

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Maud Florence Nellie; or, Don't care!, by Christabel R. Coleridge

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Maud Florence Nellie; or, Don't care!

Author: Christabel R. Coleridge

Illustrator: Charles Joseph Staniland

Release date: July 7, 2013 [EBook #43117]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Hodson of London, England

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAUD FLORENCE NELLIE; OR, DON'T CARE! ***

C.R. Coleridge

"Maud Florence Nellie"

"Don't care"

Chapter One.

Maud Florence Nellie.

Maud Florence Nellie Whittaker was standing before her little looking-glass, getting ready for her afternoon Sunday school. She was a fine tall girl of fifteen, rather stoutly made, with quantities of light brown hair, which fell on her shoulders and surrounded her plump rosy face with a perfect halo of fringe and friz. She had hazel eyes, which were rather bold and rather stupid, a cocked up nose, and full red lips, which could look sulky; but which were now curved in smiling satisfaction at the new summer hat, all creamy lace and ribbons, which she was fixing at exactly the right angle above her curly hair. She had on a very fashionable cream-coloured costume to match the hat, and altogether she was justified in considering herself as one of the best dressed girls in her class, and one whose good looks were not at all likely to pass unnoticed as she took her way along the sunshiny road that led into the large country town of Rapley. Her fine frock, her big girlish form, and her abundant hair seemed to fill up the little bedroom in which she stood; which had a sloping roof and small latticed windows, though it was comfortably furnished and had no more appearance of poverty than its inhabitant. Florrie Whittaker lived in the lodge at the gate of the great suburban cemetery, which had replaced all the disused churchyards of Rapley. Her father was the gatekeeper and caretaker, and as the cemetery was a very large one the post was important and the salary good. Florrie and her brothers and sisters had run up and down the rows of tomb-stones and played in the unoccupied spaces for as long as most of them could recollect. They saw many funerals everyday, and heard the murmur of the funeral service and the toll of the funeral bell whenever they went out, but it never occurred to them to think that tomb-stones were dismal or funerals impressive; they looked with cheerful living eyes at their natural surroundings, and never thought a bit more of the end of their own lives because they so constantly saw the end of other people's. Florrie finished herself up with a red rosebud, found her hymn-book and a pair of new kid gloves, and then with a bounce and a clatter ran down the narrow stairs into the family sitting-room below; where the din of voices betokened the father's absence, and the bustle attendant on starting for school on the part of a boy and two girls younger than herself.

"You'll all be late, children, and get bad marks from your teachers," cried Florence, in a loud gay voice.

"And what'll you be?" was the not unnatural retort of the next sister, Sybil.

"It ain't the same thing in *my* class," returned Florrie. "Teacher knows that girls of my age can't be punctual like little ones. They've to clear away, and mind the children, and all sorts of things to do."

"And what have you been clearing away?"

"And who have you been minding of?"

"And what have *you* had to do but put your fine hat on?" rose in a chorus from the indignant children; while another voice put in—

"When *I* went to school the elders came punctual for the sake of an example."

"Oh my! Aunt Lizzie, I didn't see you," said Florrie. "How d'ye do? There's plenty of examples nowadays if one wanted them, which I don't."

"I'm sure, Aunt Lizzie," put in the eldest sister, a tall young woman of nineteen or so, "there isn't harder work in the

world than in trying to set an example to *Florrie*."

"You don't set a nice one," said Florrie.

"It would be a deal better for you, Florence," said her aunt, "if you did take example by some one. You're getting a big girl, and that hat and frock are a deal too smart to run about the roads in. When I was a girl, I had a nice brown mushroom hat and a neat black silk jacket, and pleased enough I was with them as a new thing."

"And did *your* aunts wear mushroom hats and black silk jackets?" said Florrie.

"My aunts? no, indeed! Whatever are you thinking of, Florence? My aunts were most respectable women, and wore bonnets, when bonnets *was* bonnets. Hats, indeed!"

"Your hat was in the fashion then, and mine's in the fashion now," said Florence saucily; but Aunt Lizzie, refusing to perceive that her niece had made a point, continued, "Aunt Eliza Brown was married to a man in the grocery way, and Aunt Warren, as you very well know, was housekeeper to Mr Cunningham at Ashcroft Hall, and married the head keeper, which her son has the situation to this day."

"I do tell Florrie," said the elder sister again, "that she'd look a deal more like a real lady if she dressed a bit quieter than she does."

"I don't want to look like a lady. I want to have my fun," said Florrie. "Come on, Ethel, if you're coming; I want to catch up with Carrie and Ada. Good-bye, aunt; I like lessons best in school."

And off dashed Florrie through the summer sunshine, between the avenue of monuments, her hair flying, her skirts swinging, and her loud lively voice sounding behind and before her as she scurried along.

"Well!" said Aunt Lizzie, "she be a one, surely. That girl wants a tight hand over her, Martha Jane, if ever a girl die yet."

Aunt Lizzie—otherwise Mrs Stroud—was an excellent person, and had "kept her brother's family together," as she expressed it, ever since their mother's death; but she was not invariably pleasant, and her eldest niece disliked being called Martha Jane much more than Florence disliked being scolded for her finery. When all the younger ones had such beautiful names—Maud Florence Nellie, Ethel Rosamond, and Sybil Eva Constance—it was hard upon her that she had been born before her mother's love of reading, and perhaps her undeveloped love of the beautiful things of life, had overcome the family traditions. "Martha" was bad enough, and she did not know that the children's use of "Matty" was a fashionable variation of it. But "Martha Jane!"

She was not, however, saucy like Florence, so she only sighed a little and said:

"I do my best, indeed, aunt; but won't you lay off your mantle and sit down comfortably? Father won't be in yet. He likes to be round, when so many friends come to visit the graves and put flowers, in case of mischief, and the children won't be back for near two hours."

Mrs Stroud was a stout comfortable woman, not very unlike what her niece Florence might be after five and thirty more years in a workaday world had marked and subdued her beaming countenance. She was glad to sit down after the hot walk, take off her cloth mantle, which, though an eminently dignified and respectable garment, was rather a heavy one for a June day, and fan herself with her pocket-handkerchief, while she inquired into the well-being of her nieces and nephews. Martha Jane was of a different type—dark and slim, with pretty, rather dreamy grey eyes, and a pale refined face. She was a good girl, and tried to do her duty by her young brothers and sisters; but she had not very strong health or spirits, and in many ways she wished that her life was different from what fate had made it.

"That there Florrie," said Mrs Stroud, "ain't the sort of girl to be allowed to *stravage* about the roads by herself for two hours."

"Why, aunt, she must go to her Bible class," said Martha meekly.

"Well," said Mrs Stroud, "there's girls that aren't calculated for Bible classes, in my opinion. Does she come in punctual from her work on weekdays?"

"Oh, yes, aunt, and it's supposed that George meets her. Not that he always does; but she has to look out for him. And Mrs Lee keeps her very strict at the shop. She don't have her hair flying about on weekdays, nor dress fine, and she's a good girl for her work and very civil, Mrs Lee says. You wouldn't know Florrie when she's behaving."

"Pity she don't behave always then," said Mrs Stroud.

"That's just the thing," said Martha, "I tell her, aunt, constant. I tell her to read the tales out of the library, and see what the young ladies are like that are written about in them. And she says a tale may be a tale, but she ain't in a book, and she don't want to be. Florrie's always got an answer ready."

"Well, Martha Jane, I don't hold much with wasting time over tales and novels myself. You read a deal too many, and where's the good?"

"I should waste my time more than I do but for some talcs I've read," said Martha, colouring.

"Well, 'Waste not, want not.' Read your Bible, I say."

"That's not in the Bible, Aunt Lizzie."

"It might be," said Mrs Stroud; "there's a deal of truth in it. But, bless you, Martha, it ain't talcs nor nonsense of that kind that signifies. Florrie must be held in. She's that saucy, and that bouncing and set on her own way, that there's only one in the family she's like, Martha Jane, and that's 'Enery himself."

"Harry! Oh, Aunt Lizzie! But she's a girl."

"Well, Martha Jane, and if she is? There's plenty of ways for girls to trouble their families. You wasn't more than eleven or so when 'Enery went; but surely you can recollect him, ramping round. Why, when he come to sit with his family he was like an engine with the steam up for starting off again! And he went about that audacious!"

"I can remember his jumping me off the tomb-stones," said Martha.

"Ah! He jumped off tomb-stones once too often. It all came of ramping about and reading, so there's lessons in it for you and Florence both. Well, I promised a call on Mrs Taylor at the upper lodge, so I'll stroll up quietly and meet your father, and come back for a cup of tea."

Martha made no objection to this proposal; for though she never "answered back," nor asserted herself against her elders, she strongly resented the connection between ramping about and reading, and between herself and the troublesome Florence, and was very glad to get rid of her aunt for the present.

She sat still when Mrs Stroud, having assumed her mantle and opened her parasol, walked up the cemetery to meet her brother. She really wished to be a good elder sister; but what could she do with a girl only three years younger than herself, and with more "go" in her little finger than poor Martha had in her whole body?

Surely Florence was not going to be like poor Harry! Martha called him "poor Harry" in her thoughts—it is an epithet often applied half in kindness and half in contempt to the family ne'er-do-weel; but she had not a very pleasant recollection of this absent brother. If Florrie was rude, inconsiderate, and bouncing, she was nothing to Harry at fifteen. Martha recollected his utterly unscrupulous teasing and bullying alternating with rough good-nature, which had made her hopelessly afraid of him. He got situations, and lost them by practical jokes. He was started in a good place at a large printing establishment in Rapley, and, after sundry smaller feats, had sent the rector of the parish a packet of playbills announcing the performance that night of "The Corsican Brothers" and "Cut off with a Shilling;" while the manager of the theatre received the rector's notices of a missionary meeting, also being got up in a hurry on some special occasion. Neither the rector nor the manager spared the printer, and as Harry Whittaker had been heard sniggering with a companion over the exchange, it could not pass as a mistake, so that situation came to an end. Then he had to content himself with being errand-boy at a linen-draper's. There somehow the ball dresses which should have been delivered to Lady Temple in time for the county ball floated down the river instead, and were landed the next afternoon mashed up in their cardboard boxes.

And worst of all, a dreadful night, which Matty never did forget, when some poor people, coming in the dusk to one of those sad hurried evening funerals which terrible infection sometimes necessitates, had been frightened—how she did not know, but cruelly and unfeelingly by Harry's means. Martha remembered her father's just annoyance and anger. Harry had been sent away to his Uncle Warren's, where something else happened—Martha never knew what—and that was the last she heard of her eldest brother.

A little while before, mother had died, and father grew severe and strict, and Aunt Lizzie bustled them about till a year ago, when, late in life, she married a well-to-do ironmonger, and turned her energies on to her step-children.

Since then Martha Jane had done her best for her three sisters, for the brother, George, who had a good post as clerk on the railway, and for Johnnie and Arthur, the youngest of the family, who still attended the day school. The Whittaker girls had never been sent to a national school, but had got, or were getting, their education at one of the many "Establishments for Young Ladies" which prevailed at Rapley. It was supposed that in this way they would be less likely to "make acquaintances;" but acquaintances are very easily made by sociable people, and Mrs Stroud had always thought it the proper thing to send them all to Sunday school. Martha, however, had had very little of this. She was a good girl, with a turn for church-going, and the interest of most well-disposed girls of her day in varieties of church services, church music, and church decorations; but she had no personal tie to the church which the Whittakers attended, and she had not found the connection between these tastes and the duties of life.

She was rather imaginative, and she read every story book she could lay her hands on—religious domestic tales from the parochial library, novels from that provided for the servants of the railway company, which her brother brought home, and quantities of penny serial fiction. Very little of it was absolutely bad. Martha would not have read it if she had known it to be so, but a great deal of it was extremely unreal, silly, and frivolous. Martha's taste and critical powers were so uncultivated that she hardly knew that one book was of a higher tone than another, any more than she knew that it was better written. There were fine sentiments which she admired in all of them about love and constancy and self-devotion, and perhaps Martha was not to blame if she thought that people usually died in carrying out these virtues. Still, the character of the books did make a difference to her; for she was not one to whom a tale was nothing but a tale, and if she learnt from some that ladies wore wonderful and ever-varying costumes, and spent their time in what she would have called "talking about the gentlemen," she learnt from others that they studied hard, and devoted themselves much to the good of their fellow-creatures and the comfort of their families.

Martha, when she might have been attending to the comfort of hers, was sometimes lost in imagining herself reading to a mothers' meeting in "a tightly fitting costume of the richest velvet," etc, etc; but, confused as were her notions, she had ideas and aspirations, and was ready for a guiding hand if only she could have found one.

Chapter Two.

A Sunday Walk.

Florrie was troubled with no aspirations and with very few ideas. She was just like a young animal, and enjoyed her life much in the same way and with as little regard to consequences. When she and her little sisters came out of the great cemetery gates into a broad, cheerful, suburban road, the children ran on, afraid of being late. Florrie caught up, as she had expressed it, with Carrie Jones and Ada Price, also in the full glory of their new summer things, and both eagerly looking out for her. For Florrie was bigger, smarter, and more daring than any of them; she was the ringleader in their jokes, and bore the brunt of the scrapes consequent upon them; she was therefore a favourite companion. The three girls hurried along the sunny road, chattering and laughing, with their heads full of their new clothes, their friends, and themselves, so that there was not an atom of room left for the Bible lesson which they were about to receive. They came with a rush and a bounce into the parish room, where their class was held, just as the door was unfastened after the opening hymn, found their places with a scuffle and a titter, pulled some Bibles towards them, and looked all round to greet their special acquaintances, as the teacher began her lesson.

Florrie Whittaker did not behave worse than several others of the young, noisy, irrepressible creatures who sat round the table; but there was so much of her in every way that the teacher never lost the sense of her existence through the whole lesson. Miss Mordaunt was a clever, sensible lady, not very young, nor with any irresistible power of commanding attention, but quite capable of keeping her class together, and of repressing inordinately bad conduct. Sometimes her lessons were interesting and impressive, and, as she was human, sometimes they were rather dull; but the girls liked her as well as they liked anyone, and if they had been aware that they wanted a friend would have expected her to prove a kind one. But they were mostly young and well-to-do, with life in every limb and every feeling; and the Bible class was a very trifling incident to them.

Florrie felt quite good-naturedly towards her, but she did like to make the other girls laugh, and to know that she could upset nearly all of them if she liked. She was not clever enough to care with her mind for the history of Saint Paul, and she was no more open to any spiritual impression than the table at which she sat, new gloves to button and new hats to compare effectually occupying her attention. She jumped up when her class was over, a little more full of spirits for the slight restraint, and rushed out in a hurry with Carrie and Ada, that they might be round on the other side when the boys' class came out, and see who was there.

It was general curiosity on Florrie's part, and the desire to do what was disapproved of; her family were above the class who were likely to "walk with" anyone at fifteen, and she only hurried along giggling and whispering towards the riverside.

A pretty, sleepy, flat-country river ran through the meadows that lay round about Rapley, and the towing-path beside it was a favourite Sunday walk, and in its quieter regions was the resort of engaged couples, and of quiet families walking out with their babies in their perambulators. But the stretch of river between the suburban region where the cemetery lay and the church of Saint Jude, in the district of which it was included, was near the lower parts of the town, and on Sundays was full of roughs, and idle lads on the way to become roughs. No girls who were careful of their conduct and wished to keep out of noisy company would have gone there in the afternoon. Florrie Whittaker and her two friends knew quite well that they had no business to be in that direction; but a feint of pursuit from some of the lads as they hung about the classroom door sent them scurrying and looking behind them down the street, and they soon found themselves, in all their conspicuous finery, walking along the towing-path by the river. It was a shabby region; new and yet dirty little houses bordered it, their back yards and back gardens, each one less ornamental than the last, stretching down to the path, between which and the river were a few pollard willows. On the other side spread out a low-lying marshy region, which was generally flooded in the winter. A small public-house ended the row of houses where a swing gate led into the fields beyond.

"I say," said Carrie, "we didn't ought to have come down here. Mother 'll give it me when I get back."

"No more we'd ought," said Ada. "If Miss Simpson were to hear of it, she'd say I was letting down the school. Come through the gate and across the fields, Florrie; this ain't nice at all."

"I don't care," said Florrie, stimulated by sundry remarks caught in passing; "we can take care on ourselves. I ain't a-going to speak to anyone; but I'll walk here as long as I like. Oh my! what fun it'd be if your governess did catch you, Ada!"

"You wouldn't think it fun if Mrs Lee was to catch you," said Ada.

"Oh my! shouldn't I though?" said Florrie, with her beaming face all in a twinkle. "I'd like to see her coming through the gate. There's a boat on the river; let's stop and see it go by."

"Don't, Florrie Whittaker," said Carrie. "There's Liza Mason and Polly Grant, and I ain't a-going to be seen with *they*."

"Well, I am then," said Florrie, delighted at teasing her friends, and quite indifferent to the fact that the two girls who joined them were of a much rougher, lower stamp than themselves—girls whose Sunday finery consisted of an artificial flower to enliven their weekday dirt, and who, poor things, were little general drudges in places which no respectable girl would take. Liza and Polly were nothing loth, when Florrie chose to acknowledge an old Sunday school fellowship in mischief by stopping to speak. Liza was saucy, and called out loudly that she thought they'd all be too proud to take any notice.

"Not I," said Florrie. "I don't care for no one. You come into our shop, Liza, any day, and I'll show you all the best things in it."

"That you won't," said one of a group of the Sunday school lads who had followed. "I'd dare you to do that—you'd be afraid."

"I dare," said Florrie. "You come in with an errand and see. I dare do anything I've a mind to; I don't care for no one!"

"Florence Whittaker," said Ada Price, the pupil-teacher getting the better of the mischievous, idle girl in her, "I'll never walk with you again, you're too bad—and—oh my, come on, for there *is* your Mrs Lee coming through the gate. Florrie, Florrie! She'll see you in another minute!"

Ada and Carrie were indifferently behaved and common-minded girls, but they were not without some sense. A moderate amount of misbehaviour at, and on the road to and from their Sunday class was their way of enjoying their rather scanty bit of freedom; but risking their weekday occupation and their means of earning their living was another thing altogether. They pulled away from Florence, held up their heads, and walked on.

But Florence Whittaker was daring with a different degree of folly from that of most silly girls. The sense of when to stop was lacking in her, as it had been woefully lacking in her eldest brother, and the sense of how delightful her employer's face of horror would be kept her standing in the midst of the group of rough lads and girls, and tempted her to raise her voice and call out again, "You see if I don't!"

Mrs Lee, a most respectable-looking tradeswoman, walking through the fields with a friend, stopped short at sight of the "young lady" who served in her fancy shop thus surrounded. "Miss Whittaker!" she said in a voice of blank amazement.

"Good afternoon, Mrs Lee," said Florence pertly. "Isn't it a nice afternoon?"

"Miss Whittaker, I am surprised."

"Are you, Mrs Lee? Our class is just over." Mrs Lee looked her up and down, and walked on in silence. This was no place for an altercation.

"Go on, Florence Whittaker," said one of the bigger lads. "The old lady's right enough, and this ain't the place for young ladies—"

"'Twas all along of you we came," said Florence. "Well, good-bye, Liza; don't you forget."

She ran off after her companions, who were now walking soberly enough across the field path which led back into the high road. But Florrie's spirits were quite unchecked. She laughed at the thought of Mrs Lee's amazement, she laughed at Carrie and Ada's fright, she repeated with more laughing the various vulgar jokes which had passed with the lads and with Polly and Liza.

"I never thought," said Ada indignantly, "that you'd join company, Florence Whittaker, with such as them. It's as much as I'd do to pass the time of day with them."

"Now then," said Florrie, "didn't Miss Mordaunt say last Sunday as it was very stuck up and improper to object to Maria Wilson coming to the class because she's a *general*? and she said I was a kind girl to let her look over my Bible, so there!"

"Maria Wilson do behave herself," said Carrie.

"Well, Carrie Jones, don't you talk about behaviour! Do Miss Mullins always behave herself? Don't she walk out at the back with the young men in the shop, and wait outside the church for them? And you're glad enough to walk with *her*. I don't care how people behave so long as I can have my fun, and I don't care who they are neither."

Ada and Carrie, brought face to face with one of the practical puzzles of life for girls of their standing, the difficulty of "keeping oneself up" in a right and not in a wrong way, were far too conscious of inconsistency to have anything to say, and Ada changed the subject.

"Well, anyway, I wouldn't be you to-morrow morning, Florrie," she said.

"I like to get a rise out of Mrs Lee," said Florrie, "and I don't care a bit for her. I shall just enjoy it."

Carrie and Ada did not believe her, but, worse luck for Florence, it was perfectly true. She did not care. The power of calculating consequences was either absent from her nature or entirely undeveloped in it. She was not a bit put out by her companions' annoyance, and laughed at them as she parted from them at the upper gate of the cemetery. The sun was still shining brightly on the clean gravel walks, the white marble crosses and columns, and on the many flowers planted beneath them. Apart from its associations, Rapley cemetery was a cheerful, pleasant place, and Florence, as she noted a new-made grave, heaped up with white flowers, only thought that there was an extra number of pretty wreaths there, without a care as to the grief which they represented.

Mr Whittaker was very proud of the good taste and good order of his cemetery, and took a great deal of trouble to have everything kept as it should be.

Even Martha, in whose favourite literature lonely churchyards and silent tombs were often to be met with, never thought of connecting the sentiment which they evoked with the nice tidy rows of modern monuments among which she lived. Aunt Lizzie occasionally pointed a moral by hoping her nieces would remember that they might soon be lying beneath them; but they never regarded the remark as anything more than a flower of speech.

Florence got in just in time for tea, to find her father giving Mrs Stroud the history of some transactions he had lately had with the "Board," in which he had brought over all the gentlemen to see that he was right as regarded certain by-laws.

Mr Whittaker was a round-faced, rosy man, like his younger children. He was a very respectable, hard-working man, and a kind father; but he thought a good deal of his own importance and of the importance of his situation, and a good deal of his conversation consisted in impressing his own good management on his hearers. He would have been almost as much put out with Martha for wanting what she had not got as he had been with the one of his children who had brought him into disrepute. Florrie's misdemeanours had never come across him, and she did not know what his displeasure would be like. She knew quite well what that of her brother George could be, and enjoyed provoking it. George was an irreproachable youth, and aimed at being a gentleman. He was of the dark and slender type, like Martha, and cultivated a quiet style of dress and manner. He sang in the choir of another church in the town, and was friendly with the clergy and church officials. It was a new line of departure for the Whittakers, and an excellent one; but somehow George rather liked to keep it to himself, and did not encourage his sisters to attend his church, or follow his example in religious matters.

Florrie came in, and as soon as tea was over, and her father and aunt were out of hearing, she amused herself with scandalising George and Martha by boasting of how she had shocked Carrie and Ada through stopping to talk to Liza and Polly. She omitted to mention either Mrs Lee or the cause of the walk by the river. There were limits to the home endurance, and even Florence, when not worked up to delightful defiance, was aware of their existence.

Chapter Three.

Don't Care!

Mrs Lee was a widow. She kept a small, but very superior, 'Fancy Repository' in a good street in Rapley. Her daughter helped her to manage the business, and Florence Whittaker was being trained up as an assistant. Idleness was not one of Florrie's failings, and, as she was quick, neat-handed, and willing, she gave tolerable satisfaction, though Mrs Lee considered her lively, free and easy manners to pleasant customers, and her short replies to troublesome ones, as decidedly "inferior," and not what was to be expected in such an establishment as hers. Florence, however, was gradually acquiring a professional manner, which she kept for business hours, as too many girls do, apparently regarding refinement and gentleness as out of place when she was off duty.

She presented herself as usual on Monday morning, in a nice dark frock and hat, and with her flying hair tied in a neat tail, and began cheerfully to set about her duties, which were not at all distasteful to her. But she wondered all the time what Mrs Lee was going to say. Perhaps, if that lady had been a keen student of human nature, she would have disappointed the saucy girl by saying little or nothing. But she knew that most girls disliked being found fault with, and had not discovered that Florrie Whittaker rather enjoyed it. She believed, too, in the impressiveness of her own manner, and presently, summoning Florence into the parlour, said majestically:

"Miss Whittaker, it is not my intention to say much of what I witnessed yesterday, except that it was altogether unworthy of any young lady in *my* employment. Should it occur again I shall be obliged to take other measures."

"I'm very sorry, ma'am, I'm sure," said Florence meekly, and hanging down her head.

"No one can say more. I will not detain you from your duties."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'll remember," said Florrie, retreating, and leaving Mrs Lee much pleased with the result of her admonitions. Miss Lee, who caught sight of the young lady's face as she passed behind the counter, did not feel quite so well satisfied.

There was, however, very little fault to be found with Florence in business hours; and all went well till about twelve o'clock, when, there being several customers in the shop, Miss Lee became aware of an unusual bustle at one end of it, and beheld Florence opening boxes, spreading out fine pieces of needlework, and showing off plush and silk, with the greatest civility and a perfectly unmoved countenance, to a shabby little girl in an old hat and a dirty apron, while a boy with a basket on his arm stood just inside the door, open-mouthed with rapturous admiration.



A SHABBY CUSTOMER.

p. 26

"What are you doing, Florence Whittaker?" whispered Miss Lee in an undertone.

"Waiting on this young lady, Miss Lee. This peacock plush, miss, worked with gold thread is very much the fashion; but some ladies prefer the olive—"

"What do you want here?" said Miss Lee to the customer, as her mother, suddenly perceiving what was going on, paused with a ball of knitting silk in her hand and unutterable things in her face. "Have you a message?"

But Polly fled at the first sound of her voice, and was out of sight in a moment, while the errand-boy's loud laugh sounded as he ran after her.

"Put those things up, Miss Whittaker," said Mrs Lee, turning blandly to her customer. "Some mistake, ma'am."

"Why, Miss Lee," said Florence, "I thought I was to be civil just the same to everyone, and show as many articles as the customers wish."

"You had better not be impertinent," said Miss Lee. "Wait till my mother is at leisure."

In the almost vacant hour at one o'clock Mrs Lee turned round to her assistant, and demanded what she meant by her extraordinary behaviour.

Florrie looked at her. She did feel a little frightened, but the intense delight of carrying the sensation a stage farther mastered her, and she said:

"The boy there, yesterday, when you saw us down by the river, dared me to show Polly the fine things in the shop, or to notice her up here. So I said, 'Let her come and try.' And she came just now, so I kept my word. There ain't no harm done."

It was the absolute truth, but telling the truth under the circumstances, with never a blush or an excuse, was hardly a virtue.

"Do you mean to say you have dared to play a practical joke on me and my establishment—that you have been that audacious?" exclaimed Mrs Lee.

"I didn't know it was a joke," said Florrie. "You didn't laugh."

"No, Florence Whittaker, I did not. I am much more likely to cry. I have a regard for your father, but there have been too many practical jokes in your family. It is your brother Harry over again, and I could not—could not continue to employ you if *that* kind of spirit is to be displayed."

"There's other occupations," said Florrie. "I ain't so fond of fancy work."

"Oh, Florrie, don't be such a silly girl," said Miss Lee. "Ask mother's pardon, and have done with it. Then maybe she'll overlook it this time, as you've never done such a thing before."

"I don't know what I've done now," said Florrie. "I only showed the articles to a customer."

Mrs Lee looked at her. If she had appeared tearful or sulky she would have sent her away to think the matter over. But Florrie looked quite cool, and as if she rather enjoyed the situation.

"Well," said Mrs Lee, "I must speak to your father."

"I don't care if you do," said Florence.

"Then, Florence Whittaker, I *shall*," said Mrs Lee with severe emphasis. "Go back now and attend to your business."

Florence revenged herself by doing nothing but what she was told.

"Why didn't you show the Berlin wools to that lady?"

"I didn't know as I might, Miss Lee."

Towards the end of the afternoon Mrs Lee went out, and her daughter was so quiet a person that Florrie had very little opportunity of being saucy to her.

She came up as the girl was putting on her hat to go home.

"Florence," she said, in a rather hesitating voice, "tell mother you're sorry. She'll not be hard on you. Don't be like your poor brother, and throw all your chances away. You *are* like him, but there's no need to follow in his steps."

"If Harry was like me he must have been a deal nicer than George," said Florrie, who knew nothing about her eldest brother's history.

"I don't care," she said to herself as she walked home. "I ain't done nothing, and I won't stay to be put upon. If she've gone to father!"

The guess was too true. When Florence opened the parlour door, there sat Mrs Lee, her father, and Martha, all looking disturbed and worried.

"Oh," said Florence, "if you please, father, I was just coming home to tell you as how I'd rather leave Mrs Lee's shop, as she ain't satisfied with me, and I ain't done nothing at all."

"You've taken a great liberty, Florence, as I understand," said her father, "and you will certainly not leave if Mrs Lee is good enough to give you another trial."

"If Florence will express herself sorry," said Mrs Lee.

"I ain't sorry," said Florence coolly.

"And I shall put a stop to your Bible class at once, and forbid you to go out without your sister if I hear of such behaviour as yours on Sunday afternoon."

"Martha'd have a time of it," said Florence. "Well, Mr Whittaker," said Mrs Lee, rising, "I know what girls' tempers are, and if Florence has come to a better mind by to-morrow, and will come down and tell me so, I will overlook it this once, but no more."

"Bless me, Florrie," said little Ethel, as her father took Mrs Lee out, "what a piece of work to make! It ain't much to say you're sorry and have done with it."

"I ain't sorry, and I mean to have done with it. I'm tired of the shop, and I'm tired of the Lees. Mrs Lee's an old cat and Miss Lee's a young one! She ain't so very young neither."

"Oh my, Florrie!" repeated Ethel. "What a deal you'll have to say you're sorry for before you've done! For you'll have to say it first or last."

"Why?" said Florence.

"Why, one always has to."

"You'll see."

Florence remained stubborn. She did not look passionate or sulky, but say she was sorry she would not. She was tired of the business, and she didn't care for losing her situation. She didn't care at all.

"Don't care came to a bad end," said Matty angrily.

"Don't care if he did," said Florence.

George had come back from his walk by this time, and had added his voice to the family conclave. Now he gave an

odd, half-startled look at his father, and to the supreme astonishment of the naughty girl her sally was received in silence. Nobody spoke.

Back on Martha's mind came an evening long ago, and the sound of a sharp, aggravating, provoking whistle, a boy's face, too like Florrie's, peeping in first at the door and then at the window, and a voice repeating, "Don't care—don't care—don't care!" in more and more saucy accents, as the speaker ran off across the forbidden turf of the cemetery, jumping over the graves as he came to them. That night had brought the explosion of mischief which had resulted in Harry's departure from home and in his final banishment. Where was that saucy lad now? And had he learnt to care out in the wide world by himself? But Florence was a girl and if *she* said "Don't care" once too often her father could not say to her, "Obey me, or you shall do for yourself in future."

And she had no sense of responsibility sufficient to give her a good reason for conquering herself. She had a child's confidence in the care she was childishly defying. People so proud and so respectable as the Whittakers could not even send their girl to a rough place where she would "learn the difference" between Mrs Lee's "fancy shop" and general service. Poor Martha felt that to have Florence at home, doing nothing but give trouble, would be nearly intolerable; while what she would do if Mrs Stroud's suggestion was adopted, and she was sent to stay with her, passed the wildest imagination to conceive.

"You'll be very sorry, Florrie," she said, "when it's too late."

"No, I shan't," said Florence; "I like a change. I'm tired of serving in the shop. Dear me! there's a many situations in the world. I'll get a new one some time."

Florence got her way, and though she was supposed to be in disgrace, she declined to recognise the fact. She fell back into the position of an idle child at home, worried Matty, set her little sisters a very poor example, and enjoyed as much half-stolen, half-defiant freedom as she could. When she found that Carrie and Ada had been forbidden by their respective mothers to "go with her," as they expressed it, she made it her delight to tease and trap them into enduring her company, and finally, after about a fortnight, walked coolly down to see Mrs Lee and ask how she got on with the new assistant!

Chapter Four.

Ashcroft.

Some twenty miles away from Rapley, in a less flat and dull and more richly wooded landscape, was the little village of Ashcroft, where Mr Whittaker's cousin, Charles Warren, was head keeper to Mr Cunningham, of Ashcroft Hall.

The keeper's lodge was a large, substantial cottage, with a thatched roof and whitewashed walls, standing all alone in a wide clearing in the midst of the woods that surrounded the Hall. It was nearly a mile from the great house, and had no other cottages very near it, being situated in what was sometimes grandly called "the Forest"—a piece of unenclosed woodland, where the great ash-trees that gave their name to the place grew up, tall and magnificent, with hardly any copse or brushwood at their feet—only ferns, brambles, and short green turf! Right out on this turf the keeper's cottage lay, with never a bit of garden ground about it, the idea being that, as the rabbits and hares could not be kept out of the way of temptation, temptation had better be kept out of the way of the rabbits and hares.

There were no flowers, except in the sitting-room window, but there were tribes of young live things instead—broods of little pheasants, rare varieties of game and poultry, and puppies of different kinds under training. The barking, twittering, and active movements of all these little creatures made the place cheerful, and took off from the lonely solemnity of the great woodland glades, stretching out from the clearing as far as eye could reach.

It was a very beautiful place, but "it weren't over populated," as Mrs Stroud remarked one fine July evening, as she sat at the door looking out at the wood, having come to spend a couple of nights with her cousins.

"We don't find it lonesome," said Mrs Warren. "It's not above half a mile down that path to the village, and there's a good many of us scattered about in the lodges and gardens to make company for each other."

Mrs Warren was a pleasant-looking woman, well spoken, with a refined accent and manner, being indeed the daughter of a former gardener at Ashcroft Hall.

"Well," said Mrs Stroud, "there's something about them glades as I should find depressing. With a street, if you don't see the end of it, at least you know there's fellow-creatures there, if you did see it; but there's no saying what may be down among those green alleys. To say nothing that one does associate overhanging trees with damp."

"Well, we have to keep good fires, but, you see, there's plenty of fuel close by. And how did you leave your brother and his young family? I've often thought I'd like to renew the acquaintance."

"Well, they have their health," said Mrs Stroud. "But there, Charlotte, young people are always an anxiety, and them girls do want a mother's eye."

"No doubt they do, poor things. Why, the eldest must be quite a young woman."

"I don't know that there's much to be said against Martha Jane," said Mrs Stroud. "She's a good girl enough in her way, though too much set on her book, and keeps herself to herself *too* much, to my thinking. If that girl ever settles in life, she'll take the crooked stick at last, mark my word for it."

"Has she any prospects?" asked Mrs Warren.

"She *might*," said Mrs Stroud with emphasis. "Undertaking is an excellent trade, and she sees young Mr Clements frequent at funerals—or might if she looked his way, as I'm certain sure he looks hers."

"Well, girls will have their feelings," said Mrs Warren. "And isn't the next one growing up too?"

"Ah," said Mrs Stroud, with a profound sigh.

"There's worse faults than being too backward after all, and that there Florence is indeed a trial. I tell my brother that good service is the only chance for her, and that I should consult you about it."

"I thought she was in a shop."

"She *were*. But she've thrown up an excellent chance."

Here Mrs Stroud entered on a long account of Florence's appearance, character, and recent history, ending with: "So, Charlotte, seeing that she's that flouncy and that flighty that she'll come to no good as she is, I thought if you could get her under the housekeeper here for a bit it would be a real kindness to my poor brother."

"But Mrs Hay would never look at a girl that was flighty and flouncy. The servants are kept as strict and old-fashioned as possible—plain straw bonnets on Sunday, and as little liberty as can be. No doubt they learn their business well, but I do think if there was a lady at the head she might see her way to making things a bit pleasanter for young people. 'Tis a dull house, even for Miss Geraldine herself, and has been ever since the time you know of."

"Ay," said Mrs Stroud mysteriously, "and it's that there unlucky Harry that Florence takes after—more's the pity. Well, tell me about your young folk."

"Well, Ned, you know, is under his father—his wife is a very nice steady girl—and Bessie's got the Roseberry school; she got a first-class certificate, and is doing well. And Wyn—we're rather unsettled in our minds about Wyn. He don't seem quite the build, the father thinks, for a keeper, and he don't do much but lead about poor Mr Edgar's pony chaise and attend to his birds and beasts for him. Mr Edgar seems to fancy him, and we're glad to do anything for the poor young gentleman. But Bessie, she says that it's all very well for the present, but it leads to nothing. Wyn declares he'll be Mr Edgar's servant when he grows up. But there, poor young gentleman! there's no counting on that—but of course Wyn might take to that line in the end, and be a gentleman's valet."

"And Mr Alwyn, that Wyn was named after, haven't never come home?"

"Never—nor never will, to my thinking. The place is like to come to Miss Geraldine, unless Mr Cunningham leaves it to Mr James, his nephew." Mrs Warren was only relating well-known facts, as she delivered herself of this piece of dignified gossip with some pride even in the misfortunes of the great family under whose shadow she lived, and Mrs Stroud sighed and looked impressed.

"Well," she said, "small and great have their troubles, and Mr Alwyn were no better than Harry, and where one is the other's likely to be."

"I've always felt a regret," said Mrs Warren, "that we couldn't take better care of Harry when he was sent to us here. And I've been thinking, Elizabeth, that if John Whittaker would trust us with Florence I should be glad to have her here for a time, and see if I could make anything of her. It would be a change, and if she's got with idle girls, it would separate her from them."

"Well, there'd be no streets here for her to run in," said Mrs Stroud. "You're very kind, Charlotte, but I doubt you don't know what a handful that there girl is!"

"I've seen a good many girls in my time," said Mrs Warren, smiling, "though my Bessie is a quiet one; and if she finds herself a bit dull at first, it's no more than she deserves, by your account of her, poor thing!"

"I believe my brother 'll send her off straight," said Mrs Stroud. "It's downright friendly of you, Charlotte, and Florrie shall come, if I have to bring her myself."

Mrs Warren was a kind and conscientious woman; but she would hardly have proposed to burden herself with such a maiden as Florence was described to be but for circumstances which had always dwelt on her mind with a sense of regret and responsibility. When Harry Whittaker had, as his aunt put it, made Rapley too hot to hold him, he had been sent to Ashcroft to try if his cousin could make him fit for an under-keeper's place, alongside of his own son Ned. Harry's spirit of adventure and active disposition were not unfitted for such work, and the plan looked hopeful.

At that time Ashcroft Hall had been a gayer place than it was now. Mr Cunningham was still a young man, taking his full share in society, and his two sons were active, high-spirited youths of sixteen and twenty, devoted to sport and to amusements of all kinds. Alwyn, the eldest, was at home at the time when Harry Whittaker was sent to Ashcroft. He had the sort of grace and good-nature which wins an easy pardon, at any rate among old friends and dependents, for a character for idleness and extravagance, and naturally he and his brother were intimate and companionable with the young keepers, side by side with whom they had grown up. It was quite new to Harry Whittaker to spend long days in a gentleman's company, fishing and shooting, joining in conversation, and often sharing meals together; but he contrived, with tact, to adapt himself to the mixture of freedom and deference with which his cousin treated the young squires.

It was a happy relation, and one which is often productive of much good to both parties; but neither Alwyn Cunningham nor Harry Whittaker was good company for the other. Alwyn took a fancy to the saucy, sharp lad, and

encouraged him in talcs of mischievous daring, and Harry was quick to perceive that, as he put it, "the young gentleman was not so mighty particular after all."

A good deal went on that was not for the good of any of the lads, and at last came a great crash, the particulars of which no one except those actually involved ever knew.

There was an old house near Ashcroft Hall called Ravenshurst, which had the reputation of being haunted. It belonged to a Mr and Mrs Fletcher, who came there occasionally with their one daughter and entertained the neighbourhood. At last, on the occasion of a great ball, there was an alarm of the Ravenshurst ghost, a pursuit, and, it was said, a discovery that Alwyn Cunningham, assisted by Harry Whittaker, had played a trick. The affair was hushed up, and no one ever knew exactly what had happened; but a little girl had been frightened into serious illness, and at the same time some valuable jewels belonging to Mrs Fletcher had disappeared.

All that was known to the Ashcroft public was that Harry Whittaker was brought before Mr Cunningham and other magistrates the next morning on the charge of having stolen the jewels, but that the case was dismissed from absolute want of evidence, and also on Alwyn Cunningham declaring on oath that Harry Whittaker had never been near the place from which the jewels had disappeared. Ned Warren was out of the scrape, having been with his father all night. All that he could or would say of the matter was that he had told Harry that "it wasn't their place to frighten the gentlefolk, whatever Mr Alwyn might say," and had so kept out of the affair.

But the lost jewels were never found, and the exact mode of their disappearance was never clearly known outside the families of those concerned, and the magistrates who had refused to commit Harry Whittaker. But after that interview neither Alwyn Cunningham nor Harry Whittaker had ever been seen in Ashcroft again. It was known that the young gentleman and his father had had a desperate quarrel, and that Mr Cunningham never intended to forgive him.

In spite of Alwyn's oath and the magistrates' decision, the loss of the jewels hung over the memory of the two foolish youths with a cloud of suspicion. Most of the Ashcroft people thought that young Whittaker had stolen them, and had been screened by Alwyn Cunningham.

Mr Fletcher, the owner of the jewels, soon after died, and the family in the natural course of things left Ravenshurst at the end of their tenancy.

Whether Edgar Cunningham had had any share in the practical joke or knew anything of the fate of its authors no one could tell, for shortly after his health had failed from an unexplained accident in which his spine had been injured, and he had been an invalid ever since.

Since those events Ashcroft Hall had been a very dull and dreary place.

Mr Cunningham went very little into society, and only entertained a few old friends in the shooting season. Mr Edgar found what interests he could for himself, when his health allowed him to pursue any interests at all; and the girl, Geraldine, lived entirely apart from her father and brother, under charge of a governess who had been with her for many years.

Mr Cunningham was not popular or intimately known. The vicar of Ashcroft was a stranger, who had come to the place since the break-up at the Hall, and was only on terms of distant courtesy with its inhabitants, excepting with little Geraldine, who was brought up by her governess to the ordinary village interests of a squire's daughter.

Chapter Five.

A New Experience.

Mrs Stroud and Mrs Warren before they parted arranged the details of Florence's proposed visit. She was to come for three months, during which time her father was to pay a small sum for her board, and put her entirely in the hands of her cousin, Mrs Warren. If the latter thought fit, she would send her to learn "the dressmaking" in the village, and if she did not choose to trust her out of her sight, she could teach her dairy-work, and employ her as seemed best. At the end of three months, if Florence behaved herself, and appeared likely to be of any use, a situation in a superior line of service should be found for her, and if she proved incurably troublesome it was always possible to send her home.

"Well, Charlotte," said Mrs Stroud, "'tis a work of charity, and I hope you won't repent undertaking of it."

"I'd be sorry to think that another of those young things was to be thrown away," said Mrs Warren. "There was a deal to like in poor Harry. Maybe he's doing well in foreign parts, and has pushed himself up again; but that's what a girl never can do, once she lets herself go. I'll try my best for Florence."

If anything could have set Florence against any scheme, it would have been the fact that it was proposed for her benefit by her Aunt Stroud; but she dearly loved novelty, and, being of an active temper, was getting very tired of hanging about at home with nothing to do, and with a general sense of being in disgrace; so when Mrs Stroud arrived full of the idea, so far from opposing it, she rushed upstairs at once, and began to turn over her things to see if they were fit for her visit.

"I'm sure, Aunt Lizzie," said Matty gratefully, "it's a real kindness of anyone to take Florrie. I couldn't say how tiresome she is, with nothing to do. I know she isn't growing up the sort of girl she ought to be, and yet I don't see how to help it."

"Well, she's got a chance now, Martha Jane. No one can say I don't do my duty by my nieces. I always have, and I always *shall*, until I see you all comfortably settled in life, which it is every girl's duty to look to."

"I don't think it's a girl's duty to think of anything of the sort," said Martha colouring angrily.

"It ain't her duty to be forward and peacocky, Martha Jane," said Mrs Stroud impressively, "far from it; but when a good chance offers itself, and a respectable young man comes forward, she should turn him over in her mind."

"He don't want any turning," said Matty, with a toss of the head. "What you're alluding to, aunt, wouldn't be to my taste at all."

"Hoity-toity, your taste indeed! You're nearly as perverse in your way as Florrie, Martha Jane. Young Mr Clements is a very steady young man, and a very good match for you, and looks at you constant whenever he has the chance. It's your duty to let him say his say, and turn the thing over—"

"No, no! Aunt Lizzie," said Martha, in tears. "I don't want him to say anything—I don't want him to say anything at all—it quite upsets me!"

"Upsets you, indeed! No, Martha Jane, there's no one more against flirty ways than I am; but a young woman should be able to receive proper attentions without being shook to the foundations either! A good offer is to her credit, and she can say yes or no, civil and lady-like. But in my opinion, Martha Jane, this is a case for saying yes." Matty offered no explanation, but if she had had Florence's tongue at that minute she might have surprised Mrs Stroud. Perhaps if she had not had a sneaking kindness for the attentive Mr Clements, his striking dissimilarity to every hero who ever adorned the pages of fiction would not have struck her so forcibly, nor would his attentions have been so upsetting.

Love of novelty was a strong element in Florence's adventurous nature, and she started off for Ashcroft in very good spirits, and enjoyed the short journey by rail from Rapley to Ashdown Junction exceedingly. She had never been away from home before. The mere sitting in the railway carriage and watching her fellow-travellers was a delight; her round, rosy face beamed with satisfaction, and she had nursed a crying baby, and put it to sleep, and screamed out of window to ask questions of the porter for a nervous old lady before she arrived at her destination, and jumped out on the platform at Ashdown, where she was to be met.

There was a little bustle of arrival. A gentleman got out, and the porters ran for his luggage, and presently one came up to Florence, saying:

"Young woman for the keeper's lodge at Ashcroft? You're to go back in the trap that fetched Mr James's luggage. He's riding himself."

"And who's Mr James?" said Florence cheerfully, as her box was found and she was conducted out of the station.

"Mr James Cunningham for the Hall," said the porter, evidently surprised at any explanation being needed.

The trap was driven by a stolid-looking lad, and spinning along behind the big horse was the newest sensation Florence had ever experienced. She was fairly silenced, and next door to frightened, as they passed along the narrow woodland roads, where the branches brushed her hat, and trees—trees—seemed to go on for ever.

She had had no sort of image in her mind of the place she was going to, or of the sort of people she was likely to see, and when they came out into the open clearing, and stopped in front of the roomy, low-lying cottage, she echoed unconsciously her Aunt Stroud's sentiments, by saying to herself:

"Well! It's a queer spot."

"So here you are, my dear," said a pleasant voice, as Mrs Warren came out of the house. "The master and Ned couldn't come to meet you, so we were glad of the chance of the trap for the luggage."

Florence jumped down and received Mrs Warren's kiss, looking about her curiously. She was bigger and more grown-up looking than her cousin had expected; but her cheerful face with its look of pert good-nature was very familiar, and it was at least evident that she had arrived with the intention of being good-humoured.

"I hope you won't find yourself dull, my dear," said Mrs Warren, as she offered tea and a new-laid egg to her visitor. "It's quiet here, no doubt, but we shall have Bessie home come harvest, and Gracie Elton, the gardener's daughter, is a nice girl that you could go with now and then."

"Oh, I ain't the sort that gets dull," said Florence; "leastways, not when things are new. Most things are dull you have to do every day constant."

"I dare say," said Mrs Warren, "that your own home may be a little gloomy sometimes for young folks."

"Oh, it's very cheerful in the cemetery," said Florence, "and there's a deal going on with funerals and folks coming to walk there on Sundays; but I was getting tired of staying at home. I think I'd have gone back to Mrs Lee if she'd have took me."

She spoke in a voice of complete unconcern, and presently asked if she might go and look round outside.

Mrs Warren agreed, and Florence stepped out on to the short smooth turf and looked about her.

The sun was getting low, and threw long golden shafts of light under the trees across the grass; above the waving branches the sky was blue and still.

Florence was an observant girl, who walked the world with her eyes open, and she was aware that she had never seen anything so pretty as this before.

"'Tis like a picture," she said to herself. Presently a pony chair came up one of the green alleys, drawn by a little grey pony and led by a pretty fair-haired boy, younger and smaller than herself. A young man was lying back in the chair, and Florence stood staring in much curiosity as the boy led the pony up to the cottage and Mrs Warren came out curtseying.

"Here's Mr Edgar," she whispered. "You were best to go in, Florence."

Florence retreated a few steps under the shadow of the porch, but watched eagerly as the little boy said:

"Mother, I'm going to fetch the puppies for Mr Edgar to see."

"Very well, Wyn; bring them round directly. Good evening, Mr Edgar. How are you, sir, to-night?"

"Oh, pretty well, Mrs Warren, thank you. Wyn's had a long tramp with the pony, but he wants me to see how much the little dachshunds have grown. I want to give one to Miss Geraldine for herself."

"They're too wrigglesome for my taste, sir," said Mrs Warren, smiling, "but Warren, he says they're all the fashion."

Mr Edgar laughed, and raised himself a little as Wyn Warren returned with a couple of struggling tan-coloured puppies in his arms.

"They're nearly as slippery as ferrets, sir," he said, "but they're very handsome. They've no legs at all to speak of—and their paws are as crooked as can be."

Mr Edgar turned over the puppies and discussed their merits with evident interest, finally fixing, as Wyn said, on the "wriggliest" to give his sister.

Florence had been far too curious to keep in the background, and had not the manners not to stare at the young gentleman's helpless attitude and white delicate face. Wyn, being engaged with his master, had not thought it an occasion to notice anyone else; but Mr Edgar caught sight of her as he handed the puppies back, and gave a slight start as he looked. Mrs Warren coloured up and looked disturbed.

"My cousin, sir," she said, "come to pay me a visit, and to learn the dairy-work."

"Ah!" said Mr Edgar, with rather a marked intonation. "Good evening, Mrs Warren. Come along, Wyn—if you've got rid of the puppies."

Mrs Warren looked after the pony chair as it passed out of sight.

"My master did say I was in too great a hurry—but there, they'll never see anything of her. But she do take after poor Harry!"

"You should have made the gentleman a curtsey, Florence, when he saw you, and I had to name you," she said repressively, for she was annoyed at Florence's bad manners in coming out and staring.

"Law!" said Florence good-humouredly, but quite coolly, "should I? I never seen it done."

Chapter Six.

Mr Edgar.

On the morning after Florence's arrival at Ashcroft little Wyn Warren stood on the terrace of a pretty piece of walled garden on the south side of the great house, with the wrigglesome puppy in his arms, waiting for his master to come out and give him his orders for the day. Wyn was devoted to Mr Edgar, and to all the birds and beasts and flowers, which were the chief diversion of a very dull life. Edgar Cunningham was not naturally given to intellectual pursuits. He had been fond of sport and athletic exercises of all kinds, and there was a good deal of unconscious courage in the way in which he amused himself as much as possible, especially as there was no one but Wyn to care much about his various hobbies. Winter was a bad time for the poor young fellow, but in the summer, he was often well enough to get about in his pony chair, and visit the water-fowl or the farm, or hunt about in the woods for lichens, ferns, and mosses; sometimes, if he was able to sit up against his cushions, stopping to sketch a little, not very successfully in any eyes but Wyn's perhaps, but greatly to his own pleasure. Wyn managed to lead that pony into very wonderful places, and he and his master liked best to take these expeditions by themselves; for when the grave and careful Mr Robertson, who waited on Mr Edgar, went with them, they were obliged to keep to smooth ground, as he did not approve of Mr Edgar being tired and shaken, and when they had once got stuck in a bog it was difficult to say whether master or boy felt the most in disgrace for such imprudence. But Wyn secretly thought that an occasional jolt—and really he was so careful that it very seldom happened—was not half so bad for Mr Edgar as lying all alone on his sofa, with no one to speak to but the grave father, who always looked at him as if his helpless state was such a dreadful disappointment and trouble that he could not bear to see more of him than could be helped. Mr Edgar's tastes opened a good deal of desultory information to Wyn, and though the young gentleman was not of the sort to think much about teaching and educating the boy, the study of botany and natural history seemed to come naturally, books of travels interested them both, and Wyn got more knowledge than he was aware of. Edgar was scrupulously careful not to interfere with the boy's church-going and Sunday school, so that he did well enough, and had a very happy life into the bargain. The garden in which he stood was arranged according to Mr Edgar's special

fancies, and contained many more or less successful attempts to domesticate wild flowers, and Wyn was noticing the not very flourishing condition of a purple vetch when Mr Edgar came out from the open window of his sitting-room, and, leaning on his servant's arm, walked slowly to a long folding-chair at the end of the terrace, on which he lay down, then, spying Wyn, called him up at once.

"Ha, Wyn, so you've got the puppy? Miss Geraldine will be out directly. What a jolly little chap he is! Put him down on my knee. No—no, sir, you don't eat the newspaper! Anything else new, Wyn?"

"Yes, sir, the wild duck's eggs are hatched, and there are seven of them on the lower pond. Should you like to go and see them, sir?"

"Yes, I should. Get the pony round in half an hour. It's a lovely day."

As he spoke a tall girl of about fourteen, in a blue linen frock made sailor fashion and a sailor hat stuck on the back of her long dark hair, came running up the broad walk in the middle of the garden, sprang up the shallow steps that led to the terrace with one bound, and pounced on the puppy.

"Oh! what a little darling! What a perfect pet! Oh, how jolly of you to get him for me, Edgar! I'll teach him to walk on his hind legs and to die—and to bark when I ask him if he loves me—"

"Have you got Miss Hardman's leave to keep him?" said her brother.

"No, not yet. I thought I'd put him in the cupboard in my room, and introduce him gradually."

"He'll howl continually, Miss Geraldine, if you shut him up," said Wyn.

"Nonsense," said Edgar; "go and ask her if you may have him as a present from me."

"Oh, must I? It would be such fun to have him in a secret chamber, and visit him at night and save the schoolroom tea for him as if he was a Jacobite," said Geraldine.

"More fun for you than for the puppy, I should say," said Edgar.

"Well, I think a secret prisoner would be delightful—like the 'Pigeon Pie.' Edgar, didn't you ever read the 'Pigeon Pie'?"

"No," said Edgar, "I haven't had that pleasure."

"Please, ma'am," said Wyn with a smile, "I have. My sister Bessie brought it me out of her school library."

"I'm sure," said Geraldine, "it's a very nice book for you to read, Wyn. But what shall I call the puppy?"

"Please, ma'am, we call them Wriggle and Wruggle."

"Rigoletto?" suggested Edgar.

"No," said Geraldine, "it ought to be Star or Sunshine, or something like that, for I'm sure he'll be a light in a dark place. I know—Apollo. I shall call him Apollo. Well, I'll take him and fall on my knees to Miss Hardman, and beg her and pray her. And oh, Edgar! it's holidays—mayn't I come back and go with you to see the creatures?"

Edgar nodded, and Geraldine flew off, but was stopped in her career by her cousin James, who came out of the house as she passed, and detained her to shake hands and look at the puppy. He came up to Edgar's chair as Wyn went off to fetch the pony.

"Good morning, Edgar," he said; "pretty well to-day? I see you are teaching Geraldine to be as fond of pets as you are yourself."

"Poor little girl! she has a dull life," said Edgar. "I wish she had more companions."

"She is beginning to grow up."

"She is. She ought soon to be brought more forward, I suppose. But we never see anyone, or do anything. I don't see much of Geraldine—often—and she is kept very tight at her lessons."

"It's dull for you, too," said his cousin compassionately.

"Oh, I don't care when I get out and about a bit."

"My uncle doesn't look well, I think?"

"Doesn't he?" said Edgar quickly. "Ah, I haven't much opportunity of judging."

There was a touch of bitterness in his voice, and a look that was not quite pleasant in the bright hazel eyes, that were usually wonderfully cheery, considering how much their owner had to suffer, and keen as a hawk's into the bargain.

"I say, Edgar," said James Cunningham, sitting down on the wall near him, and speaking low, "people do get into the way of going on and taking things for granted. It's a long time since the subject was mentioned, but do you really think my uncle doesn't know where poor Alwyn is?"

"I don't know," said Edgar, flushing. "I've no reason to think he does."

"It has always seemed to me," said James, with some hesitation, "that if not, some one ought to find out."

"Do you think I should rest without knowing if I could help it?" said Edgar, starting up so suddenly, that the pain of the movement forced him to drop back again on his cushions and go on speaking with difficulty. "I did ask my father once, and he forbade me to mention him again. Don't talk of him."

James Cunningham was silenced. The situation was an awkward one. The estate had always gone in the male line, and he would have liked to know what had become of the next heir, after whom only a life as fragile as Edgar's stood between himself and the great estates of Ashcroft. He did not even know how deep in the eyes of father and brother was the disgrace that rested on the exile. But Edgar did not look approachable, and any attempt at further conversation was checked by the appearance of Mr Cunningham himself, a tall, pale, grey-haired gentleman, with dark eyes and long features, like his son and daughter.

He spoke to Edgar, rather distantly, but with a careful inquiry after his health, and Edgar answered shortly, and with a manner that was remarkably repellent of any sympathy his father might be inclined to offer. Geraldine came rushing back with Apollo clasped tenderly in her arms, but she stopped and walked demurely down the terrace at sight of her father.

"Miss Hardman says I may have him, Edgar," she said, "if I don't let him distract my attention at lesson-time."

"That's all right then," said Edgar, "and here is Wyn with the pony, so we had better come and see the wild duck."

The servant came out, Edgar was helped into the pony chair, on which rather pitiful process Mr Cunningham turned his back and walked away, discussing the morning news with his nephew; and presently they started off, Wyn leading the pony along the broad walk with Geraldine and Apollo frisking beside it. They turned down a shrubbery, stopping at intervals to admire the gold and silver pheasants, the doves and pigeons, and rare varieties of foreign poultry, which all had their separate establishments in what Geraldine called the Zoological Gardens. Wyn hunted them into sight, fed them, and discussed their growth, plumage, and general well-being; while Geraldine smothered the puppy in the carriage rug to keep him from frightening them with his barking and yapping.

Then they came out into an open space, where the pea-hens had their nursery—several of the ordinary coloured sort, and one rarer white one, whose two little white chicks were watched with much anxiety; while, to Geraldine's delight, the great white peacock himself appeared with his wide tail, with its faintly marked eyes like shadows in the whiteness, spread in the sun.

Then round towards the back of the farm-buildings, where, in a little square court, lived a yellow French fox, tied up with a long chain—a savage and unhappy little beast, which "might as well have been back in France for all the pleasure he gave himself or anyone else," as Geraldine said.

"Who's to take him?" said Edgar. "He was funny when he was a little cub. Being tied up isn't soothing to the temper."

A family of hedgehogs, fenced round into their own little domain, amused Geraldine mightily, as she watched the smallest curl himself up into a ball at the approach of Apollo, who thought him a delightful plaything till the prickles touched his tender tan nose, and he fled howling.

There was no time to-day to visit all the varieties of poultry, and the horses were in another direction, and formed another object for Edgar's drives; for though he could never mount one of them, the love of horseflesh was in his nature, and he liked to have them led out for his inspection, and had always plenty to say about their condition and management. To-day the little party crossed over the open turf of the park to a large pond, where Edgar cultivated varieties of aquatic birds. He was very proud of the black swans and the beautiful Muscovy ducks, the teal and the widgeon, which he had induced to breed among the reeds, rushes, and tangled grass that clothed its banks. Geraldine stood at the pony's head, while Wyn plunged into the rushes, waded and scrambled till he had driven the little flock of tiny dark ducklings into his master's range of vision.

Edgar was pleased; but his attention was less free than usual, and presently he said abruptly to Wyn:

"So you've got a cousin come to stay with you?"

"Yes, sir. Mother's got her to see what she's made of, and get her suited with a place."

"What's her name? Where does she come from?"

"Florence Whittaker—leastways, she says it's Maud Florence Nellie, which is a many names, sir, for one girl, don't you think?"

"Will she come to the Sunday school?" asked Geraldine.

"I don't know, ma'am. Shall I say as you desire her to come, Miss Geraldine?"

"Yes, do. There are never any new girls in Ashcroft. She isn't too old, is she?"

"She's only going in her fifteen, ma'am, but she's very big."

"Oh, well, Bessie Lee and Grace Elton are sixteen, quite. Yes, tell her to come."

"Thank you, ma'am, I will," said Wyn. "Do you want to go home, sir?"

"Yes, I'm tired this morning. Go straight back. I don't want to go round the wood."

He fell into silence. Geraldine played with her puppy, and Wyn trudged cheerily at the pony's head, thinking of an expedition he wanted to propose some day when Mr Edgar was very well and fresh, and there was no one to interfere with them. Mr Edgar had been so weak all the spring, and had had so many headaches and fits of palpitation—once he had even fainted after an attempt to walk a few steps farther than usual—so that he and Wyn had not been trusted to make long excursions alone together.

But now that he was better again, and the weather was so fine, Wyn longed to take Dobbles to a certain spot recently laid open to his approach. He had been thoroughly imbued with his young master's tastes, knew the haunts of every bird and beast in the wood, every hollow in the old ash-trees where owls or squirrels could nest and haunt. He watched the growth of all the wild flowers, and at the autumn cottage show intended to win the first prize for a collection of them—a new idea in Ashcroft which had been recently suggested by a lady whose husband, Sir Philip Carleton, had just taken Ravenshurst for the shooting.

Chapter Seven.

Sunday School.

Entirely unfamiliar surroundings will exercise a subduing effect on the most daring nature; and Florence Whittaker for the first few days of her stay at Ashcroft felt quite meek and bewildered. She really had nothing to say. She was quite unused to so small and quiet a family. The eldest son, Ned Warren, had recently married, and did not live at home, Bessie was away at her school until the harvest holidays, and Wyn was busy all day and had lessons to do in the evening. She had never seen so civil and well-mannered a little boy; while Mr Warren was a great big man over six feet high, with an immense red beard, very silent and grave, and good manners gained from the gentlemen with whom he associated. Her Aunt Charlotte, as she was directed to call Mrs Warren, was very kind to her, and never aggravated her, a fact which upset Florence's previous ideas of aunts. There really was no opportunity of distinguishing herself by "answering back," for Mrs Warren never said anything that gave her a chance. As she was neither idle nor unhandy, she acquitted herself well in all the little tasks her aunt set her; but she was dull enough to look favourably on the idea of the Sunday school.

"Miss Geraldine's been inquiring about you, Florence," said Wyn when he came in to dinner.

"She says she wishes you to come down to Sunday school with Gracie Elton."

"I don't mind if I do," said Florence, "but I attend a Bible class at home."

"The girls in the first class here are quite as old as you," said Mrs Warren, "but I dare say you are accustomed to a much larger number."

"Oh, I don't mind," said Florence, with cheerful condescension. "Our teacher says we ought not to be stuck up, so, though we're nearly all business young ladies, we ain't exclusive. There's two *generals* attend the class, and I think it's a shame to make them sit by themselves, don't you?"

"I think it would be very ill-mannered," said Mrs Warren quietly, "if you did. I dare say you are very fond of the lady who teaches you?"

"Oh, she's as good as another—better than some. She knows us, you see, and don't expect too much of us. But there, last spring, when she went away and Miss Bates took us, we weren't going to go to *her*. Why, she gave us bad marks for talking, when she'd only just come. She hadn't any call to find fault with us; she were just there to keep us together till teacher came back."

"Well, I suppose, as she was kind enough to teach you, you were careful not to give any trouble to a stranger," said Mrs Warren, "because that would have been rude."

"We ain't so rude as the Saint Jude's girls," said Florence virtuously. "*They* locked the door and kept their teacher waiting, and pretended they'd lost the key. That's going *too* far, I say. If ever I'm a teacher I'll not put up with such as that."

"Could you be a teacher?" said Wyn, who had listened open-mouthed.

"Well," said Florence, "they'll always give little ones to the Bible class if we apply, and I'd keep 'em strict if I had 'em. But I don't think as I'm religious enough."

"Yes," said Mrs Warren, "my Bessie says that we never feel our own defects so much as when we come to think of teaching others."

"I ain't confirmed yet," said Florence, "but I mean to go up next spring. I say our church is good enough for anyone but George; he don't think nothing of us. His place is a deal higher; he says we're as old-fashioned as old-fashioned can be."

Here Florence entered on a lively description of the ritual practised at the different churches of Rapley, showing considerable acquaintance with their external distinctions, while Wyn, who had never thought the Church services concerned him in any way except to behave properly at them, stared in amazement. Neither he nor his young master knew much about Church matters outside of Ashcroft.

Mrs Warren listened and pondered, and for the time being said nothing. Silence was a weapon with which Florrie's chatter had never yet been encountered.

She resolved to make a good impression at the Sunday school, and show these ignorant rustics a little of what a young lady attending a Bible class was accustomed to. Indeed, as she stood by herself on the Sunday morning under the great overarching trees of the silent summer wood, something not very unlike a feeling of affection came into her heart for grave Miss Morel aunt and the dusty classroom and the gay girls sitting round the table.

"They *will* be quiet without me," she thought and with more eagerness than the writer expected she began to read a letter from Matty which she had just received. After a little information as to the home news the letter went on:—"Dear Florrie you are not a little girl now, and I am going to write to you about something that I shouldn't like mentioned to father or Aunt Stroud. I am sure you must remember poor Harry, as used to jump you up and down when you were little. You know he ran away, and I am afraid he did something very wicked; but only father knows what it was. But he went away from Ashcroft, and, dear Florrie, do remember about it, for everyone says it was a daring spirit led to his ruin, so do be a good girl, and mind what Mrs Warren say; for think of Harry, wandering in a cruel world."

Florence only remembered a little and knew nothing of her eldest brother. She had no fear of touching on a tender subject, and thought that the simplest plan was to ask for an explanation; so as she and Wyn walked down to the Sunday school together that afternoon—they did not go in the morning—she broached the subject before they reached the gardener's cottage, where Grace Elton was to join them.

"I say, Wyn, do you remember my brother Harry?"

Wyn coloured up and answered shyly, "We don't ever talk about *him*."

"No more do we. Why," said Florence, staring at him with her great round eyes, "where is he?"

"I don't know," said Wyn.

"Who does?"

"Maybe the master do."

"Mr Cunningham? What did Harry do?"

"Well, Florrie, so far as I know—only I don't think mother knows I know it—he ran away with poor Mr Alwyn."

"Ran away? What for?"

"Well, they was up at Ravenshurst having a lark—which they oughtn't to have had anything to do with—and the lady's jewels were all stolen at the same time. So folks say Harry did it—but whether Mr Alwyn knew—they never came back again."

"Why should they put it on Harry?"

"He was always playing tricks."

"Playing tricks isn't stealing," said Florence.

"Well, but," said Wyn, "it isn't as if he'd stood his trial—he ran away. And they say master had never have banished Mr Alwyn if he hadn't done something downright disgraceful."

"Does no one ever talk about him?"

"Well, old Granny do sometimes to mother; and once I saw his picture, and Harry's too."

"Where?"

"Well," said Wyn, lowering his voice, "since you're his sister I'll tell you. One day last winter Mr Edgar was ill, and couldn't come out of doors, and I went to tell him how all the creatures were; but he didn't seem to take much interest, his back ached so. But he asked me to fetch him a little leather case out of a drawer, and he opened it and looked at it, and he let it fall. And when I picked it up I saw it was a photograph, and suddenly Mr Edgar said, 'Look at it, Wyn;' and there was my brother Ned and your brother Harry—I knew it must be—and a tall young gentleman, all sitting in the forest under the big beech with their guns, and Mr Edgar sitting swinging on the bough behind them, like other people, and Mr Edgar put his finger on Mr Alwyn's picture and said, 'If ever you see him again, Wyn, tell him I showed this to you. Don't you forget.' I ain't likely to forget."

"May be they're dead," said Florrie.

"Why, Florence, I look at it like this: It ain't very likely two young men would both die. I think it over often," said Wyn, "for I know Mr Edgar thinks of it. There's places in the wood where I know he thinks of it, and I'd like to hunt all over the world to find Mr Alwyn and bring him back."

Florence was older than Wyn, and a good deal more versed in the world's ways.

"I expect they were a couple of bad ones," she said, "or they'd have been back before now. Well, people may say I take after Harry; but I'll never run away, not if they tell any number of talcs of me."

"Hush," said Wyn, "here's Grace Elton. Don't you say nothing, Florence, to *no* one."

"I ain't given to blabbing," said Florence coolly.

Grace Elton was a pleasant, well-dressed girl, though in a far quieter style than Florence. Wyn fell behind with a pair of boy Eltons, and the girls chatted until they reached the little whitewashed school—close by the church, with a great climbing rose hanging over its rustic doorway.

Ashcroft was a very small village, and the school was a mixed one. On Sunday two classes of boys, under charge of the clergyman, Mr Murray, and Miss Hardman, occupied one side of the room. The day-school mistress taught the younger girls at the other; and under the pretty latticed window on a square of forms sat the elder ones. They were a flaxen-haired, rosy-faced set of children, simple and rather stolid-looking, among whom Wyn Warren, Grace Elton, and others of the head servants' children were decidedly the superiors. As Florence and Grace came up to their class, a girl in a straight white frock, with a red sash and a large straw hat, came and sat down on the teacher's chair. "Miss Geraldine'll take us," whispered the girls, as they stood up and curtsied; "Mrs Murray's got a cold."

The kind-faced, white-haired old clergyman read the prayer, and then the first class began to repeat fluently, but with an accent that Florence could hardly follow, a surprising number of lessons.

"Can you say your collect?" said Miss Geraldine to Florence.

"No, teacher. We don't learn lessons at home—we've no time for it," said Florence.

"You can learn it for next week," said Miss Geraldine, with a calmness that astonished Florence as much as the other girls were amazed at hearing Miss Geraldine called "teacher."

But there was something in the unconscious composure of this slip of a girl, who looked as if she had never been disobeyed in her life, and did not know what a struggle to keep order meant, that impressed Florence with a curious sense of fellow-feeling.

"She's got a spirit of her own," she thought; but Geraldine was only secure of her position and unquestioned in her relation to the girls she was teaching.

"Yes, teacher; and I'll look over a hymn too if you like, teacher," said Florence with alacrity.

"A psalm. Grace Elton will show you."

When the lessons were over the young lady asked questions on them in a clear, steady little voice, which were nicely answered by the girls, and then proceeded to hear the Catechism, and, thinking to be polite to the new-comer and give her an easy piece, asked her her name, to begin with.

Florence was not accustomed to say lessons standing up, nor to say the Catechism at all, and at the first attempt to repeat her long name she went off into a hopeless giggle, and stuffed her pocket-handkerchief into her mouth. Some of the other girls giggled also. Miss Geraldine's dark eyes gave a little flash.

"When you have done laughing, Florence, I'll ask you again. Grace, go on."

Florence did not know the next answer that came to her turn, and it soon became apparent that a great girl of fifteen could not say her Catechism—a fact common enough at Rapley, but unknown at Ashcroft.

She pouted and shook her shoulders; but there was an odd fascination for her in this young, firm little teacher, and when the marks were given at the end of school she anticipated notice for her giggling by saying with a benevolent smile:

"Law, teacher, I'll say my Catechism next Sunday. I ain't a-going to give you any trouble."

Geraldine had never seen anyone in the least like Florence before. Her smiling absence of deference and good-natured patronage amazed her.

"I suppose you don't *intend* to give trouble," she said. "I am sorry you don't know your Catechism, but we'll try and teach you while you're here. Learn the first three answers for next Sunday."

The two pair of bright eyes met, a little defiantly, but somehow Florence felt uncomfortable.

"Well, she is a plucky little thing," she said to her neighbour as they rose. "*She* ain't afraid of us."

"Miss Geraldine!"

"I like the look of her," said Florrie. "I shall try behaving myself. I can if I choose; some girls can't."

Chapter Eight.

Granny.

After church Wyn went to attend to the supper of some of the animals which were in his special charge, and Mrs Warren took Florence up to the great house to see her old mother-in-law, who had once been housekeeper, but was now old and rheumatic, and confined to one room. As they walked through the park they met Geraldine and her

governess. Mrs Warren made her dignified little curtsey, and Florrie grinned from ear to ear with extreme good-nature, and what she felt to be the kindest notice of her new teacher. Mrs Warren noticed, but again said nothing. They walked through the great fruit-gardens round to the back entrance and into the servants' hall, from which they went first to visit Mrs Hay in the housekeeper's room. Mrs Warren was a welcome guest, and there was plenty of politeness to her young friend. Florence was an observant girl; her ideas of superior service had risen hitherto to a villa "where three were kept." These solemn upper servants, with their vast comfortable premises, their handsome clothes, and their intense sense of superiority, were more overawing to her than their masters and mistresses would have been.

"They can't have much to do but look at each other," she thought, with some truth; for the establishment at Ashcroft had never been reduced when the gay rush of social life, for which it had been calculated, had stopped altogether.

Aunt Stroud had certainly talked of the Ashcroft household, but Florence had been rather in the habit of supposing that all these respectable ladies and gentlemen had been invented for her edification. Like all girls of her sort, Florence, if she *did* feel shy, had absolutely no manners at all and when Mrs Hay spoke to her she only sniggered and stuck out her foot, feeling relieved when they went upstairs to see "Granny."

Mrs Warren was a little old woman in a black gown and old-fashioned frilled cap. She had been in the family when the present Mr Cunningham was born, and she was always treated by him with the greatest respect. Her great trouble was that she was too lame to go and see Master Edgar, and it had been no small loss to the lonely Edgar when old "Bunny," as by some childish play on her name of Warren she was always called, was no longer able to pay him visits, and give him all the petting which, poor fellow, he ever got.

She knew all the family troubles, and regarded them as her own; if she could have brought Alwyn back or cured Edgar, she would have sacrificed herself with entire and unconscious devotion. That Miss Geraldine "did not have the advantages nor the company of other young ladies" was a constant regret to her. She had a cat and a canary bird which lived in harmony together; and in her room Wyn frequently nursed white mice, or dormice, on the plea that they would amuse Mr Edgar; they certainly amused himself, and possibly Granny too. When Mrs Warren and Florrie arrived Wyn was already established, eating buttered toast, with his infant dormice asleep on his pocket-handkerchief. Granny never thought that animals or babies were dirty, noisy, or troublesome. She preferred her cat to her carpet, and her young masters and mistresses and grandchildren to her afternoon nap.

As she was filling up her brown teapot, which had already for some time been drawing on the hob, and was setting Wyn and Florence to fetch out various delicacies from her cupboard, a quick step sounded, and Geraldine came rushing in, and, flinging her arms round the old woman's neck, kissed her heartily.

"How d'ye do, Bunny? Oh! good afternoon, Mrs Warren. I didn't know you were having tea. Sit down, please."

Florence had stood up because all the others did.

"Have a bit of cake, Miss Geraldine, my dear?" said Granny coaxingly.

"Miss Geraldine grows a tall young lady," said Mrs Warren.

"They don't give us half such nice cake in the schoolroom. Oh!—baby dormice! How lovely!"

"Would you be pleased to accept of a pair, Miss Geraldine?" said Wyn.

"You don't think Apollo would eat them? He *has* eaten my German exercises and half a sheet of music."

"There now, you'd better bring him up to me, Missy, and only have him out sometimes," said Granny.

"He likes German—I don't," said Geraldine. "Wyn, if you like you can take Florence Whittaker to see the peacocks."

"Thank you, ma'am, I will," said Wyn, while Florence grinned and sniggered.

Geraldine went off in a whirlwind as she had come, and after tea Wyn and Florence went out together, leaving daughter and mother-in-law for a comfortable chat.

"That's a fine girl of poor Jane Whittaker's, but she don't seem to have no manners at all," said Granny.

"She hasn't," said Mrs Warren. "She don't seem to know how to behave to anyone, except as if they were girls like herself. Liza Stroud wants to get her into good service, but she ain't anyhow fit for it. No lady, nor no lady's housekeeper, would put up with her for a week with them manners. But I'm in hopes to stroke her down gradually and unconscious-like, for she's very like her poor brother, and 'tis no manner of use driving her. Miss Geraldine's a fine young lady too, and favours poor Mr Alwyn remarkably."

"Yes, there it is again," said the old lady. "Miss Geraldine's kept so strict in the schoolroom that she don't know what to do when she gets out of it. She ought to be with ladies in the drawing-room, as would bring her on to receive company like her dear mamma, and sit down nice with her needlework. Oh, dear! that was a sore time, that there unlucky night at Ravenshurst."

"Granny," said Mrs Warren, "I've often wondered what *you* thought became of the jewels."

"My dear, I've thought of they jewels day and night, nor never could give a guess about them. I knew the young gentlemen had some mischief on hand, laughing and plotting, and Mr Edgar told me some of the tricks as they played on each other up at Ravenshurst—which I told him weren't such as young gentlemen and ladies should condescend to. But there, they all went off on their visit, and only the master and Mr Edgar came back."

"I was sitting here," pursued Granny, "in the dusk that next evening, when Mr Alwyn came rushing up the stairs—dear, dear! Miss Geraldine do fly up them just as he used—and told me to fetch Edgar to wish him good-bye, as he'd never see or speak to his father again. So I found Mr Edgar, and he came, but slow, and looking as white as that handkerchief. But they joked and laughed, and tried to be the one as fierce as the other. Then Mr Alwyn turned round to me, and swore Harry Whittaker never saw the jewels. 'And you don't think I've got 'em, Bunny?' said Mr Alwyn, laughing. But they wouldn't say not another word, and they was both awful hard when they spoke of master. But they made believe to laugh and make a mock of it when they was wishing each other good-bye, only I could see poor Mr Edgar was half-choking all the time, and when his brother was gone he near fainted. But never did I think when he laughed again, and said he'd had a slip and twisted his back, and the pain took him sudden, of all that was to come of it, and that he'd never come running up they stairs again."

"Well, then," said Mrs Charles Warren, "all we ever knew was that there was that bit put in the paper about a foolish and unjustifiable trick had been taken advantage of by dishonest people—valuable jewels, hidden in play, had disappeared. The person who hid them had owned that it had been done without the connivance of the young men whose names had been mentioned. But who *were* that person?"

"Well," said Granny, "I don't know, and I don't know as even Mr Edgar knows. But there, the fact's against them, and 'twas a terrible ending to a foolish trick."

"Ravenshurst is full again this summer," said Mrs Warren. "Sir Philip and Lady Carleton are coming down, and if Florrie were a sensible girl I might get her a temporary place under the housekeeper there; but it do go against me to have anything to do with that house."

"Well, I'd not send her *there*," said Granny; "she's a deal too bouncing now for any lady's house." Mrs Warren saw no occasion for some time to change this verdict. Florence "bounced" more as she became more at her ease. She did not mean to misbehave herself, but her notions of behaviour were so very unlike Mrs Warren's. The kindest thing that could be said of her was that she meant well, but unfortunately she did very badly. Moreover, she did not appear to have a single aspiration after better things. She had lived the life of a little animal, bent on nothing but on pleasing herself; but as she was not a mere animal, but a human soul, with human powers for good or evil, evil was getting terribly the upper hand. It was not so much what Florence did as what she was that was the pity. Girls are refined and softened, sometimes by intellectual tastes and a mental power of choosing the better part, and more often, in Florence's rank of life, by the many self-denials, the care of little ones, the constant unselfishness born of the hard struggle of life in the working class. Florence had no intellectual tastes, and had never known any struggle. She had been ignorant and comfortable all her life, and her mind was full of silly common thoughts and fancies, and thoughts and fancies worse than merely silly. She was vain and selfish, saucy and curious. She did not love anyone very much; she had no wants or wishes except to please herself. She was so much bolder than other girls that she attracted more notice, but she was not at all exceptional, unhappily. As for religion, what religion can a creature have who never felt a superior and never knew a need? And religion had not come much before Florence except in the form of respectable observance. Mrs Warren, who in a still and quiet way was a religious woman, wondered how to teach her better, before, as she put it to herself, "the poor thing was taught by trouble."

There was teaching of an unusual kind coming to Florence, and the absence of irritation caused by Mrs Warren's quiet management was laying her open to new impressions. But the attraction she felt to Geraldine Cunningham was really the only new idea that at present touched her, and it took the form of an intense curiosity. She stared at her whenever she had the chance—at school, in church, wherever she met her; she tried to find out what the young lady did; she questioned Wyn, and at last was suddenly struck by a connecting link. Both their brothers were missing. Florence had never cared a straw about Harry, nor, indeed, had Geraldine for Alwyn; but the idea was quite pleasant. They each had a strict father and a lost brother. The odd touch of romance was Maud Florence Nellie's first awakening and softening.

Chapter Nine.

In the Wood.

One night, about a fortnight after Florence Whittaker's arrival at Ashcroft, Edgar Cunningham had a dream—a vivid dream—of his brother Alwyn's face. Edgar could scarcely have called up the face before his mind's eye; but this dream-face was as vivid and as real as Alwyn's own had been when he planned out the fatal trick that had led to so much misery. Only, instead of the bold mocking eyes, half mirthful, half scornful, of the old Alwyn, these eyes were earnest and full of tenderness. Edgar woke, feeling as if his brother had really been near him. He had never dreamed of him in any marked way before. Although he had been fond of him in a boyish way, he had no reason to think well of him, and, though he could make many excuses for him, he would never have imagined him with such a look on his face as this. Edgar bore his own troubles with the same defiant gaiety that had marked his brother—he hardly ever pitied himself, and he had never blinked the fact that Alwyn was not likely to have improved during his absence. He resented his own ignorance of what he believed his father to know, but, except on the occasion of which he had spoken to his cousin, he had been willing to let matters alone. It was the Cunningham way; his father went about his business, and thought as little as he could of his disgraced son, saw as little as he could of his sick one; his brother had gone off with a laugh and a bitter joke from his home and his heirship. Geraldine sang when she was kept indoors, and made rhymes of the lesson she was told to learn for a punishment, and he himself prided himself on never complaining, never giving in, and taking his sufferings as a matter of course. The dream was accountable enough; Florence Whittaker's name and face had recalled old days to him; his cousin had stirred up his thoughts on the subject, but nothing had ever so roused his feelings as the look on that dream-face. He got out the photograph, which in a rare moment of depression he had once shown to Wyn Warren. Yes—he had seen Alwyn; but Alwyn, as if with another soul. And then an awful thought came into Edgar's mind, that in life Alwyn never could have looked at him so. Be that as it might, he took a sudden resolution, he would speak again to his father, and he felt that this time

he should get a hearing. His father always visited him in the morning, either in his room or on the terrace, asking him how he was—commented on the news in the paper, or talked a little about local matters. The effort should be made on the first opportunity. James Cunningham had been perfectly right, and Edgar felt that only the passive languor of ill-health could have induced him to acquiesce so long in uncertainty.

It was very hard to begin when Mr Cunningham came in as usual, and talked in dry, short sentences about the harvest and about a foreign battle that had taken place, as if he had to think between his words of something else to say to his son. Want of resolution, however, was not a Cunningham failing.

“Father,” said Edgar presently, “will you be kind enough to shut the window for me? I want to speak to you—quite alone. I want to ask you to tell me exactly what you yourself know about Alwyn. It is a painful subject; but I think I ought to know.”

Mr Cunningham came back and sat down opposite his son’s couch.

“You’re right,” he said, “you should. I have been thinking so. A few words will do it. You recall, I dare say, that your brother and I were on very bad terms. His conduct had been unprincipled, and his behaviour to me was unfeeling. He was perfectly hard and reckless. You know how the scandalous practical joke at Ravenshurst was cut short by the terror of Mrs Fletcher’s little niece and the illness caused by it. When Mrs Fletcher came up to bed she missed such of her jewels as she had not worn at the ball; which she had carelessly left on her dressing-table. Some of the servants knew that Alwyn had had a confederate in Harry Whittaker, as another absurd figure was seen close to the ball-room windows. He was at once suspected, and the next morning Lilian Fletcher confessed that she had hidden the jewels in the garden for fun, and had intended to pretend that the ghost had stolen them, to heighten the excitement. When she took her mother to the place—of course no jewels. She vowed that no one knew what she had done. Alwyn had declared himself when the child was frightened, and between him and Ned Warren they made out so good an *alibi* for Whittaker that it was impossible to commit him. The thing was investigated privately; but Mrs Fletcher was ill at the time, and very much afraid of her daughter’s share in the business being made public. Nothing was discovered. But you know all this.”

“Most of it,” said Edgar. “But I do not know what you believe about the jewels.”

“It is my belief that somehow Whittaker had them, after all! I should have committed him for trial. Alwyn took his part, violently swore I insulted him by having such an idea in connection with his companion. He chose to misinterpret what I said, and swore he would never come home till the jewels were found or I had begged his pardon. He behaved as if I had accused him of the theft himself.”

“Father,” said Edgar, “you have at least allowed other people to imagine that you thought so.”

“No, Alwyn left his home. I did not cast him off, nor cut him off with a shilling. I told him that I could not allow him to associate with you—he said he wished to emigrate. I lodged a sum of money for him in a New York bank, and told him he could communicate with me through the bankers. He never did communicate with me; but he drew the money.”

“And you don’t know where he is now?”

“No. I never saw him after that night—Beresford did the business with him in London. Whittaker went away with him. Now for what I suppose you really want to know. You are my heir, and have been so, ever since that occurrence.”

“Father,” said Edgar again, “you must know that I am very unlikely to outlive you.”

“In that ease the estates will pass to your cousin James. I object to the idea of marrying Geraldine for the sake of a master for Ashcroft, and she is amply provided for.”

“Father,” said Edgar, “I don’t see that Alwyn has done anything to forfeit his heirship. As for his dissipations—I was quite ready to follow his example had I had the chance. A practical joke, however improper, is not cause sufficient. Will you take no steps to find him?”

“No,” said Mr Cunningham, “it is in his power to find me if he chooses.”

“It is right to tell you that, should I ever have the power, I should try to find him.”

“That would be as you please,” said Mr Cunningham, “but the estate is secured to your cousin. He doesn’t know it, though, and I don’t wish him to find it out.”

It was an odd, hard scene. Edgar’s manner was rather polite than respectful; his father showed no feeling whatever.

“I think,” said Edgar with one last effort, “that the matter has been made to appear more disgraceful than it is.”

“I never thought much of appearances,” said Mr Cunningham. “But there is no more I can tell you. If there is anything that you wish for yourself, you have only to name it. That night’s business cost you much as well as myself.”

“Nothing but the fall kept me out of the scrape myself,” said Edgar, “and Alwyn never knew that he startled me.”

“I never understood your share in the matter,” said Mr Cunningham.

“Alwyn tried to get some fun out of me, by refusing to tell me his plan. When I missed him from the dancing, I ran upstairs to find out; but the old monk’s figure made me jump, and I fell backwards down the stairs. I didn’t know I was hurt, and guessed directly who it was. I was going back to see the effect, when I turned so faint that I had to get

away into my room instead."

As Mr Cunningham looked down at his son's prostrate figure it was perhaps inevitable that the bitterness of his recollection should increase rather than otherwise, especially as he knew that Edgar's determined concealment of the extent of his injury for weeks afterwards had destroyed his chance of recovery.

"I'll leave you to rest now," he said. "The past is beyond recall, and nothing is gained by dwelling on it."

Edgar lay still when his father left him, and reflected. He had hoped that more had been known about his brother. His father's last words had been the key of his own life. Was nothing to be gained by a recall of the past? The Cunninghams had been brought up to a correct performance of such religious observances as were suitable to their position; but of vital religion they knew little or nothing. They "set a proper example" in the village, but all Edgar's endurance and pluck had wanted the help that might have made it go so much deeper, and be so much more real. He could ignore his troubles, but he did not know what spiritual comfort or inward strength was. He held his tongue and disliked pity, even from himself. He was clear-headed and sensible, but neither a thinker nor a reader. It was strange to him that the thought of Alwyn's death, which his dream had brought into his mind, impressed him so much. It would simplify the family complication, and he never, most likely, would see him again. Edgar had often faced his own probable early death as the loss of life here—he had never faced it as opening out a life hereafter. He was glad to be roused from thoughts that troubled him by Wyn's appearance, looking eager and happy as usual.

"Please, sir, if you're pretty well to-day, there's a part of the wood I know I can take Dobbles to. And please, sir, there's a pond and water-lilies, and I believe, that odd sort of flowering rush as you wanted. And, sir, wouldn't you like to see it growing?"

"Well—I should, Wyn," said Edgar. "Bring Dobbles round directly after lunch, and we'll make a long afternoon of it."

It was a lovely summer afternoon; the wood was green and cool, with long shafts of golden light penetrating the boughs overhead. Wyn led the sober Dobbles slowly along the green walks, explaining, as he went, that, some underwood having been cut down, the pond was now for the first time approachable by the pony.

"So you've never seen it, sir, and it's uncommon pretty."

"Oh yes, I have, Wyn; I remember it quite well. Last time I was there I waded in after the lilies, and started a heron. He'd come over from the Duke's heronry. I can't think how Dobbles is to get there."

"Please, sir, he can; even Mr Robertson would say it was quite safe since they made the clearing."

If Edgar loved anything on earth, it was the wood; the great trees, the birds and the squirrels, the ferns and the flowers, gave him real pleasure, and he never felt so nearly independent and, as he called it, locomotive, as when he was out in this way with no one but Wyn.

It was perhaps as well that Mr Robertson was not there to express an opinion on the nature of the ground over which Dobbles was taken; but at last they came almost to the edge of the little woodland pond, and Edgar exclaimed with delight at the white and yellow lilies on its surface, the tall reeds round the edge. He raised himself up as much as possible, and looked eagerly over it.

"Wyn," he cried, "there are all sorts of treasures on the opposite bank—real yellow loose-strife and rosebay willow herb. That's not common cream and codlins. There's none of it about elsewhere in the wood. And all sorts of flowering grass. Go round and get a great bunch of whatever you can see—I'll wait here; give me the rein—but Dobbles knows his duty."



WYN AND THE STRANGER

p. 92

Wyn ran off and plunged into the brushwood. He had been trained to have keen eyes, and he had soon collected a large bunch of reeds and flowers. Dobbles and his master were quite out of sight, and Wyn had got to the other side of the pond, among a mass of ferns and brambles not likely to yield much out of the common, when he heard a rustling and saw a tall man standing on the little track beyond him, with his back turned. Wyn was a keeper's son, and as soon as he perceived that the man was a stranger he at once jumped to the conclusion that he was after no good, and that he, Mr Edgar's only protector, had left him alone at some distance. And, though Mr Edgar was only game in the sense that nothing would frighten him, he had a watch and a purse, and was of course perfectly defenceless. As he prepared to hurry back to him the man turned, showing a sunburnt face and a long yellowish beard. He looked at Wyn.

"I say, boy, do you belong to these parts?" he said.

"Yes," said Wyn, "do you? For this wood ain't open to the public."

"Do you happen to know if Mr Edgar Cunningham's at home just now?"

"What do you want of him?" said Wyn.

"Well, I want you to give him this note if you could see him by himself any time. Here's a shilling."

"No, thank ye," said Wyn. "I can give my master a note; but this wood *ain't* open to the public, and you'd best turn to the left, and go out by the stile."

"All right," said the stranger. "I've missed my way."

He turned to the left and walked off, and Wyn hurried back to his master, relieved to see Dobbles exactly where he had left him, and Mr Edgar lying, looking up at the trees overhead, evidently perfectly safe and undisturbed.

"Oh, please, sir," said Wyn, "here are the flowers. But please, sir, we'd best go home. There's characters about, and—why—wherever can it be?"

"Why, what's the matter? You look quite scared. What's missing?"

"Please, sir, I met a chap as I don't think had any business there, and he gave me a note for you, and, sir, I can't find it nowhere. I had it in my hand, and I must have dropped it."

"I suppose it was one of the men from Ashwood or Raby," said Edgar, mentioning two places in the neighbourhood. "Very careless of you, Wyn, to lose the note, and very silly to get a scare about it. Well," after some time spent in searching, "we must get back now, and to-morrow, if it's fine, I'll come here again, and you can have a hunt for it."

Wyn was so upset, or, as he would have expressed it, "put about," by the sight of the stranger, the loss of the note, and by Mr Edgar's rare reproof, that he quite forgot at the moment either to realise to himself or to tell his master that the man could have been no one from the neighbourhood, since he had asked if Mr Edgar was at home, which everyone knew was invariably the case.

Chapter Ten.

Florence's Duty.

On the same afternoon that Wyn and his master went to see the water-lily pond, Florrie Whittaker, seized with a fit of impatience, went off without leave for a ramble in the wood.

She didn't think she could bear it much longer. There was no one to chatter to, there was no one to chatter about. Mrs Lee's shop was far more lively than Mrs Warren's parlour, and Carrie and Ada were much more congenial than Grace Elton. Florence, lazy and sociable, had made a strong effort to strike up a friendship with that pretty, pleasant girl, but Grace, as Florence put it, was "*that* particular," and so often blushed and said, "Mother wouldn't like it," when Florence's ill-trained tongue went its natural way, that Florence would have been quite disgusted with her but for the thought that "Miss Geraldine" wouldn't like it either. Florence had once begun to astonish Grace with the history of how she had run after the boys down to the canal, and had then stopped with an odd new feeling that she wouldn't like Miss Geraldine to know she had done *that*. Should she write home and say she would be a good girl, and go into any business Father and Aunt Stroud wished, knowing that some sort of fun could be got out of life at Rapley; or should she wait and let Aunt Charlotte "comb her down," as she vigorously put it, till she thought her fit for a place at Ashcroft or at "The Duke's?" That implied lilac cotton gowns in the week and a neat bonnet on Sundays; but then she had heard of servants' dances and parties, and the great household wouldn't be *very* dull, surely. Florence strolled on, thinking of one thing and another, swinging her hat in her hand, and now and then snatching at a foxglove or a bit of honeysuckle, till she suddenly became aware that she had lost her way. She stopped and looked round her. Which little green track would take her home? There was a good deal of undergrowth in the part of the wood to which she had wandered, and, so far as she knew, she might be miles from any outlet but the one by which she had come. The great trees arched over her head, the green solemn light was all around her. The tap of a woodpecker, the coo of a wood-pigeon or the whir of its wing, the soft indefinite murmur of the leaves, were all the sounds that broke the stillness of the August wood. If Florence had lost her way in a town she would have asked it of a policeman with perfect composure. No crowd of passengers, no bustle of life, would have impressed her in the least, but this stillness and silence and loneliness struck on her unaccustomed nerves, and an unaccountable fear *took* possession of her. What was there to be afraid of?

Snakes and water-rats were the only definite objects of terror that occurred to her; and, as she had never seen a specimen of either of these animals, they were not very present to her imagination. She did not know what she was afraid of, but for the first time in her life she knew what fear was. She stood quite still at the turn of the little foot track, suddenly afraid to go to the right or the left; her heart beat, her breath came in gasps, tears filled her eyes, and she burst out crying like a baby—she, who never cried except from bad temper or toothache, cried with fear.

Suddenly a rapid, light step ran down the track, and Geraldine Cunningham, in her blue cotton frock, and a basket in her hand, came into view.

"Why! Florence Whittaker! What's the matter?"

"I've—I've lost my way, Miss; I can't get out!" sobbed Florence, still too much scared to be ashamed of her fright.

"Lost your way! Dear me, you're standing in the way back to Warren's lodge. Come, don't cry, I'll show you."

"Oh, thank you, Miss," said Florence with unwonted meekness, and wiping her eyes. Then, recovering a little, "I'm a great silly, but the trees is so tall, and there ain't nobody about."

"Why, that's the beauty of it," said Geraldine. "One couldn't run about in the wood if there *was* anybody about. But it's just like the garden, nobody ever comes here."

As Geraldine said this in her clear, outspoken voice, a tall man came into view along the opposite track: he was dark and slight, and dressed in a rough suit that might have belonged to anyone, gentle or simple, in a country place.

"We'll go on," whispered Geraldine, straightening herself up, and taking Florence by the hand.

The man came up to the two girls and looked at them rather keenly; then he touched his hat, and said: "Excuse me, young ladies, can you tell me the way out of the wood?"

"Yes," said Geraldine, with her straightforward gaze; "if you go straight back and turn to the right, you'll come into the Raby road."

The stranger lingered a moment as if he would have liked to say more, but contented himself with saying rather oddly, "Thank you—Miss," and walking away.

"How very odd!" said Geraldine, "that there *should* be a stranger in the wood. Who can he be?"

"He was very civil in his speech," said Florrie. "Yes; but the wood's private; he oughtn't to be here. Come along, Florence, we'll tell Mr Warren we saw him."

The two girls talked a little as they walked on together, Florence feeling suddenly shy, and as if she had nothing to

say for herself. Presently, as they came near the lodge, they met Wyn, looking hot and hurried. "Oh, if you please, Miss Geraldine," he said, touching his cap, "you haven't seen anything like a letter lying about in the forest?"

"A letter in the forest? Why, Wyn, how ever could a letter get there?"

"I've lost one, ma'am, as a man gave me for Mr Edgar, and I'm going to look for it again."

"Oh," said Geraldine, "that must be the man that spoke to us just now, and asked his way. If you run right on, Wyn, you could catch him."

Wyn rushed off, but presently came back, overtaking the girls again as they came up to the lodge.

"It wasn't the same man, Miss Geraldine," he said. "The man I met was a stout party with a red beard, and this one was a deal thinner, and a black-haired chap, too."

"Then there's two strange men in the wood," said Florence.

At this moment the keeper himself appeared, carrying his gun, and saluting his young lady; and all three children began to tell their stories. Warren took them very quietly. "I'll keep a look-out, ma'am," he said to Geraldine; "but strangers do pass through the wood. There's artists about nowadays. They scare the birds dreadful. And, as for you, Wyn, you'd best go and look for that there note first thing in the morning: you'd no business to let it drop."

"I think the man who spoke to me looked like an artist," said Geraldine as she went off.

"Florrie," said Wyn, as his father went into the house, "I don't think that the man who gave me the letter for Mr Edgar was one of the Raby or Ashwood keepers or gardeners; he hadn't the cut somehow, and he'd have known Mr Edgar was at the Hall. And he did stare *that* hard at me."

"So did the other man at us," said Florence.

"Was he a bird-catcher down from London, do you think?" said Wyn astutely.

"No," said Florence, "he looked too much the gentleman."

"I'm sure he hadn't a red beard, aren't you?" said Wyn.

"Red beard? No—d'ye think I haven't eyes in my head? He'd a pointed sort of black beard—same shape as Mr Cunningham's—only his is grey; and black eyes, looking right at you, like the squire's do. But, dear me, I think a fellow creature or two's a great improvement in that there lonesome wood. I'd sooner meet a man than a snake any day. And I believe I'd sooner meet a snake than nothing among all them trees!"

"The trees don't set no traps nor springs," said Wyn, "and snakes aren't common in our wood, and wriggles off pretty quick if you do meet with one."

"Do you think your man was a poacher?" said Florence.

"Well, Florrie," said Wyn, "there's all sorts of people come after game in these days. I shall keep my eyes open. Hallo! here's mother calling us in to supper."

In pursuance of this resolve, Wyn kept his eyes the next day open at their widest, but neither red beard, black eyes, nor letter came into his view, and the only thing he did see when he came disconsolately back again was a great owl's nest that had apparently been pulled out of an old hollow tree on the Ravenshurst side of the wood and thrown on the ground. Wyn was sorry; he thought the owls would never nest there again, and he would have had a chance next spring of getting a young one for Mr Edgar.

"You're to take the pony round again this afternoon, Wyn," said his mother when he got back, "and don't you be careless and drop any more letters about, anyhow."

Florence was very much interested in the mysterious strangers in the wood, and in the lost letter. She went for a stroll with Wyn before it was time for him to fetch the pony, and they worked themselves up into a state of excitement, and a general idea that their keen observation of suspicious characters was highly to their credit. In the course of their walk they met two of the under-keepers, and Wyn stopped and asked them if they had seen anybody about. He described his man with the red beard much as if he had been a giant, and Florence chimed in with her suspicions of the dark man who had spoken to Miss Geraldine, till her description of him would have befitted the villain in a melodrama. The boy and girl succeeded in setting the young men on the look-out, and preparing discomfort for the strangers if they were seen. Florence found a chat with the young keepers a pleasant variety in her quiet life, especially when it was so justifiable, and she lingered, talking and joking, till Wyn pulled her skirts, and said Mr Edgar would be ready.

"You see what we'll bring you, Miss," said one of the lads as he went off.

"You ain't men enough to get them there poachers," said Florence.

"Ain't we though?" cried the other youth.

"They'd best not come our way in a hurry."

Florence laughed, and ran off after Wyn, who remarked virtuously:

"We've done our duty, I'm sure, in spreading about all we've noticed."

"Your father knows too," said Florrie.

"Yes," said Wyn, with a slight suspicion that his father could have warned his own under-keepers for himself; "but father can't be everywhere at once. They might rob Mr Edgar."

"Or frighten Miss Geraldine," said Florence, "so it's quite our duty to give a warning."

Chapter Eleven.

Meeting.

If Wyn Warren had chanced to be in the right part of the wood at the right time on the afternoon after he found the owl's nest, he might have seen all the three objects of his search. For while he was leading Dobbles across the park towards the wood in order that Mr Edgar might try to sketch the lily pond, and hoping while his master was so engaged to get another chance of hunting for the letter, a respectable-looking nurse with a little boy and girl in pretty summer clothes came along the path from Ravenshurst to the stile in the Raby road. They passed the tall red-bearded man who had given Wyn the letter; but, being strangers to Ashcroft, his appearance there struck them as nothing remarkable; the nurse was holding the little boy by the hand, and the girl, running round her, was picking up moss and twigs, when her eyes fell on the spot which Wyn's had failed to find, and on which the red-bearded stranger's had never lighted. She had found one pretty, funny, white puff-ball, and she thought this other white object lying under the ferns was such another, till she took it in her hand and found that it was something much more familiar to her, namely, a letter in an envelope, moistened, and ready to break with the damp of the woods.

Lily Carleton poked her little fat fingers under the seal till the paper gave way and the open letter was in her hand, and she threw the envelope away and spread out the letter.

"It's a letter from the fairies," she thought, nodding her head, for she was a fanciful little person. "I'll take it home and get mother to read it to me."

She stuffed the letter into her little pocket, and, all unknowing, passed the writer of it, close to the stile in the Raby road, talking to the man with the red beard—a combination which would certainly have led Wyn to think that the two mysterious strangers were plotting mischief.

"Shall you go then, sir, as you have had no answer?" said he of the red beard.

"Yes, on the chance. It can do no harm; it's all a chance, you see. You're sure the lad said he was at home?"

"Yes, he undertook to deliver the note. But he was so sure I was going to set night-lines, or do some damage here, that I had to walk off as straight as I could."

"Ay, we can't lurk about here in secret. That's why I take this step. Maybe I'm going on a fool's errand, but we'll meet at the station in any case. I don't look altogether like a poacher, do I, Harry?"

"Well, Mr Alwyn, if you do," said Harry, laughing, "poachers must have improved since our time. Perhaps they have, for I didn't think I was quite the cut of one myself, and, for sure, that lad took me for some such customer. Keep up heart, sir, I'll be on the look-out."

So saying, he jumped over the stile, while his companion turned round and walked slowly through the wood. He threaded the tracks and glades with perfect case; but at the point where the next turn would bring him into view of the great ash-tree and the open space overlooking the water-lily pond he paused and grew visibly paler.

"I must remember that it cannot be much to him; if he has answered my appeal it cannot be *much* to him—it cannot be agreeable. I wish I'd asked a little more about him. However, now for it." He turned round the dump of trees by which he stood, and stopped with a start.

"What! someone else! Oh, of all the ill luck," he thought, as he saw under the tree a grey pony and a wheeled chair, in which was a young man sketching the pond and the trees beyond it.

Edgar was half sitting up against his cushions, and had pushed the soft cap which he wore back from his brows, so that his face was clearly visible; but he himself was looking the other way, and, intent on his sketch, did not observe that anyone was approaching.

The new-comer looked at him at first without any recognition. Who could the invalid be who had permission to sketch in the Ashcroft wood and seemed so much at home there? He had better walk quietly on, and pass by as if by accident. But, as he came nearer, Edgar threw back his head to look at his drawing, and something in the gesture struck on the stranger with a sudden thrill. He saw the dark hair, the long, delicate features. Could it be—was it possible? Was *this* the one he came to meet—evidently unwarned and unexpectant—and—like *this*?

As he paused, bewildered, doubtful how to proceed, Edgar turned his head and saw him. He saw the dark man with a pointed beard, whom Wyn had described on the authority of Florence as having been in the wood the day before, and, laying down his pencil, said, courteously, but with some decision, and in a voice at once recognisable:

"Excuse me, but perhaps you are not aware that this wood is private?"

The stranger made three or four steps forward, till he stood close beside the pony chair.

"Oh yes," he said, "of course I know that. You—you did not receive my letter?"

"You are—you are *Alwyn!*" gasped Edgar, breathless and dizzy with the shock that came without a moment's doubt or a moment's warning.

"Edgar! Yes, yes, I wrote. I did not mean to take you by surprise. But it is I—prepared for what welcome you will give me."

Edgar was so near fainting that welcome of any sort was beyond his power; but, as his senses came back, he saw Alwyn leaning over him, looking at him with frightened eyes, not daring to lift, hardly to touch him, and almost as much taken aback as himself by the unexpected state in which he found him.

Edgar lay looking at him for a moment or two.

"Then—you are alive?" he said slowly.

"Yes," said Alwyn, "I wrote to you to ask you if you would see me. I gave the letter to a boy, here in the wood—"

"He lost it," said Edgar, still as if half awake.

"What can I do for you?" said Alwyn anxiously. "Are you better? but no—rest a little don't mind about it yet."

Edgar still looked at him. Yes, it was Alwyn—perfectly unmistakable—only as much altered as the eight years made inevitable—with the face he remembered so clearly; yes, and with the softened look he had seen in his dream.

He put out his hand, and Alwyn took it timidly, and still with the same shocked, startled look.

"Of course," he said gently, "I did not know you had been ill, or I would not have written to you, nor risked startling you."

"I'm not ill," said Edgar, still rather confusedly. "It's only my back, you know—quite an old thing."

"But when—how?"

"I fell downstairs," said Edgar; "never mind, tell me—"

"Not *then*? Not *that flight*? You did fall, I remember. What? then I was the cause."

Alwyn started up and turned his back on his brother, evidently shocked and overpowered almost beyond control. The meeting was utterly unlike what either of them had fancied to himself as probable.

"Alwyn," said Edgar, "there's nothing to mind—I'm quite used to it. It was a mere chance, and it's not so very bad. I *can* walk—a little, and I can get out here and have very jolly times, you see."

But the boyish language, and the still boyish voice, so well remembered, completely overcame Alwyn, who had not expected to be agitated, only perhaps embarrassed, at seeing his brother. He struggled hard with himself before he could turn round, and, coming back and leaning against the tree beside Edgar, said:

"What would you like me best to do?"

"Why!" said Edgar, with recovered energy, "tell me something. I am dazed with surprise. Tell me everything."

"I went to New York, as I suppose you know," said Alwyn; "Whittaker with me. I wasn't altogether a fool, and I accepted the introductions the New York bankers gave me, and with the money my father had lodged there for me I bought some land in Massachusetts. Well, after a good deal of uncertainty it not only proved a success in the farming way, but we found coal on it, which proved well worth working, and, in short, we have done well. Whittaker is what I suppose you would call my agent and manager, and a good friend into the bargain. Well, two years ago he married—well. He had quite made up his mind to give up the old country. And I—I only wished to be independent. We made no effort, you understand, at concealment—used our own names always. Anyone could have found us out. Well, I must tell you very briefly.

"I made an acquaintance in Boston—an Episcopal clergyman. We took a walking tour together—had sundry adventures. I went home with him. He has a sister. After a little while I felt what it was to have such a past behind me. And a Boston gentleman such as Mr Dallas was not likely to accept a wandering Englishman for a son-in-law without inquiry, nor to think it natural that my father's eldest son should be living over there. I knew what sort of thing a few inquiries would tell him, and I knew what I had flung away." Alwyn paused for a moment and then went on hurriedly—"All my views changed—changed utterly."

"You decided to come home," said Edgar.

"Yes," said Alwyn, "but then something else happened."

He took a pocket-book out of his pocket, opened it, and, unrolling a little packet of tissue paper, laid something bright and glittering on Edgar's hand.

"Did you ever see that before?" he said. "Yes," as Edgar looked at him with startled eyes, "I see you remember it. But say what it is."

"It is one of Mrs Fletcher's lost jewels," said Edgar, as if under a spell.

It was a curious enamelled bird with a great ruby in its breast, and set in a sort of frame of emeralds, a curiosity as well as an object of intrinsic value.

"Yes. I didn't steal it, though," said Alwyn; "nor did Harry Whittaker."

The cool dry tone in which this was said was exactly that of the old Alwyn.

"I know who did, though," he said, "and I have come back to try to prove it. Curious proof, don't you think, of innocence, to produce the stolen object?"

"What proof can be needed?" said Edgar, warmly.

Alwyn smiled.

"I never thought there would be—for you," he said. "But it's a very long story. I think I must write it for you. There are some things I must ask. Shall we be interrupted? How can I see you again alone? My father—is he well—is he altered?"

"He is pretty well," said Edgar, "and—not altered. Wyn Warren will be back directly, I think I must tell him. You see I can't get anywhere alone. I couldn't even post a letter for myself. And my father, you know, unlocks the post-bag. I hardly ever get letters."

Edgar spoke merely as if considering the difficulties of the case—quite cheerfully; but to Alwyn the words sounded most pitiful.

"Then try not to trouble about me," he said; "you have given me a welcome. I must manage for myself. Of course I am only keeping quiet till I can get one or two things in train. I am staying in London. You mustn't have to bear the brunt of any discovery."

"I don't care a straw for that," said Edgar. "I'll answer for little Wyn. He shall bring me here again to-morrow, if possible; in any case he shall come himself. When I understand dearly I can tell my father that I've seen you, and everything else you think proper."

"No, no," said Alwyn, almost laughing at the coolness with which this fragile, helpless brother proposed to face the difficulty for him. "You were always a plucky fellow, but when the time comes I'll make my own confession. I'll go now."

But he still lingered.

"Ought you to be alone?" he said. "Do you want anything? You will not be the worse for the fright I gave you?"

"No. I'm quite jolly. If you'll just put this cushion lower for me, that's all, so that I can lie down."

"I am too rough to touch you. There—is that right, dear boy?" said Alwyn, anxiously.

"Oh yes, you are very clever!" said Edgar.

He spoke lightly; but suddenly tears filled the keen eyes at the touch that was more tender than all the skilled attention at his command.

"I'm glad you're found, Val; it's been rather lonely," he said.

"If I had guessed!" said Alwyn hoarsely; but at this moment a tremendous rush was heard, and Wyn's voice in loud tones of dismay broke in on them.

"What are you about—you? Here I am, Mr Edgar. Father ain't far off."

Alwyn, who had been bending over his brother, started up, and Edgar began to laugh.

"All right, Wyn," he said, "stop that row. This gentleman isn't smothering me, nor stealing my watch; look at him—you'll see him again. You'd better ask his pardon for losing his letter."

Wyn's mouth and eyes opened wider and wider.

"Please, sir," he stammered, "he ain't the one that gave me the letter; and please, sir, I've lighted on the envelope, and someone has took the letter out."

Alwyn and Edgar looked at each other in dismay.

"There is my address," said Alwyn, after a moment; "if anything unexpected turns up, send a telegram to me. But I shall be here to-morrow, and then you shall know all. Here, boy, Mr Edgar will tell you what you're to do. Be sure you are very careful of him. Can you lead the pony safely?" Edgar laughed again at Wyn's indignant stare, first at the speaker, and then at the half-sovereign dropped into his palm.

"All right, Wyn," he said, "he has every right to order you; yes, and give you a tip too. Put it in your pocket, and come along."

Wyn unfastened Dobbles, and turned him round, a light slowly breaking in on him as his master put both hands into the stranger's, and a few rapid whispers were exchanged between them. Then Edgar made a sign to him to go on, and Wyn, with one shrewd glance at the face and figure of the object of his suspicions, drew a long breath and said:

"Sir—sir—that's Mr Alwyn!"

Chapter Twelve.

Aunt Stroud's Surprise.

That same evening, while Alwyn Cunningham at his hotel in London was writing the story of his life to his brother, hardly able to fix his thoughts on anything but the interview of the afternoon, Harry Whittaker was walking through the streets of Rapley. Nobody noticed him there, or wondered to see a stout, good-looking man, with a long beard, and rather a rough coat, among the passers-by. Certainly no one identified him with the saucy errand-boy who had idled at street corners and engaged in a free fight, with parcels and bandboxes for missiles and weapons, eight years or so before. He walked on till he came to the small but respectable-looking ironmonger's shop, over the door of which was painted the name of Stroud. He walked in, glanced round, and a well-dressed woman came forward.

"What can I show you, sir?"

Harry asked for a clasp knife, looked at her keenly for a moment, then said:

"That's an American mowing machine, I think, ma'am?"

"Yes, sir, the newest patent, very light and handy. Anything in the way of garden tools, sir?"

Harry Whittaker was Harry Whittaker still; he appreciated the exquisite joke of being ceremoniously treated by his Aunt Stroud. But he could not afford to indulge it. He looked at her, smiled a little, and said:

"No, thank you, my farm's across the water in State. It'd hardly pay to take over machinery from the old country."

Mrs Stroud gave a start, and, as she afterwards expressed it, "nearly sunk down upon the rakes."

"Could I have a word in private?" said Harry.

"Step this way—sir," she said, still in a state of doubt, and leading him into the comfortable parlour behind the shop.

"Aunt Eliza," said Harry, as the door closed behind them, "I felt sure that *you* would know me at once."

Mrs Stroud did sink down into an arm-chair exclaiming:

"Bless us and save us, it's Harry!"

"Yes, aunt," said Harry, "it is; and I've come first to you, knowing your influence with father, and that you could be trusted with an important secret; to ask you to give me a welcome, and to overlook my past undutiful behaviour."

"Oh, my! And I'd imagined you a convict, or drowned dead!"

"Not at all," said Harry, "I never was drowned, and I haven't yet been hanged. On the contrary, finding myself well-to-do in the world, and happily settled in life, I felt that it was time to endeavour to undo the past."

Harry spoke quite earnestly, but with a boldness of manner, and confidence of look, that established his identity at once. He put out his hand; but Mrs Stroud, bursting into tears, launched herself on his neck.

"You were always my favourite, Harry, and if you've done well for yourself I'm most glad to see you."

"Thank you, Aunt Eliza, you're very good, I'm sure; it's more than I deserve. My father, my sisters and brothers?"

"Your father's very hearty, and your brothers and sisters doing well, except Florrie, who gives a deal of trouble, as you did yourself. But what'll you take, Henry? Sit down and tell me where you've been living. What will you have?"

"A cup of tea, aunt, if it's your tea-time; I'm a teetotaller," said Harry, unable to help a twinkle of fun at his aunt's astonished rapture at this evidence of virtue.

As she got the tea he began to tell his story much as Alwyn had already related it to Edgar; but at greater length, and with many interruptions from his aunt.

"Mr Alwyn," he went on, after some preliminaries about the buying of the land, and the discovery of the coal upon it, "never played the fool any more after he was on his own hands as it were. He seemed to want to justify himself, and prove those mistaken that thought we should both go to the bad. He never let on that he felt parting from home and being cut off from his expectations, nor did I. But, when there's no longer anyone to pull a young fellow up, it's one of two things: either he goes down altogether, or he has to pull up himself. And I can tell you, aunt, if all the graceless young chaps knew what a much easier sort of thing it is to get a good blowing up at the time, and the consequences saved you afterwards, than to go scot-free and find out for yourself what you've brought about, they'd not be in such a hurry to kick over the traces. But Mr Alwyn said that he'd brought suspicion and trouble on me, and he wouldn't be the ruin of me further. So we kept straight and got on, and thought a deal of ourselves for doing it."

"It's what no one never expected!" ejaculated Mrs Stroud.

"No," said Harry. "Well, I got married, as I'll tell more about by-and-by, and I thought I'd done with the old country altogether, and went on as comfortable as could be till my little boy came. Then, Aunt Eliza, somehow it came over me more and more what it would be to have that little chap hear that there were those over here that thought I was a thief, and have him know that I was an undutiful son that left my father in his old age. If that there baby was for eight years without so much as thinking of me, or caring what I thought of him, why, it'd go near to break my heart, and I'd sooner follow him to his grave now, and never see him again. God forgive me! I'd been a bad son, but 'don't care' was a word I couldn't say before the little chap, nor have him say after me.

"Well, when all this was waking in me, Mr Alwyn was away in Boston, and I'd reason to guess what kept him there, and how there was a young lady in the case. He came back sudden, and while I was thinking how to tell him what was in my mind he turned round upon me and said, says he 'Harry, I'm going home to beg pardon.'

"'If you do,' says I, 'I'll go with you.'

"And then he told me how he couldn't ask Miss Dallas to marry him till he had told about his quarrel with his father; but his pride had held him back from trying to make it up, and going to seek for what he'd thrown away. He'd had a very hard time, he told me, what with the oath he'd made, and all that lay behind him. And he did look pale and changed, I can tell you, and seemed as if he couldn't speak what was in his mind. But he should go, he said, whether the jewels were found or not, and even if the opening up of all the old scandal put him further off the young lady. And then I told him the thoughts I'd had on the subject, and he said: 'There's more than that, Harry, for through all this I've come to see that I sinned against God.'"

"Well," said Mrs Stroud, "I never did think to hear as Mr Alwyn was a converted man! It's a miracle!"

"Well," said Harry gravely, "as you may say it was; but 'twas that conviction that conquered his pride and made him resolve to go home again. Just as we'd settled on this conclusion, and were wondering what to do next, there was an accident with some paraffin, and a young fellow working for us was near burnt to death, and would have been killed on the spot but for Mr Alwyn. Now we knew that this young man Lennox had been footman at Ravenshurst, and had left the place about a week before we did, to go abroad with a gentleman. He told us he came to seek work because he had known us formerly.

"To make a long story short, Mr Alwyn, worse luck, sent the only other man about for the doctor, and he and I stayed with Lennox. Then, says he, he'd been a great sinner, and he'd like to own it before he died. And he told Mr Alwyn a number of dishonest actions, small and great, and at last he said he'd taken the Ravenshurst jewels. He'd come back on the sly to see his sweetheart after he left the place, and saw the young lady come down and slip the jewels under the ferns on the rockery, and he took them on the spur of the moment. Well, he was just off with his new master on a trip to India; but he contrived to hear how I was suspected before he started."

"And took the jewels with him?"

"Well—it's all in the confession Mr Alwyn wrote down. But one of the jewels he had still, and that he gave us, and Mr Alwyn has it now. But he said it had been on his conscience all the time he was knocking about the world, and that when he heard our names he came and got work with us on purpose, though he put off owning his guilt from day to day. He'd near put it off too late, for before he'd told us all we wanted to know the death struggle came on him and he could tell us no more. And 'twas then, Aunt Eliza, by the words Mr Alwyn said, and the prayers he made that I knew of the change that had come on him and first thought of my sin against God, as well as against the little one.

"Well, the doctor came as Lennox died, and Mr Alwyn made him stay with us and keep us in sight while, without a word to one another, we each wrote down what the dying man had said to us; and the doctor witnessed that we had written it without speech with one another since Lennox's death. Then we took the papers before the nearest judge, and made our affidavits that they contained a true confession. But it's all on our words after all; howsoever, on that confession we came back."

"Well, Harry," said Mrs Stroud, "I'd take my dying oath you was innocent. But whatever made you decamp just at that moment?"

"My father knew where I was," said Harry. "He knew I joined Mr Alwyn. But he declared that after the jewels had been named in connection with us he'd never go home, if they were found twenty times over, without the squire made him an apology."

Mrs Stroud sat and looked at her recovered nephew, at his good clothes, his watch chain, his air of undoubted respectability, and also at the unembarrassed and cheerful air with which he faced her.

"What are you going to do now?" she said.

"That must depend on Mr Alwyn. He thought Mr Edgar would perhaps have helped him search, or told him how the land lay, anyhow; so he wrote him a note appointing a meeting, which I gave to little Wyn Warren in the wood. It seems he lost it; and, though the meeting came about, Mr Alwyn was so distracted at the state in which he found his poor brother that he never laid any plans at all. When I joined him he couldn't hardly speak of him. 'Twas the heaviest punishment of all, he said."

"Ah, poor young gentleman," said Mrs Stroud; "it's a sad business, and I doubt he's not long for this world. But do I take you to say, Harry, that you're a family man?"

Harry nodded, and produced a photograph of his wife and baby, and another of the substantial house in which he

lived; and over the tea a great many more questions and answers were interchanged. Harry heard all about his sisters, and where Florence was, and what his brother George was doing. He couldn't help enjoying the joke of appearing to his aunt in so new a light—even while he asked with real affection after Mattie, and studied the photographs of his family in his aunt's book. He could not make himself known to his father, he said, until Mr Alwyn had taken some action, and, of course, he could not but hope that the explanation of the lost jewels would be accepted at Ashcroft.

His coming to see his aunt had been, he said, a sudden thought, prompted by Mr Alwyn's shock and distress at his brother's illness.

"I didn't know then what I might find at the old place," he said. "But if you could keep my coming quiet for a few days, aunt, it would be all for the better."

"Well, Henry," said Mrs Stroud, "there's nothing declares to me that you're a reformed character so much as your coming and consulting *me*, as was your true friend in the past always. It's a lucky thing that Stroud has gone down the line to-day to his cousin's funeral. I'll keep your secret, Harry, though the thought of *you*, sitting there so broad-shouldered, and so well-to-do looking, is so amazing that I feel as if it would ooze out of me at the seams of my gown!"

"Well, aunt," said Harry, "you're very good, and I hope in a couple of days the concealment will be over."

"It's well," said Mrs Stroud, "that that unlucky Florrie knows nothing of it, or she'd have controverted your intentions to a dead certainty."

Chapter Thirteen.

Most Haste, Worst Speed!

Unfortunately for his scheme of meeting with his brother again, poor Edgar awoke the next morning to one of the blinding and overpowering headaches to which over-fatigue and excitement always rendered him liable. There was no chance of getting that day to the trysting-place, no possibility of anything but lying still. He could not write a note to be given to Alwyn, he could hardly even think of a safe message for him.

"Tell Wyn—I cannot go out—tell him to—get what I told him—in the wood—he will understand," he said, with a great effort at something that would be comprehensible.

"Yes, sir; don't trouble yourself, sir," said Robertson; "it shall be attended to."

"And tell him to come for orders to-morrow; I shall be able to go to-morrow."

"Very well, sir," said Robertson, privately thinking that his master would be quite unequal to such fatigue to-morrow, or probably for two or three days to come.

Edgar chafed and fretted at his incapacity in a way that of course aggravated the headache. It was such a disappointment, besides the anxiety and suspense, not to see Alwyn again. He had not known how much he should care about it. Robertson thought that he had never known his master so restless and impatient.

The message to Wyn did not strike anyone as of paramount importance, and was sent down by the footman.

"Tell little Warren the pony won't be wanted. Mr Edgar is ill. Warren is to get something, I believe, in the wood—flowers, I suppose—but they won't be wanted to-day."

This information was finally shouted out to Wyn by the stable-boy as he fed the peacocks before coming up for orders:

"Mr Edgar's ill and can't go out, but he says you're to pick him some flowers instead."

"Is that all?" said Wyn, horrified.

"That's all, as I knows on."

"But I say, what's the matter with Mr Edgar?"

"Didn't hear—that was my message."

Wyn was a very sharp boy. He had been told by Edgar as little as possible, except as to the identity of the two strangers whom he had seen in the wood, as to which he was sworn to secrecy; but after puzzling a little over the message about the flowers he came to the conclusion that the best thing he could do was to keep Mr Edgar's appointment for him. He was detained all the morning by Mrs Elton, under whose superintendence he attended to the fancy poultry, to give them an extra cleaning, as Mr Edgar did not want him; and when he went home to dinner he found his own family in a state of excitement and hurry.

Lady Carleton, at Ravenshurst, wanted a girl to help her nurse for a few weeks, and by favour of the wife of the Ravenshurst keeper had sent to see if Mrs Warren's niece could come over.

Mrs Warren thought it a wonderful chance for Florence to try her hand at service in a good family, without being bound to a regular place, and Florence was just tired enough of the keeper's lodge to think that she should like the

change.

"I must take you over myself," Mrs Warren said, "and explain to her ladyship that you haven't things suitable at present for her household, but they shall be soon provided. She'll excuse it, as they want you to come this afternoon. You can put on your grey dress, and turn your hair up and brush back your fringe."

"My fringe! Why, even the *generals* at Rapley are allowed their fringes!" said Florence indignantly.

"Very likely. But it's not the custom in good families," said Mrs Warren dryly. "I look to you, Florence, to do me credit where you go."

Florence pouted a little, but just then Warren, who had come in to his dinner, said rather meaningfully to his wife:

"Mother, have you forgotten as Lady Carleton is Miss Lilian Fletcher that used to be? Maybe that will make an objection; it'd be best to name Florence, and make sure as she understands about her."

Florence caught the words, and the confidence she had received about her brother from Wyn came, into her mind. So this was one of the owners of the jewels which Harry had been accused of stealing. Intense curiosity, and a sort of impulse for which she could not account, determined her on going to Ravenshurst at all costs. She went upstairs after dinner, screwed her hair up into a neat knot behind, brushed it back from her brows, and generally stroked herself down into a much tidier-looking young person than she had ever before appeared.

Wyn had also heard the hint, and sat listening, open-eared, to the strange coincidence.

"Wyn," said his mother, "it's a good thing Mr Edgar doesn't want you to-day. You get out the trap and bring it round by four o'clock so as to drive Florrie and me over to Ravenshurst, and then you can take it on to the junction and pick up Bessie and her things; I'll walk back through the wood."

"But—but Mr Edgar sent word I was to get flowers."

"Mr Edgar can't want the flowers to-day. It can't matter when you get them—if you have them ready for him to-morrow morning. Now don't make difficulties, Wyn, you get idle with going after flowers and dawdling about."

Wyn rushed out of doors in despair. There was nothing for it but to go at once to the ash-tree in the hope that Mr Alwyn might be there before his time, and if he did not appear to write a message on a bit of paper and leave it where he could find it. Alwyn, however, impatient for the meeting, was already sitting under the ash-tree on the look-out for his brother, and started up in dismay as Wyn appeared alone.

"Please, sir, Mr Edgar's ill to-day. He can't come. I think he meant me to come and tell you so."

"Ill? What is the matter with him? What did he say?"

"Please, sir, I expect it's only one of his headaches, and I only got a message, but I thought I'd better come and tell you."

"Is he likely to be able to come to-morrow?"

"No, sir, I don't expect so. He often doesn't come out for a long time when he takes to having his headaches, except just to lie on the terrace."

"But you can see him?"

"Yes, sir, when he's a bit better. He likes to have me come and tell him about the ducks and the peacocks and all the creatures, and sometimes I take him the dogs to look at."

"My poor boy! Is that all he has to amuse him?" murmured Alwyn, half to himself.

"No, sir, there's the garden, and the wild flowers I get him. But, sir—please, sir, I've got to go. Is there anything for me to take him, sir? Most likely I shall see him to-morrow."

Alwyn hesitated; but the fear of disappointing Edgar prevailed, and he gave Wyn the thick packet, to be kept with the greatest care, and to be delivered to his master in private. Mr Alwyn looked so miserable as he delivered it up that Wyn tried to say something consolatory.

"Please, sir, Mr Edgar ain't no worse than usual. Often and often he has his headaches and a pain in his back. I don't think he minds it much, sir. He'll talk quite cheerful most times." Alwyn did not look much consoled by this information.

"Tell him not to think of me," he said; "not to make any exertion to see me. Come here again to-morrow, and bring me news of him."

Wyn hurried off without more words to get the trap up for his mother, and it was not till he had deposited her safely with Florence at Ravenshurst, and was waiting for his sister's train at the distant junction, that it suddenly flashed into his mind how much he and Florence had done to set the keepers on the track of the strangers whom they had met in the wood. What had he done? It was worse than losing the letter. Suppose they caught Mr Alwyn or Harry, whom he had himself taken for a suspicious character, and took them up to the squire or to his father, saying that they had been warned by Wyn Warren. What would Mr Alwyn and Mr Edgar think of him? He must go and put them off it somehow. Would the train never come? What possessed it to be so late? And when it did come groaning into the

station what a time Bessie was before she appeared with her box behind her, well-dressed, smiling, and dignified, the sister Bessie that he was ordinarily so glad to see.

Now he could think of nothing but getting home quick, and started off at a rattling pace before Bessie had had time to remark on his growth or inquire for mother.

"You ought not to drive that young horse so fast downhill, Wyn," said Bessie presently; "the road's so bad, you'll have him down. Isn't it the one father says isn't sure-footed?"

"All right, I understand him," said Wyn; but as he spoke there was a stumble and a lurch, the horse fell, the trap tilted over, and Bessie Warren, frightened, shaken, but otherwise unhurt, rolled out on to the high bank beside the road.

She knew quite well enough what she was about to slip down the bank to the horse's head and seize the rein as the beast righted himself with a great struggle; then floundered, and stood up with broken knees, dragging the trap, which had been turned right over, and scattering on the bank all its contents, Wyn included.

"Wyn, Wynny darling, are you hurt?" cried Bessie, seeing little at the first moment but her brother's heels.

It was a lonely road, and great was her relief when a gentleman on horseback trotted up, and exclaiming, "Hullo! what's the matter?" dismounted hastily, and displayed the features of Mr Cunningham himself.

"Oh, sir," said Bessie as he took the reins from her hand, "there's been an accident."

"So I perceive," said Mr Cunningham. "What, Wyn, my lad, let the young horse down, have you? Are you damaged too?" as Wyn struggled up on to his feet, looked at the horse's knees, and burst into a roar of crying, while his nose began to bleed violently from the shake and the blow, and he would have fallen back again if Bessie had not caught him, and, sitting on the bank, laid him down with his head on her lap, and tried to stop the bleeding.

"Is he hurt?" said the squire.

"Not much, sir, I think; he'll come round directly. Keep quiet, Wyn. Where's your pocket-handkerchief? On the bank? Oh, sir, thank you," as Mr Cunningham handed it to her, and saw the letter beside it with his son's name on it.

"A letter for Mr Edgar," he said, picking it up. He gave a second glance, and put it in his pocket. "I'll give it to him," he said.

Wyn was giddy and a little faint, and did not see what was passing; but presently he sat up, and Mr Cunningham said:

"Well, my boy, you'd better keep to Mr Edgar's pony for the future."

"Mr Stapleton won't never forgive me," said Wyn, feeling the horse's knees of far more importance than his own nose, and referring to the stud-groom.

"Well, I hope there's nothing worse than Rex's knees on your conscience," said the squire in the peculiar dry tone which made his displeasure so appalling. "You had better wait here, Elizabeth Warren. I'll ride back and send someone to help you."

"Thank you, sir;" then, as he rode on, "Surely nothing could be worse than breaking the horse's knees! What will father say? What's the matter, Wyn? here's your handkerchief."

"But—but—where's—where's—"

"Mr Edgar's letter? Mr Cunningham took it, so that's all right."

Wyn jumped up with a positive howl.

"Oh! oh! oh! Whatever have I done! Oh, I am the unluckiest boy in the world! Oh, whatever will he say to me? But there—"

Wyn suddenly stifled his lamentations and sat perfectly still, only sobbing at intervals.

"Why," said Bessie, "if anyone lets a horse down they must expect to catch it. But there, Wyn, it's a mercy, to be very thankful for, that we're neither of us killed. I feel all of a tremble still. There, isn't that one of the stablemen coming? The master must have met him. Wipe your face, Wyn, dear, and don't cry; we'll go home to mother, and she'll see to you."

"Oh," sobbed Wyn, burying his face in the bank as his sister went forward to meet the stableman, "I'd rather have let down all the hunters and broken all my bones than have let master have the letter. And I lost the other, and I've set on the keepers! I'm—I'm a regular traitor, and Mr Edgar'll never trust me no more—never!"

Chapter Fourteen.

The Fairy Letter.

In the meantime Florence Whittaker and her aunt, having been set down by Wyn, waited in the housekeeper's room at Ravenshurst till Lady Carleton was ready to see them. Mrs Warren was by no means confident of Florence's success, and felt that she stretched a point in recommending her. But Maud Florence Nellie was not quite the same

girl as she had been three weeks or a month before. Many new influences had been brought to bear on her some very ordinary, and others not quite so commonplace, and, like all young people, she was greatly influenced by her surroundings. If she had found herself on the Rapley road beside Carrie and Ada, she would probably have talked and acted exactly like her old self; but she had thoughts that did not belong to her old self at all. Her head had been filled with wider, other ideas than her own little follies, faults, and pleasures. The mystery of the lost jewels, the excitement of the strangers in the wood, the old grandmother, the Cunningham family—the trees, even the birds and beasts—were all apart from her own little selfish narrow interests, and were a great improvement on Carrie's new hat, Ada's new acquaintance, and her own newest scrape. Moreover, Mrs Warren's quiet refinement had a subduing influence; Wyn was a thoroughly well-behaved little boy. Nobody nagged at the keeper's lodge, and nobody quarrelled. To be saucy at Sunday school to gentle old Mrs Murray, who taught the girls with all the assured ease of long custom, was so out of keeping with the place that she never dreamed of it. Besides, she was usually occupied with the pleasure of sitting beside Miss Geraldine, who, when Mrs Murray was there, took her place in the class with the others. All these influences were doing Florence a great deal of good; and an odd sort of partisanship for the lost Harry was stirring up all sorts of new ideas in her mind.

It did not begin very worthily: chiefly consisting of the notion that he was probably much nicer than George, and wondering whether he would have been down upon herself for her tricks; but the thought of him, and of "Miss Geraldine's brother," filled Ravenshurst with interest. Besides, "dressing up to frighten people," if they were so silly as to be frightened, was a proceeding with which Florrie had far too much sympathy.

"Florrie, my dear," said Mrs Warren gently as they waited, "it's a good deal that I'm undertaking for you. You've all to learn, remember, and the nurse must tell you if you make mistakes; don't think to answer her back. Remember she's your better, and set over you. And when you're trusted with the little lady and gentleman you'll be a careful girl, and never let them hear a word from you that isn't fitting. Put it in your prayers, my dear, that you may do your duty by them. I'm not one to talk, Florrie, but there's nothing *but* praying can help us through life."

"I'll try, Aunt Charlotte," said Florrie, colouring Mrs Warren's gentleness always subdued her, and when the summons came she followed her aunt, and made a sort of imitation of Mrs Warren's country curtsy at the drawing-room door, as a proof that she meant to mind her manners.

Lady Carleton was very young and very pretty. Her manner was lively as she asked a few questions about previous experience, and said that her nurse preferred a girl who had not been out before.

"So you have only to attend to her directions. What is your name?"

"Her name is Florence Whittaker, my lady," said Mrs Warren. "My husband wished me to name that at once. But she has been brought up very careful, and her brother George is a clerk on the railway and most respectable."

Lady Carleton coloured up, and a curious look came into her face.

"I should like to do something for Florence *Whittaker*," she said with a slight emphasis. "We will consider it settled, Mrs Warren, that your niece comes on trial."

"Your ladyship is very good. Florence will do her best, I am sure," said Mrs Warren.

Accordingly, in the course of an hour or so Florence found herself in Lady Carleton's nursery, under the orders of a well-mannered superior nurse, making friends with Lily and Malcolm, and admiring the baby.

"Things are not so tidy as they should be, Florence," said the nurse, "for our last girl began with the mumps, and was sent off in a hurry. Before you undress Miss Lily, please to straighten out her walking things and put her toys to rights. I couldn't see properly to them yesterday or to-day."

Lily Carleton was quite ready to make friends with the new nursemaid, and Florence, who was good-natured with children, had soon told her the names of her little sisters, and was hearing in return about the wood and the squirrels, and the pretty puff-balls, and all the delights of a London child in the country.

"What's this, Miss Lily?" said Florence, putting her hand into the pocket of the little jacket which she was folding. "Have you been putting a puff-ball in your pocket?"

"No," said Lily, "that's a letter from the fairies. I found it in the wood; I told mother that I'd found a fairy letter, but she was too busy to look and see."

Florence straightened out the crushed ball of damp paper, which, in company with bits of moss and lichen-covered stick, filled Lily's little pocket.

"Why, Miss Lily," she began, "this ain't a fairy letter," when she suddenly stopped, catching sight of her own name in the short, clearly written note: "Whittaker." "Whittaker has come with me. Remember I am still your brother.—Alwyn Cunningham."

Florence would not have taken a letter off the table and read it; but in the case of this mysterious paper no such scruple occurred to her. She saw that it began, "Dear Edgar"—that it stated that the writer had returned, had satisfactory explanations to give, and asked for a meeting at the old ash-tree on the following day. Two things flashed at once into Florence's mind: one that this was the letter Wyn had lost; the other that the man who had spoken to herself and Miss Geraldine was Mr Alwyn.

"Miss Lily, where did you find the letter? When was it you got it?"

"I found it down under the ferns," said Lily. "It wasn't yesterday—mother took us out yesterday. It was Friday."

Florence stared at the letter. Wyn's poacher with the red beard—that must have been Harry himself! And, oh! she and Wyn had set the keepers to look out for him.

Florence turned quite pale. She had derived vague and awful notions of Mr Cunningham's power from the way in which everything at Ashcroft was referred to his pleasure. She did not know what he would do to a "poacher"—also a vague character to the town-bred girl.

"You had better undress Miss Lily," said the nurse, fearing that her new underling was a dawdle.

"Read me what the fairies say," said Lily.

"Not to-night," said Florence, stuffing the letter in her pocket. "You tell Florrie about the fairies to-morrow."

She bustled about and did her work, till, Lily's toilet being complete, she knelt up in her bed in her little nightgown, and said her prayers. She went through the usual baby prayers, which were pretty much all that Florence herself had to say, since she had never felt the need of any others; but when she had finished she still knelt with her two little hands clasped together, and said in a clear, parrot-like little voice:

"Please, God, make all wrongs right, and bring travellers safe home, for Jesus' sake."

"Miss Lily—who's a traveller?" said Florence, startled.

"I don't know; mother told me to say that prayer always," she said as she curled herself up in her little white bed and shut her eyes.

Florence stood by the window looking out over the garden into the mass of trees that bounded it, under which the level evening light was pouring. If she could only get that letter back to Wyn! only tell him to stop the keepers from minding her foolish talk! With the letter in her pocket, she really did feel a sense of great responsibility; she really did try to think what it would be right to do. She had never felt so serious in her life. Come what come might, she must get at Wyn. She must run home across the forest. Lose her place for it! Perhaps she would; but, if she had lost one place to amuse herself, she could lose another to prevent such dreadful mischief.

"I don't care," said Florence, as she had said once before. There was good in her motive now, but it was the old daring, heedless Florence that never stopped to think. She slipped out of the bedroom by an outer door that did not lead through the nursery, downstairs along the passage, out at a side door, open to the summer evening, across the grass of the garden, and right into the wood. She ran on through the band of fir trees that divided Ravenshurst from Ashcroft, and, crossing the stile between the two properties, found herself, though she did not know it, close to the place where the letter had been picked up, and not far from the ash-tree named in it.

Then she began to grow puzzled about the way. The long yellow lines of light faded, the tall trees rustled overhead, the heavy whir and flap of a startled pheasant sounded close at hand. Deadly fear seized on Florence. If she had been frightened in the sunny morning, she was doubly frightened now in the twilight. Besides, it would really get dark soon, and then what would become of her? She had said "I don't care!" but where was the use of saying "don't care" to darkness and silence and confusion as to the right way? Should she go back? she knew the way back.

"No," said Florence to herself, "I may have been a silly to come; but I'll get that there letter to Wyn if I walk all night. And I'll not be afraid of the wood. Miss Geraldine ain't—but oh, dear, I wish I had to go down the broad path in the cemetery at home, all nice and straight, instead. If I go on I'll have to get somewhere at last!"

Florence knew quite well that she had done a very serious thing, for which she would have to answer, and in the midst of her fear of the solitude came an involuntary fear of the scolding that would meet her arrival anywhere. She had rather enjoyed scolding when she knew she was wrong: why did she dread it when she thought she was right? The wood did grow darker, much darker than Florence had expected, judging by the light that she knew was outside it; and the poor girl's knees trembled as she hurried along. It was a perfectly formless terror that seized on her; she had had too utterly matter-of-fact a training to fill the wood with any imaginary inhabitants, and she was too old and had too much sense to people it with wolves or bears. It did occur to her that the keepers she had herself stirred up might shoot her through the bushes, and her cheeks tingled at the thought of being seen and recognised by them; while, if she met her Uncle Warren—

"I'll go through with it—rather than bring my own brother to the gallows," she thought with a vividness worthy of her Aunt Stroud. But which *was* the way? what *should* she do? Florence was so accustomed to trust to her own wits that where her wits were perfectly useless she felt like another person. She did not know the way, she could not get at Wyn, she could not undo the mischief! There was no one to help her! Suddenly there struck into her mind a new thought:

"God."

Now Florence had never *thought* about God in her life. She knew about Him: on the very last Sunday before she left Rapley she had answered Miss Mordaunt's questions about His nature with a glib tongue, but without a trace of reverence in her manner or of awe in her heart. He was everywhere; He could see her in the dark and in the light; He knew her thoughts; He could hear her prayers. Such awful truths had been taught to her, and had been just as much a lesson as the multiplication table. But now, in the greatest need she had ever known, it did suddenly strike Florence that perhaps God would help her if she asked Him. She looked up—up through the dark trees to the pale clear sky above them, and associating praying with nothing but with "saying her prayers," she began to repeat the childish formulary which she was in the habit of scurrying over every night, and with a sudden thought added the words which little Lily had been taught to say: "Set wrongs right, bring travellers home."

"Oh, God," whispered Florence, clasping her hands, "bring *me*—there! Save *them* somehow." Something seemed let loose within her, and for the first time in her life she really prayed. And "Oh say not, dream not," that those unrealised lessons, that formal habit of prayer, had been hitherto all in vain. How could she have heard without a teacher? There was the knowledge, there was the instinct, so soon as the naughty, graceless girl felt the need.

As she looked round, with a somewhat calmer inspection of the various footpaths, suddenly, in the stillness of the summer evening, she heard the tramp of a foot, and in a moment, round the great tree by which she stood, came the tall broad figure of a man with a long beard—surely the "character" who had given Wyn the letter.

"Hullo, my girl," he said, stopping with a start at sight of a hatless maiden in a white apron, "what's the matter? Have you lost your way?"

"Oh!" cried Florence, precipitating herself towards him, "I've got your letter—but—but, if you're my brother Harry that's come home—the keepers are going to seize you for a poacher!"

Chapter Fifteen.

Father and Son.

Edgar Cunningham got somewhat the better of his headache as the day went on, and late in the afternoon insisted on getting out into the fresh air on the terrace, in the hope that Wyn might make some excuse for coming up to speak to him. He was hardly fit even for this exertion; but the open air was always the one thing he cared for, and the suspense was more endurable so than when he was shut up in the house.

When his cushions were raised he could see across the flower garden, over the low wall that bounded it, to the road that led from the wood and the village, up to the stables, and to the back of the house; and as his bright eyes were keen and long-sighted, he often amused himself with watching the comers and goers, noticing all that went on, as only those people do who are confined to one place.

To-day, however, as he lay almost flat on his back, he could not see the road, and it was with a start of surprise that he looked up and saw his father standing by him.

"I hope, as you are out of doors, that you are better, Edgar?" he said.

"Oh yes, thanks, almost well," said Edgar.

"Your boy, little Warren, has been getting into trouble. He has let down the young bay horse and broken his knees."

"Wyn! Has he? What had he to do with the horse?" said Edgar, very much startled as he thought of what Wyn should have been doing.

"He had been driving his mother and her niece to Ravenshurst as I understand, and went to fetch his sister from the station. He let down the horse in Coombe Lane. That is what I am *told*," said Mr Cunningham with emphasis, and using all the advantage his position gave him to look straight down into Edgar's face.

"Was he hurt?" said Edgar, looking straight up in return.

Mr Cunningham was very angry with his son, and little disposed to be merciful to him, though he had not meant to enter on the subject of the letter if Edgar had been more manifestly unequal to a discussion.

"He broke his head; I believe nothing serious. He had a letter for you, which I undertook to deliver myself," and Mr Cunningham laid Alwyn's unopened packet in Edgar's hand.

Edgar caught his breath, but his face never flinched as his father went on:

"I was not aware, when you spoke to me the other morning, that you were already in communication with your brother."

"I dare say you think it possible that I might have so deceived you," said Edgar bitterly. "But my brother made himself known to me for the first time yesterday. I should not be waiting here if I had the use of my limbs like other people. As things are, I'll beg you to open that letter and read it at once yourself."

Edgar's manner and face were alike defiant, and he was so indignant at the imputation cast on him that he never saw that his father's lips were twitching and that his face was pale, nor took advantage of the moment of softening.

Mr Cunningham took up the packet, and turned round as if to open and read it, when his attention was caught by three figures coming up the road towards the house. They evidently saw him on the terrace, and after a pause and a word or two came through the gate up the garden.

"What is it? Who is there, father?" cried Edgar, expectant of any turn of events.

"It is—your brother!" said Mr Cunningham, laying his hand on the wall, with pale lips, and his eyes fixed on the first figure approaching him.

Alwyn stood still at the top of the steps and took off his hat.

"I see you know me, sir," he said; "I did not mean to come here against your wish. But your keepers have made a

mistake, which perhaps you will explain to them.”

“That will do, blockheads; don’t you know a gentleman when you see one?” said Mr Cunningham, as the two men, greatly crestfallen, and muttering a “Beg pardon, I’m sure, sir,” retreated in haste.

“It is right, sir, that I should explain myself,” said Alwyn, speaking with evident effort. “I had no intention of forcing myself on you. If you will have the goodness to read the letter I gave to my brother, I will go back to London and wait —”

“No, no, no!” interposed Edgar, struggling up on to his elbow. “I’d stand by your side if I could stand anywhere. At least I’ll claim the right to own you.”

Alwyn had not meant to make any advance to Edgar which might be construed as a defiance, but he now crossed over to the couch and took the offered hand gently in both his own.

“My father will understand,” he said, “that I should not have made any approach to you if I had known of the fatal mischief for which I am responsible. Dear Edgar, lie still; no one could have done more for me than you have.”

There was a pause. Mr Cunningham moved and sat down in a chair opposite his sons. Edgar lay back, but with eyes still fronting his father, while he still held Alwyn’s hand. Alwyn himself hardly knew what next to do. There was, however, something about him so unlike the wild youth from whom the father had parted, so unlike what Mr Cunningham had imagined as his probable condition, that all previous ideas were upset.

“Your reappearance,” said Mr Cunningham at length, “is very sudden after so complete a silence. What is your reason for coming here?”

Alwyn hesitated, his mouth quivered, and he pointed to the letter which still lay on Edgar’s knee. Then he dropped his brother’s hand and made a step or two forward.

“Father,” he said, “I— I beg your pardon. That first, nothing else. I have made a position for myself, as you will see. I came partly because I hope to set Whittaker’s character right with his friends here and to leave no mystery about my own. But I have nothing to say for myself—as to the past. I was inexcusable all through.”

“Give me your letter,” said Mr Cunningham. “I will read it; I make no promises. I—I am glad; it is a satisfaction to me to hear that you have done well. But personal intercourse is another question, to which you once attached conditions to which I am not likely to see my way.”

“The conditions, sir,” said Alwyn, “are, I know now, entirely for you to make. Without your desire I shall not come here again. Indeed, of course, I cannot.”

“I never felt till now,” burst out Edgar passionately, “what it is to be helpless. I’ll not ask you to stay without a welcome. But what my father told me is not with my goodwill. I would blot out the past I must say—wait—oh! I cannot even speak for you,” as his breath came in panting gasps and his voice failed him.

“Hush, hush! I understand,” said Alwyn, much distressed; “there is no need to tell me. Hush!”

“Don’t linger here for me,” gasped Edgar, resolute still. “It is—all—nothing.”

But the last word died away in deadly faintness. Mr Cunningham gave a hasty call. Robertson came out of the house, and Alwyn could do nothing but help to carry his brother into his room. He could not go till Edgar revived, which was not for some time, and then it was hardly to full consciousness, certainly not to his ordinary self-control, for he clung to Alwyn’s hand, entreating him not to leave him.

“Don’t go, Alwyn, don’t! You know I can’t come to you—you know I can’t come to the wood to-day.”

“Can you say nothing to quiet him, sir?” whispered Robertson. “He has no strength for such excitement. His heart is very weak.”

“I shall stay,” said Alwyn; “don’t fret, my dear boy; indeed, I won’t leave you now.”

“You know that I’ll never take your place; even if I live I will not!” said Edgar vehemently.

“No, no,” said Alwyn, without much perception of the sense of what Edgar was saying. “Never mind it now. There, that’s better. Hush! we will talk by-and-by.”

Edgar grew quieter at last, and Alwyn, as he sat beside him, began a little to realise the situation. His father had retired as soon as the first alarm was over, and no word came from him.

Presently some soup was brought for Edgar, and Robertson deferentially offered Alwyn a tray with sandwiches and some claret.

“You will need it, sir, if you remain with Mr Edgar,” he said.

Alwyn hesitated, but he had had nothing since morning, and for Edgar’s sake he must accept the situation in full. It was a long strange night. Edgar was restless and feverish, only soothed by Alwyn’s voice and touch; but towards morning he fell asleep quietly, and Alwyn, as the sweet summer morning dawned, looked round about him, and recognised that the room in which he sat had been the old “study”—full of how many memories! All the furniture was changed to suit Edgar’s requirements, but the lines of the window, the panels on the wall, had a strange familiarity.

When Edgar, half waking, looked at him, and murmured something about a dream, Alwyn felt that either this night, or all the past eight years, were as a dream to him. He heard the sounds of the rousing household, familiar as no other sounds in the world could be, and presently Robertson, who had gone to lie down in the outer room, where he usually slept, came back and said:

"Mr Cunningham has sent word, sir, to say that breakfast will be served at nine in the dining-room. Will you let this man show you a room? I think my young master will be quite easy now."

"I don't like to leave him while he is asleep, he might wake and miss me.—What, Edgar, awake? I am going to get some breakfast; I shall be back soon."

He spoke in as matter-of-course a voice as possible, and Edgar only smiled a little and assented.

Alwyn went out into the new old house. The servants, who came to him also with a curious new old deference, unknown across the water, were strange to him; but he almost laughed to see how, evidently, they accepted him, and noticed that the man who had been attending on him did not offer, when he came out, to show him the way to the dining-room; he watched him as he turned naturally towards it. The room was empty.



'ARE YOU MY BROTHER ALWYN?'

P. 155

"Mr Cunningham begged you to take some breakfast, sir, and to come to him afterwards in his library."

Alwyn sat down and silently accepted the breakfast. He recognised the gold-edged, deep-coloured china, the plate, even the special variety of hot cakes which was offered to him. He was too much absorbed to be embarrassed, and was just deciding that it would be better to get the interview with his father over before he saw Edgar again, when a quick step sounded in the hall, and Geraldine stood before him, her tall figure upright as a dart, and her dark eyes recalling Edgar's youth so vividly, that she seemed more familiar to Alwyn than poor Edgar's own altered countenance.

He rose, colouring, and hardly knowing what to do; but Geraldine walked straight up to him.

"Are you my brother Alwyn?" she said in her clear outspoken voice.

"Yes—you are Geraldine?" said Alwyn.

"Why didn't you tell me so in the wood? I am very glad you are come home. I'll be friends with you anyhow."

Her bold, defiant voice sounded to Alwyn like an echo of his own old self, and it struck him how ready both his father's children were to side against him.

Geraldine came close to him and offered to kiss him, and he kissed her tenderly but very quietly, and looked at her

as if learning her face.

"I am very glad I have seen my sister," he said. "But now I must go to my father. I must not talk to you now."

"I told Miss Hardman that I *would* come and speak to you," said Geraldine. "I shall write to you if you go away again. I won't be prevented." Alwyn said nothing, and she looked at length a little awed by his silence and gravity. He moved away towards the door, then came back and kissed her again, this time in a warm hasty fashion that brought the tears to her eyes, then went across the hall and knocked at the door of his father's library.

Chapter Sixteen.

Harry Again.

Harry Whittaker, when suddenly claimed by Florrie as her long-lost brother, felt an immediate sense of recognition of the fair, fat, bouncing-ball of a seven years child, whom he remembered in the equally bouncing and fully proportioned damsel of fifteen.

"If you're my little sister Florrie," he said, taking hold of her hands, "how do you come to be out here by yourself at this time in the evening?"

"'Twas I went and chattered to the keepers and set 'em upon you. And when little Miss Lily found this here letter, I knew as how it was you and Miss Geraldine's brother, and I run away to tell Wyn to stop 'em."

"Run away from the Warrens?"

"No—from Ravenshurst; I was to help the nurse there."

"Run away from your situation!"

"Well," said Florrie with more spirit, "it was a deal better to run away than have you put in prison. I ain't so set on situations, either."

"Well, Florence, you're a plucky girl I see, and I'm greatly obliged to you; but now I must just take you back to the keeper's lodge, that they may be able to say to the lady that your own brother brought you home again."

He gave a little squeeze to the hand he held, which brought a curious thrill to Florence's heart. "But—but won't they take you up?" she said.

"No; I shan't play hide-and-seek any longer. Anyway, if you came out to take care of me I'm bound to take care of you. So come along."

"I ain't afraid to go back to Ravenshurst and face it out," said Florrie.

"No; you shall go back with a good account to give of yourself to-morrow, and now you do as I tell you."

Harry was so uneasy as to what had become of Mr Alwyn that he was not sorry for any chance of finding out.

Florence walked along by his side more subdued than she had ever been in her life. She answered all the various questions which Harry asked her about home and their father quite meekly and as they neared the keeper's lodge, to which he knew the way much better than she did, he heard a little snuffle.

"Don't be afraid, I'll stand by you," said Harry good-naturedly, and Florence for once did not reply that she never was afraid in her life.

There was a light still burning in the lodge, and Harry went boldly up and knocked at the door. It was opened by Charles Warren himself, who looked the tall burly figure up and down.

"If you're Henry Whittaker," he said, "walk in, and we'll hear what you've got to say."

"I thank you kindly," said Harry; "I shouldn't have intruded, but I've brought back my sister, who—"

"Mercy on us, Florrie!" exclaimed Mrs Warren, coming forward, while Wyn, looking very pale and red-eyed, with a large patch of brown paper on his nose, almost fell upon Florence.

"Oh, Florrie I have they sent you home in disgrace, for—for thinking Mr Alwyn was a poacher? It's all over now, and we've been the ruin of everything, and Mr Edgar's heart will be broke, and all through me."

"It ain't ruined at all," said Florence, "and I've found the letter for you, and here it is."

"That's nothing near so bad as the other letter what master's got!" said poor Wyn.

"Now shut up, Wyn," said his father. "Mr Alwyn's at the house, and the matter's out of your hands, which never ought to have been mixed up in it. Get you to bed at once. And what has brought Florence back again?"

"I went and carried on with Jim Blake and young Benson, and I set 'em on thinking the men in the wood were poachers, and when I found the letter in Miss Lily's pocket, and saw it was Mr Alwyn and my brother, I thought I'd better run away than have their deaths on my shoulders. But I was settling down, Aunt Charlotte, I was indeed, and

folding up the clothes quite regular.”

“Could a note be sent to tell the lady what is become of her?” said Harry. “I’ll go myself if that’s all; but it’s late, perhaps, to disturb them with a long story.”

“I’ll take the note,” said Ned Warren, who had been standing in the background, “if Bessie’ll write it.”

Bessie accordingly indited a note in her mother’s name, in which she begged to inform her ladyship that Florence Whittaker had come home, but that circumstances had occurred in part to excuse her and that she (Mrs Warren) would wait on her ladyship the next morning with a full explanation.

This note despatched, Bessie good-naturedly went upstairs to bathe Wyn’s face and to hear Florence’s story, and to leave the elders free to come to an explanation with the returned stranger. “Would you be good enough,” said Harry, “to tell me what has occurred as to Mr Cunningham?”

“It’s just this,” said Charles Warren. “Strangers are scarce in these parts, and my boy and the girl took it into their heads as they must be after mischief, and chattered about what was none of their business to the two young fellows that Ned and I have got in to help us. So when they saw a stranger, as they expressed it, ferreting in a tree, they clapped him on the shoulder and asked him his business. He looked them in the face, as they put it, as cool as you please, and asked them if they thought he was looking for pheasants’ eggs in a hollow tree in August? Which they took for cheek, which it sounded like, and told him they’d walk him up here to me. So he says, says they, ‘I’m glad you mind your business so thoroughly. Just walk up to the house with me, and I’ll explain matters to Mr Cunningham myself.’ So they walked him up, and Jim Blake, who has the most gumption of the two, says he did begin to feel uncommon uncomfortable, and when they came to the garden side, there was the master on the terrace. So says their man, ‘There’s your master, alone, I think. We’ll go and speak to him at once.’ And he unlatched the gate, quite natural-like, and walks up to the terrace. And there they saw Mr Edgar lying, and he gave a start and held out his hands, and the master sent them off with a flea in the ear. And they come straight to me, full of misgivings; they’re new in these parts, but, of course, I knew who it must be at once.”

“It did sound like Mr Alwyn all over,” said Mrs Warren.

“Then back comes Wyn, and hears the story, and begins to cry, and bursts out about the letter that Mr Alwyn had given him and the master took.”

“And is Mr Alwyn at the house now?” asked Harry.

“Yes,” said Warren, “he is. But now, perhaps, you’ll tell us where you come from, and what’s brought you here, and why in the wood?”

“That last,” said Harry, “came about unfortunate. Mr Alwyn and I came down here straight from London, knowing nothing of any one. And, thinking I was least likely to be recognised, he sent me with the letter to his brother, asking him to meet him in the wood, or come to London to see him, and to tell him how the land lay before he made himself known to his father. I gave the letter to Wyn, who dropped it: here it is. Mr Alwyn met Mr Edgar by chance, and was so knocked down by the state in which he found him, that he couldn’t tell what to do next. He was afraid, you see, of his brother having to bear the brunt of a discovery, and he not there. That made him delay.”

“But, why hollow trees, which seem to have occurred in everybody’s story?” said Warren.

“Oh!” said Harry, “to pass the time,” repeating much of what he had told Mrs Stroud, omitting, however, Alwyn’s experiences, but showing the copies of the certificates and attestations of Lennox’s confession, giving proofs by letters and documents of his respectable position in the States, and expressing with the frankness which, while it was like his old daring, had yet a different note in it, how, being a father himself, he had repented of his hardness and neglect towards his home. “But,” he concluded, “if people don’t believe us, there’s no more to be said about it at present.”

Warren was a shrewd man; he had never thought it at all likely that Harry had stolen the jewels, and he saw plainly that there was no reason to induce him to return to his native country unless the story was true.

“I take it,” he said, “that the gentlemen before whom these affidavits were made believed in the story.”

“Why, certainly,” said Harry, “which they are prepared to say in writing. Mr Warren,” he added, standing up, “there’s a deal in the past I have to ask your pardon for. I was a young scamp that cared neither for man nor God, and I was downright ungrateful for all your kindness. But I’m clear from that theft, and if you and my father can say you think so, you’ll clear away a trouble from me which not all my good fortune has made me forget.”

“Well, Harry,” said Warren, “I see nothing against your story, and I’m prepared to help you to make it out.”

After this Bessie came down, and the conversation took an easier turn, the exhibition of the family photograph, with the well-dressed wife and comfortable baby, having its due effect on Mrs Warren. A shakedown was offered to Harry in the kitchen, and at a late hour they all went to bed, if not to sleep, after the day’s excitement.

The next morning, as Wyn, though he was still rather sick and headachy, and anything but presentable, was preparing to go about his work and to inquire for Mr Edgar, and as Mrs Warren was making Florence tidy, in Bessie’s hat, to accompany her on a penitential errand to Ravenshurst, there was a tap at the open door, and there stood Alwyn Cunningham himself, as Mrs Warren said afterwards, for all the world as if he had come to give his orders for a day’s shooting.

“I heard you were here, Harry,” he said, grasping his comrade’s hand. “Warren, I hope you’ll give me a welcome

also.”

“Indeed I will, sir, and glad to see you. Hope you’ll overlook the young fellow’s mistake yesterday.”

Alwyn laughed a little.

“They were quite in the right of it,” he said. “Hullo, Wyn, you have punished yourself as well as the horse.”

“Please, sir, if I hadn’t been stupid-like with my nose bleeding, I’d never have give up the letter. I’d have eaten it first!” burst out Wyn miserably.

“It was all for the best,” said Alwyn, “and you’re a faithful little fellow.”

He paused a moment, then went on, aside to Harry:

“My father wishes me to remain here for the present, and he will give facilities for the search in the wood which we wished to make. What are your plans, Harry?”

“Well, sir, since things are settled here, I think I ought to go to Rapley.”

“Can you go to London as well, and give orders for my things to be sent here? I could telegraph, but they are all in confusion. I don’t wish to leave my brother to-day. And you know I must not delay in going to Ravenshurst.”

“Is Mr Edgar better, sir?” asked Wyn timidly. “Not much, I’m afraid, as yet. He must be very quiet for the present.”

“Is all right, Mr Alwyn?” said Harry, as he followed him out of doors.

“As right as may be. My father acknowledges me, and asks me to stay with him. Friendliness and forgiveness are another matter. He read and heard all I had to say, and I believe he thinks your character cleared. Perhaps the sudden meeting was as well for him as any other, but poor Edgar fainted; all plans and scruples had to give way. It has been a terrible shock for him, and he is quite worn out, only wanting to keep me in sight I’ll go back to him. I can’t think of anything else just now.”

He turned off with a hasty “Good morning.”

“He’s as grave as his father,” said Mrs Warren, “only the master never spoke so gentle. Well, I’d like to have seen Mr Alwyn’s merry face again.”

“When folks have to right themselves after they’ve gone as wrong as Mr Alwyn and I did,” said Harry, “there ain’t so much merry-making left in them. Not but what a light heart, thank God, is very persevering. And Mr Alwyn’s got a twinkle in him yet. But coming home’s bitter hard to him, and everybody ain’t as forgiving as you, Cousin Charlotte, nor as comfortable to ask pardon of.”

Chapter Seventeen.

To Set Wrongs Right.

The abrupt disappearance of the new nursemaid had naturally caused considerable excitement at Ravenshurst, and Lily’s story, when she was asked to repeat what the new girl had said to her, did not throw much light on the subject. It seemed, however, to be clear that the child had really picked up a letter in the forest, and that, on its being shown to Florence, the girl had at once decamped. When Mrs Warren’s note came, promising an explanation, Sir Philip Carleton hummed and hawed, but told his wife that, as Cunningham’s keeper’s wife seemed so respectable a person, she had better hear the explanation. As to taking the girl back, that was another thing altogether.

Lady Carleton had no idea what the explanation was to be, and when Mrs Warren appeared at the door of her morning-room with Florence behind, hanging her head, her reception was not encouraging.

“I hope, Mrs Warren, that you have some reason to give for your niece’s extraordinary conduct. She has behaved in a most unheard-of manner.”

“She has, my lady, and I am going to trouble your ladyship with the excuse for it. Some strangers were seen in the wood, and Florence here and my little boy took it into their heads, which was none of their business, to warn the keepers about them. Then, my lady, when Florence was putting Miss Lily to bed, the little lady showed her a letter which she said she had found in the wood.”

“Yes,” said Lady Carleton; “Miss Lily told me something about that letter, but I had no time to attend to her. Well?”

“My lady, she saw in that letter the name of her own brother, Harry Whittaker, and perceived it was written by Mr Alwyn Cunningham, whose story, my lady, she had heard, it seems, from my Wyn. And Florence put two and two together, and saw that ’twas her own brother and Mr Alwyn that she had set the keepers upon, and off she ran, without another thought to send Wyn to warn them. And indeed, my lady, I hardly know whether it was her place or not; certain sure she ought to have mentioned that she was going; but her brother met her and brought her home; and if your ladyship can overlook her behaviour, she’ll be a good girl for the future, I do think.”

“But, Mrs Warren,” exclaimed Lady Carleton, to whom Florence’s conduct was the least part of the matter, “do you mean to say that Mr Alwyn Cunningham has returned?”

"Yes, my lady, he has, and Henry Whittaker too; and I may say, your ladyship, that Henry appears to be a reformed character, and well-to-do also. And very remarkable things he had to tell us. But those it is not my business to trouble your ladyship with."

Mrs Warren said no word about the confession and the jewels; that, she thought, was not her business. And now that Mr Alwyn was once more in his proper place, she had no call to discuss his character.

"Of course, my lady," she said, "if your ladyship feels that you cannot overlook such a breach of propriety, I will take Florence back at once."

Lady Carleton looked at the girl for a moment.

"I should like Florence to stay," she said. "Will you please leave her with me now, Mrs Warren? I see that the case was exceptional." Mrs Warren thanked her ladyship, and with a discreet hope that Florence would be grateful and obedient, withdrew at once.

"Come here, Florence," said Lady Carleton in the softest voice Florence had ever heard. "It was a very serious thing to do, you know, to run away without leave. It is because I think that you are a good steady girl in general that I overlook it, as you had a reason."

"I ain't a good girl, Lady Carleton," said Florence. "I ain't steady, but I wasn't after nothing wrong last night."

"What do you mean by saying you are not steady?" said Lady Carleton, somewhat taken aback by Florence's town-bred use of her name and by her queer manner.

"I was always the one to lead the rest," said Florence, "and I've always liked a bit of fun. But I had to go and try to step them from taking Harry up for a poacher, and—and he says it ain't no manner of use to say 'Don't care,' and I'm very sorry."

"If you were able to stop the harm you had begun to do, that is a thing to be very thankful for—to thank God for!" said Lady Carleton with some emotion in her tone.

Florence looked up with a certain solemnity in her round eyes never seen there before.

"I did say my prayers in the wood," she said, "when I lost my way, and then Harry came."

"Tell me about it," said Lady Carleton kindly. Thus encouraged, Florence volubly, according to her nature, but with a friendliness of manner which was really the nearest approach to respect that she had ever exhibited, told her tale.

"And my heart was in my mouth, ma'am, the trees were that black and that awful. I'd have run back, for I wouldn't have cared if nurse had given me ever so much of the rough side of her tongue. But there, I couldn't have it on my mind that I'd set the keepers on my brother and dear Miss Geraldine's too. But I didn't know one path from another no more than if there hadn't been none. And then I thought of little Miss Lily's prayer about setting wrongs right and travellers, and I said it, Lady Carleton; and there was Harry."

"Did you, Florence? Oh, thank God for it!" said Lady Carleton tearfully.

"And he took me right back, and he said this morning that the best thing I could do was to come back here and be trained a bit. And so I've come, please, ma'am—my lady. Please, aunt said I was to say 'my lady,' and I will, but I forgot; and I'll be a good girl, and not gossip on the sly, nor answer nurse back, nor make the other girls saucy. And I'll trim up my hat quiet, if you like, my lady. I—I want to be good."

Florence cried as she finished speaking, and wiped her eyes and blew her nose noisily. Perhaps, but for the circumstances that appealed so strongly to her sympathy, Lady Carleton would never have recognised how real this confused desire "to be good" was in this extraordinary girl, so unlike any well-trained maiden whom she had ever encountered.

"Well," she said, "you shall try. You had better talk as little about the matter as possible, and I trust you never will 'gossip on the sly,' or do anything of the kind, for I couldn't have a girl who was not nice and modest near my little ones. I will speak to nurse."

"Thank you—my lady."

But as Lady Carleton rose to take her back to the nursery, Florence's round face suddenly beamed all over, and she said sympathetically: "They've found out who stole the jewels, my lady, and it was not Harry nor Mr Alwyn. They were as innocent as lambs."

"I think we had better not talk about that just now," said Lady Carleton; and then, with a sudden inspiration and effort, she added: "Florence, perhaps you don't know that it was partly my fault that those jewels were lost, that I helped to put some one in the way of temptation. It was because I was so silly, that I only thought of what you call 'a bit of fun.' That is why I was so glad you were able to prevent the mischief you started, and why I taught Miss Lily to say those prayers. The good God has heard them. You see, I shall be very glad if you *are* good."

Lady Carleton had a very simple manner, but Florence looked up at her with the first sense of real respect—she had begun to have real likings—that she had ever known.

"I *will* try," she said softly, with her bold eyes cast down; and Lady Carleton took her by the hand and led her up to the nursery.

An hour or two later, when Florence, whose reception by the nurse had not been particularly cordial, was sitting demurely in the nursery window, putting her best needlework, such as it was, into Miss Lily's new pinafore, a note was brought to Lady Carleton. "The gentleman was waiting." Lady Carleton had thought of nothing but the half-heard story of the returned travellers, of the hint about the jewels, and of the hope that the consequences of her girlish folly might be undone at last.

The note ran thus:—

"Ashcroft: August 5th.

"Dear Lady, Carleton,—My eldest son has returned from abroad. He asks your permission for a short interview, either with yourself or with Sir Philip Carleton, concerning the circumstances under which he left England.

"I remain sincerely yours,—

"George Cunningham."

Lady Carleton handed the note to her husband, to whom she had already related Florence's story.

"You will see him?" said Sir Philip. "Ask the gentleman to walk in."

It was a very uncomfortable moment both for Lady Carleton and for Alwyn Cunningham, who had been boy and girl together, and now hardly knew how to meet; but Sir Philip carried it off by ordinary greetings as to the son of a neighbour, whose acquaintance he was ready to make, and Alwyn hardly waited a moment before he entered on the matter in hand.

He took out the jewel that he had shown to Edgar in the wood and laid it on the table.

"I can at least return to you this piece of your family property, Lady Carleton," he said.

"My mother's jewel, the ruby bird!" faltered Lady Carleton, hardly knowing what this implied.

"And," said Alwyn, "I will ask Sir Philip Carleton to be good enough to read these papers."

These contained the confession of Lennox, already alluded to by Harry Whittaker to his aunt, and the attestations of it, of which he had shown copies to the Warrens.

"That Lennox stole the jewels, and returned one of them on his death-bed to me, Whittaker has told some of his relations," said Alwyn, "but the main fact of the matter has only been confided to my father, as you will see that it would not do to make it public. This is the substance of what he told me as nearly as possible in his own words:

"I put the jewels for safety in a hollow tree near the entrance to Ravenshurst. I thought they were safer there than in my keeping. I kept one back to take it up to London, and see if I could dispose of it, but before I could do so the alarm was given. I was afraid to come back without a reason, and I went off with my new master, leaving the jewels in the tree, and thinking they'd either be found (I have never been in England since), or I should get a chance of coming back for them. But I put it off and I put it off. I took service with Mr Alwyn Cunningham because I thought I could find out how things had gone; and I hope he will go home and find the jewels."

"This is a most extraordinary story," said Sir Philip.

"It is," said Alwyn. "Of course it rests finally on the unsupported words of myself and Whittaker, who alone heard it. These other papers and letters may show what worth is attached to our words in our own neighbourhood, but that is all."

"Then do you mean to say," ejaculated Sir Philip, "that these missing jewels are—are in an old tree trunk in Ashcroft Wood?"

"Well," said Alwyn, "all I can say is that Lennox said that he put them in one."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Sir Philip.

"But, of course," Alwyn continued, "some one *may* have lighted on them during these eight years and carried them off, to say nothing of the difficulty of finding them. For he had done it, he said, in the dark, and though he could have found the tree himself, he could not tell me anything about it, except that it was near Ravenshurst. You see he was dying fast, and spoke with great difficulty."

"Do you remember the man, Lily?" asked Sir Philip.

"I think I remember something about a servant who went to America. Oh, Philip, you will have every place searched—you will help Mr Cunningham? If the jewels could be found! But I don't mind so much after all about that if no one is accused falsely."

"As to that," said Sir Philip, "I know Mr Dallas, of Boston, and the Bishop of. I knew them when I was once in the States, the year before I married. What they say here is quite sufficient to establish the worth of Mr Alwyn Cunningham's testimony and the character of his foreman, who is more concerned in the matter. You will allow me to call on you, Mr Cunningham, and to express my pleasure at your return."

"Thank you," said Alwyn, a little stiffly, for the situation sorely tried his pride. "I am much obliged to you," he added, after a moment.

"And, Alwyn," said Lady Carleton, with tears in her eyes, "can you ever forgive me for my silly trick, and for being too frightened to tell of it at once? Oh, I have never—never forgiven myself."

"I don't think it is easy for any of us to forgive ourselves, Lady Carleton," said Alwyn, "for that night's work. But your share was a very small one."

"The fact is," said Sir Philip, "the thing was never properly investigated. Mr Fletcher was afraid that the silly trick would come to my ears—too soon. I needn't say—since you know my wife—that I at once heard of it from her. The chance was lost. But what is to be done now? You yourself believe this story?"

"Oh yes," said Alwyn, "I do. There was no object in deceiving me. No; I am sure Lennox had not sold the jewels, and made up the story of the old tree."

"We cannot let it get about that the wood is full of diamonds," said Sir Philip.

"No," returned Alwyn with a laugh; "neither Whittaker nor myself could resist a little bird's-nesting, but it was, of course, unwise. That was partly why I wished to make myself known first to my brother. I did not know then that part of our misfortunes."

"Ah! poor fellow," said Sir Philip, "he is sadly helpless. But your return will be a capital thing for him. His life must be rather solitary."

"Yes, I fear so," said Alwyn. "I will go back to him now, with many thanks for a most kind reception."

"Lily," said Sir Philip, when their guest was gone, "I believe young Cunningham told the truth and the whole truth, to-day. But I didn't."

"What in the world do you mean, Philip?"

"Why, only yesterday I got a letter from old Dallas, giving a wonderful account of him and his high character out there, but wanting naturally to know how Mr Cunningham's eldest son came to be there at all. I was wondering what I could say, for it was very evident that he had a reason for asking—there's a lady in question, I imagine—when to-day he turns up."

"Oh, Philip, we *must* find the jewels!"

"We must; but it passes me to know how to set about it."

Chapter Eighteen.

Sunday at Home.

On the next Sunday morning the bells of Ashcroft Church were ringing for an early celebration of the Holy Communion. Many eyes were turned on Alwyn Cunningham as he walked down the village in the fresh sweetness of the summer morning. Such early church-going was not according to Mr Cunningham's habits, and probably Alwyn was the last person that any one expected to see practise it, for the formal confirmation of a careless public schoolboy had never been followed up, and in old days he had never been a communicant. The change from former habits was so marked that the conservative villagers of Ashcroft looked at him very distrustfully, as if they wondered why he came.

Perhaps Alwyn had forgotten what it was to be the observed of all observers; perhaps he had learnt that only thus would he obtain the help he needed in a most painful position. His father had accepted his statements as to Lennox's confession, and had allowed such a search for the jewels as could be made without publicity to be commenced at once. He also acknowledged in a more indirect way that his son had become a respectable member of society, fit to visit at his house; but he did not open his heart to him, nor forgive him, except in a formal manner. Alwyn felt that his father did not trust him, he knew that his engagement to an American lady would not tell in his favour, and he guessed that the marked and complete change of attitude as to religious matters, the account of which, indeed, had been intended for Edgar only, would be viewed with suspicion. Mr Cunningham, after reading the letter, had touched on no point but the lost jewels, and Alwyn had accepted his silence and the situation, and talked diligently when they met, and at meal times, of general topics.

But when old Mr Murray saw him this morning he wondered if the inaccessible Cunninghams, who had always been so polite, and on such stiff term with him since his coming to Ashcroft, would be approached by the unlikely channel of the returned exile.

Certainty anything less like the irreverent, light-minded youth whom he had heard described than Alwyn's serious face could hardly be imagined, and Bessie Warren could not help wondering what he was thinking of, as she saw him look round before he turned away, as if noting the once familiar scene.

Edgar had been so weak and so much shaken by all that had passed that he had been content to take his brother's presence for granted, and when Alwyn realised how very solitary such hours of languor and suffering must usually have been, he cared little what his presence there cost himself, if the sight of him made Edgar's eye brighten and gave him any pleasure, however small.

To-day, however, Edgar was better, and his interest and curiosity began to revive. He had been lifted on to his couch

by the open window, and had sent a message to Wyn to bring his black eyes to be looked at, and after a little space of the eager watching of the outdoor world that was always so much to him, he said to Alwyn:

"Where is that letter that you wrote for me? I could read it now, and I'm as much in the dark as the first day I saw you."

"Here it is," said Alwyn; "shall I read it to you or tell you about it? Is your head well enough to read it?"

"Oh yes; I can stop if I'm tired. I had rather have it."

Alwyn gave him the letter, and went on with the one that he was himself writing, while Edgar studied the long document for some time in silence.

Presently Edgar talked a little about the jewels and the chances of their discovery, observing that whoever poked about in the dark or on the quiet, hunting for them, would certainly get shot by the zealous keepers who had laid hands on Alwyn.

"There's nothing for it but setting the forest on fire," he said.

"No, no," said Alwyn, "the jewels are not worth a tree of it."

Edgar gave him one of his keen glances, under which the colour mounted to Alwyn's brow.

"My father has given Warren orders to be thorough over it," he said.

Edgar said nothing, and returned to the letter.

"Are—are you writing to Miss Dallas?" he said presently, with a rather shy intonation.

"No; I have not that privilege. To her brother."

"Tell me about her. What's her name?" said Edgar.

Alwyn was nothing loath.

"Corinne is her name," he said; "they use it in America." And then he went on and told Edgar a great deal, for which there is no space in this story, and as he talked his face grew happy and eager, and Edgar listened a little wistfully.

"Now it will be all right for you?" he said.

"I think so—I hope so. Mr Dallas only wished to be certain that no complications could occur in the future. He does trust me, and is satisfied with my position there. My father has said all that is needful."

"And when shall you go back, Val?" said Edgar.

The bright eyes were still resolute and clear and the voice steady, though with a little strain in it.

Alwyn looked at the white fragile face, and could not find voice for a moment to answer.

"You mustn't stay too long and spoil me," said Edgar, "unless you come back again very quickly."

Alwyn came nearer and sat down by his side.

"My boy," he said, "you know I did not come home only to clear my way for my great hopes. I did come to seek for pardon and to try to undo a little of the past. There's a long time to make up for; there is no hurry. You need not think about parting yet; that is, if my father—"

Alwyn broke off, and Edgar lay still, twisting his long weak fingers round the hand he was holding.

"I think you might promise to stay—as long as I want you," he said. "I shall let you go—soon."

"I promise," said Alwyn gently, and again Edgar was silent, till he said in a different tone:

"Well, that's all as it may be. One must take what comes."

"What is sent," said Alwyn.

"Val," said Edgar after another silence, "it was very curious. Just before you came back I dreamed about you. I saw you. I knew you directly. But I saw that you were changed; your face was like it is now—not as it used to be. You *are* different."

"Yes," said Alwyn, "I am different."

"Tell me," said Edgar.

Perhaps Alwyn had never found anything so hard as to enter on an account of what some people would call his "experiences" to his brother, but he said quietly:

"When I grew to love Corinne I found out what I had made of myself by my life. Beforehand, I thought since I had pulled myself together and all my offences had been before I was twenty that all was right. But I can't tell how,

through loving her, my sin against my father, and the bad example I set you, came back upon me. I felt how hard and selfish and callous I had been all along. Whether she cared for me or not, I wasn't worthy to know she existed."

"Go on," said Edgar, as Alwyn paused, conscious that Edgar was not exactly a comprehending listener.

"Well," said Alwyn, "as for religion, you know I never had thought about it. I don't believe as a family, we're given to thinking, and, apart Corinne, young Dallas was a new idea to me. Of course his ways and words put much into my head. But it was the earthly love that was granted to me that showed me what that Higher love might be. And when I had once said to my Heavenly Father, 'I have sinned,' there was nothing for it but to come and say the same to my earthly one, even—even if he is less merciful."

Edgar listened with great surprise, but with no doubt whatever of the absolute sincerity of the speaker.

"Well," he said, "as for me, I've had something to make up my mind to. I was determined no one should say I was beaten. I had to give up the army and to know I could never walk, but I've got along and put a good face on it. 'Never say die' is not a bad motto. Well now, you see, I've known for some time that I should *have* 'to say die,' sooner rather than later—very soon, I fancy. When I was last laid up, I made old Hartford tell me the truth, and I've faced that out too. What must be, must."

"It would have taken less pluck, my boy, to face the enemy, if you had gone into the army, than to face your life here," said Alwyn tenderly. "I thank God, who made you of that sort of stuff."

Edgar looked somewhat struck by this remark.

"One got through things by saying, 'I don't care how they go,'" he said. "And so, Alwyn, it's been great good luck to have seen you, and you mustn't stay here if things are not smooth. I shall pull along—so remember you haven't made any rash promises. Corinne mustn't think you're not in a mortal hurry to get back to her."

"Corinne will understand," said Alwyn with a smile. "Come, I mustn't let you over-talk yourself. There's Wyn on the terrace."

"I say," exclaimed Edgar, "he has made a spectacle of his little red phiz. Here, Wyn! Are you ready to take me out again?"

"Yes, sir; oh yes, sir. Are you ready to come?"

"Very soon, I hope. And how are all the creatures? Has the fox been behaving himself?"

"Yes, sir, but one of the little hedgehogs has got away, and the moor-fowl, sir, I'm sorry to say they constantly diminish. Father thinks there's rats about—or a cat, sir."

"Whew! That's a bad look-out. Alwyn, you haven't seen the Zoological Gardens?"

"Please, sir, should I bring anything up for you and Mr Alwyn to look at?"

"Let's have the little Scotch terriers. I'm thinking, Wyn, of taking up those beetles that live in decayed wood—in old trees. You'll have to hunt 'em up for me."

"Very well, sir, but I don't know as even Granny would like *them* about," said Wyn, as he went after the dogs.

"Granny? You have seen old Bunny, Val?"

"Oh yes. That was a real welcome. But, Edgar, surely it could be managed for her to come and see you; she wishes it so much."

"I should like to see her again," said Edgar. "I missed her when she was crippled, too, poor old dear!"

As he spoke, Geraldine, having come back from church and let out Apollo, joined them, and presently Mr Cunningham, walking home by himself, paused a moment in front of the terrace, as a sound, unheard for many a year, fell on his ears—the clear ringing laugh of his first-born son. So had Alwyn laughed in days before they quarrelled, so had he laughed when his mother had been alive to hear him, and when Mr Cunningham, if a rather cold father, had been at least a proud one.

The three puppies, Apollo, a young fox terrier, and a little rough Skye, were sitting up on their hind legs in a row, under the tuition of Wyn, who squatted on the ground opposite them. Geraldine was looking on, holding her breath with delight, while Alwyn, leaning against the window by Edgar's side, was laughing heartily and teasing Geraldine about her pet.

"Three to one on the little ruffian! Apollo's nowhere. His back's too long, and the fox terrier's too frisky. Bravo, Wyn! You ought to keep a circus; they're steady yet."

"I should like to, sir, uncommon, and train the performing dogs, sir," said Wyn.

"You look as if you had been practising for the clown," said Edgar, as his father came forward on to the terrace.

Down tumbled the puppies and up jumped Wyn, retreating hastily. Alwyn grew stiff and grave in a moment, offering his father a chair, and Geraldine looked, as she felt, disappointed at the interruption.

Mr Cunningham sat down. It was the first time that the family had been thus all together, the first time he had seen

his three children side by side for more than eight years. He noticed them. He observed that Geraldine was growing a tall, stately girl, with the promise of distinction if not of beauty. He noticed the hopeless delicacy of Edgar's look, the son whom he had made his heir; and he looked at the handsome, grave, strong face of the son he had disinherited, and for the first time he confessed to himself that he looked fit, at any rate, to be the master of Ashcroft.

And why were they all so grave in his presence? That Alwyn should be reserved was right enough, but the others? He had heard them laughing and at ease together. He saw Edgar turn naturally to Alwyn to do him some trifling service, and for the first time it struck Mr Cunningham that something more might be made out of his relations to Edgar and Geraldine than was the case at present. Surely they were unusually stiff, and not shy, but distant with him.

He did not wish for any approach from Alwyn; but it was none the less true that these feelings had come to him on Alwyn's return, because Alwyn was the only one of his three children that he had ever greatly loved.

Chapter Nineteen.

After Eight Years.

Life was certainly a much more peaceable thing in the Whittaker household while Florence was undergoing the process of being "stroked down" by Mrs Warren at Ashcroft, Ethel and Sybil were much less perverse and saucy without her, and went their several ways like rational girls, Ethel looking forward to a clerkship in the post-office, and Sybil to an apprenticeship to a good dressmaker in Rapley. They contrived to walk about without staring or being stared at, and as they behaved with ordinary common sense, the respectability of their superior home showed, and they were thought well of by their various teachers, and began to take the lead at their Sunday school in better things than mischief. Miss Mordaunt found her Bible class comparatively harmless, and could not honestly feel that she regretted Florence Whittaker; while, at home, Mattie enjoyed unwonted peace and quiet.

She knew that she had not managed Florrie very well, but the relief of feeling no longer responsible for her was great. After a longish interval, Florence had replied to the letter in which she had urged her to keep in mind the lesson of Harry's misconduct.

The girl could write rather a good letter, and her descriptions of her life at Ashcroft were amusing. "I should like it very well if there was anything but trees and live stock about," she said, "but I get on right enough. Aunt Charlotte ain't made up her mind that I'm going to 'harry her up,' as Aunt Stroud calls it. As for Harry, I remember him well enough, and there's others that haven't forgotten him neither, and maybe I'm taking example more than you think."

Mattie could make nothing of this sentence, but it recalled Harry to her mind; and one evening, when George had come back from his work, she began to talk about him.

"It seems a bit heartless of us, George," she said, "to think so little about him. He might be in trouble and poverty, and we so comfortable."

"I expect we should have heard of him if he had been," said George. "Of course, if he turned up, I should do the right thing by him—after proper inquiries. But I don't suppose we should be much the better for him."

"I wonder if father ever frets after him," said Mattie.

"I don't think he does," said George dryly; "he put him out of the way too much. But Aunt Stroud made a pet of him."

"I wish Aunt Lizzie wouldn't talk so mysterious!" said Mattie impatiently. "She came down here to-day and talked about bursting clouds and Providence, till one would have thought she knew something particular."

"She's a talker, worse than Florrie," said George. "I declare I'll be off, Mattie—if there isn't Aunt Stroud again!"

George was a worthy and useful young man, and if trouble or poverty had come upon his sisters he would have done his part by them well. But he liked his life very well as it was, and he naturally thought that the scapegrace Harry, though he knew nothing of the jewel story, would come into it as a disturbing element. Even Mattie, who was much more tender-hearted, felt afraid of the idea of him, and would have welcomed him from duty rather than from love. The father, too, was a good, conscientious, but rather selfish man, whose life consisted in the routine of his duties. He had been much more comfortable without Harry than with him. People cannot vanish for years, leaving trouble behind them, and always find a spontaneous welcome on their return. Neither Alwyn Cunningham nor Harry Whittaker had left to them in the world the one friend who would never have forgotten them. Their mothers were dead. Their places were filled up. Had poor Edgar been the gay young officer that Alwyn had pictured him, the place his brother held in his memory would probably have been much smaller, and when Harry Whittaker walked down the broad road in the middle of the cemetery, no dream had given notice of his return, nobody had any special desire to see him.

And for himself, he had come home more for the sake of his child than for that of his family. He recalled them all with an effort, even as he walked along counting the new tomb-stones that had appeared since he went away. His Aunt Stroud had arranged to come to the Lodge a few minutes before him, so as to prepare his family for his arrival. Suddenly, however, he perceived his father walking towards him by a side path, with his order-book under his arm, on his way from a meeting of the Board. A little greyer-haired, elderly middle-aged instead of young middle-aged, but far less altered than Harry himself, at whom he looked without any recognition. Harry had to choose between letting him pass and making himself known; but, before he could resolve what to say, some agitation in his manner, a look that was not that of the ordinary passer-by in his face, arrested Mr Whittaker's attention, and he paused and looked at him.

"I think I'm speaking to Mr Whittaker?" said Harry, in his strong outspoken voice, which nevertheless shook a little. Then he suddenly put out his hand.

"Father, do you know me? I've come back to ask your forgiveness and friendship, and to clear my character as to the past."

"My son Henry!" exclaimed Mr Whittaker. He faced him with a look of great surprise and of uncertain welcome, and yet, perhaps, he had often enough wondered whether Henry would come back, not to feel the utter strangeness of an event never looked forward to.

"It's your place to explain a little, Henry," he said, neither giving nor withholding a welcome.

"If you are willing to hear me," said Harry.

"Come with me," said Mr Whittaker.

He turned and led the way into the little office where business was transacted, and where the relatives and friends sometimes waited for funerals. In this not very cheerful spot Harry's papers and letters (including one from Mrs Warren) were once more produced, and, under promise of secrecy for the present, he told his father of the search for the jewels, and how he would willingly have held back till they were found, but for his encounter with Florence.

"And," said Harry, "after what passed I was justified, I think, in holding aloof, while I was a vagabond and times were so hard. And after I settled down comfortable and got on, thanks to Mr Alwyn's kindness, I'd made up my mind to forget the old country; but you see, father, I thought, what if little Georgie, when he grows up, were to keep away from me for eight years, and live *happy*? Why, let us have quarrelled as we would, it'd break my heart to think he could forget me so. And so—and so, father—I hope you'll let me take him his grandfather's blessing. Mother would have set great store by him if she'd lived to see him, and he shall be taught to set store by you."

The father and son sat looking at each other for a moment or two in silence. For the big, half-grown, trouble-town of a boy the father could not say that his heart had broken; but the thought of the little grandchild brought back early days, when Harry's rosy face and sandy curls had been the mother's pride, and when his father's heart would have nearly broken if he had died in that scarlet fever from which he had barely recovered. Perhaps he had been too ready to think ill of the lad, and to cast him upon his own resources.

"If you were wronged about the jewels, Henry," he said, "it's you that have the advantage of us."

"I'd acted so as to be easy wronged," said Harry, "but I'd be glad to go back with all fair behind me."

Mr Whittaker put out his hand with something like tears in his shrewd grey eyes. After all, he had not quite forgotten Harry. Harry gave the hand a great squeeze and walked over to the window, from which he presently turned round, saying:

"There's my aunt, father; she was coming to tell you."

Mr Whittaker went out to the door and beckoned Harry after him. There stood Mrs Stroud, beaming; Mattie, flushed and eager; George by no means so well pleased; and all the four younger ones eager and excited.

Harry's coolness returned as soon as he had settled matters with his father, and he greeted them all as composedly as if he had returned from a short excursion abroad, and presently they all went in to sit down to supper and take each other's measure as well as they could.

Mrs Stroud at once called for the photograph and Ethel and Sybil giggled with delight at finding themselves possessed of a nephew, while Mattie began to think that some of the romance she was so fond of had found its way into real life.

"And how long do you mean to stay this side of the water, Harry?" asked his aunt.

"Only till the matter of which I spoke to my father is concluded or given up. Mr Alwyn and myself could not both be away for long together, and I think he will not leave his brother again so quickly. Alberta would be very glad to make your acquaintances. Will you come back with me and pay us a visit, Mattie?"

"No, Henery," said Mrs Stroud; "if Mattie knows which side her bread's buttered she'll stay on this side of the ocean. But if you want to do a brother's part by your own family, you'll take Florrie off their hands. For there's no room for that girl—not in the High Street of Rapley. Perhaps there might be in Ameriky."

"Aunt Eliza!" said Mattie indignantly, "Harry only meant so as to make acquaintance."

"Well, well," said Harry, "we'll talk it all over. But Florence did her best to get me out of a scrape—"

"Which I make no doubt she got you into," said Mrs Stroud.

Harry's eyes twinkled a little, but he did not betray Florence, and the suggestion dropped into his mind. He would be glad to do something for one member of his family, and he rather inclined to the unpopular Florence, though, of course, he remembered Mattie much better, and felt pleased when at last she shyly came up to him and said that she was glad he had come home. But it was all uncomfortable and full of effort, and Harry felt glad when the time came to say "Good night," and he went off to catch the last train for London. But, as he walked along at full speed to the station, the feeling of his father's hand-shake lingered on his palm, and he felt that he could think of his child with peace and satisfaction.

Chapter Twenty.

Glad and Thankful.

There now set in at Ashcroft a period trying to the feelings of all concerned. No trace of the lost jewels was discovered. The number of hollow trees in the forest was limited, and so were their hollows, which were searched as thoroughly as was possible, and in vain. One or two old trees had been previously cut down and sawn up; the lost treasure could not be in them. Alwyn began to wish that the jewels had all been disposed of in America, and that this search, the folly of which seemed to throw a sort of doubt on the whole story, had never been undertaken. Lady Carleton was most anxious and eager over the matter, and as the search could hardly be kept quite secret, its cause came to the ears of Florence, who, when she was out with little Lily, spent her time in poking her fingers into the smallest knot or rent in perfectly sound trees, and started a theory that the jewels were probably in some of the jackdaws' nests about the chimneys of Ravenshurst, having been carried there after the manner of the various thimbles, rings, etc, which had been so disposed of in the story books with which she was acquainted. Florence was behaving wonderfully well, and little Lily was very fond of her; and she perhaps owed some popularity with the other servants to the fact that she was the sister of the Henry Whittaker whose name was in every one's mouth. Harry was very anxious to get home again. He took a room at Ashcroft, and visited his family sometimes; but he was often at a loss what to do with himself. The Warrens were very kind to him, and all the heads of departments at the great house took up the cue and showed him civility; Alwyn always treated him with the same friendly consideration, and was often glad of a chat with him on matters familiar to them both.

Alwyn had, however, much else to take up his time and thoughts. The neighbourhood accepted him and paid him attentions; which, as it soon became apparent, his father was anxious that he should accept. The Carletons especially came forward in a marked manner, and all this gradually changed and undermined Mr Cunningham's feelings about him. He saw that it was impossible to treat such a son as in disgrace, and perhaps his continued stiffness was more shyness than displeasure. James Cunningham behaved admirably, and invited Alwyn to visit him in London, and he went, though very unwillingly, for all this while poor Edgar was growing more and more dependent on him, and though he eagerly urged the acceptance of his cousin's invitation, he could not conceal his delight when Alwyn came back again. Alwyn was touched beyond measure at the affection that Edgar showed him, and repaid it with the tenderest devotion.

Poor little Wyn was always hoping that his master would be well enough to come into the wood; but the drives in the pony chaise had been very short of late, and often Edgar was only fit to lie quite still on the terrace, looking at the sky and the trees, still enjoying the sense of "out of doors," which was like life to him.

One splendid afternoon, early in September, when the sky was one glorious sheet of blue, and the red creepers and purple clematis were covering the side of the old house with colour, Wyn came up the garden with a carefully constructed basket of lichens and wild flowers in his hand. He had brought it up to show it to Mr Edgar; and, by good luck, there lay Mr Edgar, alone on his couch, for once without Mr Alwyn by his side, to take up his attention.

"Ha, Wyn!" he said; "what have you there? What splendid affair is that?"

"Please, sir, Lady Carleton has offered a prize for the best wild-flower collection at the flower show to-morrow, and this is mine. There are grasses and lichens too, sir."

"Yes. Capital! How well you have arranged it! All the three sorts of heath too!"

"Yes, sir. Please, sir, last year we went right through the wood to see the heather in bloom."

"Ah, yes; but, you see, just lately the pony chair seems to shake me, so I have to lie still."

"When you're better, sir, there's a new bit of clearing that's very pretty. There'll be plenty of anemones there in the spring."

"Yes, in the spring! We've had some very good times out with Dobbles, Wyn, haven't we? You must bring him up for me to look at some day, if I can't go out. Now tell me about all the creatures."

Wyn began a long list of the various birds and beasts under his charge, as had often been his custom; but there was something in the intent way in which his young master looked at him that made it difficult for Wyn to go on. Edgar lay so still, and made so little comment.

"Thank you," he said, when Wyn paused, which was not at all his usual way of receiving the reports, as he used to call them. "Alwyn, is that you at last?" he said, as a step sounded.

"Yes; did you wonder where I was?" said Alwyn, standing over him. His colour was high and his look quite radiant. He held some letters in his hand. Edgar's attention was caught at once.

"Your basket is first-rate, Wyn," he said; "I wish I could have helped you to get the flowers. Are you going to take it in now?"

"Yes, sir, and to take some flowers to little Miss Lily, who wants to send up a bunch, 'not for competition,' she says, sir, because she can't get them all herself."

"Well, you must come and tell me about the show.—What is it, Alwyn?" he added eagerly, as Wyn went his way.

"It is the best of good new's. Mr Dallas writes the kindest letter! My letter from here and one from Sir Philip Carleton

have fully satisfied him that all is clear as to the past. For the future, he says, he can trust me *there*; and *here* he cares nothing. When I go back I shall find a welcome home, and I may write to *her*."

"That's right," said Edgar.

He looked up bravely, but Alwyn felt the congratulating hand tighten close upon his own. Edgar's nerves were too weak now for him to be allowed to dwell on any agitating topic, and Alwyn just added a word or two of detail, and then said: "Now I shall read to you; you'll hear enough about it all in time, no doubt."

"No," said Edgar, "go and write your letter. I see father coming; he will tell me the news. Just lift me up a little bit and give me some drink. Yes, so—I am quite comfortable."

Alwyn was naturally very eager to write his letter, and went into the house, grateful to Edgar for understanding his hurry.

But he did not know that Edgar had wound up all the remains of his resolute spirit to an effort he was determined to make. Poor fellow! 'Don't care' was no easy saying to him now. His heart beat fast, and he could scarcely conquer the dread of making matters worse by speaking. "Father," he began, after Mr Cunningham had said a few ordinary words about the weather, "I can't say very much now; you'll forgive me for being short and sudden. You know, father—I shall *never* be your heir—never. You will not let any one think that you wait for the chance of finding those jewels before you set Alwyn in his right place. What can a man do but repent? I know it must come right finally; but, father, will you give me the happiness of seeing it?"

"The jewels are neither here nor there," said Mr Cunningham.

"But, if they are found, it will look as if Alwyn needed that to reinstate him. Don't you see how scrupulous he is—that he will hardly pick a flower or ask a question? He puts off all his own happiness for me; he stays because I need him so much. But that won't be for so very long. Oh, father, make it right for him to stay here; make it right for yourself. I know that you know how it *must* be, as things have turned out. But say so, father, say so. Things get clear when one is forced to think. I know now that you really missed him; he feels how much cause for anger you had. Father, I care so very much that you should really take him back and forgive him!"

"You distress yourself needlessly," said Mr Cunningham, stiffly still, but not unkindly. "I was justified, I think, in taking time to consider. I greatly regret Alwyn's American connections. But you are quite right in feeling that I should not now be justified in diverting the property from the direct line. That will I spoke of has been destroyed for some weeks."

"I did not mean to distrust you, father," said Edgar. "I knew that you would see it so, but you will let people know that it is so."

"Did your brother know that you meant to speak to me?"

"No, oh no! We have never touched on the subject."

"Don't distress yourself," said Mr Cunningham; "I will take opportunities. Here is Alwyn coming."

Perhaps Alwyn thought the echo of the voices through the window a little too eager, for he came out with an anxious look at Edgar, making an excuse of pushing the couch more into the shade.

"Alwyn," said Mr Cunningham, "my agent has been making a proposal to pull down the cottages and farm-buildings on Ashurst Farm, and throw it into one concern with Croppings. What do you think?"

"I—really, sir—I cannot judge," said Alwyn, turning round and considerably startled at this appeal.

"I shouldn't wish to do it if you disliked the notion. Perhaps, if Edgar does not want you, you would walk down with me and look at the place."

"Go—go," whispered Edgar. "Go with him at once."

Alwyn and his father were a long while away. Edgar had been taken indoors while they were out, and, weak as he was, had grown weary of waiting before Alwyn came in, much too late to send his half-written letter by that day's post.

"Edgar," he said in a low voice, "it is all right. My father shall not, if I can help, repent it."

"Tell me," said Edgar eagerly.

"We didn't get on much with settling about the farms," said Alwyn, half laughing. "As we walked down he said that he begged me to spare him conversation on the subject. I was to understand that my place was ready for me. And then, when Brooks came up about the farms, he referred him to me in a sort of matter-of-course way that I could have laughed at. A fine notion Brooks must have formed of my knowledge of the subject! We met Sir Philip Carleton, and when he said that the search in the wood seemed hopeless, my father answered that, for Lady Carleton's sake, he was sorry. It did not, of course, particularly concern himself. Then he walked round by the stables and made me say which of his young horses should be sold. I could only say I would come to-morrow and look more particularly. I couldn't have told a racer from a cab-horse then. But, Edgar, the best of it was that I—I knew that he liked it, that he felt it good to have me to ask and to care. And at last he said something about 'my friends in America.' I don't think he liked the notion much, but he ended by saying that he would write to Mr Dallas, and that he should be glad to make the young lady's acquaintance at no distant date."

"Yes," said Edgar. "Alwyn, you ought to go and fetch her—you will one day—and bring her to see Ashcroft. But—"

"Some day, perhaps," said Alwyn. "Just now I'm going to take care of you, and do what I can to please my father. He was very good."

"I couldn't let you go," said Edgar. "It used to come across me what it would be like to die alone. I was afraid of getting worse always, though I wouldn't own it to myself. Afraid of having to lie here shut up from the air and the light, and just the things that made life bearable—with never any change. But now that I have you—"

"I have had much that I don't deserve," said Alwyn very low; "but of all these mercies, the one I am most glad, most thankful for, is that I can help you, my dear, dear boy! Thank God for that!"

"I am glad," said Edgar; "oh, how glad! But I am afraid I don't know much about being thankful, Val; you must teach me."

Chapter Twenty One.

In a "Rift Imprisoned."

Wyn gave up his basket of wild flowers to Mr Elton, who had charge of the arrangements for the flower show, and then went on to Ravenshurst with those he had collected for Lily. He had been sent over there once or twice with parcels or messages for Florence, and the nurse, thinking him a well-behaved little boy, allowed him to stop and give his opinion, whether the white flowers gathered in the hedges were all, as Florence said, "hemlock," or would rank as different specimens. Wyn sorted out yarrow and wild parsley, cow parsley, and several others, and then said:

"Miss Lily hasn't got any honeysuckle. That's not rare, but it is very sweet, and suitable for a young lady's basket. You should put the climbing things round the edge for her, Florrie; different sorts of brambles, and dog-rose berries, and traveller's joy."

"There's some honeysuckle on the old oak tree," said Florrie, "but we can't get it, it's too high up."

"I'll fetch it down for you," said Wyn, scrambling up the lower branches of the tree. "Why," he said, putting his hand into a hole a few feet up, "how clean someone's scraped out this hole—taken all the old nests out of it!"

"There ain't nothing in it, Wyn, is there?" said Florrie.

"No; I once tried to make that hole ever so nice and soft with moss and stuff, and put acorns and nuts in it to get the squirrels there. I even went and got a bit of putty and stopped up the hole in the bottom and put decayed wood over it; but, bless you, they never came."

"*What* did you do, Wyn?" said Florence, coming close.

"Stopped a great hole. It's stopped still; I can put my hand down, and you feel nothing but wood."

"Could you get the hole open, Wyn? Was it a hole that things could be hidden in?"

"I suppose so. Whatever is the matter, Florrie? You look downright scared!"

The hole was wide and shallow. Wyn took the knife with which he had meant to cut the honeysuckle, scraped and cut, and, the soft decayed wood giving way, the piece of putty yielded to his pull and came out.



THE FINDING OF THE DIAMONDS.

P. 211

"There's a hole, but I can't feel the bottom of it," he said.

"Put in my sunshade; feel with the hook."

"My stars, Florrie, there'll be nothing alive in *there!*" said Wyn; but, boy like, to fish in a hole with a hook was delightful to him. "There's—there's something down at the bottom. I can just reach. It's hard—it's loose. Hi! I've got it; it's coming up. Oh, my eyes! Oh, my stars! It's—it's *diamonds!*"

"It's *them!*" cried Florence, clasping her hands as a long band of flashing stones came up into the sunlight on the hook of her parasol, and Wyn tumbled right out of the tree in his amazement, dropping his treasure-trove most appropriately at the feet of Lady Carleton, who, unseen by Wyn and Florence, had come up, and was watching them under the tree.

"Found!" she exclaimed; "found at last!"

"Is it the lost jewels?" said Wyn, bewildered. "Why, who ever would have thought of looking in a tree for *them?*"

"As if they hadn't been looking in all the holes in the wood," said Florence, "and you could have told them of another. Didn't you know?"

"I hated coming here without Mr Edgar," said Wyn.

"Now, not another thing must be done till Sir Philip knows, and Mr Cunningham, and Harry Whittaker too. Stay there, Wyn Warren; don't touch the tree. Come, Florence, and tell Sir Philip we have got them," said Lady Carleton.

Sir Philip declared that the rest of the jewels must be taken out in the presence of those most nearly concerned, and hurried messengers were sent to summon them; while Sir Philip, the Ravenshurst keeper, and Wyn patrolled round the tree, as if they thought that the jays and the wood-pigeons would carry off the precious discovery.

The short September evening had closed in, and the wood was all dusky and dewy, when at last Mr Cunningham and Alwyn, Harry Whittaker, Sir Philip and Lady Carleton, Wyn and Florence by right of discovery, the two head-keepers, and the village constable, all gathered, by the light of the rising moon and of some half-dozen lanterns, round the tree.

"Now, Warren," said Mr Cunningham, "cut away till you lay the bottom of the hole open." Wyn held the light, the keeper gave two or three cuts with a small axe, and a great piece of the rotten bark gave way under the stroke.

"You can look in now, sir," he said. "Give us the lantern, Wyn."

Sir Philip and Mr Cunningham peered into the hole, which seemed to be full of decayed wood, soft and crumbling.

"Will Lady Carleton see if she can find anything?" said Alwyn.

Lady Carleton came forward and put her hand into the hole.

"It's like a bran pie!" she said, with a nervous little laugh. "But yes—here is a prize!" Out came something, discoloured and tarnished, but a gold bracelet; then something else, which, as the dust was shaken off and the light fell on it, flashed and dazzled—a diamond star, rings, brooches, everything. The lost jewels were found at last!

"Begging your pardon, gentlemen," said Harry Whittaker, "I can't understand now how they came to be hidden so completely."

"It is clear enough at last," said Sir Philip.

"Lady Carleton, as she wishes every one fully to know, hid the box in which she had put the jewels among the ferns on the rockery. Lennox, who had left the place the week before, came back on the sly to see his sweetheart, and, according to his statement to you, stole the jewels, threw the box into the pond, and put the jewels for security into that great hole, just within a man's reach. You explained why he never came back for them, and if he had I don't see how he would have got them out, for of course they slipped through the smaller hole in the bottom of the visible hollow, of which he was not aware. Wyn Warren stopped that hole up to make a nesting-place for the squirrels, little thinking what he was burying away. He did his work so cleverly that the other day, when his father inspected this great shallow hole, he never thought of the cave beneath.

"And now this great discovery has been made by so strange a set of accidents that they must be called Providential: the losing of the letter, my little girl picking it up and this young woman finding it, which, I suppose, led to her knowing of the search for the jewels; Wyn's good-nature in getting Lily the honeysuckle; your offer of the wild-flower prize—all these trifles have worked in to clear up a most unhappy perplexity. And, Mr Henry Whittaker, I beg to congratulate you."

"And I," said Mr Cunningham, holding out his hand to Harry, "to apologise for having misjudged you."

Harry touched his hat first and then took the extended hand.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "It's very handsome of you to say so; but, under the circumstances, I should certainly have suspected myself."

"You will all come in to Ravenshurst and get some supper, and look at the jewels in a better light?" said Sir Philip.

"Thank you," said Alwyn, "but my brother will want me, and Whittaker and I would like to walk back together, if you don't mind driving home alone, father."

"As you will," said Mr Cunningham; then, in a lower tone, "I am glad we had it out to-day, Alwyn. That was poor Edgar's doing; he will be glad of this."

So the group, so strangely gathered together, dispersed. Harry and Alwyn walked away through the wood together. Theirs had been a strange comradeship, first for evil and then for good, in bad fortune and good fortune. It was hardly likely that they could be as close companions in the future as they had been in the past, but there would always be a tie between them that nothing could loosen.

And when Lady Carleton, taking Florence by the hand, led her into her own room, and kneeling down with her gave thanks that the undoing of her childish folly had come through the sister of the man who had been most injured by it, and that all doubt and mystery were over, Florence never thought of being elated at her discovery; she felt grateful and quiet, and went to bed thinking chiefly of the hearty kiss with which Harry had parted from her, and his words: "I'm heartily grateful to you, Florence. You've been the means of doing me a real good turn." Even while, as she thought how she would try and deserve my lady's kind words, and be worth the friendly treatment she had had from her, the girlish thought pressed in between:

"Oh, my! what *would* Carrie and Ada think if they'd have known I'd had the finding of a real diamond necklace!"

The flower show next day in a tent in the park was an occasion never to be forgotten, for there, in the centre of the tent, above Mr Elton's best orchids, and the geraniums from Sir Philip's garden, under a glass case, and with Mr Warren on guard beside them, lay the lost jewels of Ravenshurst, still tarnished and dusty, with the bits of touchwood clinging to them still, and testifying to the prison from which their brightness had been released, that all the world might know that they were found at last.

And there all the country round came to look at them; Mr Cunningham, with his eldest son, looking more bright and genial than he had ever been seen before, telling the story to Mr and Mrs Murray. And there were Harry Whittaker and his father, to whom he had sent an urgent telegram, and Florence walking round with them, an object of astonishment to her Aunt Stroud and to Mattie, who had come also to see the wonderful jewels. And there were Geraldine and her governess—Geraldine calling Florence eagerly to look at the wild-flower baskets sent by "our class." And at last in the afternoon, to the intense joy of Wyn Warren, came Mr Edgar himself. How carefully Wyn led the pony across the smooth turf and round the tent, where every one made way, and Edgar lay back quite still, not nodding and half raising himself and looking about, as had been his wont, but resting on his pillows, with only his bright eyes watching everything! He stopped in the middle of the tent, and Alwyn lifted down the jewels and showed them to him, one by one; and Harry, who had never yet seen him, came up to shake hands with him, and Edgar smiled at him and said in his old lively way:

"Found at last, you see!" and then, "My brother talks to me often about you."

Harry could hardly speak, the white face and bright eyes quite overcame him.

"I want to see the wild flowers," said Edgar, and the various collections were shown to him, with Wyn's with the words "First Prize" on it.

"I'm so fond of wild flowers, you know," he said. "I want all the children who collected them to have a shilling from me, besides their prizes. Wyn shall give them away."

So the dozen or so of children who had competed were called up and named, and Alwyn gave Wyn the shillings to distribute as they bowed and curtsied and smiled at Mr Edgar.

Then Alwyn said that that was enough and he must come home, and Wyn led the pony back across the turf, while Alwyn walked beside it, looking sad and anxious, bright as the day should have been for him.

Before he was lifted out of the chair, Edgar called Wyn up to him and took his little red fist in his long white fingers.

"I've liked my drive very much," he said. "Take care of old Dobbles."

Wyn could not speak a word, and when Edgar had been carried away, and he had led the pony safely out of sight, he suddenly flung his arms round Dobbles' neck and burst into a passion of tears; for he knew, as well as if any one had told him, that all their long pleasant days were over, and that he would never take Mr Edgar out again. He could not go back to the tent, to the tea that was to come, and the merry-making. He sat on the straw in Dobbles' stable and cried as if his heart would break.

Here he was discovered by Alwyn, who had come to fulfil his father's wish, by looking at the horses. Wyn jumped up in a hurry and feigned to be absorbed in the contents of Dobbles' manger. Alwyn, although he saw pretty well what was amiss, did not want to face the boy's grief just then, so he only patted Dobbles, and said that Mr Edgar was resting comfortably and did not seem overtired, and that Wyn had better go and play cricket and come up to-morrow to tell him how many runs he had made.

The half-realised fears of youth are easily soothed by cheerful words from an elder. Wyn, partly perhaps from Edgar's influence and theoretical instructions, was an excellent cricketer for his age and station, and now went off quite cheerfully to share in the game; and as the boys, and indeed all the village, were much fuller of the discovery of the jewels than of Mr Edgar or of anything else, the flower show and fête concluded joyously.

Florence remained at the Lodge that night to see her relations, and as she walked back with Harry from the station after seeing them off by the last train for Rapley, he had a long talk with her, and told her, being an outspoken person, a good deal about his own history, and of his feelings when he had contemplated his returning.

"I'd never have got over it, Florrie," he said, "if father hadn't been there to make it up."

He did not lecture Florrie nor allude to any of her misdemeanours, but somehow the tone he took influenced her and made her feel that the results of sauciness and defiance were not matters to be laughed at.

Chapter Twenty Two.

Wild Flowers.

Wyn saw Mr Edgar many times after the day of the flower show, though he never took him out again with Dobbles. The weather continued fine and bright, and Edgar, in every interval of pain and faintness, insisted on getting on to the terrace or near the window, saying that the feeling of the air and the sight of the sky and the trees kept the life in him.

Then Wyn would bring him a flower or two or tell him some anecdote about his pets, and it was very seldom that Edgar did not smile and brighten at these reminders of his old solaces.

It seemed as if with the jewels some spirit of kindness and affection had also been released from long imprisonment. The Cunninghams drew nearer to each other, and it was not so much that Alwyn's presence made the house more cheerful or might fill up the gap that Edgar would leave, as that the melting of the hardness of displeasure made them all more able to feel a common grief. Mr Cunningham was gentler to Edgar, and spoke of him tenderly; Geraldine softened down and began to have thoughts of making herself her father's companion as time went on. They remembered, and seemed to feel for the first time, how faithful the love of old Granny Warren had been for them all and to know the value of such lifelong love. The master himself, and Geraldine, to say nothing of Alwyn, went to give her accounts of Edgar, and once she was taken down to see him, and to look at her two dear boys together again.

All the village had a feeling of sympathy with the trouble at the great house which was much warmer than the old respect. Mr Murray found that his squire could give him more than courtesy and the necessary subscriptions. He visited Edgar frequently, and when Geraldine Cunningham, Florence Whittaker, and Alwyn Warren were put under instruction for an approaching confirmation, it was for all of them something more than a piece of ordinary propriety, an occasion for dress and companionship, or a mere act of obedience, as it might have been once. But on poor Edgar himself the shadow of the valley of death fell heavily. He had indemnified himself for the long years of physical dependence, so peculiarly trying to one of his temper, by the unconquerable self-reliance of his spirit. He had doffed aside his suffering and given it the go-by with unflinching courage. And now, with his bodily strength, the strong nerves

failed too; every trifle startled and fretted him. All his gay indifference was gone.

He could not meet the thought of death now as he might perhaps have done once, with unrealising boldness. He was brave still, and in moments of suffering would often whisper the old formula "I don't care—it will soon be better;" but the time came when he answered Alwyn's words of comfort with an altogether new look in his eyes, and with the faltering confession, "I am afraid."

"Of what, my boy?" said Alwyn, pressing the clinging fingers tenderly.

"Of Death," whispered Edgar; "when I must let you go."

He listened dutifully to Mr Murray, and without any mental dissent, but his words did not seem to make much impression. In fact, it was difficult to know what to say to him; for the difficulty was hardly in a region where words could reach.

"If I am afraid I'll face it," he said once.

But at last the intense conviction that had been sent into Alwyn's soul, and which had power to change his whole self—how, it was hard to say—by words or looks or tender hand-clasp, slid also into Edgar's heart. Alwyn never thought himself that it was anything that he said or did that brought peace to Edgar at last.

But there came a morning bright and blue, when the ash trees were touched with gold, and the smooth turf was thick with dew, and the clear autumn air blew through the open window—when Edgar lay in his brother's arms with the life ebbing fast away from him.

Then he opened his eyes once more and looked up into Alwyn's face:

"I don't care, Val," he said, "for He careth for me."

Those were his last conscious words, and with the daylight that he loved on his face, and, by great mercy, the day spring in his heart, Edgar Cunningham died.

Late on that same afternoon Alwyn was sitting alone on the terrace. He was very tired with the long strain of watching, and so sad at heart that he could scarcely turn with comfort to the thought of the love and the life that awaited him in future; he could only feel the want of the hand that had clung to his so constantly, could only think of the pitifulness of Edgar's story.

He looked up, and there stood Wyn Warren with his eyes red with crying, and with a great wreath of wild flowers in his hand.

"Please, sir, he liked these best. And there's a bit of everything here."

Alwyn looked at the wreath, which was constructed with great skill and of an infinite variety of leaves, berries, and blossoms. Every summer flower lingering in shady corners of the wood had been brought together. There were bits of every different kind of tree—autumn berries, curious seed vessels, grasses and rushes, heather and ferns, moss and lichen—all the woodland world was represented. It could not be a gay wreath with its infinite mixture of tints and forms, but there was the very spirit of the wood in its sober colouring and fresh woody smell.

"It is very beautiful," said Alwyn. "Yes, he would have liked it very much."

"He liked the wild things," said Wyn, "and the creatures; it's the birds and beasts that ought to follow him."

"Come," said Alwyn, "you helped him to all his pleasure in them; come and give him the wreath yourself."

He took Wyn's hand and led him, through the sitting-room window, into the room where his young master lay, calm and still, with the bright eyes closed for ever. But the window was uncurtained, and the sun and the sky looked through.

Wyn trembled as he looked. The little carefully-reared boy had never seen death before, and the awe of the sight choked back his tears. Alwyn helped him to lay the wreath on Edgar's breast, above the white cross already placed there, and then took him out again on to the terrace. Wyn touched his cap and went away; but Alwyn's silent grief was more comfort to him than any words of consolation would have been, and perhaps Alwyn too was soothed by the sense of fellow-feeling. He was glad to think that the great family vault under the floor of the church, where so many Cunninghams had been laid, could not be opened now, and that Edgar would lie under the turf in the churchyard, with the sky over his head, and the great trees of the wood near at hand.

All the servants and most of the villagers were at that funeral. Wyn Warren was set to walk by Robertson's side, next after the friends and the family, in which position he felt, in all his trouble, a sort of childish pride. The day was bright, and there was a fresh wind blowing such as Edgar was wont to love, and over the grave, instead of the ordinary hymn, the choir sang some verses about the Heavenly Jerusalem, which seemed to Wyn to picture just the sort of "happy home" where he could fancy that his dear Mr Edgar would dwell.

Thy gardens and thy gallant walks
Continually are green;
There grow such sweet and pleasant flowers
As nowhere else are seen.

Quite through the streets, with silver sound,

The flood of Life doth flow;
Upon whose banks on every side
The Wood of Life doth grow.

There trees for evermore bear fruit,
And evermore do spring;
There evermore the angels sit,
And evermore do sing.

"Ah," thought Wyn, "Mr Edgar would like that sort of Paradise."

Later in the day Alwyn asked Harry Whittaker to meet him in the park and walk with him through the wood. He had several matters, he told him, to talk about.

But when they met he put his arm through his old comrade's, and walked on for a long time in silence. At last Harry said:

"Things have been different from what we looked for, sir, haven't they? But there's comfort waiting at home for us. At least, it seems like home over there now to me."

"Ah, yes," said Alwyn. "I have gained more than I ever thought for. But I don't seem able to think of anything now but my poor boy and the lonely years that I might have made brighter for him if I had not held out so long."

"You came when he most wanted you," said Harry.

"Yes, thank God for that! But he *had* been lonely, though he was such a plucky fellow that he hardly knew it. And I miss—"

Alwyn's voice faltered, and he brushed his hand across his eyes.

"That was not what I wanted to talk of," he said, rousing himself. "What are your plans, Harry? I must not hurry away from my father; but I shall soon be going back now—for a time, at least."

"I am ready to go back at once," said Harry. "I've heard from my wife, and she's willing to have my sister Florence out to live with us."

"Your sister who found the jewels?"

"Yes. Lady Carleton's very good to her; but she told me—for I went to speak to her ladyship about it—that the girl don't exactly fit in for service. There's no one to look after her at home, specially if, as seems likely, my eldest sister settles in life. And I declare, sir, the way the young girls at Rapley run about together is worse for her than any rough company she might see out our way. She gets into mischief for want of something bigger to do. And mischief for girls—well, it is the mischief indeed!"

"So you mean to take her out?"

"No, not with me. They want to have her home a bit first; and she'd be better to wait for this Confirmation. She's set her heart on being confirmed with Miss Geraldine."

"Oh, yes, I heard my sister speak of it. But how shall you get her out to you?"

"Markham's mother and sister are coming out in the spring, and would bring her. You see, sir, Alberta must have some one—we can't get girls out our way. There'll be plenty for Florrie to do, and I make no doubt she'll be happy, and what my aunt calls work off her bouncing."

Alwyn laughed. "It seems a very good place," he said; "and certainly she did us a good turn. What—what are the Warrens thinking about for little Wyn? I wish we could give him an opening."

"I don't think his parents would part with him," said Harry. "He's a nice little chap, but it is a bit difficult to say what next for him. He's too small and not the sort for a gamekeeper, and, as his father says, he'd never have the heart to kill the vermin. Then he thought of getting him taken into the garden under Mr Elton; but I'm afraid he'd fret and not be much good here."

"Edgar asked me to take care of him," said Alwyn. "He said that perhaps he had spoiled him for other work. But he was very fond of him."

"Ah, sir, he'll be none the worse for having thought of some one before himself. You know they had had a notion, as he was so handy and quiet, to let him be put under a butler for a time and then be trained up to wait on invalid gentlemen. But—"

"Well?" said Alwyn.

"Well, his sister Bessie said something to him, but he hid his face and said, 'They'd *all* die. Robertson says *five* have.'"

"Poor little chap," said Alwyn. "It's too soon to tease him about it. But I must talk to his father, and think what can be done."

The matter was not settled very easily. Mr Cunningham's ideas were bounded by giving Wyn a sovereign, and letting him run about the place in any capacity that might turn up.

Bessie, thinking this very undesirable, wanted him to come and board with her, and be apprenticed to the schoolmaster as pupil-teacher. Wyn said that he hated teaching, and couldn't bear to be shut up indoors. Alwyn hardly knew enough of English life to judge what would be best, but he could not bear the notion that Edgar's favourite should be left to run to waste, or to a life in which he would not be happy, and at last Sir Philip Carleton made a suggestion.

If the boy really had a turn for plants and flowers, and they wanted to get him into a superior line, why should not an appointment be got for him when a little older at Kew or some other great public garden? If he was clever and took to the work, there were all sorts of openings. And in the meantime, as his education by all accounts consisted chiefly of the names of mosses and lichens, and the habits of birds, field-mice, and other wild creatures of the woods, send him to school—to the great Church public school at Ardingly for boys of his standing—where he would meet other sons of gentlemen's servants, besides boys of a superior class. He could learn Latin and science, it would be a complete change for him, and the tutors there would soon find out what he was fit for.

Alwyn liked the idea very much. He thought that Wyn had capabilities, and there was an affectionate simplicity about the little fellow that was very engaging. So, as Mr and Mrs Warren gave their grateful consent, it was at once settled that he should go to Ardingly after the Christmas holidays, about the same time as Florence's passage was taken for New York.

Chapter Twenty Three.

The Colour of the Jewels.

Before the Confirmation day came the lost jewels were safely restored to Lady Carleton's keeping, and the diamonds that had been hidden for eight years in a hollow tree were likely to be handed down as heirlooms to her children with additional care and interest.

But over the bent heads of the three young people who had had so much interest in their loss and their recovery, there flashed a glory of mystic light and colour. For the great west window of Ashcroft Church was filled with painted glass, jewel-like in pattern and colour. In the centre was the form of Him who made the lame to walk, and, as the winter afternoon sun streamed through the window, the earthly colours seemed transmuted into heavenly jewels.

Underneath was an inscription:—

“To the glory of God, in memory of Edgar Cunningham, and in thanksgiving for undeserved mercies, this window is given by all concerned in the losing and the finding of the jewels hidden in Ashcroft Wood.”

Lilian Carleton, Alwyn Cunningham, Harry Whittaker, Florence, and Wyn had all in their very different proportions contributed to the offering.

When in after life the three children looked back on their Confirmation day, it was lighted up for them by that wonderful colouring, and sweet with the recollection, for Florence, of the first person she had eared to please; for Geraldine, of the first she had much eared to help; and for Wyn, with a far deeper, tenderer memory of one who had not perhaps had the best things to give him, but who had given him all he could, the love of the beautiful things of Nature, and the example of uncomplaining courage and endurance.

Before that day came Alwyn had gone back to Boston, intending to return in the spring and bring his wife to visit Ashcroft. There was a great deal in his future life that would be difficult of adjustment, and perhaps those parts of it which he would spend under his father's roof would not be the easiest to manage. But pardon and reinstatement were worth much, and he knew well that if his father had really disinherited him, apart from the obvious loss, the bitterness would have been unspeakable. And, as the sorrow of his brother's loss turned into a sweet and tender memory, he felt that those three months with him had been worth any pain. He might well say:

My days with others will the sweeter be
For those brief days I spent in loving thee.

To Mr Cunningham the reconciliation had cleared away a cloud of which he had never acknowledged the blackness. It was perhaps inevitable that the sense that poor Edgar had no more to suffer should transcend the grief for his loss; but Geraldine had a much kinder father in the future, and her welfare became his chief consideration, as she tried to brighten his home. She rode and walked with him; the occasional visits of Alwyn and his lively, earnest-tempered wife would oblige society and friendly intercourse, and Miss Cunningham of Ashcroft bade fair as time went on to find her life full of interest and occupation.

Sir Philip and Lady Carleton settled permanently at Ravenshurst, and one great anxiety was lifted off Wyn Warren's shoulders when a happy home was found there for poor Dobbles, who drew the nursery donkey-cart or carried little Lily on his back through the woodland walks once so familiar to his steady feet.

For Wyn will never forget Mr Edgar, though he prospered at school, and found many hopes and interests open to him. He treasured the botany books that had been given to him as a remembrance; and if, as his new masters think, a career as a naturalist should be open to him in the future, he will never make a new discovery in wider fields, never see with his own eyes the wonders he has read of, without feeling an echo of Mr Edgar's pleasure when some specimen which he was sure could be found in the wood actually came to light there.

When Florence went home to Rapley before she sailed for America, her father said that she had grown into a woman. The naughty-girl period was over. She looked at everything from a different standpoint; and Miss Mordaunt never received such a surprise in her life as when Florence Whittaker called to say good-bye, and to thank her, with manners learnt at Ravenshurst, for all past kindness. Now that she knew how to be polite her broad and genial smile and warm-hearted, outspoken voice were pleasant, and in after days it is not certain that Miss Mordaunt did not look back on Maud Florence Nellie as having had her good points after all. She had a satisfactory parting also with Mrs Lee. She was not so entirely a changed character as to receive her Aunt Stroud's good advice with perfect submission, and the form in which she couched her excellent resolutions for the future was:

"Well, I shall be as meek as any lamb to Alberta, and 'fly round,' as Harry calls it, whenever she tells me, just because Aunt Stroud declares I shall make them repent of their kindness! And if I were you, Mattie, I'd say yes to Mr Clements to-morrow, for the very reason that Aunt Stroud says you'll never have the sense to see which side your bread's buttered."

Whether Mattie availed herself of this ingenious excuse, whether on a closer acquaintance Mr Clements developed traits in common with her favourite heroes, or whether, as was most probable, fiction finally faded before fact, Mattie did bring herself to a favourable answer before Florence sailed.

"And who's going to look after Sybil and Ethel?" said Florence virtuously. "My lady and Aunt Charlotte would say it was a great disadvantage to them to be left to themselves."

"Well, Florrie," said the aggravated Sybil, "I don't see as *you* were much the better for having Mattie to look after you."

"Florrie is just like Aunt Stroud," said Ethel. "She'll be just as *good advicey* when she's old enough."

For energy will have a vent, and Florence had expended some of her new-found wisdom in endeavouring to regulate her younger sisters' conduct.

"Don't quarrel, girls," said Mattie, "when Florrie's going away so soon. I'm not going away from you yet—perhaps not till Sybil's near as old as I was when Aunt Stroud married."

Nobody expressed a desire that Florence should give up her new prospects to undertake the responsibility.

"No, Martha Jane," said Mrs Stroud, "that would never do. I grant that Florrie's a much better girl than I ever thought to see her. But nothing ever will eradicate the snap and the bounce of her altogether. It's very well for Henry that he has his hands full, and I hope he'll fill up hers. She'll do a turn of work in her day. But young people should be managed quiet and peaceable, and as for the girls—George may marry or Mary Whittaker, your cousin, might want a home. Or, at any rate, there'll be my eye and your eye on them, to keep them straight."

But on the evening before she was to start—she was to go to Ashcroft for a day, and meet her escort in London afterwards—Florrie, as she stood in her little room for the last time, felt the awe of a great change coming over her. If he came back after long years as Harry had done, perhaps the younger ones wouldn't know her; perhaps she would feel strange and uncomfortable as he did.

Florrie went downstairs and back into the sitting-room, acting at once, as was her way, on the thought that came into her mind. "Father," she said, "I'm very sorry I was such a naughty girl. Harry and Mr Alwyn came home to say they were sorry—but—but—I'd rather say it before I go. And please, father, don't forget what I'm like. I'll have my photo took every year and send you."

"My dear, I didn't forget Harry," said her father; "you mistake—and certainly I'm not going to forget you."

"Oh, Florrie dear," said Mattie, taking her in her arms and crying, "I thought you didn't care a bit about leaving us all."

"Oh yes, I do," said Florrie, sobbing; "I never said I didn't care. But when things have got to be done they've got to be gone through with whether people care or not!"

And with this sentiment, which no one could say was not a turning of her bold spirit to the use for which it was given to her, Maud Florence Nellie Whittaker went out to her new life.

[Chapter 1](#) | [Chapter 2](#) | [Chapter 3](#) | [Chapter 4](#) | [Chapter 5](#) | [Chapter 6](#) | [Chapter 7](#) | [Chapter 8](#) | [Chapter 9](#) | [Chapter 10](#) | [Chapter 11](#) | [Chapter 12](#) | [Chapter 13](#) | [Chapter 14](#) | [Chapter 15](#) | [Chapter 16](#) | [Chapter 17](#) | [Chapter 18](#) | [Chapter 19](#) | [Chapter 20](#) | [Chapter 21](#) | [Chapter 22](#) | [Chapter 23](#)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MAUD FLORENCE NELLIE; OR, DON'T CARE! ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an

eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.