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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THREE GIRLS FROM SCHOOL ***

L.T. Meade

"Three Girls from School"

Chapter One.

Letters.

Priscilla Weir, Mabel Lushington, and Annie Brooke were all seated huddled up close together on the same low window-sill. The day was a glorious one in the beginning of July. The window behind the girls was open, and the softest of summer breezes came in and touched their young heads, playing with the tumbled locks of hair of different shades, varying from copper-colour to dark, and then to brightest gold.

Priscilla was the owner of the dark hair; Mabel possessed the copper-colour, Annie Brooke the gold. All three girls looked much about the same age, which might have been anything from sixteen to eighteen. Priscilla was perhaps slightly the youngest of the trio. She had dark-grey, thoughtful eyes; her face was pale, her mouth firm and resolved. It was a sad mouth for so young a girl, but was also capable of much sweetness. Mabel Lushington was made on a big scale. She was already well developed, and the copper in her lovely hair was accompanied by a complexion of peachlike bloom, by coral lips, and red-brown eyes. Those lips of hers were, as a rule, full of laughter. People said of Mabel that she was always either laughing or smiling. She was very much liked in the school, for she was at once good-natured and rich.

Annie Brooke was small. She was the sort of girl who would be described as *petite*. Her hair was bright and pretty. She had beautiful hands and feet, and light-blue eyes. But she was by no means so striking-looking as Mabel Lushington, or so thoughtful and intellectual as Priscilla Weir.

The post had just come in, and two of the girls had received letters. Priscilla read hers, turned a little paler than her wont, slipped it into her pocket, and sat very still, Mabel, on the contrary, held her unopened letter in her lap, and eagerly began to question Priscilla.

"Whom have you heard from? What is the matter with you? Why don't you divulge the contents?"

"Yes, do, Priscilla, please," said Annie Brooke, who was the soul of curiosity. "You know, Priscilla, you never could have secrets from your best friends."

"I have got to leave school," said Priscilla; "there is nothing more to be said. My uncle has written; he has made up his mind; he says I am to learn farming."

"Farming!" cried the other two. "You—a girl!"

"Oh, dairy-work," said Priscilla, "and the managing of a farm-house generally. If I don't succeed within six months he will apprentice me, he says, to a dressmaker."

"Oh, poor Priscilla! But you are a lady."

"Uncle Josiah doesn't mind."

"What an old horror he must be!" said Annie Brooke.

"Yes. Don't let us talk about it." Priscilla jumped up, walked across the room, and took a book from its place on the shelf. As she did so she turned and faced her two companions.

The room in which the three found themselves was one of the most beautiful of the many beautiful rooms at Mrs

Lyttelton's school. The house was always called the School-House; and the girls, when asked where they were educated, replied with a certain modest pomposity, "At Mrs Lyttelton's school." Those who had been there knew the value of the announcement, for no school in the whole of England produced such girls: so well-bred, so thoroughly educated, so truly taught those things which make for honour, for purity, for a life of good report.

Mrs Lyttelton had a secret known but to a few: how to develop the very best in each girl brought under her influence. She knew how to give liberty with all essential restraints, and how to cultivate ambition without making the said ambition too worldly-minded. She was adored by all the girls, and there were very few who did not shed tears when the time came for them to leave the School-House.

The said School-House was situated in the most lovely part of Middlesex, not very far from Hendon. It was quite in the country, and commanded a splendid view. The house was old, with many gables, quaint old windows, long passages, and innumerable rooms. Each girl over fifteen had a bedroom to herself in Mrs Lyttelton's school, and each girl over fifteen who deserved the privilege was accorded the *entrée* to the older girls' sitting-room. Into this room no teacher was allowed to enter without permission. The room as completely belonged to the girls as though there were no teachers in the school. Here they could give entertainments; here they could conduct debates; here they could lounge and read and chatter and enjoy themselves to their hearts' delight.

The room wanted for no lack of dainty furnishing. There were cosy nooks in more than one corner; there were easy-chairs galore; and from the low, old-fashioned windows could be seen the most perfect view of the outside world.

Priscilla Weir now turned to look at this view. She had a passionate love for all beautiful things. There was a dimness before her eyes. From the view she glanced at Mabel Lushington; then she looked at Annie Brooke.

Both girls sympathised with her; and yet, not in the way she wanted. She turned abruptly and left the room.

When the door closed behind her Mabel immediately rose, and as she did so the unopened letter tumbled from her lap. Annie Brooke took it up and handed it to her.

"How upset she is!" said Annie.

"Oh yes," replied Mabel; "but I only wish I were in her shoes. Oh, I know, of course, Annie, it is jolly here, and Mrs Lyttelton is a darling; but I want to get into the big world I shall be eighteen in a month, and it seems absurd to keep any girl at school after that age. Aunt Henrietta is in Paris, too, and is going, I believe, to one of the German spas by-and-by for gout treatment. Aunt Henrietta spends the entire year in a round of gaieties. I'd just give the world to join her."

"And why don't you?" asked Annie. "A great many girls leave school at eighteen."

"She seems determined that I shall stay on for at least another year. It is quite nonsense. She seems to think I am *not* clever enough to leave school."

"Well, you are not specially brilliant, are you, dear Lushie?" asked Annie in that soft little voice of hers, which could nevertheless be intensely aggravating. "Now, for instance, prize day is close at hand—the day after to-morrow, no less—and what prize is the fair Mabel likely to carry off?"

"I don't care twopence for prizes," was Mabel's reply; "and I don't specially want to be clever, if I can be beautiful. You think I am beautiful, don't you, Annie?"

"Oh, my dear, of course there is no denying that," said Annie. She looked up with admiration at her friend, and Mabel at that moment, with an added colour in her cheeks and displaying all the charm of her lovely figure, seemed to justify the remark.

"Why don't you read your letter?" said Annie.

"Oh, it is only from Aunt Henrietta, and she does worry me so by the sort of lecturing tone she has taken up of late. She is a dear, good old thing—not so very old, either—at least she doesn't think so; but when I know how she fritters her time and just lives for pleasure, and pleasure only, it is aggravating to be told that I must be earnest and embrace my opportunities, and endeavour to become really well informed; and that, of course, I must on no account hurry from school, for school-time is the best time; and all that sort of nonsense. You understand, don't you, Annie?"

"Yes," said Annie in a low voice, and with a sigh, "I quite understand. I have had a great deal of that myself. Uncle Horace lectures me awfully. I hate being lectured. Don't you?"

"Loathe and detest it," said Mabel.

"My plan," said Annie, "is to shut my ears; then the lectures don't seem to matter much. Do you know how to manage that?"

"I am sure I don't," said Mabel. "Being possessed of good hearing, I have to listen to words when they are addressed to me, however annoying they may happen to be."

"Oh, well," said Annie, "it is quite easy to cultivate the art of shutting your ears. It is done in this way. The very moment the lecturer begins, you fix your mind, instantly, on that thing that captivates you most—your next new dress, for instance, or your future lover, or something else all-absorbing. It is possible to do this and to keep your mind absolutely abstracted, fixed on your own delicious thoughts, and yet your eyes may be directed to the face of the lecturer. You try it next time, Mabel. The very next time your aunt Henrietta begins to talk to you of the advantages of school, you think of—of—oh, that exalted, that exquisite time when *he* proposes. You won't hear a

word of the rasping talk then; not a word, I do assure you."

Mabel laughed.

"What a goose you are, Annie!" she said. "But really, I suppose it is a good plan."

"Once I overdid it," said Annie. "Uncle Horace was talking on, oh! so gently. He was looking a little sad, too, and I knew I should have to make my subject very absorbing not to take in his words. So I had my hero down on his knees, and his hand was clasping mine, and he was talking, oh! most eloquently. I really forgot that Uncle Horace was by, and I burst out: 'I can't marry you quite yet, Clement!' I thought Uncle Horace would have a fit. He was convinced for the remainder of that day that I had been for a short time touched by lunacy. I explained to him as best I could that I was only reciting something I had learned at school; but of course he didn't believe me."

"He never understood you; that is one comfort," laughed Mabel.

"No, my dear, he didn't. But to this day I do believe he is looking out everywhere for my imaginary Clement. He is convinced that I shall run away with him some day."

Mabel was silent for a minute. Then she said, "You are too comical, Annie. It is well to have your powers of imagination; but the worst of it is that in my case I get the lectures by letter. Oh, it's enough to sicken one!"

"Well, read your letter—do," said Annie.

Mabel sank into the nearest chair, and languidly tearing open the thin envelope of her aunt's letter, unfolded the sheets and began to read. Annie's first impulse was to rise and leave the room. She had her own interests to see after, and Mabel would be lost to external things for a bit. But a sudden exclamation from her companion caused her to change her mind. Mabel uttered something between a groan and a laugh, and then, tossing her aunt's voluminous sheets across to Annie, said:

"Read that letter, and just tell me if Aunt Henrietta isn't quite enough to drive anybody mad."

"May I read it all?" asked Annie, who adored confidences, and whose principal power in the school lay in the fact that she was more or less in everybody's secret.

"Yes, yes; read it aloud. I declare I have hardly taken it in, I am so bewildered at Aunt Henrietta's point of view."

Annie accordingly picked up the sheets, put them in order, and proceeded to read the following words:

"Grand Hotel, Paris, *July 10.*

"My dear Mabel,—Your last extraordinary letter and your unladylike, and frantic desire to leave such a desirable place as Mrs Lyttelton's school have affected me a great deal. You speak with great intemperance, my dear, and annoy me much. You seem to forget that my one sole object in treating you as I do is for your good. But really, after your last letter, I do not think school can be doing you much good, and provided you will subject yourself to a test which I am about to set you, I will yield to your request. I may as well tell you first of all that I strongly disapprove of girls coming out too young. It is quite true that many girls do enter upon life and go into society at eighteen years of age; but, to begin, my dear Mabel, you are hardly that age yet; and, to go oh, I personally consider eighteen too young. At nineteen you are steadier, older, more formed. During that last precious twelve months between eighteen and nineteen you are capable of learning more than you have done in all your life previously. During those months you are becoming fitted for your future position—"

"Doesn't she lecture?" said Mabel. "Didn't I tell you so? Do go on quickly, please, Annie. Skip that part; I want you to come to the test."

"I don't mean to skip a single word," said Annie.

"Well, be quick," groaned Mabel. Annie proceeded, her level voice, which neither rose nor fell, but kept on in a sort of even monotone, reaching Mabel's ears, who was far too interested to allow her thoughts to wander: "'My dear' (continued Aunt Henrietta), 'on receiving your last letter I wrote to Mrs Lyttelton; I could not reply to your letter until I had first heard from your excellent governess. I was pleased to find that on the whole she gave me an admirable report of you. She says that she considers you a promising pupil, not especially brilliant, but plodding and conscientious.'"

"I plodding and conscientious!" said Mabel. "Oh, the horrid epithets!"

"Keep quiet, Mabel," said Annie. "These are the sort of remarks that are likely to impress your aunt Henrietta."

"Are they?" said Mabel. "Then in that case I suppose I must endure them."

"Well," said Annie, "let me proceed. 'Mrs Lyttelton is pleased with you, my dear. She says your music is up to the average, your drawing not bad'—"

"Not bad, indeed!" burst from Mabel. "I have a *genius* for black and white."

"Mrs Lyttelton evidently does not see it, Mabel. But stop talking, and let me go on.

"Your English education, dear Mabel, is, however, your weak point. Mrs Lyttelton considers that you have no love for the good things of literature or history. This she much deplures. She mentions in her letter that

she thinks more of the literature prize than any other prize the school offers, and wishes most heartily that you should obtain it. Now, my dear Mabel I make you a proposal. Win the first prize for literature on the coming prize day, and I will take you from school. You shall join me in Paris, and, in short, may consider yourself an emancipated young lady. If, on the other hand, you do not win the prize, you must patiently submit to another year of education, at the end of which time you shall again hear from me. Now, no more grumbles, my dear. Win the prize, and you are free; lose it, and you remain for another year at school."

"There!" said Mabel; "isn't it like her? Did you ever in all your life hear of anything more aggravating? She dangles liberty before my eyes, and shows me at the same time that I can as little hope to obtain it as to—well, to fly. / obtain the literature prize! Oh Annie, Annie, isn't it enough to make one mad!"

"I don't see," said Annie very gravely, "why you have not a chance of the prize. You have written your essay, haven't you?"

"Oh yes; I have written something."

"Of course," said Annie in a low, thoughtful tone, "you were not likely to be keenly interested until you received this letter, but now matters are very different. You haven't sent in your essay, have you?"

"No; all the essay? go in after breakfast to-morrow."

"Well," said Annie, "you have got to-night."

"It is hopeless—quite hopeless," said Mabel; and she began to pace up and down the room.

"I don't consider it so for a minute," said Annie.

"If it were not for Priscilla there would be a chance. The only one of us who is really clever at composition is Priscilla."

"She is the one you have to fear. I believe that with a great deal of pains, and perhaps just a little help from me, you could manage to do something quite excellent."

"I can't, I can't!" said Mabel. "There is no good trying."

Annie's eyes were very bright, and there had come vivid spots of colour into her cheeks.

"You have got to-night," she said suddenly, "and you must not lose the chance."

"Oh! it is useless," said Mabel.

"Leave it to me," remarked Annie. "I will come to your room after you go to bed to-night; I will tap twice on the wall, and you will know it is I. I am so sorry for you, Mabel; it is really too bad of your aunt Henrietta."

"It is just like her," said the angry Mabel. "She knew I could not possibly win the prize, and so she set me this test. Now, when I have to write to her meekly and say, 'Dear, kind Auntie,—Your Mabel came out worst of all the girls who tried for the literature prize,' she will write again and say, 'Who was right, Mabel, you or I?' Oh, I would give all the world to prove her wrong!"

"I quite understand," said Annie; "I'd feel precisely the same if it were Uncle Horace; but then, with all his faults, Uncle Horace would not set me an impossible task. How queer, how queer is the world; you pine to leave school, and Priscilla Weir would give her eyes to stay! Yet poor Priscilla, who is almost a genius, has to go, and you, who are not a bit of a genius, and will never appreciate the learning that is given at the school, will have to stay."

"Yes; things are most horribly contrary," said Mabel.

"Unless I can set them right," thought Annie to herself.

There was an expression on her face which Mabel could not fathom when she suddenly ran up to her, kissed her, and said, "Leave it to me."

Chapter Two.

The Temptation.

Priscilla, when she left the girls' special sitting-room, went out into the grounds. She saw a group of her young companions standing on the lawn. She was, on the whole, a favourite in the school, particularly with the younger girls, for she was gentle and good-natured, often helping them with their studies and sympathising with their small sorrows. But now she avoided her companions, and going to a shrubbery at one side of the grounds, paced up and down a shady walk.

Priscilla was very ambitious, and the letter she had received was the end of everything. She was an only child. Her father was in India, her mother dead. She was left under the care of an uncle, her mother's brother, a rough, fairly good-natured, but utterly unsympathetic person. Priscilla's father was a clerk, with only a very small salary, in one of the Government Houses at Madras. He could do little more than support himself, and Priscilla was therefore left to the care of Uncle Josiah. It was he who paid for her schooling, who received her during the holidays, who gave her what clothes she possessed—in short, who supplied what he considered her every want.

Occasionally she heard from her father; but by this time he had married again, had one or two little children, and found it more than ever impossible to do anything for Priscilla. When he wrote he urged her to make the most of her education, for when she was really properly educated she could support herself as a governess, or a coach, or a mistress at one of the high schools.

Priscilla was full of ambition, and the letter which she had just received seemed at that moment like her death-blow.

“What am I to do?” she thought. “When I am with Uncle Josiah, he and Aunt Susan will make me nothing whatever but a household drudge. Does not his letter—his horrid letter—say so?”

She took it out of her pocket and read the contents:

“You have had sufficient money spent on your schooling. You will be eighteen your next birthday, and surely by then you can earn your living. I don’t want you to take a post as teacher, for by all accounts teachers are badly paid. You can stay with us for six months and learn dairy-work under your aunt, and how to manage a household. There will be plenty for a hearty lass to do in looking after the little ones and attending to the linen, and helping your aunt, whenever you have an odd minute, at making the children’s clothes. If you don’t turn out a success—and your aunt Susan will tell you that pretty smart—I will apprentice you to Miss Johnson in the village, where you can learn dressmaking—a fifty times better thing, in my opinion, than teaching. We will expect you this day fortnight, and I will come to the station in the spring-cart to meet you.—Your affectionate uncle, Josiah Henderson.”

Priscilla crushed up the letter, flung it from her, and stamped on it. She was employed in this way when a voice behind caused her to turn her head, and she saw Annie Brooke running to meet her.

“Oh Priscie, whatever is the matter? What *are* you killing? You are stamping your foot with all your might. What poor creature has been silly enough to offend you?”

“It is this poor creature,” said Priscilla. She lifted the mangled letter and held it between her finger and thumb. “It is this horror,” she said. “I am nearly mad. If you had a future like mine hanging over you, you would be off your head too.”

“Oh, poor Priscie!” said Annie. “I do sympathise—I do really. Your uncle must be a dreadful man. Why, of course you must not leave school; you are cleverer than all the rest of us put together. Mrs Lyttelton thinks no end of you. She is prouder of you than of any other pupil she possesses. Of course you must not go.”

“It is very kind of you to be so sympathetic, Annie, replied Priscilla; person who pays for my schooling is Uncle Josiah. He has paid for it ever since father went back to India, and he doesn’t mean to pay any more. He says so in this letter. He says I am to go back to help Aunt Susan; and if I fail in pleasing her I am to be apprenticed to a country dressmaker. He considers either occupation preferable to that of a teacher. So here I am, Annie, and no one can alter the state of things.”

“But you would give anything in the world to stay, notwithstanding your uncle’s letter?”

“Anything,” cried Priscilla. “I said just now what is true, that I would give ten years of my life; I would be twenty-eight instead of just eighteen, and you know what that means—all one’s youth gone.”

“You must be desperately in earnest,” said Annie, “if you mean that, for of course to be twenty-eight means to be quite an old maid. I do pity you, poor Priscilla!”

Priscilla did not reply. She walked on a little faster. She wanted Annie to leave her, but instead of doing this, Annie Brooke slipped her hand through Priscilla’s arm.

“Have you written your prize essay yet?” she said.

Priscilla brought herself back to the subject of the essay with an effort.

“Oh yes,” she replied; “I finished it last night.”

“I suppose it is very good?” said Annie.

“I thought it was at the time,” answered Priscilla; “but where is the use of worrying about it? Uncle Josiah wouldn’t think a scrap more about me if I wrote the finest prize essay in the world. On the contrary, he would be more disgusted than pleased. If I had received this letter a week ago I should not have bothered about the essay. I don’t even know now that I shall compete.”

“I wonder,” said Annie.

“What is the matter with you, Annie?”

“I have a thought in my head, Priscie—such a funny thought. You know Mabel Lushington?”

“Why, of course.”

“She is just as angry as you are. You remember you both got letters at the same time. You read yours and told us about it. Then you left the room. Afterwards she read hers. What do you think her letter was about?”

“I am afraid I neither know nor care,” replied Priscilla.

“That is very selfish of you, for you ought to care. Well, I will tell you. She has got to stay at school, whether she likes

it or not.”

“Lucky, lucky girl!” said Priscilla.

“But that is just the point, you old silly. She doesn’t consider herself at all lucky. She hates and detests school, and wants to go; she would give all the world to go.”

“And can’t she?”

“No; at least there is scarcely a chance. Her aunt has subjected her to a ridiculous test. She says that if by any chance Mabel wins the first prize in the literature competition she may leave school and join her in Paris. If she does not win it, she has to stay here for another year. Mabel is nearly mad, for of course she has not a chance of the prize.”

“Not a chance,” said Priscilla.

“But you don’t care about winning it, and you are the one who is sure to do so.”

“I don’t greatly care,” said Priscilla. “Of course, I would rather win than not win; that is about all.”

“Suppose—suppose,” said Annie—“I am not saying it could be done, and I am not saying it is right—I am not pretending to any conscience in the matter; but—*suppose*—you and Mabel changed essays; and—suppose *you* had your dearest wish, and Mabel *her* dearest wish—you stayed at school for another year and Mabel went to Paris to join her aunt. Now—just suppose.”

Chapter Three.

To Catch at a Straw.

Priscilla’s eyes, large, dark, grey, and full of feeling, opened to their widest extent as she turned them now and fixed them on her companion.

“What do you mean?” she said. “Do you know that you are a horrible girl to propose anything of this sort. How dare you? I don’t want to speak to you again.”

“Very well, Priscilla,” replied Annie, by no means offended, and speaking in a gentle, meek little voice. “I *have* heard of worse things being done before, and I only meant to help you both. You are both my greatest friends. One of you wants to stay at school; the other wants to leave school. It can be done by such a very simple matter as changing your essays.”

“It is horrible—quite too horrible even to think about,” was Priscilla’s response.

“But you said you didn’t care about the prize.”

“No; but I do care about honour. I am bad, but I am not as bad as all that.”

“Well,” said Annie, a little frightened at Priscilla’s manner and the look on her face, “the whole thing can do me no good; I don’t profit by it. I have got to stay at school, *no lens volens*; and I think I should prefer Mabel as my greatest friend for the next twelve months to you. You won’t say anything about it, Priscie, for that would indeed be to ruin me, and I only meant to make you both happy.”

“Oh, of course I won’t tell,” said Priscilla. “I shall be leaving school in a fortnight, and then you won’t ever see me again. I can promise you to keep quiet with regard to this proposal of yours for that time.”

“Very well,” said Annie; “then that is all right. I will tell poor Mabel.”

“You don’t mean that you have suggested the thing to her?”

“Not exactly, but I have hinted at it—I mean at something—and she is very much interested. I’ll have to tell her that my little scheme is up a tree. Poor old Mabel! She is such a dear, too. We shall be glad to keep her at school.”

“Really, Annie, you are too extraordinary. Have you written a paper for the literature prize yourself?”

“I? Oh yes. But I have no imagination; not a bit. The subject is ‘Idealism’—such an odious, impossible subject; but it has appealed to you.”

“It did appeal to me very strongly; I loved to write about it.”

“I can fancy you at it; you are just full of imagination.”

“It is my dearest possession,” said Priscilla. A *new* look came into her eyes. She turned her fine face and looked at her companion. “And when I leave school,” she added, “I shall take it with me. Even when I am working in the dairy and mending the children’s socks I shall still rejoice in it. I am glad you reminded me of it—very glad.”

“Well, I wish you joy of your future life. I would have helped you, but you won’t be helped.”

“You don’t suppose,” said Priscilla suddenly, “that I don’t just long to catch at any straw? You don’t suppose that I am

not tempted? But even—even if I were to consider your base proposal for a single minute, what good on earth would it do me? The reason I am leaving school is because Uncle Josiah will not pay for my schooling. He certainly won't pay for it any more because I have not won the literature prize."

"But if I can positively promise you—and I am almost sure it can be done—that your schooling will be paid in another way, what then?"

"Annie, you cannot make me that promise. Say nothing more about it."

"Oh, well, if you won't talk of it, it can't be helped. I am going to Mabel now."

"Annie, I suppose you mean kindly, and I suppose I ought to feel that you do; but you don't understand. It is a case of *noblesse oblige* with me. If I did stoop to what you suggest I should never, never have a happy hour again."

"Very well," said Annie. "I am glad I have not such a troublesome conscience."

As she spoke she skipped away from her companion and joined the other girls on the lawn. Two little girls of about eleven and twelve years of age ran up to her. Their names were Flora and Violet Frere.

"What are you looking so solemn about, Annie?" asked Violet.

"Oh, I am worried. Poor old Priscie has got to leave school. Isn't it an awful shame?"

Violet gave a sort of howl. "I can't live without Priscie. I don't believe it for a single minute. Where is she?"

"She is walking up and down in the shrubbery. I tell you what it is, Vi. You have great influence with her. You and Flora both go to her now, and put your arms about her, and pet her a lot, and tell her that she simply must not go—that she must stay with you whatever happens."

"Come, Flora," said Violet—"Thank you, Annie, for telling us. We'll certainly go and *make* dear Priscie stay."

"Yes," said Flora. "I wouldn't stay at school myself if Priscie were to leave. I should be a very naughty girl; I would run away."

"And so would I," said Violet. Annie stood still for a minute or two after the little girls had left her; then she went into the house. She felt troubled. Annie was by no means the best of girls. She had naturally a turn for crooked and underhand ways. She was ambitious and discontented with her own lot. When she left school she would go to stay with her uncle, the Rev. Maurice Butler. She would live in a musty old rectory in a very dull part of England, and see hardly any people, and try to devote her time to mothers' meetings and school feasts, and all the thousand and one things which occupy a young girl's time when she happens to be the niece or daughter of the rector. Now, Annie had no taste for these occupations. She hated the holidays, which she had invariably to spend at Burfield Rectory. She had no appreciation for Uncle Maurice, although he was the best and kindest of men. She wanted to get into the world. She pined to enjoy herself. She was neither very pretty nor very clever. She was, as far as appearance went, an everyday sort of girl. It is true, she had lovely golden hair, but that was about all. At school she was the sort of girl who, apparently good-natured, makes many friends. Her object was to make friends. Her one desire in life was to secure the goodwill of her school companions, so that by-and-by they might invite her to their houses and give her the sort of good time she had always pined for. She knew in a vague sort of way that if she could get one of these girls more or less into her power, she might dictate her own terms. And now her chance had come. No prickings of conscience held her back; it did not even occur to her that she was acting badly. If she thought at all, it was but to pronounce Priscilla's ideas of honour obsolete and impossible. She had little doubt that she could get Priscilla to yield to the plan which was forming itself in her own brain; and she was also pretty sure that Mabel would be even a more easy victim. Many of her school friends were fond of asking small services of Annie; for she was invariably good-natured, and had a sunny, pleasant temper. She was rather amusing, too, and to all appearance never thought of herself.

Now she ran up to the elder girls' sitting-room, threw the door open wide, and entered. A tall, pale girl, with an aristocratic face was seated by an open desk busily writing. She looked annoyed when Annie entered.

"Am I in your way, Constance?" asked Annie.

"No, Annie. Of course you have a right to sit here, but I do hope you will keep quiet. I am busy writing my prize essay—not that I have a chance of the prize, but of course I want to do my very best. The subject interests me."

Annie said nothing. She flung herself into a chair, and taking up a story-book, tried to read. But her thoughts were too busy with the scheme which was forming itself in her brain. She threw down the book, and drawing her chair to the opposite window, looked out.

Constance Hadley seemed to feel her presence, for after a time she sank back in her chair with a sigh.

"Finished, Constance?" cried Annie.

"No; I can't manage the end. I want to do something really good, but the something won't come."

"I wonder you bother," said Annie; "that is, of course, unless you are sure of the prize."

"I sure of the prize!" laughed Constance. "Why, there are at least four girls in the school who will do better work than I. You, for instance, Annie; you have an audacious, smart little way of writing which very often takes."

"But I can do nothing with such a subject as 'Idealism,'" replied Annie, "except to laugh at it and thank my stars that I have not got it."

Constance looked at her gravely.

"I wonder who *will* get the prize," she said.

Annie did not reply. Constance rose, stretched herself slightly, and putting her papers together, laid them in orderly fashion in her desk.

"I shall get up early to-morrow," she said, "and come down here and finish my paper. There is no time so good as before breakfast for brain-work."

"Well, thank goodness, my attempt is quite finished," said Annie.

"I suppose," remarked Constance, "that Priscilla will get the prize. She is the cleverest of us all."

"Oh, I'm not at all sure of that," said Annie. "Priscie is clever, no doubt; but Mabel is clever too—very clever."

"Mabel Lushington! What do you mean?"

"What I say. She is awfully clever when she takes pains."

"I must say I have never found it out."

"Well, I have," said Annie, her cheeks brightening and her eyes growing deeper in hue, "and I will just tell you how. She is always scribbling poetry. I found her at her desk one day, and taxed her with it. She was frightfully annoyed, and begged and implored of me not to mention it, for she said she would be ragged by every one if it were discovered. Then she confessed that her one ambition was to be a poet. Isn't it absurd? Just think of her, with her pretty, round, dimpled sort of face, a poet, forsooth! But, nevertheless, appearances deceive, and Mabel is a poet already. I should not be a scrap surprised if she did very well with such a subject as Idealism."

"You astonish me!" said Constance. "She must be far cleverer than I gave her credit for; and her very genius in hiding all trace of her talent is much to be commended."

"Oh, now you are nasty and satirical," said Annie, "and you don't believe a word I say. Nevertheless, it is all true; our Mabel is a poet."

"Well, poet or not," remarked Constance, "she is a very jolly girl; I like her just awfully."

"You would not want her to leave the school, would you?"

"Leave the school! Why, there isn't a chance of it, is there?"

"I don't know. I hope not. But I must go to her now, poor old darling! She is worrying over her prize essay, doubting her own ability, and all that sort of thing, whereas I know she could do capital work if she pleased."

"And beat Priscilla?"

"Oh, Priscilla would not be in it if Mabel chose to exercise her powers. But the fact is, she is terribly afraid of your all finding her out. You won't breathe what I have told you to a living soul, will you, Connie?"

"Not I. I am glad you confided in me. I shall listen to her essay with special pleasure this day fortnight, now that you have really enlightened me with regard to the order of her mind."

Annie left the room and ran up to Mabel's bedroom.

Mabel's room and Annie's adjoined; but one of the strictest rules of the house was that after bed-time each girl should be unmolested by her schoolfellows. One of the worst offences at Lyttelton School was for a girl, after bed-time had arrived, to infringe the rules by going into the room of her schoolfellow. Before bed-time full liberty was, however, given, and Annie tapped now with confidence at Mabel's door.

Mabel said, "Come in," and Annie entered.

"Well, May," she cried, "has any light dawned on you?"

"Light dawned on me?" replied Mabel in a tone almost of passion. "None whatsoever. I am just in pitch darkness. I can't write a word that any one will care to listen to. I never could, as you very well know, and certainly am less capable than ever now of doing so. The very thought of all that hangs on my efforts quite unnerves me. I shall write twaddle, my dear Annie; in fact, I don't think I'll write at all."

"Oh, but you must; that would seem very bad, and make your aunt so angry. She might think that you had refused to do so out of temper, and might keep you two years at school instead of one."

"Do you think so, really? That would be too appalling."

"I am not at all sure; from what you tell me of her character, I think it would be extremely likely."

"Well, I will do something. For that matter, I *have* done something. Can't I send it in?"

"No, no!" said Annie. "You showed it to me, and I never read such rubbish in all my life. Now, look here, Mabel. You shall write a paper, and it must be the very best paper you can put together; and I will help you all I can."

"But there is no time."

"Yes, there is. We can do it to-night."

"To-night? You know we can't."

"I know we can. Miss Phillips goes round to see that all the girls are tucked up properly at ten o'clock. Soon afterwards she goes to bed, poor old dear! When the cat's away the mice will play. I will tap three times on my wall, and you must tap three times on yours. Not another soul will hear us. Then we'll both get up and slip stockings over our shoes, and we'll go down, hand-in-hand, through the silent house until we find ourselves on the ground-floor. I know a window where the hasp is broken. We'll raise the sash and go out. We will go to the summer-house at the far end of the grounds. I will have candles and manuscript paper and ink there all ready. You will write your essay there, in the summer-house, and I will help you."

"It is a very dangerous thing to do, Annie, and it strikes me we risk a great deal for very little. For if I were to steal out every night between now and prize day, and write an essay every night in the summer-house, I should not get a prize."

"You certainly wouldn't get a prize in that way; but what you do to-night will lead you to the prize."

"Now I don't understand you."

"I will tell you, Mabel. You must listen very attentively, and if you positively decide to have nothing to do with it, you must not be shocked with me or attempt to betray me. What I do I do for your good—although, I will confess, partly for my own also."

"Ah, I thought a little bit of self would come in," said Mabel, who knew her school friend better, perhaps, than most people did.

"Yes," said Annie quite calmly; "I don't pretend for a moment that I haven't a bit of self at the bottom of this. But let me tell you my scheme. Only before I breathe it, you will promise most, most faithfully not to betray me?"

"Of course I will. I know you better than you imagine, Annie. You have your good impulses, but you are not the very straightest girl in all the world."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Annie. She coloured faintly. "Perhaps you would not be straight," she said after a minute, "if you had no prospect whatever in life but Uncle Maurice—Uncle Maurice, and all the old women in the parish, every one of them, setting their caps at him, and knitting comforters for his dear throat, and working slippers for his dear feet, and asking about his precious cough, and if he would like some more red-currant jelly. Perhaps *you* would be a little crooked if you had to sit by the hour holding slobbering babies on your lap at mothers' meetings, and getting your best frock jammed over by the horrid village children. Oh, it is not a life to recommend itself, I can tell you!"

"Poor Annie!" said Mabel, "I do pity you. But, of course, you won't be always with your uncle Maurice. Now forgive me for speaking as I did, and tell me your plan."

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nest you are trying to land me in, Annie! As if Priscilla would consent!"

"Priscilla will consent. I have sounded her, and I know she will. She fights shy of it, of course, at first, but she will consent, and before morning."

"But, Annie, what good will it do her? My going away from the school won't give her money to stay here."

"Ah," said Annie, "now comes the crux. You must give her money to stay; you must manage it. You always have heaps of pocket-money. You must undertake to pay all her school expenses for at least a year."

"Now you are a silly!" answered Mabel.

"To begin with, I have not the slightest idea what Priscilla's school bills amount to. I know nothing about my own school bills, far less hers. Aunt Henrietta pays for me, and there's an end of the thing."

"Mabel," said Annie, who was now very much excited, "don't be horrid, please. Listen to me."

"I am listening. You are propounding an impossible plan, and I am telling you my opinion. Have you anything further to say to me?"

"A great deal. Your aunt is very rich."

"Rich? Oh, I imagine so. My aunt Henrietta—Lady Lushington—can go where she likes and do what she likes. She never denies herself anything at all."

"Nor you, Mabel, anything at all."

"Isn't she denying me my liberty, and is that nothing?"

"She does it for your good," said Annie; "there is no question of money in the matter. Now do listen to me. I happen to know what dear Priscie's school bills amount to. She is taken cheaper than the other girls, and all her expenses for one term are abundantly covered by thirty pounds. Now most likely your expenses for a single term would amount to fifty or sixty pounds, perhaps even to more; but poor old Pris is taken, on special terms. Mrs Lyttelton doesn't wish it to be known, but I found out; for one day I came across a letter from her uncle, in which he enclosed a cheque to Priscie for last term's expenses, and I know exactly what it amounted to: twenty-seven pounds seventeen shillings and fourpence. I thought it rather funny of him to enclose the cheque to her, and spoke to her about it. You know she is fearfully untidy, and she had left it with her handkerchiefs and ribbons and things in her top drawer. She told me then, poor girl! that her uncle always sent her the cheque, expecting her to hand it over at once to Mrs Lyttelton. 'He hates even paying that much for me,' she said, 'and I do wish I could get away from him altogether. He is horrid to me, and I lead a hateful life on account of him.'"

"Poor thing!" said Mabel. "It must be disagreeable for her. In some ways she is worse off than I am."

"She would give all the world to stay here for another year," continued Annie; "and it's most cruel of that horrid old uncle Josiah of here to take her from school; for I know quite well that if she were allowed another twelve months here she could try for a big scholarship, and go to Girton or Newnham, and than be able to support herself in the way she likes best."

"Yes, of course," said Mabel, yawning and walking over towards the window, which she flung wide-open. "But still, I don't see how I can help."

"I know how you can help quite well, and how you shall help, and must help," said Annie, speaking with great deliberation. "You must do what may seem just a *leetle* crooked in order that good may come Priscie's life shall not be spoiled; you shall not have a dull year; and I—poor little Annie—must also have my fan, and perhaps before long. Now I will tell you at once, Mabel, how you can do it."

Mabel sank down in a chair, and her face became quite white.

"This is what you must do," continued Annie. "Mrs Priestley lends money to several ladies. I happen to know, for a maid Uncle Maurice had in his house last summer told me so. Mrs Priestley has made your dresses ever since you came to school; and your aunt pays the bills, doesn't she, without worrying you much?"

"Yes."

"And no one dresses so beautifully as you do in the whole school, Mabel."

"Oh, well," said Mabel, "it isn't necessary for me to be careful—that is just it."

"You will come to Mrs Priestley to-morrow, and I will go with you; or, if you like best, I will go alone and take a note from you to her. You have but to ask her to lend you thirty pounds, and to put it down in the bill, and there you are. She will have to lend it to you in notes and gold—of course a cheque would never do—and then you can give Pris the money for her next term's schooling, and Mrs Lyttelton will accept it as a matter of course, and your aunt Henrietta will never know, for, at the worst, she will only scold you for being especially extravagant."

"Yes—but—but," said Mabel. Her cheeks were crimson and her eyes bright, and there was no doubt whatever that the temptation presented by cunning Annie was taking hold of her. "That is all very fine. But even if I dared to do the thing, the difficulties of keeping Priscie at the school might be got over for one term; but what about the two other terms? I can't go on borrowing money from Mrs Priestley, more especially if I am not at the school myself."

"As your aunt is so very rich, and as she will be taking you into society, it will be quite possible for you to spare thirty pounds each term out of your own allowance," said Annie. "But even if you don't wish to do that, I have no doubt at all that Lady Lushington is very generous, and that she will lend you the money for poor Priscie, if you only talk to her judiciously."

"She might and she might not," said Mabel; "there is no saying. And as to an allowance, she may not give me any, but just buy my things straight off as I want them. Oh dear, dear! I don't see my way with regard to the other terms, even if I could borrow the money for this one."

"You will see your way when the time comes; and, remember, you will have from now till Christmas to think of ways and means. In the meantime you will go to Paris, and from Paris to the different foreign spas, and, oh, won't you have a jolly time, and won't you be admired!"

"It certainly sounds tempting," said Mabel, "although it seems to me that it is awfully wicked—"

"As to its being so wicked," interrupted Annie, "I can't quite see that. Think what good it will do—helping poor old Pris, and giving yourself a right jolly time, and me also."

"I can't see where you come in," said Mabel.

"Oh, but I do. You don't suppose I am going to leave myself out in the cold, when I am managing so cleverly all these jolly things for you. You have got to get your aunt to invite me to join you in Paris. She will, I know, if you manage her properly. What fun we shall have together, May! How we shall enjoy ourselves! Of course I'll have to come back here at the end of the holidays; but the summer holidays are long, and, oh! I shall be a happy girl."

"You might certainly, if you came to visit me, think out a plan for paying Priscie's school fees for the other terms," said Mabel. "But, dear, dear! it is awfully dangerous. I don't know how I can consent. If the whole thing were ever found out I should be disgraced for life!"

"If," said Annie. "If is a very little word and means a great deal, May. These things won't be found out, for the simple reason that it is to your interest, and to my interest, and to Priscie's interest to keep the whole matter in the dark."

Chapter Four.

"I don't want to do Wrong."

When Annie had ended her conference with Mabel Lushington—a conference which left that young lady in a state of intense and even nervous excitement, in which she kept on repeating, "I won't; I daren't. Oh! but I long to. Oh! but I just wish I could," until Annie felt inclined to beat her—she went away at last with the quiet assurance of a girl who had won a victory.

Her scheme was ripening to perfection. Mabel, of course, would yield; the money would be forthcoming. Priscilla would stay at the school, and Annie would have her hour of triumph.

It was half-an-hour before bed-time on that same evening when clever and wicked Annie had a further conference with Priscilla. She found poor Priscilla looking very pale and woe-begone, seated all by herself at one end of the long schoolroom.

"Come out," said Annie; "it is a perfectly lovely evening, and we need not go up to our horrid beds for another half-hour."

"You want to tempt me again," said Priscilla, "I won't go with you."

"You needn't," said Annie with emphasis. "I have only this to say. Your prize paper is finished?"

"Yes."

"I will come to your room for it very, very early to-morrow morning."

"You know, Annie, you daren't come to my room."

"I dare, and will," said Annie. "I will be with you at five o'clock, before any of the servants are up. At that hour we will safely transact a very important little piece of business."

"You mean," said Priscilla, raising her haggard face and looking with her dark-grey eyes full at the girl, "that you want me to go down for ever in my own estimation, and to proclaim to my good teachers, to dear Mrs Lyttelton, and to all the girls here that I am not myself at all. You want me to read an essay written by one of the stupidest girls in the school as my own, and you want her to read mine—which may probably be the best of those written—and you want her to win the prize which ought to be mine."

"Yes, I do want her to win the prize," said Annie, "and for that reason I want her to read your essay as though it were her own."

"You forget one thing," said Priscilla. "Mabel writes so atrociously that no one will believe for a single moment that my paper *could* be her work; and, on the other hand, people will be as little likely to go down in their high estimation of my talent as to suppose that I have seriously written the twaddle which she will give me. You see yourself, Annie, the danger of your scheme. It is unworkable; our teachers are all a great deal too clever to be taken in by it. It cannot possibly be carried out."

"It can, and will," said Annie. "I have thought of all that, and am preparing the way. In the first place, the paper you will read will be by no means bad. It will be the sort of paper that will pass muster, and long before prize day there will be an undercurrent of belief in the school that Mabel is by no means the dunce she is credited to be."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You had best not know, Priscilla. The main thing for you to consider is this: You do not go to your horrid uncle Josiah. You spend your summer holidays with him, I know; but you return here afterwards. You have another happy year at Lyttelton School, and at the end of that time you win a splendid scholarship for Newnham or Girton, and go to Cambridge for three happy years. Think of it, Priscilla; and you can do it so easily. Do think of it, darling Pris. You are either a household drudge or a country dressmaker if you don't do this thing; and if you do—and it's really such a *very* little thing—you may be anything you like."

Priscilla sat very still while Annie was talking to her, but in each of her cheeks there rose a brilliant spot of colour. It spread and spread until the whole young face looked transformed, the eyes brighter and darker than before, the lips quivering with suppressed excitement. The girl's figure became suddenly tense. She stood up; she caught Annie's hands between her own.

"Oh, how you tempt me!" she said. "*How* you tempt me! I did not know I could be so wicked as to listen to you; but I am tempted—tempted!"

"Of course you are, darling. Who would not be who was in your shoes? Isn't it the law of life to do the very best for one's self?"

"Oh, but it isn't the right law!" gasped poor Priscilla.

"Well, right or wrong," answered Annie, "it is the wisest law."

"But even—even if I did it," said Priscilla, "how is the money to be got?"

"You leave that to us," said Annie. "Your term's fees will be paid, and there will be something over. Leave all that to us."

"Go away now," said Priscilla; "don't talk to me any more at all; I must have time to think. Oh! I don't want to do wrong. I must pray to God to help me not to yield to you."

"You will not do that," said Annie, "for your own heart, and every argument in your mind, are inclining you in the other direction. I leave you now, for I feel certain of you; but Mabel and I will visit you to-morrow morning at five o'clock."

"You can't come in, for the door will be locked."

"You know," said Annie, staggered for a moment, "that it is against the rules for any girl to lock her door at night."

"It will be a much lesser transgression on my part to lock my room door than to allow you and Mabel in," answered Priscilla.

"Well, we will come on the chance," replied Annie. "Ta-ta for a time, Pris. Oh, what a jolly year you will have, and how hard you will work! How I shall rejoice to see it!—for, whatever you must think of me, I at least am not selfish. I lose my dear friend Mabel by this scheme, and I keep you, who have never yet been my very special friend; but you will be when we return together to Lyttelton School next autumn. Good-bye, till to-morrow morning."

Annie tripped from the room.

Chapter Five.

Annie's Scheme.

There are at all schools girls of different degrees of talent. There are the brilliant girls, the idle girls, the plodding girls. Now Annie belonged to the middle class. She knew how essential it was for her to work hard unless she were to accept a fate which she considered too horrible to contemplate—namely, that of companion to kind Uncle Maurice in the country rectory. Her hope was to do so well at school that she might, when she left, induce her uncle to send her for at least a year to Paris in order to put what might be called the final polish on her education. Then, if her present plans went well, she might go into society with the aid of Mabel Lushington, who of course would be from henceforth in her power.

Now Annie had a fairly good gift for writing, and this gift on the present occasion she put absolutely at the disposal of her friend. Poor Mabel, excited by the scheme which Annie had proposed, trembling with fear that it might be found out, could not have written a single line of coherent English were it not for Annie's clearer and cleverer brain.

As they sat for hours together in the summer-house, Annie's thoughts really filled Mabel's manuscript.

"I will dictate to you, and you will put down exactly what I say," remarked Annie. "Now then, fire away. Idealism. You must get a sort of epitome of what your thoughts are on the subject."

"I have not any," said Mabel. "I can't give an epitome of what I know nothing about."

"Oh, come, Mabel; you are a goose! Here, let me dictate."

She began. Her sentences had little depth in them, but they were at least expressed in fairly good English, and would have passed muster in a crowd. After a long time the task was completed, and an essay was produced—an essay, compared to the one which poor Mabel had already written, almost fine in its construction. Annie, as she read it over, was in raptures with it.

"I only trust it is not too good," she said. "Don't you think it sounds very nice when I read it aloud, Mabel?"

"I suppose it does," answered Mabel. "I have got a horrid headache; I hate sitting up all night."

"You will have to sacrifice something to your year's bliss," replied Annie. "Now then, May, that is done. I have given you a paper. At five o'clock we will both go into Priscie's room. When there, a little transaction will very briefly take place. You will have to promise Pris that you will pay her school fees for another year—namely, for three whole terms; and she, in return for this kindness, will sign this essay as her own, and will hand it in as her essay during the course of the morning. Miss Phillips will lock it up, and it will lie *perdu* until the great prize day. Pris meantime will have given you a really good paper, which you will sign and give in as your own. Thus your victory will be accomplished, and you need dread nothing further."

"But," said Mabel, "I am looked upon as rather a fool in the school; no one for a moment thinks me clever."

"I am coming to that point. For the next fortnight I shall make myself intensely busy in circulating a little story. You must pretend to know nothing about it, and in all probability the tale will not reach your ears. But this story is to the effect that you are in reality a sort of hidden genius; in short, that you are a poet and write verses in private. Now what do you think of that? Am not I a friend worth having?"

"You are wonderfully clever," said Mabel. "I begin to be almost afraid of you."

"Oh, you needn't be that, dear. Who would be afraid of poor little Annie?"

"I don't know," said Mabel. "Your eyes look quite wicked sometimes. You must be frightfully wicked, you know, to have thought out this scheme so cleverly."

"I am not more wicked than you are—not one single bit," cried Annie. "Only I have the courage of my convictions, and the ability to think things out and to save my friends. If you imagine that I am unhappy now, you are vastly mistaken. Far from being unhappy, I feel intensely triumphant; for I have managed to help three people—Priscie, you, and myself."

"Oh Annie!" said Mabel, "I am not at all sure that Aunt Henrietta will invite you to Paris."

"Aren't you?" said Annie. She took the essay as she spoke, and rolled it up. She then proceeded to gather up some loose pages of foolscap paper, pen and ink, and blotting-paper, and finally she blew out the candles and added them to a little parcel which she proceeded to stow away in a small basket.

"We will go back to the house now," she said. "We must tread very softly."

Mabel found herself trembling a great deal and wishing most heartily she was out of this scrape as she followed Annie across the grass. There was a brilliant moon in the sky, and there was a little piece of lawn, bare of any shelter, which they had to cross in order to get to the home. Should any one happen to be looking out of a window, that person could not fail to see the girls as they crossed this moonlit lawn. Mabel thought of it with growing terror as they returned home, and when they found themselves standing at the edge of a belt of dark pine-trees preparatory to rushing across the lawn, she clutched her companion by the arm.



'Come, May, come; there's no holding back now.'

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"Oh, I know we shall be seen!" she cried. "Oh, I wish I had not done it!"

"It is too late to go back now, Mabel," said Annie; "there is nothing for it but forward—right forward. Don't be a coward;—no one will see us. What teacher is likely to be out of bed at two o'clock in the morning? We shall be in the house in next to no time. We'll then creep upstairs to our private sitting-room, and all danger will be over. Come, May, come; there's no holding back now."

Annie took her companion's hand, and they rushed tremblingly across the lawn, each of them devoutly hoping that no one was up. A minute or two later they were safely inside the shelter of the house, and then, again, in another minute Annie had softly opened the door of the girls' sitting-room, where they were to stay until the time for invading Priscilla arrived.

"You may go to sleep if you like," said Annie. "I will hold your hand; you needn't be at all alarmed, for I have drawn the bolt of the door, so that if any one should come prying, that person would be prevented entering. But just before you drop asleep I want to arrange my part."

"I wish I were well out of the whole thing," said Mabel.

"You *can* be, of course," said Annie. "It is but to destroy, this paper that we have just composed together."

"Oh no, Annie; it isn't mine at all."

"Well, at least you have done the writing of it; if the thoughts are mine, the penmanship is yours. Come, Mabel, don't be a goose. Everything is in progress, and you'll be as happy as the day is long by this time to-morrow."

"You forget that I have still to get that horrid money."

"Of course you have; but as you seem so nervous and faint-hearted, you had much better write a little note now to Mrs Priestley. I will light one of the candles, and you can get that over. I will take it to-morrow afternoon, and trust me not to return without your thirty pounds safe and sound. But the one thing which must be settled, and positively settled, is my little part. You have got solemnly to promise that I shall spend the summer holidays with you."

"Suppose Aunt Henrietta refuses."

"But she is not to refuse, Mabel. If this thing were completed and I found that you had backed out of your honourable bargain with me, I should find it my duty to— Oh Mabel, need I go on?"

"No, no," said Mabel, "you needn't; I understand you. I don't expect I shall be as happy as I thought, even if I have my year of liberty; but still, I suppose I must make the best of a bad bargain, and of course I should like to have you with me in Paris."

"It will be necessary for you to have me with you, if you are to manage the money for the two remaining terms," said Annie.

"Very well; I will agree, I will agree."

"You promise that I shall spend the holidays with you?"

"Yes; that is, after the first week or so. I must have at least a week to get round Aunt Henrietta."

"Oh, I will give you a week, my dear; for I also must have that week to get round Uncle Maurice. Now then, all is right. Give me a kiss, dear; we shall have fun! You will never regret this night, I can tell you, Mabel."

"I hope I sha'n't. I do feel mean and small at present. But what about the note to Mrs Priestley? What am I to say?"

"Dear, dear," said Annie, who was now in the highest spirits, "what it is to have brains! Come and sit in this corner, over here. Now I will light the candle for you; no one can see any light under the door. Here we are: and here's our little candle doing its duty."

As Annie spoke she swiftly struck a match.

"Here is your sheet of paper, Mabel; and here is your pen. And now I will dictate the note. Write what I say."

Mabel began:

"Dear Mrs Priestley,—My friend Annie Brooke is taking this letter to you. The business is of great importance, and she will explain and make the necessary terms. I want you to lend me thirty pounds, please. Annie will arrange the terms; and I want you, please, not to tell anybody. You know Annie Brooke—she is my greatest friend. Aunt Henrietta will want me to have a specially beautiful dress to wear at the break-up, for I expect to take a most distinguished position there."

"Oh, must I put that in?" said Mabel.

"You must put what I tell you," answered Annie. "Go on. Have you written 'distinguished position'?"

"Yes—oh yes. This letter sounds perfectly horrid, and not a bit like me."

"It will soon be finished now," said Annie.

"Come, Mabel; you *are* chicken-hearted. You must pay something for your thirty pounds, you know."

"Yes; but how on earth am I to return it to her?"

"I'll manage that, goosey, goosey. Now then, proceed."

"I will call on you to-morrow in order to choose the dress. It must be very rich indeed, and with real lace on it. My aunt would wish me to look well dressed on the prize day.—Yours, Mabel Lushington."

"Now, the date, please," said Annie.

Mabel inserted it.

"Fold it up, please, and direct this envelope," continued practical Annie. This was done and the letter slipped into Annie's pocket. She then, to Mabel's surprise, put another sheet of paper before that young lady.

"What does this mean?" said Mabel.

"You will write these words, please, Mabel:

"In acknowledgment of thirty pounds, I, Mabel Lushington, faithfully promise to invite Annie Brooke to spend the summer holidays with Lady Lushington and myself in Paris."

"But, Annie," cried poor Mabel, "I am terrified at having to write this."

"Don't write it, and the thing is off," said Annie.

She moved to the other end of the room. Mabel sat the very picture of misery by the little table where the one candle burned. Some minutes went by. After a time Annie said:

"You may as well go on, for I hold your letter to Mrs Priestley in my pocket."

"Oh, oh!" said Mabel, "I get more frightened of you, Annie, each moment. Well, what am I to say? I forget."

"Darling, it is so easy," said Annie in her gentlest tone. "Now then, I will dictate once more."

She did so. The words were put down. Annie herself folded up this precious piece of paper, and put it for safety into the bosom of her dress.

"Now we are all right," she said; "and I've got some chocolates to give you, and we can both curl up on the sofa and go to sleep until it's time to wake Pris."

Mabel and Annie were about to retire to the comfortable old lounge which occupied a place of honour in the sitting-room, when they were at once frightened and rejoiced by hearing a voice say very distinctly outside the schoolroom door:

"It is I—Priscie. Let me in."

Annie immediately flew to the door, drew back the bolt, and admitted Priscilla. Priscilla was wearing a long, ugly, grey dressing-gown; her face looked nearly as grey. She came swiftly forward and put her manuscript on the table.



"Sign it," she said to Mabel. "Be quick. Don't hesitate, or I will draw back. I have lived through the most awful night; but there's no use in waiting until five o'clock. I was up, and saw you two run across the lawn. I guessed you would come here, and I made up my mind. Be quick, Mabel Lushington—sign."

"Here is your pen," said Annie.—"Pris, you are a plucky girl. You'll never repent of this."

"You promise," said Priscilla, "to pay me a year's schooling?" She did not glance at Annie; her eyes were fixed on Mabel.

"Yes," said Mabel, nodding to her and speaking with difficulty.

"You will get your money to-morrow evening, dear, at latest," said Annie; "I mean the money for the autumn term."

Still Priscilla did not look at Annie.

"Where is your paper?" she asked, her eyes still glued on Mabel's face.

Annie supplied it.

"It is a very good paper," she said. "You won't be at all ashamed to read it. I only trust," she added, "that it is not too good."

One very bitter smile crossed Priscilla's face for a moment. Then, going on her knees, she deliberately wrote with a defiant air her own signature at the foot of the essay which Annie had dictated and Mabel had written. Mabel's weaker handwriting signed Priscilla's paper. Then Priscilla, gathering up the false essay, folded it within her dressing-gown, and, without glancing at either girl, left the room.

"There," said Annie when the door had closed behind her, "isn't she just splendid? Haven't we managed well? Oh! I am tired and sleepy. Aren't you, Mabel?"

"I don't know," said Mabel. "I am bewildered. I never knew what it was before to feel just awfully wicked."

"You will get over that, dear. We'll just wait a minute longer, and then we'll creep up to our rooms. What a good thing it was that I oiled the locks! There is no fear of any one finding us out."

Chapter Six.

Mrs Priestley.

The town of Hendon was only a mile away from the school, and the girls constantly rode there on their bicycles. They were never allowed to go without a teacher accompanying them. Quite a favourite exercise was to ride through the little town and out into the country at the other end.

Mrs Priestley was one of the most fashionable dressmakers at Hendon, and had the custom of most of the best girls of the school. Those, however, who were a little poor or short of funds employed a certain Mrs Arnold, who was also fairly good, but did not produce nearly such stylish gowns as those which issued from the Priestley establishment.

When Annie, in her pretty way—for her manners could be exceedingly pretty when she chose—asked Mrs Lyttelton for permission to go to Mrs Priestley on the afternoon of the following day, that lady neither expressed nor felt surprise.

"You can certainly do so, my dear," she said; "only don't stay long. And why is not Mabel Lushington going herself? I did not know, Annie, that you had your dresses made by Mrs Priestley."

"I don't as a rule," replied Annie in her sweet little, gentle voice. "My uncle can't afford it. But on this special occasion—oh, it is a great secret, Mrs Lyttelton!—Uncle Maurice will let me have a very plain white muslin made by Mrs Priestley. You know it isn't the material that counts so much; it is the way a dress is cut and made up. Mrs Priestley has such exquisite style."

"That is certainly the case," said Mrs Lyttelton. "Then you are going there about your dress?"

"I am; but, please, you won't betray me?"

"Betray you, dear Annie? What do you mean?"

"I don't want the girls to know that I am to wear a Priestley dress until the great day. It is just my own little secret. You won't breathe it, dear Mrs Lyttelton?"

"Certainly not, my child. I am glad that such a small thing gives you pleasure. And it is quite natural," she added, "that a young girl should wish to be well dressed. But don't think too much of it, Annie. Our dresses are by no means the most important things in life."

"I could not live with you," said Annie, "without being well aware of that."

There came a pretty colour into her cheeks, which always made her look very nearly beautiful; and her eyes lost that expression which made some people who were not her greatest friends consider Annie Brooke just a tiny bit "not straight, you know."

Annie now rushed off in a tumult of happiness. It was wonderful how easily her plans were being brought to perfection. She rode into Hendon on her nice free-wheel bicycle, accompanied by two or three other girls and also by a teacher. The teacher and the girls were to leave Annie at Mrs Priestley's, and to come again for her on their return from their own ride into the country. Annie would thus have plenty of time for her purpose.

When she was admitted into Mrs Priestley's very fashionable waiting-room, hung round with dresses in various stages of development, and all equally fascinating according to Annie's ideas, she felt her heart beat with satisfaction. By-and-by the mistress of the establishment made her appearance.

"I want to speak to you," said Annie, rising. "In one moment, miss."

Mrs Priestley would not have treated Mabel Lushington in so off-hand a manner; but Annie Brooke was not one of her customers—at least, had not been up to the present; and as she was very busy sending off a large order to Paris, she did not trouble her head about keeping the young lady waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour. During this time Annie felt very indignant. Mrs Priestley dared to sit by a large desk in her presence and to write several orders which her forewoman was dictating to her. At last the letter was finished. Mrs Priestley said, "Get this posted immediately." Then she turned to Annie:

"What can we do for you, miss?"

"I have come to see you on a matter of some importance," said Annie. "I have come from Miss Lushington."

"Oh, indeed, miss? We are very sorry that we were obliged to keep you waiting, but we have a wedding order at present on hand, and it is necessary to get some special laces and flowers from Paris without any delay. What can we do for Miss Lushington, miss?"

"First of all," said Annie, "I want to know if you will make a dress for me. I want to wear it on the prize day at Mrs Lyttelton's school."

"Yes, miss, we could manage; although the time is not very long. Still, we have so many of Mrs Lyttelton's pupils on our books that we should be sorry not to oblige." Mrs Priestley spoke as though she were royalty. "What sort of dress did you think of our making for you, miss?"

"It must not be expensive," said Annie, whose secret thought was that she might purchase it partly out of her own money and partly out of Mabel Lushington's very abundant pocket-money. "I think a pale-blue muslin; and can you make it for about two guineas?"

Mrs Priestley raised her eyebrows in a somewhat scornful manner.

"Quite impossible, miss. But perhaps Mrs Arnold could do it for you."

Whenever Mrs Priestley wanted to crush a customer she alluded to Mrs Arnold, whose style was so execrable, and whose "ladies"—as Mrs Priestley spoke of them—could be known at any distance by the bad hang of their garments. Annie argued a little longer on the subject of her own dress, and finally a very simple frock was arranged for her, which would not cost the young lady much over three pounds.

Mabel's letter was then produced.

"This is very, very private," said Annie Brooke as she gave it to Mrs Priestley.

"Dear Miss Lushington!" murmured Mrs Priestley. "We always take such a great interest in her clothes. It is our wish to do our very utmost to mould our garments round her fine figure."

"Read the note, please," said Annie.

Mrs Priestley did so. If she felt surprise at the contents, her face expressed nothing.

"You will excuse us, miss," she said when she came to the end; "we will return in a few minutes."

She left the room. Annie sank down into a chair, feeling limp. What if Mrs Priestley were to refuse? Such a possible and awful contingency had never even occurred to her.

Mrs Priestley was away for some time, quite half-an-hour. When she did return the expression on her face had slightly changed.

"We will come into our private sitting-room, miss," she said.

She went first; Annie followed her. Mrs Priestley's private room was very small and very much crowded. Nearly the whole of it was taken up by an enormous desk containing various pigeon-holes. There was, however, room for two chairs. Annie was asked to seat herself in one.

"We have been looking," said Mrs Priestley, "into our accounts. You, we understand, miss, are acquainted with the contents of the letter of our much-esteemed client, Miss Lushington."

"Yes," said Annie; "I know all about it. As well as I remember, my great friend, Mabel Lushington, said that I could arrange the matter with you."

"We are coming to that—if you have no objection, miss."

Annie felt snubbed. It so happened that she had never before had any personal contact with the great Priestley. She had seen her beautiful gowns on several ladies at Hendon and on some of the best-dressed girls of the school, but not until now had she been face to face with this awful priestess of the art of dressmaking.

"We would not wish," said Mrs Priestley, "to do anything to disoblige our clients and it is true that there have been times when it has been our pleasure to assist a lady in the manner indicated, but there has usually been a little sort of arrangement made in order to secure our money. You, we understand, come here to-day with such a proposal, do you not, miss?"

Annie felt more and more uncomfortable.

"I simply thought," she said, "that you would oblige. You see, Mabel is very rich."

"If we were not firmly convinced on that point," interrupted Mrs Priestley, "we would not entertain the proposal for a quarter of a minute."

"Mabel is very rich," continued Annie. "I mean that her aunt, Lady Lushington, is enormously wealthy."

"We have that distinguished lady's patronage," said Mrs Priestley. "We have made gowns for her as well as for the young lady, her niece."

"You send Miss Lushington's accounts to Lady Lushington?" said Annie. The high priestess of the art of dressmaking thought it only necessary to bow her stately head. "Then perhaps you will lend Mabel the money?" said Annie, who felt herself getting into greater and greater hot water.

"It can be done," said Mrs Priestley, "but only in one way. We must treat our young customer as we do the other clients whom it has been our privilege to oblige on more than one occasion. We must either have the lady's jewels to the value of the sum borrowed, or we must add the thirty pounds to Miss Lushington's account in our books. At the present moment Miss Lushington's bill amounts to close on forty pounds, and if we add thirty more it will make seventy. Are we to understand that Lady Lushington will pay so large a bill without comment for a young lady who is only a schoolgirl?"

"Oh, I am sure she will," said Annie, whose one desire at that moment was to get the money and leave Mrs Priestley's presence. "She is so enormously rich," continued the girl, "she thinks nothing of spending a hundred pounds on one dress for herself. Why, seventy pounds," said Annie, who would have rejoiced just then to possess three, "is a mere nothing to her—just a bagatelle. I know it."

"Your statement, miss, is satisfactory, as far as it goes. We will therefore, being assured by our own experience that you are right, lend Miss Lushington the required sum, but on the distinct understanding that if Lady Lushington raises any question with regard to the account, we are at liberty to mention your name in the matter."

"How so?" asked Annie, very much alarmed. "I am only a little schoolgirl," she added, "with no money at all."

"Nevertheless, miss, we must mention your name—Miss Annie Brooke, is it not?"

Annie nodded. Mrs Priestley made a note of it, adding the date of Annie's visit and the fact that she was a resident at Lyttelton School. She then, without any further ado, produced gold and notes to the amount of thirty pounds, which she folded up into a little parcel and gave to Annie.

"You will give us a receipt for this, miss," she said; and Annie did so in due form. "And now, miss," continued the woman, "all is well, and you will never hear any more with regard to this matter if we are paid our account in full; but if there is difficulty—and even rich ladies sometimes grumble at a bill such as we shall be forced to produce—then you may get into hot water. We will now wish you good-afternoon, miss, for our time is not our own but our customers'."

How flushed Annie was! When she got into the open air she panted slightly. She looked up the street and down the street. She had had an awful time with Mrs Priestley, and she had quite forgotten the dress which was to be made for Mabel. She could not remedy that omission now, however; for nothing would induce her to see the terrible Mrs Priestley again. Her companions were not yet in sight, and she paced up and down thinking her own thoughts.

After a time she felt calmer. The money was safe in her pocket. There would be no fuss for three months at least. Annie was a sort of girl who could not think of trouble three months ahead. In half-an-hour she felt quite happy. The memory of her depression vanished, and when the girls on their bicycles hove in sight she met them with a gay word.

"You *have* had a ride!" she said. "I have been out of Mrs Priestley's for ages."

"I thought," said Agnes Moore, one of the girls, "that you would never be tired of an interview with a dressmaker, Annie. Is she quite as imposing as people describe her? I go to Mrs Arnold, you know."

"She is withering," said Annie, with a laugh. "She invariably speaks of herself as 'we,' and is a perfect mass of pomposity. I do wish, Agnes, you could have heard the withering tone in which she alluded to 'Mrs Arnold's ladies.' Oh dear, oh dear! I nearly died with laughter." During the rest of the ride home Annie amused herself in taking off Mrs Priestley, which she did to the life. That very same evening thirty pounds in gold and notes had been transferred, first from Annie's pocket to that of Mabel Lushington, and then from Mabel Lushington to Priscilla Weir.

Priscilla turned very white when her hand touched the little packet.

"It hurts me," she said aloud. Mabel and Annie were both present when she made this remark, but neither of them

asked her to explain herself. On the contrary, Mabel took Annie's arm and hurried her away.

"How did you manage with Mrs Priestley?" she asked.

"It is all right, love," said Annie. "She has added thirty pounds to your account."

But Mabel looked not at all satisfied. "I didn't want it to be done in that way," she said. "Aunt Henrietta will be wild. She is always quarrelling with me about my dresses, and says that I spend twice too much on them. Good gracious! I do trust that I sha'n't get into trouble about this."

"You must not," said Annie; "for if, by any chance, such a thing were to happen, I should never hear the end of it. Oh Mabel! I have done a lot for you. I have in a way made myself responsible. I had to. Mabel—I must tell you, for I think you ought to know—if there is any difficulty in paying Mrs Priestley's bill, she means to tell Mrs Lyttelton about me—about me!—how I visited her, and asked her for the money; and she has my receipt to show. She put a stamp on it, and made me write my name across the stamp. Oh Mabel! I have done wonderful things for you, and you know it. You can never, never be grateful enough."

"I suppose I am grateful," said Mabel. "It was plucky of you to do that for me, Annie, and I am not one to forget."

"We will enjoy ourselves in Paris," said Annie. "I know Mrs Priestley won't send in the account for about three months, so we'll have a good time first, whatever happens."

"Oh, if the thing is three months off, I'm not going to fret about it in advance," said Mabel, who instantly became very talkative and lively.

Chapter Seven.

The Poet.

The days which passed between the occurrences related in the last chapter and the great prize day went on wings. The girls were all exceedingly busy. If there were many prizes to be won, and there was hard work beforehand to win them, there was the thought, too, of the long and delightful summer holidays to gladden each young heart; the reunion with fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters; the pleasures of the seaside resort or the country house; the knowledge that lessons, however useful in themselves, might be put away for six long, delightful weeks.

The girls were in the best of humour; and, as though Nature herself were in sympathy with them, the sun rose day by day in a cloudless sky, the flowers bloomed in more and more profusion, and the whole world seemed preparing for a grand holiday. Lyttelton School was famed for its roses, and the profusion of roses that blossomed during this special summer was long remembered by every member of the school.

Mabel Lushington was not a girl especially remarkable for conscientiousness. She was now completely under Annie's spell, who, having won her point, was determined that there should not be a single flaw in her grand scheme. Her whispers about Mabel had spread a rumour in the school that Mabel Lushington, who had long been remarkable for her fine figure, handsome face, and a certain haughtiness of bearing, was also exceedingly clever. It is no easy matter to convert a girl who has hitherto been renowned as a dunce into a genius. Nevertheless, clever Annie managed to effect this object.

"She writes such good verses, you know," Annie said first to one girl, and then to another; and as Mabel had been forewarned on the subject, she was not taken by surprise when the girls used to crowd round her and beg to see some specimens of her art.

"Oh, I can't, I can't!" Mabel would say, blushing and even giggling a little. "Don't, don't ask me; I should die of shame."

These were her invariable retorts, and, as a rule, she managed to excuse herself with a certain amount of success. But schoolgirls are tenacious. The subject of Mabel's gift for poetry became the general talk of the school, and finally a whole bevy of girls waited on Miss Lushington with the request that she would allow them to sample her poems.

"The fact is," said Constance Smedley, "seeing is believing. You must read us something, Mabel; you really must."

Mabel found herself turning pale, and Constance, who was a remarkably keen observer of character, noted the fact. Annie was nowhere within reach. Mabel began to feel as though a torture-screw were put on.

"Come, Mabel," said Constance, "it is but fair. We love poetry, and will not be hard on you."

"What I think is this," said another girl. "Mabel is a satirist; she has been laughing at us all in her sleeve. She writes about us, and doesn't want us to know.—Come, May, I know that is the case, otherwise you would not be so red."

"She was pale a minute ago," said Constance.—"What are you changing colour about, you silly old May? We won't mind whether you satirise us or not. Come, get your verses."

"I—I—can't; I—won't," said Mabel. She had not an idea what the girls meant when they spoke of her as a satirist. She wished herself far away. As she said afterwards, she could have sunk through the ground at that moment. Her tortures were at their height when Annie Brooke appeared. Annie and Priscilla were crossing the lawn arm-in-arm. Annie had been talking eagerly. Priscilla, very grave and quiet, was replying in monosyllables. Suddenly Priscilla looked up.

"What is the matter with Mabel?" she said.

"How queer she looks!"

"I had best go to her, I suppose," said Annie. "She is such an old silly that unless I keep by her side she is sure to do some thing wrong."

"Here you are, Annie," cried Constance. "Now you will be on our side. You have assured us that Mabel is not the dunce of the school, but the genius."

"So she is," said Annie indignantly. "Who dares to deny it?"

"None of us," said Constance; "only we want proof."

"What do you mean?" said Annie, still quite calm in appearance, but feeling a little uncomfortable nevertheless.

"We want proof," repeated Constance.

"Yes," said Agnes—"proof."

"Proof, proof!" echoed several other voices. "Mabel writes verses—very clever verses. We want to see them."

"So you shall," said Annie at once.

"Oh Annie, I won't show them," said poor Mabel.

"Nonsense, May! that is absurd. Girls, you can see them to-morrow afternoon. To-morrow is our half-holiday; Mabel will read her verses aloud herself to you at four o'clock to-morrow on this identical spot. She has no time now, for the gong has just sounded for tea."

Mabel turned a flushed, surprised face towards Annie. Priscilla stood perfectly still in unbounded astonishment. The girls were not quite satisfied; still, there was nothing to complain of. They must go to tea now. Immediately after tea school-work would recommence; there would not be a moment of time to read the verses before the following day. Annie, leaving Mabel to her fate, marched into the house, her hand on Constance Smedley's arm.

"I am glad I came out," she said. "Poor May is quite abnormally sensitive on the subject of her verses."

"Nonsense!" said Constance. "If she writes verses she won't mind our seeing them."

"She ought not to mind; and if she were an ordinary girl she would not," said Annie. "But, you see, she is not ordinary. There is many a girl with a genius who, as regards other matters, is even a little silly. The fact is, Mabel is frightened of her own talent."

"Well, we are glad you came up, for we are quite determined to get a specimen of our genius's work," said Constance.

"You shall know all about it; she will read them to you herself. Ta-ta for the present."

Annie marched to her own place at the tea-table, and nothing more was said. But she was not comfortable. She had got herself and her unfortunate friend into a hornet's nest. Verses of some sort must be produced; but how? Annie could not write the most abject doggerel. Clever enough with regard to her prose, she was hopeless as a rhymster. Perhaps Priscie could do it. Annie looked wildly at Priscie, but as she looked even this hope faded away. She had had a conversation with that young lady on that very afternoon, and Priscie, although she was to have her extra year at school—for everything was quite arranged now—did not seem to be happy about it. She had even gone to the length of telling Annie that she would prefer learning how to manage a farm-house or becoming a country dressmaker to staying on at Lyttelton School under the present conditions. Annie had assured her that if she failed them now, the mischief she would do would be so incalculable that it would practically never end, and Priscilla had been quieted for the time being. But Priscilla's conscience must not be further tampered with; Annie was resolved on that point. What, oh! what was she to do?

During the rest of that evening, while apparently busy over her studies, the mind of Annie Brooke was in a whirl. In what sort of way was she to fulfil her promise made to all those odious girls that Mabel would read her verses aloud? She saw that the girls were already slightly suspicious. She knew it was all-important for Mabel's success when she won the literary prize that the girls' minds should be already prepared with regard to her genius. If they were really satisfied that she wrote even moderately good verse, they would accept without comment the fact that she had won the prize over Priscilla's head. But how—oh! how—in what sort of fashion were these verses to be produced?

Annie was in the mood when she would have stopped short at very little. Could she have safely pilfered the verses of anybody else she would have done so; but there was no great store of poetry at the school. The few books out of which the girls learned their different pieces for recitation were too well-known to be tampered with, and yet Annie must do something. Her head ached with the enormity of the task which she had so unwittingly undertaken. Why, oh! why had she started that awful idea of Mabel's poetical genius in the school? Far better would it have been even to have the girls' suspicions slightly aroused by the excellence of her prize essay. Poor Annie had not only to think of this and to solve the riddle set her, but she had to appear before the eyes of her schoolfellows as utterly calm and cool. She was at her wits'-end, and certainly matters were not improved when Mabel that night tapped at her wall—the signal that the girls had arranged between them when it was necessary for one to speak to the other.

It was about eleven at night when Annie, feeling miserable beyond words, crept into Mabel's room. Mabel was sitting

up in bed with all her fine hair hanging about her shoulders.

"I have not had a minute to speak to you before," said Mabel. "You know perfectly well, Annie, that I never wrote a line of poetry in my life. I can't abide the stuff; I can't even read it, far less write it. And now what is to be done? You are going to produce a specimen of my verse which I am to read aloud before all those odious girls to-morrow!"

"Oh, I'll manage it," said Annie; "only don't keep me now, May. I had to start that little rumour in order to make it all safe for you on prize day. You don't suppose, darling did May, that I have brought you as far as this with such wonderful success in order to desert you now? You leave it to me, May Flower. I'll manage it for you somehow."

Mabel lay back on her pillow. "I did get an awful fright," she said. "I can't tell you how terrible it was when they all clustered round me, and Agnes remarked one thing about me, and Constance another. Agnes said I was a satirist. What on earth is a satirist, Annie?"

"Oh, not you, darling, at any rate," said Annie, kissing her friend. "Poor May! that is the very last thing you could ever be."

"I know you think me very stupid," said Mabel in an offended tone. "It is too awful to give a girl the imputation of a genius, when you know all the time that she is an absolute fool."

"A very pretty one, at any rate," said Annie, kissing her friend again. "You're not offended, silly May, because I said you were not a satirist? Why, a satirist is an *awful* creature, dreaded by everybody. A satirist is a person who makes fun of her best friends. Now, you would never make fun of your own Annie, would you?"

"No, indeed! I am glad I am not a satirist," said May. "What a horror those girls must think me!"

"Go to by-by now, May, and leave me to settle things for you," said Annie; and she crept back to her own bed.

Chapter Eight.

A Touch of the Sun.

Towards morning a thought came to Annie. She could not quite tell when it first darted through her brain. Perhaps it came in a dream. She was never quite certain, but it certainly caused her to jump, and it made her heart beat tumultuously.

"I wonder," she said aloud; and then she added, "The very thing!" Then she said once more, "I will do it, or my name is not Annie Brooke."

That morning the mistress and the girls missed the pleasant face of Annie Brooke from the breakfast-table. Mabel Lushington, as her greatest friend, was begged to go to her room to see if anything was the matter. She tapped at Annie's door. A very faint reply came, and Mabel entered in much consternation. She found her friend lying in bed, a handkerchief wrung out of eau-de-Cologne and water on her brow, her hair dishevelled, her face pale.

"Oh Annie, you are ill!" said poor Mabel. "What is wrong?"

"My head, dear; it aches so badly."

"Oh, I am sorry!" said Mabel. "Mrs Lyttelton sent me upstairs to know what is wrong."

"Tell her she must not be at all alarmed," said Annie. "It is just one of my very worst headaches, no more. I sha'n't be able to do any lessons to-day. But I will creep out into the garden presently. I want air and perfect quiet. I'll get into one of the hammocks in the garden and lie there. Tell them all not to be a bit anxious, for I know what I want is rest."

"You do look bad," said Mabel. "Dear Annie, I know I am the cause of it."

"You are most truly," thought Annie under her breath. But aloud she said, "No, dear, not at all; I am subject to headaches."

"I never knew you with one before," said Mabel.

"I have kept them to myself, darling; but Mrs Lyttelton knows, for I told her. This is just worse than the others, and I can't keep it to myself. If Miss Phillips likes to come up, she might bring me a cup of tea and a little toast. I couldn't eat anything else, indeed. Now, love, go down; don't be distressed; your Annie will be all right in the afternoon."

Mabel longed to say, "What are you going to do about the poem?" but in sight of that pale presence with its look of suffering, and the bondage on the head, she thought that such a remark would be quite too heartless. She stepped, therefore, very softly out of the room, and going downstairs, made a most effective announcement with regard to Annie.

"She says it is nothing," remarked Mabel, who was almost in tears; "but she looks quite dreadful—so ghastly white."

Little did Mabel know that Annie had smeared powder over her face to give it that death-like appearance. She had managed it with great skill, and trusted to its not being noticed.

"Miss Phillips," said Mrs Lyttelton, "will you go and see what is wrong? If Annie is feverish we must get a doctor. She may have a little touch of the sun, my dears; it is always unwise to be out too much this hot weather."

"She looked awfully flushed," said one girl, "when we met her in the High Street yesterday. It was after she had been with Mrs Priestley."

"It must be a touch of the sun," said Mrs Lyttelton; "perhaps I had better go to her myself."

"Let me go first, dear Mrs Lyttelton," said Miss Phillips; "I can soon let you know if there is anything wrong."

Accordingly, Miss Phillips went gently upstairs Annie had the curtains drawn at the windows, but the windows themselves had their sashes open. She was lying in such a position that the powder on her face could not be noticed. When Miss Phillips came in Annie uttered a groan.

"Oh, why do you trouble?" she said, opening half an eye and looking at the mistress.

Her dread was that Mrs Lyttelton herself might appear. It would be difficult to hide the powder from her. Old Phillips, however, as she termed her, was a person easily imposed upon. "Don't fuss about me, please," said Annie. "I have just a bad headache. I am sorry I can't be in the schoolroom this morning; but I just can't. I am not a bit hot—not a bit—but my head is dreadful. I want to go out and lie in one of the hammocks in the garden. Do you think Mrs Lyttelton will let me?"

"Indeed she will, poor dear!" said Miss Phillips. "She is ever so sorry for you. You do look bad, Annie. Wouldn't you like me to draw back the curtain, dear? Your room is so dark."

"Oh, please don't!" said Annie. "I can't bear the light."

"Well, my dear—well, of course—how thoughtless of me! I have brought you some tea."

"Thank you; I shall be glad of a cup."

"Poor child! Then you wouldn't like to see Mrs Lyttelton herself?"

"Not for the world," said Annie with unnecessary vehemence. But then she added prettily, "It is so sweet of her to think of it, and for little me—as if I were of any consequence. It's just a headache, and I'll be all right in the garden, and at dinner-time you will see me looking just as usual."

"I hope so, indeed," said Miss Phillips, who went downstairs to report that Annie was singularly pale, but not in the least feverish, and that her great desire was to lie in a hammock during the entire morning in the shady garden.

"Go up at once and tell her that she has my permission," said Mrs Lyttelton.

Miss Phillips opened the door very softly. Annie was still lying with her eyes shut, the bandage at once shading and concealing her face; but the cheeks, the tip of the little nose, and the chin were all dreadfully white; only the pretty lips were still rosy.

Annie just opened languid eyes.

"I am better, really," she said in the faintest and most patient voice.

"You poor, sweet thing," said Miss Phillips. "How I sympathise with you! I get those frantic headaches myself sometimes."

"It hurts me even to talk," said Annie. "I do value your sympathy, but I can't express what I feel. May I go into the garden? Did you find out?"

"Yes; Mrs Lyttelton has given you her permission. I am so sorry, dear, that none of us will be able to be with you. Mrs Lyttelton herself is going to drive to London, and of course the rest of us will be busy; but if you want any one, love, I could send one of the maids to you."

"I shall want nothing," said Annie, whose voice, in her eagerness, had suddenly become strong. Any one who was not poor Phillips would have been suspicious on the spot. "I am so dreadfully sorry," said Annie, "that you should be put out about me; but if I am allowed to treat my headache in my own way, I shall be all right by early dinner. Now go, dear, won't you? I will get dressed and creep down to the garden as soon as lessons begin."

"You are such a thoughtful, unselfish girl," said Miss Phillips. "Anybody else who looked so terribly ill would make a fuss."

"Sweet Miss Phillips!" murmured Annie; and with these words sounding in her ear Miss Phillips left the room.

The moment she did so Annie sprang to a sitting position on her bed. She flung the bandage across the room with a petulant movement, and the next instant she had locked the door and begun an active and hurried toilet. The powder was removed. The small, fair face assumed its normal complexion, and by the time prayers were over and the girls were all assembled in the different class-rooms, Annie, in her neat cotton dress, wearing a big shady hat, with gloves drawn over her small white hands, and a parasol ready to shade her from the sun, stood waiting by her open window.

Presently she heard a welcome sound—the noise of wheels disappearing down the avenue. Now was her time. Across the lawn she went. The hammocks were there, but Annie had no use for them at present. Until she was well out of sight of the house she did not dare to run, but when a depression in the ground hid the house from view she put wings to her feet, and flew panting and racing along by the shrubbery, until, at the farthest end, she found a small postern door.

This door opened by means of a certain catch, so that to the uninitiated it always seemed locked, whereas to the initiated it would open any minute. Annie was one of the initiated. She let herself out being very careful to close the door after her, so that it would respond to that same apparently gentle touch when she wished to come back. It was most important that she should make all things right with regard to the door, as by that means she saved at least half-an-hour of her precious—her most precious time. Oh, if only Miss Phillips could see her now! Where was the pallid, suffering girl? Surely she was not represented by this red-faced, panting, strong-looking creature who was careering along the dusty roads *en route* for Hendon.

By-and-by she reached the suburbs, turned down a side street, and knocked loudly at a little green door. The door was opened by a woman who was evidently at once the owner of the house and her own servant.

“How do you do, Miss Brooke?” she said, looking at Annie in some astonishment. “I am very sorry indeed, miss, but Susie has been having her bad days, and your dresses are not ready for you. She’ll send them down this evening, if possible; but when her back aches at its worst she cannot manage the machine, miss; so I do hope, Miss Brooke, that you won’t be hard on her.”

“Not at all; I am very sorry for her,” said Annie in her gentle voice. “May I go in and talk to her for a few minutes, Mrs Martin?”

“To be sure, miss; you will find her upstairs in the sewing-room.”

Annie seemed to know her way quite well about this house. She ran up some very steep stairs and entered a low room which had at the end a sloping roof. There was a bed tucked as it were out of sight under the eaves; but right in the fall blaze of the summer sun, and where the room was most stiflingly hot, sat a very pallid girl with a large, overhanging brow, pale, tired-looking eyes, and a sensitive mouth.

The girl was bending over a large sewing-machine, the work of which she was guiding with her hand, while her feet worked the treadles. The moment she saw Annie she looked at her with a great rush of colour spreading over her face.

“Why, Miss Brooke!” she said.

“Ah,” said Annie, “you are behaving very badly indeed to me, Susie. I have just seen your mother, and she says that your back is so bad you can’t do your machining, and in consequence my work—*mine*, Susan—is not finished. Oh Susan! it is somebody else’s dress you are making now, and you are quite well enough to do your machining. I am surprised.”

“It is true what mother said, all the same, miss,” replied the girl, interrupting her words as she spoke with a great and exhausting fit of coughing. “I ain’t fit for no work, and this room is that stifling with the sun pouring in and no means of opening more than that little crack of the window. I haven’t done your work, miss, for I knew you ’ud be kind, and Mrs Hodge at the mill is so cross if I don’t carry out her least wish. But I meant—I did indeed, miss—to go on with your things this afternoon. I did most truly, miss, for it’s a real pleasure to work for you, Miss Brooke.”

“Never mind my things to-day,” said Annie; “you’re not fit, and that is the simple truth. You ought to go downstairs, Susan, and get your mother to take you into the park; that is what you want.”

“I may want it, miss,” said Susan, “but I won’t get it, for mother have her hands full with the parlour lodger and the drawing-room lodger. Much time she do have for walking out with me as though I were a fine lady.”

“Poor Susie!” said Annie; “and you so clever, too.”

“Ah, miss, nothing frets mother like me thinking myself clever. She says that all I want is to know the three R’s—reading, writing, and ’rithmetic—that’s how she calls ’em. She hates my books, miss; and as to my thoughts—oh, dear Miss Brooke! you are the only one in all the world as knows about them.”

“And I want to help you,” said Annie. “I have come here all the way this morning to ask you to lend me that manuscript book of yours. I mean to show your lovely poems to a great, clever, and learned man, and if by chance he should publish any of them, you would be famous, Susan, and you need never do this horrible grinding work any more.”

“Oh, miss,” said the poor girl, “you don’t say so!”

“I do say so, Susie; and I suppose I ought to know. Give me the book, dear, at once; don’t keep me, for I haven’t a minute. These are school hours, and I had to pretend I had a headache in order to get away to see you. You must let me manage about your poetry, Susie; and of course you will never tell.”

“Why, miss, is it likely?”

“Well, fetch the book, then.”

Susie crossed the room, went on her knees before an old chest of drawers, and with the colour now high in her wasted cheeks and her light eyes darker with emotion, she presented the treasured book to Annie.

“There is my last bit, miss; you will find it at the end. It’s ‘Thoughts on the Sunset’ I was thinking them in reference to my own early death, miss, and they’re very affecting indeed. Perhaps you will show them the first, miss, for they seem to me the very best I have done.”

Susie looked with a world of pathos at Annie. Her eyes said as plainly as eyes could speak, “Oh! do read the poem

before you go, and tell me what you think of it." Annie read the message in the eyes, but had not an idea of acceding to poor Susie's wish.

"You will have your book back in a few days," she said, "and I do hope I'll have good news for you; and here is half-a-crown, and you needn't hurry about my things. Good-bye, Susie. Do go into the park if you can."

Susan nodded. She felt so grateful to Annie, and so excited, that she could not speak. With the book tucked under her arm, Annie flew downstairs.

She was much annoyed at being intercepted in the passage by Mrs Martin.

"I do 'ope, miss," said that poor woman, "that you ain't been 'ard on my girl. She does do her very best; for, what with the unpickin' of your old dresses, and what with tryin' to turn 'em into new ones, it don't seem as though it were worth while. You pays her very little, miss; and what with never givin' her anythin' new, it don't seem worth the trouble, that it don't."

"Oh! I am so sorry," said Annie, who in her moment of victory was inclined to be kind to any one; "but, you see, I take an interest in Susan for other matters. She is not well, and she wants rest. I am so glad to have some one to alter my old things, and if I did not give the work to Susan, I should have to employ a girl I know at home. But I will try—I really will—to give her some new plain cotton dresses to make for me later on. In the meantime, Mrs Martin, I have been recommending her to go for a walk in the park. She has great talent, and her life ought not to be sacrificed."

"There, miss!" said Mrs Martin, putting her arms akimbo and looking with great dissatisfaction at Annie. "It's *you* as encourages her in scribblin' of that poetic stuff. Never did I hear such rubbish in all my born days. If it wasn't for you, miss, she would burn all the stuff instead of sittin' up a-composin' of it. What with sunsets, and deathbeds, and heartaches, and green grass, and other nonsense, I don't know where I be when I listen to her words; I don't really. I see you've got the book under your arm now, miss; and I do wish you'd burn it—that I do!"

"It would hurt her very much indeed if I did," said Annie; for a further thought had darted through her brain at Mrs Martin's words. Here would be an easy way to hide her own deed for ever and ever. If Mrs Martin sanctioned the burning of her daughter's book, surely Annie's wicked scheme would be concealed for ever.

"I agree with you," said Annie, "that it is bad for poor Susan to write so much poetry. Her heart is set on it, I know; still, if you disapprove—"

"That I do, miss; I wish you'd give me the book now, and I'll keep it under lock and key."

"No, no," said Annie eagerly. "Don't do that on any account whatever. I have thought of a much better plan. She has lent me the book, for I promised to read her poems, poor girl! and to talk them over with a friend of mine. I need not give them back to her for the present."

"Oh, miss! I'd be *that* grateful if you'd keep them altogether."

"I don't see that I can quite do that. Still, if you wish it—"

"I do, miss; that I do."

"Well, good-bye for the present. You mustn't keep me now, as I am in a great hurry."

Mrs Martin moved aside, and once more Annie pursued her way up the dusty road. The postern door presented no hindrance when she reached it, and by-and-by, with a sigh of relief, she found herself in the cool shade of the grounds. How inviting looked that hammock under the trees! But she had not a moment of time to indulge in rest just then. Unperceived by any one, she managed to reach her room. She locked the door. She made a quick selection from poor Susan's verses. She then calmly dressed, washed her face and hands, and when early dinner was announced, took her place at table.

The girls were all pleased to see her, and when she assured them that she was as well as ever they all congratulated her. Priscilla Weir sat at table near Annie. Priscilla was not looking well. The headache which Annie pretended to have was in reality possessed by poor Priscilla. She was easily startled, too, and changed colour when any one addressed her in a hurry.

Towards the end of the meal, as the girls were about to leave the room, she bent towards Annie and said:

"Is it really true that Mabel Lushington is going to read some poems at four o'clock this afternoon?"

"She is going to read some of her *own* poems. Why not?" said Annie. She spoke defiantly.

"Her own poems?" echoed Priscilla, a world of scorn in her voice.

"Yes. Why not?" said Annie.

Priscilla was silent for a minute. Then she said in a very low voice:

"I know how clever you are; but even your genius cannot rise to this. I have seen you struggle to make even the slightest rhyme when we have been playing at making up verses. You can't manage this."

"Never mind," said Annie. She jumped up almost rudely. The next minute she had seized Mabel by the arm. "We have half-an-hour. Come with me at once to my room."

Mabel did so. When they reached the room Annie locked the door.

"Now then," she said, "who's a genius? I said I would find a way out. Sit down immediately before my desk and write what I tell you."

"Oh Annie, what do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say, and the fewer questions you ask the better. I will dictate the poem, and you shall copy it."

"But—but," said Mabel, turning from red to white—"it isn't, I hope, from a printed book. I have thought of that I have been so frightfully miserable that I've thought of everything; but that would be so terribly unsafe."

"This is not unsafe at any rate," said Annie, "Now you begin. Write what I tell you."

Annie's look of triumph and her absolutely fearless manner impressed Mabel. She wrote as best she could to Annie's dictation, and soon two of poor Susan Martin's attempts at verse were copied in Mabel's writing.

"There you are!" said Annie. "That 'sunset' one will take the cake, and that pretty little one about 'my favourite cat' will come home to every one."

"But I haven't a favourite cat," said Mabel, "and why ever should I write about it?"

"Did you never in the whole course of your life," was Annie's answer, "hear of a poet's licence? You can write on anything, you know, if you are a poet."

"Can I?" replied Mabel. "Then I suppose the cat will do."

"It will do admirably."

"I hope," said Mabel, "they won't question me afterwards about the animal. It sounds exactly as though it were my own cat, and every one in the school knows that I can't even touch a cat."

"What a pity you didn't tell me that before," said Annie, "and I would have chosen something else! But there's no time now; we must fly downstairs immediately."

"You are clever, Annie. I can't think how you got these poems. But the 'sunset' one sounds dreadful too. I never even looked at a sunset. And then there's the thoughts about dying—as if—as if I *could* know anything of that."

"You must read them as pathetically as you can," said Annie, "and make the best of a bad job. I believe they'll go down admirably. Now then, fold them up and put them away; and don't let's be found closeted together here." Sharp at four that afternoon Mabel appeared before her assembled schoolfellows and read—it must be owned rather badly—first some "Lines to a Favourite Cat," and then "Thoughts on the Sunset." The poems were not poetry in any sense of the word; nevertheless, there was a vague sort of far-off suggestion of poetry about them. It is true the girls giggled at the thought of Mabel and her cat, and were not specially impressed by the violet and rose tints of the sunset, or by the fact that florid, large, essentially living-looking Mabel should talk of her last faint breath, and of the time when she lay pale and still and was a corse.

She read the lines, however, and they seemed thoroughly genuine. When she had finished she looked at her companions.

"Well, I'd like to say, 'I'm blowed!'" said Agnes; while Constance Smedley, the head-girl of the school, said in a low tone:

"I congratulate you, Mabel; and I'm very much surprised. There is no saying what you will do in the future, only I hope you won't speak of dead people as corses, for I dislike the term."

"And of course after this," said a merry, round-faced girl who had hitherto not spoken, "we will expect to have further lines on pussie, poor, pussie; and, oh, Mabel, *what* a cheat you are! And you always said you loathed cats!"

At this instant one of the youngest girls in the school rushed up and flung a tabby-cat into Mabel's lap. The cat was large; a very rough specimen of the race. Being angry at such treatment, it unsheathed all its claws. Mabel shrieked with terror, and flung the poor animal aside with great vehemence.

"Oh, poor pussie, poor pussie!" laughed the others; "but she loves you all the same."

"When pussy comes, so sleek and warm,
And rubs against my knee,
I think we're safe from every harm,
My pretty cat and me."

"Oh Mabel, Mabel! you are a humbug."

"I hate cats!" burst from Mabel.

Annie turned pale for a minute; but her self-composure did not long desert her. "Being a poet, you know, you're quite certain to be a little mad at times," she remarked. "All poets are. I suppose you had a mad fit, dear Mabel, when you wrote about your favourite cat. I thought so."

"I think so, and I think I am mad now," said Mabel, marching away from the others as she spoke, and plunging into

the cool depths of the paddock.

At that moment, more than cats, she hated herself; she hated Annie; she hated Priscilla. What an awful tissue of lies she was weaving round herself! Surely another year at Mrs Lyttelton's school would have been much better than this. But, alas! it is not given to us to retrace our steps. Mabel had taken up a position, and there was nothing for it now but to abide by it. To confess all that she had done, to demand the money back from Priscilla, to stay on at school, were greater feats than she had courage to perform; and even if she were willing to do this, was not Annie always by her side—Annie, who did not repent, who was feathering her own nest so nicely, and who was priding herself on having overcome the immense difficulty of proving poor, stupid Mabel a poet?

The great day of the prize-giving followed soon after, and, to the unbounded astonishment of the girls, Mabel Lushington's essay on "Idealism" won the first literature prize.

The essays were not read by the girls themselves, but by one of the teachers who had a beautiful voice and that dear enunciation which makes every word tell. The vote in favour of Mabel was unanimous. Her paper had thought; it had even style. In all respects it was far above the production of an ordinary schoolgirl, and beyond doubt it was far and away the best essay written.

Priscilla's paper passed muster, but it did not even win the second prize. Mabel looked quite modest and strikingly handsome when the great prize was bestowed upon her—a magnificent edition of all the great English poets, bound in calf and bearing the school coat-of-arms.

Mrs Lyttelton, more astonished than pleased, was nevertheless forced to congratulate Mabel. She turned soon afterwards to one of the girls.

"I must confess," she said, "that I never was so surprised in my life."

"I should have been just as amazed as you," answered Constance, "but for the fact that there is far more in Mabel than any one has the least idea of. She is a poet, you know."

"A poet, my dear?"

"Yes; indeed she is. We simply would not believe it; but she read us some of her verses. A few, of course, were nothing but drivel; but there were lines on the sunset which quite amazed me, for they were full of thought."

"I am glad to hear it, Constance; nevertheless, I may as well confess to you that my feelings at the present moment are mingled ones. I wanted Priscilla to win the prize."

Meanwhile Mabel, surrounded by glory—her schoolfellows and the different visitors who had come to the school for the occasion crowding round her and congratulating her—had no longer any feeling of remorse. She acknowledged that Annie was right, and loved Annie, for the time being, with all her heart.

It was Annie herself who took the telegram to the post-office to convey the great information to Lady Lushington. It was Annie herself who was the happy recipient of the reply which came later on that evening. The words of Lady Lushington's telegram were brief:

"Congratulation. True to my word. Join me in Paris on Friday. Writing to Mrs Lyttelton."

The three girls with whom this story first opened were together once more in the private sitting-room at Lyttelton School. When Mabel had read her telegram she flung it across to Priscilla.

"Then all is well," she said; "and we owe it to Annie."

"Yes," said Priscilla. "And I have had a telegram," she added, "an hour ago. It is from Uncle Josiah. He wishes me to remain with Mrs Lyttelton during the vacation. He doesn't care that I should return home at present."

"Well, that will suit you exactly, won't it?" said Annie.

"I suppose so. I only wonder what Mrs Lyttelton will say."

"And I am going to my uncle. We all break up to-morrow; but you and I shall meet again in the autumn, Priscilla. You will have to say good-bye to dear old Mabel now."

"You must wish me luck," said Mabel. "I won't forget my part; you need have no anxiety about your school fees."

"Uncle Josiah seems pleased on the whole that I should remain," answered Priscilla, "although I cannot make out the wording of his telegram; but I do wonder what arrangement he will make for paying Mrs Lyttelton."

"If he cannot pay her you ought to go back," said Annie, who did not at all wish to have this additional expense laid at Mabel's door. She wished as much as possible of Mabel's money should be devoted to herself. "But I suppose you will hear in the morning."

"Yes; I suppose so," said Priscilla.

"You look pretty miserable, Priscie. I wonder why, seeing all that Mabel and I have done for you."

"All that I have done for *you*, you mean," said Priscilla.

"Well, I like that," said Annie.

"I will speak out for once," said Priscilla, her eyes flashing fire and her pale face becoming suffused with colour. "I have gone under, and I hate myself. The hour of triumph to-day ought to have been mine. Don't you suppose that I feel it? I loathe myself so deeply that I don't think I am even a good enough girl to help my aunt in the house-work at home; and I pity the village dressmaker who would have me apprenticed to her. I am so bad that I loathe myself. Oh, you think that I shall be happy. You don't know me; I can never be happy again!"

Mabel's face immediately became pale. She looked at Priscilla as though she were going to cry. It was Annie who took the bull by the horns.

"Now, this is sheer nonsense," she said. "You know perfectly well, Priscilla, that no better thing could have been done than what has happened to-day. In the first place, you are not disgraced, for the essay you read was quite creditable. It ought to have been, indeed, seeing that it was my work. And, in the second place, you have a year's schooling guaranteed. With your brains, think what you will achieve—a fine scholarship at least, and then Girton as your reward. You mean to say that for the sake of some little pricks of conscience you would not take these advantages? Of course you will! Indeed, you have done so, so there's no good saying anything more about it."

"I know there isn't," said Priscilla. "I don't expect sympathy; I deserve all that I can get." She left the room as she spoke.

"Oh, isn't she quite too dreadful?" said Annie.

"I don't know," answered Mabel; "I expect I'd feel much the same if I were she."

The next day Priscilla received a letter from her uncle. She had written to tell him that the funds for another year's schooling had been provided for her.

"My dear Priscilla," he wrote, "I am more disappointed than glad at your news; but of course, if a friend wants to pay for your schooling, I don't interfere. You say that you hope to win a scholarship at the end of the term. That may or may not be the case. All that I can say is that I hope you will get it, for it is my intention to wash my hands of you. I made you a sensible offer, and you have rejected it. Your aunt and I agree that as you are too grand for us, *we*, on our part, are too poor for you. Henceforth you may look to your father in India for any assistance you may require. But as I don't want to be hard on you, I am willing to pay a small sum for your support during the coming holidays, which I wish you to spend at Lyttelton School. I enclose money herewith—five pounds. I have no doubt the mistress will keep you for that for it will more than cover your consumption of food.

"Good-bye, my dear Priscilla. I look upon you as an instance of want of gratitude. You are too fine a lady for your aunt and me.—Your uncle, Josiah."

Chapter Nine.

The Rector.

It was a pretty old Rectory to which Annie Brooke was going in order to spend the first week of her holidays. It was situated on the borders of Wales, and the scenery was superb. Mountains surrounded it, and seemed, after a fashion, to shut it in. But these glorious mountains, with their ever-changing, ever-shifting effects of light and shade, their dark moments, their moments of splendour, were all lost upon such a nature as that of Annie Brooke.

She hated the Rectory. Her feelings towards Uncle Maurice were only those of toleration.

She loathed the time she spent there, and now the one thought in her breast was the feeling that her emancipation was near, and that very soon she would be on her way to gay Paris to join Mabel Lushington.

Yes, Annie had achieved much, if those actions of hers could be spoken of in such a light; she had won that which she desired. Priscilla remained at school. Mabel had left Lyttelton School, and she (Annie) was to join her friend on the Continent.

Still, of course, there was a small thing to be done. Uncle Maurice must produce the needful. Annie could not travel to Paris without money, and Uncle Maurice must supply it. She did not anticipate much difficulty in getting the necessary sum from her uncle. Her dress was, of course, very unsuitable for the time of triumph she hoped to have in the gay capital and during her time abroad with Lady Lushington and Mabel. But nevertheless, she was not going to fret about these things in advance, and perhaps Uncle Maurice would be good for more than the money for her journey.

She was seated now in a high gig, her uncle himself driving her. He had come to meet her at the nearest railway station ten miles away, and as the old horse jogged along and the old gig bumped over the uneven road Annie congratulated herself again and again on having such a short time to spend at home.

Mr Brooke was an old clergyman approaching seventy years of age. He had lived in this one parish for over forty years; he loved every stone on the road, every light on the hills, every bush that grew, every plant that flowered; and as to the inhabitants of the little parish of Rashleigh, they were to old Maurice Brooke as his own children.

He was pleased to see Annie, and showed it now by smiling at her from time to time and doing his best to make her comfortable.

"Is the rug tucked tightly round you, Annie?" he said. "You will feel the fresh air a bit after your time down south. It's

fine air we have in these ports—none finer in the land—but it's apt to be a little fresh when you come new upon it. And how are you, my dear girl? I've been looking, forward to your holidays. There's a great deal for you to do, as usual."

"Oh uncle!" said Annie, "but you know I don't like doing things."

"Eh, my love?" said the old clergyman. "But we have to do them, all the same, when they come to us in the guise of duty."

"That is what I hate," said Annie, speaking crossly. "Don't let's worry about them to-night, Uncle Maurice; I have had a long journey, and am tired."

"Poor bit thing!" said the old man. He stopped for a minute to pull the rag up higher round Annie's knees. "Mrs Shelf is so pleased at your coming back, Annie. She looks to you to help her with the preserving. She is not as young as she was, and her rheumatism is worse."

"Oh, I hate rheumatic old folks!" thought Annie, but she did not say the words aloud.

By-and-by they reached the Rectory, and while the rector took old Rover back to his stable Annie ran into the house.

The Rectory was large and rambling, and had

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"You are looking well, my dear," said the woman, "and I am glad you are back, for we want young life about the old place."

"You won't have it long," said Annie.

Mrs Shelf took no notice. "The raspberries are past," she said; "but there are a good few gooseberries still to preserve, and there are the early pears coming on; they make beautiful jam, if boiled whole with cloves and lemon-peel and a little port wine thrown in. But you must stand over them the whole time in order to keep them from breaking. Then there are the peaches; I set store by them, and always put them in bottles and bury them in the garden. There are gherkins, too, for pickling; and there are a whole lot of walnuts. We mustn't lose a day about pickling the walnuts, or they'll be spoiled. We might begin over some of the jams to-morrow. What do you think?"

"You may if you like, Shelfy," said Annie; "but I sha'n't. I have only come here for a visit. I'm off to Paris immediately."

"You off to Paris!" said the old woman. "Highly-tighty! what will your uncle say?"

"Uncle Maurice will say just what I like him to say," answered Annie. "Please have a chop or something nice for my supper, for I can't stand slops. And is my room ready?"

"I hope so, child. I told Peggie to see to it." Peggie was not the best of servants, and Annie's room was by no means in a state of immaculate order. It was a large room, but, like the rest of the house, very badly furnished. There was a huge old four-poster for the girl to sleep in, and there was a little rickety table which held a looking-glass with a crack down the middle, and there was a cracked white basin and jug on another table at the farther end of the room. Of wardrobe there was none; but a large door, when opened, revealed some shelves and a hanging press.

"Oh! it is just as of old," thought the girl—"an intolerable, horrid place. I could never live here—never; and what's more, I won't. How wise I was to make provision for myself while at school! I declare, bad as I thought the old place, I didn't imagine it to be quite so ramshackle."

While these thoughts were rushing through Annie's mind she was brushing out her pretty golden hair and arranging it becomingly round her small head. Then she straightened and tidied her dress, and presently ran downstairs, her trim little figure quite stylish-looking for that old house, and pretty enough, in the rector's opinion, to gladden any place which she chose to grace.

Old Mr Brooke loved Annie. She was all he possessed in the world. He had never married, and when his only brother, on dying, had left the child to his care, he had vowed to be a father to her, to bring her up well, and to do the best he could for her. Annie was the child of an English father and an Italian mother. In appearance she had taken in every respect after her father's race, being fair, with all the attributes of the Saxon, but in her nature she had some of the craftiness which distinguishes the Italian. Hers was a difficult nature to fathom, and to a very high-minded man like the Rev. Maurice Brooke she was a problem he could never solve. For a couple of years past he had owned himself puzzled by Annie. When she was a little child she delighted him; but more and more, as she returned from school for each holiday, he felt that there was something behind. She was frank with him; she grumbled quite openly in his presence. These things he did not mind, but he was sure there was something behind the grumbling, and that fact puzzled and distressed him.

Still, he looked forward to the weeks which Annie spent at Rashleigh Rectory as the golden periods of his life. All the little pleasures and indulgences were kept for this time. "When my niece comes back we'll do so-and-so," was his favourite remark. "When Annie comes, Mrs Shelf, we must have that new tarpaulin put down; and don't you think her room ought to be repapered and painted for her? Girls like pretty things, don't they?"

But Mrs Shelf read Annie's nature far more correctly than did her old uncle.

"If I were you, Mr Brooke," she said, "I wouldn't spend money on that girl until I knew what she was after. Maybe she

won't take to the room when it's painted and papered."

"Won't take to it?" he replied. "But naturally she'll take to it, Mrs Shelf, for it will be her own room, where, please God, she will sleep for many long years, until, indeed, she finds another home of her own."

Mrs Shelf was silent when the rector said these things. But, somehow, the room was not papered, nor was the old paint renewed; and Annie failed to notice these facts.

"Well, my little girl," he said on the present occasion, as they both sat down to supper in a small room which opened out of the study, "it's a sight for sair een to see you back again; and well you look, Annie—well and bonny." He looked at her admiringly. She was not at all a beautiful girl, but she was beautiful to him. "You have a look of my brother Geoffrey," he said. "Ah, Geoffrey, dear fellow, was remarkably good-looking. Not that looks signify much, Annie; we ought never to set store by them. It is the beauty of the mind we ought to cultivate, my love."

"Well," said Annie, "I'd like to be handsome. I don't see, for my part, why I should not have both. What do you think, uncle?"

"That would be as the Almighty chose," he replied. "But come now, my love; time passes quickly. I often forget, myself, how the years run on. How old are you, my dearie?"

"I was seventeen my last birthday, Uncle Maurice; quite grown up, you know."

"Why, to be sure, to be sure," he replied.

"Your mother was married at seventeen, poor young thing! But in these days we are more sensible, and girls don't take the burden of life on them while they are still children. You are a schoolgirl yet, Annie, and won't be anything else for another year at least."

"Oh, all right, uncle," said Annie, who had no wish to change Lyttelton School for the dullness of Rashleigh Rectory.

"But the months fly on," said the old man. "Help yourself to a roast-apple, my dear. And before we know where we are," he continued, "you'll have left school and be back here with me. I look forward to that time, my little Annie; there will be a power of things for you to do, and the parish will be all the better for your society."

Annie shuffled her feet and grew red. The old rector did not especially notice her. He was absorbed in contemplation. He had eaten his large bowl of Quaker oats, and now he laid the spoon on his plate and gazed into the fire.

"It's a fine thing," he said, "to be able to help the poor and needy. I always say to myself, 'When my bit Annie comes back we'll do so-and-so. We'll have more mothers' meetings and classes for young women.' There are some mill-hands near here, Annie, who are neglected in their spiritual part shamefully. They want a lady like yourself to understand them and to show them what girls ought to know. You might have sewing-classes, for instance; and you might read aloud to them just to interest them, you know. I have been thinking a lot about it. And then what do you say to a Sunday afternoon class, just in one of the big rooms here, for the mill-hands? It would be a pretty bit of work, and I wouldn't be above catching them, so to speak, by guile—I mean that I would give them tea and cake. Mrs Shelf wouldn't mind. We'd have to manage her, wouldn't we, Annie?"

"Yes, uncle," said Annie, yawning; "yes."

"Then there's a carving-class for the young men."

"I wouldn't mind that so much as the other," said Annie suddenly.

"Now, that is really nice of you, my child, for those rough mill-hands are often very troublesome. I would always accompany you myself to the carving-class. We'd get our patterns from London, and you would encourage them a bit."

"Only I can't carve," said Annie.

"Well, well, that needn't be a difficulty; for it is easy to learn, I am told; and you might have lessons during your last term at school. Oh, there'll be a deal for you to do, my pretty one, and no minute left unemployed; and you, all the time while you are so busy, the very sunshine of your old uncle's life."

"Am I, Uncle Maurice?" she asked.

"Are you that?" he replied. He rose and held out his arms to her. "Aren't you just all I've got," he said—"all I have got?"

She allowed him to kiss her, and even faintly responded, for she had made up her mind not to trouble him about Paris that night.

After a time he allowed her to go to bed, which she was exceedingly glad to do. But when she had flung herself in her bed and was quickly lost in slumber, the old man himself sat up and thought a great deal about her, and prayed for her not a little.

"She is a bonny lass, and a pretty one," he said to himself; "and, thank the Lord! I don't see a trace of that dark-eyed mother about her. She takes after Geoffrey, the best of men. Yes, she is a good child, and will settle down to my busy life here, I make no doubt, with great equanimity. I have much to be thankful for, and my Annie is the apple of my eye. All the same, I wish—I do wish—that she was just a *little* more responsive."

The next day Annie awoke with the lark. She jumped up, and long before breakfast was out of doors. The house was shabby enough, but the Rectory garden was a place to revel in. The rector cared nothing about indoor decoration, but his hobby was his garden. Lawns with some of the finest turf in England rolled majestically away from the house towards the swift-flowing river at the other end of the grounds. There were gay parterres filled with bright flowers. There were shrubberies and paddocks, and even a labyrinth and an old Elizabethan walk where the yew-trees were cut into grotesque forms of foxes and griffins. There was an old sun-dial, which at one time used to interest Annie but which she had long ceased to notice; and there was a kitchen-garden, which ought to have delighted the heart of any young person; for not only were the vegetables first class, but here was to be found the best fruit in the neighbourhood. The rector was celebrated for his peaches and apricots, his pears, his apples, his nuts. He had a long vinery full of choice grapes, and there were hotbeds containing melons of the finest flavour; and there were even—and these were as a crown of all crowns to the old rector—pines growing here in perfection.

Annie was too self-loving and too keenly appreciative of the good things of life not to like the old garden. She forgot some of her grievances now as she walked here and there, helping herself indiscriminately to the ripest and best fruit.

By-and-by the postman was seen coming up the avenue. Annie ran to meet him. She had been delayed for a day in leaving Lyttelton School, and she knew, therefore, that Mabel's invitation would probably arrive at Rashleigh Rectory this morning. Yes; here it was in Mabel's own writing. Annie looked at the outside of the envelope for a minute or two with intense appreciation; then she deliberately opened it and took out two letters. The first was from no less a person than Lady Lushington herself:

"My dear Miss Brooke,—I write by Mabel's wish to beg of you to join my niece and myself here early next week. We are going to Switzerland, where we hope you will accompany us, but will remain here at the 'Grand' until Wednesday. If you can manage to be with us on Tuesday night, that will be quite time enough. I hope your uncle will spare you to us; and you may assure him that while you are my guest you will be treated as though you were my child, and will have no expense of any sort.

"Looking forward to making your acquaintance, and with my compliments to your uncle, believe me, yours sincerely,
Henrietta Lushington."

"Hurrah! hurrah!" cried Annie. She read the other letter, but more carelessly; Lady Lushington's was the important one. Mabel wrote:

"Dear Annie,—It is all right. Don't fail to be with us on Tuesday night. Aunt Henrietta will send Parker to meet you at the Gare du Nord, and you will doubtless find some escort to bring you to Paris. It's great fun here, although the weather is very hot, and we are dying to be away amongst the cool mountains of Switzerland. Aunt Henrietta goes to all the fashionable hotels, and dresses exquisitely, so if you can screw a little money out of that old flint of an uncle of yours, so much the better; but even if you are shabby, I dare say I can manage to rig you up.—Your affectionate friend, Mabel Lushington."

"P.S.—That awful bill has not come yet! I shake when I think of it.

"P.S. Number 2.—I am very glad now that I took your advice. It is heavenly to be emancipated. I wouldn't be back at that odious school for a kingdom. Do come quickly."

Armed with these letters, Annie now entered the same little room where she and her uncle had partaken of their supper on the previous night.

Chapter Ten.

The Illness.

Mr Brooke was not very well. He was subject to very severe headaches, and had at these times to stay quiet. Annie might have noticed by his languid brown eyes and his slow and somewhat feeble step that something was wrong with him, had she not been so absorbed in her own pleasure.

"Good-morning, Uncle Maurice," she said. "I hope you are hungry for breakfast; for if you are not, I am."

"I can't manage much this morning, my love," said the old rector. "Just a cup of tea, please, and—and—well, yes—a very small piece of toast."

"Are you ill?" said Annie a little crossly, for she had small sympathy for suffering.

"Not exactly, my love. I have a headache; but it will pass."

"Oh, if you only knew how I suffered from them at school," said Annie in a careless tone. "Dear me! isn't this room too hot, Uncle Maurice? Do you mind if I open the window?"

"No, my love," he answered. But when she flung wide the window he shivered slightly, although he would not show his discomfort for the world.

Annie helped herself to the excellent breakfast provided by Mrs Shelf. She was really hungry, and was in excellent spirits. Things were turning out well. Even the Rectory would be endurable if she might leave it on Monday. She made a careful calculation in her own mind. This was Friday morning. She would have to go to London on Monday night.

She must sleep at a hotel; that would be all the better fun. Then she would start on Tuesday from Victoria Station and arrive in Paris that night. Nothing mattered after that; all would be golden after that. Her reaping-time would arrive; her harvest would be ready for her to gather. Oh yes, she was a happy and contented girl this morning!

"How nice the home-made bread is!" she said; "and the butter is so good! Have you got Cowslip and Dewlip still, Uncle Maurice?"

"Yes, my dear," he answered, brightening up at her interest in the Rectory animals; "and Dewlip has such a lovely calf with a white star on her forehead. We have called it after you—Annie. I hope you don't mind. Mrs Shelf would do it; for she took it into her head that the calf had a look of you."

"Really, uncle! That's not a compliment; but I don't care. I'll have some of that strawberry jam, if you please."

"The jam is good, isn't it?" said Mr Brooke. "It is made from the last crop of strawberries. Mrs Shelf is a first-rate housekeeper."

Annie helped herself plentifully. She poured rich cream on the jam, and ate with an epicure's appreciation. At last her appetite was satisfied, and she had time to consider as to when she would break her tidings to Uncle Maurice.

"Are you coming out with me?" she asked. "What are we going to do with ourselves this morning?"

"Well, my love—I am really sorry—it is most unlucky—I haven't suffered as I am doing to-day—I may say for months. I suppose it is the excitement of having you back again, little Annie; but I really do fear that until my head gets better I must remain quiet. I get so giddy, my darling, when I try to walk; but doubtless by lunch-time I shall be better. You must amuse yourself alone this morning, my little girl; but I have no doubt that Mrs Shelf has all kinds of plans to propose to you."

Annie stood up. Outside, the garden smiled; but the little room in which they breakfasted, warm enough in the evening, was somewhat chilly now, for it faced due west.

"I do want to talk to you so badly," she said; "and—can I just have a few words with you between now and post-time? I must write a letter for the post, and I have to consult you about it. I won't worry you, dear; only the thing must be talked about and arranged, so when shall I come to you?"

"The post goes early from here," said the rector—"at one o'clock. It is nine now; come to me at twelve, Annie. I dare say I shall be all right by then."

"All right or not," thought Annie, "he'll have to hear my little bit of information not later than twelve o'clock."

She went out of the room. The rector watched her as she disappeared. He did not know why he felt so depressed and uneasy. His headache was rather worse, and he felt some slight shivers going down his old frame, caused no doubt by the open window.

He left the breakfast-room and entered his study, where a fire was burning, and where, in his opinion, things were much more comfortable. He did not feel well enough to settle down to any special work. He drew up an easy-chair in front of the fire and sat there lost in thought.

His darling was safe at home; the apple of his eye was with him. She was all he possessed in the wide, wide world. There was nothing he would grudge her—nothing in reason; but, somehow, he dreaded the time when she would return and talk to him about that letter which must catch the post. Anxiety was bad for him, and his head grew worse.

Meanwhile Annie, avoiding Mrs Shelf, took her writing materials into the garden, and in the sunniest corner penned a long letter to her friend.

"Of course I am coming, dear Mabel," she wrote. "I have got to tackle the old uncle at twelve o'clock, but it will be all right. When I have seen him and got the needful, or the promise of it, I will write to Lady Lushington. I am looking forward beyond words to our time together. You need not be uneasy; I will manage the horrid bills. Whatever else your Annie lacks, she is not destitute of brains. Trust to me, dear, to see you through. Oh! I am glad that you appreciate my efforts on your behalf.—Your loving friend,—

"Annie Brooke."

This letter was just written when Mrs Shelf approached Annie's side.

"I wonder now, Annie," she said, "if you would mind riding into Rashleigh to fetch Dr Brett. I don't like the state your uncle is in. You could have Dobbin to ride; he's not up to much, but really I think Dr Brett should come. I don't like Mr Brooke's appearance. He is so flashed about the face, and so queer in himself altogether."

Chapter Eleven.

The Letter.

"I will go, of course," said Annie, jumping up; "what is the hour, Mrs Shelf?"

"It is a quarter to twelve. You had best go at once; if you don't delay you will catch Dr Brett when he returns home for lunch. Billy can put the saddle on Dobbin for you, and there's the old habit hanging on the peg in your bedroom."

"Detestable old habit," thought Annie, "and horrid Dobbin, and shocking side-saddle! Oh dear! oh dear! But whatever happens, I must get that letter off immediately."

"Why are you so slow?" said Mrs Shelf, looking at the girl with great annoyance. "Your uncle wants medical aid, and he ought to have it."

"I will go, of course," said Annie, "but not for a few minutes. Don't fidget, please; I don't believe there is anything serious the matter with Uncle Maurice. He often has these headaches."

She went slowly towards the house. Mrs Shelf stood and watched her.

"Well, if there is a heartless piece in the whole of England, it is that girl," thought the good woman. "What my dear master finds to like in her beats me. If she doesn't go off immediately for Dr Brett, I'll put Dobbin to the gig and drive to Rashleigh myself."

Meanwhile Annie entered the house. Mr Brooke was lying back in his chair, his face flushed, his hands tremulous.

"I am very sorry, my darling," he said when he saw Annie, "but I have been a little bit faint. It will pass, of course; but poor Mrs Shelf is nervous about me, and wants Brett to be called in. I don't suppose it is really necessary."

"Of course it isn't a bit necessary, uncle," said Annie. "You are just excited because I have come back. Now do listen to me, darling. Your Annie has such a big favour to ask of you. You must not think it unkind of me to speak of it now, but it is so tremendously important. I will go and fetch the doctor immediately afterwards—I will indeed—if you really want him; but don't you think you are just a wee bit nervous?"

"No, dear, not nervous," said the old man. "I am really ill. This attack is sudden, but doubtless it will pass, and I must not be selfish."

"It is horrid to disturb you when your head aches," said Annie, "I wish now I had spoken to you this morning. I did not like to when you seemed not quite the thing. I am naturally thoughtful, you know."

"Yes, yes, my little girl," he answered, patting her hand. "I shall be well very, quickly now you are back."

"But, Uncle Maurice, dear—oh, Uncle Maurice! you won't say no? I have an invitation. I—I—*want* to accept it. It is from a very great lady. Here it is; can you read it?"

She put Lady Lushington's letter into the old rector's hand. He read the words slowly and with apparent calm. Then he laid it on his knee. For a minute there was silence between the two. Annie's heart was beating hard. At last Mr Brooke said:

"You want to go?"

"I want to go," said Annie with emphasis, "more than I want anything else in all the wide world."

"You understand," said the rector very slowly, "that I am old and not well. This will be a keen disappointment to me."

"I know, I know, darling Uncle Maurice; but you are *so* unselfish. You would not deprive your own Annie of her pleasure."

"No, Annie," said Mr Brooke, rousing himself, no longer lying back in his chair, but sitting upright; "God knows that I should be the last to do that. You are young, and want your pleasure."



'My mind is firmly made up, child.'

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"Oh, so much! Think what it means."

"But what sort of woman is Lady Lushington?"

"Uncle Maurice, she is delightful; she is the aunt of my greatest friend, Mabel Lushington, one of my schoolfellows."

"And yet," said the rector, "the aunt of one of your schoolfellows may be the last person I should think it desirable to send you to. I pray God to keep me from the great sin of selfishness, but I would not have you spend your holidays with a woman, whom I know nothing about. Before I allow you to accept this invitation, Annie, I must inquire of Mrs Lyttelton something with regard to the character of Lady Lushington."

"Oh uncle! uncle!"

"My mind is firmly made up, child. I will write to Mrs Lyttelton by this post. If her report is favourable I will give you money to go to Paris—not a great deal, for I am poor, but sufficient. This is all that I can say."

"But listen, darling uncle. Lady Lushington wants me to meet her at the Grand Hotel in Paris on Tuesday night. You cannot hear in time from Mrs Lyttelton. I shall lose my chance of joining Lady Lushington and Mabel. Oh, do—do be reasonable!"

"Annie, I have made up my mind. I will not give you one farthing to join this woman until I know something about her from one who is at least acquainted with her. My child, don't be angry; I am absolutely determined."

"Then you are unkind. It is dreadful of you," said Annie.

She burst into petulant tears and ran out of the room. Here was a checkmate. What was to be done? She was trembling from head to foot. Her heart was full of anger—such anger as she had not known for years. Mrs Shelf was hovering about outside.

"Oh, what is it?" said Annie. "Why do you follow me?"

"I want you to go at once to fetch the doctor. I have ordered Dobbin to be saddled, and Billy will bring him round to the front door for you. Do rush upstairs and put on your riding-habit. Be quick, child; be quick."

Annie flew upstairs. The village of Rashleigh was between three and four miles away, for the old parish was a very extensive one, and the Rectory happened to be situated a long way from the village.

Annie had just sprung into the saddle, and was arranging her habit preparatory to riding to Rashleigh, when Mrs Shelf came out.

"Take this to the butcher's, Annie," she said, handing the girl a letter, "and be sure you get a receipt from him. Ask him to give you what I have ordered on this piece of paper, and bring it back with you."

"All right," said Annie carelessly. She started on her ride. When she had gone a very short way she dropped the reins on the old pony's neck and began to think. She had never for a single moment expected the obstacle which now stood between her and her desires. She had thought that she could easily get round Uncle Maurice, but she had not really analysed his character. He was unselfish of the unselfish—that she knew; but she had failed to remember that he was a man who was always actuated by the very highest religious principles. He was, in short, unworldly. To do right meant far more with him than to be great and grand and rich and powerful. All those things which to Annie meant life and happiness were less than nothing to Uncle Maurice. Lady Lushington might be the richest and the grandest woman on earth, but if she was not also a good woman nothing would induce him to entrust one so precious as Annie to her care. The rector would make his inquiries; nothing that Annie could do would stop him. Even supposing the result were favourable—which Annie rather doubted, for she knew quite well that Lady Lushington was a most worldly woman—the plans made for her by the great lady in Paris could not be carried out. It was already too late to post a letter to Mrs Lyttelton that day; even if she were still at Lyttelton School, she could not get it before Sunday morning, and her reply, under the most favourable circumstances, could not reach the little old Welsh Rectory until Tuesday morning. But in all probability Mr Brooke's letter would have to follow Mrs Lyttelton, who had doubtless long before now left Hendon. Mrs Lyttelton's answer would, therefore, be late, and when it came it would most likely not be what Annie desired. Whatever happened, Mrs Lyttelton would tell the truth; she was the sort of woman who never shirked her duties.

At the best, therefore, Annie could not reach the Grand Hotel in Paris by Tuesday night, and at the worst she could not go at all. Was she, who had sinned so deeply in order to obtain her heart's desire, to be balked of everything at the eleventh hour? Was Priscilla to have things to her liking? Was Mabel to have a great and royal time? And was Annie to be left alone—all alone—in the hideous Rectory, with one stupid woman to talk to her about preserves and pickles, and one stupid old man? Oh, well, he was not quite that; he was a dear old uncle, but nevertheless he *was* rather prosy, and she was young; she could not endure her life at the Rectory. Something must be done.

She was thinking these thoughts when she suddenly saw advancing to meet her a gig which contained no less a person than Dr Brett.

"Oh doctor!" cried the girl, riding up to him, "will you please call at the Rectory? How lucky it is that I should have met you! I was going to Rashleigh to leave you a message."

"Welcome back from school, Miss Annie," said Dr Brett, a stout, elderly man with a florid face. "Is anything wrong, my dear?" he added.

"I don't think that there is; but Uncle Maurice is fanciful, and Mrs Shelf more so. Will you just look in and give uncle something to put him right?"

"Of course I will go at once. But, my dear Miss Annie, you are mistaken when you call the rector fanciful; I never knew any one less so. I have often told him that he overworks, and that he ought to be careful. It is in the head that the mischief lies; and he is an old man, my dear Miss Annie, and has led a strenuous life. I am glad that you met me; it will save time."

The doctor drove away, and Annie's first intention was to turn her pony's steps back again in the direction of Rashleigh Rectory, but as she was about to do so her hand came in contact with the letter addressed to Dawson the butcher. She might as well take it on; anything was better than dawdling away her time at the dull Rectory. Then, too, she could post her letter herself to Mabel, adding something to it so as to assure her friend that the question of joining her was only postponed. Besides—but this was an afterthought—there were some things wanted at Dawson's. Annie again touched the letter, and as she did so her eyes rested on the signature. It was in her uncle's well-known hand. She was to give this letter to Dawson, and he was to give her a receipt. A receipt meant that he was to acknowledge some money.

Annie's heart gave a sudden leap. Was it possible that there was money in the letter? She felt the crimson colour rushing to her cheeks; a suffocating feeling just for a minute visited her heart. Then, urging the pony forward, she rode as fast as she could in the direction of Rashleigh.

Chapter Twelve.

Her Great Sin.

No one would have supposed that Annie Brooke, brought up so carefully by such an uncle as the Rev. Maurice Brooke, would so easily yield to one temptation after another. But it is one of the most surprising and true things in life that it is the first wrong-doing that counts. It is over the first wrong action that we struggle and hesitate. We shrink away then from the edge of the abyss, and if we do yield to temptation our consciences speak loudly.

But conscience is of so delicate a fibre, so sensitive an organisation, that if she is neglected her voice grows feeble. She ceases to reproach when reproach is useless, and so each fall, be it great or little, is felt less than the last.

A few months ago, even in her young life, Annie would not have believed it possible that she could have brought herself to open her uncle's letter. Nevertheless, a mile out of Rashleigh she did so. Within the letter lay a cheque. It was an open cheque, payable to bearer and signed by the rector. The cheque was for twenty pounds. A bill of the butcher's lay within. This bill amounted to twenty pounds. The rector, therefore, was sending Dawson, the well-known village butcher, a cheque for twenty pounds to pay the yearly account. It was the fashion at Rashleigh for the

principal trades-people to be paid once a year. This twenty pounds, therefore, stood for the supply of meat of various sorts which was used at the Rectory during the year.

Twenty pounds! Annie looked at it. Her eyes shone. "Take this, and you are all right," whispered a voice. "With this you can easily get off to London, and from there to Paris. All you want is money. Well, here is money. You must write to your uncle when you get to Paris, and confess to him then. He will forgive you. He will be shocked; but he will forgive you. Of course he will."

Annie considered the whole position. "I have done a lot of uncomfortable things," she thought. "I managed that affair of the essays, and I used poor Susan Martin's poems for my purpose; and—and—I have got Mabel into no end of a scrape; it is my duty to see poor Mabel through. This thing is horrid! I know it is. I hate myself for doing it; but, after all, the money has been thrown in my way. Twenty pounds! I can buy some little articles of dress, too. Dawson will cash this for me; oh, of course he will. It does seem as if I were meant to do it; it is the only way out. Uncle Maurice is terrible when he takes, as it were, the bit between his teeth. Yes, I must do it; yes, I will. It is the only, only way."

Before Annie and her pony had gone another quarter of a mile Dawson's bill had been torn into hundreds of tiny fragments, which floated away on the summer breeze, and the open cheque in the old rector's handwriting, with his signature at the bottom and his name endorsing it behind, was folded carefully up in Annie's purse.

It was a pretty-looking girl—for excitement always added to Annie's charms—who rode at last into the little village. She went straight to Dawson's, sprang off her pony, and entered the shop.

Old Dawson, who had known her from her babyhood, welcomed her back with effusion.

"Dear me, now, miss," he said, "I am that glad to see you! How I wish my missis was in! Why, you have grown into quite a young lady, Miss Annie."

"Of course," replied Annie, "I am grown up, although I am not leaving school just yet. Please, Mr Dawson, I want you to give me—"

She took a piece of paper from her pocket and laid it on the counter. The man glanced at Mrs Shelf's orders, and desiring a foreman to attend to them, returned to talk to Annie.

"And please," continued the girl, her heart now jumping into her mouth, "uncle would be so much obliged if you could cash this for him."

Dawson glanced at the cheque.

"Of course, miss," he said. "How will you have it?"

"In gold, please," said Annie.

"I can give you fifteen pounds in gold, miss. Will you take the rest in a five-pound note?"

Annie agreed. Two or three minutes later, with her little parcel of meat put into a basket for her, and twenty pounds in her pocket, she was riding towards the post-office.

There she dismounted, and asking for a sheet of the best note-paper, wrote a line to Lady Lushington. It ran as follows:

"Dear Lady Lushington,—Thank you ever so much for your most kind invitation, which I take pleasure in accepting. My uncle is so glad that you have asked me, and I thank you now in his name as well as my own. I shall be in Paris on Tuesday night, so will you kindly send your maid, as you suggest, to meet me at the railway station? Please give my love to Mabel.—Yours very sincerely and gratefully, Annie Brooke."

When the letter was finished it was put into a separate envelope from the one which had already been written to Mabel, and then the two were addressed and stamped and dropped by Annie's own hand into the box of the village post-office. How excited she felt, and how triumphant! Yes—oh yes—she had surmounted every difficulty now, for long before her theft with regard to the cheque had been discovered she would have left the country. She could be agreeable now to every one. She could smile at her neighbours; she could talk to the village children; and, above all things, she could and would be very, very nice to Uncle Maurice.

When she arrived back at the Rectory such a rosy-faced, bright-eyed, pretty-looking girl walked into Mrs Shelf's presence that that good woman hardly knew her. The sulky, disagreeable, selfish Annie of that morning had vanished, and a girl who was only too anxious to do what she could for every one appeared in her place.

"I met Dr Brett, Mrs Shelf—wasn't it a piece of luck?—and sent him on to see Uncle Maurice. Has he been, Mrs Shelf?"

"Oh yes, my dear, he has; and I am glad to tell you he thinks that your dear uncle, with care and quiet, will soon be himself again. The doctor thinks a great lot of your being here, Annie, and says that your company will do your uncle more good than anything else in the world. He wants cheering up, he says, and to have his mind distracted from all his parish work. I know you will do what you can—won't you?"

"Of course I shall," said Annie. "And here are the things from the butcher's," she added.

"It was very thoughtful of you, Annie, to ride on to Rashleigh," said Mrs Shelf. "I did want these sweetbreads. I mean to make a very delicate little stew out of them for your uncle's dinner. The doctor says that he wants a lot of building

up. He is an old man, my dear, and if we are not very precious of him, and careful of him, we sha'n't keep him long. There are few of his like in this world, Annie, and it will be a sad day for many when the Lord calls him."

"Oh, but that won't be for years and years," said Annie, who disliked this sort of talk immensely. "Well," she added, "I will go and sit with uncle now for a bit, and will make his tea for him presently; I know just how he likes it."

"Do, my dear. You know where his favourite cups and saucers are, and I am baking some special tea-cakes in the oven; and you can boil the kettle yourself, can't you, Annie? for I shall be as busy as a bee looking after Peggie and the churning. That wench would try any one; she hasn't a bit of head on her shoulders. And, by the way, Annie, what about the receipt? You paid Dawson, didn't you?"

Annie was leaving the kitchen. She turned her head slightly. "Dawson will send the receipt," she said. "To tell you the truth, I was in such a hurry to get back that I didn't wait for it."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs Shelf, "that is all right; I expect it will arrive on Monday. The cart won't be here before then, for we've got our week's supply of meat in. It came this morning."

"Splendid," thought Annie. "By Monday I shall be away."

She almost skipped into her uncle's study. The old man was better already. He was lying back in his chair, and was reading a paper which had come by the afternoon's post.

"Ah, here you are, my love!" he said.

"Here I am, uncle. I am so glad I met Dr Brett; he has made you better already."

"He has, child; he always does me good." Annie drew a chair forward, and pushed her hair back from her forehead. The impatient look had left her face. It looked tranquil and at its best.

"By the way, child," said Mr Brooke, "you will want me to write that letter for you."

"You must not worry about it now, really, uncle," said Annie, laying her hand on his.

"It will do quite well to-morrow—quite well," she added. "You know that whatever your Annie is, she would do nothing to make you worse."

"My dear little girl," said the old man, deeply affected by what he considered such thoughtfulness, "you may be sure that all my thoughts with regard to you are prompted by real love for you. I don't pretend that I have not looked forward very much indeed to these holidays. Nevertheless, I cannot forget that I am old, my love, and you are young. The young must have their day, dear, and the pleasure of the old is to watch them enjoying it. While you were out I have been thinking over my little money matters, and I think I can quite manage to give you a few extra pounds over and above your fare to Paris—a ten-pound note, perhaps, to buy some pretty little articles of dress."

"Thank you so much, uncle," said Annie, speaking in her sweetest tone.

"But my dear child, this will depend altogether on what Mrs Lyttelton says. But I expect the best, dear; for all her girls are nice, and you say that Miss Lushington is your special friend."

"My very greatest," said Annie—"a sweet girl—a poetess!"

"Indeed, Annie? She shows gifts at this early age? How very interesting! I am always impressed by young efforts; I like to encourage them. You have not by chance any of her little effusions by you?"

Now Annie had brought poor Susan Martin's manuscript book with her to the Rectory. She thought for a minute. Would it be safe to show these verses to the Rector? After a minute she said:

"I think I have. I will look in my trunk after tea."

"Do, my love; I shall be much interested. I used to indulge in verses when I was young myself, dear. Ah, those far-off days! And I had my dreams of greatness too. We all have our little ambitions when we are young. I wonder what yours are, my little Annie."

"Oh, I don't want to be clever at all," said Annie; "I just want to have a good time—and to make you happy," she added as an afterthought, putting out her small hand and laying it on his.

"Bless you, my darling—bless you! You are the sunshine of my life. Yes—thank God, I am much better this afternoon; that horrid feeling in my head has passed away. It gives me anxiety now and then, but only on your account, my child. As far as I am concerned, I am ready and waiting—only waiting to obey. I have had my warning—most old people have, dear; but for your sake I would live a little."

"Of course you will live for many, many years longer, Uncle Maurice," said Annie, rising and kissing him. "And now you are not going to be dismal, or to talk horrid things about—about dying. I am going to give you your tea; you always love the tea that Annie makes for you."

She flitted out of the room. She was the gayest of the gay during the rest of that evening. She chatted, and laughed, and made herself pleasant to every one; and when Uncle Maurice went to bed, feeling almost quite well again, he thanked God on his knees for having given him so bonny a creature as Annie to be the light and joy of his old age.

Meanwhile Annie herself, seated by her open window, with the moonlight falling full upon her, was counting her

money—that money which she had stolen from the faithful and affectionate old man. She put it in rows before her on the table. Fifteen beautiful, bright golden sovereigns; and there was also a five-pound note! The note looked a little dirty and as though it had passed through many hands.

Annie sat by the window and made her plans. Whether her conscience would prick her by-and-by remained to be proved; but on the present occasion it was quite tired out, stupefied by all those things which miserable Annie had done to try it. She felt, therefore, quite at her ease, and made her arrangements with care.

It would not do for her to arrive in Paris before the appointed evening. She had, therefore, the whole of to-morrow to spend at the Rectory, and also the whole of Sunday. Monday, too, might be spent there; and she would have done this but for the fact that the butcher's cart called on Monday morning, and that Mrs Shelf would notice the absence of Dawson's receipt. At first, of course, she would not be greatly surprised, and would content herself with writing him a note demanding it. It might be possible, however, that she would go to Rashleigh to see him. In great astonishment, he would ask many questions of Mrs Shelf, and would naturally tell her that Annie had cashed the cheque for twenty pounds.

Annie was positively sure that her uncle would forgive her even so great a sin as this, but she did not want to be in the house when he knew of her guilt. She resolved, therefore, to leave the Rectory on Monday morning, of course first writing a little note to her uncle telling him what she had done—in fact, making her confession to him, and begging him to forgive her.

"There is nothing else for it," she thought. "I know the dear old man will be dreadfully disappointed, but he will forgive me; I know he will."

That evening Annie neglected even to say that semblance of prayer which she was accustomed to utter before she laid her head on her pillow. Somehow, she dared not pray.

The next morning she was up, bright and early, singing gaily about the house. Mr Brooke had quite recovered. He came to meet her as she ran down into the garden.

"Why, Uncle Maurice!" cried the girl. "Oh, you are naughty!"

"I am quite well," he answered, "and I have good news for you. Who do you think is coming to stay here to-day?"

"Whom?" asked the girl. "My cousin's son from Australia—John Saxon. I have not seen him since he was a baby. You will have some fun now, Annie, with a young person in the house."

"Is he really young?" said Annie.

"Young, my dear? I should think so; about five or six and twenty. He's as good a lad as ever walked. I had a long letter from his mother. She says he is going to pay me a visit, and I may expect him—yes, to-day. You will have something to look forward to now, Annie, if Lady Lushington's character as a worldly-minded woman prevents my sending you to Paris."

"But I think I shall go to Paris," said Annie. She looked very pretty and expectant. The rector uttered a slight sigh.

"Come in, uncle; I must give you your breakfast, even if fifty John Saxons are coming to pay you a visit. Oh yes, of course I am glad."

But she did not feel so; she had a dim sort of idea that this young man might interfere with her own plans.

Chapter Thirteen.

Annie's Appeal.

John Saxon was big and square and muscular. Under ordinary circumstances Annie would have been charmed with his society. He was frankly glad to meet her, and they had not been half-an-hour in each other's company before they were chatting together as the best of friends.

"We are distant cousins, you know," said the young man. "I am so glad you are here, Miss Brooke."

"I am glad to be here, too," said Annie, "to welcome you; but you won't have much of my society, for I am going to Paris in a few days."

"Are you? I am sorry for that."

"Oh, you won't stay long either," said Annie; "you won't be able to stand the place."

"But I think I shall like it very much," he replied. "I love the country, and have never seen English country life before; this place doesn't seem at all lonely to me after our life in Tasmania. You haven't an idea what real loneliness is in any part of England; but if you lived fifty or sixty miles away from the nearest neighbour, then you'd have some idea of it."

"It must be horrible," said Annie, who was standing that moment in the sunlit garden with an apple-tree behind her and her pretty little figure silhouetted against the evening sky.

"Not for me," said young Saxon; "I love the life. Your England seems to suffocate me. In London I hadn't room to

breathe, and in that Paris to which you are going, Miss Brooke, I really felt ill.”

“Oh dear!” said Annie; “then you have not my sort of nature.”

He looked at her tentatively. She was fresh and young, and he had never talked to a real English girl before. But, somehow, she did not quite suit him. He was a keen judge of character, and those eyes of hers did not look long enough at any one. They soon lowered their lids as though they were keeping back a secret; and her pretty little mouth could also look unamiable at times. He hated himself for finding these flaws in a creature whom the rector worshipped, but nevertheless he could not help observing them.

Saxon arrived at the Rectory on the afternoon of Saturday, and he and Annie had already become, to all appearance, excellent friends.

When Sunday dawned he accompanied her to church, where the old rector preached one of the best sermons his affectionate congregation had ever listened to. Saxon and Annie were both long to remember that sermon and all that immediately followed, for on the afternoon of that same day the old man had another attack of drowsiness and giddiness. The doctor was sent for, and shook his head.

“He is not at all well,” said Dr Brett; “he is in no condition to stand the slightest shock. He did far too much when he preached to-day. Oh, Miss Annie, you need not look so dismal; I make no doubt we shall pull him round, but we have got to be *very* careful.”

Annie felt puzzled. Of course she was sorry for her uncle, but she had by no means reached the stage when she would give up her pleasure for him. She was, however, alarmed when the doctor said that the old man was in no condition to stand a shock. Was not a shock being prepared for him? Annie knew well how he loved her. She also knew how strong were his opinions with regard to right and wrong, with regard to goodness and wickedness. To old Mr Brooke Annie’s deed would bring such sorrow that his life, already in danger, might go out under the shock.

The girl felt herself trembling. She turned away from Saxon. He noticed her agitation, and went into the garden. Saxon felt that he had never liked Annie so much before.

“I thought her a rather pretty, rather heartless little thing,” he said to himself; “but I am mistaken. She does love the dear old man very truly.”

Meanwhile Annie was pacing up and down wondering what was to be done. Nothing would induce her to give up Paris; but if only she could go without giving her uncle that terrible shock with regard to the money!

All of a sudden a thought darted through her brain. Why should she not ask her cousin, John Saxon, to lend her twenty pounds? He had talked quite carelessly about his life in Tasmania last night, and, without intending to do so, had given Annie to understand that he was very comfortably off. The more she thought of borrowing money from her cousin, the more easy did it seem to her. If he gave it to her, she would go very early to-morrow to Rashleigh, pay Dawson, and bring back the receipt. Then all would be well. She could write a letter to her uncle explaining that she was forced to go to Paris for a little, but if he were really ill, she would not stay very long. In the meantime John Saxon would look after him. As to the money which she was about to borrow, Annie gave her shoulders a shrug.

“I’ll manage to let John have it some time,” she thought. “I don’t know how or when—but some time, and I don’t think he will be hard on me.”

Having made up her mind, she returned to the house. Mrs Shelf, who had been talking to Saxon, came up to her.

“You mustn’t fret really, missie,” she said. “All the doctor requires is that my dear master should have no anxiety of any sort. I am sure, miss, you would be the very last to give him any; and as we will all be equally careful, he will soon come round again.”

“Of course I wouldn’t hurt Uncle Maurice,” cried Annie. “What is he doing at present?” she added.

“He is asleep in his study, my dear; and I am going to watch by him this afternoon, for Dr Brett has given him a composing draught, and would like him to have a long rest. When he wakes I shall be handy to give him his tea. So I was thinking that if you and Mr Saxon went for a long walk it would do you both a sight of good.”

“Yes, do come, please,” said Saxon, who approached at that moment. “I want to see some of the country that you think so wild.”

“I shall be delighted,” said Annie, who felt that this proposal of Mrs Shelf’s would exactly fit in with her own plans.

Soon after three o’clock the young people started on their walk. Annie took her cousin on purpose up the hill at the back of the old Rectory and into the wildest part of the pariah, for she was determined to have him quite to herself. At last, when she was too tired to go any farther, they both sat down on the edge of a beetling crag, from where they could obtain a superb view both of land and ocean.

“Now,” said Annie, with a smile, “if you don’t call this a wild and desolate spot, I don’t know the meaning of the word.”

“The view is exceedingly fine,” replied Saxon; “but as to its being wild—why, look, Miss Annie, look—you can see a little thread of smoke there”—and he pointed to his right—“and there”—he pointed to his left; “in fact, all over the place. Each little thread of blue smoke,” he continued, “means a house, and each house means a family, or at least some human beings; and in addition to the human creatures, there are probably horses, and dogs, and cats, and barn-door fowls. Oh, I call this place thickly-peopled, if you ask me.”

Annie shuddered.

"I hate it," she said with sudden emphasis.

"You what?" asked Saxon, bending towards her.

"Hate it," she repeated. "I want to get away."

"You can't just now," he said, speaking in a low, sympathetic tone. "It would be impossible—would it not?—while your uncle is so ill."

"He isn't really ill," said Annie; "he just wants care."

"He wants the sort of care you can give him," repeated Saxon.

"Or you," said Annie.

"I?" said the young man. "How can I possibly do what you would do for him?"

"You can do far better than I," said Annie restlessly. "And the fact is, Cousin John—may I call you Cousin John?"

"Call me John, without the 'cousin,' as I will call you Annie if you don't mind."

"Then we are Annie and John to each other," said the girl; "that means that we are friends. Give me your hand, John, to close the compact." She laid her little white hand in his, and he grasped it with right goodwill.

"John," said Annie, "I must confide in you; I have no one else."

"Of course if I can help you I shall be glad," he said a little coldly; for there was something in her words which brought back his distrust of her.

"Well, it is just this: I have to go to Paris for a short time—"

"You have—I don't understand."

"And the painful part," continued Annie, "is this—that I am unable to explain. But I can tell you this much. I have a school friend—indeed, two school friends—who are both in—in trouble; and they can't possibly get out of their trouble without my help. If I go to Paris now to join my friend, things will be all right; if I don't go, things will be all wrong."

"But, excuse me," said Saxon, "how can you go when your uncle is so ill?"

"That is it," said Annie. "Of course, if he were in real danger I should be obliged to give my friends up. But he is not in danger, John; he only wants care. What I mean to do is this—or rather, I should say, what I should like to do. I would go, say, to-morrow to London, and then across to Paris, and there get through my little business and put things straight for those I love."

Annie spoke most pathetically, and her blue eyes filled with tears.

"She has a feeling heart," thought the young man. Once again his suspicions were disarmed.

He drew a little closer to her. She felt that she had secured his sympathy.

"Can't you understand," continued Annie, "that things may happen which involve other people? Can't you understand?"

"It is difficult to know why you cannot speak about them, Annie," replied the young man. "Nevertheless, if you say so, it is of course the case."

"It is the case. I undertook, perhaps wrongly—although I don't think so—to get a school fellow what she wanted most in the world last term. I wish you knew her; she is such a splendid, noble girl. She is very clever, too. I will tell you her name—Priscilla Weir. She has such a fine face, with, oh! so much in it. But she is unhappily situated. Her father is in India, and either cannot or will not help her; and she has no mother living, poor darling! and her uncle, her mother's brother, is quite a dreadful sort of creature. Priscilla is, oh, so clever! She has quite wonderful talents. And what do you think this uncle wants to do? Why, to apprentice her to a dressmaker. Think of it—a dressmaker!"

John Saxon did think of it but he showed no surprise. One of the nicest girls he knew in Tasmania was a dressmaker. She was very well informed, and could talk well on many subjects. She read good books, and had a dear little house of her own, and often and often he sat and talked with her of an evening, when the day's work was done and they were both at leisure to exchange confidences. John Saxon was not the least bit in love with the dressmaker, but for her sake now he could not condemn the occupation. He said, therefore, quietly:

"As long as women wear dresses there must be other women to make them, I suppose. I see nothing derogatory in that, Annie, provided your friend likes it."

"Oh, how can you talk in such a way?" said Annie, her tone changing now to one of almost petulance. "Why, if Priscilla were turned into a dressmaker she would lose her position; she wouldn't have a chance; she would go under; and she is so clever—oh, so clever! It does not require that sort of cleverness to be a dressmaker."

"Perhaps not," said Saxon. "I begin to understand; your English view of the calling is not ours in Tasmania. And so

you want to go to Paris to help this girl?"

"Yes; principally about her. In fact, I may say I am going almost wholly about her."

"I am not to know the reason?"

"I cannot tell you, for it would betray her."

"Have you spoken to your uncle on the subject?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say?"

"Well," said Annie eagerly, "it was this way. My other great friend is a certain Mabel Lushington. She is staying with her aunt Lady Lushington; and Lady Lushington most kindly sent me an invitation to join them both on Tuesday evening. They are going to take me to Switzerland and pay all my expenses, and of course I shall have a jolly time."

"But would that help your friend, the prospective dressmaker?"

"Yes. It may sound very puzzling; but if I were to join Mabel Lushington, it would put things all right for my friend."

"It is puzzling, of course, for me to understand, Annie; but I must take you at your word and suppose that it is so."

"Indeed it is, John; indeed it is. And I am, oh, so unhappy about it!"

The blue eyes filled with tears. They looked very pretty as they brimmed over and the tears rolled down the smooth young cheeks. Annie could cry just a little without her appearance being at all spoiled thereby. On the contrary, a few tears added to a certain pathos which came at such times into her face. John Saxon found himself looking at the tears and accepting Annie's view of the matter as quite plausible.

"It is very good of you to give me a little of your confidence," he said.

"I do!" she answered resolutely; "for I want you to help me."

"Anything in my power that is not wrong I will do," he replied.

The firm tone of his voice, and the way in which he said, "Anything that is not wrong," damped Annie's hopes for a minute. Then she continued:

"I spoke to Uncle Maurice, not telling him, of course, anything about Priscie, but simply expressing a desire to accept the invitation, and he said that I should go and he would find the money if Lady Lushington was all right."

"What does that mean?" asked Saxon.

"Oh, really, John, it was too bad. You know Uncle Maurice is very narrow-minded. He wanted to write first to Mrs Lyttelton to discover what sort of person Lady Lushington was, whether she was worldly or not; but, you see, there is no time, for if I don't join Mabel and Lady Lushington on Tuesday night in Paris I shall not be able to join them at all, for they begin their travels on Wednesday morning, and I have not the slightest idea where I can pick them up. Besides, I don't know foreign countries. I could perhaps get to Paris, where I should be met; but I couldn't manage Switzerland or any place farther afield. Don't you see that for yourself?"

"I do."

"Well, John," continued Annie, imperceptibly coming a little nearer to him, "I want you to do this for me. I want to go to Paris, but only for a day or two. I want to see Mabel and put that thing right with regard to poor, dear, clever Priscie; and then, if Uncle Maurice is really ill, I will come back. I know he would let me go if you persuaded him; and I want you to do so, dear John; and as he must not be worried in any way, will you lend me twenty pounds until Uncle Maurice is well enough to be troubled?"



He put his hand into his pocket and took out four five-pound notes.
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"But you cannot go without telling him, Annie. Of course, my dear, I could and would lend you the money, but even your friend is not so important just now as your uncle. He loves to have you near him. I wish you could have heard how he spoke of you to me. You were his sunshine, his darling, the joy of his heart."

"I know I am," said Annie; "and it is what I want to be, and love to be," she added. "But you are here, and there is my dear friend, oh! in such trouble; and she trusts me, and I can put everything right for her. Oh! if you would only lend me twenty pounds—and—and—tell Uncle Maurice yourself that I am going away for a few days and will be back again very soon. Won't you lend it to me, John—just because we are cousins, and you have come all the way across the seas—the wide, wide seas—to help me at this pressing moment?"

"You affect me, Annie," said the young man.

"You speak very strongly. I did not know schoolgirls desired things so badly as all this. Twenty pounds—it is nothing; it is yours for the asking. Here, I will give it to you now."

He put his hand into his pocket and took out four five-pound notes.

"Here," he said, "if this will make you happy and save your friend from the fate of being a village dressmaker, take it, and welcome."

"I don't know how to thank you," said Annie, trembling all over. "Oh! I don't know how."

"Don't thank me," he replied a little stiffly. "The thing is a mere bagatelle."

"You shall have it back as soon as possible," said Annie.

"At your convenience," he replied. He still spoke stiffly.

She folded up the money and pushed the notes inside her gloves. Her whole face had changed, and to John Saxon, who watched her, it had not changed for the better. The pathos and entreaty had gone out of it. It was a hard little face once more; and again he noticed that want of candour and that inability to look any one straight in the face which he had already observed in her eyes. He wondered uneasily if he had done wrong in lending her the money; but what was he to do? She must really want it, poor little thing! and after all, to Saxon, who was accustomed to great journeys taken at a moment's notice, and who had visited America and most of the habitable globe—although this was his first visit to England—a little trip to Paris meant less, than nothing.

"When do you propose to go?" he said to the girl when they presently rose to their feet.

"I should like to go to-morrow; in fact. I must if I am to meet Mabel and Lady Lushington."

"Then perhaps it would do if I broke the information to your uncle to-morrow morning?"

"Yes; that will do *quite* beautifully. Oh! I don't really know how to thank you."

"Effect your worthy object, Annie, and I shall have obtained all the thanks I need," was the young man's reply.

Chapter Fourteen.

"It Relates to your Niece Annie."

It seemed to Annie that she had got quite close to John Saxon when he and she sat together on that boulder overhanging the valley below. But when they returned to the Rectory a barrier was once again erected between them.

She had little or nothing to say to her cousin, and he had little or nothing to communicate to her. Mr Brooke was better. He was awake and inclined for company. Annie and Saxon both sat with him after supper. He asked Annie to sing for him. She had a sweet though commonplace voice.

She sat down by the little, old piano, played hymn tunes, and sang two or three of the best-known hymns. By-and-by Saxon took her place. He had a lovely tenor voice, and the difference between his singing and Annie's was so marked that Mrs Shelf crept into the room to listen, and the old clergyman sat gently moving his hand up and down to keep time to the perfect rhythm and the exquisite, rich tones of the singer.

"Nearer, my God, to Thee," sang John Saxon.

Mr Brooke looked at Annie. Her head was bowed. Instinctively he put out his hand and laid it on her shoulder. "E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me," sang the sweet voice.

"A cross that raiseth me," murmured old Mr Brooke. His hand rested a little heavier on the slim young shoulder. Annie felt herself trembling. Her worldly thoughts could not desert her even at that sacred moment.

She had escaped a terrible danger, for even she, bad as she was, would not jeopardise the life of the old man who loved her best in the world. All fear of that was over now, and she would win a delightful time in Paris into the bargain. She was quite sure that John could manage her uncle.

The next morning the strange attack which had rendered Mr Brooke's condition one of such anxiety had to all appearance? passed away. He was a little weak still, and his head a trifle dizzy; but he was able to potter about the garden leaning on John Saxon's arm.

Annie, who was anxious to go as soon as possible to Rashleigh, ran up to John for a minute.

"I have to ride to Rashleigh to get some things for Mrs Shelf," she said. "While I am away tell him—I know you will do it beautifully—tell him how necessary it is, and that I shall come back whenever he sends for me. Do it now, please; for you know that I must leave here this afternoon."

Accordingly, while Annie was trotting on horseback in to Rashleigh with that money which was to be exchanged for the necessary receipt from Dawson, Saxon broached the subject of Paris to the old man.

"There is a little matter, sir," he said, "which I should like to speak to you about."

"And what is that, John?"

"It relates to your niece Annie."

"Ah, dear child!" said the old man; "and what about her?"

"She seems to be in distress," continued Saxon. "Oh, please don't worry, sir; her great anxiety is to prevent your worrying."

"Dear, dear child! So thoughtful of her," murmured the clergyman.

"You were rather bad, you know, yesterday, and she and I took a walk together while you were having your sleep. It was then she confided to me that she has been invited to Paris."

"I know, John," said old Mr Brooke, turning and looking fixedly at the young man; "and I am the last to prevent her going; but, naturally, I want to know something about the woman who has invited her—a certain Lady Lushington. I never heard her name before. Annie tells me that Lady Lushington's niece is her greatest school friend; and I feel assured that my Annie would not have a school friend who was not in all respects worthy—that goes without saying; nevertheless, a young girl has to be guarded. Don't you agree with me, John?"

"Certainly I do, sir. Still, if you will permit me to say so, Annie seems very sensible."

"She is wonderfully so; my Annie's little head is screwed the right way on her shoulders—not a doubt whatever on that point. But the thing is this. I can inquire of Mrs Lyttelton what she knows with regard to Lady Lushington. If matters are favourable the child shall go. Can anything be more reasonable?"

"In one sense, sir, nothing can be more reasonable; but in another, your making this condition forces poor Annie

practically to give up her invitation."

"Eh? How so? How so?"

"Well, you see, it is this way. If she cannot join Lady Lushington on Tuesday evening—that is, to-morrow—she cannot join her at all, for this lady is leaving Paris on the following day. Annie can either go with her or not go with her. There is, therefore, you will perceive, sir, no time to communicate with Mrs Lyttelton."

"That is true," said Mr Brooke. "But why didn't Annie tell me so herself?"

"She couldn't bear to worry you. Poor child! she was put out very much, but she meant to give up her visit rather than worry you." Saxon wondered, as he was uttering the last words, if he were straining at the truth. He continued now abruptly: "And that is not all. From what your niece tells me, she goes, or hopes to go, to Paris for a very different reason from mere selfish pleasure. There is a young friend of hers whom she hopes most seriously to benefit by this visit. She will not tell me how, but she assures me emphatically that it is so."

"Dear, dear!" said the old man. "Sweet of her! sweet of her! And you think—you really think I ought to waive my objection and trust my child?"

"She earnestly hopes that you will do so, sir—that you will permit her at least to go for a day or two, and then recall her if it is essential."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that; I wouldn't for a moment be so selfish."

"But she herself would wish to come back to you if you were really indisposed."

"I would not be so selfish, John—not for a moment. Yes, you have opened my eyes; the dear child shall certainly go. It is a disappointment not to have her, but if we old folks cannot take a few little crosses when we are so near the summit of the hill, and all the crosses and all the difficulties are almost smoothed away, what are we worth, my dear young sir? Oh, I should be the last to stand in the way of my dear little girl."

"On the other hand," said Saxon, "Annie would be extremely unworthy if she stayed away from you did you really need her. To go to Paris, to transact her necessary business, and then quickly to return is a very different matter. And now, sir, don't let us talk any more about it. Let me bring you back to your study, and let me fetch you a glass of good port wine." Saxon met Annie as she was returning with Dawson's receipt in her pocket.

"Good news!" he said, smiling at her. She felt herself turning pale.

"Oh, does he consent?"

"He does, and only as he could—right willingly and with all his heart. He is a man in ten thousand! I told him that you would not stay if he were really ill I shall trust you, therefore, to come back as soon as ever I send you word that it is necessary. Will you promise me that?"

"Of course, of course," she replied.

"Well, go to him now. Don't stay long. Remember that he is weak and will feel the parting. He has said nothing about money; and as you have sufficient you had better not worry him for the present."

Annie's conference with her uncle was of short duration. He kissed her two or three times, but there were no tears in his eyes.

"You should have confided in me, Annie," he said once. "I am not an unreasonable man. I thought this was a pleasure visit; I did not know that my dear little girl had a noble and unselfish project at the back of everything. My Annie will herself know if Lady Lushington is the sort of woman I should like her to be with. If you find her as I should like her to be found, stay with her, Annie, until I recall you. You see how I trust you, my darling."

"You do, you do," answered the girl; "and I love you," she added, "as I never loved you before."

Chapter Fifteen.

A Travelling Companion.

Nothing interfered with Annie's arrangements. She left Rashleigh by the train by which she had always intended to go up to town. She took a room at the Grosvenor Hotel for the night, spending what little time she had in doing some necessary shopping.

Her intention was to write to Uncle Maurice for further funds on her arrival at the Grand Hotel. She would know there Lady Lushington's movements, and could tell her uncle where to forward letters. There was one thing, however, which brought rather a sting with it. There was a memory which she did not care to recall; that was the look on John Saxon's face when he bade her good-bye.

John Saxon had been her very good friend. He had helped her with funds so that her wicked action with regard to Dawson's cheque would never now be discovered. He had also smoothed the way for her with her uncle. She had gone away from the Rectory with Uncle Maurice's blessing sounding in her ears; and although Mrs Shelf was decidedly chuff, and muttered things under her breath, and declared resolutely that she had no patience with

gadabouts, and that there was a time for preserving, and not for preserving, and a time for nursing, and not for nursing; and a time for pleasuring, and not for pleasuring, these things made little impression on Annie; but John Saxon, who was silent and said nothing at all, made her feel uncomfortable. Just at the end he made a solitary remark:

“Give us your address as soon as possible; for, if necessary, I will telegraph for you. And now good-bye. I trust you will enjoy yourself and—and—save your friend.”

Then the train had whizzed out of sight. She no longer saw the upright figure and the manly face, and she no longer felt the disapproval in the voice and the want of confidence in the eyes. But the memory of these things remained with her, and she wanted to shut them away.

The next morning she was in good time at Victoria Station. But what was her amazement to find standing on the same platform, and evidently intending to go to Dover by the same train, no less a person than her old schoolfellow, Priscilla Weir!

“You look surprised, Annie,” said Priscilla. “Nevertheless, no less a thing has happened than that I am going to Paris too. Lady Lushington has invited me, and as she is good enough to pay all my expenses, you and I are travelling together. I had no time to let you know, or I would have done so. I hope you are pleased. But I don’t suppose,” added Priscilla, “that it makes much difference whether you are pleased or not.”

“I don’t suppose it does,” answered Annie, who was secretly very much annoyed. “Well, of course,” she continued, “we had best travel in the same carriage.”

The girls found their seats, and after a time, when the bustle of departure was over, Annie turned to Priscilla.

“How has this come about?” she asked.

“It was Mabel’s doing;” said Priscilla—“Mabel’s, and partly, I think, Mrs Lyttelton’s. Mrs Lyttelton found it rather inconvenient to keep me at the school during the holidays, for a good many of the rooms are to be redecorated. I couldn’t go to Uncle Josiah; and I cannot tell you how or why, but I had a long letter from Mabel, most jolly and affectionate, asking me to join her aunt and herself, and telling me that you would be sure to be of the party. There was enclosed a letter from Lady Lushington, sending me a cheque; and although I scarcely care for this sort of invitation, yet I have been forced to accept it. I am on my way now to share your fun. I can quite well believe that this is not agreeable to you, but it really cannot be helped.”

“Oh, agreeable or disagreeable, we must make the best of it,” said Annie. “Of course,” she added, “I am glad to have a companion. There’s no reason, Priscilla, why we should not be the best of friends. It did seem rather funny, at first, to think of you, of all people, joining this expedition. But if you are not sorry to be with me, I don’t see why I should not be pleased to be with you.”

“Were I to choose,” said Priscilla, “I would much prefer not to be either with you or Mabel. But that is neither here nor there. I have done wrong; I am very unhappy. I suppose I shall go on doing wrong now to the end of the chapter. But I don’t want to bother you about it. Let us look out of the window and enjoy the scenery. I suppose that is the correct thing to do.”

Annie still felt a strong sense of irritation. How hard she had worked to get this pleasure for herself, and now, was Priscilla, of all people, to damp her joys? Whatever her faults, however, Annie Brooke was outwardly good-natured and essentially good-tempered. There are a great many people of this sort in the world. They are lacking in principle and sadly wanting in sincerity, but nevertheless they are pleasant to be with. They show the sunny side of their character on most occasions, and in small matters are fairly unselfish and inclined to make the best of things.

Annie now, after a brief time of reflection, made up her mind to make the best of Priscilla. Priscilla was not to her taste. She was too conscientious and, in Annie’s opinion, far too narrow-minded. Nevertheless, they were outwardly very good friends, and must continue to act their parts. So on board the steamer she made herself pleasant, and useful also, to poor Priscilla, who felt the motion of the boat considerably, and had, in short, a bad time. Annie, who was never seasick in her life, won golden opinions while on board for her goodness and consideration to Priscilla; and when, finally, they were ensconced in two comfortable seats *en route* for Paris, her spirits rose high. She put aside all disagreeable memories and gave herself up to enjoyment.

“We shall have fun,” she said. “We must make the very best of things; we must forget all school disagreeables.”

“I only hope one thing,” said Priscilla, dropping her voice to a low tone, “and that is that the subject of the prize essay won’t be mentioned in my presence. You know how I acted with regard to it. Well, I have done the wicked deed, and want if possible, to forget it.”

“But why should it be spoken about?”

“Surely,” remarked Priscilla, “Lady Lushington is very likely to talk on the subject. You know it was on account of Mabel winning the prize that she has been taken away from school.”

“Oh yes,” said Annie in an off-hand way; “but I could quite imagine, from what I have heard of Lady Lushington, that she will forget all about the matter in an incredibly short space of time.”

“I hope so,” said Priscilla; “it will be all the better for me if she does.”

“There is one thing you must remember, Priscie,” said Annie; “if by any chance she alludes to it, you must keep up the deception.”

Priscilla looked at Annie with very wide-open, grey eyes.

"I shall leave the room," she said; "I am not good at being deceitful." Then she added quickly, "There are times when I feel that I can only recover my self-respect by making a clean breast of everything."

"Oh!" said Annie, in some alarm, "you could not possibly do that; think what awful trouble you would get poor Mabel and me into."

"I know," said Priscilla; "and that is the one thing which keeps me back."

"If I might venture to make the remark," said Annie, "it is the one thing which in honour *ought* to keep you back. There is honour even amongst thieves, you know," she added a little nervously.

"And that is what I am," said poor Priscilla. "I have practically stolen my year's schooling; I have, like Esau, sold my birthright for a mess of pottage. Oh! what shall I do?"

"Nothing," said Annie; "and please don't talk any more in that particularly intense way, for people will begin to stare at us."

Priscilla sank back in her seat. Her head was aching. Annie, on the contrary, sat very upright, looking fresh, bright, and happy. After a time, however, something occurred which made her feel less comfortable. Priscilla bent towards her and said:

"By the way—I was almost forgetting, and she begged of me so hard not to do so—but will you return her book to Susan Martin?" Annie's face became crimson, then pale.

"Susan Martin?" she said. "Do you know her?"

"Of course I know her, Annie. What a queer colour you have turned! She has been making several things for me during the last few days. She is very much excited, poor girl, about a manuscript book of poems which you borrowed from her. She said you wanted them to show to a judge of poetry in order to help her to get them published. I had not an idea that the poor girl was a poet."

"Oh, she is," said Annie, who by this time had recovered her self-possession, and whom the very imminence of the danger rendered cool and self-possessed. "She writes quite wonderfully. I did borrow her book to show to Uncle Maurice; he is such a good judge."

"Oh, was *that* all?" said Priscilla. "I thought from Susan's manner that you knew some publisher. She thinks a great deal about her poems."

"Yes, poor girl!" said Annie; "I must write to her."

"Have you shown the poems to your uncle, Annie?"

"Not yet, Priscilla. Uncle Maurice has not been well; I could not worry him with those sort of matters."

"Not well?" said Priscilla. "And you have left him?"

"Yes, my dear, good Priscilla," said Annie; "I have been wicked enough to do so. He is too ill to be bothered with Susan Martin's productions, but not too ill to afford me a pleasant little holiday. Now do let's change the subject."

"With pleasure," said Priscilla. "I wish to change it, if you don't mind, by shutting my eyes, for I have a very bad headache."

While Priscilla slept, or tried to sleep, Annie sat back amongst her cushions lost in thought.

"Really," she said to herself, "if all the things that I have done lately were discovered I should have but a poor time. I forgot all about Susan Martin and her manuscript book. It came in very handily at the time, but now it is no end of a bore. I ought to have cautioned her not to speak of it to any one. It is a great pity that Priscilla knows about it, for if by any chance she asks Susan to show her the book, the two poems attributed to Mabel will immediately be discovered. Certainly Priscilla is a disagreeable character, and I cannot imagine why I have bothered myself so much about her."

The railway journey came to an end, and a short time afterwards the girls found themselves greeted by Lady Lushington and Mabel at the Grand Hotel.

Lady Lushington was a tall, slender woman of from thirty-eight to forty years of age. Her face was rather worn and pale. She had a beautiful figure, and was evidently a good deal made up. Her hair was of a fashionable shade of colour. Annie concluded at once that it was dyed. Priscilla, who had never heard of dyed hair, thought it very beautiful.

"My dears," said the good lady, advancing to meet both girls, "I am delighted to see you.—Mabel, here are your two young friends.—Now, will you go at once with Parker to your rooms and get ready for dinner? We all dine in the restaurant—*demi-toilette*, you know. Afterwards we will sit in the courtyard and listen to the band."

"I will come with you both," said Mabel, who, dressed with extreme care and looking remarkably fresh and handsome, now took a hand of each of her friends.—"This is your room, Priscilla," she said, and she ushered Priscilla into a small room which looked on to the courtyard.—"Parker," she continued, turning to the maid, "will you see that

Miss Weir has everything that she wants.—Now, Annie, I will attend to you. You don't mind, do you?—for it is only for one night—but you have to share my room; the hotel is so full, Aunt Henrietta could not get a room for you alone. But I will promise to make myself as little obtrusive as possible.”

“Oh May!” said Annie, “I am just delighted to sleep in a room with you. I have so much to say—dear old May!” she added suddenly, turning and kissing her friend. “I *am* glad to see you again!”

“And I to see you, Annie,” replied Mabel. “I am having a glorious time, and want you to share it with me. Aunt Hennie has just been splendid, and has given me a completely new wardrobe—the most exquisite dresses, all bought and made at the best shops here, quite regardless of expense, too. I cannot tell you how much they have cost. How do you like this pink silk? Isn't it sweet?”

“Yes, lovely,” said Annie, thinking with a sigh of her own poor clothes. But then she added, “Rich dresses suit you, Mabel, for you are made on a big and a bountiful scale. It is lucky for me that I can do with lees fine garments.”

“Oh, but I assure you, Annie, you are not going to be left out in the cold. You must have no scruples whatever in wearing the clothes that Aunt Hennie has got for you. She wants to take some young girls about with her, and she would not have you a frump for all the world; so there are a few pretty, fresh little toilettes put away in that box by Parker which I think will exactly fit you. There is a dress on that bed—oh, only white lace and muslin—which you are to wear this evening at the restaurant dinner; and there is a smart little travelling-costume for you to appear in tomorrow. You can leave them all behind you at the end of your jaunt, if you are too proud to take them; but, anyhow, while with us you have to wear them *nolens volens*.”

“Oh dear!” said Annie, almost skipping with rapture, “I am sure I am not a bit too proud.”

“We have got things for Priscie too,” said Mabel, “and I do hope she won't turn up crusty; she is such a queer girl.”

“Why ever did you invite her, Mabel?” asked Annie.

“Why did I invite her?” said Mabel. “It was not my doing, you may be sure. Not that I dislike the poor old thing; far from that. She is quite a dear. But, of course, what I wanted was to have you to myself; but no—Aunt Hennie wouldn't hear of it; she said that nothing would induce her to take two girls about with her. Her remark was that we should always be together, and that she would be *de trop*. Now she doesn't mean to be *de trop*, so one of us is always to be with her, and the other two can enjoy themselves. She said at once, when I broached the subject of your joining us, that you might come with pleasure, and she would be only too delighted if another of our schoolfellows came as well. My dear, I argued and argued, but she was firm. So then I had to think of poor Priscilla, for really there was no one else to come; none of the others would dream of giving up their own friends and their own fun; and there was Priscilla landed at the school. So I told Aunt Hennie what she was like—grave and sedate, with grey eyes and a nice sort of face. I assured her that Priscie was a girl worth knowing, and Aunt Henrietta took a fancy to my description, told me to write off to her and to Mrs Lyttelton; and she wrote herself also; and, of course, Mrs Lyttelton jumped at it. So here we are, saddled with Priscie, and we must make the best of it. Dear Annie, do take off your hat and jacket, and get into your evening-dress; we shall be going down to dinner in a few minutes. I will help you with your hair if you need it, for I expect Parker is having a war of words with Priscilla. There's such a sweet dress waiting for Priscie to wear—dove-coloured silk, made very simply. She will look like a Quakeress in it; it will suit her to perfection.”

Just at that moment a commotion was heard on the landing outside; a hurried knock came at the room door, and Priscilla, flushed, untidy, and wearing the same dress as she had travelled in, stood on the threshold. Behind Priscilla appeared the equally disturbed face and figure of Parker.

“Really, Miss Lushington,” began Parker, “I have done all I could—”

“Your conduct is not justifiable,” interrupted Priscilla. “I am very sorry indeed, Mabel; you mean kindly, of course, but I cannot wear clothes that don't belong to me. I would rather not have dinner, if you will excuse me. My head aches, and I should much prefer to go to bed.”

“Oh dear,” said Mabel, “what a fuss you make about nothing, Priscie! Why, the dress is all part of the play. Let us think of you as acting in a play while you are with Aunt Henrietta and me; if you take a part in it, you must dress to fit the part. Oh, put on your lovely grey silk—you will look perfectly sweet in it—and come down to dinner with Annie and me. See Annie; she is in her white muslin already, and looks a perfect darling.”

“I feel a perfect darling,” said Annie. “I love this dress. I adore fine clothes. I am not one little bit ashamed to wear it.”

“Well,” said Priscilla, “Annie can please herself; but if I have to wear other people's clothes, or clothes that don't belong to me and that I have no right whatever to accept, I shall have to give up this trip and go back to England tomorrow.”

“Oh dear!” said Mabel, “you are queer, Priscilla. I do wish—I do *wish* I could persuade you.”

“It is all useless, miss,” said Parker in an offended tone; “I have spoken to Miss Weir until I am tired, and she won't see reason.—You see, miss,” continued Parker, “the dresses are bought, and if you don't wear them they will be wasted. I understand proper pride, miss, but this does not seem to me reasonable, miss. You will forgive my saying so?”

“Yes, Parker, of course I forgive you,” said Priscilla; “but all the same,” she added, “I shall go on this expedition in my own clothes or I don't go at all.”

“You will be a fright,” said Annie.

"I would rather be a fright and myself; I should not feel myself in other people's clothes."

"You are very silly," said Mabel. "Can I do nothing?"

"I will talk to you afterwards, Priscilla," said Annie.—"Let her alone now, May. She had a bad time crossing, and I dare say would rather go to bed.—You will look at all these things in a different light in the morning, Pris."

"We shall have to be off fairly early in the morning," said Mabel, "so you may as well go to bed if you are dead-tired, Priscie.—Parker, will you get some tea and anything else that Miss Weir may require, and have it brought to her room?"

"Thank you," said Priscilla. She stood, tall, awkward, and ungracious, before the other two. They felt that she was so, and that there was something in her expression which made them both, deep down in their hearts, feel small. Annie could not help saying to herself, "I wouldn't give up the chance of wearing pretty clothes;" and Mabel was thinking, "If only Priscilla were well dressed she would look handsomer than either of us."

A minute later Priscilla turned to leave the room. "I am very sorry, girls," she said.—"Perhaps, Mabel," she added, "as you are leaving in the morning, I ought to see Lady Lushington now."

"Oh, dear me!" said Mabel; "you will put Aunt Hennie out enormously if you worry her now."

"Still, I think I ought. I am terribly sorry, but she ought to understand immediately my feelings in this matter."

"Let her go; let her speak to your aunt," whispered Annie.

"Very well," said Mabel. "You will find Aunt Henrietta," she continued, "waiting for us all in the drawing-room."

Priscilla immediately left the room. She walked across the broad landing to the private sitting-room which Lady Lushington occupied in the hotel. The latter was standing by a window, when the door opened, and a tall, rather untidy girl dressed in dark-blue serge of no graceful cut, with her hair brushed back from her forehead and her face much agitated, appeared before that lady.

"I have something to say to you, Lady Lushington," said Priscilla.

"You are Priscilla Weir?" said that lady. "There is a great difference between you and the little girl with the blue eyes. What is her name?"

"Annie Brooke."

"You are very great friends, are you not?"

"We are schoolfellows," was Priscilla's reply. Lady Lushington looked all over the girl. The expression of her face signified disapproval; but suddenly her eyes met the large, grey ones of Priscilla and a curious feeling visited her. She was a kindly woman, although full of prejudices.

"Sit down, child," she said. "If you have something really to say I will listen; although, to tell you the truth, I am exceedingly hungry, and am waiting for you all to dine with me in the restaurant."

"I am not hungry," said Priscilla, "and, if you will excuse me, I will not go to the restaurant to-night; your kind maid will bring me something to eat in my bedroom."

"You are tired from your journey, poor girl! Well, then, go to bed and get rested. We start for Interlaken in the morning."

"That is why I must trouble you to-night," said Priscilla.

"Why, my dear? Do sit down."

But Priscilla stood; only now she put out a slim hand and steadied herself by holding on to the back of a chair.

"It was a great delight to come to you," said Priscilla, "and a very great surprise; and when you arranged to pay all my travelling expenses and to take me about with you from place to place, I consented without my pride being especially hurt; for I felt sure that in many small ways I could be of use to you. I thought over all the different things I could do, and, somehow, it seemed to me that I might make up to you for the money you are spending on me—"

"But when we ask a guest," interrupted Lady Lushington, "to go with us on a pleasure-trip, we don't form a sort of creditor and debtor account in our minds; we are just glad to give pleasure, and want no return for it beyond the fact that we *are* giving pleasure."

"I understand that," said Priscilla, her eyes brightening; "and the pleasure you would give me would be, oh! beyond any power of mine to describe, for there is something in me which would appreciate; and if I were to see great, grand, beautiful scenery, it would dwell always in my mind, and in the very darkest days that came afterwards I should remember it and be happy because of it."

"Sit down, child. How queerly you speak! You have very good eyes, let me tell you, child—fine, expressive, interesting eyes."

Priscilla did not seem to hear, and Lady Lushington was more impressed by this fact than she had been yet by anything she had discovered about her.

"There are the clothes," said Priscilla, bursting into the heart of her subject, and interlacing her long fingers tightly together. "I—you will forgive me—but I am too proud to wear them. I cannot, Lady Lushington. If you won't have me shabby as I am—and I am sure I am very shabby—I cannot come with you. You will be so exceedingly generous as to let me have my fare back to Lyttelton School, and I shall always thank you for your best of best intentions. But I cannot wear clothes that I have not earned, and that I have no right to."

"But Annie Brooke?" interrupted Lady Lushington.

"I am not here to answer for Annie Brooke," replied Priscilla with great dignity. "If you want me, you must take me as I am."

"I declare," said Lady Lushington, "you are a queer creature. And you really mean it?"

"Yes—absolutely. It is just because I am too proud. I have no right to my pride, perhaps; still, I cannot let it go."

There was a world of pathos in Priscilla's eyes now as they fixed themselves on the worldly face of the lady.

"You are quaint; you are delightful," said Lady Lushington. "Come as you are, then. You will perhaps not be too proud to allow Parker to arrange your hair so as to show off that fine head of yours to the best advantage. But even in rags, child, come with us; for any one fresh like you, and unselfconscious like you, and indifferent to outward appearance like you, carries a charm of her own, and I do believe it is beyond the charm of dress."

When Lady Lushington had uttered these words Priscilla went up to her and took her hand, and suddenly, before the great lady could prevent her, she raised that hand to her lips and kissed it. Then she hurried from the room.

Chapter Sixteen.

A Delicious Dinner.

After a time Annie Brooke and Mabel Lushington joined Lady Lushington in their smart dresses. Mabel looked most imposing in her pretty pink silk, and no one could look fresher and more charming than Annie in the white lace and muslin which fitted her trim little figure so nicely.

Lady Lushington was standing very much in the same position in which she had been when Priscilla left her. She turned now as the two girls entered. There was a frown between her brows, and she scarcely glanced at either of them.

"Come, come," she said crossly, "how much longer must I be kept waiting? We will go down in the lift, Mabel; you lead the way."

Mabel immediately went first, Lady Lushington followed, and Annie brought up the rear. They entered a large lift, and presently found themselves on the ground-floor of the great hotel. In a very short time they were in the restaurant, which was quite the most brilliant and dazzling place Annie Brooke had ever seen. It seemed to be almost filled with gay ladies all in full evening-dress, and gentlemen in immaculate white shirt-fronts, white ties, and dinner-jackets. There were waiters rushing about here, there, and everywhere; and the tables, covered with their snowy napery, were further adorned with dazzlingly bright glass and silver; and, to add magic to the general effect, a little electric lamp with a silk shade over it stood in the centre of each table. There were flowers, also, in abundance. In short, the whole place seemed to Annie to be a sort of fairyland.

A few people glanced up from their own tables when Lady Lushington, accompanied by the two girls, crossed the huge room to the table set aside for her party. She sat down, and Mabel and Annie found places at each side of her. A menu was immediately presented to her by a most gentlemanly man whom Annie thought perfectly fascinating in appearance, but who only turned out to be the head-waiter. Lady Lushington ordered certain dishes and two or three kinds of wine, and the meal began.

Annie was both hungry and agitated; Mabel was somewhat indifferent. Lady Lushington ate steadily and with considerable appetite, but all the time wearing that slight frown of disapproval on her forehead. Annie glanced at her, and made up her mind that Lady Lushington was a very grand person indeed; that she (Annie), in spite of all her temerity, was going to be a little bit afraid of her; and that, of course, the reason for the great lady's present discontent was the fact of Priscilla's outrageous conduct.

The three ladies hardly spoke at all, Mabel having quite sufficient tact to respect her aunt's present mood. But as the dinner came to an end, concluding with the most delicious ice Annie had ever tasted in all her life, she could not help bending forward and saying in a low tone to Mabel:

"What a great pity it is that our Priscie is such a fool!"

Low as her tone was, it reached lady Lushington's ears, who immediately turned and said in a snappish voice:

"Whom do you mean by our Priscie, Miss Brooke?"

"Why, Priscilla Weir, of course," answered Annie, colouring as she spoke, and looking particularly sweet and innocent.

"And why did you call her a fool?" was Lady Lushington's next remark.

"Oh," said Annie—"oh"—Mabel longed to kick Annie's foot, but could not manage to reach it. Annie plunged

desperately into hot water. "Oh," she added, "Priscilla—oh, Priscilla is so ridiculous; she has lost this delicious dinner and—and—rejected your kindness in giving her such dainty garments. I do pity her so much, and am so sorry that your great kindness should be thrown away."

"Then, pray," said Lady Lushington, "keep your pity for me entirely to yourself, for I can assure you, Miss Brooke, that I do not need it. As to Miss Weir, she may or may not be a fool—I do not know her well enough to be able to give an opinion on that point—but she is at least a thorough lady."

Annie gazed, with her coral lips slightly open.

"A thorough lady," continued Lady Lushington, glancing with cruel eyes at the white muslin and lace frock which adorned Annie's little person.

"Then you are not angry with her?" said Annie. "I thought, after your kindness— But of course she is going in the morning, isn't she?"

"Miss Weir accompanies us to Interlaken," said Lady Lushington, rising. "That is settled; and she wears her own dress, as an honest girl should. She may look peculiar; doubtless she will; but she is unaffected and has a noble way about her. Now let us change the subject—Girls, would you like to come out into the court for a few minutes to listen to the band, or are you, Miss Brooke, too tired, and would you prefer to go to bed?"

"I think I will go to bed, please," said Annie in a small, meek, crushed sort of voice.

"Very well," said Lady Lushington; "you are quite wise.—Mabel, take your friend to the lift and give her over to Parker's care.—Goodnight, Miss Brooke. Remember we start very early in the morning, but Parker will wake you and bring you your coffee."

When, ten minutes later, Mabel joined her aunt Henrietta in the court of the famous hotel, Lady Lushington turned to her.

"May I ask," she remarked, "what earthly reason induced you to ask a commonplace person like Miss Brooke to join our expedition?"

"Oh, I thought you would like her," said Mabel. "She—she is a great friend of mine." Mabel spoke in considerable alarm, for if indeed Aunt Henrietta turned against Annie, she would find herself in a most serious position. Lady Lushington was silent for a minute or two; then she said:

"To be frank with you, Mabel, I don't at the present moment like her at all. Whether I change my mind or not remains to be proved. Priscilla Weir is a fine creature, and worth twenty of that blue-eyed doll; but I suppose, as they have both come, we must put up with Miss Brooke for a short time. I may as well tell you frankly, however, Mabel, that I shall send her back to England, if she does not please me very much better than she has done on this first evening, at the first possible opportunity."

Chapter Seventeen.

Ingratiating Secretary.

But Lady Lushington, when she took a prejudice against Annie Brooke, reckoned without her host. Annie was far too clever to allow this state of things to continue long.

The next day the three girls and Lady Lushington started *en route* for Interlaken. There they put up at one of the most fashionable hotels, and there Annie began to find her feet and gradually to undermine Lady Lushington's prejudice against her. Even if Mabel had not whispered the disconcerting fact to her that she had not made a good impression on her aunt, Annie was far too sharp not to discover it for herself when Mabel said to her on that first night in the Grand Hotel in Paris, "I must tell you the truth, Annie; you are a failure so far; you have not pleased Aunt Henrietta, and Priscie has. I don't know what I shall do if you leave me, but I know Aunt Hennie will send you back pretty sharp to England if you don't alter your tactics, and how I am ever to meet all that lies before me if this happens is more than I can fathom."

Annie had assured her friend that she need not be the least afraid, and, knowing the truth, or part of the truth, took her measures accordingly.

They had not been settled at the Belle Vue Hotel, Interlaken, more than two days before Lady Lushington, who was an exceedingly selfish, worldly woman, although quite kind-hearted, began to alter her mind with regard to both Annie Brooke and Priscilla Weir.

Priscilla, notwithstanding her fine and impressive eyes, her honest manner, and her earnest wish to make herself pleasant, looked undoubtedly *gauche* in the old-fashioned garments which were mostly made for her by poor Susan Martin. Lady Lushington found that though people remarked on Priscilla when she walked with the others in the fashionable part of the town or sat with them when they listened to the band or took her place in the *salle-à-manger* by their sides, yet those glances were by no means ones of admiration. The girl looked oppressed by a certain care, and dowdy beyond all words. Lady Lushington liked her, and yet she did not like her. She felt, however, bound to keep to her compact—to make the best of poor Priscilla. Accordingly, she told her friends that Priscilla Weir was a genius, and a little quaint with regard to her clothes, and that, in consequence, she had to put up with her peculiar dress.

"But she is such an honest good creature," said Lady Lushington in conclusion, "that I am quite glad to have her as a companion for Mabel."

Now the people to whom Lady Lushington gave this confidence were by no means interested in Priscilla's predilection for quaint clothes. They pronounced her an oddity, and left her to the fate of all oddities—namely, to herself. Annie, on the contrary, who made the best of everything, and who looked quite ravishingly pretty in the smart frocks which Parker, by Lady Lushington's desire, supplied her with, came in for that measure of praise which was denied to poor Priscie. Annie looked very modest, too, and had such charming, unaffected, ingenuous blue eyes, the blue eyes almost of a baby.

Lady Lushington found her first prejudices melting out of sight as she watched Annie's grace and noticed her apparent unselfishness.

It was Annie's cue to be unselfish during these days, and Lady Lushington began to form really golden opinions with regard to her character. She had been very nice on the journey, taking the most uncomfortable seat and thinking of every one's comfort except her own. She had been delightful when they reached Interlaken, putting up with a very small and hot bedroom almost in the roof of the hotel. And now she began to make herself useful to Lady Lushington.

This great lady had a vast amount of voluminous correspondence. She liked writing to her friends in her own illegible hand, but she hated writing business letters. Now Annie wrote an exceedingly neat and legible hand, and when she offered herself as Lady Lushington's amanuensis, making the request in the prettiest voice imaginable, and looking so eagerly desirous to help the good woman, Mabel's aunt felt her last prejudice against Annie Brooke melting out of sight.

"Really, my dear," she said, "you are good-natured. It would be a comfort to dictate my letters to you, but I am stupid about business letters. You do not mind if I dictate them very slowly?"

"Oh no," said Annie, "by no means; and I should so love to write them for you. You do such a great deal for poor little me that if there is any small way in which I can help you I shall be more than glad. Dear Lady Lushington, you don't know how I feel your kindness."

"You are very good to say so, Miss Brooke. I have invited you here because you are Mabel's friend."

"Sweet Mabel!" murmured Annie; "her very greatest friend. But now, may I help you?"

"Well, bring those letters over here—that pile on the table. We may as well get through them."

Annie immediately found note-paper, blotting-paper, pens and ink, also a supply of foreign stamps and post-cards. She laid the letters in a pile on Lady Lushington's lap.

"Now," she said, "if you will read them aloud to me and tell me what to say, I will write as slowly as ever you like. You can lean back in your comfortable chair; we will get through them as quickly as possible."

This conversation took place on the first day when Annie wrote letters to Lady Lushington's dictation. Soon the thing became a habit, and Lady Lushington secured the services of Miss Brooke for a couple of hours daily. She quite enjoyed it. It was so much less trouble, sitting lazily in her chair and getting that smart, pretty little thing to do the toilsome work for her. She felt that Annie was assuredly pretty, and much more interesting than poor Priscilla.

At last, on a day when the ladies had been at Interlaken for over a week, and were meaning to move on to Zermatt, Lady Lushington opened a letter, the contents of which caused her face to flush and her eyes to blaze with annoyance.

"Really," she said, "this is too bad; this is simply abominable!"

"What is the matter?" asked Annie.

She had guessed, however, what the matter was, and her heart beat as she made the remark, for that morning she had seen, lying on the breakfast-table amongst a pile of letters directed to Lady Lushington, one in the well-known writing of Mrs Priestley; and if Annie had any doubt on that point, the dressmaker's address was printed on the flap of the envelope. Her innocent eyes, however, never looked more innocent as she glanced up now from the blank sheet of paper on which she was about to write.

"Of course you know nothing about it, child," said Lady Lushington, "but it is beyond belief; Mabel's extravagance exceeds all bounds; I will not permit it for a single moment."

"Mabel's extravagance?" said Annie, looking surprised. "But surely dear Mabel is not extravagant. I have never, never noticed it; I assure you I haven't."

"Then what do you say to this?" said Lady Lushington. "That odious woman Priestley sends me a bill for one term's clothing; total amount seventy pounds!"

"Seventy pounds," said Annie, "for Mabel's dress?" She pretended to look shocked. "It is impossible," she said slowly. "There must be a mistake."

"Of course there is a mistake. That abominable woman thinks that I am so rich that I don't mind paying any amount. But she will learn that I am not to be imposed upon."

"What do you think you will say to her?" asked Annie.

"I am sure I don't know. I had best speak to Mabel herself."

"Oh, I wouldn't do that," said Annie. "May gets so confused; dear May has no head for business; she won't have the slightest idea what dress she did get. I know there was that lovely, expensive white satin for the school dance, and that beautiful dress of *crêpe-de-Chine* with pearly trimmings which she wore on the day of the break-up—the day when she received her great honour, her prize for literature; and there was that pale-blue evening-dress of hers, and the rose-coloured silk."

"But I don't remember those dresses at all. Where are they now?"

"I dare say she has left them at school," said Annie.

"Left them at school?"

"She would probably not think them fine enough for you."

"What absurdity! And even if she did get such uncalled-for, such unsuitable dresses, the sum total from a country dressmaker would not amount to seventy pounds."

"Well, I tell you what I would do if I were you," said Annie. "If you will let me, I will write in your name for the items. Mrs Priestley has only sent you 'To account rendered,' has she not?"

"That is a good idea," said Lady Lushington. "I must speak to Mabel about her frocks when she appears. As a matter of fact, I do not mind what I spend on her now that she has come out, or partly come out, for of course she won't be really introduced into society until she is presented next year. But seventy pounds for one schoolgirl's wardrobe for a single term is too much."

"Then I may write?" said Annie, her hand trembling a little.

"Certainly. Tell the woman to send all items at once here. Really, this has worried me."

Lady Lushington did not notice that, notwithstanding all Annie's apparent coolness, there were additional spots of colour on her cheeks, and that her hand shook a little as she penned the necessary words. Suppose the majestic Mrs Priestley recognised her handwriting! There was no help for it now, however, and any delay in grappling with the evil hour was welcome.

The letter was written and laid with several others on the table. Lady Lushington remarked after a minute's pause:

"I may as well confide in you, Miss Brooke, that nothing ever astonished me more than Mabel's success in gaining that literature prize; for you know, my dear, between you and me, she is not at all clever."

"Oh, how you mistake her!" said Annie, with enthusiasm. "Dear Mabel does not care to talk about her deepest feelings or about those magnificent thoughts which visit her mind."

"She has no thoughts, my dear, except the silliest," said Mabel's aunt, with a laugh.

"Oh, how you wrong her! Why, she is a poetess."

"A what?" said Lady Lushington.

"She writes poems."

"Nonsense! I don't believe you."

"I can show them to you."

"Pray do not; I would not read them for the world. I class all rhymes as jingles. I detest them. Even Will Shakespeare could never gain my attention for more than half-a-minute."

"Nevertheless, Mabel is clever, and her prize essay on 'Idealism' was undoubtedly the best in the school."

"Yes? Wonders will never cease," remarked Lady Lushington; "but, to tell you the truth, I was more annoyed than pleased when she got the prize. I did not want her to leave school for a year, and I only made that rash promise believing it to be quite impossible for me to fulfil. However, now I must make the best of it; and as, thank goodness! she does not pose as a genius, and is a fine, handsome girl, I have no doubt I shall get her married before long."

"Oh, Lady Lushington! Could you bear to part with her?"

"Indeed I could, my dear, to a good husband. I mean by that a man in a high position in society."

Annie was silent, looking prettily down. Lady Lushington glanced at her and noticed the charming contour of her face.

"If only her eyelashes were a little darker and her eyebrows more marked, she would be a sweetly pretty girl," she thought. But the lack of distinction in her face was not apparent at that moment.

"You will have a good husband yourself some day, Miss Brooke; and if ever I can help you to bring such a desirable matter about, you may rely on me."

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" said Annie. "Poor little me! But I am only an orphan with just one dear uncle and little or

no money. Lady Lushington, I am so happy here, and you are so very kind to me.”

“Well, my dear, you are kind to me too. I believe we are of mutual benefit each to the other. Now, will you put on your hat and take those letters to the nearest post? You will just have time to get them in before we go downstairs to *déjeuner*.”

Nothing could be more welcome to Annie than this last remark, for while she was talking she was wondering much in her clever little brain if she could carry out a scheme which had darted through it. The opportunity of posting the letters gave her just the loophole she desired. Taking the pile from the table, she accordingly ran out of the room, and a few minutes later was walking down the street which led to the post-office.

On her way there she met Mabel Lushington and Priscilla. They were coming back after a long, rambling walk, and both girls were rather tired.

“Whither away, Annie?” said Mabel in her cheerful voice.

“To post some letters for your aunt, Lady Lushington.”

“But the post does not go out until the evening, and that hill is so steep and difficult to climb, and it is almost the hour for *déjeuner*,” objected Mabel. “Do turn back with us now, Annie; I shall so hate waiting lunch for you.”

“Oh, give me the letters if you like,” said Priscilla; “I will run down the hill in no time, and come back again as quickly. I do not mind climbing hills in the least.”

“They exhaust me frightfully,” said Mabel; “and I notice, too, that Annie gets a little out of breath when she walks up these impossible mountains too fast. That is a good idea, really. Give Priscie the letters, Annie, and come home with me; I want to talk to you.”

“No, I can’t,” said Annie. “I must post them myself; they are important.”

She darted away, pretending not to notice Mabel’s flushed, indignant face and Priscilla’s look of grave surprise. She reached the post-office and dropped all the letters she had written, except that one to Mrs Priestley, into the box. Mrs Priestley’s letter she kept safely in her pocket.

“This must be delayed for perhaps a couple of days,” thought Annie. “In the meantime I shall have to talk to May. What a mercy,” was her next reflection, “that I was given the writing of the letter, and also the posting of it! Oh dear, dear! I think I can almost manage anything. I am sure May ought to be obliged to me, and so ought that tiresome Priscie. I would do anything for dear old May; but as to Priscie, I get more sick of her each minute. If only Lady Lushington would send her back to England I should feel safer. She is just the sort of girl who would wind herself to a grand confession, never caring how she dragged the rest of us into the mire with her. She is just precisely that sort of detestable martyr being. But she sha’n’t spoil my fun, or May’s fun either, if we can help it.”

Annie appeared at lunch just a wee bit late, but looking remarkably pretty, and apologising in the most amiable tones for her unavoidable delay.

“I am not very good at hills,” she explained to Lady Lushington. “They always set my heart beating rather badly. But never mind; the letters are posted and off our minds.”

“One of those letters is by no means off my mind,” said Lady Lushington in a fierce tone, and glancing with reproachful eyes at Mabel. Annie bent towards her and said in a whisper (she could not be heard by Mabel and Priscilla as some servants came up at the moment to present dishes to the two young ladies):—

“Please say *nothing* before Priscilla, I beg of you.”

The voice was so earnest and so sympathetic, and the little face looked so appealing, that Lady Lushington patted the small white hand. Priscilla’s voice, however, was now heard:

“It was a great pity, Annie, that you did run so fast to the post and then toil up that steep hill, for I offered to go for you; and besides, the English post does not leave before five o’clock.”

Annie felt furious, but replied in her meekest voice:

“I felt responsible for dear Lady Lushington’s letters.”

Nothing more was said on the subject during lunch, and afterwards the ladies went off on a long expedition up into the mountains with some other friends whose acquaintance they had made in the hotel.

It was not until that evening, when they were going to bed, that Mabel heard a light tap at her door, and the next moment Annie, in her pretty blue dressing-gown, with her fair hair falling about her shoulders and a brush in her hand, entered.

“Have you time for a talk with poor little me, and has Priscie gone to bed?”

“Dear me! yes,” said Mabel. “Priscilla has been in bed and asleep an hour ago. Come in, Annie, of course. I am dead with sleep myself, and if Aunt Hennie knew she might be annoyed. Now, what is it you want?”

Annie took the letter addressed to Mrs Priestley out of her pocket.

“To talk to you about this,” she said, and she sat calmly down on a chair and faced her tall companion. Mabel was

also in the act of brushing out her luxuriant hair, and looked as handsome a creature as could be found anywhere, in her long, flowing, white dressing-gown. When she read the address on the letter her eyes darkened and some of the colour left her cheeks.

"Are you writing to Mrs Priestley?" she said. "What about?"

"I wrote that letter to-day," said Annie, "to Lady Lushington's dictation. The account has come in; total amount seventy pounds. Lady Lushington is furious. I told her all the lies I could, dear Mabel, about the dresses you had *never* got, and in the end I managed to avert the evil day by asking Mrs Priestley to send the items. That satisfied Lady Lushington for the time. You will understand now why I could not accept Priscilla's offer to post the letters, because I happened to have this one in my hand and did not wish it to *go*. It must not go for a day or two. In the meantime we must do something."

"What—what?" said Mabel. "Oh Annie, I am so frightened! I knew quite well that you would get me into an awful scrape about this. What is to be done? Nothing will ever make Aunt Hennie believe that I spent seventy pounds on my dress during my last term at school. I know she is very generous about money, but she is also careful and particular. You will see; I know her so well, Annie; and she will just get into a real passion about this and write to Mrs Lyttelton, and Mrs Lyttelton will go to see Mrs Priestley, and—"

"Oh, I know," said Annie, trembling a good deal. "But that must never be allowed."

"How are we to manage?" said Mabel. "Annie, we must do something;" and she dropped on her knees by her companion's side and took one of her hands. "You came out here on purpose to help me," she said. "You knew that I should get into trouble, and you said you would find a way out."

"Am not I trying to with all my might and main?" said Annie.

"Well, but are you succeeding? I cannot see that keeping back that letter means much. Aunt Hennie will expect an answer, and—and—wire for it; she will really, if it does not come within a specified time; and she will give me such a talking to. Why, Annie, if the thing is discovered I shall be sent back to school—I know I shall—at the end of the holidays, and poor Priscie's prospects will be ruined, and—and—you will be disgraced—"

"We all three will be disgraced for ever and ever," said Annie; "there is no doubt on that point. That is what makes the thing so terribly important. Something must be done, and at once—at once!"

"But, Annie, what?"

"I have a little scheme in my head; if you will keep up your courage and help me I believe we shall be successful."

"But what is it? Oh, do tell me! Oh, I am so terrified!"

"The first thing we must be positive about is this," said Annie: "Priscilla is to know nothing."

"Of course not," said Mabel. "Mabel, I do wish we could get her back to England; she is so tiresome and in the way, and I have a great fear in my head about her."

"What is that? She is harmless enough, poor thing! Only, of course, she does look such a dowd. But, then, Aunt Henrietta has taken such a fancy to her."

"Oh, you are absolutely quite mistaken about that. Your aunt took a fancy to her on the first night because she spoke in rather an original way and, I suppose, looked handsome, which she does occasionally; and your aunt is very easily impressed by anything that she considers rather fine. But I assure you that it is my private opinion that she is sick of Priscilla by this time, and also rather ashamed of her appearance. Priscilla has no tact whatever—simply none. When does she help your aunt? When does she do anything to oblige others? She just flops about and looks so *gauche* and awkward."

"Well, poor thing! she can't help that. With Susan Martin as her dressmaker what chance has she?"

"She is just an oddity," said Annie; "and it is my impression that your aunt is tired of oddities. I can make her a little more tired, and I will."

"Oh Annie! Poor Priscie! and she does enjoy the mountain air so, and is such a splendid climber. You might as well let her have her holiday out. You are so frightfully clever, Annie; you can always achieve your purpose. But I think, if I were you, I would let poor old Priscie alone."

"I would if there were no danger," said Annie.

"Danger—in her direction? What *do* you mean?"

"There is very grave danger," said Annie—"very grave indeed. I am more afraid about Priscie than about anything else in the whole of this most unfortunate affair."

"Annie, what *do* you mean?"

"She is troubled with a conscience, bless you! and that conscience is talking to her every day and every night. Why, my dear Mabel, you can see the gnawings of self-reproach in her eyes and in her horrid melancholy manner. She is always in a dream, too, and starting up and having to shake herself when one talks to her suddenly. I know well what it means; she is on the verge of a confession."

"What?" said Mabel.

"Yes, that is the danger we have to apprehend; at least it is one of the dangers. One day, for the sake of relieving her own miserable conscience, she will go to your aunt and tell her everything. Then where shall we be?"

"But she could not be so frightfully mean; I never, never would believe it of her."

"Mark my words," said Annie—"people with consciences, who believe they have committed a crime or a sin, never think of anybody but themselves. The thought of relieving their own miserable natures is the only thought that occurs to them. Now, we must get hold of that conscience of Priscie's, and if it is going to be a stumbling-block we must cart her back to England."

"We must indeed," said Mabel. "For all that I say I don't believe that she could be so mean."

"Oh, nonsense," said Annie; "I know better." Mabel crouched on the floor by Annie's side, her hand lying on Annie's lap.

"You are wonderful," she said after a pause, "quite wonderful. I can't imagine how you think of all these things, and of course you are never wrong. Still—poor Priscie! you won't make things very hard for her, Annie, will you?"

"I know exactly what I mean to do," said Annie. "First of all I have to get you out of your present scrape, and then I shall go boldly to Priscie and find out her pent-up thoughts, and if they are in the direction I am fearing, I shall soon find means to protect ourselves from her and her conscience. But perhaps that is enough about her. On the present occasion we have got to think of you and Mrs Priestley."

"Oh, indeed, yes! Oh, I am terrified!"

"Listen to me. But for my management at lunch to-day, Lady Lushington was so indignant that she would have blurted out the whole thing and asked you what you meant by running up such an outrageous bill. You would have given yourself away on the spot, for you have no presence of mind in an emergency. Now I am preparing you. Lady Lushington will speak to you to-morrow, and you are faithfully to describe the dresses that I have, told her you possess. Oh, I know you have not got them at all, but that does not matter; I will give you a list of them in the morning, and you are to hold to that list. But now, listen. This is the main point. At the same time you are to assure your aunt that Mrs Priestley has made a mistake and put down some one else's dresses to you, for you are positive your bill is nearer forty pounds than seventy."

"Then how in the world am I to pay the thirty pounds to Mrs Priestley?"

"I am coming to that. There is a lovely, lovely necklace in one of those shops full of articles of *vertu* in the town. It is worth, I know for a fact from fifty to sixty pounds; but I think your aunt could get it for forty. Now I want you to coax her to give it to you."

"Oh Annie, what *is* the use? Is it likely that Aunt Henrietta, when she is so furious with me about a bill at my dressmaker's, would spend forty pounds on one necklace just for me?"

"She is absolutely certain to do it if you manage her rightly; and I will help you. The necklace is a great bargain even at forty pounds. It is of real old pearls in a wonderful silver setting. Now a beautiful old necklace, once the property of a French marquise, which can be bought for forty pounds is a bargain. Lady Lushington loves making bargains. You must secure it."

"Well, Annie, even if I do get it—and I am sure I do not care a bit for the old thing at the present moment—what am I to do with it?"

"You are a stupid, May; you really are. Your aunt, Lady Lushington, will go with you, and probably with me, to the shop. We must take her there early for fear that some one else snaps up the bargain. She will buy the necklace and give it to you. She will tell you to be careful of it, and then, according to her way, she will forget all about it."

"Yes, perhaps so; but still, I do not see daylight."

"Well, I do," said Annie. "We will sell the necklace at another shop for thirty pounds, and send the money immediately to Mrs Priestley. At the same time I will write her a long letter and tell her that she must take thirty pounds off her bill, and apologise for having, owing to a press of customers, put some one else's account to yours. Thus all will be right. Your aunt Hennie will not object to paying forty pounds for your school dresses, so that will be settled; and we may be able to get a little more than thirty pounds for the pearl necklace, and thus have some funds in hand towards Mrs Lyttelton's Christmas school bill."

"Oh," said Mabel, "it is awful—awful! Really, I sometimes think my head will give way under the strain. Of course it may succeed; but there are so many 'ifs.' Suppose the man to whom we are selling the necklace shows it in his window the next day; what will Aunt Henrietta say then?"

"You goose!" replied Annie. "We shall be in Zermatt by then; and I will make an arrangement with the shopman to keep the necklace out of the window until we are off. Now I have everything as clear as daylight. You must coax and coax as you know how for the beautiful necklace, and you must get your aunt Henrietta, if possible, to pay forty pounds for it. That is the only thing to be done, but it just needs tact and resource. I shall be present with my tact and resource. I will allow you to be alone with your aunt to-morrow morning, and then, when I think she has scolded you long enough, I will come innocently into the room, and you must start the subject of the necklace; then trust to me for the rest. Mrs Priestley is asked in this letter, which will never go—for the one with the thirty pounds will take its place—to send the full items of her account to Zermatt. She will do so; and your aunt will be so much in love with you

for your economy, and so full of remorse at having accused you of extravagance, that she will probably give you another necklace when there, which one you can keep. The main thing, however, is to get through this little business to-morrow. Now go to bed and to sleep, May Flower, and never say again that your Annie does not help you out of scrapes."

Chapter Eighteen.

Dawn at Interlaken.

The next day dawned, fresh, clear, and beautiful, with that exquisite quality in the air which so characterises Interlaken. Priscilla, when she opened her eyes in the tiny bedroom which was close to Annie's and just as much under the roof—although no one thought her unselfish for selecting it—sprang out of bed and approached the window. The glorious scene which lay before her with the majestic Jung Frau caused her to clasp her hands in a perfect ecstasy of happiness. The pure delight of living was over her at that moment. It was permeating her young being. For a time she forgot her present ignoble position—the sin she had sinned, the deceit in which she had had such an important share. She forgot everything but just that she herself was a little unit in God's great world, a speck in His universe, and that God Himself was over all.

The girl fell on her knees, clasped her hands, and uttered a prayer of silent rapture. Then more soberly she returned to her bed and lay down where she could look at the ever-changing panorama of mountain and lake.

They were going on to Zermatt on the following day; and Zermatt would be still more beautiful—a little higher up, a little nearer those mountains which are as the Delectable Mountains in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, past the power of man to describe. Priscie owned to herself, as she lay in bed, that she was glad she had come.

"It was not going to be nice at first," she thought. "But this repays everything. I shall remember it all for the rest of my days. I am not a bit good, I know; I have put goodness from me. I have chosen ambition, and the acquiring of knowledge, and the life of the student, and by-and-by an appointment of some worth where I can enjoy those things which I thirst for. But whatever is before me, I am never going to forget this scene. I am never going to forget this time. It is wonderfully good of God to give it to me, for I am such a wicked girl. Annie and Mabel are wicked too, but they could never have done what they did without my help. I am, therefore, worse than they—much worse."

A servant knocked at the door and brought in Priscilla's first breakfast. The man laid the coffee and rolls on a little table by the girl's bedside, and Priscilla sat up and enjoyed her simple meal, eating it with appetite. When she had come to the last crumb a sudden thought forced itself on her mind: "What is the matter with Annie? How strangely Annie looked at me last night! Why has she taken each a violent antipathy to me? What have I done to annoy her?"

The thought had scarcely come to Priscilla when she heard a light tap at her door, and in reply to her "Come in," Annie entered.

"I thought you would be awake and having your breakfast, Priscie."

Annie tripped lightly forward. She seated herself on Priscie's bed.

"Isn't it a glorious morning?" said Priscie. "Isn't the view lovely?"

"I suppose so," replied Annie in an indifferent tone. "But, to tell the truth," she added, "I have not had time either to think of the beauty of the morning or the beauty of the view."

"You surprise me," said Priscilla. "I can never think of anything else. Why, we are just here for that," she continued, fixing her great dark-grey eyes on Annie's face.

"Just here for that?" laughed Annie. "Oh, you oddity! we are not here for anything of the kind. We are staying at Interlaken because Lady Lushington thinks it fashionable and correct to spend a little time here in the autumn. From Zermatt, I understand, we are going to Lucerne, and then presently to the Italian lakes; that is, Mabel and Lady Lushington are going to the Italian lakes. Of course, you and I will have to go back to the dreary school."

"Oh, but the school is not dreary," said Priscilla.

"I am glad you find it agreeable; it is more than I do."

"But I thought you loved your school."

"It is better than my home—that is all I can say; but as to loving it," Annie cried, "I love the world, and the ways of the world, and I should like some day to be a great, fine lady with magnificent clothes, and men, in especial, bowing down to me and making love to me! That is my idea of true happiness."

"Well, it is not mine," said Priscilla. She moved restlessly.

"How white you are, Priscie! You don't look a bit well."

"I am quite well. Why do you imagine I am not?"

"You are so sad, too. What are you sad about?"

As Annie boldly uttered the last words Priscilla's face underwent a queer change. A sort of anguish seemed to fill it.

Her mouth quivered.

"I shall never, never be quite happy again, Annie Brooke; and you know it."

"Oh, you goose!" said Annie. "Do you mean to say you are letting your little fiddle-faddle of a conscience prick you?"

"It is the voice of God within me. You *dare* not speak of it like that!"

Annie settled herself more comfortably on the bed. She faced her companion defiantly.

"I know what you are about to do," she said.

"What do you know?"

"And if you do it," continued Annie, "and turn traitor to those who have trusted you—to your own schoolfellows—you will be the meanest Judas that ever walked the earth!"

Priscilla's face was very white, almost as white as death.

"Leave my room, please," she said. "Whatever I have done, I have done at your instigation; and whatever I do in the future is my affair and no one else's. Leave the room immediately."

"I won't until you make me a promise."

"I will make you no promise. I have had too many dealings with you in the past. Leave the room, please."

Priscilla spoke with such dignity that Annie, cowed and almost terrified, was forced to obey.

She went out on the landing. Priscilla, for the time being, had completely routed her. She scarcely knew how to act.

"Of one thing I am certain," she said to herself when she reached the shelter of her own tiny room, which had not nearly such a magnificent view of the mountain and lake as Priscilla's chamber, but was a little bit larger, and therefore suited Annie better—"of one thing I am indeed certain," said Annie to herself: "Priscilla means to make grave trouble, to upset everything. Oh, well, I am glad I know. Was I ever wrong in my intuitions? I had an intuition that Priscilla was going to set her foot on all my little plans. But you sha'n't, dear old Pris. You will go back to England as soon as ever I can get you there, and trust Annie Brooke for finding a way. This clinches things. As soon as ever I have settled Mrs Priestley and the affair of the necklace I must turn my attention to you, Priscie. There is no earthly reason, now I come to think of it, why everything should not be managed within the scope of this little day. Why should Priscie accompany us to Zermatt? I am sure she is no pleasure to any one with those great, reproachful eyes of hers, and that pale face, and those hideous garments that always remind me of poor consumptive Susan Martin and her silly poems. Yes, I think I can manage that you, dear Priscie, return to England to-morrow, while Lady Lushington, Mabel, and I proceed to Zermatt. Your little schoolfellow Annie Brooke, I rather imagine, is capable of tackling this emergency." Accordingly, Annie dressed swiftly and deftly, as was her way, coiling her soft golden hair round her small but pretty head, allowing many little tendrils of stray curls to escape from the glittering mass, looking attentively into the shallows—for they certainly had no depths—of her blue eyes, regretting that her eyelashes were not black, and that her eyebrows were fair.

The day was going to be very hot, and Annie put on one of the fresh white cambric dresses which Lady Lushington's maid kept her so well supplied with. Then she ran downstairs, as was her custom, for she always liked to be first in the breakfast *salon* in order to look over the morning's post.

A pile of letters lay, as usual, by Lady Lushington's plate. These Annie proceeded to take up one by one and to look at carefully. A lady, a certain Mrs Warden, who had made the acquaintance of Lady Lushington since she came to the hotel, came into the breakfast-room unobserved by Annie, and noticed the girl's attitude. Her table was, however, situated in a distant part of the room, and Annie did not know that she was watched. Amongst the pile of letters she suddenly saw one addressed to herself. It had evidently been forwarded from the Grand Hotel in Paris, and was written in a bold, manly hand. Annie felt, the moment she touched this letter, that there was fresh trouble in store for her. She had an instinctive dislike to opening it. She guessed immediately that it was written by her cousin, John Saxon. Still, there was no use in deferring bad tidings, if bad tidings there were, and she would do well to acquaint herself with the contents before Mabel or Lady Lushington appeared.

It was one of Lady Lushington's peculiarities always to wish to have her coffee and rolls in the breakfast *salon*. She said that lying in bed in the morning was bad for her figure, and for this reason alone took care, whatever had been the fatigues of the previous day, to get up early. Priscilla, strange as it may seem, was the only one of the party who had her rolls and coffee in her own room. But that Priscilla liked to rush through her breakfast, and then day after day to go out for a long ramble all alone, whereas Lady Lushington preferred to linger over her meal and talk to those acquaintances whom she happened to meet and know in the hotel.

Annie glanced at the clock which was hung over the great doorway, guessed that she would have two or three minutes to herself, and, taking a chair, seated herself and opened John Saxon's letter. It was very short and to the point, and Annie perceived, both to her annoyance and distress, that it had been written some days ago.

"Dear Annie," it ran, "I promised to let you know if your uncle was worse and if your presence here was a necessity. I grieve to say that it is; he is very far from well, and the doctor is in constant attendance. Your uncle does not know that I am writing this letter; but then, I am sorry to tell you that he has not often known during the last few days what is passing around him. He is quite confined to his bed, and lives, I believe, in a sort of dream. In that dream he is always talking of you. He often imagines that you come into the room, and over and over he begs that you will hold

his hand. There is not the least doubt that he is pining for you very much, and it is your absolute duty to return to him at once. I hope this letter will be forwarded from the Grand Hotel in Paris, as you have forgotten, my dear Annie, to give us any further address. I am, therefore, forced to send it there. If you will send me a wire on receipt of this, I will manage to meet you in London; and in case you happen to want money for your return journey—which seems scarcely likely—I am enclosing two five-pound notes for the purpose. Do not delay to come, for there is imminent danger, and in any case your place is by the dear old man's bedside.—I am, dear Annie, your affectionate cousin, John Saxon."

Annie had barely read this letter and crushed it with its precious two five-pound notes into her pocket before Lady Lushington and Mabel made their appearance. Mabel looked rather white and worried. Lady Lushington, on the contrary, was in a good-humour, and seemed to have forgotten her vexation of the previous day; but Annie's scarlet face and perturbed manner could not but attract the good lady's attention.



"What is the matter, Miss Brooke? Is anything troubling you?"
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"What is the matter, Miss Brooke? Is anything troubling you?"

"Oh no; at least, not much," said Annie. She reflected for a minute, wondering what she could safely say. "The fact is, Uncle Maurice—the dear old uncle with whom I live—is not quite well. He is a little poorly, and confined to bed."

"Then you would, of course, like to return to him," said Lady Lushington, speaking quickly and with decision.

"Oh," said Annie hastily and scolding herself with hot coffee as she spoke, "that is the very last thing Uncle Maurice wishes. It is quite a passing indisposition, and he is so glad that I am here enjoying my good time. I will wire, dear Lady Lushington, if you will permit me, after breakfast, and give my uncle and the cousin who is with him our address at Zermatt. Then if there should be the slightest danger I can go to him immediately, can I not?"

"Of course, child," said Lady Lushington, helping herself to some toast; "but I should imagine that if he were ill your place now would be at his bedside."

"Oh, but it would distress him most awfully—that is, of course, unless you wish to get rid of me—"

"You know we don't wish that, Annie," said Mabel.

"Certainly we don't," said Lady Lushington in a more cordial tone. "You are exceedingly useful, and a pleasant, nice girl to take about. I have not half thanked you for all the help you have given me. If you can reconcile it to your conscience to remain while your uncle, who must stand in the place of a father to you, is ill, I shall be glad to keep you; so rest assured on that point."

"I can certainly reconcile it to my conscience," said Annie, breaking a roll in two as she spoke; "for, you see, it is not

even as though my uncle Maurice were alone. My cousin can look after him."

"Oh, you have a girl cousin? I did not know of that."

"Not a girl; he is a man. His name is John Saxon."

"What!" said Lady Lushington, her eyes sparkling; "Mr Saxon, the young Australian? Why, I met him in London last year. What a splendid fellow he is! I have seldom met any one I admired so much; and they say he is exceedingly rich. I want him to come over to London and enjoy himself for one of the seasons. I could get him no end of introductions."

"He is with my uncle now," said Annie, speaking rather faintly, for it seemed to her as though entanglements were spreading themselves round her feet more and more tightly each moment. "Doubtless he is a good nurse," said Lady Lushington. She then turned the conversation to other matters.

After breakfast Annie went out and sent her telegram. In this she gave the address of the hotel where they were going to stay at Zermatt, at the same time saying that she much regretted, owing to the grave complications, that she could not leave Lady Lushington for a few days. She spent a fair amount of John Saxon's money on this telegram, in which she begged of him to give her love to Uncle Maurice, and to say that if he really grew worse she would go to him notwithstanding that business which was involving all the future of her friend.

The telegram was as insincere as her own deceitful heart, and so it read to the young man, who received it later in the day. A great wave of colour spread over his face as he read the cruel words, but he felt that he was very near the presence of death itself, and not for worlds would he disturb the peace of that departing saint who was so soon to meet his Maker face to face.

"I will not wire to her," he said to himself; "but if the old man still continues to fret, and if the doctor says that his longing for Annie is likely to shorten his days, I shall go to Zermatt and fetch her home myself. Nothing else will bring her. How could dear old Mr Brooke set his affections on one like Annie? But if he can die without being undeceived as to her true character, I at least shall feel that I have not lived in vain."

Meanwhile, as these thoughts were passing through the mind of a very manly and strong and determined person, Annie herself was living through exciting times. She was not without feeling with regard to her uncle. After a certain fashion she loved him, but she did not love him nearly as well as she loved her own selfish pleasures and delights. She was sadly inexperienced, too, with regard to real illness. Her belief was that John Saxon had exaggerated, and that dear, kind Uncle Maurice would recover from this attack as he had done from so many others. Now she had much to attend to, and forced herself, therefore, after the telegram had gone, to dismiss the matter from her mind.

As Annie had predicted, Lady Lushington did call Mabel into her private sitting-room soon after early breakfast on that eventful day, and did speak very seriously to her with regard to Mrs Priestley and her bill.

"I don't pretend for a single moment," said Aunt Henrietta, "that I am poor, and that I am unable to meet a bill of three times that amount; but I do not choose you to be wantonly extravagant, Mabel, and it is simply an unheard-of and outrageous thing that a schoolgirl should spend seventy pounds on dress during one short term. You know I invariably pay your dressmaker at the end of each term. Now this bill is more than double the amount of any that I have hitherto paid for you. Will you kindly explain why it rises to such enormous dimensions?" Mabel was very much frightened, and stammered in a way that only increased her aunt's displeasure.

"What is the matter with you, May? Can't you speak out? Are you concealing anything from me?"

"Oh no, no, indeed, Aunt Hennie—indeed I am not! Only the fact is, I am quite certain Mrs Priestley must have made a mistake."

"What is all this about?" said Annie Brooke, who entered the room at that moment.

"Oh, we were talking business."

"I beg your pardon. Shall I go away?"

"No, don't, Miss Brooke," said Lady Lushington rather crossly; "you are really wanted here to help to clear matters. Seeing that I am honoured by the possession of so clever a niece as Mabel, I wish she would not on every possible occasion act the fool. She is as stupid over this outrageous bill as though she were an infant."

"Well, Mabel," said Annie, "you know quite well that you had some nice dresses, hadn't you?"

"Yes," said Mabel, who seemed to have a wonderful amount of added courage now that Annie had appeared on the scene. Then she nimbly quoted a description of the beautiful gowns which Annie had falsely described the day before.

"Most unsuitable for a schoolgirl," said Lady Lushington. "And where are they, may I ask?"

"Oh, I—I—left them at school," said Mabel.

"Worse and worse; you seem to have lost your head."

"Poor May!" said Annie; "no wonder. You must know, Lady Lushington, that after your letter came May nearly worked herself into a fever to get that literature prize. She could think of nothing else. She did so long to be with you; didn't you, May?"

"Indeed I did," replied Mabel.

"Well, that is gratifying, I suppose," said Lady Lushington; "although I am by no means certain, my dear May, that I return the compliment. My impression is that another year at that excellent school would do you no end of good. Well, you lost your head trying to get that prize. But how could that fact affect Mrs Priestley's bill?"

"I mean," said Mabel, "that I forgot about packing my dresses and taking them away, and I had not an idea that my bill amounted to that. In fact," she added, meeting Annie's eyes, "I am quite positive that Mrs Priestley has made a mistake, and that you will find the bill—"

Here she hesitated.

"I," said Annie, "happen to know pretty well what May's lovely dresses cost. Oh, you know, Lady Lushington, *we* thought them perfectly ruinous in price—we schoolgirls; for *our* best dresses usually come to from three to four pounds. But May's—oh, some of hers were up to ten or twelve guineas. Even so, however, I don't think May can owe Mrs Priestley more than forty pounds."

"Then the woman's a thief and a cheat!" said angry Lady Lushington.

"I think, perhaps," said Annie, speaking in her gentlest tones, "it might be fairest to let her explain. She has probably—oh, she has such numbers of customers!—put down some items that don't belong to Mabel in her account."

"Well, well, we shall see," said Lady Lushington. "You posted that letter, didn't you, Miss Brooke?" Then she added, hastily and without waiting for an answer, "I shall be glad if it is so. I make no objection to paying forty pounds, but I do draw the line at seventy."

"Thank you, auntie; thank you so much," said Mabel, running up to her aunt and kissing her.

"Now don't, my dear! You disturb the powder on my cheek. Do sit down; don't be so impulsive."

"I know what you are wanting to do; I know what is in your head, you silly Mabel," said Annie at this juncture.

Lady Lushington looked up. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh," said Annie, "it is that necklace—that wonderful, amazing bargain."

Lady Lushington pricked up her ears. She could not—and all her friends were aware of the fact—ever resist a bargain. She would have gone from one end of London to the other to secure the most useless old trash if she was firmly convinced in her own mind that she had to get it as a bargain. She now, therefore, sat up with sparkling eyes, and Mrs Priestley and her bill were as absolutely forgotten as though they had never existed.

"There are no bargains at Interlaken," was her next remark.

"Oh, are there not?" said Annie. "Mabel and I know something very different from that."

"What is it, my dear? What is it?"

"Well," said Annie, "it was I who found it out. I showed it to May yesterday. You know Zick the jeweller in the little High Street?"

"Of course; his shop is full of rubbish."

"There is a necklace there which is not rubbish," said Annie, "and the best of it is that he is not a bit aware of its value himself."

"A necklace? What sort?"

"He can't be aware of its value," said Annie, "which is very surprising, for these Swiss are so sharp; but I can assure you I was taught to recognise the beauty of good pearls, and there are some lovely ones in that necklace. Now nothing in all the world would be so becoming to May as real, good pearls; and this necklace—it belonged to an old French marquise, who was obliged to sell it, poor dear! to get ready cash. Zick paid—oh, he would not tell me what; but he is offering it for a mere bagatelle."

"My dear Miss Brooke—a bagatelle!"

"Yes; only forty pounds."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Lushington. "Forty pounds! All the contents of his shop are not worth that sum."

"I dare say you are right," said Annie, by no means abashed; "with the exception of the necklace. But now, you are a judge of jewels, aren't you?"

"Well, I rather flatter myself that I am."

"I saw two or three ladies from this hotel looking at the necklace yesterday. I was dying to tell you, but I had not an opportunity. I am so awfully afraid it may be snapped up. Do, do come at once and look at it!"

"If they are really fine pearls," said Lady Lushington—"and the old French *noblesse* were noted for the beauty of some of their gems—it would be exceedingly cheap—exceedingly cheap at forty pounds. But then, of course, the

whole thing is a hoax.”

“Oh, do, do come and see! It would be such a beautiful present for May.”

“She can’t wear ornaments until she is presented,” said Lady Lushington.

“Well, but think what even a string of pearls would cost, you know, in Bond Street.”

“Of course I know I could not get anything decent under a hundred pounds. You say forty pounds. Of course, the thing could be re-set—Would you really like it, May?”

“Like it?” said Mabel, trembling. “I’d—I’d adore it, auntie!”

“Well,” said Lady Lushington, “if your conjecture, Miss Brooke, with regard to Mrs Priestley is correct and Mabel has really only spent forty pounds on her dress, I should not mind doing a deal for the necklace; but as things are—”

“As things are,” said Annie, “I should not be one scrap surprised if Mrs Warden has the necklace already in her possession. It is certain to be bought up immediately, for it is a real bargain.”

“In that case,” said Lady Lushington, “I had better, Mabel, ring for Parker. I will just walk down with you to Zick’s. You can both come with me.”

Annie skipped as she ran up to her attic bedroom. Mabel, it may be mentioned, had a very nice room on the same floor as her aunt.

Priscie was out and all alone among the mountains. So much the better. Uncle Maurice, in his room which faced west, was listening for a light footstep that did not come, for the pressure of a little hand that was not present, for the love that he imagined shone out of blue eyes, but which in reality was not there. Annie forgot both Priscie and Uncle Maurice. Things were going swimmingly. How clever she was! How abundantly Mabel would thank her and love her and help her all the rest of her days!

Lady Lushington, accompanied by the two girls, went to Zick’s, and soon began the fierce war of words over the necklace. She perceived at once that Annie was right, and that the pearls were a very great bargain even at forty pounds; but she would not have been a true bargain-hunter if she did not try to bring Zick to accept lower terms. Unfortunately for her, however, two other ladies had been in the shop that morning, had examined the necklace, and had promised to call again. Lady Lushington, in the end, was afraid of losing it. She paid the money, and the necklace became her property.

“Oh May, you are in luck!” said Annie. “Lady Lushington has bought this for you.”

Mabel looked longingly at the little box in her aunt’s hand.

“Take it, child,” said Lady Lushington impulsively. “Be sure you don’t lose it. Let Parker pack it for you to-night with your other small trinkets; but on no account wear it until after your presentation. Really, those pearls are so fine that I think they might be re-set for the occasion. It is my strong impression that I have only given half the worth of that necklace to Zick. What an idiot the man must be to sell it so cheap!”

Chapter Nineteen.

A Profitable Transaction.

Annie Brooke was the sort of girl who was sure to be popular wherever she went. She had already made many friends in the Hotel Belle Vue at Interlaken. Amongst these was a quaint old gentleman with shaggy hair, deep-set eyes, a much-hooked nose, and a decidedly Jewish appearance. Few people were attentive to the old man, and he used to be glad when Annie came and sat next him in the big lounge after dinner, and listened to his rather rambling and rather meaningless talk. But Annie Brooke was the sort of person who does nothing without intent. She never met any one without trying to learn something with regard to that person’s peculiarities, that person’s past, and, if possible, that person’s present history.

Now Mr Manchuri was a dealer in gems, and it darted through Annie’s fertile brain as she was returning to the hotel with Lady Lushington and Mabel that she might do a little stroke of business both for herself and her friend if she showed the precious necklace to him. The more she thought on this, the more did this idea fascinate her. It would be *very*, very much better than taking the necklace back to Zick or offering it for sale to some other dealer at Interlaken. The jewellers there were not so clever with regard to the true value of gems as was Mr Manchuri; and besides, it was quite on the cards that they might exhibit the necklace in their windows for sale during the afternoon of that same day, and there was also a possibility that Lady Lushington, who was always rather wayward and uncertain in her movements, might postpone going to Zermatt for a day or two; in short, it would be very much safer to consult Mr Manchuri with regard to the necklace. He was going to return to England that very afternoon. If he took the necklace with him all would be safe; but Annie did not dare to confide her thoughts to Mabel. She was certain Mr Manchuri would not betray her, but she had to act warily and with tact.

Now Priscie had gone for a long walk into the mountains, and when she came back she was very tired. She went accordingly to sit in the lovely shady garden which was one of the principal features of the hotel. She chose a comfortable rustic seat under a wide-spreading tree, and sat for some time with a book on her knee lost in thought. By-and-by Annie entered the garden. She saw Priscilla, and was much annoyed. She knew that it was Mr Manchuri’s custom to smoke in the garden before lunch. She meant to join him and have a pleasant little talk. But the most

shady seat—the seat, in fact, which he generally occupied—was now filled by the—to Annie—ungainly figure of Priscilla Weir.

“Oh dear me, Priscilla!” said Annie, pausing when she saw her friend, and looking at her with a great deal of exasperation.

“Yes,” said Priscie; “what is the matter?”

“I want to sit just where you are.”

“Well, I suppose you can; there is room for two.”

“But there isn’t room for three,” said Annie.

“Three?” said Priscilla. “Who is the third?”

“Oh, never mind,” said Annie; “I suppose we’ll find another seat. It is Mr Manchuri; he is going to England, you know, to-day. He is such a nice old man, and I did think I could send a little present by him as far as London, and then it could be posted to dear old Uncle Maurice. I wanted to give him a *special* message about it. But there, never mind.”

“I will go in if I am in the way,” said Priscie. She rose hastily and went towards the house. She felt that Annie was becoming almost unendurable to her. Such a queer, sore sensation was in her heart that she almost wondered if she could live through the next term at Mrs Lyttelton’s school in the presence of this girl—this girl so devoid of principle. But then, where were Priscilla’s own principles? What right had Priscilla to upbraid another when she herself was so unworthy? She crushed down the dreadful thought, and went back into the house feeling limp and miserable.

Meanwhile Mr Manchuri walked slowly down the garden in his meditative, cautious fashion, never hurrying in the very least, and gazing abstractedly at a view which he did not in the least admire, for he had no eyes for the really beautiful things of nature. Nevertheless he considered the strong, sweet air of the Swiss mountains good for him, and as such was the case, was satisfied with his surroundings. Presently he caught sight of Annie’s white frock. He liked Annie Brooke; she was a pretty little thing, very good-natured and amusing. He thought to himself how much nicer she was than any other girl in the hotel. She had no nonsensical airs about her, and could listen to an old man’s maunderings without showing the slightest sign of weariness. Her eyes were very blue, too, and her hair golden. He did not consider her pretty; no one ever thought Annie Brooke quite pretty; but then she was charming, and had a way of making a man feel at his very best while he talked to her; and she did not object to his smoking.

He accordingly made his way as straight as an arrow from the bow to the comfortable seat where Priscilla had been reposing, and which Annie had left vacant for him. Annie was seated on a far less comfortable chair herself. She was looking straight before her, her hands lying idle in her lap, her hat slightly pushed back. She did not appear to notice Mr Manchuri until he was close to her side. But when he said, “Hallo, Miss Brooke!” she looked up, and a happy smile parted her childish lips.

“Oh, now, this is nice!” she said. “I was wondering if I should see you before you went.”

“I am not going until late this evening,” was the answer.

“I thought you were going this afternoon.”

“No; I have decided to travel by night. It is too hot for day travelling at present.”

He sank into a seat and began to pull at his pipe vigorously. Annie gave a gentle sigh.

“What is the matter?” he asked.

She looked at him, glanced round her, and then, dropping her voice to a whisper, said:

“I wonder if I might confide in you.”

“Of course you may, Miss Brooke,” he said.

“But it is,” said Annie, “a most sacred confidence. I mean that if I tell you, you must never tell anybody else.”

“I am very honoured, I am sure,” said Mr Manchuri. “Now what is this confidence, young lady?”

“You will respect it?” said Annie.

“Here is my hand on it,” he said; and he laid his wrinkled hand for a minute in her little white one.

“Then it is just this,” said Annie. “I have a dear, dear uncle in England—Uncle Maurice. He is a clergyman; he is awfully good and sweet, and he is not at all well, and he is not rich, although he has enough. I am most anxious to send him a little present, something all from myself. Now I happened to get this to-day,” and she took a box from where it lay concealed in the folds of her dress. “I got this to-day at Zick’s, the jeweller’s. You must not ask me what I paid for it. I assure you it was not a great deal, but I am under the impression that it is worth far more than Zick has any idea of. I—I want to sell it in order to send a little present to dear Uncle Maurice, and you are such a judge of gems and precious stones of all sorts. May I show it to you? The fact is, I got it as a great bargain; but if you could tell me what I ought to ask for it, it would be such a help in disposing of it again. Do you think you could—and—*would?*”

Mr Manchuri gave Annie a long glance. It was the first very observant glance that he had given her. Hitherto he had simply regarded her as a nice, well-mannered, pleasant little girl, who did not mind amusing an old man with little

nothings of conversation and little scraps of local news; but now it seemed to him all of a sudden that he saw something more in her face.

"And how," he asked after a pause—"how is it, Miss Annie Brooke, that you happen to know that I am a judge of gems and precious stones?"

Annie did not expect this question, and in consequence she coloured very vividly. After a pause she said:

"I am always fond of putting two and two together; and don't you remember that evening when you told me the wonderful story of the Duchess of Martinborough's bracelet, and—and—about the ring that was stolen and sought for afterwards by the Secret Service people?"

"Yes, I remember quite well. Well, go on."

"I thought what a lot you knew about those things. Don't you?"

"Bless your heart, child!" he said, "I am in that trade myself; I have made a pretty snug fortune in it. Yes, I can glance at your little bargain and tell you, if you like, whether it is a bargain or not."

"And you remember your promise; you will never tell any one?"

"Honour bright," was his answer.

She then put the box into his hand. He opened it, and took out the old necklace with its pearls of various sizes and different shapes, and its very quaint, old-world setting. Annie glanced at him and saw a subtle change creep over his face. He had hitherto regarded the whole thing as a joke. Annie Brooke, child as she was, could not possibly know a bargain when she saw it, and those Swiss fellows were as sharp as knives and never let anything good escape them. And yet, and yet—here was something of real merit. Those centre pearls were distinguished—round and smooth and of the most exquisite colour.

He dangled the thing lightly in his hand.

All the tricks of the trade, all that which had made him the rich old man what he was, rushed quickly through his brain, and yet he looked again at Annie Brooke. For the life of her, Annie could not keep the eagerness out of her eyes.

"Is it a bargain, or is it not?" she said. "Have I been fooled about it?"

"Will you tell me in strict confidence what you gave for it?" he asked.

Annie had hoped he would not put this question to her.

"I was a little mad, I think," she said. "I gave my all for it."

"That tells me nothing. What is your all?"

"Forty pounds," she said in a choked sort of voice.

"Were you not rather unwise to part with your last penny?"

"You don't understand," said Annie, who, having at last declared a part of the truth, felt better able to go on. "I have studied pearls a great deal; and Uncle Maurice, dear Uncle Maurice, has taught me their true value and something of their history, and I guessed that this was really cheap, and thought I could sell it for more."

"By Jove!" said Mr Manchuri, "you are the sharpest girl I ever saw. How old are you?"

"Seventeen," said Annie.

"God help the man who marries you!" said Mr Manchuri under his breath.

"What did you say?" asked Annie.

"Nothing, nothing, my dear. Of course I admire your cleverness. Well, you have come to the right person. I will give you one hundred pounds for this necklace; there, now."

"And you won't say anything about it?" said Annie, who felt at once faint and delighted, overpowered with joy, and yet subdued by an awful weight of apprehension.

"Nothing to any one in this hotel. But the thing is a curio, and I shall probably sell it for double what I give you. I do not conceal anything from you. Miss Annie Brooke. You might try for ever, and you would find it difficult to get your forty pounds back. But I, who am in the trade, am in a different position. Had I gone to Zick before you, I would have probably bought the thing for thirty pounds and thought no shame to myself for doing so. But I won't cheat a young lady, particularly such a very clever young lady, and you shall have your hundred pounds at once. Here; I have notes on my person. You would prefer them to a cheque?"

"Oh yes, please!" Annie trembled with joy.

Mr Manchuri counted out ten ten-pound notes, and Annie gave him the quaint pearl necklace.

She then lingered a little longer trying to talk on indifferent matters, but her interest in the old Jew was gone, and, as a matter of fact, she did not want to see him any more.

As to the old man himself, he felt that he hated her; but he was glad to have made a good stroke of business, although he was very rich. That was always worth something. He would in all probability clear one hundred and fifty pounds on the necklace, which would more than pay for his trip abroad and for the benefit he had derived from the air of the Swiss mountains.

Annie went into the house, rushed up to Mabel's room, and, taking three ten-pound notes out of her pocket, said exultantly:

"There, I have done it! Now who is clever?"

"Oh, you are," said Mabel. "But where did you sell it, and to whom? We must keep Aunt Henrietta from going to any of the shops to-day."

"Oh, we will easily manage that," said Annie. "She is going to have a little drive after lunch, and I am going with her—trust me. We must get to Zermatt to-morrow. Now I am going to write a long letter to Mrs Priestley enclosing this. I shall barely have time before *déjeuner*." When that day Annie Brooke did sit down to *déjeuner* she considered herself a remarkably wealthy young woman, for she had in her possession nearly eighty pounds, every one of which she intended to keep for her own special aggrandisement; and Mrs Priestley was paid—paid in full, with a long explanatory letter desiring her emphatically to send an account to Lady Lushington which would only amount to forty pounds.

Annie was exceedingly pleased. The colour of excitement bloomed on her cheeks; her eyes looked quite dark. At these times she was so nearly pretty that many people remarked on her and turned to look at her again. She was in her wildest, most captivating mood, too, and Priscilla looked by her side both limp and uninteresting. If only Priscilla would go. Her very face was a reproach. Annie wondered if she could accomplish this feat also. Mr Manchuri could take her to England. What an excellent idea, if Annie could only work it!

"I have had everything else I wanted to-day," thought the girl, "and if I can do this one last thing I will see the pinnacle of my success reached."

"You will come for a drive, won't you?" said Annie, bending towards Lady Lushington as the tedious meal of *déjeuner* was coming to an end.

Lady Lushington yawned slightly.

"Oh, I don't know," she said; "the heat is so great that I have not energy for anything. I wonder if I ought to travel to-morrow."

"Oh yes," said Annie; "it will be cooler at Zermatt."

"That is true; but the journey—"

"We have taken our rooms in the hotel, have we not?" said Annie.

"Well, that is just it; I am not sure. I telegraphed this morning to the 'Beau Séjour,' but have not had a reply yet. I insist on staying at the 'Beau Séjour.' There is no hotel like it in the place."

"There are such a lot of us, of course," said Annie; "but Priscie and I do not mind sharing the tiniest little room together; do we, Pris?"

Here she glanced at Priscilla. Priscilla looked up.

"I don't want to be unpleasant," she said, "but I certainly should like a room to myself."

"Of course, my dear," said Lady Lushington.

"Dear, dear! I must consult with Parker. There's a room for me, a room for Mabel, a room each for you two girls—that makes four; and Parker's room, five. You two girls would not by any chance mind sleeping in another hotel, would you?"

Here she looked first at Annie and then at Priscilla.

"Certainly not," said Annie. "I do not mind anything."

Priscilla was quite silent. Just then one of the waiters appeared with a telegram. It was to Lady Lushington. She opened it. There were only four bedrooms available at the "Beau Séjour."

Annie spoke impulsively. "I tell you what," she said. "I won't be in the way; I won't. I will go back to England to-night. I can go with Mr Manchuri, that funny old Jew gentleman whom I have been so friendly with. I know he will let me travel with him. It is just too bad, Lady Lushington; you must let me. I have been, oh! so happy, and it will be a cruel disappointment to go; but I will. Yes, I will go."

"Seeing that your uncle is ill, perhaps—" began Lady Lushington.

"Oh, please don't think that it is on account of that. Uncle Maurice constantly has these attacks. He is probably as well as ever by now; but it is just because I *won't* crowd you up."

"But, Annie," said Mabel in a troubled voice, "you know I can't live without you."

"It is very awkward indeed," said Lady Lushington—"very awkward. The fact is, I can't very well spare you; you are of great use to me."

Priscilla rose from the table. She had scarcely touched anything during the meal.

"I think I know what Annie Brooke means," she said. "She means that one of us two girls is to offer to go back, and she naturally does not intend to go herself."

"But I offered to go. How cruel you are!" said Annie. "I *will* go, too," she added, pouting and looking at once pretty and petulant. "Yes, Lady Lushington, I will go.—Mabel, I can't help it. You are my very dearest ownest friend; but I won't crowd you up. You will have Priscie."

"No," said Priscilla mournfully; "I am no use. I don't think at present I love people, and I can't talk much, and I can't wear"—she hesitated—"the dresses that other people wear. I will go. I have had a beautiful time, and I have seen the mountains. It is something to have had even a glimpse of the higher Alps; they are like nothing else. A little disappointment is nothing when one has had such great joy. I will go to-night if Mr Manchuri will let me accompany him."

"It does seem reasonable, Miss Weir," said Lady Lushington. "We can't stay on here, for our rooms are let, and I won't go anywhere at Zermatt except to the 'Beau Séjour.' As to one of you girls sleeping out it cannot be thought of, although I did propose that two of you might—that is, together; but there seem to be difficulties. You have not been very happy with us, have you, Miss Weir?"

"You have been the cause of great happiness to me, and I thank you from my heart," said Priscilla.

"Well, my dear, I will of course pay your fare back. I hope we may meet again some day. Then that is settled.—Annie, please go at once and wire that we will engage the four rooms, and—who will see Mr Manchuri and arrange with him to let Priscilla accompany him to England?"

"I will do both," said Annie.

She hastily left the *salle-à-manger* and ran through the great lounge with a sort of skipping movement, so light were her steps, and so light and jubilant her heart. The old Jew did not make any demur when he was told that the tall, slender young lady was to accompany him home.

"I will look after her," he said. "Don't thank me, please, Miss Brooke; I don't suppose that she will be the slightest trouble."

Priscilla went up to her room, flung herself on her bed, and wept.

Chapter Twenty.

A Confession and a Friend.

It is quite true that very clever people are sometimes apt to overstep the bounds of reason and prudence; and whether all that befell Annie Brooke and all that retribution which she so richly merited would have fallen so quickly and so decisively on her devoted head had she not been anxious to get rid of poor Priscilla must remain an unsolved question. But certain it is that Priscilla Weir's departure in the company of Mr Manchuri was the first step in her downfall. Annie, with eighty pounds in her pocket and with all fear of Mrs Priestley laid at rest, felt that she had not a care in the world.

But Priscilla, when she stepped into the first-class carriage which was to convey her *en route* for England, was one of the most perplexed and troubled girls who could be found anywhere. Mr Manchuri, with all his faults, his love of securing a bargain, his sharpness, had a kindly heart. He saw that the girl was in trouble, and took no notice at all of her for more than an hour of the journey.

It so happened, however, that very few people were returning to England so early in the season, and the pair had the railway carriage for a long time to themselves. When Priscilla had sat quite silent for a considerable time, her eyes gazing straight out into the ever-gathering darkness, Mr Manchuri could contain himself no longer.

He had scarcely ever glanced at Priscilla Weir when she was at the hotel. She was not pretty; she was not showily dressed; she was a queer girl. He knew that she belonged to Lady Lushington's party, but beyond that he was scarcely aware of her existence. Now, however, he began to study her, and as he did so he began to see marks of what he considered interest in her face. What was more, he began to trace a likeness in her to some one else.

Once, long ago, this queer, dried-up old man had a young daughter, a daughter whom he loved very passionately, but who died just when she was grown up. The girl had been tall and slender, like Priscilla, and strangely unworldly and fond of books, and, as the old man described it, good at star-gazing. He did not know why the memory of Esther, who had been in her grave for so many years, returned to him now. But, be that as it may, Priscilla, without being exactly like Esther, gave him back thoughts of his daughter, and because of that he felt inclined to be kind to the lonely girl. So, changing his seat which he had taken at the farther end of the carriage, he placed himself opposite to her and said in a voice which she scarcely recognised:

“Cheer up now, won’t you? There is no good in fretting.”

Priscilla was startled at the kindness of the tone. It shook her out of a dream. She turned her intensely sorrowful eyes full upon Mr Manchuri and said:

“I shall get over my disappointment, I am sure; please don’t take any notice of me.”

“But, come now,” said Mr Manchuri, “what are you fretting about? You are going home, I understand.”

“Oh no, I am not,” said Priscilla; “I am going back to school.”

“Oh, so you are a schoolgirl?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How old are you, my dear?”

“I am nearly seventeen,” said Priscilla.

Now Esther had been nearly seventeen when she died; she was not *quite* seventeen. Mr Manchuri felt glad that Priscilla was not quite seventeen.

“I thought of course, you were going home,” he said—“that perhaps you had some one who wanted you very much. Why should you, I wonder, leave Lady Lushington’s party?”

“There was not room for all of us at the hotel at Zermatt, so I am going back to England.”

“But why you?” said Mr Manchuri. He felt quite angry. How furious he would have been if any one had treated his Esther like that!—and this girl had a voice very like Esther’s. “Why you? Why should this be your lot?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Priscilla. “Some one had to do it.”

“I see; that little Annie Brooke would not go, for instance—not she; she is far too clever.”

“She offered to go,” said Priscilla, who would not allow even Annie to appear at a disadvantage.

Mr Manchuri laughed.

“There is a way of offering, isn’t there, Miss— Forgive me, my dear; I have not caught your name. What is it?”

“Priscilla Weir.”

“I like the name of Priscilla; it is so quaint and old-fashioned. Do you know that I once had a girl called Esther. She was my only child. That is a quaint name too, if you like. Don’t you think so? Don’t you think that Esther is a very pretty name?”

“Very,” said Priscilla. “It is a beautiful name,” she added; “and that story about Queen Esther is so, *so* lovely!”

“Isn’t it?” said Mr Manchuri. “And my girl was like her—a sort of queenly way about her. Do you know, miss—you don’t mind if I call you Priscilla?”

“Please do,” said Priscilla.

“Do you know that in a sort of manner you remind me of my dear Esther. She was darker than you; but she was like you. God took her. Shall I tell you why?”

“Please,” said Priscilla. She had come back to the present world now, and was gazing, with all her heart in her eyes, at the queer old man.

“She was too good for earth,” said Mr Manchuri; “that is why God took her. He wanted her to bloom in the Heavenly Gardens. She wasn’t a bit like me. I am all for money and bargains—I made a rare one to-day; but I mustn’t talk of that. That is a secret. I am a rich man—very rich; and when I die I will leave my money to different charities. I have not kith or kin to leave it to—neither kith nor kin, for Esther is with God and the angels. But, all the same, I can’t help making money. It is the one pleasure I have. If a week goes by when I can’t turn over a cool hundred or even sometimes a thousand I am put out and miserable. You don’t understand that feeling, do you?”

“No; I don’t,” said Priscilla.

“No more did Esther; I could not get it into her. I tried to with all my might, but not one little bit of it would get through that pure white armour she wore—the armour of righteousness, I take it.”

“Tell me more about her,” said Priscilla, bending forward and looking full into Mr Manchuri’s eyes.

“I could talk about her for ever to you,” was the answer; “although, as a matter of fact, I have not mentioned my child’s name to a living soul for going on thirty years. It is thirty years since she went to God, and she is as young as ever in the Heavenly Gardens—not seventeen yet; just like you.”

“Yes,” said Priscilla. “It is very, very interesting,” she added. “It seems to me,” she continued, “as if I knew now why I am taking this journey, and why God did not want me to see the lovely mountains that surround Zermatt.”

"You are more and more like Esther the more you talk," said Mr Manchuri. "She was all for star-gazing and that sort of thing. I take it, that includes mountain-gazing and going into raptures at sunsets and at sunrises, and going into fits at shadows on the hills and lights across the valleys, and little flowers growing in clumps by brooks, and living things that you can see if you look deep into running water, and the songs of birds, and the low hum of insects on a summer evening. After these things, which she liked best of all, she loved books that made her think, and I could not get her to take the slightest interest in what she wore, or in money, bless you! But she was sweet beyond words with children, and with people who were in trouble; and there were girls of her own class in life who adored her. They are elderly women now—oldish, almost—with children of their own; but two or three of them have called their girls Esther after her, although they don't resemble her one little bit. You are the first girl I ever came across who in the very least resembles her. I wish I could see your face in the light."

"I love the things she loved," said Priscilla.

"Hers must have been a most beautiful nature." Then she added fervently, "It was very lucky for her that she died."

"Why do you say that?" said Mr Manchuri. "Lucky for her? Well, perhaps so, for God and the angels and the Gardens of Heaven must be the very best company and place for one like my Esther; but nevertheless, she would have had a good time down here."

"No, she wouldn't," said Priscilla stoutly. "The world is not made for people like her."

"Then *you* don't find the world a good place?" said Mr Manchuri, speaking in an interested voice.

Priscilla took a long time before she replied. Then she said very gravely:

"I don't find the world a good place—I mean the people in it; and I want to say something"—her voice broke and changed—"I *must* say something; please let me."

"Of course you shall, my dear Priscilla. My dear girl, don't agitate yourself; say anything you like."

"You have been so kind comparing me to your child—to your beautiful child," said Priscilla. "But I must undeceive you. Although I love the mountains and the things of nature, and although I cry in my heart for goodness, and although I am the same age as your Esther was when she went away to God, I am not a bit like her, for I am not good. I am—wicked."

Mr Manchuri was startled at this statement, which he took to be the exaggeration of a young and sensitive girl.

"You must not be too introspective," he said after a pause. "That is very bad for all young things. Esther was not. She had a beautiful belief in God, and in goodness, and in joy. She was never, never discontented—never once. If you are not like her in that, you must try to grow like her. I tell you what; you interest me tremendously. You shall come to see me in London, and I will show you Esther's portrait."

"I can't come," said Priscilla. "You talk to me out of your kind, very kind heart; but you don't know. I am not a good girl. I have done something far and away beyond the ordinary bad things that girls do, and I cannot possibly come to you under false colours. If I could, I would be friendly with worldly people, but I am not in touch with them; and good people I can have nothing to do with. So I must stand alone. I shall never see your Esther; I know that; but thank you all the same for telling me about her; and—and—I shall never forget the picture you have given me of her most lovely character."

Mr Manchuri was considerably startled at Priscilla's words, and in some extraordinary way, as she spoke, the image of Annie Brooke when she looked at him with that crafty expression in her eyes returned to him, and he said to himself:

"I will get to the bottom of the secret that is troubling the girl who is like my Esther; and I have a very shrewd suspicion that Miss Brooke is mixed up in the affair." Priscilla closed her eyes after she had uttered the last words, as though she were too tired to say any more, and Mr Manchuri sat and watched her. She had very handsome, long, thick, black eyelashes, and the likeness to his Esther was even more apparent in her face when her eyes were shut than when they were open. The more the old man looked at her, the more did his heart go out to her. It had been for long years a withered heart—a heart engrossed in that most hardening of all things—money-making. To make money just for the love of making it is enough to crush the goodness and frankness out of all lives, and Mr Manchuri had twenty times too much for his own needs. Still, his excitement over a bargain or a good speculation was as keen as ever; and even now, at this very moment, was he not wearing inside his waistcoat that curious necklace which he had bought from Annie Brooke that day? He would make, after paying the hundred pounds which he had given Annie, at least one hundred and fifty pounds on the necklace.

Yes; he lived for that sort of thing. He had a very handsome house, however, at the corner of Park Lane, and this house was filled with rich furniture, and he had a goodly staff of servants, and many friends as rich as himself came to see him, and he drank the most costly wines and ate the most expensive dinners, and never spent a penny on charity or did one good thing with all his gold. There was one room, however, in that house which was kept sacred from the faintest touch of worldliness. This room contained the portrait of the child who was taken away from him in her first bloom. It was a simple room, having a little white bed and the plainest furniture that a girl could possibly use. There were a few of Esther's possessions lying about—her work-box, her little writing-desk, a pile of books, most of them good and worth reading; and Mr Manchuri kept the key of that room and never allowed any one to enter it. It was the sacred shrine in that worldly house. It was, in short the heart of the house.

But now Mr Manchuri discovered on this midnight journey that that withered heart of his own, which he had supposed to be dead to all the world, was suddenly alive and keenly interested in a girl of the age of his Esther—a girl who absolutely told him that she was not good, and that because she was not good she must stand alone.

"I will get her secret out of the poor young thing," he said to himself; "and what is more—what is more, I will help her a little bit for the sake of my Esther."

Priscilla was really very tired. She slept a good deal during the night, all of which time they had the carriage to themselves. But in the morning some fresh travellers entered their compartment, and Mr Manchuri had no opportunity of saying a word in private to Priscilla until they were on their way to London. When, however, they had crossed the Channel, the first thing he did was to engage a private *coupé* on the express train, and soon, as they were whirling away towards the great centre of life and commerce, he was once again alone with his young companion.

"Now, my dear," he said, "you will just forgive me for asking you a plain question."

"I am sure I will, Mr Manchuri," said Priscilla. "You have been most, most kind to me."

"We shall arrive in London," said Mr Manchuri, "at five o'clock. Now, may I ask where you intend to go for the night?"

"I will send a telegram to my schoolmistress, Mrs Lyttelton, and then take the next train to Hendon," was Priscilla's remark.

"But is your schoolmistress at home?"

"I do not know; but somebody will be."

"Do you want to go back to school in the holidays?"

"Not very specially; but I must go, so there is no use talking about it. I felt so bewildered yesterday that I did not send a telegram, as I might have done. But I know the servants can put me up, and it will be all right—and you have been, oh! so kind, Mr Manchuri."

"Not at all, my dear Priscilla; not at all. The fact is, I have never enjoyed a journey so much; your company has given me real pleasure. And now what do you say—"

"Yes?" interrupted Priscilla.

"To coming to me to my house for a few days—even for a night or so—instead of going back to Hendon?"

"To your house, Mr Manchuri?"

"Yes, my dear; you will have a hearty welcome there, and I assure you it is quite large enough. I have got excellent servants, who will look after you, and you won't see much of me except in the evening, and then perhaps you will cheer me up a bit; and—and I want to show you what you know, my dear—"

Priscilla turned first red and then white.

"I have told you why I cannot see that," she said.

"That is the subject I want to discuss with you more fully. Will you come back with me to Park Lane, and to-night? I am an old man and lonely, and you, my dear little girl, have stirred something within me which has never been stirred for thirty years, and which I thought was quite dead. You won't refuse me, will you? That, indeed, would be a sin. That would be putting a heart back once more into its grave."

Priscilla was startled at the words, and still more at the expression in the old face; there was such a hungry, pleading look in the eyes.

"Oh no," she said simply, "I am not so bad as that. If you want me like that—I, who am not wanted by any one else—indeed, I will come."

Chapter Twenty One.

Confessions.

Mr Manchuri was a person who seldom had his soft moods; but he was very kind to Priscilla. She found the house most luxurious, and was allowed to do exactly what she liked in it. The housekeeper, Mrs Wolf, petted her a good deal, and the other servants were most respectful to her. She was given a large, luxurious room to sleep in, and was allowed to do what she liked with herself while Mr Manchuri was busy all day long over his business affairs.

So one day lengthened into two, and two into three; and a week passed, and still Priscilla was the guest of old Mr Manchuri. It was a Sunday evening, the first Sunday after her visit, when she and the old man were seated together, and the old man put out his hand and touched hers and said:

"There is a dress of Esther's upstairs; it is all grey and long and straight, and belongs to no special fashion, and I believe if you put it on it would exactly fit you; and I think, in this sort of half-light, if you came down to me in that dress I should almost believe that Esther had returned."

"But I can't wear the dress," said Priscilla, "because of that which I have told you; nor can I see the portrait of your Esther for the same reason."

"Now, my dear," said Mr Manchuri, "I won't ask you to wear the dress and I won't show you the portrait of my child until you yourself ask me to do so. But what I do want to say is this: that whatever happens, I am your friend; and as to your having done something that you call wicked—why, there—I don't believe it. What can a young girl who is not yet seventeen have done? Why, look at me, my dear. I am as worldly an old fellow as ever lived, and I have made a capital good bit of business while at Interlaken. It is connected with that secret that I hinted to you about when we were on our way back from Interlaken."

"Mr Manchuri," said Priscilla, "what you have done in your life cannot affect what I have done in mine. I have done a very bad thing. It seems dreadful to me, and"—here she looked at him in a frightened way—"you attract me very much," she said. "You have been so wonderfully kind to me, and the thought of your Esther seems to give me a sort of fascination towards you, and if you will let me I—I—should like to tell you what I have done."

"Ay?" said the old man, rubbing his hands. "Now we are coming to the point."

"You will send me away, of course," said Priscilla; "I know that. I know, too, that you will counsel me to do the only right thing left, and that is to make a clean breast of everything to Mrs Lyttelton."

"She is your schoolmistress?"

"Yes."

"Then it is something you have done at school?"

"That is it."

"Oh, a schoolgirl offence—a scrape of that sort! My dear young lady, my dear Priscilla, when you come to my age you won't think much of things of that sort."

"I hope I shall never think lightly of them," said Priscilla; "that would be quite the worst of all."

"Well, out with it now. I am ready to listen."

"I want you to do more than listen," said Priscilla. She took one of his hands and held it in both of hers. "I want you to be Esther for the time being. I want you to judge me as Esther would judge me if she were here."

"My God!" said the old man. "I cannot do that. I cannot look at you with her eyes."

"Try to, won't you? Try to, very hard."

"You move me, Priscilla. But tell me the story."

"It implicates other people," said Priscilla—she sank back again in her seat—"and in telling you my share in it I must mention no names; but the facts are simply these. I have a great and very passionate love for learning. I am also ambitious. I was sent to Mrs Lyttelton's most excellent school by an uncle in the country. He could not very well afford to pay the fees of the school, and his intention was to remove me from it at the end of last term. I ought to tell you, perhaps, that I have a father in India; but he has married a second time and has a young family, and he is very poor. Uncle Josiah is my mother's brother, and he has always done what he could for me. But he is a rather rough, uneducated man; in short, he is a farmer in the south-west of England. Towards the end of the last term I received a letter from him saying that he could not afford to keep me at school any longer, and that I was to come back to him and either help my aunt in the house-work—which meant giving up my books and all my dreams of life—or that I was to be apprenticed to a dressmaker in the village.

"Now both these prospects were equally odious to me. I struggled and fought against them. The suffering I endured was very keen and most real. Then, just when I was most miserable, there came a temptation. By the very post which brought me the dreadful letter from my uncle Josiah, there came a letter to another girl in the school who was most keenly desirous to leave it. I cannot mention the girl's name, but she was told that unless she won the first prize for literature at the break-up she was to remain for another year. You see, Mr Manchuri, this was the position. One girl wanted to go; another girl wanted to stay. Now I wanted to stay, oh! so tremendously, for another year at school would give me a chance which would almost have been a certainty of getting a big scholarship, which would have enabled me to go from Mrs Lyttelton's school to Girton or Newnham, and from there I could have continued my intellectual life and earned my bread honourably as a teacher."

"This is quite interesting," said Mr Manchuri. "And what happened? You are still at school—at least, so you tell me."

"Yes," said Priscilla, "I am still at school; I am there because I—sinned."

"How, child? Speak, Priscilla; speak."

"There was another girl in the school, and she was wonderfully clever. I must not tell you her name. *She* managed the thing. She managed that the girl who wanted to leave the school should get the prize for literature, and that I should stay for a year longer at Mrs Lyttelton's."

"But how? How *could* she do it?"

"She was so marvellously clever that she did do it—of course with my connivance."

"Oh, with your connivance. How?"

"Well, you see, I could write better essays than most girls in the school, and—and—it was arranged, and—and I consented to give up my essay to the girl who wanted to go, and to allow her to put her signature to it, and I took her essay and put my signature to hers. So she got the first prize for literature and left the school, and I stayed on, my reward being that my fees were to be paid for the ensuing year. That is the wicked thing I have done, and it has sunk into my heart and has made life unendurable."

"Thank you; thank you very much," said Mr Manchuri.

Priscilla bowed her head. The old man started up and began to pace up and down the room. After a time he went up to the girl, just touched her on her bowed head, and said very gently: "We will judge this thing, if you please, in the presence of my daughter Esther. Come with me now to her room; you shall see her. The portrait of her is so good that you will almost feel that you are looking at her living self." Priscilla rose tremblingly. She was weak and exhausted in every limb, but it seemed to her that a powerful hand was drawing her forward, and that she had very little will to resist. Mr Manchuri took the girl up to a room on the first floor. It was a beautifully large room, but scantily furnished. He lit some candles that had been previously arranged in front of a large picture which stood on an easel. This picture had been painted by one of the great portrait-painters of thirty years ago. It was a most speaking likeness, and Priscilla, when first she saw it, started, turned very white, and clasped Mr Manchuri's hand.



'Why, it is I!' she said; 'it is I! I have seen myself like that in the glass.'

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"Why, it is I!" she said; "it is I! I have seen myself like—like that in the glass."

Mr Manchuri drew a deep breath of relief.

"Didn't I know it?" he said. "Didn't I say that you were like her? And see—she smiles at you.—You forgive Priscilla, don't you, Esther? Smile at her again, Esther, if you forgive her." The smile on the young face of the girl who had so long been dead seemed to become more pronounced, more sweet, more radiant.

"There," said Mr Manchuri, "Esther has judged just as God does, I take it; and the thing is forgiven as only God forgives; but what you have to do, Priscilla Weir, is this. You have to put yourself right with your schoolmistress, and in doing so you cannot, in any justice, shield your schoolfellows. I am no fool, dear girl, and I know their names well enough. One of them is that Miss Lushington whom I met at the Hotel Belle Vue, and the other—the girl who arranged the plot and carried it through with such cleverness—is no less an individual than my little *quondam* friend, Annie Brooke. You see, my dear, there is no genius in my making this discovery, for I have heard them both talk of Mrs Lyttelton's school, and Miss Brooke often entertained me in the most charming way by giving me a minute description of Miss Lushington's talents and how she won the great literature prize. Little, little did I then guess that I should be so much interested in you, my dear. We will leave Esther now. Come downstairs with me again."

Contrary Influences.

Annie's high spirits continued with her during all the somewhat hot journey from Interlaken to Zermatt. She was, in truth, the life of the party, and kept every one in the best possible humour. Her charm was undoubted, and her apparent unselfishness made her invaluable. Even Parker acknowledged that there never was such an obliging young lady, or such a thoughtful one, as Miss Annie Brooke. Mabel could groan at the heat. Lady Lushington grumble and complain, even Parker herself could give way to insupportable headache, but nothing, nothing daunted the unflagging good-humour of Annie Brooke. Had she not the eau-de-Cologne handy for poor Parker's head? Could she not chat cheerfully to Lady Lushington and make her laugh, and could she not insist on Mabel's having the seat where she was at once protected from too much draught and yet not exposed to the full glare of the August sun?

When they reached the hotel, too, it was Annie who chose, without a moment's hesitation, the one uncomfortable room of the little suite which was set apart for Lady Lushington's party.

"Nothing matters for me," said Annie. "I have got unflagging health, and I am so happy," she said. "Every one is so kind to me."

"You really are a dear little thing," said Lady Lushington when Annie herself entered that lady's room bearing a cup of tea which she had made from Lady Lushington's own private store, and which smelt so fragrant and looked so good. "Oh, my dear Annie," continued the good lady—"I really must call you by your Christian name—I never did find any one quite so pleasant before. Now if Mabel had not been such a goose as to get that literature prize, which I verily believe has swamped every scrap of brain the poor girl ever possessed, I could have had you as my little companion for a year. How we should have enjoyed ourselves!"

"Oh, indeed, how we should!" said Annie, a bitter sigh of regret filling her heart, for what might she not have made of such a supreme opportunity? "But," she added quickly, "you would not have known me then, would you? You would never have known me but for Mabel."

"It is one of the very luckiest things that could have happened to me—Mabel wishing that you might join us," said Lady Lushington. "You are the comfort of my life; you are worth fifty Parkers and a hundred Mabels. Yes, is the exact right angle for the pillow, my dear. Thank you so much—thank you; that is delicious, and I think I will have a biscuit. What a glorious view we have of Monte Rosa from the window!"

"Oh yes," said Annie, "isn't it lovely?"

"By the way, Annie, you are quite sure that Mabel is taking care of those pearls of hers. We have to thank you too, you clever little thing, for discovering them. I am quite under the impression that I have come by a good bargain in that matter."

"I am sure you have, dear Lady Lushington; and the pearls are quite, quite safe."

"I knew you would see to it, dear; you are so thoughtful about everything. By the way, I have already seen on the visitors' list the name of a certain Mrs Ogilvie. If she is my friend I should like to show her the necklace."

Annie felt her heart nearly stop for a minute. "Of course you must show it," was her gentle response; "and I will see that dear Mabel takes care of the precious things."

"Well, you can go now, darling; you have made me feel so nice, and this room is delicious. Really, the journey was trying. It is horrible travelling in this intense heat, but we shall do beautifully here."

Annie tripped out of the room and went straight to Mabel's. Mabel's room was not nearly as good as the one which Lady Lushington occupied, but still it was a very nice room, with two large windows which opened in French fashion and had deep balconies where one could stand and look into the very heart of the everlasting hills. Parker's room was just beyond Mabel's, and Annie's was at the back. It was arranged that Parker should be within easy reach of her mistress and her young lady, and self-forgetful Annie therefore selected the back-room. She had no view at all; but then, what did views matter to Annie, who was blind to all their beauty? Mabel was alone. She felt very hot and dusty after her journey, and had just slipped into a cool, white dressing-gown.

"Let me take down your hair, dear May," said Annie, "and if you sit in that deep arm-chair I will brush it for you. Isn't it nice here, May?"

"Yes," replied Mabel, "I suppose it is; only you have a horrid small room, Annie."

"I don't care a bit about that," said Annie. "I am not going to be much in it except to sleep, and when one is asleep any room suffices. But, May, I want to talk to you."

"What about?" said May. "Anything fresh?" Annie carefully shut the door which communicated between Mabel's room and Parker's.

"It is this," said Annie; "Your aunt Henrietta has been talking to me about the pearl necklace, and says she hopes you have it safe."

"Well, yes," said Mabel, with a yawn; "it is quite absolutely safe, isn't it, Annie?"

"Yes; but this is the crux: I thought she would have forgotten all about it, but she evidently hasn't, and she says she thinks a friend of hers—a Mrs Ogilvie—is staying in the hotel, and if so, she would like to show it to her."

"Oh, good gracious!" said Mabel, springing to her feet, and knocking the brush out of Annie's hand in her excitement;

“and if such a thing happens—and it is more than likely—what is to become of us?”

“If such a thing happens,” said Annie with extreme coolness, “there is only one thing to be done.”

“Oh Annie, what—what?”

“We must pretend that we have lost it. So many people are robbed nowadays; we must be robbed also: that is all Parker is supposed to have charge of it; you must confess that you never gave it to Parker, but put it into the lid of your trunk. You must lose one or two other things as well. You must have your story ready in case Mrs Ogilvie is in the hotel.”

“Oh! I don’t think I can stand any more of this,” said poor Mabel. “You seem to lead me on, Annie, from one wickedness to another. I don’t know where it is to end.”

“You must obey me in this,” said Annie with great determination.

“Oh, we are both lost!”

“We are nearly out of the wood; we are not going to lose our courage at the supreme moment. Come now, Mabel, don’t be absolutely silly; nothing may happen. But if anything happens, you must be prepared to do what I tell you.”

“You have an extraordinary power over me,” said Mabel. “I often and often wish that I had not yielded to you at that time when Aunt Henrietta wrote me that letter and I was so cross and disappointed. I think now that if you had not been present I should be a happier girl on the whole. I should be going back to the horrid school, of course, and Priscie would have left; but still—”

“Come, come,” said Annie, sitting down determinedly on a low chair by her friend’s side. “What *is* the matter with you? I really have to go over old ground until things are quite disagreeable. What have you not won through me? A whole year’s emancipation, a jolly, delightful winter, a pleasant autumn at the Italian lakes and in Rome and Florence. I think, from what she tells me, Lady Lushington means to go to Cairo for the cold weather. Of course you will go with her. Think of the dresses unlimited, and the balls and the fun, and the expeditions up the Nile. Oh, you lucky, you more than lucky Mabel! And then home again in the early spring, and preparations for your great *début* taking place, your presentation dress being ordered, and all the rest. Imagine this state of things instead of pursuing the life which your poor faithful little Annie will lead at Mrs Lyttelton’s school! And yet you blame me because you have to pay a certain price for these enjoyments.”

“I do blame you, Annie; I can’t help it. I know it all sounds most fascinating; but if you are not happy deep down in your heart, where’s the use?”

When Mabel said this Annie looked really alarmed.

“But you are quite happy,” she said. “You are not going to follow that idiotic Priscie. You are not going to get a horrible, troublesome conscience to wake itself up and torment you over this most innocent little affair.”

“I will go through it, of course,” said Mabel. “It seemed very bad at the beginning, but the amount of badness it has risen to now shocks even me. Still, I will go through that, for I cannot go back. As to Priscie, I am convinced she would rather be apprenticed as a dressmaker than live as she is doing with that load on her conscience.”

“Oh, bother Priscie!” cried Annie. “She is one of those intolerable, conscientious girls whom one cannot abide. All the same,” she added a little bitterly, “she took advantage of my talent as much as you did, Mabel.”

Mabel sighed, groaned, struggled, but eventually yielded absolutely to Annie’s stronger will, and it was definitely arranged between the two girls that Mabel was to be fully prepared to declare the loss of her necklace if Mrs Ogilvie was proved to be in the hotel.

“If she is not it will be all right,” said Annie; “for I know your aunt Henrietta pretty well by this time, and she will have other things to occupy her mind. We can soon find out if the good woman is there through Parker.”

“I don’t think I would consult Parker if I were you,” said Mabel. “She talks a great deal to Aunt Henrietta, and of late, somehow, I have rather imagined that she is a little suspicious.” Annie soon afterwards retired to her own room, but not like Mabel and Lady Lushington, to rest. Those who follow crooked ways have seldom time for rest, and Annie Brooke was finding this out to her cost. She was really exceedingly tired; even her strength could scarcely stand the strain of the last few weeks. Priscilla’s misery, Mabel’s recklessness, Lady Lushington’s anger with regard to Mrs Priestley’s bill, the terrible possibility of being found out—all these things visited the girl, making her not sorry for her sin, but afraid of the consequences. Then, too, in spite of herself, she was a little anxious with regard to Uncle Maurice. There was always a possibility—just a possibility—that Uncle Maurice might be as bad as that tiresome John Saxon had declared him to be; and if so, was she (Annie) kind about it all? A great many things had happened, and Annie had sinned very deeply. Oh, well, she was not going to get her conscience into speaking order; that mentor within must be kept silent at any cost.

Still, she was too restless to lie down on her bed, which, indeed, was not specially inviting, for the room was a most minute one, and looked out on a wall of the hotel, which, as with most great foreign hotels, surrounded a court. Not a peep of any glorious view could be seen from Annie’s window, and the hot western sun poured into the little room, making it stiflingly hot; and she could even smell the making of many dishes from the kitchens, which lay just beneath her windows.

So she changed her dress, made herself look as neat and fresh as possible, and ran downstairs into the great, cool hall.

It was delicious in the hall. The doors were wide-open, the windows also stood apart, and in every direction were to be seen peeps of snow-clad mountains soaring up far into the clouds. Even Annie was touched for a minute by the glorious view. She went and stood in the cool doorway, and was glad of the refreshing breeze which fanned her hot cheeks.

Business, however, must ever be foremost. She was pining for a cup of tea, but it was one of Lady Lushington's economies never to allow extra things to be ordered at the hotel. She had tea made for herself and her party in her room every day, and therefore kept strictly to the *pension* terms. Annie, however, suddenly remembered that she herself was the proud possessor of eighty pounds. Surely so wealthy a young lady need not suffer from thirst. She accordingly called a waiter and desired him to bring her *thé complet*. This he proceeded to do, suggesting at the same time that the young lady should have her tea on the terrace.

The broad terrace was covered by an enormous veranda, and Annie found it even more enjoyable outside than in. She liked the importance of taking her tea alone, and was particularly gratified when several nice-looking people turned to look at her. She was certainly an attractive girl, and when her cheeks became flushed she was almost pretty. The waiter came up and asked her for the number of her room. She gave it; and he immediately remarked:

"I beg your pardon, madam; I did not remember that you belonged to Lady Lushington's party."

"Yes; but I wish to pay for this tea myself," said Annie, and she produced, with considerable pride, a five-pound note.

The man withdrew at once to fetch the necessary change. As he did this a party of travellers who had evidently only just arrived turned to look at Annie. There was nothing very special about her action; nevertheless the little incident remained fixed in their memories. They had heard the waiter say, "You belong to Lady Lushington's party." The note of wonder was struck in their minds that a girl of Annie's age and in the care of other people should pay for her own tea. Annie, however, collected her change with great care, counting it shrewdly over and putting it into her purse.

She then re-entered the lounge. When she did so the lady who was seated near her turned to her husband and said:

"Is it possible that Lady Lushington is here?"

"It seems so," said the gentleman; "but we can soon ascertain, my dear, by looking at the visitors' list."

"I shall be exceedingly pleased if she is," said Mrs Ogilvie, for it was she. "I have not seen Henrietta Lushington for two or three years. She used to be a great friend of mine. But what in the world is she doing with that girl?"

"Why should not Henrietta Lushington have a girl belonging to her party?" was Mr Ogilvie's response. "There is nothing the matter with that fact, is there, Susan?"

"Oh, nothing; and I know she has a niece, but somehow I never thought that the niece would look like that girl."

"Why, what in the world is the matter with her? I thought her quite pretty."

"Oh, my dear Henry! Pretty perhaps, but not classy; not for a moment the style of girl that Lady Lushington's niece would be expected to be. And then her paying for her own tea—it seemed to me slightly bad form. However, perhaps the girl does not belong to our Lady Lushington at all."

Meanwhile Annie was doing a little business on her own account in the great hall. She had got possession of the visitors' book, and was scanning the names of the visitors with intense interest. Nowhere did she see the name Ogilvie, and in consequence a great load was lifted from her heart. She ran up in high spirits to Mabel's room.

"No fear, May; no fear," she said, skipping about as she spoke. "Mrs Ogilvie is not here at all; I have looked through the list."

"Well, that's a comfort," said Mabel, who was lying on her bed half-asleep before Annie came in. "But what a restless spirit you are, Annie! Can you ever keep still for a minute? I was certain you were asleep in your room."

"You could not sleep much yourself in my room, darling. It is a little hot and a little—dinnery. Not that I complain; but there is a magnificent hall downstairs, and such a terrace! And, do you know, I received a wee present of money a couple of mornings ago from darling Uncle Maurice, so I treated myself to some tea. I *was* thirsty. I had it all alone on a little table on the terrace. I can tell you I felt distinguished."

"You poor dear!" said Mabel. "Why, of course you ought to have had tea when we had it. I will say this for you, Annie, that you are the queerest mixture I ever came across. You have—oh, you know the side to which I allude; but then, on the other hand, you are the most absolutely unselfish creature that ever lived. Why, even Parker has been enjoying delicious tea, and we never thought of you at all."

"Poor little me!" said Annie. "Well, it doesn't matter, for, you see, I thought of myself. Now I will leave you. Be sure you make an effective toilet to-night. There are really some very nice-looking people downstairs; we shall have a jolly time at this hotel. What a good thing it is we got rid of Priscie! She made us look so odd and peculiar."

"I suppose the poor thing is bored to death at Hendon by this time," said Mabel.

"Oh no, she is not quite there yet; she will have plenty of time to think of her conscience while she is at Hendon. And now you and I will forget her."

Annie spent the next hour or two on the terrace—where she pretended to read—and looked at the different visitors as they came in and out of the hotel. She went up in good time to her bedroom, and Parker, who was always

exceedingly particular with regard to the dress of both the young ladies, arrayed her on this occasion in a dress of the softest, palest, most becoming blue *crêpe-de-Chine*. This demi-toilet, with its elbow-sleeves and lace falling away from the young, round throat, was absolutely the most becoming garment Annie could possibly wear. It seemed to add to the blue of her blue eyes and to bring out the golden shades of her lovely hair.

She felt as she entered the great *salle-à-manger* that she was looked at very nearly as much as Lady Lushington and Mabel. They had a pleasant little dinner in one of the great bay windows, which commanded a glorious view of the Alps; and during dinner Lady Lushington was her most charming self, and continued to be exceedingly friendly to Annie.

It was not until the meal had nearly come to an end that a remark was made which caused both girls to feel slightly uncomfortable. Lady Lushington turned to Mabel.

"My dear Mabel," she said, "I am really rather annoyed."

"What about, auntie?"

"Oh, please don't be annoyed this glorious evening," interrupted Annie; "we are so happy and you are so sweet. I thought perhaps we might have coffee on the terrace; I know the very table where we can sit and we can watch the moon sailing up from behind that great mountain—I cannot possibly remember its name; I am not good at all at names."

"We will have coffee on the terrace if I wish it, Annie Brooke. In the meantime I want to say what I have to say."

No one knew better when she was snubbed than Annie. She immediately retired into her shell and looked very modest and pretty—something like a daisy when it droops its head.

"I have been asking Parker about the jewels," continued Lady Lushington, turning to her niece, "and she assures me you did not give her the necklace to put away with the other things." Mabel coloured.

Annie said at once, "Mabel dear, did you not put it into the tray of your trunk? You know I asked you to be sure to give it to Parker."

"I was in such a hurry at the last minute, I had not time; but it is quite safe in my trunk," said Mabel.

"Well, I hope it is," said Lady Lushington; "but it is a foolish and dangerous thing to do; and, Annie, I thought *you* would see that Parker had the necklace. However, no matter now; you will give it, Mabel, to Parker to-night. It is not safe to have valuable jewels lying about in these hotels. You know that there is a notice in every room that the proprietors will not consider themselves liable if they are lost. No one can tamper with the jewel-case, however, when it is under Parker's care."

The girls murmured something, and the subject was dropped. They then all went out on the terrace. They had not been there more than a minute or two when a lady was seen to emerge from a shadowy corner and advance towards Lady Lushington. There was an affectionate interchange of greetings, and Annie whispered to Mabel to come away.

"How tiresome!" said Mabel. "When once Aunt Henrietta gets hold of an old friend she is good for nothing. Now she won't take us anywhere and we shall be as dull as ditch-water."

"Oh, nonsense, Mabel! We will make friends on our own account. What a good thing the friend is not Mrs Ogilvie!"

"How can you tell that she isn't?" said Mabel. "Why, of course she isn't; Mrs Ogilvie's name is not on the visitors' list."

The girls paced up and down.

"I got a great fright at dinner," said Mabel after a pause; "but you helped me out of it as usual."

"Yes; but it was an awkward moment," said Annie. "I didn't for a moment suppose that your aunt would keep on thinking of that necklace. I hope she won't insist on seeing it. I am afraid, after all, even though Mrs Ogilvie is not here, we must manage to lose it."

"Oh! I shall go wild if I have to go through that sort of thing," was Mabel's answer.

"Besides," continued Annie, "the friend your aunt met may be another of those women who adore looking at bargains and old-fashioned gems. I am certain we shall have to lose it; there is no other possible way out."

"And I know I shall die in the process," said Mabel. "I feel myself quite wasting away."

"You are too silly," said Annie. "You look as bonny as ever you can look, and there isn't a scrap of any appearance of decline about you."

It was at that moment that Lady Lushington's voice was heard calling in the darkness, "Mabel, come here!"

"Now what does she want?" said Mabel.

"Come with me, for goodness' sake, Annie! I can't walk a single step of this tortuous way without your help."

"Really, Mabel," said Annie, "you are using quite a poetic expression. Your character of a poetess will be established, my dear, if you continue to speak in that vein."

"Mabel!" said her aunt.

"I will help you through your tortuous way," laughed Annie; and the girls advanced arm-in-arm.

"Mabel," said Lady Lushington, "I have the pleasure of introducing you to my dear friend Mrs Ogilvie."

Poor Mabel gave a start; but for Annie's supporting arm, big as she was, she might have fallen.

The terrace was lighted with Japanese lanterns, which swayed slightly in the faint breeze. These cast lights here and there, and immense shadows in other directions. Annie and Mabel had now got into the light. Lady Lushington moved a step or two, bringing Mrs Ogilvie forward as she did so, and the four figures were all distinctly visible.

"Which of these girls is your niece, my dear Henrietta?" said Mrs Ogilvie.

"This is my niece, Susan," was Lady Lushington's response; and Mabel felt her hand clasped by a kindly but firm palm. She looked into the eyes of a tall woman with a pleasant expression of face, who was becomingly dressed in black lace.

This lady had hair turning grey, and a face which did not show the slightest trace of being made up. She might have been fifty years of age.

"I must also introduce you," said Lady Lushington, "to our little friend Miss Brooke. Miss Brooke: Mrs Ogilvie."

Annie's hand was also held for a minute, and Annie instantly remembered that she had sat next this lady when she was enjoying her tea on the terrace, and that Mrs Ogilvie had seen her pay for her own meal. But she could not allow this trifling circumstance to worry her on the present occasion; there were too many other rocks ahead.

"We will go into the hall in a minute or two," said Lady Lushington; "and then, Mabel, you will go upstairs, please, and bring down the pearl necklace which I bought at Interlaken. Mrs Ogilvie is so much interested in antique gems and old settings that I was telling her about it."

"You sometimes do pick up good things," said the lady, "in out-of-the-way places. From what you tell me, Henrietta, you seem to have hit upon a bargain."

"I must be just," said Lady Lushington. "I should never even have heard of the necklace but for this dear, clever little girl, Miss Brooke. It was she who discovered it."

Mrs Ogilvie glanced for a minute at Annie. Annie's eyes were raised and fixed on the good lady's face.

"How lovely it is here!" said Mrs Ogilvie after a pause. "I think the peace of nature the most soothing thing in all the world. Don't you, Miss Brooke?"

Annie said "Yes," uttering the word with a little gasp. She was wondering in her heart of hearts what to do next. Whatever happened, she must rush upstairs with Mabel. How could she have overlooked Mrs Ogilvie's name in the visitors' list? But Mrs Ogilvie's next words explained the circumstance.

"We too are fresh arrivals," she said. "We must have come by the very next train after you, Henrietta."

"Oh dear!" thought Annie. "If you only would have stayed away! How one does get pursued by all sorts of contrary influences when one is just hoping that one is out of the wood! The peace of nature indeed! Much peace it gives to me."

"It is getting a little chilly here," said Lady Lushington. "I think, if you don't mind, Susan, we will go indoors.—Girls, you can follow us in a few minutes."

Annie gave a deep sigh of relief. Not a word about the necklace. Perhaps there might be a few hours' reprieve. Perhaps it would not be mentioned again until the morning.

The two elderly ladies moved slowly together into the house, and the girls were left alone.

"Didn't I tell you," said Mabel, "that she would be sure to be here? Isn't it just like our bad luck?"

"We must go through with it," said Annie.

"Perhaps it is best in the end. Of course there will be a commotion and a great fuss, but nothing ever can be discovered."

"I know what they will do," said Mabel, in an agony of terror. "They will search all the jewellers' shops at Interlaken, and of course it will be found. Oh Annie, I am fit to die!"

"You must compose yourself," said Annie; "things are not quite as bad as that. We should indeed be in a desperate hole if I had sold the necklace to a jeweller at Interlaken; but I did nothing of the sort."

"Then you didn't sell it at all? You have it all the time?"

"Now, Mabel, what nonsense you talk! Didn't I show you three ten-pound notes, and didn't I send them to Mrs Priestley?"

"Oh, I am bewildered!" said poor Mabel.

"Why did I ever pose as a genius? I am sure I have no head at all for the complications of wickedness."

"You are very complimentary to me, I must say," said Annie. "But listen; I will calm your poor, palpitating little heart. I did a splendid thing; I sold the necklace to Mr Manchuri."

"Who on earth is Mr Manchuri?" said Mabel.

"Mabel, you really are silly. He is the dear old Jewish gentleman who took Priscilla Weir home."

"And why did you give it to him?"

"Because, my dear, I invariably use my eyes and my ears and, if possible, my tongue; and I made a discovery with regard to Mr Manchuri. He owns a big jeweller's shop in Bond Street; therefore why should not he have the necklace? So you see it is safe out of Switzerland by this time."

"And," continued Mabel, "he gave thirty pounds for it?"

"Oh, he didn't think much of it," said Annie. "Still, he gave me that, and I was glad to close with the offer."

"Well," said Mabel, "it is a certain relief to know that it won't be found in any of the shops in Interlaken."

"It is a very great relief," said Annie. "And now our object is, if possible, to make little of it to Lady Lushington. I think I can manage that; but come upstairs, won't you? I am certain your aunt won't say anything more about the stupid old thing this evening."

"I hope not, I am sure," said Mabel. "But don't go in for a minute or two, Annie, for the omnibus has just arrived, and we may as well watch the fresh visitors."

The girls came forward towards the deep porch. The large green-and-gold omnibus, with the words 'Beau Séjour' painted conspicuously on its sides, drew up with a clatter and fuss in front of the hotel. Waiters and servants of different sorts darted out to assist the visitors to alight. The omnibus was nearly full, and there was a quantity of luggage on the roof. Ladders were put up to get it down, and the girls watched the proceedings with intense amusement—the pearl necklace forgotten, all cares for the moment laid aside. They made a pretty pair as they stood thus side by side. Annie, in her ethereal blue dress, might have been taken for that sweetest of all flowers, the blue forget-me-not; Mabel, in her purest white, for the stately lily.



'I have come for you, Annie,' he said.

So thought for a brief instant a certain young man as he alighted from the omnibus; but the next moment his face changed. A hard expression came into his eyes. He came straight up to Annie Brooke.

"I have come for you, Annie," he said.

Chapter Twenty Three.

A Stern Decision.

In the briefest of all instants everything changed for Annie Brooke; the gay people, the gay hotel, the pleasant, easy living seemed to fade from her sight. She trembled all over. Mabel looked at her in astonishment.

"Come indoors; I must speak to you. We must go away to-night if possible," said John Saxon.

"May I introduce my friend Mabel Lushington?" said Annie, making a valiant effort to recover herself.

Saxon bowed to Mabel as though he did not see her. Annie whispered to her friend:

"He is my cousin. I am afraid, my dear, that Uncle Maurice is very ill. I will come to you in your room, Mabel, soon. Please don't say a word to Lady Lushington."

Mabel nodded. There was an anxious note in Annie's voice which was unmistakable. Mabel was not specially sympathetic, and would never be so to one she knew as thoroughly as she did Annie. But even she recognised the reality of Annie's present trouble.

"What in the world am I to do without her?" she thought as, refusing the lift, she went up the wide and spacious staircase, up and up to that fourth floor of the immense hotel where the Lushingtons' rooms were situated.

Meanwhile Saxon drew Annie aside into a small room which led out of the great hall.

"Why did not you come when I telegraphed? I sent you money for the purpose. You must come with me now, at once. A train leaves here for England at midnight. Will you go and pack your things? Take that off"—he glanced at the pretty blue dress. "Get ready. Do you wish to see him alive?"

"John, don't look at me like that. Where is the use? How could I tell that Uncle Maurice was so ill? I can't stand it, John, if you look at me like that. Although you are my cousin, John, you have no right to."

"No right to?" he said with scorn. "I know a *woman* when I see her, and a butterfly when I look at her. Do you think it was a pleasure to me to leave the dying old man, to run the risk of his dying in my absence, in order to bring you to him? But he shall have his last great wish gratified, and I believe God will spare him just that he may see you again. But I tell you what it is, Annie Brooke, if we return and find that saint has left the world before the one wish of his heart is gratified, I shall feel uncommonly like cursing you. Now you know what I think of you. Go upstairs at once and get ready; we leave here immediately."

"Oh John!" moaned poor Annie.

But John Saxon was obdurate. One of the waiters came in and asked the gentleman if he wanted a room. John briefly explained his errand. He would have a meal of some sort, he said, and must leave by the midnight train. The young lady, Miss Brooke, his cousin, would accompany him.

If Mabel scorned the lift in order to get to her room, Annie was glad to avail herself of it. She was glad to sink back into a corner of the spacious lift and close her eyes for a minute and try to recover her scattered thoughts. Was the whole world crumbling to pieces around her? Were all her schemes to come to naught? The necklace—would her dealings with Mr Manchuri in the matter of the necklace ever be discovered? Would other matters in connection with that disgraceful affair come to light? Would Mabel—poor silly Mabel, left all alone with Lady Lushington and Mrs Ogilvie—confess the truth? Annie was terrified that Mabel would do so. At this moment she dreaded Mabel even more than she had dreaded Priscilla; for Mabel was essentially weak, whereas Priscilla was essentially strong. If Priscilla thought it right to go through a certain course, she would go through it, come what might; but Mabel could be moved and turned and tossed about by any wind of chance.

Mabel was certainly in a tight hole. To pursue a different metaphor, her little boat was out on a most stormy sea. With Annie as pilot it might get safely to shore, but without Annie it was sure to knock to pieces on the rocks of circumstance. Mabel would tell. What was Annie to do? Why had John Saxon come? How she hated, how she loathed her manly cousin at that moment! What a fool she had been to give him her address! She had done it in a moment of impulse, little, little guessing that he would act upon the information so quickly.

He had come in person. She could not shuffle out of the strong grasp of that iron determination. She must leave all her fun just where she hoped it was really beginning.

It was a pale and worn-out Annie who presently arrived in Mabel's room. Mabel was pacing up and down, her face quite chalky in colour and her eyes wild with fright.

"Well, now," she said the moment she saw her friend, "what is to be done?"

"Oh, *do* think of some one besides yourself!" said Annie. "Have you no pity for me, with my dear uncle so ill—dying?"

"But you don't really care," said Mabel, looking full at Annie.

Annie felt inclined to stamp her foot.

"You little wretch!" she said. "Do you suppose I have no heart?"

"To be truthful with you, Annie," said Mabel, "I do not think you have much; but that's not the point. Are you really going with that—that dreadful young man?"

"My cousin, Mr Saxon? Yes; we leave here by the midnight train. I have about two hours longer to spend in the hotel."

"Then what am I to do?" said Mabel.

Annie sat down determinedly.

"Let me think," she said. She covered her face for a moment with her hand. Already she was beginning, after a fashion, to recover herself, to get back her *aplomb*, her great talent for double dealing. "Let me think," she said again.

"Well, don't be long," said Mabel, "for time passes."

"Yes; but if you will be silent I will have thought out something after a minute or two." Just then Parker tapped at the door.

"Shall I let her in?" whispered Mabel.

In reply to this, Annie herself went to the door, unlocked it, and flung it wide-open.

"Come in, Parker; come in," she said.

"Why, what is the matter with you, Miss Brooke?" said that astute woman.

"A great deal," replied Annie. "I have got to go home at once; my cousin, Mr Saxon, has come to fetch me. My dear, dear uncle is—is dying. He has been as a father to me. I must leave by the midnight train."

"So I heard downstairs," said Parker, putting on a certain sympathetic manner and trying to penetrate beneath Annie's apparent grief. "I will pack your things for you, of course, Miss Brooke; you need have no trouble on that score. I came up here to offer my services. What dress will you wear travelling, miss?"

"Oh, my dark-blue serge will be best; but it doesn't matter," said Annie.

"I will put in some of the pretty things you wore while you were here, miss," said Parker. "I know her ladyship would wish it. I don't suppose your trunks will quite hold them all, but I can get in a good many."

"Thank you, Parker; I don't care about them now. I am in dreadful trouble about dear uncle."

"Of course you must be, miss; but I am sure we are all sorry to lose you, for you do manage her ladyship in the most wonderful way, and I will say that you are as unselfish and pleasant-spoken a young lady as ever I came across. You will find the dresses and other things useful some time, miss, so I will get as many as ever I can into your trunks." Annie murmured something. She would love to keep her pretty dresses; they would be effective at school. She could think of school and her appearance there, and the looks of envy of her companions even at this supreme moment.

"Then I will go and pack at once," said Parker, preparing to leave the room.

She had nearly got as far as the door when she turned.

"By the way, miss," she said, looking at Mabel, "my mistress is quite annoyed about a necklace she bought for you at Interlaken yesterday. She said that it was valuable, although old-fashioned—a pearl necklace set in silver. She thought I had it with the rest of the jewels; but you never gave it to me, Miss Lushington. My mistress said that I was to see it safely in the jewel-case before I went to bed to-night. Where did you put it? Can I get it now, miss?"

Mabel was silent. Her voice quite choked with the agony of the moment. Annie, however, took the initiative.

"Of course you can, Parker," she said. "It was awfully silly of Mabel not to give you the box that contained the necklace; it was the most idiotic thing I ever heard of.—I am sure, darling, I urged you to do so. But there, no doubt it is safe. You put it into the lid of your big trunk."

Mabel nodded. She could not bring herself to speak.

"Then we will find it immediately," said Annie. "Notwithstanding my own great sorrow, it will be a comfort to me to know that the necklace is safe under Parker's care before I leave; for the fact is, Parker, it was I who discovered it. I thought it was quite a valuable thing, but I am rather afraid now that Lady Lushington paid too much for it. However, that is neither here nor there; we have got to find it."

"Here are the keys of Miss Lushington's trunks," said Parker. She proceeded as she spoke to unlock the largest of the trunks, which happened to be a canvas one, and slightly the worse for travel.

"I am very sorry indeed, miss, you put it in here," said Parker. "Why, see how loose the cover is. A person could almost put his hand in between the cover and the inside of the trunk. Well, where did you put it, miss?"

"I will find it; I will find it," said Annie.

She stooped as she spoke and began that examination which she knew beforehand must be fruitless. Mabel stood

with her back to the two, looking out of the window. Annie longed to shake her. Was not her very attitude giving the whole thing away?

"I really can't find it," said Annie after a moment's pause. "Do come and look yourself, May. Are you dazed? Have you lost your senses? Oh, I know, poor darling May! it is sorrow at parting with poor little me.—Parker, Miss Mabel just adores me; don't you, precious one! Well, well, Parker will do all she can for you when I am gone."



"Some one has stolen it!" she said to Parker.

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"I can't take your place, Miss Brooke. I am really sorry you have to go.—But now, Miss Mabel, the best thing to do is just to empty the lid of the trunk. We'll get to the box that way without disarranging all your pretty things."

The lid of the trunk was speedily emptied, and of course no necklace was found.

"There!" said Annie. Her heart was beating so fast that the pallor of her face was far from assumed. The fear in her eyes, too, seemed only too natural.

"Some one has stolen it!" she said to Parker. She clasped the woman's arm. "What *are* we to do?"

Parker looked distinctly annoyed. Mabel stood stonily silent, apparently almost indifferent.

"Miss Lushington," said the woman—"do wake up and consider, miss. Perhaps you *didn't* put it into the lid of the trunk; perhaps you put the box that held the necklace somewhere else."

"No, I didn't; I put it into the lid," said Mabel. "I won't say I put it anywhere else; the lid will do; I put it there. I won't be bothered about it!"

She marched out of the room, got as far as the wide landing, and burst out crying. Her queer conduct and queer words terrified Annie and amazed Parker.

"What *is* the matter with Miss Mabel, miss?" said the maid, turning to the girl.

Annie put her pretty, white hand on Parker's arm.

"Leave her alone with me for a little, please, Parker. Just go off and pack my things, like the jewel you are. She is awfully upset at my going—and you know I must, on account of my dear uncle."

Annie's voice quavered. Indeed, she herself was very nearly breaking down.

"I must go, you know, Parker," she said, her pretty eyes filling with tears which only added to their beauty. "But I'll manage Mabel. It *is* dreadful about the necklace; but perhaps you will recover it."

"We never will," said Parker. "It's a dreadful bit of business. Her ladyship will be wild. She does so hate it when anything is stolen. But there are lots of robberies taking place on the railways of late. It is a perfect disgrace. Even the registering of your goods seems not to secure things. Of course I always carry the jewels in my own hand; it's the only safe way. Miss Mabel must have been mad to put a valuable necklace such as her ladyship described into that old trunk."

"It wasn't nearly so valuable as Lady Lushington supposed; that is the only comfort," said Annie.

"But, miss, I don't understand. I thought it was you who urged her ladyship to get it, and that you had quite a knowledge of gems."

"I found out afterwards—I will tell you the secret, Parker, and you can break it to her ladyship when I am gone—I found out afterwards that I had made a slight mistake. The necklace was worth, say, about twenty pounds, but no more, for some of the pearls were quite worthless. I happened to show it to a gentleman I knew very slightly at the Belle Vue Hotel, and he deals in that sort of thing. He disappointed me in his estimate of the necklace; but that doesn't matter. It is terrible that it should be lost. Still, you might tell Lady Lushington what he said. There is no use in telling Mabel. She doesn't care twopence about it, poor child, at the present moment; she is so broken down at my leaving."

"Well, miss, I must be off to do the packing. I will make the best of things and never forget how pleasant you have been during your visit, miss. I will see, too, that you have a basket of sandwiches and some wine packed for your journey."

Parker went off. The moment she did so Annie went into the corridor and fetched Mabel in.

"Oh, you goose of all geese!" she said. "Now the worst is over; I tell you the worst is over. You don't suppose for a single moment your aunt, Lady Lushington, will think that you stole the necklace or that I stole it. She will suppose, most assuredly, that it was stolen on the journey between Interlaken and Zermatt. Parker is convinced on the subject and I have let Parker understand that it was not nearly as valuable as I supposed. Lady Lushington won't trust me to manage a bargain for her again; that is the worst that can happen. Now, May, do cheer up. You are all right. I will manage things for you when Priscilla's Christmas bill comes round. You will see plenty of me, I fancy, between now and then. Dry your eyes, darling. I know you are sorry to part from me."

"I can't go on being wicked without you; that's the principal thing," said Mabel. "I know I'll give in."

"Think what injury you'll do me; and do you really want to go back to that horrid school?"

"I don't think I'd mind so very much; it was peaceful, at least at school."

"You would soon be sick of that sort of peace."

"I suppose I should," said Mabel.

She had already wiped her eyes, and she began slightly to cheer up.

"Annie," she said eagerly, "is your uncle really dying?"

"John Saxon says so; otherwise, of course, he would not have come," said Annie.

"If," said Mabel, trembling a good deal—"if afterwards you could come back—"

Annie's heart bounded.

"I can't talk of it," she said; "don't speak of it now. When the time comes, if you—were—to write I will write to you, that is, if I have strength to write to any one. You have my address. You know how deeply I shall always love you. You know there is no good turn I would not do for you."

"I want you to help me until Priscilla's year at school is out," was Mabel's matter-of-fact retort. "Of course, dear, of course; and I will. Your Annie will never forsake you. But now perhaps we had better go downstairs."

The girls made a quite picturesque appearance as they went slowly down the broad staircase. Mabel had not cried enough to look ugly, and Annie's few tears and pallor and evident distress gave to her face the depth of expression which in her lighter moments it had lacked.

John Saxon was seated close to Lady Lushington. Lady Lushington had recognised him as a friend and a favourite. He rose when the girls appeared, and Lady Lushington went at once up to Annie.

Her manner was very cold and distant. "You did not give me the slightest idea, Miss Brooke, how ill your uncle was when you received your cousin's letter."

"I didn't know that he was especially ill," said Annie.

Lady Lushington looked full at her. It seemed at that moment that a veil had fallen away from Annie's face, and that the gay, proud, and selfish woman of the world saw the girl for the first time as she was.

Lady Lushington, with all her faults—the faults of her class and her manner of life—was exceedingly good-natured, and could be remarkably kind. She was thoroughly angry with Annie for concealing the truth with regard to John Saxon's letter. She could, and would, forgive much to any young girl who was enjoying herself and who wanted to

continue the good time which had fallen to her lot; but to forget one who stood in the place of a father, to let him long for her in vain, was more than Lady Lushington could stand.

"I don't appreciate that sort of thing," she said to herself. "It is, somehow, beneath me. I don't understand it."

She made up her mind on the spot, that, as far as Mabel was concerned, the friendship between the two girls was to terminate there and then. Never would she have anything farther to do with Annie Brooke. As that was the case, she did not consider it necessary to correct her.

"I am sorry," she said briefly, "that you did not interpret very plain English in the manner in which it was intended. I don't think for a single moment that your cousin meant to complain of you to me, but he simply quoted some words of his letter, and seemed altogether astonished that you did not start for England the day before yesterday. However, I trust you will find your dear uncle alive when you get home. I have desired Parker to pack your things, and now you would doubtless like to go up and change your dress."

"Thank you," said Annie very meekly. She glanced in Mrs Ogilvie's direction; but Mrs Ogilvie took no notice of her.

"Mabel, come and sit here near Mrs Ogilvie," said Lady Lushington as Annie once again disappeared. "You can say good-bye to your friend presently; there is no necessity for you to spend the whole evening upstairs."

Chapter Twenty Four.

Home No More.

It was all over—the fun, the gaiety, the good things of life, the delights of fine living, the charm of being with rich friends. It is true that Annie Brooke returned to England with a little private fund of her own in her pocket; but John Saxon insisted on her returning him the two five-pound notes he had enclosed to her. Out of these he paid for her ticket back to England.

John Saxon was a very cold, silent, and unsympathetic fellow-traveller. He sat moodily in a corner, wrapped in his greatcoat, the collar of which he turned up; a travelling-cap came well down over his head, so that Annie could see little or nothing of his face. He had done what he could to make her comfortable, and had wrapped her round with warm things. Then he had taken no further notice of her.

On the whole, Priscilla Weir had a far more interesting journey to England than had that spoiled child of fortune Annie Brooke. Annie, however, was glad to be left alone. She did not want to talk to that odious man, Cousin John Saxon. But for him, life would not have been suddenly spoiled for her. She would not have been found out. She was far too clever not to be sure that Lady Lushington had found her out. Not that Lady Lushington had discovered any serious crimes to lay at her door, but then she had read her character aright, and that character was of the sort which the great lady could not tolerate. Therefore Annie was—and she knew it well—shut away from any further dealings with Mabel Lushington.

Poor Mabel! How would she provide the money for Priscilla's two remaining terms at school? How would she go through a stern catechism with regard to the necklace when Annie was no longer by her side?

"Everything will be discovered," thought Annie Brooke. "There is no help for it. What shall I do? And I'd managed so well and so—so cleverly. There isn't a bit of good in being clever in this world. It seems to me it's the stupid people that have the best times. Of course that idiotic old Mabel will let out the whole story before many hours are over. And then there'll be a frightful to-do, and perhaps Mabel will be sent back to Mrs Lyttelton's school—that is, if Mrs Lyttelton will receive her, which fact I very much doubt. As to me—oh, well, I'll have to hide somewhere. I hope to goodness Mr Manchuri will never tell anybody about the necklace; he faithfully promised he wouldn't and he seemed an honourable sort of man. But then, ought I to expect any one to be honourable in his dealings with me? I don't know; the world seems coming to pieces. Horrid John Saxon! How I detest him! Oh, I feel as though I could go mad!"

Annie started up impatiently. She went across the carriage and opened one of the windows, putting her head out at the same time. She hoped Saxon would take some notice. She wanted him to speak to her. His silence, his apparent indifference to her, were just the sort of thing to madden the girl in her present mood.

Saxon was seated facing the engine, and, in consequence, when Annie opened the window wide he was exposed to a tremendous draught. He bore it for a minute or two; then, rising, he said very quietly:

"Will you excuse me? I don't think the night air is good for you, and it is certainly bad for me. I will, therefore, with your permission, shut the window; it is cold."

"I am suffocating," said Annie.

"I will open it again in a few minutes so that you can have fresh air from time to time."

"Oh!" said Annie, with a sudden burst of passion, beating one small hand over the other, "why have you been so cruel to me?"

Saxon glanced at her. There was only one other occupant of the carriage—an old gentleman, who was sound asleep and snoring loudly.

"Won't you speak?" said Annie. "Why do you sit so silent, so indifferent, when you have spoiled my life?"

"We have different ideas on that point," he said. "You can do exactly as you please with your life, as far as I am concerned, by-and-by. At present you are under the care of your uncle, the Rev. Maurice Brooke. While he lives you have to do his wishes, to carry them out according to his views. I am helping *him* in this matter, not you. Afterwards, we will discover by your uncle's will what he wishes to have done with you. You are only seventeen; you must yield to the directions and the will of those who are older than yourself and who are placed by God in authority over you."

"Oh, how I hate you when you preach!"

"Then perhaps you will not speak to me. I am exceedingly tired; a journey to Zermatt and back again without any rest makes a man inclined for slumber. I will sleep, if you have no objection. In the morning perhaps we shall both be in a better temper than we are at present."

"I wish," said Annie, speaking in sudden passion, "that I could fling myself out of that window. You have destroyed every prospect I ever had in life."

"You talk in an exceedingly silly way," said Saxon. "Now do try and be quiet, if you please."

His absolute disregard of her threat to end her own miserable life made Annie at once furious and also strangely subdued. She sat back in her corner like a little wild creature caught in a trap. There was nothing whatever to be done but to submit. To submit as she was now doing was indeed new to Annie Brooke. Her head was in a whirl; but by-and-by, to her own relief, she also slept, and so part of the miserable journey was got through.

It was late on the following afternoon when Annie and John Saxon found themselves driving in the gig to Rashleigh Rectory. They had to pass through the little village, and Annie looked with a sort of terror at Dawson's shop. She wondered if the matter of the cheque would ever be brought up against her. So occupied was she with herself and with all the dreadful things she had done that she could scarcely think of her dying old uncle at all.

The memory of a text, too, which she had learned as a child began to be present with her. Her head was aching, and the text, with its well-known words, tormented her.

"Be sure your sin will find you out. Be sure—your sin—will find you out," murmured Annie in too low a tone for Saxon to hear.

They had been met at the railway station with the information that Mr Brooke was still alive, and Saxon uttered a sigh of relief. Then his journey had not been in vain. Then the old man would be gratified. The greatest longing and wish of his life would be fulfilled. The darling of his heart would be with him at the end.

John Saxon turned and looked at the girl. She was crouching up in the gig. She felt cold, for the evenings were turning a little chill. She had wrapped an old cloak, which Mrs Shelf had sent, around her slim figure.

Her small, fair face peeped out from beneath the shelter of the cloak. Her eyes had a terrified light in them. Saxon felt that, for Mr Brooke's sake, Annie must not enter the Rectory in her present state of wild revolt and rebellion.

He suddenly turned down a shady lane which did not lead direct to the Rectory. His action awoke no sort of notice in Annie's mind. Her uncle was alive; he probably was not so very bad after all. This was a plot of John Saxon's—a plot to destroy her happiness. But for John, how different would be her life now!

They drove down about a hundred yards of the lane, and then the young man pulled the horse up and drew the gig towards the side of the road. This fact woke Annie from the sort of trance into which she had sunk, and she turned and looked at him.

"Why are you stopping?" she asked.

"Because I must speak to you, Annie," was her cousin's response.

"Have you anything fresh to say? Is there anything fresh to say?"

"There is something that must be said," replied John Saxon. "You cannot, Annie, enter the Rectory and meet Mrs Shelf, and, above all things, go into that chamber where your dear uncle is waiting for the Angel of Death to fetch him away to God, looking as you are doing now. You are, I well know, in a state of great mental misery. You have done wrong—how wrong, it is not for me to decide. I know of some of your shortcomings, but this is no hour for me to speak of them. All I can say at the present moment is this: that you are very young, and you are motherless, and—you are about, little Annie, to be fatherless. You are on the very eve of losing the noblest and best father that girl ever possessed. Your uncle has stood in the place of a father to you. You never appreciated him; you never understood him. He was so high above you that you could never even catch a glimpse of the goodness of his soul. But I cannot believe in the possibility of any one being quite without heart or quite without some sense of honour; and I should be slow, very slow, to believe it of you.

"Now, there is one last thing which you have got to do for your uncle Maurice, and I have brought you down here to tell you what that last thing is."

Annie was silent. She shrank a little more into the shelter of the rough old cloak, and moved farther from her cousin.

"You must do it Annie," he said, speaking in a decided voice; "you must on no account whatever fail at this supreme juncture."

"Well?" said Annie when he paused.

"Your uncle is expecting you. God has kept him alive in order that he may see your face again. To him your face is as that of an angel. To him those blue eyes of yours are as innocent as those of a little child. To him you are the spotless darling, undefiled, uninjured by the world, whom he has nurtured and loved for your father's sake and for your own. You must on no account, Annie, open his eyes to the truth with regard to you now. It is your duty to keep up the illusion as far as he is concerned. I have taken all this trouble to bring you to his bedside in order that he may have his last wish gratified, and you must not fail me. Perhaps your uncle's prayers may be answered; and God, who can do all things, will change your heart.

"Now, remember, Annie, you have to forget yourself to-night and to think only of the dying old man. Promise me, promise me that you will do so."

"You have spoken very strangely, Cousin John," said Annie after a very long pause. "I—I will do—my—best I am very bad—but—I will do—my best."

The next instant Annie's icy-cold little hand was clasped in that of John Saxon.

"You have to believe two things," he said. "A great man who was as your father, whom God is taking to Himself. That man loves you with all his heart and soul and strength. When he dies, there is another man, unworthy, unfit truly, to stand in his shoes, but nevertheless who will not forsake you. Now let us get back to the Rectory."

There was a feeling of peace in the old house, a wonderful calm, a strange sense of aloofness as though the ordinary things of life had been put away and everyday matters were of no account. The fact was this: that for several days now, for long days and long nights, the beautiful Angel of Death had been brooding over the place; and the people who lived in the old Rectory had recognised the fact and had arranged their own lives accordingly.

Money did not matter at all in the shadow of that Presence; nor did greatness—worldly greatness, that is—nor ambition, nor mere pleasure; and, above all things, self-love was abhorrent in that little home of peace, for the Angel of Death brooding there brought with him the very essence of peace.

It was a curious fact that Annie Brooke, when she passed under the threshold and entered on what she expected to be the most awful time of her whole life, found that same peace immediately descend upon her. She lost all sense of fear, and every scrap of regret at having left the good and gay things of life at Zermatt.

She had not been five minutes in the house before she forgot Zermatt, and Mabel, and Lady Lushington. It is true, she thought of Priscilla, and Priscilla's eyes seemed to haunt her. But even they, with their look of reproach, could not affect the queer peace that had fallen upon her.

Mrs Shelf kissed her warmly, not uttering a word of reproach, and Annie stepped with a light and fairy step, and crept to her own room and put on one of her little home dresses—a blue gingham which she often wore and which her uncle loved. She tripped downstairs again in a few minutes, and entered the kitchen and said to Mrs Shelf:

"Now I am ready."

"Go in by yourself, darling," said Mrs Shelf. "I won't take you. He is in the old room; there is, no one with him. He knows you are here; he knew it the minute you stepped across the threshold. You couldn't deceive him, bless you! Go to him all alone, dearie, and at once."

So Annie went. A minute later she was seated by the old man's bedside, and silently her little hand was laid on his. He just turned his head very slowly to look at her. They both felt themselves to be quite alone together except for the presence of the Angel of Death, who, brooding over the house, brooded more deeply over this sacred chamber, with wings held open, ready to spread themselves at any instant, and arms half extended to carry that saint of God to his home in the skies.

Mr Brooke had longed for Annie, had imagined her to be by his side in hours of delirium, had awakened to his usual senses a day or two before the end and had discovered her absence; had said no word of reproach with regard to his little Annie, but had missed her with a great heart-hunger. Now she was here. She was his own dear child. To the rest of the world Annie was at that moment a wicked, designing, double-faced, double-natured creature, but to Mr Brooke she was just his wee pet lamb, his darling; the treasure whom God had given him.

"You are back, my love," he said when his very feeble voice could speak. "I missed you, my little one."

"Yes, I am back," said Annie, and she did that which comforted him most; she laid her head on the pillow beside him, and kissed his cheek, already cold with the dews which precede the moment when the great Angel of Death carries the soul he has released from its prison away.

"I am going to God," said Mr Brooke. "It is a wonderful happiness that I am soon to be admitted into the presence of the King of Kings. There is no saying, Annie, what marvels will be revealed to me and what glories mine eyes shall look upon. I shall see in His good time the Saviour of the world. When I am ready for that sight of all sights, it will be given to me. But, my own little Annie, even in that moment of satisfaction, when I wake up after His likeness, I shall carry you, my child, in my heart of hearts. I shall look for you, my little one. You will come to me—not yet, my darling, for you are very young, but some day. Promise me, my dearest dear."

Annie's choked voice sounded low and faint.

"I cannot hear you, my sweetest. Say the word I want—say the word I want to take away with me."

"What shall I say, Uncle Maurice?"

"Say 'Yes'—one word, my darling, that I may carry it with me into the great eternity of God."

"Yes—oh, yes!" said Annie.

"Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace," said the old man. Then the Angel of Death did open wide his glorious wings, and two bright spirits passed out of that room where one had come in.

Chapter Twenty Five.

Very Dark Days.

Mr Brooke's death was followed by total collapse on Annie's part. The time between the death and the funeral was passed by the girl in a sort of delirium, in which she was too restless to stay in bed, but too feverish to go out. On the day of the funeral itself, however, she did manage to follow her uncle to his last resting-place.

A pathetic little figure she looked in her deep mourning, with her pretty face very pale and her golden hair showing in strong relief against the sombre hue of her black dress.

Saxon and Annie were the only relations who followed the Rev. Maurice Brooke to the grave. Nevertheless the funeral was a large one, for the dead man had during a long lifetime made friends and not one single enemy. There was not a soul for miles round who did not know and love and mourn for the Rev. Maurice Brooke. All these friends, therefore, young and old, made a point of attending his funeral, and he himself might well have been there in spirit so near did his presence seem to lonely Annie as she stood close to the graveside and saw the coffin lowered to its last resting-place.

She and John Saxon then returned to the Rectory. Annie was better in health now, but very restless and miserable in spirit. Saxon was consistently kind to her. Her uncle's will was read, which left her all that he possessed, but that all was exceedingly little, not even amounting to sufficient to pay for Annie's school expenses at Mrs Lyttelton's.

Saxon asked her what she would like to do with her future. Her reply was almost inaudible—that she had no future, and did not care what became of her. Saxon was too deeply sorry for her to say any harsh words just then. Indeed, her grief touched him unspeakably, and he almost reproached himself for blaming her so severely for not attending to his first letter.

It was two or three days after the funeral, and Saxon was making preparations to leave the old Rectory, where Annie herself could remain for a few weeks longer under the care of Mrs Shelf, when one morning he got a letter which startled him a good deal. Colour rose to his cheeks, and he looked across at Annie, who was pouring out tea.

"Do you know from whom I have just heard?" he said.

"No," said Annie in a listless tone.

She did not much care whom her cousin heard from, as she said over and over to herself, nothing ever need matter to her any more. But his next words startled her, and she found that she had a heart and susceptibilities, and that once again cruel, terrible fear could visit her.

"This letter is from a man whom I happen to know exceedingly well; I have met him several times in Australia. He is a certain Mr Manchuri."

"Yes," said Annie, her lips parted and the colour rushing into her cheeks.

"He says he knows you—he met you at the Hotel Belle Vue at Interlaken—and that, seeing your uncle's death in the paper, he has written for a double purpose—to convey his condolences to all those who loved your dear uncle, and to request me to meet him in town on important business in connection with you."

"Oh!" said Annie. She had been standing; she almost fell into her seat.

"He says further," pursued Saxon, "that a great friend of yours, a Miss Priscilla Weir, is staying with him."

"She told him, of course," said Annie.

"What did you say, Annie?" John Saxon looked at her, a puzzled expression between his brows. Then he started to his feet. "I shall run up to town," he said. "I will go to-day and see what this means. It was through Miss Weir he learned that I was staying here. But for that he says that he would have come himself to have an interview with you; as it is, he thinks I can manage matters best."

"Don't go!" said Annie in a choked voice.

"Don't do what, my dear Annie?"

"Don't go; don't mind him. He means mischief."

"I don't want to be cross to you, dear Annie, but really this is silly. Mr Manchuri is a most excellent man; I and my father before me have both known him. My father has transacted some business with him from time to time. He is a first-rate man of business, and straight, in every sense of the word. Of course I shall go; I cannot possibly neglect your affairs. Why, what is it, my dear?"

"You can go if you like," said Annie. "I—I don't feel well; that is all."

She crept out of the room, tottering as she did so, and supporting herself by catching hold of various articles of furniture. When she disappeared John thought for a minute. Then he went into the kitchen, where Mrs Shelf was busy.

"Mrs Shelf," he said, "I have just had a letter which obliges me to go to London at once; I shall catch the next train. It is scarcely possible for me to be back to-night, but I shall certainly come early to-morrow. In the meantime you will look after Annie."

"You needn't doubt it, Mr John," said Mrs Shelf.

Saxon lowered his voice. "I don't quite like her appearance," he said. "She is suffering a good deal; I think you ought to watch her. Don't let her out of your sight."

"Oh, I will see to her, Mr John. The poor child is fretting; she has found her true heart at long last. The death of my beloved master has revealed many things to our Annie."

"Well, be careful of her," said the young man. "I will be back as soon as I can." Shortly afterwards he started for town.

As soon as ever the sound of the horse's hoofs which was conveying John Saxon to the railway station died away on the road, Annie, who had been crouching rather than lying down in her room, ran to the window and looked out. The semi-peaceful, semi-stunned expression on her face had given way now to the old watchful, almost crafty look which used to characterise it. She was quickly making up her mind. Mr Manchuri could only want to see John Saxon on one subject—the necklace. Priscilla, horrid Priscilla, had told him everything. He had given Annie one hundred pounds for the necklace, seventy of which she had kept for herself. In all probability, if Mr Manchuri carried things out to the bitter end, she could be locked up for theft. She might even see the inside of a prison. The terrified girl felt nearly mad. She paced up and down her little chamber, fearing—she knew not what. She would have prayed, but she did not dare. She would have cried to God, but as she knew nothing would induce her to be good and to confess her sin, she was equally certain that God would not listen to her.

She remembered her promise to her uncle that she would meet him. Of course she never would. They were parted for ever and ever. But she must not think of that now. She must think of the present, and there was not a single minute to lose.

There was only one thing for Annie to do. She must go away. She had in her possession at that moment seventy pounds. With seventy pounds she could go a good way. She could leave England; there was nothing else for it; she must be well out of the country before John Saxon returned from London. He would probably come to Rashleigh Rectory accompanied by Mr Manchuri and that horrible Priscilla, and then the whole story would get out—the whole awful story—Annie's conduct with regard to the prize, Annie's conduct with regard to Susan Martin's poems, Annie's dreadful conduct with regard to Dawson and her uncle's cheque which she had kept for herself.

John Saxon would remember how she had borrowed twenty pounds from him, and that too would be told against her. But her last and very greatest crime seemed to be in connection with the pearl and silver necklace. Her theft was biggest here, her craftiness greater, her double dealing more marked.

Oh yes; such a character ought only to be put in prison. But she would not live in prison—she, the gay, the clever, the free, the bold. She would not lose her liberty; it was worth a struggle to keep it. And she had her stolen money; it should do something for her; it should help her to keep the only thing left—the power to go where she pleased, to do what she liked.

"Annie, my darling!" called Mrs Shelf's voice at the outside of the locked door.

"Coming in a minute, Mrs Shelf," said Annie, making an effort to speak cheerfully.

She knew well that if she was to carry out her project she must be very wary, she must make her plans. Fortunately for herself, she now believed that she was an experienced traveller, and that, once on the Continent, she could easily baffle all attempts at discovering her.

She went to a glass and surveyed her little face. It had more colour than it had the day before, for excitement and the imminence of her peril brought back some of her old vivacity.

After a minute's pause she opened the door and ran downstairs. Mrs Shelf was in the kitchen. She was engaged mournfully and with considerable pain searching through cupboards and counting out all the possessions of the late Rev. Maurice Brooke which would now belong to Annie. The poor housekeeper was sighing bitterly over her famous stores of jam, over her incomparable jellies, over her pickles, her liqueurs, her bottles of home-made wine. Not for her again would the trees in the garden blossom and bear fruit; not for her would the strawberries redden or the raspberry-canoe yield of their abundance. Other people who could not possibly understand the value of the dear old garden would possess it; it would pass into the hands of strangers, and poor Mrs Shelf felt perhaps as acutely as Annie herself that her life was over. Far more than Annie, too, did this worthy soul love the good old man who had passed away.

It was a tearful face, therefore, she turned upon the girl.

"Ah, my dearie!" she said, "the days are turning a bit nippy for the time of year, and I thought you would be lonesome all by yourself in your bedroom. Come along and sit by the fire for a bit, won't you, lovy? and I'll warm you up a cup of good broth. I have some lovely and tasty in the pantry. Then maybe you'd help me to make a list of the

glass and china and the old silver. There's a quantity of old silver, and most beautiful it is; and it's all yours, dear. Whenever you start a house of your own, you won't have to go far to seek for means of making it pretty. There'll be the silver and the china, and that magnificent Crown Derby dinner-set that your precious uncle took such pride in; and there'll be the great branch candlesticks—old Sheffield they are, and very valuable; and there'll be the beautiful house linen—such linen as is not to be found anywhere else in the country-side. You won't be so bad off when you settle down with your good man, Miss Annie."

"I'll never have a good man," said Annie in a petulant tone. "Nothing would induce me to marry. I hate the thought of it."

"Poor lamb!" said Mrs Shelf; "you are but a baby yet; but the time will come—you mark my words."

Annie made no reply. She gazed drearily into the fire. She was wondering how she could circumvent old Shelfy, who might, if she chose, prove a sad hindrance to her getting away before Saxon's return.

"Shelfy," she said, "don't let's bother about the old things now. I tell you what: I'll go into the dining-room and write some letters—oh no! I couldn't go near his study. I'll just go into the dining-room and stay there for an hour or two; and then, if you will give me some lunch early, I will come and help you in the kitchen soon after that; but I don't feel up to it this morning. When did John Saxon say he would be back, Shelfy?"

"Not to-night, darling, but some time to-morrow for sure. He's a very good young man, is Mr John."

"Well, Shelfy, you know I hate good young men," said Annie.

Instead of reproving her, Mrs Shelf laughed.

"I declare, now," she said, "that speech of yours, naughty as it is, is more like your old self than anything I have heard you utter since you came back. But you mustn't turn against Mr Saxon, lovy, for he is just the best of the best, and sets store by you; any one can see that."

"Well, I will go into the dining-room now," said Annie; and she went out of the kitchen.

Mrs Shelf, quite cheered and reassured about her, went busily on with her duties, and Annie was presently able to go softly to her own bedroom, where she made preparations. She fastened her precious notes into her little pocket, which she placed in an inner petticoat, keeping out enough small change for her immediate necessities. She then carefully chose from her wardrobe some of the least smart dresses she had worn when at Interlaken. She must not wear her black; that would cause her to be discovered immediately. But the pretty print and cambric frocks which she had looked so charming in while away from home would not be recognised by any of those who might possibly think it worth while to follow on her track. A dark-blue dress which she used to wear when travelling with Lady Lushington would also come in handy. In short her very modest little wardrobe was quickly selected and put into a small travelling-bag which she could carry herself in one hand.

She could take this as far as the railway station; but that railway station was not to be the one just outside Rashleigh village, but another called Norton Paget, which was situated three miles farther down the line. Not a soul would recognise Annie at Norton Paget in the clothes Lady Lushington had given her. It would be easy to go from Norton Paget to London by the night express, and once in London, she would take an opportunity of getting as far away from England as her means would permit.

Annie from time to time had been fond of reading detective stories, and in these she had learned that there was no place so splendid for hiding in as London itself. She did not know London very well, however, and felt that she would be safest farther afield.

Having carefully packed her little bag, she hid it in a deep cupboard in her room, locked the cupboard, and put the key in her pocket. She then went downstairs.

Mrs Shelf coaxed her to come into the kitchen and share her dinner there. The dinner was very good and nourishing and comforting, and Annie ate quite heartily. She knew well that it was necessary to husband her strength. How to get Mrs Shelf, however, away from the Rectory for two or three hours towards nightfall was the problem which exercised Annie's brain. Think and think as she would, she was puzzled how to manage this. For if Mrs Shelf was in the house, Annie knew well that she could not possibly leave it without being heard. If Mrs Shelf missed her at once, the hue and cry would be raised, and she could not possibly walk to Norton Paget with her somewhat heavy bag before being discovered. It was, therefore, necessary to get both Mrs Shelf and Dan, their one outside factotum, off the premises.

Almost immediately after lunch, the morning, which had been a bright and sunny one, clouded over and the day became threatening. A few drops of rain, too, fell at intervals, and there was a slight autumnal sound in the wind.

Annie started up from her meal apparently quite excited and anxious to begin those lists in which Mrs Shelf took so deep an interest. The woman and the girl, therefore, began systematically to count over piles of linen, stacks of china, quantities of glass, and then, when these were done and they were both somewhat tired, to plunge into the mysteries of the famous store cupboard. Annie jotted down items on little scraps of paper.

All of a sudden, as the dusk was beginning to fall, she turned to her companion.

"Now I tell you what it is, Mrs Shelf. We will make a clear list of all these things before I go to bed to-night."

"Oh, nonsense, my dearie!" said Mrs Shelf. "You will be killed over it."

"No, I won't. I should like to do it. I sleep very badly, and should enjoy the work. Please take me when I am in the humour, Shelfy; you know I am hard to control when I turn contrary."

"That you are, my love; but you have been very sweet since you returned from Switzerland."

"Well, if you want me to go on being sweet you must do what I want."

"And what is that, dear?"

"You must just put the horse to the gig and get Dan to drive you in to Rashleigh in order to buy a proper manuscript book for me to write my list in."

"Oh, but must I do that to-night and leave you all alone?"

"You can go and come back within an hour and a half," said Annie; "and I want some other things, too—lots of cottons and needles, and some black lining for that new dress which I am going to make for you."

"Oh, my darling, you are kind!"

"And some oil for the sewing-machine; in fact, a whole list of things. You may as well get them all while you are about it, Shelfy, do you hear?"

"But I hate leaving you."

"And why should not I be left for an hour or an hour and a half, or even two hours? Do go—do, dear—and get me the book. I want it dreadfully badly."

Annie, after a great deal more coaxing, after a vast amount of arguments and pretty smiles and pathetic gestures, had—as she knew she would have—her own way. Mrs Shelf owned that her dear young lady's whim was a just one; that there was no possible harm in leaving her for even a couple of hours at the Rectory while she drove in to Rashleigh to get the necessary things. It was scarcely four o'clock yet, and she could be back certainly not later than seven o'clock. She could unfasten Rover, the watch-dog and leave him loose in the yard; therefore Annie would be quite safe even if any marauders did appear round the premises. But as burglaries were things unknown in the peaceful parish of Rashleigh, Mrs Shelf was not at all afraid of anything happening to Annie in her solitude.

"If I must, I must," she said. "You are a very masterful young lady; but I will own I shall rather enjoy a breath of the air this fine evening. Only why should not you come with me, lovy? Why not? You could drive, and Dan could look after the house. Now why not, Miss Annie, dear? It would do you a sight of good."

"No, no, Shelfy; I couldn't bear it. You don't suppose I can see people yet after my dear uncle's—"

Her voice trembled; her eyes filled with real tears.

"Very well, dear," said Mrs Shelf. "I am sorry I mentioned it my pet. Well then, I will be off. You will be sure to give yourself a cosy tea, Annie; and I'll be back, at the latest at seven, if not before."

Dan was summoned; the old horse was put to the old gig which had been used so often by the rector, and Mrs Shelf and Dan drove smartly out of the yard.

Annie was alone in the house.

"I have succeeded," she said to herself.

She did not know whether her pain at the thought of all that lay before her and at the final severance of the ties of her entire life was as keen as her pleasure at the thought of escaping from her greatest fears. She knew she had very little time to spare. Mrs Shelf was a quick sort of woman, not at all gossipy, and she would be certainly anxious at the thought of Annie staying behind alone. But the girl, bad as she was, felt that she could not go away for ever without doing one last thing; and a moment later, in her black dress, with her fair hair tumbling loosely about her neck and shoulders—for she had let it down while helping Shelfy in the kitchen—she ran into the garden, and picking a great quantity of large white lilies, pursued her way along a narrow path until she reached a wicket gate which led into the old churchyard. Soon the girl in her black dress, with her fair face and her lovely golden hair, was kneeling by a newly-made grave.

She laid the lilies on the grave, pressed her lips, not once, but many times, against the fragrant flowers, and said in a choked, husky, agonised voice:

"Good-bye, Uncle Maurice; good-bye for ever and ever. Ask God to tell you everything. Good-bye, Uncle Maurice;" and then she came back to the house.

There was now nothing more to be done except to write a letter to Mrs Shelf.

"Dear Shelfy," wrote Annie on a piece of black-edged paper, "I have gone away. I sent you to Rashleigh on purpose. You won't ever find me again, for I am going to a part of the world where no one will know me. I shall lead my own life and perhaps be happy. Please forget me, Shelfy, and tell John Saxon to do the same; and when you hear all the wicked, wicked, dreadful stories that you will hear about me, try to believe that—that I am sorry now, and would be different if I could—but I can't. Try, too, to believe that I will never forget Uncle Maurice nor—nor the old place. Good-bye, Shelfy, darling. Annie."

This letter was not left where it could be immediately discovered, but was put with great discrimination and craft by Annie in Mrs Shelf's work-box, which she knew the old lady would be scarcely likely to open that night, but would most assuredly look into on the following day. Thus she would have a longer time to escape; for when Mrs Shelf came back and found that Annie was not in the house, she would naturally wait for a little before she began to search for her at all. For Annie all her life had been fond of prowling about in the dusk. Thus her escape was practically assured.

Chapter Twenty Six.

Dawson's Shop.

When Mrs Shelf arrived at Rashleigh she made haste to carry out her commissions. These she executed with her accustomed despatch, and would have been back at the Rectory some time before seven o'clock but for a little event which took place in no less a shop than Dawson the butcher's.

Mrs Shelf, having bought the manuscript book and the other odds and ends which Annie required, suddenly thought that she might as well choose the meat and small dainties which would be necessary for the reduced family at the Rectory during the next few days.

Accordingly she desired Dan to take her to Dawson's, and getting slowly and ponderously down out of the gig, she entered the shop.

Dawson himself was present, and came forward with much respect and alacrity to serve his well-known customer.

"Glad to see you out, Mrs Shelf," he said. "The air will do you good, ma'am. The evenings are turning a bit nippy, aren't they? Autumn coming on all too quickly. Ah, Mrs Shelf! and winter follows autumn just as death follows old age. We don't know ourselves without the rector, Mrs Shelf. No wonder that you feel it—no wonder. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken of it. But you'll come in now and have a cup of tea with my wife, won't you, Mrs Shelf?"

"No, that I can't," said Mrs Shelf, quickly wiping away the tears which had sprung to her eyes at mention of the beloved name. "I must hurry back to Miss Annie; she is all alone, poor little thing! at the Rectory."

"Is she, now?" said Dawson. "Well, now, and a sweetly pretty young lady she be. Of course you don't want to leave her by herself. But isn't that nice-looking young gentleman, her cousin, staying with you for a time?"

"Mr Saxon, you mean?" said Mrs Shelf. "So he be; but he had to go up to London on business this morning, no Miss Annie and I are by ourselves for the time. Now I want please, Mr Dawson, two pounds of your best rump-steak and a piece of kidney for a pudding, and a pound and a half of the best end of neck of mutton. That's about all to-day. We sha'n't be wanting as much meat as formerly; and perhaps, Mr Dawson, you wouldn't mind sending in your account in the course of the next week or so, for Mr Saxon is anxious to square up everything for Miss Annie before he leaves for Australia."

"I will see about the account," said Dawson. "And now, that reminds me. I was going to speak about it before, only the dear rector was so ill, I couldn't worrit him. But the fact is, I changed a cheque for twenty pounds for Miss Annie about a month ago; I can't remember the exact date. The cheque was one of Mr Brooke's, and as correct as possible. Miss Annie wanted it in gold, and I gave it to her; and the following Monday I sent Pearson, my foreman, round with it to the bank, and in some way the stupid fellow tore it so badly that they would not cash it, and said they must have a new cheque. Of course I would have gone to the rector, knowing that he would give it to me, but for his illness. Now, however, I should like to have my money back. Shall I add it to the account, or what would be the best way to manage it, Mrs Shelf?"

"But I can't make out what you are driving at," said Mrs Shelf. "Has Miss Annie asked you to cash a cheque for her—a cheque of the master's for twenty pounds?"

"She certainly did. Let me see when the date was. It was a day or two after she came back from school, looking so bonny and bright; and, by the same token, Mr Brooke was taken ill that very day, and Miss Annie was sent into town in a hurry to get some things that you wanted for the master."

"But," said Mrs Shelf; then she checked herself. A queer beating came at her heart and a heaviness before her eyes. "Perhaps," she said, sinking into a chair, "you would let me see the cheque that is so much torn that you can't get it cashed."

"I will, with pleasure, ma'am. I am sorry to worry you at all about it at the present moment but you seem the best person to talk to, being, so to speak, not exactly one of the family."

"Show me the cheque and don't worrit me with my exact relations to the family," said Mrs Shelf with dignity.

Dawson accordingly went to his private safe, which he unlocked, and taking out a ponderous banker's book, produced the cheque; which Mrs Shelf immediately recognised as one which Mr Brooke had written in order to pay the half-yearly meat-bill. The cheque had been badly torn, and was fastened together at the back with some stamp-paper.

"They won't take it; they are mighty particular about these things," said Dawson. "It has been a loss to me, lying out of my money; but I wouldn't worry the dear old gentleman when he was ill for three times the amount."

"And you say that Miss Annie brought you this. Didn't she bring you an account or anything with it?"

"Not she. She asked me if I would cash it for her. You see it was made payable to bearer, not to me myself. Is there anything wrong about it, Mrs Shelf?"

"Not the least bit in the world," said the bewildered woman, trying to keep back a rash of words from her lips. "The master thought the world of our dear Miss Annie, and doubtless gave it to her the day after she returned from school; for she has a pretty, coaxing way; and you know well, Mr Dawson, that young things like our Annie want their bits of finery."

"To be sure," said Dawson. "I gave her the money without a thought."

"But your bill—I was under the impression that your bill for the last six months was met."

"Bless you, madam! you may rest easy about that. It was Miss Annie herself brought me the money and asked me to give her a receipt for the bill. She brought it two days later in five-pound notes. You have the receipt, haven't you?"

"To be sure—at least, I suppose so. I am all in a bewilderment!" said the good woman.

She certainly looked so, and Dawson glanced after her as she left the shop with a very solemn expression of face. Just as she crossed the threshold she turned back to say:

"You will have another cheque instead of that as soon as the will is proved. You understand, of course, that there is a short delay always on account of those blessed lawyers when a death takes place," said Mrs Shelf.

"Yes, madam, I quite understand that; and I think the best thing for me to do is to add the twenty pounds to my bill which you have asked me to send you."

"Yes, perhaps you are right, Mr Dawson," said Mrs Shelf, and she got soberly and laboriously back into the gig.

During her drive home Mrs Shelf did not utter a single word. To say that she was puzzled, amazed, frightened, would but inadequately explain the situation. Her heart beat with dull fear. Annie had cashed her uncle's cheque—that cheque which had been drawn to pay the butcher's bill. Annie had cashed it for herself and had not paid the bill. But, again, Annie had paid the bill two days later—not with the cheque, but with Bank of England notes. Really, the thing was too inexplicable. It did not look at all nice; Mrs Shelf, somehow, felt that it did not, but of course the child would explain. She would speak to her about it, and Annie would tell her. At present she could not understand it. Annie had taken twenty pounds of her uncle's money; but then, again, Annie had restored it, and almost immediately.

"It's enough to split anybody's brain even to think the thing over," was the good woman's comment as, stiff and cold and tired and inexplicably saddened, she entered the desolate Rectory.

Rover, the watch-dog, had made no noise when Annie had slipped away. He was still in the yard, and ran joyfully to meet the old woman. She stopped for a minute to fondle him, but she had no heart to-night even to pet Rover.

She entered the house by the back-way, and immediately called Annie's name. There was no response, and the chill and darkness of the house seemed to fall over her like a pall. A week ago, in very truth, peace had reigned here; but now peace had given way to tumults without and fears within. The very air seemed full of conflict.

Mrs Shelf called Annie's name again. Then she set to work to light the lamps and stir up the kitchen fire. She put fresh coals on it and stood for a minute enjoying the pleasant warmth. She was not frightened—not yet at least—at Annie's not responding to her cry. Annie Brooke was a queer creature, and as likely as not was in the garden. There was one thing certain, that if she had remained in the house she would have lit the lamps and made herself comfortable. She was the sort of girl who adored comfort. She liked the luxuries of life, and always chose the warmest corner and the snuggest seat in any room which she entered.

Mrs Shelf looked at the clock which ticked away solemnly in the corner, and was dismayed to find that it was very nearly eight. How stupid of her to stay such a long time at Dawson's! No wonder Annie was tired at the lonely house. Dan came in after having done what was necessary for the horse, and asked Mrs Shelf if there was anything more he could do for her. Mrs Shelf said "No" in a testy voice. Dan was a clumsy youth, and she did not want him about the premises.

"You can go home," she said. "Be here in time in the morning, for Mr John may want you to drive to the station early for him; there is no saying when he will be back. We will have a wire or a letter in the morning, though."

Dan stumbled through the scullery and out into the yard. A minute or two afterwards the fastening of the yard gates was heard, and the sound of Dan's footsteps dying away in the country lane.

"Poor child!" thought Mrs Shelf. "That story of Dawson's is a caution, if ever there was one—to cash the cheque for herself and to bring the money back in two days. My word, she do beat creation! Nevertheless, poor lamb, she had best explain it her own way. I'd be the last to think hardly of her, who have had more or less the rearing of her—and she the light of that blessed saint's eyes. She will explain it to me; it's only one of her little, clever dodges for frightening people. She was always good at that; but, all the same, I wish she would come in. Goodness, it's past eight! I'll get her supper ready for her."

Mrs Shelf prepared a very appetising meal. She laid the table in a cosy corner of the kitchen; then she went ponderously through the house, drawing down blinds and fastening shutters. After a time she returned to the kitchen. Still no Annie, and the supper was spoiling in the oven. To waste good food was a sore grief to Mrs Shelf's honest heart.

"Drat the girl!" she said to herself impatiently; "why don't she come out of the garden? Now I am feeling—what with

nursing and grief—a touch of my old enemy the rheumatics, and I'll have to go out in the damp and cold calling to her. But there, there! I mustn't think of myself; *he* never did, bless him!"

The old woman wrapped a shawl about her head and shoulders, and opening the kitchen door, she passed through the yard into the beautiful garden. It was a moonlight night, and she could see across the lawns and over the flower-beds. The place looked ghostly and still and white, for there was a slight hoar-frost and the air was crisp and very chill.

"Annie, Annie, Annie!" called Mrs Shelf. "Come in, my dear; come in, my love. Your supper is waiting for you."

No answer of any sort. Mrs Shelf went down the broad centre path and called again, "Annie, Annie, Annie!" But now echo took up her words, and "Annie, Annie, Annie!" came mockingly back on her ears. She felt a sudden sense of fright, and a swift and certain knowledge that Annie was not in the garden. She went back to the house, chilled to the bone and thoroughly frightened. As she did so she remembered John Saxon's words, that she was to take very great and special care of Annie. Oh, how mad she had been to leave her alone for two hours and a half! And how queer and persistent of Annie to send her away! What did it mean? Did it mean anything or nothing at all?

"Oh God, help me!" thought the poor old woman. She sat down in a corner of the warm kitchen, clasping her hands on her knees and looking straight before her. Where was Annie? On the kitchen table she had laid a pile of the little things which she had bought at Rashleigh by Annie's direction. Mechanically she remembered that she had supplied herself with some spools of cotton. She drew her work-box towards her, and opening it, prepared to drop them in. Lying just over a neatly folded piece of cambric which the old woman had been embroidering lay Annie's note.

Mrs Shelf took it up, staggered towards the lamp, and read it. She read it once; she read it twice. She was alone in the house—absolutely alone—and no one knew, and—brave old lady—she never told any one to her dying day that after reading that note she had fainted dead away, and had lain motionless for a long time on the floor of the kitchen—that kitchen which Annie's light footfall, as she firmly believed, would never enter again.

Chapter Twenty Seven.

A Defender.

When Annie left the "Beau Séjour" at Zermatt, Mabel felt herself in a state of distressing weakness and uncertainty. Annie had been her prop, and, as she had expressed it, she could not possibly go on being wicked without her. Accordingly, when the loss of the necklace was revealed to Lady Lushington on the following morning, Mabel let out a great deal more with regard to the loss of that treasure than Annie had intended her to do. She said nothing to deteriorate its value, but murmured so vaguely that she had certainly put it into the old trunk, and looked so sheepish when she was saying the words, that Lady Lushington began to suspect the truth.

"Now, Mabel," she said, taking her niece's hand and drawing her towards the light, "you are not at all good at concealing things; you have not the cleverness of your friend. I have for some time had my suspicions with regard to that *quondam* friend of yours, Annie Brooke. I don't want you to betray her in any sense of the word, but I will know this: are you telling me the truth about the necklace? Did you put it into the lid of the trunk?"

Mabel prevaricated, stammered, blushed, and was forced to admit that she had not done so. On the top of this revelation, Lady Lushington was quick in pressing her niece to make a further one, and at last Mabel admitted that she thought, but was not at all sure, that Mr Manchuri, the old Jewish gentleman who had been staying at the Hotel Belle Vue, knew something about the necklace.

"It is quite safe; I am certain it is quite safe," said Mabel; "but I think he knows about it. Had not we better write and ask Annie?"

"We will do nothing of the kind," said Lady Lushington. "Mabel, I am disgusted with you. You can go away to your room. You are my niece, or I would never speak to you again; but if I do not get to the bottom of this mystery, and pretty quickly, too, my name is not Henrietta Lushington."

"Oh dear," thought poor Mabel, "what awful mischief I have done! Annie will be wild. Still, all is not known. I don't think Aunt Henrietta can think the very worst of me even if she does learn the story of the necklace; that won't tell her how I won the prize, and that won't explain to her the true story of Mrs Priestley's bill."

As Mabel was leaving the room, very downcast and fearfully miserable, Lady Lushington called her back.

"I am disgusted with you," she repeated. "Notwithstanding; justice is justice. I never wish you to have anything more to do with Annie Brooke; you never shall speak to her again, if I can help it. But in one thing she was right. I have received Mrs Priestley's bill thin morning with all due apologies, and begging of me to forgive her for having, through a most gross error, and owing to the fault of one of her assistants, added another lady's account to mine. Your bill for clothes, therefore, Mabel, only amounts to forty pounds, which is high, but allowable. As you are not going back to the school we shall never require Mrs Priestley's services again. I will send her a cheque to-day for forty pounds, and that closes my transactions with the woman, whom, notwithstanding apologies, I do not consider too straight."

Even this small consolation was better than nothing to Mabel. She went away to her room feeling very queer and trembling, and Lady Lushington took those immediate steps which she was fond of doing when really aroused. She did not know Mr Manchuri's private address, but she was well aware that he was a wealthy Bond Street jeweller. She wrote, therefore, straight to his place of business, and her letter, when it reached him, electrified the good man to such an extent that he scarcely knew what he was doing. Fortunately for himself, he had not yet sold the necklace.

Having read the letter, he sank down into a chair and gazed before him. Well did he remember the scene when Annie, looking sweet, innocent, and charming, had told him with a little pride of her knowledge with regard to gems, and had shown him with extreme diffidence the valuable necklace, and asked him what it was worth.

"What a fool I was to snap at it!" he said to himself. "I might have known that no honest girl of the class of Annie Brooke would have forty pounds to spend on jewellery. But just that hateful desire to make money came over me, and I grabbed at the thing. Now what is to be done?"

Mr Manchuri returned home early that day. Lady Lushington's letter was burning a hole all the time in his pocket.

"What a comfort it is," he said to himself, "that that dear, nice Priscilla is still in the house! She certainly told me nothing about the necklace. That little horror of an Annie Brooke begged and implored of me to keep the whole thing a secret. But the time has come, my young miss, when I feel absolutely absolved from my promise. I must consult Priscie. Priscie has as wise a head on her shoulders as even my own beloved Esther had."

The old man entered the house; and Priscilla, who was busily reading in the library, hearing the click of the latch-key in the lock, ran out into the hall. Her face had improved during the last few days. The look of great anxiety had left it. She had, in short, made up her mind, but even Mr Manchuri did not quite know what Priscilla was going to do.

"You are in early," she said, running to meet him and helping him off with his overcoat and putting his stick in the stand.

"Yes, Priscilla," he answered; "and I am right glad you are in. The fact is, I came back to consult you, my dear."

"You will have some tea first," said Priscilla. "Now that is exactly what Esther would have said," was the old man's response. "What a fuss she did make about me, to be sure! And you are going to make a fool of me now. I was a young man when my Esther was there, and I am an old man now, but the difference seems bridged over, and I feel young once more with you so kind to me, Priscilla. But there, there, my child, there is no tea for me until I relieve my mind. Where were you sitting, my dear, when you heard me come into the house?"

"In the library. I had just discovered the most glorious edition of *Don Quixote*, and was revelling in it."

"We will go back to the library, Priscilla, if you have no objection."

Priscilla turned at once; Mr Manchuri followed her, and they entered the great library full of books of all sorts—rare editions, old folios, etc.—as well as a few really valuable pictures.

"Priscilla," said Mr Manchuri, "you know all about Annie Brooke?"

"Yes," said Priscilla, her face turning *very* pale. "I wanted to write to Annie; her dear uncle is dead."

"You told me so a few days ago. You can write or not, just, as you please. In the meantime, can you explain this?"

As Mr Manchuri spoke he took Lady Lushington's letter from his pocket and handed it to Priscilla. Priscilla read the following words:

"Dear Sir,—I regret to have to trouble you with regard to a small circumstance, but I have just to my unbounded astonishment, been informed by my niece, Mabel Lushington, that you can throw light on the disappearance of an old-fashioned pearl necklace set in silver which I bought for her at Interlaken the day before we left. I was assisted in the purchase by a girl who was of our party—a Miss Brooke. She professed to have a knowledge of gems, and took me to Zick's shop in the High Street where I bought the trinket. I paid forty pounds for it, believing it to be a bargain of some value. At present the necklace is not forthcoming, and there has been an idea circulated in the hotel that it was stolen on our journey from Interlaken to Zermatt. My niece, however, now with great reluctance mentions your name, and says that she thinks you can explain the mystery. Will you be kind enough to do so without a moment's loss of time?—Yours sincerely, Henrietta Lushington."

When Priscilla had finished this letter she raised a white and startled face. Her eyes saw Mr Manchuri's, who, on his part, was trying to read her through.

"What do you make of it?" he said.

"I never heard of the necklace," she said.

"Well, perhaps you heard something else or you noticed something else. Were you sitting in the garden of the Hotel Belle Vue just before *déjeuner* on the day that you and I left Interlaken?"

"Yes," said Priscilla.

"I remember quite well now," considered the old man, "that I noticed you from where I myself was sitting on the terrace. I saw Miss Brooke go up to you, and presently you went away. Then I joined Miss Brooke."

"Yes," said Priscilla.

"You have not the least idea what occurred, have you, Priscilla, when Miss Brooke and I were alone?"

"I have not the faintest idea," said Priscilla.

"Well, I will tell you," said the old man.

He crossed the room as he spoke, opened the door, and went out, but presently returned with something in his hand. This something he laid on the table before Priscilla.

"Have you ever seen that before?"

"Never," said Priscilla. "It is rather pretty."

"It is a valuable old ornament," said Mr Manchuri. "It was bought at Zick's shop in the High Street at Interlaken. I gave Annie Brooke one hundred pounds for it."

"Mr Manchuri!"

"She told me it was her own, and asked if I would buy it. I knew it was worth a good deal more than the sum I paid her; now it seems that she took me in, I have purchased Lady Lushington's necklace; it never belonged to Annie Brooke. What is to be done?"

Priscilla sat, white as death, with her hands clasped before her.

"Did you ever," she said at last after a very long pause, "notice in all your knowledge of mankind how from the beginning of a little act of deceit great and awful things take place? If I had not yielded to a temptation which was put before me at Mrs Lyttelton's school, Annie would never have been a thief; there would have been no need—no need! Mr Manchuri, I feel that I am responsible for this."

"Nothing of the kind, child. Please don't take on in that way! It is too dreadful to hear you."

Priscilla's lips trembled.

"We must, we must save Annie Brooke," she said. "She is in trouble. Her uncle is dead; she has no home any longer. Oh, Mr Manchuri, for the sake of your Esther, don't be too hard on her!"

"I am just mad with rage," said the old jeweller. "There are some things I can stand, but not deceit."

"You can stand me," said Priscilla very gently, "and yet I was deceitful."

"You have repented, child; and you are going to do all in your power to show that your repentance is real. I will not have you and Annie Brooke spoken of on the same footing. I cannot bear it, Priscilla."

"You will be kind to her," repeated Priscilla.

"I must answer this good woman's letter. I have got the necklace. I don't choose to be at the loss of one hundred pounds. There are things I will not bear—I cannot and will not stand—even for you, Priscilla. I have been cheated by that girl, and have lost one hundred pounds on a trinket which I now cannot possibly sell. If Lady Lushington will send me that sum, she can have the necklace back; otherwise Miss Brooke herself must return the money."

Priscilla was surprised and most distressed at the obduracy of the old man. In the end she could only persuade him to write to John Saxon, whose name she knew well. It would be better for him to be acquainted with this ghastly fact than for Lady Lushington's just indignation to be turned on Annie's devoted head.

Accordingly John Saxon was written to, and thus the explanation of his sudden visit to London was arrived at Mr Manchuri had asked the young man to meet him at his house of business, and Saxon, much as he dreaded what might lie before him, little guessed the ghastly news which he was to hear. Mr Manchuri, affectionate as he was to Priscilla, nursed his wrath more and more against Annie during the hours which intervened between his receiving Lady Lushington's letter and the arrival of John Saxon on the scene.

"I am glad you have come, Mr Saxon," he said when the young man entered the old jeweller's private sitting-room, which was situated at the back of the business premises.

"Yes; I came at once," replied Saxon. "What is it you want with me, Mr Manchuri? You said you had something important to tell me with regard to my cousin, Miss Brooke."

"Something very ugly to tell you, sir. Now listen. What do you make of this story?"

Saxon did listen while Mr Manchuri enlarged on Annie's apparently innocent, wheedling ways, on her story with regard to the necklace, and on the fact that he had given her in exchange for it ten notes, each of the value of ten pounds.

"A hundred pounds in all," said the old jeweller; "and, to tell you the truth, Mr Saxon, cheap at the price, for I could sell that necklace to-morrow for two hundred and fifty pounds, or even three hundred. Mark you, my dear young sir, I could do it, but you could not, nor could she, sharp as she is; for I know the trade and you don't, and she doesn't, and Lady Lushington doesn't. Therefore a hundred pounds is a very fair sum to pay for what only cost her ladyship forty. Now, will you read that?" he added, handing him Lady Lushington's letter.

John Saxon did so. He returned it and looked full into the face of Mr Manchuri.

"Well, sir," said the merchant, "what do you mean to do?"

"What do *you* mean to do, Mr Manchuri?"

Mr Manchuri spread out his hands.

"I," he said—"I mean to take the law in this matter. I mean to write the simple and exact truth to Lady Lushington, and I mean to confront that precious Miss Brooke with the truth. That is what I mean to do. That sort of wickedness ought not to be permitted, sir. It ought to be nipped in the bud."

"I agree with you," said Saxon. He spoke very slowly, and with pain. "It ought to be nipped in the bud, and I am,"—a lamp came to his throat—"almost glad that you have made this discovery. There would be nothing quite so dreadful for my poor little cousin as that this thing should be hidden. Now it is known, soon a great deal more will be known—of that I am persuaded. But, sir, I want to plead with you on behalf of the guilty party. In the first place, the girl in question is only seventeen. Her exceeding youth, which ought to be the shield of innocence, has not proved sufficient to keep her from acting in the most crafty and guilty manner. But she was the beloved child of one of the best of men, and for his sake I will not have her name dragged in the dust; if I can save her from the world's knowledge of such a grave crime as this, I will. Mr Manchuri, you have lost one hundred pounds. Here is my cheque for the amount."

Here John Saxon took a cheque-book from his pocket.

"Give me a pen and ink," he said, "and I will fill it in for you. Having received this, will you return the necklace to Lady Lushington, telling her any story you please, but as far as possible shielding Annie Brooke from the worst consequences of her sin?"

"This makes all the difference, sir," said Mr Manchuri. "I am not appointed in any sense to be the guardian of Miss Annie Brooke. I wish never to see the young lady again. She has acted abominably. I will take your cheque, sir, and return the necklace to Lady Lushington."

"So far, so good. Then perhaps this ends our business," said John Saxon.

He took up his hat as he spoke.

"Not quite sure there are not other things I wish to say. Will you sit down?"

Saxon very unwillingly complied.

"You have, perhaps," continued Mr Manchuri, "heard Miss Brooke speak of a schoolfellow of the name of Priscilla Weir?"

"I have. I believe the young lady was with her and Miss Lushington in Switzerland."

"That is true," said Mr Manchuri; "and I had the privilege—I was, in short, the fortunate man to be allowed to escort Miss Weir back to England."

"Indeed?" said Saxon, who, terribly shocked at this story about poor Annie, could with difficulty bring himself to take the slightest interest in Priscilla.

"You have told me, sir, that Miss Brooke's uncle is dead?"

Saxon bowed his head. Mr Manchuri gazed hard at the young man.

"Your father was my good friend," he said, a softer note coming into his voice, "and I have always thoroughly respected you. Your father and I have transacted business, and you yourself have shown me hospitality in a distant part of the world I would not be unkind to you, Mr Saxon, and I pity you very much indeed because of your relationship to Miss Brooke."

"Pray do not pity me," said Saxon. "If a man of my age—I am eight-and-twenty—cannot do his best for a lonely girl, almost a child, he must be a poor sort. I am Annie's guardian, and will do my utmost as long as she lives to befriend her."

"Sir, I must speak the truth," said Mr Manchuri. "You are straight as a die and honest and open as the day; but that girl is crafty, insincere, essentially untrue. You can never turn staff of that sort into true gold, however hard you try."

"I can at least protect a weak and erring girl," said Saxon with feeling.

"The best thing you can possibly do for her, sir, is to get her out of England and away from her old friends; for she must never return to Mrs Lyttelton's school."

"Why so?" asked Saxon.

"It was my privilege, Mr Saxon, to escort Priscilla Weir back to England. She had been very little noticed by me or by anyone else while at Interlaken. But I think, if I may dare to say the word, that God took care of her, and she alone of all that party really enjoyed the glories of nature. For her the Jungfrau showed some of its majesty, and for her the other great mountains spoke unutterable secrets. She is a queer girl, but has a heart of gold, Mr Saxon, a heart of gold. Now that girl first attracted my attention because she resembled a child of my own—a child who has long lived with the angels. I can scarcely tell you what I felt when I saw the likeness, and since then I have probed into Priscilla's heart and found that in all respects it resembles the heart of my Esther. Sir, the girl was lonely; she was subjected to temptation, and she yielded to it. She has told me about it, and when Mrs Lyttelton's school opens it will be Priscilla's painful duty to tell her mistress something which implicates very seriously your cousin, Miss Brooke. It also implicates Miss Lushington. Priscilla, is a guest in my house now. What she will be eventually I have not yet disclosed to her. It is my impression that Esther sent her to me, and I am not going to let her go in a hurry."

"Yes, this is very interesting, and I am glad that a girl so worthy as Miss Weir should have found a friend in you," was Saxon's response. "But you have not explained what my cousin Annie has done."

"No, no; it is not within my province. But I can only assure you that that unfortunate young lady has got herself, as well as two more of her schoolfellows—namely, Priscilla Weir and Mabel Lushington—into the most horrible scrape. Priscilla's conscience will not allow her to live any longer under the load of unconfessed sin, and it is her duty to inform Mrs Lyttelton."

"And me," said Saxon in a determined voice.

"You must be patient, sir. I will not tell you Priscilla's secrets. They are her own. But I should advise you immediately to take steps to remove Miss Brooke from Mrs Lyttelton's school." Saxon said a few words more, and then took his leave. He had a good deal of business to attend to that day in connection with the late Mr Brooke's affairs; the winding-up of his small property and the paying of a few trifling outstanding bills must be attended to as soon as possible. But Annie—what was to be done with her? Saxon himself intended to return to Australia within a month. His business called him there, and he did not think he ought to delay. But what was to become of Annie?

She must not return to school; indeed, her circumstances forbade such a hurry. Would it be possible to settle her somewhere with Mrs Shelf? Saxon thought over this idea, but dismissed it. Annie was far too clever to be left in the hands of a person whom she could completely rule. The young man felt stunned at the depth of her wickedness. He spent a very anxious night, and returned by an early train on the following morning to Rashleigh. There he was met by the appalling information that Annie had gone.

It was Dan who first told him at the station. Dan blurted out the words, almost sobbing as he spoke. Mrs Shelf was so bad that she couldn't speak. She was lying in the kitchen, where a neighbour had found her when she had come in in the morning. The poor woman was moaning to herself in the most dreadful way. Dan knew no particulars except that Miss Annie was nowhere to be found and that Mrs Shelf was ill.

"Really," thought Saxon, "troubles thicken. I wonder when we shall see a gleam of daylight. Was there ever such a troublesome and terrible girl put into the world before?"

But the very greatness of the emergency roused all that was strongest and best in the young man. He soon got the truth out of poor Mrs Shelf, who blamed herself almost more than Annie for having gone to Rashleigh. Having tried to assure the poor old woman that she was not in fault, and that he was wrong not to have insisted on taking Annie with him to London, he further soothed her by saying that he would soon find Annie; that it was absolutely impossible for a young girl like Annie Brooke to lose herself in these days of clever detectives and patient investigations.

"We'll have her back," he said. "We'll have her back, and you must get well. And now, I am going immediately—yes, immediately—to take steps. You must have a neighbour in to look after you, Mrs Shelf; and I will write you or send a telegram whenever I get news."

"But oh, sir! there is something else on my mind," said Mrs Shelf; and she told him the story of Dawson and the cheque.

"Oh, that is all right," said Saxon in a cheery voice. "We will settle the matter with Dawson as soon as ever letters of administration have been taken out with regard to Mr Brooke's will. Don't fret any more about that and don't blame poor little Annie more than you can help, Mrs Shelf."

Mrs Shelf burst into tears. It was a relief to her to hear the manly voice and to feel the confident pressure of the strong young hand. If John Saxon could be cheery and hopeful about Annie, why should she despair?

When he was gone—and he left the house almost immediately afterwards—Mrs Shelf rose tottering from the sofa in the old kitchen and began to potter about her work. All was not lost even for Annie Brooke, while John Saxon was there to defend and help her.

Chapter Twenty Eight.

Tilda Freeman.

It was a very tired Annie Brooke who arrived laden with her little bag late on a certain evening at Norton Paget. The darkness had quite set in, and when she entered the tiny station and took a third-class ticket to London she was not recognised.

There were two other girls of an inferior class to Annie going also to London by the train. She looked at them for a minute, but they did not know her; and when presently she found herself in the same carriage with, them, she felt a certain sense of repose in being in their company. But for the fact that these two girls were accompanying her to town, she would have given way to quite unreasoning terrors, for her nerves had been violently shaken by the events of the last fortnight. Those nerves had been weakened already by all the deceit through which she had lived now during long weeks. This final step, however, made her feel almost as though she had reached the breaking-point. She could have cried out in her fears. She hated the darkness; she hated the swift movement of the train. She wanted to reach London; and yet when she did get there she would not have the faintest idea where to go. With her money securely fastened about her little person, with her neat leather bag, she might have presented herself at any comfortable hotel and been sure of a good welcome, but somehow Annie felt afraid of grand hotels at that moment. She felt deep down, very deep in her heart that she was nothing more nor less than a runaway, a girl who had done something to be ashamed of, who was obliged to hide herself, and who was forced to leave her friends.

She shivered once or twice with cold, and one of the girls who had got into the same carriage, and who had stared very hard at Annie from time to time, noticing her great dejection and pallor and her want of any wraps, suddenly bent forward and said:

"If you please, miss, I have a cloak to spare, and if you're taken with a chill I'd be very glad to lend it to you to wrap about you."

"Thank you," said Annie instantly. Her small teeth were beginning to chatter, and she was really glad of the girl's offer.

A few minutes later she was wrapped up in the cloak, and feeling inexpressibly soothed and knowing that her disguise was now more effectual than ever, she dropped into an uneasy sleep. She slept for some time, and when she awoke again she found that the third-class compartment was full of people—a rough and motley crew—and that the two girls who had accompanied her into the carriage were both still present. One faced her; the other sat pressed up close to her side. It was the girl who had lent Annie the cloak who sat so near her.

"Are you a bit better, miss?" she said when Annie had opened her startled blue eyes and tried to collect her scattered senses.

"Oh yes," said Annie; "but I am thirsty," she added.

"Suck an orange, then; do," said the girl. "They are a bit sour yet, but I bought some to-day for the journey."

She immediately thrust her hand into a string bag and produced an unripe and very untempting-looking specimen of the orange tribe.

Annie took it and said, "Thank you."

"Lor' bless you," said the girl, "but your 'ands is 'ot!"

"No, I am not hot at all," said Annie; "I am more cold than hot. Thank you so much for the orange. How kind you are!"

The girl looked at Annie with great admiration and curiosity. Then she bent forward and whispered to her companion. They consulted together for a few minutes in low tones which could not possibly reach Annie's ears owing to the swift-going motion of the train. Then the girl who was seated opposite to Annie bent towards her and said:

"Ain't you Miss Annie Brooke of Rashleigh Rectory?"

This remark so took Annie by surprise and so completely upset her already tottering nerves that she gave a sudden cry and said in a sort of smothered voice:

"Oh, please, please don't betray me!"

The girl now nodded to her companion, and the girl who was seated close to Annie said in a low, soothing tone:

"We ain't goin' to tell on yer, miss. If yer want to go up to town unbeknown to them as has the charge o' yer, 'tain't no affair o' ours. I'm Tilda Freeman, and that 'ere girl is Martha Jones. I am a Lunnon gel, and Lunnon bred, and I was down on a wisit to my friend Martha Jones. She's comin' up with me for a bit to see the big town. Be you acquainted with Lunnon, miss, and do you know its ways?"

"No, I don't know London very well," said Annie. She had recovered some of her self-possession by this time. "You are mistaken in supposing," she continued, trying to speak in as cheerful a tone as she could, "that I am—am going away privately from my friends. I have lost my dear uncle, and am obliged to go to London on business."

"Yes, miss," said Martha Jones, "and you has peeled off yer mournin'. You was in black when we seed you at the funeral. And why has yer come up by the night train, and why has yer taken a third-class ticket? And why do you ask us not to betray you? Don't you tell no lies, miss, and you'll be told no stories. You're runnin' away, and there's no sayin' but that it 'ave somethin' to do with Dawson the butcher."

"Dawson?" said Annie, her heart beginning to beat very hard.

"Dawson's in a rare way about a cheque which 'e cashed for yer, miss. 'E can't get 'is money back. Now Mrs Dawson is own sister to my mother, and we know all about it. There, miss, Tilda and me, we don't want to be 'ard on a young lady like you, and if you 'ud confide in us, you 'ud find us your good friends. There ain't no manner o' use, miss, in your doin' anythin' else, for we can soon send a bit o' a letter to Aunt Jane Dawson, and then the fat's in the fire."

"Oh, oh!" said Annie, "I—" She roused herself; she pushed back her hat; she pressed her hot hand to her hot cheek. "Do you think we might open a little bit of the window?" she said.

Tilda immediately complied.

"There now," she said; "that's better. Didn't I say as you was 'ot?—and no wonder. You tell Martha and me, and we'll do wot we can for yer."

"I don't know what you mean about a cheque," said Annie; "that is all nonsense—I mean—I am not going away on that account."

"Oh no, miss," said Tilda, winking at Martha. "Who hever said you was?"

"But you are right," continued Annie; "I am going to town for a day or two, just—just—on a little business of my own."

"Ain't we smart?" said Tilda, winking again at Martha. Martha bent forward, and once more whispered in her companion's ear.

"Look 'ere," said Tilda, "when all's said and done, you're a gel, same as we two are gels, and although you is 'igh up in the social scale, and we, so to speak, low down, we are made with the same feelin's, and souls and bodies, and all the rest o' it; and it ain't for Martha and me to be 'ard on yer, miss; we 'ud much more like to 'elp yer, miss. We won't get to Lunnun until close on twelve—Lor' bless yer! that ain't a nice time for a young lady to come all alone to the metropolis; 'tain't a nice time at all—but my brother Sam 'ull meet Martha and me, and take us straight off to Islington, where we lives; and there 'ull be a bit o' 'ot supper, and our beds all warm and cosy; and wot I say is this: why mightn't you come along with us too, and share our 'ot supper and the escort of my brother Sam, and 'ave a shakedown at Islington for the night? There's no safer way to 'ide, miss—if it's 'idin' yer mean; for none o' those grand folks as you belong to will look for yer out Islington way."

Annie considered this offer for some little time, and finally said in a grateful tone that she did not think that she could do better than accept it; whereupon the girls whispered and giggled a good deal together and left poor Annie more or less to her own reflections.

It was twenty minutes to twelve when the great express entered the huge London terminus which was its destination; and Annie was indeed glad, when she found herself in the whirl of the great Paddington Station, to have Tilda's arm to lean on, and to be accompanied at the other side by Martha Jones.

Presently a large young man with a shock of red hair and a freckled face rushed up to the girls, clapped Tilda loudly on the shoulder, and nodded in a most familiar manner to Martha. At sight of Annie, however, he fell back breathless with astonishment and open-eyed admiration; for perhaps in all her life poor little Annie had never looked more absolutely beautiful than she did now. Her cheeks were slightly crimson with the first touch of fever. Her blue eyes were at once dark and bright, and her coral-red lips might have resembled a cherry, so rich was their colour. There was a fragility at the same time about the slim young girl, a sort of delicate refinement, which her pretty dress and golden hair accentuated, so that, compared to Tilda, who was loud and coarse and uncommonly like Sam himself, and Martha, who was a plain, dumpy girl with a cast in one eye, she looked like a being from a superior sphere.

Sam had dreamed of creatures like Annie Brooke. He had believed that it was possible for some girls to look like that, but he had never been close to one of these adorable creatures before in the whole course of his life. His silly head swam; his round eyes became rounder than ever with admiration, and even his loud voice became hushed.

"Who be she?" he said, plucking at Tilda's sleeve, and his own great, rough voice shaking.

"A friend o' our'n," said Tilda, who, not being so susceptible, felt her head very tightly screwed on her shoulders, and was not going to give herself away on Annie's account. "A friend o' our'n," she continued, "a gel whose acquaintance we made in the country. She's a-comin' along 'ome with Martha and me; so you look after our trunks, Sam, and we'll go on to the underground as quick as possible. Don't stare yer eyes out, Sam, for goodness' sake! She won't bolt, beauty though she be."

"Oh! I can't go with you; I really can't," said Annie. "There must be a hotel close to this, and I have plenty, plenty of money. Perhaps this—this—gentleman would take me to the hotel."

She looked appealingly at Sam, who would have died for her there and then.

"I wull—if yer wish, miss," he stammered.

"Nothing of the kind," said Tilda, who, having secured Annie, had no intention of letting her go. A girl with plenty of money who was running away was a treasure not to be found every day in the week. "You'll come with us, miss, or that letter 'ull be writ to Mrs Dawson afore we goes to bed to-night."

"Oh yes," said Sam, wondering more and more what could have happened. "We'll take the greatest care o' yer, miss."

"Her name's Annie; you needn't 'miss' her," said Tilda, turning sharply to her brother. "Now then, do get our bits o' duds, and be quick, can't you?"

The bewildered young man did see to his sister's and friend's luggage. He had already secured Annie's bag, and he held it reverently, feeling certain that it belonged to one of a superior class. Why, the little, neat bag alone was something to reverence.

By-and-by the whole party found themselves in a third-class compartment on their way to Islington, which place they in course of time reached, Sam indulging in a cab for Annie's sake, because he saw that she was far too tired to walk the long mile which separated Tilda Freeman's home from the railway station.

This humble domicile was soon reached, and the whole party went indoors. A frowsy-looking woman with red hair like Tilda's and Sam's stood akimbo in the passage, awaiting the arrival of her son and daughter and visitor.

"How late you be!" she cried. "But there's yer supper in the kitchen, and yer beds ready.—How do, Martha Jones? It's a dish o' tripe an' onions I 'as ready for yer. I know you're partial to that sort o' food. Why, a' mercy! who on earth is this!"

"A friend o' mine," said Tilda. "Her name's Annie. She can sleep along o' me to-night, mother."

"Oh no," said Annie. "I must have a bed to myself."

"Then you can't, my beauty," said Mrs Freeman, "for there ain't one for yer. Ef yer thinks Tilda good enough to wisit uninvited in the dead o' night you must be satisfied with half her bed. And now I'm off to mine, for I 'ave to char early to-morrow mornin' at Pearson's house over the way."

Mrs Freeman disappeared, and the girls, accompanied by Sam, went into the kitchen. Annie, try as she would, could not touch the coarse supper; but Tilda, Martha, and even Sam enjoyed it mightily.

Annie had removed her hat, and her hair looked like purest gold under the flaring gas-jet, which cast a garish light over the place. Sam ate in abundance, and cast adoring eyes at Annie. Annie's head ached; her throat ached; she shivered; but nevertheless, dimly and in a queer sort of fashion, it was borne in upon her that Sam would be her true friend, and that the girls would not. She was in an evil plight, but she was already feeling too ill to care very much what happened to her. Nevertheless, she had still a sufficient amount of self-control to return Sam's gaze, and once she gave him a timid smile.

By-and-by the two girls went into the scullery to wash the plates and dishes, for great would have been Mrs Freeman's wrath if she had found them dirty in the morning; and Sam and Annie were alone.

Annie immediately seized the opportunity.

"Sam," she said, "I am in great trouble."

"I be that sorry," murmured Sam.

"I know you have a kind heart, Sam."

"For you, miss," he managed to stammer.

"And you are strong," continued Annie.

"I'd knock any chap down as wanted to injure a 'air o' yer 'ead, miss. It's that beautiful, yer 'air is miss, like—like the sunshine when we spends a day in the country."

"Do you think you would really help me, Sam?" said Annie.

"You has but to ask, miss," said the red-haired giant, placing a huge hand over his heart.

"I don't want your sister and her friend to know."

"Oh, lawks, miss! you'll turn my 'ead entirely. A secret atween you and me! Well, I'm that obligated I don't know 'ow to speak."

"I want to get away from here to-morrow morning," said Annie. "I want to go down to the docks, Sam."

"My word!" said Sam.

"And I don't know the way," continued Annie. "Do you think that you—you would come with me and find a ship that is going—a long way from England—where you would take a passage for me? A steerage passage, Sam; I can't afford anything else."

"And lose sight on yer, miss, for ever and ever?"

"Oh, but—Sam, you promised to help me."

"My word!—and I will," said Sam.

"They are coming back," said Annie in a husky voice. "I'll get up early—quite early. When do you get up, Sam?"

"I am off to my work at five in the mornin'."

"How much do you earn a day?"

"Five shullin'—and good wage, too."

"I will give you a whole sovereign if you will stay away from your work and help me to-morrow. Shall we meet outside this house—just outside—at five in the morning?"

"Oh, my word, yus!" said Sam; "and there's no talk o' sovereigns. It 'ull be jest the greatest pleasure in my whole life to sarve yer, missie." The girls bustled noisily into the kitchen, and Tilda conveyed Annie to her own tiny attic in the roof. Annie refused to undress, but lay down, just as she was, on the hard, uncomfortable bed. For long afterwards she could not quite remember what occurred that night. It was all a horrible nightmare. She was ill; she was dying. Her throat seemed to suffocate her. Every bone in her body ached. She was confronted by ghastly images; unknown and awful terrors pursued her. Something touched her. She screamed. She opened her eyes and recognised Tilda bending over her.

"What—what do you want?" she said; for Tilda had just grasped the pocket where the money lay.

"Nothing—nothing at all, miss," said Tilda.

"You leave that gel alone!" shouted a harsh voice from another attic close by.

"My word!" said Tilda. She sank down, trembling. "And I didn't mean to take her money. I am bad, but I ain't as bad as that; only I wanted to see wot she 'as got. She might make a present to Martha and me; but ef Sam 'as took her up, there ain't no chance for none o' us."

Towards morning Tilda crept into the other side of the bed and fell into profound slumber. Annie also slept and dreamed and awakened, and slept and dreamed again.

"'Be sure your sin will find you out,'" she kept repeating under her breath; and then, all of a sudden, when she felt a little—just a little—calmer, a hand was laid on her shoulder, a great rough face bent over her, and a voice said:

"I say, missie, it's time for you and me to be off."

Annie looked up. The red-haired giant had entered the room and had summoned her. Trembling, shaking, her fever high, her throat almost too sore to allow her to speak, she rose from that horrible bed, tried to shake her tumbled clothes into some sort of order, took up her bag, and followed Sam downstairs. A minute or two later, to her infinite refreshment, they were both out of the house and in the open air. Sam was all alive and keen with interest but when they had walked a few steps he glanced at Annie and the expression of his face altered.

"You be—my word!—you be real bad!" he said.

"I am," said Annie hoarsely. "I can scarcely speak. It is—my—sin, Sam—that has—found me out."

"Your sin!" said Sam. "You be a hangel o' light."

Annie laid her little, white, burning hand on his.

"I can't go to the docks," she said. "I can't go anywhere—except—except—oh, I must be quick!—oh, my senses will go! Everything swims before me. Sam, I must tell you the truth. Sam, hold me for a minute."

He did so. The street in which they found themselves was quiet as yet. There were only a few passers-by, and these were hurrying off to their respective employments. Annie put her hand into the little pocket which contained her money. She took out her purse and gave Sam a five-pound note.

"Go," she said, "to-day to Rashleigh, the place where your sister has been. Go to the Rectory and tell them that I—Annie Brooke—have found out—the truth of one text: 'Be sure your sin will find you out.' Tell them that from me, and be quick—be very quick. Go at once. But first of all take me to the nearest hospital."

Before poor Sam could quite understand all Annie's instructions the girl herself was quite delirious. There was nothing for it but to lift her into his strong arms and carry her to a large hospital in the neighbourhood of Islington. There she was instantly admitted, and, after a very brief delay, was conveyed to the fever ward.

Chapter Twenty Nine.

From Darkness to Light.

Late on that same evening Rover at the old Rectory thought it expedient to raise his voice in the extreme of exasperation and anger. A stranger of the sort that ought not to be seen about the Rectory gardens was daring to approach the back-door right through Rover's special territory. Luckily for the red-haired giant, Rover could not get at him beyond the limit of his chain. The giant knocked at the back-door, and presently a timid-looking woman, who had been called in to help to nurse Mrs Shelf, opened the door about an inch.

"Now what is up?" she said. "You get out of this; you are a stranger here, and we don't want parties of your sort about."

"I ha' come," said Sam, "with a message from one as calls herself Annie."

Mrs Shelf was still lying on the sofa in the kitchen. She was feeling far too weak and shaky to rise; but at the name strength seemed to come into her like magic. She tottered off her sofa and approached the door.

"Whoever you are, come right in," she said.

Sam entered and stood gloomily leaning up against the dresser.

"What is your message?" said Mrs Shelf. "Do tell me quickly! Do you know where Annie Brooke is?"

"In the Great Northern Hospital," said Sam Freeman, "where I left her this mornin'. She said I was to come here and say—that her sin had found her out. She guv me five pounds to come and give the message. It's a sight too much money. I tuk a third-class ticket down, and 'ere's the change." He put three sovereigns and a pile of silver on the table. "I tuk a return ticket," he said. "I'll be off, arter givin' my message."

"But tell us everything," said Mrs Shelf. "Why, we are just mad to know. Whatever do you mean?"

Thus abjured, Sam did tell what little he knew. Annie had come back with his sister and a friend of hers to their house the night before, and she had wanted him to help her, and he had arranged to do it. But in the morning she was taken bad—very bad—and lost her head, only first of all she was able to give him more than enough money to come

to Rashleigh, and a message which he was to convey to the old folks at the Rectory.

"Can't make 'ead nor tail on it," said the giant; "for if ever there was a beautiful, 'eavenly creature, it were her. Why, I tak her in these arms to the 'ospital. Oh, she's like to die!" he continued. "You'd best go to Annie if ever you want to see her again."

"And so I will—and this night, too," said Mrs Shelf. "I'll go right along back with you; but first of all I must send a telegraphic message to Mr John Saxon."

In vain the neighbour who had been put in charge of Mrs Shelf expostulated with her in regard to her madness in going to London.

"If this is madness," was the sturdy woman's reply, "I would rather be mad than sane. Is not *his* bit lamb in danger and suffering, and am I the one to keep away from her?"

Sam heard these words without understanding them, but felt immediately inclined to think that Mrs Shelf was a very good sort. Accordingly, that very same evening Mrs Shelf and Sam Freeman went up to London by the very train which had taken Annie the night before. When they reached London, however, Mrs Shelf bade her companion good-bye.

"I will never cease to thank you as long as I live," she said; "and if our Annie, our bit lamb, gets better, you will hear from me."

"I won't wait for that ma'am," said Sam. "I'll call every day at the 'ospital to inquire. I can't say no more; there's naught I wouldn't do for her, ma'am."

He hurried away, his great shock head towering above most of his fellow-men. Mrs Shelf sighed heavily. At Paddington she got into a four-wheeler and drove straight to the hotel where she knew John Saxon was staying.

He was out. She sat down patiently to wait for him. It was past midnight before he returned. What was his amazement to see the worthy, homely face of Mrs Shelf as she rose from her seat in a corner of the hall of the hotel!

"I have no news for you," he said. "My good soul, why did you come to town? Now this only adds to our complications. I have spent a fearful day, and have put detectives on poor Annie's track, but up to the present we have heard nothing."

"Then I have news for you, Mr John. You don't suppose I'd come all the way to London for nothing." And the good woman repeated the astounding intelligence which Sam Freeman had brought her.

"A message from the child herself," she said; "and you can guess from its tone, sir, and the words she used, how bad our poor Annie must be. Oh, may God spare her, and save her life!"

"Spare her and change her!" murmured John Saxon. "With God all things are possible. I will go at once to the hospital," he said.

"And you will take me with you, sir?"

"Yes, if you like; but I don't think we can be admitted at this hour."

"Oh, sir! I couldn't stay away. We must at least have a good try. Haven't I nursed her since she was a little thing—she, who all her days was really motherless?"

"All right," said Saxon. "We will go at once." The porter who answered their summons at the great hospital went away immediately to get news with regard to Annie Brooke. This was the reverse of reassuring. She was very ill, quite delirious, and could not possibly be seen until the following morning.

"Then I will wait here," said Mrs Shelf, settling herself down determinedly. "You can't put me, a woman of my years, into the street. I will go to her when the day breaks."

When Saxon and Mrs Shelf were allowed to visit Annie she did not know them. Her delirium ran high, and for days and weeks she lay truly at the point of death. All that could be done for her was, however, done. She had special nurses and a private ward; and at long last there came a day when, in answer to anguished prayers and bitter sorrow, a girl crept slowly back from the shores of death and lay truly like the shadow of her former self high and dry above danger and on her way to recovery. Day after day, slowly, very slowly, almost imperceptibly, her strength returned, until at last there came an hour when she recognised her old friends. Then by degrees she returned to health and strength.

It was three months later, and all the events which make up this story seemed to have passed into a distant part of Annie Brooke's life, when she and John Saxon had an earnest talk together.

Annie was well once more, but so changed that few would have known her for the laughing and almost beautiful girl of the early part of that same year. She had said very little of the past since her recovery, but on this occasion she made a clean breast of everything to John Saxon.

"I am sorry," she said. "I knew at last what repentance meant when I passed into that awful state of delirium and when I felt myself face to face with an angry God. But I have got something in my nature, John, which makes me tremble for the future. I am very wicked still. What can I do with my life?"

Then John Saxon made a proposal to her. "Will you and Mrs Shelf and our friend Sam Freeman, who is an excellent fellow at heart and the very person for a colonist, take passage with me to Canada? You can start a new life there, Annie. You have enough money to buy a little land, and Sam Freeman is the very man to help you. I myself will stay near you for the first year, and you can start your Canadian life in the house of a cousin of mine, who, I know, will be only too glad to receive you. In a new country, dear," continued her cousin, "one can have a clear horizon, a wider view, a better chance. Take up your cross bravely, Annie; never forget that you have sinned, but also that you have repented."

"Do they know at the school?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes, everything is known; Priscilla told the truth."

"You won't tell me what they said?"

"There is no need to tell you. Your punishment, perhaps, is not to know. You have done with Mrs Lyttelton's school. Turn your face towards the West, dear. Think of the new life and the new, clean, fresh country."

"Yes, oh yes, I will go—I will go."

"Then that is settled," said Saxon, "and I will make immediate preparations."

On the day before Annie sailed to Canada she was seated in a London hotel. All the packing had been done. There were really no farewells to make. Mabel Lushington had never written to her from the day she had left Zermatt Lady Lushington had doubtless also forgotten her existence. Her school friends, if they thought of Annie Brooke at all, must think of her as one whose name should be spoken with bated breath, who was deceitful, who had gone far astray, and who had finally left her native land because it was best for her to turn her back on England. There was no one for Annie to say farewell to, unless indeed, Priscilla Weir. But she and Priscilla had never been real friends, and was it likely that Priscilla would think of her now? It made her head ache—for she was not nearly as strong as before her illness—even to try to remember Priscilla. She pressed her hand to her forehead. She and John Saxon and her other friends were to start early on the following day.

Just at that moment the room door was opened. The light had not yet been turned on. The days were a little dusky. A tall girl came hurriedly forward. She came straight up to Annie where she sat, dropped on one knee, and took one of her little, cold hands.

"Annie—Annie Brooke," she said; "I am Priscilla. Have you nothing to say to me?"

Annie looked at her, at first with a sort of terror, then with a softened expression in her blue eyes; then all of a sudden they kindled, there was a smile round her lips, and a radiation spread itself over her wan little face. She flung her arms round Priscilla.

"Oh! Did you know I was going? Have you come to say good-bye?"

"I only heard it to-day from Mr Saxon," said Priscilla. "Yes, I have come to kiss you, and to tell you that I, in spite of everything, love you."

"You can't," said Annie. "You don't know."

"I know everything, Annie. Annie, we have both been in deep waters; we have both sinned, and God has forgiven us both."

"I am going away," said Annie restlessly. "When I am in another country I won't hear that awful text echoing so often."

"What text, Annie?"

"Be sure your sin will find you out."

"But it did find you out," said Priscilla; "and that was the very best thing that could have happened, because then you turned to God; you could not help yourself; and God, who is infinite in His compassion, forgave you."

"Oh, do you think so—do you think so?" said Annie, beginning to sob. "Priscie, I promised him—my angel uncle, my more than father—to meet him in the home where he is now. Oh Priscie! can I—can I?"

"You will meet him," said Priscilla, with conviction.

"But, Priscie, do you quite know everything?" Annie, as she spoke, still kept her arms round Priscilla's neck, and her words were whispered in Priscilla's ears. "Do you know all about Susan Martin and the poems?"

"Yes," said Priscilla, "I know. Mr Manchuri is going to help Susan; only, if possible, I should like to have the manuscript book back."

"I sent it back to Susan herself with a letter. I did that to-day," said Annie. "It seemed the very last thing left, the final drop in my cap of humiliation."

"I am so glad," said Priscilla. "Mr Manchuri will help Susan. She is going to be educated, and will give up dressmaking."

"Who is Mr Manchuri? I seem to know his name and yet to have forgotten him," said Annie.

“Oh Annie, dear Annie! he belongs to *my* story. He took me home that time from Interlaken; and—and I resemble a girl of his who died; and since then, ever since then, I have been living with him and looking after him, and he has finally arranged that I am always to stay with him as his adopted daughter. I am not going to school any more, but I am being taught—oh! in many and wonderful ways—by my dear, dear friend Mr Manchuri himself, by the beautiful picture of the girl who went to God and whom I am supposed to resemble; and I have books as many as I want, and—oh, I, who have sinned too, am happy, very happy!”

“And what about Mabel?” said Annie.

“Lady Lushington knows all about Mabel. Everybody knows about everything, Annie. Mabel is to stay at a school in Paris for a year. It is a good thing for her, too, that things have been found out Annie, I don’t think you need fear that text any more.”

“You comfort me,” said Annie. “Oh! sometimes, Priscilla, when you pray to God, ask Him to give me a clean heart, and to renew a right spirit within me.”

The End.

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