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## The Lady of the Forest

L. T. Meade

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THE

LADY OF THE FOREST.

A STORY FOR GIRLS.

By L. T. MEADE,

*Author of "The Little Princess of Tower Hill," "A Sweet Girl Graduate," "The Palace Beautiful," "Polly," "A World of Girls," etc., etc.*

"Tyde what may betyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde."

ILLUSTRATED EDITION.

A. L. BURT COMPANY, PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK.

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°THE LADY OF THE FOREST.

"Tyde what may betyde  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde."

### **CHAPTER I.—FAIR LITTLE MAIDS.**

"And then," said Rachel, throwing up her hands and raising her eyebrows—"and then, when they got into the heart of the forest itself, just where the shade was greenest and the trees thickest, they saw the lady coming to meet them. She, too, was all in green, and she came on and on, and \_\_\_"

"Hush, Rachel!" exclaimed Kitty; "here comes Aunt Grizel."

The girls, aged respectively twelve and nine, were seated, one on a rustic stile, the other on the grass at her feet; a background of splendid forest trees threw their slight and childish figures into strong relief. Rachel's hat was tossed on the ground and Kitty's parasol lay unopened by her side. The sun was sending slanting rays through the trees, and some of these rays fell on Kitty's bright hair and lit up Rachel's dark little gypsy face.

"Aunt Grizel is coming," said Kitty, and immediately she put on a proper and demure expression. Rachel, drawn up short in the midst of a very exciting narrative, looked slightly defiant and began to whistle in a boyish manner.

Aunt Griselda was seen approaching down a long straight avenue overshadowed by forest trees of beech and oak; she held her parasol well up, and her face was further protected from any passing gleams of sunlight by a large poke-bonnet. She was a slender old lady, with a graceful and dignified appearance. Aunt Griselda would have compelled respect from any one, and as she approached the two girls they both started to their feet and ran to meet her.

"Your music-master has been waiting for you for half an hour, Rachel. Kitty, I am going into the forest; you can come with me if you choose."

Rachel did not attempt to offer any excuse for being late; with an expressive glance at Kitty she walked off soberly to the house, and the younger girl, picking up her hat, followed Aunt Griselda, sighing slightly as she did so.

Kitty was an affectionate child, the kind of child who likes everybody, and she would have tolerated Aunt Griselda—who was not particularly affectionate nor particularly sympathetic—if she had not disturbed her just at the moment when she was listening with breathless interest to a wonderful romance.

Kitty adored fairy tales, and Rachel had a great gift in that direction. She was very fond of prefacing her stories with some such words as the following:

"Understand now, Kitty, that this fairy story is absolutely true; the fairy was seen by our great-great-grandmother;" or "Our great-uncle Jonas declares that he saw that brownie himself as he was going through the forest in the dusk;" then Kitty's pretty blue eyes would open wide and she would lose herself in an enchanted world. It was very trying to be brought back to the ordinary everyday earth by Aunt Griselda, and on the present occasion the little girl felt unusually annoyed.

Miss Griselda Lovel, or "Aunt Grizel" as her nieces called her, was a taciturn old lady, and by no means remarked Kitty's silence. There were many little paths through the forest, and the two soon found themselves in comparative night. Miss Lovel walked quickly, and Kitty almost panted as she kept up with her. Her head was so full of Rachel's fairy tale that at last some unexpected words burst from her lips. They were passing under a splendid forest tree, when Kitty suddenly clutched Aunt Grizel's thin hand.

"Aunt Grizel—is it—is it about here that the lady lives?"

"What lady, child?" asked Miss Lovel.

"Oh, you know—the lady of the forest."

Aunt Grizel dropped Kitty's hand and laughed.

"What a foolish little girl you are, Kitty! Who has been putting such nonsense into your head? See, my dear, I will wait for you here; run down this straight path to the Eyres' cottage, and bring Mrs. Eyre back with you—I want to speak to her. I have had a letter, my dear, and your little cousin Philip Lovel is coming to Avonsyde to-morrow."

Avonsyde was one of the oldest places in the country; it was not particularly large, nor were its owners remarkable for wealth, or prowess, or deeds of daring, neither were the men of the house specially clever. It was indeed darkly hinted at that the largest portion of brains was as a rule bestowed upon the female side of the house. But on the score of antiquity no country seat could at all approach Avonsyde. It was a delightful old place, homelike and bright; there were one or two acres of flower-garden not too tidily kept, and abounding in all kinds of old-fashioned and sweet-smelling flowers; the house had a broad frontage, its windows were small, and it possessed all the charming irregularities of a family dwelling-place which has been added to piece by piece. At one end was a tower, gray and hoary with the weight of centuries; at the further end were modern wings with large reception-rooms, and even some attempts at modern luxury and modern ornamentation. There were two avenues to the place: one the celebrated straight avenue, which must have been cut at some long-ago period directly out of the neighboring forest, for the trees which arched it over were giant forest oaks and beeches. This avenue was the pride of the place, and shown as a matter of course to all visitors. The other avenue, and the one most in use, was winding and straggling; it led straight up to the old-fashioned stone porch which guarded the entrance, and enshrined in the most protective and cozy manner the principal doors to the house.

Avonsyde had belonged to the Lovels for eight hundred years. They were not a rich family and they had undergone many misfortunes; the property now belonged to the younger branch; for a couple of hundred years ago a very irate and fiery Squire Lovel had disinherited his eldest son and had bestowed all his fair lands and the old place upon a younger son. From that moment matters had not gone well with the family; the younger son who inherited the property which should have been his brother's made an unfortunate marriage, had sickly children, many of whom died, and not being himself either too strong-minded or in any sense otherwise, had sustained severe money losses, and for the first time within the memory of man some of the Avonsyde lands had to be sold.

From the date of the disinheritance of the elder branch the family never regained either their wealth or prestige; generation after generation the Lovels dwindled in strength and became less and less able to cope with their sturdier neighbors. The last squire of Avonsyde had one sickly son and two daughters; the son married, but died before his father, leaving no son to inherit the old place. This son had also, in the family's estimation, married beneath him, and during the squire's lifetime his daughters were afraid even to mention the names of two bonny little lasses who were pining away their babyhood and early youth in poky London lodgings, and who would have been all the better for the fresh breezes which blew so genially round Avonsyde. After the death of his son Squire Lovel became very morose and disagreeable. He pretended not to grieve for his son, but he also lost all interest in life. One by one the old pleasures in which he used to delight were given up, his health gave way rapidly, and at last the end drew near.

There came a day when Squire Lovel felt so ill that he sent first of all for the family doctor and then for the family solicitor. He occupied the doctor's attention for about ten minutes, but he was closeted with the lawyer for two or three hours. At the end of that time he sent for his daughters and made some strong statements to them.

"Grizel," he said, addressing the elder Miss Lovel, "Dr. Maddon has just informed me that I am not long for this world."

"Dr. Maddon is fond of exaggerating matters," said Miss Grizel in a voice which she meant to be soothing; "neither Katharine nor I think you very ill, father, and—and——"

The squire raised his eyebrows impatiently.

"We won't discuss the question of whether Maddon is a wise man or a silly one, Griselda," he said. "I know myself that I am ill. I am not only ill, I am weak, and arguing with regard to a foregone conclusion is wearisome. I have much to talk to you and Katharine about, so will you sit down quietly and listen to me?"

Miss Griselda was a cold-mannered and perhaps cold-natured woman. Miss Katharine, on the contrary, was extremely tender-hearted; she looked appealingly at her old father's withered face; but she had always been submissive, and she now followed her elder sister's lead and sat down quietly on the nearest chair.

"We will certainly not worry you with needless words, father," said Miss Griselda gently. "You have doubtless many directions to give us about the property; your instructions shall of course be carried out to the best of my ability. Katharine, too, although she is not the strongest-minded of mortals, will no doubt, from a sense of filial affection, also respect your wishes."

"I am glad the new poultry-yard is complete," here half-sobbed Miss Katharine, "and that valuable new breed of birds arrived yesterday; and I—I——"

"Try to stop talking, both of you," suddenly exclaimed the squire. "I am dying, and Avonsyde is

without an heir. Griselda, will you oblige me by going down to the library and bringing up out of the book-case marked D that old diary of my great-grandfather's, in which are entered the particulars of the quarrel?"

Miss Katharine looked in an awe-struck and startled way at her sister. Miss Griselda rose at once and, with a bunch of keys in her hand, went downstairs.

The moment she had left the room Miss Katharine got up timidly and, with a certain pathos, stooped down and kissed the old man's swollen hand.

The little action was done so simply and naturally that the fierce old face relaxed, and for an instant the wrinkled hand touched Miss Katharine's gray head.

"Yes, Kitty, I know you love me; but I hate the feminine weakness of tears. Ah, Kitty, you were a fair enough looking maid once, but time has faded and changed you; you are younger than Grizel, but you have worn far worse."

Miss Katharine did not say a word, but hastily resumed her seat; and when Miss Lovel returned with the vellum-bound diary, she had not an idea that her younger sister had ever moved.

Sitting down by her father, she opened the musty old volume and read aloud certain passages which, written in fierce heat at the time, disclosed a painful family scene. Angry words, bitter recriminations, the sense of injustice on one side, the thirst for revenge on the other, were faithfully portrayed by the dead-and-gone chronicler.

The squire's lips moved in unspoken accompaniment to the words which his daughter read aloud, and Miss Katharine bent eagerly forward in order not to lose a syllable.

"I am dying, and there is no male heir to Avonsyde," said the squire at last. "Griselda and Katharine, I wish to state here distinctly that my great-great-grandfather made a mistake when he turned the boy Rupert from the old place. Valentine should have refused to inherit; it is doubtless because of Valentine's weakness and his father's spirit of revenge that I die to-day without male issue to inherit Avonsyde."

"Heaping recriminations on the dead won't help matters now," said Miss Griselda in a sententious voice. As she spoke she closed the diary, clasped it and locked it, and Miss Katharine, starting to her feet, said:

"There are the children in London, your grandchildren, father, and our nearest of kin."

The squire favored his younger daughter with a withering look, and even Miss Griselda started at what were very bold words.

"Those children," said the squire—"girls, both of them, sickly, weakly, with Valentine's miserable pink-and-white delicacy and their low born mother's vulgarity; I said I would never see them, and I surely do not wish to hear about them now. Griselda, there is now one plain and manifest duty before you—I lay it as my dying charge on you and Katharine. I leave the search which you are to institute as your mission in life. While you both live Avonsyde is yours, but you must search the world over if necessary for Rupert Lovel's descendants; and when you discover them you are to elect a bonny stalwart boy of the house as your heir. No matter whether he is eldest or youngest, whether he is in a high position or a low position in the social scale, provided he is a lineal descendant of the Rupert Lovel who was disinherited in 1684, and provided also he is strong and upright and well-featured, with muscle and backbone and manliness in him, you are to appoint him your heir, and you are to bequeath to him the old house, and the old lands, and all the money you can save by simple and abstemious living. I have written it down in my will, and you are tied firmly, both of you, and cannot depart from my instructions; but I wished to talk over matters with you, for Katharine there is slow to take in a thing, and you, Grizel, are prejudiced and rancorous in your temper, and I wish you both clearly to understand that the law binds you to search for my heir, and this, if you want to inherit a shilling from me during your lifetime, you must do. Remember, however, and bear ever strongly in mind, that if, when you find the family, the elder son is weakly and the younger son is strong, it is to the sturdy boy that the property is to go; and hark you yet again, Griselda and Katharine, that the property is not to go to the father if he is alive, but to the young boy, and the boy is to be educated to take up his rightful position. A strong lad, a manly and stalwart lad, mind you; for Avonsyde has almost ceased to exist, owing to sickly and effeminate heirs, since the time when my great-great-grandfather quarreled with his son, Rupert Lovel, and gave the old place to that weakly stripling Valentine. I am a descendant of Valentine myself, but, 'pon my word, I rue the day."

"Your directions shall be obeyed to the letter," said Miss Griselda; but Miss Katharine interrupted her.

"And we—we have only a life-interest in the property, father?" she inquired in a quavering voice.

The old squire looked up into his younger daughter's face and laughed.

"Why, what more would you want, Kitty? No longer young nor fair and with no thought of marrying—what is money to you after your death?"

"I was thinking of the orphan children in London," continued Miss Katharine, with increasing firmness of manner and increasing trembling of voice. "They are very poor, and—and—they are Valentine's children, and—and—you have never seen them, father."

"And never mean to," snapped the squire. "Griselda, I believe I have now given implicit directions. Katharine, don't be silly. I don't mean to see those children and I won't be worried about them."

At this moment the door behind the squire, which was very thick and made of solid oak, worn nearly black with age, was opened softly, and a clear voice exclaimed:

"Why, what a funny room! Do come in, Kitty. Oh, what a beautiful room, and what a funny, queer old man!"

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine both turned round abruptly. Miss Griselda made a step toward the door to shut it against some unexpected and unwelcome intruder. The old man muttered:

"That is a child's voice—one of the village urchins, no doubt."

But before Miss Griselda could reach the door—in short, before any of the little party assembled in the dying squire's bedroom could do anything but utter disjointed exclamations, a child, holding a younger child by the hand, marched boldly and with the air of one perfectly at home into the chamber.

"What a very nice room, and what funny ladies, and oh! what a queer, cross old man! Don't be frightened, Kitty, we'll walk right through. There's a door at the other end—maybe we'll find grandfather in the room beyond the door at that end."

The squire's lower jaw quite dropped as the radiant little creatures came in and filled the room with an unlooked-for light and beauty. They were dressed picturesquely, and no one for an instant could mistake them for the village children. The eldest child might have been seven; she was tall and broad, with large limbs, a head crowned with a great wealth of tangly, fuzzy, nut-brown hair, eyes deeply set, very dark in color, a richly tinted dark little face, and an expression of animation which showed in the dancing eyes, in the dancing limbs, in the smiling, dimpled, confident mouth; her proud little head was well thrown back; her attitude was totally devoid of fear. The younger child was fair with a pink-and-white complexion, a quantity of golden, sunny hair, and eyes as blue as the sky; she could not have been more than four years old, and was round-limbed and dimpled like a baby.

"Who are you, my dears?" said Miss Katharine when she could speak. Miss Katharine was quite trembling, and she could not help smiling at the lovely little pair. Squire Lovel and Miss Grizel were still frowning, but Miss Katharine's voice was very gentle.

"Who are you, my dear little children?" she repeated, gaining courage and letting an affectionate inflection steal into her voice.

"I'm Kitty," said the younger child, putting her finger to her lip and looking askance at the elder girl, "and she—she's Rachel."

"You had better let me tell it, Kitty," interrupted Rachel. "Please, we are going through the house—we want to see everything. Kitty doesn't want to as badly as me, but she always does what I tell her. We are going straight on into the next room, for we want to find grandfather. I'm Rachel Lovel and this is Kitty Lovel. Our papa used to live here when he was a little boy, and we want to find grandfather, please. Oh, what a cross old man that is sitting in the chair!"

While Rachel was making her innocent and confident speech, Miss Katharine's face turned deadly pale; she was afraid even to glance at her father and sister. The poor lady felt nearly paralyzed, and was dimly wondering how she could get such audacious intruders out of the room.

Rachel having finished her speech remained silent for a quarter of a minute; then taking Kitty's hand she said:

"Come along, Kit, we may find grandfather in the other room. We'll go through the door at that end, and perhaps we'll come to grandfather at last."

Kitty heaved a little sigh of relief, and the two were preparing to scamper past the deep embrasure of the mullioned window, when a stern voice startled the little adventurers, and arresting them in their flight, caused them to wheel swiftly round.

"Come here," said Squire Lovel.

He had never spoken more sternly; but the mites had not a bit of fear. They marched up to him boldly, and Kitty laid her dimpled baby finger, with a look of inquiry, on his swollen old hand:

"What a funny fat hand!"

"What did you say you called yourself?" said the squire, lifting Rachel's chin and peering into her dark face. "Griselda and Katharine, I'll thank you not to stand staring and gaping. What did you

call yourself? What name did you say belonged to you, child? I'm hard of hearing; tell me again."

"I'm Rachel Valentine Lovel," repeated the child in a confident tone. "I was called after my mamma and after father—father's in heaven, and it makes my mother cry to say Valentine, so I'm Rachel; and this is Kitty—her real name is Katharine—Katharine Lovel. We have come in a dog-cart, and mother is downstairs, and we want to see all the house, and particularly the tower, and we want to see grandfather, and we want a bunch of grapes each."

All the time Rachel was speaking the squire kept regarding her more and more fiercely. When she said "My mother is downstairs," he even gave her a little push away. Rachel was not at all appalled; she knit her own black brows and tried to imitate him.

"I never saw such a cross old man; did you, Kitty? Please, old man, let us go now. We want to find grandfather."

"Perhaps it's a pain him got," said Kitty, stroking the swollen hand tenderly. "Mother says when I's got a pain I can't help looking cross."

The fierce old eyes turned slowly from one lovely little speaker to the other; then the squire raised his head and spoke abruptly.

"Griselda and Katharine, come here. Have the goodness to tell me who this child resembles," pointing as he spoke to Rachel. "Look at her well, study her attentively, and don't both answer at once."

There was not the slightest fear of Miss Katharine interrupting Miss Griselda on this occasion. She only favored dark-eyed little Rachel with a passing glance; but her eyes, full of tears, rested long on the fair little baby face of Kitty.

"This child in all particulars resembles the portrait of our great-uncle Rupert," said Miss Griselda, nodding at Rachel as she did so. "The same eyes, the same lift of the eyebrows, and the same mouth."

"And this one," continued the squire, turning his head and pointing to Kitty—"this one, Griselda? Katharine, you need not speak."

"This one," continued Miss Griselda, "has the weakness and effeminate beauty of my dead brother Valentine."

"Kitty isn't weak," interrupted Rachel; "she's as strong as possible. She only had croup once, and she never takes cold, and she only was ill for a little because she was very hungry. Please, old man, stop staring so hard and let us go now. We want to find our grandfather."

But instead of letting Rachel go Squire Lovel stretched out his hand and drew her close to him.

"Sturdy limbs, dark face, breadth of figure," he muttered, "and you are my grandchild—the image of Rupert; yes, the image of Rupert Lovel. I wish to God, child, you were a boy!"

"Your grandchild!" repeated Rachel. "Are you my grandfather? Kitty, Kitty, is this our grandfather?"

"Him's pain is better," said Kitty. "I see a little laugh 'ginning to come round his mouth. Him's not cross. Let us kiss our grandfader, Rachel."

Up went two rosy, dimpled pairs of lips to the withered old cheeks, and two lovely little pairs of arms were twined round Squire Lovel's neck.

"We have found our grandfather," said Rachel. "Now let's go downstairs at once and bring mother up to see him."

"No, no, stop that!" said the squire, suddenly disentangling himself from the pretty embrace. "Griselda and Katharine, this scene is too much for me. I should not be agitated—those children should not intrude on me. Take care of them—take particular care of the one who is like Rupert. Take her away now; take them both away; and, hark you, do not let the mother near me. I'll have nothing to say to the mother; she is nothing to me. Take the children out of the room and come back to me presently, both of you."

## **CHAPTER II.—MAKING TERMS.**

The moment the two little girls found themselves outside their grandfather's door they wrenched their little hands away from Miss Griselda's and Miss Katharine's, and with a gay laugh like two wild, untamed birds flew down the wide oak staircase and across the hall to a room where a woman, dressed very soberly, waited for them. She was sitting on the edge of a hard cane-bottomed chair, her veil was down, and her whole attitude was one of tense and nervous watchfulness. The children ran to her with little cries of rapture, climbed together on her knee, pulled up her veil, and nearly smothered her pale dark face with kisses.

"Mother, mother, mother, he was so cross!"

"He had pain, mother, and his eyes were wrinkled up so."

"But, mother, we gave him a kiss, and he said I was strong and Kitty was weak. We have not seen the tower yet, and we haven't got our grapes, and there are two old ladies, and we don't like them much, and we ran away from them—and—oh, here they are!"

The children clung tightly to their mother, who struggled to her feet, pushed them aside with a gesture almost of despair, and came up at once to the two Miss Lovels.

"I know this visit is unwarranted; I know it is considered an intrusion. The children's father was born here, but there is no welcome for them; nevertheless I have brought them. They are beautiful children—look at them. No fairer daughters of your house ever were born than these two. Look at Rachel; look at Kitty. Is it right they should be brought up with no comforts in a poor London lodging? Rachel, kiss your aunts. Kitty, little one, kiss your aunts and love them."

Rachel skipped up gayly to the two stiff old ladies, but Kitty began at last to be influenced by the frowns which met her on all sides; she pouted, turned her baby face away, and buried it in her mother's lap.

"Look at them—are they not beautiful?" continued the mother. "Is it fair that they should be cooped up in a London lodging when their father belonged to this place? I ask you both—you who are my husband's sisters; you who were children when he was a child, who used to play with him and kiss him, and learn your lessons out of the same book, and to sleep in the same nursery—is it fair?"

"It is not fair," said Miss Katharine suddenly. She seemed carried quite out of herself; her eyes shone, and the pink of a long-gone beauty returned with a transient gleam to her faded cheek. "It is not fair," she repeated. "No, Griselda, I am not afraid of you. I will say what is in my mind. Valentine's face speaks to me again out of the baby face of that dear little child. What was Rupert Lovel to us that we should place a likeness to him before a likeness to our own dead brother? I say it is unfair that Valentine's children should have neither part nor lot in his old home. I, for one, am willing to welcome them to Avonsyde."

Miss Griselda had always a most placid face; she now said in her calmest tones:

"There is no need to excite yourself, Katharine. I too think the children have a claim on us. An arrangement can easily be made about the children—their mother is the difficulty."

The face of the plainly dressed young woman could scarcely grow any paler. She gave a quick, very quick glance at handsome little Rachel, who stood with her head thrown back and her eyes eagerly watching each movement of the excited group around her; then the mother's hand touched Kitty's golden head with a very faint caressing touch, and then she spoke:

"I have come to make terms. I knew I should be considered an obstacle, but that is a mistake. I will be none. I am willing—I am willing to obliterate myself. I would talk to you and make terms, but I would make them alone—I mean I would rather not make them in the presence of the children."

"I will take the children," said Miss Katharine eagerly; "they want to see the house; I will take them round. They want grapes; I will take them to the vineries."

"Oh, yes, we want grapes," said Rachel in an excited voice; "we want lots of grapes—don't we, Kitty?"

"Yes; lots," answered Kitty, turning her flushed little face once more to view. She had been hiding it for the last few minutes against her mother's black dress.

"That is my father's bell," said Miss Griselda suddenly. "I must hurry to him. I will see you presently, Mrs. Lovel; and, Katharine, you too must be present at our interview. I must ask Mrs. Martin to take the children round the place."

Miss Griselda opened the thick oak door of the squire's bedroom and went in. Her face was changed in expression and her usual self-possession had to a certain extent deserted her.

"What an age you have been away, Grizel," said the old man testily. "You might have known that I'd want you. Did I not tell you to take the children out of the room and to come back to me presently? Did you not hear me when I said, 'Come back to me presently?' Oh, I see how things are!" continued the irate old man, with a burst of fury. "I am weak and ill now and my commands are nothing—my wishes are not of the slightest consequence. I know how it will be when I'm gone. You and Katharine promise faithfully to obey me now, but you'll forget your promises when I'm gone. Even you, Griselda, who have always had the character of being strong-minded, will think nothing of your given word when I'm in my grave."

"You're tired, father," said Miss Griselda, "and the unexpected intrusion of the children has excited you. Let me pour you out a dose of your restorative medicine. Here, drink this; now you

will feel better."

The old squire's hand shook so much that he could not hold the glass which Miss Griselda tendered to him; but she held it herself to his lips, and when he had drained off its contents he grew a shade calmer.

"One of those children is very like Rupert Lovel," he murmured. "A strong girl, with a bold, fine face. You never would have supposed that that weak stripling Valentine would have had a child of that build, would you, Grizel?"

"No, father. But the little girl has a likeness to her mother, and it is about the mother I have now come to speak to you. Oh, come now, you must try and listen to me. You must not get over-excited, and you must not begin to talk absolute rubbish about my disobeying your wishes; for you have positively got to settle something about Valentine's children."

"I said I'd have nothing to say to them."

"Very likely; but you said so before you saw them. Having seen them, it is absolutely impossible for you to turn Valentine's orphan children from the doors. Their mother cannot support them, and she has brought them to us and we must not turn them away. I may as well tell you plainly that I will never consent to the children being sent away from Avonsyde. I won't wait to disobey you until you are dead in that matter. I shall do so at once, and quite openly, for I could never have another easy night on my pillow if I thought Valentine's children were starving."

"Who wants them to starve?" grumbled the squire.

But Miss Griselda's firm words had an effect, and he lowered his chin on his chest and looked gloomily straight before him.

"The mother has come here to make terms," said Miss Griselda. "Now what shall they be?"

"At least she shall not sleep under my roof! A low girl—no match for Valentine! If I said it once I repeat it fifty times. I will never look on that woman's face, Grizel!"

"I don't want you to, father. I agree with you that she had better go. Now let me tell you, in as few words as I can, what I intend to propose to Katharine and to Mrs. Lovel, with your sanction, presently. The children must stay at Avonsyde. If the heir is never found, well and good; they are provided for. If, on the other hand, the heir turns up, they are, according to the present conditions of your will, absolutely penniless. Now I don't choose this. Valentine's children must be provided for under any emergency, and you must make a fresh codicil to your will."

"I will not!"

"Father, you must. Valentine was your own son; these children are your rightful and legitimate heirs. I am heart and soul with you in your wish to find the lawful descendant of Rupert Lovel—I promise to devote my life to this search; but Valentine's children must not go penniless. You must make a codicil to your will providing comfortably for them in case the lawful heir turns up."

"How can I? The doctor says I have not many hours to live."

"Long enough for that, no doubt. We cannot, unfortunately, send for Mr. Baring from London, but I will send a man on horseback to Southampton, and Mr. Terry, the Barings' country partner, will be here in two or three hours."

"I tell you I have only a few hours to live," repeated the squire, sinking his head lower on his chest and looking daggers at his daughter.

"Long enough for that," she repeated.

She rose from her seat and went across the room to ring the bell. When the servant entered the room she gave some very clear and emphatic directions, and then desiring the nurse who waited on her father to be summoned, she left the room.

Her interview had scarcely been a peaceable one, and as she went downstairs her usually calm expression was considerably disturbed.

"I can make terms with the mother now," she murmured. "But I am not going even to tell my father what they are." And she went downstairs.

Floating in through the open window came the sound of gay, childish mirth, and looking out she saw the little strangers dancing and laughing and chatting merrily to old Mrs. Martin, the housekeeper, as she took them round the grounds.

Then Miss Griselda went downstairs, and she and Miss Katharine had their interview with the grave, quiet young mother, who had come, as she said, to make terms. No one heard what they said to her nor what she said to them; no one knew what arrangements were arrived at between the three; no one guessed either then or long years afterward what the terms were. When the somewhat protracted interview had come to an end, the young mother left Miss Griselda's study



with her veil drawn tightly over her face. If her eyes were red and her lips trembled, no one noticed those signs of grief through her thick crape veil. Miss Griselda offered her food, and Miss Katharine wanted to take her hand and wring it with a kindly pressure; but she shook her head at the one and drew back proudly from the other's proffered hand-shake.

The dog-cart was waiting at a side entrance, and she got into it and drove away. Nor did she once look back as she drove down the long straight avenue under the shade of the old forest trees.

That night Squire Lovel said a word or two to his daughters.

"So you have kept the children?"

"We have kept the children," repeated Miss Griselda tersely.

"It is nothing to me. I have made that codicil to my will. You have had your way in that."

"You have done justice, father—you will die happier," replied Miss Griselda.

"Have you made arrangements with the mother?" questioned the squire.

"The mother will not trouble us; we have arranged with her," answered the elder Miss Lovel.

"We have made arrangements with her," echoed Miss Katharine, and here she bent her head and gave vent to a little choking sob.

The squire was very restless all night, and several times the words "Kitty" and "Valentine" escaped his lips. The end was near and the poor old brain was wandering.

Toward morning he was left alone for a few moments with Miss Katharine.

"Father," she said suddenly, kneeling by his bedside, clasping his hand, and looking at him imploringly, "father, you would bid us be kind to Valentine's children?"

"Valentine's children?" repeated the old man. "Ay, ay, Kitty. My head wanders. Are they Valentine's children or Rupert's children?—the Rupert who should have inherited Avonsyde. Somebody's children were here to-day, but I cannot remember whether they belonged to Valentine or Rupert."

"Father, they belong to Valentine—to your son Valentine. You are dying. May I bring them to you, and will you bless them before you go?"

The old squire looked up at his daughter with dim and fading eyes. She did not wait to listen for any assent from his lips, but flying from the room, returned presently with two rosy, cherub-like creatures.

"Kiss your grandfather, Kitty; his pain is bad. Kiss him tenderly, dear little child."

Kitty pursed up her full red lips and gave the required salute solemnly.

"Now, Rachel, kiss your grandfather; he is very ill."

Rachel too raised herself on tiptoe, and bending forward touched the old man's lips lightly with her own.

"Rupert's child," he murmured; "ay, ay, just like Rupert."

Shortly afterward he died.

### **CHAPTER III.—PREPARING FOR THE HEIR**

"I wonder, Rachel," said Kitty, "I wonder when the heir will be found."

Rachel had curled herself up in a luxurious arm-chair, was devouring a new story-book, and was in consequence displeased with Kitty for her question.

"Let me read, Kitty. In half an hour I have to go to my drill, and then practicing, and then learning those tiresome lessons. I don't care if an heir is never found; do let me read!"

"There's another one coming to-morrow," continued Kitty in a by no means abashed voice; "his name is Philip and his mother is coming with him. I heard Aunt Grizel telling Mrs. Eyre all about it, and, Rachel—oh, Rachel, do listen! they are to sleep in the bedroom directly under Aunt Katharine's and Aunt Grizel's room in the tower."

This last piece of information was sufficiently interesting to Rachel to make her fling down her book with an impetuous gesture.

"What a tiresome Kitty you are. I never can read when you come into the room. I was in a most exciting part, but never mind. My half-hour of quiet will be gone in no time. I had better keep the

book until I can steal away into the forest and read it in peace."

"But isn't it exciting," pursued Kitty, "to think that they are going to sleep in the tower bedroom?"

"And his name is Philip!" repeated Rachel, "Philip is the name of this one—the last was Guy, and the one before was Ferdinand, and the one before that was Augustus. I want an heir to come of the name of Zerubbabel. I like Zerubbabel, and it's uncommon. What a pity this one's name is Philip!"

"Oh, he's not the real heir," said little Kitty, shaking her head solemnly; "he's only another make-believe; but it's rather exciting his mother coming too and the tower room being prepared. Rachel, aren't you almost certain that when the real, true heir comes his name will be Rupert? Why, of course it must be Rupert—mustn't it, Rachel?"

"I don't know and I don't care," answered Rachel, tumbling out of her luxurious chair and shaking back her dark, untidy locks. "How old is Philip, Kitty? Poor Philip, I wish him joy of the place! He'll find it dull enough, and he'll find Aunt Grizel very tiresome and Aunt Katharine very sweet, but very stupid, and he'll wish he wasn't the heir a thousand times in the twenty-four hours. How old is he, Kitty-cat? Just tell me quickly, for I must go."

"He's eight years old," replied Kitty in a very interested tone; "that's another thing that's exciting—his being so near to my age. Aunt Grizel says that he'll be a sort of a companion for me. I do hope he'll be a nice little boy."

"I don't care anything at all about him," said Rachel; "he may be the heir or he may not. I'm not in the least interested. I don't see anything exciting in the fact of a stupid little boy coming to Avonsyde with his mother; it's a slow place and he'll have a slow life, and there's nothing to interest me about it."

"Oh, Rachel, I never could guess that you found Avonsyde slow. If you do, why do you laugh so merrily and why do you look so gay?"

"I never said that I found Avonsyde dull," answered Rachel, turning round with a quick, flashing movement. "No place is slow or dull to me. But I'm not going to stay here; I'm going to school, and then afterward I'm going right round the world looking for mother. Oh, that's my drill-sergeant's bell! What a worry he is! Good-by, Kitty-cat."

Rachel skipped out of the room, banging the door after her, and Kitty climbed into her chair, and leaning back in it shut her pretty blue eyes.

It was five years now since the children had come to Avonsyde, and Kitty had absolutely forgotten the dismal day of their arrival. She knew that she had a mother, for Rachel reminded her of the fact; but she could recall no outline of her face.

Rachel not only spoke of her mother, but remembered her. Vivid memories of a grave, sweet, sad face came to her at intervals, and when these memories visited the child longings came also. Why had her mother gone away? Why were Kitty and she practically motherless? Who were the wicked people who had divided this mother and these children?

When these thoughts came Rachel's dark little face would work with strong emotion; and if Aunt Griselda or Aunt Katharine happened to be near, she would feel tempted to answer them defiantly and to favor them with flashing, angry glances.

"I miss my mother!" she would sob sometimes at night. "I wish—oh, how I wish I could give her a long, big, great kiss! Well, never mind: when I am old enough I'll go all round the world looking for her, for I know she is not dead."

These storms of grief did not come often, and on the whole the children had spent five very happy years at Avonsyde. Aunt Grizel and Aunt Katharine had each in her own way been good to them—Aunt Grizel erring on the side of over-severity, Aunt Katharine on the side of over-indulgence. But the children had no fear in their natures, and were so bright and frank and charming that even Aunt Katharine's petting could not do them any harm. They were well taught and well cared for, and were universal favorites wherever they went—the extreme side of Kitty being prone to over-tenderness; the extreme side of Rachel to over-brusqueness and almost fierceness.

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine said very little about their affection for the children—very little either to the children themselves or to one another. They were reserved women and thought it undignified to speak of their feelings. Neither Rachel nor Kitty was at all proud of being Lovels of Avonsyde; but Miss Griselda thought her position above that of a countess, and Miss Katharine supported her great honors with a meek little air of becoming pride. The old ladies' great object in life was to find the missing heir, and Miss Griselda had even once picked up sufficient courage to go to America, accompanied by the family lawyer and his wife, in search of him; but though many little boys came to Avonsyde and many fathers and mothers sent in all kinds of extraordinary claims, the heir who could claim direct descent from Rupert Lovel, the strong and sturdy boy who was to bring back a fresh epoch of health and life and vigor to the old family tree, and not yet arrived.

Now, however, shortly after Rachel's twelfth birthday and in the middle of a glorious summer, little Philip Lovel was expected. His mother was to bring him and he was to sleep in the tower room, which, as Kitty said, was most exciting. Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine too were excited; and Miss Griselda said with an unusual burst of confidence to her younger sister:

"If the boy turns out to be a true descendant of Rupert's, and if he is blessed with good physical health, I shall feel a great load off my mind."

Miss Katharine smiled in reply.

"God grant the little boy may be the heir," she said; "but, Griselda, I don't like the tone of the mother's letters."

#### **CHAPTER IV.—A SPARTAN BOY.**

"Philip?"

"Yes, mother."

"You quite understand that you have got to be a very good little boy?"

"Oh, yes, mother, I understand."

"It's a big, grand place—it's what is described as an ancient place, and dates back hundreds and hundreds of years, and you, you—why, what is the matter, Philip?"

"Is it antediluvian?" asked Philip, jumping up from his seat opposite his mother in the railway carriage. "Oh, I do hope and trust it's antediluvian!"

"How you do puzzle me with your queer words, Philip. Antediluvian!—that means before the Flood. Oh, no, Avonsyde wasn't in existence before the Flood; but still it is very old, and the ladies who live there are extremely grand people. You haven't been accustomed to living in a great ancient house, and you haven't been accustomed to the manner of such grand ancient ladies as the Misses Griselda and Katharine Lovel, and I do trust—I do hope you will behave properly."

"Hullo! There's a spider up in that window," interrupted the boy. "I must try to catch him. There! he has run into his hole. Oh, mother, mother, look! there's a windmill! See, it's going round so fast! And, I say, isn't that a jolly river? I want to fish and to shoot when I get to the grand place. I don't care what else I do if only I have plenty of fishing and shooting."

Philip Lovel's mother knit her brows. She was a tall, fashionably dressed woman, with a pale face, a somewhat peevish expression, and a habit of drawing her eyebrows together until they nearly met.

"Philip, you must attend to me," she said, drawing the little boy down to stand quietly by her side. "I have got you a whole trunkful of nice gentlemanly clothes, and I have spent a heap of money over you, and you must—yes, you must please the old ladies. Why, Phil, if this scheme fails we shall starve."

"Oh, don't, mother, don't!" said little Phil, looking full up into his mother's face, and revealing as he did so two sensitive and beautiful brown eyes, the only redeeming features in a very plain little countenance. "Don't cry, mother! I'll be a good boy, of course. Now, may I go back and see if that spider has come out of his hole?"

"No, Philip, never mind the spider. I have you all to myself, and we shall be at Avonsyde in less than an hour. I want to impress it upon you, so that you may keep it well in your memory what you are to do. Now, are you listening to me, Phil?"

"I am trying to," answered Philip. "I do hope, mother, you won't tell me too many things, for I never can remember anything for more than a minute at a time."

Philip smiled and looked up saucily, but Mrs. Lovel was far too much absorbed in what she was about to say to return his smiling glance.

"Philip, I trained you badly," she began. "You were let run wild; you were let do pretty much as you liked; you weren't at all particularly obedient. Now, I don't at all want the Miss Lovels to find that out. You are never to tell how you helped Betty with the cakes, and you are never to tell about polishing your own boots, and you are not to let out for a moment how you and I did our own gardening. If you speak of Betty you must call her your nurse; and if you speak of Jim, who was such a troublesome boy, you can mention him as the gardener, and not say that he was only twelve years old."

"What a lot of lies I'm to tell," said Philip, opening his eyes wider and wider. "Go on, mother—what else am I to do?"

Mrs. Lovel gave the little speaker a shake.

"Philip, what an exasperating child you are! Of course you are not to be so wicked as to attempt to tell lies. Oh, what a bad boy you are even to think of such a thing! I only want you to be a nice, gentlemanly little boy and not to speak of vulgar things, and of course it is very vulgar to allude to a maid-of-all-work like Betty and to cleaning one's own boots; but as to lies—what do you mean, sir? Oh, there, the train is slackening speed. We'll soon be at the station, and the carriage was to meet us. Remember, Philip, always be on your best behavior at Avonsyde! Don't speak unless you are spoken to, and always be on the lookout to please the old ladies. There are two little girls, I believe; but they are not of the slightest consequence. Dear, dear, I feel quite trembling! I hope—I trust all will go well! Philip, dear, you have not felt that pain in your side all day, have you?"

"No, mother; I have not felt it for days. I am much better really."

"I don't want you to speak of it, love. I am most anxious that the ladies should consider you a strong boy. The doctors say you are almost certain to get over the pain; and when the Miss Lovels appoint you their heir it will be time enough to mention it. If the pain comes on very badly you will keep it to yourself—won't you, Phil? You won't groan or scream or anything of that sort; and you can always run up to my room and I can give you the drops. Oh, Phil, Phil, if this scheme fails we shall simply starve!"

Philip, with his queer, old-fashioned face, looked full at his mother.

"I'll be a Spartan boy and bear the pain," he said. "I don't care a bit about being rich or having a big place; but I don't want you to starve, mother. Oh, I say, there's that jolly little spider again!"

When the London express halted at last at the small country station, Philip was gazing in ecstasy at a marvelous complication of web and dust, at one or two entrapped flies, and at a very malicious but clever spider. His mother was shaking out her draperies, composing her features, and wondering—wondering hard how a very bold scheme would prosper.

"Jump down, Phil. Here we are!" she called to her boy.

The child, an active, lithe little fellow, obeyed her. Not a trace of anxiety could be discerned on his small face. In truth, he had forgotten Avonsyde in the far more absorbing interest of the spider.

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"I am glad to welcome you, Mrs. Lovel!" said Miss Griselda as she came forward to greet the new-comers. She was standing in the old hall, and the light from a western window of rich old stained glass fell in slanting hues on a very eager and interested group. Behind Miss Griselda stood her shadow, Miss Katharine, and Rachel's bold dark face and Kitty's sunny one could be seen still further in the background. Rachel pretended not to be the least interested in the arrival of the strangers, nevertheless her bright eyes looked singularly alert. Kitty did not attempt to hide the very keen interest she took in the little boy who was so nearly her own age, and who was to be so greatly honored as to sleep in the tower room. Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine wore their richest black silks and some of their most valuable lace; for surely this was the real heir, and they intended to give him a befitting reception. The old housekeeper and one or two other servants might have been seen peeping in the distance; they were incredulous, but curious. Mrs. Lovel took in the whole scene at a glance; the aspect of affairs pleased her and her versatile spirits rose. She took Philip's little hand in hers and led him up to Miss Griselda.

"This," she said in a gentle and humble voice—"this is my little boy."

"Philip Lovel," responded Miss Griselda, "look up at me, child—full in the face. Ah! you have got the Lovel eyes. How do you do, my dear? Welcome to Avonsyde!"

"Welcome to Avonsyde!" repeated Miss Katharine, looking anxiously from the fashionably dressed mother to the precocious boy. "Are you very tired, my dear? You look so pale."

Phil glanced from one old lady's face to the other. His mother felt herself shaking. She saw at once that he had forgotten their conversation in the train, and wondered what very malapropos remark he would make. Phil had a habit of going off into little dreams and brown-studies. He looked inquiringly at Miss Katharine; then he gazed searchingly at Miss Griselda; then he shook himself and said abruptly:

"I beg your pardon—what did you ask me?"

"Oh, Phil, how rude!" interrupted Mrs. Lovel. "The ladies asked you if you were tired, love. Tell them at once that you are not in the least so. Pale children are so often considered delicate," continued Mrs. Lovel anxiously, "whereas they are quite acknowledged by many physicians to be stronger than the rosy ones. Say you are not tired, Phil, and thank Miss Katharine for taking an interest in your health."

Phil smiled.

"I'm not tired," he said. "I had a pleasant journey. There was a spider in the carriage, and I saw a windmill. And oh! please, am I to call you auntie, or what?"

"Aunt Katharine," interposed the lady.

"Aunt Katharine, do you fish? and may I fish?"

Here Kitty burst into a delighted chuckle of amusement, and going frankly up to Phil took his hand.

"I can fish," she said; "of course Aunt Katharine can't fish, but I can. I've got a rod, a nice little rod; and if you are not tired you may as well come and see it."

"Then I'm going out with my book," said Rachel. "I'm going into the forest. Perhaps I'll meet the lady there. Good-by, Kitty-cat; good-by, little boy."

Rachel disappeared through one door, Kitty and Phil through another, and Mrs. Lovel and the two old ladies of Avonsyde were left to make acquaintance with one another.

"Come into the drawing-room," said Miss Griselda; "your little boy and the children will get on best alone. He is a muscular-looking little fellow, although singularly pale. Where did you say he was born—in Mexico?"

"In Mexico," replied Mrs. Lovel, repressing a sigh. "The true Mexican lads are about the strongest in the world; but he of course is really of English parentage, although his father and his grandfather never saw England. Yes, Phil was born in Mexico, but shortly afterward we moved into the American States, and before my husband died we had emigrated to Australia. Phil is a strong boy and has had the advantage of travel and constant change—that is why he is so wiry. The hot country in which he was born accounts for his pallor, but he is remarkably strong."

Mrs. Lovel's words came out quickly and with the nervousness of one who was not very sure of a carefully prepared lesson. Suspicious people would have doubted this anxious-looking woman on the spot, but neither Miss Griselda nor Miss Katharine was at all of a suspicious turn of mind. Miss Griselda said:

"You have traveled over a great part of the habitable globe and we have remained—I and my sister and our immediate ancestors before us—in the privacy and shelter of Avonsyde. To come here will be a great change for you and your boy."

"A great rest—a great delight!" replied Mrs. Lovel, clasping her hands ecstatically. "Oh, dear Miss Lovel, you don't know what it is to weary for a home as I have wearied."

Her words were genuine and tears stood in her pale blue eyes.

Miss Griselda considered tears and raptures rather undignified; but Miss Katharine, who was very sympathetic, looked at the widow with new interest.

"It is wonderfully interesting to feel that your little boy belongs to us," she said. "He seems a nice little fellow, very naïve and fresh. Won't you sit in this comfortable chair? You can get such a nice view of the forest from here. And do you take cream and sugar in your tea?"

"A very little cream and no sugar," replied Mrs. Lovel as she leaned back luxuriously in the proffered chair. "What a lovely view! And what a quaint, beautiful room. I remember my husband telling me that Avonsyde belonged to his family for nearly eight hundred years, and that the house was almost as old as the property. Is this room really eight hundred years old? It looks wonderfully quaint."

"You happen to be in the most modern part of the house, Mrs. Lovel," replied Miss Griselda icily. "This drawing-room and all this wing were added by my grandfather, and this special room was first opened for the reception of company when my mother came here as a bride. The exact date of this room is a little over half a century. You shall see the older part of the house presently; this part is very painfully modern."

Mrs. Lovel bowed and sipped her tea as comfortably as she could under the impression of being snubbed.

"I have never been in a very old house before," she said. "You know in Mexico, in the States, in Australia, the houses must be modern."

"May I ask if you have brought your pedigree?" inquired Miss Griselda. "Yes, Katharine, you need not look at me in such a surprised manner. We neither of us have an idea of troubling Mrs. Lovel to show it to us now—not indeed until she has rested; but it is absolutely necessary to trace Philip's descent from Rupert Lovel at as early a date as possible. That being correctly ascertained and found to be indisputable, we must have him examined by some eminent physician; and if the medical man pronounces him to be an extremely strong boy our quest is ended, and you and I, Katharine, can rest in peace. Mrs. Lovel, you look very tired. Would you like to retire to your room? Katharine, will you ring the bell, dear? We will ask Newbolt to accompany Mrs. Lovel to her room and to attend on her. Newbolt is our maid, Mrs. Lovel, and quite a denizen of the forest; she can tell you all the local traditions."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Lovel. "Yes, I shall be glad to lie down for a little. I do hope Philip is not

tiring himself—not that he is likely to; he is so strong. Thank you, Miss Lovel, I will lie down for a little. Yes, of course I brought the pedigree—and—and—a very quaint house; even the new part looks old to me!”

Mrs. Lovel tripped out of the room, and the two old ladies looked at one another.

“What do you think of her, Katharine?” inquired Miss Griselda. “You are dying to speak, so let me hear your sentiments at once!”

“I don’t quite like her,” said Miss Katharine. “She seems very tired and very nervous, and perhaps it is unfair and unkind to say anything about her until she is rested. I can’t honestly say, however, that my first impression is favorable, and she may be much nicer when she is not so tired and not so nervous. I don’t like her much at present, but I may afterward. What are your opinions, Griselda?”

“Katharine,” said Miss Griselda, “you are the most prosaic and long-winded person I know. You don’t suppose for an instant that I am going to say what I think of Mrs. Lovel to-day. After all, it is the boy in whom we are interested. Time alone can show whether these two are not another couple of impostors. Now, I wonder where that child Rachel has taken herself!”

## CHAPTER V.—IN THE FOREST.

Kitty and Philip ran off together hand in hand. They were about the same height, but Kitty’s fair, healthy, flushed face showed in strong contrast to Phil’s pallor, and her round and sturdy limbs gave promise of coming health and beauty; whereas Phil’s slight form only suggested possible illness, and to a watchful eye would have betokened a short life. But the boy was wiry and just now he was strongly excited. It was delightful to be in the real country and more than delightful to go out with Kitty.

“You are my cousin, aren’t you?” said the little maid, favoring him with a full, direct glance.

“I suppose so,” he answered. “Yes, I suppose so. I don’t quite know.”

Kitty stamped her foot.

“Don’t say that!” she replied. “I hate people who are not quite sure about things. I want to have a real boy cousin to play with. Two or three make-believes came here, but they went away again. Of course we all found them out at once, and they went away. I do trust you are not another make-believe, Philip. You’re very pale and very thin, but I do hope what’s of you is real.”

“Oh, yes; what’s of me is real enough,” said Phil, with a little sigh. “Where are you going to take me, Kitty? Into the forest? I want to see the forest. I wonder will it be as fine as the forest where Ru—I mean where a cousin of mine and I used to play?”

“Oh, have you another cousin besides me? How exciting!”

“Yes; but I don’t want to talk about him. Are we going into the forest?”

“If you like. You see those trees over there? All that is forest; and then there is a bit of wild moorland, and then more trees; and there is a pine wood, with such a sweet smell. It’s all quite close, and I see it every day. It isn’t very exciting when you see it every day. Your eyes need not shine like that. You had much better take things quietly, especially as you are such a very thin boy. Aunt Katharine says thin people should never get excited. She says it wears them out. Well, if you must come into the forest I suppose you must; but would you not like something to eat first? I know what we are to have for tea. Shall I tell you?”

“Yes,” said Phil; “tell me when we have got under the trees; tell me when I am looking up through the branches for the birds and the squirrels. You have not such gay birds as ours, for I watched yours when I was coming in the train from Southampton; but oh! don’t they sing!”

“You are a very queer boy,” said Kitty. “Birds and squirrels and forest trees, when you might be hearing about delicious frosted cake and jam roly-polies. Well, take my hand and let’s run into the forest; let’s get it over, if we must get it over. I’ll take you down to the Avon to fish to-morrow. I like fishing—don’t you?”

“Yes,” said Phil. “I like nearly everything. Do you fish with flies or bait?”

“Oh, with horrid bait! that is the worst of it; but I generally get Robert—one of our grooms—to bait my lines.”

The children were now under the shade of the trees, and Kitty, after running about until she was tired, climbed into one of the branches of a wide-spreading beech tree and rocked herself in a very contented manner backward and forward. Phil was certainly a very queer little boy, but she was quite convinced he must be her real true cousin, that he was not a make-believe, that he would stay on at Avonsyde as the heir, and that she would always have a companion of her own age to play with.

"He will get tired of the forest by and by," she said to herself, "and then he will like best to play with me, and we can fish all day together. How jolly that will be! What a good thing it is that he is so nearly my own age, and that he is not older; for if he were he would go every where with Rachel and be her friend. I should not like that at all," concluded the little girl, with a very selfish though natural sigh of satisfaction.

Presently Phil—having wandered about to his heart's content, having ascertained the color of several birds which sang over his head, having treasured up the peculiar quality of their different notes, and having ascertained beyond all doubt that the English forest was quite the quaintest and most lovely place in the world—came back and climbed into the tree by Kitty's side.

"I'd like him to see it awfully," he said.

"Who, Phil?"

"I can't tell you—that's my secret. Kitty, you'll never find that I shall get accustomed to the forest—I mean so accustomed that I shan't want to come here. Oh, never, never! A place like this must always have something new to show you. Kitty, can you imitate all the birds' notes yet?"

"I can't imitate one of them," said Kitty, with an impatient frown coming between her eyebrows.

"But I know what I want to be doing, and I only wish you had the same want."

"Perhaps I have. What is it?"

"Oh, no, you haven't. You're just like the goody-goody, awfully learned boys of the story-book. I do wish you wouldn't go into raptures about stupid trees and birds and things!"

Phil's little pale face flushed.

"Rupert—I mean—I mean my dearest friend—a boy you know nothing about, Kitty—never spoke about its being goody-goody to love things of this sort, and he is manly if you like. I can't help loving them. But what is your want, Kitty?"

"Oh, to have my mouth crammed full of jam roolly-polly! I am so hungry!"

"So am I too. Let's run back to the house."

When Philip and Kitty had gone off together for their first exploring expedition, when the two little strangers to one another had clasped hands and gone out through the open hall-door and down the shady lawns together, Rachel had followed them for a few paces.

She stood still shading her eyes with one hand as she gazed after their retreating figures; then whistling to an English terrier of the name of Jupiter, she ran round to the stables and encountered one of the grooms.

"Robert, put the side-saddle on Surefoot and come with me into the forest. It is a lovely evening, and I am going for a long ride."

Robert, a very young and rather sheepish groom, looked appealingly at the bright and pretty speaker.

"My mother is ill, Miss Rachel, and Peter do say as I may go home and see her. Couldn't you ride another evening, missy?"

"No, I'm going to ride to-night. I wish to and I'm going; but you need not come with me; it is quite unnecessary. I should like nothing so well as having a long ride on Surefoot all alone."

"But the ladies do say, Miss Rachel, as you are not to ride in the forest by yourself. Oh, if you will go, missy, why, I must just put off seeing my poor mother until to-morrow."

Rachel stamped her foot impatiently.

"Nonsense, Robert!" she said. "I am going to ride alone. I will explain matters to my aunts, so you need not be at all afraid. Put the side-saddle on Surefoot at once!"

Robert's conscience was easily appeased. He ran off and quickly returned with the rough little forest pony, and Rachel, mounting, cantered off.

She was an excellent rider and had not a scrap of fear in her nature. She entered the forest by the long straight avenue; and Surefoot, delighted to feel his feet on the smooth, velvety sward, trotted along gayly.

"Now I am free!" said the girl. "How delightful it is to ride all by myself. I will go a long, long way this beautiful evening."

It was a perfect summer's evening, and Rachel was riding through scenery of exquisite beauty. Birds sang blithely to her as she flew lightly over the ground; squirrels looked down at her from among the branches of the forest oaks; many wild flowers smiled up at her, and all nature

seemed to sympathize with her gay youth and beauty.

She was a romantic, impulsive child, and lived more or less in a world of her own imaginings.

The forest was the happiest home in the world to Rachel; Avonsyde was well enough, but no place was like the forest itself. She had a strong impression that it was still peopled by fairies. She devoured all the legends that Mrs. Newbolt, her aunt's maid, and John Eyre, one of the agisters of the forest, could impart to her. Both these good people had a lurking belief in ghosts and fairies. Eyre swore that he had many and many a time seen the treacherous little Jack-o'-lanterns. He told horrible stories of strangers who were lured into bogs by these deceitful little sprites. But Mrs. Newbolt had a far more wonderful and exciting tale to tell than this; for she spoke of a lady who, all in green, flitted through the forest—a lady with a form of almost spiritual etherealness, and with such a lovely face that those who were fortunate enough to see her ever after retained on their own countenances a faint reflection of her rare beauty. Rachel had heard of this forest lady almost from the first moment of her residence at Avonsyde. She built many brilliant castles in the air about her, and she and Kitty most earnestly desired to see her. Of course they had never yet done so, but their belief in her was not a whit diminished, and they never went into the forest without having a dim kind of hope that they might behold the lady.

Newbolt said that she appeared to very few, but she admitted that on one or two occasions of great and special moment she had revealed herself to some fair dames of the house of Lovel. She never appeared to two people together, and in consequence Rachel always longed to go into the forest alone. She felt excited to-night, and she said to herself more than once, "I wonder if I shall see her. She comes on great occasions; surely this must be a great occasion if the long-looked-for heir has come to Avonsyde. I do wonder if that little boy is the heir!"

Rachel rode on, quite forgetful of time; the rapid motion and the lovely evening raised her always versatile spirits. Her cheeks glowed; her dark eyes shone; she tossed back her rebellious curly locks and laughed aloud once or twice out of pure happiness.

She intended to go a long way, to penetrate further into the shades of the wonderful forest than she had ever done yet; but even she was unconscious how very far she was riding.

It is easy to lose one's way in the New Forest, and Rachel, accustomed as she was to all that part which immediately surrounded Avonsyde, presently found herself in a new country. She had left Rufus' Stone far behind and was now riding down a gentle descent, when something induced the adventurous little lady to consult her watch. The hour pointed to six o'clock. It would be light for a long time yet, for it was quite the middle of summer, and Rachel reflected that as tea-time was past, and as she would certainly be well scolded when she returned, she might as well stay out a little longer.

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" she said. "The aunties will be so angry with me, but I don't care; I mean to enjoy myself to-night. Oh, what a tempting green bank, and what a carpet of bluebells just there to the right! I must get some. Surefoot shall have a rest and a nibble at some of the grass, and I'll pick the flowers and sit on the bank for a little time."

Surefoot was very well pleased with this arrangement. He instantly, with unerring instinct, selected the juiciest and most succulent herbage which the place afforded, and was happy after his fashion. Rachel picked bluebells until she had her hands full; then seating herself, she began to arrange them. She had found a small clearing in the forest, and her seat was on the twisted and gnarled roots of a giant oak tree. Her feet were resting on a thick carpet of moss; immediately before her lay broken and undulating ground, clothed with the greenest grass, with the most perfect fronds of moss, and bestrewn with tiny silvery stems and bits of branches from the neighboring trees. A little further off was a great foreground of bracken, which completely clothed a very gentle ascent, and then the whole horizon was bounded by a semicircle of magnificent birch, oak, and beech. Some cows were feeding in the distance—they wore bells, which tinkled merrily; the doves cooed and the birds sang; the softest of zephyrs played among the trees; the evening sun flickered slant-wise through the branches and lay in brightness on the greensward; and Rachel, who was intensely sensitive to nature, clasped her hands in ecstasy.

"Oh, it is good of God to make such a beautiful world!" she said, speaking aloud in her enthusiasm; but just then something riveted Rachel's attention. She sprang to her feet, forgot her bluebells, which fell in a shower around her, and in this fresh interest became utterly oblivious to the loveliness of the scene. A lady in a plain dark dress was walking slowly, very slowly, between the trees. She was coming toward Rachel, but evidently had not seen her, for her eyes were fixed on the pages of an open book, and as she read her lips moved, as though she were learning something to repeat aloud. This part of the forest was so remote and solitary for it was miles away from any gentleman's seat, that Rachel for a moment was startled.

"Who can she be?" was her first exclamation; her second was a delighted—

"Oh, perhaps she is the lady of the forest!"

Then she exclaimed with vexation:

"No, no, she cannot be. The lady always wears green and is almost transparent, and her face is so lovely. This lady is in dark clothes and she is reading and murmuring words to herself. She looks



exactly as if she were learning a stupid lesson to say aloud. Oh, I am disappointed! I had such a hope she might be the lady of the forest. I wonder where she can live; there's no house near this. Oh, dear! oh, dear! she is coming this way; she will pass me. Shall I speak to her? I almost think I will. She seems to have a nice face, although she is not very young and she is not very beautiful."

The lady walked slowly on, her eyes still bent on her book, and so it happened that she never saw the radiant figure of pretty little Rachel until she was opposite to her. Her quiet, darkly fringed gray eyes were lifted then and surveyed the child first with astonishment; then with curiosity; then with very palpable agitation, wonder, and distress.

Rachel came a step nearer and was about to open her lips, when the lady abruptly closed her book, as abruptly turned on her heel, and walked rapidly, very rapidly, in the opposite direction away from the child.

"Oh, stop!" cried Rachel. "I want to speak to you. Who are you? It's very interesting meeting you here in the very midst of the forest! Please don't walk away so fast! Do tell me who you are! There, you are almost running, and I can't keep up with you! What a rude forest lady you are! Well, I never knew any one so rude before!"

The lady had indeed quickened her steps, and before Rachel could reach her she had disappeared through a small green-covered porch into a tiny house, so clothed with innumerable creepers that at a distance it could scarcely be distinguished from the forest itself. Rachel stood panting and indignant outside the door. She had forgotten Surefoot; she had forgotten everything in the world but this rude lady who would not speak to her.

Rachel was a very passionate child, and in her first indignation she felt inclined to pull the bell and insist upon seeing and conversing with the strange, silent lady. Before she could carry this idea into execution the door was opened and a neatly dressed elderly servant came out.

"Well, little miss, and what is your pleasure?" she said.

"I want to see the lady," said Rachel; "she is a very rude lady. I asked her some civil questions and she would not answer."

The old servant laid her hand on Rachel's arm and drew her a few steps away from the bowerlike house.

"What is your name, little miss?" she said.

"My name? Rachel Lovel, of course. Don't you know? Everybody knows me in the forest. I'm Rachel Lovel of Avonsyde, and my pony's name is Surefoot, and I have a sister called Kitty."

"Well, missy," continued the old woman, "I have no reason at all to misdoubt your tale, but the forest is a big place, and even the grandest little ladies are not known when they stray too far from home. I have no doubt, missy, that you are Miss Lovel, and I have no doubt also that you have a kind heart, although you have a hasty tongue. Now, you know, it was very rude of you to run after my lady when she didn't want to speak to you. My lady was much upset by your following her, and you have done great mischief by just being such a curious little body."

"Mischief, have I?" said Rachel; then she laughed. "But that is quite impossible," she added, "for I never even touched the rude lady."

"You may do mischief, Miss Lovel, by many means, and curiosity is one of the most spiteful of the vices. It's my opinion that more mischief can be laid to curiosity's door than to any other door. From Eve down it was curiosity did the sin. Now, missy, my lady is lonely and unhappy, and she don't want no one to know—no one in all the wide world—that she lives in this little wild forest house; and if you tell, if you ever tell that you have seen her, or that you know where she lives, why, you will break the heart of the sweetest and gentlest lady that ever lived."

"I don't want to break any one's heart," said Rachel, turning pale. "What very queer things you say. I don't want to break any one's heart. I think I'll go home now."

"Not until you have promised me first, Miss Lovel—not until you have promised me true and faithful."

"Oh, I'll only tell Kitty and my aunties. I never care to talk to strangers about things. There's a new little boy come to Avonsyde—a new little boy and his mother. Of course I won't say anything to either of them, but I never keep secrets from Kitty—never!"

"Very well, miss; then my lady will have to go away. She is very tired and not strong, and she has just settled down in this little house, where she wants to rest and to be near—to be in the forest; and if you tell those aunts of yours and your little sister—if you tell anybody in all the wide world—she will have to go away again. We must pack up to night and we will be off in the morning. We'll have to wander once more, and she'll be sad and ill and lonely; but of course you won't care."

"What a cruel old woman you are!" said Rachel. "Of course I don't want anybody to be sad and

lonely. I don't want to injure the forest lady, although I cannot make out why she should have to live so secret here. Is she a wicked lady and has she committed a crime?"

"Wicked?" said the old woman, her eyes flashing. "Ah, missy, that such words should drop from your lips, and about her! Are the angels in heaven wicked? Oh, my dear, good, brave lady! No, missy. She has to keep her secret, but it is because of a cruel sin and injustice done to her, not because of any wrong done by her. Well, good-night, miss. I'll say no more. We must be off, we two, in the morning."

"No, don't go!" called out Rachel. "Of course I won't tell. If she's such a dear, good lady, I'll respect her and love her and keep her secret; only I should like to see her and to know her name."

"All in good time, my dear little missy. Thank God, you will be faithful to this good and wronged lady."

"Yes, I'll be very faithful," said Rachel. "Not even to Kitty will I breathe one word. And now I must really go home."

"God bless you, dear little miss—eh, but you're a bonny child. And is the one you call Kitty as fair to look at?"

"As fair to look at?" laughed Rachel. "Why, I'm as brown as a nut and Kitty is dazzling. Kitty is pink and white, and if you only saw her hair! It's like threads of gold."

"And the little gentleman, dear?—you spoke of a little gentleman as well. Is he your brother, love?"

"My brother?" laughed Rachel. "I have no one but Kitty. I have a mother living somewhere—she's lost, my mother is, and I'm going all round the world to look for her when I'm old enough; but I have no brother—I wish I had. Philip Lovel is a little new, strange boy who is going to be heir of Avonsyde. He came to-day with his mother. I don't much like his mother. Now good-night, old woman. I'll keep the good lady's secret most faithfully."

Rachel blew a kiss to the anxious-looking old servant, then ran gayly back to where she had left Surefoot. In the excitement of the last half-hour she had quite forgotten her withered bluebells. Mounting her pony, she galloped as fast as she could in the direction of Avonsyde. It was very late when she got back, but, strange to say, the old aunts were so much interested in Mrs. Lovel and in Mrs. Lovel's boy that they forgot to scold her or to remark her absence. She longed intensely to tell Kitty all about the thrilling and romantic adventure she had just gone through, but she was a loyal child, and having once passed her word, nothing would induce her to break it. Kitty, too, was taken up with Philip Lovel, and Rachel, finding she was not wanted, ran up to her bedroom and lost herself in the charms of a fairy tale.

## **CHAPTER VI.—THE TOWER BEDROOM.**

Avonsyde was a very old property. The fair lands had been bestowed by William Rufus on a certain Rupert Lovel who was fortunate enough to earn the gratitude of this most tyrannical and capricious of monarchs. Rupert Lovel had laid the first stone of the present house and had lived there until his death. He was succeeded by many wild and lawless descendants. As time went on they added to the old house, and gained, whether wrongly or rightly no one could say, more of the forest lands as their own. Avonsyde was a large property in the olden days, and the old squires ruled those under them by what was considered at that period the only safe and wholesome rule—that of terror. They were a proud, self-confident, headstrong race, very sure of one thing—that whatever happened Avonsyde would never cease to be theirs. An old prophecy was handed down from father to son to this effect. It had been put into a couplet by a rhymist as great in his way as Thomas of border celebrity:

"Tyde what may betyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde."

These words were taken as the motto of the house, and could be deciphered in very quaint lettering just over the arch which supported a certain portion of the tower. The tower was almost if not quite seven hundred years old, and was another source of great pride and interest to the family.

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine could not have done little Philip Lovel a greater honor than when they arranged the tower bedroom for his reception. In their opinion, and in the opinion of every retainer of the family, they indeed showed respect to the child and the child's claim when they got this gloomy apartment into order for him and his mother; but when Mrs. Lovel, a timid and nervous woman, saw the room, she scarcely appreciated the honor conferred upon her and hers.

Avonsyde was a house which represented many periods; each addition was a little more comfortable than its predecessor. For instance, the new wing, with the beautiful drawing-rooms and spacious library, was all that was luxurious; the cozy bedrooms where Rachel and Kitty slept,

with their thick walls and mullioned windows and deep old-fashioned cupboards, were both cheerful and convenient; but in the days when the tower was built ladies did without many things which are now considered essential, and Mrs. Lovel had to confess to herself that she did not like her room. In the first place, the tower rooms were completely isolated from the rest of the house; they were entered by a door at one side of the broad hall; this door was of oak of immense thickness, and when it was shut no sound from the tower could possibly penetrate to the rest of the house. At the other side of the oak door was a winding stone staircase, very much worn and hollowed out by the steps of many generations. The stairs wound up and up in the fashion of a corkscrew; they had no rail and were very steep, and the person who ascended, if at all timid, was very glad to lay hold of a slack rope which was loosely run through iron rings at intervals in the wall.

After a great many of these steps had been climbed a very narrow stone landing was discovered; three or four steps had then to be gone down, and Mrs. Lovel found herself in an octagon-shaped room with a very low ceiling and very narrow windows. The furniture was not only old-fashioned, but shabby; the room was small; the bed was that monstrosity, a four-poster; the curtains of velvet were black and rusty with age and wear. In short, the one and only cheerful object which poor Mrs. Lovel found in the apartment was the little white bed in one corner which had been prepared for Philip's reception.

"Dear, dear, what remarkably steep stairs; and what a small—I mean not a very large room! Are all the bedrooms of Avonsyde as small as this?" she continued, interrogating Newbolt, who, starched and prim, but with a comely fresh face, stood beside her.

"This is the tower bedroom, mem," answered the servant in a thin voice. "The heir has always slept in this room, and the ladies has the two over. That has always been the fashion at Avonsyde—the heir has this room and the reigning ladies sleep overhead. This room is seven hundred years old, mem."

Mrs. Lovel shivered.

"Very antiquated and interesting," she began, "but isn't it just a little cold and just a little gloomy? I thought the other part of the house so much more cheerful."

Newbolt raised her eyebrows and gazed at Mrs. Lovel as if she were talking the rankest heresy.

"For them as don't value the antique there's rooms spacious and cheerful and abundantly furnished with modern vanities in the new part of the house," she replied. "Miss Rachel and Miss Kitty, for instance; their bedroom isn't built more than three hundred years—a big room enough and with a lot of sunlight, but terrible modern, and not to be made no 'count of at Avonsyde; and then there are two new bedrooms over the drawing-rooms, where we put strangers. Very large they are and quite flooded with sunlight; but of course for antiquity there are no rooms to be compared with this one and the two where the ladies sleep. I am sorry the room don't take your fancy, mem. I suppose, not being of the blood of the family, you can't appreciate it. Shall I speak to the ladies on the subject?"

"Oh! by no means, my good creature," replied poor Mrs. Lovel in alarm. "The room of course is most interesting and wonderfully antiquated. I've never seen such a room. And do your ladies really sleep higher up than this? They must have wonderfully strong hearts to be able to mount any more of those steep—I mean curious stairs."

Newbolt did not deign to make any comment with regard to the sound condition of Miss Griselda's and Miss Katharine's physical hearts. She favored the new-comer with a not-too-appreciative glance, and having arranged matters as comfortably as she could for her in the dismal chamber, left her to the peace and the solitude of a most solitary room.

The poor lady quite trembled when she found herself alone; the knowledge that the room was so old filled her with a kind of mysterious awe. After her experiences in the New World, she even considered the drawing-rooms at Avonsyde by no means to be despised on the score of youth. Those juvenile bedrooms of two hundred or three hundred years' standing where Rachel and Kitty reposed were, in Mrs. Lovel's opinion, hoary and weighted with age; but as to this tower-room, surely such an apartment should only be visited at noon on a sunny day and in the company of a large party!

"I'm glad the old ladies do sleep overhead," she said to herself. "What truly awful attics theirs must be! I never saw such a terribly depressing room as this. I'm certain it is haunted; I'm convinced there must be a ghost here. If Philip were not sleeping here I should certainly die. Oh, dear! what a risk I am running for the sake of Philip. Much of this life would kill me! I find, too, that I am not very good at keeping in my feelings, and I'll have to act—act all the time I am here, and pretend I'm just in raptures with everything, when I am not. That dreadful Newbolt saw through me about this room. Oh, dear! I am a bad actor. Well, at any rate I am a good mother to Philip; it's a splendid chance for Philip. But if he speaks about that pain in his side we are lost! Poor Phil! these steep stairs are extremely bad for him."

There was plenty of daylight at present, and Mrs. Lovel could move about her ancient chamber without any undue fear of being overtaken by the terrors of the night. She took off her traveling

bonnet and mantle, arranged her hair afresh before a mirror which caused her to squint and distorted every feature, and finally, being quite certain that she could never lie down and rest alone on that bed, was about to descend the stone stairs and to return to the more cheerful part of the house, when gay, quick footsteps, accompanied by childish laughter, were heard ascending, and Philip, accompanied by Kitty, bounded without any ceremony into the apartment.

"Oh, mother, things are so delightful here," began the little boy, "and Kitty fishes nearly as well as Rupert. And Kitty has got a pony and I'm to have one; Aunt Grizel says so—one of the forest ponies, mother. Do you know that the forest is full of ponies? and they are so rough and jolly. And there are squirrels in the forest—hundreds of squirrels—and all kinds of birds, and beetles and spiders, and ants and lizards! Mother, the forest is such a lovely place! Is this our bedroom, mother? What a jolly room! I say, wouldn't Rupert like it just?"

"If you're quick, Phil," began Kitty—"if you're very quick washing your hands and brushing your hair, we can go back through the armory—that's the next oldest part to the tower. I steal into the armory sometimes in the dusk, for I do so hope some of the chain-armor will rattle. Do you believe in ghosts, Phil? I do and so does Rachel."

"No, I'm not such a silly," replied Phil. "Mother, dear, how white you are! Don't you like our jolly, jolly bedroom? Oh! I do, and wouldn't Rupert love to be here?"

Mrs. Lovel's face had grown whiter and whiter.

"Phil," she said, "I must speak to you alone. Kitty, your little cousin will meet you downstairs presently. Oh, Phil, my dear," continued the poor lady when Kitty had succeeded in banging herself noisily and unwillingly out of the room—"Phil, why, why will you spoil everything?"

"Spoil everything, mother?"

"Yes; you have spoken of Rupert—you have spoken twice of Rupert. Oh, we had better go away again at once!"

"Dear Rupert!" said little Phil, with a sigh; "darling, brave Rupert! Mother, how I wish he was here!"

"You will spoil everything," repeated the poor lady, wringing her hands in despair. "You know what Rupert is—so strong and manly and beautiful as a picture; and you know what the will says—that the strong one, whether he be eldest or youngest, shall be heir. Oh, Phil, if those old ladies know about Rupert we are lost!"

Phil had a most comical little face; a plain face decidedly—pale, with freckles, and a slightly upturned nose. To those who knew it well it had many charms. It was without doubt an expressive and speaking face; in the course of a few minutes it could look sad to pathos, or so brimful of mirth that to glance at it was to feel gay. The sad look now filled the beautiful brown eyes; the little mouth drooped; the boy went up and laid his head on his mother's shoulder.

"Do you know," he said, "I must say it, even though it hurts you. I want Rupert to have everything. I love Rupert very dearly, and I think it would be splendid for him to come here, and to own a lot of the wild ponies, and to fish in that funny little river which Kitty calls the Avon. Rupert would let me live with him perhaps, and maybe he'd give me a pony, and I could find squirrels and spiders and ants in the forest—oh! and caterpillars; I expect there are splendid specimens of caterpillars here. Mother, when my heart is full of Rupert how can I help speaking about him?"

Mrs. Lovel pressed her hand to her brow in a bewildered manner.

"We must go away then, Philip," she said. "As you love Rupert so well, better even than your mother, we must go away. It was a pity you did not tell me something of this before now, for I have broken into my last—yes, my very last £20 to come here. We have not enough money to take us back to Australia and to Rupert; still, we must go away, for the old ladies will look upon us as impostors, and I could not bear that for anything in the world."

"It is not only Rupert," continued Phil; "it's Gabrielle and Peggy; and—and—mother, I can't help being fond of them; but, mother, I love you best!"

"Do you really, Phil? Better than that boy? I never could see anything in him. Do you love me better than Rupert, Phil?"

"Yes, of course; you are my mother, and when father died he said I was always to love you and to do what you wanted. If you want Avonsyde, I suppose you must have it some day when the old ladies die. I'll do my best not to talk about Rupert, and I'll try to seem very strong, and I'll never, never tell about the pain in my side. Give me a kiss, mother. You shan't starve nor be unhappy. Oh! what an age we have been chattering here, and Kitty is waiting for me, and I do so want to see the armory! I wonder if there are ghosts there? It sounds silly to believe in them; but Kitty does, and she's a dear little girl, nearly as nice as Gabrielle. Good-by, mother; I'm off. I'll try to remember."

## CHAPTER VII.—“BETYDE WHAT MAY.”

In a handsomely furnished dining-room in a spacious and modern-looking house about three miles outside the city of Melbourne, three children—two girls and a boy—were standing impatiently by a wide-open window.

“Gabrielle,” said the boy, “have you any idea when the mails from England are due?”

The boy was the taller of the three, splendidly made, with square shoulders, great breadth of chest, and head so set on the same shoulders that it gave to its young owner an almost regal appearance. The bright and bold dark eyes were full of fire; the expressive lines round the finely cut lips were both kindly and noble.

“Gabrielle, is that Carlo riding past on Jo-jo? If it is, perhaps he is bringing our letter-bag. Father has gone to Melbourne to-day; but he said if there were English letters he would send them out by Carlo.”

“You are so impatient about England and English things, Rupert,” said little Peggy, raising a face framed in by soft flaxen hair to her big brother. “Oh, yes, I’ll run to meet Carlo, for of course you want me to, and I’ll come back again if there’s any news; and if there is not, why, I’ll stay and play with my ravens, Elijah and James Grasper. Elijah is beginning to speak so well and James Grasper is improving. If Carlo has no letters you need not expect me back, either of you.”

The little maid stepped quickly out of the open window, and ran fleet as the wind across a beautifully kept lawn and in the direction where a horse’s quick steps were heard approaching.

Gabrielle was nearly as tall as her brother, with a stately bearing and a grave face.

“If father does decide on taking you to Europe, Rupert, I wish to say now that I am quite willing to stay here with Peggy. I don’t want to go to school at Melbourne. I would rather stay on here and housekeep, and keep things nice the way our mother would have liked. If Peggy and I go away, Belmont will have to be shut up and a great many of the servants dismissed, and that would be silly. I am thirteen now, and I think I am wise for my age. You will speak to father, won’t you, Rupert, and ask him to allow me to be mistress here while you are away.”

“If we are away,” corrected Rupert. “Ah! here comes Peggy, and the letter-bag, and doubtless a letter. What a good child you are, Peggy White!”

Peggy dashed the letter-bag with some force through the open window. Rupert caught it lightly in one hand, and detaching a small key from his watch-chain opened it. It only contained one letter, and this was directed to himself:

“MR. RUPERT LOVEL,  
“Belmont,  
“Near Melbourne,  
“Victoria,  
“Australia.”

“A letter from England!” said Rupert. “And oh! Gabrielle, what do you think? It is—yes, it is from our little Cousin Philip!”

“Let me see,” said Gabrielle, peeping over her brother’s shoulder. “Poor, dear little Phil! Read aloud what he says, Rupert. I have often thought of him lately.”

Rupert smiled, sat down on the broad window-ledge, and his sister, kneeling behind him, laid her hand affectionately on his shoulder. A little letter, written with considerable pains and difficulty, with rather shaky and blotted little fingers, and quite uncorrected, just, in short, as nature had prompted it to a small, eager, and affectionate mind, was then read aloud:

“DEAR COUSIN RUPERT: You must please forgive the spelling and the bad writing, and the blots (oh! I made a big one now, but I have sopped it up). This letter is quite secret, so it won’t be corrected, for mother doesn’t know that I am writing. Mother and I are in England, but she says I am not to tell you where we are. It isn’t that mother isn’t fond of you, but she has a reason, which is a great secret, for your not knowing where we are. The reason has something to do with me. It’s something that I’m to have that I don’t want and that I’d much rather you had. It’s a beautiful thing, with spiders, and rivers, and caterpillars, and wild ponies, and ghosts, and rattling armor, and a tower of winding stairs. Oh! I mustn’t tell you any more, for perhaps you’d guess. You are never to have it, although I’d like you to. We are not very far from the sea, and we’re going there to-morrow, and it is there I’ll post this letter. Now, I am quite determined that you and Gabrielle and Peggy shall know that I think of you always. Mother and me, we are in a beautiful, grand place now—very grand—and most enormous old; and I have two little girls to play with, and I have got a pony, and a white pup, and I am taught by a tutor, and drilled by a drill-sergeant, and I fish and play cricket with Kitty, only I can’t play cricket much, because of my side; but, Rupert, I want to say here, and I want you and Peggy and Gabrielle always and always to remember, that I’d rather be living with mother in our little cottage near Belmont, with only Betty as servant and with only Jim to clean the boots and do the garden, for then I should be near you; and I love you,

Rupert, and Gabrielle, and Peggy, better than any one in the world except my mother. Please tell Peggy that I don't think much of the English spiders, but some of the caterpillars are nice; and please tell Gabrielle that the English flowers smell very sweet, but they are not so bright or so big as ours, and the birds sing, oh! so beautiful, but they haven't got such gay dresses. Good-by, Rupert. Do you shoot much? And do you ever think of me? And are you good to my little dog Cato?

“PHIL LOVEL.

“P. S.—Please, I'd like to hear from you, and as mother says you are not on no account to know where we are, will you write me a letter to the post-office at the town where this is posted? You will see the name of the town on the envelope, and please direct your letter:

‘MASTER PHIL LOVEL, ‘Post-office. ‘To be called for.’

“Be sure you put ‘to be called for’ in big letters.

“Good-by again. Love to everybody. PHIL.”

Gabrielle and Rupert read this very characteristic little epistle without comment. When they had finished it, Rupert slipped it back into its envelope and gave it to his sister.

“We must both write to the poor little chap,” he said. “The postmark on the envelope is Southampton. I suppose Southampton, England, will find him.” Then he added after a pause: “I wonder what queer thing Aunt Bella is thinking about now?”

“She always was the silliest person in the world,” said Gabrielle in a tone of strong contempt. “If she were my mother I shouldn't love her. I wonder how Phil loves her. Poor little Phil! He always was a dear little fellow—not a bit like Aunt Bella, thank goodness!”

Rupert laughed.

“Why, Gabrielle,” he said, “you can have no observation; Phil is the image of his mother. There is nothing at all belonging to his father about Phil except his eyes.”

“And his nature,” proceeded Gabrielle, “and his dear, brave little soul. I am sure if trial came to him Phil could be a hero. What matter that he has got Aunt Bella's uninteresting features? He has nothing more of her in him. Oh, she always was a silly, mysterious person! Just think of her not allowing Phil to tell us where he is!”

“My father says that there is method in Aunt Bella's silliness,” continued Rupert. “Don't you remember how suddenly she sold her little house at the back of our garden, Gabrielle, and how Betty found her burning an English newspaper; and how queer and nervous and flurried she became all of a sudden; and then how she asked father to give her that £200 he had of hers in the bank; and how she hurried off without saying good-by to one of us? We have not heard a word about her from that day until now, when Phil's little letter has come.”

“She never even bid mother good-by,” continued Gabrielle in a pained voice. “Mother always stood up for Aunt Bella. She never allowed us to laugh at her or to grumble at her funny, tiresome ways.”

“Did mother allow us to laugh at any one?” continued Rupert. “There was nothing at all remarkable in our mother being kind to poor Aunt Bella, for she was good to every one.”

“But there was something strange in Aunt Bella not bidding our mother good-by,” pursued Gabrielle, “for I think she was a little fond of mother, and mother was so weak and ill at the time. I saw tears in Aunt Bella's eyes once after mother had been talking to her. Yes, her going away was certainly very queer; but I have no time to talk any more about it now. I must go to my work. Rupert, shall we ride this afternoon? This is just the most perfect weather for riding before the great summer heat commences.”

“Yes, we'll be in summer before we know where we are,” said Rupert; “it is the 4th of November to-day. I will ride with you at three o'clock, Gabrielle—that is, if father is not back.”

The brother and sister left the room to pursue their different vocations, and a short time afterward an old servant, with a closely frilled cap tied with a ribbon under her chin, came into the room. She was the identical Betty who had been Mrs. Lovel's maid-of-all-work, and who had now transferred her services to the young people at Belmont. Betty was old, wrinkled, and of Irish birth, and sincerely attached to all the Lovels. She came into the room under the pretext of looking for some needlework which Gabrielle had mislaid, but her real object was to peer into the now open post-bag, and then to look suspiciously round the room.

“I smell it in the air,” she said, sniffing as she spoke. “As sure as I'm Betty O'Flanigan there's news of Master Phil in the air! Was there a letter? Oh, glory! to think as there might be a letter from my own little master, and me not to know. Miss Gabrielle's mighty close, and no mistake. Well, I'll go and ask her bold outright if she has bad news of the darlint.”

Betty could not find Gabrielle's lost embroidery, and perceiving that the post-bag was absolutely

empty, she pattered out of the room again and upstairs to where her young lady was making up some accounts in a pretty little boudoir which had belonged to her mother.

"Och, and never a bit of it can I see, Miss Gabrielle," said the old woman as she advanced into the room; and then she began sniffing the air again.

"What are you making that funny noise for, Betty?" said Miss Lovel, raising her eyes from a long column of figures.

"I smell it in the air," said Betty, sniffing in an oracular manner. "I dreamed of him three times last night, and that means tidings; and now I smell it in the air."

"Oh! you dreamed of little Phil," said Gabrielle in a kind tone. "Yes, we have just had a letter. Sit down there and I'll read it to you."

Betty squatted down instantly on the nearest hassock, and with her hands under her apron and her mouth wide open prepared herself not to lose a word.

Gabrielle read the letter from end to end, the old woman now and then interrupting her with such exclamations as "Oh, glory! May the saints presarve him! Well, listen to the likes of that!"

At last Gabrielle's voice ceased; then Betty hobbled to her feet, and suddenly seizing the childish letter, not a word of which she could read, pressed it to her lips.

"Ah! Miss Gabrielle," she said, "that mother of his meant mischief. She meant mischief to you and yours, miss, and the sweet child has neither part nor lot in the matter. If I was you, Miss Gabrielle, I'd ferret out where Mrs. Lovel is hiding Master Phil. What business had she to get into such a way about a bit of an English newspaper, and to hurry off with the child all in a twinkling like, and to be that flustered and nervous? And oh! Miss Gabrielle, the fuss about her clothes; and 'did she look genteel in this?' and 'did she look quite the lady in that?' And then the way she went off, bidding good-by to no one but me. Oh! she's after no good; mark my words for it."

"But she can do us no harm, Betty," said Gabrielle. "Neither my father nor Rupert is likely to be injured by a weak kind of woman like Aunt Bella. I am sorry for little Phil; but I think you are silly to talk as you do of Aunt Bella. Now you may take the letter away with you and kiss it and love it as much as you like. Here comes father; he is back earlier than usual from Melbourne, and I must speak to him."

Mr. Lovel, a tall, fine-looking man, with a strong likeness to both his son and daughter, now came hastily into the room.

"I have indeed come back in a hurry, Gabrielle," he said. "That advertisement has appeared in the papers again. I have had a long talk with our business friend, Mr. Davis, and the upshot of it is that Rupert and I sail for Europe on Saturday. This is Tuesday; so you will have your hands pretty full in making preparations for such a sudden move, my dear daughter."

"Is it the advertisement that appeared six months ago, father?" said Gabrielle in an excited voice. "Mother pointed it out to you then and you would take no notice of it."

"These things are often put into newspapers simply as a kind of hoax, child," said the father, "and it all seemed so unlikely. However, although I appeared to take no notice, I was not unmindful of Rupert's interests. I went to consult with Davis, and Davis promised to make inquiries in England. He came to me this morning with the result of his investigations and with this advertisement in the Melbourne *Times*. Here it is; it is three months old, unfortunately. It appeared three months after the first advertisement, but Davis did not trouble me with it until he had got news from England. The news came this morning. It is of a satisfactory character and to the effect that the last Valentine Lovel, of Avonsyde, in the New Forest, Hampshire, died without leaving any male issue, and the present owners of the property are two unmarried ladies, neither of whom is young. Now, Gabrielle, you are a wise lass for your thirteen years, and as I have not your mother to consult with, I am willing to rely a little bit on your judgment. You read this, my daughter, and tell me what you make of it."

As Mr. Lovel spoke he unfolded a sheet of the Melbourne *Times*, and pointing to a small paragraph in one of the advertisement columns which was strongly underscored with a blue pencil, he handed it to Gabrielle.

"Read it aloud," he said. "They are strange words, but I should like to hear them again."

Gabrielle, in her clear and bright voice, read as follows:

"LOVEL.—If any of the lineal descendants of Rupert Lovel, of Avonsyde, New Forest, Hampshire, who left his home on the 20th August, 1684, are now alive and will communicate with Messrs. Baring & Baring, 128 Chancery Lane, London, they will hear of something to their advantage. Only heirs male in direct succession need apply."

Gabrielle paused.

"Read on," said her father. "The second part of the advertisement, or rather a second

advertisement which immediately follows the first, is of more interest."

Gabrielle continued:

"I, Griselda Lovel, and I, Katharine Lovel, of Avonsyde, New Forest, of the county of Hampshire, England, do, according to our late father's will, earnestly seek an heir of the issue of one Rupert Lovel, who left Avonsyde on the 20th August, 1684, in consequence of a quarrel between himself and his father, the then owner of Avonsyde. By reason of this quarrel Rupert Lovel was disinherited, and the property has continued until now in the younger branch. According to our late father's will, we, Griselda and Katharine Lovel, wish to reestablish the elder branch of the family, and offer to make a direct descendant of the said Rupert Lovel our heir, provided the said descendant be under fifteen years of age and of sound physical health. We refuse to receive letters or to see any claimant personally, but request to have all communications made to us through our solicitors, Messrs. Baring & Baring, of 128 Chancery Lane, London, E. C.

"Tyde what may betyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde."

Gabrielle's cheeks flushed brightly as she read.

"Oh, father!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes to the face of the tall man who stood near her, "do you really believe a little bit in it at last? Don't you remember how I used to pray of you to tell me traditions of the old English home when I was a little child, and how often you have repeated that old rhyme to me, and don't you know how mother used to treasure the tankard with the family crest and 'Tyde what may' in those queer, quaint English characters on it? Mother was quite excited when the first advertisement appeared, but you said we were not to talk or to think of it. Rupert is the rightful heir—is he not, father? Oh, how proud I shall be to think that the old place is to belong to him!"

"I believe he is the rightful heir, Gabrielle," said her father in a grave voice. "He is undoubtedly a lineal descendant of the Rupert Lovel who left Avonsyde in 1684, and he also fulfills the conditions of the old ladies' advertisement, for he is under fifteen and splendidly strong; but it is also a fact that I cannot find some very important letters which absolutely prove Rupert's claim. I could swear that I left them in the old secretary in your mother's room, but they have vanished. Davis, on the other hand, believes that I have given them to him, and will have a strict search instituted for them. The loss of the papers makes a flaw in my boy's claim; but I shall not delay to go to England on that account. Davis will mail them to me as soon as ever they are recovered; and in the mean time, Gabrielle, I will ask you to pack up the old tankard and give it to me to take to England. There is no doubt whatever that that tankard is the identical one which my forefather took with him when almost empty-handed he left Avonsyde,"

"I will fetch it at once," said Gabrielle. "Mother kept it in the cupboard at the back of her bed. She always kept the tankard and our baptismal mugs and the diamonds you gave her when first you were married in that cupboard. I will fetch the tankard and have it cleaned, and I will pack it for you myself."

Gabrielle ran out of the room, returning in a few moments with a slightly battered old drinking-cup, much tarnished and of antique pattern.

"Here it is!" she exclaimed, "and Betty shall clean it. Is that you, Betty? Will you take this cup and polish it for me at once yourself? I have great news to give you when you come back."

Betty took the cup and turned it round and round with a dubious air.

"It isn't worth much," she said; "but I'll clean it anyhow."

"Be careful of it, Betty," called out Gabrielle. "Whatever you may think of it, you tiresome old woman, it is of great value to us, and particularly to your favorite, Rupert."

Muttering to herself, Betty hobbled downstairs, and Gabrielle and her father continued their conversation. In about half an hour the old woman returned and presented the cup, burnished now to great brilliancy, to her young mistress.

"I said it wasn't worth much," she repeated. "I misdoubt me if it's silver at all."

Gabrielle turned it round in her hand; then she uttered a dismayed exclamation.

"Father, do look! The crest is gone; the crest and the old motto, 'Betyde what may,' have absolutely vanished. It is the same cup; yes, certainly it is the same, but where is the crest? and where is the motto?"

Mr. Lovel took the old tankard into his hand and examined it narrowly.

"It is not the same," he said then. "The shape is almost identical, but this is not my forefather's tankard. I believe Betty is right, and this is not even silver; here is no crown mark. No letters, Gabrielle, and no tankard! Well, never mind; these are but trifles. Rupert and I sail all the same



for England and the old property on Saturday.”

### CHAPTER VIII.—THE SACRED CUPBOARD.

Mr. Lovel told Gabrielle that the loss of the tankard and the letters were but trifles. His daughter, however, by no means believed him; she noticed the anxious look in his eyes and the little frown which came between his brows.

“Father’s always like that when he’s put out,” she said. “Father’s a man who never yet lost his temper. He’s much too big and too great and too grand to stoop to anything small of that kind, but, all the same, I know he’s put out. He’s a wonderful man for sticking out for the rights of things, and if he thinks Rupert ought to inherit that old property in England he won’t leave a stone unturned to get it for him. He would not fret; he would not think twice about it if it was not Rupert’s right; but as it is I know he is put out, and I know the loss of the tankard is not just a trifle. Who could put a false tankard in the place of the real one? Who could have done it? I know what I’ll do. I’ll go up to mother’s room again and have a good look round.”

Mrs. Lovel was not a year dead, and Gabrielle never entered the room which had known her loved presence and from which she had been carried away to her long rest without a feeling of pain. She was in many respects a matter-of-fact girl—not nearly as sensitive as Rupert, who with all his strength had the tenderest heart; nor as little Peggy, who kept away from mother’s room and never spoke of her without tears filling her eyes. To enter mother’s room seemed impossible to both Rupert and Peggy, but Gabrielle found a certain sad pleasure in going there; and when she had shut the door now she looked around her with a little sigh.

“I’ll make it homelike, as if mother were here,” she said to herself. “I’ll make it homelike, and then sit by the open window and try and believe that mother is really asleep on that sofa, where she has lain for so many, many hours.”

Her eyes brightened as this idea came to her, and she hastened to put it into execution. She drew up the window-blinds and opened the pretty bay-window, and let the soft delicious air of spring fill the apartment; then she took the white covers off the chairs and sofa, pulled the sofa forward into its accustomed position, and placed a couple of books on the little table which always stood by its side. These few touches transformed the large room; it lost its look of gloom and was once more bright and homelike. A wistaria in full bloom peeped in at the open window; the distant sounds of farm life were audible, and Gabrielle heard Peggy’s little voice talking in endearing tones to the cross old ravens, Elijah and Grasper. She knelt by the open window and, pressing her cheeks on her hands, looked out.

“Oh, if only mother were on the sofa!” That was the cry which arose, almost to pain, in her lonely heart. “Peggy and Rupert and I have no mother, and now father and Rupert are going to England and I shall have to do everything for Peggy. Peggy will lean on me; she always does—dear little Peg! but I shall have no one.”

The thought of Rupert’s so speedily leaving her recalled the tankard to Gabrielle’s memory. She got up and unlocked the cupboard, which was situated at the back of her mother’s bed. The cupboard was half-full of heterogeneous matter—some treasures, some rubbish; numbers of old photographs; numbers of childish and discarded books. Some of the shelves were devoted to broken toys, to headless dolls, to playthings worthless in themselves, but treasured for memory’s sake by the mother. Tears filled Gabrielle’s eyes, but she dashed them away and was about to institute a systematic search, when Rupert opened the door and came in. His ruddy, brightly colored, healthy face was pale; he did not see Gabrielle, who was partly hidden by the large bedstead. He entered the room with soft, reverent footsteps, and walked across it as though afraid to make a sound.

Gabrielle started when she saw him; she knew that neither Rupert nor Peggy ever came to the room. What did this visit mean? Why was that cloud on Rupert’s brow? From where she stood she could see without being seen, and for a moment or two she hesitated to make a sound or to let her brother know she was near him. He walked straight across the room to the open window, looked out as Gabrielle had looked out, then turning to the sofa, laid one muscular brown hand with a reverent gesture on the pillow which his mother’s head had pressed. The little home touches which Gabrielle had given to the room were unnoticed by Rupert, for he had never seen it in its shrouded and dismantled state. All his memories centered round that sofa with the flowering chintz cover; the little table; the small chair, which was usually occupied by a boy or girl as they looked into the face they loved and listened to the gentle words from the dearest of all lips. Rupert made no moan as Gabrielle had done, but he drew the little chair forward, and laying his head face downward on the pillow, gave vent to an inward supplication. The boy was strong physically and mentally, and the spiritual life which his mother had fostered had already become part of his being. He spoke it in no words, but he lived it in his upright young life. To do honor to his mother’s memory, to reverence and love his mother’s God, was his motto.

Gabrielle felt uncomfortable standing behind the bedstead. She coughed, made a slight movement, and Rupert looked up, with wet eyelashes.

“Gabrielle!” he said, with a start of extreme surprise.

"Yes, Rupert, I was in the room. I saw you come in. I was astonished, for I know you don't come here. I was so sorry to be in the way, and just at first I made no sound."

"You are not a bit in the way," said Rupert, standing up and smiling at her. "I came now because there are going to be immense changes, and—somehow I could not help myself. I—I—wanted mother to know."

"Yes," said Gabrielle, going and standing by his side. "Do you think she does know, Rupert? Do you think God tells her?"

"I feel that she does," said Rupert. "But I can't talk about mother, Gabrielle; it is no use. What were you doing behind that bedstead?" he added in a lighter tone.

"I was looking for the tankard."

"What, the old Avonsyde tankard? But of course it is there. It was always kept in what we used to call the sacred cupboard."

"Yes; but it is gone," said Gabrielle. "It was there and it has vanished; and what is more wonderful, Rupert, another tankard has been put in its place—a tankard something like it in shape, but not made of silver and without the old motto."

"Nonsense!" said Rupert almost sharply. "We will both go and look in the cupboard, Gabrielle. The real tankard may be pushed far back out of sight."

"No; it is too large for that," said Gabrielle. "But you shall come and see with your own eyes."

She led the way, and the two began to explore the contents of the cupboard, the boy touching the sacred relics with almost more reverent fingers than the girl. The tankard, the real tankard, was certainly nowhere to be found.

"Father is put out about it," said Gabrielle. "I know it by his eyes and by that firm way he compresses his lips together. He won't get into a passion—you know he never does—but he is greatly put out. He says the tankard forms important evidence, and that its being lost is very disastrous to your prospects."

"My prospects?" said Rupert. "Then father is not quite sure about my being the lawful heir?"

"Oh, Rupert, of course he is sure! But he must have evidence; he must prove your descent. Rupert, dear, are you not delighted? Are you not excited about all this?"

"No, Gabrielle. I shall never love Avonsyde as I love Belmont. It was here my mother lived and died."

Tears came into Gabrielle's eyes. She was touched by Rupert's rare allusion to his mother, but she also felt a sense of annoyance at what she termed his want of enthusiasm.

"If I were the heir——" she began.

"Yes, Gabrielle—if you were the heir?"

"I should be—oh, I cannot explain it all! But how my heart would beat; how I should rejoice!"

"I am glad too," said Rupert; "but I am not excited. I shall like to see Europe, however; and I will promise to write you long letters and tell you everything."

## **CHAPTER IX.—A TRYSTING-PLACE.**

Rachel had a very restless fit on. She was a child full of impulses, with spirits wildly high one day and proportionately depressed the next; but the restlessness of her present condition did not resemble the capricious and ever-changing moods which usually visited her. The uneasy spirit which prevented her taking kindly to her lessons, which took the charm from her play-hours and the pleasure even from Kitty's society, had lasted now for months; it had its date from a certain lovely summer's evening. Had Aunt Griselda and Aunt Katharine known more about what their little niece did on that occasion, they might have attributed her altered mood to an over-long ride and to some physical weakness.

But Rachel was wonderfully strong; her cheeks bloomed; her dark eyes sparkled; and the old ladies were interested just now in some one whom they considered far more important than Rachel. So the little girl neglected her lessons without getting into any very serious scrapes, and more than once rode alone into the forest on Surefoot without being reprimanded. Rachel would steal away from Kitty and from little Phil, and would imperiously order Robert to saddle her pony and to ride with her just a very little way into the forest; but then the groom was not only allowed, but requested to turn off in another direction, and Rachel would gallop as fast as possible past Rufus' Stone, and on as far as that lovely glade where she had sat and gathered bluebells in the summer. She always dismounted from Surefoot here, and standing with her back to an old oak tree, waited with intense expectancy. She never went further than the oak tree; she

never went down a narrow path which led to a certain cottage clothed completely in green; but she waited, with her hands clasped and her eyes fixed eagerly on the distant vista of forest trees. Sometimes her eyes would sparkle, and she would clap her hands joyfully and run to meet a prim-looking old woman who came forward through the shades to meet her. Sometimes she returned home without seeing anybody, and on these occasions she was apt to be morose—snappish to Kitty, rude to Mrs. Lovel and Phil, and, in short, disagreeable to every one, except perhaps her gentle Aunt Katharine.

The old ladies would vaguely wonder what ailed the child, and Miss Griselda would hope she was not going to be famous for the Lovel temper; but as their minds were very full of other things they did not really investigate matters.

One frosty day about the middle of November, when Phil and his mother had been quite four months at Avonsyde, Rachel started off earlier than usual for one of her long rides. The forest was full of a wonderful mystical sort of beauty at all times and seasons, and now, with the hoarfrost sparkling on the grass, with the sun shining brightly, and with many of the autumn tints still lingering on the trees, it seemed almost as delightful a place to Rachel as when clothed in its full summer glory. The little brown-coated winter birds chirped cozily among the branches of the trees, and hundreds of squirrels in a wealth of winter furs bounded from bough to bough. Rachel as usual dismissed her faithful attendant, Robert, and galloping to her accustomed trysting-place, waited eagerly for what might befall.

On this particular day she was not doomed to disappointment. The old servant was soon seen approaching. Rachel ran to her, clasped her hands round her arm, and raising her lips to her face, kissed her affectionately.

"Ah, you are a good Nancy to-day!" she exclaimed. "I was here on Saturday and here on Wednesday, and you never came. It was very unkind of you. I got so tired of standing by the oak tree and waiting. Well, Nancy, is the lady quite well to-day?"

"Middling, dearie; middling she ever is and will be until she claims her own again."

"Oh, you mysterious old woman! You are trying to make me desperately curious, but I don't believe there is anything in your talk. You worry me to keep a tremendous secret, and there's nothing in it, after all. Oh, of course I'm keeping your secret; you needn't pretend to be so frightened. And when am I to see the lady of the forest, Nancy?"

"Now, my dear, haven't I told you until I'm tired? You're to see her come your thirteenth birthday, love. The day you are thirteen you'll see her, and not an hour sooner."

Rachel stamped her foot angrily.

"I shan't have a birthday till the beginning of May!" she said. "It's a shame; it's a perfect, perfect shame!"

Old Nancy pushed back a rebellious curl from the child's bright head.

"Don't you fret, my pretty," she said tenderly. "The lady wants to see you a deal—a sight more than you want to see her. The lady has passed through many troubles, and not the least is the waiting to see your pretty face."

Rachel began eagerly to unbutton her habit, and taking from a little pocket just inside its lining a tiny bag, she pulled out a small ring and thrust it into Nancy's hand.

"There," she said, "that's the most precious thing I have, and I give it to her. It's all gold, and isn't that a beautiful pearl? I used to wear it on my finger when I wanted to be very grand, but I'd rather she had it. Perhaps she won't feel so lonely when she wears it, for she will remember that it was given to her by a little girl who is so sorry for her, and who loves her—yes, isn't it queer?—although we have never met. You know, Nancy," continued Rachel, "I can quite sympathize with lonely people, for to a certain extent I know what it means. I miss my mother so very much. When I'm grown up, Nancy, I'm going all round the wide world looking for her."

"Bless you, darling!" said old Nancy. "Yes, I'll give the ring and your pretty message. And now, love, tell me, how is the little gentleman getting on? Have the old ladies made him their heir yet?"

"Not quite yet, Nancy; but they like him—we all like him. He is a dear little boy, and Aunt Griselda and Aunt Katharine make such a fuss about him. Do you know that a week ago I saw Aunt Griselda actually put her arms about his neck and kiss him! She kissed him three or four times. Wasn't it wonderful? for she's such a cold person. I think people can't help being fond of little Phil, though he's not exactly pretty. I heard Aunt Griselda and Aunt Katharine say that when they do really feel certain that he is the right heir they are going to have a great, tremendous party, and they will present him to every one as the heir of Avonsyde, and then immediately afterward he is to be sent to a preparatory school for Eton. Oh, won't Kitty cry when he goes away!"

"Do you make out that the ladies will soon come to a decision, Miss Rachel?" inquired the old

servant in a dubious tone. "It's a wonderful important matter—choosing an heir. Are they likely to settle it all in a hurry?"

Rachel laughed.

"I don't know," she said. "Phil has been with us for four months now; they haven't been in such a hurry. I do hope it will be soon, for I want the party. Now, good-by, Nancy; I'll come to see you before long again. Be sure you give my ring to the lady of the forest."

"One moment, missy," said old Nancy, stretching out her hand and drawing the young girl back to her side. "One moment, Miss Rachel Lovel; I'm fain to see that little boy. Could you manage to bring him this way, missy? Could you manage it without nobody finding out? Is he the kind of little fellow who wouldn't tell if you asked him earnest, most earnest, not? I'd like to see him and the lady; but no matter, Miss Rachel, I misdoubt me that you could manage a clever thing like that."

"Oh, couldn't I?" said Rachel, her eyes sparkling. "Why, I'd like it of all things! I can easily coax Phil to come here, for he's perfectly wild about squirrels and animals of all kinds, and I never saw such a lot of squirrels as there are in the oaks round here. Phil has got a pony too, and he shall come for a ride with me, and Robert of course can come to take care of us. Oh, I'll manage it; but I didn't know you were such a curious woman, Nancy."

The sun was already showing signs of taking its departure, and Rachel did not dare to prolong her interview another moment.

## **CHAPTER X.—PROOFS.**

Mrs. Lovel was becoming reconciled to her tower chamber. Ghostly as it appeared, no ghosts had visited her there; on the contrary, she had slept soundly; and as the days wore on and she found the quiet, simple life at Avonsyde soothing to her perturbed nerves and restoring vigor to her somewhat feeble frame, she came to the conclusion that the tower was a particularly healthy place to sleep in, and that some of the superabundant vigor which characterized Miss Griselda must be owing to the splendid air which night after night she inhaled in her lofty chamber.

As soon as ever this idea took possession of Mrs. Lovel's mind, she would not have changed her ancient tower bedroom for the most modern and luxurious which Avonsyde could offer.

A thought—a pleasing thought—came ever and anon to the poor lady as she watched her boy's peaceful face when he lay asleep on his little white bed.

"Suppose the healthy air of the tower makes Philip strong?"

Philip had been for some months at Avonsyde, and no one yet had found out that he possessed any special delicacy. At first the pallor of his little face had been commented on; but people soon got accustomed to this, and the boy was so merry, so good-humored, so brave, that those who watched him would have found it difficult to associate any special weakness with such lithe and agile movements, with so gay a spirit, with so merry and ringing a laugh. Miss Griselda had begun by declaring, both in her sister's presence and also in that of Philip's mother, that no decisive step could be taken until a doctor had thoroughly examined the boy; but of late she had ceased to speak of any doctor, and had nodded her head in an approving manner when Phil had sung out to her from the tops of the tallest trees, or had galloped panting and laughing to her side on his rough forest pony. Miss Katharine said many times to her sister:

"Surely we need make no delay. There seems no doubt that the boy can absolutely trace his succession from Rupert Lovel. Why should we waste money, Griselda, in inserting that advertisement any more in the newspapers when we have found our heir?"

Miss Lovel, however, was not to be unduly hurried in so momentous a matter.

"We cannot be too careful, Katharine. Yes, we will insert the advertisement once or twice again. It was only yesterday I heard from Mr. Baring that some fresh claimants are writing to him through their lawyers. There is no hurry whatever, and we cannot be too careful."

Perhaps Miss Katharine took it rather too much as a matter of course that Phil could trace his descent, without flaw, from the Rupert Lovel who had quarreled with his father long ago. She was so accustomed to hearing Mrs. Lovel say, "I have got all the proofs; I can trace the descent without a single break for you at any time," that she began to believe she had gone through the genealogical tree, and had seen with her own eyes that the child was the lineal descendant of the elder branch of her house.

Miss Griselda was far sharper than her sister. Miss Griselda knew perfectly that Phil's descent was not yet proved, but, unlike most old ladies in her position, she disliked genealogy. She said openly that it puzzled her, and on one occasion when Mrs. Lovel, in her half-timid, half-fretful voice, said, "Shall I bring you the proofs of Phil's descent now? Are you at leisure to look into the matter to-day?" Miss Griselda replied somewhat sharply:

"I hate genealogical trees. Katharine can understand them, but I can't. I don't suppose, Mrs. Lovel, you would be so utterly devoid of all sense as to bring the boy here and to establish yourself in our house without having incontestable proofs that he is what you represent him to be. I take it for granted that Phil is a direct descendant of Rupert Lovel, but I shall certainly not make him our heir until more competent eyes than mine examine your proofs. At present I am more interested in watching Phil's health, for if he was fifty times descended from our ancestor and was weakly he should not inherit Avonsyde. When I have quite made up my mind that your boy is strong I will ask Mr. Baring, our business man, to come to Avonsyde and go into the proofs; then, all being satisfactory, the boy shall be announced as our heir, and we will of course undertake his maintenance and education from that moment."

Mrs. Lovel breathed a slight sigh of relief.

"Having proclaimed Phil as your heir, nothing would induce you to revoke your decision afterward?" she asked nervously.

"Certainly not. What a strange speech to make! The boy being strong, being the right age, and being an undoubted descendant of our house, what more could we want? Rest assured, Mrs. Lovel, that when your boy is proclaimed heir of Avonsyde, were fifty other claimants to come forward we should not even listen to their plea."

A faint pink, born of intense gratification, colored Mrs. Lovel's pale cheeks.

"I should like to be bold enough to ask you another question," she said.

Miss Griselda smiled in a freezing manner.

"Ask me what you please," she answered. "You must forgive my saying that I have already observed how singularly restless and uncomfortable you are. I think I can guess what is the matter. You are intensely curious about us and our money. Oh, no, I am not at all offended. Pray ask what you want to know."

Mrs. Lovel, though a timid, was a rather obtuse person, and she was not crushed by Miss Griselda's withering sarcasm. Clearing her throat and pausing slightly before bringing out her words, she continued:

"I have wondered—I could not help wondering—what you would do with your property if no heir turned up."

This speech, which was as audacious as it was unexpected, caused Miss Lovel to raise her finely marked eyebrows with some scorn.

"Your question is indiscreet," she said; "but, as it happens, I do not mind answering it. Did no true heir appear for Avonsyde during our lifetime the place would be inherited by our nieces, Rachel and Kitty Lovel; but they would only have a life-interest in the property, and would be solemnly bound over to continue our search for the missing heir."

"Rachel and Kitty will, then, be disappointed when Phil is announced as your representative," said Mrs. Lovel, rising with sudden alacrity to her feet. "Thank you so much for your valuable information, Miss Lovel. You may be quite certain that I shall regard what you have been good enough to confide to me as absolutely confidential."

"I have told you nothing that everybody doesn't know," answered Miss Griselda. "I never reveal secrets, and least of all to those who are not related to us. Talk to any one you please about what I have said to you. As to my brother's children, I am thankful to say they have not yet attained an age when the absence or the presence of money is of the slightest moment to them. One word more, Mrs. Lovel, before we change our conversation. I have noticed without your telling me that you are extremely poor."

Mrs. Lovel interrupted with a great sigh.

"Oh!" she said, throwing up her hands and speaking with marked emphasis, "I have known the sore pangs of poverty—of course, it has been genteel poverty. I could never forget Phil's birth nor what I owed to my poor dear husband's position, and of course I made a great effort to descend to nothing menial; but, yes, I have been poor."

"You need not excite yourself about the past. When Phil's identity is established and his position assured, it is the intention of my sister and myself to settle upon you for your life an income of £500 a year. Pray don't thank me; we do it for our own sakes, as of course Phil's mother has a certain position to keep up. We should recommend you to settle somewhere near your boy. What did you say? No, no; that cannot be. When everything is settled we must request you to remove to your own home."

For Mrs. Lovel had interrupted with the almost incoherent words:

"Am I not to live at Avonsyde always?"

## CHAPTER XI.—THE LADY WHO CAME WITH A GIFT.

Rachel did not forget her promise to old Nancy. She had never taken so much pains to cultivate Phil's acquaintance as Kitty had done. She had certainly joined in the almost universal chorus that he was a nice and lovable little boy, but she had not greatly troubled her head about his pursuits or his pleasures. She was too much taken up with the wonderful secret which she possessed with regard to the real existence of the lady of the forest. But now that the said lady seemed to wish to see Phil, and now that she, Rachel, had almost bound herself to bring Phil to the trysting-place in the forest, she began to regard him with new interest. Kitty and Phil had long ere this established a world of their own—a world peopled by caterpillars of enormous size, by the most sagacious spiders that were ever known to exist, by beetles of rare brilliancy, by birds, by squirrels—in short, by the numerous creature-life of the great forest; and last, but not least, by the fairies and gnomes which were supposed to haunt its dells. Kitty could tell many stories of forest adventures, of the wonderful and terrible bogs on which the luckless traveler alighted unawares, and from which, unless instant help arrived, he could never hope to extricate himself. She spoke about the malicious little Jack-o'-lanterns which were supposed to allure the unwary into these destructive places, and Phil, with a most vivid imagination of his own, loved to lie at her feet and embellish her tales with numerous inventions. The two children were scarcely ever apart, and doubtless one reason why Rachel thought so much of her secret was because Kitty was no longer her undivided companion.

Now, however, she must seek out Kitty and Phil, and enter into their pursuits and take a share in their interests if she hoped to induce Phil to accompany her into the forest. Accordingly one day, with a book in her hand, she sauntered out into a very sunny part of the grounds. Phil, basking in the rays of the most brilliant sunshine, had thrown himself at the foot of an old sun-dial; Kitty had climbed into the boughs of a small bare tree which stood near, and as usual the two were chatting eagerly. Rachel, with her head full of the lady of the forest, came up, to hear Kitty and Phil discussing this very personage.

"She's all in green," said Kitty. "Her dress is greener than the trees and her face is most beautiful, and her hair is gold and——"

"No," interrupted Rachel; "she's in gray; and her hair is not gold—it is dark."

Then she colored high and bit her lips with vexation, for she felt that in her eagerness she had given a clew to her dear real lady's identity.

Kitty raised her eyebrows in great surprise.

"Why, Rachel," she said, "it was you who told me she was in green. How very queer and disagreeable of you to make her so ugly and uninteresting. People who wear gray are most uninteresting. You forget, Rachel, our lady is in green—greener than the grass. I do wish you would tell Phil all about her; you can describe her so much better than I can."

"She has a face which is almost too lovely," continued Rachel, taking up the cue on the instant and speaking with great animation. "She lives in the deepest shades of the forest, and she appears never, never, except to those who belong to the forest. Those families who have belonged to the New Forest for hundreds of years have seen her, but outsiders never do. When she does appear she comes with a gift in her hand. Do you know what it is?"

"No," said Phil, raising himself on his elbow and looking with great intentness at Rachel. "I know what I would wish her to give me—that is, if she ever came to see me; but of course I cannot possibly say what gifts she brings."

"Those who have seen her," said Rachel, "catch just a shadow of the reflection of her lovely face, and they never lose it—never! Some ladies of our house saw her, and their portraits are in our portrait-gallery, and they are much more beautiful than any of the other Lovels. She does not give beauty of feature—it is of expression; and such a brightness shines from her. Yes, her gift is the gift of beauty; and I do wish, and so does Kitty, that we could see her."

Phil smiled a little scornfully.

"Is that all she gives?" he said. "That wouldn't be much to me. I mean if I saw her I know what I'd ask. I'd say, 'I am a boy, and beauty isn't of much use to a boy; so please give me instead—money!'"

"Oh, Phil!" exclaimed both the little girls.

"She wouldn't come to you," said Kitty in a mournful tone. "She wouldn't look at any one so avaricious."

"Besides, Phil," continued Rachel, "when Avonsyde is yours you'll be a rich man; and I don't think," she added, "that you are quite right when you say that beauty is of no use to a boy; for if you have the kind of beauty the lady gives, it is like a great power, and you can move people and turn them as you will; and of course you can use it for good, Phil."

"All right," said Phil, "but I'd rather have money; for if I had money I'd give it to mother, and then

I needn't be heir of Avonsyde, and—and—oh, I mustn't say! Kitty, I do wish we could go to Southampton again soon. I want to go there on most particular business. Do you think Aunt Grizel will take us before Christmas?"

"Is it about the letter?" asked Kitty. "But you couldn't have had an answer yet, Phil. There is no use in your going to Southampton before an answer can have arrived."

"I suppose not," said Phil in a gloomy voice. "It's a long, long time to wait, though."

"What are you waiting for?" asked Rachel.

Phil raised very mournful eyes to her face.

"You have a look of him," he said. "Oh, how I hate being heir of Avonsyde! I wouldn't be it for all the world but for mother. Kitty, shall we go into the forest and look for beetles?"

"I'll come with you," said Rachel. "You two are always together and I'm out in the cold, and I don't mean to be in the cold any longer. I may come with you both, may I not?"

Kitty smiled radiantly, Phil linked his little brown hand inside Rachel's arm, and the three set off.

No little girl could make herself more fascinating than Rachel when she pleased. She developed on the instant a most astonishing knowledge of beetles and spiders; she drew on her imagination for her facts, and deceived Kitty, but not Phil. Phil was a born little naturalist, and in consequence he only favored his elder cousin with a shrewd and comical look, and did not trouble himself even to negative her daring assertions. Seeing that she made no way in this direction, Rachel started a theme about which she possessed abundant knowledge. The New Forest had been more or less her nursery; she knew its haunts well; she knew where to look for the earliest primroses, the first violets, and also the very latest autumn flowers; she knew where the holly berries were reddest, where the robins had their nests, and where the squirrels were most abundant; and Phil, recognizing the tone of true knowledge, listened first with respect, then with interest, then with enthusiasm. Oh, yes, they must go to that dell; they must visit that sunny bank. Before Rachel and her sister and cousin came home that day they had planned an excursion which surely must give the mysterious lady of the forest that peep at Phil which she so earnestly desired. Rachel was sorry to be obliged to include Kitty in the party, for Kitty had not been asked to pass in review by old Nancy. Phil was the one whom Nancy and the lady wished to see just once with their own eyes: Phil, who was to be heir of Avonsyde and who didn't like it. Rachel went to bed quite jubilant, for she would have done anything to please the unknown lady who had won her capricious little heart. She did not guess that anything would occur to spoil her plans, and in consequence slept very peacefully.

Phil had been much excited by Rachel's words. He was a very imaginative child, and though he did not believe in ghosts, yet he was certainly impressed by what both the little girls had told him of the lady of the forest. He quite believed in this lady, and did not care to inquire too closely whether she was fairy or mortal. She appeared at rare intervals to the sons and daughters of the house of Lovel, and when she did she came with a gift. Phil did not altogether believe that this lovely, graceful, and gracious lady would be so obdurate as only to bestow an unvalued gift of beauty. He thought that if he were lucky enough to see her he might so intercede with her that she would give him a bag of gold instead. He need keep no secrets from her, for if she was a fairy she must know them already; and he might tell her all about his difficulties, and how his small heart was torn with great love for Rupert and great love for his mother. He might tell the lady of the forest how very little he cared for Avonsyde, except as a possible future home for his gay and brave Cousin Rupert, and he might ask her to give him the bag of precious gold to satisfy his mother and keep her from starving. Phil was dreadfully oppressed with all the secrets he had to keep. Happy as he was at Avonsyde, there were so many, many things he must not talk about. He must never mention Rupert, nor Gabrielle, nor Peggy; he must never breathe the name of Belmont nor say a word about his old nurse Betty. All the delightful times he had spent with his Australian cousins must be as though they had never been. He must not tell about the delicious hours he and Betty had spent together in the little cottage behind the garden when his mother had been away in Melbourne. He must not speak about the excursions that Rupert had taken with him. A veil, a close veil, must be spread over all the past, and the worst of it was that he knew the reason why. His mother wanted him to get what Rupert would have been so much more fitted for. Well! well! He loved his mother and he could not break her heart, so he kept all these little longings and desires to himself, and only half let out his secrets a dozen times a day. On one point, however, he was firm and stanch as a little Spartan: he never breathed a sigh nor uttered a groan which could be construed into even the semblance of physical pain.

When he felt quite exhausted, so tired that it was an effort to move, he would spring up again at Kitty's least word and, with the drops on his little brow, climb to the top of that straight, tall tree once more and hide his face at last in the friendly sheltering leaves until he got back his panting breath. The splendid air of Avonsyde undoubtedly strengthened him, but the strain of always appearing bright and well was sometimes almost too much, and he wondered how long he could go on pretending to be quite the strongest little boy in the world. He fancied now how nice it would be to tell the kind lady of the forest how weak he really was; how his heart often beat almost to suffocation; what cruel pain came suddenly to stab and torture him. Oh! he could show her plainly that money was the gift for him, and that Rupert, who was so valiant, so strong, so

splendid, was the only right heir to the old place.

Phil greatly enjoyed his tower bedroom. Not a particle of the nervousness which made his mother uneasy assailed him. The only thing he did regret was that he could not sleep quite at the very top of the tower, in those attic rooms inhabited by Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine. When some of those bad attacks of pain and breathlessness assailed him, he liked, notwithstanding the exertion, to creep up and up those winding stone stairs, for he knew that when he got to the top and had attained his refuge he could really rest; he might throw off all the Spartan and be a little human boy who could moan and sigh and even shed a few secret tears for the gallant Rupert whom he loved. Phil had got into a habit of not even telling his mother of those queer attacks of weakness and breathlessness which came over him. Nothing annoyed and distressed her so much as to hear of them, and little Phil was by degrees beginning to feel a sort of protective love toward the rather weak woman: their positions were being unconsciously reversed. Mrs. Lovel seldom came to the tower bedroom in the day-time. Under the pretext that the stairs wearied her, she had begged to be allowed to have a dressing-room in a more modern part of the house, so Phil could be quite alone and undisturbed when he chose to visit his room. One of Miss Griselda's excellent rules for children was that they must retire early to bed. Phil, in Australia, had sat up far later than was good for him, but now at Avonsyde he and Kitty were always expected to have entered the land of dreams not later than eight o'clock in the evening. Mrs. Lovel seldom came upstairs before midnight, and in consequence Phil spent several hours alone every night in his quaint bedroom. He was often not at all sleepy, and on these occasions he would open one of the tiny deep-set windows, and look out into the night and listen to the hootings of some owls which had long ago made a home for themselves in a portion of the old tower. On other occasions he would amuse himself with one of Kitty's story-books, or again he would arrange some very precious little collections of wild birds' eggs and other forest treasures.

On this particular night, after Rachel's and Kitty's conversation, he was more than usually wakeful. He got into bed, for Aunt Griselda told him to be sure to undress and go to sleep as quickly as possible; but finding sleep very far away from his wakeful eyes he got up, and, after the fashion of a restless little boy, began to perambulate the room and to try to discover anything of interest to divert his attention. A very old horse-hair trunk of his mother's stood in one corner of the room; it had never been unpacked, for it was only supposed to contain books and some household treasures not immediately required by Mrs. Lovel. Phil had once or twice coaxed his mother to unpack the old trunk, for among the books was his pet "Robinson Crusoe." There was also an old box of paints which Rupert had given him, and a queer, old-fashioned cup, made of horn, which Rupert and he always took with them when they went for a day's excursion into any of the neighboring forests. Phil saw now, to his great delight, that the key was in the lock of the old trunk, and it occurred to him that he could pass an agreeable hour rummaging among its contents for his beloved "Robinson Crusoe" and his old horn cup. He accordingly set a candlestick on the floor, and opening the trunk knelt down by it and began to forage. He worked hard, and the exertion tired him and brought on an attack of breathlessness; but he was much interested in the sight of many old home treasures and had no idea how time was flying. He could not find either his "Robinson Crusoe" or his horn cup, but he came across another treasure wrapped up in an old piece of flannel which gave him intense delight. This was no other than a silver tankard of quaint device and very Old-World pattern, with a coat of arms and the words "Tyde what may" inscribed on one side. Phil knew the tankard well, and raising it to his lips he kissed it tenderly.

"Why, this belongs to Uncle Rupert and to Belmont!" he exclaimed. "The very same dear old tankard which Gabrielle is so proud of. I've seen it dozens of times. Well, I never thought Uncle Rupert would have given this dear old tankard to mother. How kind of him! I wonder mother never spoke of it. Oh, dear, what stories Gabrielle has told me about it! She used to call it a magical tankard and said it had a history. Mother must have quite forgotten she had it in the old trunk. How delighted Rachel and Kitty will be when I show it to them to-morrow."

Phil was so excited over his discovery that he became instantly careless as to finding either his "Robinson Crusoe" or his horn cup, and pushing the rest of contents of the trunk back into their place and turning the lock, he crept into bed, carrying the beloved tankard with him. When his mother came upstairs presently she found the boy fast asleep, and little guessed what treasure he clasped in his arms.

It is true that little Phil had entered the land of dreams; it is also true that in that enchanted land he went through experiences so delightful, through adventures so thrilling, that when in the dull gray November morning he awoke to listen to his mother's monotonous breathing, he simply could do nothing but step out of bed and determine to follow his dreams if necessary to the end of the world. The light had scarcely come. He would dress himself hastily and, taking the enchanted tankard with him, go into the forest all alone, in the hopes of meeting the beautiful lady who came with a gift.

## **CHAPTER XII.—LOST IN THE NEW FOREST.**

Mrs. Lovel slept very soundly, and Phil did not disturb her when he opened the ponderous oak door of his bedroom, and clasping the tankard tightly in both hands went downstairs and out. It was very, very early, for Phil had mistaken the shining of the moon for the first light of day. Not a



soul was up at Avonsyde, but the little boy easily found a means of exit, and in a few moments was running quickly down the straight avenue which led into the forest. He was intensely happy and excited, for the fragrance of his delightful dreams was still surrounding him, and he felt confident that if he only ran far enough he must find that wonderful lady whose dress was greener than the trees and whose face was so radiantly beautiful. The morning was damp and gloomy, for the moon set very soon after Phil started on his walk, and the sun had no idea of getting up for another couple of hours. The forest, which looked so pleasant and cheery by day, was now all that was dark and dismal; so of course the first thing that happened to poor little Phil was completely to lose his way.

He possessed a very high spirit, and such small disadvantages as stumbling in the dark and tearing himself with unseen briars, and altogether becoming a sadly chilled and damp little boy, could not quench the ardent hope which impelled him to go forward. He pushed on bravely, having a kind of confidence that the further he got from Avonsyde the more likely he was to meet the lady. Presently the darkness gave place to a gray, dim light, and then, in an incredibly short space of time, the little boy found himself surrounded by a delicious golden atmosphere. The sun climbed up into the heavens; the mist vanished; daylight and sunlight had come. Phil took off his cap, and leaning against a tree laughed with pleasure. It wanted three weeks to Christmas; but what a lovely morning, and how the sun glittered and sparkled on the frosty ground! Some shy robin-redbreasts hopped about and twittered gleefully; the squirrels were intensely busy cracking their breakfast-nuts; and Phil, raising his eyes to watch them, discovered that he was hungry. His hunger he could not gratify, but the thirst which also assailed him could be easily assuaged, for a brook babbled noisily not many feet away. Phil ran to it, and dipping his tankard into the water took a long draught. He had not an idea where he was, but with the sun shining and the birds singing no part of the forest could be lonely, and he tripped on in gay spirits, hoping to see the lady with the green dress coming to meet him through the trees. He had listened to many stories about the forest lady from Kitty. She appeared very, very seldom to any one, but when she did come she chose a solitary place and moment, for it was one of her unbroken rules never to reveal herself to two people together. Phil, remembering this peculiarity of the beautiful lady, took care to avoid the high-road and to plunge deeper and deeper into the most shady recesses and the most infrequented paths. As he walked on, whether from exhaustion or from hunger, or from an under-current of strong excitement, he became really a little feverish; his heart beat a great deal too fast, and his imagination was roused to an abnormal extent. He knew that he had lost his way, but as the hours went on he became more and more convinced that he would find the lady, and of course when he saw her and looked in her face his troubles would be ended. He would pour out all his cares and all his longings into the ears of this wonderful being. She would soothe him; she would pity him; and, above all things, she would give him that golden store which would make his mother contented and happy.

"Perhaps she will carry me home too," thought little Phil, "for though I am always making believe to be well, I am not really a strong boy, and I am very tired now."

The hours went on, the daylight grew brighter, and then came an unexpected change. The sunny morning was treacherous, after all; dark clouds approached from the north; they covered the smiling and sunny sky, and then a cold rain which was half-sleet began to fall mercilessly. Phil had of course not dreamed of providing himself with a great-coat, and though at first the trees supplied him with a certain amount of shelter, their branches, which were mostly bare, were soon drenched, and the little boy was wet through. He had climbed to the top of a rising knoll, and looking down through the driving rain he heard a stream brawling loudly about forty feet below. He fancied that if he got on lower ground he might find shelter, so he ran as quickly as he could in the direction of the hurrying water. Oh, horror! what had happened to him? What was this? The ground shook under his little footsteps. When he tried to step either backward or forward he sank. Phil caught his breath, laughed a little because he did not want to cry, and said aloud:

"Kitty is quite right; there are bogs in the forest, and I'm in one."

He was a very brave child, and even his present desperate situation did not utterly daunt him.

"Now I'm in real danger," he said aloud. "In some ways it's rather nice to be in real danger. Rupert and I used often to talk about it and wonder what we'd do, and Rupert always said: 'Phil, be sure when the time comes that you don't lose your presence of mind.' Well, the time has come now, and I must try to be very cool. When I stay perfectly still I find that I don't sink—at least very little. Oh, how tired I am! I wish some one would come. I wish the rain would stop. I know I'll fall presently, for I'm so fearfully tired. I wish the lady would come—I do wish she would! If she knew that I was in danger she might hurry to me—that is, if she's as kind and beautiful as Kitty tells me she is. Oh, dear! oh, dear! I know I shall fall soon. Well, if I do I'm certain to sink into the bog, and—Rupert will have Avonsyde. Oh, poor mother! how she will wonder where I've got to! Now, I really don't want to sink in a bog even for Rupert's sake, so I must keep my presence of mind and try to be as cheerful as possible. Suppose I sing a little—that's much better than crying and will make as much noise in case any one is passing by."

So Phil raised a sweet and true little voice and tried to rival the robins. But a poor little half-starving boy stuck fast in a bog is so far a remarkable spectacle that the robins themselves, coming out after the shower to dry their feathers, looked at him in great wonder. He was a brave little boy and he sang sweetly, and they liked the music he made very well; but what was he doing there? Perching themselves on the boughs of some low trees which grew near the brook,

they glanced shyly at him out of their bright eyes, and then quite unknowingly performed a little mission for his rescue. They flew to meet a lady whom they knew well and from whose hand they often pecked crumbs, and they induced this lady to turn aside from her accustomed path and to follow them, as they hopped and flew in front of her; for the lady was suddenly reminded by the robins of some little birds at home for which she meant to gather a particular weed which grew near the bog.

The rain was over, the sun was again shining brightly, when little Phil, tired, sick unto death, raised his eyes and saw, with the sunlight behind her, a lady, graceful and gracious in appearance, coming down the path. He did not notice whether her dress was gray or green; he only knew that to him she looked radiant and lovely.

"Oh, you have been a long time coming, but please save me now!" he sobbed, and then he did tumble into the bog, for he suddenly fainted away.

### **CHAPTER XIII.—ONE MORE SECRET.**

When Phil opened his eyes he was quite sure for several moments that all his best dreams were realized. He was in a very tiny parlor (he loved small rooms, for they reminded him of the cottage at the back of the garden); he was lying full length on an old-fashioned and deliciously soft sofa, and a lady with a tender and beautiful face was bending over him; the firelight flickered in a cozy little grate and the sunlight poured in through a latticed window. The whole room was a picture of comfort, and Phil drew a deep sigh of happiness.

"Have you given mother the bag of gold? And are we back in the cottage at the back of the garden?" he murmured.

"Drink this, dear," said the quiet, grave voice, and then a cup of delicious hot milk was held to his little blue lips, and after he had taken several sips of the milk he was able to sit up and look round him.

"You are the lady of the forest, aren't you? But where's your green dress?"

"I am a lady who lives in the forest, my dear child. I am so glad I came down to that dreadful bog and rescued you. What is your name, my dear little boy?"

"My name? I am Phil Lovel. Do you know, it is so sad, but I am going to have Avonsyde. I am the heir. I don't want it at all. It was principally about Avonsyde I came out this morning to find you. Yes, I had a great escape in the bog, but I felt almost sure that you would come to save me. It was very good of you. I am not a strong boy, and I don't suppose I could have stood up in that dreadful cold, damp bog much longer. Although I'm not bad at bearing pain, yet the ache in my legs was getting quite terrible. Well, it's all right now, and I'm so glad I've found you. Are you very rich, lady of the forest? And may I tell you everything?"

Had Phil not been absorbed in his own little remarks he might have noticed a curious change coming over the lady's face. For one brief instant her eyes seemed to blaze, her brows contracted as if with pain, and the band with which she held the restorative to Phil's lips trembled. Whatever emotion overcame her its effect was brief. When the boy, wondering at her silence, raised his eyes to look at her, it was only a sweet and quiet glance which met his.

"I have heard of little Philip Lovel," she said. "I am glad to see you. I am glad I saved you from a terrible fate. If no one had come to your rescue you must eventually have sunk in that dreadful bog."

"But I was quite sure you would come," answered Phil. "Do you know, I went out this morning expecting to meet you. Betty and I have spoken of you so very, very often. We have made up lovely stories about you; but you have always been in green and your face dazzled. Now you are not in green. You are in a dark, plain dress—as plain a dress as mother used to wear when we lived in the house behind the garden; and though you are beautiful—yes, I really think you are beautiful—you don't dazzle. Well, I am glad I have met you. Did you know that a little boy was wandering all over the forest looking for you to-day? And did you come out on purpose to meet him and to save him? Oh, I trust, I do trust you have got the gift with you!"

"I don't quite understand you, my dear little boy," said the lady. "No, I did not come to meet you. I simply took a walk between the showers. You are talking too much and too fast; you must be quiet now, and I will put this warm rug over you and you can try to sleep. When you are quite rested and warm, Nancy, my servant, will take you back to Avonsyde."

Phil was really feeling very tired; his limbs ached; his throat was dry and parched; he was only too glad to lie still on that soft sofa in that tiny room and not pretend to be anything but a sadly exhausted little boy. He even closed his eyes at the lady's bidding, but he soon opened them again, for he liked to watch her as she sat by the fire. No, she was scarcely dazzling, but Phil could quite believe that she might be considered beautiful. Her eyes were dark and gray; her hair was also dark, very soft, and very abundant; her mouth had an expression about it which Phil seemed partly to know, which puzzled him, for he felt so sure that he had seen just such resolute

and well cut lips in some one else.

"It's Rachel!" he said suddenly under his breath. "How very, very queer that Rachel should have a look of the lady of the forest!"

He half-roused himself to watch the face, which began more and more to remind him of Rachel's.

But as he looked there came a curious change over the lady's expressive face. The firm lips trembled; a look of agonized yearning and longing filled the pathetic gray eyes, and a few words said aloud with unspeakable sadness reached the little boy.

"So Kitty speaks of me—little, little Kitty speaks of me."

The lady covered her face with her hands, and Phil, listening very attentively, thought he heard her sob.

After this he really closed his eyes and went to sleep. When he awoke the winter's light had disappeared, the curtains were drawn across the little window, and a reading-lamp with a rose-colored shade made the center of the table look pretty. There was a cozy meal spread for two on the board, and when Phil opened his eyes and came back to the world of reality, the lady was bending over the fire and making some crisp toast.

"You have had a nice long sleep," she said in a cheerful voice. "Now will you come to the table and have some tea? Here is a fresh egg for you, which Brownie, my dear speckled hen, laid while you were asleep. You feel much better, don't you? Now you must make a very good tea, and when you have finished Nancy will take you as far as Rufus' Stone, where I have asked a man with a chaise to meet her; he will drive you back to Avonsyde in less than an hour."

Phil felt quite satisfied with these arrangements. He also discovered that he was very hungry; so he tumbled off the sofa, and with his light-brown hair very much tossed and his eyes shining, took his place at the tea-table. There he began to chatter, and did not at all know that the lady was leading him on to tell her as much as possible about Rachel and Kitty and about his life at Avonsyde. He answered all her questions eagerly, for he had by no means got over his impression that she was really the lady whom he had come to seek.

"I don't want Avonsyde, you know," he said suddenly, speaking with great earnestness. "Oh, please, if you are the lady of the forest and can give those who seek you a gift, let my gift be a bag of gold! I will take it back to mother in the chaise to-night, and then—and then—poor mother! My mother is very poor, lady, but when I give her your gold she will be rich, and then we can both go away from Avonsyde."

For a moment or two the lady with the sad gray eyes looked with wonder and perplexity at little Phil—some alarm even was depicted on her face, but it suddenly cleared and lightened. She rose from her chair, and going up to the child stooped and kissed him.

"You don't want Avonsyde. Then I am your friend, little Phil Lovel. Here are three kisses—one for you, one for Rachel, one for Kitty. Give my kisses as from yourself to the little girls. But I am not what you think me, Phil. I am no supernatural lady who can give gifts or can dazzle with unusual beauty. I am just a plain woman who lives here most of the year and earns her bread with hard and daily labor. I cannot give money, for I have not got it. I can be your friend, however. Not a powerful friend—certainly not; but no true friendship is to be lightly thrown away. Why, my little man, how disappointed you look! Are you really going to cry?"

"Oh, no, I won't cry!" said Phil, but with a very suspicious break in his voice; "but I am so tired of all the secrets and of pretending to be strong and all that. If you are not the lady and have not got the bag of gold, mother and I will have to stay on at Avonsyde, for mother is very poor and she would starve if we went away. You don't know what a dreadful weight it is on one's mind always to be keeping secrets."

"I am very sorry, Phil. As it happens I do know what a secret means. I am very sorry for you, more particularly as I am just going to add to your secrets. I want you to promise not to tell any one at Avonsyde about my little house in the forest nor about me. I think you will keep my secret when I tell you that if it is known it will do me very grave injury."

"I would not injure you," said Phil, raising his sweet eyes to her face. "I do hate secrets and I find them dreadfully hard to keep, but one more won't greatly matter, only I do wish you were the real lady of the forest."

When Nancy came back to the little cottage after disposing of Phil comfortably in the chaise and giving the driver a great many emphatic directions about him, she went straight into her lady's presence. She was a privileged old servant, and she did not dream of knocking at the door of the little sitting-room; no, she opened it boldly and came in, many words crowding to her lips.

"This will upset her fine," she muttered under her breath. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! I'll have to do a lot of talking to-night. I'm not one to say she gives way often, but when she do, why, she do, and that's the long and short of it."

Nancy opened the door noisily and entered the room with a world of purpose depicted on her honest, homely face.

"Now, ma'am," she began, "I have seen him off as snug and safe as possible, and the driver promises to deliver him sure as sure into his mother's arms within the hour. A pretty sort of a mother she must be to let a bit of a babe like that wander about since before the dawn and never find him yet. Now, ma'am, you're not settling down to that needlework at this hour? Oh, and you do look pale! Why, Mrs. Lovel, what's the use of overdoing it?"

The lady so addressed raised her sad eyes to the kindly pair looking down at her and said gently:

"I am determined to be at least as brave as that brave little boy. He would not cry, although he longed to. I must either work or cry, so I choose to work. Nancy, how many yards of the lace are now finished?"

"Ten, I should think," answered Nancy, whose countenance expressed strong relief at the turn the conversation had taken. "I should say there was ten yards done, ma'am, but I will go upstairs and count them over if you like."

"I wish you would. If there are ten yards upstairs there are nearly two here; that makes just the dozen. And you think it is quite the best lace I have made yet, Nancy?"

"Oh, ma'am, beautiful is no word; and how your poor eyes stand the fine work passes my belief. But now, now, where's the hurry for to-night? Why, your hands do shake terrible. Let me make you a cup of cocoa and light a fire in your bedroom, and you go to bed nice and early, Mrs. Lovel."

Mrs. Lovel threw down her work with a certain gesture of impatience.

"I should lie awake all night," said Mrs. Lovel. "Do you know, Nancy, that the little boy spoke of Kitty? He said my baby Kitty often mentioned the lady of the forest—that he and she both did. At first I thought that he meant me and that Kitty really spoke of her mother; but now I believe he was alluding to some imaginary forest lady."

"The green forest lady," interposed Nancy. "I don't say, ma'am, that she's altogether a fancy, though. There's them—yes, there's them whose words may be relied on who are said to have spoke with her."

"Well, no matter. I am finishing this lace to-night, Nancy, because I mean to go to London to-morrow."

"You, ma'am? Oh, oh, and it ain't three months since you were there!"

"Yes, I must go. I want to see my husband's lawyers. Nancy, this suspense is killing me!"

"Oh, my poor, dear, patient lady! But it ain't so many months now to wait. Miss Rachel's birthday comes in May."

"Nancy, the mother-hunger is driving me wild. If I could only see them both and kiss them once I should be satisfied."

"You shall kiss them hundreds of times when May comes," answered the old servant. "And they are well and bonny and Miss Rachel loves you; and the little one, why, of course her heart will go out to you when you hold her in your arms again."

"Six years!" repeated the poor lady, clasping her hands, letting the lovely lace fall to the ground, and gazing into the glowing fire in the grate. "Six years for a mother to starve! Oh, Nancy, how could good women be so cruel? I believe Miss Grizel and Miss Katharine are good. How could they be so cruel?"

"Old maids!" said Nancy, with a little snort. "Do you suppose, ma'am, that those old ladies know anything of the mother feel? Well, Mrs. Lovel, the children are two bonny little lassies, and you have given up much for them. You did it for their good, ma'am—that they should have full and plenty and be provided for. You did it all out of real self-denial, ma'am."

"I made up my mind the day Kitty fainted for want of food," answered Mrs. Lovel. "I made up my mind and I never flinched; but oh! Nancy, think of its being in vain! For, after all, that little boy is the true heir. He is a dear little fellow, and although I ought to hate him I can't. He is the true heir; and if so, you know, Nancy, that my little girls come back to me. How have I really bettered them by giving them six years of luxury when, after all, they must return to my small life?"

"And to the best of mothers," answered Nancy. "And to two or three hundred pounds put by careful; and they hearty and bonny and Miss Rachel's education half-complete. No, ma'am, they are not worse off, but a deal better off for what you have done for them—that's if the worst comes. But how can you say that that little boy will have Avonsyde? Why, he hasn't no strength in him—not a bit. Thin is no word for him, and he's as light as a feather, and so white! Why, I carried him in my arms as far as the Stone, and I didn't feel as if I had nothing in them. Why, ma'am, all the country round knows that the ladies at Avonsyde are looking out for a strong heir;

they go direct against the will if they give the old place to a sickly one. No, ma'am, Master Phil Lovel ain't the heir for Avonsyde. And is it likely, ma'am, that the ladies would be putting advertisements in all the papers, foreign and otherwise, for the last five years and a half, and sending over special messengers to the other side of the globe, and never yet a strong, hearty, real heir turn up? Why, of course, Mrs. Lovel, he ain't to be found, and that's why he don't come."

Mrs. Lovel smiled faintly.

"Well, Nancy," she said, "I must at least go to town to-morrow, and as that is the case I will take your advice and go up to my room now. No, I could not eat anything. Good-night, dear Nancy."

When Mrs. Lovel left the little sitting-room Nancy stayed behind to give it a good "redding-up" as she expressed it. With regard to sitting-rooms, and indeed all rooms arranged for human habitation, Nancy was a strict disciplinarian; rigid order was her motto. Chairs placed demurely in rows; a table placed exactly in the middle of the room; books arranged at symmetrical intervals round it; each ornament corresponding exactly to its fellow; blinds drawn to a certain level—these were her ideas of a nice cheerful apartment. Could she have had her own choice with regard to carpets, she would have had them with a good dash of orange in them; her curtains should always be made of moreen and be of a bright cardinal tone. A tidy and a cheerful room was her delight; she shuddered at the tendencies, so-called artistic, of the present day. Putting the little sitting-room in order now, her feet knocked against something which gave forth a metallic sound; stooping, she picked up from the floor Phil's tankard. She examined it curiously and brought it to the light. The quaint motto inscribed on one of its sides—"Tyde what may"—was well known to her as the motto of the house of Lovel.

"I know nothing about this old cup," she said to herself; "it may or may not be of value; but it looks old—uncommon old; and it has the family coat of arms and them outlandish, meaningless words on it. Of course it was little Master Phil brought it in to-day and forgot all about it. Well, well, it may mean something or it may not; but my name ain't Nancy White if I don't set it by for the present and bide my time about returning it. Ah, my dear, dear lady, it won't be Nancy's fault if your bonny little girls don't get their own out of Avonsyde!"

#### **CHAPTER XIV.—THE AUSTRALIANS.**

Messrs. Baring & Baring, the lawyers who transacted all the business matters for the Misses Lovel, were much worried about Christmas-time with clients. The elder Mr. Baring was engaged with a gentleman who had come from the country to see him on special and urgent business, and in consequence his son, a bright-looking, intelligent man of thirty, was obliged to ask two gentlemen to wait in his anteroom or to call again, while he himself interviewed a sorrowful-looking lady who required immediate attention.

The gentlemen decided to wait the younger Mr. Baring's leisure, and in consequence he was able to attend to his lady client without impatience.

"The business which brings you to me just before Christmas, Mrs. Lovel, must be of the utmost importance," he began.

Mrs. Lovel raised her veil and a look of intense pain filled her eyes.

"It is of importance to me," she said, "for it means—yes, I greatly fear it means that my six years of bitter sacrifice have come to nothing and the heir is found."

Mr. Baring raised his eyebrows; he did not trouble to inquire to whom she had alluded. After a brief pause he said quietly:

"There is no reason whatever for you to despair. At this present moment my father and I are absolutely aware of two claimants for the Avonsyde heirship—only one can inherit the place and both may prove unsuitable. You know that the ladies will not bequeath their property to any one who cannot prove direct descent from the elder branch; also the heir must be strong and vigorous. Up to the present neither my father nor I have seen any conclusive proof of direct succession. We are quite aware that a little boy of the name of Lovel is at present on a visit at Avonsyde, but we also know that the Misses Lovel will take no definite steps in the matter without our sanction. I would not fret beforehand, Mrs. Lovel. It seems tame and old-fashioned advice, but I should recommend you for your own sake to hope for the best."

"I will do so," said Mrs. Lovel, rising to her feet. "I will do so, even though I can no longer buoy myself up with false dreams. I feel absolutely convinced that before Rachel's birthday an heir will be found for the old place. Let it be so—I shall not struggle. It may be best for my children to come back to me; it will certainly be best for me to have them with me again. I won't take up any more of your time this morning, Mr. Baring."

"Well, come again to-morrow morning. I have got some more work for you and of quite a profitable kind. By the way, the new claimants—they have just come from Australia and I am to see them in a moment—are in a desperate taking about an old tankard which seems to have been a family heirloom and would go far to prove their descent. The tankard is lost; also a packet of

valuable letters. You see, my dear madam, their claim, as it stands at present, is anything but complete."

Mrs. Lovel said a few more words to Mr. Baring, and then promising to call on the morrow, left him. To effect her exit from the house she had to pass through the room where the Australians were waiting. Her interview had excited her; her pale face was slightly flushed; her veil was up. Perhaps the slight color on those usually pale cheeks had brought back some of the old and long-forgotten girlish bloom. The winter's day was sunshiny, and as she walked through the waiting-room the intense light throwing her features into strong relief, so strongly and so vividly did that slight and rather worn figure stand out that a man who had been sitting quietly by started forward with an exclamation:

"Surely I am addressing Rachel Cunningdale?"

The lady raised her eyes to the great, strong, bearded face.

"You are Rupert Lovel," she answered quietly.

"I am, and this is my boy. Here, Rupert, lad, this lady was once your mother's greatest friend. Why, Rachel, it is twenty years since we met. You were scarcely grown up and such a bright bit of a girl, and now——"

"And now," answered Mrs. Lovel, "I have been a wife and a mother. I am now a widow and, I may say it, childless; and, Rupert, the strangest part of all, my name too is Lovel."

"What a queer coincidence. Well, I am delighted to meet you. Where are you staying? My boy and I have just come over from Australia, and your friend, my dear wife, she is gone, Rachel. It was an awful blow; we won't speak of it. I should like to see more of you. Where shall we meet?"

Mrs. Lovel gave the address of the very humble lodgings which she occupied when in London.

"The boy and I will look you up, then, this evening. I fear our time now belongs to the lawyer. Good-by—good-by. I am delighted to have met you."

Mr. Baring prided himself on being an astute reader of character, but even he was somewhat amazed when these fresh claimants for the Avonsyde property occupied quite half an hour of his valuable time by asking him numerous and sundry questions with regard to that pale and somewhat insignificant client of his, Mrs. Lovel. Mr. Baring was a cautious man, and he let out as little as he could; but the Lovels, both father and son, were furnished with at least a few clues to a very painful story. So excited and interested was Rupert Lovel, senior, that he even forgot the important business that had brought him all the way from Australia, and the lawyer had himself gently to divert his client's thoughts into the necessary channel.

Finally the father and son left the Barings' office a good deal perturbed and excited and with no very definite information to guide them.

"Look here, Rupert, lad," said the elder Lovel. "It's about the saddest thing in all the world, that poor soul depriving herself of her children and then hoping against hope that the heir won't turn up. "Why, of course, lad, you are the heir; not a doubt of that. Poor Rachel! and she was your mother's friend."

"But we won't set up our claim until we are certain about everything—will we, father?" asked young Lovel. "Did you not hear Mr. Baring say that many false heirs had laid claim to Avonsyde? The old ladies want some one who can prove his descent, and we have not got all the papers—have we, father?"

"No. It is an extraordinary thing about those letters being lost, and also the old tankard. But they are safe to turn up. Who could have stolen them? Perhaps Gabrielle has already written with news of their safety. We might have a cab now to the General Post-office. I have no doubt a budget of letters awaits me there. Why, Rupert, what are you looking so melancholy about? The tankard and the letters may even now be found. What's the matter, lad? It doesn't do for a hearty young chap like you to wear such a dismal face. I tell you your claim is as good as established."

"But I don't know that I want it to be established," said young Rupert Lovel. "It is not nice to think of breaking that lady's heart. I don't know what Gabrielle would say to doing anything so cruel to our mother's friend."

"Tut, lad, what a lot of rubbish you talk! If you are the heir you are, and you can't shirk your responsibility, even if you don't quite like it. Well, we'll have a long talk with Rachel and get to the bottom of everything to-night."

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"And now, Rachel, you must just confide in me and make me your friend. Oh, nonsense! Were you not my wife's friend? and don't I remember you a bit of a bonny lass, as young, quite as young as Rupert here? I have got two young daughters of my own, and don't you suppose I feel for a woman who is the mother of girls? You tell me your whole story, Rachel. How is it that you, who have married a Lovel of Avonsyde, should be practically shut away from the house and

unrecognized by the family? When I met you last in Melbourne you looked free enough from cares, and your father was fairly well off. You were just starting for Europe—don't you remember? Now tell me your history from that day forward."

"With the exception of my old servant, Nancy, I have not given my confidence to any human being for years," answered Mrs. Lovel. Then she paused. "Yes, I will trust you, Rupert, and my story can be told in a few words; but first satisfy me about one thing. When I was at Mr. Baring's to-day he told me that a fresh claimant had appeared on the scene for the Avonsyde property. Is your boy the claimant?"

"He is, Rachel. We will go into that presently."

Mrs. Lovel sighed.

"It is so hard not to welcome you," she said, "but you destroy my hopes. However, listen to my tale. I will just tell it to you as briefly as possible. Shortly after we came to England my father died. He was not well off, as we supposed; he died heavily in debt and I was penniless. I was not sufficiently highly educated to earn my bread as a teacher—as a teacher I should have starved; but I had a taste for millinery and I got employment in a milliner's shop in a good part of London. I stayed in that shop for about a year. At the end of that time I married Valentine Lovel. We had very little money, but we were perfectly happy; and even though Valentine's people refused to acknowledge me, their indifference during my dear husband's lifetime did not take an iota from my happiness. Two babies were born, both little girls. I know Valentine longed for a son, and often said that the birth of a boy would most probably lead to a reconciliation with his father. No son, however, arrived, and my dear husband died of consumption when my eldest little girl was five years old. I won't dwell on his death, nor on one or two agonized letters which he wrote to his hard old father. He died without one token of reconciliation coming to cheer him from Avonsyde; and when I laid him in the grave I can only say that I think my heart had grown hard against all the world.

"I had the children to live for, and it is literally true that I had no time to sit down and cry for Valentine's loss. The little girls had a faithful nurse; her name was Nancy White; she is with me still. She took care of my dear, beautiful babies while I earned money to put bread in all our mouths. I had literally not a penny in the world except what I could earn, for the allowance Valentine had always received from his father was discontinued at his death. I went back to the shop where I had worked as a milliner before my marriage; there happened to be a vacancy, and they were good enough to take me back. Of course we were fearfully poor and lived in wretched lodgings; but however much Nancy and I denied ourselves, the children wanted for nothing. They were lovely children—uncommon. Any one could see that they had come of a proud old race. The eldest girl was called after her father and me; she was not like Valentine in appearance, neither did she resemble me. I am dark, but Rachel's eyes were of the deepest, darkest brown; her hair was black as night and her complexion a deep, glowing rosy brown. She was a splendid creature; so large, so noble-looking—not like either of us; but with a look—yes, Rupert, with a look of that boy of yours. Kitty resembled her father and was a delicate, lovely, ethereal little creature; she was as fair as Rachel was dark, but she was not strong, and I often feared she inherited some of Valentine's delicacy.

"For two years I worked for the children and supported them. For a year and a half all went fairly well. But then I caught cold; for a time I was ill—too ill to work—and my situation at the milliner's shop was quickly filled up. I had a watch and a few valuable rings and trinkets which Valentine had given me. I sold them one by one and we lived on the little money they fetched. But the children were only half-fed, and one wretched day of a hot and stifling July Kitty fainted away quietly in my arms. That decided me. I made up my mind on the spot. I had a diamond ring, the most valuable of all my jewels, and the one I cared for most, for Valentine had given it me on our engagement. I took it out and sold it. I was fortunate; I got £10 for it. I hurried off at once and bought material, and made up with Nancy's help lovely and picturesque dresses for both the children. I believe I had a correct eye for color, and I dressed Rachel in rich dark plush with lace, but Kitty was all in white. When the clothes were complete I put them on, and Nancy kissed the pets and fetched a cab for me, and we drove away to Waterloo. I had so little money left that I could only afford third-class tickets, but I took them to Lyndhurst Road, and when we arrived there drove straight to Avonsyde. The children were as excited and pleased as possible. They knew nothing of any coming parting, and were only anxious to see their grandfather and the house which their father had so often spoken to them about. They were children who had never been scolded; no harsh words had ever been addressed to them, consequently they knew nothing of fear. When they got into the lovely old place they were wild with delight. 'Kitty,' said Rachel, 'let us go and find our grandfather.' Before I could restrain them they were off; but indeed I had no wish to hinder them, for I felt sure they would plead their own cause best. We had arrived at a critical moment, for that was the last day of the old squire's life. I saw his daughters—my sisters-in-law. We had a private interview and made terms with one another. These were the terms: The ladies of Avonsyde would take my darlings and care for them and educate them, and be, as they expressed it, 'mothers' to them, on condition that I gave them up. I said I would not give them up absolutely. I told the ladies quite plainly why I brought them at all. I said it was out of no love or respect for the cruel grandfather who had disowned them; it was out of no love or respect for the sisters, who did not care what became of their brother's children: it was simply and entirely out of my great mother-love for the children themselves. I would rather part with them than see them starve or suffer. 'But,' I added, 'there are limits even to my self-denial. I will not give them up

forever. Name the term of years, but there must be a limit to the parting.'

"Then Miss Katharine, who seemed kinder-hearted than her sister, gave me one or two compassionate glances, and even said, 'Poor thing!' once or twice under her breath.

"I did not take the slightest notice of her. I repeated again, more distinctly: 'The parting must have a limit; name a term of years.' Then the ladies decided that on Rachel's thirteenth birthday—she was just seven then—I should come back to Avonsyde, and if I so wished and my little girls so wished I should have one or both of them back again. The ladies told me at the same time of their father's will. They said that a most vigorous search was going to be commenced at once for an heir of the elder branch. At the same time they both stated their conviction that no such heir would be forthcoming, for they said that no trace or tidings had been heard of Rupert Lovel from the day, nearly two hundred years ago, when he left Avonsyde. Their conviction was that Rupert had died without descendants. In that case, both the ladies said, the little girls must inherit the property; and Miss Griselda said further that she would try to make arrangements with her father to so alter his will that if no heir had been found on Rachel's thirteenth birthday, Valentine's children should have a life-interest in Avonsyde. If, on the other hand, the heir was found before that date, they would also be provided for, although she did not mention how.

"These arrangements satisfied me. They were the best terms I could make, and I went away without bidding either of my children good-by. I could bear a great deal, but that parting I could not have endured. I went back to London and to Nancy, and in a week's time I heard from Miss Lovel. She told me that her father was dead, but that the necessary codicil had been added to the will, and that if no heir appeared before Rachel's thirteenth birthday my children would have a life-interest in the place, and they themselves would be bound over to go on with the search. Miss Lovel further added that in any case the children should be educated and cared for in the best possible manner.

"Those were the entire contents of her letter. She sent me no message from my darlings, and from that hour to this I have never heard from her. From that hour, too, my terrible, terrible heart-hunger began. No one knows what I suffered, what I suffer for want of the children. Were the sacrifice to be made again, I don't think I could go through it, and yet God only knows. For two or three years I made a very scanty livelihood; then I was fortunate enough to invent a certain showy-looking lace. I could make my own patterns and do it very quickly by hand. To my great surprise it took, and from that hour I have had more orders than I can execute. My wants are very few and I have even saved money: I have over £400 put away. My dream of dreams is to have my children back with me—that is my selfish dream. Of course it will be best for them to be rich and to have the old place, but in any case I will not consent to so absolute a separation as now exists between us. A year ago a gentleman and his wife who had been kind to me, although they knew nothing of my story, asked me if I would like to take charge of a little cottage of theirs in the New Forest. It is a tiny place, apparently lost in underwood and bracken, which they themselves occupy for a fortnight or so in the course of the year. The temptation was too great. I accepted the offer, and since then I have lived, so to speak, on the threshold of the children's home. One day I saw Rachel. Well, I must not dwell on that. I did not speak to her. I fled from her, although she is my first-born child. It is now December. May will come by and by, and then the greatness of my trouble will be over."

Mrs. Lovel paused. The Australians, father and son, had listened with breathless interest to her words.

"I don't want to take the property from your children," said young Rupert, with passion. "After what you have said and suffered, I hate to be heir of Avonsyde."

"I forgot to mention," continued Mrs. Lovel, "that a little boy is now at Avonsyde of the name of Philip who is supposed to be the real heir. He is a little pale-faced boy with beautiful eyes and a very winning manner, and it is reported that the old ladies have both lost their hearts to him. I cannot say that I think he looks strong, but he is a dear little boy."

"That must be our Phil," said young Rupert, speaking with great interest. "Of course, father that explains his queer letter to me. Poor dear little Phil!"

"Just like his mother," growled the elder Lovel. "A mischievous, interfering, muddle-headed woman, sure to put her foot in a thing and safe to make mischief. Forgive me, Rachel, but I feel strongly about this. Has the boy got a mother with him?"

"Yes."

"You are right then, Rupert. It is your Cousin Phil. Poor little chap! he has no voice in the matter, I am sure. What a meddling woman that mother of his is! Well, Rachel, my boy and I will say good-night now. These revelations have pained and bewildered me. I must sleep over all this news. Don't leave London until you hear from me. I think you may trust me, and—God bless you!"

## **CHAPTER XV.—WAS HE ACTING?**

"I can't help it, Kitty; you really must not ask me. I'm a very much puzzled boy. I'm—I'm—Kitty,



did you ever have to pull yourself up short just when you wanted to say something most interesting? I'm always pulling myself up short, and I'm dreadfully, dreadfully tired of it."

"It must be something like giving a sudden jerk to one of our ponies," said Kitty. "I know—it must be a horrid feeling. Does it set your teeth on edge, Phil, and do you quite tremble with impatience?"

"Yes," said Phil, throwing himself full length on the floor of the old armory, where he and Kitty had ensconced themselves on a pouring wet day early in the month of February. "Yes, Kitty, if feeling very unpleasant all over means setting your teeth on edge, I do know it. I'm a little boy with lots of secrets, and I never can tell them, not to you nor to anybody at Avonsyde—no, not to anybody. I'll get accustomed to it in time, but I don't like it, for naturally I'm the kind of boy who can't keep a secret."

"What a horrid man you'll grow up!" said Kitty, eying her cousin with marked disapproval. "You'll be so reserved and cross-grained and disagreeable. You'll have been pulled up short so often that you'll look jerky. Oh, dear me, Phil, I wouldn't be you for a great deal!"

"I wouldn't be myself if I could help it," said Phil, with a sigh which he tried hard to smother. "Oh, I say, Kitty-cat, will you coax Aunt Grizel to take us into Southampton soon? I am quite certain my letter must be waiting for me. You don't know, Kitty, you can't possibly guess what a letter from his dearest friend means to a rather lonely kind of boy like me."

"You had better ask Aunt Grizel yourself," answered Kitty, with a little pout and a little frown. "She's so fond of you, Phil, that she'll do it. She'll take you to Southampton if you coax her and if you put on that funny kind of sad look in your eyes. It's the kind of look our spaniel puts on, and I never can say 'No' to him when he has it. I don't know how you do it, Phil, nor why you do it; but you have a very sorry look in your eyes when you like. Is it because you're always and always missing your dearest friend?"

"It's partly that," answered Phil. "Oh, you don't know what he's like, Kitty! He's most splendid. He has got such a grand figure, and he walks in such a manly way, and his eyes are as dark and wonderful-looking as Rachel's, and—and—oh, Kitty, was I telling you anything? Please forget that I said anything at all; please don't remember on any account whatever that I have got a dearest friend!"

"I think you are perfectly horrid!" said Kitty, stamping her foot. "Just the minute we begin talking about anything interesting you give one of those jerks, just as if you had a cruel rider on your back. I can't think what it all means. If you have a dearest friend, there's no harm in it; and if you had a Betty to take care of you, there's no harm in that; and if you lived in a cottage in a plantation, that isn't a sin; and if you did go into the forest to meet the lady, and you didn't meet her, although you were nearly swallowed up by a bog, why—why—what's the matter, Phil? How white you are!"

"Nothing," said Phil, suddenly pressing his face down on the cushion against which he was lying—"nothing—Kit—I—" He uttered one or two groans. "Fetch me a little water, please!"

The child's face had suddenly become livid. He clinched his hands and pressed them against his temples, and buried that poor little drawn, piteous face further and deeper into the soft cushion. At last the paroxysm of pain passed; he panted, raised himself slowly, and struggled to his feet.

"Kitty!"

But Kitty was gone. Terrified, the little girl ran through the hall. The first person she met was Mrs. Lovel, who, dressed gracefully in a soft black silk, trimmed with lace, was walking languidly in the direction of the great drawing-room.

"You had better come!" said Kitty, rushing up to her and seizing her hand. "Phil is very dreadfully ill. I think Phil will die. He's in the armory. Come at once!"

Without waiting for the lady's answer, little Kitty turned on her heel and flew back the way she had come. Phil had scarcely time to struggle to his feet, scarcely time to notice her absence, before she was back again at his side. Putting her arms around his neck, she covered his face with passionate kisses.

"Phil, Phil, I was so frightened about you! Are you better? Do say you are better. Oh, I love you so much, and I won't be jealous, even if you have got a dearest friend!"

Phil could stand, but the sudden attack he had passed through was so sharp that words could scarcely come to his lips. Kitty's embrace almost overpowered him, but he was so innately unselfish that he would not struggle to free himself, fearing to pain her.

His mother's step was heard approaching. He made a great effort to stand upright and formed his little lips into a voiceless whistle.

"Why, Phil, you have been overtiring yourself," said Mrs. Lovel. "Oh, Kitty, how you have exaggerated! Phil does not look at all bad. I suppose you were both romping, and never ceased

until you lost your breath; or you were having one of your pretense games, and Phil thought he would frighten you by making out he was ill. Ah, Phil, Phil, what an actor you are! Now, my dear boy, I want you to come up to your bedroom with me. I want to consult you about one or two matters. Fancy, Kitty, a mother consulting her little boy! Ought not Phil to be proud? But he is really such a strong, brave little man that I cannot help leaning on him. It was really unkind of you to pretend that time, Phil, and to give little Kitty such a fright."

Phil's beautiful brown eyes were raised to his mother's face; then they glanced at Kitty; then a smile—a very sorry smile Kitty considered it—filled them, and giving his little thin hand to his mother, he walked out of the armory by her side.

Kitty lingered for a moment in the room which her companion had deserted; then she dashed away across the brightly lit hall, through several cozy and cheery apartments, until she came to a room brilliant with firelight and lamplight, where Rachel lay at her ease in a deep arm-chair with a fairy story open on her knee.

"Phil is the best actor in all the world, Rachel!" she exclaimed. "He turned as white as a sheet just now. He turned gray, and he groaned most awfully, and he wouldn't speak, and I thought he was dying, and I flew for some one, and I found Mrs. Lovel, and she came back to Phil, and she laughed, and said there was nothing the matter, and that Phil was only acting. Isn't it wonderful, Rachel, that Phil can turn pale when he likes, and groan in such a terrible way? Oh, it made me shiver to see him! I do hope he won't act being ill again."

"He didn't act," said Rachel in a contemptuous voice; "that's what his mother said. I wouldn't have her for a mother for a great deal. I'd rather have no mother. Poor little Phil didn't act. Don't talk nonsense, Kitty."

"Then if he didn't act he must be very ill," said Kitty. Then, her blue eyes filling with tears, she added: "I do love him so! I love him even though he has a dearest friend."

Rachel stretched out her hand and drew Kitty into a corner of her own luxurious chair. She had not seen Phil, and Kitty's account of him scarcely made her uneasy.

"Even if he was a little ill, he's all right now," she said. "Stay with me, Kitty-cat; I scarcely ever see you. I think Phil is quite your dearest friend."

"Quite," answered Kitty solemnly. "I love him better than any one, except you, Rachel; only I do wish—yes, I do—that he had not so many secrets."

"He never told you what happened to him that day in the forest, did he, Kitty?"

"Oh, no; he pulled himself up short. He was often going to, but he always pulled himself up. "What a dreadfully jerky man he'll grow up, Rachel."

"He never quite told you?" continued Rachel. "Well, I don't want him to tell me, for I know."

"Rachel!"

"Yes, I know all about it. I'm going to see him presently, and I'll tell him that I know his secret. Now, Kitty, you need not stare at me, for I'm never going to breathe it to any one except to Phil himself. There, Kit, the dressing-gong has sounded; we must go and get ready for supper."

Meanwhile Mrs. Lovel, taking Phil's hand, had led him out of the armory and to the foot of the winding stone stairs. Once there she paused. The look of placid indifference left her face; she dropped the smiling mask she had worn in Kitty's presence, and stooping down lifted the boy into her arms and carried him tenderly up the winding stairs, never pausing nor faltering nor groaning under his weight. When they reached the tower bedroom she laid him on his little bed, and going to a cupboard in the wall unlocked it and took from thence a small bottle; she poured a few drops from the bottle into a spoon and put the restorative between the boy's blue lips. He swallowed it eagerly, smiled, shook himself, and sat up in bed.

"Thank you, mother. I am much better now," he said affectionately.

Mrs. Lovel locked the door, stirred the fire in the old-fashioned grate into a cheerful blaze, lit two or three candles, drew the heavy curtains across the windows, and then dragging a deep arm-chair opposite the glowing hearth, she lifted Phil again into her arms, and sitting down in the comfortable seat, rocked him passionately to her breast.

"My boy, my boy, was it very bad, very awful?"

"Yes, mother; but it's all right now."

"Did Kitty hear you groan, Phil?"

"Yes, mother; but not the loudest groans, for I buried my head in the cushion. I'm all right now, mother. I can go down again in a minute or two."

"No, Phil, you shan't go down to-night. I'll manage it with the old ladies; and Phil, darling,

darling, we have almost won; you won't have to pretend anything much longer. On the 5th of May, on Rachel's birthday, you are to be proclaimed the heir. This is the middle of February; you have only a little more than two months to keep it all up, Phil."

"Oh, yes, mother, it's very difficult, and the pain in my side gets worse, and I don't want it, and I'd rather Rupert had it; but never mind, mammy, you shan't starve."

He stroked his mother's cheek with his little hand, and she rocked him in her arms in an ecstasy of love and fear and longing. At that moment she loved the boy better than the gold. She would have given up all dreams of ease and comfort for herself if she could have secured real health for that most precious little life.

"Mother," said Phil, "I do want to go to Southampton so badly."

"What for, dearest?"

"Because I'm expecting a letter, mother, from Rupert. No, no, don't frown! I can't bear to see you frown. I didn't tell him anything, but I wrote to him, and I asked him to send his answer to the post-office at Southampton, and it must be waiting there now; yes, it must, and I do want to fetch it so dreadfully. Can you manage that I shall go, mother?"

"I'll go for it myself, dear; I'll go to-morrow. There—doesn't mother love her boy? Yes, I'll go for the letter to Southampton to-morrow. There's the supper-gong, Phil. I must go down, but you shan't. I'll bring you up something nice to eat presently."

"Oh, no, please; I couldn't eat. Just let me lie on my bed quite still without talking. Mother, my darling mother, how can I thank you for promising to fetch Rupert's letter?"

Mrs. Lovel laid Phil back on his bed, covered him up warmly, and softly unlocking the door went downstairs.

She had got a shock, a greater shock than she cared to own; but when she entered the long, low, old-fashioned dining-hall where Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine and the two little girls awaited her, her face was smiling and careless as usual. The poor, weak-minded, and bewildered woman had resumed her mask, and no one knew with what an aching heart she sat down to her luxurious meal.

"Is Phil still pretending to be very, very dreadfully ill?" called out Kitty across the table.

Miss Griselda started at Kitty's words, looked anxiously at Mrs. Lovel and at a vacant chair, and spoke.

"Is your boy not well? Is he not coming to supper?" she inquired.

"Phil strained himself a little," answered Mrs. Lovel, "and he had quite a sharp pain in his side—only muscular, I assure you, dear Miss Griselda; nothing to make one the least bit uneasy, but I thought it better to keep him upstairs. He is going to bed early and won't come down again to-night. May I take him up a little supper presently?"

"Poor boy! he must be ravenously hungry," said Miss Griselda in a careless tone. "Strained his side? Dear, dear! children are always hurting themselves. I wanted him to go with me early to-morrow to collect mosses. I intend to drive the light cart myself into the forest, and I meant to take Phil and Kitty with me. Phil is so clever at finding them."

"Oh, he's very strong. He'll be quite ready to go with you, Miss Griselda," answered the little boy's mother; but she bent her head as she spoke, and no one saw how pale her face was.

The meal proceeded somewhat drearily. Kitty was out of spirits at the loss of her favorite companion; Rachel's little face looked scarcely childish, so intensely watchful was its expression; Mrs. Lovel wore her smiling mask; and the two old ladies alone were perfectly tranquil and indifferent.

"May I take Phil up some supper?" suddenly asked Rachel.

Mrs. Lovel suppressed a quick sigh, sat down again in her seat, for she was just rising to go back to Phil, and almost ran her nails into her hands under the table in her efforts to keep down all symptoms of impatience.

"Thank you, dear," said Miss Griselda gratefully. "If you go up to Phil his mother need not trouble herself about him until bedtime. We will adjourn to the drawing-room, if you please, Mrs. Lovel. I am anxious to have another lesson in that new kind of crochet. Katharine, will you give Rachel some supper to take up to Phil?—plenty of supper, please, dear; he's a hearty boy and ought to have abundance to eat."

Miss Katharine smiled, cut a generous slice of cold roast beef, and piled two mince-pies and a cheese-cake on another plate. When she had added to these a large glass of cold milk and some bread-and-butter, she gave the tray to Rachel, and bidding her be careful not to spill her load, took Kitty's hand and went with her into the drawing-room.

Rachel carried her tray carefully as far as the foot of the winding stairs; then looking eagerly up and down and to right and left, she suddenly wheeled round and marched off through many underground and badly lit passages, until she found herself in the neighborhood of the great old-fashioned kitchen. Here she was met not by the cook, but by Mrs. Newbolt, the lady's-maid.

"Oh, Newbolt, you'll do what I want. Phil is ill, and his mother doesn't want any one to know about it. Take all this horrid mess away and give me some strong, strong, beautiful beef tea and a nice little piece of toast. I'll wait here, and you won't be long, will you, dear Newbolt?"

Newbolt loved Phil and detested his mother. With a sudden snort she caught up Rachel's tray, and returned presently with a tempting little meal suited to an invalid.

"If the child is ill I'll come up with you to see him, Miss Rachel," she said.

Phil was lying on his back; his eyes were shut; his face looked very pinched and blue. True, however, to the little Spartan that he was, when he heard Rachel's step he started up and smiled and welcomed her in a small but very cheery voice.

"Thank you for coming to see me," he said, "but I didn't want any supper; I told mother so. Oh, what is that—white soup? I do like white soup. And oysters? Yes, I can eat two or three oysters. How very kind you are, Rachel. I begin to feel quite hungry, that supper looks so nice."

Rachel carried the tempting little tray herself, but behind her came Newbolt, whom Phil now perceived for the first time.

"Have you come up to see me, Newbolt?" he said. "But I am not at all ill. I happened to get tired, and mother said I must rest here."

"The best place for a tired little boy to rest is in his bed, not on it," said Newbolt. "If you please. Master Phil, I am going to put you into bed, and then Miss Rachel shall feed you with this nice supper. Oh, yes, sir, we know you're not the least bit ill—oh, no, not the least bit in the world; but we are going to treat you as if you were, all the same."

Phil smiled and looked up at Newbolt as if he would read her innermost thoughts. He was only too glad to accept her kind services, and quite sighed with relief when she laid him comfortably on his pillows. Newbolt wrapped a little red dressing-jacket over his shoulders, and then poking the fire vigorously and seeing that the queer old tower room looked as cheerful as possible, she left the two children together. Rachel and Phil made very merry over his supper, and Phil almost forgot that he had been feeling one of the most forsaken and miserable little boys in the world half an hour ago. Rachel had developed quite a nice little amount of tact, and she by no means worried Phil with questions as to whether his illness was real or feigned. But when he really smiled, and the color came back to his cheeks, and his laugh sounded strong and merry once more, she could not help saying abruptly:

"Phil, I have been wanting to see you by yourself for some time. I cannot tell Kitty, for Kitty is not to know; but, Phil, what happened to you that day in the forest is no secret to me."

Phil opened his eyes very wide.

"What do you mean, Rachel?" he asked. "No, Rachel, you cannot guess it, for I never, never even whispered about that secret."

Rachel's face had turned quite pale and her voice was trembling.

"Shall I whisper it back to you now?" she said. "Shall I tell you where you went? You did not meet the myth lady—I begin really to be almost sure she is only a myth lady—but you did meet a lady. She was in gray and she had the saddest face in the world; and oh, Phil, she took you home—she took you home!"

"Why, Rachel," said little Phil again, "you look just as if you were going to cry. How is it you found all this out? And why does it make you so sorrowful?"

"Oh, I want her," said Rachel, trembling and half-sobbing. "I want her so badly. I long for her more than anything. I saw her once and I have not been quite happy since. She never took me inside her house. Phil, I am jealous of you. Phil, I want to hear all about her."

"I'm so glad you know," said Phil in cheerful tones. "I was told not to tell. I was told to keep it another secret; but if you found it out, or rather if you always knew about it, why, of course you and I can talk together about her. You don't know how nice it will be to me to be able to talk to you about one of my secrets. My dearest friend secret, and the Betty secret, and the little house at the back of the garden secret I must never, never speak of; and the secret about my being a very, very strong boy—that I mustn't talk about; but you and I can chatter about the lady of the forest, Rachel. Oh, what a comfort it is!"

"It will be a great comfort to me too," answered Rachel. "Let's begin at once. Tell me every single thing about her. What did she wear? How did she speak? Had she my ring on her finger?"

Phil smiled and launched forth into a long and minute narrative. Not a single detail would sharp

little Rachel allow him to omit. Whenever his memory was in danger of flagging she prodded it with vehemence, until at last even her most rapacious longing was satisfied. When Phil had quite exhausted all his narrative she breathed a deep sigh and said again:

"I envy you, Phil. You have been inside her house and she has kissed you."

"She was a very nice and kind lady," concluded Phil, "and she was very good to me; but all the same, Rachel, I would rather see that other lady—the lady in green with the lovely face who comes with a gift."

"Perhaps she's only a myth," said Rachel.

"Please, Rachel, don't say so. I want the bag of gold so badly."

Rachel stared and laughed.

"I never thought you were greedy, Phil," she said. "I cannot think, what a little boy like you can want with a bag of gold."

"That's my secret," said Phil, half-closing his eyes and again turning very pale. "A great many people would be happier if I had that bag of gold. Rachel," he added, "I do trust I may one day see the lady. I went to look for her that day in the forest; I went miles and miles to find her, but I didn't, and I was nearly drowned in a bog."

"It is not a bit necessary to go into the forest to see her," answered Rachel; "she might come to you here, in this very room. You know this is the very oldest part of the house. This part of Avonsyde is quite steeped in romance, and I dare say the lady has been here once or twice—that is, of course, if she isn't a myth. There is an old diary of one of our ancestors in the library, and I have coaxed Aunt Griselda now and then to let me read in it. One day I read an account of the lady; it was then I found out about her green dress and her lovely face. The diary said she was 'passing fair,' and those who looked on her were beautiful ever afterward. She showed herself but seldom, but would come now and then for a brief half-minute of time to the fairest and the best and to those who were to die young."

"Rachel," said little Phil, "just before you came up that time I was lying with my eyes shut, and I was thinking of the beautiful lady, and I almost thought I saw her. I should be happy if she came to me."

## **CHAPTER XVI.—LOST.**

Phil's mother was in every sense a weak woman. She was not strong enough to be either very good or very bad; she had a certain amount of daring, but she had not sufficient courage to dare with success. She had a good deal of the stubbornness which sometimes accompanies weak characters, and when she deliberately set her heart on any given thing, she could be even cruel in her endeavors to bring this thing to pass. Her husband and the elder Rupert Lovel, of Belmont, near Melbourne, were brothers. Both strong and brave men, they had married differently. Rupert's wife had in all particulars been a helpmeet to him; she had brought up his children to be brave and strong and honorable. She suffered much, for she was a confirmed invalid for many years before her death; but her spirit was so strong, so sweet, so noble, that not only her husband and children, but outsiders—all, in fact, who knew her—leaned on her, asked eagerly for her counsel, and were invariably the better when they followed her advice. Philip Lovel's wife was not a helpmeet to him; she was weak, exacting, jealous, and extravagant. She was the kind of woman whom a strong man out of his very pity would be good to, would pet and humor even more than was good for her. Philip was killed suddenly in a railway accident, and his widow was left very desolate and very poor. Her boy was then five years old—a precocious little creature, who from the moment of his father's death took upon himself the no light office of being his mother's comforter. He had a curious way even from the very first of putting himself aside and considering her. Without being told, he would stop his noisy games at her approach and sit for an hour at a time with his little hand clasped in hers, while he leaned his soft cheek against her gown and was happy in the knowledge that he afforded her consolation. To see him thus one would have supposed him almost deficient in manly attributes; but this was not so. His gentleness and consideration came of his strength; the child was as strong in mental fiber as the mother was weak. In the company of his brave Cousin Rupert no merrier or gayer little fellow could have been found. His courage and powers of endurance were simply marvelous. Poor little Phil! that courageous spirit of his was to be tested in no easy school. Soon after his sixth birthday those mysterious attacks of pain came on which the doctor in Melbourne, without assigning any special cause for their occurrence, briefly spoke of as dangerous. Phil was eight years old when his mother's great temptation came to her. She saw an English newspaper which contained the advertisement for the Avonsyde heir. Her husband had often spoken to her about the old family place in the home country. She had loved to listen to his tales, handed down to him orally from his ancestors. She had sighed, and groaned too, over his narratives, and had said openly that to be mistress of such an old ancestral home was her ideal of paradise. Philip, a busy and active man, spent no time over vain regrets; practically he and his elder brother, Rupert, forgot the existence of the English home.

Rupert had made a comfortable fortune for himself in the land of his adoption, and Philip too would have been rich some day if he had lived. Mrs. Lovel, a discontented widow, saw the tempting advertisement, and quickly and desperately she made her plans. Her little son was undoubtedly a lineal descendant of the disinherited Rupert Lovel, but also, and alas! he was not strong. In body at least he was a fragile and most delicate boy. Mrs. Lovel knew that if the ladies of Avonsyde once saw the beautiful and brave young Rupert, Phil's chance would be nowhere. She trusted that Rupert Lovel the elder would not see the advertisement. She sold her little cottage, realized all the money she could, and without telling any one of her plans, started with her boy for England. Before she left she did one thing more: she made a secret visit to Belmont, and under the pretext of wishing to see her sister-in-law, sat with her while she slept, and during that sleep managed to abstract from the cupboard behind her bed the old silver tankard and a packet of valuable letters. These letters gave the necessary evidence as to the genuineness of the boy's descent and the tankard spoke for itself.

Mrs. Lovel started for England, and during her long voyage she taught Phil his lesson. He was to forget the past and he was to do his very utmost to appear a strong boy. She arrived at Avonsyde, was kindly welcomed, and day after day, month after month, her hopes grew great and her fears little. Phil played his part to perfection—so his mother said—not recognizing the fact that it was something in the boy himself, something quite beyond and apart from his physical strength, which threw a sweet glamour over those who were with him, causing them to forget the plainness of his face and see only the wonderful beauty of the soul which looked through the lovely eyes, causing them to cease to notice how fragile was the little frame which yet was so lithe and active, causing them never to observe how tired those small feet grew, and yet how willingly they ran in grateful and affectionate service for each and all. Cold-hearted, cold-natured Miss Griselda was touched and softened as she had never been before by any mortal. She scarcely cared to have the boy out of her sight; she petted him much; she loved him well.

Mrs. Lovel hoped and longed. If once Rachel's birthday could be passed, all would be well. When the ladies appointed Phil as their heir, he was their heir forever. Surely nothing would occur to interfere with her darling projects during the short period which must elapse between the present time and that eventful day two months hence.

As Mrs. Lovel grew more hopeful her manner lost much of its nervous affectation. In no society could she appear as a well-educated and well-read woman, but on the surface she was extremely good-natured, and in one particular she won on the old ladies of Avonsyde. She was practiced in all the small arts of fancy needlework. She could knit; she could crochet; she could tat; she could embroider conventional flowers in crewels. The Misses Lovel detested crewel-work, but Miss Katharine was very fond of knitting and Miss Griselda affected to tolerate crochet. Each night, as the three ladies sat in the smaller of the large drawing-rooms, the crochet and the knitting came into play; and when Mrs. Lovel ventured to instruct in new stitches and new patterns, she found favor in the eyes of the two old ladies.

On the night of Phil's illness the poor woman sat down with an inward groan to give Miss Griselda her usual evening lesson. No one knew how her heart beat; no one knew how her pulse throbbed nor how wild were the fresh fears which were awakened within her. Suppose, after all, Phil could not keep up that semblance of strength to the end! Suppose an attack similar to the one he had gone through to-day should come on in Miss Griselda's presence. Then, indeed, all would be lost. And suppose—suppose that other thing happened: suppose Rupert Lovel with his brave young son should arrive at Avonsyde before the 5th of May. Mrs. Lovel could have torn her hair when Phil so quietly told her that he had written to young Rupert, and that even now a reply might be waiting for him at Southampton. She knew well that Rupert's father would remember how near Avonsyde was to Southampton. If the boy happened to show Phil's letter to his father, all would be lost. Mrs. Lovel felt that she could not rest until she went to Southampton and secured the reply which might be waiting for Phil at the post-office. These anxious thoughts made her *distracted*; and bravely as she wore her mask, one or two sighs did escape from her anxious breast.

"How silent you are!" suddenly exclaimed Miss Griselda in a snappish tone. "I have asked you the same question three times! Am I to crochet twelve or thirteen stitches of chain? Oh, you need not trouble to answer; I am putting away my work now. The pattern is not working out at all properly. Perhaps you are anxious about Phil. If so, pray do not let me detain you. It is a great mistake to coddle children, but I suppose a mother's foolishness must be excused."

"You quite mistake. I am not the least anxious," answered poor Mrs. Lovel, who was in reality on thorns. "I am so very sorry that I did not hear your question, dear Miss Griselda. The fact is, I have been wondering if I might ask a little favor. I should like to go to Southampton to-morrow morning. Can you spare the carriage to send me to the railway station?"

Miss Griselda stared.

"Can I spare the carriage?" she repeated haughtily. "I was not aware that you were a prisoner at Avonsyde, Mrs. Lovel. Of course you can go in or out as you please. Pray send your own orders to the stables."

Mrs. Lovel was profuse in her thanks, Miss Griselda as cross and ungracious as possible. The fact was the old lady was longing to pay Phil a visit in his room, and would have done so had she not

feared his mother accompanying her. The poor unhappy mother would have given worlds to be with her boy, but dreaded Miss Griselda's comments.

The next day, early, Mrs. Lovel went to Southampton, executed a few commissions in order to give color to her expedition, fetched Phil's letter from the post-office, and returned home, burning with impatience to read its contents. She would not have scrupled to open the envelope had not Phil implored of her, just when she was starting on her journey, to let him have this pleasure himself.

Phil was much as usual the next morning, and he and Aunt Grizel and Kitty had gone off on an expedition into the forest to look for mosses. When Mrs. Lovel got back the little party had not returned. She had still to control her impatience, and after taking a hurried lunch went up to her tower bedroom. She laid the letter with the Australian postmark on the writing-table and paced in a fever of anxiety up and down the small room. Suddenly it occurred to her to beguile the slow moments with some occupation. Why should she not open that trunk which contained old reminiscences and one or two articles of value? Why should she not open it and put its contents in order, and take out the precious tankard and clean it? This task would give her occupation and cause the weary moments to pass quickly.

She stooped down and was startled to find that the key was in the lock. How very, very stupid of her to have left it there! When had she been guilty of so dangerous a piece of negligence? With trembling fingers she raised the lid of the trunk and began to search for the tankard. Of course she could not find it. Suddenly she heard footsteps approaching and half-rose in an expectant attitude. Her little son came quickly in.

"Oh, mother, have you brought my letter?"

"Yes; it is on the table. Phil, there was a silver tankard in this trunk, and I can't find it."

Phil had flown to his letter and was opening it eagerly.

"Phil, do you hear me? I can't find the silver tankard."

He went up at once to his mother.

"I beg your pardon, mother. I am so dying to see what Rupert says! A silver tankard? Oh, yes; that old one they always had at Belmont; the one Gabrielle was so proud of. I did not know they had given it to you. Oh, mother, I am sorry. Do you know, I never thought of it until this minute."

"Thought of what? Speak, child; don't keep me on thorns!"

"I found it, mother, and I took it out with me that day when I was nearly drowned in the bog. I had it with me that day."

"Well, boy, well! Where is it now?"

"I don't know. I don't remember a single thing about it. I think I had it with me in the bog. I'm almost sure I had, but I can't quite recollect. Perhaps I dropped it in the bog. Mother, what is the matter?"

"Nothing, child. I could shake you, but I won't. This is terrible news. There! read your letter."

"Mother darling, let us read it together. Mother, I didn't know it was wrong. Kiss me, mammy, and don't look so white. Oh! I am almost too happy. Mother, Rupert says when I am reading this he will be in England!"

"Then we are lost!" said Mrs. Lovel, pushing the slight little figure away from her. "No, no, I scarcely love you at this moment. Don't attempt to kiss me. We are utterly lost!"

## **CHAPTER XVII.—LOOKING FOR THE TANKARD.**

When Mrs. Lovel spoke to Phil with such passion and bitterness, and when, abruptly leaving the tower bedroom and slamming the door violently after her, the little boy found himself alone, he was conscious of a curious half-stunned feeling. His mother had said that she scarcely loved him. All his small life he had done everything for his mother; he had subdued himself for her sake; he had crushed down his love and his hope and his longing just to help her. What did he care for wealth, or for a grand place, or for anything in all the wide world, in comparison with the sweetness of Rupert's smile, in comparison with the old happy days in Belmont and of the old life, when he might be a boy with aches and pains if he liked, when he need not pretend to be possessed of the robust health which he never felt, when he need carry no wearisome secrets about with him? His mother had said, "I scarcely love you, Phil," and she had gone away angry; she had gone away with defiance in her look and manner, and yet with despair in her heart. Phil had guessed that she was despairing, for he knew her well, and this knowledge soon made his brief anger take the form of pity.

"Poor mother! poor darling mother!" he murmured. "I did not know she would mind my taking

out the old Belmont tankard. I am awfully sorry. I suppose it was quite careless of me. I did not know that mother cared for the tankard; but I suppose Gabrielle must have given it to her, and I suppose she must love Gabrielle a little. That is nice of her; that is very nice. I wish I could get the tankard back for her. I wonder where I did leave it. I do wish very much that I could find it again."

Phil now turned and walked to the window and looked out. It was a delicious spring day, and the soft air fanned his cheeks and brought some faint color to them.

"I know what I'll do," he said to himself. "I'll go once again into the forest—I'm not likely to get lost a second time—and I'll look for the tankard. Of course I may find it, and then mother will be happy again. Oh, dear, to think Rupert is in England! How happy his letter would have made me but for mother, and—hullo! is that you, Kitty?"

"Yes; come down," called out Kitty from the lawn in front of the house. "I've been watching you with Aunt Griselda's spy-glasses for the last couple of minutes, and you do look solemn."

"I'm coming," Phil called back.

He thrust his beloved letter into one of his pockets, and a moment later joined his two cousins on the lawn.

"You have been a time," said Kitty, "and we have got some wonderful and quite exciting news to tell you—haven't we, Rachel?"

"You find it exciting, Kitty," said Rachel in an almost nonchalant voice, "but I dare say Phil will agree with me that it's almost a bore."

"What is it?" said Phil.

"Oh, only this—the Marmadukes are coming to-morrow to stay for ten days."

"The Marmadukes! Who are they?" asked Phil.

"Oh, some children from London. They are our relations—at least, so Aunt Griselda says; and she thinks it will be nice for us to know them. Anyhow, they're coming—two boys and two girls, and a father and a mother, and a lady's-maid, and a pug dog, and a parrot. Aunt Grizel is so angry about the pug and the parrot; she wanted to write and tell them all that they couldn't come, and then Aunt Katharine cried and there was a fuss. It seems they're more Aunt Katharine's friends than Aunt Grizel's. Anyhow, they're coming, and the pug and the parrot are to stay in Newbolt's room all the time; so don't you ask to see them, Phil, or you'll get into hot water. The best of it is that while they're here we are all to have holidays, and we can go a great deal into the forest and have picnics if the weather keeps fine. And in the evening Aunt Grizel says she will have the armory lighted, and we children may play there and have charades and tableaux and anything we fancy. Oh, I call it great, splendid fun!" said Kitty, ending with a caper.

Rachel's very dark eyes had brightened when Kitty spoke about the tableaux and the charades.

"It all depends on what kind of children the Marmadukes are," she said; and then she took Phil's hand and walked across the lawn with him.

She had a fellow-feeling for Phil just at present, for he and she shared a secret; and she noticed as he stood by Kitty's side that his laugh was a little forced and that there were very dark lines under his eyes.

"You're tired—aren't you, Phil?" she said.

"I?" asked the little boy, looking up with almost alarm in his face. "Oh, please don't say that, Rachel."

"Why shouldn't I say it? Any one to look at you could see you are tired, and I'm sure I don't wonder, after being so ill last night. Go in and lie down if you like, Phil, and I'll pretend to Aunt Grizel that you are half a mile away in the forest climbing trees and doing all kinds of impossible things."

"I do want to go into the forest," said Phil, "but I won't go to-day, Rachel. You were very kind to me last night. I love you for being so kind."

"Oh, it wasn't exactly kindness," said Rachel. "I came to you because I was curious, you know."

"Yes; but you were kind, all the same. Do you think, Rachel, we shall often go into the forest and go a long, long way when the Marmadukes are here?"

"Yes, I suppose so. It depends upon the weather, of course, and what kind of children they are. They may be such puny little Londoners that they may not be able to walk a dozen steps. Why do you want to know, Phil? You look quite excited."

"We have a secret between us—haven't we, Rachel?"



It was Rachel's turn now to color and look eager.

"Yes," she said; "oh, yes."

"Some day," whispered Phil—"some day, when the Marmadukes are here, we might go near the lady's house—might we not?"

Rachel caught the boy's arm with a strong convulsive grasp.

"If we might!" she said. "If we only dared! And you and I, Phil, might steal away from the others, and go close to the lady's house, and watch until she came out. And we might see her—oh! we might see her, even if we did not dare to speak."

"I want to go," said Phil—"I want to go to that house again, although it is not because I want to see the lady. It is a secret; all my life is made up of secrets. But I will go if—I have a chance. And if you see me stealing away by myself you will help me—won't you, Rachel?"

"Trust me," said Rachel, with enthusiasm. "Oh, what a dear boy you are, Phil! I can scarcely believe when I talk to you that you are only eight years old; you seem more like my own age. To be only eight is very young, you know."

"I have had a grave sort of life," said Phil, with a hastily suppressed sigh, "and I suppose having a great many secrets to keep does make a boy seem old."

### **CHAPTER XVIII.—THE MARMADUKES.**

The Marmadukes were not at all a puny family; on the contrary, they were all rather above the ordinary size. Mr. Marmaduke was extremely broad and red and stout; Mrs. Marmaduke was an angular and bony-framed woman, with aquiline features and a figure which towered above all the other ladies present; the lady's-maid took after her mistress in stature and became Newbolt's detestation on the spot; the pug dog was so large that he could scarcely be considered thoroughbred; and the parrot was a full-grown bird and the shrillest of its species. The four young Marmadukes took after their parents and were extremely well developed. The eldest girl was thirteen; her name was Clementina; she had a very fat face and a large appetite. The boys, named Dick and Will, were sturdy specimens; and Abigail, or Abby, the youngest of the group, was considerably spoiled and put on many airs, which made her insufferable to Kitty and Phil.

The Marmadukes arrived in a body, and without any efforts on their own parts or the smallest desire that way on the part of the old ladies they took Avonsyde by storm. They seemed to fill the whole house and to pervade the grounds, and to make their presence felt wherever they turned. They entertained themselves and suggested what places they should go to see, and announced the hours at which they would like best to dine and what times they would wish the Avonsyde carriage to be in attendance. Miss Griselda was petrified at what she was pleased to term the manners of the great Babylon. Miss Katharine received several snubs at the style of friends she kept, and only the fact that they were distantly connected with the Lovels, and that their visit must terminate within ten days, prevented Miss Griselda from being positively rude to such unwelcome inmates.

"Phil," said Rachel on the second morning after the arrival of this obnoxious household, "if Clementina thinks she is going to get the upper hand of me any more she is finely mistaken. What do I care for her Kensington Gardens and that pony she rides in the Row! I don't suppose she knows how to ride—not really; for I asked her yesterday if she could ride barebacked, and she stared at me, and turned up her lip, and said in such a mincing voice, 'We don't do that kind of thing in London.' Phil, I hate her; I really do! I don't know how I'm to endure her for the next week. She walks about with me and is so condescending to me; and I can't endure it—no, I can't! Oh, I wish I could do something to humble her!"

"Poor Rachel!" said Phil in his sweet, pitying voice, and a tender, beautiful light which is born of sympathy filled his eyes. "I know Clementina is not your sort, Rachel," he said, "and I only wish she would talk to me and leave you alone."

Rachel laughed and leaned her hand affectionately on Phil's shoulder.

"I don't wish that," she said. "I don't want to ease myself by adding to your burdens; you have quite enough with Dick and Will. You must hate them just as much as I hate Clementina."

"Oh, I don't hate them at all," said Phil. "They are not my sort; they are not the style of boys I like best, but I get on all right with them; and as to hating, I never hated any one in all my life."

"Well, I have," said Rachel. "And the one I hate most now in all the world is Clementina Marmaduke! Oh, here they are, all coming to meet us; and doesn't poor Kitty look bored to death?"

Phil glanced wistfully from one sister to another, and then he ran up to Clementina and began to chat to her in a very eager and animated voice. He was evidently suggesting something which pleased her, for she smiled and nodded her head several times. Phil said, "I'll bring them to you

in a moment or two," and ran off.

"What have you asked Phil to do?" asked Rachel angrily. "He's not a strong boy—at least, not very strong, and he mustn't be sent racing about."

"Oh, then, if he's not strong he won't ever get Avonsyde," returned Clementina. "How disappointed his mother will be. I thought Phil was very strong."

"You know nothing about it," said Rachel, getting redder and more angry. "You have no right to talk about our private affairs; they are nothing to you."

"I only know what my mamma tells me," said Clementina, "and I don't choose to be lectured by you, Miss Rachel."

Here Will and Dick came eagerly forward, squared their shoulders, and said:

"Go it, girls! Give it to her back, Rachel. She's never happy except when she's quarreling."

A torrent of angry words was bubbling up to Rachel's lips, but here Phil came panting up, holding a great spray of lovely scarlet berries in his hand.

"Here!" he said, presenting it to Clementina. "That is the very last, and I had to climb a good tall tree to get it. Let me twine it round your hat the way Gabrielle used to wear it. Here, just one twist—doesn't it look jolly?"

The effect on Clementina's dark brown beaver hat was magical, and the effect on her temper was even more soothing—she smiled and became good-tempered at once. Rachel's angry words were never spoken, and sunshine being restored the children began to discuss their plans for the day.

Miss Griselda had given a certain amount of freedom to all the young folk, and under supervision—that is, in the company of Robert, the groom—they might visit any part of the forest not too far away. When the eager question was asked now, "What shall we do with ourselves?" Phil replied instantly, "Let's go into the forest. Let's visit Rufus' Stone."

Rachel's eyes danced at this, and she looked eagerly and expectantly at her little cousin.

"You have none of you seen the Stone," proceeded Phil. "There are splendid trees for climbing round there, and on a fine day like this it will be jolly. We can take our lunch out, and I'll show you lots of nests, Will."

"I'll go on one condition," said Rachel—"that we ride. Let's have our ponies. It is too horrid to be cooped up in a wagonette."

"Oh, we'd all much rather ride!" exclaimed the Marmaduke children.

"Bob can drive the pony-cart to the Stone," proceeded Rachel, "and meet us there with our luncheon things. That will do quite well, for as there are such a lot of us we won't want a groom to ride as well. We know every inch of the road from here to the Stone—don't we, Phil?"

"Yes," answered Phil softly.

"Well, that's splendid," said Clementina, who felt that her berries were very becoming and who imagined that Rachel was looking at them enviously. "But have you got horses enough to mount us all?"

"We've got ponies," said Rachel. "Rough forest ponies; jolly creatures! You shall have Brownie, as you're such a good rider; he's nice and spirited—isn't he, Phil?"

"Yes," replied Phil. "But I think Clementina would have a jollier time with Surefoot; he goes so easily. I think he's the dearest pony in the world."

"But he's your own pony, Phil. You surely are not going to give up your own pony?"

Phil laughed.

"I'm not going to give him up," he said; "only I think I'd like to ride Brownie this morning."

Rachel scarcely knew why she felt ashamed at these words; she certainly had no intention of offering her horse to Clementina.

"What queer ways Phil has," she thought to herself. And then she saw a softened look in Clementina's eyes and her heart gave a sharp little prick.

Half an hour later the riding party set out, and for a time all went smoothly. Rachel was trying to curb her impatience; Clementina amused herself by being condescending to Philip; and Dick, Will, Kitty, and Abby rode amicably together. But the party was ill-assorted, and peace was not likely long to reign. Surefoot was an extremely nice pony, and Clementina rode well in front, and after a time began to give herself airs, and to arrange her fresh and very becoming habit, as if she were riding in the Row. Surefoot was gentle, but he was also fresh; and when Clementina

touched him once or twice with her riding-whip, he shook himself indignantly and even broke into a canter against her will.

"You must not touch Surefoot with a whip," sang out Rachel. "He does not need it and it is an insult to him."

Clementina laughed scornfully.

"All horses need the whip now and then," she said; "it freshens them up and acts as a stimulant. You don't suppose, Rachel, that I don't know? I rather think there are very few girls who know more about riding than I do. Why, I have had lessons from Captain Delacourt since I can remember."

"Is Captain Delacourt your riding-master?" asked Rachel in an exasperating voice. "If so, he can't be at all a good one; for a really good riding-master would never counsel any girl to use the whip to a willing horse."

"Did your riding-master give you that piece of information?" inquired Clementina in a voice which she considered full of withering sarcasm. "I should like to know his name, in order that I might avoid him."

Rachel laughed.

"My riding-master was Robert," she said, "and as he is my aunt's servant, you cannot get lessons from him even if you wish to. You need not sneer at him, Clementina, for there never was a better rider than Robert, and he has taught me nearly everything he knows himself. There isn't any horse I couldn't sit, and it would take a very clever horse indeed to throw me."

Clementina smiled most provokingly, and raising her whip gave gentle little Surefoot a couple of sharp strokes. The little horse quivered indignantly, and Rachel glanced at Phil, who was riding behind on Brownie.

"Oh, Phil," she called out, "Clementina is so unkind to your horse. It is well for you, Clementina, that you are on Surefoot's back. He is so sweet-tempered he won't resent even cruelty very much; but if you dared to whip my horse, Ruby, you would have good reason to repent of your rashness."

Rachel was riding on a red-coated pony, a half-tamed creature with promises of great beauty and power by and by, but at present somewhat rough and with a wild, untamed gleam in his eyes. Clementina glanced all over Ruby, but did not deign another remark. She was forming a plan in her mind. By hook or by crook she would ride Ruby home and show to the astonished Rachel what Captain Delacourt's pupil was capable of.

The children presently reached their destination, where Bob and the light cart of refreshments awaited them. The day was very balmy and springlike, and the most fastidious could not but be pleased and the most ill-tempered could not fail for a time, at least, to show the sunny side of life. The children made merry. Rachel and Clementina forgot their disputes in the delights of preparing salads and cutting up pies; Phil, the Marmaduke boys, and Abby went off on a foraging expedition; and Kitty swung herself into the low-growing branch of a great oak tree, and lazily closing her eyes sang softly to herself.

The picnic dinner turned out a grand success; and then Clementina, who was fond of music and who had discovered that Kitty had a particularly sweet voice, called her to her and said that they might try and get up some glees, which would sound delightfully romantic in the middle of the forest. The children sat round in a circle, Clementina now quite in her element and feeling herself absolute mistress of the occasion.

Suddenly Phil got up and strolled away. No one noticed him but Rachel, who sat on thorns for a few minutes; then, when the singing was at its height, she slipped round the oak tree, flew down the glade, and reached the little boy as he was entering a thick wood which lay to the right.

"Phil! Phil! you are going to see her?"

"Oh, don't, Rachel—don't follow me now! If we are both missed they will come to look for us, and then the lady's house will be discovered and she will have to go away. She said if her house was discovered she would have to go away, and oh, Rachel, if you love her—and you say you love her—that would be treating her cruelly!"

"The children won't miss us," said Rachel, whose breath came fast and whose cheeks were brightly colored. "The children are all singing as loudly as they can and they are perfectly happy, and Robert is eating his dinner. I won't go in, Phil; no, of course I won't go in, for I promised, and I would not break my word, to her of all people. But if I might stay at a little distance, and if I might just peep round a tree and see her, for she may come to talk to you, Phil. Oh, Phil, don't prevent me! I will not show myself, but I might see without being seen."

Rachel was trembling, and yet there was a bold, almost defiant look on her face; she looked so like Rupert that Phil's whole heart was drawn to her.

"You must do what you wish, of course," he said. "Do you see that giant oak tree at the top of the glade? You can stand there and you can peep your head well round. See, let's come to it. See, Rachel, you have a splendid view of the cottage from here. Now I will go and try if I can get any tidings of Gabrielle's tankard. Good-by, Rachel. Remember your promise not to come any nearer."

Phil ran lightly away, and Rachel saw him go into the little rose-covered porch of the cottage.

He raised the tiny knocker, and in a moment or two Nancy White answered his summons.

"Is the lady—the lady of the forest in, Nancy?" asked the little boy.

"The lady! Bless my heart, if this ain't Master Phil Lovel! Well, my dear little gentleman, and what may you want?"

"I want the lady. Can I see her? Perhaps she would come out to walk with me for a little, for I want to talk to her on a most important thing."

"Bless you, my dear, the lady ain't at home, and if she were she don't go taking walks at anybody's bidding. She's particular and retiring in her ways, the lady is, and when she's at home she keeps at home."

"I'm sorry she's not at home to-day," said Phil, leaning against the porch and getting back his breath slowly. "It's a great disappointment, for I find it very difficult to come so far, and what I wanted to say was really important. Good-by, Nancy. Give my love to the lady when you see her."

"Don't go yet, Master Philip. You're looking very white. I hope you're quite strong, sir."

"Yes, I'm a strong boy," said Phil in a slow voice.

"You wouldn't like to come in and rest for a bit, little master? Maybe I could do what you want as well as my missus."

"Maybe you could," said Phil, his eyes brightening. "I never thought of that. No, I won't come in, thank you, Nancy. Nancy, do you remember the day I was nearly lost in the bog?"

"Of course I do, my dear little man; and a sorry pickle you was when my missus brought you home!"

"Had I anything in my hand when I was brought into the house, Nancy? Please think hard. Had I anything rather important in my hand?"

"You had a bit of a brier clutched tight in one hand. I remember that, my dear."

"Oh, but what I mean was something quite different—what I mean was a large silver drinking-mug. I cannot remember anything about it since I got lost in the bog, and I am afraid it must have gone right down into the bog. But I thought it just possible that I might have brought it here. You did not see it, did you, Nancy?"

"Well, my dear, is it likely? Whatever else we may be in this house, we ain't thieves."

Phil looked distressed.

"I did not mean that," he said—"I did not mean that. I just thought I might have left it and that I would come and ask. Mother is in great trouble about the mug; it means a great lot to mother, and it was very careless of me to bring it into the forest. I am sorry you did not see it, Nancy."

"And so am I, Master Lovel, if it's a-worrying of you, dear. But there, the grandest silver can that ever was made ain't worth fretting about. I expect it must have slipped into the bog, dear."

"Good-by, Nancy," said Phil in a sorrowful, polite little voice, and he went slowly back to where Rachel watched behind the oak tree.

## **CHAPTER XIX.—A TENDER HEART.**

Phil's heart was very low within him. During the last few days, ever since that terrible interview with his mother, he had built his hopes high. He had been almost sure that the tankard was waiting for him in the lady's house in the forest, that he should find it there when he went to make inquiries, and then that he might bring it back to his mother and so remove the shadow from her brow.

"I never knew that mother could miss a thing Gabrielle had given her so very, very much," thought the little boy. "But there's no doubt at all she does miss it and that she's fretting. Poor, dear mother! she's not unkind to me. Oh, no, she's never that except when she's greatly vexed; but, all the same, I know she's fretting; for those lines round her mouth have come out again, and even when she laughs and tries to be merry downstairs I see them. There's no doubt at all that she's fretting and is anxious. Poor mother! how I wish I could find the green lady of the forest

and that she would give me the bag of gold which would satisfy mother's heart."

Phil walked very slowly, his eyes fixed on the ground. He was now startled to hear a voice addressing him, and looking up with a quick movement, he saw the lady who lived in the pretty little cottage coming to meet him. He was not particularly elated at sight of her; he had nothing in particular to say to her; for as Nancy had assured him that the tankard was not at the cottage, it was quite useless making further inquiries about it.

"What are you doing here, Philip?" asked the lady in a kind voice. She knew him at once, and coming up to him, took his hand and looked kindly into his face. "You are a long way from home. Have you lost yourself in this dear, beautiful forest a second time, little man?"

Then Phil remembered that if this lady of the forest meant nothing in particular to him she meant a great deal to Rachel. He could not forget how Rachel's eyes had shone, how Rachel's face had looked when she spoke about her. The color flew into his own pale little face, and he spoke with enthusiasm.

"I am glad I have met you," he said, "even though I don't know your name. Will you come for a walk with me now through the forest? Will you hold my hand and look at me while you speak? Will you walk with me, and will you turn your face to the right, always to the right, as you go?"

"You are a queer little boy," said the lady, and she laughed, almost merrily. "But I have just taken a very long walk and am tired. You also look tired, Philip, and your face is much too white. Suppose we alter the programme and yet keep together for a little. Suppose you come into the cottage with me and have some tea, and Nancy makes some of her delicious griddle-cakes."

"That would be lovely. I should like it beyond anything; but may Rachel come in too?"

"Rachel!" said the lady of the forest. She put her hand suddenly to her heart and stepped back a pace or two.

"Yes, my cousin, Rachel Lovel; she is standing up yonder, at the other side of the great oak tree. She wants to see you, and she is standing there, hoping, hoping. Rachel's heart is very hungry to see you. When she speaks of you her eyes look starved. I don't understand it, but I know Rachel loves you better than any one else in the world."

"Impossible!" said the lady; "and yet—and yet—but I must not speak to her, child, nor she to me. It—oh! you agitate me. I am tired. I have had a long walk. I must not speak to little Rachel Lovel."

"She knows that," said Phil in a sorrowful voice; for the lady's whiteness and agitation and distress filled him with the keenest sympathy. "Rachel knows that you and she may not speak, but let her look at you. Do! She will be so good; she will not break her word to you for the world."

"I must not look on her face, child. There are limits—yes, there are limits, and beyond them I have not strength to venture. I have a secret, child; I have a holy of holies, and you are daring to open it wide. Oh! you have brought me agony, and I am very tired!"

"I know what secrets are," said little Phil. "Oh! they are dreadful; they give great pain. I am sorry you are in such trouble, lady of the forest, and that I have caused it. I am sorry, too, that you cannot take a very little walk with me, for it would give Rachel such pleasure."

"It would give Rachel pleasure?" repeated the lady. And now the color came back to her cheeks and the light to her eyes. "That makes all the difference. I will walk with you, Phil, and you shall take my hand and I will turn my face to the right. See: can Rachel see my face now?"

"Yes," said Phil; "she will peep from behind the oak tree. How glad, how delighted she will be!"

The lady and Phil walked slowly together, hand in hand, for nearly half an hour; during all that time the lady did not utter a single word. When the walk came to an end she stooped to kiss Phil, and then, moved by an impulse which she could not restrain, she kissed her own hand fervently and waved it in the direction of the oak tree. A little childish hand fluttered in the breeze in return, and then the lady returned to the cottage and shut the door after her.

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Phil ran panting up to the oak tree and took Rachel's hand.

"I did what I could for you, Rachel," he said. "You saw her—did you not? She kept her face turned to the right, and you must have seen her quite plainly."

Rachel's cheeks were blazing like two peonies; the pupils of her eyes were dilated; her lips quivered.

"I saw her!" she exclaimed. "I looked at her, and my heart is hungrier than ever!"

Here she threw herself full length on the ground and burst into passionate sobs.

"Don't, Rachel!" said Phil. "You puzzle me. Oh, you make my heart ache! Oh, this pain!"

He turned away from Rachel, and leaning against the oak tree writhed in bodily agony. In a moment Rachel had sprung to her feet; her tears had stopped; and raising Phil's hat she wiped some drops from his white brow.

"I ran a little too fast," he panted, after a moment or two. "I am a strong boy, but I can't run very fast; it gives me a stitch; it catches my breath. Oh, yes, thank you, Rachel; I am better now. I am a strong boy, but I can't run very fast."

"You are not a bit a strong boy!" said Rachel, wiping away her own tears vigorously. "I have discovered that secret too of yours, Phil. You are always pretending to be strong, but it is only pretense."

Phil looked at his cousin in alarm.

"If you guess my secrets you won't tell them?" he said.

"Of course I won't tell. What do you take me for? Now you must not walk for a little, and the children are quite happy without us. Is not this a nice soft bank? I will sit by your side and you shall tell me what the lady said to you and you to her."

"No," said Phil, with sudden energy. "I cannot tell you what she said."

"You cannot tell me?"

"No. I took the lady by surprise and she let out some of her secrets—not all, but some. It would not be fair to tell them to any one else. I asked her to walk with me, and she knew that you were watching. Now, Rachel, I am quite well again, as well as ever. Shall we go back to the other children?"

Rachel rose slowly to her feet.

"I hate secrets," she said, "and the very air seems full of them sometimes. You have lots of secrets, and my aunts have secrets, and the lady of the forest has a secret, and there is a secret about my mother, for I know she is not dead and yet I never see her. These secrets are enough to starve my heart. Phil, how soon would a girl like me be supposed to be grown up?"

"Oh, Rachel, how can I tell?"

"I shall be thirteen in May and I am tall. When I am fifteen—that is, in two years' time—I shall begin to go round the world looking for my mother. I don't intend to wait any longer. When I am fifteen I shall begin to go."

"In Australia girls are nearly grown up at that age," said Phil, who was thinking of Gabrielle. "Now, Rachel, let us go back to the others."

The others were getting impatient. They had played hide-and-seek, and hunted for squirrels, and climbed trees, and quarreled and made it up again, until all their resources had come to an end; and when Rachel and Phil made their appearance they found that Robert had packed up the remains of the picnic, and that Clementina and Abby had already mounted their ponies, preparatory to riding home. Robert was leading up the other ponies as the two missing children appeared.

Rachel's mind was still a good deal preoccupied, and it was not until she was preparing to mount her own pony that she discovered that Clementina had secured Ruby and was now seated comfortably on his back.

"Oh, Clementina, it is not safe for you to ride Ruby," she called out at once. "He's only just broken in and he's full of spirit."

"Thank you," replied Clementina. "I prefer riding horses with spirit. I would not have another ride on that slow little creature, Surefoot, for the world."

"But indeed that is not the reason," said Rachel, who felt herself, she scarcely knew why, both softened and subdued. "It is that Ruby is not safe. I am the first girl who has ever been on his back. He knows me and will do what I tell him, but I am sure it is dangerous for you to ride him. Is it not dangerous, Robert, for Miss Marmaduke to ride Ruby?" called out Rachel to the groom.

Robert came up and surveyed the spirited little horse and the young rider critically.

"If Miss Marmaduke don't whip him, and if she humors him a good bit and don't set him off in a canter, why, then no harm may be done," he said. "Ruby's fresh, miss, and have a good deal of wild blood in him, and I only broke him in for Miss Rachel a fortnight back."

Clementina's color had risen very high during this discussion.

"I presume," she said in an insolent tone, "that a pupil of Captain Delacourt's can ride any horse that a pupil of one of the grooms at Avonsyde can manage! I'm sorry you're so disobliging as to grudge me your horse, Rachel. I'll just ride on in front now, and you all can follow me when you

are ready.”

She turned Ruby’s head as she spoke and rode away under the forest trees.

“If she gives Ruby a taste of the whip she’ll repent of all her proud airs,” muttered Robert. “Now, young ladies, you had better mount and get under way. I suppose, Miss Rachel, that that ’ere young lady knows the right road home?”

“Hadn’t I better get on Brownie and ride after her?” asked Phil.

“No, sir; no. Ruby couldn’t bear horses’ hoofs a-galloping after him. It would set him off mad like, and there wouldn’t be a hope for Miss Marmaduke. No; the only thing now is to trust that the young lady won’t touch Ruby with the whip and that she knows the way home.”

The other children mounted without any more discussion, and the ride home was undertaken with a certain sense of depression,

No sign of Clementina could be seen, and when they reached the stables at Avonsyde neither she nor Ruby had put in an appearance.

## **CHAPTER XX.—PUNISHED.**

Clementina was a spoiled child, and in consequence was as disagreeable and as full of herself as such children are apt to be. She was neither beautiful nor clever; she had no outward gifts to counterbalance her imperious airs and selfish ways; consequently she was only popular with her parents and with herself.

The Marmadukes were very rich people, and although Clementina had no real friends, she had many toadies—girls who praised her for the accomplishments she did not possess, for the beauty which had been denied her, and for the talents and cleverness which she knew nothing whatever about. Clementina both believed in and appreciated flattery. Flattery made her feel comfortable; it soothed her vanity and fed her self-esteem. It was not at all difficult to persuade her that she was clever, beautiful, and accomplished. But of all her acquirements there was none of which she was so very proud as of her riding. She was no coward, and she rode fairly well for a town girl. She had always the advantage of the best horses, the most stylish habits, and the most carefully equipped groom to follow her. On horseback her so-called friends told her she looked superb; therefore on horseback she greatly liked to be.

Rachel’s words that morning and Rachel’s unconcealed contempt had stung Clementina’s vanity to the quick. She was quite determined to show this little nobody, this awkward country girl, what proper riding meant; and she galloped off on Ruby with her heart beating high with pride, anger, and a sense of exultation; she would canter lightly away in the direction of the Avonsyde stables, and be ready to meet Rachel haughty and triumphant when she returned wearily home on that dull little pony, Surefoot.

Surefoot, however, was not a dull pony. He was extremely gentle and docile and affectionate, and although he hated the rider he had on his back that morning, and resented to the bottom of his honest little heart the indignity of being whipped by her, still one sound from Rachel’s voice was sufficient to restrain him and to keep him from punishing the young lady who chose to ride him in the manner she deserved. Clementina had ridden Surefoot and he had instantly broken into a canter, but at the sound of Rachel’s voice he had moderated his speed. Clementina quite believed that Surefoot had obeyed her firm hand; and now, as she galloped away on Ruby, she laughed at the fears expressed for her safety by Rachel and Robert, the groom.

“They’re jealous,” she said to herself; “they’re both of them jealous, and they don’t want me to have the only decent horse of the party. Oh, yes, Ruby, my fine fellow, you shall have a touch of the whip presently. I’m not afraid of you.”

She felt for her little silver-mounted riding-whip as she spoke and lightly flicked Ruby’s ears with it.

Back went the ears of the half-trained little horse at once, lightning glances seemed to flash from his red-brown eyes, and in a moment he had taken to his heels and was away.

His movement almost resembled flying, and for a little time Clementina persuaded herself that she enjoyed it. This was riding indeed! this was a gallop worth having! What splendid use she could make of it with her school-friends by and by. These were her first sensations, but they were quickly followed by others less pleasurable. Ruby seemed to be going faster and faster; his legs went straight before him; he rushed past obstacles; he disdained to take the slightest notice of Clementina’s feeble little attempts to pull him in. She lost her breath, and with it in a great measure her self-control. Were they going in the right direction? No; she was quite sure they were not; she had never seen that wide expanse of common; she had never noticed that steep descent; she had never observed that gurgling, rushing avalanche of water; and—oh, good God! Ruby was rushing to it. She screamed and attempted violently to pull him in; he shook his head angrily and flew forward faster than before; for Ruby was not of the gentle nature of Surefoot, and he could not forgive even the very slight indignity which Clementina had offered him. The

wretched girl began to scream loudly.

"I shall be killed! I shall be killed! Oh! will no one save me?" she screamed.

Her cries seemed to madden Ruby. He drew up short, put his head between his legs, and with an easy movement flung Clementina off his back on to the ground. The next moment he himself was out of sight.

Clementina found herself sitting in the middle of a bog—a bog not deep enough to drown her, but quite wet enough, quite uncomfortable enough, to soak through her riding-habit and to render her thoroughly wretched. At first, when Ruby had dislodged her from his back, her sensations were those of relief; then she was quite certain every bone in her body was broken; then she was equally convinced that the slow and awful death of sinking in a bog awaited her. She was miles from home; there was not a soul in sight; and yet, try as she would, she could not raise herself even to a standing position, for the treacherous ground gave way whenever she attempted to move.

Her fall had shaken her considerably, and for a time she sat motionless, trying to recover her breath and wondering if arms and legs were all smashed.

"Oh, what a wicked girl Rachel is!" she said at last. "What right had she to go out on a wild horse like that? She must have done it for a trick; she must have done it on purpose; she meant me to ride Ruby coming home, and so she tantalized me and tried to rouse my spirit. Margaret and Jessie Dawson say that I am just full of spirit, and I never can brook that sneering way, particularly from a mere child like Rachel. Well, well, she's punished now, for I shall probably die of this. If all my bones aren't broken, and I firmly believe they are, and if I don't sink in this horrid bog—which I expect I shall—I'm safe to have rheumatic fever and to die of it, and then what will Rachel do? She'll never know an easy moment again as long as she lives. She'll be sorry for the tricks she played me when she thinks of me lying in my early grave. Oh, dear! oh, dear! what shall I do? what shall I do?"

Poor Clementina threw up her hands, by so doing fastening herself more firmly in the odious bog, and burst into a loud wailing cry. She was cold and wet now, the excitement of her wild race was over, and as the moments flew on, lengthening themselves into half-hours and hours, she became thoroughly frightened. Oh, how awful if the night should overtake her while she sat there! And yet what more likely? for not a soul had passed the place since her accident. As her anger cooled and her fright increased, several prickings of that dull conscience of hers smote the unhappy girl. After all, was Rachel to blame for what had happened? Had she not begged and even implored of her not to ride Ruby? Had not Robert spoken freely of what would happen if she did so? Oh, if only she had listened to their voices! if only she had not been so self-confident! She pictured them all safe and sound now at home at Avonsyde. She imagined them sitting in the pleasant armory chatting over the day's adventures and most likely forgetting all about her. Abby and the boys, if occupied over any exciting game, would be certain to forget her; little Kitty, to whom she had always been specially cross, would most likely rejoice in her absence; Rachel, if she had time to give her a thought, would be sure to be possessed with a sense of triumph; and Phil—ah! well, somehow or other Phil was different from other boys and girls. Phil had a look in his eyes, Phil had a way about him which Clementina recognized as belonging to the rare and beautiful spirit of unselfishness. Phil's small, thin, white face was ever and always alive and glowing with sympathy; his eyes would darken and expand at the mere mention of anybody's trouble, and again that little sensitive face would sparkle and glow with delight over anybody's joy. Clementina, sitting now in the middle of the bog, the most lonely and wretched girl alive, could not help feeling comforted as she thought of Phil; it was more than probable that if all the others forgot her Phil might remember.

While Clementina was waiting in a state of absolute despair matters were not so hopeless for her as she supposed. The children when they reached Avonsyde gave an instant alarm, and steps were at once taken to search for the missing girl. But it is one thing to be lost in the forest and another thing to be found. Ruby had taken Clementina in the opposite direction from Avonsyde, and when she was submerged in the bog she was many miles away. Robert, shaking his head and muttering that a willful girl must come to grief, and that it would be well if they ever saw Miss Marmaduke alive again, went off to saddle a fresh horse to go in search of her. Other people also started on the same errand; and Phil, whose pale little face was all aglow with excitement, rushed into the stables, and securing a horse, mounted it and rode away after the others. The boy was a splendid rider, having been accustomed to mounting all kinds of steeds from his babyhood; but he was tired now, and neither Miss Griselda nor his mother would have allowed him to go had they known anything about it. But the elder members of the family were all away, and the children and servants were only acting on their own responsibility.

Phil soon caught up Robert, and the two trotted together side by side.

"I'm quite certain I saw Ruby turning to the left after he went down that steep bank," said Phil.

"Then if he did he made for the bog and the waterfall as likely as not," said Robert.

"Oh, Robert, you don't suppose Clementina has been drowned in one of the bogs?" exclaimed Phil in an accent of terror. "You don't, you can't suppose that?"



The man favored the boy with a queer glance.

"If Miss Marmaduke was like you, Master Lovel, or like Miss Rachel or Miss Kitty, why, I'd say there weren't a hope of her; but being what she is—well, maybe she'll be given a little more time to mend her manners in."

Phil's face assumed a puzzled expression. He said nothing further, and the two rode hard and fast.

In this manner they did at last find poor Clementina, who, much subdued and softened, received them with almost rapture.

"There's nothing like affliction for bringing characters of that sort low," muttered Robert as he helped the young lady on his own horse. "And now, where's that little beauty Ruby, I wonder? Dashed hisself to pieces as likely as not agin' some of them rocks up there. Oh, yes, and there'll be no 'count made at all of one of the prettiest little horses I ever broke in."

Robert had to run by Clementina's side, who was really considerably shaken and who gave way to violent hysterics soon after they started.

"Somehow, Phil, I thought you would remember," she said at last, turning to her little companion and speaking in a broken voice.

"Why, of course we all remembered," said Phil. "We were all more sorry about you than I can say; and as to Rachel, she has been crying like anything. It seems a pity, Clementina, it really does, you know——" And then he stopped.

"What seems a pity, Phil?"

"That you should be so obstinate. You know you were; and you were rude, too, for you should not have taken Rachel's horse. It seems to me a great pity that people should try to pretend—everybody's always trying to pretend; and what is the use of it? Now, if you had not tried to pretend that you could ride as well or better than Rachel, you wouldn't have got into this trouble and we wouldn't have been so terribly sorry. Where was the use of it, Clementina?" added Phil, gazing hard at the abashed and astonished young lady; "for nobody could expect you to ride as well as Rachel, who is a country girl and has been on horseback such a lot, you know."

Phil delivered his lecture in the most innocent way, and Clementina received it with much humility, wondering all the time why she was not furiously angry; for surely this was the strangest way to speak to a girl who had been for three seasons under Captain Delacourt.

She made no reply to Phil's harangue and rode on for some time without speaking.

Suddenly a little sigh from the boy, who kept so bravely at her side, reached her ears. She turned and looked at him. It was quite a new sensation for Clementina to observe any face critically except her own; but she did notice now the weariness round the lips and the way the slight little figure drooped forward.

"You're tired, Phil," she said. "You have tired yourself out to find me."

"I am tired," he replied. "We rode very fast, and my side aches, but it will be better by and by."

"You can scarcely sit on your horse," said Clementina in a tone of real feeling. "Could not your groom—Robert, I think, you call him—mount the horse and put you in front of him? He could put his arm round you and you would be nicely rested."

"That's a good thought, miss," said Robert, with sudden heartiness. "And, to be sure, Master Philip do look but poorly. It's wonderful what affliction does for them sort of characters," he muttered under his breath as he complied with this suggestion.

When the little party got near home, Phil, who had been lying against Robert and looking more dead than alive, roused himself and whispered something to the groom. Robert nodded in reply and immediately after lifted the boy to the ground.

"I'm going to rest. Please, Clementina, don't say I am tired," he said; and then he disappeared down a little glade and was soon out of sight.

"Where is he going?" asked Clementina of Robert.

"To a little nest as he has made for hisself, miss, just where the trees grow thickest up there. He and me, we made it together, and it's always dry and warm, and nobody knows of it but our two selves. He often and often goes there when he can't bear up no longer. I beg your pardon, miss, but I expect I have no right to tell. You won't mention what I have said to any of the family, miss?"

"No," said Clementina; "but I feel very sorry for Phil, and I cannot understand why there should be any mystery made about his getting tired like other people."

"Well, miss, you ask his lady mother. Perhaps she can tell you, for certain sure no one else can."

Clementina went into the house, where she was received with much excitement and very considerable rejoicing. She presented a very sorry plight, her habit being absolutely coated with mud, her hair in disorder, and even her face bruised and discolored. But it is certain that Rachel had never admired her so much as when she came up to her and, coloring crimson, tried to take her hand.

"Phil said I was rude to you, Rachel, and I am sorry," she muttered.

"Oh, never mind," answered Rachel, whose own little face was quite swollen with crying. "I was so dreadfully, dreadfully unhappy, for I was afraid Ruby had killed you, Clementina."

Clementina was now hurried away to her own room, where she had a hot bath and was put to bed, and where her mother fussed over her and grumbled bitterly at having ever been so silly as to come to such an outlandish part of the country as Avonsyde.

"I might have lost you, my precious," she said to her daughter. "It was nothing short of madness my trusting you to those wild young Lovels."

"Oh, mother, they aren't a bit to blame, and I think they are rather nice, particularly Phil."

"Yes, the boy seems a harmless, delicate little creature. I wonder if the old ladies will really make him their heir."

"I hope they will, mother, for he is really very nice."

In the course of the evening, as Clementina was lying on her pillows, thinking of a great many things and wondering if Phil was yet rested enough to leave his nest in the forest, there came a tap at her door, and to her surprise Phil's mother entered. In some ways Mrs. Lovel bore a slight resemblance to Clementina; for she also was vain and self-conscious and she also was vastly taken up with self. Under these circumstances it was extremely natural that the girl and the woman should feel a strong antipathy the one to the other, and Clementina felt annoyed and the softened expression left her face as Mrs. Lovel took a chair by her bedside.

"How are you now, my dear—better, I hope?"

"Thank you, I am quite well," answered Clementina.

"You had a wonderful escape. Ruby is not half broken in. No one attempts to ride him except Rachel."

Clementina felt the old sullen feeling surging up in her heart.

"Such a horse should not be taken on a riding-party," she said shortly. "I have had lessons from Captain Delacourt. I can manage almost any horse."

"You can doubtless manage quiet horses," said Mrs. Lovel. "Well, you have had a wonderful escape and ought to be thankful."

"How is Phil? questioned Clementina after a pause.

"Phil? He is quite well, of course. He is in the armory with the other children."

"He was not well when I saw him last. He looked deadly tired."

"That was his color, my dear. He is a remarkably strong boy."

Clementina gave a bitter little laugh.

"You must be very blind," she said, "or perhaps you don't wish to see. It was not just because he was pale that he could not keep his seat on horseback this afternoon. He looked almost as if he would die. You must be a very blind mother—very blind."

Mrs. Lovel's own face had turned white. She was about to make a hasty rejoinder, when the door was again opened and Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine came in.

"Not a word, my dear! I will explain to you another time—another time," she whispered to the girl. And then she stole out of the room.

## **CHAPTER XXI.—WHAT THE HEIR OUGHT TO BE.**

A few days after these exciting events the Marmadukes went away. Unless a sense of relief, they left no particular impression behind them. The grown-up people had not made themselves interesting to the old ladies; the lady's-maid and the parrot alike had disturbed Newbolt's equanimity; and the children of Avonsyde had certainly not learned to love the Marmaduke children. Clementina had been humbled and improved by her accident, but even an improved

Clementina could not help snubbing Rachel every hour of the day, and Rachel did not care to be snubbed. On the day they left Phil did remark, looking wistfully round him: "It seems rather lonely without the Marmadukes." But no one else echoed the sentiment, and in a day or two these people, who were so important in their own eyes, were almost forgotten at Avonsyde.

On one person, however, this visit had made a permanent impression: that person was poor Mrs. Lovel. She was made terribly uneasy by Clementina's words. If Clementina, an ignorant and decidedly selfish girl, could notice that Phil was not strong, could assure her, in that positive, unpleasant way she had, that Phil was very far from strong, surely Miss Griselda, who noticed him so closely and watched all he did and said with such solicitude, could not fail to observe this fact also. Poor Mrs. Lovel trembled and feared and wondered, now that the tankard was lost and now that Phil's delicacy was becoming day by day more apparent, if there was any hope of that great passionate desire of hers being fulfilled.

Just at present, as far as Miss Griselda was concerned, she had no real cause for alarm.

Miss Griselda had quite made up her mind, and where she led Miss Katharine was sure to follow. Miss Griselda was certain that Phil was the heir. Slowly the conviction grew upon her that this little white-faced, fragile boy was indeed the lineal descendant of Rupert Lovel. She had looked so often at his face that she even imagined she saw a likeness to the dark-eyed, dark-browed, stern-looking man whose portrait hung in the picture-gallery. This disinherited Rupert had become more or less of a hero in Miss Griselda's eyes. From her earliest years she had taken his part; from her earliest years she had despised that sickly younger line from which she herself had sprung. Like most women, Miss Griselda invested her long-dead hero with many imaginary charms. He was brave and great in soul. He was as strong in mind as he was in physique. When she began to see a likeness between Phil's face and the face of her old-time hero, and when she began also to discover that the little boy was generous and brave, that he was one of those plucky little creatures who shrink from neither pain nor hardship, had Phil's mother but known it, his cause was won. Miss Griselda began to love the boy. It was beginning to be delightful to her to feel that after she was dead and gone little Phil would have the old house and the lands, that he should reign as a worthy squire of Avonsyde. Already she began to drill the little boy with regard to his future duties, and often when he and she took walks together she spoke to him about what he was to do.

"All this portion of the forest belongs to us, Phil," she said to him one day. "My father often talked of having a roadway made through it, but he never did so, nor will Katharine and I. We leave that as part of your work."

"Would the poor people like it?" asked Phil, raising his eyes with their queer expression to her face. "That's the principal thing to think about, isn't it—if the poor people would like it?"

Miss Griselda frowned.

"I don't agree with you," she said. "The first and principal thing to consider is what is best for the lord of Avonsyde. A private road just through these lands would be a great acquisition, and therefore for that reason you will have to undertake the work by and by."

Phil's eyes still looked grave and anxious.

"Do you think, then—are you quite sure that I am really the heir, Aunt Griselda?" he said.

Miss Griselda smiled and patted his cheek.

"Well, my boy, you ought to know best," she said. "Your mother assures me that you are."

"Oh, yes—poor mother!" answered Phil. "Aunt Griselda," he continued suddenly, "if you were picturing an heir to yourself, you wouldn't think of a boy like me, would you?"

"I don't know, Phil. I do picture you in that position very often. Your Aunt Katharine and I have had a weary search, but at last you have come, and I may say that, on the whole, I am satisfied. My dear boy, we have been employed for six years over this search, and sometimes I will own that I have almost despaired. Katharine never did; but then she is romantic and believes in the old rhyme."

"What old rhyme?" asked Phil.

"Have you not heard it? It is part and parcel of our house and runs in different couplets, but the meaning is always the same:

"Come what may come, tyde what may tyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde."

"Is that really true?" asked Phil, his eyes shining. "I like the words very much. They sound like a kind of speech that the beautiful green lady of the forest would have made; but, Aunt Griselda, I must say it—I am sorry."

"What about, dear?"

"That you are satisfied with me as an heir."

"My dear little Phil, what a queer speech to make. Why should not I be satisfied with a nice, good little boy like you?"

"Oh, yes, you might like me for myself," said Phil; "but as the heir—that is quite a different thing. I'd never picture myself as an heir—never!"

"What do you mean, Phil?"

"I know what I mean, Aunt Griselda, but it's a secret, and I mustn't say. I have a lovely picture in my mind of what the heir ought to be. Perhaps there is no harm in telling you what my picture is like. Oh, if you only could see him!"

"See whom, Philip?"

"My picture. He is tall and strong and very broad, and he has a look of Rachel, and his cheeks are brown, and his hair is black, and his arms are full of muscle, and his shoulders are perfectly square, and he holds himself up so erect, just as if he was drilled. He is strong beyond anybody else I know, and yet he is kind; he wouldn't hurt even a fly. Oh, if you only knew him. He's my picture of an heir!"

Phil's face flushed and his lovely eyes shone. Aunt Griselda stooped down and kissed him.

"You are a queer boy," she said. "You have described your ancestor, Rupert Lovel, to the life. Well, child, may you too have the brave and kindly soul. Phil, after the summer, when all is decided, you are to go to a preparatory school for Eton and then to Eton itself. All the men of our house have been educated there. Afterward I suppose you must go to Oxford. Your responsibilities will be great, little man, and you must be educated to take them up properly."

"Mother will be pleased with all this," said Phil; "only I do wish—yes, I can't help saying it—that my picture was the heir. Oh, Aunt Grizel, do, do look at that lovely spider!"

"I believe the boy is more interested in those wretched spiders and caterpillars than he is in all the position and wealth which lies before him," thought Miss Griselda.

Late on that same day she said to Miss Katharine:

"Phil this morning drew a perfect picture, both mental and physical, of our ancestor, Katharine."

"Oh," said Miss Katharine; "I suppose he was studying the portrait. Griselda, I see plainly that you mean to give the boy the place."

"Provided his mother can prove his descent," answered Miss Griselda in a gentle, satisfied tone. "But of that," she added, "I have not, of course, the smallest doubt."

"Does it occur to you, Griselda, to remember that on the 5th of May Rachel's and Kitty's mother comes here to claim her children?"

"If she is alive," said Miss Griselda. "I have my doubts on that head. We have not had a line from her all these years."

"You told her she was not to write."

"Yes, but is it likely a woman of that class would keep her word?"

"Griselda, you will be shocked with me for saying so, but the young woman who came here on the day our father died was a lady."

"Katharine! she served in a shop."

"No matter, she was a lady; her word to her would be sacred. I don't believe she is dead. I am sure she will come here on the 5th of May."

## **CHAPTER XXII.—RIGHT IS RIGHT.**

When Rupert Lovel and his boy left the gloomy lodgings where Rachel's and Kitty's mother was spending a few days, they went home in absolute silence. The minds of both were so absorbed that they did not care to speak. Young Rupert was a precocious lad, old and manly beyond his years. Little Phil scarcely exaggerated when he drew glowing pictures of this fine lad. The boy was naturally brave, naturally strong, and all the circumstances of his bringing-up had fostered these qualities. His had been no easy, bread-and-butter existence. He had scarcely known poverty, for his father had been well off almost from his birth; but he had often come in contact with danger, and latterly sorrow had met him. He loved his mother passionately; even now he could scarcely speak of her without a perceptible faltering in his voice, without a dimness softening the light of his bright eagle eyes. Rupert at fifteen was in all respects some years older than an English boy of the same age. It would have struck any parent or guardian as rather

ridiculous to send this active, clever, well-informed lad to school. The fact was, he had been to Nature's school to some purpose, and had learned deeply from this most wonderful of all teachers.

When Rupert and his father reached the hotel in Jermyn Street where they were staying, the boy looked the man full in the face and broke the silence with these words:

"Now, father, is it worth it?"

"Is it worth what, my son?"

"You know, father. After hearing that lady talk I don't want Avonsyde."

The elder Lovel frowned. He was silent for a moment; then he laid his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Look me in the face, lad, and answer me a question."

"Yes, father."

"Do you trust me?"

"Why, of course. Can you doubt it?"

"Then go to bed and to sleep, and believe that nothing shall be done which in the slightest degree shall tarnish your honor. Go to bed, boy, and sleep peacefully, but just put one thought under your pillow. Right is right and wrong is wrong. It sometimes so happens, Rupert, that it is not the right and best thing to be simply magnanimous."

Rupert smiled.

"I am quite certain you will decide as my mother would have liked best, sir," he said, and then he took his candle and left the room.

The greater part of the night the elder Lovel sat up. Early the next morning he paid the family lawyers a visit.

"I have made up my mind, Mr. Baring," he said to the younger of these gentlemen. "For the next few months I shall remain in England, but I shall not bring my son forward as an heir to the Avonsyde property until I can claim for him unbroken and direct descent. As I told you yesterday, there are two unexpected obstacles in my way. I have sustained a loss—I don't know how. An old tankard and a parcel of valuable letters cannot be found. I am not leaving a stone unturned to recover them. When I can lay my hand on the tankard and when, even more important, I can produce the letters, I can show you by an unbroken chain of evidence that my boy is the eldest son of the eldest son in direct descent. I make no claim until I make all claim, Mr. Baring."

"I have to-day had a letter from the old ladies at Avonsyde," answered Mr. Baring. "They seem pleased with the boy who is at present claiming the property. From the tone of Miss Griselda's letter, I should judge that if your boy does not put in his appearance the child who is at present at Avonsyde will be publicly recognized as the heir. Even a public recognition does not really interfere with your son if you can prove his title; but undoubtedly it will be best for all parties that you should make your claim before the other child is put into a false position."

"When do you anticipate that the old ladies will absolutely decide?"

"They name a date—the 5th of May."

"I think I can promise one thing: after the 5th of May neither Rupert nor I will interfere. We make claim before or on that date, not afterward. The fact is, we know something of the child who is now at Avonsyde."

Mr. Lovel, after enjoining absolute secrecy on the lawyers, went his way, and that evening had a long interview with Mrs. Lovel.

"I fear," he said in conclusion, "that in no case would your girls come into the place, except indeed under certain conditions."

"What are they?" asked Mrs. Lovel.

"That we find neither tankard nor letters and in consequence do not make our claim, and that little Philip Lovel dies."

"Is he so ill as that?"

"He is physically unsound. The best doctors in Melbourne have examined him and do not believe he will live to manhood. His mother comes of an unhealthy family, and the boy takes after her physically—not mentally, thank God!"

"Poor little Phil! He has a wonderfully sweet face."

“He has the bravest nature I ever met. My boy and girls would almost die for Phil. The fact is, all this is most complicated and difficult, and much of the mischief would have been avoided if only that wretched sister-in-law of mine had been above-board.”

“Yes,” answered Mrs. Lovel; “but even her stealing a march on you does not give you back the tankard nor the letter.”

“True; and I don’t suppose even she could have stolen them. Well, Rachel, we must all hope for the best.”

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“If there is a thing that worries me,” said Nancy White to herself—“if there is a thing that keeps coming and coming into my dreams and getting that fantastic and that queer in shape—one time being big enough to hold quarts and quarts of water, and another time so small that you’d think it would melt before your very eyes—it’s this wretched silver can. It’s in my mind all day long and it’s in my dreams all night long. There! I wonder if the bit of a thing is bright enough now.”

As Nancy spoke to herself she rubbed and polished and turned round and round and tenderly dusted the lost tankard of the house of Lovel until it really shone like a mirror.

“It takes a deal of trouble, and I’m sure it isn’t worth it,” she said to herself. “I just kept it more out of a bit of mischief than anything else in the beginning; but it just seems to me now as if I hated it, and yet I couldn’t part with it. I believe it’s a bit of a haunted thing, or it wouldn’t come into my dreams after this fashion.”

Nancy kept the tankard up in her bedroom. After giving it a last fond rub and looking at it queerly with an expression half of admiration, half of fear, she locked it up in a little cupboard in the wall and tripped downstairs to attend to her mistress’ comforts.

Mrs. Lovel kept no secrets from her old servant, and Nancy knew about her mistress’ adventures in London and her unexpected meeting with the friend of her early days, Rupert Lovel. Still, Nancy had a shrewd suspicion that not quite all was told her; she had a kind of idea that there was something in the background.

“It comes over me,” she said to herself—“it comes over me that unless I, Nancy White, am as sharp as sharp and as cunning as cunning, my missus and my young ladies will be done. What is it that the missus is keeping in the back of her head to make her look that dreamy, and that wistful, and that despairing, and yet that hopeful? My word, if I haven’t seen her smile as if she was almost glad once or twice. Poor dear! maybe she knows as that little delicate chap can’t be the heir; and as to the others—the old gentleman and the fine young lad from the other side of the earth—why, if they have a claim to make, why don’t they make it? And if they don’t make it, then, say I, it’s because they can’t. Well, now, anything is better than suspense, and I’ll question my missus on that very point straight away.”

Accordingly, when Nancy had arranged the tea-tray in the most tempting position and stirred the fire into the cheeriest blaze, she knelt down before it and began to make some crisp and delicious toast. Nancy knew that Mrs. Lovel had a weakness for the toast she made, and she also knew that such an employment was very favorable to confidential conversation.

“Well, ma’am,” she said suddenly, having coughed once or twice and gone through one or two other little maneuvers to attract attention—“well, ma’am, I wants to have my mind eased on a certain point. Is it, ma’am, or is it not the case that the old gentleman from Australia means to do you a mischief?”

“What do you mean, Nancy?” exclaimed Mrs. Lovel, laying down the lace which she was embroidering and gazing at her old servant in some astonishment. “The old gentleman from Australia? Why, Rupert Lovel cannot be more than forty. He is a man in his prime, splendidly strong; and as to his doing me a mischief, I believe, you silly old woman, that he is one of my best friends.”

“The proof of the pudding is in the eating,” snorted Nancy. “You’ll excuse me, ma’am, but I’d like to prove that by his actions. He means that young son of his to get possession of Avonsyde—don’t he, ma’am?”

“His son is the real heir, Nancy. Dear Nancy, I wish to say something. I must not be covetous for my little girls. If the real and lawful heir turns up I have not a word to say. Nay, more, I think if I can be glad on this subject I am glad that he should turn out to be the son of my early and oldest friend.”

“Oh, yes, ma’am, I’m not a bit surprised about you. Bother that toast, how it will burn! It’s just like you, ma’am, to give up everything for six blessed years, and to have your heart well-nigh broke and your poor eyes dimmed with crying, and then in the end, when the cup that you have been so longing for is almost to your lips, to give up everything again and to be glad into the bargain. That’s just like you, ma’am; but, you’ll excuse me, it ain’t like Nancy White, and if you can be glad in the prospect of seeing your children beggared, I can’t; so there!”

"Dear Nancy," said Mrs. Lovel, laying her hand on the old servant's shoulder, "how am I to help myself? Both might and right are against me. Had I not better submit to the inevitable with a good grace?"

"That bonny little Miss Rachel," continued Nancy, "don't I see her now, with her eyes flashing as she looked up at me and that fine, imperious way she had, and 'tell the lady to wear my ring, Nancy,' says she, 'and tell her that I love her,' says she."

"Little darling," whispered the mother, and raising her hand she pressed a tiny ring which she wore to her lips.

"Miss Rachel isn't meant for poverty," continued Nancy, "and what's more, I'm very sure Miss Kitty isn't either; so, ma'am, I'd like to be sure whether they are to have it or not; and a question I'd dearly like to have answered is this: If the middle-aged man, Mr. Rupert Lovel, and his son have a claim to Avonsyde, why don't they make it? Anything is better than suspense, say I. Why don't we know the worst and have done with it?"

"Why, Nancy, I thought I had told you everything. Mr. Lovel won't make a claim until he can make a perfect claim. The fact is, some of his credentials are lost."

"The toast is done, ma'am. May I make bold to ask what you mean by that? You had better eat your toast while it is hot and crisp, Mrs. Lovel. The good gentleman from Australia hasn't to go to the old ladies with a character in his hand, like a servant looking for a situation?"

"No, no, Nancy; but he has to bring letters and other tokens to prove his son's descent, to prove that his son is a true Lovel of Avonsyde of the elder branch, and unfortunately Mr. Lovel has lost some valuable letters and an old silver tankard which has been for hundreds of years in the family, and which was taken from Avonsyde by the Rupert Lovel who quarreled with his relations."

Mrs. Lovel's head was bent over her lace, and she never noticed how red Nancy's face grew at this moment, nor how she almost dropped the steaming kettle with which she was about to replenish the tea-pot.

"Oh, my word!" she exclaimed hastily. "It seems as if toast and kettle and all was turned spiteful to-night. There's that boiling water flowed over on my hand. Never mind, ma'am—it ain't nothing. What was it you were saying was lost, ma'am?"

"Letters, Nancy, and a tankard."

"Oh, letters and a tankard. And what may a tankard be like?"

"This was an old-fashioned silver can, with the Lovel coat of arms and the motto of their house, 'Tyde what may,' graved on one side. Why, Nancy, you look quite pale."

"It's the burn, ma'am, that smarts a little. And so the silver can is lost? Dear, dear, what a misfortune; and the fine young gentleman can't get the place noway without it. Is that so or not, ma'am?"

"Well, Nancy, the tankard seems to be considered a very important piece of evidence, and Mr. Lovel is not inclined to claim the property for his son without it. However, he is having careful search made in Australia, and will probably hear tidings of it any day."

"That's as Providence wills, ma'am. It's my belief that if the middle-aged gentleman was to search Australia from tail to head he wouldn't get no tidings of that bit of a silver mug. Dear, dear, how this burn on my hand do smart!"

"You had better put some vaseline on it, Nancy. You look quite upset. I fear it is worse than you say. Let me look at it."

"No, no, ma'am; it will go off presently. Dear, what a taking the gentleman must be in for the silver mug. Well, ma'am, more unlikely things have happened than that your bonny little ladies should come in for Avonsyde. Did I happen to mention to you, ma'am, that I saw Master Phil Lovel yesterday?"

"No, Nancy. Where and how?"

"He was with one of the old ladies, ma'am, in the forest. He was talking to her and laughing and he never noticed me, and you may be sure I kept well in the background. Eh, but he's a dear little fellow; but if ever there was a bit of a face on which the shadow rested, it's his."

"Nancy, Nancy, is he indeed so ill? Poor, dear little boy!"

"No, ma'am, I don't say he's so particular ill. He walked strong enough and he looked up into the old lady's face as bright as you please; but he had the look—I have seen it before, and I never could be mistaken about that look on any face. Not long for this world was written all over him. Too good for this world was the way his eyes shone and his lips smiled. Dear heart, ma'am, don't cry. Such as them is the blessed ones; they go away to a deal finer place and a grander home

than any Avonsyde."

"True," said Mrs. Lovel. "I don't cry for that, but I think the child suffers. He spoke very sorrowfully to me."

"Well, ma'am, we must all go through it, one way or another. My old mother used to say to me long ago, 'Nancy, 'tis contrasts as do it. I'm so tired out with grinding, grinding, and toiling, toiling, that just to rest and do nothing seems to me as if it would be perfect heaven.' And the little fellow will be the more glad some day because he has had a bit of suffering. Dear, dear, ma'am, I can't get out of my head the loss of that tankard."

"So it seems, Nancy; the fact seems to have taken complete possession of you. Were it not absolutely impossible, I could even have said that my poor honest old Nancy was the thief! There, Nancy, don't look so startled. Of course I was only joking."

"Of course, ma'am; but you'll just excuse me if I go and bind up my burned hand."

### **CHAPTER XXIII.—FOREST LIFE.**

The spring came early that year. A rather severe winter gave place to charming and genial weather. In April it was hot, and the trees made haste to clothe themselves with their most delicate and fairy green, the flowers peeped out joyfully, the birds sang from morning till night, and the forest became paradise.

Rachel, Kitty, and Phil almost lived there. Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine had become lenient in the matter of lessons. Miss Griselda was wise enough to believe in nature's lessons and to think fine fresh air the best tonic in all the world for both mind and body. Phil was in his element in the forest. He was always finding new beetles and fresh varieties of chrysalides, which he and Kitty carefully treasured; and as to the roots and the flowers and the mosses which these children collected, even good-natured Newbolt at last gave vent to strong expressions of disapproval, and asked if the whole of the house was to be turned topsy-turvy with their messes.

Phil could do what he liked in his old tower bedroom; his mother never interfered with him there. This quaint old room was Liberty Hall to Phil. Here he could groan if he wanted to, or sigh if he wanted to, or talk his secrets to the silent, faithful walls if he wanted to; and here he brought his spiders and his beetles and his mosses, and kept them in odd bottles and under broken glasses, and messed away to his heart's content without any one saying him nay.

Downstairs Mrs. Lovel was a most careful and correct mother—never petting and never spoiling, always on her guard, always watchful and prim. Miss Griselda was wont to say that with all her follies she had never come across a more sagacious and sensible mother than Mrs. Lovel. As a mother she approved of her absolutely; but then Miss Griselda never saw behind the scenes; she never saw what went on in the tower bedroom, where Mrs. Lovel would take the boy in her arms, and strain him to her heart with passionate kisses, and pet him and make much of him, and consult him, and, above all things, faithfully promise him that after the 5th of May the burden which was crushing his young life should be removed, and he might be his own natural and unrestrained self again.

Mrs. Lovel had got a dreadful fright when she first read young Rupert's letter; but when day after day and week after week passed and no tidings of Rupert or his father reached Avonsyde, she began to hope that even though they were in England, they had come over on business in no way connected with the old family home; in short, even though they were in England, they had not seen those advertisements which had almost turned her head.

The weeks passed quickly, and she began to breathe freely and to be almost happy once more. The loss of the tankard was certainly disquieting, but she felt sure that with the aid of the stolen letters she could substantiate her boy's claim, and she also reflected that if the tankard was lost to her it was also lost to her brother-in-law, Rupert Lovel.

So life went quite smoothly at Avonsyde, and day after day the weather became more balmy and springlike, and day after day Miss Griselda's face wore a softer and gentler expression; for the little heir-apparent was altogether after her own heart, and she was contented, as all women are when they find a worthy object to love.

Miss Katharine too was smiling and happy in these early spring days. She had never forgotten the face of the mother who had left her two children in her charge nearly six years ago. That young and agonized face had haunted her dreams; some words which those poor trembling lips had uttered had recurred to her over and over.

"It breaks my heart to part with the children," the mother had said, "but if in no other way I can provide for their future, I sacrifice myself willingly. I am willing to obliterate myself for their sakes."

Miss Katharine had felt, when these words were wrung from a brave and troubled heart, that pride was indeed demanding a cruel thing; but for Miss Griselda she would have said:



"Come here with your children. You are Valentine's wife, and for his sake we will be good to you as well as them."

Miss Katharine had longed to say these words, but fear of her elder sister had kept her silent, and ever since her heart had reproached her. Now she felt cheerful, for she knew that on Rachel's birthday the mother of the children would return, and she knew also that when she came she would not go away again.

Rachel's charming little face had lost a good deal of its watchful and unrestful expression during the last few weeks. She had seen Nancy White more than once, and Nancy had so strongly impressed on her the fact that on the 5th of May the lady of the forest would reveal herself, and all the mystery of her secret and her seclusion be explained, that the little girl grew hopeful and bright and fixed her longing eyes on that birthday which was to mean so much to so many. Kitty too looked forward to the 5th of May as to a delightful general holiday; in short, every one was excited about it, except the child to whom it meant the most of all. Little Phil alone was unconcerned about the great day—little Phil alone lived happily in the present, and, if anything, rather put the future out of sight. To him the thought of the inheritance which on that day was to be forced upon him was felt to be a heavy burden; but, then, those little shoulders were already over-weighted, and God knew and little Phil also knew that they could not bear any added burden.

Of late little Phil had been very glad to feel that God knew about his secrets and his cares, and in his own very simple, childish little way he used lately to ask him not to add to them; and now that he was sure God knew everything, he ceased to trouble his head very much about all that was to happen on Rachel's birthday.

Thus every one at Avonsyde, with the exception of little Phil, was happy in the future, but he alone was perfectly happy in the present. His collection of all kinds of natural curiosities grew and multiplied, and he spent more and more time in the lovely forest. The delicious spring air did him good, and his mother once more hoped and almost believed that health and strength lay before him.

One day, quite toward the end of April, Kitty, his constant companion, had grown tired and refused to stay out any longer. The day was quite hot, and the little boy wandered on alone under the shade of the trees. As usual when quite by himself, he chose the least-frequented paths, and as usual the vague hope came over him that he might see the lovely green lady of the forest. No such exquisite vision was permitted to him, but instead he came suddenly upon Nancy White, who was walking in the forest and picking up small dry branches and sticks, which she placed in a large basket hung over her arm. When she saw Phil she started and almost dropped her basket.

"Well I never!" she exclaimed. "You has gone and given me a start, little master."

"How do you do, Nancy?" said Phil, going up to her, speaking in a polite voice, and holding out his hand. "How is the lady of the forest? Please tell her that, I have kept her secret most carefully, that no one knows it but Rachel, and she knew it long ago. I hope the lady is very well, Nancy."

"Yes, my dear, she is well and hopeful. The days are going on, Master Philip Lovel, and each day as it passes brings a little more hope. I am sure you are little gentleman enough to keep the lady's secret."

"Everybody speaks about the days passing and hope growing," said Phil. "I—I—Nancy, did you ever see the green lady about here? She could bring me hope. How I wish I could see her!"

"Now, don't be fanciful, my dear little gentleman," answered Nancy. "Them thoughts about fairies and such-like are very bad for growing children. You shouldn't allow your head to wander on such nonsense. Little boys and girls should attend to their spelling lessons, and eat plenty, and go to bed early, and then they have no time for fretting after fairies and such. It isn't canny to hear you talk as you do of the green lady, Master Phil."

"Isn't it?" said Phil. "I am sorry. I do wish to see her. I want a gift from her. Good-by, Nancy. Give my love to the lady."

"I will so, dear; and tell me, are you feeling any way more perky—like yourself?"

"I'm very well, except when I'm very bad," answered Phil. "Just now I'm as well as possible, but in the evenings I sometimes get tired, and then it rather hurts me to mount up so many stairs to my tower bedroom; but oh! I would not sleep in any other room for the world. I love my tower room."

"Well, you'll be a very happy little boy soon," said Nancy—"a very happy, rich little boy; for if folks say true everything has to be given to you on the 5th of May."

"A lot of money and lands, you mean," said Phil. "Oh, yes; but they aren't everything—oh, dear, no! I know what I want, and I am not likely to have it. Good-by, Nancy; good-by."

Phil ran off, and Nancy pursued her walk stolidly and soberly.

"The look grows," she said to herself—"the look grows and deepens. Poor little lad! he is right enough when he says that gold and lands won't satisfy him. Well, now, I'm doing him no harm by keeping back the silver tankard. It's only his good-for-nothing mother as will be put out, and that middle-aged man in London and that other boy. What do I care for that other boy, or for any one in all the world but my missus and her dear little ladies? There, there, that tankard is worse than a nightmare to me. I hate it, and I'd give all the world never to have seen it; but there, now that I've got it I'll keep it."

#### CHAPTER XXIV.—A GREAT ALARM.

"Katharine," said Miss Griselda to her younger sister, "do you happen to remember the address of those lodgings in London where we wrote years ago to Rachel's and Kitty's mother? The 5th of May will be this day week, and although I dislike the woman, and of course cannot possibly agree with you as to her being in any sense of the word a lady, yet still when Griselda Lovel passes her word she does pass it, and I think it is right, however painful, to give the young woman the invitation for the 5th of May."

"We wrote one letter nearly six years ago to No. 10 Abbey Street, Marshall Road, S.W., London," answered Miss Katharine in a sharp voice for her. "One letter to a mother about her own children; but that was the address, Griselda."

"No. 10 Abbey Street," repeated Miss Griselda. "I shall send the young woman an invitation to-day. Of course it won't reach her, for she is dead long ago; but it is only right to send it. Katharine, you don't look well this morning. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing more than usual," answered Miss Katharine. "One letter in six years to Valentine's wife. Oh, no, I was not likely to forget the address."

"Allow me to congratulate you on your excellent memory, my dear. Oh, here comes Phil's mother. I have much to talk over with her."

Miss Katharine left the room; her head was throbbing and tears rose unbidden to her eyes. When she reached the great hall she sat down on an oak bench and burst into tears.

"How cruel of Griselda to speak like that of Valentine's wife," she said under her breath. "If Valentine's wife is indeed dead I shall never know another happy moment. Oh, Rachel and Kitty, my dears, I did not see you coming in."

"Yes, and here is Phil too," said Kitty, dragging him forward. "Why are you crying, Aunt Katharine? Do dry your tears and look at our lovely flowers."

"I am thinking about your mother, children," said Miss Katharine suddenly. "Does it ever occur to you two thoughtless, happy girls that you have got a mother somewhere in existence—that she loves you and misses you?"

"I don't know my mother," said Kitty. "I can't remember her, but Rachel can."

"Yes," said Rachel abruptly. "I'm going all round the world to look for her by and by. Don't let's talk of her; I can't bear it."

The child's face had grown pale; a look of absolute suffering filled her dark and glowing eyes. Miss Katharine was so much astonished at this little peep into Rachel's deep heart that she absolutely dried her own tears. Sometimes she felt comforted at the thought of Rachel suffering. If even one child did not quite forget her mother, surely this fact would bring pleasure to the mother by and by.

Meanwhile Miss Griselda was holding a solemn and somewhat alarming conversation with poor Mrs. Lovel. In the first place, she took the good lady into the library—a dark, musty-smelling room, which gave this vivacious and volatile person, as she expressed it, "the horrors" on the spot. Miss Griselda having secured her victim and having seated her on one of the worm-eaten, high-backed chairs, opened the book-case marked D and took from it the vellum-bound diary which six years ago she had carried to the old squire's bedroom. From the musty pages of the diary Miss Griselda read aloud the story of the great quarrel; she read in an intensely solemn voice, with great emphasis and even passion. Miss Griselda knew this part of the history of her house so well that she scarcely needed to look at the words of the old chronicler.

"It may seem a strange thing to you, Mrs. Lovel," she said when she had finished her story—"a strange and incomprehensible thing that your white-faced and delicate-looking little boy should in any way resemble the hero of this quarrel."

"Phil is not delicate," feebly interposed Mrs. Lovel.

"I said delicate-looking. Pray attend to me. The Rupert who quarreled with his father—I will confess to you that my sympathies are with Rupert—was in the right. He was heroic—a man of honor; he was brave and stalwart and noble. Your boy reminds me of him—not in physique, no, no! but his spirit looks out of your boy's eyes. I wish to make him the heir of our house."

"Oh, Miss Griselda, how can a poor, anxious mother thank you enough?"

"Don't thank me at all. I do it in no sense of the word for you. The boy pleases me; he has won on my affections; I—love him."

Miss Griselda paused. Perhaps never before in the whole course of her life had she openly admitted that she loved any one. After a period which seemed interminable to poor Mrs. Lovel she resumed:

"My regard for the boy is, however, really of small consequence; he can only inherit under the conditions of my father's will. These conditions are that he must claim direct descent from the Rupert Lovel who was treated so unjustly two hundred years ago, and that he has, as far as it is possible for a boy to have, perfect physical health."

Mrs. Lovel grew white to her very lips.

"Phil is perfectly strong," she repeated.

Miss Griselda stared at her fixedly.

"I have judged of that for myself," she said coldly. "I have studied many books on the laws of health and many physiological treatises, and have trusted to my own observation rather than to any doctor's casual opinion. The boy is pale and slight, but I believe him to be strong, for I have tested him in many ways. Without you knowing it I have made him go through many athletic exercises, and he has often run races in my presence. I believe him to be sound. We will let that pass. The other and even more important matter is that he should now prove his descent. You have shown me some of your proofs, and they certainly seem to me incontestable, but I have not gone really carefully into the matter. My lawyer, Mr. Baring, will come down here on the afternoon of the 4th and carefully go over with you all your letters and credentials. On the 5th I have incited many friends to come to Avonsyde, and on that occasion Katharine and I will present Philip to our many acquaintances as our heir. We will make the occasion as festive as possible, and would ask you to see that Philip is suitably and becomingly dressed. You know more of the fashions of the world than we do, so we will leave the matter of device in your hands, of course bearing all the expense ourselves. By the way, you have observed in the history I have just read how the old silver tankard is mentioned. In that terrible scene where Rupert finally parts with his father, he takes up the tankard and declares that 'Tyde what may' he will yet return vindicated and honored to the old family home. That was a prophecy," continued Miss Griselda, rising with excitement to her feet; "for you have brought the boy and also the very tankard which Rupert took away with him. I look upon your possession of the tankard, as the strongest proof of all of the justice of your claim. By the way, you have never yet shown it to me. Do you mind fetching it now?"

Muttering something almost unintelligible, Mrs. Lovel rose and left the library. She crossed the great hall, opened the oak door which led to the tower staircase, and mounting the winding and worn stairs, presently reached her bedroom. The little casement windows were opened, and the sweet air of spring was filling the quaint chamber. Mrs. Lovel shut and locked the door; then she went to one of the narrow and slit-like windows and looked out. A wide panorama of lovely landscape lay before her; miles of forest lands undulated away to the very horizon; the air was full of the sweet songs of many birds; the atmosphere was perfumed with all the delicious odors of budding flowers and opening leaves. In its way nothing could have been more perfect; and it was for Phil—all for Phil! All the beauty and the glory and the loveliness, all the wealth and the comfort and the good position, were for Phil, her only little son. Mrs. Lovel clasped her hands, and bitter tears came to her eyes. The cup was almost to the boy's lips. Was it possible that anything could dash it away now?

The tankard—she was sent to fetch the silver tankard—the tankard which Phil himself had lost! What could she do? How could she possibly frame an excuse? She dared not tell Miss Griselda that her boy had lost it. She felt so timid, so insecure, that she dared not confess what an ordinary woman in ordinary circumstances would have done. She dreaded the gaze of Miss Griselda's cold, unbelieving gray eyes; she dreaded the short sarcastic speech she would be sure to make. No, no, she dared not confess; she must dissemble; she must prevaricate; on no account must she tell the truth. She knew that Miss Griselda was waiting for her in the library; she also knew that the good lady was not remarkable for patience; she must do something, and at once.

In despair she rang the bell, and when Newbolt replied to it she found Mrs. Lovel lying on her bed with her face partly hidden.

"Please tell Miss Lovel that I am ill, Newbolt," she said. "I have been taken with a very nasty headache and trembling and faintness. Ask her if she will excuse my going downstairs just for the present."

Newbolt departed with her message, and Mrs. Lovel knew that she had a few hours' grace. She again locked the door and, rising from her bed, paced up and down the chamber. She was far too restless to remain quiet. Was it possible that the loss of the tankard might be, after all, her undoing? Oh, no! the dearly loved possession was now so close; the auspicious day was so near; the certainty was at her door. No, no! the letters were proof of Philip's claim; she need not be so

terribly frightened. Although she reasoned in this way, she felt by no means reassured, and it suddenly occurred to her that perhaps if she went into the forest she might find the tankard herself. It might be lying even now forgotten, unnoticed under some bush beside the treacherous bog which had almost swallowed up her boy. What a happy thought! Oh, yes, she herself would go to look for it.

Mrs. Lovel did not know the forest as Phil and Rachel and Kitty did. The forest by itself had no charms whatever for her. She disliked its solitude; she saw no beauty in its scenery; no sweetness came to her soul from the song of its happy birds or the brilliance of its wild flowers. No, no—the city and life and movement and gayety for Mrs. Lovel; she was a poor artificial creature, and Nature was not likely to whisper her secrets into her ears.

When Phil came up by and by his mother questioned him minutely as to the part of the forest into which he had wandered. Of course he could not tell her much; but she got a kind of idea, and feeble as her knowledge was she resolved to act on it.

Early the next morning she rose from an almost sleepless bed, and carefully dressing so as not to awaken her sleeping boy, she stole downstairs and, as Phil had done some months before, let herself out by a side entrance into the grounds. It was winter when Phil had gone on his little expedition—a winter's morning, with its attendant cold and damp and gloom; but now the spring sun was already getting up, the dew sparkled on the grass, and the birds were having a perfect chorus of rejoicing. Even Mrs. Lovel, unimpressionable as she was to all nature's delights, was influenced by the crisp and buoyant air and the sense of rejoicing which the birds and flowers had in common. She stepped quits briskly into the forest and said to herself:

“My spirits are rising; that terrible depression I underwent yesterday is leaving me. I take this as a good omen and believe that I may find the tankard.”

Phil had given her certain directions, and for some time she walked on bravely, expecting each moment to come to the spot where the boy had assured her the beaten track ended and she must plunge into the recesses of the primeval forest itself. Of course she lost her way, and after wandering along for some hours, seated herself in an exhausted state at the foot of a tree, and there, without in the least intending to do so, fell asleep.

Mrs. Lovel was unaccustomed to any physical exercise, and her long walk, joined to her sleepless night, made her now so overpoweringly drowsy that she not only slept, but slept heavily.

In her sleep she knew nothing at all of the advance the day was making. The sun's rays darting through the thick foliage of the giant oak tree under which she slumbered did not in the least disturb her, and when some robins made their breakfast close by and twittered and talked to one another she never heard them. Some rabbits and some squirrels peeped at her quite saucily, but they never even ruffled her placid repose. Her head rested against the tree, her bonnet was slightly pushed back, and her hands lay folded over each other in her lap.

Presently there was a sound of footsteps, and a woman came up and bent over the sleeping lady in the forest. The woman was dressed in a short petticoat, strong boots, a striped jersey jacket, and a shawl thrown over her head; she carried a basket on her arm and she was engaged in her favorite occupation of picking sticks.

“Dearie me! now, whoever is this?” said Nancy White as she bent over Phil's mother. “Dearie, dearie, a poor white-looking thing; no bone or muscle or go about her, I warrant. And who has she a look of? I know some one like her—and yet—no, it can't be—no. Is it possible that she features pretty little Master Phil?”

Nancy spoke half-aloud, and came yet nearer and bent very low indeed over the sleeper.

“She do feature Master Phil and she has got the dress of a fine lady. Oh, no doubt she's his poor, weak bit of a mother! Bless the boy! No wonder he's ailing if she has the mothering of him.”

Nancy's words were all muttered half-aloud, and under ordinary occasions such sounds would undoubtedly have awakened Mrs. Lovel; now they only caused her to move restlessly and to murmur some return words in her sleep.

“Phil, if we cannot find that tankard we are undone.” Then after a pause: “It is a long way to the bog. I wonder if Phil has left the tankard on the borders of the bog.”

On hearing these sentences, which were uttered with great distinctness and in accents almost bordering on despair, Nancy suddenly threw her basket to the ground; then she clasped her two hands over her head and, stepping back a pace or two, began to execute a hornpipe, to the intense astonishment of some on-lookers in the shape of birds and squirrels.

“Ah, my lady fair!” she exclaimed, “what you have let out now makes assurance doubly sure. And so you think you'll find the precious tankard in the bog! Now, now, what shall I do? How can I prevent your going any further on such a fool's quest? Ah, my pretty little ladies, my pretty Miss Rachel and Miss Kitty, I believe I did you a good turn when I hid that tankard away.”

Nancy indulged in a few more expressions of self-congratulation then, a sudden idea coming to

her, she fumbled in her pocket for a bit of paper, and scribbling something on it laid it on the sleeping lady's lap.

When Mrs. Lovel awoke, somewhere close on midday, she took up the little piece of paper and read its contents with startled eyes:

"Come what may come, tyde what may tyde,  
Lovel shall dwell at Avonsyde.

"False heirs never yet have thriven;  
Tankards to the right are given."

The last two lines, which Nancy had composed in a perfect frenzy of excitement and rapture at what she considered a sudden development of the poetic fancy, caused poor Mrs. Lovel's cheeks to blanch and her eyes to grow dim with a sudden overpowering sense of fear. She rose to her feet and pursued her way home, trembling in every limb.

## **CHAPTER XXV.—A DREAM WITH A MEANING.**

Phil had a dream which had a great effect on him. There were several reasons for this. In the first place, it wanted but two days to the great 5th of May; in the second place, he was feeling really ill, so was making greater efforts than usual to conceal all trace of languor or weariness; in the third place, Rachel came to him about half an hour before he went upstairs to bed and burst out crying, and told him she knew something was going to happen. Rachel was not a child who was particularly given to tears, but when she did cry she cried stormily. She showed a good deal of excitement of a passionate and over-wrought little heart to Phil now, and when he questioned her and asked her why she was so excited about her birthday, she murmured first something about the lady of the forest and then about her mother, and then, afraid of her own words, she ran away before Phil could question her further. Phil's own mother, too, seemed to be in a most disturbed and unnatural state. She was always conning a piece of paper and then putting it out of sight, and her eyes had red rims round them, and when Phil questioned her she owned that she had been crying, and felt, as she expressed it, "low." All these things combined caused Phil to lay his head on his white pillow with a weary sigh and to go off into the land of dreams by no means a perfectly happy little boy.

Once there, however, he was happy enough. In the first place, he was out of his bed and out of the old house, where so many people just now looked anxious and troubled; and, in the second place, he was in a beautiful new forest, his feet treading on velvet grass, his eyes gazing at all those lovely sights in which his little soul delighted. He was in the forest and he was well, quite well; the tiredness and the aching had vanished, the weakness had disappeared; he felt as though wings had been put to his feet, as though no young eagle could feel a keener and grander sense of strength than did he. He was in the forest, and coming to meet him under the shadows of the great trees was a lady—the lady he had searched for so long and hitherto searched for in vain. She came quite naturally and gently up to him, took his little hand, looked into his eyes, and stooping down she touched his fore head with her lips.

"Brave little boy!" she said. "So you have come."

"Yes," answered Phil, "and you have come. I have waited for you so long. Have you brought the gift?"

"Beauty of face and of heart. Yes, I bring them both," answered the lady. "They are yours; take them."

"My mother," whispered Phil.

"Your mother shall be cared for, but you and she will soon part. You have done all you could for her—all, even to life itself. You cannot do more. Come with me."

"Where?" asked Phil.

"Are you not tired of the world? Come with me to Fairyland. Take my hand—come! There you will find perpetual youth and beauty and strength and goodness—come!"

Then Phil felt within himself the wildest, the most intense longing to go. He looked in the lady's face, and he thought he must fly into her arms; he must lay his head on her breast and ask her to soothe all his life troubles away.

"I know you," he said suddenly. "Some people call you by another name, but I know who you are. You give little tired boys like me great rest; and I want beyond words to go with you, but there is my mother."

"Your mother will be cared for. Come. I can give you something better than Avonsyde."

"Oh, I don't want Avonsyde! I am not the rightful heir."

"The rightful heir is coming," interrupted the lady of the forest. "Look for him on the 5th of May, and look for me too there. Farewell!"

She vanished, and Phil awoke, to find his mother sitting by his bedside, her face bent over him, her eyes wide open with terror.

"Oh, my darling, how you have looked! Are you—are you very ill?"

"No, mammy dear," answered the little boy, sitting up in the bed and kissing her in his tenderest fashion. "I have had a dream and I know what is coming, but I don't feel very ill."

Mrs. Lovel burst into floods of weeping.

"Phil," she said when she could speak through her sobs, "it is so near now—only one other day. Can you not keep up just for one more day?"

"Yes, mother; oh, yes, mother dear. I have had a dream. Hold my hand, mother, and I will try and go to sleep again. I have had a dream. Everything is quite plain now. Hold my hand, mammy dear. I love you; you know that."

He lay back again on his pillows and, exhausted, fell asleep.

Mrs. Lovel held the little thin hand and looked into the white face, and never went to bed that night. Ever since her sleep in the forest she had been perturbed and anxious; that mysterious bit of paper had troubled her more than she cared to own. She was too weak-natured a woman not to be more or less influenced by superstition, and she could not help wondering what mysterious being had come to her and, reading her heart's secret, had told her to bid good-by to hope.

But all her fears and apprehensions had been nothing, had been child's play, compared to the terror which awoke in her heart when she saw the look on her boy's face as she bent over him that night. She knew that he had never taken kindly to her scheme; she knew that personally he cared nothing at all for all the honors and greatness she would thrust upon him. He was doing it for her sake; he was trying hard to become a rich man some day for her sake; he was giving up Rupert whom he loved and the simple life which contented him for her. Oh, yes, because, as he so simply said, he loved her. But she laid too heavy a burden on the young shoulders; the long strain of patient endurance had been too much, and the gallant little life was going out.

On the instant, quick, quick as thought, there overmastered this weak and selfish woman a great, strong tide of passionate mother's love. What was Avonsyde to her compared to the life of her boy? Welcome any poverty if the boy might be saved! She fell on her knees and wept and wrung her hands and prayed long and piteously.

When in the early, early dawn Phil awoke, his mother spoke to him.

"Philip dear, you would like to see Rupert again?"

"So much, mother."

"Avonsyde is yours, but you would like to give it to him?"

"If I might, mother—if I might!"

"Leave it to me, my son. Say nothing—leave it to me, my darling."

## **CHAPTER XXVI.—LOVE VERSUS GOLD.**

"Katharine!"

"Yes."

"I have received the most extraordinary letter."

"What about, Grizel?"

"What about? Had you not better ask me first who from? Oh, no, you need not turn so pale. It is not from that paragon of your life, Rachel's and Kitty's mother."

"Grizel, I do think you might speak more tenderly of one who has done you no harm and who has suffered much."

"Well, well, let that pass. You want to know who my present correspondent is. She is no less a person than the mother of our heir."

"Phil's mother! Why should she write? She is in the house. Surely she can use her tongue."

"She is not in the house and is therefore obliged to have recourse to correspondence. Listen to her words."

Miss Griselda drew out of her pocket an envelope which contained a sheet of thick note-paper. The envelope was crested; so was the paper. The place from which it was written was Avonsyde; the date was early that morning. A few words in a rather feeble and uncertain hand filled the page.

"DEAR MISS LOVEL: I hope you and Miss Katharine will excuse me. I have made up my mind to see your lawyer, Mr. Baring, in town. I know you intended him to come here this afternoon, but if I catch the early train I shall reach his office in time to prevent him. I believe I can explain all about proofs and credentials better in town than here. I shall come back in time to-morrow. Don't let Phil be agitated. Yours humbly and regretfully,

"BELLA LOVEL."

"What does she mean by putting such an extra ordinary ending to her letter?" continued Miss Grizel as she folded up the sheet of paper and returned it to its envelope. "'Yours humbly and regretfully!' What does she mean, Katharine?"

"It sounds like a woman who had a weight on her conscience," said Miss Katharine. "I wonder if Phil really is the heir! You know, Grizel, she never showed you the tankard. She made a great talk about it, but you never really saw it. Don't you remember?"

"Nonsense!" snapped Miss Grizel. "Is it likely she would even know about the tankard if she had not got it? She was ill that day. Newbolt said she looked quite dreadful, and I did not worry her again, as I knew Mr. Baring was coming down to-day to go thoroughly into the whole question. She certainly has done an extraordinary thing in writing that letter and going up to London in that stolen sort of fashion; but as to Phil not being the heir, I think the fact of his true title to the property is pretty clearly established by this time. Katharine, I read you this letter in order to get a suggestion from you. I might have known beforehand that you had none to make. I might have known that you would only raise some of your silly doubts and make things generally uncomfortable. Well, I am displeased with Mrs. Lovel; but there, I never liked her. I shall certainly telegraph to Mr. Baring and ask him to come down here this evening, all the same."

Miss Griselda and Miss Katharine had held their brief little colloquy in the old library. They now went into the hall, where family prayers were generally held, and soon afterward Miss Griselda sent off her telegram. She received an answer in the course of a couple of hours:

"Have not seen Mrs. Lovel. Will come down as arranged."

But half an hour before the dog-cart was to be sent to the railway station to meet the lawyer another little yellow envelope was thrust into Miss Lovel's hands. It was dated from the lawyer's chambers and ran as follows:

"Most unexpectedly detained. Cannot come to-night. Expect me with Mrs. Lovel to-morrow."

This telegram made Miss Griselda very angry.

"What possible information can detain Mr. Baring when I summon him here?" she said to her younger sister. She was doomed, however, to be made yet more indignant. A third telegram arrived at Avonsyde early in the evening; it also was from Mr. Baring:

"Disquieting news. Put off your guests. Expect me early to-morrow."

Miss Griselda's face grew quite pale. She threw the thin sheet of paper indignantly on the floor.

"Mr. Baring strangely forgets himself," she said. "Put off our guests! Certainly not!"

"But, Griselda," said Miss Katharine, "our good friend speaks of disquieting news. It may be—it may be something about the little girls' mother. Oh, I always did fear that something had happened to her."

"Katharine, you are perfectly silly about that woman. But whatever Mr. Baring's news, our guests are invited and they shall come. Katharine, I look on to-morrow as the most important day of my life. On that day, when I show our chosen and rightful heir to the world—for our expected guests form the world to us, Katharine—on that day I fulfill the conditions of my dear father's will. Do you suppose that any little trivial disturbance which may have taken place in London can alter plans so important as mine?"

"I don't think Mr. Baring would have telegraphed if the disturbance was trivial," murmured Miss Katharine. But she did not venture to add any more and soon went sadly out of the room.

Meanwhile Mrs. Lovel was having a terribly exciting day. Impelled by a motive stronger than the love of gold, she had slipped away from Phil's bedside in the early morning, and, fear lending her wings, had gone downstairs, written her note to Miss Griselda, and then on foot had made her way to the nearest railway station at Lyndhurst Road. There she took the first train to London. She had a carriage to herself, and she was so restless that she paced up and down its narrow length. It seemed to her that the train would never reach its destination; the minutes were

lengthened into hours; the hours seemed days. When, when would she get to Waterloo? When would she see Mr. Baring? Beside her in the railway carriage, beside her in the cab, beside her as she mounted the stairs to the lawyer's office was pale-faced fear. Could she do anything to keep the boy? Could any—any act of hers cause the avenger to stay his hand—cause the angel of death to withdraw and leave his prey untouched? In the night, as she had watched by his bedside, she had seen only too plainly what was coming. Avonsyde might be given to Phil, but little Phil himself was going away. The angels wanted him elsewhere, and they would not mind any amount of mother's weeping, of mother's groans; they would take the boy from her arms. Then it occurred to her poor, weak soul for the first time that perhaps if she appealed to God he would listen, and if she repented, not only in word, but in deed, he would stay his avenging hand. Hence her hurried flight; hence her anguished longing. She had not a moment to lose, for the sands of her little boy's life were running out.

She was early in town, and was shown into Mr. Baring's presence very soon after his arrival at his office. Unlike most of the heirs-presumptive to the Avonsyde property, Phil had not been subjected to the scrutiny of this keen-eyed lawyer. From the very first Miss Griselda had been more or less under a spell as regards little Phil. His mother in writing to her from Australia had mentioned one or two facts which seemed to the good lady almost conclusive, and she had invited her and the boy direct to Avonsyde without, as in all other cases, interviewing them through her lawyer.

Mr. Baring therefore had not an idea who his tall, pale, agitated-looking visitor could be.

"Sit down," he said politely. "Can I assist you in any way? Perhaps, if all the same to you, you would not object to going very briefly into matters to-day; to-morrow—no, not to-morrow—Thursday I can carefully attend to your case. I happen to be called into the country this afternoon and am therefore in a special hurry. If your case can wait, oblige me by mentioning the particulars briefly and making an appointment for Thursday."

"My case cannot wait," replied Mrs. Lovel in a hard, strained voice. "My case cannot wait an hour, and you need not go into the country. I have come to prevent your doing so."

"But, madam——"

"I am Mrs. Lovel."

"Another Mrs. Lovel? Another heir forthcoming? God help those poor old ladies!"

"I am the mother of the boy who to-morrow is to be publicly announced as the future proprietor of Avonsyde."

"You! Then you have come from Avonsyde?"

"I have. I have come to tell you a terrible and disastrous story."

"My dear madam, pray don't agitate yourself; pray take things quietly. Would you like to sit in this easy-chair?"

"No, thank you. What are easy-chairs to me? I want to tell my story."

"So you shall—so you shall. I trust your boy is not ill?"

"He is very ill; he is—good God! I fear he is dying. I have come to you as the last faint chance of saving him."

"My dear Mrs. Lovel, you make a mistake. I am a lawyer, not a physician. 'Pon my word, I'm truly sorry for you, and also for Miss Griselda. Her heart is quite set on that boy."

"Listen! I have sinned. I was tempted; I sinned. He is not the heir."

"My good lady, you can scarcely know what you are saying. You would hardly come to me with this story at the eleventh hour. Miss Lovel tells me you have proofs of undoubted succession. I was going to Avonsyde this afternoon to look into them, but only as a form—merely as a form."

"You can look into them now; they are correct enough. There were two brothers who were lineally descended from that Rupert Lovel who quarreled with his father two hundred years ago. The brothers' names were Rupert and Philip. Philip died and left a son; Rupert lives and has a son. Rupert is the elder of the brothers and his son is the true heir, because—because——"

Here Mrs. Lovel rose to her feet.

"Because he has got what was denied to my only boy—glorious health and glorious strength. He therefore perfectly fulfills the conditions of the late Squire Lovel's will."

"But—but I don't understand," said the lawyer. "I have seen—yes, of course I have seen—but pray tell me everything. How did you manage to bring proofs of your boy's title to the old ladies?"

"Why should I not know the history of my husband's house? I saw the old ladies' advertisement in



a Melbourne paper. I knew to what it alluded and I stole a march on Rupert and his heir. It did not seem to me such a dreadful thing to do; for Rupert and his boy were rich and Phil and I were very poor. I stole away to England with my little boy, and took with me a bundle of letters and a silver tankard which belonged to my brother-in-law, but which were, I knew, equally valuable in proving little Philip's descent. All would have gone well but for one thing—my little boy was not strong. He was brave—no boy ever was braver—and he kept in all tokens of terrible suffering for my sake. He won upon the old ladies; everybody loved him. All my plans seemed to succeed, and to-morrow he is to be appointed heir. To-morrow! What use is it? God has stretched out his hand and is taking the boy away. He is angry. He is doing it in anger and to punish me. I am sorry; I am terrified; my heart is broken. Perhaps if I show God that I repent he will withdraw his anger and spare my only boy. I have come to you. There is not a moment to lose. Here are the lost letters. Find the rightful heir."

Mr. Baring was disturbed and agitated. He got up and locked the door; he paced up and down his room several times; then he came up to the woman who was now crouching by the table, her face hidden in her hands.

"Are you aware," he said softly, for he feared the effect of his words—"are you aware that Rupert Lovel and his boy are now in London?"

Mrs. Lovel raised her head.

"I guessed it. Thank God! then I am in time."

"Your news is indeed of the most vital importance. I must telegraph to Avonsyde. I cannot go there this afternoon. The whole case must be thoroughly investigated, and at once. I require your aid for this. "Will you return with me to Avonsyde to-morrow?"

"Yes, yes."

"It will be a painful exposure for you. Do you realize it?"

"I realize nothing. I want to hold Phil to my heart; that is the only desire I now possess."

"Poor soul! You have acted—I won't say how; it is not for me to preach. I will telegraph to Miss Griselda and then go with you to find Rupert Lovel and his boy."

## **CHAPTER XXVII.—TWO MOTHERS.**

"Here is a letter for you, ma'am."

Nancy was standing by her mistress, who, in a traveling cloak and bonnet, had just come home.

"For me, Nancy?" said the lady of the forest in a tired voice. "Who can want to write to me? And yet, and yet—give it to me, Nancy."

"It has the London postmark, ma'am. Dear heart, how your hands do shake!"

"It is evening, Nancy, and to-morrow will be the 5th of May. Can you wonder that my hands shake? Only one brief summer's night, and my day of bliss arrives!"

"Read your letter, ma'am; here it is."

Mrs. Lovel received the envelope with its many postmarks, for it had traveled about and performed quite a little pilgrimage since it left Avonsyde some days ago. Something in the handwriting caused her to change color; not that it was in the ordinary sense familiar, but in a very extraordinary manner it was known and sacred.

"The ladies of Avonsyde have been true to the letter of their promise!" she exclaimed. "This, Nancy," opening her letter and glancing hastily through it, "is the invitation I was promised six years ago for Rachel's thirteenth birthday. It has been sent to the old, old address. The ladies have not forgotten; they have kept to the letter of their engagement. Nancy dear, let me weep. Nancy, to-morrow I can make my own terms. Oh, I could cry just because of the lifting of the pain!"

"Don't, my dear lady," said Nancy. "Or—yes, do, if it eases you. The dear little lassies will be all right to-morrow—won't they, Mrs. Lovel?"

"I shall see them again, Nancy, if you mean that."

"Yes, of course; but they'll be heiresses and everything—won't they?"

"Of course not. What do you mean?"

"I thought Master Phil had no chance now that the tankard is really lost and can never be found."

"What do you know about the tankard?"

"Nothing. How could I? What less likely? Oh! look, ma'am; there's a carriage driving through the forest, right over the green grass, as sure as I'm here. Now it's stopping, and four people are getting out—a lady and three gentlemen; and they are coming here—right over to the cottage as straight as an arrow from a bow. Oh, mercy me! What do this mean?"

"Only some tourists, I expect. Nancy, don't excite yourself."

"No, ma'am, begging your pardon, they ain't tourists. Here they're all stepping into the porch. What do it mean? and we has nothing at all in the house for supper!"

A loud peal was now heard from the little bell. Nancy, flushed and agitated, went to open the door, and a moment later Mr. Baring, Mrs. Lovel, and Rupert Lovel and his son found themselves in the presence of the lady of the forest. Nancy, recognizing Mrs. Lovel and concluding that she had discovered all about the theft of the tankard, went and hid herself in her own bedroom, from where she did not descend, even though she several times fancied she heard her mistress ring for her.

This, however, was not the case; for a story was being told in that tiny parlor which caused the very remembrance of Nancy to fade from all the listeners' brains. Mrs. Lovel, little Philip's mother, was the spokeswoman. She told her whole story from beginning to end, very much as she had told it twice already that day. Very much the same words were used, only now as she proceeded and as her eyes grew dim with the agony that rent her heart, she was suddenly conscious of a strange and unlooked-for sympathy. The other mother went up to her side and, taking her hand, led her to a seat beside herself.

"Do not stand," she whispered; "you can tell what you have to say better sitting."

And still she kept her hand within her own and held it firmly. By degrees the poor, shaken, and tempest-tossed woman began to return this firm and sympathizing pressure; and when her words died away in a whisper, she turned suddenly and looked full into the face of the mysterious lady of the forest.

"I have committed a crime," she said, "but now that I have confessed all, will God spare the boy's life?"

The other Mrs. Lovel looked at her then with her eyes full of tears, and bending forward she suddenly kissed her.

"Poor mother!" she said. "I know something of your suffering."

"Will the boy live? Will God be good to me?"

"Whether he lives or dies God will be good to you. Try to rest on that."

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That same evening Miss Katharine tried to soothe away some of the restlessness and anxiety which oppressed her by playing on the organ in the hall. Miss Katharine could make very wonderful music; this was her one great gift. She had been taught well, and when her fingers touched either piano or organ people were apt to forget that at other times she was nothing but a weak-looking, uninteresting middle-aged lady. Seated at the organ, Miss Katharine's eyes would shine with a strange, new radiance. There was a power, a sympathy in her touch; her notes were seldom loud or martial, but they appealed straight to the innermost hearts of those who listened.

Miss Katharine did not very often play. Music with her meant something almost as sacred as a sacrament; she could not bring her melodies into the common everyday life; but when her soul burned within her, when she sought to express a dumb pain or longing, she went to the old organ for comfort.

On this evening, as the twilight fell, she sat down at the organ and began to play some soft, pitiful strains. The notes seemed to cry, as if they were in pain. One by one the children stole into the hall and came up close to her. Phil came closest; he leaned against her side and listened, his sweet brown eyes reflecting her pain.

"Don't!" he said suddenly. "Comfort us; things aren't like that."

Miss Katharine turned round and looked at the little pale-faced boy, from him to Rachel—whose eyes were gleaming—to Kitty, who was half-crying.

"Things aren't like that," repeated Phil. "Play something true."

"Things are like this," answered Miss Katharine; "things are very, very wrong."

"They aren't," retorted Phil. "Any one to hear you would think God wasn't good."

Miss Katharine paused; her fingers trembled; they scarcely touched the keys.

"Play joyfully," continued Phil; "play as if you believed in him."

"Oh, Phil, I do!" said the poor lady. "Yes, yes, I will play as if I believed."

Tears filled her eyes. She struck the organ with powerful chords, and the whole little party burst out in the grand old chant, "Abide with me."

"Now let us sing 'O Paradise,'" said Phil when it was ended.

The children had sweet voices. Miss Katharine played her gentlest; Miss Griselda slipped unseen into the hall and sat down near Phil. The children sang on, hymn after hymn, Phil always choosing.

At last Miss Katharine rose and closed the organ.

"My heart is at rest," she said gently, and she stooped down and kissed Phil. Then she went out of the hall, Rachel and Kitty following her. Phil alone had noticed Miss Griselda; he went up to her now and nestled down cozily by her side. He had a very confiding way and not a scrap of fear of any one. Most people were afraid of Miss Griselda. Phil's total want of fear in her presence made one of his greatest charms for her.

"Wasn't the music nice?" he said now. "Didn't you like those hymns? Hasn't Rachel a beautiful voice?"

"Rachel will sing well," answered Miss Griselda. "She must have the best masters. Philip, to-morrow is nearly come."

"The 5th of May? Yes, so it has."

"It is a great day for you, my little boy."

"Yes, I suppose it is. Aunt Griselda, when do you think my mother will be home?"

"I don't know, Philip—I don't know where she has gone."

"I think I do. I think she's gone to get you a great surprise."

"She should not have gone away to-day, when there was so much to be done."

"You won't say that when you know. Aunt Grizel, you'll always be good to mother—won't you?"

"Why, of course, dear; she is your mother."

"But even if she wasn't my mother—I mean even if I wasn't there, you'd be good to her. I wish you'd promise me."

"Of course, Phil—of course; but as you are going to be very much there, there's no use in thinking of impossible things."

Phil sighed.

"Aunt Griselda," he said gently, "do you think I make a very suitable heir?"

"Yes, dear—very suitable."

"I'm glad you love me; I'm very, very glad. Tell me about the Rupert Lovel who went away two hundred years ago. He wasn't really like me?"

"In spirit he was, I don't doubt."

"Yes; but he wasn't like me in appearance. I'm small and thin and pale, and he—Aunt Griselda, wouldn't your heart beat and wouldn't you be glad if an heir just like the old Rupert Lovel came home? If he had just the same figure, and just the same grand flashing eyes, and just the same splendid strength, wouldn't you be glad? Wouldn't it be a joyful surprise to you?"

"No, Phil, for my heart is set on a certain little pale-faced boy. Now don't let us talk about nonsensical things. Come, you must have your supper and go to bed; you will have plenty of excitement to-morrow and must rest well."

"One moment, please. Aunt Grizel, tell me—tell me, did you ever see the lady of the forest?"

"Phil, my dear child, what do you mean?"

"The beautiful lady who wears a green dress, greener than the leaves, and has a lovely face, and brings a gift in her hand. Did you ever see her?"

"Philip, I can't stay any longer in this dark hall. Of course I never saw her. There is a legend about her—a foolish, silly legend; but you don't suppose I am so foolish as to believe it?"

"I don't know; perhaps it isn't foolish. I wanted to see her, and I did at last."

"You saw her!"

"In a dream. It was a real dream—I mean it was the kind of dream that comes true. I saw her, and since then everything has been quite clear to me. Aunt Griselda, she isn't only the lady of the forest; she has another name; she comes to every one some day."

"Phil, you are talking very queerly. Come away."

That evening, late, Mrs. Lovel came quietly back. She did not ask for supper; she did not see the old ladies; she went up at once to her tower bedroom, where Phil was quietly sleeping. Bending down over the boy, she kissed him tenderly, but so gently that he did not even stir.

"Farewell all riches; farewell all worldly success; farewell even honor! Welcome disgrace and poverty and the reproach of all who know me if only I can keep you, little Phil!"

Poor mother! she did not know, she could not guess, that for some natures, such as Phil's, there is no long tarrying in a world so checkered as ours.

### **CHAPTER XXVIII.—THE LADY WHO CAME WITH A GIFT.**

A glorious day, warm, balmy, with the gentlest breezes blowing and the bluest, tenderest sky overhead. The forest trees were still wearing their brightest and most emerald green, the hawthorn was in full blossom, the horse-chestnuts were in a perfect glory of pink-and-white flower; the day, in short, and the day's adornments were perfect. It was still too early in the year for a garden-party, but amusements were provided for the younger guests in the grounds, and the whole appearance of Avonsyde was festive without and within. The old ladies, in their richest velvet and choicest lace, moved gracefully about, giving finishing touches to everything. All the nervousness and unrest which had characterized Miss Katharine the night before had disappeared. To-day she looked her gentlest and sweetest—perhaps also her brightest. Miss Griselda was really very happy, and she looked it. Happiness is a marvelous beautifier, and Miss Griselda too looked almost handsome. Her dark eyes glowed with some of the fire which she fancied must have animated those of her favorite ancestors. Her soft pearl-gray dress suited her well. Rachel and Kitty were in white and looked radiant. The marked characteristics of their early childhood were as apparent as ever: Rachel was all glowing tropical color and beauty; Kitty was one of Old England's daintiest and fairest little daughters.

The guests began to arrive, and presently Mrs. Lovel, accompanied by Phil, came down and took her place in the great hall. It was here that Miss Griselda meant to make her little speech. Standing at the upper end of the hall, she meant to present Phil as her chosen heir to all her assembled guests. How strange, how very strange that Mr. Baring had not yet arrived! When Mrs. Lovel entered the hall Miss Griselda crossed it at once to speak to her.

"I have given Canning directions to let you know the very moment Mr. Baring comes," she said. "You and he can transact your business in the library in a few moments. Mr. Baring is sure to come down by the next train; and if all your proofs are ready, it will not take him very long to look through your papers."

"Everything is ready," replied Mrs. Lovel in a low, hushed voice.

"That is right. Pardon me, how very inappropriate of you to put on a black velvet dress to-day."

Mrs. Lovel turned very white.

"It—it—is my favorite dress," she half-stammered. "I look best in black velvet."

"What folly! Who thinks about their looks at such a moment? Black here and to-day looks nearly as inappropriate as at a wedding. I am not superstitious, but the servants will notice. Can you not change it?"

"I—I have nothing else ready."

"Most inconsiderate. Kitty dear, run and fetch Mrs. Lovel a bunch of those crimson roses from the conservatory. Have at least that much color, Mrs. Lovel, for your boy's sake."

Miss Griselda turned indignantly away, and Mrs. Lovel crossed over to that part of the hall where Phil was standing.

"Mammy darling, how white you look!"

"Miss Griselda wants me to wear crimson roses in my dress, Phil."

"Oh, do, mother; they will look so nice. Here comes Kitty with a great bunch."

"Give me one," said Mrs. Lovel; "here, this one." Her fingers shook; she could scarcely take the flower. "Phil, will you put it into my dress? I won't wear more than one; you shall place it there. Child, child, the thorn has pricked me—every rose has a thorn."

"Mother," whispered Phil, "you are quite sure of the surprise coming?"

"Yes, darling. Hush, dear. Stay close to me."

The time wore on. The guests were merry; the old place rang with unwonted life and mirth and laughter. It was many years since Avonsyde had been so gay. The weather was so lovely that even the older portion of the visitors decided to spend the time out of doors. They stood about in groups and talked and laughed and chatted. Tennis went on vigorously. Rachel and Kitty, like bright fairies, were flitting here, there, and everywhere. Phil was strangely quiet and silent, standing always close to his mother. The chaise which had been sent to the railway station to meet Mr. Baring returned empty. This fact was communicated by Canning to his mistress, and as the time wore on Miss Griselda's face certainly looked less happy.

The guests streamed in to lunch, which was served in the great dining-hall in the old part of the house. Then several boys and girls would investigate the tower and would roam through the armory and the old picture-gallery.

"That man—that Rupert Lovel is Phil's ancestor," the boys and girls remarked. "He is not a bit like Phil."

"No; the present heir is an awfully weakly looking chap," the boys said. "Why, he doesn't look as if he had strength enough even to go in for a game of cricket."

"Oh, but he's so interesting," the girls said, "and hasn't he lovely eyes!"

Then the guests wandered out again to the grounds and commented and wondered as to when the crucial moment would arrive, and when Miss Griselda, taking Phil's hand, would present him to them all as the long-sought-for heir.

"It is really a most romantic story," one lady said. "That little boy represents the elder branch of the family; the property goes back to the elder branch with him."

"How sad his mother seems!" remarked another; "and the boy himself looks dreadfully ill."

"Miss Griselda says he is one of the most wiry and athletic little fellows she ever came across," said a third lady.

And then a fourth remarked in a somewhat fretful tone:

"I wish that good Miss Lovel would present him to us and get it over. One gets perfectly tired of waiting for one doesn't know what."

Just then there was a disturbance and a little hush. Some fresh visitors had arrived—some visitors who came on foot and approached through the forest. Miss Griselda, feeling she could wait no longer for Mr. Baring's arrival, had just taken Phil's hand and was leading him forward to greet her many guests, when the words she was about to say were arrested by the sudden appearance of these strangers on the scene.

Mr. Baring was one of them; but nobody noticed, and in their intense excitement nobody recognized, the sleek little lawyer. A lady, dressed quietly, with a gentle, calm, and gracious bearing, came first. At sight of her Rachel uttered a cry; she was the lady of the forest. Rachel flew to her and, unrestrained by even the semblance of conventionality, took her hand and pressed it rapturously to her lips.

"At last!" half-sobbed Rachel—"at last I see you, and you don't turn away! Oh, how I have loved you! how I have loved you!"

"And I you, my darling—my beloved."

"Kitty, come here," called out Rachel. "Kitty, Kitty, this is the lady of the forest!"

"And your mother, my own children. Come to my heart."

But nobody, not even Miss Katharine, noticed this reunion of mother and children; for Miss Griselda's carefully prepared speech had met with a startling interruption. The mother had stopped with her children, but two other unbidden guests had come forward. One of them was a boy—a boy with so noble a step, so gallant, so gay, so courtly a mien that all the visitors turned to gaze in unspoken admiration. Whose likeness did he bear? Why did Miss Griselda turn so deadly pale? Why did she drop Phil's hand and take a step forward? The dark eyes, the eagle glance, the very features, the very form of that old hero of her life, the long-dead-and-gone Rupert Lovel, now stood before her in very deed.

"Aunt Grizel," whispered little Phil, "isn't he splendid? Isn't he indeed the rightful heir? Just what he should be, so strong and so good! Aunt Grizel, isn't it a great surprise? Mother, mother, speak, tell her everything!"

Then little Phil ran up to Rupert and took his hand and led him up to Miss Grizel.

"He always, always was the true heir," he said, "and I wasn't. Oh, mother, speak!"

Then there was a buzz of voices, a knot of people gathered quickly round Miss Griselda, and Phil, holding Rupert's hand fast, looked again at his mother. The visitors whispered eagerly to one another, and all eyes were turned, not on the splendid young heir, but on the boy who held his arm and looked in his face; for a radiance seemed to shine on that slight boy's pale brow which we see once or twice on the faces of those who are soon to become angels. The look arrested and startled many, and they gazed longer and with a deeper admiration at the false heir than at the true. For a couple of moments Mrs. Lovel had felt herself turning into stone; but with Phil's last appealing gaze she shook off her lethargy, and moving forward took her place by Miss Griselda's side, and facing the anxiously expecting guests said:

"I do it for Phil, in the hope—oh, my God!—in the vain hope of saving Phil. I arranged with Mr. Baring that I would tell the story. I wish to humiliate myself as much as possible and to show God that I am sorry. I do it for Phil, hoping to save him."

Then she began her tale, wailing it out as if her heart were broken; and the interested guests pressed closer and closer, and then, unperceived by any one, little Phil slipped away.

"I will go into the forest," he said to himself. "I can't bear this. Oh, mother! Oh, poor, poor mother! I will go into the forest. Everything will be all right now, and I feel always happy and at rest in the forest."

"Phil," said a voice, and looking round he saw that his Cousin Rupert had followed him. "Phil, you look ghastly. Do you think I care for any property when you look like that?"

"Oh, I'll be better soon, Rupert. I'm so glad you've come in time!"

"Where are you going now, little chap?"

"Into the forest. I must. Don't prevent me."

"No. I will go with you."

"But you are wanted; you are the real heir."

"Time enough for that. I can only think of you now. Phil, you do look ill!"

"I'll be better soon. Let us sit down at the foot of this tree, Rupert. Rupert, you promise to be good to mother?"

"Of course. Your mother did wrong, but she is very brave now. You don't know how she spoke to my father and me yesterday. My father never liked her half as much as he does now. He says he is going to take Aunt Bella back with him—you and Aunt Bella, both of you—and you are always to live at Belmont, and Gabrielle and Peggy will make a lot of you."

"I'm so glad; but I'm not going, Rupert. Rupert, do ask Gabrielle to be very good to mother."

"Of course. How breathless you are! Don't talk—rest against me."

"Rupert, I must. Tell me about yesterday. Are all the links complete? Is it quite, quite certain that you are the heir?"

"Yes, quite—even the tankard has been found. Mrs. Lovel—the lady of the forest, you remember—her servant picked it up and gave it to us last night."

"Did she?" answered Phil. "I thought I had lost it in the bog. It fretted mother. I am glad it is found."

"And do you know that the lady is Rachel's and Kitty's mother?"

"Oh, how nice! How glad Rachel will be, and Kitty too! Isn't God very good, Rupert?"

"Yes," answered Rupert in a strong, manly young voice.

"Rupert, you'll be sure to love Aunt Grizel, won't you?"

"Yes, yes. I wish you wouldn't talk so much, little chap; you look awfully ill. Do let me carry you home."

"No; let me rest here on your shoulder. Rupert, there is another lady of the forest. Rachel's and Kitty's mother is not the only one. I saw her in a dream. She is coming to me to-day; she said so, Rupert."

"Yes."

"I have suffered—awfully; but God has been very good—and I shan't suffer any more—I'm so happy."

“Dear little chap!”

For about ten minutes the boys were silent—Rupert afraid to move, his little cousin rapt in ecstatic contemplation. Suddenly Phil roused himself and spoke with strength and energy.

“The lady is coming,” he said—“there, through the trees! I see her! Don’t you? don’t you? She is coming; she will rest me. Oh, how beautiful she is! Look, Rupert, look!”

But Rupert could see nothing, nothing at all, although Phil stretched out his arms and a radiant smile covered his worn little face.

Suddenly the arms fell; the eager words ceased; only the smile remained. Rupert spoke, but obtained no answer.

A little face, beautiful beyond all description now—a little face with a glory over it—lay against his breast, but Phil himself had gone away.

That is the story. Sad? Perhaps so—not sad for Phil.

°THE END.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LADY OF THE FOREST: A STORY FOR GIRLS \*\*\*

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