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“He is not horrid at all,” said Nan, very cross.

GIRLS OF THE TRUE BLUE

BY

L. T. MEADE

Author of

“Miss Nonentity,” “The Odds and the Evens,” “Light o’ the Morning,”
“The Girls of St. Wode’s,” etc.

WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS

BY

PERCY TARRANT

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GIRLS OF THE TRUE BLUE.

CHAPTER I.—“I PROMISE.”

“And how is she to-day, Nan?” said the kindly voice of Mrs. Richmond.

The time was early spring. The lady in question had come into a dark and somewhat dismal room; she herself was richly wrapped in furs and velvet; her large, smooth face was all beams and smiles. A dark little girl with thin cheeks, about eleven years of age, clasping a battered doll in her arms, looked full up at her.

“She is no better,” said Nan; “and I think perhaps it would be a good plan for you to go.”

“What a little monkey you are!” said Mrs. Richmond. “But I do not mind you, my dear Anna; I have known you too long. Come here, dear, and let me look at you.”

Nan laid her doll on the table and approached slowly. Her dress was untidy, her hair unkempt. There were traces of tears round her eyes, but none showed at that moment; the sad eyes looked bold and full and defiant into the kindly face of the lady.

“You are not too tidy, my dear little girl; that pinafore would be the better for the wash-tub. And must you play with that horrid old doll?”

“I would not give up dear Sophia Maria for anybody on earth,” said Nan in a determined voice; and now she went back and clasped her ragged and disreputable-looking baby to her breast.

“But you might have a new one.”

“I would not like a new one, thank you.”

“And you are rather old to play with dolls. Now, my Kitty and my Honora have long ceased to make babies of themselves; you must when you come.”

“I must when I come!” repeated Nan; and now, her eyes grew very big and bright and angry. “Oh! please,” she added, “will you excuse me? I want to go up to mother.”

“Certainly, dear. Tell her I am here, and would be glad to have a talk with her.”

Nan vouchsafed no reply to this, and left the room. Mrs. Richmond sat on in thought; she folded her hands in her lap.

“I will do my duty,” she said to herself; “it is my duty. Poor, dear Amy was always improvident, and careless of her health. She married without means; her husband died within a year; there is this child now eleven years of age and with no provision. Ah!”

There came a tap at the door, and the wizened and somewhat cross face of a middle-aged woman appeared.

“How do you do, Mrs. Vincent?” said Mrs. Richmond. She always spoke cordially to every one; her face beamed kindness itself on all the world.

Mrs. Vincent came in slowly.

“I am glad you have called, ma’am; the poor thing upstairs is very bad—very bad indeed—not likely to live many hours, the doctor says.”

“Oh! my good soul, I had not an idea that it was so near as that.”

“I am telling you the truth, madam; and the fact is, her poverty is excessive, and”——

“Now listen to me, Mrs. Vincent. Everything she needs as far as you are concerned will be paid for; see that she has every imaginable comfort. And leave the room.”

Mrs. Richmond’s kindly eyes could flash when occasion arose, and Mrs. Vincent, curtsying and mumbling, but highly delighted all the same, went downstairs.

There was no sign of Nan coming back, and Mrs. Richmond, after waiting for a quarter of an hour, determined to go upstairs to her sick friend’s room. The door was a little ajar; she pushed it open and went in. Nan was lying across the bed, her face close to the very white face of a woman whose features were wonderfully like her own. The woman’s eyes were open, and her lips were moving. Mrs. Richmond came and, without saying a word, lifted the child off the bed. Nan turned in a wild fury; she felt very much inclined to strike the intruder, but the look on her visitor’s face restrained her.

“You can stay, dear, if you like,” said Mrs. Richmond; and then she went round to the other side of the bed.

“Have you anything to tell me, Amy, before you go?” she asked.

There came a low—very low—murmur, and a glance of the dying woman’s eyes in the direction of the child.

“Only—only”——she began.

“I will see to everything, dear; I have promised.”

“And if—if at the end of a year—— You remember—you remember that part, don’t you, Caroline?”

“I remember it. It will not be necessary.”

“But if it is—if it should be—you will send her”——

“I faithfully promise.”

“You are so good!” said the dying woman.

“God bless you! You have made things easy for me.”

“Come here, Nan, and kiss your mother,” said Mrs. Richmond suddenly.

The child, overawed by the entire scene, advanced. She pressed her lips to the lips growing colder moment by moment.

“And now leave the room,” said Mrs. Richmond. “Go—obey me.”

Nan went.

CHAPTER II.—“I WON’T EVER GO TO YOU.”

But she only went as far as the landing; there she crouched down in a corner and waited. She did not know what she feared, nor exactly what was going to happen; it seemed to her that there was a great

darkness everywhere, and that it pressed her round and shut away the light.

The outward circumstances of Nan Esterleigh's life had never been too bright, but all the same she had been a happy little girl; she had been petted and fussed about and loved, and her battered doll, Sophia Maria, had been the greatest imaginable comfort to her. She was quite accustomed to scanty meals and poor rooms and cross landladies. She was, alas! too, poor little girl, thoroughly accustomed to her mother's state of miserable health. Mother had been often as bad before. Ever since Nan could remember, her mother had ached and shivered and moaned with pain; she had spent restless nights, and had stayed in bed to breakfast, and had struggled against the illness which crept on her more and more day by day. Nan in her heart of hearts supposed that very few people were well; she thought children enjoyed good health as a rule, and that grown people had illness. It was the law of life, she supposed. Now and then she confided her thoughts to Sophia Maria.

"My darling," she used to say, "you must be as happy as you can while you are young, because there is no chance at all when you are grown-up. You will have pains then, Maria, and aches, and you will grow old, and you won't have any strength. I'll be the same; there'll be two of us to keep each other company —that is one comfort."

Now she crouched in the corner, feeling a little more depressed and a little more anxious than usual, but not really alarmed or stricken or subdued. She wondered, however, what her mother meant by the curious words she had spoken, with long pauses between, to Mrs. Richmond. They certainly pointed to a future for Nan herself; she was to go somewhere, and if all was not well she was at the end of a year to go somewhere else.

"But I am not going to leave my own mother," thought the little girl. "Oh dear! oh dear! I know now why I am lonely; I want my poor darling Sophia."

She ran downstairs, clasped her doll to her heart, and crouching over the fire, presently fell asleep.

It was during Nan Esterleigh's sleep that her mother died. Mrs. Esterleigh died without a pang or a struggle—she just ceased to breathe; and Mrs. Richmond, with tears in her eyes, came downstairs.

Nan had stretched herself full length on the hearth-rug. The doll was clasped to her breast; her sallow little face looked more sallow than usual, and Mrs. Richmond noticed how black and long were the lashes that rested against her cheeks.

"Poor little girl, she is my care now," thought the good woman. "I know what I should like to do; I should like to pick her up, and wrap a shawl round her, and take her right away in the cab with me. Nora will be nice to her, and Kitty will show her her favourite kittens. I have a great mind to try."

But just then the big black eyes were opened wide, and Nan sat up and stared at Mrs. Richmond.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "Is mother no better? Has nobody thought of giving her her tea?"

"Come here, Nancy," said Mrs. Richmond. "I have something I want to say to you."

"But I don't want to listen," answered Nan; and she clutched her doll tightly in her embrace, staggered to her feet, and stood, with defiance in her eyes, a few feet away from Mrs. Richmond.

"Dear, dear! she is an extraordinary child," thought the good lady. "She will be very difficult to manage. I should not be a scrap surprised if she felt this very much; some children do, and I should not be astonished if she was the sort, she is so stubborn and self-contained—not a pleasant child by any means. But Amy's little girl shall always have a warm corner in my heart—always, always."

"Come here, Nan," she said again.

"If you want to say anything to me, please, Mrs. Richmond, be quick," said Nan, who was now wide awake and felt absolutely composed; "I must go up to mother. This is the hour for her tea; I always make it myself for her. I know just how much she wants put into the little brown teapot, and the right quantity of milk and sugar; and, oh! I am going to toast her bread for her, for Mrs. Vincent does send it up so hard and untempting. Perhaps you will come another day, Mrs. Richmond, and talk to me then."

"I must talk to you now, Nancy, my poor little girl; I have something to say."

Curious emotions stirred in the child's breast. She stood quite still for a moment; then she said slowly:

"You had better not say it."

"I must; it is about your mother."

"What! is mother worse?"

"She is better, Nancy." Mrs. Richmond's eyes brimmed over with tears.

"Then how silly of you to cry!" said the child, her face brightening up, and smiles dawning round her lips. "If she was worse you might cry—not that you ought ever to cry, for she is no relation of yours; but if she is better, Sophia Maria and I will sing."

"Nancy dear, I cannot break it to you. I must tell it to you at once, and God help you to bear it. Your mother is better in one sense—in the sense that God has taken her away from all her pains. She won't ever be tired or ill or sorry any more, and she will never again have aches or wakeful nights or sad days; she has gone to God. There is a beautiful heaven, you know, Nan, and—— Oh, good gracious! what ails the child?"

Nan had given one smothered scream and had rushed from the room. Fast—very fast—did the little feet run upstairs. Mrs. Esterleigh's room was on the third floor. Past the drawing-room landing she ran, where a good-natured-looking old gentleman resided. He was coming out of his comfortable drawing-room, and he saw the scared little face. He knew, of course, what had happened, and he wondered if the

child knew. He called to her:

“Nancy, come in and sit by my fire for a little.”

But she did not heed him. She ran past the second floor; no one called her here or detained her. There was a very cross old maid who lived on that floor, and Nancy had always hated her. She ran on and on. Presently she reached her mother’s room.

“It is not true,” she gasped. “It is that dreadful Mrs. Richmond trying to frighten me. It is not a bit true—not a bit.” And then she took the handle and tried to turn it and to open the door, but the door was locked.

“Mother, mother!” she shrieked. “Mother, it is me—it is Nan. Don’t let them keep me out. Get some one to open the door. Mother, mother!”

Footsteps sounded in the room, and an elderly woman, whom Nancy had never seen before, opened the door, came quickly out, and stood with her back to it.

“You must go away, my dear little girl,” she said. “I will bring you to see your mother presently. Go away now, dear; you cannot come in.”

“But I will. You shall not keep me out. You are hurting mother. You have no right to be in the room with her;” and Nancy pommelled at the woman’s hands and arms. But she was strong and masterful, and presently she picked up the exhausted child and carried her right downstairs.

“Oh! give her to me,” said Mrs. Richmond. “Poor little child! Nancy dear, I am so sorry for you! And I promise, darling, to be a mother to you.”

“Don’t!” said Nan. “I don’t want you as a mother—no, I don’t want you.”

“Never mind, I will be a friend to you—an aunt—anything you like. I have promised your own dear mother; and she is quite well, and it would be selfish to wish her back.”

“But I want to be selfish; I want to have her back,” said Nan. “I don’t believe that God has come and taken her. He would not take mother and leave me; it is not likely, is it?”

“God sometimes does so, and He has His wise reasons.”

“I don’t believe it. You only want me not to go to her, and you are telling me lies.”

“It is the truth, Nancy; and I wish for your sake it were not. Will you come back with me to-night, dear?”

“I won’t. I won’t ever go to you. I will always stay just outside mother’s door until they let me in. I do not believe she is dead—no, not for a moment.”

In vain Mrs. Richmond argued and pleaded and coaxed; Nan was firm. Presently the good lady had to consult with Mrs. Vincent, who promised to look after the child. The landlady was now all tears and good-nature, and she assured Mrs. Richmond that Nan should have all her wants attended to.

“I have got a very nice, good-natured servant-girl,” she said. “Her name is Phoebe. I will send her upstairs, and she shall sit in the room with Miss Nan, and if necessary stay with her to-night.”

“Very well,” said Mrs. Richmond. “It is the best that I can do; but, oh dear! how anxious I feel about the unhappy child!”

CHAPTER III.—THE FROCK WITH CRAPE.

All the lodgers in the house, the landlady, and the servants were extremely kind to Nan that night; but Nan would have none of them. Presently Phoebe was sent to sit in the parlour with her. The lamp, which usually smoked, burned brightly, and there was quite a good fire in the grate—of late it had been a miserable one—and the curtains were drawn, and a clean cloth had been put on the table, and Nan was treated as if she were a princess. Phoebe, too, dressed in her Sunday best, came and sat with her. Phoebe was sixteen years of age; she had left her country home about two months ago, and felt now wonderfully important. She took a sorrowful, keen, and at the same time pleasurable interest in Nan. She put the bowl of bread and milk, which Mrs. Vincent considered the best solace for grief, inside the fender to keep warm, and then she sat on a hard-bottomed chair, very erect, with her hands folded in her lap. For a long time her eyes sought the ground, but then curiosity got the better of her. She began to watch Nan. Nan sat with her back to her. Sophia Maria was lying on the table near. As a rule this battered and disreputable doll was clutched tight in her little mistress’s embrace, but even the doll could not comfort Nan now. Phoebe gave a groan.

“What are you doing that for?” said the child. She raised her eyes; there came a frown between her brows; she looked full at Phoebe.

“I am so sorrowful about you, missy!” replied Phoebe.

There was something in Phoebe’s hearty tone that interested Nan. She hated Mrs. Richmond and Mrs. Vincent when they expressed their grief; even the dear old gentleman, Mr. Pryor, on the first floor was intolerable to her to-night. As to Miss Edgar, the old maid who lived on the second floor, Nan would have fled any distance from her; but there was something about Phoebe’s country tone, and her round face, and the tears which filled her blue eyes which touched Nan in spite of herself.

“I wish you would eat your supper, miss,” was Phoebe’s next remark.

Nan shook her head. After a time she spoke.

“If your mother had just gone to heaven, would you eat a big bowl of bread and milk?”

“Oh, lor’, miss! I don’t know.”

“Has your mother gone to heaven?” was Nan’s next question.

“Indeed and she has not, miss; I would break my heart if she had.”

“Oh!” said Nan.

For the first time tears rose to her eyes. She looked again at Phoebe, then she glanced at the fire, then at the doll.

“Sophia Maria does not comfort me any longer,” she said. “Would it kill you, Phoebe, if your mother went to heaven?”

“I ’spect so, miss. Oh dear, missy! I ’spect so.”

“Then,” said Nan—and the next instant she had tumbled from her seat, had tottered forward, and was clasped in Phoebe’s arms—“let me cry. Don’t say anything to comfort me; I want to cry such a big, big lot. Let me cry, and clasp me tight—very tight—Phoebe.”

So Phoebe did clasp the motherless little girl, and the two mingled their tears. After that affairs moved better. Phoebe herself fed Nan, and then they cuddled up on the sofa, which Phoebe drew in front of the fire. Phoebe found her occupation intensely interesting. She was very, very sorry for Nan, and very comfortable in the thought that her own mother was alive. Nan began to ask her questions, and Phoebe answered.

“Did you ever know a little girl whose mother died ’cept me—did you, Phoebe?”

“Oh yes, miss; there was a girl in our village. It was a more mournful case than yours, miss, for there were two little brothers—they were young as young could be, nothing more than babies—and she was left to mind them, so to speak.”

“That must have been very nice for her. I wish I had two little brothers to mind. And did she mind them, Phoebe? Was she good to them?”

“No, miss; that she warn’t. She were for a bit, but afterwards she took to neglecting of them, and they were sent to an orphan school, and the girl went to service.”

“Oh! she was not a lady,” said Nan in a tone of slight contempt.

“We ’as our feelings even if we ain’t ladies,” was Phoebe’s somewhat sharp retort.

“Dear, dear Phoebe, I know you have; but tell me more about her. What happened just immediately afterwards, before she began to be cross to the little brothers?”

“Well, miss, there was the funeral and the funeral feast.”

“A feast!” interrupted Nan.

“In the country, miss, and amongst us we always take the occasion to have a big and hearty meal; but that ain’t interesting to you.”

“I could not eat—not now that mother is dead.”

“Well, miss, that was in the country; it is different there—grief makes us hungry. And she had her mourning to get.”

“Her mourning! What is that?”

“Black, miss—black from head to foot—and crape. She went into debt for the crape.”

“Did she? What is crape?”

“Something they put on black dresses to make people know that you are mourning for a near relative; and according to the amount of crape you puts on, so is the relation between you and the deceased,” said Phoebe in a very oracular voice.

Nan became intensely interested.

“Then I ought to get a black dress at once,” she said.

“As you will, miss. Mrs. Richmond will see to that.”

“I don’t want Mrs. Richmond to. I would rather get it myself. I have a little money. Don’t you think I could get my own dress?”

“Of course, miss, if you have the money.”

“Are you anything of a dressmaker, Phoebe?”

“Well, miss, I made the dress I am now wearing.”

“And it is awfully nice,” said Nan. “And Sophia Maria ought to wear black too.”

“To be sure, miss.”

“I wish I could get it to-night. But you might go out early in the morning and get the stuff, and we could begin to make it.”

“So we could,” said Phoebe, who wondered much if her mistress would allow her to devote all her time to Nan.

“I know a little bit about dressmaking myself; we could easily make the dress,” continued Nan. “And we need not let any one into the room; I could keep the door locked, and we could both make the dress that

I am to wear for my own mother. Phoebe, would it make her happier to know I was putting stitches into a black, black dress with crape on it to wear because of her, because she has gone to God?”

“It would make a wonderful difference,” said Phoebe.

“Would it indeed? Then I will have it very black, and a lot of crape. If I have a lot of crape, would she be glad?”

“If anything could make her more glad than she is now, that would,” said Phoebe; “I know it for a fact.”

“And Sophia Maria would wear crape and a black dress too?”

“Yes, miss.”

After that the two girls talked on until they grew sleepy, and finally Phoebe wrapped her little mistress in a warm blanket, and lay down herself on the rug; and so the first night passed away.

Nan possessed exactly two pounds, which she had saved, sixpence by sixpence. She broke into her little savings-bank now and gave the money to Phoebe, who went out at an early hour and purchased coarse cashmere and the poorest crape she could get, and brought the materials to Nan.

They kept the parlour door locked, and sewed and sewed. Nan was interested, and although her tears often dropped upon the black stuff, yet, when Phoebe assured her that her mother was growing happier each moment at the thought of the very deep mourning her little daughter was to wear, she cheered up.

“You are quite, quite certain you are telling me the truth, Phoebe?” said Nan at last.

“Certain sure, miss. Didn’t I live through it all when poor Susan Fagan lost her mother? This is a dress for all the world the same as Susan appeared in at the funeral.”

After two or three days’ hard work the dress was finished. It was certainly not stylish to look at. Then there came an awful time when carriages drove up to the house, and all that was left of poor Mrs. Esterleigh was borne away to her long home. Nan could never afterwards quite recall that dreadful day. Mrs. Richmond arrived early. She had borne with Nan’s wish to stay locked into the parlour with what patience she could; but on the day of the funeral she insisted on the door being opened, and when Nan appeared before her in her lugubrious dress, badly made, with no fit whatever, the good woman gave a shocked exclamation.

“My dear child,” she said, “I have got a suitable dress for you. I found a frock of yours upstairs and had it measured. Take off that awful thing.”

“This awful thing!” said Nan. “I bought it with my own money. I won’t wear anything—anything else. And Sophia Maria is in mourning too,” she added; and she pointed to her doll, which was attired in crape from head to foot.

“Let her wear it,” said a voice behind her; and raising her eyes, Nan saw the kindly face of Mr. Pryor looking at her.

He had always been a strange sort of character, and it seemed now that in one glance he understood the child; he held out his hand and drew her towards him.

“You bought this out of your own money?” he asked,

“Yes,” answered Nan.

Tears trembled on her eyelashes; she raised her eyes and looked full at Mr. Pryor.

“And there is a lot of crape,” she said. “Everybody must know that she was a very near relation.”

“And you made it yourself?”

“Phoebe and I made it ourselves; and Maria is in black too.” She touched the doll with her finger.

“Then you shall go to the funeral in that dress,” said Mr. Pryor. “I take it upon me to say that your mother would wish it, and that is enough.”

So Nan attended her mother’s funeral in the dress she had made herself, and stood close to the grave, and tried vaguely to realise what was taking place. But what chiefly impressed her was the depth of the shabby crape on her little skirt, and the fact that she had bought her mourning out of her very own savings, and that the doll, Sophia Maria, from whom she would not be parted for a single moment, was also in mourning.

CHAPTER IV.—THE BEST GIRL.

Immediately after the funeral Mrs. Richmond took Nan’s hand.

“Now, dear,” she said, “you come home with me.”

Nan turned first red and then very white. She was just about to reply when Mr. Pryor came forward.

“Madam,” he said, “may I make a request? I want to ask a very great favour.”

“If possible I will grant it,” replied Mrs. Richmond.

“I have known Mrs. Esterleigh, this dear little girl’s mother, for two or three years; and on the whole, although I am not specially fond of children, I think I also know Nan well. Now, I want to know if you will grant me the great favour of allowing me to take Nan home to my rooms until this evening. I will promise to bring her to you this evening.”

“Oh yes, I will go with you and with Phoebe,” said Nan. She clasped hold of Mr. Pryor’s hand and held it to her heart, and she looked round for Phoebe, who in her shabby frock was standing on the outskirts of the group.

Phoebe was nodding to Nan and making mysterious signs to her. Mrs. Richmond looked full at Mr. Pryor.

“I do not wish to make Nan more unhappy than I can help to-day,” she said; “so if you will bring her to my house by six o’clock this evening I will be satisfied.”

She turned away and entered her own carriage, and Mr. Pryor looked at Nan.

“It is only two o’clock,” he said; “we have four hours. A great deal can be done in four hours. What do you say to our spending the day out here in the country?”

“Oh,” said Nan, “in the country! Is this the country?”

“This is Highgate. I have a carriage, and I will get the man to drive us quite out into the country parts—perhaps to Barnet. The day happens to be a lovely one. I have a kind of desire to go into the Hadleigh Woods with you; what do you say?”

Nan gave a vague nod, and looked round for Phoebe.

“You would like your little friend Phoebe to come too?”

Nan’s whole face lit up.

“Oh, very, very much!” she said.

“Well, she is standing there; go and ask her.”

So Nan rushed up to Phoebe.

“Phoebe,” she said, “shall we go into the country with Mr. Pryor? I need not be back till six o’clock.”

“I don’t know if my mistress would wish it,” said Phoebe.

“I will take upon myself to say that Mrs. Vincent will not be angry with you,” said Mr. Pryor, coming up at this moment. “Now, children, get into my carriage; I will give the driver directions.”

So they left the cemetery and drove away and away into the heart of the country. It took them some little time to reach it, but at last they got where the trees grew in numbers and houses were few and far between; and although it was winter the day was a lovely one, and there was a warm sunshine, and it seemed to Nan that she had come out of the most awful gloom and misery into a peace and a joy which she could scarcely understand.

Mr. Pryor dismissed the carriage when it set them down at a pretty little inn, and he took Nan by the hand and led her into the parlour, and asked the landlord for a private room; and there he and Nan and Phoebe had dinner together.

It was a simple dinner—the very simplest possible—and Sophia Maria sat on Nan’s lap while she ate, and Mr. Pryor talked very little, and when he did it was in a grave voice.

Phoebe looked somewhat awed; and as to Nan, the sense of grief and bewilderment grew greater each moment.

“Now, Phoebe,” said Mr. Pryor when the meal was over, “I want our little party to divide. There are four of us, for of course I consider Sophia Maria quite one of the family.”

“Oh, she is quite, the darling!” said Nan.

“Will you take charge of her for a little, Phoebe,” said Mr. Pryor, “while Nan and I go for a walk?”

“Oh, must we?” said Nan, looking full at him.

He smiled very gravely at her.

“We will not be long,” he said. “There are a few things your mother has asked me to say to you. I would rather say them to you alone, without even Sophia Maria listening.”

Then Nan’s little white face lit up.

“Phoebe,” she said, “Mr. Pryor and I have something most important to say to each other. Be sure you take great care of Maria, and don’t let her catch cold.”

Phoebe promised, and Mr. Pryor and Nan, hand in hand, walked in the direction of the Hadleigh Woods.

They walked in absolute silence until they reached the woods, and then their steps became slower, and Nan looked up into the face of her companion and said:

“I wish you would tell me. What did mother say?”

“My dear Nan, your mother knew very well that the day was soon coming when God would send for her. She did not like to talk to you about it, although she often tried to; she was anxious about you, but not very anxious.”

“I wonder mother was not very anxious when she thought of leaving me so far, far behind,” said Nan.

“You see, she did not think that, for in reality those who go to God are not separated very far from those they leave.”

“Then is mother near me?”

“You cannot see her, nor can you realise it, but I should not be surprised if she were quite near you.”

“She knows all about my black dress and my crape?” said Nan. “Phoebe said she would be so glad about the crape!”

“Well, Nan, the fact is that the crape could not make her glad, nor the black dress; but the thought that you, her little girl, made it and wore it for love of her would make her glad. It is not the colour of the dress makes her happy; it is the love you put into it.”

“Oh! I don’t quite understand,” said Nan.

“You will when you think it over. You see, she is in white; she has a crown and a harp. That is what we have learnt about those who leave us—that if they have loved God they go into His presence, and their dress is white and glistening, and they have harps to sing to and crowns to wear; and we know the more we love the nearer we get to them. So, Nan, the message your mother has left me is this: ‘Tell Nan to be as good as girl can be—to be the best girl she knows. By being the best she must be the most loving, she must be the most unselfish. She must not wish to be the best to be thought well of by her fellow-men, but she must be the best because God loves those who try to follow Him.’ Do you follow me, Nan, when I say these words?”

“I follow you,” said Nan. “You want me to be good, but I do not think I can; and as to being the best, that I can never be. You want me to have a great deal of love, and I only love mother and Phoebe a little bit. And to-night everything is to be changed; I won’t even have you.”

“I am going to ask Mrs. Richmond to send you to see me sometimes—perhaps once a fortnight or so.”

“Will you?” said Nan. “I think if I could like anything I should like that.”

“I will arrange it then; and perhaps although you do not exactly love me now, you will regard me as your friend and love me presently. But there is something else I want to say. Your mother wished all these things for you, but she knew that you would have certain difficulties in your life. I am sorry to have to tell it to you, my dear little girl, but it is the fact: your mother left you without any money.”

“But mother could scarcely do that, because we had something to live on,” said Nan. “Has mother taken our money away with her up to God?”

“No, dear. In the home where she is now money is not needed; but the little money she had was only to be here during her lifetime. It was what is called an annuity; that means, she could have the use of it for her life, but only for her life. So, my dear little girl, you have no money.”

“Then I expect,” said Nan, drawing herself up and fixing her eyes full on Mr. Pryor’s face, “that I had best go to the workhouse. I can go to the workhouse until I am old enough to take a place as servant; and I would like, please, to go into the same house with Phoebe. Perhaps Mrs. Vincent would have me as her little servant, and Phoebe could teach me.”

“That is not necessary; you are not suited for that kind of life, and God does not require it of you. Mrs. Richmond is very well off; she has more money than she knows what to do with, and she always loved your mother, so she is going to take you to bring you up with her two little girls. You will be trained and educated, and have everything that a little girl can require, and all Mrs. Richmond wants in return is your love and your obedience.”

“But I don’t think I can love her. I wish—oh, I wish she would not do it!” said Nan.

“Now, Nan, the first proof of your love for your mother has arrived, for she wanted you to go to Mrs. Richmond. She would be dreadfully pained—far, far more pained, if trouble could reach her in heaven, by your not going there than even if you still wore a coloured frock.”

“Oh, how puzzling it is, and how difficult!” said Nan. “I shall quite hate to go to Mrs. Richmond. I never liked her much, and now to think that I owe everything to her!”

“I have something more to say. There is a man who owed your father money long ago, and he has promised to adopt you in case you are not happy with Mrs. Richmond; but you must spend quite a year with her before you go to him. You would have a different life with him—freer, wilder. Your mother preferred the idea of your being with Mrs. Richmond, but if you are unhappy with her you are to go to the Asprays; when last I heard of them they lived in Virginia, in the States of America.”

Nan pressed her hand to her forehead.

“That does not seem much better,” she answered; “and I think my head aches, but I am not sure. Shall we go back again now, Mr. Pryor?”

CHAPTER V.—THE MYSTERY-GIRL.

Kitty and Honora Richmond were in high spirits. Even the knowledge that Nan’s mother had been buried that day could scarcely depress them. They had heard of Nan a great deal for the last couple of years of their lives, but they had never seen her. Honora called her the little mystery-girl, and Kitty invariably made the same remark when her name was mentioned.

“I wonder if her eyes are blue or brown. If she has brown eyes she will be like me, and if she has blue eyes she will be like you, Nora.”

“As if the colour of her eyes mattered!” said Honora. “For my part,” she added, “I do not think any girl matters, and I do not see why you are so excited about her. If she were a dog it would be a different thing.”

“Yes, of course it would,” answered Kitty, looking wistfully round. “But you see she is a girl, and mother will not let us keep any more dogs.”

“The darlings!” cried Honora; “what a sin! Oh Kitty! do you know, I saw a dear little fox-terrier to-day when I was out. I know he was lost. He had one of those darling little square heads, and he did look so sweet! I would have given anything to bring him home, but when I spoke to nurse she said, ‘There are enough waifs and strays coming to the house without having stray dogs.’”

“I do wonder what she meant by that!” said Kitty.

“I expect,” said Nora in a thoughtful voice, “she must have meant poor Nan. It was not nice of her—not a bit. Do you know that Nan has no money? Nurse told me so last night; she said that if mother had not adopted her she would have had to go to the workhouse. Is it not awful?”

“Poor darling!” said Kitty. “Then we will be good to her; and it is almost as nice as if she were a dog. I like her twice as well since I know that. If she were a rich girl I should hate her coming, but as she is a poor one we will give her the very best—won’t we, Noney?”

“The best we could do,” said Honora in a thoughtful voice, “would be to give her Sally’s pup—you know, little Jack; would she not love it?”

Kitty looked very thoughtful.

“I thought perhaps I might keep Jack,” she said. “Do you think I ought to give Jack to Nan—do you, Nora?”

“Yes,” replied Nora in an emphatic voice. “We have just said that we ought to give her the best, and as Jack is your best, you ought to hand him over. Come, now, let us make the schoolroom look pretty. Mother said she would be here at six o’clock. She will be very sad, you know, Kitty; you must not laugh or be at all gay this evening. You must try to feel as if mother were in her coffin.”

“Oh, don’t!” said Kitty. “How horrid of you, Noney! How could I think of anything so awful?”

“But poor Nan has to think of it. Oh dear! oh dear! it is exciting. Do you know what I should like to do? I’d like to rush downstairs and fling my arms round her neck, and drag her up to the schoolroom, and say, ‘You poor little motherless, penniless creature, here is Jack to comfort you.’ That is what I should like to do; but, of course, I suppose it would not be right.”

Miss Roy, the children’s governess, now entered the schoolroom. She was a kindly, good-natured woman. They went to school for most of their lessons, but she looked after their dress, and took them for walks, and saw to their comforts generally.

“What are you two puzzling your little heads over?” she said. “Oh Nora, my dear, why is the schoolroom in such a mess?”

“We were teaching Jack some of his tricks,” said Nora. “Do you know, Miss Roy, he begs so beautifully, and he quite winks one of his dear little eyes when he sits upright and takes his biscuit.”

“But he sulks a good bit when we teach him to trust,” interrupted Kitty.

“Well, dears, get the brush now and sweep away the crumbs; when your little friend comes she will not like to see an untidy room.”

“I hope she will,” said Kitty. “It will be very much the worse for her if she is of the tidy sort.”

“What nonsense, Kitty! You know I have always trained you to be most careful and tidy.”

“Yes,” answered Kitty, with a sigh; “and when you do train us, Miss Roy, do you know what Nora and I think of?”

“What, dear?”

“Of the happy, happy days when we are quite grown-up, and can be as awfully untidy as we like, and sweep all our things into bundles, and never have a tidy drawer, and never be able to find anything; and have six or seven dogs, all in baskets, sleeping about the room; and a few cats, more particularly if they are sick cats, to bear them company; and birds, of course; and mice, and white rats, and”——

Miss Roy put her hands to her ears.

“Don’t introduce your menagerie until I am out of the country. I would rather leave England, although I am devoted to my native land, than be anywhere near such an awful room.”

“We told mother on Sunday,” said Nora, “and she quite laughed. I think she was ever so glad.”

Just then there came a sound of commotion downstairs. Nora drew herself up to her full height, and her heart beat a little faster than usual. Kitty rushed to her sister and clasped her hand.

“Oh Noney, has the little mystery girl come?”

“I think so,” said Nora; and just then her mother’s voice was heard shouting, and the two children ran downstairs.

Once again Honora thought of the impulse which she longed to give way to—the impulse to rush to the forlorn little figure in its quaint and peculiar frock and clasp it tightly in her arms, and sweep the child upstairs to the warm schoolroom, where Kitty would sit at her feet, and Nora would hold her round the waist, and Jack would sit on her lap, and they would talk and talk, and be happy and free, and even mingle their tears together. But Mrs. Richmond, although the most good-natured and kindest of women, would have been much shocked by such a proceeding on Honora’s part. She had lectured the little girls with regard to Nan’s arrival for the last couple of days, and had given them so many things to be careful about, so many subjects on which they must on no account touch, that now they felt quite constrained,

and it was a rosy-faced and apparently unconcerned little girl who came up now and took Nan's cold hand in hers; and a little girl in all respects her ditto, except that her eyes were brown, followed suit; and Nan gave one forlorn, frightened glance at the two little sisters, and then turned aside, a look of almost sullenness on her face.

"Take her upstairs, dears, and ask nurse to get her hot water; and then you shall all come downstairs to supper with me," said Mrs. Richmond.

Kitty said in a very low and frightened voice, "Will you come, please?" and the three children went upstairs.

They went through the cheerful schoolroom, where a fire was blazing brightly, and a lamp making a pleasant glow on the centre-table, and where there was a fascinating basket, out of which a bull-terrier raised his head and growled, and another basket with a cat and a heap of kittens in it; and there was a huge cage in the window in which swung a parrot, who called out the moment he saw them, "Here comes the naughty girl—here comes the naughty girl!" Nan, notwithstanding her misery, would have given worlds to rush to the bull-terrier's basket to examine its pups, or to the cat's basket to look at the kittens, or to laugh when Poll the parrot said, "Here comes the naughty girl!" But she did not dare to do any of these things, and she was led swiftly past the impertinent bird, and the dog, and the cat, into her own little room.

Nan's room opened out of the pretty bedroom where the sisters slept, and there was a fire here also, and a nice white bed, and pretty furniture, and even a few flowers on the dressing-table; and nurse, a stout, shrewd-looking woman, was standing in the room; and there was a jug of hot water on the washing-stand. The moment Nan appeared, nurse spoke to the little girls.

"Now go away, my dears," she said. "I will look after Miss Esterleigh. Come, miss, you would like me to wash your face and hands, would you not?"

What reply Nan made the little sisters did not hear, for they found themselves pushed out into the schoolroom and the door was shut.

"Oh Nora, what do you think of her?" said Kitty.

"Well," replied Nora, "I suppose it is because she is unhappy, but she looks rather cross."

"I do not think she is really. Did you see how her eyes danced when Sally growled?"

"Sally has very bad manners," said Nora.

"And, oh Noney, Noney, was it not shocking of Poll to say, 'Here comes the naughty girl'? She will think always now, to her dying day, that he meant her."

"You know Poll always says that whenever we bring a stranger into the schoolroom," said Nora. "But come, Kitty; let us wash our hands and get ready for supper. I suppose we'll like her after a bit—although I'm not sure."

"Did you notice the doll she had in her arms? Was it not too funny?" said Kitty.

"I expect she loves it," said Nora, "but she won't do so for long; we gave up dolls when we were ever so young. A doll is no fun when you have got a live thing to pet."

At this juncture Nora rushed to Sally's basket, took Jack from his mother, and clasped him tight in her arms.

"Oh! is he not just an angel?" she said; and then the little girls went to their room to get ready for supper.

Nan appeared, just as pale and just as unsmiling, in the schoolroom after she had submitted to nurse's ministrations. She hated the bright fires and the gay lamp and the comforts.

"It is all charity," she thought.

That afternoon she had questioned Phoebe as to the position of a girl whose mother had died without leaving any money behind; and Phoebe, who had no idea that her remarks would have any personal meaning, had said at once:

"Why, she is nothing in the world but a girl, miss; I'd not like to be her—that I wouldn't."

So Nan stood now with a bitter smile on her face. But as she stood alone in the schoolroom, looking wistfully about her, and wondering how she was to please her mother, and how by any possibility she could ever be the best girl whom Mr. Pryor spoke about, there came a funny little yap, and behold! Jack the bull-pup was at her feet.

Now, even a charity-girl could scarcely resist a bull-pup of six weeks old, and Nan felt a shiver of longing and delight creeping over her. She forgot Sophia Maria (the neglected doll was thrown on the nearest chair), and the next instant the little pup was clasped in the girl's arms. She was hugging it and petting it when Kitty came back. If there was one creature on earth whom Kitty loved it was Jack, and she had been wondering if another of the pups, little Flo or Tommy, would do equally well for Nan's possession. But Flo and Tommy were not nearly as perfect as Jack, for Jack was a little prince of bull-pups, perfect in every respect, with one white ear and one black, and with the most impudent face it was possible for a dog to have; and now Nan was smiling at him, and pressing his little cheek against hers, and then Kitty knew it was all up with her as far as Jack was concerned. She ran quickly forward.

"Oh! you have got Jack; he is yours, you know."

She panted out the words, being anxious to get the presentation over, to have the thing done beyond recall. Nan's face turned a little whiter.

“I am so sorry!” she said. “I know I ought not to have touched your pup, but he came to my feet, and he is so sweet!”

“Oh! you would like him, would you not?” said Kitty.

“Like him!” cried Nan. “I love him!”

“Then he is yours—yours! You may have him altogether.”

“I—what!” cried Nan.

“I mean that he is mine, and I give him to you. We have got plenty more; will you take him? Say so—quick!”

Nan looked full into Kitty’s eyes. Now, this was the last thing Kitty wished, for in spite of all her heroism and her desire to be as generous as possible, her eyes were full of tears.

“Oh, as if I could take him!” cried Nan. “But thank you—thank you.”

“You are to take him; Nora and I wish it. We said so; we made up our minds that you must be comforted by Jack. We cannot comfort you, because we do not know, and—— Anyhow, we are not dogs. No person can comfort like a dog can. So, will you have him—will you, please?”

“Oh, I will!” said Nan; and then Kitty went up to her and kissed her; and Nan dropped Jack, and flung her arms round Kitty’s neck, and said:

“Thank you—and thank God!”

CHAPTER VI.—THE BULL-PUP.

But when the little girls went down to supper, Jack had to stay behind. Had he come downstairs, cuddled up contentedly on Nan’s forlorn little shoulder, she might have been able to bear things; but as it was, all her miseries returned to her in a full tide. For the first time she observed how very peculiar and remarkable the dress was which Phoebe had made.

Nan was rather a small girl of eleven years of age, and the dress came down to her ankles. It was, of course, made without any attempt at style. The bodice fitted anyhow; the crape was put on in rucks instead of smoothly; the sleeves were too wide for the fashion, and too long for the little girl’s arms; the neck was too big, the part which covered her chest too narrow. She was, as nurse expressed it, all askew in that frock, and poor Mrs. Richmond quite shuddered as she looked at her.

If Nan had been a dazzlingly fair child, black might have been becoming to her; but as she was sallow, with quantities of jet-black hair, and big, very black eyes, there was not a scrap of beauty about her little face just now, although it was possible she might grow up handsome by-and-by.

Little, however, Nan recked about her appearance either in the future or the present. Just then she kept repeating to herself, “I am only a charity-girl;” and then she sat down and ate her supper without well knowing what she ate. Mrs. Richmond was very kind, and the two girls were as grave and sober as possible. They were not the least like themselves; they only spoke when they were spoken to; even the subject of the dogs did not draw them out. Kitty’s merry eyes kept looking down, and Honora’s sweet, bright face, with its wealth of light hair and smiling lips, seemed transformed into that of a very sober little girl indeed. Towards the end of supper Nan yawned once or twice. Mrs. Richmond suddenly rose.

“Come here, Nancy,” she said.

She took the little girl’s hand and drew her to her side.

“Nancy, you are my little girl henceforward.”

Nancy’s lips quivered.

“And these are your little sisters. This is Honora, aged twelve; and this is Kitty, aged eleven. You will be, I hope, the very best of friends; everything that Kitty has you have, and everything that Honora has also belongs to you. There will be three little sisters in this house instead of two. You will learn with the same kind governess, and go to the same nice school; and except that you will wear black and Kitty and Honora colours, you will be dressed alike. You will have the same pleasures and the same duties. I promised your mother that this should be the case, and all I ask of you in return is”—Mrs. Richmond paused and looked full at Nan-“happiness.”

“I cannot be happy,” whispered Nan then.

“Not yet, dear—no, not yet; but I want you to be contented, and to feel that I love you and will do what I can for you. I do not want you to feel that”——

“I am a charity-girl, and I hate it,” suddenly burst from Nan’s lips.

Mrs. Richmond took both the little hands very firmly in hers and drew the unwilling child to sit on her knee.

“Nan,” she said, “you must get that thought out of your head once and for ever. I am going to tell you something. Years and years ago, when I was young and when your mother was young, your mother did something for me which I can never repay—never. I will tell you what that thing was when you are older. Your mother died; and when dying, I asked her to let me adopt you as my own little girl. To do that does not anything like repay her for what she did for me, for she saved all my life and all my happiness. But for her I might not be alive now; and if spared, certainly be a most miserable woman. Sometime I will

tell you everything; but what I want you clearly to know is this, that in taking you to live with me I still owe your mother something. You have a right to my home and my love for her sake. Now, does this make things any better?”

“Oh yes!” said Nan. “And, oh” she added, “I am a horrid girl not to feel very glad! I will try to be very glad, but do not ask me any more to-night.”

“Poor little darling!” said Mrs. Richmond.

She kissed Nan, and nodded to Kitty to run up to Nan and take her hand.

“You are my sister, you know, and I love you already,” said Kitty; and so Nan went upstairs to bed.

Early the next morning, when the little girl felt that she had already only enjoyed her first sleep, she was awakened by some one pulling her rather violently by the arm. She looked up in astonishment. Just at first she could not in the least remember where she was, nor what had happened. Then it all rushed over her—her mother’s funeral of the day before, her own great misery, the change in her life. But she had scarcely time to realise these things, and certainly had not a moment to fret about them, when the eager voice of Kitty was sounding in her ears.

“Get up, please, Nan; dress yourself as fast as ever you can in the dark, and come into the schoolroom. If you are not very quick you will miss seeing the animals getting their breakfasts, and that is the best fun of the day. Now, be quick—be quick! I will come back again in a few minutes. I have lit the candle for you; here it is. Hot water? No; you must do without that. Fly—dash into your clothes, and be in the schoolroom in a quarter of an hour.”

Kitty disappeared, and Nan got up. She felt quite excited; she could not help herself. It was useless to pretend that she felt anything but a sense of rejoicing as she thought of the animals. When with human beings she must remember her mother, and her own suffering, and her great loss, but with the animals she could only rejoice. She scrambled into her clothes, making, it is true, a very sorry spectacle of herself.

“Sophia Maria, my darling,” she said to her doll, “you had better get warm into bed, and lie tucked up there while I am attending to the animals. I will never love them better than I love you, but I must see how they get their breakfasts. They are alive, Maria darling—they are alive; you understand, don’t you?”

Sophia Maria stared with her vacant smile at her little mistress.

“How good she is! she never frets,” thought the little girl; and then she went into the schoolroom, where a fire was lighted—a dull, dim-looking fire, which certainly gave forth no heat whatever just yet—and the gas was turned on.

“Is it not a good thing we have gas?” said Kitty.

Honora and Kitty were both in the schoolroom. They were wearing a long kind of holland smocks over their dresses; their faces looked quite serene and important.

“Now, Nan, which will you take? I think this morning, if you were to hold all the kittens in your lap, you might just watch us. We have to be ever so busy; Miss Roy only gives us a quarter of an hour at this time of day to clean out all the animals’ homes, and I can tell you it is exciting when you have got pups and kittens and birds and mice and rats. Is it not nice of Miss Roy? The mice and rats she will not allow in the room, but she allows the others. We keep them upstairs in the top attic. Sometimes the rats bite, and the mice too; but who minds a little pain when it is an animal—a darling—that has to be attended to?”

Nan was perfectly satisfied to sit near the fire holding the kittens. There were two Persian kittens, and their names were Lord and Lady. They were very handsome, with long, soft chinchilla fur, tiny tails at present, and big heads. Nan stroked them in ecstasy; there was not the slightest doubt that thrills of comfort went through her heart which Sophia Maria had never yet been able to bestow.

Kitty and Honora meanwhile were very busy. The parrot's cage required a great deal of attention. The parrot was inclined to be rather fierce; he would fly frantically after the little hands when they were put in to take out the seed-trough, and he would cock his head to one side, and then shout out, "Here comes the naughty girl!" and fix his eyes on Nan all the time.

"He does mean me," said Nan, forgetting the kittens and going up to the cage in her excitement. "Oh dear! is it not funny of him? And I suppose I am a naughty girl."

"Well, I hope so," said Kitty. "We don't want you to be a goody girl; we should not like that at all. We don't want you to be mournful and sulky and anything like that; we like you to have some spirit in you. You know your darling little Jack who belongs to you altogether? Well, you are to have all the trouble of him; and you are to take the blame also if he is naughty and fidgety, and tears our dresses, and bites the tablecloth. You will be the one to be reprimanded; don't forget that."

"I don't think I shall like that."

"Well, but surely you do not expect us to be blamed about your animal! I never heard of such a thing!" said Nora "Now we have done everything; go back and get as tidy as you can for breakfast."

Nan went back to her room feeling much excited. While she was out nurse had entered.

"So you are going to have an animal, miss; and you are going to get up every morning to help the young ladies to feed their pets and clean out their cages?"

"Yes; they have asked me to," said Nan.

"That is right, my dear; and I hope you will have a happy time and make yourself one of the family."

"I will try to," said Nan.

"The first thing you have to do is to give me the frock you wore last night."

"But, oh!" said Nan, "that is my own frock, bought out of my own money. Please, I would rather—I would rather not give it."

"I am afraid if you are one of the family you have got to obey Mrs. Richmond, and she does not intend you to wear that ugly frock any more."

"It is not ugly," said Nan, colouring high.

"Well, miss, I am afraid it is; and anyhow you cannot wear it, for I am going to take it away. Here is a nice little suitable dress—black, of course, and made the same way as Miss Kitty's dresses are made. Here, put it on, miss, or you will be late for breakfast."

All poor Nan's misery returned to her at these words. She felt as if she were most unjustly treated; she could scarcely bear her own feelings. The pretty frock in which she looked so nice and fresh, and in which she had once again the appearance of a lady, did not appeal to her. She shrugged her shoulders discontentedly, and was only comforted when nurse insisted on her wearing a white pinafore which nearly covered the frock.

Just as she was leaving her bedroom she turned and spoke.

"If you will not let me wear my own frock—and I bought all my own mourning for my own mother—may I at least keep it?"

"Oh yes, poor little girl!" said nurse, much touched by these words. "I will put it in the bottom of the little trunk you brought with you. You might give it to a poor girl some day, and she might make it fit her; it is not fit for any one to wear at present."

Nan was fain to be comforted with this sort of half-promise of nurse's, and entered the school-room, where she stood, looking somewhat forlorn, by the fire. But this mood was not to be of long duration, for Nora and Kitty came bounding in. They had made up their minds: the time of gloom was past; they were going to be their own riotous, gay, merry, rebellious, fidgety, almost unruly little selves once again to-day.

Miss Roy was almost as merry as her pupils. At breakfast they screamed with laughter; animals, of course, were the subjects of conversation. The virtues of Jack, the vices of Poll the parrot, the exquisite beauties of Lord and Lady and the bad manners of their mother, the good manners of the bull-terrier—all were discussed with animation. Each little point was noted. Nan listened, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"What is the matter? Why do you not talk?" said Kitty at last.

"I am so astonished," answered Nan.

"What about?"

"Why, you speak, you and Honora, as if—as if there were no girls and boys in the world."

"Oh! I suppose there are," answered Honora. "I am afraid there are," she continued after a pause. "They are great worries, are they not?"

"I don't know."

“Compared to animals, I mean. Who would compare them?”

“I don’t know,” said Nan again.

“You will when you have been here a little longer.—Oh, Miss Roy, Kitty has given Jack to Nan. He is her very own bull-puppy. She has got to train him; and, please, if he does anything naughty you are to blame her.”

“Well, now, children,” said Miss Roy, “put on your hats and coats and get ready for school. Nan, my dear, Mrs. Richmond has not arranged for your school until next week, so will you please stay in the schoolroom until I come back to you? I will hear you a few lessons then, and we can go out for a walk together.”

“And may she take Jack for a little airing?” asked Kitty.

“Yes, if she has a leash—not otherwise.”

“Oh! I can lend her a leash,” said Kitty. “You will find it hanging up in the passage outside the schoolroom,” she added, turning to the little girl; “and there is a collar as well. Now we must be off.”

In a moment they dashed away, Miss Roy following them. From intense excitement and vigorous conversation and loud noise and hearty laughs the schoolroom was reduced to absolute silence. Nan felt a sense of relief. She crept into her bedroom, took Sophia Maria from between the sheets, clasped her in her arms, and sitting down by the fire, called to Jack to come and make friends.

Now, Jack was of the most sociable nature, but it is, alas! true that he was possessed with a petted little dog’s invariable infirmity—that of intense jealousy. He had taken to Nan; he had liked the position on her shoulder, and had quite slobbered with bliss when she had kissed him on his little cheek the night before. But Nan was now hugging a hideous object in her arms, and Jack did not see why such a thing should be permitted. He was wary, however, and did not intend to give himself away. He knew by experience that in small puppies mischievousness was reproved by two-footed creatures who had the control of them; but in all the world what could be more delicious than the sort of mischief which meant tearing and rending, using his teeth and puppy paws to some purpose? That horrid thing in Nan’s arms could be rent and torn and demolished and worried, and what a time of enjoyment he would have while doing it! Accordingly he raised his dancing eyes to Nan’s face, and jumped backwards and forwards, inviting her as bewitchingly as puppy could to a game of romps. She played with him for a little, trying to catch him, which he avoided, for it was quite beyond the dignity of puppydom to repose in the same lap with the hideous doll dressed in crape. The dog was biding his time. Nan looked again at Maria. She still wore her inane smile. Nan kissed her. She was so cold; she did not seem to take any interest.

“She is not so nice as Jack,” thought the little girl, “but of course I like her best. Did not mother give her to me, and have not I over and over and over again cried with her in my arms? She comforted me, then, but not as little Jack does.”

Presently Miss Roy came in, bustling and fresh from the outside world.

“Now, get on your things, Nan,” she said. “I will take you for a walk first of all, as it may rain later on; it is a beautiful morning, and we will go for a walk in Hyde Park. You had better leave little Jack at home; dogs are not allowed in Hyde Park except on a leash.”

Nan got up joyfully. Sophia Maria was put comfortably sitting in the arm-chair in which the little girl had herself reposed, and a few minutes later Nan and her governess went out.

Now was Jack’s opportunity. The schoolroom was silent; the mother bull-terrier was sound asleep, with the other pups nestling up to her. Jack, bent on mischief, was practically alone. The Persian cat turned her back upon him with the most lofty disdain in her attitude; the parrot winked at him out of her wicked eye, and said, “Here we are again!” another favourite expression of hers. Jack cared little; with a dexterous leap he secured Sophia Maria, and what immediately followed may be left to the imagination of the readers.

When Nan returned from her walk there were morsels of crape on the floor, and tiny pieces of coarse black cashmere, and a naked doll, which, rent and torn and injured, lay in a distant corner; but her clothes—alas! where were they? Jack waggled up to his little mistress, coaxing and canoodling, and saying by a thousand pretty motions, “You must forgive me if it was wrong. I am sorry, but I would do it again if I had the chance; only please forgive me.” And then Nan uttered a sudden shriek and flew towards the battered remains of her doll, which she clasped in her arms.

“Oh, Miss Roy—oh, Miss Roy!” screamed the little girl.

“What is it, my dear?” said the astonished governess.

“Oh, see what Jack has done!”

“Naughty Jack!” said Miss Roy. “But really, Nan, it was a very ugly doll; if you wish to dress it again I will find some pieces for you some half-holiday. Put it in the cupboard now and forget about it. Come to me in a few minutes for your lessons.”

CHAPTER VII.—THE FALL.

Nan had gone about for the remainder of the day with a lump in her throat. It was not the least like the heavy weight of sorrow which pressed on her yesterday—but nevertheless it was a curious and strange sensation. To all intents and purposes Sophia Maria no longer existed; that battered and torn and

disreputable doll in the cupboard could not be the darling whom she had pressed to her heart and loved and worshipped during all the sorrowful days when her mother lay dead in the lodging-house in Bloomsbury.

But although the lump was there, and the sorrow and the dismay there also, Nan's day was one rush, one continued succession, of excitement; there was literally no time in Mrs. Richmond's happy house for brooding or grieving.

"I must try and forget Sophia Maria for the present," thought the child; "there is such a lot to be done! But when I get into bed to-night, oh! won't I have a good cry?"

She made up her mind also not to tell either Nora or Kitty what had happened to her dear baby.

"As for Jack," she said to herself, "I shall hate him all the rest of my days."

But when he came up to her, and sprang with great appreciation into her lap and cuddled down there, and licked her hand with his little red tongue, she found that, far from hating him, she was loving him better and better each moment. At last bedtime came, and Nan as she laid her head on her pillow and said "Good-night" to nurse, who had come in to put out her candle, whispered to herself:

"Now I *must* have a tremendous cry for my darling Sophia Maria."

But, behold! the very next instant she was sound asleep. So Maria lay neglected in the cupboard. Some day, of course, Nan would dress her, and make her a pet and an idol once more, but meantime she was too busy.

As the days flew on she grew busier and busier, for on the following Monday she went to school with Nora and Kitty. It was discovered at school that she was a very clever and well-informed little girl for her age, and she was put into quite a high-up class for a girl of eleven, and had many lessons to learn, and much to attend to. And as Nan had not only school-hours to live through, but private lessons in music to work for at home, and walks to take, and romps to enjoy, and the animals one and all to idolise, she had not been a month in Mrs. Richmond's house before she became a very merry and a very happy little girl. Not that for a single moment she forgot her mother; but she was wise enough and sensible enough to know that if she would really please that mother she would do it best by being happy and contented. Once she saw Mr. Pryor; and when Mr. Pryor said to her, "Are you trying to be the best girl?" Nan coloured, and squeezed his hand, and said:

"Oh! but I have got such a darling little puppy—all my very, very own—and his name is Jack. And I do love Kitty and Nora! And Mrs. Richmond is very kind."

Then Mr. Pryor looked straight into the dancing, dark eyes of Nan, and he laid his hand for a moment on her head and said:

"I think you are going to be the best girl."

"I wonder what he really means," thought Nan. "It is nice to be happy; even in mother's time I was never as happy as I am now. In mother's time there was always the pain—her pain—to remember, and the empty purse, and Mrs. Vincent, who was so cross, and—— Oh! lots and lots of such things. But now nothing seems sad, and no one seems sorry; and the animals alone would make any girl happy."

But as it is not appointed in this life for any one to pass from the cradle to the grave without anxiety and troubles and temptations and fears, so was Nan Esterleigh no exception to the general rule.

She had been two months at Mrs. Richmond's, and in that time had grown strong and healthy, and a pretty rose colour had beautified her dark little face, and her eyes were very bright, and her whole appearance that of an intelligent and happy child. During those two months the spring had advanced so far that it was now the daffodil and primrose time, and the children had arranged to go to the nearest woods to gather baskets of primroses on a certain Saturday, which was of course a whole holiday. Saturday was the most delightful day of the seven in Nan's opinion, for there was no school and there were no classes of any sort. It was the animals' special day, when extra cleanings had to be given and extra groomings gone through; when the cages and baskets had to get fresh flannels and fresh gravel; when the mice and the rats had in especial to be looked after. Nan always enjoyed Saturday best of all, and this special Saturday was to be indeed a red-letter day, for Miss Roy had decided to take the children to the country by a train which left Victoria at one o'clock. They would get to Shirley Woods in half-an-hour; there they could pick primroses to their hearts' content, and bring them back in basketfuls. Nan was very much excited. She had never been to Shirley Woods, and the thought of some hours in the country filled her with the wildest glee.

"Why, you dance about and make more fuss even than we do," said Nora, looking at her as she skipped up and down the room.

"Yes; I am in very high spirits," said Nan, "and I am ever so happy."

"I wonder how you will enjoy it when our cousin Augusta comes."

"Who is your cousin Augusta? I have never heard of her."

"I dare say not; but she is coming for a couple of months, either to-night or to-morrow morning—to-night, probably. Mother had a letter from our aunt, and she wants mother to take care of Augusta until she comes back from the Riviera. Her name is Augusta Duncan. She is a very handsome girl, and has a lot of spirit. She is the fashionable sort, and thinks a lot of her dress and her appearance. What fun we shall all have together!"

"But is she coming to school with us? How will she spend her day?" asked Nan.

"No, she is not going to school, for she has not been quite strong, and is to have a complete holiday. I expect she will stay here a good bit and amuse herself."

“How old is she?” said Nan again.

“She is a year and a half older than me,” replied Nora, “so she is going on for fourteen. She is a very big girl for her age. I am quite curious to see her.”

“Well, don’t let us bother about her now,” said Nan. “Let us get ready to go off for our happy day in the country.”

Kitty looked at the clock.

“I had not the least idea it was so late,” she said. “What is to be done? Mother wants us to get some flowers for the drawing-room before we start. Cannot you go, Nan? Just run and ask Susan the housemaid to go with you. You have very nice taste, and can choose just the flowers mother would like. Get them at Johnson’s at the corner. I know mother wants heaps of violets, and as many yellow flowers as you can put together. You had better select about five shillings’ worth, for some people are coming to tea with mother this afternoon.”

“Very well,” said Nan, in high good-humour. “I’ll be off at once.”

She put on her hat and jacket and ran downstairs, calling to Susan to accompany her. Susan, however, was very busy, and grumbled when the little girl made her request.

“Dear me, Miss Nan!” she said; “nurse has given me a lot to do, and I am very late as it is. Cannot the flowers wait?”

“Oh! it does not matter,” answered Nan.

A daring idea rushed through her mind. Why should she have Susan, to keep her company? It was only a step from the Richmonds’ house to Johnson’s shop; she could easily go there alone. The fact that she was forbidden ever to go out by herself was completely forgotten. In her mother’s time she had constantly been sent on messages, and surely she was just as sensible a little girl now. So, calling Jack the puppy to accompany her, she started on her mission. She arrived at the shop in good time, and there she saw two girls standing by the counter. They were ordering flowers too, and talking to each other in a somewhat excited manner. Their accents were not the accents of London girls; they had a high-pitched note in them, which Nan at first thought very disagreeable, and then considered fascinating. The girls were beautifully and extravagantly dressed. They were taller and older than Nan. They wore velvet frocks of a rich blue, and fawn-coloured jackets, and they had blue velvet hats which drooped over their faces. The hats were trimmed with enormous ostrich-feathers, also a deep royal-blue. The girls had quantities of very thick and very bright golden hair, which hung in curly masses down their backs and over their shoulders. They had each of them deep-blue eyes—very deep and very dark—and long, curly black lashes. Nan considered them quite the most lovely human beings she had ever looked at. They would not have taken the least notice of the quiet, grave-looking little girl who had come into the shop but for the fact that Jack suddenly made a dive at one of their dresses, and catching it in his teeth, pulled at it, as much as to say, “Now for a game of play!”

The girl whose dress was attacked immediately tried to shake the bull-terrier off; but the bull-terrier would not let go. It was the mission of all bull-pups never to let go, and here was his opportunity. He hung on as if for grim death, and the girl’s face got red and her eyes flashed with temper. She turned to Nan and said in an imperious voice:

“Do take your dog off, please. What a horrid little beast he is!”

“He is not horrid at all,” said Nan, very cross at anything disparaging being said of Jack; but she caught the pup in her arms, and stood red and panting, waiting for the girls to leave the shop.

The elder girl, whose dress had been the subject of Jack’s attack, found that it was slightly torn, and she turned to her sister and said:

“What an insufferable little dog, and what a still more insufferable girl!”

“Oh, hush, Flora!” said the girl so addressed.

“Where shall I send the flowers to, miss?” asked the man who was serving the girls, bending over the counter as he did so.

“Send them to Mrs. Aspray, Court Mansions,” was the elder girl’s reply. “Be quick, please,” she added; “you had better send a man round with all those flowers in pots. We are expecting company this afternoon, and mother says the flowers must arrive before two o’clock.”

The man promised; and the girls, the elder one still very cross and angry, left the shop.

Just as she was doing so she flashed her handsome blue eyes in Nan’s direction, and Nan gave her back quite as indignant a glance.

“Well, miss, and what can I do for you?” said the shopman, now turning to Nan.

Nan gave her order; the man promised to attend to it immediately, and the little girl returned home.

Now, how it happened she never knew, but going back, she trod suddenly on a piece of orange-peel. The next moment she was lying on her face, white and sick and dizzy with pain. She had sprained her ankle. For a moment or two she lay still. Then a man rushed up and raised her to her feet. She made a frantic effort, and leaning on his arm, got as far back as Mrs. Richmond’s house. When the door was opened for her, great was the astonishment of Caroline the parlour-maid.

“Why, Miss Nan,” she cried, “how white you are! What has happened?”

“I have sprained my foot. I fell when I was out; I trod on a piece of orange-peel.”

“And you were out, miss, all alone?”

“Yes, yes; Susan was not able to come.”

“My mistress will be angry, miss.”

“I am ever so sorry; but please don’t tell her—please don’t, Caroline.”

“She will find out when she discovers that you have sprained your foot.”

“Please don’t tell her; I will manage somehow,” said the child; and she limped upstairs.

In consequence of her escapade, however, she could not possibly go to the country that day. Kitty and Nora decided that they would not tell about her naughtiness in going out alone. They were really fond of Nan. They said that she was very silly to have disobeyed their mother, and very wrong, but they would make some excuse about her not going into the country; and as Mrs. Richmond was extremely busy, what with Augusta’s expected arrival and her visitors of that afternoon, it was unlikely that she would miss Nan or say anything about her. Accordingly, at half-past twelve Miss Roy and the two little Richmonds started alone for their country expedition, and Nan was left in the schoolroom.

CHAPTER VIII.—PIP.

The sunshiny morning brought a still more lovely afternoon in its train. Nan felt cross and discontented. She had looked forward for long to that happy day in Shirley Woods; she had a passionate love for all flowers, and for primroses in especial. She had gone primrose-hunting when quite a little child with her mother in the happy, happy days when they were not so poor, and mother was not so ill, and their home had been in the country. As she lay in bed at night for the past week she had thought of the intense joy of picking primroses.

“Even if mother is dead,” she had said to herself, “I shall love to hold them in my hands; and if it is true that mother is in a beautiful country where there are spring flowers that never wither, perhaps she is picking primroses too.”

But now everything had come to an end. She had been good-natured although disobedient, and her punishment had come. Her foot did not ache very badly except when she walked on it; still, she felt very impatient alone in the schoolroom—forgotten, doubtless, by every one else in the house, for even nurse had taken the opportunity to go and visit an old friend, and Susan the housemaid just peeped in once to see if there were enough coals to put on the fire. But the day was too warm for Nan to need much fire. Her book did not interest her; she knew her lessons already by heart. She did not care to practise on the piano. Even Jack tired her by his constant and officious attentions.

“Oh dear!” she said to herself, “was there ever such a long afternoon? How I wish Phoebe would come to see me! How I wish that I had my darling Sophia Maria again! I might make some more clothes for her; there are all kinds of odds and ends in nurse’s basket, and she would not mind my rummaging in it. But there! I really have not the energy. How dull it is! I wonder if Kitty will bring me a special bunch of primroses, and if they will be big ones with long stems, the sort mother used to love. Oh dear! I am tired.”

She yawned, shut up the book which she had already read, and taking Jack into her arras, kissed him on his little round forehead.

Just then a memory came to her. Kitty had been anxious about one of the white rats that morning. It was her favourite rat, Pip. Pip had not been well; he had refused his breakfast—an almost unheard-of thing in the annals of the rat world. Even a nut did not tempt him, and he had turned away from a piece of cheese. Kitty adored Pip. He was a large, rather dangerous rat. Nan as a rule kept a wide berth when she was asked to visit the rats and mice, for Pip had very sharp teeth, and a vicious way of darting at you and giving you a sharp bite. But Nan now thought of him with much interest. The very last thing Kitty had said before she went out was this:

“I sha’n’t enjoy myself very much after all, for Pip is not well. I cannot think what is the matter with him. I should just break my heart if anything happened to my darling Pip.”

Nan had asked one or two questions, and Kitty had turned round and looked at her.

“Oh! you can do nothing,” she said. “I have put him away from Glitter and Snap. I think he looks very bad indeed; he must have eaten something poisonous. No, please, do not go near the room, Nan, whatever you do, for you know you have not the slightest control over the rats and mice.”

Now Nan thought of the sick rat, and a curious and ever-increasing desire to go and look at him, to find out if he were better, if he had eaten the cheese which Kitty had last tried to tempt him with, took possession of her.

“It can do no harm,” she thought. “I will just go and have a peep; it certainly can do no harm. I shall be very careful; I will just open the door and look in.”

Notwithstanding the pain in her foot, Nan contrived to limp up to the attics. There were five or six attics on the next floor—large rooms, all of them. The smallest one, that facing the stairs, had been given over to the girls for their pets. They owned several boxes of mice, different kinds of breeds—harvest mice, dormice, Japanese mice, white mice. Nan considered all the mice most fascinating. At the opposite side of the room were the cages where the rats reposed.

Nan knew Pip very well by appearance. He was snowy white, had a long, hairless tail, and a little patch of black just behind his left ear. It was a tiny patch of black, and Kitty considered it one of his beauties.

Nan opened the door softly now and went in. She had left it a little ajar, not thinking much of what she was doing. When she entered the room her dullness vanished on the spot. She could examine one cage after the other; could poke in her hand and draw it away again when the mice tried to bite her. There were a lot of little baby mice in one cage. She thought it would be nothing short of bliss to examine them, to count them, and to see what they were really like. But of course the sick rat, Pip, must have her first attentions. He was in a cage all alone—by no means a perfect cage, for it was broken at one side. Kitty, however, had secured it against the chance of the rat's escape by leaning a bit of board up against the broken side. Nan knew nothing of this; she moved the cage so as to get it into a better light, and peering down, looked at the sick rat. He was lying curled up in the bottom of his cage, but the sudden movement and the sight of Nan's comparatively unfamiliar face gazing at him caused Pip to become wide awake. At that instant a thrill of fear shot through his rodent heart. Nan, without knowing it, had caused the piece of wood to slip. The very next instant the rat was out of his cage, and was scuttling as fast as ever he could rush across the floor.

Now, this was bad enough—for nothing would induce poor Nan to catch him—but worse was to follow; for Jack, grown a large pup now and full of spirit, had followed his little mistress, unknown to her, into the attic. The next moment there was a cry, a scuffle, and Jack had caught the sick rat by the neck. Nan screamed, rushed at the dog and rat, and tried to separate them. Alack and alas! the spirit of his ancestors was in Jack's veins at that moment; his hairs bristled in excitement. It did not take him long to shake the life out of poor Pip, who lay dead and torn on the floor of the attic.

Nan's consternation exceeded all bounds.

"What shall I do? What shall I do?" she exclaimed.

She said the words aloud. A light, low laugh falling on her ears caused her to turn quickly, and she saw, standing in the doorway, a fair-haired girl with large blue eyes and an exceedingly amused expression on her face.

"Oh!" said Nan, giving a jump.

"What is the matter?" said the girl.

"Who are you?" said Nan.

"I am Augusta Duncan. But what have you been doing? You are a funny girl, ratting up here all by yourself."

"Oh! you don't know what it means. It is perfectly awful! I came up to see Kitty's sick rat, Pip. She just worships Pip. She has had him almost since he was born; and he was ill to-day, and she put him into a separate cage, and while I was looking at him he escaped, and my bull-terrier killed him.— Oh Jack! oh Jack! what have you done?"

The smile on the strange girl's face became a little broader; she slowly crossed the room, looked at the rat, and then going away, came back with a pair of tongs. With the tongs she lifted the rat and laid him on a shelf.

"He does not look bruised," she said; "at least not much—a little perhaps. His fur is wet, but I do not suppose Kitty will know what has killed him. Have you courage to put him back into his cage?"

"Why should I do that?" asked Nan.

"Well, have you courage? I could not touch the horror."

The laughing, curious eyes were fixed on Nan's face. She did not know why—she often wondered afterwards what had ailed her during that miserable day—but the next instant she had slipped the rat back into his cage.

"That is all right," said the girl. "You need not tell; I will not. Come, let us lock the door. Have you done any further mischief in the room? I see not. Come downstairs to the schoolroom and amuse me."

Nan followed the girl as though she were mesmerised, Jack trotting behind her heels. They went into the schoolroom; the girl turned full round and looked at Nan.

"Now, who are you?" she said.

"I am Nan Esterleigh."

"Oh! And has my aunt adopted you?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that I am tired? I have had a very long journey; I have come all the way from France. Aunt Jessie is very busy, and said that I might come up to the schoolroom and amuse myself. She did not know that you were here; she said nothing about you. Now, what I want to say is this: if I keep your secret, will you make things pleasant to me?"

"But—but," said Nan, "I don't know that I want it to be kept a secret."

"Oh! you would like Kitty to know that you had stolen into her preserves when she was out, and that your dog had killed her pet rat? It would be so pleasant for you, would it not?"

"It would not be pleasant at all," replied Nan. "Why are you speaking in that tone?"

"I only thought that perhaps you were going to enjoy it. And what good would it do making Kitty unhappy? The rat was ill when she left; she would take its death as a matter of course. She would not know that Jack had killed it."

"But suppose—oh, suppose she ever finds out!"

“How can she find out if you do not tell and I do not tell?”

“You tempt me,” said Nan; “but it does not seem right.”

“Never mind whether it is right or not; do it.”

“Very well,” said Nan.

She sat down on the hearth-rug and began poking up the fire.

“That is right. If I do it, you must do things for me. Build up that fire to begin.”

Nan looked round at the insolent young figure stretched out in the easiest chair which the room contained. She built up the fire without a word.

“That is right; you can make yourself very useful. Now, run downstairs and ask one of the servants to bring me up some tea and toast, and a new-laid egg, and a little marmalade. Do not forget—toast, butter, tea, new-laid egg, and a little marmalade. I must say I think it was very thoughtless of Aunt Jessie not to order any food for me when I arrived.”

“Oh! did not she? Of course I will go and order the tea,” said Nan in a good-natured voice.

She left the room. Her heart was beating loudly. She did not like the position of things a bit, but she seemed to be whirled along by an influence stronger than her own.

“I am not even trying now to be one of the best girls,” she said under her breath.

When she came back to the schoolroom, Augusta was curled up close to the fire with Jack in her lap.

“What a nice little dog!” she said. “I should rather like to have him for my own.”

“Oh! but you can’t,” said Nan. “He is mine.”

Augusta gave her a quizzical glance.

“You can call him yours,” she said. “While I am here he is to be my dog—hey, you little beauty?” and she caught up Jack and pressed his head against her cheek.

Presently Susan appeared with the tea, which was nicely prepared, Augusta’s instructions being carried out to the letter.

“Here, Jack,” said Augusta; “stand on your hind-legs and beg. You shall have some sugar.”

“Oh! please, sugar is not good for him at all,” said Nan in a tone of entreaty.

Augusta laughed, picked out the largest lump, and presented it to Jack. He crunched it with appetite; when he had finished she gave him another, and another.

“You will ruin him. He will get to be a horrid dog at this rate,” said Nan.

“Well, when I leave here you can do what you like with him. While I am on the spot it is my will and pleasure to treat little Jack exactly as I think best.”

Nan turned away. She felt a strange, sick sensation round her heart.

“I cannot allow myself to get into the power of this horrid girl,” she said to herself. “It would be better to have Kitty quite furiously angry with me for an hour or two; yes, it would be much better than to have that girl spoiling Jack, and ordering me about just as though I were her slave.”

“I wish you would get me something to read,” called out Augusta.

“There is a shelf full of books there,” replied Nan. “You can choose which one you like. I am not allowed to walk much because I have hurt my foot.”

“How did you hurt it?”

“I was out to-day getting flowers for Mrs. Richmond, and I fell.”

“Oh, how stupid! Did you go out by yourself?”

“Yes.”

“Hum! Where did you go?”

“Not very far off; just round the corner. There is a beautiful florist’s shop just at that corner.”

“I dare say; but you are rather young to go out alone. Did Aunt Jessie say you might?”

Nan coloured and bit her lips. Augusta noticed the expression on the little girl’s face.

“Perhaps you would rather I did not say anything about this either,” she remarked. “I won’t, you know, if you tell me not. I never make mischief. I would not do so for all the world.”

“Well,” said Nan, “I did disobey Mrs. Richmond; but I was in such a hurry because we were all going to the country—we were to have such a lovely, lovely afternoon! I was very sorry afterwards that I did not insist on Susan’s coming with me.”

“We are mostly sorry when we do wrong things,” said Augusta. “I am; but then, you see, I do not get into scrapes. I would not for all the world. I am the sort of girl who gets other girls out of scrapes. I sometimes think that is my mission in life. What a lot of wrong things you have done to-day! Gone out without permission, and been the cause of poor Kitty’s favourite rat’s death. I would not be in your shoes for a good deal—that is, unless I had a girl like me to help me. Now, like a good child, bring me the least objectionable of the books on that shelf.”

“Augusta,” said Nan.

“What a portentously solemn voice! Well? Augusta is listening.”

“I think it is better to say that—that I do not want you to keep secrets for me.”

“Oh! all right, my dear—all right; you can please yourself exactly. I’ll be able to explain just how I saw you with the dog in the room, and the dead rat. Kitty will think you did it on purpose.”

“She could not think such a thing.”

“Well, you must admit that it looks like it; you up there, and the rat dead, and Jack—*your* Jack—having done it. However, please yourself. We will see when the time comes what you will choose. We will not decide at present. Now then, which is the best of the books?”

“I don’t know. Here is *The Fairchild Family*.”

“Never heard of it. It sounds goody-goody.”

“It is rather nice,” said Nan. “And here is *Ministering Children*.”

“Oh! I do not want anything of the religious order.”

“And here is—oh! here is a charming book—*The Heir of Redclyffe*, by Miss Yonge.”

“I have read it before, but I will glance through it again; just toss the volume across to me.”

Nan brought it in a meek fashion to Augusta, who took it, raised her eyes to the little dark face, and smiled.

“You are not a bad sort,” she said; “and you can be useful to me. I mean to make you useful. Now sit down, Nan, and do not make a noise. Read anything you like, only don’t disturb me.”

Augusta buried herself against some comfortable cushions, opened her book, and was lost in its contents. Nan, feeling sick and miserable, her ankle aching terribly, took the next most comfortable chair.

By-and-by there came a message for Augusta to go downstairs to Mrs. Richmond.

“That is right,” she said, jumping up. “How do I look, Nan? Hair tidy—eh?”

“Oh yes,” said Nan; “it is pretty well.”

“Pretty well! If you talk in that tone I shall send you for a brush and comb and glass. Let me look at myself through your eyes. What big, dark eyes you have! They are very pretty. You will be a handsome girl by-and-by.”

“Shall I?” replied Nan, much comforted, not to say charmed, by these words.

“Of course you will. And you are a nice little thing—quite nice. Now, keep the fire alive, and look after *my* Jack until I return.”

CHAPTER IX.—UNDER HER THUMB.

Augusta Duncan was considered by her elders to be one of the best girls in existence. She was always neat and nice to look at; she had refined, gracious, gentle manners. At school she learnt her lessons correctly, and took place after place in form, rising by slow but sure degrees to the head of the school. But Augusta was not a favourite with her companions. Even they themselves did not always know why this was the case. The fact is, they were a little afraid of her; she had a way of getting them under her thumb, as she expressed it. Augusta was never happy in any house until she had got the other girls into this position. She had no special reason to make Nan Esterleigh’s life a misery; but the moment she saw the little girl she grasped the opportunity, and her favourite passion being immediately fed, her appetite grew greater every moment. She was now resolved to have complete power over Nan, who, she felt certain, could be very useful to her.

“My dear Gussie,” said her aunt, coming forward and kissing her affectionately as she entered the room, “you must have thought me terribly rude on your arrival to send you upstairs; but I was expecting some special friends, and was anxious to finish a lot of letters. My friends will be with me in about half-an-hour, and meantime you and I can have tea cosily together. How is your mother, dear?”

“She and father are very well indeed. Is it not hard lines that I cannot be with them?”

“Well, I hope you will be happy with me. We will all do what we can to make you so.”

“Thank you, Aunt Jessie; I am always happy when I am with you and the girls.”

“That is right, my love. You have grown a good deal, Augusta. I see you are going to take after your father’s family; you will be tall.”

“I am glad of that,” said Augusta. “I would rather be tall than short; it gives one more power in the world.”

“You silly child,” laughed her aunt; “what do you want with power?”

“I love to feel that I have power, Aunt Jessie. I always like to exercise it when I can.”

“Well, the time may come when it will be useful, but at present your lot in life is to obey your elders, and to be happy with your young companions.”

“Of course, Aunt Jessie—of course. May I sit on this little footstool at your feet, and may I hold your hand?”

“Indeed you may, my darling child. I am so happy to have you with me for a little!”

“Thank you, Aunt Jessie.”

“It must be lonely for you, dear, up in the schoolroom at present, but the three girls will be in to supper; they have gone to Shirley Woods—a long-promised treat.”

“The three girls!” said Augusta, raising her calm blue eyes. “Then there are four girls now in the house?”

“Counting you, there are.”

“But I mean without me.”

“I do not understand you, dear.”

“Well, Aunt Jessie, there is a girl up in the schoolroom. She says her name is Nan—Nan Esterleigh.”

“Little Nan,” cried Mrs. Richmond. “Did not she go with the others?”

“No; I found her in the schoolroom when I arrived.”

“I wonder what can be wrong with the child.”

“I don’t think much; she has slipped and hurt her foot, but it is nothing.”

“I must go up to see about her.”

“Oh! please, not now, just when you have sent for me, and I am longing to have a talk with you. Nan was as happy as possible when I came down here. I left her playing with her little dog, and seated by the fire.”

“If you can assure me she is not in pain I will not go to her till after tea,” said Mrs. Richmond; “I am rather tired, having had a lot of running about this morning. But what a pity the poor child never told me of this! How strange of Miss Roy to have gone off without her!”

“I know nothing about that, of course,” replied Augusta. “But tell me about her, Aunt Jessie. Is she any relation? Does she live here now? I never heard of her before.”

“She does live here, Augusta, and I hope she will continue to do so.”

“How mysterious you look, Aunt Jessie! Is there any story about her?”

“In one sense there is, Augusta; but I do not care to talk about it. The dear child is a great pleasure to me. We all love her very much.”

“But do tell me, please, Aunt Jessie—do. I so love to hear anything mysterious!”

“There is nothing mysterious, darling; but perhaps, as you have asked me, I may as well tell. Nan is the dear little daughter of a great friend of mine, a Mrs. Esterleigh, who died about three months ago. At her death Nan came here.”

“Oh!” said Augusta.

She was silent for a minute, thinking.

“And is she no relation?” she asked then.

“No; only the daughter of a very great friend.”

“Is she, Aunt Jessie, a—rich little girl?”

“Rich in friends, I hope, Augusta; but rich, poor darling, in nothing else. Her mother did not leave any money behind her. But it is a great pleasure to have Nan, and I hope she will live here always.”

“Then you have adopted her.”

“Practically; only the matter cannot be fully arranged for a time.”

“Why? What do you mean?”

“There are some other people—friends of her father’s—who have also the right to adopt Nan.”

“What a curious, romantic story! People do not as a rule want to adopt little penniless girls.”

“I want to adopt her; and I do not quite like that tone in your voice, Augusta. Nan is not under the slightest obligation to me, and I wish you to understand that. Her mother once on a most important occasion in my life did me a kindness which I can never, never forget, and for her sake nothing that I could do for her child would be too much.”

“And you will not tell me what it is?”

“I have told no one yet. When Nan is older she shall know.”

“And these other people?”

“The Asprays. I hope Nan will not go to them. They have quite another reason for wishing to have her as one of the family. Now, do not ask me any more. I hear our guests arriving. Will you stay with me, or go upstairs to Nan?”

“I think I will stay if you do not mind; I can go up to Nan later on. What an interesting story! And what a dear aunty you are!”

Augusta rose as she spoke, and kissed Mrs. Richmond on her cheek.

Several ladies came into the room, and one and all admired Augusta; for her manners were good, and she had an attentive, thoughtful way which stood her in excellent stead with her elders. By-and-by she went upstairs of her own accord, and then the ladies turned to Mrs. Richmond and praised her, saying

what a very nice girl they considered her.

When Augusta went back to the schoolroom she found that Nan's foot was really very painful.

"I must not walk any more," she said. "What have you been doing, Augusta? Have you had a good time?"

"I have been listening to a story about you," said Augusta in a marked voice.

She looked full at Nan, who felt her heart beat, and who coloured uncomfortably. Just then there came the sound of laughter and of voices, and the next instant the two little girls and their governess entered the room. They brought big baskets of violets and primroses. The air of the schoolroom was full of the sweet scent of the violets. Kitty rushed up to Nan and kissed her: then they both saw Augusta, who was standing in the background, and uttered a shout of delight. Augusta went up to them, kissed them both, and stood close to Nan.

"I must run up at once to see how Pip is," cried Kitty. "I have been thinking of the darling all the time I have been coming home. I wonder if he is better. Do not keep me, please, Nan. I won't be a minute, but I want just to see how he is."

She was dashing out of the room when Nan's voice came faintly—very faintly—on the air:

"Kitty, one minute first!"

"Little fool!" said Augusta. She bent down close to the child and laid her hand across her mouth.

Nobody else had heard Nan's low tones. Nora followed Kitty out of the room; she also ran upstairs to see the sick rat.

"You are too late now," said Augusta. "Just keep your own counsel. Pretend that your foot is aching; that will account for your queer looks. And, by-the-bye, I let Mrs. Richmond understand that you had slipped on the stairs and strained your foot, and you must stick to the story when she asks you about it. Now then, just keep your courage, hold your tongue, and all will be well."

There came a piercing cry from poor Kitty, who rushed into the room, her face white, and tears in her big eyes.

"Pip is dead!" she said.

She flung herself into a chair, panting slightly. It was not her nature to cry, and she did not cry now; but her face looked white and startled. Augusta gave her a quick look. Nan shivered all over with sympathy for Kitty and longing to speak; but Augusta's eyes met hers, and there was such a world of warning and determination in their glance that she succumbed.

"Why, what is the matter," said Miss Roy, who at that moment entered the room. "What a tragic group! Nan looking as though the world were coming to an end, and Kitty—— Why, my darling, what is wrong?"

"It is Pip," said Kitty. "He is dead. He died when I was out. He must have had a fit or something, for he looks so queer; and nothing could have got at him, for the cage is firmly fastened, and just as I left it. I will never love another rat. I want to go away by myself for a little. Do not talk to me. Oh! I will not make a fuss, but I cannot be very cheerful to-night."

She went sadly out of the room.

"And Nan, what is wrong with you?" said her governess. "You were not well when we left, and you look worse now."

"It is my foot," said Nan. "I said that I had hurt it—don't you remember? And it has got worse; it hurts very much indeed."

"Poor little girl! You must let me look at it."

Nan pulled down her stocking and showed a much-swollen ankle.

"My dear child, this will never do. I must bandage it immediately. You have given yourself quite a nasty sprain; for the next few days you must keep your foot up. Have you been using it much this afternoon?"

"Only a very little."

"I am afraid I have been to blame," said Augusta, speaking at this juncture in her most amiable voice. "I did not know that poor little Nan was suffering from a sprained ankle, and asked her to go a few messages for me. I am ever so sorry!"

"But why did you go, Nan? Why did you not tell Augusta?"

"I did not want to," replied Nan.

"Well, you were very silly. Now, dear, I am going to bathe your poor ankle and bind it up."

This was done very skilfully. Nan's foot was supported on a chair; and soon, had it not been for the dead rat, and for the fact that she was concealing the truth, she might have been almost happy.

CHAPTER X.—A MYSTERY.

All in good time Nan's foot got better, but for a week she was kept away from school, and during that week Augusta contrived to rivet her chains. At the end of that time she was able to walk again, and, to her own infinite relief, she went back to school. She learnt her lessons just as carefully as ever; she was pronounced by her teachers to be a remarkably clever and intelligent child; but there was a change in

her face. It had not the look that it had worn when first she had come to the Richmonds', but in some respects its expression was even sadder. Then it was just grief, absolute and terrible, for the loss of her mother; now there was a new expression in the frank eyes and sensitive lips, which puzzled those who looked at her. In process of time Kitty had got over the death of Pip. Her affections were deep, and nothing would induce her to talk about the rat; but she was a merry and happy child in other respects. She would not have a rat again, she said—at least, not for a very long time; but she attended to her mice, and looked after Nora's rat, and saw that the dogs and kittens were comfortable, and that Polly had a good time in her cage. Not the faintest gleam of suspicion attached itself to Nan. Jack's share in the death of Pip was likely to remain a secret to the end of time; so also was the true story of Nan's sprained foot. But what ailed Nan herself? Kitty remarked on the change in her one day to Nora.

"She is not a bit the same, and I cannot make out what is wrong with her," she said. "Do you think by any chance, Noney, that Augusta has anything to do with it?"

"Oh no!" replied Nora. "Augusta is a very nice girl, and she is extremely fond of Nan: she often says so."

"Well, I am not quite so sure," replied Kitty. "I saw her two days ago"——

"Yes; what did you see two days ago?"

"I do not like to tell tales, but I came into the schoolroom quite unexpectedly. I slipped away, and no one saw."

"Well, go on; you always are so mysterious, Kitty."

"Nan was crying."

"Yes."

"And Augusta was scolding her. I heard Augusta say, 'If you tell you will be the biggest little fool that I ever heard of.' Now, why should she say that?"

"Are you sure you heard those words?" asked Nora in a tone of great astonishment.

"Yes, I am certain she said them; and she meant them. And Nan's face was—oh, so miserable! I got out of the room, and no one knew that I was listening; but I have a great mind to speak to Nan about it."

"I wish you would. If Nan has a secret on her mind she had much better tell us. She is looking so pale! She seems to have no life in her—no interest in anything."

"Very well; I will. I will tell her what I overheard."

Nora and Kitty were as downright and honest as Augusta was the reverse. But Augusta was very clever; she knew well what sort of characters she had to deal with in the two little sisters; and whereas she secretly bullied Nan, held her secret for her, and had her absolutely in thrall, she was careful not to pursue any such methods with the sisters. With them she was open and above-board, delighting them with her apparent frankness, telling good stories, taking their parts, laughing with them—making the schoolroom party a very merry one indeed.

On the evening of the very same day that Kitty had made her small confidence to Nora, Nora and Augusta were walking home together. In consequence of Augusta's superior age they were allowed to go as far as the Park by themselves, and they were hastening home now to be in time for the schoolroom tea.

"How nice it will be when I am grown-up," said Augusta. "I shall be fifteen before very long, and then it will not take many years before I am out and enjoying myself. I mean to get mother to take me a great deal into society. I should love balls and parties, and gay frocks, and—and admirers."

"Oh dear! it is more than I would," said Nora. "I do not a bit want to be grown-up."

"You will when the time comes; and of course you are too young to think of it at present. I expect you will look very nice when you grow up, Nora."

"I don't care whether I do or not. I don't care twopence about my looks. I want to do my lessons well, and to learn a good bit, and then to devote myself to natural history. I shall never care for human beings as I care for animals. I want some day to own a complete menagerie or a sort of Zoo. If ever I have money in the future I will buy a great big garden, and have high—very high—walls round it; and I will keep all sorts of animals in great cages—wild creatures, you know—leopards and tigers and pumas. Oh! and wild-cats. And I will have a deep, deep sunken pond with alligators. I suppose I must not venture on a crocodile. I'll have a snake-house, too. And of course I'll have lots of domestic animals. I think Kitty will share what money she has with me, so we will make it quite a big thing. We will not want to have anything to do with men and women; we will live alone with our darlings. Oh! I think they are so sweet—so very, very superior to men and women."

"You are an extraordinary girl," said Augusta; "but of course you will change when the time comes. You cannot be different from the rest of the world. When I am married, and have a beautiful carriage, and a very rich husband, and heaps and heaps and heaps of money, I will come and see you, and drag you out of your Zoo, and take you about and show people what a pretty face you have; and then a prince will come along and make love to you, and—and you will forget your animals because of the beautiful words of the prince, and the poor animals will be neglected and they will die off because you will have married the prince and have gone away with him. That will be the end of your day-dream, my dear, funny Nora."

Nora laughed.

"We will see," she answered. "But, talking of pretty girls, do you not think that Nan will be very, very pretty when she is grown-up, Augusta?"

"Hum!" said Augusta. "Well, yes, if she is happy I suppose she will. Don't you think there is something

funny the matter with Nan, Nora? Can you account for it?”

“I cannot,” said Nora, startled and amazed at Augusta’s words. “I wish you could tell me. Can you throw any light on the change in her?”

“Oh! you have observed the change?”

“Of course I have. And, do you know, it all began the day you came here. Of course, dear little Nan was very sad when first she came to live with mother, but she had got over it, and we were all so fond of her; we thought her such a darling! And she was so merry; she used to laugh so heartily. And she was quite comforted because we gave her Jack as her own special little dog; but now it seems to us that Jack is more your Jack than hers, and Nan is very sad.”

“Poor Nan! I have noticed it myself. I am anxious about her.”

“Then you do not know what is the matter?”

“I think I do partly, but I must not say; perhaps she will tell you herself.”

“Oh! but won’t you say? It does seem unkind to have a weight of care on her dear little mind and not to have it relieved.”

“Why do you always talk about her as though she were such a tiny creature? She is nearly as old as you.”

“She is the same age as Kitty, but somehow she looks and feels younger.”

“Well, if I were you I would not take much notice,” said Augusta. “She will come right all in good time. Of course, you know, it is not as if she had been brought up with you; she was brought up by her mother, who was a very poor woman.”

“It is not poverty that makes Nan so strange and queer at present,” answered Nora.

“I know it is not. I cannot make her out myself, poor child; I am afraid she is naturally of a very melancholy disposition.”

The girls chatted a little longer. Nora had obtained no light whatever on Nan’s trouble, and went into the house feeling worried and distressed.

Augusta managed to rush into the schoolroom before the sisters appeared.

“You must try to be cheerful, Nan,” she said; “they are both suspecting that there is something amiss. You must really rouse yourself or the whole thing will be discovered, and where would you be then?”

“What would happen if it were?” said Nan.

“Happen! I suppose they would forgive you; but, seeing the peculiar circumstances under which you live in this house, I should not like to be in your shoes. Whoever could think well again of a girl who is deceitful?”

“But I am not. Oh! I would tell now—I would tell gladly were it not for you.”

“It certainly would not be very kind of you to get me into a scrape when I did what I could to get you out of one,” was Augusta’s answer. “But come! cheer up—do. We will have some jolly games after dinner; and, if you are an awfully good girl, I have something rather exciting to tell you to-morrow. No, not to-day—to-morrow.”

The girls came in; Miss Roy followed. They had all high tea together at half-past six, and immediately afterwards Augusta proposed games.

She was a splendid leader when there was anything of that sort for her to do, and soon the children—even Nan—were laughing merrily and enjoying themselves to their hearts’ content. It was not until bedtime that Kitty ran up to Nan, put her arms round her neck, looked into her eyes, and said in her sweetest, most coaxing voice:

“Nancy, I am coming into your room early tomorrow morning—quite early. When I come, may I creep into your bed, and put my arms round your neck, and kiss you a lot of times?”

“I should like it ever so much,” said Nan.

“I will come. Good-night, Nan darling.”

Augusta was standing near when Kitty made her petition of Nan.

As Augusta herself was going to bed she went up to Nan and kissed her.

“What did Kitty say to you?” she asked in a whisper.

“Nothing.”

“Nonsense! Tell me at once.”

“She said that she was coming to see me to-morrow morning early, to get into my bed.”

“Oh,” said Augusta, “that sort of thing means confidences. Be careful, Nan; be careful what you are doing.”

Nan said nothing, but went away to her room. When she got there she fell on her knees by the open window and looked out.

It had been a lovely day in spring, and the night was clear, fine, and balmy. Nan opened her window and let the soft air blow on her hot little face.

“It is four months since mother died,” she said to herself; “a great, great deal has happened, and I scarcely know myself. I have learnt to love Mrs. Richmond and the two girls. As to Jack, I think he is the

dearest little thing in the world; and I have forgotten Sophia Maria. I have almost forgotten Phoebe; but I still love Mr. Pryor. And, oh! mother, mother, up in heaven, do you see Nan now, and are you pitying her, and are you telling me what is right to do? For I am not a good girl; and as to being the best girl that Mr. Pryor speaks about—oh I—I am more like the worst. And I am so afraid of Augusta! I think I do really, out and out, hate her. I do not know what she means by frightening me and making me so unhappy. Oh! I wish I had never yielded to her. I wish I had the courage to tell Kitty the truth."

As Nan knelt at the window it came into her head that she might ask God to give her the necessary courage, but then a wild sensation of terror swept over her.

"If Augusta were not in the house I might tell, but Augusta would make it out to be so bad; she told me she would. She told me that if I ever told what I had done she would say that I implored of her not to tell, and she said that her word would be believed before mine; and I know it would, of course, because she is quite old beside me. What a miserable girl I am!"

Nan went to bed, and after a time, wretched as she felt, she fell asleep. But her sleep was haunted by dreams, and it was with a cry that she woke on the following morning when Kitty touched her.

"Here I am, Nancy," said Kitty. "Just push over to the left side and let me get into your bed."

Nan made room, and the two little girls lay side by side.

"Now, this is quite cosy," said Kitty.

"Isn't it?" replied Nan.

"You are very fond of me, are you not, Nancy?"

"Oh yes; very—very."

"And of Nora too?"

"Very; I love you both most dearly."

"And you love mother?"

"Not as I love you two, but I do love her."

"And you love Augusta?"

Nan was silent.

"I thought you did; you are so much together, and you do such a lot of things for her. Sometimes Nora and I are rather angry when we see you trotting here and there, up and down stairs, fetching and carrying for Gussie. It is all very well, but Gus ought not to put things on you. If you do not like her, why do you do it?"

"Oh! never mind, Kitty. I do it because"——

"Well, because of what?"

"Because I do."

"That is a very silly reason—and for such a clever girl to give!"

"I cannot help it; that is why I do it."

"Then let me tell you why you do it," said Kitty: "because you are afraid of her."

Nan gave a sudden shrink into herself, and the little start all over her frame was not lost on Kitty, who lay so close to her.

"Nan," said Kitty after a pause, "why are you afraid of her?"

"I did not say I was."

"But I know it; and so does Nora."

"You know it! Oh—oh! please—please do not know it any more."

"I am going to tell you something. Two days ago I came into the schoolroom; it was in the dusk, before the lamps were lit. You were standing up, and Augusta was lying back in the easy-chair. Your face was turned towards the door, and Augusta's back was to the door, but neither of you saw me; and I heard Augusta say to you, 'If you tell you will be the biggest little fool that I ever heard of.' Yes, Nan, those were her words; and you—you began to cry. You had been crying before, and you cried harder than ever. I slipped out of the room; but I want to know the meaning—yes, I want to know the meaning, Nancy."

When Kitty finished speaking Nan suddenly flung both her arms very tightly round her neck.

"Why, you are trembling all over, Nan; what does it mean?"

"It means this," said Nan—"this."

"But what? You are not saying anything; you are only just shivering and clinging to me. What is the matter? Of course, Nora and I notice how terribly changed you are and how unhappy you look."

"Never mind about that; please answer me one question."

"Yes; what is it?"

"Do you love me?"

"Of course I love you. We all do—I mean Nora and mother and I; we love you dearly—dearly."

"Better than the animals?"

"Oh, well! I am not sure, but in a different way, anyhow."

“Better than your white rat that died?”

“I wish you would not talk about Pip. He is dead, poor darling. I think of him often at night. I loved him. I love him still. Do not let us talk about him.”

“Kitty, will you promise?”

“What, Nan—what?”

“That you will not ever say anything again about—about Augusta and me.”

“What about you?”

“What you overheard.”

“Well, if you do not wish it. But why will you not tell? You are afraid of her; what power has she over you?”

“I do not know. I mean I do; I want to tell you, but I don’t dare to. Let us talk about your rat—poor Pip.”

“How very queer you are, Nan! If there is a subject that I hate talking about it is about Pip.”

“But why?”

“I will tell you why. I have not told anybody else, not even Nora, but I will tell you. I ought not to have gone away that day in the country when Pip was so ill. It was awfully selfish of me! Perhaps if I hadn’t gone he would not have had that fit, poor dear! and he might have been alive still.”

“He might, of course,” said Nan, who knew well that he would have been alive, for certainly Jack would not have got at him had Kitty remained at home.

“That is why I am so absolutely miserable when I think about it,” continued Kitty. “The poor darling died quite neglected; even you did not go up to see him, because I asked you not.”

“And if,” said Nan, trembling very much—“if Pip had not died in the way you think, but from a sort of an accident, how would you feel then?”

“How would I feel if Pip had met with an accident? But he did not meet with an accident.”

“But let us suppose,” said Nan—“it is fun sometimes to suppose—let us suppose that he did, that that was the way he died.”

“I cannot suppose what did not happen, and I hate to talk of it.”

“But if it had, and—and somebody was to blame, how would you feel towards that somebody?”

“You really are too extraordinary, Nan! I should hate that somebody. I tell you what it is,” continued Kitty, “I would never forgive that person—never, never. But there! what nonsense you are talking! Nothing of the kind did happen. That is not your secret, is it?”

“Oh! of course not—of course not,” said Nan, frightened, and plunging into the biggest lie she had yet told. “No, no—of course not; only I like to wonder and think things out. It amuses me; I was always given that way.”

“Well,” said Kitty, “you gave me a fright. You talked as if it might be the case; and your voice was so queer and shaky! I do believe there is a mystery, but of course it is not that.”

“No, it is not that.”

“You did not go up to see Pip?”

“Of course not.”

“I am sorry I asked, for of course you would not do it, as I told you not. Nan darling, do please tell me what makes you so unhappy; please tell me. Let us forget about my little Pip. He is in his grave, poor, darling little rat, and all his troubles are over. He was so affectionate, and I was so fond of him! But he will never feel any pain ever again. And I love you, Nan; and Noney and I are wretched to think that you are so unhappy.”

“It is all right,” said Nan. “I will try not to be unhappy in the future. I have things that worry me now and then.”

“I will tell you what one of them is: you are afraid of Augusta; she has a power over you. You will be all right again when she goes away.”

“I don’t know,” said Nan; “perhaps so.”

Kitty could get nothing further out of Nan, and as it was now time to get up, she went slowly back to her own room.

Nora raised her head when Kitty came.

“Well,” she said, “have you discovered anything?”

“Nothing. I begin to think Nan a very strange little girl. Do you know, she asked me such a funny question! She said, ‘Suppose Pip had died by an accident, and somebody was to blame, how would you feel towards the somebody?’”

“What did you say?”

“That I would hate that somebody, and never forgive her.”

“I wonder why she said it,” continued Nora.

“Oh! I am sure I don’t know. I asked her point-blank if Pip had come by an accident, and she said ‘No,’

and that nobody had been upstairs. She is a very strange girl, but I love her all the same."

CHAPTER XI.—THE MIDDLE WAY.

On the following Sunday Nan came to Mrs. Richmond with a request.

"I do so want to see Mr. Pryor!" she said. "I have not seen him for two or three months; and he said that he was always at home on Sundays. May I go there this afternoon with Susan? Do, please, let me, Mrs. Richmond."

"Certainly, Nan dear; I am always glad that you should see your mother's dear old friend."

So after early dinner, Nan, dressed in her pretty and neat mourning, started off, accompanied by Susan, to visit Mr. Pryor. She had not ventured to the house where her mother had died before, for on the last occasion of their meeting Mr. Pryor had come to see her. The door was opened by Phoebe, who, in her delight at seeing Nan, forgot all decorum, and shocked Susan almost out of her wits by flinging her arms round the little girl's neck and hugging her tightly.

"Oh, Miss Nan! it is good to see you; and my missus, Mrs. Vincent, will be that pleased! You will come down, miss, and have a cup of tea with my mistress before you go back, won't you? Oh! it is elegant you look. What a pretty frock, miss! It ain't cut by our pattern, be it, miss?"

"No," said Nan. "Please, Phoebe, can I see Mr. Pryor?"

"It is delighted he will be to see you, darling. I'll just run up and ask him. Won't you come into the parlour, dear? The parlour lodgers has gone, and there is no one there at present. Wait a minute, love, while I inquire whether Mr. Pryor is in. Oh! of course he must be; but I'll go and find out."

Nan and Susan went into the parlour, and presently Phoebe rushed downstairs.

"Mr. Pryor says you are to go up this very minute, miss. And he has ordered tea for two, and muffins and cream. And perhaps this young person would come to the kitchen."

Poor Phoebe glanced with admiring eyes at Susan. Susan's manners were staid and of a rebuking character. She did not think Phoebe at all the sort of girl she would care to associate with; but as Nan said in a careless tone, "Yes, Susan, go downstairs," and then ran by herself to the drawing-room floor, there was nothing for it but to obey.

"What an elegant young lady Miss Nan has grown," said Phoebe. "Come downstairs, won't you, miss? My mistress will make you right welcome."

So Susan had to make the best of it, and tripped down, accompanied by Phoebe.

Upstairs a very hearty welcome had taken place. Mr. Pryor had kissed Nan, and taken her hand and made her seat herself in the most comfortable armchair in the room; and then he had stood in front of her and looked her all over, from her head to the points of her neat little shoes.

"Well, Nancy," he said, "and how goes the world?"

"I am very unhappy," replied Nan at once. "For a time I felt better, but I am unhappy now. I have a great big secret, and it weighs on me and gets heavier and heavier every day; and I can never tell it, not to you nor to anybody; and I can never, never, never now be the best girl that mother wanted me to be."

"That is very sad indeed, Nancy," replied her friend; "and I cannot understand it, my dear. Nobody ought to be in the position you have just described yourself to be in, far less a little girl who is treated with such kindness and love."

"It is because I am loved, and because they are so sweet, that I am so dreadfully unhappy," said Nan. "I have told a lot of lies, Mr. Pryor, and I can never unsay them. I can never tell the truth, for if I did those whom I love would cease to love me. When it began I did not think it would be such a big thing, but now it has grown and grown, and I can think of nothing else. My lessons, and my play, and my walks, and even dear little Jack, are not a bit interesting to me because of this big Thing. There is no way out, Mr. Pryor; there is no way out at all."

"That is not true, Nancy, my dear."

Mr. Pryor sat down and looked thoughtful. The little girl's face, the tone of her voice, the suffering which filled her eyes, showed him that her sorrow, whatever its nature, was very real.

"Suppose we ask God to help us out of this," he said after a moment's pause.

"I don't want to ask God, for I know what He will say, and I cannot do it."

"What will God say, Nancy?"

"That I must tell—that I am to tell the people what I did. And they will never, never forgive me, and I cannot tell—I cannot tell, Mr. Pryor."

"Then, my dear Nancy, why did you come to see me?"

"Because I thought perhaps you would find the middle way."

"The middle way, Nancy?"

"The way between the very naughty and the very good. There must be a middle way, and I want to get into it and to keep in it. Cannot you find it for me?"

“I have never heard of it, Nancy—never. I am afraid there is no middle way. You have done, I take it, something wrong; and you have, I take it, told a lie about it.”

“That is it.”

“And one lie, as is invariably the case, has led to another, and to another, and to another.”

“Oh yes, Mr. Pryor, that is certainly it.”

“And each lie makes your poor little heart feet more sad, and each lie shuts out more and more of the beautiful sunshine of God’s love from your spirit. Nancy, there is no middle way. You must go on telling those lies, and adding to the misery of your life, and getting lower and lower and your heart harder and harder, until after a time that happens which”——

“What?” said Nan. “You frighten me.”

“That happens which is the result of sin. You do not suffer any more pain; your conscience ceases to prick you; that voice within you is tired, and will not speak any more because you have treated it so badly. That is what will happen in the lower path on which you are preparing to walk.”

“You terrify me. I am sorry I came. I will not stay any longer. I could not tell.”

“Come here, Nancy, and let us talk it over.”

“I cannot—I do not want to say any more. Let us forget it.”

“My dear child, you would not have come to me if you had not hoped”——

“Yes; I hoped that you would show me the middle path.”

“There is none. Nancy dear, will you not confide in me if I faithfully promise that I will not tell any one what you have done.”

Nan paused to think.

“I should like to,” she said, “but I have promised not to tell.”

“Who did you promise?”

“I cannot even tell you that. Perhaps I will some day; perhaps I will get the person to allow me to tell you. It is a dreadful thing, and it seemed so small at the beginning! I am a very unhappy girl.”

“It requires a little pluck to get out of this dilemma, Nancy. But the strong hand of God would help you over this crisis in your life, and, lo and behold! the darkness would go, and sunshine and joy would be yours again.”

“I hoped so once, but I spoke to Kitty the other morning. I made up a sort of case, and I tried to find out what she would feel; and she said that if anybody had done such an awful thing, that person would be her enemy, and she would never, never forgive her. And then she asked me what I meant, and if anybody had done it; and I told a lot of fresh lies, and said no—nobody had done it; and I cannot go to Kitty now and tell her that I did it after all.”

“You are very mysterious, Nancy, and you make me very unhappy; but if you have quite made up your mind to go on being a naughty girl and adding to this burden of lies, I will not talk about it any more just now. But I will pray a great deal for you, and beg of God not to let your conscience go to sleep.”

“Oh, please, do not, for I am so miserable!”

“Here comes the tea. Will you pour me out a cup?” was Mr. Pryor’s answer.

Phoebe, with her beaming face, brought in the tray.

“If you please, miss, Mrs. Vincent would like to see you very much before you go away. Susan is having an agreeable time in the kitchen with a new-laid egg and buttered toast to her tea; and Mrs. Vincent will be so glad to see you once again, miss!”

Nan murmured something. Phoebe left the room. Even Phoebe noticed the shadow on the little face.

“Now, come,” said Mr. Pryor; “you know exactly how I like my tea; pour it out for me. One lump of sugar and a very little cream. Ah! that is right.”

Nan ministered to the dear old gentleman, and as he chatted upon every subject but the one closest her heart, she tried to cheer up for his sake.

By-and-by her visit came to an end. She bade Mr. Pryor good-bye. He told her that he would be in any day if she wished to speak to him, but he did not again allude to her secret. Mrs. Vincent was enraptured with Nan’s appearance, and made her turn round two or three times in order to get a good view of the cut of her dress.

“I declare, Phoebe,” she said, “you could take the pattern of that in your mind, so to speak. It is a very stylish little costume; most elegant it would look on my little granddaughter, Rosie Watson.”

Phoebe sniffed in a somewhat aggressive way; she did not consider that Rosie Watson had any right to the same pattern as Nan. Soon afterwards Susan and Nan left the house and went back to Mayfield Gardens.

CHAPTER XII—“I SHALL STAY FOR A YEAR.”

Nan was so unhappy that night that she could not sleep. She was glad that she had a room to herself, for it did not matter how often she tossed from side to side, or how often she turned her pillow, or how often she groaned aloud. Mr. Pryor's words, "There is no middle path," kept ringing over and over in her ears. She thought of her mother, too, and of what her mother would feel if she saw her now—a little girl surrounded by every kindness, surrounded by luxuries and the good things of life, and yet, because she was afraid, going down and down and down the broad and steep path which led to destruction.

"It means that I will not see mother if I do not tell," thought the child; and then she burst into tears. Towards morning she made up her mind that she would try to overcome her terrors; she would at least see Mr. Pryor and tell him exactly what had happened—she would tell him the whole truth—and be guided by his advice.

"Perhaps he will not think it necessary for me to tell everything," thought the child. "Anyhow, I know he will not be hard on me, for I do not think he could be that on any one."

Having finally made up her mind to confide in Mr. Pryor, she became soothed and comparatively happy, and dropped off towards morning into a quiet sleep.

She overslept herself, as was but natural, and had to jump up and dress in a hurry; but hurry as she would she was late for breakfast. Miss Roy said:

"Nancy, this is not as it should be."

But she was a very gentle and considerate person, and when she saw how pale Nan's face looked, and how sad was the expression round her lips, she forbore to chide her further.

The children started off for school immediately after breakfast, and the day's routine proceeded as usual. In the afternoon Nan went up to Miss Roy and made a request.

"I want to know if you will do something for me; there is something I want very, very badly."

"What is it, my dear?" asked the governess.

"Will you walk with me as far as Mr. Pryor's? I want to see him."

"But, my dear Nancy, you saw him yesterday."

"But I want to see him awfully badly again to-day."

"That sounds rather absurd."

"He was a great friend of mother's, and it is most important; may I go, Miss Roy?"

Just at that moment Augusta strolled into the schoolroom.

"Ah, Nancy!" she said, "you promised to hold this wool for me. There is a great lot to be wound; it will take us quite half-an-hour. Come, we may as well start; I have got to wind all the coloured balls and put them in order for Lady Denby's bazaar."

"I cannot do it this evening," replied Nan, shrugging her shoulders and turning back in sheer desperation to speak to Miss Roy.

"And I am afraid," said Miss Roy, "I cannot go with you, dear, so there is an end of it."

"What is it?" said Augusta. "What does she want, Miss Roy?"

"Why, this silly little girl," said Miss Roy, who saw no reason for keeping Nan's request a secret, "wants me to walk with her as far as Mr. Pryor's."

"Who in the name of fortune is Mr. Pryor?" asked Augusta.

"A friend of mine, and you have nothing to do with him," said Nan, speaking fast, and her cheeks flushing with anger.

"Hoity-toity!" cried Augusta. "But I rather think I have something to do with all your friends; for are you not my very own most special friend—are you not, Nan? Come here and tell me so; come and tell me so now before Miss Roy."

"I won't," said Nan.

"But I think you will, darling. Just come along this minute."

Nan went as if some one were pulling her back all the time. She got within a foot of Augusta; there she stood still.

"Nearer still, sweet," said Augusta. "You are my very great friend, and I am your very great friend."

"How mysterious you are, Gussie," said Miss Roy. "Why, of course, everybody knows that you and Nancy are great friends."

"That is all right," said Augusta, "I just wish to proclaim it in public. I am very proud of our friendship.—I like you immensely, Nancy; all my life long I hope to be good to you. And now, kneel; you will oblige me by winding this wool."

"I cannot. I must go out this evening."

"And I cannot go with you, Nancy, so there is an end of it, I fear," said Miss Roy; and she walked out of the room, feeling rather annoyed with Nancy.

"Now, Nancy, what is it?" asked Augusta.

"Nothing. I will hold your wool while you wind."

"What a cross face! It is not at all agreeable to me to have a girl like you standing in front of me. And I

am so good to you, and absolutely soiling my conscience for your sake—for, of course, I ought to tell what I know; I ought, but I will not. Now then, smile, won't you?"

"I cannot."

"Well, then, you need not smile. Here, hold this wool."

The next half-hour was occupied by poor Nan in holding skeins of wool until her arms ached. At the end of that time, to her great relief, Augusta was called by Mrs. Richmond to go downstairs. Nan had the schoolroom to herself. She stood still, pressing her hand to her eyes. The next instant Augusta dashed into the room.

"Hurrah!" she said, "my dear aunty Jessie is going to take me to the theatre. I shall be out the whole evening. What fun! We are to get ready immediately; we will be off in no time."

Augusta ran off to her own bedroom, and Nan went slowly into hers. Quick as thought she made up her mind. If no one would take her to Mr. Pryor, she would go to visit him alone. Miss Roy would be busy downstairs for some time and would not miss her; Mrs. Richmond and Augusta would be out; the two girls were spending the evening with friends.

"The thing is too important. All my future hangs on it. I must see him, and soon," thought the child.

She put on her hat and coat, watched her opportunity, and slipped downstairs. She got out without any one noticing her, and having a very good eye for locality, in course of time found her way to Mr. Pryor's lodgings. She had walked the entire distance; it took her exactly half-an-hour. Trembling in every limb, she mounted the steps and rang the bell. How often she had stood on those steps by her mother's side! That failing form, that wan face, those loving eyes, all returned to her memory now.

"It is for mother's sake—for mother's sake," she said to herself; and then Phoebe opened the door. She gave a start of rapture, and catching hold of Nan's hand, pulled her into the house.

"Why, Miss Nan," she said, "this is better and better. Yesterday evening you came unexpected, and to-day you come again. But you are all alone, miss; where is Susan?"

"I ran away this time, and you must not tell anybody, Phoebe."

"Oh, ain't you got spirit just?" said Phoebe in a tone of admiration. "But, miss, I hopes you won't get into trouble."

"No, no. I mean it does not matter. I want to see Mr. Pryor at once."

"Oh, Miss Nancy! ain't you heard, miss?"

"No. What—what?"

"Why, my dear, I am afraid you will be disappointed. He got a telegram this morning from his son, who is took very bad in Spain, and he has gone off to him. You know he had only one son, and he lives most of his time at Madrid, and he is took shocking bad—almost at death's door—with some sort of fever; and the dear old gentleman was near off his head all day, and he has gone to him. He is away, Miss Nan, in the train, being whirled out of London by this time. You cannot see him, miss, however hard you try."

"It does not matter," said Nan. She spoke in a low tone; there was a sense at once of relief and of disappointment in her breast. It seemed to her at that moment that her good angels left her, and that her bad angels drew near. Nevertheless, she was relieved.

"I will see you back if you wish, miss."

"No; it does not matter. I will get home as soon as I can."

"Have you any message, miss? Perhaps mistress has Mr. Pryor's address."

"No; I could not write anything. Good-bye, Phoebe."

"And you will not see my mistress?"

"No; I cannot."

"And you would not like me to see you back?"

"No, no; I will go alone."

Before Phoebe could utter another word, Nan was running up the street in the direction of Mayfield Gardens.

"God did not want me to tell, and there must be a middle path—there must," thought the child.

She got back to the house without any one missing her. She went upstairs again to the schoolroom. A moment or two later she had taken off her hat and jacket, put them away neatly in the orderly little room which nurse insisted on her keeping, and sat down by the schoolroom fire. The day had been a warm one and the fire had only been lit an hour ago, but Nan felt cold, and was grateful for its warmth. She crouched near it, shivering slightly.

"I would have done it," she said to herself, "if Mr. Pryor had been at home; but God sent him away, and—well, I cannot do it now. I hope my conscience will not trouble me too badly. I will try to be awfully good in every other way, and I must forget this; I must—I must."

It was a few days after Nan's stolen visit to Mr. Pryor that great excitement reigned in the house in Mayfield Gardens. In the first place, there had come a letter which greatly concerned Augusta. This letter was from her mother, begging of Mrs. Richmond to look after Augusta for a year, for Mrs. Duncan and her husband were going to South America on special business. They would be wandering about from place to place for quite that time, and it would suit Mrs. Duncan uncommonly well if Augusta remained

with her sister. Mrs. Richmond herself spoke to Augusta about it.

“If you can put up with me, dear,” she said, “I shall be glad to have you; but you know that ours is a somewhat humdrum life, and you are older than my girls. Your mother proposed as an alternative that you should go to a very fashionable finishing-school, where you would have a good deal of excitement and interest and be prepared for your entrance into society.”

“It does not matter,” said Augusta. “I am just fifteen. When father and mother come back I shall be only sixteen; it will be time enough then to go to a finishing-school. And I am very happy with you, Aunt Jessie.”

“I am glad of that, my dear; and I like to have you. Well, you can run upstairs to the schoolroom and tell the children; I am sure they will be delighted.”

“The only one who may not be delighted is Nan Esterleigh,” remarked Augusta in a dubious voice.

“Come, my dear child, what do you mean? Nan not delighted! Why, I thought you were such special friends!”

“To tell you the truth, Aunt Jessie, I do not quite understand Nan; she is a very strange little girl. I have done my utmost to be friendly with her.”

“That you certainly have, darling.”

“And although to all appearance she is devoted to me, that is not the case in reality. I think if you were to question her you would find she does not like me at all. It is the fact of Nan’s extraordinary attitude towards me that makes me have any doubt of staying with you for the next year, sweet Aunt Jessie.”

“Then, my dear child, if such is the case I will have a talk with Nan myself. You certainly must not be made unhappy by any such ridiculous reason. Nan is a dear little girl, and I promised her mother to bring her up and do for her and make her happy, but I certainly did not mean her to be rude or unpleasant to my own sister’s child.”

“Oh! I do not mind, Aunt Jessie; do not worry her. I just thought I would mention it. Perhaps I shall win her in the end if I continue to be awfully kind, as I have been in the past. I take a lot of notice of her, as you know.”

“That you certainly do, dear.”

“And you are so good to her—so wonderfully good!” continued Augusta.

“Never mind that, my child; I could never be anything else. And Nan owes me nothing; I have said that before.”

Augusta kissed her aunt, and presently ran upstairs to the schoolroom. The children were having breakfast when she entered.

“Hurrah! Good news,” said Augusta. “Of course, that is how people take it. You thought, all of you, that I would be going back to father and mother in a few weeks’ time. Well, I am not; I am to stay here for a year—a year, positive. I am to be with you day and night for twelve whole months. When you go to the country I will go with you, and when you come back from the country I will come back with you. And I am to have regular lessons from this at school; and—— Oh, dear me! Nancy, you are glad, whoever else is sorry.”

“Yes—of course,” said Nancy. She said it in a trembling voice, and her face turned from white to red, and then from red to white again.

“Does she not look enraptured,” said Augusta, turning with laughing eyes to Kitty.

Kitty made no reply. She was glad on the whole that her cousin should stay. “The more the merrier” was her motto. She felt almost annoyed with Nan for the peculiarity of her attitude.

But the tidings that Augusta was to stay with them was completely eclipsed by other news, which filled the hearts of the two little girls, Kitty and Nora, with untold bliss.

“What do you think?” said Kitty, rushing into the room just as Nora and Nan were putting on their hats to go to school. “Uncle Peter is coming here to-day. He will stay for a fortnight or three weeks, mother says. Oh, this is heavenly! I am nearly off my head with delight.”

“Who is Uncle Peter? What does it mean?” said Nan.

“You will know what it means when you have seen him,” said Kitty; “but I will try and tell you something. It means the height of happiness; it means the extreme of joy; it means—oh, everything delightful! He is just perfect! He will be so sweet to you, too, Nan! He will be sweet to Augusta. He will be sweet to us all. He is father’s youngest brother—much, much younger than father. He is quite young still, and he is a captain in the army. And he is great fun—oh! great fun—and the house gets full of sunshine when he is with us.”

“I have never seen him,” said Augusta; “I should like to.”

“He will be sweet to you, Gussie. He will be delightful to us all. Oh, it is too good news! You never saw anything like the delight mother is in. I must rush off now and tell nursey; won’t she be glad!”

That day as she walked to school, and worked at her lessons, and came back again, there were three pieces of news rushing backwards and forwards in poor Nan’s heart. Two of them were bad, and one was good. Mr. Pryor was away, therefore there was no middle path; Augusta—the terrible Augusta, whom she hated and feared—was absolutely to live in the house for a whole year; and the children’s uncle Peter, the man who made everything right and turned gloom into sunshine, was coming to stay with them.

CHAPTER XIII—UNCLE PETER.

On her way to school Nan made up her mind to a certain course of action. When she had done so she was full of a sense of relief. She resolved to tell Augusta what she had determined to do as soon as possible. And as the two girls generally had the schoolroom to themselves after early dinner, her opportunity was not far to seek.

On this special day the whole house was more or less in a state of excitement; the spare room—the best spare room of all, the room which was called the Blue Room—was being got ready. The housemaids were busy turning out all the furniture, sweeping and dusting, polishing and cleaning.

“We never give that room except to some one who is very, very sweet,” said Nora; “but nothing is good enough for Uncle Peter.”

Mrs. Richmond’s face fairly shone with pleasure, and her little daughters laughed often for no special reason, the invariable remark being, “It is only because of Uncle Peter.” But they had gone back to school, and the midday meal was over, and Nan and Augusta were alone in the schoolroom. Augusta was seated in a rocking-chair in the window, Jack curled up in her lap. Jack had long ceased to take any notice of Nan, and Nan had sorrowfully resigned him to his real mistress.

“He is my dog no more,” the little girl thought; but the weight on her heart prevented her feeling the loss of Jack as she otherwise would have done.

Nan sat at the table, her lesson-books piled up in front of her; Augusta was buried in a new story-book, and forgot every one but herself. Presently Nan spoke.

“Augusta,” she said, “I have been thinking.”

“Well?” said Augusta. She put down her book and glanced at Nan.

Nan had a frown between her brows, but notwithstanding this fact her handsome little face looked very striking.

“She will be far more beautiful than any of us when she is grown-up,” thought Augusta. “Why should she have such a remarkable face? I hate her for it.”

“Unless you have something very important to say, please reserve your conversation until I get to a less fascinating part of my book,” said Augusta. “The hero is on the eve of proposing to the heroine, and I cannot make out whether she will accept him or not.”

“That is only a book, and I am real,” was Nan’s answer. “I want to say something to you.”

“Yes?”

“I have been making up my mind. You know what happened on the day you came.”

“Oh, that old story over again!” said Augusta. “Well, of course I know.”

“I cannot forget it.”

“So I see. You certainly have a terribly tender conscience, seeing the way you abuse it.”

“Oh, you do not know how unhappy I feel! You were surprised when, a night or two ago, I wanted to see Mr. Pryor. I will tell you what I did; I do not mind confessing to you. No one would take me, and I ran there all the way by myself.”

“You did, Nan! You are a daring little piece. Upon my word, there is something I rather admire about you. I could not be so out and out wicked—not for anybody.”

“All the same, I think you are wickeder than me, Augusta,” said Nan.

“You do, do you? Well, now, do you think that is a very polite thing to say, particularly when you have put yourself in my power as you are doing?”

“I am so much in your power,” replied poor Nan, “that a little more or a little less does not matter. I did go and see Mr. Pryor.”

“And whoever is this wonderful Mr. Pryor?”

“He is an old gentleman—awfully good.”

“Awfully dull, you mean.”

“No; that he is not. He is not a bit dull; he has always been great fun. He lived in the house with me and mother, and when mother died he was so kind! And when mother was ill he often talked to her, and he told me—— Oh Augusta! please—please listen. He told me that mother wanted me to be the best girl.”

“Poor thing! it is well that she is out of the world,” said Augusta.

“I know it is, Augusta—I know it is—for I am not a bit good; but Mr. Pryor wants me to be good, and I went to see him, but—— Oh, well! never mind; he is gone.”

“What! has he died too?”

“No, he is not dead, but it is as bad as if he were to me. He has gone to Spain to see his son, who is very ill. I went to visit him all for nothing.”

“You disobeyed Aunt Jessie for nothing. Certainly you are a nice girl! Don’t you think you owe something to her?”

“I owe a lot to her. Now, Augusta, I am coming to what I want to say to you. I want to forget what happened that time, and I want to live quite straight from this out. I am going to put all the past away

from me, and I want to live straight."

"What do you mean by straight?"

"Oh! how am I to explain? I want to get in the middle of the road, you know—always in the middle, never going the least bit to the left or the right."

"That sounds very pretty, but the meaning of it is beyond me," said Augusta.

"You would understand if you tried to; you are not at all stupid, you know."

"Thanks, dear, for the compliment."

"And I wanted to tell you I am going to keep straight; and as you are to be here for a year"——

"Ah! I thought the shoe pinched in that direction," said Augusta, with a laugh.

"It does, Gussie—it does. I am ever so sorry! I could have loved you, of course; but I have always been just afraid of you."

"And you will go on being afraid of me, honey, won't you?"

"That is what I do not want to be. I want you never, never again to tempt me to be naughty. Do not tempt me any more, Augusta; that is what I want to ask."

"You are a nice girl! I tempt you! What next?"

"Oh! you know you did. You know but for you I would have told all about Pip. You know but for you—— Oh Augusta! how can you pretend? You know; you must know."

"I know you are a very stupid, silly little girl, and that you grow more troublesome and more silly every day. Why, what is the matter now?"

"I cannot bear it," said Nan.

She gave a cry and burst into floods of tears.

Now, this was by no means what Augusta wished. Nan in tears—in violent tears—was intolerable. She put down her book. She advanced towards Nan; then she stood still.

She stood absolutely still, staring straight before her; for the door was open, and a tall young man, with slim and graceful figure, bright blue eyes, curly hair, and the pleasantest face in the world, was standing on the threshold.

"I am Uncle Peter," he said in the gayest of voices. "Is anybody at home?"

Poor Nan dashed away her tears. The stranger—this delightful uncle of the little girls—even he was to see her in disgrace and in tears. Augusta spoke at once.

"I am Augusta Duncan," she said. "I am no relation of yours, but I do hope you will take me for a niece too. Aunt Jessie will be so sorry to miss you! But she will be back again in an hour or two."

"And this little girl?" said Uncle Peter. He glanced with the kindest of expressions in his eyes at Nan. "She is a little bit troubled about something."

"Nan darling, do cheer up now," said Augusta; "do, darling—do."

Augusta went up to Nan and kissed her.

"What a kind—hearted girl!" thought Captain Richmond. "And what a cross face the little one has! But she seems to be in trouble all the same."

"Come!" he said in a pleasant voice; "no one cries when I am by. I hate tears so much that they never flow when I am in the neighbourhood. You must cheer up now that I have come to the house. And is no one else at home? Is there no one to welcome me but a pretence niece, and the other"——

"Oh! no niece at all—no niece at all," said poor Nan; "but I wish I was."

"Then you shall be; you shall be little niece—— What is your name?"

"Nancy."

"Little new niece Nancy. Come over here."

So Nan went to the Captain, and he put his arm round her waist, and she leant up against him while he chatted to Augusta.

He did not say another word to her, but once he took her little hand and squeezed it. What was the matter with her? All her sorrows seemed to go, and all her anxieties to melt into thin air. Augusta was doing the grown-up young lady, chatting on all sorts of subjects, and Nan did not speak a word—not even once did she open her lips—but when Captain Richmond looked down at her she raised her eyes and looked full at him.

"Cross!" he said to himself; "why, it is one of the dearest little faces in the world. But who is the poor little one, and why was she so very sad when I put in my appearance?"

"We must get you tea; you shall have it in the schoolroom," said Augusta. "Aunt Jessie will not be in till about six o'clock; you know, no one expected you until the evening."

"It is my way always to do the unexpected," replied Captain Richmond. "I took an earlier train and got here about six hours before I was expected. And where are my nieces proper? Why do not they come to embrace their uncle?"

"They are at school; but, oh! won't they be delighted? I am afraid your room is not ready. Nan, go and tell the servants that Captain Richmond has come. Go at once, dear, and order tea up here.—Do you

greatly mind, Uncle Peter (because I must call you that), having tea in the schoolroom with us?”

“I should love it,” replied Captain Richmond. “But see, Nan, little one, that you order a big tea. I want a whole pot of sardines—there is nothing on earth I love like sardines—and a couple of new-laid eggs, and toast and cream. Do you understand?”

“Cross!” he said to himself; “why, it is one of the dearest little faces in the world.”

“Oh yes,” said Nan, colouring very high; “and may you not have muffins, don’t you think?”

“I do quite think I might. Now be quick, little woman, and order the biggest tea cook will send up.”

“He is good,” thought Nan as she went singing down the passage. “He is nice. He is quite as nice as Kitty said he was; I think he is even nicer. It is not what he says; it is the look in his eyes. I am sure he keeps in the middle of the road, and I will—I will keep there notwithstanding Augusta. Oh! I am glad he has come. He makes me feel strong. I was so shaky, as if I had no backbone, but I think he will give it to me—I am sure he will give it to me—and I will keep in the middle of the road. Oh! he is nice—he is.”

While Nan was away Captain Richmond asked one or two questions about her of Augusta.

“Who is that dear little mite?” he said. “What a sweet little face she has!”

“She is a little girl to whom Aunt Jessie is very kind,” replied Augusta.

“Any one would be kind to her; she looks such a sweet little thing!”

Augusta longed to give some of her true opinions of Nan, but she was far too astute for this.

“Of course, she is a very nice child,” she said; “and she is greatly to be pitied.”

“Poor little thing! What was she crying about? Her sobs were so bitter!”

“She is very sensitive; I was just trying to put a little common-sense into her.”

“She wants very special treatment,” said Captain Richmond. “I am glad I have come; I always like children of that sort. She is in deep black, too.”

“She is in mourning for her mother.”

“Oh! an orphan? Poor little one! Is her father alive?”

“No. I think perhaps, Uncle Peter, you ought to know: dear Aunt Jessie is supporting her for nothing. Is it not splendid of her?”

“It is the sort of thing my sister-in-law would do,” replied the Captain; and he gave Augusta a very straight and cold look out of his eyes. She saw that he did not think the better of her for having made this speech, and jumped up to get the table ready for tea.

The meal was in full progress; Nan, at Captain Richmond’s special request, was pouring out cup after cup for his benefit; Augusta was seated near, with flushed cheeks, entertaining him to the best of her abilities, when shouts and whoops were heard, and Nora and Kitty danced into the room.

Then indeed there were high-jinks.

“Oh, for shame! Uncle Pete—oh, for shame! to come beforehand.—Augusta, how long have you had him? —Nan, is he not just—just as nice as I said?” These words came from Kitty.

“You really make me blush, Kitty; you must be careful what you say,” remarked her uncle. “Do not mind her, Nancy; I am a very ordinary person, with lots of faults.”

“You have not a fault—not one,” said Nora.

“Oh! haven’t I? I will just declare to you now a very big fault of mine. It is this—I hate being praised.”

The Captain looked as if he meant this, for his bright blue eyes flashed fire just for an instant, but then they resumed their old merry expression.

“I have all kind of plans to propose,” he said. “I shall be here for at least a fortnight, and then I am not going very far away—only as far as Aldershot—so you will see a good bit of me.”

CHAPTER XIV.—“IT WAS NOT WORTH WHILE.”

It was a week later. Every one in the house had got accustomed to the presence of Captain Richmond, and Nan more fully, day by day, endorsed Nora’s and Kitty’s verdict with regard to him. He was delightful; he was kind; he was sunshiny. It seemed much easier to be good now that he was there. The children—even Augusta—were all anxious to please him, and at odd moments when lessons were over, and on half-holidays, he always had a pleasant scheme to propose, and would take his four nieces, as he called them, to all kinds of places which Nan had never seen before. When there, he had a way of singling her out, taking her hand, and explaining things to her, so that from the first she was his very special little friend.

A week went by in this fashion, and then all of a sudden, just when they least wished for it, came a pouring wet Sunday. It was early in June and the weather ought to have been fine. Captain Richmond said the clerk of the weather-office was seriously to blame; but whoever was wrong, the clouds were unmistakably there, and out of their sullen depths poured the rain without a moment’s intermission. The children had managed to go to church in the morning, but in the afternoon it was hopeless.

“Uncle Peter,” said Kitty, “come up to the schoolroom and let us have a cosy time.”

“I am quite agreeable,” replied the Captain.

“But, Peter,” said his sister-in-law, “I am expecting quite a number of guests this afternoon; you surely will not leave me in the cold!”

Uncle Peter put on a very wry face.

“You know, Jessie,” he answered, “that I am not at all fond of what may be called callers; I never know what to say to them, and I do not think they find me at all agreeable. May I not go and be happy in my own way with the children?”

“Very well,” said Mrs. Richmond in a resigned voice; “but please send Augusta downstairs, for she always helps me so nicely to entertain my Sunday visitors.”

“And now come, Uncle Peter—do not let us delay—come at once,” said Kitty.

So, with Kitty hanging on one arm and Nora appropriating the other, the Captain made his way to the schoolroom. Here he was welcomed with shouts of glee by Nan and Augusta. Chairs were pulled forward, and the little party settled themselves in a happy circle.

“Oh Gussie!” said Kitty all of a sudden, “I quite forgot; mother wants you to go downstairs and help her entertain the Sunday visitors.”

“Oh, but I won’t! It is quite too bad,” said Augusta, flushing with indignation. “Why should I?”

“You do most Sundays, and you always said you liked it so much.”

“Well, I won’t go now; it is not fair.—I need not go, need I, Uncle Peter?”

“You must arrange that with your aunt, Augusta; it is not my affair.”

Once again Captain Richmond put on that straight look which Augusta both adored and feared. It always caused her heart to palpitate, and gave her a sensation of longing to be quite a different girl from what she really was. She got up now, frowning as she did so.

“It is too bad,” she said—“just when we were going to have real fun.”

“If you like, Augusta,” suddenly said Nan, “I will go down when half the time is up, and you can come back. I dare say Mrs. Richmond will not mind; she only wants some one just to hand round the cups of tea.”

“Oh no; that would never do,” said Captain Richmond. “I will go down when half the time is up and send you back, Augusta. Nan is too young to be initiated into the ways of drawing-room folks.”

So Augusta had to go, very unwillingly, and the two little sisters and Nan were alone with the Captain.

“Now, Uncle Peter,” said Kitty the moment the door closed behind Augusta, “we want you to be your very nicest self.”

“And what is my nicest self?” he answered.

“We want you to be your exciting self.”

“You quite mystify me, Kitty. I should like to know when I am nicest. And I never knew before that I was exciting.”

“But you are when you make schemes.”

“Oh! that is it, is it?”

“And we want a big, big scheme now—something to last us for months—something to—— You know what I mean, don’t you, Noney?”

“To rouse us all up—to make us walk with our heads in the air,” said Nora.

“Dear me! How very funny!”

“We want to be soldiers. Do you not remember you talked to us before about being soldiers? Let us be soldiers for a bit, and make lovely plans, and you be our captain,” said Kitty again.

“Well, of course you can be soldiers; that is easy enough.”

“But you must settle a sort of victory time for us—a great big reward time—and let it come three months from now, after we come back from the summer holidays, or *perhaps* before. Plan it all out, Uncle Peter; plan everything out as straight as possible. Make us soldiers, and give us a battle to fight.”

“Dear me!” said Uncle Peter, “this is quite a Sunday afternoon talk. Do you mean it in the religious sense?”

“Oh yes, if you like; but what we want is to have something to fight hard about.—Don’t you think so, Nan?”

Nan’s face had turned very white; her eyes, shining with intense earnestness, fixed themselves on Captain Richmond’s face.

“A sort of moral battle,” said the Captain. “Well, of course it can be done. I will plan it all out and tell you what we will do to-morrow; I cannot think of it in an instant. Those who wish to join must be regularly enrolled as soldiers.”

“Soldiers under Captain Richmond,” laughed Nora—“or Captain Peter, as we always call you. You will have to set us things to do, and you will have to write to us from Aldershot, and you must make a whole lot of punishments if we go wrong. Oh! it will be exciting—quite splendid.”

Just then Miss Roy came into the room.

“How cosy you all look!” she said “What is up?”

“We are frightfully excited,” said Nan. “We are going to be turned into soldiers, and we are going to fight under the banner of Captain Peter. This is our captain,” she added, touching the young soldier’s arm with great affection; “there is nothing we would not do for him—nothing.”

“I declare you quite touch me,” said the good-natured fellow. “Well, I will think something out and let you know to-morrow. Now let us talk of something commonplace.”

The conversation was merry and full of laughter; the wet afternoon was forgotten. Augusta came back long before they expected her.

“There are no visitors,” she said, “and Aunt Jessie did not want me.”

“I was just coming down, but this is much pleasanter,”—said the Captain.

“Oh Augusta! we have something wonderful to tell you,” said Nora. “Sit right down here in this comfortable chair.—Please, Uncle Peter, tell her.”

“Oh! it is a wild scheme of these little folk,” he answered. “I do not suppose a great tall girl like Augusta will join under any consideration whatever. Well, it is this, my dear niece Gussie—these children want to become soldiers.”

“Play soldiers?” asked Augusta.

“No, not exactly, but good, tough, moral soldiers; and they want to enlist under me, and I am to help them, forsooth! I will draw up plans, and those who want to join can be enrolled to-morrow afternoon. But I do not suppose you will care about it.”

“Oh yes, but I will!” said Augusta. Her eyes wore a startled look; a red flush came into her cheeks. She looked at Nan, who shuffled uneasily and looked down.

“I shall join,” she said the next moment; “it sounds very exciting, and the sort of thing I should like.”

“Then there will be four of us.—Perhaps Miss Roy will join too?” said Kitty.

“Yes, dear; I should quite like to,” said the governess. “I want something to stimulate me, and I should like to serve under Captain Peter.”

“Then I shall deserve my captaincy,” said the young man.—“And now, chicks, I am going away, for you have given me a pretty nut to crack. We will arrange to meet here at six o’clock tomorrow, when I shall have all my plans drawn up.”

When the Captain left the room the four children were silent for a short time; then Miss Roy burst in.

“My dears,” she said, “the clouds are breaking; there is a ray of sunshine. We will have tea immediately, and then get ready to go to evening service.”

As Nan knelt in church she thought of Captain Peter, and wondered what sort of soldier she would turn out under his leadership.

“If it were not for Augusta I should be the happiest of girls,” she thought. “I do hope that to be one of his soldiers will mean lots of hard lessons and stiff sort of things to do, and it won’t mean being good and straight and honourable. Oh! I do hope and trust he won’t want us to be any of those, for I am not straight, Gussie is not straight. Oh dear! oh dear! it is exciting. I am afraid.”

Augusta rather avoided Nan that evening, to Nan’s own great relief. The next day brought as usual a rush of work, with no opportunity for any private talks, and it was not until a few minutes to six that

Augusta and Nan found themselves alone.

Nan had gone into her room to brush her hair, preparatory to the Captain's visit, when there came a tap at her door and in walked Gussie.

"Well, Nan," she said, "are you prepared for this?"

"Prepared for what?" asked Nancy.

"You know what I mean: for this sort of soldier business—folly, I call it. Of course, I am going to join; but are you?"

"Yes, Augusta, I am," said Nancy. She spoke in a very firm voice.

"Well, all right; you know what it means, I suppose. There will be a lot of morality in the matter."

"What do you mean by morality?"

"Keeping straight—keeping in the centre of that road where you want to walk, but where you never do walk. I thought I would warn you. If you are thinking of doing what the others are going to do, you will have an impossible time; but do not say I did not warn you."

"No, I won't, Augusta. Oh! please remember that you are not"——

"That I am not what?"

"That you are not going quite straight yourself."

"You little wretch!" said Augusta. "If you ever dare—dare to breathe what I in a moment of kindness helped you to do, won't you catch it from me? You do not know what I can be when I am really your enemy. Your own position, too; what are you in this house? A nobody. There! I will say no more."

Augusta ran out of the room. Nan stood white and trembling. She clasped her hands together; her eyes, brimful of tears, were fixed on the window.

"How am I to bear it?" she thought. "Just when I was beginning to be so happy! Why am I so awfully miserable? I wonder what it means. I do think that I really quite hate Augusta."

Just then Kitty's gay voice was heard.

"Come, Nancy; our captain will arrive in a minute or two, and he will want all the soldiers to be waiting for him."

Kitty's laughing face, wreathed in smiles, was poked round the door. Nan made an effort to cheer up.

"How white you look!" said Kitty. "Is anything worrying you?"

"Oh no; nothing really."

"I thought you would be so glad about this! You do not know what heavenly plans Uncle Peter is always making up. I will tell you about some of his funny plans when we were children another time; but of course there is nothing like this, and it was my thought to begin. You will see how splendidly he will draw up his rules, and how easy and yet how difficult it will be to obey them. He has a sort of way of searching through you, and dragging the best out of you, and crushing down the bad in you. Oh, he is a darling! He is like no one else in the world."

"I think so too," said Nan.

"And yet you look so sad, Nancy! I am sure you need not be, for every one is so fond of you! And as for Uncle Peter, there is hardly anything he would not do for you. He always calls you his dear little new niece; he is quite as fond of you as if you were his real niece."

"Is he—is he really?" said Nan. "Would he be as fond of me if he knew"——

"Knew what, Nan?"

"That I—— Oh Kitty! you know that I have no money, and you know that"——

"Now stop," said Kitty. "If you do want to make me angry you will talk of that sort of thing again; it is very unfair of you after what mother said."

"Oh, then, I won't—I won't!"

"If that is all that is worrying you, cheer up; Uncle Peter does not want sad faces."

"And if—— Suppose—suppose I was not good at any time, would he hate me then?" asked the little girl.

"I am sure he would not. Once, do you know, I did such a naughty thing! I spilt a lot of ink on the carpet. I was a tiny child, and when Miss Roy came in—Miss Roy had not been with us more than a month, and I did not know how kind she would be—I said pussy had jumped on the table; and I had scarcely said it before Uncle Peter came in—he was staying in the house, you know. He sat down by the fire. It was wintertime, and he asked me to come and sit on his knee; and he put his arm round me, and I sat there so cosy, though I had a big, big ache in my heart. Miss Roy quite believed me about pussy, and she got the ink wiped up, and washed the carpet with milk, so that it should not show; and then she went out of the room, and I nestled up close to Uncle Peter. There was a big pain in my heart. Uncle Peter looked straight down at me.

"You see how the milk has taken out the ink; you can scarcely see it at all now," he said; and then he raised my face and looked into my eyes, and he said, "Kitty, it was not worth while."

Then I knew that he knew; and, oh, I cried so! And I said, "Did you hear?" And he said, "I saw you spill the ink, and I heard."

"And, oh! I was so sad, and he comforted me. He was not angry after the first, but he got me to go

straight up to Miss Roy and tell her the truth. It was awfully hard to do, but I did it; and then he forgave me, and I had no more pain in my heart. Come now, Nan—come."

"I want to kiss you first," said Nan. "Kitty, you do not know how much I love you. I love you better at this moment than I have ever done before."

CHAPTER XV.—SOLDIERS OF THE TRUE BLUE.

The schoolroom was very daintily arranged; there were flowers on the mantelpiece and on a little table, near which an arm-chair had been placed for Uncle Peter. On the table were some sheets of foolscap paper, a bottle of ink, pen, blotting-paper, &c. Just as the children entered, the door was opened and Uncle Peter himself came in. He generally wore a smiling face, but now he looked grave and determined. He walked across the room with, as Nan expressed it, his most military step. He stopped when he came opposite the children, and bowed gravely to them, and then sat down in the chair.

"It is too exciting for anything!" thought Kitty. "How is he going to begin? I am sure he has made all his plans. I can judge that by his face; it is the sort of face which makes me thrill and want to do anything in the world for him."

Miss Roy had taken her place with the children. She looked grave and earnest, too, and Augusta for a wild moment wished she was out of it. Then the Captain raised his eyes. He had been arranging the paper before him, and trying the pen to see if it would write smoothly. Now he began to address the little group in front of him.

"I have been thinking over our scheme," he said in his most pleasant voice; "and if you are all determined, I want you to take, not an oath to me—nothing of that sort—but to take a promise, by which you will be enrolled. The regiment in which you will be members we will call the Royal True Blue. I am its captain, general, or what you will; and, as far as possible, the rules which will guide your conduct will be much the same rules as a real regiment which serve our King would have. Loyalty will be its motto. There are three ways in which the soldiers can serve in the Royal True Blue. They can serve by keen attention to intellectual matters, by keen attention to physical matters, and by keen attention to morals."

Miss Roy nodded her head as each of these remarks fell from the Captain's lips.

"I quite agree with you," she said; and then she coloured slightly.

The Captain looked at her and gave a smile.

"There will be," he said, "different grades, of course; month by month the soldiers will rise to higher and higher responsibilities. There will be an orderly-book, in which Miss Roy, in my absence, must write down the events of every day truthfully, exactly as they occur to her. Neglect of the different heads under which the soldiers serve will merit punishment; careful attention to these details will merit rewards. I shall visit the soldiers' camp at least every month, have a consultation with Miss Roy, who will be my sergeant, and measure out my rewards and punishments accordingly. I should like this scheme to continue until the end of the summer holidays, when to the victorious soldier I will award, if she deserves it, something similar to the Victoria Cross. It will be a cross made of silver, tied with blue ribbon, and will be as far as possible an imitation of the cross which her late beloved Majesty gave to her most distinguished soldiers. Perhaps you all understand what alone wins a Victoria Cross? It is given 'for valour'—for valour, as a rule, in the field of battle. Now, as you are all soldiers you must have a field of battle. Your battlefield is in this house; wherever you are together, whether you are in the country or in town; in your school; in your own rooms, when you lie down and when you rise up: at all times you soldiers of the Royal True Blue will be in the battlefield, and doubtless a time for valour will arrive—when one of you will endanger herself for the sake of another. It is possible that none of these soldiers will win the Royal Cross, but I mean to hold it out as an incentive—the very best I can give. And now, children, I have lectured enough; will you each in turn come forward and make the necessary promise?"

"Oh, this is dreadful!" said Augusta; she squeezed Nan's hand in her excitement. "I—I do not think I can."

"But I can," said Nan. "I can; I mean to."

"What is it, Augusta—are you frightened?" said the Captain. "Oh, come! you promised to join; do not draw back now. You do not know what a world of good it will do you. This scheme means bracing; it means a strong effort to do the right. Come! if you live in this house you will have a dull time if you are not a soldier."

"All right," said Augusta; "but I will not be the first to take the promise."

"Then you shall be the first, Kitty," said the Captain; "that is only right, for it is your scheme."

Kitty rose from her chair and came forward. Captain Richmond had some small pieces of blue ribbon fastened with silver mottoes. He held one of these up, and Kitty approached. He took her hand, looked solemnly into her eyes, and said:

"Are you willing to serve in the Royal True Blue as a soldier of the King of Heaven? Are you willing to obey the rules of the regiment, to be loyal and true, to shun what is deceitful and wrong? Are you willing?"

"Yes," said Kitty.

Then the Captain bent forward and kissed her.

“This is our seal of consecration,” he said; “and here is your motto. Wear it openly when you like, or when you do not care to show it to the world keep it safely hidden, but never lose it. On the day it is taken from you you are disgraced; you lose this ribbon as a soldier loses his sword—only by public disgrace.”

Kitty went back to her seat trembling and with tears in her eyes. The same promise was exacted from the others, and then Captain Richmond looked at the four.

“I am very proud of my battalion,” he said, “and I think you will all do well, soldiers of the Royal True Blue. Now, I want to give you a few directions. There are three distinct paths in which the soldiers must walk. First, there is the path of intellect. Now, that means great attention to your lessons at school; it means diligent reading. I do not mean that kind of slippery reading which goes on when one is thinking of a hundred things at the same time: I do not mean the reading of silly novels. I mean the reading of good books, stimulating, with nice thoughts in them. There is nothing to my mind like the life of a soldier, and there is nothing more splendid than to read accounts of what brave soldiers have done; and as you five are now soldiers, you might, during the months that you servo under me, read as many books about soldiers as possible. I can furnish you with a list. I believe such reading will do you a lot of good. This, of course, is not a command of mine; it is a suggestion which you may like to carry out. In the orderly-book there will be careful reports of your transgressions in intellectual respects; the number of bad marks at school, the getting down to the bottom of your form, lateness also in attending your different classes, will all mean marks against you. On the other hand, diligence in learning, briskness and anxiety to excel, will mean good marks. I will explain the marks to my sergeant, Miss Roy, presently. So much for intellect. Now we come to the physical part of the scheme. I believe very strongly in physical exercise. I do not mean the sort of exercise which tires one to death—over-cycling, for instance, or playing lawn-tennis too long—but I do mean steady exercise every day; and part of your duties will be your drill. I will speak to Mrs. Richmond, and she will get a real army sergeant to come here daily to drill you. You will feel as you are marching, and turning from right to left, and going through the different manœuvres that you are real soldiers, and it will do you a world of good. Other exercise ought also to be taken, and under this head I would advocate early rising. I would also advocate order and neatness. Each day ought to be planned out, and there ought to be very little time for idling, for a real soldier in the enemy’s country has to be on the alert morning, noon, and night. He ought never to be away from his post; he ought to watch for the approach of the enemy at every corner, at every unexpected point. We now come to the third head, which surely is the most important of all, for in my regiment, the Royal True Blue, I want to have soldiers worthy of the name: a coward would be detestable to me; a liar could not be borne. I want my soldiers to be straight, to be upright, to be honourable; I want them to walk in the middle of the road.”

“Oh! oh!” suddenly came from Nan’s lips.

The Captain gave her a long, penetrating glance. She coloured, and dropped her head.

“It can be done,” he said, “but it is not specially easy; and I hope it will be done. And now, surely we have had enough morality and enough solemn talk even for the soldiers of the True Blue. I propose an entertainment this evening. I have consulted with your mother, and she gives me leave to take you all to the theatre—yes, every single one of you—to see a fine play about a soldier and how he acted under difficulties.”

The wild delight of the children at this last announcement can be better understood than explained. Captain Richmond knew what he was about; he knew that the eager young minds had gone through sufficient strain. The girls rushed off to their rooms, and the Captain and Miss Roy were alone.

“It is very good of you to join this,” he said, turning to the governess.

“I like it,” she replied. “Whether the children can stand this somewhat severe discipline remains to be proved.”

“I believe they can; they have all character,” replied the Captain. “I shall be deeply interested to know how this experiment progresses. I will give you your orderly-book to-morrow, and explain to you how the marks are to be put down. There is only one thing, however, Miss Roy—there must be no favouritism; you must be as strict and as severe with your favourite, Kitty, as you are with Augusta, whom I do not think you much care about.”

“I do not,” replied Miss Roy. “I do not understand her. She is popular with most people; Mrs. Richmond is very much attached to her, and Kitty and Nora are fond of her.”

“But Nan is not,” said the Captain.

“No,” replied Miss Roy; “Nan is afraid of her.”

“I have seen that from the first,” replied Captain Richmond; “and, to tell you the truth, in planning my rules I thought a good deal both of Nancy and Augusta. This thing will try them both pretty stoutly; I have no doubt that in the end all will be well. And now, one more word in your ear: I do not think I ever met a dearer little girl than Nancy Esterleigh.”

“She is a sweet child,” replied Miss Roy; “and she was very, very happy with us before Augusta came.”

The children, now all dressed for their evening’s entertainment, came into the room. Captain Richmond had ordered a carriage; it was now at the door, and the happy party, including Miss Roy, started off for their evening’s pleasure.

In the play a soldier received the Victoria Cross. He was one who had been snubbed and looked down upon, and always shoved into the cold: he had been overlooked when others were promoted; when others were ordered to the front, he was expected to stay behind in England; the girl he loved was given to a man over his head. Everything seemed to be against him, but never once through all these trying

circumstances did he lose his brightness, his freshness, his courage. He had a gay and cheerful word for each comrade and for each friend, and in the end his chance came: he managed to get to the front—how, it does not matter; he rescued another at the risk of his own life—how, does not matter either; the thing that matters is that he received that decoration of all others the most thrilling, the most ennobling, the Cross of the Order of Victoria.

Nan's little face turned white with excitement as she watched the progress of the play; and at last, when the happy soldier was decorated for valour in the field, she burst into tears.

Captain Richmond took her hand, and bent and whispered to her:

"Odds against, but he won," was his remark. "Cheer up, Nancy; you too can win."

"Even if the odds are against me?" she whispered back.

"Ah! of course. Look well to the front, soldier of the True Blue."

CHAPTER XVI.—TIGHTENING HER CHAIN.

In about a week's time Captain Richmond went away. By then the brigade of the Royal True Blue was in full working order: the rules had been carefully drawn up, the orderly-book was given to Miss Roy, the drill-sergeant had arrived, and the soldiers were enjoying the life. The vigorous eyes of the Captain kept everything in order; he promised to come once a month to see his soldiers, and left them, having won every heart in his little brigade. It was now towards the end of June, and in a month's time the entire party would go into the country. This was the last month of school, and the girls were busy. Nan was working with tremendous diligence for a prize; she did not much care about it before she became a soldier, but now she was keen in order to ensure the marks which Miss Roy would give her if she were successful.

"Suppose you do win the prize," said Augusta, "what will it mean to you? Nothing whatever but a stupid book. For my part, I think the prize-books at school are all too dull for anything—a dreadful old Macaulay's History of England, or Tennyson's Poems, or something of that sort. I do not see why the girl who wins the prize should not be consulted."

"But we do not win it just for the sake of the book," said Nan, colouring and trembling a little.

"Well, I do. I am not going in for a prize this term, of course; I cannot.—Miss Roy, I am sure our captain would not like Nan to read so hard as to make her eyes ache. Do you know what I found her doing last night?"

"Oh! please—please do not tell; it is not right," said Nan.

"I will, for I must. We are supposed not to read after we get to bed, but there was Nan reading away by the light of a night-light. She had borrowed it from nurse, I believe. She was half-sitting up in bed devouring her book, and the night-light was on a little table near. I found her.—I did, you know, Nan; and I said I would tell."

"It was not at all right, Nan," said Miss Roy; "and it must not happen again."

"But I wanted to work up my lesson; I was not at all sure of my French," replied Nan. "And the prize will be given in ten days now. There is so little time!"

"You must remember," said Miss Roy, "that in the orderly-book, even though you do get high marks for intellect, your merit marks will go down if this sort of thing occurs again. Nan, it was a distinct act of disobedience.—But at the same time, Augusta, I would rather you did not tell tales."

Augusta flushed with indignation.

"I thought you would like to keep the house from being burnt down," she said. "Of course, in future Nan can do as she pleases."

Miss Roy said nothing more, and Augusta left the room.

"What is the matter, Nan?" said her governess suddenly. "I often wonder, my dear, why you look so sad and troubled."

"You would if you were me," said Nan then.

"Why? Is it because your mother has died, my poor little girl? I have great sympathy for you."

"No; it is not only that," said Nan, making a great effort to be honest. "It is because I have a load at my heart, and I cannot ever tell you; and if all was known I ought not to be a soldier of the Royal True Blue at all—I ought not—but I cannot draw back now."

"The past is past," said Miss Roy. "Go straight forward in the future; try and believe that the future is yours, that you can be a very brave and a very good girl."

"But is the past past?" asked Nan.

"There may come a day when you will be able to tell me all about it; go straight forward now into the future. And, Nancy, my dear, nothing has been said, but I cannot help using my eyes. Do not be afraid of Augusta; give her back in her own coin. Show her that you are not in the slightest degree under her control."

"Oh, but I am!" thought poor Nancy. "And I can never tell—less now than ever—for to lose that splendid

chance of winning the Royal Cross, and to be deprived of my blue ribbon, would break my heart."

"Nancy," said Augusta, a few evenings after this, as the two girls were alone in the schoolroom.

Nan was toiling steadily through the books which she had to prepare for her examination; she raised her eyes when Augusta spoke, and a slight frown came between her brows.

"Now, stop that," said Augusta, petulance in her tone.

"Stop what?" asked Nancy.

"Frowning when I speak to you."

"Oh, I will—I will! What is it? I wish I did not feel so cross."

"You are not much of a soldier if you give way to your passions every moment. But now, to the point. I want you to read aloud to me while I am making a copy of this stupid old cast. It is too dull for anything, and I want to finish the story-book which I took from the drawing-room."

"But I have to go on with my lessons. Don't you see that I am awfully busy?"

In reply to this Augusta got up and put the book in question into Nan's hand.

"Read," she said. "I will let you off in half-an-hour; in half-an-hour I shall have done as much as I can of this horrible drawing. I do positively hate drawing. Now then, start away. If you do not read, there is something I can tell you which you will not at all like to hear."

"You are always frightening me. I do not see why I should be under your control," said Nan.

"Get out of it, then, my dear, your own way. Remember what will happen if you do."

"What?"

"I shall be obliged to tell all that occurred in the attic when the white rat died."

"All? But you won't leave out your own part, Augusta?"

"Yes, but I shall. I shall tell that you implored and begged of me to keep it a secret, and that I listened to you. You know what this means, Nan. Your blue ribbon is given back; you are a soldier without his sword, disgraced for life. Now then, do not fret; I am not going to be too hard, but I must be read to, for I am suffering from irritation of the nerves, and nothing soothes me like a real jolly story-book."

"If I must, I must," said Nan. She opened the book languidly. "Where is the place?" she asked.

"Page 204. Read from the top, and go straight on until I tell you to stop."

Nan began. She could read well when she liked, but now her voice was little more than a gabble, for she was thoroughly annoyed and also decidedly cross.

"That will not do at all," said Augusta. "Read as if you enjoyed it. Is it not a splendid scene? Does not Rudolf speak up to Bertha? Now then, go on. I am sure he will propose to her in the end; I am certain of it."

Nan read to the bottom of the next page; then she put down the book.

"Where did you get this book from?" she asked.

"What does it matter to you, Nancy? Go on reading—do. Oh, I am just dying to hear what will happen! I adore Rudolf; don't you?"

"No; I do not like him at all. I don't like the book. I don't think Uncle Peter—I mean Mrs. Richmond—would want me to read this book; it is not a nice book."

"And what do you know about books, whether they are nice or nasty?"

"I don't like this book. I am sure Mrs. Richmond would not like you to read it. May I go down and ask her?"

For answer to this Augusta rose and snatched the book from Nan's hand.

"You troublesome little thing!" she said. "You really rouse me to be provoked with you. There! go back to your stupid lessons; but remember, you shall pay for this."

"I wonder how," thought Nan. "Oh dear! oh dear!"

She sighed deeply.

"Really, Nancy, your sighs and groans are past bearing. What is the matter with you?"

"You make me very unhappy."

"I make the house too hot for you; is not that it?"

"No, Augusta, that is not it. I have a right to be here; Mrs. Richmond says so."

Augusta gave a taunting laugh.

"A right to be here!" she said. "A pretty right; but still, if you like to think so, I am not going to interfere. If you are unhappy in the house with Aunt Jessie and Kitty and Nora you can say so; you have the remedy in your own hands."

"I! How? What do you mean?"

"You can go to the Asprays, of course."

"But who are the Asprays?"

"You little goose! don't you know?"

“No. Please, do tell me.”

“Well, I will, for it is only fair that you should know. Have you never heard that there are other people who would take care of you, and pet you, and adopt you, and bring you up as one of the family besides my poor, darling aunt Jessie?”

“Yes, I have heard of it. Mr. Pryor spoke of some people, but he said they did not live in England.”

“But they do; they live close here. Their name is Aspray. They are Virginians, and have just settled in London. They live within a stone’s-throw of here.”

“And are you certain I could go to them?”

“Certain? Of course I am certain. You can really go any day, but you have a right to go when a few months are up—six or eight months, or something like that. You have a right to go and stay with them, and to make your own choice as to whether you will be Mrs. Richmond’s child or Mr. Aspray’s child in the future; it rests with you altogether.”

Into Nan’s cheeks now there had come a very brilliant colour, and her eyes were large and bright. She stood still, thinking deeply. After a time she got up and left the room; she left her lesson-books behind her. She entered her bedroom and shut the door. In this tiny room Nan often battled out her troubles, and struggled hard to know what was right to be done. She felt much puzzled on this occasion. As to Augusta’s sharp words and tones of authority, she was accustomed to them by this time; she saw there was no chance of her ever getting away from her influence.

“And she is ruining me,” thought the child. “I did hope a fortnight ago that I should do better, that I should be a worthy soldier. But I must write to Uncle Peter; I cannot do right with Augusta always near. What is to be done? What is to be done? Oh, it would kill me to leave the Richmonds now! But what does this mean about the Asprays? I know what I’ll do; I’ll go down and see Mrs. Richmond, and ask her straight out to tell me the truth.”

No sooner had this resolve come to Nan than she ran downstairs.

It was Mrs. Richmond’s at-home day; callers had stayed until late, but they had all gone now. She was preparing to go upstairs to dress for dinner when Nan appeared.

“Ah, Nancy!” said the good woman. “Do you want me, darling?”

“Please, Mrs. Richmond, may I say something?” asked Nan.

“Of course you may, dear.”

Mrs. Richmond sat down and drew Nan towards her.

“Well, Nancy,” she said, “you look well; you have grown, and have got more colour in your cheeks.”

Here she bent forward and kissed Nan on her forehead.

“Oh, I love you so much!” said Nancy; and she put up both her soft arms, and kissed Mrs. Richmond with passionate fervour on her cheeks.

“That is very pleasant to hear, my dear little girl; and I think we may all say with truth that we love you. Now, what is the trouble, dear?”

“Oh, there is a trouble!” said Nan; “and I must ask you a question.”

“You are going to tell me about the trouble?”

“I wish I could, but I cannot. I have only just heard something, and I want you to explain, please, oh, so very badly! Who are the Asprays, Mrs. Richmond?”

“The Asprays!” said Mrs. Richmond. “What Asprays?”

“The Asprays who have the right to adopt me.”

“No, darling—no. You are my little girl, adopted by me. They have no right over you unless you will it.”

“But who are they?”

“Rich people from Virginia.”

“And are they living near us?”

“I believe so; but I do not know them—I mean, we do not visit.”

“And I can go to them if I like?”

“That is true; but then, you would hardly like to go away to strangers—to strangers from those who love you.”

“No,” said Nan in a smothered sort of voice; “I should hate it—hate it.”

Here she squeezed up closer to Mrs. Richmond, who put her arm round the child’s waist and drew her up tightly to her side.

“Who has been talking to my little Nancy? Who has been troubling you in this matter?”

“Please, I would rather not tell.”

“I cannot force you to speak, my darling; but I want you to put the Asprays out of your head.”

“Perhaps I will after you have answered me a few questions.”

“What questions, Nancy?”

“How is it that I can go to them if I like?”

“They are friends of your father’s.”

“And you are?”

“I am a friend of your mother’s.”

“But are they related to my father?”

“No; but Mr. Aspray once made your father a promise that if you were really in difficulties or thrown on the world he would adopt you, because your father had lent him a very considerable sum of money when he was in great difficulties. He could not pay back the money during your father’s life-time, so he gave him a letter instead, which your mother left with me. That letter promises to adopt you, if necessary. That, I understand, is the story. Mr. Aspray made the promise, and if you ask him you could claim it and go to him as his adopted daughter; but from the little I have heard of the family I do not think they would suit you.”

“But still,” said Nan, puckering her brows and looking very anxious, “I should have a sort of right there, should I not?”

“Nancy, my dear, have you no right here?”

“No, no, Mrs. Richmond,” said Nancy—“no right at all, because there is no money, and you have just taken me out of kindness.”

“Now, Nancy, listen. I have not taken you out of kindness. I have taken you, it is true, because I am fond of you, and because I loved your mother, but I take you also to relieve my own mind. I should be quite unhappy if you were not with me.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I owe your mother a debt which, even with you in the house, I can never repay.”

“Won’t you tell me what it is?”

“I will when you are old enough—not now. You must take it on trust for the present. Now, dear, this sort of conversation is very bad; you are my happy little girl, a child of the house, petted and loved by us all. Cease to fret, my dear; rouse yourself to do your duty and to be happy. Kiss me, darling, now, and go upstairs. Forget about the Asprays. I should be sorry if you went to them.”

Mrs. Richmond patted Nan on her cheek, and rising, she dismissed her with a good-natured nod. Nan went slowly upstairs.

For the rest of the evening she was a very sad and silent little girl, and during the night which followed she dreamt of the Asprays. After all, in that house she might have a chance of doing right; and they ought to take her. If Mr. Aspray owed her father money, it was but fair that he should bring Nan up; and there would be no Augusta there to taunt her and keep her from doing right.

“Oh! even being a soldier in Captain Peter’s regiment does not make me do right,” thought the child. “I am always going to the side of the road. I shall never, never be the best girl. What is to become of me? What am I to do?”

CHAPTER XVII.—AUGUSTA’S RESOLVE.

The four girls in Mayfield Gardens were very busy just now. From morning to night there was not a moment to spare, for the holidays were drawing near, and the prizes were to be competed for. It is true that Augusta was not competing for any prize, but somehow in this busy, energetic, lively household she did not count for as much as she herself believed she ought. Nan was trying hard, with all her might, with every scrap of energy she possessed; and so was Kitty trying, and so was Nora. Nora was perhaps less energetic than Kitty, but she was a very honourable, downright, straight sort of girl. She knew her mother wished her to bring home a prize after the final examinations at her school, and she was determined, if girl could succeed, to do so.

Immediately after the school broke up, Mrs. Richmond was going to take the four children to her country place in Devonshire. This was a lovely place within a hundred yards or so of the seashore. Mrs. Richmond kept boats, and even a little yacht, and Kitty and Nora were never tired of telling the other two of the happy, happy time which lay before them. But Nan, although she was working so hard, had a care on her mind; never, day or night, did it leave her. It is true her reports in the orderly-book were first-rate; she seemed, as far as Miss Roy could make out, to do everything not only well, but with spirit. Her drill was splendid; she held herself erect like a real soldier; she understood her drill-sergeant’s directions as if by magic. Then there were other exercises to be gone through, and Nan never failed in her early rising. No one could be more attentive and earnest over her lessons than Nan Esterleigh; and as to her morals, Miss Roy could find no fault with them. Sometimes, it is true, as night after night she put down most justly and fairly the marks of each young soldier, she would look up after her invariable question, “Well, any special thing on your consciences, or may I mark ‘Good’ against your character for to-day?”

A wild light would come into Nan’s eyes, and her face would turn pale; but ever and always, before she could say the fatal word, Augusta would manage to fix her bold, bright eyes on the little girl’s face, and Nan would drop her head and say:

“Oh yes—at least, I mean, I have tried.”

Nevertheless, she was anything but happy, and she thought of the Asprays as a possible means of relief.

She made up her mind to see them for herself before she went to the country; not to speak to them—oh no! she would not do that for worlds: that time would not come until she had fully made up her mind that she would give up the Richmonds, whom she so dearly loved, and would cast in her lot with the Asprays. But she must see them.

One day, with her heart beating, and with great outward *sang-froid*, she asked Mrs. Richmond if she knew where they lived. Mrs. Richmond told her.

“Quite close to this,” she said; “just at the corner turning into the square. It is a very large house with green railings round it; but, my darling, you need have nothing to do with them.”

“Oh! I know. I only wanted to be sure where they lived,” answered Nan.

By-and-by, when tragic things happened, Mrs. Richmond remembered this remark of Nancy’s.

That day the little girl was sent out for a message with Susan. Susan the housemaid was very fond of Nan; she had quite a respect for her since that interesting time when she went with her to see Mr. Pryor and Phoebe and Mrs. Vincent gave her tea in the kitchen.

“I am so glad we are out together, Susan!” said Nan. “You need not hurry back very soon, need you?”

“No, miss—that is, I expect not. I don’t think there is anything very special doing this afternoon. I can stay with you for a little—an hour or so, anyhow.”

“Oh! that will do splendidly,” said Nan. “You know, Susan, I like you very much.”

“And so do I like you, Miss Nancy; but it is more than I do Miss Augusta. We none of us can bear her—nasty, sly young lady!”

Poor Nan felt a fierce desire to corroborate these words, but she remembered her duty as a soldier prevented her speaking evil even of her enemies, and she restrained herself.

“We need not talk about Augusta now, need we?” she said.

“No, my dear Miss Nancy; but anybody with half an eye can see that she worries you almost past bearing. Dear, dear! there are things I could tell of her if I liked; but I don’t want to be spiteful.”

“It would be very wrong indeed to tell tales, Susan.”

“I ain’t telling them,” said Susan somewhat tartly. “Now miss, hadn’t we best do our messages first?”

Nan agreed to this. They went to one or two shops for Mrs. Richmond, and Susan put her purchases into a bag which hung upon her arm.

“Now then, Miss Nancy, shall we go home, or what shall we do?”

“I know what I want to do,” said Nancy. “I want to walk up and down outside a house.”

“Oh, lor’, Miss Nancy! that do sound queer.”

“And there is another thing,” continued Nancy, speaking very eagerly, and a spot of bright colour coming into each of her cheeks; “I want you, Susan, not to tell anybody what we are going to do. Do not gossip about it when you get back to the servants’ hall. You won’t, will you?”

“Not me,” said Susan; “I ain’t that sort.”

“I know you are not,” said Nancy in a sweet tone of voice, touching Susan’s arm for a minute with her hand; “and because I know it, that is why I like you so much. Now then, this is the house.”

Nan found herself outside the Asprays’ dwelling. She looked up with a beating heart. The house was handsome, large, and commodious; compared with the Richmonds’ house, which was also a very handsome one, it looked palatial. There were balconies to most of the windows; and awnings were put up now, and sun-blinds, and a lot of people were seated in the drawing-room balcony chatting and laughing. Their laughter was borne down on the breeze, and it reached Nan’s ears. They were having tea on the balcony, and a couple of girls were seated close together talking eagerly. One of them turned to her companion and said:

“Do you see that odd-looking child? She keeps walking up and down just outside our house. I suppose the person with her is her maid. Don’t you recognise her, Flora?”

“No, I am sure I do not, Constance.”

“Well, you have a very short memory. Don’t you know that time when we were at the florist’s round the corner, and a nasty, horrid bull-terrier came and pulled your skirt? It belonged to that child. Oh, see! oh, see! She has raised her eyes and is looking at us. Of course it is she.”

“Of course; I remember quite well now,” said Constance. “How funny! She is a strange-looking little girl! I do not admire her at all. I trust we may never see her again.”

Down in the street, Nancy said in a faint voice to Susan:

“I have walked up and down long enough now, Susan; I should like to go home.”

For she, too, had recognised the girls with golden hair and handsome faces. They were the Asprays! Would she exchange to a better fate if she threw in her lot with theirs? She felt very sad and lonely.

But the busy time was at hand; the very next day the school examinations began. These continued for nearly a week, and then came the prize-day, when all the parents and friends of the girls were invited; and Nan had the extreme felicity of winning a prize for her French studies. Oh, how proud she felt as she walked up to receive the handsome volume from the hands of her mistress! She trembled all over as she clasped it to her heart, bowed to her mistress, said “Thank you” in a tremulous voice, and went back to her seat. She was so happy and pleased that she even forgot Augusta in her joy. Kitty and Nora had

also won prizes, and three happy, almost riotous schoolgirls assembled in the schoolroom that night. Augusta came in with her head in the air.

“Hoity-toity!” she cried; “what a noise! Well, let me see the books. I trust they are novels, for I have read through all my own store, and want some fresh ones to amuse myself with.—Nan, you come and show me yours. Why, child, you look as if you were standing on your head; what is the matter with you?”

“I am so awfully delighted,” said Nan, “that I did get it.—Oh Kitty, Kitty, I almost wonder if it is true!”

“It is true enough, Nan,” said Kitty. “Don’t be over-excited, darling. Oh! I know you want to write to Uncle Peter.”

“Indeed I do: and I will, too. I expect he will be pleased.”

“He will,” said Kitty. “He will be extra pleased with you, for you worked so very hard.”

“Well, show me the book, and do stop talking,” said Augusta.

Nan put her treasured volume in Augusta’s hands. It was a beautifully bound copy of the works of Racine. Augusta tossed it back.

“Beyond words tiresome,” she said. “Who wants to read that stupid thing?”

“But I do; I mean to read every word of it. And, oh, it is so beautifully bound! And see—do see where they have put my name—‘Nancy Esterleigh, Prize I. for’”——

“Oh! don’t go on,” said Augusta.—“Show me your book, Kitty.”

“You need not be so ungracious,” said Kitty. “I do not think I will show you my book. Nancy has got a darling, lovely prize.—Have you not, Nancy pet?”

Kitty’s prize consisted of a vellum-bound copy of Macaulay’s History, and Nora had the works of Shakespeare in several small volumes. Augusta pronounced all the prizes not worth considering, and ensconcing herself in a low chair in the window, continued to devour a volume which she had secreted from the drawing-room. Nan was not the only one who had noticed this habit of Augusta’s. Miss Roy was also aware of it; but she had made up her mind to say nothing yet.

On the very day before the little party were to go to the country, Augusta received a letter from her mother. It was written from South America, and evidently caused the young recipient a good deal of consternation.

“My dear Augusta,” wrote her mother, “I have been wishing for some time to send you a really serious letter. I am leaving you at present in Aunt Jessie’s care, and I have no doubt that all has been done for your benefit. My dear, we left home in a great hurry, and a quick change had to be made in all our plans. You know, Augusta, that one or two things occurred at home before we left which displeased your father and me very much. I allude to a certain matter when you were not quite straight with us. If there is one thing more than another which your father and I would break our hearts over, it is that you, our precious only child, should be guilty of want of openness or want of regard for the truth. Now, my dear, I wish to say that we intend to put you on trial during your stay with Aunt Jessie. I have not breathed a word to her of that fault which, alas! most undoubtedly lies in your character—you are arrogant and selfish, and if it were to further your own interests you would not hesitate to tell a lie. It is terribly painful to me to have to write like this to you whom I so dearly love; there is a dreadful pain in my heart, and I could cry over it. But now, Augusta, your father and I have made up our minds. If during your stay with Aunt Jessie you are discovered to have swerved in the very least from the path of truth and honour, we will not send you to school in Paris, which it is our present intention to do on our return to England; on the contrary, we will keep you at home with a very strict governess. My dear, I am obliged to say this, and you must take what comfort you can out of this letter. It remains with you whether you go to Paris or not; all, all depends on your conduct while we are away from you. Pray to God to help you, my dear girl. I write in great sorrow of mind.—Your affectionate mother.”

Augusta read this letter over twice; then she took it to her room and put it away in a little drawer, which she locked. That night as she lay down to, rest she thought a good deal over what her mother had said. She was quite determined, at any cost, to go to Paris. If her conduct with regard to Nan were ever known she would lose her chance of this delightful plan being carried out. Far from going to Paris, she would be immured at home with a dull, old-fashioned, and tiresome governess to look after her. Augusta knew by past experience what such a life would mean. She had more than once already tried the patience and half-broken the hearts of different governesses who had been engaged to instruct her. She was fully resolved to have nothing more to do with so dull an existence. At any cost, therefore, Nan must be silenced. For if Nan brought herself to confess what lay so heavily on her conscience, Augusta must be implicated; therefore Nan must keep silence.

“What a tiresome little girl she is! I have met no one like her. How swiftly she fell! and ever since she has been in a wretched state of mind—making my life quite a misery. Well, I have her pretty much in my power. I will cosset her up a little when I get to the country, and make a fuss over her. With all her faults, she is affectionate, and if I coax and flatter her a bit she will come over to my way of thinking. But I do wish one thing, and it is this—— Why did that tiresome Uncle Peter propose that extraordinary plan of his? I am sure I don’t want to be a soldier. Tiresome, stupid man! But I have promised, and I must go on with it. To be degraded from the ranks now would be as good as a failure; to have bad marks in the orderly-book would stamp me for ever in mother’s eyes. Captain Richmond’s plan is just what would delight the mother; and father too would be pleased. Of course, when they both come back they will hear all about it. Yes, I see what must be done: Nan must be encouraged and petted and fussed over, and I must take my laurels modestly; and then, when the good parents come back from America, hurrah for Paris and a good time!”

CHAPTER XVIII.—AUGUSTA’S SIGNATURE.

A few days later the four girls went into the country. At first Nan was so delighted with the change that she forgot all her trials and worries; the air was so fresh, and the gardens round the house so beautiful; the woods, which were near by, were so fragrant, so shady, so delicious to roam about in; and last but not least came the walks by the seashore, the long rambles on the yellow sands, the hours when the girls floated away in their little boats on the surface of the blue waters. But still happier hours were those when the yacht carried them like a white bird over the dancing waves. Oh! all day and every hour was perfect with bliss. Nan sometimes wondered what had happened to her. Was she indeed the little girl who had lived a sad and anxious and lonely life in a back-street in London; who had wanted for clothes and for nourishing food; who had been satisfied with the delights of her doll, and who had known no better joys? Indeed, she was very far from being the same. It is true that in the old days she had mother, and mother counted for a good deal in Nan’s loving heart. But mother had suffered sorely, and God and the good angels had taken her away. Yes, Nan was happy now. She did not mind confessing it—she was happy; and the world was good, and all the friends she had made were very kind to her.

Miss Roy accompanied the children into the country, and for the first fortnight all went well. Night after night the marks were put down in the orderly-book, and day after day the Captain’s scheme for the improvement of his little band of soldiers was carried out, and at the end of each week Miss Roy sent to the Captain a report of progress. But the good-natured, kind-hearted governess was going for her holidays, and Mrs. Richmond was coming to the country to take her place. On the day before Miss Roy left Augusta came into the pretty room which was used as a schoolroom at Fairleigh. Miss Roy was just closing the orderly-book; she raised her eyes as Augusta advanced.

“Well, dear,” said the governess, “can I do anything for you?”

“I have been wondering,” Augusta answered, “who will put down our marks in your absence.”

“I believe,” said Miss Roy, “that Mrs. Richmond will undertake that duty.”

“But why trouble Aunt Jessie? I could do it so nicely if you would entrust it to me.”

Miss Roy looked full up at Augusta.

“I think not,” she said slowly; “it would not be fair to the others.”

“But why? I should be absolutely fair to them and to myself.”

“It is not to be thought of,” said Miss Roy a little sharply. “Mrs. Richmond must undertake this responsibility.”

Augusta said no more, and early the next morning the governess went away. A week or so after her departure Uncle Peter was expected. If Nora and Kitty had been wild with delight at the thought of his visit when he came to London, now there were four eager and anxious girls waiting to welcome him. What would he say? How would he look? What expeditions would he plan? In what manner would he add to the fascination and happiness of these long summer days?

Mrs. Richmond raised her eyes from the letter which announced his arrival, and looked at the four eager faces.

“Well, dears,” she said, “it is a great relief to me that your uncle should be coming. You see,” she added, “I call him your uncle indiscriminately, for I am given to understand that Peter has adopted you all as nieces.”

“I love him fifty times better than an ordinary uncle,” cried Nan, with extraordinary fervour.

Augusta gave her a spiteful glance, and Mrs. Richmond, for a wonder, noticed it. She noticed it, and it disturbed her. She had a great affection for her sister’s child, and believed fully in Augusta, having never yet encountered any of that young lady’s acts of deceit; but the look on her face was arresting and disturbing, and she thought about it when the children went out for their “morning walk.

“What could it have meant?” thought the kind-hearted woman; and then she rose and went slowly to the secretaire in her study, and opening a drawer, she took out her sister’s last letter. The sentences which her eyes rested on ran as follows:

“I am very loath, my dear Jessie, to put any suspicious thoughts into your head with regard to my darling and only child, but her father and I both feel that you ought to know that there have been times in her life when she has not been quite straight. Say nothing of this, Jessie, but perhaps in dealing with her character you will be more just to her, more fair to her, and more able to influence her if you get a hint of the truth.”

“Not quite straight,” murmured Mrs. Richmond; and she put the letter back into its envelope and locked the drawer in which she kept it. An hour afterwards she went out. She was walking slowly through a shrubbery which ran at the back of the house when the sound of voices fell on her ears. There was a high-pitched voice which undoubtedly belonged to Augusta, and there were the low and sweet tones of Nan.

Augusta was holding Nan by both her hands. She was a great deal taller than the little girl, and a great deal stronger, and she had drawn the child close to her.

“I would kill you if you told,” she said, with extraordinary passion. “But there! you know you daren’t. Go —I hate you!” and she pushed Nan from her, who ran fast and quickly out of sight.

Mrs. Richmond waited for a moment, too stunned to move or to speak. Then she went quickly round the tall holly which had hidden her from Augusta’s view, and putting her hand on the girl’s shoulder, turned

her round.

“My dear,” she said.

“Yes, Aunt Jessie,” said Augusta; “what is it?” She had managed to control herself, and her face looked almost as usual.

“I happened to overhear you just now, Gussie, and I must say that your words displeased me very much. I do not understand what you were talking about, but you used the most cruel and unjustifiable expressions. I wish to say, my dear, that I cannot permit you to bully little Nancy. The child is an orphan, and I should be very angry if any one were unkind to her. As to the meaning of your words, Augusta, I think they demand an explanation.”

“Oh, Aunt Jessie!” said Augusta, “Nan is terribly provoking; she is such a peculiar little thing that she sometimes almost drives me wild. She has been fretting and fidgeting about a trifling matter for days.”

“Something she wants to tell?” interrupted Mrs. Richmond. “And why should she not tell? Why should you be so violent as to terrify the poor child by informing her that you would kill her if she told? How dared you say anything so wicked?”

“I lost my temper, Aunt Jessie, and that is the truth. The whole thing referred to a little matter with regard to myself which I do not want any one to know. You surely would not encourage Nancy to be a tell-tale!”

“I feel it is my duty to speak to her,” said Mrs. Richmond.

“Oh no, no, Aunt Jessie! I beseech you not;” and going close up to her, Augusta raised her hand to her lips and kissed it.

“Please—please, Aunt Jessie, don’t say anything about it. I will make it up with Nan, and I promise never to be so nasty again. You cannot speak to her, you know, for you happened to overhear us; and it would not be fair, would it?”

“No; perhaps not,” said Mrs. Richmond a little doubtfully. “Well, my dear, I don’t want to be hard on you, and you know I have always loved you very much.”

“And I am away from my parents, too,” said Augusta, eager to take advantage of Mrs. Richmond’s softening mood. “And I am really awfully sorry that I lost my temper that time. I will go this very minute to Nan and make it up with her. You won’t speak to her about it, will you, Aunt Jessie?”

“I suppose not; but I hope very much that I am doing right.”

“Why, Aunt Jessie, you have never found me out in any meanness yet, have you? Why should you doubt me now?”

“I will try not to doubt you, dear. I will try to believe in you. Only, one thing, Augusta, your unkindness to Nan will have at least to undergo this punishment—you will receive a bad mark in the orderly-book for your conduct tonight.”

Now, up to the present Augusta’s marks in the orderly-book had been good, and she had done her utmost to fulfil the letter at least of Captain Richmond’s conditions. She had abstained from rudeness or roughness in her manner. She had—to the Richmond girls at least—been good-natured. Her private cruelties and unkindnesses to Nancy were not known to the rest of the party. Nancy herself never told. Augusta had therefore received good marks for conduct as well as for general intelligence and physical discipline. Her great hope was that Captain Richmond would bestow upon her what he called the Victoria Cross of his scheme; for after having received so valuable a proof of her excellent conduct, her father and mother would be abundantly satisfied, and would send her, on their return, to the longed-for school in Paris. But a bad mark for conduct just the day before the Captain’s return would seriously interfere with Augusta’s schemes. She walked down the shrubbery in deep thought and very much disturbed in her mind. Through the shrubbery there was a winding and very pretty path straight to the seashore. On the shore the Richmonds had arranged a tent. The tent was placed above high-water mark, and it was not only used for bathing purposes, but was also a favourite resort of the children’s for all kinds of picnics and pleasure expeditions. They used to sit there with their work and storybooks. They often brought their tea there. It was their favourite place of retirement, too, be the weather wet or fine. Augusta now approached the tent, wondering if Nancy were there. Nan had withdrawn far back into its darkest corner; she was not reading, although a story-book lay at her side. She had evidently been crying very bitterly, for her face was disfigured and her eyes swollen. Augusta looked at her with great dislike; then it occurred to her that Nancy might be very useful to her, and in short that there was no use in making her unhappy. She sank down on a cushion near the little girl’s side, and said in a voice which she tried to make very sad and sympathetic:

“I am awfully angry with myself, Nancy. I know I ought not to have spoken to you as I did. I hope you will forgive me and let bygones be bygones.”

Nancy was naturally of a forgiving temperament; she looked up at Augusta now, and said in a low tone:

“Why do you say such dreadful things to me? Why must I keep my conscience burdened because of you?”

“Now, listen, Nancy,” said Augusta; “I am speaking quite frankly to you. I will be as open to you as you are to me.”

“Well, what are you going to say?” asked Nancy.

“This: it might do me great harm if you were to tell now, but if you will only wait until the holidays are over and we are back in town, why, I will give you leave to say anything you please.”

“Why would my telling now injure you? I need not mention your name. I just want to tell dear, kind Mrs. Richmond about my own part. And of course I want to tell Uncle Peter. It is so dreadful to look into his eyes and to know that I am not what he thinks me! May I not tell my part and leave yours out? Please—please let me, Gussie. You can’t know the pain of the burden I am bearing, and how miserable I am.”

“You couldn’t tell your part without telling mine,” said Augusta, “and I don’t wish mine spoken about at present. You will have to be silent. But never mind, Nancy; you—shall tell, as I promised you, when we get back to London. Won’t you be kind to me and keep the secret until then?”

“And may I positively—certainly—tell when we get back to London?” asked the child.

“Yes; have I not said it? And now, let us talk no more of the matter.”

“But, Augusta,” said Nancy, rising, “will you do something for me—if I agree to this, will you do something definite?”

“Oh, what a queer child you are!” said Augusta. “What am I to do?”

“Will you write it down?”

“I write it down! Why should I do that?”

“Will you give me the words in writing? *Nancy may tell when she gets back to town*: just those words, and sign them ‘*Augusta*’.”

Augusta had her own reasons for wishing to please the little girl.

“And here is some paper,” said Nancy, “and here is a pencil. Write the words down, Augusta, and let me keep the paper.”

“Here is some paper,” said Nancy, “and here is a pencil. Write the words down, Augusta, and let me keep the paper.”

“You will never show any one?” said Augusta.

“Indeed—indeed I won’t.”

“And if I do this for you, will you do something for me?”

“If I can.”

“Very well.” Augusta spoke in quite a cheerful tone. “I will do what you wish and sign the paper, and you can keep it and show it to me to remind me of my promise when we get back to London. In the meantime you mustn’t talk any more of this nonsense. You mustn’t worry me from morning to night as you have been doing ever since I have had the pleasure of knowing you. And there is still something more.”

“I won’t talk of it; and I’ll be very, very grateful,” said Nancy.

“Well; child, so far so good; but now for my real condition. Do you know, Nancy, that you—you little wretch!—have just got me into a most horrible scrape?”

“How?” asked Nancy, fixing her wondering eyes on Augusta’s face.

“You have, you monkey—you have. This is what you have done. When I was talking to you just now in the shrubbery, and giving you some plain words with regard to your conduct, you put on the airs of a martyr, and, lo and behold, little Miss Martyr! somebody listened, and somebody was very angry.”

“Whom?” asked the child.

“No less a person than my aunt Jessie. You ran away in one of your fits of passion and left me to face the

brunt of the storm. Didn't I get it, too? Oh, Aunt Jessie was in a rage! She spoke of you as if you were a poor, half-murdered angel. I declare it was sickening to hear her. And there is worse to follow. You know what we all think of Uncle Peter and his scheme, and how anxious we are to get the best that he can give us; and I want the Royal Cross that he has promised to the most victorious."

"Oh no, Augusta," said Nancy, with a faint and quickly suppressed smile; "you can't mean that you are going in for that."

"And why not, miss? I mean to go in for it."

"Well, but the Royal Cross is for valour and noble conduct, and—Augusta, you can't mean it."

"You are a nice child!" said Augusta, her eyes flashing with fury. "How dare you speak to me like that, you poor little charity-girl, kept here by Aunt Jessie—kept here out of kindness"——

"Oh, don't! You dare not say that! It is not true."

"Well, I won't. But really, Nancy, you have the power of nearly driving me mad; a more irritating creature I have never come across. But now, what I want you to do is this. Aunt Jessie is angry, and she is going to give me a bad mark to-night in the orderly-book; and if I get it I am done for, for a bad mark for conduct will be talked about and commented on, and my chances of the great prize will be practically *nil*. Now, I want you, Nancy, to tell her that I was not to blame this morning, or at least *scarcely* to blame; that you were very naughty and irritating, and it was no wonder I got cross. You must do everything in your power to prevent her giving me a bad mark. And remember another thing, Nancy; if she asks you what was the matter, you are not to let out *anything*. Simply say: 'Augusta is rather quick-tempered, and I worried her and talked nonsense. I was to blame, and not Augusta, and she ought not to have a bad mark.' Do you promise? Surely you can do nothing else when you have got me into this horrid scrape."

Nancy thought hard for a minute.

"I do want to get that paper signed!" she said to herself. "It will make things quite right when we get back to London, for Gussie cannot go back from her own written promise; and then, too, I need tell no lie to Mrs. Richmond." So after a moment she said:

"Very well; I will do my best. Of course, I can't promise to succeed, but I will do my best."

"That is all right," said Augusta. "Here, give me that half-sheet of paper."

Nan did so.

Augusta wrote quickly, finishing with a dashing signature.

"There!" she said; "keep it carefully. Don't, for goodness' sake, let any one see it. And now, run off as fast as you can and find Aunt Jessie."

CHAPTER XIX.—THE ASPRAYS.

Mrs. Richmond had just finished lunch, and was preparing to go out for a drive, when Nancy, her cheeks flushed and her eyes very bright, rushed into the room.

"Well, my dear child," said the good lady, drawing the little girl towards her, "and what do you want now? I am so glad to see my dear little Nancy with that bright face! I was sorry that you were troubled this morning, my dear. I have promised Augusta not to say anything about it, nor will I; but I conclude from your face now that the trouble, whatever it was, is over."

"Yes," said Nancy, "it is quite over."

"And you are really happy, my darling?"

"I am, Mrs. Richmond. I cannot help it; you are so kind to me."

"Come close to me, dear; I want to say something to you." As Mrs. Richmond spoke she drew Nancy to her side, and put her arm round the little girl's waist and kissed her. "Why do you call me Mrs. Richmond?" she said. "I want to be as a mother to you."

"Oh!" said Nancy, with a gasp.

"I know, dear, that your own dear and sweet mother is no longer here. But my wish is, as far as possible, to take her place. I cannot really take her place, I know, Nancy, but I can at least be to you a good and kind and loving aunt. Now, Nancy, what I wish is this—I want you to promise to call me Aunt Jessie. Will you, dear?"

"I will if I may," said Nancy, with her eyes shining; "I'd like to just awfully."

"That is all right. And will you give your Aunt Jessie a kiss?"

Nancy flung her arms round Mrs. Richmond's neck.

"How much I love you! How very, very good you are to me?" she said.

"What is it you specially want to say to me, Nancy?"

"It is about Augusta," said the child. "I think perhaps I made too much fuss this morning. I know Augusta was—— I mean that it sounded cruel, but—— I don't know how to express it. If you would not mind, Aunt Jessie, just *quite* forgiving her."

“What do you mean by quite forgiving her, little woman?”

“She is in great trouble. She spoke to me about it. We are good friends now, she and I. She spoke to me, and I told her I would come and plead for her. If, Aunt Jessie, you would quite forgive her!”

“Well, dear child, I have quite forgiven her; we will let bygones be bygones.”

“If that is the case, you won’t give her a bad mark in the orderly-book?”

A look of great surprise came over Mrs. Richmond’s face when Nancy said this. She rose and said hurriedly:

“I am going for a drive, and cannot talk any more; but tell Augusta she ought not to have sent you.”

“Are you angry?” asked Nancy.

“Not with you, but with Augusta.”

“Then you won’t do what I ask”——

“I cannot, and Augusta knows the reason why. When you four girls enrolled yourselves as soldiers in Captain Richmond’s battalion you were in earnest; it was not a joke. Augusta behaved badly to-day, and she deserves the punishment which a bad mark in the orderly-book will bestow. Say no more about it, Nancy. Run away and play; you are looking quite pale and ill.”

As Mrs. Richmond uttered the last words she left the room.

Nancy stood still for a moment with her hands clasped; then she went very slowly in the direction of the seashore. The children were to have tea in the tent this afternoon, and Kitty and Nora were busy bringing down baskets of picnic things: cups and saucers, plates, knives and forks, cakes innumerable, jam, bread and butter, &c. When they saw Nancy they shouted to her to come and help them. The three children went quickly down the steep path through the shrubbery, and soon found themselves by the sea. The tide was half out, and the whole place looked perfect. There was a gay town not far from Fairleigh, and at this time of the year the sands were strewn with children and nurses—in short, with the usual holiday folks. But the part of the shore just beside Mrs. Richmond’s place was considered more or less to belong to her young people, and as a rule no other children came there to play. To-day, however, as the girls, heavily laden with the materials for their afternoon picnic, approached, they saw Augusta talking to two rather showily dressed girls, whose long golden hair hung down their backs. Augusta seemed in high spirits, and her gay laughter floated on the breeze.

“Who can she be talking to?” said Kitty. “I never knew such a girl for picking up friends.”

“Well, don’t mind her now,” said Nora, going into the tent and making preparations. “We are going to boil the kettle on the sands and have real, proper tea.—Nancy, if you have nothing better to do, you might go along by the shore and pick up bits of firewood.”

Nancy ran off immediately.

“What can be the matter with her?” Nora said. “Her eyes look as if she had been crying. I wonder if Gussie has been worrying her again.”

Before Kitty had time to reply, Gussie was seen coming towards them. “Kitty,” she said, raising her voice, “I want to introduce Miss Aspray and her sister. They are so anxious to know us, and they seem so very nice! You know, of course, who they are—the Americans who live at the corner of our street.”

“But what would mother say?” asked Nora. “You know, Augusta, she doesn’t want us ever to make acquaintance with people that she herself does not know.”

“Oh! I can’t help that now,” said Augusta. “Here they are coming to meet us. Don’t you think we might ask them to tea?”

The two girls now approached the tent. Flora, the elder, looking prettier and more full of spirit than any one Kitty had seen for a long time, held out her hand.

“How do you do, Miss Richmond?” she said. “Constance and I know you quite well by sight. We have often looked at you four girls with great envy; and just now, when we found Miss Duncan standing by herself on the sands, it seemed almost too good to be true. She seemed to us, in this outlandish, out-of-the-way spot, to be quite an old friend. May we join you; or will you join us? Mother is having a grand picnic on the rocks round the other side of the bay, and I know she will be delighted to see you all. Will you come or not?”

Augusta’s eyes were sparkling, and she evidently longed to accept the Asprays’ invitation. But Nora, drawing herself up, said in her very quiet tone, “We shall be pleased if you will join us. We are just having tea on the sands; it is not a regular picnic.”

“But quite too lovely!” said Constance. “Of course we will stay—only too glad. And is this your tent? How charming!” As she spoke she entered the tent, and flung herself down on a large cushion covered with an Oriental brocade. “Dear, dear!” she said, “you do seem to enjoy things.”

“Of course we do,” said Kitty, viewing her with some disfavour. “Why else should we come to the seashore?”

“Do you live in that nice place which I see through the trees?”

“Yes,” answered Nova. “It is our own place. We come here every year.”

Just then Nancy appeared, holding a lot of brushwood in the skirt of her frock. She coloured and started when she saw the Asprays, who had now both taken possession of the tent.

“Nancy,” said Kitty, going up to the little girl and putting her arm round her waist, “Augusta has met the

two Miss Asprays, and has invited them to tea here.—Miss Aspray, may I introduce my great friend, Nancy Esterleigh?”

The elder Miss Aspray coloured brightly when Kitty made this remark. The younger shrugged her shoulders and poked her sister in the side. Augusta’s eyes sparkled, and Nancy turned very white.

“How do you do?” she said in a low voice.

“Why, if it isn’t—— Yes, it is, Constance.”

“It is what?” said Constance. “I do wish you would mind your manners, Flora.”

“But it is quite too funny!” said Flora.— “Why, little girl, don’t you remember us? How is your dog? Does he bite as well as ever? Is he as vindictive as he was on a certain day in a florist’s shop? Oh, if you only knew how poor Constance’s ankle ached after his very gentlemanly attentions! And you, my dear, were not quite as sympathetic as might have been expected.”

“Explain—explain!” cried Augusta. “This sounds most interesting.”

“Let me tell,” said Nancy. She turned suddenly, faced the group, and told her little story. “I was sorry,” she said in conclusion, “and I would have said so, only you were both so terribly angry, and you seemed to think—— But there! I won’t say any more.”

“No, no,” said Kitty; “of course you won’t say any more. And the Miss Asprays are our guests, remember. —Now then, let us hurry with tea.”

The girls, their party augmented to six, had on the whole a jolly time. Nancy was only too glad to bustle about in order to keep her excited heart quiet. Were these the girls with whom she might have to spend her life? Were these the girls whose father had a right to maintain her and adopt her as his own child? Oh, how thankful she was that Mrs. Richmond had already adopted her!

“I would rather be a charity-child with Mrs. Richmond,” thought the little girl, “than have the greatest right in the world to live with the Asprays, for, oh dear! I don’t like them a bit—no, not a bit. What a comfort it is that I have got that promise in writing from Augusta!—for now I need never leave my darling Aunt Jessie. Yes, she asked me to call her Aunt Jessie; and how much I do love her!”

While these thoughts were passing through Nancy’s head, she was busy spreading bread and butter and opening pots of jam. She was kneeling on the sands to perform these offices, and happened to be a little away from the rest of the party.

Suddenly Augusta approached with the excuse of wanting to borrow a knife from her.

“Well,” she said in a whisper, “and what do you think of them? You would like awfully to live with them, wouldn’t you?”

“No, no,” said Nancy, shaking her head.

“No, no,” echoed Augusta, mimicking her. “And why not, my little beauty?”

“Don’t tease me, Gussie; you know what I mean.”

“No, indeed, I don’t. I like the Asprays immensely. How stylish and handsome they both are, and so well dressed! I trust we shall see a great deal of them. They are going to stay at Fairlight for a month, and they say a great many friends are going to be with them—American friends—gentlemen and ladies also. I know that they mean to see a good deal of us—of me in especial. So, little Nancy, as you are my special friend, you must be extremely nice to Flora and Constance Aspray, and pay them a considerable amount of attention.”

“What do you mean, Gussie?”

“What I say, little woman. Now, for instance, when we are all taking tea in the tent, you are to see that Constance and Flora get the strongest cups of tea, the most cream, and the most richly buttered of the scones, and the thickest pieces of cake. I am rather famous for reading character, and I am positively sure that these two girls are possessed by greediness. You will remember my injunctions, won’t you, Nancy?”

“I don’t mind helping them to the nice things if they really want them, Augusta. But, oh! please, Gussie, you won’t say anything about me—I mean anything special?”

Augusta laughed. “I am not at all sure,” she said; “it all depends on your behaviour. And, oh, by the way, have you seen Aunt Jessie?”

“Yes—yes, I have; and I am ever so sorry!”

“What! you have not succeeded?”

Nancy shook her head.

Augusta’s face grew black with anger; she also looked seriously alarmed.

“You must talk to her again,” she said. “I cannot have that bad mark entered in the orderly-book. Do you hear? I cannot!”

“I am very sorry, Augusta. You had better speak to Aunt Jessie yourself, for I can do nothing.”

“I don’t believe you have pleaded with her. You had got what you wanted, and did not care twopence for me and my fate. It is just like you—just.”

“No; that is not true,” answered Nancy. “I did my very, very best; and I am terribly sorry. I tell you what it is, Gussie, I would take that bad mark for myself—I would gladly—if only you need not have it.”

“Oh! it is all very fine to talk,” said Augusta; “but acts tell more than words.”

“What are you two chattering about?” suddenly burst from Nora’s lips. “The kettle has boiled, and the tea is made, and we are all waiting for the bread and butter.”

Nancy rose at once, and Augusta followed her. The picnic tea commenced, and no one noticed in the general mirth that one girl was looking perturbed, cross, and anxious, and that another was strangely silent and depressed. The Asprays, whatever their faults, were the gayest of the gay, and very merry and witty. Nora was not inclined to be too cordial to girls whom her mother did not know, but Kitty quickly succumbed to their charm. The picnic tea came to an end, and when the Asprays took leave, it was with warm assurances that they would soon come again, and that their mother should call on Mrs. Richmond if Mrs. Richmond did not first call on her—in short, that during their stay at Fairlight, the Richmonds of Fairleigh and they themselves must be bosom friends.

CHAPTER XX.—THE ORDERLY-BOOK.

The children returned to the house only just in time to dress for late dinner, for while in the country Mrs. Richmond had the four young people to dine with her. As they walked up through the shrubbery the one topic of conversation was the guests who had just picnicked with them.

“I don’t believe mother will like it,” said Nora. “We ought not to have done it without asking her permission. It was your fault, Augusta; you should not have done it.”

“Nonsense!” said Augusta. “I could not help myself. Americans are not so frightfully formal and stuck-up as we English. For my part, I think the Asprays are the most charming girls? Nancy, don’t you agree with me?”

“I don’t know anything about them,” replied Nancy.

“Well, dear, you can know all about them if you like,” said Augusta in a very marked tone.

Kitty opened her eyes in bewilderment. What did Augusta mean? Nancy was colouring again painfully. As they reached the house the first thing they saw was a pile of travelling-cases in the hall.

“Uncle Peter must have come,” cried Kitty. “Now everything will be all right. How glad I am!” But the next moment she saw her mother, whose face was very grave and disturbed.

“My darlings,” she said, “since you went out I have had a telegram from my special friend in the north, Mrs. Rashleigh. She has just lost her only son, and is in the most terrible grief. She has begged me to go to her. I shall have to go up to town to-night, and shall go down to Yorkshire to-morrow. I am terribly sorry to leave you four to your own devices, particularly as Miss Roy is away. But fortunately Uncle Peter arrives in the morning, and I have no doubt that you will all be as good as possible under your uncle’s care.”

“Isn’t Uncle Peter coming to-night?” said Nancy, speaking very slowly, and with great anxiety in her tone.

“Oh, you thought so because his luggage has arrived!” said Mrs. Richmond. “No. I have had a wire from him. He has sent his luggage on, but is staying with an old friend at Tiverton till the morning.”

“Oh mother, how we shall miss you!” here exclaimed Kitty.

“And I you, my darlings; but I am so shocked at my dear friend’s trouble that I cannot really stay away from her. Now, my own two little girls, will you come upstairs and help mother to finish her packing?”

Kitty and Nora both quickly complied. Their mother’s room was in a great state of confusion. Her maid was strapping boxes and writing labels, and looking very much put out. Mrs. Richmond tied on her bonnet; then she turned to the girls.

“You will find the orderly-book,” she said, “in the chiffonier in the drawing-room; here is the key. I have just entered your marks for to-day. When Uncle Peter comes, give him the book. He will be responsible for it and for you until I come back. Now I hear the wheels of the carriage on the gravel. I must be off.”

“Oh mother! one word first,” said Nora.

“It must be a very brief word, then, Nora, or I shall miss my train”——

“We met the Asprays on the beach, mother.”

“The Asprays, dear? I don’t understand.”

“If you please, mum,” said the parlour-maid at this moment, “Harris says that unless you come at once you won’t catch your train.”

“I am quite ready,” said Mrs. Richmond. “Come, Merton, you cannot waste any more time over the packages.—Darlings, the Asprays, whoever they are, must keep. Good-bye, my pets—good-bye.”

In two minutes more the carriage was bowling down the avenue, Mrs. Richmond was gone, and the four girls looked at each other.

“It is most provoking,” said Nora. “She never told us anything about the Asprays. What are we to do?”

“To do!” said Augusta. “To take all the fun we can out of them. What else could we do?”

“All the same, I don’t think they are a bit the sort of girls that mother would like,” said Kitty. “But there! it doesn’t matter, for when Uncle Peter comes he will know what we ought or ought not to do.”

The rest of the evening passed somewhat sadly. Not only Kitty and Nora, but Nancy, too, missed the

gentle presence of kind Mrs. Richmond. Augusta's mind, too, was full of many things, and she was as silent as her cousins. Nancy was the first to suggest an early retirement to bed, and the others quickly followed her example.

Fairleigh was a large, rambling, old-fashioned house. It had belonged to the Richmonds for many generations, and had been added to and altered from time to time. The bedrooms were numerous but small. Augusta had been given a very tiny room leading out of Mrs. Richmond's larger bedroom. Kitty, Nora, and Nancy had also bedrooms apiece, but their rooms were in the opposite wing of the house.

Augusta was tired and her head ached. The day through which she had just lived had been anything but to her taste. It is true there had been a certain amount of excitement, which had carried her through the long hours. But her mind was ill at ease. That bad mark in the orderly-book came between her and her rest. To receive a bad mark for conduct in Captain Richmond's orderly-book would, she knew, be all but fatal for her chance of the Royal Cross. He was anxious and particular with regard to physical training and intellectual training, but first of all came conduct—conduct straight and conduct honourable. Augusta admired him very much, but at the same time she was afraid of him; for the Captain had a look in those blue eyes of his which caused her own to drop. She had an uncomfortable sensation when she saw him looking at her that he was reading right down into her heart. When he saw the bad-conduct mark he would not rest until he found out all particulars with regard to it. Mrs. Richmond, if she had given it at all, had given it for cruelty—for cruelty to Nancy, who was a special favourite of the Captain's. But had Mrs. Richmond given that mark? That was the question which tormented Augusta and kept her from sleep. She got into bed, it is true, but instead of dropping off, as was her usual custom, into happy and healthy slumber, she tossed from side to side, thinking and thinking of Captain Richmond, and the bad mark. He would arrive in the morning, and would naturally inquire how his battalion was progressing—how his soldiers were conducting themselves. He would be very jolly, very agreeable, and a great acquisition, but at the same time he would come on Augusta at that moment of her career as a sort of Nemesis. "Notwithstanding all his agreeableness," she said to herself, "I do wish he would not come just now. He is certain to make a fuss, too, about the Asprays; and from what Flora and Constance tell me, we are likely to have a splendid time with them—that is, *I* shall have a splendid time. Brilliant, handsome, gay sort of girls like Constance and Flora are not likely to meet with my painfully old-fashioned cousins' approval. And as to Nancy, of course, she doesn't count. But *I* should enjoy their society, and if Uncle Peter were not coming *I* should have it. Oh! I know they won't suit him. Dear, dear! what a nuisance and worry everything is!"

At this juncture in her thoughts Augusta dropped into an uneasy doze, but she awakened in an hour or two to see the moonlight streaming into her room, and to find herself more awake than ever.

"I wonder if Aunt Jessie has given me that bad mark," she thought. "I do wish I could see for myself. It is quite possible that in the hurry of her departure she forgot to make the entry. What a rare bit of luck it would be if such were the case!—for she is certain to forget all about it when she returns. I wish I could see the book; it would be such a tremendous rest to my mind?"

The more Augusta thought over this suddenly conceived idea, the more she longed to put it into execution. Sleep would not again visit her. It was dull beyond words to lie awake all night. Now that Mrs. Richmond was away, she was in a part of the house quite away from the rest of the family. If she got up no one would hear her. She would get up. She would go downstairs and examine the orderly-book, and find out the truth for herself.

She jumped out of bed, put on her dressing-gown and slippers, and going very softly up the three steps which communicated with Mrs. Richmond's room, opened the door and went in. This room was also bright with moonlight. Augusta crossed the room and opened the door which led on to the landing, and a moment later found herself in the drawing-room. She knew where Mrs. Richmond kept the orderly-book. There was a very pretty old Sheraton chiffonier in one corner of the room, which contained many old-world drawers and queer hiding-places. Its legs were thin and spindly. It was a frail piece of furniture, but very good to look at. Mrs. Richmond was charmed with it, and as it was a recent acquisition she made use of it to keep her letter-paper and writing materials, and many other things, besides the orderly-book. But Augusta had quite forgotten that the drawer in which this book was always kept was locked, and she tugged and tugged now with a feeling of great irritation. To go so far and risk so much and to meet failure after all was anything but to her mind. She could be at times almost reckless in her desire to carry out her own wishes. She entered the dining-room now, opened a drawer in the sideboard, and taking out a stout knife, she returned to the Sheraton chiffonier. The chiffonier was old, and the locks not of the strongest. A little manipulation with the knife caused the hasp to go back, and without seriously injuring the piece of furniture, Augusta managed to open the drawer.

While upstairs she had not dared to strike a match, but in the drawing-room she was too far away to run any risk of being overheard. Accordingly she lit a couple of candles, and taking the heavy book, she laid it on Mrs. Richmond's desk. Never before had she been permitted to see the entries made in the orderly-book, and she was deeply interested now. In particular the pages devoted to "Augusta Duncan" claimed her attention. After all she need not have been nervous, for Augusta had done well—very well—and, oh, wonder of wonders, delight of delights! there were so far no bad marks set against her name. On the contrary, the words "Good—good—good" appeared as she turned page after page.

"What a blessing!" she said to herself. "Aunt Jessie did forget; and now I can face the whole world with an easy mind."

She was about to shut the book when it occurred to her to see what sort of marks the other girls had got. Captain Richmond had so arranged his orderly-book that day by day each girl had a page devoted to herself. These pages might be filled up or left blank according to the wishes and inclination of the person who entered the daily record. But for Kitty, for Nora, for Augusta, and for Nancy there was for each day a complete and separate page. Upon that page stood the record of the young life which had

been lived during that special day. Now, the day which had just gone by was the 24th of August. Augusta amused herself reading the different remarks with regard to her cousins. Both Nora and Kitty had scored high. Their industry was considerable; they had risen early; they were neat in their persons and with regard to their rooms. Finally, the conduct of each girl was excellent. Yes, that was the word.

Augusta turned back to the page which recorded her own life on this special day. She too had "excellent" put against her conduct. She had not noticed this before.

"It is too funny!" she thought. "Nancy must have been very persuasive although she knew it not. Aunt Jessie has never spoken of my conduct before as excellent. Dear, dear! I could hug the dear old aunty were she here. Why, she could not have said better of Nancy herself. She was evidently in a hurry, for she has not filled up the page. But my conduct is excellent. I declare it is a huge joke. Well, this sets my mind absolutely at rest. I will just glance at Nancy's page. If Aunt Jessie considered my conduct excellent to-day, what will she have to say with regard to the little favourite?"

Augusta turned the leaves of the book, and soon arrived at Nancy's page. It looked strangely empty. There were no remarks about early rising, nor intelligence, nor order, nor neatness. There were only blanks there, and under the heading "Conduct" Augusta read, "*Bad conduct—guilty of cruelty*."

Augusta nearly fell back as she read the words.

She nearly fell back as she read the words. The colour rushed in a crimson tide to her face, and just for an instant she felt strangely giddy. Then she shut the book, and putting it back into the chiffonier, stole softly and quietly upstairs to bed. She knew, of course, exactly what had happened. Aunt Jessie in her hurry had made an extraordinary and inexplicable mistake. She had written Nancy's record on Augusta's page.

"Well, I never!" said Augusta to herself. She quite panted in her excitement and flurry. When she first lay down in bed she was cold and trembling, and her impulse was to explain the matter to every one and clear Nancy.

But, alas! to do this required some nobility of nature, and Augusta was not noble enough. To expose herself, to show herself in her true light in the eyes of Captain Richmond, was more than she could stand; and she had not been half-an-hour in bed before she began to congratulate herself on her lucky—most lucky—escape.

"They will never, never know that I know," she said to herself. "I have but to remain quiet and allow things to run their course. No chance of the Royal Cross for you, little Miss Nancy; but there are great chances of my obtaining the longed-for prize. I am in luck. I declare I am quite sleepy, the relief is so great."

She turned on her side, and a moment later was sleeping as innocently as a baby.

CHAPTER XXI.—THE PICNIC.

At breakfast next morning the children were in high spirits.

Augusta had awakened without any headache or any pricks of conscience. "Let Uncle Peter come now," she said to herself; "I won't be afraid of him."

It happened to be a lovely morning, and the windows of the pretty breakfast-room were wide open. The gardener was mowing the grass on the tennis-lawn; the roses and other climbing flowers peeped in at the lattice-window, and sweet summer scents filled the room.

“Poor, poor darling mother,” exclaimed Kitty as she seated herself at the breakfast-tray; “how awfully fagged she must be! I do hope she will soon come back.”

“We ought not to wish her to come back too soon,” said Nora, who always happened to say just the right thing; “for if Mrs. Rashleigh is very sad mother can comfort her.”

“Do see what you are doing!” cried Augusta at that moment. “You have overfilled the teapot, and the tea is running out on the tray.”

Kitty laughed gleefully, and soon rectified her mistake, and the meal progressed, accompanied by gay remarks of all sorts.

“Uncle Peter ought to be here by eleven o’clock,” said Nora. “The train arrives at Fairlight at half-past ten; he is sure to come by it.”

“What are we to do to-day?” asked Augusta. “Have we any plans, girls? I think we might”——

“Oh! I know what you are going to say,” exclaimed Nora. “You want to go to see those tiresome Aspray girls. But we can’t do anything until Uncle Peter arrives. He will direct us, and we will do exactly what he wishes.”

“Tiresome man!” muttered Augusta under her breath. Aloud she said: “Pass me that brown scone, Nancy. And for goodness’ sake, child, don’t open your eyes so wide whenever I speak to you!”

“I tell you what it is,” said Nora—“I have lacked courage to say it for some days, but I will say it now—I do wish you would not scold Nancy whenever you speak to her.”

“I don’t; I know I don’t,” said Augusta.—”Do I scold you whenever I speak to you, Nancy, *mignon*?”

“*I* don’t mind,” said Nancy; and before anything else could be said the servant entered, bearing a note and also a telegram on a salver. She handed the telegram to Nora, and the note to Augusta.

“The messenger is waiting, miss,” said the girl, speaking to Nora.

“What can it mean?” cried Nora; while Kitty craned her neck forward to watch her sister as she read.

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Nora; “how very provoking! It is from Uncle Pete. He says he cannot arrive before dinner-time.—There is no answer, thank you, Ellen.”

Ellen left the room, and Augusta now turned her attention to her note. She tore it open, and the next moment she exclaimed in great excitement:

“Oh, I say, this is jolly! Here is a line from Flora Aspray. They want us to join them all for a big picnic. They are going to Fairlight Towers—you know, that charming old ruin that we have always wanted to see. They are starting at eleven o’clock, and they ask us to meet them at the crossroads. They say they will have carriages enough to take us all, and we shall be back soon after dusk. Isn’t it quite too heavenly? Of course we will go—eh, Nora?—eh, Kitty?”

“I wish Uncle Peter were here,” said Kitty; “he would tell us whether it were right or wrong.”

“What folly! If Aunt Jessie were at home she would certainly allow us to go. Anyhow, I intend to go, whether you are silly or not.”

“I am sure it is not right, and I am sure mother would not like it,” said Kitty again. “May I look at Flora’s letter, please, Gussie?”

Augusta handed the letter across to her cousin.

“There is no mention of Mrs. Aspray. Flora seems to have asked us quite from herself,” said Kitty. “What do you say, Nora? What do you say, Nancy?”

“I don’t want to go at all. To be frank with you, Gussie, I don’t care for those girls,” said Nora.

“Well, you do like to spoil one’s pleasure whenever you can. I suppose there is nothing for it but for Nancy and me to go alone.”

“Must I go with you?” cried Nancy.

“Yes—certainly,” replied Augusta.

“She sha’n’t go unless she wishes to,” here interposed Kitty. “Why do you bully her? I think you are very unkind.”

“And I think you are all perfectly hateful!” said Augusta, who was red with passion. “Well,” she added, “have it your own way. I shall go by myself; I do not intend to miss the fun.”

She marched out of the room as she spoke, and the three other girls glanced at one another.

“Perhaps I had better go with her,” said Nancy. “What do you think, Kitty? It doesn’t matter so much for me, you know; I am not your real sister. I mean that Aunt Jessie would be more particular about you and what you did than about what I do.”

“You may go, of course, if you like,” said Kitty; “but you shall not go if you do not like. Gussie shall not make your life a burden to you.”

“I think I’ll go,” said Nancy. She rose very slowly and left the room.

“What a darling little thing she is!” said Kitty; “always so self-denying and so anxious to please others. Now, I know she is merely doing this to please Gussie; and why Gussie should be humoured at every

turn is more than I can understand. Nancy would have enjoyed a long, quiet, happy day with us; and why should she make herself perfectly miserable?"

"Augusta has a power over her which I can never understand," replied Nora. "She does very wrong indeed to accept the Asprays' invitation; but perhaps it is as well, since she insists on going, that Nancy should go with her. She won't be quite so daring and so unladylike if Nancy is by."

"Oh dear!" cried Kitty, "do you really think our cousin Augusta unladylike?"

"When she does underhand things I do," replied Nora. "But there, Kit! don't let us worry any more. We have a lot to do, and on this day of all days we must not be idle, with dear Uncle Peter coming in the evening."

"Do you know," exclaimed Kitty, "that I cannot find the key of the chiffonier where the orderly-book is kept. Mother put it into my hand just when she was going, and I can't imagine where I placed it. Let us go up and search mother's room. It will never do for the key to be lost just when Uncle Peter arrives."

The girls ran upstairs and began to search in their mother's room, but nowhere, high or low, could they find the missing key. They questioned the servants, and begged them to have a good search for it, and presently, absorbed by other matters, forgot the circumstance.

Meanwhile Augusta was putting on her gayest and most becoming costume.

When Nancy put her sad little face round the door and said "I am going with you, Gussie," just for a moment Augusta's conscience did give her a sharp prick.

"You are good-natured," she said, "and I won't forget it. Put on something nice. Wear your pretty white dress and your white hat. You look so nice all in pure white!"

Nancy nodded and went off to her room.

"She is a good-natured little soul," thought Augusta. "It will be much nicer for me to go with her than alone. If by any chance anything is said, she must naturally take her share of the blame. What a blessing that tiresome captain put off his visit till to-night! I only wish, for my part, he would put it off altogether. Now, do I look best in pink or blue? Pink, I think. Pale pink suits almost any one. My white hat with the blush-roses will look sweet with this frock. I don't want those handsome girls to outshine me. Now I fancy I'll do. I shall be quite as smart as they are, and that is all I am going to trouble my head about."

At a quarter to eleven Augusta and Nancy left Fairleigh, and walked down the dusty road until they came to the cross-roads where they were to wait for the Asprays' picnic party.

Punctual almost to the moment, a wagonette, a pony-carriage, and a phaeton appeared in sight. The gaily dressed party shouted welcomes to the two girls; and Mrs. Aspray, an exceedingly stout woman with a timid face and a good-natured expression, bent forward and held out her hand to welcome Augusta and Nancy.

"Why, I thought there were four of you," she said. "Florrie said four.—Didn't you, Flo? You mentioned four girls; I am certain of it."

"Yes, mother," replied Flora; "but you can see for yourself that there are only two waiting for us at the cross-roads."

"I am so sorry," here interrupted Augusta, speaking in her most ladylike, company, and grownup manner, "but my cousins, Kitty and Nora, are both suffering from bad colds, otherwise they would have been delighted to come."

Nancy's face first grew red and then white when Augusta told this falsehood. She was about to say something, but receiving a sharp nudge on her elbow from the irrepressible Augusta, she held her peace.

Room was made for the two girls in the wagonette, and the party proceeded gaily on their way. The day was a perfect one—neither too hot nor too windy; the great heat of the summer's sun was tempered by refreshing breezes. The destination of the party was an old castle which hung over the sea at the edge of a great promontory. The castle was one of the show-places of the neighbourhood, and picnic parties there were very common.

The custodian was very pleased to receive the Asprays and their friends, and he told Mrs. Aspray that they could all have dinner in the great stone hall where once upon a time, many ages ago, the monks of the order of Ethelbert used to feed.

Augusta was in wild spirits, and Nancy tried hard to enjoy herself. There were one or two quiet, gentle sort of girls who attached themselves to her, and they walked about, examining the old place and trying to piece together its past history.

Augusta meanwhile scarcely left Flora's side. She liked her even better than Constance. Flora was so gay, so hearty in her manner—so daring, too. She was absolutely astonished when Augusta told her that she, in her own sheltered life, had to conform to rules and to obey conditions.

"But you are too old," said Flora. "Why, you are seventeen, are you not?"

"No," answered Augusta; "I am only just sixteen."

"As if that mattered! Why, in America we often marry as young as sixteen, and we certainly do exactly what we like. Oh! I am so anxious to introduce you to a great friend of ours—Mr. Archer. I did so hope he would be here to-day! He is an American, and such fun! He will put you up to a wrinkle or two. We heard from him this morning, and he will arrive to-morrow. I know you would admire him; and what is more to the point, I am certain he would like you. You are exactly the sort of English girl to take his fancy."

Augusta blushed when Flora talked about Mr. Archer and the extreme likelihood of his taking a fancy to her.

“I don’t suppose he would for a minute. And I don’t know—this is quite between ourselves—that I shall see much more of any of you.” she answered.

“What do you mean by that? Don’t you like us?” asked Flora bluntly.

“Need you ask?” replied Augusta. “I cannot express to you what a blessing it is to me having people like you close to us; but the Richmonds have very funny ideas, and the fact is, as my aunt has not called on your mother—— Oh, you understand, don’t you?”

“But your aunt is away. How can she call on mother? She would, naturally, if she were at home.”

“Yes—yes; I know.”

“And being away,” continued Flora, “the necessary formalities cannot be gone through. Surely we can all have fun together. There is Constance.—Constance, I want to say a word to you.”

Constance danced up to her sister.

“Here is Miss Duncan,” continued Flora, “hinting to me that she won’t be able to see much of us in future. Don’t you think that would be a vast pity, Connie? And with David Archer coming, too!”

Constance laughed.

“You will like him immensely if you see him,” she said, staring full at Augusta.

Once more the colour rushed into her guest’s face.

“Well,” said Augusta, “I must do my best. You may be sure I should like to come. I have said so to your sister already. But there is a Captain Richmond coming this evening—I call him Uncle Peter, although he is not my real uncle—and he is awfully particular, and may prevent me.”

“Captain Richmond!” cried both the girls.

“Is he young, and is he nice?” questioned Flora.

“Yes; I expect you would think him both young and good-looking. As to his being nice, I expect he is that too, only he might not fulfil your ideas.”

“I should like to see him,” said Flora. “Now, I tell you what, Gussie (oh! you must let me call you Gussie —‘Miss Duncan’ is far too stiff), you must manage—quite by accident, you know—to meet us to-morrow, or next day, with your dear, particular Captain Richmond; then you will be forced, you know, to introduce us, and we will introduce you to David Archer.”

“All right. I will see what I can do,” answered Augusta.

A shout from another member of the party caused the three girls to look up.

Mr. Aspray, a very stout man with a pale face, was calling to them to hurry down and help to make tea, and no further private conversation was possible. But as the carriages drew up at the crossroads for the two girls to alight, Flora whispered in Augusta’s ear:

“Don’t forget, Gussie. Constance and I will be walking in the Fairleigh woods to-morrow. Now, be as clever as you look, and do what we want.”

CHAPTER XXII.—THE BROKEN LOCK.

It was quite dusk when Augusta and Nancy found themselves once more back at Fairleigh. From the moment they left the cross-roads to the time they reached the house neither of the girls spoke.

Augusta was full of the delights of the past day, and was turning over in her mind what possible stratagems she might employ to enable her to see more of the Asprays.

Nancy was equally busy wondering if Uncle Peter had yet arrived; and when they turned the corner and saw Kitty and Nora each hanging on the arm of the Captain, she uttered a glad cry and ran forward.

“Ah! here you are. Good-evening, little niece Nancy.—And how are you, Augusta?”

“I am so sorry we were not here when you arrived, Uncle Peter!” said Augusta. “We were away at a picnic.”

“I told Uncle Peter you were having a gay time and I did not know when you would be back,” remarked Nora, “but we waited supper for you all the same. Shall we go in now?—for I am sure Uncle Peter must be very hungry.”

“Hungry is no word for it,” cried Captain Richmond. “I am starving. Don’t stay long tittivating, girls, but come down as soon as ever you can, for the patience of a hungry man has its limits.”

The four girls ran upstairs laughing merrily.

“Isn’t he nice?” thought Nancy to herself. “Doesn’t he make the whole house seem breezy and happy? I am glad that he has come. Gussie won’t dare to tell any more lies now. And I hope—oh! I do hope she won’t often expect me to go with her to see the Asprays. Oh, to think that I might have had to live with them! I should indeed have been a most miserable girl. I would not exchange such darlings as Nora and Kitty for Flora and Constance Aspray.”

“Are you ready?” cried Kitty at that moment, tapping at the door of the little girl’s room.

“Yes. Just come in, please, Kitty,” cried Nancy.

Kitty entered. She wore a white dress with a pale-blue sash, and she looked most sweet and charming.

“Oh, you darling!” said Nancy, running up to her. “I must kiss you—I must. Oh, how different you are! Oh, it is such a relief to get home again!”

“What queer, broken sentences, Nancy!” exclaimed Kitty. “Why is it such a relief to get home; and who am I different from?”

“The Asprays,” said Nancy.

“Then you had not a happy day?”

“Oh, never mind! I suppose I ought to have had.”

“You need not see any more of them; you may be sure of that, Nancy. Uncle Peter was rather surprised at your both going. I think Uncle Peter is what you call punctilious—yes, that is the word. I am sure he won’t let us have anything to say to them until mother returns. But now let us hurry down to supper. Do you know, Nancy, that he is nicer than ever, and he has got no end of lovely schemes. I can see that we are going to have a most heavenly time.”

“Did he—did he say anything,” said Nancy slowly “did he say anything about our battalion?”

“No; not a single word. I expected him to, and so did Nora; but I could see that it was in the back of his head all the time. I expect the grand prize-day, when the best girl receives the Royal Cross, will take place before we return to town. And, oh, Nancy darling! I have a shrewd suspicion that you will win.”

“I!” said Nancy. “Certainly not. *I* am not better than you or Nora.”

“In some ways you are better. You are more patient; and then, you have more to put up with. Uncle Peter is the sort of man to take all that into consideration. He is very just—very just *indeed*—and he is quite safe to give the cross to the person who has really earned it.”

“What *are* you two chattering about?” now came from Augusta. “We are all waiting downstairs. Do hurry up.”

The girls flew down, their arms encircling each other.

“Oh,” thought Nancy to herself, “how sweet, how delightful is Kitty! How happy she makes me!”

The dining-room table was prettily laid; the supper was good and abundant; Uncle Peter had a joke for every one. Never was there a more delightful meal. When the Captain assured the girls he felt quite like a paterfamilias with four grown-up daughters, they considered it the hugest fun in the world, and laughed with uncontrolled delight. But the gayest of meals come to an end, and once again the little party went out and paced up and down on the moonlit lawn.

It was now Nancy’s turn to clasp her hand inside Captain Richmond’s arm, and with Nora on the other side, to walk backwards and forwards in front of the old house. Meanwhile Kitty and Augusta fell behind the others.

“I hope you had a good time, Gussie,” said her cousin.

“You mean to-day,” said Augusta. “There is only one word for to-day—it was *ripping*. Yes; I can call it nothing else. Oh Kit, you will help me, won’t you?”

“In what way, Gussie?”

“I want to see some more of them—oh, so badly! You won’t put an obstacle in my way, will you?”

“I am not the one to do it,” answered Kitty; “but, of course, you can understand, Gussie, that we have all got to obey the Captain.”

“I wish he hadn’t come,” said Augusta suddenly.

“You wish that Uncle Peter—*darling* Uncle Peter—hadn’t *come*?”

“Yes; but you need not cry it out quite so loud. I don’t, of course, want *him* to hear. I am sorry he has come because he is sure to be very strict and proper, and perhaps he won’t like the Asprays.”

“I don’t believe he will have anything to do with them. Oh dear! there is ten o’clock striking, and we must go to bed.”

“Girls,” said the Captain as they re-entered the house, “this night has been pure pleasure; but, you know, business awaits us to-morrow, and before I retire for the night I should just like to run my eye over the orderly-book. Can you get it for me, Nora? Your mother must have left it where you could find it.”

Nora’s face turned white and then pink.

“I am so dreadfully sorry, Uncle Peter,” she exclaimed, “but we have lost the key of the drawer in mother’s chiffonier in which she keeps the orderly-book. It is altogether my fault and Kitty’s. Mother was going off in a great hurry, and she gave us the key, and we can’t find it high or low.”

“You had better have a good search for it to-morrow,” answered the Captain. “Never mind about it now. Good-night to you all. We will begin brisk and early to-morrow, soldiers of the True Blue.”

He gave the little party a military salute, and going to the drawing-room, he shut the door.

The girls went upstairs, Augusta thanking her stars that the key was lost.

“So much the better for my purposes,” she said to herself. “It will never occur to him to try that special

drawer; if he did it would open fast enough. What a bit of luck that Kitty and Nora should have lost the key!”

The girls had now reached the broad landing which led by different corridors to their bedrooms. Here they said good-night, and Augusta quickly entered her own room. She felt excited and not at all disposed to sleep. The Asprays had fascinated her, and the thought of meeting that delightful American, Mr. David Archer, the man whom Flora had assured her would take a great fancy to her, very nearly turned the silly girl’s head.

“I wonder if I am really handsome,” she said to herself. “I wonder if there is something remarkable and fascinating about me. I should like so much to know! Perhaps if I met him he would tell me. I wonder if he would. It would be very nice to be pretty; pretty girls have such a jolly time. Now, Nancy is pretty. It is horribly unfair, but although she is nothing but a charity-child, she has far and away the most charming face of any of us. What would I not give for her complexion, and those beautiful wide dark eyes of hers, and that thick, thick ebony-black hair? But I dare say I am very passable myself. I observed Flora looking at me quite with approbation to-day. I shall light some candles and see how I look before I go to bed.”

Augusta accordingly lit two candles which stood in heavy oak stands on the mantelpiece. These she placed one on each side of her looking-glass, and then, drawing the glass forward, she sat down and stared into her face. But the glass was somewhat dim from age, and the light altogether inefficient.

“Why, I see nothing but a blur,” thought the girl; and then it occurred to her to go into her aunt’s room and fetch some more candles from there.

The thought had no sooner come than she acted on it, bringing in a heavy pair of candlesticks with tall wax candles in them. Just as she reached her own door her foot knocked against something metallic. She stooped and picked up a little key.

“The lost key,” she murmured under her breath; and then she slipped it into her pocket.

With the aid of the four candles Augusta got a good view of her features. Her face was well shaped, and her eyes of a nice colour. She was altogether, as she expressed it, “more than passable.”

“If only I grow tall, and have a good figure, and am dressed as I ought to be, I shall be a success,” she said to herself. “Those two years in Paris will do wonders for me. Parisian polish is so effective! Yes, I shall have a good time when I do go into society. But, dear, dear! why should I wait for two or three years to have a good time when I may have it now? What fun to talk to a man like David Archer! Flora will do her best for me if I introduce Uncle Peter to them. I suppose they think they will fascinate Uncle Peter, but they don’t know him. Yes, he is a charming man, only I do wish he were not quite so awfully good.”

Augusta put out her candles and got into bed. As she laid her head on the pillow she remembered that she had just found the missing key.

“I am in luck,” she said to herself—“in rare luck. The first thing to-morrow I shall lock the chiffonier, and then I can throw the key down—the well in the garden. That orderly-book won’t be found then until Aunt Jessie returns.”

But man proposes, God disposes. This trite proverb proved its right to existence just at the time when Augusta thought all things were moulding themselves in her favour. For while the four girls slept peacefully in their different rooms, Captain Richmond thought and pondered in the drawing-room. He paced up and down until he had finished his cigarette. He then went and stood by the window, which was open.

He was thinking of his girls, and wondering how his battalion had behaved. In particular his thoughts were occupied with Nancy. He had taken a great fancy to Nancy when he had met her in London. He was sorry for her, and he thought he understood her character. His own nieces had always been to him as an open book, but Nancy puzzled while she interested him. “As to Augusta—I cannot make her out. Quite down in the bottom of my heart I don’t like Augusta,” said the Captain to himself. “It is very uncharitable of me not to like her, for I know nothing whatever to her discredit. But one is not accountable for these sort of feelings. Why do I like Nancy so much? Why am I certain that she is straight and noble and sweet and generous? I do believe that it was mostly on account of Nancy I thought of my little scheme to enroll the girls in my battalion. Well, I suppose as that key is lost I had better go to bed. We shall have a good time to-morrow. Yes, I must make those children happy. Jessie has entrusted them to my care, and they sha’n’t see more of those objectionable Asprays than I can help.”

The Captain was about to leave the room, having first shut the window and fastened the shutters, when his attention was attracted by the chiffonier. He was fond of Sheraton furniture, and saw at once that this was a particularly fine specimen. During his last visit to Fairleigh this handsome piece of furniture had not been in the drawing-room. He went up to it now, put down his candle, and looked it over with great care.

“I wonder where Jessie picked it up,” he said to himself, “and what she paid for it. It is certainly genuine. And how particularly fine these brass mountings are.” The chiffonier contained many drawers, some shallow and some deep. Each drawer was opened by a small brass handle, the lock being just above the handle. Captain Richmond took hold of one of the handles and pulled the drawer, which immediately slid out, and there, staring him in the face, was the well-known orderly-book.

“What a piece of luck!” he cried. “I am not a bit sleepy. So Jessie never locked the drawer. As I have found the book I may as well run my eye over its contents to-night. I shall make a more careful examination to-morrow, but I am curious to know how my soldiers have got on.”

The Captain lit another pair of candles, and drawing a comfortable chair forward, seated himself and opened the book. His practised eyes ran quickly over the pages. Augusta's entries were very much what he had expected; they were fairly good without being anything remarkable. His own two nieces were also creditable soldiers—neat, punctilious as to behaviour, early risers, well forward in their athletics, and each girl bore marks of excellent conduct.

"Now for Nancy," thought the Captain.

Nancy's pages came last, as she was the youngest girl of the four. As Captain Richmond read the entries, made first by Miss Roy and then by his sister-in-law, he smiled to himself.

"Well done, Nancy!" he said more than once. "Brave little soldier. I rather gather that you had a tussle with yourself on this day, and that you conquered again on this day. Strange that I should read between the lines! I was not mistaken in my estimate of your character, little Nancy. But, oh! what have we here?"

The Captain was now reading the brief entry made in Mrs. Richmond's writing on 24th August. He read the few remarks, once in puzzled bewilderment, twice in incredulity, and a third time with the colour mounting to his face and apprehension in his eyes.

"It can't be true," he said to himself. "Nancy guilty of cruelty! *Impossible*."

He shut the book as if he were thoroughly dissatisfied, and returning it to its drawer, he went up to bed.

CHAPTER XXIII.—"PRIZE-DAY COMES IN A MONTH."

The next day at breakfast Kitty began to talk of the lost key.

"It is most provoking," she said. "What shall we do without having our orderly-book properly signed? I cannot find the key anywhere."

"I have spoken to the servants," interrupted Nora, "and they have searched mother's room, and even taken up the rugs and shaken them. I know for a positive fact," she added, "that neither Kitty nor I took the key from mother's room."

"What did I hear you say about the orderly-book?" asked Captain Richmond.

"Why, Uncle Peter, how funny of you, and what a peculiar expression your eyes have! The orderly-book is locked up in the Sheraton chiffonier; and we cannot get it from a locked drawer, can we?"

"No, unless we break the lock or find that the drawer is already open."

"But it can't be; mother always kept it locked, and when she gave us the key she spoke about its being locked."

"She *thought* she locked it," said Captain Richmond; "but as a matter of fact I found it open. I read the orderly-book last night."

There was something very grave in his tone, and Kitty stopped talking and stared at him with knitted brows. Nora went calmly on pouring out tea. Augusta got very red, and as she helped herself to a piece of toast her hand trembled; while Nancy, with her wide-open, innocent dark eyes, looked full into the Captain's face.

He did not return Nancy's gaze.

"I hope we have all been good enough soldiers to satisfy you, Uncle Peter," said Kitty. "You won't tell us what you think, will you?"

"No," he answered—"not now; prize-day comes in a month."

"Oh, Uncle Pete, what shall we do on prize-day? We must have a gay time."

"The prizes will be given in the evening. The greatest prize—the Royal Cross—will be presented with the others. But do not ask me to tell you any more; that would be giving myself away."

He got up as he spoke and left the room. When he got to the hall he stood still for a moment, raised his hand, and pushed his short, crisp hair up on his head. He then turned in the direction of the drawing-room. There was a very wide and spacious hall to the Fairleigh house. The dining-rooms opened into one end, the great drawing-room, the library, and morning-room into the other. Captain Richmond strolled now through the big drawing-room. The French windows were wide open; the sunlit lawn blazed outside. The sun-blinds had been already drawn down, and the cool effect of the room itself compared to the heat on the lawn was most refreshing. Captain Richmond opened the drawer of the chiffonier and examined it carefully. His practised eye easily detected the marks of a tool which had forced the lock. He saw also that the lock itself was poor and of a very simple make. He pushed the drawer in and sat down by the window. Who could possibly have meddled with the lock? He took up the newspaper, opened it, and pretended to read it, but in reality his thoughts were far from the news of the day. He continued wondering over the open drawer, over the lost key, and most of all did his thoughts puzzle over the orderly-book itself.

Nancy, whom he had trusted, had failed him; she had been guilty of the sin of all others most terrible and grave in his eyes—the sin of cruelty. That gentle, kind, and loving child guilty of so grave a fault! He could scarcely believe it.

Just at this juncture in his thoughts the door opened and Augusta came in. Augusta was in reality very

nervous and troubled, and she had come now, as she expressed it, to take the bull by the horns.

“Well, Uncle Peter,” she said; and she chose a seat opposite to that in which the Captain was sitting. “Oh, how hot it is outside,” she continued, “and how beautifully cool here! I have brought my knitting. I am making a tie for you, Uncle Peter. May I work here while you read the paper?”

“Of course, Augusta; just as you like,” answered Captain Richmond.

Augusta took her work from its bag and began slowly to knit. Presently she dropped a stitch, which caused her to utter an exclamation of annoyance.

“What is it?” said the Captain; and he flung down his newspaper and looked at her.

“I have dropped a stitch in my knitting. But it doesn’t matter; Nancy will find it for me by-and-by.”

“Has Nancy such good sight?”

“Yes. My eyes ache very often. And Nancy is very good-natured; she always does what I ask her.”

The Captain looked both pleased and relieved.

“You have found Nancy good-natured?” he asked.

“He is thinking of the report in the orderly-book,” Augusta thought to herself. “I won’t do poor little Nancy more harm than I can help.”

“Nan is certainly good-natured,” she said aloud.

“I am glad you like her,” continued the Captain; and he sighed a very little as he spoke.

Augusta fiddled with her knitting. After a time she looked up.

“As we are quite by ourselves, may I speak to you?” she said suddenly.

“Why, of course, Gussie. What is it?”

“Well, you know that father and mother are away?”

“So my sister-in-law has told me.”

“And I am their only child, and I feel being parted from my parents very much.”

“Of course you do,” said the Captain; and he looked with sudden interest at Augusta. Hitherto he had not admired her in any way. “When will your parents be back?” he asked.

“Next year; and when they come back they are going to send me to Paris.”

“To Paris! What for?”

“Oh, Uncle Peter, don’t you know? To be educated—to be finished—to get Parisian French and Parisian deportment and dancing, you know, and all the rest.”

“I am afraid I do not know, Augusta. I am unacquainted with any young ladies who have been educated in the French capital. I have no particular love for the French ways. You see, I am an Englishman to the backbone.”

“But I shall still be an English girl even if I have got a little bit of French polish. Besides, it will so please father and mother! If I go it will be because”—— Here she dimpled and smiled and looked full at the Captain.

“Because of what?”

“Because of you, Uncle Peter.”

“Now I do fail to understand you. What on earth can I have to do with it?”

“You have a great deal more to do with it than you can guess. If my marks are very good—particularly my marks as regards conduct—I shall go. And, oh, I am so anxious to go! And if by any chance I could win the Royal Cross, then indeed I should be safe.”

“And suppose you did win it, would that be your object?”

“Oh! besides that there would be many others; but that too. Can you blame me, Uncle Peter? It would so please my parents!”

“No, I cannot blame you, Augusta; and, without giving myself away in any manner, I may as well say that you have at least as good a chance as the others.”

“Have I indeed? Have I truly? Oh, how very happy you have made me!”

“Continue to behave well, Augusta, and nobody knows what will happen.” He rose as he spoke.

“I am bound,” he thought, “after the excellence of Augusta’s marks, to give her that much encouragement, but surely never before was there man so disappointed.—I am going into the woods,” he said aloud. “Good-bye for the present.”

“Oh! one word, please, before you go. What do you say to our walking through the woods and having a gipsy tea there this afternoon?”

“If your cousins like it, Augusta, I am quite agreeable. Do you prefer the woods to the seashore?”

“Yes; it will be so very hot on the sands to-day,” said Augusta.

“I am, as I said, at your disposal.”

The Captain strolled away, and the moment he had gone Augusta flew to the chiffonier, pulled open the drawer, and looked at it.

“Any one can see that it has been tampered with,” she said to herself. “I am certain by his manner that he has discovered it. But one thing at least is clear—he has not the remotest suspicion of me.—Oh Nancy, what are you doing here?”

“I thought Uncle Pete was here,” said Nancy, who had entered the room and looked with disappointed eyes all over it; “Kitty said he was, and I wanted to talk to him. What are you doing by that drawer, Gussie? Is it not very strange that it should be open—that Aunt Jessie left it unlocked?”

“What are you doing by that drawer, Gussie?”

“Solve the mystery if you can, Nancy,” said Augusta, quite vexed at being discovered. “But if you want your darling Captain, he has just strolled through the woods.”

“Of course I want him,” replied Nancy; “I love him so much.”

She ran out of the open window, and was soon seen flitting across the lawn in the direction of the cool and sheltered woods. Captain Richmond was not far off. Nancy called his name, and he whistled to her to come to him. She ran quickly to his side.

“It is so lovely to have you here!” she exclaimed. “And, oh, Uncle Pete, I *have* tried! It has been very hard, but I have tried.”

Her eyes were raised to his face. There were dimples in her cheeks and smiles round her lips.

“What a face!” thought the Captain. “Angelic is the only word for it. And yet, my eyes cannot deceive me —she is a hypocrite;” and in spite of himself he shook off the loving hand which touched his arm, and began to talk quickly of indifferent matters.

For a moment a cold, curious sensation visited Nancy’s heart, but it soon passed off! She was so sympathetic that she could throw herself with zest and interest into almost any conversation. Notwithstanding his grief and displeasure, the Captain could not help confiding in her, telling her some of his own worries, and laughing when she gave childish but practical advice.

“I am so excited about the prize!” she said as the two presently returned to the house. “I don’t believe I have any chance of getting the Royal Cross, but I have tried for it.”

“Have you indeed, Nancy?”

“Yes, Uncle Pete. Why do you look at me with such a sad face? Do you think I would not try?”

“I always thought you would try,” he answered. “But remember, it is a cross *for valour*. Do you know what that means?”

“Bravery,” said Nancy.

“I think it means rather more than ordinary bravery. It needs both a tender and gallant heart to really aspire to valour; it needs a rare unselfishness. I want you all to forget the prize in the joy of attaining to it. It is the attainment that really matters; the prize in itself is but a symbol.”

“Yes,” said Nancy gravely, “but the symbol testifies to the attainment.”

“What a serious subject for a little girl!” said the Captain.

Nancy’s eyes were full of tears.

“Sometimes it is rather hard for me,” she said, “but when you are here I can do almost anything.”

“Is it possible that that child can be cruel?” thought the Captain after she had left him. “It certainly seems inconceivable; and yet Jessie would not have put such a mark in the orderly-book for nothing. If there is a very capable, careful, and trustworthy person it is my sister-in-law. And she loves Nancy, too; she would not act so to her unless there were some very grave reason. Poor little girl, when did everything fail and the great crash come? She doesn’t look a bit like it.”

At early dinner the four girls and the Captain were, to all appearance, in the highest spirits; and soon afterwards they started on their expedition to the woods.

Augusta had now fully and absolutely made up her mind to obtain the Royal Cross, and for this reason she was determined to show to the utmost advantage in Captain Richmond’s eyes.

It was arranged they were to have their gipsy tea in a part of the pine-woods about two miles away from the house. This part was just above the seashore. The place of rendezvous was not only sheltered from the rays of the sun, but freshened by the sea-breezes.

The picnic basket was packed, and the kettle, spirit-lamp, &c. were put into another basket.

“Come,” said the Captain, seizing the heavy basket and striding forward; “you girls must take turns in carrying the edibles.”

“I will carry the basket first,” said Augusta.

She dragged it out of Nancy’s hands, who gave it up in some astonishment, for, as a rule, the office of carrying Augusta’s things devolved upon her. Having secured the basket, Augusta ran forward and joined Captain Richmond. The three other girls walked together behind.

Augusta’s heart beat hard, for not only had she to play the part of a good and unselfish girl for the Captain’s benefit, but she was looking forward to meeting her fascinating friends, the Asprays, and their delightful companion, Mr. Archer. What would happen when the meeting took place she must leave to circumstances.

But she was quite resolved that if it lay within the realm of possibility she would get the Captain to admire her friends and to let them join their picnic party. By-and-by Kitty ran up to her.

“Come, give me the basket now, Augusta,” she said; “you are looking very hot and red in the face. Nancy and I will carry it between us.”

“No, thank you,” said Augusta, “I don’t feel its weight at all, and you are so pale it would tire you to carry it. Leave it to me,” she added. “I really like it; I assure you I do.”

“Then leave her the basket by all means,” said the Captain. “It is such a pity to take from us what we like, particularly when we are doing a service to others.”

Augusta could not be quite sure whether Uncle Peter was laughing at her or not. But in another moment a sudden bend in the road effectually diverted her thoughts, for coming to meet them were the two Aspray girls, looking remarkably pretty in white embroidered dresses and big shady hats; and walking between the two girls was a tall young man of about two-and-twenty years of age. The moment Flora Aspray saw Augusta she gave a shout of welcome, and rushing to meet her, kissed her with great *empressement*.

“How very nice!” she said. “Oh, so you are all here! Now I do think this is a rare piece of luck. Let me introduce Mr. Archer.”

“Captain Richmond, this is my friend, Flora Aspray; and this is my other friend, Constance Aspray,” said Augusta.

The Captain talked to the two girls in a polite and pleasant fashion; Mr. Archer began to notice Augusta; and the three girls from behind came and joined the group. In a very short time, no one quite knew how, the Asprays and Mr. Archer found themselves invited to join the Richmond party. They now all turned in a mass and walked in the direction where the picnic was to take place.

CHAPTER XXIV.—THE GIPSY TEA.

The gipsy tea was pronounced afterwards to have been a great success. Mr. Archer was agreeable, bright, and witty. He talked with a slight American twang, which added to his fascination in Augusta’s eyes. Whenever he looked at you his eyes seemed to laugh. He had white teeth, too, which he showed constantly. His hands were strong and muscular, and also very white. He was slenderly made, and looked years younger than Captain Richmond.

Augusta, determining to be her very best, her most amiable, and her most fascinating self, won approval on all sides. She was really a clever girl, and having been in her father’s and mother’s house more or less accustomed to society, knew better what to say and how to act than either her cousins or Nancy. The Richmond girls were only too pleased to remain in the background, and Nancy of course kept them company.

When the kettle boiled, and the hot cakes, mysteriously toasted by a special arrangement of cook’s, not only appeared on the scene, but vanished; when the tea itself had come absolutely to an end, the little party strolled in twos and threes through the wood. The great heat of this lovely summer’s day was tempered by a slight breeze, and under the trees the shade was a comfort. Captain Richmond could not help remarking on the great beauty of the scene. He turned as he spoke and met the clear, wide gaze of Nancy. He was about to say something to her when a laugh from Flora Aspray diverted his attention.

“Ah!” she said, “who will race with me to catch that admiral butterfly? I am collecting butterflies, and I must have it to add to my collection.”

“I hate that sort of thing,” said Captain Richmond; and as he spoke he again looked at Nancy. Her colour was coming and going.

“Oh! never mind, Captain Richmond; you must put up with it,” said the American, with a slight laugh. “And I am not so cruel after all. I generally use a chloroform-bottle. Now, who will take this net and try and catch that beauty?—Will you, little Miss Nancy? You would oblige me so much!”

“I could not for worlds,” said Nancy. She coloured crimson, and then turned very pale.

“But if I make it a request, and a very great request; if I ask it as a personal favour,” continued Flora.

“Nancy shall not be pressed,” said Captain Richmond.—“Go back to the others, Nancy, and leave this matter to me.—Suppose, Miss Aspray, that I request the life and liberty of the beautiful admiral butterfly, will you, instead of hunting it down, take a walk with me through the woods?”

Flora Aspray gave an indignant toss to her head, but Captain Richmond looked both handsome and gentlemanly, and she found it impossible to resist him, and soon was walking rapidly away from the others by his side.

Augusta found herself between Mr. Archer and Constance, and the three had a very gay time.

“I wonder what this all means,” said Kitty. “I want to ask you a direct question, Nancy. Do you, or do you not, like the Asprays?”

“I wish you had not asked me,” said Nancy; “but I don’t.”

“What is the matter with you, child? You look so queer and nervous. What can the Asprays have done to you?”

“Nothing—nothing. Of course, I ought not to dislike them, but I do. I wish they were not here. I had hoped that when Uncle Peter came everything would be all right, but I sometimes think that nothing will ever be right any more.”

“Why, Nancy,” said Nora—“why are you so miserable?”

“I wish—I *wish* I could tell you.”

“But can’t you, darling—can’t you?”

“No—no, I can’t—not now; perhaps in a few months’ time, but not now. Don’t ask me. Don’t take any notice of me. I will try and keep it to myself.”

“Oh, whatever is worrying you?” said Nora. “You are getting quite pale and thin. Kitty and I have noticed it, and we don’t like it at all. We feel somehow that Augusta is to blame, but we are not sure.”

“Don’t blame anybody,” said Nancy. “It was my own fault in the first instance, and nothing can remedy it —at least until the holidays are over.”

“Well, let us forget it,” said Kitty, going up to her little friend and kissing her. “It is so lovely in these darling woods! Don’t you just adore that peep of the blue, blue sea between those trees? And, oh, how pretty the butterflies look flitting from flower to flower! I don’t think it is right to be unhappy in such a perfect place as this.”

Nancy tried to smile.

“There, that is better,” said Nora; “come and sit between us. Let us talk about prize-day. Won’t it be exciting when it comes?”

“Yes—very,” said Nancy.

“Do you know what Kit and I are quite certain about?” continued Nora. “We are positively sure that you will get the Royal Cross.”

“Oh no, I sha’n’t! Why should I?”

“Well, you see, as far as we can tell, you have never had even what might be called a *dubious* mark for conduct. Your conduct every single day has been good, or very good, or excellent.”

“But how do you know?” said Nancy. “Have you seen the marks?”

“I did once, when Miss Roy was here. She just let me look at a page or two, and then shut the book and said I must not see any farther; but I saw quite enough to perceive how high you were on the ladder of good conduct. Neither Nora nor I will grudge you the great honour, Nancy; but I am afraid if Gussie took the prize we should be green with jealousy.”

“She has not a chance,” said Kitty. “And now let us pack up the baskets. It will soon be time to return to the house.”

The little girls busied themselves. The crockery was washed and put carefully away, the tablecloth folded, the knives and forks and spoons wrapped in tissue-paper.

“Wasn’t it funny Gussie insisting on carrying this heavy basket all the way here? Why did you offer to help her, Nancy? I quite loved to see her dragged down by the weight,” said Kitty.

“There is one thing certain,” said Nora—“*we* shall have to carry the things back. Why, even Uncle Peter has deserted us. I did think he would have stayed. I suppose he has fallen a victim to the charms of the Asprays.”

Now, Captain Richmond had done nothing of the sort. He was a grave man, with lofty views on all subjects. He also had considerable insight into character. Augusta was a girl who could never be in the

very least to his taste, but as she happened to be his sister-in-law's niece, he was bound to be kind to her. She was also living in the same house with Nora, Kitty, and Nancy. He had not taken to the Asprays, nor did he consider them suitable companions for his nieces; and it gave him a certain sense of satisfaction to see that Nora, Kitty, and Nancy were as indifferent to these gay young ladies as he was himself. It was Augusta who liked them. Now, in the absence of his sister-in-law he felt it his duty to look after Augusta, and it was really for her sake that he took this walk alone with Flora Aspray.

Flora found him exceedingly fascinating. A red colour had come to her cheeks, and her eyes were bright. She put on her most up-to-date society airs for his benefit, and felt sure in her silly little heart that she was making a conquest, for the Captain replied to her light and silly nothings with such politeness. He was determined to perform for her benefit those thousand and one little attentions which mark, as a rule, the gentleman and the soldier. She laughed merrily about nothing at all, and was highly pleased with herself. But when Captain Richmond began to talk of graver matters Flora quickly got out of her depths. She did not know that she was being weighed in the balance and found wanting. From one subject to another did the Captain lead her, and more and more did she disappoint him. None of his feelings, however, were allowed to appear, and they said good-bye to each other apparently the best of friends.

Augusta and Captain Richmond walked home together. As soon as they were out of earshot of the Asprays, Augusta turned to her companion and said eagerly:

"Didn't you have a delightful afternoon? I am sure I did. I do think Constance the most charming girl! And as to Mr. Archer, he is so American, is he not? You like him very much, don't you?"

"What a quantity of liking I have to do, Gussie!" said the Captain. "Now, do you want the truth, or just a polite remark?"

"Oh! the truth—the truth, of course," said Augusta, colouring, and then dropping her eyes under Uncle Peter's steadfast gaze.

"Very well; I will give it to you, for I think I ought. I don't care about Mr. Archer. He may be harmless, but that is the most that can be said of him. I don't like Miss Flora, and I have a strong persuasion that Miss Constance is as like her as one pea resembles another."

"And why don't you like Flora? I am sure she tried to be nice to you."

"She was extremely nice to me, but she is not the sort of girl I care about. Why need we talk about them any more? They are not our friends; they are only chance acquaintances."

"But I want them to be our friends," said Augusta; "it is so lonely and dull here, and their society would make such a great difference. At the worst you have to admit that they are harmless, Uncle Peter, and you cannot possibly object to our seeing a good deal of them."

"I will write to your aunt to-night, Augusta, and ask her what are her views on the subject. Until I hear from her you must not have much to do with the Asprays. Of course, if you meet them by accident, as we did to-day, you will be polite and all that. But you are not to go to Fairlight; neither are they to come here until I hear from your aunt Jessie."

"Oh dear!" said Augusta, "I did hope you would have liked them."

"I am here to look after you all," said the Captain, "and I want your companions to be worthy."

"But how are they unworthy?"

"Ask yourself, Augusta; you are not without common-sense. And now, don't talk to me any more on this matter."

Augusta had to make a great effort to keep back her temper, but the prize, which was so near, had to be thought of. She remained silent for a few minutes, and then spoke as cheerfully as she could on other subjects.

Immediately after supper that night Augusta went up to her own room, and Nancy too disappeared; thus the Captain found himself alone with his nieces.

"Now, this is really cosy," said Kitty, taking his right side. "Sit here, Nora.—You are not to stir, Uncle Pete; we are each going to sit on an arm of this exceedingly comfortable chair. You are going to have your nieces very, very near to you. Oh, isn't it quite delicious?"

The Captain smiled and patted Kitty's soft white hand.

"How are you getting on?" he said. "How does the soldiering prosper—or are you both tired of the campaign?"

"No; we both love it," said Nora. "But I am afraid we are poor soldiers—very; still, I think we do our best. Uncle Pete, may we talk to you about something? Are we to see a lot of these new people, the Asprays, during the holidays?"

"I cannot tell you. Augusta wishes it, and her desires ought not to be altogether ignored. But nothing can be done until I hear from your mother."

"I hope you will tell mother the exact truth about them," said Kitty. "I am most anxious to have nothing further to do with them."

"Well, you had very little to do with them to-day, Kit; you talked to Nora or Nancy all the time."

"They didn't want me. I am nothing but a child compared to Flora and Constance. But it isn't that, Uncle Pete. I should not really greatly care if they came or not were it not for Nancy."

"And what about Nancy?"

“Ah! I wish I could tell you, for I don’t think she likes them at all, but she is too good-natured to say a word against any one.”

“I wish you could find out what ails her,” said the Captain, with interest. “Does she admit that something does?”

“Yes—oh yes, poor darling; and she looked so sad when she just alluded to it! She is awfully patient, you know, and I think—— Nora, may I tell?”

“Of course you may,” said Nora. “Uncle Pete is like one of our very own selves.”

“Well, what Nora and I think is that Gussie worries her; that she has got a sort of hold over her. We can’t make it out, but we have thought it for some time.”

“I don’t see how that is possible,” said the Captain. “Perhaps there may be some other reason for Nancy’s unhappiness.”

“But what can there be?”

“How can I tell you?”

“Uncle Pete, why do you get up from your chair and look so funny? You almost tossed me on the floor.”

“A thousand pardons, Kit.—I am going to have a smoke on the terrace, and I think it is time for you little women to go to bed.”

“But have you nothing to propose about Nancy?”

“I am afraid not.”

“Are not you interested in her, Uncle Peter? You always seemed to like her so very much.”

“I am interested, but sometimes one cannot see an inch beyond one’s own nose.”

“Oh, Uncle Pete, you are not so blind as all that!”

“At the present moment I am, Kitty. Don’t say any more to-night. Justice must be done to Nancy; of that rest assured.”

The Captain left the room, and the little girls stared at each other; presently they went hand in hand up to bed.

It was not until they left the room that a girl suddenly stepped out from behind a screen, where she had been hiding for the last quarter of an hour. The girl was Augusta.

“Eavesdroppers hear no good of themselves,” was her inward comment; “but all information is useful. So those impudent little chits think I am bullying Nancy, and they will try to persuade Uncle Pete to their way of thinking if I don’t put a spoke in their wheel. I must, and will, or my name is not Augusta. Uncle Pete thinks at the present moment that that pretty and fascinating Nancy is guilty of cruelty. I will prove it before his very eyes between now and the day when the prizes are given away. Nancy, I have no dislike to you personally, but I am determined to get the Royal Cross, for it means Paris and a good time in the future; and I am also determined to get you more than ever into my power, for you must help me with regard to the Asprays. See them again I will—ay, many times. I am not going to be balked of the first bit of genuine fun that has come across my path.”

CHAPTER XXV.—THE PACKET OF LETTERS.

Two or three days later Captain Richmond received a long letter from his sister-in-law. The post arrived at breakfast-time, and the four girls watched him with more or less interest while he read.

He read the letter very carefully over to himself, and his face expressed no emotion whatever. Mrs. Richmond, in reply to a long letter from him, had written as follows:

> “My Dear Peter,—I am so thankful that you are able to stay with the children at Fairleigh for the present; you understand Nora and Kitty so well, and I am quite certain that you equally understand our dear little Nancy. As to Augusta, she is more difficult, but I trust the dear child will behave well and not give you any anxiety. Before I reply to your letter, just received, I must tell you that my own plans are somewhat puzzling; and were it not for you, and also for the fact that Miss Roy will be almost immediately returning to Fairleigh, I could not carry them out. My dear friend is in the most alarming condition both of body and mind. The death of her son has completely shattered her, and the doctors have ordered her to go to South Africa immediately to pay a visit to her married daughter. She is quite incapable of taking the voyage alone, and I am forced to go with her. I shall only stay to see her settled, and after putting her into the care of her daughter, will return home by the first boat possible to England. But the whole thing will probably take a couple of months, and during that time I want you and Miss Roy to keep house for me. I have not even time to come home to say good-bye to the dear children, but they are quite well and in the best of hands. I am writing to my own girls, and they will receive their letter by the next post. Please tell them so, and give them my dear love. My maid, Justine, will return to Fairleigh to pack some things for me, for I cannot leave my poor friend even for a day. We sail, all being well, on Monday.
>
> “Now to come to the subject of your letter. I do not know the Asprays personally, although their name is familiar to me. My dear brother, I have something curious to tell you with regard

to them. You know how fond I am of Nancy Esterleigh. I have adopted her as my own dear child, and trust she will never give her affections to any other so-called mother. But this is the state of the case: By her father's will she is entitled, should she ever wish to claim it, to a permanent home and also to provision for the future from Mr. Aspray. Were she to leave me and go to him he could not refuse her this home. The matter was arranged many years ago, when dear Nancy was only a baby. It has something to do with a considerable sum of money which Mr. Aspray borrowed from Nancy's father. He was unable to pay it back at the time, but offered, if ever necessary, to take his little daughter and to do for her and bring her up with his own children, and to provide for her future. Nancy's mother told me all about this when she herself was dying, and she gave me the letter which Nancy, if necessary, is to take to Mr. Aspray. Nancy's mother anything but wished that her little girl should be adopted by the Americans, and implored of me to do all in my power to prevent such a contingency. I feel, therefore, that any intimate acquaintance is scarcely desirable. Not that I am in the least afraid that Nancy would prefer those people to my little girls or me.

"What I have told you with regard to Nancy is for yourself alone, and you will be guided how best to act under the circumstances.

"Yes, Peter, Augusta is certainly the one who troubles me, and I am going to write her a special and private letter. She is sure to take a fancy to the Asprays, for she is more worldly-minded than my own dear children. Now I think I have explained everything to you. Of course, we cannot be rude to them, but any intimacy with the Asprays is the reverse of desirable.—Your affectionate sister-in-law,

"Jessie Richmond."

Having read this letter once, Captain Richmond slowly and carefully perused it again, and then raised his eyes.

"Oh, Uncle Pete! that is good," cried Nora; "you have looked up at last. We have been watching you by the clock, and you have been a quarter of an hour and two minutes reading mother's letter. What can she possibly have to say? We expected to hear from her this morning, but she has not written. Is anything wrong, Uncle Pete? How funny you look! You have your half-glad and half-sorry face on.—Hasn't he, Kitty?"

"Yes," said Kitty; "and we can't keep in our curiosity any longer, so please read that long, long—wonderfully long—letter aloud."

Captain Richmond rose.

"No," he said; "the letter is private. But if you will all come to me on the terrace in a quarter of an hour I will tell you what parts of it you ought to know. Be sure you come, Nancy—and you, Augusta. Ta-ta for the present."

He blew a kiss to his nieces, nodded to the other girls, and left the room.

"Then it is something very exciting," said Kitty. "I thought so when he frowned and his brows met in a line, and then when he gave that quick little jerk and sort of sigh. Oh dear! aren't you nearly mad with curiosity, Nancy?"

"I should like to know what Aunt Jessie has written about," said Nancy. "But, after all, Uncle Pete will tell us in a very short time; and I must go now and feed my canary."

Nora and Kitty had given Nancy a very beautiful canary a few days before. The bird was a splendid specimen of its kind, and sang magnificently. She had hung it up in her own bedroom, and now went up to give it fresh seed and groundsel.

The quarter of an hour soon passed, and the four girls met Captain Richmond on the terrace, which at that hour in the morning was quite cool and sheltered from the fierce rays of the sun. He was seated reading that wonderful letter for the third time; but when he saw the girls he thrust it into his pocket and came to meet them.

"Now then," he said, "for my news, which is somewhat startling. We shall not have your dear, kind mother here for the present."

"Why?" said Kitty. "Is her friend so very ill?"

"Poor thing, she is very ill indeed, Kitty—I fear alarmingly so; and your mother—just like her kindness—is going to accompany her to South Africa. They start on Monday, and your mother says she has no time to return home between now and then. Indeed, even if she had, she could not leave Mrs. Rashleigh. Justine will arrive to-day or to-morrow and pack her things."

"Don't cry, Kitty," said Nora; "mother would not go if she could help it."

"Of course not," said Kitty; but as she sat down on the nearest seat her pretty little face was white and tears were brimming over in her eyes.

Nancy immediately seated herself next to Kitty, and flung one protecting arm round her neck.

"I understand—I understand," she whispered in her ear.

The low and intensely sympathetic words comforted the little girl, and she squeezed Nancy's hand and nestled up against her.

"Well," continued Captain Richmond, "that is one part of the letter. Miss Roy returns to resume her duties next week, and between now and then I shall be in charge. You have been very good girls in the past, and I trust you will be equally good in the future. You may be certain I shall do all I can to promote

happiness and good-will amongst us."

Here he laughed, and his eyes met those of Augusta, who was gazing at him as if she would read him through.

"Now to take the bull by the horns," thought Captain Richmond to himself. He paused for a minute, and then he said slowly and emphatically:

"With regard to the subject about which I wrote to your mother, Nora and Kitty, and to your aunt, Augusta, she—as I thought she would—agrees with me. We are to be polite to the Asprays, but there is to be no intimacy. We cannot dispute my sister-in-law's wishes; we may therefore regard that subject as a closed book." Captain Richmond put on his most determined air as he spoke, and held out his hand to Kitty. "Who will come for a walk with me in the woods?" he said.

"No, thank you; I don't want to go," cried Augusta; and she turned and went very sulkily into the house.

She ran up to her own room. Shutting the door and turning the key in the lock, she took out of her pocket a letter which she had slipped into it unperceived by any one that morning. The letter had been lying on her plate at breakfast, but she had managed to secrete it before the other girls had come down. She had read it once, and now she proceeded to read it again. It was from Flora Aspray, and its contents were of the deepest interest to Augusta. Flora wrote with great earnestness and spirit.

> "Oh, we want you so badly!" explained the letter. "I don't like to say too much, but, you dear, bewitching girl, you have made a *conquest.* However, more of that anon. Yours is the very first invitation sent out. We are getting up a little dance—quite a scratch affair. It is to be this day week—only a poor little Cinderella, from eight to twelve o'clock. There will be several girls quite as young as yourself, so the most fastidious could not object. If you could come to us we could give you a bed for the night; and if you must have company, do ask any of the other three girls you like to come with you. But, to be frank, we only want *you.* David Archer says that your cousins and your queer little friend are too funny for anything. You know, David is quite a mimic; you would die with laughter if you saw him taking off that funny, prim little Nancy. Oh! and, my dear girl, that precious Captain Richmond of yours is too good for life. I never had a duller walk than the one we took together. David Archer takes him off, too, with his saintliness and goody-goody airs. Oh, it is killing! But there, Augusta; how my pen runs on! The main thing that all this leads up to is, *will* you come? Will you give us the great pleasure of your company? Oh, of course you will! You cannot help yourself. If you were not present it would nearly break the heart of your most devoted—Flo.
>
> "*P.S.* If you have not a suitable dress with you, either Constance or I can give you a big selection to choose from, so don't worry on that score—only come."

"Go I will," said Augusta to herself when she had finished reading the letter. "I would not lose the fun for all the world. But now, how shall I manage it?"

She sat with Flora's letter upon her lap and gave herself up to meditation. It was a lovely day, and the window of her pretty bedroom was wide open. The sky was blue, and the trees a brilliant green. The lawns, which rolled away right down to the end of the paddock, were smooth as velvet. Presently a little figure crossed one of them and came slowly towards the house. Augusta's eyes contracted and her brows met in a frown as she watched the little figure.

"It is odd how I dislike Nan," she said to herself. "Poor child, I suppose she is quite passable, and even agreeable to others, but she always does manage to rub me the wrong way. She could be wonderfully useful now, however. If I could get her to run to the post with my answer I should feel more or less relieved; and if things are eventually found out, and it is discovered she has a finger in the pie, so much the better for me."

Augusta sprang up, put her head out of the window, and called to Nancy.

"Come here, Nancy; I want you," she cried.

Nancy ran towards her, standing under the window and looking up.

"What are you doing?" asked Augusta.

"Oh! lots of things; but nothing very, *very* special. Do you want me, Gussie?"

"Yes; there is no one else to send, and I just want some one to run to the village and put a letter I am about to write into the post for me. Will you go? It would be awfully good-natured of you."

"Yes; of course I will."

"Well, come up to my room in ten minutes and I'll have the letter ready."

Augusta seated herself at her little table, and wrote quickly:

> "My Dear Flo,—The fat is in the fire, and we are forbidden all intercourse with you. Mean, horrid, disgraceful, unbearable, I call it! Don't think for a single moment that I submit. I love you better than any girl I have ever met. I love Constance, too. But, oh! I must hurry, for I want you to get this letter by the middle of the day. Don't come near the place at present, and don't walk in the woods, for if I met you I might be discovered, and I don't want anything to be known until after the Cinderella. Of course I am going, but how I do not know at the present moment. I can't sleep at your house; that is certain. You will hear from me nearer the time. And now, good-bye.—Your affectionate friend,
>
> "Augusta Duncan."

Augusta had scarcely finished her letter before Nancy's tap was heard at her door.

"Come in," called out the young lady; and Nancy entered.

"Is the letter ready, Augusta?" she asked.

"Yes; I am directing it. Have you got a stamp about you?"

"Yes."

"Lend me one, like a good child."

Nancy took out her purse, produced a stamp, and gave it to Augusta.

Augusta proceeded to affix it to the letter, which she then gave to Nancy.

"It is private," she said; "don't for the life of you show it to any one. And now be off; put wings to your feet, or you will lose the half-past ten clearance."

"But it is to one of the Asprays," said Nancy, taking up the letter and looking at it, and then putting it down again.

"Well, and what of that?" asked Augusta, turning very red, and looking extremely angry.

"Oh! nothing, of course; only you heard what Uncle Peter said this morning."

"Certainly I did; I am not deaf."

"And after hearing what he said, ought you to write to them?" stammered Nancy.

"What a silly child you are! Have I not told them we are to keep out of their way in the future? How comfortable we should feel if they were haunting our woods and we could not talk to them! Now, as I have explained matters, I suppose you will post the letter."

"I don't know; I don't think it is quite right. Can't you post it yourself?"

"I can't, and won't. There are things I could tell about you. I could give you an uncommonly hot time. You had better be off. Drop that letter into the pillar-box and you will be worried by no more Asprays. Refuse to drop it in and you will have a pleasant time in the future."

Nancy took up the letter very gingerly. She stood still for a moment; then she turned and left the room.

"Be sure you don't show it to any one."

"No."

"And be quick."

"Yes."

"There! that's a good thing," said Augusta to herself. "If I am discovered I can prove that Nancy posted my letter for me. When they rouse my worst passions as they are doing in this house they little know what it means. Where my own interests are concerned I stop at nothing—nothing. Go to that dance. I will. Oh dear, what a worry things are, all the same! I wish I could see the whole of Aunt Jessie's letter. I am sure there are allusions to me in it; I guessed as much by the expression in our gallant captain's eyes."

Augusta left her room and went downstairs and joined the rest of the party. The remainder of the day passed without anything special occurring. Kitty and Nora, having got over the fact that their mother was not returning home at present, gave themselves up to the delightful time Uncle Peter always managed to arrange for them. Augusta pretended to be equally cheerful; and Nan, though a little pale and silent, behaved quite in an unremarkable fashion.

Late that evening a telegram came from Justine to say that she was travelling all night, and would arrive at Fairleigh between nine and ten the following morning.

She did arrive at the time stated, and went immediately up to her mistress's room to pack the things necessary for the voyage. She had not been long there before Augusta appeared at the door.

"Can I help you, Justine?" she asked. "The others have all gone out boating, but I had a headache. It is better now, and therefore I can do anything you like, if you will only tell me what."

"Thank you very much, miss," replied the woman. "I should be pleased if you would help me. My mistress wants a lot of things, not only for herself but for Mrs. Rashleigh, for the poor lady had no time to get any sort of wardrobe for so unexpected a voyage, and my mistress is going to lend her some of her things. What I want to do is this, miss—to make two separate lists, one of my mistress's things, and one of those which are to be lent to Mrs. Rashleigh. I am going to pack the things for Mrs. Rashleigh in one trunk, and the things for my mistress in another; and as I have got to catch the three o'clock train back to town on my way to the north, there is not too much time to spare."

"Of course there is not, Justine. How glad I am I asked if I could help you! Shall I make out the lists for you?"

"Will you, miss? That was just what I wanted to propose."

Augusta went to her room, fetched paper and pens, and was soon seated beside a small table, writing out lists of different garments under Justine's directions.

Augusta could be both quick and orderly, so she was of substantial help to the maid.

"I am sure, miss, I don't know how to thank you; your help makes all the difference," said the good woman. "Oh dear, Miss Gussie! we have had a terrible time. I never saw a poor lady in such an awful state. Me and her maid, Fanny, thought she was going off her head. It was terrible, miss—terrible."

Augusta listened, and asked several questions. She was by nature very curious, and Justine's narrative gave her some pleasant and exciting thrills.

"I could make a splendid story out of this and frighten Flora so that she would scream," thought Augusta to herself. "It is such fun frightening people, particularly in the dark, or just when you are going to bed. I do wish I could sleep at the Asprays' house next week. However, that is not to be thought of."

"Now, miss," said Justine, "there is only one thing more of any importance to-day. Do you see these keys?"

"Yes," said Augusta. "Why, these are Aunt Jessie's special private keys."

"They are, miss, and she trusted me with them. I am sure I feel highly honoured. She said I was to give them to Captain Richmond, and that he would do what she wanted; but I do declare, what with being up all night and being dead fagged, I forgot it. What is to be done? I suppose the Captain will be in soon, miss?"

"Indeed he won't," answered Augusta. "They have all gone across to the Sovereign Islands, and have taken some lunch with them. They can't be back, for the tide won't let them—at least, not before five o'clock."

"And I hope to be getting towards London by that hour, so whatever is to be done?" said Justine.

"Oh, can't I do it?" said Augusta. "If those are the keys, you can give me the same directions you were to have given to Captain Richmond."

"To be sure," said Justine. "But I could do it myself, for that matter."

"No, no, Justine; you had better let me. You know, I am Aunt Jessie's very own niece, and you are only her servant."

"Thank you, miss, but servants can be faithful."

"I know that; and there never was a more faithful creature than you. If you think you are to be more trusted than me, do what is necessary, Justine; I have not a word more to say."

Justine stood silent, pressing her hand to her cheek. She had never known anything against Augusta, whose manners were pleasant enough when she chose to make herself agreeable. Augusta certainly was Mrs. Richmond's niece, and as the matter in question was of some importance, and Captain Richmond could not possibly be got at, she decided to trust her.

"Here, miss," she said; "you know the Sheraton chiffonier in the drawing-room?"

"Yes," said Augusta.

"And you know that all the drawers have different keys?"

"Have they?"

"Yes, miss, they have. My missus keeps her valuable papers and things of importance in the different drawers of the Sheraton chiffonier, and she told me to ask the Captain to open the top drawer at the right-hand side, and press a spring, which reveals a secret drawer, and take out from it a little box, which he was to give me to take back to my mistress. Mrs. Richmond only thought of this box at the last minute. It has some jewels in it which she wants to have set in a particular way at the Cape for the young ladies, and she had not even a minute to write. Do you understand, Miss Augusta?"

"Am I stupid?" said Augusta. "Why, it is the simplest thing in the world. Give me the keys, please, Justine."

"Thank you, miss; here they are. And I think, while you are getting me the little box, I will go down to the servants' hall and have my dinner, for I am not only tired but faint."

Augusta nodded, and in high spirits, her heart beating, went down to the drawing-room. She had no special desire to possess herself of her aunt's secrets. The contents of the little box did not interest her in the least, but she was the sort of girl who liked to put her finger into every pie.

"There is never any saying *what* I may come across," she whispered to herself; "and knowledge is power. I have always felt that, and I have always proved it. Dear, dear! I am lucky. No one suspects me of having broken open one of these precious drawers. Aunt Jessie is going away, so Uncle Peter will not have an opportunity of asking her about that curious mark against Nancy's conduct. And long before Aunt Jessie comes back the prize-day will have come and gone. Yes, I certainly am in luck. And now, if I can but keep up my character for good and excellent conduct, and at the same time have my bit of fun, then I shall regard myself as one of the luckiest girls in the world."

Augusta closed the drawing-room door after her, walked up the long room and standing before the chiffonier, she inserted the key which Justine had given her into the lock, opened the little drawer, and proceeded to press the spring which revealed the secret drawer. Her pressure acted immediately; the bolt shot back, and another drawer was discovered behind it. She pulled it open. It contained a small jewel-case, a little wooden box, and also a packet of letters. Augusta took out the box, which she thought must be the one described by Justine. She was about to shut the drawer when her attention was attracted by the handwriting on the letters. They were all tied together by a piece of ribbon, and the words "About Nancy and the Asprays" were written across them.

"Nancy and the Asprays," said Augusta to herself. "Ah! I may indeed find out something to my own advantage now. I have plenty of time, too, for Justine won't hurry with her lunch."

Accordingly, Augusta seated herself calmly on a small chair which stood by, and untying the packet, proceeded to read the letters. She read them one after the other. There were only three or four, and

nothing could be plainer than their meaning. The colour rushed into Augusta's cheeks as she perused them, and her eyes grew very bright. Having finished them, she sat silent for a minute; then, tying them up again so as to look exactly as they had done before, she returned them to their place in the secret drawer. She pushed back the hinge, shut the outer drawer and locked it, and, with the little box in her hand, went upstairs. She had been longer than she thought, for Justine, in some impatience, was waiting for her.

"I was just coming down to the drawing-room to look for you, Miss Augusta," she said.

"Oh! I didn't hurry," said Augusta; "I thought you would be at your dinner."

"I could not eat, miss, my head was that bad. And, oh dear! time is going; I have to leave here not a minute later than half-past two. Is that the box, miss?"

"Yes; and here is the key. I wonder, Justine," she added——

"Yes, miss."

"I don't know whether I ought to say it, but—don't you think it would simplify matters if you *didn't tell* that you had forgotten to speak to Captain Richmond of this?"

Justine coloured.

"But if I kept it secret you would tell."

"Indeed I would not. Why should I get you into a scrape, poor Justine, situated as you are?"

"Indeed, Miss Gussie, that is true, for I have had a time since I left here, and me expecting my holiday and all. I know mistress will be vexed with me if I tell, but I don't like, somehow, to make a secret of it."

"If I were you I would not tell," said Augusta; "you will only get into a scrape. And, of course, I will never breathe it to a soul. But please yourself, of course."

"Well then, miss, if you promise it won't pass your lips, I don't see why I should get myself into hot water."

"I won't speak of it, Justine. And now, do lie down for a minute. I have some lovely aromatic vinegar in my room; I will bathe your face and hands."

"Oh miss! but I am sure I could not let you."

"Nonsense! Why shouldn't I help you? Even though you are a servant, you are a fellow-creature. There! lie down on this little bed; there is lots of time—it is not two o'clock yet."

So Augusta waited on Justine, and soothed and comforted her, and made her forget her headache; and when at last she left the house the good woman said to herself that a dearer and nicer young lady than Miss Gussie never walked the earth.

"All the same," said Justine, "it would not have occurred to me to keep my forgetfulness from my mistress if she hadn't put it into my head; but as she did, doubtless it is the best way. She is a very clever young lady for her years; and very thoughtful, too."

CHAPTER XXVI.—SUNBEAM.

Mrs. Richmond sailed for the Cape on the following Monday; sending a telegram to her daughters to announce her departure just before she left England; and on the following Wednesday evening Miss Roy came back.

Miss Roy had been in the Richmond family for five years. She was a woman of about forty years of age, extremely kind, most faithful, most devoted to the interests of her employer, and most affectionate to her little charges. She was not a finishing-governess by any means. But she was just the sort of useful person who could be invaluable in times of difficulty or distress. Mrs. Richmond felt that in her absence Miss Roy would act almost as a mother to her children, and she went away happily in consequence.

The good governess had debarred herself from a whole fortnight of her usual holiday to meet this time of need.

Nora, Kitty, and Nancy hailed her return with delight; and Augusta, who in her heart of hearts regarded her as a tiresome, tyrannical old maid, was equally loud in her affectionate expressions on the night of her return.

On the following day Captain Richmond asked Miss Roy to have a private interview with him. No one was better pleased than he that she should come back to help him in the management of his battalion, as he still in fun called the four girls.

"Well, sergeant," he said, coming into the schoolroom, and speaking in as cheerful a manner as possible, "I want to talk over things with you.—Soldiers, I must deprive you of your sergeant for a short time.—This way, please, Sergeant Roy."

He opened the door as he spoke, and Miss Roy, laughing heartily, went out with him.

"Isn't Uncle Pete funny?" said Kitty. "He is always making us laugh. I do think he is a darling."

"You don't call that sort of talk, funny, do you?" said Augusta, who was by no means pleased at the Captain's desire for a private interview with Miss Roy. "If that is your idea of fun I pity you. Uncle Peter forgets that we are growing up very fast, and are not babies to be amused by infant talk."

“Uncle Pete could not be silly,” replied Nora.

“If you don’t like him, why don’t you hold your tongue?” replied Kitty.

“And why do you pretend to like him so much?” said Nora again.

“Of course I like him,” cried Augusta, who feared that she might have gone too far. “Well, let’s go on with our history; we may as well have good marks. All these sort of things will tell when the great day of the prize-giving arrives.”

Meanwhile Captain Richmond had conducted Miss Roy to the drawing-room. They both stood close to the chiffonier. Captain Richmond pushed forward a chair and asked the governess to seat herself.

“I want to show you something,” he said, “and I should be extremely glad if you could throw some light upon it. It has troubled me a good bit.”

“What do you mean?” said Miss Roy.

“I allude to an entry in the orderly-book.”

“An entry in the orderly-book!”

“Yes—made in your absence—made by my sister-in-law. Perhaps you can explain it.”

As Captain Richmond spoke he opened the drawer of the chiffonier where the orderly-book was kept, took out the book, and placed it on a small table before the governess; then opening the book, he pointed to the page where poor Nancy’s cruel conduct was testified to.

“Look,” he said. “You would not have supposed that *she* could be cruel.”

“Nancy cruel!” said Miss Roy. “Excuse me one moment, Captain Richmond; I will put on my glasses. This puzzles me.”

Miss Roy adjusted her glasses and bent over the book. She was naturally a very calm woman, and was in no hurry to give herself away. She turned page after page and examined the marks of the other girls. Finally, she took the marks for conduct, diligence, intellectual employments on the 24th of August by themselves, looking separately at the page devoted to each girl.

“Well?” said Captain Richmond, who was watching her with interest.

“I cannot understand it,” she said. “It cannot possibly be true.”

“So I thought,” said the Captain.

“It cannot be true,” repeated Miss Roy. “A mark for carelessness, for forgetfulness, even for untidiness, might be possible in the case of Nancy Esterleigh, but cruelty—— No, Captain Richmond, the child could not be cruel.”

“And yet,” said the Captain, “the mark is there—most distinctly written. You observe how empty the page is—blanks in most departments—and this terrible mark for conduct. We cannot get over it.”

“It is very unaccountable,” said Miss Roy. “There must be a mistake.”

“I have thought of that,” said the Captain; “but I don’t see how there can be. My sister-in-law is extremely particular, and not at all careless.”

“You must remember,” said Miss Roy, “that she entered these marks on the very day when she was sent for in a hurry to Mrs. Rashleigh.”

“That might account for something, but not for this—this gross act of injustice. Miss Roy, I have watched little Nancy; this mark caused me anxiety. I have watched the child at all hours. I have never seen a trace of cruelty. But there is something the matter. She is not at her ease. She is unhappy. She is like a child who carries a secret.”

“Augusta again,” said Miss Roy.

“I think not,” answered the Captain. “I have observed them together, and have noticed that Augusta is extremely kind to Nancy. I don’t personally care for Augusta. She is not at all to my taste. But one must not be unjust to her. No, it is not that. Nancy carries a secret. Why should she carry a secret, Miss Roy? Painful as it is to say, does it not rather point to the truth of this terrible report?”

“The thing to do,” said Miss Roy, “is to appeal to Mrs. Richmond. I wonder you did not think of this before, Captain Richmond.”

“I did; but I did not want to worry her while she was away, and with a great deal of care on her shoulders. And remember, we expected her home about now. Her sudden visit to South Africa upset all our calculations, and as a matter of fact put this thing out of my head. But even if I had thought of asking for an explanation, I should scarcely like to have done so just at present. She would naturally say, ‘You ought to accept my plain statements without comment.’”

“Not in this case, and with such an extraordinary accusation against a most tender-hearted child,” was Miss Roy’s answer. “Well, what is to be done now? Even if we were to write to Mrs. Richmond, we could not get an answer for six weeks.”

“We cannot wait for that,” said the Captain; “the prizes are to be given in three weeks’ time from to-day.”

“And you will let this influence you, Captain Richmond?” said Miss Roy.

“What am I to do?” he answered, shrugging his shoulders; and as he spoke he shut the orderly-book. “I am glad I have confided in you,” he said. “You may throw light on the matter; I sincerely hope you will. But for this dreadful mark, Nancy would get the Royal Cross. As it is”——

He paused and shrugged his shoulders again. “There is just one thing more,” he added. “Some one has broken open this drawer in the chiffonier. See for yourself.”

The open drawer showed the marks where a knife had been used, making distinct indentations in the delicate wood.

“The mystery thickens,” said Miss Roy. “Well, I will watch and do what I can.”

“You will be very careful not to let any one know I have spoken to you,” said Captain Richmond.

“Certainly, Captain Richmond; I will be most careful.”

Miss Roy went away. She felt very much troubled and perplexed. The Captain’s remarks with regard to Nancy troubled her almost as much as the extraordinary and unaccountable entry in the orderly-book.

“What can it all mean? There are some crimes which it is impossible to associate with certain natures,” was her thought. “Nancy would not hurt a fly. She is over-sensitive and over-affectionate; if any one could be over-kind it would be Nancy. And yet—and yet—— Oh, I do trust light will be thrown on this mystery! I hope Captain Richmond will not give away the prizes before Mrs. Richmond returns. I am quite sure she can explain what is wrong. Then, who opened the drawer without a key? It would be an act of cruel injustice to deprive Nancy of the prize until we discover who has done that. Poor, dear little girl; I will try and find her, and see if I can lead her to talk of this matter. Of course, I am bound by my promise to Captain Richmond not to ask her any direct questions.”

Miss Roy entered the schoolroom. It was empty. She went into the shrubbery, and walked round the grounds. She could not find any of the girls. Finally, she went back to the house, and went into Nancy’s bedroom.

Nancy’s room was a very small one, and was entered through the larger room occupied by Nora and Kitty. Nancy was always neat, and her little room was in absolute order. Her bird’s cage hung in the window. The canary, which had been in full feather and lively song, sat upon its perch. Miss Roy was very fond of birds, and she went up now to this one to speak to him.

“Ah, Sunbeam,” she said, “and how are you?”

As she said this she noticed that the bird was not in his usual spirits. His feathers were ruffled, and he looked at the governess with a dull expression in his eye.

“Poor dicky—poor Sunbeam,” said Miss Roy—“what can be wrong with you?”

The cage was hung high to be out of the way of the cats. Miss Roy lifted it down off its hook, and put it on a little table which stood near. The next moment she uttered a shocked exclamation.

No wonder the bird was dull and unable to sing. His water-trough was empty, and he had scarcely any seed left in his seed-drawer.

“Impossible!” said Miss Roy. “Nancy to forget the bird she loves so much! And yet I must believe my own sight.”

She felt very angry. Cruelty to dumb animals was the one sin she could not overlook. Taking the trough, she proceeded to fill it with water; and she was just replenishing the seeds when the door opened, and Augusta, singing a gay song, and carrying a bunch of groundsel in her hand, entered the room.

“Oh, Miss Roy, you here!” she cried. “I was bringing a piece of groundsel for Sunbeam. Why, what is the matter? Is the bird ill?”

“It looks like it,” said Miss Roy.

She did not want Augusta to share her discovery. But that young lady was a great deal too astute to be easily hoodwinked.

“Why, what is it?” she said. “What can be the matter?”

Then she went up to the cage, and made precisely the same discovery Miss Roy had made.

“Oh, I say!” exclaimed Augusta. “How downright wicked!”

“I will put it right,” said Miss Roy, trembling a little. “Leave me the groundsel. Go—please go.”

A voice below shouted Augusta’s name, and she ran off. Miss Roy attended to the suffering bird, giving him seed and water and a nice bunch of groundsel. He began to eat and drink at once, and before she left the room she had the satisfaction of seeing that he was much revived.

“I will see to this matter myself,” she said under her breath. “There must be no dumb creature in this house liable to such neglect. Alas, how little one knows any one! Mrs. Richmond may have given that bad mark for just such another act of carelessness. It seems to explain things. But who would have thought it of Nancy?”

At lunch that day Augusta suddenly looked up and fixed her bright eyes on Nancy.

“I have a crow to pluck with you,” she said.

“What is it?” asked the little girl.

“Come, Augusta,” said the Captain, “none of this! I am sure Nancy has not done anything wrong.”

“Oh, hasn’t she? You ask Miss Roy.—Miss Roy, don’t you think the little favourite wants a word of caution?”

“You ought not to call Nancy by that silly name,” said Miss Roy; but she looked uneasy and troubled.

Augusta said nothing more, but nodded in a very knowing way to Nancy. Immediately after dinner she rushed up to the child, slipped her hand through her arm, and pulled her aside.

“Well, Nancy,” she said, “it will be all up with you if you are not careful.”

“What do you—what *do* you mean, Augusta?”

“Listen. I don’t think Miss Roy is going to tell. She really is kind, and I don’t fancy she will tell; and if she doesn’t, the Captain, who has now charge of the orderly-book, will know nothing about it.”

“Oh Augusta, you are so mysterious! What are you talking about?”

“I am surprised at you,” said Augusta. “I hate cruelty myself.”

“And you think that I am cruel!” said Nancy. “What next?”

“I don’t trouble myself to think about what I know,” said Augusta. “A girl who had any love for dumb creatures would not starve her pet bird.”

“My canary! I starve my canary! What do you mean?”

“Ask Miss Roy. She went into your bedroom and found poor old Sunbeam anything but sun-shiny—all ruffled up and dull and drooping. The reason was not far to seek. There was no water in his trough and no seed in his drawer. Now then, Miss Nancy, what do you say to that?”

“That it is a lie—an awful lie,” said Nancy, her gentle face quite transformed with rage. “What do you mean? I fed my bird this morning. I gave him water, and plenty of seed, and a lump of sugar. What are you talking about?”

“Ask Miss Roy, my dear, if you don’t believe me. I happened to come into the room with some groundsel. I had been getting some to give the birds in the aviary downstairs, and I thought of Sunbeam. Miss Roy was in the room, and before she could stop me I had discovered what was wrong. Make what use you can of my information. Speak to her about it. She saw with her own eyes. Who else is responsible for the bird? Why, what is the matter, Nancy? Where are you going to?”

“To Miss Roy. I cannot stand this. I have an enemy, and I can’t make it out. Oh, I am a very unhappy girl! Augusta, what have I done to you? Why do you make my life so miserable?”

“Make your life miserable!” said Augusta, who by no means wished to bring things to a crisis. “I am sure I am very far from doing that. Do you think I would really tell the Captain? You may be sure Miss Roy won’t; and I will go to her this minute, if you like, and *beg* her not to. Now, am I not kind?”

“Don’t go; I would rather speak to her myself. I would rather brave things out;” and Nancy suddenly rushed away from Augusta. She went into the house and looked for Miss Roy, whom she found in the schoolroom.

“Miss Roy, I want to say something,” cried the little girl, the colour mantling her cheeks.

“What is it, Nancy?” said Miss Roy just a trifle coldly, for the incident of the starving bird had troubled the governess a great deal.

“Augusta told me,” continued Nancy; “and it is not true. There is not a word of it true. Oh, what is to be done? I did feed my canary this morning. I gave him water and seed, and cleaned out his cage. I have never neglected my bird yet—never.”

“My dear Nancy, I am sorry even to appear to doubt you, but I saw with my own eyes that the bird was without seed. Seeing is believing, you know.”

“And you believe that I could be so cruel?” said Nancy.

“Seeing is believing,” repeated Miss Roy.

“I didn’t do it. Oh, you will drive me wild! I did not think that you would turn against me.”

“No one attends to the bird except yourself. Who in this house would be so wicked and malicious as to take away the seed and water? No, my dear Nancy; you forgot. It was unlike you, and I am disappointed in you. But I have decided not to tell Uncle Peter; I will give you another chance. Had I been in charge of the orderly-book I should have been obliged to enter this circumstance in the book; but as I am not I do not hold myself responsible. Go away now, dear. Don’t keep me. Try and be more careful another time.”

Nancy stood perfectly still. Her face, which had been red with anger, was now white. She turned abruptly and walked out of the room.

“It is all most unaccountable,” thought the governess to herself. “But to suppose for a single instant that any one could have removed the seed and water is not to be thought of. Yes, I am sorry for Nancy. She forgot the bird: such things have happened even with tender-hearted and considerate children. She forgot the bird, and has not the courage to own to her fault. Poor, poor child; I fear that remark in the orderly-book is correct.”

Meanwhile Nancy went up to her room. Never before had such mad passion seized her. She felt like a wounded creature in a trap. But of one thing she was resolved.

“My dicky-bird, my darling, shall not run such a risk again,” she thought. “Oh, of course it must be Augusta! No one else could do such a fiendish thing. But my darling shall not suffer. I know who will care for him.”

She put on her hat, took the cage down from the hook, threw a handkerchief over it, and went out.

About a mile away there lived a woman with a sick child. Nancy and the two Richmond girls had visited this woman once or twice. And Nancy had spoken to little Grace of her bird. Grace had been deeply interested.

“Oh, if only my poor little Grace could have a bird all to herself!” said her mother. “But there! I cannot

afford it. I offered to buy her a linnet—one can get linnets quite cheap—but she would not have it. ‘No, mother,’ she said, ‘I would not take the liberty from an English bird. It is a canary I want. I’d like to have one more than anything else in the world.’”

Nancy had made up her mind now to give her treasured bird to Grace. She was relieved to see that no one was about. She walked slowly for fear of spilling the water in the cage. Presently she entered the woods, and setting the cage down on the ground, she removed the handkerchief, and threw herself on her face and hands close to the bird. She pressed her pretty, gentle face up against the bars of the cage, whistling softly to Sunbeam. He sidled up to her, and presently printed a soft kiss from his beak on her rosy lips.

“They say that I starve you, darling,” said Nancy. “You know better, don’t you? But you sha’n’t ever run such an awful risk again, my own little bird. You sha’n’t be at the mercy of any cruel girl. I would sooner part from you. You will soon forget me, my little dicky-bird, but I will never, never forget you. Come, you shall go to a good home—to a little girl who will be kind to you.”

She walked on through the wood holding the cage, and presently she reached Mrs. Hammond’s cottage. The day was hot with a languorous sort of heat. There was little or no wind, and thunder rumbled in the sky.

Grace had been very tired all that morning; her back ached, and life seemed weary. She had refused her dinner, and had turned away from all her mother’s attempts at consolation. When Nancy’s tap was heard on the door, Mrs. Hammond threw down her sewing and went to open it. A pale little girl with bright eyes, holding a cage in her hand, stood without.

“Why, if it ain’t one of the dear little ladies from Fairleigh!” cried the widow. “My Grace is very poorly to-day, but a sight of you will do her a lot of good, miss.”

“I have brought a bird for her—my own bird. May I go in and see her at once?” said Nancy.

“I have brought a bird for her—my own bird. May I go in and see her at once?” said Nancy.

“A bird!” cried the mother. “Oh, won’t it be just heaven to her? Yes, she is very poorly, and so dull; but a bird all her own—— Oh, I say, miss! come this way at once.—Grace, here is somebody to cheer you up,” continued Mrs. Hammond.—“Come right in, miss; I will stay in the kitchen while you talk to her.”

So Nancy entered with Sunbeam in his pretty coloured cage.

Grace, who had been lying down, started up in her delight.

“For me! It can’t be,” she exclaimed. “You have brought him to see me, miss. Oh, ain’t he just pretty?”

“I have brought him to give him to you,” cried Nancy. “He is your very own from this minute. You will be kind to him, won’t you?”

“Kind to him! Oh miss—oh miss!”

“You will never forget his water nor his seed?”

“As if I could, miss!”

“And you won’t let the cats get to him?”

“We ain’t got a cat, miss. He shall stay with me morning and night. Oh, Miss Nancy, I’ll get well now; I feel that I will. Oh, the joy of having him! How can I thank you? But there! I can’t even try to.”

“Don’t try, Grace; your face is thanks enough. No, I won’t stay. He will want lots of water; and here is a whole canister of seed—every sort. You must dry his cage after he has his bath. I give him his bath every morning before I clean and feed him.—Good-bye, my Sunbeam.”

Nancy bent towards the cage. Her curly hair fell across her face, and even the little sick girl did not notice the tears in her eyes. She ran out of the cottage before Mrs. Hammond could interrupt her.

CHAPTER XXVII.—“WAS THAT THE REASON?”

After breakfast the next morning Miss Roy felt a strong desire to go into Nancy’s bedroom. The fact was, she had dreamt of the starving bird the night before. She quite longed to see for herself that the little prisoner was attended to, that he was bright and cheerful and happy. But she scarcely liked to do this, for it seemed like doubting Nancy.

Nancy was avoiding Miss Roy. She was spending most of her time in the open air, and very often she would go away quite by herself. As she complained of nothing, however, and ate her meals all right, no one remarked on her strange conduct. Miss Roy said to herself that Nancy was repenting of what she had done.

“I shall try to find out from her if she has ever neglected the bird before,” she thought.

The morning pursued the even tenor of its way. The four girls went out on the water with Captain Richmond; and Miss Roy, at last overcome by her desire to see the canary, went into Nancy’s bedroom. She uttered an exclamation when she saw the hook on which the cage used to hang. What could have happened? Where was the bird? She went downstairs to see if it had been removed to the schoolroom. It was not there. She then questioned the housemaid, but beyond the fact that she had not seen the bird when she went to draw down the blinds on the previous evening, the girl could tell her nothing.

“This must be inquired into,” said Miss Roy to herself; and when the girls came in she spoke to Nancy, doing so openly before the others.

“Nancy,” she said, “I happened to go into your bedroom, and I could not see your bird there. What have you done with Sunbeam?”

Augusta immediately fixed her bold eyes on Nancy’s face. The other girls looked up, wondering. They knew how passionately Nancy adored her bird.

“Well, Nancy, why don’t you speak?” said her governess.

Just then Captain Richmond appeared.

“Why, Miss Roy,” he said, “what is this solemn conclave? I heard you ask Nancy something.—What is it, Nancy?”

“You asked me about my bird,” said Nancy, raising her head and speaking bravely. “I have given him away.”

“Nancy! you have given Sunbeam away?” cried Kitty.

“Yes. I took him yesterday to a little girl—you know her, Nora—you remember her, Kitty—Grace Hammond. She wanted a bird, and I gave her Sunbeam. He was my own, and I could do what I liked with him. Don’t keep me, please.”

She pushed past the girls. Her manner was almost rude. Before any one could utter an additional word she had left the room.

“What does this mean?” said Captain Richmond.

“I think it is very generous of Nancy,” here exclaimed Augusta.

But no one else applauded Nancy for her generosity. There was a weight in the air which every one felt.

Immediately after lunch Captain Richmond went away to pay a round of calls. Miss Roy retired to her own room—she happened to have a very acute headache—and the four girls were alone.

Kitty fixed her eyes on Nan. Nan shuffled uncomfortably with her feet.

“Where are you going?” cried Nora. “It is such a lovely day,” she continued, “can we not all go for a ramble on the seashore?”

“I am not going with you,” replied Nancy. Her tone was almost rude. She left the room, slamming the door after her.

Augusta raised her brows. Getting up daintily, she went out by the open window. The two little Richmond girls thus found themselves alone.

“Oh Kit,” cried Nora, “what can be happening? I am quite unhappy; I don’t like this at all.”

“Come out, Nora,” answered Kitty; “we can talk better in the open air.”

They went out, linking their arms round one another, and paced slowly up and down. Augusta was lying lazily in a hammock near by. She watched them.

“How they love each other!” she said to herself. “I never saw such affectionate sisters. But they are a dull little pair all the same. They are the sort of girls who will never do anything very wrong, and perhaps, on the other hand, never do anything very good. I know the sort. They will be medium all their days—medium pretty, too. Even Nan is better fun than Kitty and Nora. Now they are discussing her. I

see it by the way Kitty nods her head, and Nora looks at her and then looks away again; and they are twining their arms tighter round each other. They are very sorry for Nan, but they don't understand her. Even I understand that poor, miserable mite better than they do. I have a hold over my little lady, and I must tighten the knot—and very quickly, too, for Miss Nancy must help me to-morrow night. But now to find out what they are really saying, for Nancy will have to be protected by me in one sense in order that I may use her in another."

So Augusta slipped out of her hammock, and approached the little girls.

"What a wonderful confab!" she said. "Shall I guess what it is all about?"

"Oh no, Gussie; I wish you would go away," exclaimed Nora. "Kitty and I are having *quite* a private talk all by ourselves."

"But do let me guess what it is about," answered Augusta. "Now then, see if I am not right. You are talking about the little favourite and her pet canary."

"Yes; but what has that to do with you?" answered Kitty.

"My dear Kit, what a way to speak to your cousin! Now, let me tell you that it has a great deal to do with me. If I were you I would not worry Nancy; she has reasons for what she has done."

"But why give her canary away?" said Kitty. "Nora and I subscribed together and gave it to her, and she seemed so pleased. It was rather difficult to get enough money, but when we saw how *awfully* delighted she was, we felt that that made up for everything."

"It was good-natured of you," said Augusta. "I forgot that you had given it to her. Poor old Nan!"

"But why do you call her poor old Nan? I don't see that she is to be pitied at all. We have always been very fond of her, but we cannot see that she has done right in giving away her bird."

"Dear me," said Augusta, "what a fuss! If you gave her the bird it was her own, to do what she liked with. She took a fit of pity for that poor sick girl, Grace Hammond, and gave her the bird. Grace wants the bird far more than Nancy does, for she lies on her back most of the day in a shabby little room. I think it was extremely kind and self-sacrificing of Nan, and she ought to be petted, not scolded."

"I never thought of that," said Nora. "Of course, Gussie, you are right. Dear old Nan! Yes, it was sweet of her, and I suppose she felt it awfully."

"Couldn't you see for yourselves? Why, she scarcely ate any lunch, and ran off to her room soon afterwards. Oh, for goodness' sake," added Augusta, "don't make a mystery out of nothing! She gave the bird because the girl was ill and wanted it, and there the matter ends."

Augusta ran off, and Kitty and Nora owned that they felt considerably cheered.

When they saw Nancy next, Kitty ran up to her, kissed her, and said:

"We are neither of us angry now."

"What do you mean?" answered Nancy.

"About the bird, you know."

"But were you angry with me, Kitty?"

"Why, yes, Nancy; we both were a little. We gave it to you, you know, and we had to save up a good bit to get a really nice one."

"I forgot about that," said Nancy.

"But you did quite right, Nancy," said Nora; "and we are not a scrap angry now. We are so glad that the little girl should have it; she must have wanted it far more than you did. It was very brave of you to give it to her, Nan, and we both love you more than ever."

"But I didn't give it to Grace to comfort her—not for a single moment," said Nancy; and then she stopped short and faced the two little Richmond girls, and said emphatically: "Don't let us talk any more about Sunbeam, for if you do I shall break my heart. Oh, how you do stare, Kitty! You look quite silly with your mouth open. Come, who will race me to the end of the avenue?"

Away the three went, flying as if on the wings of the wind. They came bang up against Captain Richmond, who was returning from his calls.

"Hullo!" he said. "Well won, Nancy; you are considerably ahead of the others. Is it a race or what?"

The three were now all laughing heartily; but when she got back her breath, Nancy's face looked paler than its wont. The Captain noticed it, and holding out his hand, clasped hers.

"Come here," he said. "Are you fretting about your bird? What is wrong?"

Tears filled Nancy's eyes; she could not speak.

"Don't question her, please, Uncle Pete," said Kitty. "She has been quite, quite darling and sweet about Sunbeam. But she must not be questioned. Only if you stoop down I will tell you in a whisper.—Go on, Nancy; walk on with Nora."

"Please don't talk about it," said Nancy in an imploring voice; but she took Nora's hand and walked on in front.

"Stoop, Uncle Pete; she must not hear," said Kitty. "She gave her darling Sunbeam, whom she loves so passionately, to that little sick girl in the wood—Grace Hammond—because the little girl wants the bird more than she does."

"Was that the reason? Oh, how pleased I am!" said the Captain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—“IS WRONG RIGHT?”

The day arrived when Augusta was to go to the Cinderella dance at the Asprays’. All her plans were made. She was to go unknown to her family. She was to return equally unknown. As far as she was concerned, not a single member of the Richmond family was ever to discover this escapade.

How delicious the whole thing sounded! How she would enjoy herself! She was to be daring and disobedient: she was to defy all the laws which ruled her life. She was to slip away under cover of the darkness, and come back again in the small hours, and no one was to know. She was to wear her prettiest dress, and dance, and be merry; and no one was to find out. And all the time she would pose as the best of girls—the noblest member of Captain Richmond’s battalion—the soldier who on the great day of the prize-giving would be presented with the Royal Cross.

“Some day, perhaps, I will tell them,” she said to herself—“some long, happy, delicious day in the future, when I have been to Paris and got all my fun out of that; when I am engaged to a sort of prince, when my trousseau is being made, when my wedding presents are arriving. When life can scarcely present me with anything more, then, *perhaps*, I will tell how I slipped out and went to a dance in the dead of night, and came back, and no one ever found out. I will tell then of my pleasure. But, oh, the present fun—the present fun!”

Now, for a long time Augusta had made up her mind that she would tell her secret to no one; but on looking into matters she feared it would be absolutely impossible for her to get back again into the house if she had not a confederate. The right person to share it—the only one, indeed, who could possibly help her—was Nan. Nan must make things possible for her. She thought she knew a way of making her do this.

Accordingly, after breakfast on the auspicious day, Augusta called the little girl into her room.

“Come here, Nancy,” she said. “Come close to me; I want to look at you. Do you know that you are an extremely pretty girl? When you are grown-up you will be very much better-looking than either Kitty or Nora. I only wish I had a face like yours. Such splendid eyes, and such thick hair, and—— Why, what is the matter?”

“Only I hate being flattered,” answered Nancy.

“Oh, as to that,” replied Augusta, giving her head a toss, “I am the last person to flatter any one; but you are so strange, Nancy, one doesn’t know how to take you. However, to the point. I am in reality, although you don’t think it, your very good friend. I am always taking your part—*always*, Nancy. Oh! it is useless for you to shake your head and look so glum and obstinate; it is a fact. And now—— Why, child, how you stare!”

“What do you want me to do, Augusta?” said Nan.

Augusta could not help bursting out laughing.

“What a cute young un it is!” she said. “You are quite right, Nancy mine; I do require a little favour, which I hope you will grant—just a tiny thing, Nancy. Will you grant it to your own poor Gussie who loves you so much?”

“Tell me what it is, Augusta.”

“Oh, how downright we are! Well, listen; it is for your private ear, little Nan. Your dear Augusta is disposed to have a bit of a spree—just a tiny morsel of adventure on her own account—something not a bit wrong, but something that no one in the house, except sweet Nancy, is to know about. Will Nancy help Augusta, or will she not?”

“I would rather not, Gussie. I would rather not, really. I know it is not right. I am so tired—oh, so dreadfully tired!—of doing naughty things for you. Please don’t ask me; and please don’t do it, Gussie—please, please don’t.”

Augusta laughed again.

“What a sweet, touching little plea!” she said. “But just too late, my dear. Augusta is going to have her fun, and whether you help or not, she intends to go through with it. You can make things easy for me, and I shall get into no scrape, and be your humble and devoted servant for ever after; or you can refuse, and I shall still do the naughty thing—although, in that case, with a certain amount of risk. Will you subject me to that, Nancy, when *you* alone can make it quite safe?”

“I don’t see why I shouldn’t,” replied Nancy. “If you choose to be very naughty, why should I be naughty too?”

“Oh darling, you are quaint; you really are the most *naïve* creature I have ever come across. Now let me explain. I shall really not be naughty at all. It is not as if my own father and mother or Aunt Jessie were here. I owe no oath of fealty to that delightful model, Uncle Peter; if he disapproves, that is his own lookout. In short, Nancy, this is it (I will let the cat out of the bag): I want to go to-night to a small dance—the most harmless, childish little dance—at the Asprays’. Flora and I have arranged everything, and I am to meet her at the other side of our wood. She drives me to their house in a dogcart, and will bring me back again. And what I want you, sweet Nancy, to do is to open the door for me—the hall door, darling—yes, no less. I shall fling some gravel up to this window—for you must sleep here to-night, Nancy—and when you hear it you must patter, patter, patter downstairs on your ten little pink toes and

open the door for your darling, who will slip in and bless you ever after."

"I am not going to do it," said Nancy. "It is very, very wicked indeed, and I won't do it."

"Oh, come, how high and mighty we are!"

"I won't do it, Gussie. I won't tell, of course; but let me go, please. I don't want to be in the room with you. I don't like you at all, Augusta. I don't want to have anything more to do with you."

Nancy backed away; her eyes were full of fear. Augusta's eyes flashed with downright anger.

"It doesn't matter to me," she said, "whether you like me or not. Before long now our dealings with each other will be at an end. But I should like to keep in the good graces of the family till after prize-day. Nancy, I could make it worth your while. You have done a good many wrong things since you and I made each other's acquaintance. You have been unhappy about it. Do you remember that paper you made me write, in which I promised to give you leave to tell your own story when we got back to town?"

"Of course," said Nancy, "I remember all about it; it is the comfort of my life."

"I thought so, and that is why I saved it for you."

"*You* saved it for *me*! *You!* I have it myself in my desk in my room."

"Once that little desk was left open," said Augusta, "and a bird of the air came and informed somebody of the fact; and somebody, guided by that mischievous little bird, went to see, and found that the songster was right. Behold!"

As she spoke Augusta opened a drawer and took out a sheet of paper, and held it high above Nancy's head.

"Oh, how mean and dreadful you are!" said Nancy. "Give it back; give it back."

"Certainly—to-morrow morning, after you have let me in."

"Gussie, what am I to do? I cannot"——

"Now listen. I will give this back to you to-morrow morning. I will do more for you—to-morrow morning. You are in trouble about your bird Sunbeam. The supposition all over the house is that you neglected it—forgot its water and its seed—in short, that but for Miss Roy your pretty bird would have died of starvation. Now, I can put that right for you—to-morrow morning. And there is another thing. Has it never occurred to you to wonder why Mrs. Richmond, who is no relation at all, is so good—so very good—to you? I can tell you that story, and I can also explain about something with regard to the Asprays which will put you into such a comfortable position that you will literally have two homes to choose from, having absolute and complete right to live in either. Few girls are as lucky as that. You can hold up your head very high, Nancy Esterleigh, after I have told you what I shall tell you—to-morrow morning. Now, having had several little escapades with your conscience, will you have one more—the last—and so put yourself into such a position that the worries of the past need be worries no longer?"

"Is it true that you can tell me all these things?" said Nancy.

"True as I am standing here."

"All about Mrs. Richmond?"

"All about Mrs. Richmond."

"And the true story about my darling, darling bird?"

"I can clear you as regards the charge of cruelty; is not that sufficient? There, Nancy, you are yielding; I thought you were."

"I don't know whether I am yielding or not," said Nancy, "*but* you are tempting me;" and she ran across the room to the window. She looked out. Kitty was going past with her apron full of corn; she was about to feed the fowls in the farmyard. Seeing Nancy, she called out to her:

"There is a fresh brood of the downiest and sweetest little chicks out, Nancy; won't you come and see them?"

"Yes," called back Nancy; "in five minutes."

"I will wait for you under the window if you will be quick," cried Kitty.

Nancy turned with an eager face to Augusta.

"Tell me exactly—exactly what you want me to do," she said.

"Oh, you little duck, you darling!" said Augusta. "How happy you will be this time to-morrow! And *how* obliged to you I am!"

"Only tell me quick, Augusta."

"Well, it is this, you little love—this, and this only. You must be pretty loving to me to-day. You must, as it were, fawn on me, come close to me after dinner and snuggle up to me, slip your hand inside my arm, and all that sort of thing—you understand. And you are to say to me before the others—Uncle Peter and all the rest—you are to say, 'Gussie darling, *may I* sleep with you to-night?' And I am to say 'No;' and you are to coax and coax me, and in the end I am to yield. You are to do it in your very, very prettiest way, Nancy, and the others are to hear you. Then, to-night I am going to pretend to have a bit of a headache, and go to my room quite early. And you are to say, 'Poor Gussie, her head is bad; I think I will go and bathe it with aromatic vinegar;' and you are to slip up to my room, and you need not come out again as far as the others are concerned. Then, after I am gone, if any one comes to the door, you are to say, 'Hush! Gussie's head is very bad;' and of course the some one will go away. And then, oh! you are not to

sleep, for that would be fatal; you are to lie awake thinking over the wonderful things I am going to tell you to-morrow. And at about half-past twelve, or perhaps nearer one o'clock, I will throw a little gravel up to the window; and then you are to slip down, softly, softly, and open the door and let me in. Afterwards we *will* have a time. I will tell you about my partners, and how much Mr. Archer, that distinguished American, admires me; and I will even repeat to you the compliments they have made to me. And then in the morning you will have your reward. This is simple enough, isn't it, Nan?"

"Yes," said Nan.

"And you will do it, darling—you will do it?"

"Nancy, Nancy," shouted Kitty from below, "the five minutes are up."

"Yes, I'll do it," answered Nancy. "It is very wicked—awfully wicked—but I'll do it;" and she walked out of the room.

"How flushed your cheeks are, Nancy!" said Kitty when the little girl joined her.

"Never mind, Kit," answered Nancy in an almost cross tone for her. "Come and let us look at the pretty chicks. I am so sick of being flattered!"

"Has Augusta been doing that?"

"Oh yes—no—I mean I don't know; but don't let us bother about her."

"You are getting quite fond of Gussie, aren't you, Nan?"

Nan opened her eyes very wide. An emphatic "No" was on her lips, but instead she said, "Yes—of course."

They went to the farmyard and spent an hour of what was perfect bliss to Kitty, examining the birds. Then they each occupied a hammock in the garden. Kitty read a new story-book, and Nancy lay with her eyes shut, thinking of the dreadful thing which had befallen her.

"I was wicked before," she said to herself, "but never as wicked as I shall be to-night. Oh, how I hate myself! But she has got my paper which has her promise that I may tell. She can put things right about my darling bird; and she can tell me the story which Mrs. Richmond has promised to tell me some day. Oh! she has tempted me, and I will do it; I must, for I am too miserable to stay any longer as I am."

"Nancy," said Uncle Peter's voice at that moment, "will you come for a walk with me? I want to go down to the seashore; will you be my companion?"

"Won't you go, Kitty?" asked Nancy, for the Captain's society was by no means to her taste just then.

"I can't," answered Kitty, "for I have promised to go to the village with Miss Roy and Nora."

"Do you refuse me?" asked the Captain, putting on his most quizzical expression.

"No; of course not, Uncle Peter. I shall be delighted," she answered.

He took her hand and helped her out of her hammock, and they were soon going by their favourite walk in the woods to the seashore.

"How silent you are, Nancy! Are you not going to cheer me up and make my walk pleasant?" asked Uncle Peter.

"I think I have a headache," replied Nancy. "Anyhow, I feel rather dull." Then she looked suddenly up at the Captain, and said with eager emphasis, "I know what I really want. I want to ask you a question."

"Certainly, my dear little girl; what is it?"

"Will you answer it without thinking that it has anything to do with me?"

"I will try, Nancy."

The Captain's eyes were dancing as he fixed them on Nancy's flushed face.

"Oh! please don't look at me like that; it is just an ordinary question. Perhaps I was reading a book and came to it; anyhow, that explanation will do."

"Yes, as a *preface*; now for the question."

"Is it right," said Nancy—"I mean, could a boy—say a boy, or perhaps a girl, or a man, or a woman—could they, any of them, be put in the sort of position that they must do wrong to make things come right? Would it be possible?"

"I have never heard of the occasion where wrong could be put right by that means," said the Captain. "Can you give me an instance? Then, perhaps, I could explain better."

"No, I can't give you any instance. I was just thinking about it."

"And it has made you very grave."

"It—oh no, it hasn't made me grave."

"Nancy, it has troubled you."

"Please, Uncle Peter, I was telling you, you know, because of the book."

"The book of your heart, Nancy; why don't you confide in me altogether?"

"There is nothing to confide; *indeed* there is not."

"Only if you had known of such a case you would be quite happy?"

"I should be *happier*."

“Then let me tell you quite frankly that I don’t think there is such a case. When people do wrong they have got to turn round and do right in future. But it is impossible, at least to my way of thinking, to do further wrong in order to make the old wrong come right.”

“I see,” said Nancy. Her brow cleared; she took the Captain’s hand and pressed it warmly. “I am very glad I belong to your battalion,” she said—“very, very glad.”

“Has the fight been difficult, Nancy?”

“You don’t know—you will never know—— *Difficult*! Oh yes.”

“I am your captain, and again I say you ought to confide in me.”

“I will, whatever happens, when we go back to town. And thank you so much, Uncle Peter!”

“You will be able to go on reading that book now with a sense of satisfaction.”

“The book is the story of a fight,” said Nancy very slowly. “I think,” she added, “the poor, mangled soldier won’t cave in to the enemy.”

CHAPTER XXIX.—DOWN BY THE WISTARIA.

Augusta came down to lunch in high spirits. All was going swimmingly. She would have no difficulty now in carrying out her daring scheme. The point of danger was practically passed. Nancy sat during lunch at the same side as Augusta, so that astute young lady could not manage to see her face; but after lunch the beginning of the little programme which she had sketched out for Nancy’s benefit ought to have been begun. The endearing words, the suggestion of the night to be spent together, ought to be spoken. But immediately after the meal was over Nancy jumped up and ran out of the room.

“Tiresome little thing, is she forgetting?” said Augusta to herself. “Oh! perhaps it will do equally well at tea-time.”

But at tea-time Nancy was not there, and when Augusta inquired in solicitous tones where the little favourite could have hidden herself, Nora said:

“Oh! Nancy is not coming back to tea; she has gone for a walk in the woods with Miss Roy. She has gone, I think, to see little Grace Hammond, and to find out how her bird is.”

“Did you want her for anything?” asked Kitty.

“No,” replied Augusta crossly; “I just asked where she could be. I am very fond of little Nancy.”

All Augusta’s plans had now to be rearranged. Having got over her first wild anger against Nancy, she determined to ignore her, to do exactly what she pleased in spite of her, and trust to the little girl’s promise not to tell unless she were obliged to.

“Of course, she will never be obliged to,” said Augusta to herself; “I shall take good care of that.”

She then sat down and thought over matters. Yes, there was nothing whatever for it but to get out of her window, to climb down by the wistaria, and at night to return the same way. She could not possibly risk the chance of a window being open downstairs.

Fairleigh was an old-fashioned house, with shutters to all the lower windows, which were fastened by iron bars. It was situated quite by itself, and in a somewhat lonely part of the country, and these precautions were considered advisable. Night after night the servants closed the shutters and barred them, so there was no possible ingress by any of the lower windows.

Augusta considered herself in luck to have a room practically in a wing all by herself. She went to the window and looked down. Neither Nora nor Kitty would have thought anything of descending to the ground and climbing up again by the thick arm of the wistaria which ran all round this part of the house. But Augusta was not athletic, and had she been less set upon her evening’s amusement, she might have hesitated at the peril of letting herself down and of returning again by such romantic means.

“Nothing venture, nothing have,” however, and to go to the party she was resolved. She went downstairs, saw Kitty, and said in a voice which she rendered quite hollow:

“I am very ill indeed, Kitty; I have one of my desperate headaches. Do say good-night to the others, and forget all about me until you see me to-morrow morning.”

“Are you going to bed?” said Kitty. “It is not seven o’clock yet.”

“I must lie down; I cannot hold my head up another moment.”

“But can’t I do something for you? May I come and bathe your head, Gussie? I should like to, really.”

“No, thanks,” replied Augusta. “I would far rather be alone; quiet is all that I require. Don’t send me up anything to eat. Don’t have me disturbed on any account whatever. Good-night, Kitty, and say good-night to the others for me; what I want is quiet.”

“You do look bad,” said Kitty in an affectionate tone. She kissed her cousin, and then ran into the grounds. Nora and Uncle Peter were enjoying themselves under the shade of a big elm tree.

“I am so sorry about poor Augusta!” said Kitty.

“What about her?” said Uncle Peter.

“She has gone to bed with a bad headache; she says she is not to be disturbed. Oh! there is Nancy.—

Come right over here, Nancy, and tell us about the bird."

"The bird is quite well," answered Nancy.

Her pretty face was pale, and there were big dark shadows under her eyes. Uncle Peter stretched out his hand and made room for her to seat herself near him.

"Has the wrong been put right?" he whispered.

She coloured and looked up at him.

"No," she answered slowly, speaking almost into his ear. "But the wrong is not *more* wrong than it was this morning."

"What a conundrum!" he said, with a laugh; but his laugh was uneasy, and he looked seriously at the child.

"There is something more the matter with her than I had any idea of," was his thought.

"Augusta is ill," here called out Kitty; "she has gone to her room, and is not to be disturbed."

Captain Richmond had his arm round Nancy, and he felt a shiver run through her frame as Kitty uttered these words.

"What *can* it all mean?" he said to himself.

Meanwhile Augusta upstairs, even the mere thought of a headache forgotten, was getting ready for her party. She put on her prettiest white dress; the idea of borrowing a dress from the Asprays was not to be thought of for a moment. She tied a pale gold sash round her waist, and arranged her hair simply. Finally, she encircled her round and pretty throat with a single row of valuable pearls, and slipped a gold bangle on her arm. Her dress was pretty and suitable, and she looked well in it. She gazed at her own reflection in the glass with complacency. As a rule she had very little colour, but it was mounting now with a rich damask hue into each of her cheeks. Having attired herself all but her dancing-shoes, her gloves, and her fan, she slipped on her waterproof. This completely covered the white dress. She buttoned it right down, put a cap on her head, and looked out. The ground was about five-and-twenty feet away, but it seemed to Augusta then to be quite at a giddy distance. For a careful climber there was no difficulty in the descent. It was but to place a foot on one branch after the other of the wistaria, which spread forth its branches to within three feet of the ground, and the deed was done.

In order to make things more safe Augusta had tied a strong cord to her window-sash; and then, the time being come and the home party all in the house enjoying their supper, she locked her door, put out the light, and began her descent. With the aid of the rope she was able to manage it, and trembling very much, she finally reached the ground.

Were the moon to come out brightly, and were any one to walk round to that part of the house, that person might observe the rope hanging from the window, and the window itself a little open. But Augusta must take her chance of that. The sky was clouded over, too; it would probably rain before long. So much the better for her.

She ran quickly across the grounds and entered the woods. How dark and solemn they were at this hour! Had she been less excited she might even have felt a little bit afraid. But her excitement kept all nervousness at bay.

She ran on and on. Once she stumbled upon the stump of a tree which was sticking out of the ground. She fell and slightly grazed her arm, jumped up again, and went on.

At last she had reached the farther entrance to the wood. Here Flora, with the dogcart, ought to have met her; but there was no Flora and no vehicle of any sort in sight. What was to be done? Was it possible that Flora could have forgotten? Oh no, that would not be like her friend.

Augusta stood still, panting slightly, and feeling, for the first time, subdued and a little alarmed. Should she go back and give up all her glorious fun for which she had risked so much, or should she go forward?

The Asprays' house was two miles away. She made up her mind to walk there.

"Oh, how unkind of Flora—how horrid of her!" thought Augusta. "What can—what can be the meaning of this? Well, I will get there somehow, and shame her to her face."

Accordingly, she started off to walk as fast as she could over the dusty roads. It was nearly ten o'clock when she reached the Asprays'. She was surprised to see no signs of festivity. A few lights were burning in the drawing-room, and a few also in the dining-room. But the place wore no air of expectancy or bustle or gaiety.

"What can it mean? Have I come on the wrong night?" thought Augusta.

She ran up the steps and sounded the front-door bell. In a moment the butler threw open the door.

"Is Miss Flora in?" asked Augusta, in some wonder.

"Yes, miss; but——

"I want to see her. I must see her at once. Show me somewhere," said Augusta in peremptory tones.

"My mistress said, miss, no one was to come into the house, but"——

"Nonsense!" said Augusta. "I will see Miss Flora, and immediately."

The man took Augusta into a small room on the ground floor, switched on the light, and left her. In a minute or two Flora rushed in.

“Gussie,” she said, “how madly dangerous! What have you done it for?”

“What have you neglected me for?” said Augusta, opening her mackintosh and revealing her pretty evening-dress. “What is the matter? This is the night of your party, and you promised to meet me outside our wood. You never came, and I have walked all the way; and, oh, I am so tired, and so dreadfully frightened! What is it, Flo? What is wrong?”

“Then you never got my letter?” said Flora.

“Oh no; but please explain this mystery. I am so tired. Is not there a party to-night? Oh, I have gone through such a lot to come! And now what can this mean?”

“I am ever so sorry,” said Flora. “Mother would be quite mad if she knew you had come into the house, Gussie. It is too late for the rest of us, unfortunately; but for you”——

“Oh, what is it?”

“It is Constance. She is awfully ill—most fearfully, dangerously ill. We have all been with her until this morning, and the doctor says the whole house is infected. It is smallpox. Oh, isn’t it frightful?”

“Smallpox!” said Augusta.

She would not have feared scarlet-fever or diphtheria. But smallpox—that ghastly disease which did not always kill, but which took the lovely and the graceful and the gracious and defiled them; which made the fair face hideous, destroyed the right proportions, and stamped them for life!

Augusta, like every other girl in all the world, was afraid of smallpox.

“How was it I never got your letter?” she said.

“It was only known this morning,” continued Flo. “Even last night we did not think much about it. She was fearfully ill, of course, and I slept in her room. But she is subject to bad feverish attacks, and we hoped she would get well, and that we need not put off the party. The doctor came early this morning; and—she is covered with it. Oh, it is frightful! I have been vaccinated, and so has every one else in the house. But the doctor says we have all run the gravest risk. There is no use in our going away, however, for no one would take us in.”

“And is she—is she in danger?” Augusta cried, feeling a slight pang of remorse as she remembered Constance’s delicate and lovely features.

“Oh, I don’t know. They say it is a very bad case; she is quite delirious. Oh, it is awful! I saw her this morning, and I would not have known her. I am awfully upset, and I feel sick with terror. Gussie, you ought not to have come in.”

“Perhaps I had better go away,” said Augusta. “I am very sorry, of course. It was a pity you didn’t let me have the letter.”

“Mother gave it to the groom to take to you, but I suppose in the scare he forgot it. I will speak to him in the morning. Would you like him to drive you back now, Gussie? But the dogcart is not quite safe, for poor Constance drove in it the day before yesterday. She fainted before we brought her home; that was the beginning of her illness.”

“I had better walk,” said Augusta. “Good-night.”

“Good-night. I won’t tell mother that you came, as she would be in such an awful fright. But I hope you have not run any danger. Perhaps you had better tell your doctor and be vaccinated at once. Good-night—good-night.”

Augusta went away. She did not even turn to kiss Flora. She nodded to her vaguely, as though she were not thinking about her, and walked down the avenue. When she had gone down a little way she turned and looked up at the windows of the room where the sick girl lay struggling with death. She gave a shudder, and hurried her footsteps.

What an end to her mad adventure!

She was very tired, and all the excitement which had kept her up during the past day was now merged into a great terror. What should she do? Had she contracted infection in that terrible house? Ought she to be vaccinated?

All her thoughts were for herself. She was more angry with Constance than sorry for her. How severely that groom ought to be blamed for not delivering the note!

It was after eleven o’clock when she got back to Fairleigh. Had things turned out as she expected she would not have got back nearly so soon. The house was in darkness except for a light in the library window. The window was shut, and so were the shutters, but the light came out on the gravel through one or two of the chinks.

Augusta knew that Captain Richmond was there. He generally stayed in the library for an hour or so after the others had gone to bed. Just for a moment a wild longing came over her to tell him what had happened—to seek his advice. If she were infected, had she any right to infect the others?

She must not attempt to go back to her room while Captain Richmond was in the library, for the library was almost immediately under her room.

“What a nuisance his sitting up so late!” she thought.

She was too tired to walk another step. She sank down on a garden seat, wrapped her mackintosh round her, and tried to think; but her head was giddy, and her brain in a whirl. Her one and only desire was to get back safely to her room—to fling herself on her bed and lose consciousness in sleep.

Even the prize, the great and glorious prize, was as nothing to her now. Even school in Paris seemed remote and uninteresting. Suppose she sickened for smallpox. Suppose her face, so smooth and fair and attractive-looking, was altered and made ugly. Suppose she—died.

“Oh, why doesn’t that horrid man go to bed?” thought the girl. She jumped up and paced about on the grass. She had been too hot; she was now too cold.

After a time, to her horror, she heard the shutters being unbarred. The window opened, and Captain Richmond put out his head.

“Is anybody there?” he said. “I thought I heard some one speak. Is anybody there?”

There was no answer.

Augusta, in terror, was hiding behind a bush of laurustinus.

Augusta in terror was hiding behind a bush of laurustinus.

“I must have fancied it,” thought the Captain,

He waited for another minute, then shut the window, refastened the shutters, put out the light, and went up to his own room.

Augusta breathed a sigh of relief. Creeping carefully forward, she reached the wistaria, and clutching the cord, began cautiously to ascend. But if she had been nervous descending from her window, that was nothing at all to her present feelings. She was thoroughly unstrung, and very tired. When she had nearly reached the top she gave a sudden lunge forward, missed the rope, and only saved herself by clutching hold of the bare arm of a part of the vine.

In doing so she gave her wrist intolerable pain, and very nearly fainted. But the danger in which she found herself steadied her nerves sufficiently to enable her to make another great effort, and a moment later she was safe inside her room.

“So much for stolen pleasures,” thought the miserable girl. “Here I am back again, battered, torn—oh, how my wrist aches!—and having run into the gravest danger of my whole life. But there! I must only hope for the best. Now to untie the cord, put it carefully out of sight, shut the window, take off my horrid, useless finery, and get into bed.”

CHAPTER XXX.—AUGUSTA IS FRIGHTENED.

The next day Augusta’s wrist was considerably swollen, and she was in such pain that when Miss Roy went to see her she immediately said the doctor had better be sent for. Augusta herself was scarcely thinking of her wrist.

“If I can only see the doctor by himself,” she thought, “and get him to vaccinate me and say nothing about it. But that is quite impossible. And yet, it certainly ought to be done.”

The girls were all very kind to Augusta, whose head ached, and who was quite willing to remain in bed. But the one question on all the pairs of lips was:

“How did you do it, Gussie? How did you give your wrist such an awful sprain?”

“I did it shutting the window,” said Augusta, jumping at the first excuse she could think of. “Oh, it is nothing; I shall get up presently. It is not my wrist that I mind so much, but the headache I had yesterday evening has not quite gone.”

The doctor came, and said the wrist was badly sprained. He bandaged it carefully, and told Augusta she must wear her arm in a sling.

“How did you say you did it?” was his final remark.

“In shutting the window,” said Augusta. “I slipped somehow.”

The doctor made no reply, but he gave Augusta a somewhat searching look.

“He doesn’t believe me,” thought the girl. “I wonder what he thinks I have been up to. Have I really such a wicked look? For one who means to win the Royal Cross that would never do. That dear, sanctimonious Uncle Peter would scent mischief, and my chances would be over.”

Augusta put on a very mournful expression. The doctor took his leave, assuring her that he would return on the following morning.

“I wish he were a nice, young, handsome doctor,” thought Augusta; “then perhaps I could coax him to keep my secret for me, and to vaccinate me without telling the others. But he is just the most stupid sort —middle-aged and matter-of-fact.”

She lay back on her pillows, feeling exhausted and languid. She had gone through a great deal more than she had any idea of herself on the previous night.

The other girls took turn about to come and sit in her room. Nancy came early in the afternoon. The day was hot and one of the windows was wide open. Nancy sat with her elbows on the window-sill, and now and then she looked out.

Augusta pretended to read a book; she did not care to talk to Nancy. Presently the little girl’s voice sounded in her ear.

“You didn’t really sprain your wrist when you shut the window, did you?” she asked.

“The less you know, Nancy, the better for you.” Augusta answered.

Nancy coloured, and shut her lips. Augusta again took up her book.

“What trash this is!” she said. “I do hate children’s books. Is there nothing racy and lively in the house?”

“I will go to the library and look,” said Nancy.

“Get a novel—a good, rousing love story.”

“I don’t know what sort of books those are,” replied Nancy.

“Oh, you are too good to live, Nancy! You make me perfectly sick. Get one of Mrs. Henry Wood’s books. I don’t much care for her, but she is better than no one.”

Nancy left the room. She went down to the library and searched for a long time, but could not find any of Mrs. Henry Wood’s novels, and was returning again to Augusta’s room when she met the Captain.

“Whither away, Nancy?” he asked in a cheerful tone.

“I am sitting with Augusta,” answered Nancy. “She is better, but she is not at all like herself. I wanted something exciting for her to read.”

“Have you found what you wanted?”

“No.”

“Come back to the library and we will look together.”

They searched along the well-lined walls, and presently Nancy took *King Solomon’s Mines* up to Augusta.

“Little stupid! I have read it,” said Augusta; and she flung the book with passion to the other side of the room.

“You will hurt your wrist if you are so rough,” said Nancy. She went and stood by the window. She looked out, and suddenly made an exclamation.

“Why, Gussie!” she cried.

“Well, what now?”

“How did you do—— Oh, I say! there is your gold bangle hanging on one of the small branches of the wistaria—just half-way down. How *did* it get there?”

“Can it be seen?” asked Augusta.

“Seen!” answered Nancy. “Of course it can; it shines like anything.”

“Run down at once; go under my window and find out if you can see it from below.”

“But I am sure I can. Why should I go?”

“Go to oblige me; and be quick, Nancy—be quick.”

Nancy went. She returned in a few minutes.

“It can be seen,” she said; “and very plainly, too.”

“Then you must manage to get it off that branch, Nancy. Do you hear? You must.”

“I!” cried Nancy. “But how, Gussie? How am I to get down? It is ever so many feet away.”

“You must climb down.”

“But I am afraid of climbing. I always get giddy when I look from any height. I daren’t do it, Gussie; I should fall on my head and get killed.”

“You really are the most tiresome child,” said Augusta. “Here, stand out of my way. Let me look for myself.”

Augusta got out of bed, and peeped over the window-sill.

“How very awkward!” she said. “How could it have got there? It must have dropped from my arm last night when I went to look out.”

“Just before you shut the window?” said Nancy.

“Well, yes. Do you think any one will believe that story?”

“No, I don’t,” replied Nancy after a moment’s pause.

Augusta laughed. “Goosey, goosey, gander!” she said. “I might have known that you were not quite such a goose as all that. Now, could we not hook it up with an umbrella handle? Do let’s try.”

Both girls tried, but in vain.

“There is nothing for it, Nancy, but to get the gardener to bring a ladder. You must point it out to him, and ask him to take it down. Where is the gardener to-day?”

“I don’t know,” replied Nancy. “I have not seen him.”

“Well, you must go and look for him. What are the rest of them doing?”

“We are all going to have tea in the woods.”

“And leave me! How unkind!”

“Miss Roy said she would sit with you.”

“No, Nancy; she must not. You will have to stay with me. Do you hear? You must make up some sort of excuse, and then when they are all away we will ask the gardener to get us back the bracelet. Do you hear, Nancy? You must do it. I should get into the most horrible scrape otherwise; and after the way you deserted me last night it is the very least you can do.”

“Very well,” said Nancy in a low tone. “But I did want to go to the woods,” she murmured under her breath.

“I know you are to be trusted,” said Augusta. “And now I think I may have a few minutes’ sleep. You can wake me when tea arrives.”

Nancy went downstairs and told the others that she intended to stay with Augusta. Miss Roy exclaimed:

“My dear, you are looking quite pale. I often feel anxious about you. You want the air. You have been with Augusta for ever so long to-day.”

“Indeed, I would rather stay,” answered Nancy; and she coloured so painfully, and there was such an eager, supplicating glance in her eyes, that Miss Roy said nothing further.

“What a dear, sweet, unselfish little soul she is!” thought Captain Richmond. He was disappointed not to have her company in the woods; but as he passed her side he patted her on the shoulder.

“I can quite understand that the brave soldier sometimes denies himself,” he said.

A lump came into Nancy’s throat, but she made no reply.

The party went off, carrying a kettle and a tea-basket. Their voices faded away in the distance, and Nancy went up to Augusta.

“They have gone; I have heard them,” cried Augusta. “Now fetch the gardener, and be very, very quick.”

Nancy went downstairs. She raced all over the place, and at last she found Simpson, the very worthy old gardener whom Mrs. Richmond always employed.

“Can you come with a ladder, and can you come at once?” asked the little girl.

“Well now, miss, I am particular busy to-day,” was Simpson’s answer; “but if so be as you want me very bad, why, I’ll do what I can for you, miss. But if it is for that other young lady——”

“Is it for the other young lady, miss?”

“It is for me, because I want to help her,” said Nancy. “She has dropped a bracelet—a gold bangle—into the wistaria which grows up to her window.”

“Oh! I know that wistaria,” said Simpson, with a laugh. “It is a good, steady sort of tree, and afore now it has been made useful. Well, missy, if Miss Augusta has dropped her bangle into the wistaria it can wait till to-night. I need not lug a ladder all that way in the midst of my other work.”

“Oh! she wants you to come *now*; she does indeed, Simpson.”

“Then I must go,” replied the old man; and presently he and his ladder appeared under the window of Augusta’s room. Augusta had partly dressed, and stood by the window giving directions. When the bangle was handed in to her she seized it, but not very graciously.

“Here,” she said to Simpson, “is a shilling; and I am much obliged to you. You will never speak of it, of course; it is *quite* a private matter, and you must never on any account tell.”

“I ain’t likely to tell what don’t concern me,” replied Simpson—“that is, I don’t tell unless I am arsked. But as to your shilling, miss, you can keep it, for I don’t want none of it.”

“As to your shilling, miss, you can keep it, for I don’t want none of it.”

He stepped down from the ladder and moved slowly away.

“What a horrid, impertinent old man!” said Augusta when he had gone. “But there! the bangle is all right. Put it into my jewellery drawer, Nancy. Oh dear! I wonder, Nancy, if you have ever felt frightened—scared, you know.”

“Yes; once I did,” replied Nancy.

“Did you? Oh! I wish you would tell me about it. It would interest me; it would be as good as a novel.”

“It was when mother was alive,” said Nancy. “The doctor said she was very ill, that she might be dead in the morning. She did not die—not—not then; but I spent an awful night. Yes, I was scared.”

“I don’t think the account of your being scared sounds very fascinating, Nancy,” said Augusta. “It is not like my scare.”

“But are you scared about something?”

“Yes; I have had a great and terrible scare.”

“Won’t you tell me?”

“Not yet; I will some time, but not yet. I think I’ll get up now; I am much better. Come, help me into my dress. We will both be downstairs when they come back from the woods.”

Nancy helped Augusta to dress, and the two girls went downstairs.

The party from the woods returned about eight o’clock. They were all excited, and brimful of news. Miss Roy was the first to speak of it.

“How lucky,” she said—“how very, very lucky it is that Mrs. Richmond has forbidden you girls to have anything to do with the Asprays!”

“Why?” asked Nancy.

“My dear, a terrible—most terrible—thing has happened. That poor, pretty girl Constance is down with malignant smallpox. She is terribly ill, and the doctors say not likely to recover. The doctors are terribly anxious, and they have sent for a specialist from town.”

“How did you hear it?” asked Augusta. She was standing in the shadow, and as she spoke she pulled Nancy towards her.

“Keep quiet,” she whispered in her ear.—“How did you hear it, Miss Roy?” she repeated; and she fixed her eyes, bold and restless, on the governess’s face.

“Some friends of ours passed through the woods, and they told us,” she answered. “How terrible it all is! I only wish we could help them, poor creatures, but that is not to be thought of. They say the whole family are liable to catch it, as the unfortunate girl was with them during the first stage of the disease. There is no more fearful disease than smallpox. I almost wonder, girls, if your mother would like you to remain here.”

“Oh! the girls are perfectly safe at Fairleigh,” said the Captain. “I can take it upon myself to say that.

But it may be better for them not to go into the town until we find out how the poor girl got the complaint."

"Nancy, I am not quite well; will you help me back to my room?" Augusta tottered as she spoke, and fell into a chair which stood near.

Both Kitty and Nora rushed up to her, and Miss Roy went to the sideboard and fetched a glass of wine.

"Your wrist has hurt you very much, dear," she said. "You ought not to have come down. What a very excellent thing that you have not been near the Asprays for a long time! It is quite a fortnight since you saw any of them."

"Oh, quite—quite!" answered Augusta.

"And now, as you suggested," said Miss Roy, "you had better go to your room.—Kitty, you go with your cousin. Nancy ought to have a run in the fresh air before night."

"No; I want Nancy. I can't—I won't have any one else," said Augusta.

"And I don't want to go out, really," said Nancy, looking full at Miss Roy as she spoke.

The two girls left the room and went upstairs.

The moment they got to her room Augusta said, "Lock the door, Nancy; lock it, and come over close to me. Take my hands in yours. Feel how cold I am. Feel how I tremble."

"Yes—yes; I know," said Nancy.

"And you know also about my terror—my scare?"

"Yes; I think so. But, Gussie, *were* you there last night?"

"Yes; in the house—the very house. I saw Flora, and Flora had slept in the room with Connie the night before; and they said I ought not to have come in, but I went. Oh! I am sure I am infected, and if I get it I shall die. Oh Nan! I am sick with terror—sick with terror."

"You must tell," said Nancy. "You must tell Uncle Peter and Miss Roy at once. I know they will forgive you and be sorry for you; but, Augusta, you must tell."

"Tell!" said Augusta. "You little horror, if you let it out, I don't know what I shall not do to you. Of course I won't tell; why should I? Tell! Why, that would mean no Paris, no Royal Cross. It would mean disgrace; it would mean ruin. I am *never* going to tell."

"But suppose you get smallpox."

"Will telling save me?"

"But it will save the others. You ought not to be with them. You may give it to Kitty and Nora."

"And to Nancy. Now I know why Nancy is so anxious that I should make a confession. But I won't tell; and you must not tell. Now sit close to me, and let us think. It is a real comfort to have you to confide in. There! put your arms round my neck and hug me. Oh dear, how miserable I am!"

Augusta was so really wretched, and so genuinely terrified, that Nancy could not but pity her. It was impossible to be cross in the midst of such agony; and when Augusta crept close to the little girl, and squeezed her tight, and laid her head on her shoulder, Nancy found herself, in spite of everything, returning her embrace.

"You are a nice little thing," said Augusta—"so soft and petable. You don't know how you comfort me and help me to bear up. What I really ought to do is to be vaccinated. Dr Earle ought to vaccinate me, but I am afraid to speak to him."

"He certainly would tell the others," said Nancy; "and," she added, "I must, of course, tell them. You know, Gussie, it would be very, *very* wrong of me to keep this a secret."

Augusta sat still, thinking hard. Notwithstanding her softness and gentle appearance, she knew well that Nancy could be obstinate. She could be firm; she could be valiant for the truth. Augusta had proved all that the day before when the little girl had refused to help her in her escapade; so she tried to consider the best possible means of securing poor Nancy's silence by guile.

"After all, now that I come to think of it, there would be no use in my being vaccinated," she said.

"Why?" Nancy asked. "I thought it was considered a sort of safeguard."

"Yes; but I was done two years back, and I didn't take it. The doctor did me twice, and I didn't take it either time, and he said that proved I was not liable to smallpox. What a good thing I remembered! I am not half so frightened now, for our clever doctor at home must have known what he was talking about. Don't you think his opinion worth having, Nancy?"

"Yes; it comforts me too," said Nancy. "But still, I am sure you ought to tell."

"Now, why, you little goose? Do consider and be sensible, Nan. Oh, you must squeeze your arms round my neck again; I do so love to feel them! You know I am deeply attached to you, Nancy. I never mean to let you go out of my life—never."

"Oh!" answered Nancy.

"And you love me too; don't you, little darling?"

"I—I *pity* you," said Nancy, her voice trembling.

"Well, well! pity is akin to love. But now to the point at issue. Remember what my doctor said. I am almost sure I shall not take the smallpox, and there would be no use in vaccinating me, for I certainly

should not take that; so what would be the good of frightening every one? Think of the awful fortnight they would have, not being certain any moment whether I should get ill or not."

"Yes, but Nora and Kitty could go away."

"Where would be the use of that? I cannot infect them unless I get it. The clothes I wore when I was with Flora are hanging up in my cupboard. I have nothing on me that I wore then. Nancy, do believe that I am wiser than you. It would be cruel to frighten them all. I will tell them *afterwards*—yes, I will tell them afterwards, when the fortnight is past, when the danger is over; and meanwhile, if you will only be silent, I will do everything for you that I promised to do if you had helped me last night. Think what that means: the paper I robbed you of returned; and all the story of your past life explained. What a time we shall have together! And how wise you will be when you know the truth!"

"And my bird—my darling Sunbeam?" whispered Nancy.

"Perhaps I will tell about that too. I am awfully sorry about it. But, anyhow, you shall know the two other things, and we will be a good bit together for the next few days. Nancy, the moment I feel ill, the least little scrap ill, with a headache or anything, I will go away to my room, and no one shall see me but you. You are not nervous about yourself, are you?"

"Not a scrap," answered Nancy.

"You promise that you will not tell?"

"Oh, I suppose it is frightfully wrong—I am almost sure it is frightfully wrong—but you do tempt me; and if what you say is quite true—I mean about the vaccination—perhaps it would do no good to tell."

"But I'll tell you what you can do. Now that Miss Roy knows about Connie, you can put it into her head to have the rest of you vaccinated. Oh, my dear Nancy, I feel quite happy at last."

So Nancy yielded. She was sorry enough afterwards, but she yielded, being compelled by Augusta's entreaties, by the look in her eyes, and the tempting bait she held up for her acceptance.

That night Nancy was in possession of some important pieces of information. She knew exactly the position she held with regard to the Asprays. She could claim the Asprays' house as her home by right at any moment. She could leave Mrs. Richmond, and go to Mr. Aspray and say, "You owed my father money, and now I have come to you, and you are bound by your own solemn promise to my father to take me and provide for me. This is my *right*, and I owe nothing to you, because my father helped you with a large sum of money."

This was the news that Nancy was told by Augusta, but she took good care not to enlighten the little girl as to how she came by the information, Nancy listened with flushed cheeks and shining eyes; and presently, tired out, she went away to bed.

"I suppose I ought to be glad," she thought as she laid her head on her pillow; "but I am not glad, for I can never consider the Asprays' house my own. And, yes—oh yes—I would *rather* be Mrs. Richmond's little charity-girl than be the grandest girl in the world as Mr. Aspray's adopted daughter."

This news kept her from thinking so much about the smallpox, and about the danger which Augusta had run.

"Nan," said Kitty as she tumbled into bed, "how hot your face is! You tire yourself over Gussie."

"Oh, I am all right," said Nancy.

"Isn't it a good thing," said Nora, "that Augusta has not been so much with the Asprays? She might have got into most awful danger; but, as it is, all is safe."

Nancy was silent, and Kitty gave her a very earnest glance.

"You know something, and you are not going to tell us," she said abruptly.

"I wish you would not question me. I have a headache," pleaded Nancy.

"Well, no, we won't. Gussie could not have been so awfully, awfully wicked as to disobey Uncle Peter. We do know that she might be guilty of tiny sins, but a great monstrous one like that—oh, it is impossible! Now, Nan, get into bed and get your headache well. Oh, what a pity you were not downstairs to-night! We were discussing all about prize-day. Uncle Peter has arranged that it comes off on Thursday week—that is, in about ten days from now. Oh, it will be a day and a half, I can tell you!"

CHAPTER XXXI.—UNCLE PETER'S CONSIDERING CAP.

Certainly prize-day was to lose no outward manifestation of its great importance. A telegram had arrived from Mrs. Richmond announcing her safe arrival at the Cape. But when she would be back again was quite uncertain.

The girls, however, determined to have a right good time in her absence; and in this they were aided and abetted by the Captain, who, for all his moral qualities, enjoyed a lark with the best.

So far as the special prizes went, they were to be bestowed upon the successful candidates in private. "For our battalion is more or less a secret one," said the Captain. "We fight, you know, against *invisible* foes, against the powers of the air, so to speak, and we don't want *visible* people—acquaintances, and so on—to behold us either in our defeat or victory. I propose that the prizes should wind up the day, when all the guests have gone, and the dance is over, and the fun is at an end. Then will come the crowning

event, after which all must necessarily be bathos."

The girls willingly agreed, and preparations were set on foot for the festival. Captain Richmond decided that the early part of the day should be given up to the poor people of the neighbourhood. There should be a dinner on the lawn, followed by games and tea. Several prizes for feats of skill were to be offered, and the usual amusements provided.

Captain Richmond, who came down to Fairleigh almost every year, belonged to a workmen's club and a boys' cricket club, and was consequently well known by most of the people in the place. Invitations were sent out to quite a hundred poor people, and very busy were the Fairleigh servants preparing for the work which lay before them. For visitors were also to arrive in the afternoon—the several young folks whom the Richmonds happened to know. They were to help to entertain the poor people, who were expected to take their departure at six o'clock. Then would follow a dance in the great drawing-room, ending by supper. Supper would usher in the departure of the guests, and after that the successful winner of the Royal Cross would be decorated with her great honour. This was the plan, and great delight did it cause among the young people.

Augusta was now as gay as the others. She had forgotten all possible danger, and except that she avoided speaking of the Asprays, turning a little white when the subject of Connie's terrible illness was broached, she certainly looked as if nothing ailed her. She was quite in her element making preparations for the great prize-day, and proved a most useful, clever, and efficient mistress of the ceremonies; for, being the eldest girl, Captain Richmond was forced to put her into this position. Neither Kitty nor Nora wished for it; and as to Nancy, she was of course quite out of the running.

"We must have new dresses for the dance," said Augusta. "We ought to send to town for them."

"As to that," replied Captain Richmond, "you must please yourselves, girls. I never did know anything about dress; but it seems to me that all girls look much alike—that is, as far as their dress is concerned. Oh yes, put on something white and feathery-looking; that is the correct thing, is it not?"

"Uncle Pete, you are quite too killing!" said Gussie; and she laughed with great enjoyment. That afternoon she sent a long letter to her mother's dressmaker in town, the result of which was that an interesting and mysterious-looking box arrived for her on the day before the dance. It was taken straight up to her room, and she invited the three other girls and Miss Roy to come and witness the unpacking.

"I just do *adore* finery," said Gussie. "I don't pretend for a moment that I am made any other way. I revel in pretty things. No one could ever give me too much dress or too many fine feathers. Now then"——

The cord of the box was removed, the lid was lifted, and between folds of tissue-paper a beautiful white silk, soft as quantities of delicate lace and chiffon could make it, was unfolded.

"Isn't it just too sweet?" said Gussie. "Fancy me in it. I wish I were quite grown-up so that I might have a train. Well, I shall be grownup in two years' time. Two years don't take *very* long to run—do they, Miss Roy?"

"Not when you get as old as I am," said Miss Roy; "but at your age they go somewhat slowly. Yes, it is a pretty frock, but, in my opinion, a little too dressy for the occasion.—My dear Nora and Kitty and Nancy, you will look very countrified beside Augusta."

"Oh, we don't mind," said Nora, with a laugh.

"In fact," said Kitty, "we would rather wear plain washing frocks, which can just be put into the tub and come out as fresh as ever."

"Sour grapes," said Augusta. "Now, Nancy here would like a dress of this sort.—Wouldn't you, Nancy?"

"Yes—very much," replied Nancy.

Miss Roy gave her a critical and somewhat surprised glance.

"I didn't know that you cared about fine clothes, Nancy," she said.

"Not always; but I should have liked a dress like Augusta's for to-morrow. All the same," she added, "I am not going to be unhappy about it."

"Put your dress back, dear," said Miss Roy. "I am glad you are pleased. And now let us go downstairs. You know, my dears, the news about poor Connie Aspray is very serious indeed. She was so ill last night that she was not expected to live. If anything were to happen to her, our party to-morrow could scarcely take place. However, we must hope for the best.—Augusta, you are looking very white and tired; you won't be good for anything unless you go to bed soon. Now come down; Uncle Peter is waiting for his supper."

After supper that night Kitty ran up to Nora and began to whisper to her. Nora looked excited, and nodded her head once or twice. The end of the little girls' confab was a sudden rushing of two eager pairs of feet all over the grounds looking for Uncle Peter. Eventually the Captain was discovered, smoking by himself in an arbour at one end of the grounds.

"We knew you by the glow-worm in your mouth," said Nora, with a peal of laughter. "And now we want you to do something for us—oh, so very, very badly!"

"Well, come, young monkeys," said the Captain, making room for a niece to sit on each side of him. "Now then, what is the news? Oh, how your eager, silly little hearts beat! What is up, young-uns?"

"It is about Nan," said Nora. "You know, Uncle Pete, that there never was a little girl less vain than Nancy."

"My dear child, I am quite willing to believe you; but why should Nancy be vain?"

“Oh, you know she is sweetly pretty.”

“She is,” said the Captain; “she has quite a charming face.”

“And we want her to look the very prettiest girl in the room to-morrow night. Augusta has such a grand frock, sent all the way from London—a flounced and billowed and chiffoned dress, Uncle Pete—and she is so conceited about it; and to-night, when we were looking at it, Nancy said she would like a frock like that. Poor darling! we were rather surprised—though, after all, it did seem quite natural. And, Uncle Pete, we want her to have one; and, Uncle Pete, *can* you manage it?”

“Good gracious, my dear child! I know nothing about clothes.”

“Oh, couldn’t you go to town and see what the very grandest shop has—ready-made, you know? Surely there must be something that Nan could wear.”

“But to-morrow is the day of the festival. Even if I started now to London I could not be back in time.”

“But couldn’t you go to Exeter? You could get to Exeter in an hour and a half.”

“And find all the shops shut, Nora.”

“Couldn’t you take the very earliest train tomorrow morning and get back in time?”

“I could, of course, only what state should I find this place in here?”

“Oh! we will see to that. We will do every single thing in your absence.”

“What devoted little friends Nan has!”

“Of course we are devoted to our darling; who would not be?” said Nora.

“It would be so lovely to see Gussie coming in all bows and smiles and curtsies, and with that sort of affected way she has, and then Nancy dancing in in her pretty dress, looking more beautiful than Gussie could ever look!” said Kitty.

“Really, Kitty, you can be quite eloquent when you please,” said the Captain. “Well, leave the matter to me.”

“You will do it, Uncle Peter; and you will manage the money part?”

“Oh yes, child; I will manage the money part.”

“Well then, good-night, *dear* Uncle Peter; we must be going to bed.”

They tripped off through the darkness; and the Captain put on his considering cap with a vengeance.

CHAPTER XXXII.—THE BEGINNING OF THE SHADOW.

The day of the party dawned on the world as sunshiny as day could dawn. The fierce heat of the sun was tempered by just the right amount of breeze. The sultry weather of the past ten days had given place to a fresher and clearer atmosphere. All the world ought to have been in the best of spirits on such a glorious day in early autumn.

About eleven o’clock Captain Richmond appeared on the scene, carrying a square box in his hand. He entered the library, where Miss Roy happened to be alone.

Miss Roy’s face was preternaturally grave, and when she saw the Captain she uttered an exclamation of relief.

“I am so glad you have come!” she said. “I want to speak to you badly.”

“What is it?” asked Captain Richmond.

“Will you shut the door and turn the key? I don’t want any of the children to overhear us.”

“Where are the children?” asked Captain Richmond.

“Busy all over the place—busy as you might expect such little bees to be on such an occasion. Oh, but I forgot! Gussie is lying down; she has a slight headache and pain in her back.”

“Augusta doesn’t seem too strong,” said the Captain. “I have heard of several headaches lately.”

“She is a very queer girl, and I don’t understand her,” said Miss Roy.

“After all, Miss Roy,” said the Captain, “she must be a very good girl, for beyond doubt she will be the happy possessor of the Royal Cross to-night.”

“You don’t say so! I am amazed!” answered the governess.

“To tell the truth, I am amazed myself, and a little disappointed. It is wrong to say it, but I am. Still, there is no question with regard to the matter. Augusta is the only one of the little battalion who has not had a single bad mark for conduct.”

“I am sure poor Nora and Kitty have tried their best,” said Miss Roy, standing up for her pupils, as was natural.

“Just so. I am sure you are right. Nevertheless, the poor mites have little gray marks for carelessness, untidiness, forgetfulness, registered against them on several occasions.”

“Yes,” said Miss Roy, “that is true. I have entered those marks myself, and regret having had to do so.”

“What else could you do?” said the Captain. “If there was anything in my little scheme, absolute truth and justice were essential.”

“What about Nancy?” said Miss Roy, fixing her eyes on the Captain’s face.

“Nancy!” said the Captain. “Don’t you remember?”

“Remember? Oh yes! Could I forget? But I had hoped”——

“What, my dear lady?”

“That some explanation had been arrived at. How is it possible to credit a child like Nancy with cruelty?”

But then Miss Roy recalled the incident of the starving canary, and her voice faltered as she spoke.

“There is no explanation,” said Captain Richmond. “I feel nearly wild about it, I assure you. I have thought over the matter until my head ached; but the entry was made by my sister-in-law, a woman who does not make mistakes. It is impossible there could be anything wrong in the entry. What Nancy did we don’t know, but that mark takes away even the remotest chance of her winning the Royal Cross.”

“Then you will tell her,” said Miss Roy; “you will at least give her a chance of explaining, if any explanation is possible?”

“Yes; I shall have to speak of it at the time. It will be a painful moment, but it is only just to the little girl.”

“I feel certain,” said Miss Roy, “that Nancy will be able to put matters right.”

But then again she thought of the canary, and once again her speech seemed to choke her.

“You must not worry about it,” said Captain Richmond. “And now,” he added in a good-natured tone, “can I do anything for you? Pray command me.”

“There is something I must speak to you about, Captain Richmond—something very serious and painful. I cannot tell you how grieved I am that such bad news should reach us on this auspicious day. I think it will be our duty to keep what I am about to communicate from the young people. Let them have one day of pleasure at any rate. But the fact is, poor Constance Aspray is not expected to live out the day, and a servant in the house has now developed smallpox.”

“Indeed!” said the Captain. “How terrible!”

“We cannot put off our guests now,” said Miss Roy; “nor would it be wise. Any kind of panic at such a time would be sure to make the mischief worse. There have been a few other cases in the village, and although they have been removed to hospital at once, yet it would certainly be best for us to leave here to-morrow morning. I should not feel I was fulfilling my duty to Mrs. Richmond if I allowed the children to run any further risk.”

“Very well,” said the Captain, “you must do as you think best. Only let them all be happy for this day at least.”

He was about to leave the room, when he turned suddenly:

“Could you have this box conveyed to Nancy’s bedroom?” he said. “There is a little surprise within for her; and I only wish I were able to give her the Royal Cross to-night.”

Miss Roy promised to attend to Captain Richmond’s request, and the young man left the house.

Outside, Kitty, Nora, and Nancy were rushing wildly about, arranging benches, seeing to the best position for garden chairs, and helping here, there, and everywhere. They rushed to the Captain with glad welcomes, and he was soon as busy as the rest making preparations for the evening.

Lunch was extra early that day, in order to have everything in readiness for the advent of the poor people early in the afternoon.

Nancy and the other two girls went up to their rooms, and soon a shriek from Nancy brought Kitty and Nora running to her bedroom.

“Oh, is it a fairy—is it—is it? I don’t know whether I am on my head or on my heels,” cried the little girl; “but such a darling, such a beauty! Oh, isn’t it just sweet? Who gave it to me? Kitty, it can’t be true; it must be meant for some other little girl.”

“No, it isn’t. See what is written on that piece of paper,” said Kitty, whose face was red and her eyes dancing with joy. “See for yourself, Nancy; see for yourself.”

Nancy read the following words on a little white card:

“From a genie to a good fairy, with compliments.”

“Oh, it is quite mysterious!” said Nancy. “But are you certain that I am the good fairy?”

“Certain—positive,” said Kitty. “Why, I could not wear that dress; it is a great deal too small. What a figure of fun I should look with my long legs! But it will suit you, Nancy, to perfection. I knew that”——

“Hush, Kitty!” said Nora.

“You are hiding something from me,” said Nancy.

“Nothing—nothing, truly: but do let us examine it. Is it not wonderful to have a genie for a friend?”

“What is a genie?” said Nancy.

“A sort of grown-up fairy—better than a fairy, because he is stronger, and he is quite grownup, you know. And if a little girl has a genie for a friend, why, anything may happen to her. She might ask for anything and she would probably get it. And, oh, what sweet little shoes! And the stockings! Well done,

Unc”——

“Kitty, you are quite incorrigible,” said Nora. “But there, Nan! you are in luck; the dress is yours, and you are to wear it to-night. Now do come, Kit, for if we don’t hurry we shall be late for lunch.”

Nancy folded the pretty frock and put it into its box. Kitty’s words had enlightened her: Uncle Pete was the genie; and, of course, she was the good little fairy.

“But am I a good fairy?” thought the child. “Oh, if he only knew! And if he could only guess how my heart aches—often, often. I know I have no chance of the Royal Cross to-night. I wonder who will get it. Gussie hopes that she will. Perhaps she will, for she is so clever; no one guesses when Gussie does wrong things—no one but me. Oh, how unhappy she has made my life! Well, I must go to her now. I must find out if her head is any better.”

Nan flew along the corridors, and soon reached Augusta’s room, opened the door without knocking, and went in.

Augusta was lying in an uneasy doze, and her face was considerably flushed.

“It is lunch-time,” said Nan; “aren’t you coming down?”

“No,” said Augusta; “I could not eat anything.”

“Are you ill?” asked Nancy in a low, terror-stricken whisper.

“No, I am not a bit ill,” said Augusta; “but I have got one of my stupid headaches. Don’t look so scared, child. Come here, close to me, Nan.”

“Yes,” said Nancy; and she went to Augusta’s side and bent over her. “You are hot, Gussie; and, oh dear, how your face burns!”

“I always get hot like that when I have these stupid headaches; but it is better. I don’t feel it when I am lying down. Nancy, has there been any news from the Asprays?”

“I have not heard of any,” said Nancy.

“Oh, what a relief”——

“We would have heard if—if the worst——” said Nancy.

“Oh, of course; but don’t let as think any more about them,” said Augusta. “And I am not a bit ill, really. Tell them all I am coming down this afternoon, but I shall stay quiet until then.”

“But won’t you have anything to eat, Gussie?”

“No, no; nothing. I could not touch a morsel. Go away now; there’s a good child.”

“Do you know, Gussie, Uncle Pete—a good genie, I mean—has brought me such a lovely frock; very like yours, only, I think, nicer. It was in a box, and the box was on my bed. I have just unfastened it and looked at the frock. But isn’t it just too sweet of him?”

“Yes,” said Augusta. “Then there will be two of us to look pretty to-night.”

“I want to look very, very pretty,” said Nancy, “just to show Uncle Pete how grateful I am to him.”

“Well, don’t chat any more now; your silly talk makes my head worse than ever. Run away now. Only listen; if there is any worse news, be sure you let me know.”

“Yes,” said Nancy; and she left the room.

Augusta tossed from side to side of her bed. Troubled thoughts were visiting her. A fear, grave and mighty, was lying dormant in her breast; very little would make it start into full growth. She sat up presently and pushed the thick hair from her brows.

One of the housemaids came in, and started when she saw Augusta; then coming forward, she said in a tone of commiseration:

“Oh, Miss Gussie! I didn’t know you were here. And you do look bad, miss. Is there much the matter?”

“Only a stupid headache,” said Augusta. “It will be all right presently. I shall come down to have my fun when those tiresome poor people have gone; I am not going before.”

“We are all going to have a lark,” said the girl, who saw no reason for being extra respectful to Augusta, who was no favourite with the servants. “There are a lot of them coming; but Gaffer Jones can’t, nor can old Tilbury.”

“Who are they? And why can’t they come?” asked Augusta.

“Because of the sickness, miss.”

“Sickness!” said Augusta, at once on the alert. “Is any one ill?”

“Three cases of smallpox in the village, miss. But the sick people is took to the hospital—two in Gaffer Jones’s house, and one in Tilbury’s—three in all. It do seem sad about that poor, handsome young lady.”

“Miss Aspray, do you mean?” said Augusta, whose face had now turned deadly white.

“Yes, miss—of course.”

“She is not dead?”

“No, no, miss. How bad you look! But she is likely to be afore long. There! I won’t talk to you no more, miss, if I can’t do nothing for you; but if you would like a cup of tea”——

“No; leave me, please, Jane. All I want is to be quiet.”

Jane withdrew, and Augusta flung herself once more on her bed and covered her head.

“Of course it is nothing,” she said to herself; “only this headache. I am safe now, and I won’t even think there is anything to fear. But—but, oh, the pain in my back!”

Notwithstanding the shadow of illness which rested so darkly over one house, and which was already making its cruel and awful presence felt in the village, the party at Fairleigh was a merry one. Everything was done to make the guests happy. There was no selfish element at work, and the guests were delighted—there was no hitch anywhere. Poor Augusta upstairs, in pain and terror, was for the time forgotten.

But the gayest time will come to an end, and when the party had run races innumerable, swarmed up greasy poles, leapt barriers, and jumped about in sacks, and gone through the different feats which are the pride and honour of an Englishman’s holiday, a good meal followed. Then the children of the neighbourhood appeared on the scene, and soon after six o’clock the first batch of guests took their leave.

It was now the turn of the young people of the house to rush off to their rooms to get ready for the dance, which was to be, in one sense, the greatest event of the day.

Nan, with her heart smiting her for having forgotten Augusta so long, went first to that young lady’s room.

She knocked. Gussie said, “Come in;” and she entered.

“How do I look?” said Augusta.

Nancy started with genuine pleasure when she saw her. She was up, and was arrayed in her beautiful frock. The maid Jane had been summoned, and had tied all the strings and fastened the different hooks.

“You do look well now, Gussie,” said Nancy. “I am so happy!”

Augusta, always a striking-looking girl, looked distinctly handsome to-night. The brightness of incipient fever shone in her eyes, making them both large and dark; a rich colour mantled her cheeks, and the very dread which filled her softened her beauty and gave character to her face. Her lovely dress fitted her to perfection, and showed off her young graces, making her look quite remarkable.

“How nicely you have your hair done! Did Jane do it?” asked Nancy.

“No; I did it myself.”

“And is your headache quite well now?”

“It aches now and then, but it is nothing to signify. When I have danced a little I shall be quite all right.”

“Oh Gussie! you are shivering, and your face has turned white.”

“I must have taken a chill,” said Augusta. “I have been like this, off and on, all day.”

“Have you had anything to eat, Gussie?”

“No; I could not eat. But I should like something to drink. My eyes burn, and I am awfully thirsty.”

“Oh, there are such piles of ices downstairs! I will go and fetch you a strawberry ice.”

“You really are a good little thing. But come here. Have you heard anything fresh about the Asprays?”

“About the Asprays?” said Nancy. “No—nothing at all.”

“But I have. Jane has told me that Constance is worse—so bad that they don’t think she can recover. And, oh! if Connie dies, I can’t—I *can’t* bear it.”

“Oh, but she won’t die! And please—please, Gussie, do bear up. I am sure God will spare Constance.”

“I don’t know. I don’t seem able to believe anything—anything good, I mean, Nancy. But did I tell you that there are cases in the village?”

“Are there?” said Nancy. “But it can’t be true,” she added, “for if there were Miss Roy would have told us.”

“It is true; and I watched the people as they came on the lawn. I watched them on purpose. Gaffer Jones was not there, nor was Mrs. Tilbury, nor any of her family. Some of the Tilburys are down with it, Nancy, and some of the Joneses. And, oh dear! I wish I could get it all out of my head—it is so—so dreadful.”

“I must rush away to dress,” said Nancy. “It is very sad, but we are bound to make ourselves happy to-night, and forget such things.”

She ran off, having quite forgotten about the ice which she had promised to bring to Augusta.

Augusta stood for a long while by the window; then she went downstairs.

The final touches had been given to the long supper-table. Nancy was right; there were pails full of ice under the sideboard.

“I am so thirsty, Walter; will you give me some ice?” said Augusta.

The man helped her to a strawberry ice, which she ate greedily. “Now I will have something to drink,” she said; “iced champagne—anything.”

There was no iced champagne, but iced claret-cup was forthcoming, and Augusta drank it, declaring to herself that she felt vastly better. She then went out on the lawn.

There she was met by Uncle Peter in his evening-dress, and soon afterwards the three girls joined them.

Nancy looked just as sweet as the genie thought she would when he selected her dress. Her face was

pale beside the flaming colour which painted Augusta's cheeks, but—there was no doubt about it—the little girl possessed the rarer sort of beauty. Nancy's was of the spiritual order, filling her eyes with sadness and sympathy, and making the expression of her little face unworldly and high in tone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.—THE CROSS.

Never had Augusta looked so well as she did that night. She danced quite beautifully, and was really a brilliant young mistress of the ceremonies. Many were the admiring glances cast at her, and loud the admiration she evoked. For the time being Augusta was unselfish. She thought of the comfort and pleasure of her guests. She managed to make the awkward ones feel at ease, and the shy ones feel at home; at the same time she kept the too forward children in order—in short, she was invaluable.

Uncle Peter was especially struck both by her conduct and her appearance.

"She really is a fine girl," he said to himself. "There is something wonderfully taking about her to-night; and how good she is, and self-forgetful! I shall have more pleasure than I had the least idea of a few hours ago in presenting her with the Royal Cross."

As these thoughts came to him, he observed that Augusta was standing where the full draught of the open door blew upon her thin evening-dress. She shivered, and sank down on the nearest chair.

Captain Richmond immediately went to her side.

"Augusta," he said, "have you a dance to spare for me? You haven't given me one yet."

"I can give you the present one," she replied at once, "if you will sit it out with me."

"With pleasure! Where shall we go? You are in a fearful draught just here, and you look positively cold."

"I am shivering," replied Augusta. "Let us go to the conservatory."

They went there. The conservatory was too hot for many people on this summer's night, and was comparatively empty. Augusta sank down on a seat.

"I will get you a wrap," said the Captain. "You ought not to feel cold on a night like this."

"Oh, I am quite all right," she answered. "Don't leave me; let us sit down and talk. You are very fond of Nancy, are you not?"

"Of course; we all are," he replied.

"I should like to say——" stammered Augusta.

"What, my dear?"

She paused and looked full at her questioner.

"This," she said: "you know I am not an especially nice girl, but I can admire goodness when I see it in others. Now, no one was ever half so good as Nancy; and even if appearances seem to have been against her, she was far and away the best of us all.—Oh, what am I saying? What utter nonsense am I talking? Will you take me back to the ballroom, please? I would not miss the next waltz for anything."

"I will take you back when you have explained your last words."

"There is nothing to explain—nothing at all. I spoke quite at random. Dear little Nancy! I am as fond of her as you are."

"Listen, Augusta," said the Captain. "I didn't mean to confide in you, but I will. You know of the little ceremony which is to take place to-night when the dance is over. We are to go into the inner drawing-room, and there it will be decided, from what I shall read aloud out of the orderly-book, which of you four girls is to receive the Royal Cross."

"Of course; I know that," answered Augusta.

"Yes; but listen. There is an entry in the orderly-book against Nancy's name which puts her out of the running."

"Puts her out of the running!" whispered Augusta. Her very lips were white.

Captain Richmond's eyes seemed like gimlets piercing into her soul.

"There is a charge against Nancy which, made against any child, would condemn her—condemn her so utterly that one could not think of her as a winner of that great prize which means nobleness of conduct, valour, and all the rest. Augusta, you will all know soon, but it does not matter my telling you an hour or so before the others. Nancy Esterleigh is charged with *cruelty*. Can you, Gussie, help me to throw light upon, in her case, such an unnatural accusation?"

There was a wild beating in Augusta's ears; her head ached so terribly that she was almost giddy, and a cold chill ran down her back. She turned aside and plucked a geranium blossom from a great flowering bush near by.

"Can you?" said the Captain again.

"No. How is it possible? The accusation has astonished me."

"There is also that curious thing which happened with regard to her bird. Can you throw any light upon that?"

“No—no; a thousand times no. What do you take me for? Do you think I would let little Nancy suffer *if* I could help her?”

“Of course not,” said the Captain coldly. “I think the dance has come to an end. May I take you back to the ballroom?”

For the rest of that evening Augusta was not still for a single moment. When she was not dancing she was walking about. Her laugh could be heard gay, almost shrill. Her cheeks wore pink with the flush of fever, which those who saw her mistook for health. She was far and away the most successful girl at the dance. Even Nancy, beautiful little girl as she was, and lovely as she looked in the new frock, was not to be compared with her.

But all good things, as well as bad things, come to an end, and by-and-by the ball was over. The party broke up; the young folk put on their wraps, said good-bye to their hosts, and left Fairleigh. The last sound of the last carriage-wheel died away. The four girls, Miss Roy, and Captain Richmond faced each other. It was on the stroke of midnight.

“How tired you all look!” said Miss Roy. “Shall we defer the further ceremony until to-morrow?”

“No,” said Captain Richmond; “this is the appointed day. Come at once, all of you.”

The servants were rushing about, locking up and putting things in order. Captain Richmond conducted his party to the front drawing-room, and turned the key in the lock. The electric light made the room bright as day. The windows looking on to the lawn were wide open. When they all entered the room, Captain Richmond opened the drawer, the lock of which had been injured by Augusta, and took the orderly-book out. At the same moment he put his hand in his pocket and produced a small morocco case, which he laid on the table.

“Now, my little soldiers,” he said, “the crucial moment of our campaign has arrived. You have been under my command, and have also been disciplined by my good ally, Sergeant Roy, for the last few months; and, on the whole, I trust you feel better, morally and physically, for the soldier’s life.”

“Oh yes, indeed!” cried Nora. “We like it awfully. I hope we are not going to cease to be soldiers to-night, Uncle Pete.”

“Certainly not, Nora. In one sense you must always be soldiers, but whether you remain in my battalion will depend a great deal on yourselves. But now to business; you are tired, and we must not linger. This book gives, in a condensed form, the history of your lives from the moment you enlisted under my banner. Now then, soldiers of the True Blue, we will see what it says about you.”

Here Captain Richmond opened the book. He looked quickly down the pages which related to Nora’s life.

“An excellent report on the whole, Nora,” he said when he had finished, “but conduct not immaculate—a few errors, dear, in the form of untidy rooms, lost property, and forgotten duties. Nothing exactly serious, but”——

The Captain’s “but” was emphatic. Nora turned from pink to white.

“I knew it,” she said to her sister. “I never, never expected”——

“Hush!” said Kitty, “Uncle Pete is speaking again.”

“Kitty, on the whole you have done better than Nora. Your industry has been unparalleled, and, in short, I think you are deserving of a prize. If you hadn’t been so inveterately careless, my little girl, there might have been a chance of my giving you *the* prize. But see here, Kit—here, and here, and here.” The Captain laid his finger against certain marks in Kitty’s record.

Kitty coloured and stepped back.

“I deserve them all,” she said.

“Well, that is something worth hearing,” he answered with heartiness, “for when we know our faults, then is the time when we begin to mend them.—Now then, Nancy.”

Nancy was standing by an open window. Her face looked serene and quiet. She did not for a moment think that she would win the Royal Cross; but, at the same time, she did not think there could be any grave charge chronicled against her name.

“Nancy, I have something sad to say to you,” said the Captain, going forward and taking her hand in his as he spoke. “Even still I think there must be some explanation.”

“What—what,” cried Nancy—“what do you mean?”

“Don’t tremble so, Nancy. Listen. Your conduct has been irreproachable, and your struggle to maintain a high level in morals and intellect very great; but, alas! on one occasion you fell—a good deep fall, Nancy—you fell from a high ladder.”

“I fell from a height! Oh, what do you mean?”

She looked wildly at Augusta, who glanced at Miss Roy. Miss Roy turned aside; Augusta’s bold eyes were fixed upon her face.

“I have fallen from a height! When? Where? How?”

“Here,” said the Captain; “see for yourself. Every one need not know, but you must know; read for yourself.”

Dizzily the little girl bent her head. For a moment she could see nothing. Then she read, as though they were written in letters of fire, the dreadful words, “Guilty of cruelty.”

She read this aloud and flung back her head.

"*That* I have never been guilty of. It is a *lie*; it is a black lie. I have never been cruel in all my life."

The Captain sighed.

"It is in Aunt Jessie's own handwriting. I am afraid there is no refuge from this storm. You had better not add to"——

"Oh! don't say any more; I cannot—cannot stand it," said the child.

She was about to rush through the open window, when Augusta stepped forward and held her hand.

"Be quiet," she said—"for my sake."

Again the extraordinary influence which Augusta had over the little girl made itself felt. Nancy stood still, allowing Augusta to hold her hand within her own hot clasp; she partly turned her back upon the others.

"There is no bad mark against your name, Augusta," said the Captain after a pause, his voice slightly shaking. "All through these months of training and discipline your conduct has been admirable. You have been industrious; you have been courteous; you have been kind. You have, I doubt not, been also unselfish; therefore I proclaim you the happy possessor of the Royal Cross. Come here and let me fasten it round your neck."

Augusta came totteringly forward. All eyes were fixed upon her; Nancy's, no longer gentle, but fierce and defiant, were raised to watch her face, but Augusta would not now look at Nancy.

The Royal Cross was made of deep-blue enamel, inlaid in rich silver. It was in the shape of an Irish cross, and was very beautiful. On it were engraved the words, *For valour in the fight*. The cross was attached to a narrow silver chain. Captain Richmond slipped the chain round Augusta's throat, and the deep-blue cross shone on her bare white neck.

Just then, before any one could speak, there came on the air the sound of a tolling bell. It was distinctly audible. It tolled three times and then stopped, three times again and then stopped, and then three times once more.

"Some woman has died, poor thing!" said the Captain.

Then the solemn notes rang out again. They sounded sixteen times.

Augusta uttered a cry.

"It is Connie!" she said. "Oh, what shall I do?"

The next instant the wretched girl had fallen in a dead faint on the floor.

CHAPTER XXXIV.—THE LETTER.

The confusion and consternation which followed poor Augusta's utter collapse can be better imagined than described. The sick girl was tenderly lifted from the ground in Captain Richmond's strong arms. She was conveyed to a sofa, and the usual restoratives were administered; and when she opened her eyes and cried wildly, "Oh, my head!—oh, my back!" Miss Roy motioned to the other children to leave the room. Nancy was about to follow the example of the two little Richmond girls, when Augusta's feverish eyes rested on her face.

"Don't go. I can't part from you—I can't—I won't.—Let Nancy stay, please—please, Miss Roy."

"Stay for the present, dear," said Miss Roy, nodding towards Nancy.

"Oh! let her hold my hand; let her kneel by me; no one else comforts me," almost screamed the excited girl.

"You must control yourself, Augusta," said the Captain, speaking now in an almost stern voice. "We must get you to your room. If you are too weak to walk I will carry you."

"No; I can walk," said Augusta. "I will lean on you if I may. My head feels as if it would burst. Oh, is she dead? Nan—Nan, tell me the truth. Constance can't—no, she can't be dead."

"We don't know who is dead, dear," said Miss Roy. "We must only hope that it is not your poor young friend. Now, don't talk any more; just let us get you to your room."

It was with some difficulty that Augusta, who was half-delirious with illness, pain, and terror, could be got to her own apartment. At last, however, Miss Roy and the Captain succeeded in doing so. She was got into bed, and, late as it was, Captain Richmond went for the doctor.

Dr Earle happened to be in, and returned at once with Captain Richmond to Fairleigh.

He saw Augusta, took her temperature, examined her very carefully, looked into her eyes, felt her pulse, and then called Miss Roy aside.

"She is very ill, poor girl!" said the doctor.

"Her temperature is high, her pulse rapid, and she is undoubtedly very feverish. If it were not—— But no, that is impossible."

"What do you mean?" said Miss Roy, in great alarm.

“Oh, nothing. I am sorry I alarmed you. Miss Duncan has not been near any infection, has she?”

“No; certainly not.”

“We have a few cases of smallpox; but, of course, if she has not been in the village she is safe. I am not attending poor Miss Aspray; Dr Reynolds is her physician. She was frightfully ill this afternoon; and the other sister, Flora, they say, is sickening. Miss Duncan has not been near them, has she?”

“No; of that I am positive,” replied Miss Roy. “Mrs. Richmond did not wish the children to make any fresh friends during her absence, and Augusta has had nothing to do with those young people for several weeks.”

“Oh! then, of course, it is not that—although some of the symptoms point to it.”

“Dr Earle, you quite terrify me.”

“You need not be frightened; of that I am certain. But don’t let the little girl, Miss Nancy, stay too much in the room; it is never wise in these feverish cases. I will call in early in the morning. I trust by then the fever will have abated.”

The doctor went away. When Miss Roy returned to the sickroom Augusta was lying half across the bed, her arms flung round Nancy’s neck, who was kneeling by her side. As Miss Roy came in she heard Augusta say:

“Take the cross off my neck, Nancy, and put it on yours. I shall die if I wear it any longer. It is so heavy—so heavy—like lead—it goes through me; it burns through my flesh. Wear it—wear it, to please me—to please me.”

Nancy began to take the cross off with trembling fingers.

“Let me fasten it round your neck, Nan; then I shall feel better. Oh! it is some sort of—some sort of”——

“Let me fasten it round your neck, Nan, then I shall feel better.”

The words gradually trailed away into silence. The miserable girl had fallen into a broken slumber.

“Get up at once, Nancy,” said Miss Roy; “and take that off—do, my dear. And—and go away to bed.”

Nancy rose to her feet looking pale and scared. The dark blue cross with its silver mountings shone up against her white neck. Miss Roy herself removed it, and laid it on the table.

“Good-night, darling,” she said to the little girl.

“Mayn’t I stay?” asked Nancy.

“No; and you are not to come back until I give you leave. Now run away; you are looking tired.”

“It is not being just tired,” said Nan slowly; “it is—the other—it—*it kills me*.”

“I am very sorry for you, and I don’t understand it,” said Miss Roy. “Perhaps, if you are good and patient, God will give us an explanation some day. Now we are all in trouble about Augusta, and must try to forget ourselves. Goodnight, dear; go to bed.”

“I will,” said Nancy.

She walked feebly out of the room. When she reached the door she turned and looked again at Augusta; but Augusta’s head was buried in the bedclothes. Nancy gave another sigh, and shut the door.

All during the night that followed, Miss Roy did not leave the sick girl. Captain Richmond waited in the

anteroom to give what aid he could.

Towards morning Augusta dropped into a more refreshing sleep; but she presently awakened, screaming out that Connie was dead, and that she could not bear it. Miss Roy did all she could to soothe her, and presently called Captain Richmond to the door of the sickroom.

“The day has come,” she said. “That poor child is in a frenzy of grief and terror about Constance Aspray. How could one guess she loved the girl so much?—for they had seldom or never been together. I wish we could find out if the passing-bell was tolling for her. To know that she is still alive would give poor Augusta more rest than anything else.”

“It is nearly seven o’clock,” said the Captain. “I will stroll down towards the village. Doubtless, if it is true, some of the poor people will know.”

He left the house at once. The morning was beautiful. The dew still lay on grass and shrub and flower. The world outside seemed so pure and restful after the miserable and restless night through which he had just lived. But the heart of the young soldier was full of strange, inexplicable fear. He had a dread of something which was close at hand—something intangible. He thought of Nancy’s face of agony the night before; the ring in her voice when she said that the charge against her was a lie—a black lie. The words were the words of injured innocence. It was, in truth, impossible to associate so gentle a child with so strange a crime.

“Who can have done it?” thought the Captain. “Poor little Nancy! I am certain—positive—that she is innocent.”

He had now reached the village. He walked down the street, and at the farther end encountered a somewhat belated milkman hurrying by on his rounds. Captain Richmond called out to him:

“Can you tell me for whom the bell was tolling last night?”

“Oh sir, for that poor girl of Mrs. Sherlock. She’s been given over in consumption for many a day. She died just at midnight, and the ringers went at once to toll for her. She had a fancy for the passing-bell, and begged that it should be tolled the minute the breath was out of her body, poor soul! Yes, sir; God help her, she is out of her misery now.”

Captain Richmond said one or two suitable words, and, with a great sense of relief, continued his walk. There was no use in returning at once to the house, so he struck a path which brought him down to the seashore. The tide was at the full. He walked along by the edge of the shingle. Suddenly he heard his name called, and looking up, saw a lady who appeared to be a total stranger.

“You are Captain Richmond, and you live at Fairleigh?” she said. “I feel certain I am right from the description I have received of you.”

“My name is Richmond,” he answered, removing his hat, “and I am staying at Fairleigh for the present.”

“Now, that is extremely lucky, and will prevent my having to write to the house, which might not have been advisable under the circumstances. Don’t come any nearer, please. You are quite safe with six feet of pure air between us. I am Mrs. Aspray.”

“Oh, indeed!” said the Captain. “Of course, I have heard of you, Mrs. Aspray. We have all been so terribly troubled about your great anxiety. May I ask you how your daughter is?”

“My daughter Constance has passed the crisis. She was at death’s door all yesterday, but about midnight she fell into a refreshing sleep. I have left her sleeping now. I have gone through a time enough to madden any one, but the doctor is with her at the present moment and says that the danger is practically over. I felt I must get a breath of fresh air before any one else was stirring. You see, I have been with her day and night. Oh, it has been a fearful case—fearful! And now poor Flo is down—took ill yesterday morning; the disease declared itself last night. Poor Flo gave me a message, which I was to convey somehow, in some fashion, to Fairleigh. Providence has brought you here, Captain Richmond.”

“I will take the message,” said the Captain. “Who is it to?”

“To you—to the governess—to whoever has charge of the young people. I understand Mrs. Richmond is away. There is a young girl in your house of the name of Augusta Duncan, isn’t there?”

“Yes.”

“She has been a good deal with my girls. She was invited to a dance, which was to have taken place on the very day that Constance took ill. Without my knowing it, she arrived at our house late that evening. Contrary to my orders, she was admitted and saw Flora. Flora only confessed to it last night. Of course, Miss Duncan ran risk of infection, but it may not be too late—I mean, that you may have time to remove the other girls. At any rate, it is only right that you should know.”

Captain Richmond’s face turned very white.

“I am afraid I have given you a shock,” said Mrs. Aspray; “but perhaps—God knows how I feel this thing!—*perhaps* I am in time.”

“Alas! no,” he replied. “Augusta is very ill indeed, and another of the children has been much with her. Another child who”—— He broke off, and his lips trembled. “From what Dr Earle said last night, there is small or, indeed, no doubt what Augusta is sickening for. But thank you for telling me; anything is better than suspense, and I will do what I can.”

He turned without another word and went back to Fairleigh.

Mrs. Aspray looked after his retreating figure.

“Poor fellow!” she said to herself. “My news seemed to stun him. What an awful pity that Flo kept this

thing to herself! I am afraid that Augusta cannot be a very nice girl. I did feel annoyed when those young people were not inclined to follow up our advances, but I would not have one of them in the house under the rose, as it were, on any condition whatever. Flo certainly behaved very badly."

The anxious and burdened woman went slowly back to the infected house, and Captain Richmond returned to Fairleigh. On his way home he met the postman. Among the letters was one which bore the Capetown postmark. It was addressed to himself. He looked up at the windows of the house where the children, tired out by the excitement of the past day, still slept.

"I may as well read what Aunt Jessie has to say out here," he murmured to himself.

He sat down on a garden bench and opened the letter, which ran as follows:

> "My Dear Peter,—You will want to know all my news, which I am telling Nora and Kitty in the enclosure which goes with this. In the meantime I have something else to tell you. It is extraordinary what tricks memory plays one. During the voyage we had rather a bad storm; we tossed about a good bit, and some of the passengers were considerably frightened. I was not among the number; but as I lay awake I kept recalling different incidents in the happy home-life. My friend was in the berth above mine, and she kept moaning all the time, and talking to herself of her terrible loss. Although I pitied her, my thoughts would keep going back and back to the life at Fairleigh; and, do you know, a sudden quite dreadful memory came to me. You know, of course, the orderly-book. Well, my dear Peter, I am strongly under the impression that in the great hurry of leaving home I turned over two pages when I ought to have turned over one. If that is the case I have put certain marks into Nancy's entry which ought to have stood against Augusta's. I feel so uncomfortable about this that I wish you would ascertain for yourself. I don't know whether you have yet bestowed the great prize, but I rather gather that it is to be awarded in a short time. Well, it so happened that on the very day I was obliged to hurry off to my poor friend I came across Augusta treating Nancy in a very high-handed and cruel manner. I was greatly distressed, and entered into the thing as fully as I could. It is not necessary, and I have no time now, to give you all the circumstances. But the fact is, I had no choice left but to give Augusta that evening a mark for cruelty. Now, it would be too horrible if that mark, through my carelessness, was entered against Nancy. If you have not awarded the prizes, you will look into this matter and put it straight; if you have—— But I won't think of that.
>
> "Long before this reaches you we shall be on our way to Mrs. Rashleigh's daughter. I shall not make a long stay. I will just remain a night or two, and hurry home by the first boat. With much love to everybody.—Your affectionate sister,
>
> "Jessie Richmond."

CHAPTER XXXV.—THE WAY OF TRANSGRESSORS IS HARD.

It is a trite saying, illustrated over and over again in many lives, that the way of transgressors is hard; and when Augusta lay on her sickbed, stricken down by the fell disease, she was paying a bitter price for her days of selfishness, hypocrisy, cunning, and cruelty.

When God struck so hard it was impossible for man to say anything. No one could have nursed the poor girl more devotedly than did Miss Roy. Professional nurses were of course sent for; and Nora and Kitty were sent immediately to the house of a cousin who promised to receive them and take every care of them. The doctor said, when he learnt all particulars, that it would not be safe to send Nancy away. She was not allowed to go near Augusta, but she still remained at Fairleigh.

Nan and Captain Richmond had a little talk together. Nan came away after that talk and crept into a corner by herself, and cried and cried for a long time; then she came back to the Captain, put her arms round his neck, and kissed him.

"I don't mind anything now, for *you* understand, and God understands. And please—please forgive poor Gussie; she could not have known what she was doing."

But the Captain would make no promises about Augusta.

"We will leave her out for the present," he said. "You and I are happy together; we understand each other, and that which rested like a nightmare on your poor little soul is lifted. The weather is fine; we will spend all our time in the open air, and I will tell you some more things about what soldiers do."

So in those dark days the Captain and Nancy became better friends than ever.

At last there came the hour when the crisis had passed for Augusta. The danger was over—she would get well. Then both the Captain and Miss Roy looked with fear at Nan; would she sicken, or would she escape the danger? Ten days passed; then slowly—very slowly—the fortnight of probation came to an end, and Nancy was still well, still smiling, still happy.

"I do believe she will escape," said the Captain. "It seems almost too good to be true."

Wonderful as it is to relate, Nancy did not become ill. And when this point was clearly ascertained, she was taken to join Nora and Kitty at their cousin's house.

There the children had a gay time together while Augusta slowly came back to convalescence. Very slow indeed was her recovery, for she had taken the complaint badly, and for some time the fresh, fair beauty

of her face was marred. “But not for ever,” said Dr Earle. “By-and-by she will recover her looks; but she has had a narrow escape both of her life and of her eyesight.”

When Augusta was comparatively well again, on an evening in late October, Mrs. Richmond arrived at her home.

Augusta was seated by herself in the drawing-room. She sat with her back to the light. Her eyes were weak, and she did not like people to see more of her poor disfigured face than was absolutely necessary. But when Mrs. Richmond came in, and the girl noticed the kindly face, so like her own mother’s, she uttered a strangled cry, and running forward, flung her arms round her neck.

“Oh, Aunt Jessie, it *is* good to see you. Oh, now I believe I shall have a chance of being happy again.”

“Yes, my darling, I am glad to have got back. Oh, what I have suffered on your account!”

“But don’t you know the truth? Hasn’t Uncle Pete told you?”

“He came down with me from London, Augusta. And—yes—he has told me everything.”

“Then you can never really love me again.” Mrs. Richmond did not reply for a moment; then she said slowly:

“When you lay in great pain and delirium, when you were nigh to death, and missed your own mother, and felt, as you must have felt for a short time at least, that God Himself was hiding His face from you, then was your punishment, Augusta dear. If you have received it in due submission and repentance, who am I that I should not love you?”

“And does Nan—does Nan forgive me?”

“She is in the other room. You are quite free from infection; she will speak to you in a moment. But, Gussie, before you meet I have one little thing to tell you: Nan will never go to the Asprays. She will be my child always, for I owe to Nancy just as great a debt as Mr. Aspray owed her father. It is an old story, dear, and I will not tell it to Nancy yet for she is too young; but I think it right that you should hear it. Long, long ago, before you were born, and before your mother was married, Nancy’s mother and I were friends. But a great trouble arrived, for we both—each unknown to the other—loved the same man. He cared more for Nancy’s mother than he did for me; and Nancy’s mother loved him with all her heart and soul and strength. I didn’t know it at the time, although the knowledge came to me afterwards. She refused him for my sake. She loved him, and allowed him to think she cared nothing at all for him; and she did it altogether for me.

“I married him: he was my husband. He was very good to me. I never learnt the truth from him. He died, and after his death, somehow, I learnt the truth. My dear friend married in time another man. The marriage was not happy, and they were terribly poor. He died too, and little Nancy was left unprovided for. So I told her mother on her deathbed that Nancy would always be my tender care, my most cherished darling. Now, Augusta, you know for yourself that she has a right to my home and my love and my money. She is no charity-child, but a child any mother would be proud of.”

“There never was any one like her,” said Augusta slowly. “There was a time when I was mad with jealousy of her; but I know at last what she really is. But, oh, Aunt Jessie! I am tired, and I want to be forgiven right out. I have told Uncle Peter everything—every single thing from the first. And now let me see Nancy, that she also may forgive me.”

THE END.

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A FARTHINGFUL. Illustrated.

POOR MISS CAROLINA. Illustrated.

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