something more like real gypsies camping near us, and coming to ask us to lend them things, and telling our fortunes.'

But at this idea *mamma* shook her head. [Pg 94]

'No, thank you,' she said, though she smiled; 'I have no wish for any such neighbours. Besides, Ida, you forget that though we are living in a hut, we are still at home on our own ground, and certainly gypsies have never been allowed to camp inside the lodge gates.'

'They never come nearer than Kirke Common now,' said George. 'They have been frightened of Eastercove, Barnes says, ever since papa was made a magistrate.'

'I think we must be content if we want adventures,' said mamma, 'with reading some aloud. I have got one or two nice books that none of you know, and I think it would be a very good plan to read aloud in the evenings.'

We were not very eager about it. We liked very much to be read to, but we were not fond of being the readers, and though mamma read aloud beautifully, I knew it was not right to let it all fall upon her, as her voice was not very strong.

'It isn't as if Taisy were here, to take turns with you, mamma,' I said, 'as she always does.'

'After this week,' said mamma, 'you will not want any more excitement, for we must really arrange about your lessons, Ida—yours and the little ones. And Geordie, of course, will begin again regularly with Mr. Lloyd, now that we are settled.' [Pg 95]

Our daily governess was given up. She was not now quite 'advanced' enough for me, and to have her for Denzil and Esmé alone was very expensive, so it had been fixed that I was to work with mamma; and, on the other hand, be myself teacher to the little ones for the time. Mamma had thought she would have so much less to do, with papa away, and no calls to pay, or going out to dinners and luncheons, all of which she had given up for the time. But it did not look very like it so far—I mean not very like her 'having more time' than at the big house, for there were always things turning up for her to do, and then she wrote enormously long letters to papa every week.

And there were things about the place, the whole property, which she had to be consulted about now he was away.

And for my part I was not at all looking forward to my new post of governess!

'It is such a pity,' I thought, 'that we can't have Taisy. She wouldn't have minded teaching the children a bit, and she is so clever. Lots of my own lessons I could have done with her too. And I know the little ones won't obey me; Denzil would, but not Esmé, and she will set him off.' [Pg 96]

I suppose my face was looking rather cloudy, for mamma went on again.

'I daresay we shall all feel a little depressed for a time, for we have had a good deal of really tiring work as well as excitement. And the worst of over-excitement, at least for young, strong people, is, that when it is over, everything seems flat, and we find ourselves wishing something else would happen.'

'Yes,' I said; 'that's just what I feel. You do understand so well, mamma.'

'I have a mild piece of excitement in store for you to-day or to-morrow,' mamma went on again. 'I think it is quite time that I called on our tenants. They must be fairly settled by now.'

'I don't see that there was any settling for them to do,' I said. 'You left everything so beautifully neat and nice.'

Somehow I felt a little cross at the poor things!

'They have to unpack what they brought with them,' said Geordie; 'and I'm sure——' he stopped short.

I knew why he stopped. He thought that what he was going to say might vex me, for, as I think—or hope I have owned—I have a quick temper. But Dods was not famous for 'tact'; that habit of his of stopping short all of a sudden often made me crosser than almost anything he could *say*. [Pg 97]

'It's very rude not to finish your sentence,' I said sharply. 'What are you so sure about?'

'Only that you made fuss enough about our own unpacking,' he replied, 'quite extra from the getting the Hut in order and all that.'

'You are very unfair, and unkind,' I said, feeling as if I should like to cry, for *I* thought I had been very patient and good-tempered. 'Mamma, don't you think he needn't have said that?'

'He did not want to say it, to give him his due,' said mamma, smiling a little; 'and to give Ida her due,' she went on, turning to Geordie, 'I don't see, my boy, that you needed to *think* it.'

'Well,' said Dods, and I felt my vexedness begin to go away, 'after all, I don't know that I did. I suppose we've all been rather fussy, though it wasn't in a bad sort of way.'

'No, indeed,' said mamma; 'it was in a very good sort of way. You have all been most helpful; I wish you could have seen my last letter to papa about you.'

After that it would have been impossible to go on being vexed with any one, wouldn't it? I never knew any one like mamma for making horrid feelings go and nice ones come, and yet she is always quite *true*. [Pg 98]

'Then, do you mean that you want me to go with you when you call on the Trevors, mamma?' I asked.

'Yes, I do, rather particularly,' she replied, so of course I said I would be ready whatever time she fixed, though I didn't very much want to go. I was just at the age—I don't think I have quite grown past it even now—when girls hate paying calls, and I could not bear the idea of being received as visitors in our very own house. This was extremely silly of course, as it was such a lucky thing for us to have let it to good, careful people like the Trevors, but I don't think it was an unnatural feeling. And afterwards, poor mamma owned to me that it was something of the same kind that had made her wish to take me with her. It would make her feel less 'lonely,' she thought. Wasn't it sweet of her to think that?

So that afternoon, or the next, I forget which, we found ourselves walking slowly up through the woods to the big house. I felt rather as if it must be Sunday, for it was not often, except on Sundays, that I was in the woods in very neat 'get up,'—proper gloves instead of rough garden ones, and best boots, and hat, and everything like for going to church, or for going a drive with mamma in the victoria. [Pg 99]

We did not expect—at least I did not—to find our new acquaintances very interesting. There was nobody young among them, and hearing that they had come to Eastercove principally for health's sake did not sound very lively.

But, after all, something interesting *did* come of the visit, as I will tell you.

We were ushered into the drawing-room—'the ladies were at home,' he said—by an oldish man-servant, with a nice face.

Into our own drawing-room—how funny it seemed! And already it did not seem quite our own, not the same. There were little changes in the places of the furniture, and there were unfamiliar odds and ends about, which made it feel strange. I was rather glad that there was no one in the room to receive us, and I squeezed mamma's hand tight, and I am sure she understood, and we both had time to get our breath, as it were, before any one appeared.

When some one did come, nevertheless, we were taken a little by surprise, for she—it was Miss Trevor—entered by the window, and I had been looking towards the door. There are long, low- [Pg 100]

down windows in the drawing-room, and at one side a terracey sort of walk, which is very pleasant for sitting out on, in summer especially, as it is well shaded.

Immediately I saw her I felt she was nice. She seemed older than mamma, though perhaps she was not so really. Her face was very quiet—that is the best word for it, and though I was so young then and knew so little of life, I felt that it was a face that had *grown* quiet through goodness. Even now I do not know much of Miss Trevor's history, but mamma has been told enough of it to make her think very highly of her.

There was not the least bit of hardness, scarcely even of sadness in her expression, but just a look—a look that made one feel that she had come through sorrow, and could never care *very* much about anything for herself again—anything *here*, I mean.

WE WERE OUT ON THE TERRACE, AND MRS. TREVOR COMING TO MEET US.

'I am so sorry,' she said at once, in a nice, hearty way, 'to have kept you waiting. It is such a lovely afternoon that mother and I have settled ourselves outside!'

'Then please don't unsettle yourselves,' said mamma, and I saw a gleam of pleasure creep into Miss Trevor's gray eyes at mamma's pretty voice and manner. 'May we not join Mrs. Trevor on the terrace, for I suppose it is there you are sitting?'

'Yes,' was the reply. 'It is so sheltered, and of course it is still early days for venturing anything of the kind. But mother is quite strong except for rheumatism, and really who *could* have rheumatism in this dry, fragrant air? We are so delighted with everything about your beautiful home, Mrs. Lanark,' she went on. (It has *just* struck me that till now I have never said that 'Lanark' is our family name! Really, I am not fit to try to write a story.) 'And you have done so much to make it perfect for us.'

Mamma and I felt repaid for our trouble by this, but before there was time to reply, we were out on the terrace, and Mrs. Trevor coming to meet us. It was not such an easy business for her to do so, as you might think. She had three dogs—darlings, I must own, and not barking, snapping darlings—dancing round her, and she was all twisted about with wool, red and green and white and all colours, unwound from the balls from her knitting. You never saw anything so funny, especially as the doggies, though very good-natured, were very lively and affectionate, and very spoilt, evidently accustomed to think the wools and the knitting and every bit of dear Mrs. Trevor herself only existed for their benefit. How she managed to keep the wool clean, and to knit the pretty fluffy things she did, I never found out. I really think there was some magic about it, for I *never* saw her without the strands of it flying loose, *and* the dogs dancing up and down to catch it!

She was laughing—such a nice laugh.

'Really,' she said, 'you will think me a slave to my pugs, Mrs. Lanark, and I am afraid it is true. Zenia, dear, please untwist me.'

Miss Trevor was evidently pretty well used to doing so, but she laughed too; and mamma and I started forward to help, so between us we managed to get the wool wound up pretty quickly, the doggies standing by more quietly than usual. They were more in awe of Miss Trevor, it was plain to see, than of their actual mistress.

CHAPTER VII

'NO,' SAID MAMMA, 'THAT ISN'T ALL'

Then we all sat down at the end of the terrace; Mrs. and Miss Trevor had already found out exactly the nicest place, one of our own favourite places, sheltered but not too shut in, with a view of the pine woods close by, at one side, and a peep of the farther off sea, through an opening that had been made on purpose, at the other.

'I love that glimpse of the sea,' said Miss Trevor, who naturally began to talk to me, as her mother and mamma were entertaining each other.

'Yes,' I said, 'this corner is a very nice one. But you should see the view from where we are now—down at the Hut, I mean.'

'It must be charming,' she replied, 'so open and wide. I am very anxious, indeed,' she went on smiling, 'to see the Hut. It must be so—picturesque.'

'No, it isn't exactly that,' I said. 'It's *queer*, and out-of-the-common, of course, but the charm of

the place *is* the place,' and I laughed at my own way of expressing myself. 'It seems so entirely away from everything, except the sea and the trees and the wild creatures, though it isn't *really* lonely.'

Then mamma turned to Miss Trevor with some little explanation about something or other in the house which Mrs. Trevor said her daughter took charge of, and the old lady—I hope it isn't rude to call her that? she did seem old to me—began talking to me. I liked her very much. She was *so* fond of her three doggies, and she was so sympathising about one of ours that had died a few months before, and whom we had loved so dearly, that it was not till a good while afterwards that we could bear to have another.

The one we did have in the end was a present from Mrs. Trevor, a pug puppy, and we have him still, and I named him 'Woolly,' which everybody thinks a most unsuitable name for a pug, as they do not understand the reason for it. I daresay *you* will guess that it was because the sight of a pug always reminds me of Mrs. Trevor's unwound balls, and the wool all twined round her.

[Pg 105] Soon after, mamma said we must be going, and we bade Mrs. Trevor good-bye, but Miss Trevor said she would go a little bit of the way with us.

She seemed to have something she wanted to say, and as if she did not quite know how to begin, till at last, just as we were close to the turn in the drive that led to the stables and coach-houses, she stood still for a moment. From where we were there was again a peep of the sea, all glistening and sparkling, though calm.

'This is another pretty peep,' said mamma.

'Yes,' Miss Trevor agreed, 'and the advantage up here is that we can have these open views and yet be in shade. As the season gets on, I am afraid you will find it rather too unsheltered from the sun to sit out on the sea-side of the Hut.'

'We shall have to rig up shady arrangements,' said mamma laughingly.

'That reminds me,' said Miss Trevor, which was not quite true, as she had been thinking of it all this time, I am sure, and wondering how she was to offer it without seeming officious, or anything of that sort,—'that reminds me'—then she broke off—'would you mind just looking in here a moment?'

[Pg 106] 'In here' was one of the coach-houses. Miss Trevor led the way towards it, and pushed open the door. Inside stood a sort of Bath-chair, of lighter build, even though larger, than such things generally are. It was of wickerwork, covered with pretty stuff like what tents and awnings are made of—as we saw when she threw off the sheet that was over it.

'We call this my brother's boudoir,' she said. 'It is quite a curiosity,' and she began drawing out and showing us all manner of contrivances—a table which hooked on to one side, another which fastened itself to the front, a large basket for the other side, a stool, quite strong enough for a second person to sit on comfortably to talk or read to whomever was in the chair; and besides all these, wonderful awnings that pulled out and could be turned and twisted like big umbrellas, and stretches of wickerwork to make the chair into a couch—and all this on wheels!

'It is not meant to be used as a Bath-chair,' went on Miss Trevor; 'the wheels are just to move it easily for short distances. It is really a stationary affair. My brother invented a good deal of it himself two or three years ago when he was very ill—much more of an invalid than now, I mean.'

[Pg 107] 'It is a beautiful thing,' said mamma, in which I quite agreed with her, though we both wondered a little why she was exhibiting it at all to us so minutely.

'But Will isn't at all pleased with us for bringing it here,' Miss Trevor continued. 'He says he never wants to see it again; it reminds him of his worst time, and he says I must get rid of it. He prefers sitting out among the pines in a quite well sort of way. So—it just struck mother and me, that *perhaps* it might be some little use to you, down so near the sea where there is no shade,' and she glanced at us half timidly.

'Oh!' I exclaimed, before mamma had time to speak, 'it would be splendid—just in front of the little porch. We could really make a sort of tiny room with it, and you could be *so* comfortable, mamma, on sunny days. Oh, do say we may have it!'

Miss Trevor seemed delighted, and mamma smiled at my enthusiasm.

'It is a charming chair,' she said, 'far more than a chair indeed—I scarcely know what to call it. It is most kind of you to have thought of it for us, Miss Trevor, and if you are so good as to lend it to us, you may be sure we shall take the greatest care of it. And, of course, if Mr. William Trevor ever wants to have it while you are here, you must not for an instant hesitate to tell us and we [Pg 108] should send it back at once.'

Miss Trevor got rather red.

'Oh, but,' she said, 'you don't quite understand, Mrs. Lanark. We want you to have it for good—to keep, I mean, if you care for it. I am perfectly certain that Will won't want it. In fact, he says he hates the sight of it. And down at the Hut, it might be of use, even after you have moved up here again. I will have it wheeled down to you to-morrow morning; it may need a little cleaning up first. The wheels are quite strong enough for a short journey, especially with no one inside. I only meant that it is not built in the peculiarly strong way a regular Bath-chair needs to be.'

I did feel so pleased to know it was to be our very own, and so, I think, did mamma. For when things are lent, there is always a rather fidgety feeling, for fear they should get spoilt in any way.

And Miss Trevor had said it so nicely—as if our taking it would really be doing them a favour. For, of course, from almost complete strangers it is a little difficult to accept presents, though mamma has often told us that to receive a kindness graciously is quite as much a duty as to offer one.

And then too she had spoken as if our return to our proper home was quite a certainty, and our absence from it only a question of a little time, though afterwards we heard that there had been a good deal of gossip in the neighbourhood about our being completely 'ruined,' and that Eastercove was sure to have to be sold. I suppose a great deal of gossip is not meant to be unkind, but still it does seem sometimes as if people were more ready to exaggerate and talk about other people's *troubles* than about their good fortune. [Pg 109]

We said good-bye to Miss Trevor soon after that—she, turning to go back to the house, and we, after mamma had asked her very heartily to come soon to see us in our 'gypsy encampment,' as mamma called it (I wished it had been a good deal more gypsy than it was!), which she seemed very eager to do, walking slowly towards the Hut. More slowly than I felt inclined for—I was in a fever to tell Geordie about the wonderful chair—but mamma was still feeling a little tired after all the bustle and busy-ness and sad feelings of the last few weeks, and so I tried to keep down my impatience.

When we came quite out of the wood into the clear, open view of the sea, mamma stood still again and gazed down at it without speaking for a moment or two. [Pg 110]

'Are you thinking of papa?' I said softly, giving her arm, through which I had slipped my hand, a little squeeze.

'Yes, dear,' she said, turning her face towards me, and I was pleased to see that she was smiling. 'He must be nearing the end of his long journey by now. But it was not only because of his voyage that I was thinking of him. The sea is always associated with him in my mind; it was the occasion of our first getting to know each other.'

I felt greatly interested.

'Did you meet on board ship, do you mean?' I asked. 'Did you make a voyage together?'

'No, no,' said mamma, smiling again; 'I have never been a long voyage in my life. And the time I was thinking of—ever so long ago—had nothing to do with a voyage. I will tell you the story of it if you like. Shall we sit down here a little? It is perfectly dry.'

My hurry to get home to tell Geordie about Miss Trevor's present had softened down in the interest of what mamma was speaking of; besides, when I came to think of it, I remembered that he could not yet be back from Mr. Lloyd's. So I was very pleased to do as mamma proposed. [Pg 111]

'There is a little bathing-place far up in the North,' she began, when we had settled ourselves on a little bank made by some old roots which had spread out beyond the actual pine wood, 'which was rather a favourite in that part of the world a good many years ago, though now, I fancy, it is quite out of fashion. It was considered a very safe place for children, as there are great stretches of sands, and the bathing is very good, except that the tide at one part goes out with great swiftness and force, owing to a current of some kind just there. There is a garrison town—a small one—two miles or so from the bathing village—a station for cavalry—and the sands used to be, and I daresay still are, a favourite exercising ground for the horses. Well, one morning, ever so long ago, as I said——'

'Do you mean fifty years ago, or a hundred perhaps?' I interrupted thoughtlessly, forgetting that the story had some connection with mamma herself.

'No, no,' she said laughing, 'not quite as "ever so long ago" as that. Let me see—I need not be quite exact—about twenty-four or twenty-five years ago, we will say. Well, one fine summer morning an officer, a very young one, of only eighteen or nineteen, was galloping with his men—a small party—up and down these sands, when he heard and saw something which made him suddenly pull up and gaze down towards the sea, which had turned and was rapidly going out. It was just above the bathing-place—a perfectly safe place if the vans were drawn out when the tide turned, and not allowed to get into the sort of current I told you of. But by some mischance one of the vans had been allowed to stay in the water too long—the old bathing man was getting rather stupid, I fancy, and was busy drying things higher up, with his back to the sea, and did not hear the cry from the van, or see the white handkerchief that was frantically waved from its landward side. [Pg 112]

The young man had keen eyes and ears; he saw that there was not a moment to be lost—and he quickly took in what had happened and what must be done. The van was *almost* off its wheels, swaying about with every little wave that ran in, as the water rose and rose. And just outside the door, on the ledge at the top of the steps, stood a forlorn little figure waving a handkerchief, or perhaps it was a towel, and crying at the top of her small voice— [Pg 113]

"Help, help; oh, *please*, help!"

'I don't know what the officer did about his men, who were already some little way off—I suppose he signed to them to wait for him,—but I know what he did himself, and that was to gallop as fast as his horse would go, down to the sea, shouting as he went to the bathing-man, who was quick enough to see what was wrong, as soon as his attention was called to it.

'He rushed for his old horse, and was wonderfully soon at the water's edge and in it, looking horribly frightened, but quick as he was, the young man was there at least a minute or two before him. And after one glance at the state of things, the first comer did not hesitate. For he saw that

the van was growing less and less steady; it was *almost* lifted off the ground by this time, though it kept recovering itself a little. And the small figure on the steps was calling more and more wildly and shaking her white signal more desperately, while she clung on with the other hand to the side of the lurching and swaying van.

'His—the young officer's, I mean—first idea was to harness his horse *somehow* to the van, and draw it out bodily—riding like a postilion. But he gave this up at once when he found how deep the water was already and how unsteady the thing was. He was too angry with the careless owner of it to care whether the van itself swam out to sea or not, and too anxious, to risk wasting a moment. And the sight of the little white face and tear-swollen eyes lifted up to him doubled both these feelings. [Pg 114]

'"Don't be frightened, you will be all right now," he called out to the child, who by this time scarcely knew what she was saying. He thinks she changed her piteous "Help, help, do come!" to "Oh, save me, please, save me!" And when he and his horse got quite close he had no need to encourage her to come to him—she almost sprang into his arms, so quickly that he was afraid she would fall into the water. But it was managed somehow, so that in another moment he found himself riding back to the shore again, with the little girl perched on the front of his saddle, clinging to him and tucked up so as to keep even her feet from getting wet.

'She was actually quite dry when they got back to the sands and he lifted her down—getting off himself to get a good shake, for *he* was by no means quite dry, nor was the horse, who had behaved so well and pluckily, as if understanding there was something the matter, and now stood snorting with pleasure and satisfaction. [Pg 115]

'And the little girl was sensible too. She had quite left off crying and held out her hand to her preserver.

'"Oh, thank you, thank you so velly much," she said, "for saving me. I was velly neely drowned, wasn't I? Please go home and get dry quick, or else you'll catch cold."

'But before he had time to reply, a figure came rushing up to them in great excitement. It was the little girl's nurse, dreadfully frightened and ashamed, especially when the boy officer turned upon her very sharply and asked her what on earth she had been thinking of to leave her charge in such danger.

'She had a long story to tell, which he had not patience to listen to—how she had almost finished dressing the young lady when she found she had left her parasol on the sands, and had climbed over into the next van where a friend was, just as it was being drawn out, as she was so afraid of the parasol being stolen, thinking no harm could come to the child in that minute or two till the bathing-man came back again, and how her friend had seen the parasol higher up on the stones, and how—and then came the bathing-man lumbering up with *his* story—or how he had thought there was no one in the van, and he was just a-goin' to fetch it out—not that it would have gone far—— [Pg 116]

'"But it *would*," said the soldier; "and even if it had stuck, the young lady would have been half killed with fright and soaked through, and perhaps fallen into the water bodily. The bathing-man deserved to be reported, and——"

'There came a shout for the young officer just then. Some one, thinking *he* had got drowned or something of the kind, had hurried back to see. So he rode off though just as he was going, the little girl stopped him for a moment.

'"Oh, please, Mr. Soldier," she said, "will you tell me your name, so that mamma can write to thank you?"

'He laughed, but he was already in the saddle, and all she heard was the one word, "Jack."'

Mamma stopped when she got to this. I waited an instant to see if she was going on again. I felt a little puzzled, though I thought the story so interesting.

'That isn't all, is it, mamma?' I said. 'I do so like it, but—didn't you say—something about papa—and you and the sea, being mixed up?'

Mamma smiled; her pretty blue eyes were fixed on the water below us; they and it seemed almost the same colour this afternoon. [Pg 117]

'No,' she said, 'that isn't all. It was many, at least several—nine or ten or so years later, that the story goes on again. The boy officer had been out in India and seen fighting and many other things that come into soldiers' lives. But now that was over for him. Other duties had come into his life and changed it. Well—he was staying near the sea, with his mother and sisters, and one day, after a boating expedition,—it was a picnic to a picturesque island not far off,—he was introduced to a girl who had come with some other acquaintances. And they walked up and down the sands for a little. He kept looking at her in rather a curious way, and she wondered why, till at last he said—

'"I have the strangest feeling that I have seen you before, but I cannot tell where or when. And your name does not help me to remember."

'Then the girl looked at him in her turn very carefully. And a sudden rush of remembrance came over her.

'"Is your name," she said quite eagerly,—"is your name—your first name 'Jack'?"

'"Yes," he said, more and more puzzled. [Pg 118]

'She smiled, and then she laughed, and then she told him.

'"I believe I can solve the riddle," she said. "I once rode through the sea on your horse—in front of you.'"

'And then Jack remembered.'

And *I* understood!

'Oh, mamma!' I exclaimed, 'what a dear story. And *you* are the little girl, and dear papa is "Jack," and—and—it ended in your being married! How clever it was of him to remember your face again!'

'Don't you think it was still cleverer of me to remember his name?' said mamma. '*He* always says so. But Ida, dearest, look how low the sun is getting. We must hurry home, or Geordie and the others will be getting tired of waiting for tea,' and she got up from her root-seat as she spoke, and we walked on quickly.

I kept on thinking of the story all the way. It was so pretty and yet so queer to think of my own papa and mamma as if they were people in a book, and to picture to myself that once upon a time, or *ever*, they were strangers to each other.

'Mamma must have been a dear little girl,' I thought to myself, as I glanced up at her; 'she is still so pretty and sweet;' and I felt that to me she *always* would seem so, even when her golden hair had grown silver, and her bright eyes dimmer, and her rounded cheeks thin and worn. [Pg 119]

'She will always be my dear pretty mamma,' I thought.

CHAPTER VIII

[Pg 120]

'I'VE BROUGHT MY HOUSE WITH ME, LIKE A SNAIL'

The interest of listening to mamma's story had made me for the time almost forget about Miss Trevor's present. But as we got close to the Hut and saw George coming to meet us, it rushed back into my mind again.

'I say,' he called out, as he caught sight of us, 'it's past tea-time; Hoskins wanted us to begin without waiting for you, but I wouldn't. She said she was sure you were having it up there with those people,' and he nodded his head in the direction of the big house.

'Oh no!' said mamma, 'I like tea at home best, my boy.'

And 'Oh no!' I joined in;' I was really in a hurry to get back, Dods, for I have something very interesting to tell you. And you mustn't call them "those people;" they are very nice indeed and *very* kind. They're going to send——' [Pg 121]

'Wait till we are at tea to tell him all about it,' interrupted mamma. 'It will take some time, and I see Esmé and Denzil peeping out impatiently.'

Tea, you see, had become rather a settled sort of meal, even for mamma, though she and Geordie and I had a sort of little dinner or supper, I scarcely know which to call it, later in the evening. But *nursery* meals had of course to be given up at the Hut, as there was no nursery to have them in, so Esmé and Denzil did not think five o'clock tea a small affair by any means. And whether it was that the being so *very* close to the sea had sharpened our appetites, or that Hoskins and Margery between them made such very good 'plain cakes,' I can't say, but I certainly don't remember ever having nicer teas or enjoying them more than at the Hut.

'Well,' began Geordie, after we were all seated comfortably at the table, 'what is the interesting thing you have to tell about, Ida? Has it anything to do with the—our tenants,' he went on, with a tone of satisfaction in his voice; 'I may call them *that*, for that's what they are.'

'Yes, of course it has,' I said. 'You might have guessed that much without being a—what is it you call a man witch—oh yes, a wizard, as you knew mamma and I were there this afternoon, and I began to tell you they were going to send us something. It's the jolliest thing you ever saw, Dods—isn't it, mamma? Do help me to describe it.' [Pg 122]

Between us we managed to do so pretty well, and I could see that Geordie was really very pleased about it. But he was in one of those humours that boys have more often than girls, I think—of not showing that he was pleased—'contradictious,' Hoskins calls it, and of trying to poke out something to find fault with or to object to.

'Hum, hum,' he kept murmuring; 'yes, oh yes, I know the sort of thing. But there's one point you've forgotten, Ida, and mamma too, haven't you?—where is this wonderful chair affair to be kept?' and he looked round the table in a provoking sort of way. 'It won't *always* be fine dry weather, and certainly it wouldn't get in at the door here by your description, even if we had any room for it to stand in.'

I suppose my face fell, and I think mamma, who is as quick as lightning to understand one's little changes of feeling, was rather vexed with Geordie, who is—or *was* rather—he has got out of those half-teasing ways wonderfully, now that he is older—tiresome sometimes, though he is so good, for she said quickly— [Pg 123]

'We shall find some place or plan something about it. Don't be afraid, Ida dear. It is a beautiful present. Geordie will thoroughly appreciate it when he sees it.'

'Is it big enough to hold both Denny and me together?' asked Esmé.

'It's big enough to hide you, so that you couldn't be seen at all, you small person,' said mamma laughing.

I felt sure mamma would plan something, so that we need not feel we had got a white elephant in the shape of a garden chair. All the same, Geordie's objection did worry me a little. I kept wondering, when I woke in the night, where we *could* keep Miss Trevor's present, and hoping that we should not have to send it back after all.

I need not have done so, for when it arrived, as it did the next morning, it was even more complete than we had known. It was enveloped in a huge waterproof cover, looking like a miniature van or waggon, as the gardener, sent with it, slowly pushed it along! And he explained that, for eight months or so of the year, it would be quite safe outside. For there were also rollers—I don't know exactly what to call them—strips of wood you could roll *it* on to, to keep the wheels from the damp of the ground, if it *was* damp, though, as the man said, when he had told us all this and shown us how to slide the wheels into the grooves, 'it's really never for to say damp or wet in the pine woods. If it was wheeled into a good sheltered place, I'd undertake to say it'd be safer and drier than inside most coach-houses or stables.' [Pg 124]

He was an Eastercove man, I should explain, and of course he thought there was no place in the world to compare with it!

There was another addition to the belongings of the chair, which we had not known of, and that was a hot water tin which fitted into the footstool, in the same neat, compact way which everything belonging to it did. Really a very good thing, for of course any one sitting still out-of-doors may get cold feet, even though it is not winter or wintry weather.

Geordie stood with his hands in his pockets admiring it all, without a fault to find; not that he wanted to find one, I feel sure. He was in a much cheerier humour this morning, and perhaps he was feeling a little sorry for having wet-blanketed my pleasure at all, the night before. [Pg 125]

Mamma called us all away from our new toy at last. Geordie had to set off to Mr. Lloyd's, and for me, alas! it was one of the days on which I had to act governess to the little ones. I did not mind Denzil so much, though he was—I don't mind if he sees this—I am afraid I must say he still is, *very* slow at lessons.

But he cannot help it, not altogether, anyway, and I do think he generally does his best, and when you know that of any one, you can be much less particular with them, can't you? Besides, once he *has* 'taken in' anything thoroughly, he does not forget it, which is a great comfort to a teacher.

It was Esmé who tried me the most. Such a flibbertigibbet (that is one of Hoskins's queer words, and mamma does not like me to use them much, but it is so expressive) you never saw. If you got her to give her attention, or thought you had, and were feeling quite pleased and even proud of it, as she sat there with her bright eyes fixed on the map, we'll say, while you were pointing but how big Russia was, and how tiny England seemed with the sea all round it, all of a sudden she would say something like this— [Pg 126]

'Ida, *did* you see that girl just in front of the school-children in church?' (Geography, I think, came on a Monday morning.) 'I couldn't make out if the ribbon on her hat was green or blue, or both shaded together.'

And then if I scolded her and begged her to think of her lessons and not of people's hats in church, she would explain in the funniest way, that thinking of the sea, which sometimes looks blue and sometimes green, and sometimes you don't know which, had made her remember how puzzled she had been about the girl's hat.

Upon which Denzil must come in with his remark, very wise and proper of course—

'*I* think,' he said, 'that Esmé and nobody, shouldn't think about hats and ribbins and things like that in church—never. *I* think it'd be much better if ladies and girls dressed all like each other, like men and boys, when they go to church.'

'Oh, indeed,' said Esmé; 'and who was it that was in a terrible fuss about his tie not being knotted up the right way only last Sunday as ever was, and——'

'Esmé!' I exclaimed, horrified, 'where *did* you learn anything so vulgar—"last Sunday as ever was"? What would mamma say if she heard you?' [Pg 127]

'It was Margery that said it,' replied Esmé, not the least put out; 'and I thought it sounded rather nice, but I won't say it again if you'd rather I didn't. *Is* it nonsense, Ida, about men and boys never thinking about their clothes? Geordie can't bear his best hat to be touched, and I've noticed gentlemen, big ones, I mean like papa—looking as cross as anything if they couldn't put their hats safe. *I* think they fuss more on Sundays in church than any other time.'

'Well, don't talk any more about it just now,' I said, 'or you will never get your geography into your head.'

But it was already too late. There was very little use trying to call back Esmé's wandering wits once they had started off on an expedition of their own, and I really began to fear I should have to tell mamma that I was very little, if any, use as the child's governess.

About this too, as things turned out, I need not have worried. It is curious how very seldom what

we vex ourselves about before it happens does come to pass! I suppose this should show us the harm and uselessness of fancying troubles, or exaggerating them. [Pg 128]

We were very busy and happy that afternoon, I remember, when George came back from Kirke, in arranging the wonderful chair. We settled it near the porch, and to please us, as it was really a very fine, almost warm day, mamma said we might have tea there, and that she would sit in the chair with Esmé on the stool, and the little table hooked on for their cups and plates. I made tea on a little table in the porch, and Dods and Den handed it out. It was rather a squash, but we didn't mind. Mamma looked so comfortable under the awning, which we had drawn out, as we wanted to try everything; the only mistake was having the hot-water bottle in the footstool filled; poor mamma was obliged to ask to have it taken out, as she said she was afraid her feet were really nearly getting boiled, and of course it was not cold enough weather to require it.

After tea was over and the things taken away, mamma said she would stay where she was for a little and finish a letter to papa, in which she would tell him all about her movable 'boudoir,' as she called it. She really seemed to have taken a great fancy to it, which I was very pleased at, for of us all—though she never said or seemed to think so—it was certainly mamma who had had to give up the most of what she was accustomed to, when we came to live at the Hut. [Pg 129]

Esmé and Denzil ran down to the shore to play, and Dods and I strolled round a little. I remember all about that evening, even without looking up in my diary. I think I was telling him the story mamma had told me, of when she was a little girl, and the bathing machine, and papa saving her, and we had walked up a short way behind the house, to a part of the path, or road—it was a road, though a small one—from where you could see a bit of the drive from the lodge to the big house.

Suddenly something came in view—the queerest-looking thing you ever saw, like a van, and yet not like one, more like a small omnibus, only all over the top it was bumped out into all kinds of shapes, so that it looked like a gypsy's basket waggon, with a cover over.

'What can that be?' I said to Geordie.

And we both stared hard, as the thing slowly made its way along.

'The Trevors must have queer things sent to them,' I said. 'It isn't the railway van from the station, and yet, if it was travelling pedlars or anything of that kind, they wouldn't have let it in at the gates.' [Pg 130]

Geordie did not speak. He has better eyes than I—I have always been a little near-sighted—and he stood there gazing before him with an odd expression creeping over his face. He saw—what I did not—a head, or part of one, poked out of the window at the back of the strange vehicle.

'Geordie,' I said at last, 'what are you staring at so? What *do* you think it is? Oh!' as I suddenly caught sight of a new feature in the mystery, 'I do believe the thing is coming down *here*, and not going to the big house at all.'

For there was a side road out of the drive just about the part that the strange carriage or waggon had now got to, which led in our direction.

'Yes,' said Geordie, turning to me, and speaking very slowly and distinctly, though there was a twinkle in his eyes, which rather spoilt the solemnity of his tone, 'you are right, Ida. I will tell you what it is—it is the *balloon*.'

Now indeed it was I who stared!

What could he mean? [Pg 131]

Did balloons come in vans, and what had we to do with them? It was not for a moment or two that I remembered our joke about Taisy,—that she meant to astonish us by coming down in a balloon or something wonderful and original of that kind, from her mysterious hints in her letter to mamma.

And then I seemed to understand it all, almost better than Dods did. It quite took my breath away.

'Come, come, Dods!' I cried, setting off as I spoke, 'let's run to meet her. Oh, Taisy, Taisy, you funny girl! Oh, how delighted I am!'

We ran so fast that we reached the waggon almost before the driver and horses—there were two—seemed fairly launched on the side road, and in time to hear an eager voice from within calling out, 'All right, straight on, now. There is plenty of room.'

It was Theresa of course, but just at first she did not see us. She was leaning out on the other side to make the driver hear. But she turned, fast enough, when our shouts reached her, though she did not jump down, as we half expected.

'I can't very well get out,' she said. 'I'm so packed in, and there are some breakable things. But I'll manage it in a minute. Yes, yes—it's I myself! I've come to stay with you, though I have not been invited. And—you'll understand directly, I've brought my house—or rather my room—with me like a snail, so auntie can't turn me away again.' [Pg 132]

She was so excited and delighted with herself, and we were so excited and delighted too, that we could scarcely speak for laughing. We did not let her get out; she *was* so packed in, as she said, but we walked by the door, she talking as hard as she could, for her vehicle was lumbering along at a foot's pace.

'Yes,' she said, in answer to our eager questions; 'I've been travelling like this since ten o'clock. No, not *quite* like this—we did trot on the high road.

'I CAN'T VERY WELL GET OUT,' SHE SAID.

The waggonette——'

'Waggonette,' interrupted George, 'I should call it a—waggon and a half!'

'Well, never mind about that. Call it an omnibus if you like. Anyway, *it* started yesterday, and spent the night at Wetherford. Granny wanted me to come all the way to Kirke by train and to write to tell you, which would have spoilt the fun. So I got her to let me '('to *let* you indeed, Miss Taisy,' thought I to myself, though I did not say so; 'I know better. You said sweetly, "Granny, dear, I just must;" and she said, "Well, well, my darling, if you must, you must, I suppose")—'to let me come to Wetherford this morning with her maid, and to meet old Dawson' (the driver) 'there, and come on as you see. I had hard work to find room for myself inside, and I did begin to think we should never get here! But the evenings are long now, and it's been a lovely day; everything's dry and ready—bedding and all. There'll be plenty of time to unpack, and Dawson is to stay the night at Kirke, and ride home on one horse, leading the other.'

[Pg 133]

'And leaving the waggon,' I said, rather stupidly I must own; I think I was really feeling rather bewildered with the excitement and laughing and Taisy's flow of explanation.

She burst out laughing again at this.

'Of course,' she said. 'If I didn't keep my house, I might as well go back again. But do let us hurry on to tell auntie all about it.'

I think in her heart of hearts poor Taisy was feeling a tiny atom anxious as to what mamma would think of it all. But she need not have done. Mamma understood her so well and trusted her good sense as well as her affection, in spite of dear Taisy's *rather* wild ways sometimes.

[Pg 134]

She—mamma, I mean—was sitting quietly where we had left her, reading, in the new chair. And it was nice to see the bright look of pleasure which came over her face when she realised that it was Taisy, really Taisy, and not an 'optical illusion,' who stood before her and then hugged and kissed her as no illusion could have done.

'But, my child,' said she, 'where——'

'Where are you going to put me?' interrupted our new guest; 'look, auntie, look up and see,' and she pointed to the van, which was just coming in sight again. 'I have brought my house with me.'

Mamma's face looked completely puzzled now.

'I will explain,' Theresa went on, and indeed George and I wanted this part of it explained as much as mamma did. 'That lovely old thing that's lumbering along is Granny's discarded luggage-waggonette. It hasn't been used for centuries; it is really a small omnibus more than a waggonette. I ferreted it out in one of the coach-houses, where I was poking about with a vague idea that I might find something of the kind to make it possible for me to come to you after all. And I got the coachman to help me. We had it thoroughly dried and aired, and the seats at one side taken out—and a friend of the coachman's, who is a clever carpenter, has fitted it up. You will see. There is a table that slips down when not wanted, and a frame in one corner to hold a basin and ewer, and hooks for hanging things, and a tray like a deep drawer under the seat that's to be the bed. Oh, it's lovely! and really as good as a cabin on board ship,' and Taisy stopped to take breath.

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'And did Aunt Emmeline know about it?' asked mamma.

'She gave me leave to do what I liked with the old thing,' said Taisy; adding candidly, 'I did not tell her *what* I was doing till it was all ready. She thought I was fixing it up for photographing, I think. But in the end she was nearly as excited about it as I was, and she gave me all sorts of things—blankets and pillows and crockery and little curtains. It's just stuffed with things—inside and out—though I brought as few personal things—clothes, I mean—as possible, for I don't want to crowd *you* up, you see. I shall have room for everything when it's all unpacked, you will see,' she added, with a touch of apology in her voice.

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'Dearest child,' said mamma, 'as if we would mind that, if *you* were comfortable.'

Taisy's eyes beamed.

'Comfortable,' she repeated; 'that is no word for what I am going to be.'

'And how long may you stay?' asked Geordie.

'As long as you like to have me,' was the reply. 'Granny is expecting her old friend to-morrow, and I *know* they will be much happier without me. I have a letter from Granny for you, auntie, explaining her plans. But there's no hurry about that. I want to begin unpacking. And what a lovely arrangement all this is!' she went on admiringly, touching the arm of mamma's chair as

she spoke, 'nearly as beautiful as my waggon!'

Then the history of Miss Trevor's present had to be related, and all its wonderful perfections exhibited. And then Hoskins appeared with a cup of fresh tea for Miss Theresa, which she offered with a face all over smiles, for Taisy was a great favourite of hers. And 'Miss Theresa' drank the tea, and devoured bread and butter and cake in a most gratifying way; and then she *had* to run through the Hut, and see all that we had done to it. [Pg 137]

So that, after all, it was rather late before we got to the unpacking of the waggon, though Hoskins and Margery and Dawson had already done a good deal.

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CHAPTER IX

'THE KIND SEA, TOO, AUNTIE DEAR'

We *did* get everything unpacked that night, but only in a rough-and-ready way. We should have liked to go on till midnight or later even, working by moonlight, for it was full moon and very clear weather just then, but this mamma would not hear of.

And Hoskins in her sensible way pointed out how much more nicely and neatly we could finish it all by daylight with the straw and packing cloths all tidied away, which she would 'see to' first thing in the morning.

She and mamma had already arranged for Taisy to sleep in my room that night, by Esmé's sleeping with mamma, and by taking out the end of Esmé's cot, to make it longer—long enough after a fashion, for *me*.

How we laughed, Taisy and I, though any other girl would have been tired after all she had done, and the tiresomely slow drive from Wetherford! Mamma was obliged to knock on the—wall, I was going to say—but of course it was not a wall, only a wooden partition, to tell us to be quiet. I never knew any one with such spirits as Taisy—not only high spirits, but *nice* ones, for she was never boisterous, and she knew in a moment if you were not inclined for laughing or joking, though her fun was always there, ready to bubble up again at the right moment. She was full of sympathy too, in spite of her cheerfulness; no one could possibly have called her heartless. [Pg 139]

Looking back, I can see what a *very* good thing it was for us all that she came, even for mamma. We were in danger just then of being too much taken up with our own little life—the life of the Hut—which is one kind of selfishness.

And dear mamma in her *un*selfishness might have got too silent about all she was feeling; she was so afraid of making us young ones melancholy. But I have seen her sitting or standing, when she thought we did not notice, gazing at the sea—gazing, gazing, as if she could scarcely bear it and yet must look at it. The cruel sea, which had taken dear papa so far away! On fine, sunny days I almost think somehow it seemed worse. I know that feeling about the sea myself, as if it *were* cruel really, below its loveliness and brilliance. And I am sure she said something of this to Taisy, the very day after Taisy came, for I heard *her* say, though her eyes were full of tears— [Pg 140]

'The *kind* sea, too, auntie dear, which will bring him back again.'

And as for us children, it was just delightful past words to have Theresa. We had been very happy at the Hut already, very busy and interested, but the *fun* of the life there came with Taisy. She was full of it, though the things we found so amusing are too trifling, even if they would not seem really silly, to write down.

The arranging of her 'house,' as she would call it, was the nicest part of all the arranging we had had to do. We pulled it close up to one side of one of our doors—the 'parish room' doors you understand, where there were no windows, so that the waggon was, so to say, protected by one of the iron walls—I don't know what else to call it, and which also gave the advantage of a tap in the night arousing us at once, *in case* Taisy felt frightened, which she never did. But the tapping was very convenient all the same, as she could awaken me in the mornings when they got warm enough for very early bathing, without 'disturbing the whole house,' as Hoskins said. And I could tap to her, last thing at night, to wish her good-night. [Pg 141]

You never saw a cosier place than we made of it; that first day after it was all arranged, we *couldn't* leave off admiring it.

There was Taisy's bed along one side, rather a narrow one of course, though not worse than a berth at sea, and looking so bright with the lovely scarlet blankets Lady Emmeline had given her. And in one corner a little frame which held a ewer and basin, and in the other some hooks for hanging things with a red curtain that drew round, and short red curtains to the windows, and a *tiny* chest of drawers; it was really one end of an old writing-table, or *secretaire*, to hold gloves and pocket-handkerchiefs and belts and small things like that. Then under the bed there was a long low trunk, what is called a cabin portmanteau, I believe, which held Taisy's best dresses, of which she had certainly not brought many, and hooks higher up than the hanging ones, for her hats. You wouldn't believe, unless you have ever been a long voyage—I *have*, since those days—all that was got into the old omnibus, by planning and ingenuity. [Pg 142]

Taisy was as proud of it as if she had made or built, I suppose one should say, the whole carriage; indeed, I think we all were, once we had got everything perfectly arranged. Mamma carried off

some of her *most* crushable things, as she said she had really some spare room in her own cupboards or wardrobes; and I took her best hat, as it had lovely white feathers, which it would have been a thousand pities to spoil, and which there was plenty of space for in the big box where Esmé's and mine were. And then Taisy declared she felt her house quite spacious.

Lady Emmeline had sent several things for us, some especially for mamma herself, which I was particularly glad of, as dear mamma, never thinking of herself and anxious to leave the big house as pretty as usual, had left behind some little things that I am sure she missed. And old Aunt Emmeline and Taisy seemed to have guessed by magic what these were.

'How nice!' I exclaimed, when Taisy had got them unpacked. 'This screen is just like the one you have in the boudoir at home, and cushions—I *know* you will be glad of some cushions, mamma, though you wouldn't bring any with you.' [Pg 143]

'And a *couvre-pied*,' added Taisy; 'Granny was sure you hadn't got enough "wraps." Nothing will persuade her that it is not always as cold as winter down here.'

'It is most kind of her,' said mamma; 'and I really am very, very pleased to have these things. And —did you know, Ida?—Aunt Emmeline has also sent us two hampers full of all manner of good things to eat—chickens and a turkey, and a ham and pickled tongues, and I don't know all what.'

'Yes,' said Taisy; 'nothing will persuade her either that you are not——' She stopped suddenly and got rather red.

'I know,' said mamma, laughing, 'that we are not in danger of starvation as well as of cold. You need not mind, Taisy dear—as if *anything* could offend us that you said or that Aunt Emmeline thought. And of course it is true that we are anxious to spend as little as we can, while things are so uncertain.'

'And then we can't cure hams or pickle tongues like at home,' I added.

So all the kind old lady's gifts were very welcome. I think Hoskins was more pleased with the eatables than with anything. [Pg 144]

Things had been nice before, but after Taisy came, we really did enjoy ourselves. She was always planning something amusing or interesting, and mamma declared she had never heard me or Geordie laugh so much in her life. It was very good for Geordie to be 'routed out' a little, as Taisy said. He was inclined to be too serious and anxious, and to overwork, at this time, because of the scholarship, and as I had put it into his head, I was doubly glad of being helped to keep him bright and merry, as I know he worked all the better for it. He was *really* anxious-minded—not like Denzil, who never laughed and was as solemn as an owl, not because *he* was anxious, but just because he was too fat and comfortable to worry—poor old Den!—he really *is* so good-tempered, I don't like laughing at him.

It was very nice too that just about this time came the first really long letter from papa; up to now he had written scarcely more than scraps. And this letter was decidedly more cheerful and hopeful.

He had begun to go into things thoroughly, he said, and had got very good friends to help him, and he was beginning to think that, at worst, it would not turn out *too* awfully bad. And for this mamma felt very grateful, though she had so bravely prepared for whatever might be to come. [Pg 145]

So for a few weeks we went on very contentedly, more than that, indeed—very brightly too. It was, for me, too delightful not to have much governessing to do, for Taisy at once took the most of this on herself. And I assure you, she *did* keep Miss Esmé in order.

In return for this she joined me in some of my reading with mamma, and she always has said that she learnt more in this way about some lessons than she had ever done before. Mamma is very clever.

We went on, as I said, pretty steadily like this for some weeks till another rather big thing happened—almost as big as the 'descent of the balloon,' which we always called Theresa's arrival.

But before telling about this new event, I must relate a curious thing that happened one day.

It was one afternoon—just after tea—we were still sitting out of doors where we had had tea—mamma in her 'boudoir,' for the days were getting quite long, and we were specially glad to be in the open air as much as possible, for we had had a good deal of rain for nearly a week—mamma was reading, and I think I was too—when Hoskins came out of the house looking rather 'funny'—queer, I mean, as if not quite sure if she were vexed or not. [Pg 146]

'If you please, ma'am,' she said, 'there's a gypsy at the back door, and I can't get her to go till she's seen you.'

'A gypsy,' mamma exclaimed in great surprise; 'how has she managed to get inside the grounds? And I did not know there were any in the neighbourhood just now. It is so seldom they come this way too. Taisy,' she went on, looking round, 'you might speak to her for me and ask what she wants.'

But Taisy was not there.

'Miss Theresa has gone into the woods, I think,' said Hoskins; 'I heard her calling to Miss Esmé just after tea-time.'

Mamma and I had not noticed the others going; our books must have been interesting, and time passes quickly in such a case.

'How did the gypsy get through the lodge gates?' mamma repeated.

'That's what I asked her first thing,' Hoskins answered; 'but she did not answer very distinctly. She says she has come a good bit out of her way to see you—there are not any camping about near here. She has a boy with her—perhaps she wants something for him—quite a little fellow. She's a pleasant, civil-spoken woman—indeed, gypsies generally are if they want to get something out of you.'

'Like most people, I am afraid,' said mamma, smiling as she reluctantly prepared to move. 'Perhaps I had better speak to her; it would not do to have her lurking about all night. They are queer people—I should not like to rouse any ill-feeling in a gypsy.'

'Mayn't I come with you, mamma?' I said. 'I have never spoken to a real gypsy.'

Mamma looked at me rather doubtfully.

'Oh yes,' she said; 'but I don't want her to tell your fortune or anything of that kind, Ida, so do not encourage her if she begins about it.'

We made our way through the Hut, followed by Hoskins, to the door at the back, where, as she had said, the strange visitor was standing—Margery, who was washing up (I never saw Margery *not* washing up, by the bye), was also keeping an eye on the woman, though I could see by the movement of her shoulders that she was giggling.

Mamma went forward.

'What do you want to see me for?' she said gently but rather coldly.

The woman lifted her face—she was not quite as tall as mamma, and looked at her closely, but not rudely. She was older than I had somehow expected. Her skin was very brown, her hair jet-black, her eyes not *quite* as dark as one imagines a gypsy's must be; I thought to myself that perhaps the very tanned complexion made them seem lighter. She was wrinkled and weather-beaten, but not by any means ugly, though not beautiful, except her teeth, which were extremely white and even.

'Yes, my lady,' she said, 'I did want to see you. I have come far to do so.'

Her accent was peculiar, her voice low, and she talked slowly, almost as if using a foreign language.

'How did you get through the gates?' mamma asked.

The answer was a shake of the head.

'I have not passed through them—not to-day,' she said. 'There are ways—when one is in earnest.'

'I hope you have not broken through the hedges, or over the walls,' said mamma, rather uneasily.

Another shake of the head.

'No, no—have no fear; I have done no harm,' was the reply, and somehow mamma seemed as if she did not like to say any more about it.

'But what do you want to see me for?' she repeated. 'Has it anything to do with the boy? Is he your son, or your grandson?' and she glanced at the little fellow beside the gypsy. A very little fellow he was—dark too, very dark-skinned and grave and rather frightened-looking. He stood there with his eyes cast down, a shock of black hair tumbling over his forehead, so that it was difficult to distinguish the upper part of his face.

Mamma looked at him curiously—afterwards she told me she felt sorry for him, and wondered if the woman was good to him. She—the woman—glanced at him and said something rather sharply in a queer-sounding language, on which the little fellow gave a sort of tug to his cap, though without actually taking it off—meant, of course, for politeness. But he never spoke the whole time they were there.

'No, my lady,' the woman replied, turning again to mamma,—'no, I have no favour to ask for the child. He is not my son—nor my grandson,' and here she smiled, showing her white teeth; 'I am not quite old enough for that, though I may look it. I wanted to see you for a reason of my own—to do you no harm, you may be sure. And one day you will know the reason. But now,' and she held out her hand, 'you will let me tell your lines? Not much, nor far—I would not ask it. Just a little, and mostly of the past.'

Mamma shook her head.

'Then the young lady's?' said the gypsy, looking at me. Mamma shook her head still more decidedly.

'No, no,' she said; 'I would rather you told mine than hers. Such things make young people fanciful.'

'Then your own, my lady,' said the woman, and again she held out her hand persuasively,—'just a little.'

I drew nearer.

'Do, mamma,' I whispered; 'she may be offended if you don't.'

Mamma laughed, and held out her right hand.

'Cross it with silver,' said the woman, simply but gravely, as if she were issuing a command. I had my purse in my pocket, and drew it out.

'Give her a shilling,' said mamma. I did so.

Then the gypsy bent over mamma's hand, studying it closely and murmuring to herself.

'The other too,' she then said, without looking up.

Mamma gave it.

'Yes,' said the gypsy, almost as if speaking to herself,—'yes—you have come through some dangers—water was the worst, but that was long ago. Now water has robbed you of your dearest, but only for a time. It will restore what it has carried away. And you will be happy. You have a brave heart. Strange things have happened of late to you. You have with you an unexpected visitor. And you are going to have another unexpected visit—a shorter one. Show kindness to your guest; it is always well to do so, though you may not care to receive a stranger. And——' [Pg 151]

'No,' said mamma,—'no, my good woman. I really don't want to hear any more. It is getting late, and you say you have come far and this little fellow will be tired. You had better go,'—she drew away her hand as she spoke, though quite gently.

'Very well, my lady,' said the woman, without persisting further; 'and I thank you for your courtesy.'

'Shall I send some one to see you through the lodge gates?' said mamma; but the woman shook her head.

'There is no need,' she said. 'I shall not pass that way,' and she walked off quietly.

Hoskins came forward and stood beside us. [Pg 152]

'I declare,' she said, 'she is going by the shore! What a round to get to the high road!'

'Perhaps she is going to meet a boat,' I said. For there were little coves farther on, from where boats were easily launched, and whence an hour or so's rowing would bring them to a small fishing village called Brigsea.

'Very likely,' said mamma; 'that is a good idea and explains the mystery. But she was a queer woman all the same,' and mamma seemed a tiny bit upset.

'She only told you good things, though,' I said. 'I do wonder how she knew about your escape from a great danger by water, long ago.'

'Yes,' said mamma. 'It is very strange how they know things.'

'And about our unexpected visitor,' I went on; 'that meant Taisy, of course. But I wonder who the new one coming can be?'

'Oh, nobody, I daresay,' said mamma. 'Visitors and letters coming are one of their stock prophecies. Still she did not strike me as quite a commonplace gypsy. I wish Taisy had been here to see her too. Where can they all be, I wonder?'

We were not kept uncertain very long. We heard a whoop, followed by the appearance of the two boys, who told us that Taisy and Esmé were coming directly. [Pg 153]

'We've all been in the wood,' said Geordie.

'I wish you had been here,' I said. 'There's been a gypsy at the back door,' and I went on to tell him of our strange visitor and what she had said.

Geordie whistled.

'I should have liked to talk to her,' he remarked. 'Did she say how she got into the grounds?'

I shook my head.

'No,' I replied. 'She was very mysterious about it, but she went away in the direction of the shore, so she prob——'

I was interrupted by another whoop, and in a moment or two up came Taisy and Esmé, looking very hot and untidy, but very eager to hear all details of our rather uncanny visitor, as soon as the word 'gypsy' had caught their ears.

And we talked so much about her that at last mamma said we had really better change the subject, or she would begin to wish she had not agreed to see the woman.

'You will all be dreaming about her and fancying she knew much more than she did,' mamma added; and though she smiled and did not seem at all vexed, I somehow felt that she rather wished the gypsy had not come. One little thing which she said helped to explain this. [Pg 154]

'I cannot get the small boy out of my mind,' it was. 'She spoke sharply to him, and he seemed frightened. I do hope she is not unkind to him.'

'Oh no,' I said; 'she had not an unkind face at all, though there was something rather—*odd*—about it, besides her being a gypsy.'

Taisy laughed, and stroked mamma's arm.

'I should think it *most* unlikely she is unkind to the child,' she said, 'though he is not her son—or grandson! Dear auntie, you are too tender-hearted.'

Just then I heard a sort of giggle from Esmé, who, for a wonder, was sitting quietly with a book in a corner. I felt vexed with her.

'Esmé,' I whispered, 'it's very rude to laugh at anything Taisy says to mamma.'

CHAPTER X

'IT'S ANOTHER SNAIL'

It was the next morning at breakfast that another strange thing happened. It was when the letters came.

We did not get them quite so early as at home, for it would have brought the postman a good deal out of his way to come down to the Hut, so it had been arranged for him to leave them at the lodge, and for them to be sent on from there.

This morning there were only two: one for mamma—a long one, it seemed, but not a foreign one, as I saw by a glance at the thick paper while she was reading it. But I had not noticed anything about Taisy's, and when a queer kind of little gasp made me look round at her, my first thought was that there was bad news of papa, which some one had somehow sent first to her—Taisy—for her to 'break it,' as they say, to mamma.

And my heart began to beat furiously, and no wonder, I think, for Taisy was as white as the tablecloth, and was evidently on the point of bursting into tears.

'Taisy, Taisy,' I whispered. Luckily she was sitting next me, so that I could speak to her in a low voice without being overheard. 'Is it—oh, is it, anything wrong with papa?' and I felt myself clasping my hands together under the table in an agony of terror.

My face brought back Taisy's presence of mind.

'No, no,' she said. 'Nothing of that kind—nothing wrong really. I know I am very silly,' and already the colour was coming back to her cheeks, for she was not a nervous or delicate girl at all. 'It is only—oh, I must tell auntie first, and then you will understand the sort of fright I got.'

She stopped abruptly, for just then mamma looked up from her letter and spoke to Taisy. She was smiling a little, which made me feel all the more puzzled as to what was the matter with Taisy when I heard her reply to mamma's question, 'Have you too a letter from your grandmother?' 'Yes, auntie,' as if the two words were all she could force herself to say.

Still, mamma did not notice her peculiar manner. She herself turned again to her letter.

'I must say my respect for our gypsy has risen,' she remarked, 'though I suppose it is really only a rather odd coincidence.'

At this Taisy's colour changed again and her lips began to quiver. And, happening to glance across the table, I saw that Esmé's mouth was wide open, and that she was staring gravely at Taisy, in a way quite unusual with her. I could not make it out at all.

Breakfast was over by this time. Mamma turned to the children.

'Run off, dears, but don't be very long. You have just time for a little blow before Taisy and Ida are ready for lessons.'

'But, mamma,' began Esmé, 'I want to speak to Taisy first.'

'No "buts," Esmé,' said mamma decidedly. We were well used to them. 'Taisy won't be ready to speak to you just yet. Run off at——' she had not time to finish the sentence before she at last noticed Taisy; the tears were really starting by now, and her breath came in little chokes. 'Go, children,' mamma repeated, looking startled, 'and Geordie, dear, you had better be getting ready for Kirke.'

Geordie, big boy as he was, was very obedient. He got up, first catching hold of Denzil by his sailor collar, to make him hurry up. He—George—must have been as puzzled as any one, for he had no idea of course what the letters contained. But he contented himself with a kind of reassuring nod to Taisy as he left the room, and a sign to me as he gave a little gesture of the hand in her direction, as much as to say, 'Be good to her, Ida.'

Then Taisy broke down and fairly sobbed. Mamma got up and came round to her.

'My dearest child,' she said, 'what *is* the matter? It has something to do with your grandmother's letter, I can see. Do you dislike this boy—what is his name—oh yes, Rolf—Rolf Dacre—that she writes about?'

'Oh no, no, indeed. He is a very nice boy, as nice as he can be,' Taisy replied, amidst her tears. 'It isn't that at all. It's—it's about the gypsy—the saying it like a prophecy—it wasn't right. I—I shouldn't have done it, but I thought it was no harm, only fun;' and she began sobbing again.

For a moment or two mamma and I stared at each other, as if we thought Taisy was losing her wits. Then gradually light began to break in upon us.

"*You* shouldn't have done it," you say, dear,' mamma repeated. 'Do you mean—can you mean——'

Taisy nodded.

'Yes,' she said; 'you have guessed it, I see. But please do not be angry with me. I meant no harm.'

'Then *you* were the gypsy,' mamma exclaimed, as if she could scarcely believe it.

'And,' I added, 'the little boy was—oh, he was Esmé, I suppose. That was why she was looking so queer at breakfast.'

'Was she?' said Taisy, 'I didn't notice. Yes, she was the little boy. I did not mean to mix her up in it, but she came poking about when the boys were helping me to dress up, and we thought the best way to keep her quiet was for her to join in it. But, auntie—I was going to tell you all about it to-day—you believe me, don't you?' and she lifted such an appealing, tear-stained face to mamma, that mamma could not help patting it reassuringly and kissing her.

[Pg 160] 'It was very cleverly done—very,' she said. 'And I see no harm in a little trick of the kind if not carried too far. The only thing is—Why did you not unmask yourself at once? Perhaps—for Esmé's sake—it would have been better not to keep up the mystification so long.'

'I know,' said Taisy, calmer now, but speaking very humbly, 'that is what I did wrong. It might have led to her telling what was untrue. Last night when you were pitying the child—who was *not* my son or grandson'—and here Taisy's sunny nature broke out again in one of her own merry laughs—'I could *scarcely* keep it in.'

'But why did you, then?' I asked.

'Oh, that is what I wanted to explain! I had a sort of wager with Geordie. He said I might take you both in *once*, but certainly not twice, and he dared me to try it. So I made a second plan. I was coming again to-day—quite differently—dressed like a rather old-maidish lady, who wanted to know if you would let her have rooms here, as the sea-air and pine-wood air would be so good for her. I meant to have made her very pertinacious, and very funny, and I wanted you to get quite cross with her, auntie dear,' and Taisy could not help a little sigh of regret. 'That was why the gypsy foretold that you were going to have another unexpected visitor. [Pg 161] I wasn't quite happy about it. When I woke in the night, I felt as if I was carrying the trick too far, as you say. And then when I got Granny's letter about another *real* visitor, all of a sudden I felt so frightened—as if my joke had been turned into earnest as a punishment for my—my daring to predict anything.'

'Yes, I understand,' said mamma; 'but do not get exaggerated about it.'

Then she was silent for a moment or two and seemed to be thinking it over.

'Was Esmé to have come again?' I asked.

Taisy shook her head.

'Oh no—it was on condition of her keeping quite out of the way the second time—for of course she would have begun giggling if she had seen me, and spoilt it all—that I let her act the gypsy boy.'

'I think,' said mamma, 'that I must unconsciously have recognised something about her—that it was some feeling of that kind that made me so sorry for the boy. But about the whole affair—well, yes, Taisy dear. Perhaps it was scarcely right—not *quite* respectful to one so much older than you as I am to let it go on so long. And not quite a good thing for Esmé.'

[Pg 162] 'I know—I see,' said Taisy very penitently.

'But,' mamma continued, 'don't exaggerate it now. I will—and you will help me to do so—put it all right by a little explanation to Esmé. And don't get it into your head that the coincidence of a real visitor being proposed to us is in any way a "punishment" to you for your piece of fun, though I can understand your feeling startled.'

'Oh!' exclaimed Taisy, 'I shall never forget what I felt when I opened Granny's letter and saw what it was about.'

'Then,' said mamma, 'you had no sort of idea that the thing was the least possible?'

'Not the very slightest,' Taisy replied. 'You see it has happened unexpectedly to every one.'

'Yes,' said mamma, glancing again at her letter; 'but you know Rolf?'

'I have not seen him for more than a year,' said Taisy. 'He spent one or two short holidays with us when his aunt, Miss Merry, was with Granny. He is a very nice boy. I am sure George would like him, though he is two years or so older than Dods.'

I was growing rather impatient by this time to hear all about the contents of the letters which had caused such a sensation.

[Pg 163] 'Do tell me about it, mamma,' I said. 'Is it some one else coming to stay with us? Where *could* we put any one?'

Taisy began to laugh.

'That's the fun of it,' she said. 'It's another snail—some one who will bring his house with him!'

Mamma laughed too, but I could see that she was thinking over the new proposal, whatever it was, rather seriously. Then between them they told me all about it.

It appeared that Aunt Emmeline's friend, Miss Merry, had a nephew, the son of a sister, much, much younger than herself, who had died some years ago. The boy's father was in India, so he sometimes, though not always, spent his holidays with his aunt. And this spring something had happened—I forget what exactly—illness at his school, or his leaving school for some reason, sooner than had been expected—which left him with nowhere to go to for some time.

'As ill-luck would have it,' Lady Emmeline wrote to mother, 'just as Taisy had gone to you, and Bertha Merry and I were settled cosily together, down comes this thunderbolt in the shape of a great hobbledehoy of a boy, who would be utterly out of his element with two elderly ladies and [Pg 164] sure to get into mischief. Not that he is not a nice fellow and a good boy—I know him to be both,

otherwise I would certainly not propose what I am going to do.'

And this was the proposal which she had written about—she or Miss Merry, or both perhaps—to Taisy too—that Rolf should come to us at the Hut, and join Geordie, if possible, in his lessons with Mr. Lloyd, and be just one of the family for the time. *He* would be as happy as a boy could be; of that his aunt was sure, and would do anything in his power, like a big brother, to help mamma with the younger ones. But the fun of the thing was, that he would bring his room with him! There would be no difficulty about the expense of it. His father was rich and Rolf an only child, and his aunt was free to spend whatever she thought right upon him, and being a very energetic little woman, as I think many old maids are, she had already written to some place where such things were to be got, to get sizes and prices and everything required for a neat little iron room, fitted up as a bedroom; and if mamma was so very, very kind as to agree to take him in, Rolf would be ready to come the very next week.

Of course we talked it over a lot. It had to be considered if Hoskins and Margery could manage another guest, and we were almost surprised to find how pleased Hoskins was about it. 'Miss Theresa,' she said, 'was such a help; there had not seemed half so much to do since she came. And the weather was getting so nice and mild, we would scarcely need fires at all soon, except perhaps 'a little bit, of an evening in the drawing-room.' And it would be such a good thing for Master George to have a companion a little older than himself before going to school, which mamma in her own mind had already thought the same about. [Pg 165]

I never knew Hoskins quite so cheery about anything. I think the truth was, that she had thoroughly enjoyed the gypsy mystification which had been confided to her. And I believe, at the bottom of her heart, she thought that somehow or other Taisy had had a sudden gift of prediction, and that it would be very unlucky to refuse to receive the unlooked-for visitor.

Anyhow it ended in mamma's writing to Aunt Emmeline and Miss Merry, consenting pleasantly to Rolf's joining us, provided he promised, or they for him, to be content with our present very simple quarters and way of living.

'That I am sure he will be,' said Taisy, who had quite recovered her spirits by the time, or rather long before, the letters were written. 'Any boy would be a goose who wasn't delighted with the Hut, and Rolf is certainly not a goose.' [Pg 166]

The only person who did not seem quite pleased about it was George. At first I thought this very strange, as naturally you would have expected him to be very delighted at the idea of a companion of his own standing, so to say, which he had never had. But Dods was a queer boy in some respects. He is less so now on the whole, though he is just as dear and 'old-fashioned,' in nice ways, as ever, and I do think the *right* ways in which he has changed are a good deal thanks to Rolf.

Perhaps Geordie was a little jealous of him before he came, without knowing it. It was not unnatural, considering everything. Poor old Dods, you see, had been left by papa in his own place, as the 'man' of the party, and we had all got into the habit of looking to him and even asking his opinion as if he were much older than he really was. And then he was so devoted to Taisy; he looked upon himself as a sort of knight to her, I do believe, for down below his matter-of-factness and practicalness, I know now that there is a good deal of romance, and what I can only call poeticalness in dear Geordie, so that the idea of a big, handsome, rather dashing fellow coming to take place above him must have been rather trying. [Pg 167]

I shall never forget the day Rolf arrived. I had been feeling sorry for Geordie, as I had begun to understand his rather disagreeable manner about Rolf, and yet provoked with him too. I did not see after all, I thought to myself, why he should mind Rolf's coming, any more than I minded Taisy. For though Taisy was our own cousin and we loved her dearly, she could not but take a *little* the place of eldest daughter with mamma, and if she had not been so sweet, it might have been uncomfortable.

And after all, Rolf was a stranger—and only to be with us a short time. There was far less chance of his really interfering with Geordie's own place.

These things however are not often set straight by reasoning about them.

It is the people themselves—their characters and ways and feelings—that put it all right if it is to be put right.

And just as Taisy's brightness and unselfishness and simpleness—I can't find a better word—kept away any possibility of jealousy of her on my own part, so it was with Rolf. He and she were no sort of relation to each other, and yet in some ways they were very alike. I never did know, and I am sure I never shall know, any one with such a thoroughly straightforward, unfanciful, and yet very loving and sympathising heart as Rolf. When I think—but no, I must not allude to that yet—I could scarcely bear to write of these past happy days if I did. [Pg 168]

But I am wandering away from the day of Rolf's arrival. It was not of course a 'balloon surprise,' as Dods called Taisy's shooting down upon us as she had done, for we knew exactly what train he was coming by, and everything. And it was not so like a 'snail's visit,' which was Taisy's own name for hers, as in this case the house came before the snail—the day before.

It was a different kind of thing from the parish room—that very substantial affair. This was more like a strong, stout kind of tent—only it did not go up to a quite small point at the top, as I had imagined all tents do. But it was partly made of stretched canvas, with iron rods and bars, and the men who put it up told us it was fireproof as well as waterproof, which mamma was very glad to hear, especially when she saw that a small stove was among the furnishings that came with it. [Pg 169]

George was very pleased to find that the men from Kirke who had received full directions about it all, from the makers, had instructions to set it up wherever we thought best. It almost reconciled him, I could see, to the idea of the stranger boy's visit—even to being pleased at it.

And we three—Taisy and Geordie and I—were not long in finding the best place for the new addition to our encampment. We made it a sort of match, on the other side, to Taisy's waggon, though, as it was much prettier to look at, it was placed so that a bit of it showed from the front of the house in a rather picturesque way.

Inside it really was awfully nice when we got the things unpacked. There was everything that could be wanted for camping out, for I don't think the people had understood that only an additional bedroom was required. They had even sent pots and pans and things like that for cooking, if required, on the stove.

'All the better,' said Hoskins, whose face grew beamier and beamier with every article that appeared. 'I shall not be put about now if anything goes wrong with the kitchen fire, as has been at the back of my mind now and then. Master Dacre, by what Miss Theresa says, isn't one to grumble if we had to do a bit of cooking in his room, once in a way.' [Pg 170]

'No, indeed,' said Taisy laughing; 'he'd think it the best of fun and be quite ready to act kitchen-maid.'

She declared she was getting quite jealous, as all the perfectly new and fresh furniture and fittings were set in their places, for of course her waggon had been provided with what she required in rather a makeshift way. There were tables and chairs and hanging presses and bookshelves all made to fold up into next to no compass; a squashy bath, which I did *not* envy, as I was sure it would topple over and all the water be spilt. And there was a lovely red carpet, or strips of it, so thick and firm, which I *did* envy, as what we had in our rooms was rather shabby, and two or three rugs, which, by the bye, soon found their way to the inside of the Hut, when Rolf discovered that we liked them, declaring that they were always kicking about in his way.

'Yes,' said mamma, when we summoned her to see and admire, 'it is wonderfully nice. And I am glad it has all come the day before. It makes it seem more like Rolf's being our guest, that his room should be all ready to receive him.' [Pg 171]

Then Esmé made us laugh. She had been standing gazing at it all with her mouth wide open, as was her way when very much interested or very admiring. And then she said, solemnly for once—

'He must be very—termenjously rich!'

After all, something of a surprise *did* come with Rolf, which I must now tell about.

CHAPTER XI

[Pg 172]

'I MADE SURE OF THAT,' SAID ROLF

We *heard* it—the surprise I mean—almost before we heard the wheels of the fly from Kirke, bringing the visitor that *was* expected. For the drive from the lodge is on well-rolled gravel, and as there had been a few showers lately, it was soft, and you scarcely hear a carriage coming in that case.

But what we did hear, as we stood about waiting to welcome Rolf cordially, was a sharp, clear little voice, not talking, but—barking, and then, almost at the same moment, we caught sight of the fly, as it reached the turn at which anything coming up the drive could be seen from the Hut.

'I do believe,' I exclaimed, turning to Taisy,—'I do believe he has got a dog!'

Taisy shook her head.

'I don't know of it if he has,' she said; 'and I don't think he would have brought one without asking if he might.' [Pg 173]

Taisy looked a little frightened. She felt somehow as if she were rather responsible for Rolf, especially on account of the gypsy affair!

'It may be a dog belonging to the flyman,' I went on; 'though in that case it would probably be running alongside, and it doesn't sound as if it were.'

Our doubts were soon set at rest.

When the fly drew up, not at the front—there was no place for carriages there, but on a piece of level ground a little towards the back on one side—out sprang our visitor—a tall, fair boy, a good bit taller than Geordie, with nice blue eyes and a very sunny look about him, altogether. And—in his arms he held—as if very much afraid of losing it—the dearest, duckiest, little rough-haired terrier you ever saw!

Rolf—for of course it was Rolf—looking just a trifle shy, for which we—Geordie and I—liked him all the better—turned at once to Taisy, as if to a sort of protector. But he could not hold out his hand, as it was all he could do with both hands to keep the frightened doggie from escaping there and then from his grasp.

'How funny!' I thought. 'Why doesn't he let him go? He wouldn't want to run away from his own [Pg 174]

master!'

'I can't shake hands, Taisy—but how are you?' Rolf by this time was saying: 'Will you introduce me to your cousins? This little beggar—I declare he's as slippery as an eel, in spite of his coat.'

We needed no introduction—we all pressed round him to look at the terrier.

'Is he so nervous?' said Taisy. 'Has the railway frightened him?'

'Oh no, I don't think so. He was just as bad before we got into the train. It's just strangeness' was the rather puzzling reply.

'"Strangeness,"' Taisy repeated, while Geordie and I looked up in surprise,—'strangeness, with his own master holding him?'

Rolf gave a funny little laugh, and grew rather red.

'Oh, but,' he said, 'you see, he doesn't know I'm his master, and I don't want him to. It isn't worth while. I—I only bought him this morning from the keeper at Millings—you know Millings?'—Taisy nodded; it was a place near Lady Emmeline's. 'I asked him to be on the lookout for one as soon as I knew about coming here. I thought he'd suit Miss Lanark, as you once said something about her wanting a really nice little dog,' and he smiled at me in his frank, boyish way. [Pg 175]

It was quite true! Rolf must have a good memory, for it was fully six months ago that I had once said in writing to Taisy that papa had given me leave to have a dog of my very own if I could get a good-tempered, well-bred one, and that she must let me know if she came across a personage of the kind. For, though it seems odd that, living in the country, we had never had a pet of the kind, it was the case. I think papa and mamma had rather discouraged it, till we were old enough to treat a dog well and not to risk being ill-treated by him!

Since getting papa's leave to have one of my own I had almost forgotten about it, so many important things and changes had happened.

But for a moment or two I forgot everything but my delight. The wee doggie was so sweet—so just exactly what I had pictured to myself as the perfection of a pet.

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' I exclaimed, holding out my arms, in which Rolf carefully deposited the little creature, not very sorry, I fancy, at the bottom of his heart to make him over to me, for he must have been rather a tiresome travelling companion. [Pg 176]

'He's a young dog, but full-grown,' Rolf said; 'and very affectionate and good-tempered. I made sure of that. And he's really a lady's dog—his mother belonged to a lady near Millings, and that has been his home. She only sold him because she couldn't keep so many. He's a bit timid, they say, or rather nervous—but plucky too; if any one tried to hurt you he'd go for them, the keeper said. But it may take him a day or two to settle down.'

It scarcely looked like it—already the little round, rough head was nestling against me, and the nice little cold, black nose rubbing my fingers approvingly, while Taisy and George pressed up to me to see him.

'What's his name, Rolf?' asked the former. Geordie did not speak; I think for a minute or two he was feeling just a little jealous—or envious rather of Rolf—as *he* had not been able to give me a dog, when he saw how delighted I was. But he was too good and unselfish to let this feeling last, and when the terrier gave him a friendly lick in return for a patronising little pat, Dods's kind heart was completely won.

'His name,' Rolf repeated thoughtfully; 'I'm afraid I forgot to ask. But he'll soon get used to any name. It's often more the tone than the actual sound that a dog notices.' [Pg 177]

'I know,' said Taisy in her quick way; 'call him "Rough." It's not very uncommon perhaps, but it would suit him—his coat—so well, and it is rather like "Rolf" too.'

We had just decided this when mamma's voice, coming towards us from the Hut, made us turn round.

'What are you all about?' she asked. 'I heard the fly come some minutes ago. Welcome to Eastercove, Rolf,' she went on, holding out her hand, which our visitor was now able to take. 'I hope you have had a pleas—— Oh! so you have brought your dog,' and she looked a very little startled; 'take care, Ida. Is he quite good with strangers?'

'Oh, but,' I began, and then I suddenly remembered that without mamma's leave I had no right to accept Rolf's gift. 'He's mine—my own dog,' I went on; 'that's to say if you will let me have him. You know papa said I might have a dog,' I added pleadingly; 'though of course it is different now. And he is quite good-tempered and gentle.'

'Yes,' Rolf repeated; 'I made sure of that.' [Pg 178]

They were the first words mamma had heard him speak. He had not had a chance of thanking her for her 'welcome,' nor she of finishing her sentence about his journey, so taken up had we all been by Master Rough! But at least it had had the good effect of setting us all at our ease.

Then I went on to explain about Rolf's having remembered what Taisy had told him ever so long ago about my wish to have a dog—by the bye, it was lucky that I had not already got one! That possibility had never struck Rolf; he had only been turning over in his mind what he could do to please us, whom he thought very kind to 'take him in,' and mamma turned to him in the pretty way she does, which always makes people like her.

'It was very good of you,' she said,—'very good and thoughtful,' and she too patted the new pet

—*very* gently; mamma is a little afraid, perhaps wisely so, of strange dogs—so that in her case he thought a wag of his tail sufficient notice of her attention instead of a lick, for which omission, if mamma had known of it, she would have been grateful! 'Do you think,' she went on, turning to us three, 'that among you, you can look after him properly and prevent his getting into any trouble, or straying away in the woods?' [Pg 179]

'And getting shot by mistake for a rabbit?' said Geordie. 'He is so like one!'

We all laughed at this; for nothing in dog shape, *little* dog shape, at least, could be less like a bunny than Rough, though perhaps it was not *very* respectful of Dods to joke at mamma's fears. But she did not mind, and by this time we were all feeling quite at home with Rolf, and he with us. So we went in together to tea, where he and the two little ones had to be introduced to each other, and Rough exhibited to Denzil and Esmé's admiring eyes. He had fallen asleep in my arms, feeling happy and comfortable again, and probably thinking I was his old mistress restored to him after some dreadful doggie nightmare of separation.

'Mamma need not say, "*Among* you, will he be looked after?"' I thought to myself. 'The darling will have looking after enough from his owner—myself. I only hope the little ones won't tease him, or interfere with him, even out of kindness.'

That first evening of Rolf's visit left a very pleasant remembrance, and it was only a beginning of many happy days.

[Pg 180] He seemed to bring with him just what we needed (though Taisy had done a good deal, rather of the same kind). It prevented our getting too much taken up with our own affairs, or becoming too 'old-fashioned,'—Geordie and I especially—as Hoskins called it, and I don't know that there is a better word to express what I mean.

He was so thoroughly a boy, though the very nicest kind of boy—not ashamed of being a 'gentleman,' too, in lots of little ways, which many boys either despise, or are too awkward and shy to attend to. I don't mean to say that he was the least bit of a prig—just the opposite. He often forgot about wiping his feet, and was rather particularly clever at tearing his clothes, but never forgot to open the door for mamma and us girls, or to tug at his old straw hat or cap when he met us! Or more important things in a sense—such as settling mamma's 'boudoir,' as we got into the habit of calling Miss Trevor's present, in the best place; and seeing that her letters were taken in good time to the lodge for the postman, and things like that.

And looking back upon those days now that I am so much older, I can see that he must have had a good deal of 'tact' of the truest kind, as mamma says it really means care for other people's feelings, not to make dear old Geordie at all jealous,—actually, indeed, to take away the touch of it which Dods did feel at the beginning. [Pg 181]

Before a couple of days had passed, all the boys were the best of friends. Of course, I made Rolf leave off calling me anything but 'Ida,' and to Esmé he was quite a slave. Rather too much so. He spoilt her, and it was the only thing Taisy and I were not quite pleased with him for, as it did make her much more troublesome again at her lessons.

But there came a day when even he got very, very vexed with Esmé. I think I must tell the story. She won't mind even if she ever reads this, for she is *much* more sensible now, and often says she wonders how we all had patience with her.

It had to do with Rough, my doggie.

Dogs, as I daresay you, whoever you are, know, if you have had much to do with them, are not always fond of children, or perhaps I should say, are not fond of *all* children. They hate fidgety, teasing ones, who will pull and pinch them for the fun of making them snap and snarl, or who *won't* let them have a peaceful snooze on the hearthrug, if they themselves—the tiresome children, I mean—are inclined for noisy romping. If I were a dog, I should do more than snap and snarl in such a case, I know! [Pg 182]

Esmé was not as bad as that. She was a kind-hearted little girl, and never meant to hurt or worry any one. But she was a terrible fidget, and very mischievous and thoughtless. It would have been better for her perhaps to have had a rather less free life than ours at the Hut was. There was no one whose regular business it was to look after her. Out of lesson hours she might do pretty much as she liked. Mamma knew she would never do anything really naughty, or that she thought so, anyway, and we trusted a good deal to the boys, who, even little Denzil, were so particularly steady-going, and whom she was generally with.

But after Rolf came, he and George naturally went about together a good deal, just as Taisy and I did, and I don't think any of us realised how completely Esmé had the upper hand of Den.

If I was to blame about her, by not keeping her more with Taisy and myself, I was well punished for it by the fright she gave us, as you will hear.

It was rather a hot day for the time of year—still only spring. We four elder ones had gone for a good long ramble in the farther off woods, taking our luncheon with us, and for some reason—I think I *was*, in my own mind, a little afraid of Rough's getting trapped or some mischance of the kind—I had left my doggie at home, as safe as could be, I thought, for he was under Hoskins's care, and she was nearly as fond of him as I myself. [Pg 183]

He would have been far safer, as it turned out, if we had taken him with us.

Esmé must have been 'at a loose end' that afternoon, from what she told me afterwards. Denzil had got some little carpentering job in hand—he was rather clever at it, and at dinner-time,

Esmé, as well as he, told mamma about it—so she was quite happy, thinking they had got good occupation, and that there was no fear of any 'idle hands' trouble.

But Miss Esmé, as was her way, got very tired of handing Den the nails and tools and things he wanted, and of watching his rather slow progress, and told him she must really go for a run.

'All right,' said Denzil; 'but don't go far.'

He told us this part of it himself, when he came in for some blame in having 'let' Esmé' get into mischief. This sounds rather hard upon him, doesn't it, considering he was fully a year younger than she? but, as I have explained, he was such a solemn old sober-sides, that we had all got into the way of treating him as if he were the responsible one of the two. [Pg 184]

'No,' Esmé replied, she would not go far; nor did she.

She strolled about—I can see her now as she must have looked that afternoon—her hands behind her back, her black legs—she was a tall little girl for her age—showing rather long and thin beneath her big, brown Holland overall, her garden hat tilted very much to the back, her lovely goldy hair in a great fuzz as usual, and her bright hazel eyes peering about for something to amuse herself with.

As ill-luck would have it, she found the 'something' in the shape of my poor darling Roughie!

Hoskins had allowed him to go out with a bone to the front of the Hut, where he was lying very comfortably in the sunshine, on a mat, which he considered his own property. He had left off nibbling at the bone, and was half or three-quarters asleep.

Now when Esmé is—no, I must in fairness say 'was,' she is so different now—in one of her idle yet restless humours, it irritated her somehow to see any one else peaceful and quiet, even if the some one else was only a dog.

'You lazy little beggar,' she said to Rough. I don't really know that she said those very words, but I am sure it was something of the kind, and so I think I may 'draw on my imagination' a little in telling the story. 'You lazy little beggar, why don't you get up and go for a run? You are getting far too fat.' [Pg 185]

And—she told me this herself—she gave him a 'tiny' kick, not so as to hurt him—that I quite believe, but dogs have feelings about other things than being actually hurt in their bodies. He had been blinking up at her good-naturedly, though he was not, as I said, very fond of her. Nor was she of him.

But now, at the kick, or 'shove,' I think she called it, he gave a slight growl. And no wonder—it was not the sort of thing to sweeten even a sweet-tempered dog's temper—when he was doing no harm and only asking to be left alone in peace. Esmé, however, declared that it was the growl that made her wish to tease him.

She put her hand into the pocket of her blouse, meaning to take out her handkerchief to 'flick' him a little and make him wake up. But in this pocket, unluckily, besides the handkerchief were some nails and screws and such things which she had put there for convenience while being supposed to 'help' Denzil, by handing them to him as he wanted them. And when she touched them, they rattled and jingled, thoroughly rousing poor Roughie, who opened his eyes and growled again, this time more loudly, and Esmé, delighted, rattled and jingled, and again he growled. [Pg 186]

Then a wicked idea came into her head.

She had heard of naughty boys tormenting cats in a certain way.

'It can't hurt him,' she thought; 'it will only make him run, which is good for him.'

And she darted into the Hut, and through it to Rolf's tent, where, as I said, there was a small compact cooking stove, and among the things belonging to it a small but strong tin kettle. Esmé looked at it. I believe she was more afraid just then of damaging the kettle than of harming the dog!

Still she lifted it and considered for a moment.

'No,' she thought, 'it's quite light; it can't hurt him. And it won't hurt *it* either. I'll only put a few nails in,' and out she ran again to the front, where my poor pet was settling down for another nap, hoping, no doubt, that Miss Esmé had gone for good.

By ill-luck, her other pocket held a good piece of stout string. She sat down and quietly tied up the kettle, so that the lid was secure, having first dropped into it enough nails and screws to make a woful clatter, but taking care that no jingle should be heard as yet. It is wonderful how careful a careless child can be if bent on mischief!

Then speaking for once most gently and caressingly to Roughie, who was so surprised that he lay quite still, she fastened the other end of the string to his tail, and round his poor little body too. 'I didn't want his tail to be pulled off,' she said afterwards—fortunately, for his tail *might* have been badly hurt.

Then when all was ready, she got up cautiously, and walking away a few steps, called Rough very sweetly. But he was rather suspicious; he first got up and stretched himself—there was a faint jingle—poor wee man, he looked behind him—no, Esmé was not there; he moved, more jingle and rattle, again she called, and he, beginning to be frightened, turned towards her, on which the cruel little thing 'shoo'ed' him away. She described it all perfectly. And then the idea must have seized him of escaping by flight from the unseen terror.

He ran—of course the noise got worse; he ran faster, and it grew louder—faster still—oh, my poor Roughie!—louder still, Esmé laughing—at *first*, that is to say—to herself, till his doggy wits began to desert him, and a sort of nightmare agony must have seized him.

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And then—too late—the naughty girl saw what she had done.

SHE FASTENED THE ONE END OF THE STRING ROUND HIS POOR LITTLE BODY.

CHAPTER XII

[Pg 189]

'WELL—ALL IS WELL THAT ENDS WELL!'

What I described in the last chapter will explain the scene that met our eyes, and the sounds that reached our ears, as we got near the Hut.

And unluckily the 'we' did not mean only us four—the two bigger boys and Taisy and I. For as we were passing through that part of the near woods which skirts the Eastercove gardens—we always took care not to go very close to the house or more private part of the grounds, as, nice as the Trevors were, mamma said we must never risk their feeling that the place was not quite their own for the time being—just, I say, as we passed the nearest point to the house, we came upon them, all three of them—Mr., Mrs., and Miss. No, I think I should say all *six* of them, for trotting round old Mrs. Trevor's heels were of course the three pugs. And, of course too, huddled up under one arm, was the bundle of many-coloured knitting; she was working as she walked, and when she stopped to speak to us, one or two balls rolled on to the ground, so that before Rolf and Geordie had time to touch their caps almost, they were both on their knees, trying to catch the truants before they rolled farther away.

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'We were coming to see you all,' said Miss Trevor smiling; 'do you think your mother is at home and disengaged?'

'I think so,' I replied, and then I went on to explain that we had been out for several hours on a private picnicking expedition of our own, and we all joined in saying, 'Do come,' for we liked the Trevors very much, especially Miss 'Zenia.' We were a little frightened of Mr. Trevor; he was so tall and thin, and had the name of being tremendously learned, but they were all very kind, though I have nothing *very* particular to tell about them. Mrs. Trevor always made us laugh, with her dogs and her knitting, but she *was* so good-natured.

So we strolled on together, in the pleasant, still, sunshiny afternoon—Rolf and Geordie talking to Mr. Trevor, who was not at all 'awe-inspiring' when he got on the subject of his own schooldays, for we heard them all laughing most heartily now and then.

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Taisy declared afterwards that she had picked up balls of wool at least twenty times during that walk, as she kept beside Mrs. Trevor. And seeing that their mistress was thus engaged, the three dogs—they were really very well-behaved—took to following rather demurely, all three together, while I chatted to Zenia.

It was not till we were very near the Hut that any unusual sounds reached us.

I was just talking about Roughie to Miss Trevor, descanting on his perfections, when a sort of queer yelping gasp, or gasping yelp, made us stand still for a moment.

'What can that be?' I said.

'Oh, nothing,' said Miss Trevor. 'One hears all sorts of funny animal sounds in the woods, I have learnt to know. You are rather like an anxious mamma, Ida, who has been out and left her baby

too long. For I can see you at once think of the dear doggie,' and she laughed a little, though of course quite kindly.

I laughed too, and we walked on—we were just a few steps in front of the others.

But—again in another moment I stopped, this time holding up my hand, and saying, 'Hush!'

Then I turned, and I fancy I had grown quite white already. [Pg 192]

'Miss Trevor,' I said, 'it *is* Rough, and there must be something dreadful the matter. Just listen.'

There was the same gasping yelp, almost like a choking human cry, and the strangest rushing and clanking, jingling sounds, all mixed together.

'Was he chained up? Can he have broken loose?' said Zenia breathlessly. 'It sounds like——'

'"Chained up,"' I repeated indignantly; 'my sweet little Roughie! Oh no, no!' I cried, as I rushed off.

It was rather rude, I am afraid, to repeat her words like that, but she was far too kind to mind.

'Geordie, Geordie, Rolf,' I cried, 'come quickly! There is something dreadfully the matter with Rough.'

So indeed it seemed, for the noise grew louder, and mingled with it now were a child's calls and shrieks.

'Roughie, Roughie,' I distinguished in Esmé's voice; 'darling Roughie, come to me. Don't be so frightened, darling. I didn't mean it—oh, I didn't mean it!'

And this was what I *saw*.

Esmé, hair streaming, eyes streaming, scarlet with terror, rushing over the ground in front and at the side of the Hut, lost to sight for a moment among the trees, then out again, after *something*—a small, wild animal, it seemed—that was tearing before her, evidently trying to escape from her, or from—yes, what was that strange thing rushing after *it*? Another still smaller wild beast of some kind, or what? No, it was nothing alive; it was a metal thing of some kind, rattling, clanking, jingling, and—oh, horrors!—tied to my poor pet's little body. [Pg 193]

I saw it all at once—affection quickens one's eyes, they say—I took it all in before there was time for any explanation, though Esmé screamed to me as she flew on: 'Oh, Ida, Ida, I didn't mean it! Stop him, stop him!'

Naughty, naughty Esmé!

He had already rushed past me—within a few yards, that is to say—without seeing me, whom he generally caught sight of before you could think it possible. Blinded by terror—yes, and deafened too—he did not know I had come; he could not hear his own 'missus's' voice.

And he was dreadful to look at: his tongue was hanging out; his whole little head seemed spattered with foam; he was rushing like a mad thing, even though, by the gasping sound he made, you could tell he was exhausted, and had scarcely any breath left. [Pg 194]

No wonder that, as the boys hurried up behind me, they and Mr. Trevor—Mr. Trevor especially—thought he *was* mad.

Mr. Trevor kept his presence of mind, I must say, under what *he* thought the dreadful circumstances. He almost pushed his mother and sister and Taisy into the porch, and tried to push me in too. But I evaded him.

The boys and Esmé were quite out of reach—*they* were tearing after *her*, shouting to her to 'Come back, come back!' which did not tend to lessen the uproar. And when *I* started in pursuit, as of course I did, it must have seemed to any one looking on as if we had all gone mad together! Indeed, Taisy owned to me afterwards that, terrified as she was, she had hard work to keep down her laughter, especially when she heard me turn upon dignified Mr. Trevor, and in answer to his despotic—

'Go back, Miss Lanark, go back; I insist upon it,' shout back, 'Nonsense; I will *not* go back.'

And as I heard his next words— [Pg 195]

'The dog must be shot at once. Boys, is there a gun about the place?' I grew desperate, for I knew that there *was* a gun—Rolf's—though he and Geordie had given their word of honour to mamma not to touch it without leave.

Then a new idea struck me. Instead of rushing round like the others—like the boys that is to say, for by this time Esmé had dropped in front of the porch, whence Zenia Trevor had dragged her in, and she was now sobbing on Taisy's shoulder—instead of rushing after Roughie, I 'doubled' and *met* him, my arms outstretched, and using every endearing and coaxing tone I could think of. And oh, the joy and relief when, almost dead with exhaustion by now, he flew into my clasp, and, panting and nearly choking, faintly rubbed his poor little head against me!

'He knows me, he knows me!' I shouted. 'He is not a bit mad; he is only wild with terror.'

But I had some trouble to get the others to believe me; *their* fright had only increased tenfold when they saw me catch him. In some marvellous way Mr. Trevor had got out the gun—I have always suspected that Taisy or Hoskins or one of them had already thought of it—and stood within a few paces of my dog and me. But for my having him in my arms, he would have made an end of Roughie, and certainly I would never have told this story. [Pg 196]

As it was, for a moment or two he—Mr. Trevor, not the poor pet—was very angry.

'Miss Lanark!' he shouted, 'you are mad yourself to touch him. Has he bitten you?' for I was crying so by this time that I had hidden my face in Rough's coat.

'*Bitten* me!' I exclaimed, looking up and not caring if Mr. Trevor saw my tears or not,—'*bitten* me! How can you imagine such a thing? Look at him.'

And, indeed, it was a sight to melt any heart and disarm any fears! Roughie was lying quite still, nestling against me as close as he could get, only quivering now and then and giving little sobbing sighs, just as a tiny child does after some violent trouble and crying.

I believe he was already asleep!

Mr. Trevor approached cautiously.

'He—he certainly looks all right now,' he said. 'Can it have been a fit of some extraordinary kind, then, or what can——'

'There is no mystery about it,' I said, 'except the mystery of how any one *could* be so cruel. Didn't you hear the rattling, Mr. Trevor—didn't you see—*this*?' [Pg 197]

And I gave a gentle tug to the string, still firmly fastened to the poor little man; but gently as I did it, the horrid kettle and things in it jingled slightly, and at once Roughie opened his eyes and began to shake.

I soothed him again, but Mr. Trevor did the sensible thing. He laid down the gun, calling to the boys as they hurried up not to touch it, and taking out his penknife cut the string, close to the kettle end first, and then handed the knife to me, to cut the string again where it was fastened to my dog.

Rolf and Geordie could scarcely speak.

'Who can have done it?' they exclaimed. '*Could* Esmé have been so——'

'Cruel and naughty,' I interrupted,—'yes, I am afraid so, though I *couldn't* have believed it of her. Geordie, pick up the kettle please, without jingling if you can help it, and please throw away the horrid things that are in it.'

'No, no, don't throw them away!' exclaimed a newcomer on the scene. 'They're my nails and screws.'

It was Denzil.

'And my kettle,' said poor Rolf, rather dolefully, for he was proud of his cooking stove and all its neat arrangements, and the kettle looked nearly as miserable for a kettle as Roughie did for a little dog! [Pg 198]

I turned upon Denzil very sharply, I am afraid.

'Did you know of it, then?' I said.

Poor Denzil looked very frightened.

'In course not, Ida,' he said. 'I came out to ask Esmé for my nails. She had a lot of them in her blouse pockets, and she got tired of helping me and forgot to give me them back.'

'I'm very sorry,' I said. 'No, I am sure you would never do such a thing, Den.'

Then I got up, very carefully, not to disturb my poor doggie, who was really asleep by this time, and we all—Mr. Trevor and the three boys and I—went to the group in the porch, whose anxiety was already relieved by seeing us more tranquil again. Taisy had been dying to rush out to us, but Esmé, sobbing in her arms, was not easily disposed of.

She—Esmé—had begun an incoherent confession of her misdoings, but now mamma stopped it.

'Is it all right?' she asked eagerly, speaking to Mr. Trevor. 'The dog is *not* mad then? What was it?'

Mr. Trevor glanced, still a little doubtfully, at Roughie in my arms. [Pg 199]

'I—yes, I think he is all right again,' he replied. 'He certainly recognised his mistress's voice, which is the best sign. I do not think it was any kind of fit; it was just terror. He must be a nervous little creature.'

'Yes,' said Rolf; 'he is awfully nervous, though he is not cowardly.'

'A fine distinction, as applied to a dog,' said Mr. Trevor smiling. 'But if—you all knew it, how——'

A howl—really it was a howl—from Esmé interrupted him.

'Oh, I know, I know!' she wailed. 'It was all my fault. But I only meant to tease him and make him run. I didn't mean—oh, Ida, I didn't mean—to make him go mad. Will you ever forgive me? Rough will never look at me again, I know.'

She was mistaken. The prettiest thing happened just then: Roughie, placidly asleep, though giving little quivers and sobs still, was awakened by the noise she made. He opened his eyes, and his mouth—what Denzil called 'smiling'—a little; I think he meant to give a friendly lick, but finding nothing handy for this, he contented himself with a very cheerful tail-wagging, first glancing up at Esmé, who was bending over him, as much as to say, 'I do forgive you heartily.' [Pg 200]

I have always said that dogs—nice dogs—are sorry for people when they see them crying. Since

that day I have been sure of it.

But the first effect of Rough's magnanimity was to bring forth another burst of sobs and tears from poor Esmé.

Yes, I too forgave her from that moment.

'Oh, Ida! oh, mamma! oh, everybody!' she cried, 'do forgive me! You see *he* does.'

So now we fell to petting and soothing her; it never took very long to get up Esmé's spirits again, happily. Before bedtime, except for reddened eyes, you would not have known there had been anything the matter, but from that day to this Roughie has had no kinder or truer friend than her.

We were all feeling rather overstrained. Mr. Trevor, I *fancy*, a little ashamed of the great fuss he had made, though perhaps I should scarcely speak of it like that, and I think we all felt glad when mamma said brightly—

[Pg 201] 'Well—all is well that ends well! Will you join us at our schoolroom tea and forgive its being rather a scramble after all this upset?' She turned to the Trevors, but before they had time to reply there came a half-laughing but rather distressed appeal from Mrs. Trevor.

'My dears,' she said, addressing everybody as far as I could make out, 'will some of you disentangle me? The dogs and I have all got mixed up together—naughty, naughty!' and she switched powerlessly with a knitting needle at the poodles, who this time were really enjoying themselves in a good ball-of-wool chase, as the excitement of Rough's strange behaviour had actually made the old lady leave off knitting for fully five minutes!

It was quite impossible not to laugh, but Mrs. Trevor herself laughed as heartily as any one, and at last, by turning her round and round as if we were playing at blind man's buff, and catching up first one poodle and then another, we got her free.

And of course the wool looked none the worse!

That laughing set us all still more at our ease, and by the time we had sobered down, Hoskins appeared to announce tea. [Pg 202] And after the kind Trevors had said good-bye and gone, Denzil set us off laughing again by announcing in his solemn way that he didn't believe Mr. Trevor was at all ill; he ate such a lot of buttered toast!

This affair of poor little Roughie was, I think, the most exciting thing that happened to us all that spring and summer at the Hut. And though everybody, starting with the good-natured wee man himself, forgave Esmé thoroughly, we were none of us allowed to *forget* it. For my dog behaved in the funniest way. Nothing for at least a fortnight would persuade him to leave my room, where he installed himself in what he evidently thought a fortress of security, under the bed. And he would only come out if I called him, and then expected me to hold him in my arms as if he were a baby, which, as you can understand, was not very convenient.

But by degrees he got over it, and became his own happy little self again.

I think it was the very day after this thrilling experience that we got another really cheering and hopeful letter from papa. And once this happier turn of things began, it kept on pretty steadily; the only drawback to our thankfulness being that he could name no date—no *probable* one even—for his return. [Pg 203] So the lengthening days followed each other till we got to midsummer, and then came July and August, specially lovely months that year, during which the sun looked down on a busy and happy party in the queer encampment that was our home for the time.

In September Rolf left us for the big school he was bound for. We missed him sadly, though we had the cheering *hope* that his aunt would let him come to us again for the winter holidays.

And so she did!

A few days before Christmas he and Taisy—Taisy had spent the autumn with her grandmother—arrived again, together this time, though less like snails, as they had left their houses behind them when they went away. And some changes in the arrangements were made. Taisy had Geordie's room, and Geordie, to his great delight, took up his quarters in her waggon, as mamma did not like the idea of a girl's being outside—even though so near—through the long, dark nights. It was not a cold winter; it is never very cold at Eastercove, and where the Hut stands it seems even milder than higher up. So Rolf stuck to his tent, and was very pleased to have an excuse for keeping his patent stove going all the time. [Pg 204] Those holidays came to an end only too soon.

In March, just about a year after he had left, came the news of papa's return being fixed for June. It all fitted in. The Trevors had taken the house for twelve months, and with the fine weather meant to go back to their own home in the north. And now there was no talk of letting our dear home again, or, as far as we could see, of ever leaving it except for pleasant reasons. But we kept the Hut just as it was, for papa to see. Rolf would not even have his tent moved till after that summer, and Taisy's waggon is to this day somewhere about the premises, and mamma still has her movable 'boudoir' wheeled about to different parts of the grounds, as it suits her.

It is nearly three years since I made the last entry in my 'Hut' diary, from which I have written out this history of 'The House that Grew.' How I came to do so I will explain.

We have been through some very anxious times lately about Rolf. He is a soldier, and very soon

after he got his commission his regiment went to India, and he with it. I will not tell the particulars, as he might not like it, but he 'came in' almost at once for some *very* active service, up in some of those dreadfully out-of-the-way places, where there are so often disturbances with the natives, which in England do not attract much attention, unless you happen to have close personal interest in what is happening, as we had, for Rolf had become almost like another brother to us, spending half his holidays at Eastercove. And Geordie—oh, I forgot to say he *did* get the scholarship!—and he, by a happy coincidence, had been at school together.

Well—one sad day there came news that Rolf was badly wounded. We have been waiting and waiting—and I think the anxiety 'got on my nerves,' as people say. For one day mamma spoke seriously to me, when she found me sitting idle, just longing for letters.

'Ida, dear,' she said, 'you must get something to do—something *extra*, I mean, to interest you.'

And after talking a little, the idea of writing out my 'Hut' diary came into my head, and, as you see, I have done it!

And I have been, if I deserved to be so, rewarded for following mamma's advice.

 Rolf is coming home—on leave—'invalided,' it is true, but his wound is not so bad as reported; indeed, according to *him*, not bad at all!

Papa and Dods are just off to Southampton to meet him and bring him straight here.

THE END

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