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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JASPER ***

Mrs Molesworth

"Jasper"

Chapter One.

"Stockings."

Chrissie Fortescue sat looking at her toes. They were pretty little toes, pink and plump and even. But she was not looking at them in admiration. And indeed this morning they were scarcely as pretty as usual, for they were rapidly becoming blue and crimson, instead of merely pink, and though blue and crimson are charming colours in themselves, they are not seen to advantage on toes.

It was wintry weather, as you will already, I daresay, have guessed, and very cold indeed, and as the unpleasant consciousness of this made itself felt more and more plainly, Chrissie's face grew crosser and crosser.

"Nurse," she called out, and it was the third or fourth time that she had done so, "Nurse, *will* you come and put on my stockings? I am getting quite frozen."

There was no answer for a moment or two, then Nurse's face appeared at the door leading from, the little girls' room into the large day nursery, where the table was already neatly spread for breakfast and a bright fire blazing.

"Miss Chrissie," said Nurse, remaining in the doorway, "it is no use—no use whatever your going on calling to me like that. I have told you ever so many times this morning that I won't and can't put on your stockings for you. I promised your Mamma before she went away yesterday that I would not, and I cannot break my promise."

"I can't either," was Chrissie's reply, "and I've promised myself that I *won't* put them on this morning, so there you see."

Nurse turned away with a sort of groan.

"Oh dear," she said, "it is really too bad of you. A young lady of ten behaving like a baby. I'll come at once when you're ready for me to do your hair, but not before. How can you behave so, and trouble in the house, too? Breakfast will be up directly, and Master Jasper all ready, and—" poor Nurse stopped short as she caught sight of another figure in the room. "Miss Leila," she exclaimed, "what are you thinking of? Reading again before you've finished dressing! I heard your Mamma—"

"Oh bother, Nurse," interrupted Leila, "I didn't promise anything, so leave me alone, please. If I choose to read while I'm dressing, it's my own business."

Apparently poor Nurse was at the end of her patience, for she disappeared into the other room, repeating reproachfully, "and trouble in the house, too."

"Rubbish," said Chrissie contemptuously.

"There's no trouble in *this* house. I didn't care much for old Uncle Percy. Did you, Leila? He's been ill such a long time, and last summer at Fareham it was horrid having to be so quiet."

"I don't mind being quiet if people will leave me in peace," replied Leila.

"No, I daresay not, with your everlasting books," Chrissie retorted; "but for all that, you needn't think yourself any better than me. You like books and I like playing, and we both like to do what we like and not what we don't, and I suppose that's about all that can be said," and she began swinging her feet defiantly.

Leila, who was getting to think that after all it would be more comfortable to read beside the nursery fire, gave a little laugh, as she hurried on with her own dressing.

"Tastes differ," she remarked; "I shouldn't like to sit there in the cold with no shoes or stockings on. I'm going to coax Nurse to tie up my hair in there by the fire. It *is* cold this morning."

But Christabel sat on obstinately, though she was really beginning to feel wretchedly frozen, and as Leila hurried past her with another word of remonstrance, she only muttered something about "I can't break—" which her sister did not clearly catch.

Leila was a year and a half older than Chrissie, but in appearance, and in several other ways also, though different in character, they seemed much about the same age. They really loved each other, but, I am sorry to say, this did not prevent their quarrelling a great deal. There was much truth in what Christabel had said—neither had learnt to think of others before herself; neither was willing to do anything she did not wish to do; neither had learnt to be obedient, or, still less, unselfish. But a great deal, oh a great, great deal of all this sad state of things came from utter thoughtlessness, and this their mother was growing aware of, and beginning to blame herself for not having realised it sooner.

"I have only wanted to make them happy," she said to herself. "Children *should* be happy," and so they should, but are selfish people ever really happy?

The happiness that depends on outside things, on the circumstances of our lives, on amusement and indulgence and having every wish gratified—surely that is not the best and truest and most lasting?

And sometimes this lesson has to be taught by rather severe teachers.

Silly Chrissie! She was already punishing herself by her obstinacy. I really would be afraid to say how long she might have sat there, growing colder and colder, if something had not happened.

The something was a tap at the door—not from the nursery side, you understand, but at the other door, which opened on to the large landing outside.

At first Chrissie took no notice of the tap.

"It's that tiresome Fanny, I suppose," she said to herself. Fanny was the nursery-maid. "She's no business to come bothering till we've left the room."

But the tap was repeated, and a voice, which was certainly not Fanny's, a soft, coaxing little voice, made itself faintly heard.

"Chrissie, Chrissie, do let me come in."

"Come in, then," was the rather ungracious reply. "What do you want, child? I'm not dressed."

The door opened and a small figure entered.

It was Jasper, the youngest of the family.

He was barely seven years old, and not tall or big for his age. Fair and slight and rather delicate-looking, and though his face was sweet and even pretty when you examined it closely, he was not the sort of child that is noticed or admired, as were his handsome brother and sisters.

"What do you want?" Christabel repeated. "Don't you see I'm not half dressed?"

Jasper nodded.

"I know," he said calmly. "I've come to help you."

In spite of her ill-humour, Chrissie began to laugh. She was a child of very changeable moods.

"You must be so cold," continued Jasper.

"I should rather think I was," his sister agreed. "Frozen! But you see it can't be helped. I've made a vow that I *won't* put on my own stockings this morning, and I can't break a vow."

Jasper looked up at her with a twinkle in his bright blue eyes.

"Bad vows is better broken nor kept," he said.

Then Chrissie laughed again, and more heartily. It was a relief to her, for, to tell the truth, she was fast getting to a state in which if she had not laughed she would have burst into tears—a sad downfall to her pride and dignity.

"What awful grammar, Japs," she said. "You really should know better at seven years old."

But Jasper took her merriment quite pleasantly: indeed he was glad of it, and by this time he was down on his knees on the floor, softly stroking his sister's cold feet.

"What are you after now?" she said sharply.

"I'se going to put on your stockin's for you," he replied, "and then you needn't mind about vows, 'cept that you'd better not make any more, till it gets warmer, any way."

Christabel said nothing. In her heart she was very thankful for this unexpected release from the silly predicament she had got herself into, and deeper down still—for in that wayward little heart of hers there were better things than she allowed herself to be conscious of—she was really touched by her small brother's kindness. So she said nothing, but watched him with some amusement as he cleverly drew on the stockings—toes first, then heels, sighing a little as he got to the long legs, so that Chrissie at this stage condescended to give a pull or two herself. And at last the task was triumphantly accomplished, and she stood upright and slipped the now clothed toes into the shoes lying in readiness.



She said nothing, but watched him with some amusement as he cleverly drew on the stockings.—p. 2.

Frontispiece.

"You'd better be a boy at a boot-shop, Japs," she remarked. "You're so clever."

Jasper looked up with great gratification at this rather meagre acknowledgment of his services. And then, somehow, the sight of his flushed face and smiling eyes got hold of Chrissie—the naughty, foolish fit of obstinacy left her—she stooped and kissed him.

"You've been very kind," she whispered, and Jasper threw his arms round her and hugged her.

Thanks and kisses did not come in his way as often as they ought to have done.

"I'll be very quick now," Christabel added. "I'll be ready for Nurse to do my hair in five minutes. Run off, Japs, and tell her so. No—I'd rather you didn't," and she hesitated.

Jasper stood still and looked at her, his legs rather wide apart, his face solemn.

"I wasn't going to tell nobody," he replied.

"Well, run away then," Christabel repeated, and off he went.

She was a quick and clever child when she chose to give her mind to anything, little more than the five minutes had passed when she opened the door of communication and called out.

"I'm ready for my hair. Do you hear, Nurse?"

Poor Nurse required no second summons. She had really been growing uneasy about Christabel, and almost afraid that she herself would be obliged to give in, in spite of her promise to Mrs Fortescue. So the sound of Chrissie's voice came as a welcome surprise. She was a kind and good young woman, but not possessed of much tact, otherwise she would not have greeted the little girl as she did on entering the room.

"That's right, Miss Chrissie," she exclaimed with a smile; "I was sure you'd think better of it in a few minutes, and not force me to have to complain to your dear Mamma, when there's trouble in the house, too."

Instantly Christabel's gentler feelings took flight, like a covey of startled birds. She turned upon Nurse.

"That's not true," she said rudely. "You know you *weren't* sure of anything of the kind. You know me too well to think I'd go back from what I said, and, as it happens, I didn't. I've *not* put on my stockings myself this morning, but I won't tell you anything more. And I do wish you'd leave off talking rubbish about trouble in the house. There's no trouble. We didn't care for Dad's old uncle, who was as deaf as a post and whom we scarcely ever saw, and we can't be expected to."

Nurse was silent. She went on tying the ribbons round Chrissie's abundant locks, without seeming to pay attention to this long tirade.

"Can't you speak?" said the little girl, irritated by her manner.

"Yes, Miss Chrissie," was the reply, "I can, but I would rather not. I don't think what you say is at all pretty or nice."

Chrissie gave a little laugh.

"Thank you," she said. "Well, one thing's certain: it'll be ever so much jollier at Fareham the next time we go—you'll see."

This was too much for Nurse.

"Oh, Miss Chrissie," she exclaimed, "and your poor aunt! She's getting to be an old lady now, and lived all her life with Sir Percy such a devoted sister. You should care for *her*."

Christabel's face softened.

"Well, yes, I do love Aunt Margaret," she said, "but I never thought she'd mind so very much. I should think she'd be glad to be free. Why, she can come and stay with us in London now as much as she likes, in turns with us going to Fareham, though, of course, Fareham will be Daddy's very own now."

Again Nurse was silent, but this time Chrissie took no notice of it, as she was growing very hungry as well as cold, and very glad to escape into the next room, where breakfast was now quite ready.

Leila and Jasper were already there, and as Chrissie ran in, Roland, the eldest of the four children, made his appearance at the other door. He was a tall, handsome boy of nearly fourteen—shortly to go to a public school, but, for the present, working in preparation for this, under a private tutor. He was dark, like Leila, Chrissie's reddish-brown hair and eyes making the middle colouring between these two elder ones and fair, blue-eyed little Jasper.

It was not often, as a rule, that the nursery was honoured by Roland's presence at breakfast, but he preferred it to solitary state in the dining-room just now, when the death of their old uncle had called away his father and mother for some days. And, indeed, nobody could have wished for a pleasanter room than this cheerful nursery, with its large, old-fashioned bow-window facing the park, the pretty paper on the walls, white-painted furniture, bright fire, and neatness; though, as regards this last attraction, I fear first thing in the morning was the only hour at which one could be sure of finding it!

Poor Nurse and Fanny! I should be sorry to say how many times a day they were called upon to "tidy up."

"I've a letter from Mother," Roland announced, after Jasper, as the youngest, had said grace for the party. "They got there all right."

"Is that all she says?" asked Chrissie, for Leila was already buried in a book which she had propped against her breakfast-cup, only moving it from time to time as she drank her tea. "When are they coming back? She said she'd tell us as soon as she could."

"They'd only been there a few hours when she wrote. I don't know how you could expect her to say—you're so babyish, Chrissie," said Roland.

"Babyish," she repeated scornfully, "I know what Mummy said better than you do. I'll write and ask her to tell me, not you."

Roland by this time had got out the letter and was reading it again.

"As it happens," he said, good-naturedly enough, though his tone was decidedly "superior," "she does say something about it, and something else that I don't understand," and the boy's face clouded a little.

"She seems very bothered," he replied doubtfully, still fingering the sheet of paper. "I think both she and Dad were pretty worried before they left."

"Well," said Chrissie, "I suppose they had to be. I suppose they had to care for Uncle Percy. P'raps he was nicer before he got so deaf. I don't see that Mums need have gone, though."

"She's coming back as soon as she can," Roland went on. "On Monday, most likely. Dad will have to stay there, and she has to come back to do a lot of business things for him here, and then she says she'll explain that Dad and she are very worried, and she hopes we'll all be very good while they're away, and that we must help her to be very

brave. What can she mean?"

All except Leila looked rather grave and puzzled; all, that is to say, except Nurse, whose face expressed distress, but not surprise.

"She knows something," thought Chrissie. Then she turned impatiently to her elder sister.

"Leila," she exclaimed, "don't you hear? Leave off reading, you selfish thing."

"Miss Leila," Nurse joined in, "you know your Mamma has forbidden you to read at meals."

Leila looked up at last.

"What are you all chattering about?" she said, and she pushed her book to one side, in so doing almost upsetting the milk jug, had not Jasper, who was next her, just caught hold of it in time, and lifted away the little volume.

"I'll put it down for you," he said, clambering off his chair as he spoke, and Leila, who, to tell the truth, had got to the end of a chapter, made no objection.

"What are you all chattering about?" she repeated, though without giving any one; a chance of replying she turned to Nurse complaining that her tea was quite cold.

"How could it be anything else," said Chrissie. "You let it stand while you go on reading. I never did know anyone as selfish as you, Lell."

As regarded the cold tea there really was no possible defence, so Leila contented herself with saying—

"I only ask to be left in peace. I don't call that half as selfish as perpetually teasing and worrying everybody, as you do, Chrissie," and a war of words was on the point of beginning had not her curiosity suddenly changed her ideas. "What's the matter?" she went on, "I've asked you twice. What are you *all* so excited about?"

"It's poor little Mumsey," said Jasper softly.

"Shut up, Japs," said Roland. "You don't deserve to be told, Leila. It's a letter from Mother. She seems in very low spirits and—"

"She says we must help her to be brave," interrupted Christabel, "and we don't know what she means, and—"

"Chrissie," interrupted Roland in his turn, but certainly with more right to do so, "be so good as to hold your tongue. The letter is to *me*, not to you."

He glanced at it again. "Yes," he said, "it looks as if there was something the matter."

"Is that all?" said Leila. "I daresay it's nothing much. P'raps she said 'brave' by mistake for 'cheerful,' for I suppose Dads is rather cut up about old uncle, though really we can't be expected to mind much."

In this sentiment apparently both Roland and Christabel agreed. Only Jasper murmured half to himself—

"I don't like nobody to die. He used to pat my head, and he gave me five shillin's on my birthday"; but to this modest tribute to poor old Uncle Percy's memory there was no response.

"Oh, I daresay it's all rubbish," said Chrissie, having recourse to one of her favourite words. "Any way, it's no good bothering beforehand. If there's anything wrong we'll know it soon enough, when Mums comes back on Monday."

"Monday," repeated Leila in surprise. "Is she coming as soon as that?"

"She says she has things to see to for Dads here," said Roland, "and he's got to stay up there for a bit."

"Oh, that's of course," said Chrissie. "Fareham's all ours now, don't you see? Dads will have to give lots of orders and settle everything. I daresay Mummy is bothered about all she'll have to do now, with two big houses—though I'm sure she needn't mind; it's easy to get plenty of servants."

For the first time Nurse here ventured on a remark.

"Not so easy as you might think, my dear. Large possessions bring their burdens. Still there are worse troubles than riches, 'specially to those not used to small means." She sighed, and, in unconscious sympathy, little Jasper murmured again, "Poor Mumsey."

"You're always so gloomy, Nurse," said Chrissie pertly, and though it was far from true, Nurse said nothing in her own defence; she only glanced across the table, saying gently, "Master Roland, won't you be late?"

The boy jumped up hastily, exclaiming—

"Where's my book strap? I'm sure I brought it in here."

"It's fastened round your books, Roley. I did them," said a small voice.

"Thank you, Japs; you're not half a bad sort," the elder brother returned, and Jasper glowed with pleasure.

Chapter Two.

“Spoilt.”

Some half-hour or so after Roland had gone, Lewis, the footman, made his appearance at the nursery door, looking somewhat aggrieved.

“If you please, Miss Leila,” he began; then catching sight of Leila completely absorbed in her book and comfortably established by the fire, he hesitated and turned to Chrissie.

She was sitting on the floor, surrounded by scraps of silk, ribbon, coloured paper, and every article of furniture belonging to the beautiful large dolls’ house standing in a corner of the room.

“It’s Miss Earle, please, Miss Chrissie,” he began again. “She’s been here ever so long, and now she’s been ringing and ringing the schoolroom bell, till I didn’t know what was the matter.”

Chrissie went on calmly with her sortings.

“Well,” she said, “there’s nothing the matter. Tell Miss Earle we’ll come directly,” and with this piece of information Lewis had to content himself.

Chrissie glanced at Leila. Except for Jasper, quietly marshalling an army of tin soldiers at a side-table, the sisters were alone in the room, as Nurse and Fanny were busy in the little girls’ bedroom, the arranging and tidying of which was a much more serious affair than it should have been, and the door of which was shut.

“Leila,” said Chrissie.

No answer.

“*Leila*,” more emphatically, “*Leila!*”

“Well?” and Leila’s lovely dreamy dark eyes lifted themselves for a moment.

“Didn’t you hear? You might as well be stone deaf,” Chrissie went on, growing angry. “Miss Earle has sent up to say she’s been waiting hours.”

“Then she told a great story,” replied Leila lazily. “I’ll come in a moment, but I must just stop at a good place.”

“And I must match these colours for the new drawing-room furniture covers,” said Chrissie. “I’ll never get them so nice again, if Fanny muddles them all up in the scrap drawer.”

Just then her glance fell on Jasper, who had left off playing and was standing beside her.

“I’ll ’range them for you, if you like,” he was beginning, but Christabel shook her head.

“You couldn’t,” she said. “It’s something awfully partickler. But I’ll tell you what, Japs—you run down to Miss Earle and say you’ll have your reading *first* this morning. Tell her I’m having a spring cleaning and all sorts of fusses. You can say I didn’t know it was so late, and we’ll be down before you’ve half finished.”

Jasper moved towards the door, but less readily than usual.

“Hurry up, child, can’t you?” exclaimed Chrissie.

“Mumsey wanted us to be very good,” said the little fellow timidly.

“Well, we’re not being naughty. What does it matter to Miss Earle which lessons come first? She’s only a governess, and I am sure Mums pays her well.”

Her raised tone of voice had caught even Leila’s unhearing ears. She turned sharply.

“Chrissie, I’m shocked at you,” she said. “That’s not like a lady. Suppose we were grown-up and had to be governesses, you wouldn’t like to be spoken to like that.”

“I’m not speaking to her,” muttered Chrissie, rather sullenly, though she was already rather ashamed.

“But Jap might have said it to her,” persisted Leila.

“I wouldn’t,” exclaimed the child indignantly, “in course I wouldn’t.”

“Then go off at once and say what I told you to,” said Christabel, and Jasper obeyed her.

Leila, however, for once was roused. Certain words of her mother’s about remembering that she was the elder and should set a good example to heedless Chrissie, returned to her memory. She shut up her book with a sigh, and stooping, began to gather together some of the dolls’ belongings. But Chrissie pushed her away.

“Leave my things alone,” she said rudely.

“They’re not specially yours,” replied Leila. “The dolls’ house belongs to us both.”

"Much you do for it," said Chrissie contemptuously. "It'd be all choked with dust like 'in a dirty old house lived a dirty old man,' if it depended on you."

"It's in a nice mess just now, any way," remarked Leila. "Well, I'm going down to the schoolroom. You can do as you please."

The last words were like a spur to impetuous Christabel.

"You shan't go off and put all the blame on me to Miss Earle," she exclaimed, starting up. "I'm coming too. Nurse," she went on, "Nurse," so loudly, that the bedroom door opened and Nurse and Fanny hurried out in alarm.

Chrissie looked up coolly. She had an irritating way of getting cool herself as soon as she saw that she had irritated others.

"You needn't stare so," she said. "It's only about my toys and things. I want them left *exactly* as they are, till after lesson-time this afternoon—exactly as they are. Don't you hear what I say, Nurse?" waxing impatient again.

"It's impossible, Miss Chrissie," replied Nurse. "Master Jasper and I couldn't get to the table for our dinner; and even if we sat over at the other side, Fanny'd be sure to tread on some of those dainty little chairs and things and break them."

Chrissie, as a matter of fact, saw the force of this, but she would not seem to give in, so she contented herself with making a scape-goat of the nursery-maid.

"Fanny is an awkward, clumsy creature, I'll allow," she said, with an air of great magnanimity, "so you *may* move them, or make her do it. But if she breaks one single thing I'll complain to Mamma; I will indeed," with a very lordly air, as she got up from the floor and prepared to follow Leila downstairs.

Nurse had the self-control to say nothing till the young lady was out of hearing, but as she and Fanny began together to clear the confused heap out of danger's way, she could not resist saying to the girl, "To hear the child speak you'd think she never broke or spoilt a thing in her life! She's worse than Miss Leila, and she's bad enough, always half in a dream over her books. But Miss Chrissie's worse. The losings and breakings!"

"Yes," Fanny agreed, "and the messing with paint and gum and ink. Those new blouses. Nurse, are just covered with spots, and between them I don't think they've a brooch with a pin to it."

Nurse sighed, and the sigh was not a selfish one.

Downstairs, in the meantime, Miss Earle had, unwillingly enough, judged it wisest to make the best of things and to waste no more time, by beginning Jasper's lessons in accordance with the message from Christabel, which the little fellow delivered much more politely than he had received it.

But the governess was far from satisfied.

She was young, excellently qualified for her post, and really interested in the children, as they were far from wanting in intelligence and love of knowledge, and now and then the lessons went swimmingly; brightly enough even to satisfy her own enthusiasm. But at other and more frequent times there was, alas, a very different story to tell, a sadly disappointing report to make, and Miss Earle almost began to despair. She had not been with the Fortescues very long, and she was intensely anxious to give satisfaction to their kind mother, who had behaved to her with the greatest consideration and liberality, and it grieved her to feel that, unless she could gain more influence over the girls, she must resign her charge of them.

"They are completely 'out of hand,' as it were," she found herself one day obliged to say to Mrs Fortescue. "They don't seem to know what 'must' means; in fact, in their different ways, their only idea is to do what they like and not what they don't, and yet they are so clever and honest and they *can* be such darlings," and she looked up almost with tears in her eyes. "It is discipline they need," she added, "and—" hesitating a little, "unselfishness—thought for others."

She need not have hesitated. Mrs Fortescue knew it was all true.

"I suppose the simple explanation is that I—we—have spoilt them," she said sadly. "And now it is beginning to show. But Jasper, Miss Earle, the youngest—he *should* be the most spoilt."

Miss Earle shook her head.

"And he is not spoilt at all!" she exclaimed. "He is not a very quick child, perhaps, but he is painstaking and attentive. He will do very well. And as to obedience and thoughtfulness—why, he has never given me a moment's trouble."

This talk had taken place some time ago. Over and over again the young governess had tried to hit upon some way of really impressing her pupils more lastingly, of checking their increasing self-will and heedlessness. For we don't stand still in character; if we are not improving, it is greatly to be feared we are falling off. Now and then she felt happier, but never for more than a day or two, and this morning—this cold winter morning when she herself had got up long before it was light, to do some extra bookwork, and attend to her invalid sister's breakfast—this morning was again to bring disappointment.

How cosy and comfortable the schoolroom looked as she came in, and held out her cold hands to the fire!

"Really, they are lucky children," she thought, as she remembered the bare walls and carpetless floor and meagre

grates of the good but far from homelike great school where she herself had been educated. "How good they should be," as her glance wandered round the pretty, library-like little room. "But perhaps it is *not* easy to be unselfish if one has everything one wants, every wish gratified!"

Then came the tiresome waiting, the unnecessary waste of time—the footman's cross face at the door, when she felt obliged to ring and send up a rather peremptory summons, a summons only responded to by Jasper, burdened with Chrissie's far from satisfactory message—followed, just when Miss Earle was getting interested in the little boy's reading, by a bang at the door and the younger girl's noisy entrance, for she had overtaken Leila on the staircase and insisted on a race, in which, of course, she had been the winner.

"Chrissie!" exclaimed Miss Earle, surprised and remonstrant. "My dear child, you should not burst into the room in that way. It is too startling."

"Yes, do speak to her, Miss Earle," said Leila, in a complaining tone, with which their governess at one time would have had more sympathy than she now felt. For truly the little girls' quarrels were almost always "six of one and half-a-dozen of the other."

"She nearly knocked me downstairs and I was coming quite quietly."

"And in the meantime neither of you has said good-morning to me, and it is eighteen minutes past the half-hour," Miss Earle continued. "Besides which, you know you should be here before I come, with your books and all ready."

Both children were silent. Then Christabel said, rather sullenly—

"I sent a message by Jasper. I suppose he didn't give it properly."

"He gave it as properly as a message that was not a proper one could be given," was the reply, and Miss Earle's voice was very cold.

"I *must* keep up my authority, such as it is," she said to herself, "but oh, what a pity it is to have so constantly to find fault, when I love them and we might be so happy together."

It was a bad beginning for the morning's lessons, and as was to be expected, things did not go smoothly. In their hearts both Leila and Christabel were feeling rather ashamed of themselves, but outwardly this only showed itself by increased sleepy inattention in the one, and a kind of noisy defiance in the other. But Miss Earle knew children too well to "pile on the agony," and said no more, hoping that the interest they really felt in their work would gradually clear the atmosphere.

So she gave them some history notes to copy out correctly, while Jasper went on with his reading.

He was not a very quick child, as I think I have said already, but it was impossible to feel vexed with him, as he did his very best—getting pink all over his fair little face when he came to some very difficult word. Nor was it always easy to help laughing at his comical mistakes, but a smile of amusement on his teacher's face never hurt his feelings. It was different, however, when Chrissie burst into a roar at his solemnly narrating that "the *gay-oler* locked the door of the cell on the prisoner."

"The *what*, my dear?" said Miss Earle.

Jasper's eyes were intently fixed on the word.

"Go-aler," he announced triumphantly.

Then came his sisters noisy laughter, and the child's eyes filled with tears.

"Be silent, Chrissie," said Miss Earle sternly, and Chrissie's face just then was not pleasant to see.

Nor did she recover her good temper till the French lesson came and her translation was found to have only two faults, whereas Leila's rejoiced in five!

On fine days the three children went for a walk with Miss Earle from twelve to one—that, at least, was the rule. But how seldom was it obeyed! At a quarter to twelve they were sent upstairs to get ready, but in spite of Nurse's and Fanny's doing their best, it was rarely, if ever, that Leila and Chrissie made their appearance again till ten or twenty minutes past the proper time. And to-day was no exception. Nurse brought them downstairs herself, almost in tears.

"Miss Earle," she began, "I don't know *what* to do. Will you—can you say anything to the young ladies? I did so want to tell their Mamma that they had been good while she was away, and it's worse than ever. Miss Leila's been reading all the time I was trying to dress her, and Miss Chrissie pulled off her hat three times and stamped on it."

"She put it all on one side. I looked like Falstaff in it," said Christabel coolly.

"Then why do you not put it on yourself?" said Miss Earle, as they went out.

"Why should I, when they're there to dress us?" was the reply. Miss Earle was silent. Chrissie repeated her question.

"I don't think there is any use in my answering you," she said at last. "We look at these things in such a different way, according to different ideas."

Chrissie grew more amiable at this. She liked to be spoken to as if she were grown-up.

"You may as well explain," she said condescendingly. "Tell me how you mean."

"I mean that if I were rich enough to have half-a-dozen maids to dress me—or nurses to make a baby of me—I should be, and at your age should *have* been, ashamed to be as helpless as you and Leila are," said Miss Earle.

Leila, who was listening, wriggled a little. Chrissie tossed her head.

"I'm not helpless. I can do anything I choose to do."

"Indeed," said their governess drily, "I should not have thought it."

"But why should we?" said Leila, "We don't need to."

"Why should you learn to be self-helpful and, to a certain extent, independent?" replied Miss Earle. "I should say, for two reasons. Because it would be good for your own characters, and also because nobody can tell what they may not *have* to do sooner or later, and surely it is best to be a little prepared for the chances and changes of life."

"I suppose you mean we might be sent to school some day," said Chrissie; "but we shan't—that's certain."

"I meant nothing in particular. I was only answering your question. But I must add something. If you do let yourselves be treated like babies, at least you should be as nice as babies generally are—healthy babies, I mean—to those who treat them kindly."

Both the girls grew red at this, and Miss Earle was glad to see it.

"I don't fink I was a very nice baby," said Jasper consideringly. "Mumsey says I cried lots. That's why I must try to be good now."

"Poor Jasper!" said Miss Earle, "perhaps you were a very delicate baby."

"I fink p'raps I was," he said with satisfaction. "I can't remember very well, but I don't fink I meant to be naughty."

"You did roar," said Leila; "I can remember it; or rather squealed. You weren't big enough to roar."

"Everybody's got to be naughty some time or other," remarked Chrissie jauntily. "I know you think Lell and me horridly bad, Miss Earle, but p'raps we'll turn out awfully good after all."

"I hope so," said their governess, smiling. Then she added rather gravely, "I wish, dears, you could understand how much sorrow and regret you would save yourselves in the future if you would really try to be more thoughtful now," and for a few minutes both little girls seemed impressed. Then, to change the subject, Christabel began again—

"Mummy's coming back on Monday, Miss Earle. Roland's had a letter, and he thinks she's very worried."

"I am sorry to hear it," said Miss Earle. "Well, any way, let us try to have a cheerful report waiting for her, as far as we are concerned."

And the rest of the walk passed in a most pleasant way.

But, alas! the children's dinner, which the two girls had with their governess downstairs, was a cause of irritation, for, without being "greedy," I am afraid I must allow that they were very "dainty," which is almost as bad.

"I hate cutlets done like this," said Chrissie. "They're so dry. I like them with that nice reddy sauce."

"Tomatoes," said Leila. "So do I. And I don't see why we should have plain potatoes, instead of mashed or browned, just because Mummy's away."

She pushed her plate from her.

"Leila," said Miss Earle sternly, "go on with your dinner," and as there was nothing else to eat, and Leila was hungry, she had to do so.

Then came the next course.

"Apple pudding! I hate cooked apples!" exclaimed Christabel. "Is there no cream, Lewis?"

No—there was no cream.

"What a hateful dinner," both children complained, and as they saw Miss Earle about to speak, Chrissie interrupted her.

"I know what you're going to say—all that about poor children who have nothing to eat, and that we should be thankful to have anything. But I've heard it hundreds of times, and I don't see why we should have nasty things, all the same. It doesn't make it any better for the poor children."

"If your food were *not* nice, perhaps I would agree with you, but as things are, I cannot," said Miss Earle.

But eat her apple pudding Chrissie would not, and as she had really not had enough dinner for a strong, healthy child as she was, her temper was by no means at its best for afternoon lessons, and Miss Earle walked home, feeling sadly discouraged.

"I must tell Mrs Fortescue that I'm making no way with them," she thought. "Things have gone too far. I do not see how one is to get any lasting impression on them. And yet, I am so sorry to disappoint their mother! I wonder if she is really in trouble? What *would* those children do if actual misfortunes came over them?"

A sort of presentiment, caused greatly, no doubt, by her sincere interest in her pupils, and anxiety about them, seemed to add to her depression.

"I wish I had heard what Roland said," she thought. "He is a good sort of boy. Perhaps he was only trying to make the girls more considerate for their mother just now."

Chapter Three.

Breaking Bad News.

The day I have described was a Thursday, and on Monday the children's mother did return, as she had said. Nothing very particular had happened during the last day or two. Leila and Chrissie had gone on much as usual, sometimes good-tempered and pleasant—so long, that is to say, as there was nothing to ruffle or annoy them—but always thoughtless and heedless, quite unconcerned as to the comfort of those about them, thinking of nothing but their own wishes and amusement.

Still, on the whole, both the schoolroom and the nursery had been fairly peaceful. Miss Earle had found less fault than she might have done; she even let some small misdemeanours pass as if unnoticed, but she was grave and rather silent.

"I hope she's beginning to find out that it's no use nagging at us," said Chrissie, though "nagging" had never been Miss Earle's way; but as to this, Leila seemed doubtful.

"I don't know. I think there's something the matter with her," she replied. And so there was; the poor girl—for she was still a girl in spite of her learning and cleverness—was making up her mind that she was not the right person for her present pupils.

"Perhaps an older governess would manage them better," she thought. "I must speak to Mrs Fortescue when she returns," and in the meantime it seemed wiser to avoid "scenes."

And Nurse, too, on her side, had been extra patient—scarcely interfering in the squabbles and noisy discussions which every day was sure to bring. She almost left off begging Leila and Christabel to *try* to be less careless and untidy; she only "scolded," as they called it, once or twice, when the inkstand was overturned on Leila's new red serge frock, and when Christabel wilfully cut a quarter of a yard off her best sash to make an "eiderdown" for the doll-house bed.

"There's something the matter with Nurse too," said Chrissie. "She's as gloomy as an owl."

"Poor Nurse, she's had bad news," said Jasper. "Her was cryin' all by herself last night. I sawed her, and I kissed her, and she hugged me. I was so sorry for her."

"Rubbish," exclaimed Chrissie; "you're so silly, Japs. I hate people in low spirits. It's so gloomy, and when Mummy comes back, I suppose we'll have to look rather gloomy too for a bit. Roland says it would be only decent because of Uncle Percy. / call it humbug."

But when "Mummy" did arrive, there was no need for any "seeming," for as soon as her little daughters saw her poor face they were both startled and shocked and really grieved; even the few days, less than a week, that she had been away from them had changed her so sadly. And as I have already said, neither Leila nor Christabel was actually hard-hearted or wanting in affection down at the bottom of her heart.

It was all thoughtlessness and selfishness—selfishness truly not known by themselves—that were the cause of their being so troublesome, so disappointing, so very far from what they should have been, in so many ways.

"Mummy," exclaimed Chrissie, always the first to notice things, "Mummy, have you been ill? Leila, don't you see how pale poor Mummy is, you stupid thing?"

Their mother glanced up beseechingly. She was kissing Jasper over and over again, as he clung to her, though with tears in her eyes.

"Dears," she said, "my head is aching terribly. No, Chrissie, I have not been actually ill, but I have not been able to sleep, and scarcely to eat, since I left you. And poor Daddy, too—when I have taken off my things and rested a little, I will send for you and tell you—" her voice broke.

"I wish you'd tell us now," said hasty Christabel. "If it's anything horrid, it's worse to have to wait."

But Leila was thoroughly roused out of her dreams for once, by this time.

"Be quiet, Chrissie. It's very selfish of you, when Mummy is so tired. I wonder—" and she glanced round the schoolroom, where they all were—Miss Earle having left—"I wonder if—" but before she could finish her sentence, Jasper, who had run off suddenly, made his appearance again, very solemn and important, as he was carefully carrying a cup of nice steaming tea.

"Ours was just ready," he said. "I knew it was, and Nurse brought it to the door for me. Her wants you to take it while it's quite hot."

Mrs Fortescue took the cup from the kind little hands and drank it gladly.

"Thank you, darling," she said, "that has done me good;" but Leila looked rather put out, and murmured something about a "meddlesome brat."

"I was just going to order it," she said, but while she had been "thinking," Jasper had been "acting!"

Their mother got up from her seat.

"Your own teas will be cold. Don't stay any longer just now. You may run up to my room as soon as Roland comes in," and for once the little girls felt they could not loiter or linger.

"There's something awful the matter," said Christabel, as they walked slowly upstairs. "P'raps robbers have got into Fareham and stolen lots of things, and Mummy's come back to send detectives after them, and—"

"Really, Chrissie, you are too silly," interrupted Leila; "as if Mamma would look like that about a stupid burglary! Besides, there would have been no secret about it, and it would have been in the papers."

"Then what can it be?" said Christabel, and as they were now at the nursery door, she ran in, without waiting for an answer, exclaiming to Nurse, quite heedless of Fanny's presence, "Mummy's come, and she looks as ill as anything, and so dreadfully—"

Nurse shook her head with a slight glance of warning, which Leila caught, and by way of attracting her sister's attention, pinched her arm.

"*Leila!*" cried Chrissie in a fury, and the pinch would probably have been repaid with interest, had not Nurse interfered.

"Fanny, we shall not have butter enough. Please fetch some more," she said, and then, as the girl was leaving the room, she went on, in time for her to hear, "of course, dears, your poor Mamma must be dreadfully tired. Travelling so far in such a few days and so much to see to;" and when they were alone she added, "Miss Chrissie, I do wish you could take thought a little. I don't know what you were going on to say, but Fanny is only a girl, and we don't want gossip downstairs about—" she hesitated.

Chrissie's curiosity made her take this reproof in good part.

"About *what?*" she asked eagerly. "You know something that we don't, and I don't think it's fair to have mysteries and secrets. We're quite big enough to know too."

"Yes, especially if you scream things out for Fanny to hear," said Leila teasingly. "Why, Jap has more sense than that," and she glanced at the little boy, who was seated at the table, his tea and bread-and-butter untouched, his face very grave indeed.

"You will understand everything very soon," said Nurse, feeling that the time had come for her to try to make some impression on the children, and thus help their mother a little in her painful task. "Your Mamma is going to tell you herself, and I can only beg you, my poor dears, to think of her before yourselves and to be of comfort to her."

There was no reply to this, beyond a murmur. Leila and Christabel felt overawed and vaguely frightened and yet excited. They found it difficult to swallow anything, but a sort of pride made them unwilling to show this, so the meal passed in unusual silence, Nurse's voice coaxing Jasper to eat, being almost the only one heard.

Leila's imagination, filled with the quantities of stories she had read, was hard at work on all sorts of extraordinary things that might have happened or were going to happen; Christabel was simply choking down a lump that would keep rising in her throat, and trying not to cry, while she repeated to herself, "Any way, it can't be as bad as if Dads or Mummy had been killed on the railway, or died like old Uncle Percy."



He was sitting beside his mother holding her hand.—p. 42.

Roland generally came home about half-past five, but he had tea downstairs with his mother, or, if she were out or away, by himself, in his father's study. It was less interrupting for him, as he usually had a good deal of work to do at home, than with the others in the nursery. So when a summons came for the little girls to go to Mrs Fortescue in her own room, they were not surprised to find their elder brother already there. His face, however, was not reassuring. Never had they seen him so grave—Leila even fancied he looked white. He was sitting beside his mother holding her hand.

She tried to smile cheerfully as Leila and Christabel came in, followed—very noiselessly—by Jasper, who had slipped out of the nursery behind them, being terribly afraid of being left out of the family conclave!

"Why, Jasper," exclaimed his mother, when she caught sight of him, "I didn't send for you—"

"No, Mumsey, darlin'," he replied, "but I've come," and he wriggled himself on to a corner of her sofa, where he evidently meant to stay. The others could not help laughing at him, half nervously, I daresay, but still it somewhat broke the strain which they were all feeling.

"We're going to talk of very serious things, my boy," Mrs Fortescue said, persisting a little, "and you are only seven, you see. You could scarcely understand. Don't you think you had better run upstairs again? Nurse will give you something to amuse you."

"No fank you. Please let me stay. I'm not so very little since my birfday, and if you'll explain, I fink I'll understand."

By this time he had got hold of his mother's other hand and was squeezing it tightly. She had not the heart to send him away.

"What you really *need* to know, my own darlings," she began at last, rather suddenly, as if otherwise she could scarcely have spoken, "can be told you in a very few words. Till now you have been very happy children—at least I hope so—perhaps I should say 'fortunate,' for your father and I have made you our first thought and given you everything you wanted or could want. We were able to do this because we have had plenty of money. And now, in the most terribly unexpected way, everything is changed. Our poor old uncle's death has brought a little dreamt-of state of things to light. He, and therefore we—for you know Daddy is his heir—just as if he had been his son, and almost all our means came from him—he was on the brink of ruin. And we—we *are* ruined."

The children's faces grew pale, and for a moment no one spoke. Then said Roland, with a sort of angry indignation in his voice—

"Did he know it, Mother? If he did—I must say it, even though he is dead—if he did, it was a wicked shame to hide it. If Dads had known—Dads who is so clever—something could have been done, or at worst we could have been

preparing for it.”

Mrs Fortescue did not blame the boy for what he said, but she answered quietly—

“Your father felt almost as you do, at first,” she said, “till things were explained a little. It seems that poor uncle had no idea that the state of his affairs was *desperate*, until the very last—it was the shock of a letter telling this that must have caused the stroke that killed him. Aunt Margaret found the letter in his hand, though he was unconscious and never spoke afterwards.”

“But still,” Roland went on, though his tone was softer, “I can’t understand it, for Fareham belonged to him and it *must* come to father, mustn’t it?”

“Yes, it is entailed. But it is not a very large property, nor a productive one. It is a charming place as a home, but expensive to keep up. Uncle’s large income was from other sources—not land-investments. Some of these must have begun to pay less for the last few years, and to make up for this and be able to go on giving us as much as we have always had, he was foolish enough to try other things—to speculate, as it is called. He must have lost a good deal of money a year or so ago, and since then it has all been getting worse and worse, and now—well; practically all is gone.”

“Still,” Roland went on, looking puzzled, “there’s Fareham.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Chrissie. “Why shouldn’t we go and live there all the year round and not have to pay for a house in London.”

“Don’t be silly,” said Leila. “Hasn’t Mummy just said that Fareham’s expensive to keep up, and if we’ve no money!”

“Hush, dears,” said their mother, “don’t speak sharply to each other. Yes, there is Fareham, but that is what we have to depend on. It can’t be sold, but it will probably—almost certainly—let well, furnished, just as it is, and that will give us a small income in addition to the very little we have of our own. Your father is already seeing about it. And this house is almost certain to let very quickly. It is only ours for another year legally. We will just keep enough furniture for a small home, where Aunt Margaret will live with us, and sell all the rest. And your father *may* get some work; he has friends who know what he can do.”

“Will he have to leave off being an M.P.?” asked Leila very dolefully.

Mrs Fortescue only bent her head.

“And—” began Roland again, hesitatingly, “I don’t want to be selfish, Mums, but I suppose I can’t possibly go to Winton,”—the public school for which he was preparing.

“Of course not,” said Chrissie pertly: “most likely you’ll have to be a boy in an office, or even an errand boy.”

“I could be a errand boy,” cried Jasper, his face lighting up. “Or p’raps a messenger boy. There was one comed here the other day that was almost littler than me. And they have such nice coats and caps.”

The others could not help laughing, and again it did them good, though Jasper got rather red.

Mrs Fortescue took no notice of Christabel’s uncalled-for speech.

“Dear Roland,” she said, “your school is one of the things we are the most anxious about. If by any possibility it can be managed, it shall be done. There are still fully six months before the date of your going, and somehow—I can’t help hoping for it.”

Roland flushed a little.

“I—I feel as if it was selfish even to hope for it,” he blurted out.

“No,” his mother replied, “it is not. Your whole future may hang upon it. You have always done very well at school, and now with your tutor. You might get a scholarship at Winton and then College, which we have always looked forward to for you, would be possible;” for Roland was a boy not only of ability, but great steadiness and perseverance.

“It’s—it’s very good of you and Dads,” he murmured.

Mrs Fortescue’s spirits seemed to be recovering themselves a little. She was still quite a young woman and naturally of a gentle, rather childlike character, easily depressed and easily cheered. And Roland’s way of receiving the bad news seemed to strengthen her.

“There are some things I am thankful for,” she went on. “We can at once face it all and arrange to live in the new way, without any waiting or suspense or any trying to keep up appearances. It is the sort of tremendous blow that can’t be kept secret. As soon as possible Daddy and I will look out for a small house. I feel as if every day here was wasting money.”

Leila and Chrissie had been silent for a minute or two; Leila in a mixed state of feeling, uncertain whether to think of herself as a heroine, or a martyr. Christabel, on her side, was far from pleased at the “fuss” as she called it to herself, that her mother was making about Roland.

“It isn’t fair,” she thought, “it’s much worse for *us*. Boys and men can work; being poor doesn’t matter for them.

Besides, Roland's going to get all he wants, and we're evidently to be sacrificed for him," and the expression on her face was not a pleasant one.

"And what's to become of its?" she inquired. "Lell and me? We'll have to be governesses, or dressmakers, I suppose."

Mrs Fortescue could not help smiling, though she felt disappointed at the child's tone.

"*You* certainly have plenty of time to think about anything of that kind," she said. "I cannot fix as yet what we must do, but in the meantime I hope you will learn as much and as well as you can with Miss Earle. She is such a first-rate teacher. I shall be terribly sorry to part with her," and she sighed.

"/shan't," said Chrissie, "she does nothing but scold."

"No doubt you deserve it then," said Roland gruffly. He was terribly sorry for his mother, and his sisters' want of sympathy made him indignant.

"I don't think either of them cares, as long as things don't touch themselves," he said to Mrs Fortescue when Leila and Chrissie had left the room.

"Things *will* touch themselves, and very sharply," his mother replied with a sigh. "They don't realise it at all, Roland; we must remember that they are very young."

"They are just very spoilt and selfish," the boy muttered. "Just look at Jap, Mums—what a difference! And he's only seven, and quite ready to be a shoe-black if it would be any help to you. I tell you what, mother, it will be a capital thing for those girls to have to rough it a bit."

"I hope so. I suppose there is good hidden in every trouble, though it is sometimes difficult to see it," Mrs Fortescue answered. "But, darling, don't be too down on your sisters. If they are spoilt, and I fear they are, it is *my* fault more than theirs." Roland put his arms round his mother and kissed her. "Nothing's your fault, except that you've been far too kind to us all," he said, "and—about my still going to school—to Winton, I mean. I don't half like it. Why should I be the only one to—well, why should things be made smoother for me than for the others? The girls will be thinking it's not fair."

His mother smiled.

"It's not likely that they will be jealous of your going to school," she said. "I'm quite sure they don't want to be sent to school themselves."

"Oh, but it's quite different for girls," said Roland.

"Yes," his mother agreed. "But now, dear, I must send a word to your father—just to tell him I got home safely, and—and that, in one sense, the worst is over."

"You mean the telling us? Oh, Mums, it's all *much*, worse for you than for us," said Roland, and somehow the words comforted her a little.

Upstairs in the nursery, it certainly did not seem as if the strange and startling news had had any very depressing effect on Leila and Christabel. The former was already established in her usual cosy corner, buried in her newest story-book; the latter was only very cross. She had discovered that Nurse had been crying, and turned upon her sharply, though the poor thing was only anxious to be all that was kind and sympathising.

"What in the world have *you* to cry about, Nurse?" she demanded. "It isn't your father and mother that have lost all their money."

"I have no father, as you know, Miss Chrissie," she said quietly, "and my brothers take good care of mother. But *your* father and mother have been kind true friends to me, and you surely can understand that I can feel sadly grieved for their troubles, and indeed for all of you, my poor dears," and her voice broke.

Chrissie felt a little ashamed. She turned away so as not to see Nurse's tears.

"It's no use crying about it, all the same," she said more gently. "What can't be cured, must be endured."

"That's true," Nurse agreed, "and I'm glad to see you so brave;" but to herself she wondered if the thoughtless child realised in the very least all the changes that this unexpected loss of fortune could not but bring about in the, till now, indulged and luxurious life of the Fortescue children.

Chapter Four.

The New Home.

Some days passed. Mr Fortescue was detained in the country longer than he had expected, and as it was impossible for their mother to decide things very definitely without him, especially as regarded the future home of the family, the children's daily lives went on much as usual.

"You could almost fancy it was all a dream," said Leila to her sister.

"*You* could, I daresay," Christabel replied, "for you're never doing anything but dreaming; but / don't feel like that at

all. It's enough to see Nurse's red eyes, and the servants stepping about as if there was straw all over the place, like when people are very ill, and Miss Earle's never been so kind before. It really almost makes me try to please her."

"I think it's rather nice of them all," Leila remarked. The "romantic" side of the position quite took her fancy, and she felt as if she really was some thing of a heroine. "I shan't mind being poor, if people are so sorry for us—so-so respectful, you know, Chrissie."

But Chrissie was made of different stuff.

"I don't agree with you at all," she said, tossing her proud little head, so that her thick reddish-brown hair fell over her face like a shaggy mane. "Sorry for us! No indeed, I don't want people to be sorry for us. Almost the worst part of it is everybody having to know. I can't understand Mummy thinking that a good thing. I don't mind Miss Earle," she went on, softening a little, "she's different somehow. But I'm not going to pretend, any way not to you, Lell, you sleepy, dreaming thing, I'm not going to pretend that I don't think it's all *perfectly* horrid, for I do."

"If we could go to live in the country," said Leila; "a pretty quaint cottage, thatched perhaps, any way covered with roses—"

"Yes, especially in winter," interrupted Chrissie. "What a donkey you are, Lell! Better say thistles."

"We could have roses a good part of the year, and I know there are some creepers that are evergreens. Ivy, for instance. No, a cottage wouldn't be so bad, however tiny it was," Leila maintained.

"You'd have to be cook, then, and I'd have to be housemaid, for where would you put servants in your tiny cottage I'd like to know? It would be freezing in winter—no bathroom or hot water—and in summer all insecty. Horrible! However, we needn't fight about it. We're going to stay in London. Mums says we *must*, if Dads is ever to get any work to do—or in the suburbs close to. I think that would be almost worse. The sort of place with rows and rows of little houses all exactly like each other, you know, with horrid scraps of garden in front."

"No," said Leila, "I think any sort, of a garden would make it better. We could grow things."

"I'd like to see you gardening," said Chrissie. "I know what it would be. If there was any sort of a summer-house, or even a bench, you'd be settled there with a book, calling out, 'Chrissie, Chrissie, do *come* and rake that border for me. I'm so tired.'"

"I might call," retorted Leila coolly, "but most certainly the border wouldn't get raked if I had no one to call to but you."

"I'd rake it, Lelly," said Jasper. They had not noticed that he was in the room, for he was busied in a corner, as quiet as a mouse, as was often the case.

"I believe you would," said Leila. "We're not a very good-natured family, but I think you're about the best, poor old Jap."

"Nonsense," said Christabel. "He's just a baby. Shall we toss up, Lell?" she went on recklessly. "Heads or tails? I've got two halfpennies—heads for a house with a garden six feet square, tails for a dirty little pig of a house in—oh, I don't know where to say."

"I know," said Jasper; "that place where Nurse's cousin lives what makes dresses. I've been there with Nurse. Mummy said I might go. It's quite clean, and there's a sort of gardeny place in the middle, where the children was playin'. They didn't look—not *very* dirty," for if Jasper was anything, he was exceedingly "accurate."

"Really, Jasper," began Leila. Then she turned to Christabel, "You don't think it *could* be as bad as that, Chrissie?" and the alarm in her soft dark eyes was piteous. "Living in a slum, that would be." Just then Nurse came into the room.

"What were you saying, Miss Leila, my dear?" she inquired. "Something about a 'slum'?"

"It's what Jasper was saying," said Leila, and she went on to explain.

Nurse got rather red.

"It can't be called a slum where my cousin lives," she said. "She's a respectable dressmaker in a small way, and suchlike don't live in slums. Still it won't be as poor a place as that where," she hesitated, and then went on, "where the new house will be."

"Jasper's so vulgar," said Chrissie, "the minute you speak of being poor, he thinks it means leaving off being ladies and gentlemen."

"I doesn't," exclaimed the boy indignantly. "Nothin'd made Dads and Mums not be ladies and gentlemen—and us too," but the last words somewhat less confidently.

Both the girls laughed.

"Thank you, Jap," said Leila, "though I don't wonder he doesn't feel quite sure of *you*, Chrissie. You really needn't talk of 'vulgar,' with your 'heads and tails,' like a street boy."

A sharp retort was on Christabel's lips, but Nurse hastened to interrupt it.

"What are you so busy about, my dear little boy?" she said, turning to Jasper, which made the others look at him also.

"I'se packin'," was the reply, and then they saw that he was surrounded by his special treasures, in various stages of newness and oldness, completeness and brokenness. "Mums said I might divide them, and the old ones are to go to the ill children; and I'm goin' to pack the others very careful'y, for you see they'll have to last me now till I'm big," and he gave a little sigh, for in his unselfish, yet childish heart, there *had* been visions of what future Christmases might bring in the shape of a new stable and stud—"still splendider nor the one I got two birfdays ago," as he thought to himself.

Leila drew near him.

"Shall I help you?" she said. "I've finished my book," she went on, "and I've nothing to do," as if half-ashamed of her unusual good-nature. "I say, Japs, you do keep some of your toys a long time. I don't see many bad enough for the Children's Hospital."

Jasper's serious blue eyes slowly reviewed his spread-out treasures, but for a minute or two he did not speak.

Then he said gravely—

"There's isn't many broken, but I'd like to give some of the others too. Mumsey won't mind—and pr'aps, you know, I can't send many more, for these'll have to last me, and I'll get fonder and fonder of them. So I think I'd better send a good lot now—don't you think so too, Lelly?"

His hands strayed lovingly over his beloved horses and dogs, squirrels and rabbits, each one of which was known to him individually.

"It's my aanimals I care most for," he said. "I want to divide them quick, Lelly, for fear I get greedy and want to keep them all."

"You can't do that, any way," said Chrissie, who had joined the group. "You won't have room in the new house. I daresay there'll be no nursery at all. Look here, Japs, Nurse can give us one of the clothes-baskets, and we'll put all for the hospital in it for Mums to look over, and then you can pack quite comf'ably for yourself," and with the quickness and good sense she had plenty of when she chose to use them, she helped the little fellow in his rather painful task. And once the division was made, and the old favourites out of sight, Jasper grew more cheerful again, as he murmured to himself, "I daresay they'll be quite happy with the ill children. They have such nice little white beds."

How proud Chrissie felt of herself! It was just to be regretted that Nurse could not help saying—

"Dear me, what a pity you can't always be so kind and helping, Miss Chrissie," for immediately came the toss of the haughty little head and the pert reply—

"I shall do as I choose *always*, Nurse. You might know that, by this time, I should think."

"Your father writes that he is coming home to-morrow," said Mrs Fortescue, the next day. "I am so glad to be feeling better and stronger than when I first got back, for now house-hunting will start in good earnest. The agents have several chances of letting this, I hear, and we must not lose any."

"How horrible it is," exclaimed Christabel, and though Leila did not speak, her face grew very gloomy. Their mother glanced at them with disappointment.

"Dears," she said, "I hoped you were going to be so brave and help me to meet Daddy cheerfully."

"Really, Mummy," said Chrissie, "I don't see why you should scold us before we've done anything naughty."

"*Scold* you," repeated their mother. "I don't think you have the least idea of what the word means, my poor little girl," and she could not help smiling a little.

"Well," persisted the child, "you can't expect us to *like* going to live in some horrible poky place."

Mrs Fortescue thought it best not to answer. She knew too well what Chrissie could be, once a "contrary" fit was on her.

"Is Aunt Margaret coming too?" asked Leila.

Her mother shook her head.

"Not yet," she said. "Poor Aunt Margaret has to stay to see the last of things at Fareham. I don't want her to come till we are at least a little settled. Children," she went on, rousing herself to a new appeal, "my darlings, I know it is hard for you, and it is still harder for your father and me, *because* we feel it for all of you; but it is hardest of all for Aunt Margaret to have to leave the place where she has spent all her life, where she loves every tree and bush as if they were living things; never to have the joy of welcoming us all there, and arranging our rooms for us, and making us so happy. 'The delight of her life,' she called our visits the other day. It is *awfully* hard on her. Uncle Percy's death would have been a sad blow at any time, but the way it came made it ten times sadder. And she is an old woman now, though a good deal younger than he was. Yet I cannot tell you how unselfish she is—how determined to see the bright side of things, how thankful for the blessings we still have."

The children did not speak. Their mother's words could not but impress them.

Then said Chrissie, still with a touch of defiance—"I know she's awfully good, Mumsey, and we do love her, but you see I don't *pretend* to be good and unselfish and all that. Pr'aps when I get to be old, it'll come somehow."

Mrs Fortescue smiled a little.

"I don't want you to 'pretend,' Chrissie, most certainly not. I want you to *be*. And the longer you put off trying, the harder you will find it. Goodness does not come all of itself like one's hair getting grey. And though it may sometimes seem as if God left us to ourselves, it is not really so. Sorrows and trials may have to be our teachers if we allow happiness and prosperity to make us selfish and thoughtless."

"Well," said Leila gloomily, "perhaps they're beginning now—it doesn't look as if there was much to be cheerful about;" and, as often happened, Christabel turned upon her sister, though Leila was only expressing her own discontent in different words.

"I call *that* selfish, if you like," she said. "Mumsey has enough to be worried about without your grumbling."

"Hush, Chrissie," said their mother, rather wearily. "I think you *will* both try to help your father and me, but I cannot say any more. I have a great many letters to write, and Miss Earle has kindly offered to stay later to do some for me. I do want to get them done before to-morrow when Daddy comes. So run off now, dears."

All the children loved their father, though perhaps in a different way from their sweet mother. But he was a very busy man, much engaged in public matters, and till now he had seen but little of them, comparatively speaking, especially of his daughters. But for this, possibly their faults, so greatly owing to over-indulgence and over-gentleness, would not have been allowed to have taken such root. And just at first, on his return home, Mr Fortescue was pleased with them all, Roland, of course, in particular, for the boy showed great good feeling and consideration for his parents.

"And Leila and Chrissie, too," said their father, when speaking about them to their mother, "they seem rather subdued, naturally enough, but they will be plucky and sensible and do all they can to help us, I hope."

"Yes, I hope so," she agreed, and Mr Fortescue was too busy about other things to notice the want of confidence and cheerfulness in her tone.

Then followed a week or two of extreme "busyness" for the children's parents. Strange men were constantly coming to the house, with note-books, in which they made long lists of the furniture, and pictures, and ornaments—what were to be sold and what to be kept. House agents, too, and several times, parties of ladies and gentlemen to be shown over all the rooms—some of whom were already friends or acquaintances of the Fortescues, some complete strangers.

It was all very queer, but there was a certain kind of excitement about it, though once or twice Chrissie grew red and angry at hearing some murmured expressions of pity, such as—"Poor people, *isn't* it sad for them?" or, "I do feel so for them all."

"Impertinent things," muttered the child, though fortunately in a whisper.

Then at last came the day on which their mother with a little touch of relief in her voice, told them that the new house was chosen and decided upon.

"We shall move into it in about a fortnight," she said, "and it will not be so very difficult to manage. A great deal of the furniture has been bought by the people who have taken this house, and as they are not coming in here for a month or more, we can send off all that we shall require at Spenser Terrace next week, and have it fairly in order before we go ourselves."

"Spenser Terrace," repeated Leila, "I never heard of it. Where is it, Mummy?"

"Some way out, of course," was the reply. "Still, not in the suburbs, which I am glad of. It will be easier in many ways, especially for Daddy and Roland coming and going. Daddy has got a post, my dears—nothing very much, but we are very thankful. We shall *just* be able to get on with great care, for Aunt Margaret insists on joining the little income left to her, to ours. And I hope and think we can manage Roley's school," she added as she hurried off.

"Of course," said Christabel, when she and Leila were alone, "of course Roland is the one they care about. You and I are to be educated anyhow or nohow, I suppose, so long as he goes to Winton. Why, we shan't even be able to be governesses!"

"What's the good of your saying those horrid things to me," replied Leila, almost in tears. "You'd better say them to Dads."

To this there was no response. Even Chrissie's audacity would have failed her at such an idea.

Notwithstanding their mother's continued cheerfulness, and Nurse's assurances that they were not going to live in so poor a place as Jasper's "quite nice and clean" row of houses, the imaginations of both little girls had been running riot, almost without their knowing it, on the subject of their new home, and on the whole they were rather pleasantly surprised when the day came for the move to it.

It was, of course, at a considerable distance from the first-rate part of the West End where they had hitherto lived, and as the rumbling four-wheeler made its slow way along, it seemed to Chrissie, with the boxes outside and packages inside, as if all that had happened in the last few weeks must be a dream, and that they were on their way to King's Cross Station, to travel down for one of their happy visits to Fareham!

"Doesn't it seem just like that?" she said to the others. "You know we've often gone with Nurse and Jap in a four-wheeler, when Daddy and Mummy were in the carriage."

Leila gave a little shiver.

"Don't, Chrissie," she exclaimed. "It only makes things worse thinking of it all like that."

Jasper slipped his hand into hers.

"Pr'aps we'll be very happy in the new house," he said. "I'd not mind if only Nursie was going to stay."

For, alas! Nurse was only to be a few days longer with them—"just to see you a little bit settled," she had pleaded with Mrs Fortescue. Her remaining permanently would have been impossible in the changed circumstances of the family, and as she was looking forward to being married in two or three years, it was of importance for her to save what she could of her wages. But she had done all in her power to help; it was a cousin of hers who was one of the two servants which were all Mrs Fortescue could afford to have, and she had privately begged this girl to be very patient with the young ladies if they were sometimes troublesome and thoughtless.

"It will all be such a change for them, you see," she explained, and Harriet, who was good-natured and willing, delighted to come to London, and not troubled with nerves, promised to do her very best.

Hers was the face which met them as the cab at last drew up at one of a row of houses in a quiet, rather dull, but by no means "slummy" side-street.

"It isn't so very bad," said Chrissie, "and that new servant looks rather nice. I suppose she'll be instead of Fanny."

"Of course not," said Leila, "there'll be no Fanny and no Nurse and no anybody except a cook and housemaid. You certainly will have to put on your own shoes and stockings *now!*"

And Chrissie's face, which had brightened a little, clouded over again. But it was not in human nature, above all not in child, even spoilt-child nature, not to try to smile and look pleased, when at the open door of the little drawing-room the sisters caught sight of their mother, and heard Jasper's joyful cry, "Oh Mumsey, what a sweet little room."

"Come in, darlings. I've been longing so for you," she exclaimed, "and tea is all ready in the dining-room. Nurse, you must have it with us. Daddy, darlings, won't be back till seven, but Roley is here." It *was* a pretty little room. Mrs Fortescue had wisely kept only such furniture as was really suitable, especially as to size, so there was no look of crowding or "not-at-home-ness" about it. And as the whole house had been freshly painted and papered, there was nothing dark or dingy.

"If I could fancy it was a little house we had got for a few weeks at the seaside somewhere, I'd think it was quite nice," thought Christabel. "I wonder how many rooms there are. We really need one each if we're not to be always knocking against each other!"

Chapter Five.

A Stormy Morning.

Small as the dining-room was in comparison with the spacious one "at home," as, more than once, the children caught themselves saying, still, they all settled round the table quite comfortably, and on the whole they were a more cheerful party than might have been expected. Chrissie, even, was graciously pleased to express her approval of the hot buttered scones which their kind mother had specially ordered for the occasion.

"They are quite as good as Mrs Williams's," she said when she had eaten, I am afraid to say how many of them. "May we have them often, Mummy? The new cook will have lots of time, as there'll never be dinner-parties, or luncheon-parties, or—or anything like that, of course," and she gave a deep sigh.

"The new cook, as you call her," said Mrs Fortescue, "is no other than Mrs Williams' niece, Susan, who till now has been the kitchen-maid. So it is not surprising that her scones are good. But as for having lots of time, you must remember that, now we have only two servants, she will have to do many things besides cooking. We mustn't expect scones except as a treat."

"Oh, of course," murmured Chrissie, "we mustn't expect anything nice. I see how it's going to be." But either she spoke too low for her words to be heard, or her mother thought it wiser to take no notice of them, and she went on talking about other things.

"Yes," she said, in reply to a question of little Jasper's, "there is a tiny garden behind, as you see, and, besides the back-door, there is an entrance to it out of Daddy's study, through a French window. I daresay you will be able to grow some pretty hardy things in it."

Jasper's face flushed with pleasure.

"Oh, I do hope Aunt Margaret will remember to bring my new garden-tools what are at Fareham," he exclaimed.

"I will ask her about them when I write to-morrow," said his mother.

"Daddy's study," repeated Leila, "then there is a third sitting-room. I was just wondering what we'd do for a

schoolroom.”

“You will have to use this room a good deal,” said Mrs Fortescue, “but in warmer weather, when you don’t need fires, you can prepare your lessons in your own room upstairs, as you will see. Now, if we’ve all finished, I am anxious to take you over the house, Roley has seen it all,” with a glance at him.

“Yes,” Roland answered, “and I think it’s quite wonderful what you’ve made of it, Mums, really wonderful. The rooms couldn’t be nicer.”

And as the little girls followed their mother upstairs, in their heart they could not but agree with him. A nice airy room, not large of course, but as large as any in the house, had been furnished for them, with their own little beds and toilet-table, and as many of their favourite belongings as it was possible to find room for, including two bookcases with glass doors, on the wall, and a small writing-table in front of the fireplace.

“It’s really very nice, Mumsey dear,” said Leila, delighted at the sight of her low straw chair in one corner; “I don’t believe I’d ever be too cold up here—not with a shawl on. It seems so nice and peaceful, if only—” she stopped and hesitated and glanced at her sister.

“You’d better finish,” said Chrissie sharply. “I know it’s something horrid about me.”

“No, it isn’t horrid,” Leila replied. “It’s only if you *could* be tidy.”

“‘Tidy,’ indeed,” repeated Chrissie scornfully.

“I’m quite as tidy as you, and tidier. Am I not, Nurse?” she went on, turning to her.

Nurse, in spite of her extreme anxiety to make the best of things and to keep all smooth, could scarcely help smiling.

“I’m afraid, my dear, that there isn’t much to be said as to tidiness,” she replied. “Perhaps it’s been partly my fault, ma’am,” she went on to Mrs Fortescue, “I’ve not left off feeling as if the young ladies were still the tiny little fairies I remember them when I first came. But now they’re so much bigger, and with things being so different, I’m sure Miss Leila and Miss Chrissie will do their very best to help in every way.”

“She’s not at all sure of anything of the kind,” thought Christabel, “and that’s why she says she is. I wish people wouldn’t be humbugs.”

Poor Nurse herself certainly did her very best during the two or three days she remained at Spenser Terrace. And there was, of course, still a great deal to do. For, notwithstanding the careful choice of furniture and such things for the little house, when the trunks and boxes came to be unpacked, it was by no means easy to find room for all that had been brought. But for Nurse, I much doubt if the children’s possessions would ever have been properly arranged! She managed to interest the girls—Chrissie especially, who was naturally quick and active—in her plans about cupboards and shelves and chests of drawers, and before she left she glanced round with satisfaction at the result.

“If *only* they will try now to be thoughtful and methodical,” she said to herself.

These first few days had passed not unpleasantly. With Nurse still there, the great difference to themselves personally had not, of course, been very much felt by the little girls, and there is always, I think, to all children—and to many grown-up people too—a curious charm in novelty. It was a nice change to breakfast downstairs with their father and mother, to have tea also in the dining-room, and no lessons. Then, fortunately, just then the weather was fine and bright and dry. They went out with Mrs Fortescue or Nurse two or three times to explore their new neighbourhood, and found it rather amusing. They even thought it would be great fun to have expeditions in omnibuses, though at present there was still too much to do indoors for anything of that kind.

Mr Fortescue was pleased with them, and said so to their mother.

“I think we have worried ourselves unnecessarily about Leila and Chrissie,” he said, “they seem to be settling down all right.”

“I hope so,” she replied. “But of course the real test will come when Nurse goes and Aunt Margaret comes. In some ways she *must* be my first thought, when we remember all she is doing to help us.”

“But she is a miracle of unselfishness. I am only afraid of her spoiling the children,” he said.

“She is too wise to do so,” said Mrs Fortescue. “I earnestly hope they may learn to follow her example,” but still she sighed, and Mr Fortescue thought that anxiety and overwork were probably making her rather downhearted, though he did not say so.

Nurse left on a Saturday, and Aunt Margaret was expected to arrive on the Monday. I don’t think this was a very good arrangement, and if I had been consulted I should have said so. Sundays are, and should be, rather different from other days, but to make them thus in a happy way takes some method and planning, as the heads of all households, large and small, know well. And in a family accustomed to twelve or fifteen servants, suddenly obliged to manage with only two, of course the difficulties were much increased.

“We must begin rightly at once, or we shall get into wrong ways,” thought Mrs Fortescue. “The servants must both go to church; one in the morning, and one in the evening, turn about. And we must have a cold meal once a day. Let me see—if Harriet goes to-morrow morning, we can have a hot luncheon and cold supper this first Sunday, and tea all together in the afternoon,” and she lay awake half the night thinking about it, which was not very wise, I must allow, as it made her sleep later than usual the next morning.

But she dressed quickly, and on her way downstairs to breakfast, glanced in at the little girls' room, expecting to find them ready.

Alas! What was the spectacle that met her view?



“Leila, get up *at once*—I am completely ashamed of you,” and Leila started up. She attempted no excuse. “Christabel,” Mrs. Fortescue went on, “be silent.”—p. 77.

Leila in bed reading—a candle still alight on the little table by her side, though the room was, of course, in full daylight. Christabel, half dressed, standing in front of the looking-glass, tearing wildly at her hair, and scolding furiously at her sister, who was calmly paying no attention to her. And the room! Its state may be imagined when I say that it looked as if every article of clothing the children possessed had been dragged out of wardrobe and drawers and flung pell-mell on beds, chairs, and floor. It was really difficult to believe that such confusion was possible in the same room that Nurse had left in perfect order the very afternoon before.

Mrs Fortescue's heart sank. For a moment or two she stood there speechless—unobserved by Leila, absorbed in her book, or by Chrissie, in the noise and excitement of her temper. And when at last their mother spoke, it was only by raising her voice that she gained their attention.

“Leila,” she said, and her tone was more severe than either of the girls had ever before heard it, “Leila, get up *at once*. I am completely ashamed of you;” and Leila started up. She attempted no excuse.

“Christabel,” Mrs Fortescue went on, “be silent.”

“I can't be, I won't be,” stormed Chrissie. “It is all Leila's fault. I got up very soon after that stupid Harriet brought the hot water, and she said she'd come back to help me to tie my hair, and I would have been ready, but Leila wouldn't get up, and at last I threw a pillow at her, and it overturned the chair with her clothes on, and then she said I'd got out her Sunday frock instead of mine, and I hadn't, and then she went on so, that I *did* get out hers and threw it on the floor, and her jacket and hat too, just to show her, and—”

“Christabel be *silent*,” repeated her mother, and this time the child, though with flaming cheeks and really shaking with anger, did obey her.

“And this,” said Mrs Fortescue, “this is the first Sunday in our new little home; the first day you have really had an opportunity of—I won't even say helping me—but of showing yourselves sensible and trustworthy. It might and should have been a peaceful and happy morning. Stand still, Christabel,” as the little girl was flouncing about, “stand still while I tie your hair. It is very good-natured of Harriet to offer to do it, but you and Leila are perfectly able to help each other.”

“She's not good-natural,” muttered Christabel: “when I told her to come back in ten minutes, she said she couldn't. She's very impertinent.”

"Be silent," was her mother's only reply. Then, turning to Leila, she went on, "Give me that book," and Leila did so. Mrs Fortescue glanced at it. It was one of Mrs Ewing's. "I cannot let you have it again to-day," she said, "nor to-morrow, unless you are dressed and downstairs by half-past eight, and *properly* dressed, remember," and so saying she left the room, and with a very heavy heart slowly made her way downstairs.

It was a dull, grey day, not yet raining, but with small promise of lightening or brightening, and Mrs Fortescue, accustomed to a well-warmed and luxurious house, felt it very chilly. And when she opened the little dining-room door, she felt even chillier, and no wonder, for the window was pushed up as far as it would go, evidently to get rid of smoke, some remains of which was still hanging about. There was only one person in the room, and that person not only a very small one, but so crouched down in a little bundle on the hearth-rug, that for a moment or so Mrs Fortescue really did not see him. Then the bundle stirred, and a small face, rather red and with smutty marks on its cheeks, looked up.

"Jasper," his mother exclaimed, "what *are* you doing? Not playing with the fire, surely!" in anxiety, for indeed if *Jasper* were going to turn mischievous or disobedient, where would she be?

"Playin', Mummy," he repeated, with a touch of very excusable indignation, "in course not. It wouldn't flame up nicely, and I've been down a long time. Roley buttoned my waistcoat before he got up, but he's just comin'. So Susan gave me the bellowses," and he held them up in triumph, "and it's burnin' beautifly now," and so it was. "I think we might shut the window," he added, with a glance of consideration.

"My darling," said his mother, "I hope you haven't caught cold," and having closed the window, she turned to this brownie in a sailor suit with some anxiety.

"Oh no, I'm quite hot," he replied. "Shall I take the bellowses back to Susan?" he went on. "Daddy wouldn't like to see them here, and you don't mind us goin' to the kitchen if it's a real message, now we mustn't ring the bells often, do you, Mumsey?"

"No, my boy, take the bellows back by all means," said his mother, and on he went, murmuring as he did so, "Susan *will* think I'm handy and clever."

The funny little scene had cheered Mrs Fortescue again, and she was looking quite calm and happy when Roland and his father made their appearance.

"Breakfast is all ready. The things have just come in—everything is nice and hot," she said brightly.

"That's all right," Mr Fortescue replied. "I'm quite hungry. Change of air—eh?" but he smiled as he said it. Then with a glance round the table—"Where are the others?" he went on, "Leila and Chris—There is a gong, isn't there?"

"Yes, I brought the small one, but I haven't taught Harriet to strike it yet. Perhaps they—"

But almost before she had got as far as this in her sentence Jasper was at the door.

"I'll run up and tell them. I won't be a minute," he said. Nor was he. He was down again almost at once, but Mrs Fortescue's quick eyes saw that his small face looked troubled. And several minutes passed before the door opened to admit first Christabel, and a moment or two later, Leila.

"Hurry up, young ladies," said their father. "Why, Mummy has been down for ever so long, and the rest of us not far behind. I'm afraid you overslept yourselves."

"I didn't," said Chrissie; "you'd better ask Leila, Daddy, why we're late."

Her father, who had spoken quite cheerfully, glanced at her, for something in her tone struck him as slightly sullen. And the expression of her face did not reassure him. Still he spoke kindly and brightly.

"Well, here you are, better late than never," he went on. "Will you have bacon and eggs—or bacon alone—or egg alone, Leila?" but before she replied he caught sight of her strange appearance. "What's the matter with you, child?" he exclaimed. "Have you forgotten to do your hair?" and certainly there was every reason for the inquiry, for Leila's dark locks were in an extraordinary state of confusion. She had evidently tried to tie them up herself, and had only succeeded in perching a very dilapidated bow of ribbon in a wild way over one ear, where it was dangling about as if on the point of falling. And her face hardly looked as if she had washed it at all.

She grew scarlet when she felt all eyes upon her.

"I can't tie up my hair myself," she said. "I have brushed it and combed it, and it would have been all right if Chrissie had helped me a little, instead of standing mocking at me and throwing all my things about and—" here her voice broke, she was evidently on the point of bursting into tears.

"Christabel, will you have bacon and eggs?" asked her father.

"Yes, please, Daddy," she replied calmly, though she darted a look at Leila that was not good to see.

"And you, Leila?" he continued, turning again to the older girl.

"Nothing, thank you," she murmured. "I'll have some bread and butter."

"As you please," Mr Fortescue said. Then he helped Chrissie, and when her plate was before her, he looked at both children.

"This is our first Sunday morning in the new little home which your mother and I are doing our best to make a happy one for you. If you choose, wilfully and foolishly, to quarrel, do so. I shall not pity either of you. But one thing I will not allow, and that is, that your tempers are to upset the comfort of the rest of the family. So I give you fair warning. You must behave properly when you are at table with us."

Neither answered. Christabel went on eating, though with a slightly contemptuous expression which her father and mother thought it wiser to pretend not to see. Leila choked down her tears and munched away at what would have been dry bread, had not Jasper quietly put a pat of butter on her plate.

And Roland and his father began talking about the weather, the fors and againsts of frost setting in and the chances of skating, as if no such silly, disagreeable little girls as Leila and Christabel were in existence. And Mrs Fortescue made little jokes with Jasper, and poured out second cups of coffee in a most matter-of-fact way. For once, I think, both the foolish, ungrateful children began to feel themselves rather small, and the rest of the day passed fairly well, though, but for their mother's hurrying through with her own dressing, so as to be able to superintend theirs, I much doubt if either Leila or Christabel would have been ready for church, or fit to be seen when their father called them.

Mrs Fortescue did not speak till she was leaving their room, then she said quietly—

"Leila and Chrissie, I have helped you to dress this morning because I could not bear to have another scene, especially as it is Sunday. But from now, I warn you, I cannot and will not do for you what you are perfectly able to do for yourselves. When you *do* need help, you shall have it, and I can make allowance for things being difficult for you just now, but I will not help you to make them more difficult for yourselves. When you come in from church, you must put away your out-of-doors things and make the room perfectly neat," and so saying, she left them, without giving them time to reply.

"I hope you're pleased," said Christabel to her sister, as soon as the door had closed. "You *know* it all began with your refusing to get up."

Leila did not answer. She was naturally more timid and less high-spirited than Christabel, but in some ways more difficult to manage, owing to her indolence and dreaminess.

"Oh, well," continued Chrissie, "if you like to be sulky I'm sure I don't mind. Any way, it is a satisfaction to learn that you won't have any story-book all to-day."

Her tone was most provoking; Leila would have liked to turn upon her, but she was afraid of beginning to cry, so with some difficulty she remained silent till Chrissie had flung out of the room.

"I wish they would let me go to school," she said to herself when she was alone. "I don't mind lessons, I only want to be left in peace. I'm sure they might find some cheap school, and when I'm old enough I'd ask to be kept on as a governess. I will ask Mummy about it. If Roland's the eldest boy, I'm the eldest girl, and if they pay hundreds of pounds for him to go to Winton, they might pay *something* for me."

The idea seized her fancy. There was a touch of "romance" about it. She pictured herself working hard at school, becoming a teacher herself at an extraordinarily early age, earning enough to be no longer a burden on her unnatural family, whom she would only visit at rare intervals and for a very short time.

"Perhaps they would begin to wish they had treated me differently," she thought. "Perhaps even Chrissie would find out that everything wrong was not *my* fault—yes, when it was too late," and with her usual habit of fanciful dreaming, she occupied her thoughts almost the whole of church-time, I fear, by picturing herself as the heroine of this touching and romantic story. And poor Mrs Fortescue, catching sight of her little daughter's charming face, her dark eyes gleaming with interest, said to herself that Leila was really very open to good impressions. "I am sure she is making all sorts of excellent resolutions. Poor dear, I must not be hard upon her, nor upon Chrissie either," though Christabel's face still looked resentful and obstinate.

Chapter Six.

Dusters.

Monday morning brought considerable improvement. That is to say, Leila, having no book to read, and in her secret heart still faithful to the character of innocent and unappreciated martyr which she had imagined for herself, got out of bed almost as soon as she was awakened, dressed herself in silent dignity, and even offered to help Christabel.

"No thank you," Chrissie replied loftily, "I don't want any one to do anything for me except tying my hair, and Harriet can do that much, I suppose."

"Mother has told her to come for ten minutes, at eight," Leila replied meekly, glancing at Chrissie, and at the little bee-clock on the mantelpiece, which told that eight o'clock was fast approaching; much nearer at hand, according to present appearances, than the completion of Chrissie's toilet.

"And you think I won't be ready," replied Chrissie. "Well then, you'll just see," and she rushed at her clothes in a rapid but very helter-skelter fashion, stopping, however, with her skirt half over her head, to have another fling at Leila. "What's the matter with you this morning?" she said. "Why do you say 'mother,'" and she copied her sister's subdued tone of voice in a very irritating way, "like that? What a prig you can be, Leila! For my part I'd rather you were as lazy as a dormouse, staying in bed all day if you like, than to be so affected and lackadaisical."

No answer to this tirade was vouchsafed, and just then Harriet knocked at the door.

"All right," called Chrissie, "I'm ready—readier than Miss Leila, Harriet,—she hasn't fastened her belt yet, and nowadays it's got to be first come, first served, so here's my comb—hurry up."

Harriet was young and countrified, and, to tell the truth, rather in awe of "the young ladies," whom hitherto she had only heard of in her aunt's letters as beings not far removed from little princesses. So she gave a half-nervous laugh, and set to work at Christabel's thick curls, Leila—her belt fastened by this time—standing by with a solemn, resigned expression of face.

As a rule it was no easy task to "do" Miss Chrissie's hair, the owner of it being given to amusing little excursions about the room during the process, dragging her unfortunate attendant after her, in spite of all remonstrances. But this morning, out of sheer contradiction I fear, she stood like a lamb, and as soon as the ribbons were tied, dashed off, shouting, "Who's first—who's first? Who'll be first downstairs after all?"

"Chrissie, Chrissie," Leila called out, and this time she really meant well, and had forgotten for the moment all about being an innocent martyr, "Chrissie, you haven't said your prayers, and your—"

But a whistle from the staircase—plainly heard, though it was not a very successful one, as Christabel had been true to her rule of not shutting the door—was the only reply, and Leila sighed.

"Miss Chrissie do be a high-spirited young lady," quoth Harriet with a respectful little cough.

"What did you say?" asked Leila, as if awaking from a dream. "Oh yes—you wouldn't think I was *only* a year and a half older than she is, would you?"

"No indeed, Miss," was the reply in an awe-struck tone, and again Leila sighed and retreated to her self-chosen character of unappreciated heroine.

It was rather provoking, though entirely her own fault, that, in spite of her prompt getting up and irreproachable behaviour, she was *not* down early. For only when her little brother tapped at the door did she again glance at the clock, and started to see that it was already twenty-five minutes to nine.

"Lelly, Lelly, Mumsey's sent me for you. We're all down 'cept you."

Leila opened the door.

"Oh dear, it's too bad!" she exclaimed. "I've been ready ever so long. I got up ages before Chrissie."

"Never mind, poor Lelly," said Jasper consolingly. "You're not really late. Nobody's vexed wif you. And you do look so neat," he went on admiringly, as hand-in-hand they hastened downstairs. "Chrissie seems all—all in a muddle," he added anxiously. "I saw Daddy lookin' at her rather funnily, though he didn't say nothin'."

"It's her own fault. I shan't be sorry for her if she gets scolded," said Leila. "She only hurried down to be before me."

And when she caught sight of her sister at table, she really felt surprised that her father's annoyance had been only shown by "funny" looks. Christabel—except that, thanks to Harriet, her hair was fairly tidy—might have passed for a well-to-do scarecrow. Her collar was all on one side, her blouse buttoned crookedly, her face far from clean—her hands and nails—but perhaps it is better not to enter into particulars as to these! She seemed quite pleased with herself, however, and mixed in the conversation even more than was called for.

"It is going to be a very wet day, I fear. It is such a pity. I had so hoped it would be bright and clear," said Mrs Fortescue.

"Why do you mind, Mumsey?" asked Christabel. "It's hotter than if it had been yesterday and we'd had to paddle to church in the rain. I think it's much the worst for *us* now when it's wet—with nowhere proper to play in."

"Your mother was not asking your opinion," said Mr Fortescue drily, and Chrissie's face darkened. She hated being "snubbed" more, I think, than anything else in the world, but no one took any notice of her annoyance, and her father went on speaking to her mother as if there had been no interruption.

"You must not think of coming to the station," he said. "You would probably catch cold, for—" and for once, poor man, he sighed a little, "you would come in an omnibus, I am sure, and on a day like this you might have to wait some time to get a seat. Much better stay quietly at home, and have everything ready and comfortable for her when she arrives." He hesitated a little. He was on the point of adding a word or two, almost of appeal, to the two girls, but Christabel's cross expression and Leila's air of dreamy self absorption were not encouraging.

"Very well, then," Mrs Fortescue replied, though with evident regret. "Perhaps you are wiser about it. Then we may expect you about—when—four o'clock?"

"Yes, or a little later," was the reply, as Mr Fortescue rose to go, Roland having already hurried off.

"And mayn't I help you, Mumsey?" whispered Jasper, edging up to his mother. "If only there was some flowers in the garden to put in her room!"

"Perhaps she will bring—" Mrs Fortescue was beginning, when Chrissie interrupted.

"What *are* you talking about, Japs?" she said pertly. "Flowers—in the middle of winter, even if there was a garden, which there isn't. What does he want them for, Mums?"

Her mother looked at her in silence for a moment. She had stood up and was holding Jasper's hand tightly in her own, almost as if the touch of it strengthened and cheered her. Then she said quietly—

"You cannot have forgotten surely, or if you have you should not have done so, that Aunt Margaret is expected to-day, and naturally we want to make her coming to us—the only home she has now—as bright and happy as possible." Christabel tossed her head. "I was going to say, Japs dear," she added to the child, "that very likely there will be some flowers from the Fareham conservatories. The last we can have! But it will be nice if there are."

"Mayn't we have some in our room?" asked Leila suddenly. The word "flowers coming" had caught her ears, though she had heard nothing else.

"I cannot say till I see what there are," replied Mrs Fortescue, and Leila relapsed into silence, and turning to the window, stood gazing out at the rainswept street.

"Even a few flowers grudged me," she thought. "I wish I hadn't asked for them," and indeed the doing so had been an impulse not at all of a piece with her attitude of "suffering saint."

"Chrissie," Mrs Fortescue began again, "did you look at yourself in the glass before you came down? you had better do so now. You are inexcusably untidy."

"Am I?" said Christabel airily. "Well, yes, my collar's crooked, I feel." She gave a tug to it, but in the wrong direction, which did not improve matters. "It was all."

"You're not to say / had anything to do with it, or you, this morning," snapped out Leila.

"Hush," said their mother. "Go upstairs, Christabel, and dress yourself properly, and above all, wash your face and hands carefully."

"I did wash them—at least I think I did, after I got out of my bath," Chrissie replied. "They can't have been very bad or Dads would have noticed them."

"I am quite sure he did, but we did not want another breakfast upset by you children, like yesterday," said Mrs Fortescue. "Go now and do as I have told you," and Chrissie went off, pretending to whistle. "Leila," she continued, "what are you intending to do this morning?"

"Mayn't I have my book back?" asked Leila, "I did get up early."

"It is in the drawing-room," her mother replied. "Yes, you may have it, but in the first place I want you and Chrissie to help a little in the house. I am thinking of leaving the dusting of the drawing-room every morning to you, if you will be very careful with the ornaments. Harriet sweeps and brushes and does the fire of course, early, but the dusting takes time, and she is very busy in the mornings." Leila stared.

"*Us* dust—like housemaids," she said, and a sharp pang of disappointment went through her mother, for she had really expected that the little girls would have felt interest, and even pride, in taking upon them the charge she proposed—a far from difficult or disagreeable one.

Leila, not observing her mother's change of expression, went on coolly.

"What's the hurry with the drawing-room?" she said. "The fire's not to be lighted? first thing, I suppose. Harriet can surely dust it before the middle of the day."

"No," replied Mrs Fortescue, "I do not think she can. Certainly she could not do it properly. At your age I should have been very proud of being trusted with a little work of the kind; besides—"

"I daresay, Mummy, you were an angelic child, and certainly neither Chrissie nor I pretend to be anything of the sort; it seems to me that fathers and mothers always were pieces of perfection by what one hears them say of themselves."

Her words were almost impertinent, but her tone sounded as if she were half in fun, so her mother took no notice of the interruption: "besides," she went on, "the drawing-room from now must be ready early for Aunt Margaret. She must have all the comfort we can give her."

"Aunt Margaret," repeated Leila, opening her eyes very wide. "But it's not fixed about her coming, is it?"

Then Mrs Fortescue's patience began to give way.

"Leila, you are too bad," she exclaimed. "What have you been thinking of all this time? You heard your father talking of going to the station? You yourself asked if you could have some of the flowers? You must have understood that Aunt Margaret is coming to-day—this afternoon."

Leila looked rather foolish.

"To-day," she repeated lamely. "I—well, yes, I remember about the flowers, but I thought they were being sent up from Fareham as usual."

Perhaps for peace' sake it was as well that just then Harriet came in to clear the breakfast-table, and Mrs Fortescue hurried off to her morning interview with Susan in the kitchen, leaving Leila still staring out of the window. But the clatter and bustle of Harriet's rather clumsy movements fidgeted her. She turned to the door and made her way

slowly into the drawing-room.

"I may as well get my book," she said to herself, though I *hope* that in her heart there was some faint intention of fulfilling the task her mother had spoken of. Arrived in the drawing-room, she stood still and looked round her.

"So this, the only decent room in the house, is to be given up to Aunt Margaret," she thought, "and we're to be her servants! Well—it's all of a piece: but *Chrissie* won't stand it, and it will all fall upon me, no doubt, like everything else disagreeable. Yes I would far, far rather be a governess, or even what they call a pupil-teacher, in a school, than be treated like a *servant* in my own home. If only I were a little older."

Then her eyes fell on her book. She took it up and sat down, fingering the pages.

"I can't dust without a towel or a cloth or whatever they call it, and I don't know where to get one. I may as well read till *Chrissie* comes down," and in two moments she was lost to everything outside her story.

Luckily, however, as she probably would have caught cold from sitting still in a fireless room where the window was still slightly open at the top, and the door, of course, ajar—luckily, she was not long left in peace. A clatter and dash down the staircase, and *Christabel's* voice—

"Where are you, Lell? Answer, can't you?" as she dived in and out of the dining-room, without finding her sister. "Oh, there you are! You can't be hidden for long in this cupboard of a house."

Her good-humour seemed restored, and as *Leila*, unwillingly enough, glanced up in response to this summons, she saw that *Christabel*, if not very tidy as yet, still looked better than at the breakfast-table.

"What are you doing? Oh, reading of course. I say, it's freezing in here. Don't you see the window's half open and there's no fire. Why don't you stay in the dining-room? There's no one there," *Chrissie* went on.

"Mother will be coming there directly, and I don't want her to see me just now," said *Leila*. "*Chrissie*," she went on, feeling too much in need of sympathy to keep up her rôle of solitary martyrdom. "*Chrissie*, what *do* you think Mummy's just been telling me? Shut the window, can't you, if you don't like it open. I'm sure I don't care whether it's open or shut—I'm far too miserable;" and *Chrissie*, her curiosity aroused, for once obeyed without a murmur, and then turned eagerly to *Leila*.

"What?" she asked, "are we to be sent to school?"

Leila shrugged her shoulders.

"I only wish it was that," she said. "No—of course they'd say a good school would cost too much, and they couldn't send us to a common one. No, it's nothing about lessons. I daresay we shan't be taught any more—it doesn't seem as if we'd need to be! No—it's this—you and I are to be *housemaids!*"

"What do you mean?" exclaimed *Christabel*, "you are talking nonsense."

Leila explained, but to her chagrin she did not meet with the sympathy she expected. On the contrary, *Christabel's* eyes sparkled.

"Dusting the drawing-room," she repeated. "Oh, I don't mind that. It will be fun. I shall like it, at least," she added candidly, "till I get tired of it. I'd much rather do it than tidy up our own room."

"You may be quite sure you'll have to do both," said *Leila* gloomily, "and you'd better not talk about getting tired of it."

"Well, any way, I'm quite ready to begin at once," said *Chrissie*. "Where are the things—dusters—and soft brushes—feather brushes; I've seen them using them for china ornaments, haven't I?"

"I don't know," groaned *Leila*, without moving; and with a contemptuous "you are a lazy idiot," *Chrissie* darted off. But she was brought to a sudden standstill in the doorway by running against *Jasper*, who was making his way in, carrying some cloths, and one or two brushes, among them a feather one, which he evidently much admired, as he held it aloft. It was of several colours.

"Isn't it pretty?" he said. "It's to stay in the droind-room, Mumsey says, just to be used a werry little—for the bestest ornaments, I s'pose. But here's another one, and lots of dustiners for us all."

"Dusters, you silly," corrected *Chrissie*, "but, they're for Lell and me, Japs. *You* can't dust."

"Mumsey says I might 'elp," he exclaimed, for his "h's," like those of all young children, still sometimes deserted him, when he was very eager. "I'll be *werry* careful—Mums said I might do the tiny iv'ry figures—what Dads brought from Inja, you know," and he pointed to some curious and valuable little carvings, which Mr Fortescue had not found it in his heart to part with.

Chrissie glanced at them.

"Well, you couldn't very easily break those, I suppose," she said. "Give me a duster: and Lell, wake up, can't you?"

Leila slowly rose and looked about her. There was really not very much fear of the amateur housemaids doing any damage, for Mrs Fortescue had taken care to place the few ornaments of value in a glazed cabinet, and only left out several pretty but not very rare or irreplaceable things, just to give the room a bright and homelike look. And one

side-table was left quite bare.

"We must put some things—books any way,"—said Leila, "on that table—it looks so silly with nothing at all;" and she was on the point of doing so, for, in spite of herself, she was beginning to enter into the spirit of their new occupation a little, when Jasper stopped her.

"That table's to be for Aunt Margaret," he said. "She'll keep her books and things there. And there's a nice deep drawer—that goes down quite low, you see," he opened it as he spoke, "for her work, Mums says."

"How do you know about it?" asked his sisters, rather sharply. "You are such a prig," added Chrissie.

"Mumsey showed it me when we was settlin' about the dustin' this mornin'," he replied calmly.

Leila and Chrissie looked at each other.

"*Really,*" said the former, though in a low voice, "I do think mother should talk to *us* about what she is going to make us do before she discusses it all with a baby like Jasper."

Christabel did not at once answer. She was less of a self-deceiver than Leila, and she knew that neither she nor her sister had behaved in such a way as to let it be easy or pleasant for their mother to consult them about the new state of things.

"I don't suppose she said much to him," she replied, "and he's not a bit a tell-tale—he never makes mischief. He's really a good little fellow—much better than we were at his age, or than—"

"Speak for yourself, if you please," interrupted Leila crossly. She had a very shrewd suspicion what the end of the sentence was going to be and she did not want to hear it.

Christabel set to work in her usual energetic way. Jasper had already been at his corner steadily for some minutes. He rubbed at the chairs as if they were ponies that he was grooming, calling out to his sisters to look how he had made the wood shine, and seeing him, and Chrissie too, so active, Leila caught the infection, and being the tallest of the three, took the mantelpiece ornaments as her special department, and found to her surprise that she really enjoyed "housemaiding."

So that the dusting proved quite a success, and when Mrs Fortescue, having given her orders downstairs and seen to the last arrangements for their expected guest upstairs, glanced in, to see what they were all about, she was pleased and surprised to hear cheerful voices and to be met by bright faces.

"We've done it, Mummy—all, splendidly. I don't believe you could find a speck of dust if you looked for it with a microscope," cried Chrissie.

"That's very nice—very nice indeed," replied her mother. "I hope you haven't felt cold. From now, the fire will always be lighted early, and you can come straight in here immediately after breakfast."

"Or before," said Chrissie, with overflowing zeal. "I'm not afraid of cold—when you're bustling about you never feel it."

"Well," said her mother, smiling, "if Harriet gets her part done early, you may certainly follow her as soon as you like."

"You may safely say so to Chrissie," said Leila. "I think it's better to promise less and keep to what you undertake. I don't see that I can do my part any earlier, and you know, Mummy, Chrissie tires of everything much quicker than I do."

"Then you must keep her up to the mark," said Mrs Fortescue. "With enthusiasm in one and steadiness in the other, things should go on very well, I think," and this pleasant little speech was fortunately in time to stop a burst of indignation from Chrissie.

"And I'll always make the chairs shine, Mummy. I'll never forget," said Jasper.

"I'm sure you won't, my boy," replied his mother.

But as she was just leaving the room as she spoke, it is to be hoped she did not hear Leila's muttered—

"Spoilt little prig that he is—"

Chapter Seven.

Jasper's Dream.

The rain went on; by two o'clock Mrs Fortescue had given up any hope of its clearing.

"I do wish it had been brighter for poor Aunt Margaret's journey and arrival," she said more than once, when they were all at table.

"Never mind, Mumsey," said Jasper, "it'll be nearly dark when she comes, won't it? And then when it's all lighted up in the house it'll not matter outside."

"I wish it was lighted up now," said Christabel dolefully. "It's a perfectly horrid day. It never seemed so dark and dull at home—there were always nice things to do," and she sighed deeply.

"That's something new," said Leila. "You used to grumble like anything—even on fine days, because you had lessons to do, and when it rained, because you couldn't go out. / don't mind a bit. I can always read."

"Poor Chrissie," said Mrs Fortescue, hastening to prevent a squabble, "I am afraid you have had a very dull morning. You will feel more settled when you have some lessons again, won't you?"

Her words roused the child's curiosity. Not that she was by any means eager for schoolroom work to begin.

"Are we going to have a governess?" she inquired. "I thought p'raps you'd teach us yourself, Mummy, as we've so little money now to pay for lessons."

"And Roland's school will take all there is," murmured Leila gloomily. "I wish I was a boy, I know that."

Her mother glanced at her, but said nothing in reply to these remarks. And then she went on quietly—

"Nothing is quite settled yet. I have had so many other things to attend to. I am thinking of taking your music lessons myself"—Mrs Fortescue played beautifully,—"but I should not have time for more. I hope to find a good English teacher to come three or four mornings a week, and Aunt Margaret wants to give you French lessons. You know she is an excellent French scholar; she was educated in France and has been there so much."

"Aunt Margaret!" repeated the children, and from their tone it was difficult to judge if the idea met with their gracious approval or not, and their mother showed no intention of inquiring as to this.

"In the meantime," she continued, "I think you might make some sort of plan for yourselves. And I want Jasper to have some lessons every day. Chrissie, you seem very short of occupation. Suppose you read with him this afternoon, and give him a little writing and arithmetic?"

Christabel hesitated.

"I don't mind sums," she said, "I like them and I can explain them quite well; but as for reading—he does read so slowly, Mummy—it was bad enough to hear him with Miss Earle. I wanted to shake them both, often."

Jasper's face grew very pink.

"I did try, I really did," he murmured.

"I daresay you did, but I couldn't be as patient as Miss Earle, and then there'd be fusses," objected Chrissie with great candour.

"I'll be werry good," persisted Jasper. "I wish you'd do lessons with me. I'm beginnin' to forget lots, I'm sure," and the look in his small face touched his sister. After all, it might be rather amusing, better than staring out of the window at the rain pouring down on the dull street.

"Well, I'll try, as you want me so much to do it, Mummy," she said, though not too graciously. "I don't see why Leila shouldn't help," she went on.

"I've not been asked," said Leila, "and I've not been grumbling like you at having nothing to do."

"I hope you will take your part in teaching Jasper, Leila," said her mother as she rose from her chair, "but to-day it is best to leave it to Chrissie. You can come here as soon as Harriet has cleared the table," she added to the new little governess.

Jasper kept his promise—he tried his best manfully, and, for part of the time at least, Christabel did *her* best. But even with real goodwill, if one has not got the *habit* of self-control, patience and gentleness, especially in teaching, cannot be learnt all at once.

"You are too stupid for words," cried Chrissie, pushing away the book before them violently. "At your age I could read perfectly—as well as I do now."

"I *am* tryin'," said the little boy, choking down a sob which was not far off.

"Well, p'raps you are. Begin that sentence again. 'The S A X,' you must know what 'Sax' is."

Jasper gazed at the letters. He was not a quick child, though "stupid" was not by any means a true description of him, for where any service to others, or his power to help them, was in question, his gift of finding it out was almost like a fairy one.

"But there's more than 'S A X'," he objected. "I know what 'Saxon' is," and he pronounced it correctly, "why am I to say only 'Sax'?"

Christabel groaned.

"Oh, you donkey!" she exclaimed. "I was dividing it into syllables to make it easier for you, of course. If you knew what the whole word was, why did you sit staring at it as if you didn't?"

"I only wanted to be quite certin'," he said humbly, and then they started again, and again came to a standstill, for

Christabel's sharpness seemed to stupefy the little fellow: and when Mrs Fortescue, half-an-hour or so after the lessons had begun, looked in to see how teacher and pupil were getting on, she was disappointed to gather, by the traces of tears in Jasper's eyes and by Chrissie's flaming cheeks, that things were not going any too smoothly.

"Oh Mummy, he is *so* stupid!" exclaimed the little governess. "Oh, I do hope I shall never have—"

But a stifled sob from Jasper made his mother interrupt Chrissie's "hopes," the nature of which it was not difficult to guess.

"Jasper, dear," she said, and there was perhaps a tiny shadow of reproach in her tone.

"I *has* tried, Mumsey, Mumsey, teruly I has," and then his voice broke.

Mrs Fortescue glanced at Christabel questioningly.

Chrissie did not like to see her little brother crying: Jasper so seldom cried.

"Well, yes," she said, in reply to her mother's unspoken inquiry, "I don't say he hasn't tried, and I don't say I've been extra patient. But I never pretend to be very patient or good-tempered. I can't help the way I'm made," and she tossed her head as if this settled the question. "I'm certainly not meant to be a governess."

Mrs Fortescue sighed, and the sigh went to Jasper's tender heart. He flung his arms round her.

"Mumsey, darling," he whispered, "Chrissie hasn't been cross to me—scarcely not—and I did try, but some of the words were *so* hard. But I don't want you to be sorry, and I'll try more to-morrow."

In her own mind Mrs Fortescue felt very doubtful as to whether it would be wise to repeat the experiment, but just now it was better not to say so. So she soothed the little fellow, and reminded him that Chrissie did know that he had tried; and Chrissie, though not over amiably, condescended to kiss him, though she added—

"You are a baby, Jap. I hope you won't have red eyes when Aunt Margaret comes."

Mrs Fortescue started at the words.

"By-the-bye," she said, "we have not too much time to spare," and she glanced at the clock. "Put away the books, children, for Harriet must get tea ready early. Your aunt will like to have it with all of us together, when she arrives. I wonder what Leila is about."

"There isn't much need to wonder about *her*," said Chrissie, as she hastily collected the books and slates and bundled them into their little owner's arms with an "I don't know where you keep them, Jap."

"I keep them in my own room now," he replied with pride, for the possession of "my own room," a tiny slip of a place out of Roland's, had gone far to console him for the loss of former luxuries and comforts; "and I'll tell Lelly to come down to be ready for Aunt Margaret; shall I, Mumsey?" and off he ran.

So, thanks to Christabel's feeling vaguely wishful to make up for her impatience with her pupil, and perhaps in her heart grateful to him for having made the best of it to her mother; thanks, too, to Jasper's timely rousing Leila to come downstairs to be ready for their expected guest, the sisters were in good trim when the four-wheeler drew up at the door and Jasper's joyful cry, "They've come," brought them all out into the hall.

It was *such* a rainy day—a really hopelessly wet winter's day—the dull street looking duller than ever, the sky without the faintest gleam—everybody knows what London, above all London "far out," and where there are no shops even near at hand, can look like in these conditions. And to one whose whole home life till now had been spent in beautiful places, the contrast must have been sharp. Yet never did a face look brighter than Aunt Margaret's as she got out of the cab and smiled up at her nephew as if asking him, too, to be happy, which poor Mr Fortescue just then was finding difficult.

He glanced anxiously at the house, and was pleased to see the door open and a row of heads in the passage.

"I am sure of Edith"—"Edith" was Mrs Fortescue—"and little Japs," he thought, "but those girls! I do hope they will be all light."

Yes, they were at their best—gentle and affectionate, and indeed it would have been difficult to greet their aunt in any other way. She was not a *very* old lady, though her hair was quite white and she looked delicate, for she was many years younger than her brother, Sir Percy.

She came in, her eyes bright with pleasure, her kind voice already murmuring all their names, and the children gave a start of delight when they saw that their aunt was carrying a huge basket of the loveliest flowers—Fareham flowers, from the beloved hot-houses there. Their delicate fragrance already seemed to fill the little hall.

Mrs Fortescue darted forward.

"How good of you," she exclaimed, even before she kissed the new-comer, and indeed it would not have been easy to do so with the mass of flowers between them! "Oh, how delicious! Leila, Chrissie," and the little girls seized the treasures eagerly, and between them bore the basket off to a safe place.

"I thought I would like to bring the flowers in myself for my darlings," said Aunt Margaret, smiling, "as a sort of 'good luck,' you know."

Then she hugged them all round—Jasper coming in for a hearty share; and what with her pleasure and the scent and colour of her gift, somehow sunshine seemed to have come into the house for the time, and the rainy, muddy, gloomy street outside to have vanished.

“Morris,” Aunt Margaret went on, “Morris was so eager to send you a good supply. The last he can send, poor man,” with a quick sigh, “for the tenants are expected to-morrow.” Morris was the Fareham gardener of longstanding. “And there is a hamper-full of plants in pots, with my luggage—oh no, coming by goods train, I mean. We thought, Morris and I, it would amuse the dear children, Edith, to do some indoors gardening, so he chose ferns and flowers that will grow well in the house with a little care.”

“Oh, I am so glad,” exclaimed Jasper. “May I have a planted one of my werry own, Auntie?”

“Of course you may—more than one,” she replied, “and Leila and Chrissie too,” and she kissed them in turn as she named them. “My dears, how you have grown!” she went on; “Leila especially, I think. And Chrissie looking so well and rosy.”

Leila was pleased to be told she had grown, and not sorry for the “so well and rosy” to fall to her sister’s share, for she liked to think she herself looked rather pale and delicate. And Chrissie, to do her justice, cared exceedingly little about “looks” at all. Just now her whole attention was given to the flowers.

“I do hope Mums will let me arrange them,” she thought. “She’ll very likely say that Lell and I may do them together to-morrow morning, and if she does, I know what I’ll do.”

By this time the whole party had somehow got into the dining-room, where, thanks to Mrs Fortescue’s care, tea was all ready.

“We thought you would not mind having it like this all together, this first evening, dear Aunt,” she said. “Just take off your thick cloak and—”

“Please may I take it upstairs for Auntie,” said Jasper, scrambling down from his chair and hurrying off with the heavy wrap, though it was almost more than he could carry. He managed it somehow, however, and was back again almost immediately, his gaze fixed lovingly on something he held in his hand.

“Jasper,” exclaimed Chrissie, forgetting her aunt’s presence, “that’s very naughty of you. Mummy, he’s taken a flower out of the basket.”

Mrs Fortescue winced at her sharp tone. She was so anxious for everything to be smooth and peaceful.

“It does smell so lovelily,” said Jasper, for his treasure was a spike of stephanotis, “but if it was naughty of me I’ll put it back.”

“No, no, dear—keep it by all means,” said Aunt Margaret. “There is plenty more of it. And—oh Roland, my dear boy,” for just at that moment the elder brother luckily made his appearance, “how glad I am to see you! Now we are *all* together,” she added with a glance round the well-filled table, “and when one can say that, one should not feel there is much to complain of—should we, dear Reginald?” and she turned to Mr Fortescue, beside whom she was sitting.

“No indeed,” he replied heartily. “You and gloomy feelings certainly couldn’t live together, Aunt Margaret—could they, eh, Jasper, my boy? what do you think about it?” for Jasper was listening with all his ears and a pleased smile on his face, while he fondled his precious stephanotis.

“How they do spoil that child,” Leila whispered to Christabel.

“Yes,” was the reply in the same tone; “it looks as if it would be worse than ever now *she’s* come.” Then, as they had all finished tea, Mrs Fortescue took the traveller upstairs to her room.

“Mumsey, darlin’,” said Jasper, as she passed him, “mayn’t we help you to rerange the flowers?”

“Not to-night, dear. It’s too late, and it would upset the drawing-room. But I’ll tell you what—listen, Leila and Chrissie—you may *all* do them to-morrow morning, as early as you like. I will send them down to the cellar for the night, and I will look out the biggest glasses and vases we have. I am so glad I kept several, though I didn’t expect to have so much to fill them with.”

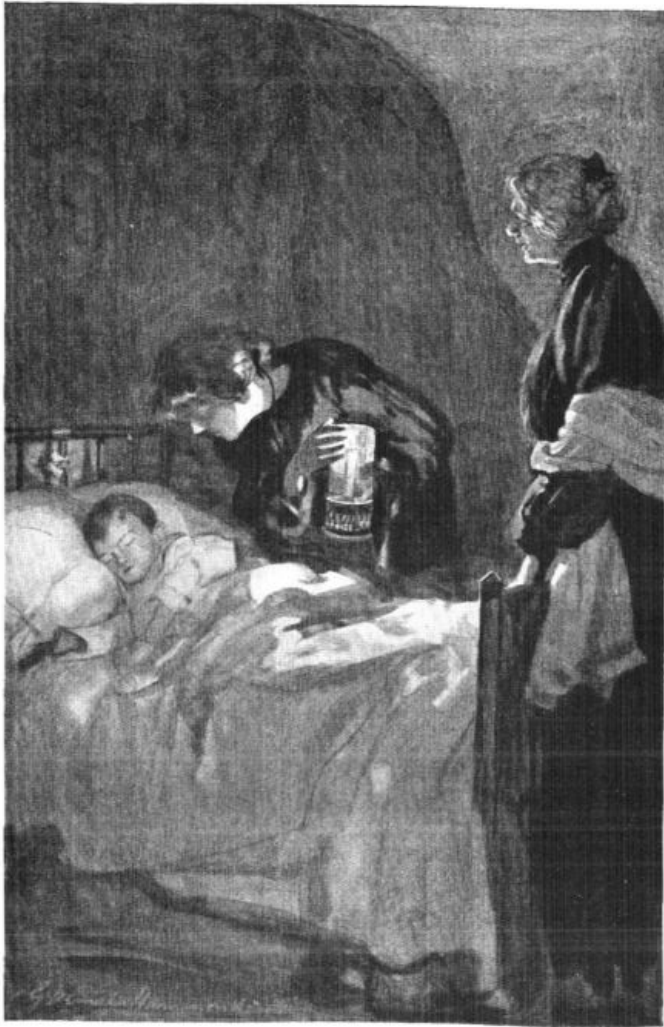
“As early as you like,” Chrissie repeated to herself. “That’ll just suit me. I love doing flowers if I’m not interfered with. And there’s not much fear of Lell turning out of bed early if I don’t hurry her up,” for, in spite of all orders to the contrary, Leila was still naughty enough often to read in bed at night with a candle lighted on a little table by her side, which, naturally, did not make her very wakeful in the morning. And Chrissie, though she had threatened more than once to tell their mother of this dangerous disobedience, took care that evening to offer no objection to it, for the selfish and unsisterly reason that I have spoken of.

Aunt Margaret was tired, notwithstanding her good spirits, and not sorry to go to bed early. As she was on her way to her room, Mrs Fortescue accompanying her, she glanced up the higher staircase.

“Let us say good-night again to the children,” she said. “I hear Leila and Chrissie talking, so they cannot be in bed yet, and I have not yet seen their room,” and as in that little house there was never far to go, Mrs Fortescue readily consented.

“Leila, Chrissie,” she said, “Aunt Margaret has come to say good-night to you in your own domain,” and they came forward to be kissed again. On the whole, things were not so desperately untidy as was often the case, and their

visitor glanced round approvingly.



"The growin' ones," he said, "it must be somefin' growin'."—F. 121.

"Yes, it is really a nice room," she said. "Poor dears, they must miss Nurse. Still you are big girls now and will be pleased to be independent," and she did not notice that there was only a very vaguely murmured reply. "Let me have one peep at Jasper," she went on. "It is so long since I have seen the dear little fellow asleep, and I remember how sweet he used to look."

Mrs Fortescue lighted a candle in Roland's room, out of which Jasper's opened—Roland was still downstairs with his father,—and carefully shading it from the little sleeper's eyes, led the way in. The child was fast, very fast asleep—he looked prettier than when awake, for slumber brought a rosy flush to his face, as a rule paler than one would have wished to see it.

And to-night he looked particularly well and happy, for he was smiling, and murmured some words as his mother bent over him, which at first puzzled her—"the growin' ones," he said, "it must be somefin' growin'."

"What can he be dreaming about?" she whispered to her aunt, and then her eye caught sight of the probable cause of Jasper's pleasant fancies. It was the sprig of stephanotis, carefully tied to a bar at the head of his little cot, so that the sweet perfume was doubtless wafted to him as he lay.

"I know," exclaimed Aunt Margaret. "Dear little fellow—it is something about the plants that I said were coming by goods train to-morrow. How glad I am that Morris thought of them!"

She was right, though it was not till long afterwards that Jasper told his dream, which in time to come, as his ideas grew and developed, seemed to him almost, simple as it was, to have been a kind of allegory. And for fear I should forget about it as our story goes on, I may as well tell it to you now.

He dreamt that he was walking up a rather steep hill; it was grassy and pleasant to step on, but still he felt a little tired and wondered how much farther he would have to go. Where he was going, or why, he could not clearly understand; he only knew that go on he must, and all the time, in his hand, he carried his sweetly scented flower. Then, suddenly, he became aware that, on his journey, whatever was the reason and object of it, he was not alone—numbers and numbers of other children were pressing on in the same direction. They did not speak to him or to each other, every one seemed full of the same eagerness to get to the top of the hill; and soon the explanation of this grew plain to him, for a breath, more than a voice, passed through the crowd of little travellers, murmuring—

"The gates, the gates of the beautiful garden." And lifting his eyes he saw, now but a short way off, great gates of silvery trellis-work, through which he could already catch glimpses of stretches of exquisite lawns, and glorious trees, and smooth winding paths, bordered by plants and flowers of indescribable loveliness. He seemed to himself to give a bound of delight, for something told him that he and all his companions were coming there by invitation, and in

another moment or two the crowd of children had reached the top of the hill and were standing in front of the gates. And then Jasper noticed another thing—each child was carrying a flower, or a plant—many, like himself, a cut-off branch or blossom only; some, and the faces of these had a different expression from that of the others, flowerpots filled with earth in which the plant was happily alive and growing. They were not all of equal size or beauty; several were very tiny, nothing but a few green leaves perhaps; some, what one would carelessly call “quite common” little things—a daisy root or a small nest of violets, of which only one timid head was as yet to be seen. *But* all these had roots, and were growing! Then glancing at the other children, who like himself carried only a single blossom, he saw an anxious look on their faces, and to his distress he perceived that these flowers were drooping and beginning to fade and wither, and he was just turning to examine his own, when he heard an eager cry—and looking up, he saw a figure coming down the garden and opening the gate at one side, not widely, but enough to let one child through at a time.

Jasper pressed forward—the new-comer was all dressed in white—the face was more beautiful than any face not seen in dreams.

“It’s an angel,” thought Jasper, and some words he had heard or read of came into his mind.

“‘The garden of Paradise,’ that must be it,” he thought dreamily.

And then he looked again and more anxiously, for he saw that by no means every child was allowed to enter—and of those who with saddened or disappointed faces turned back, every one was the bearer of a single blossom only, a poor, already-fading flower!

The angel’s face was grave as he slowly shook his head, when Jasper himself drew near.

“I cannot, my child, I cannot,” he said; “you must bring a different offering;” and Jasper, on the point of tears, replied—

“I didn’t know—I didn’t know. What shall I do?”

And the angel smiled and said—

“No, my darling, you did not know. But you can come again and bring a living plant. All have to learn. Many of those you now see entering did not know the first time they came. Take courage—your growing plant is ready for you.”

And then it was, I think, that he smiled in his sleep and whispered, “It must be a growin’ one.”

Yet for a moment or two he stood by the silver gate and watched, for he felt the angel wanted him to do so. And some things surprised him. The most beautiful plants were not always carried by the prettiest or most attractive children. Some of their bearers were sadly poor-looking—one, above all, a little cripple in shabby clothes, who could scarcely hobble in—but oh, what a glorious wealth of snow-white lilies he carried, and how his face shone with delight at the gate-keeper’s approving smile. And once inside—for Jasper gazed longingly after him—how was it?—such things come to us in dreams, and are they not the shadow of the true?—the shining seemed to clothe the stunted figure as with a garment, till he stood there erect and beautiful—a very angel himself. And murmuring, “P’raps he’ll be the one at the gate the next time I come,” Jasper awoke.

But it was not yet even midnight, so, as the scent of his flower—poor little flower, faithful to the last, though it had to wither—reached his but half-awakened senses, the boy smiled again, and this time went off into dreamless slumber.

Chapter Eight.

A Catastrophe.

Chrissie, as I think you will remember, was not given to sleeping late. Indeed, laziness of any kind was not a weak point of hers.

And on the morning after Aunt Margaret’s arrival, she woke, as she had gone to sleep determined to do, even earlier than usual. It was only just beginning to be faintly light. She lay still for some little time, for it was as yet too dark to see what o’clock it was, and if she had struck a light it might have roused Leila—the last thing she wished to do.

But before long, some slight sounds overhead gave notice that the two servants, who, being young country-bred girls, had not yet lost their good habit of early rising, were getting up. Then, even in that quiet side-street, came sounds of the great world of London being awake again—a church clock struck six, a milk cart or two rattled by, and farther off in the distance was faintly heard the rumbling of heavier carts and waggons.

“I suppose it’s no good my getting up till the servants are down, and till it’s lighter,” thought the little girl. “I’ll try to keep still till it strikes the half-hour, or at least till I can see the figures on the bee-clock. But it’s awfully tiresome. I *can’t* understand Lilly liking to stay in bed.”

And never did a half-hour pass more slowly for an impatient child than did this one. Still, Chrissie kept to her resolution; she could be both sensible and self-controlled when it suited her.

But by seven o’clock she was fully dressed, though there had been no question of a bath, seeing that Harriet only brought the hot water at half-past, and I *fear* the amount of washing that she had stealthily performed with cold water and a basin only, had better not be inquired into. All the same, she felt decidedly proud of her good management when she found herself quietly slipping downstairs, leaving Leila still peacefully slumbering.

It was not a very cold morning and it had quite left off raining. Still, it felt very chilly as she entered the drawing-room, where Harriet had just opened the windows.

"Miss Chrissie!" she exclaimed with a start.

"Is there anything the matter?"

"Of course not. I've got up early to do the flowers. Mother said I might. So go and fetch them at once, and bring the glasses to put them in, and a big can of water."

Harriet hesitated.

"Couldn't you wait, Miss, just till I've brushed and swept up and done the fire? I've to get the room right quickly, you see, to be ready for the old lady."

"Wait!" repeated Christabel, "of course I can't. And you're very rude, Harriet, to speak of the 'old lady' like that. Can't you say 'Miss Fortescue'?"

"I'm sure I beg pardon," Harriet replied, and feeling rather ashamed of her unintended disrespect, she dared not object further, and hurried off as Chrissie had ordered.

But with the young lady spreading out flowers and glasses and water-cans all over the floor, it was clearly impossible to go on sweeping. Furthermore, Chrissie made her shut the window, so all the poor girl could attend to, and that not without difficulty, was the fireplace.

Little cared Chrissie. She went on sorting and selecting, cleverly enough, it must be owned, and some of the glasses were looking pretty and graceful, when a sound made her glance at the door. There stood Jasper, Harriet by this time having fled in despair.

"What do you want?" said Chrissie sharply. She was already getting a little tired of her task, for she had been at it for three-quarters of an hour.

"Oh Chrissie, Lelly is *so* cross," he said. "She heard me goin' down and she called me. She's nearly dressed and she's comin' immediatly. And I'm afraid she's very vexed. And the room is in such a mess," and, child though he was, he gazed round in consternation.

It was quite true—the mess was appalling. For it was not in Chrissie's nature to do anything with method, and Leila's greater neatness would have been a help in the morning's work. But even worse was to follow; for almost before Chrissie had taken in what Jasper was saying, Leila, for once, in her indignation, as hasty as her sister, dashed into the room, upsetting as she did so, one of the big cans of water brought by Harriet, and, sadder still, one of the already arranged vases, breaking it into pieces—the water streaming out to mingle with the pool already forming, the poor flowers pitched about in all directions.

Christabel flew at her, trying to push her out of the room.

"You horrid girl," she said, "you clumsy creature."

"It's you that's horrid," returned Leila. "Worse than horrid. How could you be so mean and sneaky? Why didn't you wake me? Mother meant us to do them together. It's all your fault. I shall tell Mother—it isn't mine a bit. Let go of me," but Chrissie only pushed her the more fiercely.

And this was the sight, these were the sounds, that met poor Mrs Fortescue as, unheard by the furious children, she stood in the doorway,—room in chaos, the pretty carpet, chosen newly on purpose to brighten the look of things, soaking—dark with water—the bits of glass and poor flowers all strewed about, and, worst of all, two little girls, crimson with anger, struggling together and hurling out ugly words of reproach and rage.

They started however—Chrissie releasing Leila, who stood silent and motionless—when they heard their mother's voice.

"Aunt Margaret's first morning. And I trusted you both to help me," she said, as she turned away.

She was so bitterly disappointed that I really think there were tears in her eyes as she hurried down the passage in search of Harriet and cloths to wipe up the pools and streams of water. But before she got to the top of the staircase leading down to the basement, she almost ran across a small figure, whose face was hardly to be seen amid the pile of things he was carrying.

"I've been to get cloths and sponges to dry it all up, Mummy," he said breathlessly, "and a pail to squeeze it into, and Harriet's comin'," and sure enough the housemaid's head just then emerged at the top of the kitchen staircase.

"Master Jasper, Master Jasper," she gasped, "you can't carry all that;" and certainly he did look very comical, with his intensely grave face peeping out above his load.

"My poor Brownie," said his mother, "*my* good fairy—what would I do without you?" and somehow she could not help a little laugh.

Jasper gazed at her in surprise, but then feeling that he was the master of the situation, he hurried off again. "Come quick, Mumsey," he said, "p'raps we can stop any more of the carpet getting wet, if we're quick," and, followed by Harriet, they hurried into the drawing-room.

Leila and Christabel, by this time sobered and ashamed, though feeling, I fear, very far from friendly to each other, were on their knees in different parts of the floor—Leila picking up the fragments of broken glass; Chrissie rescuing the poor scattered flowers. Neither spoke, and their mother said coldly—

“Go upstairs. You are only in the way here. Come down at once when you hear the breakfast gong.”

Then Chrissie burst out—

“It’s not fair. It was all Leila. She knocked over the things, and I’d got up early on purpose.”

“Chrissie,” said her mother, and the one word silenced her again—“I cannot trust you together, I see,” Mrs Fortescue went on. “Go up to your room, Leila, and you, Chrissie, stay in the dining-room.”

Then with Harriet’s help—Jasper carefully collecting the flowers—some sort of order was by degrees brought about; the dangerous pieces of glass swept up, and the carpet dried as far as was possible. But it was necessary to leave the window open, and it was plain that some hours must pass before the room could be occupied.

“Make as large a fire as you can, to help to dry the floor, Harriet,” said Mrs Fortescue, and then she took Jasper’s hand and left the room. “Oh dear, oh dear!” she could not help murmuring, “it does seem too bad—Aunt Margaret’s first morning,” and a little squeeze of her fingers told her of Jasper’s sympathy.

“I’m sure Lelly and Chrissie is really *werry* sorry,” he said, “and Auntie is *so* kind, Mumsey.”

Kind indeed she was. For a few minutes later, when she came downstairs and it had to be explained to her that a woeful catastrophe had occurred, she declared that it would be a very good thing for her not to be tempted to loiter in the drawing-room that morning, “for I really must unpack and arrange my things upstairs. I suppose lessons have not begun regularly yet,” she went on, “so may Leila and Chrissie help me a little?” and she glanced at them as she spoke. Leila looked down, Chrissie grew scarlet.

“Ah,” thought Aunt Margaret, “I fear what has happened was not all an accident. Poor children—it would have been kinder to them in the end if they had been less indulged. We have all been to blame in the matter. Still, it is never too late to mend, and I must do my part.”

But from now, her eyes, loving though they were, watched things more closely and anxiously.

Neither of the little girls ventured to reply, but Mrs Fortescue, glancing at them, could not keep back a start.

“Chrissie,” she said, “have you looked at yourself this morning? Do you know that your face is simply—well, to speak plainly, *dirty*, and your hair ‘Like a crow’s nest,’ as my old nurse used to say? I hope Daddy won’t notice it.”

For their aunt’s sake, Mrs Fortescue tried to speak lightly, though she was really feeling sadly discouraged. Chrissie tried to toss her head in the way she usually did when found fault with, but I scarcely think the effort was a success, and she was very glad that as her father was late that morning, having had letters to write in his study, she had finished her breakfast before he came in.

“Yes,” said her mother, in answer to her unspoken question, “yes, you can go upstairs at once and make yourself fit to be seen.”

“Leila,” said Mrs Fortescue in a moment or two, “I do think you might take a little charge of Chrissie. After all she is younger and more thoughtless by nature than you are. Did you not see how untidy she was?”

“How could I?” said Leila gloomily. “She had left the room before I awoke.”

Just then Mr Fortescue’s step was heard in the passage, and as Leila’s black looks were almost as much to be dreaded as Chrissie’s dirty face, their mother added quickly, “Well, at any rate, you can help her now. So run after her;” and Leila, though with evident unwillingness, did as she was told.

“I am so sorry, so terribly sorry,” Mrs Fortescue had time to say to her aunt in a low voice, “that you should have such an uncomfortable first morning with us;” but Aunt Margaret only smiled quietly.

“My dear,” she said, “I am here, I hope, to be of some little help to you, not only to be comfortable, though really there is nothing that matters as far as I am concerned. And don’t lose heart. The little girls will profit by all this in the end.”

An hour or so later, when Aunt Margaret, up in her own room, was still busy unpacking, there came a tap at the door, and in answer to her “come in,” a small voice replied—

“It’s me, Auntie. Mumsey said p’raps I could carry things downstairs, or rerange them for you.”

“Thank you, my dear little boy. Yes—here in this corner are some books and my knitting and some of my pet treasures that I should like to have in the drawing-room. Mumsey showed me the nice table she has kept for me.”

“Yes,” said Jasper, “the table with the splendid big drawer. Shall I take them down now?”

“No, wait a minute or two till I have emptied this last trunk. You may unwrap all those things and then we can throw away the paper.”

“Auntie,” said Jasper, while he worked away busily, “will the glowin’ plants come soon? I do so want them, ’cos you see they won’t wither,” and he sighed. “Roots is funny things—when I was very little I thought flowers would grow

wifout roots, just the same.”

“And now you know better,” said his aunt with a smile. “Boots are very wonderful things—not only plant roots. We need them in our characters too.” Jasper looked puzzled. His dream was in his mind, though he was too shy to tell it.



“And then being good *grows*,” he said.—P. 138.

“You see,” Miss Fortescue went on, “it is like this. We should do things because we feel we *ought*, not just because we’re inclined. Being kind to each other, for instance, when we are feeling good-humoured and pleasant is all very well, but we need more than that. We need to be kind even when we are feeling cross or tired, or even when others are unkind to us, because it is *right*. Passing feelings are like plucked flowers—what are called good principles are like plants with roots.”

Jasper’s face lighted up.

“And then being good *grows*,” he said.

“Yes, indeed,” said Aunt Margaret, almost startled by his quickness. “Still it needs care. Watching, and above all, praying to God to help us—that is like the refreshing, nourishing water that plants need if they are to grow and prosper.”

Jasper gave a deep sigh of satisfaction.

“Now,” said his aunt, “I think you might carry down some of these things. Suppose you first take the books. Not too many at a time—can you manage all those?”

“Oh yes. I could take more quite well,” was the reply, for Jasper was a most zealous helper.

“I don’t think I want to send down any more, thank you, dear. I will keep most of my books up here, on those nice little shelves.”

So off trotted the small messenger with his load. Perhaps he was *too* careful, glancing so often at the pile of books that he did not glance enough at his own feet, for just as he was half-way down the last stair, there came an accident. Somehow or other he tripped and rolled down six or seven steps, the books on the top of him. Poor Jasper! He did not cry out, though for a moment or two he could scarcely keep back his tears—he felt bruised and giddy and rather mortified. But he was a very brave as well as patient little fellow, and he was struggling to his feet again when the dining-room door opened and Chrissie looked out.

“What was that noise?” she said. “Oh, it’s you, Japs—have you fallen downstairs?”

“Yes, I has,” he replied, “but please don’t tell Aunt Marg’ret or she won’t let me help her any more. I hasn’t hurt

myself much."

"Poor Jasper," said Chrissie, "never mind. It's a good thing you were only carrying books, not china or glass. Leila's done enough in that way for to-day. But I say, how pretty some of these books are," and she held up a small, beautifully bound prayer-book, and another "birthday book," exquisitely illuminated.

"Yes," said Jasper, "I fink they're Auntie's bestest books. She's goin' to keep them in the droind-room, on her table."

"I'll help you to carry them in," said Chrissie, and so she did—the carpet by this time was beginning to dry, though only beginning!—"I wish somebody would give me a prayer-book like this," she went on. "I'd love to take it to church."

And then, their pile being safely deposited, Jasper turned to go upstairs again, though limping a little.

"I hope I won't tumble any more," he said, "for there's lots of fings still to bring down."

"Suppose I offer to help too?" said Chrissie. "My face is quite clean now and my hair's tidy. I think it was too bad of Mummy to say anything about them before Aunt Margaret, when it was all, or nearly all, Lell's fault this morning."

"Auntie's werry kind," said Jasper. "I daresay she'd like you to help," and if he felt a tiny scrap of disappointment at not having all the honour to himself, his good little heart would not allow him to show it. "What's Lelly doing?" he went on.

"Crouched up by the dining-room fire over a story-book, of course," said Chrissie. "*She* won't mind," and her face was so bright and her tone so pleasant when she went into her aunt's room with Jasper, that Miss Fortescue began to think that she had really been taking the little girls' misdemeanours too seriously!

"They are only children after all," she said to herself, and "Yes, dear," she replied to Christabel, "I shall be very glad of your help. Can you hang up some of these cloaks and things in the cupboard? I am so glad there is a cupboard! And Jasper, my boy, will you put my boots and shoes and slippers neatly in a row on that lowest shelf? I won't send anything more downstairs till I see what had better stay up here, and I have not come across my wool for knitting yet."

Her cheerfulness touched a gentle chord in Chrissie.

"Aunt Margaret," she said, "it must be *awfully* strange for you here in this poky house, compared to Fareham. I wonder you don't mind more."

"Dear child, you must not think me better than I am," Miss Fortescue replied. "I have 'minded'," and her voice shook a little, "terribly—wrongly, I fear. But it might have been so much worse. Think what some have to bear—of loneliness and lovelessness when they are old like me! If I can feel that I am of use to you all, and able to brighten things a little for your father and mother, it will be almost as great a joy as it used to be to me to have you all at Fareham."

Christabel did not reply. But her aunt's words impressed her. Ideas—feelings rather, perhaps—were awaking in her, which were new to her; though she had often heard and read of "unselfishness," and the happiness of living for others, of bearing, or at least sharing their burdens, she had never really "taken in," realised these truths. To see them acted upon, made the very sunshine of life, struck her as very wonderful. For perhaps the first time, she said to herself, "I wish I could really care for other people and try to make them happy and not mind about myself," and though the thought passed off again, and she was as ready as ever to grumble and to squabble with Leila and to fight for her own rights and fancies, still, it was something that it *had* been there, a beginning, a tiny seedling, which might yet take root and blossom into beauty.

So the day which had seemed likely, like poor long-ago Rosamund's, to be "one of misfortunes," cleared and improved as it went on. Chrissie had one happy quality—she really, if once interested in a thing, did throw her whole heart and cleverness into it; and careless and unmethodical though she was, the sight of her aunt's fairy-like neatness and order struck her pleasantly.

"If it wasn't such a trouble," she said, "I would like to be beautifully neat like you, Aunt Margaret. Leila *thinks* she is, but I don't call it neat just to be slow and dreamy and never sure where you are or where your things are. I think its just as bad as my dashing about and turning things topsy-turvy. I don't say she tears and spoils her frocks as much as I do, but she *forgets* quite as badly, and—"

A sigh from Jasper's corner interrupted her.

"What's the matter?" she said.

"Oh, I was only thinkin' I do hope I won't forget to water the growin' plants when they come," replied the little boy.

Chrissie laughed.

"He's got those plants on the brain, Aunt Margaret," she said. "You'd better forget about them for just now, Japs," she went on, turning to him, "for very likely they won't come for ever so long. Things take such a time by luggage trains."

Jasper's face fell—somehow his dream and the talk with his aunt had got mixed up with the thought of the real plants and made him long for them with the curious intensity of longing that one scarcely sympathises with enough in children. But his aunt understood.

"Cheer up, Jasper," she said. "I shouldn't wonder if they come to-day—this very afternoon perhaps."

Chapter Nine.

Prayer-Books, Lost and Found.

And so they did! Aunt Margaret would not have raised Jasper's hopes without good reason, and she knew that there are ways and means of hurrying up hampers and cases even by goods trains, when there is cause for doing so. Morris, the Fareham gardener, had seen to it all, and the well-chosen plants and flowers arrived in good order, looking none the worse for their journey.

They gave all the children a busy and—for that very reason perhaps—a happy afternoon, Jasper especially, as his mother chose out half-a-dozen pots "for his very own" to keep on a tiny table in front of his window, and the others were arranged in groups on flower-stands in the three rooms downstairs, as neither Leila nor Chrissie cared to have any in their own quarters.

"I'd only forget to water them," said Chrissie coolly, "and so would Lell, I'm sure, and then there'd be fusses," and though Leila half thought of firing up at this, her usual dislike to trouble gained the day, and she said nothing.

"The drawing-room looks quite a different place with flowers and greenery about," said Mrs Fortescue, "and Aunt Margaret's pretty work-baskets and silver scissors and knick-knacks."

"And books," added Chrissie. "Aren't they lovely—the bindings, I mean?" and she fondled the prayer-book which had so caught her fancy.

"I am afraid the prayer-book is more ornamental than useful to me now," said Miss Fortescue. "The print is too small for my old eyes. So I have to use a much larger one. Yes—my corner looks quite homelike, thanks to your table and that most comfortable arm-chair, Edith."

"I think we may sit in here this evening," said Mrs Fortescue, eyeing the still darkened carpet. "We will leave the window open and keep up a big fire till dark. But we had better not stay any longer just now. I do hope to-morrow will be a brighter day."

"But it is not raining, though it is dull," said her aunt, "and the children have not been out. I think we might have a little walk before tea. I should like to know something of the neighbourhood."

"I can show you the post-office—it's nearer than the pillar-box," said Jasper. "Mumsey lets me go to buy stamps—and the omnibus startin'-place, and the church, and—"

"Don't be silly, Jasper," said Leila, who was feeling cross at having to go out. "That's not what Aunt Margaret wants to see—not that there's anything at all to see," she added gloomily. "It's perfectly hideous, it's not like London at all."

"I thought you were within a mile of Kensington Gardens," said Miss Fortescue quietly. "I have very pleasant associations with Kensington Gardens and the old Palace."

"We've never been there since we came," said Leila. "Mother's been too busy to take us, and besides—they're always stuffed with nursery-maids and perambulators."

"Well—let us explore a little by degrees; as the spring comes on we must find some pleasant walks. But we must be quick just now, or it will be getting too late for even a short one."

And for a wonder the two sisters did manage to be ready when their aunt came downstairs, followed by Jasper, who insisted on carrying her "numbrella." Leila was feeling a little ashamed of her peevishness, and Chrissie was still under the good impression of the morning. So both were, for the time being, at their best, and the walk passed off pleasantly.

But Aunt Margaret was very observant, and even now, in these first few day's, when the novelty of her presence and the influence of her never-failing cheerful kindness did much to smooth things, her heart was sometimes sad and anxious.

"They have been terribly spoilt," she said to herself, "and while life was made so very easy for them, this did not show as it does now. Poor dears—I hope we may be able to check this selfishness and want of consideration for others—it may be more owing to want of thought than to any deeper cause."

As time went on, however, her anxiety and disappointment increased. Leila fell back into her indolent habits, and Christabel grew more openly defiant and self-willed. And at last their mother felt that she could no longer go on trying to make the best of things in hopes of sparing her aunt distress, and herself perhaps, unselfish as she was, some sharp mortification.

"I don't know what to do with either of the little girls," she said one day, when things and tempers had been unusually trying. "I cannot bear to say much about it to Reginald—he has enough to worry him in so many ways. I had hoped that when we settled down into this new life they would really try to be a comfort to us. But they think of nothing but their own likes and dislikes—they don't seem to have the least idea of obedience. Why, Chrissie was almost rude to *you*, dear aunt, at their French lesson to-day—and Leila had evidently not pretended to learn those verses! And you are *so* good to them."

"Do not distress yourself for *me*," said Miss Fortescue. "We have all been to blame in the past, and we must face it and do our best. I am sure it will all come right in the end. Your children and Reginald's, dear Edith, *cannot* be really selfish."

Mrs Fortescue tried to smile.

"Perhaps *I* have been selfish in not being stricter with them," she said. "My one idea was to make them happy, and with the boys it seems to have done no harm."

"Roland has had the discipline of school for several years," said Aunt Margaret; "and as for little Jasper—well, really, he seems one of those sweet natures that *can't* be spoilt."

"And I fancy he has had rather a Cinderella-like life in the nursery, boy though he is," said his mother. "How strange it seems that selfishness in some should be good training for those who suffer from it."

"But, on the other hand, there is the good example," replied Miss Fortescue. "I have noticed several times that the little fellow's gentleness and sweetness *have* made his sisters ashamed of themselves—Chrissie especially. And Jasper is not very strong, you know, whereas the girls are overflowing with health, which may be a bar to sympathy sometimes—all good gifts *may* be abused. But I do hope that the great change in their lives may prove a blessing in disguise to our little girls."

"I had hoped so too," said their mother. "Indeed, Miss Earle said something of the kind before she left. She had begun to feel very discouraged."

"And other discipline will be sent if they do not profit by this," said Miss Fortescue almost solemnly. "But let us hope that they will."

Life, however, as the days went on, was by no means as peaceful and happy in the small house in Spenser Terrace as it might have been, and should have been. And but for Aunt Margaret's unflinching sympathy and hopefulness I scarcely think Mrs Fortescue could have kept up at all. For she knew that she *must* be cheerful when her husband was at home. Life was far from easy for him at present; he was working hard in ways that were new to him, and more trying than if he had been a younger man, and a bright welcome and peaceful evenings were certainly due to him. More than once she tried to make her little daughters understand this, and for a few hours, a day or two at most, it seemed to impress them. But, alas! all too soon the old habits overmastered them again: Leila was as lazy and self-absorbed as ever; Chrissie disobedient and defiant.

Mrs Fortescue, with some difficulty, had found a daily governess, living near them, who was glad to come for the morning hours and take the children for a walk when lessons were over. She was a simple, good-natured girl, well taught and well able to teach up to a certain point, but she was a very different sort of governess from Miss Earle, and very soon both Leila and Christabel began to take advantage of her simplicity and half-timid manners.

One day, to her great distress, Mrs Fortescue, meeting the poor thing on her way out, saw unmistakable signs of recent tears in her face and eyes, and when a kind inquiry was made as to their cause, they burst out again more freely.

"I'm afraid I must give it up," she sobbed, "and I was so glad to come near home and all. And it's not easy for me to find pupils, as of course I am not accomplished."

"But your English teaching is excellent," said Mrs Fortescue; "it is all I require for the children at present. Please don't be discouraged."

Still she sobbed on.

"It's—it's not that," she said, "except that if I were cleverer they—they might respect me. Jasper is as good as gold, but—but the little girls, the young ladies—they do not obey me in the least, and—and—they say things—"

Mrs Fortescue turned and walked down the street with her. It was quiet, and really less likely to be disturbed by passers-by than the small house by incursions of children!

"What sort of things? Tell me more, I beg you, Miss Greenall."

"That—that I'm not a lady—and I have never pretended to be one in the full sense of the word. Father was only a shop-keeper, and mother is a farmer's daughter. But still—I don't think Christabel need speak as she does. And Leila dawdles on purpose to vex me sometimes, I do think, and when I found fault to-day—she kept us waiting fully ten minutes—she said of course *I* couldn't understand what it was to have no maid—'of course *you*,' she said, 'have been used to huddling on your clothes anyhow, ever since you were quite a baby almost'—and," Miss Greenall continued, "I *know* I am not untidy, though I dress plainly. Mother brought us up to be very neat."

Mrs Fortescue sighed deeply.

"My dear Miss Greenall," she said, "your mother brought you up much better than I seem to have brought up *my* daughters. I am unspeakably ashamed of them, and I beg you to accept my apology. And *they* shall apologise to you to-morrow morning."

But at this poor Miss Greenall looked up with frightened eyes. She was a pretty fair girl, small and delicate-looking.

"Oh, please, please," she entreated, "do not tell them I have complained. I could not go on if they knew it. I will try again and be a little firmer with them, if only, only you will say nothing."

And, though against her own convictions, Mrs Fortescue had to agree to what Miss Greenall asked.

And for a few days things were better. The little girls had been startled by the sight of the tears which the poor governess had not been able to repress—startled and shamed. Nor had Jasper's face of shocked surprise lessened the impression.

He was no tell-tale, but still—

"Japs," said Chrissie, the first time they were alone together, "I'm sorry we made that silly Miss Green—what's-her-name—cry, and so's Lell. We were half joking, you know."

The child looked at her with his solemn blue eyes, and Christabel felt herself blushing. She was naturally truthful.

"At least," she went on, "we didn't mean her to take it like that. *She* might have seemed to think it a joke. But we don't want Mummy to hear about it. Things sound worse when they're tell-taled."

"I'se *not* a tell-tale," said Jasper stoutly.

"Well, well—I didn't say you were. And I promise that we won't say those things again, as she minds them so, silly that she is."

"Will you tell her you're solly?" Jasper inquired.

"I don't know—we'll see about it," Chrissie replied, "but any way we won't make her cry again."

So Jasper contented himself with cherishing most carefully the very best of his hyacinths, just beginning to show a little colour, as a gift to Miss Greenall, to be presented as soon as it would be fit for her acceptance.

"And if Lelly and Chrissie would *werry* much like to join," he said to himself in his generous little heart, "we might give it 'atween us all. I'm sure it's goin' to be a splendid one."

But, alas! before the hyacinth's delicate pink flowers had reached perfection, and Jasper's kind plan could be carried out, sad things had come to pass, which I must hasten to tell you about.

The impression made upon Leila and Chrissie by Miss Greenall's distress was not a lasting one, except in so far as they were more careful in their way of speaking to her; for they knew that Jasper's eyes were upon them, and that any rudeness to their teacher would not escape him. But beyond this, there was no real improvement. They were careless, unpunctual, and, so far as they dared, disobedient. Still Miss Greenall went on doing her best, and now and then her patience and gentleness had some little good, effect. She was able to tell Mrs Fortescue that things were rather better. "I think I can go on," she said, "if only Leila was more attentive and Chrissie less heedless."

It really went to her heart—brought up as she had been in neat and careful ways—to see the children's destructiveness—copy-books blotted and torn; lesson-books dog-eared and spotted; worse still, frocks and aprons covered with ink, or ruthlessly smeared with fingers much in need of soap and water! And in these kinds of carelessness Christabel was the worst offender, in spite of her occasional good resolutions, always encouraged by Aunt Margaret, to try to be as neat as "you were, when you were a little girl," in reply to which, her aunt would smile and assure her that good habits of no kind come all of themselves to anybody, man or woman, boy or girl.

It chanced one Sunday morning, when the sisters were, as usual, late in getting ready for church, and their father's voice had sounded more than once up the staircase hastening them, that Chrissie could not find her prayer-book. Go without it she scarcely dared, for this was the sort of carelessness that Mr Fortescue himself might notice, and when "Daddy" *did* "notice," even Chrissie "minded!" Now Leila was the happy possessor of two prayer-books, one of which was practically new, and which she kept wrapped up in tissue-paper in a drawer.

"Oh Lell," said Chrissie in despair, as Leila was leaving the room, "do lend me your best one, or take it yourself and let me have the one like mine."

"No, indeed, I won't," said Leila, hurrying off, as Mr Fortescue's voice came again.

"You must run after us. We can wait no longer, children," he called. Leila was already half-way downstairs.

Chrissie gave a frantic rush round the room again, scrambling under the beds, pushing aside chairs and tables in search of her book, but all in vain. And even if she had dared to take her sister's "best one," she was not sure where to look for it. It would have needed time to find.

"I must go," she thought, "whatever happens." So she dashed off—narrowly escaping falling downstairs in her hurry.

The others had all started, but the hall-door was left slightly ajar, and that of the drawing-room stood wide open, and as she ran past it, a sudden idea struck the child.

"I'll take Aunt Margaret's prayer-book," she thought. "It's just about the same size as mine, and if I keep it open nobody will see any difference, unless Lell perhaps, and she surely wouldn't be so mean as to tell, after being so ill-natured to me."

No sooner said than done, and in another minute Chrissie was racing down the street, book in hand, to overtake the family party, just turning the corner.

Leila glanced at her.

"You've found it, then?" she whispered, for Chrissie took care to hold the book so that its cover did not show. She made no reply, and Leila's face darkened.

"If you've taken mine after all," she said threateningly, though still in a low voice, "I'll—"

"I haven't, then," said Chrissie, "I wouldn't touch a thing of yours, you mean creature."

"I don't believe you," said Leila, catching her arm, so as to see the book.

"Children," said their mother's voice, warningly.

They started.

"I've got Aunt Margaret's out of the drawing-room," whispered Christabel. "There now—if it's found out, it's all your fault," and Leila, startled, made no reply.

Church-time passed, and more than once Mrs Fortescue, glancing at the children, was pleased to see that Chrissie appeared to be following the service with unusual attention. She would have been less content had she known that for this there were two reasons. Firstly, Chrissie was afraid of closing the prayer-book; secondly, she was interested and amused by the old-world names she found in it—"His Majesty King George," "Our gracious Queen Charlotte," etc, etc, the Service for "Gunpowder's Day," and other now discarded memorials. It was really quite "entertaining," but I doubt if her idle, careless thoughts took part in one single prayer all through the morning, if even one "Our Father," in which surely the very youngest child, as well as the humblest and simplest worshipper, can fully join, came from her heart.

Poor Chrissie—poor Leila—sterner teaching was preparing for them.

There was some delay in the church porch, as the congregation was passing out.

"I do believe it's raining," said Mrs Fortescue, and so it was. "I hope you have your umbrellas, children?" she went on.

Yes—Leila had brought hers; but Chrissie, no! "Really Chrissie," said her father, "you are too forgetful. Don't you remember my saying at breakfast that it looked very like rain?"

Chrissie made no reply; for once she had no excuse to offer.

"Give me your umbrella, Leila," said their mother, "and you take mine—or, yes, Daddy's," as he hold it out, "that is larger still, and run home together as fast as you can."

The sisters set off, as they were told, Leila, as the taller, holding the umbrella. But oh, how cross she was! "Too bad's" and "All your fault's" were hurled at Chrissie, till the rain and the running and the weight of the rather heavy umbrella, reduced Leila to silence, in spite of Chrissie's provoking rejoinders.

"My fault indeed! If you had been good-natured for once and lent me your other prayer-book I wouldn't have been in such a fuss, and then I wouldn't have forgotten my own umbrella."

They were both out of breath, and certainly out of temper, when at last—for distances do seem doubled and trebled in such uncomfortable circumstances—they reached Spenser Terrace, and flinging the wet umbrella at Harriet to look after, slowly made their way upstairs to their own room.



"Lell, Lell, what shall I do? I've lost it."—i. 152.

Christabel tore off her hat and coat with her usual haste. They were not very wet after all, but as she was tossing the jacket aside, something hard bumped against her knee.

"There's something in one of the pockets," she said, feeling in it as she spoke. Then out she drew her own prayer-book. "Look here, Lell," she exclaimed, restored to good-humour by her triumph. "It was in here all the time—ever since last Sunday, I daresay."

"I daresay," repeated Leila scornfully. "There never *was* any one so careless as you. You'd better run down and put Aunt Margaret's treasure back in its place before she misses it."

Christabel started. She got red, then white. She glanced at the bed, where her hat and gloves were lying; she felt in her frock pocket, she stared at the floor, then in terror and despair she burst out—"Lell, Lell, what shall I do? I've lost it."

Chapter Ten.

Peter's Place.

Leila gasped. For once, her better feelings came to the surface. The enormity of the misfortune aroused her sympathy so fully as to drown every less amiable feeling. Then she pulled herself together.

"It *can't* be lost—you were thinking of it all church-time; you couldn't have carried it carelessly. Feel in your other coat packet."

Christabel shook her head.

"No, no," she said, "I *know* I didn't put it in my pocket; and now I remember that the last time I had the *feeling* of it was in the church porch, when there was all that fuss about the rain and the umbrellas. I dropped it then, or in the street just after, and oh, if it was in the street, it'll have got soaked in the rain and ruined! And I do believe Auntie cares for it more than anything in the world. It was her grandmother's. *Oh, Leila,*" and she clasped her hands in misery.

"Don't begin crying about it," said Leila, though not unkindly. "Let's hunt about a little," and her eyes wandered round the room. "Mightn't you have dropped it on the staircase?" She turned towards the door, but Christabel stopped her. "No, no," she said, "it's no good. I know now that I didn't bring it home. And I hear them all coming in, Leila. Don't seem to be looking for anything."

"Perhaps we may get it back," said Leila, who could use her wits to advantage when she aroused herself to give her full attention. "The thing to be done is to ask for it at the church. If we could but get there by ourselves." Then her eyes turned to the window. "I wonder if it's going to rain all day."

A sudden thought struck Christabel.

"What Sunday is it? The first of the month! Oh, I do believe it's the Sunday when there's a Children's Service in the afternoon, and Mummy said once that she thought it would be nice for us to go. Suppose we ask her to let us?"

"If it leaves off raining," said Leila. "I don't think we'd be allowed to go again if it pours. But it's looking brighter."

"Oh, do let's try to manage it," said Chrissie, clasping her hands. "I'd rather—well, rather do *anything*, or have the horriest pain, rather than tell Aunt Margaret that I've lost her book."

"Yes," said Leila, piling on the agony, "for, of course, you couldn't call it an accident, as you'd no business to take it."

"And if *you'd* been,"—began Chrissie, but she did not finish the sentence, for at that moment the gong sounded for the early dinner—on Sundays now everybody's dinner—and the children had to hurry downstairs. On reflection, too, Chrissie said to herself that it would be "awfully silly" to quarrel with Leila.

"She's been kind about it, and I could never manage without her," she thought; and as they were entering the dining-room she whispered to her sister, "*You* ask; I really daren't."

It was new for Christabel to own to "not daring" about anything in the world, and Leila felt rather gratified at being trusted in the matter. Nothing was said till dinner was nearly over; the children were very quiet and behaved to perfection. Mrs Fortescue felt pleased. This state of things, following on Chrissie's attentive looks in church, made her begin to hope that her anxieties about her little daughters were likely to grow less, and inclined her to consent to Leila's unexpected request.

"Mummy," she said, "Chrissie and I would like to go to the Children's Service at church this afternoon. It's the Sunday for it, and we know the way there quite well, of course. Mayn't we go?"

Mrs Fortescue smiled.

"I should very much like you to go," she said, "and I think I can quite trust you by yourselves. But how about the weather?"

"It is clearing," said Mr Fortescue, "and the glass is going up. Yes—I think they may safely go."

Chrissie's face, which had been looking unusually solemn, brightened up. But it clouded again as her father went on, patting Jasper, who was seated next him, on the head—

"And this little man? Wouldn't you like to escort your sisters to church, Jap?"

"In course I would. I'll cally your numbrellas and your church-books—all of them, if you like."

"Then that's settled. Roley and I are going a good walk," continued Mr Fortescue. "We need a breath of fresh air, after working so hard all the week, don't we, my boy? And it will give Aunt Margaret and your mother a nice peaceful afternoon, which I am sure they will be glad of."

"Let's be ready early, Lell," said Chrissie, when they were by themselves, "and then perhaps we could ask about it as we go in."

"If only Japs wasn't coming," said Leila. "But if we had seemed not to want him, they'd have been vexed."

"P'raps he won't notice," said Christabel.

For once they were ready in exceedingly good time—too early, in fact—so afraid were they of a sudden shower of rain, or any other unlucky event, stopping their going. As they ran downstairs their father, who had not yet started on his walk, called them into the drawing-room—the door was standing open, and thus he heard them passing.

"Children," he said, "don't try any short-cuts to church. Go as we went this morning. I particularly want you not to go by Peter's Place—you know where I mean?—a street of small houses round the first corner from the church."

"Oh yes," replied Chrissie glibly. "I know. We did pass that way once, but it's much nicer to keep to the wide streets."

"Then you quite understand? You promise to go the way we went this morning," he repeated.

"Yes, certainly," said the two together. "Where's Japs?" Chrissie went on. "I wish he'd come."

"I'm here," the little boy called out, running downstairs. "I'm pairfitly ready. I didn't know you'd come down," and off the three set.

"Why did you say that about Peter's Place to the children?" Mrs Fortescue inquired.

"Because," Mr Fortescue replied—"because I saw something in the papers yesterday about an outbreak of scarlet fever there. It was quickly stopped, and there are no fresh cases, but anything like that lingers about, especially in cottage houses of that sort. And there is not the slightest need to pass anywhere near the place."

"Of course not," Mrs Fortescue agreed. "But I am glad you remembered to warn them."

"It was nothing locally wrong," he added. "It was brought from a distance, I saw. Yes," he added, "on the whole, I suppose we are really safer in London from epidemics than in most country places."

The children reached the church in good time, but though they glanced about as they entered, the little girls saw no one of whom to inquire for the missing prayer-book.

"We must ask as we come out," whispered Leila, for as yet the misfortune had not been told to Jasper; "and do let us sit in the same place, or as near as we can to where we were this morning, just *in case* you dropped it there."

But Chrissie shook her head.

"No," she replied, "I'm certain I didn't leave it in the church. It was out here, I'm almost sure," and her eyes searched all round the porch, but in vain.

The service was not long, and not dull. There was a good deal of singing, which the children enjoyed, and the little address was interesting and impressive. It was almost impossible *not* to listen.

"Oh," thought Chrissie at the close, "if only we can find the prayer-book, I do think from now I'll try to be less careless, and 'gooder' altogether;" and in her way Leila, too, felt the influence of the wise and kindly words.

Outside they waited a few minutes till the little crowd of children and mothers and governesses had dispersed, in hopes of seeing some one from whom they could get information or advice. But they saw no one looking at all like a verger, and almost in despair Chrissie caught hold of a belated choir-boy, who was passing out.

"Please," she said, "I've lost my prayer-book. Who is there I can ask about it?"

The boy stopped.

"Best ask the verger," he replied. "But you can't see him just now. He's busy, I know. If you left it inside, it'll be in the vestry, pr'aps. But if you dropped it outside—well, I'm sure I can't say," and he gave a low whistle; but as he saw the distress on the child's face he took pity, and went on. "It *might* be took to his house, if a honest person picked it up. I've known of such. He's well known about here, you see—and they might have been passing that way."

"Where is it?" gasped Chrissie.

"Peter's Place," replied the boy, "number twenty-two," and off he ran.

Leila and Chrissie looked at each other.

"Peter's Place," they both exclaimed.

It meant nothing to Jasper, of course, for he had not heard Mr Fortescue's warning.

"I know," he said. "It's a funny little street near here. We could go home that way, or I could run down from the corner. I'se so solly, Chrissie, about your prayer-book. Is it your best one?"

"No," said Chrissie, "I haven't got a best one. It's only Lell that has. No, it's far, far worse. Japs," she went on, "you won't tell, for p'raps we'll get it back and then it'll be all right and I'll *never* do such a thing again," and seeing that there was now nothing else for it, she told Jasper the whole unhappy story.

He grew pale with sympathy: he was too sorry for her, much to blame though she had been, to say anything to hurt her. No one certainly could have called the little fellow a "prig" who had seen him then. His one idea was to "help."

"Come along, quick," he said. "I'll show you the way to his house," and he sprang forward.

"Chrissie," whispered Leila, "we daren't go—we mustn't go. We promised."

"I know," Chrissie replied, "though I daresay Dads only said it for fear of our losing our way. As if we were so silly! But *Japs* didn't promise, Lell?" Leila hesitated—the breaking a promise in the spirit, if not in the letter, does not come easy to honest consciences, such as these two little girls did really possess.

"There's nothing else to be done," persisted Christabel, trying to talk down her own misgivings. "We won't go home that way, Lell, we'll keep to the big street, and let Japs run round to the house. He knows where it is, and we'll wait for him."

And to this the elder sister at last consented. "No, Japs," she said, as he was hurrying them on by what was actually the nearest way to Peter's Place, "we don't want to go that way. It's rather slummy. We'll keep to the wide streets, and when we get to the corner—you know where I mean?—you can run back, you see, and Chris and I will wait for you."

"Werry well," said Jasper, "but Peter's Place isn't at all dirty. It's kite neat and clean, somefin' like where Nurse's cousin, what Mumsey let me go to see, lived."

But he was pleased at the importance of being trusted, and ran off eagerly when they reached the corner in question.

"Japs has a natural affinity for slums," Leila remarked in her rather lordly manner, as they stood awaiting his return with what patience they could. "He'll probably go in for Holy Orders and work himself to death in the East End, when

he grows up.”

“He might do worse,” sighed Chrissie. “Any way, I wish I was as good as he is now.”

It seemed a long time—in reality barely ten minutes had passed—before, hurrying round the further corner from where they were waiting, for Peter’s Place did not run directly out of the main street, they at last caught sight of the little figure, and—yes, oh joy!—in his uplifted hand he was waving something,—something too small to be seen distinctly, but which, from Jasper’s manner, there could be no doubt, was the precious prayer-book.

“Got it! got it!” he shouted, almost before he was near enough for them to hear what he said. “It *was* there. Somebody picked it up what lives near, and brought it to the church-man’s house.”

“Oh Japs, darling Japs, how glad I am,” said Chrissie. “I’ve never been so glad in my life. Now I can put it back on Aunt Margaret’s table, and it’ll be all right.”

Jasper beamed all over; it was not often that he was spoken to as “darling” by either of his sisters. But suddenly a new thought struck him, and an anxious look came over his face.

“But you’ll tell Mumsey all about it, won’t you, Chrissie?” he asked.

Chrissie wriggled and Leila frowned.

“I’ll see about it,” said the former. “I won’t tell her to-day—it’s best not to bother her on Sunday, the only day Daddy’s at home.”

Leila murmured something, but Jasper did not hear what it was. Indeed, he did not listen, and his expression cleared a little.

“Not to-day or any day,” had been the elder sister’s whisper. “There’s no need ever to tell.”

And great temptation *never* to do so! For now, the indirect disregard of their father’s orders as to not passing by Peter’s Place had involved Leila as well as Christabel in confession, if such ever took place. “And I needn’t have been mixed up in it at all, except out of good-nature to you,” she said afterwards to Chrissie; “so if you tell, it’ll be the meanest thing you ever did.”

“Why were you so long, Japs?” they asked, rather wishing to change the subject. “Did the verger’s people make a fuss about giving it to you?”

“Oh no,” was his reply, “the minute the little boy’s mother sawed me, she gived it me. I told her it was a werry old book, though it was so pretty. It was lyin’ on the table where he was on the sofa, but he said I must wait till his mother came.”

“What *do* you mean?” said Leila impatiently. “Who was lying on the sofa?”

“The little boy—I said the little boy,” answered Jasper. “He’s been werry ill, though he’s almost kite better now. But his mother didn’t let me shake hands wif him—fear of disturbin’ him, she said. She wasn’t werry polite—not *werry*. She said, ‘Now, sir, you’d better be quick and go.’”

“I daresay she was busy,” said Chrissie carelessly, “but she didn’t need to say ‘be quick,’ for you didn’t want not to be quick.”

“In course I didn’t. She’d kept me waitin’,” agreed Jasper, whose feelings had been evidently slightly ruffled. “I was only shakin’ hands—goin’ to, I mean. Still,” he added, with his usual kindness, “it was polite of her to say ‘sir’ to me.”

By this time they were close to their own house. Arrived there, the little girls ran upstairs as quickly as possible. As quickly as possible, too, did they take off their hats and jackets, though in spite of Chrissie’s new resolutions I fear I must own that her jacket, if not hat, found its resting-place on the floor, and as to what became of boots and gloves I really could not say!

For on their way past the dining-room, the door of which had been purposely left slightly open, they had heard their mother’s voice begging them to come down at once. “Tea is ready. Your aunt and I are waiting for you,” she said.

To be quickly obedient, I am sorry to say, was not the motive that inspired their haste.

“Now’s our time, Lell,” said Chrissie. “There’s no one in the drawing-room. We can put it back at once on Auntie’s table. I’ll just slip it a little under some of the other things, so if she possibly *has* missed it, she’ll think afterwards she had made a mistake.”

“Do it yourself,” said Leila, and then it was that she added her warning as to what she would think of Chrissie if she ever “told,” to which no reply was vouchsafed.

And the prayer-book was replaced, and when the little sisters made their appearance, with, as I have said, unusual quickness, in the dining-room, their mother greeted them with her brightest smiles.

“I really think,” she was saying to herself, “that things are beginning to improve wonderfully with them.”

But Aunt Margaret, though always ready to hope and believe the best, felt less sanguine. There was a certain flurry and excitement about Chrissie, a half-veiled uneasiness about Leila, a sort of reluctance in both to look one frankly in

the face, which made her anxious, though she could have given no real reason for this.

And Jasper was very silent, and for once the cheerful and ever-ready little fellow seemed absent and self-absorbed.

“What can it be? or am I growing fanciful in my old age?” thought Miss Fortescue.

The evening passed quietly. The sisters answered intelligently to a few questions from their mother about the little “sermon for children” they had heard, and Jasper added a word or two. It was evident that all three had listened with attention, and this somewhat reassured their aunt.

“Good-night, my darlings,” she said, when she kissed them, as they were all going to bed, for on Sunday evenings Jasper too was allowed to sit up till eight o’clock. But—*was* it fancy?—did not Leila shrink away a little; was there not a slight catch, as of a very far-away sob, in Chrissie’s throat; and why did Jasper’s blue eyes, which always looked dark at night, strike her as sad and mournful?

“What can it be?” she repeated to herself.

Nor would she have felt reassured, but, on the contrary, still more perplexed, had she overheard the little boy’s whisper as the three made their way upstairs.

“You will to-morrow, won’t you, Chrissie?” and Chrissie’s impatient “Nonsense, Japs. You’re not to interfere—it’s no business of yours.”

The child went to sleep with a heavy heart.

“And I *were* so pleased at findin’ it,” he thought. “It would all have been kite happy, if only Chrissie would tell.”

For he, of course, had no idea that his very readiness to help in the matter had been accepted by the others in direct defiance of their father’s warning.

And though the next day and two or three days after were bright and sunny, and though Leila and Chrissie really seemed more anxious to please their mother and to keep to her rules, a sort of cloud hung over the house, though Aunt Margaret was the only one who said to herself, with increasing misgiving—“The children have something on their minds. What can it be?”

But before a week had passed, already the impression had faded, if not entirely, yet very nearly so. The shame and regret, the wishing, and for a time meaning, to be, as Chrissie had called it half-jokingly to herself, “gooder,” had no root; they had made fair promise for a moment, and then they “had withered away.” For if children—and people—allow themselves just to be governed by their inclinations; to put off till “more convenient seasons” real penitence, real turning in the right direction; to fill their minds and thoughts with pleasanter subjects than their own faults and failings—why, nothing is easier than to do so! And, on the other hand, more and more difficult does it become to take up the good resolutions again. For in this world we never stand still in character, any more than in our bodies; every day we are growing older, and every day, if we are not growing *better*, we are growing worse.

So the sudden improvement in her two little daughters, which had brought such happy hopefulness about them to their mother’s heart, proved but sadly passing—indeed, they fell back in several ways, as if, instead of being the better for making the start, they were the reverse; the truth being that, after all, their consciences were *not* at rest, though they tried to silence them and sometimes succeeded. The sight of the prayer-book always gave Chrissie a twinge, and still worse was the look in Jasper’s reproachful eyes, though after a day or two he left of reminding her of what, in his innocence, he had looked upon as a promise.

And Leila was as lazy and disobliging as ever, often ungenerously taunting Chrissie with ingratitude, which naturally led to very unlovely quarrels.

Neither helped the other in the last. They grew more and more unpunctual and careless and ill-tempered. They only just stopped short of actual rudeness to poor Miss Greenall, and even the pleasant French lessons with their aunt, seemed to have lost their flavour.

“Something has gone wrong,” she said to herself over and over again. “What can it be? I wish I knew what is best to do—how really to make some impression on them. I used to think I was able to influence children,” and she could not help sighing.

She little thought that her own words were so soon to come true. “Sharper lessons will be sent if they do not listen to gentler teaching,” she had said.

Chapter Eleven.

A Stern Lesson.

One morning, rather more than a fortnight after the Sunday I have told you about, while the three children were at lessons with patient Miss Greenall in the dining-room, Jasper suddenly put his head down on the table, and burst into tears.

They all gave a start of surprise; it was so unlike him!

“What is the matter, dear?” asked the governess, very kindly.

"I can't do them," he sobbed, pushing his slate away. "I can't. My head's hurtin' so, and I don't know how to do them."

Miss Greenall looked distressed.

"Perhaps I have given you too difficult sums," she said, for his sums were the "them" of his lament, and she glanced at the rows of figures.

"How she does spoil him!" whispered Chrissie, adding, as she turned to Jasper, "I wouldn't be such a baby as to cry about it, if I were you."

But though, as a rule, nothing hurt the little fellow's feelings as much as any hint of "babyishness," the words seemed to have no effect. He just cried on.

Miss Greenall tried to soothe him.

"We'll put away the sums for to-day," she said. "I know you have tried to do them, and to-morrow I'll explain them again to you. Suppose you do a little writing for a change? That won't tire your head."

"Werry well," sighed Jasper. "But I really did try."

"I know you did," his teacher repeated, and she pretended not to see the half-mocking glances that passed between her elder pupils.

So with half-suppressed sobs and deep-drawn breathings, Jasper set to work again, and Miss Greenall turned her attention to Leila and Christabel.

"Is your Mamma at home this morning?" she asked later, as she was putting on her cloak to leave. "I should like to see her for a moment."

"No, she's not. She won't be in till luncheon," Leila replied, none too politely. Miss Greenall hesitated. Then she said, lowering her voice, "Would you mind telling her that I don't think Jasper is very well?"

"There's nothing the matter with him except that he's a spoilt baby," said Chrissie. "*We're* not petted if our lessons are difficult."

Miss Greenall said nothing, but a glance, almost of appeal, to Leila, brought out a condescending reply.

"You really needn't bother about him, but I will tell Mummy if I don't forget," and with this small amount of response Miss Greenall had to be content.

Leila did forget, however, and Chrissie did not try to remember, as might have been expected, and as both their mother and Aunt Margaret were very busy that day about the sale of some of the Fareham pictures, Jasper's languor and aching head passed unnoticed.

But the next morning, while Mrs Fortescue was dressing, she was startled by an unexpected tap at the door, and Roland put in his head.

"Mums," he said, "will you come up and look at Jap? He's caught cold or something, and he seems so queer. He doesn't want to get up, and you know he's never lazy."

Mrs Fortescue needed no second bidding. She was in Jasper's little room in another minute.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked anxiously.

"My 'hroat's razer sore, Mumsey darlin'," he said, "and I'm tired in my head. Must I get up?"

"No, no. Stay in bed and I'll send up some nice breakfast," she replied, and as she met Roland following her—"Roley, dear," she said, "I hope it's only a cold, but I must get the doctor—or a doctor, for it's so far to send for our own from here."

"Let me go," the boy replied. "It's better to have some one we know. I'll take the 'bus and be very quick, and you can give me a note to explain why I'm late at Mr Banbury's," and he was off, almost before his mother realised that he was going.

After all it was not so very far to go, and as Roland at once caught the omnibus, which all but passed Dr Wilkins' door, he was back before breakfast was finished.

"What's Japs doing?" Chrissie had asked, as she and Leila made their appearance, by no means too early.

"He is not well," her mother replied. "I hope it is only a cold, but—"

"Oh, by-the-bye," Leila interrupted, "Miss Greenall thought he wasn't well at lessons yesterday."

"Why did she not say so?" said Mrs Fortescue, "it was careless of her."

"N-no," replied Leila hesitatingly, "you and Auntie were out, and—well she did tell us to speak of it to you, but—"

"She told you, not me. I'd nothing to do with it," exclaimed Christabel rather rudely, "and you forgot. But there wasn't

anything to tell. He was only cross over his sums, and cried like a baby."

Mrs Fortescue seemed far from pleased.

"Jasper's being cross about *anything*," she said coldly, "certainly points to his being ill. I cannot understand neither of you speaking of it to me."

And it was just then that Roland came in. Mr Fortescue had already left—unusually early that morning, as there was a pressure of work at his office.

"He's coming—I just caught him," said Roland, as he drew in his chair.

"You have been quick, dear," said his mother. "It is a great relief. How soon do you think he will come?"

Leila and Chrissie turned to their aunt.

"Where has Roland been?" they asked. "What is he talking about?"

"He has been to Dr Wilkins," Miss Fortescue replied quietly.

"What a fuss!" Chrissie muttered. It was only meant for Leila, but her aunt, who was by no means deaf, caught the words.

"Mother," Roland went on, "you don't think it can be anything worse than a cold? I told the doctor you thought it was a bad chill, but he questioned me a good bit when he heard Japs was sleeping close beside me—and he *was* queer in the night. Talking nonsense, you know. Dr Wilkins asked if he went to school, or had been near any infection. He said there had been a lot of scarlet fever near here—in a street called Peter's Place. It had been brought in a curious way, and they had some difficulty in tracing where it came from—that was how he had heard of it. It's over now, but if Japs *had* been near there, you see?"

"No," his mother replied, "that is impossible. We knew of the illness there some time ago, and your father warned us. No—I cannot see that he has been exposed to any infection."

But she was feeling very anxious—so much so that she did not notice the strange look that had come over the faces of both her little daughters as they heard what Roland said. *She* did not see that Leila grew white and Christabel red, but Aunt Margaret's eyes were keen.

"Can it be only nervousness—dread of serious illness?" she said to herself. "No, they are far from cowardly. I fear, I fear, it is something worse."

But then, for the time being, her mind and thoughts, as well as their mother's, were too entirely taken up by the sudden new trouble that had come upon the household, for her to be able to let them dwell on the increased misgiving that something was wrong, something "on the children's minds."

Breakfast was cleared away quickly and the two girls told to remain where they were in the dining-room. Then Dr Wilkins' brougham drove up and he came in. It was still standing at the door when, at ten o'clock, Miss Greenall punctually made her appearance.

"Is that a doctor's carriage here?" she asked with some anxiety, and then, glancing at her pupils, she saw that they seemed unusually subdued and quiet.

"Yes," replied Chrissie. "It's our own doctor. He's come to see Japs, who's got a cold."

Miss Greenall started.

"I hope you told your mother what I said," and she turned to Leila, who answered vaguely—

"Yes—I told her, but not last night. He seemed all right again yesterday afternoon. He didn't cry or anything."

Miss Greenall only sighed. But before the regular time for her to leave had come, Mrs Fortescue looked in at the door.

"Miss Greenall," she said, "will you please leave off lessons now, and when you have put on your hat, I would like to speak to you in the drawing-room. I am going to ask you to do me a favour."

"I will come directly, dear Madam," was the reply.

Then books were closed, slates and pencils, and ink and pens, put away, and with a rather cold "good-morning" to the children the little governess left them to themselves.

To themselves—yes—and to their thoughts!

"What does it mean—what's all the fuss about?" at last said Chrissie irritably.

Leila made no reply. She stood looking out of the window for a minute or two. Then she went to the door and opened it a little.

"What are you doing that for?" asked her sister.

"I want to hear when she goes," said Leila in a low voice, "and then I'll ask Mummy what's the matter."

Then came the sound of the drawing-room door opening and Miss Greenall on her way out.

"I'm sure it can be arranged," the children heard her say. "Mother always keeps the rooms so nice."

"I am very, very much obliged to you. It is most good of you to give up your own," was Mrs Fortescue's reply.

Leila and Chrissie looked at each other in perplexity. What did it mean? But they were not long left in doubt. Their mother came into the dining-room.

"Children," she said, "I have to tell you some bad news. Stand over there by the window," she went on, and then they noticed that she herself remained at the door. "Dr Wilkins has seen Jasper, and—and—" she seemed to catch her breath, "there is no doubt that it is scarlet fever. We must hope for the best, but it may be a bad attack. A nurse is coming at once. It is not very infectious at the beginning, so there is no reason to be afraid about you two and Roland, so far. Dr Wilkins has very kindly offered to have Roley in his own house, so that his lessons will not be interrupted, and he is packing his things now, to go at once."

She stopped for a moment. The children did not speak.

"We have arranged," she went on, "for you and Aunt Margaret to go to rooms in Mrs Greenall's. She lets two, and luckily they are vacant, and Miss Greenall is most kindly giving up her own. It is near here and we can hear of each other every day," she sighed. "How the dear child has caught it, we cannot imagine," she added, "but he is never as strong as the rest of you, and therefore perhaps more sensitive. Now, you must go upstairs and do your best in the way of packing all you will need. You will find Aunt Margaret and Harriet in your room, and they will help you. I must not see you again, as I shall have to stay with Jasper till the nurse comes. But, oh, my dear children, I may trust you, surely? You *will* try to be good and obedient and unselfish in this time of trouble?"

They both looked down. Then Leila murmured something that sounded like "we'd far rather stay here."

"Yes," echoed Chrissie, and even this seemed to cheer their mother. "I'm not afraid of the fever," said Leila, in a strange voice.

"But it would add to all our distress if you did get it," said Mrs Fortescue, smiling, though sadly enough.

"The unselfish thing is to go, *and* to be very, very good and thoughtful."

She turned to leave the room.

"Mumsey," cried Chrissie, and she made a sort of dart forward, but her voice was husky, and her mother did not hear or see her, and she stopped short.

"What were you going to say to her?" questioned Leila gloomily.

"*You* know," was the reply.

"What good would it do?" said Leila. "It can't be undone—and perhaps he didn't get it that day. It's so long ago."

"It's always like that," said Chrissie. "I remember about Miss Earle. She had to stay away once for three weeks to see if she didn't get it, after her sister had had it. Leila," she went on, "you said you weren't afraid of it. *I* am—awfully."

Leila looked at her in surprise.

"Yes," said Christabel, "I wouldn't dare to be very ill—and p'r'aps—you know—not get better, after being so wicked. Yes, wicked. Worse than you, I know. You needn't think I don't know that."

"I wasn't thinking about it," said Leila. "*I* thought if they let me help to nurse Japs, it would be a sort of make-up, and if I did get it, that would do for a punishment, and would put it all straight, you see."

"No, I don't see. It would make it all worse," said Chrissie irritably. Deep down in her heart, she knew well what would be the first step to take towards "putting it straight" but the impulse to confession had faded again, leaving only enough uneasiness to make her cross and quarrelsome.

Just then Harriet appeared.

"If you please," she said timidly, "Miss Fortescue says aren't you coming up to help about your things?"

They turned to go.

"What's going to happen to *you*, Harriet?" asked Chrissie recklessly. "Are you going to be turned out too?"

Harriet smiled in calm superiority.

"I've had it, Miss," she said, "and of course your Mamma couldn't nohow do without me. I'd never dare look Aunt—that's Nurse, you know, Miss—in the face again if I didn't do my best."

"She's much better than we are," thought Christabel.

That very morning—no, for they did not go till after the early dinner—saw the two girls and Miss Fortescue established in Mrs Greenall's scrupulously neat and clean, but very tiny, rooms. Spenser Terrace had seemed small in comparison with their old home, but here it looked as if the whole house could have been fitted into their former

nursery!

"There is one advantage in very close quarters," said Aunt Margaret, as she busied herself in unpacking and arranging their belongings. "You *have* to be neat. It is rather like being on board ship."

Leila sighed and Chrissie wriggled, but neither grumbled. How indeed could they have done so? For besides the miserable consciousness which they were doing their best to stifle, was there not the "object lesson" of their aunt's utter self-forgetfulness and devotion—old woman as she almost was—cheerfully accommodating herself to what, with the habits of her life, *could* not but be very trying, to say the least?

"What *would* she think of us—worst, of course, of *me*—if she *knew*," thought Christabel, little suspecting that Aunt Margaret's still keen eyes were at that very moment noting the expression on her face.

"She is very unhappy," said Miss Fortescue to herself, "and so is Leila. Poor children! They have more feeling than sometimes has seemed the case. And if—if their consciences are not at rest, this trouble, whatever it is that they are remorseful about—this trouble *may* be a turning-point for them."

A day or two passed, quietly enough. Miss Greenall attended to the little girls' lessons as usual, in the afternoon their aunt went out with them, and in the evening they read French with her. They were obedient and subdued; never had their governess found them so easy to manage, and she, naturally, put this state of matters altogether down to their anxiety about little Jasper, and liked them the better for it.

But when they were alone together, things were less smooth. Leila was peevish and inclined to "cast up" to Christabel the greater amount of blame due to her, and Christabel was not of a character to bear this patiently. With their careless habits, the small rooms and close quarters—fresh and bright as Mrs Greenall and her one small maidservant kept everything—were a great trial. Tidying-up seemed to be needed every hour of the day, and by degrees, as the first shock of their little brother's illness wore off, they grew more selfishly alive to their own really very trifling discomfort.

"I'm sure we're punished enough," said Chrissie one morning when they were arguing about first turn at the tiny toilet-table. "There's Japs having quite a good time of it, after all—everybody fussing and petting him. And Roland treated like a grown-up man at Dr Wilkins's! I daresay he goes in to late dinner."

"But they've done nothing to be punished for," said Leila, "and *I*,"—she changed her mind, and went on, "there's Mummy, and Aunt Margaret, as well as us."

"Mummy adores Japs so—she loves nursing him, I'm sure," replied Chrissie; "and as for Auntie—well, I suppose she's a saint and angel, and I don't pretend to be."

"It wouldn't be much good if you did," remarked Leila drily. "You'd better hurry up or *you'll* be the late one this morning."

Breakfast was all ready and Aunt Margaret at the table when they went in. But almost at once the children became conscious of a change in her face and tone; it almost seemed as if she had been struggling to keep back her tears, and tears, to the old, seldom come lightly.

"Is—is anything wrong?" asked Leila tremblingly, and all in a moment something came over Christabel—she felt as if her heart had stopped beating.

"Yes," said Miss Fortescue. "Darlings, we must be brave and hopeful still—and better than all, we must earnestly pray that he may be spared to us—but—I cannot hide it from you. There is sad news this morning—little Jasper has had a bad turn of some kind in the night. He is very, *very* ill."

"Who said so—who brought word of it?" said Chrissie with a strange sort of fierceness in her tone; "p'r'aps it's not true."

Miss Fortescue shook her head.

"Miss Greenall went herself, as she has done every morning," she replied; "she has been so kind; and when she rang, your mother spoke to her out of the window. She has done so twice a day, you know, and till now she looked quite cheerful. But this morning—the poor girl scarcely knew how to tell me. Edith was quite calm, but, oh dear, dear—she just said what I have told you. The darling is terribly ill—I don't think—" but here the poor old lady, brave as she was, turned away. She could say no more.

"Have they sent for Dr Wilkins?" asked Leila, and her voice sounded quite unlike itself.

"Oh yes," replied Aunt Margaret. "He has been there half the night, and is coming again this morning."

"Can't Miss Greenall go back now to ask if he's any better?" Leila went on.

"It would be no use just yet," Miss Fortescue said sadly. "There cannot be anything more to hear for some time. While you are at your lessons, I think perhaps I will go round myself—not to go in, of course, but to speak to your mother through the window."

"Lessons," repeated Leila, "we can't do lessons. We can't be expected to."

"My dears," said their aunt, "you must do something. No one knows better than I do, how miserably trying such anxiety is, but it would be worse if you hung about doing nothing. One must face these things in life, and try to be

patient. Sickness and sorrow come to all."

Then for the first time Chrissie spoke.

"Yes," she said, "I suppose they do, but—oh, oh—if it was only that!" and so saying, she rushed out of the parlour and locked herself into the little bedroom that she shared with Leila.

"Poor Chrissie," said Miss Fortescue, and the knowledge of what her sister was feeling made Leila look up sharply. Did Aunt Margaret suspect anything? She was moving away, when Miss Fortescue went on speaking. "Leave her alone for a little. You can keep some breakfast for her on the side-table. Finish your own, and then the things must be cleared, and you can get out your books," and Leila, herself in a turmoil of misery, silently obeyed.

And somehow or other the morning passed. With swollen eyes and burning cheeks Chrissie came back after a while and drank some milk, and the two went through a sort of pretence of lessons with kind Miss Greenall, who was patience and gentleness personified. Then Aunt Margaret came in, but with no cheering report.

"Just the same," she said; and after dinner she made the children come out with her for an hour or two, and in a dull stupor of wretchedness they paced along beside her, feeling as if nothing in all the world mattered in the least, if only Jasper were well again, or—crueller still—if only *they* had not been the cause of this terrible illness!

For by this time, I think, Leila's misery and self-reproach were as severe as Chrissie's.

Later in the evening Miss Greenall, as had been arranged, went off again for news. It was nearly the children's bedtime when she returned, and catching sight of her face as she came into their sitting-room, Miss Fortescue turned quickly to them.

"It is quite time for you to go, dears," she said. "I will come in to say good-night, and will tell you if there is anything different."

But they, too, had seen the girl's white face and tremulous lips.

"No, no," cried both together, "let her say it before us. Aunt Margaret, we *must* hear."

And then the dreaded word came.

"Worse," and with a burst of irrepressible tears, for she was only a girl herself, she went on confusedly, "they scarcely think—Dr Wilkins is afraid—he may not live through the night."

Poor Miss Fortescue, who had risen from her chair, staggered back into it. Miss Greenall had already rushed away. Leila stood by the table as if turned to stone, white as a sheet. Christabel, the tears pouring again from her still swollen and aching eyes, flung herself on the floor before her aunt.

"I must tell, I must," she sobbed in wild despair.

"I can't bear it, Lelly, I *can't*, and you needn't be afraid. I was the worst. You meant to help me. I'll take all the blame—all, all—I'll—oh, what can I do? I'd be cut in pieces if it would do any good. Oh Japs, Japs, my own little Japs! Auntie, Auntie, listen—it was all me."

Miss Fortescue raised her without speaking and drew her on to her knee.

"I am listening, my child," she said.

And then, between choking sobs and torrents of tears, came the story that we know. The whole story—without excuses, without slurring over the sad wrongness of it all, in any way, till at the end the miserable little face hid itself on her aunt's shoulder while she murmured—

"Can I ever be forgiven? Is it any use for *me* to pray for Japs to get better? I haven't dared to before—oh Auntie, Auntie."

It was, under the circumstances, a terrible confession to hear, though, at the root of it all, was nothing worse than childish carelessness and disobedience, followed, all too naturally, alas, by concealment and deceit. And for a moment, or two Miss Fortescue felt as if she could scarcely speak.

"How could they? How *could* they?" she said to herself. But when Leila, too, flung herself upon her, in less stormy but still agonised penitence, saying over and over again, "I've been as much to blame. I have. I was older and I knew how wrong it was. Poor Chrissie—you were no naughtier than I was," a strange sort of calm, almost of joy, came over Aunt Margaret.

"The lesson they needed—was this to be it?" she thought. "Oh, if the darling can yet be restored to us—if only our prayers may be granted."

And the very thought brought hope again, and strength to speak the best and wisest words to the two broken-hearted little girls—words which they never would forget—true in their earnest, even stern, blame of the small wrongdoings which had led to greater, yet full of loving sympathy and encouragement.

But the night which followed—of broken sleep and waking to fresh fits of misery; of miserable dreams, and flashes of hopefulness—gone as soon as they came!—the night was a dreadful one.

"Will the morning never come?" thought Chrissie as she woke for the twentieth time, to hear Leila's half-stifled sighs

and moans beside her. For the morning must bring news—if no better, it must be worse.

And as often happens in such cases, their first *sound* sleep was after dawn. And when they opened their weary eyes, Aunt Margaret was standing there, with, thank God, a smile on her face.

“Yes,” she said, before they could ask the question half-choking them. “Yes—a shade better. They are hopeful.”

Chapter Twelve.

Sea-Breezes.

And the hopefulness grew. For the improvement continued. That night of terrible anxiety had brought the crisis and the turning-point in more ways than one!

The news at noon was still good, by the evening better still, and thankfulness beyond words filled the hearts of Aunt Margaret and her little grand-nieces. And when the next day, and the days following, saw, in spite of some ups and downs of course, less and still lessening cause for anxiety, the thankfulness grew and grew and began to bear fruit. Never, I think I may safely say, never, in the course of their short lives, had Leila and Christabel been really happier than during the weeks they had still to remain at Mrs Greenall's, though the rooms were small and crowded; the food plain, though neatly cooked; though they had to dress themselves and put away their hats and jackets, and even, now and then, under Aunt Margaret's supervision, sew on a button and darn holes in their stockings! There were “ups and downs” in all this too, of course, as well as in little Jasper's recovery; bad habits are seldom to be uprooted all at once; they are terribly clinging! But so, we may gratefully allow, are good ones also—a week of steady perseverance in doing a right thing, small though it may be, is something like “compound interest,” if you have come to that rule in your sums. It is really astonishing to find what progress may be made in the time.

“I really think, Auntie, we are beginning to learn to be neater and carefuller,” said Chrissie one Sunday morning when, passing their room on the way downstairs to go to church, she begged Miss Fortescue to “peep in.”

She glanced up brightly as she said it, and her aunt's smile in return was bright also. But then Chrissie's face clouded.

“There's only one thing that keeps us miserable,” she murmured.

“Yes,” Leila agreed; “it always comes over me early in the morning, but Chrissie minds it most at night.”

“When I say my prayers,” whispered Chrissie.

“So we've made a plan,” Leila went on, “of not talking—except just what we *have* to, you know, either dressing or undressing.”

“A very good plan at all times,” said Miss Fortescue, “even when there is no special reason for it. When I was a child, it was a rule among us. It keeps tempers and feelings calm and quiet in a wonderful way to begin and end the day in silence. But what is this one thing that distresses you so?”

Both children looked down. Then there came the whisper—“Can't you guess, Auntie? It's Mummy's *not knowing yet*—Mummy and Daddy.” Miss Fortescue stooped to kiss them.

“Dears,” she said, “I can give you some comfort. They *do* know—only a day or two ago I wrote a long letter to your mother. She cannot write back, as it might bring infection, but she spoke to me out of the window yesterday. I was to tell you—I was only waiting for a quiet time this afternoon—to tell you that they both, Daddy and Mummy, send you their full and loving forgiveness.”

Chrissie drew a deep breath of relief.

“I think God has forgiven us by making Japs get better,” she said.

“Need *he* ever know?” asked Leila.

“Not about the way he caught the illness,” said Aunt Margaret. “We think it better not. But about the prayer-book, yes. From what you both told me, that was evidently on his mind, and it will make him happy to know that Chrissie has at last kept what he believed to be a promise. You must not see your mother, dears, before she takes Jasper to the seaside, as the house has to be thoroughly disinfected, but when they go—next week we hope—she is planning to pass by us on their way to the station, so that she, and perhaps little Jasper, may nod and smile to you.”

“Auntie,” said Leila, “I'm afraid it'll all cost a lot—doing the house, and the doctor and the nurse, and going to the seaside, and even us at Mrs Greenall's; and it needn't have been, and we've so little money now.”

“Yes,” replied her aunt. By this time they were on their way to church. “Yes, that is true. Still, that is really a small trouble compared to what might have been, if—” and though she said no more they understood.

She was not one to “pile on the agony” or to tell them how almost overwhelmingly difficult it was to meet these utterly unlooked-for expenses.

“They are so young still,” she said to herself, “but it is delightful to see real consideration and thoughtfulness beginning gradually to grow in them.”

The spring, unfortunately, was a cold and late one that year. April was fairly advanced before the doctor gave leave for Jasper to be taken away for change of air, or to do more than walk up and down for a very few minutes in the best time of the day. A sadly thin and white little creature he looked the morning that, as had been promised, the four-wheeler, with luggage on the top and his mother and himself inside, drove slowly past Mrs Greenall's house, where Leila and Chrissie and Aunt Margaret were eagerly on the look-out. Then there were nods and smiles and kissings of hands—but when the little girls drew their heads in again and shut the window, their aunt was scarcely surprised to see that there were tears in their eyes.

“He does look *so* ill,” they murmured, “and poor Mummy taking him away all alone, without a nurse or a maid.”

“They will be all right when they get to Seabay,” she replied; “for there they will be at your old nurse's mother's. You have often been there—it is so near Fareham. She has a nice little house with two rooms that she lets. It would not have done to go to a hotel, even if we could have afforded it, just for fear of any lingering infection, though your mother says Jasper has been bathed and carbolic-ed and I don't know all what—and their clothes stoved and boiled! In a fortnight or so from now, the house will be perfectly safe, and we shall be able to go back there and make everything nice for them to return to,” she added cheerfully.

But still the children sighed.

“I'm glad they're going to Seabay,” said Leila, “only it'll make Mummy rather sad to be so near Fareham and for it not to be ours any more.”

“My dears,” said their aunt, “I truly do believe that nothing of that kind could make her sad just now. All her heart is filled with thankfulness—and, my little girls, hopefulness too. She is looking forward to a happier home life than you have ever yet had, and I do not think she will be disappointed?”

“We do mean to try,” murmured Chrissie, and the way in which the simple, humble words were said showed that the good seed had taken root.

And now, for a little change, we are going to leave Leila and Christabel and their aunt, and travel to Seabay with Jasper and his mother. A fine, mild day had been chosen for the journey, and if any of you who read this story have ever known what it was to be very ill and to get better again, you can picture to yourselves our little boy's delight at being out once more and able to enjoy the *open* air and the bright spring sunshine. Even the drive in the four-wheeler was full of pleasure, and once he was comfortably settled in the railway carriage, in a corner by the window, you may be sure his face beamed with satisfaction.

Yet what a small white face it looked! Full of thankfulness and hopefulness as his mother was, she could scarcely keep back a little sigh as she glanced at him.

“You are sure you are quite warm, darling?” she said.

“Pairfitly, Mumsey darlin’,” was the reply: and then he added, “It's very nice, isn't it, in this comfable train, and mayn't I dig on the sands when we get there?”

“Soon, dear, I hope,” said his mother, “but just at first we must be very careful, you know, for fear of your catching cold.”

“It would have been nice if Lelly or Chrissie could have come too,” he went on. “Chrissie likes digging and makin' sand castles, doesn't she, Mumsey?”

“Yes, I am sure she does. But you see, dear, it's best for you not to be with your sisters just yet, for fear of their possibly catching the fever, even though it is not very likely.”

“I know,” said Jasper. “Poor Chrissie—I am so glad she told Auntie about the prayer-book. I fink she'd never have been kite happy if she hadn't, would she, Mumsey?” and again his mother agreed with him. And after a while the excitement and the air began to make the still delicate little fellow sleepy. His head began to nod, and Mrs Fortescue put her arm round him, and it was not till they were just drawing up at the station that he fairly awoke.

There was a drive of a mile or two to Seabay, and by the time they reached their destination, Jasper was as lively as ever, pointing out the places he remembered, the grand hotel they had stayed at the year before, the donkey-boys' stand, and other interesting objects. Nurse's mother's house was a very small one, standing in a row of neat modest little dwellings with tiny gardens in front. But to Jasper's happy feelings it was all perfectly delightful, and indeed, in its humble way, the house was quite comfortable. Nurse's mother had done her utmost—all was exquisitely clean and fresh, and she herself eager to do everything she possibly could for her guests. For she felt their coming to her a great honour—neither she nor her daughter being the sort of people to think any less highly of “the family” in these days of adversity.

So Mrs Fortescue was able to send a cheerful letter to both Aunt Margaret and to “Daddy”—poor Daddy, so busy at his office that he had not even been able to see them off at the station!

And the days passed very peacefully. For the weather on the whole was fine, and Jasper was able to be out a great deal, though principally in a bath-chair, as his poor little legs were still too weak to allow of his walking for more than a very short time.

The bath-chair man was a relation of their landlady; a good careful old fellow, and more than once, when Mrs Fortescue was very tired—walking beside a bath-chair is harder exercise than it looks!—or had many letters to write, she let Jasper go out alone in his carriage, well wrapt up and quite content in his human horse's company. Thus it

happened one day when they had been more than a week at Seabay. It was a very warm afternoon for April, and Mrs Fortescue told old Evans that he might draw up on the terrace facing the sea, for part of the time, and let Jasper watch the people walking about and the children on donkeys or digging on the sands, for already, on a very fine day like this, the regular summer customs were beginning.



"Poor 'ittle boy!" she said pityingly. "Was it werry sore to be ill?"—p. 211.

The old man did as he was told, and Jasper sat in his nest, warm and comfortable and perfectly content. Suddenly he heard a small voice beside him, and glancing round, he saw a very little girl gazing up at him with great interest, not unmingled with awe. She was a pretty little creature, charmingly dressed in white, looking about four years old, and she seemed to be quite alone. It was not in our little boy's nature not to smile at her, and then she took courage.

"Is you hurted your foots?" she said; "can't you walk or 'tand?"

"No," said Jasper, "it's not my feet. I've been ill and my legs gets tired if I walk much."

"Poor 'ittle boy!" she said pityingly. "Was it werry sore to be ill? I'd like to kiss you, to make it better?" and she came close to the bath-chair, raising herself on tip-toe with the evident intention of kissing him. But a sudden remembrance flashed into Jasper's mind.

"No, darlin'," he said in great distress, "no, no. I were forgettin'. You mustn't come near me. You mustn't kiss me. Oh, I can't explain. She wouldn't understand. Is there nobody wif you—not your nurse or nobody?" he cried, on the point of tears by this time.

"Yeth, there's Gran," the baby was beginning, when another voice came from behind the chair, the new-comer having approached from that side.

"Why, what's the matter, Lily?" it said; "you've not been teasing this young gentleman, I hope?" for Jasper's distress was too plain to be unnoticed. "She is sometimes a little too *friendly*," he went on, "though she means well, don't you, my pet?"

"Oh no, no, she was sweet and kind," said the boy; "please send her furzer away and I'll explain," and so he did—most clearly and sensibly—when the grey-haired stranger had called to the nursemaid, who now made her appearance with a donkey and donkey-boy whom she had been to fetch, and Lily was safely escorted off.

"I was only strolling about with her till the donkey came. She is my grand-daughter. And it is very good of you, my little fellow, to be so thoughtful, though I shouldn't think there's much risk now. You've been here some days, I suppose, and the sea-breezes blow away infection finely."

"But he's been pretty ill," he added to himself, "or else he's very delicate."

"Do you always live in London?" he went on, and feeling interested in the child, by one or two kindly questions he drew out a good deal of the Fortescue family history.

"Fortescue," he repeated, "and 'Fareham.' Why, then I'm your father's tenant now! I must see if we haven't some Fareham grapes for you—or I'll tell them to send you some direct. Tell me your whole name, my boy;" and Jasper, well pleased, replied—

"Jasper's my first name. 'Jasper Greville Fortescue,' that's it all."

The look of interest deepened on the gentleman's face.

"Jasper," he said musingly; "a very uncommon name, to begin with. But Jasper *Greville*, the two together! It's an extraordinary coincidence, if no more."

"Greville," said Jasper, "Greville was Mumsey's name 'afore she married Daddy, and I was called it after *her* Daddy, you see; and oh, there's Mumsey herself," as he caught sight of his mother coming towards them.

She looked a little surprised at seeing her boy on such friendly terms with a stranger, but a few words explained the whole, after which Mr Maynard introduced himself as the present occupier of Fareham. Then Evans was told to move on again slowly, Mrs Fortescue and Lily's grandfather following.

"Mumsey's" heart was soon won by Mr Maynard's praise of Jasper.

"Such a thoughtful little fellow," he said. "When I was his age I am sure it would never have entered my head to warn off any one when I was recovering from one of the illnesses so much commoner among children in those days. But your boy looks delicate—does London suit him? I'm afraid," he went on, hesitating a little, "I'm afraid you must miss Fareham a great deal. We find it so healthy—Lily is twice the child she was. She and her mother live with us. My daughter's husband was killed in the war."

"How very sad!" said Mrs Fortescue gently. Then after a moment's pause she went on—"Jasper has never been as strong as my other children, but I don't think it's the fault of London. We have always been there six or eight months of the year."

"I know what would set him up," Mr Maynard remarked. "A sea voyage! I am a great believer in sea voyages—had so many of them, you see, for I've spent most of my life in Australia."

"Indeed," said Mrs Fortescue with interest, for this explained the slight touch of abruptness in her new friend's manner, as well as some small peculiarities of tone and pronunciation. "I wish we could send him—or take him, rather—a voyage, but it is now quite impossible."

"Ah, yes—I suppose so," he replied, but rather absently. Then he turned to her again with a kind of eagerness.

"'Jasper,' your little fellow is called, he told me—'Jasper Greville.' Excuse my asking if they are family names."

"Yes," said Mrs Fortescue, a little surprised, "they were my father's. My name before I married was 'Greville.' We wanted to preserve them, for, strangely enough, my family has completely died out."

"I have met 'Grevilles,'" said Mr Maynard.

"Oh yes—there are plenty of *Grevilles*, but none with whom we can trace any connection. I was an only child, and so was my father. I was left an orphan very young and brought up by my mother's people. 'Jasper' was the name for the eldest sons in our family for generations, I believe."

"It is a very uncommon name," Mr Maynard said. Then seeing Lily on her donkey coming towards them, he lifted his hat in farewell, just stopping for a moment to ask if he might venture to send some grapes to the little invalid—"Fareham grapes," with a half-apologetic smile. And of course Mrs Fortescue thanked him, and gave him the address of their present modest home.

And the next day, and several other times besides, the grapes arrived—and a lovely basket of flowers with them. But of Mr Maynard and his little Lily they saw no more.

"Most likely," said Mrs Fortescue, "they only drove over from Fareham for the day, to give the child a breath of sea-air. But I am glad to have seen them. It is pleasant to think that kind, nice people are living at dear Fareham."

How surprised she would have been if she had known the thoughts in Mr Maynard's mind as he walked away, after his talk with her!

"I will write at once," he said to himself. "It is better to hear from old Greville first before speaking of the possibility to them. He may be dead—in which case he will have left everything to public object—hospitals and so forth, as he said to me. What a sweet woman she is, and that dear boy! I can write with real interest about them, and sympathy. Things must have been very hard upon them, I fear."

A week or two more brought the visit to Seabay to a close. Jasper, by this time, was able to take a fair amount of exercise on his own little legs, which were a good deal firmer and stronger than when he first came. Mrs Fortescue, too, was feeling rested and refreshed, and she was delighted to return home and be all together again. For Aunt Margaret's letters continued to give very cheering accounts of her two charges.

"They really are earnestly trying to overcome all the tiresome habits and thoughtless ways which made us so anxious

about them," she wrote, "and this is truly encouraging, as it shows that the impression made on them has not been a passing one. Of course there are—there must be—fallings back and disappointments sometimes, but even from these they may learn new experience and strength."

The little house in Spenser Terrace had been thoroughly disinfected and was looking fresh and bright in the sunshine—for it was a real "May day"—the afternoon on which Jasper and his mother returned home. The boy was in a state of happy excitement, and his cheeks were flushed and rosy as the four-wheeler drew up at the door.

"It will be so nice to be wif zem all again," he murmured, adding to himself, "and I *are* so glad Chrissie told about that church-book."

Yes—there they were—all at the door to meet the travellers. Aunt Margaret, Leila and Christabel, and Roland, just back from his tutor's.

"Darlings," exclaimed their mother, "what a long, long time it seems since I kissed you all!" and—

"Darlin's," echoed Jasper, "and we've brought some grapes from Fareham. That kind man sent us lots! Didn't he, Mumsey?" and he had quite a story to tell his sisters about "meetin'" the little girl on the seashore, with her grandfather, and how "frightened" he'd been of her kissing him and catching the fever, and all the rest of it.

"He's not looking ill, I don't think," said Christabel when she was alone with Leila. "His face was quite nice and rosy."

"Just at first," replied Leila. "He was so glad to see us all. But he looked very white after tea, and his cheeks are very thin," and she sighed.

"Well," said Chrissie, with a touch of the sharpness she was trying to overcome, "you needn't be so gloomy about him. *I'm* going to be gooder to him than I've ever been, and if you are too, he'll just get fat with happiness."

And so daily life got back into its usual round again. But with—oh, such a difference!

"Everything seems so much nicer at home now," said Christabel one day with satisfaction. "Of course it may be partly the weather," which *was* very bright and pleasant during that early summer.

"Yes," said Aunt Margaret, "if you include the invisible 'weather' as well, Chrissie dear, I can quite agree with you," and though Jasper looked rather puzzled, the little girls "understood."

Chapter Thirteen.

From across the World.

I have reached, I see, the *thirteenth* chapter of my story! And thirteen is supposed to be an unlucky number. Nevertheless, I scarcely think it would be fair to any children who have read to the end of chapter twelve, to stop short there, even though things are now in a much happier position in the little house at Spenser Terrace than they were a few chapters back.

Besides, I really have something more to tell about my small hero and his family, and though at first it may not sound very cheerful, I think, before we have to say good-bye to each other, you will agree with me that this time the number thirteen does not bring bad luck with it. So now I will go on with this family history.

That early summer, even in the rather dull out-skirt, where Spenser Terrace is situated, was really bright and pleasant, and for some weeks after the return from the seaside no one felt specially anxious about Jasper, though he certainly did not gain strength very satisfactorily.

"It takes a good while for a rather delicate child to recover thoroughly from such an extremely sharp attack as his was," said the doctor when he called one day. "Of course it would have been *better* to have kept him much longer at the seaside or in the country. But no doubt, when the weather becomes hot, you will be planning another change for him. It would not do for him to be in London if it grew oppressively warm."

And Mrs Fortescue did not like to say how exceedingly difficult it would be to manage any change of any kind for any of them! The expenses of the illness and all it brought about had already exhausted the very small sum they were able to scrape together, beyond what was actually necessary for every-day life, and the prospect of sending Roland to Winton by the autumn was growing sadly uncertain. But to Dr Wilkins, though he was such a very old friend, poor "Mumsey" said nothing.

"It would look," she thought, "as if I was hinting for him to invite Jasper to his own country house—and even if he did so, I could not let the darling go without a nurse or a maid of some kind, and Mrs Wilkins is rather too old to be troubled with children. It was most good of her to have Roley, but of course he is able to look after himself."

So indeed—remembering his seven years only—was Jasper; quite wonderfully self-helpful and independent. Or rather he *had* been so before his illness. But of late, more than once, his mother had said to him, laughingly, that he was "growing into a baby again;" he was so clinging and quiet, though always sweet and unselfish.

"Everything's so tirin', Mumsey darlin'," he said, "and Lelly and Chrissie does spoil me so. They'se always fetchin' my fings, and they won't never let me run messages, scarcely. But please, Mumsey darlin', might I not go out a walk to-day, but just stay here 'aside you?"

And day by day the pitiful little request was repeated, though it *had* to be refused. For even if the small legs ached and the feet dragged along rather painfully, air, fresh air, he *must* have, if he was ever to get stronger, or even not get worse!

"I wish we had old Evans and his bath-chair here for you," said his mother one day, feeling rather in despair.

"There is a stand of them about a mile off," said Roland.

"I know," replied she, "but the hire is very dear. Nearly as much as a hansom, and they would charge extra to come so far, I suspect," with a sigh.

Now and then the little patient cheered up and grew more like his old active little self again. Sometimes on a Saturday afternoon his father took him an hour or two's drive in a hansom, which nowadays was, of course, a great treat, and brought some colour into his cheeks. But, alas! it soon faded again, and he seemed more tired than usual on Sunday morning, so that there was no question of church for him, and Jasper liked going to church! Then, as June advanced, there came a spell of August heat, and though it lessened somewhat after a few days, it left him whiter and thinner and more exhausted.

"We must do something," thought Aunt Margaret, "or he will be slipping out of our hands altogether," and that afternoon she shut herself into her own room for some time, to decide what that something must be. "Yes," she said to herself, "I must do it, but I will tell the dear little girls first. It will do them no harm to be consulted," and she quietly called them to come to her.

She was seated at her writing-table, with two or three small, somewhat old-fashioned, jewel cases before her.

"Leila dear, and Chrissie," she said as they came in, looking rather surprised at her summons, "I am going to confide in you. We are not happy about Jasper. He is not improving, and he must have country or sea-air if he is ever to grow quite strong."

"I know," said Leila, growing pale. "Chris and I are *very* miserable about him, aren't we, Chrissie?—for of course—" but here her voice failed her: and as for Chrissie, she was already in tears.

"The lesson *has* been a lasting one," thought their aunt, and she was thankful to see it. But she was not one to "break the bruised reed."

"Leave the past, darlings," she said, "that is all over and forgiven. What I want to tell you is that you may help me to do something for our dear boy," and as she spoke she opened two ring boxes, showing their contents. There were two beautiful, though not very large, diamond rings—of different designs, but about the same size. The children gazed at them in admiration.

"These are the only jewels of any value that I have kept," she said, "and they are not *very* valuable, but they are old family ones, and I meant them for you two. I know the pair would sell for forty or fifty pounds—enough, with care, to get a little country cottage for two or three months where we could take it in turns to be with Jasper. But I count them really *yours*, you see?" and she looked up at them.

"Oh, sell them, sell them. Auntie darling," cried both the children together. "Thank you, oh, thank you, for letting us join in it. When can you settle about it, dear Auntie?"

"To-morrow morning, I think," was the reply. "I will tell no one but you two, dears, and perhaps Mummy will let one of you go with me to a jeweller I know. I am rather nervous about omnibuses still. And then when we bring back the money, we will all three together give it to your mother, and talk over what will be the best place. Perhaps Seabay again—it seemed to suit him."

And so it was settled. But, strange to say, the plan was *not* carried out! The dear old rings were never sold. They are on Leila's and Chrissie's fingers at this very moment. And how this came about, I must hasten to tell you.

Something had happened which even Aunt Margaret had not yet been told. "We must not raise false hopes till we know more about it all. Dear Aunt has been through so much strain already," Mr and Mrs Fortescue had thoughtfully decided.

But at the very time that the consultation was taking place about the rings, another and most important one was being held in a private room at a certain hotel, where, after several letters had passed between Mr Fortescue and his tenant at Fareham, it had been arranged that the three—for Mrs Fortescue was particularly required—should meet.

This was the subject of it. You will remember that Mr Maynard had been strangely struck by the name "Jasper Greville." It was that of a very old man—a gentleman—whom he had known for several years in Australia. This Mr Greville had been foolish and extravagant in his early youth, and having wasted what money he had—not very much after all—had been shipped off to the colonies by his relations, none of whom, as he was an orphan and an only child, cared very much what became of him, except one cousin, who had gone to Liverpool with him and done what he could for his comfort, till he sailed. And this the emigrant never forgot. Tears and years afterwards he wrote to his kind namesake—they were both "Jaspers"—to tell of his prosperity; but the letter was never answered, for by some mistake in the address, it was never received. And as the Australian was by this time happily married and the father of several boys and girls, and full of home interests and business, he never wrote again.

Life had opened sadly for him, and now, when he was over eighty, it seemed as if it were to close in the same way. For after many happy years, sorrow after sorrow fell upon him. His wife died, then his daughters; then again, after some years' interval, his two sons, in the prime of life, and last of all his twin grandsons, the last of his children, on

whom all his hopes were centred, the sole heirs of his large fortune! And then all seemed at an end for the poor old man.

"What do I care for possessions on this side now?" he had often said to his friend, Mr Maynard. "It is not a case of 'moth and rust' with me—it is even sadder from this world's point of view, though not really so," for he was a true Christian. "I can look forward to the better country where my dear ones are waiting for me. Still, I must not be selfish: I must make some use of my wealth. I will leave a fair amount for good charities here, where it has been made, but besides this Maynard, if you should come across any of my name in England, let me know. 'Jasper Greville,' remember—not Greville only; of Grevilles there are plenty, but my branch was always marked by 'Jaspers.' I fancy, however, they have all died out. There were never very many of us."

And so they had—all died out, except "Edith Greville," now Mrs Fortescue, the grand-daughter and only descendant of the kind cousin.

She—when she heard what I have just related—remembered vaguely the story of the poor lonely young fellow whom her grandfather had comforted, and this was an additional assurance that there was no mistake about the relationship.

Now good Mr Maynard had lost no time in writing to his aged friend at the antipodes, though very doubtful as to the letter finding him still alive. But it had done so—and the reply, just a few days ago received by Mr Maynard, was the reason of his correspondence with Mr Fortescue, and the present talk at the "Marvellous Hotel." For the contents of old Mr Greville's letter were most important, as it brought an urgent request that Mr Maynard would do all he possibly could to persuade the old man's newly-discovered relations to pay him a visit, in his far-away home, without delay. And this was the subject of the consultation.



"Our old friend specially begs that you will bring my little first acquaintance—
'Jasper Greville'—his namesake."—p. 229.

At first, of course, it seemed a very startling idea, and Mrs Fortescue grew pale with nervousness.

"To leave them all and go so far," she murmured, but Mr Maynard caught the words.

"Not all," he said gently. "Our old friend specially begs that if possible you will bring my little first acquaintance—'Jasper Greville'—his namesake. You see I wrote very fully to him, giving every detail. I even told him of your boy's illness and delicacy. It will really be a curious coincidence if my prescription for him, 'a long sea voyage,' should come to be followed! And," he went on, hesitating a little, "as—as this letter explains, expense must be no consideration," and though he said no more, his visitors fully understood that the unexpected and tremendous change in their means and position had been thoroughly explained to the rich relation at the other side of the world.

Then another difficulty struck Mrs Fortescue. She turned to her husband.

"Your post, Reginald?" she said. "Will you not lose it if you are away for six months?"

But it was Mr Maynard who answered her.

"Not necessarily," he said. "In fact I can assure you that if Fortescue cares to resume his present work, the place will be open for him. I have plenty of influence in that quarter. But, my dear lady," he continued, and his tone grew more earnest, "you scarcely realise the whole position. If you accede to Mr Greville's wish, and start without delay, it will certainly mean that he receives you as his heir—or heiress—and he is very rich. You are his only living relatives—except possibly some very distant cousins—there is nothing unnatural about it; nothing to hurt your reasonable feelings of independence—"

"No, I see that," she said gently. "It is very, very good of Mr Greville all the same. Most old people grow selfish and give themselves as little trouble as they can."

"That is not his character," replied Mr Maynard; "and remember, there is the association of long ago kindness received from your grandfather, which he has never forgotten. My only anxiety is that there should be no delay. Mr Greville is aged and very far from strong. If you consent, I will cable to tell him so, this very day. And the sooner you start, the better for the boy, I should say."

And I do believe it was this last consideration as much as the prospect of a return to freedom from anxiety as regarded money, that at last carried the day with Jasper's "Mumsey."

It was astounding news—was it not?—that Mrs Fortescue carried back to Spenser Terrace that afternoon, when she left her husband and their kind new friend to go on to the City, and she herself hurried home. Aunt Margaret, of course, forgetting all about herself and the trouble and responsibility this unexpected move might bring upon her, was strongly of opinion that the decision was a right one.

"Have no anxiety about the girls and Roley and me," she said at once. "We shall be all right. If we can afford to go for two or three weeks to Seabay, that will keep us all well and strong, I hope, and we may very possibly be together again by the New Year."

Mr Maynard's instructions to do everything to smooth away difficulties had been most liberal, and when things *have* to be done quickly, and there is no lack of money to do them with, it is astonishing how speedily they can be managed. Within ten days of the talk at the Hotel, the three travellers, pale little Jasper and his parents, were on board ship and on their way. The parting was a terrible wrench—it could not but be so; and though none of the group put their fears into words, there were sad misgivings in all hearts, when our brave little boy hugged each dear one in turn, choking back his own tears and sobs, and promising to get "kite, kite well again," and come back with Daddy and Mumsey for Christmas.

And before very long, letters from various points on the way began to drop in—and after a little longer, a cable to Mr Maynard, sent on by him without a moment's delay, you may be sure, which, being translated by his "code," told of "safe arrival, all well, Jasper especially."

And the refreshing visit to Seabay was paid, and Roland did go to Winton at the October term, *without* dear Aunt Margaret's rings needing to be sold, and the letters that she and her little nieces sent by every mail, had happy and cheering news to give of the peaceful and busy home life in the small house in Spenser Terrace, though, of course, they all ended with the same chorus—"oh, how we long for you to come home again."

Christmas came and went without bringing this joy. For just as Jasper and his parents were on the point of starting on their return, old Mr Greville, who had revived wonderfully for a time, refreshed and cheered by the presence and affection of his newly-found relations, died suddenly—peacefully and painlessly—at the great age of eighty-seven. And this delayed their leaving. It was not till the end of January, just about a year from the time we first made the acquaintance of Chrissie and her stockings, that the three travellers came home at last. I think happy times of this kind are difficult to describe, but less difficult to picture in one's own mind, especially for those who have themselves known the exquisite delight of "being all together again" after separation, and no doubt some of my unknown little friends have had this joy.

There was nothing to spoil the return. Jasper was taller and plumper and ruddier than he had ever been in his life; his father and mother glad to feel that their visit had given happiness as well as brought it to themselves and their dear ones; for the future now looked very different from what had been the case a year ago. There was even a prospect of having Fareham as their country home again before very long, as Mr Maynard had begun to rebuild a charming old house in the neighbourhood which he had bought, and intended to settle in, as soon as it was ready.

And many good and happy plans gradually took shape in the children's minds as to how others, less fortunate than themselves, should be made to benefit by their prosperity—ideas suggested, in great part, I feel sure, by their close companionship with their Aunt Margaret.

"Ever since I were so ill," said Jasper one day—his English by this time being almost quite "grown-up"—"ever since I were so ill, I've thought I'd like to make a beautiful big house at the seaside for poor children who've been ill, too, to get well in. And I'd have lots of bath-chairs and donkeys for the weller ones."

And who knows what may come of the idea some day?

"But in the meantime," said Leila, "as soon as ever we're settled in our big new London house, Aunt Margaret and Mumsey are going to have a room on purpose for us to have some poor children—not *ill* ones, of course—at tea, once a week. Won't it be nice?"

“There’s to be a piano for them to dance to, and all sorts of things,” added Chrissie.

“And lots and lots of cakes and buns,” said Jasper.

His sisters laughed.

“Why, Japs,” said Chrissie, “you used never to care about nice things to eat.”

“But you see I’m always hungry now,” he replied with satisfaction, “so it make me think that lots of them must be hungry too—awfly hungry sometimes, I daresay.”

“Well, they must have plenty to eat when they come to tea with *us*,” Chrissie agreed, and I am quite sure they did.

The End.

[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](#) |

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JASPER ***

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